

Sunan Kali Jaga

Sunan Kali Jaga is one of the *Wali Sanga*,¹ and remains an important figure for Muslims in Java because of his work in spreading Islam and integrating its teachings into the Javanese tradition. Throughout his time proselytizing, he used art forms that, at the time, were both amenable to and treasured by the people of Java.

Sunan Kali Jaga is thought to have been born in 1455, with the name Raden Syahid (Raden Sahid) or Raden Abdurrahman. He was the son of Aria Wilatikta, an official in Tuban,² East Java, who was descended from Ranggalawe, an official of the Majapahit Kingdom during the time of Queen Tri Buwana Tungga Dewi and King Hayam Wuruk. Sunan Kali Jaga's childhood coincided with the collapse of the Majapahit Kingdom recorded in the *sengkalan* "*Sirna Ilang Kertaning Bhumi*,"³ referring to the year 1400 *Caka*⁴ (1478). Seeing the desperate situation of the people of Majapahit, Raden Syahid decided to become a bandit who would rob the kingdom's stores of crops and the rich people of Majapahit, and give his plunder to the poor. He became well known as Brandal⁵ Lokajaya.

One day when Raden Syahid was in the forest, he accosted an old man with a cane, which he stole, thinking it was made from gold. He said that he would sell the cane and give the money to the poor. The old man was Sunan Bonang,⁶ and he did not approve of Raden Syahid's actions. Sunan Bonang advised Raden Syahid that God would not accept such bad deeds; even though his intentions were good, his actions were wrong.

Sunan Bonang pointed to a palm tree and its fruit turned into gold. He told Raden Syahid that if he wanted treasure without effort, he should take the golden palm fruits. Raden Syahid, realizing that his actions had been wrong, decided to repent and become Sunan Bonang's student. Sunan Bonang told Raden Syahid to meditate and look after his cane, which he embedded in the ground at the edge of the river, and not to move from that spot until Sunan Bonang returned.

After about three years, Sunan Bonang finally returned to the river to meet Raden Syahid. During his meditations, Raden Syahid's body had become covered by dirt and grass. Sunan Bonang roused Raden Syahid, who seemed like a dead person, and gave him the nickname Syeh Malaya and the name Kali Jaga (because he had taken care of Sunan

¹ The *wali sanga* were the nine saints credited with bringing Islam to Java; Sunan Kali Jaga was the last of the *wali sanga*.

² One of the traditional points of entry of the *wali sanga* into Java.

³ A *sengkalan* (chronogram) is a Javanese means of rendering dates, a phrase of four words that, when read backwards to forwards, represent the digits in that year; here: "gone (o), vanished (o) is the prosperity (4) of the world (o)"

⁴ The *caka* calendar is a solar calendar derived from India.

⁵ *Brandal* means "troublemaker" or "bandit."

⁶ Sunan Bonang was among the most senior of the *wali sanga*.

Bonang's staff at the edge of the river.⁷ Sunan Bonang then gave Kali Jaga new clothes and taught him about Islam. He was ordained as the last *wali*; the *Wali Sanga* were now complete and numbered nine.

Sunan Kali Jaga traveled around preaching and spreading Islam in Java. He followed the same pattern as Sunan Bonang, his teacher and companion, in proselytizing. Through his understanding of "Salafi-based Sufism," he chose art and culture as tools to spread Islam, and was tolerant of the local culture. Sunan Kali Jaga contended that the people would be repelled if their conversion was forced, and so they should be approached in a gradual way, using customs and traditions that were already familiar to the people in order to influence them. Sunan Kali Jaga was sure that if the teachings of Islam were understood properly, then old habits would disappear. It is therefore not surprising that Sunan Kali Jaga's teachings point to a syncretic feel in the introduction of Islam to Java. In Clifford Geertz's opinion, Sunan Kali Jaga provides an ideal figure depicting the fusion between Islam and Javanese culture. Geertz writes:

"He [Sunan Kali Jaga] is said to have been teacher and guide both to the original leader of the Mataram revolt against Demak, Senapati, and to the independent state's greatest king, Sultan Agung, and to have spread the new faith among the masses of the Javanese heartland. His career was thus his country's history: abandoning the dying, discredited, desanctified Madjapahit, he passed through the politico-religious upheavals of the transitional harbor states to arrive at the nascent spirituality of Mataram, a human recapitulation of a social transformation.

"In short, as a symbol, a materialized idea, Sunan Kali Jaga connects Indic Java with Muslim Java..." (from *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*)

The art forms that were appreciated, familiar, and close to the hearts of the people were those already rooted in the Javanese culture of the time such as *wayang*,⁸ *tembang*,⁹ *kakawin*,¹⁰ and gamelan. Sunan Kali Jaga used these art forms as tools for spreading Islamic teachings. He created the *Macapat*¹¹ meter, which is said to reflect the journey of human life from the moment of birth till the moment of death. He also composed the song *Ilir-Ilir*, which urges the people to get up; raise themselves above adversity and

⁷ The word *laya* means "death"; *Jaga* means "to take care of or guard." *Kali* means "river."

⁸ *Wayang* or *wayang kulit* are shadow puppets.

⁹ *Tembang* are sung or recited poems.

¹⁰ *Kakawin* verse forms are Old Javanese song meters. They are sometimes called *tembang gedhé* or "great meters."

¹¹ *Sekar Macapat* verse forms are relatively unadorned traditional Javanese song meters. They belong to the category of 'small meters' in comparison to the "great meters" of the *kekawin* form.

laziness; strengthen the faith that has already been planted in them by God; seek full understanding through undertaking introspection; purify both the inner and outer self; and, even though there are many hurdles to jump and troubles to face, pray five times a day and adhere to the five pillars of Islam. While there is still time and opportunity it should not be wasted, because one day man will face God. Another well-known song of his is *Sluku-Sluku Bathok*. Its words are unique because they are taken from Arabic. It explains that mankind should praise God in times of trouble as well as happiness by reciting *La ilaha ilallah* (the *Kalimat Tauhid*¹² that, in Javanese Sufism, should always be recited). He also composed the songs *Dhandhanggula Demak Bintara*, *Asmarandana Demak Bintara*, and *Pangkur Demak Bintara* (popularized by Ki Narto Sabdo under the name “Semarangan”). These songs combine the *Macapat* meter with the sounds of Qur’an recitations and the call to prayer. He is credited with the composition of many other songs.

Sunan Kali Jaga created literary works usually called *suluk* (in the form of songs or poetry) including *Suluk Syeh Malaya*, *Suluk Dewa Ruci*, *Suluk Kaca Wirangi*, *Suluk Ambya*, and *Suluk Hidayat Jati*.

Sunan Kali Jaga created the *wayang kulit* stories about Jimat Kalimasada (Kalimah Syahadat), Petruk becoming a king, and the stories of Dewa Ruci and Bima Suci. Sunan Kali Jaga is also mentioned in the *Babad Cirebon*, preaching Islam as a *dalang*¹³ many times under different names. He was called Dalang Sidabranti when he performed in the Pejajaran region (West Java), Dalang Bengkok when he performed in the Tegal region, Dalang Kumendung, Dalang Raka Brangsang, and Dalang Kajabur when he performed in the Purbalingga area and the north coasts of Central Java.

His creations of *Gamelan Sekaten* and *Gendhing Sekaten* (Syahadatain) were used to help spread Islam. They are still played on the grounds of the Great Mosques in Surakarta and Yogyakarta during the *Sekatenan* celebration to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.

On the connection between Gamelan and *Gendhing Sekaten*, Kuntowijoyo in *Agama dan Seni: Beberapa Masalah Pengkajian Interdisipliner Budaya Islam di Jawa*, writes:

“In connection to music, we remember how *gamelan sekaten* contains an idea. In my opinion, gamelan has a mystical atmosphere. Gamelan forms that use silence as an integral part of the composition emphasize the transitory atmosphere of those undergoing *suluk*.¹⁴ Each gong symbolizes the attainment of certain a level (*maqam*) as one switches from praise to

¹² The *Kalimat Tauhid* is the initial clause of the Islamic profession of faith, stating that there is no other god but Allah.

¹³ A *dalang* is the puppeteer in a *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppet, performance.

¹⁴ The word *suluk* indicates the mystical path to Sufi enlightenment. *Suluk* is also the name of a genre of sung poems relating to Sufi mysticism.

silence, changing back and forth. This supposition can be strengthened with the ritual that must be carried out by the musicians that resembles the preparation of a mystic. The melody, rhythm, harmony, and dynamics of the *gamelan sekaten* represent the holy journey toward God. In this instance it can be difficult to determine what is ritual and what is art. Perhaps *gamelan sekaten* is a synthesis of religion and art.”

A number of dances that are believed to be reflections of Sunan Kali Jaga’s teachings or, at the very least, to be of his legacy can still be encountered today, including the *Rodat*, *Japinan*, and *Emprak* dances, which incorporate folk characteristics, as well as the *Topeng Babakan* dance, which can be found in the Cirebon, Indramayu, and Losari areas. In the *Serat Wedha Pradangga* it is written that Sunan Kali Jaga contributed to the creation of the *Bedhaya Ketawang* dance during the time of Sultan Agung Mataram. Moreover, it was he that said the *Bedhaya Ketawang* should be understood as a Javanese *pusaka*, or sacred heirloom of Javanese kingship. The *Bedhaya Ketawang* is not just a dance, but a means of approaching God, like prayer and worship, in order to understand the origin and purpose of life. The dance uses flowing movements that are soft and slow, repeated with a guarded intensity. The sacred and grand atmosphere of the *gendhing kemanak* indicates that the *Bedhaya Ketawang* is on par with *gamelan* and *gendhing sekaten*, representing the holy journey toward God and a manifestation of Javanese Sufism.

In Sunan Kali Jaga’s preaching, it is clear that Islam teaches tranquility and peace in the present life as well as in the afterlife. It also teaches that we should love one another; help each other in a spirit of intimacy and brotherhood; maintain a feeling of togetherness; be thankful for and value diversity; respect differences; and value, respect, and preserve nature, because everything is a gift from God. Furthermore, every step and deed must follow the path blessed by God, moving ever closer to God with praise and thanksgiving for God’s grace.

Sunan Kali Jaga played an important role in the spread of Islam, especially in Java. He also contributed to the completion of the great mosque in Demak and aligned the mosque’s *qibla*¹⁵ with the direction of the Ka’bah in Mecca. He also contributed to the construction of a mosque in Cirebon. He arranged the *kraton*¹⁶ grounds, with the *alun-alun*,¹⁷ twin banyan trees, and a mosque beside them. He pioneered the establishment of Islamic education in the form of *pondok pesantren*¹⁸ via Pangeran

¹⁵ The *qibla* is the direction in which one faces to pray.

¹⁶ A *kraton* is a Javanese royal palace.

¹⁷ An *alun-alun* is an open square, found especially on palace compounds, but also referring to squares in towns and villages. Each *kraton* has an *alun-alun* to its north and south.

¹⁸ *Pesantren* are Islamic boarding schools.

Benowo, crown prince of the Kingdom of Pajang. According to Javanese historical traditions, Sunan Kali Jaga was also teacher to the Islamic kings of Java from Sultan Hadiwijaya Pajang to Sultan Agung Mataram.

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