



Theology of Ritual and Cultural Heritage: Negotiating Faith and Tradition in Indonesian Public Festivals

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the representation of theology in Islamic public festivals in Indonesia, focusing on Grebeg Maulud in Yogyakarta, Tabuik in Pariaman, and Sekaten in Surakarta–Yogyakarta. These three rituals are understood not only as cultural practices but also as theological heritage that transforms in the context of modernity. The research method used is qualitative with a descriptive approach, through literature studies utilizing cultural documents, references from the Qur'an, and academic literature. Data analysis is conducted using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, while the validity test employs source triangulation. The results show that Grebeg Maulud represents the theology of gratitude and social legitimacy through the symbol of gunung; Tabuik displays the theology of sacrifice assimilated into Minangkabau identity; and Sekaten demonstrates the theology of cultural da'wah through gamelan art and the rakyat market. Modernity encourages these three rituals to be institutionalized as cultural heritage as well as tourism attractions, giving rise to a dialectic between sacredness and commodification. The contestation between Islamic orthodoxy and local traditions strengthens the view that public rituals are dynamic arenas for theological negotiation, where faith, culture, and politics interact. This study concludes that Nusantara Islam presents a contextual, flexible, and globally relevant model of public theology, offering a significant contribution to the international discourse on religion and the public sphere.

Keywords: public theology, Islamic festivals, cultural heritage, orthodoxy, modernity

Introduction

Indonesia is a tapestry of cultures which at once forms our national identity and also is a rich field for theological discussion. From the President of the Republic of Indonesia's report (2022) we see that over 700 ethnic groups which are spread over thousands of islands bring forth a range of languages, customs, and forms of art which are known world wide from batik to wayang, from temples to performance art. This social dynamics which we see plays a role in that religion in the archipelago has always had a intense dialectic with culture which in turn means that religious practices are always situated in a social context.



Officially the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reports we have 1728 Intangible Cultural Heritage items which we recognize from 2013 to 2022 in five cultural areas which also present the complexity of the play between tradition and religion (Manor, 2024). That number puts forth the fact that Indonesia is more than a political entity it is also a great player in global culture (Nurdiani Felicia, 2021; Sunarti Fadeli, 2021). We may not separate out theology in this space which is of that which is made up of symbols, rituals and traditions which are a part of the people's collective faith.

In different regions religious practices of Islam are a proof of the religion's accommodation to local values at the same time which it maintains its core theology. Public rituals like Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik in Pariaman, and Sekaten in Yogyakarta present a flexible form of religion which has adopted cultural elements. This is a dynamic process in which tradition meets orthodoxy which although at time is put to debate is also what we see being passed on (Björkander, 2024; Jindra, 2023; Neuheuser, 2021; Storer, 2025).

Grebet Maulud in Yogyakarta is a which is at once a cultural expression and a form of da'wah, with a procession of mountain altars which it is thought to bring blessing. This ritual which has roots in royal tradition since the 18th century puts forth a theological message of thanksgiving, social justice, and the Sultan's role in the lives of his people (Mushbihah Rodliyatun Badrus Zaman, 2022). The mountain alters which the community debate are not only agricultural symbols but a means to grapple with the concept of God's grace which extends to the whole world.

Tabuik in Pariaman is a display of the historical and syncretic elements in the Ashura celebration (Akmal Lubis, 2022). We see in the miniature buraq which is paraded and then put into the sea a reenactment of the Karbala tragedy which at the same time is incorporated into the Minangkabau cosmology. This procession is a picture of how local identity and the Shiah Islamic theological heritage transform into what is today a very much a part of the cultural ritual. The theologic meaning within it is a reflection of the long going back and forth between doctrine and tradition.

Sekaten in Yogyakarta and Surakarta present a cultural da'wah approach which is the creation of the Sultan via the use of gamelan and folk festivals (Karim Raya, 2022). At the Prophets' Maulid the gamelan music which plays is not only for entertainment but is a symbol which in turn draws Javanese people to Islamic values. This festival is a live example of how we see theology put into art and culture which in turn removes the barrier between the sacred and profane and at the same time increases the religion's reach. Do today's rituals put forth our faith or have they become products in the global market (Giacobello, 2022; Zhenrao et al. 2021)?

The struggle between what is traditional in Islam and what is local practice becomes to the fore when some scholars put these practices down as bid'ah which is innovation in religion, while others present them as syi'ar which is religious practice. This issue puts forth a space for discussion which in turn shows how theology plays a role in the interaction between man and God as well as in the social structures within the cultural setting (Kuzhippallil, 2022; Lourdunathan, 2022). The play between the traditional scholars and local doers of faith is a theologic field that which in turn enriches the study of our faith.

Public rituals exist which indicate that modern public spaces have become a new home for living theology. Festivals are not only cultural celebrations but also stages for interpreting faith in the face of social change. Symbols, ritual performance, and collective participation open up for the emergence of a more contextual theology which is rooted in local issues yet at the same time addresses issues of globalization (Muhallim, 2023).

The importance of this study is that it puts forth the role of theology in to which it must respond as culture evolves. We see value in an academic which looks at the play between faith and tradition via public rituals that which puts forth a growth of what we may term as Contextual



Islamic theology. Also we must present this in a way that religion does not get caught in the polarized debate between what is traditional and what isn't but rather we find a via media rooted in the value of rahmah and relevant to the nation's cultural truths.

Literature Review

This study explores the theological dimensions embedded in public cultural practices such as Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik, and Sekaten, highlighting how the negotiation between faith and local traditions results in distinctive forms of religious expression. The analysis is directed at understanding the tension between orthodoxy and local wisdom through the theoretical framework of ritualisation by Catherine Bell (1988), who views ritual as a power strategy and meaning-making process, as well as the concept of invented tradition by Eric Hobsbawm in Hijas (2024), which emphasizes how cultural practices are inherited, modified, and legitimized according to social needs. This framework is used to interpret the dynamics of ritual theology within the context of cultural heritage as a transforming expression of faith in modern public spaces.

Miharja, Kusnawan, and Mustopa's (2022) research in *HTS Theologiese Studies* uses a qualitative approach to explore how religion-based agricultural traditions can serve as a means for sustainable Islamic da'wah. The study shows that religion-based agriculture not only addresses economic aspects but also internalizes Islamic teachings into daily life. The distinction from this article lies in the context: while their study discusses agriculture as a medium for da'wah, this research focuses on public festivals as loci for the dialogue between theology and culture.

Timbers and Hollenberger's (2022) research in *Religions* examines Christian mindfulness practices as a mental health strategy using a qualitative phenomenological approach. Their findings show that mindfulness is rooted in Christian sacred traditions and is then lived out as a form of bodily and spiritual awareness. This article fundamentally differs as it focuses on Islamic public rituals in social and cultural spaces, rather than on personal contemplative practices aimed at mental health.

Yan and Zhang (2022), in their article *Ritual and Magic in Buddhist Visual Culture from the Bird Totem*, investigate the representation of ritual and magic in Buddhist visual art through iconographic analysis and visual cultural studies. Their research reveals that bird symbols in totems serve as theological mediums representing spiritual and magical powers in religious practices. The difference with this article is clear in the subject of study, as their focus is on Buddhist visuality, while this research centers on Nusantara Islamic festivals that combine ritual, art, and theology within public spaces.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach of a descriptive type to deeply illustrate the dynamics of ritual theology and cultural heritage in the context of Islamic public festivals in Indonesia (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020). The choice of this method is based on the need to understand the symbolic meanings, cultural narratives, and religious interpretations embedded in the practices of Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik, and Sekaten. A qualitative study allows for a more flexible analysis in interpreting the relationship between religious texts and cultural practices, leading to an understanding that is not only normative but also contextual, in line with the social diversity of Indonesian society.

The data sources in this research consist of both primary and secondary data, which complement each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Weyant, 2022). Primary data includes cultural documents in the form of ritual descriptions, historical archives, and references to



Quranic verses used as theological foundations to interpret cultural phenomena. Secondary data is obtained through relevant literature such as academic books, journal articles, research reports, and media coverage documenting religious festivals in public spaces. Data collection techniques were carried out systematically through literature review, by tracing written sources that strengthen the argumentation and expand the scope of analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes the stages of data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and verification or conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020). This process was cyclical, allowing the researcher to revisit the data according to interpretative needs. Data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques by comparing findings from various sources, thereby achieving consistency and validity of the arguments (Flick, 2020). This step ensured that the research findings are scientifically credible and contribute to the development of studies in theology and culture.

Results and Findings

Islamic Theology Representation in Public Festivals

Islamic public festivals in Indonesia show how religious practices are not merely expressions of individual faith but transform into theological representations manifested through symbols, rituals, and cultural performances. Each festival presents a theological construction that lives within society, where faith is embodied in forms that can be seen, touched, and collectively experienced. Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik Pariaman, and Sekaten Yogyakarta are concrete examples of how theological concepts about gratitude, mercy, sacrifice, and cultural da'wah are embodied in symbolic forms full of meaning.

Table 1. Theological Representation in Islamic Public Festivals in Indonesia (Authors' Literature-Based Synthesis, 2025)

Public Festival	Main Ritual Form	Theological Representation	Cultural Meaning
Grebeg Maulud (Yogyakarta)	Procession of agricultural mountain offerings from the palace to the mosque	Theology of gratitude, distribution of blessings, religious legitimacy of leaders	Social harmony, welfare, palace-people relations
Tabuik (Pariaman)	Procession of tabuik (miniature buraq) thrown into the sea	Theology of sacrifice, memory of Karbala, eschatology	Local identity, communal solidarity, assimilation of Shia-Minang
Sekaten (Yogyakarta/Solo)	Playing of gamelan music, night market, Maulid Nabi celebration	Theology of cultural da'wah, celebration of prophethood, transformation of faith	Integration of Islam-Java, palace legitimacy, people's economy

The theological representation in Grebeg Maulud highlights the dimension of gratitude expressed through the agricultural mountain offerings that are paraded from the palace to the mosque. This practice reflects Allah's command in QS. Ibrahim [14]:7, which asserts that gratitude brings additional blessings. Hamka interprets this verse as a moral obligation to distribute blessings to others, not merely as verbal expression (Hamka, 2012). Quraish Shihab emphasizes the social dimension of gratitude, which is the distribution of blessings to create justice in society (Shihab, 2015). The mountain offerings contested by the community become



a concrete symbol of this interpretation, where the spiritual legitimacy of the leader is affirmed through the equitable distribution of blessings.

Grebeg Maulud is also closely related to QS. Al-Baqarah [2]:267, which commands humans to spend the best of their harvest. Ibn Kathir's interpretation explains that this verse emphasizes the obligation to give charity from the best harvest as an act of worship. Tafsir Maraghi adds that this practice serves as a means to strengthen social solidarity (Maraghi, 1910). The agricultural mountain offerings in Grebeg represent this Qur'anic command, turning the ritual into a collective act of worship that connects faith with the welfare of the people.

The Tabuik ritual in Pariaman represents the theology of sacrifice inspired by the Karbala tragedy which occurred in the 680 CE martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and some of his followers at Karbala (in Iraq). They were all killed after refusing to pledge their allegiance to an unjust ruler, thus forever making the event a strong symbol of sacrifice, moral resistance, and total devotion to God. This procession can be understood through QS. Al-Hajj [22]:34, which mentions that every community has a symbolic act of sacrifice as a symbol of devotion to Allah. Al-Razi's tafsir emphasizes that sacrifice is an expression of total submission to God (Al-Razi, 2012). Thabathabai's tafsir highlights the spiritual dimension, where every sacrifice serves as a reminder of the transience of human life (Thabathabai, 1991). Tabuik, as a medium of the memory of Karbala, affirms that sacrifice is not only personal but also collective, becoming the foundation of social solidarity and cultural identity in Minangkabau.

The meaning of sacrifice in Tabuik is also linked to QS. Ash-Shaffat [37]:107, which narrates the substitution of Prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice with a great offering. Tafsir Zamakhsyari interprets this verse as an expression of Allah's mercy, teaching that true sacrifice lies in intention and sincerity (Al-Zamakhsyari, 1995). Tafsir Jalalain strengthens this view by emphasizing that every sacrifice is a sign of absolute obedience to the divine command (As-Suyuthi & Al-Mahally, 2015). The Tabuik procession ends in the sea offering to express total surrender to Allah's will, and this symbolizes the return of all human effort and suffering to the divine. By throwing the offering into the ocean, the community enacts sacrifice and not as loss, but as total devotion and trust in God. At the same time, the communal ritual builds social cohesion because the collective participation transforms individual faith into a communal bond rooted in remembrance, humility, and needed solidarity. The Tabuik procession that thus ends with the offering being thrown into the sea reinforces the symbol of one aligning to Allah, where sacrifice becomes both a deep spiritual and social bond.

Sekaten Yogyakarta brings forth a theology of cultural da'wah through the gamelan art and the Maulid Nabi celebration. This context aligns with QS. Al-Anbiya [21]:107, which mentions Prophet Muhammad as a mercy to the entire universe. Quraish Shihab (2015) explains in his tafsir that the mercy of prophethood is not only spiritual but also expressed in cultural forms that can unite people. Hamka (2012) emphasizes that the mercy of the Prophet is universal, including in the way Islam is spread with an approach that suits social conditions. The gamelan in Sekaten as a da'wah medium by the Sultan strengthens this tafsir, making art an instrument of mercy that is accepted by the Javanese community.

Sekaten festival can also be connected with QS. An-Nahl [16]:125, which commands da'wah with wisdom and good counsel. Ibn Kathir's tafsir interprets wisdom as the ability to adapt the method of da'wah to the audience (Katsir, 2018). Tafsir Muyassar emphasizes the cultural aspect of da'wah, which is the wisdom to convey teachings within the cultural framework (Al-Qarni, 2008). By using gamelan music and the night market, the Sultan of Yogyakarta not only preserved Javanese culture but also infused Islamic values, making da'wah more effective and reinforcing the legitimacy of the palace.

These three festivals demonstrate that the representation of public theology understood here as the articulation of theological meaning within public spaces where faith engages social, cultural, and political life beyond formal religious institutions, these three festivals demonstrate



that the representation of public theology is always tied to symbols rooted in revelation and interpretations that live within society. Grebeg emphasizes the distribution of gratitude, Tabuik affirms the meaning of sacrifice, and Sekaten showcases cultural da'wah as mercy. Tafsirs from Hamka, Shihab, Ibn Kathir, Maraghi, al-Razi, Thabathabai, Zamakhsyari, and Jalalain show that the Qur'an opens up a rich space for interpreting cultural practices. Thus, public festivals in Indonesia can be understood as a locus for contextual theology, where faith is articulated in symbolic forms that respond to social needs.

This representation also underscores that the public sphere is not merely a cultural arena but also a space for the actualization of theology derived from the Qur'an. The symbols of gunung, tabuik, and gamelan demonstrate the dynamic nature of tafsir, proving that religion does not limit itself to private spaces. Classical and contemporary tafsirs intersect in these cultural practices, showing the continuity between sacred texts and social realities. Therefore, public festivals present an Islam theology that is friendly, adaptive, and contributive to the nation's culture.

Ritual as Cultural Heritage in Modernity

Islamic public rituals in Indonesia are not only understood as religious practices but also as cultural heritage that has undergone institutionalization. Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik Pariaman, and Sekaten Yogyakarta are not merely sacred celebrations but also part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognized by the state and positioned as tourism assets. This transformation shows that modernity does not erase tradition but rather encourages its survival through adaptation to economic demands, cultural policies, and digital exposure.

Table 2. Ritual as Cultural Heritage in Modernity (Authors' Literature-Based Synthesis, 2025)

Public Festival	Status/Transformation	Modernity Context	Contemporary Meaning
Grebeg Maulud	Preserved by the palace, presented as a cultural attraction	Managed as a regional tourism agenda	Sacred tradition commercialized, symbol of Islam–Java harmony
Tabuik	Recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of West Sumatra	Became a tourism icon of Pariaman, digitally published	Memorial of sacrifice institutionalized as local identity
Sekaten	Maulid festival integrated with night market	Became an annual festival attracting domestic tourists	Cultural da'wah reproduced within the framework of popular economy and culture

The narrative from the table shows that Grebeg Maulud emphasizes the role of the palace (keraton) as both a cultural preservative institution and a religious actor with connected roles. When viewed as a cultural preservative institution, the palace keeps and passes down Javanese traditions, symbols, and rituals. As a religious actor, the palace actively participates in Islamic life by organizing a ritual that commemorates the Prophet Muhammad's birth, framing the celebration as an act of religious devotion rather than just as mere tradition. This showcases how the palace legitimizes its authority by mixing culture and religion, and it shows itself as the protector of both spiritual values and cultural continuity in the society.

The ritual of the mountain offerings, which once functioned as a medium for distributing blessings, is now a tourism attraction that draws thousands of visitors. This transformation marks a change in meaning, where symbols of gratitude and spiritual legitimacy of leaders interact with the logic of economics and tourism promotion. From a public theology



perspective, this practice illustrates how religious values can adapt and present themselves in new forms that are accepted by the wider society.

Tabuik Pariaman presents a different dynamic because this tradition has been officially recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage. This legitimacy signifies the state's effort to institutionalize the memory of the Karbala sacrifice that has been assimilated into Minangkabau identity. This formal recognition shows that religious practices can shift from being mere community expressions to symbols of collective identity that carry political, economic, and tourism values. In this context, Tabuik is understood not only as a sacred ritual but also as a cultural asset that is preserved and marketed.

Sekaten presents the face of cultural da'wah transformed into a modern festival. The presence of night markets, public entertainment, and art attractions make this celebration function in two ways: as religious outreach and as an economic agenda for the people. The concept of da'wah, which initially used gamelan as a symbolic instrument, is now expanded through cultural commodification which means turning cultural elements such as traditions, symbols, practices, or even knowledge into mere products or services to be bought and sold for profit, thus very often stripping them of their original meaning and context for the purpose of mass market appeal. Public theology can view this phenomenon as evidence that da'wah does not always take place in the mosque but also in the public entertainment arena, blending faith with economic needs.

The transformation of rituals into modern cultural heritage raises questions about authenticity and sacredness. On the one hand, preservation as Intangible Cultural Heritage guarantees the continuity of traditions and expands their audience. On the other hand, the commodification process risks diluting the theological meaning when festivals are reduced to mere spectacles. The dialectic between sacredness and profaneness becomes a space for theological reflection, showing that faith cannot be detached from the social, economic, and cultural dynamics that shape it. This phenomenon can be analyzed through Hobsbawm's concept of *invented tradition*, which explains that traditions are often maintained, modified, and institutionalized according to specific socio-political needs. Grebeg, Tabuik, and Sekaten are traditions that continue to be reconstructed to remain relevant to the demands of the times. From a theological perspective, this reconstruction does not mean losing value but demonstrates the flexibility of religion in responding to modernity. Islam in Indonesia appears as a religion capable of embracing culture while maintaining its core principles.

The modernization of public festivals also highlights the role of the state in regulating, preserving, and marketing cultural heritage. The involvement of local governments in packaging Grebeg and Sekaten as tourism agendas, as well as the recognition of Tabuik as Intangible Cultural Heritage, marks the institutionalization of traditions. This shifts the role of religious scholars and local communities, as cultural authority now shares space with state authority. A public theology perspective can read this dynamic as an expansion of the locus of theology, where the discourse of faith is shaped not only by religious communities but also by political and economic institutions. Ritual as cultural heritage in modernity thus presents Islam as adaptive, contextual, and open. Public festivals show that faith can be manifested in symbols and practices that are constantly negotiated with culture, economy, and politics. Rather than weakening theology, this transformation enriches the understanding of how religion lives within society. Islam emerges not only as a normative teaching but also as a cultural force that shapes national identity and civilization.

Negotiation and Contestation Between Orthodoxy and Local Traditions

Public rituals in Nusantara Islam which relates to the Sunni Islamic practices and preaching in the Indonesian archipelago by mainly indigenous preachers, apropos by moderation, tolerance, and cultural flexibility, may often become an arena of tug-of-war between orthodoxy,

which emphasizes the purity of Shari'a, and local traditions that preserve cultural values. In this context, orthodoxy refers to interpretative positions within Sunni Islam that prioritise strict adherence to established scriptural sources, legal doctrines, and ritual norms, often emphasising doctrinal purity and uniformity over cultural accommodation. Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik Pariaman, and Sekaten Yogyakarta serve as examples of how public festivals function not only as religious expressions but also as arenas of contestation of discourse. Debates on bid'ah, syncretism, and the legitimacy of religious symbols consistently emerge, demonstrating that public rituals are spaces where orthodoxy and tradition test and negotiate with each other.

Table 3. Negotiation and Contestation Between Orthodoxy and Local Traditions (Authors' Literature-Based Synthesis, 2025)

Public Festival	Orthodox View	Local Tradition Perspective	Contestation Dynamics
Grebeg Maulud	Criticized as bid'ah due to its mixing with Javanese customs	Maintained as a collective expression of gratitude	Grows as a sacred ritual while also becoming a cultural agenda
Tabuik	Seen as excessive and closely related to Shia practices	Considered as Minangkabau identity already assimilated	Debate between Islamic orthodoxy and local wisdom
Sekaten	Viewed as a practice mixing profane elements	Interpreted as an effective cultural da'wah	Tension between public entertainment and sacred function

The narrative from the table shows that Grebeg Maulud is positioned differently by orthodoxy and local tradition. Some reformist Sunni scholars, particularly within scripturalist traditions, argue that the procession of mountain offerings lacks a clear basis in the Qur'an and Sunnah and may therefore be categorised as *bid'ah*, as this perspective prioritises the purification of worship based on normative textual authority (Al-Shāṭibī, 2005; Ibn Taymiyyah, 2004; Lauzière, 2016). However, the people of Yogyakarta see the ritual as a manifestation of collective gratitude passed down through generations. The negotiation happens when the palace tries to emphasize the spiritual and social dimensions of the mountain offerings, making it accepted as part of contextual Islamic symbols.

Tabuik Pariaman presents a more complex contestation. Orthodoxy often criticizes this tradition as being rooted in Shia influence, while the majority of Minangkabau adheres to Sunni traditions. The procession of tabuik, which ends with it being thrown into the sea, is considered not based on the Sunnah of the Prophet. However, the local community interprets the ritual as a symbol of solidarity and cultural identity that transcends sectarian boundaries. Negotiation occurs through reinterpretation of meaning, turning it from a mere commemoration of Karbala into a symbol of social integration accepted within the frame of local wisdom.

Sekaten Yogyakarta presents a more subtle form of contestation. Criticism from orthodoxy is directed at the integration of public entertainment elements in the Maulid Nabi celebration, fearing it dilutes the sacred meaning. However, the Javanese people view gamelan music and the night market as effective instruments to bring da'wah closer to the public. Negotiation occurs through emphasizing that the core of Sekaten remains the commemoration of Maulid Nabi, while entertainment elements are merely supplementary. This process shows that orthodoxy is not fully rejected but negotiated with cultural wisdom. This negotiated positioning of sacred commemoration and cultural entertainment in Sekaten has been documented as a form of cultural da'wah that balances religious meaning and public appeal within Javanese Islam (Karim & Raya, 2022).



The contestation between orthodoxy and local traditions reveals the dynamics of living public theology. Theology is not only understood as an abstract doctrine but as a social interaction process involving interpretation, symbols, and practices (Houston, 2023). In this framework, orthodoxy and tradition are not opposing entities but two poles that influence each other. The contestation of public rituals shows that religion continues to shape and be shaped by culture, creating expressions of faith that are plural but still rooted in the core values of Islam.

Negotiation also takes place at the political and institutional levels (Jansen, 2023; Reimer, 2022; Yuan, 2021). Local governments often act as mediators by incorporating public rituals into official tourism or cultural agendas. This step grants new legitimacy to the tradition, although it still provokes resistance from the orthodox camp. This relationship shows that contestation does not only occur between scholars and the community but also involves state actors who direct rituals into the interests of the economy and cultural diplomacy.

Theologically, this contestation shows three layers of interpretation. First, orthodoxy emphasizes the purity of teachings. Second, local tradition emphasizes identity and cultural continuity. Third, the space for negotiation produces hybrid forms, i.e., public rituals recognized both as religious symbols and cultural heritage. This process demonstrates that public theology is always dynamic, operating through reinterpretation that allows religion to remain relevant amidst modernity (Duderija, 2018).

From an academic perspective, the contestation of public rituals can be understood as a form of ritualisation as outlined by Catherine Bell. Ritual is never neutral; it is always a strategy of power that shapes social relations and legitimacy. Grebeg, Tabuik, and Sekaten are proof of how rituals compete for meaning: who has the right to interpret, who has the right to regulate, and who receives legitimacy from these sacred symbols. In this case, theology serves as a field of negotiation for power between orthodoxy, tradition, and the state.

The negotiation between orthodoxy and tradition also shows that religion is not only a normative teaching but also a cultural force that shapes national identity. The tensions that arise enrich theological understanding because they reveal the different ways in which Muslims interpret and live their faith. Public festivals become spaces for articulating faith that is not static but fluid, full of debate, yet still rooted in religious conviction (le Roux & Lotter, 2021).

Thus, the contestation between orthodoxy and local traditions should not be viewed as a threat but as proof of the vitality of Nusantara Islam. The negotiations allow for the emergence of new forms of religious expression that are relevant to cultural and social contexts. From this, it can be concluded that public festivals are not merely ceremonial rituals but also arenas of living theology, where faith is debated, negotiated, and celebrated in public spaces.

Discussion

Public rituals in Nusantara Islam emphasize that religious practices are not only guided by doctrinal norms but also shaped through the process of ritualisation. Catherine Bell (1988) argues that ritual is a power strategy that forms meaning and legitimacy. Grebeg Maulud with its agricultural mountain offerings, Tabuik with its procession of buraq, and Sekaten with its gamelan music all represent cultural strategies to manifest theology in symbolic forms. These symbols are not mere decoration but tools to articulate faith in public spaces, assert the legitimacy of leaders, and strengthen social solidarity.

Modernity brings consequences for the status of rituals as cultural heritage (Abebe & Mada Gatisso, 2023; Balme, 2023; Lombardo et al., 2023; Salemin, 2021). Eric Hobsbawm's concept of *invented tradition* explains that traditions are often institutionalized, modified, and maintained according to political or social needs. The transformation of Grebeg, Tabuik, and Sekaten into frameworks of tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage reflects this mechanism.



The process of preserving and promoting rituals within the state framework shows that religion is not only practiced in private spaces but interacts with public policies, the creative industry, and global market logic.

The contestation between orthodoxy and local tradition demonstrates the dynamics of living public theology. Bell (1988) also emphasizes that rituals always function to create social differentiation and legitimacy of authority. Orthodox criticism of *bid'ah* in Grebeg or Shia influences in Tabuik has not halted their practice; on the contrary, it shows how local communities negotiate legitimacy by emphasizing the social and spiritual functions of these rituals. The traditions that have been maintained demonstrate that rituals are not mere static teachings but are arenas of ongoing negotiation of meaning (Jansen, 2023; Jindra, 2023; Tallon, 2023).

In the public theology framework, public festivals present religion as a social force present on streets, squares, and night markets. Theology is not limited to mosques and formal worship spaces but permeates into cultural arenas. Tabuik does not only commemorate the sacrifice of Karbala but also affirms Minangkabau identity; Sekaten does not only commemorate Maulid Nabi but also generates a people's economy; Grebeg does not only channel gratitude but also affirms the legitimacy of the palace. This reinforces that public theology in Indonesia is fluid, flexible, and rooted in social reality. The phenomenon of ritual commodification also plays an important part in the global discourse on religion and modernity. The shift of rituals into tourism attractions shows that religion cannot be separated from market logic. However, rather than eroding sanctity, this commodification opens up new spaces for religion to reach broader audiences. This aligns with the global discourse on lived religion, which emphasizes that religion is practiced not only in doctrine but also in daily life, entertainment, and even the tourism industry.

Analysis of Indonesia's public rituals also contributes to Bell's theory of ritualisation. Festivals such as Grebeg, Tabuik, and Sekaten emphasize that rituals are never neutral; they are always laden with power—whether religious, cultural, or state power. Rituals become a medium for negotiating legitimacy, where leaders, scholars, the state, and the community all play roles. This complements Bell's theory with a new context: public rituals in Indonesia not only serve as a strategy for internal community power but also function as tools for cultural diplomacy operating at the global level (Björkander, 2024; Zhang, 2023). From a global perspective, the findings of this study affirm that Nusantara Islam presents a face of religion that can engage with modernity without losing its identity. Public festivals, rich with religious symbolism, show that Islamic traditions are able to adapt, institutionalize as cultural heritage, be promoted in tourism, and still remain as religious symbols. Thus, Islam in Indonesia contributes to the international discourse on the relationship between religion, culture, and modernity, offering an integrative model that is not only defensive but also creative.

The research by Miharja et al. (2022), Timbers & Hollenberger (2022), and Yan & Zhang (2022) demonstrates that religion is often institutionalized in daily practices, whether through religion-based agriculture, Christian mindfulness, or Buddhist visuality. However, this study presents a new context, focusing on Nusantara Islamic public festivals that showcase the interaction between faith, tradition, and modernity in open spaces. The fundamental difference lies in the focus: while previous research highlighted personal practices or specific community contexts, this study uncovers the collective dynamics of large-scale public rituals with social, economic, and political implications.

The main contribution of this research lies in revealing that Islamic public festivals in Indonesia are not merely forms of cultural preservation but also loci for living public theology amidst modernity. This article does not stop at cultural description but challenges the findings with Bell's theory of ritualisation and Hobsbawm's concept of *invented tradition* to show how religion, culture, and the state negotiate through rituals. The novelty of this research is its assertion that Grebeg, Tabuik, and Sekaten are not merely cultural attractions or tourism



objects but spaces where Islamic theology transforms into a social praxis that builds legitimacy, strengthens identity, and opens new pathways for global cultural diplomacy. These findings place Nusantara Islam as an integrative model that is highly relevant for the international discourse on religion and modernity.

Conclusion

Islamic public festivals in Indonesia, like Grebeg Maulud, Tabuik Pariiman, and Sekaten Yogyakarta, should be understood as cultural rites and the sphere of existence of public theology in contemporary times. Theological representations related to agricultural mountain offerings, tabuik, and gamelan and its symbols represent the incarnation of religion through meaningful group rites. The transformation of traditions into a modern-day manifestation of cultural heritage shows that faith adapts to social, political, and economic needs as opposed to losing ground. The clash of orthodoxy and local culture shows the energy of Nusantara Islam or is capable to adapt and assimilate the cultural values, not merely confined to the normal purification. As a result, Nusantara Islam occupies an important place in worldwide discussions on religion and the public sphere as a model of faith, culture, and modernism integration. Theoretically, this study contributes to public theology by demonstrating that Islamic theology in Indonesia operates as a living, negotiated praxis within public rituals, where revelation, culture, economy, and political authority intersect rather than remain confined to formal religious institutions.

Due to its dependence on literature review, this study is limited and it has not investigated through field data the dynamics of community involvement in public festivals. The author's argument needs further in-depth study of the elements of economic activity, politics and cultural tourism, the study also focuses more on symbolic and religious aspects. For this reason, the next study should use the ethnographic technique or participative observation to directly record the experience of groups in honoring and analyzing the ceremonies. To enhance global perspectives, the research could also investigate cross-country comparisons—for example, Islamic public festivities in Indonesia and similarly positioned ones in South Asia and the Middle East.

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