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SOUNDING ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA
The Transformation of Javanese *Tembang*[1]

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between sound and religion focusing on mediated religion and the transformation of sonic sensation. It studies a Javanese children's song (*tembang dolanan)* called *Ilir-Ilir* (Javanese pronunciation: [*iler iler*]) which is an example of a Javanese song bearing a deep philosophy, richness of interpretations, and modes of presentation. Examining the Javanese song *Ilir-ilir*, this paper examines the two dimensions of the song and the transformation of *tembang dolanan* into the Islamic ones through the meaning-making and sonic dimension to generate Islamic sensation. The analysis goes beyond the textual tradition -in case of the song i.e., lyrics and textual dimension of the song- as looking at the interpretation of the song and the sonic atmosphere of sound. The article further argues that the transformation Javanese *Ilir-ilir* delivers an important insight of relationship between sound and religion as to which sound contributes to the making of religious sensation and reverberates the mediated religion through sensational form.

Keywords: *Ilir-Ilir, Tembang*, auditory sense, sound, mediatisation.

Introduction

Since the introduction of Islam as discursive practices by Talal Asad, anthropologists have paid a strong attention to textual aspects of Islam that are mainly considered as a body of opinion. For Asad,

[1] I would like to thank to Brilian Akbar Bahaduri, Nilam Maharani, and Gadis Kristina Devi for drawing the musical notation of two version of *Ilir-ilir*. My greatest gratitude goes to Rhomayda Alfa Aimah for initiating and close-reading this article.

'discursive tradition' is the concern of an anthropology of Islam and argues that "that orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion, but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power. For Asad, "if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith".[2] Though text centred-analysis through hermeneutic, linguistic, philology and also history are important to analyse Muslim societies as Asad suggests, and there have been abundant studies pertaining to this approach, I argue approaching multitude forms of Muslim societies through the lens of discursive tradition seems to be inadequate. For Shahab Ahmed for example, this discursive approach tends to sacrifice the pluralities of interpretation at the expense of prescriptive authority that constitutes Islam while neglecting the possibility to explore the religion (*explorative* authority).[3]

Birgit Meyer on the other hand offers a fresh perspective to comprehend elements that constitute religion. Unlike Asad that emphasises on text, Meyer notes that mediatisation is inseparable from religion,[4] therefore to comprehend religion is tantamount to understanding the practice of mediatisation of the invisible.[5] Religion, as Robert Orsi also argues, after all is "the practice of making invisible visible"[6] and religion needs to be mediated to enable people to structure their spirituality in concrete ways. Webb Keane also writes 'religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms."[7] Under the disguise of this wave, I will demonstrate through this article, understanding religion through religious texts and

[2] Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington DC: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), 14–17.

[3] Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princenton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 276–277.

[4] Birgit Meyer, "Media and the Senses in the Making of Religious Experience: An Introduction," *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (2008): 124–135.

[5] Birgit Meyer, ed., "Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses," in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[6] Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 73.

[7] Webb Keane, "The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): s124.

their interpretation is insufficient and argue the importance of senses in order to better understand religion and how it is experienced. In so doing, this article brings into the fore the sensory dimension as to which it affects the making of religious sensation and how religion is received through human senses. Meyer mentions this modality as 'sensational form' or "relatively fixed modes for invoking and organising access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes."[8]

Contemporary scholars however have given a particular attention to the relation between religion and senses, particularly on the questions of how religion is mediated and how auditory element of religion creates religious nuance and bears religious identity. Inspired by the notion of "scape" by Arjun Appadurai,[9] scholars give a particular attention to the relation of identity and sound through the concept of "soundscape".[10] Soundscape, Murray Schafer writes, is sonic environment which aims to describe the totality of sounds perceived by an individual in a given spatial setting and environment.[11] Inspired by this wave, scholars of religious examine the is the relationship between sounds, religious spaces, and political belonging. They show how religious sounds that are performed in public directly impinge on questions of citizenship.[12] This is particularly especially evident for religious sounds in diverse urban settings.[13] In particular,

[8] Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): 29.

[9] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[10] Dorothea E. Schulz, "A Fractured Soundscape of the Divine: Female 'Preachers', Radio Sermons and Religious Place-Making in Urban Mali," in *Prayer in the City: The Making of Muslim Sacred Places and Urban Life*, ed. Patrick Desplat and Dorothea Elisabeth Schulz (Piscataway NJ: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 239–264; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassettes and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[11] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Vermont: Inner Traditions/Bear, 1993).

[12] Ann R David, "Sacralising the City: Sound, Space and Performance in Hindu Ritual Practices in London," *Culture and Religion* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 449–467; Marleen De Witte, "Accra's Sounds and Sacred Spaces," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 690–709.de

[13] Jeanette S. Jouili and Annelies Moors, "Introtuction: Islamic Sounds and the Politics of Listening," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 977–988.

the Islamic call for prayer (*azan*) has become the focus of controversies and has triggered local debates about Muslims' right to the city and overall political belonging.[14]

In addition to the *azan*, other Islamic sounds, such as public sermons and devotional practices are other important examples of sound bearing Islamic identity and nuance.[15] Sunarwoto, for example, studies the practice of listening to radio sermon of Islamic movements in Surakarta, Indonesia which delivers the sound contestation on practices and definitions of Islam.[16] In the same vein, Charles Hirschkind investigates ethical listening of cassette sermon and highlights the pivotal roles that tapes play in expanding spheres of Islamic debates in Egypt which he calls as "Islamic counter-publics".[17] Against the background of a powerful Qur'anic paradigm of vocal recitation, Anna Gade examines the national competition of Quranic recitation (*Musabaqah Tilawatil al-Quran/MTQ*) in performative setting, whereas Muazu and Rasmussen, through the notion of *aura* (female nudity) studies gendered sound of Quranic recitation by female reciters.[18] In Nigeria, Muazu finds the notion of *aura* of female Quranic reciter has been a heated debate among Muslim scholars on permissibility of female Quranic competition in a public setting.

This article on the other hand tries to offer a set of question on the making of Islamic sound and how sound intersects with religion and religious sensation. These sets of question of had been be overlooked as to which of how religious identity develops through sonic representation. As I will demonstrate through the article, how the song is being sung through a certain melody and tones is not meant merely to represent the song to its listeners, but seeks to induce inner spiritual experiences of listeners through which they are supposedly experience

[14] Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); P. Tamimi Arab, "Amplifying Islam: Pluralism, Secularism, and Religious Sounds in The Netherlands" (PhD Thesis, University Utrecht, 2015).

[15] Patrick Eisenlohr, "Technologies of the Spirit: Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction and the Dialectics of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 3 (2009): 273–296.

[16] Sunarwoto, "Contesting Religious Authority: A Study on Dakwah Radio in Surakarta, Indonesia" (Ph.D Thesis, Tilburg University, 2015).

[17] Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassettes and Islamic Counterpublics*.

[18] Anne Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

religious sensation and atmosphere. Thus, sound bears a particular religious sensation as to which it is experienced through auditory sense. In so doing, this article studies a Javanese children's song called *Ilir-Ilir* which is an example of a simple Javanese song bearing a deep philosophy and is recently bestowed an Islamic interpretation.[19]

In this paper I will, first of all, give background information on Javanese oral tradition, especially *tembang* (song). Secondly, a description will be given of how the song *Ilir-Ilir* is sung during the performance Nini Thowok, a traditional Javanese game. Further, because of the too many arguments of what *Ilir-Ilir* means, I will give only one example of the Islamic interpretation of the song, based on the most recent publication exploring the meaning of the song by Achmad Chodjim.[20] Finally, I will show how the song *Ilir-Ilir* has survived until today. It is exactly thanks to a new Islamic version of *Ilir-Ilir*, arranged differently from the Javanese one, that the song remains familiar to Javanese as well as to the wider Indonesian Muslims. As noted by Albert B. Lord, "[t]he picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it".[21] Thus, I argue that the transformation of *Ilir-Ilir* into Islamic song is a way to facilitate the perseverance of the tradition amid the contemporary changing landscape of Indonesian Islam.

Ilir-Ilir in Two Dimensions

Javanese literature, both written and oral, is known to be rich of philosophical and religious teachings. Poems and songs are composed containing wisdom and Javanese moral values. Not only songs with evasive words, there are also many Javanese songs using plain words which are said to conceal high valued messages. Songs are also a communication tool to inform and express religiosity to and among people because of their capacity to influence the listeners through stimulating their emotions.[22] In Java, a contrast cannot be easily made between oral and written tradition. Although writing in general was

[19] Rahina Muazu, "Qur'an Recitation and the Nudity of the Female Voice in Nigeria" (Ph.D Thesis, Freie University of Berlin, 2019).

[20] Achmad Chodjim, *Mistik Dan Makrifat Sunan Kalijaga* (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2003).

[21] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 29.

[22] Meyer, "Aesthetic Form. Media, Relig. Senses."

introduced later than speaking, there are many Javanese songs (*tembang*) which were initially written poems (*serat*). These poems are read by a group of people, mostly men. Reading a Javanese poem is not like reading a poem, for instance, in Indonesian language. When one reads a Javanese poem, it means that one sings (*nembang*) it. Some people know these *tembangs* by heart and therefore they do not have to read the texts. This shows the mingling of two traditions, oral and written, in Java.

Oral tradition plays a very important role which manifests in various kinds of traditions in Javanese society. Some among many forms of Javanese oral tradition are stories performed in shadow play (*wayang*) and drama (*kethoprak*), proverbs, riddles (*cangkriman*), and songs (*tembang*). Bernard Arps has studied Javanese *tembang* and classifies Javanese *tembang* into three categories, namely *tembang macapat* (ordinary *tembang*), *tembang tengahan* (intermediate), and *tembang gedhé* (eminent, outstanding *tembang*). The most popular genre of these three categories is *tembang macapat*. There are nine metres of *macapat* namely *Dhandhanggula*, *Sinom*, *Pangkur*, *Asmarandana*, *Durma*, *Kinanthi*, *Mijil*, *Pucung*, and *Maskumambang*.[23] J.J. Ras explains, "[e]ach metre has its own melodic pattern or patterns to which the text is sung, the choice of metre and thus of the melody depending on tone of the contents: didactic, admonishing, exhorting, serious, sentimental, [...] etc."[24]

Whereas many studies have been made to the songs mentioned above, there is another kind of song in Java which still needs to be more explored, namely *tembang dolanan* (children's song). Children's song is not included in the classification made to Javanese *tembang* presumably because it has another function. While *tembang macapat*, *tengahan*, and *gedhé* offer metres as manners to sing poems, *tembang dolanan* serves as a genre which covers all Javanese children's songs with particular melodies and lyrics. An early study on *tembang dolanan* has been made by H. Overbeck in 1938.[25] He recorded various Javanese children's songs and games in his work *Javaansche meisjesspelen en kinderliedjes: beschrijving der spelen, Javaansche liederteksten, vetaling*. The

[23] Bernard Arps, "Tembang in Two Traditions: Performance and Interpretation of Javanese Literature," *1992* (Ph.D Dissertation Rijkuniversiteit Leiden, n.d.), 53–62.

[24] J.J. Ras, "Introduction," in *Javanese Literature since Independence: An Anthology,* ed. J.J. Ras (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 3.

[25] H. Overbeck, *Javaansche Meisjesspelen En Kinderliedjes: Beschrijving Der Spelen, Javaansche Liederteksten, Vertaling. Afl. 4* (Jokjakarta: Java-Instituut, 1938).

book is important for being a bibliographical source recording popular songs in the early twentieth century Java. A more recent Indonesian scholar who studies Javanese children's songs, Triyono Bramantyo, merely makes an anthology of various Javanese children's songs with a short introduction mentioning that Javanese children's songs are dying out, thus a comprehensive study on Javanese children's song is still needed.[26] Yet, there has been a vacuum in scholarly discussions and circles discussing the transformation of *tembang dolanan* which is contemporary branded as Islamic song.

In the following discussion, I try to comprehend the transformation *tembang dolanan* to Islamic song through interpretation of the song *Ilir-Ilir* and how the song is being sung. Whereas the first discussion is important to understand of how the song bestow Islamic values and meanings, the latter discussion is essential in order to better comprehend the making of Islamic nuance through human sense, i.e., how the song is being received by auditory sense. It is intriguing to study *Ilir-Ilir* because of its richness of interpretations and modes of presentation. The song is believed to have been composed by one of the Nine Saints (Wali Sanga) who introduced Islam to Java around the sixteenth century by adapting Islamic ideals to Javanese local culture. Although many authors argue that the song was composed by the Wali Sanga, I must say that their argument is still lack of convincing evidence. Importantly, I argue that *Ilir-Ilir* is genuinely a Javanese song – in the sense that it uses Javanese words and belongs to the Javanese culture, which is strongly influenced by Hindu and Buddhist values –, that has been labelled as an Islamic song. I must say, this paper will not give an answer to the question on the origins of the song – by whom or when it was composed – because no reliable sources which is possible to answer the question. However, I argue that the song *Ilir-Ilir* delivers worth noting twofold: firstly, how the song *Ilir-Ilir* has two different dimensions, namely Javanese and Islamic, and secondly, how this song still lives in the society to this very day through new interpretations and the transformation of melody and tones of the song.

[26] Bramantyo Triyono, *Lagu Dolanan Anak* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Untuk Indonesia, 2000).

Ilir-Ilir as a Javanese Children's Song

Despite the fact that many Javanese children's songs are dying out, of course there are songs which have existed until today. *Ilir-Ilir* is one of them. Since this song lives as an oral tradition, there are many versions of the lyric of this song. Below I give some versions of the lyric of *Ilir-Ilir* according to H. Overbeck.[27] The spelling and the English translation have been adjusted referring to the *Javanese-English Dictionary* by Stuart Robson and Singgih Wibisono (see table 1).[28]

Table 1. Lyrics of Ilir-ilir in Javanese – English version

Javanese Version	English Version
Lir-ilir, lir-ilir (Ilir-Ilir, or Lilir-lilir)	the waving bamboo fan
tanduré wong sumilir (semilir)	the cool wind blows softly over
or tanduré wis sêmilir	the young plants
or tanduké wong kang minggir	
tak ijo royo-royo	which are fresh and green
or ijo royo-royo	
or sing ijo raya-raya	
tak sengguh temantèn (pengantèn) anyar	I suppose it is a newlywed
or kadia pangantèn anyar	
cah angon, cah angon (bocah angon)	hey, cattleman
pènèkna (pènèken) blimbing kuwé (kuwi)	please climb up this star fruit tree
lunyu-lunyu pènèken	even if it is slippery, please climb it
dinggo (dienggo, kanggo) masuh dodotira	we use the fruit to wash your ceremonial batik
or gawé masuh dodotira	
or dinggo ngumbah dodotira	
dodotira kemitir (kumeter, kumitir)	your ceremonial batik is flapping
or ilir-ilir	
or dodotira, dodotira sumiwir	
bedhah in pinggir	it is torn on the edge
or bedhah pinggiré	
or dodot bedhah ing pinggir	
domana, jlumatana	sew it and mend it with fine stitching
or ndondomana, jlumatana	
or do(n)domana, jrumatana	

[27] Overbeck, *Javaansche Meisjesspelen En Kinderliedjes: Beschrijving Der Spelen, Javaansche Liedteksten, Vertaling. Afl. 4*, 284.

[28] Stuart Robson and Singgih Wibisono, *Javanese-English Dictionary* (Hong Kong: Periplus Editions, 2022).

Javanese Version	English Version
dinggo (dienggo, kanggo) séba engko (mengko) soré	we will wear it to appear before the king this afternoon
or gawé séba mengko soré	
pupung (mumpung, mupung) gedhé rembulané	while it is full moon
or mupung jembar kalangané	while the yard is still spacious
mupung (pupung, mumpung) jembar kalangané	
or mupung gedhé rembulané	while it is full moon
or pumpung amba kalangané	
suraka (asuraka, ya suraka), surak: iyé (iyo, sayuk)!	let's cheer: hurray!
or yèn suraka, surak: iyé!	

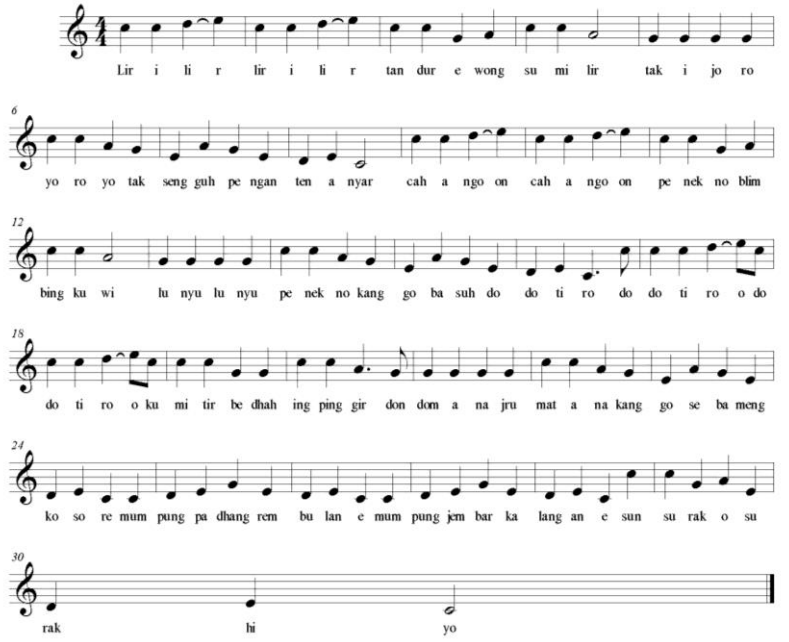
Books and early publications mentioning *Ilir-Ilir* note that the song is a Javanese children's song, together with, among other songs, *Jamuran*, *Gundhul-Gundhul Pacul*, *Ménthog-Ménthog*, *Sluku-Sluku Bathok*, and *Cublak-Cublak Suweng*. The melody of *Ilir-ilir* as Javanese is cheerful demonstrating the happiness of the singer and so does the melody. It is hardly possible to generate religious nuance because the melody of the song is cheerful and intended to create a joyful circumstance to the singers, so do the listeners. Importantly, the song is sung in joyful event where children play their games, thus it is called *tembang donanan*. It is a genre of Javanese song which is supposedly sung by children while they are playing.

Unlike any other children's songs, *Ilir-Ilir* today can be regarded as an Islamic song as well as sung by adults. So, besides learning to sing it in the Indonesian primary school (Sekolah Dasar/SD), in what other way do Javanese children usually sing *Ilir-Ilir*? The answer is quite surprising for the Javanese context of the song has nothing to do with Islam. Research by H. Overbeck (1938) describes how the song *Ilir-Ilir* is sung by girls and women during a Javanese children's game called Nini Thowok.[29] Nini Thowok is a female puppet "made of a coconut shell dipper dressed up which moves when a spirit enters it and is able to pass messages" and functions as spirit medium. Children are

[29] Ibid., 754.

supposedly singing the song *Ilir-Ilir* to welcome the spirit.[30] According to Overbeck, the game goes as follows: First of all, the puppet will be brought to a secluded place, where it next becomes inspired. In the evening, it will be picked up and people will sing some songs, including *Ilir-Ilir*. As a matter of fact, there are five songs starting with "*Ilir-Ilir*" sung in this game, namely *Ilir-Ilir Tandure Wong Sumilir* (which is the subject of this paper),[31] *Lir-Ilir Kantu*, *Lir-Ilir Gunanthi*, *Ilir-Ilir, Lir Ku Jagong*, and *Ilir-Ilir Guling*. After singing these songs, girls and women will notice that the puppet has come alive and become heavier. They will carry and hold the puppet tight. They will feel that the puppet moves and drags them.[32]

Figure 1. *Lir-ilir* as a Javanese Children's Song



[30] Bambang Hernawan and Munawar Holil, "Nini Towong and Environmental Preservation: Manuscript Review," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 469, no. 1 (2020).

[31] Javanese songs usually do not have titles. To name a song, one just mentions the first line of the song.

[32] Overbeck, *Javaansche Meisjesspelen En Kinderliedjes: Beschrijving Der Spelen, Javaansche Liederteksten, Vertaling. Afl. 4*, 284–287.

Totilawati explains that *Ilir-Ilir* (or *Ilir-Ilir Tandure Wong Sumilir*) in the performance Nini Thowok is a song to call the wind, whereas *Lir-Ilir Gunanthi* and *Ilir-Ilir Guling* function as mantras to call the nine angels to descend to earth.[33] However, there are other opinions: *Ilir-Ilir* is sung in order to inspire the ones holding the puppet, to make the puppet come to life, and it is merely a song sung by the dancers waving their bamboo fans (*ilir*).[34] The performance Nini Thowok itself has several functions: entertainment, validation of Javanese cultural traditions (Nini Thowok as a ritual to call rain, as a fortune teller, and as a village guardian), and education (teaching Javanese children about the existence of supernatural forces).[35] Nini Thowok today is no longer as popular as it was prior to the 1950s. The performance is believed to have been forbidden for it is not allowed in Islam.[36] Nevertheless, the song *Ilir-Ilir* survives and is contemporary branded as Islamic song.

The Islamic Dimension of Ilir-Ilir

The attribute that *Ilir-Ilir* is an Islamic song originates to the believe that the song is composed by one of the earliest Muslim proselytisers in Java who are said as the famous Nine Saints of Java (Wali Sanga).[37] Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence of when *Ilir-Ilir* was composed and who wrote the lyrics of the song. Any information about music in the early period of Islam in Java is still unknown. The

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[33] Totilawati, "Nini Ṭowok," in *Javanese Literature since Independence: An Anthology*, ed. J.J. Ras (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979).

[34] Parwatri Wahjono, *Laporan Penelitian Ni Thowok; Dolanan Anak-Anak, Sebuah Bentuk Teater Jawa; Kajian Folklorik Dan Sastra'* (Universitas Indonesia: Jakarta, 1988).

[35] Ibid., 110; Hernawan and Holil, "Nini Towong and Environmental Preservation: Manuscript Review."

[36] Wahjono, *Laporan Penelitian Ni Thowok; Dolanan Anak-Anak, Sebuah Bentuk Teater Jawa; Kajian Folklorik Dan Sastra'*, 163.

[37] The word 'Wali Sanga' is derived from '*wali'*, which means 'saint' and the Javanese word '*sanga'* which means 'nine.' In both the folk and literary traditions of Java, there have been various views about who belong to this group of illustrious figures. According to Salam, the Wali Sanga are limited to nine Muslim saints, namely Maulana Malik Ibrahim (Sunan Gresik), Sunan Ampel, Sunan Bonang, Sunan Dradjat, Sunan Giri, Sunan Kudus, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Muria, and Sunan Gunung Jati. Solichin Salam, *Sekitar Wali Sanga* (Kudus: Menara Kudus, 1963); Syaifudin Zuhri, *Wali Pitu and Muslim Pilgrimage in Bali, Indonesia: Inventing a Sacred Tradition* (Leiden University Press, 2022).

speculation that *Ilir-Ilir* was composed by a Muslim saint (*wali*) comes from Indonesian authors, among others Purwadi and Achmad Chodjim. For these authors, Wali Sanga introduced Islam in Java through cultural approaches, i.e., through non-violent means. For Purwadi, Sunan Giri did not only compose the song *Ilir-Ilir*, *tembang Asmarandana* and *Pucung*, but also created various Javanese children's games and Javanese musical instruments (*gamelan*).[38] Achmad Chodjim, a writer who focuses on Javanese-Islamic teachings, argues that Sunan Kalijaga was the composer of *Ilir-Ilir*.[39] However, both arguments by Purwadi and Achmad Chodjim are still lack of clear evidence. As Claude Guillot and Henri Chambert-Loir note, "Javanese Islamic leaders seemed to spread their teachings orally and hardly leave any written texts".[40] What we understand from this fact is that there is an assumption that the song was composed by one of the Wali Sanga in the period where Islam was being introduced to Java.

In the beginning of the fifteenth century, the power of Hindu-Javanese kingdoms in Java declined due to Islamic expansion. Sumarsam explains that Sufism was an important key of success of the Islamisation in Java because it emphasised on mystical practices and spiritual trainings to reach the religious enlightenment. Music and performing arts were therefore considered essential. As a result, there was a unique fusion of Javanese music and Sufism.[41] Today's Islamic esotericism in Indonesia, which is affiliated with syncretism and mysticism, traces back to the legends of Wali Sanga. According to Martin van Bruinessen, "[t]he most Javanese of these *wali* was Sunan Kalijaga, a prince, vagrant mystic and reformed robber, who acquired his profound knowledge of Islam through silent meditation rather than textual study. He is credited with adapting Javanese cultural forms such as the *wayang* puppet theatre and gamelan music to spread Islamic

[38] Purwadi, *Dakwah Sunan Kalijaga; Penyebaran Agama Islam Di Jawa Berbasi Kultural* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004), 23–24.

[39] Chodjim, *Mistik Dan Makrifat Sunan Kalijaga*.

[40] Claude Guillot and Henri Chambert-Loir, "Indonesia," in *Ziarah & Wali Di Dunia Islam*, ed. Claude Guillot and Henri Chambert-Loir (Jakarta: Serambi & EFEO, n.d.), 342.

[41] Sumarsam, *Gamelan; Interaksi Budaya Dan Perkembangan Musikal Di Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2003), 27–36.

teachings and with reinforcing the old Javanese techniques for acquiring supernatural powers with secret Islamic knowledge".[42]

It is hardly surprising that the song *Ilir-Ilir* is said to conceal important Islamic teachings since Javanese are fond of giving a deeper interpretation to Javanese literature in general, not to mention that one of the Wali Sanga is believed to have composed the song. Arps notes, "[*w*]*ong Jawa nggoné semu* 'Javanese are the locus of semblances' [...]. *Wong Jawa nggoné semu* is a saying that expresses a Javanese view of a Javanese form of conduct, a refined convention of which Javanese may be proud [...]. The concept of *semu* features prominently in talk about the interpretation of *tembang* literature [...]. It is possible to interpret elements of literary works 'plainly' (*wantah*), to take them at face value. But many elements can also be taken as *semu*; much more attractive – and in certain respects controversial– a search for an underlying import, only faintly perceptible on the surface".[43] Concerning Islamic interpretation of Javanese texts, *Ilir-Ilir* is not the only example of it. Javanese are familiar with Javanese terms translated almost literally into Arabic and so reveal the Islamic meaning of these terms. To give a few popular examples: *kalimasada*, the weapon of the *wayang* figure Yudhistira, is said to be derived from the Arabic *kalima as-ṣahada* (*kalima* 'word', *ṣahada* 'testimony'), which means the Islamic declaration of faith confessing two things: the oneness of God and that Mohammed is God's messenger; the Javanese children's song *Sluku-Sluku Bathok* is the Javanese version of *ghuslu ghuslu baṭnaka* (*ghusala* 'to bath', *baṭna* 'soul', *ka* 'you (possessive)') which means 'clean your soul'; and *sekatèn*, an annual fair organized by the *kraton* (Javanese palace) is derived from *ṣahadatain*, the two Islamic testimonies.

Unlike the abovementioned examples, interpretation of the song *Ilir-Ilir* is made semiotically by revealing the meaning of the symbols mentioned in the song. Yet, a comprehensive interpretation of the song is hard to find, either because of the too little information or the too many opinions. Publications mentioning *Ilir-Ilir* usually give only slightly what the song implies, whereas broader explanations, which are to be found more easily on the internet, are of unclear sources.

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[42] Martin van Bruinessen, "Saints, Politicians and Sufi Bureaucrats: Mysticism And Politics In Indonesia's New Order," in *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia D. Howell (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 106–107.

[43] Arps, "Tembang in Two Traditions: Performance and Interpretation of Javanese Literature," 351.

However, there is one publication that quite extensively digs for the meaning of the song *Ilir-Ilir*, namely *Mistik and Makrifat Sunan Kalijaga* written by Achmad Chodjim. Departing from the view that *Ilir-Ilir* was composed by Sunan Kalijaga, in the eighth chapter of his book, Chodjim elaborates the meaning of the symbols mentioned in the song following Sunan Kalijaga's mystical teachings.[44]

Chodjim writes that *Ilir-Ilir* contains messages addressed not to Javanese non-Muslims, but rather, to Javanese kings and political leaders who just converted to Islam.[45] *Lir-ilir, lir ilir, tanduré wong sumilir, tak ijo royo-royo* (the cool wind blows softly over the young plants which are fresh and green) symbolises the good times in Java when Islam was acknowledged as the new religion. *Taksengguh temantèn anyar* (I suppose it is a newlywed) means that the new religion was hopefully to bring happiness among the followers as well as to other people, which is equal to the happiness of a newlywed.[46] *Cah angon* (cattleman) does not symbolise the common people, but rather the Javanese kings and leaders whose duty is to give protection to their people. They must fulfil their commitment to follow the five principles (star fruit) even if they face difficulties (*pènèkna blimbing kuwé, lunyu-lunyu pènèken*). The star fruit is often interpreted as the five pillars of Islam (Ind.: *rukun Islam*). However, Chodjim has another argument concerning the star fruit mentioned in the song. Because Islam at the moment was then still alien to the Javanese, it was unlikely to introduce Islamic or Arabic terms to them. The star fruit is therefore not a symbol of the five principles of Islam, but rather the five principles of Buddhism (*Pancasila Buddhis*) which were more familiar to the Javanese. The five Buddhist principles are: the prohibition to kill, to steal, of indecency, to lie, and to drink.[47]

These principles were the guidelines of the Javanese kings to maintain the quality of their religion (*dinggo masuh dodotira*, to wash your ceremonial *batik*). *Dodot* is Javanese royal clothes. In Java, clothes (*ageman*) are often a symbol of religion. There is a Javanese saying: *agama ageming Aji* which means that religion is the clothes of kings. When the faith is tarnished, one must reaffirm it (*dodotira kemitir bedhah*

[44] Chodjim, *Mistik Dan Makrifat Sunan Kalijaga*.

[45] Ibid., 147–148.

[46] Ibid., 196–197.

[47] Ibid., 152–154.

ing pinggir, domana jlumatana, your ceremonial batik is flapping and it is torn on the edge, sew it and mend it with fine stitching). What one needs is perfect faith to face God in afterlife (*dinggo séba engko soré*, to appear before the king this afternoon).[48] *Pupung gedhé rembulané, mumpung jembar kalangané, suraka surak: iyé!* (while it is full moon, while the yard is still spacious, let's cheer hurray!) describes the fall of the Javanese kingdom Majapahit and the Javanese' conversion to Islam which were worth celebrating. This period gave the chance to the Javanese leaders to improve their faith.[49]

Sounding Islam through *Ilir-Ilir*

The previous sections of this article discuss the transformation of meaning through the act of interpretation -elsewhere speculation- by Indonesian authors and how the song is significantly attributed to the history of Islamisation in Java and the roles of Wali Sanga. As we understand from the discussion, *Ilir-Ilir* has experienced a major transformation following some Indonesians authors impinged a certain Islamic interpretation to the text of *Ilir-Ilir*. In this section, I will discuss another component essential in the transformation of *Ilir-Ilir* as Islamic song, i.e., the sonic dimension of the song. Patrick Eisenlohr argues that the voice might manifest itself as a site of divine manifestation. He calls into attention into sonic events and offers the sonic incitement of sensations that are independent from language. Eisenlohr also looks at sound reproduction as the practices of mediatisation and immediacy through media technologies.[50] Eisenlohr writes:

> "*Sounding Islam* is centered on an account of how these two dimensions of the power of sound interact. The sonic is powerful in itself; but culturally attuned bodies and selves also ascribe power to sound. As I explain later on, sounds contain suggestions of movement that bodies perceive. However, in order for sonic suggestions of movement to seize someone in a religious setting like those I describe in this book, they also must pass through

[48] Ibid., 151.

[49] Ibid., 149–150.

[50] Eisenlohr, "Technologies of the Spirit: Devotional Islam, Sound Reproduction and the Dialectics of Mediation and Immediacy in Mauritius."

> bodily attunement and interact with religious and cultural values and ideologies that mediate the power of sound".[51]

In this regard, it is important to recall the practice of singing of the *Ilir-Ilir* as introduced by the famous Indonesian poet and author Emha Ainun Nadjib, popularly known as Cak Nun. Born in Menturo, a village in Jombang, East Java, in 1953, Najib is the founder of the *maiyah* movement. Derived from Arabic *ma'a* meaning 'together", *maiyah* is a religious gathering that connect not only Muslims and *santri* circle, but also non-Muslims and *abangan* circle.[52] The gathering particularly accommodates a series of musical performance combined with *dhikr* (Islamic chanting) and Javanese songs by his Kyai Kanjeng group that Najib established in 1993.[53]

Kyai Kanjeng is a group of experimental Javanese gamelan musicians which is well known for introducing a hybrid Islamic contemporary music for it fuses Javanese gamelan music and foreign music (Arabic, Chinese, and Western). Kyai Kanjeng is widely accepted by the market, the media industry and audiences nationwide for this group frequently appears on private televisions and his performances are recorded and distributed in various forms and media. The famous performance of Kyai Kanjeng is Kenduri Sholawat. *Kenduri* is an

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[51] Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (California: University of California Press, 2018), 4.

[52] *Abangan,* derived from the Javanese '*abang',* means 'red' and connotes the Javanese religion that shows a great blending between Islam and Javanese local beliefs and rituals, i.e., Hindu or Buddhist. The term *abangan* is contrasted with the notion of *santri* that is pure and orthodox Muslim of *santri* or *putihan* (from Javanese *putih* means 'white'). However, the characterisation of *abangan* as syncretic and inobservant Islam oversimplifies the influence of Sufism on the *abangan* tradition. The most influential study on *abangan* and its religious characteristics see Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 29. On the contrast between *abangan* and *santri* from historical perspective see Merle C. Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, c. 1830-1930* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007), 49. On the influence of Sufism on the *abangan* tradition and a more recent observation on the *abangan* tradition in the peripheral Java, Banyuwangi, Mark Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion. An Anthropological Account* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For criticism against the antagonistic dichotomy of *santri-abangan* see Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises Over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town c. 1910-2010*, 2nd Enlarg. (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012).

[53] Timothy Daniels, *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 134–146.

Indonesian term referring to "celebration and "*sholawat*" is the recitation praising the prophet Muhammad. Kenduri Sholatullah was performed in a quite extravagant and dramatic stage setting combing Javanese-centric nuances, such as the Javanese-styled stage with Javanese shadow puppetry setting and the orchestra players and musicians were dressed in Javanese costumes.[54] Importantly, Cak Nun and his Kyai Kanjeng introduced many *sholawat* texts combines with Javanese popular songs through their performance.[55]

Important to every performance of Kyai Kanjeng, among others, is the singing of *Ilir-Ilir*. In so doing, in 1999, Emha Ainun Nadjib and his gamelan music group Kiai Kanjeng arranged a song titled *Ilir-Ilir & Shalawat Badar*.[56] This song is a creative combination of the Javanese song *Ilir-Ilir* and the Arabic verses of *shalawat Badar* in the gamelan music arrangement.[57] The melody of the song *Ilir-Ilir* in this album is far from the Javanese children's song or *tembang dolanan*. It is modified into the melody of the *shalawat Badar*,[58] with which it imposes a certain Islamic nuance. The Javanese Gamelan, let alone the lyrics of the song, is essential to bridge the Javanese identity and religious aspect of sound. Thus, along with the modification of the song, Nadjib successfully creates what Eisenlohr call as "transducive elements of religion", i.e., the relationships between sound and human senses which facilitate the sound of falling into a specific religious tradition.[59]

Since the composition of *Ilir-Ilir & Shalawat Badar*, the Islamic melodised *Ilir-Ilir* arranged by Kiai Kanjeng has become widely known, with the result that the older Javanese version of *Ilir-Ilir*, which has existed much longer, fades away. To give a short description, the first page on *YouTube* that appears after we insert 'ilir-ilir' as the query

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[54] Franki S Notosudirdjo, "Kyai Kanjeng: Islam and the Search for National Music in Indonesia," *The World of Music* 45, no. 2 (2003): 39–52.

[55] Anne Rasmussen, "Performing Religious Politics: Islamic Musical Arts in Indonesia," in *Music and Conflict*, ed. John Morgan O'Connell and Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 155–176.

[56] See the album *Menyorong Rembulan* (1999).

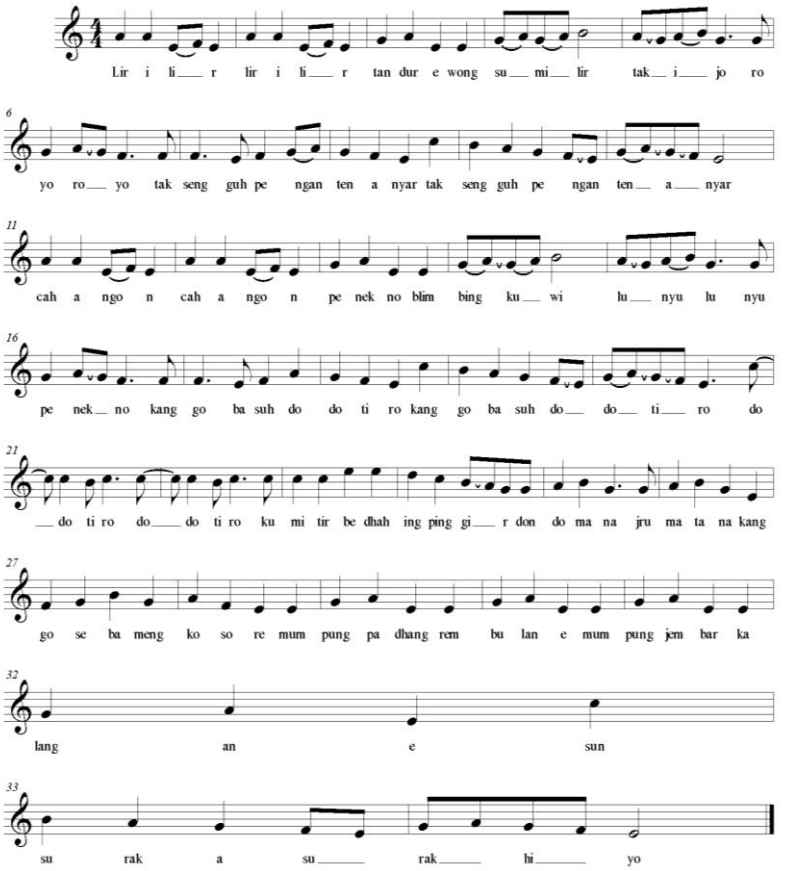
[57] *Shalawat Badar* contains verses to praise Prophet Mohammad in commemoration of the Muslims' victory in the Battle of Badr in Saudi Arabia.

[58] The melody of the *shalawat Badar* arranged by Kiai Kanjeng is the same melody as that of the Arabic song *Yaa Thoybah* arranged by Haddad Alwi in the same year.

[59] Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World*, 5.

shows twenty videos of which fourteen are of Kiai Kanjeng's version,[60] five are the Javanese version of *Ilir-Ilir*, and one is another Javanese version of *Ilir-Ilir*. This indicates that the Islamic melodised *Ilir-Ilir* is today more popular and easier to find than the Javanese one. This is because Kiai Kanjeng is not alone. There are many other musicians and music groups of various music genres presenting *Ilir-Ilir* of Kiai Kanjeng's version. Javanese musicians of *campursari* as well as musicians of the Islamic *qasidah* in Indonesia are familiar with the new Islamic melody of *Ilir-Ilir*.

Figure 2. The Islamic Dimension of *Lir-Ilir*



[60] <http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Ilir-Ilir&aq=f>

This new Islamic version of *Ilir-Ilir* was not born just like that. The Islamic awakening in Indonesia has been observed since the 1980s, particularly when Islam is becoming an important expression in a broader public sphere. As Julia Day Howell writes, "Sufism attracted considerable interest among students, intellectuals, and artists from the 1970s".[61] Sufism is no longer confined to a close devotional Sufi groups and practices or Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), but it expands to urban areas, universities and Muslim middle-classes. Since the 1980s, cassette recordings of Islamic performances have become widely available in Indonesia.

These recordings are above all used to prepare for Islamic *dakwah* (invitation) activities. Importantly, we should also look at the national politics in the 1990s when the relationship between Islam and the New Order government has come to a new phase.[62] It is the period when the New Order government started to think Islamic proponents as its potential allies. The government did not only establish Islamic institutions, issue Islamic regulations supporting Muslims' demands, but also promoted Islamic symbols at the national level.[63] On the one hand, the New Order's attitude paved the way for their structural opportunities for the Muslims to promote their Islamic symbols and identities. On the other hand, it gave rise to so-called "religious commodification" through packaging popular Islamic expressions in an impressive, modern, and inclusive way.[64] The Kiai Kanjeng's version of *Ilir-Ilir* is a form of this religious commodification in the sense that Islamic values are uniquely packaged by combining Islamic (*shalawat Badar* and other Arabic verses), Javanese (the song *Ilir-Ilir* and gamelan), and modern elements (recording).

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[61] Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (August 2001): 710.

[62] Bart Barendregt and Wim van Zanten, "Popular Music in Indonesia Since 1998, in Particular Fusion, Indie and Islamic Music on Video Compact Discs and the Internet," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34 (2002): 67–114.

[63] Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam Dan Negara: Transformasi Pemikiran Dan Praktek Politik Islam Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), 37–38.

[64] Noorhaidi Hasan, "The Making of Public Islam: Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere," *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (October 24, 2009): 242.

Conclusion

Due to the too little information about the origins of the song *Ilir-Ilir*, different opinions on the lyric, the composer, and the meaning of the song are inevitable. However, the oralness of Javanese culture keeps the song alive with its fixed melody and mode of presentation. Javanese are still familiar with this song. Researches show how *Ilir-Ilir* is regarded important in Javanese culture. It has been part of Javanese society for a long time. A Javanese mode of presentation of the song, namely the performance Nini Thowok, used to be very popular in Java. Interestingly, some people consider the performance Nini Thowok is forbidden in Islam. As a result, the game is vanishing and it is possible that the song *Ilir-Ilir* is soon to be dying out as well. From a literature point of view, giving *Ilir-Ilir* a deeper interpretation, in this case Islamic, is very intelligible considering the song is believed to have been composed by a *wali* and therefore conceals mystical and philosophical messages. From a political point of view, the last decade of the New Order in Indonesia, which gave space for Indonesian Muslims to express themselves, following the decline of the popularity of Nini Thowok, was the right moment to give the song *Ilir-Ilir* an Islamic label. Islamic interpretations have been given to the song and were massively made public: put in audio recordings, videos, and posted on the internet.

However, although the Islamic dimension of *Ilir-Ilir* is dominating and slowly replacing the Javanese children's song, we should consider that there is still no evidence proving that the song has Islamic roots. *Ilir-Ilir* finds its place in the performance Nini Thowok, which plays a key role in the Javanese society and has nothing to do with Islam. It is a Javanese children game as well as an important rite to seek for a practical solution needed in the society, like a rite to call rain and, a fortune teller, and a mantra for the rite of spirit medium. The performance Nini Thowok does not only offer a room for the song *Ilir-Ilir* to exist, but also allows the song to have significant functions – from a song to call rain until a mantra to inspire the puppet Nini Thowok – which are not related to Islamic teachings. Importantly, the Islamic *Ilir-Ilir* has contemporarily been used as a symbol to connote the indigeneity of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago. The song appears as a popular resistance against the so-called "transnational

Islam invasion" and finds it political belongings amid the "conservative turn" of Indonesian Islam.[65]

Furthermore, a new Islamic version of the song has been composed and has become very popular until today. By considering it as a re-creation of tradition – although using a different melody, metres, and tones– the Islamic melodised *Ilir-Ilir* functions exactly as a saviour and a promoter, rather than a threat, of this tradition. Importantly, the transformation of *Ilir-Ilir* from *tembang dolanan* into Islamic song demonstrates the importance of auditory dimension. What has been perceived as Islamic is without a doubt closely connected to the sonic dimension of religion as it is received by its listeners. In this way, sound constitutes the very important element of religious sensation. As *Ilir-Ilir* song demonstrates, the song's text remains, but the meaning and identity of the song changed along with the interpretation of the text and the way the song is being sung. Thus, what constitutes as Islamic should be also closely connected to sensory element and it leads us to importance of sound in the making of religion.[]

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[65] Martin van Bruinessen, *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining "Conservative Turn"* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

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