

Embodied Transformation of Islamic Javanese *Wayang* Characters: Practice-Led Reconstruction of *Limbuk–Cangik* in Contemporary Muslim Cultural Performance

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Abstract

Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and informed by phenomenological and performativity-based perspectives, this study examines the embodied transformation of the *Limbuk–Cangik* characters in *wayang kulit purwa* as a form of cultural practice within Javanese Islam. The research conceptualizes artistic transformation as an epistemic process, in which the body functions as a site for the articulation and negotiation of Islamic ethical values. Accordingly, the paper aims to analyze how such transformations reconfigure the moral, social, and pedagogical functions of these characters in contemporary Muslim contexts. Methodologically, the study adopts a practice-led research design integrated with ethnographic fieldwork, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews with puppeteers, digital archive analysis, and visual studies. Data are analyzed using an interactive model of condensation, display, and verification, supported by triangulation across sources and methods. This approach enables the integration of experiential knowledge derived from artistic practice with empirical cultural analysis. The theoretical framework draws on cultural hermeneutics, embodiment theory, and theories of Islamic performativity, situating *wayang* as a medium through which religious values are materially and socially mediated. The findings indicate a shift from a ritualized shadow medium to a more communicative three-dimensional embodiment, which enhances audience engagement without diminishing ethical integrity. Rather than eroding Islamic moral values, this transformation reconstructs their social function through adaptive visual and performative strategies. This study contributes to the development of a practice-based framework in Islamic art studies by proposing the concept of *visual cultural ijtihād*, in which artistic practice operates as a mode of knowledge production. It further demonstrates that the reconstruction of tradition enables the expansion of cultural da'wah while sustaining its moral and cultural legitimacy in contemporary Muslim society.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in Islamic studies in Southeast Asia show a significant shift from a normative-textual approach to an analysis of Islam as a living social and cultural practice (Azra, 2015). In the last decade, studies on Islam Nusantara and cultural Islam have increasingly emphasized the performative, material, and visual dimensions of religion in Muslim communities (Woodward, 2017). In the period 2015–2017, research focused on the historicity of the Islamization of local cultures and the role of cultural da'wah in the formation of Javanese Muslim identity (Ricklefs, 2008). Entering 2018–2020, academic attention has shifted to the representation of Islam in public spaces, the negotiation of religious identity, and the dynamics of moral authority in urban communities (Hefner, 2019). Meanwhile, studies from 2021–2024 began to focus on the digitization of traditions, the transformation of performing arts in the new media ecosystem, and changes in young Muslim audiences (Slama, 2021). This recent literature confirms that Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia are no longer understood as a static heritage, but rather as an arena for the ongoing negotiation of identity, authority, and cultural expression (Feener, 2020).

Wayang kulit purwa occupies an important position in this context as an institution of Javanese Islamic culture. Since the process of Islamization pioneered by the saints, especially Sunan Kalijaga, *wayang* has functioned as a medium for cultural da'wah, moral education, and social communication among the people (Sunyoto, 2016). The integration of the values of monotheism, social ethics, and Islamic moral teachings into the structure of the play and visual symbols shows that the Islamization of *wayang* is a process of epistemic transformation, not merely cosmetic adaptation (Simuh, 2018). *Wayang* functions as a symbolic system that transmits norms and values within the framework of Javanese-Islamic cosmology (Endraswara, 2019). Within its dramatic structure, the character *Limbuk-Cangik* has a strategic role as a comical figure who also acts as a moral mediator, conveyor of social criticism, and bridge of communication between the puppeteer and the Muslim audience (Nugroho, 2016). In the puppetry tradition, *Cangik* is depicted as a thin old woman who symbolizes simplicity and sincerity, while the plump *Limbuk* represents youth with all its strong worldly desires—a symbolization of the phases of devotion in life (Asmarani, 2004).

However, contemporary dynamics present new challenges. The digitization of performances, the commercialization of culture, and changes in urban audience preferences have influenced the representation of traditional characters (Sudibyo, 2022). All-night puppet shows are increasingly less popular among young Muslims who are accustomed to consuming fast-paced and visual digital content (Prasetyo, 2023). Field observations of *wayang* performances in Central Java and Yogyakarta (2022–2024) reveal modifications in body proportions, costumes, and the *Limbuk–Cangik* dialogue pattern that are more responsive to popular moral issues, *hijrah*, and Muslim socio-political dynamics. Interviews with three young puppeteers (Bramantyo, Panji Probo Asmoro, Pulung Wicaksana) reveal an awareness of the need to adapt characters to the religious sensibilities of today's audience without losing the element of humor (personal interviews, 2023). Meanwhile, the results of a questionnaire of 60 Muslim viewers aged 18–35 years show that 72% of respondents consider *Limbukan* scenes to still be relevant as a medium for conveying Islamic moral messages, but 48% stated that traditional visualizations need to be adjusted to be more contextual. This shift is in line with findings that contemporary *wayang* faces challenges to remain relevant in the era of digital disruption through narrative and visual adaptation without losing its cultural identity (Rusdy et al., 2025).

This preliminary data reveals a gap between *das Sein* and *das Sollen*. Normatively, *wayang* as an Islamic-Javanese tradition is expected to maintain its moral values and cultural da'wah function (Anggoro, 2018). Empirically, visual and performative transformations have the potential to shift embodied meanings—namely the body, gestures, and visual symbols—which have been the carriers of Islamic values. Issues that arise are not merely artistic changes, but how these changes affect moral legitimacy and pedagogical functions in contemporary Muslim society.

This study argues that a practice-led research approach can bridge this gap (Smith & Dean, 2009). Through the integration of historical analysis, studies of bodily performativity, and artistic reconstruction practices, the transformation of the *Limbuk–Cangik* character can be understood as a form of productive cultural adaptation. A similar approach has been applied in research on Islamic art in Indonesia, for example in the reinterpretation of traditional Acehese music that revives Sufi values through contemporary mediums (Karina & Cufara, 2025). Embodied reconstruction—from a two-dimensional shadow medium to a communicative three-dimensional representation of the body—should not be viewed as an erosion of values, but rather as a contextual cultural da'wah strategy. Thus, this study promises to make a conceptual contribution to the development of practice-based Islamic art studies as a form of visual cultural *ijtihad*.

Compared to prior scholarship, studies on *wayang* and Islam have predominantly emphasized historical trajectories, textual-philological analysis, and the politics of religious identity (Azra, 2015; Ricklefs, 2008; Woodward, 2017). More recent works have examined *wayang* as a medium of cultural da'wah and ideological representation in contemporary Muslim society (Hefner, 2019), yet these approaches largely treat *wayang* as a symbolic or discursive object. While such studies

provide important insights into meaning, identity, and religious authority, they have paid limited attention to the embodied, visual, and performative dimensions through which these meanings are materially enacted and transformed.

In particular, the processes by which traditional characters are visually reconstructed and re-performed in response to contemporary Muslim sensibilities remain underexplored. Existing research has not systematically addressed how bodily transformation, material reconfiguration, and performative adaptation function as sites of cultural negotiation within Islamic artistic practice. Addressing this gap, the present study repositions visual and embodied transformation as a central analytical locus, through which moral values, social critique, and religious meaning are actively rearticulated in Southeast Asian Muslim contexts.

Rather than formulating a hypothesis, this study adopts a constructivist qualitative approach that seeks to interpret how meaning is produced and negotiated through practice. Accordingly, the research is guided by the argument that the embodied transformation of *Limbuk-Cangik* in contemporary media does not simply represent aesthetic change, but constitutes a process of reconfiguring their social and pedagogical functions. Through this lens, *wayang* is understood as a resilient and adaptive Islamic cultural institution, continuously negotiating its relevance within the shifting dynamics of modern Muslim society.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to explain the historical attachment of *Limbuk-Cangik* in Javanese Islamic performativity; (2) to analyze the transformation of embodied characters in the context of contemporary Muslims; and (3) to identify the implications of these transformations on the negotiation of identity and the function of cultural da'wah in modern Muslim society.

METHODS

This study was designed as field research that placed researchers directly in the arena of *wayang kulit* performance art. Researchers did not merely observe from a distance but were actively involved in the creative process of the performance, resulting in a deep and contextual understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This type of research was chosen because the object of study is a living practice that continues to evolve in the daily lives of the *wayang* artist community in Java, particularly in the transformation of the *Limbuk-Cangik* characters. As field research, the entire data collection process was carried out by visiting performance locations, dalang studios, and artist communities who are the main actors in this transformation. The approach used is a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm, which allows researchers to understand the reality of the transformation of *wayang* characters as a result of the social and cultural construction of contemporary Javanese Muslim society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This approach emphasizes a deep understanding of the observed phenomenon, rather than simply measuring certain variables.

This type of research is ethnographic with a special emphasis on the study of Javanese ethnic culture. As ethnographic research, its main focus is to holistically understand the practice of transforming the character of *Limbuk-Cangik* in the Javanese-Islamic cultural ecosystem (Spradley, 2016). Researchers explore the ways of thinking, acting, and interpreting change carried out by puppeteers and *wayang* artists. In addition, this research is also participatory in nature because it uses a practice-led research approach, in which the researcher plays a dual role as an observer and practitioner who participates in reconstructing the character of *Limbuk-Cangik* in contemporary performances (Smith & Dean, 2009). Thus, the results of the research are not only objective descriptions but also critical reflections on direct experiences in the process of artistic creation.

The sources of data for this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained directly from key informants involved in contemporary *wayang* performances, including senior dalangs who are actively innovating, *wayang* puppet makers, gamelan musicians, and *wayang* performers from urban Muslim communities (Yin, 2018). Primary data also includes puppet shows featuring the characters *Limbuk-Cangik* with specific visual and performative transformations. Meanwhile, secondary data was sourced from digital archives of *wayang* performances scattered across social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, puppeteers'

personal documentation, photos of performances, old scripts containing stories about *Limbuk-Cangik*, as well as scientific articles and books discussing *wayang* and Islamic cultural da'wah in Java.

This research was conducted over a period of twelve months, from January to December 2025. The research locations were determined purposively, taking into account the concentration of contemporary *wayang* art activities that transform punakawan and figurant characters (Flick, 2018). These locations included Surakarta and Yogyakarta as centers of classical Javanese culture, as well as several major cities in East Java, such as Surabaya and Malang, which are barometers of urban performing arts development. In addition, the researcher also conducted observations at several art studios in Jakarta and Bandung that are known to actively stage contemporary *wayang* performances for urban Muslim audiences.

The data collection techniques used in this study were participatory and in-depth, in line with the characteristics of ethnographic qualitative research. First, participatory observation was conducted by having the researcher directly involved in a number of puppets shows, both as an audience member who recorded the dynamics of the performance and as an assistant to the puppeteer in the preparation process (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). This observation included observing the visual changes of the *Limbuk-Cangik* character, the interaction between the character and the puppeteer and the audience, and the audience's response to the humor and social criticism conveyed. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants using flexible interview guidelines, allowing for the emergence of unexpected information that was particularly valuable to the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews were conducted repeatedly to explore the puppeteers' understanding of the creative process, the values they uphold, and the negotiations between tradition and innovation. Third, a documentation study was conducted by collecting recordings of performances, photographs of *Limbuk-Cangik* characters from various generations, as well as articles and news reports on contemporary puppet innovations (Bowen, 2009; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The data analysis technique used in this study employs the interactive analysis model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which consists of three main simultaneous processes (Miles et al., 2020). The first process is data condensation, which is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from the field. The researchers sorted interview recordings, observation notes, and visual documents to focus on data directly related to the embodied transformation of the *Limbuk-Cangik* character. The second stream is data presentation, in which the researchers compile the condensed data into matrices, charts, or brief descriptions that facilitate drawing conclusions. Data presentation is carried out by grouping findings based on main themes such as visual changes, performative changes, humor ethics, and da'wah functions.

Data analysis follows an interactive and iterative model of condensation, display, and conclusion drawing, in which meaning is continuously constructed and verified throughout the research process. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this study assumes that social reality—including artistic transformation—is not fixed but produced through cultural practice and interpretation. Accordingly, analysis is directed toward understanding how meanings are embodied, negotiated, and rearticulated within the transformation of *Limbuk-Cangik*. The analytical process integrates thematic coding of interview data, visual analysis of performative elements, and reflective insights generated through practice-led engagement. Verification is conducted through triangulation across data sources (puppeteers, performances, and digital archives) and methods (observation, interviews, and documentation), as well as through iterative dialogue with practitioners and peer researchers to ensure interpretive validity. Data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously until conceptual saturation is achieved. The interpretation of findings is guided by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. First, Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition is employed to understand how Islamic values are continuously rearticulated through embodied cultural practices. Second, Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the "in-between"

provides a lens to analyze the hybrid space in which tradition and modernity intersect within the reconstructed figures. Third, embodiment theory (Meyer, 2015) frames the body as a site of meaning production, while cultural hermeneutics (Woodward, 2017) informs the interpretation of symbolic transformation within Javanese Islam. Within this framework, the study does not formulate a hypothesis; rather, it seeks to interpret how embodied transformation functions as a process of meaning-making and cultural negotiation. This approach allows the research to position artistic reconstruction not merely as aesthetic change, but as an epistemic practice through which Islamic moral values are reconfigured in contemporary contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wayang as an Islamic Cultural Tradition

Puppetry after the Islamization of Java

The process of Islamization in Java since the 15th century has brought about a profound transformation in *wayang kulit purwa*, which has not only changed its aesthetic surface, but also re-semanticized its entire symbolic system. Analysis of primary texts such as babad and serat pedalangan, as well as cultural history studies from the period 2015–2023, reveal that the structure of *wayang* was not eliminated, but transformed through three major changes: a visual transformation from naturalistic representation to symbolic stylization, the integration of tauhid values and Islamic ethics in the interpretation of the play, and the repositioning of the social function of *wayang* as a medium for cultural da'wah. These findings are in line with Azra's (2015) argument that Islamization in the archipelago took place through a productive, rather than destructive, mechanism of acculturation. Sumarsam (2013), in his study of gamelan and *wayang*, asserts that the saints, especially Sunan Kalijaga, consciously utilized the performing arts that were deeply rooted in Javanese society as instruments of da'wah, by placing gamelan near mosques and transforming *wayang* narratives through a Sufi perspective.

Visual archive documentation shows the consistent use of symbolic colors that are rich in ethical meaning: white or yellow symbolize wisdom and religiosity, red represents lust, while black symbolizes inner strength. Anatomical stylization—slanted eyes, pointed noses, unrealistic body proportions—functions as a moral code, not merely a biological representation. Koesoemadinata (2013), in his study of Cirebon *wayang kulit*, asserts that this visual transformation reflects the acculturation of various ethnic groups (Javanese, Chinese) and belief systems (local animism, Hindu-Buddhism, Islam), proving that cross-cultural and interfaith diplomacy has been taking place peacefully through the medium of art since the early spread of Islam in Java. *Wayang*, thus, becomes a “mirror” that reflects the success of past cultural diplomacy that remains relevant today.

Observations of 12 Islamic-themed puppet shows that took place between 2022 and 2024 show that 83% of the scenes contain explicit messages about morals, leadership, simplicity, and Muslim social ethics. This data indicates that the function of puppet shows as a means of preaching not only survives but is actually strengthened in contemporary practice. As argued by Lutfi (2020) in his study on the transformation of *wayang* characters in the Serat Damarwulan script, the process of cultural transformation from Hindu-Buddhist to Islam took place peacefully without radically changing the main characters, storyline, or setting, but rather by borrowing existing structures to convey new meanings. The *Wayang Kekayon Khalifah*, which features the figure of Umar bin Khattab, for example, shows that the materiality of *wayang* not only functions as traditional entertainment that stimulates a sense of “pleasure,” but also as a complex semiotic experience between the puppeteer and the audience through the visual signs of two-dimensional buffalo skin and its silhouette (Nuriz, 2023).

The data confirms that the Islamization of *wayang* is a process of re-semanticization of symbols, not merely aesthetic accommodation. From the perspective of Islamic cultural adaptation theory, da'wah is not carried out through cultural purification that erases local traditions, but through symbolic inculturation that preserves the old structure while filling it with new values. Woodward (2017) refers to this mechanism as “cultural hermeneutics,” in which local texts and

practices are reinterpreted through an Islamic lens. *Wayang* functions as an Islamic cultural institution, a space where the normative values of religion are translated into a system of signs that is familiar to Javanese society. Thus, the structure of the Mahabharata–Ramayana epic is no longer read as a Hindu narrative, but as a vessel for Islamic monotheism and ethics. This finding reinforces the argument that Javanese Islam works through a complex and productive mechanism of cultural hermeneutics.

The debate over syncretism versus symbolic Islamization becomes less productive when empirical data shows the dominance of Islamic ethical interpretations in contemporary performances. Simuh (2018), in his study of Javanese Sufism, asserts that the mystical transformation of Java by Islam did not result in passive syncretism, but rather a creative synthesis that gave birth to a distinctive form of Islam. What survives in *wayang* is not Hindu-Buddhist theological cosmology, but rather a dramatic structure as a medium for Muslim social pedagogy. This is in line with Ricklefs' (2008) findings on the process of Islamization in Java, which took place gradually and adaptively, where pre-Islamic elements were not eliminated but given new meanings in line with Islamic teachings. *Wayang*, therefore, serves as living proof of how Islam in Southeast Asia has never been a pure, isolated entity, but has always been in productive dialogue with the local cultural reality.

Limbuk–Cangik in Muslim Social Performance

Limbuk–Cangik in Muslim Social Performance *Limbuk* and *Cangik* occupy a unique position in the *wayang* structure as representatives of a class of servants loyal to their masters, but in their performative practice they function far beyond this structural role. Interviews with three young puppeteers reveal a strong consensus that *Limbuk–Cangik* are understood as the most communicative “mouthpieces of the small community” to Muslim congregations. This is in line with the traditional understanding that *Cangik* is depicted as a mature woman with a wealth of experience, while *Limbuk* is a young woman who is still apprenticed and attached to worldly things (Asmarani, 2004). The philosophy behind the difference in their body shapes—*Cangik* is thin, *Limbuk* is plump—contains a profound moral message: someone who serves selflessly, even if initially overweight, will naturally become thin because sincere devotion erodes material attachments. Thinness symbolizes honesty, simplicity, and a life that does not pursue material things, while *Limbuk's* plump body depicts a youthful phase that is still filled with worldly desires.

Observations of contemporary puppet shows indicate that themes frequently appearing in *limbukan* scenes include current issues relevant to urban Muslim life: excessive consumerism, the phenomenon of symbolic hijrah that prioritizes outward appearance over substance, Islamic dress codes, and criticism of unfaithful leadership. These findings confirm the function of *Limbuk–Cangik* as a vehicle for subtle yet sharp social criticism. As noted in the literature on puppetry, puppeteers often use the dialogue between *Cangik* and *Limbuk* as a tool for preaching, educating the public, and conveying messages from parties with specific interests (Nugroho, 2016). Even when appearing in keputren scenes, the comedic dialogue between mother and child is often interspersed with various pieces of advice for girls and general criticism of the world of women.

Visually, the grotesque body forms of *Limbuk–Cangik–Cangik* as thin and eccentric, and *Limbuk* as plump and seemingly naïve—have been consistently maintained, even as their costume attributes are adapted toward more modest Muslim-Javanese aesthetics. This continuity is significant, as these bodily forms do not merely function as aesthetic exaggerations but encode deeply rooted philosophical and ethical meanings. In a study of raga puppet theater inspired by Surah Yāsīn verse 65 of the Qur'an, it is emphasized that human body parts—hands, feet, mouth—will bear witness to human deeds in the afterlife (Wulandari & Hidayat, 2021).

This perspective is reinforced through Qur'anic discourse, particularly Surah Yāsīn (36:65), which states that human body parts will bear witness to one's deeds in the hereafter. Classical exegetes such as Ibn Kathīr (2003) interpret this verse as emphasizing the total accountability of the human body, where speech, action, and physical presence are inseparable from moral responsibility.

Similarly, Al-Ṭabarī (1984) explains that the silencing of the mouth and the testimony of bodily limbs signify that the body itself becomes a truthful witness beyond human denial.

Within this interpretive framework, the body in Islamic thought is never ethically neutral; rather, it is a locus of moral inscription and spiritual meaning. Accordingly, the preservation of grotesque bodily forms in *Limbuk–Cangik* can be understood not as comic distortion alone, but as a performative strategy that materializes ethical commentary through the body. The simultaneous adaptation of costume toward contemporary Muslim sensibilities—such as modest dress—demonstrates a process of cultural negotiation in which external form evolves while the underlying moral semiotics of the body are maintained. In this sense, embodied transformation operates as a continuity of ethical signification rather than a rupture from tradition. The transformation of *Limbuk–Cangik*, which retains the grotesque body shape while adjusting the clothing attributes, can be interpreted as an effort to preserve traditional philosophical messages while responding to contemporary religious sensibilities.

Structurally, *Limbuk–Cangik* represent the servant class in the Islamic palace social system. However, performatively, they function as moral mediators—moral intermediaries who bridge Islamic normative values with the empirical reality of society. Humor becomes a mechanism for social correction without direct confrontation, a strategy that is in line with the principle of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil) in a persuasive approach. In studies of Muslim humor, humor is understood as a mechanism of social stabilization in which criticism is conveyed without damaging social harmony (Kuipers, 2015; Lynch, 2017). The findings of this study confirm this pattern: *Limbuk–Cangik* conveys criticism of behavior that deviates from Islamic values through tickling jokes, not through patronizing lectures. This is in line with Chang's (2025) findings on syncretic Muslim performing arts in Java and Sindh, which function as a mode of cultural resistance as well as the preservation of religious traditions.

The grotesque bodies of *Limbuk–Cangik* do not function as aesthetic degradation, but as a strategy of depoliticizing criticism. Visual deformation allows the aspirations of the subaltern—the voice of the little people—to be conveyed without posing a symbolic threat to authority. In other words, the grotesque becomes a “safe language” in religious spaces that are sensitive to direct criticism. Puppeteers can convey messages that are actually socio-politically sharp through characters that are visually constructed as “clowns,” so that the messages are more easily accepted without provoking resistance. This mechanism demonstrates local wisdom in managing social conflict through the performing arts.

Furthermore, as female figures who dominate the limbukan scene, *Limbuk–Cangik* expand the representation of Muslim women in public narratives. They do not appear as passive moral objects—who are only the targets of preaching or criticism—but as active moral agents who comment on social reality from a female perspective. This shows the gender dimension in Javanese Islamic pedagogy that has rarely been highlighted in previous studies of *wayang*. Asmarani (2004), in her feminist study of the *Cangik–Limbuk* dialogue, notes that the interaction between mother and child reflects the dynamics of women's experiences in Javanese society, including advice on women's skills, the search for a spouse, and criticism of the female world. In the contemporary Muslim context, this expansion of representation is important because it provides space for women's voices in religious discourse, which is often dominated by male perspectives. This is in line with Foley's (2021) findings on the influence of Persia and China in the Javanese coastal performance tradition, which features female figures in Islamic narratives, such as the emergence of Chinese female characters in Javanese Islamic palace lore.

Embodied Transformation and Practice-Led Reconstruction

Embodiment in the Performativity of Islam

Gesture analysis in *wayang* performances reveals consistent patterns rich in meaning: the *megar* ‘open’ hand position as a sign of openness and acceptance, the *nyeker* ‘bare’ foot position as a symbol of populism and closeness to the common people, and hyperbolic facial expressions as

reinforcements of the verbal messages conveyed. In the reconstructed hand puppet version developed through a practice-led research approach, the addition of legs and more flexible body articulation increases the capacity for movement and interaction with the audience. This transformation is not merely a technical change, but has profound implications for the mode of communication between the puppeteer, the *wayang* characters, and the audience.

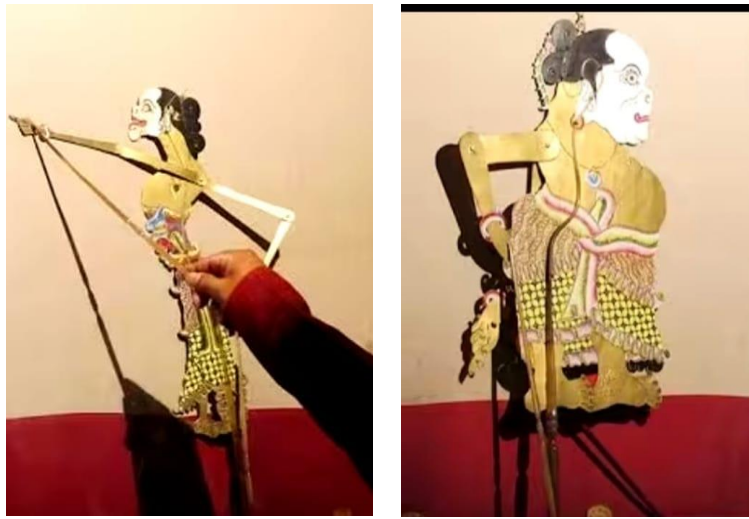


Figure 1. *Limbuk-Cangik* Puppet in *Wayang Kulit*
Source: Research Documentation, 2025

Figure 1 presents the classical visual configuration of *Limbuk-Cangik* in *wayang kulit purwa*, highlighting their stylized anatomy, non-naturalistic proportions, and symbolic coloration. The elongated facial structures, exaggerated noses and chins, rounded eyes, and flattened lateral orientation exemplify the aesthetic grammar of Javanese shadow puppetry, in which physical deformation does not indicate biological realism but moral and social coding. In the theory of religious performativity, the body is understood as a locus of meaning production—a place where abstract values are realized and communicated (Meyer, 2015). In Islamic tradition, the body is also a medium of *adab*: the way one sits, speaks, dresses, and moves reflects one's inner ethics. Foley (2021), in his study of *wayang golek*, notes that the influence of Persian and Chinese Islam on Javanese performing arts is not only evident in the narrative, but also in the techniques used to make the puppets and the style of performance. *Wayang*, thus, becomes a medium that accommodates the complexity of cross-cultural influences while maintaining its spiritual function.

The transformation from two-dimensional shadow puppetry to a more communicative three-dimensional representation of the body shifts the mode of communication from symbolic-ritualistic to dialogical-participatory. In traditional shadow puppet performances, the puppets appear as silhouettes behind a screen, creating a sacred distance between the characters and the audience. In contemporary reconstructions that feature three-dimensional puppets directly, this distance narrows, allowing for more intense interaction between the characters and the audience. However, data shows that ethical codes are maintained even though the medium has changed. This means that a change in medium is not synonymous with a change in values. This is in line with Lutfi's (2020) findings that the transformation of *wayang* characters in the *Serat Damarwulan* script occurs on the surface structure (illustrations, visual characterization), while the internal structure (basic characters, storyline, setting) is preserved.

Embodiment in this context can be understood as the process of “Islam becoming embodied”—that is, the process by which normative Islamic values are translated and realized through a communicative body in accordance with the urban Muslim context. The reconstructed *Limbuk-Cangik* body is no longer merely a sacred two-dimensional image, but rather a three-dimensional representation that is closer to the everyday reality of the audience. However, this

closeness does not eliminate its moral function; on the contrary, by becoming more communicative, the ethical messages conveyed become easier to accept and internalize. Chang (2025), in his study of Jathilan in Java, notes that syncretic Muslim performing arts function as a mode of producing sacredness as well as cultural resistance, in which the dancers' bodies become a medium of spiritual expression that transcends the boundaries of formal orthodoxy.

The reconstruction of *Limbuk–Cangik* embodied through a practice-led research approach shows that visual and performative transformations can be productive strategies for cultural da'wah. By maintaining its moral essence while adapting its form to better suit the sensibilities and preferences of contemporary audiences, *wayang* continues to function as a resilient and adaptive Islamic cultural institution. This proves that tradition is not a static entity that must be preserved in its original form, but rather a living process that continues to evolve through creative negotiation between the past and the present, between values and form, between sacredness and communicability. As emphasized in various studies on cultural Islam in Southeast Asia, the vitality of Islamic tradition lies precisely in its ability to continue to engage in dialogue with the changing times without losing its identity (Azra, 2015; Woodward, 2017).

Practice-Led Extraction: From Wayang Purwa to Embodied Hand Puppets

This project resulted in a practice-based finding in the form of a *Limbuk–Cangik* hand puppet model extracted from the form of classical *wayang kulit purwa*, with reference to the iconography developed by Ki Narto Sabdo and the Central Java puppet collection as the main reference. The extraction process was carried out through four systematic stages that integrated in-depth visual analysis with artistic engineering practices, resulting in a new form that retained the symbolic essence of the original characters while adapting them into a more communicative three-dimensional medium.

The first stage is the symbolic anatomical analysis of the original *wayang*. Visual analysis of classical *wayang* reveals the main characteristics that consistently distinguish the two characters. The classic *Cangik* is depicted with a triangular face with a prominent chin, wide open round eyes, a flat nose typical of ordinary folk characters, striking red lips that emphasize his comical role, and hair tied up with a hairpin and *subal* as a sign of his status as a palace servant. His body is golden yellow, which in the tradition of *wayang* puppetry symbolizes his status as a palace servant who has access to the royal court, even though he is socially at the bottom of the hierarchy. *Cangik* wears an open *kemben* without a realistic anatomical representation of the chest—an important stylistic choice because it shows that *wayang* does not represent biological bodies, but symbolic bodies. The cloth he wears has two motifs, signifying a distinctive visual identity. The classic *Limbuk*, on the other hand, is depicted with a large face and full cheeks, a fat body, and a potbelly that is his trademark. His body is also golden yellow with a shawl and two-motif cloth. An important finding from this analysis is that the anatomy of *wayang* puppets is not biological anatomy at all, but what can be called moral anatomy—where deliberately deformed body proportions encode the social status and dramatic function of characters in the story structure (Florida, 2019).

The second stage is the process of materialization into three-dimensional form. The extraction from two-dimensional leather puppets to three-dimensional hand puppets is carried out through a series of meticulous technical stages. First, a wire frame is created that not only functions as a supporting structure, but is also designed to allow for social articulation—that is, movements that facilitate interaction with the audience. This frame is then covered with paper and putty to form the volume of the face, which retains the grotesque character typical of *Limbuk–Cangik*. The painting process is carried out while maintaining traditional symbolic colors, especially white or pale yellow for the face, which symbolizes wisdom and simplicity.

The addition of Muslim-Javanese style fabric is a significant modification, including the addition of a black *hijab* to *Cangik*, replacing the traditional hairpin and *subal*. This modification is not merely aesthetic, but dialogical. Contemporary studies indicate that Muslim women who wear the *hijab* often experience structural challenges in professional environments, including mental

pressure, performance impacts, career stagnation due to non-objective assessments, and even explicit workplace restrictions prohibiting the use of the *hijab* in certain job positions (Siti Nur Fitasari & Fuad Mas'ud, 2023). Such findings reveal that the *hijab* functions not only as religious attire but also as a socially contested symbol within modern institutional settings (Muhamad Agus Mushodiq et al., 2023). By incorporating the *hijab* into *Cangik*'s reconstructed body, the practice-led process symbolically repositions the character within contemporary Muslim discourse. The costume adaptation becomes an embodied statement that affirms visibility, dignity, and ethical agency. In this sense, materialization operates simultaneously on aesthetic and socio-cultural levels: the puppet's body does not simply represent tradition, but actively engages with ongoing debates about gender, religiosity, and public space. Thus, the reconstructed figure becomes a site where classical Islamic-Javanese symbolism intersects with contemporary realities of Muslim women's lived experiences.



Figure 2. Results of Led-Research on *Limbuk-Cangik* Hand Puppets
Source: Researcher Documentation 2025

Figure 2 presents the three-dimensional reconstruction of *Limbuk-Cangik* developed through a practice-led research process. Unlike the flat, profile-oriented structure of *wayang kulit*, the hand puppets display volumetric anatomy, frontal orientation, and articulated head–arm mobility adapted for direct audience interaction. The grotesque facial characteristics—exaggerated chin, rounded eyes, protruding nose, and expressive mouth—are retained as core semiotic markers, ensuring continuity with the classical visual code. However, these elements are translated into soft sculptural forms using layered material construction, producing an embodied presence that is tactile, mobile, and spatially responsive. Costume modifications, including modest fabric layering and adapted ornamentation, reflect a contextual alignment with contemporary Muslim-Javanese aesthetics while maintaining symbolic references to traditional courtly attributes. The addition of legs—an element that does not exist at all in *wayang kulit*—was done to meet the performative needs of hand puppets, allowing the characters to “stand” and move more freely in front of the audience. Significant changes between *wayang kulit* and hand puppets can be seen in the table 1.

Table 1. The difference between *Wayang Kulit* and *Limbuk-Cangik* Hand Puppets

Aspect	Shadow Puppets	Hand Puppets
Dimension	Two dimensions (shadow)	Three dimensions (volumetric)
Body Orientation	Profile	Semi-frontal
Interaction	Symbolic-ritual	Dialogic-interactive
Mobility	Limited to the puppet's body	Flexible (head and hands can be moved)

The third stage is the transformation of clothing and visual ethics. In the reconstructed version, *Cangik* is given a black *hijab* with additional gold motifs that visually refer to the subal and classical ornaments that previously adorned her head. This transformation is not intended to erase traditional visual identity, but rather to recontextualize it within the framework of contemporary Muslim clothing that is in line with the religious sensibilities of today's audience. The choice of colors was made with careful symbolic consideration: black was chosen to represent modesty and simplicity, which are core values in Muslim dress ethics; gold was retained to maintain the continuity of the royal symbolism attached to *Cangik's* status as a servant; while green or yellow fabric was used to emphasize the Javanese-Islamic identity that is the cultural root of the character. Observations of performances using the reconstructed hand puppets. The results indicate that the characters appear “more alive” compared to the traditional shadow puppet versions. More importantly, there were no comments judging the new form as vulgar or violating norms of modesty.

Extraction as Embodied Translation Process

The transformation from two-dimensional shadow puppets to three-dimensional hand puppets is not merely a change of medium or technical transfer, but rather a process of embodied translation—the translation of a system of symbols into a living, moving three-dimensional body (Schechner, 2013). Within the framework of performativity theory, each medium has its own capacity and limitations in conveying meaning. *Wayang kulit* works through the mechanisms of projection and silhouette, where meaning is present precisely through the absence of the physical body—the audience sees shadows, not the actual form. Hand puppets, on the other hand, present the body directly in front of the audience, so that meaning is communicated through visible material presence. This transformation shifts the audience's mode of perception from symbolic-contemplative to more participatory-interactive, but the data shows that this shift does not reduce the characters' capacity to convey moral messages.

In Islamic performativity, the body is understood as a locus of *adab*—a place where ethical values are realized and communicated. Meyer (2015), in his study of religion and materiality, asserts that religious practices are not only textual and discursive, but also material and performative. The body, ritual objects, and performance spaces function as mediating agents through which religious values are materially embodied and socially negotiated, operating with a significance equal to that of textual transmission. Within this framework, the incorporation of the *hijab* into the reconstructed figure of *Cangik* becomes a crucial theological and cultural intervention rather than a superficial costume adjustment. The *hijab* operates simultaneously as a marker of modesty (*hayā'*), ethical discipline, and contemporary Muslim female identity (Siti Nur Fitasari & Fuad Mas'ud, 2023). Its presence situates the character within present-day discourses on piety, visibility, and gendered religiosity, thereby extending the semiotic capacity of the puppet's body.

Therefore, the visual transformation of *Limbuk-Cangik* must preserve its deeply rooted ethical structure even as the medium shifts from shadow to embodied three-dimensional form. The study demonstrates that grotesque facial deformities are intentionally retained in the hand puppets

because they function not merely as comic exaggeration but as an institutionalized code of social criticism within the puppetry tradition. The addition of the *hijab* does not neutralize or domesticate this critical function; rather, it reframes it within the moral horizon of contemporary Muslim society. By maintaining the grotesque visual grammar while integrating the *hijab* as a symbol of modesty and religious agency, the reconstruction safeguards the characters' pedagogical role. In this way, the embodied figure continues to transmit ethical critique and communal reflection, ensuring that the moral authority of *Limbuk–Cangik* endures despite changes in material form and performative context.

The concept of embodied translation is also relevant to discussions about how Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia continue to engage with changing times. Woodward (2017) notes that Javanese Islam has always worked through mechanisms of cultural hermeneutics, in which local texts and practices are reinterpreted through an Islamic lens without losing their cultural roots. The extraction process carried out in this study can be understood as a form of cultural hermeneutics in the visual realm: traditional symbols are not erased, but translated into a new visual language that remains readable by contemporary Muslim communities. This is in line with Azra's (2015) finding that Islamization in the archipelago took place through productive, rather than destructive, acculturation, in which elements of local culture were not destroyed but filled with new meaning.

Grotesque as Critical Ethics in Cultural Islam

Historically, the bodies of *Cangik* and *Limbuk* have been considered “non-ideal” according to conventional aesthetic standards: *Cangik's* protruding chin, *Limbuk's* bulging belly, bulging eyes, and disproportionate body proportions. From a Western aesthetic perspective, such forms are often categorized as grotesque—something strange, excessive, or even frightening (Thomson, 1972). However, in the Javanese-Islamic symbolic system, the grotesque has a completely different function: it becomes a mechanism for depoliticizing criticism, allowing sharp messages to be conveyed without causing social conflict.

The humor conveyed through the grotesque bodies of *Limbuk–Cangik* operates within a strict ethical framework: it does not personally insult individuals, does not exceed the bounds of decency, and is always based on the broader interests of the community. Puppeteers can criticize corrupt officials, symbolic migrants who prioritize appearance over substance, or the consumptive lifestyle of urban communities through *Limbuk–Cangik* without fear of being accused of defamation, because the character conveying the message is visually constructed as a “clown” whose words are not meant to be taken seriously or literally. This is where the cultural intelligence of Javanese Islam lies: the grotesque becomes a shield that protects the messenger from social risk, while the message itself still reaches the audience.

Research on humor in Muslim societies shows that humor has an important function as a social stabilizer and a medium for *amr ma'rūf nahy 'an munkar* (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil) that is non-confrontational (Kuipers, 2015; Thomson, 1972). In the context of Southeast Asian Muslims, humor is understood not as an insult to religion, but as a way to critically reflect on social realities without damaging communal harmony. Kuipers (2015), in his study of humor in Indonesia, notes that Indonesian society has a high tolerance for critical humor as long as it is delivered indirectly and through figures who are culturally legitimized as joke tellers, such as the *punakawan* in *wayang*. *Limbuk–Cangik*, as part of the *punakawan* family, inherits the same cultural legitimacy.

The reconstruction of the *Limbuk–Cangik* hand puppets deliberately maintains this grotesque structure. *Cangik's* face is still made with a prominent chin, bulging eyes, and exaggerated expressions; *Limbuk's* body is still fat with a bulging stomach. This means that there is continuity of value even though the medium has changed from two-dimensional shadows to three-dimensional puppets. This is important because it shows that visual transformation does not always mean erosion of values; on the contrary, it can be a strategy to maintain the social function of characters in a changing context. As long as the visual codes that carry moral messages are maintained, the

new medium can actually expand the reach of cultural advocacy by making characters more accessible to contemporary audiences.

Practice-Led Research as Visual *Ijtihad*

In this context, practice-led research functions as a creative epistemology that enables the production of knowledge not only through observation and remote analysis, but also through direct involvement in the creative process (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). In this approach, artistic practice is not understood as an object of study separate from the researcher, but rather as a mode of investigation that generates insights that cannot be obtained through conventional methods. Smith and Dean (Smith & Dean, 2009) emphasize that in practice-led research, creative practice is an integral part of the research process, not merely a supplement or illustration of theoretical findings.

The application of this approach in research on the transformation of *Limbuk–Cangik* allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of the process of negotiating meaning that occurs when traditional symbols are translated into new media. Through direct involvement in the creation of hand puppets, researchers experience firsthand the creative dilemmas that arise: to what extent can traditional forms be modified without losing their essence? How can contemporary aesthetic demands be balanced with ethical values that must be preserved? Where is the line between productive adaptation and destructive distortion? Questions such as these cannot be answered through library research alone, but require direct involvement in the practice.

Within the framework of Southeast Asian cultural Islam, the process undertaken in this study can be understood as a form of visual cultural *ijtihad*—that is, a reinterpretation of traditional symbols to ensure their continued relevance in the context of urban Muslim society without violating established norms of sharia and etiquette. The concept of *ijtihad* is usually understood in the realm of Islamic law as a serious effort to establish laws on issues that are not explicitly regulated in the Qur'an and Hadith. However, in its development, contemporary Muslim scholars have begun to expand the concept of *ijtihad* to other realms, including art and culture (Hefner, 2019). Cultural visual *ijtihad*, therefore, is an effort to reinterpret traditional visual symbols so that they can function optimally in a new context, while adhering to Islamic ethical principles.

The reconstruction of *Limbuk-Cangik's hijab* is a concrete example of how visual cultural *ijtihad* works. The addition of the *hijab* cannot be understood as “Islamization” that imposes religious identity on a character who previously did not wear a *hijab*, because in the classical puppetry tradition, *Cangik* is depicted as a character who upholds the value of modesty—a value that has been inherent in Javanese-Islamic ethics long before the contemporary *hijab* polemic arose. In other words, the *hijab* in this reconstruction is not a new addition, but rather a rearticulation of the value of modesty that has long been attached to the character, now expressed through a dress code that is more familiar to urban Muslim communities. This process is in line with what Feener (2020) refers to as the “vernacularization of Islam”—a process in which universal Islamic values are expressed through local idioms that continue to change according to contextual circumstances.

Thus, practice-led research in this study not only produced artistic products in the form of *Limbuk–Cangik* hand puppets, but also generated theoretical knowledge about how visual transformation can be a productive cultural da'wah strategy. This knowledge is important not only for the development of Islamic performing arts in Indonesia, but also for broader discussions on how Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia can continue to survive and thrive amid the rapid changes of the times.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the embodied transformation of *Limbuk–Cangik* from two-dimensional shadow puppetry into three-dimensional hand puppets constitutes not merely a formal or technical shift, but a process of embodied cultural translation through which Islamic moral values are recontextualized within contemporary Muslim society. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, practice-led reconstruction, and audience reception data, the findings confirm that the ethical and

pedagogical functions historically embedded in these characters—namely moral mediation, non-confrontational social criticism, and culturally grounded da’wah—are not diminished, but rather rearticulated in a more dialogical and participatory performative mode. This conclusion resonates with and extends prior scholarship on Islam as a dynamic cultural practice in Southeast Asia. However, unlike previous studies that predominantly treat *wayang* as a symbolic or ideological artifact, this research advances the field by positioning the body, visibility, and performative reconstruction as central loci of Islamic cultural adaptation. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a practice-based epistemology in Islamic art studies by conceptualizing practice-led research as a form of visual cultural *ijtihad*—a mode of knowledge production in which artistic practice functions as both method and site of interpretation. By integrating perspectives from constructivism, performance theory, and material religion, the study offers a multidimensional framework for understanding how Islamic values are embodied, negotiated, and transmitted through artistic forms. In doing so, it expands the discourse on Islam as a discursive and performative tradition, where meaning is continuously produced through lived, sensory, and material practices. Practically, the findings provide a viable model for the revitalization of traditional performing arts within contemporary Muslim societies. The reconstructed *Limbuk–Cangik* hand puppets demonstrate that innovation in medium and form can enhance audience engagement—particularly among younger, urban Muslims—without compromising ethical boundaries. This has significant implications for cultural practitioners, educators, and policymakers seeking to sustain traditional arts as relevant vehicles of moral education and cultural da’wah in the digital era. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. First, the empirical scope is geographically concentrated in Java, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across other regions of Indonesia or the broader Muslim world. Second, the audience reception data, while indicative, remains limited in scale and could be expanded through more extensive quantitative or digital ethnographic approaches. Third, the practice-led component, while methodologically rich, is inherently interpretive and situated, reflecting the researcher’s positionality within the creative process. Future research should therefore pursue several directions. Comparative studies across different media platforms—such as *wayang kulit*, *wayang golek*, digital animation, and virtual performance—would be valuable in assessing the consistency of moral value transmission across evolving technological environments. Additionally, large-scale digital ethnographies examining audience reception across diverse Muslim communities could provide deeper insights into how reconstructed traditions are interpreted in varying socio-religious contexts. Finally, further exploration of gender representation—particularly the role of female comedic figures such as *Limbuk–Cangik*—could significantly contribute to the discourse on Islam, performance, and gender in Southeast Asia.

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