

# The Spaces of *Sekaten*: Contesting Islamic Values and Market Logic in the Ritual Landscape of Surakarta, Indonesia

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## Abstract

*Sekaten* is a Javanese Islamic ritual that was originally designed as a medium of da'wah, integrating Islamic teachings with local cultural expressions through music, symbols, and ceremonial spaces. While *Sekaten* is also celebrated in other Javanese courts such as Yogyakarta, the Surakarta version displays a distinctive spatial configuration in which the royal square is dominated by a large-scale commercial night market and its ritual sites are more sharply separated between sacred and profane functions. This study aims to explore the segmentation of space within the contemporary *Sekaten* ritual in Surakarta and to analyze the shift from its religious orientation toward a celebratory, commodified form. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through field observation, in-depth interviews, and literature study. The findings reveal a spatial triad in the current ritual configuration: the courtyard of the Great Mosque functions as a site for symbolic Islamic da'wah, the mosque interior serves as a contemplative spiritual space, and the royal square (*alun-alun*) has evolved into a festive marketplace. This spatial segmentation reflects a broader shift in public perception—where once the ritual emphasized spiritual reflection, it is now increasingly viewed as entertainment and economic spectacle. The study concludes that reinvigorating the ritual's spiritual dimensions is essential to preserving *Sekaten*'s identity as a cultural heritage of Javanese Islam amidst the forces of secularization and market commodification.

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Sekaten* ritual celebration traces a long historical trajectory, beginning in the era of the Demak Sultanate and extending through the bifurcation of the Mataram Kingdom into two successor polities: Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Throughout its historical continuum, *Sekaten* functioned as a vehicle for Islamic proselytization, initiated by Javanese kings and the Wali Songo (Aulia, 2023; Poeger, 1999). This trajectory resonates with broader scholarly debates on Javanese Islam, in which rituals such as the *slametan* and royal ceremonies have been interpreted as key sites where Islamic doctrines are translated into local symbolic forms (Hilmy, 2018; Nasir, 2019; Woodward, 1988). Within this scholarship, *Sekaten* may be viewed as a paradigmatic example of how Islamic da'wah is embedded in performative and spatial practices, rather than being confined to textual preaching alone. The effectiveness of this da'wah medium is evident in the substantial growth of the Muslim population, particularly across the Javanese heartland. Such success was not incidental, but the result of a meticulously devised strategy that privileged cultural and artistic expressions as the principal conduit for transmitting Islamic teachings (Maharsi, 2022).

The choice to utilize cultural arts as a medium of religious propagation was not arbitrary, but rather rooted in the socio-cultural reality that art and tradition are inseparable from Javanese daily life. As emphasized by Abdurrahman Wahid, da'wah cannot be disentangled from the local cultural context. On the contrary, cultural da'wah serves as a strategic pathway for conveying Islamic values in a pluralistic public sphere without diminishing the core essence of the faith (Syabibi et al., 2021). Baehaqi further affirms that the vital essence of culture lies in its intrinsic embeddedness within the lived experiences of the Indonesian people, making it inseparable from the dynamics of social life

(Baehaqi, 2016). Therefore, through the divine will of Allah and the agency of both Wali Songo and Javanese rulers, Islam was able to spread widely across Java via the culturally embedded expressions manifested in the *Sekaten* ritual.

As Islam became the dominant religion in Java, the *Sekaten* ritual experienced a significant shift in function. What was originally conceived as a vehicle for Islamic proselytization gradually transformed into a mere symbolic celebration. This transformation can be historically traced back to the bifurcation of the Mataram Kingdom into two royal entities: Surakarta and Yogyakarta. During the latter period of Mataram rule and the subsequent relocation of political authority to Surakarta, *Sekaten* was increasingly instrumentalized for political ends—primarily serving as a ritualized mechanism to evaluate the loyalty of subordinate regional regents (*bupati*).

Within this framework, the presence of each regent at the *Sekaten* celebration was mandatory as both a political tribute and a symbolic affirmation of allegiance to the king. Absence was construed as a sign of disloyalty, if not outright insubordination (Saddhono, 2008). The requirement that a royal representative be dispatched in the event of a regent's absence further attests to the ritual's integration into royal political governance. This political use of *Sekaten* is particularly evident in the Kasunanan Surakarta court and gives its celebration a specific profile when compared with parallel traditions such as *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta. While *Sekaten* is also performed in Yogyakarta, court narratives there tend to foreground the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday and mass devotional participation, whereas in Surakarta the ritual protocol explicitly inscribes the attendance of regional regents as part of the ceremonial order. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the da'wah function of *Sekaten* was not entirely displaced. In the Kasunanan Surakarta court, the ritual retained its role as a medium for the dissemination of Islam, embedded within broader cultural festivities. The *Sekaten* ceremony as instituted by the Mataram Kingdom was never solely a commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth; it also served as a symbolic affirmation of the bond between the monarch and the Prophet as the Messenger of God. In this context, *Sekaten* became a tool for the legitimation of royal power. At the socio-political level, the attendance of *bupati* was required not merely as protocol but as a performative gesture of loyalty, materialized through the offering of tribute to the sovereign.

Concurrently, *Sekaten* began to incorporate an economic dimension, evolving into an occasion for local communities to engage in trade and partake in the festive atmosphere. This economic activity is most evident in the night market (*pasar malam*) held during *Sekaten*, where visitors are not only drawn by the gamelan performances but also by the array of culinary offerings and traditional children's games and toys sold around the venue. Such developments parallel a broader pattern identified in studies of pilgrimage and religious festivals worldwide, where sacred events increasingly function as platforms for tourism, consumption, and spectacle (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Terzidou et al., 2018). In the case of *Sekaten*, the expansion of the night market signals a gradual reorientation from a primarily da'wah-oriented ritual toward a hybrid arena in which spiritual aspirations coexist—and sometimes compete—with commercial logics and leisure practices.

This growing functional complexity of *Sekaten* reflects a parallel shift in how the ritual is perceived and interpreted by different social groups. A significant portion of the general public, especially younger visitors, no longer fully grasps the original spiritual intent of *Sekaten* as envisioned by the Wali Songo and Islamic monarchs; for them, the ritual is primarily experienced as entertainment, a recreational outing, a chance to shop at the night market, or an occasional opportunity to *ngalap berkah* or undertake *tirakat* in the Great Mosque. By contrast, palace residents and *abdi dalem* tend to emphasize *Sekaten* as a courtly rite and a manifestation of royal *pusaka*, where sacredness is attached to the continuity of dynastic authority and to the material objects—such as the gamelan and heirloom regalia—that embody that authority. Cultural figures and heritage activists often frame *Sekaten* as a “living tradition” of Javanese Islam, stressing its historical and aesthetic significance while at the same time criticizing the growing dominance of

commercial entertainment in the royal square. Religious leaders and mosque officials, meanwhile, highlight the mosque and its courtyard as the true locus of sacredness, supporting forms of da'wah and collective worship while expressing concern about practices that border on superstition, such as attributing autonomous magical power to ritual objects. Taken together, these divergent viewpoints show that sacredness in *Sekaten* is not a single, fixed attribute, but a contested category continually negotiated between the public, the palace, cultural actors, and religious authorities according to their distinct beliefs, values, and social roles.

This interpretive openness has led to the emergence of spatial segmentation within the *Sekaten* celebration. Investigating this spatial differentiation is crucial—not only to provide the public with deeper insights into the ritual's historical roots but also to guide contemporary participants in understanding the symbolic meanings attached to each distinct area of the celebration. In line with scholarship on sacred space and place attachment, different zones within a single religious complex can sustain contrasting layers of affect, memory, and identity for different groups of users (Beck, 2012; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993). The fact that each space within the *Sekaten* ritual serves a unique function and carries its own symbolic weight indicates that the ritual is not a monolithic event; rather, it embodies a spectrum of spatial meanings that mirror the diversity of its contemporary cultural interpretations.

Ideally, the *Sekaten* ritual should continue to function as a cultural event imbued with Islamic spiritual values. Despite Islam having become the majority religion in Java, *Sekaten* remains relevant as a contemplative space for reflecting on Islamic teachings in everyday life. It serves as a moment to recall the prophetic struggle of Muhammad (PBUH), which was continued by the Wali Songo and the Islamic kings of Java in spreading Islam through peaceful and culturally nuanced means. As Adnan notes, in earlier iterations of *Sekaten*, religious scholars delivered sermons aimed at encouraging the public to emulate the Prophet's character, conduct, and speech in a holistic manner (Adnan, 1977). Reviving this ideal meaning of *Sekaten* can only be achieved if the public is systematically educated to understand the spatial segmentation within the contemporary ritual framework.

The idealized vision of *Sekaten*, however, stands in stark contrast to the current realities observed on the ground. What was once a ritual steeped in religious symbolism now manifests increasingly as a secular celebration, at times in opposition to the spiritual ethos of Islam. This transformation is particularly evident in the presence of *dangdut* music performances within the night market area. The provocative choreography and revealing attire of the performers—often exposing parts of the body considered 'aurat' in Islamic teachings—highlight the extent to which contemporary entertainment contradicts the original da'wah-oriented substance of *Sekaten*. This shift represents a broader process of profanization, whereby the ritual's spiritual function is displaced by secular amusement.

Beyond the realm of entertainment, this shift is also apparent in the public's reinterpretation of symbolic objects placed in the courtyard of the Great Mosque. Historically, these items served as tools of da'wah through symbolic pedagogy. For example, the *kinang* (*nyusur*) tradition embodied the five pillars of Islam: the betel leaf, with its dual sides and bitter taste, signified the two shahadas and the struggles of professing faith; *gambir* symbolized the obligation of daily prayer; *enjet* represented fasting, which culminates in spiritual serenity; *mbako* (tobacco), used to evenly distribute the *kinang* mixture in the mouth, denoted zakat, emphasizing the duty to share one's wealth; and *kantil* flower with its fragrance signified the hajj pilgrimage, representing the aspirational ideal of becoming a moral exemplar (Mibtadin et al., 2023). Other items—such as the gamelan ensemble, salted eggs (*ndog kamal*), traditional toys, spinning tops, whips, and piggy banks—also functioned as visual instruments of Islamic da'wah, conveying moral and spiritual lessons through aesthetic means.

Symbolic objects that were once instrumental in Islamic proselytization have undergone a shift in meaning, particularly in terms of public reception. Many visitors to the Great Mosque

courtyard no longer grasp the religious symbolism embedded in these objects. Instead, the public often treats them as sacred in a misguided sense—venerating them and seeking blessings directly from the objects rather than from Allah. This phenomenon signifies a theological regression, closely resembling pre-Islamic belief systems that once thrived in Java. Such a shift not only reveals a semantic deviation but also represents a distortion of the da‘wah values that were meticulously and incrementally instilled by the Wali Songo through cultural engagement.

This reality necessitates an analytical approach to the phenomenon of spatial segmentation in the *Sekaten* celebration. The author observes that the meaning of *Sekaten*, once strongly associated with Islamic values, has now become increasingly diverse and fragmented. Empirical observations identify three representative spatial domains shaped by public perception and participation: (1) the mosque courtyard as a transitional space for symbolic da‘wah; (2) the mosque interior as a center for ritual worship and spiritual contemplation; and (3) the night market as a socio-economic and entertainment arena. These three domains form a segmented structure within the singular entity of *Sekaten*, highlighting the complex evolution of meaning and function within the contemporary Javanese-Islamic cultural framework.

Numerous studies have examined the *Sekaten* ritual from diverse theoretical perspectives. Sulaeman (2019), for example, frames *Sekaten* as a site of dialectical engagement between Islamic values and local cultural traditions, while Nursolehah (2017) foreground the dominance of night-market entertainment in contemporary practice. More broadly, scholars of Javanese Islam have problematized the categories of “syncretism” and “acculturation”, debating whether rituals such as *Sekaten* should be read as hybrid, contested, or gradually “Islamized” over time (Hilmy, 2018; Nasir, 2019; Tohe, 2021). Yet, despite this rich literature, relatively little attention has been paid to how these debates are materialized in the organization of space at a single festival site—how mosque courtyard, mosque interior, and royal square are differentially coded as sacred, liminal, or profane. The spatial-semiotic analysis of *Sekaten* offered in this article is therefore intended to fill this gap by showing how shifts in meaning and function are anchored in concrete spatial segmentations.

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the central issue in the contemporary *Sekaten* ritual lies in the shifting of its foundational meanings and functions. Most members of the modern public no longer possess a deep understanding of the historical origins of *Sekaten*. As a result, the ritual has undergone a diversification of meanings that increasingly diverge from the Islamic values upon which it was originally founded. This phenomenon underscores the urgency of recontextualizing public understanding through more nuanced and culturally grounded approaches. One such approach involves mapping the spatial segmentation within the *Sekaten* celebration. By identifying the functions and meanings assigned to distinct spatial zones, it becomes possible to examine how contemporary society constructs and reinterprets this tradition within an ever-evolving socio-cultural context.

Analyzing the spatial segmentation of *Sekaten* offers critical insights into how meaning is structured and negotiated within public reception of the ritual. This study employs an interpretive framework that combines ritual theory, semiotics, and the sociology of space. Drawing on Catherine Bell’s notion of ritualization, *Sekaten* is approached as a set of practices through which relations of power, piety, and identity are continually produced rather than as a fixed sequence of rites (Bell, 1991). At the same time, following Clifford Geertz’s semiotic understanding of religion as a system of symbols, the sounds of the gamelan, the arrangement of heirlooms, and the organization of space are treated as texts that participants interpret in their everyday lives. This perspective is complemented by Chris Barker’s reading of Giddens on social space, which highlights how particular places—such as the mosque courtyard, the prayer hall, and the royal square—channel and constrain different forms of social interaction (Barker, 2004). Within this framework, the analysis does not seek to homogenize the various interpretations of *Sekaten*; instead, it traces how different actors—palace residents, religious leaders, traders, and visitors—appropriate the same ritual spaces to construct their own understandings of sacredness, entertainment, or

economic opportunity, depending on their social roles, biographical experiences, and cultural horizons. The main objective is to make this plurality of meaning visible so that a more reflective public awareness can emerge, one that critically acknowledges contemporary reinterpretations without losing sight of *Sekaten*'s original purpose as a localized medium of Islamic proselytization infused with Javanese spirituality.

In light of this contextual background, the core research questions addressed in this article focus on two primary concerns: first, what spatial domains constitute the *Sekaten* ritual; and second, how does spatial segmentation unfold within the dynamics of its contemporary practice? In exploring these questions, Chris Barker, referencing Giddens, emphasizes that understanding how human activity is distributed across space is essential to any analysis of social life. Social practices are always situated within spatial constructs that carry layered meanings. For instance, within the domestic sphere, distinct rooms such as living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, and dining areas are imbued with differentiated social and functional values. The living room may symbolize openness and social exchange, while the bedroom represents privacy and intimacy (Barker, 2004). This logic of spatial meaning is equally applicable to the *Sekaten* celebration, where cultural zones are shaped by the public's perceptions and social functions. Therefore, this study seeks to examine cultural space in *Sekaten* as a manifestation of dynamic social meaning segmentation.

The evolving function of *Sekaten* over an extended historical trajectory reflects a profound shift in societal perception toward the ritual itself. What was once firmly grounded as an Islamic proselytization instrument is now interpreted through a plurality of lenses—many of which have drifted significantly from its religious roots. The spatial segmentation evident in the ritual's implementation indicates a transformation in how communities position themselves and interact with the symbols embedded within *Sekaten*. Each designated space no longer holds a uniform meaning but has instead undergone functional adaptation shaped by diverse social backgrounds, needs, and experiential contexts.

Understanding the function and segmentation of space within the *Sekaten* celebration is crucial to reinterpreting the ritual's meaning in a more substantive way. As *Sekaten* has evolved into a multifaceted public celebration, its core essence as a locus of religious reflection must not be lost. A nuanced awareness of spatial distribution and its symbolic implications can serve as a critical conduit for the public to recognize that *Sekaten* is more than mere cultural entertainment—it is a repository of Javanese Islamic heritage imbued with deep spiritual, historical, and social values. Preserving this ritual requires a holistic comprehension that transcends ceremonial appearances and instead emphasizes the foundational Islamic values at its core.

## METHODS

This study investigates the spatial segmentation within the *Sekaten* ritual in Surakarta, tracing its evolution from an Islamic da'wah medium to a culturally intricate celebration. A qualitative approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the contextual and social dynamics operating within natural settings (Nugrahani, 2014). Within this design, the analysis adopts a semiotic perspective that combines both structural and pragmatic approaches: structurally, the spatial arrangements, sounds of the gamelan, and ritual objects are treated as a system of signs whose internal relations (such as oppositions between mosque, courtyard, and square) produce particular meanings; pragmatically, attention is directed to how different actors—palace courtiers, religious leaders, traders, and visitors—use, interpret, and negotiate these signs in concrete ritual situations. Through this lens, the researcher not only uncovered empirical data but also explored the embedded symbolic meanings that animate the ritual practice of *Sekaten*. Data collection methods combined literature review, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation. Data sources included relevant historical manuscripts and archival records on *Sekaten*, as well as interviews with key informants such as palace courtiers (*abdi dalem*) and administrators of the Great Mosque of Surakarta. Direct observations of ritual proceedings and public activities during *Sekaten* were also

conducted to capture the social, symbolic, and spiritual dynamics enacted across its spatial configurations.

The research was conducted primarily in the vicinity of the Surakarta Palace complex, with a particular focus on the loci of *Sekaten* ritual implementation. Data were systematically gathered through visual documentation, field notes, and interview transcripts, and were subsequently analyzed using an interactive qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews were carried out with three key informants: Nanang Bayu, an *abdi dalem pengrawit* responsible for performing Gamelan *Sekaten*; Muhtarom, a member of the *takmir* (mosque board) at the Great Mosque of Surakarta; and Mrs. Kusini, a regular visitor who comes to the *Sekaten* celebration specifically to *ngalap berkah*. These interlocutors were selected to represent, respectively, court, religious-institutional, and lay-public perspectives on the ritual. The interview and observational data were then analysed through an interactive process that integrates conceptualization, categorization, and interpretation in tandem with data collection, forming a continuous, reflexive cycle (Rijali, 2018). Data analysis was carried out by organizing information into thematically relevant categories and interpreting them to reveal the underlying socio-cultural patterns shaping spatial segmentation in the *Sekaten* celebration. Triangulation techniques were employed to ensure data validity by cross-verifying findings across multiple data sources and collection methods. Ultimately, this analysis not only addressed the research questions but also offered a conceptual contribution to broader scholarly inquiries concerning the intersection of religion, culture, and spatiality within the context of Javanese Islamic traditions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Traces of Da‘wah in the Symbols and Spaces of *Sekaten*

The *Sekaten* tradition in Java has evolved within a richly diverse system of cultural values. Some elements of this ritual embody Islamic teachings, others originate from pre-Islamic belief systems such as Hindu–Buddhism, and still others do not contain explicitly religious values at all. This diversity can be understood as a product of long-standing interaction and assimilation among various cultural forces that predate the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly on the island of Java. Within this context, Hindu–Buddhism served as the foundational belief system before Islam gradually took root through processes of cultural syncretism (Baehaqi, 2016).

Historical records indicate that the Majapahit era marked a period in which the majority of Javanese society adhered to Hindu–Buddhist religious systems. The emergence of the Demak Sultanate signalled a turning point in the region’s religious transformation. Employing cultural strategies rooted in the arts and traditional performances, the Wali Songo, in collaboration with the Demak Sultan, introduced Islam to the broader populace. One of their pivotal strategies involved the continuation and reformulation of *Rojowedo*—a royal ritual inherited from Majapahit—which was later transformed into what is now known as *Sekaten* (Ardinarto, 2008).

Originally, *Rojowedo* was performed annually to invoke divine protection and blessings for the kingdom. The transformation of *Rojowedo* into *Sekaten* was neither abrupt nor destructive; instead, it involved a gradual substitution of Hindu–Buddhist elements with Islamic symbols and practices. This careful adaptation preserved the social and spiritual roles of the ritual while reorienting its theological core. *Sekaten* thus transitioned from a royal plea for safety into an inclusive platform for Islamic da‘wah aimed at engaging the wider community. In this process, Islam did not eradicate local culture but reinterpreted it, allowing continuity at the level of forms while shifting the underlying doctrinal meaning (Aulia, 2023).

The Islamic proselytization strategy in Java adopted a culturally accommodative approach, allowing for the preservation of Hindu–Buddhist traditions and rituals while reinterpreting them through the lens of Islamic teachings. Meditative practices (*semedi*) were reframed as *ṣalāt* and spiritual retreat (*tirakat*) within the mosque, while the Hindu ritual of sacrificing a wild buffalo (*mahesolawung*) was replaced with the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday (*Maulid*) framed within the *Sekaten* celebration. The Wali Songo also employed gamelan—a

traditional musical ensemble deeply embedded in Javanese cultural life—as a tool for da‘wah: crowds who gathered to enjoy the gamelan performance were subsequently engaged in Islamic teachings. This non-confrontational method proved effective in introducing Islam in a manner that harmonized with pre-existing cultural values.

In practice, then, *Sekaten* became a convergence space for Islamic da‘wah and local cultural expression. On the one hand, Islamic values were transmitted through symbols, rituals, and narratives; on the other, artistic forms such as gamelan and ceremonial processions were retained as markers of local identity. This reveals that the da‘wah of the Wali Songo was not exclusionary but inclusive and dialogic, engaging meaningfully with indigenous traditions. In this light, the notion of *Islam Nusantara* should not be viewed as heterodox, but rather as a concrete expression of Islamic jurisprudential epistemology, particularly the concept of *‘urf*—local customs that may be incorporated into Islamic law so long as they do not contravene established textual sources (*naşş*) (Maimun, 2017).

### **The Great Mosque Courtyard as the First Space of Da‘wah**

In 1408 CE, the Demak Sultanate established a grand mosque that served as the epicentre of Islamic da‘wah. This model—placing the mosque at the heart of religious and political life—was later adopted by the Mataram Surakarta Kingdom. After the relocation of Sri Susuhunan Pakubuwana II to the new royal seat in 1745, the Great Mosque of Surakarta (*Masjid Agung*) was erected using timber from Kartasura. The mosque functions as both a religious symbol and a representation of the political authority of the Kasunanan court. Under Pakubuwana III, the southern *pagongan* (gamelan pavilion) was built in 1786 to house the *Sekaten* gamelan; in 1858, the northern *pagongan* and perimeter wall completed the spatial arrangement of the mosque courtyard (Machrus, 2008).

From the 5th to the 11th of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, the *Sekaten* gamelan—Kanjeng Kyai Guntur Sari and Kanjeng Kyai Guntur Madu—is played alternately at the northern and southern *pagongan*. One notable feature is the unusually large size of these instruments, engineered to produce a sound powerful enough to travel across vast distances (Daryanto, 2014, 2016). Historically, before the proliferation of tall buildings and modern noise pollution, the sound of Gamelan *Sekaten* was believed to resonate as far as the outermost districts surrounding Surakarta.

The mosque courtyard also functions as the primary locus where visitors first encounter a dense constellation of symbols: *janur* (young coconut leaves) adorning the mosque façade, *kinang* (betel-chewing ingredients), traditional toys, and various other ritual paraphernalia. According to Muhtarom, a member of the Great Mosque’s *takmir*, this courtyard is the “front stage” of the ritual, a space where sound and symbols invite people into a liminal zone between everyday life and worship.

In an interview, Muhtarom explained that “*One of the key symbolic practices that embodies the virtues of religious excellence is the kinang (nyusur) ritual*”. This practice employs a number of materials, each endowed with specific symbolic meanings. First, two pieces of betel leaf represent the two phrases of the *shahada*; their bitterness evokes the hardship and struggle that accompany the profession of faith. Second, *gambir*, which is likewise bitter, symbolizes the performance of prayer. Third, the bitter taste of *enjet* signifies fasting which, although initially burdensome, ultimately yields a sense of pleasure and relief. Fourth, *mbako* or *susur* (tobacco), whose bitterness represents almsgiving (*zakat*), must be spread evenly to all corners of the mouth, just as *zakat* is meant to be distributed fairly. Fifth, the fragrant *kanthil* flower symbolizes the pilgrimage (*haji*), after which a person is expected to return as a moral exemplar and role model within society.”

Semiotically, these objects form a structural system of signs that encode Islamic teachings. *Janur*, often associated with the phrase *ja‘a nūr* ‘the light has arrived’, is interpreted as a summons for those who have uttered the *syahadat* to seek divine light as guidance. The popular practice of scrambling for *janur* during the opening of *Sekaten* reflects the enduring belief that these leaves carry blessings; once taken home and placed above doorways, they are treated as talismans of

protection. This demonstrates how, at the level of pragmatic use, the same symbol simultaneously conveys doctrinal messages and supports practices that verge on local notions of magic.

A similar symbolic density is found in the practice of *kinang* or *nyusur*. The ingredients—betel leaves, *gambir*, *enjet*, *mbako* and *kantil*—are interpreted as representing the Five Pillars of Islam, transforming the act of chewing into a didactic metaphor for the religious life (Wibowo et al., 2023). Traditional toys such as spinning tops (*gasing*), clay coin banks (*celengan*), and whips (*pecut*) also function as pedagogical devices, teaching lessons about the ceaseless movement of life, the accumulation of good deeds, and the discipline required to subdue the self (Isnanto, 2015).

Taken together, these symbols illustrate how the courtyard operates as the “first space” of da‘wah, where Islamic values are transmitted through culturally embedded aesthetic forms. Table 1 summarizes the main activities, actors, and meanings associated with the three spatial domains of *Sekaten* in Surakarta.

Table 1. Spatial Domains of *Sekaten* in Surakarta

Space	Main activities / symbols	Dominant actors	Dominant meaning
Mosque courtyard	Gamelan <i>Sekaten</i> , <i>janur</i> , <i>kinang</i> , children’s toys	<i>Abdi dalem</i> , small traders, visitors	Symbolic da‘wah, liminal
Interior of Great Mosque	Prayers, sermons, dhikr, Qur’an recitation	<i>Takmir</i> , <i>ustāz</i> , worshippers	Sacred, spiritual deepening
Northern square (night market)	Stalls, rides, dangdut concerts, exhibitions	Traders, local gov, visitors	Festive, commercial

### The Mosque Interior as the Second Space of Da‘wah

Once participants cross the courtyard and internalize these symbolic messages, they are gradually guided into the interior of the mosque to perform ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). Throughout the week-long celebration, Gamelan *Sekaten* is played daily from morning until late at night, but it is paused during prayer times and remains silent from Thursday evening until after the Friday ‘*Jumu‘ah*’ prayer (Awanti, 2012). This practice shows that the sonic layer of the ritual is subordinated to liturgical rhythms: the mosque retains authority in determining when the festive soundscape must yield to silence.

Within the mosque, the transmission of Islamic knowledge is continuously reproduced through communal prayers, sermons (*khuṭbah*), dhikr, and Qur’anic recitation. Drawing on an interview with Muhtarom, a member of the Great Mosque’s *takmir*, the interior of the mosque may therefore be understood as the “true” center of *Sekaten*’s sacredness, because it is in this enclosed ritual space that religious practices most directly cultivate, reaffirm, and circulate Islamic teachings. In his view, the everyday rhythm of worship inside the mosque provides the spiritual foundation upon which the more visible festive dimensions of *Sekaten* ultimately rest.

This design ensures that da‘wah does not end with the symbolic act of reciting the *syahadat* in the courtyard. Instead, it moves toward a deeper internalization of Islamic values in everyday life. When participants transition from symbolic interaction to consistent embodiment of Islamic teachings, the da‘wah initiative embedded in *Sekaten* may be said to have fulfilled its intended objective. In terms of ritual theory, this sequencing of spaces reflects what Bell (1991) calls “ritualization”: the strategic differentiation of activities that defines some practices—such as prayer and sermon—as more properly “religious” than others surrounding them.

### **The Night Market's Dominance and the Shift in Spatial Function**

The third spatial domain is the night market. Initially, this space functioned merely as a site for providing simple commodities consumed by the public while gathering to witness the *gamelan* performance—symbolically aligned products such as *ndog kamal*, *kinang*, whips, spinning tops, and traditional snacks (Ardinarto, 2008; Digdho, 2012). As public enthusiasm grew, the night market was relocated to the northern square (*Alun-alun Utara*) to accommodate larger crowds and more intense economic activity.

Drawing on an interview with Mrs. Kusini—a regular visitor who comes to *Sekaten* to *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings)—the festival is now perceived to have undergone a marked shift in meaning. Whereas she remembers *Sekaten* as once being more strongly colored by religious nuances, she observes that market logics have increasingly come to dominate. Over time, the range of merchandise has diversified and popular entertainment has taken over the atmosphere: while the formal religious celebration lasts only one week, the night market typically operates for an entire month, featuring nightly *dangdut* concerts and modern amusement rides. In her view, this extended profane space effectively “covers over” the shorter religious core of the event, so that for many visitors today *Sekaten* is more readily identified with the bustling market and popular amusements than with its Islamic rituals. Her testimony illustrates how sacred intention and recreational motives coexist in lived experience: the same journey to *Sekaten* can be motivated by hopes for blessing, enjoyment of food, and exposure to entertainment. More broadly, this pattern echoes global research on religious festivals whose sacred core becomes entangled with tourism, leisure, and market logics, turning pilgrimage arenas into hybrid spaces of devotion and consumption (Abraham, 2024; Cohen, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Liro et al., 2018; Rinschede, 1992; Terzidou et al., 2018).

Spatially, the northern square provides a vast open field suitable for mass gatherings and commercial activity. Temporally, its operation overlaps with the ritual week of *Sekaten*, creating a deliberate intersection between sacred and profane times. In Barker's (2004) reading of Giddens, such locales shape and constrain social practices: the mosque interior privileges worship, while the square privileges trade and spectacle. The increasing dominance of the latter indicates a shift in the balance of power between religious and market logics within the ritual.

### **Transformation of Da'wah Spaces into Festive Arenas**

In this context, transformation refers to a shift in both meaning and function. *Sekaten*, initially conceived as a space for Islamic da'wah, has progressively evolved into a celebratory event (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021). Previous studies on symbolic space and ritual have shown that public rituals often oscillate between sacralization and profanization, especially when tourism and commercial interests become involved. The empirical findings of this study confirm that pattern: religious activities—sermons, dhikr, Qur'anic recitation—are concentrated in the mosque, while the *Alun-alun Utara* is dominated by entertainment and economic transactions (Kuntowijoyo, 2004; Ubaidillah & Marpuah, 2021).

Several factors contribute to this development: a decline in public awareness of *Sekaten*'s da'wah function; the fact that Islam is now the majority religion in Java, reducing the perceived urgency of cultural da'wah; the weakening of the Surakarta court's political authority after integration into the Republic of Indonesia; and external interventions from tourism and cultural industries that frame *Sekaten* as a seasonal attraction. These dynamics have encouraged a re-reading of *Sekaten* primarily as a festival rather than a religious rite, pushing its sacred elements into the background. Such a shift from da'wah-oriented ritual to commodified festivity is consistent with cross-cultural studies of religious tourism, which document how pilgrimage centres are increasingly shaped by commercial infrastructures, urban branding, and visitor expectations (Cohen, 1992; Rinschede, 1992).

In comparative terms, this pattern of shifting from a da'wah instrument to a cultural commodity parallels broader findings in the literature on religious tourism and festival

commodification. Studies of pilgrimage centers and religious festivals show how sacred events become increasingly entangled with tourism promotion, heritage branding, and market-oriented urban development, while still retaining layered religious meanings (Eade, 1991; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Viewed against this wider scholarship, the Surakarta case is distinctive in the way sacredness and festivity are organized through a triadic spatial configuration centered on the Great Mosque courtyard, its interior, and the northern square. By foregrounding this spatial–semiotic arrangement, the present study moves beyond earlier works that treat *Sekaten* simply as an example of cultural da‘wah or, conversely, as a sign of religious decline. It demonstrates that both tendencies co-exist within a single ritual landscape, and that shifts in function are negotiated through concrete practices of occupying, regulating, and interpreting specific spaces.

### Sacredness and Plural Meanings: Community Interpretations of *Sekaten*

To understand how these spatial changes affect meaning, this study adopts a semiotic perspective that combines structural and pragmatic approaches, alongside ritual theory (Bell, 1991; Rappaport, 1999). Structurally, the mosque courtyard, mosque interior, and northern square form a triadic configuration whose internal contrasts—sacred/profane, mosque/market, court/people—organize how signs are distributed. Pragmatically, different groups interpret and use these signs according to their social positions and experiences.

For palace courtiers such as Nanang Bayu, *Gamelan Sekaten* and the mosque courtyard are experienced as an extension of the Kraton’s sacred authority. The gamelan is not merely a musical ensemble but a *pusaka*; its placement in the twin *pagongan* marks the courtyard as a ritual arena where royal legitimacy and Islamic devotion converge. From this perspective, the night market is tolerated as a complementary layer of festivity but should not overshadow the dignity of the palace and mosque. Religious officials like Muhtarom center sacredness explicitly on the interior of the Great Mosque. In their view, the essence of *Sekaten* lies in prayer, sermons, and Qur’anic recitation, while the courtyard and market are ambiguous zones that may either support or distract from worship. This interpretation resonates with Bell’s notion of ritualization as boundary-drawing between “proper worship” and other practices.

For lay visitors represented by Ibu Kusini, sacredness is experienced more fluidly. Coming to *Sekaten* is simultaneously an act of *ngalap berkah*—seeking blessings by being present in a holy time and place—and a family outing that offers recreation, food, and entertainment. In Rappaport’s terms, ritual efficacy here is tied not only to formal liturgy but also to the amplification of sensory experience: the dense soundscape, bright lights, and thick crowds of the night market contribute to the feeling that something extraordinary is taking place.

Table 2 summarizes how these different actor groups attach distinct meanings to sacredness and festivity in *Sekaten*.

Table 2. Actors’ Perceptions of Sacredness in *Sekaten*

Actor group	Example informant	Focus of sacredness	View on night market
Palace courtiers	Nanang Bayu	Gamelan as <i>pusaka</i> , courtyard as royal-ritual space	Necessary complement, should not dominate
Mosque officials	Muhtarom	Mosque interior, formal worship	Potential distraction from prayer
Lay visitors	Mrs. Kusini	<i>Ngalap berkah</i> , being present in ritual time/space	Main attraction and family recreation space

These findings indicate that sacredness in *Sekaten* is not a fixed, singular property of space or objects, but a relational and negotiated quality. Palace courtiers, mosque authorities, and lay visitors all operate within the same ritual landscape, yet they prioritise different signs, spaces, and practices as carriers of religious value. By combining structural and pragmatic semiotics, *Sekaten* can be seen

as a dense network of signs whose meanings are continually re-articulated through use, performance, and interpretation. This plurality does not simply signal decline or desacralization; rather, it reveals how Javanese Muslims actively rework the relationship between Islam, culture, and the marketplace in contemporary urban life. This plural and negotiated sacredness resonates with Mazumdar and Mazumdar's account of how attachment to sacred places emerges from overlapping religious, familial, and everyday meanings, as well as with Woodward's analysis of contested saint veneration and Islamic orthodoxy in Javanese ritual sites (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993; Woodward, 1988).

In summary, the findings of this study demonstrate that *Sekaten* in Surakarta is structured through a triadic spatial configuration—the mosque courtyard, the mosque interior, and the northern square—that organizes how sacredness and festivity are distributed and negotiated. The courtyard operates as a symbolic space of da'wah where Islamic teachings are translated into local aesthetic forms through *janur*, *kinang*, children's toys, and Gamelan *Sekaten*; the interior of the Great Mosque functions as a second, more explicitly liturgical space that anchors the ritual in formal worship; and the northern square has developed into a festive arena dominated by the night market and popular entertainment. These results confirm and refine earlier observations on the commodification and touristic re-framing of *Sekaten* (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2020; Ubaidillah & Marpuah, 2021), while adding an explicitly spatial and semiotic perspective that has been largely absent in previous research on Javanese Islamic rituals.

Theoretically, this article contributes to debates on ritual, space, and Islamic culture by combining structural and pragmatic semiotics with ritual theory. By reading *Sekaten* as a network of signs that are organized across differentiated locales, the study shows that “sacred space” is not an inherent property of particular sites, but a relational quality produced through practices of ritualization (Bell, 1991) and through the ways different actors interpret and use symbols in concrete situations. The perspectives of palace courtiers, mosque officials, and lay visitors reveal that sacredness in *Sekaten* is plural and contested: for some it is centered on Gamelan *Sekaten* as *pusaka* and on the royal courtyard, for others on the interior of the mosque, and for many visitors on the affective experience of *ngalap berkah* amidst the sensory intensity of the night market. This nuanced account extends existing scholarship, which has tended to treat *Sekaten* either as an example of cultural da'wah or as a case of cultural commodification, by showing how both tendencies coexist in a single ritual landscape.

Practically, the findings have implications for cultural policymakers, religious authorities, and heritage managers involved in organizing *Sekaten* and similar public rituals. Recognising the differentiated functions of the mosque courtyard, mosque interior, and northern square can inform more deliberate spatial planning that balances economic interests with the preservation of *Sekaten*'s religious ethos—for example, by strengthening educational programmes in the courtyard, safeguarding the liturgical focus of the mosque interior, and regulating commercial and entertainment activities in the night market. At the same time, acknowledging the diversity of community interpretations encourages dialogic approaches that do not simply condemn festivity as profane, but seek creative ways to re-embed da'wah within contemporary cultural practices. Future research may build on this spatial–semiotic framework to examine other Javanese Islamic festivals or to compare *Sekaten* in Surakarta with its counterparts in Yogyakarta and Cirebon.

## CONCLUSION

The *Sekaten* celebration in Surakarta has traversed a long historical trajectory, beginning as a medium of Islamic da'wah initiated by Javanese kings and the Wali Songo, and gradually transforming into a complex cultural event with diverse spatial segmentations. This functional shift reflects a broader paradigm change in how the public interprets *Sekaten*, in alignment with ongoing social, political, and economic dynamics. In its early stages, *Sekaten* served as an effective da'wah instrument by integrating Islamic teachings with local cultural expressions. However, in recent developments, the ritual has also absorbed interests beyond its original religious mission, such as

commercialization, entertainment spectacles, and cultural-political mobilization. The spatial segmentation of *Sekaten*—comprising the mosque courtyard, the mosque interior, and the royal square as a marketplace—serves as a crucial indicator of the varied public interpretations of the event. Each space embodies distinct values and functions, reflecting the wide spectrum of societal orientations toward *Sekaten*, ranging from spiritual to secular. In this context, it is essential to reaffirm the Islamic values that form the ritual's foundational ethos, so that *Sekaten* remains a space for spiritual reflection and the practice of Islamic teachings. A deep understanding of the functions and spatial divisions within the *Sekaten* celebration is therefore critical to preserving the authenticity and continuity of Islamic values amid contemporary challenges. This approach is not merely a cultural conservation strategy, but also a form of spiritual responsibility to ensure that *Sekaten* continues to serve as a contextual, inclusive, and meaningful vehicle for da'wah among modern Javanese society. Despite these contributions, this study also has several limitations. First, it is based on a single case study of *Sekaten* in Surakarta with a limited number of key informants, so its findings cannot be generalized to all Javanese Islamic festivals or even to other *Sekaten* traditions such as those in Yogyakarta and Cirebon. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on qualitative, spatial-semiotic and ritual perspectives, without examining in detail the economic, political, or gendered dimensions of participation in the celebration. Future research could therefore develop comparative studies between different courts and cities, combine in-depth ethnography with survey-based approaches to capture a wider range of community voices, and explore additional aspects such as youth participation, digital media representations, or the acoustic environment of Gamelan *Sekaten*. Such studies would not only refine the theoretical understanding of sacred space and commodification in Javanese Islam, but also provide more concrete guidance for policy and practice in managing public religious festivals.

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