

Cowongan in Javanese Islamic mysticism: A study of Islamic philosophy in Penginyongan society

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This study aims to reveal the interaction of local Javanese culture with an Islamic philosophical approach originating from the *Cowongan* tradition performed by shamans accompanied by dances with holy ladies and reciting mantras. This tradition is a prayer asking the gods to send down rain. This article emphasised that the *Cowongan* tradition places mystical power as the dominant element in life, which is embodied in symbols. The study of mysticism is closer to the study of Sufism which presents it as Islamic mysticism with the color of syncretism of religious teachings with local cultural practices embodied by mystical-occult practices as the Penginyongan culture.

Contribution: This research contributed to the fact that traditions that are good and acceptable to society can become the law as part of the Urf, which need to be maintained as long as they do not conflict with Sharia.

Keywords: *Cowongan*; Javanese Islamic; mysticism; philosophy; Penginyongan

Introduction

Indonesia is a unitary state consisting of ethnicity, religion, and race. Indonesia's diversity as a gift for the nation's wealth is contained in Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity). From a legal perspective, there are three applicable laws, namely positive law, Islamic law and customary law. Culture and customs in Indonesian society are dominated by Javanese culture as a representation of the majority culture, which has become an icon of local wisdom resulting from syncretism. The majority of Javanese people are Muslims, consisting of three groups, namely the aristocracy, Muslim scholars, and others who do not adhere strictly to the precepts of Islam (Van Bruinessen 2002).

The teachings of mysticism are closer to Sufism, which is divided into four levels: shari'a, Sufism, essence, and the highest knowledge (Sadeghi Sahlabad 2019). The teachings of Sufism help a person get closer to God by cleansing the heart and purifying the soul, with the aim of achieving true happiness by dealing directly with God. This theory is called *al-Hulul* [unity with God]. (Takahashi 2019).

Sufism is considered to be more friendly to local culture, and the majority of Javanese people have direct contact with religion and culture. Religion symbolises the value of obedience to God, while culture contains values and symbols so that humans can be dynamic in their lives. Religious systems that blend into society have a collective meaning, namely mutual influence on the totality of the socio-religious order, but cannot be seen as a standard system in society.

Javanese life is closer to mystical culture. This feature is very close to religious traits, and in certain groups it is even magical. Mysticism is a human activity that places more emphasis on the aspect of feeling or inner cultivation, so that in the Javanese context, this activity is popularly known as the mysticism or the flow of belief. Javanese mysticism is a syncretism (accommodation) between Javanese, Hindu and Islamic elements, as a result of a long historical process (De Jong 1975).

In the history of the development of religion in Indonesia, mystical views have become part of its development. The existence of mystical influences in a tradition can be seen throughout the development of Islam in Indonesia. Several Acehese Sufi works show the origins of Islam in Java and have mystical influences such as the works of Nuruddin Arraniry, Syamsuddin

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Pasai and Hamzah Fansuri, who spread his thoughts around Cirebon and Java (McDaniel 2020). There is also a view and doctrine in Islamic Sufism that God descends to earth from heaven to inhabit the human body. Understanding such a concept shows that every human good becomes a gift from God and his own nearness; however, not everyone is a part of it (Streib et al. 2020).

The Javanese people, as one of the largest tribes in Indonesia, consists of several communities. One of them is Penginyongan, a community with a typical Javanese language, culture and art with its uniqueness. The Penginyongan areas include Banyumas, Purbalingga, Banjarnegara, Kebumen and Cilacap (Wildan 2022). Penginyongan is a representation of the people, language or culture of the Banyumasan region with the word *Inyong*, which means 'I am' (Ramadhan & Masykur 2020).

One fascinating Penginyongan culture to study further is *Cowongan*, which represents cultural, mystical and religious elements. The people of Sumogedhe Banyumas mainly carry out this ritual in asking for rain during a long dry season. Views of Islam and culture are diverse; some of them are tolerant, and the majority are in the Nahdliyin community. On the other hand, most Muslims who strongly oppose the *Cowongan* come from the Salafi, which considers it part of heresy, contrary to the Shari'a. Those who support it think that Islam is a religion that recognises traditions that encourage plurality through the Islamisation of culture by absorbing culture into itself. The diversity of Islam, by offering norms, attitudes and values for harmonious relations between ethnic groups, cultures and religions, provides a basis for living together in the context of society, nation and state. While those who reject tradition, think that Islam is a definite and clear structure. Culture cannot unite with sharia, because it will only undermine faith.

Research methods

This is a qualitative study with a philosophical approach to religion and cultural acculturation. The philosophical approach is concerned with the perceptions of others, and there is much discussion about what it is. This research reveals the intersection between Islamic teachings and Javanese culture, especially the acculturation process of Islamic Sufism in Javanese culture. Data collection was carried out by observing and interviewing the *Cowongan* ritual performers in Plana Village, Somagede District and Banyumas Regency. Researchers were involved in ritual events and paid attention to the spells that were chanted. Interviews were conducted to support data observation of the readings that were used.

Results and discussion

Islamic mysticism in ontological and epistemological studies of the Penginyongan culture

Islamic mysticism in the Penginyongan tradition is a practice carried out by the Banyumasan people deliberately related

to mystical understanding and practice. The practice of mysticism begins with an excessive longing for God, starting with the awakening of the soul, repentance, meditation, and finally, attains the presence of God in the heart, which is called the Unity of God. When associated with the theory of Islamic Sufism, these stages are called shari'a, Sufi order, essence and high knowledge.

Trajtelova (2020), in her article, mentions that mystical experiences are a universal phenomenon found in every culture and tradition. Important descriptive features of the experience most clearly support this position. Saipova identifies nine characteristics common to mystical experiences (e.g. indescribable, scaleless, spiritual, paradoxical and space-time qualities) (Saipova 2019). Franklin mentions that all forms of mystical experience have one fundamental quality that involves a strong sense of unity that he calls a 'sense of indivisibility' (Breeksema & Elk 2021). Indeed, it can be said that the inherent acceptance of the universality of mystical experience is one of the assumptions determining transpersonal studies. Thus, the problem of varied expression of experience can be traced to two interrelated factors, specifically (Streib & Hood 2016):

- inherent and indescribable non conceptual nature
- sociocultural and linguistic influences on the identification or detection of experiences.

In other words, the diversity of mystical experiences appears as a form of language's inability to capture feelings and experiences. Differences in language and culture have brought structure and meaning. One of the ways to overcome this problem is to divide the mystical experience into two aspects. The first concerns the experience itself (i.e. direct understanding or intuition), and the second concerns the level of expression and description (Mamat et al. 2019).

In this case, studying the culture of entry in Islamic mysticism states that Islam Penginyongan is a religious tradition united with Javanese culture. Islamisation in Java forms opposite poles, specifically Muslim and Javanese spiritualism. The formal dimension of Islam emphasises rituals that are in line with doctrine. At the same time, the Javanese worldview focuses on the essential unity of all existence with God without having to go through legalistic practice. According to Lestari, Javanese Islam is considered a syncretic Islam, precisely the union of Islamic teachings with customs from Javanese traditions (Lestari 2019). On the contrary, in the opinion of Hefner and Woodward, Javanese Islam is only united with Javanese culture on the surface. The essence of Islamic belief remains pure or original, called Islamic *tawhid*. This statement can only be approached using the Islamic Sufism approach.

Islam does not exclusively share the cultural perspective of Penginyongan in mysticism. Mysticism in the Penginyongan culture refers to the traditions shared by major religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and other divine religions (heaven). In Islam, the proponent of

Tassawuf is known as Sufism, where the origins of Sufism come from the Middle East. At least, the material and spiritual rites before Islam's advent were reformulated and then continued by Islamic Sufis. Nakissa (2020) mentioned that various elements of mysticism emerged and influenced the development of the theory and also the mystical rituals in Islamic Sufism.

This relationship motive occurs not exclusively in the Middle East but is evenly distributed in South Asia and Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, in this case, Javanese culture. In Schimmel's opinion, Indonesian culture meets with South Asian culture as teaching or theory regarding entities. This theory is found in the philosophy of Vedanta. The intersection between Islam and Java is a common point in Islamic mysticism because the thought itself has a universal character (Lestari 2019). Long before Islam came to Java, mysticism had already developed first among the Javanese people. The Javanese have long taught the concepts of microcosm and macrocosm. The concept of the micro and macro cosmos in Islamic Sufism is known as a concept of the existence of unity.

Islamic mysticism in Penginyongan culture pervaded Javanese customs, traditions and culture. The Islamisation of Java can emerge through thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Alternatively, the struggle between culture and religion is referred to as a mystical contest between Penginyongan and Islamic mystics. This contestation refers to the 'science' approach. Streib mentions that culture has the meaning of a neutral arena, which is also part of Islamic mystical thought (Streib et al. 2020), or it can mean the understanding of *tawhid* in Islamic teachings, which is attached to the culture of Penginyongan.

This critical study of Penginyongan Islamic teachings aims to construct social facts based on Islam on Penginyongan culture as a historical reality that forms the basis for present and future Penginyongan society. In addition to eliminating minor assumptions from other parties. Furthermore, it dismisses the character created by colonialism which often brings bias. According to Susilo and Syato, religion and culture in Indonesia are inseparable from the colonialism carried out by Europe (Susilo & Syato 2016). For a long time, the study of colonialism has fully understood that the culture – in this case, the conversion possessed by Islam – comes from mysticism. Moreover, in the Prophet Muhammad's era, precisely in Mecca and Medina, harmony was established between Islam and Arab culture because of the mystical approach. Therefore, harmony between Islam and the culture can also be built because of the mystical approach attached to society.

The Penginyongan culture from an Islamic mystical perspective

Islam is a religion with universal values which have given a reasonably straightforward way regarding the existence of the supernatural mystic for the life of humankind (Nakissa 2020). Muslims are currently faced with the prosperous

traditions of the Penginyongan community, with mystical and magical practices motivated and inspired to reconstitute various activities in forms that align with existing Islamic values. From this evidence, it seems that mystical and magical traditions in Islam began to emerge and develop in Penginyongan society.

Mysticism is a term that has developed in society in general, especially Penginyongan. Mysticism, as a form of spiritual experience, is not influenced by existing religion (Wright 2021). In Penginyongan society, spirituality can be understood as a religious expression that arises in local religion (smaller streams), to existing religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. Spiritual life is considered inseparable from mysticism. In this case, faith in the context of mysticism as a secret hidden in religion which is identified as the relationship between humans and God in a cultural context.

Penginyongan culture, located between Javanese and Sundanese, has unique and different characteristics. Penginyongan culture has a characteristic that shows the existence of freedom, as in gamelan music, ancient Banyumasan songs or other traditional arts. This traditional art is folk art, performed to entertain and as a mystical ritual for salvation and welfare, especially for the Penginyongan community.

There are several similarities in the arts of the Penginyongan and Sundanese people: the use of mantras in their performances. Ritual leaders guide the ritual performance by repeating mantras and were equipped with offerings in traditional art. One of them is the ritual of calling the rain, the ritual whose implementation uses the recitation of mantras or *Cowongan*. In this *Cowongan* ritual, the existence of mantras becomes essential because it is related to myths and practices that will be lived and will always be related to the beliefs of the Penginyongan people. People have believed for generations that mantras recited while performing *Cowongan* rituals can bring rain and blessings to all of them. The mantras in *Cowongan* are depicted through symbolisation, specifically the sky, earth and *nini cowong* wrapped in Javanese philosophy (Nofrizaldi 2022).

In particular, the *Cowongan* ritual is described as a ritual performed to call angels to come down to Earth and bring rain. Literally, *Cowongan* comes from the word *cowang-coweng*, which means doodling on the face of the *cowong*. The *cowong* is a doll made of coconut shells, given clothes from straw, grass, leaves or fabric, and then dressed up like a woman who is intended as a symbol of the shape of an angel. This *cowong* doll is then decorated using whitening.

In its development, the *Cowongan* ritual turned into a performance art that still uses the mystical components of Islam by combining Banyumas culture to call the rain. Although *Cowongan* performances in Banyumas often

collaborate with other traditional arts, the magical impression of this *Cowongan* ritual remains strong and maintains its existence. This ritual cannot be separated from the preparation of equipment, procedures and mantras that are spoken during the ritual.

To carry out the *Cowongan*, handlers, cowong, dancers, flowers, smoke, and incense are needed. The handler has the skill to read spells as the key to the ritual. Meanwhile, *cowong* is a medium used to present spirits who are believed to be angels who bring rain. Before performing the ritual, handlers and *cowong* meditate in quiet places such as cemeteries, under large trees, on rocks, or the banks of rivers (Kamal, Saddhono & Suyitno 2018). While *cowong* is left for 3 days to meditate so that he is full faster. The dancers have different roles as a symbol of the universe, and some become angels, courtiers, or demons. Flowers, smoke, and incense cannot be left behind because these three are 'food' that can invite spirits to the *Cowongan* ritual (Kamal 2018).

Furthermore on *Cowongan* ritual can be seen; firstly, the handler or puppeteer opens the *Cowongan* ceremony by calling nini cowong to the '*Cowong Sewu*' court. In this opening ritual, the puppeteer explains that cowong differs from *jelangkung*. According to the ancestors, *Cowongan* was used to invoke the Almighty, who used the intermediary of head shells (*cumplung*) that made from a coconut that had fallen from its tree when a squirrel bites it. Secondly, if the *cumplung* is ready, the *cumplung* shell will be carried to the edge of a river near rice fields and left to a hermit for the night. This is done for the *cumplung* to be filled or inhabited by supernatural beings. Thirdly, the *cumplung* shells are then taken back to the place where the *Cowongan* ritual was performed. The puppeteer then mentions that the offering of flowers and frankincense must be complete, and songs or spells will be used to call ancestors (Kamal 2018).

After all the rituals have been performed, frankincense is burned, and a group of men with bodies painted black enter the ritual ceremony, which symbolizes the devil. At that time the puppeteer immediately recited the following incantation:

Sulasih sulanjana kukus menyan ngundhang dewa, Ana dewa dening sukma widadari temuruna runtung – runtung kesanga, sing mburi karia lima leng-leng guleng, gulenge pangebatan gelang – gelang nglayoni, nglayoni putria ngungkung cek – inceks raga bali rog rog asem kamilega reg regan rog rogan reg regan rog rogan. [Sulasih Sulanjana, the frankincense invites the Gods, there are gods moving spirits, Angels come down crowds of nine, there are only five left behind, hold on, survive with adorned bracelets, serving the princess bowed to check the return of the body, *rog rog asem* we are relieved, relieved, *reg regan rog rogan reg regan rog rogan*] (A. Flurianti [Cowongan] pers. comm., 19 February 2022).

The *cowongan* ritual is continued with the arrival of the singer (*sinden*) by entering the ritual area while reciting the following incantations:

Sang kamadipa, sang kamadipa Sang kamadadi, sang kamadipa Sang kamadadi, isnu kuning apa rupane, sangkalewa (?) jati arane menyan Sang cublek kuning urubing menyan. (Flurianti 2022) [Great kamadipa, Great kamadipa, Great kamadipa, Great kamadipa, Great kamadipa, isnu yellow what is it, *sangkalewa (?)*, *jati* is called frankincense, the yellow cublek glowed incense] (A. Flurianti [Cowongan] pers. comm., 19 February 2022).

Then, the puppeteer lifted the *cowong* which was made of coconut shells. This is done to attract angels from heaven, and the ancestral spirits will descend and enter the *cowong*. The puppeteer recites a mantra containing a request to the ancestors to be forgiven for the sins committed by the Penginyongan people. In addition, the puppeteer added that the ritual of summoning rain or *Cowongan* was carried out to preserve the Penginyongan culture, just like Lengger, Ronggeng, and Ebeg.

The puppeteer is often called a rain handler in this *Cowongan*. The public believes that the puppeteer has magical and spiritual powers to bring rain (Kamal et al. 2018). After reciting the (Kamal et al. 2018). Afterwards, the puppeteer continues the ritual by reciting a mantra which contains a request to ask for rain while the nini cowong dances with the others. The handler also reminded the public always to love Penginyongan culture, especially the *Cowongan* tradition. Then the handler recites a spell saying that fertility water has come. The earth will be refreshed, and the plants will start growing. Now, people will eat and drink from the land of Banyumas. (Kamal et al. 2018).

The Penginyongan people love culture extensively and are closely related to Islamic mysticism. Meanwhile, in another part, several dancers depicting devils dancing while seducing beautiful woman. This woman is a symbol of an angel who is descending to Earth. Then the angels paraded around the field, where the *Cowongan* ritual takes place. Subsequently, the puppeteer and the black-painted male dancers, angels and singers (*sindens*) continue to dance and recite mantras to invite *nini cowong* to the ritual area in progress. This dance signifies the end of the procession of rituals with symbols as a form of togetherness. Meanwhile, they sing together as a form of gratitude for the rain (Kamal 2018).

Cowongan culture, in the perspective of Islamic mysticism, is based on the symbolic form of expression adopted by the *Cowongan* tradition, which was later changed to its description. Knysh (2017) states that mystical traditions and texts show a mystical experience, both described through poetry, metaphors, and parables. *Cowongan* mysticism has used language and symbols to articulate an indescribable feeling. *Cowongan* has proven a mysticism approach in its cultural practices inherently.

In Islam, culture is carried out through an approach to God. The concept of Islamic Sufism, the attainment of the Sufi

level in the puppeteer *Cowongan* is also called an intermediary, marked by a meeting between the puppeteer and God. Therein lies the meeting point of culture and religion between Islam and Hindu-Buddhism. It is more famous because Walisongo committed acts of guardianship on non-Muslim religions.

If religion is analysed from the dimension of tradition, Williamson mentions that the contextualisation of religious traditions can arise in one religion, with universal expression and local interpretation in the other (Williamson, Hood & Chen 2019). The locality will produce derivative elements of a provincial character, inferior or imperfect realisations, as well as 'popular' and 'vulgar' cultures of its parent culture, which are religiously considered original, noble, universal, and superior. Islamic mysticism entered through customs, traditions, and Penginyongan cultures.

The acculturation of the Penginyongan culture to Islam is the acceptance of external ideas and evidence as a form of the implication of the worldview on Javanese society. Islamic traditions and the fusion of Penginyongan cultures originated from the Javanese philosophy of life as their comprehensive conception of the world. Therefore, it is necessary to take Lajwani's opinion based on the belief in the essential unity of all existence (Lajwani, Khoso & Shaikh 2021). This view encompasses more than just religion: it views human existence in a cosmological context, making life a religious experience (Hood 2016). From this life perspective, it is impossible to separate religion's elements from nonreligious elements; human existence is inevitably related to the supernatural realm. The Penginyongan society thought that the whole of existence was controlled by nature, and it has become a moral obligation to live in harmony by following nature's rules. They should be encouraged to seek self-harmony, which manages people regarding their behaviour, social relations, customary rules and social solidarity.

Moral rules emphasise stability, calmness, harmony, politeness, subtlety, patience, acceptance and self-restraint against lust. The community subordinates the individual's life, and then the society is subordinated by nature to achieve harmony and unity with God. The cultural practices of the *Penginyongan* people, especially the *Cowongan* tradition, are carried out in Banyumas to obtain worldly wealth and prosperity to avoid conflict, competition, and disputes. *Cowongan* has brought harmony between culture and religion.

This harmonisation has a central role in the life of the Penginyongan community and contextualises the Penginyongan community in understanding their lives. People can practise their culture through social and religious solidarity in all life activities. Cultural values for society are interpreted as social solidarity and economic egalitarianism, such as joint harvest and the distribution of yields. At the same time, external beliefs and ideologies minimise religious conflicts and strengthen social identification reflected in the Javanese worldview.

Thus, *Cowongan* still adheres to the religion of Islam, which is considered syncretic to Islam's teachings. However, in some aspects, this culture can represent the mystical-supernatural aspect, with *Cowongan* representing the Penginyongan culture. This tradition indicates a relationship between Islamic mysticism and the flexible culture of Penginyongan. The conception of religiosity of the Penginyongan society is related to the Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition, as a process sometimes considered privatisation, so that in this case, Islam has a mystical-spiritual dimension equivalent to the Penginyongan society, which considers human existence inseparable from the cosmological context, making life a religious experience and a mystical journey.

Based on some of these facts, Islamic mysticism in the culture of Penginyongan has positive values in applying Islamic teachings in society through a cultural approach. It can be said that the negative perspective of Islamic mysticism arises because of a misunderstanding in digesting the culture and religion that are present in society. Thus, it can be said that the misguided labelling of Sufi practices is the result of the rigid purification movement and the existence of the Takfiri Islamic movement, attributable to the wrong way of reading religious teachings. Therefore, universal religious understanding and tolerance are needed for the community in the application of Islamic mysticism studies in culture in Indonesia, one of which is the Penginyongan culture.

Conclusion

Mysticism is the actualisation of Islam by the Penginyongan society, which places greater emphasis on the mystical dimension. Magical and mystical powers are the dominant elements for the Penginyongan people. Mysticism is the main forming element of the spiritual locus of the Penginyongan society, which is oriented to the magical and spiritual. Dissemination of Penginyongan Islamic Mysticism is unique in the culture of Penginyongan, which contains animism, dynamism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The existence of Islamic Penginyongan has maintained the relevant and unique Indonesian Islamic pattern and enriched the actualisation of Islamic culture as a universal religion. Thus, the *Cowongan* ritual is one of the products of the process of Islamisation of culture and the acculturation process of Islamic thought. The *Cowongan* ritual is syncretic thought between Islamic mysticism and Penginyongan Javanese culture, which is represented in the mystical-supernatural aspect as the leading spirit of Penginyongan Javanese culture.

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Author's contributions

S.S. presented the idea, developed the theory and data and wrote and edited the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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