

AL-TUḤFA AL-MURSALA ILĀ RŪH AL-NABĪ AS THE SOURCE OF THE DOCTRINE SEVEN GRADES OF BEING IN THE MALAY-INDONESIAN ARCHIPELAGO

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Abstract:

The ‘doctrine of the seven grades’ or *martabat tujuh* is a popular Sufi teaching. It originated in early seventeenth-century India and was later introduced in Aceh and gained considerable popularity among the Malay Sufis. Despite its wide acceptance in Sufi circles, *martabat tujuh* seems incompatible with Islam and its strict belief in a transcendent God. The purpose of this article is to examine the history of the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* as the source text of this doctrine and to establish its authenticity as a legitimate source of Sufi thought in Southeast Asia. Based on detailed document analysis, the study found that its original purpose was to correct misconceptions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *waḥdat al-wujūd*. The text is attributed to Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, an eminent Sufi scholar living in the seventeenth century. The *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* and its commentaries are an important source for the study of Sufi thought in the archipelago and the doctrine of *martabat tujuh*.

Keywords: *Al-Tuḥfa al-Mursala; Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri; Ibn ‘Arabī; Martabat Tujuh; Unity of Being*

A. Introduction

One of the most controversial doctrines of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) in the region of the Malay Archipelago¹ has been the doctrine of the seven grades or echelons of being (*martabat tujuh*).² This doctrine is explained in many religious works produced by Malay scholars and has its own place in traditional Islamic literature (*kitāb Jawi*). *Martabat tujuh* dominated Sufi thought from the seventeenth century onwards. Originally from the Muslim subcontinent, it soon spread to the archipelago due to its popularity in Sufi circles and the efforts of the Malay scholars who accepted the doctrine.

¹ The Malay Archipelago was formerly known as the East Indies and includes East Malaysia, Indonesia, New Guinea, and the Philippines. Principal islands include the Greater Sunda Islands (Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and Celebes).

² The original Arabic term is *al-marātib al-sab‘*.

Examining the regional history of Sufism since the thirteenth century, we can identify two opposing trends: orthodox Sufism and speculative Sufism. Generally, speculative Sufism was more popular than orthodox Sufism among the Muslims in Nusantara. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, speculative Sufism was firmly established in Malay mysticism. It is in the early seventeenth century that we first encounter the doctrine of *martabat tujuh*.³ The evidence shows that this doctrine first appeared in Aceh, situated in the northern part of Sumatera, and from there it was disseminated to other parts of the archipelago.

Of the four leading Sufi scholars who lived in the early and mid-seventeenth century, three were from Sumatra: Hamzah Fansuri (d.c.1590), Shamsuddin of Pasai⁴ (d.1630), and 'Abdul Ra'uf of Singkil (1615–1693), while the fourth, Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d.1658), was originally from Gujarat, India. The exact dates of Hamzah Fansuri are unknown. He is generally believed to have flourished between 1550 and 1600 and authored many philosophical works and poetry. Unfortunately, only some of his works have survived today, most of them on metaphysical Sufism and heavily leaning on Ibn 'Arabī's unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). Some consider his work merely a rehash of Ibn 'Arabī's original ideas but adapted to a Malay audience, and there is no doubt that he drew much inspiration from them. His prose work *Asrār al-Ārifīn* (Secrets of the Knowers) contains some of his own poems, very much likely modeled on Ibn 'Arabī's *Tarjumān al-Āshwāq* (Translation of Desires), the *Lama'āt* (Divine Flashes) of Farid al-Din al-'Iraqi, and the *Lawā'ih* (Efulgences of Light) of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jami. Fansuri's *Sharāb al-Āshiqīn* (The Lovers' Beverage) is considered the earliest Malay work on philosophical Sufism, as well as the earliest complete work in prose. His collected poems are known as *Syair* or *Ruba'i Hamzah Fansuri*, but are also named *Syair Burung Pingai*, *Syair Sidang Faqir*.⁵

Returning to our discussion of seventeenth-century scholars in Sumatra, Fansuri lived a few decades before Shamsuddin of Pasai who died in 1630. His full name was Shamsuddin b. 'Abdullah of Pasai (d.1630) and served the Acehnese court under 'Alauddin Riayat Shah al-Mukammil (r.1589–1604) and Iskandar Muda (r.1607–1636). He may indeed have been the Muslim 'archbishop' with whom the English sea captain

³ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia. Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Southeast Asia Publications Series (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 124, 136.

⁴ Also known under the name Shamsuddin al-Sumatrani.

⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 1970), 178; Anthony H. Johns, "Islamization in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations with Special Reference to the Role of Sufism," *Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1993): 43–61. <https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/56487/1/KJ00000131747.pdf>.

James Lancaster negotiated in 1603.⁶ Shamsuddin probably served as foreign minister to Iskandar Muda until he died in 1630. The Arabic and Malay works attributed to him include *Jawhar al-Ḥaqā'iq* (Jewel of True Realities), *Nūr al-Daqā'iq* (The Light of Exactitudes), *Tanbīh al-Ṭullāb* (Advice to Students), *Mir'āt al-Ḥaqīqah* (Mirror of True Reality), and *Sharḥ Ruba'i Hamzah Fansuri* (Commentary on the Quatrains of Hamzah Fansuri).⁷

Nur al-Din al-Raniri served as *Shaykh al-Islam* of Aceh 1637–1644, before leaving for his hometown Ranir in India where he died in 1658. A contemporary as well as an adversary of Shamsuddin, Raniri is also known to have adopted the *martabat tujuh* doctrine. He is counted among those Sufis who taught the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and incorporated this system in some of his works, such as *Ma'rifat al-Sanīya* (Knowledge of the Majesty), *Jawāhir al-'Ulūm fī Kashf al-Ma'lūm* (Pearl of Knowledge to Uncover the Truth), and *Ḥill al-Zill* (The Exposition of the Shadow).⁸

Another Sufi scholar who employed the system in his writings was 'Abdul Ra'uf al-Singkili who served under four Acehnese queens in the second half of the seventeenth century. Among his books discussing the system of *martabat tujuh* and other principles related to *waḥdat al-wujūd* are *Daqā'iq al-Ḥurūf* (Subtleties of the Letters), *Kifāyat al-Muḥtaḥin* (The Contentment of the Needy), *Bayān al-Ḥlāq* (Exposition on the Application), and *Risālat al-A'yān al-Thābita* (Epistle on the Fixed Entities).⁹

Among these four figures, Shamsuddin of Pasai, Nur al-Din al-Raniri, and 'Abdul Ra'uf are known to have quoted from the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* and adopted the system of the seven grades (*martabat tujuh*), after Shamsuddin. According to Johns, Shamsuddin began his career as a Muslim scholar in 1601 while serving in the royal court of Sultan Alauddin Riayat Shah. Because he is known to have died in 1630, the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* must have already been known in Aceh, although the precise date of its introduction

⁶ Johns, "Islamization in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations with Special Reference to the Role of Sufism,"... 169.

⁷ Christoffel A.O. van Nieuwenhuijze, *Samsu 'L-Din van Pasai: Bijdrage Tot de Kennis Der Sumatraanche Mystiek* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1945), 234–45; Anthony H. Johns, "Nur Al-Daka'ik By the Sumatran Mystic Shamsu l-Din Ibn Abdullah," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, (1953): 131–53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25222649>.

⁸ Abdul Rahman Abdullah, *Pemikiran Umat Islam Di Nusantara* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1990), 156.

⁹ Wan Muhammad Saghir, *Khazanah Karya Pusaka Asia Tenggara*, vol. 2 (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Fathaniyah, 1991), 93–96, 110–12, 112–13, 117–23; Anthony H. Johns, "Daka'ik Al-Huruf by Abdul Rauf of Singkel," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, (1955): 55–73, 139–58. <https://www.scribd.com/document/425766864/Abd-Al-Rauf-Dakaik-Al-huruf>; Faudzinaim Badaruddin, "Peranan Kitab Jawi Tasawuf Sebagai Medium Transmisi Ilmu Islam Kepada Masyarakat Melayu Nusantara," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 19–26. doi:[10.24035/ijit.01.2012.003](https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.01.2012.003).

cannot be ascertained.¹⁰ This piece of information, nevertheless, allows us to date its arrival with more certainty. According to Riddell, Shamsuddin wrote his *Mir'āt al-Mu'minīn* (Mirror of the Believers) during the reign of Alauddin Riayat Shah in 1601. It contains the core of his monistic teachings in which he explains the system of the seven grades of being.¹¹ Thus, we can conclude that concept of *martabat tujuh* was already known in Aceh as early as 1601 and later gained popularity in Sumatera and Java.

B. The *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* in the Malay World

As far as the available textual evidence permits, the system of *martabat tujuh* in the Malay Archipelago was introduced by the Indian Sufi scholar, Muhammad bin Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri (1545–1620) who wrote *Al-Tuḥfa al-Mursala ila Rūḥ al-Nabī* (The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet).¹² It occupied an important position in the development of Sufi thought in the region ever since it was introduced, although the exact date of its appearance is still uncertain.

Johns suggests that the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was written as early as 1590.¹³ It could have then been carried to the Malay world in the following pilgrimage season. Gujarat and other ports of call such as Surat were only one or two monsoon seasons away from Aceh, the area in which it was first mentioned.¹⁴ It is also suggested that the author, Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, traveled himself to Aceh and established his own circle of students and followers.¹⁵ Although it is plausible that the author introduced his work in

¹⁰ Anthony H. Johns, "Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra'uf of Al-Singkili," in *Spectrum: Essays Presented to S. Takdir Alisjahbana on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Udin S. (Jakarta: Dian Rakyat, 1978), 476.

¹¹ Peter Riddell, *Transferring a Tradition: Abd Al-Ra'uf Al-Singkili's Rendering Into Malay of the Jalalayn Commentary*, Monograph 31 (California: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies University of California at Berkeley, 1990), 7.

¹² Anthony H. Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet* (Canberra: Australia National University, 1965), 8; Johns, "Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra'uf of Al-Singkili," 476; Anthony H. Johns, "Muslim Mystics and Historical Writings," in *Historians of South East Asia*, ed. D. G. E. Hall (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Ade Fakhri Kurniawan, "Konsep 'Awalim 'Abd Allah Bin 'Abd Al-Qahhar Al-Bantani Dalam Diskursus Wujudiyah Di Nusantara," *Al-Qalam* 28, no. 3 (January 31, 2019): 419–48, <https://doi.org/10.32678/alqalam.v28i3.1060>; Matussein Haji Jumat, "The Doctrine of Wahdatul Wujud: The Issue of Contamination of the Study of Islamic Sufism with Greek Philosophy," *Journal of Social Transformation and Regional Development* 2, no. 3 (2020): 214–21. <https://publisher.uthm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/jstard/article/view/8028>.

¹³ Anthony H. Johns, "Islamization in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations with Special Reference to the Role of Sufism,"... 52.

¹⁴ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 10.

¹⁵ Aliefya M. Santri, "Martabat (Alam) Tujuh: Satu Naskah Mistik Islam Dari Desa Karang, Pamijahan," in *Warisan Intelektual Islam Indonesia*, ed. Ahmad Rifai Hasan (Bandung: Mizan, 1987),... 107.

Aceh himself, it is not very likely. The fact that the name of Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri is not mentioned by Raniri in his *Bustān al-Salāṭin* (The Garden of Kings) and other works written at the time seems to indicate otherwise.

In addition, Drewes points out that Ibrahim al-Kurani (1615–1690) composed a commentary on the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* for *Jawi* students (Javanese students), as instructed to do so by his *shaykh*, Ahmad al-Qushashi (1583–1661). Since the latter died in 1661, the commentary must have been written some time before that, although the exact date cannot be ascertained. Nevertheless, the fact that the work required a commentary supposes that it was already widely known and studied. Thus, the assumption that the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was already known in Aceh in the author’s lifetime, that is by 1619 or earlier, cannot be rejected outright.¹⁶

The *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* is a rather short and eclectic treatise focusing on the basic ideas of the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), a doctrine closely associated with Ibn ‘Arabī. Like many of his followers, Burhanpuri begins his treatise by identifying reality with being, whereby Allah manifests Himself (*tajallī*) in six stages of manifestation. This first stage is that of non-determination (*lā ta’ayyun*) or oneness (*aḥādīya*). Burhanpuri maintains that ‘being’ at this stage is unknowable and inconceivable by the human mind. The six stages of manifestation that proceed from it are unity (*waḥda*), oneness (*waḥidīya*), realm of the souls (*‘ālam al-arwāḥ*), realm of similitudes (*‘ālam al-mithāl*), realm of the bodies (*‘ālam al-ajsām*), and realm of the person who has reached perfection (*‘ālam al-insān al-kāmil*).¹⁷

It seems that the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was known in the scholarly circles of Mecca and Medina, as indicated by the fact that Ibrahim al-Kurani mentions the name of its author, Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri, in his *Ithāf al-Zakī* (A Presentation to the Discerning), a commentary on the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala*.¹⁸ He provides some biographical information on Fadlullah and his teachers, establishing the former’s credentials as a religious scholar and teacher.¹⁹ According to Risvi, Burhanpuri visited Mecca and Medina, which helped not only to popularize his work but also to increase the representation of the Chishti order.²⁰

However, it is not clear to what extent his work was known or how it was welcomed by the community of scholars in Mecca and Medina, and other centers of

¹⁶ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 8.

¹⁷ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 8.

¹⁸ Oman Fathurahman, “Ithāf Al-Dhakī by Ibrāhīm Al-Kūrānī: A Commentary of Waḥdat Al-Wujūd for Jāwī Audiences,” *Archipel* 81, no. 1 (2011): 177–98, <https://doi.org/10.3406/arch.2011.4274>.

¹⁹ Saiyid Athar Abbas Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1983), 343.

²⁰ Johns, “Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra’uf of Al-Singkili,”... 480.

Islamic learning. According to Chodkiewicz,²¹ the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was translated into Persian and Turkish and has provoked numerous commentaries by Ottoman scholars like that of ‘Abd al-Ghani b. Isma‘il al-Nablusi (1640–1730), a *hadith* scholar and *shaykh* in the Naqshabandi–Qadiri order entitled *Nukhabāt al-Mas’alah Sharḥ al-Tuḥfa al-Mursala* (...) ²² and ‘Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Ali al-Duri al-Suwaydi (d.1786) entitled *al-Ḥujūb al-Musbala* (...).²³

The *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was also read in the circle of the Emir ‘Abdul Qadir in Damascus and among the disciples of ‘Abd al-Rahman Illaysh in Cairo.²⁴ The popularity of the work continued during the eighteenth century. Many Malay scholars and authors in the period like ‘Abdul Samad of Palembang,²⁵ Muhammad Nafis of Banjar²⁶ as well as Daud of Fatani²⁷ referred to it. Thus, judging from its wide circulation, it is safe to conclude that it was held in high esteem by Muslim scholars.

The popularity of the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* and the high esteem in which it was held in Malay Sufi circles is reflected in the comments of Mustafa al-Hamawi, a disciple of Ibrahim al-Kurani, in his biographical dictionary, *Fawā'id al-Irtihāl wa Natā'ij al-Safar* (The Profits of Travel and the Gains of Journeying). According to al-Hamawi, he met Ibrahim al-Kurani and became his disciple in 1675.²⁸ The dictionary provides revealing insights, not only into the close relationship between Ibrahim al-Kurani and his *Jawi* students but also into the popularity of the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* in Mecca and Medina as

²¹ Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn Arabi’s Doctrine,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 9 (1991): 46. <https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-diffusion-of-ibn-arabis-doctrine-michel-chodkiewicz/>.

²² Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*,... 2: 343.

²³ Abdullah, *Pemikiran Umat Islam Di Nusantara*,... 154.

²⁴ Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn Arabi’s Doctrine,”... 46.

²⁵ A well-known Palembang scholar, *Shaykh* Abdul Samad b. Abdullah, for instance, mentions Shamsuddin of Pasai and ‘Abdul Ra’uf of Singkel in one of his own books, *Sā'ir al-Sālikin ila 'Ibādāt Rabb al-Ālamīn*. It is plausible that he had studied Shamsuddin’s *Jawhar al-Haqā'iq* and ‘Abdul Ra’uf’s *Umdat al-Muḥtājīn fī Sulūk Maslak al-Mufarriḍīn* while he was in Aceh, judging from his familiarity with their contents. ‘Abdul Samad al-Jawi al-Palimbani, *Sair Al-Salikin Ila 'Ibadat Rabb Al- Alamin*, vol. 4 (Cairo, 1953), 176–84.

²⁶ A well-known Malay Sufi *shaykh*, Muhammad Nafis b. Idris b. Husayn of Banjar. He wrote *al-Durr al-Nafis fī Bayān Waḥdat al-Afāl wa-l-Asmā'* and *Majmū' al-Asrār*. He was born in 1735 in Martapura into the Banjar royal family. Muhammad Nafis b. Idris Al-Banjari, *Al-Durrul-Nafis Fi Bayani Wahidati'l-Afal Wa'l-Asma'i Wa'l-Sifati Wa'l-Dhat* (Penang: al-Mḡarif, n.d.); H.M. Laily Mansur, *Kitab Ad-Durun Nafis: Tinjauan Atas Suatu Ajaran Tasawuf* (Banjar: Hasanu, 1982).

²⁷ He was a renowned Malay scholar in the early nineteenth century and wrote close to sixty books. His contributions to the religious education and intellectual life of the Malays were many, although he lived most of life in Mecca. Fauzainaim Badaruddin, *Manhal Al-Safi: Text and Translation* (Bangi: Department of Theology and Philosophy, 2006).

²⁸ Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Melayu Abad XVII Dan XVIII* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995), 120.

well as in Nusantara. Here, it was used as a beginner's text taught to the young students who memorized its content. Al-Hamawi states:

“Our Shaykh ... Ibrahim al-Kurani told me that one of our *Jawi* companions—he was reading the *Tuḥfa* with him at that time, and we were present—informed him that this treatise and matters it treats were popular and famous in the lands of *Jawi*, and that it is read in their religious schools, and that youths study it as a minor treatise on the rudiments of their studies. And every reasonable minded man knows that this could only have happened by its dedication to the Prophet, and the author's (pious) intention, otherwise the best of the Sufi doctors would have rejected it, any more their followers, nay more their general public, nay more even youths at the schools. But when God desires good for one of His servants, he makes faith loved to him and makes both it and those things conducive to it, attractive to his heart. So just as the child learns the basic doctrines and obligations of religion by imitation without understanding them fully, but when he becomes an adult, and his mind has developed he perceives their true significance. In precisely the same way if a person is instructed in the great truths of religion when he is a child. When he is an adult, God gives the light to understand them fully, and this he finds easy because he is already familiar with the formulations of them that he has learned by heart.”²⁹

In addition, in his introduction to his commentary, *Ithāf al-Zakī bi-Sharḥ al-Tuḥfa al-Mursala ila Rūh al-Nabī* (A Presentation to the Discerning in Explanation of the Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet), Ibrahim al-Kurani himself explains the circumstances leading him to write such a commentary. He writes:

“We have had reliable information from a group of *Jawi* (pl. *Jawiyyin*), that there have spread among the inhabitants of the lands of Jawah some books on Realities (*ḥaqīqah*), and esoteric teachings by men attributed with knowledge because of their study and the teaching of others, but who lack any understanding of the Laws of [Muhammad] the Chosen, the Elect [of God], and even less of an awareness of the knowledge of Realities bestowed upon those who follow God's path, may He be exalted, those brought close to Him, those excellent ones, or those who have entered upon anyone of their paths based on the Book and the *Sunnah* through perfect obedience, outwardly and inwardly[physically and spiritually], as have the devout and pure. This has led many of them to deviate from the right path and given rise to faulty beliefs. They have been attracted to camp in the valleys of unbelief and heresy—we take refuge in God from error and all evil, in selected as in public.”

“Further, these *Jawi* have told me that among the best-known books among them was the compendium entitled the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala ila Rūh al-Nabī* [The Gift Addressed to the Prophet] written by the gnostic of God, may He be exalted, *Shaykh* Muhammad ibn *Shaykh* Fadl Allah al-Hindi al-Burhanpuri, may Almighty God render him of service. And more than one of them has asked my humble self to prepare a commentary upon it to make clear the conformity of the questions[it discusses] to the basic principles of religion, confirmed by the Noble Book, and the *Sunnah* of the Lord of the Apostles, may God's blessings and peace be upon him and upon them and their families all of them, a reply came - hoping that, by leave of God, Lord of the world, it will yield a sound fruit, although my ability to express

²⁹ Johns, “Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra’uf Al-Singkili,” ... 477–78.

myself is slight, and knowing that the communication of what has been beheld to the understanding in an intelligible language in harmony with the Book and the *Sunnah* is a high mountain difficult to climb. But Allah, the Strong, the Mighty, who 'let the two seas flow together, between which had been a barrier they did not overpass' [Qur'an 55:19-20], He is who can raise whomever of His servants He wishes to the meeting point. So what is necessary is to do one's best; it is God from whom help is to be sought, Who is to be asked in words of humility and neediness to give me the grace to give a sufficient explanation, selected from the writings of those successful in unveiling and vision, those who have beheld *al-Haqq* [through His Names] after observing them, by way of perfect obedience, the people of Truth and Devotion, 'Oh Lord, enlarge my breast and make my task lighter, and loosen the knot on my tongue that they may understand my words. "My Lord, give me judgment, and make me with the righteous; and make me well-spoken of among later generations...*Āmīn* [Qur.26:83-84]."³⁰

Johns says that it is impossible to judge how long this practice was continued or how many *Jawi* students al-Kurani had been teaching before he decided to write the commentary. In contrast to this narrative, Drewes maintains that al-Kurani wrote his commentary at the request of his *shaykh*, Ahmad al-Qushashi, although not providing any proof to support this view.³¹ If Drewes' claim is correct, he might have begun writing the commentary before al-Qushashi died in 1661. Furthermore, it is confirmed that al-Kurani had already written the commentary before 1675 because al-Hamawi states that he studied it together with other works such as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḡhūr* (The Small Collection) of al-Suyuti, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) of al-Ghazali, and *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations) of Ibn 'Arabī.³²

Whether he wrote the commentary to comply with his *shaykh's* wishes or at the request of his *Jawi* students, al-Kurani took his responsibility very seriously. He prayed long at the tomb of the Prophet PBUH in Medina asking for guidance. Only once had received a positive answer did he undertake this task.³³ Eventually, what is presented in *Ithāf al-Zakī* is a long presentation on the Islamic mystical interpretation based on the Qur'an and the *Hadith*.³⁴

According to Drewes, it is still uncertain whether the classification of the manifestation of God in seven grades (*martabat tujuh*) was indeed introduced by

³⁰ Johns, "Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra'uf Al-Singkili,"... 479–80.

³¹ G.W.J. Drewes and Anthony H. Johns, "Malay Sufism as Illustrated in an Anonymous Collection of 17th Century Tracts," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* XXX, no. 178 (1957): 283. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40073638>.

³² Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Melayu Abad XVII Dan XVIII*,... 120.

³³ Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Melayu Abad XVII Dan XVIII*,... 121; Johns, "Friends in Grace: Ibrahim Al-Kurani and Abd Al-Ra'uf of Al-Singkili,"... 480.

³⁴ Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Melayu Abad XVII Dan XVIII*,... 120.

Burhanpuri.³⁵ Studying *Jawāhir al-Khamsah* (The Five Gems) written by Muhammad Ghawth, an Indian Sufi scholar and *shaykh* in the Shattari order, Voorhoeve points out that his classification is more or less identical with that found in the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala*. The only difference between the two works is that Muhammad Ghawth does not separate the realm of bodies (*‘ālam al-ajsām*) and the realm of the perfect man (*‘ālam al-insān al-kāmil*).³⁶

According to Voorhoeve, it does not seem likely that the extension from six to seven grades by a division of the two worlds is attributable to Wajih al-Din al-‘Alawi, the *shaykh* of Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri; there is nothing in his works that suggests a treatment of this theme. Thus, it seems more plausible that the author of the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* was indeed the first to promulgate this classification of the seven grades that became known as the *martabat tujuh* in the Malay world.³⁷

It has yet to be determined what made this classification so popular in Nusantara. Likely, the ready acceptance of the *martabat tujuh* as presented in the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* is explained by its simple and straightforward manner. This would explain its steady popularity throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, it had high symbolic appeal because it centered on the number seven, a number that was already highly significant in Islam. Many aspects of the sacred that were observed in Islamic rituals involved this number: the sevenfold circumambulation of the Ka‘ba, the sevenfold stoning of Satan near Mina during the *hajj*, the seven layers of meaning contained in the Qur’an, the seven canonical ways to recite it, the seven gates of Hell, and the seven gates of Paradise.³⁸

C. The *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* in the Indian Subcontinent

Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri does not state his reason for writing the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* which has given rise to various opinions as to his motives. It is obvious that he intended to explain Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) using the *martabat tujuh* system as part of a more orthodox interpretation. Thus, according to Johns, the treatise was written as an attempt on the part of the orthodox Sufi tradition to restrain the extremist tendencies of certain mystical groups in India and elsewhere, and thus protect and defend the core teachings of Islam.³⁹ Johns further notes that it documents “the tension between the orthodox and heterodox wings of Sufism current

³⁵ Drewes and Johns, “Malay Sufism as Illustrated in an Anonymous Collection of 17th Century Tracts,”... 283.

³⁶ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 126.

³⁷ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 127.

³⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (USA: The University of South Carolina Press, 1975), 79.

³⁹ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 5.

throughout the length and breadth of the Muslim world”.⁴⁰ Drewes, however, questions this assumption and writes that:

“It seems a fair question to ask what exactly is meant by ‘the orthodox Sufi tradition,’ which is represented here as some kind of active corporation. Likewise, one would be glad to hear more about these extremist groups our author is supposed to combat since the text contains no specific reference to them. And secondly, on examining the contents of the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* one cannot fail to observe that, apart from several exhortations to keep to the Law, there is very little of the essential elements of Islam in this tract.”⁴¹

Having concluded his argument for rejecting Johns’ claim, he continues that:

“Therefore, I cannot share the editor's conviction [Johns] that the author was prompted by the desire to combat extremist tendencies. His book is a short treatise on Sufi ontology, completely in the vein of thinking of Ibn ‘Arabī and the author of the *insān al-kāmil*, and one gets the impression that the first and foremost incentive for composing it was the author's desire to lay claim to a recognized place for this ontological within the body Islamic. The doctrine was not modified but by stressing the need for keeping within the bounds of the Law the author aimed at making it acceptable (*muwāfiqah*; cf. the title of his commentary on the text) to the people of the orthodox persuasion.”⁴²

Yet, there is another way of solving this issue. Since the *Tuḥfā al-Mursala* was written in the specific cultural and political environment of Muslim India, it seems appropriate to first examine and understand the religious controversies surrounding Sufism in his days, meaning in the second half of the sixteenth century. The Hanbali jurist Khwaja Baqi Billah Berang (1565–1603) and teacher of the Sufi scholar Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624) relentlessly criticized the local Sufis who were, in his view, only observing the external form of *tawḥīd* (i.e., witnessing the oneness of God). Although he was an exponent of the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, he argued that Sufis who busied themselves with external forms were wayward and misled others into believing that the universe was a mere illusion and that the only reality was God. This type of philosophy, the Khwaja asserted, did not reflect the original way (*tañqa*) of the Prophet. The truth, as experienced and formulated by Ibn ‘Arabī, was being grossly misinterpreted and corrupted.⁴³

⁴⁰ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*,... 6.

⁴¹ G.W.J. Drewes, “Nur Al-Din Ar-Raniri’s Charge of Heresy against Hamzah and Shamsuddin from an International Point of View,” in *Cultural Contact and Textual Interpretation*, ed. C.D. Grijns and S.O. Robson (Dordrecht: Foris, 1986), 291.

⁴² Drewes, “Nur Al-Din Ar-Raniri’s Charge of Heresy against Hamzah and Shamsuddin from an International Point of View.”

⁴³ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*,... 2:190.

The religious affairs of the Indian Muslims in the second half of the sixteenth century are best recorded by Ahmad Sirhindi who wrote in his *Maktūbāt* (Epistles):

“The life of the masses was ridden with *shirk* (polytheism) and *bid‘a* (innovation), due, first to their contact with the polytheistic religions and cultures of India. Ignorant to their faith, Muslims participated in the religious rites of the non-Muslims; prayed to their idols and gods for various purposes; women, in particular, sought their protection against diseases such as smallpox. They joined Hindu festivals such as rakhi and Deepavali; celebrated the latter by lighting lamps, cooking rice, and sending it as a present in colored pots to relatives and friends as the Hindus used to do on that occasion. ... The other cause of the religious degeneration of the Muslim masses was the influence of ignorant and misguided Sufis. At their bidding, they made votive offerings (*nadhā*) to saints (*mashayikh*) and offered sacrifices on their graves. Women usually fasted in the name of Sufi teachers, even their wives, and observed various rituals in this connection. ... Those who subscribed to *wahdat al-wujūd* cared little for the *Shāri‘a*. They believed that the goal of the *Shāri‘ah* was to attain knowledge; hence if anyone realized the truth of *wahdat al-wujūd*, he did not have to perform the duties of the *Shāri‘a*. Some of them disparaged *ṣalat* (prayers) because it differentiated between God and the servant; others equated resurrection with the Sufi experience of *fana‘* and denied judgment and punishment. Some even loved to gaze at beautiful faces and hear sweet voices because they were the manifestation of the Eternal Beauty.”⁴⁴

Ahmad Sirhindi referred to these ideas and practices in his letters and denounced them as *shirk* (polytheism), *kufri* (unbelief), and *bid‘a* (innovation). He then urged the Sufi teachers to discard these evil practices and reform their lives.⁴⁵ In connection with the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, Sirhindi explains that the Creator of the World cannot be identified with His creation. Thus, the experience of the unity of being is not an objective but rather a subjective experience. In his journey to God, he says, a Sufi will only experience that he is one with God, but in reality, he is not. In other words, in his rapturous ecstasy, the spiritual seeker gets lost in the object of his love and adoration, feeling as if his self was annihilated. This experience of the annihilation of identity is only a transient state; once he regains consciousness, he finds himself yet again in the state of *‘abdīya* (servitude), which is the *summum bonum* (the supreme good) of the spiritual life of one who believes in the transcendental God.⁴⁶

Hence, according to Sirhindi, the spiritual seeker will then realize that his relation to his Creator is unequivocally that of a slave and his Master, or that of a worshipper and the Worshipped, and never that of a lover and the Beloved, as generally assumed.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Sharjah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi’s Effort to Reform Sufism* (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1986), 20–22.

⁴⁵ Ansari, *Sufism and Sharjah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi’s Effort to Reform Sufism...* 21.

⁴⁶ Yusuf Hussain, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1959), 58.

⁴⁷ Hussain, *Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture...* 58.

Sirhindi also viewed the common understanding of *wahdat al-wujūd* as an expression of an immature spiritual experience and fraught with danger to Muslim society. It facilitated the absorption of non-Islamic ideas and practices which ran counter to the strictly monotheistic teachings of Islam. Therefore, identifying the world with God and equating the worship of any object to worshipping God was entirely wrong.⁴⁸

Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* had been introduced in the subcontinent by Farīd al-Dīn al-'Iraqī (d.1289), a member of the Suhrawardi order.⁴⁹ Many Indian Sufis wrote commentaries on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (The Seals of Wisdom) and *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations). In the fifteenth century, the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī had become increasingly popular in Sufi circles. In the days of Sultan Akbar (r.1556–1605), the doctrine was firmly established among Indian Muslims⁵⁰ but often misinterpreted and heavily criticized.

It was within this context that Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri wrote the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala*. Considering the above, it is very plausible that he wrote this treatise to correct popular misconceptions of *wahdat al-wujūd* within the framework of the seven grades of being. It could very well be that Burhanpuri was a firm supporter of Ibn 'Arabī's unity of being who made it his life's mission to combat the erroneous ideas circulating in the community about Ibn 'Arabī's thought. This would explain why he seems intent on supporting his arguments with the Qur'an and the Sunnah and his strict emphasis on the fundamental principle of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*).

Johns' assumption that the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* documents the tension between the orthodox and heterodox wings of Sufism is thus justified. The fact that there is no specific reference to any extremist group, as argued by Drewes, does not mean, however, that it was not meant to combat extremists who intentionally misinterpreted and misappropriated Ibn 'Arabī's teachings, even if not mentioned by name. First, the doctrine itself was very difficult to understand and bound to cause confusion, as explained by Baqi Bi'llah and Sirhindi in their writings. Second, the treatise is kept concise, strictly limiting the discussion to explaining the main principles of the *wahdat al-wujūd*.

D. Fadlullah al-Burhanpuri

Muhammad bin Fadlullah's family reportedly originated from Jaunpur, and he was born in Gujarat around 1545 or 1546. Not much is known about his early life, except that, according to Risvi, he obtained his spiritual training from a well-known Sufi, Safi of Gujarat, before leaving for Mecca.⁵¹ In Mecca, he studied with a well-known Indian

⁴⁸ Ansari, *Sufism and Sharīah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's Effort to Reform Sufism*,... 107–8.

⁴⁹ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*,... 2:217.

⁵⁰ Hussain, *Glimpes of Medieval Indian Culture*,... 57.

⁵¹ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*... 2: 284.

scholar of the time, ‘Ali al-Muttaqi (c.1480/1–1567) under whom he probably studied traditions (*ḥadīth*), Islamic Law (*fiqh*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*).⁵²

‘Ali al-Muttaqi was recognized during his lifetime as a great Sufi as well as a distinguished scholar of *ḥadīth*. He taught in Mecca where he and his disciple ‘Abdul Wahhab al-Muttaqi (1536/7–1606/7) established their own circle.⁵³ Fadlullah later returned to Ahmadabad where he continued his study of theology and entered several Sufi orders by authority of Wajih al-Din al-‘Alawi, the disciple of the Shattari *shaykh* Muhammad Khatir al-Din, also known as Ghawth al-Hindi (d.1563). Fadlullah later settled in Burhanpur and began teaching there.⁵⁴

Fadlullah increased the influence of the Chishti order while living and teaching in Burhanpur until he died in 1620. According to narration, Fadlullah would repeatedly fall into an ecstatic state, feverishly intent on traveling to Mecca and Medina in that instant, and then reluctantly return when he failed to get a boat. During his lifetime, he managed to visit Mecca and Medina on several occasions. It is also reported that Fadlullah divided his accrued gifts (*futūḥ*) which he received each year into three parts, distributing one part to his family, a second to the dervishes of his *khānqa* (hermitage), and a third among the poor of Medina.⁵⁵

During his lifetime, Fadlullah befriended many well-known scholars and Sufi *shaykhs* who were not only well known in India but also in Mecca and Medina. Among his friends was Sayyid Sibghatullah b. Ruhullah Jamal al-Barwaji (also known as Baroci or Broach in Gujarat),⁵⁶ who is mentioned in the *Hikayat Aceh* (History of Aceh) as living in Mecca and conversing with the pilgrims from Aceh. Sibghatullah was generally known as a Shattari master but was also initiated into the order by Wajih al-Din al-Alawi.⁵⁷ He is believed to be responsible for introducing the *Jawāhir al-Khamsah* (The Five Gems) written by Ghawth al-Hindi and other mystical treatises for the order.

Ahmad al-Qushashi, one of Sibghatullah’s most prominent disciples, reported that his master also initiated disciples into the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Madani, Khalwati,

⁵² Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India...* 2: 284.

⁵³ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India...* 2: 319–25.

⁵⁴ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India...* 2: 284.

⁵⁵ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India...* 2: 284–85.

⁵⁶ Born in Broach, Sayyid Sibghatu'l-Lah is known as the most prominent disciple of *Shaykh* Wajih al-Din Ahmad b. *Shaykh* Nasr Allah Alawi, a famous Shattariyyah master who lived in Ahmadabad. He taught the Shattariyyah doctrines and forms of *dhikr* in his birthplace for several years. In 1591 he embarked on a journey to Mecca to perform his *hajj*. Then he went back to India and travelled to many places before staying in Ahmadabad for a year. In 1596, he again journeyed to Mecca during the *hajj* season and never returned home to India. Instead, he stayed in Medina where he built his own house and a *khanqah*. He continued to stay there where he initiated and taught his disciples until his death in 1606-1607 and was buried at Baqi in Medina. Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India...* 2: 329–30.

⁵⁷ Johns, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet...* 126.

Hamadani, Naqshabandi, and Firdawsi orders, on the authority vested in him by his spiritual master, Wajih al-Din al-‘Alawi. According to Risvi, however, Ahmad al-Qushashi and his disciples were primarily members of the Shattari order, whereas Fadlullah belonged to the Chishti order. Nonetheless, as he was a student of the eminent Sufi master Wajih al-Din al-‘Alawi, it is safe to assume that he was actively involved in the other orders as well and entertained good relations with them.⁵⁸

E. Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion of the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* that this treatise was used to introduce the doctrine of the seven grades of being (*martabat tujuh*) in the Malay Archipelago. It was authored by the eminent Sufi scholar and Chishti master, Muhammad Fadlullah of Burhanpur. The fact that the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* was also known in Medina, read in the circles of Islamic learning, and even given commentary by other scholars of repute indicates its significance as a scholarly work and the relevance of its ideas at the time. Although it was a short text, it quickly gained popularity in Sufi circles and was widely read and taught in Nusantara, for many centuries. Even today, the *Tuḥfa al-Mursala* is still relevant and should be made available to the wider Muslim public. It was originally written to correct the many misinterpretations of Ibn Arabī’s *wahdat al-wujūd* which is still being studied and discussed in our time.

⁵⁸ Risvi, *A History of Sufism in India*,... 2: 330.

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