Creating Islamic Places
Tombs and Sanctity in West Java

JULIAN MILLE

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

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

It is not surprising to find Jaelani associated with a tomb. His name bears great authority for Muslims in West Java, where rituals in which his intercession is sought are popular. By its association with this most illustrious of wali, Pasir Jengkol derives legitimacy as a potent place for making supplications. Such appropriations are not uncommon in Indonesian traditions: Abdul Qadir is held to be the bearer of Islam to some Gayo communities in the north of the island of Sumatra and Martin van Bruinessen has noted the existence of a similar narrative cherished by the Kanoman kraton (royal house) of Cirebon, West Java. Abdul Qadir is not the only wali whose name is associated with a sacred site in West Java. Not far from Pasir Jengkol is Cipareuan, where the tomb of Jafar Sidik is located. Jafar Sidik (died 1487/765) is remembered as a Shite Imam and Sufi teacher.

The tomb of Shaykh Jaelani is not counted among the well-known tombs of the area. Not far to the west of Pasir Jengkol, at Pamijahan, is found a far more celebrated site, the tomb of Shaykh Abdul Muhyi. This man is recorded in genealogies as the Khalifah (successor) of the famed Acehnese mystic of the Shattariyah Sufi Order, Abdul Rauf al-Singkel (Aceh). Abdul Muhyi’s tomb is also connected to Jaelani. A cave at the complex is thought to have been used by Abdul Muhyi to meditate with Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani.

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

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

One of the stories collected by Edi Haer is as follows: Shaykh Jaelani was travelling to Pamijahan with Abdul Muhyi. Suddenly they were confronted by three thieves intent on murdering them. Shaykh Jaelani used his powers to overcome one with tiredness, the second with itchiness, and the third with fatigue. The two Shaykhs then escaped. But the three assailants used their own powers to throw off their impediments and chased the Shaykhs. Shaykh Jaelani then transformed the road upon which the thieves were chasing them into a dead-end (jalan buntu), frustrating the villains. Nowadays, the village of Cibuntu marks that spot.

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

[T]he physical attributes of the landscape became the vehicle for expressing the site’s sacred power.
One often hears the lament that “all our books were taken to Holland,” referring to the plentiful material relating to Sundanese Islamic tradition collected by Ch. Snouck Hurgronje and others. Discontinuity in oral tradition is also relevant. The sasakala (origin stories) are protected by ritual practitioners who, for various reasons may be reluctant to pass on their knowledge. This occurs simultaneously with a cultural shift whereby the religious legitimacy of rituals associated with sacred places is not so apparent for a younger generation receiving its education in state funded schools and whose cultural awareness is mediated by modern media. Finally, Tasikmalaya has suffered great instability. The area had been destabilized in the war of independence in the late 1940s, and in the decades after that havoc was caused by the Darul Islam separatist movement. During this period, according to some residents of Tasikmalaya, many items of heritage significance were destroyed. For all these reasons, Pasir Jengkol is textually poor. This is not the case with the nearby tomb of Jaelani’s companion, Abdul Muhyi. Abdul Muhyi’s name appears in a number of genealogies linking him to other sacred sites in West Java and to well known teachers in Aceh and Banten. The tomb derives authority from these influential associations. Furthermore, a number of teachers living near his gravestone in Pamijahan possess manuscripts containing Sufi teachings and genealogies in which they themselves appear as successors of Abdul Muhyi. Cultivation of this legacy adds to their status. A Ph.D. thesis has been completed about his tomb and the related traditions, a textual creation which significantly enhances the tomb’s stature. For these reasons, Abdul Muhyi is perceived as a figure whose influence extends outside of Pamijahan. This type of construction of sacredness does not occur in Pasir Jengkol, which simply lacks the discursive materials necessary for it to take form.

**Sacrality and place**

Yet, a saintly biography is not the only means leading people to perceive graves as places of sacred power. The physical location also stimulates this. Topography can create a sacrality that is independent of the saintly identity associated with the place. As noted, Pasir Jengkol is currently poor in terms of narratives involving the saint, but the landscape itself nevertheless leads pilgrims to construct the place as sacred. An incident that occurred during my visit to Pasir Jengkol nicely illustrates how this occurs. As we were leaving Pasir Jengkol, one of my Sundanese companions named Atam commented on a massive tree he saw while we were there. It was located by the enclosure’s entrance. Atam lived in a village about two hours’ drive from Pasir Jengkol, but had never previously been there. Hussanuddin (the guardian) said that the tree had in the past been cut down, but had then righted itself. Later that evening, when Atam and I were conversing socially with a group of people in his village Atam conveyed only two pieces of information to his friends about our visit to Pasir Jengkol. He firstly described its whereabouts, and then spent some time retelling the anecdote about the tree. No information was conveyed only two pieces of information to his friends about our visit to Pasir Jengkol, but at Pamijahan the guardians tell stories that bring authoritative Islamic figures in contact with the landscape. Take this example, which concerns a deep cave or tunnel visited by pilgrims to Pamijahan: Abdul Muhyi would use the tunnel to attend the Friday prayer in Mecca. Once he arrived late, puffing because his habit of smoking had left him breathless. Abdul Qadir al-Jaelani appeared to him and reprimanded him for smoking. The Pamijahan enclosure to this day remains a non-smoking zone. These stories see the biographical and landscape elements brought together. For the pilgrim, the Sundanese landscape is transformed into a specifically Islamic one by the “presence” of canonical Islamic figures in the stories.

**Conclusion**

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

Notes

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