
Interpreting Religion Through Religious Attitudes and Orientation in Javanese Society during the New Order Period

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Abstract: Religiosity or religious practice reflects the unique characteristics of each religion in the application of its teachings. In Indonesia, especially in Javanese society, religiosity is greatly influenced by local culture. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine religious interpretation through the religious attitudes of the Javanese people during the New Order period (1966-1998). Using an in-depth literature study and critical analysis approach, this study analyzes how the policy of depoliticization and standardization of religion by the state interacts with Javanese syncretic traditions. The findings of this study show that Javanese society is not passive, but develops adaptive and resistant cultural strategies, such as maintaining *the slametan* tradition, in the midst of homogenization efforts. Religious and cultural elites have an important role in integrating Islamic doctrine with Javanese cosmology, which forms a religious typology that reflects pluralism, eclecticism, and universalism. The attitude and religious orientation of the Javanese people emphasizes sportsmanship, democracy, accommodation, and flexibility in accepting and embracing groups that have beliefs different from their ancestral traditions. Religious practices for the Javanese people are considered part of Pancasila, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, and nationalism. The Javanese religious concept is when beliefs always go hand in hand with mystical and supernatural things. Javanese people always strive to create balance in the midst of differences, uphold tolerance, and spread peace by respecting the existence of others.

Keywords: Javanese Society; New Order; Religion; Culture; Syncretism

Introduction

Religion is also an element of cultural influences, traditions, and customs inherited by ancestors. In a theological context, religion includes revelation, teachings, laws, and commandments from God. In this case, religious practices can be equated with cultural practices. Culture itself is understood as a collection of symbols that represent three aspects, namely material culture, behavioral culture, and idea culture (Reuter, 2015). These cultural symbols are integrated and interact harmoniously with religious aspects, which is reflected in the religious attitudes of individuals and has an influence in determining their religious orientation clearly.

However, the New Order period (1966-1998) was a very significant period in the change in religious life in Indonesia, where the state actively intervened in the religious practices of the community through structured policies (Hefner, 2000). In Java, this policy dealt with a syncretic tradition that had been firmly entrenched, creating a unique dynamic between state-driven normative Islam and Kejawen that persisted in local practice (Geertz, 1960). New Order policies, such as the standardization of the stream of beliefs through the Surat Keputusan Bersama 3 Menteri 1975 (Pemberton, 1994) and the Guidelines for the Appreciation and Practice of Pancasila (Pedoman Penghayatan dan Pengamalan

Pancasila) (Ricklefs, 2012), significantly influenced the way the Javanese people understood and practiced religion. In the context of religious culture and art of Javanese society, the relationship between the three aspects can be easily identified (Baldy & Yazzie, 2018).

Research on religious interpretation through the religious attitudes of the Javanese people during the New Order period (1966-1998) has profound academic and practical urgency, namely: (1) This period is an important phase in the formation of post-colonial Indonesian religious identity, where the state seeks to consolidate religious diversity under the auspices of nationalism (Ricklefs, 2012), and; (2) Javanese society with its syncretic characteristics (Geertz, 1960) provides a unique case study of how religion is interpreted in the midst of political and ideological pressures. The feasibility of this study is supported by three main arguments. First, theoretically, a micro-historical approach that integrates the perspective of religious anthropology (Asad, 1993) and social practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) allows for a comprehensive analysis of power relations in religious practice. Second, methodologically, the large number of sources of New Order research archives (such as the policy of the Ministry of Religion) and ethnographic records (local rituals, such as *slametan*) provide sufficient empirical data (Sebastian et al., 2025). Third, practically, the results of this research

are relevant to understand the historical roots of tolerance and contemporary religious conflict in Indonesia during the reform period (Beatty, 1999).

Research on the diversity of religion, attitudes, and religious orientations of the Javanese people has been carried out by a number of researchers, including: (1) Rio Febrian, Muhammad Fajrul Islam, Purnama Yudistira (2025) who show a peaceful approach in answering fundamental questions about the differences in attitudes and religious orientations of the Javanese people compared to other communities; (2) Aris Widodo (2016) which examines the relationship between culture and Islam with a compromises and non-compromising approach; (3) Merle Calvin Ricklefs (2012) who added that in Javanese culture, they generally carry out religious rituals and ceremonies at the same time. The religious orientation and attitude of the Javanese people are part of a complex, complicated, and mystical religious system; (4) Muhammad Idrus (2007) who explained the importance of religious life for Javanese people, ranging from children to adults, as well as; (5) Niels Mulder (2005) who assessed that some Javanese people integrate local beliefs or Javanese values in syncretic religious practices. However, the research discusses the interpretation of religion through the religious attitudes of the Javanese people during the New Order period (1966-1998). Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps with three key

approaches: (1) Criticizing elitist narratives by shifting the focus to the daily religious practices of ordinary people through the analysis of historical sources written by previous researchers (Asad, 1993); (2) Deconstructing the dichotomy of Islam and Kejawen by showing how Javanese society reinterpreted these categories under the pressure of New Order government policies (Beatty, 1999), and; (3) Introducing a temporal perspective that connects the practice of syncretism in the New Order era (Bourdieu, 1977).

This research aims to understand the way Javanese people interpret their religion, and analyze the attitudes and religious orientations of the Javanese based on the existing typology, as well as identify and explore the concept of obedience in Javanese religion. The hypothesis of this study is that Javanese society not only serves as a passive object of state policy, but also actively develops cultural strategies to sustain syncretic religious practices through subtle adaptation and resistance. The main contribution of this research lies in the enrichment of theoretical perspectives by integrating religious anthropology and political history to read religion as an arena of meaning contestation.

Method

This study adopts a literature study approach with an in-depth critical analysis method to investigate the religious attitudes and religious orientation of the Javanese

people in the New Order era. This approach was chosen because it provides an opportunity for researchers to conduct a thorough study of academic texts, historical documents, and other secondary sources relevant to the research topic (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Literature studies are very appropriate for this research because it emphasizes on the interpretation of the phenomenon of religiosity of Javanese people that has been widely recorded in academic literature, such as the works of Clifford Geertz, Marle Calvin Ricklefs, and Mark Woodward. Data was collected through a systematic review of primary and secondary sources, including books, journal articles, archival documents, and historical records related to Javanese society, religion, and culture during the New Order period. Inclusion criteria include: (1) Historical sources that discuss the religious attitudes and orientations of the Javanese people; (2) Historical sources related to the historical context of the New Order, and; (3) Historical sources published in the period 1966–1998. These sources are analyzed using content analysis techniques to identify patterns, themes, and relationships between concepts (Sahetapy, 2005). In addition, a critical discourse analysis approach is applied to understand how Javanese religion and culture are represented in the texts studied (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

The data analysis procedure consists of three main stages: (1) Data reduction, which

means selecting and focusing on the most relevant sources; (2) Data presentation, by organizing findings into categories such as religious typologies (inclusivism and pluralism), and; (3) Drawing conclusions, which involves the interpretation of findings within a predetermined theoretical framework (Pribadi et al., 2017). The theories on which the analysis is based include: (1) Social Identity Theory which explains how individuals define themselves through membership in social groups and how this affects their behavior (Tajfel, 2010); (2) Religious Orientation Theory which explains how individuals perceive and experience religion in their lives (Allport, 1967), and; (3) The theory of Multiculturalism which describes the situation in which all the different cultural or racial groups in a society have equal rights and opportunities, without any being ignored or considered unimportant (Crowder, 2013), which helps to explain the dynamics of the religious attitudes of the Javanese people in the cultural and political context of the New Order. Ethical considerations in this study include academic honesty by avoiding plagiarism and listing sources accurately, as well as cultural sensitivity in interpreting the religious practices of the Javanese people without bias (Magnis-Suseno, 1984). The study did not directly involve human subjects, so ethical approval was focused on the use of published sources.

Results and Discussion

Javanese Religion and Society in the New Order Period

During the New Order period (1966-1998), the government implemented a highly structured policy in controlling religious life through two main approaches, namely the depoliticization of religion and the standardization of religious practices (Hefner, 2000). The depoliticization of religion in the New Order era refers to the government's systematic strategy to reduce the political potential of religious expression while strengthening state control over religious life (Ridwan & Pababbari, 2025). This policy is implemented through three main mechanisms: (1) Neutralization of religious organizations by requiring religious-based political parties (such as Nahdlatul Ulama and the Partai Muslimin Indonesia) to join the Partai Persatuan Pembangunan in 1973, thereby reducing their political influence (Yuwono & Basara, 2024); (2) Restrictions on religious discourse through strict supervision of sermons and study materials, including the requirement to obtain permits for religious activities outside official places of worship (Ramage, 2002), and; (3) The instrumentalization of Pancasila as the "only principle" for all organizations since 1985, which forces religious groups to eliminate explicit political agendas (Pringle, 2010). In Java, this depoliticization has produced a

paradoxical impact. On the one hand, this policy has succeeded in reducing religious conflicts such as those that occurred in the 1965-1966 massacre (Yuwono et al., 2024). However, on the other hand, this gives rise to cultural resistance, for example through the tradition of *slametan* which is maintained as a form of community solidarity outside the control of the state (Beatty, 1999).

The New Order era implemented a policy of standardization of religious practices as part of the state's modernization and social control project. This policy is realized through several key approaches: (1) The uniformization of the religious education curriculum through the Ministry of Religion since 1975, which emphasizes the "official" version of Sunni Islam and the marginalization of local practices (Hefner, 2000); (2) The establishment of rituals, such as marriage and burial of the dead through local regulations that require the use of official religious procedures (Bowen, 1993), and; (3) The campaign of "religious purification" against the flow of beliefs and syncretic practices through the operation of the development of believers in the 1970s, for example, the Vihara Tri Dharma combined three religious teachings, namely Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, in one place of worship (Stange, 1984). Through instruments such as the Surat Keputusan Bersama 3 Menteri 1975 No. 01/BER/mdn/1969 on Religious Traditions and Law No. 5/1969 on the Principles of Government in the Regions,

the government effectively restricted religious expression outside the five official religions (Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism) (Pringle, 2010). This policy is based on the doctrine of "Pancasila monoculturalism" which aims to create uniformity in diversity (Ramage, 2002). In Java, this standardization faces complex challenges: (1) Islamic bureaucratization through the Majelis Taklim programs actually triggers creative adaptation, where the community inserts local elements in a state-approved format, such as recitation events interspersed with Wayang performances (Woodward, 2010), and the establishment of the Ministry of Religion as the sole regulator creates a dualism between official religious practices and educational traditions in Pesantren (Bruinessen, 1994).

The interaction between Islam, Kejawen, and colonial heritage has shaped Java's unique and complex religious landscape. The process of Islamization that occurred in Java from the 15th to the 19th centuries did not eliminate the local belief system, but rather created a creative synthesis through cultural accommodation strategies implemented by the guardians (Ricklefs, 2012). The Kejawen tradition, which combines elements of animism, Hindu-Buddhism, and Sufism, survives through institutions such as Keraton and Pesantren, with core practices such as *slametan* serving as an adaptation mechanism (Geertz, 1960). The Dutch colonial government (1800-1942)

politicized this dynamic by: (1) Segregation policies that implemented separate religious courts for Muslims (Hefner, 2000); (2) Rationalization of religion by categorizing "Islam *abangan*" (Muslim groups that practice Islamic teachings in a way that is influenced by local traditions and beliefs, including animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and place more emphasis on local customs and rituals than strict Islamic law) as a form of degeneration (Pemberton, 1994), and; (3) Institutionalization of the distinction between *priyayi* (elite bureaucrats) and *santri* (cleric) through the education system (Woodward, 2010). As a result, this colonial legacy had a paradoxical impact in the New Order era such as Kejawen was stigmatized as "not a religion" but still lived in daily practice (Beatty, 1999), and traditional and modernist Islam was divided in responding to syncretic heritage (Bruinessen, 1994).

Religious and cultural elites have an important role as mediators and innovators in the formation of religious interpretations among Javanese people. Ulama and spiritual teachers develop a framework of interpretation that integrates Islamic doctrine with Javanese cosmology through several main mechanisms: (1) Transmission of knowledge through the Kitab Kuning system in Pesantren that accommodate elements of Javanese philosophy (Dhofier, 2011); (2) Political legitimacy by bridging the interests of the state and local traditions, such as the role of KGPA

Mangkunegara IV in formulating the Javanese version of Pancasila (Ricklefs, 2012), and; (3) Adaptation of rituals through the Islamization of Hindu-Buddhist symbols (e.g. Wayang as a medium of da'wah) (Woodward, 2010). At the societal level, these religious and cultural elites function as: (1) Filters that determine external elements to conform to local values (Geertz, 1960); (2) Translators who transform abstract Islamic concepts into concrete practices (e.g. dhikr is formulated as meditation) (Stange, 1980), and; (3) Border guards who regulate the level of "Islam" in a tradition (Hefner, 2000).

The New Order government implemented a systematic policy to control spiritual diversity through the Surat Keputusan Bersama 3 Menteri No. 01/BER/mdn/1969 which was revised in 1975, which effectively restricted the stream of beliefs with several key provisions: (1) Administrative categorization that separated the "official religion" from the "stream of belief", which resulted in the stream of beliefs not being able to be taught in schools or obtain a valid marriage certificate (Hefner, 1985); (2) Restrictions on spaces of expression by prohibiting religious activities outside of private spaces and requiring special permits for public events (Stange, 1984), and; (3) Coaching programs through institutions such as the Coordinating Board for the Appreciation of Belief in God Almighty (Badan Koordinasi Penghayatan Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa) which is tasked with

"adjusting" the practice of faith to the norms of Pancasila (Ramage, 2002). Meanwhile, the "Guidelines for the Appreciation and Practice of Pancasila" (Pedoman Penghayatan dan Pengamalan Pancasila) program mandated through Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Decree No. II/MPR/1978 functions as: (1) A homogenization tool by making Pancasila the only organizational principle since 1985 (Bruinessen, 1994); (2) A control mechanism through compulsory training for Civil Servants and students that emphasizes the state version of "true religiosity" (Pemberton, 1994), and; (3) Shaping official narratives that link local religious practices to the post-1965 "threat of communism" (Ricklefs, 2012). As a result of this policy, there are impacts such as: (1) Institutional marginalization of organizations, such as Sapta Darma and Subud; (2) Erosion of the transmission of knowledge of the spiritual tradition between generations, and; (3) Forced hybridization in which ritual practices must be packaged within the framework of Pancasila (Megafajari et al., 2023).

The Meaning and Typology of Religion in Javanese Society during the New Order Period

In the course of its history, religion has brought and created various important aspects. The uniqueness and complexity of religion reflects the diversity and variety of religious practices exhibited by its adherents.

The religions of the West and the East created two polar opposites, illustrating how vast and diverse the differences in human religious experience are today. In general, religions can be divided into two main categories, namely world religions which include major religions that are internationally and constitutionally recognized (Janis & Evans, 2004), and local religions which are belief systems that arise from a particular society, which are closely related to local traditions and cultures (Cusack, 2011).

To answer this question, it is important to understand the meaning and typology of religion in order to identify the religious orientation of the Javanese people. The purpose of this understanding is not to alienate certain beliefs, but to highlight diversity in religious practices, especially among Javanese people. Religious attitudes can be categorized into several typologies, such as inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism, eclecticism, and universalism. This typology reflects the individual's tendency to embrace religion. Various factors contribute to differences in religious orientation between individuals, including historical, social, cultural, environmental factors (demographics and geography), as well as psychological factors (such as family environment, associations, and social interactions) (García-Alandete & Valero, 2013). In this modern era, the tendency of individual religious attitudes and orientations is also influenced by social media trends which

are a phenomenon among the millennial generation (Abdel-Fadil, 2019). The selection of this religious typology is generally influenced by motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, in each individual and group.

Inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism are terms often referred to as "tripolar typologies", which are widely used as references in theological discussions to identify individual religious attitudes (Race, 1983). Inclusivism refers to the acceptance and rejection of other religions that are not considered to be the most correct (Netland, 2001). On the other hand, exclusivism does not show a negotiable or ambivalent attitude. In this view, there is only one religion that is considered the truest, without the slightest doubt (Ruhmkorff, 2013). Pluralism holds that no single religion can be considered the most correct. This is due to the inability of each religion to provide an accurate definition of the true meaning of the religion itself (Burley, 2020). Religion cannot be understood or defined only through methods or concepts put forward by scholars, religious leaders, or theologians, let alone by their followers. Religion does not belong to any particular individual, but is believed and embraced because it is the revelation and truth of God. Therefore, it is not appropriate to justify a particular group or religion outside the context of its own religion (Ruhmkorff, 2013).

Each religion has a different level of religiosity, depending on their spiritual

journey. Therefore, it is important to realize that in the context of religious life there is a very wide diversity. This shows that spiritual experiences and religious practices must be passed through and determined by the religious attitudes and orientations of each individual. Eclecticism and universalism can be considered as two religious attitudes that are more mature and extroverted compared to tripolar typologies, especially inclusivism and exclusivism that tend to be closed and exclusive. For example, eclecticism reflects religious attitudes and orientations that demonstrate openness and acceptance through a process of selection and selection of beliefs that are considered non-deviant, as a condition for being recognized as a religion, regardless of conformity to that belief (Dastmalchian, 2013). On the other hand, universalism argues that conceptually, empirically, practically, theologically, and philosophically, the view of equality is a necessity and a non-negotiable principle for every religion and its adherents, including groups outside of it such as secular, liberal, and atheist (Wallensteen, 1984).

Universalism refers to the right to have beliefs and adhere to a particular religion, as well as the right to express opinions and feel freedom physically and spiritually. It includes the freedom to perform religious rituals and other aspects, where universalism is in line with human rights. All religions that exist and survive today have an equal position in various dimensions. Each religion teaches the values of

goodness, obedience, the concept of divinity, life after death, and the temporal and spiritual aspects (Pfeilstetter, 2017). All of this can be achieved through the practice of worship and rituals, which are underpinned by deep beliefs. On the other hand, some other religions experience a process of syncretism with local culture, where historical differences (time and place) are a distinguishing factor, resulting in a variety of teachings that function in accordance with the role of da'wah in a pluralistic society (Mastori & Marsambas, 2023).

The religious system of Javanese society, based on existing religious phenomena and typologies, made cultural figures during the New Order period a central element that shaped people's beliefs. The attitudes of pluralism, eclecticism, and universalism are considered to reflect the religious characteristics of the Javanese people. The religious arts of the Javanese people have characteristics that emphasize the importance of communication, such as deliberation, dialogue, small talk, and mutual respect. In addition, customs, manners, ancestral traditions, and respect for the environment and surrounding nature (Javanese cosmos-ecology) play an important role in creating reciprocal relationships that involve emotional interactions between Javanese individuals, traditions, the universe, and God (Khasbullah, 2022).

The religious attitude and orientation of the Javanese people is not only related to

beliefs and spirituality, but also ideologies that function as a view of life. This is due to the existence of noble values and philosophies of life that are interrelated with the context of space and time (Hanan & Widiastuti, 2015). Therefore, it is very important to be careful in avoiding the statement that the religious culture of the Javanese people can be considered as "teachings". The Javanese and the Javanese religion are two different entities, so it is important to distinguish between the two terms in order to prevent misunderstandings in understanding the religious attitudes and orientations of the Javanese people. More than simply showing differences or setting boundaries related to cultural and religious diversity in the context of social and communal life, the main objective is to explore the extent to which the diversity of religions (religious attitudes and orientations) and culture of Javanese society is mutually supportive. This allows the creation of a unique form of religious appreciation in the midst of cultural and religious diversity in Indonesia. In the context of Javanese society, both religion and local culture form each other, develop each other, and understand and accept differences, so that the two are integrated into a harmonious unity (Cochrane, 2009).

Javanese Religious Art as a Form of Religious Attitude and Orientation in the New Order Period

Java in this context refers to the dynamics of the religious life of its people. To understand who the Javanese are, we need to refer to the views of Frans Magnis-Suseno (1984):

Java is a complex system of life, including humans and all the order and disorders that exist in it. The island of Java is not just a place where a group of people with a certain culture live. In a socio-cultural context, Javanese speak four languages, but there are significant language differences in some regions, such as West Java (from West Banten to Cirebon), which differ from the original Javanese. The original Java language can be found in Central Java and East Java. Therefore, the term Javanese refers to individuals who have a native language, which is the original Javanese. Thus, true Javanese are the indigenous people of Central and Eastern Java who speak Javanese, while the West Java region has a distinct culture and language.

The Javanese can be further distinguished, especially among the northern coastal population who have a strong trading system. The influence of Islam in the North Java region is also considered more dominant in shaping distinctive religious and cultural attitudes and orientations among the Javanese (Sebastian & Yuwono, 2025). Religious and

cultural characteristics among coastal or inland residents of Java are often referred to as "Kejawen" (Kholis, 2018). Cities such as Surakarta, Yogyakarta, Banyumas, Kediri, Malang, and Madiun are important cultural centres for the Javanese people. According to statistical data in 1966-1998, about 96% of the Javanese population adheres to Islam, while 2.5% adheres to Christianity, and the other 1.5% consists of Hinduism, Buddhism, and local religions (Badan Pusat Statistik Indonesia, 1999).

Java is an important element in diversity, part of Bhineka Tunggal Ika, and is a component of Pancasila (nationalism) and religious culture of Indonesian society (Koentjaraningrat, 1985). Javanese society has a material culture, behavior, and ideas that contribute to the strengthening of different religious attitudes and orientations, both in concept and practice (Putro, 2010). Religious beliefs and practices among Javanese people have strong roots, reflecting a monotheistic awareness of God. This is an implication of the Islamic teachings on surrender or *tawakkal* (Abidin, 2014). This *tawakkal* attitude is in line with the Javanese culture of behavior that emphasizes flexibility and calmness, as well as avoiding conflict or direct confrontation. This concept is part of the thinking of the Javanese people which reflects one of the core elements of Javanese culture, namely the formation of identity in ethics. The closeness between the material culture, behavior, and thought of the

Javanese people with Islamic culture, especially in the context of Sufi culture, is also very evident (Stange, 1970).

The attitudes of pluralism, eclecticism, and universalism are considered to reflect the religious culture of the Javanese people. Pluralism can be seen from the acceptance of the Javanese people towards the existence of others. Interestingly, eclecticism also plays an important role by adopting various noble values from different religious teachings (assimilation). This attitude is manifested in the process of syncretism between Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian who interact with the basic culture of Javanese society. For example, the Wayang philosophy is a form of syncretism that is part of the core culture of Javanese society which is influenced by Hindu-Buddhism (Suyono 2007).

In the context of Islam, the performing art of Wayang has been used by the guardians as a means of spreading Islamic teachings. Wayang not only functions as a method of da'wah or acculturation process, but also includes the philosophy of life, spirituality, and behavior of the Javanese people. Javanese people show an attitude of acceptance and openness to other things without judging, demanding, or selfish. The religious orientation of the Javanese people that reflects the attitude of pluralism can be seen through the existence of local beliefs (Kejawen), such as *Pransuh*, *Pangestu*, *Subud*, *Sumarah*, and other ancestral religions, including the spiritual

teachings of *Kawulo Ngayogyakarta* and *Sapta Darma* (Arifin 2017). In the teachings of *Sapta Darma*, there is a process that involves the inner realm, feelings, and spirituality to do self-introspection. Self-introspection carried out by *Sapta Darma* adherents is closely related to Javanese identity, because it can only be found in the dimension of the religious diversity of Javanese society (Javanese self-introspection) to the Almighty (Putro 2010).

The identification of the religious attitudes and orientations of the Javanese people may offer a unique perspective, which is not found in the cultural and religious systems of other societies, both at the national and global levels. However, the criticism that often arises states that the beliefs of the Javanese people are not able to provide a clear boundary between Islamic culture and tradition (Ricklefs 2012). This problem needs serious attention to be straightened out, both in terms of concept, definition, meaning, and purpose. This explanation is not intended as a justification, but rather to affirm that differences are part of diversity, which is a gift of God. Difference itself is the art of life, and the attitude and religious orientation of the Javanese people are part of religious art (Mufid 2006). The syncretism contained in the religious practices of the Javanese people reflects the true attitude of pluralism and universalism.

In the context of religious tendencies, Javanese people adopt Islam as a religious

identity, both in institutional and non-institutional aspects, which includes individual rights and freedoms as well as the need to believe and worship. It is interesting to note that at the same time, Javanese people also recognized and practiced other beliefs outside of Islam, such as Christianity, Hinduism-Buddhism, as well as spiritual schools such as *Sapta Darma* and various other beliefs (Herliana 2014). The religion of the ancestors remains an integral part of the religious life of the Javanese people, where these beliefs function as principles, paths, and philosophies of life (Koentjaraningrat 1985).

Mark Woodward (2010) clearly shows us that there are two groups of people who adhere to Javanese Islam and others who adhere to normative Islam which is considered a pure form of Islam without the influence of Javanese culture. However, in practice, separating Javanese Islam from normative Islam is almost impossible. Both Javanese Islam and normative Islam have been integrated with the nuances of "Javanese", so that there is no room to separate the two except at the theoretical or conceptual level, by proposing various comparative hypotheses proposed by several scholars, such as Clifford Geertz, who classify the religious orientation of the Javanese people into three broad categories, namely *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. (Fanani 2018). Referring to the classification proposed by Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1960), the question that arises is whether the grouping carried out by Clifford

Geertz can really separate Islam and Java? Reality shows that there is always a Javanese element in the Islamic tradition, and conversely, Islam also has a Javanese character through various rituals, where Islamic and Javanese traditions interact and complement each other.

Syncretism in the Concept of Javanese Religious Obedience in the New Order Period

The diversity of Javanese society has been a concern for many people since its inception. This shows that religious practices among Javanese people not only reflect cultural aspects that are firmly rooted in traditions and customs, but also various mystical elements that surround them (Purwadi, 2006). The attitude and orientation of Javanese religion strongly emphasizes religiosity triggered by the need for values, goals, and meaning of life (Sartini, 2009). Religion is defined as the process of learning and understanding all aspects of life, because religion is related to belief, relationship with God, integration, and the divine path we take to change lives, where there is devotion that will be lived throughout life (Magnis-Suseno, 1984).

Javanese people have a unique concept and have been preserved for centuries. Basically, the attitude and religious orientation of the Javanese people cannot be separated

from the culture of ideas (*wewarah*), which reflects the outlook on life that emerges and develops from the habits and social behavior of its people. It has become an integral part of Javanese culture (Putro, 2010). In other words, the religious attitudes and practices of the Javanese people are the result of a long process that leads to the formation of distinctive religious traditions and practices (Keeler, 1987). This process actually strengthens the attitude of tolerance that is applied unconsciously, both directly and indirectly, and continues to grow. However, in various cases, the issue of tolerance can trigger identity conflicts that have the potential to cause tension (Jakaria et al., 2023).

Clifford Geertz (1960) analyzes the religious diversity of the Javanese people through the concept of syncretism, especially those who make Islam a religious identity. This concept essentially reflects the attitude of pluralism and universalism, but it also contains eclectic elements. Pluralism in the religious practices of the Javanese people is an idea rooted in local thinking, which is clearly part of the core of Javanese culture (Mufid 2006). In the context of Javanese culture, there are values and norms that function as philosophy and ethics of life. In addition, Javanese ethics is considered to be a system of rules that plays an important role in influencing human behavior (Geertz 1960).

Pluralism that is upheld through norms and ethics can be seen from the openness and

acceptance of the Javanese people to various foreign beliefs, including world religions. This shows that the Javanese people are able to accept the presence of this belief well. According to Clifford Geertz and Mark Woodward, one of the factors that facilitates the acceptance of Islam in the context of the religious diversity of the Javanese people is the similarity with local beliefs, especially in Javanese Sufism which contains strong mystical elements. The Islamic Sufism referred to here refers to Sufi teachings that emphasize the importance of spirituality and a personal approach to God, where worldly goals are not the main focus (Purwadi, 2022).

Merle Calvin Ricklefs (2012) defines syncretism as a phenomenon that has an adaptive, accommodating, and flexible character in response to certain teachings such as Islam, Christianity, and Hindu-Buddhism, which seeks to integrate with the original culture and beliefs of the Javanese people. This reflects the devotion of the Javanese people to the teachings of their ancestors, without showing a significant rejection of the presence of other teachings. Meanwhile, Clifford Geertz (1960) argues that Islam seeks to adapt to Javanese culture, so that it emerges with Javanese attributes, where Javanese elements and motifs are often present in Islamic traditions, which indicates that Islam has become an integral part of the life of the Javanese people. In this context, Clifford Geertz implicitly states that "Islam succeeded"

in infiltrating or "Islamizing" most of Javanese society. However, Clifford Geertz's view is incorrect, because in reality it is the behavior and way of thinking of the Javanese people that allows Islam to be accepted and responded to positively, even without indoctrination or elite influence during the colonial period (Yuwono & Braake, 2025).

Religious leaders, through the role of *wali* or *kiai*, try to integrate elements of Javanese culture, such as Wayang performances, so that the Javanese people do not consider Islam as something foreign. This shows that the religious attitude of the Javanese people is inseparable from norms, ethics, and manners that prioritize respect for differences. They strive to embrace and absorb existing positive values, so that their belief is on par with other noble beliefs. In this context, the religious orientation of the Javanese people indirectly reflects the attitude of exclusivity, electrification, pluralism, and universality at the same time (Magnis-Suseno, 1984).

Returning to the socio-historical context, Merle Calvin Ricklefs (2012) notes that around 1368, many individuals from East Java began to be interested and converted to Islam. The role of the elite is very significant in this process of indoctrination and belief change. The freedom given by the elite to the Javanese people to choose between embracing Islam or staying in Kejawen (traditional Javanese belief) shows a fairly good form of democracy (Sutarto, 2007). In this case, the views of Clifford Geertz and

Merle Calvin Ricklefs are in line, highlighting the process of synchronization between Islam and Javanese culture, where Islamization in Java can be accepted relatively easily thanks to the mystical teachings contained in Sufism (Prabowo et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, almost all religious practices among Javanese people show that Javanese teachings and values remain in line with Javanese Christian teachings (Kristen Jawi Wetan) or with Puritan Islam. The majority of Javanese people are still attached to the traditions and culture of their ancestors, although this is considered contrary to the Islamic principles contained in the Qur'an and hadith by some circles. Therefore, Clifford Geertz stated that Javanese whose religious practices are still influenced by the teachings of their ancestors are called *abangan*, while those who practice pure Islamic teachings are known as *santri* (Sumbulah, 2012). The *priyayi* are a group of nobles in Javanese culture who have a respectable position in society (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

In the perspective of animism, beliefs and traditions are considered as forms of reverence that reflect the recognition of relationships with other entities (Woodward, 2010). Daniel L. Pals (2012) argues that belief in primitive societies basically reflects the work patterns of nature that are universal, constant, and inviolable. The ritual practice found in Javanese society is a manifestation of respect for spirits who are believed to be outside of

themselves, who are considered to inhabit a certain object or location. Therefore, they give offerings through a series of rituals such as *nyadran*, *larung sesaji*, *ruwatan*, *slametan*, and others. This type of ritual is closely related to the Javanese people's view of life regarding the power that exists outside of themselves (Bird-David, 1999).

Aspects of nature such as mountains, trees, rivers, and forests, as well as specific locations and objects, are seen as human equivalents or have personality traits. Non-human entities are not considered objects, but rather as communicative or "personal" subjects, meaning they have feelings, awareness, and are able to respond to events that occur around them (Bird-David, 1999). This phenomenon is reflected in Javanese cosmology, where people still believe in the oneness of God as the only entity that is worshipped and has power over all of His creation (Nadjib, 2013). This is a typical form of assimilation in the various cultural practices of the Javanese people.

In an effort to identify Javanese society and group it based on religious orientation, the approach and definition put forward by Clifford Geertz (1960) indirectly reflect the fundamental differences between Javanese religion and culture, including variations of *abangan* Islam, *priyayi* Islam, and *santri* Islam. At this point, syncretism is often viewed as detrimental, where the religious tendencies of the Javanese people are considered far from puritan religious teachings and more inclined

to the practice of animism. Therefore, it is important to understand the concept of syncretism from multiple perspectives, as a process that crosses the boundaries of space and time. In the end, syncretism takes the Javanese people on a journey of search and spirituality, as well as the quest to find self-identity, which in turn leads to the attainment of the highest consciousness, which is to unite with the Creator.

This description of Javanese society provides an understanding of the characteristics of the Javanese people, where language, religion, and culture have a significant role in their social life. However, not all aspects of culture show a deep interaction with religion, so it is not always the primary representation of that culture (Cowan, 2001). Clifford Geertz (1960) states that in the context of Javanese culture, the essence of culture lies in its ability to influence social, political, religious, family relationships, social interactions, as well as government systems and village structures, which in turn shape the religious behavior of its adherents. The characteristics of the religious diversity of the Javanese can be seen when their beliefs, whatever religion they follow, always go hand in hand with mystical and supernatural elements (interpersonal relationships) (Bird-David, 1999). The objects in question are generally transcendent, such as God, ancestral spirits, and certain religious figures or individuals (Koentjaraningrat, 2004).

The attitude and orientation of the religious diversity of the Javanese people reflects the dynamic concept of religious obedience, with an emphasis on pluralism, universalism, and at the deepest stage, namely harmonization and balance. This is reflected in the effort to embrace other beliefs to unite the vision and mission, and make it the philosophy of life of choice (Netland, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that the religions embraced by the Javanese people are rooted in the core of Javanese culture and cosmology. Furthermore, the religious practices of the Javanese people follow four charter principles that must be adhered to as a form of moral responsibility towards the culture, ecosystem, and surrounding environment. These principles include respect for life and all that it entails, concern for community, and respect for diversity. The goal of all this is to form a society that has democratic, fair, participatory, pluralist, and peaceful characteristics (Miller, 2004). Being a pluralist means accustoming oneself to differences, accepting criticism, and acknowledging the existence of the "other" as part of national identity and God's grace. The orientation of society, both implicit and explicit, makes religion always relevant in every era, for every generation, and in all aspects of life, both cultural and socio-political, and relevant to every space and time.

Conclusion

This research aims to understand the way in which the Javanese people interpret their religion, analyze the attitudes and religious orientations of the Javanese people based on the existing typology, and identify and explore the concept of obedience in the Javanese religion, especially during the New Order period (1966-1998). The main findings of this study show that during the New Order, the government implemented policies of depoliticization and standardization of religious practices. Depoliticization is carried out through the neutralization of religious organizations, restrictions on religious discourse, and the use of Pancasila as the sole principle. Although this policy succeeded in reducing religious conflicts, it also triggered cultural resistance, such as the *slametan* tradition that was maintained as a form of community solidarity outside the state's control. The standardization of religious practices, such as the unification of the religious education curriculum and the "religious purification" campaign, faces complex challenges in Java, where the bureaucratization of Islam has actually triggered creative adaptations and dualism between official religious practices and Pesantren traditions.

The interaction between Islam, Kejawen, and colonial heritage has shaped Java's unique and complex religious landscape, where Kejawen traditions persist through institutions

such as palaces and Islamic boarding schools. Religious and cultural elites play an important role as mediators and innovators in shaping religious interpretations, integrating Islamic doctrine with Javanese cosmology through the transmission of knowledge, political legitimacy, and ritual adaptation. At the social level, these elites serve as filters, translators, and gatekeepers who regulate the level of "Islam" in the tradition. The religious typology of the Javanese people reflects the attitude of pluralism, eclecticism, and universalism, which is shown through acceptance of various foreign beliefs and the ability to integrate the noble values of different religious teachings, as seen in the Wayang philosophy as a form of syncretism. The religious observance of the Javanese people is inseparable from the culture of ideas (*wewarah*) that reflects the outlook on life that arises from social habits and behaviors, as well as efforts to unite the vision and mission with other beliefs through harmonization and balance.

The implications of this research are very important to understand the historical roots of tolerance and religious conflicts that occurred in Indonesia during the reform period, by knowing the interpretation of religious meaning embraced by the Javanese people during the New Order period. This research enriches the theoretical perspective by combining the anthropology of religion and political history, thus allowing us to see religion as an arena of meaning contestation.

This suggests that cultural resistance and subtle adaptation of Javanese people to state policies play a role in maintaining syncretic traditions, which in turn form the practical implications of a unique and dynamic religious identity. This understanding is very important for the development of public policies that are more inclusive and sensitive to the cultural and religious diversity that exists in Indonesia.

The study has some limitations because it adopts a literature study approach with in-depth critical analysis, which means reliance on academic texts, historical documents, and relevant secondary sources. This may limit the depth of analysis of everyday religious practices that are not extensively recorded in these sources. Moreover, the focus on the New Order period may not fully capture the evolution of Javanese people's religious attitudes before and after that period, as well as regional variations outside of Central Java and East Java. For further research, it is recommended to conduct more in-depth field studies with ethnographic methods to capture nuances of everyday religious practices and individual interpretations that may not be revealed in written sources. Comparative research with communities outside Java or with different time periods can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of religion and culture. In addition, further exploration of how social media influences trends in individual religious attitudes and orientations in the modern era,

especially among millennials, will be a relevant area of research. The main contribution of this research lies in the emphasis that the Javanese people are active agents in shaping their religious identity, not just passive recipients of state policies. It highlights the importance of understanding religious diversity as the art of living and God's gift, as well as the need for pluralism and universalism in the face of differences to create a democratic, just, participatory, and peaceful society.

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