

ISLAMIC SYMBOLISM AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION IN THE SEKATEN CEREMONY IN YOGYAKARTA

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Abstract

The *Sekaten* ceremony in Yogyakarta has been preserved for centuries as part of the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth. This study analyzes how three central rituals of the *Sekaten*, namely *Miyos Gongso*, *Miyos Dalem*, and *Grebeg Mulud*, function as symbolic media for transmitting Islamic devotion, ethical guidance, and communal solidarity through Javanese cultural forms. The research applies a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological and symbolic framework. Data are based on textual and historical sources that document Islamic acculturation and ritual practice. The analysis employs hermeneutic interpretation supported by triangulation of data and theory as well as interpretative phenomenological analysis to strengthen credibility and depth of interpretation. The findings show that *Miyos Gongso* conveys Islamic teachings through *gendhing* compositions that emphasize sincerity, repentance, and purity while remaining embedded in Javanese musical aesthetics. *Miyos Dalem* presents the Prophet's biography as a form of ritual pedagogy that promotes ethical emulation and parallels the *manaqib* tradition. *Grebeg Mulud* culminates the celebration with *gunungan* offerings that express gratitude to God, dramatize life's struggles, and reinforce communal solidarity through shared participation. The study demonstrates that the spread of Islam in Java was achieved not by rejecting existing traditions but by reinterpreting them symbolically. The *Sekaten* illustrates how Islamic values were embedded in cultural practices, producing a synthesis that remains socially persuasive and spiritually meaningful. This case contributes to scholarship on religion and culture by showing how faith becomes localized through cultural engagement and symbolic negotiation.

Keywords: *Sekaten, Islamic symbolism, cultural acculturation, phenomenology*

Abstrak

Upacara *Sekaten* di Yogyakarta telah dilestarikan selama berabad-abad sebagai bagian dari peringatan kelahiran Nabi Muhammad SAW. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana tiga ritual utama dalam *Sekaten*, yaitu *Miyos Gongso*, *Miyos Dalem*, dan *Grebeg Mulud*, berfungsi sebagai media simbolik untuk menyampaikan pengabdian kepada Allah, teladan etis, dan solidaritas sosial melalui bentuk budaya Jawa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan kerangka fenomenologi dan simbolik. Data bersumber dari teks dan catatan historis tentang akulturasi Islam dan praktik ritual. Analisis dilakukan melalui interpretasi hermeneutik yang didukung oleh triangulasi data dan teori serta analisis fenomenologi interpretatif untuk memperkuat kredibilitas dan kedalaman tafsir. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *Miyos Gongso* menyampaikan ajaran Islam melalui komposisi *gendhing* yang menekankan keikhlasan, pertobatan, dan kesucian dengan tetap berakar pada estetika musik Jawa. *Miyos Dalem*

menampilkan riwayat Nabi sebagai pedagogi ritual yang mendorong peneladanan akhlak dan memiliki kesamaan dengan tradisi *manaqib*. *Grebeg Mulud* menjadi puncak perayaan melalui persembahan *gunungan* yang melambangkan rasa syukur kepada Allah, menggambarkan perjuangan hidup, dan memperkuat solidaritas sosial melalui partisipasi bersama. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa penyebaran Islam di Jawa tidak terjadi dengan menolak tradisi yang sudah ada, melainkan melalui reinterpretasi simbolik atas tradisi tersebut. *Sekaten* memperlihatkan bagaimana nilai-nilai Islam ditanamkan dalam praktik budaya, menghasilkan sintesis yang tetap meyakinkan secara sosial dan bermakna secara spiritual. Kajian ini memberikan kontribusi pada studi agama dan budaya dengan menunjukkan bagaimana iman dapat berakar melalui keterlibatan budaya dan negosiasi simbolik.

Kata Kunci: *Sekaten, simbolisme Islam, akulturasi buday, fenomenologi*

A. Introduction

The *Sekaten* ceremony, which originated with Sunan Kalijaga during the Islamic Demak kingdom, has long functioned as a medium for spreading Islamic teachings through cultural forms that resonated with Javanese society (Putri & Hudaidah, 2021). At that time, strong animist and dynamist beliefs made the open teaching of Islam difficult because religious life was oriented toward unseen and supernatural forces believed to shape human affairs (Setiawan & Amaliyah, 2021). In this context, methods of *da'wah* that harmonized ancestral traditions with Islamic values proved highly effective in gaining acceptance among the wider community. The term *Sekaten* is derived from *syahadatain*, referring to the two sentences of the Islamic creed. The practice began when Sunan Kalijaga played *gamelan* instruments in the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Demak to gather people and attract them with songs containing Islamic messages. This was followed by shadow puppet performances and a grand religious sermon. To participate, individuals were required to recite the *syahadatain*, and from this requirement the name *Sekaten* became widely known (Lisbijanto, 2019).

The tradition continues today at the Yogyakarta Palace, where the *Sekaten* ceremony is preserved and performed annually to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad on the twelfth of Rabiul Awwal. The celebration involves several ritual stages. It begins with a thanksgiving prayer, followed by the *Miyos Gongso*, during which the sacred *gamelan* sets *Kiai Gunturmadu* and *Kiai Nagawilaga* are carried from Bangsal Pancaniti to the terrace of the Kauman Grand Mosque and played for six consecutive days. This is followed by the *Numplak Wajik* procession, which prepares the *gunungan* for the *Grebeg Mulud*. On the eve of the peak celebration, the *Miyos Dalem* takes place, featuring the recitation of the Prophet's biography by the *Kiai Penghulu*, attended by the

royal family, courtiers, and local residents. The celebration culminates with the *Grebeg Mulud*, when the Jaler and Estri *gunungan* are released in the courtyard of the Kauman Grand Mosque after prayers have been completed (Ahmad et al., 2021; Nursolehah, 2018).

Although *Sekaten* has been extensively studied, previous scholarship has mainly emphasized its historical development, cultural significance, and role in Javanese–Islamic acculturation while systematic interpretation of its Islamic symbols remains limited. Much of the existing research describes the tradition’s evolution and its persistence as a vehicle of cultural adaptation, but less attention has been given to analyzing how specific ritual components such as music, processions, and offerings convey Islamic devotion, ethical exemplarity, and social cohesion. Nurdin Zuhdi and Sawaun (2021) explored Qur’anic reception in local cultural practice, and Akbar (2024) examined Islamic symbolism in *Sekaten* rituals, yet a comprehensive symbolic analysis using a coherent theoretical and hermeneutic framework has not been sufficiently developed.

This article addresses the gap by examining three central ritual moments of the Yogyakarta Palace *Sekaten*, namely *Miyos Gongso*, *Miyos Dalem*, and *Grebeg Mulud*, as key sites of Islamic symbolism. It explores how these rituals convey devotion, ethical exemplarity, and communal solidarity through symbolic forms that integrate Islamic values into Javanese cultural expression. The study contributes by showing that the spread of Islam in Java was realized not through the rejection of local traditions but through their reinterpretation, resulting in a ritual synthesis that remains meaningful for both religious life and social identity today.

B. Methods

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach that employs a phenomenological perspective to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Sekaten* ceremony at the Yogyakarta Palace (Creswell, 2013). The analysis is guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological framework that involves setting aside prior assumptions in order to approach the symbols in their own context.

The primary data is drawn from textual and historical sources that document the development of Islamic acculturation and the symbolic dimensions of ritual practice, including books, journal articles, and archival records (Moleong, 2010). Ritual components such as *Miyos Gongso*, *Miyos Dalem*, and *Grebeg Mulud* were selected for analysis because of their historical importance, ritual function, and resonance in community interpretation. These elements were then examined in dialogue with Islamic philosophical perspectives and concepts of cultural *da’wah* (Smith et al., 2022).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies of validation were applied. Triangulation of data was achieved through consultation of multiple types of sources that cover historical, ethnographic, and interpretive accounts. Triangulation of theory and investigator triangulation were pursued by discussing preliminary interpretations with colleagues in Islamic cultural studies and by comparing them with

perspectives from symbolic interactionism and *da'wah* literature (Patton, 2015). Member checking was carried out by presenting initial interpretations to a small group of cultural practitioners and palace staff, allowing refinement of the analysis where necessary (Birt et al., 2016). The analytic process followed the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which combine descriptive accounts of ritual with interpretive depth. Themes were identified, linked to theoretical constructs, and clarified through careful comparison across sources. This procedure strengthened the credibility and plausibility of the interpretations (Smith, 2011)

C. Results and Discussion

1. Symbols and the Meaning of *Sekaten* at the Yogyakarta Palace

The notion of a symbol has been widely explored in linguistic, anthropological, and religious studies. In the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), a symbol is defined as an emblem or sign that indicates something or conveys a particular meaning, functioning as a marker that reflects certain characteristics or conditions. In Indonesian society, for instance, the *songkok* or *peci* serves as an indicator of Muslim identity, while the cross is associated with Christianity (Untung & Rosyada, 2021). Dillistone traces the term symbol to the Greek word *symbollein*, meaning “to match,” with the matched parts called *symbola* (Punto Hendro, 2020). From this origin, symbols can be understood as objects, words, or signs used for recognition based on meanings that are already known (Wardani, 2010). John A. Saliba explains that symbols act as vehicles of thought and communication that express meanings beyond literal information (Saliba, 1976). Mircea Eliade similarly emphasizes that all human activities are filled with symbolism, which provides a fundamental way to access religious understanding, since human beings, constrained by worldly limitations, rely on symbolic forms to experience the sacred (Saliba, 1976). Charles Morris extends this view by arguing that symbols range from simple to highly complex expressions of meaning (Hidayat, 2021).

From these perspectives, a symbol can be understood as a sign attached to an object or practice that conveys layers of meaning, whether material or non-material. Material symbols can be seen in places of worship, such as mosques marked by minarets and loudspeakers for the call to prayer or churches distinguished by the cross. Non-material symbols include practices like the Muslim five daily prayers guided by the call to prayer and Christian worship expressed through hymns (Hidayat, 2021). These definitions provide a foundation for analyzing the symbolic dimensions of the *Sekaten* ceremony at the Yogyakarta Palace. With this foundation established, the discussion moves to the *Sekaten* itself, examining how the ceremony has been interpreted as both a cultural performance and an expression of Islamic devotion.

The meaning of *Sekaten* itself has been interpreted in several ways. One perspective links it to Sultan Hamengkubuwono I, who observed how the *Walisongo* spread Islam through art and performance. The Sultan then organized similar activities during the month of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, including religious sermons and

Qur'anic recitations, which served as opportunities for those interested to declare the *syahadatain* in the courtyard of the Kauman Grand Mosque. To attract public attention, the Sultan also arranged *karawitan* or *gamelan* performances in the northern square, and this tradition gradually developed into the *Sekaten* (Lisbijanto, 2019).

Another view traces *Sekaten* to the time of Sunan Kalijaga during the reign of Raden Patah of the Demak Sultanate. Using a set of *gamelan* made by Sunan Giri, Sunan Kalijaga performed in the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Demak, accompanied by songs, shadow puppet plays, and sermons. Participation required reciting the *syahadatain*, and the repetition of this practice gave rise to the name *Sekaten* (Lisbijanto, 2019). A further explanation relates *Sekaten* to the word *sekati*, referring to a set of brass *gamelan* believed to date back to the Majapahit kingdom. After the fall of Majapahit, the instruments were inherited by the Demak Sultanate and later by the courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. The Yogyakarta Palace preserves the sets Kiai Gunturmadu and Kiai Nagawilaga, which are played annually during the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday from the fifth to the eleventh of Rabiul Awwal (Nursolehah, 2018).

There are also interpretations that derive *Sekaten* from the Javanese words *suka* and *ati*, meaning "happy heart," reflecting the joyful celebration of the Prophet's birthday and the community's gratitude expressed through rituals such as *sedekah bumi* or almsgiving of food and clothing (Yahya, 2009). Another explanation comes from the word *sakhataini*, which carries the meaning of instilling two values, sincere worship of Allah and noble character, while eliminating two negative traits, animalistic impulses and satanic desires. This interpretation highlights the ethical and spiritual dimensions of *Sekaten* as a practice that encourages sincerity, devotion, and social harmony (Sudirman, 2014).

The different interpretations of *Sekaten* illustrate that the ceremony carries multiple layers of symbolic meaning. It is not only maintained as a cultural tradition but also functions as a medium that integrates Islamic devotion with Javanese aesthetics and communal practices. The variations in etymology and ritual performance consistently point to the central role of the *syahadatain* as the foundation of faith, while the artistic and performative elements serve as vehicles through which Islamic values were communicated in forms that were familiar and persuasive to Javanese society.

2. The Philosophical Meaning of Islamic Symbols in the *Sekaten* Ceremony

Miyos Gongso

The procession of *Miyos Gongso* derives from Javanese words in which *miyos* means "to come out" and *gongso* refers to the *gamelan*. It marks the moment when the sacred *gamelan* sets Kiai Gunturmadu and Kiai Nagawilaga are carried from the palace to the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Kauman, where they are played for six consecutive days during the *Sekaten* commemoration. This ritual signals the opening of the ceremony and symbolizes the presentation of Islamic teachings through cultural forms.

Historically, the sets were inherited from the Demak Sultanate and preserved by the Mataram court. Accounts trace their use back to Raden Patah and the *Walisongo*, who employed *gamelan* as a medium of *da'wah* when direct preaching was unlikely to be accepted by Javanese society still influenced by Hindu culture. Sunan Kalijaga proposed using *gamelan* to gather audiences, while Sunan Giri created a special set for this purpose. From its earliest use, *Miyos Gongso* therefore represented a strategy of cultural adaptation in spreading Islam (Daryanto, 2015; Suyami, 2008; Nursolehah, 2018).

The repertoire played during *Miyos Gongso* includes numerous *gendhing* that contain Islamic messages. One well-known composition attributed to Sunan Kalijaga is *E Dhayuhe Teka*, which portrays Islam as a guest to be welcomed with sincerity and purity of heart. Its verses call on listeners to cleanse themselves, to repent, and to prepare for life by drawing closer to Allah, symbolizing moral readiness to embrace the faith (Yahya, 2009). Other central pieces include *Gendhing Rambu* from the Arabic *rabbuna* meaning “our Lord,” *Gendhing Rangkung* associated with *ro'akunna* meaning “who cares for you,” *Andong-andong* symbolizing the growth of Islamic teachings, and *Supiyatun* representing purity of heart (Admin, 2020; Novia Sapphira, 2019). Together, these compositions embed Islamic devotion in familiar musical aesthetics.

The function of *Miyos Gongso* can also be understood in relation to broader Islamic traditions of devotional music. Its parallels with *hadrah*, which combines rhythmic chanting and *shalawat* for the Prophet, demonstrate how music operates as a medium of remembrance and teaching. Both traditions embed sacred messages in familiar artistic forms, making them persuasive and accessible for their audiences (Hayuningtyas, 2018; Mujahidin, 1985).

From a theoretical perspective, Turner's concept of ritual symbols as “storage units” clarifies how *Miyos Gongso* condenses layers of meaning into a single performative act. The compositions are not only musical works but also carriers of devotion, pedagogy, and social integration (Nasir, 2019; Pratt Walton, 2007). In this way, *Miyos Gongso* exemplifies how Islamic values were localized and internalized through cultural media that balanced spiritual teaching with Javanese aesthetic expression. While *Miyos Gongso* conveys meaning through musical performance, the next stage, *Miyos Dalem*, highlights narrative devotion and the transmission of ethical exemplarity.

Miyos Dalem

The procession of *Miyos Dalem* is performed on the night before the *Grebeg Mulud* and represents the spiritual climax of the *Sekaten* celebration. The word *miyos* in this context comes from *wiyos* meaning “birth,” while *dalem* refers to the noble person of the Prophet Muhammad. Linguistically, *Miyos Dalem* signifies the birth of the Prophet. This differs from *Miyos Gongso*, where *miyos* refers to the coming out of the *gamelan*. The ceremony is held in the foyer of the Great Mosque of Kauman, led by the Kiai Penghulu, and is attended by the Sultan, members of the royal family, court officials, and local residents (Sudirman, 2014).

The recitation of the Prophet's life begins with his genealogy from the tribes of Qahthan and 'Adnan, continues with accounts of pre-Islamic Arabia including the story of Abraham and the pagan religions of the time, and then proceeds to the Prophet's birth, his mission, the migration to Medina, and his passing (Dipaningrat, 1989). The ritual concludes with symbolic offerings, such as *Sumping Melati* presented to the Sultan, which expresses the hope that leaders and participants will embody the Prophet's exemplary conduct (Makhfudoh, 2020).

This practice parallels the *manaqib* tradition in Islam, which involves the recitation of the lives and virtues of saints, most prominently Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani. Works such as *Bahjat al-Asrar* by al-Shattanawi, *Khulashah al-Mufakhir* by al-Yafi'i, and *Natijah al-Tahqiq* by Abdullah Muhammad ad-Dilai preserve accounts of his piety and miracles (Sujati, 2021). The tradition became widespread in the Indonesian archipelago through the influence of Sufi scholars and Muslim traders from Arabia, India, and Persia who arrived as early as the seventh century (Wahidin & Abdurrahman, 1984). The *manaqib* readings functioned as a pedagogical tool to strengthen devotion, promote remembrance of the saints, and inspire imitation of their ethical character (Sholikhin, 2009; Aqib, 2009).

Theologically, the balance between reverence and moderation is underlined by the hadith: "Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians exaggerated in praising Jesus, the son of Mary. I am only His servant, so say 'the servant of Allah and His Messenger'" (al-Bukhārī, 2001; Arroisi, 2019). This principle explains why *Miyos Dalem* emphasizes ethical exemplarity rather than excessive glorification. Historically, the practice of narrating the Prophet's life gained prominence during the Ayyubid period under Saladin as a means of renewing devotion and strengthening communal identity (Fillah, 2019).

The Qur'an itself affirms the importance of such narratives: "And We have already sent messengers before you; among them are those We have related to you, and among them are those We have not related to you" (Q. al-Mu'min: 78). This verse situates *Miyos Dalem* and *manaqib* practices within the broader Islamic tradition of transmitting moral lessons through stories of the prophets and the pious (Sujati, 2021).

From a symbolic perspective, *Miyos Dalem* functions as more than ceremonial homage. It serves as a ritual pedagogy that transmits the virtues of the Prophet, reinforcing communal identity and encouraging ethical emulation. The practice parallels the *manaqib* of Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani, which similarly aimed to cultivate humility, compassion, and steadfast devotion among the faithful (S. Yahya, 2020; Knysh, 2020). Both traditions highlight how Islamic teachings were localized in Java through the integration of Sufi devotional forms with Javanese cultural frameworks.

In this sense, *Miyos Dalem* embodies the mechanism of symbolic reconfiguration emphasized in this study. The recitation of the Prophet's life transforms historical memory into a living guide for conduct. By embedding devotion in narrative, performance, and communal gathering, the ritual ensures that Islamic teachings are not merely remembered but enacted in daily life. Thus, *Miyos Dalem* represents a cultural

form through which Islam was able to spread in Java without displacing existing traditions, aligning with the broader aim of *da'wah* through cultural engagement. After the recitation of the Prophet's life, the celebration reaches its peak in Grebeg Mulud, which translates symbolic devotion into collective offering and communal solidarity.

Grebeg Mulud

The *Grebeg Mulud* marks the culmination of the *Sekaten* celebration, held on the twelfth of Rabiul Awwal to honor the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Central to this ritual are the *gunungan*, mountain-shaped offerings prepared during the *Numplak Wajik* procession and brought to the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Kauman. These offerings, which are blessed by the Kiai Penghulu before distribution, embody gratitude to God and the hope for prosperity among the people (Lisbijanto, 2019).

Historical sources indicate that the *grebeg* ceremony has roots in Hindu-Buddhist traditions such as the Rajaweda ritual, originally intended to ward off calamities. With the spread of Islam in Java, the form of the ritual was preserved but infused with new meaning. Under the leadership of the Demak Sultanate, the *grebeg* was reoriented to commemorate the Prophet's birth, thereby transforming a familiar practice into a medium of Islamic devotion (Daliman, 2012; Bambang, 2022).

The symbolism of the *gunungan* is particularly rich. The male and female mountains, known as Jaler and Estri, recall the creation of Adam and Eve and affirm that human life originates from the Creator. Smaller mountains, called *saradan*, along with rice offerings placed on a palanquin called *ancak canthaka*, symbolize descendants and the responsibility to sustain future generations. Collectively, the *gunungan* express ideals of generosity, social balance, and gratitude, urging participants to live with awareness of their obligations to both God and society (Lisbijanto, 2019).

After the blessings, the offerings are distributed in a practice known as *ngrayah*, where community members eagerly scramble for a share. While chaotic on the surface, this act carries symbolic depth. It illustrates the struggles of life, where effort and persistence are required before reward is attained (Nursolehah, 2018). Socially, it reinforces solidarity, as the ritual distributes both material and symbolic blessings across the community. The shared participation transforms individual competition into collective affirmation, strengthening bonds of belonging and devotion (Hobson et al., 2018; Durkheim, 1912). Viewed in this light, the *Grebeg Mulud* integrates ethical, spiritual, and communal dimensions. It demonstrates how Islamic values of remembrance, justice, and social harmony were embedded into a longstanding cultural form. By reinterpreting the ritual within an Islamic framework, the ceremony ensured that devotion to the Prophet and to God could be expressed through practices that remained familiar and meaningful to Javanese society.

D. Conclusion

This study found that the three central rituals of the Yogyakarta Palace *Sekaten* function as symbolic media through which Islam was transmitted in Java. *Miyos Gongso* shows how devotional messages were expressed through music and performance, *Miyos Dalem* presents the Prophet's biography as a model of ethical conduct, and *Grebeg Mulud* demonstrates communal solidarity through offerings that affirm divine providence and social responsibility. These findings reveal that the ceremony as a whole operates as a negotiated synthesis in which Islamic values were embedded within Javanese cultural forms and became persuasive because they were familiar and meaningful to the community.

The analysis demonstrates that the success of Islamic propagation in Java was not achieved through the removal of local traditions but through their reinterpretation and symbolic reconfiguration. Rituals that were already embedded in the life of the community were given new meaning and became vehicles of religious devotion, ethical pedagogy, and social cohesion. In this way the *Sekaten* provides a clear example of how Islam became rooted in Javanese society by working with cultural forms rather than replacing them.

The study contributes to broader scholarship on religion and culture by offering an interpretive model of how symbolic forms mediate between tradition and faith. It highlights that cultural adaptation and religious propagation can work together to create new syntheses of meaning that are both spiritually significant and socially resilient. The case of the *Sekaten* suggests that similar processes can be observed in other contexts where religion interacts with deeply rooted cultural systems, providing a useful lens for understanding how communities negotiate continuity and change in their spiritual lives.

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