

## Javanese-Islamic Syncretism in Islamic Legal Ethnography: Religious and Cultural Fluidity in Sesajian Traditions

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### Abstract:

As Muslims, local culture cannot be separated from the Islamic religion, which is adhered to by the majority of the Indonesian population, particularly on the island of Java. For Muslims on Java Island, not all local culture is under the teachings of the Islamic religion, which originates from the Holy Qur'an and Hadith. One of the local cultures strong in Javanese nuances is the cultural practice of offerings. Although offerings are considered heresy and idolatry in Islam, they are still carried out by residents of Rembu Lor village, Mojokerto Regency, East Java, which has the distinctive name "Cok Bakal". In this research, the researchers focus on the form of syncretization existing in the "Cok Bakal" and Islam's perspective on this cultural practice. The researchers employed an ethnographic approach, which began with participant observations, documentation, and interviews during ten months of field research. The research results show that during the "Cok Bakal" procession, the community also conducted Islamic teachings, such as *istighosah*, *sholawat*, and *hajat* prayers. In Islam, the practice of offerings is considered shirk. However, since the offerings practice of "Cok Bakal" has been passed down from generation to generation, a constructive dialogue and ongoing education may encourage the community to understand Islamic teachings better. In conclusion, in addressing the culture of offerings, it is essential to consider broader social and cultural aspects while still adhering to Islamic principles.

Keywords: Islamic Religion, Local Culture, Syncretization, Offerings

### Abstrak:

Sebagai umat Islam, budaya lokal tidak bisa dipisahkan dari agama Islam yang dianut oleh mayoritas penduduk Indonesia, khususnya di Pulau Jawa. Bagi umat Islam di Pulau Jawa, tidak semua budaya lokal sesuai dengan ajaran agama Islam yang bersumber dari Kitab Suci Al-Qur'an dan Hadits. Salah satu budaya lokal yang kental akan nuansa Jawa adalah budaya sesaji. Meskipun sesaji dianggap sebagai ajaran sesat dan penyembahan berhala dalam Islam, namun sesaji tetap dilakukan oleh warga Desa Rembu Lor, Kabupaten Mojokerto, Jawa Timur yang memiliki nama khas "Cok Bakal". Dalam penelitian ini, para peneliti berfokus pada bentuk sinkretisasi yang ada dalam praktik budaya "Cok Bakal" dan perspektif Islam terhadap praktik budaya ini. Para Peneliti menggunakan pendekatan etnografi yang diawali dengan observasi partisipan, dokumentasi, dan wawancara selama sepuluh bulan penelitian lapangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa selama prosesi "Cok Bakal", komunitas tersebut juga melaksanakan ajaran agama Islam, seperti *istighosah*, *sholawat*, dan shalat *hajat*. Dalam Islam, praktik sesaji dianggap sebagai perbuatan shirik. Akan tetapi, karena praktik sesaji "Cok Bakal" ini telah dilakukan dari generasi ke generasi, dialog yang

konstruktif dan pendidikan berkelanjutan mungkin akan mendorong komunitas tersebut untuk memahami ajaran Islam dengan lebih baik. Kesimpulannya, ketika berbicara mengenai budaya sesaji, penting untuk mempertimbangkan aspek sosial dan budaya yang lebih luas namun tetap berpegang pada prinsip-prinsip Islam.

Kata Kunci: Agama Islam, Budaya Lokal, Sinkretisasi, Sesaji

## INTRODUCTION

Islam is often perceived as a monolithic teaching and interpreted individually (Hamid, 2013; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020; Syed & Pio, 2018). Yet, it has many sects and groups, and many Muslim communities still practice local culture from their respective regions. Muslims in Java, Indonesia, are the most relevant case. Before the entry of Islam in Java, the majority's fate was animism and dynamism, then followed by Hinduism and Buddhism (Agustin, 2019; Barry, 2024; Haryanto, 2020; Malik & Maslahah, 2021; Nasution & Arum, 2024). However, the traditional Javanese society accepted Islam easily as the “scholars, such as da'i or saints, finally use socio-cultural or cultural approach in spreading Islam, namely by not eliminating the original traditions of the Javanese people and embedding Islamic teachings in it or combining Islamic teachings with the original culture of the Javanese people” (Nasution & Arum, 2024). Thus, at the beginning of Islamization, society thought that culture and religion coexisted. And to this day, most people in modern Java, who call themselves Muslims, still practice local customs, such as rituals, ceremonies, or offerings.

The spreading of Islam in Java is a transformational process known as acculturation. It occurs when people and communities come into contact with new cultural norms and practices (George, 2022). Another definition of acculturation is a form of cultural change caused by immigrant groups creating new cultural patterns accepted by native communities (Deslandes et al., 2024; Schwartz et al., 2010). In this sense, when Islam first came into Java, it was incorporated into the new Javanese local cultures by participating in aspects of the more prevalent cultures, such as traditions, but still held onto Islamic teachings. As time flies, the Islamic teachings and the Javanese local cultures blend or merge, resulting from continuous interactions and exchanges. So, based on Karlsson (2018), this process is called syncretism, a “‘blending’ and ‘amalgamation’ of religious doctrine and ritual”.

Two studies have highlighted Java communities' traditions or customs, which result from syncretism. The first is Aminullah (2017), who studied the Prenduan community, which is known to be very pious in Islam, but conducts an offering tradition. This research examined the syncretic process in the community, starting from the offering tradition and how, in the end, Islamic teachings were introduced to modify the tradition. The second is a paper by Margiyono et al. (2023) that discusses the form and meaning of "Cok Bakal" in Javanese offerings. They specifically described what is usually placed inside the banana leaf, and other kitchen spices put together in a *tampah*, which is then called "Cok Bakal". The researchers also highlighted that "Cok Bakal" is an offering to get salvation and blessings from God and avoid calamity. This paper does not specifically discuss "Cok Bakal" in a particular place, but "Cok Bakal" as a Javanese tradition.

Complementing previous research, the researchers studied the offering of "Cok Bakal," particularly the one held in Rembu Lor village, Mojokerto, East Java. This research complements the contribution to the study of Islamic-Javanese religious syncretism in regional cultural practices, especially in Mojokerto. More importantly, this study discusses the complexity of the offering and examines the community's responses with various characters and backgrounds to "Cok Bakal".

The researchers found out that the entire population of Rembu Lor village is known to be Muslim. Nonetheless, almost all residents in the village carry out the cultural practice of "Cok Bakal" on certain occasions. The community holds this cultural practice during a wedding ceremony, circumcision, and village cleansing. "Cok Bakal" is usually led by village elders called "Pak Polo", in other words, the Head of the 'Dusun' during village clean-up events. The meaning of the practice of "Cok Bakal" is that important events can run smoothly without any obstacles. The practice of "Cok Bakal" is done by placing offerings under a large tree (*punden*), which is sacred, and then taking water from the well near the *punden*. The villagers consider that the harvest, safety, abundance of good fortune, and security result from the protection of the spirits who inhabit the village (Sumbulah, 2012). These spirits are believed to be God's intermediaries in helping human welfare.

In Rembu Lor village, apart from adhering to the cultural practice of "Cok Bakal", the community is also active in practising Islamic teachings. It implicitly explains that religion and culture can work hand in hand. However, seen from the perspective of Islam,

mediation of the deceased or appeal to ancestors for aid, for example by using offerings, is generally seen as outside the Islamic faith (Ally, 2022; Bahadur, 2020; Lugo, 2012). According to Margiyono et al. (2023) “Cok Bakal”, which is a form of offerings, is usually done as a way to express gratitude and seek blessings from the divine and ancestral spirits (Margiyono et al., 2023). Moreover, this cultural practice is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran or the Prophet's Sunnah. Yet, it is generally considered permissible if forbidden elements like idolatry, heresy, or actions that contradict Islamic teachings are not involved. Thus, a clear boundary of whether “Cok Bakal” is acceptable and permitted in Islamic teachings should be examined further. In response to this phenomenon, this research attempts to explore the form of syncretization existing in the “Cok Bakal” and how Islam views this cultural practice.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This research employed an ethnographic approach. Reeves et al. (2013) explain that ethnography is qualitative research that gathers observations, interviews, and documentary data to produce detailed and comprehensive accounts of different social phenomena (actions, behavior, interactions, beliefs). They further signify that “this approach means that the ethnographer goes into the field to explore a cultural group and/or certain social interactions”. Researchers who employ an ethnographic approach are usually involved directly, even living with the people to be studied; hence, this approach is also called participant-observation (Howell, 2018). Howell also mentions that the purpose of this participant-observation is “to achieve an understanding of local knowledge, values, and practices from the 'native's point of view (2018).



**Figure 1. The Researchers' Participant-Observation**

The researchers conducted ten months of research in Rembu Lor village, Mojokerto, by staying there to observe how the people live daily (see Figure 1). While the researchers were staying in the village, they experienced firsthand the importance of the “Cok Bakal” practice carried out, and how the community’s view regarding this cultural practice.

### **Research Techniques**

Research techniques are essential for researchers to collect their empirical research data. Taherdoost (2021) states that data collection techniques for qualitative research encompass three main categories: observations, document reviews, and in-depth interviews. In this study, the researchers did participant observation, meaning they observed the daily life of people in Rembu Lor village who practiced “Cok Bakal”. While observing, the researchers also documented all activities related to this “Cok Bakal” cultural practice and reviewed them in depth. Lastly, they conducted in-depth interviews using purposive sampling techniques to determine informants.

Purposive sampling was carried out with the aim that the sample taken must follow the research being discussed, with the aim that the sample can be accepted as representing the nature of the population (Sreekumar, 2023). The selected informants, chosen using purposive sampling, are people with various characteristics and backgrounds who follow the “Cok Bakal” practice.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Syncretization Form of “Cok Bakal”**

The majority of the people of Rembu Lor village openly embrace Islam and do not close themselves off to any traditions as long as they are within the path of Islam and goodness. The community carries out the cultural practice of “Cok Bakal” as a form of gratitude to Allah Almighty, who gives gifts through the village punden. This “Cok Bakal” is the original local culture of Rembu Lor village, which has not been eradicated since the time of our ancestors. “Cok Bakal” is also a symbol of the community’s respect for the village guardian spirit, believed to be God’s intermediary in protecting the village from danger. People strongly believe that just performing prayers and other religious orders is not enough, so they must be balanced with carrying out traditions they believe in, as Muhaimin (2006) states that a custom or tradition is a local culture typical of a region

whose procedures are not mentioned in the Islamic religion, but which becomes the local Islamic identity of that community.

The researchers interviewed the Head of *Dusun*, Mr. TU, who highlighted that the art of *tembang-tembang*, *wayang*, and its equipment have been passed down from generation to generation since ancient times. The art and every ceremony taking place in the village of Rembu Lor cannot be separated from the practice of offerings called “Cok Bakal”. It is one of the main parts that has been customary to be carried out in almost all parts of society.

*“Banyak mahasiswa tari yang selalu menjujuk ke desa ini, mbak. Kemarin juga diadakan Kertosuro untuk menghidupkan punden kidul. Ten mriki katah tandak e, dulu buyut samean mak kaji itu juga tandak sesepuh disini. Nenek moyang kita disini yang njaga punden juga tandak, danyang nya tandak. Masio ngadakno Cok Bakal ya mboten ninggal agomo, istighosah, sholawat.”* (Mr. TU)

(Many dance students always come to this village. Yesterday, a Kertosuro event was held to revive the *punden* on the south side. There are many dancers here. In the past, our ancestors were also dancers, and the ancestors guarding the *punden* here are also dancers. Although “Cok Bakal” is conducted, it cannot be separated from religious activities such as *istighosah* and *sholawat*.)

“Cok Bakal” is a leaf formation resembling a fishing boat tied with a skewer (see Figure 2). Usually, people make three *takir* “Cok Bakal”. The first *takir* contains a cone-shaped rice ball, which means success in terms of food, and next to it is a raw chicken egg. The second *takir* contains garden flowers or flowers according to what the community has. When the researchers made “Cok Bakal”, the second *takir* was filled with henna kuku flowers that grew in Mrs. N's yard. Flowers have symbols and meanings of fragrance, purity, and respect for women. It is said that Nyai Pandansari always wears a bun decorated with flowers. Then the third *takir* contains complete kitchen spices such as shrimp paste, salt, MSG, shallots and garlic, tamarind, and one cigarette. The meaning of the third *takir* is to emulate the attitude of Nyai Pandansari, who was previously busy being a *sinden* but still remembers her nature as a woman, namely cooking. Nyai Pandansari is a legendary figure, symbolizing beauty, women's strength, and the guardian of harmony between humans and nature (Baihaqi, 2022; Kurnia, 2024; Sururi, 2024).



**Figure 2. “Cok Bakal” Offering**

An interview with the village elder, Mrs. S, explaining that “Cok Bakal” is a form of gratitude given by the community for the smooth running of the event. Before the event is held, on average, all people perform *hajat* prayers in the third part of the night. However, they continue to make “Cok Bakal” along with *sandingan* and *tumpengan*, which are placed on the *punden* and at specific points in the house. In the implementation of “Cok Bakal” practice, the community also prays to Allah and gives prayers to the guardian of the *punden* to support the smooth running of the event.

*“Ten ngeriki niku tujuanipun damel cok bakal, sandingan niku lak ibarate matursuwun gone Pengeran. Matursuwun nglancaraken sampek acara, mboten enten nopo-nopo, selamat kabeh, rejekine akeh. Ngunuiku gak kenek diterak, kabeh opo sing gawe urip tapi menungso yo kudu ngerti.”* (Mrs. S)

(The purpose of making “Cok Bakal” here is like expressing gratitude to Allah; thank you for making the event run smoothly, there are no harmful incidents, everyone is safe, and the fortune will be abundant. This custom cannot be underestimated; it must be preserved, and humans must be aware of themselves when coexisting with the supernatural world.)

According to Geertz (1976, p. 14), “*slametan* protects you against the spirits, so they will not upset you; the incense and the aroma of the food at the *slametan* are considered as food for the spirits in order to pacify them so they will not disturb the living”. “Cok Bakal” which is a form of offerings (with *sandingan* and *tumpengan*) must be carried out so that the desired event can run smoothly without harmful incidents, as stated by Mrs. S from the interview. She also said there should be no other bad intentions while carrying out the “Cok Bakal” practice, especially just thanking Allah.



**Figure 3. “Cok Bakal” Procession**

“Cok Bakal” is always made together as an essential part of creating a *sandingan*. This *sandingan* is usually made during a celebration, such as a wedding, circumcision, village cleaning, or other important events. It is a complete offering in a large container, which is usually called a bucket basin. The various contents of the *sandingan* are two to three kilograms of rice, one coconut husk, two bananas, a small water jug, and *rengginan* crackers or rice crackers. The *sandingan* is neatly arranged, and the last stage is to place the *takir* “Cok Bakal” in the top position. After the *sandingan* is neatly arranged and put into the bucket basin, it is ready to be taken to the *punden* (see Figure 3).

*Sandingan* is usually placed in certain places. The most essential *sandingan* is placed in the north and south *punden*. One *sandingan* consists of three *takir* “Cok Bakal”, so if there are two *sandingan*, there are six *takir* “Cok Bakal”. In addition to the *punden*, *sandingan* is also very important to be placed in the house. First, it is placed in the *sepen* room or a special room that should not be entered by anyone except the person holding the event. Second, it is placed on the *ulap-ulap*, which is positioned in front of the house's door, holding the event. Third, it is placed next to the sound system operator. Fourth, it is placed in the kitchen next to the chef who cooks the rice. Fifth, it is placed under the stage if the person holding the event invites entertainment. Sixth, it is placed in a special room for food served to guests.

The *sandingan* placed in the *punden* after the prayer process and eating tumpeng together are finished will be taken home by the community, while the *takir* “Cok Bakal” are left under the *punden* tree. The *sandingan* placed at home after the event is finished will be taken home by each person responsible. The *sandingan* and “Cok Bakal” in the kitchen are taken home by the person who cooks the rice. The person who dismantles the stage takes the *sandingan* and “Cok Bakal” on the stage. The *sandingan* and “Cok Bakal” next to

the sound system are taken home by the owner of the sound system. The *sandingan* and “Cok Bakal” above the house's *ulap-ulap* will be given to those dismantling the tent.

The purpose of *sandingan* (part of the “Cok Bakal”) is to share with others, give alms, and show gratitude for helping the event run. Complete *sandingan* containing rice, coconut, and bananas are given as alms and gratitude to the cook, the people who support the event run. Although they are all paid, apart from that, their best energy and thoughts have been given so that the event runs smoothly. The *sandingan* is taken home and used to be cooked and eaten by the family. The community that receives *sandingan* admits that the blessings in their hard work are paid for by money, and can make the family happy through food. It makes the community always carry out “Cok Bakal” because there are so many positive syncretic values that benefit everyone.

### **Islam’s Perspective on “Cok Bakal”**

In Islam, religious and cultural practices are always seen from the perspective of monotheism or the oneness of Allah. Sajen, or offering food and other objects to spirits or supernatural beings, is often considered contrary to this basic principle. It is because offerings can be seen as a form of shirk, namely associating Allah with something else (Abdul-Rahman, 2022; Ramzy & Dastagir, 2018), which is strictly prohibited in Islamic teachings. Allah SWT is the only one who has the right to be worshipped. All forms of worship must be directed only to Him.

The Qur’an emphasizes the importance of maintaining the purity of monotheism, and three Surahs taken from *Quran.com* (Khattab, 2025c) state this importance. First, in Surah Al-Baqarah verses 21-22, Allah SWT says, “O humanity! Worship your Lord, Who created you and those before you, so that you may become mindful of Him. He is the One Who has made the earth a place of settlement for you and the sky a canopy; and sends down rain from the sky, causing fruits to grow as a provision for you. So do not knowingly set up equals to Allah in worship.” Another one in Surah Al-An’am verse 108, “O believers! Do not insult what they invoke besides Allah or they will insult Allah spitefully out of ignorance....” And the last one in Surah An-Nisa verse 48, “Indeed, Allah does not forgive associating others with Him in worship, but forgives anything else of whoever He wills. And whoever associates others with Allah has indeed committed a grave sin.” These verses prominently assert that all forms of worship or offerings other than Allah are acts that are against monotheism. Therefore, the intention that must be

prioritized in maintaining a tradition as an event is to show gratitude to Allah for all the blessings that have been given.

In the offering tradition, there is a belief that ancestral spirits or supernatural beings can provide protection or prosperity if given offerings (Geertz, 1976). This view is not in line with Islamic teachings, which state that only Allah has complete power over everything. Surah Al-Fatiha verse 5, which is the most essential prayer in Islam, teaches Muslims to ask only Allah for help and protection: “You ‘alone’ we worship and You ‘alone’ we ask for help.” (Khattab, 2025a). Apart from that, Rasulullah SAW, in his hadiths, criticized many practices that led to shirk. One of the relevant hadiths is, “He who dies without associating anyone with Allah would (necessarily) enter Paradise, and he who dies associating anything with Allah would enter the (Fire of) Hell” (HR. Muslim) (*Sahih Muslim 93a - The Book of Faith*, 2025). This hadith shows how serious the consequences of shirk are, including the practice of offerings, which can be considered part of shirk.

Islam also teaches the importance of *tawakkal*, or complete surrender to Allah. Offerings are often made to avoid bad luck or bring good luck. In Islam, people are taught to believe that everything that happens is by Allah’s will, and humans must try their best while surrendering to Him. This trust is also reflected in Surah At-Tawbah verse 51, “Say, ‘Nothing will ever befall us except what Allah has destined for us. He is our Protector.’ So, in Allah let the believers put their trust.” (Khattab, 2025b)

The practice of offerings can also be seen from the perspective of sharia, namely Islamic law based on the Holy Al-Qur’an and Sunnah. Many scholars agree that offerings are *bid’ah* (Iyaad, 2025; Zubaidi & Isa, 2020), namely, new worship practices not taught by the Prophet Muhammad and not found in Islamic teachings. *Bid’ah* is considered a deviation from the pure teachings of Islam and often contains elements of shirk or beliefs that are contrary to monotheism.

However, Islam’s view of offering culture is not always black and white. Some scholars may look at the cultural and historical context behind the practice before passing judgment. They may argue that providing the public with a correct understanding of tawhid and shirk while showing empathy for local traditions is crucial. This process can involve constructive dialogue and ongoing education so people can better understand

Islamic teachings. Islam also promotes tolerance and respect for cultural differences as long as they do not conflict with basic religious principles. In dealing with the practice of offerings, a wise approach is to provide polite and wise preaching, not with harsh confrontation or rejection. Rasulullah SAW always exemplified a way of preaching that was full of compassion and wisdom, even towards those who were still in the habits of jahiliyyah (ignorance before Islam) (Arinah & Alimudin, 2023; Zulia et al., 2024). Therefore, with an inclusive approach and respect for differences, Muslims can positively contribute to a plural and diverse society.

## CONCLUSION

In Rembu Lor village, the practice of offering “Cok Bakal” has become essential for carrying out various important events. Almost everyone implements it, and only a few people from certain groups ignore it. Apart from the community carrying out these traditions, they also carry out prayers and other Islamic rituals, such as *istighosah*, *sholawat*, and *hajat* prayers as a complementary core to the implementation of the event. This practice proves that religion and culture go hand in hand and flow.

In Islam, the practice of offerings is generally considered shirk. Giving food to spirits as a hope to avoid calamity is a form of associating Allah with others because humans must only surrender to Allah. Thus, it is not in line with Islamic teachings. However, in many societies, offerings are not only a religious practice but also part of a rich cultural heritage. “Cok Bakal” in Rembu Lor village is a cultural practice passed down from generation to generation, and according to the community, it is a way to show gratitude to Allah. Therefore, in addressing the culture of offerings, it is essential to consider broader social and cultural aspects while still adhering to Islamic principles.

Researchers admit that there are still many shortcomings in conducting this research. The research object is limited to the Rembu Lor village community, where the cultural practice of “Cok Bakal” is always carried out. The researchers’ discussion is also limited to religious and cultural syncretism. Researchers hope that future research can cover a wide range of objects and discuss different areas of religion and culture. Researchers also hope future research will provide new insights into various cultural practices in Indonesia.

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