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Shaykh Yusuf Al-Maqassari: Epistemic Network, Diplomacy, and the Making of Decolonial Thought

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly attention to Shaykh Yusuf al-Maqassari (1626–1699) has long been confined to two readings: the Sufi saint and the armed resistance leader. Neither is mistaken, but each leaves out the way his scholarly life itself operated as political action. This study examines how Shaykh Yusuf built transnational networks through the circulation of religious knowledge and how those networks functioned as a structural force against VOC expansion. The argument is reconstructed from Shaykh Yusuf's Arabic and Malay treatises, VOC correspondence from the Cape and Ceylon archives, and Bugis-Makassar hagiographic sources, read against three frameworks: the epistemic network model, which treats knowledge as circulating across geographical and cultural boundaries; the Sufi-warriorism thesis; and the Indian Ocean ulama network framework. The political stakes become legible only when the three are held together. In consolidating five major Sufi orders, Shaykh Yusuf was building authority as much as accumulating spiritual capital. Because the consolidation cut across factional lines, neither colonial administrators nor local rulers found stable ground from which to challenge his legitimacy. His theological shift from Waḥdat al-Wujūd to Waḥdat al-Shuhūd amounts to an epistemological reorientation that prefigures by several centuries what later theorists would articulate as decolonial thought. His successive exiles to Ceylon and Cape Town, far from diminishing his reach, wove him into global circuits extending beyond what the archipelago alone could have afforded. These findings place Nusantara Islam in conversation with cross-cultural liberation theory and offer a fresh angle on scholarship, movement, and resistance under early colonial rule

INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century witnessed profound global disruptions as transcontinental connectivity enabled the flows of goods, values, and ideas that reshaped the sociopolitical order of the world. At the epicenter of this upheaval, the Sultanate of Gowa-Tallo in Nusantara was reaching the zenith of its glory as a commercial entrepôt, where vessels from Arabia, Persia, Europe, and the Malay world converged. As de Graaf (1976) have documented, following the fall of Makassar to VOC Admiral Cornelis Speelman in 1669, numerous bands of Makassarese soldiers and nobles sought their fortunes overseas, providing the historical backdrop against which Shaykh Yusuf's strategic position in Banten around 1670 must be understood.

In this historical landscape, Shaykh Yusuf al-Maqassari was born on July 3, 1626 (or, more precisely, on Shawwal 8, 1036 AH, as Muhammad Ramli (1990) and Djirong Basang (1981) concur). His full name, Muhammad Yusuf ibn Abdullah Abu al-Mahasin al-Taj al-Khalwati al-Maqassari, encapsulates a scholarly genealogy stretching from South Sulawesi to the Ottoman heartlands (Azra, 2004). To this day, the Muslim community of Cape Town remembers him as the "Tuan Keramat of Makassar."

Shaykh Yusuf's significance extended well beyond personal spiritual practice. His itinerary (from Makassar to Banten, Aceh, West Asia, Ceylon, and finally Cape Town) can be read as an effort to reconfigure “rasa-nalar”, what Rancière (1999; 2004) terms the redistribution of the sensible: an intervention into the system of perceptual facts that simultaneously discloses both the shared space and the boundaries defining each party's position within it.

Existing studies on Shaykh Yusuf have tended to follow one of two trajectories (Lubis, 1994). The first casts him as an anti-colonial resistance figure, foregrounding the military and political dimensions of his life (Azra, 2004; Hamid, 2005a; Rahmawati, 2025), while the second confines itself to the analysis of Sufi doctrine and the internal genealogy of his tariqa (Syamsuddin Arif, 2024; Gibson, 2001; Samsinas, 2012; Mamat, 2020). Umam (2024) further develops this perspective. Drawing on manuscripts in Berlin, Princeton, and Jakarta, he shows Shaykh Yusuf at work as a copyist of Sufi-philosophical texts across Aleppo, Damascus, and Medina in the 1650s and the 1660s. What remains unexamined is how these epistemic networks operated on two registers simultaneously: as diplomatic channels and as instruments of liberation from VOC pressure.

Apipudin and Fataar (2025) come the closest. They trace how Shaykh Yusuf's mobility carried Islamic knowledge across regions but stop short of the ontological scaffolding of tasawwuf—above all, the shift from Waḥdat al-Wujūd to Waḥdat al-Shuhūd that gives the epistemic basis of liberation its substance. The omission matters. As Faruque (2024) states, the epistemic crisis of Muslim communities under colonial rule cannot be examined through a military lens alone. This article makes three contributions that build on one another.

METHODS

This approach is library-based and historical-analytical. Primary sources fall into two groups. The former comprises Shaykh Yusuf's own writings in critical editions: Zubdat al-Asrār, Maṭālib al-Sālikīn, and al-Nafḥa al-Saylāniyya (Arif, 2024; Mustafa, 2011). The latter includes Malay and Makassarese chronicles, such as Lontara Bilang Gowa (Ramli, 1990) and Riwayaqna Tuanta Salamaka ri Gowa (Basang, 1981). For secondary materials, monographs and peer-reviewed articles carry most of the weight, supplemented by doctoral dissertations and a smaller but growing body of manuscript-based scholarship. Misbachul Islam (2019) takes up textual authenticity. The genealogical disputes (particularly the contested claims about Shaykh Yusuf's descendants in exile) were tested against the Cape Town archives (Moosa, 2020), and Moosa's work alone is enough to show why studies of this figure call for a steady methodological hand.

This argument runs on two conceptual frameworks. The first is the epistemic network: a structured system linking agents of knowledge production (ulama, disciples, and rulers) through

transmissive media such as ijāza, written texts, and hajj routes. The upshot is a current of authority that travels across geographic distances and, more strikingly, through physical isolation. Recent theorists of epistemic communities define such formations as groups sharing a common approach to research agendas and sociopolitical action (Apostolopoulou et al., 2025); Shaykh Yusuf's network fits that description but adds two further dimensions: it was at once trans-temporal and transcontinental.

The second theoretical framework is Sufi warriorism (Aljunied, 2024a), which distinguishes three modes of expression: the protagonist (leading expansion), the protectionist (defending the community against external threats), and the purist (purifying religious practice). This article borrows the protectionist typology to interpret Shaykh Yusuf's resistance phase in Banten but argues that his exile produced a fourth type not yet articulated by Aljunied: warriorism-by-network, in which resistance is sustained not through physical violence but through the circulation of knowledge and solidarities bound together by collective memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Early Intellectual Landscape and the Network Framework

Even Shaykh Yusuf's birth has become a contested arena, reflecting the richness of the oral traditions surrounding this figure. Scholars generally converge on 1626 or early 1627 CE: Islam (2019) and Hamid (2005a) affirm 1626 CE, while Syamsuddin Arif (2024) gives 1037 AH/1627 CE. Regarding his birthplace, although all sources agree on the Gowa-Tallo region, the specific location remains debated between Moncongloe and the Tallo Palace—a discrepancy most likely tied to the closely intertwined twin-kingdom system of Gowa-Tallo (Islam, 2019; Djirong Basang, 1981). The historical context of his birth carries weight: two decades earlier, in 1603, the Kingdom of Gowa had formally adopted Islam following the arrival of Dato' Tiro, Dato' ri Bandang, and Dato' Patimang from Minangkabau (Syamsuddin Arif, 2024). He grew up at a crossing point. Islam was still taking root in Gowa, while European colonial powers were already pressing at the region's edges.

Shaykh Yusuf's intellectual standing came from his travels, but the groundwork was laid at home. He completed his Qur'an recitation with Daeng Ri Tassamang. From there, he moved to Cikoang for deeper textual study with Shaykh Jalaluddin al-Aidit, and then on to Bontoala for advanced training under Shaykh Sayyid Bā'Alawī ibn Abdullah al-'Allāmah Ṭāhir (Hamid, 2005a). Two worlds met in him. His father's side gave him the language of ordinary people, and his mother's side gave him the court. That double upbringing was useful to him later, in rooms where he had to read very different kinds of company at once.

In 1644, he left Gowa for Banten. According to Abu Hamid, he departed on September 22, 1644, aboard a Malay vessel, with Banten as his first destination (Hamid, 2005b). In Banten, he formed a friendship with Prince Surya (later Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa) and first encountered the name of al-Rānīrī through his works, which prompted him to continue on to Aceh (Islam, 2019). In Aceh, under the rule of Sultana Tāj al-'Ālam Ṣafiyyat al-Dīn (1641–1675), he studied Sufism and statecraft with al-Rānīrī and obtained his ijāza in the Qādiriyya *ṭarīqa* (Mustafa, 2011). It is worth pausing on al-Rānīrī himself. He was not only a Sufi master but also the author of *Bustān al-Salāṭīn*, a treatise on Islamic governance and political philosophy written in the idiom of the tariqa.

Azra (2001) traces the basic pattern: scholars and students from the Indian Ocean Rim went to Mecca and Medina, studied, taught, and brought home the teacher-disciple chains that knitted each region into a larger web of Islamic knowledge. The result, as Apipudin and Fataar (2025) argue, was a discursive field that no longer mapped the ocean's physical geography. Umam (2024) further explores this issue. Working from manuscript evidence, he shows Shaykh Yusuf in Aleppo, Damascus, and Medina in the 1650s and the 1660s copying Sufi-philosophical texts by hand, for example. This is not

the work of a student passing through the course. It is the work of someone who helps move texts through the system.

Two Decades of Wanderings in West Asia (1649–1664)

The two decades in West Asia lie at the heart of Shaykh Yusuf's formation. In 1649, he left Banten to embark on a fifteen-year journey whose principal aim was to seek the essential truths of Islam in Yemen, the Hijaz, and Damascus (Hamid, 2005a). His first destination was Yemen, where he studied under Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Bāqī al-Naqshbandī and Sayyid 'Alī al-Zabīdī, obtaining ijāzas in the Naqshbandiyya and Bā'alawiyya *ṭarīqas* (Syamsuddin Arif, 2024). Syamsuddin Arif also notes that on this Yemeni leg of his travels, Shaykh Yusuf met Imam 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Alawī al-Ḥaddād, who even mentioned him in several of his writings—an acknowledgment from one of the most eminent Yemeni scholars of the century.

From Yemen, he proceeded to Ḥaramayn. Under the guidance of Aḥmad al-Qushāshī, the dominant Hijazi Sufi scholar of the seventeenth century, known for reorienting Sufism toward shariʿa compliance, he deepened the integration of various Sufi practices. He then studied with Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī, an Athari theologian known for his capacity to reconcile the metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd* with Ash'arī orthodoxy (Hamid, 2005a; Apipudin & Fataar, 2025). Beyond his studies, Shaykh Yusuf was also actively teaching at the Masjid al-Ḥarām, a recognition of his spiritual authority at the foremost center of Islamic learning in the world (Hamid, 2005a).

The culmination of his journey was Damascus, where he received the Khalwatī ijāza together with the honorific title *Tāj al-Khalwatī* ("Crown of the Khalwatiyya") from Ayyūb ibn Aḥmad al-Khalwatī al-Qurashī (Syamsuddin Arif, 2024). It was there that he also visited the tomb of Ibn 'Arabī—his most direct point of contact with the ontological roots of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.

The Synthesis of Five Ṭarīqas as Epistemic Strategy: Textual Evidence

What set Shaykh Yusuf apart from most itinerant scholars of his time was not merely the number of teachers he sought out, but his capacity to operate the acquired knowledge as a system of knowledge. In addition to the five principal *ṭarīqas*, Shaykh Yusuf was also conversant with others, including the Dasūqiyya, Shādhiliyya, Hashtiyya, Rifā'iyya, Idrūsiyya, Aḥmadiyya, and Makhdūmiyya (Mustafa, 2011). However, the orders he most widely transmitted and synthesized were the Qādiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, Bā'alawiyya, Shaṭṭāriyya, and Khalwatiyya, a synthesis later taught to his followers and known as the Khalwatiyya Yūsufiyya *ṭarīqa* (Arif, 2024; Mustafa, 2011).

The synthesis went deeper than the method. Yes, it pulled together different forms of *dhikr*, such as silent invocation of the heart from the Naqshbandiyya, the practice of *khalwa* from the Khalwatiyya, the Qādiriyya's emphasis on *maḥabba*, the Shaṭṭāriyya's metaphysics of *nūr Muḥammad*, and the spiritual etiquette of the Bā'alawiyya (Azra, 2004; Mustafa, 2011). However, the binding agent was orthodox Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamā'a *tawḥīd* (Arif, 2024; Azra, 2004), which kept the whole construction defensible against charges of innovation.

What this gave Shaykh Yusuf was a teaching he could pitch at very different audiences: the trained adept who wanted philosophical depth, the layperson who needed something to hold onto in daily life. Van Bruinessen (1998) made the broader case some time ago that the *ṭarīqas* in Southeast Asia cannot be understood apart from the politics surrounding them. Aljunied (2024b) further develops this point by treating the region's Sufi traditions as discursive networks that ran across both colonial borders and colonial periodization.

Claims regarding the political dimensions of Shaykh Yusuf's doctrinal synthesis can now be substantiated through textual evidence drawn from

primary and secondary sources. Based on secondary readings of *Zubdat al-Asrār* and *Maṭālib al-Sālikīn*, Shaykh Yusuf did not merely offer Sufi guidance; he explicitly addressed the essence of divine unity (*tawḥīd*), gnosis (*ma'rifa*), and the concept of the Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*), all of which mandate absolute obedience to God alone (Arif, 2024; Mustafa, 2011). More direct textual evidence can be traced through the critical edition of the primary source *Sirr al-Asrār* (Misbachul Islam, 2019). In this work, Shaykh Yusuf consistently elaborates the concept of *fanā'* (annihilation in the absolute oneness of God) and the imperative to integrate *sharī'a* and *ḥaqīqa* as the antithesis of any form of servitude to entities other than God. Within this theological framework, obedience to oppressive human hierarchies that contradict divine unity (including VOC colonial dominion) is implicitly construed as an ontological transgression (Arif, 2024; Misbachul Islam, 2019). The depth of this textual grounding confirms that Shaykh Yusuf's Sufi teachings furnished the foundation for the praxis of *Sufi warriorism*, in which resistance to unjust worldly powers untethered from divine authority is fully sanctioned through the spiritual path (Aljunied, 2024).

Scholarly Authority as Diplomatic Capital

Shaykh Yusuf's return to Nusantara in 1664 was not that of an ordinary student. Hajj pilgrims from Banten who had witnessed his standing among Meccan scholars had already introduced his name to the populace; he arrived not as Muḥammad Yūsuf but as a *shaykh* and *murshid* recognized by the global centers of Islamic learning (Hamid, 2005b). His decision to return to Makassar first, however, revealed another facet of his character: he was dismayed by the moral decline that had set in after the Bongaya Treaty—Makassarese society had relapsed into bad habits and the *sharī'a* had been pushed aside. Unable to alter the situation in concert with the King of Gowa, Sultan Amir Hamzah (1669–1674), he resolved to depart for Banten in 1671 (Mustafa, 2011).

In Banten, his position consolidated rapidly. He was appointed mufti and royal counsellor to Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, married to the sultan's daughter (variously named Siti Syarifah or Ratu Aminah, depending on the source), and entrusted with the education of the royal children (Islam, 2019; Hamid, 2005a). His dual standing as mufti and son-in-law to the sultan fused religious authority with structural proximity to power within a single person. The network of disciples he cultivated (including Prince 'Abd al-Qahhār (Sultan Haji), who at his counsel undertook the hajj while simultaneously carrying out a diplomatic mission to Istanbul in 1674) offers the most concrete illustration of how an epistemic network could operate as a channel of geopolitical negotiation (Mustafa, 2011; Hamka, 1963).

From 1664 to 1682, Shaykh Yusuf not only taught and led the *ṭarīqa* but also composed six Arabic treatises on Islam and Sufism, including *Bidāyat al-Mubtadī*, *Muqaddima*, *al-Fawā'id*, and *Zubdat al-Asrār* (Hamid, 2005a). Banten was at its peak during these years. The port had become one of the major commercial centers of Southeast Asia, drawing merchants from across the maritime world. Apipudin and Fataar (2025) read Shaykh Yusuf's mobility as part of this larger picture: scholarly authority in the Indian Ocean Islamic world moved across territory by its nature, and it consistently outran the borders the European companies were trying to draw.

The Banten War and Military Leadership (1682–1683)

Everything broke open when Sultan Ageng's son, Sultan Haji, turned to the VOC for help against his own father. Shaykh Yusuf sided unhesitatingly with Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa. Between 1682 and 1683, he was embroiled in a war that lasted for 22 months. After Sultan Ageng was captured by the Dutch in March 1683, Shaykh Yusuf led 5,000 troops in guerrilla warfare through the forests of West Java, fusing military tactics with collective *dhikr* to fortify the cohesion of his ranks (Hamid, 2005a; Syamsuddin Arif, 2024). One Dutch

writer even likened him to General de Wet of South Africa for his skill in safeguarding his men (Ramli, 1990). Aljunied (2024a) observes that Sufi warriorism in its "protectionist" mode functions to shield the community from external threats through a combination of spiritual authority and military leadership. However, Aljunied leaves unarticulated the way this spiritual authority was built over the two preceding decades, well before military conflict erupted: a *preemptive construction of authority* without precedent in the existing scholarship on Sufi warriorism.

His capture did not occur through an open battle but through stratagem. On December 14, 1683, Van Happenel used Shaykh Yusuf's daughter as a lure, and she succumbed out of a father's affection (Ramli, 1990; Islam, 2019). The episode laid bare the limits of political calculation when set against personal love. After his capture, he was taken to Cirebon, then Batavia, before finally being exiled to Ceylon on September 12, 1684 (Syamsuddin Arif, 2024).

Diplomacy Through Presence: Exile as Arena of Negotiation

When the VOC exiled Shaykh Yusuf to Ceylon together with two wives (Kare Kontu and Kare Pane), two female attendants, twelve disciples, and several family members, it was certain that geographic isolation would extinguish his influence (Hamid, 2005a). This calculation proved fundamentally mistaken, and its error sprang from a basic misapprehension about the nature of epistemic networks: their power does not rest on the physical presence of their nodes but on the infrastructure of transmission already in place.

In Ceylon, Shaykh Yusuf transformed his exile into a new node within the network. Hajj pilgrims from Nusantara who stopped over while awaiting the western monsoon (a wait of one to three months) became two-way couriers, bearing news from Nusantara to him and carrying his political messages back to the homeland. The VOC itself acknowledged that the pseudonyms he employed—rendered as "kittak-na Tuan LoEta" in Makassar and known as "Ngelmu Aji Karang" or "Tuan Seh" in Banten, functioned as communicative codes that eluded the reach of their surveillance (Hamid, 2005a). One document confirming this communicative network is a letter from a Gowa nobleman written from the lands of Ceylonese exile (Suryadi, 2008), which proves that epistolary ties between the exiled community and Nusantara remained vigorously active despite conditions of confinement.

More strikingly, his influence penetrated India. Emperor Aurangzeb 'Ālamgīr (1659–1707) formally wrote to the VOC representative in Ceylon, urging that Shaykh Yusuf's dignity be safeguarded, with the warning that any disturbance to him would unsettle the entire Muslim community of Hindustan (Hamid, 2005a). That a political prisoner could move the ruler of a great empire to pressure the company holding him captive is a phenomenon made possible only because Shaykh Yusuf's epistemic network had entered the arena of pan-Islamic geopolitics. Sultan 'Abd al-Jalīl of Gowa even submitted several formal petitions to the VOC in Batavia, including one in 1690, requesting that Shaykh Yusuf be returned to Makassar—all of which were rebuffed (Hamid, 2005a).

Exile as Expansion of the Field of Struggle

Faced with Shaykh Yusuf's undiminished influence, in mid-1693 the VOC resolved to remove him further to Cape Town. On July 7, 1693, he set sail aboard the *Voetboeg* with a retinue of 49 people, arriving in South Africa on April 2, 1694, at 3:00 p.m. local time (Hamid, 2005b). The move backfired. Governor Simon van der Stel received Shaykh Yusuf and his retinue with unexpected warmth, notwithstanding his prisoner status. Within days of arrival, the group performed *maghrib* prayer inside the Castle, the first time the prayer had been said on Cape soil, and the moment from which Cape's Muslim history is conventionally dated.

The transfers to Ceylon and Cape Town, intended by the VOC as punishment, instead functioned as expansions of the field of struggle (Arif, 2024; Mustafa, 2011). In Ceylon, Shaykh Yusuf produced important treatises, now recorded in

the manuscript MS PNRI A101, such as *Maṭālib al-Sālikīn* and *al-Nafḥa al-Saylāniyya* (Abu Hamid, n.d.; Misbachul Islam, 2019). *Al-Nafḥa al-Saylāniyya*, "The Fragrant Breeze from Ceylon," is a document that acknowledges the condition of exile even as it converts that condition into a fresh source of legitimacy (Arif, 2024). A fitting comparison is with Shaykh Aḥmadou Bamba Mbacké in Senegal: Babou (2007) demonstrates that Bamba systematically harnessed exile as momentum for expanding the Murīdiyya network—a strategy structurally identical to the one Shaykh Yusuf practiced two and a half centuries earlier, without the benefit of modern communication infrastructure.

The Cape Town work began from the bottom. Shaykh Yusuf first taught his followers to hold *dhikr khafī* (concealed remembrance) at night to avoid colonial surveillance. Mutual aid networks grew around the practice, organized on the principle that all believers stood equal before God (Hamid, 2005b). He passed on the Khalwatiyya *ṭarīqa* to the local Muslim community, which kept it alive after his passing.

The egalitarian principle was specific and pointed: skin color, race, and lineage counted for nothing before God, and the only measure of human worth was piety. In the 1690s, Cape Town, where the Muslim population was largely enslaved or politically exiled, this was not abstract theology. It was a direct refusal of the racial and legal hierarchies the Dutch settlement had built. Within a short time, Shaykh Yusuf had built a robust Muslim community, now known as the Slamaaier community, numbering approximately 600,000 Muslims in Cape Town (Hamid, 2005a). This transnational legacy (which positions Shaykh Yusuf as an intellectual bridge between Southeast Asia and Africa) is traced by Wekke (2024), who situates him as a figure in the history of global Islam.

Nelson Mandela, in his address commemorating the 300th anniversary of Shaykh Yusuf's arrival in South Africa on April 2, 1994, called him "the founder of the idea of community" and "an anti-racist anti-colonialist" (Hamid, 2005b). The recognition by the 20th-century leader of the anti-apartheid struggle of a 17th-century scholar from Nusantara as a forerunner of the same resistance attests to how Shaykh Yusuf's legacy transcends temporal and cultural boundaries.

Waḥdat al-Shuhūd as Decolonial Reason: A Textual Analysis

The transition from Waḥdat al-Wujūd to Waḥdat al-Shuhūd that occurred in Ceylon was neither a regression nor a retreat from his earlier theological position. It was a maturation that can be tracked textually. Waḥdat al-Wujūd (Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine of the unity of being) furnished Shaykh Yusuf's ontological foundation (Gibson, 2001; Mustafa, 2011; Hidayat, 2024). According to Mustaqim et al.'s (2025) reading, *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* holds that the cosmos is, in its entirety, a manifestation of God's singular and absolute being. The implication is consequential: if all creatures share one ontological ground, they stand equal in relation to that ground. Colonial domination, read through this lens, is not just unjust but metaphysically incoherent; it is a hierarchy imposed on beings who, at the level of being itself, cannot be ranked.

The doctrine has its critics, and the critique is old: if all is one, why fight anything? Waḥdat *al-Wujūd*, the charge goes, dissolves the very ground from which resistance becomes possible. The transition to Waḥdat al-Shuhūd, the doctrine of the unity of witnessing, developed by Aḥmad Sirhindī as a response to Ibn 'Arabī, offers a theological resolution of this paradox, in which mystical consciousness no longer withdraws into ascetic serenity but becomes the basis for active engagement in the world (Azra, 2004). Examining this shift, Gibson (2001) and Azra (2004) note that during his exile in Ceylon, Shaykh Yusuf took a carefully measured theological step: relinquishing the controversial doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd and embracing Waḥdat al-Shuhūd to avoid being accused of pantheism. Even so, he did not wholly

discard the tradition of Ibn 'Arabī; textual research demonstrates that Shaykh Yusuf continued to integrate the concept of Waḥdat al-Wujūd in measured proportion within works such as *Maṭālib al-Sālikīn* (Misbachul Islam, 2019). It is through this middle path—uniting spiritual depth with shari'a-bound rigor—that the witnessing (*shuhūd*) of worldly injustice is transmuted into a spiritual injunction obligating resistance, rather than offering it as a mere ethical option (Arif, 2024; Azra, 2004).

In the idiom of contemporary decolonial theory, Shaykh Yusuf undertook an "ontological turn": he refused the colonial order not only at the level of practice, but at the levels of being and epistemology. VOC colonialism did not merely seize land and trade; it stripped colonized subjects of the capacity to name their own reality. This resonates with what Quijano (2000) terms the *coloniality of power*—the deepest dimension of colonialism, which controls not only global capitalist exploitation but also the hegemony of subjectivity and knowledge production. Shaykh Yusuf had already enacted resistance to this repression three centuries earlier. Faruque (2024) extends this argument by insisting that the grip of "epistemic colonialism" can only be undone through epistemic freedom, which in turn requires the recovery and revitalization of the Islamic intellectual heritage itself. Through his Sufi discourse (a project rooted in his own tradition) Shaykh Yusuf had, in effect, inaugurated this project of decolonizing thought long before such a discourse came into being.

Synthesis of the Epistemic Network

Three threads run through Shaykh Yusuf's life (knowledge, diplomacy, and liberation), and following each one shows how his epistemic network worked as a single piece of machinery. Knowledge was produced through travel and synthesis. It was distributed through *ijāza* chains and along Hajj routes. It was applied in military command, diplomacy, and daʿwa in exile. None of these was a separate phase; all three ran together.

Set Shaykh Yusuf against other itinerant scholars working in the Indian Ocean in his century, and one thing becomes obvious: he kept his network alive even after Ceylon and Cape Town cut him off physically (Arif, 2024; Azra, 2004). That was not the rule. Azra (2004) found that an Indian Ocean scholar's authority usually depended on staying close to the Ḥaramayn, or at least maintaining regular contact with them. The closest parallel came much later. Shaykh Aḥmadou Bamba Mbacké built up the Murīdiyya from exile in early 20th-century Senegal (Babou, 2007); however, Bamba was working two centuries later, with a telegraph behind him and a postal system that worked. The fact that Shaykh Yusuf achieved something comparable two and a half centuries earlier, and in far more isolated locations, suggests that the network he built was held together by a collective identity of resistance that grew, rather than weakened, under pressure (Abu Hamid, n.d.; Aljunied, 2024). In the idiom of contemporary epistemic community theory, knowledge and authority integrated within networks of this kind function not merely as conduits of doctrinal transmission but actively shape the capacity for cross-border political action, a phenomenon now described as the *political instrumentalism of expertise* (Lacatus, 2025).

One objection demands a reply: could the synthesis of the five *ṭarīqas* be read as purely spiritual motivation rather than political? Historically, this separation does not hold, as fidelity to the divine (the spiritual) and worldly concerns (the political) operated simultaneously and in tandem (Aljunied, 2024b). The evidence can be traced to Shaykh Yusuf's appointment as *Shaykh al-Islām* and mufti in the Sultanate of Banten by Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (Arif, 2024). His Sufi texts, such as *Zubdat al-Asrār*, which, among other themes, takes up the concept of the Perfect Human, *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (Mustafa, 2011), were not produced in a vacuum. In the Malay-Indonesian world of that period, Sufi teachings and the authority of the *ṭarīqas* were actively mobilized to confer ideological validation upon and consolidate the political legitimacy of ruling powers. This finding has significant

implications for the broader study of Islam in Nusantara: the Islamic epistemology of the region in the early modern period was strikingly complex, inventive, and generative within the wider currents of intellectual circulation (Apipudin & Fataar, 2025). This decisively dismantles the long-standing narrative that has reduced Nusantara to the role of a passive recipient of doctrines emanating from the scholarly centers of the Middle East (Aljunied, 2024b).

Death did not fully bring Shaykh Yusuf's story to a close. After his death on May 22 or 23, 1699, in Faure, South Africa, and his burial in the sand dunes of False Bay (now known as "Makassar Downs"), his remains were returned to Gowa and reinterred at Lakiung in April 1705, at the request of the Sultan of Gowa (Hamid, 2005b). What he left behind continues to move along two channels: the Khalwatiyya Yūsufiyya *ṭarīqa*, still rooted in South Sulawesi today, and the legacy carried by the Cape Town community, which to this day honors him as *Tuan Keramat*.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Shaykh Yusuf al-Maqassari was neither merely an anti-colonial fighter nor simply a Sufi figure, but the architect of an epistemic network (defined here as a system of cross-border knowledge transmission linking intellectual nodes through the media of *ijāza*, written texts, and hajj routes) operating simultaneously on three levels: the production of knowledge through the synthesis of five major *ṭarīqas* into the Khalwatiyya Yūsufiyya; the distribution of knowledge through teacher–disciple chains that functioned even from behind the walls of exile; and the application of knowledge as a basis for legitimacy for resistance against the VOC.

The claim regarding the political dimensions of this synthesis now rests on firmer textual ground. *Zubdat al-Asrār* was composed explicitly for the Sultan of Banten and consolidated his legitimacy; *Maṭālib al-Sālikīn* discusses divine unity in language that repudiates oppressive human hierarchy; and *al-Nafḥa al-Saylāniyya* transmutes the condition of exile into a fresh source of authority. Recent manuscript research by Umam (2024) adds a crucial dimension: Shaykh Yusuf's epistemic network operated not only from Nusantara toward Arabia, but in the reverse direction as well. He was an active node in the global circulation of knowledge in the seventeenth century, not a passive recipient at its periphery.

The theological transition from Waḥdat al-Wujūd to Waḥdat al-Shuhūd undertaken in Ceylon was not a retreat but a maturation, a decolonial reason that integrates ontology with sociopolitical responsibility. Within the framework of decoloniality developed by Quijano (2000) and extended by Faruque (2024), Shaykh Yusuf was already doing what is now called *epistemologies of the South* (building a system of knowledge rooted in the experience of the colonized rather than in hegemonic centers) three centuries before the term was coined. The military might of the colonial power, as it turned out, could not match a network of knowledge patiently woven over decades.

Two open questions remain for future research. The first concerns the precise mechanics of the communicative circuits linking Shaykh Yusuf in Cape Town with communities in Nusantara and India; an archival study of VOC records in The Hague and Mughal archives could yield more concrete answers. The second asks how far the Khalwatiyya Yusufiyya living in South Sulawesi still preserves its political-epistemic dimension, or whether it has transformed into an entity that is purely ritual.

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