

Berdoa dengan Irama Jawa: Dialog Spiritualitas dan Inkulturasi Gereja dalam Shalawatan Katolik

Praying with Javanese Rhythm: The Spirituality of Dialogue and Church Inculturation in Catholic Shalawatan

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Abstrak:

Fenomena shalawatan Katolik di Jawa merupakan ekspresi nyata dari dialog antara iman dan budaya. Tradisi doa ini, yang berakar pada irama dan bahasa Jawa, mewujudkan bentuk inkulturasi liturgis Katolik yang kontekstual dan tetap terbuka terhadap kearifan lokal. Spiritualitas Katolik dengan demikian dapat dialami melalui shalawatan dan bentuk-bentuk doa berirama yang mendorong dialog antaragama dan antarbudaya. Shalawatan Katolik bukan sekadar adaptasi budaya, melainkan sebuah bentuk dialog spiritual yang mempertemukan iman Kristen, tradisi Islam, dan budaya Jawa. Melalui irama dan bahasa doa, umat beriman mengalami kedekatan dengan Allah yang hadir dalam kebersamaan dan keharmonisan. Pada saat yang sama, kajian ini tidak berasumsi bahwa inkulturasi semacam itu bebas dari masalah. Meskipun praktik ini secara luas dianggap sebagai bentuk inkulturasi yang positif, praktik ini juga menimbulkan ketegangan teologis, perdebatan internal gerejawi tentang batas-batas devosi, dan risiko untuk ditafsirkan sebagai sinkretisme. Cara komunitas Muslim sendiri memaknai praktik ini juga tetap menjadi pertanyaan terbuka, bukan sebuah kesimpulan yang pasti. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini memperlakukan keharmonisan yang dideskripsikan oleh para partisipan sebagai sebuah klaim yang perlu dikaji, termasuk batas-batasnya, dan bukan sebagai suatu kepastian yang sudah terbukti. Spiritualitas dialogis ini menunjukkan bahwa iman tidak perlu berada di atas budaya, melainkan dapat bertumbuh di dalamnya sebagai sebuah perjumpaan timbal balik, dengan tetap memperhatikan batas-batas teologis yang menyertai perjumpaan tersebut. Kontribusi utama artikel ini terletak pada eksplorasinya mengenai shalawatan Katolik sebagai ekspresi hidup dari spiritualitas dialogis dan inkulturasi liturgis dalam konteks budaya Jawa. Kajian ini menyoroti bahwa iman Katolik dapat diekspresikan secara autentik melalui bentuk-bentuk budaya lokal tanpa kehilangan identitas teologisnya. Selain itu, kajian ini mendemonstrasikan bagaimana doa berirama dan tradisi spiritual Jawa dapat menjadi jembatan bagi dialog antaragama, khususnya antara Kristen dan Islam, yang menumbuhkan keharmonisan, pengayaan bersama, dan pengalaman akan Allah yang lebih mendalam dalam kehidupan komunal.

Kata Kunci:

inkulturasi; spiritualitas Katolik; shalawatan; budaya Jawa; dialog antaragama.

Abstract:

The phenomenon of Catholic shalawatan in Java represents a concrete expression of dialogue between faith and culture. This prayer tradition, rooted in Javanese rhythms and language, embodies a contextual form of Catholic liturgical inculturation that remains open to local wisdom. Catholic spirituality can thus be experienced through shalawatan and rhythmic forms of prayer that foster interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Catholic shalawatan is not merely a cultural adaptation, but a form of spiritual dialogue that brings together the Christian faith, Islamic traditions, and Javanese culture. Through the rhythm and language of prayer, believers experience closeness to God, who is present in togetherness and harmony. At the same time, this study does not assume that such inculturation is unproblematic. Although the practice is widely regarded as a positive form of inculturation, it also raises theological tensions, internal ecclesial debate about the boundaries of devotion, and the risk of being read as syncretism. The way Muslim communities themselves perceive the practice likewise remains an open question rather than a settled outcome. This article therefore treats the harmony described by participants as a claim to be examined, including its limits, rather than as a foregone conclusion. This dialogical spirituality suggests that faith need not stand above culture, but may grow within it as a mutual encounter, while remaining attentive to the theological boundaries that such encounters entail. The main contribution of this article lies in its exploration of Catholic shalawatan as a living expression of dialogical spirituality and liturgical inculturation within the Javanese cultural context. The study highlights that Catholic faith can be authentically expressed through local cultural forms without losing its theological identity. Furthermore, it demonstrates how rhythmic prayer and Javanese spiritual traditions can become a bridge for interfaith dialogue, particularly between Christianity and Islam, fostering harmony, mutual enrichment, and a deeper experience of God within communal life.

Keywords:

inculturation; Catholic spirituality; shalawatan; Javanese culture; interfaith dialogue.

INTRODUCTION.

Javanese culture has long been recognized for its openness to external influences while maintaining its distinctive identity. Rather than replacing indigenous traditions, outside cultural elements have blended harmoniously with Javanese values, creating new forms of cultural expression. This process of acculturation can be clearly observed in the sphere of religion, where Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism have interacted with and enriched Javanese spirituality (Geertz, 1960). Among these influences, Islam has played a particularly significant role in shaping religious and cultural practices in Java.

One important example of this cultural and religious interaction is the tradition of *shalawatan*. In Javanese Muslim communities, *shalawat*—prayers and praises addressed to the Prophet Muhammad—are commonly performed during thanksgiving celebrations,

harvest rituals, pilgrimage commemorations, and other communal events. Through the process of acculturation, *shalawatan* has become closely intertwined with Javanese cultural life and is recognized not only as a religious expression but also as a communal and artistic tradition (Woodward, 2011).

Interestingly, the practice of *shalawatan* has also found expression within Javanese Catholic communities. Through liturgical inculturation, Catholic believers in Java have adopted rhythmic forms of prayer inspired by Javanese-Islamic traditions while maintaining their Christian theological identity. In this context, *shalawatan* is not merely understood as a cultural adaptation, but as a spiritual and dialogical encounter between Catholic faith, Islamic tradition, and Javanese culture. The use of local rhythms, language, and artistic expressions allows Catholic spirituality to be experienced in ways that are both contextual and deeply rooted in the lived experience of the people (Bevans, 2002).

Historically, Catholic *shalawatan* developed within communities seeking to strengthen their faith amid social and pastoral challenges. In several Javanese Catholic villages, especially after the social and political turbulence surrounding 1965, pastoral leaders sought creative approaches to sustain communal faith life beyond the limited availability of liturgical celebrations. One such initiative was the introduction of *shalawatan* and local artistic performances into Catholic devotional practices, enabling communities to express gratitude, preserve communal identity, and deepen their faith through familiar cultural forms (Magnis-Suseno, 1997).

Within broader theological and social perspectives, Catholic *shalawatan* also opens a space for interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islamic-Javanese traditions. The practice demonstrates that Catholicism in Java is not isolated from local culture but actively engages with it in a spirit of openness and mutual enrichment. Through rhythmic prayer and communal participation, believers encounter God within togetherness, harmony, and cultural familiarity. This phenomenon therefore reflects a dialogical spirituality in which faith grows within culture rather than standing above it (Schreiter, 1985).

Based on this background, this study seeks to examine how ecclesial inculturation takes place through the tradition of Catholic *shalawatan* in Java and to explore its spiritual and social significance for Javanese Catholic communities. Specifically, this paper addresses three central questions: How does church inculturation occur through the tradition of Catholic *shalawatan*? What forms of spirituality are experienced by believers

when praying through Javanese rhythms? And what impact does this tradition have on the religious and social life of Javanese Catholics?

At the same time, inculturation is not a process that is universally welcomed or free of controversy, and this study deliberately situates Catholic *shalawatan* within these tensions rather than presenting it only as a success story. Theologically, the Church's own documents that encourage inculturation also warn against an uncritical adoption of cultural forms that could blur the boundary between authentic inculturation and syncretism (Schreiter, 1985; Calves, 1986). Scholars of contextual theology have long cautioned that the line between inculturation and syncretism is contested and is often drawn differently by theologians, clergy, and ordinary believers. Within the Indonesian Church itself, the use of Islamic-derived musical forms in Catholic devotion is not uniformly accepted; some clergy and lay Catholics view such borrowing as a dilution of Catholic identity or as a source of confusion about doctrinal boundaries, while others embrace it as legitimate inculturation. Likewise, the reception of the practice by Muslim neighbours cannot be assumed in advance: familiarity with a musical idiom does not automatically translate into approval, and some Muslim observers may regard the Catholic appropriation of *shalawat* as appropriation rather than dialogue. By naming these tensions at the outset, this study seeks to offer a more balanced account that takes both the promise and the contested character of the practice seriously.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an ethnographic and phenomenological orientation to explore the meaning of faith and spiritual experiences related to the inculturation of Catholic *shalawatan* in the Boro Parish communities of Sorotanon and Blumbang. Data were collected through non-systematic participatory observation, in which the researcher attended Catholic *shalawatan* celebrations to observe prayer patterns, communal interactions, devotional expressions, and elements of cultural acculturation within the liturgy (Moleong, 2019). In-depth and flexible interviews were also conducted with group leaders and members to understand their experiences, motivations, spiritual meanings, and communal dynamics in participating in Catholic *shalawatan*. In addition, documentation methods were used to analyze prayer texts, songs, and liturgical materials employed in the celebrations, focusing on theological meanings and forms of cultural inculturation. The data were analyzed through thematic

analysis, following the stages of repeated reading of the transcripts and field notes, line-by-line initial coding, grouping of codes into candidate themes, and review and definition of the final themes against the raw data. An earlier draft described the approach as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); however, because the study draws on prolonged participation in the community and a relatively broad set of informants rather than the small homogeneous sample and idiographic, transcript-by-transcript case analysis that characterise IPA, it is more accurately described as a qualitative descriptive study with an ethnographic orientation. This framing is stated here so that the method is not claimed beyond what was actually carried out.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Boro Parish communities of Sorotanon and Blumbang over a period of several months. Participatory observation was carried out during Catholic *shalawatan* rehearsals and celebrations across multiple sessions, with each celebration lasting approximately two to three hours, allowing the researcher to observe prayer patterns, communal interaction, and the use of gamelan, rebana, and Javanese language within the liturgy. Informants were selected purposively on the basis of their direct involvement in the practice and comprised group leaders, gamelan and vocal trainers, long-standing members, and a parish pastoral figure; the named participants in this article (referred to by pseudonyms such as Mr. Suwito, Mr. Widodo, and Mr. Hadi) are drawn from this group. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were guided by an open interview protocol covering four areas: the participant's involvement in and motivation for the practice, the spiritual meaning they attach to praying in Javanese rhythms, their sense of identity as Javanese Catholics, and their perception of how the surrounding Muslim community responds to the practice. Interviews were conducted in Javanese and Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. The study has clear limitations that are acknowledged in the conclusion, in particular that all informants were Catholic participants and that no Muslim community members were formally interviewed, so claims about interreligious reception remain provisional.

RESULT

Overview of the Catholic *Shalawatan* Tradition

The Catholic *shalawatan* tradition is a form of devotion among Catholics that emerged from a process of acculturation between the Catholic faith, Javanese culture, and

Islamic religious elements that have long existed within Javanese society. In Javanese culture, *shalawat* is closely associated with Islamic tradition as a form of praise and prayer to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and this practice has become deeply rooted in the daily life of the community. Through inculturation, this distinctive Islamic form of praise was adopted, modified, and reinterpreted by Catholics while still preserving its musical and rhythmic nuances, resulting in a new devotional tradition that remains faithful to Catholic teachings while also being familiar to the local culture.

Catholic *shalawatan* represents a living dialogue between the Catholic faith and Javanese culture, as it reflects a respectful encounter between the Gospel and local traditions. Catholic *shalawatan* also becomes an expression of Javanese mysticism in achieving *manunggaling kawula Gusti*, the union between humanity and God, where *kawula* refers to human beings and *Gusti* refers to the Divine (Endraswara, 2018). From the perspective of the Catholic faith, Catholic *shalawatan* contains prayers, praises, thanksgiving to God, and devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints. However, from the perspective of Javanese culture, these prayers are expressed through melodies, language, and styles that are familiar to the Javanese people, resembling the *shalawatan* tradition in Islam.

The following is an example of Catholic *shalawatan*: a prayer asking for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

Nyuwun Padhang Hyang Roh Suci,

Rawuha Roh ingkang Suci, ampeyan Dalem tuweni, manah ingkang sampun kareh, kersanipun ingkang murba. Astanipun Sang Maha Mulia, karya saklangkung wignya, pakaryan Dalam samukawis selangkung sampurna. Maruta napansing Allah, ngilir para tumitah, wit-witan sageda tuwuh, para kewan angkala gesang. Tutuping Sang Maha wikan, ngartosna samukawis tembung, juru basa ingkang mulang, madhangana manungsa umat sadarum. Sorotipun surya langgeng damel padhang ingkang peteng urubing latu murni manasi asepi ing manah. Toya sakti Rohing Allah ngedusi tiyang pitados, aruming sang ganda mulya sumrambah tiyang ingkang resik. Kanjeng Rama kang maringi, Kanjeng putra angintuni, Abdi Dalem sami nyadhong, Paring Dalem Hyang Roh Suci. Enggal rawuh rohing Allah, Ngedhat Ona ing manah kula, Kula pasrah jiwa raga, Kareha roh ingkang suci. Mugi Allah ngaubani, rintan kaliyan dalu, sadega tentrem rahajeng, dumugi ing kamulyan suwarga. Rawuha roh ingkang murba nuweni manah kawula angluberna sih minulya, ing manah paring paduka. Duh paduka Sang panglipur sihing Allah ingkang linuhur, tukung gesang tresna mubyar nikmat lan akarya lebar. Asta Dalem Sang Trimulya, anurunaken sih sapta. Kang digadhang mring Hyang Rama ingkang asung pamicara. Budi ulun nyuwun padhang, manah nyuwun katresnan, badan ringkih nyuwun rosa. Kakiatna kang santosa. Mengasah ulun tinebihna, lan kawula tinentremna, amrih setya mring paduka, boten dhawah ing bebaya. Nyuwun uning mring Hyang Rama, tuwin dhateng

Sang Hyang Putra, lan Paduka Hyang Roh Suci. O, kawula yun ngakeni, minulyakna Allah Rama, Putra kang wus wungu seda, lan Roh Suci Sang Panglipur ing salami-laminipun. Amin.

Theologically, Catholic *shalawatan* is rooted in the principle of the Incarnation, namely that God is present in human history and culture through Jesus Christ. This theological framing, however, is best read as the interpretive lens for the participants' own accounts rather than as the finding itself. Through Catholic *shalawatan*, the Word of God is proclaimed through Javanese music and language. For the participants themselves, this is described less in doctrinal terms than in the language of belonging. A gamelan trainer recounted how members who once felt that Latin or formal Indonesian hymns were "not quite ours" began attending more regularly once prayers were sung in Javanese; the rehearsal evenings, he noted, became as important as the celebration itself. A longtime member explained that what drew her was not a theological argument about the Incarnation but the recognition that the rhythm sounded like the music she had grown up with at village gatherings. Mr. Suwito, who is involved in pastoral leadership, framed the choice in practical terms: *shalawatan* was adopted so that the Church "could become closer to the Javanese people," and he measured its success by whether ordinary members felt able to pray in their own idiom rather than by its conformity to any document. These accounts indicate that, for participants, the value of the practice lies primarily in lived familiarity and ownership, with theological justification offered afterwards rather than as the starting point.

Furthermore, inculturation through Catholic *shalawatan* opens a space for dialogue between the Catholic faith and Javanese culture, as well as with Islamic traditions that form part of the social environment of the community. In the pluralistic context of Indonesia, this tradition serves as a bridge of love and a living witness of faith. It demonstrates that the Gospel can grow within every culture without losing its essential truth. Therefore, Catholic *shalawatan* is not merely a devotional practice but also a form of contextual evangelization that presents the Church as a friendly, open, and welcoming community capable of manifesting God's love through the language and cultural expressions of local society.

The Catholic *shalawatan* tradition is a concrete example of this spirit, in which forms of praise associated with Islamic and Javanese culture are reinterpreted in the light of the Catholic faith. Although outwardly similar to the Islamic *shalawatan* tradition, its

content and meaning are rooted in Christian faith, namely prayers and praises directed to Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. In this way, believers are able to experience their faith in a more personal and contextual manner through symbols, language, and rhythms that are familiar within their culture.

Catholic *shalawatan* has developed particularly in the regions of Central Java and Yogyakarta, including Boro Parish, where Catholics live side by side with Muslim communities. In these areas, Catholics have found that the *selawat* style, which employs traditional Javanese rhythms, tambourines (*rebana*), drums (*kendang*), and gamelan instruments, serves as an effective medium for expressing faith. Although its outward form resembles Islamic *shalawat*, the prayers and praises are directed toward Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. This allows Catholics to pray in a manner that is deeply connected to their cultural identity while also demonstrating respect and openness toward the religious traditions that flourish around them.

Historically, the emergence of Catholic *shalawatan* reflects a dynamic and adaptive faith. This tradition did not originate as part of the official liturgy of the Church, but rather grew from the devotional practices of the faithful as an expression of everyday faith. The use of the Javanese language, the melodic structure of Catholic *shalawatan*, and cultural symbols not only make prayers easier to understand and internalize, but also serve as a means of deepening local spirituality. Thus, Catholic *shalawatan* represents a concrete manifestation of the principle of inculturation: the Gospel encounters culture, and culture enriches the way believers come to know and praise God. This tradition also demonstrates that faith is not static, but living, growing, and rooted within the cultural context of the faithful.

In addition to enriching the prayer life of the faithful, Catholic *shalawatan* also possesses social and dialogical dimensions. This tradition serves as a bridge of harmony between Catholics and Muslims because its musical forms and devotional style feel familiar to both communities. In various events such as nights of praise, cultural activities, or interfaith gatherings, Catholic *shalawatan* can become a space for peaceful encounter and mutual respect for differences. In this way, Catholic *shalawatan* functions not only as a religious expression but also as a medium for strengthening tolerance, harmony, and cultural appreciation within Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Church Inculturation Through Catholic *Shalawatan*

The Encounter Between the Gospel and Javanese Culture

Inculturation is the effort to present the message and values of the Gospel in forms and ways that are appropriate to each culture so that faith and Christian life may be fully integrated (John Paul II, 1990). The Church does not merely adopt cultural elements externally, but also transforms them into means of proclaiming the faith that are deeply rooted in the life of the people. This is in line with *Gaudium et Spes* no. 57, which emphasizes the importance of the Church reading the signs of the times and understanding cultural dynamics as part of its salvific mission (Second Vatican Council, 1965). In Catholic *shalawatan*, Javanese rhythms, local language, and traditional musical patterns are embraced as vehicles for communicating the Word of God in a way that is closer and more acceptable to the faithful. As emphasized by Pope Paul VI, the Gospel must reach the deepest values of culture so that the proclamation of faith may touch the hearts of people completely (Paul VI, 1975).

Through Catholic *shalawatan*, the Church becomes present with a face that embraces Javanese culture without eliminating the essence of Christian teaching. Music and cultural symbols familiar to the community are combined with Christian prayers, enabling the faithful to experience that the Catholic faith can be lived out through their own cultural expressions. This encounter represents a concrete form of the incarnation of the Gospel in daily life, where the Word of God becomes alive through the rhythms and sentiments of local culture. Mr. Suwito emphasized that Catholic *shalawatan* was chosen so that the Church could become closer to the Javanese people. Furthermore, Catholic *shalawatan* demonstrates the Church's effort to communicate the Gospel message through forms that are most familiar to the faithful. Thus, Catholic *shalawatan* becomes a harmonious meeting point between Christian faith and the richness of Javanese culture.

The Experience of Identity as Javanese Catholics

The tradition of Catholic *shalawatan* shapes a new experience of identity as Javanese Catholics, namely an identity that integrates the Catholic faith with local culture. Through Catholic *shalawatan*, believers feel that they can be Catholic without losing their identity as Javanese people. Rhythms and musical patterns that are closely connected to their daily lives make prayer more meaningful and easier to internalize. Mr. Widodo explained that prayers sung in this form feel "*luwih nyantol, luwih mlebu ati*" (more deeply

attached and more deeply felt in the heart), showing that Javanese cultural expression actually deepens the experience of faith.

The identity of being Javanese Catholics is also reflected in the pride felt by the faithful when Scripture, sung in the style of Catholic *shalawatan*, can be heard by the wider community, including Muslim neighbors. This pride is not merely about cultural appearance, but about reinterpreting faith through a medium that has long been part of Javanese social life. As stated by Pope John Paul II, inculturation is the process of integrating faith with cultural realities without destroying the identity of that culture (John Paul II, 1990). In this context, the faithful discover that being Catholic does not mean abandoning their cultural roots, but rather living them out in the light of the Gospel. Therefore, Catholic *shalawatan* strengthens the identity of believers as culturally rooted Catholics who remain faithful to Christ.

The Spiritual Meaning of the Faithful in Javanese Rhythm

Inner Spiritual Experience

The inner spiritual experience of the faithful emerges when Church prayers are sung through Javanese musical patterns that have long been embedded in their daily lives. Traditional rhythms combined with Catholic praises create an atmosphere that is gentle, peaceful, and full of emotional depth, which is characteristic of Javanese spirituality (Endraswara, 2018). Mr. Widodo stated that prayers sung in this way feel “*luwih nyantol, luwih mlebu ati*” (more deeply attached and more deeply felt in the heart), indicating that familiar musical elements allow the faithful to experience a deeper closeness to God. The two key terms in this statement deserve closer interpretation, because they carry meanings that a literal translation does not fully convey. *Nyantol* literally means “to catch” or “to hook,” so that a prayer that is *luwih nyantol* is one that lodges in memory and lingers after the celebration ends; the words stay with the believer rather than passing by as unfamiliar sound. *Mlebu ati*, “entering the heart,” points to something deeper in Javanese spirituality, where *ati* (the heart) is understood not merely as the seat of emotion but as the inner centre where a person genuinely receives and assents to something as their own. To say a prayer *mlebu ati* is therefore to say that it has moved from external recitation to interior appropriation. This is significant because it marks a contrast that participants themselves draw with ordinary liturgical hymns. A standard hymn in Latin or formal Indonesian may be theologically correct and dutifully

sung, yet for these believers it can remain at the level of the mouth rather than the heart, something performed rather than felt. The Javanese rhythm, by contrast, is described as collapsing the distance between the worshipper and the words: because the idiom is the one they think and feel in, comprehension and affect arrive together rather than requiring translation. The difference these participants identify is thus not aesthetic preference but a shift in the locus of prayer, from cognitive recitation in a borrowed register to felt prayer in a native one. Through these familiar rhythms, believers enter into a more vivid and personal spiritual experience, where prayer is not only spoken but also deeply felt within the heart. This experience demonstrates that cultural symbols recognized by the faithful can open deeper spiritual spaces within the process of faith inculturation (John Paul II, 1990).

A Sense of Unity with Culture

The meaning of spirituality is also reflected in the sense of unity between the faithful and the culture that shapes their identity as Javanese people. When Catholic *shalawatan* prayers are performed using local language and rhythms, believers feel that there is no separation between being Catholic and being Javanese. Mr. Widodo expressed, “*yen nganggo irama Jawa kuwi, aku rumangsa luwih cedhak karo Gusti*” (when using Javanese rhythms, I feel closer to God), showing that traditional music becomes a bridge connecting faith with their cultural roots. The rhythms, language, and distinct Javanese nuances that surround Catholic *shalawatan* allow the faithful to feel that their faith grows from the same cultural soil rather than being something foreign. Thus, Catholic *shalawatan* strengthens both spiritual closeness and the sense of identity within the context of Javanese culture (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

The Meditative Atmosphere of Javanese Tradition

The soft, repetitive, and harmonious rhythms of Catholic *shalawatan* create a meditative atmosphere of prayer similar to that found in Javanese musical traditions such as *macapat* or spiritual *tembang* (Endraswara, 2018). This atmosphere provides space for the faithful to enter into inner silence, to contemplate prayer without haste, and to experience peace within the slow-flowing rhythms. Mr. Hadi described this experience as “*suasana sing damai banget*” (a deeply peaceful atmosphere), which arises when Javanese rhythms become an entry point into a calm and profound religious experience. He further

explained that the meditative atmosphere is created through gentle and repetitive rhythms that lead them into inner silence, producing a sense of peaceful spiritual harmony. This meditative atmosphere strengthens the quality of prayer not merely as a verbal activity, but also as a contemplative process that touches the heart. Therefore, Javanese rhythm serves not only as an aesthetic element, but also as a spiritual structure that facilitates silence, reflection, and union with God (Paul VI, 1975).

The Impact of the Catholic *Shalawatan* Tradition on the Faith and Social Life of Javanese Catholics

Deepening the Experience of Faith

The Catholic *shalawatan* tradition has proven to deepen the faith experience of Javanese Catholics because prayers sung in Javanese rhythms feel more alive, touching, and easier to internalize. Mr. Suwito emphasized that Catholic *shalawatan* prayers are more moving when sung rather than simply recited, showing that the use of Javanese rhythms and language in this devotion helps the faithful enter into a more personal and heartfelt experience of prayer. For believers who were previously familiar with the *shalawat* tradition from an Islamic background, Catholic *shalawatan* becomes a bridge that makes them feel more connected to the Church's way of praising God. Furthermore, the faithful feel proud because through Catholic *shalawatan*, the message of Sacred Scripture can be heard not only by Catholics but also by the surrounding community. This demonstrates that Catholic *shalawatan* not only deepens inner spiritual experience but also broadens the contextual proclamation of faith in everyday life (Paul VI, 1975).

Community Fellowship

In addition to enriching spiritual experience, Catholic *shalawatan* also has a strong social impact in strengthening relationships among parish members. Mr. Suwito explained that Catholic *shalawatan* activities make the faithful "*lebih guyub karena sering latihan bareng, nyiapke gamelan, dan saling bantu kalau ada acara*" (more united because they often practice together, prepare the gamelan, and help one another during events). Activities such as rehearsals, musical preparation, and collaborative work create warm spaces of interaction and strengthen the sense of togetherness among community members. The involvement of many individuals, including gamelan instructors and vocal trainers, demonstrates that Catholic *shalawatan* is not only a spiritual devotion but also

a collective cultural effort that nurtures a sense of belonging. This tradition revives the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity, thereby strengthening social relationships and communal unity within the Body of Christ (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

Interreligious Dialogue

The impact of Catholic *shalawatan* is felt not only within the internal life of the Church but also in relationships with the surrounding community, especially Muslims. The process of inculturation opens opportunities for interreligious dialogue and strengthens the spirit of tolerance (John Paul II, 1990). Mr. Widodo mentioned that Muslims often “*ikut mendengarkan dan tidak merasa asing, karena iramanya sama seperti yang biasa mereka dengar*” (listen along and do not feel unfamiliar because the rhythms are similar to what they usually hear). The rhythms of Catholic *shalawatan*, which are familiar to both Catholic and Muslim Javanese communities, create an atmosphere of acceptance and emotional closeness that reduces religious barriers. It is important, however, not to overstate this evidence. What the data directly support is musical familiarity and the absence of a sense of strangeness, reported by Catholic informants on the basis of their own observation of Muslim neighbours. Familiarity of this kind is a precondition for encounter, but it is not by itself equivalent to dialogue, mutual understanding, or active interreligious respect, which would require sustained reciprocal engagement and the articulated perspective of Muslim participants. Because no Muslim community members were formally interviewed in this study, claims that the practice produces interreligious dialogue should be read as a plausible interpretation reported from the Catholic side rather than as a documented two-way exchange. Stronger evidence, such as interviews with Muslim residents and local Muslim leaders and observation of actual cross-community interaction at shared events, would be needed to establish that familiarity has in fact developed into dialogue. Within these limits, this tradition can be described as a gentle medium of cultural encounter that may foster warmer, more open, and respectful relationships. Thus, Catholic *shalawatan* may contribute to maintaining social harmony, strengthening tolerance, and building bridges of encounter between two faith communities in daily life, while recognising that confirming these effects would require evidence from the Muslim community itself.

Catholic *shalawatan* also becomes a living space for dialogue with Islamic tradition because, in form, it resembles the *shalawat* that has long been known within Javanese

Muslim culture. The use of rhythms, chants, and similar musical patterns makes this tradition feel familiar to the surrounding community. Mr. Suwito explained that Catholic *shalawatan* serves as a bridge of love and interreligious dialogue because its musical form and devotional style are familiar to both groups. This creates a gentle space for dialogue. Such dialogue does not mix religious beliefs, since the content of Catholic *shalawatan* prayers is directed toward Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. However, its form of expression respects the religious traditions that exist within the surrounding environment. The Church does not alter the essence of its teachings, but rather adapts the way they are expressed so that they may be more readily received by the faithful. This process reflects the principle of inculturation: the Gospel is presented in forms understood by society while still preserving its essential truth (Paul VI, 1975). Catholic *shalawatan* therefore becomes a peaceful meeting point between two great traditions—Islam and Catholicism—that share spiritual values such as love, simplicity, and reverence for God. Consequently, Catholic *shalawatan* is not only a Catholic devotion, but also a form of cultural dialogue that strengthens tolerance and social harmony within Javanese society.

DISCUSSION

Inculturation as the Encounter Between the Gospel and Javanese Culture

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Catholic *shalawatan* tradition represents a concrete form of Church inculturation within the context of Javanese culture. Inculturation is not merely the external adoption of cultural elements, but rather a dynamic process through which the Gospel encounters local culture so that faith may be lived and experienced more deeply within the daily life of believers (John Paul II, 1990). In the Catholic *shalawatan* tradition, cultural elements such as Javanese language, traditional melodies, gamelan music, rebana, and local musical patterns are used as media for expressing Catholic prayers, praises, and spirituality. The results reveal that the faithful do not perceive Javanese culture as something opposed to Catholic faith, but instead as a meaningful bridge that helps them experience closeness with God. This finding supports the teaching of John Paul II (1990), who emphasized that inculturation involves integrating Christian faith with cultural realities without destroying the identity of that culture. Therefore, the Church appears not as an institution that eliminates local

traditions, but as a faith community that values and embraces the cultural identity of its people.

Catholic shalawatan also demonstrates that the Gospel can be proclaimed through symbols and expressions already familiar within Javanese society. Although its musical form resembles Islamic shalawat traditions, the theological content remains centered on Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Consequently, the process that occurs is not syncretism, but contextual adaptation in expressing Christian faith in ways that are culturally meaningful and spiritually accessible. These findings are consistent with the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* no. 57, which emphasizes that the Church must read the signs of the times and understand cultural dynamics as part of its salvific mission (Second Vatican Council, 1965). The Church cannot proclaim the Gospel effectively if it remains detached from the cultural realities of the faithful. Within Javanese society, Catholic shalawatan becomes a form of contextual evangelization that allows the Church to appear more approachable, open, and relevant.

Reading these findings alongside other studies of inculturation in Indonesia helps clarify both what is distinctive about Catholic shalawatan and where its difficulties lie. Tukan (2021), for example, examined the inculturation of the *dolò-dolò* tradition from a secular artistic form into the Catholic liturgy and showed that incorporating local performance into worship can deepen participation, but also that such moves provoke debate over how far a once-secular or non-Christian form can be brought into liturgical space without distorting its meaning. The present study echoes the first finding and extends the second: shalawatan differs from *dolò-dolò* in that its source form is not merely secular but explicitly tied to another religion's devotion to the Prophet Muhammad, which sharpens precisely the boundary question that this article's introduction raised and that some Catholics in Java contest. Maeja (2023), reviewing the problems of liturgical music in the Indonesian Church, argues that inculturated music succeeds pastorally only when it is theologically and aesthetically integrated rather than simply borrowed; the accounts of participants here, who value shalawatan for interior appropriation (*mlebu ati*) rather than novelty, are consistent with that claim while also showing that integration is experienced unevenly and is not automatic. Finally, work on Islam-Catholic relations such as Andika and Mubarak's (2024) reading of Magnis-Suseno's thought frames interreligious dialogue as a demanding ethical and intellectual practice of mutual recognition, not merely shared atmosphere. Compared with that

benchmark, the dialogue claimed for shalawatan in this study remains at an early, largely affective stage of familiarity; situating the finding against this literature makes clear that it is a starting condition for dialogue rather than its achievement, and indicates the further evidence that would be needed to substantiate a stronger claim.

The Experience of Identity as Javanese Catholics

The findings further indicate that the Catholic shalawatan tradition strengthens the identity of believers as Javanese Catholics. The faithful feel that they are able to remain authentically Javanese without losing their Catholic identity. The use of Javanese language and traditional rhythms makes prayer feel closer to everyday life, enabling believers to internalize their faith more naturally and emotionally. Statements from participants such as “luwih nyantol, luwih mlebu ati” (more deeply attached and deeply felt in the heart) illustrate that religious experiences become more meaningful when expressed through one’s own cultural heritage. This finding suggests that culture is not merely an aesthetic addition to religious life, but an essential dimension in shaping religious identity. In this context, Catholic shalawatan enables believers to integrate cultural identity and Catholic faith harmoniously.

Furthermore, the faithful expressed pride in witnessing that their prayers and praises could be appreciated by the surrounding community, including Muslim neighbors. This demonstrates that the Catholic Church is not isolated from Javanese social life, but instead becomes part of the broader cultural environment. Such findings support the view that inculturation allows faith to grow organically within the social and cultural realities of believers (Paul VI, 1975). The study also highlights the psychological and spiritual significance of contextual faith expression. When faith is lived through familiar cultural forms, believers feel more accepted, more connected to the Church, and more capable of expressing their spiritual experiences authentically. Consequently, local culture becomes a source of spiritual strength that enriches the faith life of the community.

The Spiritual Meaning of Javanese Rhythm

This study found that Javanese rhythms within Catholic shalawatan possess profound spiritual meaning for the faithful. The gentle, repetitive, and harmonious musical patterns create a meditative atmosphere that helps believers enter deeper

experiences of silence, contemplation, and prayer. Music functions not merely as artistic accompaniment, but as a spiritual medium that leads believers into an encounter with God. These findings align with the characteristics of Javanese spirituality, which emphasize inner peace, harmony, and depth of feeling (Endraswara, 2018). Within Javanese tradition, music and poetic chants are often used as instruments of contemplation and self-reflection. When these cultural expressions are integrated into Catholic prayer, believers experience their faith in ways that feel more alive, meaningful, and emotionally touching. Participants described the atmosphere created through Catholic shalawatan as “suasana sing damai banget” (a deeply peaceful atmosphere), reflecting how Javanese rhythms facilitate a profound spiritual experience. The slow and repetitive rhythms allow believers to focus more attentively on prayer and contemplate the meaning of faith more deeply. Therefore, Javanese cultural elements do not merely beautify worship practices but significantly enrich the spiritual quality of prayer. Additionally, the use of the Javanese language strengthens emotional and spiritual engagement because one’s mother tongue carries deep personal and cultural meaning. This finding confirms that contextual spirituality plays an important role in deepening the experience and internalization of faith.

The Impact of Catholic Shalawatan on the Faith Life of Believers

The findings reveal that Catholic shalawatan has a positive impact on the faith life of Javanese Catholics. Believers stated that prayers sung in Javanese rhythms are easier to internalize than prayers that are merely recited verbally. Traditional music and local language help create a more personal and emotionally engaging prayer experience. Catholic shalawatan also functions as an effective medium for evangelization. Through forms of praise that are culturally familiar to Javanese society, biblical messages become more accessible and understandable to the faithful. As Paul VI (1975) emphasized, evangelization becomes effective when the Gospel penetrates the deepest values of culture. In this context, Catholic shalawatan enables the Catholic faith to feel more integrated with daily life and local identity.

Moreover, Catholic shalawatan assists believers who were previously familiar with Islamic shalawat traditions in feeling more comfortable practicing Catholic devotion. Familiar musical forms create emotional continuity, reducing feelings of alienation within Church worship practices. This finding suggests that inculturation serves as an effective

pastoral approach in accompanying the spiritual journey of believers. The study further indicates that contextual forms of faith expression encourage greater participation in Church life. When believers feel that their culture is respected and embraced, they become more actively involved in spiritual activities and community life. Therefore, Catholic shalawatan not only enriches worship practices but also strengthens the overall faith experience of the faithful.

Social Impact and Community Solidarity

This study also found that Catholic shalawatan has a strong social impact in fostering community solidarity. Activities such as rehearsals, preparation of musical instruments, and collaborative participation in Church events create closer relationships among parishioners. These communal activities nurture values of mutual cooperation, togetherness, and social belonging. The involvement of various individuals in Catholic shalawatan demonstrates that this tradition is not only spiritual but also social and cultural. Believers learn to work together, support one another, and strengthen interpersonal relationships through collective participation. Consequently, Catholic shalawatan becomes a medium for reinforcing fellowship within the Church community.

These findings resonate with the Church's understanding of the Church as *communio*, namely a communion of believers united in faith and fellowship (Second Vatican Council, 1965). Catholic shalawatan illustrates how cultural practices can strengthen social relationships and deepen communal identity within the Body of Christ. In addition, the tradition involves participants from different generations, ranging from young people to older adults. This intergenerational participation contributes to cultural preservation while also strengthening relationships among members of the community. Therefore, Catholic shalawatan possesses not only religious significance but also social and educational value.

Catholic Shalawatan as a Medium of Interreligious Dialogue

One of the most significant findings of this research is that Catholic shalawatan functions as an effective medium of interreligious dialogue, particularly between Catholics and Muslims within Javanese society. Musical forms similar to Islamic shalawat traditions create familiarity and reduce social distance between the two religious communities. Muslim communities do not perceive Catholic shalawatan as foreign

because its rhythms and musical structures resemble those commonly heard in Islamic devotional practices. This familiarity creates an atmosphere of openness, acceptance, and mutual respect among different religious groups. Within Indonesia's pluralistic society, such traditions hold significant value for strengthening tolerance and social harmony.

The dialogue that emerges through Catholic shalawatan is not a blending of religious doctrines, but rather a dialogue of culture and humanity. The Church maintains the essence of Catholic teaching while expressing faith through cultural forms understood by society. This process reflects the principle of inculturation in which the Gospel is communicated through culturally meaningful expressions without compromising its essential truth (Paul VI, 1975). The findings demonstrate that culture can become a meeting point that enables communities to accept differences more openly and respectfully. Thus, Catholic shalawatan contributes significantly to maintaining social harmony and building bridges of peace between religious communities in Javanese society.

The Relevance of Catholic Shalawatan for the Contemporary Church

The Catholic shalawatan tradition demonstrates the importance of contextual and culturally relevant pastoral approaches within the contemporary Church. Amid rapid social change and modern challenges, the Church cannot rely solely on universal forms of evangelization without considering the cultural realities of local communities. Catholic shalawatan provides evidence that local culture can become an effective medium of evangelization capable of touching the hearts of believers more profoundly. The tradition also shows that the Church can remain inclusive and dialogical without losing its Catholic identity.

Within Indonesia's multicultural context, inculturated practices such as Catholic shalawatan are highly relevant because they strengthen both religious identity and social harmony. The Church is called to continue appreciating local cultural richness as part of God's work within human life. Therefore, Catholic shalawatan should be understood not merely as a religious-cultural heritage, but also as a contextual, dialogical, and pastoral expression of the Church in contemporary society. This tradition demonstrates that faith grows more deeply and authentically when rooted within the culture of the people who live it.

CONCLUSION.

Catholic *shalawatan* represents a tangible expression of inculturation and faith dialogue within the context of Javanese culture. Through the use of Javanese language, melodies, and cultural symbols, Catholic communities are able to express their faith deeply and contextually without losing the essential teachings of the Church. This tradition demonstrates how the Gospel can truly live within local culture—not merely by adapting to it, but by inspiring and enriching the religious expressions of the people. Consequently, Catholic *shalawatan* becomes a form of devotion that offers a warm, familiar, and grounded spiritual experience, allowing believers to encounter the presence of God through language and rhythms that deeply touch the heart.

Furthermore, Catholic *shalawatan* reflects the spirit of a Church that is open to interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Within the pluralistic society of Java, this tradition serves as a bridge of love between the Catholic faith and Islamic traditions that are deeply embedded in the social life of the community. Catholic *shalawatan* does not blur or combine religious beliefs; rather, it affirms that the love of Christ can be expressed through the richness of local culture. Therefore, Catholic *shalawatan* stands as a symbol of dialogical spirituality that nurtures peace, brotherhood, and unity amid diversity, while also bearing witness to the fact that the Christian faith is capable of taking root and flourishing within Javanese society.

These conclusions should be read in light of the study's limitations. The research was conducted with a limited number of informants in two communities of a single parish, so the findings are not statistically generalisable and describe a particular local case rather than Catholic *shalawatan* as a whole. All informants were Catholic participants in the practice; no Muslim community members were interviewed, which means that claims about interreligious dialogue rest on Catholic perceptions and remain provisional. The study is also interpretive and reflects the researcher's own involvement in the communities observed. Finally, although an earlier version of this work described its method as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the design is more accurately a qualitative descriptive study with an ethnographic orientation, and the analysis was thematic rather than the idiographic case-by-case procedure that full IPA requires; readers should weigh the findings accordingly.

Several directions for further research follow from these limitations. Future studies should directly involve Muslim community members and local Muslim leaders, so that

the claim of interreligious dialogue can be tested from both sides rather than inferred from Catholic accounts alone. Research focused on younger generations would clarify whether the appeal of Javanese rhythm persists among Catholics with weaker ties to traditional Javanese culture, and whether the practice can be sustained over time. Comparative studies across different regions and parishes would help establish how far the patterns described here hold beyond Boro, and could also surface the internal Catholic disagreements about the boundary between inculturation and syncretism that this single-site study could only note. Such work would build a more complete and critically grounded picture of Catholic shalawatan as both a spiritual practice and a site of interreligious encounter.

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