

Rationality of Wali Songo's Da'wa in the Spread of Islam in Nusantara: A Critique of Mystical Narratives

Ahmad Sukran,^{1*} Sukiman,¹ Liza Jauharotul Munfarida Al Khurriyyah¹

¹Magister Pendidikan Agama Islam, Fakultas Ilmu Tarbiyah dan Keguruan, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

Email: 24204011045@student.uin-suka.ac.id, sukiman@uin-suka.ac.id,
24204011057@student.uin-suka.ac.id

*Korespondensi

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Abstract

The dominance of mystical and mythological narratives in the public discourse surrounding the Wali Songo has created an epistemological bias that obscures their intellectual and strategic dimensions during the Islamization of the Nusantara. This phenomenon leads to “decontextualized spiritual personalization,” where these figures are more frequently understood through miracles rather than their actual contributions as social and educational architects. This study aims to deconstruct these mystical myths while reconstructing the rational foundations of the Wali Songo’s da’wah, which are rooted in knowledge, culture, and diplomacy. This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method with a comprehensive historical analysis approach, involving heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography of classical texts and modern academic literature. The results reveal that the Wali Songo’s success was rooted in systematic da’wah strategies, including: (1) the institutionalization of education via the pesantren model; (2) dialogic cultural acculturation; (3) political-economic diplomacy; and (4) inclusive social transformation. These findings assert that the Wali Songo were not merely sacred figures, but agents of intellectual transformation who established the groundwork for modern, critical, and moderate Islamic education in Indonesia.

Keywords:

da’wah rationality; historical reconstruction; Islamic education; mystical narrative; Wali Songo

Abstrak

Dominasi narasi mistis dan mitologis dalam diskursus publik mengenai Wali Songo telah menciptakan bias epistemologis yang mengaburkan dimensi intelektual dan strategis mereka dalam proses Islamisasi di Nusantara. Fenomena ini menyebabkan terjadinya “personalisasi spiritual tak terkontekstualisasi,” di mana figur Wali Songo lebih sering dipahami melalui mukjizat daripada melalui kontribusi nyata mereka sebagai arsitek sosial dan pendidikan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendekonstruksi narasi mistis tersebut sekaligus merekonstruksi fondasi rasionalitas dakwah Wali Songo yang berbasis pada pengetahuan, budaya, dan diplomasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif-deskriptif dengan pendekatan analisis sejarah yang komprehensif, meliputi tahapan heuristik, kritik sumber, interpretasi, dan historiografi terhadap teks klasik serta literatur akademik modern. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan Wali Songo berakar pada strategi dakwah yang sistematis, meliputi: (1) institusionalisasi pendidikan melalui model pesantren; (2) akulturasi budaya yang dialogis; (3) diplomasi politik-ekonomi; dan (4) transformasi sosial yang inklusif. Temuan ini menegaskan posisi Wali Songo bukan sekadar figur sakral, melainkan

agen transformasi intelektual yang meletakkan landasan bagi pendidikan Islam modern yang kritis dan moderat di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci:

narasi mistikal; pendidikan Islam; rasionalitas dakwah; rekonstruksi sejarah; Wali Songo



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Introduction

The spread of Islam in the Nusantara was a historical process that gradually took place over centuries, starting from the 7th century CE and reaching its peak during the golden age of Islamic kingdoms in the coastal regions. This process did not occur uniformly throughout the region but proceeded through peaceful, adaptive, and contextual approaches. One important element in the dynamics of this spread of Islam was the role of the Wali Songo, nine charismatic religious scholars who propagated Islam on the island of Java (Hamka, 1961). They not only spread Islamic teachings but also carried out cultural and social transformations of local communities in moderate and inclusive ways, such as through art, education, intercultural marriage, and even the use of local symbols in their da'wah (Azra, 2019).

The Wali Songo were known for their intelligent and contextual da'wah strategies. They used a cultural approach by integrating Islamic values into local traditions, such as gamelan, wayang, and carving art. Da'wah was carried out gradually, starting from moral and monotheistic teachings, before moving into aspects of worship and sharia, so that the community could accept Islamic teachings without feeling uprooted from their cultural roots. Sunan Kalijaga, for example, was famous for his subtle and tolerant approach, making art a means to convey Islamic messages (Dhofier, 2011). This demonstrates how Islam was spread not through violence, but by blending into the lives of the community.

However, the dominance of mystical narratives in the public representation of the Wali Songo points to a deeper epistemological problem in the construction of Islamic knowledge within society. The Wali Songo are more often portrayed as charismatic figures endowed with supernatural powers rather than as intellectual and cultural agents who carried out da'wah through rational and context-sensitive strategies. (Ricklefs, 2006). This study argues that the dominance of mystical representations of the Wali Songo, particularly narratives of *karāmah* and miraculous events, not only produces an ahistorical understanding but also obscures the rational foundations of Islamic da'wah that were instrumental to the success of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago.

The tendency toward mystification in religious practices is reflected in a range of practices and beliefs that continue to develop within society. One example is the Safarwadi Cave in Pamijahan, Tasikmalaya, which, according to local narratives, is believed to have a passage leading directly to Mecca and is also regarded as a sacred site associated with Shaykh Abdul Muhyi, a prominent figure in the spread of Islam in Java who is genealogically linked to the network of Wali Songo scholars (Nugraha & Rastika, 2026). In another context, the Saparan Sebandot tradition in Giripurno, Magelang, reflects a cultural effort to reenact the journey of Sunan Kalijaga through symbolic elements such as *Saka Tatal*, which carry philosophical meanings (Mustopa,

2023) Similarly, the Grebeg Besar tradition in Demak features a series of rituals, ranging from the cleansing of sacred heirlooms and the *Tumpeng Songo* procession to the practice of *ancakan* (communal food offerings), all of which are oriented toward seeking blessings (*ngalap berkah*) from relics associated with the saints (Kurniawan, 2025)

Taken together, these phenomena point to a process of over-sacralization of the figures and historical legacies of the Wali Songo, which has gradually taken on semi-mythological forms in everyday religious practice. Belief in supernatural elements, in this context, functions not merely as cultural symbolism but also as a framework that can encourage uncritical patterns of religiosity, where such narratives are accepted as given. Over time, this tendency may hinder efforts to reconstruct an understanding of Islam that is rational, historically grounded, and contextually engaged, an approach that, in fact, characterized the original da'wah strategies of the Wali Songo themselves. These contemporary phenomena highlight the persistence of mythologized understandings, which are, however, rarely addressed critically in existing academic scholarship.

A number of previous studies have examined the role and da'wah strategies of the Wali Songo in the process of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago from various perspectives. These studies generally position the Wali Songo as cultural agents who successfully integrated Islamic teachings with local traditions through accommodative and adaptive approaches. Mahfudh & Ari, (2025), for instance, argue that the success of Wali Songo's da'wah lies in their strategy of cultural acculturation, which fostered an inclusive and tolerant society. This finding is reinforced by Indriyani & Putra (2025), who emphasize the importance of tolerance as a core value in the Wali Songo's contextual approach to da'wah, particularly in maintaining social harmony within a multicultural society. In this regard, the Wali Songo are often understood as agents of religious moderation who utilized local culture as an effective medium for conveying Islamic teachings.

Beyond the cultural dimension, several studies also highlight the sufistic aspect of Wali Songo's da'wah. Handoko dkk., (2025) demonstrate that Sufi values, such as morality, spirituality, and social solidarity, served as the foundation for building a harmonious Javanese social order. In a similar vein, Muhajirin dkk., (1907) argue that Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*) functioned not only as a spiritual medium but also as a cognitive bridge that enabled Islamic teachings to be gradually accepted by local communities without generating significant resistance. This strategy was realized through what is often referred to as a "tradition of accommodation," namely the creative adoption of cultural symbols, such as wayang and gamelan, infused with monotheistic values, thereby constructing a broad-based religious identity without provoking sharp ideological conflict (Adib, 2023).

In addition, other studies draw attention to the strategic and contextual dimensions of Wali Songo's da'wah. Lutfillah, (2019) shows that the success of Islamization was not solely dependent on cultural approaches, but also on systematic and context-sensitive da'wah management, particularly in navigating the socio-cultural structures of the Majapahit era. Furthermore, Jha, (2025) emphasizes that the effectiveness of Wali Songo's da'wah was supported by their ability to read and navigate geopolitical dynamics and power structures in a highly adaptive manner. In the context of contemporary education, Suradi dkk., (2021) demonstrate that the values of moderation inherited from the Wali Songo tradition continue to be

reproduced within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as a means of countering radicalism and promoting inclusive Islamic understanding.

Taken together, the existing literature largely frames the da'wah of the Wali Songo as a synthesis of sufistic, cultural, and strategic approaches that were responsive to specific socio-historical dynamics. While this perspective has been instrumental in explaining the emergence of an inclusive and moderate form of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, it remains predominantly descriptive and insufficiently attentive to its broader epistemological implications. More importantly, it tends to overlook how these sufistic and cultural constructions have, over time, been rearticulated into contemporary forms of religious mystification.

In response to this gap, this study not only examines the process of mythologization, but also reasserts the rational and strategic dimensions of Wali Songo's da'wah as a crucial foundation for understanding the dynamics of Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago. Furthermore, it offers an integrative-critical analytical framework that connects historical reinterpretation with contemporary religious practices, thereby bridging the gap between classical da'wah strategies and their modern epistemological implications.

In addition, the rational dimension of Wali Songo's da'wah played a crucial role in shaping the foundations of Islamic education in Indonesia. The *pesantren*, as an early institutional form they developed, embodied a structured and knowledge-based system of learning rooted in Islamic scholarly traditions (Dhofier, 2011). Beyond serving as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge and the training of *ulama*, *pesantren* also functioned as key sites for the formation of socio-religious values within society. This demonstrates that Wali Songo's legacy was not only spiritual, but also institutional and intellectual, contributing significantly to the development of Islamic social and cultural structures in the Indonesian archipelago (Rahmat, 2008).

Building on this discussion, an important question arises regarding the actual nature of the rationality underlying Wali Songo's da'wah in the process of Islamization in the archipelago. Do the dominant mystical narratives circulating in society today truly reflect the historical reality of their da'wah, or are they the result of later constructions and reinterpretations? Furthermore, to what extent did their rational and strategic approaches contribute to social transformation and the development of Islamic education at that time? These questions serve as the foundation for formulating the focus of this study.

In response to this gap, this study critically examines the transformation of sufistic and cultural narratives into contemporary forms of religious mystification, which have contributed to the marginalization of the rational dimensions of Wali Songo's da'wah. More specifically, it seeks to re-evaluate and reconstruct the rational and strategic foundations of their da'wah by situating them within both their historical context and present-day religious practices. By doing so, this study offers an integrative and critical analytical framework that bridges historical reinterpretation with contemporary religious realities, thereby repositioning the Wali Songo as intellectual and context-sensitive agents of da'wah and highlighting the continued relevance of their rational approach for the development of Islamic education in Indonesia.

Methods

This study employs the historical research method to reconstruct and critically examine the rationality of the Wali Songo's da'wah in the Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago. Historical research investigates past events through the systematic collection, verification, interpretation, and reconstruction of historical evidence to produce an academically grounded understanding of historical phenomena (Gottschalk, 1985).

The study is based on documentary evidence obtained through library research. The historical data consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include classical manuscripts, *babad*, *hikayat*, and local chronicles documenting the activities of the Wali Songo and the Islamization process in Java. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and historical studies on Wali Songo, Islam Nusantara, and Islamic education, including works by Ricklefs, (2006), Azra, (2019), Sunyoto, (2017) Abdullah, (2002), and Dhofier, (2011). These sources were selected based on their historical relevance, scholarly credibility, and contribution to the research objectives.

The analysis followed four stages of the historical method: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Garrahan, 1946; Kuntowijoyo, 2005). Heuristics involved identifying and collecting historical sources relevant to the Wali Songo's da'wah. Source criticism consisted of external criticism to assess the authenticity of historical documents and internal criticism to evaluate the credibility and consistency of their contents. The interpretation stage comparatively analyzed historical evidence to reconstruct the rational dimensions of the Wali Songo's missionary strategies, emphasizing cultural adaptation, educational development, political engagement, and social empowerment rather than mystical explanations. Finally, historiography synthesized the verified findings into a coherent historical narrative that presents the Wali Songo's da'wah as a contextual, rational, and transformative process in the spread of Islam and the development of Islamic education in the Indonesian archipelago.

Findings and Discussion

Dominance of Mystical Narratives in Public Understanding of Wali Songo

Initial findings indicate that in Indonesian society, especially in Java, narratives about the Wali Songo are strongly imbued with mystical elements. People tend to interpret the Wali figures as individuals possessing supernatural powers such as walking on water, disappearing (*mukasyafah*), communicating with spirits, or traveling across regions in a short time. In other dominant mystical narratives, Wali Songo are even said to be able to subdue evil spirits or build mosques in just one night. The dominance of these narratives makes the Wali Songo figures not merely preachers or scholars, but rather like “demigods” in the collective imagination of society (Woodward, 1989).

Mystical narratives about Wali Songo are not only recorded in semi-legendary historical texts like Babad Tanah Jawi, but also live on and are orally transmitted in the form of widespread myths in society. For example, the story of Sunan Kalijaga, who was supposedly able to hide his body from human sight, or the tale that he could turn water into gold while preaching in Central Java. Stories like these are still frequently told at tahlilan events, village religious gatherings, and even in popular religious books sold freely in non-academic bookstores.

In the community around Sunan Bonang's Tomb in Tuban, for instance, there is a belief that if someone recites prayers or Surah Yasin at the tomb with a certain intention, their wishes will be immediately granted. A similar phenomenon is observed in the practice of pilgrimage to Sunan Gunung Jati's tomb in Cirebon, where many pilgrims bring water from a sacred well and believe it can cure illnesses. This practice is often not accompanied by deep spiritual understanding but rather leads to instrumental and transactional mystic-magical behavior (Kurniawan et al., 2019; Zulkifli, 2013).

Even in some local contexts, there is a belief that one will never get lost if they walk while mentioning the name of Wali Songo, or that goods will sell well if they open a business on days believed to be “auspicious days of the Wali”. Although seemingly trivial, these beliefs show how the Wali figures have been constructed as symbols of metaphysical power that can provide “protection” or “worldly gain”, regardless of the rational and ethical values they actually taught.

This tendency gives rise to what is called “*decontextualized spiritual personalization*”. This term is the author's critical analysis describing a phenomenon of spiritual glorification of religious figures that is detached from their historical context, normative teachings, and the rationality of their religious mission, thereby giving birth to a form of symbolic religiosity that is not intellectually and socially productive.

The author's analysis in describing the societal phenomenon with the term “*decontextualized spiritual personalization*” is inspired by concepts such as “*religious decontextualization*” (Fazlur Rahman), which describes a condition when religious teachings (including figures of holy personages) are detached from their historical, social, and rational contexts. This results in many Muslims experiencing decontextualization in understanding revelation texts, which impacts a static and a-historical form of religiosity (Rahman, 1982).

Another critique describing the phenomenon of society excessively worshipping such religious figures also comes from an American anthropologist like Clifford James Geertz, who calls it an “*Individual Saint Cult*”. Geertz, in *The Religion of Java*, touches on this phenomenon in the context of Javanese culture, which spiritually glorifies kyai or wali even outside the formal teachings of Islam (Geertz, 1960).

Geertz shows that in the context of Javanese society, the relationship between the community and religious figures such as wali or kyai is not only based on respect for their knowledge or moral example but has developed into a kind of symbolic worship. Wali are no longer seen as ordinary humans who struggled to spread Islamic teachings with social, rational, and cultural approaches, but rather as sacred figures possessing supernatural abilities. He refers to this phenomenon as part of the syncretic religious structure of Javanese society, where Islam is mixed with Hindu-Buddhist and animistic elements in a strong religious symbolism that tends to be uncritical of the essence of the teachings (Geertz, 1960).

A consequence of this pattern of religiosity is the emergence of an understanding of Islam that emphasizes symbolic and ritualistic aspects more than rational, ethical, and intellectual aspects. Wali Songo, for example, are more often remembered for their extraordinary karomah, such as being able to call fish from the sea or talk to animals, rather than for their contextual, persuasive, and knowledge-based da'wah strategies and cultural approaches. Such narratives have the potential

to reduce the historical role of Wali Songo as agents of social transformation, reformers of thought, and pioneers of Islamic moderation in the Nusantara.

The excessive worship of religious figures was also put forth by Martin van Bruinessen, stating that Indonesian society often wraps religious figures in a “cloak of karomah”, thus marginalizing the rational aspect of their da’wah. Martin notes that in the development of traditional Islam in Indonesia, Sufistic and mystical practices often take the form of excessive reverence for religious figures, even to the point of cultic worship. He criticizes that many people focus more on karomah and legends than on the rational and ethical teachings brought by the wali or kyai. In his statement, he revealed that, “*Mystical traditions in pesantren or tarekat communities often create a distance between religious figures and their followers, making these figures seem sacred and beyond criticism*” (Martin, 1995).

This mystical tradition leads to society admiring karomah (extraordinary abilities) more than the morals, knowledge, or da’wah methods of the wali. The tradition of grave pilgrimage to the tombs of Wali Songo often no longer stems from the spirit of emulating their struggles and morals but shifts to the practice of seeking blessings (*tabarrukan*), which sometimes has magical and consumptive nuances. This phenomenon indicates a shift in the religious orientation of society from normative-rational to mystical-symbolic, a tendency also criticized by figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and Kuntowijoyo (Madjid, 2000; Kuntowijoyo, 2004).

Although mystical narratives in the history of Wali Songo are often criticized for potentially obscuring the rational aspects of their da’wah, it must be emphasized that mysticism is not entirely negative. It functioned as a cultural medium for introducing Islam to the common people of the time. In the context of Javanese society, which was then deeply embedded in animistic and symbolic values, mystical approaches often served as an effective initial bridge in the da’wah process. Through spiritual symbols familiar to the local community, Wali Songo were able to convey Islamic values subtly and non-confrontationally. In this sense, mysticism functioned as a form of cultural transition, linking new religious understandings with established traditions and ways of thinking. Therefore, rather than rejecting mystical narratives entirely, a more proportional approach is to reinterpret the rational and transformative dimensions behind those mystical forms, so that Islamic da’wah remains rooted in local culture while still progressing toward enlightenment and civilization.

However, when such narratives become the sole means of understanding religious figures, society risks falling into what is known as “transactional religiosity”, a form of religious practice that emphasizes the pursuit of worldly needs (such as safety, wealth, or healing) through intermediaries or spiritual figures, rather than through a deep understanding of the core values of Islam. This phenomenon can weaken the critical reasoning of believers and distance them from the Islamic principles that promote intellect, knowledge, and righteous deeds as the true foundation of faith.

This issue was also a critical concern for Azyumardi Azra in observing the tendency of Indonesian Muslims to emphasize mystical and syncretic aspects in their religious practices. He emphasized that the Islam brought to the archipelago by scholars, including the Wali Songo, was fundamentally rooted in rationality, intellectualism, and reformist ideals. However, over time, the Islam embraced by

society became interwoven with local cultural elements that were not always aligned with the core principles of Islamic teachings (Azra, 2004b).

This mystical narrative cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context of Javanese agrarian society, which is deeply rooted in animistic cosmology and syncretic traditions. In the process of accepting Islam as a new religion, supernatural elements from local culture were accommodated into Islamic narratives, such as the miracles (*karomah*) of the saints or other spiritual symbols. Culturally, this process can be understood as an adaptive da'wah strategy. However, in the long term, it poses an epistemological problem, when irrational beliefs (*khurafat*) are mistakenly perceived as inherent components of Islamic teachings (Ricklefs, 2006).

This mystical perspective, while capable of enhancing the cultural appeal of Islam within society, in many cases actually weakens the rational dimension of the Muslim community. Mystical narratives that emphasize miracles and *karomah* often lead believers to adopt a fatalistic attitude toward Islamic da'wah. In reality, Islam demands intellectual awareness, critical thinking, mastery of knowledge, and a commitment to social ethics. As a result, Islam is no longer understood as a faith that promotes reason and social transformation, but is instead inherited as a symbolic system-magical, passive, and beyond critique.

This kind of interpretation poses a serious challenge to the advancement of Islamic education based on the principles of rationality and historical objectivity. Therefore, academic studies must engage in a deconstruction of mystical myths and rediscover the true image of the Wali Songo as strategic social transformation agents, rather than merely sacred figures endowed with supernatural powers.

Thus, the term “*decontextualized spiritual personalization*” is not only relevant as an analytical tool for understanding how the Wali Songo are positioned in the collective memory of Indonesian society, but also serves as a critique of a form of religiosity that is more symbolic than substantive. Through this critique, it is hoped that new space will emerge for a more rational, objective, and historical reinterpretation of the Wali Songo, so that the spirit of their da'wah can truly be inherited within the framework of a modern Islamic education that enlightens and liberates.

Rational Strategies of Wali Songo in Islamic Da'wah

In contrast to the mystical impression inherent in popular narratives, historical data shows that Wali Songo championed a rational, systematic, and contextual approach to da'wah. Their approach was based on a deep understanding of the socio-cultural conditions of Nusantara society, as well as a commitment to educational values and reform. Therefore, the author will elaborate on historical findings that demonstrate the role of Wali Songo in propagating Islam with a rational, systematic, and contextual approach.

1. Pioneer of Wali Songo's Rational Da'wah: Sunan Gresik

Sunan Gresik or Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim (1350-1419 CE), some people called him Kakek Bantal (Grandpa Pillow). He was the first Wali to spread Islam in Java, beginning his da'wah in the Gresik area, East Java. He came not as a conqueror, but as a merchant, healer, and educator. His da'wah strategy was highly humane and rational, prioritizing social service and cultural approaches as entry points for the spread of Islam (Sunyoto, 2017). One of his main strategies was

through medical treatment and social assistance, especially to the poor and those suffering from illness. With his medical expertise, he gained public sympathy and gradually conveyed Islamic values persuasively.

In carrying out his da'wah, Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim built educational institutions and mosques as centers for religious instruction. He taught Islamic creed and sharia to the local community gradually, using Javanese language and respecting local traditions. This strategy reflects a systematic educational and institutional approach, introducing Islam through direct teaching within community spaces, rather than through rhetoric or *karomah*. This became the beginning of the *pesantren*-based da'wah system that would later be developed by Sunan Ampel and other *walis* (Dhofier, 2011).

In addition, he was also known for building mosques and teaching dormitories, where he taught the basics of Islam with a local language and cultural approach, as well as using Persian and Arabic as instruments for elite education. This indicates an early effort at cadre formation and strengthening of da'wah structure through learning institutions. He did not overtly oppose local culture but straightened the symbolic meanings of old culture into Islamic values. With an evolutionary and non-confrontational approach, Islam developed among both the common people and the nobility.

His da'wah strategy also reflected integrative values between Islam and local culture. He did not overtly reject Javanese traditions but instilled Islamic values in social and cultural practices by harmonizing local symbolic meanings with the principles of monotheism (*tauhid*) and Islamic ethics. This approach reflects the principle of da'wah bil hikmah (with wisdom), as taught in the Qur'an, and also became a strategic legacy for subsequent Wali Songo's cultural da'wah (Azra, 2019).

Furthermore, historical records mention that Maulana Malik Ibrahim was also involved in the formation of a da'wah elite through an elite education approach. He taught Islamic sciences in Arabic and Persian to certain circles, while also extending da'wah inclusively to the general public. This demonstrates his capacity as an educator and strategic thinker who focused not only on the quantity of followers but also on the quality of Islamic understanding within society (T. Abdullah, 2002).

Thus, the da'wah of Sheikh Maulana Malik Ibrahim constituted an early foundation for the rational spread of Islam, based on social service, education, and cultural acculturation. His strategy showed that Islam could be accepted peacefully and naturally if conveyed through a contextual, intellectual, and community-oriented approach (Abdullah, 2002).

2. Cultural Acculturation: Sunan Kalijaga

One of the *Walis* who used culture as a medium for da'wah was Sunan Kalijaga or Raden Said (1450 - 1513 CE). He utilized local arts such as *wayang* (shadow puppets), *tembang* (traditional songs), and *gamelan* as media for da'wah. Through this strategy, Islamic teachings were conveyed in symbolic forms that could be understood and accepted by the Javanese people without feeling uprooted from their cultural heritage. This approach was cultural-dialogical, avoiding cultural confrontation, and successfully guided the community towards Islamic values gradually and persuasively (Sunyoto, 2017).

3. Institutional Education: Sunan Giri

Sunan Giri or Raden Paku (1442 - 1506 CE) was a Wali who initiated the establishment of a “kitab kuning” (classic Islamic texts) based educational institution, which became the precursor to the pesantren tradition. He implemented a system for training ulama by developing an Islamic curriculum and sending students to various regions. This shows that the spread of Islam was carried out through a scientific and systematic process, not merely through karomah or rituals (Dhofier, 2011).

4. Symbolic Literacy: Sunan Bonang

Another rational strategy is also reflected in the approach of Sunan Bonang or Makhdom Ibrahim (1465 - 1525 CE), who utilized literary art as a medium for da’wah. He composed suluk (mystical songs) and tembang that embedded Islamic teachings in a symbolic form easily accepted by the community. Sunan Bonang is known for writing “Suluk Wujil”, which not only contains Sufi teachings but also instills ethical values and spiritual education. In this context, a literacy-based da’wah strategy became a significant force in shaping intellectual and moral religious awareness among the general public (Azra, 2019).

5. Contextual Fiqh: Sunan Ampel

As an educator and rational thinker, Sunan Ampel or Raden Rahmat (1401 - 1481 CE), in his da’wah strategy, applied the principles of ushul fiqh in regulating community social life. He formulated Islamic ethical norms that were adaptive to local culture while maintaining the substance of sharia. His idea of “Moh Limo” (not stealing, not gambling, not committing adultery, not getting drunk, and not using drugs) became a practical and applicable da’wah formula (Sunyoto, 2017).

6. Socio-Economic Participation: Sunan Muria

Sunan Muria or Raden Umar Said (1475 - 1551 CE) propagated Islam by integrating into the lives of farming and fishing communities in the Muria mountains. He conveyed Islamic values while working alongside the people, instilling Islamic teachings through productive economic activities. This approach was participatory and contextual, strengthening the integration of Islam with social realities (Sunyoto, 2017).

7. Architectural Symbolism: Sunan Kudus

Sunan Kudus or Ja’far Shadiq (1500 - 1550 CE) built the Kudus Minaret Mosque by utilizing Hindu-Buddhist architectural styles. This was a diplomatic-symbolic approach to show that Islam did not come as a destructive force to local culture, but as a perfecting religion. This strategy prevented cultural resistance and opened up space for peaceful spiritual dialogue (Madjid, 2000).

8. Social Transformation: Sunan Drajat

Sunan Drajat or Raden Qasim (Syarifudin) (1470 - 1522 CE) focused his da’wah on social work, helping the poor, orphans, and disaster victims. He developed a system of aid and mutual cooperation as a form of implementing Islamic values in real life. This approach affirmed that Islam is an emancipatory and problem-solving religion (Zuhri, 2004).

9. Political Diplomacy: Sunan Gunung Jati

Sunan Gunung Jati or Syarif Hidayatullah (1448 - 1580 CE) played a major role in the Islamization of the Cirebon and Banten regions through political and royal diplomatic approaches. He forged strategic alliances with local kingdoms such as Demak, and used channels of power to integrate Islamic teachings into governmental structures and customary law. His approach is an example of progressive religious political rationality (T. Abdullah, 2002).

The da'wah strategies of Wali Songo as a whole relied on a combination of intellect, culture, education, and socio-political structure. They did not merely spread religion through *karomah* or spiritual symbolism, but undertook systematic social and educational engineering. This approach proved successful in forming an inclusive, moderate, and deeply rooted Islamic civilization in the Nusantara.

Mukti Ali explained that the walis also utilized local languages and traditional literary forms such as *tembang*, *serat*, and *macapat* to convey *aqidah* (creed) and *akhlaq* (morals) (Ali, 1992). This demonstrates their ability to understand the linguistic psychology of the community, making da'wah an inclusive and effective educational strategy.

From the exposition above, it is evident that the Wali Songo's approach was not mystical in a passive or supernatural sense, but rather a rational strategy based on culture, education, and social structure. They keenly and responsively read the social context of Nusantara society, so that the spread of Islam grew naturally without violence or coercion.

The author presents these historical facts about Wali Songo so that Indonesian Muslim society is no longer trapped in a decontextualized spiritual personalization of the Wali Songo figures, which tends to obscure the essence of their da'wah, which was based on reason, knowledge, and local wisdom. The author argues that by highlighting this rational side of da'wah, Indonesian Muslim society can develop a more critical, adaptive, and relevant religious understanding for the challenges of the modern era.

Through a more historically and scientifically grounded reconstruction of the narrative, the Wali Songo can once again be recognized as agents of social and intellectual transformation who prioritized dialogue, education, and cultural integration. This perspective encourages society not merely to admire their miracles or myths, but to emulate the strategic thinking and transformative values they embodied. A more comprehensive understanding is essential to actualize the spirit of Wali Songo's da'wah in today's context, encouraging Muslims to become progressive, moderate, and contributive individuals, rather than remaining trapped in a form of religiosity that is merely ritualistic and magical.

Implications of the Rationalization of Wali Songo's Da'wah on the Development of Islamic Education

The reconstruction of the rationality behind the Wali Songo's *da'wah* carries profound implications for the contemporary development of Islamic Education (PAI). First, from an epistemological standpoint, these findings necessitate a paradigm shift in how Islamic history is taught, moving away from a purely hagiographical-mystical narrative toward a historical-rational approach. This shift aligns with Kuntowijoyo's, (2004) concept of "Islam as Science," which emphasizes that historical understanding must be based on objective structures and social realities

rather than mythical idealization. Islamic education should no longer present the Wali Songo as detached, sacralized figures, but as intellectual agents of social transformation who prioritized critical reasoning and strategic planning. This is essential for fostering a generation of students who adopt a transformative intellectual work ethic in navigating modern complexities.

Second, regarding curriculum development, the Wali Songo's strategies of cultural acculturation provide robust legitimacy for an Islamic education framework rooted in religious moderation and local wisdom. As argued by Azra, (2004a) the success of Islamization in the Nusantara was determined by the "vernacularization" of Islam, the ability of scholars to harmonize Islamic values with local traditions without compromising the essence of the *sharia*. Consequently, PAI learning materials should be designed to be more responsive to local socio-cultural contexts, ensuring that universal Islamic values are communicated through familiar cultural symbols. This model of *da'wah bil hikmah* represents a pedagogical innovation crucial for countering rigid and radical interpretations of the faith.

Third, this research implies a need to revitalize the institutional methodologies of Islamic education, particularly the *pesantren*. In line with Dhofier, (2011) analysis of the *pesantren* tradition, this institution serves not only as a center for transmitting classical scholarship (*kitab kuning*) but also as a catalyst for social and cultural change. The Saints' emphasis on socio-economic participation, such as the community-based approaches of Sunan Muria and Sunan Drajat, demonstrates that Islamic education must exert an emancipatory impact on society. Thus, this historical rationalization encourages modern Islamic educational institutions to reposition themselves as architects of civilization, integrating profound spirituality with the strategic intelligence required to manage and transform social realities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the propagation of Islam by the Wali Songo in the Indonesian archipelago was fundamentally based on rational, contextual, and strategic approaches, rather than solely on mystical aspects as often portrayed in popular narratives. The Wali employed *da'wah* strategies through education, arts, local culture, political diplomacy, and economic empowerment to internalize Islamic teachings peacefully and inclusively. This rational approach was not only effective in fostering widespread acceptance of Islam, but also succeeded in laying the foundations of Islamic education through the establishment of *pesantren* and the development of an *ulama* cadre system that continues to thrive today.

The mystical narrative that dominates public understanding tends to obscure the rational, intellectual, and transformational dimensions of the Wali. Therefore, a more proportional and historical reconstruction of their roles is needed so that religious consciousness in society does not become trapped in passive and uncritical spiritual symbolism. With a more comprehensive understanding, the legacy of the Wali Songo's *da'wah* can be actualized in Islamic education that is relevant, progressive, and responsive to contemporary challenges.

This research opens opportunities for further studies focused on specific aspects of Wali Songo's *da'wah*, such as comparative analyses of the individual *da'wah* methods, the influence of rational *da'wah* on contemporary *pesantren* curricula, or discourse analysis of mystical narratives in local texts such as *babad* and *serat*. Moreover, field research is essential to examine how mystical and rational narratives

of Wali Songo influence current Islamic educational practices in both formal and non-formal institutions.

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