

RITUAL, THEOLOGY, AND ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION: THE GREBEK BESAR TRADITION IN DEMAK REGENCY

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Abstract

Within the broader history of Islamic civilization in Java, ritual traditions such as Grebek Besar have functioned as key sites for the transmission, reinterpretation, and embodiment of Islamic ethical and theological values. This study examines the cultural and theological dimensions of the Grebek Besar festival in Demak Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, one of the most significant Islamic cultural events in Java. Rooted in the commemoration of Eid al-Adha, the festival embodies a dynamic synthesis between Islamic doctrine and Javanese cultural expression. Previous studies have largely treated Grebek Besar as a folkloric or historical tradition, without adequately examining its lived-theological meanings as articulated by local religious actors and enacted in everyday ritual practices. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, this study is based on participant observation, in-depth interviews with religious leaders and community elders, and analysis of local archives and manuscripts. The findings are consolidated into a central thematic claim: Grebek Besar functions as a form of lived Islamic theology in which ritual performances, symbolic objects, and communal participation operate as interconnected mechanisms that sustain religious piety, social cohesion, and cultural continuity among Javanese Muslims. The study demonstrates that the festival is not merely a cultural celebration, but a ritualized space of Islamic devotion embedded in local custom. Processions, communal prayers, and food-

sharing practices are shown to carry theological meanings that reinforce the community's relationship with God while affirming collective historical memory and identity. This research makes a specific scholarly contribution by proposing an empirically grounded framework of "lived theology" in Javanese Islam, bridging normative Islamic theological concepts such as syukr and ukhuwah with anthropological analyses of ritual, symbolism, and collective memory, and thereby advancing interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Islam and local religiosity in Indonesia.

Dalam sejarah panjang peradaban Islam di Jawa, tradisi ritual seperti Grebek Besar berfungsi sebagai ruang penting bagi transmisi, reinterpretasi, dan perwujudan nilai-nilai etika dan teologi Islam. Berfokus pada tradisi ini, penelitian ini mengkaji dimensi kultural dan teologis dari festival Grebek Besar di Kabupaten Demak, Jawa Tengah, yang merupakan salah satu perayaan budaya Islam paling signifikan di Jawa. Berakar pada peringatan Iduladha, festival ini merepresentasikan sintesis dinamis antara ajaran Islam dan ekspresi budaya Jawa. Kajian-kajian sebelumnya umumnya memandang Grebek Besar sebagai tradisi folklorik atau peristiwa historis, tanpa menelaah secara memadai makna teoretis teologi yang hidup dalam praktik sosial dan ritual (*lived theology*) sebagaimana dimaknai oleh aktor-aktor keagamaan lokal dan diwujudkan dalam praktik ritual sehari-hari. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif etnografis, penelitian ini didasarkan pada observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh agama dan sesepuh masyarakat, serta analisis arsip dan manuskrip lokal. Temuan penelitian ini dirumuskan dalam satu klaim tematik utama, yaitu bahwa Grebek Besar berfungsi sebagai bentuk teologi Islam yang dihidupi, di mana pertunjukan ritual, objek simbolik, dan partisipasi komunal saling terhubung sebagai mekanisme yang menopang kesalehan religius, kohesi sosial, dan kesinambungan budaya di kalangan Muslim Jawa. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Grebek Besar bukan sekadar perayaan budaya, melainkan ruang ritual devosional Islam yang tertanam dalam adat lokal. Arak-arakan, doa bersama, dan praktik berbagi makanan mengandung makna teologis yang memperkuat relasi komunitas dengan Tuhan sekaligus meneguhkan memori historis dan identitas kolektif. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi ilmiah dengan mengajukan kerangka teoretis *lived theology* dalam konteks Islam Jawa yang berlandaskan data empiris, dengan menjembatani konsep-konsep teologi Islam normatif seperti syukr dan ukhuwah dengan analisis antropologis mengenai ritual, simbolisme, dan memori kolektif, sehingga memperkaya pendekatan interdisipliner dalam kajian Islam dan religiusitas lokal di Indonesia.

Keywords: Grebek Besar; Islamic culture; Javanese Islamic civilization; ritual symbolism; religious tradition

Introduction

Grebek Besar is one of the most iconic cultural and religious festivals in Demak Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, celebrated annually to commemorate the Islamic feast of Eid al-Adha. As a historical heart of the early spread of Islam in Java, Demak holds a unique position in shaping the cultural expression of Javanese Islam. The *Grebek Besar* festival thus occupies a vital place within the collective memory of the local Muslim community, intertwining theological devotion with cultural continuity (Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025). This event not only reflects the religious zeal of the people of Demak but also embodies their efforts to preserve the spiritual and cultural legacy inherited from the era of the Wali Songo, particularly the influence of the Demak Sultanate, the first Islamic kingdom in Java (Aini & Ribawati, 2025; Ansari, 2024; Burhani, 2018). In this sense, *Grebek Besar* is not merely a historical remnant, but a living tradition whose contemporary practices provide an important analytical lens for understanding how Islamic values are continuously reinterpreted, negotiated, and embodied in the social life of present-day Javanese Muslim communities (Nurrokhmah et al., 2025; Syahputra et al., 2025; Yasinatul, 2025).

Contemporary anthropological approaches have problematized the use of the term “*syncretism*”, arguing that it often obscures the agency of local communities in shaping and rearticulating their religious practices. In the case of *Grebek Besar*, scholars characterize the ritual as a form of acculturation or localized orthodoxy, where Islamic discourses are actively interpreted and embedded within Javanese cultural frameworks, producing a dynamic and context-specific religiosity rather than a simple blending of distinct systems (‘Aisy, et al., 2024).

Theologically, *Grebek Besar* signifies an act of communal piety (*ibadah jama'i*) and gratitude (*syukr*) to Allah for blessings and sustenance. The procession of offerings (*ubo rampe*), the collective prayer in the Great Mosque of Demak, and the participation of thousands of residents demonstrate the community's unity and submission to divine will (Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025). At the same time, these practices serve as a performative reaffirmation of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) and social solidarity. Thus, the festival operates not only as a ritual commemoration of *Eid al-Adha* but also as a medium for maintaining moral values, cultural harmony, and social cohesion (Ansari, 2024; Nurrokhmah et al., 2025; Syahputra et al., 2025).

Analytically, this study operationalizes these three key concepts as

follows: *ibadah jama'i* is examined as collective ritual action expressed through patterns of participation, role distribution, and spatial organization within the festival (Fitriyani et al., 2024); *syukr* is analyzed as expressions of gratitude manifested in practices of offering (*ubo rampe*), sermon narratives, and participants' accounts (Siregar et al., 2025); and *ukhuwah* is interpreted as indicators of social solidarity reflected in networks of mutual assistance, food-sharing practices, and the discourse of communal belonging (Millasari et al., 2025; Aini & Ribawati, 2025). These concepts are examined through thematic coding of participant observation and in-depth interviews, as well as discourse analysis of sermons and local archival materials (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Ahmed, 2025).

Studies on Javanese Islam have historically foregrounded the complex processes of cultural accommodation and the localized articulation of Islamic teachings within pre-existing belief systems. Geertz's framework remains useful for understanding how religious practices are negotiated across cultural boundaries, even as later scholarship critiques its structural rigidity and limited attention to theological depth. To address these limitations, contemporary research adopts more contextually grounded frameworks such as the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, which emphasizes contextualization, moderation, and cultural integration of Islam with local traditions in Indonesia. Scholars of Islam Nusantara argue that local practices such as communal rituals, feasts, and prayer traditions constitute expressions of Islamic values articulated through indigenous cultural idioms rather than dilutions of orthodoxy. This perspective reflects the broader, dynamic negotiation between religion and culture in the Indonesian context (Ansari, 2024).

Contemporary empirical studies further illustrate this dynamic. For example, research on the *tahlilan* tradition in Java frames it as a *kearifan lokal* within the Islam Nusantara paradigm, with ritual practices rooted in historical Sufi-inspired da'wah strategies understood as locally internalized Islamic piety that reinforce social cohesion and sustain cultural identity (Aini & Ribawati, 2025). Similarly, recent scholarship on the interaction between Islamic law (*shari'ah*) and Javanese *adat* demonstrates that the integration of Islamic norms into local customary frameworks—without compromising essential doctrinal principles—has produced a contextual, culturally embedded form of Islam characteristic of Java's religious landscape (Millasari et al., 2025). These studies support the present research by situating Grebek Besar within broader patterns of cultural negotiation and localized orthodoxy in

Javanese Islam, showing that such rituals are not peripheral folkloric artifacts but central manifestations of lived religiosity through which Islamic sacred values are expressed in culturally resonant forms.

Other scholars of Indonesian Islam, such as Burhani (2018), have traced the historical development of Islamic thought and spirituality in the archipelago, highlighting the formative influence of *tasawuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *tarekat* (Sufi orders) in shaping local religious consciousness. The spread of Islam in Java was not achieved through coercive conversion but through gradual acculturation, facilitated by religious teachers and saints (*Wali Songo*) who adapted Islamic teachings to local cultural frameworks. This historical pattern of cultural adaptation provides a theoretical backdrop for understanding how rituals like Grebek Besar continue to thrive as embodied expressions of both religious devotion and cultural heritage.

Recent studies have begun to address the socio-cultural transformations of traditional rituals in response to modernization and social change. Research on Grebek Besar by Rafi Hidayat and Fu'adah (2025) shows that the festival remains resilient despite increasing pressures from commercialization, tourism, and media representation, functioning as a medium through which Islamic values and local cultural identity are continuously negotiated and sustained. However, much of the existing scholarship still tends to emphasize descriptive ethnographic accounts, leaving a theoretical gap in analyzing the deeper theological-symbolic framework underlying these rituals. In particular, limited attention has been given to how Islamic metaphysical concepts such as gratitude (*syukr*), unity (*tawhid*), and moral order are embodied and enacted through the performative dimensions of Grebek Besar.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by approaching Grebek Besar through the lens of Islamic cultural theology, emphasizing how symbolic performances and ritual acts function as mediums of religious meaning-making. More specifically, this research advances the concept of Islamic cultural theology by proposing an interpretive model of Javanese Islamic ritual that conceptualizes tradition not as a peripheral or syncretic layer, but as a formative theological sphere in which Qur'anic values are socially embodied and culturally translated. By integrating anthropological perspectives on ritual practice with theological reflection, this study offers a new framework for interpreting Javanese Islamic rituals as sites of "lived tafsir," in which divine revelation is continually negotiated, localized, and re-enacted through communal performances, symbolism, and collective memory, thus

contributing to a more holistic understanding of Javanese Islam as a dynamic and living religious tradition.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address three central research questions. First, it explores how the rituals and symbols of Grebek Besar articulate the interaction between Islamic teachings and Javanese cultural traditions. Second, it examines the social and theological meanings that are constructed and communicated through these ritual practices. Third, it investigates how Grebek Besar functions as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting Islamic cultural identity across generations within the Demak community.

By exploring these questions, this research aims to contribute to the broader academic discourse on the Islamization of local traditions and the resilience of Islamic culture in Indonesia. The study not only highlights Grebek Besar as an ethnographic phenomenon but also positions it as a model of how Islamic values continue to shape, and are simultaneously shaped by, local cultural contexts in the contemporary Indonesian setting.

Method

This study employed a qualitative field research approach grounded in the paradigm of Islamic cultural studies, emphasizing the integration between empirical observation and theological interpretation. The research was conducted in Demak Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, focusing on the Great Mosque of Demak and the traditional procession routes of the Grebek Besar festival, which form the central ritual spaces of the event. Fieldwork took place from May to July 2024, covering the entire cycle of preparation, performance, and post-festival reflection. The study aimed to explore the theological, symbolic, and cultural meanings embodied in Grebek Besar as one of the most enduring expressions of Javanese Islam.

An ethnographic design was adopted to allow direct engagement with the lived experiences and symbolic worlds of the participants. This approach aligns with the Islamic cultural studies perspective, which views *tafaqquh fi al-din*—the deep understanding of religion—as inseparable from its social and ritual expressions. Through this lens, the study captures how faith-based practices are embodied, negotiated, and transmitted within everyday cultural life.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. Through participant observation, the researcher attended the full sequence of Grebek Besar events, including the *kirab pusaka* (sacred heirloom procession), *doa bersama* (communal prayer), and symbolic

offering ceremonies. Observations focused on ritual structure, spatial organization, and expressions of Islamic moral values such as *syukr* (gratitude), *ukhuwah* (solidarity), and *ikhlas* (sincerity).

In-depth interviews were conducted with ulama, cultural experts, community elders, youth participants, and local officials, representing diverse perspectives across age and social background. Informants were selected purposively based on their active participation and recognized authority within the community. These conversations explored how participants interpret Grebek Besar as a manifestation of Islamic faith expressed through local culture.

The documentary study involved the examination of written records, local archives, photographs, and historical accounts. It aimed to trace the evolution of Grebek Besar from the Demak Sultanate period to the present day. The findings illustrate how Islamic teachings have been continuously adapted within Javanese cultural frameworks.

Data analysis employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), drawing on Braun and Clarke's foundational framework (2006) and its later reflexive development (2021). The process involved iterative stages of familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation, enabling the identification of theological and cultural meanings embedded in the ritual. Themes such as Islamic symbolism, moral values, and community participation were refined through comparative reading of observation notes, interview transcripts, and archival materials. Triangulation across observation, interviews, and documents strengthened the validity of findings, while member checking with key informants ensured interpretive accuracy. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained reflexivity to preserve alignment between theological essence and cultural context (Ahmed, 2025).

In sum, this methodological approach allowed Grebek Besar to be understood not merely as a cultural performance but as a living articulation of Islamic religiosity. The integration of sustained ethnographic engagement with interpretive Islamic theology provides a methodological contribution to the field of Islamic cultural studies, demonstrating how ritual practices serve as spaces where Islamic norms are lived, negotiated, and transmitted through collective cultural expression.

Finding and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the Grebek Besar ritual represents a living synthesis between Islamic theological values and Javanese cultural

identity, forming a distinctive expression of Indonesian Islam. Beyond being a festivities celebration, the ritual operates as a structured symbolic system through which religious meanings are continuously produced and transmitted within the community.

Symbolic Structure, Cosmology, and the Ethics of Gratitude

One of the central ritual elements is the *tumpeng*, which participants consistently interpreted not merely as ceremonial food but as a cosmological symbol. As stated by a senior religious leader, Fauzi, "*Tumpeng menggambarkan hubungan manusia dengan Allah dan alam puncaknya menunjuk pada keesaan Allah*" ("The *tumpeng* represents the relationship between humanity and God, with its peak pointing to the oneness of Allah"). This interpretation was echoed by a cultural elder, Muthoin, who explained that the conical form represents "vertical devotion and social balance." These narratives demonstrate that local actors actively articulate theological meanings through material symbols.

Following the historical roots of Grebek Besar in the legacy of the Demak Sultanate, contemporary practices such as processions, communal prayers, and food distribution function as forms of embodied theology. A community elder, Masrohan, remarked, "*Grebek Besar bukan hanya tradisi, tapi cara kami beribadah bersama*" ("Grebek Besar is not merely a tradition, but a way for us to worship together"). This indicates that ritual performance is understood as a collective enactment of faith rather than a mere act of cultural preservation.

Building on these symbolic and performative dimensions, the festival's persistence illustrates both cultural continuity and religious adaptability. A youth participant, Rangga, perceived the ritual as a means of inheriting Islamic identity in a modern context: "*Lewat Grebek Besar, kami belajar Islam dengan cara yang dekat dengan budaya kami*" ("Through Grebek Besar, we learn Islam in a way that is close to our own culture"). This intergenerational perspective highlights how the ritual functions as a mechanism of cultural and religious transmission.

The central ritual of Grebek Besar—the grand procession from the *Pendopo Kabupaten* (Regency Pavilion) to the Great Mosque of Demak—embodies a profound synthesis of faith, culture, and gratitude. It is not merely a festive performance or a local custom, but rather a living act of worship: a communal *syukr* (thankfulness) manifested through bodily movement, offerings, and collective remembrance of Allah. The participants, adorned in traditional Javanese attire, proceed solemnly toward the Great Mosque carrying *tumpeng*

(rice cones), fruits, livestock, and agricultural produce as symbolic offerings of *sadaqah* and *syukr* for the sustenance and blessings bestowed upon them.

In its essence, the Grebek Besar ritual functions as a form of embodied gratitude. The Qur'an states: "If you are grateful, I will surely increase My favor upon you" (Q.S. Ibrahim [14]:7). This verse provides the theological foundation for the festival's meaning and purpose. Gratitude (*syukr*) is not simply a verbal expression of praise, but an active acknowledgment of divine bounty through deeds of sharing, giving, and humility. The ritual teaches that gratitude must manifest both vertically (*hablun min Allah*) and horizontally (*hablun min al-nas*), thereby aligning human thankfulness with ethical and social responsibility.

The act of offering agricultural produce and livestock symbolizes the community's recognition that all provisions originate from Allah. This interpretation is empirically supported by field observations and in-depth interviews, which show that ritual participants consistently articulated that the offerings represented "returning God's trust". For instance, a senior community elder, Syahrozi, stated, "*Hasil panen itu titipan Allah, jadi harus dikembalikan sebagian lewat Grebek*" ("The harvest is a trust from God, so part of it must be returned through Grebek"). Participant observation further recorded that organizers explicitly framed the distribution of offerings as an act of gratitude during preparatory ritual meetings.

These findings resonate with the concept of Javanese Islamic spiritual synthesis, which understands material and spiritual actions as inseparable (Yusdani et al., 2019; Howell, 2012). Documentary analysis of local sermons (*khutbah*) and festival guidelines also revealed repeated references to the sanctification of worldly abundance through *dzikr* and thanksgiving practices. From this perspective, *syukr* is not limited to verbal expressions of gratitude, but constitutes a comprehensive spiritual orientation—an embodied worldview in which life itself is perceived as a divine trust continuously reaffirmed through ritual practice (Siregar et al., 2025; Fitriyani et al., 2024).

The symbolism of Grebek Besar reveals an intricate theology of *syukr*. In Islamic ethics, gratitude implies three dimensions: (1) acknowledgment of divine favor in the heart, (2) expression of praise through the tongue, and (3) the use of blessings in ways pleasing to Allah (Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*). The festival integrates all three. Emotionally, the participants feel joy and reverence; verbally, they recite *dzikr* and *shalawat*; materially, they share food and wealth with others (Aini & Ribawati, 2025; Saefudin et al., 2020;

Syahputra et al., 2025).

The procession from the *Pendopo Kabupaten* to the Great Mosque itself mirrors the spiritual journey of thankfulness. The *Pendopo* represents the realm of worldly governance, while the mosque signifies divine sovereignty. The movement between these two spaces symbolizes the redirection of power, wealth, and human effort toward divine acknowledgment. This spatial transition transforms gratitude into a public ethic—affirming that the blessings of leadership and prosperity must serve the people rather than merely benefit the elite (Burhani, 2018; Millasari et al., 2025).

In the field observations at Grebek Besar, for instance, state officials, local farmers, merchants, and children were seen queuing side by side during the distribution of *tumpeng* and berkah foods, engaging in shared expressions of gratitude such as synchronized invocations of “*alhamdulillah*,” which reflected a collective emotional experience indicative of *communitas*. Furthermore, participants described this moment as a time when “status did not matter; everyone stood as equals before Allah,” exemplifying how *communitas* is materially and experientially constituted through ritual praxis. Contemporary scholarship on ritual liminality further suggests that these embodied experiences not only reflect egalitarian ideals but actively generate communal identity and social solidarity within contexts of shared worship and collective celebration. Such empirical grounding, coupled with theoretical dialogue, strengthens the argument by connecting Turner’s anthropological framework directly to lived cultural practices at Grebek Besar.

The ritual of Grebek Besar also aligns with the prophetic tradition that links gratitude to generosity. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, “The most beloved of people to Allah are those most beneficial to others” (al-Tabarani, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabir*). The festival’s redistribution of food and offerings transforms personal piety into communal welfare, embodying *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (mercy to all creation). Here, gratitude functions as an ethical bridge between individual worship and collective social justice.

From a Sufi perspective, gratitude (*syukr*) is not merely an ethical disposition but signifies deep awareness of divine presence and relationality with God. In Sufi practice, the devotee’s experience of thankfulness extends beyond emotion to an embodied consciousness of God’s creative presence in all phenomena, thus suggesting an ontological dimension of gratitude (Siregar, 2025). Similarly, the notion of *fana’*, the dissolution of the self

before the Divine, continues to be discussed in contemporary Sufi literature as part of the mystical path toward unity, in which the ego's centrality fades and divine remembrance becomes the axis of existence (Fitriyani et al., 2024). In the Grebek Besar ritual, the communal sharing of food, as interpreted by participants, enacts this *fana'*-like surrender—an act of self-effacement before the Divine expressed through generosity and collective gratitude.

In Javanese Sufism gratitude is intertwined with the concept of *ngelmu rasa*, the inner realization of divine harmony within the universe. When the community collectively expresses *syukr* through ritual movement and song, they participate in what may be called *dzikr berjamaah budaya* (a cultural form of collective remembrance) (Fitriyani et al., 2024; Yasinatul, 2025). The beating of *bedug* drums, the chanting of *shalawat*, and the rhythmic flow of the procession together create a multisensory devotion—a living form of *dzikr* that fuses the aesthetic and the spiritual (Syahputra et al., 2025; Aisy et al., 2024; Saefudin et al., 2020).

In the Grebek Besar ritual, participants articulate similar readings of the *tumpeng*'s form and ritual use. Field interviews reveal that many participants interpret the rice cone's pointed summit as a symbolic reminder of life's ultimate return to God and the aspiration toward spiritual unity (*tawhid*), echoing indigenous conceptions of vertical ascent toward the divine. During observation of the ritual distribution, informants described the act of cutting the *tumpeng*'s peak and sharing it communally as a moment of collective gratitude (*syukr*) and as a blessing bestowed upon all participants. This interpretation suggests that the ritual materializes divine benevolence through acts of social exchange.

Contemporary studies support such interpretations. Syahputra et al. (2025) explains that the *tumpeng*'s conical shape and arrangement of side dishes convey spiritual meanings of balance, gratitude, and communal harmony. Pertiwi (2023) and Yasinatul (2025) further emphasize *tumpeng* as a potent cultural symbol of shared identity and spiritual expression in Javanese ritual practice. The combination of participant testimony and recent scholarship thus anchors the symbolic reading of the *tumpeng* in both emic experience and academic discourse.

Recent studies in Islamic spirituality emphasize that ritual practices cultivate *barakah* (divine blessing) through the convergence of sincere intention (*niyyah*) and communal harmony (*ukhuwah*). Contemporary Sufi-oriented scholarship understands *barakah* not as a passive metaphysical attribute,

but as a dynamic, relational process generated through ethical intention, collective devotion, and social cohesion (Zamhari, 2022). In this framework, gratitude (*syukr*) operates simultaneously as both the source and the medium of *barakah*, reinforcing spiritual awareness while strengthening communal bonds. Empirical studies on Indonesian ritual life demonstrate that acts of giving particularly those embedded in communal religious festivals are perceived by participants as spiritually efficacious exchanges, wherein divine grace is believed to circulate through human generosity and shared intention (Fauzi, 2024). In the context of Grebek Besar, the material act of distributing food thus becomes a symbolically charged spiritual exchange, embodying the belief that divine blessing flows through ethically grounded social relations rather than individual accumulation.

The ritualized distribution of food and offerings in Grebek Besar can be interpreted as reinforcing a moral economy grounded in Islamic ethical values. Rather than claiming this as an explicit economic doctrine, this study treats it as an interpretative pattern emerging from ethnographic evidence and participants' narratives. Field interviews indicate that participants frequently described the distribution of food not in economic terms, but as acts of *sedekah* (charity) and *berkah* (blessing). For example, one community member Duriyah stated, "Bukan soal bagi-bagi harta, tapi supaya semua ikut merasakan *berkah*" ("It is not about distributing wealth, but about allowing everyone to share in the blessing"). Observational data also recorded that organizers framed the sharing process as a religious duty of mutual care rather than as formal redistribution.

In this sense, the practice of food-sharing is understood in this study as a symbolic moral economy—a cultural mechanism through which private blessings are ritually transformed into communal benefit. This interpretation is offered as an analytical reading grounded in ethnographic evidence and theological reflection, rather than as a direct doctrinal claim, maintaining methodological transparency while preserving interpretive depth.

"And spend out of that which We have provided you before death approaches any of you and he says, 'My Lord, if only You would delay me for a short term so I would give charity and be among the righteous'" (Q.S. Al-Munafiqun [63]:10).

In this verse, gratitude is closely tied to the act of spending for others. The people of Demak, by offering parts of their harvest, livestock, and food, symbolically affirm that wealth is a divine trust, not a personal entitlement. Empirical studies on Grebeg Besar show that such practices sustain local values

of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) while embodying Islamic principles of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), through which religious devotion is expressed through collective generosity and social solidarity ('Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025).

The festival also cultivates intergenerational transmission of faith and ethics. Through participation in preparation and procession, younger generations learn that gratitude is not abstract but collectively practiced and socially embodied. It teaches that faith is lived through *amal* (deeds) and *mu'amalah* (social relations) (Saefudin et al., 2020; Ansari, 2024). In this pedagogical sense, Grebek Besar functions as a cultural madrasa, where theology is not only taught but enacted through ritual performance.

Ultimately, Grebek Besar illustrates that gratitude in Islam is both devotional and distributive. It binds spiritual consciousness to ethical action. The celebration dramatizes a worldview in which every blessing demands reciprocation through service and generosity. The ritual's symbolic message is clear: divine favor increases not through accumulation but through circulation (Yasinatul, 2025; Pertiwi et al., 2023).

This ethical vision resonates with the idea of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. In this framework, gratitude is the root of mercy, and mercy is the social manifestation of gratitude. In Grebek Besar, the community learns that being thankful is not only saying "Alhamdulillah," but ensuring that others, too, can say it. By transforming gratitude into shared joy, the festival turns theology into lived experience—an affirmation that Islam, when embodied in local ritual, remains ever vital, compassionate, and profoundly human.

Ritual Performance as Lived Theology

From a theological standpoint, Grebek Besar functions as a form of collective worship ('ibadah *jama'i*) that transcends the individual and becomes communal in essence. The event includes *doa bersama* (collective prayer), *pengajian umum* (public sermon), and recitation of *sholawat*, all of which aim to awaken spiritual consciousness and strengthen the sense of belonging to the *ummah*. Religious leaders interviewed during fieldwork emphasized that Grebek Besar is not a syncretic blend of Islam and local belief, but rather a contextual expression of Islamic devotion through culturally intelligible symbols. As one *ulama* explained, "Tradition is a vessel, while Islam is the essence; if the vessel carries goodness, it becomes part of worship." (Burhani, 2018; Aini & Ribawati, 2025).

Empirical data reveal that Grebek Besar serves not merely as a religious observance but as a vital instrument for the preservation of cultural continuity and historical memory among the people of Demak. The annual festival operates as a social and spiritual medium that transmits collective identity, moral values, and historical consciousness from one generation to the next. Its enduring practice spanning from the Demak Sultanate in the fifteenth century to the modern Republic of Indonesia illustrates the remarkable resilience of Islamic cultural expressions within Javanese civilization.

At the heart of Grebek Besar lies a profound sense of historical remembrance. The festival commemorates the legacy of the Wali Songo, particularly Sunan Kalijaga and Raden Patah, whose missionary and political roles were pivotal in establishing Demak as the first Islamic kingdom in Java. Studies on Grebeg-related rituals in Java show that such ceremonies function as symbolic spaces for transmitting Islamic values and preserving collective religious memory within communal practices (Yurisa et al., 2021). Through prayers, ritual offerings, and public processions, participants reaffirm their connection to a sacred historical lineage that continues to shape their religious worldview.

This process of ritual remembrance aligns with what Hobsbawm calls the “invention of tradition,” in which cultural practices are continually reconstructed to maintain continuity with an idealized past. In Grebek Besar, however, such continuity is not artificially constructed but organically sustained through lived religious practice. The festival represents a *living tradition*, one that evolves with time while retaining its theological and symbolic essence. Its survival through political changes, colonial encounters, and modern transformations testifies to its adaptability and to the community’s deep emotional investment in preserving their Islamic-Javanese heritage.

The ritual structure of Grebek Besar can be read as a form of historical storytelling expressed through performance. This interpretive reading is grounded in a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and symbolic analysis of ritual spaces and movements. During fieldwork, the procession from the *Pendopo Kabupaten* to the Great Mosque of Demak was systematically documented, focusing on spatial sequencing, ritual choreography, and verbal cues delivered by ritual leaders.

Interviews with local historians and cultural custodians revealed that this spatial movement is consciously understood as a reenactment of the historical relationship between political and religious authority. As noted by a cultural

custodian, Rahmi, "Arak-arakan dari pendopo ke masjid itu menggambarkan bagaimana raja dan ulama dulu berjalan bersama" ("The procession from the *pendopo* to the mosque symbolizes how rulers and religious scholars once walked together"). Through symbolic analysis, the *Pendopo* was interpreted as representing temporal authority, while the mosque was understood as embodying divine legitimacy, a distinction frequently articulated in sermons and ritual commentaries recorded during the festival.

Thus, the annual ritual procession is analyzed in this study as a performative narrative that materially enacts the history of the Demak Sultanate. It symbolizes the enduring ideal of harmony between governance and spiritual guidance associated with the legacy of Raden Patah. This interpretation is grounded in systematically observed ritual practice and supported by emic interpretations provided by community actors.

Studies on Grebeg Besar emphasize that ritual processions function as lived religious practices through which historical memory and Islamic values are continually reactivated in communal life. Drawing on the perspective of living hadith, 'Aisy et al. (2024) show that elements such as the beating of the *bedug*, collective chanting of *shalawat*, and ritual processions are not merely ceremonial acts but embodied forms of religious expression rooted in historical tradition. Through bodily participation and shared sensory experience, the community does not simply recall its sacred past but actively reenacts it, allowing religious memory to be sustained through practice rather than textual transmission alone.

For participants, this ritual embodiment transforms history into lived spirituality. As one elder informant expressed, "When we walk to the mosque during Grebek Besar, we are walking with our ancestors." Such statements reflect the anthropological concept of ritual commemoration, in which collective action functions as both remembrance and renewal. The festival does not merely represent history it performs it, ensuring that the foundational story of Islam's arrival in Java remains a tangible and emotionally resonant reality for contemporary Muslims.

Cultural continuity in Grebek Besar is maintained through a complex interplay of ritual repetition, communal participation, and symbolic reinterpretation. The younger generation learns the meanings of the festival not through formal instruction but through embodied participation, such as helping prepare the *tumpeng*, joining the procession, and listening to sermons at the Great Mosque. This pattern was empirically observed during fieldwork,

where adolescents and young adults played active roles in preparatory activities under the guidance of community elders.

Several youth participants explicitly described this experiential learning process. One teenage participant, Salam, stated, “*Saya belajar arti Grebek bukan di sekolah, tapi waktu ikut menyiapkan tumpeng dan ikut arakan*” (“I learned the meaning of Grebeg not at school, but through preparing the *tumpeng* and joining the procession”). Another youth participant, Sofiyah, remarked, “*Kalau ikut langsung, baru paham bahwa ini bukan sekadar pesta, tapi ibadah*” (“Only by participating directly do you realize that this is not merely a festivity, but an act of worship”). These testimonies provide direct evidence that meaning is transmitted through practice and participation rather than through formal pedagogy.

In this context, the experiential learning observed among younger participants reflects a broader Javanese cultural ethic of *nguri-uri kabudayan*—the moral responsibility to nurture and sustain cultural heritage through lived practice. This dynamic is not only conceptually recognized within Javanese cultural discourse but is also empirically evident in the active involvement of youth during the Grebeg Besar ritual, where cultural knowledge and religious values are acquired through participation rather than instruction ('Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025).

Such participatory transmission ensures that the values embedded in the ritual gratitude, humility, solidarity, and devotion are internalized as part of everyday ethics. In this sense, Grebek Besar functions as an informal institution of moral education, a *cultural madrasa* that teaches Islamic virtues through collective action rather than doctrinal exposition. The intergenerational continuity of the festival demonstrates how Islamic values are localized and perpetuated through communal life, bridging the sacred and the social in a distinctively Javanese way.

The interpretive pattern observed in Grebek Besar aligns with broader analyses of Javanese ritual practices as lived Islamic pedagogy. Saefudin et al. (2020), in their study of the Barikan ritual, demonstrate how symbolic actions function as modes of Islamic education, transmitting Qur'anic and Prophetic values through communal participation rather than formal instruction. Similarly, the ritual practices in Grebek Besar cultivate gratitude, solidarity, and ethical responsibility through embodied performance.

Importantly, the endurance of Grebeg Besar highlights the community's capacity to reinterpret sacred heritage in the face of modernization. Younger

generations participate actively, not only through traditional forms of engagement but increasingly by documenting and sharing the event via digital media, contributing to broader visibility and cultural engagement. Research on millennial perceptions of Grebeg Besar indicates that younger participants view the tradition as an important means of cultural preservation and social involvement (Nurrokhmah et al., 2025). Moreover, studies on media and ritual practices suggest that social media can reshape how traditional celebrations are experienced and communicated without undermining core values (Tsaltsabilla et al., 2025). These dynamics resonate with findings that Grebeg Besar embodies deep spiritual, cultural, and social meanings that continue to be relevant even as the community adapts to contemporary contexts (Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025).

The persistence of Grebek Besar also reveals how collective memory operates as a foundation of Islamic identity in Java. Through its rituals, the community reaffirms its link to the early spread of Islam, the political authority of the Demak Sultanate, and the spiritual legacy of the Wali Songo. This historical consciousness functions as a moral compass in the present. In times of social tension or cultural change, the memory of Demak's tolerant and inclusive Islam serves as a guiding ideal. The figure of Sunan Kalijaga, who employed art, music, and local customs to spread Islam, symbolizes the adaptive genius of Javanese religiosity, a model of how faith can harmonize with culture without losing its spiritual essence. Grebek Besar, by commemorating this legacy, embodies and perpetuates the vision of an Islam that is peaceful, aesthetic, and deeply rooted in social ethics (Yasinatul, 2025; Syahputra et al., 2025).

The collective prayers (*doa bersama*) at the mosque during Grebek Besar further reinforce the principle of *tawhid*—the unity of God and, by extension, the unity of believers. The synchronized act of supplication embodies the metaphysical belief that the community, when united in remembrance, mirrors the harmony of the cosmos. Thus, the ritual becomes both a historical and cosmological reaffirmation of faith: a moment when the community re-enters the sacred rhythm established by their ancestors (Aini & Ribawati, 2025; Howell, 2012).

The continuity of Grebek Besar from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first demonstrates that tradition, when rooted in theology and social relevance, possesses the capacity to endure. Its resilience lies not in rigid preservation but in dynamic adaptation of what anthropologists term “cultural resilience.” Lived

Islam in Indonesia is characterized by constant negotiation between doctrinal orthodoxy and cultural expression (Ansari, 2024; Yusdani et al., 2019). Grebek Besar exemplifies this negotiation in practice, maintaining fidelity to Islamic principles while celebrating the aesthetic richness of local heritage.

In this sense, the festival functions as a cultural bridge between history and modernity. It reminds contemporary Muslims of their shared spiritual ancestry while offering a model for integrating faith with daily life. The annual procession to the Great Mosque is more than a ritual journey—it is a pilgrimage through time, carrying the moral wisdom of the past into the spiritual consciousness of the present (Aisy et al., 2024; Yasinatul, 2025).

As one participant summarized during field observation: “Grebek Besar teaches us that we are part of a story that began long before us, and will continue after us.” This awareness of historical continuity nurtures a sense of humility and stewardship. It reminds the community that their identity as Muslims of Demak is not an isolated possession but an inherited trust (*amanah*) that must be preserved for future generations.

Ultimately, Grebek Besar is not just a commemoration of history—it is history in motion. Through its rituals, symbols, and collective memory, the people of Demak continually recreate their connection to the sacred origins of Javanese Islam, affirming that the past is not lost but lives on in their worship, their community, and their enduring gratitude to Allah.

Negotiating Shari‘ah and Culture in Lived Islamic Practice

While the preceding discussion has demonstrated how Grebek Besar operates as lived theology, the following section examines how such practices are continuously negotiated within normative Islamic discourse. The harmony between Sharia and local culture becomes most evident in how Grebek Besar integrates religious and cultural elements within a single framework of meaning. The use of traditional art forms such as *gamelan* music, *batik* costumes, and symbolic offerings is not universally accepted as religiously neutral, but exists within ongoing scholarly debates in contemporary Islamic thought concerning the boundaries between authentic religious practice and cultural accommodation. In some reformist discourses, such practices are viewed with suspicion as potential *bid‘ah*, whereas in traditionalist and contextualist frameworks they are understood as legitimate expressions of ‘urf (custom) that do not contradict the core principles of Islam.

Within this interpretive context, Grebek Besar is best understood not

as a static synthesis but as a site of continuous negotiation between normative *shari'ah* and lived cultural religiosity. Field interviews revealed that local religious leaders consciously framed artistic and symbolic elements not as replacements for ritual obligation, but as *wasilah* (means) to cultivate deeper spiritual attentiveness. One ulama, Masyahar, explained, “*Bukan mengganti syariat, tapi memperindah cara kita mensyukuri Allah*” (“It is not about replacing the *shari'ah*, but about beautifying the way we express gratitude to God”).

From the perspective of Islamic aesthetics, this dynamic reflects the principle of *ihsan*, understood not simply as ritual perfection but as the embodiment of ethical and spiritual beauty in social and cultural life. Rather than dissolving *shari'ah* into culture, Grebek Besar illustrates how local Muslim communities actively interpret and negotiate religious authenticity through culturally embedded forms of worship, thereby contributing to broader debates on Islam, modernity, and indigenous religious expression (Burhani, 2018; Yasinatul, 2025; Syahputra et al., 2025).

Interviews with community leaders indicate that the ritual functions as a social platform for fostering *ukhuwah islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood), *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national unity), and *ukhuwah insaniyah* (human solidarity). These dimensions illustrate how Islam in Java continues to evolve as a cultural Islam—a lived tradition that harmonizes theology, art, and community life. Through this synthesis, the ritual not only preserves historical continuity but also reinforces collective identity and social cohesion among the Javanese Muslim community in the modern era.

Theologically, Grebek Besar demonstrates that Islam possesses an inherent flexibility that allows divine principles to be expressed through diverse cultural forms. The festival's continued vitality in modern Demak reflects the resilience of Indonesian Islam as both orthodoxy and culture, in which faith and heritage are mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional. Culturally, the ritual reinforces local identity amidst globalization, serving as a counterbalance to cultural homogenization. Its performative nature provides moral education, social cohesion, and spiritual enrichment for the local Muslim community.

In summary, the Grebek Besar of Demak exemplifies the Islamic cultural paradigm in Indonesia—faith manifested through culture, theology expressed through art, and piety realized through social action. The event remains a powerful testament to the enduring synthesis between divine devotion and cultural creativity that defines Javanese Islam. It continues to serve as a living medium

through which Islamic values are transmitted, reinterpreted, and celebrated within the framework of local tradition and communal harmony.

The spiritual essence of Grebek Besar cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader currents of Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*) in Java, which historically mediated the reception and reinterpretation of Islamic teachings within Javanese cultural forms. Contemporary scholarship confirms that Sufi values and practices continue to shape the lived religiosity of Javanese Muslims (Howell, 2012). For instance, ethnographic studies of Sufi *tariqa* communities in Indonesia show that participants engage in spiritual practices such as collective *dhikr* (remembrance of God), ethical mentoring by *sheikhs* (spiritual teachers), and communal rituals that reinforce values of humility, compassion, and social cohesion—values that ethnographers have directly linked to ritual performances and communal identity in Javanese contexts (Howell, 2012; Yusdani et al., 2019). These studies demonstrate that Sufi practices are not limited to esoteric circles but resonate in broader Muslim social life, including ritual observances that emphasize spiritual togetherness and ethical comportment as integral dimensions of communal religiosity.

In the case of Grebek Besar, although direct participant observation of *tarekat* activities during the ritual has yet to be published, field research on Javanese Sufi acculturation in local traditions (e.g., *Keduk Beji* in Ngawi) indicates that spiritual practices derived from Sufism are integrated into ritual processes and local symbolic structures, such as communal prayer, spiritual recollection, and symbolic offerings that manifest both inner devotion and outward expression. This suggests that participants in Grebek Besar may similarly invoke Sufi-inflected understandings of spiritual closeness (*taqarrub*) and unity (*tawhid*) through collective devotional acts, which scholars described this as a continuing integration of mystical values within community rituals, rather than a purely folkloric spectacle (Yasinatul, 2025).

Thus, evidence of Sufi influence in Javanese Islam includes the role of local Sufi communities, the adaptation of Sufi teachings in communal contexts, and the manifestation of *dhikr* and ethical teachings in collective religious life. These elements support the interpretation that Grebek Besar's spiritual dimension encompasses far more than ceremonial formality. It reflects a broader historical and lived *tasawuf* presence in Java, one that continues to infuse local religious life with spiritual depth, ethical sensitivity, and communal harmony.

This liminality is evident in the transition from everyday life to the

ritual moment, during which participants symbolically cross from the profane into the sacred domain. The recitation of *dzikr* and *shalawat* throughout the procession reinforces the mystical consciousness of divine presence (*hudhur*). Such acts function not merely as ritual obligations but as meditative practices connecting the human soul to the divine reality (*al-Haqq*). The *tumpeng*, for instance, not only signifies gratitude but also represents the *axis mundi*—the spiritual axis connecting heaven and earth. Similarly, the *air berkah* (blessed water) distributed from the Great Mosque embodies the concept of *barakah*—divine grace transmitted through sacred mediation.

Thus, Grebek Besar becomes a form of Sufi pedagogy—a living *majlis dzikr* that educates the community through symbolic and embodied action. It manifests what Simuh terms “*tasawuf sosial*,” a mystical orientation translated into collective virtue, humility, and service (*khidmah*). The interplay between symbolic form and spiritual depth in Grebek Besar affirms that Javanese Islam, while rooted in orthodoxy, remains receptive to mystical expressions that nurture the soul and reinforce communal harmony.

Local Context and Cultural Continuity in Demak

At the local level, Grebeg Besar represents both religious continuity and cultural resilience within the historical landscape of Demak—the cradle of early Islamic civilization in Java. Empirical studies indicate that the festival has maintained its central position in Demak's socio-religious calendar while adapting to changing social contexts without losing its core religious meanings ('Aisy et al., 2024; Hidayat & Fu'adah, 2025).

Grebeg Besar is institutionally supported by the Pemerintah Kabupaten Demak, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Demak, and local pesantren networks, demonstrating a symbiotic relationship between formal religious authority and popular religiosity. This pattern reflects broader dynamics of Islamic cultural continuity in Indonesia, where local traditions persist through selective adaptation and reinterpretation within an Islamic ethical framework (Burhani, 2018; Ansari, 2024).

In contemporary practice, Grebeg Besar functions not only as a ritual celebration but also as a significant cultural tourism attraction. Local government communications describe the event as having the potential to draw both local and international visitors due to its strong cultural symbolism and traditional appeal, thereby positioning Grebek Besar within broader cultural visibility and cultural exchange beyond Demak itself. Moreover, empirical studies highlight

high levels of community participation, suggesting that the festival's social and cultural significance extends into areas of public engagement and cultural tourism (Nurrokhmah et al., 2025). This broad participation underscores the event's dual function as both *ibadah jama'i* (collective worship) and *kebudayaan komunal* (community heritage). The sacred procession from the *Kraton Bintoro* to the Great Mosque, accompanied by *gamelan* and traditional attire, projects Demak's Islamic identity in a form that is both culturally resonant and accessible to modern audiences.

Importantly, the endurance of Grebek Besar highlights the community's capacity to reinterpret sacred heritage in the face of modernization. The younger generation participates through digital promotion and creative reinterpretations, such as visual documentation and cultural performances, without compromising the ritual's sanctity. This aligns with the findings of 'Aisy et al. (2024), who demonstrate that Grebeg Besar functions as a contextual synthesis of Islamic values and local tradition, as well as Hidayat and Fu'adah's (2025) argument that the ritual embodies intertwined spiritual, cultural, and social meanings.

Therefore, Grebek Besar stands not as a relic of the past but as a living tradition (*tradisi hidup*), a performative testimony to the enduring coexistence of Islamic spirituality and Javanese cultural creativity. It illustrates how the people of Demak embody their Islamic faith not only in doctrine but also through communal celebration, shared memory, and ongoing cultural innovation. Ultimately, this tradition demonstrates how religion and culture can coexist harmoniously, sustaining both spiritual depth and cultural identity across generations (Ansari, 2024; Aini & Ribawati, 2025).

Culturally, the festival strengthens social solidarity and intergenerational continuity, linking present-day Demak with its historical role as the birthplace of Javanese Islam. Through collective participation, the community re-enacts its sacred history and reaffirms its moral and spiritual identity. The continuity of this tradition reflects the adaptive nature of Islam in the archipelago—dynamic, inclusive, and deeply rooted in local wisdom (Millasari et al., 2025; Yusdani et al., 2019). In this way, Grebek Besar continues to serve as both a medium of da'wah and a cultural expression of faith, preserving the balance between religious devotion and cultural heritage in contemporary Javanese society.

The ritual thereby functions as a living pedagogy, a form of religious education that teaches faith through action and devotion through culture. From the perspective of Islamic cultural studies, this research contributes to a

deeper understanding of the intersection between theology and culture within the lived experiences of Indonesian Muslims. It offers evidence that local traditions such as *Grebek Besar* can serve as effective vehicles for transmitting Islamic spirituality, ethics, and social values.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *Grebek Besar* in Demak constitutes a structured form of religious practice in which Islamic theological concepts are embodied and materialized through culturally embedded rituals, symbols, and social performances. Ethnographic data from participant observation and in depth interviews show that community members consistently interpret processions, food offerings, and communal prayers as acts of *syukr* (gratitude), *ukhuwah* (social solidarity), and *dzikr* (ritual remembrance), indicating that these practices function as lived enactments of Islamic theology rather than symbolic folklore alone.

Empirically, this research contributes to the study of Javanese Islam by providing a detailed account of how the process of “indigenization” unfolds at the level of everyday ritual practice, demonstrating that theological meaning is produced through embodied action, spatial movement, and material symbolism. For ritual studies, the findings illustrate how large-scale public ceremonies can simultaneously function as sites of historical narration, social integration, and moral pedagogy. For the broader field of Islamic studies, this study offers a grounded model of Islamic cultural theology, showing how universal Islamic principles are contextually negotiated without compromising their normative theological integrity.

Rather than claiming an inherent harmony between religion and culture, the analysis shows that *Grebek Besar* represents an ongoing process of interpretation, dialogue, and negotiation, as evidenced by differing views among religious leaders, elders, and youth participants. In this sense, the festival is best understood as a dynamic arena of meaning-making through which Javanese Muslim identity is continuously articulated, transmitted, and reinterpreted in contemporary social life.

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