



# QURBAN AS CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND ISLAMIC MODERATION IN INDONESIA: FROM RELIGIOUS RITUAL TO HUMANITARIAN ETHICS AND INTERFAITH COEXISTENCE



Mohammad Muslih<sup>1</sup> , Ide Mafaza Sansayto<sup>2</sup> , Ahmad Inzimam Haq<sup>3</sup>

## \*Correspondence:

Email:  
idemafazasansayto@unida.g  
ontor.ac.id

## Authors Affiliation:

<sup>1,2</sup> Universitas Darussalam  
Gontor, Indonesia  
<sup>3</sup> Islamic University of Madinah,  
Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

This article examines qurban as a form of cultural transformation that contributes to the strengthening of humanitarian ethics and Islamic moderation within Indonesia's pluralistic society. The study responds to gaps in previous research, which has largely tended to frame qurban primarily as a normative ritual or a legalistic practice, without sufficiently engaging with contemporary social dynamics such as humanitarian philanthropy and interfaith coexistence. The primary data of this research include normative and ethical Islamic sources analyzed through close textual engagement, encompassing classical Qur'anic exegesis and the intellectual contributions of authoritative Muslim figures such as al-Ghazali, Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Malik Bennabi. These are complemented by the Indonesian institutional documents, including fatwas issued by the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) and qurban reports produced by the National Zakat Agency (BAZNAS). Secondary data consist of recent academic studies and documented community practices related to qurban implementation. The analysis employs a hermeneutic – sociocultural approach through thematic coding and the Double Movement method. The findings indicate that qurban embodies values of compassion, self-restraint, and social responsibility, which play a significant role in reinforcing Islamic moderation in Indonesia.

## Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji qurban sebagai bentuk transformasi kultural yang berperan dalam penguatan etika kemanusiaan dan moderasi Islam dalam masyarakat majemuk Indonesia. Penelitian ini berangkat dari keterbatasan studi sebelumnya yang cenderung memposisikan qurban sebagai ritual normatif atau praktik legalistik, tanpa mengaitkannya secara mendalam dengan dinamika sosial kontemporer seperti filantropi kemanusiaan dan koeksistensi antaragama. Data primer penelitian ini mencakup teks-teks normatif dan etis Islam yang dianalisis secara langsung, termasuk tafsir klasik serta pemikiran tokoh-tokoh Muslim otoritatif seperti al-Ghazali, Fazlur Rahman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, dan Malik Bennabi, serta dokumen kelembagaan Indonesia seperti fatwa MUI dan laporan qurban BAZNAS. Data sekunder meliputi kajian akademik mutakhir dan praktik komunitas terdokumentasi. Analisis dilakukan melalui pendekatan hermeneutis-sosiokultural dengan pengodean tematik dan metode double movement. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa qurban mengandung nilai belas kasih, pengendalian diri, dan tanggung jawab sosial yang memperkuat moderasi Islam di Indonesia.

## Background

In contemporary pluralistic societies, religious practices such as qurban are increasingly observed as mere ritual formalities. In many Muslim communities, qurban is often reduced to an annual tradition of slaughtering animals and distributing meat with



limited reflection on its spiritual, ethical, and humanitarian significance.<sup>1</sup> In the Indonesian context, several studies highlight a similar trend. In major urban centres such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung, qurban committees tend to prioritize logistical aspects—ranging from animal procurement, slaughter scheduling, health inspections, and distribution quotas—while largely neglecting educational programs that could explore the ethical meaning of sacrifice, including empathy, environmental concerns, or long-term social welfare.<sup>2</sup> Observations from institutions such as LPPOM – MUI and Dompot Dhuafa further show that many mosques treat qurban as a highly technical ritual, resulting in temporary meat distribution but little impact on structural poverty or community empowerment. In some regions, such as West Nusa Tenggara and parts of East Java, qurban has also been used as a symbol of family prestige: households with higher income purchase larger or “exotic” livestock to signal social standing, thereby overshadowing the prophetic values behind the practice. Moreover, cases of chaotic distribution – such as overcrowded gatherings and waste mismanagement reported annually in Jakarta and Medan – illustrate how qurban often enacted as a performative public event rather than a transformative ethical practice.<sup>3</sup>

Similar phenomena can also be observed at the international level. Ethnographic reports from South Asia show how qurban is frequently perceived as a marker of social status, with families prioritizing the size, cost, or perceived “quality” of the sacrificial animal rather than reflecting on its moral essence. A number of humanitarian organizations also highlight that despite millions of animals being sacrificed globally each year, the impact of qurban on structural poverty remains minimal because it is rarely integrated with long-term community welfare programs.<sup>4</sup> These cases demonstrate a broader contemporary challenge: although the ritual is widely practiced, its moral, cultural, and social dimensions are often overshadowed by technical or symbolic concerns. The diminishing awareness of the ethical and humanitarian dimensions of qurban has weakened its transformative role in cultivating compassion, social responsibility, and interfaith solidarity. This issue is particularly critical in the context of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*), which emphasizes balance, justice, empathy, and dialogue—values urgently needed amid rising polarization and exclusivism in plural societies.<sup>5</sup> When understood solely in ritualistic terms, the potential of qurban to shape humanitarian ethics and strengthen interreligious coexistence becomes obscured.

Historically, qurban marks the shift from pre-Islamic sacrificial traditions toward a *tawhīdic* paradigm that affirms human dignity and the direct relationship between humans and God. This transition reflects not only a change in ritual practice but also a profound reorientation of spiritual and social values. Moreover, within the broader Abrahamic traditions, the narrative of Prophet Ibrahim positions qurban as a shared symbol of

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<sup>1</sup> Javier Gil – Gimeno and Celso Sanchez Capdequi, “The Persistence of Sacrifice as Self – Sacrifice and Its Contemporary Embodiment in the 9/11 Rescuers and COVID – 19 Healthcare Professionals,” *Religions* 12, no. 5 (2021): 323.

<sup>2</sup> Dewa Agung Gede Agung, Ahmad Munjin Nasih, and Bayu Kurniawan, “Local Wisdom as a Model of Interfaith Communication in Creating Religious Harmony in Indonesia,” *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 9 (2024): 100827.

<sup>3</sup> Khairullah Zikri, “Deconstructing Animal Sacrifice (Qurban) in Idul Adha,” *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 12, no. 2 (2011): 235 – 54.

<sup>4</sup> Damanhuri Basyir, “The Practice of Qurban: Integrating Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions,” *El-Sunan: Journal of Hadith and Religious Studies* 2, no. 2 (2024): 156 – 65.

<sup>5</sup> Sarkawi Sarkawi, “Nilai – Nilai Dakwah Dalam Ibadah Kurban,” *Islamika: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 22, no. 01 (2022): 1 – 15.

submission, sacrifice, and compassion, providing a potential platform for interfaith ethical reflection.<sup>6</sup> Over the past five years, scholarly discussions on qurban have increasingly focused on its legal, institutional, and socio – economic dimensions. For instance, Sarkawi (2022) in "Nilai – nilai Dakwah dalam Ibadah Kurban" examines qurban primarily as a medium of da'wah and religious instruction, emphasizing normative religious values while paying limited attention to its broader cultural or humanitarian implications.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Ahmad Fauzi and Nur Aini (2021) in "Ibadah Kurban dalam Perspektif Fikih Sosial" analyze qurban within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and social welfare, focusing mainly on legal compliance and distribution mechanisms.<sup>8</sup> More recent studies with empirical orientations, such as Basyir (2024) in "The Practice of Qurban: Integrating Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions" explore qurban from functional perspectives related to economic redistribution and environmental awareness.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Raka Noviani et al. (2024) in "Qurban sebagai Sarana Penguatan Nilai – nilai Kebersamaan dalam Masyarakat" highlight the role of qurban in fostering social cohesion at the community level.<sup>10</sup> Despite their valuable contributions, these studies largely treat qurban as a normative, functional, or socio – economic practice, leaving underexplored its potential as a process of cultural transformation, a manifestation of Islamic moderation (wasatiyyah), and an ethical framework for humanitarian and interfaith engagement.

Despite these rich dimensions, existing scholarship on qurban remains heavily focused on legal rulings, jurisprudential debates, and procedural aspects.<sup>11</sup> Research that examine qurban through the lenses of cultural transformation, ethical meaning, and religious moderation are still limited. Furthermore, little research explores qurban as an interfaith ethical instrument or analyses it through multidisciplinary perspectives integrating hermeneutic, ethical, and anthropological approaches. To address this gap, the present study aims to: (1) Analyse qurban as a cultural transformation that extends beyond ritual formality into a meaningful spiritual and social practice; (2) Examine how qurban embodies the principles of Islamic moderation, particularly balance, justice, and social empathy; and (3) Explore the potential of qurban to cultivate humanitarian ethics and strengthen interfaith coexistence within plural societies.

This study offers a new conceptual reading of qurban as an instrument of interfaith public ethics. By situating qurban within the frameworks of theological interpretation, cultural anthropology, and normative ethical theory, this research demonstrates its relevance for contemporary humanitarian discourse and interreligious collaboration. In doing so, it expands the discussion beyond conventional jurisprudential understandings of ritual worship. This study adopts a qualitative – descriptive design integrating hermeneutical, ethical, and socio – anthropological approaches.<sup>12</sup> Primary data include

<sup>6</sup> Mariyam Jameelah and Rahmat Aiman, "Universal Values as a Meeting Point in Abrahamic Religions: Insights from Schuon and Smith," *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (2025): 29 – 46.

<sup>7</sup> Sarkawi, "Nilai – Nilai Dakwah dalam Ibadah Kurban."

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Fauzi and Nur Aini, "Ibadah Kurban dalam Perspektif Fikih Sosial," *Mawaizh* 4, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32923/maw.v12i1.1752>.

<sup>9</sup> Basyir, "The Practice of Qurban: Integrating Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions."

<sup>10</sup> Raka Noviani et al., "Qurban Sebagai Sarana Penguatan Nilai – Nilai Kebersamaan Dalam Masyarakat," *Akhlaq: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Dan Filsafat* 2, no. 1 (2025): 98 – 109.

<sup>11</sup> Noviani et al.

<sup>12</sup> Mohamad Miftahul Huda Choirul Mahfud, Ahmad Wibowo, "Islamic Interdisciplinary Studies and Its Contribution to the Development of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia.," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research.*, 2021, 47 – 52, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17499/jsser.25240>.

Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, classical exegetical texts, and Indonesian institutional documents such as MUI fatwas and BAZNAS qurban reports. These are complemented by secondary sources consisting of scholarly literature and publicly documented community practices related to qurban.<sup>13</sup> Data were collected purposively by compiling a textual corpus and selecting institutional reports and verified case documentation relevant to sacrifice, humanitarian ethics, and religious moderation.<sup>14</sup> The data analysis applied thematic coding combined with Fazlur Rahman's Double – Movement hermeneutics, enabling the reconstruction of classical meanings and their reinterpretation within contemporary socio – cultural contexts.<sup>15</sup> Triangulation across scriptural sources, institutional documents, and case – based evidence was used to enhance interpretive validity.<sup>16</sup> The analysis focuses on identifying the ethical and moderation values embodied in qurban practices, while acknowledging that publicly documented cases provide contextual illustrations rather than generalizable empirical conclusions.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Tradition of Sesajen (Ritual Offerings) and the Degradation of Human Dignity**

The tradition of sesajen has long served as a significant component of religio – cultural life in various Indonesian communities. In its common practice, sesajen consists of placing food, beverages, incense, flowers, or symbolic objects in sites believed to hold spiritual potency, including agricultural boundaries, seashores, graveyards, riversides, or large trees. These offerings are typically intended to honor ancestral spirits or appease supernatural beings, often to "avoid harm" or "obtain blessings." Koentjaraningrat defines animisme – dinamisme as "subtle spirits who possess powers that can influence human life." Despite the expansion of modern religious discourse, the tradition endures because it is emotionally meaningful and provides psychological reassurance for its practitioners.<sup>18</sup>

From an Islamic theological perspective, however, sesajen is considered problematic because it contains explicit elements of shirk: directing supplication, expectation, or reverence to entities other than God.<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an states unequivocally, "Do not call upon any being besides Allah—none can help or save you" (QS. Al – 'Ankabūt (29):17). Classical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah similarly assert, "Al – 'ibadatu kulluha la tuşrafu illa lillah" (All forms of worship must be directed only to God). Thus, the act of offering sesajen is viewed not simply as a theological error but as a distortion of human dignity,

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<sup>13</sup> A. Mukti Ali, *An Introduction to Religious Research Methodology*, ed. Abdullah Taufik and Karim Rusli (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 1990). 45.

<sup>14</sup> John W Creswell, "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches 4rd" (Sage publications, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> John O Voll, "Fazlur Rahman. Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 172 Pages, Index. \$15.00," *Review of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (1983): 192 – 93.

<sup>16</sup> A Octamaya Tenri Awaru et al., "The Islamization of the Social Sciences: A Review," *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 4, no. 3 (2021): 24 – 41.

<sup>17</sup> John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Beatty, "Varieties of Javanese Religion," *An Anthropological Account*, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Woodward, "Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta," in *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (University of Arizona Press, Tucson; Association for Asian Studies Monograph, 45, 1989).

because it shifts a person's agency from conscious submission to God toward magical fear or dependence on imagined forces.<sup>20</sup>

Sociologically, sesajen embodies a transactional worldview, in which human beings negotiate with invisible powers through symbolic payments.<sup>21</sup> Protection, fertility, or prosperity is believed to result from the "exchange" between humans and unseen entities. This structure places the human being in a subordinate position to supernatural actors, diminishing the *karamah insaniyyah*, namely the dignity endowed with intellect and free will. Such fear-based religiosity prevents spiritual transcendence and replaces devotion with anxiety. From an anthropological lens, sesajen illustrates what Clifford Geertz conceptualizes religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations".<sup>22</sup> Yet, when these symbols rigidify into habitual rituals devoid of critical reflection, they lose ethical depth and risk becoming "empty forms without inner conviction". In these cases, ritual becomes an outlet for uncontrolled spiritual desires: the desire for power over the unseen, the desire for safety without moral struggle, or the desire for certainty without intellectual discipline.

Islam conceptualizes *shahwah* (desire) not merely as appetite but as any unregulated impulse that seeks spiritual control outside divine guidance.<sup>23</sup> When sesajen becomes a vessel for these desires, it becomes a source of spiritual degradation. In contrast, Islam promotes *tazkiyat al-nafs*, the purification of the self, described in the Qur'an as the path to dignity: "He has succeeded who purifies it" (QS. Al-Shams (91):9). This purification framework elevates human autonomy, moral reasoning, and spiritual maturity. Modern religious studies also show that practices devoid of rational reflection reinforce dependency on external mystical authorities. They weaken innovation, limit social transformation, and perpetuate cultural subordination. Thus, although sesajen is often perceived as a cultural heritage worth preserving, its humanitarian and ethical implications require critical evaluation.

In contrast, Islam introduces *qurban* as a transformative ritual that redirects human desire away from magical transactions toward spiritual, ethical, and social refinement. QS. Al-Hajj (22):37 emphasizes this shift explicitly: "It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah, but your piety." *Qurban* is therefore educational rather than magical; it disciplines ego, humanizes desire, and strengthens generosity through meat distribution to the poor. It replaces fear with sincerity, superstition with devotion, and dependency with moral agency. To clarify this contrast, the following table summarizes the major distinctions between sesajen and *qurban*:

**Table 1.** Comparative Framework: Sesajen vs Qurban and Their Implications for Human Dignity

Dimension	Sesajen (Ritual Offerings)	Qurban (Prophetic Sacrifice)
Theological Orientation	Directed to spirits/deities; associated with <i>shirk</i> .	Directed solely to Allah; rooted in <i>tawhīd</i> .

<sup>20</sup> A M Shahsavarani, E A M Abadi, and M H Kalkhoran, "Stress Assessment and Development of a Primary Care of Psychology Service," *International Journal of Medical Reviews* 2, no. 2 (2015): 230–41.

<sup>21</sup> Robert W Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Cultures" (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> S al-Attas, "Islam and Secularism (Kuala Lumpur, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization)," *International Islamic University Malaysia*, 1993.



Dimension	Sesajen (Ritual Offerings)	Qurban (Prophetic Sacrifice)
Motivating Emotion	Fear of disturbance, desire for magical protection.	Piety, sincerity, devotion, and obedience.
Human – Divine Relationship	Transactional ("give to receive").	Non – transactional; based on surrender and trust.
Psychological Effect	Dependence, insecurity, irrational fear.	Moral courage, self – control, and spiritual discipline.
Social Function	Symbolic protection; minimal social impact.	Welfare distribution; strengthens solidarity.
Anthropological Meaning	A symbol that may fossilize into empty ritual.	An ethical – educative act shaping moral behavior.
Impact on Human Dignity	Reduces autonomy; subjects humans to unseen powers.	Elevates dignity through conscious worship.

Ultimately, critiquing sesajen does not equate to rejecting local culture; rather, it affirms that authentic spirituality must liberate rather than confine. Qurban, as a tawhīdic transformation of older offering rituals, reorients the human being toward a dignified relationship with God and society. By shifting from fear to moral responsibility and from magical dependency to ethical agency, qurban functions as a theological and cultural paradigm that upholds human dignity and fosters compassion, justice, and coexistence.

### Qurban as the Divine Sublimation of Human Desire

In Islam, qurban is not merely understood as the act of slaughtering an animal during the Eid al – Adha celebration; it also serves as a profound symbol of spiritual and ethical transformation. In this sense, qurban represents a channelling of "human desire", namely the innate human impulse to give, share, and offer something of value. However, this impulse is guided and disciplined within the framework of servitude to Allah, rather than directed toward a magical or transactional relationship as commonly found in sesajen traditions. Thus, qurban functions as a means of elevating the basic human instinct into an act of divine significance, rather than merely satisfying emotional or social impulses.<sup>24</sup>

In Islamic tradition, the practice of qurban represents a profoundly spiritual dimension. This act teaches that giving is not merely an expression of generosity but an affirmation of the value of ikhlaṣ—the sincere devotion to doing good solely for the sake of Allah. A Muslim is taught to understand that the animal being sacrificed is not the central element of the ritual; rather, it is the piety (taqwa) that underlies the act. As the Qur'an asserts, "It is neither their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah, but it is your piety that reaches Him" (Q. al – Ḥajj [22]: 37). This verse underscores that spiritual value transcends outward action; herein lies the superiority of the Islamic teaching on qurban, which transforms a material act into a bridge toward divine consciousness.<sup>25</sup> This argument is further substantiated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr's explanation in his book *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, which states that:

*"The act of sacrifice in Islam symbolizes the submission of the human ego before the Divine Will and the reaffirmation of man's moral responsibility toward all creation... In traditional societies, every act that involved taking the life of another creature (whether for food or ritual) was accompanied by a sense of sacred responsibility."*

<sup>24</sup> J S Nielsen, "Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22 (1999): 903.

<sup>25</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (Zondervan, 2009).

*Modern man, however, has lost this sense of the sacred, and with it, the moral bond that ties him to the rest of creation."*<sup>26</sup>

More than a mere annual ritual, qurban is a continuous educational process. It serves as a medium for the internalization of moral and humanistic values. Education through qurban is not theoretical but profoundly practical and experiential: one learns to control the ego, detach from material attachments, and cultivate social empathy through the distribution of meat to those in need. In this context, qurban aligns with the concept of character education, which emphasizes the formation of integrity and social empathy as essential dimensions of moral development. Hence, qurban serves as a profound moral and spiritual instrument that is intrinsically embedded within the fabric of social life. From psychological perspective, qurban can be perceived as an exercise in subduing the animalistic desires within the human self. These desires refer to egocentric, greedy, and domineering tendencies which, if left unchecked, can damage both social and spiritual relationships. Through qurban, an individual is trained to sacrifice a portion of their possessions for the common good and as an act of devotion to God. This corresponds to moral psychology theories that emphasize the importance of altruistic behaviour in shaping a healthy and balanced personality.<sup>27</sup> In this context, qurban is not merely a symbol of material sacrifice, but also an act of self-control and the reinforcement of one's spiritual dimension.

The values embodied in qurban are profoundly relevant in contemporary social contexts. In an age increasingly dominated by competitive and consumerist culture, qurban offers an ethical alternative grounded in the spirit of generosity and sincerity. The practice of distributing meat to the poor and needy not only alleviates their economic burdens but also fosters social solidarity. This demonstrates that qurban possesses a strong social dimension, capable of bridging social disparities and strengthening communal cohesion within society.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, qurban transcends the boundaries of a mere religious ritual, evolving into a transformative social movement. Within the theological framework, qurban also reaffirms the concept of tawhīd in a practical sense. The act of slaughtering an animal while invoking the name of Allah serves as a declaration that all forms of giving and sacrifice are performed for and because of God alone. This stands in direct contrast to the practices of sesajen, which are often polytheistic or syncretic in nature, involving forces other than God. Thus, qurban not only reinforces the monotheistic orientation of Islam but also functions as a mechanism for purifying faith (‘aqidah) and refining one's intentions.<sup>29</sup>

Equally important, qurban embodies the values of justice and equitable distribution. In its implementation, Islam prescribes that the meat of the sacrificed animal be shared with those in need, both within one's family circle and the broader community. This signifies that worship in Islam encompasses not only a vertical dimension (ḥablun min Allah), but also a horizontal one (ḥablun min al – nas). Through qurban, Islam emphasizes that true spirituality must manifest in social improvement, poverty alleviation, and the strengthening of justice within society.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, qurban serves as a symbol of the

<sup>26</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man," 1968.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> John L Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Sachiko Murata and William C Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, vol. 134 (Paragon House New York, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

harmonious relationship between human beings, God, and fellow humans. It integrates the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions into a single, profoundly meaningful act. When carried out with full awareness and sincerity, qurban transcends the status of a mere annual religious ritual and becomes a continuous means of self – purification and moral development. In this sense, qurban constitutes an essential component of Islam's holistic system of spiritual education, which is comprehensive, transformative, and perpetually relevant across all ages.<sup>31</sup>

## The Deconstruction of the Perception of Qurban as the Islamic Version of Offering Rituals

The misunderstanding among certain communities regarding the meaning of qurban often arises from its superficial resemblance to the long – standing local tradition of sesajen (offering rituals). Practices such as placing food or specific objects in locations considered sacred (such as the corners of rice fields, rivers, or graves) continue to this day and are, by some, believed to hold a spiritual value comparable to the sacrificial act in Islamic teachings. This has given rise to the perception that qurban is merely a continuation or adaptation of sesajen practices. However, theologically and ethically, the two are fundamentally opposed. In Islam, qurban is not a symbolic offering to unseen entities, but an act of total submission to the transcendent God and a reaffirmation of noble human values. It is this external similarity that often misleads the general public and reinforces syncretic tendencies in their religious experience.<sup>32</sup>

The view that equates qurban with sesajen is further reinforced by popular narratives surrounding the Qur'anic story of Habil and Qabil. In many popular interpretations, this story is often presented as the origin of the qurban practice: when both brothers offered a 'sacrifice' to God, and only Habil's offering was accepted. However, such an understanding is frequently oversimplified and lacks contextual depth, leading people to perceive the story through a framework similar to that of sesajen—as a competitive and ritualistic act. In truth, the essence of the story of Habil and Qabil lies not in its outward form, but in its inner moral and spiritual values: sincerity, intention, and devotion in one's effort to draw closer to God.<sup>33</sup> Fazlur Rahman, in *Major Themes of the Qur'an* explains the spiritual meaning behind the story of Habil and Qabil as a moral lesson that underscores the importance of intention and ethical awareness in every human action. He writes:

*"The Qur'an consistently emphasizes that the value of an act lies not in its external performance but in the moral quality of the intention that animates it. The act itself is but a vehicle; what gives it worth is the sincerity and God-consciousness with which it is performed. Thus, the Qur'an rejects ritualism divorced from moral purpose, for the true criterion of acceptance with God is taqwa, not the outward form of sacrifice. The story of Abel and Cain serves as a warning that when worship and sacrifice become a means of rivalry, jealousy, or display, they lose their spiritual essence. What God accepts is not the offering itself, but the moral and spiritual attitude that inspires it."*<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> al – Attas, "Islam and Secularism (Kuala Lumpur, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization)."

<sup>32</sup> al – Attas.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*.

<sup>34</sup> Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.



The above quote further reinforces that contemporary Qur'anic exegesis emphasizes that God accepts a sacrifice not based on its type or form, but on the taqwa (piety) of the one who offers it, as affirmed in Surah al-Ma'idah [5]: 27: "Indeed, Allah only accepts (sacrifices) from those who are righteous." An anthropological perspective also helps to clarify the fundamental distinction between sesajen (offerings) and qurban (sacrifice). Sesajen is often practiced within the framework of human relations with natural forces or supernatural beings, with the expectation of receiving protection or blessings. This relationship is transactional in nature and not necessarily grounded in universal moral values. In contrast, qurban in Islam is intended as an expression of devotion to the One God, devoid of any expectation of worldly reward or reciprocity. Within this framework, qurban rejects the principle of spiritual transnationalism that underlies the sesajen tradition. According to research by Julia Day Howell, qurban in Islam can be understood as a ritual that cultivates social and spiritual ethics rather than a mere symbolic ceremony.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, it is important to note that Islam, as a religion of tawhīd (monotheism), emerged to transform and reconstruct deviant religious practices into those aligned with divine unity and humanistic values. Islam does not categorically reject all forms of local cultural expression; rather, it provides a deeper and more meaningful orientation to religious practices. In this context, qurban represents a process of domestication and reorientation of the innate human impulse to sacrifice and to give. Instead of being directed toward ambiguous supernatural forces, such acts of sacrifice are devoted to Allah, grounded in sincerity and humanity. This aligns with Mohammed Arkoun's perspective that Islam is not merely a normative religion but also possesses a historical-critical dimension that calls for the reinterpretation of religious symbols.<sup>36</sup>

In its historical practice, the story of Prophet Abraham (Ibrāhīm) and his son Ishmael (Isma'īl) serves as a paradigmatic model of qurban. Their story contains no trace of the offering (sesajen) tradition; rather, it represents a clear rejection of human sacrifice, which was common in many ancient pagan cultures. Through this narrative, Islam affirms that God does not desire the sacrifice of human beings, but rather sincerity and obedience. Within this framework, qurban becomes a spiritual moment for the purification of the soul from animalistic and egocentric tendencies, rather than an attempt to "appease" supernatural powers. Thus, the spirit of qurban embodies the liberation of humankind from the shackles of superstition and magical culture.<sup>37</sup>

Theological and cultural studies indicate that in modern societies, the practice of qurban can serve as an effective medium of social education, countering consumerist and individualistic mentalities. By emphasizing distribution and social concern, qurban becomes a social praxis that transcends ritual symbolism. This clearly distinguishes qurban, which embodies transformative meaning, from sesajen, which remains merely symbolic without producing tangible social impact or ethical transformation. This emphasis aligns with Talal Asad's critique that religious rituals should not be viewed merely as cultural expressions but as systems of praxis possessing the potential to reshape social structures.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Julia Day Howell, "Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 3 (2001): 701–29.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammed Arkoun and Robert D Lee, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>38</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Jhu Press, 1993).

From the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), qurban has never been associated with offerings to spirits or supernatural entities. All the requirements and regulations of qurban are directed toward human welfare—whether in terms of the type of animal, the time of sacrifice, or the distribution of its meat. This indicates that qurban constitutes part of Islam's rational ethical system, grounded in the promotion of communal well-being. There is no authentic textual evidence suggesting that qurban contains any magical or mystical elements akin to *sesajen* (ritual offerings). This reinforces the position of qurban as an act of worship purified from any trace of polytheism and firmly upholding the principle of monotheism.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, it is essential for Muslims to understand that qurban is not an Islamic version of *sesajen* (ritual offering). Qurban is a form of worship with distinct theological and social orientations, serving as a hallmark of a civilization founded on *tawhīd* (monotheism). Efforts to clarify and realign this understanding must be part of a continuous program of religious education, ensuring that society does not fall into syncretism that distorts the essence of worship. The purification of qurban from the influences of offering-based cultural practices constitutes both an intellectual and spiritual responsibility for Muslims in the modern era.

### The Meaning of Qurban in Purifying the Self and Elevating Human Dignity

The deepest meaning of qurban in Islam does not merely lie in the ritual act of animal sacrifice, but rather extends to a profound symbolic and spiritual dimension. Qurban serves as a metaphor for the slaughtering of the bestial desires within the human self—those impulses that drive egoism, greed, and domination over others. Through qurban, one is reminded to detach from material attachments and to strengthen one's relationship of submission to God. In this sense, qurban functions as a spiritual practice aimed at purifying the human soul from destructive desires that diminish human dignity.<sup>40</sup> Other, qurban functions as a spiritual practice aimed at purifying the human soul from destructive desires that diminish human dignity. This understanding resonates with al-Ghazālī's assertion that "*la qīmata lil a'mali bi-ṣuwariha, innama bi-ma tuḥdithuhu fī l-qulūb min taḥdhīb wa taṣfiyah*"—that actions derive their true value not from outward form, but from their capacity to discipline and purify the heart.<sup>41</sup> From this perspective, qurban aligns with the concept of *tazkiyatul-nafs* (the purification of the self) as a prerequisite for attaining closeness to God.

Qurban also serves as a concrete expression of self-control, or what is referred to in moral psychology as "delayed gratification." According to research in the psychology of religion, sacrificial practices within religious traditions can foster strong character traits of self-regulation and social empathy.<sup>42</sup> In this context, the act of animal sacrifice is not merely symbolic, but a spiritual exercise that shapes both personal and social ethics. When a Muslim performs the qurban sacrifice, he is, in essence, slaughtering his own ego, greed, and individualistic tendencies that erode the spirit of collectivity. Thus, qurban is not merely an annual religious ritual, but a continuous process of ethical

<sup>39</sup> Hashim Kamali, "Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society," *Karmali, Ayla*, 2007, 3–4.

<sup>40</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Penerbit UTM Press, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Abū Ḥamid Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1939). 76.

<sup>42</sup> Vassilis Saroglou, "Religion and the Five Factors of Personality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Personality and Individual Differences* 32, no. 1 (2002): 15–25.

transformation and renewal. On the other hand, qurban functions as a social practice that embodies the distribution of justice and compassion. Islam emphasizes the importance of sharing the meat of qurban with those in need as a tangible expression of solidarity and wealth redistribution. In this context, qurban serves as a means to strengthen social cohesion and to reduce inequality.<sup>43</sup> Research conducted by the Center for Muslim Philanthropy indicates that charitable activities grounded in spiritual values, such as qurban, have long-term effects on social resilience and the improvement of living standards among marginalized communities. Thus, the essence of qurban lies not only in the vertical relationship between human beings and God but also in the horizontal relationship among fellow human beings.

The humanistic value embodied in qurban is manifested through the sincerity of giving, rather than through a transactional logic that expects reciprocity. In many modern cultures, sacrifice is often interpreted as a political or economic strategy—one that frequently entails sacrificing others for personal gain. This stands in stark contrast to the spirit of qurban in Islam, which explicitly rejects any form of sacrifice that degrades, exploits, or harms fellow human beings.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, qurban is not a legitimization of subordination, but rather an invitation to dismantle the structures of social injustice that arise from the collective human ego. The critique of the practice of “sacrificing” human beings within social relations is also highly relevant in contemporary contexts. In professional settings, political relations, and even within families, it is common to find patterns of interaction that turn others into “victims” for the sake of personal ambition. This phenomenon represents a distortion of the true meaning of qurban, which should serve as a means of liberation rather than oppression. Studies in Islamic social ethics emphasize that the essence of qurban lies in rejecting all forms of sacrifice carried out in the name of unjust and disproportionate interests.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, qurban teaches equality and respect for human dignity, rather than reinforcing hierarchies of power.

Philosophically, qurban affirms the concept of social tawhīd—the oneness of God as reflected in social justice and human integrity. Submission to Allah through the act of qurban cannot be separated from one's social responsibility toward others. In the thought of Fazlur Rahman and Malik Bennabi, the ethical and social dimensions of worship are far more significant than its formal symbolism.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the act of slaughtering an animal without self-transformation and social justice becomes a mere empty formality. Conversely, when qurban serves as a means of self-reflection, personal improvement, and the renewal of social relations, it becomes a living and meaningful act of worship. Qurban in Islam is not a mystical practice like *sesajen* (ritual offerings), but rather a divine injunction aimed at cultivating submission, compassion, and self-transformation. Islam rejects sacrificial models rooted in magical or transactional relationships with supernatural entities, as commonly found in certain local traditions of *sesajen*. The purpose of qurban is not to ward off misfortune or seek material blessings, but to draw closer to God (*taqarrub ila Allah*) and to purify the inner self.<sup>47</sup> This fundamental distinction affirms the

<sup>43</sup> Khurshid Ahmad, *Economic Development in an Islamic Framework* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1979). p. 45 – 48.

<sup>44</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective* (Islamic Texts Society, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 15 (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Malik Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World* (Islamic Book Trust Kuala Lumpur, 2003).

position of qurban as a symbol of spiritual rationality rather than a mystification of transcendent power.

Thus, qurban represents the highest reflection of humanity's submission to the Divine and compassion toward others. It is an act of worship that unites the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with fellow humans within the framework of tawhīd and ethics. When performed with full awareness, qurban becomes both a means of liberating the soul from the domination of base desires and a social instrument for strengthening communal solidarity. In an increasingly individualistic and fragmented world, the spirit of qurban serves as a call to return to the values of sincerity, simplicity, and unconditional compassion.

### **Qurban as a Space for Dialogue between Ritual, Moderation, and Humanity**

The phenomenon of qurban represents a religious practice rich in spiritual and moral symbolism, while simultaneously serving as a medium of cultural transformation throughout human civilization. In ancient traditions, acts of sacrifice were often associated with attempts to appease deities, ensure fertility, or ward off misfortune. However, Islam introduced a new paradigm: qurban is no longer understood as a magical or physical offering, but as a tawhīdic act of worship grounded in spiritual awareness and social responsibility. The Qur'an emphasizes that what reaches God is neither the blood nor the flesh of the sacrificed animal, but the piety of the believer (QS. al – Ḥajj [22]: 37).<sup>48</sup> This verse signifies a radical shift from symbolic ritualism to a form of worship that cultivates universal human values. Within this framework, qurban becomes a symbol of human liberation from egoism, greed, and subjugation to carnal desires, while simultaneously representing a cultural transformation—from formal ritualism to prophetic morality that reinforces civility and ethical refinement.

In the context of Islamic moderation (wasatīyyah), qurban embodies the principle of balance between ritual and substance, as well as between individual piety and social responsibility.<sup>49</sup> Islam rejects two equally reductive extremes: ritual formalism that neglects ethical meaning, and moral secularization that eliminates the spiritual dimension. Through qurban, the value of moderation is expressed in the sincerity of worship and social sensitivity toward others. The spirit of wasatīyyah affirms that true worship does not end with symbolism but extends into the realms of social, economic, and humanitarian engagement.<sup>50</sup> Within this framework, qurban serves as a medium of moral education that cultivates balance between transcendental orientation and humanistic praxis. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* affirms this balance as the core of Islamic spirituality:

*"Islam is, above all, a religion of balance and equilibrium, avoiding all forms of excess and deficiency. It unites the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the social, the transcendent and the immanent, giving to each its proper due."*<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Kathir, "Imad Al – Din Abu Al – Fida," *Isma 'Il, Tafsir Al-Qur'an Al-'Azim*, 1998.

<sup>49</sup> Abdulloh Sajjad Ahmad, "Religious Moderation in Islamic Rreligious Practices Through Wasathiyah Concept," *Sunan Kalijaga International Journal on Islamic Educational Research* 5, no. 2 (2021): 72 – 84.

<sup>50</sup> Basyir, "The Practice of Qurban: Integrating Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions."

<sup>51</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *"Islam and the Plight of Modern Man," (No Title)*, 1975.

In the context of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*), qurban embodies the principle of balance between ritual and substance, as well as between individual piety and social responsibility. Islam rejects two equally reductive extremes: ritual formalism that neglects ethical meaning and moral secularization that eliminates the spiritual dimension of worship. Through qurban, moderation is expressed in the sincerity of devotion and social sensitivity toward others, affirming that authentic religiosity does not end with symbolic performance but extends into ethical, economic, and humanitarian engagement. This integrative vision reflects the core of Islamic spirituality, as articulated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, who emphasizes that the true Muslim life is grounded in harmony between acts of worship that connect humans to God and acts of justice and charity that connect them to society. In another work, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Nasr also writes:

*"The true Muslim life is one of harmony between the acts of worship which link man to God and the acts of charity and justice which link him to society. When these two are severed, religion becomes empty ritual or secular moralism—both alien to the spirit of Islam."*<sup>52</sup>

Above explained that the humanistic ethics embodied in the spirit of qurban is rooted in the awareness of the importance of self-sacrifice, social empathy, and the equitable distribution of welfare. The act of animal sacrifice symbolizes the slaughtering of the human ego and base desires, leading to the emergence of an empathetic and altruistic personality. Through the distribution of meat to those in need, qurban serves as a means of economic redistribution and social solidarity. In a broader sense, these values form the foundation of a cross-faith humanistic ethic, emphasizing that true spiritual devotion is that which nurtures compassion toward human suffering. Thus, qurban stands as a concrete manifestation of Islamic social spirituality—one that rejects violence, cultivates mercy, and strengthens the moral order of humanity.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, qurban possesses a universal dimension that opens a space for dialogue with other Abrahamic faiths. The narrative of Prophet Abraham's (*'alayhi al-salam*) sacrifice is a shared story that connects Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.<sup>54</sup> In all three traditions, sacrifice serves as a symbol of obedience, love, and ultimate devotion to God. Accordingly, qurban in Islam can be understood as a cross-faith narrative that fosters mutual understanding and spiritual solidarity. This perspective opens the possibility for qurban to serve as a medium of interfaith coexistence.

In the contemporary context, the meaning of qurban needs to be revitalized as a platform for dialogue within a pluralistic modern society. Global challenges such as religious extremism, intolerance, and humanitarian crises demand a reinterpretation of qurban's values toward peace and social justice. Qurban is not merely an annual ritual but a vital moment to strengthen social harmony and foster cross-identity awareness. Through the internalization of sincerity, balance, and empathy, qurban can serve as a symbol of equilibrium between piety and humanity, between religious identity and social openness. Ultimately, qurban is not only an act of worship but also Islam's spiritual

<sup>52</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Ideals and Realities of Islam," *Religious Studies* 13, no. 3 (1977).

<sup>53</sup> Naqibah Muhammad Faizul, "Islamic Philanthropy and the Qur'anic Approach to Scarcity: Wealth Redistribution as a Solution," *Journal of Islamic Economics and Philanthropy* 7, no. 4 (2025): 223–37.

<sup>54</sup> Jane A Baxter and Wai Fong Chua, "The Hermeneutics of Sacrifice: A Study of Sacrifice and Christian Identity Through the Work of Paul Ricoeur and Edward Schillebeeckx," *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 130, no. 2 (1998): 556, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2012.05.050>.



contribution to a civilized and compassionate global society. This study is primarily conceptual and interpretive in nature, relying on textual, historical, and comparative analysis rather than empirical field data. As a result, the findings may not fully capture the lived experiences, socio-economic variations, and contemporary institutional practices of qurban across diverse Indonesian communities. In addition, the study focuses mainly on theological, ethical, and anthropological dimensions, leaving out quantitative assessments of qurban's social impact, policy implications, or economic outcomes. These limitations indicate the need for more interdisciplinary and data-driven approaches in future research.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal three interrelated dimensions of qurban. First, qurban functions as a form of cultural and spiritual transformation that transcends ritual formalism. Textual analysis of Qur'anic verses and classical commentaries demonstrates that qurban is not a mere continuation of pre-Islamic sacrificial practices, but an Islamic reconfiguration of sacrifice grounded in *taqwa* and ethical intention. This transformation shifts the meaning of qurban from a transactional ritual to a formative spiritual practice that restructures human desire and deepens existential submission to Allah. Second, qurban embodies the core principles of Islamic moderation (*wasatiyyah*), particularly balance, justice, and ethical self-restraint. The Ibrahim–Ismail narrative illustrates that the essence of sacrifice lies in the sublimation of excessive attachment and the cultivation of inner discipline, positioning qurban as a mechanism of moral equilibrium rather than rigid ritualism.

Third, qurban carries significant humanitarian and social implications through its emphasis on compassion, redistribution, and care for vulnerable groups. The ethical logic of qurban translates spiritual devotion into concrete social responsibility, reinforcing human dignity and inclusive solidarity. Within Indonesia's plural social context, these humanitarian dimensions enable qurban to contribute to social harmony and interfaith coexistence, as it bridges religious commitment with shared humanitarian values. Taken together, these findings position qurban as an integrated ethical practice that unites spiritual transformation, Islamic moderation, and humanitarian engagement in contemporary Muslim societies. Future research is recommended to examine the lived practices and institutional implementation of qurban in diverse Indonesian communities through ethnographic and socio-institutional approaches to capture regional variations and contemporary meanings. Comparative and interdisciplinary studies integrating sociology, psychology, and interfaith studies are also needed to explore how qurban-inspired humanitarian ethics contribute to social cohesion and interreligious coexistence in plural societies.

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