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The Religiosity of Javanese Culture in Cowongan Tradition

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Abstract

The Javanese have diverse cultures and values. Javanese culture is always related to folklore, both written and non-written using tools. In Banyumas, there is a Cowongan culture. This research aims to identify the Islamic perspective in the values that exist in the Cowongan tradition. It is a continuation of previous research on the form of Cowongan tradition and its values conducted by other researchers. The researchers get the data sources through observation, interviews, and documentation. The researchers conducted direct observations and interviews with the principal perpetrator, namely Titus Edi Purwanto. The researchers used documentation to collect library data about Cowongan, ranging from forms, practices to values. This data analysis used a qualitative descriptive method. Therefore, the researchers narrate the results of the research descriptively and interpretively. The result is that the religiosity in Javanese culture in the Cowongan tradition includes three concepts; the essence of life, the relationship between humans and nature, and the relationship between humans and humans. In addition, Cowongan is also a representation of religious-cultural identity so that humans become Insan Kamil.

Keywords: Religion, Culture, Java, Cowongan

Introduction

Many researchers have conducted scientific studies on Javanese culture. It is to strengthen the cultural identity of a pluralistic nation. From this research on culture, the term indigenous peoples emerged. In his research *Religiusitas Masyarakat Adat Kampung Dukuh Kabupaten Garut Jawa Barat*, Efendi et al. (2018) said that the term "indigenous peoples" is associated with "traditional communities":

“A society that (1) lives based on the origins of the ancestors. It is (2) in a specific geographical area. It (3) has a value system and (4) a unique socio-cultural system. It is (5) sovereign over land and natural wealth. It (6) regulates the sustainability of life with customary laws and institutions.”

In his research *Akulturasi Islam dan Budaya Jawa*, Aziz (2013) also explains. Culture, concerning the spread of Islam, causes acculturation. Researchers can investigate acculturation through tombstones, architecture, literature, and various other traditions. According to Purwadi (2012), since ancient times, Javanese culture has been famous as a noble culture that contains many noble values. Every cultural society maintains the concept of cultural values, functions, systems, and forms.

Javanese culture is not a product of stagnant thought but a dialectic of values. An example is the tradition of the *Bedhaya Ela-Ela* dance. The dance is a product of traditional art and culture that lived and developed in the two former kingdoms of Java; Surakarta and Yogyakarta. The

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representation of cultural values in the dance is a matter of taste in Javanese ethics. It appears in the standard form of the movement, namely the politeness pattern of Javanese women (Sulastuti, Katarina Indah, Simatupang, G.L.L., Soedarsini, R.M., Haryono, 2017).

Research on Javanese culture is also always related to folklore. Sari (2018) reveals that folklore is part of a culture spreading and passing down from generation to generation and traditionally in different forms or ways, both in verbal and example accompanied by motion or assistive devices. Folklore comes from English, namely folklore. The words folk and lore are the origins of the word. According to Dundes (via Istian, Irpan, Hudiyono, Yusak, Rokhmansyah, 2017), folk is a community that has physical, social, and cultural identification characteristics. Therefore, It becomes a kind of differentiator with other groups. Meanwhile, lore is a part of a culture passed down from generation to generation among different groups of people traditionally.

One form of Javanese culture or folklore that still exists is the Cowongan tradition. Researchers have studied the subject, Cowongan, several times. Kamal (2016) discussed the subject using the form and value paradigm. According to Kamal, the Cowongan tradition contains art and aesthetics that are entertainment for the people. Kamal (2016) specifically mentions that the values in the tradition accommodate the essence of life, work, the human position in space and time, human relations with nature, and human relations with fellow human beings.

In addition, in his research, Wardani (2012) also uses the Cowongan tradition as a subject. His research is *Bentuk Pertunjukan dan Makna Simbolis Kesenian Cowongan di Desa Pekuncen Kecamatan Pekuncen Kabupaten Banyumas*. According to him, the Cowongan tradition has symbolic meanings implied in every supporting element of Cowongan art; the symbolic meaning of actors, motion, accompaniment, poetry or songs, makeup, clothing for performances, and Sesajen (Javanese offerings) (Wardani, 2012).

These two studies help the author to position this research. This study will continue the results obtained by Kamal (2016) regarding the values in the Cowongan tradition. However, this study adds an Islamic perspective in analyzing the values in the Cowongan tradition.

Method

This research uses folklore research methods. Danandjaja (2007) divides the folklore research stage into three research stages; (a) pre-research stage in place, (b) research stage in a real place, (c) how to make folklore or how to practice it. In the context of this research, the researchers conduct the pre-research stage by studying and documenting previous studies through books or scientific journals on folklore. It serves to find the point of view as the basis for extracting data about the interview with the informant. In the second stage, the researchers conduct direct observations at the informant's house. The location is Pengabatan Village, Karang Lewas District, Banyumas Regency. There, an informant, Titut Edi Purwanto, explained the elements and practices of Cowongan. In the third stage, the researchers note elements or tools used in the Cowongan.

The researchers chose Cowongan as the research subject because it is an interesting cultural phenomenon in Banyumas. They obtain research data through observation, interviews, and documentation. They conduct direct observations and interviews at Titut Edi Purwanto's house in Pangebatan Village, Karang Lewas District, Banyumas Regency. They use documentation to track theoretical studies on the concept of folklore, Javanese culture, and the Cowongan tradition

via books or scientific journals.

Results and Discussion:

The Religiosity of Javanese Culture

Lorens Bagus (1966) said that religiosity (religiousness or obedience to religion) comes from *religio*. Its Latin root is *religiere* or *Religare*. In popular scientific dictionaries, religious means obedience (Tim Penyusun Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1977). According to Mangunwijaya (1986), religiosity is an aspect lived by the individual in his heart and manifested in his attitude. Religiosity is the religious attitude of an individual or group that influences the behavior and products of religion, society, politics, and culture.

Humans are cultural beings that become the standard for human behavior and life. Culture is a complex and broad issue, such as culture related to the way humans live, customs, and manners. It has been embedded and inherited in society. Therefore, culture is an entity that people need to learn to establish social relations with others.

The culture that the community has lived and maintained for generations will exist in life. It will be a belief hard to resist. The belief people hold in their lives will exist through the local characteristics in the community. The local nature slowly but surely becomes local wisdom that is always held tightly by the community. In the context of heterogeneous and pluralistic Indonesian society, customs are still well-maintained to this day.

Islam is a religion that Allah revealed to be a guide for humans and a mercy for the entire universe. The spread of Islam becomes a universal good when society can become a cultured and civilized society. It is a reflection that the community has applied the noble values of religion in life. The problem is how religious teachings can synergize with local culture and exist in the local community. In Islamic history, this religion has received a harsh response and challenge in various areas. These challenges do not need to be faced in a confrontational way but in an adaptive-compromising way (Richard, 2001).

In Java, the challenges that arise are Javanese mystical traditions and Javanese-Hindu culture. However, Islam in Java became more polite, adaptive, and not contradicting with Javanese-Hindu culture. It is because of the nine saints through their intellectuality and adjustment.

Javanese society is famous as a society that is very tolerant to foreign cultures that enter Javanese culture. Javanese (Wong Jowo) has cultural skills in adapting to various foreign cultures. This adaptive and compromising Javanese character collaborates with the process of entering Islam in Java. This collaboration triggers the emergence of mutualistic and even syncretic attitudes. This relationship appears in various Javanese cultural centers and becomes a distinctive Javanese identity.

Concerning cultural values, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) divide the system of cultural values in all cultures in the world into five main problems, (1) problems regarding the essence of human life; (2) problems regarding the essence of human work, (3) problems regarding the essence of human position in space and time (4) problems regarding the essence of human relations with the natural surroundings; (5) problems regarding the nature of human relations with each other. By Spranger's theory, Adisubroto (1987) examined the value orientation of Javanese people and their characteristics. He found that (1) Javanese people have a relatively high orientation towards

theoretical values or knowledge values compared to five other values, economic, religious, socio-political, and aesthetic value; (2) Javanese people have a relatively high orientation towards political values such as respecting position or power; (3) Javanese people have a relatively high orientation towards economic values such as respecting the time and everything.

In the structure of Javanese society, there are two groups of Javanese which Koentjaraningrat (1984) refers to as the peasant community or commonly called *Wong Cilik*, and the other group called *Priyayi*. Magniz-Suseno (2001) added a group called the aristocrats (*Ndara*). Then Geertz (1964) grouped the Javanese into *Santri*, *Abangan*, and *Priyayi*. In the Javanese, Geertz (1964) found the relation to the "world beyond their dimensions" called spirits or *Lelemah*. This relationship appears in various ceremonies, offerings, salvation. As a form of respect for the spirits of people who have died, the Javanese perform alms ceremonies (*Selametan*): *sedekah surtanah*, *sedekah nelung dina*, *sedekah mitung dina*, *sedekah matang puluh*, *sedekah nyatus* and so on.

In his research, Herusatoto (1991) underlines that the life of the Javanese has a close relationship with myth and religiosity. They also strongly believe in magical powers that affect the use of the Javanese language. Herusatoto (1991) said that Javanese people are afraid of magical powers from a world beyond their reach and afraid of mystic things. Fear and respect at the same time cause the Javanese to use symbolic language to refer to objects or names that have magical powers. To mention the name of God, the Javanese personify it as "*Gusti Kang Maha Agung Pangeran Kang Maha Tunggal*". They call mystical creatures *Sing Mbahu Rekso*, *Sing Momong Mbah*. Because of the close relationship of the Javanese people with symbols, it appears in the objects, colors, sounds, and daily activities that they show.

Cowongan Tradition

Banyumasan culture has different characteristics from other Central Javanese cultures. These differences exist because Banyumas has a culture between the Javanese culture of the Ngayogyakarta Palace and the Sundanese culture. In art, Banyumasan culture has characteristics that highlight freedom in gamelan instruments, old Banyumasan songs, or other traditional arts (Priyadi, 2013). Art is not only folk art that aims to entertain the public. It is a ritual for safety and welfare in Banyumas. Some of the arts in Banyumas have similarities with arts in other regions as mantras.

One of the Banyumas cultures that have become a tradition is the ritual of summoning rain called Cowongan. In its implementation, Cowongan uses a mantra that is very important for the ritual. For generations, people believe that the mantra in the Cowongan tradition can summon rain and blessings to the Banyumas people. If we examine it, the mantra in the Cowongan is a form of depiction through the symbolization of heaven, earth, and Nini Cowong covered in the Javanese version of Kamasutra philosophy. A mantra is a literary work that preserves culture and aims at meditation (Suraji, 2010). The Banyumas people believe that a mantra is not just a mantra but also a prayer that can connect them with the spirits of their ancestors.

Indonesian culture abundantly appears in the various rituals in several regions. Cowongan is one of the unique rituals in Indonesia. There are also rituals to summon rain with different names such as *Ujungan* (in Purbalingga and Banjarnegara, Central Java), *Manten Kucing* (in Palem Village, Tulungagung, East Java), *Ujung* (in Bondowoso, East Java), *Debug Ende* (in Bali), and Cowongan (in Banyumas, Central Java). Even in the Banyumas, there are two rituals to summon rain; Cowongan (in Pangebatan, Karang Lewas, Banyumas) and Pakeyongan (in Kembaran,

Banyumas).

Of the two rituals to summon rain in Banyumas, there are some similarities and differences. The similarity of the ritual is in the mantras to summon rain, even though the media and implementation are different. The Banyumas people believe that the mantras they repeat during the Cowongan procession have supernatural powers. This power is for protecting people from harm and bringing safety to them. In literature, mantras are part of oral literature preserved from generation to generation through rituals. The existence of mantras in rituals becomes an urgent matter. In the Cowongan ritual, mantras are fundamental so that the ritual of summoning rain is successful.

According to Ki Titut Edi Purwanto (Cowongan artist and Cowongan puppeteer), Cowongan historically is a traditional ritual performed by Banyumas farmers to request rain so that their harvest will be successful (Interview with Ki Titut on 23 November 2020). The purpose of the Cowongan ritual is to summon an angel to come down to earth and summon rain. Cowongan comes from the word *Cowang-Coweng* which means to make a scribble on the face of a Cowong doll. Cowong is a doll made of ladle from coconut shell (*Irus*) wrapped in straw clothes, grass leaves, or cloth to resemble a woman. After that, Cowong becomes a doll that look like a woman. It becomes a symbol of an angel. It is then crossed out with whiting or commonly called *Njet*. In its development, the Cowongan ritual later become a performance art carried out by the puppeteer Titut Edi Purwanto. Cowongan still uses the rain-summoning mantra despite a performing art (Interview with Ki Titut on 23 November 2020).

In this ritual, Materials and equipment are dancers, handlers, *cowong*, flowers, smoke, and incense. People call the handler the puppeteer, a figure who carries out the Cowongan ritual. Cowong is a doll decorated to resemble a woman. It becomes a medium to present a spirit believed to be the spirit of an angel who summons rain (Kamal, 2016). Practically, the puppeteer places cowong on the grave, a tree, a rock, or the edge of a river. It lasts about three days and the spirit, angle, goes to the Cowong doll. Then, dancers are also an essential aspect of the Cowongan ritual (Interview with Ki Titut on 23 November 2020).

Initially, the cowong puppeteer opens the Cowongan ritual by calling Nini Cowong to the Cowong Sewu Court, where it takes place. In the opening, the puppeteer gives an oration about cowong. Cowong is different from Jelangkung. Cowongan is a medium for praying for the ancestors to the Almighty. In addition to God, the community also prays to Dewi Sri as the ruler (*ingkang mbaurekso*) of the rice fields and rain-summoner. This belief is respect for the Javanese people to divine beings, not humans or angels. Symbolically, these creatures are Gods, Goddesses, Nyai, and Kyai, believed to be divine messengers to strengthen and grow plants (Sumbulah, 2012).

We do not simply interpret belief as a form of absolute belief in other than God Almighty. However, as explained earlier, it is only a symbol of belief in God. So, we can conclude that, behind their belief in a transcendent God, they also believe in the existence of Dewi Sri coming from God. The myth about Dewi Sri is a manifestation of an immanent longing for God. It also does not contradict the teachings of Islam. According to Islam, one of the indicators of a believer is to believe in the unseen as in Al baqarah: “who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and donate from what We have provided for them.”

People often associate polytheism with the performers of the Cowongan ritual in the Banyumas area. Several times, some expressions are less pleasant for the locals. However, according to Titut

Edi Purwanto (Banyumas Artist), the Cowongan tradition is a prayer to God to summon rain (Lynda, Susana, 2017). Prejudices about people who practice worship (*lelaku*) with syncretic nuances seem to have existed in the minds of people. Things related to ancestral rituals seem to contradict Islamic teachings. From that point of view, we will assume that there are two Islamic identities; Abangan and Santri. After all, the tools (*Ubo Rampe*) needed were in place, the puppeteer began to burn the incense, and a group of men with black bodies gathered in the ritual area. The black man is a symbol of the devil. Then the puppeteer recites the mantra:

Sulasih sulanja kucus menyan ngundang dewa,
Ana dewa dening sukma widadari temuruno
Runtung-runtung kesanga, sing mburi karia lima
Leng-leng guleng, gulenge pangebatan
Gelang-gelang nglayonin nglayoni putria ngungkung
Cek-incek raga bali rog-rog asem kamilega
Reg-regan rog-rogan
Reg-regan rog-rogan

Then when the Sinden, a female solo singer who sings with a gamelan, enters the ritual area while they recite the mantra.

Sang Kamadipa, sang kamadipa
Sang Kamadadi, sang kamadipa
Sang Kamadadi, ismu kuning apa rupane, sangkalewa (?) jati arane menyan
Sang cublek kuning urubing menyan

After reciting the mantra, the puppeteer raises the cowong. The purpose of the act is so that the angels and the spirits of the ancestors enter the cowong. Not only that, the puppeteer didn't stop reciting spells or mantras either. The mantra aims to ask forgiveness for the sins committed by the villagers. Then the Cowong puppeteer gathers the community into the middle of the Cowongan procession. He chants a mantra that aims to make harmony in the community. The final stage of the Cowongan ritual is to carry the woman on a stretcher, and the dancers parade her. The woman represents an angel who came from heaven, and the dancers represent the devil. The puppeteer immediately chanted spells or mantras so that Nini Cowong would come to the ritual. This procession marks the end. This procession became a symbol of togetherness and gratitude of the community for the blessings of the Almighty.

Religiosity of Java Culture in Cowongan

Cowongan is a tradition of the Banyumas community carried out from generation to generation. The word tradition itself derives from the Latin *tradere* meaning to transmit, to hand over, and to give for safekeeping. Tradition is an idea, belief, and behavior kept from generation to generation symbolically attached to society (Liliweri, 2014). Javanese society is always famous for having various traditions and cultures. The most fundamental one in tradition is information transmitted from generation to generation, both written and oral. Without it, the tradition will be extinct

(Isdiana, 2017).

Tradition is also an order of beliefs and procedures inherited from the past. Therefore, it is not surprising that if there is a reinterpretation of the tradition, the tradition will be different from its origin. Tradition is inseparable from the philosophy of the local community formulated based on the point of view and values of life recognized for their truth and benefits. Long before religion existed, people had views on the natural environment, and it influenced certain religious traditions. Diversity in various aspects is the basis of social and cultural life in Indonesia.

Historical records prove that the Indonesian people have always had beliefs related to magical powers that govern nature. These magical powers have positive and negative characteristics. Based on that, Javanese people try to soften the hearts of those who have supernatural powers by holding rituals such as pilgrimages, offerings, and art performances (Luqman Nurhisam and Muallimul Huda, 2016).

In addition, tradition meets the needs of a system. According to Shils, humans cannot live without traditions even though they are often satisfied with their traditions (Fajrie, 2016). Fajrie emphasized that the functions of tradition for the community include: (1) Tradition provides fragments of historical heritage or cultural history seen as beneficial for the community and others. In addition, tradition contains an idea and material used as a guide in building the future. (2) Tradition provides legitimacy to the views of life, beliefs, institutions, and rules that already exist in the community. (3) Tradition helps to provide a place for the complaints, disappointments, and discontent of modern life because it showed a felicitous past when society was in a critical condition. (4) Tradition provides a convincing symbol of collective identity and strengthens loyalty to the nation and group. Every tradition binds citizens together.

People often associate polytheism with the performers of the Cowongan ritual in the Banyumas area. Several times, some expressions are less pleasant for the locals. However, according to Titut Edi Purwanto (Banyumas Artist), the Cowongan tradition is a prayer to God to summon rain. Prejudices about people who practice worship (*lelaku*) with syncretic nuances seem to have existed in the minds of people. Things related to ancestral rituals seem to contradict Islamic teachings. From that point of view, we will assume that there are two Islamic identities; Abangan and Santri. We can trace back the journey of the abangans in the midst of globalization and modernization.

Etymologically, the word Abangan comes from the word Abang in the Javanese language (*Ngoko*). While in the Javanese language (*Krama*) of *Abang* is *Abrit*. The Dutch East Indies scholar Clifford Geertz was the one who first popularized the terms *Abangan* and *Putihan*. Clifford Geertz has received many criticisms because, according to Clifford Geert, Archipelagic Islam (Islam Nusantara) is Islam mixed with syncretism. This view then gives rise to a dichotomy; the *Abangan* and *Putihan* (*Santri*). As Clifford Geertz means, the Abangan is authentic Javanese people who reject Islam, while *Putihan* (*Santri*) is Javanese people who reject Java and accept Islam. Therefore, we can see that the academic studies of Dutch scholars always marginalized Nusantara Islam.

The consequence of the view on Islamic syncretism that separates Javanese and Islam makes the two seem to contradict each other. This concept certainly seems hasty and frivolous. According to Irfan Afifi (2019) in his book *Saya, Jawa dan Islam*, Javanese and Islam are inseparable. All manners and traditions in Java are manifestations of the teachings from Wali Songo. The character of Islam Nusantara, which is a combination of Islam and tradition, makes Islam various

and growing. This dichotomy is a colonial strategy to divide the unity. According to Nancy K. Florida in her article *Jawa-Islam di Masa Kolonial*, Islam raises suspicion as a dangerous reality, a force that can and may appear anywhere. Then the colonials referred to the Javanese Muslims as "syncretic Muslims." Giddens (1990) states that tradition will always experience renewal. Therefore, we should not rush to claim that the changes are due to globalization and modernity rather than negotiations. Thus, Irfan Afifi's view becomes essential for understanding modern society and Archipelagic Islam.

In *The Birth of the Abangan* (Ricklefs, n.d.), M.C. Ricklefs explained that the social classification of Javanese society (Abangan and Putih) began to emerge as a typical symptom of the Javanese community in the second half of the 19th century. This period is essential in the history concerning Islamization in Java. In that period, there is data which states that the number of people performing the pilgrimage increased. According to the colonial government, in 1850, there were only 58 people from Java who performed the pilgrimage. However, at the end of 1898, that number had increased to 5.322. It happened due to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which made it easier for steamboats to sail to Arabia. Javanese people who perform the pilgrimage recognize the purification of Islam, so they have a new style of Islam. The Javanese people are what we know as the Putih. However, in its development, the Putih are increasingly distant from the religious life of the local community, which has combined with local culture. Then those who refuse the invitation of the white people we know as Abangan. Until the 19th century, the friction between the Abangan and the whites grew stronger in Javanese life.

Even though people still carry out the Cowongan tradition till now, the history and essence of this tradition are fading among the current generation, and they tend to leave it. Apart from being a performing Art, Titut made the Cowongan Tradition a medium to get closer to the Creator through a cultural approach (Interview with Titut, 23 November 2020). The development of science and technology as a necessity in globalization has weakened public trust in tradition. Science can explain various natural phenomena such as earthquakes, rain, tsunamis, and even solar eclipses. The emergence of science received a warm welcome from the public. Natural events that people used to associate with myths such as the goddess Sri or the bathing nymph as an explanation of natural phenomena are now just jokes.

Therefore, the traditional ritual for summoning rain is just a show and exhibition. According to Irfan Afifi in his article *Saat Sains Menjadi Rujukan, Kita Kehilangan Cerita* (2016), myth is a symbolic way of interpreting natural events to give space for mystery and majesty to the Creator. Mystery in myth will give birth to consciousness that we are weak and small among millions of cosmic objects. Myths will bring out a sense of religion to natural phenomena as sacred events. Myths provide imaginative stories, while science provides facts.

In the globalization era, most people only have an orientation to the economy. The balanced relationship between humans and nature is now fading. Therefore, the Javanese people are no longer able to beautify the world (*memayu hayuning bawono*). The very agricultural village Pangebatan is now increasingly dominated by infrastructure. The rapid population growth has implications for the use of agricultural land for residential purposes. It has an impact on the transformation of society in their activities. People who live as farmers are no longer doing agricultural activities. They also can no longer relate to nature as before.

The people in Pangebatan Village, who mostly live as farmers, have Cowongan tradition with a

high meaning, beautifying the world (*Memayu Hayuning Bawono*). Titut added that Cowongan makes people (at least those who believe in it) close to nature and God (Interview with Titut, 23 November 2020). Although, over time, people are increasingly leaving the Cowongan tradition. W.S. is right. In the essay collection *Mempertimbangkan Tradisi* (2005), Rendra said that Java has a super-rich culture. Unfortunately, people do not care and pay attention to that tradition. Therefore, they become parasites for their culture. It also occurs in the Cowongan in the Banyumas community. This tradition is underdeveloped because the people are less creative. This problem not only affects Javanese culture but all cultures that exist in the Nusantara.

Without realizing it, We fail to define our own cultural identity. We tend to be trapped in a western mindset that offers freedom and universality that obscures the identity of Javanese, Nusantara, and Indonesian people. We assume that Western thought will bring progress and humanity, but this mindset makes us like puppets. What we call progress, without realizing it, leads to disruption or destruction. Our ancestors had anticipated the counterproductive aspects of western thought through the expression of cultural traditions that store knowledge to become perfect human beings (*Insan Kamil*).

Conclusion

From the previous discussion, the Cowongan tradition does not contradict religion with culture or tradition. In cultural logic, Cowongan represents human life that always needs God's help through a traditional approach (folklore, local wisdom). Cowongan focuses on the essence of life with nature and fellow human beings. Cowongan is a Javanese religious identity that represents a symbol of closeness to God. From this tradition and culture, the spiritual practices and experiences of the Javanese have their characteristics. Cowongan is religious practice (*Lelaku*) for everyone who believes in and appreciates Cowongan as a cultural or religious symbol.

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