

SUFISM AND HYBRID SPIRITUALITY: The Brai Performance in Cirebon- Indonesia

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SUFISM AND HYBRID SPIRITUALITY

The Brai Performance in Cirebon-Indonesia

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss a Sufi-inspired traditional art and performance popular in Cirebon, the so-called "Brai". The Brai is a traditional Islamic Sufism music popular among the Cirebonese. This traditional music combines sounds, lyrics, and dance that invite the practitioners and audiences to exercise the spiritual stages through music. The Brai performance follows the hierarchy of Sufi-state of minds and spiritual stages (suluk and raka'at). Thus, as this article argues, the Brai is a par excellence model for the entanglement between Islam and local culture. The Brai is indeed a way of the Cirebonese both to introduce Sufi-form of Islam and provides a performance where the profane arts and spiritual-Islamic Sufims are mutually entangled.

[Artikel ini mengkaji salah satu seni populer di Cirebon yang disebut Seni Brai yang mengandung pesan sufistik. Seni Brai adalah warisan Cirebon yang mengandung pesan-pesan pendidikan dalam mengelola pikiran. Pesan

yang disoroti dalam seni Brai lebih pada ibadah keagamaan eksoteris. Seni mengekspresikan rasa estetika dengan Tuhan dengan menari dan memuji dalam lima ritual. Setiap raka'at menunjuk suluk kepada Tuhan. Seni Brai ini membuktikan bahwa Cirebon diakui sebagai daerah pusat penyebaran dan pengembangan Islam dan tasawuf karena Cirebon memiliki wilayah strategis baik dari Pasifik maupun daerah maritim.]

Keywords: *Hybrid Spirituality, Sufism, Brai*

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Introduction

Artistic expression is essential to every culture and religion. Islam describes the art as the heart of religion and God is beautiful and loves beauty. The early history of Islam in Indonesia demonstrated the roles of art as a medium to introduce Islam. This article will examine the relationship between art and religion, focusing of the Brai tradition popular among Muslim in Cirebon, West Java, Indonesia. It particularly examines the mystical dimension (*sufism*) of Brai tradition as a medium to translate Islam through artistic performance. Located at the northern tip of Java, Cirebon is indeed rich with artistic performances that demonstrate Islamic influences. According to an Indonesian scholar Wahidin¹, Brai has developed since 14th century. It is an Islamic performance where the prayers dedicated for the Prophet Muhammad (*shalawat*) is communally performed at the occasion of celebrating the full-moon. The Brai performance shows a high degree of blending between Arabic and local Cirebon culture. The traditional Cirebonese percussion, such as *rebana*, *ketipung*, or *kendang*, are essential at the occasion of the performance. Historically speaking, the Brai performance was a way to introduced Islam to local population.² In later centuries, it transformed

¹ Dede Wahidin, *Kompilasi Kesenian Tradisional Cirebon* (Cirebon: Disporbudpar Kota Cirebon 2013), p. 32.

² Didin Nurul Rosidin (et.al.), *Kerajaan Cirebon* (Jakarta: Puslitbang Lektur & Khazanah Keagamaan, Kemenag RI, 2013) p. 114.

into a popular Islamic art.

There have been studies on the Brai performance including the work by Dede Wahidin³ and Fandy Hutari,⁴ that discuss the local dimension of Brai performance. This article on the other hand offers another perspective, particularly on the relationship between local tradition and Islam. It delves into the meaning of Brai performance that relates to *sufism*. This article further argues that the Brai performance strongly contests the exclusive association of artistic expression; that art is for art only. As the Brai performance demonstrates, there has been multiplicity in artistic performance and *sufism* is the core of the Brai performance. The Brai performance is a par excellence model for the entanglement between Islam and local culture. The performance is indeed a way of the Cirebonese both to introduce *sufi*-form of Islam and to provide a performance where the profane arts and *sufims* are mutually entangled.

The Brai: Entanglement between Islam and Local Culture

According to Koentjaraningrat, the concept of culture refers to the whole system of ideas, actions, and results of human work in the framework of the life of society that is made into human properties through learning processes.⁵ Aspects of culture are multiplies encompassing daily human activities, values, knowledge, beliefs, arts, ethics, laws, and customs.⁶ Artistic expression is part of culture. It relates to the norms and values that are also essential in the making of culture.⁷ The art also characterizes the society where culture is nurtured.⁸ In Islam, artistic expression enjoys a pristine position. Islam describes art as the

³ Dede Wahidin, *Deskripsi Kesenian Cirebon* (Cirebon: Disbudpar Kabupaten Cirebon, 2004).

⁴ Fandy Hutari, *Hiburan Masa Lalu dan Tradisi Lokal: Kumpulan Esai Seni, Budaya, dan Sejarah Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Insist Press, 2011).

⁵ Koentjaraningrat, *Pengantar Ilmu Antropologi* (Jakarta: Rineka Cipta, 1981), p. 180.

⁶ Harsojo, *Pengantar Antropologi* (Jakarta: Putra A Bardin, 1977), p. 92.

⁷ Supartono, *Ilmu Budaya Dasar* (Bogor: Galia Indonesia, 1983), p. 35.

⁸ Taufiq H Idris, *Mengenal Kebudayaan Islam* (Surabaya: PT Bina Ilmu, 1983), p. 91-92.

¹ heart of religion and God is beautiful and He loves beauty. As the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad narrates “Indeed Allah is all beautiful and likes beauty” (HR. Muslim)⁹. Nevertheless, artistic expression should not contradict Islamic principles. Artistic expression should be in line with Islamic messages. In Java, we can mention numerous artistic performance with Islamic meaning, such as *barzanji*, *shalawatan*, *emprak*, and *srandul*.¹⁰

The Brai performance is one of Islamic-art performance popular among Muslim in Cirebon. Taken from the Cirebonese words “*baroya*” and “*berabi*”, the Brai refers to the ultimate pleasure as a result of intimate contact between human with God. The performance is centred on the activities of Islamic prayers dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad (*salawat*). The prayer is both in Arabic and local language. The Cirebonese percussion is crucial at the occasion of the Brai performance.

As for the contents, the Brai performance is a local Sufism developed in Cirebon region. Since the early introduction of Islam in the region in the 15th century, *sufism* has been essential to explain the process of conversion to Islam and the mystical nature of Islam in Cirebon and the history of Islamisation in the region.¹¹ One of the leading 15th century *sufi* scholar and the earliest Muslim proselytizer (*da'i*), Sheikh Nurjati Cirebon is believed to establish the first Islamic educational institution

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Kuntowijoyo, *Tema Islam dalam Pertunjukan Rakyat Jawa: Kajian Aspek Sosial, Keagamaan, dan Kesenian* (Yogyakarta: Proyek Penelitian & Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara, 1987), p. 12.

¹¹ There have been studies on Cirebon which includes historical accounts from regional perspective by Sharon Joy Siddique, *The Relics of the Past: a Sociological Study of the Sultanates of Cirebon, West Java*; Zaenal Masduqi, *Cirebon from Traditional Cities to Colonial Cities* (2011); A. Sobana Harjasaputra and Tawaluddin Haris (et.al.), *Cirebon in Five Times*. Other works are focusing on history focusing important figures, such as Dadan Wildan, *Sunan Gunung Jati Between Fiction and Facts*; Nina Lubis (et.al.), *History of Old Cities in West Java*; Zaenal Masduqi (et.al.), *Islamization, Leadership Succession and the Beginning of the emergence of the Cirebon “Islamic Empire”: Study and Writing of “History of the Cirebon Sultanate”*; Bambang Irianto and Siti Fatimah entitled, *Sheikh Nurjati (Sheikh Datul Kahfi): Pioneer of Da'wah and Education*; Didin Nurul Rosidin, *Syekh Nurjati: A Driving Figure for Islamization...*, p. 16-19.

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in Bukit Amparan Jati. The story tells that he was Malacca origin and travelled to Mecca and Baghdad and later stayed in Muara Jati Port in Cirebon.¹² Later centuries, the story records the role of *sufi* scholar, a younger brother to Sheikh Nurjati, Sheikh Bayanallah (known also as Sheikh Maulana Akbar) who introduced Islam in the Kuningan area, southern part of Cirebon.¹³

Importantly, the history of *sufism* in Cirebon is related to the 16th century figure of Sheikh Syarif Hidayatullah or Sunan Gunung Djati. He was one of the Walisongo, the nine saints, who introduced Islam in West Java region.¹⁴ A popular story about Hidayatullah tells that he was a *sufi* master (*mursbid*) who attained the highest-status in *sufi* state-of beings (*maqamat*). The title *An-Nubuwat al-Warisah* (the inherited prophethood) attributes to Hidayatullah as he arrived at the *ma'rifa* (the knowledgeable) status. In addition to his role as a *sufi* master, Hidayatullah was a king, the successor of the West Java king Cakrabuana, with an honored title “*Sinubun Ingang Kanjeng Susubunan Jati Purba Panetep Panatagama Aulia Allah Kutubizaman Kholifatul Rosulullah Shallallahu Alaibi Wassalam*” (the rightful king of Jati Purba, the ruler for religion, the axial-saint for periods, and the successor for the Prophethood caliph). Importantly, Syarif Hidayatullah reserves as a paradigmatic example of Islam in Cirebon where *sufism* is the core of living Islamic tradition. *Sufism* has facilitated the entanglement between Islam and Hindu-Buddhist tradition, such as *selamatan*, *sedekah kubur*, *memitu*, *marawi*, and else.¹⁵ In other words, the entanglement between

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹³ Zaenal Masduqi, (et.al.), *Islamisasi, Suksesi Kepemimpinan, dan Awal Munculnya Kerajaan Islam Cirebon: Kajian dan Penulisan Sejarah Kesultanan Cirebon* (Jakarta: Puslitbang Lektur & Khazanah Keagamaan, Kemenag RI), p. 71-76.

¹⁴ Dadan Wildan, *Sunan Gunung Jati Between Fiction and Facts: Advice, Influence and Traces of the Guardian in Java* (Ciputat: Saliam, 2012), p. 242.

¹⁵ On Cirebon worship, culture and tradition can be seen in the work of Muhaimin, A.G., “Islamic boarding schools and congregations in the Modern Era: An Account on the Transmission of Traditional Islam in Java” *Studia Islamika*, Vol. 4 No. 1, 1997; *The Islamic Tradition of Cirebon: Worship and Custom among Javanese Muslims* (Monash: ANU Press, 1995); *Islam in the Frame of Local Culture: Portraits from Cirebon* (Jakarta: PT

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Islam and local tradition has generated a ‘hybrid’ form Islam in which the distinction between Islam and foreign tradition has blurred,¹⁶ resulting in a new tradition which characterises Islam and locality.¹⁷

Performing the Brai

As the above discussion, the Brai is indeed a hybrid performance accommodating element of Islam and local specificities. At the occasion of Brai performance, the performers gather at Paseban Brai where ritual prior to the performance is carried out, led by a Muslim priest. The Brai pre-ritual is similar to the Javanese ritual of *slametan* in which the performers dedicated prayers for the well-beings of their predecessors and the safety of the performers while performing the Brai.¹⁸ The ritual is indeed an initiation stage before the performers would experience the stage of unity between the creator and His creation. The Brai performance later continues the ritual and it is divided into five *raka’at* (spiritual stages).

At the first *raka’at*, the performers read the prayer formula dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad “*ya nabi salam alaika yarasul salam alaikaikabibi salam alaika solawatulab ilaika*. It was read six times servings as a greeting to the invisible presence of the Prophet during the performance. Following the greeting, the performers read *al-fatihan*, the first chapter of the Quran, and the formula of *istigfar*, *salasilah*, *syahadatain*. This first *raka’at* tells the performers and the Brai audiences the importance of being at the stage of “remembering” God. The formula of *salam* (safety) later concludes the first *raka’at*.

At the second *raka’at*, the performers read the following formula:

Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2001).

¹⁶ Ian Richard, *Spiritual World of Sufis*, trans. Machnun Husein (Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafino Persada: 2002), p. 195.

¹⁷ Laleh Bahtiar, *Journey to God*, trans. Purwanto (Bandung: Nuansa, 2001), p. 51.

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, “Abangan, Santri, Priyayi”, trans. Aswab Mahasin (Jakarta: Dunia Pustaka Jaya, 1983), p. 36.

.... the field took the ILALA fire, the lungangansu did not end up in the water, went for 2 months, but did not pray for the death of ILALA, so do not forget to live ILALA, to be dead again if you are ILALA and so alone let's face the death of a sinner, praying can be praying for you and your whole life. 6x (kelayan)

.. I do not know why the prophets, the gods are lost, the blessings and the prayers, the prayers and the prayers, calling ALAA ALA ALA ALA ILA HA ILALA HUALA ALAILA..6x

The above second *raka'at* formula emphasizes on the word “*hu*” in the formula. The performers would take a deep breath as saying the word which refers to God. The word “*subhanallah*” later follows as an acknowledgement of God’s ultimate power. The formula symbolizes the dictum that “the result of Allah is life itself ... the smallest slope of the slopes, the waterpark, the hot spots, the dawn, the sunshine, the sunshine for a night, the sunshine.”¹⁹ The formula particularly imply the limit of the creation and the power of the creator.

Nur ya mentor syeikh, prophet, wali-wali, ala muhammad ala nuryangalanur, I'm sad (father) yani body ingun, ala yamuhammad can not the nation of faith nur ya tawar. 6x. If you are from the faith, from the faith to the children of the faith of the reincarnation, the grace of the throne of the world, the love of the world, the remnant of the world of faith, therefore the doves do not die for the virginity of the virgin, the spirit of the virginity of the nation's virginity. 6x. (the poem was born to you)

The above formula is the essence of the third *raka'at* with which the performers testify the God and human relations and the special position of the Prophet and the Muslim saints (*wali*). The God and human relations is described as “master and slave” relations; God as the powerful and human as the slave of god (*abd*). It also tells the position of “pure heart (*sukma*)” as the place where human can experience ultimate spiritual experience with God.²⁰ And the following formula concludes the third *raka'at*:

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

²⁰ Rachmat Subagja, *Agama Asli Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan & Cipta Loka Caraka Foundation, 1981), p. 261.

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yute yulaila yute lailala yute mukamadunyute rosulila madun muka ana kakang majalala...6x.

weteng suci kangge naburmbismila asale dingin, it is mandatory that tempele sewiji-wiji (lung gadung).

The above formula is in Javanese-Cirebon dialect and testifies that monotheistic principle and the relationship with human. The word *wiji* refers to God and is proclaimed as the sole objective of human life. To do so, human needs to understand God by heart, not through their ratio. The fourth *raka'at* spells a formula which emphasizes on the prayers exclusively dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad and the God's presence which is invisible, but powerful:

Ado katon neng negesan ajo lali, ala wetan pawangenang pareke ora ketilang, in gulati parek bae, anae neng sadatselawe, , ALAILALAILA ILAHAILALA ALA ALAILA LAILAHA ILA ILALA. 6x. Then read wasalim soli ala sayidinamubakamadin wa ala ali mukamad, bu ala YAMBISMILA nirokman nirokim soli wasalimala sayidina mucamadin wa ala ali mukamad,

The final *raka'at* reads the following formula:

subakanalabi ala yahu yahu iman ala subakanalabi iman iman prastulillah ala takgonjan ganjen ... rubana ya rubana dolam enaan pusana wa ila tagpirilana watarkamna lana kunana minak kosirin.

sources of time do not sleep, there is a fire in the world of sin is not old enough to burn, there is fire in the world, in which case the death of the body of the deceased, the body of the body, which is old, miserable, mutawadisi kiyamuhu binapsihi 6x (syair wahdatullah sifating ilmu).

ala ala alaila ilabailala bu ala alaila , ala umbul umbul gunung jatidegung banten raja kene ,ala alun alun kesepuan lemah diwur pangajaran suaranegelap sewu ,(gelap sewu) yen isun lanang sejati, ala ala alaila ilaba ilala bu ala alaila...6x

At the occasion of Brai performance, the performers collectively read the above formula and experienced the state of "transcending the self" with the creator which is the highest virtue of Islamic *sufism*.

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A Hybrid Mysticism

As the above mentioned, the Brai performance is a container where Islamic mysticism and Hindu-Buddha spirituality entangled. During the Brai performance, the performers experienced the yogic state-in Hindu spirituality-which is parallel to the concept of *ma'rifa* in *sufism*. Thus, the performance of Brai is also called the “yoga”. In the Javanese-Hindu tradition, yoga is a spiritual achievement for the sake of highest spiritual stage which culminates in the state of *moksa*, the vanishing self and the end of incarnation.²¹ Thus, the Brai clearly demonstrates the hybridity of religious tradition which neither Islam nor Hindu, but both traditions.

Important to the concept hybridity is the notion of syncretism which facilitates the birth of new tradition. For Stewart, concretism is a concept that directs our attention to “the issue of accommodation, contest, feasibility, and a place for dynamic intercultural processes”. As a result, syncretism would obscure the substantive claim on the originality of a tradition. Nevertheless, despite the transgressing of religious boundaries and the hybridity of a tradition, it is important to locate the tradition within its historical context. The Brai tradition is indeed an Islamic *sufism* inspired performance. It is an ultimate means for introducing Islam to local population. Thus, it is reasonably true that the Brai performance has two important functions: religious and spiritual function as well as social symbolism.

As the above Brai formula demonstrate, *sufism* is crucial in the making of Brai performance. It teaches and practices Islamic *sufism* important to attain the highest spiritual being for the self. Despite the adoption of some aspects of Hindu spirituality, the Brai tries to defy the position of spiritual beings, like genies, and makes God as the ultimate spiritual object. This principle is different from the Hindu spirituality that mainly accommodates the genies and dangerous spiritual-being in the

²¹ *A poet, Literature and Literary Studies* (Jakarta: PT. World War, 1988), p. 355.

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ritual for achieving the stage of ultimate spirituality.¹ The Brai is oriented to the transformation of inner self -the inner dimension of the self-for the ultimate state of spiritual achievement. As Eliade Mircae argues every human is “religious being” who live with past and in the present. Every human repeats the past tradition of their ancestors and, through repetition, they nurture the tradition in the present time. In other word, every human believes in “spiritual being”. This belief is the foundation of religion. The definition of “spiritual being” should also include a spiritual conscious.

In addition to the hybrid spirituality, it is important to examine the performative dimension of the Brai. As this article also argues, the Brai performance reserves as a means of *dakwah* activities. The Brai performance delivers Islamic meaning imbued with spiritual values and practices. As Gonda explains the two meanings of feeling-“the highest meaning” or the most important hidden value “and” sensory sensation“, taste (tongue)” or “inner feeling”-which is actually taken from the Sanskrit different yet as it is also stated, in modern Java. “The last word is true has been mixed up with the first one.”

The percussion instrument, tones and lyrics at the occasion of Brai performance are also worth-examining. The sound and tones of the Javanese *gamelan* as well as the prayers in Arabic and Javanese with Cirebon dialect assemblage and create a divine experience to the performers.²² As for language aspect, many performers did not understand Arabic. Thus, the meaning of the text is not essential as “religious experience” is a crucial factor.²³ Music is essential to explain the birth of spiritual atmosphere at the occasion of Brai performance. Through his work, Andrew Beatty gives an ample discussion on the atmosphere of Javanese ritual and the state that follows the religious nuance.²⁴ Music is essential in

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.

²³ Clifford Geertz, “Abangan, Santri, Priyayi...,” p. 360.

²⁴ Andrew Beatty, *Variasi Agama di Jawa*, trans. Achmad Fedyani (Jakarta: PT. Raja Grafindo Persada), p. 152-153.

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religiously-making atmosphere as the performers experience the spiritual state of beings through their hearts. In other tradition, we could also see the importance of music in religious communities. In India, *kebuddam* refers to musical player of low-caste in Hindu social stratification. They *kebuddam* work with the *qanwal* (singer) who sing the *mantras* and the combination of musical sound and *mantras* generate a state of spiritual ecstasy.²⁵ As for the Brai tradition, the performers at the occasion of Brai performance would experience the state of spiritual ecstasy, a state of being in union with God.²⁶ In other Javanese-Islamic tradition, we could pin point also other tradition where music is essential in the making of spiritual subjects.

Conclusion

As this article argues, *sufism* is essential in the making of local tradition. In artistic dimension, *sufism* has facilitated the birth of a hybrid tradition that transgresses religious boundaries between Islam and Hinduism. The spiritual messages have been introduced through varieties of means, particularly music and *sufi* performance. As the Brai performance demonstrates, *sufism* is indeed the core of the performance which accommodates also Hindu elements. The Javanese distinction of *wadah* (container) and *isi* (substance) is essential to understand the fluid characteristic of *sufism* and varieties of local adaptation. The entanglement between *sufi* and local tradition is the key to comprehend the success of Islamisation in Java. The Brai performance is one of Javanese performance developed in Cirebon region which accommodates Islamic mysticism and local tradition and explains the Islamisation through artistic performance and music.

²⁵ Henri Chambert-Loir and Claude Guillot, *Pilgrimage and Guardian* (Jakarta: PT. Serambi Ilmu Semesta 2007), p. 251.

²⁶ Interview with Among, Karmina, and Dakina in November 23, 26, 28, 2015.

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