

## The Rambang Manuscript in Javanese Tradition: Sufism, Sectarian Negotiation and the Making of Tolerant Islam in Indonesia

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### Abstract

The Rambang manuscript, a mid-nineteenth-century Javanese text written in Javanese and Arabic Pegon script, represents a significant work of *Kejawen* (Javanism) Islamic literature. This study investigates the manuscript's articulation of Sunni Sufi thought, influenced by al-Ghazālī, through discussions of divinity, cosmos, and humanity. This study employs textual analysis to examine the Rambang manuscript, focusing on its intellectual content, cultural context, and historical significance. Identifying these values was possible because the Rambang Manuscript has been translated from Javanese and Arabic Pegon into Latin script and simultaneously into Indonesian. Results show that the Rambang Manuscript demonstrates intellectual negotiation between orthodox and heterodox Sufi traditions in Indonesia, particularly Java. It attempts to address sectarian conflicts during the Islamization of Java in the 15th and 16th centuries. The text showcases the adaptation of universal Sufi doctrines to local cultural idioms, reflecting indigenous intellectual sophistication. The Rambang Manuscript provides significant contribution to the making of tolerant Islam in Java, offering an intellectual foundation for moderation, reconciliation, and social harmony. These findings contribute to the broader debates on Southeast Asian Islam, highlighting the historical roots of moderation and tolerance in contemporary Javanese Muslim life.

**Keywords:** Rambang Manuscript; Javanese Islam; Sufism; Sectarian Negotiation; tolerant Islam; Kejawen tradition; Philology.

### Introduction

The Rambang manuscript, composed in mid-nineteenth-century Java and preserved in Javanese and Arabic Pegon script, represents one of the most significant yet understudied intellectual artifacts of Islam in Indonesia. While well-known Javanese texts such as the *Suluk Gatholoco*, *Suluk Malang Semirang*, or the works of Hamzah Fansuri have received sustained scholarly attention, the Rambang has remained largely neglected.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this manuscript provides a unique window into the intellectual history of Java: it articulates Sunni Sufi thought influenced by al-Ghazālī while simultaneously engaging with Javanese cultural idioms and mystical traditions. Unlike other manuscripts that simply reflect mystical speculation, the Rambang attempts to reconcile sharp sectarian divisions within Islam and, in doing so, contributes to the making of a tolerant Islam in Java.

This study focuses on the contestation and negotiation between conflicting socio-religious elements that ultimately shaped the distinctive character of Islam on the island of Java, namely, moderate, inclusive, and tolerant. This moderation is not a sudden development but the outcome of a long and often turbulent history of the region. Islamization in Java, particularly during the Demak Sultanate, was marked by both peaceful propagation and violent confrontations with Hindu-Buddhist polities.<sup>2</sup> The saturation of

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<sup>1</sup> M. I. Cohen, "Reading 'Suluk Wayang': Javanese Shadow Puppets, 'Nala' Vision, Private Self, Bodily Self," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12, no. 2 (2002): 167–86; P. J. Zoetmulder, *Pantheism and Monism in Javanese Suluk Literature: Islamic and Indian Mysticism in an Indonesian Setting* (KITLV Press, 1995); Andrea Acri and Verena Meyer, "Indic-Islamic Encounters in Javanese and Malay Mystical Literatures," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 47, no. 139 (2019): 277–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2019.1657723>.

<sup>2</sup> M.C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (EastBridge, 2006); Andar Nubowo, "Promoting Indonesian Moderate Islam on the Global Stage: Non-State Actors' Soft Power Diplomacy in the Post-New Order

military expansion following the death of Sultan Trenggono in Pasuruan illustrates the limits of forceful Islamization.<sup>3</sup> Parallel to these external conflicts, internal rivalries also flared among Islamic elites, especially between orthodox and heterodox groups.<sup>4</sup> Despite their often bloody nature, these contestations eventually produced a Javanese Islam that was reconciliatory and accommodative, integrating universal Islamic teachings with local traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Previous studies indicate that manuscripts report that Islam in Java was accommodative and integrated universal Islamic teachings with local traditions. Studies the Sejatiné Manusa manuscript found in the Village of Drajat in Lamongan, East Java, looking at Sufistic symbols, how Islam was assimilated in Java's coastal societies, the role of local elements in shaping Sufi expression, and the manuscript as historical evidence. This study shows that manuscripts, local cultural integration, and Sufi symbolism provide a comparative case for Java in the Islamization process. The Sejatine Manusa manuscript contains several Sufi symbols. One of them is *iwak telu sirah manunggal* (three one-headed fish), which symbolizes oneness. The meaning of the three fish with one head has the final interpretation, which is a symbol of the single being or the oneness of God.<sup>6</sup>

The Rambang manuscript also reflects a similar negotiation process. It provides theological, cosmological, anthropological, and Sufi discussions that demonstrate the intellectual capacity of Javanese scholars to mediate sectarian conflicts. Unlike earlier cataloguing and codicologing efforts that only identified and described manuscripts,<sup>7</sup> this study emphasizes the Rambang as a reconciliatory text. Therefore, it should be read not only as a product of *Kejawen* Islamic literature but also as evidence of indigenous intellectual sophistication in adapting Sufi doctrines to the socio-religious realities of nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. Based on this framework, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What theological, cosmological, and Sufi ideas appear in the Rambang Manuscript?; (2) How does the manuscript reflect the negotiation between orthodox Sunni Sufism and heterodox Javanese mystical traditions?; (3) How does the Rambang contribute to the historical formation of tolerant Islam in Java and Indonesia?

This study argues that the Rambang manuscript was written as an intellectual response to the bloody sectarian conflicts in Java, from the wars of Islamization under the Demak Sultanate to the enduring theological disputes between orthodox and heterodox groups. This reflects a deliberate attempt to reconcile divisions and articulate a peaceful Islam embedded in Javanese culture. In this sense, the Rambang contributes to the construction of tolerant Islam in Indonesia, providing an early foundation for moderation, reconciliation, and social harmony that continues to shape the ethos of *Islam Nusantara* today.

## Method

This study employs philological approach<sup>7</sup> to analyze the Rambang Manuscript, focusing on the Indonesian translation completed in 2009<sup>8</sup>. The research methodology involves the following steps:

- (1) Textual analysis: A close reading and interpretation of the Indonesian translation of the Rambang Manuscript, examining its content, structure, and linguistic features;
- (2) Comparative analysis: Comparing the translated text with the original Javanese and Arabic Pegon script versions to identify potential variations or nuances in meaning;
- (3) Contextual interpretation: Situating the manuscript within its historical, cultural, and religious context, particularly focusing on the mid-nineteenth century Javanese Islamic intellectual tradition;
- (4) Critical interpretation: Evaluating the manuscript's intellectual content, cultural significance, and its role in addressing sectarian conflicts during the Islamization of Java;

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Era," *Muslim Politics Review* 2, no. 2 (2023): 238–83, <https://doi.org/10.56529/mpr.v2i2.204>; Khasan Mursyidi, "Islam Nusantara: Identity and Religious Tolerance in Indonesian Islam," *International Conference on Islamic Studies (ICIS)*, May 27, 2024, 222–36.

<sup>3</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*.

<sup>4</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII Dan XVIII* (Mizan, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Achmad Tohe, "Revisiting the Concept of the Javanese Islam: Genealogy, Academic Representation, and Cultural Strategy," *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam Dan Filsafat* 18, no. 2 (2021): 184–231, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpif.v18i2.3966>.

<sup>6</sup> Bagus Purnomo and Afifah Dinar, "Islam di Pesisir Utara Jawa dalam Simbol Sufistik Naskah Sejatine Manusa," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 21, no. 1 (2023): 157–88, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v21i1.1080>.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen G. Nichols, "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture," *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (1990): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2864468>.

<sup>8</sup> S.T. Sulistyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving "Naskah Rambang" by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization* (Toyota Foundation, 2009), 5, 14, 16, 19.

(5) Synthesis: Integrating findings from the above steps to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Rambang Manuscript's contribution to Javanese Islamic literature and thought. While grounded in philology, the study also incorporates a historical framework, particularly in situating the Rambang Manuscript within its period-specific context of production and reception.

This interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced understanding of the manuscript's intellectual content, cultural significance, and historical relevance within the broader tradition of Kejawen Islamic literature.

The philological approach makes possible to trace linguistic patterns, theological formulations, and Sufi symbolism in the manuscript, while the historical approach situates these teachings within the broader socio-political and intellectual landscape of Javanese society. To support this analysis, relevant Javanese manuscripts held in the Sasana Pustaka Kasunanan Library, Reksa Pustaka Mangkunagaran in Surakarta, and the Sana Budaya Library in Yogyakarta have been used for corroboration.

### **Description of Rambang Manuscript**

The Rambang Manuscript was discovered in Danaraja Village, Margasari District, Tegal Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Margasari lies at the southernmost tip of Tegal, and Danaraja is situated in the extreme southeastern area. This village is rich in cultural and historical heritage; it is home to an old mosque with carved gates resembling those of the Demak Mosque, one of the earliest mosques in Java, pottery remains, and local traditions closely tied to the history of Syech Maulana Maghribi, whose tomb is also located there. Within this sacred landscape, the Rambang Manuscript is preserved and regarded by the community as a relic attributed to the saint.<sup>9</sup>

The manuscript consists of four separate parts, each kept in antique wooden teak boxes. It is written on folded paper strips approximately 21 cm wide, with lengths ranging from two to five meters. The script is a combination of Javanese characters, Arabic script, and Pegon (Arabic letters adapted for the Javanese language), see Figure 1. The text itself employs the Javanese language typical of the eighteenth century, while Arabic is used for Qur'anic citations, prophetic hadiths, and key Islamic terms. The variety of scripts and languages reflects both the Islamic intellectual tradition and its adaptation to the Javanese cultural milieu,<sup>10</sup> including *suluk*.<sup>11</sup> Between the 16th and 19th centuries, a significant collection of Javanese and Malay mystical writings emerged, reflecting a diverse range of interactions between Indic and Islamic religious traditions woven into the literary and cultural life of the Javanese and Malay-speaking communities in the Nusantara region.

Etymologically, *rambang* means "to look at one's reflection in water." This symbolism is deeply tied to the manuscript's spiritual purpose: self-reflection as a path to divine knowledge. The teaching is encapsulated in the manuscript's maxim: *Sing sapa wruh ing awake, wruh ing Pangerane* [He who knows himself will know his Lord].<sup>12</sup> This resonates with Sufi epistemology, widely integrated into Javanese Islam through the circulation of mystical texts and oral traditions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*; Rubaidi Rubaidi, *Java Islam: Relationship of Javanese Culture and Islamic Mysticism in the Post-Colonial Study Perspective*, Articles, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, 2019, 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.18860/el.v21i1.6066>.

<sup>11</sup> Acri and Meyer, "Indic-Islamic Encounters in Javanese and Malay Mystical Literatures."

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Abdullah, "Doktrin Wahdah Al-Wujud Dalam Naskah Rambang Tegal," *Literasi: Indonesian Journal of Humanities* 1, no. 2 (2011): 220–32.

<sup>13</sup> Wahyudi Wahyudi, "Epistemologi Tafsir Sufi Al-Ghazali Dan Pergeserannya," *Jurnal Theologia* 29, no. 1 (2018): 85–108, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2018.29.1.2070>; Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia* (Mizan, 1995).

**Figure 1: Parts of Rambang Manuscript (up to down) which written in Arabic, Javanese, and Arabic Pegon**



### ***Ritual Function and Sacred Status***

For the Danaraja community, the Rambang Manuscript is not merely a textual relic but a sacred object integrated into collective ritual life. The manuscript is carefully stored: the wooden boxes are wrapped in white cloth, placed in cupboards, and adorned with fragrant flowers such as jasmine and rose, underscoring its sacredness. Custodianship lies with the caretaker of the Syech Maulana Maghribi tomb.

The manuscript is revealed only once a year during the Rambang ceremony, which coincides with the Eid al-Adha festival. After the communal prayer, villagers gather at the caretaker's house, where the manuscript is ceremonially unfolded and draped over bamboo poles (*gantar*). Attendees may view, touch, or attempt to read texts. If someone can read the Pegon or Arabic script, the verses are recited aloud for the audience; otherwise, participants observe in reverence. Because the manuscript is only displayed briefly, around two hours each year, only fragments of its contents are widely known.<sup>14</sup>

The restricted access to the Rambang Manuscript, combined with the gradual decline in the literacy of Javanese and Pegon scripts, has contributed to its aura of mystery and sanctity. For the villagers, the manuscript represents both a ritual object and a repository of collective memory, connecting them to

<sup>14</sup> Siti Wachidah, "Fungsi Tradisi Upacara Buka Kitab Rambang di Desa Danaraja Kecamatan Margasari Kabupaten Tegal" (UIN Prof. KH. Saifuddin Zuhri, 2024).

the spiritual authority of Syech Maulana Maghribi and the Islamic tradition in Java.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this limited knowledge fosters the emergence of myths, which shape and sustain the community's collective imagination. This phenomenon reflects what Jan Assmann terms *cultural memory*, in which texts and rituals are preserved not primarily for their literal content but for their symbolic role in sustaining communal identity.<sup>16</sup>

### **Rambang Manuscript as Translocal Influences and Local Receptions**

Across the archipelago, Sufi thought traveled along itinerant 'ulamā' networks, orders (ṭuruq), and the manuscript trade, binding Java to the Ḥijāz, South Asia, and Aceh.<sup>17</sup> In intellectual terms, al-Ghazālī's synthesis, integrating law, ethics, and interiority, met Ibn 'Arabī's monistic cosmology through commentary traditions that permitted ontological daring to be mediated by ethical rigor.<sup>18</sup> In Aceh, Hamzah Fansuri and Syams al-Dīn al-Sumatrānī elaborated wujūdiyyah and martabat tujuh; the court of Iskandar Thani then empowered Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī to curb perceived excesses and to re-inscribe mystical discourse within orthodox limits (Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddīq).<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Sinkilī offered conciliatory readings of martabat tujuh that proved influential within Syattariyya routes to Minangkabau (via Burhānuddīn Ulakan) and Priangan/West Java (via 'Abd al-Muḥyī of Pamijahan), where manuals such as al-Burhānpūrī's Tuhfat al-Mursalāh ilā Rūḥ al-Nabī circulated in Arabic, Malay, and Javanese, often versified in macapat, and were domesticated into ritual instruction and ethical self-fashioning.<sup>20</sup>

Pedagogically, the abstract, symbolic idiom of Malay-Javanese Sufi texts, reliant on Arabic technical vocabulary and local metaphors, was not an obstacle but an aid. It translated metaphysics into mnemotechnics of verse, parable, and schematic diagrams usable in court and pesantren contexts.<sup>21</sup> The recurrent metaphors of wave/sea, seed/plant, and mirror/shadow scaffolded discourses of wahdat al-wujūd and martabat tujuh, and they provided a shared "image-bank" through which cosmology, ethics, and ritual could be taught together.<sup>22</sup>

Against this backdrop of external war and internal dispute, the Rambang Manuscript emerges as a mediating handbook. As religious literature, it is less a speculative outlier than a didactic node within a translocal curriculum of tasawuf.<sup>23</sup> Its lexicon, voice, and imagery align with a Ghazālīan pedagogy of self-purification (tazkiyat al-naḥs) and iḥsān, while its cosmography converses, cautiously, with wujūdiyyah and martabat tujuh in Javanese–Pegon idiom.<sup>24</sup> The text encodes theological guardrails, ritual counsel, and cosmological schemata designed not to dissolve orthodoxy, but to cool sectarian heat and educate the affections, "disciplining experience by doctrine" and "explaining doctrine by experience."<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the regional memoryscape of Tegal, associations with Maulana Maghribi, the debated persona of (Sunan) Panggung, and the clustering of sites, rituals, and manuscripts, suggests a vernacular scholasticism in which pilgrimage (*ziarah*), hagiography, and textual recitation mutually reinforced one another.<sup>26</sup> In such settings, Rambang is neither "pure *sharī'ah*" nor "pure Javanese philosophy,"

<sup>15</sup> Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, C. 1830-1930* (NUS Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Latif Fauzi, "Traditional Islam in Javanese Society: The Roles of Kyai and Pesantren in Preserving Islamic Tradition and Negotiating Modernity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6, no. 1 (2012): 125–44, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2012.6.1.125-144>; Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society*.

<sup>17</sup> Peter G. Riddel, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); "Philosophical Sufis among Scholars ('ulamā') and Their Impact on Political Culture," in *Philosophers, Sufis, and Caliphs: Politics and Authority from Cordoba to Cairo and Baghdad*, ed. Ali Humayun Akhtar (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Alexander Knysh, *Alexander Knysh, Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Brill, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> T. Iskandar, ed., *Nūr Al-Dīn al-Rānīrī. Hujjat al-Ṣiddīq Li-Daf' al-Zindīq* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1966); A.H. Johns, "The Role of Sufism in the Spread of Islam to Malaya and Indonesia," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 9, no. 3 (1961): 143.

<sup>20</sup> Khalif Muammar A. Harris, "Faham Wahdar Al-Wujūd Dan Martabat Tujuh Dalam Karya Shaykh 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Falimbānī," *Tafhim: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 8 (October 2015), <https://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol8no1.5>.

<sup>21</sup> Khairudin Aljunied, "Reorienting Sufism: Hamka and Islamic Mysticism in the Malay World," *Indonesia*, no. 101 (2016): 67–84, <https://doi.org/10.5728/indonesia.101.0067>; Johns, "The Role of Sufism in the Spread of Islam to Malaya and Indonesia."

<sup>22</sup> S. Simuh, *Sufisme Jawa: Transformasi Tasawuf Islam Ke Mistik Jawa* (Bentang, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah, "Doktrin Wahdah Al-Wujud Dalam Naskah Rambang Tegal." 220.

<sup>24</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*.

<sup>25</sup> van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, Dan Tarekat: Tradisi-Tradisi Islam Di Indonesia*.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

but a negotiation text that affirms law and devotion while probing the metaphysical ground of *tauḥīd*.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, what Rambang models is the work of mediation, between Arabic learning and local philosophy, mystical aspiration and juridical obligation that cumulatively underwrote the moderating trajectory of Islam in Java from the sixteenth century onward.

### Theological Analysis

In the Rambang manuscript, the section on ‘aqīdah clearly adheres to the Ash‘arī theological framework, presenting the well-known “twenty attributes” of God, such as wujūd (existence), qīdam (pre-eternity), baqā’ (everlastingness), and qiyāmuhu binafsihī (self-subsistence), alongside the other ṣifāt Allāh. In contrast, rationalist schools like the Mu‘tazila, as well as many Zaydī traditions influenced by Mu‘tazilī kalām, reject the notion of eternal attributes as realities distinct from the Divine Essence. The doctrinal orientation of Rambang thus indicates that its author (or perhaps a later copyist) remained firmly aligned with Ash‘ari theology.

A decisive indication that the Rambang manuscript is rooted in Ash‘arite theology appears in the passage quoted below, as noted in earlier studies. The excerpt makes clear that the work adopts an explicitly Ash‘arite doctrinal framework and thus confirms the manuscript’s predominantly Ash‘arite orientation.<sup>28</sup> In this passage, numerous terms, often in localized spellings, are assigned precise theological meanings: Ayun signifies life not dependent on a soul; ‘Alimun denotes knowledge without discursive reasoning; Qadirun indicates efficacy independent of bodily instruments; Samingun means hearing not through ears; Basirun means seeing not through eyes; Muridun refers to willing unmotivated by appetite; and Mutakalimun describes speech that does not involve the mouth. Baka affirms eternity and incorruptibility; Ghafur denotes merciful forgiveness; Karim indicates supreme nobility; Agifaluhun conveys preservation or maintenance; Wanasiruhu means to glorify; Fatatgosa suggests openness; Mutangarak conveys expectation; Samad asserts eternal self-sufficiency; Rifatul Salahiya/Mujadah expresses absolute holiness; and Adil signifies truth and justice. Together, these definitions emphasize divine perfections and actions unbound by created organs or passions, underscoring the classical distinction between Creator and creation.<sup>29</sup> The Rambang manuscript accordingly urges Muslims to guard their creed carefully and to remain within sound doctrine, lest they slip into misguidance and fall among the seventy-two sects regarded as outside Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamā‘ah.<sup>30</sup>

In Indonesia, the mainstream Sunni orientation is Ahlussunnah wal Jama‘ah (Aswaja), rooted in Ash‘ari (and Maturidi) theology. In its classic formulation, orthodoxy rests on three pillars: (1) creed (‘aqīdah) according to the Ash‘ari or Maturidi schools of kalam; (2) law (fiqh) by adhering to one of the four Sunni madhhabs, namely: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i (predominant in Indonesia), or Hanbali; and (3) spirituality (tasawwuf) in the “sober Sufi” tradition exemplified by al-Junayd al-Baghdadi and al-Ghazali.<sup>31</sup> Among Muslim theologians, Ash‘arism is often described as a middle path between the Mu‘tazilī emphasis on rationalism and human freedom and the Jabriyyah stress on divine determinism and intervention. It safeguards God’s absolute power while still affirming human responsibility through the doctrine of kasb (“acquisition”), a conciliatory stance that mediates between the two extremes.

Theologically, Ahlussunnah wal Jama‘ah aligns with the Ash‘arī school founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī. His full name is Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl ibn Abī Bashār ibn Ishāq ibn Sālim ibn Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mūsā ibn Bilāl ibn Abī Burda ibn Abī Mūsā al-Ash‘arī. He was born in Basra (Iraq) in 260 AH/874 CE, roughly fifty-five years after the death of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī. In his early training he studied under the leading Mu‘tazilī theologian Abū ‘Alī Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbā‘ī (d.

<sup>27</sup> Jarman Arroisi et al., “Pursuit of Spiritual Happiness: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali on The Theory of Human Nature,” *Progresiva: Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Pendidikan Islam* 12, no. 02 (2023): 291–302, <https://doi.org/10.22219/progresiva.v12i02.29265>; Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries*.

<sup>28</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>29</sup> Abdullah, “Doktrin Wahdah Al-Wujud Dalam Naskah Rambang Tegal.” 220-32.

<sup>30</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>31</sup> A. Ilyas Ismail and Badrah Uyuni, “Ghazali’s Sufism and Its Influence in Indonesia,” *Dinika: Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.22515/dinika.v4i1.1712>; Minako Sakai and Amelia Fauzia, “Islamic Orientations in Contemporary Indonesia: Islamism on the Rise?,” *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 1 (2013): 41–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.784513>.

303 AH). Al-Ash‘arī is widely regarded as a pivotal figure in Islamic intellectual history: he is credited with countering the Mu‘tazila on their own rational grounds, formulating a distinct theological system to answer rationalist critiques, and consolidating the creed of Ahlussunnah wal Jama‘ah, seen by many premodern authors as having safeguarded Islam from the excesses of unfettered religious rationalism.<sup>32</sup>

In the doctrinal sections of the Rambang Manuscript, the author positions the work against non–Ahlussunnah wal Jama‘ah currents, especially strands that invoke *ma‘rifat ilā Allāh* while loosening canonical obligations. Across many folios, the text offers extended critiques of views it portrays as departures from *Ash‘arī kalām*, engaging, for example, the determinism associated with the Jabariyya, the rationalist premises of the Mu‘tazila, and what it labels *Sanūsiyya*, among others.<sup>33</sup>

### **Sufistic Analysis of the Rambang Manuscript**

The Rambang manuscript presents a dense, integrated syllabus of Islamic learning: theology (*‘aqīdah*), law (*sharī‘a*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), and ethics (*akhlāq*). Doctrinally it aligns with Ahl al-Sunnah wa’l-Jamā‘ah in an Ash‘arī key, evident in its use of the twenty divine attributes and its policing of heterodox claims, yet its mystical vocabulary and imagery show sustained engagement with philosophical Sufism. In particular, the text gestures toward Ibn ‘Arabī’s discourse of *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) and the related schema of *martabat tujuh* (seven ontological levels), while insisting that such speculation be disciplined by ritual observance and legal obligation.

Read in its Javanese setting, Rambang translates this synthesis into a vernacular idiom. Metaphors of reflection and emanation are harnessed to articulate *manunggaling kawula–Gusti* (the “union” of servant and Lord), but the work treats this “union” as a pedagogical way of speaking that preserves divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) even as it acknowledges immanence (*tashbīh*). In practice, Rambang binds mystical aspiration to *sharī‘a*, through prayer, dhikr, and moral self-cultivation, so that unity language functions not as a license for antinomianism but as a spur to obedience and refinement. In this sense, the manuscript offers a conciliatory Javanese Sunni-Sufi synthesis: *Ash‘arī* creed provides the guardrails, while Ibn ‘Arabī-inflected symbolism supplies the contemplative depth.<sup>34</sup> Although the text engages deeply with the discourse of *wahdat al-wujūd*, it nevertheless insists on the primacy of the *sharī‘a* obligations especially the performance of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage as the proper framework for mystical life.<sup>35</sup>

Why does this emphasis appear? The passage should be read as a theological reflection and a pointed critique, indeed, a “protest” against certain Javanese Sufi currents summarized by the formula *manunggaling kawula–Gusti*. In accounts of 16th–17th-century Java, followers of this current were portrayed as neglecting core *sharī‘a* obligations (prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage), grounding their practice instead in *eling*, continuous remembrance of God. Many narratives trace the genealogy of this tendency to the teachings attributed to Shaykh Lemah Abang (Shaykh Siti Jenar), who is said to have been executed by the Wali Sanga for abandoning the law. In later usage, this orientation became linked to what came to be called “abangan” Islam. The term “abangan” is sometimes explained through two folk etymologies: first, association with Lemah Abang and his perceived defiance of *sharī‘a*; second, derivation from a word glossed as “rebellion” or “aversion to God’s command.” Whatever its precise origin, the Rambang text intervenes against such antinomian readings by reaffirming legal obligation as the proper frame for mystical life.

Put differently, the Rambang manuscript was most likely composed as a corrective intervention against certain Kejawen mystical formulations especially *manunggaling kawula–Gusti* that were judged wayward for appearing to dispense with the obligations of the *sharī‘a* (prayer, fasting, almsgiving, pilgrimage). Its premise is clear: however elevated a Sufi’s *ma‘rifa*, the legal duties of Islam remain binding. The Prophet himself, despite his infallibility, continued to perform prayer, fasting, and the other prescribed acts; prophetic precedent therefore rules out any suspension of worship.

<sup>32</sup> Nurcholish Madjid, *Khazanah Intelektual Islam* (Bulan Bintang, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>34</sup> Abdullah, “Doktrin Wahdah Al-Wujud Dalam Naskah Rambang Tegal.” 220-32.

<sup>35</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

Doctrinally, Rambang acknowledges *tajallī* and works with the classical dialectic of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immanence (*tashbīh*). Yet it subjects this “union” language to the discipline of the *sharī‘a* and the Prophetic *sunna*. In this respect, the manuscript’s position converges with the conciliatory Sunni–Sufi stance articulated in the Malay world by Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī and ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Sinkilī: mystical realization is affirmed, but only within the guardrails of law and ritual obedience.<sup>36</sup>

If this reconstruction is correct, the emergence of the Rambang manuscript in Tegal closely parallels the Acehnese controversy surrounding Hamzah Fansuri’s *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which drew sharp rebuttals from orthodox Sufis such as ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf al-Sinkilī and Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī. At Sultan Iskandar Thānī’s behest, al-Rānīrī composed corrective Sufi treatises, most notably *Asrār al-Insān fī Ma‘rifat al-Rūḥ wa’l-Raḥmān*, to “straighten” Fansurian teachings. In the Rambang manuscript, the impress of *manunggaling kawula–Gusti* is discernible in three arenas: (1) a paired emphasis on *tanzīh* (divine transcendence) and *tashbīh* (immanence); (2) the use of the *Martabat Tujuh* (seven ontological levels) schema; and (3) sustained discourse on *ma‘rifa*, each of which, however, is framed within and subordinated to the obligations of the *sharī‘a*.

### ***Character of Tanzih and Tasybih of Allah***

Among classical Muslim thinkers, the question of God’s existence and mode of being was heavily debated, particularly between philosophers and Sufis. A prominent strand is what later writers label *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“unity of being”), associated with Ibn ‘Arabī. In this perspective, theology turns on two complementary poles: *tanzīh* (God’s absolute incomparability) and *tashbīh* (the affirmed, scriptural “likeness” by which God is known through His names and attributes). The core of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching is that revelation establishes both poles; one must not assert *tanzīh* in a way that cancels *tashbīh*, nor affirm *tashbīh* in a way that cancels *tanzīh*. The Qur’anic wording “There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing” (Q 42:11) epitomizes this balance: the first clause negates any creaturely comparison, while the second affirms divine attributes, holding transcendence and immanence together without collapse.<sup>37</sup>

The attribute of *tanzīh* refers to God’s absolute transcendence as Creator. As mentioned in Quran 42:11; He is wholly unlike His creatures and admits no comparison, *لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ*. In this sense, *tanzīh* marks the boundary that differentiates the Creator from creation. In the Rambang manuscript, discussion of God’s *tanzīh* and its counterpart, *tashbīh*, is interwoven with the four classic stations, i.e. *sharī‘a*, *ṭarīqa*, *ḥaqīqa*, and *ma‘rifa* so that metaphysical claims are consistently anchored in legal practice, spiritual discipline, inner realization, and knowledge of God.

On internal evidence, the Rambang text’s affirmation of God in two dimensions, *tanzīh* (transcendence) and *tasybih* (immanence) situates its teaching within the orbit of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as locally articulated in Java as *manunggaling kawula–Gusti*. This intellectual ambience echoes earlier Javanese materials such as *Suluk Wujil*, Ronggowarsita’s *Serat Wirid Hidayat Jati*, the manuscript *Haliyatul Reality*, and related texts. What distinguishes Rambang from the *manunggaling kawula–Gusti* current associated with Shaykh Siti Jenar is its steady insistence on compliance with the Islamic *sharī‘a*. If, as local tradition holds, the work stems from Shaykh Maulana Maghribi, its doctrinal posture accords with teachings transmitted by figures like Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Bonang, and Sunan Giri. The Sufi character of the manuscript is further emphasized through its inclusion of the well-known maxim *عَرَفَتْ نَفْسَهُ فَقَدَتْ* “عَرَفَتْ رَبَّهُ”, which is rendered in Javanese as “*Sing sapa wruh ing awake, wruh ing Pangerane*”, meaning “Whoever knows himself thereby knows his Lord.” This translation reflects the deep integration of Islamic mystical thought into the local linguistic and cultural framework.<sup>38</sup>

### ***The Teaching of Martabat Tujuh***

The doctrine of *Martabat Tujuh* (literally, “the Seven Grades”) began to circulate by the late ninth century CE, associated with Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874) and further articulated by al-Ḥallāj (d. 922). It was given a more systematic formulation by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) of al-Andalus. In

<sup>36</sup> Abdullah, “Doktrin Wahdah Al-Wujud Dalam Naskah Rambang Tegal.” 220.

<sup>37</sup> Faisal Ridho Abdillah, “Tasawuf Wujudiah: Hakikat Wujud Dalam Ajaran Tasawuf Datu Abulung,” *Tajdid: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 21, no. 2 (2022): 327–55, <https://doi.org/10.30631/tjd.v21i2.256>.

<sup>38</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

the Indonesian archipelago, Ibn 'Arabī's *Martabat Tujuh* was adapted and elaborated from the sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries by figures such as Shams al-Dīn al-Sumatrānī, Hamzah Fansūrī, Shaykh Amongraga, and Shaykh Siti Jenar, and in Buton (Southeast Sulawesi) by La Elangi (Dayanu Ikhsanuddin) in 1631.

The concept of *Martabat Tujuh* in the Sufi tradition teaches that both the human being (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm) originate from the Divine Essence, that creation unfolds from this source, and that it culminates in the emergence of the Perfect Human (*insān kāmil*) through seven ontological stages. The seventh stage corresponds to the rank of the Perfect Human, in whom multiple "spirits" are integrated, variously described in Javanese, Malay sources as the life-spirit, the Holy Spirit, the *idāfi* spirit, the spirit of conscience, the *rabbānī* spirit, the *rahmānī* spirit, the spiritual soul, the corporeal spirit, the human soul, and even the vegetative spirit. In this understanding, all realities proceed from God through His Essence, His Attributes, and His Acts (*af'āl*).

At the highest level of *ma'rifat*, God manifests (*tajallī*) through seven dignities (*martabat*), as follows: (1) *Martabat Aḥadiyah*, the dignity of *lā ta'yūn*, the Absolute in its pure essence, unrecognizable and beyond comprehension; this is the highest level; (2) *Martabat Waḥdah*, the dignity of *ta'yūn awwal* (the initial determination), God's first self-disclosure, in which His Essence and Attributes remain united with all beings in an undifferentiated (*mujmal*) oneness. At this stage, *Nūr Muḥammad* is created, becoming the source of all existence, including humankind; (3) *Martabat Waḥidiyah*, the dignity of the second *ta'yūn*, the stage where unity encompasses plurality and beings begin to take distinct forms; (4) *Martabat 'Ālam al-Arwāḥ*, the realm of pure forms, identified with the *rūḥ idāfi* or the "pure soul;" (5) *Martabat 'Ālam al-Mithāl* – the stage of subtle, imaginal existence, composed of non-material forms that cannot be separated; (6) *Martabat 'Ālam al-Ajsām*, the stage in which God creates the physical world, the realm of material embodiment where everything is arranged and perfected as complete bodies; (7) *Martabat Insān Kāmil*, the dignity of the Perfect Human, the most complete manifestation because it integrates all preceding stages. Human beings contain within themselves three outer (*zāhir*) and three inner (*bāṭin*) *martabats*.

In the *Rambang* manuscript, the influence of the *Martabat Tujuh* teaching is evident in its discussion of the reality of the spirit (*'ilm ghaybat al-rūḥ*) and the hierarchy of various types of spirits. The manuscript explicitly mentions several spirits, including the *rūḥ ilāfi* (identified with the *rūḥ idāfi*, or "pure soul"). The human journey toward becoming the Perfect Human (*Insān Kāmil*) is described as an arduous ascent, symbolized by climbing steep hills, in which one must conquer base desires while traversing multiple realms of existence: (1) the realm of *rūḥiyyah* (spiritual life); (2) the realm of *sirriyyah*; (3) the realm of *malakūt*; (4) the realm of *jabarūt* (associated with divine power and might); (5) the realm of *lāhūt* (signifying continuous transformation); (6) the realm of *nūriyyah*, and (7) the realm of *ilāhiyyah*, the divine reality itself.

### ***The Teaching of Ma'rifat to Allah***

*Ma'rifat* is the highest stage in the mystical path of Sufism, attained when a person reaches true recognition of, and encounter with God, the Creator. The Sufi path (*ṭarīqah*) is traditionally described as progressing through four interconnected levels: *sharī'ah* (the outward law), *ṭarīqah* (the spiritual path), *ḥaqīqah* (inner truth), and finally *ma'rifat* (gnosis). *Ma'rifatullāh* literally means "knowing God," in the sense of perceiving the mysteries of His Essence (*dhāt*), Attributes (*ṣifāt*), Actions (*af'āl*), and Manifestations (*tajallī*). For those who attain *ma'rifat*, the veils are lifted and hidden realities are unveiled, granting access to the realm of direct spiritual vision where the doors to divine secrets are opened. Such individuals are often endowed with *'ilm ladunnī*, knowledge bestowed directly by God without reliance on formal study or textual instruction. Possessors of this knowledge are described as having the ability to *ngerti sadurunge winarah* ("to understand before something happens"), a Javanese expression suggesting insight akin to prophetic intuition.

The *Rambang* manuscript explains that a person granted *'ilm ladunnī* possesses the capacity to perceive events before they occur, for with God's permission, the dimensions of the unseen may be revealed to them. In its translation, the manuscript notes that *ladunī* refers to a form of knowledge that can disclose events before they unfold. The attribute *'ālimun* is interpreted as "understanding," specifically the ability to know both failure and success before they appear. Nothing can obstruct God's will. A true teacher, according to the manuscript, is the one who first speaks the truth, accepts it, and trusts fully in

the divine order of things. Regarding the concept of *ma'rifat*, the *Rambang* manuscript offers a distinct formulation. According to its translation, *ma'rifat* is a profound spiritual comprehension likened to a vast ocean filled with precious gems, attainable through disciplines such as fasting.

It represents a state of inner awakening in which the seeker transcends worldly attachments. Once a person reaches this level, separation between the individual and the Divine disappears; the seeker embodies divine qualities and attains a state of spiritual completeness. At this stage, the individual becomes serene and tranquil, in accordance with the teachings of the sages: “the perfect mind is God” and “the mind is the name of God.” This tranquility is realized in the ocean of divine knowledge (*lāhūt*), which symbolizes ultimate peace and the soul’s final resting place. Thus, *ma'rifat* is a vision born of sincerity, and sincerity is the path that leads one to the realization of their true essence.<sup>39</sup>

The philosophical doctrine of *ma'rifat*, which emphasizes the concept of *Wahdah al-Being*, is reflected in the teachings of figures like Shaykh al-Hallaj and Siti Jenar. They famously articulated the idea of “*Ana al-Haqq*” (“I am the Truth”), which suggests an ultimate unity with the Divine. This notion is echoed in the *Rambang* text, where it is stated that the self encompasses both the divine and the earthly, saying things like “God is me, I am the Prophet, I am spirit, I am life, I am death,” among other paradoxical expressions. Such statements convey the profound realization that all aspects of existence, physical, emotional, and spiritual, are interconnected, embodying a sense of oneness with the Divine and the universe.<sup>40</sup>

In reflecting upon this philosophical text, the reader is invited to enter into *ma'rifat ilāhiyyah* (divine gnosis), which negates the illusion of human autonomy and the perception of seeing with merely human eyes. What is often assumed by ordinary people as ownership, control, or authority is, in fact, a pretension of the layman’s *maqām* (spiritual station). For the *sālik*, the traveler on the path to God, true ownership belongs solely to God, for human beings are nothing but trustees (*amānah*) of what God has bestowed. Indeed, even the self does not belong to the human; rather, man himself is wholly possessed by God. This understanding resonates with the Qur’ānic verse, “*Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji’ūn*” (“surely we belong to God, and surely to Him we shall return”), which affirms that all existence originates in God and returns to Him. Philosophically, this points to the divine attribute of *tashbīh* (resemblance), the nearness of God to His creation, and aligns with the doctrine of emanation (*fayḍ*) in the *wujūdiyyah* school. Within such mystical frameworks, some interpretations even open the possibility of human reincarnation, rebirth under a different name and form, which becomes a symbolic expression of the continuity of the soul. In contemporary Islamic philosophy, the notion of reincarnation remains a subject of critical discourse and debate among modern thinkers, reflecting both the challenges and reinterpretations of classical mystical heritage in a modern intellectual context.

### **Contest fo Theological Thought**

*Rambang* manuscript clearly depicts the struggle or conflict of theological thought. Among these are discussions about the science of *kalam* and mysticism. The debate about *kalam* focuses on the existence and the power of God. This debate is dominant in Islamic theology, especially between schools of thought *Ahlussunnah wal Jama’ah*, *Ash’arite* and *Mu’tazila*, and between *Jabariyah*, *Qadaryah*, and *Murji’ah*.<sup>41</sup>

As noted earlier, one of the frequently cited weaknesses of *Ash’arite* theology lies in its conception of the human role, which is often portrayed as fundamentally weak and powerless before the absolute will and omnipotence of God. In this framework, God possesses unrestricted and exceptional authority, while the human being is positioned as subordinate and entirely dependent. Consequently, humans are expected to submit fully to the divine will, accepting both joy and suffering as decreed by God. In defending this absolute sovereignty of God alongside human powerlessness, *al-Ash’arī* tends to reinforce a theological image of God as a plenipotentiary ruler, one whose decrees cannot be altered or

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<sup>39</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>40</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving “Naskah Rambang” by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>41</sup> Syamsul Rijal, “Opposing Wahhabism: The Emergence of Ultra-Traditionalism in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional Religious Authority in Indonesia*, ed. Ahmad Najib Burhani and Norshahril Saat, Lectures, Workshops, and Proceedings of International Conferences (ISEAS–Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2020).

anticipated. Within this context, Ash'arite theology often appears to encourage an attitude of resignation (*taslīm*) to fate, including in matters of human happiness and misery in the world. In this respect, Ash'arite theology often appears inclined toward a fatalistic stance reminiscent of the Jabariyyah, in which human effort is minimized or even disregarded in determining one's destiny.

Adherents of this theological orientation consistently attribute all occurrences whether fortune or misfortune to *taqdīr* (divine decree), holding that everything unfolds solely by the will and power of God. Within such a framework, human agency is effectively eclipsed, and human beings are seen primarily as passive recipients of divine determination. Indeed, al-Ash'arī cannot be categorized as a Jabari, and thus not a fatalist, nor can he be considered a Qadari, who attributes full autonomy to human beings in determining their own actions, as emphasized by the Mu'tazilites and certain Shi'i schools.

Rather, al-Ash'arī sought to position himself as a mediator between these two contradictory theological currents. His doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition) was designed precisely to safeguard God's absolute sovereignty while still affirming a limited form of human responsibility. Methodologically, al-Ash'arī also occupied a middle ground between the Ḥanbalīs, who leaned heavily on a *naqlī* (literalist, text-based) approach to the sacred texts and the Mu'tazilites, who relied strongly on an *'aqlī* (rationalist, interpretive) methodology. In this way, Ash'arism emerged as a conciliatory theology that sought balance between divine omnipotence and human accountability.

In an effort to mediate between the deterministic outlook of the *Jabariyyah* and the free-will emphasis of the *Qadariyyah*, al-Ash'arī formulated the concept of *kasb* (acquisition). *Kasb* refers to the acquisition of deeds, whether good or bad, by human beings as the result of actions they perform. In this view, every act has already been created by God, yet humans acquire the act through their power of choice, without possessing the independent ability to create it. Thus, human beings are not creators of their deeds but merely the recipients or "acquirers" (*kāsib*) of them. This distinguishes the *Ash'ariyyah* from the *Mu'tazilah*, whose emphasis on human agency implies a greater degree of autonomy in creating actions.

In the *Rambang* Manuscript mentions that Ahlusunnah wal Jama'ah view that God possesses eight essential attributes of life, knowledge, power, hearing, sight, will, and speech, and is eternal, with both essential and active attributes. It affirms that denying God as Creator or rejecting His attributes of hearing and seeing, as some opposing theological schools are said to do, is considered disbelief because it contradicts the Qur'anic description of God.<sup>42</sup>

### **Moderate Islam: Balancing between *Shari'a* and Sufi**

In classical Islamic discourse, as reflected in the *Rambang* Manuscript, the tension between the Shari'ah-oriented tendency and the Sufi inclination is highly pronounced. This dichotomy is understandable and, to some extent, tolerable, given that Muslims have often engaged in dualistic thinking, between *sharī'ah* and *ma'rifat*, between jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Sufism, and between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of religion. Within the Javanese Islamic experience, however, this relationship has frequently generated unhealthy tensions. On the one hand, Islamic worship requires a balance between *sharī'ah* and *ḥaqīqah*; on the other hand, certain sects emphasize only the outward observance of *sharī'ah* while neglecting the esoteric dimension of the faith. In this context, the *Rambang* Manuscript presents an instructive narrative in the form of a dialogue between an old man and Abu Khayim (presumably Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah), which illustrates how to perform prayer properly and safeguard the gates of paradise. The text not only underscores the necessity of adhering to the *sharī'ah*, particularly through the obligation of performing the five daily prayers, but also conveys the attraction of a more complete religious life through the knowledge and practice of the *ṭarīqah*.

### ***The Influence of Wali Songo's Teaching***

Several texts also contain discussions on the religious life and teachings of the *Sunan* or *Wali Songo* who once lived and worked in Java, particularly those of Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Bonang, and others. These narratives are closely tied to the history and cultural influences that shaped the Islamization of Java and left a lasting impact on the identity of Javanese Muslims. The spread of Islam

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<sup>42</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving "Naskah Rambang" by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

in Java is marked by the use of symbolic and mystical language, as well as by unique methods of propagation. One of the most significant approaches was *maw'izat al-ḥasanah* and *mujādalah billatī hiya aḥsan* that is, preaching through gentle persuasion, wisdom, and tolerant dialogue. Such methods proved crucial to the success of Islamization in the region. Sunan Kalijaga, for instance, employed this approach in his encounter with Regent Pandanarang of Semarang. Initially marked by spirited debate, their dialogue eventually led to Pandanarang's conversion to Islam, deeply moved by Sunan Kalijaga's wisdom, humility, and character in delivering the message of Islam. So profound was his transformation that Pandanarang willingly relinquished his office, wealth, and status as the highest political authority in Semarang in order to become a disciple of Sunan Kalijaga. This episode is recorded in the *Walisanga Asmaradana* manuscript tradition, reflecting the intertwining of religious instruction, cultural expression, and political change in the history of Javanese Islamization.<sup>43</sup>

It is particularly noteworthy that the propagation of Islam by Sunan Kalijaga is widely believed to have been adapted to the traditions and social conditions of Javanese society. One example is his creative use of Javanese children's folk songs (*tembang dolanan*) as a medium for religious instruction. Through this cultural form, Sunan Kalijaga conveyed the values of divinity (*tawḥīd*) in ways that were accessible and appealing to the local community. Although over time some of these teachings came to be misinterpreted or stripped of their deeper meaning, at their origin they carried profound theological significance. This method illustrates not only the adaptability of Islamic da'wah to local contexts but also the subtlety of Sunan Kalijaga's approach in embedding Islamic values within familiar cultural expressions.<sup>44</sup> The Arabic devotional lines, urging inner purification through *La ilaha illallah* and reminding that God perceives all hidden thoughts that were adapted into Javanese, where they further evolved into oral traditions such as children's play songs (*lagu dolanan bocah*) like *Sluku-sluku Bathok*, showing how spiritual teachings were transformed into local cultural forms.

The influence of Sunan Kalijaga in the Rambang Manuscript is evident, particularly in his teachings on how Javanese women should cultivate authentic inner feeling. In this context, the manuscript presents Fāṭimah al-Zahrā', the daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad, as a symbolic model for women's spiritual formation. Beyond Sunan Kalijaga, the Rambang text also reflects the influence of other Wali Songo, especially Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang. Sunan Giri's teachings, for instance, highlight the essence of *ma'rifat* (gnosis).<sup>45</sup>

### **Contribution to the Making of Tolerant Islam**

The Rambang Manuscript contributes significantly to shaping tolerant Islam in Java by positioning itself as a mediating text within a contested intellectual and political landscape. Instead of treating theological and mystical differences as grounds for exclusion, it offers a strategy of reconciliation, harmonizing Ash'arite theology with the speculative insights of *wahdat al-wujūd* and *martabat tujuh*, while affirming the indispensability of *shari'ah*. This approach shows that moderation in Javanese Islam was not a passive state but an active intellectual project shaped through negotiation, dialogue, and compromise.<sup>46</sup>

At the same time, the Rambang highlights the intellectual sophistication of Javanese scholars in adapting universal Islamic doctrines to local cultural idioms. Its use of Javanese metaphors, Pegon script, and culturally embedded references demonstrates its role in vernacularizing Islamic knowledge. Rather than only transmitting Arabic scholasticism, it localizes it, rendering complex theological and mystical ideas accessible and meaningful to Javanese audiences. This process reflects an intellectual creativity that transcends rigid categories of "orthodox" and "heterodox," revealing a nuanced interplay between universal principles and local expression.

<sup>43</sup> Muhammad Abdullah, "Islam Nusantara: Tracing the Traces of KH Sholeh Darat Thought in Pesantren Literature," *E3S Web of Conferences* 359 (2022): 06003, <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202235906003>.

<sup>44</sup> Z. Zuhri, "Beyond Syncretism: Evidence of the Vernacularization of Islamic Theological Terms in Javanese Literature in the 19th Century," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 60, no. 2 (2022): 373–98, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2022.602.373-398>; Ignacio Sánchez, "The Textual and Manuscript Tradition of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah's 'Uyūn al-Anbā' Fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'," in *A Literary History of Medicine*, ed. Emilie Savage-Smith et al. (Brill, 2019), <https://brill.com/edcollbook/title/55835>.

<sup>45</sup> Sulistiyono et al., *Inventing the Peaceful Islam in Indonesia: Preserving "Naskah Rambang" by Performing Digitization, Microfilmization, Transliteration, Translation, and Contextualization*.

<sup>46</sup> Azra, *Jaringan Ulama Timur Tengah Dan Kepulauan Nusantara Abad XVII Dan XVIII*.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *Rambang* Manuscript is not merely a regional relic of Javanese Islamic culture but a sophisticated intellectual artifact that captures the dynamic negotiation between *sharī'ah* and *taṣawwuf*, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and universal Sufi doctrines and local Javanese idioms. The most outstanding finding is that the *Rambang* Manuscript functions as a mediating text: it integrates Ash'arite theology with mystical traditions such as *wahdat al-wujūd* and *martabat tujuh*, while consistently reasserting the centrality of *sharī'ah*. In doing so, it provides concrete historical evidence that the moderation and tolerance of Javanese Islam are not modern constructs but the outcome of centuries of contestation, reconciliation, and cultural adaptation. Despite these contributions, this study has some limitations. The philological challenges of the *Rambang*, including scribal errors, transliteration shifts, and semantic drifts, pose difficulties in reconstructing its precise theological vocabulary. Moreover, the analysis here has been confined largely to textual and historical dimensions, with limited attention to the ethnographic and ritual contexts in which the manuscript continues to live in Danaraja, Tegal, Indonesia. These limitations indicate that any reading of the *Rambang* must remain provisional, pending further multidisciplinary research.

Future scholarship could take three promising directions: First, comparative textual studies with other Javanese and Malay mystical works such as *Suluk Wujil*, *Wirid Hidayat Jati*, or the writings of Hamzah Fansuri would deepen our understanding of how theological ideas circulated and transformed across regions. Second, anthropological and ethnographic research could illuminate how the *Rambang* is engaged today in ritual practices, memory traditions, and local identity formation. Third, a broader intertextual analysis of Southeast Asian Sufi traditions, such as those of Aceh, Minangkabau, and Buton, could reveal the extent of translocal intellectual and devotional networks that shaped tolerant Islam in the archipelago.

In sum, the *Rambang* Manuscript must be seen as both a textual artifact of Islamic intellectual history and a cultural resource for contemporary debates about moderation, pluralism, and the ethos of *Islam Nusantara* (*Indonesian Islam*). Its enduring relevance lies in demonstrating that reconciliation, rather than polarization, has historically underpinned the making of tolerant Islam in Java and continues to provide an intellectual foundation for Indonesia's plural religious landscape.

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