Aqlania: Jurnal Filsafat dan Teologi Islam
Vol. 16, No. 1 (June) 2025
P-ISSN: 2087-8613 | E-ISSN: 2656-6605

Theology and Culture: Walisongo's Strategy of Islamic Enculturation in Java

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Abstract: *This study explores the theological and cultural dynamics of Islam in Java through the lens of Islamic enculturation as practiced by Walisongo, the nine saints who played a pivotal role in the Islamization of the region. Using a socio-theological framework, this study examines how Islamic teachings were not merely introduced but were harmonized with pre-existing Javanese cultural forms. The Walisongo adopted a syncretic and accommodative strategy, utilizing local traditions, such as wayang, gamelan, and traditional poetry, as mediums for daʿwah, thereby fostering a peaceful and holistic process of religious transformation in Indonesia. Their method was not confrontational but integrative, respecting local wisdom while gradually embedding Islamic values. This strategic adaptation ensured a more profound and lasting acceptance of Islam, shaping Javanese religiosity into a unique cultural expression that blended spirituality with aesthetic and communal dimensions. This study highlights that Walisongo's approach to daʿwah exemplifies a model of inculturation that goes beyond mere tolerance; it embodies a theological vision of harmony between divine revelation and cultural identity. This article contributes to the contemporary discourse on religion and culture by demonstrating how Islamic theology can inform intercultural dialogue and religious transmission in pluralistic societies.*

Keywords: *Islamic Culture, Javanese Culture, Walisongo, Theology of Enculturation, Religious Syncretism, Daʿwah Strategy.*

Abstrak: *Studi ini mengeksplorasi dinamika teologis dan budaya Islam di Jawa melalui lensa enkulturasi Islam seperti yang dipraktekkan oleh Walisongo, sembilan orang suci yang memainkan peran penting dalam Islamisasi wilayah tersebut. Dengan menggunakan kerangka sosio-teologis, penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana ajaran Islam tidak hanya diperkenalkan tetapi diselaraskan dengan bentuk-bentuk budaya Jawa yang sudah ada sebelumnya. Walisongo mengadopsi strategi sinkretik dan akomodatif, memanfaatkan tradisi lokal, seperti wayang, gamelan, dan puisi tradisional, sebagai media dakwah,*

sehingga mendorong proses transformasi agama yang damai dan holistik di Indonesia. Metode mereka tidak konfrontatif tetapi integratif, menghormati kearifan lokal sambil secara bertahap menanamkan nilai-nilai Islam. Adaptasi strategis ini memastikan penerimaan Islam yang lebih mendalam dan langgeng, membentuk religiusitas Jawa menjadi ekspresi budaya unik yang memadukan spiritualitas dengan dimensi estetika dan komunal. Studi ini menyoroti bahwa pendekatan Walisongo terhadap dakwah mencontohkan model inkulturasi yang melampaui toleransi belaka; Ini mewujudkan visi teologis tentang keselarasan antara wahyu ilahi dan identitas budaya. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada wacana kontemporer tentang agama dan budaya dengan menunjukkan bagaimana teologi Islam dapat menginformasikan dialog antarbudaya dan transmisi agama dalam masyarakat pluralistik.

Kata kunci: *Budaya Islam, Budaya Jawa, Walisongo, Teologi Enkulturasi, Sinkretisme Agama, Strategi Dakwah.*

Introduction

The da'wah strategy of Walisongo can be understood as a form of theological praxis deeply rooted in the Islamic vision of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* (mercy to all creation). Within the framework of Islamic theology, their approach embodies the principles of inclusive, adaptive, and transformative propagation methods. Rather than employing confrontational methods, Walisongo emphasized wisdom (*hikmah*), gentleness, and cultural proximity to Islam. This strategy is in line with the Qur'anic instruction in Surah An-Nahl (16:125), which urges believers to "invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner." From a theological perspective, this highlights that da'wah should be grounded in ethical communication and social empathy.

Walisongo's theological model of da'wah also represents a contextual theology based on the principle that local culture is not a threat to Islamic authenticity, but rather a strategic medium for conveying religious messages. Instead of rejecting indigenous cultural forms such as *wayang* (shadow puppetry), *gamelan* (traditional ensemble music), and Javanese rituals, they infused them with messages of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*) and ethical teachings. This process reflects what Lathif (2020) calls "cultural theology," which integrates divine values with symbolic local expression, thereby creating a dialogical space between revelation and tradition (Lathif 2020, 45–47).

In practice, Walisongo embodied a participatory theological approach to da'wah. They did not position themselves as authoritarian religious figures but as integral members of the

communities they served. They lived among the people, married local families, and engaged in everyday social interactions. Through this method, they cultivated trust and created dialogical spaces that allowed Islamic teachings to be received naturally and gradually by the students. As Hasyim (2020) observes, Walisongo's strategy reflects the transformative and empathetic nature of Islamic theology, positioning da'wah as both a spiritual and cultural liberation from within rather than as an imposition from without (Hasyim, 2020, pp. 91–93).

Furthermore, Walisongo's approach can be interpreted as a theology of social transformation. Their mission extended beyond normative religious preaching to create a more just and egalitarian society. Through the establishment of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and inclusive educational systems, Walisongo democratized access to religious knowledge and challenged elitist knowledge hierarchies. It aligns with the broader Islamic liberation theology that emphasizes justice (*'adl*), goodness (*ihsan*), and solidarity with the oppressed as integral components of the prophetic mission (Rahman 1982, 37–43).

The da'wah strategy of Walisongo exemplifies adaptive and contextual Islamic theology. Their approach demonstrates that Islamic teachings can be transmitted effectively, without symbolic violence or cultural domination. Instead, through integration, empathy, and social participation, Islam has found a vibrant and enduring space within the hearts and cultures of the Javanese people. This strategy remains a significant legacy within the intellectual and practical heritage of Islam in the archipelago, offering valuable insights into addressing the contemporary challenges of cultural and religious pluralism.

Islam was introduced, developed, and institutionalized in Nusantara (the Indonesian archipelago) through a long and complex historical process. To date, scholars have proposed three main theories regarding the origins of Islam in this region. The first theory posits that Islam came to Nusantara from the Indian subcontinent, rather than from Persia or Arabia. This view, widely known as the "Indian Theory," was first introduced by Pijnappel, a scholar from Leiden University. Pijnappel linked the origins of Islam in the region to Gujarat and Malabar, suggesting that it was brought by Arab traders of the Shāfiʿī school who migrated and settled in India. His theory was later supported and developed by other Dutch scholars, such as Snouck Hurgronje, Fatimi, Vlekke, Gonda, Schrieke, and Moquette. The second theory maintains that Islam in the Nusantara originated in Arabia or the broader Middle East.

This position is supported by historians such as Arnold, Marrison, Crawford, Keijzer, Neimann, Hollander, and Naquib Al-Attas. For example, Keijzer argued that Islam in the archipelago came from Egypt, citing the shared adherence to the Shāfiʿī school among Muslims in both regions.

A third theory emerged more recently, proposing that Islam did not come solely from India or the Middle East but rather from China. According to Romdhoni (2008:95), this theory suggests that the Chinese Muslim community played a significant role in the early spread of Islam in the Nusantara, especially in Java. The presence of Chinese Muslims during the formative period of Islam in Java is evidenced not only through accounts by foreign travelers, Chinese sources, Javanese local texts, and oral traditions, but also by Islamic archaeological relics found throughout the island. For instance, the stone carvings at the ancient Mantingan Mosque in Jepara, the minaret of the Chinese quarter mosque in Banten, the wooden door of Sunan Giri's tomb in Gresik, the architecture of the Cirebon Palace and Sunyaragi garden, the Demak Mosque's timber structure and turtle emblem, and the design of the Sekayu Mosque in Semarang all reflect strong Chinese cultural influences. Additional evidence includes two prominent mosques in Jakarta: the Kali Angke Mosque, associated with Gouw Tjay, and the Kebun Jeruk Mosque, established by Tamien Dosol Seeng and Madam Cai (al-Qurtuby, 2003).

The interaction between Islam and local cultures eventually gave rise to distinctive and localized expressions of Islam such as Javanese Islam, Madurese Islam, Sasak Islam, Minangkabau Islam, Sundanese Islam, and so on. These localized variants of Islam are not deviations from Islamic orthodoxy but instead culturally embedded forms of Islam shaped by acculturation. This process, often referred to as inculturation, involves the internalization of a new religious system within the framework of the local culture through adaptation or accommodation. Inculturation is a means of preserving cultural identity, ensuring that neither the ideological core of Islam nor the essence of local cultures is lost (Paisun, 2010, p.156).

These cultural expressions of Islam, hereafter referred to as *cultural Islam*, have persisted and evolved across different domains. Cultural Islam remains a defining characteristic of the Indonesian Islamic experience, distinguishing it from Islam in the Middle East or Europe. This uniqueness is rooted in the rich heterogeneity and pluralism of

Indonesian society—something rarely matched elsewhere in the world. As is well known, Indonesia is a pluralistic nation, diverse in religion, belief systems, cultures, ethnicities, and languages. It is also a multiethnic society comprising Dayak, Kutai, Banjar, Makassar, Bugis, Javanese, Madurese, Sundanese, Batak, Acehnese, Minangkabau, Flores, Balinese, and many more.

Furthermore, the archipelago has historically been a site of contact, negotiation, and contestation among various global influences and ideologies, including those of India, China, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, capitalism, and socialism (Aziz, 2009 in Paisun, 2010:156). This rich mosaic makes Indonesia an exceptional case, culturally, socially, and religiously. Accordingly, religions in Indonesia, including Islam, have had to negotiate with local cultures, producing uniquely Indonesian religious expressions.

Among the various cultural forms of Islam in Indonesia, Javanese Islam is particularly distinctive because of the extensive dialogue between Islam and Javanese culture. The spread of Islam in Java was predominantly shaped by acculturation through absorption and cultural dialogue. This dynamic is evident not only in the religious expressions of the Javanese people but also in the political authority of Islamic kingdoms such as the Mataram Sultanate, which successfully harmonized Javanese Islam with Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. Although the relationship between Islam and Javanese culture has experienced fluctuations—particularly in the 19th century—the acculturative character of Javanese Islam remains dominant, giving rise to a unique cultural ethos marked by syncretism and interreligious tolerance (Sumbulah 2012:51).

In reality, Islam in Java is neither monolithic nor simplistic. It continuously engages with the forces of nation-state politics, modernity, globalization, local traditions, and contemporary discourses. Within this context, the responses of Islamic groups and organizations in Indonesia, and in Java in particular, are highly diverse, ranging from conservative to moderate, liberal, radical, and even fundamentalist (Muqoyyidin, 2012, p.20). This study aims to explore the discourse surrounding Islamic and Javanese cultural dynamics in Indonesia, focusing on the role of *Walisongo* (Nine Saints) in the Islamization of Java.

The central issue addressed in this article is how the da'wah strategy of Walisongo can be understood as a manifestation of contextual and transformative Islamic theological praxis. It further explores how the cultural approach employed by the Walisongo was not merely a matter of local adaptation but was deeply theological in embedding Islamic values in Javanese society. This article highlights the tensions and harmonization between divine revelation and local culture, demonstrating why Walisongo's strategy, anchored in inclusive and adaptive Islamic theology, proved to be both practical and enduring.

This article aims to analyze Walisongo's da'wah strategy from the perspective of Islamic theology, emphasizing that their use of cultural mediums was not only a method of outreach but also an expression of a theology that is contextual, participatory, and transformative. Through this approach, this study seeks to answer how the Walisongo succeeded in integrating Islamic values with Javanese local culture without generating theological conflict. Moreover, it offers a model of da'wah as an inspiring reference for addressing the contemporary challenges of religious and cultural pluralism.

This article employs a qualitative methodology, as it is conceptual and reflective and does not aim to test the quantitative hypotheses. Therefore, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. This study utilized both hermeneutic and historical-theological methods. The hermeneutic approach is employed to interpret the theological meanings embedded in the da'wah strategies of the Walisongo and the cultural symbols they used to convey Islamic teachings. Meanwhile, the historical-theological method is applied to reconstruct the social and historical context in which the Walisongo conducted their mission and to understand how their da'wah practices served as a form of contextual, participatory, and transformative theological praxis within Javanese society.

Discourse on Religion and Culture

Émile Durkheim's sociological approach offers a relevant framework for understanding the dynamics of Walisongo's da 'wah in examining the relationship between religion and culture. Durkheim views religion not merely as a system of spiritual beliefs but as a collective expression of the values and social norms that bind communities. For Durkheim, religion is deeply intertwined with social solidarity and functions as a unifying

force that shapes the collective consciousness of society (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 39–45). In this context, Walisongo's da'wah efforts can be seen as a religio-cultural process that integrated Islamic values into the social and cultural structures of the Javanese society. Rather than radically dismantling local traditions, they infused them with Islamic meanings, producing a new form of religiosity that respected cultural heritage while transforming it with Islamic ethics. Their success lay not only in spiritual dissemination but also in establishing social stability and a culturally rooted Islamic identity.

Understanding Walisongo's da'wah practices through the lens of sociological theory allows us to see that their work was not simply the transmission of doctrine but also the construction of social and cultural meaning. Durkheim's theory provides a robust analytical foundation for understanding how religion operates as a collective force in society. He asserts that religion is not merely an individual belief system but a symbolic representation of the collective consciousness that binds communities. In Durkheim's view, religion is a projection of society itself, expressed through symbols that embody social norms, values, and identities, reinforced through ritual and communal practices (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 39–45). In this framework, Walisongo's da'wah can be interpreted as a strategy for rooting Islamic values into the social and symbolic structures of Javanese society. Instead of rejecting local culture, they appropriated and recontextualized cultural elements such as wayang (shadow puppetry), gamelan (traditional music), and oral traditions as effective media for teaching Islam. This strategy reflects Durkheim's concept of the social function of religion: strengthening social cohesion and establishing a shared moral order.

Furthermore, Durkheim emphasized that religion plays a vital role in creating social order through commonly accepted symbolic systems. He argues that "religion strengthens social cohesion by affirming shared values within society" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). Walisongo's strategy of embedding Islamic teachings within cultural practices reveals a deep understanding of the importance of symbols and rituals in consolidating new value systems in society. By using cultural symbols like wayang characters as allegories for Islamic morality and establishing pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) as educational and communal spaces, Walisongo created a new value system without dismantling the existing cultural

framework. This process aligns with Durkheim's notion that religion regulates social life through symbolically accepted representations.

Through this approach, Walisongo succeeded in developing a model of da'wah that was neither confrontational nor imposed but participatory and adaptive. They did not present Islam as a foreign system to the local society but made it an organic part of the Javanese culture. Their strategy illustrates that religion does not emerge in a vacuum; it continually interacts with social structures, cultural symbols, and communal values. Thus, Walisongo's da'wah practices can be understood as an embodiment of religion's integrative and transformative functions, as outlined by Durkheim. Their approach was not merely a strategy of religious propagation but also a demonstration of how religion operates in the social realm as a symbolic and moral force that guides cultural transformation.

"…all religion as 'an effort to conceive the inconceivable and to express the inexpressible, an aspiration toward the infinite'" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 23). This statement reflects humanity's inherent cognitive and rational limitations, compelling us to recognize the realities beyond our grasp. Therefore, religion emerges as a response to these limitations—an existential expression of human inability to explain the surrounding phenomena through reason alone. It can also arise from deep existential crises and moments of profound anxiety that lead individuals to enlist the support of a religious framework (Koentjaraningrat, 1994, p. 237).

Religious experiences are often driven by deep emotional and spiritual impulses, such as fear, awe, fascination with the sacred or supernatural, and hope for a meaningful life. These feelings stem from a mysterious force perceived as the unifying principle of the cosmos (Kholil, 2009, p. 86). According to The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, religion is defined variably. For instance, Martineau describes it as a belief in a living God—an infinite soul and divine will that governs the universe and maintains a moral relationship with humanity. It is an acknowledgment of a power beyond human understanding (Durkheim, 1995, p. 7). To encompass the plurality of religious experiences, scholars often replace the term "God" with broader designations such as "Transcendent Power," "Supernatural Reality," or "That which is beyond."

Theological discourse traditionally concerns the divine. However, not all religions possess a clearly articulated notion of God (Kholil, 2009, p. 87), prompting scholars to shift their focus toward broader categories of transcendence and symbolic expression. On the other hand, culture, according to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, is defined as "a dynamic value system of learned elements, with assumptions, conventions, beliefs, and rules permitting members of a group to relate to each other and the world, to communicate and to develop their creative potential." Culture is thus a normative system that governs social life (Syam, 2005, p. 13).

In contrast to this normative understanding, structuralist perspectives, drawing from thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, view culture as a product of human rationality, akin to language. Both are viewed as cognitive constructs rooted in the human mind (Ahimsa-Putra, 1999, pp. 23–25). Similarly, cognitive anthropology defines culture as internal knowledge residing in individuals rather than merely shared symbols in society. Goodenough notes that culture consists of what one must know or believe to function appropriately within a group, not material phenomena per se, but the internalized models for perception, relation, and interpretation (Oetomo 2000).

From an evolutionist standpoint, culture is the totality of human "cipta, rasa, dan karsa"—a combination of intellect, emotion, and intention. It consists of three levels: the abstract cultural system (values, norms, and laws), behavioral patterns (social systems), and material artifacts (Koentjaraningrat, 1985; Soekiman, 2000, pp. 40–41). Keesing (1975) and Sperber (1975, 1985) further assert that culture is a hierarchically organized system of conscious and unconscious knowledge. Woodward (2000, p. 69), applying this insight to Javanese Islam, introduces the concept of "structural axiomatics"—linking religious texts with their socio-cultural contexts. He theorizes that religious concepts may underlie broader social, economic, and political structures.

Understanding culture in this way enables a more nuanced analysis of religion in general. Rather than viewing religion solely as a product of human behavior or cognition—as suggested by structuralist or evolutionist paradigms—it is more accurate to consider religion as a cultural system (Syam, 2005, p. 16). Suparlan (1986, p. 87) asserts that religion, like culture, is a symbolic system used to interpret and relate to the world around us. The

difference lies in the sacredness of the religious symbols. Geertz similarly conceptualizes religion as a cultural system (Syam, 2007, pp. 11–13), defining culture as a pattern of behavior organized through rules, plans, and meanings embodied in symbols. From this perspective, religion is not just a transcendent truth but also a symbolic system that enables humans to make sense of their existence (al-Humaydi, 2007, p. 278).

Historically, religion and culture have mutually influenced one another. Both systems are symbolic and value-laden: religion embodies the sacred values of obedience to the divine, whereas culture contains symbols and values that enable communal life. Religion, in its symbolic expression, depends on cultural forms for collective manifestation. While religion may survive as personal faith, it cannot function socially without cultural mediation (Kuntowijoyo, 2001, p. 196). Religion and culture thus share two key features: both are systems of value and symbols, and both are vulnerable to transformation. In social sciences, religion is seen as a normative system offering ontological and ethical frameworks for interpreting reality, while culture is the expressive product of human creativity, conveying philosophical insights and local wisdom (Riyadi, 2003 in Shulhan, 2012, p. 177).

As a knowledge system, religion offers moral guidance derived from revelation, teaching what is good, proper, and accurate. It shapes human behavior through normative frameworks (Paisun, 2010, p. 158). Through ritual and symbolic acts—words, gestures, and sacred objects—religion actualizes its teachings. For instance, sujud (prostration) symbolizes total submission to God, exemplifying human acknowledgment of divine majesty (al-Humaidy, 2007, pp. 282–284). Islamic teachings found in the Qur'an and Hadith are the foundational sources of Muslim life. However, when these teachings are localized, they interact with indigenous traditions, generating culturally specific interpretations. As these interpretations are linked to sacred texts, their symbols often become sacralized. Religious traditions typically include sacred symbols that structure ritual actions, whether grounded in scriptural sources or not.

Religious expressions derived from scriptural sources are often termed "official Islam" or "pure Islam," while practices lacking such foundations are labeled "popular Islam" (Syam, 2007, p. 13) or "cultural Islam," as Gus Dur preferred. This distinction helps scholars trace the historical development of Islam in Indonesia and the intellectual transformation that

shaped Islamic universality within pre-existing cultural and structural frameworks. The Walisongo practiced *Popular Islam* by using local culture as the primary medium for spreading Islamic teachings. They employed traditional arts as tools for da'wah, adopted local customs, and communicated in vernacular languages that local people readily understood. Rather than replacing Javanese culture outright, they Islamized it gradually and wisely instead. As Syam (2007, p. 13) notes, the concept of "Popular Islam" enables the transformation of Islam into a vibrant, dynamic, and rooted form —an expression of religiosity that integrates harmoniously with local socio-cultural structures without losing its theological essence.

The Relationship between Islam and Javanese Culture

The interaction between religion and culture has long been a critical and contested issue, often eliciting subjective or pejorative interpretations in Muslim communities. Some groups seek to purify Islam from local cultural influences. In contrast, others aim to develop a constructive dialectic between the two (Roibin, 2010:1). Despite differing perspectives, the empirical reality shows the flourishing of religious expressions rooted in cultural hybridity and even interreligious syncretism. It is evident in the evolution of Islamic religiosity—from a so-called "pure" Islamic tradition (high tradition) into various localized forms such as Sunni Islam, Shiism, Mu'tazilism, and Kharijism (low tradition) (Abdullah 2001: iii; Ridwan 2004:129–136; Tibi 1991:8).

A sociological reading of this phenomenon reveals that Islam emerged as a historical response to specific local conditions in the Arabian Peninsula. As Bizawie (2003:33–34) argues, Islam began as a local product that was later universalized and transcended its origin. Although Islam is believed to be a universal divine revelation, its interpretations are always shaped by believers' experiences, intellectual capacities, and socio-cultural contexts—from Arabia and Persia to Turkey, India, and Southeast Asia (Abadi and Susanto 2012:229). Therefore, Islam is never entirely the same across regions or historical periods. As Hodgson (2002:112) notes, Islamic views are part of a broader cultural tradition that grows, diversifies, and evolves. This perspective is often identified as "accommodationist" (Abadi & Susanto, 2012:229), emphasizing an appreciative and affirmative engagement between Islam and local

culture, giving rise to various cultural expressions of the Islamic tradition in Indonesia. The Walisongo, for example, are celebrated for their skillful accommodationist strategy in introducing Islam to Javanese society. By engaging with local wisdom, they transformed elements such as *wayang*, once part of Hindu ritual, into tools for Islamic propagation. This creative approach allowed Islam to spread across social classes without threatening existing traditions or hierarchies (Mun'im DZ, 2008: 4; Ja'far, Yaqin, and Febriansyah, 2023: 190-201).

From this lens, long-standing scholarly assumptions that label local Islamic practices as merely superficial or nominal are called into question. As Bruinessen (2003:69) points out, the view that "local Islam is not real Islam, but merely surface-level Islamization" is untenable. Similarly, assertions that Indonesian religious practices are shaped mainly by Hindu-Buddhist or indigenous animistic traditions are increasingly viewed as flawed. The accommodationist approach underscores the dynamic, plural, and tolerant nature of Islam in Indonesia. It supports a model of *constructive negotiation* between religious norms and local conditions, implying that emulating early Muslim generations (salaf) in form is not obligatory. Instead, contemporary Muslims are responsible for implementing the core values of Islam (Islam substantif) in ways that resonate with their current socio-cultural realities while upholding the principle foundational to Islamic law of public good (*maslahah*) (Abadi & Susanto, 2012:231).

This phenomenon is what Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) famously described as *pribumisasi Islam* (indigenization of Islam). It is a continuous process of easing the tension between divine norms and human cultural expressions. It reflects a view of Islam as a normative religion revealed by God, which can engage with human culture without losing its identity. As Wahid (2001:111) wrote, "Islam considers local needs in formulating religious laws without altering the laws themselves. It does not mean abandoning divine norms for the sake of culture, but rather allowing those norms to accommodate cultural needs through the interpretive flexibility of the *nass*, while still guided by *usul fiqh* and legal maxims." For Gus Dur, Arabization—identifying with Middle Eastern culture—risks severing Muslims from their native cultural roots. The essence of cultural Islam lies not in avoiding the tension between religion and culture but in building a bridge between them (Naupal, 2012:292).

However, this cultural Islamic movement faces resistance from more fundamentalist trends. In recent decades, Indonesia has seen a rise in efforts to formalize Sharia, often referred to as Arabization and puritanism. These movements advocate a rigid, literalist interpretation of Islamic texts (Kasdi, 2002:20), challenging the historically tolerant and socially cohesive nature of Indonesian Islam. Such rigidity infiltrates political parties and religious movements, threatening Indonesia's pluralistic religious landscape. As such, just as Islam in the Middle East is entangled with Arab culture—sometimes blurring the lines between Islamic values and Arab customs—Indonesian Islam has similarly developed in close dialogue with local traditions in Indonesia. Early Islamic preachers in Indonesia, particularly Walisongo, wisely presented Islam not in Arabic packaging but in forms flavored with local cultural aesthetics. In other words, they delivered the "gift" of Islam wrapped in indigenous traditions (Naupal, 2012:296). This dialectic between religion and culture is not unique to Islam in Indonesia. Major world religions, including Christianity and Hinduism, have historically encountered and negotiated diverse local cultures during their expansion. In doing so, they often absorbed and reinterpreted these cultures through a spiritual lens, shaping religious practices in a way that harmonizes divine teachings with local expressions.

The Acculturation of Islamic and Javanese Culture in Walisongo's Da'wah in Indonesia

Sunan Kalijaga's role in the spread of Islam in Java is significant, mainly because of his use of cultural acculturation as a method of daʿwah. Javanese society, which has been deeply influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions, has gradually integrated Islamic teachings into its cultural fabric. This fusion of religion and local culture is a notable example of the indigenization of religion. As Reza (2018, 3) asserts, while religion is divine guidance, culture is human consensus, and both serve as guiding principles in life. Islam and Javanese culture met primarily along the northern coastal regions of Java, where Muslim traders interacted with the local populace. Over time, Islamic values were integrated into local customs, and the people began to understand, practice, and eventually embrace Islam. Classical anthropologists such as Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits describe acculturation as a phenomenon resulting from prolonged and direct contact between two different cultures, leading to cultural transformation in one or both parties (M.H. Rafiek, 2014, 24). In Java, this

process unfolded over centuries, with Islam gradually permeating the local belief systems. This integration allowed Islam to flourish without provoking widespread conflict, as religious practices were embraced as part of traditional life in the region.

The cultural approach of Walisongo in spreading Islam in Java stands as a significant embodiment of core Islamic theological principles, such as *tawhid* (divine unity), *rahmah* (compassion), and *hikmah* (wisdom). Rather than perceiving local culture as a threat to orthodoxy, Walisongo embraced indigenous traditions as strategic media for internalizing Islamic teachings, thereby producing a uniquely Javanese form of Islam that remained loyal to its theological foundations while being culturally embedded.

The principle of *tawhid*, central to Islamic theology, was not merely preached but was symbolically recontextualized within Javanese traditions. Characters in wayang (shadow puppet theatre), such as Semar and the Pandawa, were infused with monotheistic values and reinterpreted as allegorical figures aligned with Islamic ethics. This form of symbolic transformation illustrates how Walisongo practiced a theology of integration rather than annihilation, transforming local meaning without erasing Indigenous cultural expression. Their strategy resonates with Rahman's (1982) emphasis on contextual theology, which highlights the necessity of interpreting divine unity in ways that are socioculturally accessible and meaningful (pp. 37–43).

The principle of *rahmah*, or divine compassion, underpins Walisongo's non-confrontational and empathetic approach to da'wah. Instead of coercing religious adherence or denouncing local practices outright, they built trust through dialogical engagement and lived experiences within communities. It aligns with the Qur'anic mandate in Surah Al-Anbiya (21:107), which portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a "mercy to all worlds," an ethic that the Walisongo internalized in their mission. Lathif (2020) describes this approach as "cultural theology," wherein religious values are not imposed but emerge organically within cultural forms, fostering inclusive and enduring transformation (pp. 45–47).

Moreover, their method exemplifies *hikmah*, or wisdom, in both pedagogical and political senses. The Qur'an explicitly commands believers to "invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching" (Qur'an 16:125). Walisongo practiced this through gradualism, persuasion, and cultural literacy, recognizing that sustainable religious change

must consider existing symbolic systems. By embedding Islamic teachings into songs, rituals, and communal traditions, they manifested what Al-Attas (1995) terms *ta'dīb*—a model of education rooted in ethical guidance and wisdom rather than authoritarian indoctrination (pp. 23–28).

Walisongo's dakwah, therefore, cannot be reduced to mere proselytization; it was a theological praxis that enacted divine unity, mercy, and wisdom through cultural mediums. It represents an exemplary model of contextual theology that reconciles revelation with tradition and normativity with local identities. Their success lay in their ability to manifest theology not only in doctrinal terms but also in lived experiences that honored and transformed Java's cultural landscape. As Hasyim (2020) argues, the Walisongo strategy was not simply Islamization but an act of spiritual and cultural liberation grounded in the inclusive ethos of Islam (pp. 91–93).

Sunan Kalijaga, born Raden Sahid in Tuban, was deeply immersed in both Islamic knowledge and Javanese wisdom. Under the mentorship of Sunan Bonang, he mastered local arts, literature, astronomy, agricultural calendars (pranatamangsa), and Islamic spirituality (P. Djunaedi, 2019, 31–33). His famous slogan, *"Jawa digawa, Arab digarap"* ("Bring Java forward, adapt the Arab"), encapsulated his approach to daʿwah: combining Islamic principles with Javanese aesthetics and worldview. According to Ni'mah (2019, 4), such acculturation adheres to Islamic ethical boundaries, ensuring that it aligns with halal-haram, generates goodness, avoids harm, and upholds the principles of *walā'* (loyalty to God) and *barā'* (dissociation from what God disapproves).

Four key considerations drove the Islamization of local traditions. First, the Javanese royal culture, rooted in Hindu-Buddhist heritage, was rich in refined arts and literary traditions, such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, wayang (shadow puppetry), gamelan music, and poetic songs, which were preserved and infused with Islamic meaning, notably through the creative reinterpretations of the Walisongo. For instance, the *layang kalimasada*, a sacred object in *wayang* stories symbolizing the *shahāda*, served to legitimize the Islamic creed in courtly culture. Second, Islamic texts from pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) became a source of inspiration for Javanese writers, leading to the creation of religious literature such as *suluk*, *wirid*, and *primbon*, which often blended Arabic and Malay elements. Third, the

acculturation process contributed to sociopolitical stability by harmonizing pesantren Islam and Kejawen (Javanese spiritualism). Fourth, royal institutions supported Islamic propagation and aligned themselves with its spread (Simuh 2019, 127–129).

One of the most prominent examples of cultural Islamization is *Grebeg Maulud*, initiated by Sunan Kalijaga. Originally a grand Islamic sermon at Demak Mosque commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, it evolved into a royal procession featuring five *gunungan* (symbolic mountain-shaped offerings), representing harmony between the sultan and the people. This tradition, still practiced in Yogyakarta, has become both a religious and touristic event, uniting local communities and attracting national and international visitors (Tempo Data Center 2023, 53–55).

Sunan Kalijaga's daʿwah strategy extended to Javanese poetic forms, such as the *lir-ilir* and *kidung rumekso ing wengi*. These songs convey Islamic spirituality in accessible and culturally resonant ways. Other songs attributed to him include *Dhandhanggula* and *Gundul-Gundul Pacul*, which remain popular in Javanese language curricula (Suyotno 2016, 268). Although *lir-ilir* is outwardly a children's folk song, its deeper meaning reflects the profound Sufi teachings, according to Moh. Ainul Yaqin (2018, 55–62), the repeated refrain encourages constant awareness of faith. "Tandure wes sumilir" (the crops have swayed) alludes to the divine seed of faith planted in every soul that must be nurtured to thrive. A vibrant faith is likened to a newlywed's joy ("tak ijo royo-royo, tak sengguh temanten anyar"), while "cah angon" (young shepherd) represents mastery over one's desires.

The command "penekno blimbing kuwi" (climb the starfruit tree) symbolizes Islam's five pillars. The struggle of climbing ("lunyulunyu penekno") depicts perseverance through trials in the path of religious observance, while "kanggo mbasuh dodot ira" (to cleanse your garment) symbolizes purification through repentance. The refrain "dodot ira-dodot ira" refers to religious devotion as clothing, which must be mended if torn (signifying moral decline), and used for the journey to the afterlife ("kanggo sebo mengko sore") through gratitude, patience, and trust in God. "Mumpung padhang rembulane, mumpung jembar segarane" encourages repentance while opportunities remain. The triumphant cry "yo surako surak hiyo" celebrates spiritual awakening and salvation in the book.

These lyrical and symbolic forms of daʿwah exemplify *daʿwah bil-qalam*—propagation through writing. Sunan Kalijaga's works not only succeeded in spreading Islam during his time but have also endured in Javanese cultural education to this day. Another notable composition is *Kidung Rumekso Ing Wengi,* a night prayer in the form of a nine-stanza poem that offers protection through divine remembrance. Written in the *dhandhanggula* meter, it emphasizes: (1) the ethics of supplication; (2) human origin and divine care; (3) intercessory ethics through the Prophet and his companions; (4) self-control and asceticism; and (5) maintaining a conscious relationship with the Divine, known in Javanese cosmology as *sangkan paraning dumadi*—the metaphysical awareness of one's origin and return to God (P. Djunaedi, 2019, 71–73).

Sunan Kalijaga's success in blending religious teachings with artistic expression owes much to his mentor, Sunan Bonang (Makhdum Ibrahim), the son of Sunan Ampel. Born in 1465 in Tuban, Sunan Bonang was a descendant of Prophet Muhammad through Fatimah and Ali ibn Abi Talib (Syafrizal, 2015). His lineage earned him the title *Sayyid Kramat* in *Serat Darmagandul*, which recounts the fall of Majapahit and the rise of Islam. His genealogy includes notable scholars and mystics tracing back to the Prophet Muhammad (Sunyoto, 2012). Suluk Wujil, a Javanese mystical poem traditionally attributed to Sunan Bonang, conveys several core spiritual and ethical values, particularly in the context of teacher–student relationships and the inner path of Islamic spirituality. Among the prominent values in the Suluk are:

Loyalty, as found in the second stanza:
Sadasa warsa sira pun Wujil // Angastupada sang Adinira // Tan antuk warandikane // Ri kawijilanipun // ira wujil ing Maospait // Ameng-amenganira // Nateng Majalanggu // Telas sandining aksara // Pun Wujil matur marang Sang Adi Gusti // Anuhun pangat pada.

This stanza recounts how Wujil patiently waited for ten years, hoping to be taught the knowledge he longed for, yet remained devoted despite not receiving the teaching he sought. This illustrates the deep loyalty of a disciple who, upon finding a worthy teacher, is willing to dedicate himself entirely, even without immediate rewards or recognition.

Sincerity is expressed in the third stanza:
Pun Wujil byakteng kang anuhun Sih // Ing talapakan sang Jati-Wenang // Pejah gesang katur mangke // Sampun manuh pamuruk // Sastra Arab paduka warti // Wekasane

angladrang // Anggeng among kayun // Sabran dina raraketan // Malah bosen kawula kang angludrugi // Ginawe alan-alan.

Here, Wujil humbly pleads before Ratu Wahdat, his spiritual guide, dedicating his life to service, especially after completing his education, as follows: His supplication is marked not by ambition but pure devotion.

Religiosity is revealed in the sixth stanza.
Sang Ratu Wahdat mesem ing lathi // Heh ra Wujil kapo kamakara // Tan samanya mangucape // Lewih anuhun bendu // Atinira taha managih // Dening genging swakarya // Kang sampun kalebu // Tan padhitane wong dunya // Yen adol warta tuku wartaning tulis // Angur aja wahdata

When Wujil praises Ratu Wahdat, the latter smiles and humbly declines any grand titles or divine appellations, revealing deep religious humility and the awareness that spiritual identity is not rooted in self-glorification. This humility reflects a profound understanding of divine reality.

Responsibility is reflected in the eighth stanza:
Sang Ratu Wahdat lingira aris // Hih ra Wujil marengke den enggal // Trus den cekel kekucire // Sarwi den elus-elus // Tiniban sih ing sabda wadi // Ra Wujil rungokena // Sasmita katengsun // Lamun sira kalebua // Ing naraka ingsung dhewek angleboni // Aja kang kaya sir

This stanza describes Ratu Wahdat telling Wujil that if Wujil were to be condemned to hell for obeying his teachings, Ratu Wahdat would take his place. This metaphor expresses the weight of the moral and spiritual responsibility a teacher carries for the guidance they impart.

Self-knowledge and Honesty, found in the twenty-second stanza:
Suruping arka aganti wengi // Pun Wujil anuntumaken wreksa // Badhiyang aneng dagane // Patapane sang Wiku // Ujung tepining wahudadi // Aran dhekeh ing Benang // Saha sunya samun // Anggayang tan ana pala // Boga anging jraking sagara nempuki // Parang rong asiluman.

Here, *Ratu Wahdat* advises *Wuji*l to know himself to control his desires and tendencies. Self-knowledge is positioned as a necessary path to knowing God. This is confirmed in the next stanza (stanza 23), which states: *Wujil kawruhing sariraneki, iya iku nyata ing pangeran*—"*Wujil*, knowing your self is the same as knowing the Lord."

The Suluk clearly expresses Sunan Bonang's theological view that Islamic law (shariah) is foundational and remains essential even as one advances to the mystical stages of the path, such as tariqah and marifah. One must not abandon Shariah at the peak of

mystical knowledge. This Sunni orientation of Sunan Bonang's tasawwuf is evident in stanzas 11–14 (Teguh, 2015:84–85):

Pangetisun ing sira Ra Wujil // Den yatna uripira neng dunya // Ywa sumambraneng gawe // Kawruhana den estu // Sariranta pon dudu jati // Kang jati dudu sira // Sing sapa puniku // Weruh rekeh ing sarira // Mangka saksat wruh sira maring Hyang Widi // Iku marga utama.

Utamane sarira puniki // Angrawuhana jatining salat // Sembah lawan pamujine // Jatining salat iku // Dudu ngisa tuwin magerib // Sambayang araneka // Wenange puniku // Lamon ora nana salat // Pan minangka kekembanging salat da'im // Ingaran tata-krama.

Endi ingaran sembah sejati // Aja nembah yen tan katingalan // Temahe kasor kulane // Yen sira nora weruh // Kang sinembah ing dunya iki // Kadi anulup kaga // Punglune den sawur // Manuke mangsa kenaa // Awekasan amangeran adam- sarpin // Sembahe siya-siya.

Lan endi kang ingaranan puji // Sama amiji dalu lan siyang // Yen ora sarta wisike // Tan sampurna kang laku // Yen sirarsa weruhing puji // Den nyata ing sarira // Panjing-wektunipun // Kang atuduh ananing Yang // Panjing wetuning napas yogya kawruhi // Sukma catur prakara.

These stanzas reflect a deeply grounded mystical theology in which the ritual forms of worship (salat, puji, sembah) must always be aligned with spiritual consciousness. Without inward awareness, outward actions lose their essence. Based on this foundation, the da'wah method developed by Sunan Bonang and his student Sunan Kalijaga can be characterized as a culturally integrative approach designed to spread Islam peacefully across Java. Their da'wah harmonizes local cultural traditions with Islamic teachings. Wali Songo, including Bonang and Kalijaga, successfully blended Javanese culture with Islamic spirituality, enabling the local population to adopt the new faith without coercion.

By utilizing cultural art forms such as wayang performances and tembang macapat poetry, the Wali introduced Islamic values in ways that were familiar and engaging to the local people. This strategic use of local idioms fostered the widespread acceptance of Islam. Each Wali employed a distinctive method suited to their background and their audience. Sunan Bonang, for example, emphasized the use of music, poetry, and literature in his da'wah. As a nobleman from Tuban, he was exposed to classical Javanese arts from an early age and became a master of macapat poetry. His literary skills helped him embed Islamic teachings within the popular forms of Javanese expression (Sunyoto, 2017:241).

Sunan Kalijaga similarly used diverse art forms to propagate Islam. Known as a puppet master (dalang), he captivated audiences not through doctrinal preaching but through dramatic storytelling. Although still drawing on Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, he reimagined these tales by incorporating Islamic values and introducing legendary Muslim figures. His fresh and non-impositional approach made Islam appealing and relatable to the Javanese people (Munir, 2010:308). In conclusion, Wali Songo's success in spreading Islam across Java was primarily due to their culturally embedded and non-coercive strategies. By embedding Islamic teachings within local artistic and spiritual traditions, they fostered a lasting integration of Islam into the Javanese worldview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion above demonstrates that Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga were among the most influential propagators of Islam in Java, distinguished by their profound ability to develop effective and culturally adaptive da'wah strategies. They employed a method of religious propagation that harmoniously blended Islamic teachings with local Javanese traditions to attract followers. This syncretic approach enables them to engage deeply with the cultural fabric of society without provoking resistance or alienation. Rather than rejecting prevailing customs, they respected and transformed them into meaningful vehicles for Islamic values.

The Wali Songo, including Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga, strategically selected locations based on geostrategic considerations, and within less than a century, they brought a profound transformation in Javanese religious life. By incorporating local arts, such as *wayang* (shadow puppetry), *tembang macapat* (traditional Javanese poetic songs), and other forms of indigenous expression, they successfully conveyed Islamic teachings in ways that were not only accessible but also emotionally resonant with the populace.

Sunan Bonang, in particular, utilized poetic and philosophical texts such as *Suluk Wujil* to convey mystical Islamic teachings, emphasizing sincerity, loyalty, self-knowledge, and ethical-spiritual responsibility. His method of integrating *sharī'ah* (Islamic law) with *ṭarīqah* (Sufi path) and *ma'rifah* (gnosis) exemplifies a form of Sunni Sufism that is deeply rooted in scriptural observance and inner purification. Meanwhile, Sunan Kalijaga employed a more

performative and artistic approach, using storytelling and theatrical elements embedded with Islamic values. His wayang performances, which retained elements from epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, subtly introduced Islamic principles and figures, allowing for a gradual but meaningful transformation of public consciousness. These integrative and non-confrontational strategies allowed Islam to be widely and rapidly accepted throughout the island of Java. The success of their da'wah methods lay in their deep cultural sensitivity, strategic foresight, and spiritual depth—attributes that not only expanded the reach of Islam but also left a lasting legacy of Islamic acculturation in Javanese society.

This article offers a significant academic contribution to Islamic theological studies, particularly within the context of *Islam Nusantara*, by reconstructing the da'wah strategy of the Walisongo as a theological praxis that is contextual, inclusive, and transformative. The cultural approach employed by the Walisongo is not only an effective method of da'wah but also represents a concrete manifestation of Islamic theological principles such as *tawḥīd* (divine unity), *raḥmah* (compassion), and *ḥikmah* (wisdom) as embedded within the local culture. This reading affirms that Islamic teachings need not be positioned in opposition to local traditions; instead, they can organically inhabit social spaces through meaningful processes of cultural integration.

By fostering dialogue between theology and culture, this article expands the horizons of Islamic theology beyond doctrinal-normative discourse toward a lived, historical social praxis. The Walisongo da'wah context illustrates that Islamic values are not diminished when articulated through cultural forms; on the contrary, those values become more relevant and vital. In this regard, this study contributes to the development of a contextual Islamic theology that insists on interpreting revelation dialogically with the socio-cultural realities of its audience. This approach echoes Fazlur Rahman's assertion that revelation must be understood through a dialectic between text and historical context.

Furthermore, this article reinforces the idea that *Islam Nusantara* is not merely a historical or cultural identity but an alternative epistemology for understanding Islam. *Islam Nusantara*, as embodied in the strategies of the Walisongo, becomes a model of adaptive Islam rooted in deep theological principles. From this perspective, this article provides a solid

academic basis for understanding *Islam Nusantara* not as a compromise with local traditions but as a grounded and sustainable theological expression.

More broadly, this article opens up space for *Islam Nusantara* to contribute to the global theological discourse. Walisongo's da'wah approach, which is transformative and participatory, shares epistemological resonances with other inculturated theological models, such as liberation theology in Latin America and inculturation theology in Asian Catholicism. Thus, this study not only enriches the local Islamic studies discourse but also offers a compelling narrative within interfaith and intercultural conversations about how religious pluralism and cultural diversity can shape societies that are just, peaceful, and dignified through the path of culture.

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