

From Da'wah to Spectacle: Negotiating Sacred Space and Ritual Meaning in The Commodification of Sekaten

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Abstract: This study examines how the Sekaten ritual in Surakarta has shifted from an Islamic da'wah-centred ceremony into a commodified cultural festival shaped by mass tourism and urban entertainment. Using a qualitative socio-cultural design grounded in cultural ethnography, the research draws on participatory observation conducted during the 2023–2025 celebrations at the alun-alun (town square), the Grand Mosque, the night market, and Bangsal Pagongan (theatre ward), alongside purposive interviews with *abdi dalem* (palace retainers), mosque administrators, vendors, and festival attendees. The analysis applies cultural transformation theory (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021), Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), and ritual commodification theory (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006) to trace how shifts in actors, spatial organisation, and symbolic interpretation reorient the ritual's meanings. Findings indicate that municipal institutions and market stakeholders are increasingly governing Sekaten through the dominance of the night market, commercial stages, and sponsorships, while traditional custodianship by the Kraton (palace) and Masjid Agung is becoming more marginal. Sacred elements, such as the Gamelan Sekaten (traditional music), Miyo Gangsa (ritual procession), and ritual symbols including nginang (chewing betel nut) and janur (decorated palm leaves), persist; yet, they often operate as aesthetic markers within a spectacle economy rather than as central media of religious pedagogy. This reconfiguration produces spatial secularisation as the alun-alun transitions from a sacred zone into a consumerist arena, and public participation shifts from spiritual aspiration towards leisure-oriented consumption, particularly among younger visitors. This study advances debates on religion, space, and heritage governance by demonstrating that ritual changes in contemporary Java reflect negotiated struggles over symbolic power—rather than mere cultural decline. It advocates for participatory preservation strategies that sustain both ritual meaning and physical form amid tourism-driven urban development.

Keywords: Sekaten; cultural transformation; ritual commodification; spiritual space; tourism and religion.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana ritual Sekaten di Surakarta telah berubah dari upacara yang berpusat pada dakwah Islam menjadi festival budaya yang dikomersialkan, dipengaruhi oleh pariwisata massal dan hiburan perkotaan. Menggunakan desain socio-kultural kualitatif yang didasarkan pada etnografi budaya, penelitian ini dilaksanakan dengan observasi partisipatif yang dilakukan selama perayaan 2023–2025 di alun-alun (lapangan kota), Masjid Agung, pasar malam, dan Bangsal Pagongan (ruang teater), serta wawancara terarah dengan *abdi dalem* (pelayan istana), pengelola masjid, pedagang, dan peserta festival. Analisis ini menerapkan teori transformasi budaya

(Nasukah & Winarti, 2021), teori Lefebvre tentang produksi sosial ruang (Lefebvre, 1991), dan teori komodifikasi ritual (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006) untuk melacak bagaimana perubahan dalam aktor, organisasi ruang, dan interpretasi simbolis mengarahkan ulang makna ritual. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa lembaga pemerintah kota dan pemangku kepentingan pasar semakin mengendalikan Sekaten melalui dominasi pasar malam, panggung komersial, dan sponsor, sementara penguasaan tradisional oleh Kraton (istana) dan Masjid Agung semakin terpinggirkan. Elemen suci, seperti Gamelan Sekaten (musik tradisional), Miyos Gangsa (prosesi ritual), dan simbol-simbol ritual termasuk Nginang (mengunyah buah pinang) dan Janur (daun kelapa yang dihias), tetap ada; namun, seringkali berfungsi sebagai penanda estetika dalam ekonomi pertunjukan daripada sebagai media utama pendidikan agama. Perubahan ini menghasilkan sekularisasi ruang saat alun-alun beralih dari zona suci menjadi arena konsumerisme, dan partisipasi publik bergeser dari aspirasi spiritual menuju konsumsi berorientasi rekreasi, terutama di kalangan pengunjung muda. Studi ini memperkaya debat tentang agama, ruang, dan tata kelola warisan dengan menunjukkan bahwa perubahan ritual di Jawa kontemporer mencerminkan perjuangan negosiasi atas kekuasaan simbolik, bukan sekadar kemunduran budaya. Studi ini mengadvokasi strategi pelestarian partisipatif yang mempertahankan makna ritual dan bentuk fisiknya di tengah pengembangan perkotaan yang didorong oleh pariwisata.

Kata kunci: Sekaten; transformasi budaya; komodifikasi ritual; ruang spiritual; pariwisata dan agama.

1. Introduction

Sekaten remains one of the most enduring Islamic cultural traditions in Java, particularly in Surakarta, and scholars widely regard it as a product of the acculturation between Islamic teachings and local Javanese culture. Early accounts frame the celebration as a strategic medium of *da'wah* that the Wali Songo and Javanese rulers developed through symbolic and cultural approaches (Zuhdi & Sawaun, 2024). They integrated instruments such as the gamelan and other religious symbols into an adaptive, peaceful model of Islamic proselytisation resonates with existing aesthetic sensibilities and communal habits (Eko, Al-Mumtaza, & Panggabean, 2024). In Sekaten, the gamelan plays a pivotal role as a ritual element. Local practice deems it so essential that the celebration cannot proceed without it (Sumarsam, 2024).

Historical accounts and cultural narratives often situate Sekaten within a broader context of religious transformation in Java. Historians commonly describe the Majapahit era as a period when Hindu-Buddhist systems shaped much of Javanese religio-political life. At the same time, the rise of the Demak Sultanate marked a significant turning point. Many narratives credit the Wali Songo, working alongside the Demak rulers, with expanding Islam's public reach through cultural strategies rooted in the arts and traditional performance, not by abandoning earlier ritual formats, but by continuing and reformulating them. A frequently cited example concerns Rojowedo, a Majapahit-inherited royal rite that communities gradually reoriented into what later became known as Sekaten. Rather than signalling an abrupt rupture, this reorientation reflects a careful substitution of Hindu-Buddhist elements with Islamic symbols and practices, preserving the ritual's social functions while redirecting its theological orientation. In this sense, Sekaten emerged as an inclusive platform for *da'wah* that engaged wider publics through culturally resonant forms (Ardinarto, 2008).

Over time, however, Sekaten has undergone profound change. Once rooted in religiosity and Islamic pedagogy, the tradition has evolved into a cultural tourism event driven by economic and entertainment imperatives, with local government policies steering this shift. This trajectory risks semantic distortion, as commodification and mass entertainment displace ancestral values and ethical orientations (Karim & Raya, 2022). In this context, sacred practices risk becoming aestheticised displays marketed as cultural heritage, a process that signals broader value shifts within contemporary Javanese society amid globalising pressures.

This transformation extends beyond symbolism into spatial, political, and institutional domains. In Surakarta, Sekaten no longer centres exclusively on Kraton authority; instead, municipal agencies,

entertainment industries, and market stakeholders increasingly shape its organisation and public meaning. The ritual functions as a contested arena where different understandings of tradition, authority, and modernity converge, and where public visibility often rewards spectacle over instruction. As these actors negotiate control, the festival's spatial arrangements also convey shifting hierarchies of what constitutes sacred, cultural, or commercial.

Despite extensive documentation of Sekaten's historical and religious dimensions, scholars still offer limited analysis of its cultural transformation in relation to spatial change, symbolic reinterpretation, and shifting power dynamics (Pemberton, 1994). Many studies foreground theological origins (Aulia, 2023) or musical features (Setiawan, 2018) but give less attention to how contemporary tourism, commodification, and public consumption renegotiate meanings and moral claims. A few works also employ a spatial-cultural framework to examine how once-sacred sites such as the alun-alun and masjid undergo repurposing under modern capitalist imperatives. This study asks how the transformation of Sekaten in Surakarta, from a sacred ritual of Islamic proselytisation to a commodified public festival, has reflected broader shifts in cultural meaning, spatial practices, and symbolic power in contemporary Java.

This article addresses that gap by applying cultural transformation theory (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021), Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), and ritual commodification theory (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006) to the case of Sekaten. It examines how spatial restructuring, symbolic reinterpretation, and changes in power relations drive the desacralisation of ritual spaces and reframe public participation. By moving beyond strictly historical or theological narration, the study contributes to wider debates on tradition, modernity, and cultural sustainability within contexts where heritage increasingly intersects with tourism and governance.

Surakarta provides a productive site for investigating these dynamics. As one of the last remaining strongholds of Javanese royal culture, the city sustains deep symbolic ties to the Kraton, yet it also actively pursues cultural commodification through city branding and tourism development. This dual identity sharpens the negotiation between tradition and modernity, making visible how institutions compete for the symbolic control of space, narrative, and legitimacy in public ritual life.

Sekaten is not only a local event but a ritual laden with historical, religious, and cultural symbolism that communities continually reinterpret within shifting socio-economic conditions. The "syncretism" here refers to the blending of Islamic tenets with pre-Islamic Javanese cosmology, materialised through symbolic rituals and performances. This blending has long generated debate, particularly among orthodox Muslim groups who question the legitimacy of such practices, and those debates underscore the contested character of cultural Islam in Indonesia and the politics of defining "proper" religiosity.

The reconfiguration of Sekaten also resonates with wider global patterns in the commodification of religious traditions. Rituals such as India's Ganga Aarti and Thailand's Loi Krathong are increasingly operating within tourist economies and entertainment circuits, and market forces often reshape how publics encounter sacred practices (Thadaniti, 2014; Zara, 2015). By situating Sekaten within these broader dynamics, this study contributes to international discussions on how religiously rooted heritage becomes recontextualised under tourism pressures, neoliberal policy orientations, and identity politics.

In Surakarta, this recontextualisation appears in the growing dominance of night markets and tourism-driven agendas. Popular music and commercial activity often overshadow sacred processions such as Miyos Gangsa, while the mosque courtyard, once a hub of religious gathering, remains comparatively quiet. The sacred gamelan ensembles Kanjeng Kiai Guntur Madu and Kanjeng Kiai Guntur Sari, which are performed only once a year, now operate simultaneously as both spiritual markers and tourist attractions. In this framing, cultural tourism refers not only to the consumption of heritage but also to its reconstitution as performative spectacle (Khozanatu Lahpan, Putra, Hidayana, & Shafanissa, 2024).

Chris Barker emphasises that culture functions as a site of ongoing meaning production shaped by power and consumption (Barker, 2004). This insight helps explain why Sekaten now operates not merely as an Islamic-Mataram ritual but also as a performance within a tourism marketplace that

rewards visibility, novelty, and audience appeal. Nasukah & Winarti describe this process as a “shift in kind,” a fundamental change in the structure of social meaning. That formulation captures how Sekaten’s spiritual core now circulates within the frameworks and incentives of cultural tourism (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021).

The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in cultural ethnography. This research was conducted from 2023 to 2025 Sekaten celebrations, involving participatory observation at the alun-alun, the Grand Mosque, the night market, and Bangsal Pagongan. Through purposive sampling, the study interviewed four key informant groups: palace retainers (*Abdi Dalem*), mosque administrators, street vendors, and festival attendees. The analysis applied thematic procedures to identify patterns of commodification, desacralisation, and symbolic negotiation (Sugiyono, 2018).

Comparable transformations also appear in other Indonesian contexts. Setiyani examines the epistemic shift that recasts the sacred site of Pundhen Telaga Sarangan as a tourism attraction (Setiyani, Nurhairunnisa, & Holilah, 2024). Tarumingi highlights how rituals among the Towani Tolotang in South Sulawesi undergo restructuring to support local economic productivity (Tarumingi, Lopulalan, Zulkifli, & Kadir, 2023). These parallels strengthen the relevance of this study to ongoing debates about heritage, tourism, and cultural negotiation in the Global South.

Thus, this article argues that Sekaten’s transformation signals a broader cultural reorientation in Java, where religious traditions are no longer isolated from economic and political pressures. This argument, due to the changes in form, often produces bigger changes in authority, participation, and the moral vocabularies that communities use to justify their ritual life. These findings call for a reflective model of cultural preservation that sustains meaning as well as form, and that recognises how policy, markets, and cultural institutions jointly shape what the public comes to understand as “heritage.”

2. Sekaten as a Medium of Da’wah and Symbol of Islamic Identity

The Sekaten celebration in Surakarta draws on a long-standing model of Islamic da’wah commonly associated with the Wali Songo, particularly Sunan Kalijaga. The term *Wali Songo* refers to the “Nine Saints,” a revered group of scholars and missionaries who played a central role in Islam’s spread across Java during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Rather than relying on coercion, they advanced an adaptive strategy that worked through culturally legible forms. They integrated Islamic teachings with Javanese aesthetics and symbolic repertoires, allowing religious messages to circulate through familiar artistic media. Accounts of Sunan Kalijaga often emphasise his use of *wayang* (shadow puppetry), *gamelan* music, and locally rooted ritual forms to communicate Islamic values in ways that reduced confrontation and strengthened receptivity (Sumarsam, 2024). This approach facilitated Islam’s wider acceptance in Java by engaging with existing cultural practices and reorienting them, rather than positioning them as enemies to be (Abbas, Suparman, Suryanto, & Wafa, 2023). Scholars frequently describe this legacy as foundational to Javanese Islam, which they characterise through sustained cultural integration and pragmatic tolerance.

Scholars often refer to this approach as cultural da’wah, in which practitioners utilise art to convey religious teachings through gentle persuasion and public familiarity. By converting cultural symbols into vehicles of religious expression, this mode of da’wah facilitated a gradual transition from Hindu-Buddhist traditions to Islamic orientations, contributing to a distinctly Javanese Islamic identity that developed through localisation rather than the strict replication of Arab cultural forms (Nur & Maulidiana, 2024). Some scholars label the process “syncretism,” referring to an amalgamation of Islamic teachings with Javanese cultural practices, yet the term remains contested. Colonial discourse frequently deployed “syncretism” in pejorative ways to question the authenticity of Javanese Islam. Florida argues that Dutch colonial authorities, particularly after the Diponegoro War, promoted a syncretism narrative to construct a rigid binary between “orthodox Islam” and “Javanese culture,” delegitimising figures such as Diponegoro and weakening anti-colonial mobilisation (Florida, 1997). More recent scholarship suggests that these discourses continue to shape contemporary tensions between normative Islam and local expressions of religiosity. Howell, for example, notes that representations of Islamic revival often prioritise the “outer” expression of Islam, which can

marginalise culturally embedded practices that many Javanese Muslims continue to regard as central to their religious identity and moral life (Howell, 2001). These debates reflect a broader contest in Indonesian Islam between universalist interpretations and culturally grounded expressions rooted in local cosmologies.

This contested discourse around syncretism becomes even more evident in the case of Gamelan Sekaten, which serves as the central icon of the Sekaten celebration in Surakarta. Moving from the broader discussion of Islamic acculturation to its sonic manifestation, the gamelan ensemble plays a symbolic role that extends beyond musical performance. Its distinctive sound, performed only at specific times in the Javanese-Islamic calendar, creates a sacred atmosphere that draws people toward the mosque (see Picture 1). The Gamelan Sekaten is not merely an artistic attraction but a spiritual device intended to convey Islamic values through aesthetic and sensory experience. An interview with Nanang Bayu, an *abdi dalem pengawit* (court musician), revealed that the Sekaten gamelan holds profound sacred significance and, in earlier times, served as a deliberate medium for religious outreach. It illustrates how the ritual space of Sekaten is carefully curated through sound and symbolism, operating within a framework of da'wah that is at once cultural, aesthetic, and theological (Nanang Bayu, personal communication, February 22, 2023).



Picture 1: A gathering of people observing the Sekaten gamelan.

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

Before Islam's expansion, Javanese society held deeply rooted beliefs within indigenous religious systems, and these systems posed challenges for missionaries who sought to introduce Islamic teachings. In response, Sunan Kalijaga, according to local narratives, proposed the gamelan as a compelling medium for da'wah because it could attract public attention without confrontation. Communities often regard the Gamelan Sekaten as embodying Islamic elements, and its sonic appeal encouraged people to gather, listen, and engage with religious messages delivered in that setting. Through repeated exposure, many Javanese audiences gradually encountered Islamic teachings, and over time, some adopted Islam as an integral part of their everyday lives. Scholars interpret this process as a form of culturally mediated da'wah that blends aesthetics with spiritual outreach (Taufiq, 2022).

Beyond the gamelan, Sekaten also mobilises symbolic elements such as *bunga kantil* (magnolia flower), *janur kuning* (young coconut leaves), and traditional snacks that accompany the procession, each carrying Islamic connotations intertwined with Javanese cultural meanings. Pramudita et al. (2022) note that the *bunga kantil* symbolises a prayerful hope for goodness, *prosper* symbolises KRT Muhtarom, the head of the Grand Mosque's administrator, explained that *janur kuning* symbolises gratitude to Allah and conveys a philosophical aspiration for Divine Light and blessing. Among participants who practice *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings) during Sekaten, many believe that these objects and foods can mediate spiritual benefits and divine favour, especially when they circulate within sacred space and ritual time.



Picture 2: *Kantil* flowers placed in front of the Grand Mosque

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

The placement of kantil flowers in front of the Grand Mosque does more than decorate the ritual landscape (see Picture 2); it expresses a dense set of spiritual meanings within the Javanese-Islamic tradition. Local interpretations often associate the kantil with divine protection (*pengayoman*), sincerity of intention, and aspirations for blessing, and its fragrance helps cultivate a sacred ambience that supports religious reflection during Sekaten. KRT Muhtarom explained that the kantil can also signify a person who has completed the Hajj pilgrimage, which turns the flower into a visible marker of spiritual accomplishment and an ethical reminder about devotion and purity. In this context, kantil functions as material theology: ritual actors use an everyday object to communicate ideals of piety through sensory experience and culturally recognisable symbolism. Sekaten illustrates how cultural *da'wah* integrates religious teaching into forms that people can see, smell, handle, and remember, strengthening the affective and embodied dimensions of religious learning.



Picture 3: People waiting for the first performance of the Sekaten gamelan,

after which, they will carry out the ritual of scrambling for young coconut leaves (janur).

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

Janur kuning (see Picture 3), or young coconut leaves, appear in many religious and cultural ceremonies across Java, including Sekaten, and ritual actors treat their presence as highly symbolic. Within Javanese-Islamic interpretation, janur carries both theological meaning and ornamental value.

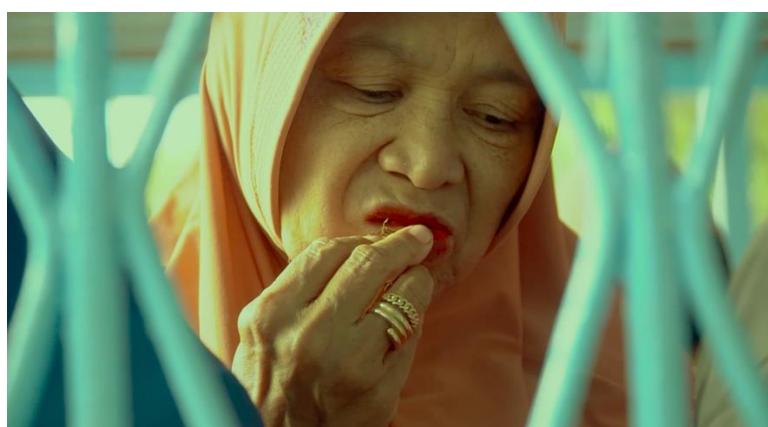
KRT Muhtarom explained that within Sekaten rituals, participants often read “janur” as “ja'an-nur,” commonly glossed as “the light of forgiveness” from God. Its bright colour and curved form allow ritual actors to present metaphors of enlightenment, repentance, and spiritual cleansing in a culturally familiar idiom. As part of the *ube rampe* (ceremonial offerings), janur reminds participants to pursue spiritual renewal, translating abstract Islamic concepts into sensory forms that circulate through communal practice. This symbolism shows how Sekaten anchors religious expression in local material culture, enabling faith to operate as something accessible, embodied, and socially shared.

Alongside janur and kantil flowers, KRT Muhtarom also described other symbolic media through which Sekaten communicates cultural da’wah, including the *nginang* tradition, which it linked to the pillars of Islam, *ndok kamal* as a symbol of righteous deeds, *celengan* as a metaphor for saving good deeds, and additional ritual signs embedded in the wider *ube rampe*. These symbolic objects work as mnemonic tools that invite interpretation and discussion, especially when elders, mosque authorities, or palace retainers explain them to participants. In that sense, Sekaten not only presents symbols; it also organises informal pedagogy, where people learn religious values through observation, embodied practice, and shared explanations within public ritual spaces.



Picture 4: *kinang* widely sold in front of the Grand Mosque during the Sekaten ceremony.

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)



Picture 5: A woman performing the *nginang* ritual while listening to the Sekaten gamelan being played.

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

Pictures 4 and 5 capture the *nginang* arrangement as part of the *ube rampe* offerings at the Grand Mosque of Surakarta during Sekaten. KRT Muhtarom explained that *nginang*, the betel leaf chewing set, carries religious symbolism representing the Five Pillars of Islam. In this interpretation, the betel leaf symbolises the *shahada* as the foundation of faith, the *injet* (lime paste) signifies daily prayers, *gambir* denotes sawm, and the *mbako susur* represents *zakat*. In this setting, *nginang* functions as a tool of cultural da'wah because it conveys Islamic teachings through familiar, embodied cultural practices. It demonstrates how Sekaten not only preaches religious principles but also invites participants to experience and perform them through material culture, reinforcing the interplay between Islamic theology and Javanese cultural expression.



Picture 6: *Ndok kamal* sold in the Grand Mosque area during the Sekaten ceremony.

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

Ndok kamal is an integral component of the *ube rampe* set prepared during Sekaten (See Picture 6). KRT Muhtarom explained that 'ndok kamal' symbolises 'amal kamal,' good deeds carried out with sincerity and completeness. The egg's closed, rounded shape represents moral wholeness and the perfection of intention within a Javanese-Islamic worldview that links inner disposition to conduct outward. This symbolic reading suggests that spiritual value depends on fully realised actions rather than partial or performative gestures. Within Sekaten, the egg thus becomes more than a ritual object; it embodies ethical instruction and encourages participants to link their everyday practices to religious ideals. The symbol illustrates how Sekaten recontextualises ordinary objects as vehicles of religious meaning and fosters a sensory religious experience that renders theological concepts culturally resonant.



Picture 7: *celengen* sold in the Grand Mosque area during the Sekaten ceremony

Source: Mukhlis Anton Nugroho (2023)

Picture 7 shows traditional piggy banks (*celengan*) displayed for sale during Sekaten's night market. KRT Muhtarom explained that the *celengan* can function as a symbolic reminder to "save" good deeds, a spiritual form of accumulation that parallels the *ndok kamal*, which symbolises righteous action (*amal shaleh*) within the *ube rampe*. In this reading, the piggy banks become a metaphor for storing moral merit rather than material wealth. Yet in contemporary Sekaten, the object's symbolic depth often recedes behind its appeal as a souvenir. Producers mass-produce and market it for children, positioning it within consumer culture and illustrating how sacred symbols can be transformed into commodity forms. This recontextualisation does not simply change the object's use; it also subtly alters the values that the ritual space communicates when religious signs circulate primarily through purchase, display, and entertainment.

In the historical context, Sekaten functioned not only as a religious expression but also as a political strategy under ruling powers, notably the Demak Sultanate and later the Islamic Mataram Kingdom (Akmir, Rizkiah, & Rifkal, 2025). By orchestrating Sekaten, rulers projected themselves as temporal sovereigns and spiritual leaders, and the ceremony helped legitimise authority through religious symbolism embedded in cultural practice. Demak later developed features of a theocratic polity that prioritised Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) within governance. The Sultan and his advisors, including members of the Wali Songo, appointed Islamic scholars (*ulama*) as judicial leaders and mosque imams under the title *Penghulu*. Narratives often cite figures such as Prince Bonang and Sunan Kudus in these roles. Hasyim (2021) also notes that Demak's location facilitated political control, economic activity, and the dissemination of Islam, thereby strengthening the state's capacity to consolidate authority through both religious and administrative institutions.

This pattern reflects a broader political logic of ritual, in which public ceremonies consolidate power by staging religious symbolism as public truth. Clifford Geertz argues that rituals can operate as a "theatre of power" where symbolic structures reinforce political authority (Geertz, 1980). Talal Asad likewise emphasises that religion does not stand apart from social life, since discourses and power relations constitute religious practice and shape its authority (Asad, 1993). From this perspective, Sekaten does not merely reflect a relationship between sovereign, people, and the divine; it actively shapes that relationship by producing a symbolic arena where legitimacy becomes visible and persuasive through cultural performance. This interpretation advances discussions on the politics of ritual by demonstrating how sacred traditions—through their religious aesthetics—both enable hegemonic authority and foster social obedience.

While the discussion above emphasises Sekaten's da'wah function, the celebration also enacted Islamic identity publicly through specific ritual performances. One key example is the communal recitation of the shahada, the Islamic testimony of faith, during Sekaten. Although the shahada carries theological weight, collective recitation also works performatively by reaffirming Islamic identity within the Javanese public sphere. Arroichan & Rasmuin (2023) describe the shahada as a solemn pledge of full commitment (*kaffah*) to Islam, and its communal articulation during Sekaten shows how participants can transform public space into a sacred arena where religious and cultural practices converge. In this setting, Sekaten functions not merely as a means of heritage preservation but also as a medium through which belief is proclaimed and enacted through collective performance.

Scholars also explain the effectiveness of Sekaten's da'wah through its contextual adaptability. Cultural da'wah succeeds because it integrates Islamic messages with existing cultural forms, allowing communities to perceive Islam not as an external doctrine, but as an integral part of local life. Abdullah (1987) argues that Islam's acceptance in Indonesia relied not only on political power but also on its capacity to assimilate into established local cultural expressions. Jalaluddin (1986) similarly suggests that Islamic communication involves more than verbal instruction, since it depends on resonance created through symbols, culture, and local values embedded in society. Within this framework, religion provides spiritual substance, while culture offers a legible and affective medium that supports communal cohesion and cultural continuity (Alhafizh, Fauzi, Zulfan, & Erman, 2024). This dialectic between proselytisation and cultural preservation is significant for the present study because shifting

socio-political contexts and changing religious authorities can reconstruct Sekaten's orientation and transform it into an arena for cultural negotiation and religious articulation.

The transformation of meaning in the Sekaten celebration in Surakarta can be traced through shifts in orientation, event structure, and the actors involved in its ritual procession. In its formative phase, Sekaten represented a cultural *da'wah* strategy developed by the Wali Songo, who synthesised Islamic symbols with local cultural elements. One of the central symbols in this processional context is the Gamelan Sekaten, which served not merely as a traditional musical instrument but as a symbolic medium of Islamic proselytisation. In contemporary developments, however, Sekaten has undergone a reorientation from a sacred religious ritual to a cultural tourism event imbued with entertainment and commercial content. Night markets, popular entertainment performances, and the involvement of creative industry players have become inseparable components of the celebration. This shift indicates that Sekaten has evolved beyond a space for preserving religious values; it now functions as a contested site of meaning amid ongoing social change and the economic imperatives of urban society.

3. Shifts in Actors and Socio-Political Interests

The transformation of Sekaten's organisation reflects a deeper institutional shift from sacred custodianship grounded in traditional authority to bureaucratic-commercial governance. In earlier periods, the Kraton and the Masjid Agung exercised primary control over the ritual, and *abdi dalem* (palace retainers) and *ulama* (Islamic scholars) held substantial authority in maintaining the event's sanctity (Munandar, 2023). These actors embodied what Weber describes as "traditional authority," which communities legitimise through heritage, charisma, and sacred lineage (Weber, 1978). Within this structure, *ulama* did not only serve as religious experts; they also acted as moral authorities who shaped the community's ethical orientation and mediated what constituted proper religious conduct in public spaces (Khairil Musthafa, Prasetyo, & Maghfuri, 2023). This arrangement positioned Sekaten as both ritual performance and moral pedagogy, where authority flowed through recognised religious and royal institutions.

However, as governance models shifted and the state expanded its role in cultural events, new actors such as local government agencies, tourism boards, and private sponsors began to assert control over Sekaten's organisation. This shift illustrates a transition towards what Weber terms "bureaucratic authority," which relies on rationalised procedures, administrative coordination, and measurable outcomes, including economic gain. Talal Asad's perspective helps clarify why this transition matters for religion, since modern regimes often reshape religious authority through regulatory discourses, public visibility, and market logic (Asad, 1993). In Sekaten, these dynamics do not simply reorganise management; they also reposition the sacred within frameworks that prioritise orderliness, branding, and profitability. The ritual becomes a site where institutional rationality competes with older claims of sanctity and lineage.

An interview with Giyan, an *abdi dalem*, indicated that the palace no longer holds full authority over Sekaten's organisation. This account aligns with Purwani's findings, which show that the city government and tourism authorities are increasingly occupying the domain of traditional practices, reducing the royal institution's influence, and signalling a shift from traditional custodianship towards bureaucratic and commercial governance (Purwani, Rahmatulloh, & Rahayu, 2022). In contemporary socio-political dynamics, local governments play a prominent role through financing, regulation, and logistical management, and they frequently frame the event through public spectacles, tourism promotion, and creative economy narratives. The Surakarta city administration has strategically reoriented Sekaten into a multi-purpose cultural, religious, and commercial attraction by centring the night market as the main feature, which it expects to stimulate local economic circulation through tourism (N. T. Rahayu, 2022). The administration also leases public spaces to vendors and entertainment providers, indicating how economic interests now influence decisions regarding spatial allocation, programming, and public attention (N. T. Rahayu, 2022). As a result, Sekaten shifts from a sacred celebration towards an entertainment-driven arena that invites market intervention and prioritises consumer traffic. This pattern supports Rahayu's argument that authorities now treat

Sekaten as a strategic asset for regional tourism and local economic growth (N. Rahayu, Warto, Sudardi, & Wijaya, 2020). In this contested arena, religious values, local cultural expressions, and contemporary economic and political agendas intersect and compete over the right to define Sekaten's meaning and public function.

This transformation mirrors what Picard and Robinson describe as state-led remaking of cultural events, where officials restructure festivals to align with policy objectives, official narratives, and commercial strategies (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006). In such settings, festivals no longer operate solely as cultural expression; they also function as instruments of governance and development, organising public space, regulating participation, and cultivating desirable images of identity. Cohen similarly argues that commodification in tourism produces meaning shifts when ritual practices are repackaged to meet the expectations of external stakeholders, particularly tourists and market institutions (Cohen, 1988). Sekaten thus becomes a key site for tracking how authority, representation, and value circulate when a ritual enters tourism economies and administrative planning.

Political interests also shape Sekaten's contemporary orientation. Local governments often utilise Sekaten to demonstrate their commitment to regional heritage while simultaneously promoting tourism and local economic growth; the celebration's expansion reflects this dual agenda. Authorities are increasingly treating commodification as a deliberate strategy to attract visitors, stimulate local trade, and enhance the city's cultural profile and heritage (Rahmatuloh, Purwani, & Rahayu, 2020). Yet this orientation raises a critical question: does it preserve culture, or does it selectively reinvent tradition to legitimise political authority? When officials reframe rituals for tourism, performances can serve as a means of political display and economic gain rather than heritage conservation (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's argument sharpens this critique by suggesting that heritage is often not preserved but "produced," curated, and staged for consumption, which can turn living culture into an exhibition and detach it from its spiritual foundations (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). This risk becomes especially visible when organisers prioritise spectacle and revenue over religious learning, moral instruction, and communal reflection.

Cultural heritage remains inseparable from collective identity, yet heritage and tradition increasingly circulate as commodities within tourism consumption. These cultural forms attract tourists who seek experiences they perceive as "authentic," and organisers often respond by reinventing or repackaging traditions to serve tourism objectives (Rahmatuloh et al., 2020). In Sekaten, the government has played an active role in commodification and promoted the celebration as a tourism destination, thereby intensifying negotiations between the Kraton, state institutions, and economic stakeholders. The Kraton once stood as the sole custodian of Sekaten's spiritual and historical legitimacy, but it now shares authority with institutions that operate through administrative and commercial logics. This redistribution of authority marginalises Sekaten's religious substance and replaces it with pragmatic interests and symbolic representations that can lose spiritual depth when they circulate mainly as spectacle.

This phenomenon is not unique to Surakarta. In Bali, temple festivals such as Odalan have undergone transformations in which organisers adapt ritual and religious dimensions to tourism demands, producing tension between spiritual sanctity and tourist spectacle (M. Picard, 1996). Royal ceremonies in Yogyakarta have also shifted towards cultural tourism, and the Kraton increasingly functions simultaneously as a spiritual centre and a living museum framed for global audiences (Firdaus, 2019). These cases show how religious and cultural performance now sits at the intersection of heritage, economy, and politics, where selective reinvention and reinterpretation become routine strategies for managing visibility and revenue.

4. Commodification of Tradition and the Dominance of the Night Market

The most visible sign of Sekaten's commodification appears in the emergence and dominance of the night market, which has transformed the event's spatial and symbolic order. The northern square (*Alun-alun Utara*) once served as a sacred transitional space between the Kraton and the Grand Mosque, but it is now filled with vendors, amusement rides, entertainment stages, and popular music

performances, such as *dangdut* (See Picture 8 and 9). This shift reconfigures ritual space into a commercial and entertainment-oriented arena, altering how participants move, gather, and interpret the celebration. Lefebvre's framework clarifies this change because he argues that society produces space through social relations, and institutions use space as a tool of power and control rather than treating it as a neutral container (Lefebvre, 1991). Rüpke similarly shows that urban space actively shapes religious life while religion also reshapes urban space through practice and presence (Rüpke, 2024). In Sekaten, market-driven urban policy and tourism agendas redefine sacred space, and this redefinition does not simply continue tradition; it interrupts the lived experience of ritual and redirects its theological orientation towards consumption and spectacle.



Picture 8: The night market located directly in front of the Grand Mosque.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMlx84koUWs>



Picture 9: A poster advertising a dangdut performance during the Sekaten ceremony.

The night market attracts residents who want to shop and socialise, and it also offers tourists a curated space to consume representations of local culture. Although it supports economic vitality, it can generate cultural and social tensions because it reorganises what audiences treat as central, meaningful, or sacred (Xu et al., 2024). Its growth signals cultural commodification, in which organisers selectively repackage traditional elements to meet consumer expectations. This repackaging can

displace values rooted in religiosity, communalism, and spiritual reflection, replacing them with aesthetically pleasing, market-friendly versions that prioritise entertainment. Commercial vendors, private event organisers, and government institutions often benefit most because increased tourism expands revenue and strengthens city branding. Meanwhile, traditional actors, such as *Abdi Dalem*, religious figures, and cultural custodians, can lose substantive roles and retain only symbolic visibility, as economic rationality and spectacle-driven programming increasingly determine the event's direction (Mailarangan & Suharto, 2024).

This process reflects the commodification of tradition, where cultural elements that once carried sacred meaning become objects of mass consumption. Within this framework, Sekaten no longer operates only as a religious rite; it also functions as a strategically packaged annual event designed to serve local economic interests. Consumer products, such as neon-lit toys, T-shirts bearing Sekaten logos, and decorative souvenirs, circulate alongside entertainment attractions like dangdut concerts and culinary branding, including "nasi liwet Sekaten." Organisers curate these features to attract crowds, extend visiting hours, and increase spending within the event space. Such additions do not merely "add" to Sekaten; they also reorder priorities by rewarding consumption as a key mode of participation.

Market processes also drive shifts in meaning, as spirituality and local wisdom become commodities that circulate through tourism and economic functions. This process is not neutral, since power relations shape whose interests define the public image of Sekaten. Municipal governments, tourism offices, sponsors, and vendors each have specific goals, and their interventions influence spatial planning, publicity, and programming. By framing Sekaten as a spectacle, these actors can extract economic value from cultural symbolism, often at the expense of the religious instruction and spiritual depth that have historically defined the celebration's significance. This dynamic shows how commodification changes not only what people do at Sekaten, but also what Sekaten can credibly claim to represent.

The commodification of Sekaten not only alters the economic structure; it also reshapes the layers of meaning that ritual practice has historically carried. Renic, Syarif, & Kurniasari (2022) argue that commodification can create a coexistence between individualistic, materialistic economic functions and symbolic functions that uphold collective and communal life; yet, this coexistence often produces tension rather than harmony. In Sekaten, several ritual elements that once anchored the procession now appear excessively symbolised or marginalised when organisers treat them as secondary to market demand. Sacred processions such as *Miyos Gangsa*, which once carried strong spiritual significance as the ceremonial movement of the sacred gamelan from the Kraton to the Masjid Agung, can function merely as formal preludes to night market festivities and public entertainment. One palace servant stated during fieldwork, "Nowadays, people watch Miyos Gangsa just for the photos. They wait not for the gamelan, but because there will be dangdut music and a night market later that night" (Muhtarom, personal communication, February 22, 2025). This testimony suggests that many attendees now orient themselves towards commercial spectacles rather than ritual meaning, which signals a deeper displacement of value driven by entertainment logic. Market forces thus shape not only the economic realm but also the symbolic structures that once anchored the ritual.

The commodification of customary ritual also carries implications for broader value shifts within society, particularly when organisers package ritual as a tourist attraction or pursue a commercial agenda. In Surakarta, the night market's dominance has gradually displaced the original procession's structure and spiritual meaning. Concrete consequences include reduced participation in mosque-based activities during Sekaten, particularly among younger generations, who increasingly view the festival as a leisure activity rather than a religious engagement. This generational shift can also weaken the Kraton's authority, since municipal and commercial actors now dominate ritual stewardship and public attention. Scholars argue that entertainment and mass consumption now replace the religious and social values that once formed the foundation of the celebration (Aptasari, Falah, & Akbar, 2024). Many members of the public perceive Sekaten primarily as a place to shop, ride amusement attractions, and gather socially rather than as a site of religious engagement rooted in historical tradition.

This transformation reflects Sekaten's incorporation into market logic, where cultural elements become commodities that drive local economic circulation. In such contexts, ritual no longer operates mainly as a vehicle for value transmission; it also becomes an instrument within wider capitalist ecosystems that reward scale, visibility, and profit. Comparable tensions are also evident in the Towani Tolotang community of South Sulawesi, where sacred rituals have undergone restructuring to support economic productivity, sometimes at the expense of spiritual meaning (Tarumingi et al., 2023). Similar dynamics also appear beyond Surakarta and beyond Indonesia. In Bali, temple festivals have increasingly been marketed for tourism, raising questions about authenticity and spiritual depth (M. Picard, 1996). In Thailand, the Songkran festival has undergone commodification, and organisers have reframed sacred elements such as Rod Nam Dam Hua, sand pagoda building, and temple offerings into spectacles designed to attract tourists (Niko & Atem, 2019). In Chiang Mai, the Thai government has incorporated Songkran into national tourism campaigns and promoted it as a hallmark event for international visitors, which illustrates how entertainment-centred experiences can displace sacred practice under commercial demand (Lauzon, 2010). These comparisons suggest that Sekaten's commodification fits a broader regional trend, where cultural heritage becomes a contested site between sacred continuity and market-driven reinvention.

Interviews with eight Sekaten attendees in Surakarta also suggest that most participants prioritised recreational motives, including visiting the night market, watching musical performances, shopping, and spending leisure time with their family. One participant, Danu Baskara (age 26), stated, "I don't really know the meaning of Sekaten. For me, it's just something fun to visit with friends, especially the food stalls and the dangdut stage" (Danu Baskara, personal communication, September 21, 2023). Another visitor, Sri Wahyuni (age 36), remarked, "My kids love the rides here, but I didn't even know there was a procession with gamelan. I thought Sekaten was just a festival like a night market" (Sri Wahyuni, personal communication, September 21, 2023). These responses indicate detachment from ritual symbolism and suggest that many participants now experience Sekaten through a secularised frame of entertainment and consumption rather than through religious reflection.

This pattern exemplifies spatial secularisation, in which sacred public spaces change meaning and function. Lefebvre's argument remains central here, as he emphasises that space emerges from socio-political relations and embeds power structures rather than existing as neutral territory (Lefebvre, 1991). The reappropriation of *Alun-alun Utara* for commercial activity marks a shift from religious symbolism to commodified spatial practice, restructuring what the public sees, hears, and values during Sekaten. Rüpke similarly argues that urban spatial change can displace or reinterpret religious practice through the frameworks of contemporary urban life (Rüpke, 2024). In Sekaten, entertainment and consumption now capture much of the public's attention, illustrating how urban economic imperatives can restructure meaning-making and reconfigure the ritual's claim to sacrality.

5. Shifting Public Perception and the Secularisation of Space

The shifting meaning of the Sekaten tradition reshapes not only the event's structure and its organisational actors, but also how communities interpret, value, and respond to the tradition. In earlier periods, people often joined Sekaten with explicitly spiritual aspirations, including seeking blessings, practising devotion, or participating in sacred processions. Contemporary participation, however, more frequently reflects entertainment and recreational priorities. This shift suggests that the values embedded in tradition do not remain fixed, since communities continually renegotiate them through changing social contexts, economic intervention, and the rhythms of popular culture. Sekaten therefore increasingly operates as a public experience organised around consumption, leisure, and urban festivity rather than around collective religious instruction.

This shifting perspective on Sekaten, from sacred tradition to a more profane spectacle, cannot be separated from broader forces, particularly the relationship between cultural ritual and tourism development. Within this framework, Sekaten does not represent an isolated local trajectory; it participates in a wider process of cultural transformation shaped by consumerist logics and the mobility of the tourism industry. Studies of Pundhen Telaga Sarangan demonstrate how sacred sites,

once central to community spirituality, can undergo epistemic shifts and become symbolic objects within cultural tourism economies (Setiyani et al., 2024). Such findings indicate that changing interpretations of ritual space extend beyond Sekaten and reflect broader patterns within contemporary cultural life, where tourism reshapes what communities consider meaningful, sacred, or socially valuable.

Sekaten's transformation in Surakarta exemplifies the increasing interconnection between ritual cultural practices and contemporary tourism dynamics. The tradition first took shape as a vehicle for Islamic proselytisation (da'wah). As a public expression of Javanese spiritual life, yet it now increasingly operates within frameworks of cultural consumption. In its contemporary form, the event functions less as a sacred ritual and more as a tourism-oriented festivity. This evolution aligns with arguments in festival and tourism studies that show how authorities often mobilise festivals to respond to social and economic pressures, including urban stagnation, declining cultural participation, or the weakening of political legitimacy (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006). In Surakarta, the municipal government uses Sekaten as a strategy to stimulate the local economy, particularly through tourism, and to signal cultural stewardship amid weakened ties between the Kraton and the urban public. The city uses the event to revitalise urban space, attract regional visitors, and project a curated image of cultural vitality, even as this orientation risks marginalising the ritual's religious and historical depth. "As festivals increasingly become platforms for urban branding and economic stimulation, their symbolic functions are reshaped to reflect contemporary priorities rather than ancestral meanings" legitimacy (D. Picard & Robinson, 2006).

In this context, tourism does not operate as a neutral or purely external force. Instead, it actively reinvents meaning and restructures festivals, while also generating new relationships between cultural agents and increasingly transnational, transient audiences. In Sekaten, Section 4 has already shown these dynamics through the transformation of the alun-alun into a consumerist space dominated by night markets, amusement rides, and commercial stages. This reconfiguration alters spatial logic by reassigning sacred public space to support the creative economy and expand market activity. At the same time, organisers increasingly package sacred elements, such as the Miyos Gangsa procession, as a visual performance, which encourages spectatorship and aesthetic consumption rather than religious attentiveness. These changes, therefore, register more than commodification alone; they show how tourism produces new patterns of social existence that blur the boundaries between ritual, spectacle, and marketplace.

Edward Casey emphasises that place sustains a deep relationship with meaning and collective memory (Casey, 2013). When religious spaces, such as mosques and public squares (alun-alun), lose their representational function in everyday practice, communities can experience a detachment of meaning that weakens their relationship with their symbolic heritage. In Sekaten, commercial attractions and spectacle-based entertainment increasingly push religious processions, especially Miyos Gangsa, towards the margins of public attention. Field observations during Sekaten 2025 revealed that many visitors were unaware of the sacred procession taking place. One local vendor commented: "People come here for entertainment, not to see gamelan music performed outside the palace. Many do not even know that it is part of Sekaten" (Suharti, personal communication, September 21, 2023). Another participant said, "I thought this was just an annual night market, but I just found out there is a religious event too" (Sri Wahyuni, personal communication, September 21, 2023). These testimonies suggest a perceptual shift towards visual pleasure and instant entertainment, which echoes broader patterns of modern cultural consumption. Sekaten once drew anticipation for its spiritual richness and communal reverence, yet contemporary visitors often celebrate it for its festive ambience and leisure. Under these conditions, religious values lose expressive space, and the tradition risks becoming a cultural product detached from its earlier sacred force.

6. The Transformation of Meaning, Ritual Commodification, and Social Reorientation of Sekaten in Surakarta

Field observations and interviews show that Sekaten in Surakarta has undergone a significant shift in meaning, moving from a sacred ritual rooted in Islamic da'wah to a recreational event repackaged within cultural tourism. This shift aligns with Nasukah and Winarti's concept of cultural transformation, which emphasises that transformation involves changes in form as well as fundamental shifts in meaning and underlying value systems (Nasukah & Winarti, 2021). Contemporary programming often positions the gamelan primarily as symbolic spectacle rather than as a medium of religious outreach. The Miyos Gangsa procession no longer consistently commands public attention, and many Islamic narratives embedded in symbols such as *nginang*, *janur*, or *ndok kamal* lose resonance amid the intensity of the night market. At the same time, amusement rides, culinary bazaars, and commercial sponsorships increasingly dominate the event's public face, which further obscures Sekaten's earlier role as a space for da'wah and as a medium that supported Islamic-Mataram sovereignty.

This pattern also reflects the secularisation of public space in ways that Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991) and Rüpke (Rüpke, 2024) theorise, since consumption-oriented logics can reorganise formerly sacred places and reduce their religious significance. In Sekaten, the transformation unfolds not only spatially but also epistemically and affectively. Epistemically, interviews with younger visitors suggested limited awareness of core rituals, since several participants could not name or describe the Miyos Gangsa procession and did not recognise its role in linking the Kraton and the Masjid Agung. Affectively, many younger participants framed their attendance in terms of leisure, such as "enjoy the crowd," "try new snacks," or "see the rides," rather than religious reflection, which indicates a shift from reverence to recreation. This pattern does not stand alone. In South Sulawesi, the Towani Tolotang rituals have been incorporated into structured tourism agendas (Tarumingi et al., 2023), while in Singkawang, Cap Go Meh, rooted in Taoist and Buddhist cosmology, has evolved into a public cultural event that promotes regional identity (Chan, 2012; Patriani & Burhan, 2019). In Thailand, Phi Ta Khon has also moved from animistic-Buddhist traditions towards state-supported spectacle that simplifies spiritual narratives to suit tourist expectations. These cases share a recurring pattern, since each shows how economic utility, political branding, and identity negotiation can recontextualise sacred ritual. Yet important differences remain: Cap Go Meh appears more community-driven, while Phi Ta Khon reflects stronger state orchestration. Sekaten occupies a middle ground, shaped through negotiation among local government and community stakeholders, where religiosity, heritage, and marketplace entertainment compete to define legitimate meaning.

These findings also carry implications for heritage governance and cultural sustainability. The tension between economic orientation and the preservation of spiritual-cultural meaning in Sekaten reflects broader challenges in participatory heritage governance, where multiple stakeholders negotiate between commodification pressures and value-based continuity (Waterton & Smith, 2010). This perspective supports frameworks that treat heritage co-management as a dialogic process involving state actors, local communities, and traditional authorities, rather than as a purely technical exercise in event management. In this sense, reconfiguring Sekaten requires organisers to treat da'wah and cultural education as substantive components that shape the event's identity, not as peripheral ornamentation. Spatially, this would require a more deliberate balance in urban design, so sacred and commercial zones can coexist without one eclipsing the other. Educational interventions, such as exhibitions on Sekaten symbols, gamelan workshops, or performances that explicitly communicate Islamic teachings, could also strengthen cultural resilience and support heritage transmission within contemporary tourism economies. Such measures would align with theories that conceptualise heritage as living practice rather than static conservation.

This article contributes to discussions on cultural transformation by demonstrating how religious rituals, when they operate within contested local economic and political dynamics, undergo recontextualisation that reshapes both meaning and authority. Sekaten illustrates how tourism-

oriented economies can resignify sacred spaces as profane arenas and reorganise public participation around consumption. This contribution extends religious cultural studies in Indonesia, which often emphasise conservation or syncretism, by foregrounding the relationship between sacred symbols, cultural consumption, and spatial authority. Within this framework, Sekaten does not function merely as ancestral ceremony; it operates as an evolving architecture of values that actors continuously renegotiate within the modern public sphere.

Future research could therefore explore how younger generations interpret the Islamic symbols embedded in Sekaten, and whether they experience cultural dissonance or produce new meanings that differ from earlier moral frames. Scholars could also examine how palace and religious institutions reposition themselves within the city's cultural tourism strategies, especially when administrative and commercial actors dominate programming. Another agenda concerns digitalisation and public narrative, including how social media, travel vlogs, and creative documentaries shape what audiences believe Sekaten "is" and what counts as authentic participation. Research could also test whether *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings) retains religious resonance among urban youth or functions mainly as symbolic habit without theological commitment. These questions matter because cultural transformation does not necessarily signal the end of spirituality; it can also mark a new arena where religious meaning becomes more complex, fluid, and interwoven with urban life.

7. Conclusions

This study investigated the transformation of meaning in the Sekaten ritual in Surakarta by examining its shift from a religious ceremony rooted in Islamic da'wah to a commodified cultural event embedded within mass tourism. Using a qualitative socio-cultural approach, the research examined how changes in spatial organisation, symbolic function, and institutional actors have redirected the ritual's values and public meanings. It also traced how participants and organisers now interpret Sekaten through frames that prioritise visibility, leisure, and economic circulation alongside, and often above, religious instruction.

The findings show that Sekaten has undergone a substantial transformation, moving from a site of spiritual pedagogy and political legitimacy under Islamic-Mataram sovereignty towards a platform shaped by economic interests, entertainment culture, and urban tourism. Sacred elements such as the Gamelan Sekaten, the Miyos Gangsa procession, and ritual symbols such as *nginang* and *janur no* longer hold the same centrality, as the night market and commercial sponsorship increasingly structure both the event's spatial layout and the public's attention. This reconfiguration indicates broader processes of spatial secularisation and cultural commodification, where consumerist logics redefine sacred public space and reposition ritual practice as spectacle and consumption. These findings matter because they frame ritual transformation not as simple cultural decline but as a contested process of negotiation, in which local traditions adapt, and sometimes resist adaptation, under global economic pressures, urban modernisation, and shifting generational orientations. Sekaten therefore emerges as a complex case of cultural recontextualisation, where sacredness, identity, authority, and tourism intersect within public space that multiple actors claim and reshape.

Future research could examine how younger generations interpret the Islamic and cultural symbols embedded in Sekaten, especially when their participation often centres on leisure and consumption. Scholars could also investigate how digital media, including social media circulation and tourism-oriented content, reshapes public narratives of ritual practice and affects what audiences perceive as "authentic" Sekaten. Another avenue concerns institutional strategy, particularly how the Kraton and the Masjid Agung may reposition their authority and pedagogical roles amid bureaucratic governance and commercial pressures. Comparative studies of commodified religious festivals across Southeast Asia would further strengthen this analysis by showing how different cultural ecologies negotiate the tension between heritage value, sacred meaning, and tourism-driven reinvention.

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