Sufism, Sharia, & Politics: Contesting Islamic Authority in Contemporary Aceh

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Abstract

This article examines the discourse between sufi and sharia-oriented scholars concerning the nature of Islam and its implementation in social and state life in contemporary Aceh. It focuses on the thought of modern Acehnese Sufi figures, particularly Abuya Sheikh Amran Waly Al-Khalidi, vis-à-vis scholars affiliated with the Aceh Ulama Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, MPU) and the Aceh branch of the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI). Drawing on qualitative field research, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. This study argues that the discourse between these groups extends beyond differences in interpretive approaches and legal application, reflecting fundamentally divergent epistemological understandings of Islamic teachings. Moreover, this contestation echoes historical dynamics in Aceh, notably the sixteenth-century debate between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniri during the Samudera Pasai Sultanate. The sufism–sharia discourse thus provides an analytical lens for examining broader dynamics of Islam in Aceh, including the implementation of Islamic law, inter-ulama relations, and the influence of Jakarta's political elites. Ultimately, this article elucidates the foundational principles guiding both Sufi and sharia scholars in translating Islamic teachings into communal and state practices in Aceh and, more broadly, in Indonesia.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji diskursus antara ulama syariat versus ulama sufi dalam memahami hakekat Islam dan implementasi dalam kehidupan sosial kemasyarakatan maupun kenegaraan di Aceh modern. Kajian ini membedah pemikiran sosok ulama sufi Aceh modern, yakni Abuya Syekh Amran Waly Al-Khalidi vis-à-vis para ulama yang tergabung dalam Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama (MPU) Aceh dan Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Aceh. Artikel ini didasarkan pada penelitian lapangan. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, dan studi pustaka. Artikel ini berargumentasi, bahwa diskursus kedua belah pihak dalam konteks Aceh modern tidak hanya menggambarkan tentang perbedaan cara berfikir dalam memahami sekaligus menerapkan ajaran Islam saja. Selain itu, kontestasi keduanya menggambarkan dinamika sejarah masa lalu yang terulang kembali di era Hamzah Fansuri versus Nuruddin Ar-Raniri pada Kesultanan Samudera Pasai abad ke-16. Diskursus antara sufisme dan syariat ini dapat digunakan untuk menganalisis dinamika Islam di Aceh dalam hubungannya dengan penerapan syariat Islam, relasi antar ulama, sekaligus keputusan politik elit pemerintah Jakarta. Artikel ini menyajikan temuan berupa prinsip-prinsip dasar pemikiran antara ulama sufi versus ulama syariat dalam konteks menerjemahkan ajaran Islam dalam kehidupan masyarakat sekaligus kenegaraan di Aceh maupun Indonesia pada umumnya.

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Introduction

Despite the formalization of sharia in Aceh Province, numerous challenges remain. Aceh was granted special status as an autonomous region under Law No. 44 of 1999. Subsequently, Law No. 18 of 2001 allowed Aceh, as a Special Autonomous Region, to enforce Islamic law (Amal, 2024). However, these initial legal frameworks proved insufficient, prompting the enactment of Law No. 6 of 2006, the Aceh Government Law (UUPA), which was approved by the Jakarta government. The UUPA emerged from extensive negotiations held in Helsinki, Finland, the stronghold of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), and is often referred to as the "Helsinki Proposal" (Kingsbury, 2010). The Helsinki Agreement symbolized a commitment to a peaceful resolution, particularly in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Aceh.

In modern Indonesia, the formalization of sharia in Aceh has not fully resolved the longstanding issues within the Acehnese Muslim community, which has historically been guided by Islamic law. The process of formalization, deeply intertwined with political power struggles, has generated diverse responses within the community. Supporters, often represented by Sharia scholars and former GAM combatants, appear to reflect a significant portion of the population. Conversely, several civil society groups, comprising NGOs, academics, women's leaders, and sufi scholars, have openly or privately resisted the policy, highlighting internal contestation over the implementation of formal Islamic law.

Although the groups opposing sharia in Aceh do not share a single agenda, they have collectively voiced concerns that its implementation may undermine civil rights within a democratized society. The formalization of sharia, along with the debates and implications surrounding its enforcement, has been the subject of extensive scholarly study. Researchers such as Feener and Cammack (2007), Aspinal (2009), Salim (2008), Ihwan (2013), Ramly (2010), Basri (2010), and Indria (2013) have examined these issues, each offering distinct perspectives on the application of Islamic law in Aceh and its social, political, and legal consequences.

The formalization of sharia in modern Aceh, along with its accompanying debates and controversies, echoes historical dynamics. The Acehnese Muslim community has long experienced tensions between sharia and sufism, a historical trauma traceable to the polemic between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin Ar-Raniri during the Samudera Pasai Sultanate under Sultan Iskandar Tsani. Despite the community's intense religiosity, contradictions have emerged regarding the application of Islam, dividing scholars into sharia and sufi camps. This discourse is not unique to Aceh; similar debates have occurred across the Islamic world. In the classical period, for example, the Baghdad Sufi School, which closely integrated with Sharia, contrasted with the Khurasan-based Malamatiyah movement, which was considered by some to differ from mainstream sharia practices (Halim, 2015). In South Kalimantan, conflicts arose between sufi scholars, represented by Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari, and sharia scholars, represented by Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (Mubin, 2010). Comparable polemics also took place in Java, notably between Siti Jenar and the Walisanga.

These two groups of scholars differ in their stress points regarding the application of Islamic principles in social life and government. The first group emphasizes various formal rules (sharia/*exsoteric*) to be positive legal products. Meanwhile, sufi scholars emphasize the inner aspect (exoteric), focusing on personality formation through inner cultivation (*tazkiyat*

al-nufūs). Discourses and polemics between sharia scholars and sufi scholars continue to attract considerable attention among academics to this day. In the context of modern Aceh, although the struggle to formalize sharia involves various stakeholders, in the end, it narrows to a contest between sharia and sufi scholars.

This article focuses on the thoughts and actions of Abuya Amran Waly al-Khalidi (1947–present), a prominent modern sufi scholar of Aceh. He is a direct descendant of the esteemed scholar Abuya Muhammad Waly al-Khalidi (1917–1961) and, inheriting his father's charisma, has emerged as a leading sufi figure with significant influence and followers both in Aceh and across Indonesia. His authority as a sufi scholar is rooted in his role as a mursyid of the Naqsyabandiyah al-Khalidiyah order, passed down from his father and other teachers within the tradition. Although his sufi teachings are grounded in classical sufi texts and traditions, they have often been misinterpreted, generating debate, particularly among Acehnese sharia scholars. His legacy is reminiscent of the great sufi scholar Hamzah Fansuri.

This article argues that the implementation of sharia in modern Aceh has often been superficial, amounting to little more than lip service, and thus fails to address the deeper challenges faced by the ummah. In this gap, sufi scholars, exemplified by Abuya Amran Waly, seek to cultivate religious awareness among Acehnese Muslims by drawing on traditions and cultural practices to revive and reinterpret Islam through sufi teachings. To complement the formalistic, exoteric expression of Islam, he established several sufi movements, including the Naqsyabandiyah Khalidiyah Tarekat, the Ratib Seribee Dhikr Council, and the Indonesian Islamic Tauhid Studies Council (MPTT-I).

Through these three sufi institutions, Abuya Amran Waly not only challenged the formalization of Islamic law but also demonstrated sufism's deeper role in shaping the character of Muslims, aiming to cultivate what he termed *al-kāmil* individuals. This article specifically examines the substance of his thought and the models through which Islamic teachings are applied via sufism in social and state life. Ultimately, it offers a framework to analyze the dynamics of Islam in Aceh, including the implementation of Sharia, inter-scholarly relations, and the political interventions and decisions of Jakarta's elite.

Method

This article is based on qualitative field research. Data were collected through observation of routine activities organized by the Indonesian Sufism Tawḥid Studies Council (Majelis Pengkajian Tauhid Tasawuf Indonesia, MPTT-I), led by Abuya Amran Waly Al-Khalidi and attended by the *jamā'ah*. In-depth interviews were conducted with Abuya Amran Waly and selected members of the *jamā'ah*, particularly senior participants. In addition, this study draws on documentary and literature-based sources, including primary materials such as classical and contemporary sufi texts, qanun and other legal instruments, official letters and fatwas issued by the MPU, MUI, and state institutions, as well as archival records and media reports. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Acehnese Islam, the formalization of sharia, and sufism.

Field data from observations and interviews were systematically analyzed alongside written documentation using triangulation to ensure analytical rigor, leading to the construction of narrative findings. The analysis adopts an interpretive and narrative approach, situating

empirical data within broader historical, sociological, and theoretical frameworks on the dynamics of Islam in Aceh. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the epistemological, political, and religious contestations between sufism and sharia within the context of contemporary Aceh.

Islam, Identity, & the Political Construction of Sharia in Aceh

The study of sharia implementation in post-reform Aceh cannot be separated from its historical context, particularly the relationship between Islam and the Acehnese people, who have actively shaped their culture. Historically, Islam has been deeply intertwined with Acehnese traditions and social life (Kloos, 2013). Discussing Acehnese Muslims is, in effect, discussing Islam itself, as the religion has become a defining symbol of the community. Being an Acehnese Muslim encompasses the Acehnese language, cultural traditions, modes of dress, and adherence to Islamic values as a central guide for life. Within this landscape, it is unsurprising that approximately 98 percent of Aceh's population is Muslim, with the remaining 2 percent following other religions. The strong Islamic identity of the Acehnese distinguishes the region from different parts of Indonesia.

Islam, closely intertwined with Acehnese identity, developed earlier in Aceh than in many other regions of Indonesia. The discovery of the Barus site indicates that Islam had reached Aceh as early as the 9th Century CE, suggesting that Islamic teachings have long shaped Acehnese religious life, traditions, and culture, well before their spread to other parts of the archipelago. By the 16th and 17th centuries, sufi Islam, particularly the *wujūdīyah* or *waḥdat al-wujūd* orientation taught by Hamzah Fansuri, had become the official religious doctrine of the Aceh Sultanate under Sultan Iskandar Muda.

In later periods, the Islamic reform movement, promoted by reformist scholars and supported by some sufi figures, also spread to Aceh and other Malay cultural regions in the 19th Century. This development fostered a renewed harmony between sharia and sufism. Within this socio-historical context, the wave of Islamic purification penetrated deeply into *dayah* (*pesantren*), Islamic organizations, and tarekat networks across Aceh. The reformist movement advocating Islamic purification gained further momentum in the modern era through figures such as Daud Beureueh, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), and various Islamic organizations. These currents eventually culminated in the formal implementation of sharia in Aceh Province after the reform era.

During the colonial era, Islam played a crucial role in cultivating Acehnese ethno-nationalism. Acehnese ulama successfully mobilized resistance against both Portuguese and Dutch colonial powers, waging a prolonged "holy war" against the Dutch from 1873 to 1942 (Kloos, 2013). Islamic values continued to serve as the core of Acehnese identity politics, continually reproduced through the authority of the ulama. After Indonesian independence, Aceh's first governor, Daud Beureueh, known as both a reformist cleric and an anti-colonial fighter, sought to integrate sharia into Aceh's governance. Drawing on a puritanical spirit, he sought to institutionalize Islamic courts and elevate the role of the ulama within the central government's structure (Reid, 1979). His demands were based, in part, on a personal conversation with President Sukarno in 1947, which he interpreted as approval for the enforcement of Islamic law. When these efforts failed, Beureueh launched the Darul

Islam/Indonesian Islamic Army (DI/TII) rebellion, which lasted from 1953 to 1962 (Sjamsuddin, 1985).

Demands for the enforcement of sharia in Aceh have never subsided, remaining a central issue from the collapse of the Suharto New Order regime through the reform era. It was only during the reform period that the longstanding agenda of formalizing Islamic sharia in Aceh could finally be realized. This raises several important questions: Who were the key actors behind the eventual implementation of Islamic law in Aceh? Does the current form of sharia enforcement reflect the aspirations long championed by Acehnese figures such as Daud Beureueh, Hasan Tiro, GAM, and other components of Acehnese society? Or does its emergence reflect the political interests and strategic goodwill of the Jakarta government? These questions are complex and multilayered. This section seeks to analyze and clarify these issues.

Following the reform era, the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Aceh began with the enactment of Law No. 44 of 1999, which granted Aceh the status of a Special Autonomous Region. This was followed by Law No. 18 of 2001, which explicitly authorized the enforcement of Islamic law. These legal foundations were later strengthened by Law No. 6 of 2006 concerning the Government of Aceh (UUPA). Over the past two decades, these legal instruments have enabled Aceh to operate under what is commonly referred to as an "Islamic government." The emergence of this Islamic governance model represents a compromise among various stakeholders, both within the Acehnese Muslim community and between Aceh and the central government in Jakarta.

The Aceh Special Autonomy Laws package extends the implementation of Islamic law across several domains, including religious affairs, customary practices, and education. According to Alyasa' Abubakar, one of the key figures involved in formulating Aceh's qonun on Islamic Sharia, the application of sharia in Aceh is intended to be *kāffah* (comprehensive) (Abubakar, 2008). In the educational sector, Aceh is authorized to develop a sharia-based curriculum. In the realm of customary law, Aceh established the Aceh Customary Council (MAA), which oversees the administration and enforcement of traditional legal norms. Furthermore, reflecting Aceh's special status, ulama are granted a significant institutional role through the Ulama Consultative Assembly (MPU), whose organizational structure extends from the provincial level down to district and sub-district levels. Another distinctive feature of Aceh's special autonomy is the allowance for the establishment of local political parties, an arrangement not found in other Indonesian provinces. These local parties are permitted to contest both legislative elections (Pileg) and regional executive elections (Pilkada).

Although sharia in Aceh is formally described as *kāffah* (comprehensive), its practical implementation has remained partial (Ihwan, 2007). A closer examination shows that only three qanuns have been fully enacted with corresponding legal sanctions. These are the qanuns on (1) alcoholic beverages, (2) gambling, and (3) khalwah (close proximity between unrelated males and females). Any citizen who violates these qanuns is subject to punishment, with enforcement carried out by the Islamic police, known as *Wilayatul Ḥisbah.*

In addition to these three, there is another qanun concerning Islamic dress, specifically the requirement for women to wear the *ḥijāb*. However, its enforcement does not involve formal sanctions; instead, it remains limited to verbal warnings and educational measures

administered by *Wilayatul Ḥisbah* for women found not wearing the prescribed attire (Afrianti, 2011).

Based on the description above, the so-called *kāffah* formalization of sharia in Aceh remains, in practice, largely superficial and even symbolic. The slogan of comprehensive sharia enforcement, often generating significant public debate at the national level, does not resemble the more extensive implementation found in several Middle Eastern or African countries. Instead, Aceh's sharia regime primarily consists of a limited set of prohibitions enforced through specific qanuns. The three qanuns noted earlier, in fact, have parallels in various Indonesian provinces or districts through Regional Regulations (Peraturan Daerah), although the sanctions outside Aceh are generally less strict.

The Law on the Governance of Aceh (PA Law), enacted following the Helsinki Agreement on 15 August 2005, has further formalized sharia in the province. However, this formalization has been characterized by some scholars as a form of "Arabization," in which elements of Arab culture are adopted artificially, without corresponding embodiment of Islam's substantive ethical values (Indria, 2013). Consequently, the prevailing academic and theoretical impression is that the implementation of sharia in Aceh is largely ceremonial and politically driven, primarily a product of compromise between the central government in Jakarta and the Acehnese Muslim community. Within this political arrangement, the principal beneficiary of the PA Law is ultimately the government in Jakarta.

The Sharia–Sufism Confrontation in Early Acehnese Islamic Thought

In sixteenth-century Aceh, public religious life was marked by a profound contestation between sufism and sharia, embodied in two major intellectual currents: the sharia and sufi scholars. This period witnessed intense political and theological conflict, most notably the confrontation initiated by Nuruddin Ar-Raniri, appointed muftī under Sultan Iskandar Thani, against the teachings of Hamzah Fansuri and his disciple, Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani (Latif, 2023). Supported by the state, Ar-Raniri sought to suppress the sufi doctrines of Fansuri and al-Sumatrani, a conflict that has been widely examined in scholarly literature.

Earlier, during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, when Fansuri and al-Sumatrani held influence as court scholars, their sufi teachings functioned as the kingdom's dominant intellectual orientation (*madhhab*) while still allowing space for sharia-oriented scholars (Braginsky, 1999). Although Ar-Raniri claimed expertise in sufi sciences, he strongly opposed Fansuri's metaphysical thought, as reflected in several of his works, *Bustān al-Salātīn, Tibyān fī Maʿrifat al-Adyān*, and *Asrār al-Insān fī Maʿrifat al-Rūḥ wa al-Raḥmān*, which contain systematic rebuttals of Fansuri's ideas (Jalil, 2020). Despite operating within the same sufi discourse, the two sides represented distinct orientations: Ar-Raniri exemplified a scholar whose engagement with sufism was primarily textual, whereas Fansuri was both a practitioner and a master of sufi literary expression.

From the perspective of the sociology of religion, the figure of Ar-Raniri embodies what is commonly understood as Islamic orthodoxy. In contrast, al-Fansuri represents a form of heterodox or non-orthodox religiosity within Islam. Orthodoxy is constructed by privileging what is perceived as correct belief, relying on codified doctrines, particularly those concerning creed, and stressing rigorous adherence to an established epistemic and ritual framework.

Orthopraxy, by contrast, emphasizes correct practice, both in ethical conduct and liturgical or ritual performance (Antes, 2004). The term derives from the neoclassical compound ὀρθοπραξία (orthopraxia), meaning "right practice."

In simpler terms, orthodoxy and orthopraxy reflect two distinct religious orientations. Orthodoxy refers to "true belief," encompassing officially accepted theories, doctrines, and practices. Orthopraxy, by contrast, denotes "right practice," but this refers not merely to the enactment of correct doctrine; instead, it emphasizes proper conduct and ritual action. Religious traditions can thus be approached from either an orientation to belief (orthodoxy) or to practice (orthopraxy). These contrasting emphases are often framed as "true belief" versus "true practice" (Rippin, 2016; Calder, 2007).

The consequences of Ar-Raniri's policies as the sultanate's muftī toward al-Fansuri's ideas were profound. As a representative of Islamic orthodoxy, Ar-Raniri wielded authority to define Islamic truth within his own framework. Although al-Fansuri previously held a similar position, he never employed that authority to suppress differing scholarly views. Ar-Raniri's deployment of orthodox power resulted not only in the prohibition and burning of al-Fansuri's works but also in the persecution and marginalization of his followers. Over the centuries, this episode significantly curtailed the intellectual legacy of al-Fansuri's sufism.

In modern Aceh, debates surrounding the public implementation of sharia have persisted. A central figure in this discourse is Daud Beureueh, a puritan-oriented scholar and prominent reformist Islamic leader. As a scholar-politician, he enjoyed broad public trust and became the first governor of Aceh Province after Indonesian independence. During his tenure, Beureueh attempted to institutionalize sharia by establishing Islamic courts under the authority of the ulama (Kloos, 2013). However, these efforts failed due to insufficient support from local elites. His subsequent disappointment, reportedly rooted in Sukarno's private promise in 1947 to allow the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh, culminated in the Darul Islam rebellion, which he led from 1953 to 1962.

Abuya Amran Waly & the Sufi–Sharia Tension in Aceh

Among the local elites who opposed the rebellion were influential sufi scholars. With extensive rural networks, these sufi ulama constituted a significant socioreligious force. One of the most notable was Abuya Muhammad Waly al-Khalidi, widely known as Abuya Muda Waly, the father of Abuya Amran Waly, a leading contemporary Acehnese scholar. Muda Waly's rejection of the Darul Islam movement was grounded in his sufi orientation, his role as mursyid of the Ṭariqah Naqshbandiyyah al-Khalidiyyah, and his adherence to the creed of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. Drawing on *fiqh al-siyāsah* within this theological framework, he argued that rebellion against a legitimate government constitutes *bughāt* (treason), which is prohibited in Islam (Safriadi, 2020). This doctrinal position was later continued and further articulated by his son, Abuya Amran Waly, as discussed in the following section.

According to Abuya Amran Waly, his father, Abuya Muda Waly, played a strategic and outspoken role in rejecting the Darul Islam rebellion led by Daud Beureueh. Abuya Muda Waly convened leading sufi scholars across Aceh to deliberate on the uprising, and they unanimously concluded that rebellion against the legitimate government of President Sukarno, based on the ʿaqīdah of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah,* constituted *bughāt* (treason). To

reinforce Sukarno's political legitimacy, Abuya Muda Waly conferred upon him the title *walī al-amr al-ḍarūrī bi al-shawkah* (Al-Khalidi, 2023), a designation also granted by Javanese pesantren scholars affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (Asy'ari, 2015).

Abuya Muda Waly's stance, rooted in the theological principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, was taken with full awareness of its risks. Viewing matters of ʿ*aqīdah* as fundamental to religion, he travelled with a group of Acehnese sufi scholars to the Bogor Palace to express spiritual and moral support for President Sukarno during a period of national crisis. At this meeting, Acehnese ulama joined their Javanese counterparts in reaffirming Sukarno's status as *walī al-amr al-ḍarūrī bi al-shawkah*. According to Hadrami Waly, grandson of Abuya Muda Waly and nephew of Abuya Amran Waly, this firm stance, followed by his students, generated hostilities with members of Darul Islam. Tensions escalated to the point of physical confrontation around the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Labuhan Haji, South Aceh (Waly, 2023).

The Beureueh rebellion formally ended in 1962 after the Jakarta government granted Aceh a form of special autonomy encompassing religion, education, and customary affairs. Beureueh himself descended from his mountain headquarters that year and withdrew from political activity. However, the emergence of a new state-led development project, the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project in North Aceh during the 1970s, generated fresh tensions. In 1976, Hasan di Tiro, a descendant of an anti-colonial ulama, proclaimed the establishment of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Initially, GAM drew support from former Darul Islam networks. Over time, however, GAM diverged significantly from its predecessor. While Darul Islam was driven by an explicitly Islamic ideological framework, GAM gradually adopted a secular orientation rooted in ethno-nationalism. By the 1980s, its political mission had shifted toward seeking complete independence and sovereignty for Aceh, separate from the Indonesian state (Kloos, 2013).

In the end, the analysis of the formalization of sharia in Aceh narrowed the debate between sharia scholars and sufism scholars. In the modern context, the implementation of sharia in Aceh is also directly or indirectly opposed by various elements of civil society groups. The study by Ihwan and Indria clearly shows the public disapproval of many aspects of sharia in Aceh (Ihwan, 2013; Indria, 2013). Sufi scholars believe that one of the impacts of the politicization of sharia will marginalize the esoteric teachings of sufism (Ihwan, 2007). This thesis departs from the history mentioned in the previous section.

In contemporary Aceh, one form of indirect resistance to the implementation of sharia is represented by Abuya Amran Waly al-Khalidi. Raised within a strong sufi tradition by his father, Abuya Muhammad Waly al-Khalidi, one of Aceh's most influential twentieth-century scholars, Abuya Amran Waly inherited both the intellectual legacy and the spiritual authority of the Naqsyabandiyah Khalidiyah order. Many of Abuya Muhammad Waly's students, now active across Aceh and the wider Malay world, trace their scholarly lineage directly to him. Building on this heritage, Abuya Amran Waly emerged as a leading sufi figure whose teachings have developed extensive followings not only throughout Aceh but also across Indonesia, Malaysia, and other parts of Southeast Asia. His role as a mursyid of the Naqshbandiyah order, supported by an extensive network of disciples, has positioned his ideas as a key reference for many of his followers.

At the outset, Abuya Amran Waly did not directly confront sharia scholars regarding the implementation of Islamic law. Substantively, he agreed on the importance of enforcing Islamic law. However, when it comes to understanding the essence of sharia and its application in the public sphere, particularly when formalized into qanun (regional regulations), his conceptualization and methodological approach diverged. It is in this domain that he offered a critique of Aceh's sharia enforcement practices. As a counterpoint, he emphasized a model of Islamic practice grounded in sufism. Consequently, the sufi thought and praxis he teaches need not be positioned in a binary opposition of "sufism versus sharia." Instead, the model of Islamic thought and praxis he proposes through the sufi tradition can be understood as an alternative paradigm for the implementation of sharia (Ihwan, 2007).

Conceptually, sharia carries a broad and comprehensive meaning. As a doctrine, it encompasses all dimensions of Muslim conduct. In Abuya Amran Waly's view, sharia represents *kāffah* Islam*,* the totality of Islam taught by the Prophet Muhammad and continued by his Companions and the scholars. This *kāffah* Islam includes the dimensions of sharia, *ṭarīqah, ḥaqīqah, and ma'rifah*; in other words, Islam, *īmān*, and *iḥsān* form a unified whole. These dimensions are inseparable and must be approached as an integrated system. Their interpretation and implementation require a gradual process, moving through spiritual "stations" (*maqāmāt*) (Al-Khalidi, 2023).

Accordingly, for Abuya Amran Waly, sharia, understood as this integrated whole, must be embodied in acts of worship and social relations across all *maqāmāt*, without neglecting any dimension. In this framework, the whole meaning and realization of sharia can only be achieved through the interpretive and practical lens of sufism.

On the other hand, sharia, as understood by sharia-oriented scholars in modern Aceh who are involved in drafting the qanun, relies almost exclusively on a single source or "ladder", namely, sharia or fiqh. In the various Islamic legal and legislative products produced in Aceh, the dimensions of *Īmān* and *iḥsān,* represented in sufi terms as *ṭarīqah, ḥaqīqah,* and *ma'rifah*, are effectively excluded. The version of Islamic sharia codified into qonun and other regulations in contemporary Aceh is thus grounded entirely in fiqh, without incorporating the inner or esoteric dimensions emphasized in sufism. In short, the legal codification enforced by the Aceh government addresses only the external aspects of Islam, while its internal (esoteric) aspects remain outside the reach of law (Adriyani, 2022).

This divergence in Islamic perspectives and praxis between the two major currents of Acehnese scholars has proven difficult to reconcile. Sufi scholars predominantly prefer cultural *da'wah* through education, *dayah* traditions, and *ṭarīqah*-based spiritual guidance. By contrast, sharia scholars occupy strategic positions within the bureaucracy, legislative bodies, and pseudo-government institutions at the provincial, regency/city, sub-district, and village levels. The Ulama Consultative Assembly (MPU) and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) of Aceh, both functioning as authoritative bodies for religious guidance, are primarily dominated by sharia scholars. These institutions play a central role in shaping and, to an extent, monopolizing the interpretation of Islam. Similarly, key posts in the bureaucratic and legislative sectors are filled by figures aligned with the sharia-oriented camp.

Abuya Amran Waly, as a prominent sufi scholar, once entered practical politics through Golkar. From 1982 to 1987, he served as a legislative member of the Golkar faction in South Aceh Regency. His political career, however, did not continue into the next period (Saprizal,

2023). Beyond his stated intention to focus on reviving the Islamic boarding school he had inherited, there were deeper, unwritten considerations: namely, that sufi scholars traditionally do not situate themselves within the sphere of practical politics. Their role tends to operate within national moral authority and behind-the-scenes influence rather than formal political office. This pattern is typical among Javanese pesantren figures as well. A comparable example is KH. Musta'in Romli, leader of the Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School, Peterongan, Jombang, and *murshid* of the Qadiriyyah wa Naqshbandiyyah (TQN) order. He too served only one term (1982–1985) as a member of Indonesia's House of Representatives from the Golkar faction before withdrawing to focus on pesantren affairs and the TQN community (Hunaini, 2022).

Abuya Amran Waly's concern regarding the formalization of Islamic law eventually proved justified. The consolidation of authority in the MPU and MUI, dominated by sharia-oriented scholars, has resulted in a form of interpretive monopoly over Islam in Aceh. One sufi institution that came under scrutiny from these bodies is the Indonesian Sufism Tauhid Studies Council (Majelis Pengkajian Tauhid Tasawuf Indonesia, MPTT-I), founded and led by Abuya Amran Waly. At the core of this tension lies a fundamental difference in methodological approach. Sharia scholars within the MPU rely almost exclusively on fiqh-based reasoning. In contrast, Abuya Amran Waly and other sufi scholars employ both fiqh and Sufi epistemology to understand the multidimensional nature of Islamic teachings.

The climax of the difference in interpretation between the two camps occurred when Abuya Amran Waly's sufi thought on the concept *of al-insān al-kāmil* in al-Jilli's work was questioned by the MPU. For MPU scholars, the thought of sufism al-Jilli in the work *of al-Insān al-Kāmil* (al-Jilli, 2010) is considered an unusual book (*ghayr al-muʿtabar*) among *the ahlussunnah wa al-Jamaah*. The consequences of the thought taught from the book *of ghayr al-muʿtabar* will mislead Muslims. Based on this monopoly of interpretation, the MPU scholars decided that the thought of Abuya Amran Waly, considered to teach the teachings of sufism al-Jilli, was heretical. This polemic has not found common ground because it departs from a different point of view: the sharia approach used by MPU scholars differs from that of the sufis.

On 10 January 2017, the North Aceh branch of the Majelis Pengkajian Tauhid Tasawwuf Indonesia (MPTT-I) was banned from holding a tauhid study session by the imam of Baiturrahim Mosque in Lhoksukon, who argued that the teachings were incompatible with the religious context and scholarly tradition of North Aceh. Subsequently, on 25 August 2017, a member of the Aceh MPU, Abdullah Rasyid, stated in a local newspaper in Medan that MPTT-I was deviant and troubling to the Muslim community because its teachings positioned the Prophet Muhammad and the Prophet Adam alongside Allah. This was followed by the destruction of an MPTT-I study hall in Gampong Asan Bideun, Matang Geulumpang, Bireun, on 3 December 2017.

The conflict escalated, prompting a reaction from MPTT-I. On 7 February 2020, members of the group burned a book written by Abuya Djamaluddin Waly (the elder brother of Abuya Amran, who passed away on 21 July 2016), titled Aliran-aliran yang Menyimpang ("Deviant Sects"). Abuya Amran's students burned the book because they believed it disparaged the ideas of ʿAbd al-Karim al-Jilli in his work *al-Insān al-Kāmil*.

The polemic spread to Southwest Aceh (Aceh Barat Daya). On 15 August 2020, the Forum Mubahatsah Teungku Dayah (FMTD), consisting of dayah leaders and religious

scholars, rejected the expansion of MPTT-I in the region. The next day, on 26 December 2020, the Southwest Aceh MPU issued Advisory Letter (*tawsiyyah*) No. 451.7/21/2020, addressed to the Regent of Abdya, the Chair of the Abdya DPRK, the Abdya Police Chief, the Military District Commander 0110/Abdya, and the Head of the Abdya Prosecutor's Office, advising that all MPTT-I activities in Abdya be suspended until an official fatwā was issued by the Aceh MPU, in order to prevent public unrest and disruptions to social order.

Tensions continued to rise. On 20 September 2020, hundreds of people from various community groups in Southwest Aceh blocked MPTT-I followers who were travelling to attend the Majelis Pengkajian Ṭauḥīd Taṣawwuf activities at the MPTT-I post in the Bukit Hijau government complex, Keudee Paya Village, Blangpidie District. Rejection also came from the South Aceh MPU, which on 28 September 2020 issued a recommendation rejecting MPTT-I teachings because many of their study sessions excessively venerated individuals and discredited earlier Acehnese scholars. The controversy culminated on 29 September 2020, when the Aceh MPU issued Advisory Letter No. 7/2020 regarding MPTT-I, effectively urging the Aceh Government to halt all movement activities.

Opponents argue that specific sufi teachings promoted by MPTT-I diverge from orthodox doctrine, particularly those related to the concept of *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, as expounded by ʿAbd al-Karim al-Jilli, which the movement's leadership endorses. Briefly, al-Jilli's notion of the "perfect human" holds that the human being can reflect the names, attributes, and essence (*dhāt*) of Allah through the manifestation of the Prophet Muḥammad. As is widely recognized in sufi scholarship, doctrines associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* have frequently been the subject of controversy throughout Islamic history, as in the teachings of the sufis Ibn al-ʿArabi and Hamzah Fansuri.

As a sufi scholar, Abuya Amran Waly argued that the work of al-Jilli, particularly *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, was not considered problematic by the Central MUI. This position was formally conveyed by the Islamic Book and Content Publishing Institute (Lembaga Pengkajian dan Penerbitan Buku Keislaman Indonesia, LPBKI) of the Central MUI in Letter No. 306/LPBKI-MUI/IX/2020, issued in response to an inquiry submitted by MPTT-I Aceh. The letter, signed by Endang Soetari and Arif Fahruddin as chair and secretary, explicitly permits MPTT-I to study *al-Insān al-Kāmil*. According to LPBKI, al-Jilli's work may serve as a legitimate reference in sufi teachings because it is regarded as an authoritative (*mu'tabar*) text. LPBKI further affirmed that MPTT-I is among the sufi orders (*ṭarīqah*) recognized and practiced within JATMAN (*Jamʿiyyah Ahl al-Ṭarīqah al-Muʿtabarah al-Naḥḍiyyah*).

The Directorate of Islamic Guidance (Bimbingan Masyarakat Islam, Bimas Islam) of the Ministry of Religious Affairs also responded on 1 September 2020 to a submission from the Chair of the Jakarta Provincial MPTT-I Council regarding four sufi texts used by the group. In essence, the Directorate stated that the four reference works, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam, al-Insān al-Kāmil, Sirr al-Sālikīn, and Kashf al-Asrār*, are widely studied by sufi scholars. Subsequently, on 10 May 2021, Bimas Islam issued a letter to the General Chair of MPTT-I, offering recommendations and expressing full support for the teachings of Abuya Amran, and calling upon the public to uphold mutual respect.

The core intellectual dispute between Abuya Amran Waly and the scholars in MPU and MUI was triggered by his interpretation of the Quranic verse *qul huwa Allāhu al-Aḥad*. His commentary interprets the pronoun *huwa* not as referring to Allah but to Muḥammad, rendering

the verse: "Say, he (Muhammad) is Allah" (Al-Khalidī, 2017). This interpretation draws on al-Jilli's exegesis in *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (al-Jillī, 2010). Such an *ishārī* (esoteric) *tafsīr* approach is common among sufi scholars in interpreting Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions. In contrast, sharia-oriented scholars rely more heavily on ʿ*ibārah*-based interpretation (textual–juridical). These differing methodological approaches inevitably yield divergent conclusions.

The interpretation summarized as "Muhammad is Allah" has been repeatedly clarified by MPTT-I through Abuya Amran Waly in his lectures and writings. This interpretation, rooted in al-Jilli's concept of the *al-Insān al-Kāmil,* is part of a longstanding discourse among philosophical sufis, including Ibn al-ʿArabi, Hamzah Fansuri, Siti Jenar, and other metaphysical thinkers. Its essence is that Muhammad, at the level of ultimate reality, serves as the locus of the divine manifestation. This manifestation does not pertain to physical form but to the divine attributes, essence (*dhāt*), and acts (*afʿāl*) reflected within Muhammad; and ultimately within the human being as a mirror of divine reality.

The debate between MPTT-I and Acehnese scholars over the interpretation of *qul huwa Allāhu al-Aḥad* has shaped Islamic public discourse in Aceh for over a quarter of a century. Abuya Amran Waly frequently asserts that Acehnese scholars fail to grasp the epistemology of sufi monotheism (*tawḥīd taṣawwuf*), leading them to label his teachings deviant hastily. MPTT-I even argues that the intellectual stagnation of the Acehnese community stems from scholars distancing themselves from divine knowledge rooted in sufi metaphysics. Conversely, Acehnese scholars accuse MPTT-I, especially Abuya Amran, of promoting the metaphysical ideas of al-Jillī, which they claim were never taught by his father, Abuya Muda Waly.

Ultimately, this ongoing "rivalry" between sufi-oriented and sharia-oriented scholars has generated a dynamic intellectual landscape in Aceh. This contemporary polemic echoes events from four centuries earlier: the disputes between Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani, and Nuruddin Ar-Raniri, in the Aceh Sultanate. The core issue remains similar: philosophical sufism and debates over the nature of divine manifestation within the human being. These earlier scholars held prestigious positions in the sultanate, serving as *muftī* or *qāḍī mālik al-ʿādil*. Amid the contemporary dispute between Abuya Amran Waly and Acehnese religious authorities, on 24 October 2025, the Governor of Aceh, Muzakir Manaf, instead bestowed upon Abuya Amran Waly the title *Walī* Agama Aceh ("Religious Guardian of Aceh"), a designation in Acehnese Islamic tradition equivalent to the historic roles of *muftī* or *qāḍī* during the Aceh Sultanate.

The conferment of the title of "*Wali agama*" (religious guardian) of Aceh on Abuya Amran Waly is politically significant. The title was bestowed directly by the Governor of Aceh. In fact, the handover ceremony included an official visit to Abuya Amran Waly's residence at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Pawoh, South Aceh. Furthermore, the title of *Wali Agama* holds the highest position in the Islamic hierarchy of Acehnese Muslim society, holding a highly strategic and prestigious position. This fact, as previously mentioned, remains unchanged, unlike historical titles such as *al-qāḍī al- mālik al-ʿādil* (just ruler) during the Samudera Pasai Sultanate or other premodern Islamic kingdoms, which have survived into the modern Aceh era.

In other words, the title of *Wali Agama,* comparable to *al-qāḍī al-mālik al-ʿādil,* is the highest religious title within the sultanate's hierarchical structure, is reserved for the most

authoritative religious figure. The fatwas issued by such a figure were historically obeyed not only by the general populace but also by the ruling elite, including kings and sultans.

In the context of contemporary Aceh, the Governor's conferment of the title *Wali Agama* evokes historical precedents, particularly the title bestowed by Sultan Iskandar Muda during the Samudera Pasai Sultanate upon Hamzah Fanzuri. Amid the formalization of Islamic law in modern Aceh, sufism has gained fundamental ground within a larger framework, namely Indonesia's democratic system of government. In Zada's words, Islamic law legislation in Aceh remains within the framework of the democratic system adopted by the central government (Zada, 2023).

The conceptual relationship between Islamic law and sufism may be understood through the analogy that Islamic law constitutes the body, while Sufism represents the mind and soul. From this perspective, the tension often perceived between Islamic law and sufism does not have to be contradictory for scholars who understand both dimensions of Islamic teachings. Zada further stated that the enactment of various special policies and Islamic law in Aceh represented a compromise and political decision between elements of Acehnese society and the central government (Zada, 2015). Similarly, the Aceh governor's promotion of sufism, represented by Abuya Amran, can be interpreted as a political compromise amidst the strong presence of Islamic scholars.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, the data reveal a continuing contestation of ideas and of the implementation of Islamic teachings between sharia-oriented scholars and sufi scholars. The entry point of this study is a localized intellectual conflict represented by the tension between Abuya Amran Waly and Aceh's sharia scholars, particularly those within the MPU and MUI. This contestation illustrates divergent methodological frameworks in interpreting Islam within the spheres of society and the state. Sharia scholars generally employ ʿibārah-based, text-oriented interpretation, whereas sufi scholars rely on ishārī exegesis. These differing epistemological approaches naturally produce distinct theological conclusions and practical applications.

The focus on the contestation between Abuya Amran Waly and modern Acehnese sharia scholars highlights the shifting dynamics of Islam in Aceh over time. This contemporary debate echoes earlier intellectual conflicts in Aceh's history, particularly during the Samudera Pasai and Aceh Sultanates. Under Sultan Iskandar Tsani, the dispute between Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin Ar-Raniri similarly involved state institutions, with Ar-Raniri, serving as the sultan's *muftī*, using his authority to suppress Fansuri's ideas, which drew upon the metaphysical thought of al-Jillī and Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Substantively, the debates between these two currents of ulama in contemporary Aceh reflect bigger differences in how Islamic teachings are understood and applied. Abuya Amran Waly's critiques of the sharia scholars' approach to Aceh's formalized Islamic regulations concern the essence rather than the form of Islamic practice. For him, Islam as inherited from his father does not need to be formalized through rigid legal structures; instead, its values must be internalized within the moral fabric of society. The long tradition of sufi thought in Aceh, from Hamzah Fansuri and al-Sumatrani to Abuya Muda Waly and Abuya Amran Waly, has

consistently emphasized Islam as an embodied ethical disposition, epitomized in the concept of *al-Insān al-Kāmil* as articulated by al-Jilli.

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