



## Transformation and Islamic Inculturation in the *Ludruk* Performing Art of Surabaya, 1975–2022: A Study of Social and Cultural History

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the process of Islamic inculturation within the traditional performing art of *ludruk* in Surabaya from 1975 to 2022, situating the analysis within the theoretical framework of inculturation and social history. It seeks to examine how Islamic values have been internalized into the structural, narrative, and symbolic dimensions of *ludruk* without diminishing its identity as a popular folk performance. Employing historical research methods—namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography—the study draws upon interviews, field observations, documentation, and library research. The findings indicate that Islamic values have been substantively integrated into *ludruk* through morally grounded plot constructions emphasizing justice and ethical conduct, the representation of religiously conscious protagonists, dialogical expressions infused with ethical-religious nuance, and visual symbolism—such as costumes and stage design—that reflects Islamic identity. Rather than displacing the traditional character of *ludruk*, this process has reconstituted its cultural function as both a medium of social expression and a vehicle for contextualized religious outreach. The study argues that the relationship between Islam and *ludruk* represents a long-term, dynamic process of cultural negotiation within the urban social landscape of Surabaya, extending beyond superficial symbolic acculturation.

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### INTRODUCTION

The encounter between Islam and traditional performing arts in East Java reveals a cultural process that is fundamentally negotiative and adaptive rather than confrontational. In the context of *ludruk* in Surabaya, Islamic values do not emerge as a force that supplants local tradition; instead, they are internalized through narrative construction, character formation, dialogue, and visual symbolism within the performance. This phenomenon reflects a process of inculturation—namely, the insertion of religious values into an existing cultural structure without erasing its foundational identity as a form of folk art. Such transformation underscores that *ludruk* functions not merely as popular entertainment but also as a site for the production of social and religious meaning within the urban society of East Java (Mulya et al., [2025](#); Yaqqin & Pratiwi, [2025](#)).

Islamic influence extends beyond plot structure into the aesthetic dimension of performance. Costumes have undergone adjustments, including the addition of elements such as the *kerudung* and designs that represent values of modesty and purity. This visual transformation generates an aesthetic identity that harmonizes the distinctive character of *ludruk* with Islamic norms, without effacing its traditional features (Lubis et al., [2023](#)). Within the context of *dakwah*, traditional performing arts such as *ketoprak*, *wayang*, *kenrung*, and *ludruk* possess communicative qualities that effectively convey religious messages to heterogeneous audiences. The utilization of traditional media as vehicles for *dakwah* enables the contextual transmission of Islamic teachings, particularly among communities navigating the intersection of modernity and tradition (Sari et al., [2024](#)). This transformation is also evident beyond the stage, where *ludruk* troupes invite religious figures to deliver sermons or spiritual counsel during intermissions, thereby expanding the function of *ludruk* from theatrical performance to a medium of religious education.

This process of acculturation has not only sustained the existence of *ludruk* as a traditional art form but has also reconstructed its role as a platform for articulating Islamic values within society. The transformation fosters cultural harmony that enriches social life while demonstrating the capacity of traditional arts to adapt to evolving religious values (Batubara et al., [2022](#)). In the mid-1970s, *ludruk* encountered significant challenges amid the socio-political



transformations of the New Order era. State cultural policies affected the dynamics of traditional arts, including *ludruk*, which had previously developed organically within local communities (Khanif & Fatoni, [2025](#)).

Entering the 1980s, *ludruk* groups sought to balance tradition and modernity by incorporating contemporary themes relevant to pressing social issues, while preserving their distinctive elements. Narrative variations and linguistic styles were renewed to respond to shifting public tastes (Afandi & Arifin, [2025](#)). The Reformasi era at the end of the 1990s opened broader spaces for freedom of expression, enabling *ludruk* troupes to explore social and political themes more openly. Between 1975 and 2022, Islamic values became increasingly pronounced in plot construction, character representation, costume aesthetics, and the insertion of moral and *dakwah* messages. These developments demonstrate that *ludruk* has evolved into an arena of dialectical engagement between religion and culture within the broader context of socio-political change.

In the early 2000s, the use of social media expanded the reach of *ludruk* promotion and documentation, while simultaneously opening opportunities for cross-disciplinary artistic collaboration (Sisnia & Abdillah, [2022](#)). For example, Ludruk “Warna Budaya” staged the play “Brandal Lokajaya,” narrating the spiritual journey of Sunan Kalijaga prior to becoming a *wali*, while Ludruk Pro 4 Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya, through the story “Romi dan Yuli,” embedded *dakwah* messages concerning social norms and obedience to the law of Allah (Alfarezis & Abdillah, [2020](#)). These instances illustrate how *ludruk* has transformed into a cultural medium representing the negotiation of Islamic identity within the urban social sphere of Surabaya.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to analyze the process of Islamic inculturation within *ludruk* in Surabaya from 1975 to 2022, to identify the forms of cultural transformation that have occurred, and to explain how the relationship between Islam and *ludruk* represents a negotiation of identity within the dynamics of urban social life. The socio-cultural historical approach employed in this research conceptualizes inculturation as an ongoing historical process rather than a merely symbolic phenomenon, thereby offering a conceptual contribution to the study of religion and performing arts in Indonesia.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in historical research methods to analyze the process of acculturation of Islamic values within the *ludruk* performing art tradition in Surabaya during the period 1975–2022. A historical perspective is adopted to trace the diachronic transformation of *ludruk* within its broader social, cultural, and religious contexts. The research positions cultural actors—*ludruk* performers, art activists, troupe managers, and representatives of the Department of Culture—as principal subjects who actively participate in the reception, negotiation, and transmission of Islamic values through the artistic medium (Rachman et al., [2024](#)). The dynamics of inculturation are thus understood as the outcome of social interactions unfolding within the urban cultural sphere of Surabaya.

The heuristic stage was conducted through the collection of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through *in-depth interviews* with informants selected using *purposive sampling* based on the following criteria: (1) direct involvement in *ludruk* performances for a minimum of five years; (2) familiarity with shifts in thematic orientation and performance aesthetics; or (3) institutional authority in the management of regional performing arts. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format using open-ended guiding questions designed to elicit the experiences, perceptions, and practices of acculturation encountered by the artists. Additional primary data were gathered through direct observation of performances, visual documentation, and examination of internal archives of *ludruk* groups. Secondary sources included books, scholarly articles, theses, dissertations, archival materials, and cultural policy documents relevant to the period under study.

All data were subjected to external and internal source criticism to assess authenticity, credibility, and consistency within their respective socio-political contexts. The interpretative stage involved thematic-chronological analysis by categorizing data into key dimensions of inculturation—namely narrative construction, character formation, dialogical expression, visual symbolism, and the function of *dakwah*—and situating them within the historical trajectory spanning 1975–2022. This analysis was further enriched by perspectives from cultural anthropology to interpret the symbolic and religious dimensions embedded in performance. The historiographical stage was realized through systematic and diachronic writing aimed at reconstructing the process of Islamic acculturation in *ludruk* in a manner that is analytically rigorous and academically accountable.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Dynamics of *Ludruk* in Surabaya during the Japanese Occupation and the Soekarno Era (1942–1967)

The arrival of Japan in 1942 brought fundamental changes to the landscape of performing arts in Indonesia, including *ludruk* in Surabaya. During the Dutch colonial administration, *ludruk* performances were subject to strict supervision and restriction. When Japan assumed control, *ludruk* organizations and performances were once again legalized. At first glance, this policy appeared to offer artists an opportunity to preserve the existence of folk performance traditions. In reality, however, such legalization was driven by political interests. The Japanese administration utilized *ludruk* as a propaganda instrument to disseminate the ideology of Greater East Asia and to construct an image of Japan as the “elder brother” liberating Asian nations from Western colonialism. In numerous performances, storylines were directed to support Japanese policies, including forced labor (*romusha*), while reinforcing Japan’s self-representation as the savior of Asia (Nusantara et al., [2022](#)).

Amid these pressures, several artists continued to insert implicit social criticism into their performances. One of the most prominent figures was Cak Durasim, a *ludruk* maestro from Surabaya renowned for his mastery of *parikan*—rhymed couplets that functioned simultaneously as humor and social critique (Sharfina et al., [2025](#)). In one performance, he recited the following lines:

“Pagupon omahé doro,  
Melu Nippon tambah sengsara.”

These verses symbolically criticized Japanese policies that caused widespread suffering, particularly through the practice of *romusha* (Yuwono et al., [2025](#)). Such criticism was interpreted as an act of resistance against the occupation regime. Consequently, Cak Durasim was arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to torture until he died in detention. This episode solidified *ludruk*’s role as a medium of resistance and established Cak Durasim as a symbol of artistic struggle against injustice (Faurina et al., [2025](#)).

Following Japan’s surrender in 1945 and Indonesia’s proclamation of independence, the function of *ludruk* underwent a significant transformation. During the revolutionary period, *ludruk* evolved into an effective medium for mobilizing nationalist sentiment. The plays performed emphasized themes of heroism, resistance to colonial domination, and calls to defend independence against Dutch attempts to reassert control over the archipelago (*Nusantara*) (Pratikno & Hartatik, [2023](#)). *Ludruk* troupes toured military headquarters and revolutionary camps, entertaining and motivating communities in equal measure. While maintaining the characteristic improvisational style of *ludruk*, performances were directed toward strengthening moral messages and patriotic spirit.

Entering the era of President Soekarno’s administration—from the 1950s until 1967—*ludruk* acquired a strategic position within national cultural policy. The government regarded *ludruk* as an effective vehicle of political communication for instilling anti-colonial sentiment, national unity, and the ethos of *gotong royong* (Prawoto & Pramulia, [2020](#); Utomo et al., [2023](#)). *Ludruk* performances thus functioned not only as popular entertainment but also as a medium for conveying messages of nationalism and state development. Several *ludruk* troupes even affiliated with cultural organizations such as *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*, which was associated with the Indonesian Communist Party, transforming performances into arenas for disseminating socialist ideas and articulating critiques of capitalism and imperialism (Rachmasari & Permatasari, [2020](#)). The period 1942–1967 therefore demonstrates that *ludruk* transformed from a colonial propaganda medium into an instrument of resistance and subsequently developed into a vehicle of political communication in the formation of Indonesian national identity.

### Restructuring and Depoliticization of *Ludruk* during the New Order Transition (1968–1975)

The events of the G30S/PKI in 1965 produced significant structural consequences for the existence of *ludruk* in East Java. *Ludruk* troupes affiliated with *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* were dissolved and marginalized, resulting in a period of artistic stagnation in various regions between 1965 and 1968. This situation was followed by new policies regulating the presence of *ludruk* groups within the broader framework of New Order political stabilization. Between 1968 and 1970, the Armed Forces, through the Regional Military Command VIII Brawijaya, coordinated the consolidation of several *ludruk* troupes into new units placed under military supervision: (1) former Ludruk Marhaen Surabaya became Ludruk Wijaya Kusuma Unit I; (2) former Ludruk Anoraga Malang became Unit II; (3) former Ludruk Urill A Malang

became Unit III under the supervision of Korem 083 Baladika Jaya Brawijaya; (4) former Ludruk Tresna Enggal Surabaya became Unit IV; and (5) former Ludruk Kartika Kediri became Unit V (Suaka, [2025](#)). These measures indicate a process of institutionalizing *ludruk* within the state apparatus as part of a broader agenda of cultural depoliticization.

Until approximately 1975, *ludruk* troupes remained under the supervision of the Indonesian Armed Forces (*Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia*). The prior experience of political repression rendered it difficult for *ludruk* to fully reclaim its critical function. During this period, *ludruk* was predominantly repositioned as popular entertainment largely sanitized of overt social critique. As a result, younger generations who lacked direct historical experience of the political turbulence of the 1960s tended to perceive *ludruk* merely as comedic or *dagelan* performance. This functional transformation reflects a shift from an art form laden with ideological dimensions to one oriented toward political stability and public recreation.

Developments in media further influenced the trajectory of *ludruk* in subsequent years. Following the establishment of Televisi Republik Indonesia Surabaya Station in the mid-1970s, public access to *ludruk* performances expanded, no longer relying solely on live staging. In the 1980s, *ludruk* began to be recorded on cassette, although the segments most favored by audiences were the humorous *dagelan* portions. Efforts at revitalization emerged, including the organization of *ludruk* competitions by groups such as Bravo Kawula Muda in 1995, aimed at rekindling younger generations' interest in this art form.

Within the socio-cultural context of East Java, *ludruk* functioned in a manner akin to a village *slametan*, serving as a meeting space for diverse social, ethnic, and political identities. During the political instability following 1965, when many *ludruk* troupes were unable to stage performances, Ludruk Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya continued to operate through AM radio broadcasts—at a time when FM technology was not yet available and television remained accessible only to limited segments of society (Eka & Wiyanto, [2025](#); Ronaldi & Lestari, [2025](#)). In the 1970s, the political stability of the New Order encouraged the supervision and fostering of *ludruk* troupes by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*) and the police. Within Ludruk Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya emerged prominent figures such as Cak Kartolo, Ning Tini, Cak Sidik Wibisono, and Cak Bandi Wibowo. The group's popularity contributed to a positive public image of *ludruk* in East Java and facilitated its wider distribution through audio recordings.

The existence of Ludruk Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya reflects a reciprocal relationship between artists and the state. For performers, affiliation with the group provided relative security and greater economic stability compared to independent troupes. For the government, *ludruk* functioned as a medium for disseminating programs and policies to the public. Nevertheless, this structural proximity constrained creative freedom, as group activities were subject to strict supervision. This condition positioned Ludruk Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya as a subject of symbolic violence within its artistic practice, as analyzed by Andriany et al. ([2023](#)).

### **Ludruk in the Ideological Dialectic between *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra)* and *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia (Lesbumi)***

The establishment of *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* in 1950 exerted a significant influence on the development of *ludruk* in Surabaya. This cultural organization, closely associated with the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*), positioned art as an instrument of popular struggle, particularly for workers and peasants. *Ludruk* was mobilized as a medium for articulating social and political issues aligned with lower-class interests. Performances during this period frequently addressed themes of class struggle, social injustice, and the exploitation of marginalized communities. Under Soekarno's leadership, *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* expanded rapidly, reportedly reaching approximately 500,000 members within fourteen years (Suaka, [2025](#)). Its influence propelled *ludruk* beyond the realm of popular entertainment, transforming it into a vehicle for more explicit and ideologically charged social critique.

This transformation became evident in the thematic construction and narrative orientation of performances. Whereas earlier *ludruk* productions emphasized humor and amusement, during this period staged plays increasingly incorporated critiques of political authorities and systems perceived as oppressive. The communicative and accessible character of *ludruk* rendered it an effective medium for disseminating political messages to broad audiences. In this context, each political force of the era established its own cultural institution. The Indonesian National Party (*Partai Nasional Indonesia*) formed *Lembaga Kesenian Nasional*; the Indonesian Communist Party developed *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat*; Nahdlatul Ulama established *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia*; and *Partindo* was

supported by *Lembaga Seni Budaya Indonesia*. Each political group likewise maintained its own newspaper as a channel for publicizing artistic and cultural activities (Ronaldi & Lestari, [2025](#)).

Conversely, *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia*, operating under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama, adopted a different perspective toward *ludruk*. Initially, *ludruk* was regarded primarily as popular entertainment containing elements deemed inconsistent with Islamic moral values, such as coarse language and the practice of *travesty*—female roles performed by male actors. These characteristics limited the organization’s full endorsement of *ludruk*, as it prioritized artistic expressions reflecting Islamic morality.

Subsequent developments, however, reveal a process of negotiation. During the New Order period, when the state promoted the integration of arts within a framework of political stability, *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia* began to acknowledge the possibility of adapting *ludruk* through normative adjustments. One outcome of dialogue between Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya and *ludruk* artists was the decision to allow female performers to appear on stage, while maintaining decorum and moral standards consistent with Islamic teachings. This policy marked a point of compromise between artistic needs and ethical-religious considerations (Afandi & Arifin, [2025](#); Eka & Wiyanto, [2025](#)).

As an organization representing Muslim artists, *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia* also provided guidance to various artistic groups. In the 1970s, for instance, an affiliated troupe in Ngemplak, Undaan, Kudus, led by Mr. Sinun, regularly staged religiously themed plays such as “Dajjal” at community celebrations. This phenomenon illustrates that traditional performing arts could evolve into contextual media for *dakwah* without relinquishing their entertainment value.

In the post-Reform era, *Ludruk* Radio Republik Indonesia Surabaya has continued to sustain its presence as a medium of entertainment, information, and education. The plays performed convey moral messages such as patience, acceptance of destiny, and social ethics aligned with Islamic teachings (Fatimah & Hermawan, [2021](#); Hidayat, [2020](#)). Historically, traditional arts such as *ludruk* have often been employed as political instruments, whether for mass mobilization or propaganda. During Soekarno’s administration, traditional arts flourished in part because they did not yet face intense competition from global cultural products such as commercial radio, cassette recordings, compact discs, and digital video. Government regulations also limited the penetration of foreign culture. In this context, the growth of *ludruk* was sustained not only by cultural inheritance but also by the support and interests of particular political forces, positioning *ludruk* as an arena of dialectical engagement among ideology, religion, and culture.

### Islamic Inculturation as a Process of Cultural Negotiation in *Ludruk* (1975–1998)

The development of *ludruk* between 1975 and 1998 reveals a complex cultural dynamic, including the gradual incorporation of Islamic values into the structure of performance. Religious elements did not always appear in dominant form; nevertheless, their presence was significant in shaping processes of cultural adaptation. Islamic themes were often introduced at the request of patrons or event organizers, for instance through plays conveying moral and religious messages. At the same time, *ludruk* retained its foundational conventions, including the practice of *travesty*—male performers portraying female characters—which remained integral to its artistic tradition (Chusniyah et al., [2025](#)). This phenomenon demonstrates that inculturation unfolded through negotiation rather than through the replacement of traditional structures.

The integration of Islamic values was also evident in the incorporation of *gending pepiling* verses, *qasidah*, and *terbangan* within performances. Several *ludruk* troupes even included *shalawat* as part of their staging, signaling the accommodation of Islamic elements without erasing the identity of *ludruk* as a form of folk art. Public responses to these transformations varied. Moderate Muslim communities tended to accept and support such adaptations, while certain segments of society maintained a more skeptical view of *ludruk*. Among practitioners themselves, the commitment to preserving creative space remained strong; Islamic elements were interpreted and expressed flexibly, thematically, and improvisationally. Over more than two decades, these changes illustrate a pattern of adaptive and contextual integration of Islamic values rather than a dominant or coercive imposition (Hidayat et al., [2021](#)).

The internalization of moral values in *ludruk* does not derive solely from Islamic teachings but also draws upon local cultural traditions that emphasize *budi pekerti* (noble character). Character formation through *ludruk* has been systematically fostered since 2015 in one art studio in East Java, highlighting the strategic function of *ludruk* as a medium

for character education. Since the mid-1970s, Islamic values have become more explicitly integrated into five principal dimensions: narrative construction, characterization, dialogue and *parikan*, visual symbolism, and institutional collaboration with *Lembaga Seniman Budayawan Muslimin Indonesia* and religious institutions. Plays centered on morality and obedience to God became increasingly prominent; protagonists embodied piety and social justice; dialogues conveyed communicative ethical-religious messages; costumes underwent normative adjustments; and institutional interactions strengthened the moral legitimacy of performance.

This process of inculturation reflects an adaptive pattern in which Islamic values were embraced insofar as they did not eradicate *ludruk*'s identity as a popular folk art. The convention of *travesty* was retained as a defining feature yet reinterpreted within more moderate standards of propriety. A symbolic negotiation emerged between *abangan* traditions and increasingly visible Islamic expressions in the public sphere of the New Order. The cultivation of *budi pekerti*—such as respect for parents and teachers—was contextualized within Islamic teachings as a foundation for moral formation. Concrete practices, such as suspending rehearsals at *maghrib* prayer time to allow performers to worship, demonstrate the integration of religious values into the creative process (Khanif & Fatoni, 2025).

In response to challenges of generational continuity, several studios began mentoring children from kindergarten through junior high school while involving parents in the process of moral education. This approach indicates that the preservation of *ludruk* aims not merely to sustain tradition but also to nurture a generation endowed with moral integrity and nationalist spirit. Inclusivity has been emphasized, for example by respecting performers who wear the *jilbab* and adjusting character roles accordingly without imposing changes in personal appearance (Sisnia & Abdillah, 2022). Historically, the relationship between Islam and *ludruk* from 1942 to 2022 may be understood in three stages: the latent stage (1942–1967), the structural negotiation stage (1968–1998), and the institutional-pedagogical stage (1998–2022). This pattern confirms that Islamic inculturation within *ludruk* constitutes a dialectical process shaped by political transformations and shifts in social structure. In Surabaya, *ludruk* has not merely survived the pressures of modernization; it has reconstructed itself as a medium of cultural *dakwah* and character education, demonstrating that religion and culture interact through dynamic negotiation rather than unilateral domination.

## CONCLUSION

Islamic inculturation within the *ludruk* performing art tradition in Surabaya since 1975 affirms that the relationship between religion and culture has not unfolded through patterns of domination, but rather through contextual negotiation and integration. The strengthening of religious consciousness among artists and audiences has encouraged adjustments in language, narrative structure, musical elements, costume design, and stage symbolism, without erasing *ludruk*'s defining character as a satirical and communicative folk art. Islamic values have become internalized within moral messages, character construction, and stage aesthetics, thereby enriching the meaning of *ludruk* as a medium of education and social reflection. This process demonstrates Islam's capacity to engage in harmonious dialogue with local tradition while reconstructing the function of performance art as a form of cultural *dakwah* responsive to social change.

Future research may broaden this inquiry through comparative approaches across different regions to examine variations in the inculturation of Islam within *ludruk* traditions beyond Surabaya. More in-depth ethnographic analysis of the creative practices of younger generations, along with studies on the impact of digital media on the transformation of *ludruk*, are also necessary to understand the trajectory of this art form amid modernization. An interdisciplinary framework combining social history, anthropology of religion, and performance studies would further enrich scholarly understanding of the dynamic relationship between religion and culture within the context of Indonesian traditional arts.

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