

Cultural System of Cirebonese People: Tradition of *Maulidan* in the Kanoman Kraton

Sistem Budaya Masyarakat Cirebon: Tradisi Maulidan dalam Kraton Kanoman

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of *Maulidan* ritual in the commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's birth at the Kanoman's palace (*kraton*) Cirebon. Although the central element of the *maulid* is the veneration of Prophet, the tradition of *Maulidan* in Kanoman reinforced the religious authority of Sultan in mobilizing a massive traditional gathering by converging Islamic propagation with the art performance. It argues that the *slametan* (ritual meal with Arabic prayers), *pelal alit* (preliminary celebration), '*panjang jimat*' (allegorical festival), *asyrakalan* (recitation of the book of *maulid*) and the gamelan *sekaten* can be understood as 'indexical symbols' modifying 'trans-cultural Muslim ritual' into local entity and empowering the traditional machinery of sexual division of ritual labour. The study focuses on the trend of Muslim monarch in the elaboration of *maulid* performance to demonstrate their piety and power in order to gain their legitimacy. Its finding suggests that religion tends to be shaped by society rather than society is shaped by religion. I emphasize that the *maulidan* tradition is 'capable of creating meaningful connections between the imperial cult and every segment of 'Cirebon people' other than those Islamic modernists and Islamists who against it in principle. Based on the literature, media reports and interview materials, I argue that the meaning of rites may extend far beyond its stated purpose of venerating the Prophet since the folk religion has strategically generated the "old power" and religious authority. This study attempts to capture the cultural system of the religious-based rituals where the practice of local Muslims has shown distinctive manifestation from the Muslim heartlands in the Middle East.

Key words: maulid, slametan, religion, belief, ritual

Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas konstruksi ritual maulidan dalam rangka kegiatan memperingati kelahiran Nabi Muhammad di Keraton Kanoman, Cirebon. Meskipun unsur utama maulid adalah memuliakan Nabi saw, tradisi maulidan di Kanoman telah menegaskan otoritas keagamaan Sultan dalam hal menyelenggarakan acara tradisional yang bersifat masif dengan cara menggabungkan dakwah Islam dan pentas seni budaya. Tulisan ini menegaskan bahwa ritual slametan, pelal alit, panjang jimat, asyrakalan dan gamelan sekaten dapat dipahami sebagai 'indexical symbols' (simbol-simbol pemberi petunjuk) yang telah merubah ritual umat Islam yang bersifat trans-nasional dalam bentuk entitas lokal dan telah memberdayakan pembagian kerja berdasarkan jenis kelamin. Penelitian ini fokus pada tren kerajaan Islam dalam upaya mengelaborasi tradisi maulid untuk menunjukkan kesalehan dan kekuasaan dalam

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upaya mendapatkan legitimasinya. Studi ini menemukan bahwa agama cenderung dibentuk oleh masyarakat dari pada masyarakat dibentuk oleh agama. Saya menekankan bahwa tradisi maulidan telah mampu menciptakan hubungan yang cukup penting antara kultus pada Sultan dan semua lapisan masyarakat Cirebon. Berdasarkan literatur akademik, media dan wawancara, saya berpendapat bahwa makna ritual maulidan bisa jadi telah jauh melampaui tujuan awal yaitu memuliakan Nabi karena agama rakyat ini telah membangkitkan sedemikian rupa “kekuasaan lama” dan otoritas keagamaan. Kajian ini berusaha untuk menjelaskan sistem budaya pada ritual keagamaan di mana tradisi muslim setempat ternyata berbeda dengan praktek beragama dengan umat Islam lain di Timur Tengah.

Kata kunci: maulid, slametan, agama, kepercayaan, ritual

The relationship between religion and culture in the context of Indonesian Islam has been enchanting source of study among anthropologists. Living traditions among the people harbor interesting puzzle concerning whether religion is influenced by its community or community is shaped by religious doctrine. The *garebeg maulid* in Yogyakarta *kraton* is one example on how elements of religion and culture have been amalgamated in a very unique way. Woodward argues that *garebeg maulid* has connected veneration of the prophet Muhammad with Javanese notions of kingship (2011:190). Meanwhile, Adlin Sila found that celebration of *maulid* Nabi in Cikoang community, South Sulawesi, has presented symbolic meanings of *maulid* which are derived from the tradition of Sufi order. This study reveals the role of *sayyid* (descendent of prophet Muhammad) as the guardian of local culture in developing the ritual of *maulid* (Sila 2001).

The reason why ritual becomes the target of study has led to the argument that ritual is a medium or vehicle to understand a particular root of culture which lies at the deepest level of social structure. As Asad said, people’s ritual is code for understanding their interpretation of culture (Woodward 2011:29). I expect that I can learn many important values and norms that lie beneath the deepest level of Cirebonese people’s worldview from my investigation to ritual of *maulid* in Kanoman *kraton*. According to the local historian, tradition of *maulid* in the Cirebon *kraton* has been commenced since the appointment of Sunan Gunung Jati (the founder of Cirebon Kingdom) as the greatest saint (*wali qutub*) in 1479 AD (Sulendradiningrat 1985:83-84). It means that the tradition has been survived for more than five centuries. Such a long history of the ritual has encouraged my curiosity to explore the elements and their meanings which involved in the celebration of *maulid*.

Apart from the assumption that *maulid* is a kind of deviation from what is labeled as “pure Islam”, the persistence of such traditional Islamic customs needs sufficient explanation linking the capacity of agents in the establishment and maintenance the local innovations with social and historical aspects of its community. Although many scholars have serious concern about this issue, the main challenge of studying local Islam, according to Eickelman, is to explicate ‘how the universalist principles of Islam have been manifested in various social and historical contexts without propounding Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand, and presenting it as ‘a plastic congeries’ of beliefs and practice on the other’ (Eickelman 1982 in Woodward 1988:85-86). In this paper, I examine the significance of local culture dealing with the reinforcement of Sultan’s religious authority in mobilizing a massive traditional gathering in the Kanoman *kraton*, Cirebon.

Cirebonese People: A Profile

The origin of Cirebonese people can be traced to a developing village around the northern coastal of West Java in 1389 AD (Tjandrasmita 1996:200). The territory grown to be seaport village which was visited by various international traders such as Chinese, European and Middle Eastern people. Due to the growing trend of coexistence with other local and world ethnic, the coastal territory is later called Caruban which means mixture. In its development, it turned to be Cerbon and finally becomes Cirebon (Yayasan Kraton Kasepuhan 2002:3). As the ruler of the territory, the King of Pajajaran delegated the authority to govern the seaport to Ki Gedeng Sindangkasih, Ki Gedeng Jumajanjati (also known as Ki Gedeng Tapa) and then Pangeran Cakrabumi. Under the control of Pangeran Cakrabumi, Cirebon became

more developing territory following the moving center of trade from Muara Jati to Kasunean (Tjandrasasmita 1996:206).

The social and political transformation from Pajajaran Hinduism to be Cirebon Islam had been commenced after Pangeran Cakrabumi (also known as Pangeran Cakrabuana) declared the independence of Cirebon from Pajajaran. He did not only establish independent central of government in Pakungwati, but also actively disseminated Islamic teachings in the land of Cirebon. One of his legacies is the small mosque which is called 'Tajug Jalagrahan' (Wildan 2002:272-3). In order to strengthen his knowledge about Islam, Cakrabumi decided to pilgrimage to Mecca for about two years (Tjandrasasmita 1996:206). After he developed the coastal territory, many people converted to be Muslim and many people from Muara Jati moved to Caruban to trade and live (Tjandrasasmita 1996:205).

The wave of Islamization in Cirebon had experienced a greater development since Sunan Gunung Jati took the role. Both political and cultural approaches were part of his strategy in introducing Islam to people. He did not only maintain political network with the influential Muslim leaders, but also fostering the popular Islamic traditions within the Cirebonese system of culture. For his authority that included both political and religious aspect, he received a title '*Raja-Pandito*', a political and religious leader. Since its inception in the 15th-16th century, Cirebon has 'its own importance in the configuration of the Islamic era' (Muhaimin 1995:7).

However, the inclination of Sunan Gunung Jati to strengthen the foundation of Islamic culture and the lack of ambition to extend his political power, Cirebon never developed into a state with strong political power (Muhaimin 1995). It could be the fact that he had been 60 years old when he took the political office (De Graaf & Pigeaud 1986:142). According to Muhaimin, Sunan Gunung Jati's concern was more on religious matters rather than political business, due to his sainthood. He was already satisfied with the political role of his son, Sabakingkin which later known as Sultan Hasanudin (Islamic King of Banten). Therefore, he could focus his energy to his religious mission (De Graaf & Pigeaud 1986: 8).

The declining power of Cirebon happened particularly since the territory had been divided into two and then three fractions of kingdom: Kasepuhan, Kanoman and Kacirebonan. The political situation worsened after Dutch colonial had controlled Java and other Islands of archipelago. The three Sultans were forced to obey and serve the interest of European ruler (Naskah Mertasinga: 209). Some kins of Sultan who disagree with his policy have stepped outside from *kraton* and some of them established *pesantren* around Cirebon. These religious institutions, in turn, contributed significant role in fostering the practice of *tarikah* (mystical path). The founder of Pesantren Buntet, Mbah Muqoyim, is one of *mursyid* of *Syattariyah kraton* (Muhaimin 1995:250).

As a small kingdom, political power of Cirebon did not grow to be a great state, however, its role in shaping the cultural system of people has shown a great influence. Since Sunan Gunung Jati, who was backed up by *Walisono* (lit.nine saints), propagated Islam, the doctrine of Sufism or mysticism has been popular among Cirebonese people. The seminal '*suluk*' or '*tarikah*' is manifested in a variety of *pupuh* (mystical song) which contains the doctrine of sufism. The '*suluk pesisir*', for example, has been an inspiring teaching among pious people. It mostly teaches how Muslim approaches his God by knowing himself, his environment, universe, angel and supernatural thing in a convincing way (Dahuri et al.) 2004:224). Two other important *suluk* are '*Suluk Naskah Wahosan Bujang Genjong*'² and '*Suluk Naskah "Kitab Asrar Yusuf"*'. The former *suluk* emphasizes the importance of '*manunggal*' (integration) in terms of four knowledge (*syari'at*, *tarekat*, *hakekat* and *ma'rifat*), while the latter conveys the position of human before God in which he/she merely undertakes God's will and no one can preclude His will (Dahuri et al.) 2004: 225-7).

The great role of propagators in the Islamization process of Cirebon has been a legend which most of them are known locally through popular accounts, either written or oral. That's why, it is difficult to identify which is fact and myth because of lack of historical evidences. As a result, the story of Muslim propagators has been developed among people as the holy men and exemplary models whose piety and behavior deserve imitation and appreciation (Muhaimin 1995:161). It has led to the practice of veneration

² *Bujang Genjong* means physical entity.

to *wali* (saint) and holy men by visiting sites and shrines relating to those great persons. This is further manifested by the belief that the ‘fragrance’ of their honour still remains posthumously and such places contain *berkah* (divine blessings) (Muhaimin 1995:162). Although the veneration of holy men has been long established practice in the Muslim world, Muslim puritans commonly condemn such a habit.

Among Javanese, the reputation of Sunan Kali Jaga as an innovative agent of Islamic propagator could not be compared with any other *wali*. His talent and interest in the arts and culture introduced a new method of communication, particularly in conveying religious tenets, in which never imagined before by the fellow saints. By means of *wayang* (puppet) and gamelan, for example, Sunan Kali Jaga successfully presented spiritual messages with peace and interesting ways. This pattern and style was followed by his son, Pangeran Panggung (literally means ‘The Prince of Stage’), who has also a great reputation among the traditional artists. For Cirebonese artists, there is strong belief that they are all descendents of Pangeran Panggung, the creator of traditional arts. That’s why, before the performance of *wayang*, for example, the artists usually provide offerings, pray or meditate and burn incense, mainly to obtain permission, blessings or help from Pangeran Panggung. If this spirit does not come to help them, they believe that their artistic endeavors would be difficult to perform. This spiritual belief is in some ways much more important than the physical or technical conviction. In fact, almost all of them, especially the *dalang topeng* (master of mask dancer) and the *dalang wayang* (*wayang* puppeteer) often fast, meditate and visit the sacred graves to strengthen and enhance their spiritual power, although they never practice their technique (Suanda 1981:30-31).

As the guardian of ideas of multiculturalism, it seems that there are important efforts of Sultan to maintain diversity or pluralism in a modest way. The awareness of recognizing multiculturalism has been perpetuated in Sultan’s vehicle by symbolizing one world culture or ethnic with the relevant symbols. In the carriage of ‘*Paksi Naga Liman*’³, for example, the word ‘*Paksi*’ refers to bird symbolizing Middle East culture. *Naga* is an imaginary animal which epitomizes Chinese culture, while *Liman* stems from Sanskrit means elephant, as symbol of Indian culture. The ‘*Singa Barong*’⁴ carriage has also similar messages. The form of carriage is manifestation of three animals, namely elephant, dragon and bird. Elephant represents Indian culture, dragon represents Chinese culture and bird symbolizes Egyptian/Arab culture (Islam). This awareness might become a simple manifestation of multicultural trend of Cirebon people which has been mentioned in the book of *Carita Purwaka Caruban Nagari*, that the word of Cirebon stems from *sarumban*, meaning ‘mixture’ of different tribes, languages, customs and religions.

Nevertheless, the position of Cirebon in the middle of two established cultures, which is Javanese and Sundanese, has created an ambiguous cultural identity. The culture does not firmly affiliate to Javanese nor Sundanese, but some practices refer to Javanese culture, while some other things have taken from Sundanese. This ambiguous position can be identified in the use of local language, called ‘*Bahasa Cherbon*’, a language that is influenced by both Javanese and Sundanese. Based on the egalitarian and outspoken style of language, the ‘*bahasa Cherbon*’ is also known as *blakasuta* (outspoken language). Ironically, when Cirebonese people met Javanese, they regard Cirebonese as Sundanese, while Sundanese assume Cirebonese as Javanese (Noer 2009:3). This confusing response of outsiders, fortunately, does not really become serious concern of the people. In a relax way, Cirebonese can response such attitude by saying: “*apa jare kono lah!*” (I don’t care). However, during the 2010 census of population, Cirebon has been categorized as ‘one *suku*’ among 1,128 tribes throughout Indonesia. It means that Cirebon can not be assumed as Javanese or Sundanese anymore. The criteria of being Cirebonese are simple: those who live in Cirebon and have paternal lineage with Cirebonese who was born in Cirebon, they can be included as Cirebonese (Radar Cirebon 2/5/2010).

There is different concept of Cirebon in terms of culture and political administration. As a cultural entity, Cirebon encompasses the so-called ‘Wilayah III’ (lit. three territory), namely Indramayu, Kuningan and Majalengka. In western part, Subang still have affiliation with Cirebon, while in the eastern

³ *Paksi Naga Liman* is an official carriage of Sultan of Kanoman which is created in 1428 by Pangeran Losari.

⁴ *Singa Barong* is an official carriage of Sultan of Kasepuhan which is proposed by Panembahan Pakung Wati I and created in 1549 by Panembahan Losari, Werk Bas Dalem Gebang Sepuh and Ki Nataguna.

part, Brebes, Tegal and Pemalang also have similar culture with Cirebonese. Due to the idea of shared culture, aspiration to unify the 'Wilayah III' as a new province has been sporadically promulgated by certain group with the brief, Ciayumajakuning (Cirebon, Indramayu, Majalengka and Kuningan). Those regions covers an area of about 5,642,569 square kilometers and had a population about 7.5 million inhabitants in 2008. Unfortunately, this aspiration tends to be political interest rather than cultural movement.

In terms of political administration, Cirebon refers to two types of administration, namely the *kotamadya* (municipality) and *kabupaten* (regency). The *kotamadya* is located in area of 37.54 square kilometer with total population 298,995 inhabitants in 2008. Administratively, the municipality of Cirebon has five *kecamatan* (district) and 22 *kelurahan* (village) (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Cirebon 2009). From the capital city of West Java (Bandung), Cirebon is about 130 km away, while from Jakarta is about 258 km. The three *kraton* (Kasepuhan, Kanoman and Kacirebonan) which become the legacy of Cirebon predecessors is located at the territory of Kotamadya Cirebon.

The Festival of Amulets in Kanoman Kraton

In anthropological studies, ritual has been important focus to understand the way people think and feel in order to seek relationships among the concepts that operate in social life (Turner 1969:6). A study on the ritual of *garabeg maulid* in Yogyakarta has shown the relationships of symbolic concepts with the cosmology and living norms of Javanese people in the context of daily life. The ritual has revealed various meanings and world view of Javanese people from the use of colors, shape and choice of materials at the '*gunungan kakung*' (Abdullah 2002:77-88). The various meanings of ritual have been also identified by Abdullah Ali (2001) in the study of *Maulidan* in Cirebon. This study found that the ritual of *maulidan* has different meaning among the pilgrimage. It could be entertainment, economic, and religious meaning. I try to explore the meaning and significance of the festival of amulets in the Kanoman *kraton* as an important part of the whole celebration of *maulid*.

The practice of various rituals during the *Maulidan* tradition at the Kanoman *kraton* has unconsciously or strategically empowered the gender role of constitutive elements of supporters for the survival of the remnant of Islamic kingdom. Unlike the male dominated practice of ritual in Kasepuhan court, the involvement of women in the Kanoman *kraton* since the early preparation of ritual until the end of ceremony has contributed a greater role than that of men counterpart. Before the peak of celebration, women have an exclusive duty to wash some noble amulets (*panjang*), known as *nyiram panjang*, in a water container. Those amulets are twelve big trays made of ceramics and have been hundreds years engaged in the annual ritual. These trays will be used to bring some kinds of meal in the *panjang jimat* festival, a procession of noble amulets from *langgar* (small mosque) to *masjid agung* (larger mosque). Unlike the ordinary process of washing, this duty requires norms and criteria.

The women involved in the washing process are privileged member of Sultan's family, such as wife, sisters and daughters. According to my informant, such criterion is intended to maintain the safety of noble amulets in the hands of trusted people. "We can not imagine if the antique items are damaged or broken. Therefore, we do not involve other people (to wash them), except our internal family". For these women, undertaking this duty is an honor that other people can not do. Although this kind of honor is socially constructed, I would argue that they realize their own interest against the weight of custom, tradition and transcendental will, as Mahmood (2001) conceptualizes about agency. As one of the women said, "I do it with *ikhlas* (highly sincere) and regard it as an honorable duty".

Besides, purity is the prerequisite to take part in the duty. The purity here is associated with women's condition that is free from blemish. Therefore, woman in her period is not allowed to join the procession, although she is part of Sultan's family. The concept of purity in this respect almost equals with the model of Islamic orthodoxy, particularly the notion that only pure women who can conduct *shalat* (prayer) and recites the Koran. Instead of doing ceremony with cheerful and relax atmosphere, the

duty is undertaken solemnly and devoutly because they recite *salawat*⁵ (pray for Prophet Muhammad) during the procession. No talk or gossiping in this ceremony. The recitation of *salawat* is highly recommended for all people who involve in ritual practices during *maulidan* in order to exalt the Prophet Muhammad.

The norms of female purity also prevails for other traditional customs in the preparation of the *panjang jimat* such as *ngerik* (chirping the fragrant wood), *dhamel boreh* (making scrub), *dhamel lilin* (making candle), *dhamel ukup* (making incense), *mipis* (soften spices), *saji buah* (serving the fruits), *mungkus salawat* (packing the coin of *shalawat*), and *nyiram pacara* (washing the noble amulets). However, the women duties are mostly backed up by some men which is called '*bapak sindang*'. These men help women to prepare anything dealing with domestic works. Local myth says that *bapak sindang* are descendants of the *kraton* guardians who used to be able to transform into a tiger (physically or metaphorically).

The involvement of women both in the *pelal alit* and *pelal ageng* procession is highly crucial. The *pelal alit* is sort of *slametan* (a ritual meal to obtain blessings) by doing *asyrakalan* (recitation of *Barzanzi/Maulid*) in the *langgar* (small mosque) as the preliminary celebration of *maulidan*. Similar with the *pelal alit*, the main ritual of *pelal ageng* is *asyrakalan*, but it is conducted in *masjid agung* (big mosque) and initiated with the procession of *panjang jimat* (festival of noble amulets). While women prepare the equipment of ceremony such as flowers, scrub, candles, fruits, coin of *salawat* and *nasi jimat* (literally means amulets rice), men prepare the troops and guardians to escort the festival. Looking at the composition of parade, women outnumber men.

Due to the myriad of amulets of *kraton*, the festival involves many people, both men and women in a long parade. The formation of parade comprises six groups. The first group march in the front bringing *chis* (spear), *dupa* (incense) and the banner of Cirebon kingdom. One man brings a spear, two men hold the incense and five men bring the banner together. The spear symbolizes the role of Pangeran Pringgabaya, one of Sunan Gunung Jati's son who has duty to guard the Cirebon's territory. The three-metres-banner with the symbol of *Macan Ali* (Ali's tiger) and the inscription *syahadatain* (Islamic creed) conveying a message for Muslims to preserve the core of faith.

The second group is women bringing some trays which contain *nasi jimat* and various meals. In this group, there are three different sections of *panjang* (big tray) which represent three important agents who played significant role in propagating Islam. The first and main *Panjang* is called *Panjang Suku* or *Panjang Rasul*, representing the Prophet Muhammad. The second one is four *Panjang*, called *Panjang Sahabat*, representing four Companions of the Prophet. The other nine *Panjang*, called *Panjang Walisongo* (Nine Saints), representing nine saints of Islamic propagators in Java. The fourteen *Panjang* (trays) are tightly wrapped with yellow-green cloth and brought respectively by two women. In every section of *Panjang*, it is accompanied by four persons. While a woman brings a big candle, three men who are *famili jaler* (male kin) bring a *payung keropak* (ancient umbrella) and two candles.

The third group is women in large number bringing various *pacara* (hairlooms) symbolizing the process of Prophet Muhammad's birth. Those amulets are two bunches of long-black hair, one *jantung pisang* (prototype of banana flower which is made of silver), three miniatures of silver-made-*Paksi Naga Liman*, five scissors, fifteen *kendi* (jars), two cases of amulets, one *toples* (glass container) with water inside and four empty trays. The black hair symbolizes the first part of baby born out of the womb. The *jantung* symbolizes the manifestation of small size of mankind. The miniature of *Paksi Naga Liman* epitomizes friend of the baby. Scissor symbolizes cutter to separate baby from its placenta. The jar which contains water symbolizes the last blood of the mother during her pregnancy. The silver case symbolizes a cradle for the baby. Water container symbolizes clean water to clean the baby. The forth group is approximately eighty women bringing flowers, scrub and the coin of *shalawat* on the tray. Its formation is exactly like the previous group, two women bring one tray.

⁵ *Salawat* words: '*allahumma shalli 'ala sayyidina Muhammad*' (May blessings of Allah be upon the Prophet Muhammad)

The fifth group is Pangeran Patih, the representative of Sultan. He is accompanied by a man bringing a candle and one man hold the umbrella. The former marches in front of him, while the later marches behind him. Pangeran Patih is also accompanied by *penghulu* (chief Muslim clerics) and his kins. As a leader of the march, Pangeran Kumisi mostly takes part in this group. The last group is tens of men bringing a tray of fruits. Among other trays, this tray is the heaviest, so one tray is brought by four men.

During the parade, Sultan mobilizes his troops and guardians to secure the running procession. Two kinds of guardians who are responsible to secure the *panjang jimat* parade, *pasukan blandrangan* and *pasukan pagersari*. They are totally more than 300 people. While *blandrangan* troop wear long-black clothes and batik headgear, *pagersari* guardians wear short-hand-blue batik (*mega mendung* motif) clothes, long-black pants and batik headgear. Unlike the *pagersari*, *blandrangan* troop is armed with spear by Sultan. In fact, both kind of guardian have similar duty to escort the allegorical parade from the *kraton* to the *masjid agung*, which is commonly known as *pagerbetis* (standing hand in hand among the guardian to keep the way clear). Since Islamic kingdom of Cirebon did not have many official troops as commonly had by a kingdom, the guardians reflect the loyal supporter of Sultan in the preservation of cultural and historical legacy of Cirebonese Islam. Historically, the troops of kingdom were supplied by the various militias in certain pouches of villages that were ready to call anytime if they are summoned or needed by the Sultan. In the layer of security system, Cirebonese military was positioned in spread locations, from the nearest post to the further one. The internal circle of guardians who were located at nearby points to the *kraton*, such as Jagabayan and Jagasatru, and external circle which is posted in further location such as Kalijaga, Watu Tameng, Penggung, Jagapura, Sirnabaya, Kuningan, and Bungko. They guarded territory based on their own village.

The Peak Ritual: Asyrakalan

As practiced by many communities in the Muslim world, the main or the peak of celebrations of the Prophet's birthday is the recitation of *maulid*, 'panegyric poems of a very legendary character, which start with the birth of Muhammad, and praise his life and virtues in the most laudatory fashion' (Fuchs 1961:366-7 in Tapper & Tapper 1987:73). The recitation of the Arabic poems is held in the mosque of *kraton* in the night of 12th of *Maulid*. The Sultan, or designated substitute,⁶ comes to the mosque after Isya prayer to attend the recitation of the Prophet's biography, which is well known as *asyrakalan*. As the executor of the ceremony, Pangeran Kumisi arranges the position of participant's seat, *nasi jimat* and other equipments. The recitation of *Barzanzi* is led by *penghulu* (chief Muslim cleric) which is assisted by two male vocalists. Unlike some other *asyrakalan* which commonly separate between men and women, this ceremony allows both sexes take part. Some women take place behind the row of *penghulu*, and some other are scattered in the family's row of Sultan.

In this peak of commemoration of Prophet Muhammad's birth, the *penghulu* recite the Book of *Barzanzi* which is written by Sayyid Ja'far Al-Barjanji (1101-1690/1177-1764). Although most participants do not understand Arabic, the *Barzanzi*'s text is recited without any translation from the reader. While *dhalang* recites the text, participants listen and sometimes interrupting by saying *shallu 'alaih* (peace upon him) in the end of sentence. In this ceremony, no one talk or make a noise except the one who recite the text and those who response the recitation. As common *asyrakalan* among Muslim communities, the rhythm of recitation of the *Barzanzi* text in tradition of *Maulidan* at Kanoman has different rhythm with other communities. According to the *penghulu*, the rhythm is so exclusive that other Muslim communities beyond the *kraton* do not duplicate the rhythm. It is recited with solemn and devotional atmosphere. I observe that this rhythm is similar with the rhythm of classic way of *shalawatan*

⁶ Pangeran Patih Qadiran usually represents Sultan to attend this ceremony, while Sultan serves his guests in the *kraton*.

before the Friday prayer in the mosque of Kasepuhan. Some traditions of this mosque still strongly preserve the habit of *Walisongo* in doing religious rituals.⁷

In the *mahallul qiyam* (time to stand up), all participants stand up to welcome and honour the Prophet Muhammad. Although this practice has been controversial after the rise of reformist movement (Kaptein 1993), 'standing up' in the middle of *asyrakalan* has been one of the favorite events among the participants. In this moment, Pangeran Kumisi walks around the participant and sprinkle them with perfume in a small jar, called the *kocrod*. He prioritizes Sultan to get a sprinkle of perfume and then his family, both men and women. Besides, people who follow the *asyrakalan* from outside of mosque also get a sprinkle of perfume. Most people expect *berkah* (blessing) from the sprinkle of perfume which has been prayed with many *shalawat* by many people in a sacred place and time. After standing up and back to sit, *dhalang* continuous the recitation. The last prayer is recited by the *penghulu* as the closing ceremony.

Since the Sultan represents himself as the master of spiritual in the order of local Sufism (*tarikat*), the visit of people in the *maulidan* is an embodiment of loyalty of disciple to their master (*seba*). Interestingly, the authority of mystic agent does not only refer to Sultan, but also to his family both men and women. If Sultan does not attend the *asyrakalan* ceremony, he usually welcomes his guests in the *kraton*. The form of *berkah* (blessing) from Sultan that is usually distributed to his guests are gifts, such as *nasi jimat*, coin of *salawat*, flowers, scrubs and *ukup* (incense). As a return, people present many offer such as rice, fruits, raw vegetables and even some money. Ratu Sri Mulya, a mother of Sultan of Kanoman XII, admits that she has more than 20 loyal guests from a variety of villages throughout Cirebon. As commonly hostess, she always serves her guest with drinks and snacks. But she wonders that almost every time she meets her guest, they do not really expect ordinary service (drinks and snacks), but they ask for the gifts.

Slametan

Slametan is one of the most important rites in the Javanese cultural system. Almost all aspect of life can be arranged by Javanese people to conduct such a rite. Geertz identified four types of *slametan* based on its function and timing. He found that *slametan* deals with life crisis (1) such as birth, circumcision, wedding and death. It also relates to Islamic festive (2) as *Idul Fitri*, *Idul Adha* and *Maulid*. The *slametan* is held for social integration in village and cleansing the village (3) it could be meant to cleanse the circumstance from bad spirits). Also, *slametan* can be conducted anytime depending on extraordinary events happened to someone, which is known as '*slametan sela*' (4), such as departure to a long journey, house moving, replacement of name, illness, and expelling the black magic (1983:38).

Although Geertz (1960) linked the ritual of *slametan* with practice of Hindu-Buddist-Animistic-syncretism of Javanese Islam, some scholars have criticized it seriously. Woodward (1988), for example, argues that although elements of the *slametan* is derived from pre-Islamic traditions, it is interpreted in Islamic terms. Similarly, Muhaimin maintains that '*slametan* is essentially Islamic'. The word *slamet* is originally borrowed from Arabic *salamah* meaning peace or safety. It deals with '*sedekah*' (*sadaqa*/charity) and *do'a* (pray) which has scriptural basis, both from the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (1995:136). Woodward has also convinced us that the *slametan* is a locally defined Muslim rite and that the criteria Geertz employs to distinguish Islam from animism are misleading. He argues that the *slametan* is an example of a ritual complex that links blessing (*barakah*) and food and extends from Arabia to Southeast Asia. Its religious and social goals are defined in terms of Islamic mystical teachings (Woodward 2011:113).

During the *maulidan* tradition, Sultan of Kanoman holds various *slametan* in different places and different times. The first round of *slametan* is conducted in the 25th of *Safar*, a few weeks before the peak of celebration. In this occasion, the participants of *slametan* recite prayers from one place to another. They move from *Lumpang Watu*, *Siti Hinggil*, *Witana*, *Gedong Jimat*, *Jinem* and then finally to the

⁷ Apart from the classic way of *shalawatan*, the mosque of Kasepuhan (Masjid Agung Sang Cipta Rasa) still preserves the sermon with Arabic and '*adzan pitu*' (calling for prayer by seven people) during the *jum'at* prayer.

Langgar. Those places are historical sites around the *kraton* which believed by people as having spirits and blessings. The second round of *slametan* is conducted in the 'Paseban' after the celebration of *Maulid* has finished. The ceremony which lasts in the 12th of *Maulid* and well known as 'buang takir'. Unlike the first and the second one, the third or the last round of *slametan* is held beyond the *kraton*. This *slametan* is conducted in the 15th of *Maulid* and take location in 21 sites and tombs around Cirebon. Some people call this ceremony as *tumpengan*.

The multi functions of *slametan* have put this rite as cultural preference of the people to convey many things. At the first round of *slametan* which is conducted in six different locations, implies the pilgrimage to important and historical places in the formative period of Cirebonese culture and Kingdom. According to Pak Kumisi, such ritual is important to respect the predecessors who played significant role in propagating Islamic teachings and at the same time commemorating their legacy to the present generations. But the most important thing, he said, "our annual prayer in this *slametan* is intended to ask to God for his blessing in this historical place". Meanwhile, the massages concerning thanksgiving to God can be found in the second and the third round of *slametan*. The 'buang takir' means 'discarding the remains' which historically refers to the Sultan's policy in distributing the remains of food for people after the completion of big feast (*maulid*). This practice, later on, has become the moment of Sultan to give charity either he has the food's remains or not. This *slametan* signifies the closing ceremony of the serial events of *maulid*. By the similar massage, the *tumpengan* is also a reflection of thanksgiving ceremony by distributing the 'nasi tumpeng' to those who have dedicated their life to guard the legacy of *kraton*.

The distribution of meal after *slametan* is surely an expected moment by most pilgrimage due to the conviction that the food contains the *berkah* (blessing) from Sultan. A variety of foods, which are provided by Sultan during the *slametan*, certainly becomes favorable charity for people. According to Ratu Sri Mulya, a wife of Sultan Kanoman XI, many meals provided for the three different kinds of *slametan*. At least there are nine kinds of menu should be prepared, such as curry chicken, beef steak, *sambal goreng daging* (fried beef with chilly sauce) and bean, *setuk* (salad with potato, carrot, cabbage, which is combined with milk, egg, coconut milk, added with some ingredients such as salt and white pepper), fried noodle, sauerkraut, beef and goat soup and boiled egg. Besides, the kitchen of *kraton* provides three kinds of rice, such as *nasi tumpeng bogana*, (mount rice with vegetable salad), *tumpeng ayam panggang* (mount rice with roast chicken) and *ura-ura* (white rice). Various cakes, drinks and fruits are also served for the *slametan* feast.

Gamelan Sekaten

The element of *gamelan sekaten* in the *Maulidan* tradition has been a crucial aspect since it was a cultural media of Sunan Gunung Jati and Sunan Kali Jaga to attract people to embrace Islam and contemplating the greatness of God by spiritual touch of *gamelan* music. It is similar with the power of *gamelan* in Yogyakarta's *sekaten* as found by Woodward (2011:182) that is projected 'to attract people to the mosque, and to compel conversion to Islam. According to my informant, the early Islamic propagators in Java used to ask people who want to attend the gamelan concert to recite *syahadat* as a "password" or "ticket" to listen to the instrumental music. In other words, the crew of *Gamelan Sekaten* will play the music for those who have already paid the ticket by *syahadat*. It is a subtle propaganda from Javanese saints which is assumed by Cirebonese Muslim as smart and creative approach rather than using violence approach.

Although the idea of conversion has been out of date, the performance of *gamelan sekaten* has been maintained for some reasons. The concept of *dakwah* or *syiar*, which became the main concern of *Walisono*, is believed by the current Muslim generation as not simple as recruiting people to embrace Islam, but also maintaining their faith and strengthen it to be the true Muslim (*insan kamil*). The leader of *gamelan* group told me that the *gamelan* music is a highly level of contemplation of mankind to his God the Almighty. Besides, preserving the historic legacy from the early propagators of Islam has been one important consideration rather than put them in a storage room. It would be a reminder for people about the concept of peace and harmony that come out from the *gamelan* rhythms. There is also traditional

conviction those who listen the *gamelan sekaten* can eliminate the negative aura of people which is believed that it can come and go.

There are seven titles of music played annually during the *Maulidan*, such as *Cing-cing Duwur*, *Tari Anom*, *Rambu Miring*, *Rambu Alit*, *Rambu Gede*, *Bango Butak* and *Sekatenan*. The music is thought having spiritual meanings which can mediate the audience to contemplate about the One. The *Bango Butak* (Lit. bold egret), for example, conveying the symbolic message about the offer of Islam to elevate people dignity and the subtle exhortation to learn Islamic teachings comprehensively. It is similar with the meaning of *Cing-cing Duwur* (Lit. highly elevate), which telling that embracing Islam by reciting *syahadat* (creed) will elevate people's dignity. He/she will know the God Almighty. However, this *gamelan* is not allowed to play in Friday, whereas its function to mediating mankind to God. Friday is believed by Muslims as the *sayyidul ayyam* (the best day to conduct spiritual rites). In this day, Muslim is recommended to perform ritual or spiritual activities which are determined by *syariah* (*ibadah mahdalah*) rather than doing undetermined activities by Islamic law (*ibadah ghairu mahdalah*) or profane deeds.

The importance of '*gamelan sekaten*' dealing with spiritual messages, however, can not be claimed as the only performance of various manifestations of Cirebonese arts which emphasize divine aspects. Some Cirebonese artists believe that most of the traditional arts were created by the *wali* (saints) to spread the Islamic religion. Therefore, the arts have religious symbols and meanings, which the people should learn to know Islam. Some people think that the philosophical meaning of one set of *wayang kulit* comes from the Qur'an and has the same ideological value as the Qur'an. Many of the *dalang wayang* are highly knowledgeable in this philosophical background of the arts and often explain this to the people through the performances (Suanda 1981: 38). The *tari topeng* (mask dance) has also explanation concerning spiritual dimension of a performance art. The role of character such as Panji, Samba, Ruyang, Temenggung and Klana (Rahwana) is representation of religious people. Their religiosity is embodied in most of motions that always form the symbol of Allah (God) when two hands are lift up as high as shoulder. The curvature which is formed by the meeting between thumbs and finger is like "h" letter (the last letter in the word 'Allah' in Arabic). It also reflects a symbolic balance between material and spiritual achievement for every mankind who believes the greatness of God. Given these symbolic messages, *tari topeng* principally demonstrates the concept of *hablum minallah* (divine relations) and *hablum minannas* (human relations) (Noer 2009:23).

The important feature of *gamelan sekaten* is played by twelve players, which is called *nayaga*. The twelve players, according to the *Sep* (group leader) of *gamelan*, represent the date of Muhammad's birth, 12 of *Rabi'ul Awal* (*Maulid*). This symbolic meaning links the whole unit of performance with the celebration of *Maulidan* which is seemingly separated from the allegorical festival and the *asyrakalan*. The performance of *gamelan* also subjects to tradition. Unlike Kasepuhan *kraton* (palace) that presents *gamelan* during *Idul Fitri* and *Idul Adha*, the *gamelan sekaten* in Kanoman is only played during the *Maulidan*. The performance lasts for five days in the Bangsal Sekaten or Mande Karesmen at Siti Hinggil area. It starts from 7th of *Maulid* after *ashar* prayer when the *pelal alit* (preliminary celebration) is held in the *langgar agung* (mosque) and ends at the *buang takir* (closing ceremony) ritual in 11th of *Maulid*.

Like a system of monarchy, the players of *gamelan sekaten* are appointed based on the lineage. In other words, all *gamelan* players are the son of previous generation of *gamelan* players. At least, he is descendant of Sultan of Kanoman. The *Sep* (Chief), for example, is a nephew of the Sultan Kanoman X (Sultan Raja Muhammad Nurus). Also, like tradition of patriarchal kingdom, there is no female player since its initial performance of *gamelan*. When I ask this issue to the *Sep*, he argues that responsibility of playing '*gamelan sekaten*' is as serious as the propagator of Islam in which no women became part of it. "If playing ordinary *gamelan*, anyone can do it including women," he said. This inclination seemingly replicates the model of orthodoxy in which male dominated paradigm contributed significant role in shaping the popular practice of Islam. The profane practice has been a pseudo-sacred thing for the sake of preserving tradition.

Genealogy among Cirebonese artists is also very important to maintain "the pure artist descendents" which relates to the quality of performance. But it is not as patriarchal as the *kraton* tradition. As Suanda (1981:30) found that there are two different groups of professional artists in Cirebon.

The larger group is of artist descent, and most of them play in the *wayang* (puppet play) and *topeng* (masked dance) performances. The second one is not of artist descent, and most of them play in the other forms of performances such as *sandiwara* (a folk dance theater which uses a proscenium stage and presents the folk stories or legends), *ronggeng* (a female professional dancer in the social dance), *reyog* (a folk theater which is performed by four main artists who carry and play single-headed drums), *bengberokan* or *bangbarongan* (totem form mask play) and *debus* (an acrobatic and magic performance), which technically or artistically are considered simpler than the *wayang* and *topeng*. Artist descent is called *turunan*, if both mother and father are artist. But if only one parent, (only mother or father) the artist is called *katurunan*. In this respect, *turunan* is considered the best, which is why until today most of them always hope to marry their children with the same family. They believe that people who aren't *turunan* or *katurunan* will not be able to obtain the spirit of Pangeran Panggung, the creator of traditional arts. They believe that his spirit can help them in doing the arts. If they can not obtain the spirit of Pangeran Panggung, it means that they can't be good artist because they are unable to reach the essence or the soul of art (1981:30).

Unlike the ordinary ensemble, the *gamelan sekaten* is treated with carefully and highly respect. It is not only because of it is the *kraton's* heirloom which has historical sentiment, but also as noble amulet that is very rare. The *Gamelan Sekaten* was a wedding gift from Sultan Trenggono (King of Demak) to Cirebon Kingdom for the marriage of Ratu Mas Nyawa from the Islamic Kingdom of Demak (daughter of king) with Pangeran Bratakelana (son of Sunan Gunung Jati) in 1495 (Wildan 2002:313). It is a witness of good relationship between Islamic Kingdom of Demak and Cirebon. The damage of the ensemble certainly will not only affect historical evidence of the development of Islam in Java, but also the continuity of *Maulidan* tradition which has lasted hundreds years. Unlike the carriage of *Paksi Naga Liman* which has its duplicate, the *gamelan sekaten* has not.

Given those situation, the *gamelan* ensemble is washed by *nayaga* and held a religious ceremony by *penghulu* (Muslim cleric) before it performs. At about 9 am, the *gamelan* ensemble are taken from the storage room in the *kraton dalem* to the *langgar*. The *penghulu* leads the ceremony which is known as *tawashul*, reciting prayer to obtain blessing. Basically, it is simple ritual by reciting *al-fatihah* (the first section in the Qur'an) which is intended to deliver to some holy men, such as Prophet Muhammad, his Companion, his follower of Companion, *ulama*, Sunan Gunung Jati, *Walisongo* and all Muslims. This ceremony is attended by Sultan, his family, Pangeran Patih, Pangeran Kumisi, Sep (chief) of *sekaten* and some *abdi dalem* (loyal group to Sultan). Instead of using detergent or other modern cleaning liquid, the washing process uses *abu gosok* (traditional cleaning ash), *serbuk bata* (brick's powder) and *sabut kelapa* (coconut fiber). After washing ritual finished, *penghulu* closes the ceremony with a pray and short *nasehat* (exhortation) to *nayaga*.

Conclusion

The whole package of *maulidan* celebration in Kanoman *kraton* confirms the argument that religion is always shaped by its society. Symbolic meanings which are created by society become tools of communication to remind the merit of predecessors, particularly those who played significant role in Islamising Cirebonese people. The parade of amulets reveals how Islam has been transmitted from Muhammad prophet, his Companions, *Walisongo* and Sunan Gunung Jati. It means that remembering and respecting important figures in religion as one of important norms. The parade also reminds people to the religious creed, *syahadatain*, as the most fundamental confession for Muslim to the Oneness of God and the recognition of Muhammad as the His messenger. Undoubtedly, Islamic creed is the core message of the whole ritual of *maulidan* in Kanoman *kraton* as happened to '*grebeg maulid*' in Yogyakarta.

The constitutive elements of commemoration of Muhammad's birth in Kanoman are 'indexical symbols' modifying a folk religion into local entity. The practice of *slametan*, *panjang jimat*, *asyrakalan* and *gamelan sekaten* in one package of religious-based celebration has demonstrated a distinct feature of popular Islam among the complex manifestation of tradition in the Muslim world. While Islamic orthodoxy restricts the movement of female actors, in the practice of popular Islam, they found a freedom to play their social and cultural role. Except participating in the *gamelan* concert, women have

opportunity to take part in most ritual of *maulidan* such as *slametan*, *panjang jimat* and *asyrakalan*. This trend indicates that traditional machinery of sexual division of ritual labour has unconsciously fostered the project of women empowerment in the ritual world.

Although the central element of the *Maulid* is the recitation of texts expressing honour and love for the Prophet Muhammad, the tradition of *Maulidan* in Kanoman shows the richness and creative innovation of the Javanese Muslim propagator (*walisongo*, nine saints) in reconciling Islam and local cultures. The adoption of local instruments and creation of musical works in the mediation between mankind and the God Almighty is a fascinating effort and has become inspiration of local artists to develop the art performance exploring spiritual achievement or divine messages. The relationship between Islamic propagation and the performance of art has been successfully exemplified by the *maulidan* ritual in a peaceful atmosphere. At the same time, the observance of *slametan* during the *maulidan* tradition has reinforced the religious authority of Sultan in mobilizing a massive traditional gathering that has lasted hundreds of years. Instead of polluting the purity of Islamic religion, the adoption of *slametan* has enriched the traditional elements of Cirebonese Islam.

The meaning of rites may extend far beyond its stated purpose of venerating the Prophet since the folk religion has strategically generated the “old power” and religious authority. The declining power after penetration of Dutch colonial into the structure of local politics has inevitably encouraged Sultan to maintain his authority as the guardian of Islamic traditions. It is in line with some scholars who believe that Muslim monarchs have used elaborate Maulid performance to demonstrate their piety and power and in so doing to establish their Islamic legitimacy for many centuries. As the success of Yogyakarta’s Sultan in celebrating *maulid*, the *maulidan* tradition is ‘capable of creating meaningful connections between the imperial cult and every segment of ‘Cirebon people’ other than those Islamic modernists and Islamists who against it in principle’ (Woodward 2011:178).

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