

## Mobilizing Intolerance: Teungku Dayah (*Ulama*) and Religious Discourse in Aceh, Indonesia

Ismail Fahmu Arrauf Nasution,\* T. Wildan,\*\* M. Anzaikhan\*\*\* & Ahmad Faidi\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

In 2018, Aceh was ranked 32nd in the index of tolerant cities in Indonesia conducted by the Setara Institute. The poor rating of religious tolerance in Aceh was due to an act of violence that occurred in Aceh in the previous periods, in which religious grounds were used. Ironically, this act was carried out by people who claim the authority of the *Aswaja* ideology in Aceh. The field research seeks to uncover the real root of the problem by interviewing religious authorities in Aceh, namely *Teungku Dayah* (ulama in Acehnese society), *Santri* (Muslim Students), and lecturers at Islamic higher education institutions. The results of the study showed that the acts of violence in Aceh stemmed from *Teungku Dayah's* inaccurate understanding of pluralism. Pluralism is understood and positioned as an ideology that contradicts and threatens the sustainability of the *Aswaja's* ideology in Aceh.

**Keywords:** Religious discourse, tolerance, plurality, Islamic thought, *Teungku Dayah*

### Introduction

The political contestation in Indonesia in 2019 caused national turmoil and was marked by polarizations on particularistic issues. These included debates around natives and non-natives, Muslims and non-Muslims, Chinese and anti-Chinese sentiments, the Islamic Khilafah and Pancasila, radicalism and pluralism. These issues have become commonplace and are widely discussed or expressed in public and social media, as power is contested at regional and national levels under the pretext of democracy.<sup>1</sup> This discussion of radicalism and pluralism is of great importance. The first group advocates for religion, especially the Islamic caliphate system, as an alternative to good politics in Indonesia. The significant impact of this discourse is the accusations of being pro-communist, anti-Islamic, and infidel against opposition parties and political groups who do not share their beliefs.<sup>2</sup> While the second group promotes pluralism, moderation, and nationalism as a defensive measure against political opponents who claim to be radical groups. This discourse has implications for the emergence of the problems of anti-radicalism and extremism.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, this discourse often gives rise to radical movements that are ready to suppress groups and individuals who are alleged to be supporters of radicalism and extremism. The intervention of such vested political interests has succeeded in deceiving and misleading some followers of the *Ahlussunnah Waljamaah* (*Aswaja* – people who are always guided by the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him). They pretend to be an anti-radical movement, but they are building a new radical bloc. This is in stark contrast to the spirit of *Aswaja* itself. Long before the 2019 political contestation in Indonesia started, intolerant socio-religious dynamics existed in Aceh. The act of accusing and misleading each other is not only influenced by political dynamics, but also by the economy and the cultural image of Aceh's elites.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs leads to a poor assessment of the plurality of diversity in Aceh.<sup>5</sup> Aceh is also ranked 32<sup>nd</sup> Indonesia's Tolerant Cities Index.<sup>6</sup> They are fellow Muslims, but they often consider infidels and blame other Muslims when there are differences of

\* Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, Professor, State of Islamic Institution Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia. Email: ismaifahmiarraufnasution@iainlangsa.ac.id.

\*\* T. Wildan, State of Islamic Institution Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia. Email: wildan@iainlangsa.ac.id.

\*\*\* M. Anzaikhan, Faculty of Sharia, State of Islamic Institution Langsa, Aceh, Indonesia. Email: m.anzaikhan@iainlangsa.ac.id.

\*\*\*\* Ahmad Faidi, Dept. History of Islamic Civilization, UIN Salatiga, Indonesia. Email: ahmadfaidi86@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> Leli Salman Al-Farisi (2018), "Politik Identitas: Ancaman Terhadap Persatuan dan Kesatuan Bangsa dalam Negara Pancasila," *Jurnal Aspirasi*, Vol. 2, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Aksin Wijaya, Suwendi Suwendi, and Sahiron Syamsuddin (2021), "Observing Islam with Ethics: From Hatred Theology to Religious Ethics," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 175-208.

<sup>3</sup> Inayatul Ulya (2016), "Radikalisme Atas Nama Agama: Tafsir Historis Kepemimpinan Nabi Muhammad di Madinah," *Addin*, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Nirzalin Armia, M. Nazaruddin, and Fuadi Fuadi (2015), "Kekerasan atas Nama Aliran Sesat: Studi tentang Mobilisasi Isu Sesat dalam Kontestasi Elit Gampong," *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Abd. Wahid (2014), "Karakteristik Pluralitas Agama di Aceh," *Substantia*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 243-250.

<sup>6</sup> Setara Institute (2018), "Indeks Kota Toleran (IKT) Tahun 2018," *Setara Institute*, No. 1, pp. 1-6.

opinion. They therefore take a hard line against followers of other religions. *Aswaja* is the dominant Islamic sect in Aceh and often clashes with other Muslims, accusing them of being Wahhabi.

Ironically, accusations of Wahhabism often target non-Wahhabi groups.<sup>7</sup> The burning of the Muhammadiyah Mosque foundation in Bireuen, the takeover of mosque management in Lhokseumawe, and the expulsion of a Middle Eastern preacher at the Oman Mosque, are all violent examples attributed to the *Aswaja* group in Aceh. Even moderate thinkers on campus are accused of producing Wahhabi cadres.<sup>8</sup> This assumption resulted in a movement to oppose the Islamic thought study program at a State Islamic University in Aceh. These rejection movements stem from accusations made towards each other due to *khilafiyah/ikhtilaf* (differences in views among Islamic jurists on a legal issue).<sup>9</sup>

This study aims to identify the root cause of the Acehese religious pattern with *Teungku Dayah* being the main subject, given their high social status within the community. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the *Aswaja* ideology of *Teungku Dayah* and how it impacts the religious pattern. This study uses qualitative data, with the research object being the thinking of *Teungku Dayah*.<sup>10</sup> The primary data collection method is through observation and interviews. Secondary data to strengthen research findings is obtained through literature reviews of journals, books, or recent scientific works. The spatial scope of this research is limited to the Aceh region due to its unique community diversity in comparison to other areas in Indonesia. In addition, there exists a significant gap between *Aswaja*'s ideology and the actions and attitudes of Aceh's religious people, which tend towards radicalism.

Participants in this study consisted of three main groups, namely the *Teungku Dayah*, Acehese intellectuals, and the general public. Participants from the *Teungku Dayah* circle in Banda Aceh and Aceh Besar were selected randomly. In addition, interviews were conducted with Acehese intellectuals to strengthen the research argument. To represent university scholars, the respondents were chosen from among lecturers in Islamic studies who engaged in debates with the Acehese, who had been accused of propagating the Wahhabi sect. Finally, the general public, such as *santri* and madrasa teachers, were also enlisted as respondents to gather comprehensive data.

### ***Teungku Dayah's Socio-Political Position in Acehese Society***

The ulama figure is known as the *Teungku Dayah* in Acehese society, which is an Islamic boarding school cleric. They hold a high social status and are greatly esteemed by the community. Moreover, they are responsible for determining policies, thoughts, and representations of the Acehese Muslim actions<sup>11</sup>, not only in religious terms, but also in social and political aspects.<sup>12</sup> The *Teungku Dayah*'s social status is obtained through a lengthy socio-cultural process. Their social position is not determined solely by their level of formal education and expertise. Most of the *Teungku Dayah* are educated in Islamic high schools or other equivalent educational institutions. However, as the time has passed, they have also pursued formal education to enhance their religious knowledge. Many of them have pursued higher education to increase their religious insights and to fulfil administrative requirements for establishing government-funded legal educational institutions.<sup>13</sup>

The ulama or *Teungku Dayah* are regarded as the inheritors of the prophets and apostles by the Acehese, earning them a distinguished status as charismatic figures. Politically, the Acehese were more compliant with *Teungku Dayah*'s fatwas than those issued by the government. This is due to the

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<sup>7</sup> Mulyana Idris and Muhammad Sahlan (2018), "Antara Salah Paham dan Paham yang Salah: Pandangan Teungku Seumeubeut terhadap Wahabi," *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> M. Hasbi Amiruddin (2014), "Isu Terorisme Dan Respons Aktivistis Muda Aceh," *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan*, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ilyas Ilyas et al. (2023), "The Accommodation of Customary Law to Islamic Law: Distribution of Inheritance in Aceh from a Pluralism Perspectives," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 897-919.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Mulyadi (2011), "Penelitian Kuantitatif dan Kualitatif serta Pemikiran Dasar Menggabungkannya," *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi dan Media*, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Nirzalin (2018), "Jaringan Ideologi Keilmuan dan Modal," *Substantia*, Vol. 20, pp. 185-195; Nirzalin and Yogi Febriandi (2020), "Teungku Dayah Agency and Religious Social Capital on Drug Eradication in Aceh, Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 210-222.

<sup>12</sup> Nirzalin Armia (2014), "Teungku Dayah dan Kekuasaan Panoptik," *Substantia*, Vol. 16, pp. 13-34.

<sup>13</sup> Syamsuddin et al. (2021), "Communication Strategy of Teungku Dayah as Effort to Interpret Radicalism," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 495, No. 1, pp. 354-358.

*Mobilizing Intolerance: Teungku Dayah (Ulama) and Religious Discourse in Aceh, Indonesia* community's conviction that *Teungku Dayah* is a centre for the religious knowledge dissemination.<sup>14</sup> The strategic position of *Teungku Dayah* was not obtained instantly but through an extensive socio-cultural process. During the sultanate, ulama served as advisors to the king. *Teungku Dayah's* fatwas were pivotal in contributing to the success and glory of Aceh in the past. *Teungku Dayah* also acted as a skilled commander during ancient wars, demonstrating expertise in military strategy. In addition, *Teungku Dayah* was widely respected for his profound Sufism teachings.<sup>15</sup>

Later, the term *Teungku Dayah* became a title for male and female religious teachers, specifically *ustadz* and *ustadzah*, in Aceh.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the significance and influence of *Teungku Dayah* continue to grow in the lives of the Acehnese due to a considerable regeneration process. When a *santri* is considered capable and worthy of becoming a teacher, they will receive a mandate from their teacher to establish a Dayah or Islamic Boarding School in their hometown.<sup>17</sup> *Teungku Dayah's* identity is primarily formed by their role and contributions in the socio-religious sphere rather than by formal education. Therefore, they gain cultural recognition from the community, especially the congregation.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Acehnese, recognizing *Teungku Dayah's* social status is determined by several factors. The primary factor is proficiency in Arabic, which is essential for understanding yellow books – traditional Islamic books in the educational curriculum of the Islamic seminary in Indonesia). Consequently, proficiency in Arabic and the ability to read yellow books are vital attributes for any *Teungku* in Aceh.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, it is necessary to establish religious education centres in remote areas. Thirdly, *Teungku Dayah* assume the role of a surrogate parent to the Acehnese people. They act as a figurehead for students whose education model centres around dormitory living arrangements. Conversely, *Teungku* perceives the students as their children.<sup>20</sup> This fosters an unbreakable bond similar to that of a parent-child relationship. *Teungku Dayah* in rural areas prioritise non-material concerns. Those with limited economic capital are accepted and considered as adopted children of *Teungku Dayah*.<sup>21</sup> They are employed as *ustadz* or *ustadzah* and entrusted with the responsibility for maintaining fields or gardens. Furthermore, their marriage partners are chosen by the teacher. Consequently, *santri* exhibit greater respect towards their teacher compared to governmental authorities.<sup>22</sup>

### Plurality and Pluralism Problems in *Teungku Dayah's* Thought

Traditionalists are the dominant force within the Muslim population of Aceh, adhering to the *Aswaja* ideology. The socio-religious context led to the Ulama Consultative Assembly (UCA) issuing a fatwa that recognised *Aswaja* as the official school of thought in Aceh.<sup>23</sup> The UCA's presence serves as an encouraging indication for the continuity of religious tolerance in Aceh. However, the introduction of the *Aswaja* school of thought has engendered friction in Acehnese society. The obligation to comply with UCA provisions results in a threat to the plurality and the diversity of religious beliefs. Therefore, enforcing the fatwa is a way of imposing uniformity upon the the Acehnese people.<sup>24</sup>

UCA's decision is in stark contrast to *Aswaja's* values of respecting plurality, both in culture and religion. The Acehnese population aspires to combat radicalism, but instead tends to refuse pluralism, thus entangling themselves in a cycle of radicalization brought about by the community movement

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<sup>14</sup> Fakhurrazzi and Saliha Sebgag (2020), "Methods of Learning Kitab Kuning for Beginners in Islamic Boarding School (Dayah)," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 296-310.

<sup>15</sup> Syamsuar (2019), "The strategies of Teungku Chiek Dirundeng to develop islamic education in Aceh, Indonesia," *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 5, pp. 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> Hamdan Hamdan (2018), "Dayah dalam Perspektif Perubahan Sosial," *Al-Hikmah: Media Dakwah, Komunikasi, Sosial dan Budaya*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 108-121.

<sup>17</sup> Jon Paisal (1988), "Metode Pengkaderan Ulama di Dayah Budi Lamno Kabupaten Aceh Jaya," *At-Tanzir: Jurnal Ilmiah Prodi Komunikasi dan Penyairan Islam*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 33-49.

<sup>18</sup> Fakhurrazzi and Sebgag (2020), "Methods of Learning Kitab Kuning," p. 298.

<sup>19</sup> Syarifuddin Syarifuddin (2021), "Islamic Plurality in the Perspectives of Ulama Dayah in Aceh," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 567.

<sup>20</sup> Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad (2015), "Educational practice: Lessons to be learned from madrasah and religious schools in contemporary Southeast Asia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 29-48.

<sup>21</sup> Nirzalin and Febriandi (2020), "Teungku Dayah Agency," p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Aji Sofanudin et al. (2023), "Islamism in Dayah: Shafi'iyah, Hanbaliyah, and Popular Islam," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 283-302.

<sup>23</sup> Firdaus M. Yunus and M. Hasbi Amiruddin (2021), "Tension Between Schools of Thought: Aswaja and Wahabi in Aceh," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> Farkhani Farkhani et al. (2022), "Converging Islamic and religious norms in Indonesia's state life plurality," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 421-446.

ideology. The majority of Acehnese often accuse fellow Muslims of deviating from their religious understandings, such as branding Muhammadiyah as Wahhabis or radicals. This socio-religious context has an impact on *Teungku Dayah*'s thinking, causing confusion regarding the understanding of plurality and pluralism. Such understanding affects the dynamics of religious moderation. The poor rating attributed to religious tolerance in Aceh is due to *Teungku Dayah*'s differentiation of plurality and pluralism as separate concepts. They consider plurality as an acknowledgment of difference and diversity. Meanwhile, pluralism is commonly understood to recognise the validity of all religions. Therefore, *Teungku Dayah* accepts religious differences but does not recognise the truth of other religions.

The classification of Aceh as an intolerant region, particularly regarding different sects, is based on an understanding of the concepts of plurality and pluralism. *Teungku Dayah* believes that Shia and Wahhabis have a significant influence on other schools of thought besides *Aswaja*.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is not surprising if the Chairperson of UCA issued a fatwa declaring Salafis, Wahhabis, and Shiites as heretical. Moreover, the *Aswaja* disciple retained Aceh's religious authority by issuing a regional regulation which prohibits religious studies outside of *Aswaja* within the community. One *Teungku Dayah* stated that plurality is the freedom of opinion, but this freedom has restrictions.<sup>26</sup> His interpretation of Quran Surah Al-Kafirun suggests that every religion is granted the right to practice its beliefs, but it is forbidden to mix them with other religions.<sup>27</sup> In essence, the concept of plurality does not imply that all religions are true, but rather that all religions should show respect towards each other.

Meanwhile, Abi Syariah, a *Teungku Dayah*, argues that religion is basically pluralist, as demonstrated by the description of the religion which consists of the divine and *ardhi* religions. The divine religion culminates in monotheism, while the *ardhi* religion manifests in pantheism and pluralism. This diversity constitutes the very essence of plurality. Therefore, he believes that plurality is *sunnatullah*, a fundamental aspect of divine law established by God to govern the creation and mechanism of the universe. Therefore, Muslims should not adopt concepts from other religions as they already possess a religion that is divinely blessed by Allah.<sup>28</sup>

Abi Syariah also explained that Acehnese religious thoughts are diverse. The majority group is *Aswaja*, but other groups such as Muhammadiyah, Salafiyah, Wahhabiyah, and Shia also exist. Abi Syariah, as a *Teungku Dayah*, argues that the existence of HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) in Aceh is evidence of Shia adherence. Moreover, he suggests that HTI adheres to the Shia model of thinking in the application of Imamah.<sup>29</sup> Imamah is a form of Islamic government system adopted by the Shia community. According to him, the Shia community in Indonesia differs from other Shia communities in their approach. Rather than openly declaring their Shia identity, they tend to adhere to other Islamic beliefs that have been prevalent in society.

Muhib, a *Teungku Dayah*, believes that there should be limits to plurality. Plurality can only be allowed in the form of religious tolerance; it cannot be debated in the case of monotheism. Therefore, Muhib's understanding of plurality is how religious individuals conduct their religious practices based on their respective rules.<sup>30</sup> Plurality is considered lawful if it falls within the right dimensions to maintain the identity of each religious adherent. Some of the understandings of *Teungku Dayah* indicate that they accept limited forms of plurality. Plurality in Aceh is included exclusively in the context of religious harmony, not in the area of monotheism. Consequently, *Teungku Dayah* views the validity of plurality based on Islamic studies. Muhib also believes that religious plurality is part of Allah's power, as God made people aware of and respectful to each other but did not allow for the exchange of worship between one another.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Marhamah (2018), "Pendidikan Dayah dan Perkembangannya di Aceh," *At-Ta'dib: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Agama Islam*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 71-92.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Muhammad Husain, December 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Firdaus (2019), "Peran Organisasi Teungku Dayah dalam Pelaksanaan Syariat Islam di Aceh," Program Studi S3 Aqidah Dan Filsafat Islam (AFI) Pascasarjana, UIN Sumatera Utara, p. 243.

<sup>28</sup> T. Wildan, Sukiman Sukiman, and Amroeni Drajat (2019), "Thinking of Kalam Ulama Aceh XX Century Shaykh Mudawali Al-Khalidi (1917-1961)," *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI-Journal): Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 657-665.

<sup>29</sup> Mohammad Asrori Alfa (2004), "Menggagas Alternatif Pemikiran Aswaja di Tengah Kehidupan Masyarakat Berbasis Pesantren," *El-Harakah*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 63-74.

<sup>30</sup> Arfah Ibrahim (2015), "Pemikiran Ulama Dayah Inshafuddin," *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 203-218.

<sup>31</sup> Nurlaila Nurlaila and Zulihafnani Zulihafnani (2019), "Pengaruh Fatwa Ulama Dayah dalam Masyarakat Aceh," *Substantia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 93.

Plurality is understood as diversity in either religion or culture. This term has dual meanings; one denotes the existence of religious diversity and the other denotes the fusion of religions.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the second meaning is often misunderstood and individuals may reject the concept of plurality based on these misunderstandings. Traditionalists, for example, reject religious pluralism in their belief that equating Gods across different religions is unacceptable. Plurality refers to the approach of every religious believer to respect other religions without contradicting each other. Religious pluralism means accepting the existence of other religions without having to impose one's own beliefs.<sup>33</sup> A common misconception about pluralism is that it cannot feel correct. While an individual may feel that their belief system is right, they must acknowledge that others have the same right to their own beliefs. Therefore, the pinnacle of religious pluralism is essentially religious tolerance.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of plurality is an undeniable phenomenon that individuals worldwide must confront amidst advancing globalization. Plurality is a challenge and a hope that religious people must live with various ups and downs. M. Amin Abdullah defines plurality as diversity, highlighting the importance of accepting differences in various aspects such as religion, social standing, education level, property ownership, and ethnicity. Religious communities navigate the complexities of plurality with both difficulties and aspirations. Therefore, the comprehension of plurality is crucial for building an inclusive and objective society. According to Nurcholish Madjid, pluralism encompasses more than just the acknowledgement of Indonesia's embrace of diversity and its various ethnicities, groups, and religions. It is not a term that encourages religious fanaticism, but rather a means of promoting diversity in civilisation.<sup>35</sup>

The terms monotheism, dualism, and pluralism do not originate from historically religious or Islamic orientations. It is important to note that these terms are objective and unbiased in their definitions. Rather, Islam recognises an identical definition. Monotheism stems from the concept of the oneness in God (*tawhid*) and unity in social and religion matters from classical to contemporary times.<sup>36</sup> Dualism manifests in concepts such as of good-bad, black-white, reward-sin, heaven-hell, and so on. Plurality within the Islamic concept is observable through the existence of diverse creations of God, encompassing ethnicity, religion, language, class, resources, profession and law.<sup>37</sup> According to Muhammad Imarah, plurality is a perspective that embraces diversity while adhering to distinctiveness and uniqueness. Plurality is akin to a state of being multiple.<sup>38</sup> It is essentially heterogeneous and diverse. Thus, religious modernization (*wasathiyah*) has become a widely adopted approach for acknowledging the presence of religious pluralism in Indonesia.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, there is also a pluralism theory that delves deeper into the concepts of diversity and pluralism.

Muhammad Sahlan, both a researcher and an academic, wrote *Teungku Dayah's* thoughts on pluralism in Aceh. According to him, *Teungku Dayah* appears to misconstrue the pluralistic concept. The adherents of pluralism themselves favour a different interpretation than *Teungku Dayah*. They consider pluralism as heretical since it tends to mix all religions or equate all Gods in religions.<sup>40</sup> Instead, pluralism promotes the idea that all religions are essentially good and foster positive ethics. In essence, God exists but we cannot force followers of other religions to carry out the same rites. Husna Amin argues that while a Muslim is entitled to view their religion as correct, non-Muslims are also afforded the same right. This statement does not imply that Muslims have abandoned their monotheism (apostasy). Generally, *Teungku Dayah* presents an emotional and narrow-minded comprehension of

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<sup>32</sup> Purwanto (2011), "Pluralisme Agama dalam Prespektif Nurcholish Madjid," *Jurnal Studi Agama - agama*, Vol. 1, p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> Farooq Hassan (2012), "Pluralism in Islam: A Comparative Study with Western Pluralism," *European Journal of Scientific Research*, Vol. 70, No. 2, pp. 220-227.

<sup>34</sup> Faisar Ananda Arfa (2014), "Problems of Pluralism in Modern Indonesian Islam," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 209-234.

<sup>35</sup> Catur Widiat Moko (2017), "Pluralisme Agama Menurut Nurcholish Madjid (1939-2005) Dalam Konteks Keindonesiaan," *Medina-Te: Jurnal Studi Islam*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 61-78.

<sup>36</sup> M. Hilaly Basya (2011), "The Concept of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: A Study of the MUI's Fatwa and the Debate among Muslim Scholars," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 69-93.

<sup>37</sup> Robert W. Hefner (2020), "Islam and Covenantal Pluralism in Indonesia: A Critical Juncture Analysis," *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 1-17.

<sup>38</sup> Biyanto (2009), "Pluralism Discourse: The Views of Young Muhammadiyah Intellectuals," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 314-340.

<sup>39</sup> Khairil Razali (2013), "Religious Practices in Trauma Coping," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 97-120.

<sup>40</sup> Idris and Sahlan (2018), "Antara Salah Paham dan Paham yang Salah," p. 139.

pluralism. The discussion on tolerance discussion seems to deny monotheism, posing a challenge to the collective knowledge of *Teungku Dayah Aceh*.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Teungku Dayah's Rejection on Pluralism***

*Teungku Dayah* acknowledges the notion of limited plurality; however, when discussing pluralism, this idea is firmly rejected. An instance of such rejection is the involvement of religious institutions in Aceh, such as Ulama Consultative Assembly (UCA), Aceh Dayah Ulama Association (ADUA), Dayah Agency, and the like against diverse Islamic sects.<sup>42</sup> In this case, UCA advocates for religious plurality to be comprehended in three approaches, beginning with compliance with the UCA's legal fatwa in Aceh. Secondly, it is recommended that fatwas be issued against government policies. Thirdly, recognized scholars should refrain from adhering to the principles of pluralism, liberalism, Wahhabism, and even the concept of Shia.

Lem Faisal,<sup>43</sup> a senior UCA Aceh official, stated that deviant and dangerous sects would be categorised and evaluated based on specific criteria. Among these criteria is the Islamic pluralism concept, which recognises the truth of all religions and their shared belief in one God.<sup>44</sup> Aligning with other *Teungku Dayah*, Lem Faisal argues that pluralism should extend respect to other religions rather than other Islamic concepts. He strongly rejects the presence of Islamic teachings in Aceh that do not align with the principles of the *Aswaja* school and the *maturidiyah*, a theological sect with a rational-traditional pattern.<sup>45</sup> He contends that the deviation from other Islamic schools stems from the influence of Shia and Wahhabi ideologies. Therefore, Muslims in Aceh must avoid any Islamic values that conflict with their monotheism.

Likewise, the charismatic Acehnes *Teungku Dayah*, Tu Bulqaini,<sup>46</sup> asserts that the notion of religious pluralism, which implies equality among religions, is erroneous and should be avoided. He prioritises Islam as the most significant religion, being the final teaching of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him.<sup>47</sup> The Qur'an consistently says that Allah has blessed Islam as the only authentic religion, thereby discrediting the concept of pluralism as a liberal ideology. Tu Bulqaini posits that it is not permissible to adhere to the truth of other religions in any context without risking confusion and moral ambiguity within a Muslim's belief system. He also argues that preaching is unnecessary if Muslims must sacrifice their *aqidah* (which translates to 'faith' in Islamic terminology). Furthermore, even if non-Muslims do not wish to acknowledge Allah as a matter of faith, their true God remains Allah, although they are misguided and have yet to receive guidance. Meanwhile, Tu Bulqaini also forbade insulting other religions.<sup>48</sup> Even if they are Christians or Jews, their Prophets are those that Muslims believe too, Jesus and Moses.<sup>49</sup>

Tu Sop, a *Teungku Dayah* and the chairman of ADUA<sup>50</sup>, has a different view on plurality. His understanding of plurality is more open and moderate, aimed at handling diversity wisely and preventing its destruction.<sup>51</sup> Tu Sop believes that stakeholders in religious and spiritual affairs should be aware of their differences, using them to strengthen each other, rather than weaken. He believes that differences are a necessity that must be maintained, not a medium to be fought over. Although there are attempts towards standardisation, Tu Sop argues that small differences still exist within the community. Tu Sop emphasised the importance of Acehnese people comprehending religious and sectarian plurality. If other *Teungku Dayah* imposes uniformity on Islamic schools (*Aswaja* only), community unity and integrity may be jeopardised. He suggests that the responsibility for any future conflict within

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, Husna Amin, November 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Mahmuddin Mahmuddin (2019), "Identitas Politik Kaum Bersarung: Relasi Thaliban dan Huda dalam Proses Damai Aceh," *Al-Ijtima'i: International Journal of Government and Social Science*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 157-178.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Lem Faisal Ali, November 2021

<sup>44</sup> Marhamah (2018), "Pendidikan Dayah dan Perkembangannya di Aceh," p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Ummu Farida (2014), "Membincang Kembali Ahlussunnah Wa al-Jamaah: Pemaknaan dan Ajarannya dalam Perspektif Mutakallimin," *Fikrah*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 41-56.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, Tu Bulqaini, November 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Mizaj Mizaj (2018), "Dayah Darussalam Network and Dayah Awakening in Aceh," *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI-Journal): Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 13-22.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, Tu Bulqaini, November 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Marhamah (2018), "Pendidikan Dayah dan Perkembangannya di Aceh," p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Tgk. Muhammad Yusuf (Tu Sop), November 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Mahmuddin (2019), "Identitas Politik Kaum Bersarung," p. 160.

the community falls on those who let Aceh collapse.<sup>52</sup> *Teungku Dayah* needs to consider finding a solution in addressing the sectarian differences in Aceh rather than punishing and expelling their existence.<sup>53</sup>

Tu Sop argues that it is common for these to be differences between religion and sects.<sup>54</sup> For example, within a family, the religious beliefs of the father, mother, and child may not be identical. Nevertheless, family members should not resort to violence towards one another.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, in Aceh, with its diverse sects, Acehese clerics must understand the concept taught by the Prophet Muhammad, namely *ikhtilafu ummati rahmatun* (which translates to ‘disagreement among my ummah is a mercy’). The focus should remain on strengthening differences rather than bringing them down. As the chairman of ADUA, the strategies for dealing with plurality come from the organisation’s history which dates back to before independence, and its congregations have come up with solutions to address the plurality.<sup>56</sup> ADUA serves as the final defender against religious diversity in Aceh.

The solutions for addressing religious diversity consist of various approaches. The first recommended approach is to visit the *Dayah* to establish brotherhood ties and strengthen mutual understanding among *Teungku Dayah* within the framework of Islam. Secondly, enhancing the identity of the ulama in the community’s perception by organising discussions that focus on the people’s welfare.<sup>57</sup> Thirdly, encouraging the community to strengthen unity and solidarity. Strengthening unity can be achieved by conducting recitation activities, such as the *ta’lim* assembly, designed for the teaching of Islamic practices.<sup>58</sup> The fourth approach entails extending Islamic law through the Aceh government. It is crucial for the *Ulama* (Islamic scholar) and *Umara* (Islamic government) to collaborate and avoid conflicting with one another, despite possessing differing perspectives. In considering dissimilar understandings of the concept of grace, responding in an intelligent manner with an *Aswaja* basis is essential.

## Sects’ Friction

In general, the promotion of plurality in Aceh is essential. Nevertheless, most *Teungku Dayah* have expressed that the differences in the allowed sects are dependent on the Syafii school of thought.<sup>59</sup> This is evidenced by the prohibition of UCA and the Aceh Islamic Sharia Service against other Islamic sects in carrying out their religious studies.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Aceh’s lack of religious plurality is evident in the protest against the government’s policy to build a church in the city centre. The vast majority of Acehese organised massive demonstrations that resulted in the cancellation of the church-building project.

According to Tarmizi Daud, the government’s refusal to build a church in Banda Aceh was based on the government’s decision to build a worship place. Moreover, specific protocols existed for permits to construct places of worship dependent on the number of followers.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, the number of Christians and other non-Muslims did not meet the standards for establishing houses of worship in the city centre. Furthermore, there were already permitted houses of worship in the city centre, such as the one located next to the Banda Aceh Kodim Iskandar Muda and close to the Banda Aceh Grand Mosque. Constructing a church adjacent to the historic Aceh Mosque could potentially pose conflicts with Aceh’s history.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, Tgk. Muhammad Yusf (Tu Sop), November 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Fajri M Kasim (2017), “Ulama dan Upaya Menangkal Radikalisme Agama (Studi Gerakan Ulama Dayah Aceh Indonesia),” Proceeding of International Conference of Empowering Islamic Civilization, pp. 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Interview, Tgk. Muhammad Yusf (Tu Sop), November 2021.

<sup>55</sup> T. Saifullah and Fauzah Nur Aksa (2021), “Peran Pemerintah Aceh dalam Penanganan Konflik Keagamaan Antar Mazhab Islam,” *Reusam: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 40-56.

<sup>56</sup> Mahmuddin (2019), “Identitas Politik Kaum Bersarung,” p. 162.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, Tgk. Muhammad Yusf (Tu Sop), November 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Ibrahim (2015), “Pemikiran Ulama Dayah Inshafuddin,” p. 207.

<sup>59</sup> Eka Srimulyani (2013), “Islamic Schooling in Aceh: Change, Reform, and Local Context,” *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 467-487.

<sup>60</sup> Kurniawan Kurniawan (2014), “Aspek Hukum Fatwa Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama (Mpu) Tentang Aliran Sesat,” *Jurnal Dinamika Hukum*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 310-323.

<sup>61</sup> Nurlaila and Zulihafnani (2019), “Pengaruh Fatwa Ulama Dayah dalam Masyarakat Aceh,” p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Tarmizi Daud, December 2021.

This form of anti-plurality is evident in the friction between sects in Aceh, which grew more intense following the 2012 Aceh regional elections. At that time, one of the candidates for governor of Aceh sought to gain popular support by asserting *Aswaja* as the superior Islamic doctrine in Aceh. Some political actors, with a support from some *Teungku Dayah*, organised demonstrations and accused other sects of espousing Wahhabism.<sup>63</sup> Politically, government officials took step to win people's sympathies, and ideologically, this approach was adopted by *Teungku Dayah*, which led to their emergence as religious authorities in Aceh.

The religious style of the Aceh community is significantly influenced by its political dynamics. This pattern was initially observed during the sultanate of Nurddin Ar-Raniry and Syiah Kuala, where religious officials held sway. Likewise, in post-independence Aceh administration, a religious approach has remained a popular means of gaining power.<sup>64</sup> Since the *Aswaja* Muslims constitute the majority in Aceh, other sects have often been unjustly targeted and marginalised. Thus, in 2021, the governor-elect issued a warrant that did not align with the views of the wider community. Moreover, the governor implemented a policy restricting religious studies solely to *Aswaja* in Aceh.

The authority issued by the governor was deeply regretted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Religious leaders in Indonesia believed that Aceh had erred in its response to the importance of plurality in the region. As a result, the *Aswaja* group has become more emboldened and resolute due to this authority, which has resulted in them taking concrete actions to reject and even exclude other Islamic studies besides *Aswaja*. This is the precursor to the expulsion of various preachers from the Middle East or Islamic thought circles.<sup>65</sup> According to them, imams from the Middle East or Islamic scholars from universities propagate Wahhabism values.

The *Aswaja's* behavior is becoming increasingly concerning. In Bireuen, they asserted their control over a mosque constructed by members of Muhammadiyah community, accusing it as a Wahhabi centre.<sup>66</sup> Eventually, several Muhammadiyah mosques managers in Aceh were coerced into relinquishing control of their mosques to the *Aswaja* community. It should be noted that these mosques were constructed through the hard work and effort of the Muhammadiyah community. Similarly, as occurred in other regions of Aceh, the foundation of the Muhammadiyah mosque was burnt down because it was deemed to be operating outside the parameters of a school recognised by the Aceh government. Likewise, widespread agitation occurred in October 2015 across several major mosques in Aceh regarding the mandatory requirement for Friday preachers to carry sticks. Failure to do so has led the *Aswaja* to believe that the mosque follows Wahhabi beliefs. Following the incident, prominent Acehnese ulama, including representatives from UCA and the Islamic Sharia Service, issued a fatwa stating that holding a stick during the Friday sermon is considered *sunnah*. While this decision may be politically astute as *Aswaja* constitutes the majority group in the region, the government fails to protect the rights of minority Muslims in practice.

According to representatives of the leaders of Islamic campuses in Aceh, the feature of *Aswaja* becoming prominent among non-believing Wahhabis is attributable to power struggles. They liken this situation to what occurred during the period of *Jahiliyah* (the time when the individuals of Mecca were ignorant because there was no communication from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). At that time, the Quraysh were disturbed by the presence of a novel teaching concept (Islam) that could undermine their livelihood.<sup>67</sup> Previously, the religious leaders of the Quraysh used to create idols and sculptures for commercial purposes and charged people to visit Mecca and worship these idols. The appearance of Islam, which demands that Allah alone must be worshipped, posed a significant obstacle to their business activities.

According to informants from Islamic universities in Aceh, the emergence of *mazhab* disputes in the region can be traced back to *Teungku Dayah's* envy towards campus ulama. He believed they had taken over his authority among the Acehnese people. For instance, religious studies, which were once solely

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<sup>63</sup> Idris and Sahlan (2018), "Antara Salah Paham dan Paham yang Salah," p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Abd. Wahid (2014), "Karakteristik Pluralitas Agama di Aceh," p. 246.

<sup>65</sup> Syafieh (2016), "Pergulatan Pemikiran Islam di Aceh (Analisis terhadap Organisasi Masyarakat Islam di Aceh Pasca MoU-Helsinki)," *Jurnal At-Tafkir*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 1-22.

<sup>66</sup> Firdaus (2019), "Peran Organisasi Teungku Dayah," p. 225.

<sup>67</sup> Eka Januar Ermita Dewi (2019), "A Comprehension Transfer of Wahabiyah in Recitation System," *Millati, Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 35-52.



*Mobilizing Intolerance: Teungku Dayah (Ulama) and Religious Discourse in Aceh, Indonesia* under *Teungku Dayah*'s supervision, are now predominantly led by more moderate campus scholars.<sup>68</sup> This jealousy sparked the rejection of and accusations against other sects apart from *Aswaja*. Additionally, *Teungku Dayah* alleged that Islamic campuses in Aceh were responsible for propagating Wahhabism.

### **Dayah's Rejection of Islamic Thought Studies in Aceh**

*Teungku Dayah*'s rejection of Islamic thought studies in universities has become a benchmark for the sustainability of religious tolerance in Aceh.<sup>69</sup> While Islamic study programs have managed to survive in Aceh, they have had to exercise caution and refrain from publicly presenting their scientific studies. Nonetheless, Islamic thought serves as a driving force for promoting a more ideal and *Aswaja*-compliant religious understanding among the people.

The existence of Islamic thought in Aceh is hampered by the *dayah* authority, which rejects religious plurality in large numbers. *Teungku Dayah* suggests that the study of Islamic thought entails a teaching concept that contains the values of *Wahhabism* and liberalism.<sup>70</sup> Many students who have taken the Islamic Thought Study Program at Islamic universities were asked to opt-out and enrol in an alternative area of study. Furthermore, according to the findings from interviews conducted with graduates of the Islamic Thought Study Program in Aceh, it is not feasible for them to carry out their scientific research in several areas of Aceh that follow the *Ahlusunnah waljamaah* doctrine.

Islamic scholars in Aceh worked clandestinely, solely within the academic confines of the campus. In addition, the *Teungku Dayah* circles alleged that the Islamic Thought Study Program's academic seminar, which invited scholars from the Middle East, aimed to barter the *aqidah* in Aceh.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, during the academic lectures on Islamic Thought, specifically in the Postgraduate Program at UIN Ar-Raniry, caution was warranted. Multiple professors and notable Acehese scholars have advised against the indiscriminate dissemination of Islamic thought theories, particularly those that defy the *Aswaja* concept, to the general public. Additionally, explication of Islamic thought on social media or recording for dissemination to the Acehese populace is strictly prohibited. This is to ensure that traditionalist *dayah*-based Acehese society does not reject Islamic thought in Aceh.

### **Conclusion**

Plurality and Pluralism hold distinct positions and meanings for *Teungku Dayah*. Plurality refers to both religious and cultural diversity, whereas pluralism is the acceptance and acknowledgement of the validity of all religions. However, *Teungku Dayah*'s conception of pluralism stands in stark contrast to that of Islamic scholars. Pluralism entails respecting the existence of religions and their inherent right to uphold the veracity of their own beliefs. However, this does not necessarily imply recognition of the validity of other religions. Returning to its fundamental principles, pluralism guards against the fusion of beliefs that *Teungku Dayah* fears, thus preventing such occurrences within the Acehese Muslim community.

The dominant Acehese *Aswaja* sect's socio-religious background can counter the inconsistency in Acehese understanding. Nonetheless, *Teungku Dayah*, possessing religious, social, and political authority, has not achieved a conclusive point in *Aswaja*'s comprehension and application. Therefore, there is a consistent need to promote and engage in Islamic Thought Studies within the Acehese Muslim community, specifically the *Teungku Dayah*. The sustainability of religious tolerance in Aceh, as desired by the *Aswaja* community, relies on the dynamics of Islamic Thought Study.

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<sup>68</sup> R. Michael Feener, David Kloos, and Annemarie Samuels (eds.) (2016), *Islam and the Limits of the State: Reconfigurations of Practice, Community and Authority in Contemporary Aceh*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 1-249.

<sup>69</sup> Syafieh, "Pergulatan Pemikiran Islam di Aceh," p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad (2011), "Contemporary Islamic Thought in Indonesian and Malay World: Islam Liberal, Islam Hadhari, and Islam Progresif," *Journal of Indonesian Islam*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 91-129.

<sup>71</sup> Marhamah (2018), "Pendidikan Dayah dan Perkembangannya di Aceh," p. 78.

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