

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Indonesia is a great nation and possesses many potentials. The population of Indonesia has nearly reached 250 million people, possessing abundant natural wealth, diverse ethnicities, various cultures, and also religions. Indonesia, with a population that has nearly reached 250 million people, consists mostly of adherents of the Islamic religion (Muhammad, 2020:6-11). Indonesia did not suddenly become a nation with a majority Muslim population without going through a process.

The process of Islam entering Indonesia was caused by its position being in a strategic region, which is located at the intersection of important ancient trade. The first intersection is the Indian Ocean, while the other follows along the South China Sea. That strategic position was beneficial from the aspect of trade, which was accompanied also by the spread of religion. Several Arabic-language reports also discussed the shipping routes from the Persian Gulf to the ports in South China, with a stopover point in the Strait of Malacca. The captains would wait for the change of the monsoon winds in the Strait of Malacca to carry them to continue the journey or return home; in addition to that, trade within the archipelago supplied several goods, one of which must have been spices. The spice traders of Aden, in Yemen, at the beginning of the thirteenth century began to realize the existence of Muslim people inhabiting a place that they now call "Java." Ports on the northern coast of Java Island such as Gresik and Tuban began to emerge because of the influence of powerful people who are now remembered as the *wali*. The word *wali* originates from the Arabic language which means closeness to God. These *wali* numbered nine and are better known by the designation *Wali Sanga*. Several *wali* who are connected with the Islamization of Java consist of Malik Ibrahim, "Tuan" (*Sunan*) Bonang, Ampel, Drajat, and Kalijaga (Laffan, 2015:1-8).

One of the five *wali* who played a role in the Islamization of Java most famous in Surabaya is Sunan Ampel. Sunan Ampel originated from Champa, Vietnam, who had the original name Raden Rachmad and was a nephew of one of the wives of the King of Majapahit. Raden Rachmad was the son of an Arab spreader of the Islamic religion in Champa who married the sister of one of the wives of the king of Majapahit from Champa. Raden Rachmad came to Majapahit in the year 1414, and was appointed by the King of Majapahit to live in Ampel Village and was given the opportunity to spread Islam to the local residents. Raden Rachmad

died in the year 1467 in Ampel and was buried around the Ampel Mosque (Husain, 2010:128).

Ampel Mosque is a legacy from Sunan Ampel. Ampel Mosque has now been made into the oldest Islamic cultural heritage center in Surabaya (Putra & Tucunan, 2021:71). Ampel Mosque is located in Ampel Denta (Holy Ampel) which is now in the North Surabaya area. Ampel Mosque was built by Sunan Ampel in the year 1421 (Husain, 2010:127).



Figure 1. 1 Ampel Mosque Area Surabaya, 2025

(Source: Personal Archives)

The location where the Ampel Mosque stands, namely Ampel Village, is administratively located in the Semampir District. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of Surabaya City, (2025:3) Ampel Sub-district has an area of 0.4 km<sup>2</sup> or 4.41 percent of the total area of the Semampir District. Ampel Sub-district is located on the main road of K.H.M. Mansyur. The boundaries that exist in Ampel Sub-district are the north is Ujung Sub-district of Semampir District, the west is Nyamplungan Sub-district of Pabean District, the south is Nyamplungan Sub-district of Pabean Cantikan District, and the east is Sidotopo Sub-district of Semampir District (Nuraini, 2024:36).

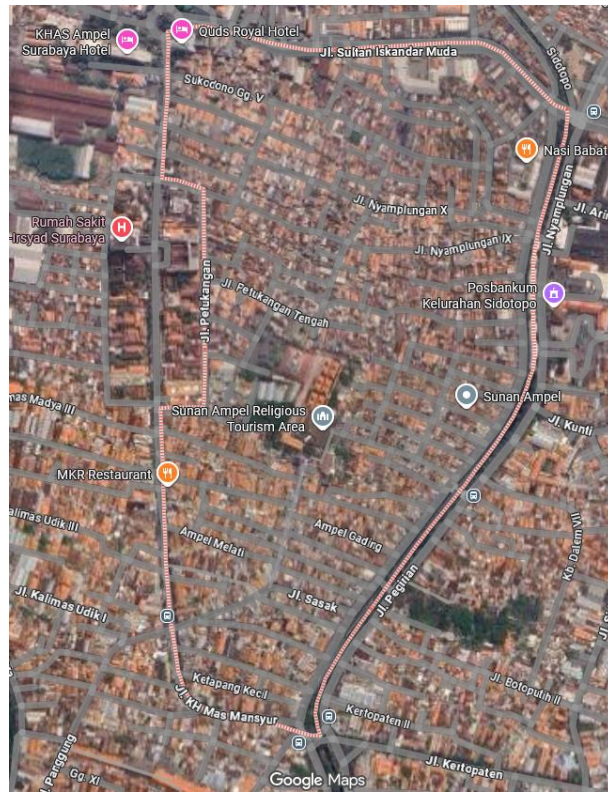


Figure 1. 2 Regional Map of Ampel Sub-district, Semampir District, Surabaya, 2025

(Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Ampel,+Semampir,+Surabaya,+East+Java/> accessed on October 3, 2025)

Surabaya residents know Ampel Village as the "Arab Village" because the majority of its residents' ethnicity is Arab (Basundoro & Sofansyah, 2024:30). Ampel is the birthplace of the Islamic religion in Java. The Ampel area was still a bamboo forest when Raden Rachmad (who later held the title Sunan Ampel) formed an Islamic society. This is what underlies the naming of Ampel, because Ampel is the name of a type of bamboo (Husain, 2010:103).

Ampel Village has now become a tourist destination that focuses on aspects ranging from cultural to religious tourism. Ampel Village as an "Arab Village" certainly reflects a quite strong nuance of Arab culture. Culture, according to the science of anthropology, is a product of thought that gives birth to a work in social life created through a learning process. This has the meaning that almost the entirety of human actions are classified as culture, because very few human actions in social life are not created from a learning process, namely only a few instinctive actions, some reflexes, some actions resulting from physiological processes, or blind behavior. Some human instinctive abilities carried in genes and birth such as eating, drinking, and walking, are even transformed into cultural acts by learning ways of eating and drinking according to table manners, as well as learning the desired way of walking; such as a soldier or a model (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:180).

Culture briefly can be interpreted as wealth and heritage from ancestors that must be preserved. The discussion of culture in more recent cultural studies is put forward by Chris Barker (2004:44) as follows:

The multitudinous ways that culture has been talked about within cultural studies include culture as a whole way of life; as like a language; as constituted by representation; as a tool; as practices; as artefacts; as spatial arrangements; as power; as high or low; as mass and as popular.

Various ways of discussing culture in cultural studies include: culture as a whole way of life; as language; as something formed by representation; as a tool; as a practice; as an artifact; as spatial planning; as power; as high or low culture; as mass culture and popular culture.

Humans, in their journey through the timeline, are capable of bequeathing various types of culture such as ideas or concepts, artistic forms, and material heritage. One of the results of cultural heritage is heritage in visual form (Setiawan & Handayani, 2020:2). Visual culture according to John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin (1997:1-2) is as follows:

...Visual culture can be roughly defined as those material artefacts, building and images, plus time-based media and performances, produced by human labour and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic or ideological-political ends, and/or practical functions, and which address the sense of sight to a significant extent.

John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin's idea regarding visual culture briefly means visual culture as material artifacts, buildings, and images, as well as time-based media and performances, produced by human labor and imagination, which serve aesthetic, symbolic, ritualistic, or ideological-political purposes, and/or practical functions, and involve the sense of sight.

Visual culture can be represented through everything that can be captured by the sense of sight. Representation according to Chris Barker (2004:177) in his book titled *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* is as follows:

The commonsense meaning of the concept of representation is that of a set of processes by which signifying practices appear to stand for or depict another object or practice in the 'real' world. Representation is thus an act of symbolism that mirrors an independent object world. However, for cultural studies representation does not simply reflect in symbolic form 'things' that exist in an independent object world, rather, representations are constitutive of the meaning of that which they purport to stand in for. That is, representation

does not involve correspondence between signs and objects but creates the 'representational effect' of realism.

The definition of representation according to Chris Barker, in other words, is a series of processes in which signifying practices emerge as representatives of other objects or practices in the real world. Representation is a symbolic action that reflects an independent world of objects. Representation in cultural studies does not merely imitate the symbol of an existing thing in an independent object world, but rather forms the meaning of what it represents. Representation does not involve a correspondence between the sign and the object, but creates a representational effect of realism.

The concept of representation has certainly undergone renewal over time. Representation is simply defined as the process of using language by culture to create meaning. Language in this context is defined as any system that uses signs, whether in verbal or non-verbal forms. The function of a sign that can be considered a representation is a sign capable of depicting, imitating something, imagining, or connecting. The father of representation, Stuart Hall, expressed a new concept of representation, namely that representation is not just about interpreting text, but must also be understood from the active and creative role in making sense of the world. Representation is not only about the creation of meaning, but also the exchange of meaning that can be carried out through language, or images as symbols (Alamsyah, 2020:94).

The representation of visual culture in Ampel Village as a religious village tourism area is demonstrated, among others, in souvenir products. A souvenir is an object used as a medium for remembering (Potts, 2018:2). Souvenirs are part of tourism branding. Branding according to Kotler (2009) is a process to create a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of all of them that can be used to identify a product from other competitors (Putri et al., 2021:182). Souvenirs are presented along the Ampel Suci corridor leading to the tomb of Sunan Ampel and the Ampel Mosque.

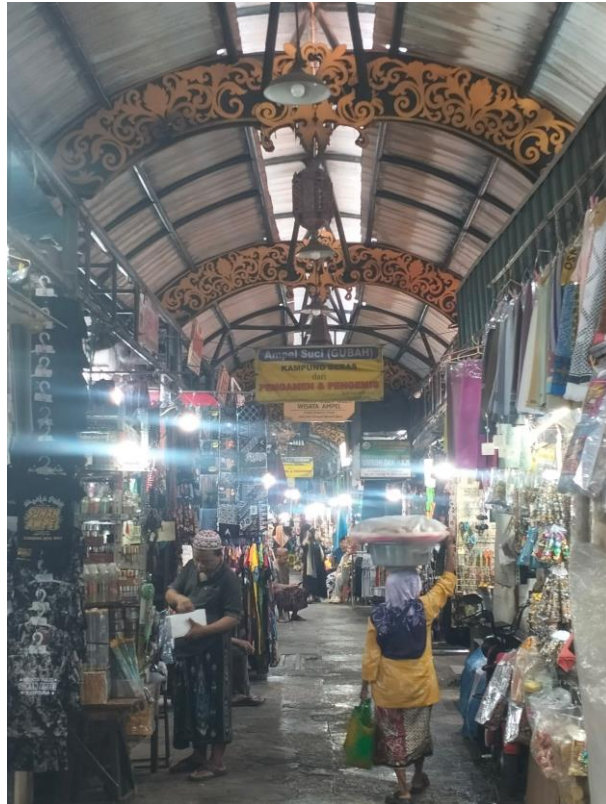


Figure 1. 3 Ampel Suci Corridor, 2025

(Source: Personal Archives)

The souvenirs displayed in the Ampel Suci corridor cover a wide and diverse range of categories. These categories include merchandise, clothing, fabrics, home decor, religious items, children's toys, perfumes, and food. The merchandise category is dominated by keychains and bracelets. The clothing category is dominated by children's clothing, as well as abayas for women and men. The fabric category features fabrics with distinctive Arab patterns combined with traditional Javanese motifs. The home decor category includes calligraphy, wall clocks, paintings, and vases. The religious items category is dominated by sarongs, skullcaps, prayer shawls, prayer mats, prayer beads, and tambourines. The children's toys category focuses on selling trendy children's toys. The perfume category is dominated by roll-on perfumes and perfume refills. The food category is dominated by dates, kebabs, kamir cakes, samosas, and maryam bread. All souvenir categories sold in Ampel Village feature distinctive visual elements designed to attract tourists' purchasing interest. These visual elements in the souvenirs can also be utilized as a medium to strengthen the branding of the Ampel Village area as a religious tourism destination.

Souvenirs representing Ampel Village certainly contain distinctive Ampel signs or symbols, but they are often viewed merely as decorative elements supporting product sales.

These signs or symbols can be found in the souvenirs used as research objects, such as T-shirts featuring Ampel's distinctive gate (*gapura*) and typography in Arabic script, and Ampel-style tote bags depicting the Ampel Mosque and a becak. All research objects were obtained through direct observation in Ampel Village in 2025. The signs or symbols appearing in the research objects are linked to religious beliefs, which raises the question: do the religious signs appearing in these souvenirs still represent religious meaning, and how have they shifted?

The visual signs that appear in souvenirs as branding are worth examining to understand why these souvenir objects are used as religious representations, using a visual semiotics approach. Visual semiotics involves understanding how people construct and interpret the meanings of various visual messages embedded in sign systems such as graphics, images, body language, and text. Saussure viewed visual semiotics as an independent sign system that can be divided into two parts: the form taken by the sign (signifier) and the concept or idea that this form evokes in our minds (signified). Saussure stated that denotative signs, or first-order signs, are understood to have literal meaning, while connotative signs are considered second-order signs that generate a chain of connotations linking the signifier (the image) and the signified (the concept attached to it) (Dunleavy, 2020:155-160). Roland Barthes then introduced the concept of the mythical sign. A myth is a semiotic structure that enables an object to understand and create a cohesive identity (Ryan, 2020:185).

## **1.2 Research Question**

1. What motifs are featured on souvenirs in Ampel Village, Surabaya, that characterize this religious tourist area?
2. How are religious symbols incorporated into the souvenirs through their shape, ornamentation, color, or other visual elements that represent Islamic values?
3. Why were these images chosen to convey or represent religiosity?

## **1.3 Scope of the Problem**

1. This study is limited to an examination of souvenirs sold in 2025 in the "Arab Village" religious tourism area in Ampel, Surabaya, and does not cover all aspects of trade or the economic activities of the local community.
2. The analysis focuses solely on the religious symbolic signs found on the souvenirs and the accompanying production aspects, without addressing distribution aspects or product features lacking religious symbolic value.

3. The approach employed is visual semiotics, so the study focuses on the process of sign meaning production (denotation, connotation, and myth) within the visual representations of the souvenirs.

#### **1.4 Research Purposes**

1. To examine and describe the forms of religious symbols found in souvenirs in the “Arab Village” of Ampel, Surabaya.
2. To uncover the religious meanings represented in the souvenirs, as well as how those meanings are produced.
3. To analyze how these visual signs are understood through a visual semiotic approach (denotation, connotation, and myth).

#### **1.5 Research Benefit**

1. For Institutions
  - a. To serve as an academic reference in the development of visual semiotics studies within the context of religious culture in Indonesia.
  - b. To serve as an academic reference for educational and research institutions focused on cultural and tourism studies.
2. For the Community
  - a. To provide an understanding of the meaning of religious symbolic signs in souvenirs, so that the community can better appreciate the religious values contained within them.
  - b. Encourage local communities to participate in preserving and developing souvenirs that are not only economically valuable but also possess religious and cultural significance.
3. For Visual Communication Design Students
  - a. Serve as an academic reference for understanding how visual design can be used as a medium for religious representation.
  - b. Serve as an example of the application of visual semiotics theory in analyzing everyday cultural products, particularly souvenirs.