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## Negotiating Qur'anic Teachings and Local Beliefs: Muslim Community Perceptions of Magic in North Luwu, Indonesia

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### Abstract

Belief in magic (sihr) continues to persist within many Muslim communities despite the explicit prohibition of harmful magical practices in Islamic teachings. This study investigates how Muslims in Banyuwangi Village, North Luwu Regency, Indonesia, perceive magic and negotiate Qur'anic teachings with local cultural beliefs. Employing a qualitative field research design, data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving religious leaders, community leaders, and local residents. The data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that community understandings of magic are shaped by both Islamic teachings and inherited local traditions. Participants generally acknowledge the existence of magic as described in the Qur'an, particularly through narratives concerning Harut and Marut, the magicians of Pharaoh, and verses of spiritual protection. At the same time, local cultural beliefs continue to influence interpretations of supernatural phenomena and magical practices. The study identified six forms of magic commonly recognized within the community: separation magic, love magic, madness-inducing magic, marriage-blocking magic, santet, and pesugihan. These forms are associated with social relationships, economic aspirations, personal conflicts, and spiritual concerns. The findings further demonstrate that community members distinguish between harmful magical practices and spiritual practices perceived as legitimate forms of protection and healing. This study argues that perceptions of magic among Muslims in North Luwu reflect an ongoing negotiation between Qur'anic doctrine and local cultural traditions, illustrating the dynamic interaction between scriptural authority, lived religion, and cultural experience in contemporary Muslim society.

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## **Introduction**

Belief in magic remains a persistent phenomenon across many Muslim societies despite the advancement of modern education, scientific rationality, and religious reform movements. In various cultural contexts, magic is not merely understood as a supernatural practice but also functions as a social mechanism through which individuals interpret misfortune, illness, interpersonal conflict, economic hardship, and unexplained events. Anthropological studies have demonstrated that beliefs concerning magic, witchcraft, and supernatural forces continue to shape social behavior and religious practices in many communities around the world (Evans-Pritchard, 1976; Tambiah, 1990). Within Muslim societies, discussions concerning magic occupy a unique position because the phenomenon is simultaneously addressed through theological, legal, and socio-cultural perspectives.

The concept of magic (*sihr*) occupies an important place in Islamic discourse. The Qur'an explicitly mentions *sihr* in several narratives, particularly in relation to Prophet Musa and the magicians of Pharaoh, the story of Harut and Marut in Babylon, and various references to the practices of sorcerers and fortune tellers. Qur'anic descriptions indicate that *sihr* is a real phenomenon capable of influencing human perception and behavior, although its effectiveness ultimately remains subject to the will of Allah (Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:102; Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:116–117; Q.S. al-Falaq [113]:1–5). Classical Muslim scholars such as al-Qurtubi, Ibn Kathir, and al-Razi generally regarded *sihr* as a prohibited practice associated with deception, manipulation, and reliance upon demonic forces. Consequently, Islamic teachings strongly discourage Muslims from engaging in magical practices and classify certain forms of magic as acts that may lead to *shirk* and disbelief (Ibn Kathir, 2000; al-Qurtubi, 2006).

Although Islamic teachings clearly condemn magical practices, beliefs concerning supernatural powers continue to exist in many Muslim communities. Scholars have argued that religious beliefs often interact with local cultural traditions, producing forms of religious expression that combine scriptural teachings with inherited cultural practices (Geertz, 1960; Woodward, 2011). In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, local understandings of supernatural forces, ancestral traditions, mystical practices, and spiritual healing frequently coexist with Islamic beliefs. As a result, many Muslims simultaneously acknowledge Qur'anic teachings regarding the prohibition of magic while maintaining cultural understandings that recognize the existence and efficacy of certain supernatural practices.

Indonesia presents a particularly important context for examining this phenomenon. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia exhibits remarkable diversity in religious expression. Numerous studies have documented the persistence of mystical beliefs, sacred objects, spiritual intermediaries, and magical practices within Muslim communities across different regions (Beatty, 1999; Howell, 2001). These practices are often embedded within local cultural traditions and are interpreted through religious frameworks that draw selectively upon Qur'anic verses, prophetic traditions, and local wisdom. Consequently, the boundaries between Islamic orthodoxy and local belief systems frequently become fluid and subject to negotiation.

Within this broader context, the issue of magic remains highly relevant in rural communities where traditional knowledge systems continue to influence social life. In

many villages, magic is associated with various purposes, including protection, healing, attraction, wealth acquisition, revenge, and social control. Community members often interpret personal misfortune, family disputes, illness, or economic difficulties through supernatural explanations. Such interpretations demonstrate that beliefs about magic are not merely remnants of pre-modern culture but continue to function as meaningful frameworks for understanding everyday experiences.

Previous studies on magic in Islamic scholarship have predominantly focused on textual and theological dimensions. Lismawati (2019) examined the concept of magic through a Sufistic interpretation of Qur'anic verses and concluded that magic constitutes a form of deviation from Islamic teachings. Similarly, Malihah and Habdin (2022) investigated magic from a thematic Qur'anic perspective and emphasized its prohibition within Islamic law. Meanwhile, Al-Alam (2021) conducted a comparative study between Tafsir al-Qurtubi and Tafsir al-Misbah concerning the interpretation of magic in the Qur'an. These studies have contributed significantly to understanding the doctrinal and exegetical dimensions of sihr. However, they primarily concentrate on textual interpretation and pay limited attention to how ordinary Muslim communities understand, negotiate, and apply these teachings within their social realities.

The existing literature therefore reveals an important gap. While scholars have extensively explored the Qur'anic concept of magic and its theological implications, relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating how local Muslim communities interpret and negotiate Qur'anic teachings concerning magic in relation to enduring cultural beliefs and practices. Understanding this relationship is important because religious beliefs are rarely formed solely through scriptural interpretation; rather, they emerge through continuous interaction between religious teachings, cultural traditions, historical experiences, and everyday social realities.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining Muslim community perceptions of magic in Banyuwangi Village, Sukamaju Selatan District, North Luwu Regency, Indonesia. The village provides an important case study because Islamic teachings coexist with local beliefs concerning supernatural forces, magical practices, and traditional forms of spiritual knowledge. By exploring how community members understand the concept of magic, interpret Qur'anic teachings regarding sihr, and identify forms of magic believed to exist within their social environment, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between Islamic doctrine and local belief systems.

Accordingly, this article argues that community perceptions of magic are shaped not only by Qur'anic teachings but also by local cultural traditions and collective social experiences. The persistence of magical beliefs among Muslims in North Luwu illustrates an ongoing process of negotiation between scriptural authority and local knowledge, revealing the complex ways in which religion is interpreted and practiced within contemporary Muslim societies.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore Muslim community perceptions of magic (sihr) and its relationship with Qur'anic teachings in Banyuwangi Village, Sukamaju Selatan District, North Luwu Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand

participants' beliefs, experiences, interpretations, and socio-religious understandings regarding magic within their local cultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research adopted a field research approach by combining perspectives from Qur'anic studies and sociology of religion. This interdisciplinary approach enabled the researcher to examine both the textual foundations of magic in Islamic teachings and the ways these teachings are interpreted within everyday community life. The research was conducted in Banyuwangi Village, a community characterized by a strong Muslim identity alongside the persistence of local beliefs concerning supernatural practices and spiritual traditions.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious leaders, community leaders, and local residents who possessed knowledge or experiences related to beliefs about magic. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling, focusing on individuals considered capable of providing relevant information regarding community perceptions and practices associated with magic. Observation was used to understand the socio-cultural context in which these beliefs were maintained, while documentation served to support and verify information obtained during interviews.

The primary data consisted of interview results and field observations, whereas secondary data were obtained from the Qur'an, classical and contemporary tafsir literature, books, journal articles, and other scholarly works discussing magic, Islamic theology, and local religious beliefs. The use of multiple data sources allowed for data triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings (Miles et al., 2014).

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and field notes were carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes related to participants' understanding of magic, perceptions of Qur'anic teachings concerning sihr, and forms of magic believed to exist within the community. The identified themes were then interpreted through relevant Islamic and sociological perspectives to generate a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between religious doctrine and local belief systems.

## **Results**

### ***Qur'anic Understanding of Magic***

The findings indicate that community perceptions of magic are closely associated with Qur'anic narratives concerning sihr. Religious leaders and community members generally believe that magic is a real phenomenon whose existence is acknowledged in the Qur'an. Participants frequently referred to the story of Prophet Musa and the magicians of Pharaoh, the account of Harut and Marut in Surah al-Baqarah (2:102), and verses of protection such as Surah al-Falaq (113:1–5) when discussing the nature of magic.

Several participants emphasized that magic is not merely an illusion but a harmful practice capable of influencing human life. According to community interpretations, magic can cause illness, psychological disturbances, family conflicts, economic difficulties, and even death. Religious leaders also stressed that magic is associated with cooperation between humans and supernatural beings such as jinn and devils, making it contrary to Islamic teachings.

The interview data further revealed that participants viewed Qur'anic teachings as the primary source for understanding the dangers of magic. Informants frequently cited the Qur'anic prohibition of sihr and described it as an act that may lead individuals away from tawhid. Consequently, many respondents regarded magic as a forbidden practice despite acknowledging its continued existence within society.

### ***Community Perceptions of Magic***

The study found that belief in magic remains prevalent among community members in Banyuwangi Village. Participants generally perceived magic as a supernatural force that can influence human behavior, emotions, relationships, and physical conditions. Although respondents recognized that modern society is increasingly influenced by scientific and technological developments, many maintained that magic continues to operate within contemporary social life.

Interview findings revealed that community members associate magic with various motives, including revenge, wealth acquisition, attraction, protection, and social influence. Several informants described magic as a practice inherited through generations and preserved through local cultural traditions. According to some participants, magical knowledge is transmitted through family networks, spiritual teachers, or traditional practitioners who maintain specific rituals and requirements.

Community members also reported that magical practices are commonly believed to involve agreements with supernatural entities, ritual offerings, fasting, recitations, and specific ceremonial procedures. These beliefs demonstrate the continued influence of local spiritual traditions in shaping community understandings of supernatural phenomena.

An important finding concerns the coexistence of Islamic teachings and local beliefs. While respondents generally acknowledged that Islam prohibits harmful magical practices, they also distinguished between destructive forms of magic and certain spiritual practices they perceived as protective or beneficial. This distinction illustrates the complex ways in which religious doctrine and local cultural knowledge interact within everyday life.

### ***Forms of Magic Believed and Practiced in Banyuwangi Village***

The research identified six major forms of magic recognized by community members.

#### **1. Magic for Separation**

Participants described separation magic as a practice intended to create hostility, conflict, and separation between individuals, particularly married couples. Informants associated this type of magic with the Qur'anic narrative concerning efforts to separate husbands and wives as mentioned in Surah al-Baqarah (2:102).

#### **2. Love Magic (Pelet)**

Love magic was frequently mentioned by respondents as a practice used to influence a person's feelings and create emotional attachment. Community members believed that this form of magic could cause individuals to become excessively attracted to the intended target and alter their normal emotional behavior.

#### **3. Madness-Inducing Magic**

Respondents also identified a form of magic believed to cause psychological disturbances, confusion, memory loss, or abnormal behavior. According to

participants, victims may appear disoriented, isolated, or unable to perform their normal daily activities.

#### 4. Marriage-Blocking Magic

Another form frequently mentioned by participants was magic intended to prevent marriage or disrupt romantic relationships. Informants believed that such practices could create aversion between potential partners or repeatedly obstruct marriage proposals.

#### 5. Santet (Harmful Magic)

Santet was described as one of the most feared forms of magic within the community. Participants believed that santet could be used to inflict physical suffering, illness, or even death from a distance through supernatural means. Respondents frequently associated this practice with feelings of jealousy, hatred, and revenge.

#### 6. Wealth-Seeking Magic (Pesugihan)

The final form identified in the study was pesugihan, a practice believed to provide wealth or economic prosperity through supernatural assistance. Informants stated that such practices generally require ritual offerings, spiritual agreements, or other forms of exchange. Despite acknowledging the potential material benefits associated with pesugihan, respondents commonly viewed it as morally and religiously problematic because of its perceived connection to supernatural entities and prohibited practices.

## Discussion

The findings reveal that belief in magic remains a significant element of religious and cultural life among Muslims in Banyuwangi Village. Although participants generally recognize that Islamic teachings prohibit harmful magical practices, many continue to acknowledge the existence and influence of supernatural forces in everyday life. This situation demonstrates that community understandings of magic are not formed solely through scriptural teachings but emerge from a continuous interaction between religious doctrine, local traditions, and lived experiences.

From an Islamic perspective, the respondents' belief in the existence of magic is not entirely inconsistent with Qur'anic teachings. The Qur'an explicitly refers to sihr in several passages, including the story of Harut and Marut (Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:102), the confrontation between Prophet Musa and the magicians of Pharaoh (Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:116–117), and the protective supplications contained in Surah al-Falaq (Q.S. al-Falaq [113]:1–5). These verses indicate that the concept of magic occupies a recognized position within Islamic theology. Consequently, community members often view their belief in magic as being supported by religious texts rather than merely inherited cultural assumptions.

However, the findings also reveal that local interpretations of magic extend beyond Qur'anic descriptions. Community narratives concerning santet, pelet, pesugihan, marriage-blocking magic, and supernatural agreements with unseen entities reflect the influence of local cultural traditions that have developed over generations. This finding supports Geertz's (1960) argument that religious life in Indonesia cannot be understood solely through doctrinal teachings because local cultural elements continuously shape the ways religious beliefs are interpreted and practiced. In this sense, community understandings of magic represent a form of religious-cultural synthesis in which Islamic teachings coexist with inherited local traditions.

The persistence of magical beliefs in Banyuwangi Village can also be explained through the concept of lived religion. McGuire (2008) argues that religion is not merely a collection of official doctrines but is expressed through everyday practices, experiences, and interpretations. The interview data demonstrate that community members frequently interpret illness, family conflict, economic hardship, and social misfortune through supernatural frameworks. Such interpretations provide practical explanations for events that may otherwise appear difficult to understand. As a result, belief in magic continues to function as a meaningful interpretive system within community life despite increasing exposure to modern education and scientific knowledge.

Another important finding concerns the distinction made by participants between harmful magic and practices perceived as spiritually beneficial. Several respondents differentiated between destructive forms of magic and spiritual practices such as prayer, ruqyah, protective recitations, and the use of Qur'anic verses for healing or protection. This distinction illustrates how community members negotiate religious boundaries by attempting to reconcile local spiritual needs with Islamic teachings. Rather than completely rejecting supernatural beliefs, they selectively categorize certain practices as religiously acceptable while condemning others as sinful or prohibited. Similar patterns have been identified in studies of popular Islam in Southeast Asia, where local Muslims often distinguish between legitimate spiritual practices and forbidden magical activities (Woodward, 2011; Howell, 2001).

The identification of six forms of magic—separation magic, love magic, madness-inducing magic, marriage-blocking magic, santet, and pesugihan—further demonstrates the diversity of supernatural beliefs embedded within local society. These categories indicate that magical practices are commonly associated with social relationships, economic aspirations, emotional desires, and interpersonal conflicts. In many cases, magic serves as a cultural explanation for experiences involving jealousy, competition, romance, family disputes, or sudden misfortune. Consequently, belief in magic should not be understood merely as a theological issue but also as a social phenomenon that reflects broader concerns regarding power, uncertainty, and human vulnerability.

The findings additionally suggest that belief in magic continues to operate as a mechanism for maintaining moral boundaries within the community. Informants consistently associated magical practices with negative consequences, including spiritual deviation, moral corruption, and dependence upon supernatural entities. By emphasizing the dangers of magic, religious leaders reinforce Islamic teachings concerning tawhid and encourage community members to seek protection through prayer, remembrance of God, and adherence to religious obligations. In this regard, discussions about magic function not only as conversations about supernatural phenomena but also as opportunities to strengthen religious identity and moral discipline.

This study therefore argues that Muslim perceptions of magic in Banyuwangi Village reflect an ongoing process of negotiation between Qur'anic teachings and local cultural beliefs. While Islamic doctrine provides the primary theological framework through which magic is understood, local traditions continue to influence how individuals interpret, explain, and respond to supernatural phenomena. The coexistence of these influences illustrates the dynamic nature of religious life in contemporary Muslim communities, where

scriptural authority and cultural experience interact continuously in shaping everyday religious understanding.

## Conclusion

This study examined Muslim community perceptions of magic in Banyuwangi Village, North Luwu, Indonesia, with particular attention to the relationship between Qur'anic teachings and local cultural beliefs. The findings demonstrate that community understandings of magic are shaped by both Islamic religious teachings and inherited local traditions. Participants generally acknowledge the existence of magic as recognized in the Qur'an, particularly through narratives concerning Harut and Marut, the magicians of Pharaoh, and verses of protection found in Surah al-Falaq. At the same time, these understandings are intertwined with local beliefs concerning supernatural forces, spiritual intermediaries, and culturally transmitted magical practices.

The study identified six forms of magic commonly recognized within the community: separation magic, love magic, madness-inducing magic, marriage-blocking magic, santet, and pesugihan. These categories illustrate that beliefs about magic remain embedded in social, economic, and interpersonal dimensions of community life. Magic is frequently used as a framework for explaining misfortune, illness, conflict, and uncertainty, thereby serving important social and cultural functions beyond its theological significance.

The findings further reveal that community members do not simply accept or reject magic based on religious doctrine alone. Rather, they engage in an ongoing process of negotiation between Qur'anic teachings and local cultural knowledge. While harmful magical practices are generally viewed as contrary to Islamic principles, certain spiritual practices associated with protection, healing, and religious devotion are perceived as legitimate and beneficial. This demonstrates the dynamic nature of religious life in which scriptural authority and cultural experience continuously interact in shaping everyday belief systems.

This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Islam and local culture by highlighting how Muslim communities interpret supernatural phenomena within the intersection of religious doctrine and lived experience. It suggests that discussions of magic in contemporary Muslim societies should not be approached solely as theological issues but also as social and cultural processes through which religious meaning is constructed and negotiated. Future studies may expand this inquiry by comparing perceptions of magic across different regions and cultural settings to provide a broader understanding of the relationship between Islam, local belief systems, and contemporary religious life.

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