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The unseen saints of Islam: Sufi ritual and religious worldmaking in Java

Widodo, W.

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Introduction

On 9 April 2023, several people gathered and form concentric circles in the hall of the *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB, National Awakening Party) office in Jakarta. Most of them were dressed in blue-coloured outfits. Standing in concentric circles, they uttered Arabic formulations in unison. The Arabic salutation that they uttered was to invite the unseen men from the mystical world. By mentioning their names, they asked for help from God through the *Wali Kutub* or the Poles of the Saints. The general chief of PKB, Muhaimin Iskandar, well known as Cak Imin, along with other leaders of PKB, performed this devotional ritual (see figure 1). This devotional performance is called the *Walikutuban* ritual. Cak Imin believed that by performing the ritual, the politically problematic circumstances that he faced would be taken care of and solutions would come. His activities during the ritual were uploaded to his Instagram account and received numerous comments and emoji reactions from his millions of followers. A few months later, Cak Imin was running in the 2024 election as the vice-presidential candidate paired with Anies Baswedan, a politician who served as Governor of Jakarta from 2017 to 2022. Since 2014, this Sufi ritual has been practiced by the members of the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. However, this Sufi ritual is rarely performed. Therefore, it is not generally known.



Figure 1. The general chief of PKB, Muhaimin Iskandar, well known as Cak Imin, along with leaders of PKB, performed the *Walikutuban*. (Courtesy of Cak Imin Now Instagram).

In the Muslim world, saints are regarded as God's protégés who have a task as mediators between God and humans. While the title *wali* (saint) is used for all those who have become a bridge between God and humans, there are different classes of saints. The saints are divided into various ranks, depending on their proximity to the divine, their achievements, and their tasks. In this hierarchy of saints, the elites that occupy the top rank of the hierarchy are called the Poles (Ar. sing. *qutb*, pl. *aqṭāb*; Jv. *Kutub*). These figures are recognized as having the task of guarding the universe. They continue to keep the cosmos in motion until the end of days. When one of them dies, a saint from the lower ranks will be promoted accordingly. The role of these figures, therefore, is eternal as long as the worlds are believed to still be revolving. The unseen saints who occupy each level in the hierarchy are called the *Wali Kutub*. An invisible world in which the divine saintly figures play a significant role in maintaining the cosmic order operates in the *Walikutuban*. These are the saints that are being called upon in the *Walikutuban*. This Sufi ritual is an act to ask for help from God through the *Wali Kutub* who are believed to reside in each of the cardinal points. By invoking them, Sufi adepts believe that the *Wali Kutub* will handle their problems, including achieving victory in the political struggles. In a nutshell, these unseen saints are believed to not only maintain a closeness to the divine thrones in the invisible world, but also to influence everyday situations in the real world.

The asking of help to God through the *Wali Kutub* that I discuss in this book is an instance of religious worldmaking¹, or the activity of building or trying to build a reality through a ritual based on religious teachings that are reflected in artefacts. By making sense of the *Walikutuban*, we will see how the worlds that have been created and are being created through the ritual. The worlds that the *Walikutuban* makes are intricately designed. In order to make sense the *Walikutuban* world, the point of departure in this book is the question of how the *Walikutuban* initially emerged as one of the devotions of Javanese and Malay Muslims. To address this question, I present several Javanese texts and the Malay manuscripts dealing with the *wali* and their hierarchy. These texts portray the saints and their hierarchy as embedded in religious practices in Java and the Malay worlds. I then proceed to discuss the *Kitab Wali Kutub* (hereafter *KWK*), or the 'Book of the Poles of the Saints' in Cod. Or 7581. fl. 1r-6v from the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda will help us to illuminate the structure of the ritual from the Java's

1. I use the term of worldmaking for referring 'a world built around the artefact' as proposed by (Arps, 2016:62). Arps initially used *diegesis* (1996:66), then he changed it in established term as worldmaking in Arps (2018: 86; 2016:62).

past. Moreover, the illustrations in the *KWK* will help us to reconstruct how the ritual was performed in Java (see figure 2).

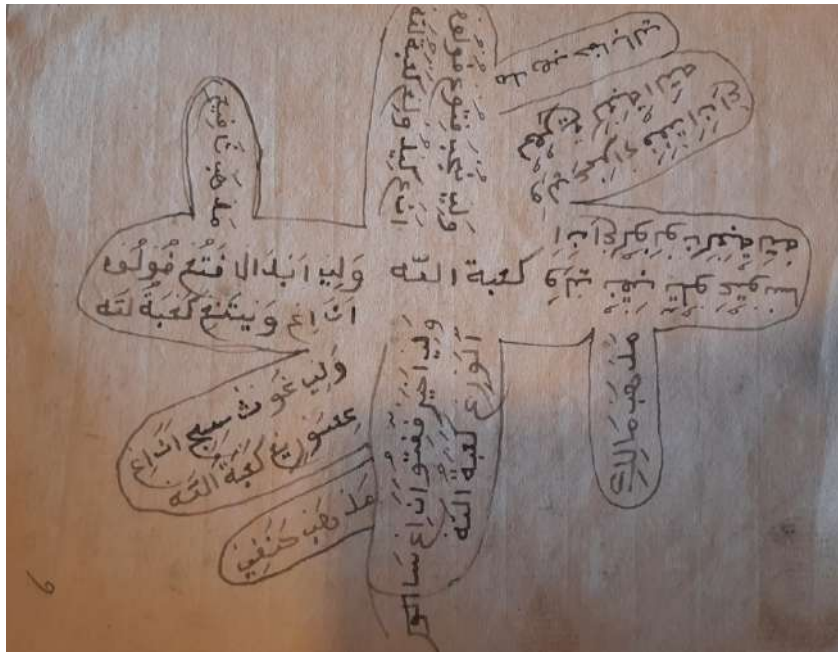


Figure 2. The Illustration of the *KWK* in Cod. Or. 7581, fl. 6v. Courtesy of Leiden University Library.

Mas Malang Yuda (1828-1888) was a charismatic religious leader of the Banyumas-based Akmaliiyah Sufi path (Ar. *tariqa*; Jv. *tarekat*) in Central Java. By extending his influence and authority, Mas Malang Yuda declared himself to be a *Ratu Adil*, i.e. a messiah (Drewes, 1925:30). He claimed that he was a righteous king and a *wali* who brought new hope to society through his teachings. As a spiritual leader of the Akmaliiyah *tarekat*, Mas Malang Yuda might have encouraged his pupils to perform an invoking ritual *Wali Kutub*. This ritual seemed to have contributed to the accumulating radicalism among Javanese peasants in the final decades of the nineteenth century. On 2 February 1886, Mas Malang Yuda, together with seventy-two of his loyal followers, was accused of raising a rebellion against the Dutch colonial government. He was apprehended and imprisoned in Buitenzorg, West Java. Shortly thereafter, he was tried in a colonial court under the colony's criminal law and exiled to Buru Island, a remote eastern part of the East Indies territory located just northwest from the island of Ambon. To add insult to injury, all fourteen manuscripts attributed to him regarding Islamic mystical teachings were seized and brought to Batavia. Thanks to the

intervention of the Dutch orientalist Christian Snouck Hurgronje, these manuscripts are now kept in the Leiden University Library.

In 1925, Drewes wrote a doctoral dissertation titled *Drie Javaansche Goeroe*, pioneering the study of Akmaliiyah teachings and Mas Malang Yuda's manuscripts. Under Snouck Hurgronje's academic guidance, Drewes showed how in second half of the nineteenth century-Java the leaders of Sufi paths, their teachings, and their messianic preaching had a significant role in the accumulating radicalism. Sixty years later, Kumar's 1985, *The Diary of a Javanese Muslim*, shows us the close relationship between Mas Malang Yuda and Mas Rahmat, also known as Mas Juragan Somarēja or Raden Somasari Adikusuma. Mas Rahmat was a Javanese nobleman who had strong connections with Islamic leaders in rural areas and with the Javanese elites in royal courts. Moreover, he was involved in three rebellions in Java. Kumar portrays Mas Rahmat's life and his political role through his travel accounts in Java from 1883 to 1884. She only briefly touches upon Mas Malang Yuda's manuscripts. Previous scholars such as Drewes and Kumar have only paid little attention to the importance of the ritual aspects of the Islamic mystical groups to which people like Mas Malang Yuda and Mas Rahmat belonged. While Kartodirdjo (1973:11) has claimed that supernatural powers "give [an] enormous spiritual impetus and [...] should be associated with rebellious movements," one of the major lacunae in the study of the relation between mysticism and rebellious movements in the context of Southeast Asia that remains is how the teachings of Islamic mysticism are constructed and represented through the ritual. By applying a close reading of the *KWK*, I produced an edition of the book of the *Wali Kutub*. In the following chapters, I will show how the ritual was intertwined with the social and political colonial issues during that period of Java's past.

Since his passing in 1888, Mas Malang Yuda has long faded into oblivion. Today, the Javanese general public has no knowledge of his life. I will address the question of how the *Walikutuban* has managed to survive until today. In order to explore this, I present several versions of the *Walikutuban* and how they are being handed down from generation to generation within certain small families of Islamic clerics and to their followers in particular areas in Java. Then, I demonstrate how the ritual has been formalized and standardized within the Nahdatul Ulama (NU), and gradually spread throughout its branches. The *Walikutuban*, among other cultural artefacts, has been introduced to enhance the political loyalty and ideological commitment of the NU members.

Apart from the socio-political aspects surrounding the ritual, I will show how the ritual also has elements that attract NU members to participate the ritual.

The choreography of *Walikutuban* is shaped in a form of concentric circles. The spatial positionality and movement of the participants are meticulously placed and choreographed in this formation. During the execution of the ritual, the participants pause in each of the cardinal points to pray to the *Wali Kutub* within those areas. The *Walikutuban* possesses the beauty of spatial positionality of participants and the artistry of producing sound to call on the *Wali Kutub*.

Through the lens of philology of performance (Arps, 2016:41-62; 2017:116, 2020:180), this book carries out a systematic inquiry with two main objectives. The first is presenting the *KWK* from the second half of nineteenth century. The second is discussing the *Walikutuban* performance in the early twenty first century. The centrepiece of the research thus is a presentation of both artefacts through two kinds of an editions: a text edition and an edition of the ritual performance. By applying the principles of philology of performance (Arps, 2016:64-65), I illustrate schematically the *mise-en-scène*, the spatial positionality and movement of the participants, and the choreography of the ritual. By comparing the lingual properties of the text and the performative features in the performance in both artefacts, I demonstrate in great detail how the ritual and its elements interrelate with its social and political aspects. More specifically, I discuss how the unseen saints from the mystical worlds, who are perceived as a source of power, are invoked to solve the social and political problems of the devotees. By comparing both artefacts, I intend to show the characteristics that can be found both in the past and present of the *Walikutuban*. Through the ritual, participants collectively try to build a reality or a world. Therefore, the ritual can also be conceived as a means of religious worldmaking. The question of how the religious worldmaking is achieved by means of the ritual becomes essential. The practitioners of the ritual are emotionally attached to the *Wali Kutub* during the performance, and these collective acts can be perceived as the construction of a world that the participants face. I aim to unravel the religious worldmaking that is being attempted during the ritual.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The philology of performance approach is marked by interdisciplinarity. This was observed in Javanese performance studies in 1992 by Arps when he discussed the ethnography of performance. The ethnography of performance was initiated by Hymes (1968) in his “Ethnography of Speaking”, and by Bauman (1986) in his long-established academic background in folklore performance studies. Over the following decades, this approach was improved and further elaborated in 2016. Arps attempted to formulate a theory from the Javanese

shadow-play performance (Arps, 2016:viii). The basic principle of this approach is to apply the classical academic discipline of textual philology, especially its systematic attention to the artefactuality, apprehensibility, compositionality, contextuality, and historicity of a performance.

The interconnected domains of enquiry will reveal a better understanding of the *Walikutuban* ritual. The approach also requires philological sensibility, in particular interpretative skills, contextual and historical expertise. I employ textual philology to analyse the lingual properties and historical values of the *KWK*, and then I try to employ the philological principles to analyse the ritual features of the *Walikutuban* performance. In this sense, philology is understood the “artefact-focused study of worldmaking” (Arps, 2016:62). The *Walikutuban* in this regard can be viewed as an artefact.

My object of scholarly analysis is the two *Walikutuban* artefacts. The first one is the *KWK* in Cod. Or. 7581 and the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda in Cod. Or. 7576-7588. In order to make sense of the *KWK*, I also employ several Dutch colonial archives from the National Archives in The Hague. The political activities of Mas Malang Yuda are recorded in several Dutch colonial newspapers, allowing me to capture his political activities and his social and political environment in more detail. I was also fortunate to be able to read Mas Malang Yuda’s letter which has been ignored by previous scholars (cf. Drewes 1925; Kumar, 1985). I am devoted to analyse these artefacts philologically by producing an edition of the *KWK*. Notes on the conventions and editorial policies that I have employed to preserve the original text, its historical values and idiosyncrasies of the language are discussed in appendix II.

The second artefact is the contemporary performance of the *Walikutuban*. I reconstruct this *Walikutuban* performance from several the training session held by the PKPNU (*Pendidikan Kader Penggerak Nahdlatul Ulama*, a cadre training program for public movers of NU) held in a number of regions and settings around Java in 2019-2022. I have selected the *Walikutuban* conducted at Pésantren Ngalah, Pasuruan on 3 April 2020 as the primary focus due to the intensive training implemented to create political obedience among the NU members. From this performance, I derive the performative aspects of the ritual through “editing [the] performance philologically” (Arps, 2016:64-65).

In order to get a valid picture of the ritual in contemporary Java, I conducted fieldwork among traditionalist Muslims joining the PKPNU team for over two years from 2019 to 2021. During this period, I observed the NU intensive training team who worked tirelessly in organizing, maintaining, and expanding their visions to shape more organized, militant, and disciplined cadres

across the branches of the NU amidst the various uncertainties that emerged during corona outbreak. In order to get an accurate picture of how the ritual relates to certain social and political aspects, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to become a participant in the NU training on 27 to 29 April 2019, and in organizing committee of the training from 20 to 22 September 2019 in Malang, East Java. Furthermore, I participated in a regional advanced training session, referred to as *Pendidikan Instruktur Wilayah* (PIW: regional instructor advance training), on 30 April to 2 May, 2021 in Depok, West Java. Additionally, in order to make sense the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda, I also conducted fieldtrips in certain areas in Java that are mentioned in the Notes in the summer of 2023. I also did intensive interviews with key figures of the NU training teams. The goal of studying both artefacts is to develop an understanding on how reality is being built through the ritual.

1.2. Organization of the Study

As mentioned above, the centrepiece of this book is a presentation of two artefacts through a text edition and an edition of the ritual performance. In the following chapters, I shall try to present a clear picture of the ritual through presenting related issues surrounding both artefacts, namely the Sufi paths and political policies in the high-colonial period. I also present the social and political issues which surround the *Walikutuban* in present-day Java. These chapters will weave together past and contemporary texts in their past and contemporary contexts with the main figures and their devotional practices in both past and present Java, as well as my own bewildered experience of being involved in the ritual. At the centre of this study stands the edition of the *Kitab Wali Kutub*, as discussed in chapter four, whereas the edition of the *Walikutuban* ritual performance is explored in chapter seven. However, both editions are connected by means of the following interlinked issues.

Chapters two through four explore the contextuality and historicity of the *Walikutuban* in the second half of nineteenth century as reflected in the *Kitab Wali Kutub* and in the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda.

Chapter two aims to investigate in detail the processes of the acquisition of the Notes of Mas Malang Yuda. Among the fourteen of Notes of Mas Malang Yuda that were confiscated by the Dutch colonial government was the script of the *Walikutuban*. In discussing these events, I recount the political history of Mas Malang Yuda, who had undergone a transformative path from petty aristocrat to a *tarekat* leader. By recounting his political history, I provide the historical background for the intimate connections between the *Walikutuban* and the

political activism of the Akmaliyyah *tarekat* during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Chapter three deals specifically with the mystical conception of the *Walikutuban*, as it was conceived in last decades of nineteenth century. Special attention is paid to how the *Walikutuban* is closely related to the teachings of Akmaliyyah. By presenting these teachings, I will show how the metaphysical doctrines of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) and the seven grades of divine self-manifestation (*martabat tujuh*) were adopted into the teachings of Akmaliyyah. The central question in this chapter is how the doctrines of the *wahdat al-wujud* and *martabat tujuh* were adopted by the Akmaliyyah *tarekat*. A better understanding of these doctrines can help us grasp what kind of reality was constructed through the ritual script of the *Walikutuban*.

In chapter four, I will discuss two main points. Firstly, I will further explore how both the notion of the hierarchy of the *wali* and the ritual of invoking the *Wali Kutub* were spread throughout Java and the larger Malay world. To trace this expansion, I present several texts from Java and Malay manuscripts dealing with the *wali* and their hierarchy. These texts portray the saints and their hierarchy as embedded in a Javanese and Malay religious practices. Secondly, I will discuss *Kitab Wali Kutub*, one of the devotional texts of Akmaliyyah *tarekat*. I have made a text edition of *Kitab Wali Kutub* in order to understand how this ritual had to be performed. I will show how the textual properties of the *KWK* offer instructions on how to perform parts and scenes of the ritual, more precisely through a script used to ask for help from God through the *Wali Kutub*. I will propose that the *KWK* is a ritual performance text that belongs to an Islamic textual repertoire. I further argue that the mystical idea behind the ritual has roots stretching beyond the nineteenth century, beyond Akmaliyyah, and beyond Java.

In chapters five through seven, I turn to discuss the contextuality of the *Walikutuban* in twenty first century Java.

In chapter five, I investigate how *inter alia* the *Walikutuban* contributed to creating political loyalty among NU members. I will show how the ritual and other cultural artefacts were invented, constructed, and then formally instituted within the NU community. I conceive the *Pendidikan Kader Penggerak Nahdlatul Ulama* (PKPNU) intensive trainings as a device to produce a worldmaking narratives and an active process of cultural reality creation involving narrativity.

In chapter six, I will explore two main points. Firstly, I will explore how the *Walikutuban* spread in the small circles of Islamic clerics in particular areas in Java. In order to better understand this process, I present several versions of the

Walikutuban and show how they have been passed down from generation to generation. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the *Walikutuban* has been formalized and standardized (canonization) within the NU and gradually spread over its branches. As I discuss earlier in the chapter five, the PKPNU team institutionalized the ritual and transformed it into an insigne of the soldiers of Dipanagara. The ritual carries distinctive formal properties and profound meanings as an insigne.

In chapter seven, I will discuss the performative aspects of the *Walikutuban*. In order to get a handle on these performative aspects, I focus on two points. Firstly, I will discuss the spatial positionality of participants of the *Walikutuban*, particularly the spatial arrangement of the leader and participants, as well as their body orientation. Secondly, I will examine the patterns of sounds that are uttered by the participants and the leader in unison when they call up to the *Wali Kutub*.

In chapter eight, I discuss the elements of the *Walikutuban* both in texts and performances from the past and from today. Having identified the features of the ritual, I will explore some of the feelings that are being aroused during the ritual. These intense feelings are stimulated by the perceptions of the presence of the *Wali Kutub*. The depiction of the characteristics of the ritual and of the feelings that come into being during the ritual will provide answers to the following question: Why do Javanese Muslims both in the past and in the present ask for help from God through the *Wali Kutub*? Understanding how the world is built by means of these elements and several feelings operating in the *Walikutuban* performance is a pivotal to the study of worldmaking. By examining these elements, this dissertation not only discusses the *Walikutuban* and its social and political context in the past and in the present Java, but also explores how the ritual contributed to make a world.