

Islam and Coastal Culture: A Study of Symbolic Meaning in the Tradition of *Sedekah Laut* in Rembang, Central Java

Islam dan Kultur Pesisir: Studi Pemaknaan Simbolis dalam Tradisi *Sedekah Laut* di Rembang, Jawa Tengah

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengungkap tradisi *Sedekah Laut* di Rembang, Jawa Tengah, dengan menempatkannya sebagai manifestasi Islam pesisir yang dibangun melalui pemaknaan simbolik ritual. Penelitian ini difokuskan pada cara simbol-simbol ritual dipahami, dialami, dan interpretasi makna religius oleh masyarakat Muslim pesisir. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan etnografi, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Kerangka analisis penelitian ini bersandar pada teori Clifford Geertz, tentang interpretatif simbolik yang berusaha untuk memahami simbol sebagai wahana makna yang historis dan kontekstual, yang mana manusia memahami dan mengkomunikasikan pola-pola kebudayaan, pandangan dunia, dan nilai-nilai kehidupan secara mendalam. Ia menekankan pentingnya interpretasi simbolik untuk memahami budaya dan makna di balik praktik sosial dan keagamaan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *Sedekah Laut* yang dikenal sebagai *Larung Sesaji* tidak dimaknai oleh masyarakat sebagai praktik kompromi keagamaan, melainkan sebagai medium simbolik untuk menstrukturkan relasi antara manusia, Tuhan, dan laut dalam pengalaman hidup masyarakat pesisir. Unsur-unsur ritual seperti miniatur rumah, kepala kambing, jajanan pasar, bunga, kelapa, dan rokok tidak dipahami sebagai sesaji dalam pengertian pemujaan, tetapi sebagai simbol kosmologis yang merepresentasikan keberlanjutan hidup, keselamatan, dan keterikatan ekologis yang dilegitimasi secara religius. Sehingga peneliti menghadirkan argumen bahwa keberlanjutan *Sedekah Laut* bertumpu pada fungsi simbolik ritual dalam membentuk pengalaman keberagaman yang kontekstual, alih-alih pada proses negosiasi normatif antara ajaran agama dan tradisi lokal.

Kata Kunci : *Sedekah Laut*; Islam Pesisir; Tradisi

ABSTRACT

This article reveals the tradition of *Sedekah Laut* in Rembang, Central Java, by placing it as a manifestation of coastal Islam built through the symbolic meaning of rituals. This study focuses on how ritual symbols are understood, experienced, and interpreted for religious meaning by coastal Muslim communities. Using qualitative methods and an ethnographic approach, data was collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The analytical framework of this study is based on Clifford Geertz's theory of symbolic interpretation, which seeks to understand symbols as vehicles of historical and contextual meaning through which humans understand and communicate cultural patterns, worldviews, and values in depth. He emphasizes the importance of symbolic interpretation in understanding culture and the meaning behind social and religious practices. The results of the study show that *Sedekah Laut*, known as *Larung Sesaji*, is not interpreted by the community as a religious compromise, but rather as a symbolic medium for structuring the relationship between humans, God, and the sea in the lives of coastal communities. Ritual elements such as miniature houses, goat heads, market snacks, flowers, coconuts, and cigarettes are not understood as offerings in the sense of worship, but as cosmological symbols that represent the continuity of life, safety, and ecological attachment that are legitimized religiously. Thus, researchers argue that the sustainability of *Sedekah Laut* relies on the symbolic function of rituals in shaping contextual religious experiences, rather than on the normative negotiation process between religious teachings and local traditions.

Keywords: *Sedekah Laut* (Sea Alms); Coastal Islam; Tradition

INTRODUCTION

Islam in Indonesia developed through a long historical and social process, marked by an intensive encounter between religious teachings and local traditions that had lived in the community. In this context, Islam does not exist as a normative system that completely replaces the local culture, but rather interacts, adapts, and forms diverse religious expressions according to the social, ecological, and cultural conditions of the supporting communities (Hermansyah 2014). The diversity of Islamic expressions can be found in various ritual practices, communal traditions, and symbol systems that live in the daily lives of Muslim communities in various regions of Indonesia.

One of the regions that shows this dynamic is the coastal communities of Java. The lives of coastal communities are shaped not only by social and economic structures, but also by ecological experiences that are highly dependent on the ocean (Indrahti and Meirina 2021). The sea is not just a geographical space, but a field of meaning that shapes the way of life, cosmology, and religious orientation of maritime societies. It is in this context that the religious practices of coastal communities develop with their own characteristics, which are often different from the expression of Islam in agrarian or urban areas. The Sea Alms tradition is one of the important examples of cultural-religious practices born from the encounter between Islam and the life experiences of coastal communities.

Sea Alms is an annual ritual carried out by coastal communities as an expression of gratitude for the sustenance of the sea and hope for safety in sea activities (Ismatu 2017). In Rembang, Central Java, this tradition is known as *Larung Sesaji*, which is a procession of banning various ritual symbols into the sea that are carried out collectively. This ritual not only involves fishermen, but also the wider community, traditional leaders, and religious leaders, so that it becomes a social event that brings together religious, cultural, and communal dimensions. The sustainability of Sea Alms to date shows that this tradition still has a strong meaning for the coastal people of Rembang.

However, in contemporary Islamic discourse, Sea Alms is often the object of debate. A number of normative views question this practice because it is considered to contain elements that are not in line with formal Islamic teachings, such as the use of offerings, certain symbols, or belief in the power of the sea (Bambang and Edy 2023). In many academic studies, the debate is then represented as a negotiation process between normative Islam and local traditions. As Hanifah and Nurdin's research shows, it shows that the tradition of sea alms was once suspended because it was considered to contain elements that were contrary to Islamic teachings, then resumed after undergoing a cultural Islamization process with a change to the term *sea tasyakuran* (Hanifah and Nurdin 2024). In Cilacap, the phenomenon of acculturation is also in the spotlight, with research showing that elements that were previously seen as incompatible with Islamic law, such as offerings to sea spirits, have turned into assimilative processes by placing prayers and alms to Allah SWT (Janah et al. 2024).

This approach generally places Sea Alms as an arena of attraction between religious orthodoxy and customs, focusing on how the community compromises, adjustments, or legitimacy so that the tradition can continue to be carried out (Salamah 2019). Although the normative negotiation approach makes an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of local Islam, an overly strong focus on aspects of conflict and compromise has the potential to simplify the complexity of meaning that lives at the level of ritual performers. In many cases, the people who perform Sea Alms do not interpret the ritual as a form of negotiation or ideological compromise, but rather as a practice that is inherently meaningful in their religious lives. In other words, there is a gap between the way academics or religious authorities define Sea Alms and the way coastal communities understand it in their daily experiences.

Based on this problem, this article proposes a different perspective by placing Sea Alms as a symbolic system that shapes and structures the religious experience of coastal Muslim communities. Instead of making normative negotiation the main point of analysis, this study focuses on the symbolic meaning of ritual from the point of view of cultural actors (*native's point of view*). This approach seeks to understand how coastal communities give meaning to ritual symbols, how they are linked to Islamic values, and how the Sea Alms ritual shapes religious experiences that are perceived as legitimate, meaningful, and relevant to their lives.

This study aims to analyze how the Muslim community of the coastal Rembang interprets the symbols in the Sea Alms tradition and how these meanings shape their religious experience. In particular, this article wants to answer the question: how are the ritual symbols of Sea Alms understood by coastal communities, and how does that understanding contribute to the sustainability of this tradition in the context of local Islam? This question places religious meaning and experience at the center of analysis, not just a process of normative negotiation or theological legitimacy.

The main contribution of this article lies in its efforts to expand the study of local Islam in Indonesia by shifting the focus of analysis from normative negotiations to symbolic meanings and religious experiences. By presenting ethnographic data on coastal communities in Rembang, this study shows that religious practices are not always understood by the perpetrators in the context of conflicts between religion and customs. Instead, the practice is often lived as an expression of a whole religion, where religion, culture, and life experiences are intertwined in a single system of meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sea Alms Tradition

Tradition is a symbolic space where people's values and beliefs are reproduced from generation to generation, including in the context of people's spiritual defense against various forms of threats and dangers that often cannot be explained rationally. One form of expression is the tradition of sea alms, which is the collective effort of the community to ward, avoid, or dampen the arrival of reinforcements, both in physical, social, and spiritual forms through rituals, prayers, and alms at sea (Indrahti and Andita Meirina 2021). This practice not only shows the religious side, but also shows how society builds protection mechanisms that involve theological, cultural, and social dimensions in an integrated manner.

Marine alms are a form of local wisdom of coastal communities in Indonesia that describes the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, especially the sea. The tradition of sea alms has quite long historical roots, which are inseparable from the syncretism between animism-dynamism, Hinduism-Buddhism, and then Islam (Abdurrohman 2016). Various studies in Indonesia and Southeast Asia have extensively researched marine rituals as a cultural practice filled with symbolic meaning, cosmology and the integration of religious values and traditions of coastal communities. In Indonesia, the ritual of larung sesaji is taught as part of the local culture that reflects the community's relationship with the sea. The study of *Larung Sesaji* in Puger (Widiyawati 2018), for example, shows that a series of sea rituals is a combination of Islam and animistic traditions that aim to ask for blessings and safety while going to sea. This ritual is also a means of solidarity for the fishing community in facing marine environmental challenges. Similarly, in the *Semah Laut tradition* in the Panglong Sea Tribe community, rituals involving distinctive symbols (such as yellow glutinous rice and betel nut) show the relationship between humans, nature, and the transcendent as a belief system that affirms moral norms and the formation of the identity of the marine community (Swastiwi et al. 2024).

Although not a direct study of *marine alms*, studies of maritime culture in general support the understanding that coastal communities have a strong marine cosmology (Kaharudin et al. 2024). Studies of maritime anthropology emphasize that coastal communities in different parts of the world developed rituals, symbolic systems, and social structures that were closely related to the sea as the source of their lives and cultural identity. This kind of approach provides a strong theoretical framework for reading *sea alms* as a broad cultural phenomenon, rather than just a local practice. From some similar studies, the research conducted by the author does not place marine alms as a normative problem, but as a religious experience lived by coastal communities. The sustainability of Sea Alms is understood not through the framework of conflict or cultural Islamization, but through the symbolic meaning of rituals that form the collective religious experience.

Religion and Culture in the Perspective of Clifford Geertz

This research relies on a theory developed by Clifford Geertz, who views culture as a system of meaning that is manifested through symbols. Since we are dealing with meaning, start with a paradigm. Religion has a profound impact on the way we understand the order of existence as a whole. Geertz said that religion provides a "life and death explanation" of the world, not just about everyday life. Religious concepts focus on the ultimate meaning or purpose of the world. Geertz defines culture as an inherited system of ideas articulated in symbolic form, historically transmitted patterns of meaning conveyed in symbols, and the means by which people communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge and attitudes in

life. Clifford Geertz emphasized that the main goal of anthropology is to find the meaning that exists in the cultural phenomena of a society by analyzing the experiences, emotions, and worldviews of its cultural actors (Geertz 1993). This is the basis of anthropological knowledge and is referred to as the perspective from within the culture itself. According to Geertz, religion is: (1) a system of symbols that serves to (2) build a strong, pervasive, and long-lasting mood and motivation in human beings by (3) by formulating conceptions of the general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality so that (5) such moods and motivations appear uniquely realistic (Geertz 1993).

The relationship between religion and culture in Javanese Muslim society is not singular, but is formed through various religious orientations that reflect social positions, cultural traditions, and Islamic understanding. Clifford Geertz, in his study of Javanese society, classifies Islamic expressions into three main variants: *santri*, *priyayi*, and *abangan*. This classification is not intended as a rigid theological division, but rather as a cultural typology for understanding the ways in which Islam is practiced in different social contexts. Islamic students are characterized by a strong orientation towards Islamic normative teachings, such as obedience to sharia, formal worship, and textual references. In this perspective, local culture tends to be judged to the extent of its conformity with religious norms. Religious and cultural relations are selective; local traditions are acceptable as long as they do not contradict the principles of Islamic teachings. However, in practice, Islamic students can also adapt culturally through the process of reinterpreting symbols and rituals. In contrast to students, *priyayi* Islam emphasizes the dimensions of ethics, spirituality, and cosmological harmony. Religion is understood as a way to establish nobility of mind and balance of life. Within this framework, local culture including traditional rituals and symbols is positioned as a medium of expression of religious values (Ahmad 2017). Religious and cultural relations are integrative, where tradition is a means of spiritual appreciation.

Meanwhile, *abangan* Islam represents a form of religion that is closely tied to local traditions and Javanese cosmology. Religious practices are mostly manifested through traditional rituals, *slametan*, and respect for ancestors. Religion and culture are integrated in a system of symbols that are difficult to separate, so that the boundary between Islamic teachings and local traditions becomes fluid (Mukodi and Burhanuddin 2016). In contemporary developments, puritan Islamic perspectives have also emerged that emphasize the purification of teachings and the rejection of cultural practices that are considered to have no textual basis. Puritanical Islam positions culture as a potential deviation that needs to be corrected.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method based on a field study, in Gedongmulyo Village, Rembang, Central Java. The focus of the research is directed to the tradition of Sea Alms (Larung Sesaji) as an annual coastal ritual. The object of study includes a series of ritual processions, sacrificial symbols, prayers, and the community's interpretation of the position of Islam in the practice. With this focus, the research seeks to explain how Islamic values are articulated through cultural symbols in the context of coastal life. This research was conducted for 2 months from April-May 2025, in the coastal area of Rembang regency. The subject of the study was determined purposively, taking into account the involvement and knowledge of the informant to the Sea Alms ritual.

Table 1. Field Informant

No	Name of the Informant	Social Role
1	Sugeng	Village Apparatus (Pemdes)
2	Tarmidi	Traditional Elders and Religious Leaders
3	Ratno	Sea Alms Ritual Committee
4	Bakir	Fisherman
5	Suradi	Village Elders

Data collection was carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis is carried out qualitatively with the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The process of analysis refers to Clifford Geertz's theory of symbolic interpretive anthropology, which views ritual and religion as meaning-forming symbolic systems. The data were analyzed inductively and contextually by emphasizing the emic meaning of the community towards the Sea Alms ritual and its relationship with Islamic expressions in coastal culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tradition of Sea Alms or Larung Sesaji in Rembang

The tradition of Sea Alms or *Larung Sesaji* in Rembang shows how the religious practices of coastal Muslim communities are built through the life experience of a meaningful symbol system. The location of this research is precisely in Gedongmulyo Village, Lasem, Rembang Regency. Field research shows that people do not interpret Sea Alms as a normative negotiation arena between Islam and tradition, but rather as a religious practice that is inherently meaningful and relevant to their living conditions. In practice, Sea Alms is understood as an expression of gratitude and a request for salvation to God for the sustenance obtained from the sea. The sea is not interpreted as an entity that is sacred separately from God, but as God's creation that is an intermediary between sustenance and life (Abdurrohman 2016). The procession of *sacrificial larung* is understood as a symbol of letting go of prayer and hope, not as a form of worship (Noviarwati and Setyawan 2021). This meaning shows that coastal communities build the religious legitimacy of Sea Alms through symbolic meanings rooted in Islamic values, especially the concepts of gratitude and *tawakal*, without having to articulate them in formal theological language.

Larung Sesaji is a traditional ceremony that is widely known in the tradition of the Javanese people as a form of gratitude for the sustenance given by God. This ritual practice is not only found in coastal areas, but also carried out by mountainous and inland communities, with various means of protection such as the sea, lakes, mountain craters, and other water sources (Saddhono, Pertiwi, and Anggrahini 2019). This shows that Larung Sesaji is not solely tied to the maritime context, but is rooted in Javanese cosmology which views nature as a space of relations between humans and transcendent forces.

Historically, Larung Sesaji is known as part of the ancient Javanese tradition that has developed since the time of great kingdoms such as Ancient Mataram, Singosari, and Majapahit. In its development, this practice is inherited across generations and undergoes adjustments according to the social, geographical, and religious context of the supporting communities. There is a study on the Larung Sesaji Ritual of Telaga Ngebel in Ponorogo, nothing that in some parts of Java, Larung Sesaji is traditionally held every 1 Suro in the Javanese calendar (Saddhono et al. 2019). The timing shows the connection of this ritual with the Javanese sacred calendar system which is full of symbolic meanings about initiation, purification, and self-reflection.

In practice, Larung Sesaji is carried out by sweeping offerings in the form of natural products into nature—both seas, lakes, and craters—as a symbol of returning part of sustenance to its origin. The offerings that are forbidden are generally in the form of cone tumpeng which is composed of yellow rice, agricultural products, fruits, vegetables, and marine products such as fish and shrimp. In some areas, offerings are also equipped with batik cloth and flowers that have their own symbolic meaning. The form and composition of this offering reflect the Javanese people's view of the balance between humans, nature, and supernatural forces. This view of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature is not unique in the Javanese context alone. In a cross-cultural context, Indonesian and Japanese people both have traditional rituals that place nature as an entity that needs to be respected and nurtured. In Japan, the value of nature conservation is manifested through various traditional ceremonies (*matsuri*), where water is often used as a symbolic medium for purity, gratitude, and pleas for salvation (Indrahti and Andita Meirina 2021). This similarity shows that water-

based rituals in different cultures serve as a symbolic means of maintaining the ecological and spiritual connection between humans and their environment.

Based on field data processing, the meaning of Larung Sesaji by the community is not singular. In general, this ritual is understood as a form of offering and expression of gratitude to God for the abundance of sustenance and as a means of asking for safety, protection, and welfare. However, in some Javanese communities, Larung Sesaji is also associated with a belief in certain cosmological figures, such as the Queen of the South Sea, who is positioned as the guardian of the balance of nature (Widyatwati and Mahfudz 2021). This interpretation shows that Larung Sesaji works as a symbolic space that accommodates various religious and cosmological interpretations.

In the communities of Rembang, field findings show that Larung Sesaji—known as Sea Alms—is undergoing a symbolic reinterpretation process. The fishing community interprets this ritual mainly as an expression of gratitude to God for the products of the sea and as a collective prayer for safety while at sea. Although historically Larung Sesaji is related to pre-Islamic Javanese cosmology, in the practice of the coastal Muslim community of Rembang, this ritual is not understood as a worship of forces other than God, but as a symbol of the reciprocal relationship between humans, God, and the sea as His creation.

Based on the results of interviews with the surrounding community, it is said that (Ratno 2025):

“Sedekah laut kuwi dudu nyembah segara utawa sing liyane, mbak. Kuwi mung cara dhewe kanggo matur nuwun marang Gusti pengeran. Segara kuwi kan titipan saka Gusti, dadi nek dhewe njaluk slamet ya kudu nganggo cara sing apik lan rukun. Doane yo nganggo cara Islam yo gowo dongo Jowo. Larung sesaji kuwi mung simbol wae, tandha rasa syukur lan pangajab ben nek melaut tansah piningan slamet. (Sea alms isn't worshipping the sea or anything else, Miss. It's simply our way of asking God. The sea is a gift from God, so if we ask for safety, it must be done in a good and harmonious manner. The prayer uses Islamic and Javanese traditions. The offerings are merely a symbol, a sign of gratitude and a request for safety while at sea.)”

However, field findings also show that there are variations in meaning at the individual level that are not entirely uniform. In one of the informal conversations, a fisherman expressed his belief that the sea has a *waiter* who is often referred to as Nyai Roro Kidul (Suradi 2025), a symbolic figure who is trusted to manage safety and report the catch. This belief is not always positioned as a form of religious worship, but rather as cultural knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation and lives in the collective memory of coastal communities.

The purpose of implementing Larung Sesaji in various regions of Java generally revolves around the application for smooth sustenance, safety, and protection from danger. In addition, this ritual is also symbolized as the process of human return to his origin and as a representation of human connection with the universe. Variations in implementation times—such as the night of 1 Suro, the month of Ruwah before Ramadan, the full moon, or the month of Kasada in the Puger community—show that Larung Sesaji is adaptive and contextual, following the belief system and life experiences of each community (Maharani, Puspitasari, and Pramudia 2024).

Based on the researcher's observations, the procession of this ritual begins with the preparation of offerings such as *tumpeng*, produce (coconut, fruits and vegetables, rice), goat heads and flowers. Furthermore, there is a traditional art performance that accompanies the procession such as gamelan and dancers, then there is a joint prayer which is offered with 2 versions, namely Javanese and Islamic. This is followed by a banning event where offerings are placed on small boats or rafts, then washed into the middle of the sea. And then the peak of the event is that the community eats dishes together and holds a puppet show or traditional music.

The event was marked by meaningful activities that combined the real side and the mysticism that is the belief of the surrounding community (Afriansyah and Sukmayadi 2022). Starting from eating together collectively, welcoming and entertaining all residents who come from outside the region, and presenting various art and cultural performances. This activity

aims to strengthen the bond of brotherhood and foster the spirit of togetherness between fellow humans. Until now, the tradition of sea alms rituals is still maintained and has become a very important and awaited annual routine agenda for the people of Gedongmulyo Rembang. As expressed by Mr. Tarmidi (Tarmidi 2025), as a fisherman:

"This event is a gathering place, we can welcome brothers and sisters who come. I don't know since when this ritual event was carried out because since I was born this event has been running decades ago as an expression of gratitude and mutual relationship with the sea, once the offering that we were running low (flower) made high waves causing fishermen to worry if they were going to go to sea".

Larung Sesaji can be understood as a ritual practice that works through the symbolic system and religious experience of the community. In the context of coastal Islam, this ritual is not maintained solely because of tradition, but because of its ability to form meaningful religious experiences. The symbols in Larung Sesaji serve as a medium to express gratitude, build social solidarity, and affirm human relationships with God and the marine nature. This reading shows that Larung Sesaji is not a static practice, but a living tradition that continues to be reinterpreted in accordance with the social and religious context of the supporting community.

Symbolic Meaning in the Offering Larung Ritual

The Larung Sesaji ritual in the Sea Alms tradition of the people of Gedongmulyo Village does not only present ritual objects as a complement to the ceremony, but also forms a symbolic system that represents the life views, cosmological relationships, and religious experiences of coastal communities. Each element of the offering is understood as a symbolic communication medium that connects humans, ancestors, the marine realm, and God. In the framework of interpretive anthropology, offerings are not seen as inanimate objects, but as *symbolic vehicles* that work to construct collective religious meaning and experience. The requirements that must be completed in the larung sesaoffering ritual include:

Figure 1. Offering larung procession



Source: researcher documentation, 2025

Miniature houses in the Larung Sesaji tradition in Gedongmulyo Village have a symbolic meaning that represents the dwelling place of ancestral spirits or spiritual entities that are revered by the community. This miniature does not merely represent a physical building, but a symbol of survival, shelter, and household stability of the fishing community (Bakir 2025.). By displaying miniature houses and offerings in them, the community expresses their gratitude for the prosperity that has been obtained as well as asking for protection so that domestic life remains peaceful. This symbol shows that material well-being and inner peace are understood as an inseparable unit in the life of coastal communities.

Furthermore, the goat's head in the Larung Sesaji ritual is interpreted as a symbol of human submission and submission to God. Different from popular interpretations that see it as a literal offering to other powers, the people of Gedongmulyo Village interpret the goat's head as a representation of the human ego that must be destroyed (Tarmidi 2025). The head—as the center of control and will—is symbolized as a part that needs to be "returned" so that humans are not dominated by pride and lust. The selection of goats is not without meaning.

Goats are understood as animals that are relatively easy to control, so they become an ideal symbol for humans who are expected to be able to control themselves and submit to God's will.

Then, the market snacks in Larung Sesaji function as a symbol of social solidarity and equal distribution of sustenance. In Gedongmulyo Village, types of snacks such as *bugis*, *gemblong*, *pear*, and *dumbek* were chosen not only because of their traditional value, but because of their meaning as a natural processed product that can be enjoyed together. The involvement of market snacks in offerings reflects the belief that sustenance should not be enjoyed individually, but should be shared, both to fellow human beings and to the respected spiritual dimension. Thus, traditional food becomes a symbol of egalitarian social relations and a form of gratitude for the abundance of nature that sustains the lives of coastal communities.

Flowers in the Larung Sesaji ritual function as a symbol of purity of intention and inner beauty. In Gedongmulyo Village, the flowers used are generally jasmine as well as red and white roses. Jasmine (*Melati*) is interpreted through the local interpretation of *ngati* literacy, which means harmony between speech and heart. The characteristics of beautiful and fragrant flowers represent the hope that humans will have a clean, kind, and sincere heart in getting closer to God (Sugeng Raharjo 2025). Thus, flowers not only serve as a tribute to spiritual entities, but also as an ethical reminder for humans to maintain the cleanliness of heart and behavior.

Coconuts, especially young coconuts, are used in Larung Sesaji because they symbolize purity, freshness, and balance. Coconut water is understood as a symbol of inner cleansing and neutralizing, in line with the lives of fishermen who are heavily dependent on seawater as a source of livelihood. In this context, the coconut is a symbol that a good life must be lived with a clean and balanced heart. The coconut also represents unity and collective strength, as all parts of the coconut tree are beneficial to human life—an ideal metaphor for community life.

Cigarettes in the Larung Sesaji tradition have a complex symbolic meaning. Etymologically, the word *rokok* refers to the activity of smoking, while the connotative meaning of *moro takok* is interpreted as coming to ask questions or seek clues. In the context of rituals, cigarettes are understood as a medium of symbolic communication with ancestors and spiritual entities. In Gedongmulyo Village, cigarettes are also understood as a form of respect for ancestors and an expression of gratitude for the natural results of tobacco. The presence of cigarettes in the offerings shows that the daily symbols of the fishing community can be interpreted religiously without having to be separated from their life experiences.

Finally, the prayer in the Larung Sesaji ritual does not only function as a verbal complement to the series of ceremonies, but also as a symbolic core that activates all elements of the offering. In a symbolic interpretive perspective, prayer can be understood as a *cultural text*—a symbolic text that contains the *worldview* of coastal communities and how they interpret the relationship between humans, God, ancestors, and the marine nature. The text of the prayer recited in the Larung Sesaji ritual in Gedongmulyo Village uses the delicate Javanese language (*krama*), which symbolically marks respect, humility, and hierarchical awareness in the cosmic order. Expressions such as “*tan kawula kautus panjenenganipun yang mulia*” placing humans as subjects who do not have absolute power, but as beings who depend and beg (Tarmidi 2025). This language reflects the spiritual ethos of coastal communities which emphasizes surrender (*sumarah*) as the basis of religion.

Interestingly, this prayer also mentions *the elders* and *ancestors* as the guardians of the region (*ngayomi aera*). This shows that prayer functions as a means of temporal reconciliation, connecting the past (ancestors), the present (society), and the future (survival). The request that the ritual be carried out completely, including *the uborampe*, shows that prayer is not separate from the ritual action. Prayer validates and gives symbolic legitimacy to the practice of Larung Sesaji. Without prayer, offerings are seen as ordinary objects; With prayer, offerings turn into a sacred medium. This shows that prayer functions as a ritual speech act, which is speech that is not only meaningful, but also "works" symbolically.

Expressions of Islam in the Ritual of Larung Sesaji: Islam as a Coastal Life Experience

The Larung Sesaji ritual in the Sea Alms tradition in Gedongmulyo Village shows a form of Islamic expression that is not present in a normative-doctrinal framework, but is articulated through symbols, prayer language, and ritual practices that are firmly rooted in the life experiences of coastal communities. Islam, in this context, does not appear as a system of teachings that stands apart from local traditions, but as a horizon of meaning that nourishes and structures customary practices. This understanding demands an anthropological reading that places ritual as an expression of *lived religion*, not as an object of orthodoxy judgment. The expression of Islam can first be traced through the prayer structure that is the center of the ritual. The subtle Javanese language used in prayer signifies ethical and spiritual attitudes in the form of humility, awareness of man's position in the cosmos, and recognition of the limitations of man's will before God. The prayer does not merely serve as a request for salvation and sustenance, but as a symbolic action that unites the theological and cosmological dimensions. By mentioning God as the center of supplication, the community affirms the orientation of monotheism, although at the same time they include the mention of ancestors and guardians of the territory as part of the local cosmos system.

The expression of Islam is also manifested in the value of surrender which is the main ethos of fishermen's life. The uncertainty of the weather, the risks of going to sea, and dependence on the sea form a spiritual orientation that emphasizes *tawakal* as an attitude of life. This value is symbolically manifested in the offering of a goat's head which is interpreted as the decay of the ego. The head, as the center of will and control, is symbolized as a part that must be sacrificed so that humans are able to submit to God's will. In this context, ritual does not function as an attempt to magically control nature, but as a means of moral reflection on the position of man in the presence of a greater power.

The meaning of Islam is also articulated through the practice of gratitude that is expressed collectively. The entire series of offerings—miniature houses, market snacks, coconuts, flowers, and produce—represent the recognition that sustenance comes from God through the medium of the sea. Gratitude is not manifested in an individualistic form, but through joint actions that involve the community. This shows that the concept of *shukr* in Islam translates into social practices that strengthen the solidarity and cohesion of coastal communities.

Miniature houses, for example, symbolize not only material prosperity, but also the continuity of social life and domestic peace. The home is understood as a shelter space that allows humans to live a safe and dignified life. In a symbolic perspective, the miniature house that is thrown into the sea is a recognition that the stability of life depends on the harmony of the relationship between humans, nature, and God. This expression reflects the Islamic ethic of life balance that is not only oriented to the world, but also to the sustainability of moral values.

The Islamic aspect is further reflected in the emphasis on cleanliness of intentions and hearts. The symbol of flowers, especially jasmine which is interpreted as *meliter ngati*, shows that harmony between speech and heart is an ethical principle that is upheld. This value is in line with Islamic teachings about sincerity and purity of intention as the basis of worship. Through the symbol of fragrant and beautiful flowers, people express their hope that life will be lived with a clean heart, so that the relationship with God and others is maintained.

Coconuts, especially young coconuts, reinforce the Islamic dimension related to purity and balance. Coconut water is interpreted as a symbol of inner purification, a metaphor for the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of the heart in living a social life. In coastal societies that coexist with the sea, the symbol of water becomes very significant. Water is not only a source of economic life, but also a medium of spiritual reflection on calmness, patience, and harmony.

Meanwhile, the presence of cigarettes in offerings suggests that Islamic expressions do not always appear in symbols that are explicitly associated with formal Islam. Cigarettes, which are interpreted as *moro takok*, function as a medium of symbolic communication and respect for ancestors. This practice affirms that social ethics—respecting the origins and history of the community—is seen as part of religiosity. Coastal Islam, in this context, operates through a relational ethic that emphasizes respect and historical awareness, not through a symbolic disconnection to the past.

This whole practice shows that the expression of Islam in Larung Sesaji cannot be reduced to a matter of normative negotiation between Islam and tradition. Islam does not exist as a force that corrects or judges traditional practices, but rather as a framework of meaning that lives the ritual and gives it spiritual depth. This is the novelty of this study. Different from previous research that tends to place Sea Alms in the framework of syncretism or religious-cultural conflicts, this article shows that for coastal communities, the categories of "Islam" and "tradition" are not understood as entities that face each other.

By reading Larung Sesaji as an expression of *lived Islam*, this study confirms that the continuity of rituals is determined by its ability to form meaningful religious experiences, not by its conformity with formal norms alone. Coastal Islam emerged as a religious practice that was contextual, symbolic, and rooted in maritime life experiences. This approach broadens the horizons of the study of Islamic anthropology by placing traditional rituals not as a deviation from religion, but as an important medium for the formation of dynamic and sustainable local religiosity.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the sustainability of Sea Alms in the Muslim community of the coastal Rembang is not primarily determined by normative negotiations between Islam and local traditions, but rather by the symbolic function of rituals in shaping meaningful religious experiences for the fishing community. These findings enrich the study of religious anthropology by showing that Sea Alms function as a symbolic medium that connects the relationship between humans, God, and the sea, without having to be understood as a non-Islamic worship practice. Conceptually, Clifford Geertz's symbolic interpretive and qualitative ethnographic methods have proven to be effective in answering research questions. Through the analysis of local symbols, prayers, and narratives, this study reveals that Javanese Islamic and cosmological expressions do not exist dichotomically, but are intertwined in the emic meaning of coastal communities. The limitations of this study lie in the limited regional focus and the absence of comparative analysis between generations or religious groups. Further research is suggested to expand the location of the study and examine the dynamics of the meaning of Sea Alms in the context of social change, contemporary Islamic da'wah, and coastal environmental sustainability issues.

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