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Revitalising *Sesajen*

The Role of Ritual Offerings in Yogyakarta Palace Ceremonies Amid Globalisation

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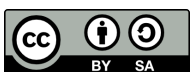
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Abstract

The tradition of offerings (*sesajen*) in the customary ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace represents a vital part of Javanese cultural heritage, embodying profound philosophical and spiritual values. Rooted in the syncretism of animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, the practice of *sesajen* serves as a medium for gratitude, reverence for ancestors, and spiritual communication. Rituals such as *Labuhan* and *Sekaten* continue to reflect the Javanese worldview of harmony among humans, nature, and the supernatural. Each offering component carries symbolic meaning and reflects generations of local wisdom that underpin Javanese identity. However, in the face of globalisation and modernisation, this tradition faces existential threats, particularly from shifting values among younger generations and the increasing influence of global ideologies. In response, the Yogyakarta Palace and traditional communities have implemented revitalisation strategies through cultural education, religious integration, and ceremonial preservation. This paper examines the types, preparation processes, symbolic meanings, and socio-cultural roles of offerings in Yogyakarta Palace rituals. Within the framework of Southeast Asian Indigenous and Ethnic Studies, this research highlights the dynamic resilience of Indigenous practices in adapting to changing times while preserving their core values.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Indigenous people, *sesajen*; Yogyakarta Palace, Javanese cosmology, ritual syncretism



Introduction

The tradition of offerings (*sesajen*) in the customary ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace (*Keraton Yogyakarta*) represents a cultural heritage that holds profound meaning in the lives of the Javanese people. The Yogyakarta Palace, as the centre of Javanese culture, functions not only as the royal family's residence but also as the guardian and preserver of ancestral traditions, including the offering rituals that continue to be practised today in various traditional ceremonies such as *Labuhan*, *Sekaten*, and other important rites (Ahmad et al., 2021; Al-Fajriyati, 2019; A'yuni & Syarifah, 2020).

To ensure accessibility for international readers, it is essential to clarify that *Kejawen* refers not to a formal religion but to a Javanese spiritual-philosophical worldview that synthesises indigenous animist-dynamist beliefs, Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies, and Islamic mysticism. It emphasises inner harmony, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of spiritual balance through ritual practice (Woodward, 1989a). Within this framework, *sesajen* (ritual offerings) function as tangible mediators between the human and spiritual realms. Unlike everyday food or objects, *sesajen* are ritually consecrated materials—ranging from agricultural produce, textiles, incense, and sacred water to personal items of the Sultan—arranged according to strict cosmological and symbolic protocols (Geertz, 1976). The term *ubarampe* is often used interchangeably to denote the complete set of ritual implements and offerings required for a ceremony.

The offering rituals at the Yogyakarta Palace are inseparable from the belief system of the Javanese people, which combines elements of animism, dynamism, and the influence of major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Historically, the Yogyakarta Palace was established in 1755 by Sultan Hamengku Buwono I as a continuation of the divided Islamic Mataram Kingdom; since then, it has become a symbol of the cultural and spiritual strength of the Javanese people. The values embodied in the offering traditions reflect the Javanese philosophy of harmony among humans, nature, and the supernatural, as seen in the *Labuhan* ceremony, where offerings are presented to supernatural rulers such as *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul* on the Southern Coast and *Kyai Sapujagat* at Mount Merapi (Adinugraha, 2024; Haryanto et al., 2024; Mulyana, 2017).

Sesajen itself is a symbol of local wisdom that harmoniously blends pre-Islamic teachings with Islamic values. The Javanese interpret offerings as a form of gratitude, respect for ancestors, and supplication for protection and safety from Almighty God. Each component of the offerings—ranging from food and drinks to specific objects—carries symbolic meanings that have been passed down through generations and forms an inseparable part of the Javanese cultural identity. This tradition also serves as a medium for maintaining spiritual connections with ancestors and the universe, as well as strengthening social cohesion and harmony within the community (Adam et al., 2019).

However, in the face of globalisation and modernisation, the tradition of *sesajen* faces challenges such as shifting paradigms and values within society, especially among the younger generation. The influence of foreign cultures and the development of global ide-

ologies often raise concerns about the continued existence of offerings as part of local wisdom. Nevertheless, preservation and adaptation efforts continue to be carried out by the Palace and traditionalist communities through ritual revitalisation, the strengthening of cultural education, and integration with the dominant religious teachings of today (Adam et al., 2019; Agustina & Syaifudin, 2021).

In the context of Southeast Asian customary and ethnic studies, the tradition of offerings at the Yogyakarta Palace serves as a concrete example of how Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia are able to preserve, adapt, and reconstruct ancestral traditions in response to social and cultural change. In fact, many offering practices are carried out outside the Yogyakarta area—for instance, in Bali, where they are often called *canang sari*. *Canang sari* is a daily offering, consisting of flowers, leaves, snacks, and incense. This tradition is an important part of Balinese Hinduism, serving as a form of gratitude and a means of achieving harmony among humans, nature, and God (*Tri Hita Karana*) (Geertz, 1973).

Beyond Indonesia, this tradition is widespread across Southeast Asia, including in Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, where it takes various names and embodies distinct symbolic beliefs. In Thailand, offerings are associated with spirit houses (*San Phra Phum*), where food, drinks, flowers, and incense are placed in front of houses to honour the guardian spirits of the land (Cohen, 1985). In Vietnam, ancestor worship serves as a form of respect for ancestral spirits, with offerings of food, fruit, tea, and incense placed on family altars (Malarney, 2002). In Cambodia, offerings—typically fruit, rice, flowers, and candles—are part of Theravada Buddhist practice and the veneration of ancestral spirits (Harris, 2005). In Myanmar, under the name of *nat* worship (worship of *nat* spirits), offerings such as coconuts, bananas, rice, and drinks are given to *nats* (guardian spirits) as part of a traditional belief system that coexists with Buddhism (Schober, 2011). Finally, in the Philippines, *alay* and *atang* refer to offerings of food and drink presented to ancestral spirits or *makhuk* (subtle beings) (Jocano, 1975).

The tradition of offerings across various regions of Southeast Asia reveals a common cultural pattern rooted in the cosmological views of local peoples. Whether in the practice of *canang sari* in Bali, spirit houses in Thailand, ancestor worship in Vietnam, or offerings to *nats* in Myanmar, offerings function as a medium of symbolic communication between humans and non-material entities. This practice reflects the belief in supernatural forces that affect human life, which must be maintained through the ritual of giving offerings as a form of respect, a request for protection, and an expression of gratitude. At the same time, the diversity of forms and meanings of offerings confirms that this practice is contextual and dynamic, adapting to social, religious, and cultural developments in each region. Although some modern societies have begun to view it as a purely symbolic tradition, offerings still play an important role in maintaining cultural identity and the continuity of local values. Thus, the tradition of offerings in Southeast Asia can be understood not only as a ritual practice but also as a system of meaning that reflects the relationship between humans and God, nature, ancestors, and the spiritual dimension in daily life.

This study engages with classical anthropological frameworks—particularly Clifford

Geertz's interpretive approach to Javanese religion, Victor Turner's theory of ritual liminality, Shelly Errington's analysis of ritual as political and aesthetic performance, and Anthony Reid's historical perspectives on maritime Southeast Asian statecraft—to deepen its analytical rigour (Geertz, 1973). Research on this phenomenon is important not only for documenting local cultural richness but also for understanding the dynamics of identity and spiritual transformation within Indigenous communities in the face of modern challenges. Studying *sesajen* in the traditional ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace is highly relevant to understanding how this tradition functions not only as cultural heritage but also as a value system governing the relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. This study also contributes to the preservation of intangible culture and enriches our understanding of the evolving yet deeply rooted dynamics of Javanese culture (Akbar Rijal et al., 2024; Alfiah et al., 2022).

Thus, the background of this research on offerings in the traditional ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace highlights the importance of preserving tradition as part of the cultural identity, spirituality, and local wisdom of the Javanese people, as well as its relevance within the study of Indigenous and ethnic communities in Southeast Asia. Based on this background, this research aims to examine in depth the types, preparation processes, philosophical meanings, and socio-cultural roles of *sesajen* in the traditional ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace. The research findings are expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the significance of offerings as an integral part of the cultural and spiritual identity of the Palace community, while also serving as a reference for the preservation and future development of Javanese culture.

The History and Traditional Patterns of Ritual Offerings (*Sesajen*) in Javanese Palaces Through the Ages

The *Kraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat* (Yogyakarta Palace) is a centre of Javanese culture and spirituality with a long-standing history dating back to its establishment in 1755 as a result of the Giyanti Agreement. As a symbol of power and cultural identity, the *Kraton* functions not only as the residence of the Sultan and his family but also as a guardian of traditions and customary rituals rich in meaning. One of the most significant aspects of these traditions is the use of *sesajen* (ritual offerings) in the various customary ceremonies regularly held by the Yogyakarta Palace (Maharsi, 2018).

The Yogyakarta *Kraton*, as one of the primary cultural centres of Java, plays a vital role in preserving the continuity of traditions and the noble values passed down by the ancestors. In many traditional ceremonies held by the *Kraton*, *sesajen* constitutes a central element accompanying every procession. It is not merely a ritual device but a symbol of Javanese philosophy that reflects the close connection between humans, nature, and God within a harmonious cosmic order. *Sesajen* is a tangible representation of the Javanese belief system, which acknowledges the relationship between the physical world (microcosm)

and the spiritual realm (macrocosm). In the context of the Yogyakarta *Kraton*, *sesajen* functions not only as an offering to ancestors or spirits but also contains profound symbolic meanings related to social structure, ethical living, and the concept of balance in human life within the universe (Mustofa, 2024; Woodward, 1989b).

From a theoretical standpoint, Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a cultural system provides a useful lens: *sesajen* operates as a symbolic language through which Javanese cosmology, moral order, and social hierarchy are enacted and reproduced. Rather than mere superstition, these offerings constitute what Geertz would describe as a 'deep play' of cultural meaning, where material arrangements communicate spiritual intentions and communal values (Geertz, 1976).

Looking back at the life of the palaces in the southern Central Java region from the 18th to the early 19th century, one can clearly see ritual practices aimed at appeasing powerful deities such as Batari Durga and Ratu Kidul. In the Southeast Asian context, one of the king's primary responsibilities was to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom through the performance of religious and spiritual ceremonies. These rituals were usually conducted at the centre of power or at sacred sites associated with the kingdom's protective goddesses. Such ceremonies were often carried out by royal emissaries, and these guardian deities were believed to rule over the four cardinal directions. The benevolence or wrath of these goddesses was viewed as a key factor in determining the kingdom's fate (Agustina & Syaifudin, 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2020). Anthony Reid's historical work on early modern Southeast Asia reminds us that such royal rituals were not isolated spiritual acts but integral to statecraft, legitimising rulership through cosmological alignment and demonstrating the king's capacity to mediate between human and supernatural realms (Reid, 1988).

Moreover, the Yogyakarta *Kraton* continues to preserve traditions such as *Grebeg Maulud*, which is celebrated during the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, forming part of a significant series of royal festivals in southern Central Java. Among these, *Grebeg Maulud* or *Sekaten* stands as the most important. Although formally commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, *Sekaten* also incorporates agrarian ritual elements, serving as an expression of gratitude for the harvest and a hope for better yields in the coming year. A distinctive feature of the celebration is the *gunungan* procession—large cone-shaped offerings that symbolise both masculine (*jaler*) and feminine (*estri*) elements. The *gunungan jaler* consists of agricultural produce such as vegetables, while the *gunungan estri* typically contains rice crackers (*rengginan*). According to Kanjeng Gusti Pangeran Haryo Puger of the Surakarta Palace, the *gunungan* symbolises the king's gratitude to his people (Azizah & Kurnia, 2023; Dutayana & Bustami, 2022; Pratisara, 2020).

In Javanese tradition, the *gunungan* is also closely associated with Dewi Sri and Joko Sadono (a form of Vishnu), indicating that *Sekaten* maintains continuity with harvest festivals commonly held in Central Javanese villages. During the reign of Pakubuwono XII (1945–2004), a special ritual was performed in the *Dal* year (the fifth year of the eight-year Javanese cycle), in which the king and queen consort cooked rice together as a royal harvest symbol. Two royal envoys were also sent to sacred sites such as Alas Krendowahono,

north of Surakarta (believed to be the dwelling place of Batari Durga), and Parangtritis in the south (considered the realm of *Ratu Kidul*). *Ratu Kidul* is believed to be a daughter of the King of Pajajaran, whose original name was Dewi Retno Suwido (Alviyah et al., 2020).

Through *Ratu Kidul*, a spiritual connection exists between the Central Javanese kings and the rulers of the western regions, such as Batavia. However, this relationship is symbolic and does not entail claims of political dominance. Each authority remained sovereign: the Sundanese for the Dutch and the Kejawen for the Javanese kingdom. *Ratu Kidul* is also known as the spiritual consort of the Mataram kings and the protector of the kingdom. In the *Babad Tanah Jawi* manuscript, it is told that Panembahan Senopati travelled to Parangtritis to meet *Ratu Kidul* at her underwater palace and establish a mystical bond with her. This relationship is believed to have marked the beginning of Mataram's golden age, especially during the reign of Sultan Agung, Senopati's grandson, in the early 17th century (Ichsan & Hanafiah, 2020; Jalil, 2015).

Ratu Kidul herself is a goddess whose beauty is said to follow the lunar cycle and is believed to be a dual manifestation of Dewi Uma (bringer of blessings) and Batari Durga (bringer of destruction). To ensure her favour, *Labuhan* rituals are held annually at Parangtritis. In Yogyakarta, offerings such as green cloth and *batik*—*Ratu Kidul's* favourites—are cast into the sea. Sacred dances like *Bedhaya Ketawang* (Surakarta) and *Bedhaya Semang* (Yogyakarta) are also performed to invite her presence. For the Javanese people, *sesajen* is not a new concept but a deeply rooted tradition inherited from their ancestors. These offerings, usually consisting of food, drinks, fruits, and ritual items such as cigarettes and tobacco, are presented to ancestral spirits as a sign of respect and gratitude. This tradition reflects the Javanese philosophy of life that prioritises reverence, compassion, and appreciation for all beings—living and non-living (Budiawati et al., 2024).

Sesajen is also believed to serve as a medium for maintaining balance and harmony among humans, God, and the universe. Over time, this practice has evolved, especially with the integration of Islamic values into local culture, resulting in a unique form of cultural acculturation within Javanese society. According to Prof. Djoko Suryo, Professor of History at Gadjah Mada University, *sesajen* represents a form of respect for ancestors and those who have passed away. He explains that offering food or ritual items (*ubaramè*) to ancestral spirits is a prayer for their forgiveness, acceptance of good deeds, and a rightful place in the presence of Almighty God. This forms the basis of the *selamatan* tradition, a communal ritual aimed at praying for safety and well-being in both this world and the hereafter for the deceased (Alfiah et al., 2022).

Prof. Djoko Suryo also emphasises that *sesajen* reflects a process of cultural acculturation between pre-Islamic traditions and Islamic values. The Javanese people interpret *sesajen* as an effort to seek divine protection and blessings, particularly for deceased family members, so that they may be spared from the torments of the grave and receive divine mercy. The concept of harmony among humans, nature, and the Creator becomes the core essence of the *sesajen* practice, aiming for a peaceful and balanced life.

He asserts that *sesajen* represents a form of local wisdom passed down through gener-

ations, aligning with Islamic teachings that emphasise the importance of prayer and communal worship. In the Islamic context, collective prayer and the recitation of the Qur'an are seen as means of attaining blessings. Thus, *sesajen* is not merely understood as symbolic but also as a spiritual medium for conveying prayers. Prof. Djoko concludes by expressing hope that younger generations will continue to uphold and embody the noble values of ancestral traditions, without neglecting the spiritual and ritualistic essence of Islamic teachings. He further observes that Javanese society experiences deep spiritual satisfaction when engaging in collective acts of worship, such as prayer (*salat*) and Qur'anic recitation. Therefore, *sesajen* should be seen as an external medium—the most important aspect lies in the meaning of prayer and hope embodied within it.

In the face of modernisation and the rise of rational paradigms, the relevance of *sesaji* (a variant spelling of *sesajen*) is often questioned. Some perceive it as outdated and incompatible with modern religious doctrines. However, many continue to uphold *sesaji* as a form of respect toward ancestral spiritual heritage. More than a symbolic practice, *sesaji* constitutes a crucial element of national identity, teaching the values of gratitude, reverence for ancestors, and the maintenance of harmony with nature. In this light, *sesaji* becomes a manifestation of living local wisdom that retains meaning and relevance even within modern society (Akbar Rijal et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2020).

The ritual of *sesajen* also functions as a medium through which the *Kraton* (Javanese royal court) preserves its legitimacy. Although the *Kraton* no longer wields political power in modern Indonesia, its symbolic authority remains significant, with the Sultan formally recognised as the Governor of the Special Region of Yogyakarta. By maintaining traditions such as *sesajen*, the Sultan reinforces his position as a symbol of cultural and spiritual authority. This tradition strengthens the narrative that the *Kraton* is not merely a ceremonial institution but also an active custodian of Javanese ethnic identity. These practices are not simply rituals but are manifestations of cosmological, social, and political systems that have been deeply rooted in Javanese society for centuries (Ghozuan, 2020; Wirayudha, 2025).

Within the *Kraton*, *sesajen* is far from being a mystical object devoid of meaning; it is a symbolic expression rich in cultural and spiritual significance. The offerings are meticulously arranged, guided by the cosmological principles of Javanese philosophy. The tripartite division of the universe—upper world, middle world, and lower world—forms the foundational framework for constructing *sesajen*. Each component—such as fragrant flowers (*setaman*), incense, traditional food, sacred water, and white cloth—carries profound meanings related to spiritual purification, ancestral reverence, and the harmonisation of nature's forces with human life.

Through the performance of *sesajen*, the *Kraton* affirms its role as a mediator between the human realm and the spiritual world. The Sultan, as head of the *Kraton*, functions not only as an administrative and symbolic leader but also as a spiritual figure with an essential role in the cosmological order of Javanese culture. During the *Labuhan* ceremony, for example, offerings are sent to sacred sites such as the Southern Sea (Parangkusumo Beach)

and Mount Merapi. These acts reflect the belief that royal authority is rooted in spiritual legitimacy, derived from the harmonious relationship among humans, nature, and divine forces.

Interestingly, despite the majority of Yogyakarta's population being Muslim, *sesajen* practices have not been abolished but rather accommodated through syncretism. *Islam Kejawen* (Javanese Islam) is a clear example of cultural acculturation that allows indigenous cultural elements and Islamic teachings to coexist harmoniously. The *Sekaten* festival—originating from the missionary efforts of Sunan Kalijaga—serves as a convergence point for art, religion, and culture. In this celebration, *gamelan* music is performed, traditional food is distributed, and *sesajen* remains part of the ceremony, signifying the continuity of older beliefs within the framework of the newer faith. This syncretism illustrates the flexibility and resilience of Javanese culture in absorbing and adapting to external influences. The *Kraton* plays a pivotal role in maintaining this balance. Its endurance lies not only in its administrative function but also in its ability to shape and reproduce value systems relevant to its people. By preserving the *sesajen* ritual, the *Kraton* effectively maintains collective memory and sustains the cultural narrative of the Javanese people.

The Figure of the 'Dalem' Woman as a Guardian of Tradition and Knowledge of *Sesajen* in the Yogyakarta Palace

In simple terms, the difference between *sesaji* and *sesajen* lies in their usage and context. *Sesaji* is more commonly used to refer to food or offerings in traditional or religious ceremonies, whereas *sesajen* typically refers to more elaborate offerings that may include food, flowers, and other objects believed to possess spiritual or magical significance. The Yogyakarta Palace (*Keraton Yogyakarta*) serves as a cultural centre, a seat of government, and the official residence of the Sultan. It requires complex household management, and every activity—whether daily or ceremonial—is strictly regulated and must not be violated (Falah, 2020; Hammam, 2018).

Everything, from offerings (*sesajen*) to food and drink, must be prepared and presented according to established procedures. As a centre of Javanese cultural preservation, the palace requires a wide variety of dishes daily, both for the Sultan's household and palace servants (*Abdi Dalem*), as well as for ritual offerings and traditional ceremonies. To support these needs, the palace maintains five main kitchens known as *Pawon Ageng*. Among them are *Pawon Wetan* (also called *Pawon Sekulanggen*) and *Pawon Kulon* (or *Pawon Gebulen*), named according to their positions east and west of Plataran Magangan. These two kitchens take turns preparing daily offerings and the monthly *Sugengan Ageng*.

One of the key figures in *Pawon Kulon* is Nyi Mas Bekel Hamong Hatmo Yuliana, who began her involvement in 2010 and officially became an *Abdi Dalem* four years later. She now leads the kitchen with great dedication and a light heart. Born as Yuliana Isdaryani, she did not initially plan to work in the palace, despite her mother and grandmother having

served in the same kitchen. However, when her mother could no longer fulfil her duties, she took up the family legacy—first as a companion, and then officially applied to become an *Abdi Dalem* in 2010 (Kratonjogja.id, 2025).

Before her service at the palace, she was a housewife actively involved in several organisations, including the Dharma Wanita of Hotel Ambarukmo, where her late husband worked. He too was once an *Abdi Dalem* in *Pawon Kulon*. Holding the position of *Bekel Anom*, Bu Yani (as she is respectfully known) has become a primary source of knowledge regarding the types of offerings and ceremonial dishes in the palace. In addition to overseeing the cooking process, she manages the procurement of ingredients for the kitchen.

Pawon Kulon has a team of six women and eight men serving as *Abdi Dalem*, who prepare offerings for various traditional ceremonies such as *Siraman Pusaka*, *Garebeg*, and *Malam Selikuran*. They also create special offerings for high-status heirlooms like *Kanjeng Kiai Ageng*. Regular offerings are prepared on specific Javanese calendar days, including Kamis Wage, Senin Wage, Senin Pahing, Selasa Pon, Kamis Pon, and Sabtu Wage. Each offering has a distinct composition, though many share similar elements (Dinas Kebudayaan, 2025).

One example is the *Sugengan Tingalan Dalem Tahunan* offering, presented on the Sultan's birthday according to the Javanese calendar. It includes *Tumpeng Yuswo* prepared in a number matching the Sultan's age, along with side dishes such as white rice, *gudhangan bumbu anyep*, *jangan kothok*, *ketak-keluwak*, soybean powder, and halved marinated eggs. Dozens of other offerings are prepared for the same ceremony. Bu Yani ensures that all processes run smoothly and orderly. She inspects the final offerings before handing them over to the *Sedahan*, who then delivers them to the ceremonial location. During large events such as *Garebeg*, *Tingalan Jumenengan*, *Siraman Pusaka*, or royal weddings, the number of offerings can be substantial, requiring additional assistance (Pratisara, 2020).

Throughout her years managing the palace kitchen, Bu Yani has rarely received complaints about the quality of the dishes. If there is any feedback, she views it as an opportunity for improvement. The biggest challenge often lies in sourcing seasonal ingredients, especially during events like *Khaul Ageng*, which require various fruits and fish. Nevertheless, she always manages to find the necessary items, even if it means searching far and wide. To overcome supply issues, she maintains good relationships with market vendors, who are willing to help source rare ingredients upon request. Such issues are typically discussed in inter-kitchen meetings, which are regularly held under the coordination of GKR Maduretno, the *Penghageng Kawedanan Hageng Punokawan* (KHP) Parasraya Budaya.

Besides Bu Yani, another important figure behind the preservation of these traditions is Nyi Kanjeng Raden Tumenggung (KRT) Hamong Tedjonegoro, affectionately known as Bu Kanjeng, who is now 75 years old. She holds the position of *Pengageng Kalih Keparak Para Gusti*, a high-ranking role in the palace household structure, under the *Kawedanan Keputren*, overseen directly by Gusti Kanjeng Ratu (GKR) Mangkubumi, the Sultan's eldest daughter. Her main responsibility is to ensure the readiness of offerings, which are symbolic gifts to Almighty God, consisting of food, flowers, and other complementary items. In Javanese culture, nearly every ritual requires a different kind of offering, so a deep un-

derstanding of their presentation is essential. Although Bu Kanjeng does not personally prepare the offerings, she is responsible for ensuring their correctness, especially during significant events such as royal weddings (*Hajad Dalem Mantu*), heirloom purification (*Jamasan Pusaka*), or thanksgiving ceremonies (*Sugengan*) (Dinas Kebudayaan, 2025).

Born as Sri Siswati, Bu Kanjeng comes from a noble lineage—the lineage of Raden Patah from the Demak Sultanate. She married RM. Puntadewa, a grandson of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono VII, who also served as an *Abdi Dalem* in the palace. Due to her background, she has long been familiar with palace life and customs. In 2001, Kanjeng Ratu Hemas personally called upon Sri Siswati to oversee the *Abdi Dalem* in the *Keparak* division. At the time, GKR Hemas was serving in the national parliament (DPR RI) in Jakarta, while GKR Mangkubumi was not yet married. The royal wedding of GKR Mangkubumi in 2002 was Bu Kanjeng’s first major test. She was responsible for the entire procession, from the *siraman* (cleansing ritual) to the preparation of offerings. She even paid close attention to minor details like foot-washing water. Despite never having served the royal children directly before, everything proceeded smoothly with the palace’s blessing (kraton-jogja.id, 2025).

To deepen her understanding of *sesajen*, Bu Kanjeng relied on ancient handwritten manuscripts from her predecessors. She later re-documented these notes in typed form, including knowledge of traditional *jampi-jampi* (healing recipes), which are valuable aspects of Javanese cultural heritage. The *Tepas Keparak Para Gusti* consists of around 50 female *Abdi Dalem* with specific duties. These include the *Sedahan Section*, responsible for providing offerings, particularly before Selasa Kliwon and every Thursday night; the *Abdi Dalem Dak Njawi*, who deliver offerings to designated palace points and maintain the cleanliness of palace surroundings; the *Sembagan*, who arrange flowers for ceremonies; and the *Pasar-eyan*, who light oil lamps in the evening and ensure they stay lit until morning. These tasks require special attention, as each ceremony has unique requirements. For instance, when the Sultan is *siniwaka* (enthroned), four *Abdi Dalem* carry special items such as cigarette holders, betel leaves, and incense trays. Bu Kanjeng is responsible for selecting who performs these roles. A deep spirit of service has become a part of Bu Kanjeng’s life. She is present at the palace from Monday to Thursday each week. Outside her palace duties, she also serves as a neighbourhood chief (*Ketua RT*) and is proud to be the oldest *Ketua RT* in Yogyakarta. She has received an award from the mayor in recognition of her age and her service. Her calm demeanour and meticulousness have made her a loyal and spirited guardian of the sacred traditions of the Yogyakarta Palace.

From an anthropological perspective, the role of these women aligns with Shelly Errington’s analysis of ritual as performance: the careful curation, spatial arrangement, and sequential preparation of *sesajen* constitute a highly choreographed cultural performance that reproduces royal authority, gendered knowledge, and domestic cosmology. The *panwon* (kitchens) function not merely as culinary spaces but as ritual laboratories where symbolic order is maintained through disciplined practice and intergenerational transmission (Fox, 1991).

The Traditional *Labuhan* Ceremony as a Representative Offering from the Yogyakarta Palace

Etymologically, the term *Labuhan* derives from the Javanese word *labuh*, which means to drop, release, or set something adrift. Symbolically, the *Labuhan* tradition is understood as a prayer to cast away all forms of negative energy or traits, both individually and collectively. On the other hand, *labuh* can also be interpreted as a form of offering. This is reflected in the implementation of the *Labuhan* ceremony, which always involves *ubarampe* (or ritual offerings), symbolising devotion to supernatural forces and ancestral spirits (Adinugraha et al., 2024; Agustini, 2023).

Figure 1: Several types of Yogyakarta Palace Offerings



Source: Department of Culture

The term *dalem* refers to the Sultan himself; thus, the ceremony is called *Labuhan Dalem* because it is performed under the Sultan's and the royal family's command. This ritual reflects the distinction between the royal family and common people, as only the royal family holds the right to perform the *Labuhan*. In this context, the royal family acts as a representative of the people in praying for collective safety and well-being. Since the independence era, the *Labuhan* ritual has been scheduled for the day following the *Tingalan Dalem*, although the preparations are conducted simultaneously. *Tingalan Dalem* (also known as

Wiyosan Dalem) marks the Sultan's birthday according to the Javanese calendar (a yearly birthday, not the 35-day *selapan dina* cycle). Various activities are held in its commemoration, including the preparation of *apem* cakes, the crafting of precious metals (gold, silver, copper), and the serving of food during the *sugengan plataran* ceremony (Tyas et al., 2021; Widyatwati et al., 2021).

The deeper meaning of this tradition lies in expressing gratitude and praying for the well-being of the Sultan and all the people of Yogyakarta. Aside from honouring the ancestors of the palace, *Labuhan* is also believed to be a form of collective spirituality addressed to Almighty God, asking for continuous peace, safety, and prosperity for the land. Historically, during the reign of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX, the *Hajad Dalem Labuhan* was not held in celebration of the *Jumenengan Dalem* (coronation of the Sultan), but rather to commemorate the *Wiyosan Dalem*, the Sultan's birthday according to the Javanese calendar (Tjahjono, 2018).

However, this policy changed during the reign of Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono X, when the *Labuhan* tradition was reintegrated as part of the *Jumenengan Dalem* commemoration. Since then, the *Labuhan* procession has been held annually, precisely one day after the peak of the coronation ceremony, on the 30th of Rejeb, and is known as *Labuhan Alit*. In addition to this annual ceremony, there is also the *Labuhan Ageng*, held once every eight years in the *Dal* year of the Javanese calendar. The *Labuhan Ageng* commemorates the eight-year anniversary of the Sultan's coronation and is conducted on a larger scale with more elaborate offerings than the *Labuhan Alit* (Sukma et al., 2023; Supriyadi, 2000).

According to official information from the website kratonjogja.id, the *Labuhan* ceremony is conducted at several sacred sites known as *petilasan*. These places are deeply connected to the history and spirituality of the Yogyakarta Palace. The key *petilasan* where *Labuhan* takes place include Parangkusumo Beach, believed to be the spiritual meeting point between Panembahan Senopati and Nyi Roro Kidul; Mount Merapi, symbolising natural power and high spirituality; Mount Lawu, known as a place of meditation for royal ancestors and important palace figures; and Dlepih Kahyangan, which holds historical significance as a meditation site for former kings.

Each location is chosen not only for its geographical features but also for its mystical, historical, and cosmological value in Javanese culture, particularly within palace traditions. In this context, the *Labuhan* ceremony represents an offering to the supernatural entities believed to guard certain territories. This tradition dates back to the time of Panembahan Senopati, the founding ruler of the Mataram Kingdom, who sought spiritual support to strengthen his kingship. He established a spiritual pact with *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, the mythical queen of the Southern Sea (Indian Ocean).

In this agreement, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul* promised protection and assistance to Panembahan Senopati on the condition that he regularly performed the *Labuhan* ritual offerings. Since then, the tradition has been passed down from generation to generation within the Mataram Kingdom. Because *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul* is believed to be immortal, Senopati's successors have continued the ritual as an act of reverence. Neglecting this duty is believed

to provoke her wrath, potentially resulting in the dispatch of supernatural beings to spread disease and disaster across the kingdom. Conversely, when performed regularly, the ritual is believed to ensure ongoing protection for both the people and the kingdom (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

The *Labuhan* tradition continued even after the division of the Mataram Kingdom into two royal houses—the Yogyakarta Sultanate and the Surakarta Sunanate—following the Giyanti Agreement of 1755. The four selected *Labuhan* locations are believed to have been sites of meditation for former kings, especially Panembahan Senopati, as they interacted with spiritual beings. Moreover, the guardian spirits of these places are believed to have contributed to the founding of the Mataram Kingdom. Therefore, the ceremony is intended to seek protection for the Sultan, the Yogyakarta Palace, and its people. The *Labuhan* ritual is conducted prior to the coronation of a new king, meaning that the schedule of the ceremony changes with each new Sultan, in accordance with the coronation date (Nuzulanisa & Fariha, 2022).

The offerings (*sesaji*) for the *Labuhan* ceremony are prepared simultaneously with the *sugengan plataran* by the two main kitchens of the Yogyakarta Palace: *Pawon Sakalanggen* (east) and *Pawon Gebulen* (west). The offerings include various items such as *sanggan*, *tukon pasar*, *pala gumantung*, *pala kependhem*, and *pala kasimpar*. On the *Tingalan Dalem* day, the *Kawedanan Ageng Punakawan Widya Budaya* organises and categorises the items to be offered into three sets for *Labuhan Alit* or four for *Labuhan Ageng*. These items are placed in small wooden boxes, each marked to avoid confusion. Once collected, the boxes are stored overnight in the *Bangsasri Manganti* and will be used the next day in the ceremonial casting ritual (*pelarungan*). Some of the objects that are offered include clippings of the Sultan's fingernails (*kenaka*) collected over the past year; strands of the Sultan's hair (*rikma*) collected over the past year; the Sultan's worn clothing; the Sultan's personal umbrella (*songsong*); *layon sekar* (dried flowers from sacred heirloom offerings); and specific pieces of cloth selected for the ritual.

Labuhan Merapi: Harmony Between Humans, Nature, and Spirituality

Labuhan Merapi is a profound symbol of the harmonious relationship between the community, the universe, and the ancestors. For those living around Mount Merapi, this procession is not merely a customary ritual but an essential part of daily life imbued with spiritual meaning, local wisdom, and a deeply rooted cultural identity. The Special Region of Yogyakarta itself stands on a foundation of strong philosophical values, reflected in various aspects of life, including its spatial layout. One manifestation of this is the existence of an imaginary line stretching from Parangtritis Beach, through the Yogyakarta Palace, to the peak of Mount Merapi. This line, conceptualised by Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono I, symbolises the philosophy of human life's journey and the balanced relationship between humans, God, nature, and fellow beings (Tyas et al., 2021).

This imaginary line is widely recognised in anthropological and heritage literature as the Yogyakarta Cosmological Axis, or *Mandala*, a UNESCO-recognised spatial-philosophical

framework that structures the kingdom's ritual geography. The axis connects three cosmological poles: the southern sea (domain of *Ratu Kidul* and the element of water/*tirta*), the *Kraton* (centre of political-spiritual authority), and Mount Merapi (northern domain of volcanic fire/*dabana* and primordial energy). The *mandala* operates not as a physical boundary but as a symbolic continuum that regulates ritual movement, offering types, and cosmological alignment. *Labuhan* rituals are spatially distributed along this axis to maintain cosmic equilibrium (Hefner, 1985).

A concrete expression of this harmony is the annual traditional ceremony known as *Labuhan Merapi*. This ritual is part of the commemoration of *Tingalan Dalem Jumenengan*, marking the coronation anniversary of Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X as King of Yogyakarta. One of the *Labuhan* processions is held in Srimanganti, Cangkringan, Sleman, on the slopes of Mount Merapi. Organised by the Yogyakarta Palace, this tradition is carried out solemnly, involving palace servants (*abdi dalem*) and enthusiastic community members. As explained by Mbah Asih, the *juru kunci* (key guardian) of Merapi (Mas Wedana Surakso Hargo Asihono), the procession is a form of supplication to God for safety and protection from disasters (Sukma et al., 2023).

There is also a *Labuhan Ageng* ceremony, performed only in the Javanese year of *Dal*, which occurs once every eight years (one *windu*). If the *Labuhan Ageng* is conducted in a particular year, then the regular *Labuhan Alit* will not take place that year. During this grand ceremony, offerings are divided into four parts and presented at four locations: Parangkusumo, Mount Merapi, Mount Lawu, and Dlepih Kahyangan. Specifically for Mount Lawu, an additional sacred umbrella called *songsong pethak seret praos*, white with golden accents, is included. Meanwhile, the *Labuhan Alit* is an annual ritual (except during *Labuhan Ageng* years), in which the offerings are divided into three parts and sent to Parangkusumo, Mount Merapi, and Mount Lawu (Rachman, 2012).

Figure 2: Labuhan Merapi — Expression of Gratitude and Prayer for the King of the Kraton



Source: Department of Culture

Labuhan Merapi is typically held on the 30th of Rajab. This event lasts about two days and is open to the public. Besides being part of the local culture, the ceremony also serves as a yearly tourist attraction in Sleman and the Yogyakarta region. The 2025 theme is “*Rahayuning Bawana Gumantung Pakartining Janma*” (The harmony of the world depends on human conduct). Despite being open to the public, the organisers prioritise safety, especially since Mount Merapi is currently at Alert Level III, and strict disaster mitigation procedures are in place (Nurkhayati & Triwahana, 2021).

People from various regions and even abroad attend *Labuhan Merapi*. Starting at around 6:00 AM, locals gather at the site of Mbah Maridjan’s former residence to follow the procession. At approximately 6:20 AM, *abdi dalem* led by Mbah Asih begin walking with offerings (*ubarampe*) from the site to Srimanganti, a distance of about 2.5 kilometres. According to Mbah Asih, the essence of *Labuhan Merapi* lies in preserving harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual forces believed to dwell around Mount Merapi. Through this ritual, it is hoped that blessings, safety, and the preservation of Javanese culture are maintained (Ma’rufah et al., 2025).

Some of the offerings brought to *Labuhan Merapi* include *Nyamping Cangkring*, *Kawung Kemplang*, *Semekan Gadhung*, *Semekan Gadhung Mlatbi*, *Semekan Banguntulak*, *Kampuh Poleng Ciut*, *Dhesthar Daramuluk*, *Paningset Udaraga*, *Sela Ritus Lisah Konyoh*, *amplop Yatra Tindbih*, and *biji Ses Wangen*. These offerings have been used for generations, and each holds a specific

philosophical significance. Notably, the Merapi *sesajen* emphasise raw natural materials, volcanic soil, and white and dark textiles (symbolising balance), as well as incense, reflecting the northern pole of the *mandala* where fire, purification, and ancestral guardianship converge. Unlike coastal offerings, Merapi's *ubarampe* avoid excessive sweetness or maritime elements, instead focusing on austerity, resilience, and spiritual fortitude.

Although *Labuhan Merapi* is organised by the Yogyakarta Palace, the people of Merapi's slopes play a central role in its implementation. This tradition is not solely the palace's cultural responsibility but a collective heritage deeply respected by the local community. For these residents, Mount Merapi is not just a natural formation or volcano—it is a spiritual entity with mystical powers. The *Labuhan* tradition is understood as a way to maintain harmony with the mountain so that people may live peacefully and safely beside it. Therefore, *Labuhan Merapi* represents the relationship between humans and nature, mediated by spirituality and Javanese cultural values. It is not merely a heritage but a living testament to cultural resilience in the face of modern change (Septia, 2024).

Victor Turner's concept of liminality and *communitas* offers a powerful framework for understanding this procession (Turner, 1975). The ascent to Merapi represents a transitional, betwixt-and-between phase in which ordinary social hierarchies are temporarily suspended. Participants enter a sacred threshold, sharing vulnerability, collective prayer, and mutual reliance. The two-hour trek, the night-long *wayang* performance, and the communal feasting generate *communitas*—an egalitarian spiritual solidarity that reinforces social cohesion beyond everyday stratification.

The series of *Labuhan Merapi* activities begins on the first day with a procession from the Yogyakarta Palace carrying offerings to the Cangkringan Subdistrict Office, after stopping at the Depok Subdistrict Office. The offerings are handed over by the palace to the Regent of Sleman, Kustini Sri Purnomo, and then passed on to Mbah Asih, the *juru kunci* of Mount Merapi (Mas Kliwon Suraksa Asihono). The procession then continues to Mbah Maridjan's site in Kinahrejo Hamlet, Umbulharjo Village, where the offerings are symbolically returned to Mbah Asih. The day proceeds with cultural performances and the distribution of blessings from the *gunungan*. At night, the event features communal feasts, the *Tari Pudyastuti* dance, communal prayers, and an all-night *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) performance led by Ki Sancoko Hadiprayitno, featuring the tale 'Pandawa Sesaji Hargo'.

The next morning at 6:40 AM, the procession resumes with the offerings carried 2.45 kilometres from Kinahrejo to Bedengan, then to Srimanganti at an elevation of 1,550 metres above sea level. Here, the main ceremony takes place, including prayers, the distribution of *nasi berkat* (blessing rice), and the ritual led by Mbah Asih. The *ubarampe* are carried in a two-hour procession to *Bangsral Srimanganti*, where the official *Labuhan Merapi* ceremony is held.

The *Labuhan* at Mount Merapi is dedicated to a series of spiritual figures, including *Empu Romo*, *Empu Ramadi*, *Gusti Panembahan Prabu Jagad* (also known as *Sapu Jagad*), *Krincing Wesi*, *Branjangkawat*, *Sapu Angin*, *Mbok Ageng Lambang Sari*, *Mbok Nyai Gadhung Mlati*, and *Kyai Megantoro*.

The items offered (*ubarampe*) include one piece of *Sinjang Limar*; one piece of *Sinjang Cangkring*; one piece of *Semekan Gadhung*; one piece of *Semekan Gadhung Melati*; one piece of *Peningset Udaraga*; one piece of *Kambil Watangan*; ten seeds of *Seswangen*; one bundle of *Seloratus Lisah Konyoh*; two envelopes of *Yatro Tindih*; and one piece of *Destar Doromuluk*. Offerings distributed to visitors include *kembang setaman* (assorted flowers), *nasi tumpeng* and *ingkung* (whole chicken dish), and *serundeng* (spiced grated coconut).

The entire *Labuhan Merapi* procession concludes around 10:00 AM and is attended by palace servants, local residents, and both domestic and international tourists. The event also features a range of art performances, from the all-night *wayang* show to the closing ritual the next morning. For the Merapi slope communities, the mountain is not merely part of the natural landscape but a powerful entity. They believe that when nature's balance is disturbed, Merapi may erupt and cause disasters. Hence, *Labuhan Merapi* is held annually to pray for safety and maintain harmony with nature. This tradition is not merely a customary event but a manifestation of the Javanese philosophy emphasising the importance of balance between humans and the environment. Through *Labuhan*, it is believed that maintaining good relations with Mount Merapi and its spiritual guardians—such as *Kyai Sapu Jagad*—will help foster peace and safety. *Labuhan Merapi* also serves as a platform for honouring and passing down cultural values across generations. Originating from the Islamic Mataram Kingdom, this ritual underscores the commitment of both the people and the Yogyakarta Palace to preserve their meaningful ancestral traditions (Kusuma, 2019).

More than that, *Labuhan Merapi* stands as a powerful symbol of Javanese cultural identity. The ceremony reflects the local wisdom in responding to natural forces—not through domination, but through reverence and gratitude. Each stage of the ritual conveys messages about the close bond between the palace and the people, and between humans and the cosmos. Amid rapid modernisation, *Labuhan Merapi* continues to thrive as a living and relevant traditional ceremony—not only for its spiritual value but also for its educational and cultural preservation function. This tradition attracts both tourists and researchers who wish to understand how Javanese society frames the relationship between culture, spirituality, and ecology. Thus, *Labuhan Merapi* not only maintains balance with nature but also serves as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future of Javanese culture (Nurkhayati & Triwahana, 2021). Comparative studies show similarities with highland rituals in Tengger and Bali, where volcanic peaks are similarly venerated as sites of spiritual mediation, though Yogyakarta's *mandala* framework uniquely integrates the northern mountain within a tripartite cosmic axis.

Labuhan Parangkusumo: A Traditional Ceremony on the Southern Coast of Bantul

Parangkusumo is located on the southern coast of Yogyakarta, specifically within Bantul Regency. This coastal area was chosen by Panembahan Senopati as a place of meditation, contemplation, and spiritual retreat to seek divine guidance in becoming a just and wise ruler. According to legend, during his meditation, Panembahan Senopati encountered the Queen of the Southern Sea, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*. In their mystical meeting, the Queen

pledged to support Panembahan Senopati and his descendants. Ultimately, Panembahan Senopati succeeded in founding the Mataram Kingdom, from which the Yogyakarta Sultanate later emerged as a successor. This legendary event underpins the selection of Parangkusumo as one of the sacred sites for the *Labuhan* ceremony.

This ritual is celebrated with great enthusiasm and draws thousands of visitors from across the country. The procession begins with the ceremonial handover of offerings (*ubarampe*) at the Kretek Subdistrict Pavilion and continues to the Parangtritis Beach Pavilion. From there, palace courtiers (*abdi dalem*) of the Yogyakarta Sultanate lead a solemn procession along the coastline to the Cempuri area of Parangkusumo Beach. Upon arrival, the offerings are blessed by the beach's spiritual guardian (*juru kunci*), Ki Sulaksotopo Samudera. After the prayers, the offerings are carried out to sea and released as a symbolic tribute to the spiritual forces believed to guard the Southern Ocean (Rahmawati & Setyani, 2019).

Figure 3: Labuhan Parangkusumo



Source: Department of Culture

Hundreds of people participate in this ritual, many hoping to obtain a portion of the sacred offerings. The entire procession is closely monitored by the Parangtritis Beach Search and Rescue Team (SAR) and members of the Water and Air Police Unit (*Polairud*) of the Yogyakarta Regional Police to ensure the safety of all involved. The main offering is a *tumpang gudangan*, a cone-shaped rice dish resembling a mountain, encircled by various vegetables—symbolising prosperity and the hope for communal well-being. Flowers also hold a central place in Javanese offering traditions, representing purity and reverence. A typical set of offerings includes not only flowers but also *empon-empon* (traditional herbal

spices), agricultural produce such as tubers and leafy greens, traditional snacks (*jajanan pasar*), aromatic herbs, fruits, and the *tumpeng* as the centrepiece. In Javanese culture, prayer is expressed in two forms: through spoken invocations and through symbolic acts such as *tirakat* (ascetic fasting or restraint) and *keungkeum* (ritual immersion in rivers or lakes) (Sabila, 2021).

According to Javanese cosmology, pests and disasters cannot be eliminated but can only be mitigated or kept at bay. Thus, humans are believed to bear the responsibility of maintaining ecological balance and the continuity of the food chain—preserving harmony with the natural world. Parangkusumo Beach in Bantul Regency, Yogyakarta, is widely recognised as the principal location for the *Labuhan* ceremony, traditionally held on the 1st of *Sura* in the Javanese calendar. This ritual is believed to honour the sacred encounter between Panembahan Senopati and *Nyi Roro Kidul*, the spiritual sovereign of the Southern Sea. Unlike the simpler *larung sesaji* (offering cast-off) ceremonies typically performed throughout the year, the *Labuhan* held on the 1st of *Sura* carries a deeper symbolic and ceremonial weight (Yuwono, 2023).

There are several variations of *Labuhan* practised within Yogyakarta's cultural communities. One such variation is the Rainy Season *Labuhan*: when rain falls on the 1st of *Sura*, only a small group of devoted pilgrims proceed with the ritual, often casting off symbolic items such as spears into the sea. Another variation is the *Tapa Bisu* (silence and endurance) pilgrimage, during which residents from Mayungan, Potorono, and Wonosari undertake a ritual of silence and endurance by walking barefoot for 37 kilometres to Parangkusumo. Throughout the journey, they abstain from speaking and eating, consuming only water and *gula jawa* (palm sugar). Their aim is to sanctify a wooden spear known as *alugoro*, which is believed to hold protective powers. This item is later used as a talisman for personal safety while travelling or for safeguarding one's household. Pilgrims are also forbidden from eating rice and engaging in conversation throughout the ritual. It is said that those who faithfully observe these conditions may even gain visions of the spiritual realm.

The *ubarampe* that will be anchored at the *Labuhan Parangkusumo* ceremony are as follows:

Pengajeng	Pendherek	Lorodan Busana Dalem
1. <i>Sinjang Cindbe Abrit</i>	1. <i>Sinjang Poleng</i>	1. <i>Sinjang</i>
2. <i>Sinjang Limar</i>	2. <i>Semekan Solok</i>	2. <i>Surjan</i>
3. <i>Sinjang Cangkring</i>	3. <i>Semekan Gadhung Mlathi</i>	3. <i>Udbeng</i>
4. <i>Semekan Solok</i>	4. <i>Semekan Songer</i>	4. <i>Lancingan Panjang</i>
5. <i>Semekan Gadhung Tepen</i>	5. <i>Semekan Dringin</i>	5. <i>Lancingan Lebet</i>
6. <i>Semekan Gadhung Mlathi Tepen</i>	6. <i>Semekan Pandhan Binethot</i>	6. <i>Rasukan Hem</i>
7. <i>Semekan Jingga Tepen</i>	7. <i>Semekan Podhang Ngisep Sari</i>	7. <i>Kaos</i>
8. <i>Semekan Udaraga Tepen</i>	8. <i>Semekan Banguntulak</i>	8. <i>Pethetan Rikman Kenaka Dalem</i>
9. <i>Semekan Banguntulak</i>	9. <i>Semekan Teluh Watu</i>	9. <i>Layon Sekar Kanyeng Kyai Hageng</i>
	10. <i>Kuluk Kanigara</i>	10. <i>Layon Sekar</i>
	11. <i>Kuluk Pethak</i>	
	12. <i>Songsong Gilap</i>	
	13. <i>Gelaran Pasir Sinasapan Mori</i>	
	14. <i>Sela, ratus, lisah konyoh</i>	
	15. <i>Yatra Tindhib</i>	

Within the southern pole of the Yogyakarta *mandala*, Parangkusumo represents the domain of water, fluidity, and feminine spiritual authority. The *sesajen* here differ markedly from those of Merapi: they include maritime textiles, personal items of the Sultan (hair, nail clippings, worn garments), and sweet or fragrant elements that appeal to *Ratu Kidul*'s mythic preferences. These offerings function as diplomatic tokens within a cosmological pact, reflecting what Anthony Reid identifies as the Southeast Asian ruler's dual role as terrestrial sovereign and maritime mediator. The casting of offerings into the Indian Ocean is not merely sacrificial; it is a performative assertion of sovereignty over coastal waters, echoing similar *sedekah laut* traditions on Java's northern coast and Bali's *melasti* ceremonies, though uniquely structured here around the *Kraton*'s axial cosmology.

Shelly Errington's framework of ritual as political performance illuminates how Parangkusumo's *Labuhan* stages royal legitimacy through public spectacle, bodily discipline, and controlled interaction with the 'wild' southern sea (Fox, 1991). The procession transforms the beach into a temporary theatre where spiritual hierarchy, royal lineage, and communal participation are visibly enacted. Victor Turner's notion of social drama further explains how potential tensions between modernity and tradition, as well as between state regulation and popular pilgrimage, are ritualistically contained and resolved through prescribed ceremonial form (Turner, 2011).

Socio-Religious Functions and Cultural Syncretism of Offerings in the Traditional Ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace

Besides the *Labuhan* ceremony, offerings (*sesajen*) hold an essential place in other major traditional rituals such as *Grebeg* and *Sekaten*, which are regularly held at the Yogyakarta Palace (*Keraton*). In *Grebeg*, the offerings take the form of a *gunungan*—a mountain-shaped arrangement of agricultural products decorated with various beautiful ornaments. The *gunungan* is paraded and then contested by the community as a symbol of blessings and charity bestowed by the Sultan upon his people. Meanwhile, in *Sekaten*, the offerings accompany the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*Maulid Nabi Muhammad SAW*), blending Islamic religious elements harmoniously with Javanese cultural traditions. The *Sekaten* ceremony begins with a *gamelan* procession from the Palace to the Great Kauman Mosque (*Masjid Gede Kauman*) and culminates in the festive *Grebeg Mulud* event.

At the centre of the *mandala*, the *Kraton* square hosts *Grebeg* and *Sekaten*, where *sesajen* take on a distinctly public, legitimising, and redistributive character. Unlike the secluded mountain or coastal *labuhan*, palace courtyard offerings are monumental, highly visible, and designed for communal participation. The *gunungan* embody Geertz's concept of symbolic theatre: they are materialised prayers that communicate royal benevolence, agrarian prosperity, and Islamic-Javanese syncretism (Geertz, 1973). The ritual scramble for *gunungan* pieces is not mere festivity but a structured redistribution that reinforces patron-client bonds and social equilibrium. Comparative analysis with Surakarta's *Grebeg* and Cirebon's *Maulud* festivals reveals shared Javanese-Islamic performative logics, though Yogyakarta's axial framing uniquely positions the *Kraton* as the cosmological pivot balancing northern fire and southern water.

Offerings also mark various stages of Javanese life—from birth and marriage to death. In Javanese tradition, each life milestone is accompanied by customary ceremonies featuring *sesajen* as a form of respect and prayer to ensure a harmonious and blessed life. This demonstrates that offerings are not only significant in royal rituals but also function as integral components of the broader cultural values and educational system of Javanese society.

The preservation of offering traditions at the Yogyakarta Palace receives special attention from palace attendants (*abdi dalem*) and cultural custodians such as Nyi Mas Hamong Yuliana and Nyi KRT Hamong Tedjonegoro. They manage the traditional kitchen (*pawon*), the centre of *sesajen* preparation, and ensure that the rituals continue to be performed in accordance with inherited customs. The role of the *abdi dalem* is crucial in maintaining the cleanliness, sanctity, and completeness of the offerings so that ceremonies proceed with solemnity and meaning.

Philosophically, *sesajen* in the Yogyakarta Palace ceremonies symbolise respect for nature, ancestors, and spiritual forces believed to maintain the balance of life. Offerings act as a medium to convey gratitude, supplication for safety, and hopes for prosperity. Their

symbolism reflects Javanese cosmology, which emphasises balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. Through *sesajen* rituals, the palace community actualises local wisdom values teaching harmony, equality, and reverence for all of God's creation.

Overall, the variety of offerings in the traditional ceremonies of the Yogyakarta Palace is diverse and rich in meaning. *Sesajen* consists not only of food and drink but also of symbolic objects that reinforce spiritual and social messages within the rituals. The functions of *sesajen* include honouring the guardian spirits of places, serving as a bridge between the human and supernatural worlds, symbolising the Sultan's power and courage, and preserving the cultural and spiritual values of Javanese society. The adaptation and preservation of these offering traditions illustrate cultural dynamics capable of surviving and evolving amid changing times, while also representing an important focus in the study of Indigenous and ethnic communities in Southeast Asia.

Thus, *sesajen* in the Yogyakarta Palace ceremonies manifest local wisdom by harmoniously integrating religious, symbolic, and social elements. This practice not only strengthens the cultural identity of the Javanese people but also serves as a means to maintain cosmic and spiritual balance, believed to bring safety and blessings to the Palace and its surrounding community. The socio-religious functions of *sesajen* in the Yogyakarta Palace ceremonies are multifaceted, reflecting the integration of spiritual, social, and cultural values that have historically developed within Javanese society. Offerings act as a communication medium between humans and supernatural forces as well as God, simultaneously symbolising the Sultan's legitimate authority and fostering social cohesion within the Sultanate. Rituals involving *sesajen*, such as *Grebeg Sawal*, emphasise the concept of *Manunggal-ing Kawula lan Gusti*—the unity between the macrocosm and microcosm, between Sultan and subjects, and between humans, nature, and the Almighty (Dinas Kebudayaan, 2025).

Socially, *sesajen* serves to strengthen solidarity and unity within the Palace community. Rituals involving offerings not only demonstrate the vertical relationship between Sultan and people but also reinforce horizontal bonds among community members participating in the ceremonies. Through *sesajen*, values such as loyalty, respect, and social responsibility are upheld and passed down through generations. For example, in the *Grebeg* ceremony, the *gunungan* offerings paraded to the public symbolise the Sultan's charity and generosity, simultaneously strengthening the social relationship between ruler and subjects.

From a religious perspective, *sesajen* reflects the syncretism of local indigenous beliefs with Islam, which is the official religion of the Yogyakarta Palace. Although the tradition of offerings originates from animism and ancestral beliefs, contemporary palace ceremonies incorporate strong Islamic elements such as prayers and intentions in accordance with Islamic law (*syariat*). This demonstrates a harmonious syncretic process in which Islamic values are integrated into traditional rituals without diminishing the original meaning of *sesajen* as offerings to ancestral spirits and natural forces. *Sesajen* also functions as an educational medium for teaching the noble values and life philosophy of the Javanese people. Through the rituals and symbolism of offerings, the community learns about the importance of living in harmony, awareness of origin (*Sangkan Paraning Dumadi*), and moral

responsibility toward God, fellow humans, and nature. Hence, *sesajen* becomes a cultural and spiritual learning tool that continues to live within the daily life of the Palace and its environs.

Moreover, *sesajen* in the Yogyakarta Palace ceremonies plays a role in maintaining cosmic and ecological balance. Rituals such as *Labuhan*, which involve casting offerings into the Southern Sea and making dedications to Mount Merapi, aim to preserve harmony among earth, water, and sky, as well as between humans and the supernatural guardians of nature. Offerings released into the sea and dedicated to *Ratu Kidul* and *Kyai Sapujajat* symbolise respect and requests for protection so that nature remains balanced and the community is safeguarded from disaster.

The socio-religious function of *sesajen* in the Palace's traditional ceremonies thus transcends religious ritual to become a social institution regulating relations between rulers, society, and nature. *Sesajen* embodies the Sultan's legitimate authority and serves as a vehicle for preserving cultural and spiritual values that bind the Palace community in harmonious unity. The syncretism between local traditions and Islam in the practice of offerings reflects the cultural flexibility of the Javanese people, who are capable of adapting to changing times without losing their identity.

The Transformation of the Sesajen Tradition in the Yogyakarta Palace in a Modern Context

Sesajen (ritual offerings) are an integral part of the belief systems and cultural practices of Javanese society, passed down from generation to generation. In the context of the Yogyakarta Palace (*Kraton Yogyakarta*), *sesajen* serve not only as offerings to spiritual entities or ancestors but also as sacred symbols of communication between humans and cosmic forces. However, in recent decades, social, economic, and technological developments have brought about significant transformations in how *sesajen* are practised, understood, and presented. These dynamics open new spaces for reinterpreting the role of *sesajen* in contemporary society, particularly in relation to cultural identity, spirituality, and the commodification of culture.

In the past, *sesajen* within the Yogyakarta Palace held a highly sacred position. They were prepared and offered by *abdi dalem* (royal servants) according to specific procedures, based on the Javanese calendar and strict cosmological principles. Each element of the *sesajen* had symbolic meaning that reflected the harmonious relationship between humans, the universe, and spiritual entities. *Setaman* flowers symbolised purity and inner fragrance; incense acted as a medium to open spiritual communication; traditional foods such as *jenang*, *ketan*, or *tumpeng* served as offerings to nourish the spirits; and holy water represented the element of purification for both self and space. All of these were arranged within a ritual structure that was not only symbolic but also functional in maintaining universal balance.

However, with the advent of modernisation and global influences, the practice of *sesajen* has undergone adaptation in various aspects. The Yogyakarta Palace, as an institution

that preserves tradition, faces the dilemma of maintaining ritual purity while responding to the demands of the times. Modernisation brings with it a logic of efficiency, visualisation, and accessibility, which, on the one hand, helps broaden public understanding of traditional rituals but, on the other hand, also alters the meaning and essence of these practices. The *Labuhan* ceremony, for example, which was once closed and followed only by the royal family and local customary communities, is now regularly broadcast through mass media and social media. This shift has transformed closed spirituality into an open spectacle.

This transformation is not only technical but also semantic. When *sesajen* are presented to the public without adequate philosophical explanation, people tend to view them as ‘exotic traditions’ rather than complex spiritual practices. In some cases, *sesajen* are even presented as part of cultural tourism packages, complete with traditional costumes and dances. This raises serious questions about the boundary between preservation and commodification. Are *sesajen* still authentic spiritual instruments, or have they become cultural performances aimed at attracting tourists? Contemporary anthropological debates on heritage and authenticity resonate here: as Errington and others note, ritual’s political and aesthetic dimensions inevitably shift when staged for external audiences, yet this does not necessarily erase its indigenous epistemology (Fox, 1991). The *Kraton*’s careful management of sacred boundaries—restricting inner rites while opening peripheral ceremonies—demonstrates a strategic negotiation between preservation and public engagement.

This transformation is evident in several aspects. First, traditional rituals involving *sesajen* are now often combined with cultural tourism agendas, educational activities, and environmental conservation efforts. For instance, the *Grebeg* and *Sekaten* ceremonies, which were once highly exclusive, have become public spectacles and educational platforms for teaching the values of Javanese tradition. Processions such as *Tumplak Wajik*, *Siraman Pusaka*, and *Labuhan* continue to be carried out with deep meaning, but parts of these rituals are now open to tourists and the general public, even being included in the regional tourism calendar.

Second, there have been adjustments in the materials and forms of *sesajen*. In the past, the ingredients had to follow specific traditional rules and could only be prepared by designated *abdi dalem*, but today these materials are more accessible and sometimes adjusted to suit contemporary conditions without diminishing their symbolic value. The integration of technology and science has also begun, for example, in the conservation of heirlooms using modern techniques, while maintaining their spiritual and ritual meanings. Third, transformation also occurs in the dimension of meaning. *Sesajen* are no longer merely seen as offerings to supernatural forces but also as symbols of preserving local wisdom, social solidarity, and Javanese cultural identity. Ceremonies involving *sesajen* serve to strengthen social cohesion, introduce noble values to younger generations, and affirm the Palace’s role as a cultural centre that is adaptive to change.

Nevertheless, this transformation does not necessarily eliminate the core values of *sesajen*. In fact, amid the current of modernisation, the Yogyakarta Palace continues to strive to preserve the purity of the meanings and philosophies behind *sesajen* through the regen-

eration of *abdi dalem*, cultural education, and restricted access to the highly sacred parts of the rituals. Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX and X, for instance, are known for emphasising the importance of preserving tradition while remaining open to innovation and social change, allowing the Palace to continue serving as a role model for safeguarding cultural heritage in the modern era.

Thus, the transformation of *sesajen* in the modern context of the Yogyakarta Palace is a concrete example of dynamic cultural adaptation. The *sesajen* tradition has not only endured but also evolved and adapted to contemporary needs, without losing its identity and philosophical meaning. This transformation is evidence that local wisdom can adapt and remain relevant as part of the identity and spirituality of Javanese society in the face of globalisation.

The transformation of *sesajen* in the modern context essentially reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of culture. Culture is not a static entity; it continuously moves along with time, space, and social interactions. *Sesajen*, as a symbol of culture and spirituality, cannot be separated from the social context surrounding it. What happens in the Yogyakarta Palace is a concrete example of how local culture can maintain its traditional roots while responding to the challenges of the times. This transformation proves that *sesajen* are not merely rituals of the past but also symbols of the future—a future that continues to honour the ancestors, cherish nature, and preserve harmony in life.

Therefore, the transformation of *sesajen* cannot be viewed in black-and-white terms as either decline or loss of meaning. It is part of a complex cultural process, in which sacredness, identity, and social function are constantly being negotiated. The Yogyakarta Palace plays a strategic role in ensuring that this transformation does not erase the noble values embedded in every petal of flower, every wisp of incense, and every drop of holy water arranged in the *sesajen*. On the contrary, this transformation may well be the path for *sesajen* to remain relevant, meaningful, and alive within modern Javanese society.

The tradition of offerings (*sesajen*) in the ceremonial practices of the Yogyakarta Palace stands as a testament to the continuity of cultural and spiritual values among the Javanese people, passed down through generations. Offerings are not merely symbolic rituals but serve as a reflection of Javanese cosmology that emphasises harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. This tradition has shaped and preserved the cultural identity of the Yogyakarta community and represents a tangible manifestation of deeply rooted local wisdom in daily life. From historical and spiritual perspectives, offerings carry complex dimensions. They are not only acts of homage to ancestors or supernatural rulers but also serve as a means to internalise core values such as gratitude, reverence, humility, and an awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the universe. Thus, offerings function as an integral part of the Javanese moral and spiritual system, which is holistic and transcendent.

Nevertheless, the challenges posed by modernisation and globalisation have significantly impacted the existence of this tradition. The influx of new values, technological advancements, and shifts in generational perspectives towards traditional culture have raised

concerns about the potential erosion of the original meaning of offerings. Practices that were once sacred are gradually being commodified, especially when transformed into tourist attractions or repackaged as popular cultural events. Despite these challenges, the Yogyakarta Palace and traditional communities have taken active steps to preserve the essence of *sesajen*. Through strategies such as cultural education, the regeneration of court retainers (*abdi dalem*), integration with religious teachings, and the revitalisation of traditional ceremonies, the philosophical and spiritual values of offerings continue to be safeguarded. These efforts demonstrate that culture is not a static entity but a dynamic force capable of adapting to changing times while maintaining its core identity.

The tradition of offerings across Southeast Asia reveals a relatively similar pattern, namely the symbolic relationship between humans and the spiritual world—whether God, ancestral spirits, or supernatural beings. Although they differ in material and ritual forms, their main functions still revolve around reverence, protection, and cosmic balance. Therefore, offerings should not be seen only as relics of the past but as cultural practices that still hold contemporary relevance: as markers of identity, instruments of cultural diplomacy, and media for strengthening social cohesion. In the context of Southeast Asian Indigenous and Ethnic Studies, the offering tradition exemplifies how local communities can preserve their ancestral values while adapting to global currents. This provides strong evidence that local spirituality and culture can continue to thrive and remain meaningful—as long as there is collective awareness and thoughtful commitment to protecting them.

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