

***More Than Entrepreneurial Activity:
The Practice of Selling Nasi Pecel That Reproduces Public Space***

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Abstract

Lore into traditional food has documented that the practice of preserving traditional food is as important as the traditional food itself. More than just entrepreneurial activities, everyday practices such as selling traditional food have been influential in the reproduction of public space and the identity of the city. We seek to elaborate this study further by exploring evidence from traditional food in the Global South countries. In doing so, we work with 30 *nasi pecel* sellers in Mataraman cities in East Java province in Indonesia to explore the practice of selling *nasi pecel*. Drawing on our fieldwork in the cities of Madiun, Nganjuk, Kediri, and Jombang; our research employs a qualitative approach by utilizing archives and/or documentation, FGD notes, and interviews; all these are utilized to gather foodmaps. Our findings showcase the practice of selling *nasi pecel* is particularly influential to reproduce public spaces in which people from different backgrounds socialize to converse on different social issues. The centrality of such social interactions within the socio-historical context of Indonesian society is also discussed in dialogue with literature in public spaces. Our engagements also demonstrate that a particular area, as well as traditional food, determines the politics of everyday life of the city and their residents. The practice of selling *nasi pecel* also reproduces the capital of women entrepreneurs in their legitimate businesses.

Keywords: *Nasi Pecel*, Foodmaps, Public Space, The Politics of Everyday Life, Global South, Fieldwork

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Introduction

A portion of *nasi pecel* is served by its sellers to people who eat it, either during breakfast or at night. A plate of *nasi pecel* usually consists of warm white rice, vegetables that have been boiled/steamed before, including long beans, cabbage, spinach, kangkong, cassava leaves, sprouts, basil, *kembang turi*, then doused with a legit and slightly spicy peanut sauce on top. It is incomplete if it is not added with complements such as *peyek* or other variants of side dishes. As one of the traditional foods, Indonesians especially who live on the Java island, are no longer unfamiliar with *nasi pecel*, including in the four Mataraman cities that became our research locations: Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun. These four cities are located in East Java with a total distance of about 200 km or 5 hours' drive. Madiun is even known as the city of *pecel* as it goes along with the city branding. The word 'pecel' itself means vegetable that is squeezed after boiling (Budiyanto, 2023). When looking at its history, the presence of *pecel* has existed since ancient times in 1800 AD, known from the archive found in *Serat Centhini*. In addition, in *Babad Tanah Jawi*, *pecel* is mentioned to have been served along with peanut sauce, which was favoured by the people at that time until today. *Nasi pecel* has become one of the most popular traditional cuisine in Indonesia (Loi, 2020).

Nasi pecel is sold at an affordable price, ranging from Rp 5,000-15,000 or more depending on the variant of side dishes eaten with *nasi pecel*. In addition, it is available everywhere, home-cooked, and not too difficult to prepare. Rice is staple food in Java, including Mataraman cities, and *pecel* represents an interethnic and diasporic encounter. Furthermore, *nasi pecel* is mostly sold by women sellers in the four research cities: Ngajuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun. These *nasi pecel* sellers are women working in the small and medium enterprises sector, which is the main source of livelihood. From here, the trading activities carried out by *nasi pecel* sellers are not just an act of entrepreneurship, but a wave of actor networks that sustain family life and become a recognisable face in the city where they live (Cavanaugh, 2023). This research aims to explore two main things, namely how the practice of selling *nasi pecel* in these four cities embodies public space and how its cultural repertoire shows the politics of everyday life.

Previous Research

Previous research that discusses food seen from the experience of travellers in cyberspace, these food travellers articulate and position themselves in cyberspace by accumulating the capital they have and highlighting gender strategies—in this case is feminine capital—that is strengthened (Swastika, 2016). In addition, in an effort to mediatise the #stopfoodwaste issue, Garda Pangan, a non-profit organisation, conducted interesting programmes in Surabaya and through their social media to attract more attention from local residents (Swastika, 2018). Similarly, research conducted by Mares (2012) on how immigrants trace their identity through the plate of food they eat and the memory of the taste of the dishes eaten. Then Dean et al. (2012) which shows the cultural repertoire of the use of household utensils that are closely related to food. By referring to these sources, this research shows the cultural repertoire of the practice of selling and consuming *nasi pecel* in Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun, four cities in East Java. In this cultural repertoire, the practice of selling *nasi pecel* has gone beyond entrepreneurial practices by small and medium enterprises, but portrays the politics of everyday life of urban residents in public spaces. In terms of their location, selling *nasi pecel* has transformed a public space where citizens access material culture in the form of traditional food. In that public space they can be connected to each

other. *Nasi pecel* sellers also occupy a site with a vernacular design to represent a site of cultural consumption.

From four cities as research locations, we collected data from 30 *nasi pecel* sellers. They became informants for the duration of the study which was conducted over eight weeks. We used the snowball technique to recruit *nasi pecel* sellers during the fieldwork (Hayes-Conroy, 2010). Fieldwork was chosen because we wanted the data to be based on participatory co-creation through verbal and nonverbal communication. The aim of the fieldwork was to present a form of intentionally designed experiences that involved sensory manner. Communication centred on understanding how sites we visited were bound by *nasi pecel* served and consumed. The selection of the four cities was also based on proximity reasons, both proximity or areas that are still in the East Java region as well as the manageable distance of fieldwork. In addition; Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun are also known as cities that sell *nasi pecel*. In collecting data, we not only interviewed *nasi pecel* vendors, but also bought their food and interacted with fellow consumers. The busy nature of *nasi pecel* trade requires us to have a strategy to not disturb or we accommodate the busyness of the traders. Ethical process means the ability to immerse oneself in the *nasi pecel* sellers' activities and mingle with other consumers. The language we used was predominantly Javanese which they often use on a daily basis. This go-along method helps us collect stories and data from the informants without disturbing their routine of selling *nasi pecel* (Brinkmann, 2014). Some *nasi pecel* stalls are quiet so that it allows us to come directly and interview but in other locations, *nasi pecel* stalls are very crowded so there is no need to force an interview. This is part of the ethical reflection itself. The result was a large body of empirical material and over 200 photographs (Hodgetts, et al., 2007). To process the data, we act as *bricoleurs* (Strauss, 1962) by working in an interdisciplinary manner to explore the depth of the data and analyse it validly and reliably.



Figure 1: *Nasi pecel* served in Mataraman cities, Indonesia

Conclusion

Based on the field research we have conducted in Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun, we can gather several points, which in this case focus on the story behind the process of selling and buying *nasi pecel* in Mataraman cities. The first is the fact that sellers of *nasi pecel* have become an integral part of the residents of the Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun. It would've been very easy to find *nasi pecel* with a variety of side dishes and their respective characteristics. All the *nasi pecel* stalls served the dishes based on their home recipes. The main characters were women vendors who mixed the *pecel* seasoning recipe and

prepared boiled vegetables and complimentary side dishes so that they could be sold as a dish called *nasi pecel*. Not only as cooks, we also saw that most of the *nasi pecel* merchants are women with a range of ages. Some are still students, housewives, and even elderly mothers, also they are women vendors by the female naming as we know in Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese such as ‘mbak’, ‘bu’, ‘mak’, or ‘jeng’. For instance, at Bu Mursini’s *nasi pecel* stall where the mother and daughter-in-law sell *nasi pecel* and other complementary dishes together. There are quite a few who have been selling *nasi pecel* for generations and usually the person entrusted to continue the business is the daughter in the family (Jackson, 2011).

We also discovered the fact that the majority of *nasi pecel* sellers in Mataraman cities sell this dish as their main occupation in order to improve the welfare of their families. One of them is the story of *Warung Pecel Pincuk Bu Hj. Djiyah*. Djiyah’s stall is a business that has been running for 20 years. Initially, Mrs. Djiyah worked odd jobs to support her family, but one day she ventured to sell *nasi pecel* she made herself and it turned out that many people liked her cooking. She consistently sells *nasi pecel* and adds various choices of side dishes, that is where the success of *Warung Pecel Pincuk Bu Hj. Djiyah* began. Djiyah has now become one of the must-visit culinary destinations in Jombang. With the same enthusiasm and hope, Yoyon, Djiyah’s daughter-in-law decided to learn the recipe for *pecel* seasoning directly from her and finally she and her husband decided to open a *nasi pecel*. We found that most of the *nasi pecel* sellers in Mataraman cities aim their business as the only or main source of livelihood (Cavanaugh, 2023). This means that all family members’ needs, especially financially, must be met from income through selling *nasi pecel*, this is all because of the belief in the irreplaceable selling value of *nasi pecel*, especially for the local community (Jackson, 2011).

The Identification of *Nasi Pecel* Sellers Through the Foodmaps

Throughout the fieldwork, we realised that the story of *nasi pecel* trade is not as simple as selling in the morning or at night at roadside stalls. Therefore, a mapping is needed, which is known as foodmaps (Marte, 2007). Foodmaps can be used to research the sites that we visit, occupy, and even consume as public spaces. Furthermore, foodmaps are needed because it is necessary to know the existence of *nasi pecel* sellers who apparently form a pattern. The existence of *nasi pecel* sellers is not random and scattered but centred at several points in each city. They also usually sell in strategic locations so that consumers can easily come to them to buy and eat *nasi pecel*. These *nasi pecel* sellers serves their dishes in front of shop that have closed for the night, while some sell in the morning on main roads or in markets. In these four cities, they can be grouped into two types: morning and night time *nasi pecel* vendors; where the morning is more accessed by locals, usually the neighbours or other local area, while the night time *nasi pecel* is much more open to out-of-town visitors. Aside from the time relation, another landmark of these foodmaps is that *nasi pecel* sellers occupy the sidewalks at night along the main roads. This condition is common on Indonesian roads. In the development of the landscape of cities in Indonesia, we cannot deny that the street is the pulse or a city where almost all citizen activities are centred there, including trade. The idea of public space then emerges because it is in this area where people meet that is not limited to commercial purposes. Foodmaps also comes with evidences of vernacular design found massively in *nasi pecel* trading sites in four cities. They sell by arranging selling utensils, such as plastic or wooden tables and chairs. On the table are large containers containing *pecel* vegetables, side dishes, and peanut sauce. They also provide cold and hot drinks so some vendors need to set up a stove to boil water. Eating areas are available on the spot, on long benches or mats on the pavements. For light, vendors install light bulbs and put up banners

with the name of their stalls and the menu. They use names that are synonymous with ‘female naming’ because they always begin with ‘bu’, ‘mbak’, ‘jeng’, and ‘mak’. Each stall can accommodate 3-4 people as a selling team and 10-15 consumers who eat on the spot. Not far from the stalls, consumers can park their vehicles either motorbikes or cars. Additional information here, even in Madiun, we found that there is a *pecel* monument installed right in the main road area.

Talking about the identities embedded in *nasi pecel* sellers we met, they are all women who rely on this *nasi pecel* business as the main livelihood of their families. Female *nasi pecel* sellers known as ‘bu’, ‘mbak’, ‘jeng’, or ‘mak’ become a network of small and medium enterprises in these cities. Hall suggests that the naming of identity is changed to identification, which is organised in multiple and fluid ways. Identification as “a strategic and positional view of identity” is a way of enacting identity strategically and adjusted to the position in which the identity is articulated. Hall (as cited by Bell, 2001) mentions that identification provides ample opportunities for self-representation based on their choices. Their identification is closely related to their strategy of managing capital. The mode of capital as the critical perspective of entrepreneurial activity in selling *nasi pecel*. The focus of Bourdieu’s thinking is on social practices that manifest in daily life. Bourdieu organises society in a vertical dimension which is shown through actors in social classes who have high or low economic capital. This condition gives birth to a logic of ownership that determines the relationship between social class and practice and struggle of it. Capital can be owned by someone, it can be tangible materials or various attributes that carry cultural significance. Capital consists of 1) economic capital which is a resource in the production process and financial, economic capital that is most easily converted into from other capital; 2) cultural capital is contained in forms such as education level, graduate status, knowledge, cultural codes, language skills; 3) social capital lies in the social position of actors, such as status, position, title, surname, prestige; then 4) symbolic capital is all forms of recognition, either by institutional or non-institutional groups (Haryatmoko, 2010; Jenkins, 1992).

For *nasi pecel* vendors, they clearly get economic capital from the profit of selling *nasi pecel*. If a portion of *nasi pecel complete* with side dishes is priced at Rp 15,000 and multiplied by a minimum of 50 portions sold, then a net profit of 70% is taken, so every day the vendors can pocket around IDR Rp 525,000. Then add the proceeds from the sale of drinks. Cultural capital arises from the knowledge and skills of these vendors to prepare, process raw ingredients, cook, serve rice, *pecel*, side dishes, drinks, while offering their menus with their marketing skills. As a material culture, *nasi pecel* is a traditional food that has sustained for hundreds of years in Java; one of the ways of preserving *nasi pecel* is through these vendors. Further, social capital is obtained when *nasi pecel* vendors are able to socialise with each other, not even a few of them are members of an association of *nasi pecel* vendors. Also, social capital is collected when they are able to negotiate as well as intercultural meetings with shop owners who provide a place for them to sell. Then symbolic capital is exchanged when their existence is recognised by the public, by their loyal customers. In addition, some vendors, especially those located in Madiun, have been able to continue this *nasi pecel* business as a family business from one generation to the next. Bourdieu borrowed the concept of capital from economics because some features of capital can explain the unequal power relations within social classes, hence the differences in social status. Capital can be accumulated through investment, capital can be given to others through inheritance, and capital is able to provide benefits according to the opportunities its owner has (Bonnewitz as cited in Haryatmoko, 2010). Bourdieu’s capital is a variety of sources, both tangible and intangible, from which a person can achieve success in a particular arena. For him, such an

arrangement would make clear the arena of struggle, what is at stake, and what kind of capital is needed to play a role in the game, which directs the logic of ownership that determines the relationship between social classes and their practices (Haryatmoko, 2010; Jenkins, 1992).

The body in this study is a cultural locus for gender-related meanings. McDowell (1999) suggests that masculine culture has identified women with aspects of the body, while men are free from such bodily markings. The body is present in the presence of agents who are female *nasi pecel* sellers as working-class women. Working-class women accumulate a pool of capital and to mark that capital is legitimised as power for their position, but the normative view states that women are subjects who do not typically do so, women are considered not capital-accumulating subjects. They are capital-bearing objects where value can be increased by the presence of women in a social group, such as husbands with wives or families with mothers (Thorpe, 2009). But with this *nasi pecel* business, they are present as subjects who are able to accumulate their capital. Since the 1990s, feminist scholars have argued that women are not only able to accumulate capital, they also control their own form of feminine capital. For Skeggs (as cited in Thorpe, 2009) femininity is embodied, at once born of competence and therefore can operate as capital. Femininity, as part of cultural capital, is a discursive position present through gender relations that is encouraged to be inhabited and utilised by women *nasi pecel* sellers. The use of femininity is driven by social position in class, gender, sexuality, region, age, race that ensures femininity can be utilised and resisted in various ways. The use of femininity, consisting of female capital and feminine capital, as part of cultural capital is needed in the labour market. Female capital refers to the benefits that can be reaped from being a woman, while feminine capital is the benefits that come from one's character or skills or the benefits that come from being feminine. Both of these capitals can be seen in their figures. Being female and feminine can lead to certain earnings in the social arenas of family, work, education, and so on (Thorpe, 2009).

If spatial matters between public and private, or between inside and outside, also shape gender distinctions so that a binary comparison between masculine and feminine emerges (McDowell, 1999), then women *nasi pecel* sellers in this condition cannot be applied. Their identity narratives are fluid and dynamic, they can embrace traits that were previously compartmentalised. They merge everything in the practice of trade in public spaces that are easily found in the cities of Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun. Women *nasi pecel* sellers are intertwined in public-private issues, being independent and dependent in their interplay with other parties, being inside and outside the home, also merging their main work with activities such as caregiving, networking, filling their free time. Identity is ultimately composed of aspects of "the social landscapes out there" where the process of identification becomes more open, varied, and complex (Hall, 1996).



Figure 2: Women vendors in their *warung* serving *nasi pecel* to the consumers

Spatial Practice is Situated in the Public Space

During the field research period, we also discovered a unique element that differentiated sales of *nasi pecel* in the city of Mataraman from other cities. This lies in the factors that cause a stall to be able to sell in front of the shop at night only with an agreement. In fact, most of these agreements were made without requiring the *nasi pecel* sellers to pay rent. The agreement was established due to various factors, whether because of the good relationship between the *nasi pecel* sellers and the shop owners which has existed for a long time, the willingness of the shop owners to give their places for free use, and so on. The agreement between the *nasi pecel* sellers and the landowners will certainly influence the implementation of environmental regulations around the place where they sell. An example is determining the area that will be used as a place to sell and the duration of time for selling. Most of the existing agreements only require *nasi pecel* sellers to pay the electricity and water costs used to sell in front of the shop. *Nasi pecel* sellers usually give some of their wares to landowners to express their gratitude. Behind their daily operation at stalls, during the interviews we have conducted, it turns out that the interactions between the parties are quite diverse and surprising considering the reality of the agreements. *Nasi pecel* sellers occupy the space in front of the Chinese-Indonesian owned shops in the main roads around Mataraman cities; such as Cokroaminoto Street in Madiun, A. Yani Street in Nganjuk, and Dhoho Street in Kediri, and Wahid Hasyim Street in Jombang.

After conducting fieldwork, we also discovered the particular characteristics of each *nasi pecel* stall located in these cities. The way each region serves *nasi pecel* is varied, although they all come back to the conclusion that *pecel* rice is really delicious. One of the significant differences from Nganjuk's *nasi pecel* is that most stalls provide the option to add *sambal tumpang* which is placed on top of the *nasi pecel* along with additional side dishes. The *sambal* has a distinctive taste and aroma that are very easy to recognize just by smelling. *Sambal tumpang* itself is a condiment sauce mainly made by *tempe*. For *nasi pecel* in

Jombang, the characteristic is the addition of *lodeh*, a coconut milk soup based vegetable dish, which is placed directly together as part of *nasi pecel*. This may feel foreign to most people, but it tastes delicious. The textures of food when chewing a spoonful of *nasi pecel* can be felt even more because of the element of *lodeh*. *Nasi pecel* served in Kediri can be said to be quite general compared to the other three cities. In Kediri, there are rice stalls that include a choice of chili sauce, there are also those that serve basic *nasi pecel* without the addition of chili sauce or *lodeh* as is usually served in Nganjuk and Jombang. Even so, the number of people interested in *nasi pecel* in Kediri is no less numerous than those interested in other cities. The distinctive taste of processed peanut sauce is one of the main factors why people still return to continue consuming *nasi pecel* in Kediri. Meanwhile in Madiun, precisely in HOS Cokroaminoto Street, there are a number of *nasi pecel* stalls located along the road which have become culinary tourism spots that are always busy with visitors. When it comes to *nasi pecel* in Madiun, there is no need to doubt the authenticity of the taste of each portion. Through our field research while in Madiun, we have visited seven *nasi pecel* stalls and indeed the quality of each *nasi pecel* ingredient is very well maintained. All the *nasi pecel* that we have consumed while in Madiun really confirmed to us that Madiun has the right to be labelled as *Kota Pecel* (the city of *pecel*).

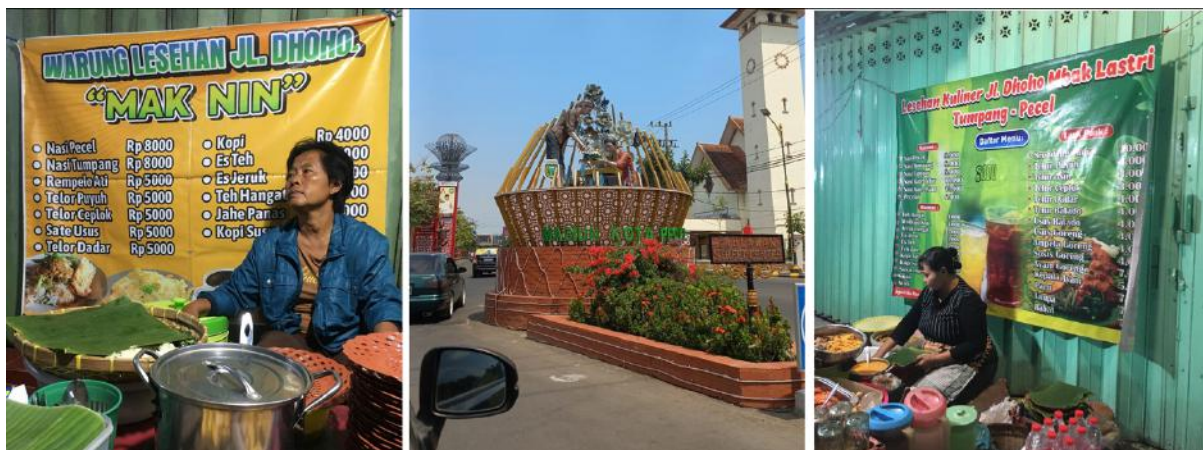


Figure 3: The representational space of *nasi pecel* trade

In the practice of selling or buying *nasi pecel*, what is consumed is no longer food as material culture, but also consumes space. The study of place is developed basically because almost all social and cultural theories contain explanations of place-spatial relations, also not forgetting time relations in their own ways. Thus, representational space (lived space) is the site where agents/subjects live, inhabit, and construct their narratives of everyday life (Johnson, et al., 2004). Southeast Asia is closely related to the trade sector and is filled with interactions between people from many groups and social classes. The road, therefore, can be understood as a place for dis-placement, the road is a place to pass, the road accommodates the movement of various forms, postures, and various human forms (Jacobs as in Raihana, 2011). The attachment between consumption activity and the space in which this activity takes place because the place that accommodates the activity provides a spatial context in which objects or services can be used, purchased, compared, and evaluated. This condition indicates the physical place has been culturally contextualised as space. A place does not function solely as a physical setting, but also as centres of consumption that surround it (Urry, 1995).

Over the past decade, research focusing on the Global South has surged. This popularity should be understood not as a marker of research based on regions or geographical locations

in the southern hemisphere alone, but rather as an interpretation of postcolonial ideas and decolonisation of a nation across time and between specific sites. The interconnection of the Global South with the global region expands our view of economic, political, socio-cultural issues in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Haug, 2021). A Global South perspective needs to be placed in this research of *nasi pecel* trade in Mataraman cities to show the complexity of the data findings. Tracing back the sites that are used as selling points, it explains how cities in Indonesia are mostly built of two approaches. Looking at the history of the formation of cities in Indonesia, there are two types of cities; port cities which are used as trading points and have international shipping lanes and inland cities as administrative centres located in agricultural areas (Raihana, 2011). Inland cities are built on the banks of rivers, while trading cities exist as coastal cities. By this explanation, we can look specifically at Southeast Asia regionalism as the school of thought we can build from and within the region and also as the continuity of doing critical and reconstructive research work which is incorporated with local knowledge.



Figure 4: The practice of selling *nasi pecel* as seen in the study of a reconstructive knowledge and politics of everyday life

The practice of selling *nasi pecel* on the main roads reproduces the public space for local citizens and tourists, it also reproduces the cultural sites within the four Mataraman cities; Nganjuk, Jombang, Kediri, and Madiun. The production of space lies within these three findings of “spaces of representation” as a) the site of economic, socio-cultural, and politics of everyday life where *nasi pecel* is the embodiment of local, affordable, sustainable gastronomy, b) the site of public encounters and the relationality of space which can be consumed, and c) the site of capital that is exchanged. Capital not only defined as pricing value or profit by selling *nasi pecel* but it is extended into the social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital, one and another capital are exchanged or even fought to possess. The deeper thought then is which one is the least and which one is more valuable out of those capitals. The main concern is not the mere idea of selling something humble but rather the efforts of the sellers, most of whom are women, to continue the legacy of *nasi pecel* and to

support the family's income. The gastronomy of *nasi pecel* originally came from a tradition and their local knowledge, yet it embodies the concept of a commons based on shared knowledge of cooking *nasi pecel* recipes. After the research was finished, we reflect on the results we got, in this case what we did had several limitations. This research has not looked in depth from the perspective of buyers who are also in the same public space as *nasi pecel* sellers. Apart from that, we also recommend research with a quantitative approach to cover a wider distribution of traders so that it can be seen from the lore of actor network theory with the hope that research that looks more closely at a network can emphasize on cultural practices in a public area.

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