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Beyond Digital Boundaries: The Physical Journey of Mbah Mangli's Followers as A New Paradigm in Global Digital Da'wah

Puji Laksono[1], Wakit Abdullah [2], Argyo Demartoto [3], Suryo Ediyono [4]

[1] Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, UNS, Indonesia
[2] Javanese Literature, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, UNS, Indonesia
[3] Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, UNS, Indonesia
[4] Arabic Literature, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, UNS, Indonesia

Email: pujilaksono75@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT
This study focuses on an anomaly within the context of modern religious communication, wherein the emerging paradigm of global digital dakwah (Islamic propagation) tends to supplant physical traditions rooted in local wisdom. The Mbah Mangli congregation persists in its tradition of walking long distances amid extreme weather every selapan (a 35-day cycle in the Javanese calendar), directly contrasting with contemporary, influencer-centric dakwah styles. To comprehend the significance of this physical mobility, this study analyzes digital artifacts in the form of viral videos circulating on the TikTok social media platform. A qualitative approach utilizing a netnographic method was employed. Data collection was conducted through virtual observation by tracking, archiving, and extracting audiovisual artifacts (videos) alongside textual data (captions and comment section interactions) on TikTok, utilizing relevant keywords and hashtags. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analytical stages encompassed the reduction of irrelevant data, the coding of discursive meanings derived from visual narratives and netizen discourse, and the categorization of recurring semantic patterns. The thematic analysis yielded three primary findings: (1) the reactualization of tirakat (ascetic practices)—encompassing the pursuit of barokah (divine blessing), spiritual reward, and physical well-being—as a form of spiritual resilience; (2) the emergence of spatial philanthropy and community cohesion

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through citizen-initiated rest posts (tempat istirahat); and (3) the mediatization of religion, which transforms a traditional practice into a subject of public discourse. These findings culminate in a conceptual framework termed "Embodied Dakwah" (Dakwah Berbasis Laku Tubuh). Within this framework, grassroots congregations collectively assume the role of religious communicators through the performativity of their physical endurance. This study concludes that digital disruption does not eradicate local wisdom; rather, it enriches it. The results suggest that the future trajectory of global digital dakwah can be anchored in the authenticity of communal traditions.
Keywords: *Digital Dakwah, Local Wisdom, Netnography, Mediatization of Religion*.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary studies on digital religious communication generally focus on how technology facilitates the transition from physical presence to virtual spaces. Literature over the past decade has shown that the digitalization of *dakwah* (Islamic preaching) is highly effective for the global dissemination of religious messages (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Muhtadi, 2021). However, this paradigm often reduces digital *dakwah* to mere text or visual message transmissions centered around religious figures (influencers), assuming that technology will gradually replace or simplify physical traditions.

The phenomenon of the Mbah Mangli congregation presents an anomaly that challenges this assumption. Thousands of congregants from the areas surrounding Mount Sumbing to Wonosobo (such as Kalikajar, Sepuran, and Banyumudal) routinely practice the tradition of walking long distances to the recitation location in Mejing, Candimulyo. This physical mobility is driven by the value of local wisdom in the form of *tirakat*—the quest for *barokah* (blessings), divine rewards, and spiritual endurance—which simultaneously triggers the social solidarity of local residents through the establishment of self-funded rest posts. Interestingly, this traditional physical practice is massively documented by citizens' gadgets and amplified by social media algorithms. This intersection creates a new cultural dakwah space that organically mediates personal spiritual experiences into a global public dakwah discourse.

Although religious discourse in digital media has been widely investigated, a significant research gap remains in the existing literature. Previous studies have focused almost exclusively on analyzing religious texts or virtual authority figures, neglecting how the mobility and embodied practices of grassroots congregants can be mediatized and transformed into the digital *dakwah* infrastructure itself.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to explore and analyze the mediatization of the Mbah Mangli congregants' physical journey as a new paradigm in digital religious communication. The theoretical contribution of this study is to offer a conceptual expansion framework for "*digital dakwah*" by positioning local wisdom not as an entity eroded by technology, but rather as the foundation of a communication infrastructure. This infrastructure broadens the reach of religious messages, rendering them sociologically more inclusive and deeply resonant within contemporary society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the netnography method (Kozinets, 2015), which intersects closely with the disciplines of the sociology of religion and digital communication. This method was selected due to its high relevance in investigating social interactions, cultural practices, and the formation of discourses mediated by digital platforms. Through the lens of netnography, researchers can gain an in-depth understanding of how physical traditions rooted in local wisdom (kearifan lokal) transform into public *dakwah* (Islamic preaching) phenomena in cyberspace.

The primary data sources for this research are digital artifacts in the form of viral videos documenting the physical journey of the Mbah Mangli congregation on the TikTok social media platform, focusing specifically on posts from the account @yulianto7928. These data encompass three elements: visual (footage of the congregation’s journey and self-funded community rest posts), audio (interviews regarding the congregants’ regions of origin and their motivations for *tirakat*), and textual (captions and interactions in the

comment sections). Data collection was conducted naturalistically through non-participant observation techniques in the digital space and virtual archive documentation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Secondary data were also gathered from a review of recent academic literature related to digital *dakwah* and the sociology of religion to strengthen the analytical foundation.

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The stages of analysis included (1) data reduction through the transcription of audio-visual elements into narrative forms; (2) coding of discursive meanings based on representations of local wisdom, such as *tirakat (spiritual* endurance) and social solidarity; and (3) the categorization of major themes. The final interpretation was conducted by contextualizing these findings within the theoretical framework of digital religious communication.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results of the empirical analysis to address the research problem established at the end of the introduction: how the physical practices of grassroots congregants not only survive but also transform into a digital *dakwah* (Islamic preaching) infrastructure in cyberspace. This discussion is designed to shift the reader's initial understanding—from the assumption that technology reduces or replaces physical presence (as believed in much of the previous literature)—toward a new insight that digital disruption actually amplifies tradition. Based on the netnographic method previously outlined, the analytical process was conducted sequentially: beginning with data reduction from TikTok videos, the coding of textual and audio-visual discourses, and finally, the extraction of meaning across five interconnected thematic subsections. These findings are then interpreted and contrasted with previous literature to assert the theoretical significance and novelty of this study.

1. Reactualization of Tirakat Practices: The Construction of Spiritual Resilience and Religious Mobility

The first analytical step focuses on reading the audio-visual narratives related to the practice of *tirakat* (spiritual endurance/asceticism). Classical sociological literature often positions ascetic traditions like tirakat as anomalies within modern societies accustomed to the instantization of religion (Woodward, 2011). However, observational findings challenge this view by revealing a massive reactualization of *tirakat* practices. Thousands of middle-aged and elderly congregants travel on foot for up to 6 hours from the slopes of Mount Sumbing to Candimulyo, braving extreme weather.

The scale of this mobility is confirmed by spontaneous interview recordings in the field: "Where did you walk from, Ma'am?" | "From Wonosobo... Wonosobo Kalikajar... Sepuran springs... Kacetan Kaliangkrik... from Wonosobo Banyumudal..." (Congregant Audio Transcript, 00:22-00:41). Unlike previous studies that view mobility merely as demographic movement, this analysis finds that these regions function as spatial signifiers for the expansion of dakwah. Further interviews elaborate on the congregants' trilogy of intentions: "First is to walk, second is for physical health, and third is to seek *barokah* (blessings) from God." (Audio Transcript, 01:05-01:13). Employing the theory of religious mobility (Knott, 2015), these findings update our understanding: physical exhaustion is transformed into spiritual capital that refuses to submit to material comfort.

2. Spatial Philanthropy and Ephemeral Communities Along the Recitation Route

Subsequent analysis examines the social ecosystem accompanying the congregants' mobility. The video narrator captures this phenomenon: "Community enthusiasm is a crucial part... residents set up simple rest posts..." (Audio Transcript, 01:15-01:28). Previous studies (Fauzia, 2013) generally define Islamic philanthropy within an institutional framework (*zakat* or *infaq*). The significance of this study's findings lies in the emergence of the concept of 'spatial philanthropy', wherein resources are mobilized independently and are bound to a specific geographical space and the *selapanan* (35-day cycle) momentum.

Using Victor Turner's (1969) framework of communitas, interactions at these posts create communal bonds that transcend social status boundaries. Class identities dissolve into a single collective entity: servants of the seekers of knowledge (*khadimul ilmi*). The new understanding offered here is the expansion of the definition of *dakwah*; *dakwah* is no longer exclusively a pulpit sermon but manifests in the materiality of a warm cup of tea. This shifts the reader's paradigm, demonstrating that local wisdom (such as *tepo seliro* or mutual respect) can serve as a highly effective instrument of *dakwah*.

3. The Mediatization of Religion: Transforming Physical Practices into Social Media Discourse

The third stage contextualizes physical practices within the digital dimension. Hjarvard (2012) posits that media actively alter the landscape of religious authority. In this documentation, the content creator functions as a 'curator of meaning': "For them, this journey is not merely about relocating; there is the intention of tirakat, a love for knowledge..." (Audio Transcript, 00:00). These findings provide new insights regarding the use of the TikTok platform. While TikTok was previously associated with pop culture and highly polished instant content, this analysis demonstrates that the platform is repurposed into a digital pulpit featuring the aesthetics of 'slow religion'.

Spiritual deterritorialization occurs when a global audience responds to the video with awe and prayers, validating that amateur authenticity actually possesses a far more massive dakwah resonance compared to celebrity sermons.

4. Conceptual Discussion: 'Embodied Da'wah' as a New Paradigm

Through a synthesis of empirical findings, this section formulates the theoretical contribution of the research: the paradigm of 'Embodied Da'wah'. Previous dominant literature (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022; Muhtadi, 2021) has been highly logocentric—focusing on verbal texts and prominent figures. This study advances that understanding by proving

that the primary subject of *dakwah* can shift to grassroots congregants. The bodily performance of walking through the rain is the main text being communicated.

In line with participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), the boundaries between producers and consumers of meaning blur. The Mbah Mangli congregants, initially positioned as listeners, transform into a primary source of inspiration when their communal activities go viral, proving the power of non-verbal prophetic communication in the digital age.

5. Sociological Implications: The Resilience of Local Wisdom Amidst Digital Disruption

The discussion concludes with a macro-sociological evaluation. Traditional modernization theories predict that technological penetration will homogenize religious practices and marginalize irrational local customs. The analysis of the Mbah Mangli congregants' practices convincingly overturns this thesis. Social media does not erode but rather serves as a catalyst for the resilience of the *tirakat* tradition.

The new understanding acquired is that the hybridity between ancient traditions and cutting-edge technology can create a highly potent cultural *dakwah* infrastructure. Amidst the clamor of hate speech in cyberspace, this mobility practice offers a counterbalancing narrative of religion as a harmonious and empathetic practice.

As a comparative instrument to clarify the theoretical paradigm shift generated by this research, Table 1 below maps the differences between previous literature and the newly proposed paradigm findings:

Aspect of Analysis	Previous Literature & Understanding	New Findings (Research Significance)
Subject of Digital Dakwah	Centered on religious figures, preachers, or influencers (Logocentric).	Grassroots congregants through the performance of collective action (Embodied Da'wah).
Message Infrastructure	Verbal texts, scriptures, rhetoric, and high-	Physical mobility (walking), spatial

	aesthetic video production.	philanthropy, and amateur aesthetics (slow religion).
Tradition & Technology Relations	Technology replaces or simplifies physical presence.	Technology amplifies and deterritorializes communal physical practices without altering their authenticity.

Table 1: Synthesis Matrix of the Paradigm Shift in Digital Religious Communication

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study affirms that the physical mobility of grassroots congregants in the Mbah Mangli recitation tradition is not merely a relic of the past surviving technological onslaught but has transformed into the digital *dakwah* infrastructure itself. Through cyberspace mediatization, the practice of *tirakat* and local citizens' solidarity (spatial philanthropy) merge into a new paradigm termed Embodied *dakwah*. Within this framework, the performance of physical endurance and communal sincerity successfully overtakes the role of verbal rhetoric from central religious figures.

This understanding is highly crucial for readers and scholars of the sociology of communication, as it corrects the deterministic view that has long assumed digitalization would homogenize religious practices and marginalize local wisdom. This research proves that the authenticity of communal traditions, even when presented through amateur video aesthetics, possesses extraordinary global resonance. The implication is that the future of digital religious communication does not have to rely on celebrity preachers or grandiose content production; rather, it can firmly rest upon the sincerity of the physical practices of ordinary people, which is sociologically far more inclusive, grassroots-oriented, and rooted in empathy.

Considering that this study limits its focus to the mediatization of discourse on social media platforms, there is vast room for future research development. Therefore, future studies are highly recommended to examine the post-virality impact of this phenomenon on

the local community's social structure—for instance, whether massive digital exposure triggers the commodification of religious rituals or, conversely, strengthens the citizens' social cohesion. Furthermore, comparative studies investigating grassroots religious mobility traditions in other cultural ecologies are also needed to test and expand the universality of the Embodied Da'wah framework proposed in this paper.

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