



**The Dialectic of Art and Religion: An Axiological
Study of Wayang Da'wah in The History of
the Spread of Islam in Indonesia**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study, conducted as a literature review, is to explore the axiological aspects related to the function of wayang dakwah in the history of the spread of Islam on the island of Java (Indonesia). This study employs a content analysis approach. Data were obtained from various academic sources discussing wayang dakwah in the history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia. The findings indicate that, historically, wayang dakwah has been passed down from generation to generation as an integral part of cultural arts, closely linked to religious values within the history of Javanese Muslim society. In practice, wayang dakwah has made a significant contribution to the dissemination of Islamic teachings, encompassing socio-cultural, political, religious, and other aspects. The contribution of this study emphasises that the acculturation between cultural arts and religion can create an effective and accommodating form of artistic media for disseminating religious values within local communities.

Keywords: *Studies in Axiology, History, and Wayang Dakwah.*



A. Introduction

Historically, Islam and culture have had an inseparable relationship. Both shape and influence each other in daily life. Islamic teachings are easily conveyed and accepted by the faithful because they are conveyed through culture; conversely, the Islamic teachings that are internalized and practiced by the faithful give rise to new cultural expressions in human life. Islamic teachings contain universal values for life; conversely, Islam as a doctrine is not rigid in the face of the times and their changes. Islam consistently expresses its values in flexible forms when encountering societies with diverse cultures, customs, or traditions. As a historical reality, religion and culture can influence one another because both contain values and symbols (Amaliyah, 2015). This is the history of wayang dakwah within the Islamic civilization in Indonesia, which is the subject of this study.

Historically speaking, the history and development of wayang have evolved in tandem with the cultural growth of Javanese society, in terms of its attributes, functions, and roles. Wayang has been passed down through hundreds of generations, accompanied by various historical events and developments. The traditions and culture of wayang have become an integral part of the philosophy and way of life of Javanese society.

The purpose of this study is to explore the axiological aspects related to the function of wayang dakwah in the history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia. This study can be categorized as qualitative research in the form of a literature review using a content analysis approach. The research data utilizes various scholarly works that describe the historical dynamics of the role of wayang dakwah in the history of Indonesian Islamic society. The research data was obtained through documentation techniques. Meanwhile, data analysis was conducted through the stages of reduction, presentation, and verification.

There are various relevant prior studies, including Mukti's research, which explains that the term wayang dakwah was used by preachers in Java to convey Islamic missionary material (Mukti, 2008). Siswanto's research further indicates that wayang in Indonesia has been known to communities outside Java—and indeed around the world for hundreds of years. Wayang is not only an art form but also a medium for disseminating values, including religious and moral values as well as social and political values (Siswanto, 2018). Research by Suryadi, Anggraeni, and Tanszil indicates that wayang has been a rich cultural heritage since the time of the Indonesian people's ancestors. From the very beginning, wayang has been used as a medium for disseminating educational values, art, culture, and even religion (Suryadi et al., 2020). Next, Bayu Anggoro's research explains that when Islam arrived and spread across the island of Java, the medium through which Islam was disseminated was inextricably linked to the art of wayang. Wayang served as a

medium for conveying the values embedded in the messages of Islamic preaching (Anggoro et al., 2018)

Unlike the previous studies mentioned above, this research focuses on a holistic exploration of the role of wayang dakwah in the history of Islamic civilization in Indonesia, particularly in Java. This study is urgently needed because, both theoretically and practically, it can contribute to enriching the historical study of wayang dakwah in Java and is expected to serve as a model of da'wah that accommodates local cultural wisdom for preachers in Indonesia in particular, and international preachers in general. Therefore, this study was conducted.

B. The Relationship Between Religion and Culture

The relationship between religion and culture can be observed in religious expressions characterized by strong local traditions (low tradition) influencing the original character of formal religion (high tradition), and vice versa they mutually influence one another, ranging from language to socio-anthropology, a process known as the dialectic of religion and culture. A community's religious traditions arise from the patterns of interaction between socio-cultural values and mainstream Islamic values (Azizah, 2017). The practice of a syncretic form of religion a blend of two local cultures and Islam has, in reality, sparked debate within the Muslim community. Some people view this fusion or compromise between culture and religion as giving rise to idolatry, superstition, and myth.

Taylor states that any religion, at its core, teaches belief in spirits and belief in a source of inspiration in life. A religion, with its set of doctrinal rules, is a construct of its creators, while myths are the product of human cognition. If through formal religion, then one must believe in the concepts and metaphors of the respective religious texts. Meanwhile, if through non-formal religion, one is led to believe in the results of one's own imagination systematically and philosophically conceptualized which hold meaning in reality, known as myths (Lersen and Tylor, 2013).

Clifford Geertz's perspective reinforces the logic of the argument above. According to him, religion is not merely a matter of the spirit; rather, there is an intense relationship between religion as a source of values and religion as a source of cognition. First, religion serves as a pattern for human behavior. It acts as a guide that directs human actions. Second, religion is a pattern of human behavior. Religion is considered the result of human knowledge and experience, which has often institutionalized itself into a mythical force. Therefore, in this second perspective, religion is often understood as part of a cultural system, where the effectiveness of its teachings is sometimes no less than that of formal religion. That is why myths are an inevitability, just as religion itself is an inevitability for humanity. (Syam, 2008).

Ernest Gellner states that within every "high tradition," there is inevitably a "low tradition." Religion is not portrayed solely through its high tradition—that is,

through the literal text alone—but also through its religious social behavior and experience, meaning a religion that has been significantly influenced by local tradition. Similarly, M. Arkoun notes that Islam with a capital “I” is always accompanied by Islam with a lowercase “i.”

Religion manifests itself in the midst of society, adapting to the times, and is no longer a pure representation of revelation detached from the subjectivity of human interpretation, but has interacted with the pluralistic reality of human life. The religiosity present in society is the result of a compromise between divine teachings and human subjective reasoning. This compromising religiosity gives rise to myths within society, particularly in Java. This perspective suggests that when we believe in the truth of a particular scholar’s interpretation, we are simultaneously embracing the myths of that specific interpreter. Interpretation is not a pure divine revelation but rather a synthesis of perspectives: the creator’s intent embedded within the text’s meaning and human perspectives on the subject matter of the text’s teachings (Ridwan, 2004).

Religion, as understood by the scholars mentioned above, seems to have legitimized the interaction between religion and local cultural wisdom; indeed, the relationship between the two is viewed as an inevitable reality. Geertz also uncovered some interesting findings. Geertz states that the Islamization of Java carried out, among others, by Sunan Kalijaga brought the Hindu world of wayang into the Islamic world of the holy scriptures.

Thus, Islamization in Java was carried out by accommodating local traditions and dynamism. This is certainly different from Geertz’s findings in Morocco, where Islam was developed by Lyusi in a manner that opposed local traditions and dynamism, through a purificatory approach.

The accommodative pattern of Javanese Islamization, which absorbs local traditions and dynamism, is reflected in various current religious traditions and practices. Ritual practices that have since become traditions illustrate the pattern of acculturation between Islam and Javanese culture, such as wayang, sekaten, and ceremonies during major religious festivals. The pattern of Javanese Islamization exhibits a high degree of tolerance toward other cultures or adherents of other religions. Anderson’s findings in his work “Mythology and Tolerance of the Javanese” state that the Javanese possess a high degree of tolerance toward adherents of other religions (Roibin, 2018).

C. Ontological Discourse on Da'wah

Linguistically, the word “dakwah” derives from the root words da’a, yadh’u, and dakwatan, which mean to invite, call out, summon, invite, ask for help, plead, pray, encourage toward something, and bring about change through words, deeds,

and actions. This meaning is derived from the word “dakwah” in the Qur’an, which appears 198 times in various forms across 55 surahs and 176 verses.(Basit, 2013)..

Upon examination, the verses related to da’wah have two meanings: first, a call to people to enter Paradise; and second, da’wah that signifies a call or invitation toward sin or toward Hell (Dakwah Lis Syayatin). Thus, there is what is known as Islamic da’wah and pre-Islamic da’wah, which is da’wah that leads to Hell as its ultimate destination. Based on these definitions, da’wah encompasses both positive and negative meanings. Historically, the term da’wah has been used with a positive connotation.

In technical terms, dakwah, according to Muhammad Abu al-Fath al-Bayanuni, is the act of conveying and teaching Islam to humanity and applying it in human life. A similar meaning is articulated by Awaludin Pimay, who defines dakwah as an invitation, a call, a plea, an appeal, a defense, and other synonymous meanings. (Pimay, 2005).

According to Abu Bakar Zakaria, as quoted by Ali Aziz, da’wah is an effort to educate the public, carried out by scholars or those with religious knowledge—whether in worldly or religious matters—with the aim of fostering peace, security, well-being, and inner and outer happiness.(Aziz, 2019). Meanwhile, according to Abdul Karim Zaidan, da’wah is inviting people to the path of Allah, in accordance with verse 108 of Surah Yusuf in the Qur’an (Ghazali, 2020). Meanwhile, according to Quthb, as quoted by Dalinur, da’wah, in his view, is an effort to urge or invite people to follow Islamic sharia as a way of life, and not to follow a preacher or a group(Dalinur, 2011) Thus, the primary focus of da'wah is ensuring that Islam, with all its teachings, is widely accepted by society.

Considering the various definitions of da’wah, it can be concluded that it refers to the effort to invite people to embrace the Islamic faith and practice Islamic teachings in all aspects of life. Dakwah contains several key elements, namely: (1) *At-Taujih*, which is guiding people by providing life guidance and a good way of life for the community to follow, and informing them of the paths in life that must be avoided; (2) *At-Taghyir*, which is changing and improving the condition of society or individuals toward a way of life based on Islamic values, away from a previous state that tended toward immorality and sin; (3) *At-Tabsir*, which involves instilling positive hope regarding Islamic values when applied in society (Qodaruddin, 2017). Secara garis besar, dakwah diartikan sebagai segala upaya atau aktivitas yang pada tujuannya menyampaikan ajaran Islam kepada orang lain agar dijadikan pedoman hidup dalam menjalani berbagai aktivitas kehidupan sesuai dengan tujuan diciptakannya manusia yaitu beribadah kepada Allah.

The da'wah approach is rooted in a human-centered perspective that places great value on the human person. This approach, which focuses on other da'wah partners, utilizes various aspects of social and community life. This model of da'wah includes: the socio-political approach, the socio-cultural approach, the socio-

economic approach, and the socio-psychological approach. All of the above approaches can be simplified into two categories: the structural approach to da'wah and the cultural approach to da'wah (Aziz, 2019).

In practical terms, this approach requires a persuasive and contextually appropriate paradigm and strategy for da'wah (Aini et al. 2026). Especially in the digital era, life requires effective strategies and media to spread Islamic values in the public sphere (Utami et al. 2026). In this context, Islamic da'wah activities have a strategic role and can become a medium for transforming educational values critically regarding social problems in modern community life (Mastori et al. 2026)..

Based on the explanation above, there are two approaches to da'wah: the preacher-centered approach and the recipient-centered approach. The preacher-centered approach requires the elements of da'wah to be tailored to the preacher's capabilities. The recipient-centered approach focuses the elements of da'wah on fostering the recipient's receptiveness.

D. An Axiological Review of the Role of Wayang Dakwah in the Civilization of the Javanese Muslim Community

Wayang Dakwah, a form of traditional Javanese performing art rich in religious values, has become an integral part of Javanese culture. Featuring leather puppets and profound stories, Wayang Dakwah performances are not merely entertainment but also a means of conveying Islamic teachings. Wayang kulit has played a significant role in the development of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. Throughout the historical journey of Islamic da'wah in Indonesia, the wayang medium has been regarded as the most effective and down-to-earth method for spreading Islam.

Wayang Dakwah has also become an integral part of Javanese culture, blending traditional performing arts with profound religious messages. Wayang performances have greatly aided the spread of Islam across the Indonesian archipelago, ensuring that da'wah messages delivered by the dalang (preacher) are easily accepted by people of all walks of life.

Over time, wayang evolved as a medium for Islamic da'wah and propagation, with the Wali (Islamic saints) employing approaches ranging from psychology and history to pedagogy and even politics. In the past, wayang performances were held in mosques, and the public was free to attend; before entering the mosque to watch the performance, one simply needed to perform wudu and recite the shahadah first..

Wayang dakwah aims to spread Islamic teachings through staged stories. Its origins are closely tied to the spread of Islam in Indonesia during the 15th century, known as the Islamization period, when art and culture served as effective means of spreading the religion. During that time, Javanese wayang characters such as Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong were utilized to convey Islamic teachings.

Wayang stories were adapted to align with Islamic values, particularly in Wayang Kulit Purwa, which blends traditional Javanese characters with narratives from Islamic history. This reflects the result of acculturation between Javanese culture and Islamic teachings, creating a unique and highly valuable art form for disseminating religious messages.

In the 15th century, the Walisongo played a central role in developing the concept and narratives of wayang dakwah. They made wayang the primary means of promoting Islamic teachings to the Javanese people, who at that time were heavily influenced by wayang culture. Their involvement is reflected in several aspects. First, the Conveyance of Islamic Teachings.

The Wali Songo utilized wayang performances as a means to spread Islamic teachings to the community. They adapted traditional wayang stories to reflect Islamic values, even incorporating themselves as Islamic figures within those stories. Second, Selection of Stories and Characters. The Wali Songo selected stories that aligned with Islamic teachings and the moral principles they wished to convey to the community. They also prioritized stories that could reinforce Islamic values within the cultural heritage of wayang. Third, Cultural Approach. The Wali Songo employed an approach aligned with local culture to spread Islam. By utilizing wayang, an integral part of Javanese culture, they were more readily accepted by the community in their da'wah efforts. Fourth, Innovation and Creativity. The Wali Songo likely developed new stories or adapted old ones to create wayang performances that better aligned with Islamic teachings and the social conditions of the time.

The Wali Songo's involvement in developing wayang for da'wah had a significant impact, as they not only used this performing art as a medium for da'wah but also as a tool to strengthen and expand the influence of Islam in the Java region.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that, historically, Wayang Dakwah has been passed down through generations as an integral part of cultural arts intertwined with religious values. In practice, Wayang Dakwah has made a significant contribution to the transmission of Islamic teachings, whether in socio-cultural, political, religious, or other aspects. Consequently, Wayang Dakwah serves as a model for the dissemination of Islam in Java, employing approaches ranging from psychology and history to pedagogy and politics.

This study's contribution underscores that the acculturation between art, culture, and religion can create an effective and accommodating form of artistic media that respects local cultural wisdom in disseminating religious values to the local community. However, this study has not examined the obstacles and challenges faced by wayang dakwah activities within the history of Islamic da'wah in Java; thus, further research addressing these aspects is essential.

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