



Ancestral Legitimization and Syncretic Islam in the Wayang Klithik of Gotanjung's Sedekah Bumi

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Abstract

Wayang klithik is a two-dimensional wooden puppetry tradition found in Central and East Java. In Gotanjung Village, Pati Regency, Central Java, *wayang klithik* is performed every year as part of *sedekah bumi* ceremony, a ritual to express gratitude for agricultural blessings. This study analyzes how *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* functions as a ritual performance in which ancestral legitimation within a syncretic Islamic framework serves as a mechanism that sustains the tradition. It also examines how *sedekah bumi* and *wayang klithik* work together in reinforcing Gotanjung's agrarian identity. Employing a performative ethnographic method, data were collected through field observations, interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that *wayang klithik* performance in *sedekah bumi* plays a crucial role in demonstrating the practice of *tawassul* through ancestral figures within syncretic Islam, providing a case study of how local cosmology and religious syncretism intersect to sustain cultural legitimacy. The study contributes to understanding how Islamic devotional practices are negotiated within a Javanese cosmocentric framework through ritual performance, offering insights for the preservation of both *sedekah bumi* and *wayang klithik* traditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ancestors of Java perceived the earth as a great hero that sustains human life [1]. This worldview continues to shape the cultural practices of many agrarian communities across Java, who traditionally organize *sedekah bumi* ceremony in various forms and practices adapted to their ancestral traditions. *Sedekah bumi* expresses gratitude for fertile land and abundant harvests while expressing hope for future prosperity and well-being [2]. Terminologically, *sedekah bumi* means giving offering to the earth to ensure its fertility, preserve its natural balance, and foster material and spiritual prosperity [3].

Drawing on Eliade's notion of the sacred-profane dialectic, the experience of the sacred creates the terms of "cosmic religiosity," in which human existence is understood as participation in larger cosmic rhythms and sacred patterns within cosmological frameworks [4]. In a cosmocentric worldview, human existence is understood through a relational

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ontology that connects people not only with one another but also with non-human agencies [5]. *Sedekah bumi* represents an effort to maintain harmonious relationship between humans and the earth.

In many regions, *sedekah bumi* incorporates a syncretic blend of Javanese, Islamic, and Hindu elements, which believe in metaphysical entities and sacred energies beyond the human realm [1]. This resonates with Javanese philosophy, rooted in cosmocentric thought, which posits that humans exist in harmony with both *jagad cilik* and *jagad gedhe* [6]. According to the Turner's concept of liminality [7], ritual practice opens a pathway to the cosmic dimensions of experience that transcend the boundaries of the ordinary human realm (*jagad cilik*) and extend into the non-human realm (*jagad gedhe*).

Gotanjung Village, located in Margoyoso District, Pati Regency, Central Java, is one of the many regions in Java that still practices *sedekah bumi* each year. Beyond a ritual of expressing gratitude and maintaining harmonious relationship to the earth, *sedekah bumi* in Gotanjung is deeply rooted in ancestral veneration. Mbah Soreng, the village's ancestral figure, is considered an active participant in shaping the ongoing course of community life, including environmental conservation [8], which is expressed through *sedekah bumi* practice.

In Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi*, *wayang klithik* performance—a two-dimensional wooden puppet theater also known in some regions as *wayang krucil* [9]—has become an integral and inseparable part of the ceremony. Beyond mere entertainment, it serves as an offering to honor Mbah Soreng and to foster Gotanjung's agrarian identity. Villagers believe that excluding *wayang klithik* performance in *sedekah bumi* is violating the tradition norms, and it risks inviting misfortune.

Most of *wayang klithik* performances present the narratives of *Panji Asmorobangun*, *Babad Majapahit*, and *Babad Menak* [9], [10]. However, Gotanjung's *wayang klithik* performance presents *Among Tani*, a local folktale about a farmer who successfully reclaimed Java's prosperity and his life partner Dewi Sri from the hands of his enemy. This is the distinct characteristic of *wayang klithik* performance in Gotanjung Village.



Figure 1. Gotanjung's Wayang Klithik.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Previous studies have briefly noted that *wayang klithik* is considered a sacred artifact [10], performed in various rituals such as *sedekah bumi*, *bersih desa*, *nyadran* [11], and *manganan janjang* in Blora [12]. However, little attention has been paid to how *wayang klithik* functions as a medium of ritual through ancestral legitimization within syncretic Islam. Studies on *wayang klithik* in Wonosoco Village, Kudus Regency, Central Java, have primarily focused on its artistic [13], entertainment, and creative economic aspects, following the village's designation as a tourism destination by the Kudus Regency Tourism Office [14]. Meanwhile, studies on *wayang klithik* in East Java remain limited in analyzing how the performance operates within the ritual settings.

In contrast, *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* holds a distinctive position as a ritual performance through which the authority of the village's ancestor, Mbah Soreng, is

reaffirmed and integrated into the ritual as an active agency shaping communal traditions. Moreover, *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung presents a narrative that differs significantly from most *wayang klithik* performances, featuring the story of *Among Tani*, which aligns closely with the agrarian themes embodied in *sedekah bumi*.

To address this research gap, this study analyzes how *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* functions as a ritual performance in which ancestral legitimization within a syncretic Islamic framework serves as the mechanism that sustain the tradition. It also examines how *sedekah bumi* and *wayang klithik* work together in sustaining cultural identity within an agrarian community of Gotanjung. In this context, the community's cultural and spiritual perspectives become essential in shaping the ritual meaning and maintaining role of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village.

2. METHODS

This is qualitative research using ethnographic method to develop deeper understanding of the perspectives and lived experience [15] of Gotanjung Village community through *wayang klithik* and *sedekah bumi* context. Specifically, the ethnographic method applied in the immersive fieldwork is performance ethnography, which fosters embodied learning and deeper understanding [16] of cultural experience through in-depth engagement for capturing the complexity of ritual, performance, and cosmological meaning within its context [17]. During the fieldwork, researchers were not only distant observers but active participants in *sedekah bumi*, engaging alongside the villagers in Gotanjung. The researchers also attended the *wayang klithik* artists' rehearsals and even practiced manipulating the *wayang klithik* puppets under the guidance of the puppeteer.

Data were collected through a combination of field observation, focus group discussions, and interviews. Field observations were conducted both before and during *sedekah bumi*, allowing researchers to document the preparatory processes, rituals, and communal dynamics of the event. The focus group discussions attended by selected participants (Table 1) to gather community's perspectives regarding the spiritual and cultural values that influence their views on *wayang klithik* in *sedekah bumi* ceremony. Interviews were conducted with key informants (Table 2) to explore their understanding of *wayang klithik*, *sedekah bumi*, and the historical narrative surrounding Gotanjung Village. The key informants and focus group discussions participants were selected based on their knowledge, experience, and active involvement in *sedekah bumi* ceremony and *wayang klithik* performance.

Table 1. Participants of Focus Group Discussions.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Participants	Gender	Age	Role
*Mbah Udip	Male	43	Religious leader
Mbah Kliwon	Male	39	Cultural Observer
Aris	Male	24	Head of Yayasan Tanjung Muria**

**In Gotanjung Village, the term *Mbah* is used to address someone who is an expert in a particular field and is therefore respected for their expertise, rather than merely as a form of address for an elderly person.

*A legally registered foundation, established on January 23, 2024, aims to promote the arts and culture of Gotanjung Village, with a particular focus on *wayang klithik*.

Table 2. List of Informants.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Informants	Gender	Age	Role
Mbah Priyo	Male	61	Wayang klithik puppeteer
Ibu Yayuk	Female	59	Wayang klithik puppet collection's owner
Ibu Sri	Female	57	Bu Yayuk's younger sister
Budi Hantomo	Male	35	Villager

All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of participants' perspectives. The verbatim transcripts and observation notes were then combined into the primary data set for analysis. To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, data triangulation was applied by integrating multiple data sources.

The analysis followed a systematic thematic coding process. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times. Then, initial codes were generated and organized into broader themes of *wayang klithik* and *sedekah bumi*. In addition, a narrative structural analysis was conducted to examine how informants and participants conveyed their experiences and perspectives through storytelling. Researcher triangulation was conducted through collaborative discussions and interpretations to minimize individual bias. All analytic processes were conducted to maintain ethnographic reflexivity for producing credible and ethical research outcomes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Honoring Ancestors Through Wayang Klithik

Historically, *wayang* performances functioned as a medium for worshiping *hyang* (ancestral spirits) [18]. During the process of Islamization in Java, *wayang* served as a medium for *dakwah* (Islamic teaching), blending with the influence of Hindu-Buddhist traditions in Javanese culture [19] [18], which ultimately gave rise to the syncretic character of Javanese Islam. This aligns with Lord's [20] assertion that the origins of oral traditions are fundamentally religious rather than artistic. Although *wayang* has developed over time to be appreciated as a form of art or entertainment, its foundation as a medium for ritual practices can still be observed in its current forms. The *ruwatan* ritual, for example, demonstrates how *wayang* serves as a medium for spiritual cleansing and protection from misfortune of the only child, which continue to be observed in both Java and Bali [21] [22]. In Gotanjung Village, *wayang klithik* performance in *sedekah bumi* exemplifies the continuity of these ritual functions. The oral histories gathered from Mbah Priyo and Mbah Kliwon reveal that the performance serves to honor ancestors and seek communal well-being. This demonstrates that Gotanjung continues to represent the ritualistic origins of *wayang* within the framework of syncretic Islam.

Mbah Priyo, a *wayang klithik* puppeteer, stated that before it was established as a village, Gotanjung's landscape had been a dense forest. One day, a knight from the Kingdom of Surabaya in Raden Pekik era named Mbah Soreng arrived in Gotanjung with his three sisters. The information about Raden Pekik, also known as Pangeran Pekik, can be verified through historical records, which identify him as the last crown prince of Kadipaten Surabaya before the region was conquered by Mataram Islam Kingdom under the reign of Sultan Agung in 1625 [23]. While exploring the dense forest of Gotanjung, Mbah Soreng and his sisters discovered a lake shaded by a large *tanjung* tree (Eng: spanish cherry tree). Considering that Gotanjung region had an abundant water supply, Mbah Soreng decided to clear the forest and establish a settlement there. Finally, according to the Javanese calendar, on a Saturday Kliwon in the month of Apit, a village named Gotanjung was established—derived

from the Javanese word *tlogo* meaning "lake" and *tanjung* referring to the tanjung tree that shaded the lake in the area.

The lake discovered by Mbah has been dried up for a long time and is considered a pilgrimage site known as the *punden* (Figure 2). This *punden* serves as the heart of sedekah *bumi* ceremony. Within this revered space, wayang *klithik* performance are staged in a pavilion constructed on the site.



Figure 2. Punden.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

The intertwining of Mbah Soreng's figure with Raden Pekik is analyzed as a strategy for reinforcing ancestral legitimization, thus strengthening Mbah Soreng's authority in the eyes of the community. Geertz [24] states that legitimization can emerge through symbols that are integrated into community life. As a sacred site, *punden* serves as a symbolic space that plays an important role in strengthening the relationship between Gotanjung villagers and their ancestor. The existence of *punden* represents the materialization of Mbah Soreng's presence, as people believe that his spirit continues to accompany them.

To gain a deeper understanding of the philosophical foundations and perspectives shaping Gotanjung villagers' attitudes toward their ancestors, a focus group discussion was conducted involving a religious leader, a cultural observer, and a representative from the local community. The discussion revealed deeply rooted respect for Mbah Soreng who is perceived as a parental figure.

In showing respect to elders, certain codes of conduct (*tata krama*) are upheld, one of which is politeness. This etiquette also applies to the villagers of Gotanjung in their relationship with Mbah Soreng, expressed through their behavior when passing by the *punden*—they greet and ask permission by saying "Assalamualaikum" or "permisi" to Mbah Soreng. Offering a wayang *klithik* performance to Mbah Soreng is likewise considered a form of *tata krama*, akin to children giving a gift that delights their parent. It is believed that Mbah Soreng had a fondness for wayang *klithik*, which originated from his homeland in East Java. He was the one who introduced wayang *klithik* to the villagers of Gotanjung.

According to Mbah Kliwon, a cultural observer in Gotanjung, presenting offerings (*sajen*) and performing wayang *klithik* are ways of materializing prayers addressed to Mbah Soreng, serving as a form of respect for his presence. Similarly, Mbah Udip explained that by offering wayang *klithik*, villagers seek to ensure Mbah Soreng's contentment, which they believe will, in turn, help convey their prayers to God for the well-being of the community. This practice resonates with the Islamic concept of *tawassul*, a form of prayer that involves a *wasilah* (mediator) permitted in Islam to draw closer to Allah or to seek the fulfillment of one's wishes [25]. In this context, a parent can serve as an intermediary acknowledged within Islamic teachings.

Mbah Soreng is represented as a *wasilah* who can bridge the prayers of the villagers. Mbah Udip emphasized that the practices performed by the villagers toward their ancestor are not acts of *shirk* (associating partners with Allah). Fundamentally, the villagers worship only Allah, not their ancestors. Their actions toward Mbah Soreng are expressions of respect for a revered elder and should not be equated with worship.

Mbah Udip's reconciliatory stance toward the tradition of ancestral veneration reflects a nuanced negotiation between religious belief and cultural practice. Such reconciliation deserves closer examination, as differing interpretations of such practices can easily become a source of theological debate [26]. Within Islam, two broad orientations often frame this tension: *puritan* Islam and syncretic Islam.

Puritan Islam, emphasizing a return to the Quran and the purification of religious practice, tends to reject local traditions perceived as incompatible with Islamic values [27]. From this perspective, rituals involving communication with or offerings to ancestors may be considered *bid'ah* (innovation in religious matters that has no basis in the Quran or Hadith) or even *shirk*. In contrast, syncretic Islam embraces a more accommodative approach, integrating local customs, rituals, and beliefs [27]. In the context of Islam in Java, Geertz [28] described syncretic Islam as *Islam Abangan*, which blends Islamic teachings with indigenous Javanese traditions. Koentjaraningrat [29] characterized this concept as *Islam Kejawen*, which embodies a syncretic worldview that integrates Islamic teachings with a comprehensive Javanese spirituality. *Kejawen* is not merely a belief system but a holistic perspective that infuses various aspects of Javanese life, including traditions, customs, and cognitive frameworks. *Islam Kejawen* acknowledges not only God and the prophet but also the significant role of ancestors and spiritual entities as intermediaries. Rather than viewing such practices as contradictions to faith, syncretic Islam interprets them as cultural expressions of reverence, moral continuity, and communal harmony.

Aris Setiawan, one of the FGD participants, explained that the majority of villagers belong to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an Islamic organization whose theological orientation aligns with the syncretic strand of Islam that values continuity of local traditions. This reality demonstrates that Islamic practice in Gotanjung is embedded within a cosmological worldview that upholds both Islamic devotion and ancestral reverence as interconnected rather than oppositional.

The harmonious tension between Islamic devotion and ancestral reverence is vividly manifested in the sequence of the *sedekah bumi* ceremony. At night before the event, the male villagers gathered for a *pengajian* (Quranic recitation) at the *punden*, praying to Allah for the ceremony to proceed smoothly. After *pengajian* concluded, Mbah Priyo sat quietly in the shadow of the *punden*, offering prayers to Allah for blessings and the successful execution of *sedekah bumi*, which also included prayers for the ancestors. He then asked permission from Mbah Soreng to present the *wayang klithik* performance, hoping that Mbah Soreng would take pleasure in it and would look upon villagers with favor and support their prayers for prosperity. This ritual allows Mbah Priyo to enter a liminal space, immersing himself into spiritual reality that connects his human existence with God and his ancestor.

The figure of Mbah Soreng can be seen as a mechanism that provides legitimization for the tradition of performing *wayang klithik* in the *sedekah bumi* ceremony. It is possible that Mbah Soreng has undergone a process of mystification aimed at reinforcing the legitimacy of the tradition to ensure that it is a culturally and spiritually binding practice. According to Geertz [24], humans depend on meaningful systems of symbols to help them communicate, orient themselves, and regulate their actions. If the narrative of Mbah Soreng is viewed as a myth, it functions as an expression of such a symbolic system that constructs and sustains shared perspectives within the community. Geertz stated that myths are used by communities both to reflect reality (*model of reality*) and to shape it (*model for reality*), serving as a compass that guides them in understanding and acting within their world.

As a *model of reality*, the myth of Mbah Soreng reflects the reality of the origins of Gotanjung Village and the development of *wayang klithik* within it. Logically, the existence of a village is considered impossible without the presence of a founding figure or ancestor

who first established it. Similarly, the presence of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung must have originated from someone in the past who first introduced it.

Meanwhile, as a *model for reality*, the myth constructs the reality of Mbah Soreng as the village ancestor who loved *wayang klithik* and brought it to Gotanjung. In other words, the figure of Mbah Soreng is constructed by the community through myth to legitimize the tradition of *wayang klithik* performances during the *sedekah bumi* ceremony. Mbah Soreng thus emerges to fill this historical void.

Through the myth of Mbah Soreng, Gotanjung villagers communicate that *wayang klithik* is an ancestral heritage that holds an important place in their lives. The narrative of Mbah Soreng is passed down orally from generation to generation, continually reproduced, and accepted as a collective truth. The myth of Mbah Soreng, therefore, becomes a form of authority that shapes the community's perspectives and actions toward the tradition.

3.2. The Sacred Legacy of Gotanjung's Wayang Klithik

The history of the puppet strongly influenced the sacredness of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung Village. The collection of *wayang klithik* puppets belongs to a family that has been descended from the village's former head. Currently, the collection is entrusted to the fourth generation of the family. Among the six siblings of this generation, Bu Yayuk, along with her sister, Bu Sri, is tasked with safeguarding and maintaining the ancestral *wayang klithik* puppet collection. The other four siblings have moved away and no longer reside in Gotanjung Village.

Through interviews with Bu Yayuk and Bu Sri, they explained that the puppets were originally purchased by Bu Yayuk's great-grandfather, and their estimated age now exceeds 200 years. Those were crafted by a renowned *wayang klithik* craftsman from Kedungpanjang, Margoyoso District, Pati. The craftsman practiced a strict spiritual ritual during the crafting process called *puasa mutih*, a fasting practice in which only white rice and water are consumed daily, alongside meditation. In Kejawen practices, *puasa mutih* is aimed at self-purification, enhancing inner strength, and preparing for significant ritual or artistic performances [30]. It is believed that because the craftsman performs *puasa mutih*, the *wayang klithik* puppets carry mystical power. This practice aligns with the core philosophical concepts of Kejawen, which emphasizes inner spirituality. This reflects a cosmocentric understanding in which the spiritual energy is not confined to human beings alone (craftsman) but flows through all forms of existence, including non-human entities (*wayang klithik* puppets).

The puppets are housed in an inherited family home (Figure 3) next to Bu Yayuk's current residence. This ancestral house has remained unoccupied since the death of Bu Yayuk's parents and now serves solely as a storage space for *wayang klithik* collection. In the past, before the establishment of the village hall, this house was a venue for community activities.

The puppets are stored in a large green box (Figure 4), which consists of 93 *wayang klithik* puppets and 15 three-dimensional *wayang golek*



Figure 3. An Inherited House for Wayang Klithik Storage.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

puppets. The inclusion of three-dimensional *wayang golek* puppets in these performances adds a distinctive characteristic of Gotanjung's *wayang klithik*. These different types of puppets are selected for performances based on the storyline, adding versatility to *wayang klithik* performances.

In addition, four specific *wayang klithik* puppets were stored separately in a smaller brown box (Figure 5) because of their highest sacred status (see Table 3 for details). These sacred *wayang klithik* puppets receive special attention and treatment compared to others in the large green box. The presence of these four *wayang* puppets serves as a symbol that reinforces legitimization of the *wayang klithik* sacredness.



Figure 4. The Large Green Storage Box.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Table 3. List of The Most Sacred Wayang Klithik Puppets.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

No.	Wayang Klithik Puppets	Representation
1.	Jalodeh	A <i>dangkong</i> (elder figure) known for his great wisdom.
2.	Prasonto	A <i>dangkong</i> known for his liveliness and humor.
3.	Among Tani	A farmer hero who protected the land of Java.
4.	Golek Baku	A beautiful female puppet which can dance.

The *dalang* (puppeteer) also functions as an active agent in reinforcing the legitimization of the sacredness of *wayang klithik*. The puppeteer's conduct and ethical discipline are governed by the same spiritual values that define the sanctity of the puppets themselves. In this sense, the *dalang* not only serves as a performer but also as a guardian of *Kejawen* principles, ensuring that every aspect of *wayang klithik* aligns with the value of *Kejawen*.



Figure 5. A Small Brown Storage Box.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Becoming a *dalang* is not merely about mastering the technical aspects of storytelling and performance. This role demands profound spiritual discipline and adherence to moral conduct, deeply rooted in the principles of *Kejawen*. Mbah Priyo stated that a *wayang klithik* puppeteer must possess strong inner strength. He added that it is essential to maintain exemplary behavior and speech, as these are regarded as extensions of the puppeteer's spiritual authority. Therefore, becoming a *wayang klithik* puppeteer requires spiritual preparation, cultivated through the study and practice of *Kejawen* teachings, in order to achieve harmony between body and soul. Without sufficient spiritual preparation, a puppeteer risks physical or

mental harm. The *dalang* must be a person of high moral character, one who is respected and feared by the community. This is why the *dalang* is considered a sacred figure in the *wayang klithik* tradition. The *dalang* is the one who brings the story to life, and it is through his performance that the audience can experience the spiritual world of *Kejawen*. The *dalang* must be a person who is deeply committed to his art and to the principles of *Kejawen*. He must be a person who is able to control his emotions and to maintain a calm and focused state of mind during his performance. This is why the *dalang* is considered a sacred figure in the *wayang klithik* tradition. The *dalang* is the one who brings the story to life, and it is through his performance that the audience can experience the spiritual world of *Kejawen*.

spiritual harm. Past incidents involving inexperienced puppeteers have supported this belief.

One particularly well-known story among the villagers is that of Mbah Gunawan, a previous *wayang klithik* puppeteer whose disrespectful behavior toward the sacred *wayang dangkong* was believed to have caused his death. During his time as a puppeteer, Mbah Gunawan undertook the task of repainting Jalodeh, one of the four most sacred puppets. However, during this process, he reportedly made disrespectful remarks about the puppet. On one occasion, while traveling with the puppet, he stopped to relieve himself by the roadside. According to his account, the solid ground beneath his feet suddenly turned soft and muddy, leaving him struggling to free himself. This unsettling experience was only the beginning. After completing the repainting of the puppet, Mbah Gunawan passed away unexpectedly. The villagers attribute his death to his perceived disrespect toward Jalodeh.

The story of Mbah Gunawan reinforces the legitimacy of the sacredness of *wayang klithik* in Gotanjung, which continues to be sustained through the stories and experiences shared by the villagers. This narrative functions as a mechanism of shaping and regulating communal perspectives. The incident of Mbah Gunawan underscores the villagers' conviction that the role of a *wayang klithik* puppeteer is not merely a form of performing art but a sacred responsibility.

3.3. Reinforcing Agrarian Identity through A Ritual Performance

In Gotanjung Village, according to the Javanese calendar system, *sedekah bumi* is held on Saturday *Kliwon* in the month of *Apit*. This specific timing is deeply rooted in local customs, as it is believed by the villagers to commemorate the day when Gotanjung Village was first established by their ancestor. Holding the ceremony on a different day or outside this timeframe is considered forbidden or culturally inappropriate.

The ritualistic nature of Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi* aligns closely with Jan Vansina's [31] assertion that traditions with ritual functions are not arbitrarily performed. Ritual performances are governed by specific rules concerning timing, place, and frequency, reflecting their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual significance. This observation resonates with the practice in Gotanjung, where *wayang klithik* performance is intricately embedded in *sedekah bumi*, occurring at a designated time and setting, reinforcing its integral role in the community's cultural identity.

In the morning when the preparation of *sedekah bumi* began, dressed in full *dalang* costume, Mbah Priyo prepared for his sacred duty. Assisted by two men to lift the heavy lid of the large green storage box, Mbah Priyo carefully prepared the puppets, chanting a prayer before opening the lid. The puppets were carefully removed from the box one by one as needed. For the smaller brown box housing the four sacred puppets, the prayers were more prolonged. As each sacred puppet was taken out, Mbah Priyo held it close against his cheeks while reciting additional prayers, further signifying the puppets' extraordinary status and his deep connection to their spiritual essence. Only Mbah Priyo is authorized to open the storage boxes containing *wayang klithik* collection. This restriction is rooted in the belief that Mbah Priyo possesses the spiritual strength to safely handle puppets.

The careful and prayerful handling of the puppets exemplifies ritual performativity [7]. These acts are performative gestures that express and produce the sacredness of *wayang klithik* and *sedekah bumi*, as Turner stated, rituals are not only symbolic but also constitute performative acts [7]. The preparation process reflects the moment when Mbah Priyo steps into a liminal dimension that transcends the boundaries between the profane and sacred realms. Mbah Priyo's ritual knowledge and exclusive authority as the only person permitted

to open the storage boxes, reflect his spiritual capacity and the community's recognition of his liminal status.

Mbah Priyo's authority over *wayang klithik* puppets exemplifies Max Weber's concept of traditional authority, which is legitimized by the sacredness of tradition [32]. This authority is continually maintained through repetition of ritual practice. Villagers' veneration for sacred tradition and their fear of the potential consequences of violating ritual norms further reinforce his authority.

Once the puppets and accompanying instruments had been arranged, the performers, including the *gamelan* musicians and *sinden* singers, took their place. The opening notes of the *gamelan* signaled the start of the ceremony. With the resonant notes of the *gamelan* music, the village seemed to be summoned to the *punden*. Suddenly, *punden* area was filled with communal energy.

Sedekah bumi ceremonial procession began with the arrival of the village chief and his retinue. They carried a *jolenan*, a traditional Javanese house-shaped box with dried rice plants on top and food inside, including rice, roasted chicken, fried tempeh, and fried yellow tofu. As the *jolenan* was carried to the site, the villagers eagerly scrambled to collect pieces of the dried rice plants and food. They believed that these items would bring blessings and ensure future abundance and well-being for their families.



Figure 6. Jolenan.

[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Following the procession, the villagers gathered around the sacred tree, while the village chief, along with his retinue, placed *sajen* (offerings) and recited prayers on one side of the tree. After that, the village chief and his wife distributed rice in a basket and purified water in a pottery jug, symbolizing the sharing of prosperity and the community's interconnectedness.

The villagers' enthusiasm in collecting dried rice plants, the food inside *jolenan* and the rice distributed from the basket reflects that rice is regarded not only as an agrarian commodity but also as a cultural symbol representing prosperity. Rituals aim to sustain social structure through symbols that embody social values [24]. The symbolism of rice in the context of *sedekah bumi* touches upon the spiritual dimension, influencing perspectives and social actions in accordance with the rice's significance as both a staple food and a marker of agrarian identity. This symbolism is reaffirmed in the *Among Tani* play, which is performed immediately after the series of rituals concludes.



Figure 7. Praying and Placing Sajen.

[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Mbah Priyo began the tale of *Among Tani* by describing how the land of Java is known for its prosperity because of its fertile land. Java was ruled by a king named Prabu Pancawarna, who had a beautiful and graceful daughter named Dewi Sri. Dewi Sri was tied to Among Tani, a brave farmer in the village. However, peace was soon threatened when a powerful king from a distant land, Prabu Kolomurko, arrived to seize Java and claim Dewi Sri as his bride. In this moment, Among Tani fought to defend the land of Java and his beloved, Dewi Sri. With the guidance of the elder figures Jalodeh and Prasonto, Among Tani received a powerful weapon, *trisula*, to defeat Prabu Kolomurko. The climax battle between Among Tani and Prabu Kolomurko becomes the highlight of the performance. Among Tani, armed with his *trisula*—a weapon with sharp, pointed edges—finally managed to defeat Prabu Kolomurko, restoring prosperity to Java and ensuring the safety of Dewi Sri.



Figure 8. Rice and Water Distribution.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

The depiction of Among Tani character as a brave farmer who defends Java's prosperity represents the essential role of farmers as the backbone of agrarian life. Farmers' skills in cultivating the land, understanding planting cycles, and maintaining the balance of the rice-field ecosystem illustrate a profound relationship between humans and nature. This aligns with Javanese philosophy rooted in cosmocentric thought, which emphasizes harmony between the two.



Figure 9. Battle Scene of Among Tani and Prabu Kolomurko.
[Source: Research Team, 2024]

Among Tani and Dewi Sri as a destined partner symbolizes the strong bond between farmers and rice. The abduction of Dewi Sri by Prabu Kolomurko reflects that the prosperity of Java is under threat, as it signifies that rice no longer grows in Java. In Javanese culture, Dewi Sri is considered the Rice Goddess [33] or Prosperity Goddess [34], which is reflected in various myths and folktales. These narratives reveal the Javanese belief that rice is imbued with a soul.

The presence of the characters Jalodeh and Prasonto as *dangkong* (village elders) also serves as a symbol, legitimizing the role of the ancestors as parental figures who protect and impart wisdom to the younger generation. In the story of *Among Tani*, they act as advisors who also provide weapons to Among Tani to help him defeat Prabu Kolomurko. Meanwhile, Prabu Kolomurko represents a threat to Java's prosperity. In the context of agrarian society, this threat may manifest either through natural phenomena or human intervention.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, ancestral legitimization functions as the primary mechanism that sustains the *wayang klithik* performance in Gotanjung's *sedekah bumi*. This legitimacy is actively maintained through the practice of *tawassul* within the Islamic framework. The narrative of Mbah Soreng is continuously constructed and reproduced by villagers, and in turn, it shapes their perspectives and actions toward the tradition. The community's majority affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) explains why syncretic forms of Islam persist in contemporary religious life. The interconnected elements of this tradition therefore reinforce Gotanjung's identity as an agrarian community.

Although this research is a single-site case study, it contributes to theoretical discussions of syncretism by demonstrating how Islamic devotional practice are negotiated within a Javanese cosmocentric framework through a ritual performance. For Gotanjung specifically, these findings provide a reference for *wayang klithik* and *sedekah bumi* preservation strategies. Further studies need to be carried out in order to explain the challenges Gotanjung faces in maintaining this tradition amid social modernization and to conduct comparative studies across other *wayang klithik* locales to assess variation and broader applicability.

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