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History and Understanding of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia

Azman Md Zain^{1,*}, Abu Bakar Ahmad Mansor¹, Ahmad Zamil Abd. Khalid¹

¹ School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy (SLCP), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) constitutes the cornerstone of Islam, the official religion in Malaysia. This conviction has underpinned the religious life of the Malaysian Muslim community for an extended period. Entering the 21st century, this concept is not exempt from confronting different challenges, including the variability of cognitive patterns in interpreting ASWJ. Furthermore, there exists the perspective that this concept does not constitute the essence of Islam's development in Malaysia. Moreover, this conviction encounters numerous challenges both internationally and domestically. Consequently, to address the above-mentioned issues, this study concentrates on the principles of the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah adherents in Malaysia. The study concentrates on (i) the historical background of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah adherents in Malaysia, and (ii) their comprehension of the notion of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia. This study is qualitative, utilizing approaches such as document analysis for data collecting. Simultaneously, the gathered data was examined utilizing the Inductive-Generative approach and NVivo15 Software. The study's findings indicate that the teachings of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah, adhered to by the majority of the Muslim community in Malaysia, including both the government and the populace, are founded on the al-Asya'irah school regarding creed, the Imam al-Syafie madhhab concerning jurisprudence, and the methodology of Imam al-Ghazali in sufism. The findings of this study indicate that ASWJ occupies a unique status in Malaysia, having been continually practiced for centuries up to the present day. Consequently, this conviction must be paramount and prioritized in endeavours to sustain Islam in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Article 3(1) of the Federal Constitution designates Islam as the federal religion of Malaysia. While the Federal Constitution does not specify the beliefs to be adhered to and performed, the majority of Muslims generally follow the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ). The National Fatwa Council's 1996 judgment underscored that ASWJ is central to Islamic practice in Malaysia [1,2].

The comprehension of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) is fundamental to the adherence and practice of Islam in Malaysia, as determined by the Special Muzakarah of the Fatwa Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs of Malaysia, which convened on 5 May 1996 in

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: manzain@uum.edu.my

Penang. During the special meeting, it was resolved that Malaysian Muslims should adhere exclusively to Islamic teachings grounded in the ASWJ regarding creed, sharia, and ethics [3].

Abdul Shukor [4] asserts that the ASWJ interpretation and methodology have been widely embraced and implemented by the Muslim population in Malaysia, yielding positive outcomes for their spiritual practices. This feature contributes to Malaysia being the most homogeneous nation among Muslim communities in other countries regarding creed, sharia procedures, and ethics [2]. The power and stability of ASWJ within its Muslim community is so pronounced that it is challenging for other religions to assimilate, threaten, or supplant it.

Despite ASWJ's longstanding role as a policy or foundation inside the theological framework of the Malaysian Muslim community, this concept currently encounters numerous problems that have infiltrated the community's mindset. Numerous alternative schools or doctrines diverging from ASWJ views seek to sway the convictions and practices of the predominant Malaysian Muslim populace [5]. The growth of beliefs divergent from ASWJ poses a challenge for its proponents within the Malaysian Muslim community to uphold its long-standing values, beliefs, and practices.

This research examines the history and comprehension of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah adherents in Malaysia to address these issues. The conversation centered on:

- i. The historical background of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia.
- ii. The comprehension of the notion of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia.

The objective of the discourse and elucidation of the ASWJ concept, as comprehended and implemented in Malaysia, is to assess the acceptance of this principle, which is the essence of Islam, acknowledged as the official religion of Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah

ASWJ is a combination of three Arabic terms: Ahl, al-Sunnah, and al-Jama'ah and these three terms possess distinct meanings. Nevertheless, these words, when combined, will provide a distinct sequence of meanings if interpreted via the lens of terminology.

Numerous Islamic scholars have elucidated the word ASWJ, including Ibn Hazm [6], who defined Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) as a faction designated as Ahl al-Haq, in contrast to their adversaries, termed Ahl al-Bida'ah. He asserts that the groups within this category include the companions of the Prophet PBUH and all factions adhering to their methodology, such as the ahl al-hadith, at-tabi'in, and jurisprudence scholars. This group persists to the present day, along with their respective adherents from the general populace, regardless of whether they reside in the eastern or western regions of the world.

Ibn al-Jauzi [7] characterized ASWJ as comprising Ahl al-Athar and Ahl al-Naql, who accept and practice the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the athar of his associates. In the meantime, Ibn Taimiyah [8] defines *Ahl al-Sunnah* as a faction that adheres to the Quran, the sunnah of the Prophet PBUH, and the consensus reached by al-Sabiqun al-Awwalun, comprising the Ansar, the Muhajirin, and their adherents.

Likewise, al-Asfarayini [9] elucidated that ASWJ represents a faction that adheres to the path of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH and accepts all genuine hadith attributed to him. This group also tracks the trip of his friends. Al-Safarinni similarly asserts that ASWJ represents Ahl al-Tawhid and Ahl al-Islam, firmly guided by the unequivocal sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH regarding creed and belief [10]. Hassan [11] asserted that the ASWJ comprises Ahl al-Hadith who followed the

Prophet PBUH and adhered to the Book of Allah SWT and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

Similarly, Ibn 'Abd al-Bar [12] elucidated the group known as ahl al-Sunnah, which comprises Ahl al-Hadith and Fiqh (jurisprudence). According to Ibn Hajr [13], the ASWJ group encompasses all Shariah specialists. Imam al-Nawawi [14] posits that ASWJ encompasses the diversity within the Muslim community, including military factions on the battlefield, scholars of jurisprudence, experts in Hadith, practitioners of Zuhud, and those who advocate for virtuous actions while prohibiting illicit activities, alongside other members dedicated to righteousness. Imam al-Nawawi asserts that it is not requisite for the ASWJ group to convene at a specific location concurrently. Instead, they may be dispersed and exist in all corners of the globe.

Imam Abdul Qahir al-Baghdadi (d. 1037 AD), in his work *al-Farq Bain al-Firaq*, delineates ASWJ as a collective of Ahl al-Ra'y, specifically the followers of Imam Abu Hanifah and his students, alongside Ahl al-Hadith, jurisprudence scholars, Quranic memorizers, hadith narrators, and Mutakallimun of Ahl al-Hadith. They unanimously concurred on things concerning the Oneness of the Creator, His Attributes, His Justice, His Wisdom, and His Names, as well as on the topics of prophethood and leadership, hudud law, and Usuluddin [15].

Hamka stated that individuals who believe in and follow the Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali schools of thought about subsidiary issues (*furu'iyah*) are also considered part of the ASWJ group. Similarly, regarding Kalam science, the al-Asha'irah and Maturidiyah schools align with the ASWJ interpretation [16,17].

Malayan scholars, like Sheikh Abdullah Fahim bin Sheikh Ibrahim, have provided a testimony regarding the ASWJ interpretation to guide the Malaysian Muslim community. He said that the inhabitants of Malaya have, for centuries, adhered to the Syafie school of thought in jurisprudence, implementing the majority of usuluddin principles through Imam Abu Hassan al-Asy'ari and following the teachings of Imam al-Ghazali in sufism and ethics. All references are informed by the Quran and al-Hadith as compiled by the scholars present in the earlier convention [18].

According to Islamic scholars, Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) denotes a collective of imams and adherents across several Islamic disciplines who embrace, adhere to, and implement the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, his companions, and the righteous predecessors (*salaf al-soleh*). Despite the word ASWJ emerging subsequently, its philosophy and influence are grounded in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). ASWJ comprises the entirety of Islamic teachings focused on three primary tenets: creed, shariah, and ethics, which were exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and perpetuated by his companions, the *tabi'in*, and the *tabi' al-tabi'in* to contemporary Muslims globally.

2.2 The History of the Emergence of the Term ASWJ

The historical development of the phrase Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ) reveals varied and divergent perspectives among academics. The precise date of the ASWJ school's inception and the initial individuals who coined the term for this sect remain unidentified [19]. Unlike the Shia and Khawarij ideologies that sprang from political motivations, the word ASWJ is not intrinsically connected to the political matter of Muslim leadership [4].

In the history of Islamic thinking, the term ASWJ possesses distinct meanings across many religious domains. In the political context, the ASWJ comprised individuals who had a neutral position in the conflict between the proponents of Muawiyah bin Abi Sufian and Ali ibn Abi Talib. This conflict arose from misinterpretations and divergent views of the leadership and retribution for the assassin of 'Uthman bin Affan [17].

In matters of creed, ASWJ is bifurcated into two principal factions: Salaf and Khalaf. The Salaf group is exclusively guided by the Quran and the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, whereas the Khalaf group also adheres to the Quran and al-Sunnah but organizes them according to the attributes of Obligation, Impossible, and Wajib for Allah SWT, following the methodology established by Imam al-Asya'ari and al-Maturidi. In fiqh (jurisprudence), the Khalaf adhere to the doctrines of Imam Abu Hanifah, Imam al-Shafi'i, Imam Malik, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, while in Sufism, they align with the perspectives of Imam al-Ghazali [17].

Ibn Taymiyah [8] asserts that ASWJ predates the birth of Imam Abu Hanifah, Malik, Shafi'i, and Ahmad, and posits that the name ASWJ has been recognized since the era of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The term ASWJ has been referenced by Ayyub al-Sikhtiyani (d. 131H) and Sufian al-Thauri (d. 161H) in relation to the Ahl al-Sunnah [20,21]. Imam al-Tabari [22] in 'Tahdhib al-'Athar' documented a comparison between ASWJ and the Murjiah and Jahmiyah sects on theological beliefs. Ahl al-Sunnah refers to those who integrate knowledge, discourse, and actions within their faith.

Abu Ubaid al-Qasim Sallam [23] asserted in the preface of "al-Iman" that ASWJ constitutes a doctrine that must be embraced within the framework of creed knowledge. Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 241H) asserts in the preface of his work "al-Sunnah" that ASWJ pertains to the school of thought of scholars and Ahl al-Sunnah who adhered to the practices of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH [24].

Consequently, the aforementioned data indicate that the term ASWJ is already recognized and utilized by the companions of the Prophet PBUH and Salaf scholars. Nonetheless, alternative perspectives assert that the term ASWJ emerged only when Imam Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi championed and endorsed this theological current among the Muslim world at that period.

Shak'ah [25] elucidates that the branding of ASWJ was initially directed only at the Asya'irah group and its adherents. Subsequently, the purview of ASWJ was broadened to encompass the leaders of madhhab and fiqh (jurisprudence) academics, including Imam Syafie, Maliki, Abu Hanifah, Ahmad bin Hanbal, Auza'i, among others, along with their respective adherents [10-16].

Imam Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani [13] asserts that during 260H, the Mukta'ilah, Khawarij, Musyabbihah, and others introduced and disseminated several innovations characterized as heretical, particularly concerning creed or belief. Consequently, Imam al-Asya'ari and al-Maturidi, contemporaries of that era, emerged to spearhead the initiative to reinstate the authentic doctrines of ASWJ. They endeavored to elucidate the creed of ASWJ, as upheld by the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and their followers, by providing textual evidence from the Quran and al-Hadith (naqli), alongside rational evidence (aqli), to counter the doctrines of heretical groups such as the Mu'tazilah, Khawarij, Musyabbihah, and others.

Imam al-Haitami [26] stated that when ASWJ is discussed, it refers to people adhering to the doctrines established by Imam al-Asya'ari and al-Maturidi. These two theological leaders are regarded as the forerunners of the movement advocating a return to the teachings that establish al-Sunnah as the cornerstone of creed, sharia, and ethics following the Quran. Similarly, the ijmak of the companions and scholars, coupled with the qias methodology, is seen as a significant reference in addressing issues that emerge within the three pillars of Islam: creed, sharia, and ethics.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 History of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia

The subsequent discussion pertained to the historical context of ASWJ in Malaysia. The elucidation of ASWJ's history within the Malaysian Muslim community will commence with an examination of the introduction of Islam to the archipelago and Malaya. This is due to the correlation between the dissemination of Islam in Malaya and the development and implementation of ASWJ within the local community's life.

3.1.1 A Brief history of the arrival of Islam

The discourse on the hypothesis of Islam's introduction to the archipelago has been extensively examined by scholars from both Western and Eastern perspectives. In their discussions, they address several significant themes, including the precise date of Islam's arrival in the archipelago, its site of origin, and the quick development of Islam [27-29].

3.1.2 Date of propagation of Islam

Scholars are divided over the precise period of Islam's dissemination throughout the archipelago [30]. Despite varying perspectives, two predominant views are frequently discussed among scholars regarding the introduction of Islam to the archipelago: one posits that it commenced as early as the 7th century, while the other asserts that it began no earlier than the 13th century AD [31].

Scholars who assert that the dissemination of Islam to the archipelago transpired in the 7th century exhibit divergent views about whether this arrival coincided with the era of the Prophet PBUH or occurred subsequently during the rule of the Umayyad dynasty. Most accounts indicate that throughout the era of the Prophet PBUH, the expansion of Islam was confined to the region of the Arabian Peninsula. Subsequently, it extended to the northern region of the Arabian Peninsula, encompassing Syria, Iraq, and North Africa during the era of the Khulafa al-Rashidin. The expansion of its development to the west, specifically Spain, and to the east, notably China, reportedly commenced with the ascendance of the Banu Umayyad monarchy [32].

Arnold [33] asserts that an Arab-Muslim town existed on the west coast of Sumatra in 674 AD under the reign of Muawiyah bin Abi Sufian. Arnold's perspective is corroborated by Hamka, an Islamic scholar from the archipelago, who incorporates Chinese materials in his studies. Hamka [34] posits that Islam was introduced to the inhabitants of the archipelago in the 7th century. The source elucidated the existence of a kingdom named Tashi or Ta-Chi in Sumatra, purportedly having maintained diplomatic connections with China about 650-655 AD. Ta-Chi is a designation assigned by the Chinese to the Muslim minority in northern Sumatra [35].

Consequently, records from China suggest that Islam arrived in the archipelago during the 7th century AD, with the Malay Peninsula also considered part of the region that acquired Islamic da'wah in that century.

While some perspectives assert that Islam reached the Malay Realm in the 7th century AD, supported by various arguments, the majority of Western scholars favor the theory that its introduction occurred in the 13th century AD [30]. Marco Polo, a renowned Venetian navigator, documented in 1292 AD the existence of the Islamic kingdom of Perlak in northern Sumatra, governed by Sultan al-Malik al-Saleh [36].

Owing to the absence of definitive sources and evidence on the precise date of Islam's introduction to the Malay Realm, experts and researchers have concurred with the perspective

presented by Western sources that the inaugural Malay-Muslim kingdom in the region emerged solely in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Consequently, considering the perspective of the bulk of these historians, the preachers who arrived may have been affected by specific schools of jurisprudence. Since the 10th century, following the decline of *ijtihād*, the Islamic areas have been shaped by the four principal schools within the ASWJ tradition: Maliki, Hanafi, Shafie, and Hanbali [37].

3.1.3 The origin of the preacher

In addition to the discussion on the precise date of Islam's entrance, the origins of the preachers who disseminated Islam in the Malay world have also been a subject of extensive scholarly debate. Numerous ideas are frequently proposed regarding it, including those pertaining to the state of China, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arabian Peninsula. Among these three theories, the Islamic doctrine propagated by Indian and Arab preachers has generated more extensive scholarly dispute than the theory originating from China [38].

Many Western orientalist and researchers, particularly from the Netherlands, concur that Islam was introduced to the Malay Archipelago via the Indian subcontinent [29-39]. Pijnappel of Leiden University, the Netherlands, was the first researcher to propose the theory of the introduction of Islam to the Malay Realm from the territories of Gujarat and Malabar in India. He believes that the Arabs of the Shafi'i school migrated and established themselves in Indian territory, thereafter, introducing Islam to the archipelago [40].

S. Hurgronje further extended Pijnappel's theory, emphasizing that the Indian Subcontinent (Muslim Deccan) was the first locus for the expansion and evolution of Islam into the Malay Realm. It was only subsequent to that event that the Arabs finalized the dissemination of Islam in the region. Snouck Hurgronje asserted that these Muslims from India are predominantly descendants of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, as evidenced by their titles of Sayid or Syarif. These Arabs appeared in the Malay Realm as 'priests' or 'sultans' [41]. He did not provide further details on the southern part of India, which he saw as the source of Islam's dissemination to the Malay Realm, but merely indicated the 12th century AD as the probable onset of Islam's propagation to the area.

Another Western historian, J.P. Moquette, similarly determined that Islam entered the Malay Realm via the Indian Subcontinent, specifically through the region of Gujarat. Uka Tjandrasasmitha [27] reported that Moquette contended the finding of a gravestone in the Pasai district, dated 27 September 1428, together with other tombstones near the burial of Maulana Malik Ibrahim in Gresik, East Java, exhibits parallels to tombstones located in Cambay, Gujarat. Consequently, Moquette identifies the resemblance among the tombstones as evidence supporting the notion that Islam originated from that area [27].

Nonetheless, Qudratullah has challenged the perspective articulated by Moquette. He finds Moquette's assertion that all tombstones in Pasai, including that of Malik al-Salih, resemble those in Gujarat province to be highly misleading. Qudratullah elucidated that a distinction exists between tombstones from the Gujarat region and those located in the archipelago. Qudratullah asserted that the tombstones discovered in the Malay Realm exhibit numerous parallels to those located in the Bengal region. Consequently, Qudratullah asserted that the Islam introduced to the Malay Realm originated from the Bengal region rather than the Gujarat region [42]. Nonetheless, Qudratullah's view is contested, particularly regarding sectarian distinctions. Azyumardi [29] posited that Muslims in the Malay world predominantly follow the madhhab of Imam al-Syafie, whereas the populace of Bengal adheres to the madhhab of Imam al-Hanafi.

The idea positing the transmission of Islam from India to the Malay Archipelago, as proposed by several Orientalists, lacks integrity and has been contested by the Islamic-Nusantara scholar Hamka. He asserts that the objective of Western researchers is to advance a theory with the expectation that the local Malay population lacks faith in a profound spiritual connection with the Arab Land [34]. Hamka believes there is substantial evidence regarding the introduction of Islam to this region, particularly to Malaya, directly from the Arabian Peninsula. Hamka demonstrates that Arabs contributed to the Islamization of the Malays in the past by referencing historic Malay literary works, like the Malay History and the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa.

In discussing the Islamization of the Sultan of Malacca, Hamka highlighted the contributions of an Arab preacher named Sayid Abdul Aziz upon his arrival in the port of Malacca. The backup is unspecified, although the event is documented in the book Malay History [39]. During this Islamization event, Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Sultan of Malacca at the time, reportedly dreamed of encountering the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who subsequently instructed him to recite the two words of shahadah. The Prophet PBUH instructed him to travel to the port of Malacca and summon an Arab preacher from Jeddah named Sayid Abdul Aziz the following day [43].

Likewise, the event concerning the Islamization of the Sultan of Kedah, as referenced by Hamka in Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, recounts a narrative involving an Arab preacher named Sheikh Abdullah al-Yamani who arrived immediately in Kedah. Sheikh Abdullah subsequently converted the Sultan of Kedah to Islam, designating him Sultan Muzaffar Shah [34].

While the majority of Western scholars adhere to the view that Islam's introduction to the Malay Realm originated from India, some acknowledge the Arab theory of the dissemination of Islam. Professor Keyzer, a Dutch academic, has asserted that the expansion of Islam in the Malay world originated from Egypt, as it is associated with the Syafie school, which shares parallels with the local populace [44]. In addition to Keyzer, several other academics, including Niemann, De Hollander, John Crawford, William Marsden, and Diego de Couto, have conducted research on the Islamization of the Malays through the mediation of these Arabs [38].

In response to the controversy among historians over the origins of Islamic preachers, whether from Arabia or India, Sayid Naquib al-Attas emerged, attempting to reconcile the two perspectives [37]. Al-Attas asserted that the preachers originated from the Middle East rather than the Indian subcontinent. Nonetheless, their entry into the Malay Kingdom seems probable via alternative routes, including India. To bolster his point, al-Attas asserted that their religious comprehension was rooted in the Middle East rather than India. The preachers educated the locals on the concepts of creed and sufism, presenting Jawi works influenced by Arabic rather than Indian sources [45]. Consequently, an examination of scholarly writings indicates that the preachers who arrived in the Malay Realm, particularly in Malaya, adhered to ASWJ due to the alignment with the Shafie madhhab, despite the lack of consensus among researchers regarding their origins, whether from the Arabian Peninsula or India [42].

The initial acceptance and development of Islam among the Malays is attributed to trade factors. This theory was proposed by the Western scholar Tom Pires, who authored it in 1515 AD [38]. While it is indisputable that trade operations facilitated the introduction of Islam to the Malay Realm, a debate emerges regarding whether the widespread embrace of Islam by the Malays in the 13th and 14th centuries can be adequately attributed solely to trade activities [46]. Hamka contends that trading motivated solely by profit and loss is improbable to be the primary factor in the dissemination and swift advancement of Islam in the Malay World [34].

Hamka, citing local sources from the palace, stated that the dissemination of Islam in the Malay Realm transpired in a 'top-down' manner. This indicates that the Arab missionaries from the Arabian Peninsula during that period converted the local Malay authorities to Islam. This phase was then

adopted by the general populace, who converted to Islam en masse. According to palace sources, it is evident that the individuals responsible for disseminating Islam are not merchants but rather preachers [39]. Hamka [34] bolstered his claim by enumerating the Malay kings who were effectively converted to Islam by Arab missionaries, including the monarchs of Samudera-Pasai, Aceh, Kedah, Malacca, Brunei, and Pontianak.

In addition to Hamka, Qudratullah identified the influence of Arab preachers as a significant factor contributing to the swift acceptance of Islam among the Malays at that period. Qudratullah [42] asserts that the demeanor exhibited by Islamic preachers markedly contrasts with that of Christian missionaries who accompanied Western colonization.

According to the perspectives and assertions of Islamic scholars like Hamka, al-Attas, Azyumardi, and others, it is evident that the Islamic faith that emerged in the Malay area originated from the Middle East and was influenced by Arab culture.

Their arguments are derived from local traditional historiographic sources, which can be categorized into numerous aspects, including the direct introduction of Islam from Arabian territories, including the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Hadrat Maut, or Egypt. The religion of Islam is communicated by authentic preachers rather than merchants. The initial adopters of Islam in the Malay World were local dignitaries, thereafter followed en masse by the general populace. Most preachers began to arrive in the Malay Realm during the 12th and 13th centuries, while some contend that Muslim engagement commenced in the first century of Hijrah.

3.2 Understanding the Concept of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia

The historical evolution of madhhab in Malaysia reveals that the Muslim community has traditionally embraced and practiced Islam in accordance with ASWJ, encompassing creed, jurisprudence, and Sufism [47]. The Asya'irah and Maturidiyah schools serve as esteemed authorities in questions of creed, whilst the Syafie madhhab provides guidance on legal and ritual practices of worship. Simultaneously, within the realm of Sufism, the neo-Sufism movement, which has evolved from Imam al-Ghazali's Sufi methodology, has emerged in communal life. Consequently, these components have historically underpinned the majority of public religious traditions [48].

Nonetheless, there exist further schools that are practiced inside the community's religious life. In the realm of creed, in addition to the predominant schools of Imam Asya'ari and Maturidi, the Muslim community is also influenced by another school associated with Imam Ibn Taymiyah [49]. This institution employs a distinct methodology compared to the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah schools, particularly regarding the comprehension of the concept of divinity. The Asya'irah school employs the recitation of 'Twenty Nature' to acknowledge the divine essence, while the Ibn Taymiyah school advocates for the recitation of 'Tawhid Uluhiyah and Rububiyah and Asma' wa al-Sifat' for the same objective [50].

Regarding jurisprudence, certain Muslim communities do not exclusively adhere to the Syafie madhhab; instead, they select the opinion deemed most favorable among the principal schools as their legal foundation. In Perlis, the introduction of sharia law distinctly indicates that the state is not obligated to adhere to any single sect. Dahaman and Mohd Akram [51] assert that a provision exists stipulating that when the council issues a fatwa and the Shariah Committee provides its perspectives, the entity must adhere to the principles established in the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet PBUH.

"In issuing any fatwa under section 48 or certifying any opinion under section 53, the Fatwa Committee shall follow the Quran or the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)"

3.2.1 The essence of creed

The principal characteristic of ASWJ in Malaysia about the concept of creed or monotheism adheres to the principles established by Imam Abu Hassan al-Ash'ari, the founder of the Ash'ari school. Furthermore, the Islamic community adheres to the doctrine established by Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi [52]. These two schools have nearly identical foundational philosophies due to their common objectives. Both prioritize religious texts, including the Quran and al-Hadith, while also acknowledging reason as a means to derive solutions, particularly for divine inquiries [16]. These two schools of thought are elementary perspectives situated between the Muktazilah, Jabariyah, and Muhaddithun schools [47].

The core of these two schools encompasses the utilization of naqli arguments (the Quran and Hadith) alongside aqli or logical arguments (mantiq) when discussing concepts such as matter, nature, mass, space, particles (atoms), and time [53]. The policies of these two schools were subsequently reinforced in the archipelago and notably in Malaya through the development and examination of the book *um al-Barahin*, penned by Imam al-Sanusi [54]. This book examines the 'Nature of the Twentie' methodology for comprehending the notion of divinity. This book is highly esteemed in the Malay world, regarded as the foundational text of all Usuluddin literature [55]. Included in the lectures or descriptions of the book *Um al-Barahin* are the 1911 work by Muhammad Zain bin al-Faqih Jalal al-Din titled *Bidayat al-Hidayat* and the book by Zain al-'Abidin bin Muhammad al-Fatani entitled *'Aqidat al-Najin fi 'Ilm Usul al-Din*. Alongside these two volumes, Muhammad Zin al-Din bin Muhammad Badawi al-Sunbawi's work, *Siraj al-Huda*, serves as a commentary on the book *um al-Barahin* [56]. Furthermore, the texts *'Aqidah al-Nājin* and *Faridah al-Farā'id* serve as references in the science of creed.

The tenets of this creed fundamentally center on the sixth pillar of faith, which encompasses belief in Allah SWT as the One, the Angels, the Prophets and Messengers who convey the truths, the sacred texts that direct humanity, the retribution of the Day of Resurrection, and the decrees of Qada' and Qadar of Allah SWT. The discussion regarding belief in Allah SWT and the Messenger pertains to the principles of reason, which are classified into three categories: obligatory, impossible, and necessary [57]. The discourse on the first Pillar of Faith is grounded in the doctrine of the Twenty Natures, which ASWJ scholars categorize as the twenty traits that must be inherent in Allah SWT. This characteristic is subdivided into four components: *Nafsiyah*, *Salbiyah*, *Ma'ani*, and *Ma'nawiyah* [58]. In addition to the twenty obligatory traits, the attributes that are impossible for Allah SWT are also examined. This impossible nature contrasts with the obligatory nature of Allah SWT and possesses 20 qualities. There exists a singular attribute pertaining to Allah SWT, specifically that Allah SWT possesses the capacity to both perform and refrain from actions that are feasible [54-59].

Upon affirming their faith in Allah SWT, Muslims must also acknowledge the presence of Angels composed of light. According to ASWJ, there are ten Angels that must be recognized, each with specific functions [57].

The third argument in the Pillars of Faith addresses the belief in prophets and apostles. Muslims are required to believe in a minimum of 25 apostles [55]. The debate also invokes the principles of reason, including required, impossible, and must, in relation to the topic of believe in Allah SWT. Concerning the requisite traits, there are four: *Siddiq*, *Amanah*, *Tabliq*, and *Fathonah*. The impossible contradicts the aforementioned essential traits. The attributes required of prophets and apostles are

those of regular individuals, from which they are not exempt, provided these do not compromise their dignity as prophets or messengers [59].

The fourth pillar of religion is to have faith in the sacred texts granted to the prophets and messengers by Allah SWT. These books can be categorized into two types: suhuf and books. The suhuf were revealed to the Prophet, including those of Shith, Idris, Ibrahim, and Moses. Scriptures such as the Torah were revealed to Prophet Moses following the Suhuf, the Zabur was given to Prophet David, the Gospel was bestowed upon Prophet Isa, and the Quran was transmitted to Prophet Muhammad PBUH [60].

The subsequent topic pertains to the belief in the Day of Resurrection, during which all beings will be revived to confront Allah SWT's judgment over their earthly actions [61]. The final pillar of religion is the belief in Qada' and Qadar, which pertains to the acceptance of the fate of both good and negative experiences encountered by individuals in this world [62].

The Pillar of Faith, founded on these six principles, has become a cornerstone for ASWJ adherents in Malaya about their beliefs [57]. Among the six principles, the belief in Allah SWT is frequently contested, particularly via the framework of Twenty Nature, despite criticisms of its teachings for purportedly being influenced by the Greek logical philosophy discussed by Aristotle [63].

3.2.2 The essence of jurisprudence

The principal characteristic of jurisprudence thought in Malaysia is the adherence to the ASWJ doctrine by following the madhhab of Imam al-Syafie [64]. A survey of the production of jurisprudence texts authored by earlier scholars reveals a pronounced emphasis on the fourth school, particularly the school of Imam al-Syafie. Nevertheless, an examination of the jurisprudence texts utilized by these scholars reveals that they do not comprehensively reference the works of Imam al-Shafi'i, such as al-Risalah and al-Umm, but instead concentrate on the writings of other Shafi'i scholars. Included are the book al-Muhazzab by al-Shirazi, Minhaj al-Talibin by Imam al-Nawawi, Tuhfat al-Muhtaj by Ibn Hajar al-Haitami, Fathul al-Wahhab by Zakaria al-Ansari, Fath al-Muin by Zainuddin bin Abdul Aziz al-Malibari, Nihayat al-Muhtaj by Shamsuddin al-Ramly, al-Ghayat wa al-Taqrib by al-Asfahani, Mughni al-Muhtaj by Ibn Khatib al-Sharbini, among others [57-65].

The examination of ASWJ fiqh (jurisprudence) in Malaysia predominantly focuses on the discourse surrounding the Five Pillars of Islam and its intrinsic significance. The writing and debate encompass issues pertaining to the laws of prayer, Ramadan fasting, the issuance of zakat, and the performance of Hajj and Umrah. The focus on prayer commences with the chapter on purification, proceeds to the law of prayer, and concludes with a discourse about wirid and prayer. Furthermore, this domain of worship encompasses discussions concerning the matters of sacrifice and akikah, as well as the distinctions between halal and haram in food, hunting, and slaughter [66].

In addition to worship, the question of ASWJ fiqh in Malaysia encompasses three more aspects: munakahat, muamalat, and jinayat. The domain of munakahat addresses issues including engagement, marriage, the obligations and rights of married couples, which encompass hadanah, maintenance, divorce, and related problems. The subject of muamalat addresses inquiries pertaining to socio-economic dimensions, including the necessity of transactions, khiyar, riba, pawnbroking, shares, insolvency, sulh, hiwalah, iqrar, representation, luqatah, wadi'ah, remuneration, leasing, ariyah, dhaman, syuf'ah, hibah, ijarah, corporations, levies, reclamation of barren land, waqf, among others [67]. Nonetheless, these domains receive limited attention in studies pertaining to the broader Muslim community in contrast to the domain of prayer. In the boarding school setting, it becomes a prescribed syllabus that pupils adhere to during recitation.

3.2.3 The essence of Sufism

In addition to monotheism and jurisprudence, the advancement of ASWJ in the archipelago and Malaya (Malaysia) encompasses the examination of Sufism. The collaboration between Ahl al-Syariah and Ahl al-Haqiqah represents the predominant method employed throughout the Islamic community under scholarly leadership. All facets of Islamic teachings have been emphasized, encompassing legal, spiritual, intellectual, practical, social, and individual domains.

The practice of Sufism in Malaysia is oriented towards Sunni Sufism, rooted in the teachings of Imam al-Ghazali and Imam al-Junaid al-Baghdadi [68]. Nonetheless, the philosophical Sufism of Abdul Qadir al-Jilani and Ibn 'Arabi continues to be discussed within Sunni Sufism, utilizing the Quran and Hadith as primary references to mitigate the risk of deviation [69].

The Sufi path introduced by Imam al-Ghazali is identical to that of Imam al-Junaid al-Baghdadi. Imam al-Ghazali underscores the importance of comprehending the Quranic text and the matn of hadith in his Sufi writings. The book *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, for instance, has several lines from the Quran and hadiths of the Prophet at the commencement of each topic addressed by Imam al-Ghazali. Subsequently, he elucidated the significance and philosophy of maqāṣid underlying the verses of the Quran and the hadiths [68].

Sufism comprises three essential elements: ethics and conduct, wirid and dhikr, and philosophy and metaphysics, which collectively provide the foundation of its knowledge [70]. Nonetheless, scholars hold varying perspectives regarding the role of philosophy and metaphysics within this discipline. Some individuals embrace this element with care and caution, while others deny its existence within Islamic Sufism [57].

Scholars have concurred on the significance of morals and manners within the teachings of Sufism. They solely disagree in their perspectives regarding the evaluation of this facet of Sufism. Scholars that acknowledge the three components of Sufi teachings assert that the aspects of morality and etiquette constitute the muḥtadī (beginning) stage, which precedes the mutawassit (middle) stage, ultimately leading to the muḥtadī (highest) level. Other scholars assert that the components of morals and manners constitute the fundamental nature of Sunni Sufism, rather than serving as preliminary steps leading to higher stages [57].

Moreover, the texts that have sparked discourse on Sufism, as per ASWJ's interpretation in Malaysia, encompass *Hidāyah al-Sālikīn*, *Siyar al-Sālikīn*, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, *Risālah Qushayriyyah*, *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*, *al-Ḥikam* [68], and *Minhaj al-'Abidin*.

Furthermore, Sufism in Malaysia can be traced through the presence and practice of specific tarekat (order). At least 10 tarekat have emerged and proliferated among the populace in Malaysia, including Qadiriyyah, Naqsyabandiyah, Rifa'iyah, Syadhiliyyah, Cristiyah, Syattariyyah, Ahmadiyah, Tijaniyyah, and 'Alawiyah [71], as well as Qodiriyyah Naqsyabandiyah [72]. Currently, the tariqat that significantly influences scholars in Malaysia comprises two tarekat: Naqshabandiyah and Ahmadiyah [57].

The emergence of the Naqshabandiyah Order in Malaysia is evident in states such as Terengganu, Johor, Perak, Penang, Selangor, and Kedah. The individuals engaged in disseminating the doctrines of this organization included intellectuals from the archipelago, notably Sayid Muhammad al-Zawawi, who originated from Riau and advanced his teachings in Terengganu. Sheikh Abdul Wahab Babus Salam of Langkat, East Sumatra established this institute in Johor [73].

In the state of Perak, Sheikh Muhammad Zain from Simabur, Minangkabau established this institute, whereas in Selangor, Haji Yahya bin Laksamana from Rambah, Sumatra is credited as the creator who constructed it in the vicinity of Kajang. In addition to him, other prominent individuals involved in the establishment of this institute included Haji Yusuf Shahabuddin, who served as the

Mufti of the state government for 14 years (1953-1967), Kiyai Haji Umar, Sheikh Haji Ismail Khalidi Naqshabandiyah, and Sheikh Muhammad Nur al-Khalid [74].

The Naqshbandiyah Order was also established in Kedah under the leadership of Sheikh al-Islam Haji Wan Sulaiman bin Wan Sideq. Subsequently, the instructional endeavors of this institute were perpetuated by Sheikh Abu Yazid bin Haji Ahmad, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Wan Besar, Ustaz Azizan, and Haji Ahmad Fauzi bin Haji Mustafa of Yan [75]. In Penang, the study of Naqsyabandiyah Sufism was initiated by Hamid bin Bahaman in 1806 and further advanced by Sheikh Omar bin Basheer [57].

The Ahmadiyya Order's development is primarily concentrated on the states of Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, and Kedah. This institute is often referred to as the Idrisiyah Order, named for its founder, Ahmad bin Idris. Key individuals involved in the establishment of this institute included Ibrahim al-Rashid, Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Dandarawi, and Sidi Azhari, who contributed to promoting the institute in Malaysia [76].

The Ahmadiyya Order was established by Muhammad Shafii bin Muhammad Salleh, a prominent Sufi figure from Kedah, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Makkah. Nonetheless, the swift advancement of this tarekat transpired in Negeri Sembilan due to the emergence of numerous influential figures, including Muhammad Yatim bin Zainal Abidin, who served as the Kadi of Rembau district, Muhammad Said bin Jamaluddin al-Linggi, Haji Mansor bin Haji Muhammad Said, Abdullah bin Haji Muhammad Said, and Haji Ahmad bin Muhammad Said [57]. The Syattariyah Tarekat is linked to the lineage of 'Abdul Rauf bin 'Ali al-Fansuri, Sheikh Daud al-Fatani, and Tok Pulau Manis [73].

Moreover, the evolution of the Qodiriyah Naqsyabandiyah Oder in Malaysia is evident through the Pondok Remaja Inabah initiative introduced by Tuan Guru Dato Mohd Zuki in the early 1980s [78]. Tuan Guru Dato Mohd Zuki obtained the endorsement of the 37th Mursyid of the Qodiriyah Naqsyabandiyah Order, Syeikh Ahmad Sohbulwafa Tajul Arifin, to disseminate this order in Malaysia by establishing a private drug rehabilitation center, Pondok Remaja Inabah [79]. Pondok Remaja Inabah functions as both a drug rehabilitation facility and a center for the advancement of the Qodiriyah Naqsyabandiyah Order in Malaysia [77].

3.3 Analysis of the Concept of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah in Malaysia

The examination of tree nodes as shown in Figure 1 reveals that the comprehension of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* in Malaysia is founded on three principal elements:

- i. Knowledge of creed.
- ii. Knowledge of jurisprudence.
- iii. Knowledge of Sufism.

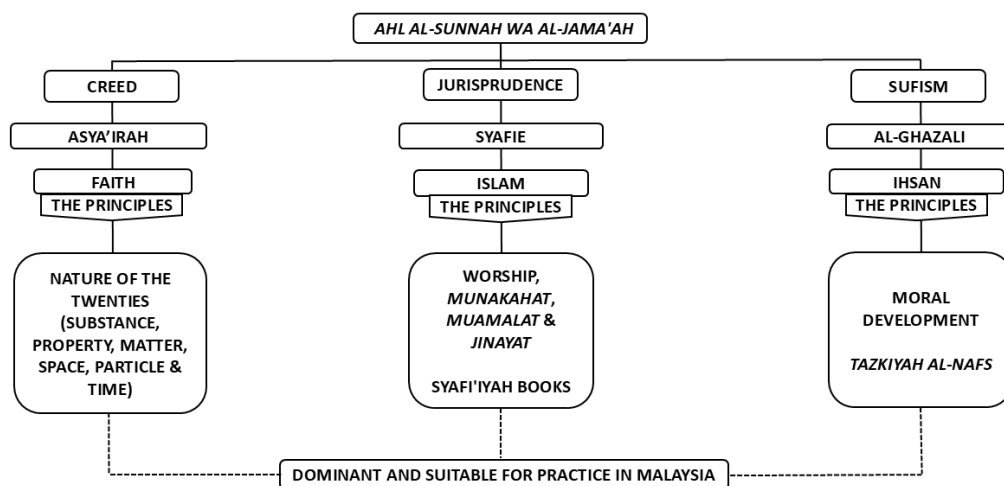


Fig. 1. *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* in Malaysia

3.3.1 The science of creed

Within the framework of the science of creed, the Islamic community in Malaysia predominantly adheres to the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah theological schools. The Asya'irah school employs the concept of the 'Nature of the Twenties' to comprehend the characteristics of Allah, highlighting a balanced interpretation while preserving Islamic doctrines without beyond the boundaries of rational analysis. The pillars of religion constitute a subject of discourse within the realm of knowledge of religion, encompassing belief in Allah, angels, prophets, scriptures, the day of resurrection, and qada' and qadar.

The selection of the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah schools' credo in Malaysia as the doctrine of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* is shaped by numerous primary elements. The dissemination of Islam to Malaya by earlier academics is included among them. Scholars from the Middle East who disseminated Islam in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaya, predominantly adhere to the Asya'irah or Maturidiyah doctrines. They introduced these doctrines, which ultimately shaped the evolution of religious thought in Malaya until this creed became predominant in Malaysia.

Within the realm of intellectual discourse, Asya'irah and Maturidiyah provide moderate and logical methodologies for comprehending Islamic theology. This school emphasizes the importance of balancing faith and reason, offering clear explanations on topics such as the characteristics of God, destiny, and endeavor.

Moreover, in the religious matters of Malaysia, the majority of countries adhere to the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah schools of matters of creed. Several muftis in Malaysia endorsed the Bill proposed by the Mufti of the Federal Territories, which delineates the Asya'irah and Maturidiyah schools in interpreting the tenets of creed.

The Asya'irah creed's moderate attitude has significantly contributed to the cohesion of the Muslim community in Malaysia. This congruence in comprehending the creed aids in averting conflicts and divisions throughout society. Moreover, Asya'irah's ideology mitigates the likelihood of extremism and radicalism inside the community. This arises from the school's focus on a balanced, moderate, and rational comprehension of the concept of divinity.

The moderate theological stance of the Asya'irah creed facilitates the establishment of cordial relations with the non-Muslim community in Malaysia. A balanced and rational comprehension of this creed in a multiracial, religious, and cultural community fosters integration and tolerance among diverse groups, thereby enhancing societal unity and harmony.

The Asya'irah and Maturidiyah spiritual practices in Malaysia significantly contribute to social stability, fortifying belief, and fostering harmony among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslim groups.

3.3.2 The science of jurisprudence

Moreover, within the realm of Jurisprudence Science, the Syafie School serves as the principal authority in fiqh jurisprudence, highlighting texts authored by Shafi'iyah scholars, including al-Risalah, al-Umm, al-Muhazzab, among others. Simultaneously, the discourse pertains to the fundamental tenets of Islam, encompassing worship (the shahadah, prayer, fasting, zakat, and hajj), munakahat (marriage and divorce), muamalat (commercial transactions), and jinayat (criminal justice).

The designation of the Syafie madhhab as the principal madhhab in Malaysia is shaped by several significant elements. Included are the influences of prior scholars. Scholars from the Middle East, particularly those affiliated with the Shafie madhhab, significantly contributed to the dissemination of Islam throughout Southeast Asia, notably in Malaysia. The teachings of the Syafie school were introduced to Malaya, significantly impacting the development and acceptance of this madhhab in Malaysia.

Additionally, Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia, particularly religious schools, frequently adhere to the Syafie School of thought. This continuous instruction is crucial in reinforcing and sustaining the school's teachings across the community. The Syafie School provides a clear framework and instruction for worship and sharia law, thereby facilitating the implementation of Islamic teachings in everyday life.

Consequently, the Syafie school of thought has become an essential component of the Islamic cultural heritage in Malaysia. Syafie's fiqh (jurisprudence) practices, ingrained in local culture, constitute an integral aspect of the daily lives of Malaysian Muslims. This institution not only offers legal counsel but also influences the framework and ethos of Malaysian Muslim society, rendering it a crucial component in preserving religious peace and identity.

The implementation of the Syafie School in Malaysia is important in establishing a coherent and acceptable Islamic legal framework. The madhhab Syafie, through explicit instruction and a robust framework, persists in shaping religious and cultural life in Malaysia, while facilitating the orderly and effective application of Islamic doctrines.

3.3.3 The science of Sufism

The Sufi tradition in Malaysia is grounded in the teachings of Imam al-Ghazali, particularly the principle of soul purification (tazkiyah), which underscores the necessity of eliminating undesirable attributes from the soul. The discourse in Sufism pertains to the tenets of ihsan, specifically "al-ihsanul antaq budallah," signifying that ihsan encompasses the intellect and ethics imparted by Allah SWT through the exemplary conduct of the Prophet PBUH. The discourse on the foundations of ihsan in Sufism encompasses ethics and comportment, wirid and dhikr, in addition to philosophy and metaphysics. The comprehension of Sufism in Malaysia is manifested in the practice of muktabar order.

The selection of Imam Al-Ghazali's Sufi methodology as a spiritual paradigm in Malaysia is shaped by various crucial considerations. The effect of intellectuals and preachers disseminating Islam to Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, encompasses the teachings of Sufism from the Al-Ghazali school. Al-Ghazali's writings, particularly "Ihya' Ulum ad-Din" (The Revival of Religious Sciences),

significantly contribute to the dissemination of Sufi doctrines in Malaysia. The work was disseminated to the Malay community via translation and instruction by local intellectuals.

Moreover, Imam Al-Ghazali's spiritual methodology is regarded as suitable within the broader Malay society. Al-Ghazali's methodology provides a comprehensive means of attaining proximity to God and enhancing spiritual comprehension, specifically through the purification of the heart, mastery over desires, and the cultivation of personal communion with the Divine.

Al-Ghazali's methodology is regarded as congruent with the cultural values of the Malay and Muslim cultures, which prioritize morals and ethics in everyday life. This is due to al-Ghazali's Sufism emphasizing the cultivation of ethics through " ". Alongside the notion of self-purification, the al-Ghazali school emphasizes the significance of prayer and religious activities that align with the principles of jurisprudence. Al-Ghazali asserts that worship should be performed with mindfulness and heartfelt sincerity to attain proximity tazkiyah al-nafts to Allah. This indicates that the school prioritizes not only Sufism but also the scientific dimension of jurisprudence concerning acts of worship.

The Sufi tradition of Imam Al-Ghazali places significant emphasis on dhikr as the primary means of attaining closeness to Allah SWT. Dhikr is regarded as an efficacious practice for purifying the heart and enhancing spiritual consciousness. This aligns with the tradition of the muktabar orders in Malaysia, where the practice of dhikr serves as the fundamental framework for the spiritual journey toward attaining makrifatullah.

This Sufi school underscores the significance of the integration between the temporal realm and the afterlife. This doctrine posits that one must reconcile these two facets, ensuring that worldly existence serves not merely as a pursuit of transient gratification, but as a preparatory arena for the everlasting afterlife. This technique enables Muslims in Malaysia to attain success in both this life and the afterlife.

Within the framework of Malaysia's heterogeneous society, the Al-Ghazali school of Sufism significantly contributes to mitigating inter-racial tensions. The teachings of Al-Ghazali's Sufism underscore virtues such as tawaduk (humility) and patience, which might indirectly foster a more amicable and tolerant environment between Islamic and non-Muslim societies.

In Malaysia, the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (ASWJ), which is the foundational principle of Islam, is predicated on the Asya'irah school about theology (creed), the Imam al-Syafie madhhab concerning jurisprudence (fiqh), and the methodology of Imam al-Ghazali in the realm of Sufism. This discourse aligns with the assertions of Muhammad Ayman and Zainul Abidin [68] and Mohd Aizam [1] that the populace in Malaysia predominantly selects the religious foundation that aligns with the majority of Muslims, specifically Asya'irah, according to the ijtihaad of Imam al-Sanusi. In the realm of jurisprudence, he adheres to the Shafi'i School, while in Sufism, he follows Imam Al-Ghazali and aspires to emulate Imam Al-Junaid.

4. Conclusions

In Malaysia, the ASWJ concept, central to the Islamic practice of the majority of Muslim communities, both governmental and civilian, is founded on the teachings of Imam Abu Hassan al-Asy'ari regarding creed, the madhhab of Imam al-Syafie concerning jurisprudence (fiqh), and the Sufi perspective of Imam al-Ghazali. Moreover, several Muslim communities in the country reference alternative schools for interpreting Islam, such as the Ibn Taymiyah school concerning creed and ethics, and select the approach deemed most favorable among the prominent schools in fiqh issues.

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