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BEYOND SANTRI AND ABANGAN: ANDREW BEATTY'S HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF JAVANESE RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Studies of Javanese religion remain strongly influenced by the santri-abangan typology, which tends to position religious identity as a relatively fixed category. Yet Javanese religious practices reveal more fluid relations among Islamic normativity, local traditions, ritual practices, authority, and cultural memory. This study aims to examine Andrew Beatty's contribution to reconstructing Javanese religion through the perspective of historical anthropology. It employs a qualitative interpretive literature-study design. The primary source is Andrew Beatty's Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account. Secondary sources include works by Clifford Geertz, Mark R. Woodward, and M. C. Ricklefs, together with peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2022 and 2026 on Javanese Islam, Kejawen, slametan, syncretism, changing religious authority, local ritual, and transformations of Javanese Muslim identity. Data were analysed through close reading, thematic coding, historiographical comparison, and interpretive synthesis. The findings show that the santri-abangan distinction retains historical value but becomes inadequate when treated as an essential identity. Slametan demonstrates multivocality because a single ritual can accommodate different religious interpretations without eliminating social cohesion. The concept of syncretism also proves too static when it fails to explain processes of selection, legitimation, reinterpretation, and shifting authority. This study proposes the concept of a historically negotiated religious configuration to explain Javanese religion as a configuration shaped through interactions among Islamic normativity, actor interpretation, ritual practice, social authority, cultural memory, and historical change. Javanese religion should therefore be understood as an ongoing historical process of negotiation rather than as a finished religious category.

Keywords: Andrew Beatty, historical anthropology, Javanese religion, multivocality, santri-abangan.

INTRODUCTION

The study of Javanese religion occupies a central place in the historiography and anthropology of Islam in Indonesia because it reveals persistent tensions between religious normativity, local culture, ritual practice, social identity, and historical change. For decades, scholarly interpretations of Javanese Islam have been shaped by Clifford Geertz's influential typology of *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. This classification provided an important framework for mapping religious orientations within Javanese society. Yet its explanatory power becomes increasingly limited when these categories are treated as fixed, mutually exclusive, and historically stable identities. Recent

scholarship demonstrates that Javanese religiosity is far more fluid. Religious identities shift, overlap, and are continually reconstructed through family networks, political change, ritual participation, institutional authority, and new forms of Islamic piety (Hudayana, 2022; Khamami, 2022).

The continuing dominance of Geertz's paradigm is not merely an intellectual legacy. It has shaped the vocabulary through which Javanese Islam has been represented for more than half a century. Recent bibliometric research on Javanese Islam shows that categories such as *santri*, *abangan*, *priyayi*, *slametan*, syncretism, and tradition remain recurrent conceptual nodes in the literature. Their persistence confirms their analytical importance, but it also exposes their limitation. The central problem is therefore not whether such categories should be discarded entirely, but whether they remain capable of explaining the lived complexity of Javanese Muslim society. When typologies become rigid explanatory templates, they risk reducing religious experience to classifications constructed by scholars rather than reconstructing religion as it is actually lived and negotiated by social actors (Kabir, 2025).

This limitation becomes particularly visible in contemporary transformations of Javanese Muslim identity. Members of Javanese kinship organisations have experienced significant shifts from forms of Kejawen-oriented religiosity toward more Sharia-centred Islamic identities. Such transformation does not necessarily eliminate older cultural attachments. Family solidarity, ritual memory, and Javanese cultural identity can persist even as formal Islamic observance becomes stronger. This pattern demonstrates that identity change does not always proceed through total replacement, but through selective reconstruction and negotiation between inherited cultural forms and emerging models of Islamic piety (Hudayana, 2022).

The same instability can be observed among groups historically associated with nominal or abangan Islam. Research on rural East Java indicates the emergence of a *Nasionalis-cum-Nahdliyin* identity that combines national political orientation, Nahdlatul Ulama affiliation, and increased Islamic observance. This development challenges the assumption that abangan and santri constitute permanent and mutually exclusive social blocs. Instead, such identities appear as historically contingent positions shaped by political transformation, organisational affiliation, religious authority, and social mobility (Khamami, 2022).

³ This is precisely where Andrew Beatty's contribution becomes significant. In *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, Javanese religion is not approached through rigid boundaries between santri, abangan, Kejawen, Hinduism, mysticism, and normative Islam. The analysis instead focuses on how different religious orientations coexist, interact, and acquire meaning within the same social field. Beatty's ethnography of *slametan*, practical Islam, Javanism, sacred places, the Sangkan Paran movement, and Javanese Hinduism reveals a religious landscape characterised by interpretive plurality rather than categorical purity (Beatty, 1999).

Beatty's intervention is especially important because it shifts the analytical unit from social classification to religious practice. The classical Geertzian model seeks to

map Javanese religion through social-cultural variants, while Woodward's revisionist interpretation challenges readings that overemphasise Hindu-Buddhist survivals and syncretism. Woodward instead highlights normative Islamic traditions, Sufism, and court symbolism as constitutive components of Javanese Islam. Beatty moves the discussion further by concentrating on how people interpret rituals, negotiate competing meanings, and maintain social relations despite religious difference. His contribution therefore lies not in producing another fixed typology, but in questioning the assumption that stable categories are sufficient for understanding Javanese religious life (Beatty, 1999; Geertz, 1976; Woodward, 1989).

The concept of *multivocality* is central to this shift. The same ritual may accommodate different, even competing, interpretations. A *slametan* may be understood by one participant as an Islamic prayer, by another as an ancestral obligation, by another as a form of social solidarity, and by another as an inherited Javanese custom. The ritual can remain socially coherent even when its meanings are not uniform. This insight complicates conventional understandings of religious identity because participation in the same ritual does not necessarily indicate theological agreement. Religious practice therefore cannot automatically be treated as a transparent expression of a fixed religious category (Beatty, 1999).

This problem becomes even more significant when the concept of syncretism is applied to Javanese religion. Syncretism has often been used to describe Javanese Islam as a mixture of Islam, Hindu-Buddhist traditions, animism, mysticism, and local custom. Yet such a formulation can unintentionally presuppose the existence of pure and self-contained religious traditions before their encounter. More recent studies show that Islamic and Javanese traditions have interacted through processes of translation, vernacularisation, adaptation, contestation, and reinterpretation. *Kejawen*, for example, can function as a field in which Islamic spirituality and local wisdom intersect rather than merely as a residual pre-Islamic tradition (Soenjoto, 2022).

A similar pattern appears in Javanese verbal and symbolic traditions. Javanese mantras can simultaneously contain Islamic values, educational functions, and local symbolic structures. Such findings indicate that local cultural forms should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of weakened Islamic commitment. They may instead operate as media through which Islamic values are translated, appropriated, and transmitted in culturally meaningful ways (Pamungkas, Hastangka, Raharjo, Sudigdo, & Agung, 2023).

Historical evidence further complicates the binary distinction between normative Islam and local religion. A recently identified sixteenth-century Javanese Islamic text contains instructions concerning prayer, belief, Islamic terminology, and religious practice. This evidence demonstrates that Islamic teachings had already been transmitted through Javanese linguistic and cultural media at an early stage of Islamisation. The use of local language and culturally specific forms therefore cannot automatically be equated with theological dilution. Localisation may instead represent a

historical strategy through which Islamic knowledge entered Javanese social worlds (Sastrawan, Aldahesh, & Vickers, 2026).

The interaction between Islam and Javanese culture also appears clearly in literary traditions. Javanese genres such as *suluk*, *serat*, *babad*, and *wulang* developed as important media for transmitting religious knowledge, mystical concepts, moral values, and historical memory. These genres demonstrate that Islamisation was not only a matter of institutional expansion, but also a process of cultural translation through literary forms familiar to Javanese society. Javanese literature thus became one of the important sites where Islamic knowledge and local intellectual traditions were brought into sustained interaction (Widyastuti, 2022).

Ritual practices reveal the same historical layering. Muslim communities in East Java continue to use Javanese-Pegon manuscripts in *ruwatan* practices, showing an ongoing negotiation among pre-Islamic cultural memory, Muslim piety, textual tradition, and cultural preservation. Such practices are not static survivals of the past. They are continually reinterpreted and legitimised in relation to contemporary religious sensibilities. This pattern corresponds closely to Beatty's concept of multivocality because one ritual may simultaneously carry religious, social, historical, and cultural meanings (Iswanto, 2026).

Historical transformation also operates through political authority. The development of Islamic kingdoms in Java demonstrates how religion, court culture, political legitimacy, and social structure interacted over long periods. Political restructuring in the Islamic Mataram period, for example, cannot be separated from colonial intervention and transformations in local power relations. This shows that religious and cultural identities are never formed outside political history. They emerge within changing structures of authority, territory, social hierarchy, and cultural memory (Masbait, 2025).

Traditional practices likewise function as mechanisms for transmitting collective memory, social identity, moral values, and intergenerational continuity. Studies of ritual traditions in different Indonesian communities demonstrate that local practices are not simply inherited customs but social institutions through which communities reproduce values and historical consciousness. Such findings strengthen the argument that ritual should be read as a historically situated social process rather than as an isolated cultural artifact (Ismail, Mondong, & Hasan, 2025; Paudi, Yunus, Arrazaq, & Tasnur, 2026).

The historical depth of this problem becomes clearer when Javanese Islamisation is examined over the *longue durée*. Islamisation in Java involved competition, accommodation, resistance, political mobilisation, cultural transformation, and shifting relations among religious actors. From this perspective, *santri* and *abangan* should not be regarded as primordial identities. They are better understood as historically produced positions that emerged from specific transformations in religious authority, social organisation, politics, and cultural practice. A historical perspective therefore changes the central question from "Who are the *santri* and *abangan*?" to "Under what historical

conditions did these identities emerge, change, and acquire social significance?” (Ricklefs, 2012).

This shift is crucial because the epistemological problem in the study of Javanese religion does not lie only in the empirical adequacy of particular categories. It also concerns the authority of scholars to define religious identities on behalf of the communities they study. Contemporary research on Javanese-Islamic identity shows that categories inherited from colonial and orientalist epistemologies require critical reconsideration. Analytical terms are never entirely neutral because they determine what forms of practice become visible and which experiences remain excluded. A rigid use of *santri*, *abangan*, or syncretism may therefore reproduce conceptual boundaries that do not correspond to the ways communities understand themselves (Mushthafa, 2024).

Beatty provides an important point of departure for moving beyond interpretations of Javanese religion that rely too heavily on fixed classifications. His ethnography demonstrates that different religious interpretations can coexist within the same social space. However, an ethnographic approach alone does not fully explain how such interpretations are shaped by historical change, shifts in authority, textual transmission, and social contestation. Historical anthropology is therefore necessary to connect everyday religious practices with long-term transformation.

This approach also enables a reassessment of syncretism. Syncretism should not be understood merely as the blending of religions, but as a process involving the selection, legitimation, rejection, and reinterpretation of religious elements. From this perspective, the central research problem lies in the fragmented interpretation of Javanese religion, shaped by the persistent *santri-abangan* dichotomy, the limited historiographical reading of Beatty, and the insufficient dialogue between anthropology and history. These three concerns are therefore consolidated into a single need for a more integrated analytical framework.

This study addresses these gaps by rereading Beatty through historical anthropology, integrating ethnographic insight with historical change, continuity, and shifting configurations of religious authority. It argues that Beatty’s contribution lies not in constructing a new typology, but in challenging assumptions about fixed and stable religious identities. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing Javanese religion as a historically negotiated religious configuration, rather than merely as syncretic, hybrid, or fluid. This concept emphasizes ongoing processes of formation, interpretation, legitimation, and transformation shaped by Islamic normativity, ritual practice, social authority, cultural memory, and historical change. Therefore, this study aims to critically reinterpret Beatty’s account of Javanese religion through a historical-anthropological framework and to explain how Javanese religious identities are continuously negotiated, reconstructed, and transformed across changing historical and social contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative design using a historical-anthropological literature study. The design was selected because the study focuses on the reconstruction of Andrew Beatty's interpretation of Javanese religion and its historiographical implications rather than on the collection of new field data. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining meanings, interpretive structures, historical contexts, and conceptual relationships that cannot be reduced to numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tisdell, Merriam, & Stuckey-Peyrot, 2025).

The primary data consisted of Andrew Beatty's *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1999. The book was treated as the central analytical corpus because it provides Beatty's ethnographic descriptions, conceptual formulations, and interpretations of *slametan*, practical Islam, Javanism, sacred places, the Sangkan Paran movement, Hindu communities, syncretism, multivocality, and social negotiation. The study examined these sections not merely as ethnographic descriptions but as historical-anthropological evidence concerning how religious identities were represented, differentiated, and negotiated in Javanese society.

The secondary data consisted of two clearly defined groups. The first group comprised key books on Javanese religion and Islam, particularly works by Clifford Geertz, Mark Woodward, and M. C. Ricklefs, which were used to reconstruct the historiographical trajectory from social typology and normative interpretations of Islam to the historical transformation of Javanese religion. The second group consisted of 12 peer-reviewed journal articles, published primarily between 2022 and 2025, addressing Javanese Islam, Kejawen, *santri-abangan* identity, ritual, Islamisation, acculturation, cultural negotiation, religious authority, and historical change. These included studies on the shift from Javanese Islam toward shari'ah-centred identity (Hudayana, 2022), Islam Kejawen and local wisdom (Soenjoto, 2022), the continuing relevance of the *santri-abangan* category (Fermadi, 2023), the Apitan ritual in Javanese Muslim life (Munir, 2023), negotiations between Islam and Javanese culture (Pranata & Munir, 2024), local Islam amid purification and modernization (Basit, 2024), ritual communication in *Nyadran* (Tuti & Safitri, 2024), cultural-religious negotiation in *Nyadran* (Fadilah, 2024), paradigmatic trends in Javanese Islam studies (Kabir, 2025), syncretic religiosity in punden traditions (Sanjani, Zain, & Mustofa, 2024), the integration of Islamic values in Barikan (Kiom, 2025), and Islam-Javanese syncretism in Rebo Wekasan practices at pesantren (Setiawan & Fauzi, 2025).

These secondary studies were purposively selected based on their direct relevance to Javanese religion and Andrew Beatty's arguments, publication credibility, analytical contribution, and capacity to compare, challenge, or extend Beatty's interpretations. Sources were excluded if they were non-scholarly, duplicative, only marginally relevant to the research questions, or lacked adequate methodological and analytical clarity. This selection produced a focused secondary corpus through which Beatty's ethnographic

arguments could be critically situated within recent developments in Javanese religious studies and historical anthropology.

Table 1. Research Data and Analytical Procedure

Component	Description
Research approach	Qualitative historical anthropology
Research design	Interpretive literature study and qualitative document analysis
Primary data	Andrew Beatty's <i>Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account</i> (1999)
Primary analytical units	Slametan, practical Islam, Javanism, Sangkan Paran, Hinduism, syncretism, multivocality, ritual negotiation
Secondary data	Books on Javanese Islam and peer-reviewed studies on santri-abangan, Kejawen, Islamisation, ritual, historical change, and religious authority
Data collection technique	Documentation, close reading, analytical note-taking, and thematic classification
Coding categories	Social classification, ritual practice, multivocality, syncretism, authority, identity shift, historical negotiation
Analytical strategy	Thematic coding, comparative reading, historiographical reconstruction, and interpretive synthesis
Validation	Source triangulation and comparison between primary and secondary interpretations
Analytical output	Reconstruction of Javanese religion as a historically negotiated religious configuration

Data collection was conducted through documentation and close reading. Document analysis was used to identify statements, concepts, descriptions, and interpretive patterns relevant to the research questions. Documents were treated as cultural and intellectual products that carry both explicit arguments and contextual meanings (Bowen, 2009). Each relevant section of Beatty's book was read repeatedly and recorded according to thematic categories. Close reading was essential because the study sought to distinguish between Beatty's empirical observations, actors' interpretations, and his theoretical conclusions.

Data analysis proceeded through four stages. First, the data were condensed by selecting passages related to social classification, ritual plurality, multivocality, syncretism, religious authority, and identity negotiation. Data condensation allowed the study to retain only material directly related to the research problem (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, the selected data were coded deductively and inductively, then organized into conceptual categories that were consistently applied across both primary and secondary sources. Coding was used to connect individual textual units with broader analytical themes and to identify recurring patterns across the primary and secondary sources (Saldaña, 2021).

Third, thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns of meaning across Beatty's ethnography and later studies of Javanese Islam. Thematic analysis was used flexibly, with attention to both explicit concepts and underlying assumptions concerning identity, ritual, and religious boundaries (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Fourth, the study

employed comparative historiographical analysis. Beatty's interpretation was compared with Geertz's social typology, Woodward's emphasis on normative Islam, and Ricklefs's account of long-term Islamisation. This comparison allowed the study to determine whether Beatty merely offered another anthropological description or contributed to a deeper reconstruction of how Javanese religion has been conceptualised historically.

The validity of interpretation was strengthened through source triangulation. Primary claims from Beatty were cross-read against historical studies, contemporary ethnographic research, manuscript evidence, and studies of religious transformation. Triangulation was used not to produce absolute agreement among sources, but to test the consistency, limits, and explanatory strength of each interpretation (Flick, 2018). The final analytical synthesis therefore focused on explaining Javanese religion as a historically negotiated configuration formed through the interaction of Islamic normativity, ritual practice, actor interpretation, social authority, cultural memory, and historical change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Santri-Abangan Typology to Fluid Religious Identity

The first finding shows that the *santri-abangan* distinction remains historically significant but is no longer sufficient as a fixed analytical framework. Evidence from Beatty's primary text indicates that Javanese religious identities are more fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent, shaped by social relations, ritual practices, and interactions among religious actors. Beatty's ethnography reveals a social field in which normative Islamic piety, mysticism, local ritual, Javanism, and other religious orientations coexist within close social relationships. Religious boundaries exist, but they do not consistently produce mutually exclusive identities. Actors may participate in Islamic worship, maintain Javanese ritual obligations, respect inherited cultural symbols, and interact with groups holding different religious orientations without perceiving these practices as necessarily contradictory.

Beatty explicitly frames his research around religious complexity: "*This book is about religion in Java – its diverse forms, controversies, and reconciliations.*" (Beatty, 1999). This formulation is theoretically significant because Beatty does not begin by asking which religious category is dominant. He examines what religious diversity does to social life. His interest lies in the interaction among Islamic piety, mysticism, Hinduism, and folk traditions and in the compromises produced through their coexistence. Religious plurality is therefore not treated as an anomaly or incomplete stage of Islamisation. It constitutes the empirical condition through which Javanese religion operates (Beatty, 1999).

The finding challenges a rigid use of *santri* and *abangan*. These terms may still describe broad orientations, but they become problematic when converted into permanent identities. Contemporary research similarly shows that the interaction between Islam and Javanese culture takes place through continuous negotiation rather

than simple separation. Islamic norms, customary wisdom, family interests, and local social structures can operate simultaneously when Javanese Muslims resolve disputes concerning marriage and inheritance. Religious and customary reasoning therefore function relationally rather than as completely autonomous normative systems (Huda, Purnomo, Mun'im, Aminuddin, & Santoso, 2024).

The fluidity becomes more apparent within Kejawen communities. Kejawen identity continues to face reinterpretation as Javanese society responds to religious change, multicultural interaction, and contemporary cultural pressures. The persistence of Kejawen therefore depends not merely on preserving inherited practices but on the capacity to reinterpret what being culturally Javanese means in changing social circumstances (Mulyana, 2005). This supports the argument that Kejawen, like *santri* and *abangan*, should not be treated as an immutable religious essence.

Empirical evidence from Muslim Kejawen communities also demonstrates that differences in religious interpretation do not automatically create social separation. Kejawen Muslims may employ Javanese language in devotional practices, follow the *Aboge* calendar, and preserve specific cultural customs while continuing to identify as Muslims and maintaining harmonious relations with Muslims who adopt more puritan orientations. Such coexistence shows that religious identity involves several layers of belief, practice, social affiliation, and cultural memory (Zulaihah, Aulia, & Husain, 2023).

The relationship between Islam and Javanese culture is consequently better understood as negotiated rather than oppositional. Studies of Javanese Muslim cultural practice show that local traditions frequently operate through processes of reinterpretation in which cultural forms are evaluated, retained, adjusted, or given new Islamic meanings. Islam and Javanese culture therefore do not always occupy separate spheres. Their relationship develops within shared social spaces where legitimacy must continually be established (Pranata & Munir, 2024).

Table 2. Reassessing the Santri-Abangan Typology through Beatty's Historical Anthropology

Dimension	Conventional Typological Reading	Beatty's Perspective	Historical-Anthropological Implication
Religious identity	Relatively fixed	Overlapping and situational	Identity changes historically
<i>Santri-abangan</i>	Distinct religious blocs	Different orientations within one social field	Categories are heuristic, not essential
Kejawen	Separate or syncretic orientation	Part of plural religious interaction	Requires actor-centred interpretation
Religious practice	Marker of group identity	May contain several meanings	Practice cannot automatically define belief
Local tradition	Opposed to normative Islam	Continuously negotiated	Tradition can acquire new legitimacy
Religious	Movement between	Reconfiguration of	Change is relational

The table confirms that Beatty's contribution does not lie in replacing *santri-abangan* with another rigid classification. His analytical importance lies in changing the question itself. Instead of asking whether an individual is fundamentally *santri* or *abangan*, the researcher should examine how that individual positions Islam, cultural inheritance, ritual practice, and social obligations within particular situations.

This interpretation also corresponds with research showing that Javanese cultural forms can contain explicit Islamic meanings without losing their local symbolic structure. Javanese mantras, for example, may function as religious, educational, literary, and cultural media simultaneously. Such findings demonstrate that localisation cannot automatically be equated with weak Islamisation or theological deviation. Local form and Islamic content may interact through reinterpretation and cultural mediation (Pamungkas et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the first major finding suggests that the *santri-abangan* distinction remains useful as a historical vocabulary but becomes analytically limited when treated as a fixed category of Javanese religion. Beatty's account shifts attention from classification toward interaction. Through historical anthropology, religious identity can be interpreted as a configuration that changes in relation to shifting forms of authority, cultural memory, social relations, and Islamic normativity. Javanese religious identity is therefore better understood as fluid yet historically conditioned, rather than as membership in permanently bounded religious categories.

Slametan, Multivocality, and the Negotiation of Religious Meaning

The second major finding identifies *slametan* as the clearest empirical arena in which Beatty demonstrates the multivocal character of Javanese religion. The ritual is communal, but its communal character does not imply theological uniformity. Participants may sit together, listen to ritual speech, pray, share food, and affirm neighbourhood solidarity while privately attaching different meanings to the same event. The significance of *slametan* therefore lies not in its ability to erase religious difference, but in its capacity to organise coexistence without demanding a single interpretation.

Beatty captures this paradox directly: "*The slametan is a communal affair, but it defines no distinct community.*" (Beatty, 1999). This statement challenges an essentialist interpretation of ritual. A common practice does not automatically reveal a common religious identity. The ritual may bring together people who differ in their understanding of Islamic piety, local custom, ancestral memory, spiritual protection, and social obligation. Its apparent unity therefore conceals interpretive plurality. In this sense, *slametan* is not evidence of doctrinal consensus but a social mechanism through which disagreement can remain manageable.

Beatty sharpens this point when he states: "*What is not said is at least as significant as what is said.*" (Beatty, 1999). Silence and ambiguity are therefore not

weaknesses of ritual communication. They are part of the ritual's social logic. Participants do not always need to define every symbolic element in identical theological terms. Some differences remain deliberately unspoken. This allows the same ritual language to accommodate Islamic prayer, cultural obligation, family memory, social reciprocity, and local understandings of blessing. Multivocality operates precisely because a shared ritual form can sustain different interpretive registers at the same time.

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship on Javanese religion demonstrates that interpretive plurality remains a defining feature of Muslim ritual practice. Historical-anthropological studies, however, show that ritual meanings are not fixed entities but are continually negotiated and reconfigured through shifting patterns of religious authority, social relations, cultural memory, and the historical contexts in which those practices are embedded. The transformation of *ruwat* into *ruwat santri* demonstrates how an inherited Javanese purification ritual can be reformulated through Qur'anic recitation, Islamic prayer, and new religious justification without completely erasing its cultural memory. This process does not represent simple replacement. It reveals a change in the source of ritual legitimacy. Local cultural form remains visible, but its theological centre is increasingly rearticulated through Islamic discourse (Anam, Yusuf, & Karim, 2025).

A similar process can be observed in Qur'anic soundscapes within *slametan*, *tahlilan*, and *pengajian*. Qur'anic recitation operates not only as textual transmission but also as embodied interpretation. Sound, repetition, collective listening, emotional resonance, *rukun*, and *unggah-ungguh* influence how sacred texts are experienced. The Qur'an therefore becomes part of the ritual environment itself. It is not simply inserted into local culture from outside, but lived through culturally specific forms of listening, respect, and communal participation (Anam et al., 2025).

Table 3. Multivocality and Negotiated Meaning in Javanese Religious Rituals

Ritual Dimension	Beatty's Interpretation	Contemporary Transformation	Analytical Implication
Participation	Shared communal action	Continues across different religious orientations	Participation does not equal doctrinal uniformity
Ritual speech	Public agreement	Increasing use of Qur'anic language	Shared language may conceal different interpretations
Religious meaning	Multiple and private	Reinterpreted through scriptural references	Meaning changes historically
Social function	Maintains coexistence	Reinforces solidarity and cultural continuity	Ritual functions beyond theology
Authority	Distributed among participants	Increasing role of kiai and Islamic institutions	Multivocality is shaped by changing authority

The persistence of *hajatan* further demonstrates the capacity of Javanese ritual to contain several meanings simultaneously. Contemporary ethnographic research shows that *hajatan* may express gratitude to God, social reciprocity, psychological security,

family honour, cultural continuity, and communal cohesion. Its persistence amid modernisation is related to this flexibility. The ritual survives not because its meaning remains unchanged, but because different generations continue to reinterpret its significance within changing social conditions (Pohan, Ramli, Atmoko, Akbar, & Hanurawan, 2025).

The same pattern appears in *nyadran*. In contemporary Muslim communities, the ritual may combine prayer, Qur'anic recitation, remembrance of the dead, *gotong royong*, cultural memory, and social solidarity. Rather than representing a fixed remnant of pre-Islamic religion, *nyadran* is continuously recontextualised through Islamic values and contemporary social needs. Its continuity therefore reflects the capacity of ritual to absorb new interpretations while retaining recognisable cultural forms (Ediyono & Nugraha, 2025).

These findings confirm Beatty's central proposition but also extend it historically. Multivocality should not be understood merely as the simultaneous presence of several interpretations. It also concerns the changing authority of those interpretations. Qur'anic recitation, kiai authority, Islamic educational institutions, and contemporary religious discourse may gradually alter which meanings become dominant, acceptable, marginal, or contested.

This point is crucial because ritual continuity can easily be misread as religious continuity. A ritual may retain the same name, location, food, sequence, or social participants while undergoing substantial semantic transformation. Conversely, explicitly Islamic elements may become embedded within long-established Javanese forms. The history of ritual is therefore not simply a history of survival or disappearance. It is a history of reinterpretation.

The second major result of this research is therefore clear: *slametan* is not evidence of a single and homogeneous "Javanese religion," nor should it be reduced to a residue of syncretism. It is a negotiated ritual space in which Islamic normativity, cultural memory, social solidarity, and actor interpretation intersect. Beatty's contribution lies in showing that social consensus does not require theological sameness. Historical anthropology deepens this insight by demonstrating that the balance among competing meanings changes over time as religious authority, scriptural discourse, and social conditions are reconstructed.

Beyond Syncretism: Reconstructing Javanese Religion Historically

The third major finding is that *syncretism* remains useful as a descriptive term, but becomes analytically insufficient when it is treated as the final explanation of Javanese religion. The term can identify the coexistence of Islamic, Javanese, Hindu-Buddhist, mystical, and local elements, yet it does not by itself explain how these elements came into contact, why some were retained, how they were reinterpreted, or which actors authorised their continued practice. Beatty's ethnography points toward a more dynamic reading because his attention is directed not simply to mixture, but to interaction, controversy, accommodation, and reconciliation among religious orientations.

Beatty's own formulation is revealing: "*Syncretism is the systematic interrelation of elements from diverse cultural traditions.*" (Beatty, 1999). The importance of this formulation lies in the phrase *systematic interrelation*. Beatty does not reduce Javanese religion to an accidental mixture of heterogeneous elements. He emphasises relationships among traditions. The analytical question therefore shifts from identifying the origins of cultural components toward explaining how these components are made socially compatible, religiously meaningful, and historically durable.

Recent studies support this finding but differ from static acculturation approaches by emphasizing historical negotiation, shifting authority, and ongoing contestation over religious meaning. The spread of Islam in Java developed through trade, education, marriage, art, religious institutions, and the adaptation of local cultural forms. Islamisation was therefore not a single event in which an Islamic system simply replaced an earlier cultural order. It unfolded through prolonged interaction between religious teachings and existing cultural structures. Syncretic forms were produced within this historical process rather than existing as timeless characteristics of Javanese society (Fathkan, 2002).

The same historical complexity can be seen in broader studies of Islam and local culture in the Indonesian archipelago. Islamic expansion occurred through reciprocal acculturation in which local communities did not merely receive Islamic culture passively. They actively interpreted Islamic values through pre-existing systems of art, governance, ritual, and social organisation. This reciprocal process generated culturally specific Islamic expressions while maintaining connections to Islamic normative frameworks (Abdullah, Asdam, & Alimbagu, 2025).

This finding is important because the language of syncretism can otherwise suggest that Islam and local culture were originally two completely separate and internally pure systems. In practice, however, religious traditions are transmitted through language, institutions, aesthetic forms, social relations, and political structures. Localisation is therefore unavoidable in any historical expansion of religion. The analytical task is not simply to identify whether local elements are present, but to determine how they are evaluated and integrated.

Research on Javanese *klenik* traditions demonstrates the limits of a purely celebratory interpretation of syncretism. Some practices remain controversial because religious actors interpret them as conflicting with Islamic teachings. Their persistence is connected to inherited beliefs, local experience, and intergenerational cultural transmission. This shows that negotiation does not always produce harmony. It may also generate contestation over the legitimacy of particular practices (Alwiyah & Sahrul, 2024).

A similar tension is visible in contemporary Banten Javanese marriage rituals. Customary practices are not accepted or rejected wholesale. Religious actors assess them through Islamic normative reasoning, particularly considerations related to the objectives of Islamic law. Cultural continuity therefore takes place through processes of

selection, reinterpretation, legitimation, and sometimes elimination (Pratama & Mon, 2026).

Table 4. From Syncretic Mixture to Historical Reconstruction

Analytical Dimension	Static Syncretism Model	Historical-Anthropological Reconstruction
Basic assumption	Distinct traditions are mixed	Traditions interact historically
Main question	Which elements come from which religion?	How are elements selected, interpreted, and legitimised?
Role of actors	Passive recipients of inherited mixture	Active interpreters and negotiators
Religious authority	Secondary	Determines acceptable and contested meanings
Ritual continuity	Survival of older religious elements	Continuity may involve semantic transformation
Analytical outcome	Classification as syncretic	Reconstruction of historical processes

The table shows why historical anthropology provides a sharper framework. It refuses to treat cultural coexistence as self-explanatory. Instead, it asks how authority, social context, and historical change shape the relationship between Islamic normativity and local practice.

The reconstruction of Javanese tradition through literary anthropology reinforces this argument. Cultural traditions recorded in Javanese texts are not static reflections of a fixed past. They are continuously reinterpreted in relation to changing moral, social, and cultural concerns. Literary tradition therefore demonstrates that cultural continuity itself involves reconstruction (Iqbal, Endraswara, & Widyastuti, 2025).

This point is also visible in current research on pre-Islamic religious legacies. Practices such as grave pilgrimage, *slametan*, and local ritual can retain traces of earlier religious formations, yet their contemporary meanings are shaped by later Islamic interpretation and present social conditions. Historical continuity should therefore not be confused with semantic continuity. A ritual may preserve an old form while acquiring a substantially different religious meaning (Alfionisa, Pitaloka, & Ulhaq, 2025).

The third result is therefore clear: Javanese religion cannot be adequately explained by identifying it as syncretic. Syncretism describes plurality, but historical anthropology explains transformation. Beatty's contribution becomes strongest when his concept of interrelation is historicised. The central question is no longer whether Islam and Javanese culture are mixed, but how specific actors, under particular historical conditions, negotiate which cultural forms remain legitimate, which are reinterpreted, and which are rejected. This shift moves the analysis from cultural classification toward the historical production of religious meaning.

Historical Anthropology and the Reconstruction of Javanese Religion

The fourth major finding is that Beatty's ethnography becomes more analytically powerful when it is read through historical anthropology. His work demonstrates how Javanese religious life is organised through interaction among actors, rituals, beliefs, cultural memory, and religious authority. Historical anthropology extends this insight by asking how these relations change over time. The central issue is therefore no longer only how Javanese religion is practised, but how particular interpretations become authoritative, contested, inherited, or reformulated under different historical conditions.

⁸ Beatty's emphasis on interaction is clear in his description of the religious field: "*The fascination of Javanese religion lies in the interplay between its different traditions and religious styles.*" (Beatty, 1999). This statement provides a crucial bridge between anthropology and history. The term *interplay* indicates that Javanese religion cannot be reconstructed through isolated traditions. Islamic normativity, mystical practice, local ritual, sacred geography, kinship, and cultural memory acquire meaning through their relationships with one another. Historical anthropology adds temporality to this relationship by examining how the balance among these elements changes across generations.

This temporal dimension is evident in the continuity of traditional Muslim communities. Collective memory, ritual, and religious symbols continue to function as mechanisms through which communities defend cultural identity amid modernity. *Tahlilan*, *manaqiban*, Qur'anic recitation, pesantren traditions, and symbolic attachment to local religious spaces are not merely repetitions of inherited practice. They reproduce historical consciousness by linking present religious identity with remembered religious communities and authoritative figures from the past (Kholiludin, 2025). Religion therefore operates simultaneously as lived practice and cultural memory.

Historical continuity, however, never means the absence of transformation. The *Suroan* tradition demonstrates how Islamic and Javanese temporal systems have been historically reorganised since the integration of the Hijri and Saka calendars during the reign of Sultan Agung. The sanctification of Muharram remained important, but ritual forms, prohibitions, symbolic meanings, and local practices underwent continual modification. The relationship between continuity and change therefore becomes more analytically productive than the opposition between authentic Islam and local tradition (Rofiq, 2024).

The transmission of Islamic knowledge through Javanese texts provides further evidence of this historical process. The *Asmarakandhi*, a Javanese translation of an Arabic theological text, circulated for centuries as a source of Islamic instruction. Its existence demonstrates that vernacularisation was an important mechanism in the historical formation of Javanese Islam. Islamic theology did not remain confined to Arabic textual traditions but entered local intellectual worlds through translation and reinterpretation (Wieringa, 2022). This textual evidence challenges the assumption that local cultural expression necessarily indicates distance from normative Islam.

Cultural transmission also occurs through ritual education. Contemporary research shows that Islamic values embedded in Javanese community rituals can move from ritual space into formal and informal educational contexts. Practices such as *Merti Dusun*, *Sungkem Tlompak*, and local arts transmit aesthetic, spiritual, and social values to younger generations. Cultural inheritance therefore operates through active pedagogical processes, not simply through passive imitation (Arbi, Jazuli, Wadiyo, Cahyono, & Adi, 2025).

A similar process is visible in *nyadran*. The ritual combines grave visitation, collective prayer, *tahlil*, communal meals, and symbolic practices related to purification before Ramadan. Rather than functioning as a fossilised remnant of the past, *nyadran* becomes a site where collective memory, Islamic devotion, and contemporary religious authority are continuously negotiated (Fadilah, 2024). Its durability depends precisely on its capacity to remain interpretable under changing religious conditions.

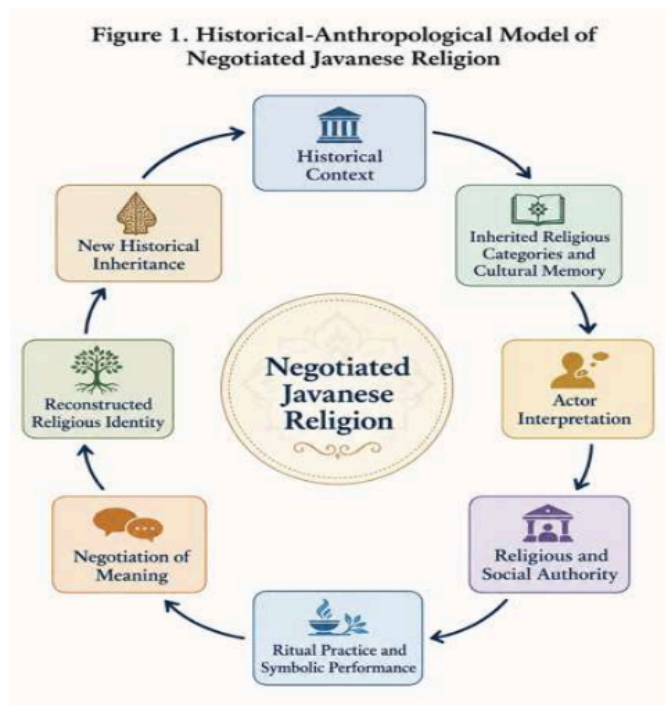
Sacred architectural space also illustrates the historical production of religious meaning. The Menara Kudus Mosque continues to reproduce Islamic-Javanese values through architecture, ritual, historical narratives, and repeated everyday practices. The site does not merely preserve an old cultural synthesis. It actively reproduces symbolic legitimacy through social practice and collective memory (Shorfana & Luthfi, 2025).

These findings lead to a clear theoretical conclusion. Historical anthropology does not treat Javanese religion as either an unchanging cultural system or a linear process of religious purification. It examines how religious meaning emerges through the interaction of historical context, textual traditions, ritual practice, authority, memory, and actor interpretation.

The fourth result is therefore decisive: Beatty's greatest historiographical value lies in showing that religious plurality must be reconstructed as a process rather than classified as a condition. Historical anthropology extends Beatty by demonstrating that multivocality itself has a history. Ritual meanings shift, authoritative voices change, texts move into new cultural settings, and inherited symbols acquire new legitimacy.

The conceptual novelty of this study lies in understanding Javanese religion as a historically negotiated religious configuration, continually shaped through historical negotiations among Islamic normativity, religious authority, ritual practice, cultural memory, and social change. This concept moves beyond the *santri-abangan* typology, which tends to stabilize religious identity into relatively fixed social categories. Recent research demonstrates that Javanese Muslim identity can shift toward more shari'ah-centred orientations, indicating that religious identity changes in response to evolving social and political conditions (Hudayana, 2022). Likewise, recent critiques show that representations of Javanese religion as animistic or syncretic often reflect particular analytical paradigms rather than neutral descriptions of religious reality (Kabir, 2021). The concept of vernacularization has productively explained how Islamic theological categories were translated into Javanese language and literature, but it primarily emphasizes intellectual and cultural translation rather than transformations in identity and religious authority across time (Zuhri, 2022). More recent scholarship further

argues that the opposition between “Islam” and “syncretism” remains trapped within the same analytical paradigm unless alternative theoretical approaches are developed (van den Boogert, 2023). The concept proposed here therefore does not merely replace the language of syncretism. It explains how religious identity, ritual meaning, and authority are historically formed, negotiated, legitimized, and reconstructed as social conditions change. Continuity in Javanese religion thus depends not on preserving meanings unchanged, but on communities’ capacity to reinterpret inherited religious resources under new historical conditions.



Limitations and Future Research

The fifth major finding concerns the limits of the present reconstruction and the directions in which Beatty’s framework needs to be extended. The research demonstrates that *Varieties of Javanese Religion* remains highly productive for understanding religious plurality, ritual negotiation, and shifting boundaries of identity. However, Beatty’s ethnography was produced within a specific historical and geographical setting. Its explanatory power therefore depends on how carefully it is transferred to contemporary Javanese Muslim life

Beatty himself acknowledges that his central concern is “*the effect of diversity upon Javanese religion*” (Beatty, 1999). This emphasis is crucial, but it also marks a methodological boundary. Diversity is observed ethnographically in a particular Banyuwangi setting, while the long-term transformation of that diversity remains beyond the immediate scope of the book. The present research extends Beatty historically, yet it still relies primarily on published texts rather than longitudinal

fieldwork. It cannot therefore demonstrate directly how every community described by Beatty has changed since the 1990s.

A first limitation concerns temporal distance. Javanese religious life today is shaped by institutions and technologies that were far less influential when Beatty conducted his fieldwork. Religious authority now circulates through pesantren networks, Islamic organisations, television, YouTube, social media, podcasts, and algorithmically mediated religious content. Digital religious authority is increasingly produced through visibility, communicative style, platform reputation, and online followership rather than solely through traditional scholarly genealogy (Hidayatullah, 2024). This transformation raises a question that Beatty could not have fully anticipated: does digital authority reduce ritual multivocality by promoting standardised Islamic judgments, or does it multiply competing interpretations?

A second limitation concerns the changing relationship between online and offline religion. Contemporary Indonesian Muslim practice increasingly operates within hybrid religious spaces where digital communication reshapes how religious knowledge is accessed, discussed, and practised. Social media does not merely transmit religious messages. It changes the mediation of religious experience itself and creates new connections between virtual religious participation and everyday practice (Rohmawati & Hakiem, 2025). Future studies of Javanese religion therefore need to examine how *slametan*, *nyadran*, Kejawen, pilgrimage, and ritual legitimacy are debated in both village settings and digital public spheres.

A third limitation concerns religious authority and power. Beatty's concept of multivocality effectively captures interpretive plurality, but not every voice possesses equal authority. Contemporary religious legitimacy is shaped by institutional organisations, kyai, state actors, cultural intellectuals, and platform-based religious figures. Recent research on digital fatwas shows that classical jurisprudential authority now interacts with platform visibility and new forms of symbolic capital. Religious legitimacy is not simply replaced by digital culture, but reconfigured through it (Maulana, Harahap, Nasution, Ashani, & Fadhlurrahman, 2026). Historical anthropology must therefore connect multivocality with asymmetrical power: who can define a ritual as Islamic, cultural, superstitious, or deviant?

A fourth limitation concerns mobility and territoriality. Beatty's model emerged from a relatively bounded social setting, yet Javanese religious identity increasingly develops through migration. Javanese migrants in Aceh, for example, negotiate cultural identity through adaptation to Acehnese religious norms. Their subjectivity changes through constant interaction with a new religious and political environment rather than through simple cultural preservation (Khumairoh, Alamsyah, Wildan, & Muslimin, 2025). This suggests that "Javanese religion" cannot be studied only within Java. Diaspora and internal migration provide important laboratories for examining how identity is reconstructed when local cultural memory encounters new regimes of Islamic authority.

A fifth limitation concerns the relationship between ritual continuity and modernisation. Contemporary research on Javanese Muslim *hajatan* demonstrates that traditional rituals remain socially relevant because they function as mechanisms of gratitude, psychological resilience, solidarity, and cultural identity amid social change (Pohan et al., 2025). Yet ritual continuity does not prove semantic continuity. Future research should therefore distinguish carefully between continuity of form and continuity of meaning.

These limitations generate a concrete research agenda. Comparative ethnography is needed between Beatty's original Banyuwangi field and contemporary Javanese communities. Digital ethnography should examine online debates over *slametan*, *ruwatan*, pilgrimage, and Kejawen. Studies of youth should investigate whether inherited rituals are increasingly understood as religion, culture, identity, or heritage. Research on migration should trace how Javanese religious categories change outside Java. Living Qur'an approaches can also investigate how Qur'anic recitation alters the authority and meaning of local ritual.

The fifth result therefore clarifies rather than closes the argument. Beatty provides a powerful anthropology of religious plurality, but contemporary Javanese religion requires a wider historical field. The central question is no longer simply how different religious orientations coexist, but how new technologies, migration, shifting authority, and generational change continually reshape the historical conditions that make such negotiation possible.

The usefulness of the historical-anthropological framework proposed in this study extends beyond the Javanese context. It can illuminate other religious communities in which religious norms, customary traditions, authority, collective memory, and social change are continually negotiated. Research on the Ammatoa Kajang community in South Sulawesi, for example, shows that the relationship between Islam and Patungtung has developed through processes of negotiation that cannot be adequately reduced to conversion or syncretism alone (Mallongi, Septiwiharti, Nurbaety, Hak, & Ibrahim, 2023). Comparative research in Gorontalo, Minangkabau, and Banten similarly demonstrates that interactions between sharia and local culture produce different patterns of integration, negotiation, and dominance according to distinct historical trajectories, power relations, and configurations of authority (Suleman, Tungkagi, Suleman, Kau, & Salleh, 2025). At the Southeast Asian level, madhhab negotiation within Tablighi Jamaat networks further illustrates how religious traditions are continually adjusted across different social and institutional settings (Hamdi, Nurjannah, Nasrullah, & Zuarnum, 2022). The transformation of religious authority in digital environments further expands the framework's relevance, as legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through online visibility, media practices, algorithmic structures, and audience responses rather than solely through traditional chains of transmission (Hidayatullah, 2024). Historical anthropology therefore provides a comparative framework for explaining how Muslim communities simultaneously maintain continuity and renegotiate identity, practice, and authority under changing historical conditions. It

moves analysis beyond binaries such as tradition versus modernity or local versus universal toward examining how religious configurations are formed, sustained, and reconstructed across different societies and historical contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Andrew Beatty's major contribution to the study of Javanese religion lies in challenging fixed categories such as *santri*, *abangan*, normative Islam, syncretic Islam, and Kejawen. His emphasis on multivocality, ritual plurality, and negotiated meaning reveals that Javanese religiosity is shaped by overlapping practices, differentiated interpretations, and changing forms of social authority. Extending Beatty through historical anthropology, this study proposes the concept of a historically negotiated religious configuration to explain how Javanese religion is continually reconstructed through Islamic normativity, cultural memory, ritual practice, interpretation, and shifts in religious authority. This framework moves beyond rigid *santri-abangan* typologies and static models of syncretism by emphasizing historical processes of selection, reinterpretation, legitimation, and contestation. The study therefore contributes to a more dynamic understanding of Javanese religion as a history of changing regimes of interpretation rather than merely a history of Islamisation or cultural survival. Future research should test this framework through longitudinal ethnography, digital religious studies, migration studies, and Living Qur'an approaches to examine how new authorities, technologies, and generational change continue to reshape Javanese Muslim identity.

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