

Research Article

Ketan, Kolak, and Apem: An Imprint of Three Traditional Food Symbols in Islamic Religious Ceremonies and Rituals During Ramadan

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Eka Yuniati: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0011-2534>**Abstract.**

Ramadan, or *bulan suci* (the month of fasting), is one of the five pillars of Islam and a central ritual in Muslim practice. In Indonesia, this sacred month is marked not only by religious observance but also by vibrant communal celebrations, particularly centered around food. This study explores traditional Ramadan food customs among Muslims in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, using a qualitative ethnographic approach. Data were gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation. Findings reveal that food plays an integral role in Javanese traditions, often embedded in ritual and social practices. In Yogyakarta, a region influenced by the King's decisions and authority, the regulation of food traditions during Ramadan is shaped by hierarchical customs. Three key phases define the food practices during this period: *Ruwahan* (pre-Ramadan), the Ramadan fasting month, and *Eid al-Fitr* (post-Ramadan). During *Ruwahan*, traditional offerings such as *ketan*, *kolak*, and *apem* are prominent. In Ramadan, food is categorized by its timing: meals for breaking the fast and *sahur* (pre-dawn meal). Finally, during *Eid al-Fitr*, the presence of *ketupat* or *kupat* is essential. This study highlights how local culinary traditions in Yogyakarta are deeply intertwined with religious observance, royal influence, and cultural identity during the holy month of Ramadan.

Keywords: Ramadan, ritual, symbol, traditional food, Yogyakarta

1. Introduction

Ramadhan, or '*bulan suci*' (holy month), the ninth month of the Arabic calendar (Hijra), is known as the month of fasting (1). Fasting during Ramadhan is also one of Islam's five pillars and fundamental rituals (2). Muslims abstain from eating food, drinking, smoking, and sexual activity—almost all Muslim communities in the world fast for 29 or 30 days. Muslims perform fasting in different periods, ranging from 13 hours to 20 hours, depending on where they live (country and region). Ramadan rituals start with eating when '*sahur*' before sunrise, then eating when breaking the fast or '*iftar*' after sunset or after the evening prayer call of the mosque, radio, telephone, or television (3). The holy month of Ramadhan is unique and special because it only happens once

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a year, with celebrations that use food symbols or certain ceremonial rituals in various countries

In Indonesia, many parties or celebrations are closely related to food, or they cannot be separated from the symbol of food. One of the religious celebrations related to a series of food arrangements is Ramadhan & Eid in Islam. Every Muslim community has a particular set of habits for carrying out the fasting month. In the holy month of Ramadhan Muslim avoid eating, drinking, and smoking from dawn (*sahur*) to sunset (*iftar*). In the holy month of Ramadhan, people prefer to have a meal with their family (4). At dawn (*sahur*), they had to get up early before sunrise. The foods for *sahur* are usually similar to breakfast, but the menu served is also not different from the food at breaking the fast or *iftar*. Yogyakarta is one of the cities with important icons during the holy month of Ramadan. Various celebrations around Ramadan are always crowded and become a magnetic field that absorbs various communities' interest. Ramadan in Yogyakarta can be said to have its own "Ramadan Ritual System". This complex of rituals includes those associated with the month of Shaban before fasting, the *Sawal* that follows it, and the total number of rituals and other religious acts performed during Ramadan. Many contemporary Javanese Muslims comment on the character of this ritual which requires a certain time complexity. Some people explain that remembering everything has to be completed before and after Ramadan (5). Various kinds of food are served, traded, and served to welcome and carry out the month of Ramadan in Yogyakarta.

This study discusses Ramadhan's traditional food for Muslims in Indonesia, especially society in Yogyakarta. The research questions are as follows: 1) How do people in Yogyakarta interpret the holy month of Ramadhan (related to the preparation of food)?; 2) How to serve the leading food during the Ramadhan (breaking the fast and dawn); 3) What are the modifications/differences of '*kolak*' as a food icon in Ramadhan?

2. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the phenomena experienced based on the participant's view of a problem that occurs and is described in words and language (6)(7). Data collection steps include limiting research topics, collecting information through structured or unstructured observations and interviews, documentation, and designing rules or protocols for recording or recording information related to the holy month of Ramadhan in Yogyakarta (8). The ethnographic study method was chosen to recognize, identify, understand people's behavior, ideas, and views regarding

knowledge and reasons for choosing social media as the basis for the existence of horoscope or astrology service activities (9).

To answer the problem questions in this article, the author conducted a series of data collection techniques. First, researchers made observations by observing the activities of the Ramadhan Market (Ramadan Market) in several places in the Yogyakarta Ramadhan Market such as the Jogokariyan Ramadhan Market, and the Ramadhan Market on Jalan Kaliurang during the month of Ramadan in April 2022. In the second step, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 8 people. The informants consisted of the people of Yogyakarta, food traders, courtiers or *abdi dalem*, and employees of the Yogyakarta Culture Service from April to June 2022. The courtier or *abdi dalem* is a person who devotes himself to the palace and the King with all existing rules. *Abdi dalem* comes from the word *abdi*, the bare word of 'to serve', and *dalem* or *ndalem* which can be interpreted as a pronoun for the mention of 'Susuhan/Sultan (King)'. Five people conducted interviews in person (offline), and three people conducted interviews online. This literature research is used to trace the history of Ramadhan food as a medium for the spread of Islam in Indonesia, especially Yogyakarta. Book literature also refers to traditional Yogyakarta food (in everyday life) collected by the Yogyakarta Cultural Office (Dinas Kebudayaan Yogyakarta), and autoethnography to observe the atmosphere (directly) and I tried to eat *kolak* and some Ramadhan foods in Yogyakarta Ramadhan market.

3. Research Result and Discussion

3.1. Ramadhan in Yogyakarta

Yogyakarta or Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta is one of the areas dubbed the 'special area' because this area is one of the provinces led by a King or *Raja* or *Sultan* who also doubles as governor. Now Yogyakarta Province is ruled by a 10th descendant King known as Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwana X. Not apart from the royal government system, Yogyakarta has a hierarchical level in the form of caste, which consists of government officials, courtiers (*abdi dalem*), and the community or society in Yogyakarta. The people are subject to the rules and policies that apply in Yogyakarta, which are decided by the King. Everything goes according to decisions and hierarchical levels that have been agreed upon or recognized by the entire community of Yogyakarta.



Figure 1: Ramadhan Market in Yogyakarta. (Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2022).

Some traditions that prevail in Yogyakarta are that the King's decisions affect the food preparation process and when to eat. One of these hierarchical structures affects the arrangement of food traditions in the holy month of Ramadan. In the month of Ramadan, especially for the people of Yogyakarta, this stage or cycle is essential and becomes an inseparable unit. Each of these three stages (cycles) has its meaning. Especially before Ramadan, with a series of self-purification rituals (*ruwahan*) before the holy month of Ramadan. This *ruwahan* tradition is closely related to the King's hierarchy. The decision of the King determines how lower levels carry out or carry out *ruwahan* rituals or traditions. In addition, the three cycles also affect the food served by the people of Yogyakarta (during Ramadan). This discussion is divided into three sections: before, during, and after the holy month of Ramadan. There is a detailed explanation.

3.2. Before entering the month of Ramadhan

There are several traditions before starting or entering the month of Ramadhan. One of them is called *ruwahan*. The month of *ruwahan* in the Javanese Calendar or Sya'ban is the Hijriah Islamic calendar is a month before the holy month of Ramadhan (10). During this month, people in Javanese villages, especially in Yogyakarta, conduct a ritual called *ruwahan* or *nyadran*. *Ruwahan* comes from the word '*arwah*' or spirit, while *nyadran* comes from the Arabic word '*sadr*' which means chest or hearth. This *ruwahan* was held in February 2022. In Yogyakarta, this event continues to be celebrated yearly by all families in the village by giving certain types of food to neighbors.

"Before the month of Ramadan, there is something called *ruwahan*. *Ruwahan* consists of three types of food made. Usually there is *kolak*, sticky rice, and *apem* on one plate." (*Sebelum ramadhan itu ada yang namanya ruwahan. Ruwahan itu ada tiga*

jenis makanan yang dibuat. Biasanya ada kolak, ketan, sama apem jadi satu piring gitu). (AA, 40 years old)

In *ruwahan* tradition, ketan, kolak, and apem are three foods that always appear as offerings at various *selamatan* ceremonies. During this time, ketan, kolak, and apem were widely cooked among Javanese families which was then shared with the neighbors. These three foods are placed on a container made of banana leaves called *sudhi*. They are arranged on platted covered with banana leaf called *Samir* and are then covered with banana leaf shaped like a cone called *tutuo*. Berikut merupakan penjelasan secara rinci dari masing-masing jenis tersebut. Below is a detailed description of each of these types.

First, ketan. Ketan is made of white sticky rice cooked with coconut, milk, salt, and pandan leaves. The combination of these ingredients gives a delicious taste to the food. Ketan comes from the Arabic word “*khata’an*” which means mistake, and “*khataam*” which means finished. Ketan is a symbol of sending prayer for the ancestral spirits, hoping that God Almighty receives their souls in heaven. Other meanings of ketan can be interpreted as ‘*kraketan*’ or ‘*ngraketke ikatan*’, which means to glue (strength) the bond. It is interpreted as a symbol of the bond of brotherhood between human beings. This is also marked by the distribution of dishes to neighbors and relatives to strengthen intimacy. The name *ketan* is also believed to have come from *kemutan* in Javanese, which means remember. This is a symbol of self-reflection and introspection on the mistakes and sins that have been committed so far. In other words, human beings must always remember and reflect on His sins.

Second, kolak. This *kolak* is slightly different from *kolak* in general during the month of Ramadan. In the month of *ruwahan*, the people of Yogyakarta make kolak without broth, such as sweets and dry foods. *Kolak* is made from sweet potato slices and bananas cooked with coconut milk, coconut sugar, cloves, cinnamon and salt. The type of bananas that are most appropriate for *kolak* are pisang *kepok* or pisang *raja* (*kepok* banana or *raja* banana). *Kolak* is derived from the Arabic word ‘*qola*’ which means refusing or avoiding unlawful deeds. On the other hand, *kolak* is from ‘*khalaqa*’ which means the Creator. In other words, this *kolak* refers to God Almighty. This *kolak* is a symbol of hope from the maker, to always remember the Creator, God Almighty.

Third, apem. Apem is Javanese rice pancake made from rice flour dough mixed with yeast tape and then roasted over a fire using a skillet or *apem* mold. Apem means apology, which comes from the Arabic term ‘*afwan*’, which means asking for forgiveness.

This word comes from ‘*afuan*’, which means to apologize. Thus, *apem* is a symbol of apology for all sins committed by the deceased. With this, *apem* is interpreted if we are expected to always be able to forgive the mistakes of others, or also interpreted as human repentance begging for forgiveness.



Figure 2: Ketan, kolak, and apem. (Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2022).

Ketan, kolak, and apem are served simultaneously on a banana leaf mat (Samir plate). Separately, each food is placed in a container called *sudhi* made of banana leaves. Ketan is served about 2-3 tablespoons, kolak contains 3 pieces of sweet potatoes and 1 piece of banana, and a pair of apem are stacked. The three food items combined bring the meaning *sedaya kalepatan nyuwun pangapunten*, or apologies for any mistakes by the departed, and the family that is left behind is protected. In addition, ketan - kolak - apem also express the readiness of the deceased to re-unite with God so that their souls may rest in peace ever after (Team Rumah Budaya Tembi (2008), in Murdijati-Gardjito, 2019).

In Yogyakarta, each family member makes *ruwahan* food and distributes this ketan, kolak, and apem to neighbors. In addition, they also usually gather at the mosque. Each family in Yogyakarta usually only makes 10 servings of *ruwahan* snacks each and is used to carry out the tradition of distributing *ruwahan* food to their closest neighbors. As a result of distributing *ruwahan* food to each other, *Ruwahan* is now starting to be modernized with practicality through delivery mode. Every Yogyakarta family no longer cooks their ketan, kolak, and apem. They ordered somewhere together. For example, in one *rumpun tetangga* or RT or neighbour's clump, they collect a fee of Rp. 50,000 to

order three menus in catering. When the designated *ruwahan* day arrives, they will get 5 packs each and distribute them to their neighbors or relatives. Unlike *abdi dalem*, they will celebrate *ruwahan*, a week after the Palace (King) holds *ruwahan* tradition. They will not dare to precede the procession from the Palace. But, society in Yogyakarta, can freely hold *ruwahan* at any time. The essential things are still in the month of *ruwahan*.

On the other hand, outside the event to welcome the month of Ramadan, *ketan*, *kolak*, and *apem* are three foods that always appear together as offerings at various *selamatan* ceremonies. Parents understand that during this month there is *ngirim* (praying to the One God for forgiveness for the ancestors who have died) tradition. In Javanese calendar, *Ruwah* is the month for pilgrimage to the ancestral grave called *nyadran*. During this time, *kolak*, *ketan*, and *apem* were widely made among Javanese families, then shared with neighbors. This trio is identical to the event of death. Before entering the month of Ramadan, the family of the informant made purchases at the market for various Ramadan needs. Wholesalers or markets will usually be full and crowded with consumers who buy necessities such as eggs, dates, syrup, and fruit. A long line would be at the checkout door when they finished shopping. In addition to fulfilling food needs, preparations for Ramadan are carried out with various forms of self-cleaning rituals. Usually, Muslims take a big bath, a symbol of cleansing themselves from all mistakes and sins before entering the holy month called Ramadan.

3.3. On the Holy Month of Ramadhan

In 2022, fasting was held during 29-30 days in April. Fasting begins with *sahur* in the morning and continues with breaking the fast in the evening. *Sahur* in Indonesia, starting at 04.30 to 05.10 WIB. Everyone had to finish their meal before dawn. *Iftar* is done at sunset. In Indonesia, they usually break the fast or *iftar* at 17.30-18.00. If we observe the time of fasting in Indonesia, there is something unique about it. The longer the fasting time, the longer it will take to break the fast until dawn. On 1 Ramadan 2022 it is recorded that *iftar* starts on. However, on the 29th of Ramadan it is seen that *iftar* and *sahur* begin. Generally fasting in Indonesia is done 13-14 hours.

The food menu in Ramadan is very diverse. Here I divide it into two important discussions. First, the food menu for breaking the fast. Snacks or dessert, usually this food is eaten when people are breaking the fast. People generally provide 2-3 types of snacks, tend to sweet food, such as date fruits (*kurma*), cake, *gorengan*, bread. Also, choosing to break the fast, they drink hot and cold drinks like hot tea, iced tea, coconut

ice, and fruit ice. For people who decide on warm drinks, they say that, “I choose warm drinks, so the body is not surprised, because after fasting for one day, to adjust the temperature the body”.



Figure 3: Snacks for breaking the fast. (Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2022).

For snacks, they usually calculate the number of snacks according to the number of family members. For example, AD family who has 4 family members, they will prepare 4 snacks and not too much,

“For example, my family at home consists of 4 people, so if we buy snacks, it’s just the four of us. Usually we buy martabak, or bread at the market. It depends on the taste, what the family members want that day.” (Misalkan ya, keluargaku itu kan dirumah ada 4 orang ya, jadi kalau beli jajan cuma 4. Biasanya kita beli martabak, atau roti di pasar. Tergantung selera anggota keluarga juga lagi pengen apa pas hari itu). (AD, 25 years old)

Here also, I found the differences between families with few and many family members. When they only consist of about 3-4 people, they prefer to buy food at the market (pasar). In contrast, to those main foods, usually eaten after eating a snack. Such as rice

followed by some side dishes. There are several types of food, informants said to be 'masakan rumahan' (home food) served by a small family at home. In addition, some informants argue that during Ramadhan they eat food that they want.

"In my opinion, Ramadan is usually more about cooking and eating what we want to eat, which we don't usually eat on a daily basis. Because in my family, we buy the food we want from outside or my mother sometimes cooks it herself at home." (*Kalau menurutku, ramadhan itu biasanya lebih ke masak dan makan apa yang pengen kita makan sih, yang tidak biasanya kita makan pas sehari-hari. Soalnya kalau di keluargaku, kita beli makanan sendiri yang kita pengen diluar atau ibu kadang masak sendiri dirumah*). (DH, 24 years old)

Informants argued that they cooked and ate what they wanted to eat. Usually, the family has one or two important menus and favorites. They cook the food with the family, which is cooked by their mother at home (in the nuclear family). They usually start to prepare the food ingredients from 2.00-3.00 pm. They mix and cook them according to the required portion until the food is ready to be served at sunset or breaking the fast time (*iftar*).



Figure 4: Home food or cooking for *iftar*. (Source: Fieldwork Documentation, 2022).

At dawn (*sahur*), the food menu served differs significantly from iftar's. Usually, they reheat the food when breaking the fast to eat it at dawn. In Yogyakarta, people eat

sahur with various habits, some only drink water and eat snacks, and some eat rice. They eat before dawn, call to prayer or *imsak* reverberates. For drinks, they usually tend to drink warm drinks at dawn. The choice of food and drink depends on the wishes of the person who performs *sahur* or iftar, and is closely related to the family's food consumption tastes.

3.4. After Ramadhan or 'Lebaran'

Lebaran is in the tenth month of the Islamic calendar, following immediately after Ramadan. The first day is known as Idul Fitri in Indonesia. One of the foods that must be present during Eid al-Fitr is ketupat or *kupat*. Ketupat is a typical food containing rice wrapped in young or woven coconut leaves. This has become a hereditary tradition in the archipelago as a marker of the arrival of Eid al-Fitr. *Kupat* is an abbreviation for the Javanese phrase '*ngaku lepat*', or which means admitting a mistake. Therefore, some say *kupat* is '*laku papat*' or four actions. The four actions contained in the word '*laku papat*' are lebaran, overflow, *leburan* and *laburan*. Another side dish of ketupat is chicken *opor* and beef *rendang*, which are served simultaneously.



Figure 5: Ketupat, chicken opor, and beef rendang (Lebaran Food). (Source: Personal Documentation, 2022).

3.5. Discussion

Ramadan food for the people of Yogyakarta is a form of ritual and tradition carried out from generation to generation by the people of Yogyakarta itself. A series of celebrations of the holy month of Ramadan, which may seem simple in explanation and description, give a unique set of meanings to Javanese families in Yogyakarta, as revealed by the informants in this study. Symbols of family closeness and social relations are seen during celebrations to welcome the arrival of Ramadan, the month of *ruwahan*.

The *ruwahan* tradition describes food as a symbol of harmonizing relations between community members in a community or regional scope. Delivering food can strengthen the relationship in it. In addition, when entering the month of Ramadan, eating together at iftar and *sahur* may be a rare moment for some families in Java. They may rarely eat together in their daily life because they are now busy with busy workers outside the home. 29-30 days is essential for them to return to having fun and joking with other family members. The same thing happens on Eid celebrations when they gather with their families.

The explanation of *ruwahan* above is closely related to the meaning of food as a purified context through its relationship with supernatural beings and their processes. (12,13). *Ruwahan* as a process of *selametan* and how prayer is conveyed through food symbols such as *ketan*, *kolak*, and *apem*. Associated with hierarchical issues in the life of the people of Yogyakarta, many influences on the food served. This can be seen in the *ruwahan* celebration, there is not much difference between the food consumed by the nobles and the kings in the *Keraton* (palace). The difference lies in the timing of the celebration.

Here is a difference in the presentation of compote between before Ramadan and during the month of Ramadan. In general, *kolak* is a sweet dish made from sweet potatoes, bananas, and *kolang-kaling*. Some of these ingredients are boiled with coconut milk and palm sugar. However, unlike the usual *kolak* in the month of Ramadhan, *kolak* in *ruwahan* usually has a thicker, even almost sour taste. And the taste is usually a bit sweeter with a little coconut milk left. This proves that a symbol and identity is built into the bowl of compote served in the Ramadan tradition. There is a difference between the compote served during *ruwahan* and the holy month of Ramadhan. When talking about food, it cannot be separated from its containers, which makes a proper presentation. If we take a closer look to see Javanese food, food packaging and decoration (garnish) are all made of leaves, such as young coconut leaves or *janur* on *ketupat* food during Eid. The use of leaves as a food wrapper has a function, among others, to make food more durable and provide its own flavor.

4. Conclusion

Food and human life are inseparable. Javanese people have traditions that always involve food in their organization. For Javanese, the food produced locally has a vital role in the various activities or traditions, and rituals, especially in the holy month of

Ramadhan. In Yogyakarta, there are three cycles or stages to welcome this holy month of Ramadhan: before Ramadan or the *Ruwahan* tradition, during Ramadan, and after Ramadan or Eid (Eid al-Fitr). Each of the three times or the process or stages contains a variety of special foods that are present and enjoyed by the people of Yogyakarta. The food that was present was not just ordinary food; but from several menus that were served had different values and meanings. This paper is expected to benefit readers regarding traditional foods, traditions, and rituals in Yogyakarta related to Ramadan. This paper is far from perfect and requires improvements and additions from various parties. Suggestions are very open to me as a writer to get input related to this paper.

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