

ISLAMIZATION OF JAVANESE CULTURE UNDER SULTAN AGUNG: EDUCATION, ART, AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE MATARAM SULTANATE

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Abstract

This article affirms the concept of productive syncretism as the main analytical framework for understanding the Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung. Islamization is not positioned as a process of cultural homogenization, but rather as a creative mechanism that brings together universal Islamic values with local Javanese traditions in a dialogical and functional manner. Through a qualitative historical-cultural approach, analysis of texts such as Serat Sastra Gending and the views of Javanese cultural experts show that this syncretism gave rise to new forms of praxis in palace education, religious artistic expression, and Sufi-influenced spirituality. The research findings show that productive syncretism allows Islamic values to not only be accepted but also reinterpreted in accordance with Javanese cosmology, resulting in a sustainable and contextual cultural system. Thus, the main contribution of this study lies in offering the conceptual framework of productive syncretism as a lens for reading the Islamization of the archipelago, which is relevant for strengthening character, moderate religious diversity, and the preservation of Javanese-Islamic culture in a contemporary context.

Keywords: Islamization of Javanese culture, Sultan Agung, Islamic education, religious art, spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

In the 17th century, the Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung can be understood as a process of socio-cultural learning, in which Islamic values were transmitted through mechanisms of enculturation and symbolic acculturation within the social space of Mataram society. From the perspective of social learning theory, culture functions as an observational medium that enables

communities to learn religious values through collective practices such as sekaten, grebeg, and the reform of the Javanese-Islamic calendar (Feener & Gade, 1998). The integration of the Saka and Hijri calendars shows that Islamization did not take place coercively, but rather through cognitive and affective adaptation in harmony with local meaning structures. In international debates, this type of Islamization is often

positioned in opposition to the normative Middle Eastern model of Islamization, which tends to negate local culture, so that the Javanese case is seen as an example of inclusive cultural Islamization (Kersten, 2017). The main issue that arises is how these cultural learning mechanisms worked systematically to shape Javanese-Islamic education, art, and spirituality during the reign of Sultan Agung.

Previous literature generally describes the Islamization of Java as the result of historical interactions between political elites, scholars, and local traditions without conducting a critical cross-disciplinary synthesis. Studies on the Islamization of the archipelago emphasize the cultural strategies of the Walisongo and their continuity with Mataram, but focus more on the symbolic aspects of *da'wah* than on its pedagogical implications (Aminim et al., 2025). Research on Javanese religious orientation explains the syncretic tendencies of post-Mataram society, but does not explicitly link them to Sultan Agung's cultural policies (Budiyanto, 2004). Studies of Javanese art and Sufism describe aesthetic and spiritual transformations, but remain limited to descriptive analysis of texts or performances (Sunarto & Abror, 2022). Thus, these studies summarize the phenomenon of Islamization partially without synthesizing

education, art, and spirituality as a unified process of cultural learning.

In the dimension of education, Islamization during the era of Sultan Agung can be interpreted as the formation of religious habitus through informal education based on the palace, Islamic boarding schools, and cultural rituals. Performing arts such as gamelan and dance function as symbolic learning tools that instill Islamic values through aesthetic representations that are easily internalized by the community. Javanese-Islamic spirituality, especially that inspired by Sufism, formed a transformative learning framework that emphasized inner experience and social ethics (Aziz, 2022). The historical-cultural approach shows that these three dimensions are interrelated as an effective non-formal learning system in the context of traditional society. Therefore, Islamization in Mataram was not merely a change in belief, but a layered and continuous process of cultural education.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its analysis of Javanese Islamization during the reign of Sultan Agung as a model of integrative cultural learning that unites education, art, and spirituality in a single system of local Islamic enculturation. Theoretically, this study expands the concept of Islamization of knowledge by incorporating it into the framework of Javanese cultural history (Sudarto,

2021). Practically, these findings are relevant to the development of religious and cultural education curricula rooted in local wisdom (Pakpahan et al., 2023). In a global context, this research strengthens the position of Islam Nusantara as an alternative form of peaceful Islamization that is recognized in international discourse on religion and culture. Thus, Sultan Agung's legacy not only represents the past but also provides a reflective framework for the development of contemporary Islamic education and culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a historical-cultural qualitative approach to interpret the meaning of the Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung in a contextual and reflective manner. This approach is relevant because it allows for an understanding of cultural values, symbols, and practices as the result of the social and spiritual construction of the Mataram community (Creswell & Poth, 2020). The main data was obtained through a literature study of classical manuscripts, historical archives, and scientific literature on Islamization and Javanese culture (Aziz, 2022; Sudarto, 2021). Interviews with historians and Javanese cultural experts were conducted on a limited basis to deepen interpretation, upholding the ethical principles of research in the form of informed

consent, confidentiality of identity, and the use of data solely for academic purposes (Iswar et al., 2021). Thus, the research method was not directed solely at factual reconstruction, but rather at the historical interpretation of the Javanese-Islamic acculturation process.

The validity of the findings was maintained through triangulation of sources and perspectives, comparing historical manuscripts, academic literature, and expert views to obtain interpretive consistency (Sugiyono, 2021). This triangulation not only served as a validity control but also as an analytical strategy to capture the complexity of the meaning of cultural Islamization. Data analysis is conducted interpretively, emphasizing the relationship between education, art, and spirituality as a thematic whole. Historical analysis and content analysis techniques are used selectively to interpret patterns of meaning, rather than as a mechanical step-by-step procedure (Miles & Huberman, 2020). The results of the analysis then point to the core theme of Islamization as a process of cultural learning that is axiological in value for contemporary education and cultural practices (Pakpahan et al., 2023; Rizqi & Muchtar, 2020).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the Islamization of Javanese

culture during the reign of Sultan Agung formed a consistent integrative pattern between education, art, and spirituality as a single unit of meaning. The analysis confirms that Islamization did not operate through ritual change alone, but rather through the continuous internalization of values in the social and symbolic life of the Mataram community. This pattern is evident in the use of religious educational institutions, performing arts, and literature as mediums for the transmission of contextual Islamic values (Susilo & Asmara, 2020; Aziz, 2022). These findings point to the core interpretive theme that Islamization functions as a dialogical and non-hegemonic process of cultural learning. Thus, the main value produced is the formation of a stable Javanese-Islamic identity without destructive symbolic conflicts.

In the symbolic realm, the results of the analysis show that the reform of the Javanese-Islamic calendar and the transformation of royal rituals are integrative strategies that unite Islamic and Javanese cosmologies. The calendar innovation is not only administrative in nature but also functions as a device of meaning that harmonizes the religious and agrarian time orientations of the community (Diandini et al., 2021). In the field of art, the grebeg tradition and literary works such as *Serat Sastra Gending* show a consistent

pattern of using cultural symbols as a vehicle for internalizing Sufi values (Kurnialoh, 2015; Aziz, 2022). These three fields show a recurring pattern that Islamization works through the reinterpretation of symbols, not the elimination of traditions. This synthesis confirms that the core of Mataram's Islamization lies in the production of shared meaning across fields.

In synthesis, the research results reveal a key pattern of interconnection between power structures, cultural practices, and value pedagogy. Education functions as a normative foundation, art as an affective medium, and spirituality as an inner orientation that unifies the entire process of Islamization. These three elements form a cultural learning system that enables Islamic values to be passed down continuously. This pattern is consistent across various fields and strengthens the legitimacy of Islam in Javanese society without causing cultural dislocation. Therefore, Islamization during the reign of Sultan Agung can be concluded as an integrative, cross-domain model oriented towards the formation of meaning and character.

These research findings can be explained through social learning and cultural learning theories, in which values are transmitted through observation, participation, and symbolic internalization in a social context (Bandura in a cultural

context; Feener & Gade, 1998). The Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung demonstrates an indirect pedagogical mechanism, whereby society learned Islamic values through art, rituals, and meaningful social practices. This mechanism is in line with the concept of transformative learning, which emphasizes a change in the framework of meaning through cultural experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2020). Thus, Islamic education in Mataram was not limited to formal institutions but was distributed throughout the cultural space. This reinforces the understanding that culture functions as a living curriculum in traditional societies.

When compared to studies of Islamization in other regions, such as Aceh or the Middle East, these findings reveal a significant difference in approach. Previous studies have tended to emphasize normative Islamization oriented toward law and formal institutions (Kersten, 2017). In contrast, the Islamization of Mataram displays a cultural approach that places local art and symbols as the main pedagogical tools (Rizqi & Muchtar, 2020). This comparison implies that the success of Islamization in Java is closely related to its ability to adapt to local structures of meaning. In international debate, these findings reinforce the argument that Islamization is not singular, but plural and contextual.

Within the framework of the theory of Islamization of knowledge, the results of this study show that Sultan Agung implemented an integration between revelation, culture, and local rationality (Sudarto, 2021). Education, art, and spirituality functioned as pedagogical mechanisms that unified the cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions of society. These findings are in line with the idea of humanistic education based on local wisdom that emphasizes a balance between intellectuality and ethics (Pakpahan et al., 2023). By placing the Islamization of Mataram in a global context, this study shows that Islam Nusantara is an important contribution to the international discourse on religious education and peaceful culture. Therefore, the Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung can be understood as a model of cultural learning that is relevant to contemporary educational challenges and diversity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research objectives, the results of this study show that the Islamization of Javanese culture during the reign of Sultan Agung (1613–1645) addressed the issue of how Islamic values were effectively internalized through education, art, and spirituality within the framework of local culture. The main conceptual contribution of this study lies in the understanding of

Islamization as an integrative cultural learning process, in which revelation, Javanese tradition, and local rationality interact dialogically to form a contextual Islamic-Javanese identity. In the Islam-Nusantara discourse, these findings reinforce the argument that the success of Islam in Indonesia relies on non-hegemonic cultural strategies that place art, symbols, and social practices as the main pedagogical medium. The implications of these findings for contemporary education and culture lie in their relevance as a basis for developing local wisdom-based education that balances intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Thus, the Islamization of Javanese culture during the era of Sultan Agung can be positioned as a sustainable and applicable conceptual model of Islam-Nusantara for strengthening character education and preserving religious culture in Indonesia today.

Suggestions and Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Local Wisdom-Based Education.** The government and Islamic educational institutions should develop curricula that integrate the values of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), *tawazun* (balance), and *tasamuh* (tolerance) inherited from the Islamization of Javanese culture into the learning process. This is essential for fostering students' religious character while nurturing respect for local culture.
2. **Preservation and Revitalization of Islamic-Javanese Arts.** Cultural agencies and art communities are encouraged to promote the preservation of traditions such as *grebeg*, *wayang*, and Islamic *gamelan* as media of *da'wah* and religious expression relevant to the contemporary era. Collaboration among artists, scholars, and religious leaders is necessary to strengthen the spiritual dimension within local art forms.
3. **Strengthening Contextual Spirituality.** Religious institutions can draw inspiration from the Sufi-oriented approach of Sultan Agung's era to guide communities toward a balanced integration of rationality and spirituality, ensuring that religion remains inseparable from culture as its living spirit.
4. **Integrative Cultural Policy.** Local and national governments are encouraged to adopt the model of Javanese cultural Islamization as a paradigm for modern cultural policy, one that honors the plurality of local values within the framework of Islam Nusantara.

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