Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam
Volume 10 No. 1. March 2026
ISSN: 2549 – 3132; E-ISSN: 2549 – 3167
DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Sunni Islamic Thought and the Development of Religious Tolerance in North Maluku: Perspective of Sufism and *Maslahah*

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Abstract: Indonesia is home to the world’s largest Sunni Muslim population, where Islam historically developed within the framework of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā‘ah*, grounded in the creeds of al-Ash‘ari and al-Maturidi, the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, and classical Sufism. This study examines the role of the Sunni tradition in fostering interfaith tolerance in North Maluku. Employing a qualitative approach, the research draws on field observations, in-depth interviews, and literature analysis, and is analytically informed by Sufi perspectives in Islamic thought and the concept of *maṣlaḥah* (public welfare) in Islamic law. The findings reveal that the Sunni tradition, particularly through its Sufi teachings, promotes a balanced model of religious moderation that integrates firm theological commitment with social openness. In Indonesia, Sunni Islam has played a significant role in nurturing interfaith tolerance not only at the theological level but also across social, cultural, and political dimensions, both conceptually and in everyday practice. In North Maluku specifically, from the era of the sultanates to the present day, the Sunni tradition has consistently contributed to harmonious interreligious relations, positioning religion as a source of universal compassion. As the majority religious orientation, Sunni Islam advances moderate teachings that encourage peaceful coexistence, as reflected in Sufi ethics and Shafi‘i jurisprudence, which emphasizes the pursuit of social welfare. Consequently, the *Aswaja* tradition has profoundly shaped Indonesian Islam as an inclusive, humane, and socially responsive religious expression.

Keywords: Sunni school of thought, tolerance, interfaith relations, sufism, *mashlahah*

‖ Submitted: October 01, 2024 ‖ Accepted: February 16, 2026 ‖ Published: February 17, 2026

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Abstrak: *Indonesia merupakan negara dengan mayoritas penganut faham mazhab sunni terbesar di dunia. Islam yang masuk dan berkembang di Indonesia adalah ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah yang mengikuti aqidah al-Asy'ari dan Maturidi, mengikuti empat imam mazhab dan bertasawuf sebagaimana sufisme Al-Ghazālī dan Junaid al-Baghdādi. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk membahas tentang peran mazhab sunni dalam menciptakan toleransi antar umat beragama di Maluku Utara. Kajian tersebut menggunakan metode kualitatif, dianalisis dengan menggunakan teori sufistik dalam pemikiran Islam dan mashlahat dalam hukum Islam. Data dikumpulkan dengan cara observasi lapangan, wawancara mendalam, dan studi literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mazhab Sunni melalui ajaran dan konsep tasawufnya memberi kontribusi pada model moderasi yang berimbang antara keteguhan akidah dan keterbukaan sosial. Di Indonesia mazhab Sunni memiliki peran yang siginifikan dalam menciptakan toleransi antara umat beragama, aspeknya tidak hanya teologis tetapi juga sosial, budaya, dan politik, pada tataran konsep dan aplikasi dalam kehidupan sehari. Demikian juga mazhab Sunni di Maluku Utara sejak masa kesultanan sampai saat ini perannya dalam menciptakan toleransi antara umat beragama telah terbukti menjadikan agama sebagai rahmatan lil alamin. Dari aspek teologis, mazhab sunni sebagai kelompok mayoritas membawa ajaran yang moderat sehingga pemahaman masyarakat lebih damai dan toleran. Hal ini tercermin dalam ajaran sufisme dan mazhab fiqih yang mengikui Imam Syafii dalam hukum Islam mengedepankan nilai-nilai kemaslahatan. Karena itu, tradisi Aswaja telah membentuk karakter Islam Indonesia yang inklusif, ramah, dan menjunjung tinggi nilai-nilai kemanusiaan.*
Kata kunci: *Mazhab Sunni, toleransi, hubungan antar Agama, tasawuf, maslahah*

Introduction

Islam in the Indonesian archipelago is characterized by diverse religious interpretations and practices. The Malay world of Indonesia and Southeast Asia has played a significant role in shaping a form of moderate and progressive Islam that emphasizes diversity, inclusivity, openness, peace, and social harmony in an increasingly globalized world. These varied religious understandings have been practiced across Indonesia's many ethnic communities and have developed through local interpretations of Islamic teachings originally introduced from the Middle East.[1] Consequently, the character of Islam in Indonesia cannot be homogenized or equated with that of Middle Eastern Islam. The socio-political and religious contexts of the Middle East differ markedly from those of Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and the broader Malay world. Muslim societies in

[1]Amin Abdullah, "Islam as A Cultural Capital in Indonesia and The Malay World: A Convergence of Islamic Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, No. 2 (2017). Azyumardi Azra, "Networks of the Ulama in the Haramayn: Connections in the Indian Ocean Region," *Studia Islamika* 8, No. 1 (2001).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Indonesia have historically followed distinct socio-political trajectories, including relatively peaceful leadership transitions that have occurred without widespread violence or loss of life.

As a pluralistic and deeply religious nation, Indonesia encompasses a wide array of cultures, languages, ethnic groups, and religious traditions. This diversity represents an important form of social capital; however, it also carries the potential for socio-religious conflict if not accompanied by tolerance and mutual understanding. Communal conflicts in Ambon (Maluku), Poso (Central Sulawesi), and Sambas (Central Kalimantan) serve as critical national lessons, illustrating that diversity in the absence of tolerance can escalate into violent confrontation.[2] Furthermore, rigid, sectarian, and textualist interpretations of religion have contributed to the development of intolerant attitudes, including the marginalization and stigmatization of religious "others," who are often labeled as infidels or heretics. Such interpretations may evolve into extremism and terrorism, rooted in distorted understandings of faith that stand in direct contradiction to the tolerant principles of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Tragic incidents such as the Bali bombings, the Makassar suicide attack, and the bombing at the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta exemplify the destructive consequences of intolerant religious ideologies.[3]

Within this context, it is important to emphasize that religious understanding significantly shapes religious attitudes and behavior. When individuals or communities embrace a moderate interpretation of religion, their religious practices and social conduct tend to reflect moderation and tolerance. Conversely, rigid, intolerant, or *takfīrī* interpretations of religion are often manifested in exclusionary and, in some cases, radical behavior. The emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in the Middle East has subsequently influenced several radical groups in Indonesia, including the Majelis Mujahin Indonesia (Indonesian Mujahideen Council), Jamaah Islamiyah, Jama'ah Ansharu Tauhid, and Jama'ah Ansharu Daulah. A closer examination of their theological orientations reveals a shared foundation of intolerance and radicalism, an

[2]Azman Arsyad, et.al., "Religious Moderation, *Pela Gandong* and Jihad Reconstruction: Conflict Prevention in Maluku from the Perspective of *Maqāṣid Al-Sharī'ah*," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 9, No. 3 (2025). Kirsten E. Schulze, "The "ethnic" in Indonesia's Communal Conflicts: Violence in Ambon, Poso, and Sambas," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, (2017)..

[3] Hasan, Noorhaidi, "The Salafi Movement in Indonesia: Transnational Dynamics and Local Development," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, No. 1 (2007). Yusuf Hanafi, et.al., "Sentiment Prevalence on Jihad, Caliphate, and Bid'ah among Indonesian Students: Focusing on Moderate-radical Muslim Group Tension," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, No. 1 (2022).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

ideological pattern that consistently generates conflict and violence against those who adhere to different religious interpretations or schools of thought.[4]

The losses resulting from communal conflict and acts of terrorism extend far beyond damage to property and material assets, encompassing profound human costs in the form of lost lives. Moreover, such violence has deeply affected the social, cultural, and political fabric of the nation. For this reason, the maintenance of tolerance among religious communities is essential to ensuring that social and religious life can proceed peacefully, harmoniously, and sustainably. In this context, the distinctive character of Islam as practiced in Indonesia and Southeast Asia has gained broad recognition, functioning as a form of "living law" that shapes everyday religious life and influences the practices of Muslim communities. In practical terms, the Shāfiʿī school of Islamic jurisprudence has been particularly influential, not only in Indonesia but across Southeast Asia. Its widespread transmission through traditional educational institutions such as *pesantren*, *surau*, and *dayah* has reinforced its religious authority and ensured its continuous production and reproduction across generations.[5]

A similar pattern can be observed in the field of Islamic theology, where the dominant orientation is *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. This theological tradition is commonly associated in Southeast Asia with the doctrine of the "twenty attributes" of God (*sifat dua puluh*), a concept deeply embedded in Malay-Islamic religious discourse. The doctrinal foundation of this framework can be traced to the work *Umm al-Barāhīn* by Yūsuf al-Sanūsī. The notion of the "twenty attributes" gained prominence in the nineteenth century, particularly within Javanese and Malay religious texts produced by Southeast Asian scholars residing in Mecca. These scholars translated the text into Malay and expanded upon it through commentaries (*sharḥ*), a distinctive literary tradition that flourished in Javanese and Malay Islamic manuscripts of the period. With the subsequent printing and circulation of these texts throughout Southeast Asia, the theological framework of Sunni Islam was systematically transmitted and reproduced, ultimately becoming the dominant form of Islamic orthodoxy in the region. [6]

Islam in Indonesia emerged through an intimate and sustained engagement with the long-established traditions and cultural practices of the archipelago's diverse societies. Rather than displacing pre-existing customs, the spread of Islam

[4] Abdul Majid, et.al., "Salafi, Hadith, and Islamic Law: Identity Politics and Wahabi Movement in East Kalimantan," *Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 23, No. 1 (2023).

[5]Yasrul Huda, et.al., "Strengthening the Shafi'i Madhhab: Malay Kitab Jawi of Fiqh in the 19th Century," *Juris: Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah* 22, No. 2 (2023).

[6] Jajat Burhanudin, "The Popularizing of Sunni Doctrine in Southeast Asia: Sifat Dua Puluh in Malay Kitab Jawi of the 19th Century," *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, No. 2 (2022).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

was largely facilitated through processes of acculturation, in which Islamic teachings were harmonized with the local traditions of various ethnic communities. This accommodative approach enabled Islam to be widely accepted and to develop rapidly across the region. As a result, Indonesia has become the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, characterized by remarkable diversity in terms of ethnicity, culture, customs, and language.

These evolving religious perspectives underwent processes of socialization alongside the continued development of local cultural and traditional patterns, a dynamic that at times generated tension and social inequality. Despite such challenges, local religious scholars and community leaders played an active role in mediating these tensions and fostering social cohesion. Over time, as Islam became the dominant religious tradition in Indonesia, local customs were increasingly infused with Islamic values and norms. The majority of Indonesian Muslims adhere to the Sunni school of Islam, which constitutes the largest branch of Islam globally. More fully known as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*—often abbreviated in Indonesia as *Aswaja*, this tradition is characterized by its theological alignment with the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī schools,[7] its recognition of the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) Mālikī, Ḥanafī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī and its integration of Sufism, as articulated in the teachings of figures such as Al-Ghazali and Junayd al-Baghdadi.

The Sunni school of thought represents the mainstream of Islam and encompasses the majority of the world's Muslim population, estimated at over 85 percent globally.[8] Throughout the history of Islamic thought, Sunni Islam has played a central role in shaping social, political, and theological principles, including normative approaches to coexistence and tolerance toward adherents of other faiths. Core Sunni principles such as justice (*ʿadl*), public welfare (*maṣlaḥah*), and *ʿurf* (social custom) provide a conceptual foundation for acknowledging human plurality.[9] From a Sunni perspective, tolerance does not imply theological relativism; rather, it is grounded in the doctrine of monotheism (*tawḥīd*), which affirms that human diversity is part of divine will, as articulated in the Qurʾān (49:13). Accordingly, diversity is understood not as a threat to faith, but as an opportunity to promote social justice, ethical responsibility, and mutual understanding within and across religious communities.[10]

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[7] Mujamil Qomar, "The Dynamic of Islamic Theology in Indonesia," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 9, No. 2 (2015). Saifuddin Dhuhri and Tarmizi Jakfar, "Māturīdite Kalam among Southeast Asian Ash`Arite: A Synthesis of Māturīdite Influences on Dayah's Theology," *al-Jamiah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 58, No. 2 (2020).

[8] John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 45.

[9] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 32.

[10] M. Quraish Shihab, *Wawasan al-Qur'an* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), p. 201.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Within this broader Sunni framework, Sufism occupies a significant and enduring position. Far from being a recent development, Sufism—with its emphasis on spiritual discipline and the purification of the heart—has long been embedded in Islamic intellectual and educational traditions, ranging from classical scholarship to Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and modern universities. Its theological orientation and ethical praxis tend to foster moderation, commonly conceptualized as *wasatiyyah*, with a central aim of reconciling diverse viewpoints through reflective and compassionate engagement. This orientation has been profoundly influenced by the intellectual legacy of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, whose synthesis of jurisprudence, theology, and spirituality has had lasting implications for Indonesian Islamic culture. As a result, Sufism has contributed significantly to shaping a moderate socio-religious discourse among Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, reinforcing traditions of tolerance, balance, and social harmony within the broader landscape of Islamic thought and practice.[11]

The central research question of this study concerns how the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* school of thought contributes to the creation and maintenance of tolerance among religious communities in North Maluku. To address this question, the study adopts a qualitative research design, employing analytical frameworks drawn from Sufistic thought within Islamic intellectual traditions and the concept of *maṣlaḥah* (public interest) in Islamic law.[12] Sufistic theory is utilized to examine the role of Sunni Sufism in fostering tolerant attitudes and interreligious harmony, while *maṣlaḥah* serves as an analytical lens to explore how the Sunni school of thought—particularly followers of Imam al-Shafi'i conceptualizes and promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the socio-religious context of North Maluku. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews, and literature review. The interviews involved academics and scholars of Islamic thought, experts in Islamic law, and local religious leaders in North Maluku. The literature review focused on relevant journal articles, scholarly books, and classical and contemporary works associated with *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*. This combination of empirical and textual sources enables a comprehensive analysis of both normative doctrines and lived religious practices related to tolerance and social harmony.

[11]Yedi Purwanto, et.al., "Tasawwuf moderation in higher education: Empirical study of Al-Ghazālī's Tasawwuf contribution to intellectual society," *Cogent Social Science* 9, No. 1 (2023).

[12] Muhammad Ainun Najib, et.al., "Tasawuf Sebuah Pendekatan dalam Studi Agama di Indonesia," *Jurnal Al-Aqidah* 16, No. 2 (2024), p. 132-145. M. Harir Muzakki, et.al., "Al-Juwaini's Ideas and the Development of Islamic Law: A Shifting Paradigm from the Inadequacy of Qiyas as a Method of Ijtihad to Mashlahah," *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 29, No. 2 (2025).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

The Arrival of Sunni Islam in the Archipelago

Scholars have expressed differing views regarding the arrival of Islam in Indonesia. According to Azyumardi Azra, scholarly debates on this issue generally revolve around three interrelated questions: the geographical origins of Islam, the agents who transmitted it, and the period of its initial arrival in the Indonesian archipelago. In response to these questions, several major theories have emerged. The first is the Gujarat–Malabar theory, which posits that Islam arrived in the Indonesian archipelago in the twelfth century through Muslim traders from Gujarat and Malabar, rather than directly from Arabia or Persia. This theory was first proposed by Pijnappel in 1872 and later supported by prominent Dutch scholars, including Snouck Hurgronje, Moquette, and Morrison.[13]

The second theory, advanced by S.Q. Fatimi, suggests that Islam entered Indonesia via Bengal. Fatimi argued that many prominent figures in the Pasai Sultanate were of Bengali origin or descent. He further maintained that Islam first reached the Malay Peninsula in the eleventh century through eastern maritime routes, rather than via the western route through Malacca. According to this view, Islam spread through trading networks connecting Canton, Phanrang (present-day Vietnam), Leran, and Trengganu, highlighting the significance of trans-regional maritime interactions in the Islamization process.[14]

The third theory contends that Islam came directly from Arabia, particularly from Hadhramaut. This view was initially proposed by John Crawfurd in 1820 and subsequently supported by scholars such as Salomon Keyzer, Niemann, de Hollander, and P.J. Veth. Crawfurd asserted that Islam entered the archipelago directly from Arabia, while Keyzer, Niemann, and de Hollander emphasized that Muslims in the archipelago predominantly adhered to the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence, which was also dominant in Egypt and Hadhramaut. This alignment, they argued, indicated a strong Arabian influence. Elements of this "Arab theory" were further reinforced by Thomas W. Arnold, who acknowledged the role of the Coromandel and Malabar coasts while emphasizing the central contribution of Arab traders in the spread of Islam to Southeast Asia. Arnold suggested that Arab merchants had been active in disseminating Islam in the archipelago as early as the seventh and eighth centuries CE, corresponding to the first century of the Hijri calendar. He noted that by 674 CE, Arab settlements had already been established along the west coast of Sumatra.[15] This perspective has also been supported by prominent Muslim

[13]Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII dan XVIII: Melacak Akar-akar Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1994), 25.)

[14]Azyumardi Azra, "Islam di Asia Tenggara: Pengantar Pemikiran", in Azyumardi Azra (editor), Perspektif Islam di Asia Tenggara (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1989), p. xii.

[15]Thomas W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, Delhi: Low Price Publication, 1995), p. 363-364.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

intellectuals such as Hamka and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who emphasize the decisive role of Arab religious and intellectual networks in the Islamization of Indonesia.[16]

Furthermore, Islamic missionary activities expanded significantly during the Ayyubid dynasty and Mamluk Sultanate periods in Egypt, extending to various regions of Southeast Asia, including the Indonesian archipelago. Centers of early Islamic dissemination included Pasai in North Aceh, Perlak in East Aceh, Muar in present-day Malaysia, Aru in eastern Sumatra, Kuntu in Riau, Ulakan on the west coast of West Sumatra, and Jepara in East Java. One notable figure was Sheikh Ismail as-Shiddiq, a Muslim scholar dispatched by the Mamluk authorities to the Pasai Sultanate, where he taught *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah* theology and Shāfiʿī jurisprudence. His activities exemplify the institutionalized transmission of Sunni orthodoxy from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.[17]

The development of Islamic scholarship in Southeast Asia was further shaped by the use of Malay, Javanese, and Arabic as scholarly languages. Prominent among the region's scholars were Da'ud al-Fatani and Nawawi al-Bantani. Daʿud al-Fatani composed his works primarily in Malay, whereas Nawawi al-Bantani wrote extensively in Arabic, although both pursued their religious education in Mecca. Their writings played a decisive role in shaping Islamic knowledge and intellectual traditions in Southeast Asia and contributed to the emergence of dynamic scholarly networks in Patani and Java during the nineteenth century. Living under conditions of Muslim-majority political leadership in different regions, both scholars exerted significant influence on the choice of language as a medium of religious expression, a form of cognitive and cultural articulation within broader socio-religious movements. Thus, their works were not merely intellectual endeavors, but were deeply embedded in the dominant mentalities and leadership cultures of Malay and Javanese Islam. [18]

As a Sunni tradition, *Ahl al-Sunnah* is defined by its commitment to the *Sunnah*, understood as the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), as a primary source of Islamic teachings. This tradition positions itself as both a practitioner and guardian of the *Sunnah*, particularly in response to intellectual currents that seek to marginalize or reject its authority. Classical Sunni scholarship generally reflects a moderate and methodologically rigorous approach to teachings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, emphasizing careful verification and ethical responsibility in the transmission of religious knowledge. Sunni scholars

[16] Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, Bandung: Mizan, 1990, p. 53-54.

[17]KH. Sirajuddin Abbas, *Sejarah Keagungan Madzhab Syafii*, Pustaka Tarbiyah, 1994. p. 258

[18]Jajat Burhanudin, "Two Islamic Writing Traditions in Southeast Asia: Kitab Jawi and Kitab Kuning with Reference to the Works of Da'ud al-Fatani dan Nawawi al-Bantani," *al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 60, No. 1 (2022).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

have articulated clear criteria for the acceptance of *ḥadīth* reports. First, a *ḥadīth* narration is accepted only if it is transmitted by individuals who possess *thiqqah* (recognized reliability and moral integrity). Second, the transmitter's personal conduct including worship practices, moral behavior, and overall character must reflect religious uprightness; deficiencies in these areas undermine the credibility of the narration. Third, reports are not accepted from individuals who lack recognized expertise in *ḥadīth* sciences. Fourth, narrations transmitted by individuals known to lie, act according to personal desires, or lack comprehension of the content they transmit are categorically rejected. Finally, *ḥadīth* reports are not accepted from individuals whose legal or moral testimony has been deemed invalid.

In subsequent developments within Sunni scholarship, Imam al-Shafi'i is widely recognized as one of the earliest scholars to articulate systematic criteria for determining the admissibility of *ḥadīth* as legal evidence. He outlined several conditions for accepting a transmitted report: (1) the narrator must demonstrate integrity in religious practice and moral conduct; (2) the narrator must be known for honesty in transmitting *ḥadīth*; (3) the narrator must possess a sound understanding of the content of the report; (4) the narrator must be aware of potential shifts in meaning arising from variations in wording and, therefore, should avoid transmitting *ḥadīth* merely by paraphrased meaning when precision is required; (5) the narrator's memory must be reliable if transmitting orally, and accuracy must be preserved if transmitting from written materials; and (6) the report should be corroborated by other reliable transmitters, ensuring consistency in wording and substance. These principles reflect a rigorous methodological framework aimed at safeguarding the authenticity of prophetic traditions.[19]

This framework further clarifies that, within Sunni Islam, the narrations regarded as authoritative sources of Islamic teaching are those attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and transmitted by his Companions, without restricting authority to a specific subset among them. This inclusive recognition of the Companions forms part of the meaning of the term *al-Jamāʿah* (the community or congregation) in the designation *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, which signifies adherence to the beliefs of the majority of Muslims. This position differs from that of Shia Islam, which generally limits authoritative narrations to those transmitted through the lineage of the Prophet and the line of Imams recognized within Shiʿi doctrine, thereby excluding reports transmitted by other Companions.

[19] Munawir, Kajian Hadis Dua Mazhab, (Purwokerto: STAIN Press Purwokerto,2013), p. 139-140.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

The Contribution of Sunni Sufism to Religious Tolerance

Sunni theological thought, particularly as formulated by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, affirms that religious freedom operates within the framework of divine will, granting human beings the capacity to choose their faith.[20] This theological orientation is commonly associated with the Qurʾānic declaration, "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qurʾān 2:256). Ashʿarī scholars such as Al-Baqillani interpreted this verse as recognition that genuine faith cannot be imposed through political authority or coercive power.[21] Similarly, al-Māturīdī, in his *Taʾwīlāt al-Qurʾān*, emphasized the role of human reason in discerning truth, arguing that authentic belief must arise from conscious understanding rather than external compulsion.[22] These perspectives demonstrate that, within the Sunni theological framework, rational inquiry and moral agency constitute essential elements of the religious process.

In the domain of Islamic jurisprudence, the major Sunni legal schools, Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī have also contributed significantly to regulating relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Ḥanafī school, founded by Abu Hanifa, is often noted for its relative flexibility in granting civil rights to non-Muslims under Islamic governance.[23] Abū Ḥanīfah permitted non-Muslims to serve as experts in economic and commercial affairs and recognized their right to maintain their own family laws and religious practices.[24] The Mālikī school, associated with Malik ibn Anas and later influential in Andalusia and North Africa, developed the doctrine of *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (consideration of public interest), which prioritizes the common good beyond narrow communal boundaries.[25] Within this framework, tolerance is not merely an ethical preference but a socio-political necessity for ensuring public order and stability. Although the Shāfiʿī and Ḥanbalī schools are often described as more textually stringent in doctrinal matters, they nonetheless uphold the principle of justice toward non-Muslims. For example, Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi, a twelfth-century Ḥanbalī jurist, affirmed that *ahl al-dhimmah* are entitled to protection and equitable treatment within Islamic courts.[26]

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[20] Harun Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Aliran-aliran Sejarah dan Analisa Perbandingan* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1996), p. 89.

[21] Al-Bāqillānī, *al-Tamhīd fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1987), p. 132.

[22] Al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2005), jil. 1, p. 212.

[23] Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 117.

[24] Abu Yusuf, Kitāb al-Kharāj (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1979), p. 61.

[25] Abu Ishaq Al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī Uṣūl al-Sharī'ah* (Kairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1997), p. 231.

[26] Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī* (Kairo: Maktabah al-Qāhirah, 1968), jil. 10, p. 582.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Historically, Sunni-ruled polities exhibited various forms of accommodation and coexistence. Under the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, Christians and Jews were employed within administrative institutions and intellectual centers. The Nestorian Christian scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq, for instance, played a pivotal role in translating Greek philosophical and scientific works into Arabic.[27] Likewise, in Islamic Spain under the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba, Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted within a comparatively integrated social framework.[28] Scholars such as Maria Rosa Menocal have described this period as *convivencia*, referring to a form of productive coexistence facilitated by Islamic legal and political structures.[29]

The Ottoman Empire, as a major inheritor of the Sunni political and legal tradition, institutionalized religious tolerance through the *millet* system, which formally recognized non-Muslim religious communities and granted them a degree of autonomy in managing their internal affairs. Under this system, churches and synagogues continued to operate, and non-Muslim religious leaders retained authority over matters of worship, family law, and communal governance. Sunni jurists consistently emphasized that justice (*ʿadl*) constitutes a universal ethical principle applicable to all human beings, irrespective of religious affiliation. In *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah*, Al-Māwardī argued that political authority is legitimate only insofar as rulers uphold justice toward all subjects, including non-Muslims, warning that injustice ultimately undermines the moral and legal foundations of governance.[30]

This conception of justice subsequently informed the development of public law within Sunni systems of government. Fiscal instruments such as *zakāt* and *jizyah* were understood not as mechanisms of discrimination, but as components of distributive justice reflecting differing social responsibilities and legal statuses within a plural society.[31] Beyond legal and administrative frameworks, Sufi thought rooted in the Sunni tradition also provided a profound ethical foundation for tolerance and inclusivity. Influential mystics such as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and Ibn ʿArabī articulated a vision of spirituality centered on the universality of divine love. Rūmī famously likened religious diversity to light emanating from different lanterns yet originating from a single source, an image that affirms the intrinsic value of humanity beyond formal religious distinctions.[32] Such Sufi perspectives reinforced a moral imagination within Sunni Islam that

[27] Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 54.

[28] W. Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 78.

[29] Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), p. 45.

[30] Al-Māwardī, *al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyyah* (Kairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah, 1960), p. 25.

[31] M. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1991), p. 289.

[32] Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawī-i Maʻnawī*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1925), jil. 2, p. 127.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

transcends exclusivism and supports coexistence, compassion, and shared human dignity.

Sunni Sufism, particularly as articulated within the Qadiriyah and Naqshbandiyah orders, emphasizes the ethical principles of *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance) and *ukhuwwah insāniyyah* (human brotherhood).[33] These principles have historically formed the foundation of peaceful *daʿwah* (Islamic preaching) across the Indonesian archipelago, as well as in regions of Africa and South Asia, where Islam spread primarily through non-coercive and accommodative means.[34] In the Indonesian context, including South Sulawesi, Sufi networks played a significant role in promoting social harmony by integrating spiritual teachings with local cultural practices. From the perspective of the Sufi orders, the relationship between human beings and God is regarded as the most fundamental and essential dimension of religious life. Accordingly, Sufi teachings emphasize the cultivation of spiritual proximity to God through acts of worship, *dhikr* (remembrance of God), obedience, and virtuous conduct.

Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) further reinforce this spiritual orientation. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) consistently encouraged his followers to draw closer to God through devotional practices such as prayer, fasting, and recitation of the Qurʾān. He also stressed the importance of gratitude and humility in response to divine blessings. Within this framework, the human-divine relationship is understood as a spiritual bond that must be continuously nurtured and strengthened through worship and ethical commitment. From a *ḥadīth*-based perspective, these teachings can be broadly categorized into two interrelated domains. First, they provide guidance on ritual order and religious ethics, outlining correct forms of worship and appropriate modes of conduct in one's relationship with God. This includes prescribed rituals such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), as well as detailed instructions concerning devotional practices, including prayer and *dhikr*.

Second, with regard to submission and obedience, prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) emphasize the imperative of submitting to God's commands and avoiding His prohibitions as expressions of devotion and reverence. From the perspective of Sufi orders (*ṭarīqah*), the relationship between human beings and God is understood as central and indispensable to religious life. Accordingly, Sufi teachings stress the cultivation of spiritual intimacy with God through various practices, including acts of worship, *dhikr* (remembrance of God), obedience to divine law, and righteous conduct. The Prophet Muhammad PBUH

[33] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 293.

[34] Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah dan Kepulauan Nusantara* (Bandung: Mizan, 1998), p. 63. Muhaemin Latif and Husnul Fahimah Ilyas, "Analyzing the changing dynamics of Tariqah Khalwatiah Samman (TKS) political influence in South Sulawesi, Indonesia," *Cogent Social Science* 10, No. 1 (2024).

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

also emphasized spiritual discipline and inner devotion, underscoring that true religiosity involves not only outward conformity to ritual obligations but also sincerity, humility, and ethical refinement. In this sense, Sufi traditions place particular emphasis on inner transformation (*taṣfiyat al-qalb*), seeking spiritual closeness and unity with God through sustained remembrance, meditation, and moral self-discipline, rather than limiting religious life to external ritual performance alone.

Third, the sufi traditions also highlight the importance of the relationship between teacher and student in the spiritual journey. Within *ṭarīqah* structures, the guidance of a spiritual mentor (*shaykh* or *murshid*) is regarded as essential for navigating the path toward divine proximity. This relationship provides structured guidance, ethical supervision, and access to deeper spiritual insight, enabling disciples to internalize religious values more profoundly. While both *ḥadīth*-based teachings and Sufi paths share the common objective of bringing believers closer to God, they operate through complementary approaches. The *ḥadīth* tradition offers a normative framework of ritual obligations and ethical conduct, whereas Sufi orders contribute an experiential and pedagogical dimension, emphasizing lived spirituality and personal transformation.

From the perspective of *ṭarīqah*, the term refers to a specific spiritual path that individuals undertake to draw closer to God. A *ṭarīqah* typically consists of structured spiritual practices through which Sufis or adherents of Sufism seek deeper knowledge of God and experiential closeness to the Divine. Within this framework, individuals are guided to cultivate continuous spiritual awareness, discipline the self, and restrain worldly desires in order to attain spiritual refinement and proximity to God.

Across both perspectives, the *ḥadīth*-based normative tradition and the experiential path of the *ṭarīqah*, the relationship between human beings and God is understood as a fundamental source of inner peace, happiness, and well-being. By establishing and maintaining a strong spiritual relationship with God, individuals are believed to receive guidance, protection, and moral strength in their daily lives. This relationship also functions as a means through which believers are able to confront life's challenges and trials while improving their character and ethical conduct. From the combined perspectives of *ḥadīth* and *ṭarīqah*, the human–divine relationship is not confined to formal acts of obedience alone, but rather entails sustained spiritual effort, sincerity, and the internalization of religious values in everyday life.

In this way, Sunni Sufism has made a significant contribution to the cultivation of harmonious relations among religious communities. By emphasizing love (*maḥabbah*) and compassion (*raḥmah*) as central ethical principles, Sufi teachings promote respect for the dignity of all human beings, regardless of differences in religion, ethnicity, or social background. Such an orientation fosters mutual understanding, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

within plural societies, reinforcing the role of Sunni Sufism as an important moral and spiritual resource for interreligious harmony.

Sunni Sufism is generally characterized by an inclusive orientation that embraces diverse expressions of religiosity. Within this tradition, spiritual truth is understood as potentially accessible through multiple religious and cultural pathways, an outlook that facilitates constructive and peaceful interfaith engagement. Sufi teachings frequently emphasize diversity as a manifestation of divine wisdom and greatness, viewing religious and cultural plurality as integral elements of God's creation that warrant respect and appreciation. This theological orientation encourages mutual recognition and helps mitigate conflict among religious communities.

Historically and contemporarily, many Sufi figures have been actively involved in promoting peace and reconciliation. Through spiritual instruction and ethical practice, Sufis seek to address interreligious tensions with compassion, empathy, and moral sensitivity. They often participate in both formal and informal interfaith dialogues, drawing on Sufi ethical wisdom to identify shared values and foster meaningful communication with adherents of other faiths. Such engagements play an important role in reducing prejudice and cultivating mutual understanding across religious boundaries.

More broadly, Sunni Sufism has made a substantial contribution to the development of harmonious interreligious relations. Its emphasis on love (*maḥabbah*), tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*), and respect for diversity provides a strong moral foundation for building inclusive and peaceful societies. Classical scholars such as Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) argued that religious difference should never negate a Muslim's ethical obligation to treat non-Muslims with justice and kindness.[35] In the modern period, Sunni thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Wahbah az-Zuhaili have reinterpreted the classical concept of *ahl al-dhimmah* within the framework of *muwāṭanah* (equal citizenship).[36] emphasizing that in contemporary nation-states tolerance entails not only freedom of worship but also equal social and political participation.[37]

The Sunni tradition has likewise played a pioneering role in institutionalizing interfaith dialogue in the modern Islamic world. Al-Azhar University, for instance, has actively promoted interreligious engagement through its scholarly body, *Majmaʿ al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyyah*, particularly since the twentieth century.[38] This engagement is grounded in the Qurʾānic principle of

[35] Muhammad bin Muhammad Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2005), jil. 3, p. 244.

[36] Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Fiqh al-Jihād* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2009), p. 621.

[37] Wahbah az-Zuhaili, *Āthār al-Ḥarb fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (Damaskus: Dār al-Fikr, 1998), p. 304.

[38] Al-Azhar, *Majmaʿ al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyyah: al-Taʿāruf wa al-Ḥiwār* (Kairo: al-Azhar Press, 2008), p. 11.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

taʿāruf (mutual recognition), which frames dialogue as a pathway to peace and cooperation. The Sunni approach to interfaith relations thus rejects theological syncretism while affirming active coexistence, manifested in collaborative efforts in humanitarian work, education, and social justice.[39]

The Role of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah in Religious Tolerance in Indonesia

Ahlussunnah wal Jamaʿah (Aswaja) constitutes the mainstream Islamic tradition in Indonesia, profoundly shaping the religious landscape of Muslim communities across the archipelago.[40] Rooted in a balanced engagement between textual sources and socio-cultural context, as well as in the integration of *sharīʿa* with local traditions, the Aswaja framework has enabled Islam in Indonesia to develop within an atmosphere of peace, inclusivity, and social harmony. Central to this tradition are the normative principles of *tawassuṭ* (moderation), *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), and *iʿtidāl* (justice), which function as ethical guidelines for religious and civic life in a plural society.[41]

Religious tolerance within the Aswaja tradition is grounded in the Qurʾānic principle of *"lā ikrāha fī al-dīn"* (there is no compulsion in religion), as articulated in Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah [2]: 256. Aswaja scholars, particularly those associated with the Shāfiʿī school of jurisprudence have historically interpreted this verse as affirming individual freedom in matters of faith and belief.[42] In the Indonesian context, this interpretation has provided a foundational theological justification for interreligious coexistence and social harmony within a religiously diverse society. Moreover, Aswaja theology, drawing on the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī intellectual traditions, conceptualizes diversity as *sunnatullāh*, a divinely ordained aspect of creation).[43] From this perspective, religious and cultural plurality is not an aberration to be resisted, but a natural condition willed by God. Consequently, rejecting diversity is understood as contradicting the divine order itself. This theological orientation has furnished Indonesian Muslims with a robust spiritual and ethical basis for peaceful coexistence and constructive engagement with followers of other religious traditions, reinforcing Aswaja's enduring role as a pillar of moderation and tolerance in Indonesia's socio-religious life.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as the largest representative of *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaʿah* (Aswaja) in Indonesia, plays a pivotal role in cultivating and

[39] Muhammad Imarah, *al-Islām wa al-Taʿaddudiyyah* (Kairo: Dār al-Syurūq, 1998), p. 77.

[40] Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Substantif* (Bandung: Mizan, 2000), p. 15.

[41] Said Aqil Siradj, *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaʿah: Jalan Tengah Islam* (Jakarta: LTN PBNU, 2015), p. 22. Muliadi Muliadi, et.al., "Religious Moderation by Design: A Comparative Sociological Da'wah Study in Indonesian Higher Education," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, No. 2 (2025).

[42] M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2001), p. 478.

[43] Harun Nasution, *Teologi Islam* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1995), p. 97.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

institutionalizing values of religious tolerance. NU has developed and consistently promoted the concept of *Islam raḥmatan lil-ʿālamīn* (Islam as a mercy for all creation), which underscores the universal ethical mission of Islam to foster compassion, justice, and peace for all humanity, rather than exclusively for Muslims.[44] In practice, this theological orientation is manifested through NU's active engagement in interfaith dialogue, multicultural education, and social as well as humanitarian cooperation with adherents of diverse religious traditions. Beyond NU as an organization, Islamic educational institutions, particularly traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) affiliated with the Aswaja tradition also play a crucial role in transmitting values of moderation and inclusivity. These institutions emphasize the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), which foreground moral integrity, justice, and respect for others.[45] Moreover, the tradition of *baḥth al-masāʾil* (collective juristic deliberation) within *pesantren* has contributed to the production of contextual and moderate religious opinions (*fatwas*), especially in response to complex socio-religious issues arising in pluralistic societies.

Aswaja has also played a historically significant role in the acceptance of *Pancasila* as Indonesia's state ideology. At NU's 27th National Congress held in Situbondo in 1984, NU scholars formally declared that *Pancasila* does not contradict Islamic teachings, but is instead consonant with Aswaja principles such as *tawassuṭ* (moderation) and *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance).[46] This declaration marked an important milestone in affirming Muslim commitment to a nation-state framework that guarantees religious freedom and social cohesion. In this regard, Aswaja has functioned as a vital bridge between Islamic values and national identity. Importantly, NU's acceptance of *Pancasila* should not be understood merely as a political compromise. Rather, it reflects a principled interpretation of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, the higher objectives of the Islamic law, including the protection of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property.[47] From this perspective, social harmony, justice, and peaceful coexistence are intrinsic to the ethical aims of Islamic law.

In Indonesia, *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaʿah* (Aswaja) articulates religious tolerance not only at the level of theology but also through lived cultural practices. Communal traditions such as *slametan* (ritual communal prayers), *tahlilan* (collective remembrance gatherings), and grave pilgrimage constitute social expressions of Aswaja's openness toward local customs, provided that such

[44] Greg Fealy and Greg Barton (ed.), *Tradisionalisme Radikal* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1997), p. 12.

[45] Zamakhsyari Dhofier, Tradisi Pesantren (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), p. 89.

[46] Achmad Siddiq, *Khittah Nahdliyah* (Jakarta: PBNU, 1984), p. 5.

[47] Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law* (London: IIIT, 2008), p. 92.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

practices do not contradict the core principle of *tawḥīd* (monotheism).[48] Within the social sphere, these traditions function as mechanisms of social cohesion, strengthening communal bonds and fostering harmony among community members, often transcending religious and cultural differences. Sufism, deeply rooted in the doctrinal framework of Aswaja, has played a decisive role in the historical process of Islamization in Indonesia. Sufi scholars affiliated with the Sunni tradition, particularly the *wali* and *ʿulamāʾ* successfully integrated Islamic teachings with indigenous cultural forms without compromising the foundational values of monotheism. Their approach was characterized by *ḥikmat al-daʿwah* (wisdom in preaching), emphasizing sensitivity to local contexts and an appreciation of the pluralistic social fabric of the Indonesian archipelago.[49] This method of cultural accommodation enabled Islam to be received gradually and peacefully, avoiding coercion or large-scale political conflict. As a result, the spread of Islam in regions such as Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi largely took place through cultural and spiritual engagement rather than military expansion.[50]

Aswaja Sufism is inherently inclusive and emphasizes a harmonious balance between *sharīʿa* (Islamic law), *ḥaqīqa* (spiritual reality), and moral conduct. Within this framework, religious practices rooted in local wisdom are not categorically rejected, provided that they do not contradict the core principles of *tawḥīd* (monotheism).[51] Practices such as *slametan*, *maulidan*, and *tahlilan*, for example, are understood as social and spiritual expressions of Indonesian Muslim religiosity that embody values of communal solidarity (*ukhuwwah*) and gratitude toward God.[52] This perspective reflects the juristic maxim *al-ʿādah muḥakkamah*,the principle that custom may serve as a source of law so long as it does not conflict with Islamic norms, which occupies an important place within Aswaja jurisprudence.[53]

The openness of Aswaja Sufism to local wisdom is further evident in its acceptance of indigenous symbols and artistic expressions. In Indonesia, Sufi teachings have frequently been transmitted through cultural media such as *gamelan*, *tembang* (traditional singing), *syair* (poetry), and *wayang* performances, whose symbolic meanings were reinterpreted and imbued with Islamic values by Sufi scholars and saints.[54] In this way, Sufism functions as a bridge between

[48] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 27.

[49] Azyumardi Azra, *Islam Nusantara: Jaringan Global dan Lokal*, Jakarta: Prenada Media, 2017, p. 56.

[50] M. C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), p. 22–24.

[51] Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1992, p. 426.

[52] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 129–131.

[53] Wahbah az-Zuhaili, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (Damaskus: Dār al-Fikr, 1986), p. 87.

[54] Agus Sunyoto, *Atlas Wali Songo* (Jakarta: Pustaka Iman, 2012), p. 74–76.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

universal Islamic principles and local cultural forms.[55] This approach stands in contrast to more scripturalist orientations of Islam that tend to reject cultural accommodation as syncretism. From the Sufi perspective, however, Islam did not emerge to eradicate culture, but rather to refine, redirect, and elevate it toward the affirmation of divine unity.[56]

In the contemporary context, Aswaja Sufism remains highly relevant as a model of religious moderation. It represents not merely a historical legacy, but also a living theological foundation for promoting tolerance, social harmony, and national integration.[57] By nurturing a form of spirituality that is responsive to changing social realities while remaining faithful to the essence of Islamic belief, Aswaja Sufism offers a balanced and humane expression of Islam.[58] Through its emphasis on *tasāmuḥ* (tolerance), *tawāzun* (balance), and *tawassuṭ* (moderation), Aswaja Sufism presents a calming and constructive religious ethos that resonates strongly with the cultural and ethical character of Indonesian society.[59]

The local wisdom embraced within the Aswaja tradition functions as an effective social instrument for fostering interfaith solidarity. In many Javanese and Madurese communities, for instance, practices such as *kenduri* (communal feast gatherings) and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) are conducted collectively by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.[60] These shared social rituals demonstrate that Aswaja Islam is not merely a theological orientation but also a lived social practice that actively cultivates harmony and coexistence at the grassroots level. Despite its deeply rooted tradition of tolerance, Aswaja has faced significant challenges following the political reforms of 1998, particularly with the emergence of more puritanical and exclusive religious ideologies.[61] Transnational movements promoting *takfīrī* doctrines have frequently accused Aswaja's religious practices of deviation or heresy. In response, Aswaja has positioned itself as a stronghold of religious moderation, countering extremism through scholarly argumentation, contextual religious reasoning, and culturally grounded approaches rather than confrontational methods.[62]

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[55] Martin van Bruinessen*, Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah di Indonesia*, Bandung: Mizan, 1992, p. 45.

[56] Ahmad Syafii Maarif, *Islam dalam Bingkai Keindonesiaan dan Kemanusiaan*, Bandung: Mizan, 2009, p. 97.

[57] Ahmad Baso, *Islam Nusantara: Ijtihad Jenius dan Ijma' Ulama Indonesia*, Jakarta: Pustaka Afid, 2015, p. 211.

[58] Haidar Bagir, Spiritualitas Islam dan Peradaban (Bandung: Mizan, 2019), p. 165.

[59] Said Aqil Siradj, *Tasawuf sebagai Kritik Sosial* (Jakarta: LP Ma'arif NU, 2006), p. 142.

[60] Robert Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 103.

[61] Noorhaidi Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militansi, dan Pencarian Identitas*, Jakarta: LP3ES, 2008, p. 14.

[62] Yahya Cholil Staquf*, Islam Rahmatan lil 'Alamin* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2018), p. 41.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

Through institutional mechanisms such as the *Bahtsul Masāʾil* forums, *Rabithah Maʿahid Islamiyah*, and *Lakpesdam NU*, Aswaja has consistently strengthened moderate Islamic discourse both within academic environments and in wider society.[63] Its inclusive *daʿwah* strategy and empathetic engagement with social realities constitute key strengths in maintaining communal harmony amid increasing ideological polarization. Moreover, Aswaja's commitment to interfaith dialogue is evident in its active participation in initiatives such as the Interfaith Harmony Forum (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*/FKUB) and other interreligious cooperation programs across Indonesia.[64] Prominent Aswaja figures, most notably Abdurrahman Wahid (widely known as Gus Dur), consistently emphasized that religious freedom constitutes a fundamental pillar of Indonesian democracy. He argued that religion should serve as a source of peace, moral guidance, and social reconciliation, rather than as a justification for violence or exclusion.[65]

Sunni and Religious Tolerance in North Maluku: A Sufi Perspective and the *Maslahat*

Islam in North Maluku developed within one of the most significant Islamic political traditions in the Indonesian archipelago, alongside major Islamic kingdoms such as Aceh, Palembang, Banten, Demak, Goa, and Tallo. The region was home to prominent Islamic sultanates, notably Ternate Sultanate, Tidore Sultanate, Jailolo Sultanate, and Bacan Sultanate. Historians offer differing accounts regarding the arrival of Islam in North Maluku: some argue that it was introduced as early as the ninth century CE by Middle Eastern traders, while others suggest that Islam was brought later, in the thirteenth century CE, through Malay and Javanese networks.[66] Regardless of its precise origins, Islam as it developed within these sultanates was firmly grounded in the Ahlu Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah tradition, emphasizing mercy (*raḥmatan li al-ʿālamīn*), respect for diversity, and religious tolerance, values that continue to shape religious life in the region today.[67]

Consistent with this historical foundation, interreligious relations in North Maluku have generally been characterized by peaceful coexistence. A contemporary example can be observed in the Morotai Islands, where the Morotai Interfaith Communication Forum (*Forum Komunikasi Lintas Agama*/FKLA) was

[63] PBNU, *Laporan Konferensi Besar Nahdlatul Ulama* (Jakarta: LTN PBNU, 2019), p. 12.

[64] Kementerian Agama RI, *Profil Kerukunan Umat Beragama Indonesia*, Jakarta: Balitbang Diklat, 2020), p. 31.

[65] Abdurrahman Wahid, *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita*, Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2006), p. 22.

[66] Rusdiyanto, "Kesultanan Ternate Dan Tidore," *Aqlam: Journal of Islam and Plurality* 3, No. 1 (2018).

[67] Field Observation in Ternate City and other areas in North Maluku, 2024.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

established in 2023. The forum emerged in response to tensions related to temporary restrictions on places of worship at the village level. Rather than relying on top-down administrative intervention by district or provincial authorities, FKLA successfully mitigated potential conflict through a bottom-up approach grounded in interfaith dialogue, deliberation, and community consensus-building. In this context, religion functions not only as a spiritual system but also as a vital social and political resource that shapes patterns of interaction, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making. This role is particularly evident in the authority of religious leaders, who serve not merely as custodians of religious doctrine but also as social mediators and facilitators of peace amid local political and economic dynamics. Such practices reflect the enduring influence of the Aswaja tradition in translating theological principles of tolerance into concrete mechanisms for social harmony in North Maluku.[68]

Furthermore, tolerance and interfaith harmony in North Maluku are evident during major religious celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. On these occasions, Christian communities actively assist and show respect for Muslim celebrations. Likewise, during religious holidays observed by other faiths, such as Christmas, Muslim communities reciprocate by providing assistance and expressing respect, without compromising the doctrinal principles of their respective religions.[69] Social distance among religious and ethnic groups serves as an indicator of the degree of acceptance and quality of social relations shaped by religious identity. Although Ternate experienced episodes of conflict between Muslim and Christian communities, albeit less severe than those that occurred in other parts of the Maluku region, these conflicts nonetheless disrupted social relations within the community.[70] Following the peace process, intergroup relations gradually recovered and have continued to improve to the present day.

Sunni Islam has played a significant historical and sociological role in shaping the social, political, and legal order of North Maluku. Since its establishment as the official religion during the Sultanate era, and continuing to the present, the predominance of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* tradition has positioned Islam not merely as a theological belief system but also as an ethical and legal framework oriented toward communal welfare. From a legal perspective, Sunni contributions in North Maluku can be identified in several key areas:[71] First, Sunni teachings have contributed to the strengthening of social harmony. The tradition emphasizes principles such as *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh*

[68] Sahbi Diti, et.al., "Peran Agama dalam Membangun Toleransi dan Kerukunan Sosial di Tengah Keragaman Masyarakat: Studi Kasus di Kabupaten Pulau Morotai," *al-Kindi: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam dan Multidisipliner* 2, No. 1 (2026).

[69] Field Observation in Ternate City and other areas in North Maluku, 2024.

[70] Arifuddin Ismail, "*Interaksi Sosial antara Kelompok Islam dan Kristen di Ternate*," Jurnal al-Qalam 15, No. 24 (2009).

[71] Interview with Jubair Situmorang, Professor of IAIN Ternate, Ternate, January 2026.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

(tolerance), and *al-'adl* (justice), which have been internalized within North Maluku's pluralistic society, characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Through moderate and culturally embedded *da'wah*, Sunni scholars have played a crucial role in maintaining social stability and preventing horizontal conflict, aligning with the objectives of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, particularly the protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*) and public order. Second, Sunni Islam has facilitated the integration of Islamic law with local customary law. This integration is grounded in the principle that custom (*adat*) is rooted in religion, while religion is grounded in the divine text. In the administrative practices of the sultanate, Sunni Islamic law has not functioned as a rigid or isolated system; rather, it has interacted dynamically with local customs. The principle of *al-'adah al-muhakkamah* (custom may serve as a basis of law) has thus become a foundational element in legal decision-making. This synthesis reflects significant legal benefits, as it preserves cultural identity (*hifz al-'urf*) while simultaneously ensuring substantive justice for the community.[72]

Third, Sunni *ulama* in North Maluku play a crucial role in governance. They function as advisers to the sultan, *qadis* (religious jurists), and custodians of moral authority within society. Their responsibilities extend beyond the enforcement of formal legal norms to ensuring that political decisions and public policies align with principles of justice, public interest, and societal welfare. This role corresponds closely with the objectives of *maqasid al-shari'ah*, particularly the protection of religion (*hifz al-din*) and the promotion of social justice as central aims of Islamic law. Fourth, Sunni Islam contributes significantly to religious moderation and the prevention of extremism. Grounded in established *madhhab* traditions and a theology of moderation, the Sunni approach has functioned as a social bulwark against radicalism and *takfiri* tendencies. From the perspective of *maslahah* (public benefit), this contribution is especially important, as it prevents greater *mafsadah* (social harm), including communal fragmentation and religious instability. In this regard, it upholds the legal maxim *dar' al-mafasid muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masalih* (preventing harm takes precedence over attaining benefit), which prioritizes social cohesion and moral order. Fifth, Sunni institutions also play a vital role in public education and moral development. Through traditional educational settings and *majelis taklim*, Sunni scholars foster legal consciousness, ethical reasoning, and religious literacy among the broader population, thereby strengthening the moral foundations of society.[73]

Consistent with these principles, the maxim *dar' al-mafasid muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masalih* is actively applied by scholars associated with Al-Khairaat and other Sunni figures in North Maluku as a means of mitigating provocation and preventing renewed conflict. These scholars prioritize social stability and

[72]Interview with Jubair Situmorang, Professor of IAIN Ternate, Ternate, January 2026.
[73]Interview with Jubair Situmorang, Professor of IAIN Ternate, Ternate, January 2026.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

public security over sectarian interests, recognizing that security is a fundamental prerequisite for the effective implementation of *shari'ah*. Sunni scholars, particularly those educated within the Al-Khairaat tradition, often refrain from delivering provocative sermons or disparaging other religious communities in public discourse. This restraint should not be interpreted as a reluctance to uphold religious truth; rather, it represents a conscious legal and ethical commitment to closing avenues (*sadd al-dhara'i'*) that could lead to renewed conflict and widespread social harm.[74]

From the perspective of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, Sufism is not understood merely as ritual *dhikr* performed in secluded religious spaces, but rather as *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) that has tangible implications for social conduct and ethical behavior. Within this framework, the distinctive contribution of the Sunni tradition associated with Al-Khairaat (one of the largest Islamic boarding schools in Central Sulawesi which is Sunni, and has influence in North Maluku), particularly through the Alawiyah Sufi order, lies in cultivating Muslims who are firm in their religious principles without syncretism or doctrinal compromise while remaining deeply courteous, empathetic, and compassionate in their social interactions. This ethical formation is a key factor in shaping a form of religious tolerance in North Maluku that is experienced as organic and vibrant, rather than merely rhetorical or symbolic.[75] Consequently, the Sunni tradition has made a substantial contribution to interreligious harmony in the region. Given that the majority of the population in North Maluku adheres to *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* and the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, religious practices are characterized by a notably inclusive and accommodating ethos, particularly in matters of worship and communal life.[76]

Beyond the religious sphere, cultural values also play a crucial role in sustaining social cohesion. One prominent local maxim, commonly expressed as "Let us move forward together," signifying unity and collective strength, continues to be preserved and practiced within North Maluku's pluralistic society. This shared motto has functioned as a form of social capital and a unifying force, effectively mitigating the potential for interethnic and interreligious conflict. Indeed, its normative influence within the local society is often regarded as comparable to that of Indonesia's national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). For this reason, the continued internalization and enactment of this

[74]Interview with Ansar Tohe, Islamic Thought Expert, Academic at IAIN Ternate, January, 2026.

[75] Interview with Fatum Abu Bakar, Islamic Law Expert, Academic at IAIN Ternate, January, 2026.

[76] Interview with Zainuddin Arifin, Islamic Philosophy Expert, Academic at IAIN Ternate, January, 2026.

DOI: 10.22373/sjhk.v10.i1.26267

principle are essential for maintaining communal harmony among the ethnically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically diverse communities of North Maluku.[77]

Therefore, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (the followers of the Prophetic tradition and the communal consensus) has fostered a moderate understanding of religion that emphasizes not only adherence to normative doctrinal teachings but also their application through a balanced, non-extremist way of life. This orientation gives concrete expression to Islam as *rahmatan li al-'alamin* (a mercy for all creation), promoting values of compassion, tolerance, and mutual respect for religious differences within social life.[78] Such an approach enables peaceful coexistence both between and within religious communities that may hold differing theological interpretations. Moreover, this moderate religious framework can function effectively as a strategy for conflict resolution in situations of social or religious tension.[79]

In North Maluku, as in Indonesia more broadly, the understanding of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* is characterized by the Ash'ari theological tradition, adherence to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, and a strong Sufi orientation. This Sufi dimension is reflected in the presence of recognized (*mu'tabarah*) spiritual orders such as the Qadiriyah, Naqshbandiyah, and Shattariyah, as well as mass-based Islamic movements such as Muhammadiyah and other established Sunni traditions. From a Sufistic perspective, this configuration of theology, jurisprudence, and spirituality cultivates a religious ethos that is tolerant, peaceful, and moderate. At the societal level, such conditions contribute significantly to the welfare of the people of North Maluku and Indonesia as a whole. A tolerant and harmonious social environment fosters peace and security, which are essential prerequisites for sustainable national development. In turn, these conditions enable the state and society to pursue the foundational goals of independence, namely, the realization of both material and spiritual prosperity for all citizens.

Conclusion

The form of Islam that entered the Indonesian archipelago and continues to be embraced by the majority of its population is *Ahlu Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (Aswaja)*. This Sunni tradition possesses distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other Islamic schools of thought. Theologically, it is grounded in the creeds of Imam Ashʿari and Imam al-Maturidi; juridically, it

[77] Asriadi Ibrahim, et.al., "Mari Moi Ngone Futuru Sebagai Identitas Kultural: Makna Dan Imlementasinya Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat Maluku Utara," *Waskita: Jurnal Pendidikan Nilai dan Pembangunan Karakter* 7, No. 1 (2023).

[78] Mustamin Giling, et.al., "Penguatan Moderasi Beragama Bagi Mahasiswa Iain Ternate Dalam Menangkal Radikalisme," *Martabe: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 8 No. 5 (2025), p. 1971-1982.

[79] Mustamin Giling, et.al., "Dynamics of Mining Conflict in Konawe Islands: Religious Moderation Movement in Negotiation of Conflict," *Khazanah: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Humaniora* 22, No. 2 (2024).

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adheres to the four classical schools of law founded by Abu Hanifa, Imam Malik, Imam al-Shafiʿi, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal; and spiritually, it draws inspiration from the Sufi traditions articulated by al-Ghazali and Junayd al-Baghdadi. Aswaja offers a balanced model of religious moderation that harmonizes firmness in matters of faith with openness in social relations. Sunni tolerance does not imply compromising doctrinal truth, but rather reflects respect for human dignity and freedom as recognized within Islamic law. From the classical period to contemporary discourse, this tradition has demonstrated its capacity to engage constructively with principles of human rights and modern pluralism without sacrificing its religious identity. In the context of Indonesia, the Sunni tradition has played a pivotal role in fostering interreligious harmony. Its influence extends beyond theology to encompass social, cultural, and political dimensions, both at the level of normative thought and everyday practice. Similarly, in North Maluku, the Sunni tradition, from the era of the sultanates to the present has consistently contributed to nurturing peaceful coexistence among religious communities, positioning religion as a source of mercy for all. Theologically, *Aswaja*, as the majority tradition, promotes moderate teachings that cultivate a peaceful and tolerant social outlook. This orientation is evident in its Sufi ethics and in the dominance of the Shafiʿi school of jurisprudence, which prioritizes public welfare (*maslahah*) in legal reasoning. Consequently, the *Aswaja* tradition has profoundly shaped the character of Indonesian Islam as inclusive, compassionate, and committed to upholding human values. At the global level, the Indonesian *Aswaja* model stands as a compelling example of how Islam and tolerance can coexist harmoniously within a peaceful national framework.

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