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From Character Education to Islamic Educational Philosophy: Reinterpreting the Values of Wayang Kulit as a Local Wisdom-Based Educational Medium

Dari Pendidikan Karakter Menuju Filsafat Pendidikan Islam: Reinterpretasi Nilai-Nilai Wayang Kulit sebagai Media Pendidikan Berbasis Kearifan Lokal

Nurul Mubin*¹ Lulu Tri Rahayu² Nasifa Fatimatus Sakina³

Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an, Wonosobo, Indonesia ^{1 2 3}

*Corresponding Author: pesantrenmaula@gmail.com

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Abstract

Wayang kulit, as one of Indonesia's cultural heritages, embodies educational values that are closely aligned with the philosophy of Islamic education, yet studies integrating these two perspectives remain limited. This study aims to analyze the philosophical values of Islamic education embedded in wayang kulit performances. A qualitative approach employing a library research design was adopted, and the data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that the values of *tauhid*, *adab*, leadership, responsibility, justice, and moral formation are represented through the *gunungan*, Semar, the *Punakawan*, the Pandawa, the *lakon*, and the role of the *dalang* as interconnected educational symbols. These values are internalized through culturally contextual representations, enabling wayang kulit to function as an educational medium grounded in local wisdom. This study contributes a conceptual synthesis linking the philosophy of Islamic education with local culture as a foundation for developing educational practices relevant to contemporary society.

Keywords: Philosophy of Islamic Education; Wayang Kulit; Local Wisdom; Character Education; Javanese Culture

Abstrak

Wayang kulit sebagai warisan budaya Indonesia menyimpan berbagai nilai pendidikan yang relevan dengan filsafat pendidikan Islam, namun kajian yang mengintegrasikan keduanya masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis nilai-nilai filsafat pendidikan Islam yang terkandung dalam pertunjukan wayang kulit. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain *library research* dan dianalisis melalui *qualitative content analysis*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai *tauhid*, *adab*, kepemimpinan, tanggung jawab, keadilan, serta pembentukan akhlak direpresentasikan melalui *gunungan*, Semar, Punakawan, Pandawa, *lakon*, dan peran dalang sebagai simbol pendidikan yang saling terintegrasi. Nilai-nilai tersebut diinternalisasikan melalui representasi budaya yang kontekstual sehingga wayang kulit berfungsi sebagai media pendidikan berbasis kearifan lokal. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan sintesis konseptual yang menghubungkan filsafat pendidikan Islam dan budaya lokal sebagai landasan pengembangan pendidikan yang relevan dengan konteks masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Filsafat Pendidikan Islam; Wayang Kulit; Kearifan Lokal; Pendidikan Karakter; Budaya Jawa



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INTRODUCTION

Wayang kulit is one of Indonesia's most prominent cultural heritages, serving not only as a traditional performing art but also as a medium for transmitting values that have been passed down across generations.¹ Throughout its historical development, wayang kulit underwent a process of acculturation with Islamic teachings, resulting in performances that preserve local cultural identity while simultaneously conveying Islamic values. Various performance elements, including the *gunungan*, puppet characters, storylines, and the role of the *dalang*, embody symbolic meanings that represent spiritual, moral, and social values.² This condition indicates that wayang kulit should not be understood merely as an aesthetic performance but also as an educational medium capable of transmitting values to society through a culturally grounded approach that is contextual, meaningful, and widely accepted across different social groups.

Amid rapid digital transformation and changing patterns of social interaction, education faces increasing challenges in fostering moral, spiritual, and character development among younger generations. Contemporary educational approaches frequently emphasize cognitive achievement while giving comparatively less attention to the formation of ethical character and spiritual awareness.³ Consequently, educational media that effectively connect religious values with the cultural realities of society have become increasingly necessary. Wayang kulit offers considerable potential in this regard by communicating life lessons through symbols, dialogues, and narratives that resonate with people's social experiences.⁴ Through this cultural approach, the internalization of educational values becomes more reflective, communicative, and less dependent on direct doctrinal instruction. Therefore, wayang kulit deserves to be recognized as a relevant educational resource for strengthening Islamic education based on local wisdom.

The philosophy of Islamic education views education as a process aimed not only at developing intellectual competence but also at cultivating individuals who possess faith, noble character, responsibility, and the capacity to fulfill their role as *khalifah* on earth.⁵ From this perspective, values such as *tawhid*, *adab*, justice, leadership, and responsibility constitute the essential foundation of education. These philosophical principles can be identified within various elements of wayang kulit performances, which portray the relationships between humans and God, fellow human beings, and the natural world. Accordingly, examining the symbols, characters, and narrative structures of wayang kulit is essential for understanding how the philosophical values of Islamic education are represented through cultural expression. Such an approach further demonstrates that local traditions provide an effective context for contextualizing Islamic teachings within the everyday lives of society.

Research on character education through cultural media has been widely conducted. Existing studies have demonstrated that traditional arts serve as effective educational media for instilling moral values and fostering character development through contextual and culturally meaningful

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- 1 Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Wayang in Jaman Now : Reflexive Traditionalization and Local, National and Global Networks of Javanese Shadow Puppet Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 40–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883318000834>.
 - 2 Afendy Widayat and Ghis Nggar Dwiadmojo, "The Javanese Philosophy behind the Panakawan Characters: An Ethnolinguistic Analysis of the Play Semar Mbangun Kahyangan," *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13, no. 2 (September 30, 2023): 343–57, <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v13i2.63094>.
 - 3 Ke Jia et al., "Constructing an Empathy Education System: Values, Principles, and Approaches," *Journal of Moral Education* 55, no. 2 (April 3, 2026): 457–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2024.2416686>.
 - 4 Agus Tricahyo and Yufridal Fitri Nursalam, "Metaphors and Idioms of Wayang Tradition," *Ascarya: Journal of Islamic Science, Culture, and Social Studies* 5, no. 1 (2025): 60–75, <https://doi.org/10.53754/iscs.v5i1.731>.
 - 5 Abdullah Sahin, "Critical Issues in Islamic Education Studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western Liberal Secular Values of Education," *Religions* 9, no. 11 (October 30, 2018): 335, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9110335>.

messages.⁶ Other studies have found that wayang kulit contains diverse educational values, including honesty, responsibility, leadership, and wisdom; however, these discussions primarily emphasize character education without relating them to the philosophical foundations of Islamic education.⁷ Additional research has shown that the Islamization of Javanese culture transformed wayang kulit into an adaptive medium for Islamic propagation, yet such studies mainly focus on historical and cultural dimensions rather than providing a philosophical analysis of the educational values embedded within the performances.⁸ Consequently, a significant research gap remains regarding the integration of cultural studies on wayang kulit with the philosophical framework of Islamic education.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to analyze the philosophical values of Islamic education embedded in wayang kulit performances through a library research approach employing qualitative content analysis. The analysis focuses on identifying the philosophical meanings represented by major performance elements, including the *gunungan*, Semar, the *Punakawan*, the Pandawa, the *lakon*, and the *dalang*, and subsequently interpreting these meanings through the perspectives of Islamic educational philosophy. This study is significant because it offers a conceptual framework that integrates local cultural heritage with Islamic educational thought. In addition to enriching scholarly discussions on the relationship between culture and Islamic education, the findings are expected to provide a theoretical foundation for developing educational models rooted in local wisdom while remaining relevant to the contemporary challenges faced by modern society.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design to examine the philosophical values of Islamic education embedded in wayang kulit performances.⁹ Library research was chosen because the focus of the study was to analyze concepts, meanings, and symbolic representations derived from documented sources rather than empirical field observations. Data were collected through a comprehensive review of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other relevant academic publications concerning Islamic educational philosophy, Javanese culture, and wayang kulit. The selected literature was critically examined to identify theoretical perspectives and cultural interpretations relevant to the research objectives.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involved identifying, categorizing, interpreting, and synthesizing concepts related to the philosophical values of Islamic education represented in the symbols, characters, narratives, and performance elements of wayang kulit.¹⁰ The analytical process emphasized the integration of perspectives from Islamic educational philosophers and scholars of Javanese culture to generate a comprehensive conceptual understanding. Through this interpretive approach, the study produced a systematic synthesis explaining how the cultural elements of wayang kulit embody and transmit the philosophical principles of Islamic education within the context of local wisdom.

6 Mardan Umar et al., "Revitalization of Islamic Character Values in Local Folklore and Its Implication on Character Education," *Ulmuna* 29, no. 1 (June 30, 2025): 188–220, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v29i1.1375>.

7 Ariani Iva, Mardhiyah Shoim, and Syahilabi Rajasa Nabel, "Traditional Puppetry as Political Philosophy: Evaluating Wayang Kulit Narratives in the Context of Global Leadership Deficits," *Fikri: Jurnal Kajian Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 11, no. 1 (April 13, 2026): 108–21, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jf.v11i1.7495>.

8 Agus Fatuh Widoyo, "An Axiological Study of Wayang Da'wah in the History of the Spread of Islam in Indonesia," *TATHO: International Journal of Islamic Thought and Sciences* 3, no. 2 (May 1, 2026): 282–90, <https://doi.org/10.70512/tatho.v3i2.184>.

9 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2008).

10 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wayang Kulit as a Cultural Heritage and Medium of Islamic Da'wah

Wayang kulit is one of the most prominent forms of traditional Javanese performing arts, which has developed as an integrated cultural system rather than merely a form of entertainment. According to Sri Mulyono, wayang represents Javanese civilization by integrating artistic expression, philosophical thought, and symbolic representations of human life through various performance elements, including the *dalang* (puppeteer), puppet characters, the *gunungan* (*kayon*), *kelir* (screen), *blencong* (traditional oil lamp), gamelan ensemble, *sinden* (female singer), and the narrative (*lakon*) performed.¹¹ Meanwhile, Clifford Geertz regards wayang as part of a symbolic system through which Javanese society interprets social, moral, and spiritual realities.¹² These perspectives collectively suggest that every component of a wayang performance is interconnected, forming a cultural communication medium capable of conveying messages through visual, verbal, and symbolic expressions. Consequently, wayang should be understood not only as an artistic heritage but also as a representation of the Javanese worldview that continues to evolve alongside societal change.

The complexity of wayang kulit is reflected in the integration of its performance components. Soetarno explains that the *dalang* functions not only as the controller of the storyline but also as the principal communicator who connects the narrative with the audience through dialogue, *suluk* (traditional chants), and improvisation.¹³ In contrast, Sri Mulyono emphasizes that elements such as the *gunungan* symbolize the cycle of life, heroic characters (*ksatria*) represent the ideal human character, while the *punakawan* convey social criticism through humor that is readily understood by the community.¹⁴ Furthermore, the gamelan ensemble and the songs performed by the *sinden* establish the dramatic atmosphere that reinforces the meaning of each scene, whereas the *kelir* and the illumination provided by the *blencong* strengthen the visual symbolism of the performance. Synthesizing these perspectives reveals that the structure of wayang is designed not solely for artistic purposes but also as a symbolic system through which cultural meanings are effectively communicated to society.

As a living cultural tradition, wayang kulit has continuously evolved alongside social and religious transformations in Java. M.C. Ricklefs argues that the Islamization of Java was characterized by an accommodative approach toward local culture, allowing existing traditions to be preserved while being reinterpreted in accordance with Islamic teachings.¹⁵ This perspective is reinforced by Agus Sunyoto, who explains that within the missionary activities of the *Wali Songo*, particularly Sunan Kalijaga, wayang was employed as a medium of communication that was more readily accepted by the local population than confrontational methods of preaching.¹⁶ The synthesis of these viewpoints indicates that the transformation of wayang formed part of a broader process of cultural dialogue, in which the traditional performance format was maintained while Islamic messages were gradually incorporated into its narratives, symbols, and modes of presentation. Such a process demonstrates that cultural

11 Sri Mulyono, *Wayang: Asal-Usul, Filsafat Dan Masa Depan*, 2nd ed. (Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1978).

12 Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

13 Soetarno, *Estetika Pedalangan* (Surakarta: Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Surakarta bekerja sama dengan CV Adji, 2007).

14 Mulyono, *Wayang: Asal-Usul, Filsafat Dan Masa Depan*.

15 M C Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006).

16 Agus Sunyoto, *Atlas Wali Songo: Buku Pertama Yang Mengungkap Wali Songo Sebagai Fakta Sejarah* (Depok: Pustaka IIMaN, 2016).

continuity and religious dissemination were not mutually exclusive but rather developed through mutual adaptation.

This transformation became increasingly evident in the reinterpretation of various elements of the wayang tradition. According to Agus Sunyoto, a number of *lakon carangan* (non-canonical stories) were developed to incorporate Islamic messages, while the *punakawan* characters assumed the role of conveying moral advice, social criticism, and wisdom through accessible language and humor. Likewise, Soetarno notes that the transformation extended beyond the narrative itself to include the structure of performances, the recitation of *suluk*, the dialogues delivered by the *dalang*, the symbolism of the *gunungan*, and the overall presentation, all of which gradually adapted to the needs of the Muslim Javanese community. Consequently, the transformation of wayang did not eliminate its cultural identity but rather expanded its function as a medium through which local traditions and Islamic teachings could interact harmoniously. This flexibility explains why wayang has remained relevant and widely accepted across different generations and social groups.

The philosophical significance of wayang extends beyond its narratives and is deeply embedded in the characteristics of its figures. Franz Magnis-Suseno argues that wayang embodies the Javanese philosophy of life, emphasizing harmony, balance, and self-restraint in responding to life's challenges.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Benedict R.O.G. Anderson interprets wayang as a representation of social order and political authority, illustrating the relationships among leaders, society, and prevailing moral values.¹⁸ These perspectives are reflected in the portrayal of the *Pandawa* as symbols of wisdom and self-control, the *Kurawa* as representations of uncontrolled ambition, *Semar* as the embodiment of popular wisdom, and *Arjuna* and *Bima* as contrasting models of leadership. The synthesis of these interpretations demonstrates that wayang characters function not merely as fictional figures within a theatrical performance but as symbolic representations of diverse dimensions of human existence, thereby preserving philosophical reflections within the cultural imagination of Javanese society.

Drawing upon the perspectives of Sri Mulyono, Soetarno, M.C. Ricklefs, Agus Sunyoto, Franz Magnis-Suseno, Benedict R.O.G. Anderson, and Clifford Geertz, it can be concluded that wayang kulit constitutes a comprehensive cultural system composed of interconnected performance elements, symbols, characters, and narratives. The integration of these components enables wayang to function simultaneously as a medium of artistic expression, social communication, and cultural transmission, while continually undergoing reinterpretation in response to societal development. The Islamization of wayang illustrates that its evolution was characterized more by the transformation of meaning than by the replacement of its traditional form. Consequently, the richness of its symbolism, performance structure, and character representation provides an important foundation for examining the philosophical values of Islamic education embedded within wayang kulit, which will be discussed in the following section.

Philosophical Values of Islamic Education in Wayang Kulit Performances

Islamic educational philosophy views education as a holistic process aimed not only at the acquisition of knowledge but also at the development of faith (*aqidah*), moral character (*akhlak*), spirituality, and social responsibility. Omar Mohammad Al-Syaibany argues that the ultimate objective of Islamic education is to cultivate individuals who are capable of fulfilling their roles

17 Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Etika Jawa: Sebuah Analisa Falsafi Tentang Kebijakan Hidup Jawa* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1984).

18 Benedict R O'G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

as servants of Allah while carrying out their responsibilities as *khalifah* (vicegerents) on earth.¹⁹ This perspective is reinforced by Hasan Langgulung, who regards education as a continuous process of developing a complete Muslim personality through the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions.²⁰ Within this framework, wayang kulit performances can be understood as a cultural medium that internalizes educational values through characters, symbols, dialogues, and narratives that closely reflect the lived experiences of society. The synthesis of the relationship between the elements of wayang kulit and the philosophical values of Islamic education is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Philosophical Values of Islamic Education Embedded in the Elements of Wayang Kulit Performances

Elements of Wayang Kulit	Philosophical Values of Islamic Education	Educational Implementation
<i>Gunungan (Kayon)</i>	<i>Tawhid</i> and awareness of God	Instilling the belief that human life originates from Allah and ultimately returns to Him.
Semar	Exemplary character, wisdom, and humility	Cultivating wise, humble, and morally responsible educators and learners.
Punakawan	Moral character, social awareness, and communication	Developing honesty, empathy, and the ability to convey moral messages through humane communication.
Pandawa	Leadership, responsibility, and justice	Fostering leadership characterized by integrity, fairness, and accountability.
<i>Lakon</i> (Narrative)	Wisdom, self-reflection, and moral decision-making	Encouraging learners to reflect critically upon life experiences and ethical dilemmas.
<i>Dalang</i> (Puppeteer)	Exemplary leadership and educational guidance	Positioning teachers as facilitators, mentors, and role models throughout the learning process.

Source: Author's analysis (2026)

As presented in Table 1, the *gunungan (kayon)* symbolizes the value of *tawhid*, which constitutes the foundation of Islamic educational philosophy. Appearing at both the beginning and the end of every performance, the *gunungan* represents the origin and ultimate destination of human existence, reminding audiences that all aspects of life remain under the sovereignty of Allah SWT. This interpretation corresponds with Al-Syaibany's view that recognizing and strengthening one's relationship with God constitutes the primary objective of Islamic education. Likewise, Imam Al-Ghazali emphasizes that education should guide individuals toward *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul), enabling every aspect of human life to be directed toward sincere devotion to Allah.²¹ Consequently, the *gunungan* functions not merely as an artistic component of the performance but also as a profound theological symbol that reinforces the spiritual dimension of education.

Moral values are prominently reflected in the characters of Semar and the *Punakawan*, who consistently serve as mediators and moral guides throughout the narratives. Semar is portrayed as humble, wise, and compassionate, while Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong communicate social criticism and ethical advice through humor that is easily understood by the audience. These

19 Omar Mohammad Al-Toumy Al-Syaibany, *Falsafah Pendidikan Islam* (Bulan Bintang, 1979).

20 Hasan Langgulung, *Manusia Dan Pendidikan: Suatu Analisa Psikologi, Filsafat Dan Pendidikan* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al Husna, 1986).

21 Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1967).

portrayals demonstrate that moral education does not necessarily require formal instruction but can be effectively conveyed through persuasive narratives and culturally familiar expressions. This interpretation is consistent with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's concept of *adab*, which positions proper conduct as the central objective of Islamic education by placing everything in its rightful order.²² Similarly, Abdurrahman An-Nahlawi highlights exemplary conduct, advice, and storytelling as among the most effective educational methods for internalizing Islamic values.²³

Beyond shaping individual character, wayang kulit also conveys values of leadership, responsibility, and justice through the figures of the Pandawa. Yudhistira is portrayed as a wise and just ruler, Arjuna represents intelligence and self-discipline, whereas Bima embodies courage and steadfastness in defending truth. These diverse characteristics illustrate that effective leadership is formed through the integration of integrity, wisdom, courage, and responsibility rather than by a single personal attribute. Such an interpretation aligns with Hasan Langgulung's perspective that education should cultivate individuals who are capable of fulfilling their responsibilities as trustworthy Muslims. In addition, Thomas Lickona argues that character education should integrate *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*, ensuring that ethical principles are transformed into consistent patterns of behavior in everyday life.²⁴

The philosophical values of Islamic education are further reflected in the various *lakon* that portray human struggles, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of personal choices. Rather than merely depicting conflicts between protagonists and antagonists, these narratives encourage audiences to pursue wisdom, self-control, and ethical judgment throughout life's challenges. This perspective corresponds with Imam Al-Ghazali's view that education should nurture the soul, enabling individuals to distinguish between the impulses of desire and the guidance of reason and divine revelation. At the same time, Ki Hajar Dewantara emphasizes that education should be rooted in the cultural context of society so that values can be understood and internalized more effectively. Accordingly, wayang narratives provide a contextual medium through which learners may develop reflective thinking and sound moral judgment.²⁵

Overall, the integrated elements of wayang kulit demonstrate that this traditional performing art possesses not only aesthetic significance but also profound educational value consistent with the objectives of Islamic educational philosophy. The *dalang* serves as an educator who guides the narrative, the puppet characters function as moral exemplars, while the symbolic elements of the performance encourage reflection on the relationship between humanity, God, society, and nature. A synthesis of the perspectives of Al-Syaibany, Hasan Langgulung, Al-Attas, Al-Ghazali, An-Nahlawi, Thomas Lickona, and Ki Hajar Dewantara indicates that the values of *tawhid*, *adab*, leadership, responsibility, moral reflection, and culturally grounded education are deeply embedded within wayang kulit performances. Therefore, wayang kulit should be recognized not only as an important cultural heritage but also as a culturally responsive medium for Islamic education that remains highly relevant in addressing the challenges of contemporary education.

22 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978).

23 Abdurrahman An-Nahlawi, *Prinsip-Prinsip Dan Metode Pendidikan Islam* (Bandung: CV Diponegoro, 1989).

24 Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

25 Ki Hajar Dewantara, *Karya Ki Hajar Dewantara: Bagian Pertama—Pendidikan* (Yogyakarta: Majelis Luhur Persatuan Tamansiswa, 1977).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that wayang kulit embodies the philosophical values of Islamic education through the integration of cultural symbols, narrative structures, and character representations that have evolved through the process of Islamization in Java. Rather than functioning merely as a traditional performing art, wayang kulit serves as a cultural medium through which the values of *tamhid*, moral integrity (*adab*), leadership, responsibility, self-reflection, and social harmony are internalized. These values are embedded in various elements of the performance, including the *gunungan*, Semar, the *Punakawan*, the Pandawa, the *lakon*, and the role of the *dalang*, each of which contributes to the formation of ethical and spiritual awareness. The findings indicate that the philosophical values of Islamic education are transmitted not through doctrinal instruction alone but through symbolic, contextual, and culturally meaningful representations that facilitate the internalization of values within society.

This study contributes to the discourse on Islamic educational philosophy by providing a conceptual synthesis that positions wayang kulit as a culturally responsive medium for value-based education, thereby strengthening the integration between Islamic educational thought and local wisdom. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its reliance on a library research approach, which does not examine how these philosophical values are implemented or perceived in contemporary educational settings. Future studies are therefore encouraged to employ empirical methods, such as case studies, ethnographic research, or classroom-based investigations, to explore the effectiveness of integrating wayang kulit into Islamic education. Such research would provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the pedagogical relevance of traditional cultural heritage in addressing the educational challenges of contemporary society.

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