

Creating Islamic Places Tombs and Sanctity in West Java

JULIAN MILLIE

The Muslim traditions of West Java, the region occupied by the Sundanese ethnic group, share a characteristic common to those of many of Indonesia's Islamic communities; they often represent local conceptions of spirituality and power within specifically Islamic frameworks. In literary representations of the early Muslims of West Java, for example, these figures inevitably travel to Mecca to meet famous Muslims, often returning with an object that grants them power in their proselytizing efforts. This article explores Pasir Jengkol, a site notable for the tomb of Shaykh Jaelani whose name brings to mind Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani (561/1166), one of Islam's most revered intercessors. Apart from giving information about the site, this article discusses two contrasting ways in which holy sites in West Java are interpreted as sacred places. The first is by the connection of the site with a saintly person (*wali*). This connection is largely biographical and textual in nature. The second is through the landscape of the place itself, a connection which is experienced in an unmediated way by the pilgrim. I argue that Pasir Jengkol succeeds only through the second of these processes, in contrast to more successful sites in West Java at which the two processes operate together to create a sacred quality. One of these successful sites, the tomb of Shaykh Abdul Muhyi at Pamijahan, is referred to for comparative purposes.

The tomb

Pasir Jengkol lies above a small hill in a densely forested location in the regency of Tasikmalaya, West Java Province. The site is serene, and the complete absence of vendors testifies that this is not a popular site for pilgrimages. A number of people from the nearby village act as *kuncen* (guardians) and are able to guide pilgrims through a supplication ritual at the tomb. The first step in the ritual visit is the entry to the tomb; the guardian pauses at the threshold before entering while loudly offering three blessings to the *ruh* (spirit) of the Shaykh. He is believed to maintain a non-corporeal presence in the tomb. The tomb's interior is dominated by the casket containing the Shaykh's body. The ritual continues with the oral invocation known as *ta-wassul* (supplications to mediators), in which gifts of *al-fatihah* (the first chapter of the Quran) are offered up to various parties, including the Prophet Muhammad, Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani and Sunan Gunung Jati (the figure held by tradition to have brought Islam to West Java). After this, visitors are asked to verbalize their *hajat* (intention) directly to the Shaykh. The ritual ends with the recitation of Quranic verses.

It is not surprising to find Jaelani associated with a tomb. His name bears great authority for Muslims in West Java, where rituals in which his intercession is sought are popular. By its association with this most illustrious of *wali*, Pasir Jengkol derives legitimacy as a potent place for making supplications. Such appropriations are not uncommon in Indonesian traditions: Abdul Qadir is held to be the bearer of Islam to some Gayo communities in the north of the island of Sumatra¹ and Martin van Bruinessen has noted the existence of a similar narrative cherished by the Kanoman *kraton* (royal house) of Cirebon, West Java.² Abdul Qadir is not the only *wali* whose name is associated

Identification with authoritative Islamic figures and concepts extends to landscape elements, and many topographical features in West Java become Islamic landscapes through names of Islamic saints and leading figures of Sufi tradition. Such places are regarded as sites of *karamat* (sacred power), and are visited by Sundanese Muslims, whose penchant for making supplications at graves supports a domestic tourist industry.

in genealogies as the *khalifah* (successor) of the famed Acehese mystic of the Shattariyah Sufi Order, Abdul Rauf of Singkel (Aceh). Abdul Muhyi's tomb is also connected to Jaelani. A cave at the complex is thought to have been used by Abdul Muhyi to meditate with Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani.

Sacrality and biography

Pasir Jengkol lacks biographical or genealogical details about the holy person lying at rest there. The primary guardian of the tomb, Hassanuddin, claims no line of descent to Shaykh Jaelani. According to him, nobody in the village knows much about the tomb's history or its occupant. They know that Shaykh Jaelani was of Arab descent, that he had studied in Cirebon (on Java's north coast), and later had joined Abdul Muhyi in his struggle for Islam in the highlands of West Java. They had fought battles against what Hassanuddin described as "Java-nesse followers of the Hindu-Buddhist religion."

Hassanuddin was not aware that there previously existed a considerable body of information about Shaykh Jaelani, most notably in the oral traditions of the area. Some of this is preserved in an academic exercise by Edi Haer, a recently deceased employee of the Department of Education in Tasikmalaya.³ His thesis contains tales concerning Shaykh Jaelani collected from elders of the villages near Pasir Jengkol. According to these tales, Shaykh Jaelani was delegated by Sunan Gunung Jati, the famous sixteenth century proselytizer of Islam on Java's north coast, to spread Islam in the area of Pasir Jengkol. He was assisted by Shaykh Abdul Muhyi, who was performing the same task in nearby Pamijahan. Abdul Muhyi's wife was from the Pasir Jengkol area, and the two Shaykhs were companions. They would perform the Friday prayer together in Mecca, making the journey from West Java using the tunnel from a cave in Pamijahan that, according to tradition, was utilized by Abdul Muhyi for that purpose.

One of the stories collected by Edi Haer is as follows: Shaykh Jaelani was travelling to Pamijahan with Abdul Muhyi. Suddenly they were confronted by three thieves intent on murdering them. Shaykh Jaelani used his powers to overcome one with tiredness, the second with itchiness, and the third with fatigue. The two Shaykhs then escaped. But the three assailants used

their own powers to throw off their impediments and chased the Shaykhs. Shaykh Jaelani then transformed the road upon which the thieves were chasing them into a dead-end (*jalan buntu*), frustrating the villains. Nowadays, the village of Cibuntu marks that spot.

Yet this material seems to have dropped from memory in Pasir Jengkol, and hence Shaykh Jaelani is a saint lacking biography and genealogy. Sundanese are acutely aware of losses of heritage such as this.

[T]he physical attributes
of the landscape became
the vehicle for expressing
the site's sacred power.

One often hears the lament that “all our books were taken to Holland,” referring to the plentiful material relating to Sundanese Islamic tradition collected by Ch. Snouck Hurgronje and others. Discontinuity in oral tradition is also relevant. The *sasakala* (origin stories) are protected by ritual practitioners who, for various reasons may be reluctant to pass on their knowledge. This occurs simultaneously with a cultural shift whereby the religious legitimacy of rituals associated with sacred places is not so apparent for a younger generation receiving its education in state funded schools and whose cultural awareness is mediated by modern media. Finally, Tasikmalaya has suffered great instability. The area had been destabilized in the war of independence in the late 1940s, and in the decades after that havoc was caused by the Darul Islam *separatist* movement. During this period, according to some residents of Tasikmalaya, many items of heritage significance were destroyed.

For all these reasons, Pasir Jengkol is textually poor. This is not the case with the nearby tomb of Jaelani's companion, Abdul Muhyi. Abdul Muhyi's name appears in a number of genealogies linking him to other sacred sites in West Java and to well known teachers in Aceh and Banten. The tomb derives authority from these influential associations. Furthermore, a number of teachers living near his gravesite in Pamijahan possess manuscripts containing Sufi teachings and genealogies in which they themselves appear as successors of Abdul Muhyi. Cultivation of this legacy adds to their status. A Ph.D. thesis has been completed about his tomb and the related traditions, a textual creation which significantly enhances the tomb's stature.⁴ For these reasons, Abdul Muhyi is perceived as a figure whose influence extends outside of Pamijahan. This type of construction of sacrality does not occur in Pasir Jengkol, which simply lacks the discursive materials necessary for it to take form.

Sacrality and place

Yet, a saintly biography is not the only means leading people to perceive graves as places of sacred power. The physical location also stimulates this. Topography can create a sacrality that is independent of the saintly identity associated with the place. As noted, Pasir Jengkol is currently poor in terms of narratives involving the saint, but the landscape itself nevertheless leads pilgrims to construct the place as sacred. An incident that occurred during my visit to Pasir Jengkol nicely illustrates how this occurs. As we were leaving Pasir Jengkol, one of my Sundanese companions named Atam commented on a massive tree located by the enclosure's entrance. Atam lived in a village about two hours' drive from Pasir Jengkol, but had never previously been there. Hassanuddin (the guardian) said that the tree had in the past been cut down, but had then righted itself. Later that evening, when Atam and I were conversing socially with a group of people in his village Atam conveyed only two pieces of information to his friends about our visit to Pasir Jengkol. He firstly described its whereabouts, and then spent some time retelling the anecdote about the tree. No information was offered about Shaykh Jaelani. Instead, the physical attributes of the landscape became the vehicle for expressing the site's sacred power. I observed that although Atam found this sufficiently interesting to tell his friends, he, nor his friends, was not overly impressed by it. Perhaps this was because many Sundanese conventionally associate locations of natural beauty or unusual features such as large rocks or trees with non-corporeal beings. An isolated tomb in a beautiful location automatically creates an aura of sacrality. Against this background, his understanding of the sacred quality of Shaykh Jaelani's tomb required no reference to the individual himself.

If we compare this with the situation in Pamijahan, we realise how much wealthier that site is in terms of its sacred references. Pamijahan



PHOTO BY DR. D. A. RINKES, 1910

is no more beautiful than Pasir Jengkol, but at Pamijahan the guardians tell stories that bring authoritative Islamic figures in contact with the landscape. Take this example, which concerns a deep cave or tunnel visited by pilgrims to Pamijahan: Abdul Muhyi would use the tunnel to attend the Friday prayer in Mecca. Once he arrived late, puffing because his habit of smoking had left him breathless. Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani appeared to him and reprimanded him for smoking. The Pamijahan enclosure to this day remains a non-smoking zone. These stories see the biographical and landscape elements brought together. For the pilgrim, the Sundanese landscape is transformed into a specifically Islamic one by the “presence” of canonical Islamic figures in the stories.

Conclusion

Pamijahan and Pasir Jengkol contrast in the way visitors are able to construct the places as sacred. Textual resources affirm Abdul Muhyi as a figure of influence throughout Indonesia, and the guardians of the tomb make the site an Islamic landscape through stories in which topographical elements are brought into contact with Islamic notables. People approach the site confident that the tomb's occupant is an intercessor of potency. It is no wonder that bus groups are continually ferrying visitors to the tomb, granting the local community a constant flow of income from parking and entrance fees, and from the sale of souvenirs, cigarettes, food, and drinks. The historical representation of the person buried at Pasir Jengkol, by contrast, is weak. The lack of oral and written textual resources makes it difficult for Shaykh Jaelani to appear as a compelling intercessor for pilgrims, and it attracts few visitors. It is to some degree the natural environment of the place that sustains its sacrality, and in this way the tomb is not remarkable amongst the many sites of natural beauty in the sacred topography of the Sundanese.

Julian Millie is a post-doctoral fellow at the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne. He defended his Ph.D. thesis “Splashed by the Saint: Ritual reading and Islamic sanctity in West Java” at Leiden University on 14 February 2006. Email: Julian.millie@adm.monash.edu.au

**Supplicants
at the grave
of Shaykh
Abdul Muhyi in
Tasikmalaya,
West Java,
1910**

Notes

1. J.R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse: religion and ritual in Gayo society* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).
2. Martin van Bruinessen, “Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilāni and the Qādiriyya in Indonesia,” in “The Qādiriyyah Order,” ed. Thierry Zarcone, Ekrem Isin and Arthur Buehler, special issue, *Simurg: Journal of the History of Sufism* (Istanbul) 1-2 (2000).
3. Edi Haer, *Tinjauan terhadap tjerita-tjerita rakjat jang terdapat didaerah ketjamatan Tjibalong kabupaten Tasikmalaja; skripsi untuk melengkapi tugas-tugas dan memenuhi sjarat-sjarat untuk udjian sardjana muda pendidikan* (Institut keguruan dan Ilmu pendidikan Bandung extension Tasikmalaya, 1970).
4. Dissertation by Tommy Christomy, a lecturer of Universitas Indonesia currently working at Hankuk University in Seoul. A broadly representative example of his work about Abdul Muhyi is “Shattariyyah Tradition in West Java: The case of Pamijahan,” *Studia Islamika* 8, no.2 (2001): 55-82.