

# **From Sundanese Traditional Music to Islamic Pop Genre**

## ***Cultural and Aesthetic Transformations<sup>1</sup>***

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**Neneng Y Kozanatu Lahpan** examines the transformation of Sundanese traditional music into a new hybrid form of Islamic musical expression, both in the aesthetic and cultural elements. The hybridisation process is analysed in the context of contesting and negotiating the Islam-Sunda identity within the performance.

### **Introduction**

**A**th-Thawaf is a Sundanese music group located in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. This group has brought about a new music aesthetic that represents a process of cultural and aesthetic transformation from Sundanese traditional art into a new genre, Sundanese Islamic pop music. Inspired by the *Tembang Sunda* (a traditional Sundanese song), Ath-Thawaf combines traditional instruments of Sundanese music and Western elements, and adopts religious themes as its special mark.

This transformation of musical expression is considered a response to the great changes among Sundanese audiences with a tremendous taste for popular music instead of traditional music, particularly the younger generation that considers *Tembang Sunda* old-fashioned. It was for the young people that motivated Ath-Thawaf to create a new musical expression that would keep the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* alive.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extended version of article (Bahasa Indonesia) published in *Panggung Journal* of STSI Bandung (2009).

The author examines how this process of transformation happens, both concerning the elements of music and the cultural aspects of *Tembang Sunda* through which Ath-Thawaf produced a new musical hybrid. The process of hybridization is discussed within the context of how Ath-Thawaf has positioned and negotiated itself within Islam-Sunda identity discourses.

According to Piliang (2005, 2007), traditional performance in contemporary society is facing a paradox. On the one hand, in order to survive traditional performing arts need innovations and new creations sourced from their own tradition to make performances more attractive for contemporary audiences. On the other hand, to prevent the loss of the tradition itself, there is an expectation to maintain and keep expressions in their original form rather than making new ones.

Among Indonesian scholars and artists, there has long been a debate on the issue of traditional art conservation, between those who believe that the traditional arts should be conserved in their original forms to preserve their local values and identity, and those who think that it should be elaborated in new forms of expression as an adjustment to contemporary needs (Lindsay 1995, Kartomi 1995). This conservation theme, according to Kartomi, is closely related to ‘debates in Southeast Asian countries about national identity, cultural policy, and dominant ‘ethnicity’ (1995, p.382).

In this situation, some traditional artists in West Java continue to try to create new concepts and creations in their work. Adapting to new surroundings has enabled these artists to create new expressions. They adjust to the new tastes of their audiences, while at the same time they endeavour to maintain their consistency in preserving traditional values through the performances. In doing so, these artists are changing their paradigms and tastes, and improving their insights in creating new forms of expression. This has been done by exploring possibilities in developing new relationships and networks with other artists from different backgrounds so as to elevate performance to a more complex aesthetic level.

Such new possibilities are embodied in various artistic forms that have mostly received positive responses from group audiences. One of these new artistic forms emerged as religious Sundanese pop music, named Ath-Thawaf. By choosing the Sundanese pop genre with its contemplative (religious) themes, Ath-Thawaf has unique characteristics that deserve study. Ath-Thawaf responds to mainstream or dominant pop music by contesting the meaning of Islam and Sunda at the same time. Moreover, this group has also focused on marking their music-projects by promoting the Islam-Sunda identity.

## **Problematic Issues concerning Islamic Music in West Java**

The intersection between Islam and music has been identified for centuries, especially since the *walisanga* (the nine saints) noticed the use of musical performance in their mission of Islam (Dijk 1998, Simon 2010, Sumarsam 2011).<sup>2</sup> The way in which the *walisanga* used performance for proselytization has become an important reference for those concerned with preserving music for Islamic *dakwah*.<sup>3</sup> However, in contemporary Muslim Indonesia, this encounter of Islam and music becomes more complicated when different interests and meanings meet each other, while the popularity of *Musik Islami* dramatically increases in various forms at the same time (Rasmussen 2011).

In Indonesia, there is a unique concept in defining Islamic music. There are two terms used for explaining the concept of Islamic music, namely *Musik Islam* (Islamic music) and *Musik Islami* (music inspired by Islam) which refer to different meanings and characteristics. *Musik Islam* is categorized as music that uses

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<sup>2</sup> *Walisanga* are the notable nine saints who played a role as key Islamic figures in spreading Islam in Java in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> *Dakwah*: converting people to become believers in Islam.

Arabic instruments, scale, tone, and particular stage display. Some people even categorize the music as *Musik Islam* because of the use of Arabic language in the lyrics (Berg 2003, Rasmussen 2005, van Zanten 2011).

While the term Islamic music is continually contested among Muslims, including in Indonesia, previous research has employed different terms in English to communicate the appropriate meaning of *Musik Islami* as represented in Bahasa Indonesia. Generally, this term translates as 'Islamic music'. However, the term 'Islamic music' in the Indonesian context has a different context and meaning to that in the Arabic. Some scholars use the term 'Islamic musical arts', 'music with Islamic flavour' or 'music that breathes with Islamic flavour', 'music with Islamic characteristics', 'music with Islam quality', and 'music inspired by Islam', respectively, to refer to various musical genres in Indonesia that are coloured by Islamic flavours. The term, Islamic music, is complex, open to debate, and not easily defined.

From literature, it can be concluded that the main characteristic of Islamic music in Indonesia is an Arabic element that is embedded strongly in the music. In general, there are two groups of people in Indonesia with different perspectives on Islamic music. The first group consists of those who look at Islamic music in how performance is displayed in terms of whether it is regarded as 'halal' or permitted under Islamic law, including taking into consideration the Arabic style of clothing performers, mostly regarded as 'Islamic', and that has become an important symbol of Islam in Indonesia. They also tend to generalize the 'Arab sound' as the 'Islamic sound'. The other group argues that Arabic music is not always 'Islamic' when its texts are secular, non-Islamic, and serves only the purpose of entertainment (Berg 2003, Rasmussen 2005).

Deni Hermawan (2005), a Sundanese ethnomusicologist, defined the concept 'Islamic music' in different ways. He distinguished between the concepts of Islamic music in the Middle East and Islamic music in Indonesia. According to him, Islamic music in the Middle East uses a Middle Eastern music scale (Arabic, Persian,

Turkey, Egypt, and their surroundings) with various themes, not only religious matters. Meanwhile, Islamic music in Indonesia uses a wide range of musical scales (according to its various regional cultures) but with a single theme, namely an Islamic religious theme. He argues that what is called Islamic music in Indonesia is more suitably regarded as *Musik Islami* rather than *Musik Islam*.<sup>4</sup>

Van Zanten (2007, 2011) and Becker (2011) also emphasize Hermawan's categories of *Musik Islam* and *Musik Islami* when lyrics and vocal are taken as an important aspect of music by which the aim of *dakwah* can be fulfilled.

These categorizations have led to another debate in which *Musik Islam* (Islamic music) or Islamic songs in Arabic are always regarded as *halal* (permitted) because of the Arabic symbols embedded within it, while *Musik Islami* (music with Islam characteristics) is defined in a different and more debatable way.

In fact, the concept of *Musik Islami* in West Java needs to be examined more extensively while the term itself is problematic. The categorization of 'Islam-Sunda, Sunda-Islam' adds to the complication in interpreting *Musik Islami* in the socio-cultural context of West Java.

Among Sundanese artists in the present day, including artists and scholars at the Institute of Indonesian Art (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia/STSI), Bandung, the term *Musik Islami* (music with Islamic characteristics) has gained prominence in its use to differentiate it from music with Arabic idioms. Most Sundanese

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<sup>4</sup> Deni Hemawan, *Musik Etnik Sunda Islami Ath-Thawaf: Sebuah Kajian terhadap Nilai-nilai Musikal, Kultural, dan Religius*, in *Journal of PANGGUNG STSI Bandung* No.XXXV, 2005. He explains the various forms of Islamic music in Indonesia which are classified into 5 categories: (1) music in which all of its musical aspects is the same as music in Middle East (its melodies, instruments, contours, vocals, costumes, lyrics, etc); (2) music which uses Indonesian style of music but adopting the musical scales of the Middle East; (3) music which does not use Middle East music style at all, except its theme of Islam; (4) mixture of musical aspects between Arabic (Middle East) and local colour of music, and (5) all of musical aspects that use local style.

artists are more likely to name their works as *Musik Islami* in which they use local artistic forms of music rather than the Arabic ones, although some Arabic instruments, such as frame drums (*rebana*), are still used. They may experiment in composing their works using the richness of local (Sunda) idioms of music, in its instruments and language of lyrics, but the main theme is one of Islamic learning. Dinda Upajabudi, a Sundanese music scholar, advised audiences against being confused by the term ‘Islami’, and that Islamic values in Sundanese arts (music) is not similar to those in Arabic music.<sup>5</sup> Dinda’s opinion represents many Sundanese artists’ and STSI scholars’ view of the general concept of *Musik Islami*. However, the importance of lyrics to mark the music as Islamic is still commonly accepted by most Indonesian scholars and general public in defining Islamic music. A Sundanese music scholar, Oman Resmana, says: “If you play music without lyrics, nobody can recognize it as Islamic music (*Musik Islami*) whereas once you put lyrics on it, everyone will note that this music is *Islami*. So, *Islami* in the music is in the lyrics whatever the music genre is.”

Apart from that debate, it can be concluded that in the Indonesian context, especially in West Java, the categorization of *Musik Islami* tends to be more general than *Musik Islam*. It refers to any kind of music, both traditional and modern, with the single theme that is Islam; whereas for *Musik Islam*, it commonly refers to Arabic music, regardless of the content of its lyrics. This definition and understanding of *Musik Islami* embodies the unique interaction between Islam and local culture in Indonesia, inclusive of the Sundanese community with their motto ‘Islam-Sunda, Sunda-Islam’.

## **Is Tembang Sunda Islamic?**

The problematic issues concerning the concept of Islamic music arise when the term *Islami* is defined in a wider context by some

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<sup>5</sup> Interview *Yus Wiradiredja*, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf: Dari Tembang Sunda Cianjuran Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif Cultural Studies)*, Pangung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

performers as not only about the instruments, tonal systems, or Islamic themes of the song but also recognising Islam as an inspiration for the whole musical form. Everything that is congruent with Islamic values can be categorized as *Islami*. Traditional art preservers such as scholars at STSI Bandung believe that traditional values in arts are in accordance with Islamic values, and as such, can be labelled *Islami*. This is the concern of Yus Wiradireja (*Tembang Sunda* singer, scholar, and the founder of Ath-Athawaf) in *Tembang Sunda*. He argues that *Tembang Sunda* songs contain Islamic values, as it deals with humankind's relationship with God (*hablum minallah*), humankind's relationship with others (*hablum minannas*), and humankind's relationship with the environment (*hablum minal alam*).<sup>6</sup> His position on the matter is further strengthened by the creation of *Tembang Sunda* in an Islamic environment; its performers, audiences, and patrons are all Muslims.

However, in Sundanese music, *Tembang Sunda* cannot be categorized as *Musik Islami* because there are no specific Islamic idioms used in it, and most importantly the work is not intended as 'Islamic' or 'to be Islamic'. In this way, 'Islami' in music should be symbolised by any kind of Islamic symbols, including how it is displayed on stage. That is the reason why Yus Wiradireja has motivated himself to create the Sundanese Islamic music group 'Ath-Thawaf'. He explained that he needed to express his idea using another medium to spread the inspiration of *Tembang Sunda* which he believes still has contextual meaning in this era. Through Ath-Thawaf, he hopes that this inspiration will still be recognized by the younger generation when *Tembang Sunda* itself has lost its appeal.<sup>7</sup> He transferred the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* to a new form of musical expression called 'musik etnik Islami' or ethnic music inspired by Islam, which combines traditional and modern idioms of music. He tries to deliver

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf: Dari Tembang Sunda Cianjuran Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif Cultural Studies)*, Panggung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 8 April 2008. See Neneng K. Lahpan, *Ath-Thawaf: Dari Tembang Sunda Cianjuran Ke Pop Sunda Religius (Perspektif Cultural Studies)*, Panggung Journal STSI Bandung, Vol.21 No.2 June-September 2009.

religious messages through easy-listening music, so that wider audiences in West Java can appreciate it.

This example leads to another issue relating to the use of the term *Musik Islami* in Sundanese music. It is not applied to designate/reject other traditional music as non-*Islami*, but rather to differentiate it in its use of Arabic (Islamic) idioms of music. They use the term *Musik Islami* not in rejection of other kinds of music but to differentiate it from other Islamic (Arabic) music. For example, *shalawat*, *rebana*, *berzanji*, *kasidah* are *Musik Islami*, while *pop-nasyid* or Islamic-pop song, and Islamic-traditional songs, are also *Musik Islami*. Accordingly, *Tembang Sunda* should not be labelled non-*Islami* music because of the absence of Islamic symbols as this traditional music is believed to incorporate Islamic values in its performance.

## **From *Tembang Sunda* to Ath-Thawaf**

For Sundanese people, practising Islam is not only about religious activities but also an important mark of identity (Newland 2001, Millie 2009), as expressed in their popular axiom ‘Islam is Sunda, Sunda is Islam’. This statement has been absorbed in many ways by Sundanese people in their daily life, including in the performing arts.

Ath-Thawaf is a transformation of the Sundanese traditional music, especially *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, creating a new genre called Sundanese pop music, which has a different characteristic to Sundanese pop in general. Imbued by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda Cianjuran*, Ath-Thawaf uses religious themes as its special mark, placing itself in a unique position in this pop genre. The group locates itself against dominant pop music using the same music genre, basically subscribing to the local spirit and Islam.

Founded in Bandung in 2001, Ath-Thawaf named its musical genre as an ethnic music inspired by Islam (*musik etnik Islami*), that is music that combines traditional and modern elements of music with Islamic themes as its special mark. The group uses traditional – much more than modern – instruments, reflecting the aim to voice local values and Islamic spirit.



Ath-Thawaf is created from the long creative processes and experiences of its founder, Yus Wiradiredja, who has devoted himself to learning *Tembang Sunda* since childhood. He grew up in the environment where *Tembang Sunda* was part of his life, in the upper-class community (*menak*) in Cianjur regency, West Java. As music produced by the upper-class community, *Tembang Sunda* is considered a contemplative and religious work. Due to this background, Yus believes that *Tembang Sunda* has different characteristics from other traditional performances rooted in and created by ordinary people, as its musical qualities and philosophical values attest to. Yus argues that the philosophical values in *Tembang Sunda* are still valid and relevant to the present time.<sup>8</sup> These philosophical values of *Tembang Sunda* have been embraced by Yus in creating *Ath-Thawaf*, the conceptualizations and performance of which have been influenced by his background as a *Tembang Sunda* expert.

Yus explained that he needed a new medium of expression that would make *Tembang Sunda* more acceptable and appreciated easily by wider audiences. He said that the choice of adopting Sundanese pop genre with religious symbols in Ath-Thawaf is an option based on and influenced by the *Tembang Sunda*. The present Ath-Thawaf acts as a space where negotiation between Islam and Sundanese values takes place. It is important to note Ath-Thawaf is easily accepted by both camps of traditional arts preservers and new creative arts proponents.

The aesthetic and cultural transformation of *Tembang Sunda* into the Ath-Thawaf can be traced from its musical concepts including its composition, instruments, and songs. From a cultural perspective, it can be seen as a paradigm shift in understanding performance creation, which is a new art form (pop music) yet characterized by its traditional project of *Tembang Sunda* to cater to new audiences' tastes.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Yus WR. Ibid.

## ***Musical Form and Presentation on Stage***

The concept for the musical form of Ath-Thawaf<sup>9</sup> is different to that of Sunda pop music in general. In its live-performance, the music is performed on stage, resembling an orchestra, by using a large number of musical instruments accompanied by choir-like vocals. Although there is a solo singer, backing vocalists always provide accompaniment. This concept is taken from the Western orchestra, even though traditional performances in West Java, such as in Gamelan or Wayang, also contain a large number of performers. Yus wanted to present Sundanese ethnic music in a different way, and in this creative process, he admitted that he had been influenced by the concept of the Western musical choir; although Sundanese music also involves a kind of choir called *Rampak Sekar*. However, according to Yus, historically the *Rampak Sekar* concept was influenced from the West. It is clear that Ath-Thawaf was created by combining both local and Western musical concepts.

Ath-Thawaf has a number of performers (all the instrumentalists are male). In total, the performing group has 25 members: 15 instrumentalists (men) and 10 vocalists (5 men and 5 women). The large group of performers contribute to a wide range of musical composition and harmony of sound.

Another philosophical value espoused by this group in presenting its music is attributed to the concept of *jamaah* or congregation. Literally, the Arabic word of *jamaah* means ‘collection’ or ‘unity’ or ‘people who get together’. This congregation contains the spirit of helping one another, tolerance, empathy, and solidarity. In the congregation, there is a strong bond of brotherhood and friendship. It also means that working in ‘togetherness’ will be easier and lighter, and pertains to Islamic teaching on Muslim prayer which explicitly

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<sup>9</sup> The name of ‘Ath-Thawaf’ is taken from ‘thawaf’ which is known as one of the mandatory requirements in pilgrimage (Hajj) in Islam. In fact, Yus has acknowledged that his initiative to form this music has been influenced by his journey from Mecca in 2000 – the group was formed soon after this pilgrimage (interview, 8 April 2008)



*Figure 1. Large number of performers (similar to a Western orchestra)*

states that a prayer in congregation is better than praying alone. In Islam, the spirit of congregation is very important and encouraged. This spirit is intended to be built in such a way to form a solid and strong music group.

In terms of its personnel, Ath-Thawaf has a composition of men and women, the musicians being all male. To keep their performance in line with the Islamic way, they try to preserve the gestures of the vocalists (*munsyid*) to avoid negative effects for performers, listeners, and audiences'.<sup>10</sup> The group's Islamic music has consciously followed Islamic rules that are regarded as 'true' for the Muslim majority in Indonesia. Hence, this 'Islami' musical identity project can be seen as a way to give it 'an acknowledged place in Indonesian Islam' (Harnish and Rasmussen, 2011, p.26).

Regarding their appearance, Ath-Thawaf adheres to local Islamic rules on clothing by ensuring that performers' costumes are 'coloured by Indonesian nuance in designs, motives, and using simple accessories, but still attract attention for the audiences which can bring them in improving their morality and piety...'<sup>11</sup> As a costume

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<sup>10</sup> <http://ath-thawaf.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/ath-thawaf-musik-etnik-islami.html>, accessed on 15 October 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

is a very important element in symbolizing Islam, Ath-Thawaf has put local elements that are salient in their clothing style with attention to Islamic rules. Local symbols in costume rather than Arabic influences are promoted. This also underlines how Islam has been accepted through a dialogue between local values and Islam, and the interpretation of Islam that is based on local and not Arabic influences.



Figure 2. Clothing style accentuating local (Sundanese) elements by following Islamic rules on costume

## **Musical Instruments**

To signify its musical project as 'Islami', Ath-Thawaf combines various musical instruments, both modern and traditional, which are incorporated to produce a new harmony of sound. These instruments include electric bass guitar, big Sundanese zither called *kacapi indung*, and small zither called *kacapi rincik*; string instruments include violin and the local instrument (modified Sundanese string instrument) called *renggana*; percussion instrument includes Sundanese traditional drums called *kendang* and *gembyung*, also *jimbe* and *conga* derived from Africa; Sundanese flute, and *puklung* (formed from popular instrument called *angklung* but with different way of playing) and Sundanese xylophone-like instrument known as *gambang*.

Some musical instruments such as *puklung* and *renggana* are made and modified by members of the group itself. *Puklung* is similar with *angklung* but is played by beating it, while *renggana* is an

adaptation of the local string instruments called *rebab*. Not every instrument is played at the same time in the performance. Rather, they are used on the basis of their suitability with the musical theme. The creative efforts in producing a new musical harmony serve to bring the Sundanese musical identity into prominence.



Figure 3. Various musical instruments are used, combining local and Western elements

Ath-Thawaf's exploration of these various types of musical instruments is not limited to musical instruments used in *Tembang Sunda*, such as *kacapi* (zither), *suling* (flute), or *rebab*, but also other traditional instruments, including those that come from the West. The exploration demonstrates Yus' experience and his extensive interaction with various types of music. He said that Sundanese musical instruments are used more than these of Western instruments, enhancing the project of promoting Sundanese ethnic music.

### **Lyrics and theme songs**

The choice of religious themes in Ath-Thawaf, besides individual experiences, is also greatly influenced by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda*, which is, according to Yus, laden with spiritual values that are relevant now. As in *Tembang Sunda*, Ath-Thawaf songs are also created in a contemplative way, offering 'serious' themes accessible to many. The themes of divinity, humanity, and nature are presented in an easy listening musical style.

In general, the themes of the songs can be divided into three major groups: 1) the relationship between humankind and God, 2) the relationship among humankind, and 3) the relationship between human beings and the environment. These themes have emerged in three Ath-Thawaf's albums, namely *Jihad Tahmid* (2002), *Jamaah* (2003), and *Pancering Hirup* (2003). In addition, there are also a number of songs that have not yet been recorded and released. The aforesaid three themes, always presented in the *Tembang Sunda*, according to Yus, suggests that the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* is contextualized in Ath-Thawaf songs.

Yus is a professional singer in both types of music, and also a songwriter and composer. He wrote most of the lyrics for Ath-Thawaf as well as *Tembang Sunda*, and produced his own musical compositions. Most lyrics of both musical expressions have similarities in using Islamic vocabularies, such as the words, *iman* (faith), *Nu Maha Agung* (Almighty), *Gusti* (God), and so on. Meanwhile, the musical compositions are distinctive because of their different genres, although the first has affected the latter. As contemplative works, themes for both music are similar; examples include the following *Tembang Sunda* songs: *Sekar Wiwitan* that questions the origin of human creation; *Sang Wening Ati* (sincerity) *Sekar Aji* (self-reflection) and so forth, in which localizing these Islamic vocabularies is salient. In Ath-Thawaf, Islamic vocabularies can easily be found in song titles, such as *Jamaah*, *Jihad Tahmid*, *Silaturahmi*, *Al hadist*, and *Istiqomah*.

Religious themes in Sunda pop music are not new though. For example, Bimbo and Doel Sumbang, popular singers from West Java, have created very popular songs with these themes, such as *Dina Amparan Sajadah* (on the unfolded praying mat). However, the option to make religion the only theme, and consistently vocalised it in the music is the only choice for Ath-Thawaf group. In fact, by embracing Islam and Sunda together, Ath-Thawaf intends to touch its audience and mark its identity as Islamic music where Islam-Sunda discourses are contested and negotiated. The group states in its website:

Ath-Thawaf is a Sundanese Islamic ethnic group, based on the awareness of Sundanese and Islamic values which combined together in musical art. This awareness is a result of our observation [of] social phenomena which have changed and [have been] developed recently, [leading] to negative practices.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Some people are confronted with the paradox between the presence and position of traditional performance against a modern life and a contemporary culture. In their interaction with contemporary culture, traditional performance artists perform a variety of new creative art forms in order to keep traditional performances alive and contextual. These efforts include those of Yus Wiradiredja, who created Ath-Thawaf, to produce pop music using contemplative-religious themes.

Combining traditional and Western elements of performance, Ath-Thawaf is considered 'hybrid' music. Its musical concept, stage display, musical instruments, and lyrics can be seen as inspired strongly by the spirit of *Tembang Sunda* which is considered contemplative and spiritual. Using this new form of music, Ath-Thawaf has positioned itself as a space of negotiation where Sundanese and Islamic values meet.

There is an expectation that traditional performances can continue and have a voice in a global culture. Using new significations and meanings, Ath-Thawaf represents hope and opportunity in preserving the inspiration of traditional performance, offering a space to express local and Islamic values in the form of Islamic ethnic music.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid



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Images courtesy of Ath-Thawaf Group

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