IJECT INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Vol. 01 /No. 02 /August 2026 | https://jurnal.haizumsaintek.com/index.php/sundano/index

ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION: AUTHORITY, SYNCRETISM, AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION

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Received: 2026-May-10

Rev. Req: 2026-May-29

Accepted: 2026-June-22

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the paradox of religion in the contemporary Nusantara, which is simultaneously claimed to be secularizing while becoming increasingly visible and contested. Using a qualitative literature review method, this study synthesizes three interrelated dynamics that existing scholarship has tended to treat in isolation: the fragmentation of religious authority in digital space, the ongoing tension between syncretism and purification, and the politicization of religious identity in electoral contests. Through thematic-critical synthesis, the findings show that these three phenomena are not parallel but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single process: the shift of religion from a bounded system of personal belief into an open, competitive arena of meaning-negotiation. Digital hybridization of authority produces an interpretive vacuum that fuels purification discourse, while the moral vocabulary of authenticity generated by that discourse is subsequently appropriated by political actors to mobilize religious sentiment for electoral gain. This integrative reading offers a more coherent anthropological framework for understanding contemporary religious dynamics in Indonesia without resorting to normative judgments about religious authenticity or purity.*

Keywords: *Religious Authority, Syncretism, Politicization of Religion*

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion, within the contemporary socio-cultural landscape of the Nusantara (Indonesian archipelago), is undergoing a paradox worth examining

closely: on one hand it is claimed to be undergoing secularization, yet on the other it displays ever-greater visibility and becomes an increasingly contested site of meaning. One of the most conspicuous symptoms underlying this paradox is the shift of religious authority away from traditional sources, scholarly lineage and institutional affiliation, toward factors such as visibility, popularity, affective communication, and algorithmic circulation in digital space (Zaman, 2024; Lubis, 2023). This phenomenon is clearly visible in the dynamics of online da'wah, where traditional ulama must now share, even compete for, legitimacy with new actors produced by platforms themselves (Hew, 2018; Qudsy & Muzakky, 2021). This challenge to traditional religious authority has in fact been comprehensively mapped within the context of Indonesia's "new santri," showing how digital media reshapes long-established structures of belief (Saat & Burhani, 2020).

Notably, this shift in authority does not always unfold as a straightforward replacement. A number of religious organizations have instead responded with adaptive-integrative strategies, modernizing how teachings are delivered without losing their historical basis of authority (Hasanah et al., 2024), while at the grassroots level digital da'wah has also become a fairly productive space for negotiating religious moderation (Ilaihi et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this fragmentation of authority carries broader structural implications, as seen in studies of provincial-level Indonesian Ulama Councils whose authority has become increasingly decentralized (Rosidi et al., 2021), as well as in the unresolved regulatory challenges surrounding digital religious broadcasting that has yet to keep pace with this rapid change (Kholili et al., 2024). This disruption was further intensified by external shocks such as the pandemic, which forced religious rituals to shift abruptly and massively from traditional to virtual space (Hannan, 2022).

Such tensions are, in fact, not new phenomena but rather contemporary iterations of a syncretism process that has long characterized religious life in the Nusantara. Islam, as received by Nusantara societies, underwent a lengthy process of adjustment with pre-existing local traditions, producing locallyinflected religious expressions that nonetheless retained the core principles of the faith—a process understood by several scholars not merely as assimilation, but as a bridge balancing relations between different beliefs and communities (Ri'ayah,
2024). This transformation of Nusantara culture through the process of Islamization subsequently produced traceable material forms of syncretism,

evident for instance in mosque architecture blending Islamic and Nusantara elements (Hikmah et al., 2020; Hidayah et al., 2023). The case of Surabaya's Sunan Ampel Mosque is frequently cited as an empirical example, where forms of syncretism appear both in physical architecture and in the rituals conducted there, understood as a political manifestation of an Islam tolerant of Javanese culture (Kusumo, 2015). At a more personal ritual level, practices such as nyadran further illustrate how religious plurality and local tradition can coexist within a single unit of religious meaning (Hanif, 2010).

Syncretism, however, has never been free of contestation. Some groups view it as a deviation from doctrinal purity, giving rise to purification movements that seek to "cleanse" religious practice of local elements, a tension that has long been the subject of anthropological and historical debate since it was first popularized through influential typologies of Javanese religious variation by both Western and local scholars. This purification-syncretism tension has, moreover, not remained confined to theological discourse but has spilled into a far more political domain: the use of religious symbols as instruments of power. The politicization of religion, understood as the use of religion or its symbols for purposes beyond religious substance itself, has become a markedly intensifying phenomenon over the past two decades, both in Indonesia and in various other democratic states (Sekolah Pascasarjana UIN Jakarta, 2023). The long history of religious politicization in Indonesia in fact predates independence and has continued to evolve alongside shifting dynamics of power contestation (Al Qurtuby, 2018).

This phenomenon is most conspicuous in electoral contests, where religious identity is frequently transacted as an instrument of political legitimacy, from the selection of presidential running mates to the formation of coalitions based on religious affiliation (Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021). Religion-based identity politics has also been documented across various regional electoral contests, including the momentous Jakarta gubernatorial election, which triggered largescale religious mobilization with lasting social polarization effects that persisted even after the political contest concluded (Ali et al., 2023). Such politicization, in turn, carries implications for the quality of democracy itself, since when religious identity becomes the dominant factor in elections, substantive issues such as public policy and accountability tend to be marginalized by sentiments of religious affiliation (Ruslan, 2014).

These three dynamics, the fragmentation of religious authority in digital space, the purification-syncretism tension, and the politicization of religious symbols in power contestation, reveal a single interwoven pattern: a shift from religion as personal belief toward religion as an increasingly open, competitive, and political arena of meaning-negotiation. Unfortunately, the available literature tends to read these three phenomena in fragmented isolation, without a systematic effort to unite them within a coherent anthropological framework. It is precisely this gap that the present article seeks to fill, employing a qualitative approach based on literature review to construct a critical synthesis of contemporary religious dynamics in the Nusantara, without succumbing to normative judgments regarding the authenticity or purity of any particular religious practice.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the literature review method, chosen deliberately given the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Contemporary religious dynamics, as emphasized within the interpretive tradition of anthropology, cannot be reduced to context-free quantitative data; they demand a thick reading of meaning, symbol, and the social processes surrounding them. Data sources for this study consist of secondary literature, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and academic reports, both national and international, selected through purposive sampling based on thematic relevance to three interrelated issues: the fragmentation of religious authority in digital space, the purification-syncretism tension, and the politicization of religious identity in the Nusantara context. Sources were traced through academic databases and search engines using keyword combinations relevant to each theme, then filtered based on inclusion criteria of thematic relevance, recency, and publication credibility.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic-critical synthesis, in which findings from various sources were mapped, compared, and interconnected to construct a more integrative conceptual framework than that offered by existing fragmented literature. This process involved three stages: first, categorizing sources according to the three thematic clusters identified; second, identifying conceptual intersections and gaps among the clusters; and third, constructing

critical narrative synthesis to explain how the three dynamics interrelate as a single process of meaning-negotiation in contemporary religious life. This approach was chosen specifically to avoid normative judgment regarding the authenticity or correctness of any particular religious practice, and instead to position the phenomenon as an empirical object worthy of anthropological understanding.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Reconfiguration of Religious Authority in Digital Space

The findings from the reviewed literature indicate that the crisis of religious authority in the digital era cannot be adequately explained through a

simple displacement narrative, that is, the assumption that traditional authority is being wholly replaced by new digital actors. Rather, what emerges is a process of contestation and renegotiation, in which traditional and algorithmic forms of legitimacy operate simultaneously within the same discursive space (Zaman, 2024; Lubis, 2023). This finding is theoretically significant because it challenges the classical Weberian assumption that authority tends to move linearly from traditional to rational-legal or charismatic forms. In the Indonesian digital context, what occurs instead is a hybridization of authority: religious institutions that once relied solely on scholarly lineage now find themselves compelled to adopt platform logics, visibility, engagement, and algorithmic circulation—without necessarily abandoning their traditional legitimacy claims (Hasanah et al., 2024; Ilaihi et al., 2024).

This hybridization, however, is not without structural cost. The fragmentation documented at the level of provincial religious councils (Rosidi et al., 2021) suggests that decentralization of authority does not automatically produce democratization of religious knowledge, as is often optimistically assumed. Instead, it generates a vacuum of interpretive accountability, since digital religious content circulates largely outside the regulatory and pedagogical structures that once ensured a degree of doctrinal coherence (Kholili et al., 2024). The disruption catalyzed by the pandemic further accelerated this vacuum, compressing the timeline within which religious communities were forced to migrate ritual practice into virtual space without adequate institutional preparation (Hannan, 2022). Read together, these findings suggest that the

digitalization of religious authority in the Nusantara is best understood not as a crisis of faith, but as a crisis of interpretive gatekeeping, a structural condition in which the sheer proliferation of religious voices outpaces the mechanisms available to adjudicate among them.

Syncretism and Purification as a Continuous, Not Concluded, Process

The literature on syncretism reviewed in this study reinforces a central argument of this article: that the blending of Islamic and local Nusantara traditions is not a historical relic awaiting completion, but an ongoing negotiation that continues to shape material and ritual expressions of religiosity today. The architectural and ritual evidence documented at sites such as the Sunan Ampel Mosque (Kusumo, 2015) and in localized practices such as nyadran (Hanif, 2010) demonstrates that syncretism functions less as doctrinal compromise and more as a mechanism of social cohesion, a bridge, as several sources describe it, rather than a dilution (Ri'ayah, 2024; Hidayah et al., 2023). This reframing matters analytically because it repositions syncretism away from the binary of "pure" versus "impure" religion that purification discourse often presupposes, and toward a functionalist understanding of how plural societies sustain coexistence through shared symbolic vocabulary.

Yet the persistence of purification movements documented across the literature indicates that this negotiation is far from settled. What is analytically striking is that purification discourse rarely frames itself as rejecting tradition outright; rather, it positions itself as a return to authenticity, a discursive move that grants it considerable moral authority even as it disrupts long-standing local accommodations. This creates an intergenerational tension that the reviewed literature only partially captures: older generations who inherited syncretic practice as taken-for-granted cultural inheritance increasingly find themselves negotiating with younger cohorts exposed to more textually oriented, globally circulating religious discourse. The purification-syncretism tension, in this sense, is not merely a theological dispute but a generational and epistemic one, a contestation over which register of religious knowledge (embodied local tradition versus textual global orthodoxy) carries greater legitimacy.

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From Symbol to Instrument: The Political Life of Religious Identity

The politicization literature reviewed in this study extends the discussion beyond authority and doctrine into the terrain of power. What distinguishes politicization from religious legitimation, as the literature clarifies, is intent and function: legitimation mobilizes religious language to strengthen ethical or political claims, whereas politicization instrumentalizes religious symbols primarily to secure power (Sekolah Pascasarjana UIN Jakarta, 2023). This distinction is analytically useful because it allows the phenomenon of religious symbol deployment in Indonesian electoral politics, from presidential ticket formation (Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021) to large-scale religious mobilization in regional elections (Ali et al., 2023), to be read not as an aberration of an otherwise secular political process, but as a structurally embedded feature of a democracy in which religious identity remains a primary axis of social organization.

The consequence of this instrumentalization, as several sources indicate, is a gradual erosion of substantive political discourse. When religious affiliation becomes the dominant currency of electoral legitimacy, issues of policy, accountability, and governance are correspondingly marginalized (Ruslan, 2014). This finding resonates with the broader argument of this article: that religious symbols in the contemporary Nusantara increasingly function as identity markers within a competitive social field, rather than as expressions of private conviction. The boundary between the sacred and the political, in other words, becomes not merely blurred but actively renegotiated by political actors who recognize the mobilizing power of religious sentiment.

Toward an Integrative Reading

Taken together, these three bodies of literature reveal a pattern that existing scholarship has yet to synthesize explicitly: the fragmentation of religious authority, the unresolved tension between syncretism and purification, and the politicization of religious identity are not parallel, unrelated phenomena but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single underlying process—the transformation of religion from a relatively bounded system of belief into an open, contested field of meaning-making. Digital fragmentation of authority creates the conditions under which competing claims to religious "authenticity" can

proliferate unchecked, feeding directly into purification discourse; purification discourse, in turn, supplies the moral vocabulary that political actors readily appropriate to mobilize religious sentiment for electoral gain. Understanding these dynamics as an interconnected system, rather than as isolated case studies, offers a more coherent anthropological account of why religion in the contemporary Nusantara appears simultaneously more visible and more contested than at any point in recent memory.

IV. CONCLUSION

The dynamics of religion in the contemporary Nusantara cannot be adequately explained through fragmented, single-issue analyses. This study demonstrates that the fragmentation of religious authority in digital space, the unresolved tension between syncretism and purification, and the politicization of religious identity are three interlocking dimensions of a single underlying transformation: the shift of religion from a relatively bounded system of personal belief into an open, competitive field of meaning-negotiation. Digital hybridization of authority has not eliminated traditional legitimacy but has forced it to coexist with algorithmic visibility, producing an interpretive vacuum in which competing claims to religious "authenticity" proliferate largely unchecked. This vacuum feeds directly into purification discourse, which frames itself not as a rejection of tradition but as a return to a purer, more textually grounded orthodoxy, thereby generating a deeper generational and epistemic contestation over which form of religious knowledge holds greater legitimacy. That same moral vocabulary of authenticity is, in turn, readily appropriated by political actors, who instrumentalize religious symbols to mobilize sentiment and secure power, often at the expense of substantive political discourse and democratic accountability.

Reading these three phenomena as an interconnected system, rather than as isolated case studies, offers a more coherent anthropological understanding of why religion in the Nusantara today appears simultaneously more visible and more deeply contested than in previous eras. This integrative framework also opens avenues for further research, particularly empirical and ethnographic studies that can trace directly how digital fragmentation, purification discourse, and political instrumentalization interact within specific communities and events. Such an approach is expected to enrich the anthropology of religion in Indonesia with a

more holistic perspective, one that avoids normative judgments about religious authenticity while remaining sensitive to the complex power structures shaping the practice of faith in contemporary society.

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