



THE COSMOPOLITANISM OF THE TABLE: COMMENSALITY, CONVIVIALITY, AND INTRA MUSLIM DIVERSITY IN KUALA LUMPUR'S COMMUNAL IFTAR


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Abstract

Communal iftar meals during Ramadan are often analysed as a homogeneous in-group practice, yet this overlooks their role as spaces for encounters across the internal diversity of the Muslim world in pluralistic cities. This article examines joint iftar meals in Kuala Lumpur—where diverse traditions converge—as a case of intra-Muslim conviviality. Through a qualitative ethnographic design (observation, interviews and document analysis), this study explores how communal religious meals foster cross-cultural cohesion and what underpins this, by analysing these practices through the sociology of commensality (Simmel, Fischler), theories of ritual interaction and solidarity (Collins, Durkheim), and the literature on urban and multicultural conviviality (Amin, Gilroy). The cohesion of communal iftar depends on institutional infrastructure, the layout of the dining area, and the food served as a medium for exchange. Differences are negotiated through commensality, giving rise to a sense of togetherness that extends from ritual spaces into the public sphere. The hospitality of the mosque, as an infrastructure of intra-Muslim conviviality, shapes a vernacular cosmopolitanism at the table, whilst simultaneously revealing its boundaries—who is welcomed and who remains on the margins of urban Islamic social life.

Keywords: communal iftar; commensality; conviviality; intra-muslim diversity; mosque hospitality

Abstrak

Iftar bersama selama Ramadan kerap dikaji sebagai praktik *in-group* homogen, namun menutupi peran ruang perjumpaan lintas keragaman internal dunia Muslim di kota-kota plural. Artikel ini mengkaji iftar bersama di Kuala Lumpur—tempat ragam tradisi bertemu—sebagai kasus konvivialitas intra-Muslim. Melalui desain etnografi kualitatif (observasi, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen), penelitian ini menelusuri bagaimana santap keagamaan bersama menghasilkan kohesi lintas budaya dan apa yang menopangnya, dengan membaca praktik tersebut melalui sosiologi komensalitas (Simmel, Fischler), teori ritual interaksi dan solidaritas (Collins, Durkheim), serta literatur konvivialitas perkotaan dan multikultur (Amin, Gilroy). Kohesi iftar bersama bergantung pada infrastruktur kelembagaan, penataan ruang santap, dan hidangan sebagai medium pertukaran. Perbedaan dinegosiasikan melalui komensalitas, melahirkan kebersamaan yang meluas dari ruang ritual ke ruang publik. Keramahan masjid sebagai infrastruktur konvivialitas intra-Muslim membentuk kosmopolitanisme meja yang vernakular, namun sekaligus menyingkap batas-batasnya—siapa yang dijamu dan siapa yang tetap di pinggir kehidupan sosial Islam perkotaan.

Kata Kunci: iftar bersama; komensalitas; konvivialitas; keragaman intra-muslim; keramahan masjid

INTRODUCTION

Ramadan is a vital period in the religious lives of Muslims worldwide. The daily fast is a central form of worship, alongside communal activities that foster spiritual awareness and social unity (Hartati et al., 2025). Among these, Iftar has special cultural and religious importance. While many fast at home, communal iftar meetings have become a significant aspect of many Muslim societies (Suroyo, 2022); (Zubair et al., 2026). These gatherings are not only ritual performances but social spaces where sharing food produces collective expressions of faith and belonging, reflecting key Islamic values such as charity, hospitality, and social solidarity (Al-Holy & Olaimat, 2025). At the heart of these activities lie mosques, which serve as dynamic socio-religious institutions supporting community life through educational and charitable engagement (Hadi, 2025); (Abbas, 2022). This function is more prominent during Ramadan when attendance increases and collective activities become more frequent (Kabir & Rabby, 2025); (Suroyo et al., 2023).

In Malay Muslim society, the concept of *majlis* (Afifah Dwi Ramadhani & Yasnel, 2025) is often used to understand these organised religious gatherings—formal assemblies for a common religious or social purpose, such as prayers, sermons, or communal meals (Hasnain et al., 2022). This is particularly evident in mosque-based iftars, where people gather in an orderly fashion to break their fast; here, the *majlis* is more than a spontaneous gathering, but a formally organised space involving devotion, hospitality, and community interaction (Pal & Mohamed, 2025). In urban Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, this practice has become highly institutionalised, with many mosques arranging daily iftars systematically prepared or sponsored by committees and donors (Yus et al., 2025). Participants generally sit on mats (*tikar* or *kain bentang*) spread on the floor; although meals are often individualised, breaking fast together fosters a strong sense of collective belonging (Ab Majid, 2022; Hamzah et al., 2024). bringing together diverse backgrounds—local residents, civil servants, students, and migrant communities—and making religious practice a visible part of urban life (Abd Karim et al., 2022; Suroyo et al., 2024; Suroyo et al., 2024; Suroyo et al., 2024).

Compared to Indonesia, the pattern of communal iftar differs markedly. While mosque-based iftar is common, many Indonesian mosques focus more on distributing takeaway food packages than on organising shared meals within the mosque itself (Rafkahanun et al., 2022). In campus settings such as Masjid Kampus UGM, participants are relatively more homogeneous, comprising mostly students and the academic community (Nugraha et al., 2025). Although these practices reflect values of charity, their social dynamics differ from the more *majlis*-style gatherings found in urban Malaysia, suggesting that communal iftar practices across Southeast Asia are shaped by both religious obligation and local cultural tradition. The *majlis*-based gatherings in Malaysia illustrate how ritual practices develop into structured cultural forms that shape social interaction. Despite its significance, communal iftar has received relatively little attention as an organised practice within urban Southeast Asian mosques. This study examines the *majlis* tradition in Kuala Lumpur, focusing on its function as a religious-cultural institution and its divergence from Indonesian practices. By framing communal dining as a social practice, the study contributes to the anthropology of Islam and Southeast Asian studies, demonstrating that mosque-based gatherings play a vital role in strengthening community identity and shaping social interaction in contemporary urban societies.

Ramadan has long been examined in scholarly literature as a period in which religious practices are closely connected to everyday social life in Muslim communities, with fasting, nightly prayers, and charitable acts commonly highlighted as key practices shaping the rhythm of the month (Shalihin et al., 2020). Within this context, iftar—the meal used to break the daily fast—occupies an important place between religious obligation and social interaction. While breaking the fast often takes place at home, many Muslim societies extend this practice into communal settings, gathering in mosques, community centres, or public spaces to share meals and experience Ramadan together (Haris et al., 2025). Communal iftar has also been framed as part of broader Islamic values of charity and ethical practice (Alterkait, 2022; Daas, 2025; Haque & Ahmad, 2025), as providing food to those who are fasting is widely regarded as a rewarding and encouraged act—prompting mosque committees, charitable organisations, and private donors to organise meal programmes throughout Ramadan. These initiatives often provide practical

support for individuals with limited access to food or difficulties preparing it themselves. Despite the growing body of research on Ramadan practices, communal iftar is still mostly discussed in terms of ritual observance or charitable giving (Kabir & Rabby, 2025; Idris et al., 2022; Wesselhoeft, 2022). Existing studies tend to focus on the religious meanings of fasting and generosity, while paying less attention to how communal iftar is organised, how space is used, and how participants experience these gatherings within mosque settings. Consequently, the ways in which mosque-based iftar events are structured, managed, and experienced remain underexplored, particularly in urban contexts where participation is often large in scale and socially diverse.

Mosques are widely recognized as multifunctional institutions that go beyond their primary role as places of worship. Scholars note that mosques often serve as active centers of community life, hosting educational programs, social gatherings, charitable initiatives, and religious celebrations (Suud Sarim Karimullah, 2023). Through these activities, mosques help build social networks and strengthen a sense of shared identity, particularly in urban settings where people from diverse backgrounds come together for religious practices (Omar et al., 2019). (Hadi, 2025); (Afriyanti, 2024); (Othman & Abu Bakar, 2025) further show that mosque-based activities contribute to social cohesion, as congregational prayers, study circles, and religious lectures create regular opportunities for interaction and collective engagement. Mosques frequently organise Ramadan charitable activities, attracting diverse participants—students, professionals, migrant workers, and travellers—and becoming important spaces where religious practice intersects with everyday social life. Yet despite extensive research on mosque activities, communal meals as structured religious gatherings remain underexamined, leaving Ramadan's shared meals an underexplored aspect of mosque-based social life.

The concept of *majlis* is widely recognised in Muslim societies as a structured gathering combining social interaction with cultural and religious expression, broadly defined as an organised gathering for discussion, celebration, or religious activities (Hasnain et al., 2022). *Majlis* events may take place in homes, community halls, or religious institutions, often involving shared meals, prayers, or ceremonial practices that strengthen social ties and a sense of collective identity (Qudsiyyah et al., 2023). In Malay Muslim society, *majlis* usually refers to formal communal events—such as weddings, thanksgiving ceremonies, and religious commemorations—reflecting long-standing traditions of hospitality and collective participation (Sallehuddin et al., 2020). often extended during Ramadan into mosque-based gatherings where communities break the fast together. Despite being common in everyday social life, scholarly discussions of *majlis* have mostly addressed its general cultural meaning rather than its role within specific institutional settings, particularly mosque-based practices in Southeast Asia (Sa'ari et al., 2025).

Moreover, while studies on Ramadan frequently mention communal iftar, they rarely examine how these gatherings are shaped by broader cultural frameworks such as *majlis* (Md Radzi et al., 2024), highlighting the need to understand communal iftar not only as a religious activity, but also as a socially and culturally embedded practice. Such an approach aligns with the perspectives of living religion (Tan et al., 2022) and religious moderation (Muhajarah & Soebahar, 2024), which view religious traditions as enacted through everyday social practices, shared experiences, and communal interaction rather than through ritual observance alone. By focusing on *majlis*-based gatherings in urban mosques, particularly Kuala Lumpur, this study seeks to explain how religious rituals, cultural traditions, and community participation collectively produce forms of ritual hospitality embedded in everyday religious life.

Although communal iftar is widely recognised as a shared religious practice during Ramadan, existing studies often treat it as a relatively uniform activity centred on religious observance, charity, and social gathering, overlooking the cultural diversity embedded within such practices, particularly in multicultural urban settings. Field observations in Kuala Lumpur indicate that communal iftar is neither organised nor experienced uniformly across locations, with significant variation in participant composition, food traditions, spatial arrangements, hospitality, and patterns of social interaction. Masjid Negara, for instance, is characterised by stronger Malay cultural influences and traditional *makan berhidang* practices, while Masjid India reflects South Asian traditions through the dominance of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani participants and cuisines. Masjid Jamek presents a hybrid environment where Malay and South Asian influences

intersect, whereas Surau NU Sentral accommodates a more international Muslim community, including participants from the Middle East and North Africa; public gatherings at Dataran Merdeka further extend these dynamics by incorporating tourists and non-Muslim visitors. Such variation suggests that communal iftar functions not only as a religious ritual but also as a site where cultural identities, hospitality traditions, and social integration are negotiated, though how these variations shape its social meaning and organisation within multicultural Muslim cities remains underexamined.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach grounded in an interpretivist perspective. Situated within the traditions of urban religious ethnography and practice-oriented studies of ritual hospitality, the research examines communal iftar not as a fixed religious event but as a socially embedded practice through which meanings of generosity, belonging, and religious observance are enacted and negotiated in urban settings. Fieldwork was conducted across five Ramadan gathering sites in Kuala Lumpur: Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, Surau NU Sentral, and Dataran Merdeka. These sites were purposively selected to represent variations in scale, organizational structure, and spatial setting, ranging from highly organized national mosques to smaller prayer spaces located within commercial and transit environments. This multi-sited design enabled the study to examine how institutional arrangements, spatial conditions, and patterns of social interaction within a multicultural urban context shape communal iftar practices.

The study employed purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in communal iftar gatherings—mosque administrators, volunteers, and attendees—approached during fieldwork based on their relevance and willingness to participate. Due to cultural considerations regarding gender norms in mosque settings, the study focused exclusively on male participants. A total of 33 individuals were interviewed, representing diverse national and ethnic backgrounds from Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, reflecting the multicultural character of Kuala Lumpur's urban Muslim population and supporting the study's aim of examining communal iftar as both a religious practice and a site of intercultural interaction. Field sites were selected for their prominence in hosting large-scale iftar gatherings and their varied food-distribution systems, while smaller locations such as Surau NU Sentral and Masjid India captured more localised, informal forms of communal dining, facilitating comparative analysis across institutional and spatial contexts.

Data were collected through methodological triangulation, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation, the primary method, spanned from one hour before iftar to thirty minutes afterwards at each site, enabling observation of the full sequence of activities—preparation, spatial organisation, food distribution, social interaction, and post-iftar transitions—supported by detailed fieldnotes on coordination, inclusion, participation, and hospitality. Semi-structured interviews with all 33 participants, conducted in English or Malay, explored their understandings of, motivations for, and experiences within communal iftar, and were audio-recorded where consented or otherwise documented through notes. Mosque announcements, posters, and public communications were also analysed for contextual information.

The data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis consistent with the study's interpretivist orientation. Analysis began with repeated readings of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, followed by open coding to identify recurring patterns, emerging concepts, and preliminary analytical categories. Through an iterative process of constant comparison, related codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting key dimensions of communal iftar practices. The analytical process generated themes relating to institutional coordination, ritual hospitality, spatial organization, and multicultural interaction. Throughout the analysis, empirical observations were continuously interpreted in relation to broader discussions on religion, urban life, hospitality, and social interaction. This iterative approach ensured that analytical themes remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while contributing to wider theoretical debates.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and rigor of the study. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the integration of participant observation, interviews, and documentary materials. Fieldwork conducted across multiple sites spanning two Ramadan periods (2025 and 2026) enabled the identification of recurring patterns and context-specific variations in communal iftar practices. The use of thick description enhanced the transferability of the findings by providing detailed contextual accounts of social practices and interactions. Furthermore, the iterative relationship between data collection and analysis strengthened the consistency of interpretation, allowing emerging insights to be continuously refined and validated throughout the research process.

The study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study and provided informed consent before participation. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To protect confidentiality, identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms or coded identifiers. All data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. Particular attention was given to the religious and cultural sensitivities of the research setting, including appropriate conduct within mosque environments, respect for prayer schedules, and adherence to locally observed gender norms.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Temporal Patterns of Iftar Gatherings

Field observations conducted between 20 February and 10 March 2026, during the early phase of Ramadan 1447 AH, and supplemented by analytical reflections from Ramadan 2025 (11 March–9 April 2025), revealed remarkably consistent temporal patterns in the organization and participation of mosque-based iftar gatherings across Kuala Lumpur. Across most observed locations, including Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, Surau NU Sentral, and the public iftar event at Dataran Merdeka, participants typically began arriving one to two hours prior to the breaking of the fast. Attendance noticeably increased following the Asr prayer, as individuals and families gradually gathered in designated dining areas. Early arrival served both practical and social functions. Many participants arrived in advance to secure a place within communal dining rows, particularly in mosques with large congregations. At several sites, attendees strategically placed personal belongings or prayer mats to reserve seating spaces along rows of tikar (woven mats) or kain bentang arranged by mosque committees and volunteers. Rather than reflecting purely spontaneous participation, these practices indicate that communal iftar is socially infrastructured through shared routines, spatial arrangements, and collective expectations. The organization of dining rows by committees and volunteers demonstrates that social cohesion is actively produced through material and organizational arrangements rather than emerging naturally.

People were waiting (and saving the spot) during the Iftar Event (Source: author's documentation, The period preceding iftar also functioned as an important social interval rather than merely a waiting phase. Individuals engaged in casual conversations, rested, read religious texts, or simply remained together in a relaxed and anticipatory atmosphere. In larger venues such as Masjid Negara and Dataran Merdeka, the gradual influx of participants transformed courtyards and open spaces into temporary yet highly interactive communal environments well before sunset. Viewed through the lens of commensality (Fischler, 2011), the significance of iftar extended beyond food consumption itself. The shared experience of waiting created a common temporal horizon in which eating became embedded within social interaction and collective presence. This pattern indicates that communal iftar extends beyond the act of eating and encompasses a collective temporal experience of waiting, reinforcing the social dimension of Ramadan observance. From an analytical perspective, these temporal dynamics demonstrate that mosque-based iftar gatherings function not only as mechanisms of food provision but also as ritualized social events embedded within the daily rhythm of Ramadan. Arriving early reflects a shared understanding that the gathering represents a meaningful communal occasion, where participation begins long before the actual breaking of the fast. Participants do not simply arrive at sunset; rather, they invest time in a shared process of anticipation, which contributes to the collective experience. This

anticipatory engagement reinforces the idea that Ramadan operates through a shared temporal structure (Baker et al., 2020), in which religious time is collectively organized and socially experienced. The waiting period before sunset fosters communal synchronization, as individuals from diverse backgrounds gather and prepare to break the fast simultaneously. Consistent with interaction ritual theory (Summers-Effler, 2006) and Durkheimian notions of solidarity (Thijssen, 2012), the synchronization of attention, bodily co-presence, and emotional anticipation generates a shared emotional energy that strengthens feelings of belonging among participants. The

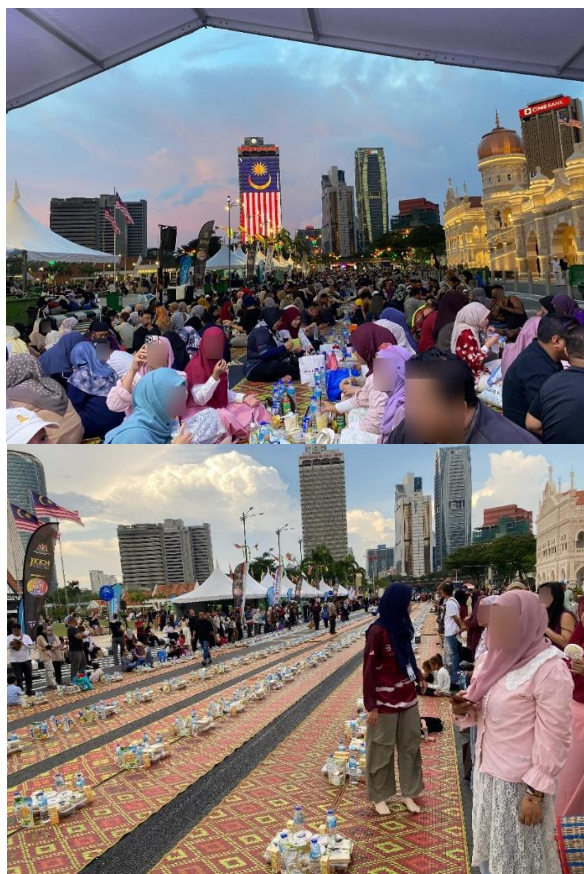


Figure. 1

Majlis Culture During Iftar Event at Dataran Merdeka (Source: author's documentation, Dataran Merdeka, 2026)

collective experience of waiting for the adhan and breaking the fast simultaneously transforms individual religious observance into a socially binding ritual.

Moreover, these gatherings function as micro-publics within the Muslim community, where individuals from different ethnic, social, and organizational backgrounds encounter one another through ordinary practices of waiting, conversing, and sharing space (Amin, 2008). The sociality produced around dining mats and communal rows reflects a form of everyday conviviality or a “table cosmopolitanism,” in which differences are not erased but routinely accommodated through shared participation. In this sense, the temporal organization of mosque-based iftar gatherings contributes to what can be understood as mosque-organized ritual hospitality (Weng, 2022). Hospitality during Ramadan therefore operates not only through the provision of food but through the orchestration of time, space, and interaction. The structured timing of arrival, the preparation of shared dining spaces, and the collective anticipation of iftar work together to transform mosque environments into spaces of social cohesion and religious solidarity. Social cohesion, in this context, is not an automatic outcome of eating together but the product of ritual coordination and infrastructural arrangements that enable communal life to

emerge through everyday religious practice (Cheong et al., 2023).

Institutional Organization of Mosque Iftar

Field observations indicate that communal iftar in Kuala Lumpur mosques operates through coordinated institutional arrangements rather than emerging spontaneously. Mosque committees at locations such as Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, and Masjid India oversee logistical preparation, food distribution, and spatial organization during Ramadan, while volunteers, local residents, youth groups, and regular attendees support meal distribution and post-event cleaning. These arrangements demonstrate that social cohesion during iftar is socially infrastructured through the coordinated involvement of committees, volunteers, donors, and food providers rather than arising naturally from co-presence alone. Food preparation varies across locations, with some meals prepared in mosque kitchens and others supplied through catering services, yet participants generally perceive them as expressions of mosque-based hospitality rather than commercial provision. The menu itself serves as a medium of cultural exchange. Many mosques rotate dishes reflecting Kuala Lumpur's multicultural Muslim population, including Malay, Indian Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian cuisines (see **Fig. 3**). Dishes such as *nasi kebuli*, *ayam masak merah*, and *sambal belacan* enable participants to reconnect with familiar culinary traditions while encountering those of other communities. Summer (Summers-Effler, 2006) and (Fischler, 2011) viewed through the perspective of commensality, food functions not merely as

nourishment but as a social medium through which belonging and collective identities are reproduced. Culinary diversity therefore becomes an everyday expression of conviviality rather than a marker of difference (Gilroy, 2013).



Figure 3a.

Nombu Kanji or Beef Porridge from South India and a small pack of dates (source: Author' Documentation, Masjid India, 2025)



Figure 3b.

Malay feast with Sweet-Cooked Chicken and *Sambal Belacan* (source: Author' Documentation, Masjid Negara, 2025)



Figure 3c.

Saudi Chicken Bukhari Set Menu with *Lambok* Porridge, Chocolate Drink, and Moroccan Dates (source: Author' Documentation, Dataran Merdeka, 2026)



Figure 3d.

Javanese *Ayam Penyet* with yellow-fried chicken and *Sambal Terasi* (source: Author' Documentation, Masjid Jamek, 2025)

These arrangements demonstrate that communal iftar functions as organized religious hospitality rather than informal charity. Hospitality is embedded within mosque governance and sustained through collective participation, transforming religious values such as generosity and solidarity into routinized social practices (Weng, 2022). The recurring collaboration among organizers, volunteers, donors, and vendors constitutes an interactional infrastructure that enables communal life to be reproduced daily throughout Ramadan. Viewed from the perspective of urban sociology, these findings demonstrate that mosques function as social infrastructure by providing stable institutional spaces that facilitate repeated social interaction, collective care, and community integration beyond their primary religious role. Through these organizational capacities, mosques become public institutions where religious practice simultaneously generates social cohesion and civic engagement.

Field observations further reveal that hospitality is expressed differently across mosques according to their social composition. Masjid Negara predominantly serves Malay dishes, reflecting its association with Malay Muslim heritage, whereas Masjid India incorporates South Asian and Middle Eastern cuisines corresponding to the backgrounds of its congregants. Masjid Jamek displays greater culinary diversity through rotating vendors offering Malay, Indian, and Indonesian dishes. These variations indicate that communal iftar is not organized around a single cultural tradition but accommodates multiple culinary identities within a shared religious space. In this sense, mosque-based iftar functions as a micro-public where everyday encounters are mediated through food-sharing practices (Amin, 2008); (Min & Jianjun, 2024). Rather than

dissolving differences, collective dining enables diverse Muslim communities to negotiate and accommodate them through what may be understood as a form of "table cosmopolitanism" (Hiebert, 2002). The social infrastructure provided by mosques therefore extends beyond physical facilities, encompassing the organizational networks, shared routines, and inclusive social environments that enable culturally diverse communities to interact on a regular basis. Consequently, communal iftar should be understood not simply as a religious observance or charitable practice, but as an institutionalized form of ritual hospitality in which food, organizational infrastructures, and repeated interactions collectively produce solidarity in a culturally diverse urban setting.

Spatial Arrangement and Dining Rituals

Communal iftar gatherings in Kuala Lumpur exhibit spatial arrangements that actively shape social interaction. Observations at Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, and Dataran Merdeka revealed a consistent pattern in which participants sat facing one another in long rows while sharing food collectively. This arrangement resembles the Malay tradition of *makan berhidang*, emphasizing collective participation rather than individualized consumption. Although dining surfaces varied *kain bentang* being more common in South Asian and Middle Eastern settings and *tikar* in predominantly Malay contexts the underlying principle of shared dining remained consistent. Viewed through commensality theory (Hiebert, 2002; Simmel, 1994); (Fischler, 2011), these material arrangements transformed eating into a social practice that encouraged interaction, reciprocity, and collective presence.

Gender arrangements varied across settings. At Masjid Negara and Dataran Merdeka, men and women commonly sat together as family groups, while other mosques maintained more visible gender separation in certain areas. Regardless of these differences, participants generally observed Islamic norms of modesty. The ritual sequence also followed a common pattern, with dates and water consumed immediately after the azan before continuing with the main meal and performing congregational prayer afterward. The synchronization of bodily practices, attention, and shared anticipation reflects what Collins (Collins, 2014) describes as interaction rituals that generate emotional energy and reinforce solidarity, echoing Durkheim's (Durkheim, 1897) conception of collective effervescence. More importantly, the spatial organization of communal dining did not merely accommodate participants but actively structured social encounters. Rows of *tikar* and *kain bentang* functioned as interactional infrastructures that brought individuals from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds into routine face-to-face encounters. In this sense, mosque-based iftar operates as a micro-public where everyday conviviality is enacted through shared meals and embodied co-presence (Amin, 2008); (Gilroy, 2013). Rather than eliminating differences, these arrangements enable diverse Muslim communities to experience a form of "table cosmopolitanism" grounded in ordinary practices of sitting, waiting, and eating together.

Participation and Ethnic Diversity

Field research conducted between 20 February and 10 March 2026 reveals that communal iftar gatherings at Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, Surau NU Sentral, and Dataran Merdeka attract participants from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds. Rather than simply accommodating diversity, these gatherings bring together people with different languages, culinary traditions, and social backgrounds within a shared ritual setting. Distinct participant patterns were observed across locations. Masjid India was largely attended by Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani communities, while Masjid Jamek displayed a more balanced composition of Malay, Indian, and Pakistani participants. Masjid Negara exhibited greater demographic diversity and a higher proportion of younger and female participants, whereas Surau NU Sentral showed a noticeable presence of worshippers from Egypt, Algeria, and other Middle Eastern and North African countries. Dataran Merdeka represented the most heterogeneous setting, attracting local residents, migrants, and international visitors. These variations suggest that communal iftar reflects the social composition of each site rather than producing a uniform multicultural experience. Although participants shared dining spaces, food arrangements, and ritual practices, the depth of intercultural interaction could not be fully inferred from bodily appearance or patterns of co-presence alone. Doing so would risk imposing ethnic stereotypes and attributing identities beyond what participants themselves articulated. Consequently, this study

limits its interpretation to observed interactions and interview data, avoiding broader claims regarding the extent of social integration among different ethnic groups.

From this perspective, communal iftar is better understood as creating opportunities for encounter and co-presence rather than as evidence of complete social mixing. In line with (Amin, 2008) notion of micro-publics and (Gilroy, 2013) conception of conviviality, the coexistence of diverse groups within shared ritual spaces demonstrates the capacity for ordinary forms of togetherness without necessarily implying the dissolution of social, ethnic, or cultural boundaries. Moreover, the solidarities generated through these gatherings appear to be primarily ritual and situational. Repeated encounters throughout Ramadan may foster familiarity and a sense of belonging, yet the extent to which these interactions develop into durable relationships beyond the fasting month remains beyond the scope of the present study and warrants further investigation.

Iftar as Social and Cultural Experience

Beyond its religious function, communal iftar in Kuala Lumpur provides important social and experiential dimensions for participants (Latif, 2020). Interviews conducted at Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, Surau NU Sentral, and Dataran Merdeka indicate that attendance was motivated not only by access to free meals but also by the desire to experience the atmosphere of Ramadan, participate in collective worship, and strengthen social connections. Several participants described the gatherings as resembling family occasions despite having no prior relationships with many attendees. These narratives suggest that communal iftar generates a sense of temporary belonging through shared rituals and co-presence rather than through pre-existing social ties. Many participants, particularly travelers and individuals living away from their families, emphasized that mosques provided reliable spaces where food, companionship, and religious participation converged (Burchardt et al., 2023). Consistent with (Collins, 2014), the collective anticipation of the adhan, shared meals, and congregational prayers produced emotional synchrony that participants associated with warmth, brotherhood, and spiritual togetherness. However, the solidarity generated through these encounters appeared to be situational and ritual-specific rather than evidence of enduring social relationships. Male, 27-year-old Malay said (interview at Dataran Merdeka, 2026):

"For me, it's really about that unique feeling you only get during Ramadan the ambience. Coming here isn't just about the food, though a hot meal is always a blessing; it's more about being part of the crowd and feeling that spiritual energy together rather than just sitting alone at home."

Male, 35-year-old Pakistani said (interview at Masjid Jamek, 2026):

"I find myself coming back because it's a wonderful way to connect with brothers I don't see often enough. Between the prayers and the shared plates, there is a real sense of belonging and warmth that makes the long hours of fasting feel much lighter and more meaningful."

Male, 42-year-old Arab said (interview at Masjid Negara, 2026):

"To be honest, it is the spirit of the community gathering that draws me in. Having a place where everyone is welcome to sit for a meal and participate in the evening worship reminds me of the true generosity of the month; it's like being with a very large, extended family."

Field observations further revealed distinct cultural expressions across sites. Masjid India, Masjid Jamek, and Surau NU Sentral displayed stronger South Asian and Arab influences, whereas Masjid Negara and Dataran Merdeka more prominently reflected the Malay tradition of *makan berhidang*. These variations indicate that communal iftar accommodates multiple cultural traditions within a shared religious framework, functioning as a micro-public where ordinary forms of conviviality emerge through eating, waiting, and worshipping together (Amin, 2008); (Gilroy, 2013). Importantly, no exclusionary practices based on ethnicity or nationality were observed during fieldwork. Participation was open to all attendees regardless of ethnic or cultural background, and communal dining arrangements did not differentiate participants according to racial categories. Nevertheless, the ethnographic descriptions presented here should not be interpreted as representing the full diversity of Kuala Lumpur's Muslim population. Participant

identities were documented primarily through interview data and observable social interactions rather than through assumptions based on bodily appearance, which could reproduce ethnic stereotyping. Consequently, this study refrains from attributing specific ethnic identities beyond what participants themselves disclosed (Male, 39-year-old Arab, Masjid Jamek, 2026):

“Even if we don’t know each other, it feels like eating with family during Ramadan. Everyone sits together and shares the moment of breaking the fast.”

The absence of interview participants from certain communities, including Indonesians, Rohingya, or other migrant populations with significant demographic presence in Malaysia, should not be interpreted as evidence of their exclusion from communal iftar. Rather, it reflects the practical limitations of ethnographic access and participant recruitment during the fieldwork period. Likewise, communities originating from Sabah, Sarawak, or other regions of Malaysia may well have participated in these gatherings, although their presence could not be systematically verified through the available data. Therefore, the findings are intended to capture the diversity encountered during fieldwork rather than to provide an exhaustive representation of all ethnic and national groups participating in Ramadan gatherings in Kuala Lumpur. From this perspective, communal iftar should be understood less as a space that dissolves social differences and more as an open ritual setting that enables temporary forms of togetherness without requiring the erasure of cultural distinctions. Its inclusiveness lies not in the complete integration of all groups, but in the absence of visible barriers to participation and in the shared experience of hospitality that momentarily brings diverse Muslims into the same social space.

Mosque Iftar and Urban Religious Hospitality

Findings indicate that Kuala Lumpur mosques function as consistent providers of hospitality during Ramadan, aligning with Fischer’s (Fischer, 2025) observation that religious spaces transform into centers of communal care. Throughout the observation period, iftar gatherings were held daily at Masjid Negara, Masjid Jamek, Masjid India, Surau NU Sentral, and Dataran Merdeka. Participation ranged from approximately 200 attendees in neighborhood mosques to 1,000–2,000 participants at larger sites. Meals were provided free of charge and generally open to the public, reflecting Ramadan’s charitable ethos while reinforcing its communal dimension. Despite this openness, gatherings were highly organized through the coordination of mosque committees, volunteers, and sponsors. Such arrangements enabled large-scale participation and support the argument of (Hadi, 2025) and (Alaca, 2022) that mosques operate as institutional providers of communal care. The inclusive nature of these gatherings was evident in the participation of local residents, migrants, international students, and non-Muslim visitors, particularly at Dataran Merdeka, where iftar events also intersected with tourism activities (Taj, 2023); (Wan Ali et al., 2020). This inclusiveness also reflects Malaysia’s broader social integration policy, which encourages multicultural coexistence through shared public participation while allowing different ethnic and religious communities to maintain their cultural identities. Rather than limiting Ramadan activities to Muslim communities alone, communal iftar has increasingly become a civic space that welcomes participation across cultural and religious boundaries.

These observations support the concept of mosque-organized ritual hospitality (Thoha et al., 2025), in which food provision and spatial organization transform religious spaces into sites of social solidarity (Abo-Zena & Hassan, 2024). Unlike individualized charity, these gatherings rely on systematic institutional coordination and recurring implementation. In Kuala Lumpur, hospitality extends beyond food provision by accommodating diverse cultural traditions represented by Malay, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian communities. This diversity is expressed through participation, culinary practices, and social interaction within a shared ritual setting. The findings also resonate with Malaysia’s approach to religious moderation, where religious practices are encouraged to remain open, peaceful, and socially inclusive. During observations at Masjid Negara, for example, non-Muslim visitors were welcomed to attend the communal iftar, with several participating respectfully while wearing robes provided by the mosque. Such practices demonstrate that mosque hospitality functions not only as a religious obligation but also as an instrument of interreligious engagement and mutual respect. Consequently, communal iftar contributes to the formation of urban Muslim life (Ab Majid, 2022), where cultural plurality is integrated into everyday religious practice.

Viewed analytically, these findings highlight the role of mosques as providers of social infrastructure within urban Muslim societies. Through the regular organization of communal meals, mosques create accessible spaces where religious observance and social welfare intersect. Beyond their religious function, several large-scale iftar events are also incorporated into Malaysia's cultural tourism agenda, where Ramadan is promoted as part of the country's multicultural identity. Government-supported events frequently combine communal iftar with the presentation of Malay culinary traditions, cultural performances, and public festivals, while also accommodating Middle Eastern and South Asian influences that characterize Malaysia's multicultural society. In this context, communal iftar operates simultaneously as religious hospitality, cultural diplomacy, and tourism promotion. The Malaysian case further demonstrates how communal iftar supports interaction among diverse cultural communities while maintaining their distinct identities. Rather than producing cultural uniformity, these gatherings facilitate coexistence through shared experiences of dining, conversation, and ritual observance, illustrating how mosque-organized hospitality functions as both religious care and multicultural social infrastructure.

Public Ramadan Events and Cultural Diplomacy

An additional dimension of communal iftar in Kuala Lumpur is evident in large-scale public events held beyond mosques, particularly at Dataran Merdeka. Organized with support from government institutions, these gatherings present Ramadan not only as a religious observance but also as a shared public experience (Sa'ari et al., 2025). Long communal dining rows arranged on mats brought together local residents, migrant communities, international students, tourists, and non-Muslim visitors (Weng, 2022); (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Consequently, iftar extends beyond mosque settings and temporarily transforms urban public space into a site of collective participation and ritual hospitality. Field observations revealed that non-Muslim visitors, including Chinese tourists and international travelers, participated primarily as observers and guests, sharing public space and occasionally interacting with local participants. These encounters enabled visitors to experience Ramadan practices directly rather than through formal cultural performances. However, the extent of interaction varied, and co-presence did not necessarily imply deep intercultural integration. In this sense, Dataran Merdeka functioned as a micro-public in which diverse actors encountered one another through ordinary practices of sitting, waiting, eating, and conversing (Amin, 2008). Such encounters reflect forms of everyday conviviality that allow differences to coexist without requiring their disappearance (Gilroy, 2013).

Rather than viewing communal iftar as a straightforward embodiment of the "Malaysia Truly Asia" narrative, the findings suggest that public Ramadan gatherings provide opportunities for intercultural encounters while preserving distinct social and cultural identities. Diversity was visible and publicly enacted through shared participation, yet the depth and durability of these relationships remain difficult to ascertain from ethnographic observation alone. Analytically, Dataran Merdeka illustrates how ritual hospitality extends into civic space (Hadi, 2025). The event demonstrates how state-supported public rituals, spatial arrangements, and repeated interaction collectively produce temporary forms of social cohesion. Thus, communal iftar should be understood not as evidence of complete multicultural integration, but as an open and inclusive setting that facilitates moments of conviviality and shared belonging within a culturally diverse urban society (Burchardt et al., 2023); (Kabir & Rabby, 2025); (Thoaha et al., 2025); (Ab Majid, 2022).

The theoretical contribution of this study is built upon a progressive transition from traditional institutional paradigms to a more fluid, de-territorialized understanding of religious practice in urban spaces. At the foundational level, this research acknowledges the established framework of "mosque-based hospitality," which traditionally confines ritual efficacy to formal, institutional boundaries. However, by observing the communal gatherings at Dataran Merdeka, this study introduces the concept of ritual de-territorialization. This suggests that the ethical and symbolic dimensions of the *majlis* specifically the egalitarian values and shared consumption can be projected into secular, nationally significant environments without losing their spiritual essence. The "building blocks" of this theory culminate in a new conceptual category: "Public Ritual Hospitality." In this model, the spatial logic of the mosque is not merely moved but is hybridized with the civic environment, creating a "sacred-secular" hybridity. This hybridity serves as an active

platform for ritual diplomacy, moving beyond a purely devotional practice into a form of symbolic mediation. Through this diplomacy, Islamic values of generosity are enacted to produce social capital that bridges diverse trajectories, from local residents to international observers, including non-Muslim participants from various ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, this study refines the discourse on urban sociology by positioning multicultural public spaces as liminal zones. In these transitional environments, the rigid social hierarchies and institutional boundaries typically found in more regulated settings are temporarily softened. This phenomenon reveals a shared social character within the *serumpun* (kindred) societies of Malaysia and Indonesia, where the practice of communal dining serves as a tangible mechanism for social cohesion. Ultimately, this theoretical building suggests that in contemporary pluralistic societies, urban public spaces function as critical arenas where religious harmony is not just a concept, but a negotiated and lived experience through the hybridity of shared ritual hospitality.

For government bodies like the Ministry of Tourism, these findings highlight the efficacy of using "culturalized" religious events to promote Malaysia's image as a harmonious, multicultural nation. This suggests that future tourism strategies should continue to leverage authentic communal traditions to attract international visitors while strengthening the country's image as an inclusive multicultural destination. The integration of communal iftar into tourism programming also demonstrates that religious traditions can serve as cultural assets without diminishing their spiritual significance, contributing simultaneously to destination branding, intercultural dialogue, and community participation. The success of public iftar events suggests that local councils and NGOs should utilize communal dining as a tool for social engineering. By creating more "long-row" dining arrangements in public spaces, cities can actively foster peaceful coexistence and reduce social silos between different ethnic and religious communities. These findings also offer practical lessons for Indonesia. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population and remarkable cultural diversity, Indonesia possesses similar potential to develop communal iftar as an inclusive public tradition that transcends ethnic, religious, and social boundaries. Adopting hospitality-based approaches similar to those observed in Malaysia could strengthen social cohesion by encouraging participation regardless of religion, ethnicity, or cultural background, while preserving local Islamic traditions. For mosques and religious organizers, this study implies that "opening the gates" to the wider public including non-Muslims can act as a powerful form of cultural preaching. It encourages religious leaders to think beyond the walls of the mosque to engage with a broader, more diverse audience through shared social traditions. More broadly, the Malaysian experience illustrates how mosque-based hospitality can simultaneously support religious moderation, social integration, and religious tourism. By welcoming visitors from different faiths to observe and participate respectfully in communal iftar, religious sites become spaces of intercultural learning rather than exclusive places of worship. This approach enhances the attractiveness of religious tourism destinations while reinforcing the message that religious diversity can coexist within shared public spaces. For Indonesia, integrating similar hospitality-oriented practices into selected religious tourism destinations could strengthen the country's tourism competitiveness while promoting inclusive social relations and interfaith understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that communal iftar gatherings in Kuala Lumpur function as more than occasions for breaking the daily fast. Through the majlis tradition, communal iftar operates as a structured religious-cultural practice that combines worship, hospitality, and social interaction within urban Muslim life. The findings reveal that these gatherings are characterized by distinctive temporal patterns, institutional coordination, spatial arrangements, and diverse forms of participation, collectively transforming mosques into important centers of community engagement during Ramadan. The study further shows that communal iftar is sustained through organized networks involving mosque committees, volunteers, donors, and participants. These arrangements enable mosques to provide not only food but also inclusive social spaces where individuals from different ethnic, national, and socioeconomic backgrounds interact and develop a sense of collective belonging. In this regard, communal iftar contributes significantly to social cohesion by fostering interpersonal relationships, reinforcing shared religious values, and facilitating intercultural encounters within multicultural urban environments. A key contribution

of this study is the development of the concepts of mosque-organized ritual hospitality and public ritual hospitality. The findings demonstrate that hospitality during Ramadan extends beyond charitable food provision and functions as a structured social practice through which religious values of generosity, solidarity, and communal care are enacted. Observations at Dataran Merdeka further indicate that the principles of mosque-based hospitality can extend into public urban spaces, creating opportunities for broader intercultural engagement involving local residents, migrant communities, international visitors, and non-Muslim participants.

These findings contribute to the anthropology of Islam, urban religious studies, and Southeast Asian studies by highlighting how religious hospitality serves as a mechanism for social integration in contemporary cities. Rather than viewing communal iftar solely as a devotional ritual, this study demonstrates its significance as a socially organized practice that connects religious observance, community participation, and multicultural coexistence. This study is limited by its focus on selected sites in Kuala Lumpur and by data collection conducted during specific Ramadan periods. Future research may extend this analysis to other urban contexts in Southeast Asia, undertake analysis studies between Malaysia and Indonesia, or explore in greater depth the experiences of female participants and non-Muslim attendees. Such studies would further enrich our understanding of how communal Ramadan practices contribute to social cohesion and intercultural relations in increasingly diverse urban societies.

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