
***Semar Mesem* among Santri: A Phenomenological Study of Magical Practices**

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Abstract: This study examines an interesting phenomenon in the world of pesantren: the use of the magical practice "*Semar Mesem*". Through a qualitative approach, this research seeks to understand this practice's meaning, purpose, and consequences in pesantren life. The study results show that *Semar Mesem* is not just a magical practice but also reflects the social and psychological dynamics in the pesantren environment. The practice is influenced by various factors, from internal factors such as self-discovery and social pressure to external factors such as cultural and environmental influences. In this study, religious education is correct and comprehensive in responding to this phenomenon. Religious education is not only limited to theoretical understanding but must also be able to form a strong and critical character. In addition, an open dialogue between Santri, scholars, and the community is also needed to find the right solution to overcome these problems.

Keywords: trust, mysticism, social dynamics, romantic relationships

INTRODUCTION

The *Semar Mesem* mantra is a form of "science of compassion," believed to have magical powers to captivate someone's heart. Although it is rooted in Javanese culture and associated with the figure of Punakawan Semar, this mantra is also found in various regions in Indonesia, including among Santri in Banten (Widayat & Dwiadmojo, 2023). Martin van Bruinessen, in his book *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren, and Tarekat: Islamic Tradition in Indonesia*, states that Banten is included in one of the areas where magical science (occult paradise)

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develops (Martin van Bruinessen, 2015). The Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School is one of the institutions that is suspected to be the centre of traditional culture and supernatural knowledge traditions. In the Banten Salafiyah Islamic boarding school, one of the sources used by the pesantren community in practicing occult knowledge is books that contain magical elements (Ayubi & Masruri, 2025).

According to Dutch colonial reports, after the population of Aceh, the people of Banten are said to be the most obedient Muslims in carrying out Islamic law. Still, according to Martin van Bruinessen, the people of Banten have a significant reputation as a sacred place to practice esoteric (magical) sciences (Muhtadi et al., 2023). Magi is believed to be a hierophany, the appearance of God in symbols of life and the universe, including humans and their creatures. In addition, prayer texts and symbols (primbon: horoscope: mantras) that cover various aspects that apply in Javanese society provide strength and magic. This is popular among the people of Banten, and the tradition of using symbolic mantras as a source of wisdom persists today (Pamungkas et al., 2024).

Even in Southeast and South Asia, the use of esoteric formulas (primbon: horoscope) pronounced in rituals or unique forms of speech is still found (Arfianti et al., 2022). According to Lorens, magical texts (spells) can also be seen as rites intended to influence individuals. In some ways, a mantra is a recitation by a person to worship something or perform a magical ritual. Mantra is an instrument of the mind, as it comes from the word *man*, which means mind, and *tra*, which means tool. Mantra is a type of poetry in Sundanese literature whose content is similar to mantras or words that contain magical meanings; content may contain persuasion, curses, or challenges directed at opponents; Strings of words without a precise meaning, usually spoken by shamans or handlers when faced with a need (Wardani et al., 2021). This mantra means 1) words or speech that have magical power (for example, it can heal, harm, and so on); 2) wording with poetic elements (such as rhyme, rhythm, romance) that is suspected of containing supernatural powers and is usually pronounced by shamans or handlers to rival other supernatural powers (Rahman et al., 2023).

However, various works of literature record the existence and meaning of the *Semar Mesem* mantra in local traditions, there have not been many studies that specifically examine how this mantra is interpreted, functioned, and applied in the lives of Santri at the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School. The lack of attention to Santri's perspective on the practice of magical science and its implications for their religious understanding and behaviour leaves a significant gap in the study of religious dynamics in Islamic boarding schools. This study explores the use of *the Semar Mesem spell* among Santri, especially in the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School. The focus of the research includes (1) The meaning and function of *the Semar Mesem spell* in the context of magical science, (2) The Santri's views on mantras and the practice

of magic in general, and (3) The implications of the use of *the Semar Mesem mantra* on the religious understanding and behaviour of Santri. This research is expected to significantly contribute to understanding the dynamics of religious practices in Islamic boarding schools, the relationship between religious texts and magical traditions, and the identity of Santri in the context of local culture. This research is important because it can contribute to knowledge about *the* dynamics of religious practices in Islamic boarding schools, especially those related to local traditions and beliefs. *Second*, the relationship between religious texts, magical practices, and Santri identities. *Third*, a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of mantra use in Indonesian society.

METHOD

This study aims to explore in depth the phenomenon of the use of *Semar Mesem* among Santri at the Banten Islamic Boarding School through a qualitative approach. This research explores the meaning, motives, and perspectives of individuals who instilled *Semar Mesem*, especially in pesantren's lives. Therefore, this approach assumes that social reality is a complex and dynamic construction of the individual. As in Creswell's view, the qualitative approach allows for a deep exploration of individuals' meaning, interpretation, and subjective experience in a particular sociocultural context, making it relevant to understanding unique phenomena (Huyler & McGill, 2019). This study uses a case study design focusing on Santri at the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School, one of the centres for developing Islamic traditions and religious sciences in Banten. The choice of this location is based on a strong suspicion that the pesantren is a place where the practice of *Semar Mesem* is still preserved and inherited from generation to generation. With a focus on this pesantren, the research can reveal various aspects related to the practice, motivation, and impact of using *Semar Mesem* in pesantren's lives. Yin said that case study design is very effective for exploring complex phenomena that require a deep understanding of their context and social interactions (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019).

The subject of this study is Santri at the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School, who have or are practising *Semar Mesem*. The determination of subjects is carried out by a purposive sampling technique, which is the selection of participants based on certain conditions relevant to the research objectives. With the provision that Santri are 18 to 25 years old, have studied at a pesantren for at least three years, and admit that they have or are still practising *Semar Mesem*. This provision ensures that participants have sufficient knowledge and experience regarding the practice. Using the purposive sampling technique, researchers can select the most relevant

participants and provide in-depth insight into the phenomenon that is the focus of the research (Andrade, 2021).

This study relies on several diverse data collection techniques to collect comprehensive data. Participatory observation was carried out with researchers directly involved in daily life in the pesantren, observing social interactions, religious rituals and practices related to *Semar Mesem*. This observation is structured by documenting various related aspects, including field notes, photos, and audio-visual recordings. The direct involvement of researchers in pesantren life allows for more in-depth observation and a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural context of the practice (Key et al., 2019). In addition to observation, in-depth interviews with Santri were also conducted to explore *Semar Mesem*'s experience, motivation and understanding. The interview uses a semi-structured guide to provide flexibility in exploring various topics that arise during the interview process (Thille et al., 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Meaning and Function of *Semar Mesem*

For the Santri, *Semar Mesem* is interpreted as a magical practice to attract the opposite sex, especially when finding a mate. They use spells or prayers that are believed to have supernatural powers. The text of the *Semar Mesem* mantra generally contains praise to God, prayers to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, and a request to get an ideal soul mate. Not only that, *Semar Mesem* is also interpreted as a means to increase self-attraction and confidence in interacting with the opposite sex. Interestingly, there are variations in the interpretation of *Semar Mesem*. Some Santri interprets it literally as a practice to get a soul mate, while others interpret it metaphorically as an effort to improve themselves and get closer to God so that it is easier to find a soul mate. Each Santri's level of religious understanding, cultural background, and personal experience influences this difference.

The *Semar Mesem* mantra is a form of compassion believed to have magical powers to captivate a person's heart. It is rooted in Javanese culture and is associated with the Semar punakawan figure (Hadzantonis, 2020). However, this mantra is also found in various regions, including among Santri in Banten. Based on Martin van Bruinessen's study, Banten is known as a region where magical traditions develop, with the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School becoming one of the centres of traditional cultural practices and supernatural sciences (Bruinessen, 1994; Ćuković, 2023). In this pesantren, books containing magical elements are often used as a reference in occult knowledge (Al Ayubi, 2012). In addition, the Dutch colonial report also noted

the people of Banten as very devout Muslims, and it was known as an area with strong esoteric traditions. Mantra texts, both in local and regional contexts in Southeast and South Asia, are used as instruments in magical rituals (Pamungkas et al., 2023). Mantras are seen as recitations with magical power and deep symbolic meaning (Burchett, 2008). Mantras have poetic and magical dimensions and are seen as tools to influence or create specific effects in a spiritual or supernatural context (Alfian, 2023). Spells are often seen as "magic formulas" or "spells" due to their rhythmic and repetitive nature, which is in harmony with traditional poetic forms. The dual nature of mantras as poetic and magical is highlighted in various traditions, where they are used to connect with the cosmic order and give rise to specific vibrational patterns (Rodin, 2010).

Usage Patterns of *Semar Mesem*

The pattern of use of *Semar Mesem* among Santri of the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School shows a significant variation in the methods and approaches used. Based on the results of interviews and in-depth observations, most Santri prefer the indirect method of using *Semar Mesem*. Most Santri choose to communicate with Kiai, who are considered to have supernatural intermediaries, such as letters, written messages, or third parties, without meeting in person. This choice reflects a desire to avoid direct involvement in mystical or spiritually risky practices. In their statement, they think that using indirect methods provides a sense of security, especially regarding their religious beliefs, where they want to avoid practices that may contradict the teachings of Islam. However, a small percentage of Santri who interact directly with shamans use personal objects such as photos, clothes, or other items that are considered to have a spiritual connection with the person they want to be enchanted. In interviews, they expressed the belief that these objects have specific energies that can influence or attract the attention of the opposite sex. For them, these personal objects are a connecting medium between the physical and spiritual realms, thus facilitating the achievement of success in the practice of *Semar Mesem*.

However, despite expectations for this practice's effectiveness, the results often do not follow expectations. Many Santri admitted they were unsuccessful in using *Semar Mesem*, and some even doubted whether the practice gave results. Only a small percentage feel that they have succeeded in achieving their goals. Some Santri prefers to rely on communication and genuine efforts in building romantic relationships, feeling that relationship success is more influenced by compatibility, communication, and personal effort than magical practices (Nurjamilah, 2015). These findings suggest that although *Semar Mesem* is used with certain expectations in mind, it is not

always effective in realizing romantic goals and many other factors that further determine the success of a relationship.

***Semar Mesem* and Romantic Relationships**

The study results show that although there is a perception that *Semar Mesem* can help start a romantic relationship, its influence on the sustainability of the relationship is minimal (Niemyjska, 2015). Many Santri claims to have a romantic relationship after doing this practice, but the relationship is not always strong and does not last long. This shows that although there is trust in the supernatural power of *Semar Mesem*, it does not play a full role in determining the success and sustainability of romantic relationships. Several other factors are more influential, such as communication, compatibility, and commitment (Brahmandika, 2021). Santri, who practised this practice, often said that even though romantic relationships are formed after using *Semar Mesem*, the relationship tends to be fragile and does not last long. This suggests that *Semar Mesem* functions more as an initial trigger or temporary encouragement in a relationship, but it cannot replace the effort and commitment needed to build a healthy and sustainable relationship. In the success of romantic relationships, *Semar Mesem* is only a tool to attract the opposite sex, and many Santri feel that natural interactions and personal introductions influence the relationships they form more than the influence of these occult practices.

Many Santri knows the benefits of *Semar Mesem* after a relationship is established. They rely more on good communication and personal compatibility to maintain the relationship. This proves that although *Semar Mesem* has a limited influence in starting a healthy and lasting romantic relationship, it is more influenced by non-magical factors involving emotional maturity, understanding, and commitment between couples.

Santri's Views on *Semar Mesem* and the Practice of Magical Science

It turns out that Santri's views on *Semar Mesem* and the practice of occult knowledge are quite diverse. Some see it as a practice that is permissible in Islam, as long as it does not contradict the sharia and does not condemn God. They consider *Semar Mesem* to be part of an Islamic tradition that has been inherited from generation to generation and has positive values. However, some Santri are sceptical of it, doubt its efficacy, and consider it as superstitious or teachings that deviate from Islam. This group emphasizes the importance of sincere effort and prayer. These differences of views show the dynamics of religious thought among Santri, who not only passively accept teachings and customs but also interpret and reason according to their understanding and context.

Implications of the Use of *Semar Mesem* on Religious Understanding and Santri Behavior

The use of *Semar Mesem* has implications for Santri's religious understanding and behaviour. For some Santri, *Semar Mesem* can strengthen their belief in supernatural powers and encourage them to get closer to God (Rohmayani, 2019). They believe that by practising it, they can get God's help in marriage and other life matters. In addition, the use of *Semar Mesem* also has a negative impact because this practice has the potential to deviate from religious understanding. Some Santri can fall into excessive mystical practices so that they forget the fundamental aspects of Islamic teachings, such as morals, worship, and mastery of science. This phenomenon shows that it is difficult to maintain a balance between belief in supernatural forces and commitment to actual religious teachings.

In-depth, the use of *Semar Mesem* also impacts the social behaviour of Santri. Santri, who rely too much on *Semar Mesem* to find a life partner, tend to be passive and lack the effort to develop themselves and establish healthy social relationships. They are also prone to disappointment or problems in relationships because they tend to ignore important criteria in choosing a life partner, so this reflects the importance of a holistic approach in finding a soulmate, namely with effort, prayer, and rational consideration, rather than relying only on magical practices.

Factors Affecting the Use of *Semar Mesem*

Several factors affect the use of *Semar Mesem* among Santri of the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School. *First*, Tradition and Culture: The Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School has strong traditional roots in practising religious sciences, including wisdom and magical practices (Ainul et al., 2022). This tradition has been inherited from generation to generation and integrated with the Santri's identity. *Second*, the Influence of Kiai and Religious Leaders: Kiai and religious leaders significantly influence Santri's understanding and behaviour (Ayubi et al., 2023; Hidayatulloh, 2020). Some kiai at the Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School in Banten still teach and practice *Semar Mesem*, so Santri tends to imitate and follow in their footsteps. *Third*, Social Pressure: Santris of marriageable age often feel pressure to get married immediately (Ayu et al., 2022). This pressure encourages some Santri to find shortcuts, including practising *Semar Mesem*. *Fourth*, Lack of Religious Knowledge: Some Santri with less in-depth religious knowledge tend to be more easily influenced by mystical beliefs and practices that do not have a strong foundation in Islamic teachings (Bassar et al., 2021).

***Semar Mesem*: Between Mysticism and Rationality**

As revealed in this study, the *Semar Mesem* phenomenon among Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School Santri reflects a complex reality containing mystical and rational dimensions (Meliani et al., 2023). The findings of the qualitative approach suggest that *Semar Mesem*'s practice is more than just a ritual practice; it is also a way to explain or overcome social phenomena, especially in the context of romantic relationships. The majority of Santri who use *Semar Mesem* tend to choose the indirect route with the help of shamans, who show a cautious attitude and are reluctant to get directly involved in practices that are considered mystical or magical (Kouri & Hytönen-Ng, 2022). They are more comfortable using intermediaries to keep a distance from taboo practices or violate religious norms. However, a small percentage of Santri who use assistive devices such as photographs or other personal objects show confidence in the supernatural power inherent in these objects. This proves a spiritual connection exists between the Object and the intended person.

The difference in perspective and use of *Semar Mesem* shows an ambivalence between rationality and mysticism in practice. On the one hand, Santri seems sceptical of the effectiveness of *Semar Mesem*, and many feel that his practice is ineffective (Pasha et al., 2018). On the other hand, they still believe in supernatural powers and see *Semar Mesem* as an instant solution to finding a soulmate or achieving a specific goal, even though they know its limitations (Prasetyo, 2020). This ambivalence reflects the dynamics of the Santri's thinking between the desire to adopt modern logic and maintain traditional practices that are part of their cultural heritage (Marchinkowski, 2022). In this case, *Semar Mesem* serves as a spiritual practice and a bridge connecting the mystical world with more practical social life, although it does not always yield the expected results.

***Semar Mesem* in the Frame of Santri Tradition in Islamic Boarding Schools**

Semar Mesem is part of a pesantren tradition rich in religious knowledge, such as Sufism, wisdom, and magical practices. This tradition views *Semar Mesem* as an Islamic cultural heritage rooted in local values. Al Ayubi (2012) explained that *Semar Mesem* can be analyzed through two main approaches: Sufism and wisdom. In Sufism, *Semar Mesem* expresses mahabbah or love rooted in the human desire to get closer to God by realizing mahabbah (love) through affectionate relationships with fellow humans as a reflection of love for Allah (Mustaf, 2020). However, for this love to have high spiritual value, it must be based on ma'rifat, a deep knowledge of Allah, and accompanied by noble morals (Wati & Hasanah, 2021).

From the wisdom perspective, *Semar Mesem* is interpreted as an effort to create harmony between humans and the universe (Brastyan, 2019). This approach is often used in establishing social relationships, including relationships with the opposite sex. The science of wisdom emphasizes the wise use of the potential of nature and human beings for good purposes. However, its use must always be within the corridor of Islamic sharia and carried out with high moral responsibility. Deviation from this principle can make the science of wisdom a magical practice contrary to religious teachings. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools are responsible for guiding Santri in understanding the essence of Sufism and wisdom. Santri is taught to distinguish between the practice of true and valuable wisdom in the pesantren tradition and the practice that has the potential to deviate. Pesantren provides a theoretical foundation and instils moral values, noble morals, and deep spiritual appreciation. Santri can use wisdom wisely and remain aligned with Islamic teachings.

Contestation of the Meaning of *Semar Mesem*

The variation in the meaning of *Semar Mesem* among Santri reflects the dynamics of the meaning negotiation process that occurs in their religious practice. Some Santri interprets *Semar Mesem* literally as a practice-oriented way of finding a soul mate or life partner; others interpret it metaphorically as an effort to improve themselves, introspect, and get closer to God. Interpreting this is based on several factors, including the level of religious understanding, cultural background, and the influence of the social environment that affects their perspective on this practice (Subhan et al., 2021). Santri, who have a deeper understanding of religion, tend to understand and interpret *Semar Mesem* more symbolically and critically, viewing it as part of a broader spiritual effort to reach closeness to God. This contrasts Santri, who has a simpler or more pragmatic understanding of religion in interpreting *Semar Mesem* directly and practically and who focuses on worldly goals such as finding a mate. In this context, pesantren plays a significant role in helping Santri understand and practice religious teachings in a more profound, critical, and relevant way to the reality of daily life. Islamic boarding schools ensure that Santri is based on narrow interpretations and gain a more holistic and deep understanding of Islamic teachings (Jamaludin, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The research on the *Semar Mesem* phenomenon among Santri of the Banten Salafiyah Islamic Boarding School revealed several important findings. *First*, *Semar Mesem*'s practice shows a tug-of-war between mysticism and rationality in Santri's life. Despite living in an environment thick with religious traditions, Santri is also exposed to modern modernity, which emphasizes logic

and a scientific approach. This creates a form of negotiation and adaptation in interpreting and practising religious teachings. The findings reveal the complexity of the motivations behind using *Semar Mesem*, which is not solely based on the desire to attract the opposite sex but is also influenced by other social, cultural, and psychological factors. The low success rate indicates the need to explore Santri's expectations further and understand and interpret this practice. *Second*, the practice of *Semar Mesem* also reflects the influence of a patriarchal culture that is still strong in Indonesian society. The dominance of men as users of *Semar Mesem* shows that there is an imbalance in power relations between men and women. The use of *Semar Mesem*, which often focuses on the physical and sexual aspects of women, also shows the objectification of women.

Third, *Semar Mesem* occupies a unique position in the scientific framework of Islamic boarding schools. On the one hand, it can be associated with Sufism concepts such as *mahabbah* and the science of wisdom that offer theological and spiritual justifications. On the other hand, this practice is also prone to falling into excessive mysticism and contrary to sharia principles. This requires a critical effort to reinterpret and contextualize *Semar Mesem* to align with the teachings of Islam, which are *kaffah*. *Fourth*, the *Semar Mesem* phenomenon shows the urgency of further study with a qualitative approach to explore deeper meanings, motivations, and psychosocial impacts. This further research is expected to provide a holistic understanding and support the formulation of comprehensive solutions rooted in religious, ethical, and humanitarian values. *Fifth*, criticism of *Semar Mesem* comes not only from a religious perspective that considers it contrary to Islamic teachings but also from an ethical perspective that highlights the potential for manipulation, objectification, and human rights violations. Furthermore, *Semar Mesem* is also seen as hindering Santri's self-development because it creates dependence on supernatural forces and ignores the importance of effort. Therefore, comprehensive reinterpretation and contextualization efforts are needed to purify teachings, emphasize ethics, integrate self-development, and actively involve women in discourses.

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