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Wayang civilises religion: From spectacle to guidance

ABSTRACT

Indonesia's cultural acculturation and Christianity left behind by Islam are undeniable social realities that could be harmonised through puppetry. However, the propagator of Islam has used wayang *(puppet) as a national symbol and original face. It has raised a polemic that involved serious conversations and sharp debates between religious and customary communities and invited the struggle of religious-cultural groups. Efforts to acculturate Christianity and culture in Java have not received serious attention. However, various opportunities could be used as media or objects of encounter such as* wayang. *Christian inculturation with a* wayang *perspective could contribute to the contextualisation of mission in Java, promoting smooth conversations with the community. This study aims to capture the potential that contributes to* wayang *for the mission and contextualisation of Christianity. A qualitative method with an analytical-descriptive approach was used to examine the past mission of Islam as well as* wayang *and model contextualisation in church traditions. The findings show that* wayang *is an opportunity for Christianity to take root and grow together with its culture. It must be an aim in the contextualisation mission to civilise Christianity in society.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has various faces such as *wayang* (puppet) representing national identity in the Java archipelago. However, *wayang* has raised a polemic that involved serious conversations and sharp debates between religious and customary communities and invited the struggle

of religious-cultural groups. Theological-missiological struggles, coupled with disagreements and accusations of wild syncretism, have occurred since Islam first entered the country (Aizid 2016). The issue of banning *wayang* by Islamic religious leaders continues to surface even presently (Baha 2022). However, *wayang* is used as a medium of *da'wah* by *a wali*, the first spreaders of Islam. *Wayang* is a medium or meeting point between the Javanese people with a strong cultural heritage, the influence of Hinduism, with its strong roots, and Islamic teachings brought by traders. Although the meeting of two different traditions has created a dynamic Islam, a portrait of constructive acculturation of religion and culture, this synergy cannot be separated from critics who call it syncretism. Sungaidi (2016) found that the Javanese community and their culture displayed dynamism when interacting with Islamic traditions. The encounter through *wayang* has resulted in a significant growth of the Muslim community in this country, specifically in Java.

Christianity grew more slowly than Islam, even though Western nations such as Portugal, Spain, and The Netherlands ruled over the archipelago for a long time. There are some possibilities that the teachings have not spread massively. First, Christian stereotypes, even Catholics, are a legacy of Western colonialism (Cipta 2020). This led to the public opinion that Christianity is the face of ideological colonialism (Lauterboom 2019). The long history of indigenous peoples' experiences with the colonisers has created a negative stigma against Christianity. Secondly, it is not suitable for the archipelago people, specifically Java, whose tradition contradicts the Western Christian tradition, promoting negotiation of social identity as an indigenous or religious community. Thirdly, there is no contextualisation of Christian teachings. Before the mid-19th century, when Protestant Christians began to discuss and follow Catholic contextual theology, *wali* had conducted inculturation through *wayang* (Kesumasari & Anjarwulan 2021; Muryani 2017; Mayang & Setyaprana 2007). However, Protestant Christians have not realised the need to place religious values in local cultural containers. The acculturation of the Protestant church and Javanese culture is far behind compared to the Catholic Church (Kesumasari & Anjarwulan 2021; Muryani 2017; Mayang & Setyaprana 2007). Christian contextualisation theology has been practised in various regions in this country. Siahaya *et al.* (2019) describe missions as starting from the context of the local church. Furthermore, Rumbay showed how Christianity is combined with *Mangongkal Holi* in the Batak lands (Rumbay *et al.* 2021), the belief in ancestral spirits in Minahasa, and Christian pneumatology (Rumbay 2021a). Rumbay *et al.* (2022) examined leadership and the philosophy of Minahasa leadership; Rumbay (2021b) explored the culinary identity and lifestyle of Christians, whereas Tumbelaka *et al.* (2020) discussed efforts to acculturate the *mumper* tradition, ancestral souls, and *kampetan* in Minahasa land and other constructions to create synergy and

harmonisation between theology, religion, and local culture (Berdame *et al.* 2024; Rumbay *et al.* 2022; Rumbay *et al.* 2023; Rumbay & Siahaya 2023; Hutagalung *et al.* 2022).

Efforts to acculturate Christianity and culture in Java have not received serious attention. However, various opportunities could be used as media or objects of encounter, such as *wayang*. This expectation is not unreasonable for the church because Islam previously approached the community using cultural media to ensure that *wayang* cultivates Islam. Contextualisation of Christian teachings must be introduced into Javanese culture because religious education by *wayang* creates a more friendly communication space. Christian inculturation with a *wayang* perspective could contribute to the contextualisation mission in Java, promoting smooth conversations with the community. Therefore, this study aims to examine the opportunities for *wayang* as a missionary and contextual media to guide Christian religious values. It also attempts to answer the question as to what could be learned from *wayang* values that contribute to contextualising Christianity in Java, in order to create a harmonious inculturation.

2. METHOD

This qualitative study used an analytical-descriptive approach with books, articles, and other academic references as the main support in developing ideas. Data on *wayang* philosophy were collected from national journals and by examining how Islam uses it as a medium of *da'wah*. The data were analysed to obtain values useful to discuss the mission of contextualising Christianity in Java. In addition, the opportunity for *wayang* to become a guide that spreads Christian values was also examined.

3. JAVANESE IDENTITY AND FACE

The tradition of *wayang* performances in Java is rooted in the past with Javanese-Hindhu characters, including the Balinese (Wika Krishna & Eka Suadnyana 2020; Ni Made *et al.* 2019). Although there is a strong suspicion that *wayang* came from India with the spread of Hinduism, this has been denied by academics who argued that it is an authentic Indonesian tradition. *Wayang* is close to forming community character through social experiences (Riyanto & Sugito 2021; Halimah 2020; Permana 2021; Setyawan 2020), and the religion and spiritual values of Java (Purwanto 2018; Setiawan 2020; Muawam 2021). It features sound, music, and visual arts, making it a subject for discussion for the arts, social, cultural, anthropological, and theological spheres. In line with this, Setiawan (2020) states that the gods of

the Hindu religion are involved in this art, meaning that *wayang* has religious-theological expressions. When traced etymologically, *wayang* derives from the word *Mah Hyang*, correlating with gods, creators, and spiritual spirits. This theological value is a necessity inseparable from the meaning of *wayang*. Tradition, Javanese facial expressions, and theological meanings promote the Indonesian government to become international. Consequently, UNESCO has recognised *wayang* as a cultural institution under the United Nations (*Perjalanan Wayang Kulit Indonesia Diakui UNESCO* [n.d.]).

Wayang is an artificial doll made of sculptures mainly of cow or buffalo skin. It plays figures and characters in the show led by the *dalang* (puppeteers). However, other interpretations consider it a human incarnate doll made of animal skin. This implies an art form that displays shadow drama scenes of dolls made of animal skins with a mystical stigma, with the aim of providing a spectacle and entertainment (Budi 2002). Although *wayang* means shadow, this definition has changed with the times (Guritno 1988) as a mystical belief that creates contemporary debates in modern Javanese society. The vast majority of Javanese Muslims adhere to their cultural heritage, although a few groups oppose this entertainment practice (Baha 2022). Adherents to the tradition of the *wayang* spectacle assume that elements of life guidance are conveyed and rich in noble values relevant to the present (Bastomi 1993). Furthermore, the practice has an economic meaning that could avoid disaster, distress, and misfortune (Mulyono 1982). The two main functions of *wayang* performances are entertainment by playing puppet characters and guiding life in relationships with others and the creator (Gutama 2020). The formation of the traditional *wayang* theatre presents an entertaining spectacle and religious guidance full of meaning and philosophy of life. Moreover, the communicators' strong role in animating *wayang* performances makes them a mediation object that conveys moral messages and community aspirations applicable to social rules. This allows traditional and religious leaders to preach humanity or religiosity.

Puppet performances involve *dalang* and *lakon* (characters), the two main entities that follow the changing times and local issues discussed in the group. As the main actor, the *dalang* plays the puppets by directing or guiding the audience to a certain narrative and regulating the show's story. The word *dalang* derives from the acronym *ngudhal piwulang*, where *ngudhal* means dismantling or disseminating, while *piwulang* implies teaching, guidance, education, knowledge, or information (Bastomi 1993). Therefore, dissemination, guidance, entertainment, performances, and spectacles depend on the *dalang*'s ability. *Dalang* must be proficient in puppetry techniques from the entertainment dimension, have extensive knowledge, and exert influence. The ability to narrate requires one to direct doctrinal

coherence using symbols displayed through creativity, taste, and intention (Sofwan 2004). *Lakon* is a character played by a puppeteer and is strongly influenced by local culture taken from the ancestors' stories and re-created to provide moral values. Popular figures in *lakon* include Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong. *Lakon* from Rama, Rahwana, Pandawa Lima, 1000 Kurawa correlate closely with Hindu religious mythology (Setiawan 2020). The wealth and power of *wayang* have made it a constructive medium for disseminating information about social and religious life and the central object of Javanese civilisation. Sumodiningrat (1993) states that *wayang* is an ancestral cultural heritage that must be interpreted as the culture of the queen, a leader of a country or state. *Karatuan* is a source of *wayang* culture (Bastomi 1993) that must be preserved, based on a noble and useful life ethic. This preservation is a moral burden delegated to the Javanese palace or kingdom to cultivate the *wayang* culture.

Wayang is a spectacle that shows the face and identity of the Javanese people by representing their character, culture, and social life. It becomes an attractive object for foreign traditions to interact with the Javanese community. This is an opportunity for interactions between cultures and religions to introduce their values to local communities.

4. ISLAM IN DA'WAH WAYANG

The theological dimensions of *wayang* are unavoidable (Ayuswantana *et al.* 2020; Roziqin 2020; Prasojo & Arifin 2022). Although this show is a medium for conveying information, it has an aspect of divinity because it relates to the Creator. An exploration of history shows that the influence of Hinduism is strongly combined with Javanese culture. However, Islamic teachings prohibit displaying the manifestation of God in human figurations. The contextualisation of sacred creatures is displayed only as shadow puppets *(wayang kulit*) (Setiawan 2020). Its potential as a medium for conveying information is used by *wali* to spread Islamic teachings in a more friendly way. Consequently, the Javanese people view *wayang* as a cultural heritage with deep philosophical meanings that provide wide opportunities for spreading religion (Haryanto 1992).

Sunan Bonang and Kalijaga used this opportunity to spread Islamic teachings because religious-spiritual messages are easily received and brought to life through *wayang*. Therefore, Sunan creates religious teachings that occupy people's hearts and *wayang* culture as part of the increasingly popular arts and spectacle (Setiawan 2020). Islam was cultivated subtly without using military force, suppressing old beliefs, forbidding ancestral

cultural heritage, and challenging Hinduism and Buddhism teachings dominant in Java. Similarly, social change is conducted wisely and slowly; it teaches subtlety without violence, and does not directly oppose old habits, but it thinks through the *wayang* media. Several adjustments were made to reach hearts and minds. First, the original *wayang* is in the form of a human being, the face is changed to be tilted with an elongated neck, and the arms extend down to the legs. Manufacturing materials are taken from animal skins, and the story conveyed by the *dalang* is embedded with Islamic teachings. The Bima Suci play represents God Almighty and teaches it to his brother Arjuna (Kusnawan 2012). The adjustments made by *wali* draw attention and get a place in the community, making *wayang* civilise the Islamic moral elements. The Islam propagator changed, modified, adjusted, refined, and perfected *wayang* by filling it with Islamic morals and other dogmatics. Therefore, Sunan Kalijaga and *wali* broaden the religion and preach through *wayang*. Essential elements in Islamic teachings are included in the art for people to watch and digest easily without coercion. The Javanese community greatly exalts cultural values but they would accept religious values more when the delivery is persuasive and more subtle. This supports the psychology of the Javanese society that prioritises subtlety, grammar, and attitude (Suryadi 2015) without violence, coercion, intimidation, and extreme indoctrination.

Secondly, *wayang* is full of symbolic meanings because the performance describes cosmology, including the journey of humankind in search of identity regarding its origin not limited to life and death (Salam 1960). The play is adjusted to the character in the figure of Islamic teachings. In this case, the figure used is Sunan Kalijaga because he contributed significantly to civilising Islam in Java. *Wayang,* made from buffalo skin material, was converted into leather puppets to radiate the Islamic style. Furthermore, *punakawan* figures were created as symbols of Islam, such as Semar, which means nail and a symbol of determination. Petruk was adapted from the word *Faruk* to symbolise leaving the ugly (Setiawan 2020). This symbolism confirms the philosophical concept of good and evil, the two elements inherent in every living being. Moral and religious values with non-Islamic characters and *wayang* are a unified whole. *Wali* is only encouraged to synergise by cultivating Islamic teachings through Javanese cultural symbols. By contrast, *wayang* takes its teachings from the sources of belief systems, social norms, and etiquette to various living traditions, a momentum used by Islam to preach its teachings.

Thirdly, Sunan Kalijaga considers demography and ritualisation, where the organisation of *wayang* performances selects a place near the mosque. A ditch is made flowing with clear water to train the *wayang* audience to perform ablution or cleansing before enjoying the entertainment (Setiawan 2020). Demographic contextualisation is important to develop a new religious tradition in people with diverse backgrounds. However, the weather factor

has significance for religious rites and rituals. Areas with dry soil structure and hot weather have minimal clean water reserves and require adaptation to religious teachings related to the usage of water in rituals. Furthermore, Islamic teachings practise sacraments that require adherents to use water under various conditions. Although *wayang* performances do not have a direct relationship or philosophical meaning with the usage of water, Islamic teachings require people to cleanse themselves with water while performing religious services. This opportunity was used to introduce self-cleaning with water through puppet shows, and religion has civilised the sacraments or their rituals to the community. However, *wayang* is the subject, actor, main character, or play that cultivates religion from the puppet world perspective. The religious and cultural perspective has great social and *anthropos* implications that trigger serious conversations. When religion uses cultural media for its spreading, it acts as a play that uses culture to unify teachings with the community. This creates a stereotype that religion is opportunistic with sectoral motivations without accommodating cultural sustainability. Therefore, the entry of Islam into the archipelago through *wayang da'wah* must be viewed from another perspective that civilises Islamic teachings. This perspective avoids the stigma that culture is sidelined after achieving religious goals. This means that the best option to view the meeting between Islam and Javanese society through *wayang* is how it cultivates Islam. This does not erode the existence and popularity of culture in society but provides additional religious values. People live with new religious traditions but do not abandon the culture rooted and passed down by their ancestors.

Contextualising Islam through *wayang da'wah* must be understood as cultural modelling that civilises Islam, not Islam that converts *wayang* culture (Subagya 2021). The domination of Muslim Javanese that cultivates *wayang* is a perfect model showing how people embrace religion but still uphold culture. *Walisongo*, the nine spreaders of Islam, saw the opportunity for *da'wah* through *wayang* and had expertise in preaching, as well as deep and substantive Sufistic treasures (Sungaidi, 2016). This privilege does not make them arrogant towards culture but displays sincerity and humility in surrendering religious values cultured by *wayang*. Syaifullah (2010) suggests a pattern of spreading Islam through *wayang*. First, it conveys Islam evenly to areas subordinate to the kingdoms in Java. Secondly, Islamic teachings are introduced persuasively and oriented to cultivating *aqidah* according to the context, conditions, and situations. Thirdly, ideological wars are carried out to eradicate and suppress dogmatic values. Fourthly, *wali* avoids horizontal conflicts and approaches traditional and community leaders. The fifth principle is mastering and meeting the basic needs of the community.

The encounter between Islam and Javanese society through *wayang* culture indicates that contextualisation construction could contribute to traditions or other religions that intend to approach Indonesia's local communities. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration when Christianity is oriented to Islam, which has surrendered its value to be cultured by *wayang* spectacles.

5. WAYANG SHOW AS A GUIDE IN CHRISTIAN CONTEXTUALISATION MISSION

The church's contextual approach is opportunistic in using objects and cultural expressions to spread religious teachings and maintain the purity of dogmatics. For instance, Bevans (2002) offers a contextual model of translation in the Catholic Church tradition. This modelling is not a contextualisation by translating theological and religious terms, such as Hebrew to Indonesian, Greek to regional languages, or other languages into the local context. The main motivation of the translation model is an idiomatic form that is functional and dynamic. Elements in *wayang* functionally translate symbols in Christianity to create synergy and harmonious collaboration. However, Bevans (2002) limits the translation model to the main criteria. First, contextualisation should not oppose any biblical principles or church traditions (Acts 14:15-17, 17:2-31), meaning that *wayang* culture should not erode and disrupt the Christianity identity. Secondly, revelation must be considered a model formulation with a clear direction and sacred to the essence of the doctrine. Thirdly, religion must assess the cultural context as an inevitable necessity, a good existence, a gift from the Creator, and worthy of respect (Tara 2017). This indicates that the model is intended to translate Christian teachings into local cultural contexts to make them more acceptable. Bevans (2002) also offers an anthropological model based on the value and goodness of the human being, believing in God's divine presence and representation in every individual, social group, and the heritage of every culture. This concept believes in the divine presence in all life contexts without discrimination. This contextualisation model exudes an anthropological character and accommodates social sciences, specifically anthropology. It promotes an understanding of the relationship between human beings and the cultural values in which the Creator is present and offers life, healing, and wholeness. However, this model has opportunities that could be used to contextualise *wayang* culture and Christianity. *Wayang* relates closely to the philosophy of community life, meaning its moral messages influence social order and individual life.

Bevans also offers a practical model in which contextual and liberation theologies relate to scanning meaning, contributing to social change, and taking religious values from past, present, and future realities. This praxis

model is commonly discussed in Marxism in the Frankfurt school and the educational philosophy of Paolo Freire (Bevans 2002). Religious teaching does not find its fulfilment only limited to right or doctrinal thinking but is also manifested in right actions. The praxis model promotes Christianity to be used by *wayang* for its noble values to be embedded in the social order. The model believes that truth exists at a practical level, not only in ideas and theories. Berryman characterises this model as referring to using Paulo Freire's understanding that praxis is action and reflection. In this case, reflecting on the action and holding action on reflection are interrelated and rotate into one. The contextual praxis model is considered more ethical and polite when termed the liberation model (Bevans 2002). Christianity must be freed from narrow dogmatics limited to theoretical discussion but reject implementation. Therefore, this model promotes the church to be directly involved in puppetry.

The Protestant Church tradition hardly discusses contextualisation compared to the Catholic Church. Although the contextualisation mission is a strong foundation to reach local communities, the church sought a new formulation. There needs to be a "beyond contextualisation" effort to ensure that the church does not overdo it and is satisfied with the old contextualisation. In Java, two main opportunities become the power of *wayang* to be used by the church to become partners in carrying out missions. First, the cultural heritage of *wayang* is diverse and could be used by the church to spread religious teachings. Christian doctrinal symbols could be translated into puppet language and characters. This was practised by Islam when the *Walisongo* contextualised *wayang* as a *da'wah* medium. Secondly, the puppet has the power of autochthon from itself, opening up opportunities for missions. The social power such as a strong relationship between *wayang* and the individual and community morals is not shared by other cultural objects. This means that the church does not have to replace this power with other dogmatic constructions. Therefore, *wayang* could be converted into Christian teachings as a spectacle for the Javanese people. The church reconstructs the culture according to its traditions, indicating that the cultural foundation has been adapted to the needs of the mission. It also baptises culture, a process known as the Christianisation of culture. This may benefit the church, but it also has the potential to destroy, weaken, and reduce the originality and main identity of *wayang*. This implies that the approach taken must be more persuasive-passive, where *wayang* uses Christian teachings as an object. This is reasonable because *wayang*'s distinctive character and strength enable it to use Christian teachings through *da'wah* as a contributing alternative. Christian dogmatics does not need extreme adjustments because *wayang* cannot reduce Christian values. It is important to allow *wayang* to cultivate religion as a subject and not as an object because it is a social spectacle and a guide for life.

6. CONCLUSION

As both an object and medium used for missionary purposes by Muslim pioneers, *wayang* possesses distinctive characteristics that render it a promising element for contextualisation, particularly among the Javanese population. *Walisongo* historically employed *wayang* as a tool for disseminating religious teachings and values. *Wayang* performances, with their rich narrative traditions, provided a compelling means to convey Islamic messages, enabling missionaries to effectively communicate with diverse audiences. The adaptability of *wayang* allowed for the incorporation of Islamic narratives into the traditional Javanese cultural context. Among the Javanese, *wayang* holds a profound cultural significance, being deeply embedded in their artistic and spiritual heritage. The popularity of *wayang* performances reflects its role as a cultural touchstone, making it a potent vehicle for conveying messages to the local population.

The contextualisation of *wayang* involves integrating Christianity themes into its narratives and performances, aligning it more closely with the religious and cultural ethos of the Javanese people. This approach leverages the pre-existing popularity of *wayang* to facilitate a more resonant reception of Islamic teachings within the local context. The unique characteristics of *wayang*, both as a promising tool of contextualisation and a culturally significant medium among the Javanese, underscore its potential as an object that can be strategically contextualised for effective communication of church principles within the rich tapestry of Javanese culture. By doing so, the project of "shifting *wayang* from spectacle to a guidance" is realistic.

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