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Pilgrimage as a Collective Spiritual Practice: Building Community Through Rituals at the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati

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Abstract:

This study aims to holistically analyze pilgrimage practices at the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati, focusing on three aspects: (1) the form and process of rituals, (2) the construction of collective spiritual values, and (3) its contribution to the formation and maintenance of a spiritual community. A qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through intensive participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, and documentation at the Astana Gunung Jati Complex, Cirebon, from July to December 2025. Data were analyzed using interactive thematic analysis. The pilgrimage practices and socio-spiritual dynamics surrounding the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati, Cirebon, West Java, as one of the most significant Wali pilgrimage centers in Indonesia. The pilgrimage is structured as a rite of passage that creates an egalitarian liminal space where temporary communitas emerges. Spiritual values such as ngalap berkah and tawassul are actively constructed through ritual performances and the exchange of karomah (spiritual power) narratives. This collective experience crystallizes into an "imagined" identity as the "community of Sunan Gunung Jati's followers." The pilgrimage site is also a contested space where traditional authority, economic interests, puritan critiques, and government tourism policies are negotiated. The complexity of observation during peak crowd moments and the need to maintain neutrality while recording diverse perspectives and potential tensions in the field. Prudent site governance is needed to balance the preservation of sacredness, economic justice for local traders, and constructive responses to religious interpretative pluralism. This study provides a theoretical contribution by synthesizing and testing the frameworks of Turner,

Anderson, Ammerman, and Eade & Sallnow in the context of Indonesian Islam (Islam Nusantara), while offering a Global South perspective that enriches global discourse on lived religion, community-building through ritual, and the politics of meaning in sacred spaces.

Keywords: collective Spirituality; contested space; Indonesian Islam; liminality; pilgrimage.

INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimages to the tombs of saints, particularly in the context of Nusantara Islam, have long been recognized as one of the most vibrant and resistant religious practices to modernization (Hillenbrand, 2024). Among the major pilgrimage sites in Java, the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon holds a special position, not only as the final resting place of one of the main propagators of Islam (the Wali Songo), but also as a complex intersection of spirituality, history, culture, and economics. Thousands of pilgrims arrive each week, peaking on Friday Kliwon nights and the annual haul celebrations, creating a massive and dynamic religious landscape (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). This tradition not only reflects the continuity of past heritage but, more importantly, demonstrates religion's ability to adapt and express itself in concrete, collective practices in public spaces.

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift in academic approaches to the phenomenon of pilgrimage. While previously viewed largely through a doctrinal lens—as an individual form of worship with syncretic or even deviant nuances—recent studies have begun to position it as a holistic social fact. Pilgrimage is now understood as a performative act that simultaneously expresses and shapes social reality, a practice in which profound spiritual dimensions are discovered and strengthened in togetherness (Ammerman, 2016). In other words, there has been a shift in perspective from pilgrimage as a personal devotion to pilgrimage as a collective project that actively builds community, forges identity, and produces social solidarity across borders (Pradita et al., 2020).

However, despite the increasing number of studies on pilgrimage and religious tourism, the existing research landscape shows significant fragmentation and gaps. Most studies tend to focus on a single aspect, without engaging in in-depth analytical integration. For example, a number of studies focus on the governance and political economy dimensions of pilgrimage sites, such as Supardi et al.'s (2023) study on agile governance and public-private partnerships in managing the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati as a tourist destination (Supardi et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, other studies focus on the symbolic analysis of certain ritual elements, such as Liutikas's (2025) study, which explores the philosophical meaning of incense in the pilgrimage tradition at the same site (Liutikas, 2025). On the other hand, studies such as those conducted by Pradita et al. (2020) highlight the values of religious humanism in the teachings of Sunan Gunung Jati, but without explicitly linking them to living ritual practices (Pradita et al., 2020). These approaches, while making valuable contributions, often render pilgrimage a static object—a site to be managed, a symbol to be read, or a teaching to be passed down—rather than a dynamic and lived socio-spiritual process (Oládémọ, 2022).

More specifically, there is still very limited research that deliberately and systematically integrates pilgrimage as a form of collective spirituality and simultaneously as a community-making engine. This gap is particularly felt in efforts to synthesize an adequate theoretical

framework to understand these three key dimensions: ritual structure, the production of shared spiritual meaning, and the construction of communal bonds.

It is to fill this theoretical and empirical gap that this article is presented. This research aims to analyze the practice of pilgrimage at the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati not as a collection of separate parts, but as a holistic phenomenon. By utilizing the synthesis of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, this article will make Victor Turner's ritual theory (especially the concepts of liminality and community), Nancy Ammerman's concept of collective spirituality, and Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities as complementary analytical scalpels. This synthesis is expected to capture the complexity of pilgrimage: how ritual structures create a space of shared experience (liminality), how in that space spiritual values are constructed and experienced collectively, and finally, how that collective experience crystallizes into a sense of togetherness and communal identity that endures beyond the ritual moment itself. With this approach, pilgrimage will be positioned as an active space for the production of meaning and as an agent of socio-spiritual transformation (Sahni et al., 2023).

Therefore, the research questions to be answered are: (1) How are the forms and processes of pilgrimage rituals at the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati carried out by pilgrims? (2) What spiritual values are contained and collectively constructed in these practices? and (3) How do pilgrimage practices contribute to the formation and maintenance of spiritual communities? By exploring these three questions, this article aims to provide not only a rich ethnographic description, but also a theoretical contribution to the study of religion, particularly in understanding the mechanisms through which religious practices rooted in locality (Islam Nusantara) are able to build and maintain social cohesion and collective identity in the midst of a diverse and ever-changing Indonesian society.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design, designed to understand the meaning and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon as interpreted by the participants themselves (Poth, 2023). This approach is considered most appropriate to answer research questions that focus on the meaning, process, and socio-spiritual construction of pilgrimage practices, because it allows researchers to delve into the depths of the subjective experiences of pilgrims while analyzing how these experiences are embedded in broader cultural and social contexts (Spickard, 2017). This research is essentially an in-depth field study, in which researchers immerse themselves in a natural setting to observe and understand the social interactions and symbolic practices that occur around the pilgrimage site (Miles et al., 2014).

The research location is centered at the Gunung Jati Astana Complex, Astana Village, Cirebon Regency, West Java. This location was chosen purposively, considering that the site is one of the most significant epicenters of saint pilgrimage in Indonesia with rich ritual characteristics and a constant flow of pilgrims. Field data collection was carried out intensively from July to December 2025. This time span was chosen strategically to capture the variation and dynamics of pilgrimage practices in various temporal contexts. Observations included pilgrimage activities on ordinary days to understand routines, as well as at peak spiritual moments such as Friday Kliwon Night and the anniversary celebration of Sunan Gunung Jati. Thus, the data obtained are not snapshots, but are able to reflect the rhythms and ritual cycles that live at the site.

Data collection techniques were triangulated to ensure the validity and depth of the findings. First, participant observation was the primary technique. Researchers not only

observed as outsiders, but also engaged in limited ways in the flow of activities, such as following the queue procession, sitting in the prayer area, and witnessing interactions in the pilgrim area. Observations focused on documenting the physical and emotional atmosphere, patterns of social interaction among pilgrims and between pilgrims and administrators, as well as the sequence and procedures of rituals (such as scattering flowers, reciting tahlil, and praying together). Detailed field notes were made immediately after each observation session. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informants who were purposively selected to represent a variety of stakeholders and experiences. These informants included the caretaker (coded as I1) as a traditional authority, local community and religious leaders, traders whose economy depends on pilgrimage activities, and pilgrims from both local and outside Cirebon communities. The interview guide focused on personal experiences, spiritual motivations, ritual meanings, and perceptions of togetherness during the pilgrimage. Third, documentation was used as a supplement, in the form of photographs of ritual activities, artifacts (such as scattered flowers or prayer water containers), and informal notes to enrich the context.

Data analysis followed the interactive thematic analysis model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). After collection, all data (interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents) were transcribed and organized (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process began with data reduction, which involved repeated readings to identify emerging initial codes. These codes were then grouped based on their similarity to form broader themes, such as "ritual structure and stages," "liminal experiences," "construction of blessing values," and "solidarity and collective identity." The validity of the themes was verified through source triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. The final stage was the presentation and drawing of conclusions, in which the synthesized themes were presented narratively and critically linked to key theoretical frameworks—Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and community, Nancy Ammerman's collective spirituality, and Benedict Anderson's imagined communities—to answer the research questions and build a robust academic argument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ritual as a Liminal Structure and Shaper of Collective Experience

An analysis of pilgrimage practices at Astana Gunung Jati reveals a coherent and transformative ritual structure that clearly represents the rites-of-passage model as conceptualized by Victor Turner (1969). This structure not only regulates the physical movements of pilgrims but, more importantly, frames their spiritual and social journey through three classic stages: separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The first stage, separation, begins long before the pilgrims arrive at the tomb gate (Turner, 1969). For many groups, especially those from out of town, the procession begins with a small ritual at the group leader's house, such as a prayer and tahlil (recitation of the Koran), or at the mosque. A pilgrim from Tegal (I9) explains, "Our journey begins with a shared intention. We gather, pray for safety, and then board the bus. It's like a momentary escape from the worldly affairs of the village." During the journey, the group buses are often filled with the recitation of prayers and stories of Sunan Gunung Jati's blessings shared by guides or elders. This activity serves as a psychological and social mechanism to leave behind (separate) everyday profane identities and routines, and gradually reset consciousness towards a sacred mode of experience. This process aligns with Ropi's (2020) findings in his study of pilgrimages in East Java, which emphasize that mobility to sacred sites

is an integral part of building a spiritual atmosphere, where the journey itself is already an act of communal worship (Laksana, 2016).

The culmination of this separation is manifested both physically and symbolically when pilgrims arrive at the Astana Gunung Jati complex and begin passing through nine layered gates (gapura). These nine gates are not merely architectural barriers, but rather powerful markers of limen (thresholds). Each gate passed through signifies a refinement and sharpening of intention, as well as an increasing gradation of the sacredness of the space. A caretaker (I1) explains their philosophical meaning, "The first to seventh gates are open to the public, as a symbol of abandoning worldly desires. The eighth and ninth are exclusively for family and those of us who guard them, symbolizing that we are close to the core of holiness." The symbolism of these gates creates a dramatic spatial narrative, in which the pilgrim's body physically experiences an ascent toward the sacred center. This reflects the hierarchical cosmological conception common in Javanese tradition, but here it is Islamized and functions as part of ritual discipline (Tohe, 2021). As you pass through these doors, the bustle of the market and traffic outside gradually subsides, replaced by silence, the scent of incense and flowers, and the chanting of prayers. The procession through these doors marks the final transition to the main space, the liminal stage.

The liminal stage, or the between and between phase in Turner's terms, is the core of the collective pilgrimage experience at Astana Gunung Jati (Brady Wagoner, 2021). Within the burial chamber, particularly in the courtyard before the tomb, normal social structures are suspended. Observations show that in this space, pilgrims from various backgrounds sit side by side, pray with the same gestures, and queue to perform the flower-laying ritual in a uniform manner. A businessman from Jakarta and a farmer from Majalengka can prostrate side by side, reciting the same prayer, without any privileged access based on economic status. A community leader (I2) stated, "Here, in front of the tomb of Kanjeng Sunan, we are all equal. There is no such thing as an official or a commoner. There are only servants facing, pleading." This state of symbolic equality is what Turner calls community, a social bond that is spontaneous, egalitarian, and based on a shared experience of the sacred (K. Zhang et al., 2025). This sense of community is particularly strong during mass rituals such as communal recitation of the tahlil (Islamic prayer) or during the peak of the Friday Kliwon night. A young pilgrim from Bandung (I10) said, "The atmosphere here gives me goosebumps. Hundreds of people, strangers, chanting prayers with one voice. It feels like we're one body, one purpose. The differences outside seem meaningless."

This liminal space is also a space where old identities are shed and the possibility of spiritual transformation is opened up. Core rituals such as scattering flowers towards the grave, touching or stroking specific headstones, and emerging with quietly recited personal prayers are performative acts that allow pilgrims to experience the presence of the transcendent. The act of scattering flowers, for example, is not simply a gesture of respect. For many informants, flowers symbolize prayer and the purity of the heart being offered. A flower seller (I3) said, "Flowers bought or brought from home are a manifestation of intention. When scattering them, it's like scattering all your wishes and complaints, hoping to be cleansed and blessed." In Turner's framework, material symbols such as flowers, water, or incense in the liminal state become multivocal, carrying multiple meanings simultaneously (personal, social, and transcendental) that unite individual experiences with collective meaning frameworks (Hartogsohn, 2021).

The final stage of this ritual journey is reaggregation, or reintegration. Pilgrims do not return empty-handed (Y. Zhang et al., 2022). They bring home spiritual and material "souvenirs" that serve as markers of their transition back to the profane world, as well as a medium for carrying with them the sacredness they have experienced. The main objects brought are prayer water (air

pilgrimage) that has been prayed for near the tomb, as well as various souvenirs such as prayer beads, headscarves, or calligraphy drawings purchased at stalls around the tomb. This prayer water will then be used at home for various purposes, drunk as medicine, washed on the face for calm, or sprinkled on the yard to ask for fertility. A senior pilgrim (I20) explained, "I bring this water home for my family. So that the blessings of Sunan that I feel here can also be felt by my wife and children at home." This practice demonstrates that the temporary and localized liminal experience at the pilgrimage site is attempted to be maintained and transmitted into the context of everyday life through material objects. By bringing the water of prayer home, pilgrims are reintegrating, but a transformative reintegration; they return to their home communities with a slightly changed status, bringing with them new spiritual capacities (blessings) and stories of experience that will strengthen the collective narrative of Sunan Gunung Jati's blessings.

Thus, the entire pilgrimage process at Astana Gunung Jati can be read as a complete socio-spiritual dramaturgy. Through a clear three-stage structure, this practice effectively creates a managed liminal space, where ordinary social norms are suspended and a temporary, egalitarian community can emerge. The physical symbolism of the nine doors not only regulates the flow of people but actively constructs a narrative of the sacred journey that increases the intensity of the experience. This finding strengthens and enriches Turner's theory by showing how the concepts of liminality and community are not only applicable in isolated tribal initiation rituals, but are also alive and relevant in analyzing complex and contemporary mass religious practices in Indonesian Muslim societies (Isnaeni et al., 2025). The liminal space of the guardian's tomb becomes a kind of social and spiritual "safe space," where organic solidarity can temporarily grow, providing a direct experience of equality and brotherhood that is often difficult to find in the hierarchical and competitive structures of society outside (Balázs, 2024).

Figure 1. Ritual as a Liminal Structure and Shaper of Collective Experience

Key Aspects	Core Description	Empirical Examples & Mechanisms
Struktur Ritual (Rites of Passage)	The pilgrimage to Astana Gunung Jati follows three transformative stages: Separation, Liminality, and Reaggregation.	- Separation: Pre-departure rituals (prayer, tahlil), journey with blessings and stories of blessings. - Liminality: Passing through 9 gates as markers of sacred-profane boundaries. - Reaggregation: Bringing home prayer water and souvenirs as a medium of reintegration.
Separation Level	The process of leaving behind worldly identities and routines, preparing the mind for sacred experiences.	- Pilgrim from Tegal (I9): “Starting from the intention that was declared together… like freeing oneself from worldly affairs.” - Travel becomes a communal act of worship (Ropi, 2020).
Liminality Level (Threshold)	The “betwixt and between” phase where normal social structures are suspended, symbolic equality and community formation occur.	- Pilgrims from various backgrounds sit side by side, praying together. - Community figure (I2): “Here we are all the same… only the servant is facing.” - Bandung pilgrim (I10): “Hundreds of people praying with one voice… becoming one body.”

Community Formation	Social bonds are spontaneous, egalitarian, and based on shared sacred experiences.	- Arises in mass rituals (joint tahlil, Friday Kliwon). - Ignoring socio-economic status in the burial chamber.
Multivocal Material Symbol	Ritual objects (flowers, water, incense) contain multiple meanings: personal, social, and transcendental.	- Flowers: a symbol of intention, prayer, and purity of heart (I3). - Prayer water: a medium for transmitting blessings to everyday life.
Reaggregation Stage (Reintegration)	Returning to the profane world with spiritual "souvenirs," integrating sacred experiences into everyday life.	- Prayer water is used for medicine, tranquility, fertility. - Senior pilgrim (I20): "This water was brought home so that the family could also feel the blessing."
Theoretical Contributions	Enriching Turner's theory: liminality and community apply not only to tribal rituals, but also to contemporary mass religious practices in Indonesia.	- The liminal space of the saint's tomb becomes a socio-spiritual "safe space". - Provides direct experience of organic equality and solidarity.
Social-Spiritual Function	Pilgrimage as a complete dramaturgy that builds collective experience, social cohesion, and communal identity.	- The three-stage structure creates a manageable sacred journey narrative. - Cultivate solidarity across social boundaries.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the pilgrimage ritual at Astana Gunung Jati is not simply an individual activity, but a structured collective process that intentionally creates a liminal space for experiencing equality, building community bonds, and transforming sacred experiences into everyday life. These findings confirm the relevance of Victor Turner's ritual theory in the contemporary religious context in Indonesia (Sulaeman et al., 2022).

The Construction of Collective Spiritual Values: Between Local Traditions and Normative Islam

The practice of pilgrimage at Astana Gunung Jati reveals that the underlying spiritual values are not static entities passively inherited, but rather a reality that is actively and continuously constructed, lived, and negotiated through collective interactions within the ritual space (Liu & Schofield, 2025). Research findings indicate that key concepts such as ngalap berkah (taking blessings), tawassul (intercession), and the search for inner peace constitute living axes of meaning, gaining their power and validity precisely through shared experiences (Caswito et al., 2025). This construction process occurs through two main channels: first, through the implementation of a series of communal ritual practices; and second, through the reproduction and exchange of narratives about the karomah (spiritual specialness) of Sunan Gunung Jati among fellow pilgrims and between pilgrims and local authorities such as caretakers.

Ritual practices such as flower-laying, mass recitation of tahlil, and congregational recitation of shalawat serve as both a physical and social medium for experiencing and affirming these values. For example, the act of collectively scattering flowers towards a grave is not simply an individual physical gesture. One pilgrim (I10) described it as, "When we scatter flowers together, it feels like our hopes and prayers are also united. I believe that is what makes seeking blessings here feel more powerful." This statement demonstrates how the meaning of seeking blessings is experienced not as a one-way spiritual transaction between an individual and a guardian, but as a process strengthened by simultaneity and togetherness. Field observations show that the solemn atmosphere during collective tahlil or shalawat creates a collective emotional atmosphere that Randall Collins (2004) calls emotional energy (Collins, 2004). This positive emotional energy, arising from the shared focus of attention, harmony of mood, and physical presence in a solemn crowd, then becomes attached to the symbols and values being celebrated. Thus, the feelings of calm, surrender, or hope experienced by pilgrims are the product of ritual interactions, not simply a spontaneous inner state. Inner calm, therefore, is both relational and situational, produced within and by a collective context (Ammerman, 2016).

On the other hand, the value of tawassul, or asking God through the intermediary (wasilah) of Sunan Gunung Jati, is continuously validated through narratives circulating within the pilgrim community. These narratives primarily take the form of stories of the saint's blessings, both historical and contemporary. The caretaker (I1) and guides are often the primary conveyors of these stories, which are then disseminated and developed in conversations between pilgrims. Stories of healing from illness, ease of sustenance, or the fulfillment of wishes experienced by someone after a pilgrimage become a kind of social proof that strengthens belief in the efficacy of tawassul through Sunan Gunung Jati. A trader (I4) said, "I often hear stories from buyers, some whose businesses are running smoothly after regular pilgrimages, some whose children are accepted for work. These stories make people believe and become more confident in coming." This phenomenon shows how spirituality, in this case belief in the effectiveness of tawassul, is constructed through networks of conversation and exchange of experiences (Ammerman, 2016). Islam, in this context, appears as what Talal Asad (1986) calls a discursive tradition, namely a tradition that consists not only of sacred texts, but also of practices, conversations, and authorities that are constantly referred to and negotiated to produce authentic meaning in certain situations (Asad, 1986).

This negotiation between local traditions and normative Islam is a crucial point. The practice of seeking blessings and seeking forgiveness at the tombs of saints is often the target of criticism from some who emphasize religious purification. However, in Astana Gunung Jati, these values are not defensively defended as superstition, but are reinterpreted and legitimized within a broader Islamic discursive framework. A local religious figure (I6) explained, "What we seek is God's blessing. This blessing can come through a place, time, or person who is blessed by Him. Sunan Gunung Jati is a beloved of God (waliyullah), so visiting and praying for him is an expression of our love for God's beloved, and it is a means to draw closer to Him." This kind of explanation demonstrates an active effort to align local practices with the Islamic theological concept of God's sainthood (wilayah) and compassion (rahmat) (Abdullah et al., 2024). Thus, the construction of spiritual values on this site is dynamic and adaptive, able to respond to the pressures of modernity and puritanism by producing a synthesis of meaning that remains coherent for its adherents (Ali & Hasanah, 2021).

Furthermore, these collectively constructed values have a strong social function. They act as a social glue that binds individuals who were initially strangers into a solid temporary community. Shared belief in the blessings of the place and the efficacy of tawassul creates a common basis of identity. The collective experience of feeling emotional energy during shared rituals then fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual trust among participants. A pilgrim from outside the area (I15) stated, "Even though we don't know each other, because we both love and believe in Sunan Gunung Jati, we feel like brothers. We help each other, remind each other to queue, share stories." This is what Nancy Ammerman (2016) identifies as a characteristic of collective spirituality, where experiences of transcendence are generated and experienced within the framework of social relations, strengthening the bonds between group members (Ammerman, 2016). In other words, pilgrimage is not just about individuals seeking blessings, but about creating a community bound by the same search for blessings, through mutually agreed upon means, and under the umbrella of a collectively shared narrative.

By juxtaposing Ammerman's lived religion framework and Asad's discursive tradition, this analysis reveals that spirituality in Astana Gunung Jati is the product of a complex ecology of meaning. Key spiritual values such as seeking blessings and seeking tawassul are the result of an ongoing dialectic between bodily ritual actions (such as scattering flowers and praying), narrative exchanges about sacred power, and discursive attempts to provide theological legitimacy (Rodrigues, 2022). This process does not occur in a vacuum, but is reinforced by the collective emotional energy generated in intense ritual interactions (Kišjuhas, 2024). Thus, pilgrimage is a concrete example of how religion is "lived" as a social practice that generates meaning and cohesion, while demonstrating the capacity of Nusantara Islam to accommodate and Islamize local values within a discursive tradition that remains vibrant and relevant to its community (Schaefer, 2021).

From Liminality to Imaginary Community: The Formation of Collective Identity

The liminal phase and experience of community formed in the courtyard of Sunan Gunung Jati's tomb are intense but temporary; they last only as long as the ritual and tend to fade as pilgrims leave the complex. However, research findings reveal that the impact of this shared experience is not completely lost. It undergoes a process of crystallization into a more stable form of collective identity that transcends physical encounters, a phenomenon that can be understood by expanding Victor Turner's framework with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). In their interactions, many pilgrims, both local and foreign, identify themselves as part of the "people of Sunan Gunung Jati" or at least as "fellow Sunan lovers." A pilgrim from Brebes (I20) stated, "Even though their homes are far away, once you've been on pilgrimage here, you feel a sense of connection. Meeting people who have also been to Gunung Jati elsewhere immediately creates a sense of familiarity, like meeting relatives." This statement suggests that shared liminal experiences serve as the basis for imagining a community whose members are widely dispersed.

Major rituals such as the annual haul (haul) and the Friday Kliwon (Night of Friday) celebrations serve as culminating moments in the reproduction and strengthening of this imagined community. At haul events, tens of thousands of people from across the archipelago gather. Those in attendance witness and become part of a massive crowd that performs a unified action: listening to sermons, attending prayers, and participating in processions. These colossal events, as Royyani explains in the context of the haul of other saints, function as rituals of solidarity that visually and emotionally demonstrate the scale

and togetherness of the community (Royyani & Kumalasari, 2020). Although a pilgrim from Lampung will not know all the pilgrims from Surabaya in attendance, they share the experience of participating in the same event, hearing the same narrative about the saint's history and blessings, and are subject to the same spatial rules. This is the mechanism Anderson describes: imagined communities are formed through awareness of participation in a shared space and time, and the consumption of shared narratives (Lomas et al., 2024). This shared narrative is not only a story of the past, but also contemporary stories of experienced blessings, which continue to be spread by word of mouth and now also through social media, expanding the reach of this imagined community beyond the geographical boundaries of the pilgrimage site (Syam et al., 2024).

The collective identity of the "followers of Sunan Gunung Jati" is also part of a larger identity, namely "Islam Nusantara." The practice of pilgrimage, with its characteristic accommodation to local culture and emphasis on tawassul and respect for saints, is an important marker of the distinctive Indonesian variant of Islam. By participating in and identifying with the rituals at Astana Gunung Jati, a pilgrim also implicitly aligns himself with the Islamic tradition developed by the Wali Songo, who are considered the architects of Islam in Java. Thus, the imaginary community that is formed is a community that is imagined not only in space (across regions) but also in time (connecting itself to the history of Islamization). This process shows how the liminal ritual experience and the generation of a temporary community can be channeled into a broader and more permanent channel of cultural identity, becoming one of the pillars in the construction of a collective religious identity in Indonesia (Bräuchler, 2022).

However, the pilgrimage space that appears harmonious and full of solidarity is not a space that is innocent and without conflict. Instead, Astana Gunung Jati is an arena or, in Eade and Sallnow's (1991) terms, a contested space, where various interests, authorities, and interpretations intersect, negotiate, and sometimes clash (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). This dynamic is precisely a sign of the vitality of pilgrimage as a living and evolving social practice, not just a dead heritage that is preserved.

First, negotiations occur around the authority and meaning of the ritual itself. Traditional authority is held by the caretaker (kuncen) and the descendants of Sunan Gunung Jati, who regulate procedures, access to certain spaces (especially the Pasujudan Gate), and are the primary source of authentic narratives about history and tradition. This authority, which is charismatic and hereditary, often comes into conflict with formal religious authorities from outside, such as preachers or modernist-puritan Islamic groups. Several informants mentioned criticism from certain groups who consider practices such as scattering flowers, direct supplications at graves, and excessive belief in blessings as forms of bid'ah (heresy) or even shirk (polytheism). A community leader (I2) responded casually, "That's normal. We respect their opinions, but our traditions have been going on for hundreds of years, passed down through generations, and this is our way of giving thanks and drawing closer to Allah through His beloved ones." Such responses demonstrate the tension between orthopraxy (practical truth) maintained by local traditional authorities and orthodoxy (doctrinal truth) claimed by more textual, external religious authorities (Zaid et al., 2022). This negotiation is part of an ongoing dialectic within Indonesian Muslims regarding the ideal form of religiosity (Yuliantri & Suwignyo, 2024).

Second, economic dynamics constitute a layer of negotiation that is not easily understood. Pilgrimage activities have created an economic ecosystem that supports

hundreds of families, from flower vendors, water and food sellers, mat renters, parking managers, to souvenir sellers and guides. However, this ritual economy contains a paradox. On the one hand, it is a real economic blessing for the surrounding community, a form of religious livelihood recognized in various studies on religious tourism (Gambhir et al., 2021). On the other hand, there are concerns about the commodification or shallowing of spiritual meaning. Some pilgrims expressed frustration with prices perceived as excessive or the practice of forcing certain services. One trader (I17) acknowledged tensions, "Sometimes there is friction between traders fighting for space. But we remember, this sustenance from Sunan must be shared fairly, don't be greedy." Managing trading space and establishing fair rules often involves negotiations between the trader association, the cemetery caretaker (caretaker), and village officials. These conflicts and resolutions in the economic realm demonstrate how sacred sites are also battlegrounds for material interests, where spiritual values must be constantly negotiated with market logic (Dhan Gahalot & Gupta, 2025).

Third, there are negotiations regarding accessibility and preservation. The local government, recognizing the economic potential of tourism, has an interest in developing infrastructure and managing the area. However, these modernization efforts must contend with the desire of traditional administrators to maintain the sacredness and traditional spatial structure of the tomb complex (Ningrum & Abdullah, 2025). The development of improved public facilities must be undertaken carefully to avoid damaging the spiritual atmosphere, which is the primary attraction.

Through the lens of Eade and Sallnow (1991), all these dynamics show that the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati is not a passive container containing a single, fixed meaning (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). It is an empty vessel that can be filled with various different, even competing, meanings: meaning as a place of worship and seeking blessings by pilgrims, meaning as a source of legitimacy and authority for the caretaker, meaning as a source of livelihood for traders, meaning as an object of criticism for religious purifiers, and meaning as a tourism asset for the government. The interaction, tension, and negotiation between the bearers of these meanings is what makes pilgrimage remain a relevant and dynamic practice. The fact that this tradition survives and even thrives amidst various pressures and criticisms is precisely a testament to its resilience and flexibility.

Thus, an analysis of the Astana Gunung Jati not only reveals the formation of community and solidarity, but also reveals the complexity and diversity of meanings that accompany every religious practice lived in a pluralistic society. The vitality of pilgrimage lies precisely in its ability to become a contested space, an arena where religion is continually practiced, debated, and lived within concrete social realities (Shinde & Olsen, 2022).

Global Contributions: Revisiting Pilgrimage, Community, and Lived Religion in Transnational Contexts

This study of the pilgrimage to the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati extends its significance beyond the local context of Indonesian Islam, offering substantive contributions to global academic conversations in the anthropology of religion, the sociology of pilgrimage, and the study of contemporary religious practices. By rigorously applying and synthesizing classical theories (Turner, Anderson) with contemporary frameworks on collective spirituality (Ammerman) and contested sacred space (Eade and Sallnow), this study presents a nuanced ethnographic study from the Global South that challenges, refines, and enriches broader theoretical models.

First, this research contributes to the global discourse on pilgrimage as a mechanism of social and community formation. While studies of the world's mega-pilgrimages (e.g., to Mecca, Lourdes, or the Kumbh Mela) often focus on their massive scale, political economy, or global flows, this research highlights the micro-sociological processes of community and identity construction at regional pilgrimage sites. This research empirically demonstrates how Turner's concept of liminality operates not within tribal initiations, but within complex modern Muslim societies, creating a temporary egalitarianism that transcends Indonesia's sharp socio-economic hierarchies. This offers a comparative model for understanding how other regional pilgrimage sites around the world, whether Catholic sanctuaries in Latin America, Hindu temples in South India, or Buddhist stupas in Southeast Asia, function as crucial local nodes for generating social cohesion and fleeting experiences of equality, complementing studies of mega-pilgrimages (John Eade, 2016).

Second, this study provides a critical non-Western perspective on the dynamics of "lived religion" and collective spirituality. The work of Nancy Ammerman (2016), largely developed in a North American context, finds strong confirmation and complexity in the case of Cirebon (Ammerman, 2016). The research shows how spirituality is co-constructed through lived rituals (flower scattering, collective dhikr), shared narratives of karamah (the power of holiness), and the collective management of economic and doctrinal tensions. This underscores that the shift toward "lived religion" is not simply a Western academic trend, but a vital framework for understanding religious vitality in plural societies elsewhere. It dialogues with works such as Fedele and Knibbe's exploration of gendered spirituality in Europe, but adds the dimension of ancestor reverence and localized Islamic authority, demonstrating how global Islamic discourse is indigenized and made experientially meaningful (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020).

Third, the analysis of Astana Gunung Jati as a "contested space" engages directly with a central theme in the global anthropology of holy sites. Findings demonstrating tensions between traditional custodians (jaga kecar), reformist Muslim critics, local traders, and state tourism interests mirror conflicts observed in places such as Jerusalem's holy sites, Buddhist-Catholic shrines in Sri Lanka, or Sufi tombs in Pakistan contested by Salafist groups (Walker et al., 2020). This research contributes by highlighting how such contestations over meaning are not merely destructive but generative forces. Negotiations over access, authentic practices, and economic gain are shown to be intrinsic to the site's continued relevance and vitality. This reinforces the global argument that the meaning of a pilgrimage center is never fixed, but constantly negotiated, and that this polyvocality is the source of its resilience (Eade & Sallnow, 1991).

Furthermore, the study's exploration of the transition from a temporary community to an enduring imagined community bridges the study of ritual with the study of religious nationalism and transnational identity. While Anderson's (1991) concept was developed for secular nationalism, its application to religious communities bound by a shared saint and ritual practices demonstrates how religious "imagined communities" are forged through shared sensory and emotional participation (Anderson, 1991). This has implications for understanding the formation of transnational Sufi orders, diasporic Hindu communities connected to particular shrines, or global Catholic devotion to local Marian apparitions. The "community of followers of Sunan Gunung Jati" serves as a powerful example of how subnational and supralocal religious identities are forged alongside, and sometimes in tension with, national citizenship.

This study goes beyond the exoticization of "Javanese syncretism" to present a sophisticated theoretical analysis of universal social processes: how ritual creates solidarity, how space becomes sacred through conflict, and how spiritual meaning is produced collectively. In doing so, it invites scholars of religion worldwide to look beyond doctrinal texts and institutional structures to the lived, contested, and communal practices through which religion is lived and continually reshaped. This study offers an engaging template for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of ritual, space, and community in an increasingly connected yet locally rooted religious world.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the practice of pilgrimage to the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati as a holistic phenomenon that is simultaneously a ritual structure, a space for the production of spiritual meaning, and a machine for community formation. In answering the research questions, it was found that the pilgrimage ritual is carried out through a clear structure of rites of passage—separation, liminality, and reaggregation—which effectively creates a managed liminal space. In this space, core spiritual values such as seeking blessings and tawassul are collectively constructed through ritual performativity (such as flower scattering and mass tahlil) and the narrative exchange of karomah. This practice not only facilitates the experience of personal transcendence, but actively builds and maintains a temporary, egalitarian community at the site, which then crystallizes into a more stable collective identity—an "ummat Sunan Gunung Jati"—that is imagined and transcends geographical boundaries.

Theoretically, this study provides three main contributions. First, it enriches and tests the relevance of Victor Turner's theories (liminality and community) and Benedict Anderson's (imagined communities) in the context of contemporary mass religious practices in the Global South. Second, the synthesis using the frameworks of lived religion (Ammerman) and discursive tradition (Asad) successfully offers a more dynamic analytical model for understanding how spirituality is produced, lived, and negotiated in social interactions. Third, by applying the lens of contested space (Eade & Sallnow), this study shows that the vitality and resilience of pilgrimage lies precisely in its ability to accommodate various interests and interpretations that negotiate each other (traditional authority, economics, puritanism, the state).

The practical implications of these findings are significant for various stakeholders. For site managers (caretakers, local governments), the research underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between preserving the sacredness of liminal spaces, equitable economic management, and a wise response to doctrinal criticism. For the pilgrim community and the wider public, these findings can strengthen awareness of pilgrimage's potential as a source of social cohesion and cultural identity in Indonesia's diverse society. However, this study has limitations. Its scope focuses on one major pilgrimage site, so the findings may not fully represent the dynamics at other holy sites with different socio-cultural characteristics. Furthermore, despite using triangulation, the qualitative approach employed emphasizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization. Suggestions for further research include: (1) Comparative studies between Wali Songo pilgrimage sites or between Islamic pilgrimage sites and religious sites from other religions in Indonesia, to test the transferability of the proposed analytical model; (2) A deeper exploration of the role of social media and digital technology in shaping, expanding, and transforming the imaginary community of pilgrims; and (3) Longitudinal research to observe the long-term impact of

pilgrimage experiences on the social behavior, religious tolerance, and civic identity of participants.

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