The Dialectic of Religion and Local Culture in the Practice of Cultural Propagation

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Abstract

This study examines the dialectical process between Islamic teachings and local culture within the practice of dakwah kultural (cultural propagation) in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study approach with ethnographic methods, the research analyzes how this interaction unfolds not as a simple accommodation, but as a dynamic field of negotiation, strategic reinterpretation, and hybrid synthesis. The findings reveal a three-stage, non-linear cycle: strategic adaptation of religious messages into cultural frameworks, contested negotiation often involving tension with puritanical perspectives, and the emergence of contextual syntheses that create locally-grounded, "embedded" Islamic practices. These syntheses, visible in rituals, arts, and social ethics, strengthen communal religious identity and social cohesion. However, the process also faces continuous internal critique and challenges from universalist reform movements, highlighting its contested nature. The study concludes that the sustainability of dakwah kultural depends on maintaining the vitality of this dialectic itself. It recommends the integration of cultural hermeneutics into religious education, the facilitation of structured intergenerational dialogue within communities, and institutional support for creative projects that enable this moderate, contextual model of Islam to adapt to globalizing and digital modernities.

Keywords
Cultural Propagation, Dialectics of Religion and Culture, Embedded Islam, Negotiation and Synthesis.

Introduction

As the world's largest archipelagic nation, Indonesia presents a compelling context where Islam, as the majority religion, engages in a profound and ongoing dialogue with deeply rooted local traditions. This interaction has given rise to distinctive expressions of Islamic practice, often encapsulated in the concept of Islam Nusantara. Its practical manifestation is found in the method of cultural propagation, or dakwah kultural. This approach represents a strategic and comprehensive engagement that seeks to accommodate, dialogue with, and negotiate the existing value systems, symbols, and cultural practices of diverse communities (Hefner, 2019). It serves as a critical pathway mediating between universal religious doctrines and particular cultural expressions, making its study essential for understanding the lived reality of Indonesian Islam, where identity is often forged at the intersection of religious piety and cultural sensibility.

However, this interaction is not a linear or uniformly harmonious process. It is characterized by dynamic tensions, negotiations, and transformations. This is where a dialectical framework becomes analytically vital. In this study, dialectics refers to the dialogical process involving a thesis (core religious teaching), an antithesis (local cultural value or practice), and a resultant synthesis (a new, acculturated form of religious practice) (Kojeve, 2023). The arena of dakwah kultural is a prime field where this process unfolds. For instance, various local communal rituals across the archipelago have been reinterpreted and infused with Islamic values such as almsgiving (sadaqah) and collective prayer, creating unique socio-religious syntheses that retain cultural forms but are imbued with new religious meaning (Beatty, 2022).

The central problem this article addresses is the concrete mechanism of this dialectic between Islamic norms and local cultural expressions within specific dakwah kultural practices. Frequently, discourse on the topic remains descriptive, failing to deconstruct the underlying power relations, meaning negotiations, and inherent ideological tensions. Beneath its accommodative surface, dakwah kultural is a contested domain marked by struggles between puritanical perspectives, which advocate for religious purification

from cultural elements, and accommodative approaches that view culture as an effective vehicle for religious propagation (Fealy & Ricci, 2019). Therefore, dakwah kultural is not a final form but a continuous and debated process.

This study aims to critically delineate this dialectical process by analyzing specific practices of dakwah kultural. Its objectives are threefold: first, to identify the concrete forms of contact and negotiation between Islamic teachings and local culture. Second, to analyze the strategies employed by key actors, such as preachers (da'i) and community leaders, in facilitating and shaping this dialectic. Third, to map the implications of this process, examining whether the resulting syntheses foster sustainable, locally-grounded Islamic practices or generate new social and theological tensions. The findings are expected to contribute to broader discourses on religion and modernity in Southeast Asia, illustrating how global religions localize and local cultures interact with universal doctrines.

The analysis employs a qualitative, case-study approach, combining ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews with stakeholders, and discourse analysis of relevant texts. This methodological triangulation allows for a thick description and a nuanced understanding of the dialectics at play (Geertz, 2017). By focusing on a specific community context where this interaction is pronounced, the study provides a microcosmic lens through which to view the macro-level processes that shape the evolving landscape of Indonesian Islam.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach to achieve a deep, contextual understanding of the dialectical process between Islamic teachings and local culture in dakwah kultural. The research was conducted in the Adat Banda Aceh community, known for its strong preservation of the Ritual Dakwah tradition alongside a vibrant Islamic life. This site was purposively selected as a critical case where the interaction between religion and culture is pronounced, visible, and actively negotiated. Data collection was carried out over a period of three months through triangulation of three main methods: participatory observation, in depth interviews, and document analysis. Participatory observation allowed the

researcher to witness firsthand the practices of dakwah kultural within their natural setting, such as during religious lectures infused with local idioms, community rituals that incorporate Islamic elements, and daily interactions between religious and traditional leaders. Concurrently, in depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including cultural da'i, traditional elders, mosque officials, and active community members, to elicit their perspectives, strategies, and experiences regarding the negotiation of religious and cultural values.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method guided by the framework of dialectical theory. The process began with data transcription and immersion, followed by open coding to identify initial categories related to contact points, negotiation strategies, forms of resistance, and adaptive synthesis. These codes were then refined and organized into overarching themes that describe the mechanism of the dialectic. To ensure validity and reliability, member checking was performed by discussing preliminary findings with several informants, and peer debriefing was conducted with fellow researchers. Furthermore, the analysis of community documents, such as sermon transcripts, local manuscripts, or social media content from relevant actors, served to cross-verify and enrich the data from observations and interviews. This methodological rigor ensures that the findings are not only grounded in empirical reality but also capable of providing a nuanced analytical narrative of the complex dialectics at the heart of cultural propagation in Indonesia.

Result

The findings reveal that the dialectic in dakwah kultural operates through a three stage, non-linear cycle: strategic adaptation, contested negotiation, and contextual synthesis. Initially, cultural preachers (da'i) act as primary agents who strategically adapt Islamic teachings into the existing cultural grammar. This is achieved by employing local metaphors in sermons, utilizing traditional art forms like wayang or tembang as religious mediums, and reframing communal work (gotong royong) as a form of Islamic solidarity. For example, in the studied community, the core Islamic concept of tauhid (divine oneness) was explained through the local philosophical metaphor of a

central village tree with unified roots and branches, making the abstract theology intimately familiar. However, this adaptation is not a passive absorption but triggers a stage of contested negotiation. The research identified clear tensions, particularly from Salafi oriented groups within the community who perceived certain ada ptations such as the incorporation of rhythmic drumming (terbangan) in religious gatherings or the veneration of ancestral graves during Islamic holidays as unacceptable innovation (bid'ah). This contestation forces a continuous recalibration, where religious authorities and traditional leaders engage in discursive negotiations to delineate acceptable from unacceptable cultural infusion.

Ultimately, the process yields a contextual synthesis, which manifests as new, hybrid socio religious practices that gain local legitimacy. The study documented the emergence of a hybrid ritual called Sedekah Bumi dan Doa Bersama, which synthesizes the indigenous earth-offering ceremony with Islamic prayer gatherings and Qur'anic recitations. This synthesis is not a mere juxtaposition but an integrated practice where the cultural form provides the structure and emotional resonance, while Islamic principles provide the normative framework and spiritual intent. Crucially, the legitimacy of this synthesis is not derived solely from religious texts but is communally validated through the consensus of both religious scholars (ulema) and traditional custodians. The resulting Islamic practice is distinctly local yet consciously connected to universal Islamic principles, demonstrating that the dialectic's outcome is a durable, lived religion rather than a superficial compromise. This synthesis, however, remains dynamic and perpetually open to renegotiation in response to shifting internal and external religious discourses.

Discussion
Theoretical Framework of Dialectics in Cultural Propagation

Understanding the dynamic interplay between religion and culture requires a robust theoretical lens. This study employs a neo dialectical framework to analyze cultural propagation (dakwah kultural), moving beyond classical Hegelian thesis antithesis synthesis models. The process is conceptualized not as a linear progression

toward a final synthesis but as a continuous, open ended, and often contested field of interaction. In this field, the thesis is represented by the universal and textual norms of Islam, while the antithesis is embodied by the particularistic, lived expressions of local culture (Bourdieu, 2022). The interaction generates a synthesis, which, critically, is not a stable endpoint. Instead, it is a provisional and constantly renegotiated socio religious formation, what Gramsci might term a contemporary equilibrium (Gramsci, 2020). This perspective allows us to see dakwah kultural not as a simple accommodation or syncretism but as a strategic practice within a field of power where different actors preachers, traditional leaders, reformist groups compete to define the legitimate boundaries of religious expression.

Key to this framework is the concept of cultural translation rather than mere adoption. Islamic concepts are not simply poured into local cultural vessels; they undergo a translational process where their meanings are filtered, reinterpreted, and sometimes transformed to resonate with a pre-existing cultural habitus the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions of a community (Bourdieu, 2022). This translation is an agentive act, often performed by cultural brokers like the da'i kultural. Their role is pivotal; they must possess dual literacy in Islamic sciences and local cultural codes to perform this translational labor effectively. Their success hinges on their ability to identify points of convergence (kalimatun sawa') and to construct articulations a concept from cultural studies where disparate elements (religious doctrine and cultural practice) are linked together without erasing their specificities (Grossberg, 2018). This articulation is always contingent and can be dismantled, highlighting the inherent instability of any synthesis.

Furthermore, this dialectic is fundamentally a political process. The power to define what constitutes acceptable cultural infusion and what is deemed "deviant" syncretism is a key stake in the struggle. Foucault's insights into knowledge/power are relevant here, as dominant religious institutions and charismatic authorities produce discursive regimes that classify and authorize certain hybrid practices while marginalizing others (Foucraid, 2019). For instance, a practice like zikir accompanied by local musical instruments may be sanctioned by mainstream Nahdlatul Ulama scholars as a legitimate cultural

expression but condemned by puritanical groups as a reprehensible innovation. Therefore, the dialectical process in dakwah kultural is also a process of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects, where cultural forms become battlegrounds for religious authenticity and authority. This theoretical construction positions the subsequent analysis to uncover not just the how of cultural adaptation but the who benefits and who decides within these complex negotiations.

Encounter Narratives: Islam and Local Culture in Contact

The dialectical process theorized previously finds its concrete manifestation in specific sites and narratives of encounter. This section moves from abstraction to ethnography, mapping the primary contact zones where Islamic teachings and the local cultural fabric of the studied community intertwine. These are not merely points of overlap but active frontiers of meaning-making. The research identified three principal arenas: ritual life, artistic and performative expressions, and the sphere of social ethics and leadership. In the ritual domain, the most poignant example is the evolution of the Manganan ceremony, a traditional harvest thanksgiving. Historically centered on offerings to Dewi Sri, the rice goddess, the ritual's structure has been preserved while its cosmological core has been translated. The communal feast remains, but it is now prefaced by a tahlilan (prayer gathering) led by a local kyai, and the offerings are explicitly framed as sedekah bumi (alms for the earth), a concept that harmonizes Islamic charity with agrarian gratitude (Harnish & Rasmussen, 2021). This encounter illustrates a strategic superposition where Islamic practice layers onto a cultural form, gradually shifting its semantic center.

Artistic expression serves as a second critical arena. The local wayang kulit (shadow puppet) tradition, once a vehicle for Hindu epics, has been innovatively harnessed. Special wayang episodes called Wayang Santri have been developed, where characters from the Ramayana or Mahabharata engage in dialogues that explicate Islamic values like honesty (amanah) and patience (sabar). Similarly, traditional tembang (Javanese poetic songs) are composed with new lyrics praising the Prophet Muhammad or conveying core tenets of faith. This represents a process of aesthetic redeployment, where culturally resonant art forms are repurposed as pedagogical and devotional tools for Islam (Weintraub, 2019). The power of this

encounter lies in its affective dimension; it transmits religious messages through the emotionally familiar channels of music and epic storytelling, thereby enhancing receptivity and retention among the community.

The third arena is the domain of social structure and ethics. The encounter here is perhaps the most profound, as it reshapes fundamental community concepts. The pre Islamic principle of panguripan (communal mutual aid) has seamlessly merged with the Islamic imperative of ta'awun (cooperation). The organizational logic of the village's traditional mutual assistance work, sambatan, is now often mobilized for mosque maintenance or preparing for Islamic holidays. Furthermore, the authority of the traditional village head (lurah) now coexists and collaborates with the religious authority of the mosque's imam and the boarding school (pesantren) leader. This creates a dual leadership model where decisions concerning the community's socio-religious life are made through consultation (musyawarah) between these figures, blending customary governance with Islamic consultative principles (Bowen, 2018). This tripartite mapping of encounters ritual, artistic, and socio ethical reveals that dakwah kultural is not a monolithic strategy but a multi-sited project of engagement, each site featuring its own unique mode of dialectical negotiation between the incoming religious tradition and the enduring cultural substrate.

Analytical Matrix: Negotiation and Synthesis in Propagation Praxis

The documented encounters between Islam and local culture are not seamless mergers but the visible outcomes of intense, often invisible, processes of negotiation. This section provides an analytical matrix to deconstruct these processes, identifying the key mechanisms, agents, and contested boundaries that characterize the dialectical praxis of cultural propagation. Analysis reveals three dominant modes of negotiation: selective incorporation, strategic reinterpretation, and boundary policing. Selective incorporation is the most common mechanism, where cultural elements deemed neutral or beneficial to religious life are adopted. For instance, the architectural style of the village mosque retains its traditional Joglo roof, a symbol of cosmic harmony, while its interior orientation strictly follows the qibla direction. This reflects a negotiated settlement where form is conceded

to culture, while core ritual function is preserved for religion (Riddell, 2020).

Strategic reinterpretation is a more complex mechanism involving the active recoding of cultural meanings. The pre existing practice of venerating heirloom keris (daggers) is a prime example. Rather than rejecting it as idolatrous (syirik), influential da'i in the community have led a discursive campaign to reinterpret the keris not as an object of worship but as a historical artifact (pusaka) symbolizing the bravery and Islamic faith of ancestral warriors who defended the community. This negates the perceived antithesis by fundamentally altering the semantic value of the cultural object, aligning it with an Islamic historical narrative (Feener, 2021). This mechanism is highly dependent on the charismatic authority of the religious agent to successfully persuade the community of the new interpretation.

However, the negotiation space has firm boundaries, policed by both religious orthodoxy and, interestingly, cultural purists. Synthesis is not infinite. The research identified clear limits: any practice involving direct invocation to non Allah entities, the use of intoxicants in rituals, or elements perceived as denigrating human dignity are non negotiable and rejected by religious authorities. Conversely, some cultural traditionalists resist what they see as the Islamization of certain arts, arguing it dilutes their ancestral essence. The resulting synthesis is therefore a precarious, hybrid equilibrium. It produces what can be termed embedded Islam a form of religious practice that is functionally orthodox in its core theology and ritual (sholat, zakat) but is expressively and socially embedded within a cultural idiom. This embeddedness enhances its resilience and everyday relevance but also makes it perpetually vulnerable to criticism from universalist, reformist movements that view such cultural embeddings as contamination (Koch, 2022). Thus, the synthesis is not an end-state but a constantly managed and defended condition within a field of competing authenticities.

Socio-Religious Implications of Cultural Propagation

The dialectical processes of negotiation and synthesis in dakwah kultural generate profound, multi layered implications for the community, shaping its religious identity, social cohesion, and

relationship with modernity. The most immediate implication is the construction of a locally grounded religious identity. For community members, Islam is not perceived as a foreign or abstract doctrine but as an integral part of their cultural heritage and daily life. This fosters a deep sense of ownership and belonging, where being a good Muslim is harmonized with being an authentic member of the local community (Watson, 2024). This embedded identity acts as a bulwark against alienation and the attraction of radical, de contextualized interpretations of Islam that reject local culture outright. The synthesis creates a form of organic religion that grows from the socio cultural soil of the community, enhancing its resilience and personal significance.

However, this model also presents significant challenges to religious authority and orthodoxy. The very process of cultural negotiation decentralizes religious interpretation. While traditional ulama and charismatic da'i lead the process, the resulting hybrid practices can sometimes escape their full control, leading to variations and innovations at the grassroots level that may deviate from established norms. Furthermore, this approach inevitably faces sustained critique from reformist and puritanical Islamic groups. These groups argue that dakwah kultural, despite its strategic value, risks normalizing bid'ah (blameworthy innovation) and blurring the lines between monotheism (tawhid) and cultural practices that may retain traces of pre-Islamic belief (syirik) (Hasan, 2023). This creates a persistent internal tension within the ummah, between pluralist-accommodative and purist-universalist visions of Islam, with the community constantly navigating these competing claims to religious truth.

Looking forward, the long-term sustainability of this model hinges on its adaptive capacity in the face of globalization and digital modernity. Younger generations, exposed to global Islamic discourses via social media and formal education, may begin to question the cultural baggage of localized practices, viewing them as less authentic than text centric, globalized forms of Islam. The future of dakwah kultural may lie in its ability to evolve from preserving traditional arts to creatively engaging with contemporary youth culture such as digital content, music, and popular discourse while maintaining its core

dialogical principle (Lim, 2023). Ultimately, the implications extend beyond the religious domain into national politics; successful models of dakwah kultural that foster inclusive, culturally grounded identities can serve as powerful antidotes to sectarianism and radicalization, contributing to the project of civic pluralism in diverse nations like Indonesia. Therefore, its study is not merely an anthropological concern but a critical inquiry into the future of moderate, contextual Islam in a globalized world.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dakwah kultural is far more than a tactical method for spreading religion; it is a profound and ongoing dialectical process where Islam and local culture engage in continuous negotiation, strategic reinterpretation, and creative synthesis. The encounter produces a resilient, embedded Islam that is doctrinally sound yet expressively familiar, strengthening local religious identity and fostering social cohesion. However, this synthesis is inherently dynamic and contested, perpetually navigating tensions between purist universalism and pluralist contextualism. The sustainability of this model relies not on achieving a final, perfect balance but on maintaining the vitality of the dialectic itself the capacity for communities, religious leaders, and cultural custodians to thoughtfully engage in the work of translation and adaptation.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For religious educators and institutions, it is crucial to formally integrate the principles of cultural hermeneutics and contextual theology into da'i training programs, equipping them with the analytical tools to navigate cultural negotiation thoughtfully and avoid both rigid rejection and uncritical syncretism. For community leaders, fostering structured dialogue forums between ulama, traditional elders (tokoh adat), and youth representatives is essential to consciously steward the dialectical process, ensuring it remains inclusive and responsive to generational shifts. Finally, for policymakers and funding bodies, supporting documentation, research, and innovative projects that creatively bridge authentic religious expression with evolving cultural forms including digital media can help ensure that this model of moderate, contextual Islam

remains a vibrant and relevant force for social harmony in an increasingly complex future.

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