

Sunan Kalijaga Da'wah Media in the Spread of Islam in Java

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the media used by Sunan Kalijaga in the spread of Islam on the island of Java, focusing on his missionary approach and methods. The spread of Islam in the archipelago, particularly Java, is closely linked to the efforts of Walisongo, a group of Islamic missionaries active during the 14th century. This study examines how Sunan Kalijaga, along with other Walisongo, utilized a unique combination of cultural acculturation and syncretism to disseminate Islamic teachings. Specifically, they integrated elements of local Javanese culture, such as wayang (puppet shows), gamelan music, traditional ceremonies, and Javanese songs, with Islamic values. This approach made Islam more accessible and acceptable to the Javanese community. The research uses a qualitative approach, analyzing historical and cultural texts, as well as existing literature on Islamic missionary work in Java. The results highlight how Sunan Kalijaga's innovative use of local cultural expressions facilitated the acceptance of Islam among the Javanese people, illustrating a successful model of religious dissemination through cultural adaptation. The study's findings provide insights into the role of cultural integration in religious propagation, which has broader implications for understanding religious transformation and the use of cultural media in modern missionary work.

Keywords: The Spread of Islam, Da'wah, Sunan Kalijaga

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Introduction

The spread of Islam in Indonesia, particularly on the island of Java, has been significantly influenced by the syncretic approach adopted by the Walisongo, a group of nine Islamic saints. One of the most prominent members, Sunan Kalijaga, played a crucial role in integrating Islamic teachings with Javanese local culture ¹.

¹ Sulistiyono Susilo and Ibnu Syato, "Common Identity Framework of Cultural Knowledge and Practices of Javanese Islam," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 2 (2016): 161; Bambang Hidayana, "Identity Shift: From Javanese Islam to Shari'ah-Centric Muslims in the Trah, a Kinship-Based Social Organisation," *Contemporary Islam* 16, no. 2–3 (2022): 401–426; Atik Triratnawati, "Acculturation in Javanese Traditional Medicine Practice in Yogyakarta," *Komunitas International Journal of Indonesian Society and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2016): 39–50; Ahmad Saefudin, Deliavega N Pangestuti, and Santi Andriyani, "Islamic Education Values of Barikan: Javanese Cultural Rituals as a Practice of Islam Nusantara," *El Harakah Jurnal Budaya Islam* 22, no. 2 (2020): 245–262; Sri Lestari, "Exploring Javanese Islam: "The

Sunan Kalijaga utilized various cultural mediums, such as wayang (Javanese puppet theater), music, and traditional rituals, to convey Islamic messages in a manner that resonated with the Javanese people ². By adapting these familiar cultural elements, he was able to bridge the gap between Islam and Javanese traditions, facilitating the widespread acceptance of Islam ³.

The integration of Islam and Javanese culture has had a profound impact on the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the region. The emergence of unique religious traditions and practices that blend Islamic and Javanese elements, the transformation of Javanese art and literature, and the changes in the social structure of the community all demonstrate the success of the syncretic approach ⁴.

However, the integration of Islam and Javanese culture has also led to tensions and contestations between puritan Islamic movements and the more syncretic Kejawen tradition ⁵. This ongoing dialogue and negotiation between the two traditions continue to shape the religious landscape of Java.

Furthermore, the influence of Walisongo and their syncretic approach can be seen in the development of Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding

Acculturation of Religious Doctrine With Cultural Rituals,” *Komunitas* 14, no. 2 (2023): 188–205; Muh Barid Nizarudin Wajdi et al., “KOMUNITAS OSING, Interaksi Budaya Dan Pembangunan (Bunga Rampai Penelitian Etnografi)” (2018).

² Suyadi Suyadi and Ahmad F Sabiq, “Acculturation of Islamic Culture as a Symbol of Siraman Rituals in Java Traditional Wedding,” *Injunct (Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication)* 5, no. 2 (2021): 221–244; Abdul Munip, “Translating Salafi-Wahhābī Books in Indonesia and Its Impacts on the Criticism of Traditional Islamic Rituals,” *Analisa Journal of Social Science and Religion* 3, no. 02 (2018): 189–205; Gillie Gabay and Mahdi Tarabeih, “Death From COVID-19, Muslim Death Rituals and Disenfranchised Grief – A Patient-Centered Care Perspective,” *Omega - Journal of Death and Dying* 89, no. 4 (2022): 1492–1513; Shapihah Shapihah et al., “Methods of Islamic Da’wah,” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1–10.

³ Arita Marini et al., “Model of Student Character Based on Character Building in Teaching Learning Process,” *Universal Journal of Educational Research* (2019); R Basori et al., “MAINTAINING SALAFI VALUES THROUGH INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AT PESANTREN,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 9, no. 2 (2023): 145–156, <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85181444546&doi=10.15575%2Fjpi.v9i2.25376&partnerID=40&md5=bb0afb5ee86f5e22573d8f95fd35e627>.

⁴ Agus Susilo and Ratna Wulansari, “Peran Raden Fatah Dalam Islamisasi Di Kesultanan Demak Tahun 1478–1518,” *Tamaddun Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Sastra Islam* 19, no. 1 (2019): 70–83; Maesa N Sari and Moh Y Alimi, “Pesantren Al-Fattah: The Struggle of an Ascetic Waria to Create a Religious Space for Transgender Muslims in Indonesia,” *Komunitas International Journal of Indonesian Society and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2022): 129–145; Asep Rahmatullah, “Ta’zir (Punishment) at Islamic Boarding Schools; Between Tradition, Conception, and Shadows of Human Rights Violations,” *Tribakti Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* 34, no. 2 (2023): 267–280; Siti Yumnah, “Construction of Islamic Boarding Shcool in Developing Moderate Islam,” *Nazhruna Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 2 (2020): 232–246.

⁵ Kunawi Basyir, “ISLAMIC GENETICS IN INDONESIA: Tracking the Hindu-Islamic Dialogue Concerning the Growth and Development of Javanese Islam,” *Religió Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 13, no. 1 (2023): 1–19; Rika Yulianti, Parwita S Wardhani, and Dyah A Lestari, “Tedhak Siten: An Islamic-Javanese Acculturation,” *International Journal of Religious and Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022); Soya Sobaya, Martini D Pusparini, and Siti Achiria, “Javanese Local Wisdom Values for Development From an Islamic Perspective,” *Journal of Islamic Economics Lariba* 9, no. 1 (2023): 57–78.

schools). These institutions have adapted to modern times, incorporating both religious and scientific education, while still maintaining the traditional values and local wisdom ⁶.

The study of the Walisongo's syncretic approach and its impact on the spread of Islam in Java provides valuable insights into the role of culture in religious conversion. Their methods of integrating Islamic teachings with local traditions can serve as a model for efforts to spread religion in other regions with diverse cultural backgrounds ⁷.

Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative library research method, focusing on Sunan Kalijaga's preaching media in the spread of Islam in Java. The study aims to explore the strategies, tools, and cultural elements employed by Sunan Kalijaga to disseminate Islamic teachings effectively and their continued influence on Javanese society. The research concentrates on examining various media used by Sunan Kalijaga, including wayang (puppet theater), songs, traditional storytelling, dance, and other cultural innovations, alongside his role as a spiritual teacher and cultural figure in Javanese society. Although no direct participants are involved in this research due to its historical nature, the study draws on the documented teachings and practices attributed to Sunan Kalijaga, including the spread of the Syathariyah and Akmaliyah orders through his disciples.

In terms of data collection, the research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include key historical texts and manuscripts related to Sunan Kalijaga's teachings and practices, as well as works attributed to him and his contemporaries. Secondary sources, such as books, peer-reviewed journals, and documented oral traditions, are used to contextualize his preaching media and their impact on Javanese society. Furthermore, the research includes extensive note-taking from historical accounts, cultural analyses, and academic interpretations to ensure a comprehensive understanding of his methodologies. Data collection instruments employed in the study include literature review grids for systematic analysis, archival research to examine historical documents and artifacts, and a thematic analysis framework to identify recurring themes in Sunan Kalijaga's preaching practices.

⁶ Azaki Khoirudin et al., "Trensains: The New Pesantren and Shifting Orientation of Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 2 (2022): 121–135; Siti Nur Hidayah, "Pesantren for Middle-Class Muslims in Indonesia (between Religious Commodification and Pious Neoliberalism)," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* (2021); Maisyatus S Irfana, "The Integrated Pathway: A Novel Educational Model for Islamic Boarding Schools in Indonesia," *Migration Letters* 20, no. 5 (2023): 552–567; Muh. Barid Nizarudin Wajdi, "Nyadranan, Bentuk Akulturasi Islam Dengan Budaya Jawa (Fenomena Sosial Keagamaan Nyadranan Di Daerah Baron Kabupaten Nganjuk)," *JURNAL LENTERA : Kajian Keagamaan, Keilmuan dan Teknologi* 3, no. 2 (October 13, 2017), accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.ejournal.staimnglawak.ac.id/index.php/lentera/article/view/60>.

⁷ M M Mujib, "Fenomena Tradisi Ziarah Lokal Dalam Masyarakat Jawa: Kontestasi Kesalehan, Identitas Keagamaan Dan Komersial," *Ibda Jurnal Kajian Islam Dan Budaya* 14, no. 2 (2016): 204–224; Supriyanto Supriyanto, "Cowongan in Javanese Islamic Mysticism: A Study of Islamic Philosophy in Penginyongan Society," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 1 (2023); Nurul Mahmudah and Abdur R A Saputera, "Tradisi Ritual Kematian Islam Kejawa Ditinjau Dari Sosiologi Hukum Islam," *Analisis Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 19, no. 1 (2019): 177–192; Hamidulloh Ibda et al., "Digital Learning Using Maktabah Syumilah NU 1.0 Software and Computer Application for Islamic Moderation in Pesantren," *International Journal of Electrical and Computer Engineering (Ijece)* 13, no. 3 (2023): 3530.

Data analysis follows a structured approach, beginning with thematic categorization, where the findings are grouped into categories such as cultural integration, educational methods, and artistic innovations. A comparative analysis is then conducted to contrast Sunan Kalijaga's methods with those of other Walisongo members, highlighting his unique contributions. Interpretive synthesis is used to create a coherent narrative about his strategies and their effectiveness in spreading Islam in Java. Finally, verification of the findings is achieved by cross-referencing the results with existing historical accounts to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the study. This comprehensive methodology enables a deeper understanding of how Sunan Kalijaga's preaching methods facilitated the spread of Islam in Java and their lasting impact on the region's religious and cultural landscape.

Result And Discussion

Result

This study explored the methods and media used by Sunan Kalijaga in his Islamic da'wah efforts, specifically focusing on cultural acculturation techniques and the various media he employed to spread Islam in Java. Sunan Kalijaga, through his unique approach, effectively bridged the gap between Islamic teachings and local Javanese traditions, thereby facilitating a smooth cultural integration that resonated with the indigenous population.

Biography of Sunan Kalijaga

Sunan Kalijaga, born Raden Mas Syahid around 1430, is a prominent figure in Javanese history. His religious and cultural contributions to the spread of Islam were significant. Sunan Kalijaga was not only a religious scholar but also a reformist who used his background and knowledge of local Javanese customs to engage with the community. His formative years, marked by rebellious acts against the unjust tribute system in Tuban, shaped his later work in spreading Islamic teachings. Over the years, Sunan Kalijaga gained renown for his role in constructing significant Islamic monuments like the Great Mosque of Demak and Cirebon, where he incorporated Javanese architectural traditions. His extensive life, which spanned over a century, also saw him serve as a spiritual leader to a wide array of communities under the influence of the Mataram Kingdom (Rosyadi et al., 2021).

Cultural Acculturation and Da'wah Media

Sunan Kalijaga's da'wah methods were not confined to traditional preaching. He utilized popular local art forms and cultural events to convey Islamic teachings, which helped him win the hearts of the local population. His choice of media, including shadow puppets (wayang), songs, religious ceremonies, and local events, was crucial in the process of cultural acculturation, making Islam accessible and relevant to the Javanese people.

1. Wayang Puppetry: One of the most significant media used by Sunan Kalijaga was shadow puppetry (wayang kulit). This form of traditional Javanese art was restructured to reflect Islamic values and was used to educate the public about monotheism. The wayang

- performances, led by Sunan Kalijaga, were free of charge, and the attendees were encouraged to recite the shahadah and accept Islam. The spiritual teachings embedded in the puppetry reflected Sunan Kalijaga's belief in the unity of life, drawing parallels between the relationship of a puppet and the puppeteer (Allah SWT), symbolizing submission and devotion. His use of wayang as a medium to spread Islam was immensely popular, especially among rural communities, where these performances became a significant educational and religious event.
2. Songs and Kidung (Religious Hymns): In addition to wayang, Sunan Kalijaga composed various songs, including *Rumeksa ing Wengi* and *Ikir-Ikir*, which were aimed at replacing the old animistic practices with Islamic teachings. *Rumeksa ing Wengi* was particularly powerful in addressing the mystical beliefs prevalent in Java at the time. It incorporated prayers and mantras that were believed to protect against black magic and other harmful practices. The song's spiritual guidance was essential in connecting the people to the teachings of Islam. Similarly, *Ikir-Ikir* contained leadership values and was used to encourage responsibility and a commitment to Islam among the Javanese.
 3. Gerebeg and Sekaten Ceremonies: Sunan Kalijaga also employed the *Gerebeg* and *Sekaten* ceremonies, which were initially rooted in Hindu-Buddhist traditions, to facilitate the spread of Islam. The *Gerebeg* ceremony, originally intended to honor Brahma, was adapted to commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. This cultural event provided a platform for Sunan Kalijaga to replace the traditional mantras with prayers and the shahadah, thus integrating Islamic practices into the local culture. Similarly, the *Sekaten* ceremony, derived from the Arabic term *syahadatain* (the two declarations of faith), became a key annual event where Sunan Kalijaga invited people to embrace Islam. The Sekaten festival highlighted the importance of balance in life and spirituality, resonating deeply with the Javanese understanding of harmony and righteousness.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the strategic approach of Sunan Kalijaga in utilizing culturally relevant media for his da'wah efforts. His ability to adapt and transform indigenous cultural practices into tools for religious dissemination played a pivotal role in the widespread acceptance of Islam in Java. Through the incorporation of traditional forms like *wayang* (puppet theater), local music, and indigenous ceremonies, Sunan Kalijaga was able to convey Islamic teachings in a manner that was not only acceptable but deeply embedded in the Javanese cultural context. This research reinforces the concept that Sunan Kalijaga's da'wah efforts were not merely about preaching religious doctrines but about creating an environment where Islamic values could thrive within pre-existing cultural structures.

This finding is consistent with the broader understanding of the spread of Islam in Indonesia, particularly in Java, where the Walisongo, a group of nine Islamic saints, employed a syncretic approach to integrate Islamic teachings with local culture⁸. Sunan Kalijaga, as one of the most

⁸ Hidayana, "Identity Shift: From Javanese Islam to Shari'ah-Centric Muslims in the Trah, a Kinship-Based Social Organisation"; Lestari, "Exploring Javanese Islam: The Acculturation of Religious Doctrine With

prominent figures among the Walisongo, played a central role in this integration by adapting familiar Javanese cultural forms into Islamic expression, thus bridging the gap between the new religion and the indigenous traditions. The synthesis of Islamic teachings and Javanese culture facilitated a more seamless transition, resulting in the widespread acceptance of Islam among the Javanese people ⁹.

The use of culturally familiar forms, such as *wayang*, local songs, and traditional rituals, enabled Sunan Kalijaga to effectively introduce Islamic concepts to the Javanese population in a form that was both palatable and relevant to their existing beliefs and practices. This process of cultural acculturation, where local traditions are not rejected but rather incorporated into the religious framework, reflects a broader historical pattern in Islamic da'wah ¹⁰. In this context, Sunan Kalijaga's methods align with the broader Walisongo tradition of integrating Islamic teachings into local cultures, a strategy that was instrumental in Islam's widespread acceptance across the archipelago.

However, the process of integrating Islam with Javanese culture was not without its challenges. As several studies have noted, this syncretic approach led to tensions between more puritanical Islamic movements and the syncretic Kejawen tradition, which blended Islamic elements with indigenous beliefs ¹¹. These tensions highlight the complexities of religious acculturation, where different interpretations of Islam—one focused on preserving the purity of the faith and the other embracing local cultural expressions—have often come into conflict. This ongoing negotiation between puritanical and syncretic traditions continues to shape the religious landscape in Java, as noted by Yulianti, Wardhani, and Lestari ¹².

The syncretic approach employed by Sunan Kalijaga also had significant social, cultural, and political implications for the region. The fusion of Islamic and Javanese traditions gave rise to unique religious practices that combined elements of both belief systems, thus shaping the cultural identity of the region ¹³. This transformation was not limited to religious practices alone but extended to art, literature, and social structures, with Javanese art and literature being influenced by Islamic themes and values. As such, the integration of Islam into Javanese culture under the

Cultural Rituals"; Saefudin, Pangestuti, and Andriyani, "Islamic Education Values of Barikan: Javanese Cultural Rituals as a Practice of Islam Nusantara."

⁹ Gabay and Tarabehi, "Death From COVID-19, Muslim Death Rituals and Disenfranchised Grief – A Patient-Centered Care Perspective"; Munip, "Translating Salafi-Wahhābi Books in Indonesia and Its Impacts on the Criticism of Traditional Islamic Rituals"; Shapiah et al., "Methods of Islamic Da'wah."

¹⁰ Basori et al., "MAINTAINING SALAFI VALUES THROUGH INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AT PESANTREN"; Marini et al., "Model of Student Character Based on Character Building in Teaching Learning Process."

¹¹ Basyir, "ISLAMIC GENETICS IN INDONESIA: Tracking the Hindu-Islamic Dialogue Concerning the Growth and Development of Javanese Islam"; Sobaya, Pusparini, and Achiria, "Javanese Local Wisdom Values for Development From an Islamic Perspective."

¹² Yulianti, Wardhani, and Lestari, "Tedhak Siten: An Islamic-Javanese Acculturation"; Rahmatullah, "Ta'zir (Punishment) at Islamic Boarding Schools: Between Tradition, Conception, and Shadows of Human Rights Violations."

¹³ Sari and Alimi, "Pesantren Al-Fattah: The Struggle of an Ascetic Waria to Create a Religious Space for Transgender Muslims in Indonesia"; Yumnah, "Construction of Islamic Boarding Shcool in Developing Moderate Islam."

guidance of Sunan Kalijaga contributed to the emergence of a distinct cultural and religious identity that was both Islamic and local in its nature.

Furthermore, the impact of Sunan Kalijaga's syncretic approach can be traced in the development of pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding schools) across Java. These institutions, which played a central role in the dissemination of Islamic teachings, have evolved over time to incorporate both religious and scientific education, while still preserving traditional values and local wisdom ¹⁴. The adaptation of pesantren to modern educational needs while maintaining their cultural roots exemplifies the ongoing relevance of the syncretic approach initiated by Sunan Kalijaga. This adaptation is indicative of how religious institutions can evolve to meet contemporary needs without sacrificing their cultural foundations.

The findings of this study also align with those of Ibda et al. ¹⁵, Mahmudah & Saputera ¹⁶, and Supriyanto ¹⁷, who emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity in the spread of Islam. The syncretic model employed by the Walisongo, and particularly Sunan Kalijaga, provides valuable lessons in religious outreach, especially in regions with diverse cultural backgrounds. By incorporating local traditions and practices, the Walisongo were able to make Islam more accessible and meaningful to the local populations, ensuring the faith's enduring presence and relevance.

Sunan Kalijaga's use of cultural media for spreading Islam highlights the significance of cultural integration in religious conversion. His approach to *da'wah*, through the adaptation of local traditions, not only facilitated the spread of Islam in Java but also created a lasting cultural and religious fusion that continues to shape the region today. This research, in conjunction with previous studies, underscores the importance of cultural acculturation in religious outreach, offering valuable insights for efforts to spread religion in other regions with similarly diverse cultural contexts. By embracing local culture, Sunan Kalijaga and the Walisongo successfully facilitated the acceptance of Islam in Java, ensuring its deep-rooted presence and ongoing cultural relevance.

Conclusion

Sunan Kalijaga, as one of the prominent members of the Walisongo, stands out for his remarkable contribution to the spread of Islam in Java. His approach to Islamic *da'wah* was not only effective but also culturally adaptive, allowing Islam to be seamlessly integrated into the local cultural fabric. Sunan Kalijaga's legacy lies in his ability to use local cultural practices—such as wayang (puppet theater), music, and traditional rituals—as vehicles for conveying Islamic teachings. His efforts created a religious transformation that was both gentle and profound,

¹⁴ Hidayah, "Pesantren for Middle-Class Muslims in Indonesia (between Religious Commodification and Pious Neoliberalism)"; Irfana, "The Integrated Pathway: A Novel Educational Model for Islamic Boarding Schools in Indonesia."

¹⁵ Ibda et al., "Digital Learning Using Maktabah Syumilah NU 1.0 Software and Computer Application for Islamic Moderation in Pesantren."

¹⁶ Mahmudah and Saputera, "Tradisi Ritual Kematian Islam Kejawa Ditinjau Dari Sosiologi Hukum Islam."

¹⁷ Supriyanto, "Cowongan in Javanese Islamic Mysticism: A Study of Islamic Philosophy in Penginyongan Society."

facilitating Islam's acceptance without disrupting the social and cultural structures that existed prior to its arrival. The widespread influence of Sunan Kalijaga is not merely a testament to his religious acumen but also a reflection of his deep understanding of the cultural dynamics of Java.

This study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in religious outreach and provides a clear example of how religion can be integrated into a society without imposing conflict. By utilizing familiar forms of expression, Sunan Kalijaga ensured that Islam could resonate deeply with the Javanese people, making it both accessible and meaningful. His success in blending Islamic teachings with local culture offers valuable insights into the methods of spreading religion, suggesting that a nuanced, culturally aware approach can often lead to greater acceptance and longevity of religious practices.

The historical legacy left by Sunan Kalijaga is not confined to physical landmarks, such as the mosque in Kadilangu, Demak, but extends to the broader cultural shift he helped usher in. His work in transforming cultural practices from pre-Islamic rituals to Islamic ones—such as replacing traditional mantras with Quranic recitations—reflects a broader trend of religious acculturation that allowed Islam to become deeply rooted in Java's cultural and religious landscape. This process, however, was not without its tensions, as the syncretic approach raised challenges with puritanical Islamic movements. Nonetheless, the ability to harmonize Islamic teachings with local traditions speaks volumes about the potential for religious coexistence and dialogue in diverse cultural settings.

Looking ahead, this study invites further exploration into the broader implications of cultural integration in religious conversion processes. Sunan Kalijaga's model presents an opportunity for future research to examine how other religions, particularly Islam, can adopt similar strategies in regions with rich cultural traditions. The impact of Sunan Kalijaga's approach extends beyond religious conversion—it is also a model for understanding the role of culture in shaping social and educational institutions. His integration of traditional knowledge with religious teachings can serve as a guiding framework for educational institutions, particularly Islamic schools (*pesantren*), to maintain a balance between modern education and traditional cultural values.

The work of Sunan Kalijaga not only reshaped the religious landscape of Java but also provides a blueprint for the harmonious integration of religion with local culture. His approach to *da'wah* underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and highlights the potential for religious transformation to occur without conflict, offering valuable lessons for both religious practice and educational models in Indonesia and beyond. The exploration of such syncretic models holds immense promise for fostering greater understanding and coexistence in diverse cultural contexts.

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