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Lived Religion in *Ziarah*: The Dialectics of Scriptural Knowledge and Spiritual Experience among Prospective Muslim Scholars in South Kalimantan

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Abstract

How do prospective Muslim scholars reconcile advanced textual study with the embodied appeal of saint veneration? This question remains underexplored among educated religious actors who possess both scriptural literacy and devotional commitment. This study investigates how Indonesian students of Qur'anic exegesis and hadith sciences from the Cadre Program for Muslim Scholars (*Program Kaderisasi Ulama*, PKU) at UIN Antasari, Banjarmasin, Indonesia, navigate the dialectic between textual knowledge and spiritual experience during *ziarah* (pilgrimage) to the grave of Guru Sekumpul. Drawing on lived religion theory and phenomenological interviews with ten final-semester students, the research examines their hermeneutical strategies, affective experiences, and forms of authorization. The findings reveal that participants inhabit a pre-validated framework of integrative piety: their PKU training provides sophisticated tools—contextual interpretation, juristic reconciliation (*fiqh al-ikhtilāf*), and historical reasoning—that neutralize textual conflicts before pilgrimage. This intellectual grounding is affirmed through embodied experiences: feelings of peace, witnessed communal generosity, and perceived *barakah* (blessing) that serve as empirical validation. Rather than experiencing cognitive dissonance, these students treat scriptural mastery and somatic knowing as complementary sources of religious authority. The study advances understandings of lived religion by demonstrating how elite religious education can authorize, rather than undermine, venerative practices, revealing a model in which intellectual rigor and devotional wholeheartedness operate in constitutive partnership.

[*Bagaimana calon ulama memadukan pendalaman teks-teks keagamaan dengan daya tarik spiritual dalam penghormatan terhadap wali? Pertanyaan ini masih jarang dikaji, khususnya pada aktor-aktor religius terdidik yang memiliki kemampuan membaca teks keagamaan secara kritis dan komitmen spiritual yang kuat. Penelitian ini mengkaji*

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bagaimana mahasiswa ilmu tafsir dan hadis yang tergabung dalam Program Kaderisasi Ulama (PKU) di UIN Antasari, Banjarmasin, menavigasi dialektika antara pengetahuan tekstual dan pengalaman spiritual dalam praktik ziarah ke makam Guru Sekumpul. Dengan menggunakan teori lived religion *dan wawancara fenomenologis terhadap sepuluh mahasiswa tingkat akhir, penelitian ini menelaah strategi penafsiran, pengalaman afektif, serta bentuk-bentuk otorisasi keagamaan mereka. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa para partisipan hidup dalam kerangka kesalehan integratif* (integrative piety) *yang telah mapan. Pelatihan PKU membekali mereka dengan perangkat ilmiah yang canggih—seperti penafsiran kontekstual, rekonsiliasi fikih (fiqh al-ikhtilāf), dan penalaran historis—yang memungkinkan mereka menetralisasi potensi konflik tekstual sebelum praktik ziarah dilakukan. Landasan intelektual tersebut semakin diteguhkan melalui pengalaman batin dan jasmani: perasaan tenang, kemurahan hati masyarakat yang mereka saksikan langsung, serta barakah yang mereka rasakan sebagai bukti nyata. Alih-alih mengalami kegamangan batin, para mahasiswa ini justru menjadikan penguasaan teks dan pengalaman batin sebagai dua sumber otoritas keagamaan yang saling melengkapi. Penelitian ini memperkaya studi tentang* lived religion *dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pendidikan agama yang elite justru dapat melegitimasi, bukan malah merusak praktik penghormatan terhadap wali, sehingga melahirkan model keberagamaan di mana ketajaman intelektual dan kesungguhan spiritual berjalan beriringan secara utuh.*]

Keywords: Guru Sekumpul, Integrative Piety, Lived Religion, Scriptural Knowledge, Spiritual Experience, *Ziarah* Tradition.

Introduction

The relationship between scriptural authority and lived religious practice has long constituted a central tension in Islamic intellectual history, particularly regarding devotional acts that involve veneration of saints and pilgrimage to graves (Meri, 2000). Throughout the Muslim world, practices such as *ziarah* (grave visitation) and *tawassul* (seeking intercession through righteous figures) have generated persistent theological debate, with reformist movements often condemning such acts as illegitimate innovations (*bidʿah*) bordering on polytheism (*shirk*) (Mujib, 2016, p. 206), while traditional Sunni communities defend them as commendable practices rooted in prophetic precedent and scholarly consensus (Muhaimin, 2006, p. 159). This tension is not merely academic but shapes the everyday religious lives of millions of Muslims who navigate between textual prohibitions and deeply ingrained devotional traditions. As Feener (2007) has observed, the contestation over grave visitation reflects broader struggles over religious authority, hermeneutical methodology, and the very definition of orthodox practice within contemporary Islam. Consequently, understanding how educated believers reconcile scriptural texts with embodied

devotional practices remains a pressing concern for scholars of contemporary Muslim societies.

Nowhere is this pressing concern more urgently illustrated than in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation (Bruinessen, 2012, p. 117), where diverse theological orientations—from the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) to the reformist Muhammadiyah and Salafi movements—coexist and compete for influence (Arifianto, 2024, pp. 337-338). In South Kalimantan, the grave complex of Guru Sekumpul (1942–2005), a revered Banjarese scholar and saint, attracts thousands of daily pilgrims from across the archipelago, making it a uniquely significant site for studying contemporary pilgrimage practices (Syah et al., 2025). What makes this site particularly intriguing for scholarly investigation is the presence of university students from the Cadre Program for Muslim Scholars (*Program Kaderisasi Ulama*, PKU) at the State Islamic University (UIN) Antasari in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, Indonesia—an elite program designed to produce religious intellectuals deeply trained in Qurʾanic exegesis, hadith criticism, and Islamic jurisprudence. These students represent a population at the intersection of advanced scriptural training and active participation in a devotional practice that reformist critics might deem theologically suspect (Hanafi et al., 2025, p. 15). Investigating how these theologically literate pilgrims navigate the potential dialectic between their textual knowledge and their embodied spiritual experiences offers a critical window into the dynamics of contemporary Islamic authority, hermeneutical negotiation, and lived religion in a modern Muslim educational context.

Previous scholarship on grave visitation in Islam has developed along several distinct trajectories. One strand, primarily represented by reformist and Salafi-oriented works, emphasizes the prohibition of practices deemed excessive, arguing that grave visitation risks compromising monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and that traditions permitting visitation were either abrogated or conditional (Al-Albānī, 1996; Hasan, 2007). A second strand, emerging from traditional Sunni jurisprudence, defends *ziarah* as a recommended practice that softens the heart and reminds believers of death, citing the prophetic tradition: "*I used to forbid you from visiting graves, but now you may visit them*" (H.R. Muslim) (Sabiq, 2010, p. 121). A third and more analytically fruitful strand, drawing on the "lived religion" framework developed by McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2016), and Knibbe & Kupari (2020), shifts attention from normative debates to how ordinary believers actually practice, experience, and make meaning through devotional acts. Studies within this tradition have examined pilgrimage as embodied practice (Csordas, 1990), the role of affect and sensory experience in religious knowing (McGuire, 2016), and the social dimensions of *barakah* (blessing) as observable community ethics (Kurniawan et al., 2025). More recent empirical work on Indonesian pilgrimage practices has explored motivational dimensions (Mahzumi et al., 2020), theological interpretations of sacred sites (Nurhanifah et

al., 2025), and the strengthening of traditionalist values through pilgrimage traditions (‘Azmi et al., 2024). However, despite this growing body of research, the specific question of how university students with advanced scriptural training individuals positioned to be acutely aware of textual critiques, navigate the potential tension between their textual knowledge and their devotional practice remains underexplored.

The existing literature reveals a significant gap: while scholars have examined either the normative theological debates over grave visitation or the phenomenological experiences of ordinary pilgrims, few have investigated the hermeneutical processes of educated religious actors who possess both deep textual knowledge and personal devotional commitment. Most studies of pilgrimage tend to focus either on “popular” piety, implicitly assuming its practitioners lack sophisticated theological reasoning, or on elite legal discourses that remain detached from lived practice. This bifurcation obscures the reality of figures like the PKU students, individuals who are simultaneously trained textual critics and active participants in venerative traditions. Moreover, while the lived religion framework has been fruitfully applied to various contexts, its potential to illuminate how scriptural knowledge and embodied experience interact within the same religious subject has not been fully realized. The question, therefore, remains: how do theologically trained students, equipped with the hermeneutical tools to identify and evaluate contradictory scriptural proofs, actually experience and justify their participation in practices that reformist critics would deem problematic? Do they experience cognitive dissonance, and if so, how is it resolved?

This study addresses this gap by offering a novel examination of the dialectical relationship between scriptural knowledge and spiritual experience among PKU students who perform *ziarah* to Guru Sekumpul*’s* grave. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on an understudied population of elite religious students in an intensive training program and its application of the lived religion framework to analyze how these students actively construct meaning through the integration of textual learning, affective experience, social observation, and embodied practice. Rather than assuming a predetermined tension between text and practice, this study investigates the specific hermeneutical strategies, epistemological commitments, and forms of authorization that enable these students to inhabit a religious world where scriptural rigor and devotional pilgrimage coexist as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory endeavors. Accordingly, this research seeks first to describe how PKU students understand and justify the practice of *ziarah* to Guru Sekumpul*’s* grave in relation to Islamic scriptural sources, and second, to explore their subjective experiences during pilgrimage, including the affective, somatic, and social dimensions of those encounters. It further aims to identify how these students negotiate any perceived tensions or harmonies between their textual knowledge and lived experience, and

finally, to theorize the implications of their integrative piety for broader understandings of religious authority and hermeneutical practice in contemporary Islam. By pursuing these objectives, this research aims to contribute to scholarly conversations at the intersection of Islamic studies, religious education, and the anthropology of lived religion.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the essence and underlying structures of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). The primary objective was to explore the dialectical relationship between scriptural knowledge and spiritual experience as narrated by the participants themselves. The research was conducted over three days, from January 5 to 7, 2026. All interviews were conducted online via the Zoom meeting platform, with each session lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The study was in two primary sites: (1) UIN Antasari, specifically its PKU Program dormitory and academic facilities; and (2) the grave complex of Guru Sekumpul in Martapura, South Kalimantan, approximately 39 kilometers east of Banjarmasin. The justification for selecting Guru Sekumpul's grave as the pilgrimage site is that it is the only *ulama* tomb outside Java that consistently attracts large numbers of pilgrims every day from across the entire Indonesian archipelago, making it a uniquely significant site for studying contemporary pilgrimage practices (Syah et al., 2025). The justification for selecting the PKU at UIN Antasari is twofold: first, UIN Antasari is the only university in South Kalimantan that offers this type of intensive training program; second, the PKU program is the oldest such training program in Indonesia, having been established for more than twenty years, specifically founded on October 24, 2005 (Hanafi et al., 2025, pp. 4-5).

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (a) final-semester undergraduate students in the Department of Qurʾanic Exegesis and Hadith Studies at UIN Antasari; (b) active enrollment in the PKU Program; and (c) having performed *ziarah* to Guru Sekumpul's grave at least five in the past two years. A total of ten participants were recruited, consisting of four women and six men. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom. The interviews were guided by a protocol exploring: (1) educational background and scriptural training; (2) understanding of *ziarah* in Islamic law; (3) personal experiences during pilgrimage; (4) perceived tensions or harmonies between text and practice; and (5) the role of Guru Sekumpul as a spiritual exemplar. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the phenomenological reduction process of identifying meaning units,

clustering them into themes, and synthesizing these into a structural description of the lived experience (Creswell, 2007).

The following table provides anonymized information about the ten participants. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The gender distribution—four females and six males—reflects the composition of the participant sample.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Major
Ahmad	21	Male	Qur'anic Exegesis
Fatimah	21	Female	Qur'anic Exegesis
Khadijah	23	Female	Qur'anic Exegesis
Hamzah	23	Male	Qur'anic Exegesis
Umar	23	Male	Qur'anic Exegesis
Muhammad	22	Male	Qur'anic Exegesis
Bilal	20	Male	Hadith Studies
Aisyah	19	Female	Hadith Studies
Zaid	20	Male	Hadith Studies
Sarah	23	Female	Hadith Studies

Source: Author' elaboration.

This study adopts the theoretical lens of "Lived Religion" to move beyond the normative theological binaries that have often characterized scholarly discourse on *ziarah*. Developed by scholars such as McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2016), and Knibbe & Kupari (2020), the Lived Religion framework shifts the focus from formal doctrines and institutions to how religion is practiced, embodied, and understood by individuals in their everyday lives. It is concerned with the ways people do their religion, emphasizing hybridity, personal narrative, and the creative agency of believers as they navigate their spiritual worlds. This approach is particularly adept at capturing the on-the-ground realities of religious practice that often diverge from official orthodoxy (McGuire, 2008). By applying this framework, the study analyzes how PKU students do not simply accept or reject scriptural rulings but actively construct meaning through the integration of textual learning, affective experience, social observation, and embodied practice.

The Theologically Grounded Pilgrim

Religious practices are shaped by believers' knowledge, social context, and embodied experience, including both formal and informal religious education (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008). In this study, all participants hailed from traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) before entering the PKU Program at UIN Antasari, which provided them with an initial

understanding of the permissibility of grave visitation. However, as one participant revealed, this early understanding was receptive but uncritical: *"Back in the pesantren, we only knew that* ziarah *was recommended (sunnah), but we didn't really delve into the scriptural proofs used by groups who forbid it"* (Ahmad, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). The PKU program subsequently transformed this normative knowledge into a complex intellectual framework. Designed to integrate the *pesantren* tradition with modern academia, the program not only teaches classical texts (*kitab kuning*) in jurisprudence, mysticism, exegesis, and hadith but also trains cadres to engage in critical reading, both textually and contextually (Hanafi et al., 2025, p. 10-11). This approach fosters a dynamic understanding, as articulated by Rahman (1984), where religious teachings are not merely memorized as legal proofs but are interrogated for their rationality and contemporary relevance.

This transformation of knowledge is markedly evident in how they formulate specific, theological intentions (*niyat*) prior to their pilgrimage. Their intentions vary, ranging from *tawassul*, simply longing for the teacher, to seeking solace (healing) from academic pressures. Yet, this diversity is unified by a sharp hermeneutical awareness of *tawassul* as supplication to God through (not to) a saint (Yamani & Nurdin, 2023: 385). One participant explained, *"We believe Guru Sekumpul's body has passed away, but his soul lives with God. We visit his grave not to ask from the tomb, but because we believe he is a potent* wasīlah *(medium) for our prayers"* (Fatimah, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). This conviction is consciously anchored in a specific interpretation of Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 154: *"And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, 'They are dead.' Rather, they are alive, but you perceive it not."* Thus, their intention is not an expression of animistic belief, but a theological construction based on a particular exegesis concerning life in the *barzakh*,[1] common within the Sunni tradition (Yamani & Nurdin, 2023).

Consistently, all participants cited one Prophetic tradition as the primary scriptural foundation legitimizing their practice: *"I used to forbid you from visiting graves, but now you may visit them. Indeed, visiting graves softens the heart, brings tears to the eyes, and serves as a reminder of the Hereafter"* (H.R. Muslim). Their comprehension of this hadith is not literal but historical and contextual. They interpret the initial prohibition as applicable during Islam's formative period when the community's faith was vulnerable to pre-Islamic, potentially idolatrous practices. This prohibition was later abrogated (*naskh*) and turned into a recommendation once Islamic monotheism was firmly established. *"Grave visitation was initially forbidden out of fear that the pre-Islamic Arabs would revert to worshipping idols at tombs. But after* tawḥīd *was strong, the Prophet permitted it, even encouraged it as a means of remembering death*

[1] *Barzakh is* a term that in the Q.S. al-Muʾminūn [23]: 100 is used to describe an obstacle standing behind the dead until the day of resurrection. See: Tesei (2016, p. 31).

(dhikr al-mawt)," clarified a participant (Bilal, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). This interpretation, employing the classical jurisprudential concept of *naskh*, demonstrates their ability to situate scripture within a historical narrative and the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*).

Awareness of internal criticism within the Islamic tradition is, in fact, integral to their scholarly identity. They do not ignore or deny the existence of proofs used by reformist groups to prohibit *ziarah*, such as the hadith forbidding turning graves into places of festivity. On the contrary, they understand them and then undertake a hermeneutical maneuver to reconcile the apparent contradiction. The dominant strategy is one of distinction (*tamyīz*) between the prohibited and permitted substances of the practice. One participant stated, *"We understand their critique.* Ziarah *becomes forbidden if the intention is* shirk*, asking directly from the grave, or if the grave is turned into a mosque or a place for festivity. But our visitation is intended for prayer, taking lessons, and correct* tawassul. *Therefore, the proofs of prohibition do not apply to us"* (Khadijah, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). In other words, they resolve the intra-textual conflict not by selecting one proof and discarding another, but by delimiting the scope (*takhṣīṣ*) of each, allowing both to remain valid in different contexts. This is a direct application of the science of comparative Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh al-ikhtilāf*) that they have studied.

Consequently, their identity as PKU cadres' functions as a unique framework of authorization. This background affords them the capacity not merely to follow tradition (*taqlīd*), but to intellectually master and reframe it. The pilgrimage they perform is the result of a scholarly curatorial process: they select permissive interpretations from a diverse body of exegesis, backed by methodologically defensible arguments. This distances them from accusations of being blind followers of *bidʿah* and instead positions them as a generation of scholars who both inherit and renew tradition with sound scholarly tools. As one participant asserted*, "PKU teaches us to have a strong basis for every religious practice. So, if anyone accuses our* ziarah *of being deviant, we are ready to discuss it with clear proofs and methodology"* (Zaid, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026).

This finding reveals that, for the participants, "pilgrimage" is not a passively inherited ritual but, rather, an active theological practice: contemplated, justified, and defended through the complex framework of Islamic sciences. This aligns with what pilgrimage scholars have identified as the shift from objective to subjective meaning-making in contemporary sacred travel. As Thomas (2013, p. 4) argues, pilgrimage construction is multi-dimensional, multi-layered, and influenced by self-constructed narratives, wherein meaning is not one-dimensional, and objectivity and subjectivity are not polarized concepts. The participants in this study exemplify this active construction: they bring their educational background into dialogue with scripture, a process that Francis et al.

(2020, p. 1) recognize as the reader-perspective approach to hermeneutics, where readers' prior knowledge and social location fundamentally shape textual interpretation. What distinguishes these PKU students from general pilgrims is the specific content of their interpretive framework, not merely individual reflection but systematic engagement with Qurʾanic sciences (*ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*), *fiqh al-ikhtilāf*, and hadith criticism (*ʿilm al-ḥadīth*). They are, in effect, theologically grounded pilgrims: individuals for whom every step toward the grave is preceded and accompanied by intentionality, scriptural reasoning, awareness of critique, and hermeneutical reconciliation. This very construction—the fusion of embodied devotion with scholarly self-awareness—forms the core of their religious subjectivity. As King (2024: 1) observes in a different pilgrimage context, such groundedness, whether achieved through physical ritual or intellectual mastery, carries considerable psychological dividends and theological significance.

The Living Legacy of Guru Sekumpul

Guru Sekumpul, whose full name is KH. Muhammad Zaini bin Abdul Ghani al-Banjari (1942-2005), is widely recognized as one of the most influential and charismatic ulama of South Kalimantan (Munandar, 2023, p. 138). A descendant of the renowned 18th-century Banjarese scholar Syekh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari, he mastered Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and Qurʾanic exegesis, while also serving as a *murshid* (spiritual guide) of the *Sammaniyah* Sufi order (Armiah et al., 2023, p. 229). Following his passing in 2005, his grave at the *Musala Ar-Raudhah* complex in Martapura became a major pilgrimage destination, attracting approximately 5.8 million visitors in 2019 alone (Armiah et al., 2023, p. 22; Munandar, 2023, p. 140). Each year, the commemoration of his *haul* (death anniversary) on the 5th of Rajab draws millions of pilgrims from across the Indonesian archipelago and neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore (Hidayah, 2020, pp. 78, 85). Scholars have analyzed this tradition as a manifestation of traditional community action with theological roots in prophetic hadith regarding grave visitation (Anwar et al., 2023), while others have examined how *barakah* functions as social capital that generates voluntary service, trust-building, and large-scale mutual aid (*gotong royong*) (Putri et al., 2025). Consequently, Guru Sekumpul's enduring spiritual authority and the scale of devotion at his tomb render it a uniquely significant site for investigating lived religious practice in contemporary Indonesia.

For the participants, Guru Sekumpul transcends the category of a deceased scholar. He is perceived as a living embodiment of the sacred sources he taught. They describe him as the "fruit" or the practical manifestation of the Qurʾan and Hadith. A recurring and powerful metaphor among them is that of *Guru Sekumpul* as a "walking Qurʾan." As one participant articulated, *"We believe that Guru Sekumpul did not just teach the Qurʾan; he was shown by the Qurʾan. His*

entire life, his character, his very presence was a living exegesis (tafsir hidup). Even though we never met him in person, we feel we know the Qur'an better through him" (Aisyah, Personal Interview, 6 January 2026). This conception positions the *Guru* not merely as a transmitter of text but as its incarnation, effectively collapsing the dichotomy between scriptural authority and its human realization. This perception directly facilitates their pilgrimage, as visiting his tomb (see Figure 1) is seen as approaching a locus where textual truth was fully actualized (Gade, 2004).

Figure 1

The Grave of Guru Sekumpul



Source: https://www.caknun.com/2022/letto-ziarah-ke-makam-tuan-guru-zaini-sekumpul-martapura (2022).

The social manifestation of the *Guru*'s enduring influence provided a profound, tangible "proof" that deeply affected several participants, particularly those from outside Kalimantan. Two participants from Palembang recounted their astonishment during the annual memorial (*haul*). They witnessed thousands of pilgrims and, more strikingly, the spontaneous generosity of the local community, who provided free meals, accommodation, fuel, and even mechanical repairs without any central coordination. When they questioned a local resident about potential financial loss, the response was illuminating: *"We have been doing this since the first* haul *21 years ago. We have never become poor or felt a loss. In fact, this is what makes us rich—and rich isn't always about money; it's about other, deeper things"* (Umar, Personal Interview, 6 January 2026). This encounter with a community-driven "economy of grace" served as

powerful empirical evidence of *barakah*, understood not as an abstract blessing but as a social force generating generosity, cohesion, and an alternative logic of abundance, directly observable in the world (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

The physical and emotional encounter at the gravesite itself was consistently described in terms of profound affective and somatic resonance. Participants reported an immediate and palpable sense of peace, comfort, and a unique spiritual ambiance upon approaching the tomb. These feelings were often framed in intimate, familial terms. *"It feels like coming home to a wise and loving parent. You can just sit there, whisper your problems, and feel heard without judgment. The anxiety from my studies just melts away,"* shared one participant (Sarah, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). This experience underscores the embodied dimension of their religiosity, where knowledge is not only cognitive but felt through the senses and the body, aligning with the phenomenological core of Lived Religion, which privileges affective and sensory modes of knowing (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020; McGuire, 2008).

Central to their experience is the concept of receiving *barakah*. Participants defined it broadly as divine grace that brings increase, benefit, and continuity in both material and spiritual realms, such as peace of mind, health, and piety. Crucially, they linked this abstract concept directly to concrete outcomes in their lives as students. For instance, one participant stated, *"I am convinced that my studies at UIN Antasari feel lighter because of the* barakah *of Guru Sekumpul. The material becomes easier to understand, and my focus improves"* (Hamzah, Personal Interview, 6 January 2026). Another provided a specific testimony: *"Several times before important exams, I made a point to visit his grave. Alhamdulillah, I felt facilitated in my revision and was able to face the exams with a calm heart. For me, that ease is the trace (athar) of his* barakah*"* (Muhammad, Personal Interview, 6 January 2026). Here, *barakah* transitions from a theological concept to a perceived causal agent in their daily successes, validated through personal, lived experience.

The pilgrimage experience catalyzes a transformative intention. The combination of venerating the living presence of the *Guru*, witnessing communal virtue, experiencing personal peace, and perceiving tangible *barakah* culminates in a reinforced commitment to ethical and spiritual self-improvement. The visit is not an endpoint but a generative ritual. As summarized by a participant, *"After leaving the tomb, I don't just feel calm; I feel a renewed duty to be a better Muslim, more patient in my studies, more respectful to my teachers, and more sincere in my worship. It's like the visit charges my spiritual battery"* (Ahmad, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). Thus, the pilgrimage functions as a holistic practice that engages intellect, emotion, body, and social observation, integrating them into a powerful engine for ongoing religious commitment and moral refinement.

Embodied Knowledge and Affective Experience

Surprisingly, the majority of participants stated that they had never experienced a fundamental tension between their textual knowledge and the experience of pilgrimage to Guru Sekumpul's tomb. One of them explained, "On the contrary, *entering PKU only strengthened my conviction. Here, we learn a methodology for understanding scriptural proofs holistically, considering their context* (asbāb al-wurūd)*, and appreciating juristic differences* (ikhtilāf). *So, when I perform* ziarah*, I do not come with doubts, but with a solid understanding that this is part of the Sunni tradition with a strong foundation"* (Bilal, Personal Interview, 5 January 2026). Thus, the PKU program functions as what Malkawi (2014) called "epistemological integration," anticipating and answering potential conflicts before they arise by equipping students with a jurisprudential and hermeneutical framework that already accommodates practices like *ziarah* and *tawassul*.

Nevertheless, a few participants acknowledged having experienced moments of critical reflection that held the potential for tension. One participant revealed a personal struggle with the meaning of God's proximity. *"I once pondered: in Q.S. Qāf [50]: 16, Allah states that He is closer to us than our jugular vein. So, what is the need for* tawassul*? Can't we ask directly?"* (Fatimah, Personal Interview, January 5, 2026). This theoretical tension was not resolved through textual debate alone, but through the authority of her own subjective experience. She continued, *"But my heart cannot lie. Every time I finish a pilgrimage, I feel calmer, more enthusiastic about worship, and driven to be a better person. That experience is real. So, for me, the verse is true about Allah's closeness, and my experience at the tomb is also true about the benefit of* tawassul. *I choose to believe both"* (Fatimah, Personal Interview, January 5, 2026). This resolution reveals an integrative epistemology where the truth of the text and the truth of lived experience are positioned as complementary sources of knowledge, not mutually exclusive ones, a hallmark of knowing within a lived religion framework (McGuire, 2008).

Another form of tension arose from sociological observation, particularly among participants from outside the region. Two students from Palembang admitted to initially wondering, *"Are the Banjarese people excessive here? Even the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (mawlid) is not this crowded"* (Fatimah and Aisyah, Personal Interview, January 5-6, 2026). Their doubts concerning the "propriety" or "proportionality" of the practice were again answered not by text, but by the social ethics they witnessed. The mass generosity, solidarity, and selfless joy that permeated the *haul* event became a pragmatic "proof" of its goodness. *"My doubts collapsed when I saw with my own eyes how people shared with one another. This taught me more about the meaning of charity* (ṣadaqah) *and brotherhood* (ukhuwwah) *than any book. It made me want to be like them,"* shared one (Aisyah, Personal Interview, January 6, 2026). This

communal experience functioned as a form of social validation, converting initial skepticism into moral inspiration and demonstrating how concrete social context can shape theological judgment (Schielke, 2015).

Ultimately, the identity as a PKU student (*santri*) serves as the primary lens shaping the entire process of negotiation. This identity does not merely provide them with the cultural capital to defend the practice of *ziarah*; more profoundly, it shapes the very way they experience and assign meaning to the pilgrimage itself. One participant articulated this clearly: *"Others may come merely to seek blessings* (ngalap berkah) *or follow the crowd. But as a PKU santri, I come with full awareness of its jurisprudence* (fiqh)*, its history, and also the intention to emulate the character of Guru Sekumpul as a scholar (alim). For me, the pilgrimage is a continuation of my learning in the study circle* (ḥalaqah). *I don't just 'feel'; I also 'understand' what I am feeling"* (Zaid, Personal Interview, January 5, 2026). This statement crystallizes the core synthesis they achieve. PKU empowers them to become subjects who simultaneously master the text and deeply inhabit the experience, without having to sacrifice either. They are active hermeneutical agents who utilize traditional scholarly tools precisely to affirm and enrich personal spiritual experience, thereby crafting a religious identity that is both holistic and reflective.

The Saint and the Scholarly Self: PKU as a Framework for Integrative Piety

This study reveals that PKU students navigate the apparent dialectic between text and tomb not through a strenuous, solitary hermeneutical struggle, but by inhabiting a pre-validated framework of integrative piety, where the anticipated tension is largely resolved before the pilgrimage even begins. This framework is constructed from two mutually reinforcing sources: the paradigmatic figure of Guru Sekumpul himself and the formative scholarly discipline of the PKU curriculum. The findings demonstrate that Guru Sekumpul is perceived not merely as a historical scholar but as a living synthesis of Islamic orthodoxy and spiritual charisma. Participants consistently described him as a "walking Qurʾan," an embodiment of deep scriptural knowledge (*ʿilm*) and transcendent spiritual grace (*barakah*). This perception is critical, as it provides a tangible, person-centered resolution to an abstract theological problem. As stated by a participant, *"He showed that being a profound* faqīh *(jurist) and a beloved* wali *(saint) are not contradictory. He is the proof"* (Umar, Personal Interview, January 6, 2026). In the logic of lived religion, such exemplary figures serve as powerful "models of" and "models for" religious life, offering a pre-packaged synthesis that believers can emulate without having to intellectually engineer it themselves (Albrecht et al., 2018; McGuire, 2008).

Concurrently, the PKU education functions as the institutional and intellectual machinery that systematizes this emulation. Crucially, it acts as a hermeneutical incubator, proactively addressing and neutralizing potential

contradictions. The program's pedagogy, which immerses students in classical texts while encouraging critical contextualization, equips them with a sophisticated hermeneutical toolkit. This toolkit allows them to authoritatively frame their pilgrimage within the boundaries of orthodox Sunni jurisprudence. As one participant noted, *"In PKU, we learn the fiqh of* ziarah*, the ethics* (adab)*, the proofs from* kitab kuning*, and also the counterarguments. We don't just follow; we understand the map of the debate"* (Khadijah, Personal Interview, January 5, 2026). This advanced literacy in the classical tradition, particularly in Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and its discourse on grave visitation, grants them what Bourdieu (1986) would term "cultural capital", a form of authority that legitimizes their practice from within the very tradition critics might invoke. Their identity as PKU cadres thus transforms them from passive participants into informed custodians of the tradition they practice.

A key finding of this research is the notable absence of the profound cognitive dissonance or intra-textual crisis that might be expected from such theologically literate pilgrims. For most participants, the intense dialectic anticipated by the research question was notably absent. As they explained, *"The tension was resolved in the classroom and the* ḥalaqah *long before I ever went to the grave. By the time I visited, I was already convinced on both intellectual and spiritual grounds"* (Ahmad, Personal Interview, January 5, 2026). This indicates that the primary negotiation is not a real-time, on-site struggle, but a curricular accomplishment. The PKU environment acts as a hermeneutical incubator, where the theological validity of venerative practices is established through text-based study, making the subsequent physical pilgrimage an enactment of an already-settled conviction. This process mirrors what Gade (2004) observed in Qurʾanic education, where textual mastery and experiential learning are fused, creating a form of knowledge that is both cognitively held and somatically realized.

Furthermore, this integrative framework finds its ultimate validation in the observed social world, particularly *ziarah* during the annual *haul*. The spectacle of mass devotion, coupled with the community's extraordinary, non-transactional generosity—providing free food, fuel, and lodging—was cited by participants as empirical, social proof of the framework's truth. This phenomenon aligns with what sociologists have identified as the gift economy (*économie du don*), following Mauss's classic analysis of reciprocity as a total social fact that transcends purely economic transactional logic (Barsihannor, 2025). In the Banjarese context, this gift economy operates not through contractual obligation but through what Kurniawan et al. (2025, p. 2) conceptualize as *barakah*-driven social capital, a spirituality-based framework in which divine blessing generates voluntary service, trust-building, and routinized mutual aid. This phenomenon, where giving is perceived as a source of richness rather than depletion, was not seen by participants as an economic anomaly but

as a direct social manifestation of the *barakah* emanating from Guru Sekumpul's legacy.

This finding resonates with comparative international research on contemporary pilgrimage sites dedicated to modern-day saints. Shinde and Trono's (2026) cross-cultural analysis of *Padre Pio* in Italy and *Sai Baba* in India demonstrates that places valorized by charismatic religious figures attract pilgrimage not merely for material well-being but for spiritual growth and the experience of proximity to living sanctity. Crucially, they observe that at such sites, the traditional structure of religious functionaries and religious rituals is absent; instead, lay devotion and voluntary service become the organizing principles of communal religious life—a pattern directly observable at the *haul* of Guru Sekumpul. Furthermore, Rodrigues's (2025) ethnographic study of pilgrimages to Queen Saint Elizabeth in Portugal highlights how expressions of faith also constitute social, cultural, and economic practices, with the pursuit of healing and the performance of sacrifice serving as embodied mechanisms through which pilgrims construct religious identity and community belonging. This social evidence provides a powerful corroboration that bypasses purely textual argumentation. It demonstrates that the synthesis embodied by the saint and codified by the PKU curriculum produces tangible, positive social fruits, thereby retroactively legitimizing the entire epistemological system through what William James (2009) would recognize as the pragmatic verification of religious truth, the observable consequences of belief in lived practice.

For the PKU students, Guru Sekumpul and their scholarly training together constitute a comprehensive framework for integrative piety. This framework does not require them to resolve the dialectic between text and experience anew at the tomb; rather, it offers a fully realized path where scripture, spiritual exemplarity, communal tradition, and personal devotion are already harmonized. In theoretical terms, this framework operates through what Bourdieu conceptualizes as habitus, a durable, transposable disposition that shapes perception, appreciation, and action without requiring conscious deliberation at every moment (cited by Akbar, 2025, p. 21). The PKU students' pilgrimage is not an act of theological negotiation but one of confident inhabitation: they step into a role prepared for them by a charismatic saint and an elite religious education, allowing them to seamlessly embody a form of Islam where intellectualism and spirituality are not in tension but in constitutive partnership. As Alshamary's (2025) research on pilgrimage economies in Iraq and India demonstrates, religious pilgrimages generate social capital through two mechanisms: the localized pilgrimage mechanism, through which prosocial values are continuously reinforced in the local population, and the organizational capacity mechanism, through which residents acquire skills from organizing pilgrimage activities. The *haul* of Guru Sekumpul exemplifies both mechanisms, producing

a durable moral community whose integrative piety transcends the analytic distinction between textual orthodoxy and embodied devotion.

Toward an Epistemology Realized through Affective Experience and Practical Validation

The findings of this study reveal a significant epistemological shift in the participants' religious authority. In the face of potential tension between text and practice, the ultimate legitimacy of their pilgrimage did not always stem from winning a hermeneutical debate over contradictory proofs, but rather from the authority of direct, embodied experience. When a participant grappled with the meaning of God's proximity in Q.S. Qāf [50]: 16, which seemed to negate the need for *tawassul*, he did not resolve it with a more complex textual interpretation. Instead, he referred to the authenticity of his subjective feeling: *"But my heart cannot lie. Every time I finish the pilgrimage, I feel calmer, more enthusiastic about worship, and driven to be a better person. That experience is real"* (Umar, Personal Interview, January 6, 2026). This statement reveals a logic of validation where the affective and transformative truth of personal experience supersedes or at least equates to textual truth. This is a crystallization of what McGuire (2008) identifies as the core of lived religion, supported by Knibbe and Kupari (2020), who argue that practices and feelings experienced in the body are often more decisive for meaning and belief than official doctrine.

This source of legitimacy is reinforced and socially verified through the observation of *barakah*'s manifestations in public space. The initial shock and doubt of participants from Palembang, who questioned the "excessiveness" of the *haul* compared to the Prophet's *Mawlid*, collapsed not because of a *fatwā* (Islamic legal opinion), but because of the community ethics they witnessed. The selfless, mass generosity, where local residents voluntarily provided for the basic needs of thousands of pilgrims, functioned as undeniable social proof. The narrative that this practice *"has never made us poor, in fact, it has made us rich"* transmits a conception of *barakah* that is concrete and observable. Here, *barakah* is no longer an abstract theological concept, but a social force that generates cohesion, generosity, and an alternative moral economy. This collective experience provides empirical validation that surpasses the authority of the text, demonstrating that the truth of a practice is also measured by its social fruits (Schielke, 2015).

Therefore, the pilgrimage evolved for them into a process of somatic knowing. Knowledge of the truth, benefit, and validity of this practice was not obtained solely through cognitive learning in PKU classrooms, but through a series of "proofs" experienced by the body and emotions, the feeling of peace enveloping them near the tomb, the renewed zeal felt afterward, and the awe at the social solidarity during the *haul*. These physical and affective sensations—goosebumps, comfort, and being moved—became sensory data confirming the

spiritual value of the place and practice. Within this framework, the body is not merely a vessel for worship but an epistemological instrument itself, a site for generating and validating religious knowledge through its sensations and transformative effects (Csordas, 1990).

The synthesis that occurs is not between two conflicting texts, but between two different modes of knowing: discursive-academic knowledge (acquired at PKU) and affective-somatic knowledge (gained through the pilgrimage experience). For the participants, it is often the latter mode of knowledge that settles the matter and provides final certainty. This finding both confirms and extends existing international scholarship. As the Cambridge theologian Sarah Coakley (2016) observes, following Weber and Troeltsch, appeals to experience as a basis for theological truth have historically emerged most forcefully at the sectarian margins of institutional religion, where they challenge established hierarchies. What distinguishes the PKU students is precisely the opposite: their experiential claims are not a rejection of textual authority but rather complement and extend it, legitimized by the very educational framework (PKU) that produced their scriptural literacy. This challenges the conventional Weberian binary between charismatic-experiential and institutional-textual authority. Furthermore, Jackie Feldman's (2020) analysis of pilgrimage knowledge identifies three modalities—cognitive, social, and embodied—and argues that pilgrimage involves a suspension of disbelief, a deliberate bracketing of critical faculties that makes the pilgrim subject to other religious authorities. The PKU students exemplify this suspension, but uniquely, their ability to suspend critique is itself enabled by their prior mastery of critique. Their religious education does not create doubt at the tomb; it grants them the confidence to temporarily set aside hermeneutical vigilance and become effectively permeable. The practice of pilgrimage, therefore, shifts the center of gravity of religious authority. Authority no longer resides absolutely in text or institution, but also in lived experience, tested and validated by the subject themselves through their body and social interactions.

This confirms the central thesis of lived religion that in everyday religiosity, the authority of personal and communal experience often becomes the most powerful determinant of meaning, complementing and at times even rivaling the authority of scripture and formal religious hierarchies (Ammerman, 2016; McGuire, 2008). Yet the PKU case also extends this thesis. Unlike the sectarian figures Coakley describes—medieval mystics or Protestant enthusiasts whose experiential claims challenged ecclesiastical hierarchy—the PKU students' embodied knowledge is authorized by their textual training. Their affective certainty is not a rejection of *ʿilm* but its fulfillment. As Christopher Howard (2015) argues in his phenomenology of Himalayan pilgrimage, unfamiliar environments generate embodied learning at the level of the pre-reflexive body that is affected and solicited by the new and unfamiliar demands of an alien

world. For the PKU students, the tomb of Guru Sekumpul functions as precisely such an alien world within the familiar, a space where normal cognitive protocols are suspended and somatic modes of knowing become authoritative. Their pilgrimage thus produces what Howard calls continuous adjustment of habits and practices, but crucially, this adjustment is pre-validated by their scholastic habitus (Bourdieu, 1976). They do not choose between mind and body, text and tomb, or reason and affect. They inhabit a framework where all four operate in constitutive partnership. The result is a religious subjectivity that is neither naïve traditionalism nor critical distance, but confident inhabitation, a mode of piety that is simultaneously intellectually rigorous and devotionally wholehearted.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that for PKU students at UIN Antasari in Banjarmasin, the pilgrimage to Guru Sekumpul's grave never becomes a battleground between textual authority and experiential authority. Rather, these two domains are integrated from the outset through two primary mechanisms: first, the figure of Guru Sekumpul himself is experienced as a living embodiment of both scriptural piety and spiritual charisma; second, the PKU curriculum functions as a hermeneutical incubator that equips students with a jurisprudential and methodological framework to systematically reconcile seemingly contradictory texts. Consequently, when they step into the cemetery complex, they arrive not as anxious seekers of justification but as ritual practitioners who already possess a solid intellectual foundation. This finding shifts our understanding of the relationship between religious education and devotional practice: rather than creating critical distance or doubt, elite religious education can serve as the very foundation that enables religious subjects to more fully and consciously inhabit traditions that might appear controversial from the standpoint of textual literalism.

A second and equally significant finding concerns the central role of embodied and social experience as an independent source of legitimacy. When a participant grappled with the meaning of God's declaration that God is closer than the jugular vein, God did not resolve this unease through more complex textual interpretation but by appealing to the peace and renewed spiritual zeal God felt each time after pilgrimage. Similarly, doubts about the propriety or proportionality of the *haul* tradition dissolved not because of a *fatwā*, but because participants witnessed firsthand how local residents voluntarily and selflessly served thousands of pilgrims. Within the logic of lived religion, the truth of a practice is measured not only by its conformity to scriptural proofs but also by the social and psychological fruits it produces—fruits that are directly felt by the body and emotions. In other words, religious authority within this framework is plural and distributed: it resides not only in texts or institutions but also in authentic subjective experience and observable social ethics.

More broadly, this study offers a conceptual model of integrative piety that transcends traditional dichotomies between scripturalist Islam and syncretic Islam or between scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) and common believers (*awam*). This model demonstrates that one can simultaneously master the tools of textual criticism and wholeheartedly inhabit venerative practices without sacrificing either. For the study of Islam in Indonesia, these findings invite researchers no longer to a priori position higher religious education as a force that produces cold critical distance or even antipathy toward local traditions. On the contrary, religious education designed holistically—teaching not only texts but also methodology, not only jurisprudence but also ethics, and not only critique but also empathy—can become a vehicle for the emergence of a generation of scholars who are both intellectually rigorous and deeply rooted in their nation's spiritual traditions. Further research is needed to test whether this integrative model, found in the context of pilgrimage to Guru Sekumpul, also applies to other devotional practices and to similar educational programs elsewhere in Indonesia.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics principles. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, and all identifying information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Generative AI Usage Statement

The author used DeepSeek solely for grammatical and language polishing purposes during the preparation of this manuscript. No generative AI was used for data analysis, interpretation, argumentation, or the generation of original ideas, findings, or conclusions. All research, analysis, and writing—including the intellectual framework, theoretical interpretation, and substantive content—were conducted solely by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and scholarly integrity of this work.

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