



## Muhammadiyah and Javanese Culture: A Theological Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture is often the subject of discussion in the context of the relationship between religion and local traditions. The main problem raised in this research is how Muhammadiyah selects, accommodates, and assimilates Javanese traditions with the Islamic theological principles it promotes. This research aims to analyze Muhammadiyah's theological strategy in responding to Javanese traditions and its contribution to Javanese society at large. The method used in this research is a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. Data was collected through literature studies from relevant primary and secondary sources, including official Muhammadiyah documents, scientific journals, as well as the results of previous research. The research results show that Muhammadiyah adopts a selective approach to Javanese traditions, maintaining cultural elements that do not conflict with Islamic creeds and modifying certain traditions for the sake of da'wah. This approach produces significant contributions in the fields of education and social and cultural arts, as well as creating harmony between religion and local culture. This study emphasizes the importance of dialogue between universal Islamic values and local wisdom as a basis for building an inclusive and civilized society.

### INTRODUCTION

As one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has played a significant role in shaping the expression of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. Founded in 1912 by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta, Muhammadiyah has sought to transform religious life through a spirit of reform and the purification of Islamic creed. Its objective is to present Islam that is not only spiritually relevant but also contextually responsive to the challenges of modernity (Al-Hamdi et al., 2019). In this context, the relationship between Muhammadiyah and local culture, particularly Javanese culture, becomes an intriguing issue worthy of deeper examination.

Javanese culture is widely recognized for its rich traditions, symbolism, and spirituality. Practices such as *slametan*, *wayang*, and various traditional ceremonies reflect a long-standing acculturation of Hindu-Buddhist values, Islam, and local wisdom that has evolved over centuries (Lupita et al., 2024). However, these cultural elements are often viewed as problematic from the perspective of the normative Islam embraced by Muhammadiyah, which emphasizes the purity of Islamic teachings based on the Qur'an and

Hadith (Pongsibanne, 2017). This raises a fundamental question: how does Muhammadiyah respond to Javanese traditions that are deeply imbued with symbolic meanings and ritual practices?

In many respects, Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture is shaped by its theological principles. The organization seeks to eliminate cultural practices considered *bid'ah* (religious innovation), *keburafat* (superstition), and *shirk* (polytheism). For example, the *slametan* ritual, which often involves specific prayers addressed to ancestral spirits, has been one of the traditions criticized by Muhammadiyah (Mohadib & Tajudin, 2024). Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah does not entirely reject Javanese culture. Instead, it endeavors to identify points of convergence between Islamic principles and local traditions that do not contradict Islamic creed.

Muhammadiyah's selective approach to Javanese culture can be observed in its efforts to utilize *wayang* as a medium of da'wah. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, for instance, is known to have employed *wayang* performances to convey Islamic values to Javanese communities (Lukens-Bull, 2005). This illustrates that Muhammadiyah recognizes the importance of cultural approaches in propagating Islam within societies that continue to strongly adhere to local traditions.

However, the relationship between Muhammadiyah and Javanese culture has not always been smooth. In certain cases, Muhammadiyah's criticism of local traditions has often provoked resistance from communities who perceive their cultural heritage as being marginalized or devalued. This resistance reflects an underlying tension between the need to preserve cultural identity and the demand to practice religion in a "pure" form (Geertz, 1976). Therefore, it is essential to understand how Muhammadiyah navigates and mediates this tension while remaining faithful to its theological principles.

Historically, Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture has also been shaped by Indonesia's political and social dynamics. During the colonial period, for instance, Muhammadiyah viewed Javanese culture as a means to strengthen Islamic identity while simultaneously resisting Western cultural dominance. In this context, local culture was not merely seen as an expression of tradition, but also as an instrument of social and political struggle (Mulkhan, 2010). This demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's engagement with Javanese culture has been dynamic and context-dependent.

On the other hand, Muhammadiyah has also employed an educational approach to shape public understanding of the relationship between Islam and culture. Through the educational institutions it has established, Muhammadiyah teaches Islamic values grounded in the Qur'an and Hadith, while still appreciating local wisdom that does not contradict Islamic principles (Noer, 1987). This approach not only strengthens the Islamic identity of Javanese society but also fosters a synergy between religion and culture.

In recent decades, Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture has continued to evolve. Amid the currents of globalization, Muhammadiyah has become increasingly aware of the importance of preserving local traditions as part of national identity (Susanto & Karimullah, 2016). However, such preservation is pursued while remaining firmly anchored in Islamic theological principles. For example, *wayang* is now utilized as an educational medium to convey moral and religious messages to younger generations.

This article aims to analyze Muhammadiyah's theological approach to Javanese culture using a qualitative method based on literature analysis. Through this analysis, it is expected that a deeper understanding will be gained of how Muhammadiyah bridges the relationship between religion and culture within the continually evolving context of Javanese

society. Thus, this article contributes not only to the study of Muhammadiyah but also to broader discussions on the dynamics of religion–culture relations in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This article employs a qualitative approach based on literature analysis. The data were obtained through a review of official Muhammadiyah documents, including fatwas, books, journal articles, and other relevant publications. This approach is complemented by an analysis of specific traditions within Javanese culture, such as *slametan*, *wayang*, and various customary rituals, in order to understand how Muhammadiyah responds to these cultural elements. This method aims to provide an in-depth depiction of the relationship between Muhammadiyah's theological principles and elements of Javanese culture within their social and religious contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Muhammadiyah's Approach to Javanese Traditions

Muhammadiyah's theological principles, which are rooted in the purification of Islamic creed (*'aqidah*), serve as the primary guideline in its engagement with Javanese culture. Muhammadiyah emphasizes the importance of practicing Islam in its pure form based on the Qur'an and Hadith (Kaharuddin et al., 2024); consequently, cultural practices perceived as contradicting these principles often become the subject of criticism. One tradition that has received considerable attention is *slametan*, a socio-religious ritual that constitutes an integral part of Javanese communal life. *Slametan* frequently involves elements regarded by Muhammadiyah as *bid'ah* (religious innovation), such as prayers directed to ancestors or the veneration of certain spirits (Geertz, 1976). However, rather than rejecting the tradition outright, Muhammadiyah seeks to offer alternatives that are more consistent with Islamic teachings.

One strategy employed by Muhammadiyah is the modification of cultural practices to ensure their conformity with Islamic law (*shari'ah*). In the context of *slametan*, for example, Muhammadiyah proposes replacing prayers deemed un-Islamic with recitations from the Qur'an and *dhikr* (remembrance of God) (Rumadi, 2014). Through this approach, the social values embedded in the *slametan* tradition such as togetherness and social solidarity can be preserved without violating doctrinal principles. This strategy reflects Muhammadiyah's pragmatic approach to engaging with local culture.

In addition, *wayang* has become one of the cultural media accommodated by Muhammadiyah. As a traditional Javanese performing art, *wayang* possesses significant educational value. Muhammadiyah recognizes its potential as an effective medium for *da'wah*, particularly in conveying moral messages and Islamic teachings. K.H. Ahmad Dahlan himself utilized *wayang* as a means to explain Islamic concepts to the public. On several occasions, *wayang* narratives were modified to align more closely with Islamic values, such as replacing Hindu mythological figures with Islamic ones (Lukens-Bull, 2005).

This approach demonstrates Muhammadiyah's flexibility in interacting with local culture. Rather than merely rejecting cultural practices, Muhammadiyah seeks ways to integrate beneficial cultural elements into Islamic practice. This principle aligns with the concept of *'urf* (custom) in Islamic law, which allows for the accommodation of local traditions as long as they do not contradict Islamic teachings (Nashir, 2015). It also reflects the objectives of *maqāṣid al-shari'ah*, which emphasize the promotion of human welfare and social benefit.

Nevertheless, this selective approach has not always been readily accepted by Javanese society. In some cases, criticism of certain cultural practices has generated resistance from communities who feel that their cultural identity is being eroded. Such conflicts reflect the tension between religious modernization and the preservation of local traditions. To address this issue, Muhammadiyah has sought to enhance dialogue with the community, particularly through educational and *da'wah* programs. Muhammadiyah's educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of the relationship between Islam and culture. By promoting inclusive Islamic principles, Muhammadiyah helps communities recognize that cultural preservation does not necessarily conflict with religious practice (Noer, 1987).

Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese traditions has also evolved over time. In recent decades, globalization and modernization have brought significant changes in how Javanese society perceives its cultural identity. Muhammadiyah has increasingly acknowledged the importance of preserving local traditions as part of the national cultural heritage. In this context, Muhammadiyah functions not only as an agent of religious purification but also as a guardian of culture that supports social harmony (Subhan, 2012).

Overall, Muhammadiyah's engagement with Javanese culture reflects its effort to bridge the tension between religion and culture. By rejecting cultural elements that contradict Islamic creed while supporting traditions that provide social benefit, Muhammadiyah demonstrates a flexible and contextual approach to societal dynamics. This approach not only strengthens the Islamic identity of Javanese society but also contributes to the preservation of local culture within the framework of Islamic values.

### **Accommodation and Assimilation**

The accommodative and assimilative approach adopted by Muhammadiyah toward Javanese culture constitutes part of the organization's adaptive strategy within local social and cultural contexts (Syamsuddin, 2018). Accommodation, in this sense, refers to the selective acceptance of traditions that do not conflict with Islamic teachings, while assimilation involves the process through which elements of local culture are integrated into Muhammadiyah's Islamic praxis. This approach reflects Muhammadiyah's awareness of the importance of maintaining social harmony without compromising its theological principles.

One concrete example of accommodation is the use of *wayang* as a medium of *da'wah*. In Javanese society, *wayang* holds a significant position as a tool for education and entertainment. Although Muhammadiyah initially viewed this tradition with skepticism due to its associations with Hindu mythology, the organization later recognized its potential as an effective medium for conveying Islamic messages. *Wayang* narratives were subsequently modified to align with Islamic values, such as replacing mythological figures with Islamic characters who embody exemplary moral traits (Lukens-Bull, 2005). Through this approach, Muhammadiyah not only preserves local traditions but also imbues them with Islamic meaning.

Accommodation is also evident in Muhammadiyah's response to the *slametan* tradition. Although certain elements of *slametan* are considered incompatible with Islam, Muhammadiyah has chosen not to eliminate the tradition entirely. Instead, the organization proposes adjustments in its practice, such as replacing prayers addressed to ancestors with Qur'anic recitations and *dhikr*. This approach allows communities to continue observing their traditions while purifying their religious practices in accordance with Islamic teachings (Geertz, 1976).

Assimilation likewise plays a crucial role in Muhammadiyah's strategy for engaging with Javanese culture. This process involves integrating elements of local culture into Islamic practice without losing their theological essence. In the field of education, for example, Muhammadiyah adopts an approach that respects local wisdom. Educational materials in Muhammadiyah schools are designed to reflect Islamic values while simultaneously honoring students' cultural traditions and identities. This strategy not only strengthens students' Islamic identity but also fosters a sense of pride in their local cultural heritage (Noer, 1987).

Nevertheless, this accommodative and assimilative approach has not always proceeded smoothly. In some cases, Muhammadiyah has faced criticism from groups who argue that accommodating local culture may weaken the purity of Islamic teachings. Such criticism often comes from more conservative Islamic circles, which maintain that local traditions should not be accommodated in any form. In response, Muhammadiyah emphasizes that its accommodation and assimilation strategies do not contradict Islamic principles; rather, they enhance the relevance of Islam within local contexts (Lubis, 2017).

Moreover, this approach has also presented challenges in terms of community acceptance. In certain communities, proposed changes to local traditions have encountered resistance, particularly when those traditions carry deep symbolic meanings. To address these challenges, Muhammadiyah has sought to strengthen dialogue with local communities by explaining the theological rationale behind its approach and demonstrating the benefits of the proposed adaptations (Woodward, 2010).

Overall, Muhammadiyah's accommodative and assimilative approach to Javanese culture reflects the organization's effort to maintain a balance between Islamic theological principles and the socio-cultural needs of society. This approach not only reinforces the position of Islam within local contexts but also makes a significant contribution to the preservation of Indonesia's cultural traditions within the framework of Islamic values.

### **Contributions to Javanese Society**

Muhammadiyah's contributions to Javanese society reflect the organization's commitment to fostering a balanced way of life that harmonizes religious principles with local wisdom. As an organization founded in Yogyakarta, the heart of Javanese culture, Muhammadiyah is deeply aware of the complexity of Javanese culture, which is rich in traditions and spiritual values. Consequently, Muhammadiyah seeks to make tangible contributions that are not only theological in nature but also social, economic, and cultural (Haris et al., 2022).

In the field of education, Muhammadiyah has established thousands of schools, madrasahs, and higher education institutions across Java. These institutions not only teach modern scientific knowledge but also instill Islamic values that are compatible with local culture. For example, curricula in Muhammadiyah schools often integrate elements of Javanese local wisdom such as batik arts and the Javanese language with Islamic teachings. This approach not only strengthens students' identities as members of Javanese society but also cultivates a younger generation with a contextualized understanding of Islam (Noer, 1987).

In the social sphere, Muhammadiyah is actively involved in a wide range of humanitarian initiatives aimed at empowering Javanese communities. One notable example is mosque-based economic empowerment programs designed to improve community welfare through skills training and microcapital assistance. These initiatives not only help alleviate poverty among Javanese communities but also reinforce the role of mosques as centers of social and spiritual activities (Latief, 2013).

Furthermore, Muhammadiyah contributes to the preservation of Javanese arts and culture. Although the organization maintains a critical stance toward certain traditions, such as *wayang* and *gamelan*, it continues to appreciate the artistic value embedded in these cultural forms. Muhammadiyah even supports the performance of traditional arts that have been modified to align with Islamic teachings. For instance, some Muhammadiyah-affiliated art groups utilize *wayang* as a medium of *da'wah* to convey moral and religious messages to the public (Woodward, 2010).

In the field of health, Muhammadiyah has established numerous hospitals and clinics throughout Java. These healthcare services are designed to provide broader access to medical care, particularly for communities in rural areas. Muhammadiyah's health initiatives also emphasize public education on environmental hygiene, which aligns with Islamic teachings on cleanliness and well-being. These programs have had a significant impact on improving the quality of life of Javanese society (Latief, 2013).

Muhammadiyah also plays an important role in strengthening interreligious harmony in Java. As a region characterized by religious pluralism, Java has at times experienced tensions among religious groups. In this context, Muhammadiyah actively promotes interfaith dialogue and cross-religious cooperation. Through discussion forums and collaborative activities, Muhammadiyah strives to foster harmonious relationships between Muslims and followers of other religions in Java (Rohim, 2024).

In the environmental domain, Muhammadiyah demonstrates its concern through various conservation initiatives. One prominent effort is its reforestation movement involving local communities. This initiative aims not only to mitigate the impacts of climate change but also to instill Islamic values regarding the responsibility (*amanah*) entrusted by God to humanity in safeguarding the natural environment. Such programs have been well received by Javanese communities, who traditionally maintain a strong spiritual connection with nature (Geertz, 1976).

Overall, Muhammadiyah's contributions to Javanese society illustrate the organization's holistic approach to building harmonious relations between religion and culture. Through diverse programs in education, social welfare, culture, health, and environmental stewardship, Muhammadiyah not only strengthens the position of Islam within local contexts but also delivers tangible benefits that enhance the quality of life of Javanese society.

### **Practical Implications**

Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture offers several important lessons that are relevant and adaptable to broader contexts:

1. Theologically Grounded Cultural Adaptation Model

Muhammadiyah demonstrates that religious organizations can play a crucial role in fostering harmony between religion and local culture. By prioritizing a selective, evidence-based (scripturally grounded) approach, this model of cultural adaptation can serve as a reference for other religious organizations in Indonesia and beyond.

2. Contextualized Da'wah Strategies

The use of local traditions such as *wayang* as a medium of *da'wah* illustrates that religious communication strategies rooted in local contexts are more effective in conveying religious messages. This approach is particularly relevant for expanding the reach of Islamic preaching within multicultural societies.

3. Community Empowerment through Local Traditions

Muhammadiyah has successfully utilized traditional cultural elements, including arts and crafts, to promote community empowerment. Examples include the preservation of batik art and the integration of Islamic values into arts education. This strategy can be applied in other regions with strong local traditions.

4. Managing Cultural Diversity

Muhammadiyah's engagement with Javanese traditions provides a practical framework for managing cultural diversity within society. In a global context, this approach can help mitigate conflicts rooted in cultural and religious differences.

5. Reform in Cultural Education

The educational model implemented by Muhammadiyah, which integrates religious values with local wisdom, can serve as an inspiration for other educational institutions. Strengthening local identity without compromising universal Islamic values is key to nurturing a generation that is both tolerant and principled.

6. The Role of Religious Organizations in Sustainable Development

Muhammadiyah's contributions to environmental issues such as reforestation initiatives and mosque-based community empowerment programs demonstrate that religious organizations play a strategic role in sustainable development. This community-based approach can be replicated to address global challenges such as climate change and social inequality.

## CONCLUSION

Muhammadiyah's approach to Javanese culture represents a concrete example of harmonizing religious values with local traditions. This analysis demonstrates that Muhammadiyah functions not only as a religious organization but also as an agent of social change capable of bridging cultural and religious diversity within Javanese society. The processes of accommodation and assimilation undertaken by Muhammadiyah, although often complex, illustrate that religion and culture need not exist in opposing positions.

Muhammadiyah's contributions in the fields of education, arts, and community empowerment have generated significant positive impacts. These contributions confirm that approaches grounded in contextual understanding and dialogue can foster greater social harmony. As a practical implication, this model may serve as an inspiration for other organizations in addressing the challenges of cultural diversity across various contexts.

This study opens opportunities for further, more in-depth research on how other religious organizations might learn from Muhammadiyah's experience. Accordingly, the relationship between religion and culture can continue to be maintained within a mutually enriching and supportive framework. This study also underscores the importance of integrating the universal values of Islam with local wisdom as a foundation for building a tolerant, inclusive, and civilized society.

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