

CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES OF POWER: The Role of *Sekaten* and *Tabot* in the Formation of Local Identity

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Abstract

This study focuses on local traditions in Indonesia, specifically *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Bengkulu, as manifestations of local community identity. The primary data sources are colonial historical archives, magazines, newspapers, and secondary documents related to both traditions. The study aims to analyze how *Sekaten* and *Tabot* shape local identity through ritual practices, symbols, and community participation. Data were analyzed using a postcolonial approach combined with cultural identity theory, as well as power relations and resistance theory. The findings indicate that *Sekaten* and *Tabot* do not function merely as religious rituals, but also as social arenas in which local identity, symbolic authority, and power relations are continuously negotiated and reproduced. Although the two traditions operate within different configurations of power, their persistence amid regime changes from the colonial to the modern period demonstrates the existence of cultural strategies through which communities maintain and rearticulate their respective local identities.

Keywords: *Sekaten*; *Tabot*; Local Identity; Cultural Tradition.

Introduction

Indonesian history cannot be separated from European colonialism, especially Dutch. Since the arrival of colonizers in the 16th century, Indonesia has undergone significant transformations in all aspects of life (Aditya et al., 2024). Colonialism and its legacy continue to be issues that are frequently discussed in historical studies. In recent times, these issues have also become the focus of research in the social sciences (De Juan & Pierskalla, 2017). According to Ziltener & Kunzler (2013), the longer the period of colonization, the more violence, investment in infrastructure, plantations, labor migration, and religious conversion occurred. Colonialism gave rise to social orders in the colonies that differed significantly from those in Europe, even though both were driven by the rise and expansion of capitalism. In Western Europe, the system of private ownership and the commodification of social life unfolded through a process that Antonio Gramsci described as *hegemony*—a blend of compromise, persuasion,

and the strategic use of coercion, implemented gradually through the transformation of institutions such as education, law, religion, politics, and cultural, as well as public private structures. By contrast, colonial administrations often bypassed many of these mechanisms of intervention, relying instead on force and imposing what Ranajit Guha has termed *dominance without hegemony* (Sarkar, 2012).

The imported influence of colonial origins shaped by the identity of the colonizing power served as a determinant for the institutional frameworks that persist today. The identity of colonial authority also played a significant role, as its impact was often transmitted and perpetuated through cultural forms (Acemoglu et al., 2001). In other words, colonial practice was not solely centered on the exploitation of natural resources but also actively shaped and influenced the culture and social life of local communities (Sakti et al., 2024). Traditions and cultural heritage are regarded as essential elements in the construction of local community identity (Fahma & Safitri, 2024). Turner et al. (1994; also cited by Sussman, 2000) stated that social identity tends to become more salient in intergroup contact implies that when individuals or groups from different cultural or social backgrounds interact, their sense or awareness of group identity such as ethnicity, race, religion, or social status becomes more pronounced and clearly articulated.

In Indonesia, there are two well-known traditions, *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Bengkulu. Although they emerge from different historical contexts, involve different actors, and reflect distinct configurations of power relations, both remain highly relevant objects of analysis. *Sekaten* is a local tradition that commemorates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (Ahmad et al., 2021), while *Tabot* commemorates the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson (Gustiana, 2024). However, both traditions originate from religious rituals that function as symbols and representations of local community identity. Turner (1991) states that earlier thinkers such as Freud, Levi-Strauss, Spencer, Durkheim, Mauss, Levy-Bruhl, Hubert, Weber, van Gennep, Wundt, and others, despite their different analytical approaches, did not deny the central role of religion in shaping, maintaining and transforming human social and psychological structures. Both traditions reflect cultural values, historical experiences, and belief systems embedded within their respective communities, while also playing an important role in strengthening social cohesion and solidarity among community members.

The traditional *Sekaten* ceremony has become an integral part of the cultural life of the people in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Muzammil et al., 2022; Nofrima et al., 2021). This tradition is held annually, specifically from the 5th to the 11th of Rabi' al-Awwal, or the month of *Mulud* in the Javanese calendar. The series of *Sekaten* events usually culminates in the *Grebeg Mulud* ceremony, which

takes place on the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal (Putriditya & Soekarba, 2024). This ceremony has become part of Javanese cultural identity as well as a medium for commemorating major Islamic holidays, and this tradition has continued to live and thrive within the community. Over time, *Sekaten* has evolved beyond merely reflecting ethnic identity; it has transformed into a cultural practice observed by segments of the community as an expression of reverence for significant Islamic occasions, particularly the *Maulid Nabi* (Putriditya & Soekarba, 2024).

Tabot, or *Tabot*, is an annual celebration in Bengkulu that is rich in sacred traditions and incorporates elements of the mystical (Rimapradesi & Jatmika, 2021). The series of *Tabot* ceremonies is held annually from the 1st to the 10th of Muharram. Its primary purpose is to commemorate the deaths of Hasan and Husain, who were martyred during the Battle of Karbala in 61 AH at the hands of Yazid's forces, an event deeply rooted in Shi'a tradition (Gustiana, 2024). In Bengkulu, the *Tabot* tradition offers a compelling example of how local culture can become closely intertwined with Islam. *Tabot* blends religious and cultural elements into a distinctive celebration. Although originating from the same historical event commemorated in Shi'a communities, it has undergone a process of adaptation that incorporates local cultural expressions.

This illustrates how Islam can harmoniously integrate with local wisdom, producing a rich and diverse cultural identity in Indonesia. *Sekaten* and *Tabot* have transformed into cultural arenas that articulate the local identities of their respective communities. Both demonstrate that religious and cultural practices are capable of transcending the boundaries of formal authority in shaping distinctive local identities. Both traditions are significant to examine as they reveal unique processes of identity construction within their respective socio-cultural contexts. This finding underscores that local identity is not a static entity, but rather a dynamic outcome of continuous negotiation and transformation. External elements such as Islam were not merely adopted passively, but were actively adapted, reinterpreted, and reconstructed to generate new meanings aligned with the cultural horizons of local communities.

Literature Review

This perspective is consistent with Monica Wilson's findings in her study of *Nyakyusa* religious life in Tanzania, which emphasize that ritual reveals the most fundamental values of a society. Because rituals are conventional and obligatory, what they express are not individual preferences but collective values shared by the group (Wilson, 1951 [2018]). In this sense, ritual can be understood as a primary key to examining the essential structure of human societies. Building on this argument, Turner (1991) suggests that the study of tribal ritual is not only theoretically important but also politically and practically significant, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where a deep understanding

of ritual practices becomes a prerequisite for establishing more stable and mutually acceptable relations between indigenous and non-indigenous societies.

The existence of both *Tabot* and *Sekaten* has been documented since the colonial period, as evidenced by reports in contemporary newspapers. *De Sumatra Post*, for instance, described:

“Compared with such splendor, the *Tabots* of Benkoelen, made of *kiaten* wood, bamboo, colored paper, and ten-cent gold-colored copper, naturally appear very modest. However, Benkoelen is not the Netherlands Indies. Moreover, ‘*Tabotism*’ here is steadily declining. Strictly speaking, there are no true Shi’ites left here. The entire population here has become Sunni. All Muslims here, for example, regard Abu Bakar, Umar, and Utsman as legitimate and just caliphs, for whom they ask God’s blessings in their prayers something that a true Shi’ite would never do. What remains of Shi’ism here is only the last remnant of tradition the custom of setting up *Tabots* every year. Yet even this last remnant is steadily diminishing... Nevertheless, for the time being, we still celebrate the annual *ramé-ramé*.” (*De Sumatra post*, 1940:2).

A newspaper account shows that the *Tabot* tradition continued to exist despite the passage of time and various adjustments. Colonial observers noted that earlier celebrations of *Tabot* were considered rather “rough,” characterized by shouting and leaping about “like madmen.” Over time, however, such practices disappeared. Likewise, the once elaborate decorations gradually diminished, leaving only one or two variations visible, though the tradition itself persisted annually (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1913). This indicates that *Tabot* has endured through changing times and continues to be practiced to this day. A similar continuity can be observed in the case of *Sekaten*, described extensively by Dr. Groneman in his works, where he depicted the *Grebeg Mulud* the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday on the 12th day of the third month of the Islamic calendar. It was observed as a public holiday and accompanied by six days and nights of festivities, known as *Sekaten*, which were preceded by the *Tebiran Mulud*, a prayer gathering on the eve of the celebration. Thousands of people from various regions gathered to participate in the *Garëbëg Mulud* (*Tropisch Nederland; veertiendaagsch tijdschrift ter verbreiding van kennis omtrent Nederlands Oost- en West-Indië*, 1934-1935:119).

Studies on the traditions of *Sekaten* and *Tabot* have been widely conducted, emphasizing religious, cultural, social, and socio-political aspects. Rimapradesi & Jatmika (2021), for instance, find that despite processes of acculturation with local communities, expressions of Indian Muslim cultural identity can still be traced in the ritual structure of *Tabot*. This is evident in the restriction of ritual actors, where sacred processions may only be performed by the descendants of Imam Senggolo, known as the *Tabot* family. Thus, *Tabot* is not entirely detached from the ethnic and genealogical roots of the Bengali community, even though in contemporary practice it has become a collective tradition of the wider Bengkulu

society. This study highlights the dimensions of migration history and cultural transmission in the formation of *Tabot*, but does not sufficiently address changes in ritual meaning within the context of colonial politics, local power relations, or the transformation of ritual functions from sacred practices into representations of identity and tourism.

Furthermore, Megayanti & Arie (2019) employ the theory of *receptio in complexu* to explain that *Tabot* represents the reception of religious teachings into customary law, while simultaneously incorporating elements outside Islam, such as offerings and *Tabot* structures resembling statues. *Tabot* is therefore understood as a cultural practice shaped by encounters between religious norms and local traditions, and possibly influenced by other belief systems, such as Hinduism. Although certain elements may conflict with formal religious doctrines, the tradition continues to be recognized as *living law* because it has become socially and culturally embedded in the community. Meanwhile, Sirajuddin (2016) examines *Tabot* from a normative Islamic legal perspective using the concepts of '*urf sahih*' and '*urf fasid*'. He argues that *Tabot* contains values compatible with Islamic teachings, such as strengthening religious devotion, spiritual awareness, and respect for ancestors, and thus can be categorized as legitimate cultural practice. However, he also identifies certain belief elements considered deviant and in need of reconstruction. This approach demonstrates that studies of *Tabot* have also developed within the domain of normative religious evaluation of ritual practices.

In contrast to *Tabot*, studies of *Sekaten* more frequently emphasize its connection to royal institutions and symbols of religio-political authority in Java. A more contemporary approach is offered by Pramudita et al. (2022) who frame *Sekaten* as a form of cultural-based Islamic *da'wah*. Based on the understanding that *da'wah* constitutes a collective obligation to invite people toward righteous paths, this study argues that preaching strategies are not limited to verbal or textual forms but can also be conveyed through cultural media. *Sekaten* is linked to classical Islamic methods of *da'wah* *al-hikmah* (wisdom), *al-mau'izah al-hasanah* (good counsel), and *al-mujadalah* (dialogue) which are adapted within Javanese cultural contexts. However, the political dimension, including power relations between the royal court, religious authorities, and society, as well as the transformation of *Sekaten* under colonial and postcolonial conditions, receives limited attention. *Sekaten* is primarily understood as a harmonious interaction between Islam and local culture, without in-depth exploration of how it also functions as an arena for legitimizing power and producing social identities.

Another study examines *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta through an ethnographic approach within a constructivist paradigm, viewing ritual as a form of cultural communication. This research emphasizes that the symbols, artifacts, and sequences of *Sekaten* processions are the result of acculturation between Islam,

Hinduism, and Javanese philosophy, serving as nonverbal communication media to transmit moral and philosophical values to society. *Sekaten* is thus understood as a mechanism for the sustainable inheritance of cultural values through ritual practices. However, while offering rich insights into symbolic meanings and cultural communication, this study does not situate *Sekaten* within broader historical power relations between royal courts, society, and political authorities. Consequently, the role of ritual as a site for social identity formation and power legitimation remains underexplored (Mulyana, 2017).

Finally, Khadafi & Harahap (2024) position *Sekaten* as cultural heritage originating from the Islamic Mataram Kingdom, containing philosophical values concerning human relations with God as well as social solidarity within Javanese society. Their study highlights declining interest among younger generations due to modernization, which is perceived as threatening the continuity of the tradition. Therefore, the authors emphasize revitalization efforts through rediscovering local wisdom and promoting cultural awareness among youth to maintain *Sekaten* as a relevant cultural identity. Nevertheless, this preservation-oriented and normative approach does not analyze *Sekaten* as the product of historical processes involving power relations among political institutions, religious authorities, and society.

In general, previous studies on *Tabot* and *Sekaten* have tended to interpret ritual primarily as an expression of cultural harmony, a medium of religious propagation, or a means of transmitting moral values and local identity. The political dimensions of ritual particularly the role of institutions of power such as royal courts, customary elites, religious authorities, colonial administrations, and the modern state in shaping, regulating, and reproducing ritual practices have received relatively limited attention. Moreover, few studies have examined these two traditions comparatively in order to analyze how different configurations of power generate different forms of local identity formation. *Sekaten* developed within the political cosmology of the Javanese courts, where ritual functioned to reinforce the symbolic legitimacy of royal authority. In contrast, *Tabot* emerged from Muslim diasporic communities in a colonial context and was later institutionalized as regional cultural heritage. These divergent historical trajectories indicate that local identity is not shaped solely by tradition, but also through negotiations among ritual authority, political institutions, and social boundaries. Therefore, a significant research gap remains in analyzing *Sekaten* and *Tabot* as arenas of power production and negotiation that actively contribute to the formation of local identity. By situating ritual within frameworks of power relations and colonial postcolonial history, this study seeks to demonstrate how boundaries of power are constructed, maintained, and performed through religious rituals that have become public cultural symbols.

Research Methods

The formation of cultural identity has never been a static process; rather, it emerges through ongoing historical, social, and political interactions. The traditions of *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Bengkulu can be understood as cultural arenas in which communities negotiate their identities within broader forces of religion, the state, and colonialism. Within the framework of cultural identity theory, such practices illustrate that identity is not a fixed inheritance but a social construction continually renegotiated through symbols, rituals, and collective narratives. As Giddens emphasizes, identity in the modern era is never permanent but constitutes a *reflexive project of the self* a reflective endeavor through which individuals and groups continuously construct, evaluate, and renegotiate their sense of self in response to social change.

Identity, therefore, should not be seen as a frozen legacy but as a fluid construct, always open to transformation (Giddens, 2005). Within this framework, the traditions of *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Bengkulu can be regarded as reflective mediums through which communities rearticulate their identities. Through symbols, rituals, and collective narratives, these traditions are not merely preserved as ancestral heritage but are continuously reinterpreted in accordance with the historical context whether in relation to colonial influences, the modern state, or the demands of globalization. Thus, *Sekaten* and *Tabot* function not only as religious ceremonies but also as social arenas where local identities are negotiated, sustained, and reactivated. At the same time, the lens of power and resistance particularly as theorized by Foucault highlights that power is not solely repressive but also productive, shaping the very conditions under which cultural identities are articulated and reconfigured (Foucault, 1977). Power manifests itself in the regulations that govern the performance of traditions, in the legitimization of religious authority, and in the production of knowledge about the meaning of ritual. Yet, local communities are not merely passive recipients. Through the symbolic practices embedded in *Sekaten* and *Tabot*, they enact subtle forms of resistance a means of preserving cultural autonomy while renegotiating their relationship with dominant structures. This is precisely where a postcolonial approach offers a critical perspective. The colonial experience and the legacies of modernity have shaped Indonesia's socio-cultural landscape, including the traditions of *Sekaten* and *Tabot*. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, local communities emerge not simply as victims of colonial domination or state narratives, but as active agents of appropriation, negotiation, and even subversion. In this sense, *Sekaten* and *Tabot* are not only religious celebrations but also sites for the formation of local identity, affirming the capacity for cultural resistance against various forms of hegemony.

Results and Discussion

Construction of Local Identity

Based on Chris Barker's perspective, the concepts of identity and subjectivity are closely intertwined and inseparable. In the 1990s, this theme became a central focus in Western cultural studies, particularly among scholars concerned with the "regimes of the self." Barker emphasizes that identity is not something that arises naturally or independently, but rather the outcome of social and cultural construction. In other words, identity can only be formed through processes of representation and cultural acculturation; it cannot exist independently outside of these contexts. Barker further categorizes identity into two main forms cultural identity and political identity. Cultural identity relates to how individuals position themselves within their social relations, while political identity refers to an individual's position within a community, which is marked by two dimensions: a sense of belonging to one's own group and a sense of otherness in relation to others (Barker, 2003:169-190).

Meanwhile, Stuart Hall (as cited in Ernawati, 2011; 1-9) explains that cultural identity is rooted in cultural commonalities within a group that shares the same historical and ancestral background. In this sense, cultural identity reflects shared historical experiences and cultural symbols that bind people together into a stable and continuous community, even in the face of historical change. This perspective views the group as "one people" fixed and unchanging thus reflecting an essentialist understanding of identity.

Within this framework, religion emerges as a primary factor in shaping identity, both in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and to some extent reflects differences in economic patterns. In these contexts, two dominant religions Orthodox Christianity and Islam developed deeply rooted local traditions. Through a long and complex process of indigenization, both religions became integral parts of local identity, functioning as social glue as well as sources of legitimacy for political authority. This process was dynamic and dialectical, marked by shifts in the balance of power between the two religions (Dirar, 2007). In connection with this, the discussion of power must also be seen in its social function, namely as a system that operates for society as a whole. To understand power relations, it is first necessary to examine how power itself emerges within society (Andriyani et al., 2021).

Indonesia remained under Dutch colonial rule until 1942, and this condition left long-term effects on the patterns of life and worldview of its people. It can even be described as a paradigmatic shift in the overall trajectory of the nation's social development. Such influence emerged because colonial practices not only shaped cultural forms but also embedded particular values within local society (Sakti et al., 2024). The imported influence of colonial origins reflecting the identity of the colonizing power also played a decisive role in shaping present-

day institutions. The identity of the colonial power itself holds significant importance, as its impact was likely transmitted through cultural channels (Acemoglu et al., 2001).

Cultural identity in Indonesia has been shaped by a long history of interaction with various nations. These interactions not only enriched local cultural heritage but also introduced new elements that were later integrated into existing cultural identities. For instance, the influence of Hindu-Buddhist traditions from India and Confucian thought from China played a significant role in shaping cultural identity in countries such as Indonesia. Consequently, cultural identity in this region reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, as well as between local and global elements (Abbasovna, 2024).

When people move across regions, it is often assumed that the relationship between culture and place is fixed and permanent. Within this view, the bond between a specific territory and its identity is perceived as stronger for those who reside within it than for those who come from outside. However, in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the relationship between place and identity has become far more complex. The challenge lies in opening up traditional boundaries, while practices and discourses related to difference and territorial demarcation continue to evolve and intersect, thereby producing an ever more intricate situation (Paasi, 2011).

Sekaten and Tabot as Cultural Heritage and Local Identity

The cultural diversity in Indonesia has been preserved and transmitted across generations through both verbal and nonverbal ritual communication, and these two traditions exemplify this process. *Sekaten* is a ritual that continues to be maintained in Yogyakarta and Surakarta. This ceremony is held to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad SAW (Utami, 2011). The tradition is part of the broader Islamic practices established since the early period of the Demak Sultanate. Historical records indicate that the *Sekaten* tradition evolved from earlier cultural practices among Javanese communities influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. During the Majapahit Kingdom, the community conducted *selamatan* rituals offered to deities and ancestral spirits. Over time, within the Javanese cultural context, the *Sekaten* ceremony came to be held on the 5th day of *Maulud*, the third month of the Javanese calendar (Mulyana, 2017). From a religious perspective, this celebration functions as a medium of *dakwah*, spreading Islamic teachings blended with local cultural elements. The *Grebeg Sekaten* tradition has endured for centuries, originating during the Demak Kingdom in the 16th century, and continues to be observed annually in the third month of the Javanese calendar. *Sekaten* remains a prominent traditional ceremony in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (Pramudita et al., 2022).

The *Sekaten* tradition is believed to originate from the term *Syahadatain*, closely linked to the process of Islamization in Java. The *Walis*, such as Sunan Kalijaga and Sunan Bonang, employed cultural media as instruments of *dakwah*. During the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, Sunan Kalijaga presented *wayang kulit* performances to attract the public's interest in embracing Islam. A primary requirement for the audience was to recite the two sentences of the *shahada*, which simultaneously signified their acceptance of Islam. Over time, the term *Syahadatain* evolved into "*Sekaten*." Another account regarding the origin of the term suggests that it derives from *Sekati*, the name of the sacred gamelan *Kyai Sekati* owned by the Demak Sultanate. This gamelan was played to attract the attention of those unfamiliar with Islam, thus serving as a crucial medium for spreading Islamic teachings in Java (Putriditya & Soekarba, 2024). By contrast, J. Groneman records that the *Sekaten* tradition in Java is believed to derive from the term *seseq ati*, which literally means "deep sorrow" (Groneman, 1888). More specifically, Groneman interprets this origin as reflected in the musical structure of the *Sekaten* gamelan, which symbolically represents Fatimah's lament over the deaths of Hasan and Husain. This symbolism is expressed through a musical progression that moves from a subdued opening, to an emotionally intense and faster middle section, and finally to a calming closure. Although the commemoration of Hasan and Husain's deaths does not fully correspond chronologically with the timing of the *Sekaten* celebration, this narrative persists in the collective memory of Javanese society as a marker of spiritual and emotional values embedded in religious practice.

From this linguistic root, the term "*Sekaten*" (or "*Sekaten*") emerged and later came to denote a series of ceremonies commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, particularly those held in the royal courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Groneman, 1895:7-8).

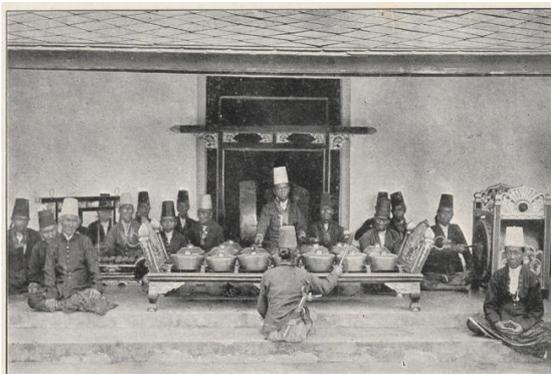


Figure 1. *Sekaten* in the Past
(Source: Soedjono Tirtokoesoemo, *De Garebegs in het Sultanaat Jogjakarta*. H. Buning, 1931:19).



Figure 2. *Sekaten* in the modern era
(Source: <https://www.kratonjogja.id/hajad-dalem/12-syiar-islam-melalui-Sekaten/>)

Basically, cultural practices in Java demonstrate a strong continuity between pre-Islamic traditions and Islamic religious practices, as reflected in the use of gamelan during the *Garebeg* and *Sekaten* celebrations. Although the population had embraced Islam, elements of ritual festivity (*ratné-ramé*) and musical traditions were retained as part of religious expression. From this perspective, the *da'wah* strategies employed by Islamic figures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were accommodative toward local culture, allowing gamelan to remain within religious contexts as a means of cultural transition.

Nevertheless, religious debates persisted regarding the status of gamelan in Islamic law. Some groups classified it as part of *al-malāhī* (diverting instruments) that could potentially distance humans from God. Other arguments, however, emphasized that prohibition applies only when a practice demonstrably causes moral or spiritual harm. Since the gamelan performed during *Sekaten* at the mosque was not accompanied by practices considered normatively deviant such as dancing or profane entertainment most religious scholars at the time accepted its use within ritual and religious settings (Kunst, 1949:267).

While in the Javanese context ritual practices such as *Sekaten* developed through the continuity between pre-Islamic traditions, Islamic proselytization, and the political cosmology of the royal court, in Bengkulu the *Tabot* tradition emerged through a different historical trajectory, shaped by migration, colonialism, and the formation of a Muslim diaspora community. In this sense, *Tabot* did not originate from an established local power structure, but rather from the interaction between migrant communities, colonial interests, and the local population.

Historical sources record that the *Tabot* tradition first arrived in Bengkulu through migrants from the Bengali Shi'a community (India) who had joined the British military in 1685 and were later employed to construct Fort Marlborough. Prior to reaching Bengkulu, they had settled in Aceh but relocated due to insufficient reception, eventually landing in Bengkulu in 756 or 757 *Hijriah* (1336 M). These artisans, originating from Madras and southern Bengal in India and adherents of Shi'a Islam, came at the invitation of the British. Finding compatibility with the local way of life in Bengkulu and under the leadership of Imam Senggolo, they decided to settle and establish a new settlement, later known as *Berkas*, which is now part of the Tengah Padang sub district. The *Tabot* tradition was subsequently transmitted to their descendants, who ultimately integrated with the indigenous population of Bengkulu, forming the community now known as the Sipai people (Dahri, 2009).



Figure 3: *Tabot* in the Past

(Source: Tn Delprat, *Viering van liet Moharran- of Hassan Hoessein-feest. Eigen haard; geillustreerd volkstijdschrift*, 1889, No. 40, 01-01-1889:481).



Figure 4. *Tabot* in the modern era

(Source: <https://eventdaerah.kememparekraf.go.id/detail-event/festival-tabot-2024>)

Sekaten and *Tabot* represent dynamic manifestations of the interplay between Islamic values and deeply rooted local wisdom, both of which have become integral parts of Indonesia's cultural heritage. These traditions reflect the capacity of Indonesian society to preserve while simultaneously transforming cultural practices into authentic and enduring forms of identity. Although originating from different commemorative contexts, at least two points of relevance can be drawn between *Sekaten* and *Tabot*:

First, as cultural symbols. *Sekaten* and *Tabot* serve as manifestations of rich cultural heritage, reflecting longstanding traditions and practices within their respective regions. *Sekaten*, which originated as a religious activity, evolved into a cultural event with historical roots dating back to the Majapahit Kingdom at that time, the meaning and celebration of *Sekaten* referred to the term *sekati*, a unit of weight equivalent to 680 kilograms, illustrating the weight of the gamelan instruments used (Utami, 2011). Similarly, *Tabot*, initially centered solely on religious practices, developed into a celebration that integrates ethnocultural elements (Feener, 1999).

Second, the reinforcement of local community identity. Both the *Sekaten* and *Tabot* traditions play a crucial role in strengthening local community identity. Through collective participation, these ceremonies foster a sense of shared belonging and create strong social bonds among community members. Even during the colonial period, when Indonesia was under Dutch rule, these traditions became spaces where communities could assert their identity and solidarity. J. Groneman's account illustrates the communal dimension of the *Sekaten* celebration:

“...It was the night of Tuesday Wage, the sixth day of the month of Mulud, roughly coinciding with the first quarter of the month, the night when *Sekaten* began. We walked across the large *aloen-aloen* and proceeded to the front yard of the Kedaton, called *Kemandoengan Lor*, or simply *Keben*, named after the trees that grew there. There was unusual activity yet a quiet atmosphere, marked by numerous groups of men, women, and children, as well as many food and drink stalls illuminated by small oil lamps...” (J. Groneman, 1888:466).

A similar pattern is evident in the *Tabot* tradition, where large numbers of people gather to celebrate. As reported in contemporary newspapers: “The celebration concluded with the throwing of the *tabut* into the sea. Thousands of people flocked to the Laut Beach to witness this spectacle...” (De Locomotif, 1928:1). Moreover, the argument of Mr. Delprat in a colonial magazine, based on his observation of the ten-day *Tabot* festival, highlights the strong sense of local community identity embedded in this tradition. According to Mr. Delprat:

“It is truly strange that every year this celebration, exactly as described above, is still being held. It entails considerable expense and requires no small amount of effort from the very few Shi’a in Sumatra, and every year for ten days they are obliged to carry out various formalities that certainly cause them more difficulty than pleasure. This once again proves how traditions and customs among Eastern peoples can persist without change for centuries.” (Eigen Haard; geïllustreerd volkstijdschrift, 1889, no. 40, 01-01-1889:482–483).

The author emphasizes that for ten consecutive days the community must perform ritual formalities that are more burdensome than pleasurable, yet the celebration is consistently maintained from year to year. This condition can be understood as strong evidence of the resilience of tradition within the community. In the framework of local identity formation, the continuity of rituals that require collective participation plays a crucial role in strengthening social solidarity and fostering a sense of togetherness. Repeated communal involvement in ritual practices not only reproduces historical memory of the Karbala tragedy, but also builds social bonds through collective labor, the distribution of ritual roles, and shared public spaces. In this sense, *Tabot* functions not merely as a religious commemoration, but also as a social mechanism that binds the community and affirms the collective identity.

A similar pattern can be observed in the practice of *Sekaten* in Java, where public participation in ritual processions, night markets, and the presence of royal and religious symbols creates a social arena that brings together different segments of society. Such communal participation does not simply represent religious piety, but also reproduces social attachment and a sense of belonging to traditions associated with Javanese local identity. In this context, both *Sekaten* and *Tabot* can be understood as forms of cultural heritage that function as social arenas for reinforcing local community identity through repeated and institutionalized collective practices.

Constructing Local Identity through Sekaten and Tabot

The *Sekaten* tradition is a Javanese ritual institutionalized by the *keraton* (palace) as both a custodian and preserver of cultural heritage, serving simultaneously as a cultural symbol and a source of sociocultural authority (Putriditya & Soekarba, 2024). The Yogyakarta Keraton holds the *Sekaten* ceremony annually, from the 5th to the 11th of *Rabi'ul Awal*, corresponding to the *Mulud* month in the Javanese calendar. The celebration concludes on the 12th of *Rabi'ul Awal* with the *Garebeg Mulud* procession. The climax of *Sekaten*, *Garebeg Mulud*, is marked by the parade of "*Gunungan*," offerings symbolically shaped like mountains, carried from the palace complex to Masjid Gedhe.

There are six distinct types of *Gunungan*: *Gunungan Kakung*, *Gunungan Putri*, *Gunungan Dharat*, *Gunungan Gepak*, *Gunungan Pawuhan*, and *Gunungan Picisan*. Each element of the *Garebeg Mulud* procession carries symbolic meanings: *Gunungan* represent nature, fertility, prosperity, and life; *Gunungan Kakung* embodies the king's character; *Gunungan Putri* represents the queen's persona; *Gunungan Dharmat* symbolizes princes; *Gunungan Gepak* reflects royal daughters; and *Gunungan Pawuhan* represents royal grandchildren. Ultimately, *Sekaten* functions as a distinctive cultural emblem of Yogyakarta, attracting both local and international tourism while reflecting the values and character of the Javanese people (Mulyana, 2017). The following figures present *Gunungan* as documented in the Dutch colonial period and in the contemporary period.

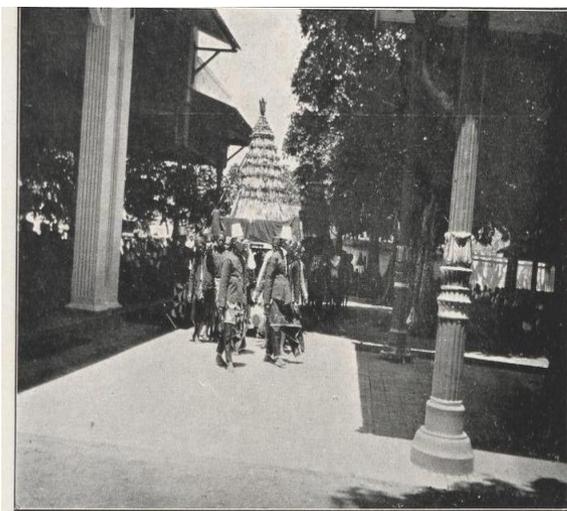


Figure 5: *Mannelijke Goenoengan* (*Gunungan* of men) in the past (Source: Soedjono Tirtokoesoemo, "De Garebegs in het Sultanaat Jogjakarta". H. Buning, 1931:21).



Figure 6. *Vrouwen Goenoengan* (*Gunungan* of women) in the past (Source: Soedjono Tirtokoesoemo, "De Garebegs in het Sultanaat Jogjakarta". H. Buning, 1931:21).



Figure 7: *Gunungan Kakung* (*Gunungan* of men) in the modern era.

(Source: <https://www.kratonjogja.id/kagungan-dalem/15-jenis-jenis-Gunungan-keraton-yogyakarta/>)



Figure 8. *Gunungan Putri* (*Gunungan* of women) in the modern era.

(Source: <https://www.kratonjogja.id/kagungan-dalem/15-jenis-jenis-Gunungan-keraton-yogyakarta/>)

Based on a visual comparison between *Gunungan* in the pre-independence period and contemporary *Gunungan*, no significant changes are observed in terms of form, structure, or symbolic composition. Core elements such as the vertical arrangement, the use of agricultural products as the main materials, and the function of *Gunungan* as an object for the distribution of blessings to the public have been consistently preserved. This continuity suggests that *Gunungan* operates as a ritual symbol endowed with strong sacred meaning and cultural legitimacy, making it relatively resistant to social and political change. The persistence of the *Gunungan* form also indicates the existence of stable mechanisms of tradition transmission through royal institutions and ritual-supporting communities. In this context, preservation is not merely a matter of aesthetic reproduction, but also of reproducing symbolic meanings related to concepts of prosperity, fertility, and harmonious relations between rulers, religion, and society. Thus, the visual continuity of *Gunungan* can be interpreted as a cultural strategy to maintain the legitimacy of tradition amid regime changes, from the colonial period to post-independence and into the era of cultural tourism.

Sekaten in Yogyakarta and Surakarta is a multidimensional event. Beyond serving as a medium for Islamic proselytization, it also functions as an economic, entertainment, and touristic event. The Kraton carries a moral responsibility to promote culture while disseminating religious teachings. As a protector and supporter of Islam, the Kraton strives to strengthen Islamic propagation (*syiar*). The *Sunans* and *Sultans* consistently worked to align cultural aspects with the

construction of structural and cultural facilities to enhance the reach of Islamic teachings (Utami, 2011). During *Sekaten*, cultural exhibitions organized by the Kraton aim to showcase and familiarize the public with local cultural wealth. Participation in the event allows the community not only to celebrate collectively but also to gain a deeper understanding of the embedded cultural values, fostering pride and commitment to preserving ancestral cultural heritage (Khadafi & Harahap, 2024).

The atmosphere of *Sekaten* nights combines solemnity with festivity, as people from diverse backgrounds gather to witness and listen to the *Sekaten* gamelan, performed only during sacred occasions. Despite its large scale, the celebration remains orderly and tranquil. Interestingly, colonial records noted the absence of disorderly behavior, intoxication, or indecent conduct, commonly associated with folk festivals in the West (Eigen haard; geïllustreerd volkstijdschrift, 1888). This emphasis on order and sanctity indicates that *Sekaten* is not merely a cultural celebration but also an expression of Javanese religiosity and ethical values. Moreover, *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Bengkulu function as socio-cultural arenas where communities negotiate their identities amid formal power structures, including colonial authority. Through symbols, rituals, and collective narratives, the communities do not merely preserve ancestral heritage but also reconstruct traditions to remain relevant within their social and historical contexts. *Sekaten* operates as a medium of Islamic da'wah and a marker of Javanese identity, whereas *Tabot* integrates religious elements with the local culture of Bengkulu, shaping the distinct identity of the Sipai community.

Efforts to maintain these cultural traditions are evident in public responses to proposals such as implementing ticketed entry for *Sekaten*. Such proposals sparked controversy and received criticism, as the festival is regarded primarily as an Islamic religious observance (Overzicht van de Inlandsche en Maleisisch-Chineesche pers, 1925). The transformation of *Sekaten* into an annual fair, while seen as beneficial for fostering entrepreneurship, also raised concerns that capitalist pressures could gradually erode the festival's cultural authenticity (Overzicht van de Inlandsche en Maleisisch-Chineesche pers, 1918). Local critiques aimed to defend *Sekaten* as a cultural identity deeply rooted in historical continuity.

Whereas the Keraton plays a central role in *Sekaten*, *Tabot* is primarily community-driven. The *Tabot* ceremony spread from Bengkulu to Painan, Padang, Pariaman, Maninjau, Banda Aceh, Meulaboh, and Singkil. Over time, the practice declined in many locations, surviving primarily in Bengkulu (as *Tabot*) and Pariaman, West Sumatra (as *Tabuik*, from around 1831) (Megayanti & Arie, 2019). Two major family groups maintain *Tabot* traditions *Tabot* Berkas and *Tabot* Bangsal. After the indigenous Bengkulu population, known as the Sipai,

distanced themselves from Shia influence, adherence to *Tabot* became a family obligation, adopted as a means to participate in preserving Bengkulu's cultural heritage. Since 1990, *Tabot* has been incorporated into Bengkulu's tourism agenda as the Festival *Tabot* (Sirajuddin, 2016).

This pattern reflects the tradition's emphasis on active community participation in the practice and preservation of *Tabot*. Key sites, such as the *Tabot* family gathering grounds at Lapangan Tugu near Tapak Paderi Beach and Fort Marlborough, serve as focal points for cultural engagement. The Chinese community played a significant role in Bengkulu's trade sector, especially in settlements along the main road near Fort Marlborough, confirming the area as a major economic center during the British colonial period. Along Tapak Paderi Beach, fishing communities also contributed to the cultural integration of Bengali migrants, the Chinese, and indigenous coastal populations (Rimapradesi & Jatmika, 2021).

"The parade is accompanied by music and small banners, allowing spectators to perform charitable acts by visiting wealthy households to beg. Children participate actively, while elderly participants also join, often engaging in disputes that appear to be resolved during the *Tabot* holiday" (De Sumatra Post, 1938; 3). Similarly, in Padang, *Tabot* celebrations actively involved the local community: "For several days, the *Tabot* celebration has taken place in Padang, as in past times. Residents paraded with their tabut accompanied by drums, and especially at night, many locals joined the procession behind the village art pieces under police supervision" (Deli courant, 1938:2).

In this context, the local population plays a central role in organizing, executing, and sustaining the *Tabot* tradition, which reinforces local identity through historically rooted cultural practices. Colonial responses to local traditions were not consistently repressive but often ambivalent, balancing tolerance with control. This is evident in *Sekaten* in Yogyakarta and *Tabot* in Sumatra, where colonial authorities sought to accommodate local cultural expression while enforcing regulations to maintain political stability and social order. For instance, *Sekaten* was officially inaugurated by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, attended by colonial officials, Javanese nobility, and the Chinese community. In 1927, an exhibition was initiated to separate arts and crafts from the religious-based *Sekaten* celebration, forming an annual event focused on promoting local cultural products. Resident Jasper was widely praised for facilitating the exhibition, showcasing works from across the archipelago. The event was perceived as a colonial policy supporting indigenous economic and cultural development and as a symbol of collaboration between the Dutch, indigenous peoples, and the Chinese. In his speech, the Sultan highlighted the distinction between *Sekaten* as a religious festival and the annual fair as an educational and productive platform. Press reports noted that the exhibition

surpassed Batavia's Pasar Gambir in scope and quality, representing a major step toward introducing indigenous art internationally with support from institutions such as Boeatan (Het koloniaal weekblad; orgaan der Vereeniging Oost en West, jrg 27, 1927:6-7).

The initiative to host an annual fair had previously drawn criticism, including from indigenous writers, who argued that while the fair could stimulate entrepreneurial spirit, it offered little benefit to Javanese society under capitalist pressures. They contended that transforming *Sekaten* into a fair, though potentially positive, conflicted with the festival's original essence (Overzicht van de Inlandsche en Maleisisch-Chineesche pers, 1918:5).

Colonial regulations were not limited to *Sekaten*; they also applied to *Tabot*. Although *Tabot* had become a firmly established local tradition celebrated annually, colonial authorities required official permits for the parade. This policy was justified on grounds of maintaining security and order, as the festivities could occasionally provoke disturbances (Bataviaasch nieuwsblad, 1913; 5). Hence, even when colonial authorities appeared not to interfere directly, they asserted control through administrative mechanisms. Additionally, colonial reports indicated that not all local community members embraced the tradition; some complained about disruptive drum sounds or questioned religious practices considered deviant from Islamic teachings. Nonetheless, *Tabot* continued to thrive as a local tradition and an integral aspect of indigenous identity (De Sumatra Post, 1938).

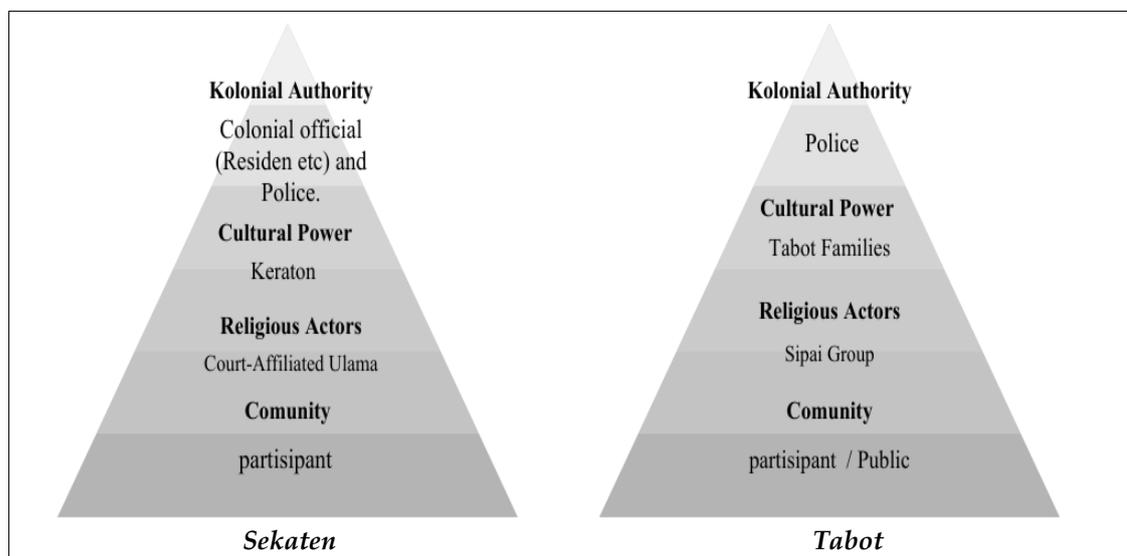


Figure 9. Comparative Pyramid of Authority in *Sekaten* and *Tabot* Ritual Practices (Source: author analysis).

This diagram illustrates differences in actor configurations and the distribution of authority in the *Sekaten* and *Tabot* traditions. In *Sekaten*, the structure of authority is more centralized and institutionalized, with the royal

court serving as the primary cultural authority that mediates relations among religious scholars, the wider public, and colonial authorities. Religious scholars affiliated with the court function as religious authorities operating within the framework of the palace's symbolic power. In contrast, in the *Tabot* tradition, religious and cultural authority is more dispersed at the community level, particularly through *Tabot* their families and the Sipai community, so that ritual legitimacy is derived from genealogical continuity and social participation.

After independence, and especially in the contemporary period, both *Sekaten* and *Tabot* have continued to exist, although they have undergone various changes and adjustments by the relevant authorities. According to the findings of Dutayana & Irawan (2021), *Sekaten* is understood as a space of social and religious integration that brings together Muslims from diverse backgrounds. The diversity of participants, both local and from outside the region, occurring within a relatively harmonious atmosphere, makes *Sekaten* function not only as a religious ritual but also as a mechanism for building social cohesion and strengthening unity within a multicultural society.

The continuity of *Tabot* has also been maintained. In 1990, the descendants of the *Tabot* lineage established the KKT (Keluarga Keturunan Tabut) organization as a formal association of tradition bearers, aimed at strengthening kinship ties while safeguarding the continuity of *Tabot* rituals. This organization has played a crucial role in sustaining the existence of the tradition. One major strategy has been the transformation of *Tabot* into a cultural festival that incorporates dance performances, parades, and exhibition booths representing various districts across Bengkulu Province.

This transformation has increased public appeal and broadened community participation. In practice, the celebration of *Tabot* involves collaboration among the KKT, government institutions, and the wider community. At the same time, the role of the government has become increasingly significant, particularly because the *Tabot* community does not yet have a dedicated physical space for coordinating activities. The current series of events has thus positioned *Tabot* not only as an inherited ritual tradition but also as a socio-cultural attraction that functions to strengthen social cohesion and to attract both domestic and international tourists (Sari, 2019).

Overall, the *Sekaten* tradition in Yogyakarta and the *Tabot* tradition in Bengkulu demonstrate how local culture functions as a space for negotiating identity while simultaneously interacting with formal power structures, including colonial influence. These traditions are not merely religious rituals but also serve as means to assert community identity, preserve social values, and sustain cultural heritage that has developed over centuries. Through symbols, ceremonial processes, and collective participation, communities have been able to adapt and reconstruct traditions to remain relevant within their social,

political, and economic contexts. Furthermore, responses to external pressures such as the commercialization discourse surrounding *Sekaten* or colonial regulations on *Tabot* highlight the community's resilience in preserving the original meanings of these traditions. Despite undergoing transformations, these practices continue to reinforce local identity and reflect cultural wisdom in navigating social change and power dynamics. Thus, *Sekaten* and *Tabot* are not only cultural or religious celebrations but also symbols of community identity resilience and expressions of the ways in which societies negotiate and sustain traditions amidst modernity and colonial influence.

Table 1.

Trajectory of *Sekaten* and *Tabot* from the Colonial to Contemporary Period

Period	<i>Sekaten</i> (Yogyakarta/Surakarta)	<i>Tabot</i> (Bengkulu)
Pre-colonial	Media for Islamic <i>da'wah</i> by the <i>Wali</i> and the <i>Keraton</i>	Shia traditions of the Bengali community
Early colonial	<i>Keraton</i> rituals, colonial tolerance	Community rituals, considered "exotic"
Late colonial	Starting to be arranged, separated from the exhibition	Permitted with police supervision
Post-independence	Symbols of Javanese culture and tourism	Local Identity of Bengkulu
Contemporary	Cultural-religious festival	Cultural festival and tourism

Source: compiled by the author

Conclusion

Sekaten and *Tabot*, which can be understood as rituals commemorating birth and death, cannot be interpreted merely as religious ceremonies or cultural heritage. Rather, they function as social arenas in which relations of power, symbolic authority, and local identity are continuously negotiated and reproduced. Although both traditions originate from Islamic commemorative practices, they have developed through different historical trajectories and configurations of power, which have ultimately shaped distinct patterns of local identity in their respective regions.

Sekaten evolved within the political cosmology of the Javanese court, where the palace acts as the central ritual authority connecting religious scholars, the wider community, and, historically, colonial authorities. It functions as an instrument of symbolic legitimation of royal power as well as a medium of Islamic propagation integrated with local culture. The continuity of *Sekaten* and the *Gunungan* plays a crucial role in preserving cultural traditions and reproducing a form of Javanese identity closely tied to hierarchical social structures. In contrast, *Tabot* in Bengkulu emerged from the migratory

experiences of Muslim diaspora communities in the colonial context and was not rooted in an established local political authority. Ritual authority in *Tabot* is derived from the genealogical legitimacy of hereditary families and community participation, which later underwent transformation when the modern state and the tourism industry became involved in its management.

The comparison between *Sekaten* and *Tabot* demonstrates that the formation of local identity is determined not only by the symbolic content of ritual, but also by who controls, regulates, and represents the ritual in public space. In other words, local identity is the product of ongoing negotiations among ritual authorities, political institutions, and society. The boundaries of power within ritual practices are not static, but shift in response to the dynamics of colonialism, the nation state, and the cultural economy.

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