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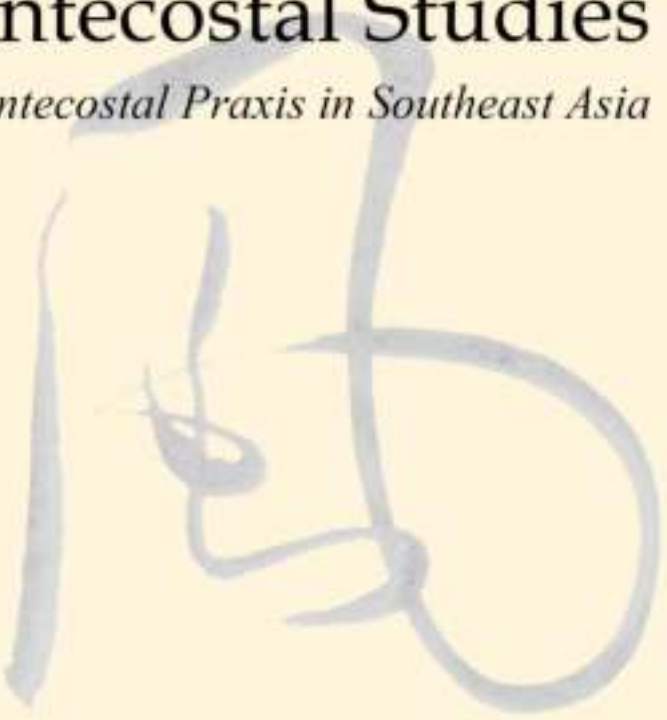

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A Biblical Evaluation of the Rite of Ziarah Kubur as Practiced by Javanese Muslims

by Lew Belcourt

Introduction

Ziyara is a practice of visitation in which Muslims attend "venerated places such as graves and shrines of saints, trees, wells, and rocks."[1] More narrowly, the term "specifically designates grave visitation, or *ziyarat al-qubur*, which is recorded in the prophetic tradition (hadith)."[2] In Indonesia, this practice is called *ziarah kubur*. As practiced by Javanese Muslims, *ziarah kubur* goes beyond classical Islam and has taken on elements of animism in light of the Folk Islam practiced by the Javanese.

Thesis Statement

This article examines whether a critical contextualization of the *ziarah kubur* Folk Islamic rite may be useful as a bridge for Javanese Muslims to encounter the God of the Bible, rather than the spirits of the dead, as the true source of blessing.

Scope

Ziarah kubur is practiced by Javanese Muslims living in Central Java. A discussion of pre-Islamic Javanese culture and religion is included to determine any correlation with the worldview of Folk Islam. Three classes of Javanese society are identified to evaluate how each class practices *ziarah kubur*. Sunan Tembayat, one of nine evangelists who brought Islam to Java, will be used as the object of *ziarah kubur*.

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[1]Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek, *From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction: The Question of Ziyara through the Eyes of Salafis* (Waltham, MA: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, 2009), 1, https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/papers/pdfs/cp2.pdf.

[2]Ibid., 1-2.

A biblical examination of the practice and an evaluation of possible contextualization follows.

Limitations

Ziarah kubur is practiced in many ways among the Muslim populations on all the major islands of Indonesia, but this examination of the practice of *ziarah kubur* is limited to the grave of Sunan Tembayat by Javanese Muslims living in Central Java. The Javanese worldview affects many concepts of Javanese culture but only two, *slametan* (safety) and the *Raja Adil* (Just King), are discussed here.

This article offers a cursory review of Islamic and Christian doctrines as they relate to the practice of *ziarah kubur*, specifically praying to the dead and identifying the source of true blessing. More detailed examinations of Islamic and Christian theology are recommended for future research. Since several sources were written in Indonesian, I acknowledge possible limitations in translating and presenting the positions of Indonesian scholars in the English language.

The Practice of *Ziarah Kubur*

Before looking at the practice of *ziarah kubur* by Javanese Muslims, one must consider the rite in classical Islam and the Islamic worldview.

Classical Islam

The "veneration and visitation of tombs . . . must be considered one of the most important and wide-ranging features of Islamic devotion and piety."[3] Interestingly, *ziarah kubur* seems to run counter to the worldview that underlies classical Islam. The structure of the classical Islamic worldview is threefold: first, the belief that Allah is the only God, creator of the universe, and the source of everything; second, God gave the Qur'an as his revelation to mankind through angelic intermediaries; and third, that "all creation comes from Allah and is temporary in nature."[4]

Given this worldview that God is the center of everything, the practice of *ziarah kubur* with its prayers to saints and visitation of tombs

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[3]Werner Diem and Marco Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam: Epitaphs as Texts* (Weisbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 11, Google Books.

[4]Hadi Yasin et al., "Islamic Worldview," *Tahdzib Al-Akhlaq* 5, no. 1 (2022): 128, https://doi.org/10.340051tahdzib.v5i1.1947.

has been controversial from the beginning of Islam. Certain Islamic movements reject the practice. The Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia "considers the practice to be heresy (*bid'ah*) that is categorized as one of the greatest sins in Islam."[5] The Salafi movement follows the teaching of Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), who condemned the practice of building monuments over the tombs of Islamic holy men as a form of idolatry.[6] However, these condemnations of *ziarah* occur primarily among scholars and theologians, far removed from the common practices of the average Muslim adherent.[7] This includes the prohibition of women performing *ziarah*, which was decreed but not enforced in early Islam.[8]

Many Islamic schools of thought accept the practice of *ziarah kubur* as a valid spiritual practice or *ibadah*. The Sunni movement believes that visiting the grave of Muhammad is permitted. According to the Sunnis, "More than any other tomb in the Islamic world, the shrine of Muhammad is considered a source of blessings for the visitor."[9] A hadith of Muhammad states, "Whoever visits my grave, my intercession is guaranteed for him."[10] Gibril Fouad Haddad notes,

> The emphasis and encouragement on visiting his noble grave is mentioned in numerous hadiths, and it would suffice to show this if there was only the hadith whereby the truthful and God-confirmed Prophet promises that his intercession among other things becomes guaranteed for whoever visits him, and the Imams are in complete agreement from the time directly after his passing until our own time that this [i.e., visiting him] is among the best acts of drawing near to Allah.[11]

According to the Shī'ah, *ziyara* is permissible if the visit does not involve worship of the dead saint.[12] Shī'ah scholars also teach that God

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[5]Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning: Ziarah Tradition in Java," *Studia Islamika* 7, no. 1 (2000): 56, https://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika/article/view/716.

[6]Beranek and Tupek, 11.

[7]Ibid., 24.

[8]Ibid., 8.

[9]Diem and Schöller, 7-8.

[10]Gibril Fouad Haddad, "The Hadith: 'Whoever Visits My Grave, My Intercession Is Guaranteed For Him,'" As-Sunnah Foundation of America, https://sunnah.org/2012/06/03/the-hadith-"whoever-visits-my-grave-my-intercession-is-guaranteed-for-him" (accessed September 13, 2023).

[11]Ibid.

[12]"Ziyarat," Sensagent, https://dictionary.sensagent.com/Ziyarat/en-en/ (accessed September 15, 2023).

favors prayers offered from certain locations, including the tombs of the saints.[13] Asking for the intercession of the deceased saint is a main objective of the *ziyara*. "They [the holy figures] are being requested to supplicate to Allah, to deliver the person in need from his affliction, since the supplication of these saintly figures is accepted by Allah."[14] Another purpose of *ziyara* is to receive *barakah*, or blessing, from God. "The *Ziyarah* of the Imāms is also done by the Shī'ah, not only as a means of greeting and saluting their masters who lived long before they were born, but also as a means of seeking nearness to God and more of His blessings (*barakah*)."[15]

The Sufi movement ascribes several meanings to the practice of *ziarah*, including forming an "intellectual link to the Sufi who is buried in the tomb."[16] For example, a visit to the grave of a Sufi teacher who was an expert in Islamic theology creates an intellectual link to that teacher, increasing one's credibility and acceptance.[17]

To summarize, the rite of *ziarah kubur* in classical Islam is meant to remind the visitor of the reality of death and the afterlife.[18] The visitor asks the saint to intercede with God on his behalf.[19] *Ziarah kubur* also contains the hope of a *baraka*, or blessing, received from God through the mediation of the saint.[20] These goals are in keeping with the Islamic worldview that is strictly monotheistic and considers God the source of all things. Although the use of a saint as an intermediary is a matter of controversy among the different movements in classical Islam, this is not the case among Javanese Muslims. Their practice of *ziarah kubur* rests on the foundation of a very different worldview than that of classical Islam.

Javanese Muslims

Over 116 million Javanese live in Indonesia, with the majority living on the island of Java. The Javanese constitute 42 percent of the total population of Indonesia. Every president of Indonesia has been

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[13]Ibid.
[14]Ibid.
[15]"Ziyarat."
[16]Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning," 56.
[17]Ibid.
[18]Beranek and Tupek, 14.
[19]Ibid., 2.
[20]Jamhari, "The Meaning Interpreted: The Concept of Barakah in Ziarah," *Studia Islamika* 8, no. 1 (2001): 91, https://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika/article/view/696.

Javanese. Ninety-three percent of Javanese are Muslim. However, an estimated 70 percent of Javanese Muslims practice Folk Islam, a blend of classical Islam and pre-Islamic Javanese religion.[21]

The Islam that came to Java in the 1300s was Sufism, an open and accommodating kind of Islam that allowed its followers "to encounter and embrace the local culture and religions uncritically."[22] When this form of Islam met the existing religion on Java, a mixture of Hindu and Javanese indigenous religious practices was called *Kejawen* or "Javanized," and the resulting form of Islam was called *abangan* Islam. This still exists in southern Central Java.[23]

Based on his anthropological study on the island of Java, Geertz divided Javanese Muslims into three distinct groups: *santri*, *prijaji,* and *abangan*.[24] The *santri* were a conservative group who held closest to the formal teachings and practice of Islam. The *prijaji* comprised the ruling class who led both religious organizations and the government. The *abangan* were primarily "people of low social status, uneducated, illiterates, villagers, farmers or factory workers, peasants, and marginalized" who held to the worldview and *Kejawen* religious practices of their ancestors.[25] This article primarily focuses on the worldview of the *abangan* Javanese Muslims and their practice of *ziarah kubur*.

Worldview

Hiebert defines worldview as "the basic assumptions about reality which lie behind the beliefs and behavior of a culture."[26] Worldview is the deepest of four levels of cultural knowledge that begins with the "world outside" and continues into the "world inside."[27] Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, following Laudan, separate the "world inside" into three levels: theories, belief systems, and worldviews.[28] Theories, the

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[21]"Country: Indonesia," Joshua Project, https://joshuaproject.net/countries/id (accessed July 13, 2023).

[22]Ferry Mamahit, "*Abangan* Muslims, Javanese Worldview, and Muslim-Christian Relations in Indonesia," *Transformation* (2020): 4, https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820965602.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 5.

[25]Mamahit, 4.

[26]Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 45.

[27]Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 38.

[28]Ibid.

outermost level, "answer questions raised by belief systems and order experience into theories."[29] Belief systems, the middle level, "determine the domain of examination, define questions to be asked, provide methods for investigation, integrate theories in belief systems and worldview, and mediate between empirical realities."[30] Worldview, the innermost level, "provides ontological, affective and normative assumptions on which the culture builds its world, and integrates belief systems into a single worldview."[31]

Without penetrating to the core of the "world inside," an examination of a religion in terms of its "beliefs and practices such as ancestor veneration, witchcraft, magic, or divination . . . misses the point that beliefs and doctrines are part of larger belief systems that seek to answer fundamental questions in life."[32] In turn, belief systems rely on worldviews to "provide the fundamental assumptions about the nature or reality and of right and wrong which belief systems use to build their theories."[33]

Confining a study of *ziarah kubur* among Javanese Muslims to the rites and rituals will fail to identify the worldview that underlies the practice. An understanding of the worldview through which the Javanese view the practice will be useful not only when examining why *ziarah kubur* diverges from the practice in formal or classic Islam, but also when analysing *ziarah kubur* theologically and considering if the practice can be contextualized as a bridge for the gospel.

Javanese Worldview

The Javanese worldview is described as

> the conviction of the essential unity of all existence. It views the divine, human beings, and the cosmos as one integral unit or system. It means that the survival of such a system depends on the relationship among each other. Every Javanese has a responsibility to attune to the universal order, mainly to maintain a harmonious relationship with the divine and the world. It thus implies that he or she has to acclimate himself/herself with all existence, seen or unseen.[34]

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[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid.
[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid., 40.
[33]Ibid., 41.
[34]Mamahit, 6.

This Javanese worldview is reflected in "ancient Javanese indigenous religion and culture."[35] *Kejawen*, the syncretic result of Javanese indigenous religions and Hinduism, displays a belief system that includes the unseen cosmic beings, local gods, goddesses, spirits, and the spirits of ancestors that exist in the world, and the visible world consisting of humans, plants, animals, and the earth.[36] In an effort to maintain harmony and balance (thereby avoiding calamity and incurring goodwill), the Javanese attempt to control the spirits through various rites and rituals. Mamahit notes,

> The Javanese people usually do not want to engage with the spirits because they prefer to be in a safe condition or of being safe (*selamat*) from the fear or difficulties caused by such spiritual beings. However, their presence is necessary for keeping the universe in balance. It thus reflects a prevailing oriental-animistic worldview, a belief in the existence of the spirits that [are] essential for cosmic harmony.[37]

Spirits

In his research into the unseen spirits that inhabit the world of the Javanese, Geertz records three categories of roaming spirits, *memedi* (literally, frighteners), *lelembut* (literally, ethereal ones), and *tujul*.[38] According to Geertz, *memedi* are generally harmless and merely like to scare people.[39] *Lelembut*, on the other hand, can "make one ill or drive one crazy" and are "very dangerous to human beings."[40] The third category, *tujul*, appear as young children and bring financial gain to the person who gains their loyalty. People gained control of a *tujul* through "fasting and meditation," often at Hindu ruins found in Central Java or at the graves of Islamic saints.[41]

Geertz notes two other types of spirits, *demit* and *danjang*, which do not roam but are linked to a specific geographic location. *Demit* are spirits "with a fixed abode who may support the wishes of men."[42] These spirits typically "live in holy places called *pundèns*, which may

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[35]Ibid.
[36]Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, 49.
[37]Mamahit, 6.
[38]Geertz, 16.
[39]Ibid.
[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid., 21.
[42]Ibid., 24.

be marked by a small Hindu ruin (perhaps one little broken statue), a large banyan tree, an old grave, a nearly hidden spring, or some such topographical peculiarity."[43] A *danjang* is the guardian spirit of a village, often identified with a specific individual, usually the founder of the village, and located at his grave.[44] Both *demit* and *danjang* "respond to people's pleas for help."[45]

Slametan

The worldview of the Javanese, with its desire for balance and harmony, is reflected in certain concepts and practices that "have their roots in ancient Javanese indigenous religion and culture."[46] One is *slametan*, which literally means "safety." *Slametan* "relates to the animistic belief, particularly a belief in the existence of the good and the evil spirits, which also imply the positive and negative forces. These spirits can generate a positive attitude toward a harmonious living with other beings inhabiting this world."[47] *Slametan* is a broad term that refers to numerous Javanese rites or rituals centered around the cycles of life (birth, coming of age, marriage, child-bearing, death) and circumstances (for example, illness, war, and the choosing of leaders).[48] *Slametan* is an attempt to appease the spirits, avoid evil and bad luck, and to bring good fortune to an individual, a family, or a community.

"Just King"

A second Javanese concept is that of a "Just King," or *Ratu Adil*. This concept reflects the desire for fundamental balance expressed in the Javanese worldview. Although its origins are lost to antiquity, the concept of a "Just King" was born from the desire to be delivered from difficult circumstances. It is "a cultural-social expression of the people who resist and protest against life-suffering or affliction. Besides, it is a kind of people's messianic hope for liberation or freedom from harsh circumstances."[49] According to Javanese prophetic literature, the final epoch of world history will be a time of great suffering and affliction. The "Just King" will appear during the last days to liberate the Javanese

[43]Ibid.
[44]Ibid., 26.
[45]Ibid.
[46]Mamahit, 6.
[47]Ibid.
[48]Ibid., 6-7.
[49]Ibid., 8.

and bring them to "a state of order, peace, justice, abundance, and well-being."[50] Imam Mahdi, "an Islamicized manifestation of *Ratu Adil*," will fight against *Raja Iblis* (the King of the Devils) and establish peace in Java for one thousand years. On the last day of history, the "day of doom," Imam Mahdi will destroy *Raja Iblis*.[51] The concept of the "Just King" influences the Javanese practice of *ziarah kubur* by providing a foundation for the belief that prayers may bring relief from suffering and affliction and bring life back into balance.

Wali Sanga

Ziarah kubur as practiced by Javanese Muslims reflects the different worldviews and belief systems of the *santri*, *prijaji*, and *abangan* Javanese. All three groups perform *ziarah kubur* at the graves of the nine saints, or *Wali Sanga*, who brought Islam to the island of Java beginning in the 14th century.[52] The *Wali Sanga* are Sunan Ampel, Sunan Giri, Sunan Bonang, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Sunan Muria, Sunan Kudus, Sunan Gunung Jati, and either Seh Siti Jenar or Sunan Tembayat, depending on which Javanese tradition is accepted.[53] According to Jambali, there are three reasons why being acknowledged as a *wali* is important.

> First, it relates to the legitimation of the existence of the *wali*. There are many tombs of pious people in Java, which are considered by the local people to be *wali* tombs. Second, it has become a truism in Java that the *wali* spread true Islamic teachings. Therefore, if the person is recognized as a *wali*, he brought the true teaching of Islam. Finally, the acknowledgment of *wali* is to provide a legitimation for the tomb as an appropriate place to acquire *baraka*. This is because a *wali* is believed to be a person who is close to Allah and who can transmit baraka.[54]

Particularly for the *santri* and *prijaji* Javanese, *ziarah kubur* reflects the classical Muslim monotheistic worldview that sees Allah as the source of all things. Prayers are offered according to established Islamic practices. Recitation of the Shahada or the repetition of Qur'anic verses

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[50]Ibid.
[51]Ibid.
[52]The word *wali* in Javanese means holy person or saint. *Sanga* means nine.
[53]Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning," 61.
[54]Ibid.

during *ziarah kubur* are all directed towards God. The saint is seen only as an intermediary or intercessor. Blessings are believed to come only from God, and the pilgrimage to the tomb of the saint only brings the pilgrim to a place where God is known to be attentive to prayer.

Sunan Tembayat

The rite of *ziarah kubur* is practiced at the grave of one of the Wali Sanga, Sunan Tembayat. First, let us explore the historical background of Sunan Tembayat.

Historical Background

The life of the ninth *wali*, Sunan Tembayat, is obscure. He purportedly lived in the 16th century. Various traditions say that he was Brawijaya V (the last king of the Majapahit empire), the ninety-fourth son of Brawijaya V, or the son-in-law of Brawijaya V.[55] Tradition agrees that Sunan Tembayat was converted to Islam after an encounter with Sunan Kalijaga, the most important *wali* in Central Java.[56] Sunan Kalijaga then tasked Sunan Tembayat to bring Islam to the southern part of Central Java. His success earned him the status of *wali* and his tomb has been the site of *ziarah kubur* since the 17th century.[57]

Myths about Sunan Tembayat contain tales of his supernatural powers, including transforming the physical appearance of his two disciples and turning a sack of rice into sand. The relocation of the first mosque he built on top of a mountain is also the subject of legends. According to one, in order to determine the new location of the mosque, Sunan Tembayat hurled a spear down the mountain. The place where the spear landed became the new location. Another legend holds that Sunan Kalijaga admonished Sunan Tembayat that locating the mosque on the top of the mountain was not the way for a new *wali* to show his identity and that it needed to be moved lower on the mountain. The first legend affirms the supernatural powers of Sunan Tembayat; the second strengthens his spiritual link with Sunan Kalijaga.[58]

[55]Ibid., 64.
[56]Ibid., 61.
[57]Ibid., 63.
[58]Ibid., 65.

Ziarah Kubur at the Grave of Sunan Tembayat

The influence of Javanese culture on the Islamic practice of *ziarah kubur* in Java cannot be overstated. The Majapahit Empire was the height of Javanese culture. Its decline led to a sense of loss of Javanese traditions.[59] By linking Sunan Tembayat with the Majapahit Empire, either as the last king or being related to him, the Javanese maintain a connection with their cultural past. Identifying Sunan Tembayat as both a disciple of Sunan Kalijaga and as the ninth *wali* gives Javanese Muslims a reason to perform *ziarah kubur* at his tomb while expressing "the desire for the re-emergence of the Javanese superiority."[60] The rites of *ziarah kubur* performed at the tomb of Sunan Tembayat reflect this connection with Javanese culture and *kejawen* religion, both based on the Javanese worldview.

Javanese pilgrims to the tomb of Sunan Tembayat generally perform *ziarah kubur* for one of three purposes. For those who consider Sunan Tembayat a pious *wali*, the visit is *ziarah*, the purpose of which is "to obtain a reward from God through the mediation of Sunan Tembayat."[61] For those who believe he was Brawijaya V or a close relative, the visit is *sowan*, the Javanese tradition of visiting respected people such as kings, teachers, superiors, and parents.[62] For those who consider him the *pundhen*, or founder of the village of Bayat, the visit is "a means of showing respect."[63]

Visitors to the tomb of Sunan Tembayat perform *ziarah* in Bayat in different manners depending on whether they are *santri*, *prijaji*, or *abangan*. *Santri* and *prijaji* generally perform *ziarah kubur* in the Islamic manner. Visitors recite verses from the Qur'an, the *tahlil* (reciting the Shahada 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger') or the *dzikr*, the recitation of special words from the Qur'an. Similar practices are conducted by Muslims around the world and reflect the worldview of classical Islam.[64] Those who practice *ziarah* in the Javanese manner, the *abangan* Javanese, "conduct *ziarah* with meditation or with other special procedures such as *nenepi* (a meditation with special attitude and procedure)."[65] The differences in practice reflect both the different Javanese social groups and their worldviews. This "effects a

[59]Ibid.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Ibid., 66.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Ibid., 67.
[65]Ibid.

different articulation of an understanding of the *wali*, and influences the explanations of the purpose of *ziarah*, including the perceptions of *baraka* and its transmission."[66]

The ritual of *ziarah kubur* at the tomb of Sunan Tembayat is generally divided into three stages: the preparation, the *ziarah*, and the follow-up to the *ziarah*. Preparation begins with ritual washing and changing into new clothes. Visitors are led to a hall where they meet the *juru kunci*, a spiritual guide who is said to have power derived from the *wali* and is the intermediary between the *wali* and the visitor. The *juru kunci* asks the visitor why they have come and what offering they have brought, normally incense and flowers. The *juru kunci* invites the visitor to pray while burning the incense. The prayer usually consists of asking forgiveness for disturbing the *wali*, asking for specific blessings, and thanking the *wali* for their help. The *juru kunci* echoes the prayer to the *wali*.

During the second stage of the ritual, the *juru kunci* leads the visitor to the tomb of the *wali*. The *juru kunci* prays before opening the door to the tomb and leading the visitor to sit cross-legged in front of the tomb. Then the visitor

> rubs the saint's gravestone with his hands three times, then he wipes his face three times. After this has been done, by lowering his head face down to the earth, he begins to pray silently. When he finishes his prayer, he puts the flowers on the tomb. He selects the Kantil (white flowers that have 5 leaves)—sometimes, in a crowded situation, visitors struggle to obtain the flowers. The flowers are believed to be Sunan Tembayat's gift. Therefore, like other visitors, he takes the flower home as a *baraka* from the Sunan. Whenever he feels sick or suffers misfortune case, he will take the flower to help him.[67]

During the third stage, the visitor leaves the tomb with the *juru kunci*. Outside the hall, the visitor drinks water from a clay jar as a symbol of receiving *baraka*. Finally, the visitor spends the night in the graveyard. This is a time of waiting for a special sign, or *ngalamat*, of *baraka*.[68] The sign may be in the form of a dream but is sometimes an animal encountered in the graveyard. The visitor consults with the *juru kunci* to interpret the sign in order to understand what blessing he has received.

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[66]Ibid.
[67]Ibid., 77.
[68]Ibid., 78.

The *juru kunci* is considered a "special mediator" who can interpret the *ngalamat* due to his close relationship with the saint and because of his previously successful interpretations of the *ngalamat*.[69]

The influence of *abangan* Islam is seen in both the source of the *barakah* and what blessings are requested by the pilgrims. Unlike classical monotheistic Islam that sees God as the only source of blessing, *abangan* Javanese expect to receive blessings from the saint himself. *Abangan* Javanese ask for spiritual blessings and good fortune but also request job promotions and even winning lottery numbers. A successfully conducted *ziarah* may also give a pilgrim power over a *tujul*, the spirit that can bring wealth and fortune.[70]

A final consideration of the practice of *ziarah* at the tomb of Sunan Tembayat involves the physical elements of the ritual: incense, water, and flowers. The use of incense in religious rituals is common. Although some Javanese use incense to call upon spirits, including in rituals where people are possessed by spirits, the use of incense in the *ziarah* ritual primarily helps the prayers of the visitors rise to heaven. The aroma of incense is also to please the saint. It follows "the Prophet Muhammad's support in using something aromatic while praying."[71]

The use of flowers in the ritual, similar to the incense, brings a pleasing aroma to the tomb of the saint.[72] Unlike the incense burned during the *ziarah*, flowers are gathered by the visitor after completing the *ziarah* and taken home. Visitors believe these flowers are imbued with *barakah* by the saint. Men and women wear the flowers on their person. Some make tea from the flowers to drink during times of illness or misfortune.[73] One visitor performed *ziarah* whenever their supply of flowers ran out, in order to have *barakah* available at all times.[74]

Finally, water is used both in preparation for *ziarah* in the ritual ablutions as a symbol of cleansing from sins and as protection from evil spirits, and after the *ziarah* as a symbol of blessing received from the saint. Like flowers, pilgrims often take water home after the *ziarah* and drink it when they need physical healing or good fortune.[75]

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[69]Jamhari, "The Meaning Interpreted," 97.
[70]Ibid., 91.
[71]Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning," 57.
[72]Jamhari, "The Meaning Interpreted," 107.
[73]Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning," 77.
[74]Ibid., 73.
[75]Jamhari, "The Meaning Interpreted," 107-108.

Summary of Formal and Folk Islamic Teaching and Practices

Ziarah kubur conducted following classical Islam and the Islamic worldview sees God as the source of all blessings. During the ritual, the pilgrim prays directly to God or asks the saint to intercede on his behalf. The pilgrim is reminded of death and the last days. Blessings may be sought from God, but never from the saint.

In contrast, *Abangan* Muslims perform the ritual by blending classical Islam with the *Kejawen* religion and the Javanese worldview. Although *santri* and *prijaji* pray to God or ask the saint for intercession, *abangan* Javanese Muslims pray to the saint and expect to receive blessings from him. The *juru kunci* functions as an intermediary and translator of dreams. The pilgrim brings gifts for the saint and asks for practical help, not just spiritual benefits. Physical aspects of the ritual are important (flowers for healing tea, water for healing, inspiration). Some seek to gain wealth by gaining control of a *tujul*, or spirit, through *ziarah kubur*.

Biblical Evaluation of *Ziarah Kubur*

The *ziarah kubur* practiced by *abangan* Javanese reflects a worldview that stands in opposition to biblical teachings. This Javanese worldview considers "the divine, human beings, and the cosmos as one integral unit or system" and stresses finding a "harmonious relationship with the divine and the world," to the point that an individual must "acclimate himself/herself with all existence, seen or unseen."[76] The *abangan* Muslim seeks power not only from God but also from the spirits of the dead who occupy the middle ground between the divine and mankind. The Christian worldview does not acknowledge the spirits of the dead as operating as part of the unseen world. Rather, the unseen spirits that exist in the world are "related to the activity of demons."[77]

Praying To the Dead

A substantial difference between Muslim and Christian worldviews is further seen in the biblical evaluation of two of the practices of *ziarah kubur*, praying to the dead and obtaining blessings.

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[76]Mamahit, 6.

[77]Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2013), 70.

Muslim Doctrine

The rite of *ziarah kubur* is either permitted or forbidden depending on the teaching of different movements of Islam. The controversy rises from the classical Islamic monotheistic worldview that considers prayers to anyone other than God a type of idolatry. The prophet Muhammad originally forbade *ziarah kubur* but eventually changed his mind. Nurhadi, an Indonesian Muslim scholar, notes that those who allow *ziarah kubur* refer to the following hadith that quotes Muhammad: "I previously forbade you to practice *ziarah kubur*. But now visit the graves, for in visitation you will be reminded of death" (Abu Daud - 2816).[78] Regarding the practice of praying and asking the dead to intercede on behalf of the living, Gibril Fouad Haddad cites the hadith that again quotes Muhammad: "Whoever visits my grave, my intercession is guaranteed for him."[79] These two hadith form the basis for the practice of *ziarah kubur* among the movements of Islam that allow the practice.

Although practiced by classical Muslims, the worldview that accepts praying to the dead more closely reflects *abangan* Islam than classical monotheistic Islam. Javanese pilgrims performing *ziarah kubur* and praying to the saints to intercede on their behalf will experience no conflict with their Javanese worldview.

Christian Doctrine

In contrast, praying to the dead is strictly forbidden in the Bible. "Let no one be found among you . . . who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord" (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).[80] The Bible teaches that the living must pray directly to God (Luke 11:13) rather than to the spirits of the dead. Jesus taught his disciples to pray to the Father in his name (John 16:23). There are no biblical instructions to pray to the dead. Rather, prayers are offered to the Father in the name of the risen Savior.

Further, the Bible does not teach that the dead can intercede on behalf of the living. The Old Testament portrays death as the end of one's participation in this world (Psalm 115:17). Daniel is told that after his death he will rest until the "end of days" (Daniel 12:13). In the Gospels, Jesus refers to both the righteous and the wicked dead

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[78]Nurhadi, "Kontradiktif Hadis Hukum Ziarah Kubur Perspektif Filsafat Hukum Islam," *Al-'Adl* 12, no. 1 (January 2019): 11, http://dx.doi.org/10.31332/aladl.v12i1.1379.

[79]Haddad.

[80]Scripture quotations are from the NIV 2011.

being in their graves when the Son of Man returns (John 5:28-29). The church in Corinth struggled with issues surrounding death. Regarding 1 Corinthians 15:29, Horrell notes, "The crucial point in this context is that the Corinthians' baptism for the dead is a practice that is believed to make some difference to the fate of the dead, to effect or ensure their transfer to salvation."[81] In response, the Apostle Paul rejects the thought that baptism could be effective for someone who had already died.[82] Finally, 1 Thessalonians 4 portrays the dead returning with Jesus at "the coming of the Lord." There is no mention of any activity of the dead while they wait for that day.

Regarding the act of intercession, the New Testament teaches that the role of intercession is not assigned to the righteous dead but to living believers (Ephesians 6:18). Indeed, believers have the privilege of approaching God directly "with freedom and confidence" (Ephesians 3:12). Besides intercession by living believers, intercession is an active role within the Godhead. Jesus intercedes on behalf of believers (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25), as does the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26).

Source of Blessing

There are also crucial differences between Muslim and Christian understandings of the sources of blessings. This is especially true of animistic Muslims.

Muslim Doctrine

For the movements who accepted it, *ziarah kubur* in classical Islam is a legitimate rite as long as pilgrims do not pray to receive a blessing from the one whose tomb they are visiting. This is consistent with the classical Islamic monotheistic worldview in which God is the source of everything. The *abangan* Javanese, whose worldview links the cosmic, spirits, and world, are willing to seek blessing wherever it may be found.

Seeking solutions to worldly problems from the spirits of the dead was common practice. In pre-Islamic Java, pilgrims visited Hindu temples and the graves of holy people to seek wisdom, wealth, safety,

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[81]David Worrell, "Who are 'The Dead' and When was the Gospel Preached to Them?: The Interpretation of 1 Pet 4.6," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2003): 86, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688503000055.

[82]Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 767.

and power.[83] This practice becomes engrained in Javanese culture. After Islam arrives, *ziarah kubur* as practiced by the *abangan* Javanese reminds the pilgrim of death as he pays his respects to the saint. However, he also considers the saint as the source of blessing that is "useful to the living."[84]

Christian Doctrine

For the Christian, blessing does not come from the spirits of the dead but rather from the Lord. The earliest examples are found in Genesis. Wehmeier sees God's punishments in pre-Abrahamic times always paired with an example of God's blessing.[85] Adam and Eve eat from the tree in the garden but do not die in their sin. Rather they are blessed when God makes clothing for them. Cain is sentenced to wander the earth as a murderer but is also given a mark to protect him from other men. The Flood narrative displays God's wrath on mankind, yet he provides a future for mankind through Noah and the ark. Only the punishment of the nations at Babel in Genesis 11 is not immediately paired with an example of God's blessing.[86]

Wehmeier sees the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 as the paired blessing for the judgment of the nations. He sees the covenant as not simply a blessing of Abraham, but a four-step blessing that expands far beyond the individual.[87] In verse 2, Abraham receives a blessing and becomes a blessing. In verse 3, a blessing is extended to those who bless Abraham. The final step of blessing is intended for the entire world: "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3b). This global blessing, says Wehmeier, completes God's pairing of blessing with the judgment of the nations pronounced at Babel in Genesis 11.[88]

God is also the source of the patriarchal blessings Jacob pronounces upon his sons. This is most clearly seen in Jacob's blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49:25, with the Almighty blessing Joseph with "blessings of the skies above, blessings of the deep springs below, blessings of the breast and womb." The blessings pronounced by Moses upon the tribes

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[83]Zaura Sylviana, "Ziarah: Antara Fenomena Mistik dan Komunikasi Spritual," *Darussalam* 10, no. 1 (2018): 127, https://doi.org/ 10.30739/darussalam.v10i1.273.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Gerhard Wehmeier, "The Theme 'Blessing for the Nations' in the Promises to the Patriarchs and in Prophetical Literature," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 6 (1974): 2, ATLA.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid., 3.

[88]Ibid.

of Israel before his death are also clearly from the Lord. Moses invokes the Lord, "who came with myriads of holy ones" (Deuteronomy 33:2). Moses declares it is the Lord who surely "love[s] the people; all the holy ones are in your hand" (Deuteronomy 33:3). Only then does Moses pronounce the blessings on the individual tribes.

The New Testament continues the theme of blessing coming from the Lord. Referring to the Abrahamic Covenant, Peter declares that the Jews are the recipients of God's blessings if they believe in the risen Christ and repent of their sins (Acts 3:12-26). The Apostle Paul also refers to the same covenant when he says that the blessing is for the Gentiles who receive the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith (Galatians 3:8).[89] To the church in Ephesus Paul declares, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). The biblical source of blessing is clearly not humanity but God. This stands against the *abangan* Muslim view that blessings can come from the dead saints whose graves are the objects of *ziarah kubur*.

Christian Response to Ziarah Kubur

We have described the rite of *ziarah kubur*, examined the Javanese worldview and *abangan* Islam, and evaluated two of its concepts from a biblical perspective. Now we must ask whether a critical contextualization of the rite may result in a bridge for Javanese Muslims to encounter the God of the Bible, rather than the spirits of the dead, as the true source of blessing.

Accept, Modify, or Reject?

The practice of *ziarah kubur* by *abangan* Muslims is based on a worldview very different from Christianity. Considering the divine, humanity, and the cosmos as equally important has led *abangan* Muslims to seek solutions to their problems through prayers to the spirits of dead saints. They pursue safety and balance from a saint at the expense of acknowledging God as the only source of blessing. The two worldviews conflict, and an attempt to contextualize the rite of *ziarah kubur* as a bridge for the gospel falls at this hurdle.

Additionally, the two main practices of *ziarah kubur*, praying to the dead saint and seeking blessing directly from him, contradict biblical teaching. The former is strictly forbidden by Scripture, which

[89]Ibid., 3-4.

declares that prayers must be offered only to God. The latter is opposed by Scripture, which in both the Old and New Testaments portrays God as the only source of blessing. Therefore, based on a consideration of both worldview and practice, the rite of *ziarah kubur* as practiced by *abangan* Muslims cannot be accepted or modified to become acceptable to God and must be rejected. However, this conclusion does not mean that *ziarah kubur* has no value as a bridge for the gospel.

Cultural Bridges

Diverse opinions and practices regarding the value and use of culture exist between various Christian leaders. For example, Pinoejadi, former pastor of the Gereja Kristen Jawa church in Banyubiru, Central Java, rejected using Javanese traditions at the church. He disallowed the feasts or celebrations marking occasions like circumcisions or funerals that were traditionally celebrated in Javanese culture.[90] The current pastor, Utomo, graduated from Bible college in 1994 and became senior pastor of GKJ Banyubiru in 1997. As a younger pastor, he is willing to use Javanese culture and traditions as long as they don't directly conflict with Scripture. To that end, he encourages the congregation to study the Bible and make their own decisions when their culture appears to be in conflict with the Bible.[91]

As previously discussed, praying to the dead and expecting blessings from the *wali* are contrary to Scripture and must not be practiced. However, certain aspects of Javanese culture such as the concept of safety, protection from evil spirits, salvation, and the "Just King" may all find parallels within the Christian worldview and biblical teaching. Even the classical Islam purposes of *ziarah kubur* of respecting the dead and being reminded of the reality of death are not in conflict with biblical teachings.

Accordingly, Christians may use certain Javanese concepts to create contextualized rites in which the dead are remembered, God is acknowledged as the one true God, and in which God is thanked for the deceased's life and contributions to their families. The focus of the rites becomes theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Prayers are directed to God in the name of Jesus. In keeping with Javanese cultural traditions, these remembrances may take place at the graves of the departed, use

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[90]Emmanuel Satyo Yuwono, "Kejawaan dan Kekristenan: Negosiasi Identitas Orang Kristen Jawa dalam Persoalan di Sekitar Tradisi Ziarah Kubur," *Humanika* 16, no. 1 (2016): 104, https://journal.uny.ac.id/index.php/humanika/article/view/12139.

[91]Ibid.

Javanese cultural forms of language, dress, and music, and may take place on the seventh, fortieth, one-hundredth, and one-thousandth day after their passing. Visits to graves may involve cleaning them, placing flowers on the graves, thanking God for the life of the departed, and asking for God's blessings on the family that is left behind.

Evangelism Bridges

Participating in lifecycle celebrations in ways that combine Javanese culture and a Christian worldview creates cultural bridges that help Christians minister to Javanese Muslims. Understanding the *abangan* Muslim worldview and the practice of *ziarah kubur* can help Christians make a clear presentation of the gospel.

Abangan Muslims live in the world of spirits. They live in fear and are constantly seeking power. Unlike in the West, discussions about spiritual issues are common. *Abangan* Muslims will pray for blessing in the form of physical healing, financial prosperity, life partners, or the desire to have children. They will also pray for protection from curses and evil spirits. A Christian who is aware of the worldview of *abangan* Islam can engage Javanese Muslims through three specific encounters.

Power Encounter

The first encounter is power. Christians who are aware of the spiritual environment in which an *abangan* Muslim lives can offer the power found in a relationship with Jesus as protection for them. This fulfills the Javanese need for safety. Love notes that practitioners of Folk Islam need a power encounter to fully understand the gospel.[92] Wagner defines a power encounter as "a visible, practical demonstration that Jesus Christ is more powerful than the false gods or spirits worshiped or feared by a people group."[93] Christians can pray in the name of Jesus for *abangan* Muslims to break the power of curses and evil spirits. Christians in the Majority World are equipped to do this as they understand the spirit world.

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[92]Rick Love, "Power Encounter Among Folk Muslims: An Essential Key of the Kingdom," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1996): 194, https://ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/13_4_PDFs/05_Rick%20Love.pdf.

[93]C. Peter Wagner, *Confronting the Powers: How the New Testament Church Experienced the Power of Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1996), 102, Google Books.

Truth Encounter

The second encounter is truth. Kraft says a truth encounter "counters ignorance or error and brings people to correct understandings about Jesus Christ."[94] A truth encounter must follow a power encounter. Those practicing Folk Islam often see displays of spiritual power. Without proper instruction, they will not understand the true source of the divine power they have experienced. Love, a former missionary on the island of Java, estimates that only ten percent of Folk Muslims who experience divine healing become followers of Jesus.[95]

The truth encounter about the source of blessing becomes a bridge for the gospel. *Abangan* Muslims pray to the spirits of the dead to receive blessings and to have their felt needs met. A valid question is, "Why pray to the spirit of a dead person when you can pray directly to the God who created that person?" *Abangan* Muslims know that the spirits are lower than God. A conversation about where the souls of the dead reside and how demons (*jinn*) pose as the dead can lead to a discussion of the fall of Satan from heaven. By contrasting a righteous and holy God and the fallen spirits, they can be encouraged to pray directly to God for their needs. As Christians share that God is the true source of all blessings, they can also share the ultimate blessing of God for mankind, the gift of Jesus as the Savior of the world (John 3:16).

Allegiance Encounter

The third encounter is allegiance. Kraft writes, "Allegiance encounters are the exercise of the will in commitment and obedience to the Lord. The initial allegiance encounter leads a person into relationship with Jesus."[96] The ultimate goal of Christian evangelism is for the hearer to choose to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. For an *abangan* Muslim, an allegiance encounter will follow a power encounter and a truth encounter. A demonstration of power to Muslims living in a world of hostile spirits earns the right for the Christian to be heard. The truth encounter points them to the true source of blessing and introduces them to the ultimate blessing from God. After these encounters, the Muslim must be challenged to commit to faith in Jesus. This is the allegiance

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[94]Charles Kraft, "Three Encounters in Christian Witness," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. 4th ed., ed. Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 446, Global DTL.

[95]Love, 194.

[96]Kraft, 447.

encounter, where they renounce the *abangan* worldview and Muslim religion and adopt a new worldview and relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

The rite of *ziarah kubur*, or visiting the graves of holy men or ancestors, has taken on an anthropocentric focus in the Folk Islam practiced by the Javanese. *Abangan* Muslims pray to the dead saints to receive blessings such as money, promotion, or healing. Scripture expressly forbids praying to the dead and encourages Christians to pray directly to God. Scripture also teaches that blessings only come from the Lord.

A biblical analysis of the practice of *ziarah kubur* and the underlying Javanese worldview concludes that the practice cannot be redeemed. However, some aspects of Javanese culture can be used by Christians to minister to Javanese Muslims in ways that are theocentric, adhere to Scripture, and honor the Javanese value of community.

Finally, by discussing *ziarah kubur* with *abangan* Muslims, Christians will find many bridges across which the gospel can penetrate into the *abangan* worldview, beliefs, and felt needs. Through power and truth encounters, they can be challenged to commit their allegiance to Jesus.

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