

Nyadran Semiotics and the Negotiation of Culture and Religion: A Pre-Ramadan Javanese Ritual in Kuncen Village, Karangduren, Tengaran, Semarang Regency

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Abstract

Nyadran is a Javanese ritual tradition commonly performed prior to Ramadan through a sequence of grave cleaning (*besik kubur*), cemetery visitation (*nyekar/ziarah*), collective prayers and *tahlil*, and communal feasting (*kenduri/manganan*). This tradition merits scholarly attention because it reveals a dynamic encounter among local cultural memory, Islamic piety, and social cohesion amid the growing discourse of religious purification. The research questions are: (1) how the Nyadran procession in Kuncen Hamlet (Karangduren, Tengaran, Semarang) is carried out before Ramadan, (2) how ritual signs (objects, actions, utterances, and spatio-temporal arrangements) are interpreted by residents, and (3) how Nyadran functions socio-religiously as an arena for negotiating local tradition and Islamic devotion. This study employs a qualitative–interpretive approach with a case study design. Data were collected through participant observation across the Nyadran sequence, in-depth interviews with hamlet elders, the *rois* (local religious authority)/religious figures, organizing committee members, and residents, as well as document analysis for triangulation. The data were then analyzed thematically and interpretively using a semiotic ritual lens (Peircean–Barthesian semiotics and Turner–Bell ritual theory) to map sign object interpretant relations and examine processes of ritualization, liminality, and the formation of *communitas*. The findings show that Nyadran in Kuncen is not a mere “remnant of tradition,” but a signifying system that produces the meaning of “cleanliness” (physical–spiritual–social) as readiness for Ramadan. Signs such as mixed flowers, incense, *apem–ketan–kolak*, *tumpeng/ingkung*, communal *kenduri*, and the timing in Ruwah/Sya’ban function as symbolic communication devices that affirm gratitude, filial piety toward ancestors/parents, moral discipline, and communal solidarity, while also demonstrating the recontextualization of ancestral remembrance into Islamic devotional repertoires (*tahlil*, supplication, and almsgiving). Nyadran thus operates as an adaptive form of vernacular Islam. Recommendations include community-based documentation (audio-visual and written archives), strengthening inclusive religio-cultural literacy to explain symbolic meanings and normative boundaries, engaging youth and schools to use Nyadran as a medium for character education without imposing interpretive uniformity, sustainable governance (transparent contributions, waste management, and environmentally responsible cemetery arrangements), and further comparative cross-village studies as well as analyses of changing religious discourses and their effects on Nyadran practices.

Keywords: Nyadran; Javanese Islam; Semiotics; Ritual; Local Wisdom; Ramadan

Abstrak

Nyadran merupakan tradisi ritual masyarakat Jawa yang lazim dilakukan menjelang Ramadan melalui rangkaian *besik kubur*, *ziarah*, *doa bersama*, dan *kenduri/makan bersama*; tradisi ini penting dikaji karena memperlihatkan perjumpaan dinamis antara memori budaya lokal, kesalehan Islam, dan kohesi sosial di tengah berkembangnya wacana purifikasi. Rumusan

masalah penelitian ini adalah: (1) bagaimana prosesi Nyadran di Dusun Kuncen (Karangduren, Tenganan, Semarang) berlangsung menjelang Ramadan, (2) bagaimana tanda-tanda ritual (objek, tindakan, ujaran, dan ruang-waktu) dimaknai warga, serta (3) bagaimana Nyadran berfungsi secara sosial-keagamaan sebagai arena negosiasi tradisi lokal dan devosi Islam. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-interpretatif dengan desain studi kasus; data diperoleh melalui observasi partisipatif sepanjang rangkaian Nyadran, wawancara mendalam dengan sesepuh dusun, rois/tokoh agama, panitia, dan warga, serta studi dokumen untuk triangulasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik-interpretatif dengan lensa semiotik-ritual (semiotika Peirce-Barthes dan teori ritual Turner-Bell) untuk memetakan relasi sign-object-interpretant serta proses ritualisasi, liminalitas, dan pembentukan komunitas. Kesimpulan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Nyadran di Kuncen bukan “sisa tradisi”, melainkan sistem penandaan yang memproduksi makna “bersih” (lahir-batin-sosial) sebagai kesiapan Ramadan; tanda-tanda seperti bunga, kemenyan, apem-ketan-kolak, tumpeng, kenduri, serta waktu Ruwah/Sya’ban berfungsi sebagai perangkat komunikasi simbolik yang menegaskan syukur, bakti kepada leluhur/orang tua, disiplin moral, dan solidaritas komunal, sekaligus memperlihatkan rekontekstualisasi penghormatan leluhur ke dalam repertoar devosi Islam (tahlil, doa, sedekah) sehingga Nyadran bekerja sebagai Islam vernakular yang adaptif. Rekomendasi penelitian meliputi dokumentasi berbasis komunitas (arsip audio-visual dan tertulis), penguatan literasi agama-budaya yang inklusif untuk menjelaskan makna simbolik dan batas syariat, pelibatan pemuda dan sekolah sebagai media pendidikan karakter tanpa pemaksaan tafsir tunggal, tata kelola berkelanjutan (transparansi iuran, pengelolaan sampah, penataan makam ramah lingkungan), serta riset lanjutan komparatif lintas-desa dan analisis perubahan wacana keagamaan terhadap praktik Nyadran.

Keywords: Nyadran; Javanese Islam; Semiotics; Ritual; Local Wisdom; Ramadan

Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as a plural socio-cultural space, marked by the diversity of ethnic groups, languages, religions, customs, and traditional practices. Such diversity does not emerge “naturally” alone; rather, it is shaped through human interaction with the environment, historical experience, and social dynamics that continually reorganize how communities think and act. From an anthropological perspective, culture encompasses systems of knowledge, language, religion, the arts, material culture/technology, social organization, and livelihood systems. These elements manifest differently across regions and provide the framework for collective life (Koentjaraningrat, 1990: 203–204).

In social life, actions repeated over time tend to form collective habits and become accepted as “normal” by community members. These habits exceed mere routine and may develop into culture when they embody core ideas of social advancement, become collective products, and are oriented toward humanization—namely, shaping the quality of shared humanity in communal life. Culture, therefore, can be understood as a system of meanings

that structures how people interpret reality while simultaneously guiding their social actions (Poespowardojo, 1993: 219).

Within this cultural framework, tradition occupies a strategic position as a marker of intergenerational continuity. In the Indonesian dictionary (KBBI), tradition refers to customs or habits transmitted from generation to generation and maintained in community life (KBBI, 2018). This definition suggests that tradition functions not only as “heritage,” but also as a social mechanism for sustaining group identity, strengthening togetherness, and maintaining social order through shared norms and rituals.

More broadly, tradition may be seen as a symbol of a community’s connection to its past. The bond with the past is never fully severed; it is embedded in social life, for without it societies lose the foundation that shapes who they are. In this sense, tradition serves as a bridge between collective memory and contemporary social needs, encompassing both ideas and material practices that are inherited, maintained, and continuously reinterpreted according to changing contexts (Shils, 1981, cited in Sztompka, 2007; Sztompka, 2007: 67). In Javanese contexts, the relationship between religion and local tradition often appears through religious practices intertwined with communal rites. One prominent pre-Ramadan tradition is Nyadran, typically involving *besik kubur* (grave cleaning), cemetery visitation and flower scattering, collective *tablil* and prayers, and communal feasting (*kenduri* or eating together). This sequence indicates that ritual is not merely a spiritual expression but also a medium for producing solidarity and strengthening social bonds through collective labor, shared food, and renewed social ties (Koentjaraningrat, 1990; Geertz, 1960).

In Kuncen Hamlet (Karangduren, Tengaran, Semarang), Nyadran is understood as an expression of gratitude to God and a means of praying for ancestors, as well as a moment of social reunion—particularly for migrants who return home before the holy month. Yet, like other vernacular traditions, Nyadran also functions within a field of negotiated meanings. Some residents view it as compatible with Islamic values (prayer, almsgiving, togetherness), while others express caution about elements perceived as pre-Islamic residues or as conflicting with purification agendas. This dynamic suggests that tradition lives through interpretation, social negotiation, and adaptation to changing knowledge and configurations of religious authority (Geertz, 1960; Shils, 1981, cited in Sztompka, 2007).

Against this backdrop, studying Nyadran in Kuncen is important for explaining how a local tradition operates as a meaning system connecting religious, social, and cultural dimensions. This article positions Nyadran not only as something “performed,” but also as

something “read” through ritual signs—objects, actions, utterances, and spatio-temporal arrangements that produce meaning and shape residents’ normative orientations before Ramadan. The analysis therefore moves beyond describing the procession to uncover its symbolic logic and social function in sustaining communal cohesion (Koentjaraningrat, 1990; Sztompka, 2007).

Existing studies on Nyadran show two major tendencies. First, research emphasizing Nyadran as an acculturative form between Islam and Javanese culture: ancestral remembrance is rearticulated through prayer, *tablil*, almsgiving, and religious instruction so that the tradition persists while aligning with a monotheistic orientation. In this view, Nyadran is a socio-religious institution strengthening religio-cultural identity and maintaining social cohesion (Anam, 2017; Arinda, 2014; Nasir, 2019). Second, research highlighting Nyadran as symbolic communication and a social mechanism: mutual cooperation, deliberation, social control, and cross-class solidarity through commensality and food distribution. This perspective reads Nyadran as a “rite of passage” toward Ramadan—a moment of self-cleansing, social renewal, and collective memory maintenance, enabling communities to feel more spiritually and socially prepared for the holy month (Riyadi, 2017; Nasir, 2019; Azzahra et al., 2025).

However, many studies remain at the level of describing the procession or offering normative judgments (pro–contra) without systematically mapping how ritual signs generate religious and social meanings in practice. Consequently, fewer studies explain mechanisms of semiosis—how objects (flowers, foods, offerings), actions (*besik kubur*, *kenduri*), utterances (*tablil*–prayer), and spatio-temporal arrangements (Ruwah/Sya’ban before Ramadan) are produced as a signifying system that negotiates collective memory, communal identity, and religious authority within a changing tradition. The novelty of this article lies in integrating semiotics and ritual theory to read Nyadran as a dynamic vernacular Islamic practice: not merely “heritage,” but an arena of value negotiation between continuity and socio-religious change (Koentjaraningrat, 1990; Geertz, 1960; Shils, 1981; Sztompka, 2007; Peirce, 1931–1958; Barthes, 1972; Turner, 1969; Bell, 1992).

Accordingly, this article aims to: (1) map the Nyadran procession in Kuncen Hamlet prior to Ramadan; (2) identify key ritual signs (objects, actions, utterances, space-time arrangements) and explain their symbolic meanings for residents; and (3) analyze Nyadran’s socio-religious functions in building cohesion, transmitting values, and shaping moral–spiritual readiness for Ramadan amid shifting knowledge and purification discourses.

Theoretically, the article contributes to studies of Javanese Islam/Islam Nusantara by showing how local rites function as a “social language” linking past and present while shaping communal normative orientations; methodologically, it offers a semiotic–ritual analytic model applicable to other vernacular traditions; and practically, it provides a basis for religio-cultural education and context-sensitive tradition safeguarding without closing critical reflection (Shils, 1981; Sztompka, 2007; Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969; Geertz, 1960; Woodward, 1989).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative–interpretive approach with a case-study design to understand the meanings, practices, and value negotiations embedded in Nyadran in Kuncen Hamlet prior to Ramadan. This approach is appropriate because Nyadran is a symbolically dense socio-cultural phenomenon that is better understood through actors’ interpretations and local contexts than through quantitative measurement (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The research site is Kuncen Hamlet, Karangduren Village, Tenganan District, Semarang Regency, selected because Nyadran is regularly conducted prior to Ramadan and is connected to local narratives about ancestors/local figures. This setting enables observation of Nyadran as a communal rite integrating religious, social, and cultural dimensions while also capturing changes in practice as knowledge and religious authority evolve (Geertz, 1960; Koentjaraningrat, 1990). Data sources consisted of primary data (participant observation across the Nyadran sequence and in-depth interviews) and secondary data (local documents/archives and relevant literature). Informants were selected purposively (hamlet elders, the *rois*/religious leaders, organizing committee, neighborhood leaders, and participating residents) and expanded via snowball sampling until data saturation was reached (Patton, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Data collection involved: (1) participant observation to record the ritual sequence, spatio-temporal arrangements, community participation, collective labor, and ritual objects as signs; (2) semi-structured interviews to explore residents’ interpretations of meaning, rationales, changes in practice, and the relationship between tradition and Islam; and (3) document analysis to strengthen context and triangulate findings (Spradley, 1980; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Bowen, 2009). Data were analyzed thematically and interpretively by combining semiotic reading and ritual theory. The data were coded to identify key themes; ritual signs were mapped in sign–object–interpretant relations and classified as icon–index–symbol; and ritual theory was used to

examine processes of ritualization, liminality, and the production of *communitas*. Analysis proceeded iteratively until a coherent argument was generated (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Peirce, 1931–1958; Turner, 1969; Bell, 1992).

Ritual Semiotics (Peirce–Barthes)

This article uses semiotics to explain how Nyadran functions as a signifying system how specific objects, actions, and utterances become “signs” interpreted by community members. In Peirce’s triadic framework, meaning emerges through the relation between sign–object–interpretant. Thus, items and actions in Nyadran (e.g., flowers, foods, *besik kubur*, *tahlil*, *kenduri*) are not neutral; they point to something (object) and are interpreted by social actors (interpretant). Nyadran can therefore be read as a “social language” producing both religious and social meanings (Peirce, 1931–1958).

Within Nyadran, signs operate in multiple modes. Icons are present when signs are meaningful through resemblance (e.g., the cleanliness of graves as an icon of “self-purity” before Ramadan). Indices appear through existential/causal connection (e.g., visitation and prayer as indices of continuing bonds with ancestors). Symbols emerge from cultural convention (e.g., *kenduri* as a symbol of gratitude and togetherness). This classification clarifies which meanings appear “immediately,” which are “pointed to” by relations, and which are “socially agreed upon” (Peirce, 1931–1958; Chandler, 2017).

To deepen levels of meaning, Barthes’ framework reads signs through denotation–connotation. Practices that appear simple (grave cleaning, sharing food, flower scattering) carry connotative values (purity, respect, solidarity). Repeated connotations may sediment into “myth,” a cultural narrative that naturalizes collective beliefs e.g., Nyadran is taken as a legitimate way to prepare for Ramadan and maintain social bonds. At this point, ritual becomes not only action but also a device for legitimizing values (Barthes, 1972). This semiotic lens enables systematic analysis of Nyadran’s elements as signs: objects (flowers, *apem–ketan–kolak*, *tumpeng*, incense), actions (*besik kubur*, *nyekar*, *kenduri*), utterances (*tahlil*, prayer), and spatio-temporal arrangements (Ruwah/Sya’ban before Ramadan). By mapping these elements, the study shows that meanings are not “carried” by objects alone but are produced through practice, context, and communal interpretation (Peirce, 1931–1958; Barthes, 1972).

Ritual Theory and Social Practice (Turner–Bell)

Ritual theory is used to explain Nyadran as an ordered sequence of practices that shapes collective experience, communal identity, and social order. In traditions such as Nyadran, ritual is not merely “worship” or “ceremony,” but also a generator of social relations through working together, eating together, and gathering across families and classes. Nyadran should therefore be read as a social practice that organizes action, facilitates value transmission, and restores communal cohesion (Turner, 1969; Bell, 1992).

Turner conceptualizes ritual as a process comprising separation–liminality–reintegration. In Nyadran, separation is visible when residents step out of everyday routines to enter the pre-Ramadan ritual sequence; liminality occurs in cemetery and *kenduri* moments when social boundaries soften and symbolic equality is affirmed; reintegration appears when residents return to daily life with renewed moral identity feeling “ready for Ramadan.” Nyadran thus functions as a rite of passage marking spiritual and social transition toward the holy month (Turner, 1969).

Turner’s notion of *communitas* explains why Nyadran strengthens togetherness: solidarity is produced through collective labor (*gotong royong*), synchronized prayer/*tablil*, and food distribution. Community is not simply “present” but is enacted and reinforced through shared rhythm and action, especially when migrants return and kinship networks are reactivated (Turner, 1969). Bell’s concept of ritualization, meanwhile, frames ritual as a practical strategy that organizes bodies, space, time, and symbolic authority so that certain actions appear legitimate and “higher” than ordinary activity. This perspective helps explain Nyadran as an arena of authority negotiation, the *rois* leading prayers, village officials opening the event, and shifts toward forms perceived as more Islamic. Nyadran is thus dynamic, adaptive, and continuously negotiated amid changing knowledge and purification discourses (Bell, 1992).

Defining Nyadran

Nyadran derives from *sraddha* (Sanskrit), meaning faith/belief, and in Javanese traditions developed into cemetery visitation and grave cleaning commonly conducted during Ruwah (Sya’ban) before Ramadan. Locally, Nyadran refers to a ritual sequence comprising *besik kubur* (grave cleaning), flower scattering, *tablil* and prayers, and culminating in *kenduri/selamatan*. Foods such as *apem*, *ketan*, and *kolak* are often considered key elements (Arinda, 2014; KBBI, 2010; Mubarok, 2017).

The *kenduri* within Nyadran is intended as a form of honoring ancestral spirits and strengthening kinship ties within a lineage (*trah*). In practice, it is accompanied by cemetery visitation with flowers (e.g., basil) as symbols of enduring emotional bonds between visitors and the deceased (Hutari, 2009; Mubarak, 2017).

Historical accounts note similarities between Nyadran and *craddha* traditions in the Majapahit era, particularly in ancestral veneration through ritual offerings and symbolic devices. This similarity is often interpreted as traces of pre-Islamic culture later transformed upon encountering Islam (Mumfanganti, 2007; Arinda, 2014). Etymologically, *craddha*/*sraddha* also signifies belief, and in ancient Javanese society ancestors were believed to remain connected to their descendants. Hence, temporal markers (days, dates, moments of death) were important, and families prepared offerings foods, drinks, or preferred items of the deceased—arranged with flowers and lighting (Mumfanganti, 2007; Arinda, 2014).

As Islam entered Java from around the 13th century, some Hindu-Buddhist practices underwent acculturative adjustment through cultural da'wa strategies. This process intensified in the 15th century through Walisongo, producing new ritual forms that retained local cultural structures while being re-filled with Islamic symbols and discourse. In this context, *sraddha* is often understood to have transformed into Nyadran (Mumfanganti, 2007; Ibda, 2018b).

With Islamic influence, Nyadran's meaning shifted from pre-Islamic ancestral veneration toward cemetery visitation and prayer directed to God, becoming a moment of self-reflection before Ramadan. This religious interpretation aligns with viewing Sha'ban as a period of spiritual evaluation and preparation; Nyadran becomes a practice of *muhasabah* (self-accounting) and seeking forgiveness for oneself and ancestors (Arinda, 2014; Ibda, 2018b).

Cultural da'wa strategies are commonly framed as persuasion: traditions are not abolished but aligned so they can become media for value education and Islamization (e.g., via prayers, *tablil*, religious gatherings). Nyadran, in this framing, is a cultural “modification” enabling communities to embrace Islam without severing ties to tradition (Mumfanganti, 2007; Ibda, 2018b). Another frequently cited compromise is the use of gravestones as markers that facilitate visitation and prayer at certain times (Mumfanganti, 2007; Arinda, 2014).

In rural Javanese contexts, the Ruwahan period before Ramadan often triggers return migration; some migrants treat Nyadran as a crucial moment to maintain family bonds and

ancestral memory. Because the later Eid homecoming can be costly and risky, some prefer returning during Ruwahan/Nyadran and allocate funds for repairing gravestones or maintaining family cemeteries as acts of filial devotion and kinship maintenance (Mubarok, 2017; Ibda, 2018b).

The Meaning of Nyadran

Historically and culturally, Nyadran is often read as a tradition rooted in Hindu-Buddhist ritual practice, parallel to *craddha*. When Islam entered Java from around the 13th century, the tradition was not immediately erased but adjusted through cultural *da'wa* strategies. Through this process, Nyadran transformed into a communal rite acceptable to local society because it did not directly confront the local belief system while opening space for internalizing Islamic values in everyday practice (Handayani, n.d.; Mumfanganti, 2007). Within this cultural Islamization framework, Walisongo are frequently positioned as key actors in recontextualizing meanings. Elements of praise and offerings common in pre-Islamic traditions were modified by incorporating Qur'anic recitation, *tahlil*, and prayer, and strengthened through *selamatan/kenduri* as a medium of togetherness. Nyadran thus becomes not merely “inherited ritual,” but a site of encounter between local tradition and Islamic teachings producing a more contextual religious practice (Mumfanganti, 2007).

In Kuncen Hamlet, Nyadran meaning is also attached to symbolically charged spatio-temporal markers. Informants explain that choosing particular days such as Thursday Legi and Friday Pahing is perceived as ancestral heritage, linked to communal memory about Kyai Bumi and Nyai Bumi as local spiritual-ancestral figures (*danyang*) and to the period before Ramadan. In semiotic terms, these day selections function as “collective signs” binding memory, traditional authority, and social legitimacy for the rite (Interview with Kentu, 40 years; Peirce, 1931–1958).

Nyadran begins with *nyekar*, cemetery visitation accompanied by bringing flowers to scatter on graves as an act of respect and a reminder of continuing ties to ancestors. Informants note that this activity is performed days before the Nyadran peak and is directed especially to Kyai Bumi–Nyai Bumi and the ancestors of Kuncen residents. Socio-culturally, *nyekar* emphasizes that the relationship with ancestors is not framed as “worship” but as respect, prayer, and the maintenance of collective memory through ritual (Interview with Melan, 40 years; Geertz, 1960).

During visitation, residents bring ritual foods placed in *takir* (banana-leaf containers), including *ingkung* and other dishes for the *manganan/kenduri*. Here food has a double function: as a ritual device accompanying prayer and as a social medium binding togetherness through eating together at the cemetery. Symbols thus work not only as “meanings of objects” but through communal practices that strengthen solidarity (Mumfanti, 2007; Turner, 1969). Residents often interpret food offerings as gratitude to God and as almsgiving shared with others. Some informants explain that almsgiving food and communal commensality serve as a way to “send merit” to ancestors while also strengthening family and neighborhood ties. Nyadran meaning therefore operates on two layers: vertical (gratitude and prayer) and horizontal (solidarity and sharing) (Interview with Tinah, 36 years; Arinda, 2014).

Nyadran in Kuncen also functions as a social moment gathering extended families, including migrants. Consequently, *manganan* occurs not only at the cemetery but also at homes as a means of reunion and kinship renewal. Some residents regard Nyadran as “obligatory,” and some believe there are social-moral consequences if it is not performed, indicating that the tradition also functions as a mechanism of social control and collective order maintenance (Noer and Tuti, 2015).

At the ritual peak, the Nyadran sequence continues with collective prayers at the cemetery and the preparation of foods for *munjung/ater-ater* (distributing dishes to older relatives and neighbors). This distribution highlights that Nyadran is oriented not only to spiritual ritual but also to social ethics: strengthening solidarity, sustaining the value of sharing, and expanding social ties within the community (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015). The social values embedded in Nyadran are evident in its organization: mutual cooperation from preparation to implementation, unity reinforced through commensality and food distribution, and deliberation through establishing committees and community meetings (*rembug warga*) to ensure orderly ritual performance. These values indicate that Nyadran operates as a cultural institution organizing collective labor, affirming communal identity, and producing social cohesion prior to Ramadan (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

Thus, Nyadran in Kuncen cannot be reduced to “cemetery visitation” alone. It is a space of encounter among ancestral memory, Islamic spirituality, and social solidarity, continuously negotiated through symbols, actions, and communal procedures. In this sense, Nyadran functions as a religio-cultural practice that preserves tradition while affirming social values relevant to contemporary communal life (Geertz, 1960; Noer and Tuti, 2015; Turner, 1969).

Strengthening Sufi Values in Nyadran

Nyadran contains religious values that extend beyond cemetery visitation or matters “of graves” alone. In practice, Nyadran is intertwined with religious activities such as collective prayers, *tahlilan*, *yasinan*, *manaqiban*, and religious sermons, indicating that this ritual is also a medium for strengthening the spiritual relationship between humans and God as well as harmonious relations with others and nature. Nyadran can therefore be read as having “Sufi roots” worth strengthening, as it cultivates inward religious experience through ritual, prayer, and togetherness (Qomar, 2014).

Conceptually, Sufism (*tasawuf*) refers to efforts to draw closer to God through perfecting obligatory and supererogatory worship and cultivating inner refinement that fosters deeper spiritual awareness. In this sense, local traditions in the Indonesian archipelago often become spaces where Sufi values manifest because they emphasize not only formal worship but also spiritual feeling, social piety, and self-awareness. The term theosophy, etymologically “divine wisdom,” is sometimes used to describe inner dimensions of religious experience, underscoring that spirituality is not always articulated as doctrine but also enacted in embodied practices and experience (Jamil, 2007; Qomar, 2014).

At the cultural level, Islam in Indonesia developed through encounters with local contexts and thus cannot be understood partially or judged solely through one cultural standard. Religious experience in Nusantara often represents a creative synthesis between Islamic values and local culture without losing doctrinal substance. Emha Ainun Nadjib emphasizes the importance of a selective-critical stance: preserving local culture as identity, mapping and processing external elements, and filtering harmful influences before adoption. This perspective supports reading Nyadran as contextual religiosity Islam lived within the socio-cultural space of communities (Pratama, 2017).

In this frame, Nyadran can be positioned as part of Islam Nusantara, containing not only local wisdom but also religiosity and Sufi values. It demonstrates that spirituality can grow through communal rites: collective prayer, sharing food, mutual cooperation, and maintaining ancestral memory. Nyadran thus becomes an arena for socio-religious ethics relevant to community life (Anam, 2017).

Studies indicate that Nyadran strengthens basic social values such as mutual cooperation, unity, deliberation, social control, and local wisdom visible in food sharing. These values show that spirituality is inseparable from social responsibility; piety in local

traditions often appears as collective piety binding relations through solidarity and shared labor (Anam, 2017).

Nyadran also contains Sufi values related to inner cultivation, such as *syauq/mahabbah* (longing and love for God), *tark al-shahwat* (controlling desire), *muhasabah al-nafs* (self-accounting), *tambah* (repentance), and an otherworldly orientation/ascetic restraint. As Nyadran is practiced before Ramadan, it can be understood as spiritual preparation: cleansing the self, resetting orientations, and strengthening moral–spiritual awareness prior to the holy month (Qomar, 2014).

Another approach in Sufi ethics emphasizes virtues such as *al-hikmah* (wisdom/clarity), *al-iffah* (chastity/self-restraint producing generosity and steadfastness), *al-shaja'ah* (courage expressed as calmness and patience), and *al-'adl* (justice expressed in compassion, friendship, and humility). These values highlight that spirituality is not only formal ritual but also character formation. In Nyadran, practices that appear cultural can become means for internalizing Sufi virtues: sharing, maintaining harmony, restraining ego, and repairing relationships (Wardi, 2014).

The core of Sufism lies in the consciousness of the heart—an inner presence that is clear, spacious, and capable of acknowledging limits. Strengthening Sufism in Nyadran thus need not be interpreted as distant “mysticism,” but as strengthening inner qualities that generate social piety. In traditional practices, experiential dimensions (feeling, closeness, sincerity) often constitute the strongest spiritual core because they live in shared experience and repeated practice (Qomar, 2014).

Contemporary Indonesian Sufi thinkers propose models responsive to modern change social Sufism, positive Sufism, urban Sufism, contextual Sufism, and Javanese Sufism. This diversity shows that Sufism is not static but adapts to socio-economic-cultural contexts. Nyadran can thus be situated as a form of socio-cultural Sufism: a spiritual practice rooted locally yet oriented toward closeness to God, solidarity, and socio-ecological harmony (Wardi, 2014).

Hence, strengthening Sufi values in Nyadran means reaffirming its ethical–spiritual substance: gratitude, prayer, almsgiving, self-control, and social concern. Nyadran can cultivate Muslims devoted to God while remaining rooted in cultural identity and civic belonging. It thus integrates inward spirituality (Sufism), social solidarity, and cultural memory in an adaptive living rite (Anam, 2017; Wardi, 2014).

The Performance of Nyadran

Nyadran is typically performed at ancestral family cemeteries or the graves of figures considered to have contributed to local socio-religious life. Consequently, patterns of visitation vary across regions depending on local history, revered figures, and the structure of collective memory (Mubarok, 2017; Ibda, 2018b).

Nyadran is generally conducted during Ruwah/Sya'ban, sometimes on particular dates based on community agreement and local beliefs regarding a special period of closeness to ancestors before Ramadan. Local understandings of *mudhun/munggahan* are often used to explain culturally why Ruwah is considered sacred for visitation and prayer (Arinda, 2014; Mubarok, 2017).

The ritual usually begins with preparing symbolic foods such as *apem*, *ketan*, and *kolak*, placed in containers (e.g., *takir* made from banana leaves) and distributed as *munjung/ater-ater* to older relatives and neighbors. This distribution functions not only as a complement to the *kenduri* but also as a message of solidarity and social piety in the community (Hutari, 2009; Mubarok, 2017). After grave cleaning, residents hold a communal feast around the cemetery or along the route toward it. In some local traditions, village officials (e.g., *kebayan*) open the feast as an expression of gratitude and appreciation for residents' participation, including contributions of food, time, and labor throughout the Nyadran sequence (Mubarok, 2017; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

A local religious authority (e.g., *Mbah Kaum/rois*) then leads Islamic prayers and *tablil* asking forgiveness for oneself and ancestors. Broad participation, including children, indicates that the ritual is also a medium for socio-religious learning through the repetition of symbols, utterances, and shared practice (Mubarok, 2017; Mumfanganti, 2007). After prayer, food is eaten together; families exchange dishes, converse, and renew kinship ties, especially when migrants return. In some practices, the prayer leader receives modest honoraria in money and food, while residents who did not attend or vulnerable groups receive *gandhulan* (food packages) delivered to their homes as a form of social care (Noer and Tuti, 2015; Mubarok, 2017).

This sequence confirms that Nyadran is not only a cemetery-visitation ritual but also a field for socio-cultural values such as mutual cooperation, togetherness (*guyub*), sacrifice, and an economy of communal contributions. Ritual gatherings can also become spaces for exchanging information and strengthening social networks, including work/migration opportunities among relatives (Noer and Tuti, 2015; Isyanti, 2007).

The Symbolic and Social Meanings of Nyadran

Nyadran's symbolic meaning is closely intertwined with the idea of being "clean" before Ramadan: cleansing the body (physical), cleansing inner orientation (spiritual), and cleansing social relations (communal). "Cleanliness" here is not reduced to physical acts alone; it is enacted through a ritual sequence that reorganizes relationships with God (through prayer and *tablil*), with ancestors (through visitation and remembrance), and with others (through communal feasting and sharing). Nyadran thus functions as a mechanism of moral-spiritual preparation before Ramadan and a means of repairing social order through kindness and togetherness (Arinda, 2014; Ibda, 2018b).

At the symbolic level, the values of "cleanliness" and "readiness for Ramadan" are produced through objects and ritual actions conventionalized by the community. Foods, flowers, and other ritual items are not mere accessories but signs carrying socio-religious messages. Hutari (2009), for example, explains that *tumpeng* is often interpreted as hope that prayers will be answered; *ingkung* symbolizes purity/submission; bananas and market snacks symbolize blessings and happiness; *apem-keketan-kolak* symbolize seeking forgiveness; incense accompanies supplication; and flowers symbolize the "fragrance of prayer" from a sincere heart. These symbols shape inner atmosphere, direct intention, and bind residents into a shared understanding of piety and Ramadan preparation (Hutari, 2009).

These ritual "provisions" then bind prayer and togetherness through sharing. After prayers, food does not remain "offerings" or symbols but becomes a medium of solidarity when eaten together, exchanged between families, or distributed to absent residents and vulnerable groups. Here Nyadran demonstrates that piety is not only individual-spiritual but also social—expressed through almsgiving, sharing sustenance, and attention to others. Eating together reduces social distance, produces *guyub*, and strengthens the sense of a unified community before Ramadan (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

Nyadran therefore integrates three dimensions simultaneously: religious (prayer, *tablil*, seeking forgiveness), social (mutual cooperation, togetherness, social ties), and cultural (maintenance of symbols, procedures, and ancestral memory). Values of cooperation, compassion, sacrifice, and communal cohesion appear from preparation to implementation, indicating that Nyadran functions as a mechanism of social order grounded in local wisdom. Tradition thus sustains collective identity while also enabling relational "renewal" through recognized shared practices (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

In Nyadran's social space, kinship among residents and lineage members is reaffirmed through gathering, eating together, and exchanging symbolic goods (foods). The involvement of multiple generations—elders, youths, and children makes Nyadran a vehicle for value transmission: younger generations learn the meanings of togetherness, ancestral respect, and spiritual preparation through lived experience rather than purely normative preaching. This process indicates that tradition does not merely “survive,” but is continually “re-formed” as contexts change: core values are maintained while certain forms may adjust in response to changing knowledge, religious discourse, and social conditions (Shils, 1981, cited in Sztompka, 2007; Sztompka, 2007).

Thus, Nyadran symbolism is not limited to a list of object meanings (*tumpeng*, *ingkung*, flowers, etc.), but is evident in its social function as a bridge connecting ancestral memory, communal piety, and readiness for Ramadan. Through this ritual, Javanese communities—including Kuncen—affirm that entering the holy month involves not only personal worship but also repairing relations with others and sustaining shared identity through inherited cultural practice (Arinda, 2014; Ibda, 2018b; Hutari, 2009).

The Impacts of Nyadran

Over time, Nyadran has expanded in meaning, particularly for migrants who link Nyadran with almsgiving, social charity, the construction of worship facilities, and cemetery renovation. Such practices are interpreted as repaying ancestral sacrifice and as respect expressed through concrete contributions to the community (Mubarok, 2017; Arinda, 2014). Nyadran is no longer understood merely as collective grave cleaning and feasting, but also as a social adhesive, a medium for building shared identity, and even as a reinforcement of civic belonging through cross-status mixing. In ritual situations, social differentiation tends to soften because residents gather in a shared rhythm of action and values (Noer and Tuti, 2015; Isyanti, 2007).

Values Embedded in Nyadran

In Kuncen Hamlet, Nyadran is understood as an inherited tradition comprising *besik kubur*, collective prayer, food exchange as almsgiving, and *pambagyo tamu* (welcoming guests) as a distinctive feature that strengthens social ties. *Pambagyo tamu* is framed as an expression of gratitude and a means of connecting people to one another (Mubarok, 2017).

Isyanti (2007) argues that tradition contains values of mutual cooperation, unity, deliberation, social control, and local wisdom. In Nyadran these values appear from preparation, contribution collection, committee formation, to the feast and food distribution. In other words, Nyadran operates as a social integration device that affirms communal value systems (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

Mutual cooperation is evident in collective labor from early preparation to completion, including mobilizing youths and elders and using collective funds. Unity is reflected in communal feasting and almsgiving food distribution, while deliberation appears in community meetings that establish committees and decide on needs (Noer and Tuti, 2015; Isyanti, 2007). Social control emerges when Nyadran becomes a space to affirm gratitude to God while maintaining ancestral tradition through collectively followed norms. Local wisdom appears in the principle of sharing food so that all groups not only Kuncen residents can enjoy Nyadran's collective blessings (Noer and Tuti, 2015; Isyanti, 2007).

Semiotic Analysis of Nyadran: Producing “Cleanliness” and Communal Piety

This analysis underscores that Nyadran in Kuncen Hamlet is not simply a residual tradition to be preserved, but a signifying system that continuously produces piety through sign-object-interpretant relations (Peirce, 1931–1958). Actions such as *besik kubur*, *nyekar*, *tahlil*, and *kenduri* are not neutral routines but meaningful sign-actions interpreted collectively in the pre-Ramadan context. Meaning does not reside inherently in objects (flowers, foods, incense); it emerges from social practices that interpret these objects as moral-spiritual and social devices.

A Barthesian analysis shows how the overarching theme of “cleanliness” moves from denotation to connotation and hardens into a cultural “myth” (Barthes, 1972). At the denotative level, *besik kubur* is grave cleaning; at the connotative level it becomes self-cleansing (*muhasabah*) and social cleansing (restoring harmony/*guyub*). Through annual repetition, this connotation becomes naturalized into a narrative: “before Ramadan, good people should be clean physically, spiritually, and socially.” This myth mechanism helps explain why Nyadran retains moral legitimacy even when certain elements are debated: the ritual feels “appropriate” because it embodies Ramadan preparation ethics, not merely care for the past.

A sharper semiotic account emerges when “cleanliness” is read through Peirce's icon-index-symbol modes (Peirce, 1931–1958). Clean graves function as an icon of self-

purity through visible resemblance: tidy-clean becomes the image of purity expected of the actors. Visitation and prayer function as indices of continued kin relations across life and death, while the Ruwah/Sya'ban calendar acts indexically as a marker of transition toward Ramadan (Koentjaraningrat, 1990). Communal *kenduri*, *munjung/ater-ater*, and eating together operate symbolically as gratitude and social concord through shared convention across generations (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

The ritual devices (*apem-ketan-kolak*, *tumpeng*, *ingkung*, flowers, incense) reveal a sensitive yet productive arena of negotiation. In local interpretation, these symbols shape inner orientation: *apem-ketan-kolak* as seeking forgiveness, *tumpeng* as hope, *ingkung* as submission/purity, flowers as the “fragrance of prayer,” incense as accompaniment to supplication (Hutari, 2009). Yet when some elements are read as pre-Islamic residues, Nyadran persists through recontextualizing interpretants from a logic of “offering to spirits” to a logic of “almsgiving and devotion”: foods ultimately become alms and social bonds rather than worship (Arinda, 2014; Nasir, 2019). This is where Nyadran appears as vernacular Islam: what is Islamized is not only the objects but the communal way of interpreting and using them.

Ritual and Authority Analysis: Rites of Passage, Communitas, and Social Sufism

Ritual theory shows that Nyadran functions as a rite of passage toward Ramadan with a separation liminality reintegration structure (Turner, 1969). Separation occurs when residents leave everyday routines to enter the pre-Ramadan sequence (preparation, grave cleaning, visitation). Liminality occurs at the cemetery and feast: residents gather in shared rhythm, social boundaries soften, and moral orientation is directed toward being “ready for Ramadan.” Reintegration occurs as the ritual ends: residents return to daily life with renewed moral identity feeling cleaner, more harmonious, and more prepared for Ramadan’s discipline.

The concept of *communitas* explains Nyadran’s effectiveness as a cohesion generator: solidarity is not automatic but produced by ritual (Turner, 1969). Cooperation in preparation, synchronized prayer, and communal eating generate a sense of “we” that exceeds status differentiation. Migrants’ return strengthens this function by reactivating kinship networks and restoring social ties; food exchange practically reduces distance. Nyadran thus shows that communal piety is not merely individual spirituality but includes social repair and solidarity (Isyanti, 2007; Noer and Tuti, 2015).

A further dimension often overlooked is ritualization as a strategy of power and as an arena negotiating the “Islamicity” of tradition (Bell, 1992). Who leads prayer (the *rois*), who organizes contributions and procedure (committee/village officials), and which elements are highlighted or minimized all involve the production of symbolic authority. Under purification discourse pressures, Nyadran sustains legitimacy by foregrounding devotional formats (*tahlil*, prayer, almsgiving) and reordering contested elements. Thus, the negotiation between tradition and Islam is not neutral but a subtle contestation over where boundaries are drawn and who has the authority to define a legitimate Nyadran (Geertz, 1960; Bell, 1992).

Finally, strengthening Sufism in Nyadran is most sharply read as embodied social Sufism: *muhasabah*, repentance, self-control, and otherworldly orientation are not only discourses but enacted through communal practice (Qomar, 2014). Grave cleaning cultivates discipline and awareness; prayer for ancestors cultivates humility; almsgiving and sharing cultivate ego reduction and care; mutual cooperation embodies compassion. Nyadran thus integrates inward spirituality (Sufism), social solidarity, and cultural memory in an adaptive rite explaining why it persists as vernacular Islam rather than a fossilized tradition (Woodward, 1989; Ricklefs, 2006; Shils, 1981 cited in Sztompka, 2007).

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article draws the following conclusions. First, regarding research question (1) mapping the Nyadran procession in Kuncen Hamlet prior to Ramadan, the study shows that Nyadran is performed through a relatively stable ritual sequence: beginning with *besik kubur* (grave cleaning), followed by *nyekar/ziarah* with flower scattering, then collective prayers/*tahlil* led by a local religious authority, and culminating in communal feasting (*kenduri/manganan*) as well as food distribution through *munjung/ater-ater* and food packages for certain residents. This sequence establishes a socially recognized “special time” before Ramadan, functioning both as spiritual preparation and as the restoration of kinship relations, especially when migrants return home. Second, regarding research question (2) identifying key signs and their symbolic meanings, the semiotic analysis indicates that Nyadran elements mixed flowers, incense, *apem-kekan-kolak*, *tumpeng/ingkung*, communal *kenduri*, and the timing before Ramadan operate as a non-neutral sign system. Within Peirce’s framework, these signs function as icons (clean graves as an image of self-purity), indices (visitation–prayer as markers of enduring kin relations across life and death,

and Ruwah/Sya'ban as an index of transition toward Ramadan), and symbols (*kenduri* and *munjung* as conventionalized expressions of gratitude, almsgiving, and social harmony). At Barthes' level, the practice of "cleanliness" moves from denotation to connotation and crystallizes into a cultural myth: entering Ramadan should be preceded by cleansing of the body, spirit, and social relations, thereby granting Nyadran moral legitimacy as a "proper" preparation practice. Third, regarding research question (3) on Nyadran's socio-religious functions in building cohesion, value transmission, and moral-spiritual readiness amid purification discourse, the findings affirm that Nyadran functions as a rite of passage producing *communitas* and reorganizing neighborhood solidarity. Social cohesion is enacted through mutual cooperation, synchronized prayer, communal eating, food exchange, and care for vulnerable groups, while the ritual also transmits intergenerational values (gratitude, filial piety, empathy, moral discipline). At the same time, Nyadran is an arena for negotiating authority and the boundaries between religion and culture: contested elements are not automatically removed but are often recontextualized to align with Islamic devotional repertoires (*tahlil*, prayer, almsgiving), enabling the tradition to persist as "Islamized" at the level of meaning and social function. In sum, Nyadran in Kuncen Hamlet constitutes a form of vernacular Islam—not merely a relic of the past but an adaptive cultural strategy for negotiating ancestral memory, Islamic piety, and social order prior to Ramadan. Future challenges involve sustaining a balance between safeguarding tradition and strengthening religio-cultural literacy so that Nyadran is not reduced to formality but remains a living space for ethical formation and communal spiritual readiness. Practically, the study recommends: (1) community-based documentation that records origin narratives, procession sequences, and changes in Nyadran practices through audio-visual media and written archives as durable learning resources for younger generations; and (2) strengthening inclusive religio-cultural literacy through study circles or cultural classes that explain Nyadran's symbolic meanings and normative boundaries dialogically, enabling residents to distinguish devotional substance (prayer, almsgiving, gratitude) from culturally contested elements.

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