

A Study of the Reinterpretation of the Qur'ān in a Seventeenth-Century Malay Sufi Text Written by al-Rānīrī

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Abstract

Sufi interpretations of the Qur'ān aim to justify a mystic view of the God-human-universe relationship, focusing on the Qur'ānic verses. This paper studies controversies related to the interpretations of the Qur'ān by the Wujūdiyyah Sufis of Malay in the seventeenth-century Aceh and the Malay Archipelago. Their interpretations were pantheistic according to their opponent, the Shaykh al-Islām of Aceh, Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (d. 1658). Al-Rānīrī challenged the teachings of the Wujūdiyyah Sufis to cleanse Sufism from pantheistic views. The text chosen, al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn 'alā 'l-Mulḥidīn (A Clear Victory against the Heretics) is a Jawi text written by al-Rānīrī before he left Aceh in 1446 for India. The Wujūdiyyah Sufis interpreted the Qur'ānic verses to support their ideas. In response, al-Rānīrī reinterpreted the same verses to demonstrate the flaws found in their teachings. Issues of reinterpretation, authoritative interpretation, and cogency are clearly expressed in the text. The article provides an overview of the seventeenth-century Malay Sufism which the contemporary scholars of the Islamics often ignore. The paper begins by giving a background of the controversy and proceeds to discuss arguments articulated by al-Rānīrī for a reinterpretation of the Qur'ānic texts misinterpreted by the Wujūdiyyah Sufis, in his quest for upholding the true Sufi view. Whenever possible, a comparative view of the teachings and statements of Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240 CE) is brought into the analysis.

Keywords

Malay, Aceh, Wujūdiyyah, Ibn al-'Arabī, Sufis, Qur'ān, interpretation.

Introduction

Seventeenth-century Aceh was a prosperous city port where various merchants came for their trade. Many commodities traded in Venice could easily be found in Aceh. In that sense, Aceh replaced Malacca in its golden days as the busiest port of the Malay Archipelago. The

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Illustrious Sultan of Aceh Iskandar Mūdā (r. 1607-1636) was a promoter of free trade and encouraged many to come to the nation to trade. Chinese, Portuguese, and Syrian traders came to trade with their counterparts from the Spice Islands of Maluku, Banten, and Riau, including the Malay states of Johor, Pahang, Inderaputra, and Kampar. The items traded included spice, camphor, textiles, bronze, gold, nutmeg etc.

Apart from these physical riches and trade, the Sultan was also interested in the spiritual arts. Many Sufi scholars were welcomed at his court, including Shams al-Dīn al-Sūmatrā'ī (d. 1630) as his Shaykh al-Islām. Consequently, Aceh became well-known even in the heartlands of the Muslim world, i.e., Mecca and Medina.¹ Anthony Johns regarded the Sultan as a follower of the Naqshbandī Sufi order. Shams al-Dīn wrote in a seventeenth-century text how many Acehnese were interested in taking the path of Sufism to reach the level of the *muḥaqqiq*.² Ḥamzah al-Fanṣūrī (d. ca. 1590), a near contemporary of Shams al-Dīn, penned many of his poems with Sufi themes. Based on their writings, both can be considered followers of Muḥyī 'l-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī's (d. 1240 CE) school of Sufism.³

However, the death of Shams al-Dīn in 1630 and later the death of Sultan Iskandar Mūdā in 1636 changed the landscape of Acehnese politics and society. The following Sultan, Iskandar Thānī (r. 1636-1641) was an outsider who became Sultan due to his marriage to Sulṭānah Ṣafīyyat al-Dīn Shāh, the eldest daughter of Iskandar Mūdā. He had a hard time reigning over the nobles of the court of Aceh. Interestingly, the appointment of the next Shaykh al-Islām Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (d. 1658) in 1637 helped cement his power over them.

Al-Rānīrī was of mixed parentage, the father being an Indian from Rānīr or Rander and the mother an Acehnese. The accessibility of Aceh to India and vice versa made the union possible. Al-Rānīrī was brought up in Rānīr. His uncle who had a name similar to him came to Aceh for work as a religious scholar. He found that the Acehnese preferred Sufism to the subjects that he was accustomed to i.e., logic and

¹ see Mohamad Nasrin Nasir, *The Metaphysical Epistemology of Shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Sumatrā'ī: A Study of the Ḥaqq al-Yaqīn fī Aqīdat al-Muḥaqqiqīn* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2019), 37-38.

² Anthony Johns, "Daḳā'ik al-Ḥurūf by 'Abd al-Ra'ūf of Singkel," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain* 87, nos. 1-2 (1955): 55-73; Johns, "Daḳā'ik al-Ḥurūf by 'Abd al-Ra'ūf of Singkel," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain* 87, nos. 3-4 (1955): 139-58. Also see Nasir, *Metaphysical Epistemology*, 25.

³ Nasir, *Metaphysical Epistemology*, 19-20.

theology. He went to Pahang to educate himself in Sufism to get acceptance in Aceh. Al-Rānīrī was an initiate with the Chishti Sufi order, read many Sufi texts in India, and was educated thoroughly in Sufi teachings. Thus, his entry into the Acehese world was smooth and caught the eye of the Sultan, Iskandar Thānī.⁴ From very early on, al-Rānīrī stamped his authority by accusing the followers of the former Shaykh al-Islām of being deviated from the true teachings of Islam. He issued a ruling that the teachings of Shams al-Dīn al-Sūmaṭrā'ī and Ḥamzah al-Fanṣūrī were heretical and, hence banned. They were branded as Wujūdiyyah Muḥidah or heretical Wujūdiyyah and their followers were told to recant their Wujūdiyyah teachings or face the threat of capital punishment.

The situation became worse for the Wujūdiyyah and their followers when Sultan Iskandar Thānī believed a rumour that they were in cahoots with a movement to oust him from power and issued an order for them all to be punished by death.⁵ News from Peter Mundy, a British traveller, confirms this action of the Sultan based upon hearing the movement to oust him from power. He punished them in the most severe ways and methods, much akin to Western punishments in the Middle Ages. Mundy records the following in his travelogue:

Here wee understood of aboutt 400 persons putt to death by this King some 3 or 4 Monthes since with sundry sorts off exquisite tormentts, viz., Divers Cutt in peeces; others sawne in 2, beeing made fast to tymbers, and as the wood is cutt soe goeth the saw through their Bodies by httle and httle; some hung on Iron hookes by the heeles, stretched wide abroad, and Molten lead powred into the Fundamentts of the Men and privities of the

⁴ In fact, he used the persecution of the Wujūdiyyah Sufis as an effective tool against his enemies in Aceh which even included the family of the late Sultan Iskandar Mūdā, see Sher Banu A. L. Khan, "What Happened to Sayf al-Rijal?" *Bijdragen tot de- Taal Land-en Volkenkunde*, 168 no. 1 (2012): 100-11. For a discussion on how anti-Wujūdiyyah propaganda was used by the Sultan, see Mohamad Nasrin Nasir, "Menghalusi Penghujahan al-Raniri dalam Kitab Fathul Mubin alal Mulhidin: Suatu Analisis Logiko-Deskriptif," [Analysing the argumentations of al-Rānīrī in *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn 'alā 'l-Mulḥidīn*: A logical and descriptive analysis] in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Religion and Society*, organised by Pusat Penataran Bahasa, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, in 2017.

⁵ This can be seen in primary sources written by al-Rānīrī such as *Tibyān fī Ma'rifat al-Adyān* (Clarification about the Knowledge of Religions), folio 2v and *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn 'alā 'l-Mulḥidīn*, folio 3r-4v, as well as in secondary sources such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *al-Raniri and the Wujūdiyyah of Aceh* (Singapore: JMBRAS, 1966) and al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986).

weomen to cause them [to] Confesse where their Masters or husbands treasure lay.⁶

Such horrid punishments were meted out by Iskandar Thānī not only to those Wujūdiyyah Sufis but also to those who were with them. In addition to these punishments, al-Rānīrī wrote many tracts against the teachings of the Wujūdiyyah Sufis, whom he regarded as heretics. His writings aimed to educate the people on the dangers of the teachings of the Wujūdiyyah, which the former Sultan vehemently supported.

This tense atmosphere in Aceh, which began with the death of Iskandar Mūdā, continued until the death of Iskandar Thānī in 1641. The persecution of the Wujūdiyyah stopped with the rise of Sulṭānah Ṣafiyat al-Dīn Shāh (d. 1675) in 1641 in place of her husband. The Sulṭānah instead encouraged al-Rānīrī to write on differences in religions,⁷ history, and law. However, old wounds were not healed and in 1643 the nobles of Aceh, who were still loyal to her father, initiated a debate between al-Rānīrī and Sayf al-Rijāl (d. 1661),⁸ a follower of a former Wujūdiyyah Sufi master Kamāl al-Dīn, who was executed by al-Rānīrī earlier. The Sulṭānah was asked to witness the debate⁹ and to decide the winner, of which she withdrew and instead allowed the nobles to decide in her name. Sayf al-Rijāl was declared the winner and as punishment, al-Rānīrī had to leave Aceh immediately. Thus, the six-year persecution of the Wujūdiyyah by al-Rānīrī and Sultan Iskandar Thānī came to an end. Aceh never experienced such persecution as it did in the six years when al-Rānīrī was the Shaykh al-Islām of Aceh.

Al-Rānīrī started writing the book *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn ‘alā ‘l-Mulḥidīn* (A Clear Victory against the Heretics) shortly before he was deported from Aceh. It was written in the Jawi script in the Malay language. In this work, he explained why the Wujūdiyyah Sufis were heretics and how their interpretations of the verses of the Qur’ān led to heretical and pantheistic beliefs. He completed the work in India and sent its copies to

⁶ Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple (London: Hakluty Society, 1919), vol. 3, pt. 2, p. 330. One should note that punishments meted out by the Sultan with the help of the Shaykh al-Islām were not based on the *sharī‘ah*. No evidence was ever given by al-Rānīrī in any of his writings to justify these punishments.

⁷ Of which he wrote *Tibyān fī Ma‘rifat al-Adyān*. See al-Attas, *Commentary*, 27.

⁸ See Mohamad Nasrin Nasir, “Sayf al-Rijāl,” in *Oxford Online Islamic Resources*. For a shorter biography of Sayf al-Rijāl, see Khan, “What Happened to Sayf al-Rijāl?”

⁹ Details about the debate are still sketchy as the Dutch source on which Takeshi Ito based his article did not go into the details. Takeshi Ito, “Why Did Nuruddin Ar-Raniri Leave Aceh in 1054 A.H.?” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 134, no. 4 (1978): 489-91.

various places to prevent the spread of Wujūdiyyah heresies. Although at this point al-Rānīrī was at his home in India, he still gave an order for the books of the Wujūdiyyah Sufis to be burnt and their followers executed.

Interpretation and Reinterpretation in *al-Faḥ al-Mubīn*

What follows is an analysis of Qur'ānic verses used by the Wujūdiyyah of Aceh to support their pantheistic understanding of God's relation with His creation. It is admitted that such a view is one-sided as the views of al-Rānīrī are given precedence over the Wujūdiyyah's views. Al-Rānīrī is not free from committing mistakes in quoting the Wujūdiyyah beliefs. However, what is intended here is to analyse the views of Wujūdiyyah Sufis as reported by al-Rānīrī and compare them with the views of Ibn al-'Arabī, who is considered the founder of the ideas concerning the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) in Islamic philosophy. This paper analyses and compares the views to see whether the Wujūdiyyah or al-Rānīrī had gone far from the statements of Ibn al-'Arabī or they are coherent with each other. In what follows, the verses used by the Wujūdiyyah are mentioned, which are followed by al-Rānīrī's presentation of their views and his refutation of them. The views and statements of Ibn al-'Arabī are then included under each section, whenever possible, for an analysis.

1. Who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return." (2:156)

According to al-Rānīrī, the Wujūdiyyah Sufis take this verse to mean the following:

The world comes out of God's Being like the Christians say that God comes out of the womb of Mary. Surely, God says in the Qur'ān, have become infidel those who say God is al-Masīḥ b. Maryam, i.e., that God is Jesus the son of Mary. The coming out and the return according to them is like Zayd's coming out of his house to go to the city and then returning home. Further, they say that God is like a seed, and the world is like a branch which comes out of the seed. Furthermore, they make examples as like the river that goes back to the sea so the world goes back to God and unites with Him, as a poet says,

Say I am the Truth and do not be afraid

For this is a wave that has become the Sea¹⁰

For if it is as they say, then God has become a body, and the body comes out of it as the body goes back or returns to it, God forbid!¹¹

¹⁰ Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, *al-Faḥ al-Mubīn 'alā 'l-Mulḥidīn*, catalogued as MSS 2148, at the Pusat Manuskrip Melayu (Malay Manuscript Centre), National Library of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

Al-Rānīrī also criticizes those who are influenced by philosophers and often use the metaphor of sunlight coming out of the sun. Sunlight is not the sun, but as long as there is heat, there is sunlight, which means—according to them—that the world is with God forever.

To al-Rānīrī, the authentic meaning of this verse is that God created man from nothing and brought him to existence.¹² People will be brought back to either Heaven or Hell, depending upon their deeds. The true Sufis agree with exegetes on this interpretation, but they add that we are made to exist by God with His loci of manifestation and His shadow.

Thus, we are the loci of the manifestation of His beautiful and majestic names. The beautiful names relate to His attribute of mercy and the majestic names belong to His attribute of power. For surely all of the prophets, saints, and believers are the loci of the manifestation of His beautiful names. And all the infidels and heathens are the loci of the manifestation of His majestic names. Thus, the loci of the manifestation of His mercy will return to Heaven and the loci of the manifestation of His power will return to Hell. That is why it is said that whenever a believer dies, he returns to the mercy of His Lord.¹³

This method of explanation using the manifestation is hereby practised by al-Rānīrī in interpreting many other Qur'ānic verses. This method is used to distinguish the correct understanding of the Sufis from that of the Wujūdiyyah as we will see further below.

2. (To the righteous soul will be said:) “O (thou) soul, in (complete) rest and satisfaction!” (89:27)

Al-Rānīrī comments on this verse as follows:

The Wujūdiyyah mean this verse to signify that the world comes out of God's Being, returns to Him, and unites with Him. Because to them, there is neither Heaven nor Hell. And there is no God but they make themselves to be God, as God says, “Surely, the heathens have no *mawlā* for them.”¹⁴

However, for the Qur'ānic exegetes and the Sufis, God trained *al-nafs al-muṭma'innah* to follow His commands and return to God into His mercy.

3. And within you, do you not see? (51:21)

According to al-Rānīrī, the Wujūdiyyah believe this verse to mean, “I am yourself why do not you see me whilst you prostrate? I am with you.”¹⁵ He says that the Wujūdiyyah are like the Jews and the Christians

¹² Ibid., 9-10.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

who changed, added, and deleted parts of their scriptures as God said in the Qur'ān regarding their evil deeds, "Those (the Jews) who distort words from their rightful places" (4:46) and "So woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for their earnings" (2:79). For al-Rānīrī the real meaning of the verse is the opposite to this.

However, when we look at the commentary of the school of Ibn al-'Arabī, we find something similar to what the Wujūdiyyah Sufis say. In his *Shams al-Ma'ārif al-Kubrā*, Shams al-Dīn al-Būnī (d. 1225 CE), says,

It is incumbent upon you to sweep away the veils that cloud your inner vision and to turn toward the tablet, which is the manifest Book of Allah, His immutable secret and His eternal treasure. God said: "And you do not see within your very selves (Q. 51:21)." He who does not know his book which is his very self (*huwa huwa*) is not, himself, his very self (*fa-laysa huwa huwa*).¹⁶

One can say here regarding the Wujūdiyyah's interpretation of the verse that they are not alone in interpreting this Qur'ānic verse from a pantheistic viewpoint. Some followers of Ibn al-'Arabī also interpreted it similarly.

4. We will show them Our signs in the horizons and themselves until they discern that He is the Real. Is it not enough that your Lord witness all things? Ah indeed! Are they in doubt concerning the Meeting with their Lord? Ah indeed! It is He that doth encompass all things! (41:53-54)

The Wujūdiyyah say, "The sign is that God is within us gathered together and exists with us."¹⁷ For al-Rānīrī, this is against the meaning of this verse and the meaning that the Prophet (peace be on him) understood from it. To the Sufis and the Prophet, the meaning of the verse is as stated in the verse itself though it also contains some secrets which are coherent with the apparent meaning of it, such as, "We have shown to them all the signs, which point towards Us."

Looking at Ibn al-'Arabī's interpretation of the verse, "The signs here are indications that they are places of divine manifestation"¹⁸ and "The signs are indications that it is the Truth that is manifested in the places of manifestation of beings in the universe,"¹⁹ it is clear that the meaning hinted at by Ibn al-'Arabī is not far from what the Wujūdiyyah meant in their interpretation of the verse.

¹⁶ Ibn al 'Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, trans. Cyrille Chodkiewicz and Denis Gril (New York: Pir Press, 2004), 2:197n138.

¹⁷ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 15.

¹⁸ Ibn al 'Arabi, *Meccan Revelations*, 2:242n2.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Perhaps the Wujūdiyyah Sufis did not realize the adverse impact of their pantheistic interpretations on Muslim thought in Aceh. However, when al-Rānīrī came to Aceh and observed that pantheism was flourishing in the region, he set about to correct what he saw as deviation from the right path.

Al-Rānīrī's interpretation of this verse is that "all the things that exist in the seven layers of sky and seven layers of earth are the various loci of the manifestation of God. A Muslim gnostic (*ārif*) has said, 'In everything, there is a sign which indicates that God is one and every existing thing is a sign indicating to God.'"²⁰ This is similar to the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabī who explains the loci of manifestation as follows:

The entity of the servant possesses a specific preparedness that displays its effects in the Manifest and gives rise to the diversity of forms within the Manifest, which is the Entity of the Real. (II 517.23)

[God says, "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and in themselves,] until it is clear to them that He is the Real" (Koran 41:53), nothing else. Hence the "signs" (*āyāt*) are the denotations (*dalālāt*) showing that He is the Real, Manifest in the loci of manifestation, that is, the entities of the cosmos. . . . He completed the instruction by saying, "Is it not enough that thy Lord is witness" through self-disclosure and self-manifestation "over everything" (41:53), that is, over every entity of the cosmos? The cosmos cannot repel from itself this Manifest within itself, nor can it refuse to be a locus of manifestation. . . .

Then He completed the verse by saying, "Surely He encompasses everything" (41:54) in the cosmos. "Encompassing" (*iḥāṭa*) a thing conceals that thing. Hence the Manifest is the Encompasser (*al-muḥīṭ*). That thing is not manifest since the encompassing prevents its manifestation. Hence within the Encompasser, that thing—that is, the cosmos—is like the spirit within the body, and the Encompasser is like the body in relation to the spirit.²¹

Al-Rānīrī does not agree with the interpretation of the Wujūdiyyah whom he considered heretics. Where the Wujūdiyyah Sufis point out that God is the same with the world, al-Rānīrī points out that God's signs in this world are with us and within us but they are not the same with Him. In other words, the Wujūdiyyah Sufis point to God's permanency in His essence within everything in this world, whereas al-Rānīrī holds that

²⁰ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faḥḥ al-Mubīn*, 15.

²¹ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 92-93. Ibn al-'Arabī's explanation of the loci of manifestation is similar to how al-Rānīrī used it in *al-Faḥḥ al-Mubīn*.

the permanency of God is not His essence but merely His names and divine attributes.

5. We are closer to him than his jugular vein. (50:16)

According to al-Rānīrī, this verse means that God is closer to a human being than his/her jugular vein. “Closer than jugular vein” is an Arabic phrase that denotes something being closest to another thing.²² In showing how the Prophet is close to God, al-Rānīrī refers to the verse of ascension (*mī'rāj*). Thus, he says that the closeness of Muḥammad to his God on the night of ascension is the closeness meant here.²³

According to the Wujūdiyyah, the meaning of this verse is “You are more than just a companion to God. You are mixed and united with God’s existence.” This is heresy according to al-Rānīrī. To the Sufis and the folk of God, the meaning of the verse is as stated in the verse itself though it contains some secrets, which are coherent with its apparent meaning.

For al-Rānīrī, when God says that He is closer to a human being, it means that because He has created the human being and because He knows what is in his heart, He is the closest to him without place, time, or degrees. God’s essence does not mix with nor is it incarnated or connected to him.

This emphasis on the transcendence of God and the denial of the concept that God’s essence is united with His creation seems to be al-Rānīrī’s aim when interpreting these verses.

However, the Wujūdiyyah Sufis are not that far from the truth when seen from the prism of the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī. The idea of *qurbah* or nearness to God is often discussed in conjunction with the station of the saints. In his book on sainthood in the doctrine of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Michel Chodkiewicz had a long discussion on this particular concept.²⁴ Needless to say, the idea of nearness does not mean physical nearness but it is of a spiritual kind. The Wujūdiyyah’s idea regarding human existence is close to God’s existence and needs further investigation. As to nearness, this verse has to be read with verse 15:29 on the spirit that was breathed into the clay of Adam which is discussed further below.

6. “And He is with you wheresoever ye may be.” (57:4)

²² Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 17.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

According to the Wujūdiyyah, this verse means that “I and you exist together wherever you may be.”²⁵ Al-Rānīrī considers this interpretation heretical and against the saying of the Prophet, “God existed and there was nothing with Him.”²⁶ The apparent meaning of this verse, for al-Rānīrī, is that He is with human beings wherever they are. He explains that the word “*ma‘a*” (with) does not necessarily mean that a person is with another person physically because it can also contain a non-physical sense, which is in agreement with the views of the Qur’ān exegetes and the Sufis. To them, God’s essence and His knowledge are analysed differently. His essence is not in this world because this world is the locus of the manifestation of His essence. In other words, this world is not His essence, but His essence manifests in this world via His creation, which is the locus and shadow of His essence.²⁷ This distinction is important to preserve God’s transcendence while preserving His permanence in this world. For al-Rānīrī, the Wujūdiyyah’s view is heretical because they equate the world with God’s essence.

Looking at Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statement regarding this verse, we find some hints to the Wujūdiyyah’s position. He says,

Hence God does not move a servant from place to place in order that [the servant] might see Him, but rather “so that He might cause him to see of His Signs” (Qur’an 41:53, etc.) those that were unseen by him. He said: “*Glory be to Him Who made His servant journey one night from the Sacred Place of Worship to the Furthest Place of Worship, whose surroundings We have blessed so that We might cause him to see of Our Signs!*” (Qur’an 17:1) And similarly, when God moves [any] servant through his [inner spiritual] states in order also to cause him to see His Signs, He moves him through *His* states. . . . [i.e., God] says: “I only made him journey by night in order that he see the Signs, not (to bring him) to Me: because no place can hold Me and the relation of all places to Me is the same. For I am such that [only] ‘the heart of My servant, the man of true faith, encompasses Me,’ so how could he be ‘made to journey to Me’ while I am ‘with him wherever he is?!’” (Qur’an 57:4)²⁸

7. To Allah belong the east and the west: Whithersoever ye turn, there is the presence of Allah.” (2:115)

²⁵ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Fatḥ al-Mubīn*, 20.

²⁶ There is a slight difference in the wording according to Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb bad’ al-khalq, bāb mā jā’ fī qawl Allāh ta‘ālā: wa huwa al-dhī yabda’ al-khalq thumma yu‘īduh.

²⁷ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Fatḥ al-Mubīn*, 21.

²⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, trans. William C. Chittick and James W. Morris (New York: Pir Press, 2002), 1:208–09.

For al-Rānīrī, the apparent meaning of this verse is as follows: “For God is the ownership of the east and the west. Thus, wherever you put forward your face, there is God’s essence.”²⁹ The Wujūdiyyah Sufis interpret this verse to mean that “wheresoever you face there is God who exists in this world. Thus, the one facing and the one made to face are God Himself!”

According to al-Rānīrī, this is heresy and is against the meaning given by the Qur’ān interpreters and the Sufis, who regarded this verse as part of the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) of the Qur’ān, which require *ta’wīl*. Still, the *ta’wīl* has to agree with the apparent verses of the Qur’ān. Al-Rānīrī asserts,

The meaning of God’s face is a thing which is made by God because nothing is created except by God. Thus, whoever sees God’s attributes upon everything stands on his own and is the one who sees God’s face in everything. Know that no one faces anything but creation itself and each creation is God’s locus of manifestation and His shadow. It is this existence that is apparent on each of the faces. Thus, everything is His locus of manifestation. This is what is clear by God’s face.³⁰

Thus, according to al-Rānīrī, God’s shadow and manifestation are on the world. The meaning of the verse is then clear, i.e., God’s face is only a shadow of God. The shadow is not God nor is it what is reflected in God’s essence.³¹

Ibn al-‘Arabī says, “Now the Truly Real (*al-Haqq*) is the Vision (*basar*) of the world, and He is the Seer (*al-Rā’ī*) [in the ‘mirror’ of all contingent things] . . . and everything that appears is a sign pointing to the Seer, Who is the Truly Real: so reflect—and know who you [really] are!”³²

8. Ah indeed! It is He that doth encompass all things! (41:54)

The meaning of this verse is “Surely God encompasses everything” but the Wujūdiyyah Sufis say it means that “God’s existence encompasses the world and is mixed with it. The one doing the encompassing and the one being encompassed are one and inseparable as it is stated in *Kitāb Arba‘īn*: As the diamond is encompassed in stone / Similar is that analogy of you and the King.”³³

²⁹ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Meccan Revelations*, 1:292n101.

³³ This couplet was mentioned in full in *Ḥaqq al-Yaqīn* written by Shams al-Dīn who attributed it to Ḥamzah al-Fanṣūrī. However, he did not mention the title of the work. Therefore, I attributed it to a lost work of al-Fanṣūrī (see Nasir, *Metaphysical Epistemology*, 155). However, after the discovery of the manuscript of *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*,

For al-Rānīrī, this belief is blasphemous and leads to heresy. He comments,

Thus, they mean to say that the diamond is the light of God's essence. . . . They also mean to say that the stone is the world and it is God's essence which enveloped the world, united and mixed with parts of the world. If the stone was crushed into particles, each of them would carry God's light without separation. That is how God is united with this world.³⁴

To refute this view, al-Rānīrī says that there is a difference between the meaning of encompassing and being encompassed by something. The Sufis regard *muḥīṭ* to mean to get something with perfection in its outer and inner. In other words, God is *muḥīṭ* with His essence. His knowledge and power do not deplete even an iota. He is encompassed in the seven layers of heavens and earth because they are His loci of manifestation and His shadow. The light of His Being shines brightly for this is how things came into existence. "For if there had not been *muḥīṭ* of His self-disclosure and His being in everything, the whole world would have not come into existence."³⁵

9. There is not a secret consultation between three, but He makes the fourth among them, - Nor between five but He makes the sixth, - nor between fewer nor more, but He is in their midst, wherever they are. (58:7)

To al-Rānīrī the meaning of this verse is "No three persons whisper but God listens and no five persons whisper but He is the sixth, there is no less and no more than it but He is with them wherever they maybe."

For the Wujūdiyyah Sufis, this verse means the following: "God's Being is united and mixed with the world and it is said that this world is God and God is the world."³⁶

Again the emphasis on God's transcendental essence is made by al-Rānīrī against the views of the Wujūdiyyah. As the Christians became infidels by saying that God was one of the three in their trinitarian theology, so did the Wujūdiyyah by alleging that God in His essence is the third, fourth or fifth, as stated in the above verse.

Ibn al-'Arabī says regarding this verse,

If there is one, He is its second, for He is with it. Thus bringing together becomes manifest through Him, so He is "He-Who-Brings-Together". As for what is greater than one, He is with the totality, but without this being voiced. In other words, it is not said that He is the third of three [5:73].

we have found the work from which this couplet was taken, i.e., *Kitāb al-Arba'īn* written by al-Fanṣūrī.

³⁴ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 23-24.

³⁵ Ibid., 24.

³⁶ Ibid., 25.

Rather, it is said that He is “the third of two,” “the fourth of three,” and “the fifth of four.” After all, He is not of the same kind as that to which He is being ascribed in any sense, for *Nothing is as His likeness, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing* [42:11].³⁷

This statement of Ibn al-‘Arabī helps clarify what is meant by the verse according to his school of thought. It also helps us to see that the Wujūdiyyah Sufis were mistaken in interpreting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings, as the above statement concurs with al-Rānīrī’s position in refuting the Wujūdiyyah.

10. We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it; He was indeed unjust and foolish. (33:72)

According to the Wujūdiyyah, trust (*amānah*) mentioned in this verse means that God put His Being upon the whole world, thus uniting with His Self. However, al-Rānīrī explains how Sufis and Qur’ān exegetes interpreted this verse to mean that all creations of God, including the angels and the animals that move and fly above the earth, declined to carry the burden of this trust because they were afraid that they would not be able to carry it. However, the weak human agreed to bear this trust due to his obstinate nature though he was not able to carry it perfectly.

The word “trust” has many meanings including everything that is commanded by God, the responsibility put upon by God’s orders, the love of God, and forgetting everything that does not relate to Him. To the Sufis, trust refers to accepting God’s luminescence (*fayz*) and self-disclosure (*tajallī*). “This is the locus of the manifestation of God’s divine names and His attributes.”³⁸

For Ibn al-‘Arabī, trust means fighting against the self to acquire God’s divine names in becoming God’s representative (*khalīfat Allāh*). This happens via adapting oneself to the noble traits of God (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). Ibn al-‘Arabī holds that “this *amāna* is to be compared to the necessarily hidden role of the *umanā*, the repositories of the divine secret God has entrusted to men.”³⁹ This interpretation does not support the Wujūdiyyah’s understanding of the verse. The emphasis on trust is different from the Wujūdiyyah’s emphasis on the concept of disclosure (*tajallī*).

³⁷ William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 179.

³⁸ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 26.

³⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabi, *Meccan Revelations*, 2:209n245.

11. They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord: of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you (O men!). (17:85)

The Wujūdiyyah Sufis take this verse to mean the following: “Say O Muḥammad that the spirit is from the form of my God and He does not give you knowledge but a little.”⁴⁰ According to al-Rānīrī, this view of the Wujūdiyyah is similar to the teachings found in the book *Asrār al-‘Arifīn*.⁴¹

Ibn al-‘Arabī has a lot to say regarding this and another verse “And We have blown into him of My spirit” (15:29). He says,

As for our words, “the spirit of the *yā’*,” by this we mean God’s words, *I have blown into him of My spirit* [15:29] employing the *yā’* of ascription to Himself. He calls attention to the station of bestowing eminence. He is saying, “You are eminent in root—do not perform the acts of the vile.”⁴²

He does not mean it in the pantheistic sense at all. The Wujūdiyyah Sufis are mistaken when they interpret the verse “I breathe into Adam’s form My spirit” to mean that God’s spirit united with the spirit of Adam, holding that “God united with and entered into Adam and thus all His creatures exist with God’s Being.”⁴³ This is not the meaning understood by Ibn al-‘Arabī as we can see in his quotation above.

Al-Rānīrī explains the meaning of the Spirit (*rūḥ*) of God and the spirit of the human being in detail. He mentions the views of many Sufi authors such as al-Qushayrī, Ibn al-‘Arabī and his commentators, refuting the Wujūdiyyah’s position. The detailed refutation indicates that this was one of the most controversial issues among the populace of Acheh at that time.

Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets the verse that mentions the *rūḥ* as God’s command as follows:

The spirit from the command is His words, *They will ask thee about the spirit*, that is, from whence it has become manifest. It was said to him, *Say: the spirit is from the command of my Lord* [17:85]. Hence, this was not a question about whatness, as some have supposed, for they did not ask, “What is the Spirit?” Although it is plausible for them to question in this manner, the sense that we have maintained is supported by the answer: *From the command of my Lord*. He did not say, “The spirit is such and such.”⁴⁴

To Ibn al-‘Arabī, the important thing regarding the verse is to identify the origin of the spirit “from whence it has become manifest.”

⁴⁰ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faḥ al-Mubīn*, 27.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 278.

⁴³ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faḥ al-Mubīn*, 28.

⁴⁴ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, 278.

The issue of what is the spirit is of secondary importance. However, many other commentators, like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, have concentrated on its whatness.⁴⁵

Some commentators of Ibn al-'Arabī tend to explain the spirit in a way similar to the Wujūdiyyah's explanation of it, i.e. God being mixed with creation. Michel Chodkiewicz observes when explaining the end of the spiritual ascension (*mi'rāj*) as follows:

At the end of this *mi'rāj*, man is reduced to the indestructible divine secret (*sirr ilāhī*) which was lodged in him at the beginning of time by the breath of the Spirit (*nafkh al-rūḥ*) breathed into Adam's clay. "Then," says Ibn al-'Arabī in his *Kitāb al-Isrā'*, "the even and the odd come together, He is and you are not. . . . And He sees Himself through Himself."⁴⁶

However, one should note that the seeing of Himself through Himself need not necessarily be from a pantheistic viewpoint because man has been given the spirit from a divine place. The point of contention here is "Himself" as if a man becomes divine by having the spirit from the divine. However, one can argue that at the point of spiritual ascension, man's individuality is destroyed or effaced and what is left is the spirit which came from the divine. There is no man at that moment but only the divine. Only then "He sees Himself through Himself." By accepting this position, one can reconcile between the two views and avoid the trap of pantheism.

12. Verily those who plight their fealty to thee do no less than plight their fealty to Allah: the Hand of Allah is over their hands. (48:10)

Al-Rānīrī holds that the Wujūdiyyah make God to be like a man who prostrate like themselves. For them, God has two legs and two hands, relying on the Prophetic tradition, "Surely, God created Adam in His image."⁴⁷ Furthermore, the Wujūdiyyah quote *Mir'āt al-Muḥaqqiqīn* (Mirror of the Verifiers),⁴⁸ written by Shams al-Dīn al-Sūmaṭrā'ī. This book mentions that the Black Stone (*al-Ḥajar al-Aswad*) in Mecca is God's right hand on the earth. Al-Rānīrī regards such explanations to be heretical and those who believe in them to be outside the fold of Islam.⁴⁹

In his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Ibn al-'Arabī holds that the hand of Allah refers to the apparent meaning that refers to the locus of the

⁴⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, comments on 17:85.

⁴⁶ Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 169.

⁴⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-isti'dhān, bāb bad' al-salām; Al-Rānīrī, *al-Fatḥ al-Mubīn*, 41ff.

⁴⁸ For a brief outline of the text, see Van Newvenhuijze, *Samsu'l Din van Pasai* (Leiden: Brill, 1945), 299.

⁴⁹ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Fatḥ al-Mubīn*, 41.

manifestation of His Prophet who is His greatest name (*al-ism al-a'zam*).⁵⁰ The phrase “upon their hands” refers to God’s will manifested in the hands of His Prophet. However, the attribution of this exegesis to Ibn al-‘Arabī has been contested by some scholars.

13. It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah: when thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not thy act, but Allah’s. (8:17)

To al-Rānīrī, this verse means that “it is not the companions who killed the Quraysh but it was God who killed them, and it is not you who threw that piece of earth to them but surely it was God who threw it.”⁵¹ The wrong meaning propagated by the Wujūdiyyah is as follows: “It was not you who fired the arrow O Muhammad, but it was God and firing the arrow is true.”

Ibn al-‘Arabī comments on this verse,

No one in the cosmos brings together opposites except the Folk of God specifically, because He whom they have realized is He who brings together opposites, and through Him the gnostics know. For *He is the First and the Last, the manifest and the Nonmanifest* in respect of One Entity and one relationship, not in respect of two diverse relationships. Hence they have departed from rational categories, and rational faculties cannot delimit them. Or rather, they are the Divine Ones, the Verifiers, whom the Real has verified in what He has given them to witness. Hence, they are and they are not. *You did not throw when you threw, but God threw [8:17]* so God affirmed and He denied.⁵²

Ibn al-‘Arabī denies the making of lordship and servanthood together or making God into creation and creation into God, i.e., pantheism. For him, this is an illusion.

The ultimate illusion is for a person to bring together Lord and servant through *wujūd* [Being/existence], for that does not bring them together. For I do not mean by “that which brings together” the ascription of words. I only mean the attribution of a meaning to one of the two in exactly the same sense as it is attributed to the other. But this is not found in the *wujūd* which is attributed to the Lord and the *wujūd* attributed to the servant. For the *wujūd* of the Lord is His own Entity, while the *wujūd* of the servant is a property which the servant is judged to possess. In respect to his entity, the servant may exist or may not exist, but the definition of his entity is the same in the two cases.

⁵⁰ Muḥyī ‘l-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001), 255.

⁵¹ Al-Rānīrī, *al-Faṭḥ al-Mubīn*, 46.

⁵² William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problems of Religious Diversity* (New York: State University of New York, 1994), 64.

Since the *wujūd* of the servant is not his own entity, and since the *wujūd* of the Lord is identical with Himself, the servant should stand in a station within which no whiffs of Lordship are smelt from him. For to have lordship would be falsehood and ignorance itself, so its possessor would not gain the station of servitude, though in fact he is a servant. . . . However, others might ascribe lordship to this servant, because of the effects of it which they see becoming manifest from him. But this belongs to God, not to him. And in himself he is different from that which he makes manifest to the cosmos.”⁵³

Conclusion

The study concludes that the Wujūdiyyah Sufis of the seventeenth-century Aceh interpreted some Qur’ānic verses in a pantheistic sense. However, their interpretations were contrary to the teachings of Muḥyī ‘l-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī. He did not teach pantheism nor should his statements be interpreted as pantheistic. However, some interpreters of Ibn al-‘Arabī did explain them in a pantheistic sense because they failed to comprehend his magnum opus *Meccan Revelations* in its entirety.

Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī attempted to correct many ideas of the Wujūdiyyah Sufis. However, he might have over-generalized in alleging that their teachings had their origins in the teachings of Ḥamzah al-Fanṣūrī and Shams al-Dīn al-Sūmaṭrā’ī, a postulate discussed elsewhere.⁵⁴ This means that a deviant Sufi group already existed when al-Rānīrī came to Aceh after the demise of al-Sūmaṭrā’ī in 1630. The next Shaykh al-Islām, ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf Singkel (d. 1693) defended al-Fanṣūrī and al-Sūmaṭrā’ī and held that the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, which he found in Aceh, were different from the teachings taught by established teachers in Mecca and Medina.⁵⁵ This can open up new vistas of research in the study of the different interpretations of the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī in premodern Aceh.

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⁵³ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 324.

⁵⁴ Mohamad Nasrin Mohamad Nasir, “Analisis Penghujahan al-Raniri dalam Kitab Fathul Mubin ala al-Mulhidin terhadap Golongan Wujudiah” [An Analysis of the Arguments of al-Raniri in His Book *A Clear Victory over the Heretical Wujūdiyyah*], *Malay Literature* 33, no. 1 (2020): 21-44.

⁵⁵ See his *Tanbīh al-Māsyī: Menyoal Wahdatul Wujud Kasus Abdurrauf Singkel di Aceh Abad 17* [Questioning Oneness of Being in the Seventeenth-century Aceh], ed. Oman Fathurrahman (Bandung: Mizan, 1999).