

Rituals, memory and the city: how intangible heritage shapes Islamic sacred districts in Java

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Rituals, memory and the city: how intangible heritage shapes Islamic sacred districts in Java

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ABSTRACT

Intangible heritage is undergoing a transformative shift towards becoming an active participant in cultural and identity formation. It is moving from merely safeguarding what is vulnerable to becoming a dynamic force that shapes both culture and space. This transformation unfolds through ongoing processes of valuing, re-evaluating and negotiating the boundaries between material and immaterial heritage. The case of Islamic urban heritage in post-colonial Java, expressed through generational rituals and social practices, demonstrates its persistent role in

shaping and reshaping urban districts, placing the intangible at the axis of significance that influences district regeneration. Drawing on four case studies from the early Islamic era, this paper examines how the rituals of *ziyarah* and *haul* shape city configuration and governance through the emotions and memories that linger in urban spaces.

Keywords

Ziyarah, emotional landscapes, ritual memory, sacred cultural spaces, humanities-informed planning

Introduction

There are underlying tensions that have been overlooked in the way historic districts are shaped and reshaped in their future development within the city, especially in relation to the direction of the city towards economic benefit and modernisation, which often conflicts with the community's living heritage. Within heritage studies, such conflicts resonate with critiques of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (hereafter 'AHD') (Smith 2006) and the challenges of applying UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (hereafter 'HUL') approach (UNESCO 2011), which often prioritise material conservation

and economic growth over lived practices. This paper, illustrated through case studies, explores how rituals that have been transmitted through generations since the 1600s defy linear historicism. These rituals are *ziyarah* (pilgrimage) and *haul* (death commemoration) in seven cities in Java.

Both practices are rooted in religious and memory traditions of remembrance of the *Walisanga*, the nine Islamic figures who spread Islam in Java between the 1200s and 1400s. In the modern era, they have also been extended to more recent Islamic figures, such as

Indonesia's former fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). *Ziyarah* refers to pilgrimage to the graveyards of the *Walisanga*, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, while *haul* is the annual commemoration of their deaths, observed on the day of their passing. While these practices are often legitimised within the Shāfi'ī school of thought as *bid'ah ḥasanah* (good innovation), reformist Islamic movements such as Salafism contest them as religious deviations (Lynch 2010; Muthuswamy 2022; Pektaş and Kaşıkçı 2025).

Despite these contested opinions, the practices reach around one million pilgrims every year during Ramadan in Java, across nine graveyard locations encompassing seven cities: Gresik, Surabaya, Tuban, Lamongan, Kudus, Demak and Cirebon. Pilgrimage has also been organised and promoted as religious tourism. Mosques, travel agents and Islamic circles arrange *ziyarah* routes to visit all nine graveyards or selected sites. A full pilgrimage usually takes a week, travelling from East to West Java or vice versa, while partial pilgrimages focus on specific regions.

The number of pilgrims, ranging from hundreds daily to hundreds of thousands during peak times, has undeniably shaped these historic sites not only as sacred cultural landscapes but also as sites of tourism – a phenomenon observed in many other cultural landscapes as well (Taylor 2008; Woodward 2010). The influx of pilgrims has pushed these sacred spaces to adapt, incorporating commercial activities such as shops, bazaars and restaurants alongside public facilities such as schools and health centres. This situation gives rise to several frictions in the historic districts: first, the contestation between religious and non-religious activities that occupy and shape these districts, which affects how they will be developed and conserved; and second, the negotiation of methodologies and approaches that could be integrated into historic district masterplans for future development. This paper seeks to explore how communities, particularly those that carry the memory of these commemorations, perceive and treat their historic districts in ways closer to heritage conservation practice than to engineering-based approaches.

This topic is particularly compelling because of its potential to push boundaries and negotiate intersections between intangible heritage, memory studies and urban planning as both an engineering discipline and a facilitator of urban space. *Ziyarah* and *haul*, as embodied acts of

ritual tied to memory and emotion, have not been studied in depth in relation to the development of urban spaces. However, these spaces are not only temporary ritual sites but also living environments for residents who inhabit the historic districts. The failure to protect the emotions and memory embedded in these districts risks accelerating the decline of sacred spaces, historic districts and the wider urban settlements connected to them. This paper argues that recognising and protecting the emotional and mnemonic dimensions of these rituals is crucial to sustaining sacred spaces, historic districts and urban settlements in Java.

Research objectives and methodology

This study aims to explore the sacred and cultural landscapes of the *Walisanga* graveyards in post-colonial Java, Indonesia, through humanities-based approaches. It focuses on how space is perceived and shaped by the community within a shared collective identity, which should be protected as an inherited form of living heritage expressed through rituals and social practices. By engaging with the discourse of cultural landscapes, the HUL approach and heritage studies, this research moves beyond practical and economy-centred perspectives in historic district conservation. It argues that memory, enacted through rituals and social practices, constitutes a sustainable and community-rooted approach to conservation.

The research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in urban ethnography and heritage fieldwork. Combining spatial observation, walking interviews and multi-stakeholder dialogue, it seeks to understand how Islamic sacred graveyards are experienced and managed. The study employed a periodic, site-specific ethnographic approach focused on embodied experience, stakeholder engagement and contested spatial meaning. While not immersive in the classical anthropological sense, the method is grounded in interpretive and urban ethnography traditions that emphasise relational depth over chronological length (Denzin 1997; Pink 2015).

Site selection and observations

Fieldwork was conducted across four key Islamic sacred graveyard sites in Java: Sunan Ampel (Surabaya), Sunan Giri (Gresik), Maulana Malik Ibrahim (Gresik) and Sunan Kalijaga (Demak). These sites are part of the *Walisanga* pilgrimage destinations. Each year, pilgrims,

who usually belong to the same group (such as a mosque group, neighbourhood group or even small family group), aim to visit all nine sites. Many travel organiser options are available if a person or small family group cannot afford individual travel. The reason for choosing these four sites was primarily due to their accessibility and the feasibility of conducting interviews.

The sites were observed through back-to-back and multiple visits over the course of a year-long fieldwork period, with a focus on capturing the most essential moments during Ramadan in order to document relevant social, cultural and behavioural dynamics at the historic sites. This approach also enabled reflexive engagement by the researcher. Data were collected from multiple sources and were triangulated – both through data and theory triangulation – during the analysis process, following the guidelines of Rapid Ethnographic Research (Vindrola-Padros 2021; Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros 2018). The subjects of observation included:

- *Space*: both physical layout and representational space.
- *People*: identifying the types of actors involved and the values embedded in their activities.
- *Activities*: including pilgrimage, tourism, site management and conservation efforts.
- *Events*: particularly *ziyarah* and *haul* rituals.

- *Time*: covering both temporal rhythms (e.g. day and night cycles) and event-based timing (e.g. during annual rituals or peak visitation periods).

Results

Intangible heritage, and how the ziyarah and haul rituals impacted the urban form

Islamic heritage in the *Walisanga* era left several intangible cultural practices, including basic Islamic rituals such as daily prayers, as well as artistic and performative traditions for introducing Islamic teachings (*tembang macapat*, *gamelan* and *wayang*) to narrative manuscripts. However, the most common are the *ziyarah* and *haul* rituals at the *Walisanga* tombs. Historical sources suggest that these rituals have their roots in Javanese Islam, as the *Babad* (Chronicle) Gresik manuscript (16th century) recorded the graveyard or *Jaratan/Pakoekoeboeran* (Javanese language) of the first *Walisanga*, Maulana Malik Ibrahim, the saint (*pandita*) from Jedah Arab (*Gedah Ngarab*). Tomé Pires, in *Suma Oriental*, also recorded that Gresik, the entry point of Islam in Java, had a famous, wealthy international port known as the Port of Jortan, which was also known as to be the port with many graveyards. During the same period, Sufism had become a culture in Malacca and had reached its pinnacle as an engine of Islamic propagation

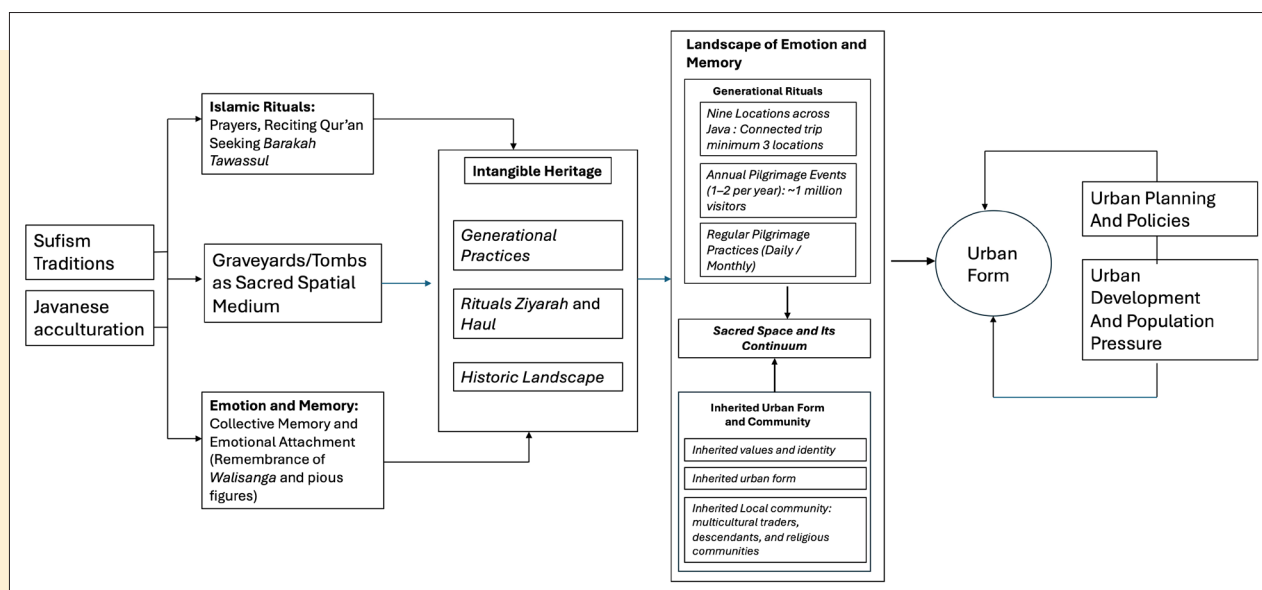


Figure 1 Conceptual relationship between intangible heritage practices, collective memory formation, and the spatial development of historic districts
Source: Authors

in Java (Peacock 2024). Sufism practices introduced more syncretic Islamic forms known as *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Unity of Existence), which bridged the worldly and the afterlife by using graveyards as a medium of religious gathering (Peacock 2024). As a result, graveyard rituals have taken on increased importance.

The *Walisanga* tombs nowadays can be found in nine locations in seven cities, ranging from the most urbanised, such as Sunan Ampel in Surabaya, to middle cities such as Gresik, Cirebon and Kudus; to small cities such as Demak; and to villages such as Muria. The ongoing activities of the annual rituals represent an enduring form of intangible heritage. In these historic districts, rituals include praying, reciting the Qur'an, and seeking blessings (*barakah*) via *Walisanga* (*tawassul*). Through repetition, generational rituals reproduce collective memories and emotional attachment to places. The rituals have unconsciously shaped the historic district, navigating functions such as sacred space, living environment and tourism, which are frequently overlooked in public policy and planning. Figure 1 represents the relationship between intangible heritage and urban form.

The fabric of the Islamic sacred cultural landscape and living neighbourhoods

The idea of HUL is to balance heritage conservation, economic development and sustainable development goals (UNESCO 2011). Most cases of HUL integration emphasise the cultural landscape as a relationship between people, place and belief systems (Yodsurang et al. 2025), continuing Taylor's (2023) emphasis on connectivity beyond local values, cosmology and land-use practices. Carboni and De Luca (2016) likewise highlight how intangible values and tangible forms together shape the way people interpret their environment.

Through analysis of four sites across Java, concentric patterns consistently emerge within sacred historic districts. The concentric zones are structured by the ritual practices of *ziyarah* and *haul*, which divide the districts into inner and outer spheres of sacredness. In an Anglo-Saxon framework, this might be read through Eliade's binary of sacred versus profane (Eliade, 1959; Shiner, 1972). However, in Islamic thought, this binary does not fully hold: any place marked by prayer or remembrance of God may be elevated into the sacred (O'Meara 2022). This explains why graveyards – ordinarily liminal in many traditions – are perceived as sacred in these districts (Figure 2). The

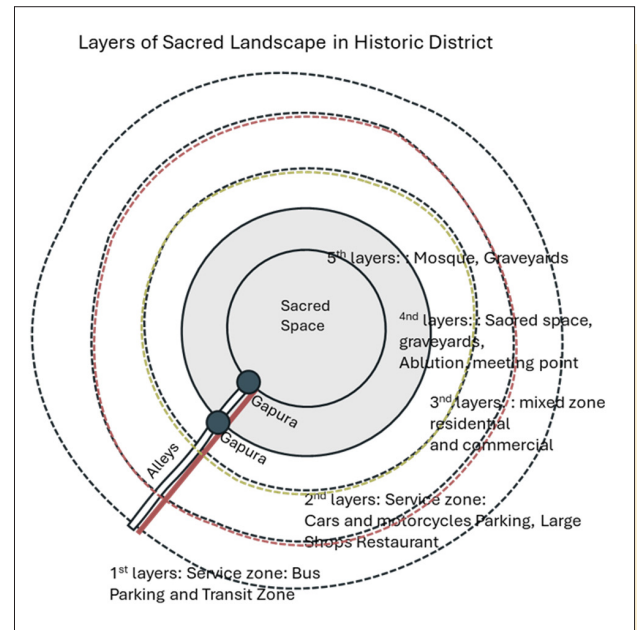


Figure 2
Layers of Sacred Landscape in Postcolonial Java
Source: Authors

core, represented in grey in the figure, denotes the most sacred layers, while the surrounding areas are not simply 'profane' but rather 'less sacred', as elaborated further in the following section.

Observations of the outer layers illustrate this ambiguity. The outermost layer serves primarily as a transit hub, where buses arrive from across Java. Pilgrims often walk or use secondary transport to reach the second layer, which functions as a service zone with shops and restaurants. These spaces carry a chaotic and irregular nuance. Some areas are crowded and full of energy, with retailers lining the paths, promoting food, clothes and accessories. The smells of traditional Arabic dishes and perfumes often mix with the scent of pilgrims. The third layer blends residential and commercial uses, its narrow alleys (*gangs*) crowded with pilgrims, tourists and residents (Figure 3).

The fourth layer marks the threshold of sacredness, often delineated by a *gapura* (gate), where ablution takes place and gendered separation is observed. Upon entering the gate, there is a palpable shift: a dimension marked by prayer, *dzikr* and the aroma of frangipani, a flower often used in Javanese Islamic graveyards. The architecture – strange, yet familiar – reflects Javanese cultural forms, while the cul-de-sac patterns of surrounding neighbourhoods clash

Layers 4th and 5th : The Sacred



Layers 1st, 2nd and 3rd : The Less Sacred



Figure 3
Sacred Space Layers Activities
Source: Authors

with the ideals of regularity, aesthetics and modernity typical of urban planning. This zone may also include the graves of descendants and other historic figures, visited by pilgrims alongside the *Walisanga*. The fifth layer is the sacred core, typically marked by a mosque. In some cases, mosque expansion has absorbed the graveyard itself, collapsing the distance between worship space and burial site. This layering shows that sacredness is graduated and adaptive, challenging conservation models that isolate only core monuments or material assets.

The fabric of the Islamic sacred cultural landscape and the actors

The concentric layering of sacred districts also reflects the roles of different actors and governance regimes. The less sacred zones (white areas) are managed and planned by government authorities, whose interventions focus on infrastructure, functionality and, increasingly, the

optimisation of sites for economic purposes. In contrast, the grey areas – representing the sacred core – are overseen by the *juru kunci* (site guardians), whose responsibility is to sustain and transmit memory, ensuring that the sacred remains felt and remembered. These overlapping domains reflect the scope of authority exercised by each group: government management from the outside in, and custodianship from the inside out.

Beyond formal management, two broad groups of actors emerge. The first group, which can be designated as 'memory keepers', includes pilgrims, *juru kunci* (guardians of the tombs) and residents. These are the people who sustain, embody and transmit the sacred meaning of the site through daily practice, ritual and memory, and who are the most important actors in this sacred cultural landscape. Pilgrims are mostly Javanese, or people affiliated with *Nahdlatul Ulama* (hereafter 'NU')

– one of the largest Islamic cultural communities in Java. NU is rooted in grassroots networks, especially among people of lower educational and economic backgrounds (Meyer 2025; Saenong 2021). They are predominant in poorer regions of Java and Madura, such as Trenggalek, Bangkalan and Pamekasan. Their religious practice focuses on making religion simple and liveable – something that can be followed through routine, usually guided by their local *ulama*. Because of this, engaging in theological debate or dialectic reasoning is not common. Instead, ritual becomes the easiest way to align oneself with religion (Meyer 2025).

Juru kunci are part of a broader system that includes descendants of the *Walisanga* and members of NU. Many of them are affiliated with Islamic foundations (*yayasan*) linked to NU, which not only hold religious authority but also serve administrative and communication functions – especially in matters of heritage site conservation and engagement with government authorities. The *juru kunci* are also responsible for orally transmitting the history and memory of the *Walisanga* to pilgrims and the wider public. Their role is driven by deep religious piety and a belief that preserving this memory will bring divine blessings and livelihood.

This is the Sunan Kalijaga Foundation. I've already passed the period of active leadership, so now I'm more like an elder. I could still be considered an advisor, but people mostly see me as someone involved in daily affairs. I don't handle everything every day anymore, but I'm usually responsible for managing the oil. And yes, I am one of the descendants of Sunan Kalijaga. (HN, juru kunci of Sunan Kalijaga, personal communication, 4 July 2024)

The third group of memory keepers are the residents. In many sacred sites, local communities consist of both saintly descendants and culturally diverse populations shaped by historic international trade. These include Arab, Indian, Gujarati, Javanese and Madurese communities. Among the residents, views on *ziyarah* vary. Those who support it are usually descendants who follow the Shāfi'ī school. Those who do not support it range more widely and often include followers of the Ḥanbalī school, which is common among Arab Yemeni descendants.

There are two types of residents here. One group consists of descendants rooted in the Shāfi'ī tradition

– they're mostly Arabs we refer to as Ba'alawi. The others are non-Ba'alawi. My family and ancestors come from Hadramaut, Yemen, and we follow the Ḥanbalī madhhab. (HM, Ampel resident, personal communication, 22 June 2024)

The second broad group of actors, which can be designated as 'rational eyes', consists of government officials, planning consultants and tourists. Their engagement with the sites tends to be more functional, observational or fleeting, shaped by regulation, policy or visual consumption rather than lived ritual. The spatial reach of each group and actors varies. Pilgrims and tourists are the only ones to engage with all five layers – from the outer transit hubs to the innermost sacred core – though tourists often engage only superficially. *Juru kunci* are concentrated in the sacred inner layers, where they lead rituals and perform spiritual maintenance. Residents occupy a more complex position: some actively participate in pilgrimage practices, while others do not but still acknowledge and respect the sacredness of the district. In contrast, government officials and planners are generally limited to the outer zones (Layers 1–3), where their focus remains on infrastructure and access. Their engagement with the inner sacred layers tends to be abstract or regulatory rather than embodied. These distinctions are illustrated in Figure 4, which maps the degrees of spatial engagement across groups.

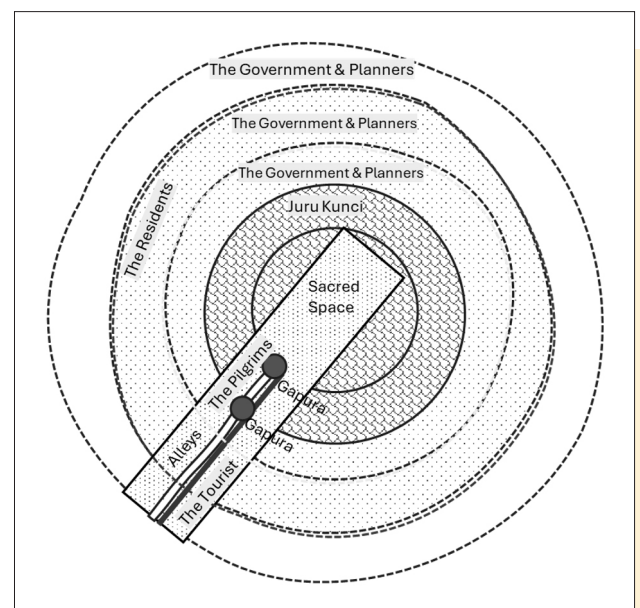


Figure 4
Actors and Cultural Sacred Space Layers
Source: Authors

Memory and emotion in the Islamic sacred landscape

The interactions between space, rituals and memory keepers are associated and resonate with what Taylor (2008, 2012) refers to as the 'landscape of emotions and memory'. Taylor (2008, 2012) argues that there are deep memories and emotions tied to the cultural landscape. What makes the inner sacred layers feel more sacred than the outer layers is the peculiar and collective emotions and memories embedded in the space. As noted, all the memory keepers operate in these spaces.

Drawing on Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka's work, the concept of bonding memory is understood as a foundational mechanism through which individuals develop emotional and historical attachment to a place. This bonding memory transforms over time into what Halbwachs (1992) conceptualises as collective memory – a shared framework through which collective identity is asserted and sustained (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Assmann and Livingstone 2006; Halbwachs 1992). The cases discussed here illustrate a distinctive mode of memory formation within sacred Islamic graveyards through rituals such as *ziyarah* and *haul*, ultimately revealing the embedded collective identity that shapes the

historic character of these inner layers.

Meanwhile, in the outer layers – despite the expectation that these spheres would be mundane – the presence of residents, who are also part of the memory keepers, strongly influences how the outer layers are perceived and approached. The residents see a continuity of blessing in being near or living within the sacred space, which is reflected in their economic and social activities. They tie everything to the results of strong collective memory and emotions embedded in both the inner and outer layers. However, there are distinct differences between the forms of memory and emotion present in the inner and outer layers.

Memory and emotion in the inner layers

The sacred layers in this landscape are the inner zones (Layers 4 and 5), which are predominantly governed and maintained by memory keepers. This is where the rituals of *ziyarah* and *haul* are performed (Figure 5). Pilgrims typically pray, chant *dhikr* (remembrance of God), recite the Qur'an and make specific *du'a* (supplications). Within these sacred layers, four types of memory are enacted through ritual: the memory of God; the memory of divine reward, including divine blessing (*barakah*); the memory



Figure 5
Rituals Ziyarah and Haul at Ampel Surabaya.
Source: Instagram @MasjidAmpel, Accessed 7 September 2025. Reproduced here for academic purposes.

of the *Walisanga* as saintly intermediaries close to God (*tawassul*); and the memory of death, including the pilgrims' own mortality. These memories are amplified through particular emotions: longing (for divine closeness and forgiveness), *khusyu'* (deep concentration and surrender) and *taubah* (repentance). Together, these emotions embody and intensify the collective memories sustained in the sacred core.

To elaborate on the memories enacted through *ziyarah* and *haul*, it is important to note the conviction that remembering God itself brings *barakah* – divine blessing resonates with the Qur'anic promise in Surah At-Talaq (65: 2–3): '... And whoever is mindful of Allah – He will make a way out for them and provide for them from where they do not expect. And whoever relies upon Allah – then He is sufficient for them ...'

Maybe it's also because we ... have a positive mindset toward Allah, you know? Yes, through praying, through pilgrimage ... insyaAllah, alhamdulillah, things become easier. Not just easier – so we end up praying more and remembering Allah more often. (DW, pilgrim, personal communication, 9 May 2025)

If there is Allah's blessing and the blessing of Kanjeng Sunan, insyaAllah it will thrive. If not, then it means we must plant something else. (BH, juru kunci of Sunan Giri's Graveyard, personal communication, 24 April 2024)

The pursuit of *barakah* is understood by Muslims as striving for the highest benefits in this world – such as wealth, sustenance, a good career, harmonious relationships and strong family ties. This pursuit is encouraged in both the Qur'an and Hadith. However, Islam also teaches that the material world is temporary and insignificant compared to the rewards of the hereafter. Thus, when Muslims do not receive what they desire in this life, they are reminded that everything is predestined and are encouraged to be patient with *sabr jameel* (beautiful patience), believing that their reward awaits in the hereafter.

This is the energy that drives the practice of pilgrimage. It is not only about seeking closeness to God but also about the hope for divine reward. This is what transforms an ordinary landscape into a sacred and even magical space – and memory keepers are the ones who believe most deeply in this transformation. While all Muslims share the goal

of seeking *barakah*, their methods differ. One approach is to seek *barakah* directly from God through remembrance and prayer in every place. The other approach is to use *tawassul* – an intermediary connection through individuals who are believed to be close to God, such as the *ulama* or saints (e.g. the *Walisanga*). The miracles or spiritual power associated with these figures is called *karomah*. The acts of performing *tawassul* through the *karomah* of the *ulama* are expressed in rituals such as *ziyarah* and *haul*. Those who engage in *ziyarah* and *haul* believe that supplications (*du'a*) made at these sacred sites are more likely to be accepted – this is the theological basis of *tawassul* (Amaruli et al. 2022; Slama 2014).

Among the saints we often use for tawassul, I personally see them all as equal. In the past, when I was a child, I would just follow along, not fully understanding the essence. It was always crowded during ziyarah, lots of groups coming and going. Sometimes when one group arrived, it distracted me from my own prayer, and I would accidentally follow along with their recitation. (AF, pilgrim, personal communication, 26 April 2024)

It is important to clarify that *tawassul* does not mean praying to the dead. Rather, it is the belief that praying near those who are close to God increases the likelihood that the *du'a* will be accepted. The rituals include Qur'an recitation, remembrance of God, and sending *du'a* to the Prophet and to those who have passed. This practice also activates a third form of memory within the pilgrimage: the memory of one's own death. By remembering death, the pilgrims are reminded to live righteously and to avoid wrongdoing.

Sometimes, during ziyarah, when I'm sitting and praying with many people around me, I suddenly think: 'Oh, Allah ... I'm reminded of death. Will anyone pray for me when I die?' (RN, pilgrim, personal communication, 28 April 2024)

Beyond the memory of God, *ulama* and death that is embodied in the chanting of prayer (*dzikir*) in the sacred space, that memory ignites deep emotions that are often hard to classify within basic emotion theory, which includes: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise (Ekman 1992). For example, the emotion of crying because they remember God – is that sadness? Or, as one pilgrim described, the 'feeling of repentance' – is that fear?

Sadness? Or something else entirely?

But now, over time, it's become more emotional – I often cry during prayer. After making du'a, I can finally focus and feel the depth of it. (AF, pilgrim, personal communication, 26 April 2024)

At those moments, I feel a bit repentant. I don't know why – it just makes me reflect on death more deeply. (AH, pilgrim, personal communication, 28 April 2024)

Van Heijst et al. (2025), however, argue that emotions are evolving, and that rigid definitions separating emotions and feelings are increasingly inadequate. Referring to Barrett's (2017) Theory of Constructed Emotion (hereafter 'TCE'), Van Heijst et al. emphasise that 'the emotions humans experience are heavily dependent on the specific situations, and the emotion concepts individuals have formed.' In this view, the emotional landscape of sacred space should be redefined to accommodate the richness and specificity of the collective emotions it produces.

Next, drawing from cross-transcript narratives among pilgrims and residents, several emotions emerge as deeply connected to the Islamic sacred space in Java:

- *Longing*: Often expressed through heartfelt *du'a*, this emotion lies at the intersection of hope and sadness. Pilgrims yearn for divine closeness, forgiveness, or a breakthrough in life, anchoring their emotions in the sacred environment.
- *Khusyu'*: This is the feeling of intense connection with God, born from deep concentration in prayer. It creates a state of humility, surrender and calm submission. *Khusyu'* can be understood as a synthesis of longing, fear and joy.
- *Taubah (repentance)*: This emotion arises from self-disgust over past wrongs, fear of divine punishment, and the joy that comes from the hope of being spiritually cleansed. Repentance in this context is not only emotional but also transformative.

Together, these emotions often lead to a state of gratitude, calmness and clarity, empowering pilgrims to face life's complexities with renewed purpose and spiritual grounding.

And through this ziyarah, what we feel is that the heart becomes calm ... clear. (Munir, pilgrim, personal

communication, 28 April 2024)

Reflecting on the proposed framework of the landscape of memory and emotion, this sacred space reveals a distinct epistemological difference between Islamic landscapes of remembrance – particularly in relation to death – and those typically conceptualised in Western memory and heritage discourse. While Western approaches often centre on loss, trauma and war (Frihammar and Silverman 2017; Macdonald 2013; Nora 2008; Young 2008), the Islamic sacred landscape is shaped by longing, hope and the pursuit of sustenance drawn from the memory it retains. Rather than absence, it emphasises presence and continuity – through *ziyarah*, *dzikr*, and the remembrance of *ulama* and the afterlife. This perspective offers a meaningful contribution to the broader field of memory studies and the heritage of death, expanding how we understand the emotional and ritual dimensions of sacred space.

Memory and emotion in the outer layers

Drawing on Burgess's (1925) urban theory of concentric zones, which claims that the city is a series of rings that expand from the central business district (hereafter 'CBD'), signifying the interaction between the inner and outer layers, the sacred inner layers act as the CBD. In this context, the inner sacred space is not the only heritage in urban perspectives; it is always supported by the surrounding area that was also home to the memory keepers, which includes the multi-generational community that practises *ziyarah* and *haul*; traditional communities; and *Walisanga's* descendants, who firmly believe that living near the sacred space is linked to their identity and sustenance. They feel that space proximity connects them to the *barakah* (blessing) and is a valuable inheritance. The beliefs of *barakah* create multiplier effects and strong relationships between the inner and outer layers. *Barakah* goes beyond wealth and social motivation. It is connected to the rituals that people share. It is also tied to and embodied in different emotional forms within each layer. Thus, outer layers are not profane spillover but a continuum of belonging, and livelihood sustained by collective memory. No literature that discusses landscape and memory in this kind of layered, relational notion has been located.

This finding emerged from zooming in on one of the memory keepers living in Ampel – namely, a resident. In an earlier description, one of the residents explained how

the community is divided between descendants of the *Walisanga*—those who are actively involved in remembrance – and her own group, who do not actively participate nor believe that such practices are part of Islamic tradition. Her group is still categorised as ‘memory keeper’ because they benefit from and participate in the remembrance, but in a different form from the others. Uniquely, their focus is not located in the inner layers, but in the outer layers. Just as in economic theory, this provides living evidence that memory is a driving force similar to economic activities. It creates multiplier effects and helps to construct space – one that cannot be separated from meaning. This must trigger curiosity: Why? And how?

The answer is still related to the multiplier effects of *barakah* itself. First, a sense of closeness to God, and to those who are close to God, is strongly formed in this resident community. Although they belong to different sects of Islam, to some extent they respect each other; more importantly, they respect the same God, the same Prophet, the same obligatory *ibadah*, and appreciate the *Walisanga*’s contribution to the Islamic world in Indonesia. They may pray in different mosques, have different remembrance events and different community networks, but none of them denies that the sacred space of Ampel feels deeply and uniquely Islamic. To them, the *adzan*, Ramadan activities and the *dzikr* cannot be replicated anywhere else.

Yeah ... it just feels so different from my husband’s home in East Surabaya, which is more modern. Here, I can really feel God, and I feel ... it’s hard to explain, but a strong sense of spiritualism ... Even though I’ve never belonged to the pilgrims. (HM, Ampel resident, personal communication, 22 June 2024)

This unwavering attachment among residents who are not part of the pilgrimage is motivated by the collective cultural memory of the community itself. Even though they come from different groups than those who engage directly with the sacred space, they have their own cultural memory and identity that is strongly tied to this sacred district. It enacts their collective identity.

One of the small shop owners who also lives there stated that to preserve their memory and sense of belonging, one house could be registered under six families. This means that at least 30 people live in a 10 × 15 square-metre house, which seems almost impossible. However, further

investigation of other stalls and homes nearby confirmed this. The confirmation process was one of the difficult parts of the fieldwork – especially considering that Arab communities are generally very private about their lives. In this district, two to three families casually live together. A large two-storey home can hold between eight and ten people. But often, houses registered under six families might only have one or two families currently living there. The rest have moved nearby or relocated entirely. Still, they refuse to move their registration or community identity away from Ampel. They will always say: ‘I belong to that historic district.’

The same pattern also exists in Gresik, especially around the tombs of Maulana Malik Ibrahim, due to the similar ethnic and cultural typology in those areas. This condition is quite the opposite of the situation in Demak, where the residential layer is smaller in scale compared to Ampel. The surrounding zones have been modernised, and the sacred site has been completely separated from the city centre. Both cases could possibly represent types of *Walisanga* graveyard networks that lend credence to the argument that the collective memory of identity and community has played a significant role in shaping the landscape of the outer layers.

Second is the memory of the residue of greater past activity in the Ampel historic district. Famous for more than just its graveyards, Ampel has always been a significant part of a global port trading network. It has long served as a home to diverse ethnic groups, each offering distinct goods and services. But these activities are not seen as merely economic. The people here believe that this kind of commerce is part of the *barakah* (divine blessing) of the *Walisanga* (Figure 6).

*Yes, of course – this market, it exists because of the barakah of Sunan Ampel. The market thrives, people can sell their goods, hotels are booked by large pilgrim groups. Could any of this happen if there were no *Walisanga*? (IS, Madurese resident of Ampel, personal communication, 20 June 2024)*

One of the locals brought the researcher to a small shop and introduced them to its owner. The researcher sat there for about an hour or two. The old man, roughly 80 years old and of Arab descent, owned and managed the store. When asked whether he had ever considered moving or opening a new branch somewhere else in Surabaya – or



Figure 6
Outer Layers Ampel Surabaya.
Source: Instagram @MasjidAmpel, Accessed 7 September 2025. Reproduced here for academic purposes.

even in another city – he replied:

What for? I already have great sustenance here. Money is not a problem here ... Yeah, this is all because of the barakah of Ampel. (AS, in Ampel, personal communication, 24 June 2024)

The owner explained that he not only runs the shop but also supports and takes care of his extended family – not just his nuclear one. He looks after his sisters and nieces and owns a two-storey house in Ampel which he proudly claimed is very expensive. During the researcher's time observing at the shop, she saw him sitting calmly while managing transactions in the traditional way (cash). In just two hours during a weekday, he handled about 3 million rupiah in sales – roughly equivalent to the monthly minimum wage in Surabaya. Assuming a 10% profit margin, working 8 hours a day for 30 days, he could easily be earning 36 million rupiah (around USD2200) – which is about 12 times the city's average income. The researcher believes that this is a conservative estimate. The owner also employs from three to five workers himself. As a comparison, the salary of an average lecturer in Indonesia will not be enough to purchase a small home in Ampel. Currently, for example, there is one home – 76 square

metres – on the market priced at 1.6 billion rupiah (around USD100,000). If many old towns are actively experiencing gentrification and revitalisation, Ampel has been an outlier.

Memory in these outer layers does not stop at the multiplier effects of *barakah*; it is also enriched by other forms of cultural collective memory, which are noted as an important source in urban planning. This memory is embodied and transmitted by various actors – from the *juru kunci* to the residents themselves. These memories include both social and cultural patterns and spatial patterns, particularly those associated with the *Walisanga*. The cultural memories embedded in this sacred space include customs and practices, organisational structures, and the acculturation of religious practices.

Moh limo – yes, that's real. I experienced it myself. The surrounding community here used to practice madon (adultery), mabuk (drunkenness), madat (drug use), maling (theft), and main (gambling). Moh means 'no', and limo means 'five'. So 'moh limo' means refusing those five things: no to adultery, no to prostitution, no to drugs, no to drunkenness, and no to gambling. (IS, Madurese resident of Ampel, personal communication, 20 June 2024)

In the area around Giri, it's called Pegiren. The people living around it are referred to as Pegiren. Even today, they have what's called orong-orong – at night they gather, usually to eat together and stay awake into the night with the ulama, often accompanied by someone guiding them. Back then it was called orong-orong, but now the name has been changed to Al-Hikmah. (BH, *juru kunci* of Sunan Giri's Graveyard, personal communication, 24 April 2024)

Insyallah, yes, that's how it is. One example is tahlilan – that's when people gather after someone passes away. In Hinduism and Buddhism, they also have gatherings like that. So it was gradually adapted – just a little changed. It's okay to gather, but now we recite the kalimat tahlil, tawhid and tahlil. (IS, Madurese resident of Ampel, personal communication, 20 June 2024)

Another form of memory, still related to social and cultural practices, is found in performances and artistic expressions – such as *wayang* (shadow puppetry) and *tembang* (traditional chants or songs) – which serve as media for transmitting Islamic values. The community also continues to preserve and recall the moral teachings of the *Walisanga* themselves.

Like when we sing *tembang* – that's called *suluk*, from Sunan Bonang. And then the person who developed *wayang* and *syair macapat* was Sunan Kalijaga. He had two companions who helped compose *aksara jorin* – what we now call *tembang macapat*. (HM, *juru kunci* of Sunan Kalijaga, personal communication, 4 July 2024)

The last part of memory in the outer layers – especially among the *juru kunci* and residents – is the memory of spatial structure and organisation. The Ampel residents and *juru kunci* eloquently described the origins of Ampel, tracing its history from the Majapahit era, the origin of the name 'Ampel', to the activities that once took place there, particularly the Islamic boarding school – believed to be the oldest one – known in Indonesia as a *pesantren*. Over time, the *pesantren* model has been adopted by many Islamic sects, including NU, Muhammadiyah and even Salafy. The *juru kunci* of Maulana Malik Ibrahim also expressed his strong belief in the existence of a port city during the rise of the Islamic era, with spatial life centred around it. The *juru kunci* of Giri and Sunan Kalijaga likewise mentioned

Kedaton and the lost kingdoms associated with both figures. However, little of these spatial memories have ever been explored or acknowledged by the government in the development of the historic districts.

Pushing disciplinary boundaries: negotiating intangible heritage in Indonesia's urban development framework

Interviews with government officials, planning consultants and heritage experts led to the conclusion that discussions of intangible heritage narratives and memory were uncommon. The distinction between history and memory was often blurred or overlooked, with the result that historic districts tended to be managed as historical artifacts, focused primarily on preserving visibility rather than safeguarding the intangible values that give meaning to place. The root of this issue lies in the knowledge gap between intangible heritage in post-colonial Java – such as identity, values and memory – and the practices of urban planning. This gap is embedded in the institutional legal framework. The current legal basis for *cagar budaya* (cultural heritage), rooted in rational planning, is largely physical. The regulations used to guide the *Kota Pusaka* (Heritage City) program emphasise tangible aspects, including:

- Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage
- Law No. 28 of 2002 on Buildings
- The Omnibus Law, replacing Law No. 26 of 2007 on Spatial Planning
- Government Regulation No. 36 of 2005 on the implementation of Building Law
- Minister of Public Works and Housing Regulation No. 1 of 2015 on Preserved Heritage Buildings.

Although *Kota Pusaka* was supposedly designed to adopt the HUL framework in line with UNESCO's recommendations, no legal document explicitly includes intangible heritage under its protection. Other regulations, such as:

- Presidential Regulation No. 78 of 2007 (ratifying the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage)
- Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 106 of 2013 on Indonesia's Intangible Cultural Heritage
- Law No. 28 of 2014 on Copyright

were meant to build a foundation for safeguarding

intangible heritage. However, these laws focus mostly on community-based preservation and cultural performance. The responsibility is placed in the hands of cultural practitioners, such as artists, performers and linguists; however, these actors have largely been excluded from the interpretive narratives of historic sites. The proposed solution for this framework is to bridge disciplinary boundaries between the humanities and planning – especially in areas related to rituals and social practices – when planning historic districts. Crucial steps need to be performed that recognise memory as part of the infrastructure of historic districts, not only their physical components. At least two components need to change in this proposal, including the epistemological changes and methodological transformation.

The first step is navigating epistemological changes in the way planners process the historic district. The heritage knowledge gap remains visible – even among self-identified heritage experts. In Indonesia, scholarship in heritage studies often prioritises socio-cultural, historical or tangible heritage domains, with comparatively less emphasis placed on how such perspectives might be meaningfully inserted into planning practice. Recognising intangible heritage as not just a performance or touristic activity, but rather as a repository of memory and life, and as a crucial part of community identity and urban morphological change, forms the foundation for this change. Combining humanities and planning (humanities-informed planning) creates essential tools for building narratives, forging identities and expressing values. Epistemological changes should also bring an end to uneven engagement with the language and uses of heritage – terms such as ‘memory’, ‘identity’, ‘value’ and ‘cultural landscape’ should be the central framework, not a peripheral concept.

The next step is the methodological transformation, especially related to the process of participatory planning. Most rationalists focused their research on individuals with legitimacy and power, such as community legal representatives, and some replaced this approach

with social data mining. Both processes often failed to include, or to identify, the real actors or memory keepers in the planning process. Lastly, it requires the change in policy-making and guidelines related to heritage policy to meaningfully connect the intangible and tangible factors in a unified manner.

Conclusion

Islamic sacred heritage in post-colonial Java exposes how intangible heritage such as the rituals of *ziyarah* and *haul* could move, shape and sustain a whole district. These districts, rich in memory and emotion, are sustained by everyday sacred practices, but are often reduced to mere physical and economic-oriented development. By foregrounding memory and intangible heritage as urban infrastructure, a humanities-informed approach challenges the rigid separation between sacred and secular, tangible and intangible. Integrating cultural practitioners and respecting spiritual narratives allows for more equitable planning. Sacred districts must not be sidelined by tourism or zoning logics but instead be embraced as living spaces where identity, belief and planning meaningfully intersect. These findings extend *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* debates by framing ritual and memory as urban infrastructure in living sacred districts and, as such, as being applicable to other pilgrimage cities.

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