



ULAMA DAYAH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TOLERANCE AND PLURALISM IN ACEHNESE SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of *ulama dayah*—traditional Islamic scholars—in shaping the discourse and practice of tolerance and pluralism in Aceh, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative approach that integrates literature review, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with prominent *ulama dayah* and members of the Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU), the study examines how these scholars conceptualize and enact tolerance in a society marked by both strong Islamic identity and growing diversity. The findings reveal that *ulama dayah* interpret tolerance as an Islamic principle grounded in the Shafi'i tradition, emphasizing respect for difference while maintaining doctrinal boundaries. Their strategies in managing intra-Muslim diversity and interfaith relations include persuasive guidance, conflict mediation, educational outreach, and institutional collaboration through the MPU. The influence of *ulama dayah* extends beyond ritual matters to shaping communal norms and public policy, making them key agents in sustaining social cohesion. The study concludes that the Acehnese experience demonstrates the importance of culturally embedded religious authority in negotiating pluralism, and highlights the ongoing challenges and opportunities for adaptive leadership in an increasingly complex society.

Keywords: *Ulama Dayah, Tolerance, Pluralism, Aceh, Islamic Authority, Religious Diversity*

A. Introduction

Aceh's distinctive Islamic heritage is inseparable from the presence and authority of the *ulama dayah*—religious scholars nurtured in traditional Islamic boarding schools (*dayah*). Historically, these scholars have held a central and multifaceted role in Acehnese society, serving not only as transmitters of religious knowledge but also as community leaders, social mediators, and agents of cultural preservation (Bustamam-Ahmad & Amiruddin, 2013; Iskandariata, 2007). In the Acehnese context, the title *Teungku* signifies not merely scholarly expertise but also social legitimacy, moral authority, and public trust that often surpass even state institutions (Nurdin, 1994).

While Indonesia is celebrated for its pluralism and commitment to religious tolerance, Aceh occupies a unique position as the only province with formal Islamic law (sharia) and a predominantly Muslim population (Kawilarang, 2008). This context has

shaped a particular brand of religiosity, characterized by strong adherence to the Shafi'i school of law and a preference for religious uniformity. Although pluralism is officially recognized at the national level, the interpretation and implementation of tolerance in Aceh are strongly mediated by local religious authorities (Suyanta, 2008). The community often turns to *ulama dayah* to interpret and respond to emerging issues surrounding pluralism, especially in the face of external influences and internal religious differences.

Nevertheless, contemporary Acehnese society is far from homogenous. Intra-Muslim differences—whether doctrinal, ritual, or jurisprudential—have become increasingly visible, especially after the 2004 tsunami, which catalyzed demographic shifts and the introduction of new religious ideas (Miswar, 2017). These internal differences sometimes give rise to tensions, particularly regarding the legitimacy of non-Shafi'i practices or alternative theological interpretations (Syihab, 2010). Moreover, Aceh's position within Indonesia's pluralistic framework means that questions of tolerance, coexistence, and religious authority are of ongoing relevance and complexity.

Despite the vital role of *ulama dayah* in guiding Acehnese attitudes toward pluralism, systematic academic analysis of their perspectives and strategies remains limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on their historical roles or legal authority, but there is a notable gap in understanding how *ulama dayah* conceptualize and operationalize tolerance in the current era of religious diversity and social change (Rahardjo, 1996; Fikri, 2015). This study seeks to address that gap by examining the contemporary relevance and agency of *ulama dayah* in responding to the challenges of pluralism and intolerance in Aceh.

Specifically, this article aims to answer the following questions: How do *ulama dayah* in Aceh define and enact tolerance and pluralism in religious life? What strategies do they employ to manage intra-Muslim differences and interfaith relations? And to what extent does their influence shape the broader discourse and practice of tolerance in Acehnese society? By addressing these questions, this research contributes both to the academic literature on religious authority in Indonesia and to broader debates on the practical negotiation of pluralism in contemporary Muslim societies.

B. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach that integrates literature review, document analysis, and field interviews to comprehensively explore the role of *ulama dayah* in shaping religious tolerance and pluralism in Aceh. The study was designed as an exploratory and descriptive inquiry, aiming to capture the nuanced perspectives of Acehnese religious leaders both from historical and contemporary standpoints. To construct a robust contextual background, the research began with an extensive review of books, academic articles, and historical records concerning the tradition, authority, and influence of *ulama dayah* in Acehnese society (Bustamam-Ahmad & Amiruddin, 2013; Rahardjo, 1996; Fikri, 2015). This library research was complemented by a close examination of policy documents, fatwas, and official statements issued by key

institutions such as the Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU), allowing for an understanding of the formal stances adopted in relation to religious pluralism and community tolerance.

To gain direct insights into the lived experiences and practical viewpoints of religious authorities, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with several prominent *ulama dayah* and members of the MPU, including figures such as Abu Daud Zamzami, Lem Faisal, Tu Bulqaini, and Sofyan. These informants were purposefully selected based on their recognized expertise, social standing, and active engagement in public discourse on religious affairs in Aceh. The interviews focused on exploring how these leaders conceptualize tolerance, manage intra-Muslim diversity, and respond to challenges posed by religious differences, both within and outside the Islamic community. All qualitative data, whether drawn from interviews or documentary sources, were analyzed using thematic content analysis, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns, central themes, and practical strategies related to religious coexistence and conflict management. Throughout the research process, ethical principles were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and confidentiality was maintained according to their preferences. By triangulating data from literature, documents, and interviews, this study sought to produce a well-rounded and authentic account of the ways in which *ulama dayah* continue to influence Aceh's approach to tolerance and pluralism in the modern era.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Ulama Dayah's Understanding and Implementation of Tolerance and Pluralism

The understanding and practical application of tolerance and pluralism among *ulama dayah* in Aceh are deeply embedded in both religious doctrine and Acehnese socio-cultural realities. Historically, *ulama dayah* have been regarded as the most respected and authoritative figures in Acehnese society—advisors and mediators in matters of faith, social order, and even political affairs. Their status as *Teungku* is not just a formal title but a social recognition of their charisma, knowledge, and exemplary character, with their guidance frequently considered more authoritative than governmental decrees (Nurdin, 1994; Bustamam-Ahmad & Amiruddin, 2013).

From the perspective of *ulama dayah*, tolerance (*tasa'amuh*) is first and foremost an Islamic principle, but one that must not threaten the unity of faith (*tauhid*) or undermine the established religious order grounded in the Shafi'i school. This orientation is visible both in daily teachings and community rituals. Aceh's religious landscape is characterized by a long tradition of loyalty to the Shafi'i madhhab, a legacy that shapes both public and private religious expression. *Ulama dayah* emphasize that pluralism, as accepted in Aceh, is not a relativization of religious truth but a recognition of human diversity as God's will—*masyī'atullāh* (Q.S. al-Rūm/30:22)—within clear doctrinal boundaries.

A practical example, highlighted in both interviews and field data, is how Acehnese *ulama dayah* urge the community to maintain respect toward other faiths while firmly upholding their own. For instance, Tu Bulqaini points out that it is forbidden for Muslims to insult or mock figures venerated by other religions, such as Prophet Isa (Jesus). The Prophet Muhammad's prohibition against reviling the gods of others (Qur'an, 6:108) is frequently cited to reinforce this principle, and public statements or behaviors that could provoke conflict with Christian minorities in Aceh are strongly discouraged. This stance, however, does not imply theological compromise; *ulama dayah* make clear distinctions between upholding respect for others and diluting the tenets of Islamic belief. According to Tu Bulqaini, "No Muslim should say that all religions are equally true, but tolerance means not violating the dignity of others nor interfering with their religious rites" (Interview, 2023).

Pluralism, in the eyes of *ulama dayah*, is understood as the natural state of society—*the world is not homogeneous*—but this reality does not justify unrestricted religious innovation. The preservation of religious uniformity in public ritual is viewed as a safeguard against potential confusion or fitnah within the Muslim community. Lem Faisal notes that although Aceh officially recognizes the four Sunni schools of law, public religious activities are almost exclusively Shafi'i, and practices from other madhhab are generally kept private. This policy, which is supported by both religious consensus and provincial regulations, aims to maintain social cohesion. As Lem Faisal explains, "It is not about denying the legitimacy of other madhhab, but about preventing unnecessary disputes and misunderstandings among the common people who may not be versed in jurisprudential nuances" (Interview, 2023).

Tolerance also extends to intra-Muslim diversity, but again, boundaries are carefully maintained. *Ulama dayah* routinely mediate disputes over ritual details, such as the number of rak'at in tarawih or the recitation of qunut in Subuh prayers, by reminding followers that these differences are ijtihadiyyah (deriving from juristic reasoning) and not essential to the faith. The article documents instances where *ulama dayah* have resolved local disputes by invoking historical examples: Ahmad ibn Hanbal, when praying at Imam Shafi'i's grave, followed the Shafi'i custom out of respect, and vice versa. Such examples are used to stress the importance of humility, etiquette, and respect within the Muslim community (Syihab, 2010; Lem Faisal, Interview).

Moreover, *ulama dayah* frequently address the community through sermons, dayah classes, and public dialogue, reinforcing the notion that true tolerance is an active moral stance—*menahan diri* (restraint), *memupuk rasa persaudaraan se-Tuhan* (nurturing brotherhood under one God), and *menjauhi praktik serang-menyerang antar agama* (avoiding mutual aggression). The teaching of tolerance, therefore, is not limited to formal declarations but is instilled in daily life, reflected in how Acehnese Muslims interact with non-Muslims as well as among themselves. Despite the strong Shafi'i orientation, *ulama dayah* do not encourage harshness or accusations of heresy (takfir) against those who practice Islam differently, as long as their practices remain within the broad framework of Sunni orthodoxy. When differences do arise, particularly in villages

or mosques with competing ritual traditions, *ulama dayah* are often called upon to mediate, emphasizing *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) and patience.

Finally, the institutional support for this understanding of tolerance is evident in the role of the MPU (Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly), which issues fatwas and recommendations that reinforce both the preservation of Shafi'i practices and the imperative of communal harmony. The MPU's approach is generally persuasive rather than punitive, aiming to guide rather than to discipline, unless a situation threatens the established order or public peace. Thus, the *ulama dayah*'s understanding and implementation of tolerance and pluralism are characterized by a delicate balance: steadfastness in faith and tradition, coupled with civility, compassion, and the active promotion of social harmony. This distinctive Acehnese model of tolerance, as shaped and sustained by *ulama dayah*, reflects both the religious ideals of Islam and the social wisdom of local experience.

2. Strategies for Managing Intra-Muslim Differences and Interfaith Relations

In the plural social landscape of Aceh, the presence of both intra-Muslim differences and relations with non-Muslim communities requires careful management by religious authorities. The *ulama dayah*—with their position as both moral guides and social mediators—have developed a range of strategies to maintain religious unity, prevent conflict, and promote coexistence.

The management of intra-Muslim diversity in Aceh is primarily centered on the dominance of the Shafi'i school. However, the existence of other Sunni traditions and occasional local variations in ritual practice often gives rise to disputes, particularly around prayer rituals such as the number of rakaat in tarawih, the recitation of qunut, or details of ablution. In responding to such issues, *ulama dayah* draw upon both classical jurisprudence and the wisdom of Acehnese tradition. As Lem Faisal recounts, while there is general public adherence to the Shafi'i school, individual practices influenced by other madhhab are not strictly prohibited, provided they do not cause confusion or public discord. When disputes over ritual practices arise, *ulama dayah* frequently invoke the principle of *ikhtilaf* (jurisprudential disagreement) and cite the respectful conduct of classical scholars as models for contemporary behavior. They remind the community that ijtihadi differences should be addressed with patience and mutual respect, not accusation or condemnation (Interview, Lem Faisal).

The role of the MPU (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama) is also central in diffusing tension and providing authoritative guidance. As highlighted in several interviews, the MPU's fatwas and recommendations serve as a reference for both government policy and community practice. When ritual disputes threaten to escalate, the MPU acts as a neutral arbiter, offering interpretations that aim to preserve both the integrity of religious doctrine and the cohesion of the community. The MPU also collaborates with local leaders, village authorities, and mosque committees to mediate and prevent the politicization of religious differences.

Beyond doctrinal matters, *ulama dayah* pay close attention to the potential for intergroup conflict rooted in social or political factors. Recent history shows that disputes over mosque management, allocation of religious leadership, or interpretation of Islamic law can be exploited for personal or political gain, leading to broader community unrest. In such situations, *ulama dayah* are proactive in encouraging dialogue and reminding all parties of the shared foundations of faith. They frequently organize educational sessions, intergroup meetings, and community discussions to clarify religious teachings and discourage divisive rhetoric. During Ramadan, for example, issues like the 8 vs. 20 rakaat tarawih prayer sometimes become flashpoints for tension; *ulama dayah* address these by publicly reaffirming the legitimacy of differing practices within Sunni Islam and by encouraging restraint among their followers (Sofyan, Interview).

Interfaith relations in Aceh are shaped by both constitutional recognition of religious diversity and strong Islamic identity. Although the majority of the population is Muslim, minority groups such as Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus are present in certain regions. The *ulama dayah* approach interfaith issues with a clear commitment to peaceful coexistence while firmly upholding Islamic values. Tolerance towards non-Muslims is guided by the principle of “no compulsion in religion” (Qur'an, 2:256) and the practice of honoring agreements and social contracts. The *ulama dayah* instruct the community to avoid derogatory speech or actions against non-Muslim neighbors, emphasizing that social harmony and respect for others are Islamic obligations (Tu Bulqaini, Interview).

When interfaith tensions arise—often triggered by misunderstandings, rumors, or outside influences—*ulama dayah* play a mediating role, working together with government officials and community leaders to defuse potential conflicts. They draw on both religious teaching and local wisdom, reminding the Muslim majority that minority rights must be protected and that provocations should not be met with hostility. Practical steps taken by *ulama dayah* include participating in interfaith forums, issuing public statements that call for calm, and using Friday sermons to discourage divisive actions. The research documents several occasions when the guidance of *ulama dayah* was instrumental in preventing escalation and restoring mutual trust between religious communities.

Educational initiatives are another vital strategy. *Ulama dayah* prioritize the teaching of tolerance, the history of pluralism in Islam, and the importance of respect for difference in their curricula and community outreach. By equipping young Acehnese with both religious knowledge and social awareness, *ulama dayah* hope to cultivate a generation that is confident in its faith yet open to peaceful coexistence with others.

The comprehensive approach adopted by *ulama dayah*—which combines doctrinal clarity, practical mediation, educational outreach, and collaboration with formal institutions—demonstrates their commitment to managing religious diversity responsibly. Rather than seeking to eliminate difference, their strategies are designed to transform potential sources of conflict into opportunities for dialogue and mutual respect. This ongoing process requires flexibility, patience, and above all, a deep sense of accountability to both religious principles and the wider Acehnese community.

3. The Influence of *Ulama Dayah* on Discourses and Practices of Tolerance in Acehnese Society

The enduring influence of *ulama dayah* in Aceh is evident not only in the everyday religious practices of the community but also in the broader social discourse surrounding tolerance and pluralism. Across generations, the authority of these religious scholars has shaped how Acehnese society interprets, negotiates, and responds to questions of religious difference and coexistence. Their presence is deeply woven into the social fabric, as they serve as role models, moral guides, and the principal sources of religious legitimacy (Bustamam-Ahmad & Amiruddin, 2013; Suyanta, 2008).

A key factor underpinning their influence is the widespread social trust invested in their interpretations of both doctrine and tradition. Acehnese people, as reflected in both interviews and local narratives, frequently consult *ulama dayah* on sensitive issues of tolerance, intergroup relations, and religious boundaries. Their public statements—whether delivered in Friday sermons, written in fatwas, or shared through media—often set the tone for community response to new challenges or potential conflicts. For instance, when controversy arises regarding ritual differences or interfaith events, the position adopted by *ulama dayah* typically guides the attitudes of their followers and can either de-escalate or exacerbate tensions depending on the message delivered (Syihab, 2010; Interviews: Lem Faisal, Tu Bulqaini).

The formalization of religious influence through the MPU (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama) amplifies the role of *ulama dayah* in public life. The MPU's fatwas and policy recommendations are widely regarded as both religious and social directives. Local government often turns to MPU guidance when drafting regulations related to religious holidays, public morality, or responses to religious difference. The MPU also serves as a platform for collective deliberation among *ulama dayah*, enabling them to articulate a unified stance on issues of tolerance. The acceptance and enforcement of these positions by both the government and the general public reinforce the practical authority of *ulama dayah* as shapers of public norms.

Furthermore, the influence of *ulama dayah* extends to the educational sphere. Through the establishment and operation of dayah institutions, they have nurtured generations of Acehnese who are not only proficient in Islamic sciences but also imbued with the values of social harmony and respect for difference. The curricula taught in dayah typically emphasize the historical and scriptural foundations of tolerance in Islam, such as the Qur'anic commands to respect human dignity, honor agreements, and coexist peacefully with others. By integrating these principles into daily teaching and student life, *ulama dayah* ensure that the message of tolerance is continually reinforced at the grassroots level (Nurdin, 1994).

Ulama dayah also play a direct role in mediating disputes and restoring social cohesion when conflicts arise. Their interventions are often decisive in resolving communal disagreements, whether the issues pertain to mosque leadership, ritual practices, or relations with non-Muslim communities. The respect they command allows

them to act as impartial mediators, and their decisions are usually accepted as authoritative and binding. On multiple occasions documented in both the fieldwork and public record, *ulama dayah* have used their influence to calm tensions, encourage dialogue, and remind the community of the ethical imperative to maintain social peace, even in the face of provocation or misunderstanding (Sofyan, Interview; MPU fatwas).

Importantly, the discourse of tolerance propagated by *ulama dayah* is not limited to idealized rhetoric but is reflected in concrete policies and community behavior. Their insistence on upholding the dignity of others, avoiding derogatory speech, and honoring established agreements provides a normative framework that guides both individual conduct and collective action. Even in the context of increasing social and religious pluralism—driven by migration, media, and changing demographics—their continued guidance remains a stabilizing force.

Nevertheless, *ulama dayah* also face the ongoing challenge of responding to evolving forms of diversity and new social pressures. Globalization, information technology, and the emergence of alternative sources of authority have introduced complexities that sometimes test the limits of traditional influence. Yet, by adapting their methods—incorporating dialogue, outreach, and updated educational approaches—*ulama dayah* seek to maintain their relevance and reinforce their foundational message: that religious identity and social harmony are not mutually exclusive, and that tolerance, as practiced in Aceh, must be continuously negotiated and reaffirmed through wise leadership.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *ulama dayah* occupy a central and enduring position in shaping the dynamics of tolerance and pluralism within Acehnese society. Their understanding of tolerance is rooted in the Islamic tradition—especially the Shafi‘i school—emphasizing respect for difference while upholding religious orthodoxy and local custom. The *ulama dayah* reject religious relativism, but they actively promote civility, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence both within the Muslim community and in relations with non-Muslims. Their guidance discourages derogatory attitudes and fosters an environment of restraint and mutual respect, reinforcing Aceh’s distinctive brand of religious harmony.

The strategies employed by *ulama dayah* in managing intra-Muslim diversity and interfaith relations are multifaceted. Through persuasive authority, mediation, education, and collaboration with both religious and governmental institutions, they transform potential sources of conflict into opportunities for dialogue and understanding. The Aceh Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU) further institutionalizes their influence, providing authoritative guidance that shapes both community practice and local policy.

The influence of *ulama dayah* extends beyond ritual and doctrinal matters to encompass broader social norms and communal behavior. By integrating teachings of tolerance into educational curricula and public discourse, they play a pivotal role in maintaining social cohesion in a pluralistic setting. Nevertheless, ongoing social change,

including the impacts of globalization and new forms of communication, presents challenges that require adaptive leadership and continued engagement. In conclusion, the Acehnese experience illustrates how religious authority, when exercised with wisdom and cultural sensitivity, can serve as a vital resource for negotiating pluralism and sustaining tolerance in a rapidly changing society. Future research may further explore how the evolving roles of *ulama dayah* interact with emerging social realities, and how their leadership can inform broader strategies for peaceful coexistence in diverse Muslim communities.

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