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Constructing Sacred Space: Sufi Cosmology, Ritual Practice and the Sacralization of the Sheikh Maulana Ishaq Tomb in East Java

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Abstract: Pilgrimage to Islamic saints' (*awliyā'*) tombs is an important Javanese tradition shaped by Sufi beliefs, devotional practices, and collective memory. This study examines how sacredness is created and sustained at the Tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq in Kemantren, Paciran, Lamongan, East Java, focusing on cosmology, rituals, narratives, spatial organization, and management. Using qualitative ethnographic and phenomenological methods, it explores rituals, social relations, community participation, tomb management, and pilgrims' experiences of sacredness. Findings reveal three connected dimensions of sacralization: Sufi concepts of *wilāyā* (sainthood/spiritual authority), *baraka* (divine blessing), and *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence); rituals including *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *tahlīl* (religious gathering and prayer ceremony), *ḥaul* (commemorative anniversaries), and *tawassul* (seeking intercession), reinforced by *karāma* (miraculous gifts) narratives; and the influence of spatial organization, management, community involvement, and religious tourism. Pilgrims experience sacredness through prayer, devotion, hopes for *baraka*, and encounters with divine grace, connecting personal meaning, shared memory, and community life. The study introduces "socio-cosmological sacralization" to explain how cosmological beliefs, lived experience, ritual, space, memory, and social structures together create and sustain sacredness.

Contribution: This study contributes to the anthropology and sociology of religion by introducing socio-cosmological sacralization as an analytical framework for understanding how sacredness emerges through the interaction of Sufi cosmology, devotional practices, collective memory, spatial organization, and community relations.

Keywords: Sufi cosmology; sacralization; Maulana Ishaq tomb

Introduction

Pilgrimages to the tombs of saints (*awliyā'*) constitute an important part of religious practice in Indonesia. Such sites are not merely places for prayer and worship; rather, they represent a confluence of ritual, collective memory, the sanctity of the saints, material culture, and social relations.[1] The pilgrimage to Tembayat offers a valuable case study of how religious traditions preserve beliefs and memories while remaining flexible enough to accommodate the dynamics of contemporary Islam in Indonesia.

Maulana Ishaq's tomb is located in Kemantren Village, Paciran Subdistrict, Lamongan Regency, East Java. It provides significant background on the relationship between the ulama's authority and the development of Islam in Java, the descendants of Sunan Giri, and other matters regarding the *Walisongo* (Nine Saints).[2] The site contains a spiritual story associated with Maulana Ishaq's tomb. Pilgrims come to the tomb to perform *tawassul* (using a conduit to draw closer to Allah), recite the Quran, and participate in *tahlīl* (religious gathering and prayer ceremony) and other activities during the annual *ḥaul* ceremony. Various objects around the site, such as the well and others, shape pilgrims' perception of the tomb's sanctity.

The concept of sacred space offers a starting point for this inquiry. Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane, along with the concepts of hierophany and axis mundi, highlights how particular places acquire significance distinct from ordinary space.[3] This study, however, considers spatial symbolism alongside the religious meanings, practices, and social relationships associated with a Muslim saint's tomb. The concepts of *wilāyā* (Islamic sainthood) and *baraka* (divine blessing) provide a more specific vocabulary for examining saintly authority and the blessings attributed to relationships with a *walī* (saint). Chodkiewicz's discussion of sainthood in the doctrine of Ibn ʿArabi supplies a conceptual point of reference rather than direct evidence of local pilgrims'

[1] Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Kees de Jong, "The Pilgrimage to Tembayat: Tradition and Revival in Indonesian Islam," *The Muslim World* 91, no. 3–4 (2001): 325–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2001.tb03720.x.

[2] Puguh Cahyono, Ruswaji, and Moh. Muklis Sulaeman, "Peran Wisata Religi Di Makam Sunan Drajat Dan Syeh Maulana Ishaq Sebagai Penggerak Ekonomi Kreatif (Studi Kasus Di Makam Sunan Drajat Dan Syeh Maulana Ishaq, Kecamatan Paciran, Kabupaten Lamongan)," *Community Development Journal* 4, no. 5 (2023): 9788–9795, https://doi.org/10.31004/cdj.v4i5.20948.

[3] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 20–40.

beliefs.[4] Sufi cosmology is thus used as an interpretive lens for investigating how relationships among God, saintly authority, spiritual mediation, and human experience are understood. This approach does not presume that pilgrims consciously subscribe to a single metaphysical doctrine.

Ritual practice provides a second analytical dimension. Research on Tembayat connects pilgrimage traditions with sacred landscapes, historical memory, and changing religious contexts.[5] Hellman's work on pilgrimage in West Java also draws attention to interactions between pilgrims and guides in the production of sacred experience.[6] These perspectives help frame an examination of how prayer, recitation, bodily conduct, narratives, and encounters with material features make sacred meanings experientially present. They also direct attention to the people whose interpretations and actions mediate pilgrims' relationships with a sacred place.

The third dimension focuses on the organization and economic dynamics of pilgrimage. Studies of pilgrimage tourism in Indonesia provide a useful framework for understanding how religious motivations and spiritual experiences intersect with tourism-related activities.[7] Quinn's examination of commercial aspects of pilgrimage in Java likewise offers a point of departure for analyzing economic exchange around saintly sites.[8] This article does not treat commercial activity as sufficient evidence of diminished sacredness. Instead, it asks how economic practices and institutional arrangements relate to devotional meanings at the site. Custodial authority, community participation, spatial management, and tourism-related activities are examined as conditions through which the tomb is maintained, accessed, and represented.

These bodies of scholarship provide a foundation for understanding saintly authority, pilgrimage experience, sacred space, and religious tourism. Building

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4 Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 47–59.

5 van Doorn-Harder and de Jong, "The Pilgrimage to Tembayat."

6 Jörgen Hellman, "Pilgrim Guides and Pilgrims in Productive Complicity: Making the Invisible Visible in West Java," *Tourist Studies* 19, no. 1 (2019): 43–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797617723765.

7 Tanti Handriana, Praptini Yulianti, and Masmira Kurniawati, "Exploration of Pilgrimage Tourism in Indonesia," *Journal of Islamic Marketing* 11, no. 3 (2020): 783–95, https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-10-2018-0188.

8 George Quinn, "Throwing Money at the Holy Door: Commercial Aspects of Popular Pilgrimage in Java," in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 63–79.

on them, this article focuses on how these dimensions interact in the ongoing sacralization of the Maulana Ishaq Tomb. Rather than claiming that previous studies have neglected their connections altogether, it develops a site-specific account of the relationships among cosmological meanings, ritual practices, material-spatial arrangements, collective memory, and institutional governance.

To examine these relationships, the article proposes the concept of socio-cosmological sacralization. This term refers to the relational process through which cosmological meanings are enacted, sustained, and negotiated through ritual practice, material-spatial arrangements, collective memory, and institutional governance. The framework connects three analytical dimensions: understandings of saintly authority and blessing; ritual and spatial practices that shape how sacred meanings are experienced; and the social, material, and institutional arrangements that organize and maintain the site. The analysis examines how these dimensions relate to one another in the production of sacredness.

This study examines how Sufi beliefs, pilgrimage rituals, spatial experiences, and site management shape and maintain the sacredness of the Maulana Ishaq Tomb. It explores how pilgrims understand the saint's spiritual authority and *baraka*, and how rituals, local narratives, and the physical environment shape their experiences of the sacred. It also considers how caretakers, community participation, and religious tourism contribute to preserving the tomb and shaping its religious significance over time.

This work contributes to studies of Indonesian Islam, pilgrimage, and practical Sufism by analyzing aspects of sacredness: cosmological, experiential, material, and organizational. Rather than judging the tomb's sacredness by particular religious dogmas, the work examines how religious practice shapes perceptions of sacredness. In this respect, the concept of socio-cosmological sacralization helps frame sacredness as an ongoing phenomenon shaped by beliefs, rituals, environment, memory, and social ties.

Literature Review

The study examines the sacralization of the Maulana Ishaq Tomb by analyzing three closely related aspects: the perception of sacred space, Sufi cosmology, and the local activities that recognize the shrine and render it sacred. Each aspect contributes to a better understanding of the way religious beliefs manifest in practice and gives the location physical significance. Belief systems,

rituals, group memory, and the authority and social relations involved in caring for the site shape the process.

Sacred Space

The concept of sacred space serves as the primary analytical basis for this research. According to Mircea Eliade, sacred space differs from profane space through a process he calls hierophany, the appearance of the sacred in specific sites, objects, or events. Within this framework, sacred space is more than mere space; its significance is rooted in religious beliefs and practices and accompanied by certain experiences.[9] Thus, sacred places give religious communities landmarks of significance, setting them apart from the ordinary and allowing their beliefs to take concrete form in the world.

Eliade's axis mundi signifies a theoretical center that joins various levels of reality and links the earthly world to higher spheres of existence. This principle manifests in numerous sacred locations, including temples, shrines, mountains, and burial places. Nonetheless, their sacred nature cannot be explained solely through the physical characteristics of these places. In fact, religious texts and rituals cannot be underestimated when analyzing how people perceive the place.[10] Consequently, sacred places cannot be regarded simply as built objects; they result from the interplay of all the above aspects.

The perspective provided is particularly useful for appreciating the concept of Muslim saints' tombs as holy places. A *wali's* grave can become a sacred site through several elements, such as tales of the saint, associations with miracles, belief in *baraka*, and the saint's legacy. These meanings arise from practices such as pilgrimage, prayer, *tawassul, tahlīl, Yāsīn* recitation, and activities connected to relevant events. In Indonesia, tombs serve several purposes simultaneously. They are notable not only for their significance in faith practices but also for their role in social activities.[11]

This study does not treat the sacred character of the Sheikh Maulana Ishaq Tomb as intrinsic to the site. On the contrary, it conceives of sacred character as something constructed and sustained through religious beliefs, shared meanings,

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9 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 20–21.

10 Eliade, 22.

11 Amin Tohari, "Construction of the Wali Pitu's Sacredness and Islamic Veneration in Balinese Hindu Civilization," *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 123–36, https://doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v7i2.4722; Muhammad Rusli Ibrahim, "Persepsi Masyarakat Tentang Makam Raja Dan Wali Gorontalo," *El-HARAKAH* 18, no. 1 (2016): 76–89, https://doi.org/10.18860/el.v18i1.3417.

and activities performed over time. From this point of view, the site is distinguished from ordinary sites by the stories told about it in that locality, the religious rituals performed there, the design of its physical space, and the activities of the site keepers. Thus, it can be said that its sacred character is determined not only by its association with Maulana Ishaq but also by how people interpret, experience, and maintain this site.

Sufi Cosmology

Sufi cosmology provides the second conceptual foundation of this study. Scholarship on the subject explores a wide range of themes, including the creation and structure of the universe, different levels of existence, the nature of time, the spiritual status of saints, and the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds.[12] It also offers ways to understand the religious significance attached to saints' tombs and pilgrimage practices. Sufi cosmology, however, is not a single, uniform system of thought. It encompasses diverse ideas that have developed across different philosophical traditions and mystical teachings. Despite this diversity, these perspectives offer a useful framework for examining how Sufi beliefs shape understandings of sainthood, the spiritual significance of tombs, and the meanings pilgrims attach to their devotional journeys.

This perspective matters because the holiness of a saint's tomb cannot be accounted for solely by its physical properties. It is important within the Sufi worldview, especially regarding notions such as *wilāyā*, *baraka*, and the spiritual characteristics associated with the saint. These notions allow travelers to understand the saint's spiritual role and to answer the question of how the tomb is meaningful for followers today. In the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabi, there are several topics discussed, such as human-Divine and universe-Divine relationships. As Chittick says, the philosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabi is devoted to many important themes, such as spiritual perfection, the nature of being, the means by which individuals know things, and the nature of the material and spiritual worlds. All of this is a good basis for understanding how the Sufi approach to saints and their tombs helps explain the relationship between a saint and a tomb within a broader context.[13]

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[12] Christian Lange and Alexander Knysh, eds., *Sufi Cosmology* (Leiden: BRILL, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004392618; Christian Lange and Alexander Knysh, "Introduction: What Is Sufi Cosmology?," in *Sufi Cosmology* (Leiden: BRILL, 2022), 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004392618_002.

[13] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1989), 28–30.

In this study, the term *walī* refers not simply to a pious figure from the past but to someone whose spiritual significance continues to shape the religious life of a community. The concepts of *wilāyā* and *baraka* help explain why a saint's death does not necessarily bring an end to their religious influence. Their memory and perceived spiritual authority may remain meaningful through ongoing pilgrimages, devotional rituals, local narratives, genealogical traditions, and other activities associated with the tomb. Through these practices, the saint's legacy continues to be remembered and incorporated into the community's religious life.[14]

Sufi cosmology offers a theological and symbolic framework for understanding why certain places are associated with saints, closeness to God, divine blessings, and the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. In this study, however, Sufi cosmology is not treated as a collection of abstract ideas detached from everyday religious life. Instead, the focus is on how these beliefs take shape through local narratives, ritual practices, personal experiences, and material activities involving pilgrims, caretakers, religious leaders, and the wider community. This approach helps explain how Sufi cosmological beliefs become part of the ways people experience, understand, and maintain the sacredness of the Maulana Ishaq Tomb.

The Maulana Ishaq Tomb as a Sacred Site

The third conceptual dimension concerns the specific site examined in this research: the tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq in Kemantren Village, Paciran, Lamongan, East Java. The site is officially recognized as a religious tourism destination in Lamongan and is located in the coastal area of Kemantren. The local and institutional narratives surrounding the site associate Maulana Ishaq with the spread of Islam in the region and with the genealogy of Sunan Giri.

The Maulana Ishaq tomb has also been the subject of earlier academic research. Mas'ud's study specifically examined religious behavior among pilgrims at the Maulana Ishaq tomb and documented practices including *tahlīl, Yasin*, annual *ḥaul*, and pilgrimage on ordinary and particular religious occasions. The study further identified religious, belief-related, socio-cultural, and economic factors influencing pilgrimage behavior.[15] Another study by Cahyono, Ruswaji, and Sulaeman examined the Maulana Ishaq tomb together with the Sunan Drajat

[14] Chittick, 30.

[15] Mas'ud, "Perilaku Keagamaan Peziarah Di Komplek Makam Syekh Maulana Ishaq Desa Kemantren Kec. Paciran Kab. Lamongan" (UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, 2013).

tomb primarily from the perspective of religious tourism and creative economic development. Their findings demonstrate that the site has significance for the development of religious tourism and the local economy.[16]

These studies are important because they establish that the Maulana Ishaq tomb is not an unexplored site. Nevertheless, their analytical emphases are different from the concern of the present study. Existing research has primarily examined pilgrims' religious behavior and motivations or the economic and tourism dimensions of the site. The present study instead investigates how the tomb's sacred status is constructed and reproduced through the interaction of Sufi cosmological meanings, ritual practices, collective memory, and spatial authority.

This distinction is also supported by broader studies of saintly tombs in Indonesia. Tohari's research on the *Wali Pitu* demonstrates that the sacredness of saintly tombs can be constructed through historical narratives, collective practices, religious tourism, and the involvement of tomb custodians (*juru kunci*) and religious communities.[17] Similarly, Ibrahim's phenomenological study of royal and saintly tombs in Gorontalo shows that tombs can be interpreted simultaneously as places of remembrance, prayer, blessing, religious learning, and spiritual experience.[18]

The Maulana Ishaq Tomb can therefore be understood as a living sacred space whose significance continues to develop rather than as a monument defined solely by its historical past. Its sacred character emerges through the relationship between the physical site, stories about Maulana Ishaq, pilgrims' devotional practices, the transmission of collective memory, and the role of religious custodians in preserving traditions associated with the saint's lineage. These elements work together to sustain and renew the tomb's religious meaning over time.

Method

To examine the process of meaning construction associated with the concept of sacredness at the tomb of Syeikh Maulana Ishaq, this study employs ethnographic and phenomenological approach. The ethnography is used to investigate the rituals, social life, and religious narratives of the pilgrims, while the phenomenological approach is applied to explore the pilgrims' perceptions of

[16] Cahyono, Ruswaji, and Sulaeman, "Peran Wisata Religi Di Makam Sunan Drajat."
[17] Tohari, "Construction of the Wali Pitu's Sacredness."
[18] Ibrahim, "Persepsi Masyarakat Tentang Makam Raja Dan Wali Gorontalo."

the sacred.[19] Fieldwork for this study was conducted between September and November 2025 in Kemantren Village, Paciran District, Lamongan Regency, East Java. Through purposive sampling, 10 pilgrims, along with 5 other individuals (the custodian of the tomb, one religious figure, community leaders, and one local resident), were selected for this study. There were 10 male and 5 female participants, aged 30 to 70 years, selected for their experiences of pilgrimage, familiarity with the site, and knowledge of various local religious customs.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The observations examined Qur'anic recitation, prayer, *tahlīl, tawassul,* gestures of respect, use of space, interaction with the custodian of the tomb, and religious events (haul events). Interviews, conducted with all 15 informants, took into consideration five important themes, including motivation to go on pilgrimage, understanding of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq in terms of being *walī*, understanding of and experiences with *tawassul,* as well as some beliefs that were associated with the terms *baraka* and *karāma* (saintly miracle), as well as interpretations regarding the tomb as a sacred site in relation to the *wali,* pilgrims, and God. Documentary materials were used to contextualize and triangulate the data obtained during interviews and observations.

The data analysis took place iteratively during both the fieldwork and post-fieldwork phases. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were categorized and analyzed through initial coding, categorization, and thematization. The initial coding findings included ritual practices and bodily gestures, as well as the spiritual dimension of the experiences, extraordinary experiences, and perceptions of the tomb. The different codes were grouped into broader codes encompassing the worship of the *walī, tawassul, baraka, karāma,* collective memory, and sacred space. Themes were then discovered by comparing evidence from across interviews, observations, and documentaries.

The Sufi concepts of *walī, baraka, tawassul,* and *karāma* were used to define the analytical frames rather than the predetermined conclusions. In addition, they provided guidance on analyzing how local stories, religious

[19] Martyn Hammersley, "Ethnography: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 3–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820500512697; Brian E. Neubauer, Catherine T. Witkop, and Lara Varpio, "How Phenomenology Can Help Us Learn from the Experiences of Others," *Perspectives on Medical Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 90–97, https://doi.org/10.1007/S40037-019-0509-2.

practices, and pilgrims' experiences contribute to understanding the shrine's sacred nature. Comparing different types of data enabled the identification of patterns common across data sources and the study of how spatial arrangement, ritual repetition, communal activities, and stories are involved in the notion of sacredness.

Informed consent was obtained from 15 participants prior to their involvement in this study. This consent was obtained for research purposes; participants were provided with an explanation of the study's objectives, the interview methodology, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw any previously provided responses. Participants were also informed of potential risks to the confidentiality of their names and that their names would be replaced with codes. Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained by substituting participants' personal names with codes and, where necessary, removing information from the transcripts that could reveal their identities.

Results and Discussion

Sufi Cosmology, Pilgrimage Rituals, and the Reproduction of Sacredness

The Sufi cosmology explains why certain places are associated with saints, closeness to God, divine blessings, and the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. Accordingly, a tomb is regarded not merely as a physical burial site but as a sacred space tied to a wali's spiritual legacy. Pilgrims express this understanding through rituals, seeking closeness to God and blessings associated with the saint. Through these beliefs and practices, sacredness is continually renewed through spiritual experience, collective memory, and communal devotion. This study reveals the importance of *wilāyā, baraka,* and *tawassul* rather than the explicit influence of *waḥdat al-wujūd* on local pilgrimage practices. The latter concept may provide a comparative theoretical perspective, but its direct relevance to pilgrims' interpretations would require additional evidence from interviews or religious texts.[20]

Further, Sufi cosmological beliefs become tangible through the ritual activities performed at the tomb.[21] These include Qur'anic recitation, *tahlīl, dhikr,* personal supplication, prayer for the deceased, and collective religious

[20] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 77–86.

[21] Lu Yang, "The Sacred Theater in Goguryeo Tomb Murals: Myth, Belief, and the Pictorial Performance of Political Authority," *Religions* 16, no. 10 (2025): 1237, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101237.

gatherings. Such practices provide a setting in which religious beliefs are enacted and experienced. The tomb's sacredness is thus reproduced not through belief alone but through recurring devotional activities that connect religious meanings with embodied practices. From a sacredness perspective, the significance of the Shrine of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq in Kemantren Village, Lamongan, can be explained through the relationship among Sufism, the pilgrimage ritual, and the tale of the saint's sanctity. The pilgrims of the tomb do not consider the shrine just as the burial place of an important religious figure in the past. The shrine is regarded as a sacred place associated with *wilāyā, baraka,* and *tawassul*. One pilgrim explained the motivation for visiting the tomb:

> "Pilgrims go to the grave of Skeikh Maulana Ishaq to gain *baraka* from God and get his assistance in their lives. They think that going to the tomb of such an esteemed spiritual personality will allow them to receive God's blessings. Visitation to the tomb also serves as a means of expressing gratitude to the saint for his contributions to the promotion of Islam in the area."[22]

This narrative exemplifies how the concept of *baraka* shapes pilgrims' understanding of the tomb's significance. The *baraka* emanates from God, but the legacy of Maulana Ishaq provides a rich context for prayer. In this case, the pilgrimage is not only about making a physical visit to the grave; it is also a representation of the pilgrims' religious aspirations. Supporting evidence for this interpretation can also be found in other accounts. For instance, one pilgrim spoke about how visiting the grave helped them pray for the safety and good health of their relatives.[23] This made him or her feel closer to Allah. For another pilgrim from Madura, the pilgrimage had meant gaining peace and restoration.[24] From this, we understand that the meanings associated with *baraka* include not only the expected blessings but also reflection and emotional peace.

The phenomenon of *tawassul* illustrates another way pilgrims understand the connection among the saint, the holy place, and God. According to the stories gathered for the research, visiting the tomb allows them to pray to Allah while acknowledging the spiritual importance of Maulana Ishaq. This practice, therefore, should not be considered proof that pilgrims regard the saint as an independent source of divine power. In addition, the concept provided by Turner and Turner offers a useful perspective on pilgrimages as rituals involving spiritual

[22] Interview with LW (R1), Head of the Pilgrims' Group from East Lampung, 23 October 2025.

[23] Interview with NJ (R2), Caretaker of the Tomb of Maulana Ishaq, 20 October 2025.

[24] Interview with S (R3), Pilgrim from Madura, 27 October 2025.

experiences, symbolism, and social relationships.[25] Communal rituals at the Maulana Ishaq Tomb have a greater impact than personal practices because they offer a chance to remember and learn about religion as part of social interaction. Narratives about *karāma*, often defined as extraordinary abilities or events associated with sainthood, can also help build religious authority. Nevertheless, the empirical data in this research show that people's belief in *baraka, wilāyā,* and *tawassul* is much stronger than belief in miracles themselves. In other words, *karāma* should be viewed within the framework of the broader concept of sainthood, rather than as an empirical fact.

Table 1. Ritual Practices and the Construction of Sacred Space at the Tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq

Ritual practice	Empirical expression	Religious meaning	Contribution to sacred space
Yasin and *tahlīl*	Collective Qur'anic recitation and *tahlīl*	Remembrance of God, prayer, and *baraka*	Establishes the tomb as a place of devotion
Tawassul	Supplication to God while invoking Maulana Ishaq as *wasīla* (a means to approach Allah)	Mediation, sainthood, and *baraka*	Reinforces the spiritual significance of the tomb
Prayer and *dhikr*	Individual and collective devotional practices	Worship, remembrance, and spiritual reflection	Produces embodied experience of sacred space
Khidma (devotion) and grave cleaning	Caring for and maintaining the tomb	Reverence and religious service	Connects material care with sacredness
Semedi (Meditation)	Individual contemplation and reflection	Personal spiritual experience	Deepens individual engagement with the sacred site
Annual *ḥaul*	Commemoration every 11th of *Shuro*	Collective remembrance of Maulana Ishaq	Reproduces sacred memory across generations
Sacred wells	Collection of water from *Jeding Ngaron Kembar* and *Sumur Sepaku*	Perceived *baraka* associated with sacred materiality	Extends sacredness beyond the tomb

[25] Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 30–35.

Sedekah	Donations and charitable activities	Devotion, generosity, and religious merit	Supports the material reproduction of the site
Collective gatherings	*Shalawat*, *Mahalul Qiyam*, *Burdah*, *dhikr*, and sermons	Religious remembrance and learning	Integrates the tomb into community religious life

As summarized in Table 1, the ritual practices associated with the tomb contribute to the construction of sacred space through complementary processes. Individual devotional activities, such as prayer, *dhikr,* and *semedi* (meditation)*,* facilitate personal reflection and spiritual engagement. Collective practices, including *Yasin* recitation, *tahlīl, shalawat,* and the annual *haul*, reinforce shared religious meanings and collective remembrance. Meanwhile, *Khidmah* (Devotional service)*,* grave cleaning, charitable donations, and practices associated with the wells connect religious devotion with the material maintenance and symbolic significance of the site. This means that sanctification results from the interaction among ritual performance, cosmology, material sustenance, and communal participation. Rituals do not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone who visits; instead, they offer a set of activities that help pilgrims relate to the tomb's spiritual significance. A local resident described the regular religious gatherings held at the tomb:

> "Every year during the month of *Suro* (*muharram*), we hold a gathering to commemorate Sheikh Maulana Ishaq. We also assemble at the tomb on *Jumat Kliwon* (or *Jumat Pon*)—an event attended by local residents, *santri* (Islamic boarding school students) from Paciran, and pilgrims. The proceedings include the recitation of *shalawat*, followed by the reading of Surah Yasin and the *tahlīl* prayer, and conclude with a religious lecture delivered by a *kiai* from Lamongan, Gresik, or Tuban."[26]

These practices keep collective memory alive and pass Maulana Ishaq's legacy from one generation to the next. Through regular rituals and commemorations, the tomb's sacred significance is continually renewed. The *ḥaul* is particularly important because it brings together remembrance, worship, religious learning, and communal gathering, turning the saint's memory into a living tradition.[27] Similarly, *tahlīl* and Qur'anic recitation offer pilgrims and community members recurring opportunities to strengthen their spiritual

[26] Interview with MH (R4), Head of Takmir of Al Abror Mosque, 20 October 2025.

[27] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41–71.

connection with Maulana Ishaq's legacy. Collective memory is also sustained through material and historical narratives. A religious figure explained:

> "We are committed to preserving historical traces related to Sheikh Maulana Ishaq, including an inscription on the tomb wall which quotes a manuscript by the late Kyai Zainuri from Ngimbang. Other sites that are related to his existence include Bayang Gambang, old mosques, and the nine wells in Kemantren Village."[28]

This account shows that sacralization is reproduced not only through ritual but also through the preservation of material traces and narratives of saintly presence. The inscription, manuscript, historical sites, mosques, and wells function as mnemonic resources through which Sheikh Maulana Ishaq's legacy is made visible and continually interpreted.[29]

The results of the research indicate a cycle of collective memory and ritual practice in which each influences the other, with ritual practice preserving the tomb's spiritual significance and serving as a source of inspiration for pilgrimage and remembrance. Spiritual meaning is not just transmitted from one generation to another; each generation creates its own sacred meaning through the behaviors and religious practices at the site, thus preserving the significance of the Sheikh Maulana Ishaq tomb and conferring on it a sacred status.

Sacred Space, Caretakers, and the Management of Religious Tourism

The sacred meaning attached to the Ishaq Tomb is also influenced by how the space's physical setting and social relations are organized. The results reveal that the pilgrims move through various parts of the complex, each holding its own meaning. Traveling from the surrounding areas to the mosque courtyard and the inner part of the tomb (*cungkup*) shapes their pilgrimage journey.

The distinction made by Eliade between sacred and profane spaces is a useful point of departure for understanding such forms of spatial configuration. Yet the results indicate that the sacred nature of the tomb cannot be understood solely in terms of its physical location and architectural limits. Instead, it is through religious attitudes, rituals, and behavior that distinctions among spaces get their meaning. It is the association of the enclosure, mosque, gardens, and wells with devotional practices that makes them sacred.[30] The caretaker's

[28] Interview with M (R5), Chairman of the Tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq, 2012–2016 period, 20 October 2025.

[29] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520.

[30] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 20–26.

account illustrates the relationship between religious practice and the maintenance of the physical site:

> "The practices carried out by pilgrims who visit the Sheikh Maulana Ishaq Tomb include reading *Surah Yasin* and reciting *tahlīl* in praise of the saint. Other practices include spending time at the tomb, cleaning up around it, and praying. Other pilgrims donate to benefit the community as an act of charity known as *amal jāriya* (running good deeds).[31]

This account demonstrates that maintaining the tomb involves both practical responsibilities and religiously meaningful activities. Cleaning the site, preserving its surroundings, and facilitating devotional practices connect material care with reverence for Maulana Ishaq. The caretaker consequently occupies an important position at the intersection of spatial maintenance, religious practice, and the transmission of local knowledge.

The findings indicate the presence of other water sources associated with the tomb, which form part of its broader religious geography. Although the caretaker points out a well located near the tomb's entrance, an inventory of rituals conducted as part of this study identifies *Jeding Ngaron Kembar* and *Sumur Sepaku* as wells that possess *baraka*. Some pilgrims view these sites as an extension of the tomb's religious significance, reaching beyond the immediate confines of the burial site itself. This significance must be understood within the context of local religious beliefs and symbols.

The role of the *juru kunci* extends beyond mere physical maintenance. By assisting in preserving the site and recounting stories about Maulana Ishaq, these custodians play a vital role in ensuring the continuity of the pilgrimage tradition. Through these efforts, they forge a connection between the pilgrimage site's physical environment and the interpretations of that place rooted in religious teachings. The results also show links between caretakers, religious experts, pilgrims, local inhabitants, and people in charge of running the complex. These people ensure the continuity of religious practices, preservation of historical stories, and maintenance of the pilgrimage site. They provide the necessary social setting that enables the tomb to remain a religious site.

Eade and Sallnow emphasize that pilgrimage sites are shaped by social interactions and the different meanings that religious participants bring to them. This perspective is relevant to the Maulana Ishaq Tomb because the site accommodates individual devotion, collective worship, historical remembrance,

[31] Interview with NJ (R2), Caretaker of the Tomb of Maulana Ishaq, 20 October 2025.

and visits from people beyond the local community. Its religious significance is sustained through these overlapping forms of participation rather than through a single activity or interpretation.[32]

Consequently, the relationship between sacred space and religious tourism requires an understanding of the site's multiple functions. The tomb serves as a pilgrimage destination, a setting for communal religious gatherings, and a place associated with the historical memory of Maulana Ishaq. These functions intersect with the practical requirements of maintaining the complex and accommodating visitors. However, the available empirical material does not establish detailed visitor statistics, formal tourism policies, the economic impact of pilgrimage, or the precise division of administrative authority. Such matters should therefore be treated as potential areas for further research rather than as established findings.[33]

The findings nevertheless suggest that the management of the tomb should be considered in relation to the continuity of its religious and communal functions. Physical maintenance, the preservation of historical traces, and the facilitation of devotional activities can support the site's continued use. At the same time, management arrangements need to recognize the importance of the practices and local interpretations that give the tomb its religious meaning.

Religious tourism, on the other hand, can therefore be seen not only as a matter of availability for visitors and facilities. It includes the interplay among physical surroundings, community involvement, religious power, and the maintenance of devotional practices. In this sense, the case of the caretaker shows how such issues are interrelated in routine site maintenance; however, a further empirical study is required to evaluate the effectiveness of current managerial practices. For this reason, this sub-chapter shows how the notion of sacred space is maintained through the relationship among spatial configuration, material preservation, religious power, and community involvement. Such arrangements enable the continuation of the cosmological understandings and rituals described in the previous sub-chapter.

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[32] John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London: Routledge, 1991), 5.

[33] Ningning Chen, "Secularization, Sacralization and the Reproduction of Sacred Space: Exploring the Industrial Use of Ancestral Temples in Rural Wenzhou, China," *Social & Cultural Geography* 18, no. 4 (2017): 530–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1197302.

Sacralization as an Ongoing Socio-Cosmological Process

These findings suggest that the sacralization of the Tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq is best understood as an ongoing socio-cosmological process, rather than as an inherent or permanent quality of the physical site itself. This socio-cosmological process encompasses various elements, such as Sufi cosmology, rituals, spatial experiences, collective memory, and social relations. Each of these elements contributes to the process of sacralization, while their interactions ensure the continuity of the religious site's significance from one generation to the next.[34]

The results of the empirical analysis show three interrelated dimensions. Firstly, the cosmology of Sufism provides an interpretative framework through which visitors understand Maulana Ishaq's spirituality and the importance of the shrine visit for them. Secondly, the meaning is conveyed through certain actions such as prayer, *tawassul,* recitation of the Quran, *tahlīl, dhikr,* and commemoration rituals. Finally, the communal activity preserves meaning through the preservation of historical stories, the construction of the shrine, and practices. All of the three dimensions are interdependent rather than sequential. This means that beliefs lead to rituals, rituals emphasize sacred meanings, and participation in communal activity helps preserve the social context in which these meanings are relevant.

The concept of *wilāyā* (sainthood/spiritual authority) illustrates how this interaction unfolds. The pilgrims' perception of Maulana Ishaq as a mystic shapes their interpretation of the tomb, while the concepts of *baraka* (divine blessing) and *tawassul* (seeking intercession) underpin the practices they engage in during their pilgrimage. These interpretations manifest in concrete actions imbued with religious significance, such as ritual prayers and the recitation of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *tahlīl* (proclaiming the oneness of God). Thus, this study demonstrates that sacredness is not merely theological or symbolic; rather, it is also generated through the practical embodiment of religious meanings within a specific space.

The phenomenology of sacred space offers another approach to this study. In his work, Eliade highlights the division between the sacred and the profane in religious experience, explaining why certain spaces and times are endowed with

[34] Javier Urcid, "Bodily Transformation and Sacralization: Human Sacrifice in Southwestern Mesoamerica," in *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica*, ed. Rubén G. Mendoza and Linda Hansen, 2024, 295–343, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36600-0_10.

religious meaning.[35] In the case of the Maulana Ishaq Tomb, the division is evident in the distinction among the outer complex, the mosque courtyard, and the inner tomb complex. Nevertheless, it appears that the division is sustained by means of human activity as well. The religious meaning of the tomb does not depend solely on the spatial arrangement.

Furthermore, collective memory links the site's historical connections to religion in the present day. By preserving inscriptions, manuscripts, mosques, wells, and other locations associated with Maulana Ishaq, a connection is forged between the landscape and the site's religious history. In this sense, material remnants serve as a means of preserving and understanding the legacy of the holy figure. However, the significance of these material remnants lies in their social engagement.

Recurring rituals strengthen this relationship between memory and religious experience. The annual *ḥaul* and regular communal gatherings create occasions for the transmission of religious knowledge, the reaffirmation of collective identity, and the continuation of devotional traditions. Turner and Turner's analysis of pilgrimage offers a framework for understanding how ritual participation connects religious symbols, personal experiences, and social relationships. In the present case, communal gatherings enable the saint's memory to remain active within local religious life rather than confining it to historical accounts of the past.[36]

The resulting analytical model can be summarized through five interconnected dimensions. First, Sufi cosmology, particularly beliefs concerning *wilāyā, baraka, tawassul,* and saintly authority, provides the religious framework through which the tomb is interpreted. Second, ritual practices such as prayer, *dhikr, tahlīl, haul,* and other devotional activities embody and reaffirm religious meanings. Third, spatial experience makes those meanings tangible through the tomb enclosure, the mosque, the surrounding grounds, and the associated wells. Fourth, collective memory connects the saint's legacy with contemporary religious life through narratives, commemorations, inscriptions, and historical sites. Fifth, social reproduction involves caretakers, religious scholars, local residents, and pilgrims in sustaining the practices and meanings associated with the site.

[35] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 20–21.
[36] Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 20–21.

These elements must not be read as a linear progression. Instead, they constitute a recursive process in which each element affects and strengthens the others. The cosmological beliefs determine the ritual; the ritual reaffirms the sacredness of that space; collective memory keeps the religious stories relevant; and social participation keeps alive the practice and physical arrangements for the perpetuation of the sacred.

This model also helps us understand the connection between the individual religious experience and the collective process. The pilgrim might go to the tomb for prayer, meditation, or peace, whereas group rituals will facilitate the exchange of religious meaning and the preservation of memory. This individual dimension and this collective one are linked by the very same place and its practice. It means that sacredness is created through both individual practice and social relations.

However, such results need to be considered within the bounds of the available data. The research demonstrates the significance of the factors mentioned, namely belief, rituals, spatial perception, and community involvement. The effects of the area's commercialization by tourists, changes in its formal management system, and its sustainability are not examined in this study. Nor has the uniformity of the tomb's interpretation across the Sufi universe been proved for all pilgrims.

The sacralization of the Tomb of Sheikh Maulana Ishaq is an ongoing socio-cosmological process in which religious meanings, devotional practices, spatial experiences, collective memory, and social relationships continually interact. The tomb's sacred significance is sustained not only by inherited beliefs about the saint but also by the everyday and periodic activities through which pilgrims and local communities reaffirm those beliefs. Sacredness is therefore best understood as relational and continually reproduced through the interaction of cosmology, ritual, memory, space, and collective participation.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the anthropology of pilgrimage and the analysis of sacred space by viewing sacralization as a continuous process rather than as a fixed condition in a religious place. Thus, by bringing Sufi cosmology together with ritual acts, social memories, physical environments, and local connections, the article advances understanding of sacredness as arising from the interplay of religious meanings and practices. In this manner, terms such as *baraka* and *wasīla*

do not represent abstract theology but are connected with the pilgrimage and rituals that help create meaning.

This viewpoint also has consequences for research on and management of pilgrimage locations, since it calls for proper attention to caretakers, the local population, rituals, and the material context that is important for the continued existence of sacred places. Management of religious heritage should not be identified with merely preserving buildings, establishing visitor facilities, or developing tourism. The actual meanings attributed to it, the community's memory of a specific place, and the links among people should also be taken into account.

The limitations of this research stem from its focus on a single pilgrimage site and the need to incorporate evidence from participants engaged in these religious activities. Perspectives from those outside the group of pilgrims, such as the younger generation and adherents of other faiths, have not been accounted for, nor have the gender, economic, political, and digital dimensions of the sacralization process. Nevertheless, these limitations point toward productive avenues for future research without diminishing the significance of the current project. Comparative studies of various pilgrimage sites, involving a diverse range of stakeholders, could offer deeper insights into the variations in the social and cosmological processes that unfold within pilgrimage spaces across different locations.

Acknowledgment

This research has a few limitations. Firstly, as the study is based on a particular pilgrimage site, it is important to know that the research is related only to the Sheikh Maulana Ishaq Tomb. In addition, the opinions of those who do not participate in the pilgrimage, are young, and belong to other religions are not taken into account.

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