NAHRASIYAH: Journal of Aceh and Malay Archipelago Heritage
Volume 03, Issue 01 (June 2025), 19-32
DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

The Wali Songo's Contribution to the Historical Continuum from Indic Knowledge Traditions to Islamic Humanism in the Nusantara

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Abstract: This paper examines the Islamization of Java as a civilisational dialogue that fused universal Islamic values with the local wisdom rooted in Hindu–Buddhist and Indic traditions. Employing a historical and cultural-analytical approach, it highlights how the *Wali Songo* synthesised the doctrine of *tawhīd* with Javanese social ethics and aesthetic expressions, creating a uniquely localised expression of Islam. While each saint—such as Sunan Ampel, Sunan Kalijaga, and Sunan Kudus—adopted distinct methods ranging from education and social reform to art and performance, they shared a common conviction: Islam should not reject but reinterpret local ethos. By adapting indigenous media like *wayang kulit*, *gamelan*, and communal rituals, they built a form of Islam grounded in tolerance, intellectual depth, and cultural empathy. The study concludes that the early Islamization of the archipelago was inherently syncretic, producing a peaceful, plural, and humanistic faith that continues to define *Islam Nusantara* today.

Keywords: Wali Songo; Islamization of Java; Islam Nusantara; Indic traditions; Hindu–Buddhist heritage; cultural synthesis; syncretism; Javanese culture; tawhîd; local wisdom; wayang kulit; gamelan; religious humanism; civilizational dialogue; Southeast Asian Islam

Article history: Received: June 01, 2025 | Revised: July 20, 2025 | Accepted: June 30, 2025 | Available online: June 30, 2025

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Introduction

The Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago stands as one of the most remarkable cases of cultural adaptation in world history. Rather than emerging as a rigid extension of Middle Eastern orthodoxy, Islam in the archipelago evolved into a distinctive, syncretic form that harmonised universal Islamic values with the region's pre-existing cultural, intellectual, and spiritual frameworks.

The dissemination of Islam from Arabia to South and Southeast Asia followed maritime and mercantile channels rather than conquest or coercion. From the 7th century onward, Arab, Persian, and later Indian Muslim traders established settlements along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, where Islam interacted with local cultures and political systems. These trading communities, supported by intermarriage and shared commercial ethics, became the first conduits of Islamic ideas to the eastern Indian Ocean. As Azra notes, the expansion of Islam toward the *Nusantara* was facilitated by Sufi networks and scholars trained in Indian centres such as Gujarat and Bengal, which had absorbed Persian and Arabian theological currents.[1] Recent scholarship further underscores that the spread of Islam was driven by what Laffan calls a "maritime cosmopolitanism,"[2] a circulation of traders, pilgrims, and teachers who linked ports from Aden and Calicut to Pasai and Demak. Thus, by the time Islam reached Java, it was already a hybridised faith—carrying layers of Arabian, Persian, and Indic intellectual influences that made its localisation both inevitable and enduring.[3]

This process was religious and profoundly civilisational—reflecting a dialogue between Indic knowledge traditions and the incoming Islamic worldview. The result was a localised expression of Islam that emphasised tolerance, inclusivity, and accommodation rather than confrontation. The agents of this transformation—the Wali Songo ("wali" in Arabic is the "trusted one" or the "saint" and "sanga" is "nine"), a group of nine revered Islamic scholars who played a central role in this indigenisation process in Java. They could interpret Islamic teachings that resonated with the archipelago's sociocultural milieu through their deep understanding of

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[1] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 28–31.

[2] Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 54–58.

[3] Abdurrahman Kasdi, "The Role of Walisongo in Developing the Islam Nusantara Civilisation," *ADDIN* 11, no. 1 (2017): 325–328.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

local belief systems, languages, art forms, and social hierarchies. Consequently, Islam in the Nusantara (Maritime Southeast Asia) became not an imported faith but an organic part of local civilisation, embedded in its rituals, ethics, and everyday life.[4]

It was not the result of conquest, territorial aggrandisement, or political coercion, but rather a process of intellectual dialogue, mercantile interaction, and spiritual persuasion that originated from Gujarat, India, and extended across the Indian Ocean to the shores of Sumatra and Java. The Islamization of the region was deeply intertwined with centuries of maritime, commercial, and cultural exchanges between South and Southeast Asia—networks through which ideas, aesthetics, and moral systems circulated freely and creatively. The spread of Islam seemed inevitable as it penetrated the Indian subcontinent, making a pervasive impact on the sociocultural and intellectual life of the region. However, when Islam assumed its distinct character within the Indian milieu, it followed a completely different trajectory of *da'wah* compared to the Arab or Central Asian world.

There was a conspicuous absence of any rigid theological orientation inspired by the Salafi, Wahhabi, or even the later reformist schools, such as the Deobandi or Tablighi Jamaat movements. In fact, the early Sufi and missionary scholars who carried Islam eastward relied not on ideological orthodoxy but on spiritual pluralism and cultural empathy. As Azyumardi Azra explains, Islam's dissemination across the Indian Ocean—particularly through Gujarat, Bengal, and Aceh—was facilitated by Sufi networks that emphasised ethical piety, tolerance, and intellectual dialogue rather than scriptural rigidity.[5] Similarly, Michael Laffan notes that the Islam which reached the *Nusantara* was already infused with Persian and Indian cosmopolitanism, producing a localised form of religiosity that was inherently inclusive and non-confrontational.[6]

Moreover, given the limited means of transportation and communication in those centuries due to the expanse of the archipelagic geography, the dissemination of Islamic teachings depended heavily on pre-existing oral traditions and local storytelling. As a result, Indian and subsequently Javanese missionaries employed popular folklore, legends, and epic narratives such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*

[4] Kees van Dijk, "Dakwah and Indigenous Culture: The Dissemination of Islam," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154, no. 2 (1998): 223.

[5] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, 162–166.

[6] Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*, 54–58.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

to communicate moral and metaphysical principles of Islam in a vernacular language intelligible to the ordinary people. This creative method ensured that Islam was not perceived as a foreign intrusion but as a continuation of the ethical and moral tradition already embedded in the Indic consciousness.

Among the most prominent agents of this process were the Wali Songo—the nine saints of Java—whose influence on Indonesian Islam remains unparalleled. They operated within a sociocultural environment enriched by centuries of Indic thought, Buddhist philosophy, and Sanatana knowledge tradition. Rather than destroying these traditions, the Wali Songo integrated Islamic principles with them, thereby achieving what scholars like Azyumardi Azra[7] and M. C. Ricklefs[8] have described as a "mystic synthesis." Their Islamization strategy did not aim to replace local wisdom or the kearifan lokal, but to purify and reinterpret it in line with monotheistic values. This intellectual bridge enabled Islamic metaphysics to find familiar ground in the region's philosophical and linguistic structures. Ravindra K. Jain,[9] who observed that the pluralistic ethos of Southeast Asia was conducive to dialogue rather than confrontation, supports this. In this sense, the Islamization process exemplifies what might be called an "Indic-Islamic synthesis"—an intersection of two great civilisations through moral and aesthetic negotiation. Thus, the introduction of Islam in Java through the *Wali Songo* represents both continuity and transformation: continuity in its retention of cultural symbols and transformation in its reorientation toward *tawhīd*[10]

Tawhīd, the central doctrine of Islam, literally means "unity" or "oneness" and refers to the absolute monotheism that defines the Islamic worldview. It asserts that only one God (*Allāh*) is the universe's sole creator, sustainer, and sovereign. In its philosophical sense, *tawhīd* transcends mere theological assertion—it embodies the unity of existence, purpose, and moral order. It rejects any division between the sacred and the secular, affirming that all aspects of life are interconnected manifestations

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[7] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia.*

[8] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 4th ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

[9] Ravindra K. Jain, *Between Nomad and Settler: Cultural Process in the Middle Ground* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[10] S. Muliana and M. Nasruddin, "Treading the Footsteps of Wali Songo as the Shaper of the Islamic Nusantara Tradition," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 9, no. 2 (2021): 159–175; Jefry Sakhok, "The Wali Songo and Western Historiography," *Journal of Asian Thought* 36, no. 1 (2024): 45–63.

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of divine will. For the *Wali Songo*, *tawhīd* was not a dogmatic formula but a living principle to be realised in human conduct, social harmony, and artistic expression. By grounding their teachings in *tawhīd*, they could reinterpret pre-Islamic ideas of cosmic unity and spiritual liberation within a monotheistic framework that upheld divine transcendence and moral responsibility.

The Wali Songo's inclusive pedagogy, exemplified by their use of local languages, arts, and social rituals, underscores their belief that true faith should enlighten, not alienate. Their approach remains a model for inter-civilisational harmony and cultural sustainability in the modern world.[11]

Pre-Islamic Knowledge Traditions and Cultural Matrix

Before the advent of Islam, the Indonesian archipelago was part of a vast cultural sphere profoundly shaped by Indic civilisation. From the 4th century onward, waves of Indian traders, Buddhist monks, and Brahmanical scholars brought with them not only goods but also language, philosophy, and ritual systems that took deep root in the Malay and Javanese worlds. The kingdoms of Srīvijaya in Sumatra and Majapahit in Java became epicentres of learning and transregional diplomacy, sustaining the maritime extension of what Coedès[12] famously termed the "Indianized States of Southeast Asia." Sanskrit, as the language of power and metaphysics, infused the local lexicon with concepts such as *dharma* (righteous duty), *karma* (causal morality), *artha* (prosperity), and *moksha* (liberation). Buddhist monastic centres in Palembang and Kedah served as nodes of intellectual exchange with Nalanda and Vikramashila in India. At the same time, Javanese courts absorbed Puranic mythology and Tantric symbolism into their art, architecture, and polity.

The Majapahit Empire (13th–15th centuries), contemporaneous with the early arrival of Islam, exemplified the zenith of this Indic-Javanese synthesis. Its cosmology was based on the balance between the divine and the temporal, embodied in the ideal of the *cakravartin*—the universal ruler who upholds *dharma*. The Nagarakretagama and Kakawin Sutasoma texts, composed in Old Javanese, propagated ideals of harmony

[11] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, 162–166; M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 47–48.

[12] George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1968).

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

and tolerance that prefigured later Islamic values of *'adl* (justice) and *rahmah* (compassion). Thus, when Islam began to spread through trade routes and Sufi orders, it entered a world already accustomed to metaphysical reasoning, textual hermeneutics, and moral philosophy. As Laffan[13] notes, this intellectual environment provided fertile ground for Islam's localisation, as it could converse fluently with indigenous categories of meaning.

The Wali Songo encountered a society where religion was not confined to temples but interwoven with everyday ethics, aesthetics, and statecraft. Rather than denouncing the pre-Islamic worldview, they engaged it through reinterpretation. The Indic triad of dharma-karma-moksha found parallels in the Islamic *īmān-'amal-ākhirah*. At the same time, the Upanishadic notion of the unity of existence (*tat tvam asi*) resonated with the Sufi doctrine of wahdat al-wujûd (unity of being). This semantic and philosophical proximity eased Islam's integration into Javanese spirituality. The saints translated abstract theology into accessible idioms: karma became linked to moral accountability on the Day of Judgment; moksha was equated with eternal peace in the afterlife; bhakti (devotion) was reimagined as *mahabbah* (love of God). Such translation was not merely linguistic but epistemological—it allowed Islam to be understood not as an alien creed but as a refinement of an existing moral order.

Archaeological and literary evidence further attest to this continuity rather than rupture. The ornamentation of early mosques such as Demak and Kudus displays unmistakable Majapahit motifs—lotus patterns, kala-makara heads, and tiered meru-like roofs—suggesting that the material culture of Hindu-Buddhist Java was not abolished but sacralised anew. As Ricklefs emphasises,[14] the "mystic synthesis" that defined later Javanese Islam resulted from centuries of accommodation, wherein local symbols were re-signified through Qur'anic ethics. The Wali Songo thus acted as both theologians and cultural translators, maintaining reverence for ancestral wisdom while redirecting it toward monotheistic devotion.

When Islam spread eastward through traders from the Indian subcontinent, it assumed a character markedly different from the one it exhibited within India. This divergence arose mainly from the Indic civilisational temperament, which was contemplative and dialogical rather than militant or proselytising. The Indian

[13] Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*.

[14] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

experience of faith had long been shaped by philosophical pluralism and intellectual tolerance—qualities deeply embedded in its knowledge traditions. Between the 1st and 6th centuries CE, India's scholarly culture reached its zenith with universities such as Nalanda and Takcaúilā, which produced eminent thinkers in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, economics, and linguistics.

These institutions nurtured a rational and moral foundation for kingship, where knowledge and governance were seen as mutually sustaining forces—*vidyā* providing legitimacy to *rājadharma*, and security (*rakcaGa*) ensuring the continuity of learning. Such intellectual infrastructure prepared India to receive and reinterpret new religious ideas through the prism of reason and ethics rather than coercion. Hence, when Indian merchants and Sufi scholars carried Islam across the Indian Ocean, they transmitted a faith and a civilisational habit of dialogue.

This process reveals a broader Indic–Islamic civilisational conversation. Ravindra K. Jain observed[15] that South and Southeast Asia share a "habit of pluralism"—an ability to absorb new ideas without dissolving their cultural core. The diffusion of Islam through the maritime routes from Gujarat, Bengal, Kalinga, and Coromandel exemplified this phenomenon: it was a movement of ideas already enriched by India's philosophical ethics and Sufi cosmology, ready to engage creatively with the spiritual worlds of the Malay and Javanese peoples.

When these ideas reached Java, they encountered another Indic-derived world, resulting in a double mediation—Islam translated through India, and India refracted through Java. The saints of Java internalised this layered inheritance. Sunan Bonang's use of *suluk* (mystic songs) and Sunan Kalijaga's *wayang kulit* performances echo the pedagogical styles of Indian bhakti saints and Persian Sufis, where devotion and art coalesced into spiritual instruction.

Hence, the pre-Islamic knowledge tradition of the archipelago did not vanish with Islam's arrival; it evolved. The *Wali Songo* perceived in the ancient texts, epics, and rituals the universal longing for truth that Islam also proclaims. Their mission was not iconoclastic but hermeneutic—decoding the sacred continuity between the Indic past and the Islamic present. By weaving Qur'anic monotheism into the aesthetic and moral fabric of Javanese civilisation, they ensured that the new faith took root organically, nourished by the wisdom of the old. This fusion produced the distinctive ethos now celebrated as Islam Nusantara—an Islam that is devotional

[15] Ravindra K. Jain, *Between Nomad and Settler*, 101–103.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

yet dialogical, scriptural yet civilisational, and unmistakably Indonesian in its cultural soul.

Strategies of Da'wah: From Trade to Tarekat

Islam's dissemination in the Nusantara was a multidimensional process facilitated through commerce, education, and spirituality. The early Sufi missionaries, particularly Malik Ibrahim (Sunan Gresik), pioneered a form of da'wah grounded in moral conduct and social welfare. Historical sources suggest that he taught through example, using trade as a medium for ethical demonstration. His approach reflected the Indic notion of righteous livelihood (*dharma-yajña*), emphasising sincerity and service. Azyumardi Azra explains[16] that the Wali Songo were deeply influenced by Persian and Indian Sufi traditions, such as the Chishtiyya and Qadiriyya orders, prioritising compassion and dialogue over dogma. Sunan Ampel institutionalised Islamic learning through the pesantren system, embedding ethical and spiritual education into daily life, reflecting the Indic gurukula holistic education model, where learning combined moral, intellectual, and practical skills. Trade routes between Gujarat, Malacca, and Java also carried spiritual ideas, facilitating a dialogue between Islamic law (sharia) and Indic customary codes (*adat*). Coedès[17] and Jain[18] both argue that the commercial cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean world fostered cultural exchange and mutual adaptation rather than conflict. The Wali Songo thus functioned as mediators between faith and culture, constructing a social theology rooted in humanism, tolerance, and justice.

The Nine Saints: Profiles and Cultural Contributions

Malik Ibrahim/Sunan Gresik /Kakek Bantal/Makhdum Ibrahim al-Samarqandy (1404 CE-1419 CE.)

Malik Ibrahim, revered as Sunan Gresik or Kakek Bantal, is widely recognised as the earliest Wali Songo and the pioneer of Islamization in Java. He was born into a Syed and highly educated family in Kashan, Persia—his great-grandfather having migrated from Samarkand to Kashan, hence the family's nisba as-Samarqandi. His erudition combined Persian Sufi metaphysics with a practical concern for social

[16] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*.

[17] George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*.

[18] Ravindra K. Jain, *Between Nomad and Settler*.

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reform. Local chronicles and Javanese manuscripts, including the Babad Gresik, record that Malik Ibrahim may have met King Hayam Wuruk of Majapahit (r. 1350–1389 CE), which situates his arrival in Java toward the late fourteenth century.[19] As a makhdum—a learned master—he advocated peaceful da'wah through trade, education, and public service. He was revered as "the All-Gracious, the teacher of princes and adviser to sultans and viziers, friend of the poor and destitute"[20] His approach reflected the early Indian Ocean model of Islamization—mercantile yet spiritual, pragmatic yet compassionate. Malik Ibrahim's emphasis on social ethics (*akhlāq*), charitable work, and dialogue with local elites laid the moral groundwork for later saints such as Sunan Ampel and Sunan Giri. His tomb in Gresik remains a significant pilgrimage site symbolising the harmony between Persian-Sufi piety and Javanese-Indic civility that characterises *Islam Nusantara.*

Sunan Ampel/Raden Rahmat (1401 CE- 1481 CE)

A disciple and successor of Malik Ibrahim, Sunan Ampel founded the first pesantren (Islamic boarding school) in Ampel Denta near Surabaya around the mid-15th century. Educated in Champa (Vietnam) and Arabia, he embodied trans-regional Islamic learning.[21]

Sunan Ampel's pedagogy was deeply ethical: he taught moderation (*tawassut*), tolerance (*tasāmuh*), and balance (*tawāzun*) — principles that became the foundation of Javanese Islamic education. His students included Sunan Bonang and Sunan Giri, who later spread Islam throughout the archipelago. The *pesantren* system mirrored the Indic *gurukula* model, integrating moral, intellectual, and spiritual training.[22]

Sunan Bonang/Makhdum Ibrahim (1465 CE-1525 CE)

The son of Sunan Ampel, Sunan Bonang, combined Sufi mysticism with Javanese aesthetics. His famous *Suluk Bonang* — a collection of mystical verses and songs — illustrates his effort to teach *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) through local musical forms. Using the *gamelan* and *tembang macapat*, he translated Islamic

[19] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 47–48.

[20] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, 166.

[21] B. Uyuni, "Exploration of Wali Songo Ziyarat in Indonesia," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024): 12–20.

[22] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia.*

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

metaphysics into poetic language familiar to Javanese listeners. This method echoed the Indian *bhakti* tradition, where devotion is expressed through art. He is also credited with introducing the call to prayer in Javanese rhythm and spreading Islam to Tuban and Madura.[23]

Sunan Drajat/Raden Qasim (1470 CE-1522 CE)

Sunan Drajat, another disciple of Sunan Ampel and brother to Sunan Bonang, focused his mission on social welfare. He founded charitable institutions, organised public works, and promoted *gotong royong* (cooperation) as an Islamic virtue. His philosophy — "Give light to those in darkness and water to those in thirst" — illustrates his humanitarian approach.[24] Sunan Drajat's model of social da'wah parallels the Indic concept of *dāna* (generosity) and the Sufi ethic of compassion.

Sunan Kudus/Ja'far Sādiq (died in 1550 CE)

Sunan Kudus is renowned for his tolerance and respect for local customs. He built the Menara Kudus Mosque (1549 CE) using red brick and Hindu-Javanese architectural motifs, including a candi-like tower. This structure embodies the fusion of Hindu-Buddhist aesthetics and Islamic functionality. Historical accounts record that Sunan Kudus prohibited his followers from slaughtering cows to respect Hindu sensibilities — an act of religious empathy cemented his reputation as a saint of tolerance.[25]

Sunan Giri/Raden Paku/'Ain al-Yaqīn (1442 CE-1506 CE.)

Sunan Giri, a leading scholar and jurist, established the Giri Pesantren near Gresik, a significant Islamic learning and spiritual authority centre. Known for his didactic tales and children's stories, he combined education with spiritual imagination. His jurisdiction extended to the eastern archipelago (Sulawesi, Maluku), making him a symbol of Islam's maritime reach. The title *Prabu Satmata* bestowed upon

[23] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*.

[24] Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*.

[25] Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*; M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*.

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him reflects his moral sovereignty and his balancing of law (*sharī'ah*) and local custom (*adat*).

Sunan Kalijaga/Raden Sahid (15th-16th Century CE)

Perhaps the most culturally astute of the saints, Sunan Kalijaga employed art and storytelling as his principal means of da'wah. He mastered *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) and wove Qur'anic messages into narratives from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, demonstrating how Islam could coexist with Javanese literary heritage. He also introduced ritual forms like *slametan* (communal feasts) to promote social unity and reinterpret local symbolism within a monotheistic framework. Sunan Kalijaga's legacy epitomises "Islamization through localisation" — a dialogue of civilisations rather than a rupture.[26]

Sunan Muria/Raden 'Umar Said (15th-early 16th Century CE)

Sunan Muria, the son of Sunan Kalijaga, worked among rural communities, teaching Islam through folk songs, agricultural ethics, and daily rituals. He blended Islamic values with agrarian symbolism and encouraged local self-reliance. His emphasis on environmental stewardship and spiritual purity through labour parallels the Indic concept of *karma-yoga* — work as worship. Through him, Islam penetrated deeply into the heart of Javanese village life.

Sunan Gunung Jati/Sharif Hidayatullah (died in 1568)

As a political and spiritual leader, Sunan Gunung Jati was instrumental in establishing the Sultanate of Cirebon and expanding Islam's influence to Banten and West Java. He exemplified integrating Islamic values into statecraft and diplomacy, maintaining relations with China and Arab traders. His doctrine of "Tri Tangtu" — harmonising religious authority, royal power, and people's will — echoes the Indic idea of dharma as the basis of governance.[27] His tomb at Gunung Sembung remains a pilgrimage site visited by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Each of the Wali Songo contributed uniquely to the cultural Islamization of Java. Sunan Bonang (Makhdum Ibrahim), son of Sunan Ampel, was a visionary who merged music, mysticism, and literature. His suluk (spiritual songs) employed Javanese

[26] Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam*.

[27] George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

poetic forms to convey the unity of God, reflecting the integration of Sufi metaphysics with local aesthetics. Sunan Drajat championed social justice and communal welfare, establishing charitable institutions and promoting the value of gotong royong (cooperation) as an Islamic virtue. Sunan Kudus, remembered for his tolerance, built the Menara Kudus Mosque using Hindu-Javanese architectural elements—an enduring symbol of synthesis. Rather than demolishing pre-Islamic sanctuaries, he redefined their meanings, exemplifying Islam's adaptability. Sunan Kalijaga, perhaps the most culturally astute of the saints, utilised wayang kulit (shadow puppetry) to teach Islamic morals. By embedding Qur'anic messages in familiar stories, he made Islam intellectually accessible and emotionally resonant. Sunan Gunung Jati (Syarif Hidayatullah) extended Islam's reach to Cirebon and Banten, establishing a governance model that fused Islamic law with local customs. Sunan Giri (Raden Paku) advanced Islamic education and authored didactic tales for children, spreading Islam's message to Sulawesi and Maluku. As Ricklefs (2008) and Laffan (2011) affirm, these saints did not attack local beliefs but redefined them within an Islamic ethical framework, achieving a synthesis that sustained harmony rather than division.

Conclusion

Although the *Wali Songo* shared a collective mission to spread Islam across Java, their theological orientations and pedagogical methods displayed considerable diversity. Figures like Sunan Ampel emphasised jurisprudence and social ethics, Sunan Bonang and Sunan Kalijaga integrated mysticism with aesthetics. At the same time, Sunan Kudus and Sunan Drajat focused on social welfare and communal harmony. Some leaned toward Shāfiʿī orthodoxy, others toward Persian and Indian Sufi metaphysics. However, as Kasdi and Laffan observe, their teachings converged in one essential principle: Islam should be propagated through adaptation, not annihilation. The saints recognised that spiritual truth could flourish only when expressed through the familiar idioms of local culture. Thus, rather than dismantling pre-Islamic customs, they re-signified them—transforming *wayang* performances into moral allegories, temple aesthetics into mosque ornamentation, and ancestral rituals into community prayer. This convergence of spirit within diversity of form demonstrates the intellectual sophistication of the *Wali Songo*, whose plural approaches collectively forged an inclusive model of Islamization that remains a defining characteristic of the Islamization process in early Java.

DOI : https://doi.org/10.47766/nahrasiyah.v3i1.6993

The Islamization of Java was not a linear conversion process but a gradual civilisational dialogue grounded in mutual adaptation. As Kees van Dijk demonstrates, the *Wali Songo* consciously employed indigenous artistic and ritual expressions—such as *gamelan*, *wayang kulit*, and *slametan*—to communicate Islamic teachings within familiar cultural frameworks. This dakwah method did not seek to replace Javanese cosmology but to reinterpret it, allowing Islam to root itself organically within local values of harmony (*rukun*), cooperation (*gotong royong*), and respect for ancestral tradition. The saints' approach exemplifies what van Dijk terms a resilient syncretism: a civilisational pattern in which external influences are absorbed and re-Javanized, producing a uniquely Nusantaran expression of faith. This syncretic propagation of early Islam in Java ensured its widespread acceptance and the birth of an intellectual and spiritual synthesis that continues to define the identity of *Islam Nusantara* today.

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