

## The Art of Sintren Performance in the Perspective of Islamic Education in Tegal Society

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the Sintren performing art in Tegal from the perspective of Islamic education, focusing on its historical transformation from a pre-Islamic ritual into an acculturated cultural medium that conveys Islamic moral values. Using a qualitative approach through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving performers and audiences, the research examines symbolic elements within the performance. The findings show that Sintren contains religious symbols and moral teachings such as sincerity, purity, ukhuwah, and respect for parents, with mystical elements now reinterpreted as symbols of spiritual transformation. The study concludes that Sintren functions not only as entertainment and cultural preservation but also as a form of cultural dakwah that aligns with Islamic values when practiced within the principles of tauhid.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Art has long been an effective medium in the spread of Islam in various regions of Indonesia. During the spread of Islam in Indonesia, where the majority of the population still adheres to Hindu-Buddhism, the Walisongo used art as one of the main tools in spreading Islamic teachings (Liasari & Badrun, 2022). This art is not only entertainment, but also a means to insert the values of Islamic religious teachings in it.

Various forms of art are used as Islamic da'wah media, such as wayang kulit, berokan, masks, lumping horses, and sintren (Safliana, 2018). In the context of Sufism, some of these traditional arts even have a connection with the levels of sharia, hakis, tarekat, and ma'rifat (Yaqin & Badrun, 2022). One of the arts that is the focus of this research is sintren.

The Sintren dance that developed in Tegal is believed to have strong roots with pre-Islamic traditions, especially the influence of Hindu-Buddhism and animism-dynamism beliefs embraced by the local community before the entry of Islamic teachings. Before the spread of Islam, the Sintren dance functioned as a ritual of worship to ancestors and supernatural powers. Along with the entry of Islam into Tegal, especially through the role of guardians, Sintren dance experienced acculturation with Islamic values. This historical development makes Sintren dance a real embodiment of the meeting and fusion of local culture and religious values that takes place continuously, Sintren performing arts are traditional arts that live in the northern coastal communities of Java, including in Tegal Regency. Sintren is known as a mystical dance that depicts the love story between Sulasih and Sulandhana, where a dancing girl is "possessed" by a spirit while dancing in a chicken cage (sintren cages) (Irmawati, 2020).

For the people of Tegal, Sintren is not only entertainment, but also part of cultural heritage and local identity. However, from the perspective of Islamic education, questions arise about what values can be taken from the arts, and the extent to which the practice is in line with or contrary to the principles of monotheism and Islamic morals. Sintren performances have hidden messages that contain religious values. These messages are conveyed through various aspects of the performance, including the dance movements, song lyrics, and musical instruments used.

Several similar studies related to the theme of this research have been conducted before, namely: first, Lestari, et al., in their research explored the origins and history of Sintren in Cirebon, Indonesia. This provides an important historical background for further understanding of Sintren's role in the spread of Islam (Lestari et al., 2022). Second, Romadi, in his research focuses on the religious messages hidden in the Sintren performance and how these messages affect the understanding of Islam among the community (Romadi, 2018). Third, Gunawan et al., in their research examining Sintren from a social and cultural perspective, explored how this performance reflects Islamic values in the context of Javanese culture (Gunawan et al., 2020).

Based on the results of research conducted by Kusumaningrum (2015) in his writing, it was revealed that, sintren is "a traditional art that has a uniqueness, because it contains magical elements in its performance. Sintren is a Javanese-

Sundanese folk performing art, which is a mystical dance art that has certain traditional magical rites that can surprise appreciators who enjoy it". This is in line with what was expressed by Gofur (2015) that this sintren art has a uniqueness, namely the existence of trance events experienced by sintren dancers when the song Turun Sintren is sung. Specifically, Sumardjo (2011) also revealed the same thing that, sintren dancers who are in trance are in a state of being with *widadari* (angels) who are invited down through the verse of the song (down sintren) to the dancer's body. In the performance process, the art of sintren has a condition that must be obeyed for a sintren dancer, namely that it must be still a girl (virgin), because according to some traditional art figures, especially for sintren artists in the Pantura area (North Coast) believe that the virginity of a girl as the main actor of the sintren art is the main prerequisite for the realization of the art.

The spread of sintren art from each region has a different performance process both in terms of style and form of performance, what distinguishes the performance process is the work of the artist in the actualization of his ideas. As informed by Ganjar (2003) related to sintren spoken by its artists, "sintren" comes from the words *sin* (sarcasm) and *tataren* (that is, questions through poetry that need to be thought about and answered). In addition to this view, it is said that the origin of sintren comes from the spirit summoning ceremony because judging from the songs, sintren still has a religious magical nature, namely with the trance scene experienced by sintren dancers. The characteristic of this sintren performance art is dancers who use sunglasses, confinement, offerings and mystical elements as symbols of the sintren art.

The performing arts in which there are mystical dances discussed in this study is sintren. Sintren as a folk performing art around the northern coasts of Java and Sunda, which nowadays is very rare to perform. Sintren as a form of art in the past that is very rarely known by the wider community, even people from the Sintren area do not know exactly what sintren actually is, but actually the art of sintren is a very unique art, maybe if this art of sintren is studied more deeply, there will be many people who are interested in appreciating it, therefore in this study, The presenter tried to introduce the art of sintren so that it could be better known. So that this can introduce sintren not only as long as you know the name, but also know how sintren is.

The purpose of the problem presented by the presenter is so that readers can find out what the art of sintren actually is, then how the history of the art of sintren is, then how the performance of sintren art goes, and finally this research discusses the role of sintren performance art in the perspective of Islam in Tegal Regency. Thus, this research will provide an in-depth insight into the art of Sintren in the perspective of Islam in Tegal Regency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Lestari et al. (2022) examined the origins and history of *Sintren* in Cirebon, as well as its role in the process of spreading Islam on the northern coast of Java. The results show that *Sintren* has long been a means of cultural *da'wah* for guardians to introduce Islamic values to coastal agrarian communities.

Romadi (2018) examines the hidden religious messages in *Sintren* performances and how these messages affect people's understanding of Islam. He found that elements of music, lyrics, and dance function as symbolic mediums to convey the message of monotheism and morality.

Gunawan et al. (2020) examined *Sintren* from a socio-cultural aspect and found that this performance reflects Islamic values within the framework of Javanese culture, such as mutual cooperation, patience, and respect for others.

Some researchers such as Kusumaningrum (2015) call *Sintren* "a mystical Javanese-Sundanese folk performing art with traditional magical rites that are able to thrill the audience."

The same thing was expressed by Gofur (2015) that the essence of *Sintren*'s uniqueness is the *trance* event experienced by the dancer when the song *Turun Sintren* is sung.

Meanwhile, Sumardjo (2011) interprets that the *trance* condition is a symbol of being *one* between humans and the divine element, where the dancer is believed to be one with *the widadari* (angel) who is invited down through poetry.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research aims to explore the role and impact of *Sintren* art in the spread and understanding of Islam in Tegal Regency, Indonesia. This study uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to understand the deeper cultural and religious context, as well as analyze the religious messages implied in the *Sintren* performance (Sugiyono, 2013). Data will be collected through various techniques, including interviews with *Sintren* figures, cultural observers, and local communities. In addition, direct observation will be carried out during the *Sintren* performance (Yusuf, 2014).

Interviews with *Sintren* Performers: The cast and managers of *Sintren* will be interviewed to understand their role in the performance and the messages they want to convey to the audience. Interviews with local religious leaders will be interviewed to get their perspectives on the influence of *Sintren* in the spread of Islam and how religious messages are integrated into the performance. This research includes direct observation with the main character of the *Sintren* performance in Tegal. Observation will record the elements of the performance, such as dance movements, song lyrics, and musical instruments used (Koentjraningrat, 1993). This research also involves the analysis of documents related to the history and development of *Sintren* in Tegal, including relevant literature, articles, and historical records. A survey was conducted to the local community to understand their understanding of the religious messages in the *Sintren* performance and its impact on the understanding of Islam.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

### ***Sintren Art Background***

*Sintren* art comes from the story of Sulandano as the son of Ki Bahureso, the first Regent of Kendal, who was the result of his marriage to Dewi rantamsari who was nicknamed Dewi Lanjar. Raden Sulandono fell in love with Sulasih, a princess from Kalisalak village, but the romantic relationship did not get the

blessing of Ki Bahurekso, finally R. Sulandono went to a recluse and Sulasih chose to become a dancer. However, the meeting between the two is still ongoing through the supernatural realm. The meeting was arranged by Dewi Rantamsari who put the spirit of an angel into Sulasih's body, at the same time R. Sulandono who was a recluse was called by his mother's spirit to meet Sulasih and a meeting took place between Sulasih and R. Sulandana. Since then, every sintren performance is held, the dancer must be entered by the spirit of the angel by the virgin, with the note that this is done when the dancer is still in a state of purity (virginity).

Nyai Seblong as a sintren figure said;

"Not just anyone can be a sintren, sintren players are required to be women who are still young girls and still virgins. This condition must not be violated. The reason is, if a sintren is no longer a virgin, the angel who is summoned from the heavens will not go down into the performance arena. His spirit will not be willing to penetrate"

The existence of Sintren Arts in Tegal Regency has indeed been eroded along with the development of the times. The sintren. Based on the explanation of the art of sintren mentioned above, it is explained that sintren is famous for art that contains mystical or supernatural elements, because of the trance scene experienced by sintren dancers in the process of performing. In this case, the results of the interview with runi (elder sintren) explained that,

"Sintren in Karangdawa Tegal has existed since the time of my great-grandfather. In the past, it was said that Sintren was not just entertainment, but part of the village salvation event. It is usually held after the rice harvest, a long drought or when the earth is alms. In the past, the village elders held it, and the players were still holy girls, unmarried. It's a lot of fun now, but it's still a fun way to play." ( interview Nyai Runi)

"Well, that's a sacred part. Initially, the sintren girl had to take a bath clean of anything, then put in a chicken cage. She sat with a sintren shirt, glasses, and makeup. Outside, we, the drummers and musicians, began to sing the opening song usually "Turun-Turun Sintren". The song was like the call of an ancestral spirit, but now we interpret it more as a symbol of prayer, so that the girl may be given strength and courage." (Interview with Runi)

### ***The Symbolic Form and Meaning of Sintren Art***

There are several stages in the performance of sintren art, including:

(pre-show) Starting with the gamelan as a sign of the start of the sintren art performance, it is intended to gather the time or audience.

(diff) Kamudian continued by praying together accompanied by burning incense with the aim of asking for protection from God Almighty, so that during the performance to avoid danger.

(forming a syntrain) The stage of making sintren is carried out by a handler, by bringing a prospective sintren dancer along with 2 other players as a dayang. In Javanese, it is usually called "widodari patang puluh", then sintren is seated by the handler in ordinary clothes accompanied by the dayang then immediately makes sintren in 3 stages, namely:

1. The handler holds the hands of the prospective sintren dancer, then placed on the incense smoke while saying a mantra, then the sintren dancer is tied with a rope wrapped around the body.
2. Prospective sintren dancers are put in a chicken cage (cage) along with sintren clothes and makeup equipment, a few moments later the prison is opened, sintren is already in a confinement in a state tied to a rope and then sintren is closed in confinement again.
3. After there are signs of the confinement vibrating or swaying, it indicates that the sintren is ready, and has been released from the rope ties, then the sintren is ready to dance, then the confinement is opened, the sintren also comes out and is ready to dance, in addition to dancing, sometimes the sintren also performs acrobatic movements including such as standing on the sambul cage dancing. During the sintren performance, the burning of the multitude must not stop, this is because, according to the handler, it is a requirement requested by the angel, and must not be violated.

The type of song that is usually used to accompany the art of sintren, namely the *sungang turun sintren* is used as an opening so that the spirit of *sulasih* enters the body of the prospective sintren dancer. When the song is sung, the sintren dancer will change clothes from ordinary clothes to sintren clothes in a state of rope and in confinement. *Sinden* usually spawns twice. The first is intended to invite the audience, and the next is aimed at calling a sintren out.

"The first song verse sung was *Tambak Tambak Pawon*. Fill the steamer boiler. A crowd of spectators gathered at the party. While the second verse of the song is *Kembang trate*. Bought across the street. "Your name is Randy Randy." (Nyai runi sings her song in an interview)

Accompaniment to pleas and praise *rahayu*, the song of flowers *orok-orok* or *kembang lombok* for the request of sintren to change clothes, for example from *kebaya* clothes to skirts. *Tembang kaula gusti*, to apologize to the sintren who is a cousin because he is angry or displeased. The song of roses, sung to accompany the request for discovery to the audience.

As for the closing accompaniment, the song *turun sintren*, *selasih suliandono*, as a sign that the sintren game will end.

### *The values of Islamic education in Sintren's performing arts*

Although Sintren contains mystical elements, the moral and social values contained in it remain relevant to the principles of Islamic education. For example, the story of *Sulasih* and *Sulandono*, on which the legend of Sintren is based, contains a message of loyalty, sacrifice, and holy love – values that are in harmony with the Islamic teachings of sincerity and determination. In addition, the Sintren tradition also fosters the spirit of togetherness, mutual cooperation, and social responsibility in its implementation.

These values can be used in Islamic education as a means of contextual learning, namely linking Islamic moral teachings with local cultural practices. This approach is relevant to the principle of al-'adah muhakkamah (customs can be made into law as long as they do not contradict the sharia) and encourage students to respect culture while affirming faith.

Sintren is a relic of the ancestors of the Animist era, it is symbolized by the use of incense and frankincense. In ancient times incense and frankincense were used to invite "spirits" from heaven. This statement is strengthened by the verse of the sintren song that widadari (angels) can be called, worshipped to awaken the soul to the human body. The art of sintren at that time was used as a tool to get closer and communicate with the spirits of the ancestors, called Batara Tunggal. This can also be seen from the performance of the Sintren art always prioritizing the means of offerings (incense, frankincense, perfume, seven kinds of flowers, and tumpeng food) to be offered to the spirits of their ancestors at the end of the event, so that they can receive protection and help in life in this world and in the hereafter

In line with its development, sintren art performances have undergone changes, both in their function and the procedures of the performance process. As is the case with the sintren art in Karangdawa Village, Tegal Regency, the art has a distinctive style in its performance, namely being used as a medium for Islamic da'wah and becoming the main characteristic of sintren art. The peculiarity of sintren art is in the performance process which does not contain mystical elements or supernatural elements but only pure performance techniques or acting demonstrated by sintren players. So this sintren is called sintren da'wah, which is a spectacle that becomes a guide for mankind. Da'wah itself, according to Malini (2016) in her writing, explains that da'wah comes from Arabic which means invitation, call, call, and invitation. The relationship with the art of sintren as a medium of da'wah is da'wah that is conveyed orally during the performance which contains the meaning of Islamic symbols that are inserted in the scenes of the sintren art performance and an invitation to Muslims to be on the path in accordance with Islamic law.

"In the past, people believed there were supernatural powers, but now I teach young people to see it as a symbol. The Sintren girl is a symbol of purity, she enters the prison in an innocent state, then comes out with beautiful clothes, which means that humans can change for the better if their hearts are clean. In Islam, it is also the same, sincere intentions make all deeds beautiful in the eyes of Allah." ( Interview Runi, elder of sintren)

"So when I sing, my intention is not to summon spirits, but to accompany the process of change from an ordinary girl to a strong girl, daring to perform, but still maintaining manners." ( Interview Tika, Sintren singer)

In the lyrics of the song, Selasih and Suliandana are experiencing disappointment and disappointment is symbolized by the word Selasih because basil is a symbol of death for the community. White clothing wadahe raga which means white cloth where the body is with meaning, white cloth (white cloth) is a garment or shroud which is the last garment that a human being wears when he is lifeless to cover his body when buried. The lyrics are the essence of a person's

death from the lyrics remind us of death, that humans will not live forever in this world and should never be complacent with the life of the mortal world because the life of the world is nothing but a deceptive pleasure. Ana ragakadiran sukma means that there is a body filled with spirits, which means that humans are given two facilities by Allah, namely the body/body and the spirit to live life in the world. When the soul leaves the body, it means that man is dead, because everything that is alive will surely die and will never return to the world (except with Allah's permission) as explained in Q.S Ali'Imran verse 185 which reads:

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ وَإِنَّمَا تُوَفَّقُونَ أُجُورَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَمَنْ رُحِزَ عَنِ النَّارِ وَأُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ فَقَدْ فَازَ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْعُرُورِ

"Every living thing will feel death. Only on the Day of Resurrection will your reward be given perfectly. Whoever is kept from Hell and admitted to Paradise, he will indeed have a victory. The life of the world is only a deceptive pleasure."

The Quran of Surah Ali'Imran verse 185 is the basis for the creation and change of the lyrics of the song Selasih Suliandana, so that the hope of humans when they are dead, namely, Sukma wening temuruna means God lowers affection, which has the meaning of Allah lowering his affection.

From the above statements, it can be concluded that the lyrics of the song Selasih Suliandana have a meaning to remind us of death and what provisions we will prepare to go to death.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the art of Sintren in Tegal Regency not only functions as a people's entertainment, but also contains symbolic values related to Islamic teachings and the spiritual life of the northern coastal people of Java. Although rooted in pre-Islamic traditions mixed with elements of animism and Hindu-Buddhism, the process of Islamization carried out by guardians and scholars has changed the function and meaning of this art so that it has developed into a means of cultural communication that is full of moral and religious messages.

In Sintren's performance, symbolic elements such as virgin female dancers, chicken confinement, and trance processes have a deep meaning for society. A dancer who is still holy is chosen not just as a condition of tradition, but symbolizes the purity of the human soul from birth (fitrah) – a concept that in Islam is synonymous with the human condition that is free from sin (Liasari & Badrun, 2022). When dancers are put into a chicken cage with their hands tied, then come out in a state of adornment and dance freely after going through a "trance" process, people interpret this event as symbolic of man's journey from worldly attachment to spiritual liberation and divine consciousness.

Sufistically, the stages in this performance can be associated with the concepts of sharia, tariqat, hakiikat, and ma'rifat. The initial stage that describes symbolic attachment can be interpreted as *sharia* (rules), while the release and free movement of the dancer becomes a symbol of *the tariqat* and *the essence*, that is, the

process towards higher spiritual consciousness. In the end, the trance condition of the dancer is considered a symbol of *ma'rifat* – the union of humans with the divine element (Sumardjo, 2011).

Romadi (2018) emphasized that religious messages in Sintren are often conveyed symbolically through movements, songs, and poems. The song *Turun Sintren*, for example, is not only a call to the spirit of *widari*, but can also be interpreted as a form of prayer and hope for God's grace to descend on human beings. Thus, Sintren performances can be seen as a medium of cultural da'wah, namely the delivery of Islamic values through an art form that can be accepted by the wider community.

Sintren in Tegal Regency has an important role in strengthening social relations between residents. These performances are often held in village events, earth alms, or large celebrations involving all levels of society. This tradition reinforces the values of *ukhuwah*, mutual cooperation, and gratitude – all of which are the principles of Islamic morality (Gunawan et al., 2020).

In addition, through the active participation of the community in the implementation of performances, Sintren is also a non-formal educational means for the younger generation to learn about cultural identity and morality. Values such as politeness, responsibility, and respect for customs and ancestors are conveyed through performance structures and interactions between citizens. In this context, Sintren functions as a social learning medium that is in line with the spirit of Islamic education: teaching morals, morals, and awareness of responsibility for the social environment.

This art also acts as a tool for cultural da'wah, which is an approach to spreading Islamic teachings through cultural media. This is in line with Walisongo's da'wah strategy which uses local art and culture so that Islamic teachings can be easily accepted by the community (Yaqin & Badrun, 2022). Thus, Sintren not only functions as a cultural heritage, but also as a means of internalizing spiritual values in a communicative and attractive form.

However, the results of the study show that not all elements in the Sintren performance are fully in line with the principle of monotheism. The mystical and trance elements that are still maintained in the show often cause debate among religious figures. Some people still believe that the spirit of the *widadari* really enters the dancer's body during the performance process. From the perspective of Islamic faith, this can cause potential deviations because it contains elements of superstition, superstition, and *shirk*, if it is believed to be a summoning of spirits other than Allah (Kusumaningrum, 2015; Gofur, 2015).

However, many artists and community leaders argue that these elements are now more symbolic and artistic, no longer a religious ritual. This change in meaning shows the process of cultural Islamization, which is the transformation of old elements into cultural expressions of aesthetic and moral value without violating Islamic teachings. If formulated wisely, the trance element can be understood as a symbol of self-purification, not a spiritual practice that is contrary to monotheism.

Therefore, there is a need for a reorientation of meaning and value education so that Sintren performances remain relevant and do not contradict the

principles of faith. The involvement of religious leaders, Islamic educational institutions, and local artists is important to reinterpret these symbols within the framework of the correct faith.

From a social perspective, Sintren plays a big role in strengthening the identity of the Tegal people as part of the northern coastal community of Java. The performance activities that are still carried out in villages such as Jatilaba and Balapulang Kulon show that this art is still alive and part of the collective expression of the community. On various occasions, the local government has also made Sintren a representation of Tegal's religious culture, for example through performances at Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) Jakarta accompanied by moral and spiritual messages (setda.tegalkab.go.id, 2025).

In the context of Islamic education, Sintren can be used as a tool to teach Islamic values in a contextual manner. For example, teachers or dai can use the love story of Sulasih and Sulandana as a metaphor for human struggle to face the world's trials, or the process of "descending sintren" as a symbol of the coming of Allah's guidance to sincere and patient servants.

Overall, the results of this study show that Sintren art has two faces: on the one hand is mystical cultural heritage, on the other hand is the medium of da'wah and moral education. The two do not have to negate each other, but can be synergized through contextual and Islamic reinterpretation.

With the right approach, Sintren is not just a traditional spectacle, but can also be a guide and means of cultural da'wah, as revealed by Lestari et al. (2022), that traditional arts such as Sintren are able to be a bridge between local culture and Islamic teachings, showing a peaceful, beautiful, and respectful face of Islam.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The performing arts of Sintren in Tegal Regency are a manifestation of effective cultural da'wah, which has been transformed from pre-Islamic traditions into a medium for conveying Islamic moral and spiritual messages. Sintren performing arts contain Islamic educational values which include sincerity, purity, ukhuwah (brotherhood), and respect for parents. In addition, the lyrics of the song that have been adapted (such as "Selasih Suliandana") are a powerful means to remind the audience of death and the essence of mortal world life. Sintren functions as a medium of da'wah bil hikmah, which is accepted by the community and local religious leaders as a form of spreading Islam that does not contradict the principles of monotheism. This transformation makes Sintren not only entertainment and a means of cultural preservation, but also a spectacle that provides guidance.

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*Sofinatunnajah*

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