# Performing Islam in an Urbanizing Periphery: Mekar Jaya, Wayang Kulit, and Cultural Preaching in Eastern Bekasi, 1990–2000

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## Abstract

This article reconstructs how a family tradition of *wayang kulit* performance became a locally organized repertoire of Islamic preaching in eastern Bekasi between 1990 and 2000. It argues that Mekar Jaya did not simply convert an inherited art into a religious instrument. Its historical importance lay in a gradual process of institutionalization in which household transmission, informal leadership, notarial recognition, performance technique, and audience-sensitive language were assembled into a durable cultural practice. The decisive shift occurred in 1994, when dalang Sukarlana Nemit Putra recalled beginning to insert Islamic messages consistently without replacing the classical narrative structure. Dialogue, dalang narration, *punakawan* humor, symbolism, *suluk*, and gamelan enabled messages concerning prayer, honesty, justice, family responsibility, solidarity, and tolerance to circulate within entertainment. The study applies the historical method, consisting of heuristics, external and internal source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Its main evidence comprises 2025 oral-history interviews, a photographed notarial cover dated to 1996, a later operational recommendation, material objects, and scholarship on Bekasi wayang. Source criticism addresses two important problems in the evidence. Mustika Jaya, Mustika Sari, and Cimuning are treated as eastern Bekasi localities rather than three 1990s districts, and the number printed beneath the notary's name is not presented as the deed number. The article also distinguishes evidence of deliberate preaching from retrospective claims about religious change. Mekar Jaya's contribution was therefore not a measurable conversion effect, but the creation of a culturally translated Islamic vocabulary whose reach remained contingent on language, duration, dalang credibility, economic conditions, and competition from modern media.

**Keywords:** Mekar Jaya, wayang kulit, cultural preaching, oral history, Bekasi, Islamic history

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## Introduction

The history of Islam in Java cannot be separated from the history of media. Sermons, teaching circles, manuscripts, mosques, family networks, ritual calendars, song, and performance each created different conditions under which religious ideas could be heard and interpreted. *Wayang kulit* occupies a particularly contested place within this history. It has often been described as both an inheritance from pre-Islamic courtly traditions and a medium through which Islamic ethical language entered Javanese public life. That dual genealogy has made the performance unusually adaptable. A dalang can retain recognizable characters, plots, music, and comic conventions while redirecting their moral implications toward new concerns. The result is neither a simple survival of an ancient form nor a straightforward religious lecture with puppets. It is a negotiated performance whose meaning depends on the choices of artists, patrons, audiences, and local institutions.[1]

Scholarship on wayang and Islam has established the general significance of this cultural strategy. Bayu Anggoro locates performance within a long history in which entertainment, education, and preaching repeatedly overlapped. Elly Herlyana and Eko Setiawan emphasize the capacity of character, symbolism, and narrative to convey Islamic religious and ethical values without abandoning the dramatic form of *wayang purwa*.[2] These studies are useful for explaining why wayang could carry religious messages, but their wide chronological and geographical scale leaves the organizational labor of local performers largely invisible. The familiar story of the Wali Songo also tends to function as an origin narrative that validates contemporary cultural preaching. Specific claims that Sunan Kalijaga invented individual characters or redesigned every visual element are difficult to establish from contemporary fifteenth- or sixteenth-century evidence. For a history of the 1990s, that tradition is best treated as a cultural genealogy available to later dalang, not as direct evidence for the practices of one Bekasi group.

Bekasi requires a more locally grounded account. The region has long connected coastal, agrarian, metropolitan, Javanese, Sundanese, Betawi, Chinese, and Islamic histories. Pancar Catur Ramdiansyah describes a culturally mixed society already visible in the colonial period, while Yusril Fahmi Adam, Badrun, and Firza Nofdi Muhammad reconstruct a longer and locally varied process of Islamization.[3] Such diversity did not disappear with the expansion of metropolitan Jakarta. It shaped

[1] Bayu Anggoro, "Wayang dan Seni Pertunjukan: Kajian Sejarah Perkembangan Seni Wayang di Tanah Jawa sebagai Seni Pertunjukan dan Dakwah," *JUSPI: Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam* 2, no. 2 (2018): 122–133, https://doi.org/10.30829/j.v2i2.1679.

[2] Elly Herlyana, "Pagelaran Wayang Purwa sebagai Media Penanaman Nilai Religius Islam pada Masyarakat Jawa," *Thaqafiyyat: Jurnal Bahasa, Peradaban dan Informasi Islam* 14, no. 1 (2013): 127–144, https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/adab/thaqafiyyat/article/view/616. Eko Setiawan, "Makna Nilai Filosofi Wayang Kulit sebagai Media Dakwah," *Al-Hikmah* 18, no. 1 (2020): 37–56, https://doi.org/10.35719/alhikmah.v18i1.21.

[3] Pancar Catur Ramdiansyah, "Bekasi pada Masa Kolonial (1925–1945)," *Historia Madania: Jurnal Ilmu Sejarah* 6, no. 1 (2022): 64–77, https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/historia/article/download/16198/7212. Yusril Fahmi Adam, Badrun, and Firza Nofdi Muhammad, "Jejak Islamisasi di Bekasi dalam Perspektif Sejarah," *NALAR: Jurnal Peradaban dan Pemikiran Islam* 7, no. 2 (2023): 214–241, https://doi.org/10.23971/njppi.v7i2.7407.

the cultural field within which different performance idioms competed and mixed. In this setting, a Javanese-language shadow-puppet performance could not assume that every spectator shared the same linguistic knowledge. It had to cross social and linguistic boundaries even when it was staged close to the performers' home.

Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin provide the closest historiographical point of comparison. Their study identifies Bekasi wayang as an acculturated tradition whose forms drew on Betawi, Javanese, and Sundanese elements. It also charts a broad trajectory from popularity in the 1970s to competition with screen entertainment in the 1980s, renewed artistic activity between 1990 and 2000, and a sharper decline after 2001. Their fieldwork included an interview with Sukarlana Nemit Putra at Mekar Jaya in December 2020.[4] This independent encounter is important because it confirms that Sukarlana and the sanggar were not produced only by a later interview. Yet the 2021 article does not reconstruct how Mekar Jaya emerged from a family lineage, when preaching became an intentional element of performance, how its organizational form changed, or how the dalang adjusted messages across nearby localities.

This article addresses that microhistorical gap by gathering oral testimony from Sukarlana and several religious or community figures. Its central insight is that the 1990s marked a transition from inherited performance to an organized practice of cultural preaching. Such testimony, however, requires caution because narrators often present retrospective recollection as direct proof of audience transformation. Statements that mosque attendance increased, neighbors ceased quarreling, or spectators became more observant are reported many years after the events and are not supported by attendance registers, contemporary surveys, diaries, or serial mosque records. These localities are often described as three districts in the 1990s, even though the administrative map changed over time. In 1981, Mustikajaya and Cimuning were listed among the villages of the newly established Bantargebang district. Bekasi became an autonomous municipality only in December 1996, and the later Mustika Jaya district belongs to a subsequent reorganization.[5] "Eastern Bekasi" is therefore used here as a geographical description for the localities in which Mekar Jaya circulated, not as a claim that they formed the present administrative district of Bekasi Timur.

A second problem concerns the legal evidence. A photograph of a notarial cover survives, and the number "C-132 HT.03.01-TH.1996" could easily be read as the establishment deed number. Visual inspection shows that this number appears under the notary's name and follows the formula of a ministerial appointment credential. The photograph is too small to disclose the deed's own instrument number with

[4] Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780.

[5] Republic of Indonesia, *Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 53 Tahun 1981 tentang Pembentukan Kecamatan Muaragembong, Kecamatan Tambelang dan Kecamatan Bantargebang di Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1981). Republic of Indonesia, *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 1996 tentang Pembentukan Kotamadya Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1996), https://peraturan.go.id/id/uu-no-9-tahun-1996.

confidence. This distinction does not undermine the broader evidence that formalization occurred in the mid-1990s. It does require a more precise formulation. Mekar Jaya's institutional history must be based on the convergence of oral recollection, the photographed notarial cover, and the dating of the document to 1996, while the disputed number remains unidentified as a deed number.[6]

These corrections make possible a stronger historical question. Rather than asking whether wayang was "effective" in an abstract sense, this article asks how Mekar Jaya made cultural preaching practicable between 1990 and 2000. How did a household lineage become an organized sanggar? What performance techniques allowed Islamic messages to enter classical stories without displacing entertainment? How did language and local social conditions shape circulation in Mustika Jaya, Cimuning, and Mustika Sari? What can retrospective oral testimony establish, and where must its claims remain limited?

The article argues that Mekar Jaya's historical significance lay in the institutionalization of a flexible preaching repertoire. Institutionalization here does not mean the creation of a large bureaucracy. It refers to the stabilization of roles, authority, material resources, a public name, documentary recognition, and repeatable performance practices. The process was uneven. A family lineage and informal leadership existed before a formal sanggar. Sukarlana's assumption of a leading role in 1994 introduced a more deliberate Islamic vocabulary. The notarial document dated to 1996 gave the group a public legal identity. Across these phases, Islamic messages were translated through dialogue, narration, humor, symbolism, music, and shifts among Javanese, Indonesian, Sundanese, and locally familiar speech.

This interpretation makes three contributions. First, it places Mekar Jaya within the specific history of Bekasi wayang rather than treating it as a late imitation of a Wali Songo model. Second, it reconstructs the relationship between lineage, organization, performance, and local circulation over a defined decade. Third, it establishes an evidentiary hierarchy. Interviews are strong sources for remembered intention, craft knowledge, lineage, and performer strategy. They are weaker sources for exact performance frequency, audience totals, and causal claims about religious behavior. This distinction preserves the importance of oral history while preventing memory from being converted into statistics it cannot supply.

## Method

The research follows the historical method, consisting of heuristics, external criticism, internal criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Heuristics began with the collection of written, oral, material, visual, and audiovisual evidence. The most important primary sources are interviews conducted in 2025 with Sukarlana Nemit Putra, Muhammad Rumli, Honda Wijaya, Nurali, and Ahmad Syafe'i. Dates are retained because the first appears repeatedly in the body notes and supports the

[6] Mekar Jaya, notarial deed cover, photograph, document dated to 1996. The visible number "C-132 HT.03.01-TH.1996" appears with the notary's appointment information and is not treated here as the deed's instrument number.

specific recollection that he became active as a dalang and consistently inserted Islamic messages from 1994.[7]

The oral evidence is supplemented by a photographed notarial cover associated with Mekar Jaya, a photographed operational recommendation issued in 2012, an undated performance photograph, and material objects held by the sanggar, including puppets, gamelan, *kelir*, *kepyak*, a puppet chest, and lighting equipment. These objects establish the material basis of performance and later institutional continuity. They do not, by themselves, establish the date or frequency of any event in the 1990s. The 2012 recommendation is therefore used only as evidence that Mekar Jaya still sought or received administrative recognition after the research period, not as proof of its operations in 1990.[8]

External criticism assessed provenance, date, physical form, and institutional context. The oral interviews were checked against the identity and role assigned to each narrator. Sukarlana spoke as a dalang, family heir, and sanggar leader. Rumli, Nurali, and Honda Wijaya spoke as community or religious observers. Their positions gave access to different forms of memory, but they did not make every recollection equally verifiable. The notarial photograph was examined as a visual object rather than accepted through its caption alone. That examination revealed that the number that might be read as an establishment deed number is more plausibly the notary's ministerial appointment reference. Administrative legislation was also used to test geographical labels and to avoid projecting the post-2004 district map backward onto the 1990s.[9]

Internal criticism evaluated coherence, proximity, retrospective distance, and the distinction between observation and inference. Sukarlana's statements about how he inserted messages, selected moments in a plot, changed languages, and balanced instruction with entertainment concern practices that he performed himself. They carry greater evidentiary weight than claims that spectators later prayed more regularly or resolved social disputes because of a performance. The latter statements may reveal how narrators remembered Mekar Jaya's moral importance, but they do not isolate causation. The article therefore uses terms such as "remembered reception," "reported response," and "practitioner assessment" when the evidence is retrospective.

Interpretation proceeded through a chronological and thematic comparison. The chronology distinguishes four overlapping layers: family transmission before 1990, an informal performance network from 1990 to 1994, Sukarlana's deliberate preaching turn from 1994, and legal or public institutionalization in the mid-1990s. The thematic comparison groups performance practices into dialogue, dalang

[7] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.

[8] Mekar Jaya, Operational Recommendation No. 430/2013-Porpubdar/XII/2012, Bekasi municipal cultural and tourism authority, 2012, photograph.

[9] Republic of Indonesia, *Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 53 Tahun 1981 tentang Pembentukan Kecamatan Muaragembong, Kecamatan Tambelang dan Kecamatan Bantargebang di Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1981). Republic of Indonesia, *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 1996 tentang Pembentukan Kotamadya Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1996), https://peraturan.go.id/id/uu-no-9-tahun-1996.

narration, humor, symbolism, and music, then examines how language and duration varied across the three localities. Historiography places the reconstruction in conversation with scholarship on wayang as religious communication and with Wardani and Saripudin's history of Bekasi wayang. The resulting article organizes the evidence around a single argument about institutionalization, cultural translation, and the limits of oral evidence.

## Results

### Bekasi Wayang as an Acculturated Performance Field

Mekar Jaya emerged within a performance culture that was already mixed. Bekasi wayang cannot be understood as a pure import from Central Java placed before an unchanged audience. Wardani and Saripudin describe it as a locally acculturated form that incorporated Betawi, Sundanese, and Javanese elements. Their periodization also shows that the 1990s were neither an untouched golden age nor a simple moment of decline. Screen entertainment had challenged traditional performance during the 1980s, but the following decade created space for artistic adaptation and renewed activity.[10] Mekar Jaya's development belongs within that intermediate moment.

The longer cultural history of Bekasi helps explain why adaptation was necessary. Colonial and postcolonial settlement linked agrarian communities with migration, market growth, and proximity to Jakarta. Islamic institutions existed alongside varied linguistic and artistic practices. *Wayang kulit* competed not only with modern entertainment but also with local forms whose audiences carried different expectations. In Cimuning, for example, narrators remembered a stronger familiarity with Sundanese speech and *wayang golek*. In Mustika Sari, a more heterogeneous audience included people without a deep knowledge of either Javanese shadow puppetry or its narrative conventions. These descriptions are retrospective, but they are consistent with scholarship that identifies cultural mixture as a defining feature of Bekasi wayang.[11]

The group therefore inherited two forms of cultural capital. The first was technical. A family of dalang possessed knowledge of puppetry, voice, stories, music, and staging. The second was social. Wayang was connected to weddings, circumcisions, neighborhood celebrations, commemorations, and household patronage. A performance could gather people who had not come to attend a formal religious lesson. This social capacity did not guarantee that a message would be

[10] Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780.

[11] Pancar Catur Ramdiansyah, "Bekasi pada Masa Kolonial (1925–1945)," *Historia Madania: Jurnal Ilmu Sejarah* 6, no. 1 (2022): 64–77, https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/historia/article/download/16198/7212. Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780.

understood. It created an occasion in which entertainment, hospitality, prestige, and moral speech could be combined.

The national narrative of wayang as an instrument of Islamization gave later performers an additional language of legitimacy. Sukarlana could present his innovations as a continuation of a respected cultural strategy rather than an arbitrary mixture. Yet Mekar Jaya's actual practices were shaped by 1990s Bekasi, not by direct continuity with a fifteenth-century script. The group's historical work lay in adapting a received claim about cultural preaching to a metropolitan periphery with multilingual audiences and changing entertainment habits.

**From Household Lineage to an Organized Sanggar**

The earliest history of Mekar Jaya is best reconstructed as a lineage before it is treated as an organization. Sukarlana remembered that his grandfather had been a dalang from the Ngong Blentet area and that the craft passed through several relatives, including Nein and Nemit. He also acknowledged a limit in his knowledge. He did not know from whom his grandfather had learned. That admission is significant because it marks the boundary between remembered family genealogy and documented apprenticeship.[12] The lineage is therefore credible as family memory, but its earliest stages cannot be dated precisely.

Transmission was broader than the movement of puppets from one owner to another. It included manipulation, vocal differentiation, command of plots, musical coordination, and an understanding of character. A dalang had to preserve enough of the inherited narrative for spectators to recognize the performance while remaining able to improvise. This combination of discipline and flexibility later became central to Islamic messaging. Sukarlana repeatedly insisted that he did not replace the classical plot. He changed the mode of delivery and inserted ethical or religious meanings at appropriate points.[13]

Oral accounts present Nein bin Blentet as leader from 1990 to 1994 and Sukarlana as leader from 1994 to 2000. The longer November interview complicates this neat sequence. Sukarlana remembered that when he began active dalang work in 1994, he was still working without a formal group and subsequently gathered associates who shared an interest in wayang and preaching. He dated formal establishment only to the middle of the decade and could not recall the precise year.[14] These accounts can be reconciled if the years 1990 to 1994 are understood as an informal family-based phase rather than the existence of a fully constituted sanggar with fixed offices. The leadership chronology then records authority within a performance network, while the later recollection records the creation of an organization with a public name and more stable roles.

The emergent organization remained compact. Interviewees identified a chair, treasurer, dalang, gamelan musicians, singers, and technical assistants. Membership was recruited through kinship, friendship, and shared interest rather than through a

[12] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.
[13] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.
[14] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.

formal school or salaried bureaucracy. Trust reduced the cost of coordination, and the household base allowed practice, equipment storage, and preparation to occur close together. At the same time, dependence on family and personal commitment limited succession. Institutionalization strengthened continuity, but it did not detach the group from the authority of a few performers.

Sukarlana explained the name "Mekar Jaya" as a hope that the group would develop and prosper. The simplicity of the phrase was part of its usefulness. It gave a dispersed family practice a recognizable public identity. The name could appear in patronage, neighborhood invitations, later administrative correspondence, and the memory of audiences. Naming was therefore not decorative. It allowed a lineage to become an institution that could be addressed by people outside the family.

**The 1994 Preaching Turn and Mid-Decade Formalization**

The most defensible turning point is 1994. Sukarlana consistently linked that year to the beginning of his active work as a dalang and to the deliberate insertion of Islamic messages. He distinguished his practice from earlier generations, which he remembered as emphasizing classical stories, local wisdom, and Javanese or Sundanese ethical values without explicit Islamic preaching. His innovation was incremental. The underlying story remained recognizable, but a conversation, a narrator's explanation, a comic passage, or a song could redirect attention toward worship, honesty, justice, or social responsibility.[15]

This distinction matters because some accounts describe a direct transformation from "mere entertainment" to "an effective preaching instrument." In practice, entertainment did not disappear. It was the condition that made preaching possible. Sukarlana warned that messages should not be forced or delivered in a manner that felt excessively didactic. He described the dalang's task in contemporary terms as reading the room. A battle scene could become an occasion to discuss reconciliation and worship. A scene of advice between Semar and the Pandawa could sustain a more explicit moral lesson. The dalang had to find a moment in which the message grew from the dramatic situation.[16]

The turn in performance preceded or overlapped with legal formalization. The notarial document is dated to 1996, and a photograph of its cover survives. The photograph shows the name of notary Sri Bandiningsih, S.H., the word "Akta," and a ministerial reference beneath the notary's name. It does not permit a secure reading of the deed's own number. The safest conclusion is that a notarial instrument was associated with Mekar Jaya and was understood as evidence of formalization in 1996. The legal cover should not be made to prove more than it shows.[17]

The historical sequence is nevertheless meaningful. Deliberate preaching did not begin because a legal document instructed the group to preach. It began through performance practice and was later stabilized by an organizational identity. Formalization could assist relations with patrons and local institutions, but the

[15] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.
[16] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.
[17] Mekar Jaya, notarial deed cover, photograph, document dated to 1996.

group's authority continued to rest on artistic skill, family reputation, and the credibility of the dalang. The legal document and the repertoire performed different kinds of institutional work.

Table 1 summarizes the reconstructed chronology and makes the evidentiary status of each phase explicit.

***Table 1. Reconstructed chronology of Mekar Jaya and its evidence, 1990–2000***

| Period | Organizational development | Performance and circulation | Evidentiary status |
|---|---|---|---|
| Before 1990 | Family transmission associated with Blentet, Nein, Nemit, and later heirs | Classical stories and local ethical instruction remembered as more prominent than explicit Islamic preaching | Retrospective family genealogy with no secure dates for the earliest apprenticeship |
| 1990–1993 | Informal family network, later remembered as leadership under Nein | Activity remembered in Mustika Jaya, Cimuning from 1991, and Mustika Sari from 1992 | Oral reconstruction, not supported by serial contemporary programs |
| 1994 | Sukarlana assumed a leading performance role | Consistent insertion of explicit Islamic messages began according to his repeated recollection | Strong evidence for practitioner intention, weaker for exact audience effects |
| 1995–1996 | Associates and roles became more stable | Repertoire consolidated and varied by locality | Oral testimony and reconstruction |
| 1996 | Formalization dated to a photographed notarial instrument | Public organizational identity strengthened | Notarial cover survives, but the deed's own number cannot be securely read |
| 1997–1998 | Organization faced increased economic pressure | Crisis, television, and changing preferences constrained patronage, with decline remembered in Cimuning by 1998 | Retrospective testimony consistent with the broader Bekasi chronology |
| 1999–2000 | Core activity continued with growing dependence on committed members | Mustika Jaya remained the strongest base, while modern entertainment narrowed the audience | Oral history supports the trend, not precise annual totals |

**A Repertoire of Dialogue, Narration, Humor, Symbol, and Sound**

Mekar Jaya's preaching cannot be reduced to a list of topics. Its significance lay in the performance forms through which topics became audible. The evidence identifies five recurring channels: dialogue among puppet characters, narration by the dalang, humor and satire, symbolism and allegory, and *tembang*, *suluk*, or gamelan. These channels overlapped within a single performance and gave the dalang several ways to control intensity.

Dialogue was the most flexible channel. Because a religious message appeared as speech between characters, spectators could encounter it as part of dramatic conflict rather than as an interruption. Advice concerning prayer could be voiced by Semar. Honesty could be attached to Yudhistira. Opposition to injustice could be framed through the conflict between the Pandawa and Kurawa. Family responsibility could emerge from exchanges between parents, children, husbands, and wives. Sukarlana emphasized that nearly any scene could bear a message if the relation was plausible and did not distort the plot.[18]

Narration allowed the dalang to move from the specialized language of character dialogue toward explanation. Classical performance could include levels of Javanese that were not equally accessible to all spectators. The narrator could summarize an event, clarify a symbol, or restate an ethical point in Indonesian. This function was especially important when the audience did not share the dalang's full linguistic repertoire. Narration acted as a bridge between inherited form and present comprehension.

Humor supplied another bridge. The *punakawan* could speak in a socially familiar register, criticize greed, mock hypocrisy, or expose the absurdity of conflict. Comic speech lowered the distance between performance and daily life. Its religious force did not depend on quoting scripture at length. A joke about dishonest trade, neglected prayer, or an arrogant official could place moral judgment inside laughter. Humor also protected the entertainment value that brought spectators to the event.[19]

Symbolism enabled the dalang to connect familiar character traits with Islamic ethics. Yudhistira's honesty, Semar's wisdom, or the Kurawa's injustice could become analogies for conduct. This process did not make the puppet characters Islamic figures in any historical or theological sense. It used the moral intelligibility already attached to them. Such analogy was effective only when the association remained recognizable. Sukarlana's warning against forced interpretation reveals a practical source criticism within the performance itself. The dalang had to judge whether a new message could be supported by the character and scene.

Sound extended the repertoire beyond prose. *Suluk* and song could establish a contemplative mood, while gamelan controlled pace and emotion. Narrators indicated that religious advice could be carried in songs or framed by music that

[18] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

[19] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025. Elly Herlyana, "Pagelaran Wayang Purwa sebagai Media Penanaman Nilai Religius Islam pada Masyarakat Jawa," *Thaqafiyyat: Jurnal Bahasa, Peradaban dan Informasi Islam* 14, no. 1 (2013): 127–144, https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/adab/thaqafiyyat/article/view/616.

prepared an audience to receive reflection. The precise texts of 1990s songs are not preserved, so their content cannot be reconstructed line by line. The evidence supports the use of sound as a channel, not a complete catalog of lyrics.[20]

Across these forms, the most frequently remembered themes were prayer, fasting, almsgiving, honesty, justice, compassion, family responsibility, social harmony, and tolerance. The themes combined ritual obligation with social ethics. This breadth helped the group address religiously committed spectators and those who attended mainly for entertainment. It also allowed messages to be tailored to the concerns attributed to different localities without abandoning a shared moral core.

**Language and Uneven Circulation across Eastern Bekasi**

Narrators organized Mekar Jaya's reach around Mustika Jaya from 1990 to 1999, Cimuning from 1991 to 1998, and Mustika Sari from 1992 to 1995. These ranges should be read as remembered periods of activity rather than independently documented schedules. No complete set of invitations, contracts, programs, or financial books survives. Even so, the sequence reveals how performers remembered an expanding and then contracting radius around their home base.

Mustika Jaya occupied the central position because it contained the sanggar and its closest networks. Family reputation, neighborhood familiarity, equipment, and patron contacts could all reinforce one another. Performances were connected to household celebrations and local commemorations. Narrators remember a high frequency of invitations in the middle of the decade, but exact claims such as weekly performances or audiences numbering in the hundreds rely on recollection. The secure historical point is comparative. Mustika Jaya remained the group's strongest base and the place where Sukarlana's 1994 preaching strategy was most fully associated with the public identity of Mekar Jaya.[21]

Language in this base was already mixed. Javanese could preserve the character of *wayang kulit*, while Indonesian, Sundanese, or locally familiar Betawi-inflected speech made advice more accessible. The switch did not occur at random. Interviewees stated that character dialogue more often retained Javanese, while narration and important advice could shift to Indonesian or another familiar language. Code-switching therefore marked a division of labor between cultural authenticity and communicative reach.[22]

Cimuning presented a different problem. Narrators remembered a stronger Sundanese cultural environment and greater familiarity with *wayang golek*. Mekar Jaya's Javanese shadow puppetry entered as one option within an existing performance field. Sukarlana responded by adding Indonesian explanations and simple Sundanese phrases when a message was important. Narrators date intensive activity from 1991 and remember consolidation from 1994 to 1996. They also identify

[20] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025. Eko Setiawan, "Makna Nilai Filosofi Wayang Kulit sebagai Media Dakwah," *Al-Hikmah* 18, no. 1 (2020): 37–56, https://doi.org/10.35719/alhikmah.v18i1.21.

[21] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.

[22] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.

language as a persistent constraint. Translation could clarify advice, but it could not make every allusion, pun, or level of Javanese equally available.[23]

Mustika Sari was represented as the most heterogeneous audience and the shortest period of concentrated activity. Narrators date performances from 1992 to 1995 and state that Indonesian was used more extensively there. They also report that introductory explanations helped unfamiliar spectators understand the performance and that duration was shortened from the conventional seven or eight hours to approximately five or six. These figures are remembered estimates, but the contrast is analytically useful. Adaptation involved not only what the dalang said, but how long the performance demanded attention.[24]

The message emphasis also varied. Agricultural and family ethics are especially prominent in the account of Cimuning, while tolerance and social coexistence dominate the account of heterogeneous Mustika Sari. Mustika Jaya carries a wider combination of prayer, trade ethics, justice, neighborhood relations, and family responsibility. These distinctions should not be hardened into exclusive local identities. They show how the narrators understood the same repertoire as locally adjustable.

The three localities therefore reveal cultural translation as a practical operation. Translation did not mean replacing Javanese with Indonesian throughout. It meant deciding which elements had to remain recognizable as wayang and which had to change for a message to travel. The performance retained the puppet form, major stories, character identities, music, and much of the dialogic style. It modified explanation, linguistic register, topical examples, comic references, and sometimes duration. The result was a layered performance in which not every spectator received every layer in the same way.

**Constraints at the End of the Decade**

The late 1990s exposed the limits of this model. The first constraint was economic. A full performance required payment, transport, musicians, singers, equipment, food, space, and a host. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1998 reduced household capacity to sponsor expensive celebrations. The interviews connect this pressure to fewer invitations, especially outside the group's closest base. This explanation is historically plausible, though no annual financial accounts survive with which to measure the decline.[25]

The second constraint was competition for attention. Television, recorded video, popular music, and other urban entertainment offered shorter and more easily repeated experiences. Wardani and Saripudin identify the longer movement of Bekasi audiences toward screen and modern entertainment, while the narrators recall the same pressure from the position of practitioners.[26] A seven-hour performance asked

[23] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.
[24] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.
[25] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, February 25, 2025.
[26] Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan*

spectators to organize an entire night around the event. Shortening the duration could make wayang more accessible, but it also reduced narrative space and altered expectations held by committed audiences.

The third constraint was linguistic. Code-switching widened access but did not remove the specialized knowledge embedded in character voices, puns, honorific levels, plots, and musical cues. Muhammad Rumli explicitly remembered a communication gap between Javanese-language wayang and spectators who did not understand Javanese.[27] The same cultural specificity that distinguished the form could limit the reach of its religious message.

The fourth constraint was personal authority. The dalang controlled plot, voice, improvisation, timing, moral emphasis, and interaction with the audience. This concentration made cultural preaching responsive, but it also made it dependent on skill and reputation. Sukarlana and other narrators argued that a dalang who preached values without embodying them would lose credibility. Their claim cannot be tested as a universal rule, but it reveals the ethical expectations attached to the role.[28]

These pressures did not produce an abrupt disappearance in 2000. The 2012 operational recommendation and Wardani and Saripudin's 2020 encounter with Sukarlana demonstrate later continuity. The decade boundary instead marks a change in conditions. By the end of the 1990s, the combination of household patronage, long-duration entertainment, and inherited cultural knowledge no longer commanded the same position. Mekar Jaya survived, but survival required increasingly conscious acts of preservation and adaptation.

## Discussion

### Institutionalization without Bureaucratization

Mekar Jaya complicates the assumption that institutionalization begins with a legal deed. Its history shows at least four kinds of institution operating at different times. Kinship transmitted craft and authority. Informal leadership coordinated performances. A public name made the group recognizable. A notarial instrument supplied documentary form. None of these alone created the sanggar. Together they stabilized a practice that had previously depended on individual family members.

The 1994 preaching turn is central because it joined organizational leadership to a repeatable communicative purpose. Sukarlana did not merely deliver an occasional religious aside. He remembered making the insertion of Islamic messages consistent. The important historical change was routinization. Once dialogue, narration, humor, symbol, and song could be used repeatedly, preaching became part of what patrons and performers could expect from Mekar Jaya. The repertoire functioned as an institution even when it remained improvisational.

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*Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780. Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

[27] Muhammad Rumli, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

[28] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

The 1996 formalization changed the group's external position more than its internal artistic authority. A document could help identify the sanggar before local officials, patrons, or cultural programs. It could not generate the dalang's ability to read an audience. The later 2012 recommendation makes this distinction visible. Administrative recognition could be renewed, while artistic legitimacy had to be reproduced at each performance.[29]

This pattern explains both durability and fragility. A family-centered structure allowed knowledge, equipment, reputation, and labor to remain connected. It also concentrated succession risk. If younger relatives or associates did not acquire the craft, the organization could retain a name and documents while losing the ability to perform its defining repertoire. Institutionalization without bureaucratization was therefore well suited to local flexibility but poorly equipped for large-scale reproduction.

**Cultural Translation rather than Simple Syncretism**

The language of adaptation and acculturation fits this case. These terms are more historically productive than treating Mekar Jaya as evidence of an undifferentiated religious syncretism. The group did not fuse two fully bounded systems into a single doctrine. It translated Islamic ethical and ritual vocabulary through an existing performance grammar. Characters, narrative conflict, humor, and music supplied forms through which new emphases could be made intelligible.

This translation involved selection. Messages concerning prayer, honesty, justice, family care, solidarity, and tolerance were especially compatible with narrative situations. They could be attached to decisions, conflicts, reconciliations, and character traits. More specialized theological instruction would have been harder to sustain without turning the performance into a lecture. Sukarlana's preference for ordinary language reflects this limit. He aimed to make advice understandable to people unfamiliar with formal religious terminology.[30]

Translation also preserved difference. Javanese dialogue signaled continuity with wayang, while Indonesian explanation addressed a wider public. Sundanese phrases or local humor recognized the audience's linguistic world. The form did not become culturally neutral. It carried visible signs of origin even as it moved across Bekasi's mixed social landscape. Wardani and Saripudin's concept of acculturated Bekasi wayang helps explain this layered identity, but Mekar Jaya adds an organizational dimension. Acculturation was not only a finished hybrid style. It was an ongoing decision made by performers in response to place, patron, and audience.[31]

The Wali Songo narrative should be located within this process as a repertoire of legitimacy. General studies of Islamic wayang describe the saints, especially Sunan Kalijaga, as exemplary cultural preachers. Contemporary performers and audiences

[29] Mekar Jaya, Operational Recommendation No. 430/2013-Porpubdar/XII/2012, Bekasi municipal cultural and tourism authority, 2012.

[30] Sukarlana Nemit Putra, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

[31] Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780.

could invoke that history to defend the religious permissibility and pedagogical value of wayang.[32] For the microhistory of Mekar Jaya, however, the decisive evidence comes from the group's own practices. Its creativity cannot be explained simply as continuity with the saints. It belonged to a different historical moment shaped by urbanization, state cultural administration, household patronage, multilingual communication, and electronic media.

**Remembered Reception and the Limits of Effectiveness**

The strongest evidence concerns intention and technique. Sukarlana could explain when he began to preach deliberately, how he chose a dramatic moment, why he avoided forced moralizing, which languages he used, and how he related values to character. These are first-person accounts of craft. Community narrators could also describe the kinds of messages they remembered and their assessment of why audiences attended.

The evidence for effects is different. Narrators present rising mosque attendance, improved prayer, reduced conflict, and greater tolerance as outcomes of wayang preaching. Yet no contemporary baseline or follow-up measurement is available. The interviews were conducted between twenty-five and thirty-five years after the events. Narrators knew the research topic and often spoke in a moral vocabulary that affirmed the value of cultural preaching. Their testimony is historically important because it records remembered reception and local claims about significance. It cannot establish that wayang alone caused a change in conduct.[33]

Continued invitations are a more defensible indicator of social acceptance. Families and communities would not repeatedly sponsor a costly performance that they wholly rejected. Even here, motive remains plural. Patrons could value prestige, entertainment, tradition, family celebration, social gathering, religious messages, or several purposes at once. Attendance does not prove comprehension, and comprehension does not prove behavioral change. The article therefore interprets patronage as evidence that Mekar Jaya maintained a place within local cultural life, not as a numerical measure of preaching success.

This evidentiary distinction changes the meaning of "effectiveness." If the term means proven change in individual religious practice, the evidence does not provide sufficient data. If it means the capacity to create a socially acceptable occasion in which Islamic messages reached people beyond a formal sermon, the evidence is considerably stronger. Mekar Jaya assembled audiences through entertainment, inserted recognizable ethical language, and adapted speech across local settings. Its

[32] Bayu Anggoro, "Wayang dan Seni Pertunjukan: Kajian Sejarah Perkembangan Seni Wayang di Tanah Jawa sebagai Seni Pertunjukan dan Dakwah," *JUSPI: Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam* 2, no. 2 (2018): 122–133, https://doi.org/10.30829/j.v2i2.1679. Elly Herlyana, "Pagelaran Wayang Purwa sebagai Media Penanaman Nilai Religius Islam pada Masyarakat Jawa," *Thaqafiyyat: Jurnal Bahasa, Peradaban dan Informasi Islam* 14, no. 1 (2013): 127–144, https://ejournal.uin-suka.ac.id/adab/thaqafiyyat/article/view/616. Eko Setiawan, "Makna Nilai Filosofi Wayang Kulit sebagai Media Dakwah," *Al-Hikmah* 18, no. 1 (2020): 37–56, https://doi.org/10.35719/alhikmah.v18i1.21.

[33] Honda Wijaya, interview by Sulthan Saddam Al-Farabi, Bekasi, March 24, 2025.

effectiveness was communicative and institutional before it can be described as behavioral.

Oral history remains indispensable precisely because the performance archive is incomplete. Programs, scripts, contracts, audience lists, and recordings from the 1990s are not systematically preserved. Memory supplies information that documents do not, especially about improvisation and intention. Source criticism does not diminish that evidence. It identifies the historical questions each source can answer. The same interview can be strong evidence for a dalang's remembered method and weak evidence for the number of worshippers at a mosque.

**Periodization, Urban Change, and Historical Novelty**

The reconstructed chronology also revises a simpler periodization. The beginning in 1990 should not be read as the sudden birth of a formal institution. It marks the phase in which a family network was later remembered as an organized line of leadership. The year 1994 is more securely tied to a change in performance intention. The mid-1990s brought organizational consolidation and the notarial formalization dated to 1996. The years 1997 to 2000 exposed economic and media pressures. This layered chronology is more persuasive than assigning every development to a single founding event.

Administrative history reinforces the point. During much of the research period, the localities belonged to an arrangement centered on Bantargebang, and the autonomous municipality of Bekasi itself was created only at the end of 1996. The later Mustika Jaya district should not be projected backward.[34] Mekar Jaya's geographic world was changing while the group was institutionalizing. Local performance circulated through neighborhoods whose later administrative identities can obscure their earlier relations.

The novelty of the case lies in the intersection of two transitions. One was organizational, from family inheritance to a named and documented sanggar. The other was communicative, from a primarily classical and entertainment-centered repertoire to the consistent insertion of Islamic messages. These transitions did not move in perfect sequence. Intentional preaching could begin before full legal formalization, and family authority persisted after it. The overlap shows that cultural institutions are made through practice as much as through documents.

The decade also qualifies the broad narrative of inevitable traditional decline. Wardani and Saripudin identify renewed creativity between 1990 and 2000, followed by greater contraction after 2001.[35] Mekar Jaya demonstrates what that creativity looked like at the level of one group. It involved code-switching, shortened

[34] Republic of Indonesia, *Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 53 Tahun 1981 tentang Pembentukan Kecamatan Muaragembong, Kecamatan Tambelang dan Kecamatan Bantargebang di Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1981). Republic of Indonesia, *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 1996 tentang Pembentukan Kotamadya Daerah Tingkat II Bekasi* (1996), https://peraturan.go.id/id/uu-no-9-tahun-1996.

[35] Dalila Kusuma Wardani and Didin Saripudin, "Potret Keberadaan Kesenian Wayang Kulit di Bekasi: Wayang Kulit Akulturasi (Periode Tahun 1970–2015)," *FACTUM: Jurnal Sejarah dan Pendidikan Sejarah* 10, no. 2 (2021): 211–220, https://doi.org/10.17509/factum.v10i2.36780.

performance, localized examples, moral humor, and organizational naming. At the same time, these adaptations could not remove the economic cost of performance or the attraction of shorter media. Innovation prolonged relevance without eliminating structural pressures.

Mekar Jaya should therefore be positioned neither as the sole pioneer of Islamic wayang in Bekasi nor as proof that traditional performance could replace formal religious institutions. The available sources do not support either claim. Its contribution was more specific and historically significant. It converted a family craft into a locally repeatable form of cultural preaching during a decade when Bekasi's administrative identity, media environment, and cultural consumption were rapidly changing.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that Mekar Jaya's history between 1990 and 2000 was a process of institutionalization and cultural translation. The group emerged from a family lineage associated in oral memory with Blentet, Nein, Nemit, and their descendants. The earliest part of the decade is best understood as an informal performance network rather than a fully formal sanggar. Sukarlana Nemit Putra's assumption of a leading role in 1994 marked the clearest change. From that point, he remembered inserting Islamic messages consistently while preserving classical stories and the entertainment that attracted spectators. A notarial instrument dated to 1996 gave the organization a documentary identity, although the surviving photograph does not reveal a secure deed number.

The main historical finding concerns repertoire. Mekar Jaya made Islamic preaching performable through dialogue, dalang narration, *punakawan* humor, symbolism, song, and gamelan. Prayer, honesty, justice, family responsibility, solidarity, and tolerance were connected to recognizable characters and conflicts. The dalang adjusted language and duration across Mustika Jaya, Cimuning, and Mustika Sari. These localities formed an eastern Bekasi circuit, not three separate 1990s districts. Javanese preserved the identity of wayang, while Indonesian, Sundanese, and locally familiar speech widened access. The balance was never complete, and linguistic specialization remained a constraint.

The evidence supports a claim of deliberate religious communication and remembered social acceptance. It does not support precise causal claims that performances increased mosque attendance or transformed individual behavior. That limit is part of the article's contribution. By separating practitioner intention, documentary evidence, reported reception, and authorial inference, the reconstruction preserves the value of oral history without turning memory into unverified measurement.

Mekar Jaya's novelty lies in the way family transmission, organizational naming, legal recognition, and improvisational performance converged in an urbanizing periphery. The group did not defeat modern media or secure an unlimited audience. Economic crisis, long duration, linguistic distance, dalang dependence, and changing entertainment narrowed its reach by the end of the decade. Yet its repertoire created a durable local vocabulary in which wayang could remain recognizably

traditional while speaking explicitly about Islam. That achievement places Mekar Jaya within the history of Bekasi not as a timeless survival, but as an institution made through adaptation.

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