

THE CHARACTER OF SEMAR IN WAYANG: A SYNTHESIS OF JAVANESE CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

The character of Semar in Javanese puppetry is a unique figure who bridges Javanese philosophy and Islamic teachings. This study explores the synthesis between the two traditions through an analysis of Semar's characteristics and teachings. This study aims to (1) analyze how the character of Semar represents the synthesis between Javanese cultural philosophy and Islamic principles, (2) examine its implications for understanding cultural acculturation and (3) its relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesia. This study applied the library research method. Data sources included literature on puppetry, Javanese philosophy, and Islamic teachings. The analysis was conducted by using a hermeneutic, comparative, and semiotic approach. The study result reveal that (1) a significant correlation between the characteristics and teachings of Semar and the basic principles of Islam. Concepts such as "manunggaling kawula gusti" and "memayu hayuning bawana" are in harmony with the teachings of tauhid and khalifah fil ardh in Islam. Simplicity, honesty, and social criticism that characterize Semar are also in line with Islamic values. The synthesis reflected in the character of Semar shows the flexibility of Islam in adapting to local culture without losing the essence of its teachings. (2) This has important implications for understanding Javanese-Islamic cultural acculturation and offers an inclusive and tolerant model of religiosity in the context of contemporary Indonesia. (3) This study also reveals the relevance of this synthesis in facing the challenges of modernity and globalization, as well as its potential in building a national identity that is rooted in local wisdom but open to universal values.

Keywords: Semar; Javanese philosophy; Islam; Cultural acculturation.

INTRODUCTION

Wayang, an Indonesian cultural heritage, has been designated a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. This designation underscores the significance of wayang as an integral aspect of Indonesian cultural identity and its role in safeguarding traditional values and traditional performing arts that hold profound significance. This performing art has a long historical tradition and has been an integral part of Indonesian society, particularly Javanese society, for centuries (Wibawa, 2024). The stories presented in wayang are capable of conveying profound messages that encompass lessons pertaining to ethics, wisdom, and the comprehension of the intricacies of life (Nurgiyantoro, 2011). The Javanese philosophical tradition, which provides the foundation for numerous wayang narratives, encompasses intricate concepts pertaining to the interrelationship between humans, nature, and the divine.

The advent of Islam in the archipelago, particularly in Java, has resulted in substantial alterations to the cultural milieu and the intellectual milieu of society. The initial propagators of Islam in Java, exemplified by Sunan Kalijaga, are documented to have employed a cultural methodology in their proselytization, encompassing the medium of wayang art. The process of acculturation between Islamic values and pre-existing Javanese culture resulted in the formation of a distinctive synthesis, which is evident in various aspects of life, including in the field of wayang performance art (Nur & Hadori, 2023).

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In the pantheon of wayang, the character Semar occupies a unique and special position. Semar, known as a *punakawan* or servant in wayang stories, is, in fact, a figure of much greater significance than that of a mere servant. He is regarded as a manifestation of a deity who descended to Earth with the purpose of guiding the knights and maintaining the equilibrium of the world (Franke, 2017; Raharjo & Sawarjuwono, 2022). Semar's presence in wayang narratives frequently conveys profound moral messages and wisdom (Gumilang & Robinson, 2022). The figure of Semar, in this context, becomes a more interesting subject of study because of its position at the intersection of pre-Islamic Javanese tradition and Islamic teachings. Many experts argue that the characteristics and teachings brought by Semar have similarities with the basic principles of Islam, such as simplicity, wisdom, and the role of a spiritual guide (Muthoifin et al., 2023). This prompts the question of how this figure can be seen as a synthesis between Javanese philosophy and Islamic teachings (Anan & Juwariyah, 2017). The teachings of "*memayu hayuning bawana*" (beautifying the world) and "*manunggaling kawula gusti*" (the union of servants with God) exemplify the depth of Javanese thought reflected in the figure of Semar. This figure is frequently utilized as a symbol of local wisdom that is capable of bridging the material and spiritual realms (Siswanto, 2019).

Research on Semar in wayang has been conducted from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, including literary studies, anthropology, and theology (Pramulia, 2022; Setyobudi, 2018; Meyer, 2016). Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine Semar as a nexus between Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles remain relatively scarce. Indeed, a more profound comprehension of this figure may offer novel insights into the interrelationship and mutual enhancement of these two significant traditions within the broader context of Indonesian culture.

Moreover, in the context of accelerated globalization and modernization, the comprehension of cultural figures such as Semar assumes growing significance. On the one hand, there is a concern that traditional values are being eroded in the context of modernization. Conversely, there is a necessity to ascertain the continued relevance of traditional values in the modern era. The study of Semar as a synthesis of Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles has the potential to make a significant contribution to the effort to bridge tradition and modernity, as well as to the understanding of the complexity of Indonesian cultural identity (Kresna, 2010).

Despite the abundance of research examining the character of Semar in wayang, there remains a notable deficiency in the comprehensive analysis of how this figure serves as a nexus between Javanese philosophical tenets and Islamic principles. The majority of previous studies have concentrated on the mythological or symbolic aspects of Semar within the context of Javanese culture, without undertaking a comprehensive investigation into his relationship with Islamic teachings (Subarkah & Ayundasari, 2021). This presents a gap in our understanding of the process of acculturation and cultural synthesis that occurred in Javanese society after the arrival of Islam. Furthermore, previous studies have tended to differentiate between the philosophical tenets of Java and Islamic teachings when examining the character of Semar. This dichotomous approach is less effective in capturing the complexity and nuances of the interaction between the two great traditions. Consequently, our comprehension of the manner in which Islamic tenets were integrated with indigenous Javanese wisdom through the medium of wayang, particularly the character of Semar, remains constrained. Another gap is the lack of systematic comparative analysis between the characteristics and teachings brought by Semar with the basic principles of Islam. Although some experts have indicated similarities, there has been no comprehensive study that maps in detail the points of intersection between the philosophy represented by Semar and the teachings of Islam. This leads to a lack of understanding of the extent to which the character of Semar can be seen as a product of cultural synthesis.

The majority of existing studies adopt a historical or traditional perspective when examining Semar, without sufficiently addressing its continued relevance in the context of modernity and globalization. Indeed, it is of great significance to comprehend the manner in which the cultural synthesis exemplified by Semar can inform the discourse on identity and values in the contemporary Indonesian context (Sungaidi, 2019).

This study introduces several novel elements that differentiate it from previous research on the character of Semar in puppetry. Firstly, this study differs from a research by (Catur Nugroho, 2021), which focuses on the mythological aspects of Semar within the context of Javanese culture. This study will specifically examine the characteristics and teachings of Semar in correlation with the fundamental tenets of Islam. By comparing and contrasting the various aspects of different traditions, this approach can elucidate the manner in which the character of Semar is shaped through the interplay and integration of a multitude of cultural elements, thereby enhancing our comprehension of the intricacy and profoundness of this figure within the context of Indonesian culture. Secondly, this study builds upon the concept proposed by Subarkah & Ayundasari (2021), which places greater emphasis on the Javanese mystical aspect and elucidates the elements of Javanese mysticism present in the figure of Semar in dialogue with spiritual concepts in Islam. It is anticipated that this analysis will contribute to a deeper comprehension of Javanese-Islamic spirituality. Thirdly, in contrast to Woodward's (1989) methodology, which prioritises an examination of the institutional dimensions of Javanese Islam, this study delves into the internalisation of Islamic teachings within cultural narratives through the figure of Semar. This approach is anticipated to offer a novel perspective on the manner in which Islam integrates with local culture at a more nuanced and symbolic level. Fourthly, this study employs a novel methodology. In contrast to previous studies, which have employed a descriptive-analytical approach, this study applies semiotic and hermeneutic analysis concurrently to elucidate the multifaceted meanings inherent in the figure of Semar. It is anticipated that this approach yields a more comprehensive and intricate interpretation of Semar's function as a conduit between Javanese philosophical traditions and Islamic tenets.

Based on the background and gaps that have been identified, this study has a problem formulation; analyzing the Semar character in puppetry which represents a synthesis between Javanese cultural philosophy and Islamic principles, and examining its implications for understanding cultural acculturation, and its relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the library research method, or literature study, was employed. This method was selected due to the emphasis on the analysis and interpretation of texts pertaining to the Semar character in puppetry, as well as literature on Javanese philosophy and Islamic teachings. A literature study enables researchers to collate, analyse and synthesise a range of pertinent written sources in order to address the research problem (Hamzah, 2020).

The sources utilized in this study encompass a range of materials, including books on wayang, with a particular focus on those that examine the character of Semar; literature on Javanese philosophy and culture; Islamic texts and their various interpretations; as well as scientific articles and academic journals that address the acculturation of Javanese-Islamic culture. Furthermore, ancient manuscripts pertaining to the wayang narrative and the tenets espoused by Semar were examined to gain a more profound understanding of the attributes and teachings associated with this figure.

In the analysis process, this study employed a hermeneutic approach to interpret the meanings inherent in the texts under examination (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Furthermore, a comparative analysis is employed to examine the characteristics and teachings of Semar in relation to the fundamental tenets of Islam. Furthermore, a semiotic analysis is employed to investigate the symbols and signs associated with the character of Semar within the context of Javanese and Islamic culture.

To enhance the rigor and dependability of the study, a strategy of source triangulation was employed, entailing a comparison of diverse literature sources. Moreover, the research was subjected to peer review and consultation with experts in the fields of puppetry, Javanese culture, and Islamic studies to verify the interpretation and findings (Roosinda, F. W. et al, 2021). It is

anticipated that the comprehensive and systematic literature study method facilitates the production of an in-depth analysis and a significant contribution to the understanding of the synthesis of Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles in the character of Semar.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Synthesis of Javanese Philosophy and Islamic Principles

Semar is a prominent character in Javanese wayang (shadow puppetry), representing wisdom, humility, and spiritual guidance. Unlike traditional heroes, Semar is depicted as a comical, corpulent figure with a humble appearance. However, he is revered as a divine guardian and advisor to noble characters, embodying profound wisdom beneath his humorous demeanor. In mythology, Zulfikar, et. al (2017) state that Semar is believed to be an incarnation of a god who takes on a common form to assist humanity. As a panakawan (clown-servant), he serves both as comic relief and a moral compass, guiding kings and warriors toward righteous actions.

Semar, as a central character in Javanese puppetry, has unique and multidimensional characteristics. Physically, Semar is depicted with a disproportionate body shape - a pot belly, a big bottom, and a face that seems to be smiling and crying at the same time. This physical appearance is often interpreted as a symbol of balance and acceptance of the duality of life. Despite his simple and sometimes comical appearance, Semar is known to have deep wisdom and great spiritual power (Nurcahyo, 2021).

The characteristics and teachings of the Semar character in the puppet show exhibit an intriguing correlation with the fundamental tenets of Islam. Firstly, the concept of "manunggaling kawula gusti" exhibits similarities with the teachings of tauhid in Islam. While the Javanese concept of unity with God may differ in nuance from the Islamic concept of tauhid, which emphasizes the oneness of Allah, both traditions espouse the importance of a close spiritual relationship between humans and the Creator (Tjahyadi, 2009). In Islam, this concept is reflected in the teachings of ihsan, which encourage Muslims to worship as if they were meeting Allah directly. If they do not see Allah, they are instructed to believe that He sees them.

Semar's teachings about "memayu hayuning bawana," or beautifying the world, are aligned with the concept of khalifah fil ardh, which is a fundamental tenet of Islam. The Qur'an makes mention of humans who are appointed as representatives of Allah or caliphs in the world, with the responsibility to prosper and maintain the balance of nature (Endraswara, 2017). This principle is consistent with Semar's teachings, which place significant emphasis on human responsibility towards the environment and towards one another. Furthermore, Islamic teachings espouse the significance of virtuous actions and the repudiation of evil (amar ma'ruf nahi munkar), which aligns with the concept of "beautifying the world" as conveyed by Semar.

The simplicity and honesty that are hallmarks of the character of Semar also have strong parallels with the teachings of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad SAW was renowned for his simplicity and consistently exhorted his followers to embrace a life of moderation and simplicity (zuhud). Furthermore, honesty (sidq) is regarded as a fundamental trait for Muslims (Endraswara, 2017). In the hadith, honesty is identified as a defining characteristic of a believer, whereas lying is regarded as a manifestation of hypocrisy.

Semar's critique of arrogance and injustice is in line with Islamic teachings that emphasize justice (al-'adl) and forbid arrogance (kibr) (Stange, 2009). The Qur'an repeatedly mentions the importance of upholding justice and warns against arrogance. Semar's courageous attitude in speaking the truth, even to those in power, reflects the teachings of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar, which means that every Muslim has an obligation to invite to good and prevent evil.

Semar's teachings about accepting destiny and wisdom in facing life's trials are in line with the concept of qada and qadar in Islam. Islam directs that things that happen are according to the will of Allah, but humans still have an obligation to strive (ikhtiar) and rely on Allah. The attitude

of steadfastness and patience in facing trials, as taught by Semar, is strongly emphasized in Islam, as stated in the Qur'an that Allah is with those who are patient (Endraswara, 2017).

While there are numerous similarities between Semar's teachings and Islam, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of significant theological divergences between the two. Islam, as a monotheistic religion, has a well-defined and unambiguous concept of divinity. In contrast, the role of Semar in wayang, as a god who assumes the form of a servant, is imbued with a distinct nuance. Nevertheless, the parallels between Semar's teachings and Islamic principles suggest an intriguing convergence between Javanese indigenous wisdom and Islamic teachings, which may facilitate the process of acculturation and cultural synthesis observed in Java.

The synthesis between Javanese philosophy reflected in the Semar character and Islamic principles has substantial implications for understanding the acculturation of Javanese-Islamic culture and its relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesia.

First, this synthesis shows that Islam, as a universal religion, has the flexibility to adapt to local cultures without losing the essence of its teachings (Abbas, Suparman, Suryanto, & Wafa, 2023). This is in accordance with the principle of Islam as a blessing for the entire universe, as stated in the Qur'an: "And We have not sent you (Muhammad) except as a blessing for all." (QS. Al-Anbiya: 107). Islam's ability to synthesize with local Javanese wisdom, as reflected in the Semar character, shows that Islam can be a blessing that is contextual and relevant to various cultures.

Second, this synthesis reinforces the understanding that universal values such as wisdom, modesty, and social responsibility taught by Semar are in harmony with Islamic teachings (Nurchayyo, 2021). This reminds us of the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW: "Wisdom is the lost property of a believer. Wherever he finds it, he has more right to it." (HR. Tirmidhi). This synthesis shows that wisdom can be found in various traditions and cultures, and Islam appreciates this.

Third, the acculturation of Javanese-Islamic culture reflected in the synthesis of Semar and Islamic teachings shows that Islamic and Javanese identities do not have to be in conflict, but can enrich each other. This is relevant to the contemporary Indonesian context where issues of identity are often a source of tension. The Qur'an states: "O mankind! Indeed, We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another." (QS. Al-Hujurat: 13).

Fourth, this synthesis provides a model of how traditional values can be maintained and revitalized in the context of modernity. In the era of globalization, where many local values are threatened with erosion, the figure of Semar who has synthesized with Islamic teachings shows that local wisdom can remain relevant and even enrich religious understanding (Abbas et al., 2023). The Prophet Muhammad SAW said: "Whoever initiates a good habit in Islam, he will receive its reward and the reward of those who practice it after him." (HR. Muslim). This hadith encourages positive innovation in religion, including in the context of culture.

Fifth, understanding the synthesis of Javanese-Islamic culture through the figure of Semar can be a model for conflict resolution and social harmony in a multicultural Indonesian society. Semar's teachings on maintaining balance and harmony are in line with the Islamic principles of peace and brotherhood. The Qur'an states: "The believers are indeed brothers. Therefore make peace between your two brothers and fear Allah, that you may receive mercy." (QS. Al-Hujurat: 10). This synthesis shows that cultural differences can be a source of strength, not division. An example of implementing Islamic preaching (da'wah) through a cultural approach is the use of traditional Javanese art forms like wayang kulit (shadow puppetry). In this context, Islamic values are subtly integrated into the narratives of these performances without disrupting the original cultural elements. For instance, a puppet master (dalang) may adapt stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana, embedding Islamic teachings on morality, humility, or social justice within the plot. The character of Semar, who represents wisdom and spiritual guidance, can be portrayed teaching Islamic concepts like tawakkul (trust in God) or akhlaq (good character) to the main heroes.

Sixth, this synthesis provides insight into how Islamic da'wah can be implemented with an inclusive cultural approach that is accepted by local communities. The da'wah method that accommodates local wisdom, as reflected in the Semar-Islam synthesis, is in line with the principle of da'wah in the Qur'an: "Call (people) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a manner that is good" (QS. An-Nahl: 125). A da'wah approach that takes into account the local cultural context tends to be more effective and sustainable.

Seventh, the implications of this synthesis for Islamic education in Indonesia are very significant. This shows the importance of integrating the values of a more contextual and relevant understanding of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad SAW said: "Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim." (HR. Ibn Majah). In the Indonesian context, knowledge can include an understanding of local wisdom that has been synthesized with Islamic teachings.

Eighth, the synthesis of Javanese-Islamic culture through the figure of Semar provides an example of how spirituality can be manifested in everyday life and in the context of local culture. This is relevant to the Islamic teachings of *ihsan*, where a person who worships is always convinced that he is seen by Allah. The Prophet Muhammad SAW said: "Indeed Allah has made *ihsan* obligatory for everything." (HR. Muslim). This synthesis shows that Islamic spirituality can be expressed through various forms of culture, as long as the essence of monotheism is maintained. An example of *ihsan* (excellence in faith) in practice can be seen in the way a Muslim business owner conducts their affairs. A person who embodies *ihsan* believes that Allah is always watching, influencing them to act with integrity, even when no one else is observing. For instance, the business owner ensures fair pricing, provides honest product descriptions, and avoids exploiting customers or engaging in unethical practices. They treat employees with kindness and respect, paying wages on time and creating a positive work environment, knowing that their actions reflect their faith.

Implications of Semar's Teachings for Understanding Islamic Culture

Semar's teachings have significant implications for the study of Javanese cultural acculturation, the formation of the Indonesian national character, and the interpretation of Islamic teachings in a local context. Firstly, Semar's teachings on "*memayu hayuning bawana*" (beautifying the world) reflect Javanese philosophical tenets that emphasise the importance of achieving harmony between humans, nature and the divine (Wibawa, S, et, al, 2023). The implication for Javanese cultural acculturation is that these local values can be integrated with Islamic teachings on the role of humans as *khalifah fil ardh* (caretakers of the earth). This synthesis gives rise to a more comprehensive understanding of environmental and social responsibility, which in turn informs the character of the Indonesian nation, which is committed to the preservation of nature and social harmony.

Second, the simplicity and honesty that characterize Semar have implications for the form of social ethics in Javanese society based on Islamic principles. This acculturation produces a national character that values simplicity and integrity, which is reflected in the Javanese concept of "*prasaja*" (simple) and "*honest*" which are in line with Islamic teachings on *zuhud* (simplicity) and *sidq* (honesty) (Darmoko, 2016). The implication is the formation of a society that upholds universal moral values, which are an important foundation for the diverse Indonesian nation.

Third, Semar's role as an advisor who uses humor and subtle criticism has important implications in forming a culture of communication and social criticism that is unique to Indonesia (Susdarwono, 2020). The acculturation between Javanese wisdom in conveying criticism indirectly (sarcasm) with the Islamic concept, namely *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, produces a unique approach in voicing truth and justice. This forms a national character that is able to convey aspirations and criticism in a polite but effective manner, avoiding open conflict but still fighting for social change.

Fourth, the teachings of Semar on self-introspection and continuous improvement have implications for the formation of a reflective and adaptive national character. The integration of the Javanese concept of "*self-awareness*" with Islamic teachings on *muhasabah* (introspection) has

resulted in a cultural value system that emphasizes lifelong learning and self-improvement. This implies the formation of an Indonesian society that is more open to change and able to adapt to global challenges while maintaining its cultural roots.

Fifth, Semar's role as a figure who connects the human world and the spiritual realm reflects the synthesis of Javanese mysticism and Islamic Sufism. This leads to the formation of a distinctively Indonesian understanding of spirituality, in which the esoteric elements of Javanese and Islamic traditions can coexist and mutually enrich each other. This results in the formation of a national character that exhibits spiritual depth while maintaining an openness to the diversity of religious expressions, thereby establishing a model of tolerance that is grounded in personal spiritual experience.

Sixth, Semar's teachings on the balance between the outer and inner aspects have implications for the formation of a holistic understanding of well-being and progress. The acculturation of the Javanese concept of "inner and outer harmony" with the Islamic teachings on the balance of the world and the hereafter (*hasanah fi dunya wal akhirah*) produces a unique development paradigm for Indonesia. The implication is the formation of a national character that does not only pursue material progress, but also prioritizes spiritual and cultural aspects in national development. This is the foundation for a sustainable development model that is unique to Indonesia, which combines economic, social, environmental, and spiritual aspects.

Thus, the synthesis between Javanese philosophy reflected in the figure of Semar and Islamic principles has broad and profound implications for our understanding of cultural acculturation and its relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesia. It offers a rich perspective for facing the challenges of modernity while maintaining cultural and spiritual identity.

Relevance of Semar's Teachings in the Context of Contemporary Indonesia

As demonstrated by a number of principles, the author himself claims that Arkoun's political ethics can be categorised into six major sub-themes: Firstly, the Prophet Muhammad's power and authority dimensions show the relationship between authority domains (Mecca). Medina's historical-empiricism combined with transcendental prophecy makes it a powerful period.

In the context of contemporary Indonesia, the acculturation of Javanese-Islamic culture, as reflected in the synthesis of the figure of Semar with Islamic teachings, is of considerable significance. First, it provides an inclusive and tolerant model of religiosity, which is particularly relevant in the context of increasing tendencies towards extremism and intolerance in various parts of the world, including Indonesia (Alif, N, et al, 2020). The capacity to integrate local teachings with universal religious teachings, as exemplified by the figure of Semar, can serve as a model for the coexistence of religious and cultural identities in a harmonious manner.

Second, in the context of contemporary Indonesia, an understanding of the synthesis of Javanese-Islamic culture can provide a robust foundation for the construction of a national identity that is firmly anchored in local wisdom while remaining open to universal values (Dewi, Annisa, Hidayati, Eka, & Puspita, 2023). This is crucial for the development of cultural resilience in the face of globalisation, which often introduces values that are in conflict with local culture.

Third, in the context of national development, an understanding of Javanese-Islamic cultural acculturation can provide inspiration for the creation of a more balanced and holistic development model. The teachings of Semar regarding the maintenance of natural balance and social responsibility, which are in alignment with Islamic principles, can serve as a guiding framework for the formulation of development policies that prioritize material, spiritual, and environmental sustainability.

CONCLUSION

From the aforementioned presentation of results and discussions, several key points emerge. The character of Semar in puppetry embodies a synthesis of Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles, reflecting values such as wisdom, simplicity, social responsibility, and spiritual balance. This fusion illustrates how Islam can adapt to local cultures while preserving its core teachings. The implications of this synthesis for our understanding of Javanese-Islamic acculturation are considerable. This synthesis of Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles provides valuable insights into Javanese-Islamic acculturation, showing how cultural and religious identities can complement each other. In modern Indonesia, it promotes a model of inclusive and tolerant religiosity that fosters social harmony in a multicultural society. It also offers a foundation for contextualizing *da'wah* and Islamic education by integrating local wisdom. Exploring Semar's portrayal as a blend of Javanese philosophy and Islamic principles opens pathways for revitalizing and integrating local wisdom into modern life, ensuring its relevance. It also promotes innovative approaches to balancing tradition with modernity and building a national identity rooted in local culture while embracing universal values. Understanding this cultural synthesis holds academic significance and contributes to fostering a more harmonious, tolerant, and just Indonesia.

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