

## **The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Profane in the Religious Tradition of *Nyalase* Among the Madurese Community**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to explore the dialectic or encounter between the sacred and the profane within the *nyalase* religious tradition of the Madurese community. *Nyalase* is a customary practice in which members of the community gather at burial grounds to perform rituals such as cleaning the gravesite, planting ornamental plants on the graves, sharing meals at the cemetery, and holding communal prayers and *tahlil* (Islamic litany). These activities exemplify a dialectical process. The dialectic referred to in this study draws from Hegelian philosophy, in which two seemingly opposing elements are brought into reconciliation. To this day, the *nyalase* tradition remains actively practiced in Madura. In order to analyze the dialectic between the sacred and the profane within this tradition, the study refers to the thought of Mircea Eliade, who argues that human activity often simultaneously invokes both sacred and profane experiences. The sacred refers to that which holds spiritual or holy significance, while the profane denotes that which is considered ordinary or devoid of spiritual value. This research adopts a literature review method, utilizing books, articles, and other relevant references to explore the object of study. The findings indicate that the *nyalase* tradition serves as a mediating practice between the sacred and the profane, allowing the local community to encounter the experience of the sublime.

**Keywords:** Dialectic, Sacred–Profane, *Nyalase*

### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini bermaksud mengeksplorasi dialektika atau perjumpaan antara yang sakral dan yang profan dalam tradisi keagamaan *nyalase* masyarakat Madura. *Nyalase* salah satu tradisi dimana masyarakat mendatangi area persemayaman dengan menggelar bersih-bersih, tanam pohon hias di atas kuburan, makan bersama di area kubur, serta pagelaran doa dan *tahlil* berjamaah. Tradisi *nyalase* dengan bentuk kegiatan tersebut menunjukkan adanya dialektika. Dialektika yang dimaksud dalam penelitian ini adalah dialektika persepektif Hegel yakni, dua hal yang dipertentangkan lalu didamaikan. Hingga kini, tradisi *nyalase* tersebut masih berlangsung di Madura. Guna mengetahui dialektika sakral dan profan dalam tradisi *nyalase*, penulis mengacu pada pemikiran Mircea Eliade yang memandang bahwa aktivitas manusia secara bersamaan mempertemukan pengalaman yang sakral dan yang profan. Sakral adalah sesuatu yang makna suci sedangkan profan merupakan sesuatu yang dianggap tidak memiliki nilai suci atau biasa. Teknik penelitain ini menggunakan tinjauan literatur dengan menentukan beberapa buku, artikel dan referensi yang dinilai relevan guna

mengeksplorasi obyek kajian. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa nyalase memediasi antara yang sakral dan yang profan untuk membawa masyarakat setempat mengalami the sublime.

**Kata Kunci:** Dialektika, Sakral-Profan, Nyalase

## Introduction

This paper discusses the dialectic between the sacred and the profane within the religious tradition of nyalase in Madurese society. Cultural meaning-making remains a significant issue in contemporary communities, as evidenced by the cultural phenomenon of nyalase, which continues to generate debate. This tradition, expressed through practices such as cemetery visits, is often criticized as being futile or even superstitious. Some religious groups perceive the rituals associated with nyalase as irrational, heretical, or polytheistic. These critics argue, not without a certain logical consistency, that cemeteries are merely places for burying human remains—hardly deserving of reverence or ritual attention.

Nonetheless, nyalase remains a vital tradition practiced widely in Madura today. The Madurese people engage in various religious customs, one of which is nyalase. While it is often equated with the more familiar practice of *ziarah kubur* (grave pilgrimage) in Indonesia, nyalase is distinctly different. It involves communal activities at the burial site, such as cleaning the area, planting decorative plants on graves, sharing meals, and engaging in collective prayers and *tahlil*. Through these activities, the cemetery is transformed from a place of fear and death into a communal space of comfort and social connection. The act of visiting graves becomes an uplifting experience that helps people cope with life's hardships.

Herein lies the intersection of the sacred and the profane, a concept central to the work of Mircea Eliade. Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane emerges from a variety of life experiences, including family, education, religious characteristics, and intercultural exposure. He posits that human experience is fundamentally structured around two heterogeneous realities: the sacred, which is imbued with divine or spiritual significance, and the profane, which pertains to the ordinary and the secular. These two domains form the basis for understanding religious life, both individually and collectively. This conceptual framework provides a lens through which the symbolic dimensions of human experiences—particularly in relation to sacred and profane objects—can be analyzed.

Sacred space is defined as divine and holy, distinct from profane space. It is through the interrelation of divine and human experiences that individuals can move from the profane toward the sacred. The dialectical interaction between these domains can lead to the emergence of the sublime—a higher spiritual experience. This paper aims to explore how the sacred and the profane interact dialectically within the nyalase tradition as practiced by the Madurese people.

## **Research Method**

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nyalase phenomenon in Madura. The primary focus is on interpreting the meanings and symbols embedded in the nyalase tradition, particularly in relation to how local communities perceive the dialectic between the sacred and the profane. The data collection technique employed is literature review. Data were gathered through the examination and analysis of a range of relevant sources, including books on the theory of the sacred and the profane (especially those pertaining to Mircea Eliade's thought), as well as scholarly articles and journals on Madurese cultural and religious traditions.

The process involved identifying topics related to the sacred, the profane, and nyalase; gathering primary and secondary sources from academic literature; and categorizing these sources according to their relevance, particularly by identifying arguments and evidence linked to the practice of nyalase. The collected data were then filtered and organized into thematic categories: sacred, profane, and the dialectical synthesis between the two. The symbolic meanings embedded in the nyalase rituals were interpreted in reference to Eliade's theoretical framework.

This study follows a deductive-inductive reasoning structure. Deductively, it begins with Hegelian dialectics and Eliade's conception of the sacred and the profane. Inductively, it connects these theoretical constructs with the empirical practices observed in the nyalase tradition. Thus, the research reveals how nyalase operates as a dialectical space where sacred and profane values converge, and as a cultural event that culminates in sublime spiritual experiences. Ultimately, the study offers contextually relevant insights by situating nyalase within the socio-cultural realities of Madurese society.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Nyalase as a Religious Tradition in Madurese Society**

Nyalase is a unique tradition among the Madurese people that differs from the common practice of grave pilgrimage (*ziarah kubur*) found throughout Indonesia. Nyalase involves more than simply visiting the graves of the deceased—it encompasses a series of religious and social activities deeply embedded with spiritual significance. These activities typically include cleaning the cemetery area, planting ornamental plants on the graves, communal meals, and collective prayers including *tahlilan*. Each element within this tradition is filled with sacred symbolism and serves a higher purpose: to honor the dead and strengthen the spiritual connection between the living and the deceased. This tradition reflects a religious act grounded in the belief in the power of prayers and respect for those who have passed.

In the nyalase tradition, the Madurese community does not perform rituals solely as a means of honoring the deceased, but also as a medium to enhance their

relationship with God. Each action carried out within this tradition is intended to align with the Islamic values held by the majority of Madurese society. The practice of grave pilgrimage in nyalase holds meaning beyond physical visitation—it is an act of religious devotion that functions as a reminder of mortality and the afterlife. In Islam, visiting graves is recommended by the Prophet Muhammad as a way to remind the faithful of death and the life thereafter.

Nyalase represents an adaptation of Islamic teachings within the cultural context of Madura. The Madurese believe that the deceased benefit from the prayers of the living. Islam teaches its followers to pray for the dead so that their good deeds may be accepted by Allah SWT and their sins forgiven. Additionally, Muslims are reminded to constantly reflect on death so that the temporary nature of worldly life does not lead them astray from their duties as servants of Allah. This belief forms the foundation of nyalase, which is not only regarded as a form of respect for the dead but also as a reminder of life's true purpose: the afterlife.

There are three main reasons why nyalase holds significant meaning for the Madurese people. First, it is seen as a way to practice Islamic teachings, especially regarding grave visitation, which serves as a reminder of death. Nyalase expresses this teaching profoundly, as the pilgrimage is performed collectively by families or communities, strengthening social ties while nurturing a sense of reverence and humility within individuals. In this context, visiting graves is more than a ritual—it becomes a means of fostering spiritual closeness to Allah.

Second, the nyalase tradition serves as a reminder that death is inevitable. In Islam, death is a certainty that no living being can escape. Through nyalase, the Madurese are reminded of their mortality so they do not become overly attached to the temporal nature of this world. The practice becomes a powerful reminder that life on earth is fleeting, and that the afterlife is the ultimate destination. Collective prayers and tahlilan serve as moments for individuals to reflect on the meaning of life and death, and to spiritually prepare for the life to come.

Third, nyalase functions as a means of spiritual purification. Through this tradition, the Madurese are taught that all deeds must be performed solely for the sake of Allah SWT. Thus, nyalase is not merely a physical ritual but a vehicle for spiritual cleansing. Cleaning the graves, planting flowers, and engaging in communal prayers are acts of devotion meant to bring the soul closer to God and to erase sins that may have been committed during one's lifetime. Nyalase offers a moment of reflection on servitude to God and instills the importance of sincere intention in all actions.

The rituals in nyalase, such as cleaning the grave and planting flowers, are laden with symbolic meaning. Cleaning the grave is not merely an act of maintenance, but also a metaphor for cleansing oneself from sin. It symbolizes the need for spiritual purification before returning to God. Planting flowers on the grave symbolizes the continuity of life even after physical death. It reflects the belief that

while the body decays, the legacy of good deeds and prayers continues to live on in the hearts of those left behind.

Furthermore, the communal meal following the grave pilgrimage has both social and spiritual implications. It creates a sense of unity and strengthens interpersonal bonds within the community. This act becomes a symbol of solidarity and mutual support in facing life and death. The tahlilan gatherings, whether at the gravesite or in someone's home, serve as expressions of gratitude and hope—that the good deeds of the deceased will be accepted by God and that the living will continue to receive guidance and blessings.

The Madurese community upholds the religious values of Islam through these rituals. The prayers and tahlilan conducted with deep devotion become a means of increasing spiritual closeness to God and reinforcing religious faith. Through this, the community seeks to strengthen their religious understanding and practice, both individually and socially. This demonstrates that nyalase is not merely a customary tradition, but a religious ritual imbued with significant spiritual meaning.

The nyalase tradition serves as a profound reminder of the essence of life and death for the Madurese people. It also acts as a means of strengthening social bonds and deepening one's devotion to Allah SWT. Despite its seemingly simple form, the tradition encompasses deep reflections on life, mortality, and the hereafter. Every component of nyalase—from the communal prayers and tahlilan to shared meals and planting flowers—aims to purify the soul, foster nearness to God, and reinforce social cohesion among Muslims in Madura. Thus, nyalase is more than a grave-visiting ritual; it is a religious tradition rich in spiritual and social values.

However, it must be acknowledged that within any religious society, distinctions between the sacred and the profane are understood differently. Hindus venerate and sanctify the cow; Muslims revere the Black Stone (Hajar Aswad) in Mecca; Christians sanctify the cross atop the altar; and many indigenous communities conduct totemic rituals involving animals. Collective religious experience indicates that relationships between members of a faith community and sacred objects or practices are often tied to that community's moral and spiritual values. It is also important to recognize that although the Prophet Muhammad initially prohibited grave visitation to protect the nascent Islamic faith and prevent syncretic influences from pre-Islamic traditions, such practices were later permitted—provided that they did not involve supplication to the deceased but remained focused on remembrance and supplication to God.

From Mircea Eliade's perspective, nyalase can be interpreted as a moment of encounter between the sacred and the profane. For the Madurese, nyalase is not merely a sensory experience but a spiritual one. Eliade asserts that ordinary events or practices in life—the profane—can, at certain moments, be transformed into the sacred. Through ritual, meaning is transmitted and the supernatural flows into the

natural world. This is precisely what happens in nyalase—a sacred transformation of the everyday, deeply felt by those who partake in it.

### **Exploring the Dialectic Between the Sacred and the Profane in the Nyalase Tradition**

For the Madurese people, nyalase is a heritage passed down from their ancestors. It is undeniable that this tradition has often been viewed with skepticism, particularly because it incorporates seemingly contradictory rituals such as communal meals and religious recitations held at graveyards. However, upon closer examination, the nyalase tradition and its associated rituals reveal a unity of contradictions. In other words, it reflects a dialectic between what is typically seen as opposing elements—namely, the sacred (that which holds spiritual or holy significance) and the profane (that which is ordinary and devoid of spiritual value).

In his seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade outlines the fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane. Eliade emphasizes the significance of humanity's relationship with the Divine, analyzing the sacred as that which is ontologically real, enduring, and eternal—contrasting sharply with the ephemeral, ever-changing nature of profane space and time. For Eliade, sacred space and time are not only real but serve as points of return and renewal for the *homo religiosus*, or religious individual, in reconnecting with primordial goodness.

The incursion of the sacred into profane space, therefore, transforms the latter into a sacred domain—a space that is created, eternal, and ontologically authentic. According to Eliade, the sacred reveals itself to humans through hierophanies—manifestations of the sacred that differ from the mundane world. The sacred, imbued with supernatural value, power, or reality, may temporarily embody a particular object or space, though its essence remains immutable and eternal. Because the sacred is Divine, it transcends mortality and temporality, distinguishing itself entirely from the profane.

A space becomes sacred due to a hierophany, a moment in which the Divine reveals itself at a particular location. Through this act of manifestation, a site is rendered sacred—elevated, distinguished, and set apart from its surroundings. The sacred revelation in a hierophany breaks the homogeneity of space, revealing an absolute reality that stands in contrast to the surrounding vastness of non-reality. This manifestation, as Eliade notes, establishes the foundational ontological structure of the world, marking a fixed, central point amid boundless spatial homogeneity—an otherwise groundless expanse.

This dialectical relationship between the sacred and the profane is embodied in the ongoing nyalase tradition of the Madurese community, particularly in the village of Sana Laok, Waru Subdistrict, Pamekasan Regency. In practice, the people of Sana Laok perform nyalase through several symbolic acts: cleaning the cemetery area,

planting ornamental plants on graves, communal dining near the tombs, and holding group prayer and tahlil sessions.

First, the act of cleaning the cemetery is outwardly perceived as an ordinary (profane) activity. However, it carries profound spiritual implications. Participants in nyalase regard this cleaning as a way of offering comfort to the deceased—treating the gravesite like a home that must be kept pleasant for its occupants.

Second, planting ornamental plants on graves is a common sight across Madura. These plants do not grow naturally but are deliberately planted during nyalase. This act is deeply symbolic: the ornamental plants are believed to bring a sense of coolness and tranquility to the spirits of the dead. Thus, what appears to be mere decoration (profane) actually contains sacred significance.

Third, the recitation of prayers and tahlil in congregation at the burial grounds provides participants with profound religious experiences. Many testify to feelings of inner peace or even encounters with long-deceased relatives during or after the rituals. These transcendent experiences point to the permeability between the physical and spiritual worlds within this tradition.

Fourth, the act of communal dining near the graves, performed after the prayer rituals, also carries spiritual weight. The food, voluntarily contributed by families of the deceased, is offered not just as an expression of gratitude to God but also as a symbolic gift to their departed kin. While the food itself is not believed to be consumed by the dead, the merit (reward) of the charitable act is thought to reach them and provide comfort in the afterlife.

## **Conclusion**

The nyalase tradition is a religious practice embedded within the cultural fabric of the Madurese community. It demonstrates how activities that appear ordinary or profane—such as cemetery cleaning or communal eating—are imbued with sacred meaning. First, the act of cleaning the burial area, though seemingly mundane, becomes a means of spiritually attending to the dead, reflecting a confluence between visible (profane) actions and invisible (sacred) intentions. Second, planting ornamental plants on graves, while decorative in appearance, is seen as a medium through which tranquility is offered to the departed, bridging the material and spiritual realms. Third, the collective recitation of prayers and tahlil exemplifies the core of the nyalase ritual, where participants report experiencing transcendence and spiritual encounters with their ancestors, turning a communal gathering into a sacred rite. Fourth, sharing food at the burial grounds, though a profane activity, becomes a conduit of spiritual blessing, believed to ease the afterlife of deceased family members. This belief reinforces the notion that everyday practices, when embedded within a ritual context, are capable of forging a spiritual link between the living and the dead.

In sum, the nyalase tradition is not merely a cultural performance but a living dialectic of sacred and profane elements, wherein ordinary acts are elevated through

religious significance to create a sacred experience that unites the seen and unseen realms.

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