

THE ADOPTION OF NEW-AGE SPIRITUALISM IN TRADITIONAL ESOTERICISM IN INDONESIA

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Abstract. Shamanistic figures play pivotal roles in cultures across the globe as spiritual healers, diviners, or fortune tellers. In Indonesia, shamanistic figures are represented by dukuns who are understood as shamans who possess supernatural abilities to heal or help with other problems. However, new-age spiritualism and its practices such as tarot reading and meditation have affected how traditional esoteric practitioners in Indonesia present their services and personas to the general public. This qualitative study analyzes how new-age perspectives have affected traditional esotericism in Indonesia not just in terms of stigma toward esoteric practitioners and dukuns but also how rituals are conducted. This study used in-depth interviews with five esoteric practitioner informants to conclude the state of esotericism in modern urban Indonesia. The results show that esoteric practitioners have now understood the use of stigma management in personas and rituals based on their understanding of clients' psychology. This new paradigm has also changed the nature of esoteric rituals from purely liminal to liminoid according to the intentions of practitioners and clients.

Keywords: *New-age spiritualism, esotericism, neo-shamanism, liminality, Indonesia*

Introduction

Shamanistic figures can be found in all cultures with each culture assigning a different role or a particular set of supernatural abilities to their shamans. However, some cultures like those in Central Asia and Siberia have more prominent shamanistic practices as opposed to other cultures (Fournet, 2020; Rozwadowski, 2016; Stépanoff, 2015; DeWeese, 2014). In Southeast Asia, for example, the term 'bomoh' in Malaysia is assigned to those with supernatural abilities to heal. At the same time, the term 'dukun' is used to describe a group of people with such abilities. Shamanism is described as a practice where a spirit guides the actions of the practitioner or the shaman (Harner, 1990). This focus on access to a higher power gives shamanism its esoteric nature where healing and clairvoyant phenomena can only be achieved by those supernaturally skilled individuals and the people who believe in their abilities. Esotericism itself in general comprises divine experiences that lead to higher knowledge or gnosis (Asprem, 2016; Von Stuckrad, 2005). Therefore, in Indonesia, dukuns are always associated with magic or supernatural practices that are sometimes deemed malevolent and/or adjacent to black magic.

Traditional dukun healing practices are still prevalent in Indonesia despite the ubiquitous existence of modern medicine as dukuns still retain the trust of the public (Ardani, 2013). In a particular village in the Jambi Province of Indonesia, dukuns even possess more credibility than trained medical professionals (Fitriani and Eriyanti, 2020). In Java, people assume "a sacred value and position within society" as they believe in their special abilities (Arini et al., 2016). Classically, Geertz (1960) categorized dukuns into

twelve types based on the services that they offer and the abilities that they possess, including but not limited to healing-related services, divination, and efficacious herbs. Despite the strong presence of dukuns, Indonesia is still affected by the rapid distribution of information and knowledge through the use of the internet and the inevitable rise of social media. The general public has become more aware of conventional medical knowledge and treatment by learning them through social media. On top of that, those who are still interested in alternative and esoteric practices can find information on less traditional healing and divination. Indonesia has now welcomed tarot reading as one of the most popular forms of esoteric divination and consultation as seen in the rise of the tarot community in Java (Fawaid, 2016).

The rise in popularity of tarot reading in Java (Fawaid, 2016) also prompted tarot readers to offer their services on social media. Not only that, tarot reading is also now a service offered by practitioners who were originally known for their traditional esoteric practices. Indonesia has also seen tarot reading being used for mental health counseling (Sukandi et al., 2022) as well as reiki to alleviate health issues such as hypertension (Septiawan et al., 2024). This evolution in esotericism in Indonesia is also demonstrated by indigo figures who claim to be spiritual consultants with abilities that are less traditional such as the renowned Om Hao who is a retrocognition expert and Citra Prima who is an empath. Om Hao's retrocognition ability allows him to read into the past of a place or an object, whereas Citra Prima's empath ability allows her to absorb unseen energy that surrounds her. According to Possamai (2001), tarot reading falls under a group of spiritualistic activities categorized as new-age spiritualism. Besides tarot reading, new-age spiritualism also comprises crystal manipulation, meditation, astrology, reiki, palmistry, as well as urban shamanism. This study, therefore, aims to look for traces of new-age spiritualism in modern Indonesian esoteric practices, especially in terms of how new-age spiritualism helps evolve and rebrand traditional Indonesian esotericism. The conclusion of this study does not only show the effects of social media and new-age spiritualism in the transformation of Indonesian esotericism but also acts as a blueprint for the universal understanding of how syncretism evolves.

Review of literature

New-age spiritualism and neo-shamanism

The concept of esotericism was originally a Western concept that described rituals or practices that would unlikely demonstrate coherence. However, the notion that esotericism can only exist in a Western context should be challenged, as it can also be found in other cultures (Hanegraaff, 2015). Every culture has its version of spiritualism which involves communication with spirits through channeling and mediumship (Aureliano, 2015). Spiritualism, in its traditional form, has long been evolving and has created other forms of spiritualism as seen in modern societies. New-age spiritualism first became prominent in the 1960s and the 1970s. According to Peters (2023), new-age spiritualism focuses on "spiritual themes and occultist influences that represented a spiritual holism dating back to a philosophy of self that is both transformative and healing". The hippie movement was cited as starting the popularity of new-age spiritualism with their interests in issues such as civil rights, ethnic freedom, nature worship, and vegetarianism (Lahood, 2010). Tarot reading, reiki, and astrology among others then became the most known practices in new-age spiritualism (Possamai, 2001) as they can accommodate such modern concerns that the hippies first brought to the

public. Indonesia has then seen a rise in interest in new-age spiritualism such as in Java where there has been a significant presence of tarot readers (Fawaid, 2016). Neo-shamanism is another Western concept that explains practices that combine indigenous shamanic practices with psychotherapeutic techniques which are usually performed in urban settings (Scuro and Rodd, 2015). Neo-shamanism has been known to be accessible due to its focus on self-development (Boekhoven, 2013). However, neo-shamanism in the West has been perceived as too commercialized and inauthentic (Crockford, 2010). With the rise in popularity of online tarot readers, crystal practitioners, and astrology consultants in Indonesia, this study aims to look at possible new commercialization efforts to market esotericism as more accessible and acceptable.

Stigma and objectivation

Stigma is explained by Goffman (2009) as an object's discrediting attributes. This very concept is related to the concept of objectivation by Berger and Luckmann (2016). Berger and Luckmann's construction of reality explains that an object could represent the feelings of the person producing or presenting the object. For example, a weapon brought to an altercation represents the level of anger of the person holding it as a physical embodiment of their feelings. This process is called objectivation as explained by Berger and Luckmann in their construction of reality. The object at play in an objectivation is also the source of a stigma if applied to a person or an activity. In another concept by Goffman (2023) called dramaturgy, a person may choose to show their front-stage or back-stage persona based on the context of the interaction that takes place between them and the other person. The back-stage persona represents a person's actual persona, whereas the front-stage persona involves every element of personality and communication especially constructed for a particular interaction. Therefore, the objects a person wears or brings to an interaction, or the actions a person intentionally shows to another person, would create a front-stage persona that determines the stigma surrounding that person through a specific objectivation process. An esoteric practitioner may then manage their front-stage persona and stigma through different strategies in objectivation. However, as opposed to stigma being discrediting to the object or person explained by Goffman (2009), it can be manipulated in such a way that is beneficial to an esoteric practitioner. Objects or actions brought to an interaction by an esoteric practitioner could intentionally be used to create a personal stigma: it could be adjacent to a traditional dukun or represent the modern traits of a new-age practitioner.

Liminality

Arnold van Gennep's concept of the liminal phase became the basis of Victor Turner's concept of liminality (Turner, 2017; Kapferer, 2008; Turner, 2008) which serves as the main theoretical framework of this study's conclusion. Liminal phases are involved in rituals such as in a rite of passage where children transition into adulthood. There is a phase in which the children are no longer children nor have they transitioned into adulthood, and this exemplifies what a liminal phase is. Simply put, a liminal phase occurs between two phases where learned values do not apply. Therefore, liminality explains a state where liminal beings are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 2017). In a modern, non-ritualistic society, actual liminal rituals are rarely a part of the people's lived

experiences. However, some events simulate rituals and involve liminal-like phases. In liminal-like events, instead of experiencing liminality, people experience a state called liminoid which explains liminal-like experiences (Wels et al., 2011; Bigger, 2009). The liminoid experiences usually occur in activities that are not of serious enterprise such as dance hall activities, theater, sporting events, and other entertainment activities. The incorporation of more accessible practices that are of new-age spiritualism roots challenges the liminality of traditional esoteric rituals. This study looks into ways new-age spiritualism can change an otherwise liminal ritual into a liminoid affair. As a result, the liminal or liminoid nature of a modern esoteric ritual can be the attribute that determines the stigma (Goffman, 2009) of an esoteric practice and/or its practitioner.

Materials and Methods

This study used qualitative, in-depth interviews with five esoteric practitioners selected through non-probability, purposive sampling. All of the informants were from the Jabodetabek area of Indonesia which includes the Greater Jakarta area and four satellite cities of Jakarta: Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi. The Jabodetabek area is the biggest metropolitan area in Indonesia with a population of 10.56 million in the Greater Jakarta area alone (Tantarani et al., 2024). *Table 1* shows the details of the informants of this study. The five in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then manually coded through a thematic analysis based on the study's variables and keywords. Coding results were analyzed and tabulated to make rigid conclusions. The results section below shows the tabulated thematic analysis results combined with some examples of findings from the raw data of the interviews.

Table 1. Informants' details.

Informant	Sex and religion	Practitioner's nomenclature
Informant 1	Female, Catholicism	Demonologist
Informant 2	Female, Islam	Dukun Trainee
Informant 3	Male, Islam	Healer
Informant 4	Male, Islam	Aspiring Healer
Informant 5	Male, Islam	Dukun & Magician

Results and Discussion

All of the five informants had traditional esoteric knowledge as the basis of their practice. All informants admitted to having access to a supernatural source of power which granted them the ability to perform traditional esoteric practices or rituals. Both Informants 1 and 2 could perform traditional exorcism, seance, and spiritual cleansing. Informants 3, 4, and 5, on the other hand, could perform traditional healing based on their supernatural abilities. Informant 2 admitted to being a 'dukun trainee,' Informant 3 was originally a traditional dukun before transitioning into a healer, while Informant 5 admitted to still being referred to as a dukun. Informant 1 acknowledged the fact that she was still seen as a dukun while fully branding herself as a demonologist, and Informant 4 consistently denied his dukun status as he said that his ability was for healing and he did not want to perform supernatural practices as a full-time job. Despite their traditional esoteric backgrounds, especially Informant 5 who still performed pelet (a traditional dukun magic to make a person attracted to a client) and santet (a

traditional dukun magic to harm another person through supernatural means), all informants dabbled in new-age practices. Informants 1 and 2 performed tarot readings, Informant 3 did numerology readings, and Informants 4 and 5 could perform hypnosis. *Table 2* recaps the types of esoteric practices and abilities. Reemphasizing that none of these informants only did traditional esoteric practices is important.

Table 2. *Details on informants' practices/abilities.*

Informant	Traditional/new age	Practices/abilities
Informant 1	Traditional + New Age	Exorcism, seance, cleansing, business advocacy, tarot
Informant 2	Traditional + New Age	Exorcism, seance, cleansing, tarot
Informant 3	Traditional + New Age	Healing, numerology
Informant 4	Traditional + New Age	Healing, clairvoyant reading, hypnosis
Informant 5	Traditional + New Age	Healing, cleansing, pelet, santet, hypnosis

Informants 1, 2, 3, and 5 stated that it would be important for an esoteric practitioner to understand psychology. One of the most significant abilities a practitioner has is the ability to read a client's problems through their psychological state so that the practitioner can give suggestions based on the psychological needs of the client. For Informants 1 and 2, the use of tarot cards in their practices was meant to help them in these consultations with clients. This shows how much providing consultations to clients are considered more important than the rituals themselves. All informants began to hone their supernatural skills after realizing that they possessed indigo abilities. Informant 1 became curious about the supernatural world after realizing her abilities, while Informants 2 and 4 hit a low point in their lives and started to resort to understanding their indigo abilities. Informant 3 never had the intention to become a dukun until he helped a possessed person at a family event. While Informant 5 did not state clearly what prompted him to become a dukun, yet, he had an interesting background of working as a performing magician.

All informants did not acquire any formal esoteric practice training. Informant 1 read everything she needed to know about demonology from books even though demonology is a significant field of study in the Vatican. Informant 2 had informal dukun mentors while Informant 5 had a network of dukuns within his circle. Informant 3, interestingly, started out as a lab analyst and had formal medical training and a professional medical background before transitioning into becoming a dukun: this made him confident enough to fully transition into becoming a healer with a specialty in acupressure post his dukun days. Informant 4 had finished an online chiropractic training course but refused to become a full-time healer (Informant 4 was a full-time audio engineer and music producer at the time of the interview). Similar to Informant 4, Informant was also still an English teacher and had no intentions yet to transition into a full-time dukun. *Table 3* below shows the recap of the informants' history with esoteric knowledge and abilities.

Table 3. *How informants acquire their knowledge/abilities.*

Informant	Relevant life history	Formal training
Informant 1	Indigo ability & curiosity	None
Informant 2	Indigo ability & hitting a low point	None
Informant 3	Indigo ability & helping a possessed person	Conventional medical training
Informant 4	Indigo ability & hitting a low point	Chiropractic training
Informant 5	None, possibly indigo ability	None

Informant 1 stated that some possession cases were not actually caused by demonic possession but were psychological in nature. Nonetheless, the rituals should still be performed but the main treatment was the psychological counseling that Informant 1

conducted. Informant 5 also stated that many of the rituals performed, including those related to the traditional pelet and santet practices, were placebo in order to increase the confidence of the clients or make them believe that harm had been caused to an enemy. These rituals would then often become a mere performance for the practitioners. When interviewing Informant 4, the researcher was provided with a demonstration of a hypnosis attempt by Informant 4 toward a guest present during the interview. The hypnosis did not work and the suggestions given by Informant 4 failed to affect the person being hypnotized. Informant 4 emphasized that this type of practice would need full concentration from the hypnotized, meaning that the hypnotized must be fully committed to the process in order to feel the effects of the hypnosis. The understanding of psychotherapy in the informants' esoteric practices affects the informants' awareness of the performative rituals that they conducted. Conversely, as Informant 4 stated, the full commitment of the client would also contribute to the results of a ritual. The discussion section below then concludes how new-age spiritualism in traditional esotericism may affect the liminality of rituals.

Communication with spirits is still present in Indonesian esotericism as would be the case with traditional spiritualism (Aureliano, 2015). However, traditional esoteric practitioners and dukuns have been dabbling in new-age practices like tarot reading (Possamai, 2001). Psychotherapeutic techniques have also been playing a significant part in the evolution of traditional esotericism into new-age spiritualism (Scuro & Rodd, 2015). The interviews above clearly demonstrate that traditional esoteric rituals and practices can still prevail in urban Indonesia but with some new-age adjustments and perspectives. The persona and traditional rituals that remain are now mostly performative and in keeping with the management of stigma (Goffman, 2009). Stigma is often explained as discrediting attributes, but in this case, these performative objectivation efforts with dukun rituals and objects (Berger and Luckmann, 2016) play a significant role in the production of placebo effects. However, there have also been consistent efforts to distance oneself from the dukun persona through the inclusion of more accessible and logical new-age practices in traditional esoteric enterprises. It is safe to say that Indonesian esoteric practices are more aware of how stigma management can be used according to the types of clients and aims of a ritual.

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proposes models of liminality in modern esoteric practices. These models may help explain the direction of modern esotericism's evolution in the age of logic and accessible esoteric knowledge. *Table 4* explains a total of four models that the researcher proposes to help further studies understand the nature of modern rituals.

Table 4. *Proposed liminality models of modern esoteric practices.*

Model	Conditions	Type of experience
Positive Absolute	Both the practitioner and the client have genuine intentions	Liminal for both
Negative Absolute	Both the practitioner and the client understand that the ritual is for theater/entertainment purposes	Liminoid for both
Mixed Type 1	The practitioner has genuine intentions but the client does not	Liminal for the practitioner, liminoid for the client
Mixed Type 2	The practitioner does not have genuine intentions but the client does	Liminoid for the practitioner, liminal for the client

Conclusion

Indonesia has seen a rise in the incorporation of new-age spiritualism and its perspectives in otherwise traditional esoteric practices. Not only does this phenomenon affect the practitioners' stigma in public but also it provides practitioners with an understanding of how important stigma management is when used contextually. However, the performative nature of certain rituals and the experiences that they offer to clients affect the liminality of esotericism in general. Esoteric rituals today, especially in the post-social media age, lose their cultural significance as a supernatural phenomenon and a liminal experience that involves a liminal phase. Further research should be conducted in other settings and cultures to improve the general understanding of the evolution of esotericism. It is worth noting that the concept of liminality should be used in future inquiries as it helps with predicting whether traditional esotericism may survive the impact of new-age spiritualism. New models of liminality within rituals should then be produced as more traces of evolution in world esotericism are discovered.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research.

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