

# Pilgrimage Rituals in Islam: An Anthropological Analysis of Practices, Meanings, And Social Changes

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Islamic pilgrimage rituals as dynamic socio-cultural practices within contemporary Muslim society, focusing on pilgrimage activities in Banten Lama, Serang, Banten, Indonesia, one of the major Islamic pilgrimage destinations in western Indonesia. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research investigates how pilgrimage rituals are constructed through the interaction of religious beliefs, local traditions, economic interests, and institutional authority. Fieldwork was conducted over three months using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving five informants, including pilgrims, religious leaders, local traders, site managers, and community members. Data were collected through field notes, audio recordings, and visual documentation, and then analysed thematically to identify recurring socio-cultural patterns within pilgrimage practices. The findings reveal that pilgrimage rituals are contextual religious practices shaped by local culture, religious authority, and collective social experience. Pilgrimage sites function not only as sacred religious spaces but also as arenas of negotiation between theological discourse, popular religious expressions, and state regulation. Furthermore, pilgrimage activities contribute significantly to the socio-economic transformation of local communities through the expansion of religious tourism, trade networks, and service-oriented economic activities. The study also demonstrates that the commodification of pilgrimage does not necessarily diminish its sacred dimension; instead, it reflects an adaptive negotiation between spirituality and economic livelihood. Theoretically, this research contributes to the anthropology of religion by emphasizing pilgrimage as a lived religious experience shaped by symbolic interaction, cultural adaptation, and social negotiation in contemporary Muslim societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage in Islam has enormous theological, spiritual, and cultural significance, with various forms, ranging from the Hajj to visits to the tombs of saints or to historical Islamic sites (Parkes, 2023). In contemporary Muslim societies, pilgrimage practices continue to develop alongside globalisation, technological advancement, and the expansion of religious tourism (Oliviero, 2019). This practice, while historically unchanged, has evolved in its socio-cultural interpretation, influenced by global trends and technological advances (Denny, 2020). Pilgrimage sites, such as the holy mosques in Mecca and Medina, have become symbols of Islamic faith, representing a deep connection with the divine (Ali, 2017). The increasing number of Muslim pilgrims visiting sacred Islamic sites reflects the continuing relevance of pilgrimage traditions in modern society (Sahli, 2025). The rapid development of transportation systems, digital religious campaigns, and social media promotion has transformed pilgrimage into not only a spiritual activity but also a socio-cultural and economic phenomenon (Saefudin et al., 2023). This transformation has strengthened the interaction among religious identity, communal solidarity, and economic activities surrounding pilgrimage destinations (Fatikh, 2025).

The theological debate about pilgrimage continues among Islamic scholars, with some emphasising its spiritual significance as a means of drawing closer to Allah (Dianto et al., 2025). In contrast, others argue that it is *bid'ah* (innovation), associated with the potential for idolatry (Khan & Ahmad, 2021). This debate highlights tensions within the Islamic community regarding traditional practices and interpretations of "pure Islam" (Shaikh, n.d.). The broader impact of pilgrimage, however, extends to the social and economic spheres, as religious tourism has transformed pilgrimage sites into major economic hubs (D. J. Eickelman & Piscatori, 2019). The social dynamics surrounding pilgrimage practices have become increasingly complex due to the influence of globalisation, religious authority, social class, and economic interests. (El-Zein, 2020). Pilgrimage rituals are not only theological in nature but also represent important social and emotional experiences for Muslim communities. Pilgrims seek spiritual blessings (*barakah*) while engaging in communal practices that strengthen social bonds (Van Der Veer, 2022). Anthropological studies of pilgrimage have explored its dynamic role in reshaping social realities, particularly in the context of modernity and technological advances, such as the use of social media and digital platforms to promote religious sites (Oliviero, 2019). These technologies are changing pilgrimage patterns and expanding the understanding of the pilgrimage experience worldwide (Singh & Bhuyan, 2025). These developments indicate that pilgrimage practices are continuously negotiated between spiritual values and modern social transformation. The diversity of pilgrimage practices across Muslim communities reflects the flexibility of Islamic traditions in adapting to local cultures and practices. Rituals at pilgrimage sites vary significantly, demonstrating how Islamic teachings are shaped and integrated into local contexts (D. J. Eickelman & Piscatori, 2019). The economic impact of pilgrimage has also led to increased commodification, which affects the spiritual authenticity of the pilgrimage experience (Cohen, 2019). These economic activities, including religious tourism, increasingly link pilgrimage to local and global networks, affecting both its religious and social significance (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

Consequently, pilgrimage has become an important subject within contemporary Islamic studies because it reflects the interaction between religion, culture, economy, and globalisation (Fatikh & Hendrik, 2023). Previous studies on Islamic pilgrimage have mainly focused on theological debates, jurisprudential perspectives, and socio-cultural dimensions separately. Several studies discuss pilgrimage as a spiritual practice, while others emphasise economic impacts and religious tourism. However, limited studies comprehensively examine the interaction between spirituality, commodification, technological transformation, and social dynamics within contemporary Islamic pilgrimage practices. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative anthropological approach to

examining Islamic pilgrimage rituals as a dynamic socio-religious phenomenon, understood not only within a normative-theological framework but also as a cultural practice that continues to transform. Unlike previous studies that tended to focus on aspects of Islamic law or the doctrinal aspects of pilgrimage, this study combines an analysis of ritual practices, symbolic meanings, social dynamics, and economic and technological impacts simultaneously. Furthermore, this research highlights the interaction between spirituality, commodification, and state regulation in the context of modernity and globalisation, which has been relatively rarely studied comprehensively in Islamic pilgrimage studies. Thus, this research offers a new perspective on pilgrimage as a space for negotiation between tradition, religious identity, and contemporary social change. This study aims to analyse Islamic pilgrimage rituals from anthropological, social, cultural, economic, and technological perspectives. Specifically, this research examines how pilgrimage practices are transformed within contemporary Muslim societies through the interaction between spirituality, religious identity, commodification, and globalisation. Furthermore, this article attempts to prove that Islamic pilgrimage rituals are dynamic socio-cultural practices that continuously adapt to modernisation, technological development, and changing patterns of Muslim social life (Asti, 2025; Liutikas, 2025).

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions of Islamic pilgrimage rituals in Banten Lama, Serang, Banten, Indonesia. Banten Lama was selected as the research site because it is one of the most significant Islamic pilgrimage destinations in western Indonesia, attracting pilgrims from various regions due to its historical and religious importance. Data collection was conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was carried out by directly engaging in pilgrimage activities at several sacred sites, including the tomb complex of Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin and the Great Mosque of Banten. During the fieldwork process, the researcher observed pilgrims' ritual practices, patterns of social interaction, religious expressions, and symbolic activities surrounding the pilgrimage tradition (Chui & McConville, 2024).

In-depth interviews were conducted with pilgrims, religious leaders, residents, and cultural experts to obtain diverse perspectives regarding the meanings, motivations, and socio-religious values attached to pilgrimage practices. Interviews were conducted semi-structuredly and recorded using field notes and audio recordings with participants' consent (Mertens, 2023). Observational data were documented through descriptive field notes written during and after field activities to capture contextual situations, symbolic expressions, and social interactions occurring at the pilgrimage sites (Litosseliti, 2024; Privitera, 2024). The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques, involving data reduction, categorisation, interpretation, and identification of recurring cultural themes related to spirituality, commodification, religious identity, and social dynamics. This analytical process enabled the researcher to interpret pilgrimage rituals as dynamic socio-cultural practices shaped by both religious values and contemporary social transformations (Jones, 2022). In ethnographic research, the researcher's reflexivity plays an important role in understanding the research context. Therefore, the researcher continuously reflected on personal assumptions, cultural perspectives, and interactions with participants during the fieldwork process to minimise subjective bias and maintain the credibility of the findings. Ethnography allows for a holistic understanding of pilgrimage practices within their natural social and cultural contexts (Coe et al., 2025).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

#### Pilgrimage Rituals as Diverse and Contextual Religious Practices

The diversity of pilgrimage rituals in Islam emerged as a response to the complexity of the social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the Muslim communities that practice them. This research finding stems from the fundamental issue that pilgrimage is often normatively understood as a uniform religious practice, whereas in social reality, its implementation shows highly contextual variations. Through participatory observation and in-depth interviews at various pilgrimage sites, this study found that differences in religious sects, local traditions, and local religious authorities play a major role in shaping the way pilgrims perform rituals, from the manner of prayer, the use of certain symbols, to the form of social interaction during the pilgrimage. These practices not only reflect religious teachings but also become a space where religious identity is negotiated and adapted to local cultural values. The results of interviews with pilgrims who regularly visit the tombs of saints show how the local context influences ritual practices. One informant stated:

*"We make pilgrimages following the traditions taught by the local religious leaders here. The prayers may be different from those in other places, but for us, that is the way to honour the saint and draw closer to Allah according to the customs we understand."*

This statement confirms that pilgrimage practices are not perceived as deviant, but rather as a legitimate form of religious expression within the local cultural framework. Anthropologically, this finding shows that pilgrimage rituals function as flexible and adaptive religious practices, in which Islamic teachings interact with the social and cultural context, resulting in diverse expressions of religious belief that remain meaningful to those who practice them.

#### Disputes and Negotiations: Theological Debates, Popular Practices, and State Supervision of Pilgrimage Sites

Disputes and negotiations are an integral part of the practice of pilgrimage in Islam, especially when popular rituals clash with normative theological discourse and state supervision. The findings of this study stem from the fact that pilgrimage is not only an individual spiritual practice but also a social arena filled with debates about religious legitimacy, moral authority, and institutional control. In practice, pilgrimage rituals are often questioned by certain groups who view them as practices that potentially deviate from the pure teachings of Islam. In contrast, for local communities, pilgrimage is understood as a religious tradition that has been deeply rooted and passed down from generation to generation. This tension becomes even more complex when the state intervenes through the regulation, management, and supervision of pilgrimage sites, whether in the name of order, security, or the development of religious tourism. Interviews with a pilgrimage site manager reveal the existence of ongoing negotiations between religious interests, local traditions, and state policy. One informant stated:

*"We have to adjust the rituals performed by pilgrims to government regulations, but on the other hand, we also strive to preserve long-standing pilgrimage traditions. So there is always a compromise."*

This statement reflects how pilgrimage practices exist in a space of tension between religious authority, popular religious practices, and state regulation. Anthropologically, these findings confirm that pilgrimage is an arena of symbolic and structural contestation, where religious meaning is not singular but is negotiated through intersecting power relations and interests. Thus, pilgrimage practices

can be understood as a dynamic social process that is continually shaped by conflict, adaptation, and compromise in the context of contemporary Muslim societies. To facilitate understanding of the dynamics of conflict and negotiation in pilgrimage practices, the findings of this study are mapped into several key aspects. The presentation in the following table helps to show the relationship between actors, interests, and forms of negotiation that occur at pilgrimage sites.

**Table 1: Disputes and Negotiations in Pilgrimage Practices**

No	Aspect	Description
	Theological Debate	There is a difference of opinion between the normative group, which considers pilgrimage to be potentially deviant, and the local community, which interprets pilgrimage as a legitimate and long-standing religious tradition.
2	Popular Religious Practices	Pilgrimages are carried out as collective practices rooted in local culture, involving rituals, symbols, and customs that are not always in line with formal theological interpretations.
3	Religious Authorities	Ulama and local religious leaders play a role in legitimising pilgrimage practices and mediating between normative demands and community traditions.
4	State Supervision and Regulation	The state is present through policies on the management, supervision, and regulation of pilgrimage sites in the name of order, security, and religious tourism.
5	Negotiation and Compromise Practices	Site managers and local communities adjust rituals so that they can continue without violating regulations, while maintaining the sustainability of pilgrimage traditions.

Based on these aspects, it can be concluded that pilgrimage practices are a social arena filled with ongoing negotiations between theological discourse, popular religious practices, and state regulations. The disputes that arise do not always lead to open conflict, but rather give rise to adaptive compromises. Through the active role of the local community and site managers, pilgrimage continues to survive as a dynamic religious practice shaped by intersecting relations of power, authority, and interests.

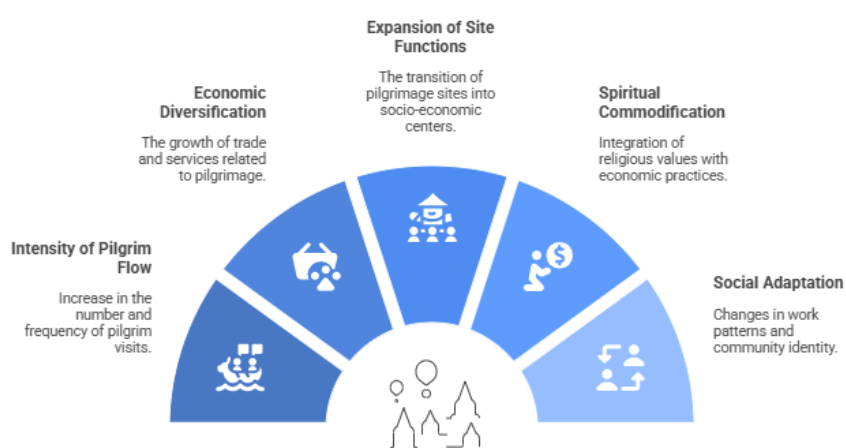
### **Pilgrimage and the Socio-Economic Transformation of Local Communities**

The socio-economic transformation of local communities is one of the most tangible impacts of the continuation of pilgrimage practices at various religious sites. The findings of this study stem from the issue that pilgrimage not only functions as a spiritual activity, but also as a driving force for social and economic change in the surrounding environment. Through participatory observation and interviews with local communities, this study found that the increasing flow of pilgrims has encouraged the growth of various economic activities, such as the trade of pilgrimage equipment, transportation services, lodging, and local culinary specialities. Pilgrimage sites, which previously functioned as sacred spaces, have slowly expanded their social function to become lively and productive economic spaces. This process demonstrates the commodification of spiritual experiences, where religious values interact with economic interests without eliminating the sacred meaning of

pilgrimage itself. The results of interviews with a trader near the pilgrimage site clearly illustrate this change. One informant stated:

*"Since many pilgrims have been coming, our income has increased. We sell not only to make a profit, but also to serve the people who come to worship. For us, this has become part of our daily lives."*

This statement shows that economic activity is not always seen as a threat to the sanctity of pilgrimage, but rather as a form of social adaptation by local communities to opportunities arising from religious practices. Anthropologically, this finding confirms that pilgrimage is an arena of negotiation between spiritual values and economic interests, where local communities play an active role in shaping new relationships between religion, economy, and social life. Thus, pilgrimage can be understood as a religious practice that is not static, but continues to transform in line with changes in the social structure and economic needs of the communities that support it. To clarify the dynamics of socio-economic transformation arising from pilgrimage practices, the findings of this study are summarised into several key indicators. These indicators are formulated based on observations and interviews with local communities around pilgrimage sites, enabling a systematic description of the relationship between spiritual practices, economic activities, and changes in social structure. The visualisation of the following indicators helps readers understand the flow of these transformations comprehensively.



**Picture 1: The Impact of Pilgrimages on Local Communities**

Based on the indicators compiled, it can be concluded that pilgrimage practices play a major role in triggering socio-economic transformation in local communities. The increase in pilgrim traffic encourages economic diversification, which in turn expands the social function of pilgrimage sites. This process demonstrates the commodification of spiritual experiences that is not destructive, but rather adaptive. Local communities are not only recipients of the impact but also active actors in negotiating religious values and economic interests, so that pilgrimage develops as a dynamic and sustainable religious practice.

## Discussion

### Pilgrimage Rituals as Diverse and Contextual Religious Practices

Findings regarding pilgrimage rituals as diverse and contextual religious practices show that diversity in Islam cannot be understood solely through a normative doctrinal approach, but must be

seen as a living social practice that is negotiated within a specific cultural context. Theoretically, these findings are in line with Victor Turner's view of ritual as social drama, in which religious practices become a space for symbolic interaction that reflects the values, conflicts, and social identities of the supporting community. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps explain how patterns of pilgrimage are reproduced from generation to generation through the authority of religious leaders and local traditions, so that practices that appear different in ritual are still perceived as valid by their practitioners. Compared to previous studies that tend to place pilgrimage within the framework of the debate between bid'ah and orthodoxy, the findings of this study reinforce Eickelman's argument that the religious practices of Muslims are pluralistic and shaped by the interaction between texts, authority, and social context. Normative studies often ignore the subjective experiences of pilgrims, while this study shows that the meaning of pilgrimage is constructed through lived religious experiences rooted in local culture (Juzwik et al., 2025). Thus, pilgrimage not only functions as an expression of faith but also as a means of articulating religious identity that is adaptive to social change. This interpretation confirms that the diversity of pilgrimage practices is not a form of deviation, but rather a manifestation of the flexibility of Islamic tradition in responding to diverse social realities (Abdallah, 2022). In the context of religious anthropology, these findings enrich our understanding of how Islam is practised concretely in the daily lives of its followers, while challenging homogeneous views of Muslim religious practices.

### **Disputes and Negotiations: Theological Debates, Popular Practices, and State Oversight of Pilgrimage Sites**

Findings regarding disputes and negotiations in pilgrimage practices show that religious rituals never exist in a vacuum, but are always bound to relations of power, authority, and institutional interests. From a religious anthropology perspective, these dynamics can be understood through the concepts of *religious authority* and *power relations*, whereby religious meaning is produced and maintained through interactions between religious scholars, local communities, and the state (Al-Kandari et al., 2025). Theoretically, these findings are in line with the thinking of (2025), which emphasises that religious practices are shaped by discipline, regulation, and the discourse of power, not solely by individual beliefs. The presence of the state in the supervision of pilgrimage sites shows how religion becomes part of social governance, where popular practices are negotiated to be in line with the interests of order and development. Compared to previous studies that focused on the normative debate between bid'ah and orthodoxy, this study shows that the conflict does not stop at the realm of theological discourse, but continues in everyday practice through compromise and adaptation. 's study (2025) highlights the plurality of religious authority in Islam. The findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing how pilgrimage site managers act as mediators between the demands of the state and the religious expectations of the community. Thus, pilgrimage can be understood as an arena of ongoing social negotiation, where popular religious practices not only survive but also transform through dialogue, resistance, and adaptation to existing power structures (Richardson & Rammal, 2018). This interpretation confirms that the dynamics of conflict in pilgrimage are not a sign of religious disintegration, but rather part of the process of forming religious meaning and authority in the context of contemporary Muslim society.

### **Pilgrimage and Socio-Economic Transformation of Local Communities**

Findings regarding the socio-economic transformation of local communities around pilgrimage sites show that religious practices cannot be separated from the accompanying economic dynamics. From an economic anthropology perspective, this phenomenon can be understood through the concept of *religious commodification*, in which spiritual experiences are produced and consumed in the economic sphere without necessarily losing their sacred meaning. The findings of this study are in line with the thinking of (2025) on religious tourism, which places pilgrimage sites as hybrid spaces

between the sacred and the profane, where religious values and economic interests interact and negotiate with each other. Contrary to the normative view that sees commodification as a threat to the purity of worship, the results of this study show that the local community actually interprets economic activities as part of the sustainability of pilgrimage practices (Leaman, 2022; Mahmud, 2023). Within the framework of *moral economy*, economic activities that grow around pilgrimage sites are not solely driven by the logic of profit, but also by the values of service, blessing, and social solidarity (Le Polain de Waroux & Kronenburg García, 2025). Compared to previous studies that emphasise the negative impact of the commercialisation of religion, this study shows that local communities play an active role in managing and adjusting economic changes to remain in line with religious values. Thus, pilgrimage is not only a source of income, but also an arena for the formation of new social relations between pilgrims and local communities. This interpretation enriches the study of religious anthropology by showing that economic transformation in pilgrimage practices is not a linear process towards secularisation, but rather a continuous negotiation between spirituality and livelihood needs. In the context of contemporary Muslim societies, these findings confirm that pilgrimage is an adaptive religious practice, capable of responding to changes in the socio-economic structure without losing its underlying religious meaning.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Islamic pilgrimage rituals are not merely devotional activities but dynamic socio-cultural practices shaped through continuous interaction between religion, local traditions, economic interests, and institutional authority. The findings reveal that pilgrimage practices are continuously negotiated within contemporary Muslim societies, resulting in diverse ritual expressions influenced by local culture, religious authority, and social transformation. Pilgrimage, therefore, cannot be understood as a static and uniform religious tradition, but rather as an adaptive religious practice embedded within changing social realities. Furthermore, this study shows that pilgrimage sites function as arenas of negotiation between theological discourse, popular religious practices, and state regulation. The presence of religious authorities, local communities, and institutional supervision demonstrates that religious legitimacy is socially constructed through intersecting relations of power and cultural acceptance. At the same time, pilgrimage practices contribute significantly to the socio-economic transformation of local communities through the development of religious tourism, trade activities, and local economic networks without eliminating the sacred dimension of pilgrimage itself.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the anthropology of religion by emphasising that pilgrimage rituals should be analysed not only through normative theological perspectives but also through anthropological approaches that highlight lived religion, symbolic interaction, social negotiation, and cultural adaptation. This study expands anthropological discussions on Islam by integrating spirituality, commodification, religious authority, and state regulation into a comprehensive analytical framework. Future research is recommended to examine the influence of digital media, virtual religious networks, and transnational Islamic communication on the transformation of pilgrimage practices in contemporary Muslim societies. Comparative ethnographic studies across different pilgrimage destinations are also needed to understand further how globalisation and technological change reshape religious identity, ritual meaning, and socio-cultural relations within Islamic pilgrimage traditions.

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