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Dynamics of Power and Prosperity: An Interdisciplinary Study of Saint Pilgrimage in Indonesia

Siti Rohwati

Sekolah Pascasarjana, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah,
Jakarta, Indonesia

email: sitirohwati8@gmail.com

Hamdani

Sekolah Pascasarjana, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah,
Jakarta, Indonesia

email: hamdani@uinjkt.ac.id

Abstract

This research examines the complexity of the relationship between spiritual and economic aspects in the context of the pilgrimage of saints in Indonesia. Using qualitative and anthropological approaches, this research relies on secondary sources of relevant literature. The 'ziarah

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wali' (saint pilgrimage), which has strong roots in traditional Muslim cultures, has undergone significant transformations along with economic and political developments in the modern era. This study analyzes how the veneration of holy men in many parts of Javanese culture transformed from religious ritual into social and economic activity manifested in popular tourism. The literature review includes various sources of literature data related to the study of the history of the pilgrimage of saints, socio-cultural changes, government policies related to religious tourism, and the economic impact on the community around the pilgrimage site. The main findings indicate an ongoing negotiation between spiritual values and economic interests in shaping the contemporary pilgrimage landscape in Indonesia. The analysis shows the complex dynamics between pilgrims' spiritual motivations, local communities' economic interests, and government policies in developing the religious tourism sector. This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of socioeconomic dynamics in spiritual practices and the implications for policies on cultural heritage preservation and religious tourism development in Indonesia.

[Penelitian ini mengkaji kompleksitas hubungan antara aspek spiritual dan ekonomi dalam konteks ziarah wali di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan pendekatan antropologis, penelitian ini mengandalkan sumber-sumber sekunder dari literatur yang relevan. Ziarah wali, yang memiliki akar kuat dalam budaya Muslim tradisional, telah mengalami transformasi signifikan seiring dengan perkembangan ekonomi dan politik di era modern. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana pemujaan terhadap orang-orang suci di banyak bagian budaya Jawa berubah dari ritual keagamaan menjadi aktivitas sosial dan ekonomi yang terwujud dalam pariwisata populer. Tinjauan pustaka mencakup berbagai sumber data literatur yang terkait dengan studi tentang sejarah ziarah wali, perubahan sosial budaya, kebijakan pemerintah terkait wisata religi, dan dampak ekonomi terhadap masyarakat di sekitar situs ziarah. Temuan utama menunjukkan negosiasi yang terus berlangsung antara nilai-nilai spiritual dan kepentingan ekonomi dalam membentuk lanskap ziarah kontemporer di Indonesia. Analisis menunjukkan dinamika yang kompleks antara motivasi spiritual para peziarah, kepentingan ekonomi masyarakat lokal, dan kebijakan pemerintah dalam mengembangkan sektor wisata religi. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang dinamika sosial-ekonomi dalam praktik keagamaan, serta implikasinya terhadap kebijakan pelestarian warisan budaya dan pengembangan wisata religi di Indonesia.]

Keywords: tradition; pilgrimage; commodification of religion; community; political-economic dynamics

Introduction

The pilgrimage to saints' graves in Indonesia has long been an integral part of the religious life of Muslim communities. It is a spiritual practice that seeks to draw closer to God and is a socio-cultural phenomenon that continues to evolve.¹ In Indonesia, rich in cultural diversity, the pilgrimage of the saints is a meeting point between Islamic teachings and local wisdom, creating a unique and complex form of religious expression.² Pilgrimage is one of the oldest and most fundamental forms of human mobility, and its political, social, cultural, and economic implications have always been substantial and continue to be.³

As George Quinn explains in his study of Islam in Java, pilgrimage to holy graves has been an integral part of the religious life of Indonesian Muslim communities since the early days of Islam's spread in the archipelago. The pilgrimage tradition is considered a form of respect for the saints and a means of seeking blessings and intercession.⁴

Chambert-Loir and Reid's work examines the critical role of ancestors, saints, and heroes in Indonesian culture and beliefs. Their research revealed that deceased people (whether family ancestors, saints, or national heroes) have spiritual power and influence in people's lives. They showed that many Indonesians believe that the spirits of ancestors and significant historical figures can be asked for

¹ Anna Sørensen and Henrik Høgh-Olesen, "Walking for Well-Being. Exploring the Phenomenology of Modern Pilgrimage," *Culture & Psychology* 29, no. 1 (Maret 2023): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X221131354>.

² Martin Slama, "Mengkomodifikasi Orang Suci: Sirkulasi Barang-Barang Suci dalam Islam Indonesia," *Jurnal Humaniora and Ilmu Sosial Asia Tenggara* 173, no. 2 (2017): 196–222, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-17302003>.

³ N. Collins-Kreiner, "Researching Pilgrimage," *Annals of Tourism Research* 37, no. 2 (April 2010): 440–56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.10.016>.

⁴ George Quinn, *Bandit Saints of Java: How Java's Eccentric Saints Are Challenging Fundamentalist Islam in Modern Indonesia*, Second edition (Burrough on the Hill, Leicestershire: Monsoon Books, 2020).

help, protection, and blessings.⁵ Chambert-Loir and Reid also observed that this phenomenon is not limited to one particular religion or ethnicity but can be found in various layers of Indonesian society. It reflects the syncretism between local beliefs, major religions, and modern nationalism.⁶

The practice of saint pilgrimage has undergone various changes. Modernization and globalization have changed the way people understand and practice pilgrimage. In recent decades, the pilgrimage tradition has transformed due to the influence of political-economic dynamics, in which this religious activity has begun to be commodified within the framework of the religious tourism industry. This phenomenon allows spiritual tourism objects to be managed with market logic, creating economic opportunities for local actors and state institutions.⁷

According to the charisma and stories of the buried privileged figures, many parties also use pilgrimage activities to pursue specific interests, such as seeking peace, good luck, healing, and so on.⁸ It creates a new dynamic between spirituality, culture, and economy, sometimes raising debates about commercializing religious practices.

In a social context, the pilgrimage of saints is a medium of social glue that brings together different layers of society from various backgrounds. Collective rituals performed during the pilgrimage, such as tahlilan and kenduri, strengthen communal ties and transmit religious and cultural values between generations. However, differences in interpretation and practice of pilgrimage between community groups

⁵ Chris Devereux and Elizabeth Carnegie, "Pilgrimage: Journeying Beyond Self," *Tourism Recreation Research* 31, no. 1 (Januari 2006): 47–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2006.11081246>.

⁶ Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid, ed., *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

⁷ M. Misbahul Mujib, "Ziarah and Transaksi: Komodifikasi Ibadah dalam Ekonomi Ziarah di Indonesia", *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 21, no.1 (2021): 33–56. <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v21i1.2407>

⁸ Kira N. Shinde, "Pilgrimage and the Environment: Challenges in a Pilgrimage Centre," *Current Issues in Tourism* 10, no. 4 (September 2007): 343–65, <https://doi.org/10.2167/cit259.0>.

can also be a source of tension, reflecting the complexity of Indonesia's religious landscape.⁹

The debate over the practice of pilgrimage has been ongoing for a long time, beginning with the views of figures such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Taymiyah in the 12th-13th centuries and continuing with thinkers such as Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Rashid Rida, and Sayyid Qutb in the 19th-20th centuries. Some have consistently denounced the practice of pilgrimage as shirk (polytheist) and bid'ah (innovation). Despite this, many believers continue to believe that pilgrimage is a legitimate form of worship and practice it.¹⁰

Mark Woodward's research examines the interaction of Islam and Javanese culture. It also discusses Javanese mystical Islam, pilgrimage to the Saint (Wali) tomb, and Sufism and reveals that Islam has adapted to local traditions in Java. Mark Woodward revealed that Islam in Java was not fully adopted in the form of orthodoxy as in the Middle East but was integrated with local cultural and spiritual elements.¹¹

Pilgrimage, both traditional and religious, as well as modern and secular, is experiencing a resurgence worldwide. Increasing indications point to competition for access to and use of sacred sites. This competition sometimes involves traditional owners who consider these sites sacred, with commercial managers and operators also engaged in the conflict, as illustrated by the case study of Uluru (Ayers Rock).¹²

This research uses the cultural pluralism approach. Its primary purpose is to examine how Javanese people integrate Islamic traditions with local customs. It contrasts the research in this article, which emphasizes the impact of political economy and commercialization on pilgrimage practices in Indonesia by showing that pilgrimages have become part of the tourism industry managed by the government.

In the article by Arifuddin Ismail, the phenomenon of pilgrimage to the tomb of Sunan Tembayat in Paseban Village, Klaten, is studied

⁹ Arifuddin Ismail, "Ziarah Ke Makam Wali: Fenomena Tradisional di Zaman Modern," *Al-Qalam* 19, no. 2 (9 Januari 2016): 149, <https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v19i2.156>.

¹⁰ M Misbahul Mujib, "Tradisi Ziarah dalam Masyarakat Jawa: Kontestasi Kesalehan, Identitas Keagamaan and Komersial" 14.

¹¹ Mark Woodward, *Java, Indonesia and Islam* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0056-7>.

¹² Justine Digance, "Pilgrimage at Contested Sites," *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 1 (Januari 2003): 143–59, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(02\)00028-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00028-2).

according to the theories of Geertz and Riaz Hasan. Ismail states that the assumption that the more modern a society becomes, the more popular religious practices will be abandoned is incorrect.¹³ Despite modernization, the local community still makes pilgrimage to Sunan Bayatgrave. It is due to two factors: first, the pilgrimage tradition has a basis in the Safi'i madhab, and second, the community feels the blessing of the pilgrimage practice. This blessing is not only in the form of fulfilling spiritual needs but also has positive economic impacts.

In addition to Islam, Buddhists believe in pilgrimage; they consider it an essential practice in spiritual life and provide meaning in religious practice.¹⁴ This phenomenon is inseparable from the political economy dynamics that influence how pilgrimage is disseminated, practised, and commodified among the wider community.

In the Indonesian context, pilgrimage to the graves of saints has become an arena for strengthening religious identity and an economic tool involving various actors and institutions, both from the formal and informal sectors. Since the last few decades, the transmission of the guardian pilgrimage tradition has undergone significant changes, especially with the commercialization and industrialization of the religious tourism sector.

These practices are influenced by globalization, technological developments, and political-economic policies driven by the state and various market interests. On the one hand, the pilgrimage of saints becomes a commodity marketed massively through religious tour packages, both by domestic and international travel agencies. On the other hand, the spiritual element of the pilgrimage remains the main attraction for millions of pilgrims seeking blessings and enlightenment.¹⁵

With the advent of commercialization, the question arises as to how political economy dynamics play a role in the transmission of saint pilgrimage in Indonesia and whether this commercialization changes the spiritual meaning of pilgrimage practices. To answer this question,

¹³ Arifuddin Ismail, "Ziarah ke Makam Wali: Fenomena Tradisional di Zaman Modern," *Al-Qalam* 19, no. 2 (2016): 149–160, <https://doi.org/10.31969/alq.v19i2.156>.

¹⁴ Shinde, "Pilgrimage and the Environment."

¹⁵ Zaura Sylviana, "Ziarah: antara Fenomena Mistik and Komunikasi Spritual," *Jurnal Darussalam: Jurnal Pendidikan, Komunikasi and Pemikiran Hukum Islam* 10, no. 1 (30 September 2018): 118, <https://doi.org/10.30739/darussalam.v10i1.273>.

this research will examine the impact of commercialization on the practice of saint pilgrimage in Indonesia, focusing on the changes in spiritual meaning and the accompanying political economy dynamics. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines the perspectives of the sociology of religion, cultural anthropology, and political economy, this study aims to uncover the complexity of interactions between spiritual, social, and economic aspects in the context of contemporary wali pilgrimage.¹⁶

As such, this research will provide new insights into the transformation of religious practices in the modern era and contribute to a broader understanding of how spiritual traditions adapt and negotiate with the demands of the global market. The results of this study are expected to serve as a foundation for more informed policy-making in the management of pilgrimage sites and provide a critical perspective for practitioners and stakeholders in maintaining a balance between the spiritual value and economic potential of saint pilgrimage practices in Indonesia.

Methods

This research uses qualitative.¹⁷ Methods to explore the political-economic dynamics in transmitting the guardian pilgrimage tradition in Indonesia. This study aims to understand how pilgrimage practices transform meaning, value, and social function of interaction due to spirituality, capitalism, and state policy. The data analyzed are academic literature, including journal articles, books, research reports, and scientific writings relevant to pilgrimage, the commodification of religion, Islamic political economy, and religious traditions.

This article uses an interdisciplinary literature review approach as the primary method to examine the political economy dynamics in the pilgrimage tradition of the saints in Indonesia. Literature sources were systematically collected from reputable academic databases, including JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, and Scopus, to ensure extensive and credible reference content. As Synder describes, this

¹⁶ Tahani Hassan et al., "Sociodemographic relationships of motivations, satisfaction, and loyalty in religious tourism: A study of the pilgrimage to the city Mecca," *PLOS ONE* 18, no. 3 (30 Maret 2023): e0283720, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0283720>.

¹⁷ Anggito Albi and Setiawan Johan, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Sukabumi: Cv. Jejak, 2018).

method is relevant because literature reviews help synthesize existing research, develop new perspectives, and understand the theoretical foundations for future research.¹⁸

In terms of validity and reliability, the researcher rigorously selected the sources used by considering the publications' credibility and relevance to religious commodification and transmission. The primary focus of this study is how the practice of pilgrimage to the saints is reproduced by economic and political actors in the Indonesian context and how local communities respond to these changes regarding values, rituals, and spiritual narratives. Thus, this study seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between pilgrimage practices, commodification, and community responses. The results of this study will not only add to the body of knowledge but also provide recommendations for more sustainable management of pilgrimage sites that continue to respect the spiritual values of the community.

Results

This literature review reveals several findings, one of which is the process of commodification in religious practices, especially in the context of the pilgrimage of guardians. The commodification of pilgrimage sites refers to religious sites, especially the tombs of saints, being transformed into objects or spaces that have economic value, transacted, and packaged as part of the religious tourism industry. As M. Misbahul Mujib explains in his article, the site of the tomb of the Wali is not only a spiritual space but also undergoes a massive economic transaction process.¹⁹ Mujib noted the involvement of local economic actors in the provision of food services, lodging, souvenirs, and the *jasa do'a* (prayer service)

Clifford Geertz's opinion on *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi* also corroborates this, indirectly providing a basis for analyzing how religious practices can have hidden economic dimensions.²⁰ Guillot's

¹⁸ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, and R&D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2010).

¹⁹ Misbahul Mujib M, "Fenomena Tradisi Ziarah Lokal dalam Masyarakat Jawa: Kontestasi Kesalehan, Identitas Keagamaan and Komersial," *Ibda': Jurnal Kajian Islam and Budaya* 14, no. 2 (2016): 204–24, <https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v14i2.673>.

²⁰ Najib Burhani Ahmad, "Geertz's Trichotomy of Abangan, Santri, and Priyayi: Controversy and Continuity," *Jurnal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 2 (2017): 329–50, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2017.11.2.329-350>.

research also shows that the graves of saints in coastal Java, such as *Sunan Ampel*, *Sunan Bonang*, and *Sunan Kalijaga*, have become part of spiritual tourism destinations organized with modern logistics systems, complete with parking management, souvenir shops, and travel agencies that explicitly package pilgrimages in tour packages. As in the table below:

Aspect	Field Findings (Literature Study)	Critical Analysis
Main Actors	Local communities, travel agencies, and local governments	Commodification is driven by market capitalism and the state, which views pilgrimage as a site of economic and political potential.
Economic Motivation	Increased income for local communities and regional revenue from the tourism sector	Economic benefits are unevenly distributed, with certain groups monopolizing access to resources such as stalls or transportation services.
Spatial Transformation	Burial sites are expanded and redesigned to resemble shopping centres	Sacred spaces undergo functional secularization, becoming hybrid zones where spirituality intersects with commercialism.
Pilgrims' Response	Still, seek blessings but also enjoy the improved facilities	Pilgrims are not merely passive participants; they actively negotiate

Aspect	Field Findings (Literature Study)	Critical Analysis
		between spiritual fulfilment and consumer comfort.

The meaning of the table image above shows that commodification is not the elimination of spirituality. In this context, prayer and dollars do not negate but strengthen each other in the logic of contemporary religio-capitalism. Pilgrims can still experience sacredness even amid commodified space. However, commodification also experiences tension between conservation and exploitation, such as infrastructure development, which is often considered a form of preserving tradition. Still, in practice, it can damage local values, as in the case of excessive commercialization, which shifts the position of Indigenous peoples from managers to labourers or spectators.²¹

The commodification of pilgrimage sites is not entirely negative or positive. It is a tug-of-war between market logic, spirituality, and power. This literature review shows that the pilgrimage tradition is transforming into a religious product that still contains social and spiritual negotiation elements. It shows the tradition's resilience in the face of economic-political pressures.²²

In the literature review's cultural and political aspects, several findings include local or state governments and religious institutions that use and regulate pilgrimage traditions as part of identity representation, social control, and development strategies. As Guillot's work shows, the pilgrimage of the saints, which was originally local and spiritual, began to blend into the national cultural narrative. The state promotes saint grave sites as "cultural heritage" in the context of development and tourism. In addition, local governments often organize pilgrimage-based cultural festivals such as *Grebeg Maulud* in Demak or *Sewu Kupat* in Sunan Giri to attract tourists and strengthen local identity in the frame of religious nationalism.

²¹ Yung-Chuan Huang and Yi Hsien Lin, "The Influence of Perceived Authenticity on Pilgrimage Image in the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage," *Current Issues in Tourism* 27, no. 12 (17 Juni 2024): 1989–2003, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2222581>.

²² Piotr Roszak, "Contemporary Trends in the Theological Understanding of Christian Pilgrimage," 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21427/FA9W-9E96>.

The findings on the political culture aspect have been described in the table below:

Cultural-Political Aspect	Findings	Critical Analysis
Official Cultural Narrative	Pilgrimage is incorporated into national cultural and tourism agendas	The state engages in the cultural engineering of local practices; spirituality is reinterpreted to align with national ideology.
Elite Symbolic Activism	Politicians and religious figures use pilgrimage for legitimacy	It reflects the politics of representation, where piety is mobilized as symbolic capital.
Regulation of Pilgrimage Space and Time	The state regulates pilgrimage through permits and organized festivals	Such regulations demonstrate state control over religious practices, limiting the spontaneity of local spiritual expressions.
Local Community Negotiation	Local communities are sometimes included, sometimes marginalized	There is a constant tension between preserving local values and accommodating the economic-political agendas of the state and elites.

In addition to the pilgrimage tradition, especially in the context of the *Wali Songo*, tombs become performative sites where people experience spirituality, social interaction, and even economic transactions. The results of the field study indicate a persistent tension between local communities' efforts to preserve traditional values, both customary and religious, and the push from the state and elite actors

with economic and political interests.²³

In many cases, practices such as pilgrimage to the graves of saints, earth alms, or traditional rituals are no longer just spiritual or cultural arenas. However, they are also instrumental in the promotion of tourism or the increase of local revenues. The state and local elites promote festivals or traditional heritage, as Picard suggests that rites become a kind of cultural performance framed within an economic narrative rather than a living local knowledge system.²⁴

Local people often feel they have lost control over their inherited pilgrimage traditions' space, time, and meaning. In the context of pilgrimage to the graves of saints, for example, the management of pilgrimage sites can be taken by the local government or private foundations in collaboration with travel agencies, which in turn shifts the social function of rituals into an economic function. Guillot expresses that local communities are reduced to symbolic custodians while outside actors manage their monetary value. However, local communities are not always passive victims. They also negotiate meaning and symbolic resistance by defending their version of traditional practices or resisting certain forms of commercialization.

The tension between the preservation of local values and the political-economic agenda of the state or elites creates a complex dynamic within communities. On the one hand, efforts are made to maintain and preserve centuries-old traditions and cultural identities. On the other hand, interventions from those with power often force communities to adapt to the demands of modernity and capitalism.²⁵

The meaning of culture is no longer static in the context of the commodification of Islam in Indonesia. This process encourages negotiation and reinterpretation of religious and cultural practices. For example, traditional festivals that were once merely religious rituals can now be seen as lucrative tourist attractions. It creates a dilemma. On the

²³ Marc Van Iwaarden and Jeroen Nawijn, "Eudaimonic Benefits of Tourism: The Pilgrimage Experience," *Tourism Recreation Research* 49, no. 1 (2 Januari 2024): 37–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1986777>.

²⁴ Ling-Zhong Lin, "Modeling and Analysis of Customer Journey Enablers: A Case Study of Religious Pilgrimage," *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 57 (Desember 2023): 200–212, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.10.004>.

²⁵ And Wang dkk., "What Is the Most Influential Authenticity of Beliefs, Places, or Actions on the Pilgrimage Tourism Destination Attachment?," *Sustainability* 16, no. 1 (3 Januari 2024): 431, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010431>.

one hand, the festivals provide income for local communities and boost tourism. On the other hand, there is a risk that the original essence and values of the event could be distorted.

In the article reviewed by Greg Fealy,²⁶ the commodification of Islam creates a vast spiritual market where Islamic products and services not only fulfil religious needs but also become a source of income. For example, many entrepreneurs utilize Islamic values to market various products, from fashion to Islamic financial services.

This dilemma reflects the tension between maintaining tradition and adopting new, more commercial practices. Communities must balance economic gain and preserve the spiritual values underlying their religious practices. Thus, this commodification changes how people interact with religion and affects how they understand their identity and culture. It suggests that culture, in this context, continues to evolve and adapt to changing times, albeit often with complex consequences.

In line with Triantoro et al. and Faiz findings,²⁷ the increased visibility of Islam in the public sphere coincided with modernization and globalization, which provided opportunities for middle-class Muslims to express their religiosity. For example, religious festivals and events that were once considered rituals have now transformed into lucrative tourist attractions. It creates a dilemma: on the one hand, such events bring revenue to the community, but on the other hand, their spiritual essence can be distorted.

Apart from pilgrimage sites, commodification is also reflected in products such as hijab and halal cosmetics that have become part of the Muslim consumerist culture. The mass media is essential in accelerating this process, with many television programs and magazines featuring Islamic lifestyles. It shows how dynamic the

²⁶ Greg Fealy and Sally White, ed., “2. Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia,” dalam *Expressing Islam* (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 15–39, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812308528-006>.

²⁷ Dony Arung Triantoro, Tri Wahyuni, and Fitra Prasapawidya Purna, “Digital Philanthropy: The Practice of Giving Among Middle to Upper-Class Muslim in Indonesia and Soft Capitalism,” *QIJIS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 9, no. 2 (26 Desember 2021): 315, <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v9i2.7814>; Abd. Aziz Faiz, “The Appropriation of Islamic Literacy by Middle-class Muslims in Jogokariyan and Sudirman Mosques, Yogyakarta,” *JSW (Jurnal Sosiologi Walisongo)* 7, no. 1 (30 April 2023): 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.21580/jsw.2023.7.1.12455>.

relationship between religion, identity, and the market is in modern Indonesian society.

Cultural authority has also come under scrutiny. Who gets to determine what counts as “local values”? When political or economic elites are involved, there is a risk that they will dominate the cultural narrative, overriding the voices of local communities. In many cases, these voices become marginalized, even though they best understand the value and meaning of the tradition.

Amidst the pressures of modernity, individuals and communities strive to find a balance. They attempt to adapt to new elements without completely losing their identity. This process often involves dialogue, collaboration, and sometimes conflict between older and younger generations with different perspectives on preserving cultural values.

Thus, this tension is about preserving traditions and how society reacts and adapts to inevitable change. In a broader context, it reflects the struggle to maintain cultural integrity amid the relentless tide of globalization that continues to reshape communities worldwide.

Discussion

This research reveals the complexity of political economy dynamics that influence the practice and transmission of *wali* pilgrimage in Indonesia. The main findings point to several critical aspects that require further discussion:

The Dynamics of the Political Economy of the Pilgrimage Wali: Contestation, Power, and Legitimacy in Indonesia

The pilgrimage to Saints’ graves (*ziarah wali*) is a cultural practice that has long been rooted in Islamic tradition in Indonesia, particularly among traditionalist Muslim communities. However, this phenomenon is not solely religious; it also possesses complex political dimensions. According to research by George Quinn, the practice of saint pilgrimage in Indonesia, especially in the Java region, has become an arena of contestation among various groups.²⁸ Quinn successfully demonstrates that several saints’ tombs have become sites of contestation where competing narratives of history, politics, and religion converge.

²⁸ Quinn George, *Bandit Saints of Java: How Java’s Eccentric Saints are Challenging Fundamentalist Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019).

Johan Meuleman also argues that the practice of saint veneration (*ziarah wali*) in Indonesia has long served as an instrument of power. He explains that this phenomenon can be traced back to the era of the Islamic kingdoms in the Indonesian archipelago.²⁹ Kings and local rulers often claimed genealogical or spiritual ties with the *Wali*.³⁰ It gave the rulers religious legitimization, thereby strengthening their political position. Researchers may conclude that negotiating historical sites among relevant stakeholders can benefit local religious authorities, regional governments, and other community groups.

Robert W. Hefner suggests that the transformation of saint veneration can evolve into an industry with wide-ranging and complex implications. The management of saints' tomb sites by governing institutions can have a positive economic impact on local communities.³¹ As more Muslims emphasize their piety and Islamic identity, this will create a positive economic ecosystem.³²

Many local governments have started promoting pilgrimage sites as religious tourism destinations, attracting local pilgrims and tourists from other regions and even abroad. It has driven investments in infrastructure and supporting facilities, which in turn has had a positive impact on the regional economy. Additionally, larger supporting industries have emerged, such as travel agencies specializing in pilgrimages, the publication of pilgrimage guidebooks, and the production of religious items related to the saints. These industries not only operate at the local level but have also developed into national-scale businesses involving extensive production and distribution networks.

Transformation of the Meaning and Practice of Saint Pilgrimage

The spread of Islam in Java employed two approaches to ensure that the society easily absorbed Islamic values. The first approach is the

²⁹ Meuleman Johan, *Islamisasi Nusantara: Ziarah and Wali di Dunia Islam* (Jakarta: Serambi, 2017).

³⁰ Quinn, *Bandit Saints of Java*.

³¹ W. Hefner Robert, *Islam Pasar Keadilan: Artikulasi Lokal, Kapitalisme, and Demokrasi* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2000).

³² Ashari Fadhil, "Ziarah Wali sebagai Manifestasi Ekonomi Islam Sektor Pariwisata: Studi Eksploratif Dampak Keberadaan Wisata Religi terhadap Perekonomian Masyarakat Jombang," *Amanu: Jurnal Manajemen and Ekonomi* 5, no. 2 (2022): 175–82.

Islamisation of Javanese culture, which sought to make the existing culture appear Islamic, both formally and substantively. The second approach is the Javanisation of Islam, where Islam was introduced through Javanese culture. Javanese terms were still used in this case, but their embodied values were Islamic. Thus, Islam became “Javanese.”³³

The phenomenon of visiting graves has become widespread in the Islamic world, as is often seen among those who follow the *Sunni* or *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* sect. On certain days, such as before the month of Ramadan, during the *Idul Fitri* and *Idul Adha* celebrations, on Friday nights, and at other specific times, they visit the graves of their ancestors, family members, or religious figures they look up to who have passed away.³⁴

As a religion with a mission, Islam was spread in various ways through cultural approaches that adapted to the traditions of the local communities.³⁵ The approach does not aim to force the community to follow Islam as a new religion. Instead, it seeks to dispel suspicions that Islam advocates violent methods to gain the people's sympathy. Before Islam arrived in Nusantara, the society still adhered to Hindu-Buddhist religions and local animistic and dynamic beliefs, so the approach had to consider local traditions.³⁶ The practice of Islam was continuously acculturated with local culture, bringing along symbolism and supernatural values.

³³ Alif Naufaldi, Mafthukhatul Laily, and Ahmala Majidatun, “Akulturasi Budaya Jawa and Islam Melalui Dakwah Sunan Kalijaga,” *Al'adalah* 23, no. 2 (2020): 147–48, <https://doi.org/10.35719/aladalah.v23i2.32>.

³⁴ M Misbahul Mujib, “Tradisi Ziarah dalam Masyarakat Jawa: Kontestasi Kesalehan, Identitas Keagamaan and Komersial”, *IBDA': Jurnal Kajian Islam and Budaya* 14, No. 2 (2016): 207.

³⁵ Mardika Andi and Anuar Ramli Mohd, “Nusantara Ulama: Islamic Intellectual Tradition and Local Culture,” *Journal of Islamic Understanding* 3, no. 1 (2025): 15–25, <https://journal.cas.or.id/index.php/jiu/article/download/594/6/2200>.

³⁶ Kasdi Abdurrohman, “Islamic Dialectics and Culture in Establishing Islam Nusantara Paradigm: Variety Model of Islam Nusantara for Indonesia,” *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 8, no. 11 (2023): 345–46, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334801774_Islamic_Dialectics_and_Culture_in_Establishing_Islam_Nusantara_Paradigm_Variety_Model_of_Islam_Nusantara_for_Indonesia.

The spreaders of Islam who came from outside the Nusantara had their distinctive methods and media for spreading Islam peacefully.³⁷ The development of Islam cannot be separated from the critical role of merchants from Gujarat, Persia, and Mecca, who stopped in various regions. Islam was introduced as early as the first centuries of the Hijri calendar, around the 7th century CE. Still, the acceleration of the spread of Islam and religious practices in a tangible way only occurred around the 12th century CE and the subsequent periods.

In the history of Islam's development in Nusantara, the missionaries often used cultural approaches to fill the cultural spaces, which were still influenced by Hindu-Buddhist nuances by incorporating Islamic values. Local tools and practices were modified as media for the spread of the religion, making the propagation of Islam by the scholars at the time appear highly adaptive and accommodative to the aspirations of the local communities.³⁸

In the research by Henri Chambert-Loir and Claude Guillot, it is stated that in all regions where Islam spread, the phenomenon of visiting graves also spread, from the Middle East, Northeast Sudan, the Maghreb region, Iran, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Central Asia, China, and even Indonesia. According to Waardenburg, the tradition of visiting the graves of scholars/saints in *Official and Popular Religions* falls into the category of Popular Islam or *Little Islam*. Meanwhile, Stafford distinguishes between pilgrimage and tourism based on the motivations behind why people engage in these practices.³⁹

Pilgrimage emphasizes sacred, spiritual, and religious aspects, while tourism focuses on profane entertainment and pleasure.⁴⁰ Pilgrimage reflects the relationship between the individual and entities considered sacred, playing a role in forming religious identity. The

³⁷ Pranailahi Restu, Intania Naila, and Alghani Raid, "Acculturation of Religion and Culture within Muslim Communities in West Java," *Al-albab: Borneo Journal of Religious Studies* 10, no. 1 (2024): 50–79, <https://jurnal.iainpontianak.or.id/index.php/alalbab/article/download/2977/1392>.

³⁸ Hanani Silfia, *Menggali Interaksi Sosiologi and Agama* (Bandung: Humaniora, 2011).

³⁹ Waardenburg Jacques, *Official, Popular, and Normative Religion in Islam*, "dalam *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 199M).

⁴⁰ Graham, Brian, and Howard Peter, "The Sacred and the Profane: The Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela," *Ecumene* 4, no. 4 (2023): 389–409, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096746089700400401>.

tradition of visiting graves has been practised for a long time within Muslim communities. In addition to being a tradition, visiting graves is also one of the practices recommended in Islam.⁴¹ Amsal Bakhtiar argues that death is a fact, whereas the afterlife is not a fact but a belief strengthened by logical arguments.⁴²

Every religion explains the existence of the afterlife and believes that this world will end. Pilgrimage is a phenomenon that has always existed throughout human history. It is part of religious rituals and has become a cultural practice. Thus, the pilgrimage is considered an artistic practice with meaning and function. Initially, the pilgrimage was only performed to visit relatives, family, and others who had passed away.⁴³ It later developed into a tradition of pilgrimage to the graves of Saint or respectable persons in society.

Pilgrimage in the context of Islam holds deep and complex meaning, encompassing spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions. For example, pilgrimage is a form of honouring those who have contributed to the spread of Islam, such as saints, scholars, and religious figures. It is a way to remember their contributions and emulate their lives. Through pilgrimage, Muslims seek to draw closer to Allah through prayers, dhikr, and the recitation of Quranic verses at places believed to be blessed. The experience and sense of religiosity arise when someone prays or performs acts of *worship* in public spaces, as the spirituality generated by religious rituals creates various fascinating experiences.⁴⁴

The research findings show a significant shift in the meaning and practice of saint veneration (*ziarah wali*) in Indonesia. What was originally purely spiritual now has economic and political dimensions that cannot be overlooked.⁴⁵ This phenomenon reflects a broader process of the commodification of religion in contemporary society.

⁴¹ Latifah Eni, "Tradisi Ziarah dalam Masyarakat Jawa Perspektif Filsafat Nilai Max Scheler," *An-Nur: Jurnal Studi Islam* 15, no. 2 (2023): 153–73.

⁴² Amsal Bakhtiar, "Eskatologi: Perspektif Agama and Filsafat," *Jurnal Kajian Agama and Filsafat* 1, no. 3 (1999): 115–30.

⁴³ Matrokhim, "Islamic Education Values in Ziarah Kubur Tradition of Javanese People," *JNUS: Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama Studies* 1, no. 2 (2020): 131–61, <https://doi.org/10.35672/jnus.v1i2.131-161>.

⁴⁴ Khamad Daandg, *Sosiologi Agama* (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2009).

⁴⁵ Rodli Ahmad, "Fenomena Ziarah: Antara Kesalehan, Identitas Ke-Islaman and Dimensi Komersial," *An-Nur: Jurnal Studi Islam* 5, no. 2 (2020), <https://www.jurnalannur.ac.id/index.php/An-Nur/article/view/32>.

The findings also show that the commodification of saint veneration does not necessarily mean diminishing the spiritual significance of the practice. On the contrary, in many cases, the economic and spiritual aspects reinforce each other. For example, the development of tourism infrastructure around the saints' tombs not only enhances the comfort of the pilgrims but can also strengthen the sacred aura of the site through grand architecture and beautiful ornaments.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the economic dimension of saint veneration has created new job opportunities and stimulated local economic growth around pilgrimage sites.⁴⁷ It can enhance the local community's pride and attachment to its spiritual heritage. This phenomenon reflects what Hefner (1998) calls the "moral market," where religious values and market economics are not always in conflict but can synergize in specific contexts.⁴⁸

However, this process of commodification also brings challenges and potential conflicts. Among them is the tension between groups that wish to preserve the "purity" of the pilgrimage tradition and those that support modernization and economic development. Furthermore, the increasing commercialization may raise questions about the accessibility and inclusiveness of pilgrimage practices, especially for marginalized groups or those with limited financial means.

Pilgrimage as a commercial transaction

The development of pilgrimage tourism has significantly impacted the local economy around pilgrimage sites. On one hand, it has created new economic opportunities and driven infrastructure development. On the other hand, there is a risk of developing new

⁴⁶ Kusumaningayu dkk., "Karakteristik Infrastruktur Kawasan Wisata Religi Desa Giri," *Jurnal Arsitektur Zonasi* 5, no. 3 (2022): 512–18, <https://doi.org/10.17509/jaz.v5i3.38530>.

⁴⁷ Rohman M, "Ziarah ke Makam Wali: Fenomena Tradisional di Zaman Modern," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial and Humaniora* 5, no. 2 (2016): 45–60, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326777255_ZIARAH_KE_MAKAM_WALI_Fenomena_Tradisional_di_Zaman_Modern.

⁴⁸ W. Hefner Robert, *Market Cultures: Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499050>.

inequalities within communities and regions.⁴⁹ This phenomenon reflects the paradox of development often seen in the context of heritage-based tourism. While there are clear economic benefits, the distribution of these benefits is usually uneven. It highlights the need for a more inclusive and sustainable development approach in the development of pilgrimage tourism.

M. Misbahul Mujib reveals that the increasing number of pilgrims can improve the economic status of the local community around the pilgrimage site and the pilgrimage organizers and even become a source of income.⁵⁰ In his research, Mujib argues that the transaction process is not a disruption, reduction, or corruption of worship but instead integrates with it as a material manifestation of the interaction between the servant and God.

For example, pilgrimage tourism to Mecca in Saudi Arabia has significant emotional implications. The emotional experience during pilgrimage can trigger a spiritual transformation for the pilgrims, which may then impact their environment and community. Sacred graves are considered holy symbols, thus holding strong authority as sacred places. Each sacred grave usually has a keeper (Khadim or mutawalli in Iraq) responsible for managing and maintaining the traditions and rituals.⁵¹

The motivations and purposes of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints are explored in depth, revealing the various layers of meaning underlying this practice among Muslims. Visiting saints' tombs is a religious activity and a rich and diverse social phenomenon. One of the primary motivations for pilgrims is to seek blessings (*barakah*) from the revered Saint. Saints are believed to have a special closeness to God, and pilgrims hope to obtain intercession or spiritual mediation through pilgrimage. It is based on the belief that saints can offer protection and blessings in this life and the hereafter. Personal spiritual experiences, such as visions of the Saint in dreams, often strengthen the spiritual bond between the pilgrim and the honoured Saint.

⁴⁹ Dwi Yana Mira and Sudrajat Arief, "Analisis Fenomena Religi, Komersial, and Edukasi di Wisata Religi Gus Dur: Sebuah Perspektif Sosiologi Pariwisata," *Jurnal Sabhata Yatra* 5, no. 1 (2024): 95–104.

⁵⁰ Mujib, "Tradisi Ziarah Dalam Masyarakat Jawa: Kontestasi Kesalehan, Identitas Keagamaan and Komersial."

⁵¹ Loir and Guillot, *Ziarah And Wali Di Dunia Islam* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010).

Conclusion

This research emphasizes that the practice of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints in Indonesia is a field of complex interaction between spiritual and economic dimensions. The transformation of pilgrimage from a traditional religious ritual to a contemporary socioeconomic phenomenon reflects the ongoing negotiation dynamics between religious beliefs, local economic interests, and state policy interventions. In this context, pilgrimage functions as an expression of individual spirituality and a means of livelihood, cultural identity, and an instrument for developing the tourism sector.

The findings of this study show that the motivations of pilgrims, while rooted in the desire for blessings and spiritual closeness, are now also influenced by material aspects such as accessibility, tourism facilities, and government promotion. Meanwhile, local communities that manage pilgrimage sites play a strategic role in reshaping the meaning and form of pilgrimage to respond to economic demands while preserving its religious legitimacy. On the other hand, the state positions religious tourism as part of the cultural economy agenda, which impacts the management of pilgrimage sites and the relationship between religious authorities, the government, and local communities.

Thus, this research contributes significantly to understanding pilgrimage as a religious practice that cannot be separated from the social, economic, and political contexts that shape it. An anthropological approach provides a deeper understanding of how religious meanings are negotiated within the framework of modern life, as well as a meeting point between spiritual heritage and profane interests. The implications of these findings are important for considering the formulation of policies for the preservation of cultural heritage and the development of religious tourism sensitive to local values and the socioeconomic sustainability of local communities.

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