

"*Ngalap Berkah*" for Political Power: Tomb Pilgrimage as Spiritual Legitimacy in Yogyakarta's Royal Heritage Sites

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Abstract

This article examines tomb pilgrimage, known in Indonesian, particularly Javanese society, as *ziarah*—not merely as an act of praying for the deceased but as a search for spiritual blessings and power. This special intention motivates the present study to treat tombs as more than cultural heritage sites, recognising them as sources of political fortune as well. Framed by the concepts of *pulung* and *wahyu* (divine blessing), the study examines the relationship between tomb pilgrimage and political fortune. *Pulung* is widely believed to be an abstract symbol of divine power bestowed upon candidates who succeed in elections; here, *pulung/wahyu* is understood as sacred power associated with deceased royalty, which political aspirants seek to appropriate to bolster their own legitimacy. Fieldwork was conducted at three cultural heritage sites in Yogyakarta, i.e., Wotgaleh, Kotagede, and Imogiri, each regarded as sacred owing to its status as a royal tomb complex, and each attracting numerous visitors, including political candidates, politicians, and bureaucrats, particularly on specific auspicious nights. Data were collected through qualitative methods, drawing on interview transcripts cross-referenced with documentary evidence. The data were derived from in-depth interviews with 30 purposively selected informants, comprising pilgrims and tomb caretakers, together with relevant documentary analysis. The findings indicate that tomb pilgrimage functions as a means of seeking blessings for political fortune, consistent with the prevailing belief that power derives not only from the microcosm but also from the macrocosm. The study concludes that although political competition is a rational contest for power, spiritual blessings continue to play an important role in its pursuit.

Keywords: *tomb pilgrimage; blessings; Yogyakarta; pilgrims; Javanese*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji ziarah makam yang dikenal dalam masyarakat Indonesia, khususnya Jawa bukan sekadar sebagai kegiatan berdoa untuk yang telah meninggal, tetapi sebagai upaya mencari berkah dan kekuatan spiritual. Maksud khusus inilah yang mendorong penelitian ini untuk memandang makam bukan hanya sebagai warisan budaya, tetapi juga sebagai sumber keberuntungan politik. Dengan menggunakan konsep *pulung* dan *wahyu* (berkah ilahi) sebagai kerangka, penelitian ini meneliti hubungan antara ziarah makam dan keberuntungan politik. *Pulung* secara luas dipercaya sebagai simbol abstrak kekuatan ilahi yang dianugerahkan kepada calon yang memenangkan pemilu; di sini, *pulung/wahyu* dipahami sebagai kekuatan suci yang terhubung dengan leluhur bangsawan, yang ingin diperoleh para calon politik demi legitimasi mereka sendiri. Kerja lapangan dilakukan di

tiga situs warisan budaya di Yogyakarta seperti Wotgaleh, Kotagede, dan Imogiri yang masing-masing dianggap sakral karena statusnya sebagai kompleks makam kerajaan, dan masing-masing menarik banyak pengunjung, termasuk calon politik, politisi, dan birokrat, terutama pada malam-malam tertentu yang dianggap baik. Data dikumpulkan melalui metode kualitatif, dengan merujuk pada transkrip wawancara yang disandingkan dengan bukti dokumenter. Data diperoleh dari wawancara mendalam dengan 30 informan yang dipilih secara purposif, terdiri atas peziarah dan penjaga makam, serta analisis dokumenter yang relevan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ziarah makam berfungsi sebagai sarana untuk mencari berkah demi keberuntungan politik, sejalan dengan kepercayaan yang berlaku bahwa kekuasaan bersumber tidak hanya dari mikrokosmos tetapi juga makrokosmos. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun kompetisi politik merupakan perlombaan rasional untuk memperoleh kekuasaan, berkah spiritual tetap memainkan peran penting dalam pencapaiannya.

Kata Kunci: *ziarah makam; berkah; Yogyakarta; peziarah; Jawa*

Introduction

Tombs are cultural heritage objects that have existed for a very long time. They are places where people commemorate the lives of the deceased, and they stand as tangible legacies of a long historical process for the current generation. Tombs therefore continue to attract pilgrimages, commonly known as *ziarah* in Indonesian society, and particularly among Javanese people (Quinn, 2008; Laksana, 2016). *Ziarah* is intended not only to commemorate the deceased by offering prayers on their behalf, but also to serve as a means of seeking blessings, particularly at sacred tombs—those of former kings or sultans, ulama, or other charismatic figures. It is widely believed among Javanese people that although the body of the deceased decays, an inner spirit remains within the tomb (Fournie, 2019; Nasir, 2019), retaining a spiritual power that pilgrims seek for their own fortune, particularly in relation to political careers.

Several studies have examined *ziarah*. Recent studies argue that tomb pilgrimage is a means of paying respect to ancestors, particularly by commemorating their contributions to the community (Alatas, 2016; Umami, 2024). Other studies have treated tomb pilgrimage as an annual cultural tradition typically undertaken ahead of religious celebrations, such as before the fasting month of Ramadan and during Eid (Beck, 2018; Lücking, 2014), both practices widely observed among Indonesian Muslims. What remains underexplored in the existing literature, however, is the special intention behind tomb pilgrimage among political candidates, a practice that has received little scholarly attention to date. Drawing on Anderson's (1990) concept of Javanese power, traditional authority is understood to stem from the cosmos rather than from democratic elections, with cosmic legitimacy serving as proof of a leader's authority. While existing studies closely link tomb pilgrimage to religion and tradition, they leave open a scholarly gap regarding its political purpose. This study addresses that gap by examining the meaning of tomb pilgrimage as a search for spiritual blessings in the pursuit of power. Its central research question is: why do politicians undertake tomb pilgrimage as part of their political bids?

The primary objective of this study is therefore to investigate the motivations and purposes of tomb pilgrimage that extend beyond conventional practice, with particular attention to pilgrims such as political candidates who seek divine blessings in sacred tombs to advance their political ambitions.

Literature Review

Tomb Pilgrimage as Cultural Ritual

Tomb pilgrimage as a research object remains understudied. Most existing studies treat pilgrimage as part of historical and heritage studies (Hellman, 2019; Matrokhim, 2020). The former perspective foregrounds pilgrimage as part of an ongoing ancestor tradition, while the latter underscores it as a form of heritage preservation sustained through regular visits. Taken together, both perspectives suggest that pilgrimage is part of an enduring practice of animism and dynamism that continues into the present day.

In several Asian countries, particularly those influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions, pilgrimage is commonly associated with the worship of deities (Pradana et al., 2023; Arjana, 2021). As part of religious devotion, visits to sacred places such as temples, monasteries, and hermitages are considered obligatory for maintaining a connection with the divine, and rituals involving flowers and incense are used to express gratitude and devotion. Pilgrimage and worship are thus treated as a single entity in earlier studies (Barretto, 2018; Yoachim, 2010).

However, as Islam spread across the archipelago between roughly the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the meaning and practice of pilgrimage shifted. As Hindu-Buddhist influence declined, pilgrimage was reframed by Islam as no longer a form of worship but as an act of good deeds—specifically, praying for and seeking forgiveness on behalf of the deceased (Syamsurijal et al., 2022). This understanding persists to the present day, particularly among Javanese communities who continue the tradition of visiting tombs in specific months, typically shortly before the fasting month of Ramadan.

Building on this trajectory, the study of pilgrimage has become an increasingly specific field of inquiry. As Islamic studies scholars have engaged more directly with pilgrimage, the concept has been enriched with further nuance. Within Islam, debate persists over whether tomb pilgrimage is permissible or constitutes *bid'ah* (religious innovation); most Islamic studies addressing pilgrimage originate from the traditionalist branch of Islam (Abdi, 2017; Barretto, 2018). From this scholarly tradition, pilgrimage has been analysed through two units of analysis: religious habitus and religious marketplace. In brief, while religious habitus underscores tomb pilgrimage as part of Islamic ritual

tradition, the religious marketplace perspective reveals how spiritual meaning intersects with material need, particularly the pursuit of legitimacy.

The Intersection of Tomb Pilgrimage and Religious Habitus

Beginning with pilgrimage as a religious habitus, Islamic studies of tomb pilgrimage have long been intertwined with socio-cultural and socio-religious concerns, shaping how people perceive cultural heritage. A tomb may be viewed as a historical artefact with an enduring influence on society, particularly through the legacy of ancestors who devoted their lives to future generations. At the same time, a tomb may be understood as part of a socio-religious practice, since visiting it is itself considered a good deed in many religious teachings (Quinn, 2024). From these two perspectives, tomb pilgrimage has served as both a tradition and a ritual for Indonesians over many centuries.

As tomb pilgrimage has become increasingly salient as a personal ritual, it exposes a gap in the existing literature: a tomb is not merely a place associated with death. Rather, it is a site for acquiring spiritual power or blessings relevant to one's future career, particularly in politics. This intention—seeking political blessings through tomb pilgrimage—remains understudied, as most existing publications focus instead on religious blessings, which can be categorised into two related concepts: *tawassul* and *tabarruk* (Asmaran, 2018; Faidah, 2021; Haryadi, 2020). The former refers to meditative prayer performed by Muslims before a tomb, particularly that of an ulama, to obtain spiritual guidance. The latter, *tabarruk*, refers to seeking blessings. Within Islamic thought, the related concept of *karamah* is closely associated with ulama: once an ulama has passed away, their *karamah* is believed to persist and may be transferred to a new spiritual heir (Alatas, 2020). *Tabarruk* accordingly remains popular among *santri* in traditional Islamic boarding schools (Guslianto et al., 2020; Kusumaningtyas, 2023), and is practised even by those who are not themselves *santri*, including family members of the deceased.

In brief, pilgrimage as a religious habitus underlines that the practice is a form of paying respect to those who made significant contributions in the past, particularly sultans or ulama. Over time, this practice has become institutionalised into norms observed especially by traditionalist Muslims in Java (Jati, 2024). Consistent with Islamic teaching, tomb pilgrimage also builds *silaturahmi*, i.e., a bond between ancestors and the present generation, through prayer for the deceased.

Tomb Pilgrimage as a Medium of Blessings

The second perspective treats pilgrimage as a religious marketplace. Finke and Stark (1988) argue that religions provide "compensators": rewards or assurances of future, unproven benefits such as an afterlife, that are consistent with people's ways of life. This perspective suggests that supply and demand dynamics shape spiritual practices such as tomb pilgrimage, which crosses the boundary between the sacred and the secular in order to meet visitors' expectations. This practice encourages pilgrims, both metaphorically and practically, to negotiate the sacredness of the site against their own material wishes. Pilgrims often know relatively little about the historical figures they visit, focusing instead on prayer and blessings (Meyer, 2025). Such practice is common in traditional Javanese Islamic communities that continue to observe *kejawen* teachings (Masduki, 2016; Keane, 2022), in which not only ulama but also kings and sultans widely regarded as having held a caliphate-like status, are considered worthy of pilgrimage. As with the *karamah* believed to remain with an ulama after death, deceased kings and sultans are similarly believed to retain *kasekten* or *wahyu* (a form of divine mandate) that can be symbolically transferred to their successors (Anderson, 1990; Salim, 2013). In some regions, this belief extends to the tombs of warlords or local chiefs, who are likewise believed to possess *wahyu* that draws pilgrims. As with ulama, deceased kings and sultans are thus seen as intermediaries between pilgrims' wishes and divine will: the more frequent the visits, the greater the likelihood that those wishes will be fulfilled.

This belief continues to draw pilgrims to pray at the tombs of sultans and kings, with many also observing specific auspicious days in the traditional calendar, which are believed to be more effective times for their prayers to reach the divine. Existing studies have largely focused on the religious dimension of this practice, particularly within Islamic studies. There remains a need, however, to expand this line of inquiry, since religion itself increasingly functions as broader spiritual guidance, rendering tomb pilgrimage not merely a religious practice but also a political one. Seeking spiritual reinforcement to support a political career has become increasingly common among politicians. Because tomb pilgrimage carries deep traditional roots, there is a need to reinvigorate scholarly understanding of its political dimension. Existing literature pays only limited attention to political blessings specifically, and most such publications are written in Bahasa Indonesia or Javanese, leaving considerable room to develop this topic for an international scholarly audience.

The literature establishes ongoing debate regarding the special intention (*ngalap berkah*) behind tomb pilgrimage, since this intention may appear to fall outside the conventional purpose of pilgrimage. Fundamentally, for power to be attained within Javanese political culture drawing on the Javanese worldview of *Kejawen*, it must align with the people's inherent cultural understanding, or religious habitus. This alignment is achieved through the visible display of spiritual vitality, divine favour, or sacred power. In this context, prolonged meditation is a common religious observance aimed at achieving spiritual power and drawing closer to Allah through established practices in

certain schools of Islamic thought, such as *tawassul*. The practice of *tawassul* illustrates that Java's religious landscape has historically been vibrant and diverse, shaped by the convergence of *Kejawen* and Islamic tradition. Current research, however, tends to emphasise these combined practices rather than examine how *Kejawen* persists on its own terms, particularly within Yogyakarta. This is the specific gap that the present paper addresses. The article concentrates on tomb pilgrimage as a means of gaining political favour in Yogyakarta, highlighting a scholarly gap in understanding how tradition intertwines with the pursuit of worldly power.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach, which allows the researcher to capture emergent findings during fieldwork, particularly information that may extend beyond gaps identified in previous studies, and to elaborate on phenomena from diverse perspectives. Fieldwork was conducted at three sacred royal tombs in Yogyakarta, including Wotgaleh, Kotagede, and Imogiri, between 2023 and 2024. These three tombs hold royal status because those interred there are sultans and commanders believed to possess considerable charismatic and spiritual power. They also hold cultural heritage status owing to their historical connection with the Mataram Kingdom. For these reasons, the three sites are among the most frequently visited pilgrimage destinations for those seeking blessings on particular days.

The study employed purposive sampling to select informants based on their role in the pilgrimage practice, namely, tomb caretakers, regular pilgrims, and political candidates, in order to capture different perspectives from practitioners and spiritual seekers alike. All informants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was ensured throughout. A total of 30 informants were interviewed, comprising five tomb caretakers, fifteen regular pilgrims, and ten political pilgrims. In addition, 30 field observations were conducted, each lasting between two and two-and-a-half hours. Interviews focused primarily on participants' feelings and experiences related to pilgrimage and how these experiences connect to their everyday lives. Given that several informants held positions as candidates, politicians, bureaucrats, or other public figures, their identities and credentials have been anonymised throughout this article.

Data collection involved in-depth interviews with both tomb caretakers and pilgrims, with particular attention to pilgrims' motivations and desires both before and after their visits to the sacred tombs. The researcher also directly participated in pilgrimage activities, which provided additional insight into pilgrims' lived experiences. Data analysis involved transcription, thematic coding, categorisation, and integration of observational notes and documentary review. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of interview data with observational and documentary sources.

Result

Findings in Yogyakarta's Royal Heritage Sites

The initial findings of this study indicate that tomb pilgrimage has become increasingly important, particularly for those with specific wishes. Following the traditional Javanese calendar, pilgrims regularly visit and pray at designated evening rituals in Yogyakarta's royal tombs, which are widely believed to possess divine power. This section presents who visits these sites, when they come, what rituals they perform, how tomb caretakers explain the meaning of blessings, how pilgrims understand *pulung/wahyu*, and how these practices connect to political aspirations.

Pilgrims who visit the three sites come from diverse backgrounds. In general, they pray before specific tombs—for example, Pangeran Purbaya at Wotgaleh, Panembahan Senopati at Mataram, and Sultan Agung at Imogiri. Many pilgrims burn incense and perform devotional acts according to their own faith. On certain Javanese calendar dates, pilgrims also organise a communal feast in the late evening once their wishes have been granted, an act of gratitude expressed through sharing food and drink with fellow pilgrims.

According to Mardi and Kusno, both royal servants serving as tomb caretakers in Wotgaleh, the meaning of blessings often depends on personal faith.

"ziarah teng mriki sakjane nggih mung kangge lantaran mawon, soale kabeh nek niku kabeh nggih saking kersana Gusti Allah" (Mardi)

"Pilgrimage here is really just a means; everything, after all, happens by the will of God."

"nek masalah pulung niku Mas, biasane nggih kangge sing percoyo mawon lan mantep atine" (Kusno)

"As for *pulung*, it is usually meant for those who believe in it and hold firm conviction."

This divine gift, in the caretakers' view, can be bestowed in varying degrees according to one's wishes. Similarly, Bambang, a tomb caretaker in Kotagede, and Tresno, a caretaker in Imogiri, described *pulung/wahyu* as something deeply personal that cannot be compared across individuals, since it depends on one's capacity to endure spiritual self-restraint (*laku prihatin*); pilgrimage, in this sense, is a means of receiving reward from divine power.

"pulung ki nek ra dilantari prihatin yo angel makane wong-wong gede kaya mantan presiden ana sing mrengs ziarah ro Panembahan" (Bambang)

"*Pulung* is difficult to obtain without self-restraint through meditation; that is why prominent figures, even a former president, have come here to visit Panembahan."

"pulung ki nganggo sarana munggah derajat. kanggo politisi ket jamane Bung Karno tekan Jokowi mesti sowan Sultan Agung nggo tirakat, apa maneh nek rep pemilu" (Tresno)

"*Pulung* serves as a means of elevating one's standing. Politicians, from the era of Bung Karno to Jokowi, have always paid respects to Sultan Agung as part of their spiritual discipline, especially ahead of elections."

Tomb pilgrimage at Yogyakarta's royal sites is thus linked to political aspirations, particularly around election periods. Many local candidates seek to meditate at these royal tombs on multiple occasions in order to obtain blessings. Susmanta, a regular pilgrim, related this to a personal experience in which one's home is illuminated by a spiritual white light at dawn before voting day, a sign believed to indicate that blessings have been received.

"Pasarean Raja nang Jogja ki magnet spirituale gede nggo karir politik, apa maneh Imogiri po Kotagede. Sopo wae sing rutin ziarah mrana ki bakale entuk pulung" (Susmanta)

"The royal tombs in Yogyakarta are a powerful spiritual magnet for political careers, especially Imogiri and Kotagede. Whoever visits regularly will receive a blessing."

Tomb Pilgrimage as Acculturation of Islamic *Tawassul* Rites and Javanese *Kejawen* Tradition

The contemporary practice of tomb pilgrimage is essentially a product of acculturation between Islamic and Javanese traditions. Although still regarded by some as syncretic, the practice has rapidly become common, particularly since Islamic teaching has clarified that tomb pilgrimage does not constitute *shirk*, that is, associating a partner with Allah or worshipping other than Him. Tomb pilgrimage is therefore widely practised among Muslims, provided that its purpose remains prayer.

In Islamic terms, pilgrimage refers to visiting a grave or cemetery with the intention of praying, following specific practices. The Prophet is reported to have said that such visits can cultivate an ascetic disposition and remind believers of the afterlife. According to mainstream Islamic teaching and scholarship, tomb pilgrimage particularly to the tombs of deceased ulama, is regarded as *sunnah*, a tradition of the Prophet (Muawanah & Mustolehudin, 2020; Uyuni et al., 2024). In this view, an ulama's standing before Allah does not diminish with death; rather, death is understood to mark entry into a more perfect realm of existence than worldly life. In brief, the soul of an ulama is believed to remain intact even as the body decays. This belief encourages Muslims to perform *tawassul* at pilgrimage sites, drawing closer to Allah through acts pleasing to Him, such as reciting verses of the Qur'an (particularly *Al-Fatihah*), offering *salawat* upon the Prophet Muhammad and his family as an expression of love and respect, and engaging in contemplation.

The Islamic scholar Sheikh Abdullah Ibn Siddiq al-Ghumari authored a work translated as "A Gift for the Intelligent on the Permissibility of Seeking Intercession through the Prophets and Saints" (Nikmah, 2021). This work provides a reference point for arguments regarding the permissibility of *tawassul*, which, while not obligatory, is not considered *bid'ah* or polytheism, given its grounding in the Qur'an, authentic Hadith, and the practices of scholars throughout Islamic history (Jati, 2025).

The Qur'an itself, from Surah Al-Baqarah, verse 184, is understood by some scholars to permit *tawassul* through the Prophet Muhammad: believers ask for forgiveness from Allah, and the Messenger, in turn, intercedes on their behalf. In this sense, *tawassul* denotes closeness rather than worship; scholars emphasise that the Messenger's intercession does not imply that those who practise *tawassul* through him are polytheists, but rather that the Messenger serves as a bridge between Allah and the prayers of Muslims.

A further reference concerning *tawassul* to ulama, discussed in Ahmad Nabawi's essay on the traditionalist school of Hadith scholars, treats such intercession as an expression of humility toward their righteous deeds and their standing before Allah, since that standing does not disappear with death. Accordingly, it is considered equally permissible to seek intercession through an ulama, whether living or deceased, on the basis of their righteous deeds and spiritual standing.

Drawing on these sources, *tawassul* is commonly interpreted as a practice best conducted in quiet surroundings. Among traditionalist Muslims, such settings include the tombs of habaib, charismatic ulama, and even great kings and sultans, all considered appropriate sites for *tawassul* (Jati, 2024). Many pilgrims believe that the deceased have lineage ties to the Prophet's line, which further motivates their focus on *tawassul*.

It is important to note that *tawassul* does not constitute worship of the Prophet; rather, it is a request that the Prophet and his descendants pray on the supplicant's behalf, with all prayers ultimately directed to Allah. *Tawassul* thus has a basis in both the Qur'an and the practices (sunnah) of Islamic scholars, and also serves as a means of establishing a *sanad*, i.e., a chain of transmission connecting the Prophet to the present-day *ummah*. The Hajj pilgrimage offers a comparable example, as pilgrims visit the *maqam* of Ibrahim near the Kaaba during *tawaf*, and the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, Saudi Arabia—both considered sacred sites for *tawassul* and prayer.

This practice has developed across the Muslim world in various forms. One example is the Shi'i pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq, site of the tomb of Husayn, son of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (Flaskerud, 2022). Another is the veneration of Sheikh Shahul Hamid, a sixteenth-century saint associated with a pilgrimage site in Tamil Nadu, India, whose influence extended beyond his original resting place through replica shrines built in Penang and Singapore in the early eighteenth century (Sivakumar et

al., 2019). These examples illustrate how tomb pilgrimage has become a widespread religious ritual broadly accepted across the Muslim world.

Discussion

When Divine Power Shapes Political Wishes in Tomb Pilgrimage

Javanese tomb pilgrimages, or *ziarah*, function as significant socio-political and spiritual focal points, transforming sacred burial grounds into dynamic arenas where religious practice, Javanese cosmology, royal legacy, and claims to political authority converge. These pilgrimages unify theoretical Javanese worldviews by embedding them within concrete practices, such as *ngalap berkah*, and the established rituals distinctive to Wotgaleh, Kotagede, and Imogiri.

Revisiting Anderson's (1990) theory of Javanese power, Western democratic ideals require moral legitimacy, whereas Javanese power is understood as an accumulation of cosmic energy, often portrayed as divine effulgence, a celestial omen of good fortune, or a spontaneous illumination of luck bestowed upon the chosen. *Pulung* thus signifies a divine cosmic energy that blesses its recipient with the potential for leadership and political power.

From a Javanese perspective, effective leadership is determined not solely by bloodline but also by spiritual qualities and capability. Notably, several past sultans came from commoner backgrounds, subjecting themselves to rigorous self-discipline grounded in *Kejawen* and Islamic ritual practices to attain rulership. This suggests that both nature and divine authority sanctioned their reign, as evidenced by their capacity to withstand hardship. Such narratives continue to inspire individuals seeking political office or public service, and consequently, the royal tombs experience a perpetual influx of visitors—intensifying especially during election seasons, as candidates seek to "absorb charisma" through pilgrimage.

Mulyadi (a pseudonym) reported engaging in regular fasting and pilgrimage well before an election in his bid to become village head in Klaten regency. Similarly, Dulmaji, a local lawmaker in Sleman whose identity has been withheld, stated that frequent visits to the royal sites bolster his confidence in political competition. Busari, a tomb caretaker in Kotagede, observed that prominent individuals from Jakarta occasionally visit Panembahan's tomb, and that their numbers increased noticeably around the 2024 elections. These accounts underscore the continued significance of pilgrimage as a meaningful activity, despite its inability to guarantee electoral success.

From *Tawassul* to Divine Power: The Transformation of Tomb Pilgrimage in Yogyakarta

In Javanese society, pilgrimage is a long-standing tradition that persists into the present, forming part of a *Kejawen* tradition that renders Islamic practice consonant with local custom. Owing to the combined influence of Islam and residual Hindu-Buddhist traditions, pilgrimage practices vary across regions, reflecting different inherited teachings; even so, the underlying essence remains constant: a reminder of death. In a broader context, much as the importance of Mecca to Muslims reflects both the aspiration to perform Hajj and the mystical inspiration to attain religious legitimacy, echoed in Sufi teaching, pilgrimage to the tombs of ulama, sultans, or ancestors serves a comparable function: both find their essence in prayer and remembrance of death.

Consistent with this, Javanese communities have long used the term *ngirim* (literally, sending) to describe pilgrimage as sending prayers to ancestors, rather than sending food or drink. During the Hindu-Buddhist period, pilgrimage traditionally involved bringing offerings, typically food and beverages. With the spread of Islam, however, any food or drink brought is understood not as an offering to the deceased but as a medium for prayer, generally shared and eaten communally in the area surrounding the tomb, often within a *pendopo* (open pavilion) rather than at the grave itself. In this way, the concept of *shadaqoh* (charity) has shaped the practice of *ngirim*, incorporating the sharing of food and drink among pilgrims.

Pilgrimage is generally undertaken between the fifteenth and thirtieth of the Javanese month of *Ruwah*, corresponding to the Islamic month of *Sya'ban*. This month is widely believed to mark the return of holy spirits such as; ancestors, sultans, and ulama to their former homes. Consequently, this period sees numerous pilgrimage-related activities within Javanese society, including communal prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and the cleaning of pilgrimage complexes. Javanese tradition also recognises mass pilgrimage, known as *nyadran*, typically conducted by an entire community, largely concentrated in rural areas, with the aim of purifying the soul before the onset of the Ramadan fast. Cleaning ancestors' tombs, praying on their behalf, and seeking mutual forgiveness are therefore standard components of mass pilgrimage, understood as good deeds that prepare the community for the holy month (Jati, 2024).

The pilgrimage procedure, according to Javanese custom, typically follows several steps. First, ingredients are prepared, including a small clay incense stove (*anglo*) used to burn a mixture of roses, marigold, jasmine, and *kantil* flowers. Second, pilgrims offer a respectful greeting at the cemetery gate before entering the burial ground. Third, pilgrims recite *Al-Fatihah* three times, *Al-Ikhlâs* three times, and *salawat* three times for the deceased. Fourth, pilgrims meditate while offering a specific

prayer or wish, conveyed through the grave as an intermediary. Finally, pilgrims scatter flowers on the grave and take solemn leave of the deceased.

These steps reflect common practice among Javanese pilgrims today, through which pilgrimage has become deeply embedded as a cultural custom—understood as a form of social and pious engagement both between the living and the deceased and among fellow pilgrims. The enduring influence of Islam on Javanese culture has reinforced pilgrimage as a common practice, particularly in the lead-up to Ramadan.

Beyond this general practice, however, a more specialised form of pilgrimage is undertaken on particular days at sacred sites associated primarily with sultans and commanders. These sites are today most closely linked to the remaining local royal houses of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, which, as joint successors to the throne of Mataram, together maintain several royal tombs scattered across the two territories. These tombs have become especially favoured destinations among certain groups of pilgrims, since royal ancestors are believed to have possessed not only immense inner strength but also profound spiritual knowledge that persists after death. This belief continues to attract prominent contemporary figures, particularly political candidates, who undertake a pilgrimage to these sacred sites in order to seek *ngalap berkah* (blessings) from those interred there.

Tomb Pilgrimage as Political Blessing

Tomb pilgrimage among Javanese people is deeply embedded in the existing socio-cultural system, structured in part around designated "good days" for pilgrimage—commonly a birth date or death date—as well as the five-day Javanese calendar cycle comprising *Pon*, *Wage*, *Kliwon*, *Pahing*, and *Legi*.

These days are known as *hari pasaran*, the days when a particular traditional market experiences its highest trade volume. Each market has its own *pasaran* day, which rotates in conjunction with the seven-day week, and is generally well known to the surrounding community.

This same calendrical knowledge informs *Kejawen* practice regarding tomb pilgrimage, particularly through observance of *wetonan*, the day of the deceased's birth according to the combined five- and seven-day cycle. Unlike a conventional annual birthday, each *wetonan* cycle recurs every thirty-five days, meaning that for prominent figures, a *wetonan* commemoration may occur more than ten times within a single year.

The *wetonan* date is calculated by aligning the five-day *pasaran* cycle with the seven-day week, yielding designations such as *Senin Kliwon* (Kliwon Monday) or *Rabu Pahing* (Pahing Wednesday). Using this method, the precise pilgrimage date can be determined according to both the modern and

Javanese calendars. *Jumat Legi*, for instance, is widely recognised as the *weton* marking both the birth and death of Sultan Agung, one of the greatest sultans of Java and a pioneer of the modern Javanese calendar; his stature has established *Jumat Legi* as a particularly significant evening for pilgrimage.

Metaphorically, political blessing can be understood through the concepts of *karamah* and *wahyu*, which represent a form of divine power that is transferable to those who seek to rule and govern. Unlike Western conceptions of power as decentralised and abstract, the Javanese conception treats power as concrete and centralised, requiring the maintenance of a balance between the macrocosm and the microcosm. In this view, a ruler must obtain legitimacy not only from society but also from nature and ancestral forces, the latter typically accessed through pilgrimage. This understanding leads politicians, candidates, and bureaucrats alike to undertake pilgrimage; although they share no biological lineage with the buried sultans or ulama, frequent pilgrimage positions them as ideological heirs. While this notion remains debatable, it nonetheless constitutes an important spiritual motivation for politicians' continued pilgrimage, particularly in Yogyakarta.

Suharto, Indonesia's second president, was widely known for his considerable spiritual authority, attributed in part to his regular pilgrimages to sites regarded as sacred tombs. His example subsequently became the norm for later generations of politicians, reflecting a broader belief that political stability and longevity in office derive from ancestral blessing. Following Suharto's example, contemporary politicians continue to undertake pilgrimages in the hope of securing similar stability during their own tenures.

Seeking Blessings at the Kotagede and Imogiri Royal Sites

Kotagede and Imogiri are widely regarded as religious tourism destinations owing to their considerable historical significance, and both also function as sacred pilgrimage sites in Yogyakarta. They serve as the final resting places of sultans from the Islamic Mataram Kingdom and the later Yogyakarta and Surakarta royal houses (Aarifah & Zain, 2020; Chambert-Loir, 2020). The Kotagede royal tombs are the older of the two complexes, while Imogiri is the more recent; Kotagede is historically linked to the early Islamic Mataram Kingdom, while Imogiri holds a particular connection to Mecca, as its founder, Sultan Agung, is said to have brought sand from Mecca to lay the foundation of the royal tombs.

Both sites accordingly attract regular pilgrims. The contemporary Yogyakarta and Surakarta sultanates serve as a symbolic bridge between past political and cultural greatness and the present. Notably, many prominent Indonesian political figures, including several presidents, claim direct or indirect ties to the House of Mataram. While such claims are sometimes viewed with scepticism,

given their evident value in enhancing legitimacy, they nonetheless remain significant for politicians seeking to govern the country.

Given their considerable spiritual authority, both Kotagede and Imogiri attract regular pilgrims, though on ordinary days both sites remain quiet, attended mainly by royal servants. On specific auspicious days, however, both sites become considerably busier, drawing pilgrims with a range of particular interests. On ordinary days, traders, merchants, and bureaucrats visit primarily to seek spiritual blessing; during political campaign periods, however, both sites see a marked increase in visits by politicians.

At Kotagede, the designated *pasaran* days are Monday and Thursday *Kliwon* evenings, widely regarded as auspicious for pilgrimage and ritual. Pilgrims are required to wear traditional Javanese dress before entering the site—a custom that, according to one royal servant, reflects longstanding Mataram tradition governing public visits to the sultan. For traders and bureaucrats, a pilgrimage to Kotagede combines prayer for the deceased sultans with *ngalap berkah* directed toward economic and career fortunes; many pilgrims stay overnight to maintain focus on their prayers, while others remain awake through the night.

For politicians, a pilgrimage to Kotagede is specifically directed toward political blessing. The principal site of devotion is the tomb of Panembahan Senopati, founder of the Mataram Kingdom and a figure believed to have held considerable religious and political power; this tomb serves as a religious marketplace where pilgrims seek spiritual blessings through practices ranging from Qur'anic recitation to the burning of incense and myrrh. A second significant tomb, that of Sultan Hadiwijaya—Panembahan Senopati's adoptive father and ruler of Pajang prior to the establishment of Mataram—is situated at a higher elevation than Panembahan Senopati's.

According to Susmanta and Bambang, prominent political pilgrims to Kotagede have included Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his sons, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), Prabowo Subianto, and the late President Suharto, each of whom is associated with claims of lineage to Mataram. President Joko Widodo, by contrast, is reported to prefer visiting the tomb of Sultan Hadiwijaya.

"SBY kae ro anake Ibas sijine AHY sowan Sultan Agung pas Malam Sabtu Legi. Prabowo arep njago nyapres yo sowan nang Kotagede njut Imogiri" (Susmanta)

"SBY, together with his sons Ibas and AHY, visited Sultan Agung's tomb on Saturday night *Legi*. Prabowo, as a presidential candidate, also visited Kotagede and then Imogiri."

"Gus Dur nika rutin rumiyin ziarah nang Kotagede ro Imogiri" (Bambang)

"Gus Dur used to visit Kotagede and Imogiri regularly."

Beyond the presidents named above, numerous candidates for legislative, regional head, and village chief elections also visit Kotagede to seek blessings; according to one royal servant, they sometimes visit more than twice a week, often performing *tawassul* and occasionally arriving with a substantial entourage.

The Imogiri royal cemetery, meanwhile, holds the most complete assembly of Mataram House burials, together with those of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta sultanates, with the tomb of Sultan Agung—the great sultan of Mataram—occupying the highest position within the complex. Unlike Kotagede, where Monday and Thursday *Kliwon* evenings are sacred, Imogiri's sacred night is Friday *Legi*, which corresponds to Sultan Agung's birthday; traders typically undertake a pilgrimage on this night to pray for their trade, while bureaucrats pray for career advancement and personal safety.

Pilgrimage with a specific ritual purpose in front of Sultan Agung's tomb requires special permission from both the Yogyakarta and Surakarta palaces, and pilgrimage at night—generally regarded as the most auspicious time for prayer—requires separate approval. On ordinary days, the tomb of Sultan Agung is open from morning until afternoon for regular visitors. As with other royal tombs, most pilgrims must first walk a hilly footpath—an initial ritual act demonstrating devotion and loyalty to the deceased sultans and ancestors. Near the gate of Sultan Agung's tomb, pilgrims are required to step over a specific stone associated with a Mataram traitor, after which they may proceed to perform *tawassul* or other rituals.

Seeking Blessings at the Wotgaleh Royal Site

Unlike Kotagede and Imogiri, which house the tombs of sultans, Wotgaleh is the resting place of the Mataram war commander Panembahan Purbaya and his family (Kusumohastuti, 2023). Historically designated as crown prince, Purbaya was ultimately passed over for succession because his mother was not a queen consort; he was nonetheless known for his considerable spiritual power in defending the Mataram throne (Sulistiyowati, 2013), as well as his longevity, having lived long enough to witness four generations of Mataram rulers before his death.

Owing to these narratives of spiritual power, strength, and longevity, Wotgaleh has attracted pilgrims for many years despite Purbaya not having held the title of sultan. Pilgrimage there may be undertaken individually or collectively, typically on Monday and Thursday evenings until midnight—days shared with Kotagede, given that Purbaya was the son of Mataram's first ruler, Panembahan Senopati. Regular pilgrims, including politicians, participate in a communal prayer gathering known as *mujadah* before Panembahan's tomb, usually lasting approximately one hour, though it may be extended if royal servants receive further requests from pilgrims following the

tawassul or *shalawatan* session; the royal servant leading the *mujahadah* encourages fellow pilgrims to pray collectively for one another's wishes.

Political figures seeking office typically undertake an individual pilgrimage following the *mujahadah*, either accompanied by royal servants or alone. In such cases, the ritual of seeking blessings may extend overnight or over multiple nights, depending on the pilgrim's degree of conviction.

It is important to note that a pilgrimage to these three sites does not guarantee pilgrims will obtain the spiritual blessing they seek. Rather, pilgrimage functions as a regular tradition or ritual that must be sustained in order to have any prospect of success, a logic comparable to the practice of frequent prayer among Muslims more broadly. Pilgrimage to these sacred sites is fundamentally a means of seeking quietness and peace conducive to prayer; the tomb itself functions symbolically as a "medium," rather than as an object of worship.

Conclusion

This study examined the special intention (*ngalap berkah*) underlying politicians' pilgrimages to the royal tombs in Yogyakarta. In doing so, it demonstrates the continued relevance of Anderson's concept of Javanese power, showing how pilgrimage at Wotgaleh, Kotagede, and Imogiri functions as a medium for seeking *pulung/wahyu*, spiritual legitimacy, and political charisma—practices that remain vital and deeply embedded within Indonesian, and particularly Javanese, society. At its core, pilgrimage involves remembering the deceased and praying on their behalf by seeking forgiveness from Allah; this tradition has evolved from its Hindu-Buddhist origins into an Islamic practice in which pilgrimage is understood as prayer conducted in a quiet place, rather than as worship.

Today, pilgrimage has become a tradition typically undertaken on specific days determined by the birth or death date of the deceased, in accordance with the Javanese traditional calendar; on these designated days or sacred moments, pilgrimage is widely believed to be more likely to yield blessings. Pilgrimage may be undertaken either individually or collectively, though individual pilgrimage is generally preferred, as it allows pilgrims to focus more closely on prayer and personal wishes.

The three sites examined in this study are among the most prominent pilgrimage destinations for politicians seeking natural or cosmic legitimacy before contesting elections and governing their regions. Although the concept of blessing remains abstract, it continues to hold considerable importance for politicians seeking to enhance their charisma.

Nevertheless, the outcome of pilgrimage for blessing depends on the faith and commitment of each individual pilgrim and does not guarantee that a pilgrim's wishes will be realised. Pilgrimage functions instead as a form of contemplative practice—meditation and reflection—centred on prayer for the deceased and the pursuit of one's wishes before Allah.

In summary, this study demonstrates the continued application of informal practices and rituals within Indonesian society, with particular attention to the Javanese context. Its principal academic contribution lies in demonstrating that tomb pilgrimage is not merely a spiritual activity but also part of the broader pursuit of political legitimacy. The scope of this research is limited to the Javanese context and its particular understanding of divine favour; further research beyond Java is therefore warranted, particularly given that other ethnic groups in Indonesia practise tomb pilgrimage according to different interpretive traditions.

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