

Zuhud in the Modern Era: Perspectives of Traditional and Modern *Teungku Dayah* in Aceh Besar

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the concept and practice of *zuhud* in the modern era from the perspectives of traditional and modern *teungku dayah* in Aceh Besar. In contemporary society, *zuhud* is often misunderstood as withdrawal from worldly life or rejection of material possessions. This research seeks to clarify such misconceptions by exploring how *teungku dayah* interpret and implement *zuhud* within changing social, economic, and cultural contexts. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with traditional and modern *teungku dayah*, participant observation in dayah environments, and analysis of relevant classical and contemporary Islamic texts. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in the understanding and implementation of *zuhud* in daily life, leadership, and social relations. The findings reveal that both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* conceptualize *zuhud* as inner detachment rather than physical deprivation. *Zuhud* is understood as an ethical-spiritual orientation that regulates attachment to worldly possessions while encouraging social responsibility, moral discipline, and balanced engagement with modern life. Differences between the two groups appear mainly in emphasis and expression, particularly in responding to contemporary lifestyles and institutional demands, rather than in the core meaning of *zuhud* itself. This study contributes to the discourse on Islamic spirituality by demonstrating that *zuhud* remains relevant in the modern era as a flexible ethical framework. Rather than functioning as an ascetic doctrine, *zuhud* operates as a moral guide that enables religious actors to navigate material abundance, social change, and leadership responsibilities without compromising spiritual integrity.

KEYWORDS:

Zuhud,
Islamic Spirituality,
Teungku Dayah,
Modern Era,
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Introduction

Islamic In Islamic spiritual discourse, *zuhud* is not understood as prohibiting what is lawful nor as neglecting material possessions altogether. Classical Islamic scholars emphasize that *zuhud* signifies a spiritual orientation in which trust in God surpasses attachment to worldly ownership. Al-Ghazali explains that *zuhud* does

not require rejecting wealth, but rather cultivating inner detachment so that the heart is not controlled by material desires (Al-Ghazali, 2003). In this sense, worldly resources are positioned as means to fulfill religious obligations rather than as ultimate life goals.

Several scholars define *zuhud* as a balanced ethical stance toward worldly life. A *zahid* is described as a person who does not rejoice excessively upon gaining worldly benefits nor grieve excessively upon losing them. This perspective reinforces the idea that *zuhud* does not negate engagement with the world but regulates emotional and spiritual attachment to it. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah argues that *zuhud* reflects freedom of the heart from domination by worldly desire, not the absence of ownership itself (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 1990). Thus, *zuhud* cultivates generosity in material matters while nurturing spiritual depth and moral awareness.

In many contemporary contexts, however, *zuhud* is frequently misunderstood. It is often associated with isolation, poverty, or withdrawal from social life. Such interpretations tend to ignore the ethical and social dimensions emphasized in classical and modern Islamic thought. Hamka criticizes this misconception by asserting that *zuhud* should not lead to passivity or social disengagement. Instead, he argues that *zuhud* ought to sharpen social sensitivity and encourage active participation in addressing social problems (Hamka, 1994). Accordingly, *zuhud* does not demand physical deprivation but requires spiritual discipline that prevents excessive attachment to worldly pleasure.

The relevance of *zuhud* becomes increasingly significant in the modern era, which is characterized by materialism, consumerism, and the dominance of economic rationality. Modern society often prioritizes material success, resulting in weakened moral sensitivity and diminishing concern for social inequality. In this condition, spiritual values are marginalized, and individuals may lose awareness of their ethical responsibilities. As a response to this challenge, *zuhud* functions as a spiritual filter that enables individuals to engage with worldly life without being deceived by it (Syukur, 1997).

Within the Acehnese Islamic tradition, *teungku dayah* occupy a central role in transmitting religious knowledge and ethical values to the community. They are not only educators but also moral authorities whose perspectives significantly shape public understanding of Islamic teachings. Their interpretations of *zuhud* are influenced by their educational backgrounds, institutional affiliations, and engagement with contemporary realities. Traditional *teungku dayah* often emphasize spiritual discipline and simplicity, while modern *teungku dayah* tend to highlight the importance of social responsibility and contextual engagement. Despite these differences, both groups view *zuhud* as a fundamental ethical principle that must be preserved in modern life.

Empirical insights from local religious figures reinforce this perspective. One senior *teungku dayah* emphasized that *zuhud* in the modern era cannot be reduced to ritual devotion alone, but must be accompanied by concern for the surrounding community, particularly orphans and the poor (A. Tajuddin, personal

communication, October 8, 2023). This view aligns with the ethical foundations of *zuhud*, which prioritize compassion, generosity, and social responsibility as integral components of spiritual practice.

From a theological perspective, *zuhud* originates from the doctrine of *tawhid*. Al-Ghazali explains that *tawhid* generates faith, obedience, and ultimately love for God, which culminates in *ma'rifatullah*. In this spiritual process, *zuhud* functions as a means of detaching the heart from worldly distractions in order to focus on the ultimate purpose of human existence (Al-Ghazali, 2003). This understanding suggests that *zuhud* is not an end in itself, but a spiritual path that guides believers toward deeper awareness of God.

In the modern era, however, the application of *zuhud* requires contextual reinterpretation. Contemporary Muslim scholars argue that worldly life should not be abandoned, but treated as a bridge toward the hereafter. Quraish Shihab emphasizes that the world serves as a field for moral action and spiritual preparation rather than an object of rejection (Shihab, 2002). In this regard, *zuhud* encourages individuals to pursue worldly endeavors responsibly while maintaining spiritual integrity.

Based on these considerations, this study examines the concept of *zuhud* in the modern era from the perspectives of traditional and modern *teungku dayah* in Aceh Besar. The study aims to explore how *zuhud* is understood, interpreted, and practiced in contemporary contexts, particularly in relation to social responsibility, economic activity, and moral leadership. By analyzing these perspectives, the study seeks to clarify misconceptions surrounding *zuhud* and demonstrate its continued relevance as a spiritual and ethical framework capable of addressing modern challenges without abandoning Islamic principles.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the concept of *zuhud* in the modern era from the perspectives of traditional and modern *teungku dayah* in Aceh Besar. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on understanding meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences related to spiritual concepts that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The case study design enabled an in-depth examination of how *zuhud* is understood and practiced within specific socio-religious contexts, particularly among *teungku dayah* who play a central role in shaping Islamic discourse in Acehnese society.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with *teungku dayah* representing both traditional (*salafiyah*) and modern (*khalaifiyah*) educational backgrounds. These informants were selected purposively based on their roles as religious teachers, community leaders, and active practitioners of Islamic education. Interviews were conducted between October 2023 and focused on participants' understandings of *zuhud*, its relevance in the

modern era, and its implementation in daily life and social relations. Observations were carried out in dayah environments to capture patterns of interaction, leadership styles, and expressions of simplicity and social responsibility. Relevant books, classical Islamic texts, and contemporary scholarly works were also analyzed to support and contextualize the empirical findings.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis technique. Interview transcripts and field notes were carefully read, coded, and categorized to identify recurring themes related to the meaning, interpretation, and implementation of *zuhud*. The analysis followed an iterative process, moving back and forth between empirical data and theoretical frameworks drawn from classical Islamic scholarship and modern interpretations of *tasawwuf*.

Results and Discussion

1. The Concept of *Zuhud* in the Modern Era from the Perspectives of Traditional and Modern *Teungku Dayah*

The findings reveal that both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* perceive *zuhud* as a spiritual orientation rather than a rigid ascetic practice. For them, *zuhud* does not signify the rejection of worldly life, but the regulation of one's inner attachment to material possessions. This understanding consistently emerged across interviews and reflects continuity with classical Islamic thought, which positions *zuhud* as inner detachment rather than physical deprivation (Al-Ghazali, 2003; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 1990).

A senior traditional *teungku dayah* explicitly rejected the notion that *zuhud* means isolating oneself from social realities. He stated:

"Zuhud in today's era must still pay attention to the surrounding environment. It is not enough to perform acts of worship alone while ignoring orphans and the poor around us. If someone prays every night but does not care about people in hardship, then his worship loses its meaning" (A. Tajuddin, personal communication, October 8, 2023).

This statement illustrates a key empirical finding: *zuhud* is understood as inseparable from social responsibility. Ritual devotion that lacks compassion and ethical concern for others is considered spiritually incomplete. The informant further emphasized that helping those in need—at minimum by providing food or basic necessities—is an essential manifestation of *zuhud*, especially in contemporary society where social inequality is increasingly visible.

Another traditional *teungku dayah* reinforced this view by stressing that *zuhud* is not about rejecting the world, but about positioning the world correctly. He explained:

"In the modern era, the world is not the ultimate goal. It is a bridge toward the hereafter. In the past, some people left the world entirely, but today, the world must be used wisely as a means to reach God" (T. Alfian, personal communication, October 8, 2023).

This perspective demonstrates a contextual reinterpretation of *zuhud*. While acknowledging changes in social and economic conditions, traditional *teungku dayah* maintain that the essence of *zuhud* remains unchanged: the heart must not be controlled by worldly desire. This interpretation resonates with Al-Ghazali's argument that *zuhud* emerges from *tawhid* and functions as a spiritual discipline that purifies intention and orientation toward God (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

Modern *teungku dayah* articulate similar principles but tend to frame *zuhud* more explicitly in relation to contemporary lifestyles. One informant explained that external appearances often mislead society into judging spiritual states:

"Many people think that someone who owns a luxury car or lives comfortably cannot be zuhud. That assumption is wrong. Zuhud is not about what you own, but about whether your heart is attached to what you own" (T. Arif, personal communication, October 4, 2023).

This statement reflects a recurring theme in the data: *zuhud* is fundamentally an inner condition rather than an external performance. Modern *teungku dayah* criticize the tendency to equate simplicity with poverty or to assume that material success contradicts spiritual integrity. Instead, they emphasize that wealth, position, and facilities become problematic only when they dominate one's intentions and moral judgment.

From an analytical perspective, these findings align closely with Hamka's concept of modern *tasawwuf*, which rejects passive asceticism and instead promotes active ethical engagement within society. Hamka argues that *zuhud* should strengthen social sensitivity and moral courage, rather than encourage withdrawal from communal life (Hamka, 1994). The perspectives of both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* confirm this position by framing *zuhud* as a moral filter that governs how individuals interact with worldly resources.

Furthermore, the data indicate that misunderstandings of *zuhud* persist widely within society. Several informants noted that outward symbols—such as clothing, housing, or vehicles—are often used as superficial indicators of spiritual status. This tendency, according to the informants, reflects limited religious understanding and reduces *zuhud* to mere appearance rather than ethical substance. As one *teungku dayah* observed:

"People often judge zuhud from what they see, not from how a person behaves toward others and toward God" (T. Zainuddin, personal communication, October 9, 2023).

Theologically, this reinforces the classical view that *zuhud* functions as a process of disciplining desire and purifying intention. When worldly life is treated as a means rather than an end, *zuhud* becomes compatible with work, leadership, and social responsibility. This interpretation is further supported by contemporary scholars who argue that the world serves as an arena for moral action rather than an object of rejection (Shihab, 2002).

The perspectives expressed by both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* show that *zuhud* is understood as a living ethical orientation rather than a rigid spiritual

doctrine. Although their modes of expression differ—particularly in responding to contemporary lifestyles and social expectations—both groups emphasize that the essence of *zuhud* lies in the discipline of the heart and the regulation of intention. Worldly possessions, social status, and modern facilities are not viewed as contradictions to *zuhud* as long as they do not dominate one's moral judgment or weaken commitment to social responsibility. Within this framework, *zuhud* emerges as a form of moral consciousness that guides engagement with the world while preserving spiritual integrity. Such an understanding allows *zuhud* to remain meaningful in the modern era, not as an abstract ideal, but as an ethical practice embedded in everyday life and social relations..

2. The Implementation of *Zuhud* in the Daily Life of Traditional and Modern *Teungku Dayah*

The implementation of *zuhud* among *teungku dayah* is reflected not merely in personal spirituality, but also in patterns of daily life, leadership styles, and social engagement within the dayah and the surrounding community. Both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* emphasize that *zuhud* must be practiced through balance—between worldly responsibility and spiritual commitment—rather than through extreme asceticism. This balance is particularly visible in how they approach work, income, authority, and social relations.

Several informants explained that *zuhud* in everyday life begins with self-control and the regulation of desire. One *teungku dayah* stated:

"Zuhud in today's context is about controlling one's desires from disgraceful actions and directing oneself according to the Qur'an and Hadith. As long as someone remains within these guidelines, there will be no confusion in practicing zuhud" (T. Nardi, personal communication, October 8, 2023).

This statement highlights a practical understanding of *zuhud* as ethical discipline. Rather than avoiding worldly engagement, *teungku dayah* stress the importance of aligning daily actions—teaching, earning a livelihood, and interacting socially—with Islamic moral principles. In this sense, *zuhud* functions as an internal moral compass that governs behavior in both private and public spheres.

Another recurring theme in the data concerns simplicity (*kesederhanaan*), which informants clearly distinguished from poverty. One traditional *teungku dayah* explained:

"Simple living does not mean being poor or not having possessions. Simplicity means treating wealth normally—according to need and without excess. From this simplicity, strength, patience, and self-control are formed" (T. Zainuddin, personal communication, October 9, 2023).

This perspective reflects a practical ethic of moderation. Simplicity is understood as a conscious attitude toward material resources, not as a rejection of them. Within the dayah context, this attitude is also transmitted to students through leadership example, daily routines, and institutional culture. Informants noted that

the moral tone of a dayah often mirrors the lifestyle and values of its leader (*abon*), indicating that *zuhud* operates not only at the individual level but also institutionally. Modern *teungku dayah* further emphasized that professional roles and material facilities do not contradict *zuhud* when they are used responsibly. One informant remarked:

*"People often misunderstand *zuhud* by thinking that using modern facilities or having a good income means loving the world. The problem is not using these things, but becoming dependent on them or making them the goal of life"* (T. Baizawi, personal communication, October 2023).

This view reflects an adaptive interpretation of *zuhud* in response to contemporary realities. Teaching, organizational leadership, and community service often require access to modern tools and resources. For modern *teungku dayah*, refusing these tools is not seen as piety, but rather as impractical and potentially harmful to educational effectiveness. What matters is whether these resources serve ethical and spiritual purposes.

The data also show that several informants associate *zuhud* with key moral virtues such as patience (*sabr*), humility (*tawadhu'*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), and contentment (*qana'ah*). These virtues were repeatedly mentioned as indicators of *zuhud* in practice. One informant explained:

*"A person who is *zuhud* can accept loss sincerely, because he understands that everything belongs to God. Whether it is wealth or position, it can be taken at any time"* (T. Dedi, personal communication, October 2023).

Such statements reveal that *zuhud* is closely linked to emotional and moral resilience. Rather than detachment from society, *zuhud* equips individuals to navigate uncertainty, loss, and social pressure without compromising ethical commitments. This finding resonates with classical Islamic perspectives that frame *zuhud* as a means of disciplining desire and strengthening spiritual stability (Al-Ghazali, 2003).

Another important aspect of implementation concerns leadership and authority. Several informants emphasized that positions of power, including religious authority, must be treated as trust (*amanah*) rather than privilege. One *teungku dayah* noted:

"If someone is given a position, that position should become a medium for worship and service, not a way to enrich oneself or seek recognition" (T. Syuhada, personal communication, October 2023).

This perspective underscores the ethical dimension of *zuhud* in public life. Leadership without *zuhud*, according to informants, risks moral corruption, misuse of authority, and loss of public trust. Conversely, *zuhud*-oriented leadership is expected to foster justice, humility, and concern for communal well-being. Analytically, these findings reinforce the argument that *zuhud* in the modern era operates as an ethical framework rather than a set of ascetic rules. Its implementation is flexible in form but firm in principle, allowing *teungku dayah* to

engage with modern realities while maintaining spiritual discipline. This understanding aligns with modern interpretations of *tasawwuf* that emphasize active moral engagement and social responsibility over withdrawal from society (Hamka, 1994; Shihab, 2002).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *zuhud*, as understood by both traditional and modern *teungku dayah* in Aceh Besar, is not an ascetic rejection of worldly life but an ethical-spiritual orientation that regulates the relationship between human beings, material possessions, and moral responsibility. Across differing educational backgrounds and institutional settings, *zuhud* is consistently framed as inner detachment rather than physical deprivation, allowing worldly engagement to function as a means toward spiritual and ethical goals rather than an ultimate end.

The findings further show that the practice of *zuhud* in the modern era is closely linked to social awareness, leadership ethics, and moral discipline. *Teungku dayah* emphasize that spiritual devotion loses its substance when detached from concern for social injustice, care for the poor, and responsible use of authority. In this sense, *zuhud* operates as a moral filter that shapes daily conduct, professional roles, and communal relations, rather than as a symbolic display of simplicity or poverty.

By situating *zuhud* within contemporary social realities, this study contributes to a contextual understanding of Islamic spirituality that bridges classical *tasawwuf* and modern life. It reinforces the view that *zuhud* remains relevant not as a rigid doctrine, but as a flexible ethical framework capable of guiding moral action amid material abundance and social change. Future research may expand this analysis by examining how *zuhud* is internalized among broader community groups or younger generations, particularly in contexts shaped by digital culture and economic transformation.

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