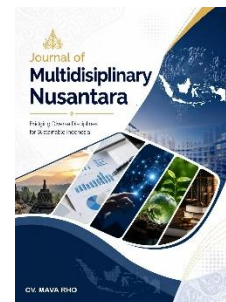


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Traditional Beliefs in Indonesia: A Study of Animism, Dynamism, Javanese, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan in Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Indonesia has a diversity of belief systems that have developed since before the arrival of major religions. Some of these belief systems persist today as part of the cultural identity of the community, including Animism, Dynamism, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan. This study aims to describe the history, teachings, and characteristics of these various belief systems and analyze them from an Islamic perspective. The study used a qualitative approach with library research. Data were obtained through the study of books, scientific journals, and various relevant literature, then analyzed using content analysis techniques. The results show that each belief system has a historical background, a concept of divinity, and religious practices that differ according to the culture of its supporting community. Animism and dynamism are based on beliefs in spirits and supernatural powers that are believed to influence human life, while Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan developed as belief systems that integrate local cultural values, customs, and spirituality. From an Islamic perspective, any form of belief that includes worship, supplication, or glorification of other than God contradicts the principle of monotheism. Nevertheless, Islam still teaches respect for the diversity of society through a preaching approach that is carried out wisely, argumentatively, and full of wisdom.

Keywords: Beliefs, Animism, Dynamism, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, Kaharingan, Islamic

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Introduction

Indonesia is known as a country with a high level of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and belief system diversity. Long before the arrival of major religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, the people of the archipelago were familiar with various forms of traditional beliefs passed down from generation to generation. Some of these This belief system still survives today and is part of the cultural identity of people in various regions (Harakan et al., 2023; Septiadi & Ramdani, 2024).

The existence of traditional beliefs is inextricably linked to the history of Indonesian society. Each community has its own way of understanding the relationship between humans and nature, ancestors, and transcendent powers. This gave rise to various belief systems that developed in accordance with the cultural characteristics of each region. Among the beliefs still recognized today are Animism, Dynamism, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan. Each has its own distinct history, teachings, and religious practices, but all emerged from the social and cultural dynamics of the Indonesian archipelago (Siregar et al., 2021).

The study of religious beliefs is crucial not only from a historical and anthropological perspective, but also in the study of religion. Understanding local belief systems can provide insight into the development of religiosity in Indonesian society before and after the arrival of world religions. Furthermore, this study is part of an effort to understand the relationship between religion, culture, and social identity as they develop within a multicultural society.

Previous studies have primarily discussed religious beliefs from the perspectives of anthropology, cultural history, and the protection of indigenous peoples' rights. Meanwhile, studies integrating discussions of traditional beliefs with analyses based on Islamic faith are relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing five religious beliefs that have developed in Indonesia, while still emphasizing the principles of monotheism in Islam (Sanusi & Rizal, 2025a; Sutarno et al., 2023).

Based on this description, this study aims to describe the history, characteristics, and main teachings of Animism, Dynamism, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan, then analyze them from an Islamic perspective. This research is expected to contribute to the development of comparative religious studies, enrich the literature on Islamic da'wah, and serve as an academic reference in understanding the diversity of belief systems in Indonesia.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with library research. (Amin et al., 2026; Madji et al., 2026; Wahyunan Widhi et al., 2021) This approach was chosen because the study focused on examining various traditional beliefs in Indonesia through analysis of relevant literature. Data were obtained from literature sources including books, scientific journals, articles, official documents, and other references related to animism, dynamism, Javanese culture, Sunda Wiwitan, Kaharingan, and Islamic perspectives on beliefs (Rosyadi, 2022).

Data collection techniques are carried out through documentation studies by identifying, inventorying, and reviewing various literature related to the research object. Next, the data was analyzed using content analysis techniques, namely by grouping the data based on the discussion theme, comparing the characteristics of each belief system, then interpreting it based on the concepts contained in the comparative literature on religion and Islamic teachings.

To ensure data validity, the study employed source triangulation by comparing information from various references to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the history, teachings, and religious practices of each belief system. The analysis results are then presented descriptively and analytically, depicting the characteristics of each belief system while also providing an overview from an Islamic faith perspective.

Discussion

A religious belief system is a system of beliefs that grows and develops within a society as a result of historical processes, spiritual experiences, and traditions passed down through generations. In the Indonesian context, religious beliefs are part of a cultural heritage that existed long before the arrival of major religions. Their existence not only reflects the community's perspective on the relationship between humans and nature and transcendent powers, but also shapes the social and cultural identity of their supporting communities.

According to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), a belief system is a school of thought that acknowledges the existence of one Almighty God, but is not part of or based on the teachings of any of the state-recognized religions. Etymologically, the term "belief system" is composed of two elements: "stream," meaning a system of thought or understanding, and "belief," meaning a belief that serves as a guideline for life for a group of people. Thus, a belief system can be understood as a belief system born from local cultural values and traditions passed down from generation to generation (Nugroho et al., 2021; Riyanto et al., 2022).

In its historical development, the term *aliran kepercayaan* began to be widely used after the National Symposium of Javanese Spiritual Organizations held in Yogyakarta on November 7–9, 1970. Prior to this, various groups of believers were better known by the term *aliran kebatinan*. The use of this new term indicates an attempt to provide

a broader identity for the various traditional belief systems that have developed in Indonesia.

The existence of religious beliefs is inextricably linked to the development of Indonesia's multicultural society. Although the majority of the population has embraced major religions, a number of indigenous communities maintain ancestral belief systems as part of their cultural identity. Therefore, the study of religious beliefs is not only important from a historical and anthropological perspective but also relevant to the study of religion, particularly in understanding the dynamics of the relationship between religion, culture, and social life in Indonesian society.

Animism

Animism is one of the oldest belief systems known in the history of the development of world religions. The term animism comes from the Latin word "animus," meaning soul or spirit. In this concept, every living creature and object in nature is believed to possess a spirit that can influence human life. Therefore, natural elements such as trees, rocks, mountains, rivers, and certain places are seen as possessing spiritual powers worthy of respect and even sacredness (Puspendari & Meijknecht, 2015; Sanusi & Rizal, 2025b, 2025c).

Belief in these spirits has given rise to various forms of religious practices in traditional societies. Ancestral spirits are believed to maintain a connection with their descendants, thus being seen as capable of providing protection, good fortune, and even disaster. This belief has given rise to various rituals, such as offerings, traditional ceremonies, specific prayers, and reverence for sacred places. These practices are carried out as an effort to maintain a harmonious relationship between humans and the spirits believed to control the surrounding environment.

In the study of religious history, animism is seen as one of the earliest forms of human religious expression before the development of a more systematic concept of divinity. Human limitations in understanding various natural phenomena led to various events, such as lightning, floods, earthquakes, and even death, being perceived as manifestations of spiritual powers beyond human comprehension. This condition then formed a pattern of belief that placed spirits as a crucial element in the social and religious life of society.

Analysis from an Islamic Perspective

Islam teaches that the entire universe and its contents are under the sovereignty of Allah SWT. No creature has the ability to provide benefits or repel harm independently without His permission. Therefore, the belief that ancestral spirits or certain objects possess supernatural powers that can determine human life is inconsistent with the principle of monotheism, which affirms that Allah SWT alone is the One and Only Being worthy of worship, assistance, and reliance. However, not all traditions originating from animist societies automatically contradict Islamic teachings (Fauzia, 2013; Mas' ud et al., 2023). Traditions that merely contain social values, such as mutual cooperation, respect for parents, or environmental preservation, are acceptable as long as they are not accompanied by belief in supernatural powers other than Allah SWT. Conversely, if a tradition contains elements of worship of spirits, prayers to ancestors, or the belief that certain objects are capable of bringing benefits and warding off harm independently, then this

practice is a form of deviation from the faith that must be abandoned (Isra & Faiz, 2021; Septiadi & Ramdani, 2024; Tartillah, 2022).

Thus, Islam views animism not only as a historical phenomenon in the development of human belief, but also as a lesson in the importance of maintaining the purity of monotheism. At the same time, Islam continues to teach that preaching to communities that still maintain local traditions must be done through a polite, argumentative, and wise approach without diminishing respect for the dignity of every human being.

Dynamism

Dynamism is a traditional belief system that developed in societies before the emergence of major religions. The term dynamism comes from the Greek word *dynamis*, meaning power, ability, or strength. In comparative religious studies, dynamism is understood as the belief that supernatural powers reside in certain objects and are believed to influence human life.⁶ According to TSG Mulia, dynamism is the belief in the power or supernatural powers inherent in certain objects, such as stones, trees, fire, water, animals, and humans. This power is believed to provide benefits in the form of safety, good fortune, and healing, but it is also believed to bring disaster if not respected or treated appropriately.

A central concept in dynamism is known as *mana*, a supernatural power that is not physically visible but is believed to be present in certain objects. The existence of *mana* is understood as something beyond the capabilities of ordinary humans, thus evoking awe, respect, and even fear. Therefore, objects believed to possess *mana* are often treated with special respect through various forms of reverence and rituals (Judijanto et al., 2024; Toy et al., 2024).

In practice, dynamism has given rise to various traditions that can still be found in some Indonesian communities. The use of amulets, *keris* (traditional daggers), agate stones, sacred spears, and ancestral objects as means of protection are common examples. Furthermore, certain places, such as springs, large trees, caves, and mountains, are also considered to possess supernatural powers, making them locations for traditional rituals or prayers for safety.

Javanese

Kejawen is a system of values, outlook on life, and spirituality that developed within Javanese society through a long historical process. The term Kejawen is derived from the Javanese word for cultural identity. Unlike formal religion, Kejawen is better understood as a value system that combines elements of custom, ethics, philosophy of life, and spiritual practices that are passed down through generations.

Over its development, Kejawen did not emerge as a stand-alone belief system, but rather as a result of the acculturation of local Javanese beliefs with Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic influences. This acculturation process resulted in various traditions still practiced by some Javanese people today, such as Nyadran, Mitoni (Tingkeban), Tedhak Siten, and Wetonan. These traditions not only have religious significance but also contain social values such as respect for ancestors,

strengthening family ties, and preserving local culture.

One concept often associated with Javanese culture is *manunggaling kawula Gusti*, a teaching that describes the spiritual closeness between humans and God. In Javanese tradition, this concept is understood as a process of self-purification through controlling desires, inner practice, and living in harmony with virtuous values. However, the meaning of this concept varies among different groups of Javanese practitioners, so it cannot be generalized as a single teaching.

Sunda Wiwitan

Sunda Wiwitan is a local belief system that developed among the Sundanese people before the arrival of major religions in the archipelago. The term Sunda Wiwitan is derived from the word Sunda, which refers to the ethnic identity of the Sundanese people, and *wiwitan*, which means beginning or origin. Thus, Sunda Wiwitan is understood as ancestral teachings that serve as a guide for the Sundanese people in regulating their relationships with God, fellow humans, and the universe. Anthropological studies show that Sunda Wiwitan is understood not only as a belief system but also as a cultural identity containing moral values, social ethics, and local wisdom that are passed down from generation to generation.

The concept of divinity in Sunda Wiwitan is centered on the belief in Sang Hyang Kersa or Nu Ngersakeun, the One and Only God as the creator of the entire universe. Furthermore, adherents recognize a cosmological concept that divides nature into three levels: Buana Nyuncung as the highest realm, Buana Panca Tengah as the realm of human existence, and Buana Larang as the lower realm. This cosmological view demonstrates the orderly relationship between humans, nature, and the Creator, manifested through adherence to customs and norms of life.

Islamic Perspective Analysis

Islam teaches that all forms of worship and servitude are only directed to Allah SWT. This principle is the core teaching of monotheism which is the main difference between Islam and various other belief systems. Allah SWT. said:

"Only You do we worship and only to You do we ask for help."

(QS. Al-Fātiḥah [1]: 5).²⁰

This verse emphasizes that all forms of prayer, worship and requests must only be addressed to Allah SWT. Therefore, if in Sundanese Wiwitan practice there are rituals that contain elements of supplication to ancestral spirits or belief in supernatural powers other than Allah, then this practice is contrary to the principle of monotheism.

Allah SWT also said:

"And do not worship anything that neither benefits nor harms you except Allah..."

(QS. Yūnus [10]: 106)

However, Islam does not reject all traditions that have developed in society. The history of the formation of sharia shows that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) maintained various Arab customs that were in line with Islamic values, such as deliberation, respect for guests, marriage contracts, and the performance of the Hajj pilgrimage, which originated from the sharia of Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him). He then perfected it by eliminating elements of polytheism and practices of ignorance. This shows that Islam is selective about culture, not rejecting it outright.

This principle is in line with the rules of Islamic jurisprudence:

العادات الإباحة حتى الله على التحريم Al-Aqsa Fi

"The original law is that customs are permissible as long as there are no arguments that indicate their prohibition."

Conclusion

Studies on animism, dynamism, Kejawen, Sunda Wiwitan, and Kaharingan show that these beliefs are part of the cultural heritage and religious history of the Indonesian archipelago, born from a long process of human interaction with nature, ancestors, and their social environment. Each has its own characteristics, both in terms of concepts of divinity, cosmology, ethics of life, and ritual practices that developed within indigenous communities.

From an Islamic perspective, not all cultural elements contained in these sects are seen as contrary to sharia. Values such as mutual cooperation, respect for parents, social responsibility, simplicity of life, and environmental preservation are universal values that are in line with Islamic teachings and can be accepted as part of local wisdom. However, Islam emphasizes that all forms of worship, prayer and devotion are only directed to Allah SWT. Therefore, elements of belief that contain worship of ancestral spirits, requests to other than Allah, belief in independent supernatural powers, or rituals that lead to shirk cannot be justified because they conflict with the principle of monotheism.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the Islamic approach to local beliefs is proportional, distinguishing between cultural aspects that contain benefits and aspects of faith that deviate from the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This approach allows Muslims to appreciate the diversity of Indonesian culture while maintaining the purity of faith. Therefore, studying local beliefs and sects is not only important for understanding the history and culture of Indonesian society, but also serves as a means of strengthening understanding of monotheism and developing wise, dialogical preaching that respects human dignity in a pluralistic society.

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