

WAHDAT AL-WUJUD IN SERAT WEDHATAMA: HISTORICAL ROOTS, JAVANESE CONTEXTUALIZATION, AND ONTOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

The concept of Wahdat al-Wujud or the unity of being between humans and God is one of the central teachings in Sufism, which was systematically formulated by Ibn 'Arabi but has roots in earlier Sufi thought, such as Abu Yazid al-Busthami and al-Hallaj. Although widely accepted among Sufis, this concept has drawn theological criticism from figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah. In Java, this teaching entered through the scholarly channels from Andalusia–Middle East–Gujarat–Indonesian archipelago in the 15th/16th century, then adapted to local traditions influenced by the Kapitayan and Hinduism-Buddhism, forming a syncretic “Javanese Islam.” This study aimed to analyze the representation of Wahdat al-Wujud in the Serat Wedhatama by KGPA Mangkunegara IV, focusing on symbolism, worship practices, and ontological perspectives. The method used was descriptive-analytical with a socio-linguistic approach, utilizing Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism theory and the framework of categorizing existence in mantiq. This study hypothesized that Serat Wedhatama not only adopted the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud theoretically, but also integrated it into the local wisdom of the palace through language, symbols, and spiritual practices typical of Javanese culture, thus creating a unique and contextual form of understanding.

Keywords: Wahdat al-Wujud, Serat Wedhatama, Javanese Islam, Ibn 'Arabi, Sufism

INTRODUCTION

A study of classical Javanese manuscripts is an important part of preserving the intellectual heritage that records the outlook on life, moral values, and religious teachings of past societies. These manuscripts are written in traditional languages and scripts, containing a blend of local elements and external influences, including Islam. Based on their form and content, Javanese manuscripts can be grouped into four categories: *Babad* (historical records), *Sastra* (old poetry and verses), *Suluk* (Sufi teachings), and *Piwulang* (advice or guidance for life) (Behrend, 1999; Florida, 1993). *Serat Wedhatama* by Kanjeng Gusti Pangeran Adipati Arya Mangkunegara IV holds a special place because it combines elements of *piwulang* and *suluk*, teaching ethics and spiritual wisdom rooted in Javanese tradition.

One of the main teachings in *Serat Wedhatama* is the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud*, namely the idea of the unity of being between humans and God. This concept in the history of Sufism is often associated with Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240 CE), although similar thoughts had been put forward earlier by figures such as Abu Yazid al-Busthami and al-Hallaj (Nasr, 2007; Massignon, 1994). Ibn ‘Arabi formulated *Wahdat al-Wujud* systematically in works such as *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, asserting that only God has true being (*al-Haqq*), while all creatures are only His manifestations (*al-Khalq*) (Chittick, 1994). This view received widespread acceptance among Sufis, but also sharp criticism from figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah, who rejected the ontological unity of being because it was considered to obscure the principle of monotheism (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995).

The teachings of *Wahdat al-Wujud* entered the Indonesian archipelago through trade networks and the preaching of Sufis from Gujarat in the 15th/16th century, then adapted into local Javanese culture. The process of Islamization in Java took place in a society still influenced by *Kapitayan* beliefs and Hindu-Buddhist heritage (Sunyoto, 2012). This adaptation gave birth to a form of “Javanese Islam” that differed from “Arab Islam”: more accommodating to local symbols and traditions, combining sharia with inner practice, and emphasizing social harmony (Woodward, 2011). This context becomes fertile ground for the development of Sufism, including *Wahdat al-Wujud*, which is later expressed in court literary works such as *Serat Wedhatama*.

The selection of *Serat Wedhatama* as the case study in this research is based on its unique position as an eminent literary work that harmonizes Islamic teachings with Javanese local wisdom. Beyond conveying ethical and spiritual values through refined literary expression, this work of Mangkunegara IV employs the medium of macapat verse, which is deeply familiar to the Javanese people, making its teachings easily internalized and transmitted across generations. The distinctiveness of *Serat Wedhatama* lies in its ability to articulate the universal doctrines of Sufism—particularly the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud*—within the framework of everyday life: self-restraint, moral consciousness, and a harmonious relationship between human beings, nature, and God. Thus, *Serat Wedhatama* is not only relevant as a literary text but also as a historical

reflection of the dialogical process between Islam and Javanese culture (KGPAA Sri Mangkunegara IV, 2017).

LITERARY REVIEWS

This study is an extension of a previous comparative study that examined *Wahdat al-Wujud* in Serat Menak and Serat Wedhatama (Mahamid & Hidayatulloh, 2024), but now focuses solely on Serat Wedhatama. It is supplemented by two previous studies that discussed the concept of Peace Education in Serat Wedhatama (Tunjung & Fauzi, 2023) and the dimensions of Islamic religiosity in Serat Wedhatama (Putro et al., 2021).

This study discusses three aspects: (1) the historical roots and theological debates of the *Wahdat al-Wujud* concept, (2) the process of its spread to Java along with the characteristics of Javanese Islam, and (3) its representation in Serat Wedhatama through symbolism, worship practices, and ontological perspectives that are typical of palace culture. Thus, this study not only reveals the content of the text but also explains the process of adapting universal Sufism teachings into the framework of Javanese culture.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a descriptive-analytical approach to describe and analyze the representation of the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* in the Serat Wedhatama by KGPAA Mangkunegara IV. This approach allowed the researcher to present the text's contents systematically and then interpret them based on the historical, social, and cultural context of Java (Neuman, 2014). The primary data source was Serat Wedhatama: Classical Literature Study, a transliteration and translation by Bambang Khusen Al Marie (2017), chosen because it preserved the nuances of the original language while facilitating comprehension of the manuscript's contents.

The analysis was conducted using a socio-linguistic approach, which examined the relationship between language, moral messages, and cultural values contained within the text (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Each *pupuh* containing the teachings of *Wahdat al-Wujud* was analyzed to identify Sufi messages, particularly how these concepts were

adapted within a Javanese framework. To strengthen the interpretation, secondary sources in the form of journals, books, and relevant scientific works were used. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the process of adaptation of universal Sufi teachings into the local wisdom of the Javanese court.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Roots and Theological Debates on the Concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud*

Before the term *Wahdat al-Wujud* was systematically formulated by Ibn ‘Arabi, a number of early Sufi figures had already touched on the idea of the unity between humanity and God. Abu Yazid al-Busthami (d. 874 CE), for example, is known for his ecstatic expressions (*syathahat*) that imply self-melting in the presence of God, such as “Subhānī, mā a‘zhama sha’nī” (Glory be to Me, how exalted is my state), which is understood as an expression of *fana*’—the disappearance of self-awareness within divine consciousness (Nasr, 2007). Another figure, al-Hallaj (d. 922 CE), shocked the Islamic world with his statement “*Ana al-Haqq*” (I am the Truth), which he meant as a statement that he had completely spiritually merged with the absolute truth, namely God (Massignon, 1994). Although neither of them used the term *Wahdat al-Wujud*, their views laid an important foundation for the development of this concept in the subsequent period.

Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240 CE) is considered the primary formulator of *Wahdat al-Wujud* within a systematic theoretical framework. In his works *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, he distinguished between *al-Haqq*—the true being that is absolutely possessed by God—and *al-Khalq*, the manifestation of creation whose existence depends entirely on *al-Haqq* (Chittick, 1994). According to Ibn ‘Arabi, all reality is essentially one, because all forms of existence in the universe are merely manifestations of the single being of God. The diversity of phenomena in the world is merely a variation of manifestations from the same source, so understanding this unity will lead a Sufi to *ma‘rifatullah*, a profound knowledge of God (Addas, 1993).



Ibn 'Arabi (Originator of the Concept of Wahdat al-Wujud)

(Source: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/who-was-ibn-arabi-sufi-master-damascus>)

Ibn 'Arabi's view has sparked debate among scholars, especially those who firmly emphasize the purity of monotheism. Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 CE) was one of the most vocal critics of *Wahdat al-Wujud*. According to him, the concept of the unity of being has the potential to obscure the fundamental distinction between *Khaliq* (Creator) and creatures (creations), thus leading to the equating of God with creatures (*tasybih*) or even pantheism (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995). Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized that monotheism demands an absolute separation between Allah as the All-Perfect Being and creatures as limited creations. This distinction is ontological and should not be erased by mystical interpretations, even if intended to express spiritual closeness (Muaffan, 2021).

Therefore, although *Wahdat al-Wujud* has roots dating back to early Sufism, Ibn 'Arabi was the one who formulated the concept into a structured philosophical system of Sufism. The controversies that have arisen, particularly regarding Ibn Taymiyyah's views, demonstrate that the understanding of the unity of being remains a theological debate to this day, particularly regarding the boundary between profound spiritual experience and the fundamental principle of monotheism in Islam.

The Spread of *Wahdat al-Wujud* to Java and the Context of Javanese Islam

The context in which *Wahdat al-Wujud* emerged in Java in the 16th century was very different from the intellectual environment in which Ibn 'Arabi lived in Andalusia in the 13th/14th centuries. Andalusia was then a cosmopolitan centre of Islamic civilisation, where philosophy, Sufism, and science flourished under the patronage of Muslim rulers. Cities such as Seville, Cordoba, and Granada became arenas for cross-cultural discussions between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, enriching the Islamic intellectual tradition (Menocal, 2002). Meanwhile, Java in the 16th century was in the early stages of Islamization, spearheaded by the Sultanate of Demak. Its social and cultural structures were still strongly influenced by the *Kapitayan* belief system—a native Javanese belief that recognizes the Supreme God (*Sang Hyang Tunggal*)—as well as centuries-old Hindu-Buddhist heritage (Sunyoto, 2012).

The spread of *Wahdat al-Wujud* from Andalusia to Java followed a long path of scientific transmission. Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts spread first to the Middle East, then to India via Gujarat, before finally arriving in the archipelago. One of the important figures in this transmission is Muhammad ibn Fadhl Allah al-Burhanpuri, a Sufi from Gujarat who wrote *al-Tuhfah al-Murlahan ila Ruh al-Nabi*, a work that explains the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* briefly but in depth. This work influenced Malay Sufis such as Hamzah Fansuri and Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani in the 16th/17th century. Hamzah Fansuri is known as the first Sufi poet in the Malay world who combined Ibn 'Arabi's teachings with local symbols and language, while Syamsuddin al-Sumatrani played a major role in teaching this doctrine in the Aceh Sultanate before it spread to Java through the ulama and palace networks (Azra, 2004; Johns, 1961).

The process of integrating the *Wahdat al-Wujud* teachings into Javanese culture forms a different pattern from its reception in the Arab world. Islam in the Arab region generally emphasizes adherence to sacred texts, formal application of sharia, and purification of faith from external influences (*tath-hir al-'aqidah*). In contrast, Javanese Islam develops through adaptation to local culture, resulting in a syncretic form of Islam. In this tradition, Islamic teachings are combined with *Kejawen* values—a Javanese system of life philosophy—and elements of *Kapitayan* inherited from pre-Islamic times.

Agus Sunyoto (2012) explained that *Kapitayan* teaches recognition of the Supreme God through inner practices and natural symbols, so that when Sufism entered, especially *Wahdat al-Wujud*, it is easily accepted because it shares a similarity in emphasizing humanity's existential closeness to God.

Therefore, the entry of *Wahdat al-Wujud* into Java is not simply a transfer of discourse from Andalusia to the archipelago, but rather a process of adaptation and transformation. Teachings originally formulated within the framework of cosmopolitan Sufi philosophy are absorbed into Javanese socio-cultural structures, symbolized in songs, myths, and traditional ceremonies, giving rise to a distinctive form of understanding known as Javanese Islam. This pattern provides a fertile ground for the birth of works such as *Serat Wedhatama*, which conveys the teachings of the unity of being with language, symbols, and values familiar to Javanese society.

***Wahdat al-Wujud* in Serat Wedhatama: Representation, Worship Practices, and Ontological Perspective**

The concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* within Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and within the Javanese royal court has a clear point of convergence: the recognition that God is the source of all existence. Both the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and the *Serat Wedhatama* pupuhs emphasize that all reality is merely a manifestation of the Divine Being, and the existence of all creatures depends entirely on His existence (Chittick, 1994; KGPA Sri Mangkunegara IV, 2017). However, despite theological similarities, differences emerge in expression and symbolism. Ibn ‘Arabi elaborated this concept in the complex language of Sufi philosophy, using Arabic terminology and a structured ontological framework. Meanwhile, the Javanese Palace formulated it with local nuances through the expression *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*—a term that not only has metaphysical nuances, but is also full of cultural meaning, containing ethical values, social harmony, and an invitation to know oneself within the framework of Javanese tradition (Simuh, 1988).

In the Javanese tradition, the implementation of the teaching of the unity of being is often realized in the form of religious practices that emphasize inner purification. *Serat Wedhatama* describes forms of worship that reflect *Wahdat al-Wujud*, such as dhikr,

which continuously presents Allah in the heart, prayer, which is performed fervently as an inner encounter with the Creator, seclusion or asceticism to isolate oneself from the hustle and bustle of the world, *muhasabah* to evaluate oneself, and gratitude, which becomes an attitude of daily life. One of the important concepts emphasized is heart worship (*ibadah qalbiyah*), namely service that is centered on inner awareness, not just external implementation. In *Serat Wedhatama*, heart worship is described as a state of the soul that always submits to God's will, views every event as part of His destiny, and feels togetherness with Him in all situations (KGPAA Sri Mangkunegara IV, 2017).



The Manuscript of Serat Wedhatama by KGPAA Sri Mangkunegara IV

(Source: <https://mjscolombo.com/serat-wedhatama.html>)

The ontological perspective on being also appears implicitly in the teachings contained in *Serat Wedhatama*, which can be enriched by the classification of existence in the science of *mantiq*. First, *Wujud Ahya* refers to empirical forms that can be seen by the senses, such as humans, nature, and objects. Second, *Wujud Alhad* (often also called *wujud ma'nawi*); inner forms that are only captured by the heart or spiritual intuition, for example, a sense of closeness to God. Third, *Wujud Kitabah*; forms manifested in written texts or symbols, such as the al-Qur'an or *piwulang* manuscripts. Fourth, *Wujud Wadha*; conceptual or conventional forms recognized by social agreement, such as language or

traditional symbols (Al-Farabi, 1986). This layered understanding enriches the way of interpreting symbolic expressions in Serat Wedhatama, where physical and inner forms are intertwined (Prasetyo, 2025).

Some of the most striking stanzas that illustrate the encounter between the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and Javanese symbolism are 13th and 14th stanzas of *Pupuh Pangkur*:

Stanza	Javanese Text	Translation
Pupuh Pangkur, 13 th stanza	Tan samar pamoring Sukma/ Sinuksamaya Winahya ingasepi/ Sinimpen telenging kalbu/ Pambukaning warana/ Tarlen saking liyep layaping aluyup/ Pindha pesating supena/ Sumusup ing rasa jati//	Surely, the image of the Suksma (Divine Essence) shines clearly. It is absorbed in moments of solitude, stored within the heart, serving as the opening of the veil, between waking and sleeping states, fleeting like a passing dream, permeating the awareness of the true self.
Pupuh Pangkur, 14 th stanza	Sajatine kang mangkana/ Wus kakenan nugrahaning Hyang Widhi/ Bek alaming asuwung/ Tan karem karamayan/ Ingkang sifat wisesa winisesa wus/ Mulih mula mulanira/ Mulane wong anom sami//	Indeed, such a person has received the blessings of God, dwelling in a world of stillness, disliking crowds, possessing and exercising divine authority, returning to the original source, and thus all young people.

(Source: KGPA Sri Mangkunegara IV, 2017)

This verse describes the state of someone who attains spiritual enlightenment while in solitude or self-isolation (*khalwat*). This enlightenment enters the heart during the transition between wakefulness and sleep, like a flash of a dream that leaves a deep impression. In the Mangkunegaran tradition, this state is sought through silent asceticism and meditation on the night of 1 Sura, which aims to calm the self, reflect on life's journey, and raise hopes for the future (Suseno, 1999). Although specifically associated with the month of Sura, this spirit actually persists throughout the day, becoming an inner practice that continuously sharpens awareness of the divine presence (Jamaly, 2024).

Thus, Serat Wedhatama not only teaches the doctrine of the unity of being theoretically, but also provides practical guidance through symbols, worship practices, and inner reflection that are in keeping with Javanese cultural frameworks. The

combination of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical framework and the local wisdom of the Javanese court makes this text one of the most distinctive representations of the adaptation of Sufism to the court literary tradition in the archipelago.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujud* in the *Serat Wedhatama* by KGPAA Mangkunegara IV represents a confluence of Ibn 'Arabi's Sufi doctrine and Javanese local wisdom. The teaching of the unity of being, originally formulated within the framework of cosmopolitan Islamic philosophy in Andalusia, is adapted through a long path of scholarly transmission to Java, then combined with Javanese traditions and the Kapitayan heritage. This integration not only maintains the theological core that God is the source of all existence but also packages it in symbols, language, and spiritual practices appropriate to the cultural context of the palace.

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