

## Islamic Rituals and Spirituality in Southeast Asia: An Ethnographic Study of Coastal Muslim Communities

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the practice of Islamic rituals and spirituality among Muslim communities in Southeast Asian coastal regions, where these practices have become an integral part of social and cultural life. The central issue addressed is the lack of comprehensive documentation concerning how these communities understand and practice Islamic spirituality and symbolism in the study of modernization and religious reform. Employing a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods, this study delves into various ritual practices, including Maulid, Sea alms, Earth alms, Zikir, and daily Wirid. The findings reveal that coastal Muslim communities interpret these rituals as a means of strengthening social solidarity, fostering a transcendent relationship with God, and maintaining harmony with the natural environment, particularly the sea. Spirituality is practiced communally and passed down as part of a living religious habitus. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice is utilized to analyze the interplay between tradition and change within the community's social space. This research affirms that Islam in coastal areas is not monolithic but rather contextual, adaptive, and rich in symbolic meaning. The findings contribute to the study of local expressions of Islam and offer new insights into the diversity of religious practices in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Spirituality, Local Rituals, Coastal Communities, Religious Habitus, Islamic Ethnography.*

### Introduction

Islam, as a religion that is deeply rooted in the lives of Southeast Asian communities, cannot be separated from the social and geographical aspects in which it grows. In the coastal regions of Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and parts of Thailand and the Philippines, Islam developed not only as a spiritual belief system but also as a social structure integrated into local culture (Fadhil, 2024). Muslim communities in coastal areas play a crucial role in shaping, preserving, and reconstructing distinctive religious practices, which often differ from those found in inland or urban settings (Hoesterey, 2022).

These communities express Islam through ritual practices such as Maulid, sea alms, sea pilgrimage, earth alms, and the recitation of Barzanji and Burdah poems, all performed in

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a distinctive social and spiritual setting (Amin, 2019). In its geographical location, the coastal area serves as a meeting place between local culture and outside influences, making the Islamic tradition in the area rich in acculturation. This phenomenon reflects how Muslim communities in coastal areas not only practice the teachings of Islam in a personal spiritual dimension but also make them the basis of collective values and ethics in daily social life (Sari Dewi et al., 2023).

Regional data indicate that the concentration of Muslim communities in Southeast Asia is predominantly found in coastal areas, particularly in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia (Zuhri et al., 2023). Their proximity to sea shipping and trade routes meant that Islam was present early on as part of a strong maritime culture (Dhuhri & Jakfar, 2020). The following data shows the distribution and dominance of coastal Muslim communities in several Southeast Asian countries:

**Table 1.**

Distribution of Coastal Muslim Communities in Southeast Asia

No	Country	Number of Muslims (%)	Muslim population (million)	Community Dominance
1	Indonesia	87.2	231.0	High
2	Malaysia	63.5	20.0	High
3	Thailand	5.8	4.5	Medium
4	Philippines	6.0	6.4	Low
5	Brunei Darussalam	82.7	0.5	High

Source: Jatmika (2022)

The table indicates that countries with high Muslim populations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, also have a strong dominance of coastal Muslim communities. This suggests a close connection between coastal spaces and the development of distinctive Islamic rituals, and opens up an important area for ethnographic research.

This research is significant because of the rapid social, economic, and cultural transformations occurring in coastal areas. Modernization, migration, and the globalization of information have impacted traditional religious practices, affecting both the meaning of spirituality and the form of rituals performed. Some local Islamic traditions have begun to undergo adjustments or even disappear, either voluntarily or due to pressure from groups that carry out Islamic purification (Sutiyono, 2015). Local rituals that have developed in coastal areas have reflected a dynamic and contextual Islamic spirituality that is relevant to the lives of local people (Surur et al., 2024).

The problem that arises in this study is the lack of ethnographic documentation describing how coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia understand and practice their Islam spiritually and socially. Many studies of Southeast Asian Islam focus on the dynamics of Islamic politics, Islamic law, and textual studies (Jatmika, 2022). At the same time, aspects of local religious praxis and spirituality are often mentioned only in passing (Wigley, 2018). This gap highlights the need to examine how local religious rituals are practiced as a form of daily religiosity and how Islamic spiritual values are incorporated into the coastal culture.

To address these issues, Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory approach can serve as the primary analytical framework for understanding them. This theory provides insight into how ritual practice is not only a reflection of religious doctrine but also a result of the internalization of habitus, social structure, and power relations within the community (Bourdieu, 2018) capitalism, the symbolic organization of space and the structural determination of conceptions of time, modernization, language, education, aesthetics, the Algerian peasantry, and the French elite. Its topical variations nevertheless belie a more limited array of overarching interests and themes. Perhaps the most salient and persistent of those themes centers on sociocultural "reproduction"

and especially on the means and modes of the reproduction of domination. Such a theme unites virtually all of Bourdieu's monographs currently available in English, from the *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (translated by R. Nice [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977]). With this approach, Islamic rituals are viewed not solely as religious obligations, but rather as social products shaped by the local and enacted in complex relations between tradition and innovation, authority and participation, and spirituality and symbolism.

Previous studies have made significant contributions to the study of local Islam in Southeast Asia. For example, Bizawie's work highlights the significance of ulama networks and the dissemination of Islam through a cultural lens. Kooria (2019) shows the role of ports and coastal towns as centers of Islamic growth in the past. Zayadi (2023) highlighted how Sufism shaped traditional religious patterns in the region. However, most of these studies have not specifically explored how Muslim communities in coastal areas dynamically practice local Islamic rituals in contemporary studies. The ethnographic approach remains underutilized for capturing the actual practices and spiritual narratives that are integral to the daily lives of the community.

The gap in the literature on this research is evident in studies on Islam in Southeast Asia, which have so far focused more on political dimensions, Islamic law, and textual studies. At the same time, aspects of religious practice and local spirituality are often mentioned only briefly without in-depth analysis. Research on coastal Muslim communities in particular is still limited, even though this region is a center of cultural interaction and a significant route for the spread of Islam. Most of the literature has not ethnographically documented how coastal communities understand and practice Islamic rituals in their daily lives. This gap will be addressed by examining coastal Islamic spirituality in a contextual, dynamic, and adaptive manner.

This study should explore the spiritual practices of Islam as part of the local wisdom within Muslim communities along the coast of Southeast Asia. Through an ethnographic approach, this research can illustrate the diversity of forms and meanings of Islamic rituals in the local community, as well as demonstrate how these communities negotiate tradition with the challenges of the present day (Mundakir & Hidayat, 2020). By focusing on spirituality as a collectively practiced experience tied to local values, this research not only contributes to the treasury of Islamic studies but also enhances the understanding of the plurality of living Islamic cultures (Manan et al., 2024).

This research aims to address fundamental questions about how local Islamic rituals are practiced and understood by coastal communities, how spirituality is integrated into daily life, and how the dynamics between tradition and renewal unfold within local Islam. Thus, this study is not only descriptive, but also interpretative and reflective of the development of Islam as a living religion in the practice of Southeast Asian society. The importance of conducting this study lies in its form of appreciation for the practice of Islam, which is contextual and accommodating to local culture. This study will raise the voices of Muslim communities that have been less heard in the dominant discourse of Islamic studies - namely, those who live in coastal areas, practice Islam ritually and spiritually in their daily lives, and still try to maintain local wisdom amidst the waves of global change.

The research question in this study stems from a fundamental question about how coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia understand, interpret, and practice Islamic rituals in their daily lives. This study also questions how Islamic spiritual values are integrated into local social and cultural structures, and how the dynamics between tradition and renewal unfold amid the currents of modernization, migration, and Islamic purification movements. Thus, this study aims to explore how local rituals serve as a means of fostering social solidarity, preserving religious identity, and navigating the interplay between religion, culture, and social change.

## Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing ethnographic methods, to thoroughly explore the practice of Islamic rituals and spirituality within coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. This approach was chosen because it enables the recording of religious experiences and local narratives in an emic manner, capturing the symbolic meanings that reside within the community's cultural and social aspects (Atkinson et al., 2012). Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and systematic field notes. Researchers were directly involved in the community's lives to understand ritual practices, such as Maulid, sea tahlil, and earth alms, as well as spiritual expressions through dhikr, wirid, and collective prayers.

The primary data sources were local religious figures, community leaders, fishermen, women activists from the Majelis Taklim, and pesantren youth who are actively involved in spiritual activities. The types of data collected include verbal and narrative accounts, directly observed ritual behavior, visual documentation, and local religious artifacts. Data were analyzed using interpretive techniques, including categorization, source triangulation, and contextual reading of texts and social practices. The analysis was conducted by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice to understand how habitus, symbolic capital, and social field shape and reproduce the meaning of Islamic spirituality in the social space of coastal communities (Müller, 2021).

## Literature Review

The study of Islamic rituals and spirituality in Southeast Asia has evolved into a significant academic discourse within the realm of contemporary Islamic studies, particularly when examined in the locality, identity, and socio-cultural transformation. In many cases, the study of Islam in this region not only explains the doctrinal aspects but also traces how Islam is practiced as a living tradition embedded in the social and cultural structure of the community. Therefore, understanding Islamic rituals and spirituality in coastal areas requires theoretical and conceptual approaches that can capture the complexity of the relationship between religion, space, and culture.

Theoretically, this study employs Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory approach to analyze the relationship between habitus, social field, and cultural capital that influence the practice of religious rituals by coastal Muslim communities. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) emphasize that social practices, including spiritual practices, are the result of the internalization of social structures that operate through habitus. The practice of Islamic rituals cannot be understood only as a form of normative fulfillment of religious teachings, but also as an expression of social identity and power relations that are internalized in everyday life. Thus, rituals such as Maulid, Sea alms, or Earth alms in coastal communities represent more than just religious practices; they become social mechanisms to maintain community cohesion, cultural legitimacy, and the continuity of local traditions.

Scholars, both local and international, have widely developed the study of Islamic religious rituals in Southeast Asia. Panopoulos et al. (2020) highlight the importance of understanding the religious practices of Indonesian people through the framework of spiritual experience and cultural expression in their research. They assert that the ethnographic approach enables researchers to observe how local Muslims perceive, experience, and engage in religious rituals as part of their life world. Similar findings were presented by Maarif (2002), who studied Islam and globalization in Southeast Asia. He notes that Islamic practices in the region tend to be adaptive to local traditions, while also being open to the flow of Islamic transnationalism. In coastal spaces, where cultural exchange and social mobility are high, local Islamic practices reflect the tension between preserving old values and accepting new influences.

Conceptually, spirituality in Islam cannot be reduced to formalistic rituals alone. Spirituality refers to the inner dimension of religious experience, which in many cases is realized through

Sufistic and contemplative practices. Ruslan et al. (2022) examined a tarekat community in South Sulawesi. They found that dhikr and wirid rituals are integral to the community's religious life, serving as a symbolic space to strengthen collective ethics and social solidarity. Meanwhile, Hasan et al. (2023) emphasized that local rituals, such as slametan and nyadran, survive not only because of their function as cultural heritage but also because they represent spiritual experiences that are collectively shared.

Other research by Mohamad (2021) in his study on gender and Islam in Southeast Asia also shows that local religious rituals can serve as an arena for identity negotiation, encompassing both gender relations, spiritual authority, and social position within the community. In the coastal areas, the role of women is often crucial in maintaining, preserving, and even organizing collective ritual practices, such as maulid readings, recitations, and sea pilgrimages. This suggests that Islamic spirituality in coastal communities is not a static and closed phenomenon, but rather a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that accommodates diverse social roles.

Criticism of formalist and textualist approaches in Islamic studies is also a crucial foundation for developing the framework of this study. Research by Gumiandari et al. (2022) reveals that many Islamic approaches in Southeast Asia often overlook local practices that do not conform to mainstream doctrines. In many cases, practices such as tahlil, barzanji, and other forms of ritual are marginalized by groups that promote Islamic purification. These practices have strong cultural legitimacy and are integral to the spirituality of a living and evolving society. The ethnographic approach becomes crucial for exploring the subjective and symbolic meanings of each form of religious ritual performed.

In terms of methodology, ethnographic studies have proven to provide depth of analysis in local Islamic studies. Anthropologists, such as Hasan (2011), have long emphasized the importance of this approach to understanding the dynamics of religion in the locality. Ethnography enables researchers to document religious experiences in a naturalistic manner, thereby avoiding the normative reductions that often occur in formal studies of religion. Through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and direct engagement with the community, this approach captures the emic narratives and meanings of how coastal Muslims live their spirituality.

The religious ecology approach, developed by Lee & Lee (2023), is also relevant in this study. They explain that the physical environment, including the sea, rivers, and beaches, plays a crucial role in shaping the religious practices of coastal communities. Seawater, for example, is not only an economic resource but also a spiritual entity that is honored in various local Islamic rituals. This concept enriches our understanding that Islamic spirituality in coastal communities cannot be separated from the relationship between humans and nature, which in many cases is symbolic and transcendent.

In terms of regionalization, studies on local Islam in Southeast Asia have increased significantly over the past decade. Research by Fogg (1970) and Ismail & Mujani (2023) shows that the character of Islam in Southeast Asia is plural and contextual. They note that locality is not a threat to orthodoxy, but rather a creative arena in formulating more inclusive forms of religiosity. This is evident in the practices of Muslim communities in coastal areas that can maintain traditions while adapting to global and social changes.

This literature review also reveals a notable lack of documentation and analysis of the Islamic practices of coastal communities, in particular. Most studies are either generalized or too focused on inland or urban areas. The study of Islamic rituals and spirituality in coastal areas remains underexplored, particularly through an ethnographic approach that can capture the diversity and complexity of local religious practices. Therefore, this research aims to fill this void and offer an analytical framework that bridges the gap between local traditions and global Islamic discourse.

This research emphasizes the importance of understanding Islam not only as a theological system but also as a social practice deeply rooted in local space, history, and culture through the

synthesis of various literatures. Spirituality and religious rituals in coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia are living, dynamic, and evolving entities. This study will contribute to the local Islamic studies literature and open a broader discussion on the plurality of religious expressions in Muslim societies.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The Dynamics of Religious Rituals in the Social Spaces of Coastal Muslim Communities***

This ethnographic research reveals that Islamic ritual practices in Southeast Asian coastal communities are carried out collectively and play a crucial role in fostering social solidarity and preserving the continuity of tradition. In several Indonesian coastal communities, such as those on the north coast of Java and South Sulawesi, as well as in the coastal areas of eastern Malaysia, religious ritual practices like the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, sea tahlil, and earth alms are still carried out with enthusiasm by cross-generational residents. The community views rituals not only as a form of religious worship but also as a space for social interaction and the strengthening of collective identity (Parish, 2020).

The Prophet's birthday ritual, for example, is carried out by reading the barzanji and organizing a cultural carnival that involves religious leaders, fishermen, homemakers, and schoolchildren. These activities typically last several days and are accompanied by prayer readings, complimentary food, and folk entertainment. Meanwhile, sea alms, which in some communities is also known as "ruwatan laut" or "labuh sesaji," is performed by delivering offerings to the middle of the sea as a form of gratitude for sustenance from the sea and prayers for the safety of fishermen. This ritual is often followed by congregational dhikr and the reading of Surah Yasin, led by local religious figures. Earth alms is also still an important annual agenda held before the planting season or after harvest. In it, the community reads prayers together, slaughters sacrificial animals, and distributes crops to others as a form of social solidarity and respect for the land (Sulfinadia et al., 2023).

The ritual practice is not rigid, but continues to undergo adjustments in response to changing social and economic conditions. In some locations, such as coastal Gresik and Pahang, rituals have begun to be packaged as cultural festivals to attract tourists. Local governments and tourism agencies have even become involved in funding and promoting these activities, indicating a transformation from purely religious rituals to socio-cultural events with economic value. Some community groups have concerns that the spiritual essence of the ritual is being compromised due to commercialization and outside intervention (Chen, 2024).

The influence of tourism, urbanization, and migration also affects the sustainability of local religious rituals. In some communities that experienced an influx of migrants from outside the region or abroad, ritual practices have declined in participation due to shifting patterns of life, individualism, and a lack of emotional ties to local traditions. However, some communities show cultural resilience by regenerating and educating the younger generation about the importance of tradition through informal schools, recitations, and social media (Vlachová & Hamplová, 2023).

Ideologically, the emergence of the Islamic purification movement, which carries the discourse of returning to the literal Qur'an and Sunnah, poses a serious challenge to the survival of local Islamic rituals. These groups consider most local rituals as heresy, khurafat, and even shirk. In some areas, such as coastal Sumatra and southern Thailand, there are open debates between traditionalist and reformist groups regarding the legitimacy of rituals, including sea alms and earth alms. However, in many cases, people prefer the moderate path by continuing to perform rituals, but adjusting the religious narrative to remain acceptable to all parties (Fortuin et al., 2020).

The continuity of religious rituals in coastal Muslim communities is not just an expression of religion, but also a social strategy to maintain the continuity of values, local authority

structures, and kinship systems. From the perspective of Bourdieu's practice theory, this ritual can be understood as the result of a religious habitus formed through historical experiences, social structures, and symbolic capital that continues to be reproduced in the community's social space (Bourdieu, 1992). The habitus of the coastal Muslim community encourages individuals to perform rituals as part of an inseparable social and religious obligation, making spiritual practices a means to affirm their existence within the wider social structure.

The social aspect in which these rituals occur is not neutral. There is a symbolic battle between traditional values, the demands of modernization, and ideological pressures from outside. In this field, social agents such as local ulama, pesantren youth, government officials, and tourism actors play different roles in defining the meaning of rituals. The cultural capital possessed by traditional scholars lends them legitimacy to maintain ritual forms. In contrast, modern agents, such as local governments, emphasize the importance of transforming rituals into cultural assets with economic value. This tension and negotiation characterize the dynamics of religious rituals in coastal areas.

This finding aligns with Hartanto et al.'s (2023) study, which states that Islamic practices in Indonesia, particularly in the rituals and public expressions, are predominantly shaped by the interplay between local values and fluid interpretations of religion. Nuraisah et al.'s (2023) research also demonstrates that Islam in coastal Southeast Asia evolved through a prolonged process of acculturation and cannot be disentangled from the characteristics of maritime society. Cornish (2024), in his ethnographic study, demonstrates that dhikr and other religious rituals serve not only as spiritual tools but also as social media to strengthen patron-client networks and relations between social groups. Research by Hasyim et al. (2020) suggests that local rituals, often wrapped in natural symbolism such as the sea and mountains, demonstrate the integration between Islamic cosmology and local cosmology. In the practice of sea alms, for example, people not only recite prayers but also symbolize the spiritual connection between humans, nature, and God. This view aligns with the ecotheological framework in Islam, which regards nature as signs of divine power (*ayat kauniyah*) that must be respected and preserved.

The connection between spirituality and the sea adds a new dimension to the discourse on contemporary Islamic ethics (Ouis, 2002). Amidst the global ecological crisis, coastal rituals demonstrate the potential of Islam Nusantara in formulating an eco-theology based on local wisdom (Darmalaksana et al., 2022). Sea alms, prayers for the safety of fishermen, and the symbolism of the sea as a sacred space are forms of religious practice that affirm humans as caliphs on earth with a mandate to preserve nature. Thus, this study lays the groundwork for a global conversation on how Islam can make an ethical contribution to environmental issues through an approach rooted in local traditions.

Religious rituals in coastal Muslim communities not only preserve the heritage of the past but also serve as an active space to negotiate local Islamic identity in the face of changing times. The community does not passively face modernization and religious purification; instead, it actively adjusts the form and meaning of rituals to meet its social and spiritual needs. Practices such as packaging Maulid in the form of festivals, utilizing social media to invite worshipers, or replacing sea offerings with symbolic prayers demonstrate creativity in maintaining the essence while responding to contemporary challenges. The importance of viewing religious rituals not only within a theological-normative framework but also as social and cultural practices that exist within a particular social space. The ethnographic approach becomes essential for capturing the meanings hidden behind symbols, local narratives, and collective actions of the community. The results of this study enrich the discourse of Islamic studies by providing an in-depth understanding of the plurality of religious expressions in a specific local aspect, while demonstrating that Islamic spirituality in Southeast Asia exhibits strong resilience in the face of changing times.

### ***Islamic Spirituality as Cultural Capital in Everyday Life and Practice***

Islamic spirituality among coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia is not an abstract concept; rather, it manifests itself in daily practices, social relations, and community values. Residents of coastal communities such as those on the south coast of Java, the west coast of Sumatra, and the coastal areas of Kelantan in Malaysia practice spirituality through activities that are integrated into their routines, including dhikr after prayers, nightly wirid in langgar or surau, sunnah fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and voluntary giving of alms to neighbors or fishermen in need. These practices are not separated from daily life, but rather become part of a system of meanings that are passed down through generations and reinforced through social exemplars (Azis et al., 2021).

The community views Islamic spirituality as a form of direct relationship with God, characterized by acts of charity, inner peace, and an awareness of God's presence in every aspect of life. The informants often mentioned concepts such as "ikhlas", "patience", and "gratitude" as the core of their religious appreciation. One informant from coastal Lombok stated that "dhikr is not only to seek rewards, but to keep the heart calm, because living at sea is full of risks, we must always be close to Allah." Similarly, in the coastal communities of Pattani, Thailand, fishermen observe *sunnah* fasting as a means of seeking safety before going out to sea, and perform wirid together in a surau before dawn as a way to seek blessings for their families (Manan et al., 2022).

The religious practices are not merely understood as Sharia obligations, but as a means of shaping social and emotional ethics. The practice of dhikr, for example, is carried out not only to gain rewards in the afterlife but also to calm down and build social relations among community members. The wirid malam becomes an informal forum to strengthen relationships between neighbors, discuss life issues, and foster social solidarity. Values such as honesty, hard work, humility, and concern for others become tangible expressions of the Islamic spirituality practiced. This proves that spirituality in coastal Muslim communities is not individualistic, but collective, operational, and functional in shaping daily social life (Mossière, 2024).

In terms of theory, this finding can be explained through the concept of cultural capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Cultural capital is not only in the form of formal education or skills, but also encompasses values, ethics, and habits that are inherited within a community (Bourdieu, 1992). Islamic spirituality acts as cultural capital that is inherited and reproduced through religious habitus formed in the social space of coastal communities. This habitus instills religious dispositions that encourage individuals to carry out spiritual practices as part of the process of shaping themselves and living life together. Zikr, wirid, and *sunnah* fasting are not just rituals, but integral to a social formation that fosters cohesion, moral strengthening, and stability of religious identity (Pamungkas et al., 2023).

According to the sociological perspective on religion (Breskaya et al., 2018), the results of this study demonstrate that religious authority at the local level is never static, but is continually negotiated amid contestation between traditional scholars, puritanical groups, and modern agents, such as the government and the tourism industry. This phenomenon confirms Bourdieu's (1992) thesis that the religious sphere is an arena for the contestation of symbolic capital, where legitimacy is obtained not only through authoritative texts but also through proximity to the lived experiences of the community. In the case of the Nusantara, this legitimacy is tied to the ability of clerics and local leaders to maintain the continuity of tradition while reinterpreting Islamic teachings to make them relevant to contemporary realities.

The Islamic spirituality in coastal areas is closely related to the spiritual ecology of maritime communities. The relationship between humans and the sea, as well as the uncertain weather, fosters a profound spiritual awareness. The sea is not only seen as a source of livelihood, but also as a spiritual space that demands submission, humility, and dependence on Allah. In this interpretation, prayer, dhikr, and fasting become a form of "inner security" against realities that

are beyond human control. These spiritual practices help individuals manage anxiety, build hope, and cultivate a sense of security in the face of the challenges of living in a harsh and risky coastal area (Dahlan et al., 2021).

This finding reinforces the results of previous research. Freyer et al. (2018) found that spirituality is practiced within a framework of close social and ecological relations. Zikr and wirid become part of the social strategy to strengthen internal solidarity and maintain collective identity in the face of change. Subchi et al. (2022) confirm that religious practices, such as pengajian, tahlilan, and nightly wirid, play an essential role in shaping public morals and fostering spiritual connectedness in the daily lives of Indonesians. Solahudin & Fakhruroji (2020) state that Islamic spirituality in local communities often manifests in a form of praxis that is not only transcendent but also contextual. They found that in coastal communities in Indonesia, the relationship with God is facilitated by natural symbolism, ocean cycles, and daily ritual practices that are imbued with local cultural values. This suggests that local spirituality is not a form of “fringe Islam” but rather a full expression of a vibrant and dynamic Islamic experience. This finding aligns with the anthropological approach to spirituality, which emphasizes the importance of viewing religious experience not only through a doctrinal lens but also as a form of praxis closely connected to existential experience. Rubio-Rico et al. (2021) highlighted that the physical environment, social conditions, and daily rhythms of life strongly influence spirituality in traditional communities. They asserted that spiritual practices in local communities reflect human efforts to address life’s issues through symbolic and transcendent frameworks.

Islamic spirituality in coastal communities cannot be understood solely from a legal or fiqh perspective, as its practice is more influenced by local interpretations, life experiences, and shared narratives formed within the community’s social space. The existence of spirituality as cultural capital demonstrates that Islam in Southeast Asia is not monolithic, but rather plural, fluid, and adaptable to the local. It can address inner needs while also serving as a means to create an inclusive and supportive social structure. Islamic spirituality plays a significant role in shaping the daily lives of coastal communities, serving as a moral driving force that influences the way individuals think, act, and relate. It is also the basis for the formation of a distinctive religious identity, which rests not only on the formal aspects of worship but also on the inner appreciation that is internalized in daily social life. Spirituality becomes a pillar that sustains the community’s survival, not only in religious terms but also in social resilience, economic ethics, and ecological harmony. Islamic spirituality is a significant cultural force that is deeply embedded in the daily lives of Southeast Asian coastal communities. This spirituality is not passive, but actively shapes social relations and collective ethics. In a world increasingly affected by modernization and the disruption of local values, Islamic spirituality in coastal communities demonstrates its resilience and relevance as a cultural capital that can address the challenges of the times while maintaining the continuity of contextual and down-to-earth Islamic values.

### ***Religious Authority and the Negotiation of Tradition: Between Local Ulama and the Purification Movement***

Local clerics in Southeast Asian coastal Muslim communities play a pivotal role in preserving and negotiating culturally ingrained religious traditions. They act as moral guardians, spiritual educators, and cultural agents, connecting the community with its local Islamic heritage. Field findings in the coastal areas of Central Java, Aceh, Terengganu (Malaysia), and Patani (southern Thailand) show that ritual practices such as tahlilan, maulid, and almsgiving are still preserved by communities with strong support from traditional ulama. These scholars frame these rituals as expressions of love for the Prophet, a form of collective gratitude, and an inner endeavor to obtain blessings from God (Bety et al., 2023).

This research has made a significant contribution to the debate surrounding the concept of Islam Nusantara, namely the idea that Islam, which developed in the archipelago of Southeast

Asia, has always been shaped through creative dialogue with local cultures (M. Aris Munandar & Encung Heriyadi, 2024). The finding that coastal rituals such as Maulid, Tahlil, Earth alms, and collective wirid have survived despite facing pressure for religious purification shows that Islam Nusantara is not merely an academic construct, but a practical reality rooted in the lives of the community (Fuadi et al., 2024). This praxis is evidence that Islam in coastal areas continuously negotiates orthodoxy with local wisdom, thereby creating a form of religiosity that is inclusive, participatory, and relevant to contemporary ecological and social challenges.

Significant tensions exist between the authority of traditional scholars and reformers or Salafi groups with an Islamic purification agenda. This group considers that local ritual practices derived from community traditions, even if they contain prayers and dhikr, are a form of bid'ah that deviates from pure Islamic teachings. They openly criticize tahlil activities, grave pilgrimages, and the use of offerings in religious events that have become part of the social structure of coastal communities. This tension has led to symbolic conflict in religious social spaces, especially in mosques, majelis taklim, and informal education institutions (Muthohirin et al., 2022).

The dynamics between local clerics and Puritan groups do not occur in a vacuum, but within a social field characterized by contestation over religious meaning and legitimacy. Traditional clerics attempt to maintain their authority through cultural approaches, social dialogue, and the reinterpretation of tradition. In some locations, they try to adapt ritual language to a more rational and textual religious narrative, in order not to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the younger generation. In contrast, puritan groups utilize social media, transnational da'wah networks, and the influence of modern religious institutions to spread anti-tradition and purificationist discourses of Islam (Jamaludin, 2022).

This conflict does not always lead to extreme polarization. In many communities, a dynamic process of socio-religious negotiation is at play. Some local clerics have adopted aspects of the purification movement, such as simplifying rituals, eliminating symbolic elements deemed unsubstantiated, or emphasizing the purification of intentions in ritual performance. They have also responded to criticism by strengthening the Qur'anic and hadith bases that support the validity of communal dhikr, collective prayer, and respect for ulama and ancestors. This process demonstrates that religious authority is not a static entity, but rather one that is continually negotiated in social spaces and public discourse (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Theoretically, these findings can be analyzed through the framework of *field* and *capital* in Pierre Bourdieu's theory. The religious field is an arena for symbolic battles between social actors to win legitimacy as the legitimate interpreter of Islamic teachings (Bourdieu, 2018) capitalism, the symbolic organization of space and the structural determination of conceptions of time, modernization, language, education, aesthetics, the Algerian peasantry, and the French elite. Its topical variations nevertheless belie a more limited array of overarching interests and themes. Perhaps the most salient and persistent of those themes centers on sociocultural "reproduction" and especially on the means and modes of the reproduction of domination. Such a theme unites virtually all of Bourdieu's monographs currently available in English, from the *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (translated by R. Nice [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977]). Traditional clerics possess substantial symbolic capital because they are considered to inherit a scientific pedigree, emotional closeness to the community, and spiritual capabilities that are demonstrated through daily practices. Meanwhile, Puritans seek to seize authoritative positions by carrying modern cultural capital, including mastery of classical Arabic texts, Middle Eastern education, and transnational da'wah networks. The battle between these two actors unfolds within the broader social shifts, including the globalization of Islam, advancements in information technology, and the erosion of religious authority.

This research reinforces Rosidi et al.'s (2024) findings that religious authority in Indonesia, particularly in non-urban areas, is determined not only by formal power but by social connectedness and cultural sustainability. Clerics who are close to the community, involved

in daily life, and understand local spiritual needs tend to be more accepted than figures who only emphasize the legality of textual teachings. This is also supported by Noviandy et al.'s (2023) study, which highlights the fragmentation of religious authority in Aceh following the implementation of Islamic law. They note that the pluralism of religious interpretations remains alive as communities still hold strong to local religious traditions despite pressure from the state and modernist groups. Meanwhile, Mandaville (2020) shows that Islamic purification comes as a response to the anxieties of modernity and secularization. Salafi groups seek to create a religious identity that is "clean" from local cultural influences by emphasizing a return to the original religious texts. However, Maru et al.'s (2020) research also found that these groups often encountered strong resistance from communities entrenched in local ritual traditions. This shows that coastal communities do not necessarily accept a single narrative about Islam, but make selections and adaptations based on their own religious experiences. Walsh's research also reinforces the findings of this study by demonstrating that local rituals frequently serve as a platform for negotiating religious authority and meaning. They emphasize that symbolism in rituals is not just a cultural heritage, but also a means to form collective identity and build relationships with the transcendent world. Local clerics serve as mediators between the spiritual and social worlds, bridging the gap between Islamic values and contextualized cultural practices.

The plurality of Islam is not a threat to orthodoxy, but rather a testament to Islam's vitality in articulating itself in various social and ecological studies (Marshall, 2022). At this point, the Muslim communities along Southeast Asia's coastline can be seen as essential actors in shaping an inclusive, ecological, and grounded Islamic discourse, rooted in everyday life experiences and relevant to contemporary global challenges.

The conflict between traditionalism and puritanism extends beyond theology to encompass power structures, symbolic economics, and social transformation. When local ulama lose legitimacy because they are unable to respond to the new needs of society, their position as guardians of tradition wavers. Conversely, when they succeed in demonstrating that traditions can be maintained while also being updated, they strengthen their position as authoritative figures in the relevant religious sphere. Religious authority in Southeast Asian coastal Muslim communities continues to evolve and adapt. In a space open to multiple discourses, local clerics are not only victims of the purification movement but also active actors in responding to, adjusting, and reconstructing the meaning of tradition. This process reveals the resilient, creative, and adaptive dynamics of local Islam. Islamic spirituality and rituals remain alive not because they are immune to change, but because they can engage with the challenges of the times through religious authorities who are responsive to local needs.

### ***The Sea as a Sacred Space: Spiritual Relationships among Humans, Nature, and God***

The sea holds a meaning that extends far beyond its economic or geographical functions in the lives of coastal Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. For communities in areas such as the southern coast of Java, the west coast of Sumatra, the eastern shore of Malaysia, and the coastal region of Mindanao in the Philippines, the sea is revered as a sacred spiritual space. In the religious experience of these communities, the sea is an extension of the divine will that not only gives life but also demands respect, protection, and spiritual conquest (Jatmika, 2022). The community perceives the sea as a living entity with a metaphysical dimension. They perform rituals such as sea pilgrimages, prayers to ward off bad luck, and offering sacrifices to the middle of the sea, not to worship the sea, but as a form of symbolic communication between humans, nature, and a Higher Power. For example, in the *sea alms* tradition on the south coast of Java, the community parades crops and buffalo heads to the beach, then sends offerings to the open sea while reciting prayers for safety. The fishermen believe that this rite is done as an expression of gratitude and as a request for safety before entering the fishing season. The coastal communities of Langkat and Tapanuli in North Sumatra also observe a similar tradition of dhikr together on

the shoreline before embarking on a sailing journey (Muhammad Jodi Prasetyo et al., 2023).

The prayer to ward off misfortune performed on the beach is usually led by a local religious figure, often a village cleric or kyai, who recites Qur'anic verses and protective prayers such as the verse of Kursi, the prayer of the Prophet Yunus, and certain hizibs. These rituals are seen as a form of collective spirituality that unites people's hopes for social, ecological, and spiritual safety. Some communities also associate the sea with the stories of prophets in Islam, particularly the story of Prophet Yunus and his journey in the belly of a fish, as a symbol of human limitations before the will of the Almighty God (Slamet et al., 2023).

The sea is an integral part of the local Islamic cosmology, which combines the vertical dimension (human relationship with God) with the horizontal dimension (human relationships with nature and others). The sea is understood not just as a physical space, but as "ayat kauniyah" or signs of God in nature that must be contemplated, respected, and utilized with ethics. In sea pilgrimage rituals, communities construct a spiritual narrative in which the sea is perceived to have a will and boundaries that must be safeguarded, not exploited. These rituals reflect an ecological awareness rooted in Islamic spirituality, a tradition that has been practiced for generations.

Theoretically, these findings can be analyzed through the approach of Islamic ecotheology and Clifford Geertz's symbolic theory. Islamic ecotheology posits that the relationship between humans and the environment must be grounded in the principles of tawhid, amanah, and khalifah, where humans are obligated to preserve God's creation, rather than destroy it (Geertz, 1993). Religious rituals on the coast can be understood as a form of manifestation of ecotheological awareness. Sea prayers and alms are not just a form of local tradition, but an ethical representation of the belief that nature is part of an interconnected divine system. Meanwhile, Geertz's symbolic theory helps explain how communities collectively interpret the sea as a symbol of ambiguity between life and death, hope and risk, blessing and disaster (Geertz, 2019). In the symbolic system of coastal communities, the sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a spiritual realm that requires inner involvement. The symbolism associated with the sea is reflected in narratives, prayers, and collective actions that shape religious structures in daily life.

This research corroborates the findings of Hamka et al. (2022), who noted that the spiritual practices of Indonesian coastal communities often combine Islamic values with local meanings of nature. They state that rituals such as sea alms are a form of "ritual synthesis" that cannot be reduced to mere cultural traditions, but are rather complex and contextualized expressions of religion. Research conducted in Bali and the southern coast of Java revealed that communities perceive the sea as a transcendent space where interaction between the human world and the supernatural occurs. As such, it must be honored with spiritual and symbolic gestures. Well, in Ridhwan's study of Sufism in South Sulawesi (2001), he also asserts that the spiritual experiences of coastal communities are often manifested in the form of inner relationships with natural elements. He found that the practice of dhikr and the sea prayers became a way for people to strengthen their spiritual connection with God through reflection on His creation. Beach prayers and sea hizib recitations are part of a locally developed and powerful Sufistic belief system among fishing communities. Nakamura (2020) also emphasizes that local Islamic practices in Southeast Asia are often inextricably linked to spatial structures and cultural memory. On the coast, the sea becomes a spiritual landscape that embodies the community's history, trauma, and hopes. Sea rituals are not merely a means of cultural preservation, but living theological expressions that connect the past, current ecological conditions, and future spiritual aspirations.

The long-standing debate between universalistic Islam and local Islam is exemplified concretely in the lives of coastal communities in Southeast Asia, where ritual practices are not merely regarded as syncretism or deviation, but as evidence of Islam's adaptability in responding to diverse social contexts (Bowen, 1998). This aligns with criticism of the textualist-formalist paradigm in religious studies, which often dismisses everyday religious experiences as unimportant. This research affirms that living Islam can only be understood through actual

practices, local narratives, and social habits that are continuously reproduced.

The survival of sea rituals is facing challenges from modernization, religious purification, and commercialization. Some reformist or Salafi groups view traditions such as the sea alms as a form of shirk or bid'ah that is not based on pure Islamic teachings. They reject the symbolism of the sea and the making of offerings because they believe it mixes Islam with animism. This has created tensions in some communities, especially in areas that are beginning to open up to outside reformist proselytizing. However, coastal communities with emotional and spiritual attachments to marine traditions tend to maintain these practices, albeit in a more 'ritualized' form, such as replacing offerings with prayer readings, replacing buffalo heads with tumpeng rice, or removing elements of traditional music that are considered excessive.

The community's efforts to maintain the spiritual meaning of the sea in more moderate ritual forms indicate a strong adaptive dynamic. The community does not necessarily abandon tradition, but makes adjustments to remain relevant to the spirit of the times. This suggests that the spiritual relationship with the sea is flexible and evolving, rather than static or conservative. Islamic values remain the primary foundation, but are articulated in practices that respect the local ecological and cultural environment. The sea is a sacred space for Southeast Asian coastal Muslim communities, bringing together religious experiences, spiritual ecology, and cultural wisdom. The relationship between humans, the sea, and God extends beyond religious rites to become an integral part of the belief structure, social norms, and daily life orientation. The sea serves as a symbol of spiritual sustainability, as well as an ethic of life, where humans learn to submit to God's power through reflection on nature and the sustainability of life.

## Conclusion

Based on ethnographic findings and in-depth discussions, this study concludes that Islamic rituals and spirituality in Southeast Asian coastal Muslim communities are not merely normative religious practices, but also embody social, symbolic, and ecological dimensions that are rich in meaning and significance. The research effectively addresses key questions concerning how coastal Muslim communities interpret and enact Islamic rituals in their daily lives, as well as how Islamic spirituality is collectively expressed through local traditions passed down across generations. Religious practices such as Maulid, sea alms, Earth alms, Dhikr, Wirid, and prayers to ward off misfortune at sea are performed not only as expressions of faith but also as means to foster social solidarity, preserve ecological balance, and reinforce a localized Islamic identity. The study reveals that Islamic spirituality in these coastal communities is neither individualistic nor detached from the social realm. Instead, it is deeply embedded within social structures that shape relationships among individuals, between humans and nature, and between humans and the Divine. These rituals have undergone various forms of adaptation in response to social transformations, including modernization, migration, ideological challenges from Islamic purification movements, and the pressures of cultural commercialization. Nonetheless, the community's adaptive and selective responses reflect a strong sense of local resilience and creativity in sustaining Islamic spiritual values in contextually relevant ways.

Theoretically, the application of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice enables a more profound understanding that ritual practice is not solely normative but also a manifestation of the religious habitus cultivated within a complex social field. This study contributes original insights through its documentation and ethnographic analysis of the diverse Islamic practices that exist and evolve in Southeast Asian coastal studies. It not only fills a gap in local studies on Islamic spirituality but also broadens the discourse on the plurality of religious expression in the contemporary Islamic world.

This research has several limitations that must be acknowledged honestly, so that the results can be understood in proportion. First, the data collected through the ethnographic approach

are limited to specific coastal communities, so they do not fully represent the diversity of Islamic spiritual practices throughout Southeast Asia. Second, the study's limited time frame meant that some seasonal or incidental ritual variations were not covered in depth. In addition, the researcher's interpretation remains influenced by subjectivity, despite employing data triangulation, which aims to maintain the validity of the findings. External factors, such as social changes resulting from modernization, migration, and the influence of the Islamic purification movement, also cannot be thoroughly examined longitudinally in this study. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the study location to other coastal areas with different socio-cultural characteristics, as well as to use cross-country comparative methods to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Further studies can also utilize an interdisciplinary approach by combining anthropological, eco-theological, and digital communication studies to capture the new dynamics of Islamic spiritual practices amid the tide of globalization.

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