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Interplay of modernity, symbolism, and religious practice in Cirebon's death rituals

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Abstract

This study examines the persistence of death rituals in Cirebon amid the pressures of modernity, focusing on how these practices continue to hold deep social and spiritual significance within the community. The research explores how changing values and economic challenges, particularly concerning food preparation and distribution during post-funeral events such as *tahlilan* and slametan, reflect tensions between religious teachings that discourage wastefulness and local beliefs surrounding purity and respect for the deceased. Employing a qualitative case study design, fieldwork was conducted in Trusmi Village, Cirebon, through in-depth interviews and participant observation involving ritual custodians (*kuncen*), family members, community leaders, and elders. Data were analyzed thematically via Blumer's social action theory to interpret how symbols, social meanings, and modernization interact in shaping ritual practices. Findings reveal that while death rituals maintain their function as expressions of religiosity and social solidarity, modern consumerist tendencies have transformed certain practices into displays of prestige, often leading to food waste. The study calls for cultural adaptation and education to align these traditions with Islamic principles of moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and sustainability, reducing waste while reaffirming the rituals' essence as expressions of piety, compassion, and solidarity, ensuring they remain spiritually meaningful and socially relevant in Cirebon society.

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Introduction

Indonesia is known as a multicultural country rich in ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity (Hoon, 2017). This diversity is not only reflected in daily life but also in the way society faces the reality of death. Death is not only understood as the end of human life but also as the termination of an individual's social role in the network of social relations in society (Kastenbaum, 2018). For families and those closest to them, death carries a deep meaning of loss. However, the way Indonesian people express loss and treat the body varies greatly, depending on the traditions, culture, and religious values they adhere to (Manan et al., 2024). Some communities show sadness through crying and deep mourning, while others hold *slametan*, traditional ceremonies, or even certain celebrations. In some traditions, the loss can seem "meaningless" to people outside the tradition, even though it actually has deep meaning in the context of the local culture (Walter, 2012).

This multicultural context is also evident in Cirebon, a region in West Java that is rich in religious traditions and culture (Millie, 2008; Walter, 2012). As a region rich in Islamic values, the people of Cirebon have a unique way of interpreting and carrying out death rituals. Traditions such as *slametan* (a tradition to pray for the deceased to get a proper place in the sight of God), *tahlilan* (an Islamic tradition carried out to pray for and remember the deceased), and *ziarah kubur* (an activity of visiting the grave of a deceased person to pray for them) are an important part of the religious expression of the local community (Millie, 2008). These rituals not only show respect for the deceased, but also reflect the values of togetherness, solidarity, and spirituality in their religious culture. However, amid the rapid flow of modernization and social change, an important question arises: how do these traditions survive? How do the people of Cirebon maintain the values and meaning of death rituals amidst the pressures of modernity that often erode traditional practices?

Academic studies on the values and meaning of death in Indonesia, especially in the context of Cirebon society, are still relatively limited. In the last five years, most of the existing research has focused more on the implementation of Islamic values in general or specific traditions such as *slametan*. For example, studies on the values of tolerance in the Mapag Sri tradition in Slangit Village, Cirebon (Alfarisi & Saepuloh, 2023), and the *slametan* tradition from the perspective of religious education (Basiran et al., 2023). On the other hand, research on the meaning of death rituals such as reuhab in Aceh contributes to the understanding of cultural and religious dynamics (Nurdin & Fazal, 2022), but the context is different from that of Cirebon society. This gap indicates the importance of more specific research, which not only focuses on cultural aspects but also highlights the social and religious dimensions of the death rituals of the Cirebon community.

This study aims to answer an important question: how do social actions related to death rituals, such as corpse management, funeral processions, and post-funeral practices, persist amidst modernization? By answering this question, this study attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature and provide a new understanding of the values and meanings of death in the religious culture of the Cirebon community. This study is also expected to provide an important contribution to enriching the discourse on the sociology of death, especially in the context of a multicultural and religious society such as Indonesia. In addition, this study offers a relevant perspective to understand how local traditions can survive amidst dynamic social changes.

Table 1. Stages of death events in Cirebon

Stages of Death Ceremony	Description	Information
1. Death	The initial process of death, the body is bathed, shrouded, and prayed for.	Performed immediately after someone dies according to Islamic procedures.
2. 1-7 Day Ceremony	After the body is buried, the family performs *tahlilan* for seven consecutive days.	This tradition involves close family and the local community to pray for the spirit.
3. 40-Day Ceremony	As a reminder and prayer for the deceased spirit. Usually done with *tahlilan*.	For families from the lower classes, this stage is usually considered sufficient.
4. *Mendak* 1/100 First Day	An event held on the first day of one hundred days after death.	Usually held by inviting the extended family and the surrounding community to pray together.
5. *Mendak* 2/100 Second Day	Held on the second day of one hundred days after death.	The surrounding community is invited to participate in the *tahlilan* and prayer event.
6. *Mendak* 3/100 Day Three	The peak event involving the entire extended family and local community, accompanied by a big event such as a wedding party celebration.	This is the peak event that requires great preparation, with food, joint prayers, and *tahlilan*. Usually only done by upper-class families.

The researchers highlight the death ceremony tradition in Cirebon, particularly in Trusmi Village, due to its unique post-death rituals that integrate Islamic religious values with strong social and cultural dimensions. These rituals, ranging from immediate burial practices to *tahlilan* and the three-stage *Mendak* events, illustrate how the community maintains tradition amidst modernization, social differentiation, and economic considerations (see Table 1).

Research on Javanese funeral practices rarely focuses specifically on Cirebon, particularly Trusmi Village. Unlike other regions in Java or Southeast Asia, where rituals emphasize mainly spiritual or communal aspects (Adinugraha & Al-Kasyaf, 2025; Danugroho et al., 2025), Cirebon's death rituals uniquely integrate Islamic values, social solidarity, and economic activity, including class-based practices like the three-stage *Mendak* ceremonies. This case illustrates how the community negotiates traditions amid modern pressures, such as consumerism and food waste, highlighting Cirebon's distinct sociocultural configuration compared to other Javanese contexts. While prior studies have largely focused on local or national settings, this research engages with broader international scholarship on death rituals and the sociology of religion to provide comparative and theoretical depth. For instance, Turner's (1967) work on ritual and liminality emphasizes how communal rites transform social structures and negotiate transitions, Douglas's (2003) theories illuminate cultural classifications of purity and waste, and contemporary studies (O'gorman, 1998; Walter, 2017) explore the evolving meanings of death in modern societies. These frameworks help situate the Cirebonese practices within global discussions of ritual adaptation, symbolic meaning, and social action. Using Blumer's (2018) symbolic interactionism, this study examines how ritual participants actively construct, negotiate, and reinterpret meanings, linking spiritual, social, and economic dimensions of death rituals while responding to modern values and promoting solidarity. By integrating both local ethnographic data and international theoretical perspectives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of ritual persistence, cultural negotiation, and modernization in a Southeast Asian context.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the persistence, meanings, and social functions of funeral rituals in Cirebon. A qualitative design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of complex social phenomena, particularly the ways in which local communities negotiate tradition, religion, and modernity. The study applies Blumer's (2018) symbolic interactionism to analyze how participants actively construct, interpret, and assign meaning to ritual practices, linking observed behaviors with broader social and symbolic patterns.

The research was conducted in Trusmi Village, Cirebon, selected for its sociological significance as a community that maintains distinctive post-funeral traditions while actively adapting to modern social and economic pressures. Trusmi provides a unique setting where the intersection of Islamic values, social solidarity, and class-based ritual practices, such as the three-stage *Mendak* ceremonies, can be observed, making it an ideal case to examine both continuity and transformation in ritual life.

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct knowledge or authority regarding the rituals, including *kuncen* (ritual custodians), family members responsible for funeral organization, community leaders, and respected elders. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

Data was gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and direct observation of ritual events. Interviews focused on participants' experiences, interpretations, and the symbolic significance of each ritual stage, while observations documented behaviors, interactions, and the use of material symbols in their natural context. Field notes complemented audio recordings to capture nonverbal cues, contextual details, and researcher reflections. Ethical procedures were strictly followed, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for local Islamic and cultural norms.

All collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic content analysis, guided by Blumer's conceptual framework. Coding focused on social actions, embedded religious values, symbolic meanings, and responses to modernity and economic considerations. Triangulation between interviews and observations enhanced the credibility of the findings, while reflexive notes, repeated readings, and peer debriefing strengthened validity and reliability beyond standard triangulation methods.

Results and Discussion

The role of tradition and the meaning of death rituals in Cirebon society

The meaning of death rituals as a form of respect

The meaning of death rituals as a form of respect in Cirebon society reflects a deep process of symbolic interaction, where individuals define and interpret the meaning of death through shared social actions. These rituals, such as *tahlilan* and *slametan*, are not merely ceremonial but represent a continuous negotiation of meaning between religion, culture, and communal identity. Based on field data, the people of Cirebon perform these rituals to express respect for the spirits of the deceased and to reaffirm social bonds among community members. As Humaeroh (2023) found, *tahlilan*, conducted for seven consecutive days after death, embodies a collective spiritual practice where recited prayers are believed to help alleviate the sins of the deceased. At the

same time, participation in these collective prayers becomes a symbolic action that renews a sense of togetherness and mutual empathy (Manan et al., 2024). Thus, death rituals act as a shared stage where the living continuously negotiate moral and emotional meanings through visible social symbols. Within this shared process, practices such as corpse management and burial also embody social and symbolic dimensions, where the family's social position determines the scale, expenditure, and level of community involvement, illustrating how ritual performance itself becomes a symbolic expression of social hierarchy (Gittings, 2023).

According to the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the death ritual in Cirebon can be seen as a form of symbolic communication that involves certain symbols in every stage of the ritual, from the food served to prayers and burial places. Blumer (1986) stated that these symbols not only have meaning in a social context but also function to form a group identity. For example, the food shared during the *tahlilan* procession is considered a form of alms and respect for the deceased with the symbolism of this food being maintained as a form of social solidarity. Research by Claudia (in Seise, 2021) also confirmed that the implementation of the death ritual with all its ornaments has a very strong meaning in maintaining the relationship between the living and the deceased and functions as a form of giving back to the community.

This phenomenon is further strengthened by the existence of modernization, that affects the implementation of death rituals. Based on interviews with several members of the Cirebon community, it was found that although the implementation of rituals is increasingly adjusted to economic capabilities, the community still tries to maintain the essence of the ritual. The data shows that despite the reduction in the scale of the event, the spiritual and social meaning of this ritual is maintained. This is in line with Denis's findings (in Newiak, 2024) which states that although modernization can affect the way rituals are carried out, the cultural meaning contained in them can still survive. Modernization, in this case, focuses more on changing the ways and methods of implementation, while traditional values are maintained as part of cultural identity.

The following table describes changes in the implementation of death rituals in Cirebon before and after the influence of

Table 2. Changes in the implementation of death rituals in Cirebon

Aspects	Before Modernization	After Modernization
Event Scale	Death rituals are carried out on a large scale, involving many people and families.	Smaller and simpler events, depending on the family's economic capabilities.
Expenditure	Large costs are spent on food, invitations, and decorations.	Expenditure is more efficient, focusing on elements that are considered essential (food and prayer).
Implementation of Rituals	Inviting many people, the event lasts for days with various stages.	The event is shorter and simpler, with a shorter duration.
Food and Banquets	Very abundant food and shared with many people.	Food is adjusted to the family's capabilities, although it remains a symbol of respect.
Social Presence	All levels of society attend, often indicating the social status of the deceased's family.	Attendance is more limited to close family and selected people, although there is still solidarity.
Technology and Modernization	Rituals are carried out traditionally, without the influence of technology.	The use of technology for invitations or documentation of events, such as sending digital invitations.
Focus on Traditional Values	Despite the large scale, the value of respect for the deceased is still maintained.	Spiritual and social values are maintained, although the implementation of the event is more adjusted to economic conditions.

modernization, with a focus on changes in the methods and manner of implementation, as well as the traditional values that are still maintained:

Table 2 shows that although modernization has brought changes in the way death rituals are carried out, deep traditional values are still maintained. The influence of modernization is more visible in the scale and method of implementation, which is more efficient, and by the family's economic capabilities, but the essence of the death ritual as a form of respect is still maintained.

Symbolism and meaning in each stage of the ritual

The symbolism in each stage of the death ritual in Cirebon, especially in Trusmi Village, has a deep meaning, connecting elements of tradition, religion, and social interaction in society. The death ritual carried out at the Trusmi Ancient Mosque, with various stages such as *tahlilan* on the first to seventh days, the 40th day, and the peak in a series of *mendak* 1-3, illustrates the local community's understanding of the life cycle, death, and respect for the deceased. According to Blumer's (1980, 2018) symbolic interactionism theory, the symbols in each stage of this ritual have an important role in creating social meaning resulting from interactions between individuals in society. In this context, the actions and symbols used in the ritual not only have personal meaning for the individual but also create a collective understanding in society about the values that are upheld, such as respect for the deceased, social solidarity, and belief in spirituality.

One of the striking symbols in this ritual is the tradition of distributing offerings in a certain amount, namely 7 or 9 baskets, reflecting a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation, which not only includes complete food but also a sarong that is adjusted to the gender of the deceased. The procession in the death ritual in Trusmi Village reflects the depth of symbolism and respect for tradition, one of which is the procession of bowing when handing over offerings into the big house (Rumah Gede). Under custom, the offerings brought by the descendants of the deceased, some of which must be handed over to the big house (Rumah Gede) and are done by bowing when going through the back door as a form of respect for the respected figure (ancestor of the owner of Rumah Gede), avoiding arrogance and showing humility. This is a profound social symbol Blumer (2018), considering that the Trusmi community believes that this method is a form of respect for ancestors and spiritual figures.

Symbolism in food offerings during death rituals reflects a deep cultural tension, as food shared in *tahlilan* or *mendak* is viewed both as an act of charity and respect for the deceased, yet often avoided for consumption due to the belief that it has been spiritually "contaminated," illustrating, as Keesing (1991) notes, how local cultural beliefs can reshape religious meanings and ritual practices.

The 40th day commemoration ritual and the *mendak* held every 100th day, for 3 periods, also contain symbolism related to time and the life cycle. Each stage of this ritual depicts the process of cleansing the soul and respecting the deceased. On the 40th day, for example, this ritual is held after Isya by turning off the lights to create a solemn atmosphere, which shows that this ritual aims to deepen spiritual meaning and connect individuals with the supernatural world. In symbolic interactionism theory Blumer (1986), this action can be understood as a symbol created by society to create shared meaning to honor and absorb loss.

Overall, the symbolism in each stage of the death ritual in Trusmi Village shows how the community combines religious, social, and economic values in a series of interrelated events. This ritual not only functions as a form of respect for the deceased, but also as a means to strengthen social ties, solidarity, and economic empowerment in the community. Research by Geerd (2021) on symbolism in rituals in Bali shows that rituals not only function as respect for the deceased but also as a means to strengthen social and economic structures in society. Thus, although there are differences in the context and form of the ritual, both have similarities in terms of the importance of maintaining a balance between religious and social values in the death tradition.

The role of religion in maintaining the sustainability of death ritual traditions

Death rituals in the Cirebon community, especially in the Trusmi area, show how close the relationship is between Islam and local traditions in maintaining the continuity of death ritual practices. Religion functions not only as a guide to life but also as a force that unites society in carrying out traditions that are passed down from generation to generation (Sokoy & Idris, 2025). In this case, Islam, with its strong teachings, provides deep meaning and guidance for each stage of the death procession, both in the management of the body, burial, to post-burial activities such as *tahlilan* and *slametan*. Based on research conducted, although modernization and pressure from the development of the times threaten the sustainability of this tradition, the community continues to carry it out because religion is a strong foundation that binds them in these ritual practices.

Religion, in this case Islam, provides a deeper meaning for each individual in carrying out death rituals. This study also shows how religion not only provides spiritual guidance but also strengthens social ties in society. The *tahlilan* and *slametan* rituals, although rooted in religious teachings, have a very strong social dimension. As expressed by Azharghany (2022) the *tahlilan* and *slametan* traditions are not only a means of praying, but also a mechanism to strengthen social solidarity in the community. Blumer (1986) emphasizes that individuals act based on the meaning they give to the existing social situation. In this context, despite economic difficulties, people continue to carry out these rituals because of the meaning they give to the practice, both as a form of respect for the deceased and as a means to maintain social harmony in the community.

Despite the influence of modernization and consumerism, the Cirebon community still maintains the tradition of death rituals because of the meaning contained in the ritual. As found in this study, the community continues to carry out the *tahlilan*, *slametan*, and *mendak* rituals despite economic difficulties because they understand that these rituals are not only a form of respect for the deceased but also part of a social bond that strengthens the sense of solidarity among them. In Blumer's (2018) perspective, these social actions are formed through ongoing social interactions, where the meaning of each action is derived from the collective experience and understanding of the community. Therefore, despite the pressures of changing times, these rituals remain alive because of the meaning given by individuals in the interacting community.

Overall, the role of religion in maintaining the sustainability of death ritual traditions in Cirebon society is very large. Religion provides deep meaning in every aspect of the procession, from the management of the corpse to post-burial activities. These rituals do not only survive because of religious teachings, but also because of the social meaning formed through interactions between individuals in the community. Based

on Blumer's (2018) theory of social action, it can be concluded that the sustainability of this tradition is maintained because of a shared understanding that forms meaning in social actions carried out by the community. Islam, in this case, functions as a force that binds social, cultural, and economic values in society, which allows the death ritual tradition to remain alive and relevant amidst the challenges of the times.

Social actions in death rituals: Tradition, economy, and social solidarity

Mutual cooperation and social solidarity in death rituals

Mutual cooperation and social solidarity, which have been evident since the early stages of death rituals, play a central role in Cirebon society by strengthening social relations and maintaining existing social structures; as seen in practices such as *tahlilan*, *slametan*, and *mendak*, these collective activities symbolize mutual support across social classes, where all community members, regardless of economic status, contribute time, energy, and resources to sustain the shared values of togetherness and respect (Blauner, 1966; Erlan Muliadi et al., 2024). Blumer (1980), in the theory of symbolic interactionism, emphasizes the importance of meaning created in social interaction, where individual actions are driven by the meaning of the symbols that exist in their social life. In the context of death rituals in Cirebon, mutual cooperation and social solidarity can be seen as forms of social action that not only act physically but also give deeper social meaning to the symbols that appear during the death procession. Like the tradition of "*mendak*," which is carried out in three stages, each stage has a certain symbolic meaning for the participating community. Blumer (2018) states that the meaning given by individuals to certain symbols is influenced by their interactions in social groups and their interpretation of the symbols. In this case, the symbols of "*mendak*" and "*tahlilan*" contain meanings that are more than just religious routines. They represent social solidarity that is built through mutual cooperation in helping grieving families and as a form of respect for the deceased.

The Toraja research (Baan et al., 2022), adds to the evidence that highlights how death rituals in other parts of Indonesia also reflect the importance of gotong royong (activities carried out together and voluntarily to achieve a result) in society. The research shows that despite variations in the form of rituals, the essence of the rituals remains the same, namely, building social solidarity and strengthening social ties between members of society. In Javanese society, for example, gotong royong in death rituals is not only in the form of physical assistance but also includes strong emotional support between family members and the community (Cooley, 1992). This is in line with the findings in death rituals in Cirebon, where the community is not only involved in providing food and equipment for the procession but also provides emotional support to each other through *tahlilan* and *slametan*, which are held together.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory (Blumer, 1980), every social action in this death ritual is the result of a symbolic communication process between individuals and groups. In the context of the *tahlilan* and *slametan* rituals, symbols such as food shared and clothes worn by the deceased's family have a certain meaning for the community. The food shared, although sometimes thrown away, also reflects the community's perception of giving and sharing in tradition. For example, the tradition of giving blessings after *tahlilan* is a symbol of a social relationship that supports and shares each

other, although there are social dynamics related to the perception of the usefulness of the food in a broader cultural and religious context.

However, as found in previous studies (Prickett & Timmermans, 2022), there are also challenges related to how this mutual cooperation and social solidarity are implemented, especially in the context of different social classes. In some cases, people with higher social status can afford to organize a death procession at a much greater cost, while people with lower social status may only be able to carry out part of the procession. This suggests differences in economic capacity that influence the extent to which social solidarity can be realized in practice. However, despite differences in social class, social solidarity is maintained through the practice of mutual cooperation, which reflects the deep cultural and religious values of Cirebon society.

Thus, mutual cooperation and social solidarity in the death ritual in Cirebon not only serve as a tool to help the grieving family but also as a mechanism to strengthen social relations within the community. Through the symbolic interactions built during the death procession, the Cirebon community can revive its cultural and religious values while building greater solidarity among members of the community. As expressed by Blumer (1986), social actions in these interactions not only reflect the meaning contained in the symbols but also show how individuals and groups can support each other in facing meaningful life events such as death.

Social disparities and differences in ritual implementation

Social disparities in the implementation of death rituals in Cirebon society show striking disparities between community groups based on socio-economic status. Based on the results of observations and interviews conducted, death rituals in Cirebon, especially in the Trusmi area, have clear variations, depending on the financial capabilities of the bereaved family. For example, families with high socio-economic status tend to carry out the entire series of ritual processions completely and luxuriously, such as holding *tahlilan* and peak *mendak*, or third *mendak*, on a large scale, even involving the making of complete offerings and spending a considerable budget. On the other hand, families with low socio-economic status are unable to carry out the full ritual procession, with several stages not being carried out due to limited funds. This confirms the existence of differences in access to resources that affect the implementation of rituals, which should, from the perspective of religion and culture, have the same meaning, namely respect for the deceased.

In this context, Blumer's theory of social action (Blumer, 2018), provides a deep understanding of how the meaning and symbols contained in death rituals are understood and interpreted by individuals in the social group. According to Blumer (1980), the meaning of social interaction is formed through the interpretation process carried out by individuals involved in social action. The death ritual in Cirebon, with its various stages and symbols, is a social action that contains varying meanings, depending on the social and economic position of the individuals involved. Families with high social status tend to interpret this ritual as a means to show social prestige and strengthen their position in society, while families with low social status may focus more on efforts to carry out religious and cultural obligations, despite limited resources.

This phenomenon of social inequality is in line with the findings of previous studies (Geerd, 1976, 2017), which observed that in the implementation of death rituals in Java, there are differences in the way the

procession is carried out between the upper and lower social classes, where the upper social class tends to use rituals as a tool to strengthen their social status and power networks, while the lower class is more limited in terms of implementing rituals due to economic limitations. This study also shows that in some cases, although people are aware that the ritual is important as a form of respect for the deceased, the inequality in the implementation of rituals is a reflection of the social inequality that exists in society.

In addition, other studies have also revealed that in Java (de Grave, 2018), the implementation of death rituals is influenced by a collective awareness of the importance of sharing and social solidarity. However, the existing social gap causes differentiation in the implementation of rituals (Xygalatas & Maňo, 2024), where those who are better off involve more people in the procession and hold more festive events, while those who are less well off can only invite close family and carry out rituals more simply. This indicates a difference in the meaning of rituals that are basically intended to pay respect, but are distorted by deep socio-economic factors (Hart, 1993; Xygalatas & Maňo, 2024).

Blumer (2018) suggests that in every social interaction, meaning is formed through a process of symbolic communication carried out by the individuals involved. In the context of death rituals, symbols such as *tahlilan*, *mendak*, and *slametan* have deep meanings, but the interpretation of these meanings is greatly influenced by the social position of the individuals involved. Individuals with more resources tend to interpret these rituals as a means to demonstrate status and power, while less fortunate individuals place more emphasis on religious values and togetherness in the community.

Thus, the social gap in the implementation of death rituals in Cirebon not only reflects differences in economic capacity but also creates differences in how society interprets the meaning and symbols contained in the ritual. This inequality shows how social status influences individual social actions in society, according to Blumer's theory, which emphasizes that social meaning is formed through the interaction and interpretation of individuals in their social context (Blumer, 1986).

Economic dimension and adaptation of death rituals

Death rituals in Indonesia, particularly in Cirebon, reflect the interconnection between cultural practices and the economic values embedded in society. The social actions of the Cirebonese community show how tradition and economy intertwine, aligning with Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism, which explains how individuals construct meaning through interaction and shared symbols (Blumer, 1980, 2018). Within these rituals, meanings are produced collectively by families, community leaders, and the wider society. One prominent aspect of the death tradition in Cirebon is its significant economic dimension, as ceremonies such as *tahlilan* and *slametan* involve considerable costs and community participation (Gassing, 2025). The distribution of food during *tahlilan* symbolizes both charity and respect for the deceased, yet some people avoid consuming it due to beliefs that the food has been spiritually contaminated, revealing differing interpretations of ritual symbols.

According to Blumer (1980), meaning in social interaction is dynamic and constructed through very continuous interpretation;thus, variations in perception toward ritual food highlight how religious and cultural beliefs shape symbolic meaning and social behavior. Beyond its spiritual function, the death ritual also serves as an arena for economic empowerment, as local communities engage

in food preparation, offering-making, and craftwork that generate income, particularly for lower economic groups (Straub et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with earlier studies (de Grave, 2018; Geerd, 1976), which emphasizes that Javanese death rituals function not only as a form of respect for the deceased but also as a means of maintaining social relations and economic interdependence through mutual cooperation (Kišjuhas, 2024; Tsegaye, 2025). Over time, however, socio-economic changes have influenced ritual practices. This phenomenon illustrates a transformation of ritual meaning in which the primary focus shifts from spiritual solidarity and communal reciprocity to social prestige and conspicuous display. Such a shift reflects how material practices, like elaborate food offerings, become symbols through which families negotiate social status and community recognition (Douglas, 2003; Walter, 2008). As Douglas (2003) argues, cultural classifications of purity, pollution, and contamination shape social behavior, explaining why some community members refuse food perceived as "contaminated" by the spirit of the deceased. Geerd (2021) concept of social drama further helps interpret these processions as staged performances in which status, hierarchy, and economic power are publicly enacted. From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1955), these evolving interpretations of ritual symbols demonstrate that social actions are not fixed but are continuously constructed and renegotiated by participants, highlighting the interplay between tradition, modernity, and economic considerations in Cirebon's funeral practices.

To reduce waste and restore the essence of togetherness, greater awareness is needed regarding sustainable resource management in rituals. Previous studies (Mahmudah & Saputera, 2019; Saraswaty, 2024) show that adapting rituals to align with community economic conditions can minimize waste without diminishing their sacred value. Education and collaboration among religious leaders, community figures, and local institutions are essential to reframe the meaning of death rituals, from displays of prestige toward practices that emphasize solidarity, sharing, and social sustainability.

Conclusion

The death ritual tradition in Cirebon remains resilient despite pressures of modernity, sustained by its embedded social, religious, and symbolic meanings. The community continues to perform funeral processions, including corpse management, burial, and post-burial practices, as expressions of respect for the deceased and social solidarity. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding excessive food preparation and waste, driven by beliefs that distributed food carries the touch of the deceased's spirit. Such practices, while culturally significant, result in material loss and contradict Islamic teachings that promote efficiency and responsible use of resources.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift in community perceptions, promoting sustainability in rituals without diminishing their social and spiritual essence. Alternatives, such as more efficient food management or channeling excess provisions for social assistance, can preserve the ritual's values while reducing waste. This approach necessitates collaboration among religious leaders, community members, and local authorities to educate and facilitate adaptive practices that align tradition with contemporary environmental and economic considerations. Blumer's symbolic interactionism highlights how socially constructed meanings shape behavior, suggesting that changing interpretations of

ritual symbols, such as the role of food in funeral ceremonies, can lead to meaningful behavioral adjustments in the community.

Future research should further examine community responses to these adaptive measures and the role of religious and cultural figures in guiding sustainable ritual practices. By integrating cultural sensitivity, social responsibility, and modern awareness, Cirebon's funeral traditions can continue to thrive as meaningful, socially cohesive, and environmentally considerate practices.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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