

## Investigating the Historical Influence of Islam in Java Through Bojonegoro's *Wayang Thengul* Art

Abdul Khamid<sup>1</sup>, Nanang Setiawan<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Miftakhul Huda<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Institut Agama Islam Al-Fatimah Bojonegoro

Corresponding email: [abdulkhamid@iai-alfatimah.ac.id](mailto:abdulkhamid@iai-alfatimah.ac.id)

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**Abstract:** This study aims to preserve the local culture of Indonesian society and serves as an educational medium to introduce the history of Islamic development to future generations. Moreover, amidst various opinions regarding the prohibition of wayang, this research reaffirms that Wali Songo also used wayang as a medium to spread Islam in Indonesia. This qualitative study employs in-depth interviews with wayang figures, as well as continuous observation and analysis to obtain valid data. The results of the study reveal that Wayang Tengul, beyond merely serving as a medium for introducing and educating people about the history of Islamic development in Indonesia, also plays a crucial and multifaceted role in fostering, nurturing, and maintaining a sense of religious moderation and tolerance among the diverse population of Bojonegoro Regency. This art form not only preserves historical narratives but also acts as a dynamic tool in promoting social cohesion and understanding within the community. This study contributes to enhancing knowledge literacy about local culture and developing insights into religious moderation in Indonesia. Through a deeper understanding of Wayang Tengul, it is hoped that this culture can continue to be preserved and appreciated as an essential part of the nation's cultural and historical heritage.

**Keywords:** Islamic history, Wayang Tengul, Wayang Art, Bojonegoro

### Introduction

Indonesia is renowned for its diverse cultural heritage, with each region boasting its unique traditions and artistic expressions (Setiawan, Khamid, & Huda, 2023; Setiawan, Khamid, Huda, et al., 2023). This vast array of cultural assets reflects the rich history and multifaceted identity of the nation. Among these regions, the Regency of Bojonegoro in East Java stands out for its abundant cultural and traditional arts, each steeped in historical significance. One of the most notable of these traditional arts is *Wayang Thengul*, a distinctive form of puppet theatre that encapsulates the region's rich cultural narrative and artistic ingenuity (Sani & Setyawan, 2021).

*Wayang Thengul* has become an iconic representation of Bojonegoro's cultural identity, proudly promoted by the local government as a traditional art form that embodies the region's historical and artistic legacy. This art form is not only a source of local pride but also a significant contributor to Indonesia's overall cultural wealth. By actively supporting and showcasing *Wayang Thengul*, the Bojonegoro Regency government aims to preserve and

perpetuate this invaluable cultural heritage, ensuring it remains an integral part of Indonesia's diverse and vibrant cultural tapestry for future generations.

The influence of modernization in the millennial era has significantly altered society's perspective on culture. As technological advancements and the rapid flow of globalization progress, traditional values are increasingly marginalized, and several forms of traditional art are beginning to be forgotten. One such art form affected by this shift is *Wayang Thengul*, which now faces considerable challenges in maintaining its existence. The younger generation, who should be the inheritors and preservers of cultural heritage, show a decreasing interest and desire to care for and sustain this traditional art. This decline is evident from their low participation in local cultural events and minimal efforts to learn and master the art of *Wayang Thengul* (Lutfiyah et al., 2023).

Furthermore, with technological advancements demanding that Indonesian society possess modern technological competencies and skills, the focus and attention on traditional culture are increasingly diverted. Digital media and technology-based entertainment have become more appealing to the younger generation compared to traditional arts. Consequently, *Wayang Thengul* and other traditional arts face the risk of losing relevance and acceptance in the community. This situation raises concerns that cultural heritage, which has been an integral part of Indonesia's national identity, may gradually disappear if there are no concrete and sustained efforts to preserve it.

The art of *Wayang Thengul* must be preserved, as its existence will undoubtedly be abandoned if it is not safeguarded. The decline in the number of artisans and puppeteers in Bojonegoro Regency is particularly alarming. According to data from the Department of Culture and Tourism of Bojonegoro Regency in 2022, there are currently only 30 *Wayang Thengul* puppeteers remaining in the area. Of these 30 puppeteers, only 2 possess the skills necessary to craft *Wayang Thengul* puppets. This sharp decline highlights a critical need for concerted efforts to preserve this traditional art form and to ensure that the skills required to create and perform *Wayang Thengul* are passed down to future generations.

This situation suggests that the community's appreciation and support for *Wayang Thengul* are insufficient. Despite its cultural significance and historical value, *Wayang Thengul* has not been adequately recognized or celebrated by the local population. The limited number of skilled artisans capable of producing *Wayang Thengul* puppets further underscores the urgent need for initiatives to revitalize interest and investment in this art form. Without such efforts, there is a genuine risk that *Wayang Thengul* will fade into obscurity, taking with it a rich cultural legacy that is vital to the identity and heritage of Bojonegoro Regency and Indonesia as a whole. Therefore, strategic actions must be implemented to raise awareness, provide education, and foster a renewed appreciation for *Wayang Thengul* among both the younger generation and the broader community.

Based on this analysis, it is imperative to initiate efforts aimed at preserving *Wayang Thengul*. One of the key strategies should be the creation of media platforms that provide comprehensive information and knowledge about this traditional art form. Such platforms can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the local wisdom embedded in *Wayang Thengul* and enhancing the recognition of cultural diversity on a national scale. By promoting the understanding and appreciation of *Wayang Thengul*, these efforts can ensure that the art form receives the acknowledgment it deserves, both locally and nationally.

Therefore, the objectives of this research are multifaceted. Firstly, it aims to preserve the local culture of Indonesian society, with a particular focus on *Wayang Thengul*. By doing so, the study seeks to transform *Wayang Thengul* into an educational medium that introduces the history of Islamic development to future generations. Additionally, this research aspires to highlight the significant role that *Wayang Thengul* can play in fostering and maintaining religious moderation among the people of Bojonegoro Regency. This is especially pertinent in light of the contemporary debates surrounding the prohibition of wayang, despite its historical use by Wali Songo in spreading Islam in Indonesia. The findings and contributions of this research are expected to provide valuable insights that support cultural preservation initiatives and promote religious tolerance, thereby enriching the cultural fabric of Indonesia.

## Literature Review

### *Wayang Thengul*

*Wayang Thengul* is a traditional art form originating from the Regency of Bojonegoro. This unique puppetry was first introduced by Ki Samijan in 1930. Ki Samijan, a distinguished *Wayang Thengul* artist from Padangan District in Bojonegoro Regency, played a pivotal role in popularizing this art form (Prianto & Liana, 2016). *Wayang Thengul* is characterized by its three-dimensional puppet figures, which resemble dolls with movable arms and heads that the puppeteer, or *dalang*, can manipulate according to the performance's requirements. The term "*Thengul*" is derived from the Javanese words "*methentheng*" (implying strong force) and "*methungul*" (sudden appearance). This nomenclature reflects the nature of the puppets, which are made of wood and require significant effort to lift, move, and animate to ensure they are visible to the audience (Hawa et al., 2023).

*Wayang Thengul* is typically performed at entertainment events such as weddings, circumcisions, and other community celebrations. The narratives portrayed in *Wayang Thengul* performances often revolve around the stories of revered figures like the Wali Songo, as well as historical tales from the Demak and Majapahit kingdoms. Initially, *Wayang Thengul* performances were accompanied solely by traditional musical instruments such as the gamelan pelog or slendro, which some found monotonous. However, starting in the 2000s,

the musical accompaniment for *Wayang Thengul* expanded to include a broader range of instruments, such as the *gamelan laras salendro*, *demung*, *bonang*, *saron*, *slenthem*, *peking*, *kenong*, *gender*, *gong/kempul*, and *gambang*. Additionally, vocal performances were incorporated to enhance the characters' uniqueness and originality, adding a new dimension to the *Wayang Thengul* experience (Fernandez et al., 2015). These developments have revitalized the art form, making it more engaging and dynamic for contemporary audiences while preserving its rich cultural heritage

### ***Islamic History in Java***

Discussing the history of the arrival of Islam in Indonesia inevitably involves acknowledging the pivotal role of the Wali Songo in spreading Islamic teachings, particularly on the island of Java. The term "wali" originates from the Arabic language, meaning beloved, helper, supporter, and leader. The plural form of wali is "auliya" (Mar'atussholeha et al., 2023). The concept of wali also has its roots in the Quran, as mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 257. This verse highlights the significance of wali in Islamic tradition, underscoring their esteemed status and the critical role they play in guiding and protecting the faithful. The Wali Songo, or the Nine Saints, are renowned for their strategic and culturally adaptive methods of dawah (Islamic preaching), which included the use of local cultural practices and art forms to communicate Islamic principles effectively.

The Wali Songo utilized various mediums to introduce and disseminate Islamic values, one of the most notable being the adaptation of traditional Javanese art forms, such as wayang (shadow puppetry). This innovative approach not only facilitated the acceptance of Islam among the local populace but also ensured the preservation of indigenous cultural expressions. The fusion of Islamic teachings with local traditions exemplifies the dynamic and integrative nature of the Wali Songo's mission. Their efforts laid the foundation for a harmonious coexistence of Islamic and Javanese cultures, which continues to be a distinctive feature of Javanese society today. By embedding Islamic teachings within the familiar context of wayang performances, the Wali Songo were able to convey complex theological concepts in a relatable and engaging manner, thus fostering a deeper understanding and acceptance of Islam among the Javanese people.

The term "Wali Songo" refers to a group of nine individuals, akin to a council of Islamic preachers, who were believed to possess exceptional capabilities for teaching Islam to the people of the Indonesian archipelago during their era. The members of Wali Songo include prominent figures such as Sunan Ampel (Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah), Sunan Giri (Sayyid Muhammad 'Ainul Yaqin), Sunan Gresik (Maulana Malik Ibrahim), Sunan Drajat (Sayyid Qosim), Sunan Bonang (Sayyid Makhдум Ibrahim), Sunan Kudus (Sayyid Ja'far Shadiq), Sunan Kalijaga (Raden Syahid), Sunan Muria (Sayyid Umar Said), and Sunan Gunung Jati

(Syarif Hidayatullah). These revered saints played a crucial role in the Islamization of Java and other parts of Indonesia.

The success of Wali Songo's missionary efforts can be attributed to their innovative and culturally adaptive methods of dawah (Islamic proselytism). One of their most effective strategies was the incorporation of Javanese culture and local wisdom into their preaching, exemplified by the use of wayang (shadow puppetry) as a medium. Sunan Kalijaga, in particular, is renowned for his adept use of arts and culture to engage and attract the local populace. By integrating Islamic teachings with traditional Javanese art forms, Sunan Kalijaga and other members of Wali Songo were able to make their message more accessible and appealing to the indigenous people. This method not only facilitated the spread of Islam but also preserved and enriched the local cultural heritage (Humaedi, 2015).

The use of wayang by the Wali Songo, especially by Sunan Kalijaga, proved to be a highly effective approach. It allowed them to convey Islamic principles in a manner that resonated deeply with the Javanese audience. The incorporation of familiar cultural elements into their religious teachings helped bridge the gap between the new Islamic faith and the existing cultural practices, fostering a smooth transition and greater acceptance of Islam. This culturally sensitive approach contributed significantly to the widespread conversion to Islam, resulting in the majority of Indonesia's population being Muslim today. The legacy of Wali Songo's methods continues to influence the practice of Islam in Indonesia, highlighting the enduring impact of their innovative and integrative approach to dawah (Setiawan & Cholili, 2023).

### *Wayang as a Medium for Introducing Islamic History*

Human beings, as agents of change, possess the potential to develop their ideas and creativity in managing natural resources. Through their creations, a multitude of cultures emerged, adapting to the conditions of their societies, including the Islamic culture that flourished in the Indonesian archipelago as a result of cultural acculturation. There are at least three crucial points to consider: firstly, the Islamic doctrine itself, derived from the Quran and Hadith teachings conveyed by Prophet Muhammad SAW. Secondly, the cultural influences from Arab thinkers who spread Islam. Thirdly, the local cultures served as venues for Islam's dissemination (Marsaid, 2016).

In Indonesia, long before the advent of Islam, local cultures with deep roots had already developed among the populace, such as the wayang culture (Setiawan et al., 2022). Wayang, a traditional Javanese art form, is estimated to have existed before Islam's teachings spread in the archipelago around the 15th century AD. In Java, wayang puppetry was utilized and adapted for Islamic religious propagation. It underwent rapid evolution, experiencing transformations in its visual aspects and other supporting elements such as music (karawitan), literature, and more. This development involved the participation and influence of Sufi

scholars and local rulers who embraced Islam. The Wali Songo themselves were actively engaged in this process, notably Sunan Kalijaga (Anita, 2014). They made concerted efforts to harmonize traditional wayang art, which had non-Islamic origins, with Islamic teachings (Setiawan & Alim, 2022). Thanks to their efforts, wayang art came to be interpreted by some as containing Islamic teachings in every aspect, even though its narratives still include elements from Indian Hindu-Buddhist epics.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Paradigm***

This research adopts a qualitative study using an interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm views reality or real-life situations as multifaceted and not singular, allowing for examination from various perspectives (Lehman, 2010). Interpretive research treats a phenomenon as unique with specific contexts and meanings essential for understanding its social significance. In this study, the interpretive paradigm is employed to introduce *Wayang Thengul* as a cultural heritage of Bojonegoro Regency and to utilize it as a tool for teaching the history of Islam in Java.

This approach provides flexibility to immerse in the experiences of research subjects and involves active participation from *Wayang Thengul* puppeteers and performers as conversational partners. Consequently, the researcher can explore contextual and profound perspectives on *Wayang Thengul* as a local cultural heritage of Bojonegoro Regency, particularly focusing on its role as a medium for introducing the history of Islam in Java.

### ***Data Sources***

The data sources used in this research include literature review, field observations, and interviews. The literature review draws from books and previous studies on *Wayang Thengul* and the history of Islam in Java. This literature provides a solid foundation for understanding the history, values, and performance practices of *Wayang Thengul* (Rhoades, 2011). Field observations were conducted directly in Dusun Gedangan RT. 001 RW. 004, Kedungrejo Village, Kedungadem Subdistrict, Bojonegoro Regency, to gather firsthand information about *Wayang Thengul* performances and the concepts and planning before these performances. These observations reflect the use of *Wayang Thengul* as a means of introducing the history of Islam in Java (Sugiyono, 2020).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with two *Wayang Thengul* puppeteers, namely Mr. Darno and Mr. Trio Wahyu Aji. These interviews provided deep personal and narrative insights, enabling the researcher to directly understand the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of these key figures in preserving and promoting local artistic and cultural values (Sugiyono, 2020). The combination of these three data sources facilitates a

holistic and in-depth investigation into *Wayang Thengul* as a cultural heritage of Bojonegoro Regency (Bowen, 2009).

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis employed in this study includes content analysis and source triangulation (Hermawan & Amirullah, 2016). The combination of these two methods provides a strong foundation for comprehending and interpreting data in-depth, particularly in the context of using *Wayang Thengul* as a medium for introducing the history of Islam in Java (Bowen, 2009). Content analysis approach is utilized to explore meanings and thematic patterns within data gathered from literature review, field observations, and interviews. Qualitative data derived from literature, observations, and interviews are systematically sorted, classified, and interpreted. Through this analysis, key patterns and findings can be identified within the context of utilizing *Wayang Thengul* as a medium for teaching the history of Islam in Java. Source triangulation is employed to ensure the credibility of the generated data, thereby ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the research outcomes.

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***The Importance of Preserving Local Culture amidst Modernization Influence***

Indonesia is a unitary state with a geographical condition comprising thousands of islands and vast stretches of territory. This geographic diversity contributes to each region having its distinct traditional arts, leading Indonesia to boast thousands of cultures spread across its entire span from Sabang to Merauke (Atmoko, 2018). The cultural diversity of Indonesia is widely renowned internationally, with many foreigners curious about the uniqueness and allure of Indonesian culture. It is no wonder that Indonesia attracts global attention, with many foreign tourists making it one of their favorite countries to visit.

However, in this era of globalization, technological advancements are rapidly advancing, and easy access to information is bringing about changes to Nusantara culture. Indonesians find it increasingly easy to interact with the outside world just through their smartphones. They can effortlessly consume content related to foreign traditions and cultures. Consequently, perceptions such as "outdated" and "antiquated" have begun to emerge regarding Nusantara culture, which is deeply rooted in traditional values. People are starting to be influenced by foreign cultures perceived as more advanced and modern. Nusantara culture is thus beginning to erode as Indonesian society develops a preference for foreign cultures, evident in phenomena like the excessive adoration of Korean pop music, a fondness for fast food or junk food, a penchant for Western-style TikTok dances, and more. These trends are often at odds with the values and norms of Nusantara culture. The decline in the prominence of

Nusantara culture necessitates a response to ensure its preservation and sustainability (Nahak, 2019).

It's not wrong for foreign cultures to exist in Indonesia, as humans inherently have the right to freedom, including the right to admire cultures that resonate with their expressions. However, it's important not to forget that Indonesia also has its own culture, and as Indonesian society, we must participate in preserving Indonesian culture to ensure its continued existence and prevent division. If Indonesians themselves do not take action, then who will? One way to address the influence of foreign cultures is by fostering critical and careful attitudes, which means being able to discern which aspects of foreign cultures bring positive or negative impacts on Indonesian society (Fauzan & Nashar, 2017).

The role of the younger generation is crucial in preserving Indonesian culture today, given their curiosity and enthusiasm. An example of a young person who cares deeply about Indonesian culture is Trio Wahyu Aji. He is a young individual concerned about Wayang Thengul, being the son of Pak Darno, a senior dalang (puppeteer) of *Wayang Thengul* in Bojonegoro Regency. Based on interviews conducted by researchers with Pak Darno on November 17, 2023, in Kedungadem District, Bojonegoro Regency, it was revealed that Trio Wahyu Aji started learning dalang techniques when he was in the third grade of elementary school.

*"Trio began learning dalang skills at the age of 8, precisely in the third grade of elementary school. Whenever I performed as a dalang, Trio always joined me. If not invited, he would cry. This continued until now. It's no wonder that Trio received the Maestro of Traditional Arts Award in the Children and Adolescents category from the Minister of Education and Culture, Prof. Dr. Muhajir Efendy, in 2018."*

Trio Wahyu Aji emerges as a young individual from Bojonegoro deeply concerned about the fading interest of youth in Wayang Thengul. Born on March 3, 2000, in Bojonegoro, he is determined to dedicate his life as a successor committed to preserving the traditional art of Wayang Thengul. Therefore, the youth of today play a crucial role in the continuity of existing cultures, expected to preserve and develop these cultural heritages with the aid of advancing technology year by year.

### ***The Importance of Understanding the History of Islam in Java***

History is an integral part of the journey of a community, nation, state, or individual. It serves a crucial purpose as it explains the origins of events. History is not merely a record of past events but also involves critical reasoning to uncover the truth of historical events. Thus, the essential elements of history include events, a timeframe or past period, the actors involved, and the critical analysis by historical researchers (Muslimah, 2017).

From these perspectives, it can be concluded that Muslim generations need to understand the development of history, especially Islamic history in Java. Islamic culture is the culture of communities practicing Islam, where its development is intricately tied to political and authoritative elements. Fundamentally, studying Islamic history in Java aims to understand various issues in human life related to Islamic law. Additionally, it helps us comprehend the progress and regress of Islamic culture itself.

Several objectives highlight the importance of understanding Islamic history in Java. Firstly, it is to grasp the history of civilization and Islamic development in Java. Secondly, it serves as a lesson applicable to the present day, enabling an understanding of the cultural identity and history of Islam in Java. Thirdly, it aims to delve into and reassess the factors contributing to both the advancement and decline of Islam in the history of Islamic civilization in Java (Endarti, 2023). By studying these advancements and declines, we can learn from them and use them as a mirror for future generations.

### *The Existence of Wayang Thengul as a Local Cultural Heritage*

Indonesia is a nation composed of various ethnic groups with diverse cultural backgrounds. Culture is the result of intellect and creativity that includes habits of human beings as members of society. According to Bronislaw Malinowski in M. Munandar Sulaeman's book, cultures worldwide share seven universal elements: language, religion, knowledge systems, livelihood systems, social organization, technology systems, and the arts (Krisnawati, 2019).

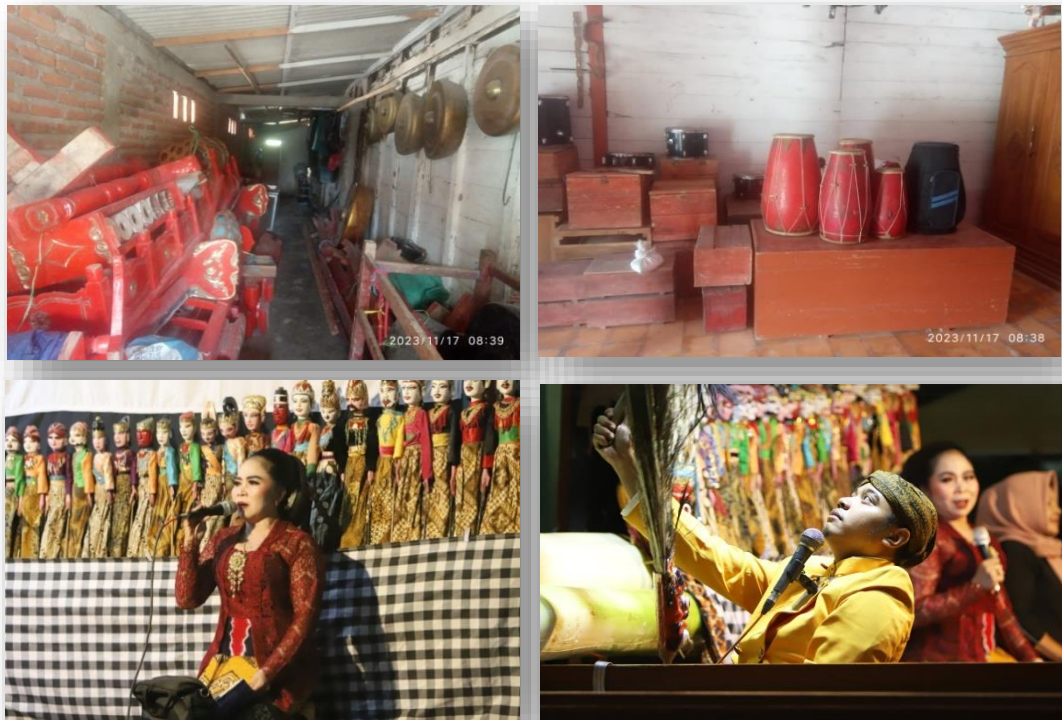
Wayang is one of the traditional arts that has grown and flourished in the daily lives of people in Indonesia, especially on the island of Java, including Wayang Thengul. Researchers gathered and analyzed data from several journals and literary sources on the history of Wayang Thengul. It is explained that *Wayang Thengul* is a local art form introduced around 1930 by Ki Samijan, inspired by the Wayang Golek Menak from Kudus, Central Java. This aligns with the findings from an interview between the researcher and Pak Darno regarding the establishment of Wayang Thengul:

*"The art of Wayang Thengul is inspired by the Wayang Golek Menak from Kudus. It was inspired by a youth from Bojonegoro named Samijan from Banjarjo Village, Padangan Subdistrict, after watching a performance of Wayang Golek Menak Kudus in 1930. As for myself, I started practicing and learning the art of Dalang Wayang Thengul in 1979."*

Ki Samijan, with his artistic talent, created *Wayang Thengul* in a three-dimensional form resembling puppets similar to the Wayang Golek Menak from Kudus, Central Java. Based on field observations conducted by the researcher, particularly during a *Wayang Thengul* performance in Campurrejo Village, Bojonegoro Subdistrict, Bojonegoro Regency, it was noted that *Wayang Thengul* differs in form from Wayang Kulit. While Wayang Kulit is thin

and has its head turned sideways, *Wayang Thengul* takes on a more puppet-like appearance with a variety of characters. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Wayang Thengul* in Bojonegoro



The performance of *Wayang Thengul* is accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as gamelan, with members handling or striking the instruments as required. However, based on literature sources discovered by previous researchers, the musical accompaniment in *Wayang Thengul* performances was deemed monotonous. Therefore, starting in the 2000s, additional musical instruments were incorporated into *Wayang Thengul* performances, including bonang, gong, and even a drum band. This change was observed and directly interviewed by the researcher with Pak Darno, the founder of the *Wayang Thengul* studio in Kedungadem District, Bojonegoro Regency.

*"The Wayang Thengul performance itself consists of 20 to 25 members. There are 15 members handling or striking the musical instruments. For the waranggana or female vocals, there are a maximum of 4 members, while there are 2 puppeteers, namely myself and Mas Trio. Thus, for a complete performance with personnel and equipment, approximately 4 cars are needed: 1 for musical instruments, 1 for the sound system, 1 for the stage, and 1 for the players."*

The researcher captured this transformation in pictures as evidence of the changes in *Wayang Thengul* performances in modern times. The existence of *Wayang Thengul* as a cultural heritage is beginning to show its presence. Gradually, the people of Bojonegoro Regency are starting to recognize *Wayang Thengul*. This began when *Wayang Thengul* became an icon and was introduced by the Bojonegoro Regency Government as a traditional art form and one of Indonesia's cultural treasures.

According to interviews conducted by the researcher, Pak Darno himself began his involvement with *Wayang Thengul* in 1979. From 1979 to 1982, he even performed *Wayang Thengul* for free or through street performances (ngamen). He did this to train and familiarize himself with *Wayang Thengul*, as well as to promote and dedicate himself to introducing *Wayang Thengul* to the people of Bojonegoro Regency. After establishing cooperation with the Bojonegoro Regency Tourism Office, enthusiasts of *Wayang Thengul*, or what they call the *Wayang Thengul* studio, began to demonstrate their existence to the community. This is evidenced by the establishment of "MUSYDA," the Assembly of Puppeteers consisting of 40 puppeteers from 10 districts in Bojonegoro Regency. The elected Chairman of MUSYDA in 2023 is Pak Ragil Sugito from Sukosewu District, Bojonegoro Regency, as he expressed to the researcher.

The enhancement of *Wayang Thengul*'s existence must be preserved and even further developed so that cultural heritage like *Wayang Thengul* does not disappear with time. This is our collective responsibility as citizens and generations to participate in preserving, safeguarding, and conserving Indonesia's cultural heritage

### ***Wayang Thengul as a Medium for Introducing the History of Islam***

Based on literary sources obtained by the researcher, the *Wayang Thengul* performance narrates stories of kingdoms in the Indonesian archipelago, such as the Demak Kingdom, Majapahit Kingdom, and others. This is in contrast to *Wayang Kulit*, which primarily focuses on the Ramayana narrative. Pak Darno added that he is sometimes requested to present stories of the Wali Songo, such as Brandalan Lokajoyo or Sunan Kalijogo, "depending on who invites us," he said. From the interviews with Pak Darno, the researcher underscores that *Wayang Thengul* can serve as a medium to introduce or narrate the history of Islam in Java to the community. Learning history becomes more engaging when using audio-visual media such as *Wayang Thengul* performances.

Based on data received by the researcher, it is evident that *Wayang Thengul* can be a medium to tell and introduce Islamic history. In interviews with Pak Darno, he mentioned that his *Wayang Thengul* art often receives opportunities from the Bojonegoro Regency Tourism Office to introduce this art to students, from elementary to high school levels. The stories presented often include the tales of the Wali Songo, Pak Darno mentioned. The enthusiasm of students

and the support from the Bojonegoro Regency Government make Pak Darno confident that *Wayang Thengul* will be much better known in the future than it has been.

Pak Darno also noted that his *Wayang Thengul* performances are frequently covered by several national television stations such as JTV, TVRI, and even RCTI. They cover and document moments not only during performances but also during preparations before and after the show. They do this solely to introduce and preserve the local culture or traditional art unique to Bojonegoro Regency, Pak Darno explained to one of the TV station crews.

Pak Darno's success did not come without struggle. In the early days as a puppeteer of *Wayang Thengul*, as previously mentioned by the researcher, he often performed for free or "ngamen" for two years. He did this solely to introduce *Wayang Thengul* to the community. His efforts did not stop there; he also promoted his *Wayang Thengul* performances on radio, television, and print media like newspapers using his funds. Therefore, it is quite fitting that he now reaps the rewards of the efforts he made back then. What made him most proud was performing *Wayang Thengul* in front of three foreign nationals from Pakistan, India, and Mexico.

However, while puppetry's presence in Indonesia is improving, opinions are circulating from religious figures about the prohibition of using puppets as a medium for preaching or learning, including *Wayang Thengul*. One of the principles in Indonesian life is to adopt a moderate stance, including in matters of religion, hence the concept of religious moderation. Religious moderation is crucial for us to learn and practice in daily life because it fosters harmony, peace, and unity among Muslims and among different generations of the nation. From the above exposition, the researcher emphasizes that the opinion of one religious figure contradicts the principle of religious moderation. It subtly denies and blames the Wali Songo for spreading Islam in Indonesia through puppetry as a strategy. Therefore, it is clear from the above discussion that *Wayang* art is a cultural heritage of the nation that deserves to be preserved and protected, especially as it holds historical value in the development of Islam in Indonesia.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to preserve the local culture of Indonesia, specifically *Wayang Thengul*, and utilize it as a learning medium to introduce the history of Islam to the nation's younger generations. The study conducted qualitatively through literature review, observations, and in-depth interviews with *Wayang Thengul* puppeteers in Bojonegoro Regency, revealed that *Wayang Thengul* serves effectively as an educational tool to impart Islamic history in Java. The findings contribute significantly to increasing literacy about *Wayang Thengul* and promoting its use as an educational medium for Islamic history. This research serves as a valuable

resource for researchers, practitioners, readers, and especially students, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural heritage and promoting religious moderation among the diverse communities in Bojonegoro Regency. This study underscores the role of *Wayang Thengul* in cultural preservation and its potential to foster intercultural understanding and unity. By documenting its historical and educational value, the research supports efforts to sustain local traditions while promoting tolerance and appreciation for diversity.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a specific region and art form, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts or puppetry traditions. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research may present challenges in quantifying the impact of *Wayang Thengul* on educational outcomes or community attitudes. Future research could expand beyond *Wayang Thengul* to compare its effectiveness with other forms of cultural and educational media. Quantitative studies could be employed to measure the cognitive and affective impacts of *Wayang Thengul* performances on students' understanding of Islamic history. Moreover, longitudinal studies could assess the sustainability of cultural initiatives and their long-term effects on community cohesion and identity. By addressing these recommendations, future research can further enhance our understanding of how traditional arts like *Wayang Thengul* can contribute to educational strategies and cultural sustainability in diverse societies.

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