

Local Pilgrimage in Java and Madura: why is it booming?

Research >
Indonesia

Pilgrimage to the tombs of Muslim saints in Java and Madura is booming. The scale of the boom is difficult to measure and the reasons for it are not easy to discern, but its reality is undeniable. It is becoming a significant part of Indonesia's rapidly changing religious landscape. It is even important in the country's political life.

By George Quinn

Evidence of increase in pilgrim numbers is mostly anecdotal – statistics that permit comparison of numbers over extended periods are almost impossible to come by. The custodian's office at the tomb of the saint Sunan Bonang in the centre of Tuban, East Java, is one of the few that has kept some reasonably reliable figures. When I visited the tomb in July 1997 custodial staff told me that pilgrim numbers had been increasing at a rate of between 10 and 20 per cent for the previous five years, culminating in a total of 526,268 visitors in 1996. When I visited the tomb again in November 2003, staff assured me that visitor numbers had topped one million in 2002.

Other sites claim similar increases, though the figures are decidedly rubbery. In 1987 a total of 341,385 people visited the Great Mosque at Demak with its adjacent holy graves. By the year 2000 this had jumped to 606,918 people. In the same year around one and a half million people are said to have visited the tomb of Sunan Kalijaga at nearby Kadilangu. In 1997, a million visitors were claimed for the tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon and in the same year an average of 1,000 visitors a day were coming to the tomb of Sunan Giri in Gresik. When I visited the latter two sites last year, staff assured me that visitor numbers were well above the 1997 figures.

A principal reason for these increases is that over the past three decades access to sites has improved. Roads, even to remote sites, are now sealed and often served by public transport. Many places now boast spacious parking areas, eateries and nearby losmen or hotel accommodation. In the early 1990s when I first visited Kahyangan – a magically beautiful holy place in the hills to the south of Tirtomoyo in Central Java – there was no vehicular access. Pilgrims had to walk about two kilometres along a rough, steep track to reach the site. Long-stay visitors (apart from those who were fasting during their stay) had to return along the track to a nearby village to buy food. Today a sealed road runs right to the site's entrance where there is also a parking area. Inside the site compound there is a small warung eatery as well as a bathroom and simple overnight accommodation.

Spiritual tourism

The prosperity of the Soeharto years (1967-1998) put more disposable income in people's pockets making pilgrimage journeys more affordable. At the busiest sites most pilgrims now come in chartered buses, and companies have sprung up to service the fast-growing 'spiritual tourism' industry.

There has even been an opening up of access to sites that were once restricted



Site custodians (*jurukunci*) await pilgrims at the tomb of Ki Ageng Gribig, Jatinom, Central Java

in some way. One reason for this is the take-over of many sites by government agencies which then require that the sites be equally open to all citizens. East Java's Archeological Service (*Dinas Purbakala*), for example, has a hand in the administration of five of the tombs of Java's renowned Nine Saints (*Wali Sanga*) as well as other sites as disparate as the tombs of Batoro Katong in Ponorogo, Putri Cempa in Trowulan and Ratu Ibu near Arosbaya in Madura.

More powerful still are the brute forces of commercialism. With the rise of mass pilgrimage, communities in and around pilgrimage sites are relying more and more on pilgrims as a prime source of income. Local people may work as guides, provide hospitality services or sell souvenirs. Much of a site's income comes from 'voluntary' contributions or alms (*sedekah*) sometimes aggressively demanded of pilgrims at many points in the visitation process.

Indonesia's decentralisation is placing pressure on local administrations to maximise local sources of revenue and pilgrimage sites are being targeted. Some sites now have box offices at their entrances. Visitors are required to buy entry tickets, the revenue from which may go largely, or entirely, to the local government. As part of this process some local governments are encouraging, even directly investing in, the development of holy places as tourist attractions in the hope that the sites will attract sight-seers or casual day-trippers as well as religiously motivated pilgrims.

All this notwithstanding, local pilgrimage is still driven ultimately by religious conviction and there are religious reasons for the increased interest in pilgrimage. But pilgrims are far from uniform in the rationales they give for what they do.

Closer to God...

Increasingly self-confident displays of Islamic identity and piety are undoubtedly a major factor. For many Muslims, whether followers of purist orthodoxy or

those prepared to make accommodations with local beliefs and practices, visiting the tomb of a revered saint is an act of *sunnah* piety sanctioned by tradition and explicitly urged upon Muslims by verses in the Qur'an as well as by the words of the Prophet.

The Qur'anic verse most often cited in justification of pilgrimage is Al-Mā'idah 35 which exhorts believers to seek ways and means to bring themselves closer to God. This is interpreted as permitting believers to seek *tawassul*, that is, intercession by the Prophet or by another figure 'close to God' on behalf of the believer. In order to accomplish this, pilgrims say, believers may petition God and the Prophet by way of prayers to a local saint.

On several occasions pilgrims have quoted to me the well-known and well-authenticated *hadith* from the *Sahih Muslim* in which the Prophet is reported to have said 'Visit graves, for that makes you mindful of death' (*Sahih Muslim* Book 4, number 2130). It is often said that the Shafei school of law, which dominates almost exclusively in Indonesia, classifies the visiting of graves as 'recommended' (*mandub, mustahabb*), though religious scholars in Indonesia sometimes add conditions to this recommendation.

The shrine of the messianic Prince Erukakra, Ketonggo Forest, Ngawi, East Java



The steady rise in the number of pilgrims undertaking the *hajj* to the Holy Land probably flows on into local pilgrimage. Before and after performing the *hajj* many Indonesian Muslims make visits to the tombs of local saints as part of the totality of the *hajj* experience. With a current cap of 205,000 on the number of Indonesians permitted to undertake the *hajj*, it is also possible that some pilgrims who miss out – estimated at around 30,000 during the 2003 *hajj* season – may make a local pilgrimage as a substitute for the 'real thing'. Certainly for some of the many millions of Indonesians who cannot afford to undertake the *hajj*, local pilgrimage may be a kind of *umrah* or 'lesser' pilgrimage.

... and money

Many pilgrims frequent holy places in order to plead for specific personal favours (*ngalap berkah*). They may ask for help with health problems or straitened financial circumstances, with employment, promotion, business, study, fertility, personal relationships and harvests. Very often pilgrims try to negotiate a 'transaction' or contract (*nadar, nadhar or nazar*) with a saint, vowing to 'repay' the saint in some way if a wish is granted.

There seems to be a widespread perception that economic success is never wholly a result of individual initiative or plain hard work. Wealth comes from God, or from the fecund realm of the supernatural. During the prosperous years of President Soeharto's New Order holy places were filled with pilgrims expressing gratitude for their prosperity but since 1998 Indonesia's protracted recession seems to have brought equally large numbers of pilgrims to holy places to plead for solutions to their economic problems.

For some Muslims the veneration of God, or God's saints, for self-enrichment is impious and possibly idolatrous. When I questioned one pilgrim about this he answered: 'If I did not ask God, or His saints, for the things I need, wouldn't it be an act of arrogance on my part? By asking God for wealth, good health and a beautiful wife I am doing no more than

acknowledge that God is all-powerful and the source of all things. As a good Muslim surely this is what I *should* do.'

Allied with the dead

From time immemorial Java's rulers have legitimated their authority through alliances with the dead forged at holy places. Since the presidency of inveterate pilgrim Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), this ancient practice has assumed a dramatically higher profile in Indonesia's political life. The new centre of this practice is the imposing mausoleum of Indonesia's founding President Soekarno in Blitar, East Java.

Between April and October this year, during six months of incessant electioneering, Indonesia's President Megawati Soekarnoputri made pilgrimage visits to the tomb of her father no fewer than seven times. Twice she took her vice-presidential running mate Hasyim Muzadi, and on one occasion was accompanied on a late-night visit by ex-president Abdurrahman Wahid. She paid a final visit to her father's tomb three weeks after her defeat in the second round of the election.

At least twice during the presidential campaign, Megawati's opponent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono visited the tomb of his father in Pacitan, East Java. He also paid his respects – twice – to Sarwo Edhie Wibowo, his late father-in-law and one-time senior general in the Indonesian armed forces who lies buried in Purworejo, Central Java. Two weeks after his election victory he made a thanksgiving pilgrimage to President Soekarno's tomb in Blitar, just four days before Megawati's final visit.

When Clifford Geertz published his agenda-setting *Religion of Java* in 1960 he made no mention of the pilgrimage phenomenon. Today, it is a facet of Java's religious, social and political life that can no longer be overlooked. ◀

General references

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