

# Criteria for the Practice of Ṭarekat in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

The absence of clear and uniform criteria for evaluating the practice of ṭarīqah (Sufi orders) in Malaysia has created space for prolonged polemics and, in certain cases, has led to the rejection or prohibition of specific practices by religious authorities. This situation has consequently generated confusion among the public regarding the legitimacy and acceptability of ṭarīqah practices. Previous studies have yet to successfully develop a robust evaluative framework capable of resolving the tension between the Sufi tradition and the demands of religious regulation within a modern context. This study adopts a document analysis approach through a critical examination of selected materials, including authoritative classical Sufi texts (turāth), fatwas and guidelines issued by religious authorities, as well as official documents related to the governance of ṭarīqah in Malaysia. The analysis aims to identify key principles and indicators that may serve as a systematic and authoritative basis for evaluating ṭarīqah practices. The findings identify three fundamental pillars of criteria for the practice of ṭarīqah: first, the authenticity of the scholarly chain of transmission (sanad) and the spiritual lineage of the murshid; second, conformity of teachings and practices with Islamic law (sharī'ah) and the creed of Ahl alSunnah wa al-Jamā'ah; and third, the existence of a clear organizational structure and an appropriate level of institutional oversight by religious authorities. It is hoped that this proposed framework may serve as an initial foundation for policy alignment and the standardization of evaluative approaches to ṭarīqah practices in Malaysia, thereby reducing existing conflicts and providing clearer and more authoritative guidance for ṭarīqah practitioners, the general public, and religious enforcement bodies.

**Keywords:** Ṭarīqah, Taṣawwuf, Sufism, Recognition, Sharī'ah

## INTRODUCTION

Fatwa warnings often remain merely warnings. For decades, discourse surrounding the practice of ṭarīqah in Malaysia has been marked by ambivalence—acknowledged on the one hand as a noble spiritual heritage, yet viewed with suspicion and, at times, subjected to outright prohibition on the other. Ironically, this pattern continues to recur, with issues concerning the legitimacy of spiritual guides, the authenticity of teachings, and methods of dhikr becoming subjects of endless debate, frequently culminating in enforcement actions that appear inconsistent.

The existence of multiple ṭarīqah streams—some officially registered, others operating discreetly or, more precisely, outside the radar of religious administration—has generated unease, particularly when allegations of doctrinal deviation or social misconduct arise. Such situations inevitably test the credibility of state religious institutions. It appears that no comprehensive reference framework genuinely functions as a benchmark for distinguishing the authentic from the spurious, the acceptable from the rejectable.

Why have scholars seemingly avoided this arduous task? Perhaps due to its complexity. The central issue is no longer whether ṭarīqah is inherently good or bad—an outdated debate—but rather how to formulate criteria that are fair, transparent, and authoritative in determining which practices should be upheld and which should be rejected, without bias and without compromising either public order or the integrity of authentic Islamic spiritual tradition. This vacuum must be addressed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of ṭarīqah in the Malay world is replete with contestation and adaptation. Azmi Ishak (2018) explores how ṭarīqah—particularly the Naqshbandiyyah and Qādiriyyah—took root as early as the seventeenth century, alongside the arrival of scholars from the Middle East. He argues that their assimilation into local culture facilitated widespread acceptance but simultaneously opened the door to interpretations that conflicted with sharī'ah norms, a concern frequently raised by contemporary scholars. This view, however, may be overly simplistic.

Ramli Abdul Wahid (2019), by contrast, presents a different narrative, highlighting the role of ṭarīqah as a medium for Islamic dissemination and an agent of social transformation, portraying it as the backbone of Islamic intellectual revival prior to colonialism. Nevertheless, his account tends toward glorification and offers limited engagement with the darker or more problematic internal challenges faced by ṭarīqah traditions themselves.

More critically, such optimistic perspectives rarely engage deeply with the issue of official recognition of ṭarīqah by modern religious authorities—a significant gap. Zulkifli Mohamad (2020) addresses this issue through an analysis of fatwas, noting that Malaysian fatwas tend to be reactive rather than proactive, often issued in response to complaints or specific incidents. This results in ad hoc and unsystematic patterns of action. While this critique is fair, Zulkifli's argument may be contested: is spiritual innovation always justified?

Jamil Hashim (2021), adopting a legalistic approach, emphasizes Islamic legal frameworks and state regulations in governing ṭarīqah, highlighting the authority of state governments to approve or prohibit ṭarīqah under Islamic administrative enactments. While firm, this approach does not elaborate on the substantive criteria employed by religious departments in their evaluations, focusing instead on legal mechanisms alone, as though legislation itself were sufficient to resolve metaphysical issues. This represents a clear limitation.

Other narratives examine ṭarīqah from a socio-psychological perspective. Hassan Abdullah (2022), for example, argues that the appeal of modern ṭarīqah lies in their ability to provide communal support and spiritual meaning in an increasingly fragmented world. However, such arguments contribute little to the formulation of objective evaluative criteria and are impractical for administrative purposes.

More critically, debates on sanad and spiritual lineage—the foundation of ṭarīqah legitimacy—are often treated in isolation. Abdul Hamid Marzuki (2020) emphasizes the importance of sanad in ensuring continuity of teachings and the legitimacy of the murshid, but offers limited discussion on how modern religious authorities can practically verify such lineages, particularly when they involve foreign or deceased figures. This represents a genuine administrative challenge.

In summary, existing literature despite its richness in historical narratives and legal analysis—lacks a comprehensive conceptual synthesis capable of answering a fundamental question: what are the actual criteria for accepting or rejecting a ṭarīqah within the Malaysian context, where religious plurality and state regulation intersect?

## METHODOLOGY

This study does not employ field surveys or ethnographic observation. No interviews were conducted, nor were questionnaires distributed. Instead, the research is grounded entirely in rigorous conceptual analysis—a method often dismissed as mere “desk research” but which in reality demands considerable intellectual acuity.

This approach was selected for several reasons. First, the issue of criteria for ṭarīqah practice in Malaysia is not a phenomenon measurable through quantitative data, nor fully comprehensible through individual perceptions. It is a substantive epistemological debate concerning legitimacy and authority within religious tradition. Second, the primary objective is to construct a robust conceptual framework capable of synthesizing diverse perspectives drawn from primary and secondary sources, including classical scholars, fatwas issued by national and state fatwa councils, and Islamic administrative legislation in Malaysia.

The process involved several key stages. Relevant documents were first identified and collected, including authoritative Sufi texts, academic journals, official fatwa compilations, and Islamic administrative enactments.

Outdated materials or those merely reiterating existing arguments without offering new insights were excluded. This was followed by repeated critical readings, extracting and interrogating key concepts related to *ṭarīqah* recognition or rejection. Fatwas declaring certain practices “deviant” were scrutinized to assess the underlying legal reasoning and its consistency with broader textual and classical scholarly positions. Divergent viewpoints between more inclusive traditional scholars and more restrictive contemporary scholars were compared to identify points of tension and convergence.

Recurring themes such as sanad, *sharīʿah* compliance, and institutional oversight were then categorized. Finally, these concepts were synthesized into a coherent conceptual framework, with each criterion clearly defined and supported by relevant textual justification. The entire process represents an exercise in interpretation, reflection, and normative reasoning—seeking not merely to describe existing practices, but to articulate what ought to constitute valid criteria for legitimate *ṭarīqah* practice in Malaysia.

This approach necessitates a meticulous engagement with textual sources. The process involves several key stages. First, relevant documents were identified and systematically collected, including authoritative classical works of *taṣawwuf*, peer-reviewed academic journals examining *ṭarīqah* and Sufism, official fatwa compilations issued by state mufti departments, as well as Islamic administrative enactments and statutes applicable in Malaysia. Materials that were outdated or merely reiterated existing arguments without offering new analytical perspectives were deliberately excluded.

Following the compilation of textual data, the study undertook repeated cycles of critical reading, during which key concepts related to the criteria for the recognition or rejection of *ṭarīqah* were filtered and extracted. This process extended beyond surface-level reading and involved rigorous interrogation of each argument. For instance, when a fatwa categorised a particular *ṭarīqah* practice as “deviant,” the analysis examined the *sharīʿah*-based justifications underpinning the ruling and assessed whether these arguments were consistent with broader scriptural evidence or with the more expansive views of classical scholars. Conflicting perspectives were also systematically compared such as between traditional scholars who adopt a more inclusive stance toward *ṭarīqah* and contemporary scholars who advocate a more restrictive approach—in order to identify points of tension as well as areas of convergence.

Subsequently, recurring themes and patterns were categorised, including the significance of sanad, adherence to *sharīʿah*, and the necessity of institutional oversight. This stage resembled an exercise in the archaeology of ideas, uncovering successive layers of meaning embedded within the texts. Finally, all identified concepts and themes were synthesised into a coherent conceptual framework, with each criterion articulated in detail and supported by relevant textual justification.

Overall, this process constitutes an exercise in interpretation, reflection, and conceptual construction, aimed at producing an analytical model that is not merely descriptive but also normative that is, articulating what ought to constitute valid criteria for legitimate *ṭarīqah* practice in Malaysia, rather than simply documenting what is currently practised or sporadically subjected to fatwa rulings. Objectivity, in this sense, does not entail the rejection of interpretation, but rather the presentation of arguments grounded in robust and substantiated evidence.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The practice of *ṭarīqah* (Sufi orders) in Malaysia necessitates the existence of a clear and authoritative evaluative framework to ensure the authenticity of teachings and their conformity with recognised Islamic principles. Based on the conceptual analysis conducted, this study identifies three principal sets of criteria that function as the foundation for evaluating *ṭarīqah* practices. Each of these criteria presents its own methodological challenges and practical implications.

The first criterion emphasises the authenticity of the sanad and the *silsilah* of the *murshid*, namely the continuous and legitimate chain of transmission of spiritual and scholarly authority that extends back to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). In the science of *ṭarīqah*, *silsilah* constitutes a fundamental element. According to Abdul Manam (2017), an authentic *ṭarīqah* must possess a valid and uninterrupted *silsilah* that traces back to the Prophet (peace be upon him). Without a genuine *silsilah*, a *ṭarīqah* is not regarded as legitimate in the view

of the practitioners of Sufism, as silsilah serves as the primary proof of the order's authenticity. It also functions as the conduit for the transmission of spiritual blessings (*barakah*) originating from the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Abdul Manam further notes that several groups labelled as "spiritual" and suspected of causing problems in religious understanding, practice, and social relations were found, upon investigation, to lack an authentic and continuous silsilah, to present fabricated silsilahs, or to claim valid silsilahs that are in fact invalid due to the absence of proper authorisation (*ijāzah*). Among such groups are those who explicitly reject and deny the necessity of silsilah altogether, often on the grounds that they can "connect directly with God."

In this context, sanad is not merely a genealogical record of *ṭarīqah* figures; rather, it constitutes a mechanism of epistemological legitimation that guarantees the authenticity of teachings, the methodology of spiritual training (*tarbiyyah rūḥiyyah*), and the leadership authority of the murshid within a *ṭarīqah*. The continuity of a sound sanad serves as the primary basis for assessing the credibility of a *ṭarīqah*, as its absence may give rise to serious doubts regarding the authenticity of the sources of teachings and practices observed by its adherents. Nevertheless, the process of verifying sanad is inherently complex and requires specialised expertise in the history of Islamic scholarship, the development of *ṭarīqah* institutions, and the examination of relevant manuscripts and documentary sources. This challenge has become increasingly pronounced in the contemporary context, where claims of sanad are often made orally without strong documentary support, alongside instances of information manipulation that may mislead the general public.

The second criterion concerns the conformity of *ṭarīqah* practices with Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) and the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. In this regard, Imām al-Ghazālī (2018) advises spiritual seekers (*sālikūn*) to fulfil four essential obligations, among which is adherence to a sound and correct creed. In the Malaysian context, the officially accepted and practised creed is that of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, which is epistemologically and historically attributed to Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī and Imām Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī. This position is consistent with the mainstream Islamic scholarly tradition that forms the foundation of Muslim theological understanding in the region.

Clarification of the meaning of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah can be found in *Ittiḥāf al-Sādah al-Muttaqīn* by Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Zabīdī (1994). In the second volume of this work, al-Zabīdī explains that when the term Ahl al-Sunnah is used in a general sense, it refers to the Ash'arīs, the followers of Imām Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, and the Māturīdīs, the followers of Imām Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī. This statement reinforces the understanding that these two theological schools constitute the principal representations of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah within Islamic theological tradition.

This criterion represents the normative core of *ṭarīqah* evaluation, as any form of spiritual practice, including *dhikr*, *wird*, and spiritual discipline (*riyāḍah*), must not contradict the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, or the established principles of Islamic creed as agreed upon by the majority of scholars. Accordingly, practices containing elements of superstition (*khurāfāt*), reprehensible innovation (*bid'ah madhmūmah*), or doctrinal deviation should be rejected on principled grounds.

Nevertheless, the application of this criterion also faces interpretative challenges, particularly when dealing with esoteric and symbolic Sufi practices. Differences in levels of understanding of Sufism, whether among the general public or even among some scholars, often give rise to polemics concerning the boundaries and scope of *sharī'ah* compliance in *ṭarīqah* practices. Consequently, the evaluation of this criterion requires a balanced approach grounded in rigorous scholarly methodology and authoritative references within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

In certain cases, confusion and limited understanding of Sufism have led to the rejection of particular practices of specific *ṭarīqahs*. Some orders are labelled as extreme or deviant merely because their practices appear unfamiliar or inconsistent with mainstream religious observances. In reality, some of these practices may represent profound manifestations of spiritual obedience that can only be properly understood through a Sufi framework that distinguishes between the outward dimension of *sharī'ah* and its inward dimension, without negating the binding authority of *sharī'ah* as the foundation of both. Therefore, the assessment of such practices demands a comprehensive understanding of Sufi epistemology and its methodological application within the



tradition of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah. Zakaria Stapa (2016) attributes this phenomenon to three main factors: the general public's limited understanding of Sufism and ṭarīqah, the frequent association of ṭarīqahs with deviant teachings that deliberately adopt spiritual approaches and Sufi terminology, and the existence of groups within contemporary Malaysian Muslim society who actively promote the view—through publications and public lectures that Sufism and ṭarīqah are not part of Islamic knowledge, but rather disciplines filled with elements of shirk, superstition, illusion, and falsehood.

The third criterion relates to organisational structure and institutional oversight by religious authorities. The systematic and responsible practice of ṭarīqah should not operate covertly or without registration; rather, it should function within the legal and administrative framework of state Islamic governance. Registration with official institutions such as the State Islamic Religious Departments and State Islamic Religious Councils serves not merely administrative purposes, but also functions as a mechanism of monitoring, coordination, and guidance to ensure that ṭarīqah practices remain within the limits prescribed by sharī'ah and the law. This measure is also essential for protecting adherents from the risks of deception, exploitation, or deviation by individuals lacking legitimate scholarly and spiritual authority.

However, the enforcement of institutional oversight also gives rise to critical discussions regarding the balance between the spiritual autonomy of ṭarīqahs and the bureaucratic control of the state. This tension must be managed prudently so that regulatory efforts do not evolve into excessive control that could stifle the dynamics of spiritual training and erode the spiritual essence that lies at the core of ṭarīqah existence. Accordingly, the relationship between ṭarīqah institutions and religious authorities should be built upon principles of dialogue, mutual trust, and a clear understanding of their respective roles.

In conclusion, without adherence to these three principal criteria namely the authenticity of sanad and the silsilah of the murshid, conformity of practices with sharī'ah and the creed of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah, and a transparent and accountable organisational structure the practice of ṭarīqah in Malaysia risks remaining in a state of uncertainty. Such a condition not only exposes ṭarīqahs to persistent misunderstanding and prolonged polemics, but also opens the door to deviations that may tarnish the image of Sufism and undermine Islam's emphasis on balance between sharī'ah and ḥaqīqah.

## DISCUSSION

The identification of the three principal criteria namely the authenticity of sanad, compliance with sharī'ah, and institutional oversight represents more than a procedural checklist. Rather, these criteria function as a mirror reflecting the persistent tension between religious tradition and the demands of modern administrative governance. What, then, do these findings signify in practical terms? First, the recognition of the murshid's sanad, which constitutes the spiritual root of a ṭarīqah, often emerges as a blind spot within evaluative processes conducted by religious authorities. Assessing sanad not only requires deep expertise in Islamic intellectual history, but also demands the intellectual courage to justify forms of spiritual legitimacy that may not be readily quantifiable through empirical or bureaucratic standards. This raises a critical question: do religious authorities in Malaysia genuinely possess the mechanisms and more importantly, the specialised expertise necessary to evaluate sanad critically, particularly when such chains of transmission may span centuries, multiple geographical regions, and complex networks of scholarly relationships?

The absence of such expertise may compel religious institutions to rely on the most conservative or administratively convenient interpretations, thereby rejecting otherwise legitimate ṭarīqahs solely due to the complexity involved in verification. Such an approach risks significant loss, potentially resulting in the marginalisation or disappearance of valuable spiritual and intellectual heritage simply because existing institutions lack the capacity to engage with it adequately.

Second, the issue of sharī'ah compliance, although seemingly straightforward, constitutes a profound hermeneutical challenge. While there is broad consensus that ṭarīqah practices must align with the Qur'ān and Sunnah, interpretations of what constitutes such "alignment" are often shaped by divergent schools of thought, educational backgrounds, and even the political orientations of individual scholars or fatwa committees. A narrow interpretation of sharī'ah—one that dismisses esoteric practices merely because they are unfamiliar or intellectually inaccessible to the general public—has frequently been observed.

In this regard, religious authorities must exercise caution against the tendency to pass judgement on practices they do not fully understand. Instead, there is a pressing need to foster dialogue and to involve scholars of *tasawwuf* who possess genuine expertise, rather than relying solely on religious figures whose authority is derived primarily from media visibility. This is not a trivial concern. It demands heightened sensitivity to the inward, spiritual dimensions of Islam, which have historically coexisted with, rather than contradicted, its outward legal framework.

Third, while institutional oversight is undeniably important for maintaining public order and safeguarding adherents, it also carries inherent risks. Excessive bureaucratic control may stifle spiritual spontaneity and, in extreme cases, erode the very vitality of a *ṭarīqah*. Fundamentally, a *ṭarīqah* represents a spiritual journey rather than a corporate entity governed by rigid procedural compliance. When subjected to excessive formalisation characterised by layers of documentation, approvals, and administrative rigidity it risks losing its spiritual essence and transforming into a hollow, formalistic organisation.

This presents a paradox: how can regulation be implemented without destruction? Achieving such balance requires extraordinary prudence, akin to walking a tightrope. The crucial question remains whether religious institutions are prepared to exercise flexibility and to recognise that spirituality requires space to breathe, rather than confinement within purely legalistic frameworks. This is not merely an administrative dilemma; it constitutes a struggle for the soul of a centuries-old spiritual tradition. Failure to engage with these nuances may perpetuate ongoing tensions and, more alarmingly, contribute to the erosion of an important spiritual heritage in Malaysia—a loss that could otherwise be avoided through more thoughtful and comprehensive engagement beyond superficial rhetoric and entrenched prejudice.

## CONCLUSION

The debate surrounding the practice of *ṭarīqah* in Malaysia, particularly concerning issues of authenticity and legitimacy, has exposed a critical gap in the current approach to religious administration: the absence of a standardised and transparent evaluative framework. This study has sought to address this gap by proposing three foundational pillars—namely, the authenticity of the *sanad* and *silsilah* of the *murshid*, conformity of practices with *sharīʿah* and the creed of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*, and the necessity of an organisational structure subject to institutional oversight by religious authorities.

These criteria do not represent a definitive solution; far from it. Rather, they constitute an essential starting point—a conceptual framework intended to facilitate more constructive and informed discourse. Continued silence or purely reactive responses are no longer viable. When applied carefully and conscientiously, these criteria may serve as practical guidelines not only for religious authorities in making recognition decisions, but also for *ṭarīqah* practitioners in ensuring that their practices remain on a sound and legitimate path. In this sense, the framework functions as a navigational map through a terrain fraught with conceptual and practical challenges.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the application of these criteria is far from straightforward. It demands not only a robust understanding of *sharīʿah*, but also sensitivity to the historical and spiritual dimensions of *ṭarīqah* traditions, as well as a genuine willingness to engage in dialogue. Neglecting these considerations risks producing hasty fatwas, unjustified rejections, and unnecessary fragmentation within the Muslim community.

Future research should therefore examine empirically how individual State Islamic Religious Departments in Malaysia apply these criteria in their processes of *ṭarīqah* approval—potentially through content analysis of official documents or in-depth interviews with relevant officers. Comparative analysis across states would further illuminate variations in practice and help identify best practices. Failure to establish a clear and just evaluative system will not only perpetuate polemics, but may also erode public trust in religious institutions and, more dangerously, obstruct genuine spiritual development while allowing deviant teachings to flourish in an environment of uncertainty. This represents a significant and avoidable risk.

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