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THE RELIGION OF KALANG: MISTICAL-SYNTHESIS BETWEEN CULTURE OF KALANG AND ISLAM

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to explain the religious model of the Kalang after interacting with Islam. Islamic penetration of the Kalang raises the dialectic between the religion and culture of the Kalang. The Kalang have views and attitudes in the face of Islamization. This study used a qualitative method, focusing on the Kalang community in Poncorejo, Kendal. This study explains that the Kalang religion is constructed through a dialectical process between the Kalang belief system and Islam, with a rationalization that both can be reconciled without having to deny each other. His acceptance of Islam does not eliminate the Kalang tradition, which has been practiced for hundreds of years, but rather a pattern has developed by incorporating elements of Islam into its implementation. These symptoms, in turn, produce a hybrid culture as evidence of the occurrence of cultural reproduction in mystical-synthetic forms, such as adding Tahlil in the Obong ritual procession.

Keywords: Kalang People, Religious, Symbolic, Adaptation, Resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies on Islam in Java have been widely conducted by scholars such as Geertz (1981), Beatty (1994), Mulder (1999), Woodward (1985), Muhaimin (2001), and Syam (2005). These studies generally agree that Javanese Islam reflects a dynamic interaction between Islamic teachings and local culture. However, they differ in conceptualizing the typology of Javanese Islam. Geertz (1981), Beatty (1994), and Mulder (1999) describe it as syncretic Islam, characterized by the blending of Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and animistic elements. In contrast, Woodward (1985) and Muhaimin (2001) emphasize an acculturative model, in which Islam and local culture interact in a mutually adaptive process that produces localized forms of Islam. Meanwhile, Syam (2005) introduces the concept of collaborative Islam, referring to the continuous negotiation between Islamic values and local traditions through reinterpretation by local religious elites.

These debates indicate that Islam in Java cannot be reduced to a single religious model. Similar processes of cultural negotiation can also be found within the Kalang community, one of the Javanese sub-ethnic groups that has maintained its cultural identity despite long-term interaction with Islam. Previous studies on the Kalang have primarily focused on their historical origins, ethnic identity, and cultural traditions (Altona, 1923; Muslichin, 2008; Wartyo, 2011). However, limited attention has been given to how the Kalang negotiate Islamic teachings within their ritual practices and everyday religious life. This gap is significant because the religious experience of the Kalang demonstrates a distinctive pattern of religiosity that cannot be fully explained by existing typologies of Javanese Islam.

The Kalang community exhibits what this study conceptualizes as *combinative religiosity*, namely a religious pattern in which Islamic traditions and Kalang cultural practices coexist without eliminating one another. This phenomenon can be observed in the Obong death ritual, where ancestral Kalang ceremonies are performed alongside Islamic practices such as *tahlil*. In this context, *tahlil* represents Islamic devotion, while Obong symbolizes the continuity

of ancestral obligations inherited across generations. Rather than replacing local traditions, Islam is accommodated within the existing cultural framework, producing a parallel and complementary religious expression.

Historically, the Kalang are believed to have interacted with Islam since the early spread of Islam in Java. Initially, many Kalang communities isolated themselves in forest areas in order to preserve their traditions (Wartyo, 2011). More intensive interaction with Islam occurred during the reign of Sultan Agung following the conquest of Blambangan and Bali in the seventeenth century (Kartodirdjo, 1975; Harun, 1995). Although their early acceptance of Islam tended to be sociopolitical and associated with the *abangan* orientation (Nakamura, 1974), continued interaction gradually produced a dialectical relationship between Islam and Kalang culture. This process demonstrates that religion and culture continuously shape and reinterpret one another within local communities.

The urgency of this study lies in the growing tendency of contemporary religious studies to simplify local Islamic expressions into rigid categories such as “orthodox” and “syncretic.” Such perspectives often overlook the complexity of local communities in negotiating religious identity, cultural continuity, and social change. In the context of increasing religious formalization and cultural homogenization in Indonesia, the Kalang community represents an important example of how local traditions continue to survive and adapt within Islamic society. Examining the Kalang religiosity is therefore essential not only for understanding local forms of Islam in Java, but also for enriching broader discussions on cultural hybridity, indigenous religiosity, and the dynamic relationship between religion and local identity in contemporary Indonesia.

Based on this context, the present study aims to explore the religious pattern of the Kalang community in Kendal Regency, particularly regarding how Islamic values are negotiated, interpreted, and integrated into Kalang traditions in everyday life. This focus constitutes the novelty of the study by highlighting the

emergence of combinative religiosity as an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the encounter between Islam and local culture in Java.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to examine the religious practices of the Kalang community in Kendal Regency, Central Java. The ethnographic approach was selected because the study seeks to understand how the Kalang construct, interpret, and negotiate religious meanings within their socio-cultural context. In this perspective, religion is not viewed as a separate entity from culture, but as a system of meanings, symbols, and values that are continuously interpreted and practiced in everyday life (Geertz, 1992; Thohir, 2006).

The research focused on Kalang family units, considering that the family plays a central role in transmitting cultural memory, religious values, and ritual traditions across generations (Tilaar, 2003). Participants were selected purposively based on their involvement in Kalang traditional rituals, particularly the Obong death ritual, as well as their understanding of local religious practices. The participants consisted of community elders, religious leaders, family members, and local residents who actively maintain Kalang traditions.

Fieldwork was conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was carried out by directly attending religious and cultural rituals in order to understand the interaction between Islamic practices and Kalang traditions. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and perspectives regarding the relationship between Islam and Kalang culture. In addition, documents, local manuscripts, and previous studies related to the Kalang community were reviewed to strengthen contextual understanding. The collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documentary data. Through this

procedure, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Kalang community adapts Islamic teachings within their cultural traditions and how this interaction produces a distinctive pattern of religiosity.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Cultural Identity of the Kalang: Beliefs and Ritual Traditions

The beliefs and ritual traditions of the Kalang community are closely connected to ancient Javanese religious traditions that existed prior to the arrival of major world religions in Java. Historically, these indigenous beliefs attempted to preserve their cultural identity amid the expansion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam. One of the surviving forms of these indigenous traditions can be found within the Kalang community.

Historical sources mention the Kalang in relation to a belief system practiced by communities living east of the Brantas River during the Majapahit period. According to Wardo (2011), the Kalang maintain a worldview rooted in ancient Javanese mythology and strong ancestral traditions. Their belief system emphasizes the inseparable relationship between God, ancestors, and human existence. The Kalang also revere sacred figures such as Sabdo Palon Naya Ginggong, who is believed to be the manifestation of Hyang Ismaya (Semar), an important spiritual figure in ancient Javanese cosmology. Agus Sunyoto (2012) further explains that Semar occupies a central position in Javanese spiritual traditions connected to Kapitayan beliefs, which worship Sang Hyang Taya as the supreme metaphysical power.

Kalang cultural identity is also reinforced through myths of origin transmitted across generations through oral tradition. One well-known myth narrates that the Kalang descended from the union between a princess and a dog (Roorda, 1847; Muslichin, 2011). Although mythical in nature, this narrative functions as a symbolic foundation for Kalang identity and ritual life. The myth is commemorated through the Gegalungan ritual, which is performed every seven months on Tuesday-Wage or Friday-Wage according to the Javanese calendar. The ritual symbolizes respect for ancestral spirits, represented by a dog statue, which is believed to

embody sacred ancestral power (Soelardjo, 1971; Sholeh, 2004). For the Kalang, the myth does not merely recount origins, but also legitimizes social solidarity and cultural continuity.

Another important ritual tradition is Obong, a mortuary ceremony performed to honor deceased family members. The ritual is usually conducted during the sependhak commemoration and one year after death. In this ceremony, the family burns a puspa, a symbolic representation of the deceased, together with personal belongings favored during the person's lifetime. The ritual is led by a Kalang shaman and accompanied by offerings and symbolic processions before the objects are finally burned. The remaining ashes are then placed in flowing water. According to local belief, the ritual serves to help the spirit of the deceased safely reach the spiritual realm while simultaneously protecting the surviving family from misfortune (Sholeh, 2004).

In Poncorejo, Kendal, the Kalang community also preserves beliefs surrounding local ancestral figures such as Demang Kalang and Mbah Coyudo. These figures are regarded as danyang, or spiritual guardians, who are believed to provide protection and assistance to Kalang descendants. Before conducting important ceremonies such as ngunduh mantu (post-marriage celebrations), community members often visit the graves of these figures to seek blessings and spiritual safety. Such practices demonstrate the continuing significance of ancestral reverence within Kalang religious life. Myths surrounding ancestral figures and sacred traditions continue to be reproduced within the collective memory of the community. These narratives are transmitted orally from generation to generation and function as cultural instruments for maintaining identity and social cohesion. In many cases, illness, misfortune, or disaster are interpreted as consequences of neglecting Kalang traditions or disrespecting ancestral obligations. As a result, myths become an important mechanism through which cultural norms and religious values are reinforced.

From a theoretical perspective, these beliefs can be understood as myths of origin and sacred beings, following the classification proposed by Mircea Eliade. The myths function not only as

symbolic narratives but also as cultural frameworks through which the Kalang interpret reality, misfortune, and spiritual experience. In this sense, myth serves as both a system of meaning and a mechanism of cultural preservation. Despite increasing interaction with external religious influences, the Kalang continue to maintain these traditions as part of their collective identity and inherited cultural memory.

3.2 Islamic elements in the Tradition Kalang: Synthesis-Mystical

In a historical perspective, Islamization continues to coincide with the historical journey of Kalang society (Muslichin, 2008). The Kalang social system that is open caused the Kalang to be forced to make choices, resist Islamic domination, or accept it without resistance. In fact, the Kalang have their own wisdom in determining their attitude. They accept Islam by adapting it to the Kalang tradition. The Kalang has its own local genius to defend itself from the currents of Islamization. Like other Javanese, the Kalang can translate the will, adaptability, and local economic and political interests in the context of *Kalang* culture.

Wanglu Krajan Poncorejo is one of the hamlets that is the center of concentration of Kalang people remaining in Kendal Regency. The nature of the Kalang Wanglu Krajan community, which is open, resulted in a more open intensity of da'wah and Islamic education in the community of Kalang. Empirically, the Kalang in Wanglu Krajan showed its acceptance of Islam, though not necessarily abandoning the beliefs and traditions of Kalang. They believe in the existence of God, believe in the prophethood of Muhammad, believe in the truth of the book of the Koran, and believe that good people will enter heaven. But they also believe that *Demang Kalang*, *Danyang*, and believes in performing Kalang rituals is an instinct that can not be abandoned. The Kalang denominational phenomenon shows the form of acculturation as a cultural strategy of the Kalang. According to Ricklefs, there was an identity reconciliation, Javanese beliefs with Islam as a mystical synthesis (Ricklefs, 2013). The acceptance of the Kalang against Islam does not eliminate or change the traditional pattern of Kalang that has

been running for hundreds of years, but the pattern developed is to add tradition to the elements of Islam.

The phenomenon of the mystical synthesis of Kalang's beliefs and traditions with Islam appears in a series of *Kalang* rituals at Wanglu Krajan as follows: First, the *Kalang* perform the ritual of *tahlilan* as part of the *Kalang* death ritual series in both the ritual of *Obong mitungdino* and the ritual of *Obong sependhak*. Based on observational data in the implementation of the ritual of *Obong mitungdino* in Wanglu Krajan, before the ritual of *Obong* is performed, beginning with *tahlil* reading led by a local *kyai*. After reading *Tahlil*, the *shaman sonteng* start the ritual of *Obong*. Not much different from the ritual of *Obong mitungdino*, the implementation of the ritual of *Obong sependhak* also does not leave the Islamic tradition by reading *tahlil*. The difference is in the ritual *Obong mitungdino*, the implementation of *tahlil* ritual, and the ritual of *Obong* performed on the same day, but in the ritual of *Obong sependhak*, the implementation of *tahlil* and the ritual of *Obong* are held on different days.

The ritual of *tahlil* also became a phenomenon that became a tradition, held by every family in Wanglu Krajan in every month *ruwah* (Javanese month). The *Kalang*, like the Javanese, generally make the month of *Ruwah* the month of spirits; every family holds *selamatan* to send prayers to families who have died. This sociological fact proves the acceptance of the *Kalang* towards Islam precisely through the tradition of communal rituals associated with the respect of the spirits, such as *tahlilan*. According to Mr. Pardi Paryo (70th), many *Kalang* people diligently follow *tahlilan*, even though they do not perform the five daily prayers (Interview with Pardi: 27/11/2025). This fact shows that the *Kalang* in Wanglu Krajan can accept Islam through traditions or cultures such as *tahlilan* and so on.

Secondly, the *Kalang* in Wanglu Krajan commemorated the day of the death of *Coyudo*, a man believed to be the elder of *Kalang*, along with the ritual of *nyadran* organized by the Wanglu Krajan society. The series of activities in the ritual of *Nyadran* consists of reading *Surah Yasin* and *tahlil*, and ended by *mauidhah*

hasanah by a *kyai* or *mubalig* invited. The ritual is complemented by slaughtering goats to be distributed to all community members present in the form of cuisine to be eaten together in the burial area (Interview with Slamet, 15/4/2025). The ritual of *Nyadran* becomes a social arena for the people of Wanglu Krajan.

Based on research data, the meeting between the culture of *Kalang* and Islam gave birth to a hybrid culture. This fact caused a change in the ritual order of the *Kalang* community. There is a dialectical process of meeting both cultures. Some survive, but some have been reduced and changed into new cultures or at least filled with new values. In the implementation of the ritual of *nyadran*, initially done to honor the spirit of *Kalang* ancestors, maintained as an expression of instinct inherent in the *Kalang*. This belief in instincts is no longer to be denied, for it is believed the instincts of the *Kalang* are based on descent of blood that can not be abandoned. However, the ritual format indicates that the value of animism is reduced to praying for the ancestral spirits through Islamic means. Similarly, the slaughter of goats in the cemetery area. Initially, the slaughter was almost identical to the practice of the ritual of *nyadran* in the coastal villages that offered the buffalo heads to the villagers and the ruler of the sea. The strength of Islam's influence is slowly shifting the practice of animism into a practice of conditionality with Islamic values. The *Kalang* people, who previously slaughtered the goats to be given to the villagers as *caos dedaharan* (feeding), shifted to salvation to pray for the spirit of *Coyudo* by giving alms as a form of gratitude to Allah SWT, who has bestowed *rizki* on the citizens of Wanglu Krajan.

Third, the ritual of *ewuhan*, which contains the making of offerings or offerings that are destined for *Demang Kalang*. In making these offerings, there appears to be a change from previous offerings in the form of *gemblong* food, rice with *ingkung* (chicken) and banana, which are limited to offerings that should not be eaten. The *Kalang* generally have a prohibition (prohibited) to eat offerings. There is a fear that eating the offerings will result in an unfortunate reinforcement or disaster. Therefore, the food offerings after being served overnight, then in the morning was

discarded. Along with the influx of Islam, gradually discarding the offerings of the ritual of *ewuhan* turned into a tradition of *weweh* or giving alms to neighbors (Interview with Pardi, 27/1/2025). According to the *Kalang* people's mind, the food of offerings is still good to eat and would be better if given to the neighbors. Changes in attitude can not be separated from the influx of Islamic influences that teach that the disposal of food is *mubadhir*, not in accordance with the teachings of Islam. The culture that emerges at the celebration of the present day, the *Kalang* are just *weweh* or giving alms to their neighbors and relatives. Thus, in the tradition of *ewuhan*, there is a shift from giving offerings to *Demang Kalang* to giving alms to relatives and neighbors.

Based on the description above, it appears that the elements of Islam are integrated into the culture of *Kalang*. The dialectics of Islam and culture are the nature of religion, whose historical reality is in the socio-cultural environment of its followers. The facts above can be interpreted to mean that religion can be understood as a teaching that was born and bound itself in history. Islam is present and lives not in space and time, which is empty of culture; both religion (Islam) and culture are intertwined and mutually enriching. His presence is thus a logical consequence of God's decision to end his message, 'perfect it' (Surat al-Ma'idah [5]: 3). As the author, God has given Islam as a final thing. He gave the fate of Islam entirely to humans. Now he remains waiting for the creativity of his servants in understanding and addressing the verbalization of all his teachings that are textual and hardened to become "closed official corpus" (*mushhaf*), and humans also approach, understand, and experience it with their respective cultural horizons. The articulation and expression of (*ummah*) Islam in the cultural and civilization order shows different characters when it comes into contact with every treasure of a variety of civilizations. Islam in each place forms a new character in accordance with the system of values in the area concerned. The so-called prestigious achievement of Islamic civilization is a hybrid culture that is symbolized by the spirit of *tauhid*, so that the character of Islamic civilization is tolerant, inclusive, and

open to various innovations and Islamic intellectual development, whose characteristics are of course diametrically different from Islamic expressions at the origin. Likewise, when entering Indonesia, Islam also encounters various variants of local culture, including intersecting with the *Kalang* locality.

3.3 The Religion of the *Kalang*: Combinative Islam

Studies on Islam in Java generally agree that Javanese religiosity reflects an interaction between Islamic teachings and local cultural traditions. However, scholars differ in explaining the character of this interaction. Clifford Geertz, Andrew Beatty, and Niels Mulder describe Javanese Islam as syncretic, emphasizing the blending of Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and animistic elements. In contrast, Mark R. Woodward and Muhaimin interpret the relationship as acculturative, arguing that Islam and local traditions interact through a process of mutual adaptation that produces localized expressions of Islam. Meanwhile, Nur Syam proposes the concept of collaborative Islam, referring to the negotiation between Islamic teachings and local culture through reinterpretation by local religious elites.

The religious experience of the *Kalang* community demonstrates a similar process of interaction between Islam and local tradition. However, this study argues that the *Kalang* case cannot be fully explained by the categories of syncretic, acculturative, or collaborative Islam. Instead, the encounter between Islam and *Kalang* culture produces what this study conceptualizes as *combinative Islam*.

Combinative Islam refers to a pattern of religiosity in which Islamic practices and local ritual traditions coexist side by side without eliminating or fully transforming one another. Unlike syncretism, which implies the fusion of religious elements into a new belief system, combinative Islam maintains the distinct identity of both Islamic and local traditions. Likewise, it differs from acculturation, which emphasizes adaptation and mutual adjustment, because in the *Kalang* context each tradition continues to operate according to its own symbolic framework and ritual logic.

This pattern can be observed in the *Kalang* death

ritual, particularly in the coexistence of the Obong ritual and the Islamic practice of tahlil. Obong functions as an ancestral ritual rooted in Kalang cultural tradition, while tahlil represents Islamic religious devotion that has become widely integrated into Javanese Muslim society. Although both rituals are performed within the same ceremonial sequence, they are understood as fulfilling different spiritual and cultural functions. Tahlil is performed as an expression of Islamic piety, whereas Obong is maintained as an ancestral obligation inherited across generations. The coexistence of these practices illustrates that the Kalang do not perceive Islam and local tradition as contradictory entities. Instead, both are positioned as complementary dimensions of social and spiritual life. In this context, combinative Islam represents a form of cultural-religious negotiation that preserves ancestral identity while simultaneously affirming Islamic affiliation. The concept therefore contributes to broader discussions on religious hybridity and local Islam in Indonesia by demonstrating that the interaction between Islam and indigenous traditions may produce parallel rather than fully assimilated religious expressions.

IV. CONCLUSION

The religion of the Kalang community is shaped through a continuous dialectical process between indigenous Kalang beliefs and Islamic teachings. This interaction produces a distinctive form of religiosity referred to in this study as *combinative Islam*, in which Islamic practices and ancestral traditions coexist without negating one another. For the Kalang, Islam is understood as a revealed religion, while Kalang traditions are perceived as inherited cultural instincts that remain essential to communal identity and spiritual life.

The findings show that the acceptance of Islam among the Kalang did not eliminate their traditional rituals. Instead, Islamic elements were integrated into existing cultural practices, creating a hybrid religious culture. This process can be observed in the Obong death ritual, where Islamic practices such as tahlil are performed alongside ancestral ceremonial traditions. Both rituals continue to function within their respective symbolic and spiritual frameworks while collectively shaping Kalang religious life.

This study contributes to anthropological and religious studies by offering the concept of combinative Islam as an alternative framework for understanding the interaction between Islam and

local traditions in Indonesia. The Kalang case demonstrates that the encounter between religion and local culture does not always result in syncretism or full acculturation, but may also produce parallel and complementary forms of religiosity.

More broadly, the findings highlight the adaptive and negotiated character of Islam within local cultural contexts. The study also suggests the importance of examining indigenous Muslim communities beyond dominant typologies of Javanese Islam. Future research may further explore how younger generations of the Kalang reinterpret these traditions in response to modernization, religious reform movements, and digital cultural transformation.

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