



Living Quran in the *Merti Desa* Tradition: Symbolism and Cultural Meaning

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Abstract

The *Merti Desa* tradition represents a form of local wisdom that reflects the interaction between cultural values and Islamic teachings within community life. Various cultural symbols embedded in this tradition are interpreted as representations of Quranic values, making it a significant manifestation of the Living Quran phenomenon. This study aims to examine the symbolism and cultural meanings embodied in the *Merti Desa* tradition and to explore how communities interpret symbols associated with Quranic values. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving a Muslim community in Indonesia that continues to preserve the tradition. Data were analyzed through reduction, categorization, interpretation, and meaning-making processes. The findings reveal that Quranic values are expressed through cultural symbols such as *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng*, which symbolize gratitude, social cohesion, blessings, and harmonious relationships between humans, God, and fellow human beings. These findings demonstrate that the Quran functions not merely as a normative text but also as a living source of meaning manifested in cultural practices. This study contributes to Living Quran scholarship by highlighting the dynamic relationship between sacred texts, cultural symbolism, and local wisdom in Muslim societies.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known for its cultural diversity and local traditions, which serve as means of transmitting values, shaping collective identity, and strengthening social cohesion. From a cultural anthropological perspective, traditions are understood not merely as legacies of the past but as social practices that are continuously reproduced through interactions, symbols, and systems of meaning within communities. The persistence of local traditions demonstrates how communities preserve cultural values while fostering harmonious social relationships through collective practices passed down from generation to generation (Tohari, 2025). One such tradition that continues to be practiced in Javanese society is *Merti Desa*, an annual ritual expressing gratitude for the blessings, safety, and agricultural yields enjoyed by the community.

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In the context of Indonesian Muslim society, local traditions are not necessarily regarded as being in opposition to religious teachings. Rather, they often serve as a medium through which Islamic values are actualized within cultural settings. The Living Quran perspective views the Quran not only as a text to be read and understood normatively but also as a source of values that are experienced, internalized, and manifested in social practices. Accordingly, Living Quran studies seek to understand how communities respond to, interpret, and bring Quranic messages to life through various social and cultural activities (Rohmah & Mujahidin, 2022; Sari, 2024).

The *Merti Desa* tradition provides an important context for examining the relationship between religious texts and local culture. The various ritual activities associated with this tradition, including collective prayers, processions featuring agricultural produce, village almsgiving, and the preparation of traditional foods, demonstrate how religious values are internalized and expressed through cultural symbols. These elements indicate that cultural practices function not only as expressions of local identity but also as vehicles for conveying moral and spiritual messages embedded in the community's collective consciousness. Through this process, the Quran is present not merely as a sacred text but also as a source of meaning that is continually reproduced in social life.

Symbolism is a central element of the *Merti Desa* tradition. Traditional foods served during the ritual, such as *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng*, function not merely as food for communal consumption but also carry meanings associated with gratitude, unity, blessings, and aspirations for a harmonious life. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, these meanings are not inherently embedded in objects but emerge through ongoing social interactions within the community (Abdullah, 2020). Accordingly, the cultural symbols found in the *Merti Desa* tradition can be understood as products of social construction that reflect the community's religious experiences.

The use of food as a cultural symbol is also evident in various Indonesian traditions. Tohari (2025) explain that food and ritual offerings in customary ceremonies function as forms of symbolic communication through which communities express their hopes, prayers, and socio-religious values. These symbols serve as a means of fostering harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and God through meanings collectively negotiated and shared by community members. These findings demonstrate the important role of cultural symbols in establishing and maintaining community value systems.

Previous studies have demonstrated that the relationship between the Quran and community traditions has attracted considerable attention in Living Quran scholarship. Rohmah & Mujahidin (2022) found that the tradition of reciting *Yasin Fadilah* functions not only as a religious practice but also carries symbolic meanings that strengthen social solidarity. Sari (2024) revealed that the tradition of completing a recitation of the Quran during Jambi customary wedding ceremonies represents reverence for the Quran as a source of cultural and religious legitimacy. Both studies demonstrate that the Quran becomes part of community life through various forms of cultural symbolization.

Other studies on Quranic reception in local cultures have shown that traditions such as *sedekah bumi*, *slametan*, *tablilan*, *haul*, Quranic completion ceremonies, and other religious rituals represent ways of actualizing Quranic values in social life. These studies emphasize that the presence of the Quran extends beyond the textual domain, transforming into practices, symbols, and cultural identities that remain alive within communities (Rohmah & Mujahidin, 2022).

Furthermore, research on symbolic communication in customary rituals Tohari (2025), religious symbolism in Javanese traditions, Quranic reception in local

religious ceremonies, Living Quran practices in Quranic completion ceremonies, the symbolization of Quranic verses in wedding traditions, religious meanings in *slametan*, the social functions of Yasin recitation, religious symbols in *sedekah bumi* rituals, and the construction of cultural meaning through symbolic interactionism has demonstrated the central role of symbols in mediating the relationship between religion and culture (Abdullah, 2020). Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on ritual practices, Quranic recitation, or religious symbolism in general.

Although numerous studies have examined Living Quran phenomena in community traditions, research specifically investigating Quranic symbolism in the *Merti Desa* tradition through the interpretation of traditional food symbols remains limited. Ritual foods constitute an important medium for understanding how Quranic values are translated into cultural expressions, preserved, and transmitted within local contexts. Moreover, much of the existing research adopts descriptive or reception-oriented approaches, leaving the processes through which symbolic meanings are constructed through community interactions insufficiently explored.

This situation reveals a research gap between Living Quran studies, which generally emphasize recitation practices, reception, and the use of Quranic verses, and the cultural realities of communities that manifest Quranic values through ritual symbols. Previous research has predominantly examined Quranic recitation traditions, the symbolism of religious rituals, and the social functions of traditional practices. In contrast, the role of food symbolism in representing Quranic values within the *Merti Desa* tradition remains underexplored. Furthermore, the processes through which symbolic meanings are constructed and maintained through social interactions have received insufficient attention in Living Quran scholarship.

The novelty of this study lies in its analysis of Quranic symbolism in the *Merti Desa* tradition through the Living Quran perspective, combined with Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on textual reception or religious ritual practices, this research examines *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng* as cultural symbols through which Quranic values are manifested. Another distinctive contribution is the application of symbolic interactionism to explain how symbolic meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transmitted within community life.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Living Quran scholarship by extending its analytical focus from textual reception to cultural symbolism and the social construction of meaning. Its findings also demonstrate the relevance of symbolic interactionism for explaining the relationship between sacred texts, cultural symbols, and community social practices. Practically, the study may serve as a reference for academics, religious leaders, cultural practitioners, and local governments seeking to preserve local traditions that are compatible with Islamic values. Furthermore, it may encourage stronger cultural and religious literacy and promote more constructive dialogue among religion, culture, and local identity within Indonesia's multicultural society.

METHODS

This study was conducted in several stages, including identifying the research focus, selecting informants, collecting field data, organizing the data, analyzing cultural symbolism in the *Merti Desa* tradition, interpreting the data based on the Living Quran perspective and symbolic interactionism theory, and drawing conclusions. These stages were systematically arranged to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Quranic values are actualized through community traditions and how meanings are constructed within them. The Living Quran perspective was used to understand the relationship between the sacred text and social practices, while symbolic interactionism was employed to explain how meanings emerge

through social interaction within the community (Engkizar et al., 2019; Murtadho & Najiburrahman, 2025; Murtadlo et al., 2023).

Methods and Type

This study employed a qualitative method using a case study approach within the Living Quran framework. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of social realities, religious experiences, and the construction of meaning within community life. The case study approach was used to investigate Quranic symbolism in the *Merti Desa* tradition as a living cultural practice that continues to be maintained by the community. Through the Living Quran approach, this study examined how community members receive, interpret, and actualize Quranic values through local traditions that have developed within their social environment (Engkizar et al., 2025).

To gain a deeper understanding of the construction of symbolic meanings, this study employed Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism. According to this perspective, meanings are not fixed properties of objects or symbols but emerge through ongoing processes of interaction, interpretation, and social communication. Therefore, cultural symbols in the *Merti Desa* tradition were understood as products of social construction that reflect the community's interpretations of Quranic values within the context of local culture (Adi et al., 2025).

Data Sources

In accordance with the characteristics of qualitative research, this study used primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from community leaders, religious figures, members of the *Merti Desa* organizing committee, and residents actively involved in the tradition. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement, experience, and knowledge of the cultural practices under investigation (Engkizar et al., 2026; Wright et al., 2016).

Secondary data were obtained from relevant written sources, including books, journal articles, research reports, village documents, activity archives, photographs, and literature on the Living Quran, cultural symbolism, symbolic interactionism, and the community's religious traditions. The use of both primary and secondary data was intended to deepen the analysis and broaden the interpretive context of the phenomenon under study (Forth & Bowen, 1999).

Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, commonly referred to as the human instrument, responsible for determining the research focus, selecting informants, collecting data, analyzing information, and interpreting the findings. The researcher's direct presence in the field enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural context underlying the *Merti Desa* tradition.

To support data collection, additional instruments included a semi-structured interview guide, observation sheets, and documentation records. The interview guide was developed according to the research focus, encompassing Quranic symbolism, cultural meanings, and the construction of meaning within the *Merti Desa* tradition. Before being used, the interview guide underwent expert judgment validation involving academics specializing in Quranic studies, qualitative research methodology, and cultural studies. This validation process aimed to ensure the relevance of the indicators, the clarity of the questions, and the alignment of the instrument with the research objectives (Hakak et al., 2017).

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain in-depth and contextual data, this study employed three data collection techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore informants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of the cultural symbols found in the

Merti Desa tradition. This technique enabled the researcher to obtain information about experiences and meanings that could not be directly observed (Takona, 2024).

Participant observation involved directly observing the sequence of activities in the *Merti Desa* tradition, including the use of cultural symbols and social interactions during the ritual. Documentation was used to complement and verify the data through photographs of the activities, traditional archives, field notes, and other documents related to the research subject. Combining these three techniques enabled the collection of rich, in-depth, and complementary data.

Data Analysis Tools

After data collection, the data were organized using categorization matrices, coding sheets, and thematic maps. These analytical tools were used to identify cultural symbols observed in the field, classify them into specific categories, and map their relationships with Quranic values and community interpretations. The use of matrices and thematic maps helped maintain a systematic analytical process and facilitated the examination of relationships among the research findings (Nieman, 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The process began with transcribing interview data, compiling observation notes, and organizing documentation according to the research focus (Akinyode & Khan, 2018; Daniel & Harland, 2018; Lungu, 2022). The data were then coded to identify cultural symbols emerging in the *Merti Desa* tradition. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into themes representing Quranic symbolism in the community's cultural practices. These themes were subsequently analyzed using Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory to explain how symbolic meanings are formed, negotiated, and transmitted through social interaction within the community.

To strengthen the interpretation, the findings were examined through the Living Quran perspective to explain how Quranic values are expressed, internalized, and actualized within the *Merti Desa* tradition. These analytical stages provided a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religious texts, cultural symbols, and the social realities of the community.

Data Validity

Data validity was established through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from community leaders, religious figures, members of the organizing committee, and residents involved in the tradition. This process was intended to assess the consistency of information across different perspectives (Kocaman, 2024).

Methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. The interpretations were then reconfirmed with informants through member checking to ensure that the meanings derived from the data were consistent with their experiences and understanding. These techniques were intended to strengthen the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Adi et al., 2025; Swain & King, 2022). Through this methodological design, the study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of Quranic symbolism in the *Merti Desa* tradition and explain how meanings are constructed through social interaction within the framework of Living Quran studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History and Development of the *Merti Desa* Ritual Tradition

The *Merti Desa* tradition is a cultural heritage of Javanese society associated with local belief systems and customary practices. It embodies values of respect for nature, ancestors, and community life. Over time, *Merti Desa* has come to be practiced as an expression of gratitude to God for the safety, well-being, and blessings enjoyed by the community. The tradition also serves as a means of strengthening social solidarity and preserving cultural identity passed down from generation to generation (Rijal et al., 2025).

In Batur Hamlet, Kauman Kidul Urban Village, Salatiga City, *Merti Desa* has become an integral part of community life and continues to be preserved across generations. The tradition is understood not merely as a ceremonial activity but also as a cultural heritage with social and religious significance. Sulis, a religious figure in Batur Hamlet, explained that the tradition should be preserved because it has become deeply rooted in the community's way of life.

... Regarding the history of Merti Desa, based on our understanding, the Merti Desa tradition in Batur is a good tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. It needs to be diuri-uri (preserved and maintained) because it brings goodness to our village. The tradition has become deeply rooted in the community's way of life. Therefore, Merti Desa is a tradition that seems impossible to forget and is observed every year in anticipation of the month of Muharram (Informant).

This statement indicates that the continuity of *Merti Desa* is closely associated with the community's awareness of the importance of preserving ancestral heritage. The expression *perlu diuri-uri*, meaning that a tradition needs to be maintained and nurtured, reflects the importance of ensuring that it remains known and practiced by future generations. Thus, the tradition functions as a means of transmitting cultural values and strengthening the community's collective identity.

Historically, Kauman Kidul Urban Village is connected to the development of Salatiga City. One of the important historical artifacts in the Salatiga area is the Plumpungan Inscription, dated to 750 CE, which serves as the basis for determining the city's anniversary (Gunawan & Griffiths, 2021). However, the inscription should be understood as part of the broader historical context of the area rather than as direct evidence of when the *Merti Desa* tradition first emerged.

The practice of *Merti Desa* in Kauman Kidul has changed over time. In the past, the event was organized collectively by several hamlets within the same urban village. The program included cultural parades and various traditional performances, such as *wayang orang* (Javanese human-puppet theater), *ketoprak* (traditional Javanese theater), traditional dances, soldier-themed performances, and *wayang kulit* (shadow-puppet theater). Today, however, the tradition is more commonly organized separately in each hamlet, and cultural parades are no longer part of the program. Informant described these changes based on his experiences during the 1980s.

... When I was a child in the 1980s, Merti Desa was often organized collectively, bringing together several hamlets within one urban village. There were also cultural performances, including wayang orang, ketoprak, traditional dances, soldier-themed performances, and wayang kulit. However, all these performances depended on the budget allocated by the urban village administration (Informant).

This account demonstrates that the development of the tradition has been influenced by social conditions and the availability of funding. In the past, collective celebrations made it possible to organize a variety of artistic performances. Changes in the organization of the event, meanwhile, indicate adaptations to the community's circumstances and the organizers' capacity to sustain the tradition.

Changes are also evident in the clothing and equipment used during the event. In the past, elders wore traditional Javanese attire, including *blangkon* (traditional

Javanese headgear) and headcloths. Farmers also wore loose-fitting black clothing and *caping* (conical field hats), and carried *tenggok*, or bamboo baskets, to transport agricultural produce. Over time, modern clothing and transportation have gradually replaced some of these traditional attributes. The chair of the *Merti Desa* organizing committee, explained these changes as follows.

...Nak dulu dulu, eyang dulu niku pake pakaian kejaven, do blangkonan, iketan; nak saiki yo do kuplukan, pakaiane wes pakaian jaman saiki. Nak kelompok tani mbah mbah rien do nganggo katok ireng, klambi ireng sing gombor-gombor do capingan, do gendong tenggok nek saiki wis ora do gelem gendong tenggok do isin, saiki nganggone tossa, sepeda dll (Informant).

These changes indicate that the *Merti Desa* tradition is dynamic. Some cultural attributes have been adapted to changing times, while the tradition's fundamental values have been maintained. These values include gratitude, togetherness, mutual cooperation, prayers for safety, and the preservation of ancestral heritage. In line with this understanding, Herawati et al (2025) explain that *Merti Desa* is an expression of gratitude for God's blessings, manifested through cultural ceremonies.

Implementation of the *Merti Desa* Ritual Tradition

The *Merti Desa* tradition, generally understood as an effort to care for or cleanse the village, is an annual event that combines social, cultural, and religious elements. In Batur Hamlet, Kauman Kidul Urban Village, the tradition is practiced as an expression of gratitude to God for the community's safety and well-being, while also serving as a means of strengthening relationships among residents. The *Merti Desa* celebration is generally held around the beginning of the Javanese month of Suro, which corresponds to Muharram in the Islamic calendar. The timing and location are determined according to local customs and community circumstances. Informant explained that the venue is selected based on its capacity to accommodate participating residents.

...The event is usually held close to the month of Suro, once a year, around August, and coincides with the Dawuhan tradition. In the past, the event was held at the house of the community leader, provided that the house was large or spacious enough. Nowadays, since there is no longer a designated leader responsible for hosting it and the younger generation takes the initiative, the organizers look for a spacious house according to the circumstances. Sometimes, the event can also be held in front of the mosque (Informant).

This statement indicates that the organization of the tradition has adapted over time, particularly in terms of venue selection and the involvement of younger generations. Whereas the event was previously centered on the home of a community leader, it can now take place in a resident's house with sufficient space or in an area near the mosque. These adaptations demonstrate that the continuity of the tradition depends on community participation and the ability of residents to organize the event collectively.

The *Merti Desa* ritual takes place over three days: Wednesday Wage, Thursday Kliwon, and Friday Legi, according to the Javanese calendar. Each day features activities that are interconnected and involve community participation.

On Wednesday Wage, residents clean the river and maintain a spring that provides water for their daily needs. This activity is followed by a *slametan*, a communal ritual meal featuring *nasi kluban* (rice served with mixed vegetables), traditional market snacks, and *nasi tumpeng* (cone-shaped rice). Prayers are also offered in remembrance of a figure believed to be associated with the history of the local water source. The head of the neighborhood association in Kauman Kidul Urban Village, described the sequence of activities as follows.

...The Merti Desa activities take place over three days. On Wednesday Wage, residents clean the river. Further upstream, there is a spring near a large banyan tree, and the water source is also maintained because it is very useful for the community's daily needs. The spring

is drained and cleaned, followed by a slametan, which includes only nasi kluban, traditional market snacks, and nasi tumpeng. They also pray for the citak bakal of this area. In the past, the person who opened the river was named Nyai Dasimah. On Thursday afternoon, residents clean the roads and surrounding environment. The women bring brooms and hoes and participate in communal work. On Friday, the main Merti Desa celebration takes place (Informant).

Cleaning the river and maintaining the spring demonstrate that *Merti Desa* is concerned not only with religious rituals but also with environmental stewardship. The water source is maintained because it provides direct benefits to the community. Meanwhile, the prayers offered in remembrance of a figure associated with local history illustrate the relationship between collective memory, respect for ancestors, and the continuation of tradition.

On Thursday afternoon, corresponding to Kliwon in the Javanese calendar, residents work together to clean the roads and surrounding environment. This activity involves community members, including women who bring cleaning tools. Such participation demonstrates how mutual cooperation is sustained as a social value through the tradition.

The main celebration takes place on Friday Legi and includes a communal *kenduri* (ritual feast), collective prayers, the placement of ritual offerings, and the distribution of *berkat* (food packages distributed after the ceremony). The *kenduri* is held in a resident's yard or another sufficiently spacious location. The food served includes *nasi tumpeng*, vegetables, fruits, and traditional market snacks. These dishes form part of the ritual and also serve as a means of strengthening social relationships within the community.

Before the *kenduri* begins, the organizing committee or a community leader delivers a speech. A religious figure or elder then leads the collective prayers, which include recitations of Surah Al-Fatihah, Al-Ikhlâs, Al-Falaq, An-Nas, Ayat al-Kursi, and Surah Yasin, accompanied by *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *salawat* (prayers for the Prophet Muhammad), and *tahlil* (the recitation of the declaration of faith). This sequence demonstrates the presence of Islamic religious practices within the local tradition.

In addition to the *kenduri*, the placement of ritual offerings is another component of the *Merti Desa* celebration. These offerings consist of food donated by residents and are placed at several locations regarded as significant within local tradition, including near a large stone, a cow statue, a crossroads, a stream, and the roof of the house where the ritual takes place. According to the informant, flowers and incense, which were used in the past, have gradually been discontinued. Informant described this practice as follows.

...On Friday, Merti Desa involves a communal slametan and the placement of ritual offerings. The offerings are taken from food donated by residents. Small portions of the donated food, including rice and other dishes, are set aside and placed among the offerings. In the past, the offerings included flowers and a little incense, but nowadays flowers are no longer used. Instead, the offerings consist of food and hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes (mbako). Before the offerings are placed, prayers are recited, including Surah Yasin, dhikr, salawat, and tahlil. The offerings are placed at several locations: near a large stone, at the cow statue, at a crossroads where there is a stone on the left side, by the river, and on the roof of the house where the ritual takes place. One distinctive aspect of Merti Desa is the communal slametan, which features rice, vegetables, and various other foods, including traditional market snacks and fruits,.... (Informant).

This account indicates that the materials used in the ritual have changed, although food remains an essential element of the practice. Prayers and Quranic recitations precede the placement of the offerings. In this study, the practice is understood as an expression of local cultural beliefs and practices based on the

informant's account, rather than as a ritual requirement directly prescribed by the Quran.

After the prayers and the placement of the offerings, the event continues with the distribution of *berkat* to residents and committee members. Food packages are distributed according to the number of households, with additional portions provided to those involved in organizing the event. The uniform contents of the packages are understood to represent togetherness, fairness, and brotherhood (Dewi & Januar, 2019).

Thus, the implementation of *Merti Desa* demonstrates the interconnectedness of environmental conservation, mutual cooperation, religious prayer, respect for ancestral traditions, and food sharing. The tradition functions not only as an annual ritual but also as a social space for strengthening relationships and preserving the community's cultural identity.

Quranic Symbolism in the *Merti Desa* Tradition

In the *Merti Desa* tradition of Batur Hamlet, foods such as *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng* serve not only as ritual offerings but also carry social and spiritual meanings. These meanings are shaped by collective experiences, the accounts of community figures, and cultural practices passed down from one generation to the next. This phenomenon can be examined through the Living Quran perspective, which explores how the Quran is received, understood, and actualized in people's lives. In the context of *Merti Desa*, Quranic values are reflected in the symbolic meanings attributed to these foods, which are associated with seeking forgiveness, social harmony, hope, and gratitude (Dukes et al., 2013; Samiran et al., 2022; Tridiani Febrisia, 2019).

To analyze the formation of these meanings, this study employs Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism. According to Morrione (2021), people act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things hold for them; these meanings emerge through social interaction and are modified through interpretation. From this perspective, the symbolism of food in the *Merti Desa* tradition is understood as the product of interactions among cultural experiences, religious understanding, and community practices.

***Apem Pasung* as a Symbol of Seeking Forgiveness**

Apem pasung is a traditional Javanese cake made from ingredients such as rice flour, coconut milk, and sugar, which are steamed in a cone-shaped wrapper. In several Javanese traditions, *apem* is associated with seeking forgiveness and pardon (Muzakki & Prastiwi, 2025; Putri et al., 2024). In the *Merti Desa* tradition, this food is understood as a symbol of seeking forgiveness from Allah and fellow human beings for past wrongdoings. It is also associated with prayers for deceased family members (Nugroho & Sulanjari, 2025). Informant explained the meaning of *apem pasung* as follows.

...*Apem pasung iku pangapuro. 'Pasung' iku (paring pisungsung), pisungsung iku berarti nusul... apem pasung, ketan, gedhang... kon jaluk pangapuro kanggo ngirim ahli kubur* (Informant).

This statement indicates that the meaning of *apem pasung* is shaped by local interpretations passed down within the community. The term *pangapuro* emphasizes the idea of seeking forgiveness, while the explanation of *pisungsung* connects the food with the act of giving in a ritual context. Thus, *apem pasung* functions as a symbol that connects the seeking of forgiveness, respect for ancestors, and the collective practice of tradition. This meaning is relevant to the Quranic teaching in Surah Az-Zumar, verse 53, which emphasizes the vastness of Allah's forgiveness and mercy.

Quran Surah Az-Zumar [39]: 53

وَلَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

Meaning: *Do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, He is the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful.*”

This verse emphasizes that people should not despair of Allah’s mercy. In the context of *Merti Desa*, its message provides a way to understand the meaning of seeking forgiveness that the community associates with *apem pasung*. This connection represents a local cultural interpretation of Quranic values rather than evidence that the Quran directly establishes this food as a symbol of forgiveness.

From Blumer’s theoretical perspective, the meaning of *apem pasung* develops through communication and social interaction and is sustained through the annual ritual. Explanations provided by religious figures and community participation allow the meaning of seeking forgiveness to be transmitted across generations. Accordingly, *apem pasung* becomes a cultural medium connecting community experiences with religious understanding.

***Ketan Gedhang* as a Symbol of Social Harmony and Hope**

Ketan gedhang is a dish consisting of glutinous rice and bananas. In Javanese cultural interpretations, the sticky texture of glutinous rice is often associated with closeness and togetherness, while bananas are linked to hopes for a better life. In the *Merti Desa* tradition, the combination of these ingredients is understood as a symbol of the hope for social harmony, blessings, and community well-being (Muzakki & Prastiwi, 2025). Informant explained the symbolic meaning of *ketan gedhang* as follows.

...*Ketan (caket karohmatan), dekat dengan rohmatipun Allah; gedhang iku saget pikantuk kepadang (Informant).*

This statement shows that the community associates the food with the hope of receiving Allah’s mercy and experiencing a better life. This meaning is derived not only from the characteristics of the ingredients but also from linguistic interpretations, ritual experiences, and religious understandings transmitted collectively. The value of social harmony is relevant to Quran 49:13, which explains that human diversity is intended to enable people to know one another. The verse emphasizes the importance of building social relationships based on mutual respect.

Quran Surah Al-Hujurat [49]: 13

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

Meaning: *O humanity, indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Indeed, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.*

Meanwhile, the hope for a good life is relevant to Quran 2:201, which contains a prayer for goodness in this world and the Hereafter.

Quran Surah Al-Baqarah [2]: 201

وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ يَقُولُ رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

Meaning: *Among them are those who pray, ‘Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the Hereafter, and protect us from the punishment of the Fire.*

These two verses provide a basis for understanding the values of social harmony and hope associated with *ketan gedhang*. From the Living Quran perspective, this relationship illustrates how the community interprets local traditions through Quranic values. According to symbolic interactionism, the meaning of *ketan gedhang* is formed through social interaction and sustained through repeated ritual practices. When the food is prepared and distributed during communal activities, residents do more than maintain a culinary custom; they also reproduce values of togetherness, social harmony, and hope for a better life.

***Nasi Tumpeng* as a Symbol of Gratitude**

Nasi tumpeng is a cone-shaped rice dish typically served with a variety of side dishes. In Javanese tradition, it is often understood as a symbol of gratitude, safety, and hope for a good life. During *Merti Desa*, *nasi tumpeng* is served alongside other foods as part of the communal feast to express gratitude for health, agricultural yields, peace, and the safety of the community (Fitriyani et al., 2024). Informant explained the meaning of *nasi tumpeng* in the *Merti Desa* tradition as follows.

...*Nasi tumpeng, nasi asaban (sekul suci ulam sari), and traditional market snacks represent the expression of gratitude among the people of Batur...* (Informant)

This statement indicates that *nasi tumpeng* and other dishes are understood as expressions of the community's gratitude. This meaning is manifested through the communal feast, collective prayers, and food distribution among residents. Thus, gratitude is expressed not only through prayer but also through acts of sharing that strengthen social relationships. This value is consistent with Quran 14:7, which emphasizes the importance of giving thanks for Allah's blessings.

Quran Surah Ibrahim [14]: 7

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ وَلَئِنْ كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

Meaning: *And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more. But if you are ungrateful, surely My punishment is severe.'*

This verse emphasizes that gratitude is an important attitude in a Muslim's life. In the context of *Merti Desa*, this value is reflected in expressions of thankfulness to Allah for safety, agricultural yields, health, and community well-being. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, *nasi tumpeng* is understood not merely as food but also as a social representation of gratitude. Its meaning is sustained through the practices of preparing food, participating in the communal feast, offering prayers, and distributing food to residents. These practices make *nasi tumpeng* a symbol connecting religious understanding with the community's social experiences.

The equitable distribution of food also demonstrates how gratitude is expressed through social action. The uniform contents of the *berkat* packages reflect togetherness, care, and brotherhood. Thus, *nasi tumpeng* represents the relationship between gratitude to Allah and the strengthening of community solidarity.

Synthesis of Quranic Symbolism in the *Merti Desa* Tradition

The findings indicate that *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng* carry distinct yet complementary symbolic meanings in the *Merti Desa* tradition. *Apem pasung* is understood as a symbol of seeking forgiveness, *ketan gedhang* as a symbol of social harmony and hope, and *nasi tumpeng* as a symbol of gratitude. These meanings are shaped by cultural experiences, social interaction, and the community's religious interpretations.

From the Living Quran perspective, the meanings attributed to these three foods demonstrate how Quranic values are understood and actualized within local traditions. The meaning of seeking forgiveness associated with *apem pasung* is relevant to Quran 39:53; the values of social harmony and hope associated with *ketan gedhang* relate to Quran 49:13 and Quran 2:201; while the gratitude represented by *nasi tumpeng* is relevant to Quran 14:7.

These connections do not mean that the Quran directly establishes the three foods as symbols of specific rituals. Rather, the findings demonstrate how community members interpret their cultural traditions in relation to the religious values they understand and practice. Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism helps explain this process through three aspects. First, community members assign particular meanings to foods based on their cultural experiences and understandings. Second, these meanings are formed and maintained through social interaction, including communication among religious figures, elders, organizers, and

residents. Third, the meanings continue to be reinterpreted through ritual practices and intergenerational transmission (Morriane, 2021; Rohmah & Mujahidin, 2022).

In conclusion, the symbolism of food in the *Merti Desa* tradition demonstrates how the relationship between the Quran and local culture can be expressed through processes of social meaning-making. The tradition serves not only to preserve cultural heritage but also as a setting in which people express gratitude, seek forgiveness, maintain social harmony, and strengthen community solidarity. This phenomenon illustrates how Living Quran practices can emerge through cultural symbols that acquire religious significance within the collective experiences of Javanese Muslim communities (Adi et al., 2025; Aji et al., 2021; Nabel, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The *Merti Desa* tradition demonstrates that local cultural practices function not only as social rituals expressing gratitude for safety, prosperity, and agricultural abundance but also as a medium for embodying Quranic values in everyday life. From a Living Quran perspective, the symbolic meanings of *apem pasung*, *ketan gedhang*, and *nasi tumpeng* reflect values of gratitude, social solidarity, harmony, mutual cooperation, and devotion to God. Through Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, these meanings can be understood as socially constructed and transmitted through ongoing interactions within the community. The main contribution of this study lies in integrating the Living Quran perspective with symbolic interactionism to explain how ritual food symbols represent and communicate Quranic values, extending the analysis of Quranic reception to cultural practices and the social construction of religious meaning. The findings also provide a conceptual basis for preserving local traditions that are consistent with Islamic teachings and strengthening cultural and religious literacy among younger generations. Ultimately, the *Merti Desa* tradition illustrates how local wisdom and Islamic teachings can interact harmoniously to sustain cultural heritage, reinforce communal identity, and promote social cohesion in accordance with the principle of *rahmatan lil alamin*, meaning mercy to all creation.

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Author contribution

Adinda Puspita Sari: writing-original draft preparation and visualization, **Milla Akhmad:** data curation, and editing, **Nur Azizah Vilan Sari:** analysis, conceptualization, methodology.

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