



Sufism in Contemporary Scholarship: Mapping the Evolution and Knowledge Production of Sufi Studies through Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

This study maps the evolution and geopolitics of knowledge production in contemporary Sufi studies through a bibliometric analysis of 2,180 Scopus-indexed documents published between 1894 and 2025 across 613 publication sources. Using the Bibliometrix package in R, the analysis examines publication growth, authorship, country distribution, collaboration patterns, and thematic development. The findings indicate an annual publication growth rate of 3.59%, demonstrating sustained scholarly interest in Sufism. Religion and the human remain central themes, while more recent publications increasingly engage with Islamism, politics, modernity, and Muslim identity. Nevertheless, the global visibility of Sufi scholarship remains uneven. Publication and authorship networks are concentrated in Anglophone academic centres, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States, while Pakistan emerges as an important Southern node. This pattern reveals a disparity between the regions in which Sufi traditions are historically embedded and the academic institutions that acquire authority to classify, interpret, and circulate knowledge about them. The dataset also contains engineering publications using SUFI as an acronym, underscoring the need for more rigorous bibliographic curation. From a Southern sociological perspective, this study argues that Sufism should not be treated merely as an empirical object located in the Global South. Southern archives, languages, concepts, institutions, and scholarly communities must also be recognised as sources of sociological theory and epistemic authority. The study contributes to debates on the geopolitics of knowledge in Islamic studies and proposes a more reflexive and regionally grounded agenda for future Sufi scholarship.

Keywords: Sufism; bibliometric analysis; knowledge production; Southern sociology

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INTRODUCTION

Sufism occupies a central position in the intellectual, spiritual, and social history of Islam. It has shaped not only individual forms of piety and mystical experience but also institutions of religious authority, ethical formation, education, collective identity, and cultural production. Across the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, Sufi teachings and organizations have contributed to the transmission, localization, and social reproduction of Islam in diverse historical settings (Johns 1993; Bruinessen 1994; Laffan 2011; Buehler 2016). The significance of Sufism therefore cannot be reduced to an inward or esoteric dimension of religion. Sufi ideas, practices, orders, and networks have long interacted with political authority, migration, colonialism, nationalism, economic change, and the formation of modern Muslim societies (El Taftazani 1992).

The diversity of Sufism is reflected in its intellectual and institutional expressions, including philosophical traditions, the teachings of figures such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, and Jalal al-Din Rumi, organized Sufi orders or *tariqa*, devotional communities, literary traditions, pilgrimage practices, and contemporary forms of urban spirituality (Ismail and Uyuni 2020). Classical scholarship frequently approached these traditions through theology, philosophy, philology, and intellectual history. Such studies contributed to the interpretation of mystical texts and to the reconstruction of the historical development of Sufi thought.

Historical studies have extended this textual focus by tracing the institutional development and geographical circulation of Sufi orders across South and Southeast Asia (Jafri and Reifeld 2006; Johns 1993; Bruinessen 1994; Laffan 2011). These studies show that Sufi networks played an important role in the spread of Islam, the formation of religious elites, and the translation of Islamic teachings into local cultural settings. In Southeast Asia, Sufism was closely connected to Islamization, the circulation of scholars, the production of manuscripts, and the emergence of localized religious traditions (Johns 1993; Bruinessen 1994; Laffan 2011). It involved the reinterpretation of Islamic ideas through local languages, cultural practices, networks of authority, and social institutions.

This continuing relevance has encouraged the expansion of academic research on Sufism. Earlier scholarship was largely concerned with doctrine, mystical texts, prominent thinkers, and the historical formation of Sufi institutions. More recent studies have broadened the field by analyzing Sufism in relation to modernity, politics, gender, migration, transnationalism, identity, popular culture, religious education, religious moderation, and the

commodification of spirituality (Heck 2007; Hermansen 2007; Howell 2007, 2008; Zamhari 2013; Miichi 2019; Wajdi 2020; Anshori et al. 2021). Researchers increasingly examine how Sufi actors negotiate secular governance, Islamist movements, urban religious change, global spiritual markets, and digital media. Sufi studies have consequently developed into an interdisciplinary field involving religious studies, sociology, anthropology, history, cultural studies, political science, education, and gender studies.

Nevertheless, the expansion of themes and disciplines does not automatically create an equal structure of knowledge production. Academic fields are shaped not only by their objects of study but also by the institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced, validated, circulated, and cited. Universities, journals, publishing houses, citation databases, funding institutions, and international research networks help determine which scholars, concepts, regions, and research questions become visible. The development of Sufi studies therefore needs to be examined not only through changes in substantive themes but also through the social organization and geographical distribution of scholarly production.

This issue is especially important because many societies in which Sufi traditions are historically embedded are located in what is commonly described as the Global South. South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have long served as major centers of Sufi practice, institutional development, intellectual production, and religious transmission. Yet academic interpretations of these traditions often achieve their highest international visibility through universities, journals, and publishers located in Europe and North America. This creates a disjunction between the social locations in which Sufism is practiced and the institutional locations that receive the greatest authority to classify, interpret, and circulate knowledge about it.

Such a disjunction concerns relations of epistemic authority, not merely the physical location of authors. Scholars working in Southern societies may have direct access to local languages, religious institutions, manuscripts, oral histories, and everyday practices. However, their work may receive limited international circulation when published in national journals, local languages, books, or institutional publications that are not indexed in major databases. Conversely, scholars affiliated with well-resourced institutions in the Global North may benefit from stronger publishing infrastructures, English-language editorial support, established citation networks, research funding, and access to prestigious journals. Unequal scholarly

visibility therefore reflects differences in academic infrastructure and institutional power rather than differences in intellectual capacity alone.

Major citation databases such as Scopus and Web of Science are useful for identifying publication patterns, citation networks, collaboration, and thematic change. However, they do not represent the totality of academic knowledge. Their coverage remains uneven across regions, languages, disciplines, and publication types. English-language journals and journals published by established international publishers tend to be more visible, while local-language journals, monographs, edited collections, and publications from smaller academic institutions are often underrepresented (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016). This bias is particularly consequential in the humanities and social sciences, where books, regional journals, and non-English publications remain important forms of scholarly communication.

The limits of citation databases have significant implications for bibliometric studies of Sufism. Knowledge about Sufism is produced not only in internationally indexed journals but also in Islamic universities, pesantren, Sufi institutions, regional research centers, local archives, and vernacular intellectual traditions. Treating Scopus-indexed publications as an exhaustive representation of Sufi scholarship would therefore risk equating database visibility with intellectual production. A more careful interpretation understands bibliometric data as a representation of knowledge that has become visible within a particular global indexing infrastructure.

Southern sociology offers a particularly relevant framework for examining these patterns. Connell (2007) argues that global social science has historically been organized through unequal relations between metropolitan centers and peripheral regions. Metropolitan institutions are often positioned as producers of general theory, while societies outside these centers are treated as sources of empirical cases, cultural difference, or raw data. This creates a division of intellectual labor in which theory travels from the center to the periphery, while data travel in the opposite direction. Alatas (2006) similarly identifies Eurocentrism and academic dependency as central problems in the development of the social sciences in Asian societies. Academic dependency occurs when scholars and institutions in peripheral or Southern locations remain structurally dependent on concepts, publication systems, theoretical agendas, and standards of recognition established elsewhere. This does not mean that Southern scholars passively reproduce Northern ideas. Rather, it points to institutional conditions that make some forms of knowledge easier to legitimize than others. Local experiences are

frequently translated into theories developed in Western academic centers, while locally generated concepts are more often described as cultural categories than recognized as contributions to general social theory.

This argument is highly relevant to Sufi studies. Sufi concepts concerning the self, ethical transformation, spiritual authority, community, knowledge, discipline, and human relations are frequently treated as religious doctrines interpreted through external analytical frameworks. A Southern sociological perspective invites a different question: can concepts emerging from Sufi traditions also contribute to sociological theorization? This does not require turning theological propositions into social theory without critical examination. It requires recognizing that intellectual traditions developed in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East may contain analytical categories capable of informing discussions of social action, authority, morality, community, subjectivity, and modernity. Such recognition is consistent with the epistemologies of the South, which challenge the marginalization of knowledge traditions located outside dominant Eurocentric systems of validation (Santos 2014).

The category of the Global South must nevertheless be used cautiously. It does not refer only to a fixed geographical division. It describes historically produced inequalities associated with colonialism, capitalism, political power, and global knowledge systems. At the same time, the Global South is not a homogeneous intellectual space. Academic inequality also exists within Southern regions. Some countries, universities, and researchers possess greater access to international publication networks than others. Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, and South Africa may function simultaneously as locations of religious traditions, sites of empirical research, and emerging centers of international scholarship.

Existing research on Sufism has produced extensive insights into mystical thought, religious institutions, historical networks, political engagement, and contemporary religious change. However, relatively limited attention has been paid to the long-term structure of knowledge production within Sufi studies itself. Most studies focus on a particular thinker, text, Sufi order, country, historical period, or contemporary movement. These approaches are essential, but they do not provide a comprehensive picture of how the academic field has evolved across time, countries, disciplines, and thematic networks.

Bibliometric methods offer a systematic means of addressing this gap. They enable researchers to analyze publication growth, authorship patterns, geographical distribution, international collaboration, citation influence, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic evolution.

Bibliometric studies have increasingly been used in various areas of Islamic studies. However, comprehensive mapping specifically focused on Sufi studies remains limited, and existing research has not sufficiently connected quantitative mapping with a sociological interpretation of academic hierarchy and epistemic inequality.

Bibliometric research also often treats publication counts, citation scores, and international collaboration as neutral indicators of scientific progress. Such measures are informative, but they can obscure the conditions that produce academic visibility. High publication output may reflect intellectual productivity, but it may also reflect access to funding, English-language publishing, international co-authorship, and established institutional networks. Conversely, low indexed output from a region may reflect the exclusion of local journals, books, religious texts, and non-English scholarship rather than limited intellectual activity.

A critical bibliometric analysis should therefore move beyond numerical description. It should ask how the organization of academic publishing influences the representation of Sufism as a field of knowledge and whether the geographical distribution of scholarship corresponds to the historical and social geography of Sufi traditions. When regions that provide the principal empirical materials of a field remain less visible in influential publication networks, bibliometric patterns become evidence of a broader sociological problem involving representation, authority, and epistemic recognition.

There is also a methodological problem specific to the terminology of Sufi studies. The keyword “Sufi” may refer to Islamic mysticism, Sufi actors, communities, or institutions. However, “SUFU” is also used as an acronym in engineering and environmental modeling, particularly for Sequential Uncertainty Fitting. A search based only on “Sufi” or “Sufism” can therefore retrieve publications unrelated to religion. In the present dataset, technical terms such as “calibration,” “uncertainty analysis,” and “soil and water assessment tool” indicate that such contamination has occurred. This overlap demonstrates that bibliometric research requires rigorous screening, data cleaning, and contextual interpretation before thematic patterns can be treated as substantive evidence.

Against this background, the present study maps the evolution and production of knowledge in contemporary Sufi studies using Scopus-indexed publications from 1894 to 2025. Rather than treating bibliometric data merely as indicators of publication growth, it uses them to examine the institutional and geographical organization of the field. The study asks:

how have publication output, authorship, collaboration, and geographical participation developed over time; which themes have become dominant, marginal, emerging, or declining; and what do these patterns reveal about the geopolitics of knowledge and the position of Southern scholars and institutions in global Sufi studies?

The study argues that the development of Sufi scholarship should be understood as both an intellectual transformation and a socially structured process of knowledge production. The sustained growth of publications demonstrates the continuing relevance of Sufism to debates about religion, humanity, politics, modernity, and Muslim identity. However, the geographical concentration of visible scholarship also indicates that authority within the field remains unevenly distributed. The strong position of Anglophone academic centers, alongside the emergence of Pakistan and other Southern locations, suggests that Sufi studies constitute a differentiated global field rather than a simple opposition between a dominant North and a subordinate South.

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides a long-term mapping of Scopus-indexed Sufi studies. Methodologically, it demonstrates both the usefulness and limitations of bibliometric analysis in a field characterized by terminological overlap and uneven database representation. Sociologically, it situates publication patterns within wider inequalities of academic visibility and epistemic authority. From a Southern perspective, Sufi traditions, vernacular languages, local archives, religious institutions, and scholarly communities should not be positioned solely as empirical objects to be classified through theories developed elsewhere. They should also be recognized as potential sites of theoretical production. This reframing does not reject scholarship from the Global North or romanticize local knowledge. Rather, it calls for a more plural, reflexive, and geographically grounded structure of knowledge production.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed bibliometric analysis and science mapping to examine the historical development, thematic structure, collaboration patterns, and geographical organization of knowledge production in Sufi studies. Bibliometric analysis enables the systematic examination of publication patterns, citation structures, research collaboration, and thematic development across a large body of literature (van Doorslaer 2015; Aria and Cuccurullo 2017; Passas 2024). Science mapping was then applied to visualize relationships

among authors, countries, and research themes. The resulting patterns were interpreted through a Southern sociology of knowledge perspective.

Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database. Scopus was selected because it provides standardized metadata on authors, affiliations, publication sources, abstracts, keywords, references, and citation counts. The search covered publications issued between 1894 and 2025 using the terms “Sufi” and “Sufism” in the title, abstract, and keyword fields.

No geographical restriction was applied because the study aimed to map the global structure of Sufi scholarship. Publications were included when their titles, abstracts, or keywords substantively addressed Sufism as an Islamic mystical tradition, religious institution, intellectual discourse, cultural practice, or social phenomenon. This included studies of Sufi thinkers, texts, orders, devotional communities, religious authority, education, politics, gender, and transnational movements. Duplicate records, incomplete metadata, and publications unrelated to Sufism were excluded.

Particular attention was given to the term “SUFI,” which is also used in engineering and environmental modelling as an abbreviation for Sequential Uncertainty Fitting. Records discussing calibration, hydrological modelling, uncertainty analysis, SWAT, or SUFI-2 were screened through their titles, abstracts, keywords, and source titles. Publications in which SUFI referred exclusively to a technical algorithm were removed from the final dataset. The reported total of 2,180 documents should therefore represent the corpus after relevance screening and data cleaning. If the figure was obtained before excluding technical publications, the bibliometric analysis and visualizations must be rerun using the curated dataset. The presence of engineering terminology in the current word cloud and thematic map indicates that this verification is essential.

Data cleaning included the removal of duplicates and the standardization of author names, institutional affiliations, countries, and keywords. Variations in spelling, initials, transliteration, singular and plural forms, and equivalent expressions were consolidated where appropriate. Generic metadata terms such as “article” were removed from thematic analysis because they did not represent substantive topics. The thematic analysis primarily used author keywords, as these more directly reflect the concepts selected by the authors. Scopus index terms may be analysed separately because generic expressions such as “human” and “humans” can otherwise dominate the results.

The analysis was conducted using R version and the Bibliometrix package version. Descriptive indicators included the number of documents, annual publication growth, publication sources, authors, single-authored documents, authors per document, international coauthorship, average document age, and average citations per document. A three-field plot was used to visualize relationships among author countries, individual authors, and keywords. Keyword frequency analysis and a word cloud were used to identify frequently occurring terms. The thematic map classified keyword clusters according to centrality and density into motor, basic, niche, and emerging or declining themes. Thematic evolution analysis was employed to examine changes in research themes. The thresholds, clustering method, and number of terms included in each visualization should be reported to ensure analytical transparency.

The findings were interpreted as patterns of visibility within Scopus-indexed scholarship rather than as a complete representation of all knowledge about Sufism. Scopus may underrepresent local-language publications, regional journals, books, manuscripts, and scholarship produced within Islamic universities, pesantren, Sufi institutions, and other Southern intellectual settings. Country affiliation was therefore treated as an indicator of institutional participation in indexed publishing, not as evidence of an author's nationality or intellectual identity. From a Southern sociological perspective, differences in publication output were analysed in relation to unequal access to journals, publishing languages, funding, indexing systems, and international research networks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Publication Growth, Authorship, and the Structure of the Field

The bibliometric dataset contains 2,180 Scopus-indexed documents published between 1894 and 2025 across 613 sources. As summarized in Figure 1, the field records an annual growth rate of 3.59 percent, 2,027 contributing authors, 1,166 authors associated with single-authored documents, an international coauthorship rate of 5.459 percent, and an average of 1.32 coauthors per document. The dataset also contains 4,443 author keywords, an average document age of 9.75 years, and an average of 6.184 citations per document. These indicators show that Sufi studies constitute a long-standing and gradually expanding field rather than a recent or episodic area of inquiry.



Figure 1. Main Information on the Scopus-Indexed Sufi Studies Dataset, 1894–2025

Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny based on the Scopus dataset.

The annual growth rate indicates sustained scholarly attention to Sufism across more than a century. This continuity is consistent with the field's broad intellectual base. Sufism has been studied through theology, philosophy, philology, history, anthropology, sociology, political studies, education, and cultural studies. Its publication growth therefore reflects more than an increase in studies of mystical doctrine. It also reflects the widening range of questions through which Sufism is approached, including religious authority, modernity, political mobilization, identity, migration, gender, education, and transnational religious networks.

Authorship patterns nevertheless indicate that the field remains strongly oriented toward individual scholarship. The low average number of coauthors per document and the large number of authors associated with single-authored publications are consistent with humanities-based research, where textual interpretation, archival work, historical reconstruction, and qualitative analysis are frequently conducted individually. This pattern should not automatically be viewed as a weakness. It reflects the epistemic and methodological traditions of the field. However, it also suggests that Sufi studies have developed fewer large-scale collaborative structures than research areas organized around laboratories, shared datasets, or multicountry research consortia.

The international coauthorship rate of 5.459 percent deserves particular attention. It indicates that only a limited proportion of indexed publications connect authors across national institutional settings. This may be partly explained by the prevalence of single-author research, but it may also reflect unequal access to international conferences, research funding, mobility, English-language editorial support, and established publication networks. From a Southern sociological perspective, collaboration is not merely a technical feature of research production.

It is also an indicator of how resources and opportunities for participation are distributed across the global academic field.

The average citation count of 6.184 per document indicates that the literature circulates within indexed scholarship, although this mean should be interpreted cautiously. Citation distributions are commonly skewed by a small number of highly cited publications, and citation counts are shaped by publication age, language, database coverage, journal prestige, and disciplinary conventions. The value therefore cannot be taken as a direct measure of quality. In addition, Figure 1 reports zero references, which most likely indicates that cited-reference metadata were not exported or parsed in the current dataset. This field should be verified before conducting any reference-based network or intellectual-structure analysis.

Overall, the descriptive indicators portray a field that is institutionally established but socially fragmented. Publication output has expanded and thematic diversity has widened, yet international collaboration remains limited. The next question is therefore not only how much scholarship has been produced, but also where it becomes visible, which authors occupy central positions, and which themes are most strongly connected within the indexed field.

Geographical Concentration, Visible Authors, and Epistemic Authority

Figure 2 presents a three-field plot connecting authors' institutional countries (AU_CO), individual authors (AU), and author keywords (DE). The thickness of each flow indicates the relative frequency of the relationship between the selected countries, authors, and themes. The visualization includes prominent participation from the United Kingdom and the United States, alongside Germany, Australia, Canada, France, Denmark, Italy, and the Netherlands. Asian institutional locations, including India and Iran, are also visible. Frequently represented authors include Geaves, Ridgeon, Green, Knysh, Hermansen, Pinto, and Piraino, while the principal keywords include "Sufism," "Islam," "mysticism," "religion," and "Islamism."

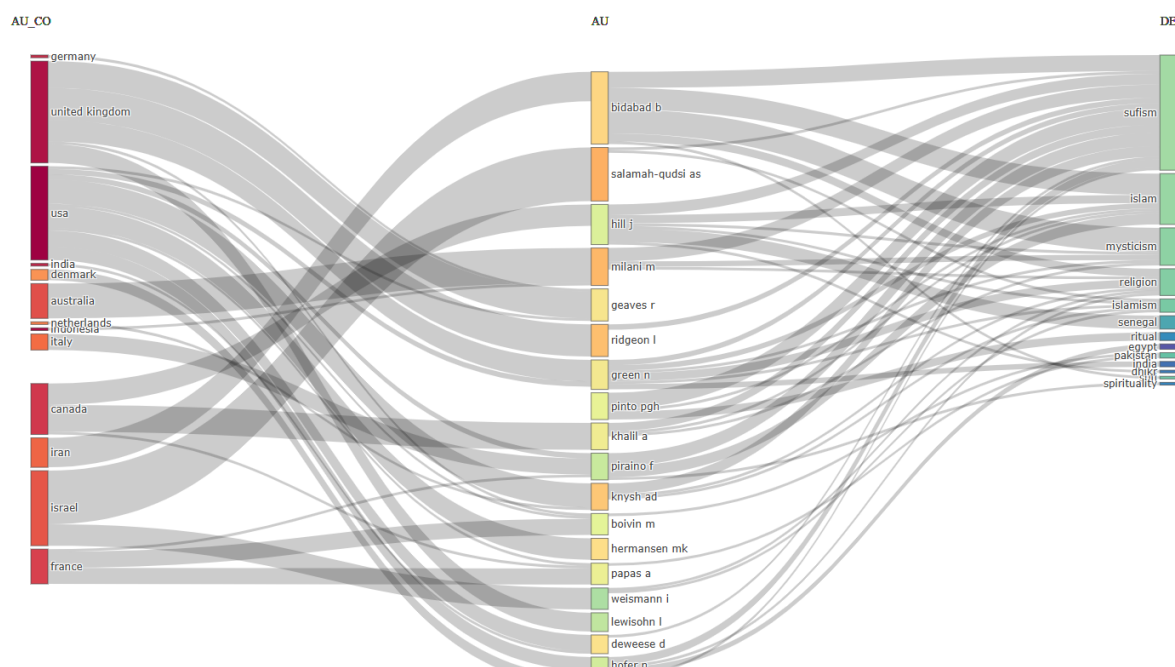


Figure 2. Three-Field Plot Connecting Authors' Countries, Authors, and Author Keywords

Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny based on the Scopus dataset.

The strong presence of the United Kingdom and the United States indicates the importance of Anglophone academic infrastructures in the international circulation of Sufi studies. Universities in these countries host established programs in religious studies, Islamic studies, Middle Eastern studies, anthropology, and sociology, while their scholars benefit from extensive library collections, research funding, international publishers, and journals with high database visibility. The figure therefore maps not simply where research is conducted, but where research is most effectively converted into internationally indexed academic output.

This distinction is central to interpreting the geography of the field. Bibliometric visibility should not be equated with the total production of knowledge about Sufism. Sufi traditions have historically developed through intellectual and institutional centers across South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Scholarship is also produced in local universities, Islamic colleges, pesantren, madrasas, Sufi organizations, regional journals, monographs, vernacular commentaries, and religious teaching networks. Much of this production may remain outside Scopus. The prominence of Anglophone institutional locations consequently reveals the structure of indexed visibility rather than the absence of intellectual activity elsewhere.

The appearance of India and Iran in the country field and of Pakistan, Senegal, Egypt, and India among the keywords complicates a simple North–South binary. Southern societies

are present both as locations of institutional authorship and as geographical objects of study. Yet these two forms of visibility are not equivalent. A country may appear prominently as a research topic while its scholars and institutions remain less central in authorship or citation networks. Future analysis should therefore distinguish between the geography of the object being studied and the geography of the institutions authorized to interpret it.

The recurring presence of particular authors also shows how intellectual authority becomes concentrated. Scholars who publish repeatedly and connect multiple countries and themes can influence the vocabulary through which a field is organized. This is not inherently problematic; intellectual fields require cumulative scholarship and recognized areas of expertise. However, the normalization of a relatively limited set of authors may reduce the visibility of conceptual traditions and scholarly communities publishing outside dominant international networks. A Southern sociology of knowledge therefore asks not only who appears in the network, but also which forms of authorship and scholarship are structurally absent from it.

The plot should nevertheless be read as a selective visualization rather than a complete map. Three-field plots normally display only the most frequent items, and the manuscript must report how many countries, authors, and keywords were included. Institutional affiliation also cannot be used to infer nationality, ethnicity, or epistemological orientation. A scholar affiliated with a European or North American university may originate from or maintain deep intellectual relationships with Southern societies, while a scholar located in the South may still work within dominant metropolitan theoretical conventions. The figure maps institutional participation, not fixed intellectual identities.

Dominant Keywords and the Problem of Corpus Contamination

The word cloud in Figure 3 displays the most frequent terms in the dataset. “Islamism,” “religion,” “human,” and “article” are visually prominent, while “Pakistan,” “cultural tradition,” “mysticism,” and other religious or geographical terms also appear. At the same time, the visualization contains technical expressions such as “calibration,” “uncertainty analysis,” “sequential uncertainty fittings,” and “soil and water assessment tool.” These terms reveal a major problem in the current corpus: the search has captured publications in which SUFI refers to Sequential Uncertainty Fitting rather than Islamic mysticism.



Figure 3. Word Cloud of Keywords in the Current Scopus Dataset

Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny based on the Scopus dataset.

Among the substantively relevant terms, the prominence of “religion” confirms that Sufism continues to be positioned within the wider study of Islamic belief, practice, and authority. “Islamism” suggests a growing concern with the relationship between Sufi actors and contemporary political Islam. Studies may examine Sufism as an alternative to Islamist movements, as a resource used by states in policies of religious moderation, or as a set of institutions that participate directly in public and electoral politics. The word cloud alone cannot establish which of these interpretations dominates, but it indicates that the political framing of Sufism has become visible within the indexed literature.

The appearance of Pakistan reflects the centrality of South Asia to the social history and contemporary organization of Sufism. Pakistan contains major shrines, Sufi orders, devotional practices, poetic traditions, and political struggles surrounding religious authority. Yet the prominence of a geographical term should not be treated as equivalent to the intellectual centrality of scholars located in that country. It may indicate a substantial body of research about Pakistan rather than research produced through Pakistani institutions. This reinforces the need to separate the geography of empirical attention from the geography of academic authority.

The terms “human,” “humans,” and “article” require more caution. “Article” is a metadata category rather than a substantive research concept and should be removed from

thematic analysis. “Human” and “humans” may originate from Scopus index keywords rather than terms deliberately chosen by authors. When database-generated index terms are combined with author keywords, generic categories can appear disproportionately central. The final analysis should therefore prioritize author keywords and either exclude index terms or report a separate sensitivity analysis.

The engineering vocabulary is a more fundamental problem because it demonstrates that the dataset combines two unrelated literatures. The resulting contamination can alter the number of publications, source distribution, country productivity, keyword frequencies, citation averages, thematic clusters, and apparent thematic evolution. The current visualizations must therefore be regarded as diagnostic rather than definitive. The corpus should be rescreened using titles, abstracts, keywords, subject areas, and source titles to remove publications referring exclusively to SUFI, SUFI-2, hydrological calibration, or environmental modeling. All figures and descriptive statistics should then be regenerated.

This problem also has a broader methodological implication. Bibliometric analysis can create an impression of objectivity because it processes large quantities of standardized metadata. Yet its validity depends on substantive decisions made before visualization: the construction of the search query, the meanings assigned to ambiguous terms, the treatment of database-generated keywords, and the exclusion of false-positive records. The word cloud therefore demonstrates that automated mapping cannot replace disciplinary knowledge and interpretive judgment.

Thematic Structure: Central, Peripheral, and Misclassified Themes

Figure 4 positions keyword clusters according to centrality and density. Centrality measures the extent to which a cluster is connected to other themes, whereas density indicates its internal development. The upper-right quadrant identifies “religion,” “human,” and “humans” as motor themes. The lower-left quadrant places “Islamism,” “Pakistan,” and “cultural tradition” among emerging or declining themes. Technical terms associated with calibration and the Soil and Water Assessment Tool appear as niche themes, while “article” is positioned as a basic theme.

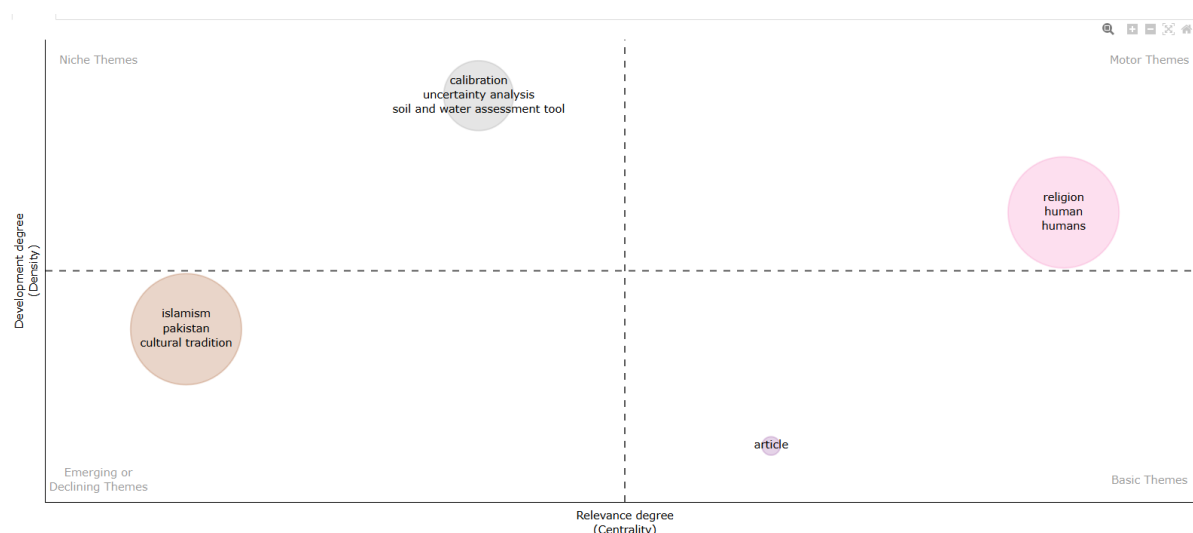


Figure 4. Thematic Map Based on Keyword Centrality and Density

Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny based on the Scopus dataset.

The position of religion as a motor theme is substantively plausible. It indicates that religious interpretation remains both well developed and strongly connected to the wider conceptual structure of Sufi studies. The expansion of sociological, political, and cultural approaches has not displaced the field's foundational concern with mystical experience, Islamic doctrine, devotional practice, and religious authority. Contemporary Sufi studies thus appear to develop through the addition of new problematics rather than through the abandonment of earlier religious and historical questions.

By contrast, the motor-theme status of “human” and “humans” should not be accepted without further testing. Their high centrality may reflect the operation of database indexing rather than the emergence of a coherent scholarly program centered on humanity. A term can become highly connected because it is assigned broadly across publications, even when authors do not use it as a primary analytical concept. Rerunning the thematic map with cleaned author keywords is necessary to determine whether a meaningful cluster concerning ethics, subjectivity, human development, or social relations remains after generic index terms are removed.

The cluster containing “Islamism,” “Pakistan,” and “cultural tradition” is potentially important for understanding the changing direction of the field. However, the lower-left quadrant cannot by itself distinguish an emerging theme from a declining one. Both appear in this position because they have relatively low centrality and density. Temporal publication trends are required to establish whether interest is increasing or receding. Islamism may represent a developing concern with political identity, extremism, religious moderation, and

the state's use of Sufism. Pakistan may signal a growing regional concentration, while cultural tradition may capture research on the localization of Sufi practices in ritual, music, poetry, pilgrimage, and vernacular religious authority.

The position of “cultural tradition” is especially relevant to a Southern perspective. In many Southern societies, Sufi practice is embedded in local languages, embodied rituals, customary institutions, and forms of authority that do not fit neatly within modern distinctions between religion and culture. Colonial administrations, reform movements, and postcolonial states have often classified such practices as custom, superstition, heritage, or popular religion. Their peripheral position in the thematic map may indicate that locally grounded cultural analysis remains less integrated with the dominant conceptual networks of internationally indexed Sufi scholarship.

The technical SUFI cluster cannot be interpreted as a niche theme within Sufi studies. Its high internal density merely demonstrates that hydrological modeling has a coherent technical vocabulary. Its weak relation to the religious clusters confirms that the map contains two unrelated domains. Likewise, “article” should not be interpreted as a basic theme. These anomalies show that a thematic map is not self-validating; it can reproduce errors already present in the dataset. Substantive interpretation must therefore follow, rather than precede, corpus validation.

Thematic Evolution: Continuity and Transformation

The thematic evolution displayed in Figure 5 divides the literature into two periods: 1894–2010 and 2011–2025. In the first period, “religion,” “human,” and “article” are shown as principal themes. In the second period, “religion” is linked to “Islamism,” while “human” continues as a separate theme. The figure therefore suggests both continuity in the religious and human dimensions of Sufi studies and a more recent movement toward political questions.

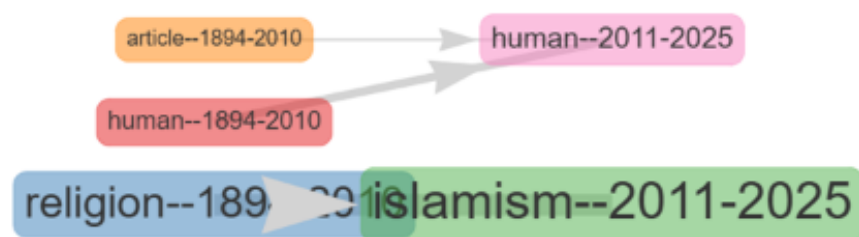


Figure 5. Thematic Evolution of the Current Dataset, 1894–2010 and 2011–2025

Source: Authors' analysis using Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny based on the Scopus dataset.

The persistence of religion is consistent with the historical development of the field. Sufism remains inseparable from questions of spiritual discipline, mystical knowledge, religious authority, and Islamic practice. Even studies focused on politics, identity, or modernity generally interpret Sufi actors through their relationship to religious institutions and discourses. The apparent continuity of this theme therefore reflects the enduring conceptual core of Sufi scholarship.

The link from religion to Islamism may indicate the increasing incorporation of Sufism into contemporary political debates. Since the late twentieth century, Sufi groups have been discussed in relation to secular governance, Islamist movements, state projects of religious moderation, counter-extremism policy, identity politics, and public mobilization. In some contexts, Sufism is represented as a tolerant or culturally embedded alternative to political Islam. In others, Sufi orders and devotional associations are themselves involved in electoral politics, protest, or struggles over religious authority. The later appearance of Islamism may therefore reflect a real transformation in the questions addressed by the field.

Nevertheless, the figure cannot yet support a strong claim that Sufi studies have shifted from religion toward Islamism. First, the two periods are highly unequal in duration: the first spans 117 years, while the second spans only fifteen. The split may be defensible if publication output increased sharply after 2010, but the number of documents in each period and the criterion for selecting 2010 must be reported. A temporal division should be based on changes in publication volume or an identifiable transformation in the field rather than an unexplained software setting.

Second, the evolution is sensitive to corpus contamination and keyword selection. The appearance of “article” confirms that generic metadata remain in the analysis, while the technical use of SUFI may alter the thematic links between periods. The figure should be regenerated after excluding irrelevant documents and standardizing author keywords. A three-period model may also produce a more historically meaningful account, distinguishing an early formative phase, a phase of disciplinary consolidation, and a contemporary phase of rapid publication growth and thematic diversification.

Subject to these qualifications, the thematic evolution points to an important substantive pattern: Sufi studies retain their concern with religion and ethical subjectivity while increasingly addressing the place of Sufism within modern political and social formations. This

is better understood as an expansion of the field than as a linear replacement of spiritual themes by political ones.

Sufi Studies and the Geopolitics of Knowledge: A Southern Sociological Perspective

Taken together, the findings show that Sufi studies are shaped by two simultaneous processes. The first is intellectual expansion: publication output has grown, research themes have diversified, and Sufism is increasingly studied in relation to politics, identity, modernity, and transnational social change. The second is unequal academic visibility: the institutions, languages, and publication systems through which this knowledge circulates are geographically concentrated. The field must therefore be understood not only as a body of scholarship about Sufism but also as a social structure in which authority to define Sufism is unevenly distributed.

This structure resembles the metropolitan division of intellectual labor described by Connell (2007). In that division, dominant academic centers are more readily recognized as locations of theoretical production, while societies outside those centers are treated primarily as sources of empirical material. Sufi studies are particularly vulnerable to this pattern because the traditions being analyzed are deeply rooted in Asian, African, and Middle Eastern societies. Manuscripts, shrines, rituals, devotional communities, and local religious institutions may be located in the Global South, while the classifications and theoretical narratives through which they gain international authority are disproportionately circulated through Northern universities and publishers.

The three-field plot supports this interpretation, but it also prevents an overly simple North–South opposition. Institutions in India and Iran are visible, and countries such as Pakistan, Senegal, Egypt, and India appear among the thematic objects of study. Southern scholars and institutions are not absent from the field. Rather, they occupy differentiated positions within it. Some Southern institutions are integrated into English-language publication networks and international collaboration, whereas others remain primarily connected to regional or vernacular scholarly communities. The Global South should therefore be understood relationally, as a position within unequal circuits of knowledge, rather than as a homogeneous geographical category.

Alatas's (2006) concept of academic dependency helps explain why numerical inclusion does not necessarily produce epistemic equality. Scholars located in Southern

institutions may gain greater international visibility by using concepts, problem definitions, and publication conventions established in metropolitan centers. Their empirical cases enter the global literature, but locally generated categories may continue to be described as cultural particularities rather than recognized as theoretical contributions. Increasing the number of indexed publications from Southern countries is therefore necessary but insufficient. The more difficult question is whether Southern intellectual traditions can shape the concepts through which Sufism, religion, authority, and modernity are understood.

This question also changes how Sufi traditions themselves are treated. Sufi concepts concerning ethical self-formation, spiritual authority, discipline, knowledge, community, care, and the relationship between the individual and society are usually positioned as objects of theological or anthropological interpretation. A Southern sociological approach does not accept these concepts uncritically or transform religious claims directly into universal theory. It does, however, recognize that intellectual traditions formed outside the dominant Western canon may generate analytical questions and concepts relevant to sociology. In this sense, Sufi archives and communities are not merely sites from which data are extracted; they can also be sites of conceptual production.

The limitations of Scopus are therefore theoretically significant rather than merely technical. As Mongeon and Paul-Hus (2016) demonstrate, major citation databases provide uneven coverage across languages, countries, disciplines, and publication types. In Sufi studies, this means that vernacular monographs, regional journals, religious commentaries, teaching texts, and scholarship produced in *pesantren*, *madrasas*, Islamic universities, and Sufi institutions may be absent from the map. The database does not simply measure a preexisting field; through its inclusion and exclusion practices, it helps construct the field that becomes internationally visible.

A Southern perspective consequently requires methodological reflexivity. Publication counts should be interpreted as indicators of indexed visibility rather than the totality of intellectual production. Country affiliations should not be converted into assumptions about identity or epistemological orientation. Collaboration should be examined for its distribution of authorship, conceptual control, and research resources, not merely celebrated as internationalization. Most importantly, the absence of a region or language from a bibliometric map should be treated as a question about infrastructure and recognition rather than evidence that knowledge is not being produced there.

Future Sufi scholarship can respond to these inequalities in several ways. Bibliometric research should combine Scopus with regional databases, books, and local-language sources where possible. International projects should develop equitable collaboration in which Southern researchers participate in setting research questions, constructing concepts, interpreting data, and controlling authorship. Journals and institutions should strengthen multilingual publication and recognize regional scholarly forms. These measures would not eliminate global academic hierarchy, but they would reduce the tendency to position Southern societies solely as empirical locations. The central contribution of this study is therefore not limited to identifying growth rates or keyword clusters. It demonstrates how bibliometric evidence can be used to analyze the geopolitics of knowledge. Sufi studies emerge as a productive site for examining the relationship between religion, institutional power, language, academic infrastructure, and epistemic authority. From this perspective, the Global South is not only where many Sufi traditions are practiced; it is also a potential location from which sociological concepts and alternative accounts of modernity can be produced. Recognizing this possibility is essential if the international study of Sufism is to become more plural, reflexive, and epistemically balanced.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the historical development, thematic structure, and geographical organization of Scopus-indexed scholarship on Sufism through bibliometric analysis and science mapping. Based on the current dataset of 2,180 documents published across 613 sources between 1894 and 2025, the findings demonstrate that Sufi studies constitute a long-established and continually expanding field. The annual publication growth rate of 3.59 percent reflects sustained scholarly interest, while the diversity of authors, sources, and keywords indicates the increasing interdisciplinarity of the field. Sufism is no longer examined only through mystical doctrine, classical texts, and spiritual practice, but also through questions of politics, modernity, identity, cultural tradition, and contemporary Muslim social life.

The results nevertheless reveal an uneven structure of knowledge production. Individual authorship remains dominant, and international coauthorship is relatively limited. The author-affiliation network also indicates the prominence of Anglophone academic centers, particularly institutions associated with the United Kingdom and the United States. At the same time, the visibility of Southern locations and themes, including Pakistan and the wider South Asian context, demonstrates that the field cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between a

knowledge-producing North and a data-producing South. Instead, Sufi studies form a differentiated global academic field in which countries, institutions, and scholars occupy unequal positions in relation to publication infrastructure, language, citation visibility, and international collaboration.

The thematic findings suggest both continuity and change. Religion and related human or social dimensions remain prominent across the publication period, confirming that the spiritual and ethical foundations of Sufism continue to structure the field. More recent literature also appears to engage increasingly with Islamism, politics, modernity, and Muslim identity. This development indicates that Sufism is being studied not only as a mystical tradition but also as a social and political formation embedded in contemporary struggles over authority, moderation, public religion, and collective identity. However, these thematic trends should be interpreted cautiously because generic indexing terms such as “human,” “humans,” and “article” may have shaped the visualizations.

A more serious methodological issue concerns the inclusion of technical publications in which SUFI refers to Sequential Uncertainty Fitting. The appearance of terms such as “calibration,” “uncertainty analysis,” and “soil and water assessment tool” demonstrates that the corpus contains records unrelated to Islamic mysticism. Consequently, the current word cloud, thematic map, thematic evolution, citation indicators, and geographical distribution should be treated as provisional until the corpus is fully cleaned and the analysis rerun. This limitation does not eliminate the value of the study, but it confirms that bibliometric analysis requires substantive knowledge of the field and careful data curation rather than reliance on automated retrieval alone.

The principal sociological contribution of this study lies in showing that the development of Sufi studies is also a question of epistemic authority. Sufi traditions are historically embedded in societies across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, yet knowledge about them often gains international recognition through institutions, journals, languages, and indexing systems concentrated elsewhere. From the perspective of Southern sociology, this disparity reflects a broader division of intellectual labor in which Southern societies frequently provide religious practices, archives, communities, and empirical cases, while dominant academic centers retain greater authority to formulate theoretical interpretations (Connell 2007; Alatas 2006).

A Southern perspective therefore requires more than increasing the number of publications originating from countries classified as part of the Global South. It requires reconsidering what counts as authoritative knowledge and who is recognized as capable of producing theory. Vernacular texts, local archives, Islamic universities, pesantren, Sufi orders, regional journals, and scholarly communities should not be treated merely as sources of data. They should also be recognized as intellectual sites from which concepts concerning authority, ethical subject formation, community, discipline, spirituality, and social transformation can be developed.

Future research should expand the dataset beyond Scopus by incorporating regional databases, local-language journals, monographs, and publications produced within religious and educational institutions. Comparative analysis between Scopus, Web of Science, and relevant regional indexes would help identify which countries, languages, and scholarly traditions remain underrepresented. Future studies should also distinguish more clearly between author keywords and database-generated index terms, justify the division of thematic periods, and examine collaboration patterns at the institutional level. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that bibliometric mapping can contribute to more than the description of publication trends. When interpreted through a Southern sociology of knowledge, it can reveal how scholarly visibility, theoretical authority, and academic recognition are unevenly distributed. Sufism should therefore be understood not only as an object of global academic inquiry but also as a potential source of concepts and theoretical perspectives emerging from the intellectual traditions of the Global South.

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