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SYNCRETISM'S TRACE IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the role of syncretism in shaping religious identity in Southeast Asia, a global trade route where Hinduism-Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity encountered local cultures, creating unique blends. Its objective is to explain syncretic patterns strengthening cultural preservation and religious acceptance. Using qualitative literature study methods, it collects data from ancient manuscripts, archival documents, and scholarly books, analyzed through historical, comparative, and content approaches (heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, historiography). Findings reveal syncretism as dynamic adaptation: Siwa-Buddhist fusion in kingdoms, Walisongo's integration of local customs and arts during Islamization, and Christian adaptations via torok prayers and Batak traditions. In summary, syncretism serves as a cultural strategy maintaining societal stability and religious relevance through creative dialogue between global doctrines and indigenous traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Shoutheast Asia has been a global trade hub since pre-Christian times until the 15th century. This region becamea meeting point for civilizations, Southeast Asia has been a global trade hub since pre-Christian times until the 15th century. This region became a meeting point for civilizations, trade, and

religions from various parts of the world. Its strategic location connects the main sea lanes between India, China, and the Middle East, leading to the emergence of ancient ports. These ports were not just economic centers but also places for cultural and religious exchange. In religious history, this strong cultural interaction created a key feature in the form of syncretism, which is the process of mixing or absorbing different belief elements (Man et al., 2022).

This process of religious blending has been evident since the arrival of major religions. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism began to grow after the pre-literate era. This is supported by the Brahmana theory, and evidenced through the adoption of writing systems and ways of governing kingdoms (Zulkarnain, 2020). Islam later entered Southeast Asia gradually and peacefully through trade, education, and the preaching of scholars. The development of Islam was flexible, adapting to local customs, thereby giving rise to a rich and dynamic Islamic culture (Amin, 2018). Meanwhile, Christianity entered through the missionary efforts of Western nations—Catholicism was brought by the Portuguese and Spanish (especially in the Philippines), while Protestantism was brought by the Dutch (Ricklefs et al., 2013). Instead of replacing local beliefs, the incoming religions actually interacted with and absorbed local traditions, such as ancestor worship or customary ceremonies. Consequently, syncretism became a key element in religious pluralism in the Archipelago (Makin, 2016).

This phenomenon of syncretism gave birth to new, mixed religious traditions, where the original teachings changed through processes of harmonization, adaptation, and creativity. The first example is the fusion of Shiva-Hinduism and Mahayana-Buddhism during the Singhasari and Majapahit eras, which demonstrated religious tolerance within the kingdom's religious vision (Wahyudi et al., 2021). Subsequently, the process of Islamization in Java by the Walisongo also employed an inclusive approach, utilizing local language, art, and customs. For example, *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) were used to convey Islamic teachings, and the *Selametan* and *Sekaten* traditions were adapted to have an Islamic nuance (Afandi, 2023; Khasanah, 2022; Subqi, 2018). Even within Catholicism, this integration is evident in the effort to unify traditional ceremonies like 'misa kaba' (buffalo mass) and to incorporate local

prayers ('torok') into the Catholic Church's liturgy (Widyawati, F., Lon, YS, & Midun, 2025). Therefore, this research argues that syncretism is not an anomaly, but a primary and dynamic mechanism that allows major religions to take root and survive in Southeast Asia. The trace of syncretism is clearly visible in the practices, rituals, and socio-religious structures of the region, thus becoming a hallmark of Southeast Asian religious identity to this day.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method based on literature review, meaning all data is sourced from writings such as journals, books, research reports, as well as historical literature or ancient manuscripts discussing the history of religion, syncretism, and the development of Islam in Southeast Asia (Makin, 2016).

The data is analyzed using a historical approach to describe the process of the entry of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, along with the development of acculturation from pre-Christian times to the modern era. A comparative approach is also used to compare the mixed elements of religions and the patterns of syncretism across various places and times, such as the fusion of Shiva-Hinduism, Mahayana-Buddhism, as well as local Islamic traditions like *Selametan* and *Sekaten* (Tan, 2014).

The research data is divided into two types: primary data and secondary data. Primary data includes ancient manuscripts such as *Nāgarakrētāgama* and *Serat Centhini*, as well as books and journals that directly discuss syncretism practices. Meanwhile, secondary data consists of supporting literature such as the history of Southeast Asia and sociological-anthropological theories of religion. Both are analyzed to trace the signs of syncretism and strengthen the research findings (Ricklefs, 2006).

Data is collected through documentation and literature review methods, by recording historical manuscripts, religious archives, and journal articles. These sources are examined through external and internal criticism, then grouped by themes such as Catholic-local syncretism, the process of Islamization with customs, and Hindu-Buddhist heritage for historical and comparative analysis (Zuhri, 2022). Data analysis is carried out with content analysis based on the historical method through four stages: heuristics (collecting sources), source

criticism (verifying authenticity and validity), interpretation (interpreting the meaning of religious practices as a form of syncretism), and historiography (compiling a systematic and time-sequenced scientific narrative) (Sukmana, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

1. **General Finding: Syncretism as a Mechanism of Cultural Adaptation**

Syncretism in religious and cultural practice functions as a way for local communities to adapt to maintain their traditional identity amidst social change and strict religious rules. The research findings indicate that syncretism is not merely a passive mixing of beliefs, but an active process of aligning customary values with the main religious teachings. Through this process, communities can face pressure from governments, official religious institutions, and modernization without losing the beliefs and cultural symbols inherited from their ancestors.

Besides being a form of adaptation, syncretism also serves as a tool for social negotiation so that local customs and broader religious rules can coexist harmoniously. Customary practices are selected and adjusted to remain in line with social norms and official rules. This pattern proves that adaptation through syncretism aims to reduce conflict and maintain the legitimacy of the community in a diverse and layered society.

Another finding proves that syncretism helps maintain cultural resilience by ensuring that traditional rituals, symbols, and authority continue amidst change. This adaptation does not eliminate the meaning of tradition but provides space for the culture to remain alive and relevant. Thus, syncretism becomes the main way for communities to cope with change without losing their identity.

Overall, this finding confirms that syncretism is a cultural strategy that allows local traditions to survive in the modern era. Syncretism demonstrates not only the community's capacity for survival but also creativity in uniting customs, religion, and social change, thereby creating a balance

between cultural preservation and the demands of the time.

a. Geographical Adaptation Patterns

The location of Southeast Asia along the international maritime trade route has long made the region an open meeting place for various civilizations. Its strategic position connects Southeast Asia with major centers of civilization such as India, the Middle East, and China. This sea trade route was not only used for the exchange of goods but also for the dissemination of ideas, values, and religious teachings. This situation triggered intensive and sustained cultural contact between local communities and newcomers, thus forming complex patterns of social interaction.

In this context, religion spread through gradual and peaceful interaction. Foreign traders who settled in coastal areas and trade hubs created spaces for cultural encounters, which encouraged the exchange of values and religious practices. This process was not due to coercion but rather through social, economic, and cultural relationships in daily life. Religious teachings were introduced in a persuasive and flexible manner to be accepted by the local community.

The acceptance of religion did not occur in a vacuum; instead, it interacted with existing local beliefs and traditions. Therefore, the incoming religious teachings adapted to local values, both in rituals, religious symbols, and the community's way of life. This adaptation gave birth to a unique form of religiosity, where local elements and religious doctrines blended.

Thus, Southeast Asia's geographical position as a meeting point for world civilizations played a major role in shaping a flexible and contextual way of practicing religion. The spread of religion, influenced by trade and cultural encounters, resulted in syncretism, where religious teachings did not completely erase local traditions but integrated selectively. This finding proves that geographical factors are crucial for understanding the process of acculturation and religious syncretism in Southeast Asia.

b. Core Acculturation

Syncretism emerges as a form of encounter between major religions and existing local cultures. This process involves adapting religious doctrines to the symbols, values, and traditional customs of the community, allowing the religion

to remain connected to past culture. Local beliefs are still utilized in religious life, although reinterpreted according to the tenets of the new religion.

In daily practice, acculturation is visible through the continuation of traditional rituals, the use of traditional symbols, and the application of old social structures. Religious values do not appear as foreign concepts, but are adjusted to blend with the community's customs. Consequently, the religion gains social acceptance, while the local culture retains its meaning and role in communal life.

The process of syncretism also proves that communities do not merely accept religion passively. They actively interpret religious teachings according to their own social and cultural conditions. The result is a unique pattern of religious practice, where religious rules go hand-in-hand with local traditions. This signifies that acculturation is a process of mutual influence between religion and culture, not the domination of one party.

Furthermore, syncretism helps maintain cultural stability during religious change. By incorporating elements of local tradition, conflict between old beliefs and new teachings can be minimized. Religion provides moral and spiritual values, while local traditions become the foundation of the community's cultural identity. This pattern ensures social continuity remains secure amidst religious transformation.

These findings affirm that religious acculturation is inseparable from the dynamics of local culture. Syncretism is not just a mixing of signs or customs, but a continuous process of adjustment. Through this mechanism, major religions can take deep root in society without erasing local traditions, thereby creating a pattern of religious practice that is context-appropriate and enduring.

2. Traces of Pre-Islamic Syncretism (Hindu-Buddhist and Local)

Religious syncretism before the arrival of Islam in the Archipelago is evident in the fusion of Hindu and Buddhist teachings that flourished during the classical period, particularly in Ancient Bali and East Java. This blend was not only in thought but also physically manifested in temple structures, statues, symbols, and ceremonial implements that simultaneously combined elements of Shiva (Hindu) and Buddha. This proves the adjustment of religious teachings to

existing local traditions, resulting in a new, unified belief system that did not erase the local culture.

In the religious perspective of that time, pre-Islamic syncretism was marked by an open understanding of God. Hindu and Buddhist elements were not considered contradictory; instead, they were seen as complementary within the cosmology of the classical Archipelago society. The way of viewing God, nature, and inner life demonstrated an effort to integrate foreign teachings with local beliefs, resulting in a flexible belief system that was easily accepted by a society that already had its own established system.

Pre-Islamic syncretism also served as a social and cultural method to preserve local traditions. Religious practices did not eliminate the veneration of ancestors and nature; rather, they incorporated these elements into the Hindu-Buddhist teachings. Thus, local traditions continued and gained new recognition within a larger religious framework, while simultaneously strengthening the community's sense of togetherness.

From a social perspective, the resulting religious pattern was flexible and adapted to local conditions. Rituals and religious structures were adjusted to the culture and social environment, making religion a cultural unifier and a guardian of social stability. This finding demonstrates that pre-Islamic syncretism was a cultural strategy that allowed Hindu-Buddhist teachings and local traditions to coexist harmoniously before Islam entered the Archipelago.

a. Royal Syncretism

During the periods of Singhasari and Majapahit, religious practices within the kingdoms showcased an official syncretism that unified the teachings of Hindu-Shivaism and Mahayana-Buddhism. These two teachings were not considered superior to one another or mutually exclusive; instead, they were merged into the royal ideology to reinforce the king's authority.

The concept of Shiva-Buddha emerged as the philosophical foundation emphasizing the unity of religious truth, evident in Old Javanese writings and the veneration of the king as a divine figure. This pattern demonstrates that syncretism was not confined to the common populace but also became a part of royal politics as a form of religious tolerance and harmony.

Syncretism during the Singhasari and Majapahit eras was also visible in royal symbols and rituals that combined elements of Hindu-Shiva and Buddha. The king was revered as an incarnation of a Hindu deity while simultaneously being an enlightened Buddhist being. This is evidenced by the construction of temples, the use of dual symbols, and ceremonies that integrated terms and views from both traditions. In this way, the kingdom built political strength based on spiritual unity, ensuring that doctrinal differences did not spark conflict but rather strengthened stability and togetherness.

Furthermore, this syncretism indicates that religion among the political elite served as a tool for ideological unification. The Shiva-Buddha concept proves that the kingdom did not enforce a single doctrine but accepted various traditions within the official system. This pattern reflects the maturity of religious thought within the palace environment, where tolerance and philosophical blending became the foundation for religious governance and the relationship between the state and society.

b. Cultural-Political Heritage

The influence of Hindu-Buddhism in the Archipelago is clearly evident in the emergence of a writing tradition that was utilized as an official tool of state administration. The use of Sanskrit language along with Pallava and Kawi scripts on inscriptions demonstrates a structured system of political communication. These inscriptions served as state documents to record boundaries of dominion, the granting of *sima* (tax-free) land rights, and the validation of the king's status and authority. Thus, writing became a key element in the organization and management of the kingdom.

The Hindu-Buddhist influence is also apparent in the understanding of power and governmental structure. The king was viewed as the supreme leader who received religious recognition, as seen from the religious titles and cosmological symbols found in inscriptions and royal artifacts. This proves the strong link between political power and religious values, where religion reinforced the authority and stability of the government.

Furthermore, the relationship between the ruler and religious institutions became an integral part of the kingdom's political system. Priests and religious institutions were involved in rituals, the creation of inscriptions, and the

ratification of political decisions, thus participating in the administration of the government. This pattern affirms that Hindu-Buddhist elements did not only influence the spiritual aspect but also supported the political authority and administration of the kingdom.

Although Hindu-Buddhist elements originated from external sources, their application was not a mere blind imitation. Local traditions were maintained and integrated with new political concepts, symbols, and writing systems. This process of adaptation gave rise to a distinctive way of governing the kingdom, where foreign and local elements united to form the enduring cultural-political heritage of the Archipelago.

3. Syncretism in Islamization of the Archipelago (Islam and Local Traditions)

The entry of Islam into the Archipelago occurred in a manner that adapted to local culture and traditions. The spread of Islam did not erase old customs but rather gave them new meanings that aligned with Islamic values. Local customs (*adat*) were maintained as identity, while Islamic elements were gradually introduced through symbols, prayers, and religious rituals. This approach made Islam easily accepted because it was seen as respecting local culture and preserving social harmony.

Syncretism is clearly visible in the communal practices that blend Islam and local customs, especially during life events such as births, marriages, and other community traditions. These practices are not only expressions of faith but also ways to maintain togetherness and preserve culture. Customs that have been adapted to Islam prove that Islamization in the Archipelago focused more on the transformation of values, rather than the complete replacement of culture.

This contextual and accommodating model of Islamization shows that syncretism was an effective method of *da'wah* (preaching). Syncretism did not involve the arbitrary mixing of Islamic teachings but rather the adaptation of culture and rituals to align with Islamic law (*syari'ah*). Thanks to this approach, Islam became a firm and ingrained belief in the lives of the Archipelago's people, persisting and developing without eliminating their cultural elements.

a. Walisongo's Inclusive Media

The Islamization carried out by the Walisongo (Nine Saints) in the Archipelago serves as an example of an open, flexible, and easily integrated

approach to local culture. They utilized local arts and culture as the primary tools for spreading Islam. This approach was intentionally designed so that the message of *tawhid* (Oneness of God) could be accepted without triggering social or religious conflict, instead relying on adapting and reinterpreting existing local wisdom.

For instance, the art of wayang (shadow puppets) was used as a medium for *da'wah* by subtly altering the stories and characters to incorporate Islamic messages. Additionally, gamelan music was utilized to support spiritual teachings, and Hindu-Buddhist traditions like the *sraddha* ritual were transformed into *kenduri* (communal feasts) by Sunan Ampel. All these actions demonstrate the Walisongo's success in unifying Islam with Javanese culture, leading to a distinctive, tolerant, and tradition-rooted pattern of religious life.

b. Transformation of Traditional Rituals

Local cultural arts with an Islamic nuance refer to the arts in the Archipelago that have integrated and been influenced by Islamic teachings. The process of blending Islam with this culture was heavily influenced by the Walisongo (Nine Saints), who integrated local traditions into Islamic practices. This missionary approach, which accepted and adapted, gave birth to a unique and strong pattern of Islamic religious life in society.

In Java, this blend resulted in traditions such as Tahlilan (Slametan), Sekaten, Grebeg Maulud, Takbiran, and the Javanese-Hijri calendar system. For example, Tahlilan evolved from the Hindu-Buddhist *kenduri* (ritual feast) by replacing offerings with *berkat* (blessings/food packets). Sekaten was created by Sunan Bonang using gamelan as a tool for *dakwah* (preaching) with Islamic verses and the recitation of the *syahadat* (testimony of faith).

In Sunda, Islamic-influenced religious traditions include the Seven-Month Pregnancy/Tingkeban Ceremony, Reuneuh Mundingeun, Caring for the Placenta (Tembuni), Gusaran (teeth filing), Sepitan/Sunatan (circumcision), and Cucurak.

In the Malay region, there are rituals such as Petang Megang, Mandi Balimau Kasai (a cleansing bath ritual), Jalur Pacu in Kuantan Singingi, Tahlil Jamak/Kenduri Ruwah in the Riau Islands, and the Barzanji Tradition. All of

these prove how culture and religion in these regions have united to form the traditions of Nusantara Islam.

4. Traces of Syncretism in Christianity (Christianity and Local Traditions)

The development of Christianity in Batak society demonstrates a close fusion between Christian teachings and local culture. The entry of Christianity did not erase the old customs; instead, it involved adaptation and the provision of new meaning to local cultural values. Customary elements such as family relations, funeral arrangements, and traditional symbols are maintained but are interpreted according to Christian teachings. This proves that Christianity is practiced within a framework of local culture without losing the community's traditional identity.

The blending of the Christian faith and local culture is also evident in worship, such as the use of regional languages, traditional music, and customary rituals adapted for religious celebrations. Local tradition serves as a means of conveying Christian teachings while simultaneously preserving culture. This pattern reflects a cultural and functional syncretism, where custom and religion proceed hand-in-hand in the community's socio-religious life. Thus, Christianity in Batak developed not in separation from the culture, but through continuous dialogue and adjustment with existing traditions.

a. Catholic-Local Liturgy

In Catholic worship in Manggarai, the traditional prayer called ***torok*** is incorporated into the celebration of the Eucharist (Mass). The *torok* prayer, which was previously used in customary rituals, is now recited by the congregation as an expression of gratitude and a request for blessings, following the Catholic order of worship.

This reflects the process of inculturation, where local cultural values and symbols are adapted to Catholic worship without changing the theological meaning of the Mass. The integration of the *torok* prayer not only enriches the spiritual experience of the congregation but also preserves local traditions, resulting in a distinctive and contextual religious identity. This approach proves that liturgical inculturation strengthens the bond between the Catholic faith and the local culture, while also becoming a way for the faithful to express their belief

authentically through language, symbols, and ancestral heritage.

b. The Role of Colonial Denominations

The spread of Catholicism by the Portuguese and Spanish, and Protestantism by the Dutch, triggered significant interaction with traditional beliefs across various regions of Indonesia.

In several areas, this process not only introduced Christian teachings but also led to cultural adaptation and the blending of old traditions with new religious rituals. The form of this blending varied in each location, depending on the social conditions, customs, and the degree of involvement of the colonial missionaries, resulting in unique and distinct religious patterns in each region.

DISCUSSION

Syncretism plays a crucial social role in the pluralism of the Nusantara (Indonesian Archipelago) by continuously shaping, developing, and preserving new traditions. Since the Singhasari-Majapahit era, the fusion of major religions with local customs has been the primary way to maintain the stability of the vast kingdoms. During the Hindu-Buddhist period, syncretism adapted Indian traditions to Javanese culture through *kakawin* literary works, which discussed good and evil without eliminating negative elements. When Islam entered, this process became more complex as Islam absorbed Hindu-Buddhist traditions, making Islamic literature reflect the past-present continuity and allowing Javanese kingdoms to claim the Majapahit heritage. This open attitude was influenced by Sufi teachings that emphasized tolerance (Makin, 2016).

The spread of religion has changed with technological advancements, moving from centralized traditional media to democratized digital platforms. The history of Islamic media shows this pattern: it once relied on official channels, oral narratives, and print before the rise of mass communication (Ingtias et al., 2024). Today, the role of print media and mosque sermons is declining, replaced by YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram as the main choices for 90% of the community for socialization and *dakwah* (Islamic propagation), making content unbound by space-time and highly influential on society (Nurhasanah, 2021).

Indonesia's religious traditions are unique due to local creativity and cultural fusion through syncretism, adaptation, and innovation that reinterprets ancient

texts into a distinctive pluralism. Since the Hindu-Buddhist era, this approach has shaped the religious identity of the Nusantara, where the meeting of major religions with local culture gave birth to unique teachings. Therefore, Indonesia's religious diversity differs from its original practice—for instance, Nusantara Islam grew from a Hindu-Buddhist foundation, unlike in the Middle East (Makin, 2016).

Evidence of syncretism as a survival mechanism for major religions is seen in the syncretic-accommodative strategy of the Walisongo (Nine Saints), who utilized *wayang* (shadow puppets), *gamelan* (traditional orchestra), and traditional poetry to instill *tauhid* (monotheism), *rahmah* (compassion), and *hikmah* (wisdom) in Javanese society. This contextual theological approach unites divine revelation with local culture without theological conflict, similar to Latin American liberation theology and Catholic inculturation in Asia—proof that cultural integration is an effective means of *dakwah* and a sustainable theological expression (Aminim et al., 2025).

The acceptance of Islam in the Nusantara occurred through active dialogue and selection of local elements, not passive assimilation. Studies of Islamic law in Southeast Asia show that local culture selectively chooses useful elements from classical heritage, forming diverse meanings of Islam that are not "less Muslim." The 17th-century Melaka Law Text divides law into (a) reason (*akal*), (b) Islam, and (c) state customs (*adat negara*), sometimes prioritizing reason-customs if a conflict arises, proving selective adjustment. Colonial criticism regarding the "corruption of Islamic law" actually confirms a self-exploration of meaning that gave birth to Nusantara Islam, avoiding religious-cultural conflict while highlighting the contextual-adaptive nature of Indonesian Islam (Rudiger Lohlker, 2021).

This research suggests that syncretism is a strategic mechanism, not merely a cultural one, that allows Hinduism-Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity to take deep root via dialogue, negotiation, and reinterpretation of symbols without unilateral domination. The diversity of Southeast Asian practices stems from geographical adaptation, the role of kingdoms, the *dakwah* of the Walisongo, and Catholic inculturation, forming a religion that is flexible, plural, and resilient to change. These findings are relevant to current identity: religious practice is

always contextual-creative, blending local preservation with global teachings. Syncretism serves as the historical foundation and a pillar of sustainable religious life in Southeast Asia to this day.

CONCLUSION

This research asserts that syncretism is the primary mechanism shaping religious identity in Southeast Asia, from the pre-Islamic era to the present day. The blending of major religions, such as Hinduism-Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, with local customs occurred through dialogue and mutual acceptance, rather than by rejecting or replacing the old. Southeast Asia's geographical location on world trade routes encouraged strong and continuous cultural exchange. This resulted in forms of religiosity that could adapt to local conditions. During the ancient kingdom era, such as Singhasari and Majapahit, the teachings of Hindu-Shaivism and Mahayana Buddhism were used as political and spiritual foundations. When Islam arrived, the Walisongo (Nine Saints) integrated local customs, arts, and languages as tools for *dakwah* (propagation), thus giving birth to the distinctive Nusantara Islam.

In Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, the process of inculturation is evident in the insertion of traditional rituals into church services. This allowed the Christian faith to be accepted without eliminating local culture. In short, syncretism is not a deviation but a cultural and religious strategy that maintains survival, social stability, and the everyday relevance of religion. Local customs were not discarded; rather, they were reinterpreted so that the major religions could grow strong and endure. Thus, syncretism is the historical foundation and great strength that shapes the diverse, flexible, and innovative nature of Southeast Asian religiosity to this day.

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