
The Burial Sites of Sheikh Siti Jenar: Social Change and the Creation of Tombs and Memorial Spaces in Java

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the claim burial sites of Sheikh Siti Jenar, a mysterious figure in Javanese history, analyzed from the perspective of social structure and collective memory from Javanese. The importance of this research is the fact from the narrative of Sheikh Siti Jenar continues to shape religious authority, pilgrimage patterns, and understandings of Islamic history. Using a qualitative, this study combines analysis of historical documents, ethnographic observation, and semi-structured interviews with local communities, custodians of sites, and religious leaders about the burial sites of Sheikh Siti Jenar. The results demonstrate that the distribution of Siti Jenar's burial sites is not simply a historically contested phenomenon, but rather a socially constructed reality that emerges from tensions related to religious authority, local cultural traditions, politics, and economics within the pilgrimage tradition. The tombs function simultaneously as centers of spiritual power and sites where historical meanings are continually forged and contested. The study finds that sacred spaces in Java are subject to change, social (not historical) productions, and calls for more critical and inclusive methods in the preservation and interpretation of Islamic sites, particularly sacred tombs, to allow for the coexistence of different narratives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Multiple tombs, more than one burial place associated with a single religious figure, are a fascinating but neglected feature of Javanese Islamic tradition. A well-known case is that of Sheikh Siti Jenar, a divergent character linked with the Walisongo, or Nine Saints of Java (Woodward and Gohier-Mangkubumi, 2024; Acri, Meyer, and Aminullah, 2024). There are a number of sites throughout Java, from Cirebon to Demak and Jepara, that claim to be his resting place (Pamungkas, 2022). The sheer number of tombs raises not only still-mysterious historical questions about his life and death but also multifaceted social, cultural, and spiritual implications, making it a development zone for interdisciplinary study.

The confusion of history and theology in the case of Sheikh Siti Jenar is well documented. Popular narratives portray him as possessing a singular theological interpretation of the mystical union between servant and God (*manunggaling kawula gusti*), which is thought in some quarters to refer to the unity of being or *wahdatul wujud* (Syarifah, 2022). His polemics against the Walisongo and the legendary accounts of his death, ranging from his execution to his departure from earthly life, have led to multiple sites being claimed as his burial place (Chodjim, 2016). However, while the relevance of such assertions is clear, I argue that the current academic literature is inadequate for exploring the reasons for the existence of so many Siti Jenar tombs, how they were constructed, and what they may suggest about the possibility of interpreting Islamic tradition in Java.

From historical reconstruction, some studies have focused on the past (Tursina, Widodo, and Saddhono, 2019; Sholikhin, 2022) or on the socio-cultural aspects of tombs in general, but lacked perspectives that could elucidate the phenomenon of double tomb as a religious and life-sustaining space (Damanhuri, Roibin, and Jamilah, 2025). Alternative cases of double tombs, including those of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak and Cirebon and Sunan Bonang in Tuban and Bawean, suggest that double sites fulfill symbolic functions rather than serving merely as tombs; however, rigorous studies tracing this process with Sheikh Siti Jenar are not yet prevalent (Pataruka, 2019; Ghozi et al., 2024). In particular, investigations into the active production of local community identities through place- and ritual-makers and their performance at these sites and their connection to identity, pilgrimage, and social authority are still rare (Kusumaningtyas et al., 2024).

This research aims to fill this gap by combining historical, anthropological, and theological perspectives in the study of the tombs of Sheikh Siti Jenar. First, it examines the historical, cultural, and political roots of the contradictions of claims about his burial, oral historiography, and local power. Secondly, it investigates the symbolic significance and social functions of these locations as expressions of communal solidarity and collective memory, and as mediators of local-global tensions. In conceptualizing these tombs as contested sites of history, polity, and spirituality, the analysis provides tremendous insight into Javanese processes of Islamization, syncretism, and the re-inscription of sacred sites by subsequent generations (Alatas, 2019).

Finally, the investigation into many tombs of Sheikh Siti Jenar has academic and practical implications. Academically, this study contributes to the study of Islamization in Java and to scholarship on the socio-cultural life of sacred religious figures (*wali*) in that context. In practical terms, it offers perspectives for policy makers, cultural heritage managers, and local communities

who are interested in maintaining these tombs by caring not just for the material fabric but also for the spiritual and cultural values embedded in them (Pamungkas, 2022).

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method to analyze the occurrence of multiple tombs of Sheikh Siti Jenar through the lenses of collective memory and social construction. The analysis draws on two broad theoretical approaches. First, *lieux de memoire* by Pierre Nora, conceptualizes tombs as material sites around which the collective memories of society crystallize and are sustained (Nora, 1997; Horn et al., 2020). Tombs, in this sense, become more than just places of burial; they embody symbolic values through which people narrate history and establish a link to the past. The proliferation of these graves thus constitutes a network of memorial sites within changing socio-political and cultural formations. Second, the theory of the social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (2021) explains how symbolic claims are transformed into socially shared realities through collective belief systems, ritual practices, and oral traditions, which together shape pilgrimage practices, religious authority, and the local identity surrounding Siti Jenar's tomb.

In terms of methods, this study is a historical-anthropological ethnography. Historical analysis is employed to follow the development of several claims to the tomb of Siti Jenar, to identify narrative variations in several *babad* and *suluk* manuscripts, and to situate these narratives within the socio-political context of Javanese-Islamic thought in the 15th–16th centuries. Fieldwork was carried out through participant observation and semi-structured interviews from August to September 2025. Attention centers on the pilgrimage to sites identified as the tombs of Siti Jenar in Cirebon, Pekalongan, Jepara, and Tuban. In this way, sacred meanings can be studied as they are being manifested and reproduced in the present.

The scope of the study covers a number of places in the four abovementioned regions claimed as the gravesite of Siti Jenar. Each grave site was analyzed as a single case study, with attention to its history, spatial layout, management, and orally transmitted local legends. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with keepers of the tombs, religious leaders, and pilgrims, as well as participant observation of ritual and pilgrimage events. Secondary data were derived from historical documents, reports from the colonial period, and academic literature on Javanese Islam.

Two-step data analysis was performed. First, a historical narrative analysis was undertaken to discern continuities, contradictions, and transformations in narratives concerning the death and burial location of Sheikh Siti Jenar. Second, an interpretive analysis and a symbolic analysis were performed on the ethnographic material to understand the ways rituals, oral traditions, and spatial performances construct the Siti Jenar tomb as a sacred place that is socially significant to the community. This integrated reading analyzes how the Siti Jenar tombs not only function as historical identity claims but also serve as dynamic sites of memory and of social and religious identity in Javanese Islam.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Historical Narrative and Distribution of the Tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar

The historical storyline of Sheikh Siti Jenar is intertwined with his multifaceted character as a controversial holy person and accused heretic in Javanese Islamic tradition and the polity of the Demak and Cirebon Sultanates. Various described as a member of the Walisongo or as an unorthodox mystic, Siti Jenar promulgated an esoteric version of Islam, in particular *manunggaling kawula gusti*, the union of servant and God (Pamungkas, 2022). This doctrine, labeled as heretical by some, especially amongst the Walisongo and Islamic officials of its time, led to conflicts with the religious elites and with the state, disrupting the social life of the era. The ambiguity of his demise — whether he was put to death by the Walisongo, died naturally at an advanced age, or attained spiritual release — has inspired various oral traditions across Java (Woodward and Gohier-Mangkubumi, 2024). These different stories, combined with the absence of any authoritative written documentation, have led to the proposal of several graves as his.



Figure 1. Sheikh Siti Jenar's Tomb in Pamlaten, Cirebon

Figure 1 describes the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar in Pamlaten, Cirebon. The tomb is well maintained, with a clean environment and traditional ornaments still preserved by local people. The site is quite busy with pilgrims who commemorate Sheikh Siti Jenar in Javanese Islamic tradition.

Ancient manuscripts such as the *babad* mention several locations associated with the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar. While some of these spots are widely considered the final resting place of Sheikh Siti Jenar, other strongly believed contenders exist in Demak, Kediri, and other parts of Java (Van Bruinessen, 1998; Pamungkas, 2022). Each site is embedded in its own local history, and in most cases, related to regional politics as told in the *babad* as well as religious prestige. For example, the Cirebon site has been linked to that city's prominence as an Islamic center in 15th- and 16th-century Java and, more broadly, in the Indonesian archipelago, suggesting that the

significance of Siti Jenar's tomb in Cirebon was used to bolster the city's spiritual authority. In contrast, Jepara developed later in an area with a more robust cadre of Muslim scholars and drew symbolic support from the Kalinyamatan Sultanate, which was linked in some way to Sheikh Abdul Jalil, also known as Sunan Jepara (Karim et al., 2023).

The *Suluk Seh Siti Jenar*, said to have been written at the beginning of the 16th century (c. 1535), is a *macapat* poem from Sunan Giri of Giri Kedaton Gresik. The manuscript chronicles Siti Jenar's execution in 1505 and his burial at Mandala Anggaraksa in the town of Cirebon. In the *suluk* verses, his body is said to turn into jasmine flowers, which is why his burial site is named Pamlaten (Sholikhin, 2022). The *Kropak Ferrara* (Javanese Kropak) is a very old palm-leaf manuscript from the early 16th century. The appearance of Siti Jenar's name in the *Kropak Ferrara* alongside the Walisongo indicates that he was historically acknowledged in Javanese tradition and was an actual person rather than a mythical figure invented during the colonial era (Adha, 2021).

The scattering of such burial places across Java should therefore be explained not simply in terms of error or historical inaccuracy, but in terms of cultural memory and sacred geography in Javanese life. In Javanese culture, the grave of a saint (*waliyullah*) is not simply a tomb, but also a center of spiritual potency. Several parties may claim the grave of a saint to access the spiritual blessings associated with him. This pattern is seen elsewhere in the Islamic world: Sunan Kalijaga has graves in Demak and Cirebon, and Sunan Bonang is said to have several graves, one in Tuban and another in Bawean (Uyuni et al., 2024). The presence of these tombs reflects not only devotional interests but also the politics of legitimation and local pride.

Comparisons between physical facts and accounts of oral traditions grant additional understanding of some of Siti Jenar's graves. Fieldwork observed distinctions in tomb types, materials, and tombstones. For instance, some locations have ornate *cungkup* graves (roofed grave houses) with Islamic calligraphy and decorative motifs, while others are simple ground graves marked with minimal stones. Variations in tomb shape found here might be the result of different building times, or they more likely suggest that some tomb places were built or renovated long after the life of Siti Jenar (Pratiwi, Numan, and Idham, 2023). In addition, tombstone epitaphs generally do not include precise historical dates and instead bear religious verses, such as "*inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un*," without stating who is buried or when, which has allowed considerable latitude for interpretation by local tomb keepers.

Oral traditions told by tomb keepers and older local people often serve as the only proof that a site is real. These accounts differ substantially from one region to another. On the tomb of Siti Jenar in Cirebon, the guardians highlight the narrative of Siti Jenar's execution and burial. According to this version, the execution was meant as a warning to anyone who strayed from the pure tenets of Islam. In Jepara, the tale of Siti Jenar is further mystified by the suggestion that his body vanished, and what remains is spiritual energy that has materialized in many places. The keepers of the Demak Mosque area narrate a version in which Siti Jenar submits himself to execution, but his dying is granted by divine will, and his bones are miraculously dispersed to different places, thus accounting for the multiple graves found across Java. An account of Siti Jenar's death is also found in the *Babad Tanah Jawi* (the Javanese chronicle). These contrasts show the ways in which localized readings of Siti Jenar's death and sanctity fit within larger cultural and religious ideals.

From a historical-anthropological perspective, the dissemination of the Siti Jenar tomb can also be associated with the political disintegration in Java after Majapahit and the nascent Islamic polity of the Demak Sultanate. As Islamic power became firmly established in new centers — especially Demak and later Cirebon, Pajang, and Mataram — claims to sacred figures were often strategically aligned with these new centers (Romdhoni et al., 2024). Claiming a saint's tomb in a region helped to boost that region's religious credentials, drew in pilgrims, and reinforced social-cultural integration. In certain instances, the founding of graveyards is part of a larger village or regional development scheme, or an effort to profit from tourism and religious heritage in the local area.

In addition, the presence of several Siti Jenar tombs signifies a form of Javanese syncretism in which history, spirituality, and group identity are tightly interwoven. In this context, it is less important whether the tomb is historically accurate than whether it symbolically represents the presence of Siti Jenar's presence of the community's imagination. For instance, many scholars consider the tomb of Siti Jenar in Pekalongan doubtful because the strongest evidence of Siti Jenar's tomb is located in Cirebon and Jepara. Nevertheless, for the people of Kedungdoro, this does not diminish their conviction that Siti Jenar also lived and preached in their hometown of Pekalongan. The version of the tomb of each group is validated through ritual performances such as *nyekar* (offering flowers), *slametan* (collective prayer), and *haul* (a tradition commemorating the anniversary of death) (Muqoddam and Maghfiroh, 2019). These ritualized activities turn the grave into a site of active negotiation between past and present, the material and the spiritual, living people and Siti Jenar.

The history and geography of the tombs attributed to Sheikh Siti Jenar in different places demonstrate how sacred geography in Java has been shaped and contested socially and politically in the past as well as in the present. Far from coincidental, the multiplicity of sites of the tomb of Siti Jenar attests to the intertwining of political power, religious legitimacy, spiritual symbolism, and local identity (Keane, 2022). Every tomb that Siti Jenar is said to have occupied is not only a physical location but also a symbolic claim on Siti Jenar's spiritual capital, his moral authority, his charisma, and the teachings that are still discussed, even debated today. Although scholars may be more interested in finding the real tomb, local communities, through their rituals and acts of remembrance, rediscover over time the authenticity of the spiritual presence of Siti Jenar.

3.2. The Symbolic and Spiritual Meaning of the Existence of Tombs

Toward the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, Islamic power in Java grew strong, and control of religious officials became pivotal to the legitimacy of new powers, such as the formation of the Demak Sultanate. The Walisongo network, whose authority was challenged by figures like Sheikh Siti Jenar, was essential in the consolidation of Islamic orthodoxy at that time. Proclaiming the existence of his tomb in multiple locations — more than that of most Walisongo members — later became a way to assert Siti Jenar's political and spiritual significance (Qolbiyah, 2024). Thus, the multiple claims to Siti Jenar's tomb represent a competition of influence between regions. Even then, local rulers were noted by Dutch ethnographers for fostering competing claims to bolster regional versus centralized rule (Assilmi & Mendrofa, 2018). A relatively balanced distribution of burial places of Siti Jenar's burial places across Java testifies to his far-reaching missionary career, which extended to all layers of society.

Javanese Islamic legitimacy is grounded in place. A tomb like that of Siti Jenar enhances the spiritual prestige of the community and, by virtue of its potency, connects the area to a wider cosmological network (Wasanjoyo, 2019). The various representations of Siti Jenar as a wali or saint, a reformer or revolutionary opposing the powers, and the founder of Lemahabang as a village free from tribute and social oppression make his image adaptable to different theological causes and social groups. Some sites stress narratives in which he was reconciled with the Walisongo, presenting him as a figure brought into the fold of institutional Islam. Others, rooted in Javanese spirituality, express a mystical radicalism embedded within syncretic Javanese sensibilities, where Sufi doctrine converges with ancient Hindu-Buddhist cosmology (Fauzan, 2016).



Figure 2. Sheikh Siti Jenar's Tomb in Doro, Pekalongan

The picture above describes that the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar in Doro, Pekalongan, is a pilgrimage site guarded and maintained by the local community. The head of the grave is made of wood, unlike other ancient saint tombs, which are made of stone. To protect Sheikh Siti Jenar's tomb, local people built a roofed structure to protect it and make it accessible for pilgrims.

In addition, the proliferation of tombs attributed to Siti Jenar demonstrates how memory, power, and identity intertwine with the sacred in Javanese Islam and how Javanese Muslims live their faith. Each tomb is a living environment in which the heritage of historical memory, political legitimacy, and religious understanding is constantly engaged with and reproduced. They distill the push and pull between Islamic purity and Islamic mysticism, centralization and local autonomy, and remind us that spiritual geography is as much a social construction as it is a question of faith. Local populations often build or borrow narratives about holy men as part of their identity-making. Thus, access to Sheikh Siti Jenar's tomb is not simply a claim to political and religious superiority but one that locates the group within sacred geography. In places like Cirebon, Jepara, Pekalongan, and Tuban, the materiality of these tombs is implicated in local narratives of origin and identity. For example, the tomb of Siti Jenar in Tuban is associated with a stage of his journey to Surabaya to study under Sunan Ampel and onward to Banyuwangi; the area accordingly contains both a shrine to Siti Jenar and a village named Lemahabang. Oral traditions, commonly maintained by tomb keepers and transmitted across generations, have historical relevance and ethical implications (Muldiansyah, 2019; Wasanjoyo, 2019).

In the Javanese worldview, multiple true tombs do not constitute a contradiction; rather, they must be interpreted across multiple layers of meaning. A saint or *wali* can have a physical presence in one tomb, a spiritual presence in another, or even an omnipresent presence in all places at once (Chambert-Loir, 2002; Quinn, 2019). This stems from a syncretic spiritual way of life — an ethos in which body, spirit, and symbolic imagery can be separated and revered individually.

The claims to multiple tombs in the name of Sheikh Siti Jenar are also a struggle between the center-based religio-political authority and local power. In Javanese Islam, the religious-political center routinely attempts to lay claim to the core of sacred narratives as part of its ideological project, even when this is at odds with the court or the ulama council, the de facto center of power (Alatas, 2016). By identifying the true site of Siti Jenar's tomb, the center could be trying to clarify the meaning of his life and teachings.

Regional aristocrats, coastal traders, and village elders all possess their own means of shaping religious memory, particularly in the case of Siti Jenar. They may identify claimed burial places and incorporate them into local ritual life, thus making them vital elements of a community's sense of identity. This diffusion of power to the local level often leads to resistance to top-down rectification or oppression. Rivalry between center and periphery is not necessarily openly hostile (Feener, 2017). In some instances, rather than contesting the existence of multiple places, both parties tacitly accept it on the grounds that they serve different social, political, and economic interests. Centralized authorities may align tombs with official narratives, while local sites serve the needs of everyday devotion and pride.

The phenomenon of a spiritual figure such as Siti Jenar having several tombs attributed to him transcends questions of historical doubt or contradictory oral traditions. From the point of view of Sufi philosophy, such things are usually highly symbolic. George Quinn (2019) elucidates that in Islamic mysticism, the tomb is more than a physical resting place for the body; rather, it is a locus of spiritual memory, a place that solidifies the continuity of influence, and a symbolic nexus for esoteric ideas such as *fana'* (*annihilation of the self*) and *baqa'* (subsistence in God). Thus, the multiplicity of tombs can be understood as a reflection of the multifarious impact of a saint or mystic whose ideas have spread across the world and sustained their hold on the human mind and soul for countless generations.

In Sufi metaphysics, death is understood through two distinct but related realities: physical death, the end of biological life, and spiritual death, the annihilation of the self before God (*fana' fi Allah*). A Sufi who has been transformed after this mystical experience is thought to live on through the divine presence, his consciousness merged into eternal reality (Dickson, 2022). In that sense, many graves symbolize stages or expressions of this spiritual death in a given community. Every site, as a tomb, has a mystical ambiance which is experienced or recollected in myriad ways. Woodward and Gohier-Mangkubumi (2024) argue that Siti Jenar, whose teachings were both popular and controversial in his own time, may have acquired an intensification of this type of symbolism because of his contested association with the Walisongo.

In this reading, the many tombs of Siti Jenar are not about distributing his physical remains but about marking the spiritual sites where he preached. The tombs of Cirebon, for instance, represent his physical departure, whereas those of Jepara or Cirebon may also represent the dissemination of his esoteric teachings to other cultural centers. In Sufi literature, the saints frequently portray themselves as living after their death. Their souls exist in the *barzakh*, a liminal

state separating the material world from the world of afterlife, yet one may somehow grasp its spiritual dimension (Assadi, Naamneh, and Sindawi, 2025). These graves become places where the temporal and the eternal conjoin, rivers along which to be blessed, that is, where Siti Jenar may be touched by spiritual pilgrims. Jati Pamungkas (2022) states that when more than one tomb for a saint exists, each tomb represents a gateway to this liminal interaction. The pilgrims obtain distinct experiences of the saints, including Siti Jenar, at different locations, the narratives and the rituals being gradually localized. For Sheikh Siti Jenar, this pluralism allows communities across the archipelago and beyond to recover their spiritual roots and to find a shared sacred home that sustains and transmits his teachings.

Symbolically, the many Siti Jenar graves echo the Sufi idea that divine truth is not confined to one object or location. In the same way that we believe God is present in everything, in all times, and in all spaces, the presence of a saint can be felt across a number of locations. Here again, it is a symbolic presentation of the Sufi concept of tawhid, one essence, many forms. The existence of multiple graves also functions as a symbol for the dissemination of spiritual teachings. For Sufi elders who led nomadic lives, their influence was never confined to the settlement where they died. Instead, their disciples and followers built shrines and symbolic tombs in the areas with Siti Jenar among them. Such secondary tombs may be empty of remains, but constitute loci of local memory and ritual (Chambert-Loir, 2002).

In Siti Jenar's case, this dispersal was perhaps especially natural: he was arguably the most misunderstood figure in Javanese Islamic mysticism, and his ambiguous statements about Islam appealed to many across Java. The symbolic duplication of his tomb in various places could suggest that he sowed powerful spiritual seeds in different communities. This is reminiscent of mystical imagery: the life of a saint is like a seed planted in the earth that sprouts in different places wherever the sun of Islam shines on the land he once walked (Otoman, 2020). This plurality of tombs can also be read politically. Yogesh Snehi (2019) argues that communities that seek to link themselves to the saint's charisma and spiritual authority are likely to do so to strengthen that bond. These kinds of claims anchor Siti Jenar's significance within communal identity, allowing groups to see themselves as continuing the tradition of a past they venerate. In this regard, the multiple tombs are as much spiritual signs as they are tokens of local authentication in a place memorably associated with the life of Siti Jenar.

In Sufi exegesis, graves are also metaphors for one's self-burial on the path of soul purification or self-purification. In the annihilation of the ego (*nafs*), the Sufi mystic is reborn into the consciousness of divinity. In this sense, each tomb is a spiritual station where the seeker makes a leap towards God and the old ego dies, giving rise to a new self. Thus, the multiple graves of a saint can be said to reflect multiple deaths, for which one explanation is that each death and rebirth is required to achieve a certain level of spiritual perfection. For Siti Jenar, the many graves and symbolic deaths may reflect his multiple roles as recounted in different stories: heretic, rebel, and political dissident in historicized interpretations. Each of the roles may refer to the same person but represent different facets of Siti Jenar, each buried in a tomb in a different geographical location. The dispersal of graves is not unusual for Java's wali, and similar cases appear across the Islamic world. For example, the tomb of Mansur al-Hallaj, a Persian mystic executed in 922 CE for declaring "Ana al-Haqq" ("I am the Truth"), is venerated at multiple sites in Iraq and Iran, even though only one exact historical location is recorded (Parsapajouh, 2021). Similarly, this

multiplicity of monuments stands as a metaphor for the reach of his teaching, which cannot be localized or tied to a single place but is available to all communities that receive it.



Figure 3. Entrance Gate to the Tomb Complex of Sheikh Siti Jenar in Semanding, Tuban

The picture above describes the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar in Semanding, Tuban, is known as the tomb of Pangeran Gedong. This tomb complex is located in an area that still retains traditional Javanese and is a revered pilgrimage site for local people. The tomb's demonstrates how Sheikh Siti Jenar's figure is connected to local narratives and the spiritual identity that developed within the people of Semanding, Tuban.

The multiple Siti Jenar tombs' symbolic function reiterates the Sufi belief that the real resting place of a wali is not found in a grave but in the hearts of the seekers of truth, not only in his followers but also the ummah who strives for the truth of the teachings of Siti Jenar. In that regard, the plurality of Sheikh Siti Jenar's tombs can be understood as a landscape metaphor for the multitude of hearts his message inhabits across regions. The metaphorical significance of these myriad tombs connects the physical and metaphysical elements (Nasser, 2022). On a physical level, each place is a site for communal gathering, ritual, and pilgrimage. Metaphorically speaking, on a spiritual level, each tomb is a manifestation of spiritual truth, as a vehicle for the teachings of Siti Jenar, as the very metaphor of the path of the seeker towards divine reality.

The ambiguous tombs of Siti Jenar have been viewed as riddles of history, political artifacts, and spiritual icons. The tombs may represent contested narratives, narrative gaps, or even duplications for local or communal aggrandizement, from a strictly historical point of view. Spiritually, the tombs symbolize the endless and immeasurable nature of divine wisdom, which cannot be confined to a single place.

3.3. Social, Cultural, and Economic Functions

Siti Jenar's tombs are alive with socio-economic activities and religious engagements as was their past. Each so-called site of exposure, be it in Cirebon, Pekalongan, Jepara, Tuban, or elsewhere, has developed its own pilgrimage tradition informed by particular historical narratives, literary and oral, local cultural context, and the dynamics of the local community. Visiting Siti

Jenar's tomb is a spiritual and material enterprise, and religious vigor is mixed with social solidarity. In the Javanese Muslim perspective, the pilgrimage to a saint's tomb is an integral part of cultural life. For Siti Jenar, whose teachings remain contested in Islamic historiography, visiting his grave carries particular weight (Barokah and Khoiruddin, 2025). For pilgrims, the act is not just paying respects to religious figures such as Siti Jenar but also engaging with a larger spiritual tradition that emphasizes individual enlightenment, mystical awareness, and the rejection of strict orthodoxy.

In many instances, the pilgrimages are group travels with religious bodies (*majelis taklim*), Islamic schools (*pesantren*), and families. Rizal Abdi (2017) describes how this sense of togetherness can instill social solidarity among pilgrims, fostering relationships that extend beyond the pilgrimage. For local residents, these groups of travelers are not strangers passing through in search of a meal. They are participating in a continuity of exchange that reaffirms a collective cultural identity. The arrival of pilgrims at the supposed tomb of Siti Jenar generally brings a good economic boost to the town, though much less than at the tombs of other Walisongo, since Siti Jenar is historically rather controversial. Local vendors sell offerings, flowers, incense, and food from small stands, while others provide lodging and transportation to serve the visiting crowds. In some places, local cooperatives have been established to charge parking fees for motorcycles, cars, and buses, sell souvenirs, and share the financial benefits with the community.

In Cirebon, for instance, a small but steady tourism economy has grown up in Pamlaten around the tomb of Siti Jenar, complete with shops selling batik, herbal remedies, and printed pamphlets recounting the story of Siti Jenar. In Jepara, local craftsmen weave some of the saint's motifs into woodcarvings, merging the region's craft tradition with its spiritual identity. These businesses support the tomb's caretakers through income from local villagers and pilgrims, while also keeping the saint's cultural relevance alive in local memory. Every grave site is a place-making node that reconstructs the identity of the surrounding community (Muldiansyah, 2019). Local legends tend to highlight the saint's special relationship with the site, whether through events of his life, miraculous occurrences, or moral lessons emanating from the tomb. In this way, sacredness as a place can inspire community confidence and be mobilized for community identity, particularly in the face of external change.

In Pekalongan, oral tradition maintains that Siti Jenar himself taught inner spirituality to the non-Muslim population while traveling in the region, before being executed by Islamic leaders. While there is limited historical evidence to support this claim, the story became a cornerstone of local identity, and the tomb came to embody his presence in the region. Although each community produced its own legend about Siti Jenar, these tombs enabled a trans-regional identity among pilgrims. Pilgrims who frequented more than one of Siti Jenar's tombs thus developed a sense of significance that extended beyond any single locale, allowing them to imagine him as foundational to particular communities (Wasanjoyo, 2019). As a result, pilgrimage practice at the tombs of Sheikh Siti Jenar became infused with a Javanese Muslim cultural identity that reached beyond provincial boundaries.

Differences in ritual performance, site maintenance, and narrative interpretation underscore the independence of local-regional religious cultures. For instance, at Jepara, rituals at the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar (Sheikh Abdul Jalil or Sunan Jepara) may be more oriented toward formal Islamic teachings, while at Cirebon they may feature stronger syncretic symbols influenced by Javanese coastal culture. These are not conceived as contradictions but as elements

of the multifaceted identity of Siti Jenar. The presence of Siti Jenar's tomb also intersects with local configurations of religious authority (Asnawi et al., 2016). In some places, tomb guards are important in overseeing not only the maintenance of the physical site but also the oral histories related to Siti Jenar, which in turn permit them to manage the behavior of pilgrims and to mediate between pilgrims and the sacred space associated with Siti Jenar (Indralak, 2021). The power of the keepers of the tomb is often a combination of the spiritual and the hereditary and so carries significant weight in religious and community affairs.



Figure 4. Sheikh Siti Jenar's Tomb in Tahunan, Jepara

The figure above explains that the tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar in Tahunan, Jepara, is better known as Sheikh Abdul Jalil or Sunan Jepara by local people. The tomb of Sheikh Siti Jenar or Sheikh Abdul Jalil is a pilgrimage site with religious and historical value. The use of multiple names of Sheikh Siti Jenar demonstrates the diversity of local narratives of Sheikh Siti Jenar's identity in Javanese Islamic tradition.

Kyai, local religious scholars, in the area also often bring their followers to the tomb of Siti Jenar, making his narrative a powerful lesson on the tension between mystical insight and the limits of communal norms. Pilgrimage thus also serves as a vehicle for the construction of religious discourse at the grassroots level. Fieldwork confirms women's active participation in the pilgrimages, as they coordinate journeys, make offerings, and engage in the economic activities associated with these events (Rohanda et al., 2024). For many rural women, these journeys provide opportunities for social mobility, travel, and religious involvement, and the presence of female pilgrims challenges the assumption that saint veneration is primarily a male activity (Damanhuri, Roibin, & Jamilah, 2024).

Pilgrimage is also political and performative, preserving culture, identity, and — most importantly — the teachings of Siti Jenar from generation to generation. The tomb functions as a place of memory, where worship and tradition coalesce and are reconfigured in response to social change. Moreover, the contemporary view among some Puritans that such a gravesite pilgrimage is a heretical practice brought in by outsiders further complicates the community ritual

(Nurhanifah et al., 2025). This tension illustrates the balancing act between tradition, economic realities, and contemporary religious discourse, demonstrating that pilgrimage is a site of negotiation where spirituality and heritage continue to interact.

CONCLUSION

The numerous burial sites of Siti Jenar emerge at the intersection of narratives recorded in historical literature such as the *babad* (chronicles), narratives derived from oral traditions, and local socio-religious politics. Both archival and ethnographic material demonstrate that claims to Siti Jenar's grave function as symbolic ownership of his spiritual heritage rather than its physical form. Some graves emerge as issues of political legitimacy, religious authority, and local identity. Siti Jenar's symbolic grave represents Sufi concepts and teachings on spiritual death and the transformative power of *wali* (saints). These graves function as pilgrimage centers supported by spiritual practices, local economies, and collective memory. As a scholarly contribution, this study demonstrates how these graves were constructed and contested through social processes, and suggests comparative studies of other Sufi graves across Java and Indonesia.

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