

Religion as a System of Symbols: Religious Rituals and the Construction of Collective Identity in the Nahdlatul Wathan Special Wirid Congregation

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Abstract

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This study analyzes the religious ritual practices of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan* as social symbols and a medium for shaping collective identity, viewed through the lens of Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach, the research utilizes interpretive analysis based on literature reviews, documentation, and an examination of the community's religious practices. The analysis draws upon concepts such as religion as a symbol system, "thick description," worldview, and ethos to understand the interplay between ritual practices, the construction of meaning, and the social lives of the congregation members. The findings indicate that practices such as *wirid* (recitation), communal *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *tahlilan* (commemorative prayers for the deceased), and the observance of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid Nabi*) serve not merely as spiritual expressions but also as symbols representing collective values, beliefs, and worldviews. These repetitive ritual practices cultivate a religious ethos, strengthen solidarity, and reinforce the identity of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan*. Thus, religious rituals function as a space for the reproduction of meaning and identity, linking spiritual experience with the community's social cohesion. These findings underscore the relevance of Geertz's approach in understanding religion as a system of meaning that thrives within a local cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

In the evolution of social science and religious studies, theoretical approaches play a crucial role in constructing a deeper understanding of religious practices (Wita & Mursal, 2022). The study of religion is no longer confined to purely doctrinal or ritualistic perspectives; instead, it has shifted toward analyses that interpret religion as a cultural phenomenon rich in symbols, meanings, and social functions (Sirojuddin et al., 2023). In this context, the symbolic-interpretive approach proposed by Clifford Geertz offers a significant conceptual contribution, particularly in dissecting religion as a system of symbols (Wita & Mursal, 2022). Geertz views religion as a symbolic system that shapes human dispositions and actions through the inculcation of collective meanings (Tsuroya, 2020). According to Geertz, religion cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it develops, as religious symbols reflect socially constructed structures of meaning (Nurdin, 2016). Consequently, interpreting a religious practice requires considering the interplay between symbols, meanings, and the lived experiences of the practitioners.

Geertz's approach opens up opportunities to examine religious practices not merely through a theological lens, but also as social expressions that shape community identity (Tsuroya, 2020). Within this framework, rituals serve not only as spiritual vehicles but also play a vital role in fostering social cohesion, strengthening solidarity, and delineating the boundaries of collective identity (Sentavito et al., 2024; Simarmata, 2024; Tawabie, 2024). Thus, religious rituals can be understood as spaces for symbolic articulation where a community reconstructs its social relationships and cultural values. One community that presents an interesting case for study using this approach is the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan*. This group is known for its intense and distinctive religious ritual practices, such as collective *wirid* (recitations), *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *tahlilan* (commemorative gatherings involving the recitation of the *tahlil*), and the observance of the Prophet's birthday (*Maulid*) (Irfani, 2023). These activities are not merely spiritual in nature but also possess a strong social dimension. In this context, it is important to understand how the symbols and ritual practices within the community shape religious identity and strengthen social integration.

This study aims to analyze the ritual practices of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan* using Clifford Geertz's symbolic-interpretive approach, and to explain how the symbols and meanings within these religious practices serve as a medium for shaping collective identity and strengthening social bonds within the community. Accordingly, the research addresses the question: how are the ritual practices of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan* interpreted as social symbols and collective identity within the framework of Clifford Geertz's theory? This inquiry seeks to uncover the symbolic significance of the religious practices performed and their implications for

identity construction and social relations within the community. Thus, this study is expected to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of religion and culture, particularly in understanding religion as a system of meaning that thrives within society.

The study's argument is grounded in Clifford Geertz's view that religion is a system of symbols linking cultural meaning structures with human action through a process of symbolic interpretation. Three arguments are advanced in this regard. First, the ritual practices of the **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan** can be understood as symbolic expressions that represent collective meaning structures and serve as a vehicle for internalizing spiritual and social values. Second, the symbols embedded in the **wirid** (litany), **dhikr** (remembrance of God), and **tahlilan** (commemorative prayer gatherings) function as a medium of cultural communication that reinforces a shared sense of identity; consequently, the rituals are not merely oriented toward transcendence but also foster social cohesion. Third, the symbolic interaction occurring within these rituals demonstrates that religion operates as a dynamic system of meaning, wherein interpretations of religious symbols are continuously renewed through the social experiences of the congregation. Thus, the study's logic positions religious practice as an interpretive arena that connects meaning, identity, and social structure.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach with a theoretical analysis grounded in Clifford Geertz's interpretive framework. Its primary focus is to understand the symbolic meaning of the **Jam'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan** ritual practice as a form of cultural expression and a shaper of collective identity. Rather than testing hypotheses, the method aims to interpret the meanings embedded in religious actions from the perspective of the cultural participants themselves. To this end, the research relies on a review of Geertz's works, alongside documentation and descriptive studies concerning the ritual practices of the Nahdlatul Wathan community.

The data analyzed comprises primary sources—such as Geertz's **The Interpretation of Cultures** and **Islam Observed**—and secondary sources, including scholarly articles, ethnographic reports, and religious studies related to the **Jam'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan**. The analysis utilizes the method of "thick description"—describing ritual practices in detail and within their context—to reveal the web of meanings underlying these religious actions. The researcher seeks to interpret ritual symbols not merely as expressions of spirituality, but also as social instruments that shape the community's worldview and ethos. Thus, this method provides insight into the relationship between religious symbols and the construction of collective identity within a local cultural context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

An Intellectual Biography of Clifford Geertz

Clifford Geertz—born Clifford James Geertz on August 23, 1926, in San Francisco, California, USA (Sodiman, 2018)—was raised in a middle-class family. His biological father passed away when he was young, and he lived with his mother and stepfather. Geertz's family background helped shape his early understanding of social dynamics (Hobsbawm & Macfarlane, 2022, pp. 41–51). After completing high school and fulfilling his military service during World War II, Geertz pursued higher education at Antioch College in Ohio, earning a bachelor's degree (B.A.) in philosophy in 1950 (Pals, 2015, pp. 293–294). Subsequently, he undertook graduate studies in anthropology at Harvard University—specifically within the Department of Social Relations—and obtained both his master's and doctoral (Ph.D.) degrees in 1956 (Zubair et al., 2024). While in the academic environment at Harvard, Geertz was influenced by Talcott Parsons and exposed to the ideas of Max Weber; these influences significantly shaped his approach to culture and symbolism (Hobsbawm & Macfarlane, 2022, p. 61). Geertz was a cultural anthropologist widely recognized for his contributions to developing an interpretive approach within anthropology, particularly in explaining religion as a cultural system (Riady, 2021).

Geertz's academic career flourished after he completed his doctoral studies. He taught at various institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the University of California, Berkeley (Anam, 2016). His career gained significant prominence during his decade-long tenure at the University of Chicago, spanning the early 1960s to 1970. In Chicago, Geertz became widely recognized as a pioneer of symbolic anthropology, emphasizing the importance of symbols as guides for social action and viewing culture as a system of meanings transmitted through symbolic forms (Hendro, 2020). He was part of a group of scholars who helped drive a paradigm shift in American anthropology (Mawikere et al., 2024). In 1970, Geertz joined the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, serving as a professor of social science at the institution where Albert Einstein had once worked. He spent the remainder of his career there until his retirement; Geertz passed away on October 30, 2006 (Ortner, 2007).

Clifford Geertz produced numerous works, including **The Religion of Java** (1960), which resulted from his research in the Mojokuto region of Java and depicted the religious pluralism of Javanese society—specifically the **santri**, **abangan**, and **priyayi** groups (Geertz, 1960). Second, in **Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia** (1968), Geertz compared two distinct forms of Islamic expression: one characterized as exoteric and legalistic (in Morocco) and the other as symbolic and syncretic (in Indonesia) (Geertz,

1968). Third, in **The Interpretation of Cultures** (1973), Geertz developed the concept of "thick description"—a dense, contextual account of cultural actions that enables a profound understanding of the symbolic meanings embedded in social practices (Geertz, 1973). Fourth, **Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology** (1983) continued his interpretive approach by examining culture as a system of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983). Overall, Geertz's works shifted the focus of religious studies from functionalist or reductionist approaches toward a more interpretive and contextual perspective.

Marshall Sahlins responded positively to Geertz's approach, particularly his efforts to bridge culture and meaning. Sahlins considered Geertz's interpretive approach to be a shift away from the overly mechanistic paradigm of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, bringing anthropologists closer to a humanistic understanding (Susen, 2024). In his book **Culture and Practical Reason**, Sahlins also developed an approach similar to Geertz's, interpreting human action as an expression of cultural symbolic systems (Sahlins, 1976, pp. 106–107). Within the realm of sociology, however, Anthony Giddens responded to Geertz with caution. Giddens acknowledges that Geertz's interpretive approach is profound in its understanding of social action as meaningful; however, he also criticizes it for being overly descriptive and for failing to allow sufficient room for social structure in explaining social change (O'Boyle, 2013). In **The Constitution of Society**, Giddens proposes the theory of structuration, which seeks to strike a balance between agency and structure—contrasting with Geertz's approach, which tends to favor the agency of symbolic meaning (Giddens, 1984, pp. 1–40).

Clifford Geertz's Epistemology and Theoretical Basis of Culture

Based on Clifford Geertz's book **The Interpretation of Cultures**, the epistemology of his theory is built upon an interpretive approach to culture, positioning symbols and meanings at the core of human social reality (Geertz, 1973). Geertz's theory does not rely on objective knowledge derived from quantitative or positivistic methods; rather, it rests on an understanding (**Verstehen**) of the meanings that social actors attach to their actions and life structures (Syarifah & Mushthoza, 2022). The concept of culture as a system of symbols stands as one of Clifford Geertz's major contributions to the study of cultural anthropology (Arofah Aini Laila, 2017). Geertz holds the view that culture cannot be understood merely as outward behavior or solely as social structure; instead, it is viewed as "webs of meaning" actively woven by humans (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). In other words, culture is a symbolic construct that enables humans to interpret and assign meaning to the world they experience. In this context, symbols serve as fundamental elements that shape the framework for understanding and social action.

In his book **The Interpretation of Cultures**, Geertz defines culture as follows:

"a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89).

Based on the definition above, Geertz characterizes culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols—a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms that enable humans to communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge of and attitudes toward life (Amalia & Wiyani, 2023). This indicates that Geertz's epistemology views culture not as something material, but as a system of meaning transmitted and expressed through symbols. Consequently, knowledge of culture cannot be separated from an understanding of symbols and the social contexts in which they are produced and utilized.

According to Geertz, cultural symbols are not merely representational but also performative, as they serve as the means through which meaning is articulated and mediated in everyday life (Amalia & Wiyani, 2023). Every action, ritual, or social practice carries symbolic content that reflects the values, beliefs, and thought structures of a society (Syarifah & Mushthoza, 2022). Thus, symbols act as the primary medium connecting the individual dimension with social structures, and subjective experience with collective constructs. Through symbols, culture lives and functions as a complex communication system (Lastaria et al., 2018). With this approach, Geertz emphasizes the importance of "thick description" in cultural studies—an in-depth interpretive method for analyzing the symbols and meanings embedded in social practices (Rorah & Loho, 2024).

Key concepts in Clifford Geertz's theory of culture

In the study of cultural anthropology, according to Geertz, culture is understood not merely as a collection of habits or behavioral patterns, but as a system of symbols—a complex system of meaning through which humans interpret the world and give direction to their actions (Hendro, 2020). Within this framework, culture is not viewed as something biologically innate, but rather as a web of symbols created, maintained, and imbued with meaning by humans within their social contexts. These symbols serve as a means to understand experiences and to articulate the values and norms prevailing in a community. To understand this symbolic system, Geertz developed an interpretive approach that prioritizes a deep understanding of cultural meaning as interpreted by the actors themselves (Aryanti et al., 2022). In this process, Geertz distinguishes

between two types of description in ethnographic research: "thin description" and "thick description" (Karim, 2024).

"Thin description" refers to a superficial account of an action or behavior that is visible to the naked eye (Porter, 2012). For instance, a wink might be recorded simply as a brief movement of the eyelid. However, such a description is insufficient for grasping the meaning behind the action. Conversely, "thick description" requires the researcher to delve into the context, intentions, and systems of meaning underlying the action (Freeman, 2014; Luhmann, 2015). Returning to the example of the wink, a thick description would distinguish whether it is an ordinary wink, a secret signal, or even a form of sarcasm. Thus, thick description records not only what is done but also the reasons for the action and how its meaning is constructed by cultural actors and the community.

Within the structure of cultural meaning, Geertz introduces two pivotal concepts: **worldview** (a model **of** reality) and **ethos** (a model **for** reality). **Worldview** refers to a society's perspective on the world and the reality surrounding it (Geertz, 2016). It encompasses fundamental beliefs regarding the nature of life, the structure of the cosmos, and the relationship between human beings and the transcendent or the "Other." Meanwhile, **ethos**—or the model **for** reality—is an expression of a group's moral and affective dispositions; it reflects the attitudes, sentiments, and emotional drives that guide how that society conducts its life (Karim, 2024). According to Geertz, **worldview** and **ethos** reinforce one another: **worldview** provides a cognitive framework for understanding reality, while **ethos** offers an emotional and moral justification for that framework (Karim, 2024).

In a cultural system, **worldview** and **ethos** are bound together by symbols that articulate both concepts simultaneously. This means that cultural symbols serve not only to communicate ideas or values but also to embody and sustain the coherence between how the world is perceived and how it is felt. Thus, an interpretive approach to culture does more than reveal social structures or behavioral patterns; it delves deeply into the web of meaning that lives within a society. Culture is not merely "what humans do," but rather "how humans assign meaning to what they do." Within this framework, symbols become windows into a society's inner world, and ethnographic research becomes a hermeneutic endeavor to interpret that world as understood by the actors themselves.

Religion as a System of Symbols According to Geertz

As for religion, Geertz defines it as follows:

"a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general

order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”(Geertz, 1973, p. 90).

Based on the definition above, religion is understood as a complex and functional system of symbols. This symbolic system encompasses not only rituals and doctrines but also involves structures of meaning that touch upon the deepest aspects of human experience (Amalia & Wiyani, 2023). Within this framework, religious symbols play a role in shaping and guiding how individuals perceive the world, while simultaneously serving as a medium for instilling collective values and beliefs within a community. Furthermore, religion plays a significant role in fostering moods and motivations that are profound, pervasive, and enduring (Hasan et al., 2025). Through symbols employed in rites, religious narratives, and spiritual experiences, religion establishes an affective and cognitive framework that compels individuals to act and think within specific boundaries.

The moods and motivations shaped by religion are not fleeting; rather, they form lasting dispositions within an individual's personality, coloring the way they navigate daily life. To exert such a powerful influence, religion articulates concepts regarding the general order—specifically, a metaphysical view of the nature of the world, life, and the ultimate purpose of humanity. These concepts are then embedded in symbols that possess an aura of factuality—conveying the impression that religious teachings represent not merely beliefs, but an absolute and indisputable reality. By framing its teachings with an aura of absolute truth, religion renders the moods and motivations it cultivates appear highly rational and realistic to its adherents.

According to Clifford Geertz, religion is understood not merely as a set of doctrines or ritual practices, but as a complex system of symbols (Sodiman, 2018). This symbolic system encompasses a framework of meaning that enables individuals and groups within a society to comprehend, experience, and respond to the reality of life in a coherent manner (Sodiman, 2018). Religious symbols serve a dual function: first, they represent abstract religious ideas—such as God, salvation, or morality; second, they act as catalysts for human emotions and actions in daily life. For instance, the cross in the Christian tradition or the crescent moon in Islam are not merely visual markers but emblems imbued with profound theological, historical, and existential significance. Through such symbols, religion articulates metaphysical beliefs in a form accessible to collective consciousness.

Religious symbols play a central role as vehicles for articulating meaning and shaping the structure of human understanding regarding reality. Religious symbols are not limited to physical forms alone—such as mosque domes,

Christian crosses, or Buddha statues—but also encompass actions (such as speaking, walking, remaining silent, or gesturing), sacred historical events (such as the Prophet Muhammad's **Hijrah** or the crucifixion of Jesus), and meaningful social relationships (such as the bond between father and child or between a prophet and his followers). Through symbols, religion conveys fundamental messages that are not only grasped cognitively but also deeply rooted in individual and collective affective experiences.

Symbols are not merely representations but also agents that shape and direct human behavior. They give rise to feelings, habits, worldviews, and an ethos that become integral parts of a religious-cultural system (Pals, 2015, pp. 303–304). Geertz illustrates this with the story of a Native American man who dreams of seeing a buffalo. In that culture, the buffalo is understood as a symbol conveying a message from the spirit world or the realm of ancestors (Geertz, 1973, pp. 112–113). This example demonstrates that symbols do not simply point to something else; they also generate existential meaning that shapes how humans understand themselves, their communities, and their relationship with the transcendent. Thus, religious symbols serve as a meeting point between empirical experience and spiritual meaning, playing a vital role in the construction of culture and religious identity.

As a system of symbols, religion functions to address the human existential need for meaning. According to Geertz, religion does not exist merely as a set of rites or doctrines but as a human endeavor to create an **order of existence**—a comprehensive worldview regarding the nature of being that explains the human position and role within the universe (Ramli, 2012). In this context, religion provides a cosmology and a philosophical framework for life, enabling individuals to understand the world, guiding their actions, and helping them respond to a reality that is often bewildering and awe-inspiring. Geertz highlights three primary limits that threaten human existence: first, the limitations of the intellect in comprehending reality in its entirety; second, the limitations of one's capacity to endure suffering and life's hardships; and third, the limitations of moral insight in absolutely determining what is right or good.

In confronting these limits, religion provides symbolic and existential support by focusing on what is termed "the really real"—that which is considered most fundamental, absolute, and unshakeable. Through this symbolic framework, religion situates human experience within an "ultimate context"—a higher, transcendent horizon of meaning—thereby becoming a collective force that empowers individuals to navigate life with steadfastness, hope, and a clear moral direction. As a system of symbols, religion also serves to bridge **ethos** (a "model for") and **worldview** (a "model of"). **Ethos**, reflecting the emotional character and moral attitudes of a religious community, finds expression in its

enacted rites and values. Meanwhile, *worldview* encompasses cognitive concepts regarding the structure of the universe, the nature of life, and human destiny. Through its symbols, religion enables these two elements to merge integratively, ensuring that religious life is not merely rational but also rooted in profound affective experience.

Religion as a symbolic system is neither static nor monolithic; it is dynamic and contextual, constantly reinterpreted by its adherents in response to unfolding social, political, and cultural changes. This understanding allows the study of religion to avoid being trapped in purely theological reductionism, opening instead a space for hermeneutic and semiotic approaches that view religion as a practice of interpreting reality through symbols alive in the collective consciousness. Under this approach, researching religion entails more than simply describing doctrines or acts of worship; it guides the researcher to deeply interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in those practices. Religion thus becomes a rich field of interpretation, a realm where symbols reveal the deepest dimensions of how human beings understand their own existence.

Victor Turner appreciated Clifford Geertz's approach, which emphasized the importance of meaning and symbols in understanding culture (Turner, 1974, pp. 13–19). Turner observed that Geertz's effort to place symbols at the center of analysis opened the way for a deeper understanding of culture—viewing it not merely as a social system or functional structure, but as a system of meaning that is alive and influential in the lives of a society (Turner, 1974, pp. 13–19). However, Turner did not passively accept Geertz's entire approach; instead, he developed his own study of symbolism, particularly within the context of ritual (Turner, 1967). According to Turner, symbols hold significance beyond the cognitive dimension; they also encompass affective and performative dimensions that play a crucial role in the process of social transformation (Atasoge, 2022, pp. 20–23).

Talal Asad offers a sharp critique of Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach, which places excessive emphasis on symbols and meanings in the understanding of religious practices (Wendry, 2016). According to Asad, religion cannot be reduced merely to a symbolic system interpretable solely through a hermeneutic approach. Such an approach is seen as overlooking the fact that religious practices are also shaped by the historical contexts and power structures surrounding them (Asad, 1993, pp. 15–24). In Asad's view, an understanding of religion must encompass the social, political, and historical dimensions that influence the formation of meaning. Asad asserts that religious meaning is neither neutral nor detached from power relations; rather, it is the product of discursive constructions that evolve within specific institutional and historical frameworks (Asad, 1993, pp. 15–24).

Similarly, James Clifford and George Marcus criticize the mode of cultural representation that tends to position culture as a "text." They argue that this approach risks reducing culture to a static aesthetic object, thereby ignoring its dynamic nature and the political dimensions that shape the process of meaning production within it (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, pp. 1–26). Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu criticizes interpretive approaches like Geertz's for overemphasizing subjective meaning while failing to consider the **habitus** and objective structures that influence social action. Bourdieu maintains that symbols and meanings cannot be separated from power relations, social positions, and dispositions instilled through social structures (Bourdieu, 1977).

Clifford Geertz's cultural theory merits appreciation for its significant contribution to broadening our understanding of culture as a complex, symbolic system of meaning. Through an interpretive approach, Geertz emphasized that culture is not merely a collection of behaviors but a "web of significance" woven by humans—one that must be interpreted contextually. In works such as **The Interpretation of Cultures**, Geertz demonstrated that cultural analysis requires a profound understanding of the symbols and social practices embedded in people's daily lives. This approach not only enriched anthropological methodology but also paved the way for interdisciplinary studies regarding the construction of meaning, identity, and social structure across diverse cultural contexts.

However, Clifford Geertz's cultural theory is also prone to subjectivity and limitations regarding structural analysis. His approach—which places heavy emphasis on the interpretation of symbols and meanings—is often criticized for overlooking the material, economic, and power-related factors that also shape social reality. Furthermore, the "thick description" method he championed tends to be primarily descriptive, lacking a systematic analytical framework to explain the dynamics of cultural change. Consequently, while rich in narrative and contextual detail, Geertz's cultural theory is considered less capable of addressing broader structural issues within the study of society.

Application of Clifford Geertz's Theory to the Study of Religious Rituals

Clifford Geertz's approach to understanding religion as a symbolic system can be effectively applied to examine the religious practices of local communities—specifically, the **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan**. This community is widely known in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, for emphasizing spiritual power through practices such as **wirid** (recitation of litanies), communal **dhikr** (remembrance of God), **Maulid Nabi** (celebration of the Prophet's birthday), and **tahlilan** (commemorative prayer gatherings) (Irfani & Dahri, 2025). The ritual activities of the **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan** are as follows:



Figure 1.1

Caption: Prophet's Birthday celebration activities

Source: Personal photo collection



Figure 1.2

Caption: Wirid activities, communal dhikr, and tahlilan

Source: Personal photo collection



Figure 1.3

Caption: Wirid activities, communal dhikr, and tahlilan

Source: Personal photo collection

These activities are not merely religious expressions; they embody cultural symbols that reinforce the structure of meaning within socio-religious life (Mamiq Muiz, 2023). Within Geertz's theoretical framework, these rituals can be understood as symbolic systems that actively instill and reproduce the community's worldview. For instance, the recitation of the **Maulid Nabi** (commemorating the Prophet's birth) does more than recall history; it conveys a cosmological and ethical understanding of the Prophetic example. Similarly, **Tahlilan** and communal **dhikr** (remembrance of God) are not just sequences of prayers; they serve as symbols binding the living and the dead, while expressing a belief in spiritual continuity within their existential order.

The symbols within these rituals also shape the community's **ethos**—its mental and moral dispositions—manifested through religious action. Through regular participation, congregation members internalize values such as submission to God, social solidarity, and respect for tradition. This **ethos** becomes a collectively accepted guide for action, influencing the members' daily behavior in broader contexts. Geertz's method of "thick description" offers a crucial approach for grasping the profound meaning of these practices. Using thick description, a researcher does not merely record that a ritual takes place but also explores why it holds significance for the participants. In the context of the **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan**, this approach reveals that the ritual serves as a means of constructing shared meaning, rather than acting as a mere religious formality.

Furthermore, rituals performed collectively and repeatedly strengthen a shared identity that is both symbolic and emotional. Social bonds within the community are reinforced through the shared experience of chanting **dhikr**, listening to Prophetic narratives (**Maulid Nabi**), and offering prayers for ancestors. This demonstrates that social solidarity within the **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus** is not built solely upon organizational interests but also through symbolic structures that engage collective affect and spirituality. Consequently, Geertz's theory of religion as a system of symbols proves not only relevant but also applicable to interpreting local religious practices, such as those of the Nahdlatul Wathan **Jama'ah Wirid Khusus**. Ritual symbols serve as a cultural foundation that sustains community identity, unites individuals in meaningful religious experiences, and shapes a distinctive worldview. Such studies highlight the importance of an interpretive approach to understanding religion as a dynamic cultural phenomenon.

Religion should be understood as a culturally rich system of meaning, wherein religious symbolism, rituals, and narratives play a central role in shaping a society's worldview and collective identity. From Clifford Geertz's perspective, an emic approach—viewing religion from the internal standpoint of

the practicing community—is essential to fully grasp the meanings embedded in religious practices within their local cultural context. Geertz's emphasis on the symbolic significance of religion highlights that religious rituals are not merely spiritual manifestations; they also serve a significant social function as a medium for forging and maintaining collective solidarity.

In the context of the Nahdlatul Wathan *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus* (Special Litany Congregation), for instance, religious practices such as communal *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *Maulid Nabi* (Prophet's Birthday celebrations), and *tahlilan* (commemorative prayer gatherings) serve not only as avenues for individual spiritual expression but also as markers of a distinct group identity. These practices foster a robust network of social solidarity among congregation members, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging to local Islamic traditions. Such rituals internalize shared values, strengthen emotional bonds, and affirm the community's presence within the broader social landscape. Thus, religious rituals transform into social symbols reflecting the continuity of tradition, playing a pivotal role in constructing the group's cultural and religious identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Clifford Geertz's cultural theory positions religion as a system of symbols that functions to shape and maintain structures of meaning in human life. Through an interpretive approach and the concept of "thick description," Geertz demonstrates that religious practices cannot be understood merely as ritual activities, but rather as symbolic media connecting a community's worldview and ethos. Thus, religion plays a role in constructing a perspective on reality while simultaneously shaping the moral orientation and social actions of its adherents.

Based on an analysis of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan*, rituals such as *wirid* (recitations), communal *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *tahlilan* (commemorative prayers for the deceased), and the observance of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid*) embody symbolic meanings that transcend the spiritual dimension. These practices serve as vehicles for internalizing religious values, transmitting traditions, and forging the congregation's collective identity. The symbols present in these rituals act as media for cultural communication, reinforcing a sense of togetherness, social solidarity, and an awareness of shared membership within the religious community.

The ritual practices of the *Jama'ah Wirid Khusus Nahdlatul Wathan* can be understood as social symbols that play a crucial role in sustaining the community's social cohesion and collective identity. These findings underscore the relevance of Clifford Geertz's theory in interpreting local religious phenomena as systems of meaning that are living, dynamic, and continuously reproduced through the social experiences of the participants. In this context, religion serves not only as a space for spiritual expression but also as a cultural foundation that preserves values, traditions, and social integration within the community.

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