

## From Majelis Taklim to Majelis Selawat: Tracing the Cultural Transformation of Islamic Preaching in Java

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Received: 05.11.2024; Accepted: 10.12.2024; Published: 12.12.2024

**Abstract:** Cultural evolution has occurred in various aspects of community life, including religious practices. In Indonesia, religious study groups (*majlis ta'lim*) and prayer groups (*majlis ṣalāwāt*) are two forms of religious activities that play an important role in the spiritual development of Muslims. However, recently, prayer groups (*majlis ṣalāwāt*) have become more popular than religious study groups (*majlis ta'lim*). This study aims to examine the cultural evolution in the religious practices of the Muslim community in Indonesia, focusing particularly on the transition from religious study groups to prayer groups. The study was conducted using a literature review method, collecting data from various relevant sources. The results show that this shift is influenced by several factors, including the appeal and interactivity of prayer group activities, their emotional impact, ease of understanding, and the strengthening of the communities involved. Furthermore, technological advancements and new media have accelerated the spread and popularity of prayer groups, particularly among the younger generation. The impact of this evolution includes changes in the function and tone of religious studies, the integration of music into spiritual activities, and the emergence of new forms of cultural expression that blend tradition and modernity. This study provides insight into how social and cultural changes shape religious practices and the spiritual identity of Muslims in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Cultural evolution, Modernity, Religious practices

**Abstrak:** Evolusi budaya telah terjadi dalam berbagai aspek kehidupan masyarakat, termasuk dalam praktik keagamaan. Di Indonesia, kelompok pengajian dan kelompok selawat merupakan dua bentuk aktivitas keagamaan yang berperan penting dalam pengembangan spiritual umat Muslim. Namun, belakangan ini, kelompok selawat menjadi lebih populer dibandingkan kelompok pengajian. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji evolusi budaya dalam praktik keagamaan umat Muslim di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pergeseran ini dipengaruhi oleh beberapa faktor, termasuk daya tarik dan interaktivitas kegiatan kelompok selawat, pengaruh emosional yang ditimbulkan, kemudahan pemahaman, serta penguatan komunitas yang terlibat. Selain itu, perkembangan teknologi dan media baru telah mempercepat penyebaran dan popularitas kelompok selawat, khususnya di kalangan generasi muda. Dampak dari evolusi ini meliputi perubahan fungsi dan nuansa pengajian, integrasi musik dalam aktivitas spiritual, serta munculnya bentuk-bentuk ekspresi budaya baru yang menggabungkan tradisi dan modernitas. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana perubahan sosial dan budaya memengaruhi praktik keagamaan dan identitas spiritual umat Muslim di Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci:** Pernikahan Dini, Faktor Penyebab, Dampak Pernikahan Dini

## Introduction

Culture is the transmission from one generation to the next through teaching, knowledge, values, and other factors that influence behavior (Batubara, 2022). As time goes by, humans experience changes both in social and cultural aspects. These changes occur through a process that runs slowly but can influence and change culture. This process of change is termed cultural evolution. Evolution occurs due to various internal and external factors and has impacts that can be positive or negative. It depends on how society responds to a change that occurs. Therefore, society must reflect properly so that a change can have a good or positive impact (Sofiani & Frinaldi, 2023).

Cultural evolution has occurred in various aspects of people's lives, including in religious practices. In Indonesia, the study group or *majlis ta'lim* (*majelis taklim*) and the prayer group or *majlis şalāwāt* (*majelis selawat*) are two forms of religious activities that have an important role in the spiritual development of Muslims. The Majelis Taklim has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet taught Islam in Mecca secretly to every house and place. While in the era of Medina, the Prophet taught Islam openly in mosques. This became the seed of the development of the *majelis taklim* as it is known today. At the beginning of the entry of Islam into Indonesia, the *majelis taklim* was the most effective means to introduce and disseminate Islamic teachings to the community. Various innovations and methods were applied by the spreaders of Islam to make the *majelis taklim* a place to unite people who were interested in studying Islam and a means of communication between fellow Muslims. Starting from this *majelis taklim*, a more orderly, planned, and sustainable teaching method emerged, such as Islamic boarding schools and madrasas (Ridwan & Ulwiyah, 2020).

The transition from *majelis taklim* to *majelis selawat* reflects a paradigm shift in how Muslims interact with their religious teachings. It indicates a need to create a more inclusive and enjoyable space for all levels of society. However, this shift also raises questions about religious identity and understanding of traditional values amidst the current of modernization. With this background in mind, this paper aims to explore the cultural evolution from *majelis taklim* to *majelis selawat* and its implications for the social and spiritual lives of Muslims in Indonesia.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of the *majelis selawat* emerged as a response to social and cultural changes. This assembly not only focuses on reciting the Sholawat, but also integrates elements of entertainment and music, thus attracting the attention of the younger generation. By utilizing new technology and media, the Majelis Sholawat has succeeded in creating a more relaxed and interactive atmosphere. After the New Order, young Ḥaḍramīy Arab preachers began to appear, popularly known as *habib* or in the plural form *habaib*. They deliver sermons on stage with a number of other local *kiai* and preachers accompanied by a traditional Arabic music group (*ḥaḍrah*). Their sermons usually attract thousands of people, causing traffic jams (Rijal, 2020).

## Literature Review

(1) Journal article entitled History and Contribution of Majelis Ta'lim in Improving the Quality of Education in Indonesia by Iwan Ridwan and Istinganatul Ulwiyah in the Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter Jawa in 2020. This study examines the majlis taklim as a basis for traditional Islamic learning and preaching and the role of early Islamic educators and Walisongo in building community-based religious education (Ridwan & Ulwiyah, 2020). (2)

Majelis Shalawat: From Sacred Genealogy, New Media, to Religious Musicality by Syamsul Rijal in *Trilogi: Jurnal Ilmu Teknologi, Kesehatan, dan Humaniora* in 2020. The study discusses the integration of salawat with elements of music and entertainment, which creates a distinctive cultural form (Rijal, 2020). (3) A book entitled *Anthropology in Religious Studies* by Zaenuddin Hudi Prasajo published by IAIN Pontianak Pres in 2019 provides literature on the impact of cultural evolution on Islamic preaching (Prasajo, 2019).

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach utilizing a literature review method. The primary data sources are collected from books, peer-reviewed journals, and official documents that provide insights into the cultural evolution of religious gatherings, particularly the transition from *majelis taklim* to *majelis selawat* in Indonesia. These sources were selected for their relevance and credibility in addressing the central themes of this research. The data analysis adopts content analysis techniques, which involve identifying, categorizing, and interpreting key themes and patterns related to cultural evolution and its social, religious, and spiritual implications. This method allows the study to systematically explore the historical, sociological, and cultural dynamics influencing the transition, as well as the impact of modernization, spirituality, and media integration on these practices. This methodological framework ensures a comprehensive understanding of how *majelis taklim* evolved into *majelis selawat*, capturing the factors that drive this cultural shift and its implications for Islamic practices in Indonesia. The approach is particularly suited to examining textual and narrative sources, providing an in-depth exploration of the interplay between tradition, modernity, and religious expressions.

## Result and Discussion

### *Cultural Evolution*

In terms of evolution is a change in the structure of the body of living things that occurs slowly over a very long time. This concept includes changes in the inherited traits of a population of organisms from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the theory of evolution is the first theory that is usually presented in the field of human studies. This study begins with a narrative about the creation of a material from an energy, then gives rise to life, and is continued with environmental changes that then ultimately give birth to the hustle and bustle of life as it is today. Humans in this case are part of this natural process, at the same time humans are a unique form of combination of matter, including all the components of human life forms are also unique (Prasajo, 2019).

The word *budaya* (culture) comes from the Sanskrit word *buddhayah*, which is the plural form of *buddhi* which means mind or reason. Thus, culture can be interpreted as something related to reason. Culture can also be interpreted as a development of the compound word *budi-daya* which means the power of the mind. Therefore, they distinguish culture from *budaya*. Thus, *budaya* means doing creation, will and feeling, while *budaya* is the result of creation, will and feeling. In terms of cultural anthropology, this difference is eliminated. The word *budaya* here is only used as an abbreviation for *budaya* with the same meaning. As for the word culture, which is a foreign word with the same meaning as *budaya*, it comes from the Latin word *colere* which means to cultivate and work, especially to cultivate land or to farm. From this meaning, the meaning of culture develops as all human efforts and

actions to cultivate land and change nature. Then, culture is interpreted as a way of life that develops and is owned by a person or group of people, and is passed down from generation to generation. This term covers various aspects of human life, including knowledge, attitudes, behavior patterns, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and certain habits (Koentjaraningrat, 1985).

From the description above, it is known that cultural evolution is the process of change and development of culture over time. This involves transformation in culture, either through innovation, adaptation, or merging with other cultures. We can see how culture continues to change and adapt to changing times and environments. The concept of cultural evolution is an idea that tries to explain how human culture changes and develops over time. Similar to the theory of biological evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, this concept assumes that culture also undergoes a process of selection and adaptation, resulting in cultural forms.

### ***Majelis Taklim***

*Majelis taklim* is composed of a combination of two Arabic words, namely *majlis* and *ta'lim*. *Majlis* is the *ism makān* (a word that indicates the meaning of a place) which means a place to sit, while *ta'lim* is the *ism maṣḍar* (basic word) which means teaching so that the *majelis taklim* is understood as a place of teaching or study for people who want to study the teachings of Islam (Ridwan & Ulwiyah, 2020). In terms, the meaning of the *majelis taklim* by borrowing Helmawati's theory is a forum for sharing knowledge, information, explanations, religious knowledge, or other knowledge such as life skills needed in everyday life to produce good deeds for a better life and increasing good deeds in the world and the hereafter to achieve the pleasure of Allah (Helmawati, 2013).

### ***History of the Taklim Assembly***

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the concept of teaching and learning religion already existed, although it was not specifically called a *majelis taklim*. The Prophet Muhammad often held meetings with his companions to study Islamic teachings. Islamic religious learning at that time had taken place in a structured manner, although the term. This activity mainly took place in places such as the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and *Dār al-Arqam* in Mecca, which functioned as early education centers for Muslims.

### ***Mecca Phase***

The Prophet SAW distanced himself from the crowd and hedonism by contemplating in the Cave of Hira and receiving the first revelation of Allah. The stages of learning in the Mecca phase are:

#### **a. Stages of Islamic Education in Secret and Individually**

The educational pattern carried out at the beginning of the first revelation was secretly considering the unstable socio-political conditions, starting from the Prophet himself and his close family. Initially, the Prophet educated his wife Khadijah ra. to believe in Allah and accept guidance from Him, then followed by Ali bin Abu Thalib (his uncle's son) and Zaid bin Haritsah (a household servant who was later adopted as his son). Then his close friend Abu Bakar Siddiq. Gradually the preaching was conveyed widely, but was still limited to close family members of the Quraysh tribe. In this early era, the first educational institution and center of Islamic activities was the house of Arqam bin Arqam (Najmuddin & Iskandar, 2013).

#### b. The stage of Islamic Education is Overt

Secret education lasted for three years, until the following time, which ordered preaching openly and openly. When this revelation came down, the Messenger of Allah. gave an invitation to his immediate family to gather on Mount Safa, calling on them to be careful of the punishment for those who deny Allah as the One God and Muhammad as His messenger. The order for da'wah was openly carried out by the Messenger of Allah, along with the increasing number of friends and to increase the reach of the call for da'wah, because it was believed that many Quraysh would convert to Islam through this method of da'wah.(Najmuddin & Iskandar, 2013).

#### c. Stages of Islamic Education for the General Public

The results of the open call for preaching were not yet optimal according to what the Prophet had hoped for. So, he changed his preaching strategy from a call focused on the family to a general call to humanity as a whole (international). The strategy was during the Hajj season when the Prophet visited the tents of the pilgrims. At first, not many received the Prophet's preaching enthusiastically except for the Khazraj tribe, a group of pilgrims from Yastrib. From here, Islam began to spread outside Mecca. The high spirit of the companions in preaching the teachings of Islam so that all the residents of Yastrib converted to Islam except for the Jews (Najmuddin & Iskandar, 2013).

#### *Medina Phase*

The arrival of the Prophet Muhammad SAW with the Muslims of Mecca was welcomed by the people of Medina with joy and a sense of brotherhood. Islam seemed to have a new environment free from the threat of the rulers of Quraysh of Mecca to convey its teachings and implement them in everyday life. Revelations came down in succession during the Medina period. The wisdom of the Prophet Muhammad SAW in teaching the Qur'an was to encourage his followers to memorize and write down the verses of the Qur'an as he taught them. He often repeated the reading of the Qur'an in prayers, sermons, in lessons, and other occasions (Najmuddin & Iskandar, 2013).

#### *The Early Period of Islam in Indonesia*

After the arrival of Islam in Indonesia, the *majelis taklim* began to develop as a means of education for Muslims. The concept of the *majelis taklim* began to be known in Indonesia when the spread of Islam began to develop rapidly through the method of preaching. One of them is known for the role of Walisongo with a ustaz in front of the congregation and there is a question and answer process. Over time, the *majelis taklim* continued to develop from rural to urban areas. Ulama and figures such as Walisongo have an important role in establishing the *majelis taklim* and spreading Islamic teachings on the island of Java and its surroundings. They not only teach religion but also integrate local values with Islamic teachings (Daulay, 2018).

One of the main methods used by the Walisongo to convey Islamic teachings was the lecture method. The Walisongo combined Islamic teachings with local culture as a medium of preaching so that people did not feel they were losing their cultural identity. For example, Sunan Kalijaga used *Wayang Kulit* as a medium of preaching, inserting Islamic values into the traditional performance. In addition to *Wayang Kulit*, the Walisongo also used gamelan and tembang (traditional songs) to convey Islamic messages in an interesting and easily

accepted way by the community. They also held question and answer forums and discussions to encourage community participation and understanding of other people's thoughts. The Walisongo established Islamic boarding schools as centers of Islamic education that taught various disciplines, including interpretation of the Qur'an and fiqh. Islamic boarding schools became a place for students to learn and practice Islamic teachings in everyday life. In addition, several Walisongo sent envoys to expand the spread of Islam to certain areas. For example, Sunan Giri sent envoys to Madura, Bawean, and Ternate, which accelerated the spread of Islamic teachings in the archipelago. In his teachings. The Guardians showed exemplary behavior in daily behavior, such as humility, honesty, and sincerity in worship. This attitude made them respected and loved by the community, so that the Islamic messages they conveyed were more easily accepted (Nursaudah, 2020).

Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim founded the first Islamic boarding school in Indonesia. He is considered the teacher of teachers among the Walisongo and played an important role in the introduction of Islam in Gresik. Then Sheikh Mohammad Ali Rahmatullah (Raden Rahmat) founded the Ampel Denta Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya, East Java. This Islamic boarding school became the center of education and preaching. Raden Muhammad Ainul Yaqin founded an Islamic boarding school in Sidomukti, Gresik, East Java. This Islamic boarding school is known as Giri Kedaton and became the center of community development and Islamic education. Sheikh Maulana Makdum Ibrahim founded an Islamic boarding school in Tuban, East Java. This Islamic boarding school is known as Watu Layar. In addition, Raden Qosim founded the Sunan Drajat Islamic Boarding School in Drajat Village, Paciran, Lamongan, East Java (Misbah & Rozi, 2022).

### ***17th-18th Century AD***

Sultan Agung of the Mataram Kingdom strengthened the influence of the Walisongo teachings. He founded Islamic boarding schools and taught tarekat studies, and paid special and serious attention to Islamic boarding school education. This initiative helped increase the number of Islamic boarding schools in West Java and East Java. Then Sultan Agung also founded the Madrasah Nidzamiyah, which is an example of the development of the madrasah system in Islamic boarding school institutions. This madrasah added a wider variety of subjects than just religious knowledge, helping to broaden the horizons and knowledge of students (Sujianto, 2021).

Currently, pengajian sermons in Java continue to evolve to adapt to the modern era. Many sermons use digital technology to deliver materials, such as online videos and educational applications. This helps increase the accessibility and effectiveness of preaching (*pengajian*), especially for the millennial generation who are more familiar with technology. In addition, modern preaching also focuses on improving the spiritual mentality of the community. With the increasingly complex pressures of life, preaching becomes an important means to balance stress and increase spiritual awareness.

### ***Transition to the Majelis Selawat***

Etymologically, selawat comes from the Arabic word, *ṣalāh* which means prayer. In the Islamic context, *bersalawat* is a form of respect and glorification of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Recommendations for praying can be found in the Qur'an, such as in Surah Al-Ahzab verse 56, which states that Allah and the angels prayed to the Prophet. This shows the importance of *salawat* as part of the religious practices of Muslims (Al-Barbasy, 2022). So, it

can be interpreted that the prayer assembly is a place where Muslims gather and recite prayers together.

Social development and the spiritual needs of the community encouraged the emergence of the *majelis selawat*. This assembly not only functions as a place of learning, but also as a means to strengthen social ties through collective dhikr and praise of the Prophet. The *majelis selawat* often combines elements of local traditions with religious practices, creating a new form of spiritual practice.

### ***Factors Causing Transition***

The factors that encourage Indonesian Muslims to make changes from the routine of the *majelis taklim* (study and remember assembly) to the *majelis selawat* (pray and *maulid* reading assembly) can be understood from several aspects (Al-Mashduqiah, 2021):

- a. Interesting and interactive activities. The selawat assembly is often equipped with interesting and interactive activities, such as the reading of the salawat accompanied by qasidah poetry, which makes the event more dynamic and enjoyable for the participants;
- b. Emotional influence. Reading selawat can have a strong emotional influence, increasing feelings of love and monotheism towards Allah and the Prophet Muhammad SAW. This makes participants feel more connected to the teachings of the Prophet who taught Islam;
- c. Ease of understanding. Selawat assembly is often easier to understand and follow, especially for teenagers who are still in the phase of searching for their identity. This activity can help them understand and practice Islamic teachings more simply;
- d. Strong community. Majlis shalawat often becomes a strong and solid community, where participants can interact and share experiences. This increases awareness and concern among members;
- e. Introduction and dissemination of selawat knowledge. The Selawat Council is often founded based on the need to get closer to Allah and the Messenger of Allah. through reading prayers. Selawat recitation can be more intensive and specific compared to general recitation at the taklim assembly;
- f. Spiritual needs. The prayer assembly often prioritizes spirituality, as shown by Ahbabul Musthofa who focuses on dhikr and reading the maulid. This shows that spiritual needs drive the change from general pengajian routines to more spiritual specific teachings;
- g. The influence of religious figures. Religious figures such as Habib, Kiai, Ustaz, and Gus, play an important role in driving this change. They often have a vision to develop spiritual activities among the community;
- h. Dissemination and reception. These changes are often triggered by wider dissemination and acceptance. The increasing public interest and demand for selawat recitation makes it increasingly sought after;
- i. Organizational development. Organizations that focus on selawat often grow larger and have branches in various regions. For example, Nurul Musthofa started by reciting the Koran at home and then grew his following to thousands of people.

### ***History of the Salawat Assembly***

The reading of the qasidah selawat was first sung by the Ansar to welcome the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad. to Medina in 622 AD known as *Thala'a al-Badru 'Alainā*. However, there is controversy about whether this verse was actually sung during the emigration directly from Mecca or when returning from the Battle of Tabuk (Indonesia, 2023).

### ***Ḥaḍrah***

The word *ḥaḍrah* comes from the Arabic word *ḥaḍara* which means presence. In terms, *ḥaḍrah* refers to an art accompanied by percussion instruments, such as tambourines, while reciting praise poems to the Prophet Muhammad SAW. This art is a development of the duff musical instrument that existed before Islam and was used to accompany poems and dances. *Ḥaḍrah* is thought to have existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. When the Prophet migrated from Mecca to Medina, the Ansar people as mentioned above, which is one of the early forms of *ḥaḍrah*. It entered Indonesia along with the arrival of Arab traders who spread Islam in the archipelago. It is thought that *ḥaḍrah* began to be known in the Malay lands before spreading throughout the archipelago. In Indonesia, *ḥaḍrah* first appeared in Madura in the 18th century. After entering Indonesia, *ḥaḍrah* underwent cultural adaptation. Local people began to recognize and use the *rebana* musical instrument for *ḥaḍrah* performances. The term *rebana* then became commonly used to refer to musical instruments used in *ḥaḍrah* performances (Hadrah, 2022).

### ***Classical Selawat***

In Indonesia, the tradition of praying is growing rapidly, especially among traditionalist communities. *Selawat* is not only read in the context of religious rituals, but is also part of everyday culture. For example, many people read *selawat* while waiting for prayer time or during other social activities. Variations in the form of *selawat* also appear, including in the form of praise and poetry relating to the life of the Prophet (Azkia, 2022).

### ***Selawat in Popular Culture***

In recent years, *selawat* has become part of popular culture in Indonesia. For example, performing arts such as pop, dangdut, beatbox and other modern music often adopt elements of *selawat* to attract the attention of the younger generation. This shows that *selawat* is not only seen as a spiritual practice but also as a dynamic cultural expression (Azkia, 2022).

### ***The Influence of Cultural Evolution***

The cultural evolution from the *majelis taklim* to the *majelis selawat* has several significant impacts on the social, religious, and cultural aspects of society, especially in Indonesia. Some of these impacts are (Rijal, 2020):

- a. Changes in function and nuances of activities. The traditional *taklim* assembly focuses on teaching and education of the Islamic religion, while the *selawat* assembly has evolved into a more fun and interactive activity. The *selawat* assembly is no longer seen as a serious place to pray, but rather as a place to socialize, chant and sing praises to the Prophet. accompanied by traditional music performances;
- b. Integration of music and entertainment. The *selawat* assembly has integrated the dimensions of spirituality and musicality, making it more appealing to young millennials in both urban and rural areas. This shows a change in the way Muslims

- express their religion, by incorporating elements of entertainment and music into religious rituals;
- c. Use of new technology and media. *Selawat* assembly has utilized new media and technology such as the internet for promotion and dissemination of their activities. This allows them to reach a wider audience and strengthen their influence in society;
  - d. The role of leaders and sacred genealogy. Leaders of the *selawat* assembly, such as *habaib*, *kiai*, or *gus*, often have sacred genealogy from the Hadramaut or Walisongo line. This provides significant legitimacy and promotional power for their activities, because this sacred status is valued by the community;
  - e. Transformation of the lyrics and music of the song. Changes in the lyrics and music of *selawat* also occur along with cultural evolution. Factors such as cultural changes, technological advances, and trends have influenced the variety of *selawat* songs and recitations, making them more relevant and attractive to the younger generation;
  - f. Social and community impact. This evolution also affects the social dynamics in society. The *majelis selawat* becomes a place for young Muslims to express their aspirations and gain a more modern and inclusive religious identity. This strengthens *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national brotherhood) and facilitates broader social interaction.
  - g. Balance between tradition and modernity. Despite significant changes, the *majelis selawat* still tries to maintain traditional elements. This shows an effort to achieve a balance between maintaining religious traditions and adapting to the changing times and needs of modern society. Thus, factors such as spiritual needs, the influence of religious figures, the spread and acceptance, and the development of the organization, all contribute to the change from the routine of *majelis taklim* to *majelis selawat* among Indonesian Muslims.

## Conclusions

Social development and the spiritual needs of the community encourage the emergence of the Majelis Selawat which replaces the Majelis Taklim. The factors that encourage Indonesian Muslims to make changes from the routine Majelis Taklim to the Majelis Selawat are interesting and interactive, emotional influence, ease of understanding, strong community, introduction and dissemination, spiritual needs, influence of religious figures, dissemination, and acceptance, organizational development.

The impacts of this cultural evolution are changes in the function and nuances of religious study activities, the integration of music and entertainment, the use of new technology and media, the role of leaders and sacred genealogy, the transformation of salawat lyrics and music, social and community impacts, and the balance between tradition and modernity.

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