

Socio-Theological Expression in the Sajen Tradition: A Study of the Javanese Community of Mawar Village, Langkat Regency

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the tradition of *sajen* in Javanese society through the lens of social theology. The research problem focuses on how the community interprets *sajen* and how social theology can be applied to analyze this phenomenon. Employing a qualitative method with a field study approach in Mawar Village, Langkat Regency, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal two primary dimensions of *offering* : first, as a spiritual expression related to the transcendent dimension of human existence; and second, as a social instrument that strengthens solidarity and cultural identity within the Javanese community. The continued practice of *offering* can therefore be understood not merely as a religious ritual but also as a manifestation of symbolic values expressed in the social sphere, which in turn reinforces communal cohesion and harmony.

Keywords: *Tradition of Sajen, Socio-Theological, Javanese Society Village Makmur*

Abstract: Tulisan ini bertujuan dalam mengeksplorasi tradisi sajen dalam masyarakat Jawa dengan menggunakan perspektif teologi sosial. Rumusan masalah yang diajukan adalah bagaimana masyarakat memaknai sajen, serta bagaimana teologi sosial dapat digunakan untuk menganalisis fenomena tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi lapangan di Desa Mawar Kabupaten Langkat di mana data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sajen memiliki dua dimensi utama: pertama, sebagai ekspresi spiritual yang berkaitan dengan relasi manusia secara transenden, kedua, tradisi sajen sebagai instrumen sosial yang memperkuat solidaritas dan identitas kultural masyarakat Jawa. Tradisi sajen yang terus dipraktikan dapat dipahami tidak hanya bentuk ritual keagamaan, tetapi juga memiliki manifestasi nilai-nilai simbolik yang diterjemahkan dalam bentuk ranah sosial dan hasilnya dapat memperkuat kohesi dan harmoni komunitas.

Keywords : *Tradisi Sajen; Sosio-Teologis; Masyarakat Jawa Desa Makmur*

Introduction

Indonesia's religious traditions are remarkably diverse, reflecting the diversity of its cultures and beliefs. This diversity has long been a hallmark of the Indonesian archipelago, characterized by its ability to absorb and process external influences without losing its local identity. One tradition that persists and thrives among Javanese people is the practice of offerings (sajen). Sajen is generally understood as a set of offerings consisting of food, flowers, water, or certain objects prepared in a ritual and placed in a sacred place. This practice is typically present at various important events, both those related to individual life cycles such as birth, marriage, and death, and social-communal life cycles such as village cleansing or slametan (a celebration). Sajen is often viewed reductively as merely a "mystical ritual" related to animist or dynamism beliefs, often positioning it as a syncretic practice that conflicts with formal religious teachings. However, this understanding is partial and incomplete, as it ignores the religio-social dimensions underlying the emergence of sajen practices in Javanese tradition. (Aryadhani, 2013)

In reality, offerings are not merely a legacy from the past, trapped in myth, but rather a religious expression imbued with symbolic and functional meaning. Offerings convey messages about human relationships with God, ancestors, fellow human beings, and the environment. In Javanese society, offerings serve as a symbolic medium of communication, emphasizing gratitude, prayers for safety, and hopes for a harmonious life. However, offerings also have an equally important social dimension: strengthening solidarity, strengthening relationships between residents, and serving as a collective identity that unites communities. Through the process of preparing and performing offerings, communities engage in mutual cooperation practices that strengthen social ties. In other words, offerings are a tradition that is not only transcendental but also horizontal, as it connects people with each other in social bonds. (Puspitasari, 2020)

Based on field data, Mawar Village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, still relatively consistently carries out the tradition of offerings at various important moments. In the context of modernization, Mawar Village becomes an interesting social laboratory for research, because traditions often abandoned elsewhere still persist there with their meanings constantly reinterpreted. This demonstrates a unique dynamic: on the one hand, the community does not want to abandon their ancestral heritage, but on the other, they also strive to align traditions with their religious teachings. This phenomenon is evidence that the tradition of offerings is dynamic, flexible, and adaptive to changing times, without losing its basic essence as a religious and social expression. (Bellapertiwi & Putra, 2022)

The tradition of offerings and the empirical reality within Javanese society, which maintains this tradition as part of its cultural and social identity, are often overlooked. Some groups, particularly those based on a scripturalist understanding of religion, view offerings as idolatrous, as they are considered offerings to someone other than God. This view creates a

negative stigma that ultimately weakens the tradition's sustainability. On the other hand, the Javanese community of Mawar Village, as one representative of a community that still steadfastly practices offerings, interprets this tradition within a more inclusive religious framework. For them, offerings are not worship of spirits or supernatural beings, but rather symbolic expressions of prayer, gratitude, and respect for ancestors. Through such reinterpretation, offerings remain alive and preserved, even in the face of globalization and modernization that have the potential to erode local traditions. (Huda, 2017)

There are quite sharp differences in perspective. On the one hand, formal normative theology tends to use categories of right or wrong, monotheism or polytheism, in assessing a religious practice (Prihantini, 2017). Meanwhile, society, as the actors of the tradition, views offerings not within rigid theological categories, but rather within a broader cultural framework. As a result, a gap arises between theological assessments and empirical reality. Many previous studies have attempted to explain the offering tradition from an anthropological or ethnographic perspective (Nasihin & Asih, 2019). Clifford Geertz categorized offerings as part of "abangan religion," which is replete with cosmic symbols. Such studies highlight the cultural aspects, symbols, and social structures surrounding the offering practice. However, research rarely attempts to examine it from a social theological perspective, an approach that seeks to understand the relationship between religious faith and social life. Yet, social theology allows us to view offerings not only as a cultural heritage but also as an expression of faith intertwined with the social dimensions of life. (Yuniarto et al., 2022a)

This paper attempts to link the Javanese practice of offerings in Mawar Village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, with a social theological framework as understood from Paul Tillich's ideas and Islamic theological thinking on *hablun minallah* and *hablun minannas*, emphasizing that faith does not stop at the vertical relationship between humans and God, but is also manifested in everyday social actions. Within this framework, offerings can be read as religious symbols that have a social function at the same time. In other words, offerings not only function as a medium of communication with God and ancestors, but also as a social instrument that strengthens relationships between residents. By adopting a social theological perspective, this paper further analyzes it from a social theological perspective, so that two important dimensions can be revealed, namely the religious and social dimensions. (Fatholla, 2020) This article aims to present a more comprehensive understanding of the dual function of offerings, which is often overlooked in previous studies. (Yuniarto et al., 2022b)

Method

This research was conducted through a field study in the Javanese community of Mawar Village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra. The location was chosen based on the consideration that the offering tradition

is a socio-religious phenomenon rich in symbols, meanings, and cultural interpretations that still preserve the offering tradition in various ritual activities. The aim is to provide a more authentic picture of how the Javanese community interprets and lives their ancestral traditions. Data collection was carried out using three main techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews during offering ritual events held by the community. Through this involvement, researchers were able to observe the forms of offerings, the symbolic arrangements used, and community participation in preparing and carrying out the ritual. Interviews were conducted with various key informants, such as community leaders, local religious leaders, and residents active in ritual practices to explore their meanings of the offering tradition, how they understand the relationship between offerings and religious beliefs, and the social function of the practice.

The data analysis process was conducted descriptively and analytically, then interpreting the meaning contained therein using Clifford Geertz's social theology framework on Javanese religion, Paul Tillich's thoughts on theology. This analysis aims to connect the ritual practice of offerings with the concepts of social theology, so that it can be understood how offerings function as religious expressions as well as social instruments in the lives of Javanese society. The interpretation was carried out hermeneutically, namely by reading the symbols of offerings as cultural texts that have layered meanings. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used a triangulation technique, compared and analyzed simultaneously to find similarities and differences.

Results and Discussion

The Tradition of Offerings in Javanese Society

Sajen comes from the word *sesaji*, which means an offering or symbolic gift addressed to transcendent powers, ancestors, or guardian spirits of nature. In Javanese society, sajen usually consists of food, flowers, incense, and other objects arranged with meaning. Sajen is never understood as just an inanimate object, but has a symbolic value that represents prayer, hope, and gratitude. (Nasihin & Dewi, 2019b) Clifford Geertz (1960) calls sajen part of the "abangan" tradition, namely the Javanese belief system that is full of symbols and rituals. For Geertz, sajen is a bridge of communication between humans and supernatural powers, whether personified in the form of ancestors or other transcendent entities. Sajen is also an instrument for maintaining cosmic harmony, namely the balance between the human world, nature, and the spiritual dimension. (Nasihin & Dewi, 2019a)

Offerings are present at various important moments in Javanese life, such as celebrations for births, marriages, and deaths, as well as in communal rituals like *village cleansing* or *nyadran*. In each event, offerings are central to rituals that mark the transition of life's phases, ward off disaster, or ask for safety. (Nurjannah & Haziza, 2023) Furthermore, the function of offerings is not solely religious, but also social. The process of

preparing offerings involves community cooperation, strengthens family ties, and emphasizes Javanese cultural identity. In other words, offerings symbolize the integration of spiritual and social aspects.

Each element in the offering has its own meaning. For example, the tumpeng rice symbolizes a mountain, symbolizing humanity's closeness to God; flowers symbolize purity; and incense is considered a medium for conveying prayer. These symbols are not understood literally, but as representations of values internalized through generations. This symbolism emphasizes that offerings are not a practice of worshipping objects, but rather an expressive way for Javanese people to articulate faith, gratitude, and prayer. Therefore, understanding offerings requires a hermeneutical approach that uncovers the meaning behind the symbols, rather than simply evaluating them formally.

The research results show that the offering tradition in Mawar Village has quite strong religious significance. The Javanese people in this village understand offerings not simply as offerings of objects or food, but as a symbolic medium for conveying prayers, hopes, and gratitude. Offerings are seen as a form of respect for ancestors and a means of spiritual communication with God. Thus, although this practice appears to be rooted in animistic traditions or local beliefs, its meaning has undergone a transformation so that it is not seen as contradictory to the religious beliefs held by the local community.

The practice of offerings is often present at important moments in the life cycle, such as births, weddings, deaths, and collective rituals like village cleansing. At birth, for example, offerings are presented as an expression of gratitude for the gift of a child and a prayer for the baby's safety. At weddings, offerings symbolize prayers for blessings and peace in the newly formed household. Meanwhile, at death, offerings serve as a final tribute to the departed spirit and a means of asking for fortitude for the family left behind.

The religious dimension of offerings is also evident in the community's belief that this ritual can bring about cosmic balance. Offerings are considered a means of maintaining harmony between humans and God, humans and nature, and humans and their ancestors. This concept aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1960) view, which views Javanese religion as a syncretic system emphasizing cosmic harmony. However, the findings of this study confirm that the people of Mawar Village do not understand offerings as a form of worship to anyone other than God. Instead, they view them as symbolic means containing prayers and hopes for a balanced life.

Social Theology and Local Traditions

In the context of Javanese society, social theology provides an understanding that the practice of offerings is not merely a mystical or syncretic expression, but rather a concrete form of maintaining harmonious relationships with God, nature, and fellow human beings. As

a local religious ritual, offerings are relevant to universal religious teachings about gratitude, prayer, and solidarity.

This thinking aligns with the idea that religion must be understood within a cultural context. Clifford Geertz emphasized that religion is a system of symbols that gives meaning to social life. Thus, offerings can be seen as theological expressions embodied in Javanese cultural symbols.

Nevertheless, social theology also allows for criticism of local traditions. This criticism is not intended to eliminate them, but rather to interpret them more contextually. For example, some consider offerings to be practices that contradict formal religious teachings. However, with a social theological approach, offerings can be understood as symbolic media that enrich religious expression, not as a deviation from faith. In the contemporary context, the relevance of social theology is crucial because it can bridge the gap between formal religious norms and cultural practices. Social theology encourages dialogue between religion and local traditions, so that the diversity of religious expression can be accepted as a richness, not a threat.

The connection between the tradition of offerings and social theology provides a more comprehensive understanding of Javanese religiosity. Offerings are not merely viewed as ancestral practices, but as a form of theological praxis that combines transcendental and social dimensions. From this perspective, offerings can be understood as: a religious medium for expressing gratitude, prayer, and hope to God; a social instrument that strengthens solidarity, mutual cooperation, and cultural identity; and a cultural-theological symbol that unites spiritual values with social practices in everyday life.

Through social theology, the tradition of offerings is placed within a more inclusive framework, where religious and cultural values coexist, enriching each other, and creating harmony in community life. This study demonstrates that offerings in Javanese society are not merely mystical practices, but symbols containing religious and social meanings. Using the concept of social theology, the offering tradition can be understood as a contextual religious practice, connecting humans with God and with other humans. Through this approach, research on offerings in Mawar Village has a strong theoretical foundation for interpreting religious cultural practices as expressions of faith that simultaneously strengthen social solidarity. With this framework, offerings can be interpreted as practices that are not only related to spiritual beliefs but also laden with social meaning in building solidarity and maintaining communal order. (Rohmah et al., 2022) From a social theological perspective, this interpretation confirms that the religious faith of the Javanese people is inseparable from the local cultural context. Social theology explains that faith is not only manifested in formal rituals, but also through cultural practices that provide religious meaning. Offerings in Mawar Village can thus be seen as an expression of faith integrated with Javanese culture, where spiritual and symbolic values unite to strengthen people's belief in God and harmony in life.

Social Dimensions in the Sajen Tradition

Several key principles characterize social theology. First, social theology assumes a connection between the transcendent and the immanent, so that religious experience is always bound to a social context. Second, social theology emphasizes praxis, meaning that faith must be embodied in concrete actions that impact the community. Third, social theology is dialogical, seeking to understand religious traditions in interaction with local culture and context. With these principles, social theology can be used as a lens for understanding local religious practices such as offerings, which are imbued with both spiritual and social values.

In addition to the religious dimension, this study found that offerings also have a very prominent social dimension. Preparation of offerings is not done individually, but involves the collective participation of family members and the community. This process is generally carried out cooperatively: women prepare the food, flowers, and ritual equipment, while men prepare the venue, tent, and supporting equipment. This shared involvement demonstrates how offerings serve as a vehicle for strengthening social solidarity. Social theology can be understood as a branch of theology that highlights the relationship between faith, religious values, and social reality. Paul Tillich stated that theology is not only about the relationship between humans and God, but also about how faith is manifested in social and historical contexts. In other words, social theology views religion as something practical, not merely doctrinal. (Endah, 2020)

In the Islamic context, the concept of social theology can be referred to two dimensions of human relations: *hablun minallah* (relationship with God) and *hablun minannas* (relationship with other human beings). These two dimensions are inseparable. True religiosity is reflected not only in vertical ritual worship but also in social behavior that fosters solidarity, justice, and harmony. (Sakin, 2012)

The offering ritual also serves as a means of strengthening family ties. In each ceremony, relatives from various places are usually invited to attend and participate. This gathering serves as a gathering that strengthens emotional bonds between extended family members. Furthermore, the widespread involvement of the village community demonstrates that offerings serve as a social glue that extends beyond the nuclear family. Beyond solidarity, offerings also play a role in maintaining the cultural identity of the Javanese community in Mawar Village. Amidst the tide of modernization and cultural homogenization, offerings serve as markers of identity that distinguish their community from others. This cultural identity is maintained through the reproduction of traditional symbols in rituals, allowing the younger generation to recognize and appreciate their ancestral heritage. Thus, offerings are not only a religious ritual but also a social instrument that maintains the continuity of cultural identity.

Within the framework of social theology, the social dimension of offerings demonstrates that religious practices cannot be separated from

social reality. Social theology teaches that the relationship between humans and God (*hablun minallah*) must be in line with relationships between humans (*hablun minannas*). Offerings in Mawar Village reflect this principle: prayer and reverence for God and ancestors go hand in hand with strengthening social solidarity. Thus, offerings become a form of worship that is not only vertical but also horizontal, strengthening social relations within the community.

One interesting finding in this study is the existence of differing normative views regarding the practice of offerings. Some groups who adhere to formal theology tend to view offerings as a syncretic practice that potentially contradicts the teachings of monotheism. This view arises because offerings are perceived as a form of offering to someone other than God, which is considered invalid within a normative framework. However, the people of Mawar Village have a different perspective. For them, offerings are not a form of worship to spirits or supernatural beings, but rather a symbol of respect and a medium for prayer to God. The symbols used such as tumpeng rice, flowers, and incense—are interpreted metaphorically, not literally. This means that these symbols are understood as representations of gratitude, prayers for safety, and requests for blessings in life.

This is where social theology plays a role as a bridge between normative perspectives and empirical reality. Social theology seeks to understand religious faith not only from formal dogma but also from the daily practices of society. With this approach, offerings can be viewed as religious expressions born from the dialectic of faith and culture. Although their form differs from formal religious rituals, their spiritual values remain aligned with the principles of faith.

The results of this study demonstrate that social theology has significant relevance in understanding the tradition of offerings. *First*, social theology allows for a more inclusive analysis of local religious practices. Rather than viewing offerings as deviations, social theology views them as expressions of faith conditioned by cultural context. *Second*, social theology helps explain the dual function of offerings: as a religious expression and a social instrument. Faith is not only manifested in formal prayer and worship, but also in forms of solidarity, mutual cooperation, and respect for ancestors. Thus, social theology demonstrates that Javanese religious life is holistic: spirituality and sociality go hand in hand. *Third*, social theology also contributes to building dialogue between formal religion and local traditions. In the context of Indonesia's plurality, this approach is crucial to avoid exclusivity and foster a more tolerant understanding of the diversity of religious practices.

Research on the offering tradition in Mawar Village shows that this practice cannot be understood solely on its outward appearance. Offerings are not simply the act of arranging food, flowers, or other objects in a special place. They are symbolic manifestations of the beliefs, values, and perspectives of the Mawar Village community regarding the relationship between humans, nature, and the transcendent. If offerings

are only understood partially, for example, only from a ritual perspective or viewed as a practice that contradicts certain religious teachings, their deeper meaning will be overlooked. In fact, such a partial understanding has the potential to create negative stigmas, such as labeling them as idolatrous or superstitious practices, even though they actually have a strong philosophical and social basis.

Symbolic Meaning in Offerings

Offerings in Mawar Village arose and developed from a cultural system that views the world as an interconnected whole. From the local perspective, human life does not exist in isolation, but is closely connected to the forces of nature and supernatural beings believed to help regulate cosmic harmony. Offerings serve as a symbolic medium for maintaining this balance. For example, when the community is about to begin the planting season, they hold an offering ritual to pray for a bountiful harvest, protection from pests, and good health. Offerings are also present in the context of births, weddings, and even deaths, demonstrating their ingrained integration into the community's life cycle.

In the social realm, offerings are not only individual rituals, but also collective means of strengthening togetherness. The community gathers, works together to prepare the equipment, and then carries out the procession in full unity. At this point, offerings play a crucial social function, building solidarity and a sense of belonging to the traditions passed down from their ancestors.

Each element of the offerings carries symbolic meaning that is inseparable from the way of thinking of the people of Mawar Village. For example, the use of flowers symbolizes purity and beauty, tumpeng rice symbolizes prosperity, and water represents purity and self-purification. These symbols are not merely inanimate objects, but rather a medium for communication with the supernatural. Within Clifford Geertz's framework, the symbols in offerings can be understood as "models of" and "models for" reality, that is, they simultaneously depict the community's view of reality and serve as guidelines for how they should act within that reality. If these symbols are ignored, the offering tradition will be seen as empty and irrational. In fact, it is precisely through these symbols that the people of Mawar Village formulate their identity and values.

However, research also confirms that the tradition of offerings faces significant challenges in the modern era. At least three factors are at play: Lifestyle changes: Modernization brings practical and efficient lifestyles. Younger generations accustomed to technology and modernity tend to view offerings as cumbersome and less relevant.

The influence of formal religion: The emergence of a more scripturalist or puritanical understanding of religion often rejects offerings as something considered contrary to monotheism. This stigma reduces the courage of some communities to preserve traditions openly. The flow of globalization: Information coming from outside opens new horizons, but also brings different cultural values. Local traditions are often pushed aside

by global culture, which is considered more modern and universal. These three factors put the sustainability of offerings at a critical juncture. Traditions can be eroded if they cannot find room for adaptation.

Nevertheless, the research results reveal an interesting dynamic of adaptation. The people of Mawar Village have not abandoned their traditions completely, but rather reinterpreted them to align with their formal religious values. For example, the offering ritual is now more often accompanied by Islamic prayers, such as reciting Surah Al-Fatihah or reciting blessings. Offerings are no longer interpreted as offerings to spirits or spirits, but rather as symbols of charity, gratitude, and respect for ancestors. Thus, the practice remains sustainable, but its meaning is altered to align with the community's religious beliefs. This adaptation demonstrates that offerings are not a static tradition. They possess the flexibility to persist despite changing times. From an anthropological perspective, this demonstrates the "dynamic" nature of culture, where traditions are not simply inherited but also reinterpreted to suit the needs of the community.

In a broader context, offerings can be viewed as part of the religio-social identity of the people of Mawar Village. This tradition is not merely a relic of the past, but rather a living tradition that continues to live and have meaning. This identity signifies that the people of Mawar Village have a unique way of integrating local culture with formal religion. They do not position the two in a binary conflict, but rather strive to find common ground that allows them to coexist.

The tradition of offerings also serves as a marker of cultural differentiation. In a globalized world that tends to standardize identities, offerings provide space for the people of Mawar Village to remain distinct, retaining their distinctive characteristics that distinguish them from other communities. From this perspective, preserving offerings is tantamount to preserving identity. The sustainability of offerings in Mawar Village depends on the extent to which the younger generation can be educated about the symbolic meaning and social function of this tradition. If the younger generation only accepts the negative stigma without understanding its meaning, the tradition will gradually be abandoned. Therefore, documentation efforts, cultural education, and more creative reinterpretation are needed to ensure that offerings remain relevant in the modern era.

For example, offerings can be incorporated into village cultural festivals, enabling them to be present not only in the religious realm but also in the broader public sphere as a source of local pride. In this way, offerings can continue to live, not only as rituals but also as symbols of the community's cultural identity. The discussion of this research confirms that the offering tradition in Mawar Village cannot be understood in isolation. It is a religio-cultural practice rich in symbols, with profound meanings that can only be understood within the community's socio-cultural context. Offerings serve to maintain cosmic harmony, strengthen social solidarity, and strengthen the community's religio-social identity. Despite facing the

challenges of modernity, the influence of formal religion, and globalization, the people of Mawar Village demonstrate their adaptability by reinterpreting the meaning of offerings to align with religious values. This demonstrates that offerings are a dynamic tradition, not merely a static relic, but rather a living part of their identity.

Conclusions

This study concludes that offerings in the Javanese community of Mawar Village have a dual meaning: as a religious expression that connects humans with God and ancestors, and as a social expression that strengthens solidarity and communal identity. From a social theological perspective, offerings are not merely syncretic rituals, but a religious practice that integrates faith with social life. The implications of this study suggest that understanding local traditions such as offerings requires a social theological approach to avoid a reduction in meaning. This research also opens up space for dialogue between normative theology and community cultural practices, thus creating a more contextual understanding of the diversity of religious expressions in Indonesia.

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