

**Reimagining Tradition: Faisal Kamandobat and the Fusion of  
Islamic Values, Poetry, and Contemporary Art**

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**Abstract**

Discourses on globalization, contemporary art and tradition often revolve around power dynamics, positioning them in binary terms of domination or emancipation. This paper proposes an alternative framework that moves beyond power relations, emphasizing the role of *Bildung*—a process of cultural and intellectual formation—in understanding the interaction between these forces. Through a critical analysis of Faisal Kamandobat's artistic practice, the paper argues that globalization, contemporary art and tradition are not opposing forces, but rather interconnected elements that shape cultural and artistic expression. Kamandobat's approach to art, which is deeply rooted in the *pesantren* tradition, shows how tradition can be reinterpreted through a modern and cosmopolitan sensibility. By exploring *Bildung* as a conceptual lens, this study reveals how culture functions as a living and evolving entity that bridges the past and the present. Ultimately, Kamandobat's work demonstrates that artistic practices can serve as spaces for creating meaning, resilience, and dialogue, rather than mere contestations of power.

**Keywords:** Faisal Kamandobat, Gadamer, Islam, *Bildung*, globalization, contemporary art, tradition, cultural synthesis



## Introduction

The relationship between globalization, contemporary art and tradition has long been a source of debate. Is the interaction between these forces merely an acceleration of artifact exchange across nations, or is it a process of homogenization and actualization of universalism as proposed within the Western framework of thought? Is it a space for the commodification of art, or is it a discursive space that returns art to society? Is it something entirely separate, or is there interconnectedness between these elements we have long ignored? Many other questions may arise, but they reveal a pattern: inherently, globalization, contemporary art and tradition exist within a discursive tension. However, despite this tension, there is one connecting thread that emerges and ties the three together: the tendency to view globalization, contemporary art and tradition as a contestation for power. As a result, conceptualizing these three forces tends to present analyses that take only two forms: seeing them as an act of domination or as an effort towards emancipation.

There is actually nothing wrong with conceptualizing globalization, contemporary art, and tradition through the framework of power relations. Analyses within this framework have had a significant impact in raising awareness about the subtle and implicit nature of power in everyday life. Especially in contemporary art, power relations have successfully provided space for postcolonial frameworks to negotiate identities, aesthetic foundations, and civilizational positions that have been subordinated. However, within that framework, another question arises: What are we missing when we view everything, even artistic practices, ontologically, as a struggle for power? This article, therefore, seeks to offer an alternative framework for viewing the complexities of globalization, contemporary art and tradition.

Through a critical analysis of Faisal Kamandobat's artistic practices, this article argues for the possibility of fostering culture to exist equally and constructively within the tension between globalization, contemporary art, and tradition. This article will be divided into four sections: First, it examines the relevance of the concept of *Bildung*—defined in Gadamerian hermeneutics as the lifelong, dialogical process of engaging with cultural works and reshaping one's self-understanding through reflective encounters (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 9–17)—as an alternative paradigm that frames globalization, contemporary art and tradition as interconnected rather than solely governed by power dynamics; Second, a

discussion of Kamandobat's alternative interpretation of art practice as a role or action; Third, a discussion of the spiritual character of Kamandobat in his works as a form of resilience against modernity; and Fourth, how Kamandobat discursively uses tradition, which he interprets as *Bildung*.

The tension between globalization and tradition—particularly in relation to power and sovereignty—has been examined extensively in cultural and anthropological studies (Appadurai, 1996; Eriksen, 2007; Held & McGrew, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2000). This discourse is especially prominent in the context of global art biennials, where local identities are often reshaped for transnational display (Lockard, 2013; Lauzon, 2011; Stalabrass, 2004). However, to sharpen the focus of this critical review, the discussion will center specifically on how this tension informs cultural and artistic practices—most notably, the artistic work of Faisal Kamandobat.

### ***Bildung* as an Alternative Perspective on Cultural Phenomena**

“Perhaps it is because I see culture as something *lived*, something experienced in everyday life.” (F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

Globalization and tradition are often conceptualized as being antithetical to one another; on one side, globalization is defined as a linear continuation of modernization, synonymous with technological development and capitalism (progress toward the future), while tradition is associated with the need for preservation (protection of the past). On the other hand, contemporary art is seen as a reflection on and a discursive space between the two. When connected to culture, this dichotomous conceptualization becomes limited and incapable of offering a holistic explanation of the phenomena. This is because culture, as a phenomenon, exists, adheres to, and influences society's daily life. Culture manifests as values and norms, beliefs, popular literature and scriptures, inscriptions and biennials, architecture and royal ruins, folklore and films, food, and in some cases, as moral order. In short, culture exists within globalization and within tradition; it is both a product and a framework of thought.

In other words, culture cannot be conceptualized based on territorial or temporal boundaries as in popular definitions that separate globalization and tradition; rather, it blends the two together. To quote Spivak, “Culture is the space where every discourse meets.” (Spivak, 2012, p. 12). From this point, this discussion

attempts to separate the notion of globalization and tradition as dichotomies and antitheses, arguing instead that culture—and contemporary art included—bridges the gap between these two concepts. From this section onward, this paper will use the conceptualization of “culture” interchangeably with “contemporary art” to emphasize the author’s argument that the relationship between contemporary art and cultural phenomena is a unified, inseparable phenomenon. When culture is given boundaries, it risks rendering its conceptualization as merely an instrument, or in a more radical definition, alienating culture as a concept from its phenomena and ontology.

However, acknowledging the interconnectedness of culture, tradition, and globalization—and their mutual influence—does not necessarily simplify the task of conceptualizing culture. In *Culture and Cultural Analysis*, Michael Fischer (2006, p. 360) underscores the need for a distinctive and relational approach to cultural understanding. He warns that when culture is treated as singular and nominalized, it risks becoming a tool for flawed reasoning and discriminatory attitudes. Therefore, cultural analysis must move beyond legitimizing imperial power or universalizing Third World cultures; instead, it should be framed as a contestation of meaning-making—a process grounded in the formation of a social reality that reflects its historical and cultural context.

Fischer’s approach, which views culture as relational, is an interesting perspective. However, the next question is: where is the most ideal starting point for viewing the contextuality of culture? And how can we avoid conceptualizing culture in a way that alienates it from its subjects—namely, individuals and society? Thus, this issue demands an approach that can better bridge the realities of individuals, society, and humanity as a whole.

There are two issues in conceptualizing culture: first, placing it too closely within the framework of individual character and identity, and second, defining it as an attribute or, in Fischer’s view, as an instrument. The first issue results in a conceptualization of culture that is overly subjective and unable to grasp a broader value structure, while the second leads to an analysis that is artificial and symbolic, failing to understand the meaning behind it. The consequence of these two problems is the creation of partial analyses—forgetting that culture is a process of meaning-making that is continuously updated and exists within the tension between structure and subject, positioned in the middle of what is abstract and what is real.

In addition to breaking down the dichotomy between globalization and tradition by emphasizing culture as a living concept that experiences both, there is a need to return to a foundation to make the concept of culture more grounded. The concept of culture explored in this discussion is based on the individual's lived experience of their life context.

To realize this aspiration, the author adopts the concept of *Bildung* as a cultural paradigm that is formative, continuous, and shaped by individuals through their engagement with culture. Introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his seminal work *Truth and Method*, *Bildung* offers a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of social reality through cultural processes. While the term *Bildung* literally translates to “education” or “self-cultivation” in German, its philosophical legacy—particularly within Romanticist thought—positions the subject as the central unit of analysis. In this view, *Bildung* serves as an epistemological model for understanding the dynamic interplay between self, values, and norms (Gadamer, 1989, pp. 70–71). The concept also draws from Hegel's notion of becoming, wherein culture functions as a medium through which individuals engage with externalities to discover greater truths.

Simply put, *Bildung* is the realization we experience while reading a book, poetry, watching theater, paintings, or films, and in a moment of reflection, absorbing the dilemmas and values presented, and then carrying those values into our lives until we find even better values to address our human anxieties. In brief, it is how an external cultural product or phenomenon resonates with us, shapes our being, and contributes to our growth.

Based on this explanation, our relationship with culture can be rescued from alienation because culture grows within us and ages with us, enhancing our understanding of the larger macro-consciousness. Adopting the concept of *Bildung* in cultural analysis, particularly in artistic practices, allows us to provide a middle ground for analyses that accommodate both context and subject in a more representative manner.

## **Art as a Play: The Fusion of Tradition, Modernization, and Cosmopolitan Awareness in Faisal Kamandobat**

Distance and antiquity (the emphasis of space and time) pull on our hearts. If we are already sobered by the thought that men lived two thousand five hundred years ago, how could we not be moved to know that they made verses, were spectators of the world, that they sheltered in light, lasting words something of their ponderous, fleeting life, words that fulfill a long destiny? (F. Kamandobat, personal interview, February 15, 2024).

This concept of *Bildung* is deeply relevant in discussing and understanding the artistic practices of Faisal Kamandobat. Born in 1980, Faisal Kamandobat is an artist and writer from Cilacap, Central Java. He grew up in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) environment, spending his childhood and teenage years in various *pesantren* with differing characteristics and locations: after being born in Majenang (Cilacap), he spent his childhood in Magelang, Central Java, and teenage years in Kediri, East Java, before attending the Cipasung *Pesantren* in Tasikmalaya, West Java, and then pursuing higher education in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. Eventually, he returned and settled back in Cilacap to help manage a *pesantren* with his extended family and to create, alongside Sanggar Matur Nuwun, a platform for fostering the creativity of students and the local community.

As a *santri* (Islamic student), Kamandobat was raised in the *pesantren* ecosystem, which is intrinsically connected with culture, tradition, and society—an ecosystem that, according to Nancy Florida (1990), serves as a vital space where the literary traditions of the royal courts could be enjoyed by both men and women outside the palace walls. This strict scholastic tradition of literature is also reflected in Kamandobat's parentage. His father shared similar interests with Kamandobat, particularly in crafting manuscripts and writing poetry in both Arabic and Javanese. Meanwhile, his mother had a passion for reading, especially novels—another trait Kamandobat inherited. Kamandobat recalls that during his childhood, his family and the *pesantren* served as a meeting place for diverse

knowledge and people from various cultural backgrounds, making it a cosmopolitan space—contrary to the common perception of such institutions.

However, this *pesantren* tradition does not stand in isolation, finalized without intersecting with the historical context that frames it. From a historical perspective, *pesantren*, as a structure, use their values to engage with history and, ultimately, the modern world. Through the spice routes, colonization, the inception of nation-states, wars, decolonization, modern nationalism, the Old Order, the New Order, the Reform period, and, most recently, globalization, *pesantren* have endured as a contemporary structure that remain deeply intertwined with the historicity of civilizations. Rather than becoming irrelevant, *pesantren* have emerged as one of the most enduring institutions rooted in tradition, even in today's world.

Thus, *pesantren* cannot merely be defined as an institution; they are more than that—they are a tradition. They form the foundation of moral order, a model of life, and a sense of responsibility that remains intrinsically tied to their subjects, even in their rational processes as Florida (1990) outlined. This is what makes the *pesantren* tradition impossible to define solely as the past, let alone as the antithesis of the present or future. It continuously lives and settles in the experience of the individuals who are its subjects. Kamandobat is no exception; he lives within this tradition and even witnesses how this tradition interacts and sometimes clashes with other civilizations.



**Figure 1.** Faisal Kamandobat, *Sacredness of Space, Sanctity of Time*, 2024. Acrylic and ink on canvas, 150 × 400 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The civilizational context we refer to is the socio-historical landscape of Indonesia, which serves as the environment in which Kamandobat understood social realities. Born in 1980, Kamandobat grew up during a period of numerous transitions introduced and adapted by the New Order regime: economic development, modernization, centralized authoritarian government, and the formation of a secular and stable national identity (Carey, 2000, p.125-136). This period marked Indonesia's entry into a linear logic tied to modernization, characterized by economic growth, secularism, —a time that drew a vertical line between tradition, history, and frameworks of thought focused on singularity. However, in reality, the singularity and linearity promoted by the New Order did not completely close off the space for culture and tradition to negotiate their identities.

When Kamandobat was educated in Magelang, he witnessed how culture existed as an ecosystem. His *pesantren*, which was located near a temple site, stood near a place that the community used as a tourist destination. He often watched artisans sculpting statues and saw souvenir shops selling Indonesian landscape paintings and silver products. His *pesantren* encouraged creativity, urging students to learn about the world around them by speaking with the community about the history of the Gunung Wukir Temple or asking about the plants in their gardens (F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21, 2024). For many, this might seem like a normal practice, but in a more conceptual landscape, Kamandobat did not just observe daily life; he saw how everything was interconnected in a larger structure. He observed how different cultures (as represented by tourists), artisans (representing tradition), and souvenir shops (representing modernization) coexisted—not in confrontation or isolation, but with their own distinctive characteristics, blending together.

This pattern of fusion became a consistent feature as Kamandobat grew older and began creating his works, making it difficult to trace a clear origin for his references. Kamandobat never drew strict boundaries against the contradictions in the social and cultural realities around him. Instead, he drew inspiration from these contradictions, seeing them as part of a greater order that fascinated him endlessly. As a student in a Magelang *pesantren*, he regularly visited art exhibitions at the Sekaten in Yogyakarta's Kraton and visited museums such as the Affandi Museum in Solo Street, Yogyakarta. Later, he studied at a classical *pesantren* in Kediri, where students were required to transcribe classical texts in



Arabic Pegon script using Chinese ink, which were then translated into Javanese. This was a simple yet dedicated skill, and as we can now see, his artistic works are an extension of the traditions he experienced in his youth.

During this period, he also developed a passion for poetry, reading modern Indonesian literature, particularly social and Sufi themes, and began publishing his works for the first time in the mass media (*Minggu Pagi* and *Horison*), with poems dedicated to eccentric poets such as Chairil Anwar (1922-1949), the classical Chinese poet Li Po (701–762 CE), and the classical Arabic poet al-Mutanabbī (915-965 CE). During *pesantren* holidays, he was introduced to Western thought through his father's student, who was studying philosophy at Gadjah Mada University, and took drawing courses in the Sokaraja style from Rukman, a teacher of art and science at his family's educational foundation. At this time, he occasionally visited Rumah Seni Cemeti to buy postcards with illustrations of contemporary Indonesian artists' works, including works by Heri Dono, who later became a friend and one of his mentors. Shortly thereafter, while continuing his studies at *Pesantren* Cipasung in Tasikmalaya, he formed close relationships with artists such as Acep Zamzam Noor and Iwan Koeswanna, followed by Radhar Panca Dahana and Halim HD. Through them, he gained various references in literature, visual arts, and critical thinking. And when he pursued his studies in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, he began to understand knowledge not merely as “flashes of ideas and tastes” but as an effort to achieve “a deeper understanding of humanity.”

Kamandobat never existed in a vacuum; he lived alongside culture and its contradictions in a process of continuous becoming. In this process, Kamandobat does not see civilization and culture as having boundaries. His approach merges with the context surrounding him, enabling him to perceive the multitude and draw a synthesis from things that may seem to be different. For him, culture is not something separate from his life, which he lives daily, but also not something that can be ranked. To quote Kamandobat in a conversation we had:

I am someone who owes a great debt to the history of civilization and tradition that I have lived through, even to those traditions and histories that are not my own. I owe them all. And all of this becomes raw material in my work. I reassembled those mosaics: Javanese tradition, Islam, modern science, current issues. When I reassemble them, I want to express my gratitude. I return to them what I have borrowed, in a new form. (F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

Without intending to over-simplify this quote, what Kamandobat imagines in his work, whether in the form of manuscripts, poetry, or others, is an embodiment of the concept and awareness of cosmopolitanism, where each civilization stands independently without undermining the ontological roots of other civilizations. This is often the possibility we overlook when looking at cultural products, including contemporary art, which is often viewed through the lens of cultural dichotomy and power relations.

This reality is also explored by Clifford Geertz in his essay “Popular Art and the Javanese Tradition,” where he challenges the commonly held differentiation, dichotomy, and separation in the understanding of cultural phenomena—arguing that such divisions reflect an epistemological error rooted in Western thought. Geertz proposes an alternative perspective that rejects the binary between high art and low art, suggesting instead that both can coexist within the same cultural moment (Geertz, 1990, pp. 77–94). He illustrates this through an ethnographic account of a farewell ceremony in Pare, where he observed three distinct ceremonial events, each representing a different cultural pillar. The ceremony began with a gamelan performance by students in uniform, followed by a poetry reading, a speech from a representative of the Ministry of Education and Culture—who emphasized Pancasila and progress—and concluded with a popular band performance of a love song. Through this example, Geertz critiques the linear and segmented understanding of culture by showing how high art, low art (popular culture), tradition, modern ideology, myth, and religion can coexist within a single social event. As he notes, such cultural intersections are frequently observed but remain difficult to fully grasp through conventional anthropological frameworks.

This pattern also appeared in the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, where its dynamics were filled with contradictions. On one hand, the New Art Movement (GSRB, *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia*) emerged, which later transformed into the Black December Movement, criticizing the excessive censorship in the visual arts scene and the emphasis on art as a discursive practice; but on the other hand, art began to be seen as a commodity, initiated by the emergence of auctions for paintings by masters such as Affandi and also auctions held by art universities at that time to fund exhibitions, as well as the establishment of the *Balai Lukisan* (BL) a kind of painting gallery, initiated by the Institusi Mitra Budaya in 1981. When Kamandobat was in elementary school in Magelang, he followed news related to this matter.

“At that time, Affandi was still alive and had become a *myth*. You know, an artist whose paintings were considered ugly but were sold at high prices.” (F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21st, 2024).

This quote does not suggest negative sentiment between Kamandobat and Affandi, but rather shows Kamandobat reflecting on the cultural dynamics of Indonesia both from the perspective of a practitioner and as a member of society. In the 1980s, towards the end of Affandi’s career, a distance had emerged between artists and society, where art began to be viewed as a commodity. This shift was supported by the rise of capitalist values and the New Order government’s influence, which separated the social realism art style from the masses to which it was once closely tied. These developments were antithetical to each other, but they happened simultaneously during nearly the same period. Kamandobat witnessed this cultural friction within the art scene and its relationship with society, which later transformed into the foundation for his artistic practice, where classical traditions, modern art, and global cultural dialogues were woven into his works.

At first glance, the premise that a *santri* could experience culture in a multitude of ways might pose a critical question, one that is likely to be encountered when examining the dynamics and trends of contemporary art today. However, to incorporate the concept of *Bildung* into our analysis, we must be open to

understanding the fragments of values, cultures, norms, and contradictions that shape the development of a subject over the course of their life. In the case of Kamandobat, there are three key aspects that must be considered as the foundation of his work: i.) Tradition, ii.) Islam and Spirituality, and iii.) Universalism and Cosmopolitanism. Each of these aspects, which may appear to be antithetical to each other, form the experiences that Kamandobat has lived and embodied in every aspect of his artistic practice, whether as a writer, poet, or visual artist.

### **Spirituality as a Legacy of Tradition and an Effort of Resilience**

*Look, how I become a ghost:  
To explore the earth and the sky,  
My soul must control  
The body of my fear.  
I wear a white cloak  
As wings, as well as a sign  
I come from a half-eternal realm.  
Like the wind, my face is full of daydreams;  
I inhabit a world that is almost impossible,  
And from there I come to you.*

(Kamandobat, 2012)

It is important to understand that Kamandobat's artistic practice did not develop in a linear fashion like most artists. Despite his exposure to the development of modern visual arts, which became vital for the emergence of contemporary art in Indonesia, Kamandobat's journey began with poetry. Perhaps this was something genetically inherited from his parents or passed down through tradition and social norms through the *pesantren*, or through his own restlessness as a human amidst rapidly advancing and seemingly linear modernization.

Kamandobat's beginnings in, and his work from, poetry are also a consequence of the *pesantren* tradition he embraced. Poetry, for him, was one of the cultural traditions closest to the *pesantren* tradition at that time. This view was

emphasized again by Nancy Florida (1990), who observed that during the heyday of the Surakarta Palace, many poets who wrote books and poetry came from *pesantren*. The connection between the *pesantren* Islamic tradition and literature itself was further strengthened by Islamic traditions that were embedded in the production of literature such as poetry or prose, which was often introduced by Persian poets who conveyed the values of Sufism, such as two Persian mystic-poets Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (d. 1221) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273), as well as the Andalusian mystic-poet Ibn ‘Arabī. Poetry that always questions the position and purpose of humans in the vast expanse of life. However, on the other hand, Kamandobat also does not deny that, compared to literature, *pesantren* sometimes viewed visual arts and performing arts as inappropriate activities.

The *pesantren* tradition and Islam that provided the foundations for the way Kamandobat understands life have led him to always search for works that discuss the principles of Sufism in observing human restlessness in contemplating their position in the world. Kamandobat sees poetry, which carries the nuance and perspective of Sufism, as offering a value framework that does not separate us from our spirituality. It is this spiritual framework that makes us as humans able to survive amid life’s difficulties and the emptiness of meaning that can alienate us. For Kamandobat, the poetry he reads and writes is always an attempt to offer a concept about eternity amid transience that is full of pressure and uncertainty. This thought comes from Kamandobat’s value framework and belief that is largely influenced by three traditions of thought: Islamic law (*sharī‘ah*), Javanese esoteric values, and Sufism, referring to the practice of mysticism. In experiencing these three traditions of thought, Kamandobat again sees a synthesis between them, not as separate and conflicting concepts, but as complementing each other. Javanese thought led Kamandobat to see himself as a small part of a larger civilization (a concept related to Mandala philosophy); Islamic law emphasized daily law and moral ethics; and Sufism, which was interpreted as the next stage of Shari’a, emphasized religious practice as a ritual full of contemplation and efforts to purify oneself. These concepts form a debate that always appears in Kamandobat’s works.

How Kamandobat interprets his work is also closely linked to his awareness of the role of the artist in civilization and in society, both in tradition and its actuality. According to Kamandobat, artists, especially traditional artists, are aware that

they are part of a larger system than themselves — a vast cosmology and a worldview that has been ongoing for centuries. This awareness makes Kamandobat's work a continuous process of abstraction that strives for its spiritual elevation. For Kamandobat, knowledge is a vehicle that can answer how spirituality can be enhanced. In this case, abstraction in art and science is the same practice as the work of transcendence in spirituality.

This view, on one hand, can be seen as a reformist attitude towards the practice of creating and the role of the artist. However, this framework of thinking is, once again, a tradition passed down and one that Kamandobat sincerely experienced. In examining the literary practices of the Surakarta Palace, Florida (1990) observed that a writer or poet has various connotations, but one important aspect is how the writer is not understood merely in the literal sense of the verb "to write," as understood in the West. A writer is sometimes understood as a "weaver" or "engraver," giving a different connotation than what we understand as a modern writer. Furthermore, the connotation of the writer in the Western definition is closest to the word "*pujangga*" ("*pujangga*"); although translations often frame this term as referring to a royal writer, a "*pujongga*" is more deeply understood as an expert in words who writes with the pen of prophecy. This definition leads us to a deeper understanding of the practice of writing.

*"The true pujongga was s/he whose writing was prophetic not just as the record of an already determined foreseen future, but rather as a kind of writing whose very inscription itself could (or would) materially effect a future. Often writing about the very distant past, the sometimes-anonymous pujongga wrote these texts of material prophecy self-consciously to affect the practical and political realities of both the historical presents in which they wrote and the imagined futures towards which they wrote. They wrote and rewrote history, not just after the fact, but also before and in suggestive anticipation of it."* (Florida, 1990. P. 25)

The understanding of this literary practice introduces us to the concept of fusion, where a poet is not only present and engaged in the time they live in but also comes from a universal intuition of unrest that may occur for others, even when

that person is in the future. From this conclusion, it is evident that the role of a poet is not seen as something outside the tradition and civilization in which they live, but is always present and embedded in that civilization, both in particular and universal terms, constantly rooted in and believing in their own ontology.

There is a greater humanitarian crisis than this, where people must constantly restructure themselves (with the current state of civilization). When I became an artist, I tried to find ways to develop my tradition so that it could endure without losing its main orientation. (F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21, 2024).

This dialogue is understood by Kamandobat as a transformative process to “become” a complete human being who merges, experiences, and is responsible for life and society. Amidst the various anxieties faced by humans, including the alienation they feel in a life where the structure of meaning has become disordered; when identity is understood as a discursive process rather than an inherent interpretation in reflection and concrete life. Kamandobat attempts to do the opposite of what is considered the norm in contemporary art: introducing what is rooted in him not as a request for more space, but as a nexus, as paragraphs in the manuscript of civilization that meet and greet each other at intersections.

### **Traditional Art as a Discursive Practice: Creating Space for Traditional Art in Contemporary Art**

Rather than destroying (tradition), (I want) to develop it from within by including diverse knowledge in it. Knowledge that comes from different civilizations and disciplines and is processed differently. From there, I can arrange the future, bringing my tradition across time that is moving so fast.

My work is a creative dialogue so that tradition and globalization do not continue until they reach a dead end in the creation of history.

(F. Kamandobat, personal communication, February 21, 2024)

Contemporary art, in its latest incarnation, can no longer be separated from its definition as a discursive practice. Discursive in this sense refers to a field of discourse where artists can negotiate various interpretations of reality, moral orders, and cultural orders with the aim of disrupting public perceptions of the social reality they understand. Its development as a cultural phenomenon has undergone various changes and dynamics; art, which was initially used as a depiction of beauty, has now turned into a medium for negotiation and argumentation. This is also closely related to the context of its development, colored by the emergence of postmodernist thought and activism during the 1950s-1970s, which had implications for a shift in the art world's orientation towards non-Western countries like Havana.

Frederic Jameson (1991), in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, tries to address this difference by comparing Van Gogh's paintings with Andy Warhol's paintings. Through this comparison, he observes that postmodern art experiences the death of the artist's subject, which implies the fading effect of art as a consequence of the development of the global economic system and the domestication of agency within art itself. The analysis presented by Jameson is, on one hand, parallel to the analysis by Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry, who, during the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, observed how the art world overlapped with the market and led to the emergence of a layered definition of art as a hybrid of fashion, investment, and social status (Joy & Sherry, 2003, p. 155).

Amid the amalgamation process between visual art and the capitalist system that turns art into a commodity, internal unrest emerged within the circle of artists and academics regarding the true function of art and to what extent art should distance itself from society. Triggered by the emergence of Cultural Studies, pioneered by Stuart Hall in the 1950s in England, a consciousness arose about popular artistic practices and mass communication production, such as newspapers and television, as extensions of power relations and negotiations with them. In his conceptualization, Hall was able to view culture as something we live in and as a vital space for negotiating power, as the process of meaning production in society was no longer centralized (Hsu, 2024). This is where contemporary art adapts; a framework of thinking about culture as a matter of representation, power relations, and discourse. This framework of thought saves contemporary visual art from the alienation brought by capitalism: as something



inseparable from society; as an effort to awaken the society that witnesses it. But another question arises: which society?

As we are now, the longing for the roots of identity was also felt by almost all societies in the 1960s and 1970s, especially when capitalism and technology increasingly blurred geographical boundaries. Along with cultural studies, postcolonialism also emerged as an effort to bring knowledge paradigms back to their roots. Postcolonialism began its critique by questioning the validity of Western epistemology in determining “universal truth.” Starting as a critique and literary theory initiated by Edward Said, postcolonialism seeks to accommodate the development of knowledge in a plural and inclusive way by incorporating the “Orient.” In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said explains that the West, as an empire, organized a hegemony of knowledge to determine universal truth through the power of narrative and discursive practices (Said, 1994). Postcolonialism, therefore, not only acts as an intellectual process and an epistemological renewal, but also acts as a practice of negotiation and a moral foundation that seeks space for alternative interpretations aside from what has been determined by the West. Now, the question “which society?” is enriched with a critical stance, “who has the right to determine that truth?”

Both Cultural Studies and Postcolonialism developed into vehicles that allowed art to break free from its alienation as a commodity. As descendants of postmodernist thought, these two paradigms provide epistemological and axiological foundations for the development of contemporary art. The epistemological foundation is found through the emphasis of these paradigms on the products and conceptualization of culture as a space of contestation, while at the same time, the emphasis of contemporary art as an effort for deconstruction directly gives it a moral order that makes its practice relevant and inseparable from society. This foundation is also empirically supported by the transnationalism of artists, which allows artists and their art to transcend geographical and social boundaries; the increasing popularity of conceptual art; and the proliferation of biennales introducing other artistic standards besides those introduced by the West, denying it the ability to position itself as the only civilization with art.

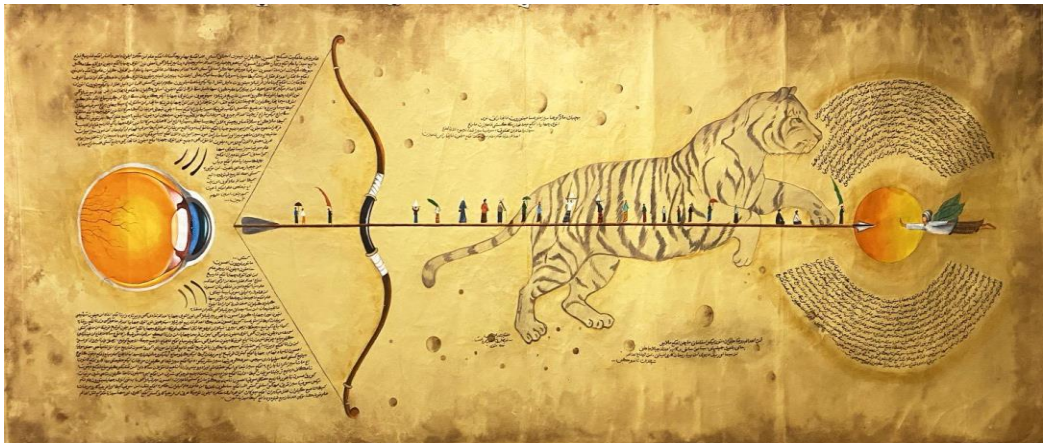
We should now return to post-reform era Indonesia, which has its own dynamics in the development of the contemporary art space. A detailed discussion on the development of contemporary art in post-reformation Indonesia would be time-

consuming, but we can highlight key developments: the December Black Movement, the New Art Movement (GSRB), the involvement of Indonesian artists in the Asia Pacific Triennale, the internationalization of artists, the emergence of art collectives, the Jakarta Biennale, Art Jog, the Jogja Biennale, and other events are part of the mosaic of the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. Parallel to this, Indonesian cultural policies also experienced a shift in approach, where cultural policies, which were previously centralized by the government, became decentralized and came under the authority of regional governments with minimal control. In the adaptation of post-reformation cultural policies, contemporary art in Indonesia and its artists have found space that accommodates their development as a fragment of the overall global contemporary art scene.

This article would be irrelevant if the development and celebration of contemporary art practices in Indonesia were not simultaneously celebrated by traditional artists. While contemporary art in Indonesia is increasingly connected with society – and we witness it in public spaces such as shopping centers, urban planning, hotels, and public spaces in major cities – traditional art, on the other hand, is the opposite. The practice of traditional art remains as a series of ceremonial events, an icon, and an artifact in museums. Regardless of the contradictions found by Geertz (1990, p.83) regarding the dichotomy of culture, the separation of tradition and contemporary, as well as high art and low art, we still encounter and witness these dichotomies in practice. Amid the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, which strives to introduce other aesthetic standards beyond Western aesthetics in the form of biennales and conceptual exhibitions, traditional art experiences alienation as a non-modern aesthetic standard. Traditional art is not only trapped in spaces that are associated with the past but also in more limited spaces compared to contemporary art.

Kamandobat's artistic practice cannot be defined as adhering to a particular "ism," but nor can we say that his work is not a discursive practice. This becomes one of the topics of discussion here, as we outline Kamandobat's artistic pattern, which in several ways differs from the typical artist. Usually, modern artists experience a linear development, where the more experience they gain, the more extensive their exploration into other mediums such as installations becomes. In contrast, Kamandobat returned to his lived tradition. This is not only the tradition closest to his present age, but in fact, he the earliest tradition he experienced:

Islam and Javanese culture. However, he does this without discarding other traditions and cultures, such as Western thought, which he has absorbed over a long period of time. To bring his tradition into contemporary art, he introduces Western thought and modernism as a “souvenir” to enrich his tradition and develop it from within. Not by rejecting it, but gently and persuasively pushing for it to be accepted by a public that may not have truly lived and inherited his tradition or has merely “used” tradition for conceptual and artistic purposes.



**Figure 2.** Faisal Kamandobat, *The Book of Light (Kitab Cahaya)*, acrylic and ink on canvas, 150 × 400 cm, 2024, Courtesy of the artist

This was one of the practices utilized during Kamandobat’s performance titled “Singir Sedulur Jagad,” which was showcased at the Artjog art event in 2022. Broadly speaking, the performance was a *pengajian bandongan* (a general lecture, often found in Islamic boarding schools). However, unlike traditional *pengajian* that focuses on *syariat* and religious knowledge, this performance discussed visual arts, conveyed in the Banyumas Javanese dialect known as *ngapak* (Asmara, 2024, p 151). This lecture was accompanied by *hadrah* music, a devotional practice rooted in *pesantren* traditions (Utami, 2020, p. 151) and also featured a *perkutut*, a bird commonly associated with rural tranquility and spiritual symbolism in Javanese culture (Bubandt, 2024, p.22), adding a sense of everyday life to the contemporary art event. In a conversation, Kamandobat explained that what he was using his lived tradition but was fully aware that there

were different responses from the audience witnessing it; an audience that had been alienated from their traditional roots.

In contemporary art practice, conceptualism is the currency used by artists to enter into this practice circuit. Therefore, anyone who intends to enter into contemporary art must also strengthen the conceptualization in their work. However, this conceptualism is inseparable from the legacy of Western thought, with a tendency to draw boundaries that actually make it vulnerable by giving birth to dichotomization or, worse, drawing a hierarchy of what can be stated as aesthetic practice. Caroline A. Jones explains that in the dynamics of contemporary art, which she examines with a focus on the biennale phenomenon, a critical globalist attitude is needed to imagine the possibility of contemporary art practices that can distance themselves from the neoliberalization of art and the establishment of a single aesthetic standard (Jones, 2016, p. 226-229). For Jones, critical globalism is a practice that does not negate the reality of globalization that alienates culture and contemporary art but interprets it critically and proactively seeks space to intervene in the interpretation of reality.

The need for artists to be in this structure becomes vital for their discursive practices to work for the public (spectator). Kamandobat is aware of this. For him, to integrate his tradition as a part of the development of contemporary art, both Indonesian and global, his works and his emphasis on tradition must also have a narrative vocabulary that can be understood by contemporary art circles. The need for this discursive assimilation, according to Chakrabarty (2000, p.86-89), is necessary to maintain the sovereignty of the narrative we are trying to negotiate. In his discussion on the politics of translation, Chakrabarty mentions that the concept of contemporary culture inherently refers to the linearity of time and secular history. However, in reality, culture does not progress linearly; each culture, regardless of its interaction with the secular structure introduced by modernity, can produce a different historical translation. Thus, a translation is needed that does not negate the disparity between secular history and traditional history, because by negating and assuming that every culture has the same position, the space to conduct a narrative disruption becomes nonexistent. Negotiating a discursive space, therefore, must be done not by focusing on boundaries, but by engaging from within the structure itself.

One of Kamandobat's works, titled *Bridges of Cosmologies* (2023), exhibited at the G20 Art Project in India, was created with intentional awareness of the importance of a piece of art being translatable across cultures. Through *Bridges of Cosmologies*, Kamandobat seeks to bridge the dichotomies, distances, separations, and alienations between humans, nature, and life through the concept of cosmology. In this context, cosmology is understood by Kamandobat as a larger moral order than social institutions, laws, and national boundaries. Here, he attempts to create a utopia where humans, nature, and space can coexist and merge into unity.

This work is not created in the form of *suluk* (a form of Javanese Islamic literature, often in the form of poetry, that explores Sufism, from Ar. *Sulūk* “spiritual journeys”), as some of Kamandobat's other works, but rather as a video featuring a *sinden* (a Javanese traditional singer) performing a prayer song amid manuscripts discussing the history and benefits of spices as goods that unite civilizations. In its creation, Kamandobat incorporates technologies associated with modernity, yet the substance he highlights presents a strong argument for tradition: that traditions, which have faced stagnation and restrictions from modernity, might offer alternative solutions in addressing contemporary and actual problems. In the *sinden*'s chant, Kamandobat's script discusses the relationship between humans and nature, colonization, and death—universal legacies of civilization that all humans experience, regardless of their origin. Through this work, Kamandobat strives to create a discursive practice that foregrounds traditional poetry, current issues, and cosmopolitanism, with the hope of weaving them all into a single unity.

Curator and art historian Alka Pande describes this prophetic-themed work as, “visionary creation.” He later reiterated:

*Bridges of Cosmologies* also offers a fresh and benevolent perspective to navigate the complexities of challenging economic and political times. By breaking free from stagnation, Kamandobat's artwork envisions a future where the world's history is steered towards salvation and rebuilt on a firm foundation of unity and mutual understanding. (Pande, 2023, p.15)

However, in his effort, Kamandobat no longer stands as a figure in his work; he dissolves with the experience and role (*Bildung*) as a unity, becoming a small part of various cosmologies that he continuously articulates in a creative and contemporary manner.

## Conclusion

Faisal Kamandobat's artistic practice serves as an example of an alternative cultural interpretation to the common approach in contemporary art, which has traditionally focused on "boundaries," whether territorial or temporal. Through an analysis using the cultural approach of *Bildung*, where culture is understood as the process of becoming an individual (human) without forgetting the context in which one is born, grows, and is even influenced by other cultures outside of oneself, this article provides space for interpretation and understanding that does not separate culture from the subject and its background. An examination of Kamandobat's social context further supports the argument that culture cannot be excluded from the subject. The interpretation of a merging culture makes dichotomies and hierarchies irrelevant. How a person perceives and interprets an artwork cannot be separated from their experiences and the other values they have absorbed. This reality makes human understanding and interpretation of culture the opposite of how culture is introduced: not with boundaries, but through the process of synthesis between the subject's experience and the artwork they witness. This interpretation can even be transcendental, extending beyond the context in which Kamandobat was born and intuitively developing through his encounters with other civilizations and cultures.

The spirituality that we consistently see in Kamandobat's work is a spirituality that is rooted firmly in its origins and inspired by tradition, ritual, and daily life. This spirituality does not prevent interactions with other cultural orders, but rather, through these interactions, Kamandobat is able to draw connections and synthesize them. This enriches the interpretation of the spirituality embedded in Kamandobat's work, making it accessible and meaningful to an audience that may not even be a part of his own cultural background.

However, Kamandobat is aware that the modernity he experiences and in which he lives has, in fact, created space for his traditions and spirituality to gradually

fade. Along with neoliberal structures and modernization, he realizes that his traditions have become alienated from the ecosystem they once helped create. For this reason, he takes the tradition he has lived and learned and develops it, offering it back to the structure that unconsciously marginalized his traditions. In this way, Kamandobat defends and develops his tradition through the works he creates. He attempts to reintroduce the forgotten and alienated elements of tradition amidst the rapid changes of the times. This defense is not carried out aggressively, but with an approach of embracing and incorporating various elements as materials and mechanisms to develop meaning, practice, and materiality through abstraction, transcendence, and concrete exploration. This effort opens up a space for a multi-vocal echo, where the past and the future, tradition and the contemporary, can engage in dialogue with one another on equal terms. He does this because, as a poet, he is the nexus bridging culture and his community amid various challenges, opening up possibilities in history so that human matters can increasingly enrich civilization.

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