

Traces of Pre-Islamic Syncretism in Local Culture: Reconstruction of The Religious Identity of the Indonesian Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the dynamics of pre-Islamic syncretism in the Indonesian archipelago by examining the interaction and assimilation of animism and dynamism with Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as their manifestations in social and ritual life and their continuing cultural legacy. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research seeks to capture the complex and contextual patterns of syncretism that shaped early Indonesian society. The study is based on secondary data drawn from scientific journals, academic articles, books, and other scholarly publications collected through library research. Data were analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis, involving data reduction, interpretation, and categorization. The findings reveal that the interaction between animism, dynamism, and Hindu-Buddhist traditions formed a fundamental basis for early religious and cultural identity in Indonesia, resulting in a syncretic framework that structured social practices and belief systems. This framework later facilitated the integration of Islam in an accommodative and peaceful manner with local traditions. The legacy of pre-Islamic syncretism remains evident in contemporary practices such as grave pilgrimages, *slametan* rituals, and Islamic architectural forms, which continue to function as socio-cultural foundations supporting religious tolerance and moderation in modern Indonesian society.

Keywords: Animism, Dynamism, Islam Nusantara, Pre-Islam, Syncretism

INTRODUCTION

Traces of pre-Islamic syncretism in the local culture of the archipelago are an important element in understanding the process of forming the religious identity of Indonesian society. Before the arrival of major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, the people of the archipelago already had a unique belief system that was deeply rooted in their natural environment and life experiences. This belief system is known as animism and dynamism. Animism views that every object in nature, both living and non-living, has a spirit or supernatural power. Meanwhile, dynamism emphasizes the belief in supernatural powers that can be accessed through certain objects such as amulets, heirlooms, or sacred places. This belief system did not disappear even after foreign religions began to enter the region, but rather formed a syncretic pattern that has survived in the traditions, rituals, and socio-cultural



practices of the community to this day. These two belief systems became the spiritual and cultural foundation of the Indonesian people before outside influences entered the region. Therefore, tracing pre-Islamic syncretism is important in reconstructing and understanding the religious identity of the Indonesian people holistically.

Hinduism and Buddhism were assimilated into the local cultures of the archipelago, but animism and dynamism persisted and flourished in the lives of the people (Darne & Andhifani, 2023). This assimilation process did not simply replace existing beliefs, but rather gave rise to new forms through syncretism, namely the blending of different belief elements into a unique system of beliefs and religious practices, in accordance with the local context of the Indonesian people. This syncretism can be seen, for example, in the transformation of the concept of gods and goddesses associated with ancestral spirits, worship practices in sacred places such as mountains or water sources, and social structures that take inspiration from the caste system but are modified according to local needs. Furthermore, it is not only evident in the realm of religious practice but also has a broad impact on the cultural identity of the Indonesian people. Various aspects such as art, architecture, literature, and even early kingdom systems such as the Kutai Kingdom, the Sriwijaya Kingdom, and the Majapahit Kingdom show a harmonization between Hindu-Buddhist symbolism and local traditional values, providing clear evidence that the culture of the archipelago developed through a process of creative reinterpretation, not merely passive adoption.

Studies on syncretism need to be updated because various local religious practices that are often considered as traditions passed down from generation to generation are often not systematically documented in formal sources. This condition results in the potential loss of historical records that are important for understanding the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Indonesian archipelago. Re-examination becomes increasingly relevant when empirical findings reveal that a number of local rituals still retain pre-Islamic elements, but at the same time are reinterpreted within the framework of Islamic teachings by the communities that practice them. As an illustration, research on the *Rebo Wekasan* (A Javanese-Islamic ritual observed on the last Wednesday of Safar to ward off misfortune) tradition in Islamic boarding schools shows the integration of local Javanese rituals and Islamic religious understanding, which was built through a process of adaptation and social interpretation by the community. This phenomenon confirms that syncretism is not only related to past history, but also lives and thrives in contemporary religious practices carried out collectively. Therefore, it is important to re-examine pre-Islamic syncretism, not only to trace its historical roots, but also to understand its contribution to the formation of the cultural and religious identity of the Indonesian people to this day.

When Islam began to enter the archipelago in the 13th century, traces of pre-Islamic syncretism were still very strong and even played an important role in the process of accepting Islam itself. Many religious values, rituals, and symbols were adapted to be in harmony with Islamic teachings, without completely abandoning the local elements that had existed previously. This can be seen, for example, in the traditions of *slametan* (a Javanese communal ritual emphasizing social harmony and spiritual

balance), grave pilgrimages, *wayang kulit* (Javanese shadow puppet), or traditional ceremonies that contain a blend of Islamic values with Hindu-Buddhist heritage and indigenous beliefs.

Although there are a number of studies that highlight the phenomenon of syncretism of local beliefs in the archipelago, there is a gap in research relevant to the focus of this study. First, research such as that conducted by Ahmad Afandi on “Animism-Dynamism Beliefs and the Adaptation of Hindu-Buddhist Culture to Indigenous Culture on the Island of Lombok-NTB” does discuss the acculturation of local belief systems with Hindu-Buddhist culture, but its scope is limited spatially and historically to the Sasak people of Lombok alone (Afandi, 2016).

Second, studies such as those conducted by Lilik Umami et al. on “Animism and Dynamism Beliefs in East Nusa Tenggara Muslim Society” present contemporary data on the existence of local beliefs in modern Muslim society. However, this research emphasizes current conditions and does not discuss historically how these practices were formed through a process of syncretism with Hindu and Buddhist teachings before and after the arrival of Islam (Kaltsum & Tsauri, 2022).

Although a number of studies have discussed syncretism between Islam and local traditions in various regions, there has been no research that systematically explores regional differences in patterns of syncretism, whether in terms of history, ritual adaptation, or socio-cultural dynamics, so that the form of syncretism in one region, for example in Java or Lombok, cannot be generalized to the entire archipelago; in other words, there is a conceptual and empirical gap in the literature that prevents us from having a comprehensive picture of the geographical and historical variations of syncretism. Cross-regional research is needed so that we can compare how environmental factors, local social structures, and the history of cultural contact influence the form of syncretism, and thus understand whether there are common patterns, distinctive differences, or unique models of syncretism that only appear in certain contexts.

Unlike previous studies, which generally focused on only one region or community, this study offers a cross-regional approach to examining the process of acculturation between animism and dynamism beliefs. Previous studies tended to highlight only partial phases of syncretism, for example, only the pre-Islamic period or only the period of Hindu-Buddhist development, thus failing to present a complete chronological picture of how the process of syncretism took place in layers and continuously. This research fills that gap by linking three important phases, namely pre-Islamic, the period of Hindu-Buddhist acceptance, and the phase of syncretism continuity after the arrival of Islam, thus demonstrating that the transformation of beliefs did not stop at a single point in history, but continued to adapt in line with the socio-cultural dynamics of society. By placing animism-dynamism interactions with Hindu-Buddhism as the conceptual foundation for the formation of early cultural identity in the archipelago, this study presents a new contribution in the form of a comprehensive understanding of how this syncretic heritage is manifested in the social and ritual practices of society today. Thus, this paragraph serves as an important link to the formulation of the research objectives, namely to analyze the dynamics of pre-Islamic syncretism, map its forms of assimilation in various

regions, and assess the continuity of cultural values that still survive as characteristics of Indonesia's inclusive and adaptive identity.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to identify, describe, and analyze patterns of syncretism among animism, dynamism, Hinduism, and Buddhism in shaping the religious identity of Nusantara societies. A qualitative approach is suitable for this research because it enables the exploration of non-numerical data and the interpretation of cultural meanings embedded within historical and symbolic contexts. Qualitative inquiry is particularly effective for examining complex cultural phenomena, values, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Therefore, this approach allows the researcher to understand the dynamics of religious syncretism in a holistic and interpretive manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data used in this study consist of secondary sources, including scholarly journals, academic books, peer-reviewed articles, and relevant scientific publications that discuss the interaction and acculturation of animistic, dynamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions in the Nusantara region. Using secondary data provides a wide analytical scope and enables the researcher to trace historical developments and conceptual frameworks that have been systematically documented by previous scholars. These sources also offer diverse perspectives on the characteristics of indigenous beliefs, the spread and influence of Hindu-Buddhist traditions, and the formation of syncretic religious practices prior to the arrival of Islam.

Data collection was conducted through literature research, which involved systematic steps in searching for potential sources from academic databases, library catalogs, and credible scientific publications: selecting based on relevance criteria such as peer review and recent publication dates: reviewing thoroughly: recording analyses: and organizing into thematic categories. This approach is effective for conceptual and historical insights from verified sources (Bowen, 2009).

Validation is carried out through source triangulation and method triangulation, namely comparing information from journals, academic books, and official reports, and combining content analysis with cross-checking references to ensure consistency of findings (Schlunegger et al., 2024). The quality of sources is assessed through authenticity, accuracy, author authority, and citation strength, while bias is minimized by selecting diverse literature, using snowballing techniques, and conducting backward and forward citation tracking for independent cross-source verification (Horsley et al., 2011)

The data were analyzed using a combination of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis identified key concepts, symbols, narratives, and recurring patterns related to cultural syncretism through systematic coding and frequency quantification. Thematic analysis categorizes data into broad themes such as acculturation of indigenous beliefs, Hindu-Buddhist integration, and historical adaptation (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The integration of the two produces a more rigorous analysis, in which the quantitative findings from content analysis reinforce the qualitative

interpretations from thematic analysis. This approach allows for internal triangulation and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of acculturation and historical adaptation in the phenomenon of syncretism.

The data analysis procedures consisted of three main stages: (1) data reduction, which involves selecting relevant information and filtering out irrelevant content; (2) categorization, in which data are grouped into thematic clusters related to syncretism; and (3) interpretation, where meanings are constructed from the findings to understand how animistic, dynamic, Hindu, and Buddhist elements interacted and contributed to the formation of early religious identity in the Nusantara region.

Overall, this methodological framework provides a robust and academically sound foundation for examining religious and cultural syncretism comprehensively, ensuring analytical coherence and interpretive depth in understanding the cultural landscape of pre-Islamic Nusantara.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Local Belief Systems in the Pre-Hindu and Buddhist Archipelago

Before the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Indonesian archipelago, the Indonesian people adhered to animism and dynamism. The animism belief system is a belief in ancestor worship. In this concept, humans believe that the spirits of deceased ancestors/relatives must be respected so that the spirits do not cause harm. People who adhere to animism ask for protection from ancestral spirits to watch over the living. In addition, animisms also ask for things they believe in, such as success, safety, healing, and protection from natural disasters. Furthermore, the dynamism belief system is known as the worship of objects that have supernatural powers. Objects believed to have supernatural powers include trees, caves, stones, and fire. This belief arose because these objects are often associated with mysterious natural experiences, such as dark and secretive caves, rocks that remain unmoved in the midst of storms, trees that grow majestically as if they have a life of their own, and fire that can both warm and burn. Over time, this dynamism belief has persisted to this day. Like many people, there are still people who believe in stone rings or other talismans that can provide benefits, strength, immunity and even good looks (Meizandi, 2025).

The local belief systems of the archipelago, particularly animism and dynamism, interacted and adapted to the influx of Hindu and Buddhist elements through a complex process of religious and cultural syncretism. After the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism around the 2nd to 5th centuries AD, the people of the archipelago did not abandon their native beliefs, but instead combined new elements from Hinduism and Buddhism with existing animist and dynamist beliefs. For example, Batara Guru is considered a manifestation of spirits in Hinduism related to animism, then there is also the concept of spirits and gods in animism that is found parallel to the concept of gods in Hinduism, as well as heirloom objects that are considered to have magical powers related to dynamism and parallel to Hindu and Buddhist teachings.

Thus, these animistic and dynamic beliefs formed the spiritual foundation of the pre-Hindu and Buddhist archipelago, which then syncretically adapted to form the foundation of a rich religious and cultural identity. This demonstrates the ability of local communities to absorb new influences without erasing the roots of old traditions (Hermanto et al., 2023).

History of Acculturation of Islam and Nusantara Culture

Acculturation is a social process that occurs when a group of people with one culture encounters elements of a foreign culture, allowing them to be processed and accepted into their own culture without losing their original cultural identity (Praiswari & Arsandrie, 2021). Furthermore, the history of Islamic acculturation in the Indonesian archipelago begins with Islam's arrival in Indonesia in the 11th and 12th centuries through trade routes (Usman et al., 2023). In Java, Islam began to be known around the 12th century, but its more serious spread began in the 14th century.

The spread of Islam was carried out by the Wali Songo, the nine famous saints in Java, in a polite, wise, and non-coercive manner. The Wali Songo used an approach that was appropriate to the conditions of society at that time. They did not want to be seen as outsiders, so they chose methods that were easily accepted, such as teaching Sufism (Islamic spirituality), providing education, through marriage, implementing political approaches, and acculturating with the local culture (Kholifah et al., 2025).

In this way, Islam was not perceived as foreign but rather integrated with existing traditions. The saints also held traditions such as the *nyadran* and *slametan* held during the month of Sha'ban, which originated from Hindu traditions but was modified to align with Islamic teachings. All of these methods were carried out with great patience and wisdom so that Islam could spread widely without causing conflict. And because of this approach, which adapted to local culture, Islam was quickly accepted by the community. This process is called acculturation, which is the blending of Islamic and local cultures. In this acculturation, Islam successfully adapted without losing its core teachings, which remain universal (Muamara & Ajmain, 2020).

The Process of Acculturation of Islam with Nusantara Culture

The Islam that was brought and spread by the Prophet Muhammad SAW from Mecca to Medina is the original and pure Islamic religion. Sharia Islam is a form of the Prophet's understanding and practice of religion that has not been influenced by local cultural elements, because Islam teaches monotheism, namely worshiping only Allah SWT. This is different from the Jahiliyyah Arab culture which worshiped idols or what is usually called polytheism. And the Islamic religion, sourced from the Al-Qur'an and Hadith, can guide people in faith, worship and morals, and emphasizes absolute monotheism by rejecting all forms of spiritual power other than Allah SWT. With the Al-Qur'an and Hadith, understanding of Islam becomes complete and rational, in accordance with the revelations and examples of the Prophet SAW without any mixture of local culture or other beliefs (Muntoha et al., 2023).

When Islam arrived in Indonesia, particularly in Java, it had to contend with the deeply rooted Javanese culture. The spread of Islam outside Java also encountered a cultural environment that was relatively undeveloped. Islam was not immediately accepted, and even met with suspicion from courtiers. Because of this, Islam began to spread its message in coastal areas of Java. Islam successfully transformed the northern coastal areas of Java by creating new traditions that rivaled those of the court. This significant tradition led to the emergence of new community centers known as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Ramona, 2023).

The spread of Islam in Java gave rise to three groups of Muslims: *santri* (muslim student), *abangan* (syncretic muslim), and *kejawen* (rich) Muslims. These three groups influenced the way Islam was thought about in Indonesia, especially in Java. Furthermore, the founding of the Demak Kingdom marked the pinnacle of Islamic missionary success. Raden Patah, the first king to hold the title of Sultan Syah Alam Akbar, ruled for 43 years. The Demak Kingdom was then succeeded by a series of Javanese Islamic kingdoms. These kingdoms maintained the kejawen tradition, adapted to Islamic law (Zakiyya, 2024).

Javanese literary works often feature stories (*hikayat*), mysticism, and ethical values that reflect the way Javanese people understand Islam. Although the Demak kingdom succeeded in spreading Islamic teachings by making Islamic law and the Qur'an the source of law, Javanese traditions and culture continued, but this did not necessarily eliminate Javanese civilization and traditions. In fact, what happened was not much different from what happened in previous Javanese kingdoms, namely during the Hindu and Buddhist eras (Umam & Nabila, 2025). The success of Islamic preaching on the island of Java was a struggle carried out by the Wali Songo with their multicultural preaching system. Therefore, it can be said that the Wali Songo's preaching practices used the existing Hindu-Javanese preaching system. As a result, Javanese society was not yet able to digest the true values of Islam, even though Islam had become part of Javanese society.

To this day, the connection between society and Javanese traditions remains very strong. Those who have embraced Islam are still accustomed to old beliefs such as animism and dynamism, namely the belief that spirits still exist. They believe that the spirits of the deceased still live in a spiritual form. According to Koentjaraningrat (1985), Javanese Muslims believe that after a person dies, their soul transforms into a spirit called a *lelembut*. This spirit typically wanders around the home. After a period of time, the spirit passes away to the eternal abode. To mark this journey, families typically hold a slametan (celebration), a special event. Family and descendants can still connect with the spirit if needed.

Some celebrations held after a family member dies include: *surtamah* (the day of death or burial), celebrations on the 3rd, 7th, 40th, 100th, then a year, and up to a thousand days. Other traditional traditions include births, weddings, and other traditional ceremonies for major holidays. Furthermore, in Javanese culture, which is associated with animism and dynamism, Islamic elements are also syncretized with ancient traditions such as prayer and the dhikr tradition in Islamic boarding schools.

From this explanation, it can be seen that the process of Islamization and acculturation of Islam with Javanese culture has a fairly long process and method. The background is that the Hindu religious system has been integrated with Javanese traditions, and Islam has adapted to local culture. This acculturation process can occur gradually because the ulama and Wali in Java apply the concept of Ushuliyah by trying to integrate Islamic values with existing community customs by changing some of the content so that it does not conflict with Islamic law (Alhafizh et al., 2024).

Tangible Manifestations of Pre-Islamic Syncretism

The term syncretism comes from ancient Greek, namely from the word “*synkretismos*,” which was originally used in a political context where cities in Crete united against a common enemy. Over time, this term was adopted into the realms of philosophy and religion to describe efforts at reconciliation or unification between different schools of thought or beliefs, such as the attempt to unite the ideas of Plato and Aristotle by figures such as Bessarion in the 15th century. In a religious context, the term was then used to indicate a combination or fusion of different traditions into a new form, although throughout history its meaning has been misinterpreted as simply “any mixture”. Thus, the meaning of syncretism has evolved from a political-social meaning to a religious-cultural meaning, encompassing various forms of integration of ideas, practices, and symbols from different traditions into a single entity.

The term syncretic is not only used in studies of Christian and Protestant traditions, but also to explain how Islam in the archipelago was mixed with local beliefs that were previously considered to have different theological bases. In the context of this study, the use of the term “syncretic” is not only terminological, but also methodological as an analytical framework for examining how pre-Islamic animism-dynamism elements in the archipelago interacted, assimilated, or were reshaped with the arrival of Hindu-Buddhist and then Islamic influences. We can find this broadening of the meaning of syncretic in the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, which defines syncretic as something that seeks adjustment (balance, etc.) between two schools of thought (religion, etc.). For example: some of the literary works of that time reflected the views of both traditional Javanese values and Islam (Tomi, 2023).

Worship of Objects, Places, and Spirits as a Legacy of Animism-Dynamism

Islam in the archipelago is indeed different from common practices in the Arabian Peninsula and other countries where the religion originated, due to its long exposure to local belief systems that have existed since ancient times, giving a unique flavor to Islamic teachings and practices in the archipelago. According to Martin Van Bruinessen, Islam, especially in the Java region, is essentially no more than a thin layer that differs from the transcendentalism found in the Middle East (Naja et al., 2017). This is because religious practices in the archipelago were greatly influenced by religions brought from India (Hinduism and Buddhism), which had existed and arrived before Islam. Furthermore, Islam was influenced by religions that worshipped ancestors, gods, and spirits (Maulana

et al., 2024). Therefore, the process of Islamization in this region was not merely an adoption of doctrine, but took place through a complex process of acculturation and cultural syncretism, in which local symbolic structures and ritual practices played an important role in shaping the religious experience of the community.

Islam was originally a superstructure that interacted with the underlying structure of local culture, so that Islamic practices were often framed through a system of symbols and rituals rooted in Javanese traditions, including respect for ancestors, mystical practices, and forms of community rituals such as slametan or ruwatan, which still exist today. A similar phenomenon is also found in other regions such as Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, where the spread of Islam was accompanied by adjustments to local traditions, both in terms of ritual and social systems. This concept is understood as a manifestation of religious inculturation, namely the process whereby religious teachings accept, adapt, and transform elements of local culture to create forms of religious practice that are contextual and meaningful to the local community. This research reinforces the understanding that syncretism is not merely a mixture of symbols but is the result of ongoing cultural and belief negotiations.

One of the most tangible manifestations of animism-dynamism that has survived to the present day is objects, locations, and spirits that are considered to have supernatural powers in the lives of the people of the archipelago. In the context of cultural history anthropology, reverence for mountains, rocks, trees, springs, or water sources is not only viewed as a traditional belief, but also as part of the local religious architecture in which spiritual meaning is formed through the relationship between humans, nature, and metaphysical entities. An empirical example from Aceh is recorded: "Before the arrival of Islam in the Lhokseumawe City and North Aceh Regency areas, the community adhered to animism and dynamism. They still believed that there were hidden powers in inanimate objects and supernatural forces in all places that could help them in all matters." (Hasan, 2012).

Pre-Islamic beliefs, divided into animism and dynamism, are part of the local cosmology that influences the way of life and spiritual practices of the community. This kind of cosmology is understood as a system of meaning that connects spiritual values with human relationships to the physical and social environment. These beliefs have existed since before the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism, which means that they are local in nature and were not brought in from outside Java. Animism is a belief in the existence of spirits in objects, plants, animals, and humans themselves. Everything that moves is considered alive and has a spirit, whether good or bad. With this belief, they assume that in addition to existing spirits, there are spirits that are more powerful and superior to human spirits. In order to avoid these spirits and receive protection, they perform various rituals of worship and thanksgiving with various offerings as a medium, led by the sang hyang, thus giving rise to the tradition of slametan. Offerings are generally made under large trees, large rocks, springs, and ponds, which are considered to be danyang that mbahurekso or protect the place. Not only that, they also built several monuments made of large, roughly carved stones (pepunden) as places of worship to honor their ancestors and ward off evil spirits or disturbances (Yusuf, 2024).

Furthermore, dynamism is a belief held by the Javanese people that every object has magical powers. At that time, in order to achieve inner strength to influence the universe, the Javanese people undertook various practices such as *mutih* (eating white rice), *ngasrep* (eating bland food), *pati geni* (not eating, sleeping, drinking, or seeing any light), and others. To enhance their spiritual existence, they used various objects believed to have magical powers, such as amulets in the form of *keris* (traditional daggers), spears, agate stones, and others.

Traditions such as *slametan* (communal meals), grave pilgrimages involving sacred sites, or the emergence of other rituals that blend Islam and local beliefs, show that the spiritual roots of the Indonesian people are strongly based on respect for nature and supernatural beings. Such practices are not merely irrelevant remnants of tradition, but part of a configuration of continuity of values that allows Islam to coexist peacefully and accommodatively with local culture. Even after Islam entered and became the majority religion, some elements of local beliefs still survived through cultural and religious syncretism. This is evidence that the process of Islamization in the archipelago was peaceful and accommodating to local cultures, without completely eliminating the spiritual heritage of the past.

Pilgrimage to Tombs and Sacred Graves: Plural Rituals That Connect Ancestors, Saints, and Local Powers

In the religious development of the Indonesian archipelago, the tradition of visiting graves is not only understood as an individual religious practice but as a manifestation of the relationship between formal religious structures and local spiritual traditions that developed long before the arrival of Islam. In the context of the archipelago, pilgrimage is a form of visiting graves that are considered sacred, including the graves of saints, great ancestors, or spiritual figures. *Ziarah* (pilgrimage) is a form of Masdar from the word *Zaara*, which means to visit or pay a call. The KBBI (Big Indonesian Dictionary) defines *ziarah* as a visit to a place that is considered sacred or noble. *Kubur* (grave), commonly referred as a tomb, is a place of burial or interment of the deceased. Therefore, *ziarah kubur* (grave pilgrimage) is visiting or paying respects at a burial site. *Ziarah* is a tradition related to visiting someone who is considered a *Wali* or *Eyang*, who is noble in character and considered sacred by pilgrims. This means that *ziarah* reminds us that humans will return to God (Latifah, 2023).

This tradition demonstrates a symbolic continuity between contemporary pre-Islamic beliefs, namely a form of structural syncretism that is understood locally. This ritual serves to strengthen social relationships and unite the meaning of spiritual practices and communities, not merely theological norms. In the modern era, pilgrimage can also serve as a means of educating people about local Islamic history, reviving a spirit of moderate and tolerant Islam, and strengthening local wisdom amid globalization. In Javanese society, pilgrimage to graves is a refinement of a tradition of grave worship that existed before Islam entered Indonesia. This activity was then refined because Islam viewed it as *shirk*. Therefore, when Islam entered Indonesia, including the Javanese region, the mindset of the people, who were generally Hindu-Buddhist, changed, and many converted to Islam and reformed the

tradition of tomb worship into tomb pilgrimage (Ilham, 2021).

The transformation of grave pilgrimage practices from what was once regarded as a form of reverence for spirits or local spiritual entities into contemporary Islamic rituals is part of a long cultural historical process that cannot be separated from the local context of each community. The practice of grave pilgrimage in various regions of the archipelago shows that this ritual functions as a ritual arena that accommodates Islamic monotheistic values while maintaining respect for ancestors and traditional local powers. The practice of grave pilgrimage is understood as a religious activity that encourages existential awareness in pilgrims of the temporary nature of humanity. Through this practice, pilgrims are reminded that every individual will eventually experience death and enter the afterlife, just like the corpses they visit. This awareness is beneficial for individuals to continue improving their piety towards Allah and reminds them that there is another place besides this world. In addition, pilgrimage is also carried out with the aim of praying for individuals who have died to receive forgiveness and a better position with Allah (Mujib, 2016).

The Ritual Ceremony of Slametan in Javanese Society

Slametan ceremonies in Javanese society are practices that emerged as part of a broad and pluralistic religious ritual system, reflecting the relationship between Islamic teachings and local cultural heritage that had long developed before Islam entered the archipelago. The Javanese people perform slametan traditions to celebrate almost all events, such as births, circumcisions, marriages, deaths, Islamic celebrations, village cleanings, house moves, name changes, recoveries from illness, recoveries from the effects of magic, and so on. Some believe that slametan is a mandatory spiritual requirement and that violating it will result in a lack of blessings (Rudianto et al., 2017). The overall actions in slametan are not merely individual rituals, but practices that reflect the social logic inherent in the local value system and are connected to beliefs about the balance of the universe and the relationship between humans and their ancestors.

Slametan ceremonies, as a form of culture, are constantly undergoing changes and developments. This is due to changes in the mindset of the people who uphold the culture, technology, and religion. These changes in mindset, technology, and religion have a direct impact on the means and processes involved in slametan ceremonies. Slametan ceremonies have undergone continuous development to adapt to the socio-cultural conditions of their time. Starting from beliefs that developed into Hinduism, they evolved and transformed into Islamic culture and blended with other religions until now. The embryo of slametan was a ritual ceremony to worship the spirits of ancestors, which developed into the worship of gods and goddesses, and then evolved again, transforming to adapt to Islam. In its further development, slametan in some communities is called *syukuran* (feast) or *tasyakuran*.

Slametan in the modern era can be referred to as *kenduri* or *genduren*, *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, and others. Tahlilan and yasinan are usually synonymous with sending prayers to the spirits of ancestors.

During these events, participants usually recite the *kalimah toyyibah tahlil* and Surah Yasin together. Afterwards, the host provides a variety of food, which is intended as charity for the deceased so that they may receive charitable deeds and be spared from punishment in the grave (Warisno, 2017). Although the theological understanding of the slametan tradition is often described in religious discourse as something obligatory or auspicious, this practice needs to be viewed through the lens of religious plurality and cultural syncretism. Slametan does not exist outside the context of local value systems and the long history of cultural interaction that preceded Islam in the archipelago, but is a concrete example of how pre-Islamic heritage remains alive in a new form that is interpreted and practiced when Islam is accepted and integrated locally. Thus, the slametan tradition not only functions as a religious ritual, but also as a social glue that strengthens *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), maintains harmony, and serves as an effective means of preserving Islamic values and Javanese culture amid changing times (Suwandi & Sari, 2025).

Pre-Islamic Syncretism and the Formation of Islamic Identity in the Archipelago

Syncretism is the merging of different elements into one and adapting them to create distinctive characteristics (Lestari & Yunita, 2025). In the Indonesian archipelago, the pre-Islamic syncretism framework was formed from a blend of animist, dynamist, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs. This fusion formed a strong cultural foundation before the arrival of Islam. The syncretization process between Islam and Indonesian culture was smooth and comprehensive, making Islam in the archipelago seemingly inseparable from local traditions. In fact, when we look at Indonesian culture today, the influence of Islam is very pronounced, and conversely, local traditions are also strongly felt in Islamic practices (Maulida et al., 2021).

Clifford Geertz's theoretical framework regarding religion as a cultural system helps to interpret this phenomenon. Geertz asserts that religion provides a system of meaning that shapes human behavior. (Riady, 2021). In the context of the archipelago, local symbolic systems were not abolished, but rather reinterpreted within an Islamic framework. Recent research shows that this process took place selectively and through socio-political negotiations, rather than always harmoniously as is often generalized. (Baron et al., 2025). Local cleric, merchants, and political elites played an important role in reinterpreting cosmology and rituals, resulting in different expressions of Islam across regions.

This process of reinterpretation contributed to the formation of a distinctive Nusantara Islamic identity. However, the results were not uniform. These variations were influenced by social structures, political authorities, and the spread of Islam in each region. The architectural form of mosques, such as the typical Javanese roof combined with a Middle Eastern-style dome, reflects a material negotiation between old symbols and Islamic symbols (Maulana et al., 2024). Similarly, practices such as Nyadran, Slametan, Tahlilan, and regional rituals such as Tabuik in Pariaman or Maccera' Tasi in South Sulawesi demonstrate a process of historical adaptation. These practices do not necessarily indicate smooth integration, but rather the result of ongoing adjustments (Lestari & Yunita, 2025).

In contemporary developments, this syncretic tradition is often positioned as the basis for religious moderation, but research shows that moderation does not arise automatically from local culture, but rather through institutional and social constructs. (Syamsurijal et al., 2022) explains that the values of *tawasuth*, *tasamuh*, and *tawazun* associated with Islam Nusantara were formed through educational narratives and the historical reconstruction of the Wali Songo. (Nurhanisah & Tjoetra, 2025) also emphasize that the concept of Islam Nusantara serves as a contextual framework for moderation that connects religious identity with modern citizenship.

Empirical findings reinforce this. (Hidayatullah & Saumantri, 2023) show that higher education institutions internalize the value of inclusivity through their curricula and student activities. A study in Tanjung Kubah Village reveals that community dialogue can strengthen social relations and prevent conflict (Warnisyah et al., 2024). In Boyolali, the leadership of clerics and religious figures plays a key role in producing moderate Islamic practices that are accepted by the community (Muallifah & Sutomo, 2024).

Thus, pre-Islamic syncretism should be understood not as a harmonious legacy that automatically produces tolerance, but as a historical mechanism that allows Islam to be contextualized locally. Its relevance today lies in the ongoing process of reinterpreting cultural symbols and practices to respond to the needs of modern society. This understanding avoids romanticizing syncretism and frames it as a complex adaptive process that depends on the ever-changing socio-political conditions in the archipelago.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data obtained, this article comprehensively examines the process of syncretism between animist beliefs, dynamism, and Hindu and Buddhist cultures. It also examines Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, which shaped the cultural and religious identity of the community. Before the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism, the people of the Indonesian archipelago already possessed strong local belief systems, namely animism and dynamism. These were then acculturated with Hindu and Buddhist teachings through cultural adaptation, resulting in a syncretism that became the foundation of early cultural identity. When Islam arrived in the 13th century, the process of accepting Islam also went through acculturation, while maintaining elements of pre-Islamic local culture and Hinduism, resulting in a moderate and inclusive Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. This syncretism is evident in local traditions such as grave pilgrimages, *slametan*, rituals, and symbols that combine Islamic values and local beliefs. This legacy of pre-Islamic syncretism can strengthen the inclusive character of Nusantara culture, which is the ability to respect diverse beliefs without discrimination, and adaptive, which is the flexibility to adapt new teachings to local traditions. It also serves as a foundation for religious moderation in the contemporary era. Islam in the Nusantara religion did not emerge as a religion that confronted local culture, but rather through a dialogical process involving local religious leaders. This process resulted in an Islamic Nusantara identity that harmonizes with local traditions and plays a role

in strengthening religious tolerance and moderation in modern Indonesian society. Thus, the discussion of pre-Islamic syncretism makes a major contribution to the formation of the distinctive religious and cultural identity of the archipelago, providing an inclusive and relevant model of cultural continuity to face the challenges of the modern era.

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