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Religious and Cultural Contestation In Strengthening The Role of Women Through Pedhalangan Art

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Abstract
This article explores the contestation of religion and culture in the context of female puppeteers in Banyumas. Some young female puppeteers in Banyumas show their talent and interest in *Wayang Golek* performances performed by the Paguyuban Muda Banyumas to preserve existing local culture. This qualitative research uses data collection techniques through observation and interviews with the chairman and members of the Banyumas Young Dalang Art Association. The results of this study show that the role of women in the arts is interpreted from the point of view of religion and culture, so the dynamics are diverse. Religious and cultural contestation regarding the world of Pedhalangan Art provides ample opportunities for the Banyumas female puppeteer community to be more aggressive in facing the increasingly rampant Islamization fever that often marginalizes local culture, which is sometimes considered traditional and always synonymous with heresy. On the other hand, the phenomenon of female puppeteers played by young women in Banyumas is part of an effort to preserve ancestral culture that is increasingly fading on the surface. At least to preserve local culture, maintain and produce cultural products, create cultural agents, and strive to build national character.

Keywords: Culture; Contestation; Female Mastermind; Religion; Role.

Abstrak
Artikel ini mengeksplorasi kontestasi agama dan budaya dalam konteks dalang perempuan di Banyumas. Beberapa dalang perempuan muda di Banyumas menunjukkan bakat dan minat mereka dalam pertunjukan wayang golek yang dilakukan oleh Paguyuban Muda Banyumas untuk melestarikan budaya lokal yang ada. Penelitian kualitatif ini menggunakan teknik pengumpulan data melalui observasi dan wawancara dengan ketua dan anggota Paguyuban Seni Dalang Muda Banyumas. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa peran perempuan dalam seni diinterpretasikan dari sudut pandang agama dan budaya, sehingga dinamikanya beragam. Kontestasi agama dan budaya terkait dunia seni pedhalangan memberikan peluang besar bagi komunitas dalang perempuan Banyumas untuk lebih agresif menghadapi demam Islamisasi yang semakin marak, yang seringkali meminggirkan budaya lokal yang terkadang dianggap tradisional dan selalu identik dengan bid'ah. Di sisi lain, fenomena dalang perempuan yang dimainkan oleh perempuan muda di Banyumas merupakan bagian dari upaya melestarikan budaya leluhur yang semakin memudar di

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permukaan. Setidaknya untuk melestarikan budaya lokal, memelihara dan menghasilkan produk budaya, menciptakan agen budaya, dan berupaya membangun karakter bangsa.

Kata Kunci: *Agama; Budaya; Dalang Perempuan; Kontestasi; Peran*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, religious and cultural dialectics, in the eyes of Muslim societies, give rise to many subjective and pejorative judgments. Some communities try to sterilise religion from the acculturation of local culture, while others, others are busy and focus on building a dialectic pattern between the two (Nor Hasan, 2019). Regardless of the state of belief of each understanding, the portrait of religion increasingly here shows the fertile pattern of acculturation, even syncretisation. In Islam, indications of religious and cultural dialectics are seen in the changing patterns of religious understanding and behavior (Abdullah, 2001).

The variety of religious expressions indicates that the strength of the local tradition (low tradition) influences the original character of the formal religion (high tradition) and vice versa (Roibin, 2012). This mutual understanding in socio-anthropological language is the dialectic process of religion and culture. In anthropological scientists' eyes, such phenomena are considered externalisation, objectification, and internalisation processes. Who forms what, and vice versa, and what affects whom? How people understand religion and how local roles influence their social behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Tylor, 2010; Waters, 1933).

In Indonesia, the tendency that is used as an approach to conveying religious values is culture. One of those cultures is pedhalangan. Dalang is the leading actor in Javanese shadow puppet performances in Indonesia (Williams, 1991). He plays a vital role because not only does he play the role of director, but the puppeteer also plays the role of scriptwriter, storyteller, singer, and musician. The stories Dalang plays for the audience are full of educational and informational value. Therefore, a Dalang must have qualified and extensive knowledge about culture, habits, values, and discourses or current issues in society. Usually, the puppeteer performs for 7 to 8 hours, starting from 9 p.m. until it finishes at dawn (Van Ness & Prawirohardjo, 1981). Therefore, a puppeteer also needs the stamina and energy needed in his performances throughout the night, and for this reason, in general, this profession is played by men.

The majority of society believes that the mastermind should be male. However, this view does not necessarily show that men always play the puppeteers in shadow puppets. Several female puppeteers, such as Nyi Wiwik, Sabdo Laras, and Sri Sulansih, stand out in wayang performances. However, their number is far inferior to male puppeteers (Santoso, 2009). So far, wayang seems to be claimed as the "world of male culture" meaning that men dominate the performance culture, roles, and traditional criteria, meaning there is no place for

women in it (Ismah, 2017; Ramonita et al., 2023; Santoso, 2009; Sugiarti et al., 2022; waluyo, 2000).

There are fewer female puppeteers than male puppeteers. However, in Banyumas there is the Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas, which was established in 2020 and consists of 34 young puppeteers, including four female puppeteers: Hasna Imarotun, Nabila Yuyun, and Afifah. Their existence highlights the role of female puppeteers in Banyumas (Yin, 2015). This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the existence of women in the context of religion and culture, as well as their role in the Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Representation of Women's Role in Pedhalangan

The role of women in shadow puppetry culture, including the art of puppetry, has not dominated despite the great appreciation of the community. The role of women can be interpreted, first, as a play or "played" (Agustina, 2010). Second, attitudes, behaviors, or actions with expected goals based on an individual's position in society. In other words, the role of women as cultural arts activists is an action that is expected by some people to achieve certain goals. However, being a female puppeteer involves many parties, including oneself, and is a complex action. This is also in line with what was conveyed by one of the young female puppeteers in Banyumas, Mba Nabila:

> "Initially, choosing to be a female puppeteer was one's awareness. However, I know that the intention to become a female puppeteer must be supported by roles or support from all parties. Fortunately, in Banyumas Raya, there is a Banyumas Young Mastermind group, which has female puppeteers, including me. On the sidelines of being a student (college obligation), strengthening and continuing talent development to become a puppeteer and sinden can be accommodated properly…." (Nabila, 2023).

The interview quotes show that the role of women in puppetry is good and sustainable. Women should take a role in various fields, including in this case the preservation of wayang culture. Women have the same opportunities as men in many ways. But the most important thing in the art of pedhalangan is that women have the intention supported by talent. Intention and talent will determine the role of a puppeteer so that their performance can be maximized. In general, being a female puppeteer must have a qualified voice, "To really become a sinden or song guide 'nyinden" (Nabila, 2023).

In art, the role of women is interpreted variously from both religious and cultural perspectives, resulting in various dynamics. These dynamics, which are nothing but contestation, provide ample opportunities for the Banyumas youth puppeteer community to be more aggressive in facing the rampant fever of Islamization that often marginalizes local cultures that are sometimes considered traditional and synonymous with heresy. On the other hand, pedhalangan played

by young women is part of an effort to preserve ancestral culture that is increasingly fading to the surface. The presence of female puppeteers is considered to preserve local culture, maintain and produce cultural products and agents, and strive to build national character. “There is a kind of responsibility as a Javanese to preserve the world of female puppetry as a representation of the role of women that should be appreciated for Indonesia's cultural mecca in the future” (Nabila, 2023).

Although the capacity of representation of women's roles related to the role of young female puppeteers of Banyumas is still very far from perfect, researchers see the phenomenon of young female puppeteers of Banyumas as something worthy of appreciation. There is a solid cultural commitment among the performers of pedhalangan art, including those they experienced (Nabila, Hasna and Afifah) as young female puppeteers in Banyumas Raya. In addition to talent, interest and high willpower, awareness is essential in committing to efforts to uphold Javanese culture. Mba Afifah explained this:

> "Even though I am very young, I am still in SMKI Banyumas. I realised that, as far as I know, local culture must continue to be maintained and preserved. I realised that it is not easy to be a female mastermind. There are still many misperceptions by some people who do not understand the world of art (puppet puppets), so they still see one eye. There is a false assumption that women in a state of hijab play the role of female masterminds. Although not a few of them also gave extraordinary support and appreciation, including from the Regent Ir. Husein. This has further encouraged me to practice harder, even though later the plan is to continue studying at ISI Surakarta, majoring in pedhalangan arts which, of course, will rarely be for training at Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas led by Mas Panji Laksono belief" (Afifah, 2023).

It takes a solid commitment to be a mastermind, especially for women. An extraordinary dynamic that is interpreted as an effort to learn in it. An earnest process, coupled with diligent practice, is believed to produce extraordinary results in the future. Although the effort just now is not as easy as turning your hand. Related to the representation of women in the phenomenon of pedhalangan in Banyumas, this is undoubtedly a response to how women's issues and culture are seen as mutually reinforcing.

The phenomenon of young women in Banyumas shows the complex role of women as pedhalangan cultural activists, despite facing various obstacles. They play an active role in preserving, maintaining and producing local culture, as well as shaping the character of the nation. Their significant contribution shows the importance of recognizing and appreciating the role of women in Indonesian culture. The young women of Banyumas embody the fundamental role of dignity for Indonesian women.

On the other hand, young female puppeteers in Banyumas often also act as sindhen. Sindhen, or swaraswati, are women who contribute vocals to the

gendhing accompaniment to enhance the karawitan (Endraswara, 2006). In wayang kulit performances or other events, there is usually more than one swaraswati, three to four depending on the situation. In the past, swaraswati sat in the center of the gamelan set, kneeling on the rebab.

But along with the times, sindhen sat in a row kneeling close to the puppeteer, facing the audience. This is intentional because it is a decoration. Shinden (female traditional singer) or already skilled self-care will be stopped (paused) by the ketoprak or mastermind on the targeting. At that time, there were often shindens who were spoken to by puppeteers or comedians. Besides accompanying the sound of gamelan or karawitan, Sindhen can also chant Tetembangan, which is specially used as a marker for beating his gamelan. A good Shinden, of course, is not easily hurt when worked on in performances. Should *Sumeh* and full of laughter, Shinden not only needs vocal skills but also needs *Grapyak (Gonas-Ganes)* and has allure. Sindhen's performance will be the highlight of the audience, both in terms of appearance and sound, both interrelated and needed.

Analytically, women's position in promoting culture is an integral part of human development at all levels. Unfortunately, most cultural heritage rites around the world are the domain of men, with little or no participation of women (Rezaei, 2022). In this study, on the contrary, Banyumas women have an understanding of many things, including wayang art. Women have understanding of equality in terms of actions, words and behavior. The basic thing related to the Banyumas female puppeteer phenomenon is how they prepare themselves for wayang art performances where a female puppeteer appears in a wayang performance (Panji Laksono, 2023). This shows that women in Banyumas Javanese culture have an equal role to men and this is in line with gender mainstreaming (Erlina, 2023).

2.2. Challenges of Being a Young Female Mastermind

In addition to the factors described above, related to talent, interest and diligent efforts to become a female mastermind, extraordinary commitment is also needed. Many things must be understood to explain the existence of young female puppeteers in Banyumas, Central Java. Strictly speaking, it is not easy to be a female puppeteer, given that our cultural conditions still tend to be geared towards men. This kind of understanding makes developing young female puppeteers in Banyumas seem slow.

In addition to talent, interest, and diligent effort to become a female puppeteer, it also requires extraordinary commitment. This is because being a female puppeteer is not easy, as our culture still tends to favor men. This understanding makes the development of young female puppeteers in Banyumas seem slow, even though puppetry is a noble profession in the field of cultural arts. Although it cannot be denied that some young female puppeteers stand out in wayang performances such as Nyi Wiwik Sabdo Laras and Sri Sulansih.

However, they are far outnumbered by male puppeteers (Santoso, 2009). So far, wayang has been claimed as a “male cultural world”, meaning that men dominate the traditional performance culture, roles and criteria, meaning that there is no place for women in it (Santoso, 2009).

In response to the above, in our society there are still many views that say that puppetry is associated with men. Women seem to get a problematic space when touched by the world of puppetry, especially the dalang. This explanation is in line with the results of an interview conducted with one of the young puppeteers in Banyumas, Mba Nabila:

> "Indeed, in our society, Banyumas, especially the accusations that the puppeteer is identical to the male figure, still exist." Nyong be sometimes mistaken for inappropriate". He said. Women's role in the rural world is still seen as inappropriate. However, I realise, and even some other young masterminds, that this is part of the challenge in building ihtiar to preserve the existing local culture, the world of pedhalangan art. On the other hand, Alhamdulillah is not a small number of people who provide spiritual and moral support, and what we do should be appreciated for the sake of the existing local culture. All I consider is constructive criticism and sentiment, which is always optimistic in every effort and action. "Let the community judge; anyway, it is its right" (Nabila, 2023).

The problems above show the dilemma faced when someone decides to become a puppeteer, especially in a relatively young situation. This is always used as an effort to control and self-correction so that in the future it will be maximized in a career in the world of obstacle art. However, learning the art of puppetry is a life-learning process undertaken by female teenage puppeteers in Banyumas. Not only are they puppeteers, they are also required to be sinden, although this capacity is only attached to female puppeteers. Being a female teenage puppeteer requires a total love for wayang, all the cultural elements that complement it (painstaking) because it is one unit. Studying and caring for wayang, gamelan, gapet, making puppets, raising puppets, and helping people make puppets are some of the activities that must be continuously carried out by a puppeteer. It can be said to be part of the soul and spirit. Mba Afifah, in her narration:

> "Being a female mastermind at 18, I feel proud. Although, to be honest, competence has become Sinden—as the unity of competence of a female puppeteer, I cannot be qualified, but I always try to get better occasionally. In addition to physical exercise, to be optimal during the performance, learning to be happy, suluk used not to be bored. "There must be someday a benefit" (Afifah, 2023).

Overall, interviews with young Banyumas female puppeteers (Mba Nabila, Hasna, Afifah) revealed several challenges faced by them. First, gender stereotypes: *wayang kulit* is often considered a male-dominated art, and female puppeteers still face stereotypes and misperceptions from some parts of the community. Some people in Banyumas still have the view that women, especially

those wearing hijab, are not suitable to play puppets in shadow puppet shows. However, there is also support from the community for the existence of young female puppeteers. Second, technical skills such as *karawitan pakeliran, antawacana, and sulukan wayang kulit gagrag* Banyumas as well as the ability to be a sinden. These skills are an integral part of shadow puppetry in Banyumas. Third, physical strength: young female puppeteers may need to work harder to acquire qualified skills and prove themselves to their audiences. The physical strength of men and women is different, so being a female puppeteer requires extra physical strength, especially to perform late at night. In line with this, as one of the young female puppeteers in Banyumas said:

> "We realised women and men are physically much different. For this reason, before performing pedhalangan in shadow puppet art, we young female puppeteers need extraordinary extra needs. We must stay up late at night with a maximum performance duration of 3 hours for each female puppeteer to be optimal until the morning before shubuh (morning). On the one hand, this habit is a special challenge for us, but on the other hand, it is interpreted as an effort to learn endlessly; hopefully, it will be better" (Nabila, 2023).

On the other hand, advances in digital technology and industrial innovation challenge traditional arts such as shadow puppetry to remain relevant and attractive to young audiences. The art of puppetry needs to be contextualized for today in order to encourage recognition and love for local culture.

> "As one of the young Banyumas female puppeteers who had the opportunity at ISI Surakarta, I see the potential of local cultures, such as the world of puppetry played by female puppeteers, demanding the latest technological capacity. The introduction of local culture is further strengthened by the rampant role of technology utilisation in this digital era. Including the world of obstacles cannot be separated from technology and information today" (Hasna, 2023).

Being a female teenage puppeteer in Banyumas is challenging, but many continue to pursue their love of shadow puppetry to preserve the art for future generations. Although many young people, including women, love local culture, their active participation is still lacking. Hopefully, in the future more women will preserve and participate as puppeteers. Challenges and obstacles are part of the process of learning and maturing.

2.3. The Hope of Young Women Puppeteers Concerning the Preservation of Javanese Culture.

The phenomenon of young female puppeteers organized by Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas is responsible for preserving local culture. In the process, they face many challenges, but also have many hopes. Young female puppeteers try their best to fulfill the expectations of the audience during wayang kulit performances. Maximum on stage is a must for them. Through discussion and observation, role theory shows how role-appropriate behavior is carried out, such

as being a sinden, which is adapted from the world of theater. In theater, actors must behave in accordance with the character being portrayed (Biddle, 1979; Sarwono, 2019). Several demands must be met in order for this role to be carried out optimally. Some demands must be met so the role can be carried out optimally. Mba Nabila conveyed this narrative in his interview; she said:

> "At first, being a young female puppeteer was very awkward; you could say you were not confident. Because you are also one of the senior puppeteers in Banyumas (Mr Jayus), training, social interaction, listening, and practising efforts to become a female puppeteer are increasingly challenging; Alhamdulillah is producing results now. It does not take too long to be offered when you want to perform shadow puppet art (do not think long). The demands in the role, as the role is played, including as a puppeteer, are intended to be none other than so that we are more mature and mature in playing the role of the mastermind in the future. The more honed, the better your talents and interests will be; the key is to remain diligent and consistent in training, no matter how it is" (Nabila, 2023).

There is hope for young female puppeteers in Banyumas, namely the process of socialization, regeneration, and implementation of wayang culture and other local cultures. Maintaining and preserving the heritage of our ancestors is a collective responsibility of the performers, stakeholders, and the entire community. Wayang kulit, as a local culture, is our collective responsibility. The expectations of the young female puppeteers conveyed through Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas include: *first*, socialization. the younger generation needs to be introduced to local culture such as wayang, puppetry, karawitan, and sindhen. Social media can be very effective in this process. Hopefully, with more young people being introduced to wayang, there will be more who are interested in becoming dalang. Misconceptions about women as puppeteers can be reduced by increasing knowledge about puppetry culture.

Second, regeneration. Cadre is the process of producing cadres, people who are believed to be able to carry on tasks or responsibilities in an organization or culture. The function of regeneration is to prepare candidates who are ready to continue the struggle with above-average skills and disciplines. Young female puppeteers in Banyumas are an important part of this process. Optimizing the role of women in shadow puppetry, including as puppeteers, is an inevitable part of regeneration. Regular training for young female puppeteers at Sanggar Wayang Kedung Banteng or Mr. Sungging Raharjo, a senior puppeteer in Banyumas Regency, is a great hope for the continuation of local culture preservation.

Third, creativity and implementation. This is important for the sustainability of cultural communities such as Paguyuban Dalang Muda in Banyumas. Preserving local culture is the responsibility of all parties, including artists, academics, stakeholders and the general public. They must continue to be creative to preserve local culture. The phenomenon of young female puppeteers is an effort for women to be creative and implement the values of art and culture inherited

from the ancestors. It is hoped that shadow puppetry culture, through young female puppeteers, will become part of the nation's identity that is sustainable and maintained. In an interview excerpt, Mba Afifah, as the young puppeteer of Banyumas Women, said:

> "This pedhalangan culture is a legacy of the ancestors. If the younger generation does not care, how will local culture continue? Of course, it will be very concerning if the younger generation is not called to continue the art of pedhalangan, karawitan and sindhen. "Kudu diuri uri",” (Afifah, 2023).

This is a review of the hopes of young female puppeteers in Banyumas. Modernity is slowly shifting our local culture. Culture should be open, including to modernity, despite the risks. The community's loyalty to traditional values and morals should include the original culture but become multidimensional and complex (Sumjati, 2001). Culture must be adaptive and open to the times without losing its original essence, to build a dignified Indonesian identity.

2.4. Women's Barriers at the Intersection of Religion and Culture

The discourse of religion and culture has always been a serious concern, with the dialectical process between the two often triggering subjective and pejorative debates. Some societies try to sterilize religion from cultural acculturation, while others build a balanced dialectic of religion and culture. In Islam, this dialectic is seen in the pattern of individual religious understanding in religious behavior (Abdullah, 2001).

The variety of expressions of diversity indicates that local traditions (low tradition) strongly influence the original character of formal religion (high tradition) and vice versa. This mutual understanding in socio-anthropological language is the dialectic process of religion and culture. In anthropological scientists' eyes, such phenomena are considered externalisation, objectification, and internalisation processes. Who forms what, and vice versa, and what affects whom? How people understand religion and how local roles influence their social behaviour (Waters, 1933).

There is an assumption that Islam forbids wayang, even though wayang is a performing art that develops together with religion and culture. Wayang has an important role as an authentic identity of Javanese culture, with a fundamental historical, sociocultural, religious and anthropo-psychological position. Wayang is integrated with Javanese identity, making it inseparable from Javanese culture. Its position is very important in the thoughts, actions and feelings of the Javanese people, with integrative power and symbolic meanings that describe the journey of life towards the final consciousness (Solichin Salam, 1990). Wayang unites and strengthens Javanese society and culture, facilitating the achievement of noble ideals and common life goals. Wayang has become part of the flesh and blood of Javanese society and other cultures with wayang traditions, such as Malay (Panji Laksono, 2023).

In the context of wayang religion and culture, it is important to examine the role of women in depth to understand the dialectic between religion and culture. In Islam and Javanese cosmology, women are seen as manifestations of love, compassion, gentleness and harmony. Women are the essential core of the family, a sincere and loving soul. The family born from the womb of women is the spirituality of society, and it is from here that civilization is built to achieve the balance of micro and macrocosm.

Women have important roles in all religions, with success spanning many aspects of life, not just the domestic sphere. In Banyumas, a well-known community of young female puppeteers in Central Java, demonstrates this. Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas, established around 2020, responds to the challenges of modern times, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The same thing was conveyed by the Chairman of the Banyumas Young Dalang Association, Mas Panji Laksono:

> "Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas was established not so long ago, only around the 2020s. Although not yet formal, this group is a forum for the community of art lovers/wayang culture activists to meet, interact, and practice together to strengthen the preservation of existing local culture, mainly shadow puppets. This is also in line with the noble ideals of senior puppeteers so that there is a relay about local culture (Pedhalangan wayang, karawitan and sindhen). If not his younger generation, then who else?" (Panji Laksono, 2023).

The young Banyumas female puppeteers in this group demonstrate the extraordinary role of women who are not limited to the domestic sphere. The community's response to their existence reflects the diverse standards of values, references, and behaviors in society. The role of young female puppeteers in Banyumas develops through a long social and learning process, including social interaction and learning to imitate others. The urgency and guidance of the choice to become a young female puppeteer in Banyumas shows a culture that should be appreciated, although it is not always in line with religious and cultural views. (Bandura, 1962), including social interaction and learning to imitate others. The urgency and guidance of the choice to become a young female puppeteer in Banyumas shows a culture that should be appreciated, although it is not always in line with religious and cultural views.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of young female puppeteers in Banyumas is part of the formation of one's identity. According to (Monceri, 2009), self-identity is an individual construction in response to external factors, with family as a very influential factor, especially in parenting (Ragelienė & Justickis, 2016). In the context of wayang, women as female puppeteers reflect Banyumas society and deliver inspirational messages to their audience. The wayang culture played by young female puppeteers in Banyumas provides examples that should be emulated or exemplified, depicting a reflection of a particular society, especially Banyumas in Java (Hardjowirogo, 1984).

The phenomenon of young female puppeteers in Banyumas is similar to Bandura's (1964) modeling theory, where modeling is a cognitive process of imitation and observation. Becoming a female teenage puppeteer in Banyumas is the result of continuous observation that produces cognition. The role of young women as puppeteers is the result of significant observation, attraction, and imitation. This is also in line with what Mba Nabila, one of the young female puppeteers in Banyumas, said.

> "The beginning of liking to be a puppeteer was when I was a child, and I often saw Father performing as a puppeteer. My father is Mr. Jayus, arguably one of the senior masterminds in Banyumas. Continue to like listening to puppet tapes, long time cool then imitation, learn a lot, and finally practice. As a result, I believe there is a talent that may initially depart from that sense of interest. Until now, Alhamdulillah has become one of the female puppeteers in Banyumas whom this group accommodates" (Nabila, 2023).

Bandura states there are four stages in model imitation: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. First, attention is directed towards things of interest to the individual. Second, retention involves storing remembered information. Third, reproduction is the re-performance of the observed behavior. Fourth, motivation encourages individuals to engage in related activities (Bandura, 1962). This theory describes how young women in Banyumas (Hasna, Afifah, and Nabila) are interested in wayang. They observe and practice it, memorize wayang stories, and reproduce them as female puppeteers. They are motivated to be directly involved in the world of wayang. An important finding of this study is that young female puppeteers in Banyumas see wayang as a combination of cognitive and affective elements. They not only use their cognitive ability to understand wayang stories, but also their affective ability to feel and think about its messages. Feeling becomes the main link between female puppeteers and wayang performances. According to Driyarkara, feeling is a form of higher wisdom, touching the senses or as the peak of spiritual wisdom (Driyarkara, 1989).

The role of young female puppeteers in Banyumas in shadow puppetry is a rational choice that involves cognitive processes such as observing, imitating, and producing, in accordance with Bandura's modeling theory. They convey messages that can be emulated, are called to preserve local culture, and play their role as members of a cultural society. The way they work and motivate themselves as young female puppeteers is a wise choice that should be appreciated. Hopefully, more and more artists, especially female puppeteers, will ensure the preservation of local culture and pass it on to future generations.

2.5. Religion and Culture in Strengthening the Existence of Young Dalang

The phenomenon of young female puppeteers in Banyumas raises various views regarding religion and culture. Some consider the construction to be

demeaning, while others try to maintain the authenticity of religion without being influenced by local culture. Some communities try to build a dialectical relationship between the two. Although Islam emphasizes the important aspect of da'wah, the acculturation of religion and culture can occur through wayang kulit, especially in the context of female puppetry in Banyumas, Central Java. Skilled female puppeteers are effective representatives in conveying religious messages through the art of wayang.

According to Sasono, da'wah is also a manifestation of faith and responsibility to Allah SWT as the creator of all things. This means that da'wah is an individual's way of understanding the teachings of Islam as a life guide for Muslims. However, we need to understand that the condition of the community in spreading Islamic da'wah is very diverse, influenced by socio-economic factors. Therefore, it is important to use the medium of local culture as a means to effectively propagate Islam. Culture plays an important role in spreading Islam as a value that respects human dignity. One way is through the interpretation of wayang culture, which is effective in conveying high messages, including Islamic values (Hasna, 2023).

Wayang is a traditional Indonesian art that involves puppet shows and stories. It has been an important part of Indonesian culture since the days of the Hindu kingdom in Indonesia. In the past, this puppet art was an illustration of Javanese beliefs influenced by Hindu-Buddhism, reflected in classical dance, gamelan music, and puppet performances. Before Islam entered Indonesia, Hindu influences had already shaped Hindu-Javanese society and art in the Indonesian region. This Hindu influence is seen in stories such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which form the basis of wayang performances (Jong, 1952; Poedjosoedarmo, 1978; Woodward, 2004)

Nevertheless, explanations related to wayang culture in the intersection of religion and culture always appear in diverse dialectics. Here are some essential points related to the dialectic of both (between religion and culture) in the context of puppets. *First*, there is a debate about whether wayang is compatible with Islam. Some argue that wayang is not an Islamic tradition, while others argue that wayang can be used as a tool for Islamic da'wah wayang as a tool for Islamic da'wah: Sunan Kalijogo, a Muslim scholar, uses wayang as a medium for Islamic da'wah. He incorporated shahada (Islamic declaration of faith) into puppetry. *The second* is dialectic (between religion and culture) is inevitable. Religion gives spirit to culture, while culture gives shape to religion. *Third*, there is a transformation of characters in puppets. The transformation of this puppet character by Islamic preachers is considered a genius effort to spread Islamic values. *Fifth*, Da'wah and Javanese culture. In Javanese history, pewayangan (puppet performances) and gamelan (traditional Javanese music) were used as religious rituals to bring in the spirits of ancestors. In this ritual tradition, the function of the spirits of the ancestors is to provide guidance and blessings for the living.

Wayang is a traditional Indonesian art that has been part of Indonesian culture for centuries. There is debate over its compatibility with Islam, but some Muslim scholars have used it to proselytize Islam. The dialectic between religion and culture is inevitable, and the changing character of wayang by Islamic preachers is considered a clever way to spread Islamic values. The dialectical process of wayang as a tool for Islamic proselytization in Javanese culture continues to occur. The problem is that the identification of wayang as part of culture and a medium for Islamic preaching has always existed. These two views vary. However, scholars argue that wayang was a medium of Islamic proselytization in the past, including during the era of Sunan Kalijaga (Nabila, 2023).

Young female puppeteers in Banyumas, such as Nabila, Hasna, and Afifah, have important strategic roles. (Thoha, 2005) explains that roles are a series of behaviors that give rise to rights and obligations. The optimization of female puppeteers is a community expectation that must be met in order for the show to succeed. As social beings, humans interact and depend on each other, so that roles can be formed properly. According to (J. Dwi Narwoko dan Bagong Suyanto, 2010) roles help a person behave by giving direction to socialization; inheriting traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and knowledge; uniting groups or communities; and controlling and saving society.

Young female puppeteers in Banyumas must adapt their roles to the local context. Although there is incompatibility in some areas regarding Islam and local culture, it is important to remember that wayang has historically been effective for Islamic proselytization in Indonesia. Banyumas female puppeteers show how religion and culture can come together, so that women are accepted as Islamic and respected. The balance of gender roles in Banyumas, with its strong Javanese culture, shows that balanced thinking about religion, culture and women can produce srikandi-srikandi who contribute to the world of puppetry. This is expected to give birth to an Islamic, cultured and virtuous generation for the future of Indonesia.

3. CONCLUSION

Some Muslims view the dialectic between religion and culture as subjective and demeaning. While some try to separate religion from local cultural assimilation, others aim to build a dialectical relationship between the two. One example of this cultural and religious fusion is the art of female puppetry in Banyumas, performed by significant contributors such as Ni Afifah Mawarsari, Ni Nabila Nurul Amalia, and Ni Hasna Imarotun Nahdliyah, under the Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas led by Mas Panji Laksono. Female puppeteers, though requiring more specialized training and physical preparation than their male counterparts, play a crucial role in cultural education and cognitive reinforcement in Banyumas. Despite their small numbers, these women inspire and assert their presence in both religious and cultural contexts. This phenomenon demonstrates

that in Banyumas, women are highly valued and seen as equal in both religious and cultural aspects, reflecting a broader societal recognition of gender equality. The Paguyuban Dalang Muda Banyumas serves as a platform for artists and female puppeteers to promote peace and gender equality, emphasizing collaborative existence between men and women in the art of puppetry.

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