



RESHAPING ISLAMIC KNOWLEDGE,
ADVOCATING WASAȚISM:
The Azharites and the Transformation of Urban
Religious Learning in Banda Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract: This article examines the significant role of the Azharites (Al-Azhar alumni) in reshaping Islamic knowledge alongside the transformation of urban religious learning in Banda Aceh over the past two decades. The study highlights their contributions to disseminating Islamic knowledge through platforms like the Middle East Alumni Association (Ikatan Alumni Timur Tengah—IKAT), advanced reading communities, mosques, coffee shops, and mass/social media. They have facilitated public learning in classical Islamic knowledge, such as *tafsir*, *taḥṣīn al-Qur'an*, *hadīth*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *aqīdah*, *sīrah*, and *mawārith* by introducing not only basic and intermediate but also advanced religious texts. Furthermore, the Azharites have promoted also *Wasaṭism* (*wasatiyyah*, moderation) in the understanding of Islam, rooted in Shafi'ite-Ash'arite traditions, while incorporating texts from other madhhabs, such as the Hanafite, Hanbalite, and Malikite schools, in comparative way. Their approach distinguishes them from both the strict madhabism and the anti-madhabism of Salafi-Wahhabism and radical Islamism. The study concludes that the Azharites have contributed to the discursive democratization and reform, which have resulted in the reshaping of Islamic knowledge in Banda Aceh—and Aceh province in general—and the moderation of madhabism, by introducing Wasaṭism and fostering alternative urban religious learning.

Keywords: Azharites, Islamic knowledge, urban religious learning, Wasaṭism, religious authority, Banda Aceh.

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Introduction

ACEH is the only province in Indonesia granted the official, legal permission to implement sharia (Islamic law) based on Laws No. 44 of 1999 and No. 18 of 2001. Since then, shari'a has been enforced gradually through various *qanuns* (local by-laws), from those concerning Islamic creed, worship, and *shi'ar* (symbols)—*qanun* No. 11 (2002) and consumption of intoxicants (*khamr*), gambling (*maysir*), and *khalwat* (being alone with someone of the opposite sex who is not a relative)—*Qanuns* Nos. 12, 13, and 14 (2003) respectively—to the more comprehensive Islamic criminal law—*Jarimah Qanun* No. 6 (2014), which expands the scope of criminal law and revises the previous *qanuns*. Apart from *khamr*, *maysir*, and *khalwat*, the latter includes such criminal offenses as adultery, sexual harassment, rape, *liwāt* (gay sexual act), and *musāḥaqah* (lesbian sexual act), but does not include the hard *hudūd* punishments, such as hand cutting, stoning (*rajm*), and death sentence (*qīṣāṣ*). The mainstream response to this official shari'atization has been one of constructive enthusiasm. However, there are other responses, such as excessive euphoria by specific individuals or groups of people who attempt to enforce shari'a without proper legal procedure, primarily, but not exclusively, during the early implementation of shari'a.¹ critical engagement by several public intellectuals, women's and human rights activists, queers, and some (neo-)Sufi circles;² and ignorance and negligence.³ This has been shown by not only Muslim elites—religious scholars ('*ulama*'), religious organization leaders, and

¹ Munawiah Munawiah, Hasnul Arifin Melayu, and Nurul Husna, "Perempuan Aceh Dan Human Security," *Gender Equality* 3, no. 2 (2017): 19–36, <https://jurnal.ar-raniry.ac.id/index.php/equality/article/view/3440>.

² Moch Nur Ichwan, "Alternatives to Shariatism: Progressive Muslim Intellectuals, Feminist, Queer and Sufis in Contemporary Aceh," in *Regime Change, Democracy, and Islam: The Case Indonesia*, ed. Kees van Dijk and Nico Kaptein (Leiden University, 2013), 137–79.

³ David Kloos, "The Ethics of Not-Praying: Religious Negligence, Life Phase, and Social Status in Aceh, Indonesia," in *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion*, ed. D. Beekers and D. Kloos (Berghahn Books Inc., 2017).

religious as well as local political leaders—but also the general Muslim public.⁴

Many actors have been involved in official and societal shari'atization processes. Among these actors are the Azharites or Al-Azhar alumni,⁵ either personally or collectively as an organization. They are involved in both official shari'atization through the local government, especially the Shari'a Office (Dinas Syariat Islam—DSI) responsible for drafting the shari'a qanun and ensuring that all *qanuns* are by shari'a, and the Ulama Deliberation Council (Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama—MPU), as well as societal shari'atization through *da'wah* (proselytization) and education. Some key Azharites might be mentioned in this regard, such as Prof. Al-Yasa' Abubakar, the first chairman of the Shari'a Office, Prof. Muslim Ibrahim, the chairman of MPU for several periods, Prof. Muhibbuddin Waly, the adviser of the Nanggroe Aceh Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Naggroe Aceh—MUNA), and Prof. Azman Ismail, the Grand Imam of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque—to mention some. Later, the younger generations of Azharites became more active in various fields, especially after the establishment of the Middle East Alumni Association (Ikatan Keluarga Alumni Timur Tengah—IKAT) in 2007, but mostly, although not exclusively, in the field of Islamic knowledge and learning.

This article aims to explain the dynamics of the Azharites, or Al-Azhar alums, in reshaping Islamic knowledge and religious learning in the shari'atized urban area of Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh Province, by introducing Al-Azhar's reform approach, known as *Wasatism* (*wasatiyyah*, moderation). Islamic knowledge (or Islamic religious knowledge) here refers specifically to the so-called “*al-*

⁴ Moch Nur Ichwan, “The Politics of Shariatization: Central Governmental and Regional Discourses of Shari'a Implementation in Aceh,” in *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*, ed. Michael Feener and Mark Cammack (Islamic Legal Studies Program, Harvard University Press, 2007), 193–215; R. Michael Feener, *Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Arskal Salim, *Challenging the Secular State: The Islamization of Law in Modern Indonesia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

⁵ The terms “Azharite” and “Al-Azhar alumni” are used interchangeably.

‘ulūm al-diniyyah” (religious sciences), such as *tafsīr* (Qur’anic exegesis), *ḥadīth* (Prophetic tradition), *fiqh* (Islamic law), *kalām* (Islamic theology), *sīrah* (Prophetic biography), *mawārith* or *‘ilm al-farā’iḍ* (inheritance), and *taḥsīn al-Qur’ān* (Qur’ān recitation improvement); religious learning (or Islamic religious learning) refers here not only to formal but also (mainly) to non-formal urban learning (including *da’wah*) of Islamic knowledge;. In contrast, Wasaṭism (*wasaṭiyah*, moderation) refers to Al-Azhar’s way of Islamic reform, which emphasizes a balance between traditional Islamic teachings and modern interpretations by promoting adherence to the four principal Sunni schools of law (*madhahib*), belief in one of the Ash’ari, Maturidi, or Athari creeds (*‘aqāid*), and the practice of Sufism (Tasawwuf).⁶

Despite the long history of Al-Azhar alums in Aceh, their role in reshaping Islamic knowledge and learning has been largely overlooked by researchers.⁷ Indeed, there are some studies of Al-Azhar alumni in the international context (such as Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai,⁸ and John T. Chen),⁹ and of Indonesian students in Cairo, particularly Al-Azhar (Mona Abaza,¹⁰ Michael Laffan,¹¹ and

⁶ On Al-Azhar Wasaṭism, see Aria Nakissa, *The Anthropology of Islamic Law: Education, Ethics, and Legal Interpretation at Egypt’s Al-Azhar* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷ The data for this qualitative research was gathered during our fieldwork in Banda Aceh (30 June - 10 October 2023) through Focused Group Discussion (FGD), in-depth interviews, observation, and examining relevant documents. One of the co-authors, Mujtahid, who is also an Al-Azhar alumnus, functions as both research assistant and informant whom we interviewed. As a professional doctoral student, he is conscious of taking distance from the subject of study he is a part of. Moreover, both the principal author (Ichwan), who has been a researcher of Aceh for about two decades, and the second co-author (Shadiqin), who is himself an Aceh scholar and researcher, together conducted fieldwork and ensured “objectivity” (intersubjectivity) of the analysis.

⁸ Masooda Bono and Keiko Sakurai, eds., *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

⁹ John T. Chen, “Re-Orientation: The Chinese Azharites between Umma and Third World, 1938-55,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no. 1 (May 2014): 24–51, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2648560>.

¹⁰ Mona Abaza, *Changing Images of Three Generations of Azharites in Indonesia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993); Mona Abaza, *Indonesian Students in Cairo: Islamic Education, Perceptions and Exchanges* (Association Archipel, 1994).

Kinoshita Hiroko¹²). William Roff¹³ and Norshahril Saat¹⁴ studied not only Indonesian students, but also those from other Southeast Asian countries in Cairo. Some studies on the role of Al-Azhar alumni in Indonesia after returning to Indonesia have been done by such scholars as Mona Abaza,¹⁵ Hiroko Kinoshita,¹⁶ As'ad, D. I. Ansusa Putra, and Arfan,¹⁷ and Pangeran Arsyad Ihsanulhaq and Mohammad Izdiyan Muttaqin.¹⁸ However, the study of the Azharites in contemporary Aceh is almost nonexistent, at least

¹¹ Michael Laffan, "An Indonesian Community in Cairo: Continuity and Change in a Cosmopolitan Islamic Milieu," *Indonesia* 2, no. 2 (2004): 1–26, <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/54309>.

¹² Kinoshita Hiroko, "Discovering the Diversities of Indonesian Islam in Contemporary Cairo-The Case of the Indonesian Azharis Community," *Mediterranean Review* 3, no. 1 (2010): 83–103, <https://www.riss.kr/link?id=A60179184>.

¹³ William R. Roff, "Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920's," *Indonesia* 9 (April 1970): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350623>.

¹⁴ Norshahril Saat, *Tradition and Islamic Learning: Singapore Students in the Al-Azhar University* (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

¹⁵ Abaza, *Changing Images of Three Generations of Azharites in Indonesia*; Mona Abaza, "Indonesian Azharites, Fifteen Years Later," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18, no. 1 (2003): 139–53, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/401655>.

¹⁶ Hiroko Kinoshita, *Islamic Higher Education in Contemporary Indonesia Through the Islamic Intellectuals of Al-Azharite Alumni*, Kyoto Working Papers on Area Studies: G-COE Series (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2009), <http://hdl.handle.net/2433/155748>; Hiroko Kinoshita, "Al-Azharites Popularized in Present Day Indonesia: Through an Analysis of the First Congress of Establishing the Indonesian Branch of the World Association of Al-Azhar Alumni," *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 511, no. 1 (2011): 124–34, <http://id.ndl.go.jp/bib/11132478>; Hiroko Kinoshita, "The Networks and Activities of Al-Azhar Alumni in Contemporary Indonesia," "Contemporary Indonesia" Kyoto-Cornell Joint International Workshop on Trans-national Southeast Asia: Paradigms, Histories, Vectors, 2013, https://researchmap.jp/montacat2/published_papers/35758660.

¹⁷ As'ad, D. I. Ansusa Putra, and Arfan, "Being Al-Wasatiyah Agents: The Role of Azharite Organization in the Moderation of Indonesian Religious Constellation," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 2 (September 2021), <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.112.07>.

¹⁸ Pangeran Arsyad Ihsanulhaq and Mohammad Izdiyan Muttaqin, "Al-Azhar University's Indonesian Student Alumni Strategic Role Analysis in Influencing the Politics of Indonesia-Egypt Foreign Policy," *Journal of World Science* 3, no. 10 (October 2024): 1351–61, <https://doi.org/10.58344/JWS.V3I10.1191>.

until the writing of this article.¹⁹ In this context, Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad's newspaper article is worthy of mention.²⁰ He refers to the growing visibility of the Azharites as "the revival of the Al-Azhar alumni."

The intersection of the sociology of knowledge and urbanity examines how urban environments influence the production, circulation, and legitimacy of knowledge, including religious knowledge. It investigates how urban space, social structure, and power influence what is considered valid knowledge and who can produce or access it.²¹ Based on this theoretical perspective,²² this article argues that the Azharites have contributed in reshaping Islamic religious learning especially, but not exclusively, in the urban spaces of Banda Aceh, either individually or collectively, through various means, including organization, religious learning communities/circles, mosques, and mass and social media, by which they exercise their religious authority, in the last decades following the official implementation of shari'ah in the region. By so doing, they have offered alternative ways of learning Islamic knowledge beyond the conventional institutions, such as *dayah* (Islamic boarding schools), *madrasahs*, and Islamic universities, and beyond the strict Shafi'ite-Ash'arite madhabism. As pointed out by Foucault,²³ knowledge contains power, and vice versa—so does Islamic knowledge. Such a condition is closely linked to the

¹⁹ There are some studies on the individual Al-Azhar alumni, but not because they are Azharites. See, for instance, Abdullah Sani, Mukhsin Nyak Umar, and M. Yusuf Al-Qardhawy, "Sosio-Kultural Aceh Tentang Kepemimpinan Perempuan Dalam Pandangan Abuya Profesor Muhibuddin Waly," *Arus Jurnal Sosial Dan Humaniora* 4, no. 2 (August 2024): 1044–51, <https://doi.org/10.57250/ajsh.v4i2.605>; Amiruddin, "Pemikiran Filsafat Pendidikan Azman Ismail," *Jurnal Kalam* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–22.

²⁰ Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad, "Memahami Kebangkitan Alumni Al-Azhar," in *Serambinews*, March 2018, <https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2018/03/05/memahami-kebangkitan-alumni-al-azhar>.

²¹ Gautam Bhan et al., *Cities Rethought: A New Urban Disposition* (Polity Press, 2024).

²² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Penguin Books, 1966).

²³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, vol. 23 (Pantheon Books, 1980).

issue of religious authority, in which mastering religious knowledge enables a person to exert power over individuals who are religiously oriented. In such a context, we argue, the media is important both as the new site of religious learning and as a new means to broaden the reach of religious authority.

This paper begins with a brief history of the Azharites in Aceh, especially about actors, networks, and institutions, with an emphasis on the 2000s. It is followed by the description of new sites of Religious learning in which the Azharites actively engaged, such as organizations, advanced reading communities, mosques, coffee shops, and mass and social media, and the implications they have had on the (re-)shaping of Islamic knowledge and madhhabism; and ends with the concluding remarks.

The Azharites of Banda Aceh: Actors, Networks and Institutions

William Roff noted that following the conquest of the Hejaz in 1924 by the Wahabi ruler, many students from Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, came to Cairo to further their religious education, particularly at Al-Azhar University.²⁴ Moreover, Cairo attracted many students with nationalism and political inclinations. Roff quoted a statement by a Malay student, "In Mecca one could study religion only; in Cairo, politics as well."²⁵ However, in the second part of the 1960s, Roff mentioned nothing about Aceh students in Cairo from the 1920s, although he did mention students from Padang, Bukittinggi, Java, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang.

Among the early Acehnese students of Al-Azhar University during the Dutch colonial time was M. Nur el-Ibrahimy (the son-in-law of Tgk. M. Daud Beureueh, the leader of the Darul Islam movement, which revolted against Jakarta in the 1950s and early 1960s) from 1930 to 1935.²⁶ He also studied at the Dār al-‘Ulūm. According to Alfian, the Aceh War was a condition that drove the

²⁴ Roff, "Indonesian and Malay Students in Cairo in the 1920's."

²⁵ Roff.

²⁶ "Tgk" is an abbreviation for "Teungku", a title of respect used for traditional religious leaders or scholars in Aceh. Alfian, "The Ulama in Acehnese Society: A Preliminary Observation," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 3, no. 1 (February 1975), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24489966>.

Acehnese to study outside Aceh because most of their schools were destroyed by the Dutch. They sent their children to study in Minangkabau (West Sumatra), Java, or Egypt.²⁷ Following Indonesian independence, several Acehnese students studied at Al-Azhar. In the 1960s, there were Tgk. Muhammad Ali Bin Muhammad Irsyad (Abu Tepin Raya),²⁸ Tgk. Muhibuddin Waly, and Tgk. Mawardi Waly, the last two were the sons of Tgk. Muhammad Muda Waly.²⁹ Muhibuddin Waly became the first Acehnese to earn a doctorate from al-Azhar University in 1969 at the age of 33.³⁰

Among those studied at Al-Azhar University in the 1970s were Tgk. Ilyas Daud, Tgk. Abdul Qadir Umar Usman Al-Khalidi and Muslim Ibrahim. Ilyas Daud taught at Al-Muslim University in Bireuen, Aceh, whereas Abdul Qadir taught in Brunei Darussalam for over 15 years. After earning a doctorate in comparative Islamic law from a school in 1984, Muslim Ibrahim became a lecturer and professor at UIN Ar-Raniry and the chairman of the Ulama Consultative Council (MPU Aceh) for almost 20 years. In the 1980s, notable figures included Azman Ismail and Tgk. Bukhari Husni. Azman Ismail received a doctorate in Arabic in 1991, became a professor at Al-Raniry State Islamic University, and served as the Grand Imam of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque from 2003 to the present. Tgk. Bukhari Husni did not finish his studies at Al-Azhar. In the 1990s, several Acehnese students pursued their studies at al-Azhar, including Musthafa

²⁷ Alfian. 83.

²⁸ Al Husaini M. Daud, "The Implication of Abu Teupin Raya's Thought in Transforming Islamic Education in Aceh," *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Societies* 5, no. 1 (July 2021): 134–58, <https://doi.org/10.30821/JCIMS.V5I1.8874>; Nurkhalis Mukhtar El-Sakandary, "Syekh Haji Usman Maqam: Ulama Aceh Lulusan Saulatiah Dan Darul Ulum Makkah - Ranah Pertalian Adat Dan Syarak," in <Https://Tarbiyahislamiyah.Id/Syekh-Haji-Usman-Maqam-Ulama-Aceh-Lulusan-Saulatiah-Dan-Darul-Ulum-Makkah/>, 2021.

²⁹ On Syaikh Muda Waly, see Sehat Ihsan Shadiqin et al., "Muda Waly Al-Khalidi (1917-1961): Pesantren, Tariqah, and Politics of Religious Authority in Aceh," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 25, no. 1 (February 2025): 67–93, <https://doi.org/10.22373/JIIF.V25I1.14233>.

³⁰ Interview with Teungku Habibi Wali, Banda Aceh, May 23, 2023.

Thaib, Masykur Abdullah, Mutiara Fahmi, Ahmad Faisal, Israr Hidayadi, and Salman Abd. Muthalib and M. Idharyah—were the former chairpersons of the Acehnese Student Association (Keluarga Mahasiswa Aceh) in Cairo for different periods.

In early 2002, they established an organization called al-Urwatul Wutsqa, named after the magazine published by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh in Paris, led by Azman Ismail. The name reflected the organization's reformist orientation. However, this organization was not active, except for organizing travel for the Hajj pilgrimage. In 2003, the Azharites established Noor el-Azhar, led by M. Idharyah.³¹ The first activity was preparing Acehnese students to pursue studies at Al-Azhar University, with a focus on learning the Arabic language. Nevertheless, Noor el-Azhar also did not last long. After the 2004 tsunami, it was discontinued.

After the Helsinki MoU, which signifies the end of the conflict between GAM and Jakarta in 2005 (called the post-conflict period), the Azharites established a more inclusive organization called Ikatan Keluarga Alumni Timur Tengah (Middle East Alumni Association—IKAT), founded in Banda Aceh on July 1, 2007.³² However, unlike the previous organizations, IKAT is not exclusively for Azharites, but also for other graduates from universities in Western Asia and North Africa (WANA).³³ Despite this new orientation, IKAT acts as part of the Indonesian branch of the international organization of Al-Azhar graduates, Organisasi Internasional Alumni Al-Azhar (OIAA) (*al-Munazzamah al-Ālamiyah Li-Khirrījī al-Azhār*, translated in English as the World Association for al-Azhar Graduates—WAAG).³⁴ IKAT is

³¹ Interview with Israr, one of the founders of Noor el-Azhar, Banda Aceh, September 23, 2023.

³² Interview with Idharyah, former chairman of Noor el-Azhar, Banda Aceh, October 2, 2023, and Suhayli, the first secretary general of IKAT, Banda Aceh, September 23, 2023.

³³ The term Western Asia and North Africa (WANA) is used here, instead of the Middle East, due to the latter's Eurocentric nature, unless it is part of the organization's name or quotation. On WANA, see <https://wanainstitute.org/en/why-wana>

³⁴ See: <https://waag-azhar.org/en/>

considered Aceh's branch of the OIAA. The board members of IKAT are inaugurated by the chairperson of the Indonesian OIAA/WAAG or the central OIAA/WAAG.³⁵

Despite the inclusive term "Middle East", not all WANA alumni join IKAT. Some non-Al-Azhar alumni are reluctant to join IKAT, partly due to differing theological orientations, such as those from Salafi-oriented universities in Medina and Yemen. Theologically, IKAT develops Al-Azhar's Wasaṭism and leans towards the Ash'arite theological understanding, while also accepting some standard religious practices that, in Salafi's view, contradict the prophetic traditions (sunnah) and the practices of the *Salaf Ṣāliḥ* (the first generation of Islam).³⁶ Other non-Al-Azhar graduates join it, but are not as active, such as those from Hadramaut universities.³⁷ Some Moroccan, Sudanese, and Tunisian alumni are also graduates of Al-Azhar, where they pursued their undergraduate studies.³⁸

Urban Learning of Islamic Knowledge and Wasaṭism

Aceh has been the home of Sunnism, even though there were traces of Shi'ism in the past.³⁹ In Aceh, Shafi'ism has been the dominant legal school, superseding the other three legal schools (Hanafism, Malikism, and Hanbalism); and Ash'arism has been the dominant theological school, surpassing Maturidism, let alone Mu'tazilism and Salafi-Wahhabism. The *tasawuf* of Imam al-

³⁵ For instance, Dr. Muhammad Zainul Majdi (known as Tuan Guru Bajang—TGB), the chairperson of Indonesian OIAA from 2017, inaugurated the IKAT board members (2019-2023). This was also the case with the previous inauguration of the IKAT board members. In 2023, IKAT board members (2023-2026) were inaugurated by Dr. Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari. See: <https://lintasgayo.co/2020/01/06/tgb-lantik-pengurus-ikatan-alumni-timur-tengah-ikat-aceh-periode-2019-2022/> and <https://www.infopublik.id/kategori/nusantara/738000/pengurus-ikat-aceh-periode-2023-2026-resmi-dilantik>; accessed February 3, 2025.

³⁶ Interview with one of Saudi alumni, Banda Aceh, October 15, 2023.

³⁷ Interview with Habib Haris Al-Aidrus, alumnus of Dar al-Mustafa, Hadramaut, October 15, 2023.

³⁸ Interview with Fadhil Rahmi, Banda Aceh, September 23, 2023.

³⁹ Ali Hasjmy, *Syiah Dan Ahlussunnah Saling Rebut Pengaruh Dan Kekuasaan Sejak Awal Sejarah Islam Di Kepulauan Nusantara* (Bina Ilmu, 1983).

Ghazali and Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili have been the dominant Sufi schools.⁴⁰

The Azharites are generally Shafi'ite-Ash'arite followers, but, as we will see, they struggle to reshape madhhab-based Islamic knowledge using Wasatism in various urban religious learning sites, mainly organizations, advanced reading communities, mosques, coffee shops, and mass and social media.

Organization

IKAT is at the same time a site of learning Islamic knowledge, not only for its members, but also for Muslims in general. However, regarding the reshaping of religious knowledge organizationally, we will focus here on two main programs, mainly in the form of *halaqahs*: shari'ah literacy and *Madhyafah IKAT*.

1. Shari'ah Literacy

IKAT has an organizational program called "shari'ah literacy". The shari'ah literacy comprises six trainings: Qur'an recitation improvement (*tahsin al-Qur'an*), corpse care (*tajhiz*), inheritance (*mawarith*), prayer leadership guidance (*bimbingan imam shalat*), family *fiqh*, and women's *fiqh*—apart from the first (which is Qur'anic studies), the rest are *fiqh*. They consider that the Banda Aceh Muslims have problems with their knowledge of *fiqh*. In some places, IKAT has cooperated with the Shari'a Office to support the "Shari'a Village Development" (Pembinaan Kampung Syariat), also known as *Saweu Gampong* (proselytization in villages), where training sessions on Islamic knowledge, including *tahsin al-Qur'an*, *tajhiz*, and *mawarith*, have been held. It began in 2019, in the "shari'a village" Wonosari in Tamiang (from 9-10 April 2019).⁴¹

In the context of the *fiqh* of *mawarith*, the Azharites are concerned with the local practice of "*patah titi*" (lit. broken bridge),

⁴⁰ M. Hasbi Amiruddin and Firdaus M. Yunus, *Aswaja Dan Wahabi Di Aceh* (LSAMA, 2020).

⁴¹ IKAT Gelar Pembinaan Kampung Syariat di Aceh Tamiang, Kabar Birieun, 10 April 2019. <https://kabarbieuen.com/ikat-gelar-pembinaan-kampung-syariat-di-aceh-tamiang/>

an Acehnese customary inheritance law (*adat*), which refers to a condition where grandchildren do not receive a share of the inheritance from their grandfather or grandmother because their parents (children of the testator) have died before the testator. The Azharites criticize that this practice has no sound basis in Shafi'ism and suggest giving the grandchild some of the property voluntarily based on the Qur'an (al-Nisa 4:8).⁴² Moreover, article 185 of the Compilation of Islamic Law (Kompilasi Hukum Islam—KHI), which considers the grandchildren as the "substitute heirs", is based on the *waṣīyyah wājibah* (binding will).⁴³

The other issue is related to the fiqh of *tajhīz*, especially the customary bathing of the deceased, which contains some local practices, such as (1) menstruating women are prohibited from washing the body of the deceased; (2) uncovering the body of the deceased; (3) using specific prayers (*du 'ā'*) which are not taught by the Prophet Muhammad. However, they do not problematize the use of lime and some local flowers as fragrances mixed in the water.⁴⁴ However, in both cases, the Azharites do not contradict the Shafi'ite fiqh, although they do contravene local custom.

2. Madhyafah IKAT

Another important religious learning organized by IKAT is the so-called "*Madhyafah IKAT*" (herewith, *Madhyafah*), which was initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic,⁴⁵ which was carried out online. *Madhyafah* was named after a learning site for studying the books of *turath* (traditional Islamic knowledge) around the Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt. *Madhyafah* was established in Aceh as a platform focusing on the study of the *turath*, primarily Shafi'i and

⁴² "But if at the time of division other [non-inheriting] relatives, or orphans or poor, are present, feed them out of the (property), and speak to them words of kindness and justice." (Q. al-Nisa 4: 8)

⁴³ Interview with Sarinah Aini, July 2, 2023. See also: "Istilah 'Patah Titi' di Ilmu Faraid - Tgk. Gamal Achyar, Lc. M.SH, August 14, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/live/PNyKNtMHQuo?si=LkNw7Vl5utOxAn-q>

⁴⁴ Interview with Sarinah Aini, July 2, 2023.

⁴⁵ It was initiated by Nurmarini Abdurrahman, the head of the Women's Division, and the members of the Da'wah Division. It has its Instagram, separated from IKAT's, https://www.instagram.com/madhyafah_ikat/

Ash'ari schools, in 2019. Since December 2021, it has been held offline.⁴⁶ In addition to studying the book, *Madhyafah* also organizes various other Islamic activities, such as night prayers and dawn prayers, and invites national figures, including Ustadh Abdul Somad and Ustadh Hannan Attaki, both of whom are Al-Azhar alumni—the latter originally from Aceh. Additionally, *Madhyafah* also conducts special religious learning sessions and short sermons (*kultum*) during the month of Ramadan to enrich the Islamic knowledge of the congregation.

One of the other important *Madhyafah* activities is *talaqqī* (face-to-face reading of a particular religious book) by the preacher who has *sanad* (chain of transmission) going back to the author of the studied book. It is free of charge and open to the public. The first *talaqqī* began with the books of Ash'arite belief ('aqīdah), beginning with *al-Kharīdah al-Bahiyyah* by Sheikh Ahmad ad-Dardir, followed by *Lumā' al-Adillah fī Qawā'id al-'Aqīdah* by Imam Juwayni, and then *Al-Lumā'* by Imam Abu Hasan al-Asy'ary.⁴⁷ In the fields of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), some Shafi'i books are read: *Syarah al-Waraqāt* (by Imam Mahallī) and *Al-Yaqūt al-Nafīs* (by Imām Aḥmad bin 'Umar Ash-Shātīrī). In the field of *ḥadīth*, there is still one book read so far, namely *Matan Al-Arba 'īn* (by Muhyi al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Nawawī). In Arabic grammar and literary works, some books are read: *Al-Tuḥfah al-Saniyyah bi-Syarḥi al-Ajurumiyyah* (by Muhyi al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamid); *Qatr an-Nadā wa Ball al-Sudā* and *Sharḥ Bānat Su 'ād Qasīdah Ka 'ab bin Zuhayr* (both by Ibnu Hishām al-Ansārī), and *Mīzān al-Dhahab fī Sinā'i Shi'ri al-'Arab* (by Sayyid Ahmad al-Hāshimī). All the above *fiqh*, *hadīth*, and language scholars are Shafi'ites.

In 2023, the *Madhyafah* was institutionally transferred from the Da'wah Section to the Education Section of IKAT, led by Husni Nazir. Since then, *Madhyafah* has not only managed the reading of

⁴⁶ "Madhyafah IKAT Mulai Kembali Talaqqī Syarah Qathrunnada," December 7, 2021; <https://www.ikataceh.org/madhyafah-ikat-mulai-kembali-talaqqi-syarah-qathrunnada/>; accessed February 4, 2025.

⁴⁷ "IKAT Adakan Pengajian Tauhid, Untuk Bentengi Aqidah Masyarakat Aceh Sesuai Dengan Aswaja," *SerambiNews*, July 8, 2020; <https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2020/07/08/ikat-adakan-pengajian-tauhid-untuk-bentengi-aqidah-masyarakat-aceh-sesuai-dengan-aswaja>

religious books but also discussed Islam in general thematically and organized international seminars by inviting scholars from both Indonesia, as mentioned earlier, and abroad, especially from the WANA regions, such as Shaykh Usamah Sayyid al-Azhari, Shaykh Sa'id Faudah, Shaykh Anas Syarfawi, Shaykh Mar'i Hasan Rashid, and Shaykh Hisham Kamil—all are Shafi'ites and Ash'arites.

Advanced Reading Communities

An advanced reading community refers to an informal learning community whose primary activity is reading a particular book and discussing it in depth. It is an elite reading circle that aims to provide its members with advanced Islamic knowledge, utilizing specialized references. Some limited learning communities are established by Al-Azhar alumni, such as Majlis Al-Yasa' and Majlis Muwafaqat.

1. Majlis Al-Yasa'

The so-called Majlis Al-Yasa' is an unnamed advanced reading community established by Prof. Al-Yasa' Abubakar in 2018. We label it "Majlis Al-Yasa'" to facilitate analysis and reference to Al-Yasa' as its central figure. Some senior Al-Azhar alumni have joined this community, including Khairul Badri, Sarinah Aini, Fitriadi, Mujtahid, Mursalin Basyah, Ivan Aulia, Syahminan, Mujaddid, Cut Endang, Kuntari, and Husni Mukhtar.⁴⁸ Al-Yasa' is a member of Muhammadiyah, a modernist Muslim organization, and claims to be following the *tajdīdī* (renewal) method, rather than *madhhabi* and Salafi, but not anti-madhhab.⁴⁹

Majlis Al-Yasa' contains two important focuses of Islamic knowledge: *uṣūl al-fiqh* and *hadīth*. He not only introduced *uṣūl al-fiqh* from classical scholars but also contemporary ones, such as Shaykh Mustafa Zarqa, a Syrian Hanafite scholar. He also introduced comparative *madhhab* and encouraged the members to read philosophy, particularly the philosophy of knowledge, to develop a critical and systematic thought framework. For this

⁴⁸ Interview with Sarinah Aini, July 2, 2023.

⁴⁹ Interview with Prof. Al-Yasa' Abubakar, Banda Aceh, July 7, 2023.

purpose, Al-Yasa' introduced Amin Abdullah's book *Islamic Studies dalam Paradigma Integrasi-interkoneksi* and Fakhruddin Faiz's *Metode Berfilsafat*. Moreover, he also encouraged the members to read sociology and anthropology. To him, these sciences can support *fiqh* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* in making legal decisions relevant to the contemporary world.⁵⁰

Apart from *uṣūl al-fiqh*, this community also studied *ḥadīth*, especially those with relevance to Islamic law (*fiqh*), which is widely practiced but sometimes controversial in society, such as prayers (*salah*). The study used a comparative *madhab* approach and critically examined all relevant ḥadīths. By doing so, the differences concerning prayers can be adequately explained. However, this reading community was unable to survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Majlis Muwafaqat

The second advanced reading community is Majlis Muwafaqat, which several IKAT members with interests in Islamic knowledge, including Khairul Badri, Mursalin Basyah, Mujtahid, Ahmad Syukran, and Munawar Rizki, initiated. This community is formed to revive the scientific tradition and strengthen Islamic knowledge.⁵¹ Although they are Shafi'ites, they named the forum after *Al-Muwāfaqāt*, a work written by the Malikite scholar Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (1320-1388 AD), and used it as their primary reference.

The use of this Malikite book reflects the openness of the community's members. They read Muwafaqat for several reasons. First, its scope is broad, which is suitable for advanced readers. Second, the language style is much easier to understand than in other, more classical books. Third, Al-Shāṭibī's reasoning is engaging because he employs a comparative analysis of various views on *fiqh*. Fourth, Al-Shāṭibī indirectly teaches readers how to solve problems based on his own opinion and that of others. Finally, Al-Muwafaqat is commonly quoted by scholars in

⁵⁰ Interview with Prof. Al-Yasa' Abubakar, Banda Aceh, July 7, 2023.

⁵¹ Interview with Mujtahid, coordinator of Majlis Muwafaqat, Banda Aceh, July 8, 2023.

contemporary Islamic law studies, particularly in *maqāṣid* studies.⁵²

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Majlis Muwafaqat also organized a Tuesday Night online discussion, in which Ibn 'Ashūr's *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah* was read. Ibn 'Ashūr is a modern Tunisian Malikite scholar. However, the Majlis Muwafaqat depends heavily on the Mujtahid, who is responsible for organizing it. The Majlis's activity was inactive when he pursued his doctoral degree in Yogyakarta (2020-2025), except during his return visits during the Covid-19 pandemic and semester breaks. However, the Majlis Muwafaqat still exists today despite its elitist nature.⁵³

There are other reading communities, such as Beut Mahalli and Ngaji Ilmu Kalam (*beut* and *ngaji* mean "reading" or "studying"). Beut Mahalli was founded in Banda Aceh on October 6, 2018, by Tgk. Ayyub Bardan. There were around 10 members, who were mainly Azharites. Beut Mahalli started when they were at Al-Azhar and were part of the activities of the Egyptian Aceh Student Family (KMA). Beut Mahalli studied Ibn 'Ashūr's *Maqāṣid al-Shari'ah* (Malikite) online.⁵⁴ Established in 2018, Ngaji Ilmu Kalam read *Jawhar al-Tawhid*, an Ash'arite book, at Ngoh Ya coffee shop. Its members are mostly Azharis (especially those who graduated from the Ushuluddin faculty), such as Khalid Mudassir, Mursalin Basa, and Fitra Ramadani. However, these last two learning communities did not survive after the pandemic.

The above reading communities used Hanafite (Majlis Al-Yasa') and Malikite (Majlis Muwafaqat and Beut Mahalli) as their primary references, and developed a comparative approach for studying fiqh. However, they were not interested in studying theology, except for Ngaji Ilmu Kalam, which utilized Ash'arite references in its theological studies.

⁵² Interview with Ustadh Mursalin Basyah, Banda Aceh, 5 August 2023.

⁵³ Interview with Munawar Riski, Banda Aceh, August 5, 2023.

⁵⁴ Interview with Mursalin Basyah, Banda Aceh, 5 August 2023

Mosques

According to governmental records in 2023,⁵⁵ There are 106 mosques in Banda Aceh, and some of them have active religious learning activities, in which Al-Azhar alumni have taken important roles, as we will see below.

1. Baiturrahman Grand Mosque

Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, located in Banda Aceh, was founded in 1612 during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636).⁵⁶ It has become one of the important tourist destinations in Banda Aceh. For many decades, this mosque was dominated by modernist scholars, until 2013 when the traditionalist *dayah* scholars, who are Shafi'ite madhhabists, forced the adoption of a strict Shafi'ite way of prayers and devotion.⁵⁷

As the grand mosque of Aceh, it serves not only as a center of worship but also as a hub for religious learning and social activities. It has formal educational institutions, ranging from elementary (Ibtidaiyah) to senior high (Aliyah) schools, known as Darussyari'ah, as well as non-formal learning institutions, such as Al-Qur'an education for children and religious learning for Muslims, particularly in the form of *pengajian* or wide *halaqah* (religious learning circles).

Some Azharites have contributed to the religious learning activities in the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. Besides serving as the grand imam (from 2003), Prof. Azman Ismail is a regular preacher who teaches *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis). He also writes *tafsir* in the *Baiturrahman* tabloid, available online (www.grandbaiturrahman.com). Some other Azharites are also regular preachers who teach various fields of Islamic knowledge. Tamlikha Hasan, for instance, has taught *akhlāq* (Islamic ethics) and *tafsir* since 2007. For *tafsir* he uses some references written by Shafi'ite scholars, such as *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (by Ibn Kathīr), *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mahallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī),

⁵⁵ <https://bandaacehkota.go.id/agama>

⁵⁶ M. Junus Djamil, *Tawarikh Raja-Raja Kerajaan Atjeh* (Iskandar Muda, 1968).

⁵⁷ <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/ulama-dayah-hendaki-masjid-baiturrahman-aceh-terapkan-aswaja-oVWzi>

Mafātiḥ Al-Ghayb (by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī), *Safwat al-Tafsīr* and *Tafsīr Āyāt al-Ahkām* (both by Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Sabūnī), as well as a book written by a Hanafite scholar, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Wajīz* (by Wahbah Zuhaylī). He also teaches *Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Qur’anic sciences) and *Qawā’id al-Tafsīr* (principles of interpretation) using *Al-Itqān fī Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī), *Al-Mufradāt* (by Rāghib al-Asfahānī), and *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Qawā’iduhu* (by Khālid ‘Abd al-Rahmān Al-‘Āk)—while the first is a Shafi’ite scholar, the last two are non-*madhhabi* scholars with the strong elements of Shafi’ism and Salafism respectively.⁵⁸

Mursalin Basyah teaches both theology and sufism.⁵⁹ For theology, he uses two Ash’arite books, *Tuhfat al-Murīd ‘alā Jawhar al-Tawhīd* (by Burhanuddin al-Baijūrī) and *Kubra al-Yaqīniyyāt al-Kawniyyah* (by Sa’id Ramaḍān al-Būtī), and an academic book, *Al-‘Aqīdah al-Islāmiyyah* (by Mustafa Sa’id al-Khān and Muhyi al-Dīn Mustū). For Sufism, he uses *Al-Ḥikam* (by Ibn ‘Aṭā’illāh al-Sakandarī) and its commentary, *Iqāz al-Humām fī Sharḥ al-Ḥikam* (by Ibn ‘Ajībah)—both of which follow the Shadhiliyah Sufi order and the Malikite school in *fiqh*.

Gamal Achyar teaches fiqh of inheritance (*mawārith* or *‘ilm al-farā’id*). He consulted some books, including *Matan al-Rahbiyyah* (by Abū Abdullāh al-Ḥasan al-Rahbī) and *Aḥkām al-Mawārith* (by Muḥammad Tāhā Abū ‘Alā)—both are Shafi’i books—and the Al-Azhar *Mawārith* textbook. He has been teaching it since 2016. Every Sunday morning, after the subh prayer, Edi Saputra teaches *Sīrah* using two references: *Fiqh Sīrah* (by Shaykh Ramadan al-Buti), a Syrian Shafi’i-Ash’ari scholar, and *Al-Rahīq al-Makhtūm* (by Ṣafiyurrahmān al-Mubārakfūrī), an Indian Hanafi-Salafi scholar.⁶⁰ Although the Azharites primarily use Shafi’i-Ash’ari references, they also introduce other sources.

2. Oman Al-Makmur Mosque

Oman Al-Makmur Mosque is located in Bandar Baru village, which was built in 1979. Ideologically, it is closely aligned with

⁵⁸ Interview with Tamlikha Hasan, Banda Aceh, November 28, 2023.

⁵⁹ WhatsApp communication with Mursalin Basyah, February 7, 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with Gamal Achyar, Banda Aceh, November 30, 2023.

Muhammadiyah, particularly its Salafi wing.⁶¹ It is the most important mosque in Banda Aceh after the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque. It was reconstructed after the earthquake and Tsunami on December 26, 2004, with full financial support from the Government of Oman, and was completed in 2008. It is now one of the religious tourism sites in Banda Aceh.⁶²

In 2019, there was an incident in which the pengajian inviting a Salafi *ustadh*, Firanda Adirja, was attacked by a dayah-based community, namely the Aswaja group. A similar case happened in 2020 during the pengajian of another Salafi *ustadh*, Farhan Abu Furaihan.⁶³ Due to this conflict, the local government intervened temporarily in managing the mosque. Following these cases, the mosque management body attempted to moderate itself by inviting non-Salafi scholars, including Azharites. However, the latter had already been involved in this mosque's activity long before.

Some Azharites teach *hadīth*, *sīrah*, *fiqh*, and theology in this mosque. Prof. Al-Yasa' Abu Bakar teaches *hadīth* but without using a particular book. In his preaching, he relates *hadīth* to common problems in Aceh and tends to employ a critical reading of *hadīths*, accepting only *sahīh* (authentic) and *hasan* (good) *hadīths*. Unlike most Shafī'ites, he rejects *da'īf* (weak) *hadīths*. Mizaj Iskandar teaches *Sīrah* using *Zād al-Ma'ād fī Hadyi Khayr al-Ībād* (by Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah). Mukhlis Hasballah teaches *fiqh* using *Iḥkām al-Āḥkām Sharḥ Umdat al-Āḥkām* (by Ibn Daqīq al-Id). While Ibn Daqīq al-Id followed Shafī'ism and Malikism, Ibn al-Qayyim followed Hanbalism. Ajidar Matsyah teaches contemporary social *fiqh* by observing daily life through a comparative approach, although he prefers the Shafī'ite perspective most of the time. Amri Fatmi teaches Islamic theology thematically, focusing on current issues, primarily from an

⁶¹ Interview with Mauliza Akbar, *imam* and board member of Oman Mosque, October 19, 2023.

⁶² See Mesjidomanalmakmur.id

⁶³ "Imam Masjid soal Kisruh Pembubaran Pengajian di Masjid Oman, Aceh," January 28, 2020, <https://kumparan.com/acehkini/imam-masjid-soal-kisruh-pembubaran-pengajian-di-masjid-oman-aceh-1sjMkb0wyu9>

Ash'arite perspective. Therefore, Oman Al-Makmur Mosque tends to be non-*madhhabi*.

3. Baitusshalihin Mosque

Baitusshalihin Mosque, located in Ulee Kareng, Banda Aceh, was built in 1980. It can accommodate a congregation of around 5000 people. This mosque is home to several educational institutions, including a kindergarten, non-formal education programs for learning the Qur'an (similar to *kuttāb* in the Arab world), a junior high school for memorizing (*tahfiz*) the Qur'an, and an Islamic boarding school for memorizing the Qur'an (Pesantren Tahfiz al-Qur'an), all of which operate under the name Baitusshalihin. It also features a religious learning forum (*majlis ta'lim*) for women and regular religious sessions for the general congregation members.⁶⁴

For the Religious learning forum, every Sunday morning, after dawn prayer, three Azharites teach. Prof. Al Yasa Abu Bakar teaches *sīrah* (biography) of the Prophet, but does not use any particular book explicitly. However, it seems that he uses al-Tirmidhi's *Shama'il* as a reference. Mizaj Iskandar teaches comparative *fiqh* using Shaykh Wahbah Zuhaylī's book, *Al-Fiqh al-Islāmī wa Adillatuhu*, on Wednesday evenings (since 2012). During the 2023 interview, he stated that he had read the book up to volume four.⁶⁵ He used Zulayli's book, despite the latter being a Hanafite scholar, due to his comparative approach to *fiqh*. Meanwhile, Ihsan Tabarak teaches *tahsīn al-Qur'ān* every Saturday morning after the dawn prayer.⁶⁶

4. Other Mosques

There are other mosques where Azharites make significant contributions to teaching Islamic knowledge. At the Haji Keuchiek

⁶⁴ Syukri Syamaun, "Analisis Proses Interaksi Antara Da'i Dan Mad'u Pada Pengajian Mesjid Baitushsalihin Ulee Kareng Banda Aceh," *Jurnal Peurawi* 2, no. 2 (August 2018), <https://doi.org/10.22373/jp.v1i2.3430>.

⁶⁵ Interview with Mizaj Iskandar, July 4, 2023.

⁶⁶ "5 Kajian Rutin di Masjid Baitusshalihin Ulee Kareng Banda Aceh," <https://witness.tempo.co/article/detail/1480/5-kajian-rutin-di-masjid-baitusshalihin-ulee-kareng-banda-aceh.html>; accessed 1 November 2023.

Leumik Mosque (Lamseupeung), Mursalin Basyah teaches Ash'arite theology using *Tuhfah al-Murid Sharḥ Jawhar al-Tawḥīd*; Gamal Achyar teaches *fiqh* of inheritance (*mawārith*); Masrul Aidi teaches Shafi'ite *fiqh* using *I‘ānat al-Tālibīn* (by Abū Bakar Shaṭā al-Dimyāṭī). The latter also teaches Shafi'ite *fiqh* using a similar book at some other mosques, such as Subulussalam (Punge Blang), Nurul Huda (Peunyeurat), al-Fitrah (Jasdam Neusu), and al-Falah (Neusu).

Mizaj Iskandar teaches *hadīth* at three mosques: Al-A'la, Al-Badar, and Hasyimiyyah Mosques. Tamlikha Hasan teaches *tafsīr* at Baiturrahmah (Keramat) and al-AbRAR (Lamdingin) Mosques. Khairul Rafiqi and Mursalin Basyah teach Islam thematically at some mosques, such as Darul Makmur, Syuhada', Baitul Musyahadah, Punge Juroeng, and Lingke Mosques. Some other Azharites teach *Taḥṣīn al-Qur’ān*, such as Khairul Rafiqi at some mosques—Babussalam (Lam Ujong), Baitul Azhar (Cot Iri), Darul Falah (Pineung), Abdurrauf (Blang Oi), and Miftahul Jannah Mosques (Punge Ujong); Mujtahid at Baitul Alam Mosque (Kuta Alam); Fazlul Ridha, the head of the IKAT Taḥṣīn Team, at As-Shadaqah Mosque; and Muhajirul Fadhl at Al-Muhajirin (Rukoh) and Al-Furqan (Beurawe) Mosques.

In short, the Azharites have hegemonized the Banda Aceh mosques in teaching Islamic knowledge and navigating it towards moderation (Wasaṭism).

Coffee Shops

Drinking coffee has been part of Acehnese culture, and coffee shops have been part of Acehnese public life in the post-conflict period—although it can be traced back to the Military Operation Area (Daerah Operasi Militer/DOM) period (1990-1998).⁶⁷ Several coffee shops open in the early morning because many people drink coffee soon after performing the dawn prayer in mosques. Many people go to coffee shops twice or more a day. Many coffee shops are open until late at night.

⁶⁷ Antara, “Tracing Aceh’s enduring coffee shop culture,” September 19, 2024, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/326627/tracing-acehs-enduring-coffee-shop-culture>

The coffee shops (*Warung Kopi, Kedai Kopi*) are not only a place for enjoying coffee but also for socializing and organizing informal meetings. One of the meetings is a religious learning gathering. The Majlis Muwafaqat organizes its meetings, reading the Malikite text *al-Muwāfaqāt*, in the “Chek Yuke” coffee shop. One of Majlis Muwafaqat’s meetings was included in a documentary video “Coffee Shops and Civilization.”⁶⁸ The Ngaji Ilmu Kalam reading community read the Ash’arite text, *Jawhar al-Tawhīd*, in the “Ngooh Ya” coffee shop. Mursalin Basyah teaches *sīrah* in the “Andalusia” coffee shop by reading al-Buti’s *Fiqh al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyah*. As mentioned earlier, Al-Buti is a Syrian Shafī’ite-Ash’arite scholar who graduated from al-Azhar.

Mass and Social Media

The Azharites also utilize mass media, including radio, newspapers, and social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, to convey Islamic knowledge. In the case of mass media, there are two important radio stations: the government-run Radio Republika Indonesia (RRI) and mosque-based radio. RRI of Banda Aceh has several network stations, namely RRI Pro 1 (for informative and educational programs), RRI Pro 2 (for entertainment programs targeting teenagers and young people), RRI Pro 3 (for national broadcasts), and RRI Pro 4 (for local broadcasts). During Ramadan 2025, IKAT cooperates with the RRI in disseminating the *fiqh* of Ramadan through the “Dialog Ramadan” program, broadcast on Pro 1, 2, and 4 from 5:00 to 6:00 pm.⁶⁹ The cooperation has continued since then through programs called “Dialog Kajian Islami” (Islamic Learning Dialog), held every Friday from 10:00 to 11:00 am (in RRI Pro 1), and “Sie Reuboh”, also held every Friday from 11:00 to 12:00 pm (in RRI Pro 4). All of these programs are broadcast on RRI’s YouTube channel.⁷⁰ Most of IKAT’s preachers participating in these radio programs are Azhatites.

⁶⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuZNvdqElkk>

⁶⁹ “RRI - IKAT Cetuskan Program Ramadhan Untuk Publik,” January 25, 2025, <https://rri.co.id/ramadan/1279763/rri-ikat-cetuskan-program-ramadhan-untuk-publik>

⁷⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/@rribandaaceh>

Second, the mosque-based radio station, Radio Baiturrahman FM, which was established in 1973.⁷¹ Being part of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque, it initially aimed to broadcast religious teachings held at the mosque after Maghrib and Dhuhr prayers. During its development, this radio also broadcasts programs such as da'wah, music, news, religious consultations, family consultations, and talk show programs. Several Azharites contribute to the Islamic knowledge programs of this radio station.

Acehnese newspapers, such as *Serambi Indonesia*, are another important medium for the Azharites to communicate their views on Islamic knowledge to the Acehnese people. Prof. Muslim Ibrahim also had a special column in the daily *Serambi Indonesia* called *Konsultasi Agama Islam* (Islamic Consultation) for years. Although he seemed to be adopting Abdurrahman's reform in the early 2000s, he later moved to Wasatism. Some other Azharites write religious articles. *Serambi Indonesia* is also available online with a similar Wasatist perspective.

In the context of social media, there are three types of media in which Azharites have been engaged. First is personal media, which most Azharites use to communicate with the broader Muslim community. However, only some managed their media professionally, such as Masrul Aidi, Amri Fatmi, and Nurkhaliq Mukhtar. Most of these personal media contain not only the *da'wah* activities of the owners but also texts, memes, and short videos containing Islamic knowledge.

Second, organization-based media, such as IKAT TV. Managed by IKAT, it was created on February 7, 2017. It has broadcast 336 videos and has 8.4K subscribers (as of February 8, 2025). Although it is named "TV," it is not television in the conventional sense; it is like other YouTube-based channels. From the "About" section, we know that this channel has a preaching mission and is not "monetized," meaning that it is created not for economic purposes. Thematically, it publishes topics related to Islamic issues, including theology (*tawhid*), devotion (*ibadah*), inheritance, and various aspects of general Islamic knowledge.

⁷¹ <https://baiturrahmanfm.com/>

Third, mosque-based social media. Several mosques in Banda Aceh have their own social media accounts. The Baiturrahman Grand Mosque has a social media presence, which includes Tilvaz Baiturrahman on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Tilvas Baiturrahman contains 125 videos, from January 29, 2019, to March 21, 2023, and has not been updated since then. Other mosques with active social media presence include the Oman al-Makmur Mosque and Haji Keuchik Leumiek. Starting on July 7, 2020, YouTube's "Masjid Oman al-Makmur" channel has broadcast 785 videos and has 2,211 subscribers (as of May 18, 2025).⁷² Whereas "Masjid Haji Keuchik Leumiek" YouTube started in December 2020, and has broadcast 565 videos and has 11.8K subscribers (as of May 18, 2025).⁷³ Most of the videos on both channels are live broadcasts of religious learning held by these mosques.

Some Azharites have participated in the above mass and social media, such as Al-Yasa' Abubakar, Ajidar Matsyah, Mizaj Iskandar, Amri Fatmi, Fadhil Rahmi, Gamal Akhyar, Mubashshirullah, Masrul Aidi, Mukhlish Hasballah, Fitra Ramadhani, Sarina Aini, and Zakiah Zainin—the last two are women scholars. Through the media, they have introduced Wasatist approach to Islamic knowledge and madhhabism.

Conclusion

The urban sites of Banda Aceh discussed in this article—organization, advanced reading communities, mosques, coffee shops, and mass and social media—are epistemic spaces, rather than merely material ones, in which Islamic religious knowledge is constructed, taught, and studied or consumed in line with social, political, and technological changes. These sites become alternative knowledge institutions outside the *madrasah*, *dayah*, and Islamic university tradition, in which classical Islamic texts are re-read and re-interpreted through comparative and contextual frameworks. Moreover, the Azharites (re-)shape Islamic knowledge and learning by transforming urban organization, reading

⁷² <https://www.youtube.com/@masjidomanalmakmur>

⁷³ <https://www.youtube.com/@MASJIDHAJIKEUCHIKLEUMIEK>

communities, coffee shops, and media into platforms for Islamic discursive practices, rather than merely secular spaces, and, in the case of mosques, into ritual-only spaces. Despite this, the classical ways of religious learning are not erased but reformed. They contributed to the development of public learning of classical Islamic knowledge, such as *tafsīr* and sciences of the Qur'an (including *tajwid* and *tahsīn al-Qur'ān*), *hadīth*, *fiqh*, and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *'aqīdah*, *sīrah*, and *marwārīth*, in more systematic and informal ways. They also introduce the traditional way of learning through *talaqqī*, which is common in Egypt and *dayah*, to urban Muslims as well. In this way, the *talaqqī* method is not only enjoyed by students of *dayah* now. One can attend a mosque that offers the *talaqqī* method and receive an *ijāzah* (certificate) for learning a particular Islamic book.

In the Foucauldian sense, the Azharites have reshaped Islamic knowledge by treating it not merely as a purely spiritual or divine domain, but also as a discursive field shaped by historical contingencies, religious authorities (both official and societal), institutional power, and the disciplinary mechanisms of state shari'atization. In this way, they problematize the hegemonic "truth" of Islam offered by the provincial state authority, *dayah*-based ulama, and transnational Islamism, by introducing Wasatīsm in their re-reading of Islamic knowledge. The reshaping processes include the dynamic process of refinement, adjustment, tension and negotiation. The relative success of such reshaping is closely tied to the issue of religious authority, which is built on the mastery of various fields of Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language, on the one hand, and the image of Al-Azhar as an international Islamic learning center, on the other. In this context, mass and social media are important new sites of religious learning and new means to expand the reach of religious authority.

In terms of madhhabism, the Azharites do not confront the mainstream Shafi'ism-Ash'arism school of thought in Aceh, but introduce the Al-Azhar way of Wasatīsm. The Azharites read both Shafi'ite-Ash'arite and non-Shafi'ite-Ash'arite texts in contextual, comparative, and rhetorically more systematic ways. Using comparative perspectives when reading *madhhabi* books is a

common strategy employed by the Azharites. In *fiqh*, as we have seen above, they introduce several books belonging to the Hanafite, Hanbalite, and Malikite madhhabs. This method represents a significant development in the context of Aceh, as most *dayah*-based ulama adhere strictly to the Shafi'i school of thought. In theology, they are followers of Ash'arism, like most Al-Azhar scholars, but they use advanced commentaries. Although some religious books studied in a *dayah* are used, they introduce several other advanced religious books that are not commonly read in public religious learning. Some Azharites also teach Sufism (*tasawwuf*) by reading Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* and *Bidayat al-Hidayah*, as well as Ibn 'Ata'illah's *Hikam*, which are considered acceptable texts that combine shari'ah and spiritual quests. They contextually interpret these Sufi texts, based on the urban context of Banda Aceh.

Most Acehnese Azharites do not refer to Salafi books, like those written by Ibn Taymiyyah, Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Ibn 'Uthaymin, Naṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, and Rabī' bin Hādī al-Madkhālī. This means that they position themselves as non-Salafi. Taking such a position also means that they align themselves with the mainstream *dayah*-based Islamic thought in Aceh, which Shafi'ism-Ash'arism rather than Salafi-Wahhabism hegemonizes. Apart from that, the Azharites, especially in the post-conflict period, do not refer to reformist books written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muhammad 'Abduh (Grand Mufti of Egypt), and Muḥammad Rashīd Rīḍā (editor of Egyptian reformist journal *al-Manar*), who are rejected by the *dayah* community, because they are associated with modernist Salafism. However, as mentioned earlier, "light purification" is introduced, similar to the cases of *tajhīz* and *mawārith*. Ibn al-Qayyim's *Zād al-Ma'ād* is also used, although the author is Hanbalite-Salafi. However, the light purification and the use of Ibn al-Qayyim's book are still in the framework of Shafi'ism-Ash'arism. Unlike Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim is accepted by certain *dayah* circles due to his acceptance of Sufism.

After all, although they identify themselves as Shafi'ite-Ash'arite followers, like most *dayah*-based ulama and Acehnese Muslims in general, and use mostly Shafi'ite-Ash'arite books, the

Azharites have paved the way to the democratization and reform of Islamic knowledge and learning in the urban society of Banda Aceh in particular, and in the Aceh province in general, by introducing the Wasatist approach to Islam. In this way, they introduce more moderate Shafi'ism-Ash'arism and differentiate themselves from the strict-madhhabism, held by *dayah*-based ulama, on the one hand, and anti-*madhhab*-ism, promoted by puritanical Salafi-Wahabism and radical Islamism on the other hand. They have promoted the triple synthesis of Shafi'ism, Ash'arism, and Wasatism.

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