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The Polygamy of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli: Negotiating Religious Authority and Identity in the Matrilineal Muslim Society of Minangkabau

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Abstract

This study analyzes how Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli (1871–1970) constructed his religious identity and authority through polygamous practices within the Minangkabau matrilineal system in the early 20th century. Using a qualitative-historiographical method, data were collected through documentation and written works of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli. The data were analyzed using Erving Goffman's theoretical framework (social dramaturgy) and Charles Taylor's (authenticity) to reveal the process of identity negotiation. Findings indicate that the interaction between public performance and private negotiation in Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamous practice—with 17 wives—functioned as both a symbol of social prestige and a means of legitimizing religious authority in the public sphere (front stage). Meanwhile, in the private realm (back stage), a transformation occurred from commitment to monogamy toward polygamy as a result of negotiation between personal preferences and social expectations. The combination of Goffman's and Taylor's theoretical frameworks yields a deeper understanding of the construction of religious authority in the context of Islamic and cultural convergence. These findings offer insights into how ulama navigate public and private identities amid social change, while demonstrating the intersection of gender, religion, and culture in societies undergoing value transformation

Keywords: polygamy; religious authority; matrilineal society

Introduction

The construction of religious authority in Islam has undergone significant transformations throughout the twentieth century, particularly through the intersections of religion, gender, and social change (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 105; Mahmood, 2005, p. 152; Schneider, 2016, p. 15). The negotiation of ulama identity endowed with religious authority has unfolded within the context of modernization, colonialism, and shifting socio-political landscapes (R. Abdullah et al., 2015, p. 146; Mawardi, 2022, p. 1063). This negotiation becomes even more dynamic when intersecting with the practice of polygamy, which in many Muslim communities functions not merely as a marital arrangement but as a cultural and religious instrument of legitimacy (Commercio, 2020, p. 15; Krenawi, 2014, p. 131; Paramole & Segun, 2018, p. 119; Rossi, 2019, p. 29). Polygamy constitutes not only a family structure but a site where power configuration embedded in the construction of religious authority are enacted, particularly when practiced by prominent ulama within culturally specific social frameworks in Indonesia (Aziz et al., 2023; Shofa & Chairinisa, 2022; Solikin, 2021; Thabrani & Kusairi, 2024). A historical investigation into this phenomenon reveals how ulama articulate and legitimize their authority through gendered performances that respond to social expectations, cultural positioning, and religious interpretation (Farid & Hidayat, 2021, p. 992; Hasan et al., 2022, p. 7; Mohamad, 1998, p. 8; Muzzammil et al., 2021, p. 129).

Minangkabau society offers a distinct social context for such inquiry due to its two fundamental features: a matrilineal kinship system and the normative adherence to Islamic teachings (T. Abdullah, 1987, p. 127; Agustina, 2024, p. 210). The position of ulama in Minangkabau society reflects a continuous negotiation between adat (customary norms) and Islamic principles (Darwis & Muslim, 2024, p. 803). During the early twentieth century, polygamy was highly prevalent in the region, exceeding the national average, and was considered a marker of social prestige, particularly among ulama (Herlambang, 2020; Sari, 2020; Sari et al., 2021). The matrilocal family system created a unique dynamic, requiring men to rotate between households (Chatra, 2005, p. 5). Within this context, Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's record of seventeen marriages offers a representative case study of how a leading ulama negotiated religious authority and identity through the practice of polygamy.

Previous studies on polygamy have explored its religious, cultural, and authoritative dimensions across various global contexts. These include legal (Archampong, 2010; Chusnayaini, 2017), socio-economic (Becker, 2022; Rossi, 2019), and psychosocial (Krenawi, 2014, 2020). approaches. In Indonesia, polygamy among ulama has been examined in diverse localities such as Java (Duri, 2022; Hakim, 2022), Madura (Afandi et al., 2024; Thabrani & Kusairi, 2024), Aceh (Aziz et al., 2023), and Sulawesi (Alip, 2021; Hamdun & Ridwan, 2020). In Minangkabau, studies have addressed the historiography of polygamy (Sari, 2020;

Sari et al., 2021) and Islamic legal perspectives in conjunction with local customs (Shofa & Chairinisa, 2022). From a gender perspective, scholars have analyzed hegemonic masculinity in marriage structures, including polygamy. One study has also offered a biographical sketch of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli and his polygamous lifestyle (Sarwan & Kurniawan, 2012) Despite these various contributions, a significant gap remains in understanding how polygamy serves as an instrument for constructing religious authority—especially within a matrilineal society. Existing literature tends to separate theological-doctrinal aspects from the performative and dramaturgical dimensions of polygamous practice. Moreover, no study to date has specifically employed Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's case to explore how an ulama negotiates public and private identities through polygamy.

This study fills that gap by integrating Erving Goffman's theory of social dramaturgy (1956) with Charles Taylor's concept of authenticity (1991) to analyze Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamous practice as a performance of identity and a means of constructing religious authority. This framework offers a critical lens for viewing polygamy not merely as a doctrinally permitted practice but as a social performance involving negotiation between public visibility and private motives in the shaping of religious subjecthood (Chriss, 2015; Moors, 1999; Scheff, 2005). In contrast to prior studies that adopt descriptive or normative approaches (Solikin, 2021), this study applies a performative analysis to uncover how ulama navigate social expectations and personal values. A novel contribution of this work is its exploration of Sheikh Sulaiman's transformation from monogamy to polygamy as a form of value realignment. This framework enables the study to explore religious imagery and subject formations (Mahmood, 2005; Mir-Hosseini, 1993) as well as the emergence of ethical landscapes (Hirschkind, 2006) shaped by interactions between religious interpretation and social expectation.

This study aims to analyze how Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli constructed his religious identity and authority. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify the dramaturgical elements within his polygamous practice; (2) explore value transformations and identity negotiations in constructing his religious authority; and (3) analyze the implications of his polygamous practice for the intersections of gender, religion, and authority in Minangkabau society. This research contributes to the broader fields of Islamic history and religious authority by offering insights into how ulama negotiate public and private identities amid social transformations.

Similar to how family law reforms have been studied in Tunisia (Chusnayaini, 2017) Malaysia (Mohamad, 1998) and Morocco (Hursh, 2012), Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamy reflects the complex interaction between Islamic legal tradition, gender relations, and social change. This study provides a deeper understanding of power and gender dynamics within religious contexts and highlights the multifaceted interactions between culture, religion, and

authority in societies experiencing shifting moral landscapes, as seen across various local settings in Indonesia.

Literature Review

The study of polygamy in Islam has evolved through various theoretical approaches. Works by Mir-Hosseini, (1993) and Mahmood (2005) have demonstrated that marriage is deeply shaped by socio-cultural contexts and may offer forms of agency for women. Existing scholarship has explored polygamy from psychosocial, economic, legal, and religious perspectives. In the Indonesian context, a wide range of studies have analyzed polygamy through socio-political, gendered, family law, and psycho-educational lenses. The practice of polygamy among religious scholars has also been investigated across diverse local settings, employing multiple theoretical frameworks.

The matrilineal kinship system adds complexity to the dynamics of polygamous practice. Historical dimensions revealed in other studies indicate a high prevalence of polygamy among the Minangkabau elite (Sari, 2020; Sari et al., 2021). Bahardur et al. (2022) identified polygamy as a practice of hegemonic masculinity within Minangkabau's matrilineal Muslim society. A comparative study by Shofa & Chairinisa (2022) examined the differing views of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli and Buya Hamka on polygamy, while Herlambang (2020) analyzed Hamka's critique of the practice. However, biographical and intellectual studies on Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli—particularly in the fields of political and educational thought (Masnur Al Shaleh et al., 2024; Sarwan & Kurniawan, 2012; Zed et al., 2021; Zulkifli, 2015) have not examined the role of polygamy in shaping his religious authority.
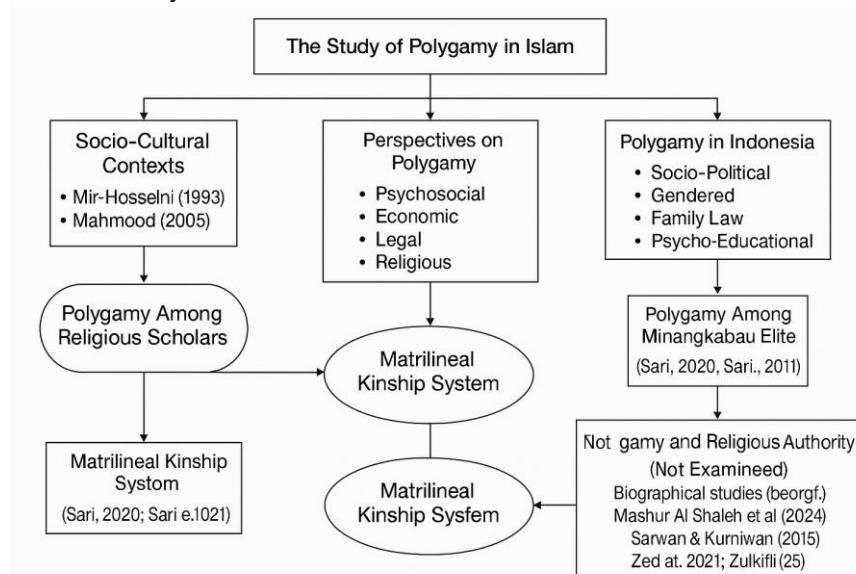

Figure 1. A conceptual framework of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamous

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative-social historiography method to analyze the construction of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's identity as an ulama through the practice of polygamy. Primary data were obtained from documentary sources and written works directly related to Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli and his family. Data selection was based on authenticity, relevance, and representativeness of different periods of his life. Secondary sources include biographies, historical studies on Minangkabau, and previous research on ulama and marital practices within the realm of customary law. The data collection process involved cross-verification of documents to ensure the validity of chronological events and to reconstruct both personal and public narratives (Iggers, 2005, p. 4). The data were analyzed using the theoretical frameworks of Erving Goffman's social dramaturgy and Charles Taylor's theory of authenticity. The analytical stages included: identifying elements of social dramaturgy, exploring the evolution of ideas related to marriage, contextualizing the cultural and historical setting of the early twentieth century, and interpreting the negotiation between personal values and social expectations. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the study applied source triangulation, rigorous document examination, and strict historical contextualization to minimize retrospective bias.

Result

Socio-Historical Context of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli, widely known as *Inyiak Canduang* (the Elder of Canduang), was born and died in Pakan Kamis, Nagari Canduang Koto Laweh, Agam Regency, West Sumatra (10 December 1871 – 1 August 1970) (Zed et al., 2021). Born with the name Muhammad Sulaiman, he was the eldest son of Muhammad Rasul and grandson of Angku nan Pahik, both of whom were prominent religious and customary leaders in Nagari Canduang Koto Laweh prior to his emergence (Noer, 1996, p. 443). At the age of 28, he was bestowed the title *Angku Mudo* (honorable youth) by the community, and at age 31 he received the traditional title *Malin Mangiang* following his first marriage. Later, he earned the honorific *Sheikh* in recognition of his religious stature (Rusli, 1978, p. 9; Zed et al., 2021).

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli played a pivotal role in the development of Islamic scholarship and intellectual tradition in Minangkabau during the early 20th century—a period marked by socio-religious transformations influenced by modernization and colonial rule. The year 1907 was critical, signifying ideological divergences between the *Kaum Tua* (traditionalists) and *Kaum Muda* (modernists), reflecting broader debates on the direction of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago (Latief, 1988, p. 131). That same year, having returned from Makkah in 1903, Sheikh Arrasuli emerged as a central figure in the traditionalist movement,

establishing his intellectual base at Surau Pakan Kamis, Canduang. This institution evolved into a center for Islamic education rooted in the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence, Ash'ari-Maturidi theology, and Ghazalian Sufism (Latief, 1988). He implemented the *halaqah* system (traditional religious pedagogy), focusing on the classical Islamic texts (*turath*) central to *Kaum Tua* thought (Kosim, 2015, p. 39).

Sheikh Sulaiman embodied the ideal social figure in Minangkabau society (Azizi, 2020, p. 51). In the first half of the 20th century, through his roles as a cleric, cultural advocate, educator, literary scholar, and politician, he was appointed as the head of the local chapter of *Sarekat Islam* (SI) Canduang-Baso in 1917—a position he held until the Second Dutch Aggression. His acceptance of this role was strategic, enabling the propagation of Islam and the organization of the Muslim community through *wirid pengajian* (religious study circles) aimed at unifying doctrinal understanding (Zed et al., 2021).

In response to the modernist challenge advocating Islamic purification and modern education systems, Sheikh Arrasuli not only preserved the *halaqah* system but also innovated by founding the *Madrasah Tarbiyah Islamiyah (MTI) Canduang* in 1928 (Kosim, 2015). This institution combined modern pedagogical methods with traditional education, ensuring the continuity of Islamic intellectual traditions amidst social changes. More than an educational center, the madrasah also served as a strategic platform for the traditionalists to assert their religious authority in the face of colonial policies and waves of reformism (Gucandra et al., 2021, p. 7).

To further institutionalize his religious and intellectual influence, Sheikh Arrasuli co-founded the Islamic mass organization *Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah (Perti)* in 1930, with foundational efforts beginning in 1928 alongside other traditionalist clerics (Latief, 1988). This organization became a vehicle for traditionalist ulama to maintain their authority amid socio-political shifts instigated by Dutch colonialism and the intensification of reformist movements. Beyond education, Perti also offered space for traditionalist ulama to engage in Islamic political discourse, particularly in the post-independence period (Maimunah, 2015, pp. 74–75).

During the Japanese occupation in 1943, Sheikh Arrasuli and other clerics initiated the formation of the *Majelis Islam Tinggi Minangkabau (MITM)*, with a leadership structure integrating diverse elements of the Islamic community. He served as General Chair, with A. Gaffar Jambek (Chair I), H. M. Daud Dt. Palimo Kayo (General Secretary), and H. Mahmud Yunus (Chair of the Teaching Council), along with A.R. Sutan Mansoer and H. Sirajuddin Abbas representing the ideological spectrum (Ilyas, 1955, p. 8). MITM was a strategic response to Japanese policies that permitted the operation of Islamic socio-educational institutions such as Perti and Muhammadiyah (Rusli, 1978). After independence, he was appointed Chair of the *Mahkamah Syar'iyah* of Central Sumatra (1947–1960), a position through which he mediated Islamic traditions with the emerging national legal system.

Through MITM and the *Mahkamah Syar'iyah*, Sheikh Arrasuli facilitated reconciliation between *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda*, previously polarized in religious discourse. This reconciliation produced a significant consensus: (1) non-heretical *khilafiyyah* (disputable matters) should not be contested; (2) adherence (*taqlid*) to the legal schools should be respected; and (3) mutual denigration among groups should be avoided (Ilyas, 1955). His leadership integrated religious authority with political acumen to reinforce Minangkabau's socio-religious foundations during the colonial, occupation, and early independence periods. His accommodative stance on doctrinal differences reflected an inclusive vision aimed at religious unity as a prerequisite for sustainable social transformation.

Sheikh Arrasuli's thoughts on the relationship between Islam and Minangkabau customary law were elaborated in two of his 18 authored works: *Pedoman Hidup di Alam Minangkabau menurut Garisan Adat dan Syarak* (1938) and *Pertalian Adat dan Syarak* (1927). These were intended as normative guides and intellectual reflections on the coexistence of Islamic and customary systems (Arrasuli, 2003, p. 3). His intellectual framework rested on three pillars—consciousness, cultural internalization, and empowerment—placing ulama, customary leaders, and state officials as central actors in maintaining the balance between religion and tradition (Zulkifli, 2015). Beyond his role as a prominent cleric, Sheikh Arrasuli was widely recognized for his expertise in Minangkabau customary law, particularly in mentoring future traditional leaders (*pangulu* and *datuak*) (Putra & Ahmad, 2011, p. 109).

His influence shaped the socio-political mechanisms of Minangkabau society throughout the 20th century (Asril, 2018, pp. 61–62). His leadership across institutions served as a symbolic asset that legitimized his social standing (Zed et al., 2021). He did not operate in isolation but was grounded in the moral compass of Minangkabau society (Triasa, 2024, p. 161). As a bridge between tradition and modernity, Sheikh Arrasuli mitigated the polarization between *Kaum Tua* and *Kaum Muda* (Hamka, 1982, p. 293). His articulation of a harmonious relationship between *adat* and religion shaped a powerful narrative of collective identity (Zulkifli, 2015). His contributions to the Minangkabau social arena and institutional development reflected the construction of legitimacy not merely through impression management but through authentic engagement with the society's foundational values (Sarwan & Kurniawan, 2012).

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's Polygamy: Meaning and Representation of Marriage in Early 20th Century Minangkabau

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli entered his first marriage in 1901 at the age of 31, with Shafiyyah, a woman also from Canduang Koto Laweh. Over the course of his life, he married 17 times, with his final marriage occurring in 1937 (Yunus, 1958, p. 3). His second marriage took place in 1910 to Hasanah of Baso, a region bordering Canduang Koto Laweh to the north (Jasmi, 2020, p. 134). This marriage further cemented his status as a prominent religious scholar in Minangkabau (Shofa & Chairinisa, 2022).

In early 20th century Minangkabau, polygamy was a common practice and often associated with social prestige, particularly among the elite (Sari, 2020). Having multiple wives was considered a symbol of honor at the time. As a traditionalist ulama, Sheikh Arrasuli married 17 times until the age of 67 (Rusli, 1978). although Islamic law permits a maximum of four wives simultaneously.:

Table 1. Wives of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli

No	Wife's Name	Origin (District-Regency)	Marital Status	Number of Children
1	Shafiyyah	Canduang (Agam)	Deceased	4
2	Hasanah	Baso (Agam)	Deceased	3
3	Raudhah	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Deceased	4
4	Rawasah	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Divorced	1
5	Enn	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Divorced	-
6	Salehah	Canduang (Agam)	Divorced	1
7	Lambok	Canduang (Agam)	Divorced	-
8	Rakena	Salimpauang (Tanah Datar)	Divorced	-
9	Rakimah	X Koto (Tanah Datar)	Divorced	-
10	Fatimah	Canduang (Agam)	Divorced	-
11	Dalipah	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Divorced	-
12	Nurilah	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Divorced	-
13	Rugayah	Sungai Tarab (Tanah Datar)	Divorced	1
14	Jailan	Ampek Angkek (Agam)	Divorced	1
15	Fatimah	Tanjung Raya (Agam)	Divorced	1
16	Jalisam	Baso (Agam)	Deceased	2
17	Alamsiyah	Canduang (Agam)	Deceased	1

Source: Baharuddin Rusli (1978).

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's marital life spanned 36 years. For the first nine years, he was married only to his first wife, Shafiyyah, reflecting a monogamous lifestyle. The subsequent 27 years were characterized by polygamous marriages, meaning that monogamy represented only one-third of his overall marital

experience (Rusli, 1978). His marriage to Shafiyyah was arranged by her father, following Minangkabau customs in which women traditionally propose marriage to men (Krier, 2000; Zed et al., 2021). This marriage occurred prior to Sheikh Sulaiman's departure for Mecca, resulting in physical distance between them. Their relationship was maintained through written correspondence, which reflected the strength of their relational bond.

Initially, Sheikh Sulaiman was committed to monogamy, a conviction shaped by his observations in Mecca, where returning pilgrims often engaged in polygamy. In 1904, a year after settling in Mecca, he wrote:

> "You know, my dear, that you will bear considerable hardship during my absence. I ask for nothing but your patience, for this journey is for the future wellbeing of our household. Upon my return, if someone proposes that I become their son-in-law—as is customary after pilgrimage—I vow before God that I will decline"(Rusli, 1978).

Shafiyyah, however, responded differently. She perceived that her husband's elevated status and his religious mission in Minangkabau justified polygamy as a practice of social honor:

> "My husband has clearly become an honorable man sought by many. If I restrict him too much, it would diminish his dignity as a haji"(Rusli, 1978).

In early 20th-century Minangkabau, social expectations dictated that prominent ulama should have more than one wife. A religious leader who remained monogamous might cause shame to his wife or suggest he was too miserly to share with other women (Jasmi, 2020; Reenen, 1996)

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamous life had a significant impact on his perspectives regarding marriage and the institution of the family. In his 1938 work, *Pedoman Hidup di Alam Minangkabau: Menurut Garisan Adat dan Syara'* (*Guidelines for Life in Minangkabau According to Customary and Islamic Principles*)—published a year after his seventeenth marriage—he elaborated on his conceptual framework for marriage and familial relationships. His perspective was also shaped by the matrilineal system in Minangkabau society, where lineage is traced through the maternal line, creating a distinctive set of dynamics within marital and kinship structures.

Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamous life profoundly influenced his perspective on marriage and the family institution. In his 1938 work *Pedoman Hidup di Alam Minangkabau menurut Garisan Adat dan Syara'*—published one year after his 17th marriage—he elaborated his philosophy on marriage, shaped by the matrilineal system in which lineage is traced through the mother. He emphasized strict moral criteria in choosing a wife. A woman's worth was based on her character, teachability, and social standing, rather than her physical beauty. This suggests

that even for women entering polygamous unions, moral and social considerations outweighed physical or sexual appeal:

> "When choosing a daughter-in-law from another village, with the consent of the maternal uncle and extended family, and the agreement of the parents, examine the woman first. If she lacks modesty and good character—even if her beauty rivals the full moon—do not accept someone who brings disgrace and ruin. Forget appearance; seek one who has good morals, is willing to learn, and shows modesty and decorum"(Arrasuli, 1938, p. 27).

Minangkabau family structures functioned as social control mechanisms. Marriage was not viewed as an individual decision but a collective one involving extended family networks, who played an active role in evaluating and guiding marital relationships:

> "When a child marries and becomes a son- or daughter-in-law in another village, their relationship should extend beyond the couple. Family members—from elders to siblings and in-laws—are part of that relationship. Do not isolate the couple, eating and living together alone, ignoring others, as such behavior is socially unacceptable" (Arrasuli, 1938).

Sheikh Arrasuli recognized the potential for marital conflict and advocated family-based conflict resolution through truth, teaching, and mediation:

> "If a wife clashes with her siblings or parents, stay with them in truth. Be courageous in teaching, unlike modern people who provoke conflict and weaken family bonds" (Arrasuli, 1938).

Marriage norms created a social context in which age and community expectations shaped individual choices:

> "In Minangkabau, if a girl reaches 18 and remains unmarried, her family suffers shame before society" (Arrasuli, 1938).

His ideal of marriage emphasized unity, cooperation, and the avoidance of conflict. This may reflect a subtle critique of polygamy that disrupts family cohesion:

> "When a daughter's husband is welcomed into another village, it signifies a marriage blessed with kindness and sincerity. The union should lighten burdens, unify kin, and avoid conflict or jealousy—traits prohibited by God and our ancestors" (Arrasuli, 1938).

For Sheikh Arrasuli, polygamy was not merely a personal practice but governed by strict social norms, deep moral reasoning, and a priority on familial harmony. Rooted in the matrilineal structure of Minangkabau, polygamy became a communal matter, where a man's leadership and social reputation were assessed through his role within the matrilocal residence system (Chatra, 2005).

Discussion

Social Dramaturgy: Frontstage and Backstage Realities in the Life of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamy reflects a frontstage reality in which religious authority and social status are performed and legitimized. According to Erving Goffman, the frontstage is a public arena where roles are presented using background, appearance, and demeanor to construct impressions (Goffman, 1956, p. 30). Sheikh Sulaiman's ulama status and his leadership in institutions such as MTI, Perti, MITM, and the Sharia Court reinforced his authority in the public sphere. His polygamy became a medium through which elite religious prestige was publicly affirmed in early 20th-century Minangkabau, as articulated in his own work *Pedoman Hidup di Alam Minangkabau*. For him, polygamy in Minangkabau was not about personal desire but a social commitment rooted in collective agreements between two matrilocal family structures. This aligns with Goffman's notion of reciprocal collusion, where the audience co-produces the impression presented by the actor (Goffman, 1956).

Conversely, the backstage reality—representing the private sphere—revealed a contradiction. Goffman describes the backstage as the realm where actions contradict the polished public performance (Goffman, 1956). Sheikh Sulaiman initially held a monogamous ideal, as documented by Baharuddin Rusli (1976). However, social expectations during the early 20th century pressured him toward polygamy. His first wife, Shafiyyah, played a supportive role in this transition. Her acceptance allowed him to renegotiate his monogamous commitment. This supports the findings of Vitri Puspita Sari et al., which describe polygamy as a symbol of honor among ulama like Sheikh Sulaiman (Sari et al., 2021).

His 17 marriages describe a pattern of simultaneous marriage and divorce. Islamic law permits a maximum of four concurrent wives, a rule Sheikh Sulaiman managed by divorcing wives four through fifteen. In early 20th-century Minangkabau, divorce was normalized as a minor external-transcendent issue—a manageable micro polemic (T. Abdullah, 1987; Armi, 2024, p. 94). Other studies indicate that da'wah activities requiring travel contributed to the frequency of divorce among ulama in the region(Reenen, 1996; Sarwan & Kurniawan, 2012).

The Identity of the Ulama: The Performance of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli

According to Goffman, personal identity involves symbolic expressions manifested through the social and religious titles one holds (Goffman, 1956). Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's status as an ideal figure in the Minangkabau social arena was realized through his roles as an ulama and leader. His presence in the public sphere was further solidified through his polygamous practice, which reinforced his religious identity. Goffman's concept of idealization—where

individual performance tends to incorporate and exemplify values officially recognized by society—is evident in Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy (Goffman, 1956). Polygamy was not merely a personal act but a public performance associated with elite status. It functioned as what Goffman calls a presentation of self in everyday life—designed not merely to reflect personal preference, but to fulfill social expectations placed on a revered religious figure(Goffman, 1956).

Sheikh Sulaiman's intellectual identity in the public domain was visible through his preaching, socio-political engagement, and marital philosophy. His polygamous practice not only reflected his thinking but also served as a tool for sustaining and legitimizing his public frontstage as an authoritative ulama during a time of modernization and colonial influence in Minangkabau. While initially committed to monogamy, this shift highlights a tension between his religious role and social expectations—a gap between social reality and subjective experience (Goffman, 1956). For Sheikh Sulaiman, marrying 17 wives was a progressive act and a rejection of regression that would have undermined his public performance (MacCannell, 1973, p. 589).

Given the post-marital matrilocal structure and strong matrilineal tradition of Minangkabau, polygamy was culturally facilitated (Alim, 1936, pp. 85–91). Thus, it is reasonable to state that Sheikh Sulaiman strategically used this cultural framework. For him, marriage was an intensive and adaptive social practice worth promoting as part of his religious persona (Chriss, 2015).

Three strategies were identified in maintaining his religious performance through polygamy. First, he adhered to Islamic legal limits by never having more than four wives simultaneously, preserving his image as a sharia-compliant ulama while accommodating polygamy's function as a social status symbol. Second, he employed segregation to minimize interactions among wives, thereby reducing the risk of social backlash. nlike the cases discussed by Joke van Reenen (1996), Sheikh Sulaiman's divorces were attributed solely to da'wah-related mobility and not interpersonal conflicts. This segregation was supported by the matrilineal structure and its inherent matrilocal residential system. Third, he adopted a passive-corrective approach in responding to social expectations of polygam**.** His passive stance toward marriage proposals was a strategy to fulfill community expectations without overt initiative (Scheff, 2005)

Authenticity and Negotiation Through Value Transformation

According to Charles Taylor, personal identity is shaped through an internal dialogue that navigates social norms and expectations (Taylor, 1991, p. 33). Sheikh Sulaiman experienced this dynamic while attempting to balance social expectations with the prestige he had achieved. Taylor refers to this process as the quest for a "horizon of meaning," a search for value and negotiation that precedes and shapes every effort to define the self and determine what is important in social life (Taylor, 1991).

Sheikh Sulaiman discovered an authentic identity by being critical of prevailing norms and remaining open to new views shaped by the social realities

of 20th-century Minangkabau. He viewed the matrilineal system as a social engine and ulama as its operative agents. His da'wah, leadership, and polygamous practices were integral to his status as an ulama (Taylor, 1991). The matrilineal system served as a cultural horizon through which he maintained the authenticity of his religious role.

In this context, Sheikh Sulaiman reinterpreted polygamy to fit the Minangkabau social arena. In *Pedoman Hidup di Alam Minangkabau*, he developed ethical and moral reflections on marriage and polygamy as a collective responsibility within the matrilocal family system, rather than an expression of nuclear family autonomy. His cultural idealism (Taylor, 1991) derived from matrilineal marital traditions that prioritized communal over individual practice. He constructed this as an ideal mechanism, contrasting it with modern, contract-based conceptions of marriage, which he considered inadequate.

From a legitimacy perspective, Sheikh Sulaiman transitioned from charismatic authority—common among Minangkabau ulama—to authentic authority in response to modernity (Taylor, 1991). He positioned himself within hierarchical social orders by establishing and leading religious institutions rooted in sacred legitimacy. Thus, his polygamous practice must be viewed as part of a broader strategy to sustain and enhance religious authority in early 20th-century Minangkabau. He successfully navigated this authority amid the historical transformations of the time (Taylor, 1991).

Using Taylor's authenticity framework, Sheikh Sulaiman's legitimacy emerges as a "continuous struggle" to preserve his religious authority across multiple social roles throughout his life. He bridged patriarchal religious perspectives while maintaining his legitimacy—partly manifested through polygamy.

Implications of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's Polygamy: Gender, Religion, and Authority in Contemporary Studies

Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy, involving 17 wives, reflects gender dynamics within the matrilineal system of Minangkabau and reveals transformative dimensions of religious authority in the early 20th century. As Mahmood (2005), religious subjectivity is shaped through disciplinary practices that are inseparable from regimes of power. Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy became a performative act that constructed religious subjectivity and responded to societal expectations of the ulama, as explored in other studies (Afandi et al., 2024; Muzzammil et al., 2021). The shift from monogamy to polygamy signified not only a personal change but also a negotiation between religious authority and social-political structures. This illustrates that seemingly contradictory personal practices may enhance social performativity and religious legitimacy.

ender dynamics within Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy highlight the paradox of a matrilineal system interacting with patriarchal Islamic interpretations. Religious leaders adapted by building symbolic authority through polygamy—what Reenen (1996) called patriarchal adaptation within a matrilineal system. The

active role of the first wife (Shafiyyah) , who encouraged polygamy, aligns with other studies (Commercio, 2020; Paramole & Segun, 2018), that show how women may affirm patriarchal practices to gain symbolic status. This phenomenon parallels the findings of Hafidz et al. (2023) also found that women adopt dominant values to gain social recognition. In Sheikh Sulaiman's case, women were not merely objects of patriarchal subordination but active agents navigating tensions between matrilineal status and religious virtue—confirming Mir-Hosseini (1993) argument about female negotiation within diverse marital contexts.

The religious dimension of Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy was not limited to textual interpretation; it embodied a contestation of authority and the construction of ethical landscapes (Hirschkind, 2006). Unlike anti-polygamy reforms in Tunisia (Chusnayaini, 2017), and restrictive policies in Malaysia and Morocco (R. Abdullah et al., 2015; Hursh, 2012; Mohamad, 1998), his practice reflected how conservative marital interpretations reinforced the power of ulama in intra-religious competition. Mawardi (2022) noted similar opposition among Nahdlatul Ulama figures to colonial bans on polygamy in 1937.

The study by Shofa & Chairinisa (2022) comparing Sheikh Sulaiman and Buya Hamka's perspectives on polygamy also revealed intra-religious authority contestation. Sheikh Sulaiman's shift from monogamy to polygamy aligned with evolving social expectations. This transformation parallels findings by Thabrani & Kusairi (2024) regarding polygamy among Madurese ulama as a strategy to preserve lineage and scholarly heritage. In contrast to Hakim (2022) classification of three key motivations (infertility, spousal permission, and attraction to other women), Sheikh Sulaiman's polygamy functioned as a navigational tool amid socio-political transformation. This constructed authority was not static but negotiated across adat, colonialism, and political shifts—an assimilation into Indonesian marital practice.

This study offers significant contributions to understanding contemporary intersections of gender, religion, and authority in Muslim societies. A performative analysis of polygamy transcends the traditional-modern binary in Southeast Asian Islamic studies, particularly in Indonesia (Bowen, 2019). Alhassan & Sani (2024) critiqued religious motivations in Nigerian polygamy as often masking personal and social drivers. This study illustrates how religious piety is operationalized through marriage, intersecting with studies like Hasan et al. (2022) on tafsir works by Indonesian ulama. Another contribution is the demonstration of how religious authority is negotiated within matrilineal societies, similar to Panakkal (2024) study of Kerala. It also provides historical insight into why polygamy persists in various local contexts.

Critically, Sheikh Sulaiman's case reveals how Islam and adat interact in matrilineal societies to create paradoxical spaces where religious authority and gender contestations are continually renegotiated. Contrary to Krenawi (2014) emphasis on polygamy's psychosocial harms, this study argues for a contextual

understanding rooted in socio-historical specificity. Polygamy here functioned as a performance of identity and a means of legitimizing authority, underscoring that religious authority is never static but constantly constructed and reformulated through daily practices with far-reaching implications for both collective and individual identity.

Conclusion

An analysis of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's polygamous practice reveals how religious scholars in Minangkabau construct and negotiate their identities within the framework of a matrilineal society in the early twentieth century. Through the lens of social dramaturgy and authenticity, this study explores the interaction between public manifestations and private negotiations in his polygamous marriages. Performed dramaturgically, Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli's marriages reinforced his social prestige among the Minangkabau elite and expanded his socio-religious influence. His transition from monogamy to polygamy reflected a strategic response to prevailing social expectations. Operating within a matrilineal system that applied post-marital matrilocal residence, he managed the potential role conflict as a religious scholar by mitigating tensions through spatial and symbolic adjustments.

Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli navigated a dialogical process of identity formation, negotiating between personal commitment and social expectation in a society undergoing transformation under the forces of colonialism and modernization. His reinterpretation of polygamy within a matrilineal framework reflects a pursuit of authenticity amid shifting moral and social values. This insight demonstrates how religious authority is constructed and legitimized not solely through doctrinal knowledge, but also through social practices such as marriage. In the unique context of Minangkabau, where matrilineal norms diverge from most Southeast Asian Muslim societies, religious authority intersects with gender dynamics and women's economic autonomy—yet remains framed within a patriarchal religious order. This study contributes to the scholarship on the construction of ulama identity by exposing the performative dimension of religious authority. Future comparative studies could explore similar patterns among religious leaders across other Southeast Asian cultural contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how religious authority is constructed within diverse cultural frameworks. This study acknowledges its limitation in relying solely on documentary sources to examine the domestic dynamics of polygamous households. Complementary ethnographic approaches—particularly those involving descendants of Sheikh Sulaiman Arrasuli—hold potential to enrich the understanding of the long-term social and cultural implications of his polygamous practice.

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