The Result of a Holy Alliance: Debus and Tariqah in Banten Province

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, the writer describes the practice of debus in Banten and its function among present-day Bantenese. The underlying question to be considered here is the way in which debus performances are now regarded as an integral part of Banten’s tradition. There is a number of studies devoted to debus in Banten and in several places in Indonesia, most of which are anthropological studies. Little attention has been given to an in-depth study of debus practised by the Bantenese. In fact, debus has developed as invulnerability performance and has gone much further of late than the previous invulnerability performances in Aceh described by Snouck at the end of the nineteenth century. The writer attempts to show how the debus performances combined with aspects of tariqah’ now also include several new attributes.

Keywords: debus, tariqah

INTRODUCTION
One of the performance arts influenced by religion is the invulnerability performance known as debus or dabus (in Banten), gedebus (in Java), daboih (in West Sumatra), rapa’i (in Aceh) or daboso (in South Sulawesi) practised in some regions of the Indonesian archipelago. There are two schools of thought regarding the origin of the term debus.¹ The first indicates that debus originally developed from local tradition and that it means either tembus (penetrable) or tidak tembus (impenetrable).² Another argument suggests that debus is an abbreviation of Dzikiran (remembrance of the word of God), Batin (spiritual) and Salawat (praising the prophet).³ The second school of thought indicates external influence in

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the formation of debus, claiming that the
term is derived from the Arabic ‘dabbus’
meaning needle or thumbtack.4

In addition, debus can be defined either by
the invulnerability performance itself or by
the instruments used during the perfor-
mance, as stated by Vredenbregt. According
to him, the purpose of debus is to demon-
strate the invulnerability of the performers by
piercing their bodies with a special imple-
ment called a debus, an awl-like dagger with
an iron spike at the end of a wooden hilt.5 In
some regions of Banten, invulnerability
performances are also known as al madad6
performances because the performers nor-
mally summon al madad before one strikes
the other. During the performances, percus-
sion instruments such as tambourines, drums,
small drums (talinggit) and rattles are played
and combined with dhikr, Qur’anic verses and
wawacan seh (the legend of some of tariqah’s
founders) recitations. 7 Vredenbregt con-
ducted his fieldwork in three sub-districts of
Serang, concluding that detailed descriptions
of debus performances before the twentieth
century do not exist.8 He added that this was
not because people had not mastered the
required skills but was either due to a govern-
ment ban or to resistance from orthodox
Islam.9

As far as Vredenbregt’s argument about
the lack of records of debus performances are
concerned, it seems he did not consider Aceh
to be an important centre for Islam in the
archipelago. It is true that we cannot find any
documentation of invulnerability perfor-
mances in Banten before the twentieth
century. Nevertheless, in describing rapa’i
performances, Snouck Hurgronje implies
that performances similar to debus relating to
tariqahs did exist in the archipelago during
the time he conducted his fieldwork.10

Snouck Hurgronje describes that rapa’i
included some demonstration of invulnerabil-
ity that if unsuccessful could result in sickness
or death, for example, eating glass fragments,
biting the heads off snakes, wounding the
performers with knives and throwing the
performers under horses’ hooves.11 If true,
this shows that debus-like performances with
tariqah influence were performed in the
nineteenth century and not only in Aceh but
also in other places in the archipelago includ-
ing Banten. Vredenbregt also found that debus
performances practised in three sub-
districts of Banten were influenced by
Qadiriyyah tariqah, suggesting that debus as
invulnerability performance is not a new
phenomenon because tariqah itself was
significant in the development of Islam in
Banten as it was in most places in the Indone-
sian archipelago.

Vredenbregt’s argument was strengthened
by Bruinessen who pointed out that debus
performances are closely related to tariqah.12
Reiterating findings related to invulnerability
performances during Snouck Hurgronje’s
fieldwork in Aceh, Bruinessen emphasised
that debus-like performances in Aceh were
influenced by Rifa’iyyah tariqah. However
Banten’s debus was not influenced by
Qadiriyyah (to be exact Qadiriyyah wa
Naqshabandiyyah) alone but also by other
tariqahs such as Sammaniyyah and Rifa’iyyah
that serve the same purpose.13 The most
frequently cited explanations for the emer-
gence of debus in Banten are first, that it was
created by Mawlana Hasanuddin to attract
the natives to convert to Islam and second,
that Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa used it to boost
his soldiers’ morale during the fight against
the Dutch.14

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THE TARIQAH, BANTEN SULTANATE AND THE EMERGENCE OF DEBUS

The desire to harness the supernatural (kesakten) and master invulnerability (ilmu kebal) has been handed down from generation to generation in the archipelago. Religious influence is always evident. Before the presence of Islam for instance, people who needed protection from danger invoked magical formulae (mantera) from Hinduism or Buddhism. Meanwhile, the presence of Islam represented by tariqah gave the local inhabitants a new relationship with the supernatural and invulnerability because the dhikr and witr brought by Islamic mystics during the spread of Islam were considered more powerful than that the formulae of Hinduism or Buddhism. Although the purpose of tariqah is to bring performers closer to God, many native Muslims during the first phase of the spread of Islam joined tariqah orders because their rituals were similar to pre-Islamic practices. Beside the dhikr and witr considered to be like mantera, the teaching of 'uzlah (meditation) and asceticism practised by tariqah teachers were also compared to the tapa (meditation) ritual of the pre-Islamic period.

In Banten, the spread of Islam was encouraged by local rulers who worked closely with tariqah orders. According to the Sejarah Banten texts, sunan Gunung Djati and his son, Mawlana Hasanuddin (d. 1570), travelled to Mecca and Medina, the traditional centres of Islam, to obtain religious legitimacy by becoming members of a tariqah order. However, according to Bruinessen, some chronicles in Sejarah Banten, especially those relating to the ordination of Mawlana Hasanuddin as a member of Naqshabandiyyah and to sunan Gunung Djati joining the tariqah orders of Kubrawiyyah, Shadziliyyah, Shattariyyah and Naqshabandiyyah, were just ancient tales designed to legitimise and strengthen the Banten dynasty’s relationship with mysticism. He claims the Naqshabandiyyah tariqah did not exist when sunan Gunung Djati and Mawlana Hasanuddin visited the two holy cities of Islam and neither did the other tariqah orders that sunan Gunung Djati apparently joined.

Nevertheless, the founding fathers of the Banten sultanate could have joined other tariqah orders. After all, rumours of ‘Abd al Qadir Jaylani’s miracles (karamah) spread among Banten Muslims, proving that the Qadiriyyah tariqah’s influence had existed for some time. This particular tariqah was the first tariqah in the archipelago. It is quite likely that sunan Gunung Djati and Mawlana Hasanuddin were members of Qadiriyyah when they preached Islam in Banten. Showing supernatural and invulnerability influenced by the ‘Abd al Qadir Jaylani’s miracles, They successfully converted the local Hindu and Buddhist populations by demonstrating their supernatural power and invulnerability skills. For the next two hundred years, the relationship between tariqah teachers living in the two holy cities and the Banten rulers was much clearer.

According to Djajadiningrat, the relationship between Mecca and Banten can be observed as early as the 1630s when Banten’s ruler, Abu al Mufakhir ‘Abd Qadir (r.1596-1651) received the title of ‘sultan’ from the grand Sharif of Mecca. The sultan was so interested in Islam that he sent questions on religious matters to famous scholars in Mecca and Medina. These scholars answered Sultan ‘Abd Qadir’s questions. In addition to becoming an important link in international
trade networks with foreign countries such as England, Denmark, China, Persia, India, Siam, Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, Banten in the seventeenth century functioned as the home of Islamic education and a centre for the spread of Islam into the hinterland of Java and many other places in the archipelago.23

During the reign of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (r.1651-1682), the sultanate was influenced by Shaykh Yusuf al Makassari (d.1699), a prominent tariqah teacher from the Khalwatiyyah, Naqshabandiyyah, Shattariyyah, Qadiriyyah and Ba’alwiyyah tariqahs.24 During the confrontation with the colonial government, Shaykh Yusuf led the Banten sultanate’s soldiers and his supernatural ability played a significant role in boosting his followers’ morale.25 Bruinessen argued that Yusuf al Maqassari taught invulnerability skills in Banten through his tariqah teachings.26 We can assume that the presence of Yusuf Makassari with his profound knowledge of Islam and involvement with tariqahs, strengthened the interconnectivity between the tariqah, the Banten sultanate’s court and invulnerability skills. Interestingly, there is no significant evidence that debus invulnerability performances which include pencak silat and music were performed in public. According to Djajadiningrat who studied the Sejarah Banten chronicles, the ruler of Banten at that time only had artistic hobbies such as raket and dedewaan and did not watch public performances of debus.27

It appears that Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa and Yusuf al Makassari only taught invulnerability skills to his soldiers to boost their morale to fight the Dutch. During this period, when tension between the Banten sultanate and the Dutch was increasing, the sultanate’s officials preached Islam and taught invulnerability skills in the hinterland of Banten. This is supported by the fact that Islam had only penetrated inland regions of Banten by the late seventeenth century.28 In order to convert as many Bantenese Hindus and Buddhists as possible to the Muslim cause to support the war against the infidel Dutch, the sultanate’s officials accepted the practice of local traditions, thus creating syncretism in Banten. This led to the emergence of a combination of the tariqahs dhikr and wîrd techniques alongside local magical formulae (jangjawokan), creating more powerful invulnerability skills to use against the Banten sultanate’s enemy.

The relationship between tariqah, the Banten sultanate and invulnerability skills did not end after Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa and Yusuf al Makassari were arrested. In fact, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Sultan ’Arif Zayn al ’Ashiqin al Qadiri (r. 1753-1777) was directly involved in the genealogy of some tariqah orders after becoming the khalifah (leader) of Qadiriyah, ‘Alwaniyyah and Rifa’iyyah tariqahs.29 The sultan’s full name is: al Khalifah al Sultan ibn al Sultan Abu al Nasr Muhammad ‘Arifin al ‘Ashiqin al Qadiri al ‘Alwani al Rifa’i al Bantani al-Shafi‘i.30 The sultan’s wanted to be khalifah of the Qadiriyah and Rifa’iyyah tariqahs because of their association with shaykh ‘Abd Qadir and Ahmad Rifa’i’s miracles and invulnerability skills recognised by traditional Islam.31 Banten sultanate’s ruler therefore seems to have developed a strong relationship with those tariqahs most involved with the supernatural and invulnerability skills. During this period, the practice of invulnerability skills based on the tariqahs teaching did not take place at court. This was to avoid raising
Dutch suspicion that the performances might encourage increased resistance against them. On the other hand, invulnerability performances based on the tariqah’s teachings was used to accelerate the spread of Islam into the hinterland of the Banten sultanate.

The explanation above leads us to presume that debus as public invulnerability performances emerged in the nineteenth century, as indicated by Snouck Hurgronje. He implied that invulnerability performances emerged as a result of competition among tariqahs to attract as many followers as possible. In order to compete with other tariqahs, the shaykh made his disciples increase their skill level by incorporating the shaykh’s mystical prowess. From then on invulnerability games were used to persuade followers that their tariqah was more attractive than the others. Therefore, in Banten we find invulnerability performances are not only practised by the Qadiriyyah wa Naqshabandiyah, but also by the Sammaniyyah, Rifa’iyyah and Shadziliyyah tariqahs. Perhaps due to the peasant revolt in Banten in 1888, influenced by tariqahs’ teachers, performances were forbidden by the colonial government to preserve security in the region. Debus performances re-emerged in the twentieth century after Indonesia’s independence in 1945, now incorporating pencak silat and musical instruments.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEBUS PERFORMANCE

Unlike the debus performance as described by Vredenbreght which the show of invulnerability was conducted in pairs in which one performer stabbed his partner’s body by using either the small debus (technique A) or large debus (technique B) beaten by a big wooden hammer, the debus performance after Vredenbreght’s investigation produces several new invulnerability including magical games such as burning the performer’s body, cooking eggs above the head of the performer, using hand to reverse the egg in the hot oil, slicing the stomach with machete, peeling the coconut, slicing the tongue by using knife, ascending the machete-ladder steps, eating the fragmented glasses and pouring the Sulfuric Acid (99h H2SO4) to the performer’s body.

According to Athoullah’s investigation, other games are: Stabbing cheeks using a big pin; stabbing the neck using a sharp iron, eating hot coal’ ejecting bats and snakes from the mouth; rolling on broken glass and nails; beating the head with bottles and wood; shelling coconuts with the teeth and slicing cucumbers on the stomach. To create a more interesting and at the same time interactive performance, the debus shaykh will invite and ask the audience to imitate the actions of debus performers by eating broken glass or brushing their hair with fire.

It is interesting to note that Vredenbregt did not refer to the invulnerability games mentioned by Hadiningrat who investigated debus in Banten in 1981, less than ten years before Vredenbregt conducted his research. This is either because he only wanted to investigate the Qadiriyyah’s influence on debus in Banten without considering local influences or perhaps the performances in the three regions he investigated really did not have any new invulnerability games and were conventional debus performances with Qadiriyyah’s influence. If the latter is true, some invulnerability games in today’s debus performances can be considered new ones performed as part of the show in Banten.
New invulnerability games and magic tricks performed in *debus* performances demonstrate that *debus* has evolved from its core performance which is basically resulting from a state of trance (*fana*) induced during the recitation of *dhikr* prescribed in *tariqah* teachings.

Bruinessen stated that the *tariqahs*’ *dhikr* technique is only a part of *debus* performances and the leaders of *debus* performances (the *debus* shaykhs) are no longer strictly related to the *tariqah* order nor to the *tariqah*’s genealogical tree (the *silsilah*). Some *debus* shaykhs practise *wird* in the same way the *tariqahs* practise *dhikr* and *wird* but none has become a *khalifah* of a *tariqah* order. Some of them are only *pencak silat* (traditional martial arts) teachers with a limited knowledge of *dhikr* and *wird*. According to Bruinessen, most *debus* teachers use magic according to the *tariqahs* teachings and local traditions which proves that the invulnerability techniques used in *debus* performances nowadays are derived from an eclectic combination of *tariqah* and local pre-Islamic teaching.

**ELEMENTS OF DEBUS PERFORMANCE AND DEBUS FUNCTIONS**

**The *debus* shaykh and his functions**

The *debus* shaykh is the most important figure in *debus*. He has the authority to manage the performance because he possesses the greatest supernatural power in his group. A *debus* shaykh has three functions, one before, during and after the performance. Before the performance, the *shaykh* fulfils some obligatory rituals such as giving *wird* (in the context of *debus* this can be defined as a combination of short prayers taken from Qur’anic verses mixed with some in the local language) to his pupils to be read, memorised and recited after performing prayers five times; supervising the training of his pupils; reciting the *manaqib* (reading the *tariqah* shaykhs’ supernatural stories) and preparing the holy water to protect the performers from injury and to heal their wounds. Vredenbregt gives five functions for a *debus* shaykh during the performance, namely:

1. A technical function in which he gives instructions on *debus* techniques to the performers.
2. As a mediator, he invokes the intercession and protection of the *shaykh* *Abd al Qadir Jaylani to safeguard the performers from harm.
3. A magic function in that he renders the *debus* daggers as soft as the body of a woman.
4. A curative function in treating potential injuries.
5. A leadership function in the sense that the general direction of the performance is in his hands and he determines who participates.

An additional function which Vredenbregt did not mention is the *debus* shaykh as Master of Ceremonies (MC), because he usually opens and closes the performance. After *debus* has been successfully performed, the *shaykh* divides up the income given to him by the official event organisers such as local government and tourist companies. He also deals with marriage proposals and circumcision ceremonies relating to participants in the performance. Besides earning money from *debus* performances, the *shaykh* is also paid by his pupils who just want to learn invulnerability skills and harness supernatural
power without becoming *debus* performers. **The performers**

The invulnerability performed during a *debus* show is not just dependent upon the *debus* *shaykh*’s authority and and *manaqib* recitation requesting *shaykh* ‘Abd al Qadir Jaylani or *shaykh* Rifa’i’s assistance to protect the performers. Indeed the performers are also required to be Muslim, be proficient in *pencak silat* (martial arts) and memorise *wird* formula provided by the *shaykh*. In addition, those who want to become *debus* performers have to endure a long and exhausting physical and mental exercise (*tirakat*) such as 7, 40 or 100 days of fasting according to the *shaykh*’s order and they are obliged to eat a very small portion of cooked rice with salt and chili only when they break their fast. They also have to perform prayers five times and observe Islamic prohibitions such as stealing, drinking alcohol and committing adultery.40

It is also interesting to look at the formulae (*niyyah*) recited before *debus* performers begin fasting. Some of the incantation formulae are as follows:

*Bismillamirrahmanirrahim*
*Niat isun puasa udu puasane wulan*
*Udu muasane dina muasane kakarepan isun*
*da den karepken dening isun*
*Muga-muga dikabulaken dening Allah*
*La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad al rasulullah*41

Another incantation formula is:

*Niat kaula puasa*
*Muasakeun jangjawokan*
*Kakuatan kaulan*
*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*42

If we look at these two incantations, the language used is Javanese and Sundanese Banten with additional Islamic influence such as the use of *basmalah* and *shahadah* sentences. These incantation formulae are different with the *debus* performers’ incantation for fasting used by the Ciwasiat group in Pandeglang as follow:

*Nwaytu cauma ghadin li qada’i alhajati sunnatan lillahi ta’ale*43

From the formulae above, it seems that each *debus* group has its own formula that must be applied before fasting to achieve invulnerability. It also shows the lack of unity among *debus* groups.

**Tawassul in tariqah and debus**

Tawassul can be defined as an individual or collective attempt to achieve gifts through a mediator (*wasilah*) by reciting certain *surahs* of the Qur’an especially *surah al-Fatihah* to the prophet Mumammad, the saints and *khalifah* in the the tariqahs’ genealogy. If we examine tariqah and debus practice, similarities between the two are obvious. The main similarity is that tariqah and debus are performed by tawassul and rabitah *shaykhs* (the will to invoke the spirit of tariqah teachers). Athoullah however, highlighted the differences between tariqah and debus. While tariqah’s *shaykh* emphasises the *dhikr* and the rabitah *shaykh* to guide his followers in conducting *dhikr* techniques as well as for spiritual experience, a *debus* *shaykh* emphasises the *wird* and the rabitah *shaykh* to gain supernatural power and invulnerability skills without strict adherence to the *dhikr* performance.44

In *debus* groups influenced by Rifa’iyyah tariqah, *surah al-Fatihah* is offered to members of the genealogical tree. These include the prophet Muhammad, *al-Khulaifa al-Rashidun*, the prophet’s companions (*cahabah*), the

In debus groups influenced by the Qadiriyyah tariqah, the surah al-Fatihah recitation is offered to the prophet Muhammad, Shaykh Muhtar al Palimbani, Shaykh Khalil Aceh and Shaykh ‘Abd al Qadir Jaylani.46 However, some debus shaykhhs do not merely send the surah al-Fatihah recitation to the members of the tariqah genealogy. They also offer it to the Uyut Widara Tampolong, Uyut Santika Cimahi Ujung Kulon and Embah Khaer spirits known to supernatural practitioners such as the jawara (Bantenese traditional leaders who are masters of pencak silat and possess supernatural prowess and invulnerability skills) and to pencak silat practitioners.47

**Genealogy and wird of debus performers**

In the tariqahs’ genealogical tree, the order of teachers is clear. The recitation of the dhikr and wird is the same within a tariqah order while debus ignores genealogical chains and has many forms in the sense that debus groups can have different ways of working, using wird and incantation formulae. Debus groups with different teachers but using the same sacred formulae and activities vary considerably from place to place. A debus shaykh usually begins a debus performance by asking permission as a form of courtesy to those in the audience who also have supernatural powers, to allow them to perform debus and not to disturb the course of the performance. If the shaykh does not ask permission, undesirable incidents can happen, for example, the performers might be wounded by sharp weapons or they could become drowsy during the performance.

As for the wird texts used by the debus shaykh, they are always written in Arabic and combined with the jangjawokan, sacred formulae originating from pre-Islamic teachings usually written in old Javanese or the Sundanese language of Banten. This sacred formula is sometimes mixed with elements of surahs in the Qur’an such as al Kahf, Yusuf and al Ikhlas including the basmalah, hamdalah and shahadah (the Islamic profession of faith). The use of basmalah (bismillah) and hamdalah in the sacred formulae is because both have very deep Islamic influence. In Islamic teaching, the reciting of basmalah is strongly recommended by the prophet at the beginning of any act to obtain God’s blessing and salvation. Likewise, recital of hamdalah is recommended after performing certain acts. The shahadah is the highest confession statement in Islam which can select who becomes a Muslim or non-Muslim.

Surprisingly, some Qur’anic verses used by debus performers in the wird to obtain invulnerability skills are confusing in terms of the text and meaning if we consult the Qur’an. The wird of debus performers from Serang for example consists of surah al Kahf and mentions:

Allahu Kahfi
Another example is the use of part of surah al Kawthar
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
Inna’a’tainaka ‘l Kawthar
Facalli liwali
Liwali warba li wali warba
Tulung para wali sakabeh
Mangka welas mangka asih
Atine wong sedunia
Ngadeng maring isun
La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad al Rasulullah

It is clear the texts above are Islamic and to some extent are also based on the Qur’an. However, after consulting the Qur’an surah al Kahf and al Kawthar not a single verse is exactly the same as the texts above. In the first formula, they are simply a combination of the name of the surah and the word Allah. The second is a combination of basmalah, the first sentence of surah al Kawthar and the jangjawokan. Indeed, in a region inhabited mostly by Muslims lacking orthodox influence but with a strong belief in mysticism, Qur’anic and Arabic texts are revered by its inhabitants who appreciate their power even though they do not understand the texts. Therefore many wirts, amulets and sacred formulae use Arabic texts derived either from just a few lines of Qur’anic text or from a sentence in Arabic combined with the local sacred formula to increase the power of the supernatural.

Pencak silat (traditional martial art)

The debus shaykh incorporates pencak silat (traditional martial art) into the invulnerability performances. This is based on the assumption that invulnerability skills cannot be separated from proficiency in pencak silat. In other words, those who master pencak silat would be more capable if they also possess invulnerability skills. Clearly, pencak silat is vitally important to the Bantenese because many pencak silat schools (paguron) claim their jums (movements) were created during the time of the Banten sultanate.

All debus groups in Banten perform pencak silat, either in the opening session or in the middle of the performance when they show the duel between two pencak silat players, using sharp weapons such as a machete or a sickle. In addition, debus performers’ movements during the performance are related to pencak silat movements. Due to the combination of invulnerability skills and pencak silat, many prominent pencak silat schools in Banten can also take part in debus performances. These include TTKDH (Tarikolot Tjimande Kebon Djeruk Hilir), Terumbu and Bandrong.  

Differences between tariqah and debus

Besides the similarities, there are of course some differences between tariqah and debus which I attempt to illustrate in the following table 1:

Although there are differences between the two, it is in fact impossible to separate tariqah and debus because, as I noted earlier, the tariqah’s requirements to recite the manaqib including sacred Islamic statements such as dhikr, wirt, basmalah, shahadah and other sentences from the Qur’an are in-
inclined in *debus*. The Bantenese consider *debus* to be part of Islamic art through which the spread of Islam takes place through the Islamic components involved in *debus* performances. For a number of reasons pertaining to Islam, *debus* has been categorised a ‘white science’ because those who master the invulnerability skills through *debus* have to ignore some Islamic prohibitions otherwise their invulnerability will be lost. This differs from black magic in that followers are not obliged to perform Islamic teachings. This is why *debus* performances are admired by the Bantenese.

**Debus and local politics**

The involvement of *debus* in local politics is something that cannot be ignored. Although it is theoretically a performance art free from political interference, *debus* performances are in fact used to attract the masses to vote, particularly by Golkar’s ruling party in Banten as well as being a form of entertainment. The first evidence of the significance of *debus* in local politics was during Golkar’s campaigns for the elections of 1971 and 1977. One of the Pandeglang *debus* groups led by Muhammad Ilyas was asked by local politicians to perform for Golkar’s campaigns for those elections in Pandeglang district.

The main factor facilitating the involvement of *debus* in Golkar’s political campaigns is the state’s coercion of *debus* shaykhs who are respected by *debus* performers and have many loyal followers. In the case of Muhammad Ilyas, besides practising *debus*, he was also chief of Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia (Indonesian Traditional Martial Arts Association, IPSI) which was affiliated to the armed forces and to the New Order. Another example is the *debus* shaykh of the Walantaka group who was directly active in politics. Besides becoming a member of Golkar at sub-district level, he was also head of the Indonesian veterans organisation in Walantaka sub-district and village leader (*lurah*) as well.

### Table 1: Components of Tariqah and Debus Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENTS OF TARIQAH</th>
<th>COMPONENTS OF DEBUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allah is at the centre of proceedings.</td>
<td>Allah and other pre-Islamic gods are revered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The aim is closeness to Allah through the mediation of the shaykh. Invulnerability while in a trance is a side-effect of dhikr practice.</td>
<td>The aim is to obtain invulnerability skills through the shaykh’s supernatural ability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaykh is part of the tariqah genealogy.</td>
<td>An individual shaykh is not part of a tariqah’s genealogy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhikr and wind are the main teachings.</td>
<td>Dhikr, wind, parts of Qur’anic verses and jangjawakan sacred formulae are used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils can be any Muslim interested in Islamic mysticism.</td>
<td>Pupils are mainly Muslims from Jawara groups and pencak silat practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fasting is based on Islamic texts e.g., such as fasting in the month of Ramadan month and every Sunday and Thursday fasting.</td>
<td>Fasting is based on Islamic texts with additional obligatory fasting of a certain number of days (7, 40 or 100 days).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invulnerability skills are based on genealogical chain in the sense that the dhikr, niyyah and wind would be the same from one teacher to another as long as they are in the same tariqah and therefore tariqah has a centralised leadership.</td>
<td>Invulnerability skills are not based on genealogy chain in the sense that the dhikr, niyyah and wind are different from one teacher to another and therefore debus leadership is decentralised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some tariqahs need incense (kemenyan) in their rituals.</td>
<td>Some materials such as incense (kemenyan), flower kamboja and coconut oil are obligatory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pencak silat skills are not required.</td>
<td>Pencak silat skills are required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This situation was strengthened by the government’s initiative in 1971 to organise jawara in Banten by founding the jawara organisation known as Satkar Jawara (the Jawara Working Squad). In 1973 it became Persatuan Pendekar Persilatan Seni Budaya Banten Indonesia (the Indonesian Union of Bantenese Martial Arts, Art and Culture, PPPSBBI). The establishment of PPPSBBII which has a close relationship with Golkar, unites all the pencak silat schools in Banten most of which perform debus.

**Debus as Banten province’s symbol and the source of income**

After the founding of Banten province, the search for a new identity intensified to distinguish it from its former province. One of the ways of reviving Banten’s identity is to encourage local performance arts, most of which are influenced by Islamic culture. This influence is evident from the use of calawat, dhikr and musical instruments considered Islamic, for example, the bedug (a traditional drum made of wood) and the rebana (tambourine). In this way, debus incorporating rudat, marawis and rampak bedug become part of Banten’s cultural identity. However, unlike other performance arts, debus is the most familiar because of its unique performances of invulnerability skills, bravery and power considered to be typical Bantenese characteristics.

According to information obtained from Banten province’s Culture and Tourism Bureau, there are 26 active debus groups spread across five regions, namely Lebak (5), Pandeglang (8), Serang district (2), Serang municipality (7) and Cilegon municipality (4). However, the number of groups could be higher because some are not recognised, either because local government failed to register them or because the groups themselves do not want to be registered, to protect the secrets behind their invulnerability practices. Missing from the official list are debus groups such as Taman Jaya in Ujung Kulon and the Ciwasiat group, both from Pandeglang district, as well as groups from Cikande, Ciruas, Taktakan and Cikeusal, where Vredenbregt and Hadiningrat conducted their fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s.

The way debus operates nowadays has changed in two ways. First, invulnerability performances now take place in many cities, in Indonesia and abroad as well as in Banten. Second, because some debus groups perform for tourists, the performers are no longer just farmers filling their spare time after the harvest but are now semi-professional performers who depend on debus to support their families financially. According to Tb. Ence, Banten province’s Culture and Tourism Bureau normally gives a debus group between 3 and 7 million rupiah for a performance lasting between one and one-and-a-half hours depending on the distance between the debus group’s home base and the location of the performance. The amount of money they obtain could be three to four times higher if they are invited to perform in other provinces such as Jakarta and Bali or countries like Japan, Singapore, France and the Netherlands.

To ensure debus groups survive and develop, local government has implemented programmes to provide musical equipment, to invite them to perform at official ceremonies held by Banten province’s administration, to help them work with privately-owned TV stations and to promote debus on
the Banten province’s official website.60 Moreover, to preserve debus performance as part of Banten province’s heritage, the local government plans to register the patent for Banten’s debus.61

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown that debus has existed alongside the spread of Islam in Banten and cannot be separated from the tariqah orders that introduced invulnerability skills to the sultanate of Banten. The combination of invulnerability skills and Islamic ritual has led to debus performances becoming part of Bantenese tradition. The emergence of debus as public performance is also a result of the reconciliation between Islam and pre-Islamic beliefs. A number of Islamic elements from tariqah teachings and pre-Islamic components have been combined to produce the invulnerability performances we see today performed in public. In this sense, debus performance can be regarded as the result of a ‘holy alliance’ between Islam and local pre-Islamic beliefs. Furthermore, debus has become one of Banten province’s symbols and icons, particularly after Banten became Indonesia’s thirtieth province.

ENDNOTES


2 K. Hadingratingr, Kesenian Tradisional Debus, p.11. 3 Masruri, Teknik Magis, p.16.


5 Vredenbregt, Dabus in West Java, p.302.


7 Tarekat/tariqah is derived from the Arabic tariqa meaning path, way or method. In this context, it has two meanings. First, it is a combination of spiritual techniques and devotional practices employing the dhikr (remembering God) formula “la ilaha illa Allah” in a specific way for a given number of times. It includes several prayer formulas such as hizb and calawat (praising a prophet) and litanies. These recitations involve breath control and particular body movements. One can only receive instruction in these practices from a tariqah teacher. See Martin van Bruinessen, Shari’ah Court. Tariqah and Pesantren: Religious Institutions in the Banten Sultanate, in Archipel Vol. 50. (1995), p. 177. The second meaning refers to the group influenced by prominent mystic teachers such as ‘Abd al Qadir al Jaylani for the Qadiriyyah tariqah.

8 Martin van Bruinessen, Shari’ah Court, p.303.

9 Martin van Bruinessen, Shari’ah Court, p.303.


12 Martin van Bruinessen, Shari’ah Court, p.220.

13 Martin van Bruinessen, Shari’ah Court, p.221.


16 Sejarah Banten is a series of dynastic chronicles about Banten first composed in 1662 and 1663; the oldest

**References**

1. Athoullah, K. Hadiningrat, J. Vredenbregt.
2. Julian Millie.
6. Athoullah, *Laporan Hasil Penelitian Debus*. p.49. Athoullah did not name the debus group practising this incantation but I think this formula is used by debus groups in Serang because they use Javanese Banten language. I would translate this formula as follows: In the name of Allah the most gracious and the most merciful, I intend to fasting for the sake of the moon, not for the sake of the day or for the sake of myself, I have some desires, I hope that Allah will agree, no God except Allah and Muhammad is his messenger.
7. Athoullah, *Laporan Hasil Penelitian Debus*, p.49. This is probably the incantation formula used by a debus group in southern Banten because it is in the Sundanese Banten language. I translate it as follows: I intend to fast, the fasting is for the sake of the day or for the sake of myself, I want to study *taripah* teachings, they just want to master invulnerability skills. This is true of the jawara group.
8. Athoullah, *Laporan Hasil Penelitian Debus*, p.52. He also emphasised that *debus* performers do not necessarily want to study *taripah* teachings, they just want to master invulnerability skills. This is true of the jawara group.
12. See the table of *debus* groups in Banten in my appendix.
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Interview with Tb. Ence F. on 19th April 2011.

Interview with K.H. Munfassir, leader of the Padarincang pesantren on 12th March 2011.

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