



Ulama Dayah and Semantic Transformation: Authorized Localization of Arabic Loanwords in Acehnese Rituals

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Abstract

Arabic terms used in Acehnese religious rituals may acquire locally distinctive meanings while retaining their association with Islamic textual traditions. Studies of loanword semantics have documented such changes, but have paid less attention to how localized sacred meanings gain religious legitimacy. This study examined patterns of semantic transformation and the role of Ulama dayah in interpreting and authorizing Arabic loanwords in Acehnese rituals. Using a qualitative interpretive design informed by linguistic ethnography, it drew on interviews with 15 purposively selected informants, participant observation, and document analysis. Arabic source meanings were compared with contextual ritual uses, while recurring relationships among religious instruction, ritual enactment, and community recognition were analyzed. The findings identified semantic narrowing, broadening, specialization, cultural reinterpretation, and sacralization. Localized meanings were sustained through the interaction of lexical adaptation, interpretation by Ulama dayah, repeated ritual use, and collective acceptance. The study developed Authorized Localization of Meaning as a framework connecting semantic transformation with religious authority and social practice. Its theoretical contribution is to identify religious authorization as a mechanism through which changed sacred meanings become legitimate and endure.

A. Introduction

A sacred word can retain its Arabic form yet acquire a meaning that would be difficult to infer from its source-language definition alone. In a religious ritual, that difference has consequences beyond vocabulary: it raises the question of who may interpret the term and why a community accepts the interpretation as legitimate. Arabic-derived words carry religious and epistemic authority across Muslim communities (Dimyathi et al., 2025), but their meanings are also shaped by the social settings in which they are used (Geeraerts, 2009; Sahrasad, 2024). The central problem is therefore not simply that sacred vocabulary changes meaning. It is that a changed meaning can become an accepted part of religious practice while continuing to claim a connection to Arabic textual tradition.

Language-contact research has established that borrowed terms may undergo semantic narrowing, broadening, functional shifts, and cultural reinterpretation. These approaches make it possible to compare a term's source-language meaning with its use in a recipient language. They are less able, on their own, to explain why a particular local interpretation comes to be treated as religiously appropriate. This distinction matters when vocabulary names doctrines or ritual acts: its use is shaped by people recognized as competent to interpret religious texts and guide practice (Andini & Ma'nawi, 2026; Guise, 2024; Widayanti & Dewi, 2024). The study of sacred loanwords must consequently examine both lexical transformation and the social conditions under which transformed meanings gain authority.

Aceh provides a setting in which these processes intersect. Arabic has circulated through classical Islamic texts and dayah educational networks in Acehnese religious life (Feener, 2019; Ismail et al., 2024). Terms including *shamadiyah*, *tawassul*, *talqin mayet*, *fidyah shalat*, *kifarat*, *khanduri molod*, *beureukat*, *dhikee*, *sulok*, and *rateb* appear in practices where inherited religious vocabulary meets locally situated ritual meanings. Research on Arabic-Acehnese contact has documented borrowing alongside phonological and semantic adaptation (Azmi, 2016; de Heer et al., 2023; Kamal, 2025). Studies of Arabic loanwords in Acehnese and other Muslim languages have likewise concentrated on linguistic forms and the outcomes of contact (Muttakin et al., 2026). This scholarship identifies changes in vocabulary, but provides a less complete account of how particular ritual meanings are interpreted, taught, and sustained.

The difficulty becomes clearer when a term is examined within the practices through which people encounter it. Ulama dayah, a term that can be broadly understood

as Acehese traditional Islamic scholars (hereafter referred to as Ulama dayah), transmit religious knowledge, interpret texts, and guide rituals in Acehese society (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024; Ismail et al., 2024; Marzuki et al., 2025). Their explanations can influence how Arabic-derived terms are understood, while repeated ritual use and community recognition can contribute to the persistence of those understandings (Iqbal et al., 2025; Shadiqin et al., 2025). These processes should not be collapsed into a claim that ulama alone determine meaning or that repetition automatically makes an interpretation legitimate. What requires explanation is the relationship among lexical reinterpretation, religious instruction, ritual enactment, and collective acceptance.

The role of Ulama dayah in shaping ritual usage brings into focus a question that existing theories address separately: how does a changed lexical meaning acquire religious legitimacy? Semantic-change approaches explain alteration and recontextualization, but do not fully specify the process of religious authorization (Geeraerts, 2009; Akmal et al., 2022; Davydova, 2024; Marzuki et al., 2025). Symbolic authority helps explain why some actors have a recognized capacity to define legitimate knowledge, yet it does not by itself trace how a transformed term enters recurring ritual practice. Language ideology and enregisterment illuminate beliefs about language and the social recognition of linguistic forms, but recognizing a form is not the same as accepting its localized meaning as religiously valid. The gap lies in the relationship between theories of meaning change and theories of authority: neither alone adequately explains how a transformed sacred meaning becomes both authorized and durable.

To examine that relationship, this study develops Authorized Localization of Meaning (ALM). The framework connects semantic comparison with the interpretation of religious vocabulary, its enactment in ritual practice, and its recognition within the community. ALM treats linguistic change, ritual, and authority as related dimensions of meaning formation rather than separate explanations for the same outcome. It also gives the study a defined analytical focus: whether and how localized meanings move from reinterpretation toward accepted religious usage. The framework does not presume that every term follows an identical sequence or that the process applies unchanged across religious settings. It offers a way to investigate the relationships visible in Acehese evidence while attending to the symbolic dimensions of religious language (Zokirov & Inomjonovna, 2026).

The Aceh case speaks to a question with relevance beyond one language community. Arabic-derived vocabulary also enters vernacular religious education and practice in other Muslim settings, although their institutions and forms of authority may differ. Findings from Aceh cannot establish that the same mechanisms operate everywhere. They can, however, make a comparative problem more precise: under what conditions does locally interpreted sacred vocabulary retain its connection to textual tradition while gaining legitimacy in ritual life? This places the study in wider conversations about language, religion, and symbolic power without assuming that local meanings are either departures from, or exact reproductions of, inherited meanings (Juliansyahzen et al., 2024; Nasyirudin, 2025).

Accordingly, this study examines patterns of semantic transformation in Arabic loanwords used in Aceh religious rituals and investigates how Ulama dayah participate in the interpretation, authorization, and transmission of localized meanings. By relating lexical comparison to religious instruction, ritual enactment, and community recognition, it seeks to explain how changed meanings become accepted and sustained. Its contribution is to connect the study of semantic adaptation with an account of religious legitimation, clarifying why identifying a lexical change is only the first step toward understanding how sacred vocabulary becomes locally meaningful.

B. Method

This study used a qualitative interpretive design informed by linguistic ethnography to examine how Arabic-derived ritual terms acquire localized meanings in Aceh and how those meanings become accepted in religious practice. The design enabled semantic comparison to be combined with observation of language use in its social setting (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Linguistic analysis identified changes in lexical meaning; attention to ritual practice examined how terms were used and reproduced; and analysis of religious authority investigated how interpretations were taught and recognized as legitimate.

Fieldwork took place in Aceh from May to September 2025. Fifteen informants were selected purposively for their sustained experience with dayah education or Aceh religious rituals and their familiarity with the terms studied. Seven were Ulama dayah; the others included dayah teachers, senior santri, alumni, ritual practitioners, and community

members. These positions provided perspectives on textual interpretation, religious instruction, ritual use, and community acceptance. Recruitment continued until additional interviews produced no substantively new patterns within the study's analytical categories.

Data came from participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations covered religious gatherings, sermons, communal prayers, *khanduri*, and other activities in which the selected terms were used. Interviews examined participants' interpretations of the terms, their perceived relationship to Arabic meanings, their ritual functions, and the role of Ulama dayah in teaching or validating particular uses. Dayah manuscripts, sermon transcripts, prayer texts, and teaching materials were examined alongside interview and observation records to compare textual references with contemporary ritual usage.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed and analyzed iteratively. Coding combined concepts drawn from semantic change, symbolic authority, and enregisterment with categories developed through comparison of interviews, observations, documents, and lexical items (Bourdieu, 1991; Fakhira & Amaly, 2024; Geeraerts, 2009). Arabic source meanings were compared with contextual Acehese uses to identify narrowing, broadening, functional shifts, cultural reinterpretation, and sacralization. Claims of authority were examined through accounts and observed instances of who interpreted, validated, or corrected a term and why that interpretation was accepted (Bourdieu, 1991; Junaedi et al., 2025). Recurrent ritual use was examined to assess how localized meanings became recognizable and reproducible.

Comparison across terms, participants, and sources produced four higher-order categories: semantic transformation, religious authorization, ritual enactment, and collective acceptance and institutionalization. Authorized Localization of Meaning was developed from the relationships observed among these categories rather than applied as a predetermined sequence. The model is therefore an analytical interpretation of recurring patterns, not a claim that every term passed through the same stages in a fixed order. Interpretations were checked across interviews, observed practices, and documents; selected interpretations were also discussed with key informants and scholars familiar with Acehese Islamic studies and Arabic linguistics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were informed of the study's purpose and agreed voluntarily to participate. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports, and the data were used for academic purposes.

The study followed the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and agreed voluntarily to participate. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports, and the data were used solely for academic purposes.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion in an integrated manner. The analysis focuses on Arabic loanwords employed in Acehne religious rituals, drawing on data obtained through ritual observations, interviews with *dayah* scholars and ritual practitioners, as well as documentation of religious texts and oral traditions. The analysis was conducted by comparing the original textual meanings of the Arabic terms with their localized ritual meanings in Acehne society, classifying patterns of semantic transformation, and examining the roles of *dayah* scholars' authority, ritual practices, scholarly transmission, and community-based social legitimacy. Accordingly, the semantic transformation of Arabic loanwords in Acehne rituals is understood not merely as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a structured socio-religious process through which meanings are negotiated, reproduced, and institutionalized within local religious traditions.

1. Results

a. Patterns of Semantic Change in Arabic Loanwords Used in Acehne Religious Rituals

The analysis identified 43 Arabic-derived terms used in Acehne religious rituals that exhibited varying degrees of semantic transformation. Comparison between their Arabic source meanings and their contextual uses in Aceh revealed several recurring patterns, including semantic narrowing, broadening, ritual specialization, metonymic shift, cultural reinterpretation, and sacralization. In most cases, the Arabic lexical reference remained recognizable, while its semantic scope or ritual function had been modified in local usage.

Table 1. Representative Patterns of Semantic Change in Arabic Loanwords

Arabic Term	Original Arabic Meaning	Acehne Form	Localized Ritual Meaning in Aceh	Pattern of Semantic Change
صمدية <i>Ṣamadiyyah</i>	Derived from <i>al-Ṣamad</i> , one of the attributes of	<i>Shamadiyah</i>	A collective death ritual combining the recitation of <i>Sūrat al-Ikhlās</i> , <i>dhikr</i> , <i>tahlīl</i> , prayers, communal feasting,	Metonymic shift

Arabic Term	Original Arabic Meaning	Acehnese Form	Localized Ritual Meaning in Aceh	Pattern of Semantic Change
	Allah		and social solidarity under the guidance of <i>teungku</i> or <i>dayah</i> scholars.	
توسل <i>Tawassul</i>	Seeking a means of approach to Allah	<i>Tawassul</i>	A ritualized invocation through al-Fātiḥah, <i>dhikr</i> , <i>tahlil</i> , and the dedication of rewards to the Prophet, religious scholars, ancestors, and the deceased, creating a spiritual network of blessing and intercession.	Semantic broadening and localization
صدقة <i>Ṣadaqah</i>	Giving charity for the sake of Allah	<i>Seudeukah 'amai</i>	Food, rice, money, or other offerings distributed during death-related rituals to participants, religious leaders, and the poor, serving both devotional and social functions.	Semantic narrowing and ritual institutionalization
تلقين ميت <i>Talqin al-Mayyit</i>	Instructing or guiding the deceased	<i>Talqin mayet</i>	A funerary ritual providing spiritual support for the deceased, family members, and the wider community, symbolizing the relationship between the living and the dead.	Semantic narrowing / ritual specialization
فدية صلاة <i>Fidyat al-Ṣalāh</i>	Compensation or redemption for prayer obligations	<i>Fidyah shalat (fidyah seumbahyang)</i>	A ritual practice (<i>tulak breuh</i>) understood not as a direct substitute for missed prayers, but as charity, transfer of merit (<i>iḥdā' al-thawāb</i>), and religious precaution (<i>iḥtiyāt</i>) on behalf of the deceased (Muhammad Zukhdi, 2025).	Semantic narrowing
كفارة <i>Kaffārah</i>	Expiation or atonement	<i>Kifarat</i>	A socio-ritual form of expiation associated with distributing rice (<i>tulak breuh</i>) to the poor during death-related rituals.	Semantic broadening
خَوْرِي <i>Khaūrī</i> (Arabic-Persian origin)	Ritual feast or prayer banquet	<i>Khanduri</i>	A sacred communal feast integrating prayer, charity, collective dining, and social cohesion, serving as a key medium for expressing devotion to the Prophet and communal solidarity.	Semantic broadening and sacralization
مولد <i>Mawlid</i>	Birth	<i>Molod</i>	A large-scale ritual commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad through feasting, <i>dhikr</i> , sermons, blessings, and communal gatherings.	Semantic narrowing
بركة <i>Barakah</i>	Divine blessing or increase in goodness	<i>Beureukat</i>	In the context of <i>Molod</i> celebrations, blessing associated with food, charity, communal gathering, and participation in religious festivities.	Semantic broadening and cultural reinterpretation

Arabic Term	Original Arabic Meaning	Acehnese Form	Localized Ritual Meaning in Aceh	Pattern of Semantic Change
صلوات <i>Ṣhalawāt</i>	Invocations of blessings upon the Prophet	<i>Seulawet</i>	Collective devotional recitations expressing love, reverence, and spiritual attachment to the Prophet, creating a sacred atmosphere.	tation Ritual specializat ion
سلوك <i>Sulūk</i>	To follow a path or spiritual journey	<i>Sulok</i>	A spiritual path involving <i>dhikr</i> , retreat (<i>khalwah</i>), fasting, and guidance from a Sufi master to attain closeness to Allah.	Semantic specializat ion
راتب <i>Rātīb</i>	Regular or prescribed litany	<i>Rateb</i>	A collective and rhythmic form of <i>dhikr</i> performed repeatedly under the leadership of religious scholars in ritual assemblies.	Semantic narrowing
شفاعة <i>Syafā'ah</i>	Intercession or mediation	<i>Syafaat</i>	The expectation of spiritual assistance through <i>dhikr</i> , blessings upon the Prophet, and devotion to the Prophet as a means of attaining divine favor.	Semantic broadening

The data show that semantic transformation did not follow a single direction. Narrowing and ritual specialization were particularly visible when broad Arabic concepts became associated with specific ritual practices. *Mawlid*, for example, shifted from the general lexical meaning of “birth” to the specific commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad, while *rateb* became associated with a particular form of collective and rhythmic *dhikr*. Broadening occurred when an Arabic term acquired additional ritual and social references, as observed in *tawassul*, *kifarat*, and *syafaat*.

Comparable transformations can be observed in terms such as *khanduri*, *beureukat*, *sulok*, and *rateb*. Within Acehnese society, these terms have developed into ritual concepts with broader social and religious functions than those implied by their original lexical meanings. *Khanduri*, for instance, no longer refers merely to a communal feast but has become a sacred social space that integrates prayer, charity, communal gathering, and expressions of devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. Likewise, *beureukat* is understood as a spiritual value embedded in food, togetherness, and collective religious activities that are believed to convey divine blessings to both individuals and the wider community.

Field evidence further indicates that these semantic transformations emerge through repeated social use and collective acceptance. As T.S.H. stated:

“Khanduri dalam masyarakat Aceh tidak lagi sekadar dimaknai sebagai jamuan makan. Khanduri telah menjadi ruang kebersamaan yang menggabungkan doa, ibadah, silaturahmi, sedekah, dan penghormatan terhadap tradisi keagamaan yang diwariskan oleh para ulama.”

[In Acehese society, khanduri is no longer understood merely as a communal feast. It has become a collective space that integrates prayer, worship, social solidarity, charity, and respect for religious traditions transmitted by the ulama.] (Interview with T.S.H., August 8, 2025)

This statement illustrates how the meaning of *khanduri* has expanded beyond its original lexical reference to a feast and evolved into a broader socio-religious institution that embodies both ritual and communal functions.

Similar patterns were observed in the use of *dhikee* and *talqin mayet*. Abon Tajuddin noted that *dhikee* no longer refers solely to the individual act of remembering God but has developed into a collective ritual practice that reinforces religious identity through communal dhikr gatherings. Likewise, *talqin mayet* is no longer understood merely as the act of instructing a dying or deceased person; rather, it has become an integral component of funeral rituals that serves as a spiritual reminder for both the bereaved family and the broader community (Interview with A.B., August 12, 2025).

Cultural reinterpretation is particularly evident in the meaning of *beureukat*. As K.B.A. explained:

“Beureukat dalam masyarakat Aceh tidak hanya dimaknai sebagai keberkahan dalam arti teologis, tetapi juga melekat pada makanan, sedekah, kebersamaan, dan perayaan maulid Nabi.”

[In Acehese society, beureukat is understood not only as a theological blessing but also as a value attached to food, charity, communal solidarity, and the celebration of the Prophet's birth.] (Interview with K.B.A., August 11, 2025)

This statement indicates that *beureukat* has undergone a process of cultural reinterpretation in which an abstract theological concept is transformed into a socially embedded and ritually enacted meaning. Consequently, the term functions not only as a religious expression but also as a symbolic resource that reinforces social cohesion and communal spirituality within Acehese ritual life (Masykur, 2025).

Similar semantic specialization was observed in *dhikee* and *talqin mayet*. A.B. described *dhikee* as referring in practice to collective dhikr gatherings rather than solely to individual remembrance of God. The same informant described *talqin mayet* as an established component of Acehese funerary practice with relevance not only to the

deceased but also to the bereaved family and attending community (A.B., interview, August 12, 2025).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that semantic change in Arabic loanwords used in Acehnese religious rituals cannot be understood solely as a linguistic process. New meanings emerge through the interaction of Islamic scholarly traditions, ritual practices, local cultural contexts, and repeated social usage. As a result, these terms continue to retain connections to their original Arabic meanings while simultaneously reflecting the religious and social realities of contemporary Acehnese society.

Across the analyzed terms, therefore, the original Arabic meanings were generally not replaced entirely. Instead, the data revealed varying degrees of retention and localization: some terms became semantically narrower, others acquired additional meanings, while others became associated with specific ritual functions or locally recognizable religious practices.

b. From Localized Meanings to Social Legitimation

Analysis of interviews, observations, and documentary materials identified four recurrent categories associated with the formation and stabilization of localized meanings: semantic reinterpretation, religious authorization, ritual enactment, and collective acceptance. These categories occurred across different participant groups and were also observed in ritual settings and religious teaching practices.

Table 2. Empirical Categorization of Localized Meaning Formation

Empirical Category	Recurring Evidence	Participant Groups/Sources	Observed Outcome
Semantic reinterpretation	Adaptation of Arabic meanings to local religious practices and social contexts	Ulama, teachers, ritual practitioners; interviews and documents	Context-specific meanings
Religious authorization	Explanation, teaching, textual interpretation, and validation of terminology	Ulama dayah, teachers, senior santri	Recognized religious meaning
Ritual enactment	Repeated use in <i>khanduri</i> , <i>dhikee</i> , talqin, Molod, sermons, and communal prayers	Ulama, ritual practitioners, community members; observations	Recurrent and recognizable usage
Collective acceptance	Continued community use and intergenerational transmission	Alumni, practitioners, community members	Stabilized localized meaning

The findings indicate that the semantic transformation of Arabic loanwords in Acehese religious rituals does not occur spontaneously but emerges through a social process involving the authority of dayah scholars, ritual practices, and community acceptance. While the original Arabic lexical forms are largely preserved, their meanings within the religious life of Acehese society have undergone adaptation in response to local socio-cultural needs and contexts.

Arabic-derived terms employed in Acehese religious rituals are not always maintained according to their original etymological meanings. Rather, these terms undergo semantic adaptation as they become embedded within the socio-religious practices of the community. The meanings attached to such terms are continuously reinterpreted to align with local cultural realities, religious experiences, and communal expectations. The first category, semantic reinterpretation, was evident when participants distinguished between the lexical meaning of an Arabic term and its practical meaning in Acehese religious life. N.AR., for example, described this process in relation to *fidyah* shalat:

“Penggunaan kata serapan Arab dalam praktik ritual keagamaan di Aceh, pada umumnya mengalami penyesuaian dengan konteks budaya dan kebutuhan sosial masyarakat setempat. Oleh karena itu, pemaknaan terhadap istilah-istilah Arab tidak selalu dipertahankan secara ketat berdasarkan makna etimologis asalnya, melainkan mengalami reinterpretasi sesuai dengan kebutuhan dan praktik lokal. Misalnya, istilah fidyah shalat secara leksikal tetap mempertahankan bentuk aslinya, namun implementasinya dalam masyarakat mengalami penyesuaian.”

[The use of Arabic loanwords in Acehese religious rituals generally undergoes adaptation to local cultural contexts and social needs. Consequently, the meanings of these Arabic terms are not always maintained strictly according to their original etymological meanings but are reinterpreted in accordance with local practices and social realities. For example, the term fidyah shalat retains its original lexical form, yet its implementation within the community has been adapted to local circumstances.] (Interview with N.AR., August 13, 2025)

These observations suggest that semantic transformation does not sever the connection between the borrowed terms and their original Arabic meanings. Rather, meanings evolve through adaptation to the socio-cultural context and religious practices of Acehese society. In the case of *fidyah* shalat, the Arabic lexical form is retained, while its practical application and interpretation have been adjusted to accommodate prevailing local religious traditions.

Field evidence further demonstrates that dayah scholars play a central role in shaping, interpreting, and legitimizing the meanings of Arabic-derived terms employed in religious rituals. Abon Tajuddin explained that community understanding of these terms does not emerge automatically; instead, it is cultivated through sustained processes of religious instruction, preaching, and spiritual guidance provided by religious scholars (Interview, A.T., 12 August 2025). Similar findings were reported by N.AR., who emphasized that Arabic-derived terms gain acceptance within the community because they are repeatedly taught and practiced through religious study circles, sermons, and various ritual activities (Interview, N.AR., 13 August 2025).

These findings indicate that semantic transformation is not merely the result of linguistic adaptation but is also shaped by institutionalized mechanisms of religious transmission. Through continuous teaching and ritual repetition, dayah scholars function as key agents in preserving the lexical forms of Arabic while simultaneously facilitating the reinterpretation of their meanings within the local religious and cultural framework. As a result, the authority of religious scholars contributes significantly to the social legitimacy and long-term sustainability of these transformed meanings in Acehese ritual life.

Beyond the authority of religious scholars, the construction of meaning is also facilitated through the educational system of the dayah. T.F. explained that Arabic-derived terms are introduced through classical Islamic texts, interpreted by teachers, and subsequently transmitted to students before being incorporated into broader social and religious practices (Interview, T.F., 11 August 2025). In this regard, the dayah functions not only as an institution of religious education but also as a crucial site for the transmission, preservation, and reinterpretation of religious terminology. Through this process, linguistic meanings are reproduced across generations and embedded within the religious worldview of the community.

Repeated ritual practice further reinforces the localization of meaning. T.S.H. noted that terms such as *khanduri* and *dhikee* have acquired broader and context-specific meanings because of their continuous use in various communal religious activities (Interview, T.S.H., 8 August 2025). The recurrent use of these terms within ritual settings strengthens collective familiarity with their localized interpretations, enabling them to become socially recognized and culturally meaningful components of Acehese religious traditions.

Another factor contributing to the sustainability of localized meanings is community acceptance. N.AR. explained that terms initially introduced by religious

scholars are subsequently adopted and transmitted across generations, eventually becoming integral elements of the religious vocabulary of Acehese society (Interview, N.AR., 13 August 2025). A similar view was expressed by T.S.H., who argued that the strong trust placed in religious scholars facilitates the acceptance and continued use of these terms in everyday religious life (Interview, T.S.H., 8 August 2025). Community endorsement therefore serves as an important mechanism through which localized meanings gain social legitimacy and cultural permanence.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the semantic transformation of Arabic loanwords in Acehese religious rituals is produced through the interaction of three mutually reinforcing processes: the transmission of religious knowledge, the repetitive enactment of ritual practices, and the collective acceptance of the community. These interconnected mechanisms contribute not only to the formation of localized meanings but also to their preservation, institutionalization, and intergenerational transmission. Consequently, the meanings attached to Arabic-derived ritual terms are sustained as integral components of the religious-linguistic repertoire of Acehese society.

This pattern suggests that semantic transformation in Acehese religious rituals extends beyond a purely linguistic phenomenon. Rather, it represents a socio-religious process in which religious authority, educational institutions, ritual performance, and community legitimacy interact to shape the evolution of meaning. The persistence of Arabic lexical forms alongside locally adapted meanings illustrates how global Islamic linguistic heritage is continuously negotiated within the cultural and religious context of Aceh, producing forms of meaning that are simultaneously rooted in Islamic tradition and responsive to local social realities.

A cross-comparison of the patterns above reveals a recurring empirical sequence. First, the term of Arabic origin reflects a localized semantic interpretation. Second, this localized interpretation appears in explanations or teachings associated with *dayah* religious scholars. Third, the meaning is repeatedly enacted through recognizable ritual practices. Finally, participants describe this established usage as familiar, acceptable, and passed down within the community. This pattern is not limited to a single lexical item or informant but recurs across multiple terms and data sources.

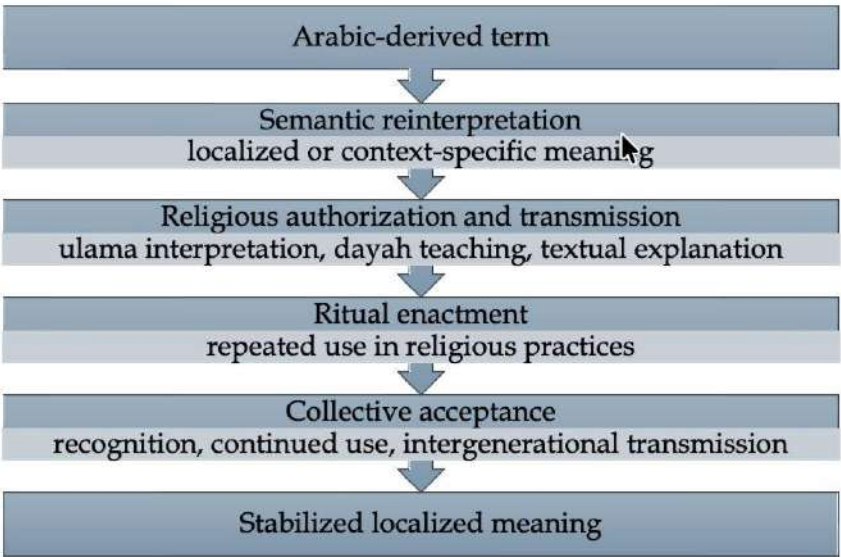


Figure 1. Empirical Progression of Localized Meaning Formation

This recurrent progression constitutes the empirical foundation from which the Authorized Localization of Meaning (ALM) model was developed. At the level of the Results, the data establish the recurrence and relationships of these categories; their theoretical interpretation and implications for semantic change, symbolic authority, enregisterment, and religious institutionalization are addressed in the Discussion.

2. Discussion

The Acehnese findings point to a problem that descriptions of lexical change leave unresolved. Comparing an Arabic term with its Acehnese ritual use shows how its meaning has narrowed, broadened, or acquired a specialized function. It does not explain why that use becomes recognized as religiously appropriate. Semantic-change theory provides the first part of the explanation by identifying transformations produced through language contact and contextual use (Geeraerts, 2009; Akmal et al., 2022; Davydova, 2024; Ahmad Bahauddin AM et al., 2025). The present study adds a second part: in religious practice, a localized meaning may also need to be interpreted, validated, and reproduced within relationships of religious authority. Lexical adaptation and religious legitimation are therefore related processes with distinct analytical functions.

This distinction prevents two common assumptions. A change in meaning does not necessarily break a term’s connection to its Arabic textual inheritance, and frequent

use does not necessarily make the changed meaning legitimate. Terms associated with ritual acts may retain recognizable inherited meanings while gaining functions shaped by local practice. Their continued use also depends on whether participants regard those functions as religiously acceptable. Research on language contact and semantic adaptation helps identify changes in form and meaning, including those documented in Acehese (Aziz et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2024; Zokirov & Inomjonovna, 2026). Yet the Acehese evidence shows why linguistic comparison must be joined to an account of how religious interpretations gain standing.

The relationship between adaptation and legitimation is clearest when meaning is considered within the settings where a term is taught and used. Dayah education, sermons, communal gatherings, and ritual leadership allow interpretations to circulate beyond an individual speaker. An explanation offered by a religious scholar can become familiar through repeated practice, while community members help sustain or modify its use. Studies of religious language in other Indonesian cultural settings likewise direct attention to the relation between lexicon and social practice, although they address different traditions and questions (Iqbal et al., 2025; Masykur, 2025; Pratiwy et al., 2023). The contribution of the Acehese case is to make the role of interpretive authorization within that relationship more explicit.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic authority clarifies why participants do not necessarily treat all interpretations as equally persuasive. Ulama dayah hold a recognized position in the teaching and interpretation of Islamic knowledge in Aceh (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024; Shadiqin et al., 2025). Their influence can extend from judgments about religious practice to the vocabulary through which that practice is described. This is the specific function identified here as semantic authority. It concerns the recognized capacity to explain, validate, or question a term's religious meaning. It does not mean that scholars invent local uses independently of the community or exercise complete control over subsequent change.

Semantic authority becomes consequential through transmission. An interpretation remains a scholarly explanation unless people encounter it in teaching and enact it in religious practice. Ritual makes a term's localized use recurrent and publicly recognizable; community participation allows that use to continue beyond the occasion on which it was first explained. Authority, repetition, and acceptance thus perform different tasks. Religious authority can lend credibility to an interpretation, ritual can provide a

setting for its reproduction, and collective recognition can help stabilize it. The findings suggest a relationship among these processes, rather than proving that every Acehese ritual term follows an identical chronology or that any single process is sufficient.

This relational account also gives community members an interpretive role. Trust in Ulama dayah may make an explanation easier to accept, but meanings are sustained through use by teachers, practitioners, and other participants. An account based only on institutional power would overlook this participation; an account based only on everyday use would overlook the unequal authority attached to religious interpretation. Research on community language ideologies shows how beliefs about appropriate language are connected to social practice (Kiramba et al., 2023). The Acehese case specifies a further question within that relationship: how does an interpretation of sacred vocabulary become recognized as a legitimate religious meaning?

The findings can therefore extend symbolic authority theory without turning social acceptance into a theological judgment. A term's dominant local use need not be linguistically superior to other possible uses, and its acceptance by a community does not independently prove that every associated practice is doctrinally uncontested. The study instead explains a social process through which meanings acquire standing. This distinction is relevant to scholarship on contested religious authority, where recognition of an actor or interpretation is itself a social question (Nasyirudin, 2025). It allows analysis of power in language while keeping the scope of the empirical claim clear.

The connection between inherited meaning and localized practice is especially important for Arabic-derived ritual vocabulary. Acehese uses of terms such as *shamadiyah*, *tawassul*, *fidyah shalat*, *kifarat*, *dhikee*, *sulok*, and *rateb* cannot be described adequately as simple substitutions for Arabic definitions. Their meanings are encountered through textual reference, explanation, and participation in local rituals. Work on *fidyat al-ṣalāh* in Acehese society, for example, places the term within a broader social and ritual setting rather than treating it only as a lexical item (Zukhdi, 2025; Setiawan et al., 2026). The present analysis asks how such locally situated uses can retain a claimed connection to Islamic tradition while gaining recognition within community practice.

These relationships inform the Authorized Localization of Meaning (ALM) model. ALM links inherited textual meaning, semantic localization, authoritative mediation, ritual enactment, collective recognition, and the stabilization of local usage. It does not

propose a new category of narrowing or broadening. Its contribution is to identify the social and religious processes through which a localized meaning may become durable. The components are analytical relationships, not compulsory stages through which every term must pass in a fixed order. An interpretation may be taught before it becomes widely used, while established practice may also prompt further explanation. ALM accommodates both possibilities without treating semantic change as entirely spontaneous or entirely directed from above.

ALM also clarifies how the approaches used in this study differ and connect. Lexical semantics explains what changes in a term's meaning (Geeraerts, 2009). Symbolic authority explains why certain interpretations may carry greater legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991). Enregisterment and language ideology examine how forms become socially recognizable and associated with particular practices or identities (Fakhira & Amaly, 2024; Kiramba et al., 2023). ALM brings these concerns together around a narrower question: how does a localized meaning of religiously significant vocabulary become accepted as appropriate usage? Its value depends on specifying that question rather than claiming to replace established accounts of lexical change.

The model's limits follow from the same argument. Many borrowed words change through ordinary communicative use without requiring religious validation. ALM is most relevant where lexical meanings carry normative significance and where participants recognize actors or institutions as competent to interpret them. Ritual vocabularies and terms associated with religious teaching are plausible domains; the findings do not establish that legal, political, commercial, or everyday loanwords are governed in the same way. Scholarship on semantic and social meaning reinforces the need to examine change within its specific social setting rather than apply one mechanism to every lexical item (Sandow et al., 2023; Mundiri, et al., 2026). ALM should therefore be evaluated by its explanatory precision within religious contexts.

This precision gives the study a contribution across linguistics, anthropology, and the sociology of religion. Linguistic comparison identifies localized meanings; attention to ritual shows where they are enacted and repeated; analysis of religious authority explains why particular interpretations may be received as legitimate. The relationship among these perspectives is the argument, rather than the mere presence of multiple disciplinary terms. Research on religious discourse and Arabic in Acehese settings provides context for this integration (Firdaus et al., 2024; Jannah et al., 2025; Pratiwy et al., 2023). The

Acehnese evidence shows how language can function simultaneously as inherited vocabulary, a resource for ritual action, and an object of institutional interpretation.

Its international significance lies in a comparative problem that extends beyond the Acehnese terms themselves. Arabic-derived religious vocabularies circulate among communities with different vernacular languages, educational institutions, and arrangements of authority. The findings from Aceh cannot demonstrate that authorization takes the same form elsewhere. They do, however, offer a framework for asking who is recognized as able to interpret sacred terms, how those interpretations are enacted, and why some become durable while others remain contested. Scholarship calling for a sociolinguistics of Islam underscores the value of examining Islamic language practices through their social settings rather than through lexical inheritance alone (Bhatt et al., 2025; Marzuki et al., 2025; Ashadi et al., 2026).

The role of Ulama dayah in Aceh invites comparison with religious settings in which interpretive authority is organized differently. Scholarship on Acehnese dayah and religious authority helps explain why institutional recognition matters in the present case (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024; Shadiqin et al., 2025; Ikhwan et al., 2026). Elsewhere, religious interpretations may circulate through mosques, madrasas, Sufi networks, universities, or state religious institutions. These differences raise a question that the Acehnese evidence cannot answer: when several actors claim interpretive authority, how do communities decide which localized meanings to accept? Comparing such settings would clarify whether ALM describes a relationship specific to dayah-centered practice or one that takes different forms under other arrangements of religious authority (Bhatt et al., 2025; Setiawan et al., 2026).

Multilingual and digitally connected Muslim communities may complicate this relationship further. Religious vocabulary can be encountered through local instruction alongside transnational scholarship, online preaching, and interaction across languages. Research on community language ideologies suggests that judgments about appropriate usage are shaped by social context and may differ among groups (Kiramba et al., 2023; Sofi et al., 2026). The Acehnese findings do not establish how competing interpretations are resolved in these settings. They do, however, identify what a comparative study should examine: who participants regard as credible interpreters, where particular meanings are enacted and repeated, and how those meanings gain or lose acceptance. Such inquiry would test the reach of ALM while allowing the relationship between language and religious authority to vary across communities (Bhatt et al., 2025; Wibowo et al., 2026).

The international relevance of ALM must be interpreted in light of this study's limitations. The research was conducted in Aceh with a relatively small, purposively selected group of informants and gave particular attention to Ulama dayah. It therefore does not capture the full range of Acehese religious orientations, community perspectives, or institutions that may shape ritual language (Mustofa et al., 2024). The analysis was also limited to Arabic-derived terms used in religious rituals; meanings in legal, educational, political, or everyday contexts may develop through different mechanisms. Because the study is qualitative and context-specific, its findings support analytical rather than statistical generalization. Finally, the evidence identifies relationships among semantic transformation, religious authority, ritual enactment, and collective recognition, but cannot establish that these processes follow a fixed sequence or have the same relative importance in other Muslim societies.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the localized meanings of Arabic loanwords in Acehese religious rituals are shaped by more than lexical adaptation. The findings connect changes in meaning with interpretation by Ulama dayah, recurrent ritual use, and community recognition. Authorized Localization of Meaning (ALM) brings these relationships together to explain how a transformed sacred term may become accepted and sustained within local religious practice. Its principal contribution is to distinguish the linguistic process through which a meaning changes from the social process through which that meaning gains religious legitimacy. This distinction connects semantic-change research with the study of ritual and symbolic authority without treating locally developed meanings as necessarily disconnected from Arabic textual tradition.

The study also demonstrates the value of examining a term's textual reference alongside its use in teaching and ritual settings. Such an approach makes visible the relationship between inherited vocabulary and the institutions and practices through which communities interpret it. ALM remains an analytical model developed from Acehese evidence, rather than an explanation already established for other religious communities. Its value lies in specifying relationships that can be examined across contexts where sacred language and vernacular practice meet.

Future research should address the limits identified in the Discussion. Studies involving a wider range of Acehese communities and religious institutions could examine

whether meanings are authorized differently beyond dayah-centered settings. Research on legal, educational, political, and everyday Arabic-derived vocabulary could assess whether the mechanisms identified for ritual terms also apply to other lexical domains. Comparative studies in Muslim communities with different structures of religious authority should test whether semantic transformation, authoritative mediation, ritual enactment, and collective recognition occur in similar relationships or carry different weight. Longitudinal studies could then examine how accepted meanings persist, change, or become contested over time. The question opened by this study is therefore not only how sacred words acquire local meanings, but also how those meanings gain legitimacy and endure.

The Acehnese case shows that the transformation of sacred vocabulary is not complete when a word acquires a local meaning. What matters equally is how that meaning is interpreted, enacted in ritual life, and recognized as legitimate relationship that places religious authority and community practice at the heart of how sacred language endures.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests, personal relationships, institutional affiliations, or conflicts of interest that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly and QuillBot solely for language editing, grammar correction, sentence refinement, and readability improvement. All research activities, including conceptualization, study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions, were conducted entirely by the authors. All tool-generated outputs were carefully reviewed and edited, and the

authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and content of the publication.

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