RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN ORAL TRADITION: CONTESTING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AT THE KI AGENG BALAK PILGRIMAGE SITE

Sri Lestari[1], Ria Kasanova[2]
[1] *Tadris Bahasa Indonesia, Fakultas Adab dan Bahasa, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta, Indonesia*
[2] *Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia, Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Madura, Indonesia*
Corresponding author: srilestari@uinsaid.ac.id

Abstract
Research on religious authority has largely emphasised institutional, textual, and clerical sources of legitimacy, leaving less understood how orally transmitted narratives become socially recognised religious knowledge within pilgrimage communities. This study examines how religious knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak is transmitted, negotiated, legitimised, and reproduced through oral tradition, collective memory, lived religious experience, and differentiated sources of religious authority. Using a constructivist–interpretive qualitative case study, data were generated at the Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage site in Central Java, Indonesia, through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with shrine custodians, community leaders, local residents, and pilgrims, document analysis, and the collection of oral narratives. Data were analysed through an abductive thematic approach. The findings reveal a plural narrative field sustained through genealogical custodianship, communal circulation, and pilgrims' experiential testimony. Religious meaning claims acquired credibility through four differentiated bases of legitimacy: genealogical/custodial authority, communal recognition, lived experiential testimony, and theological reasoning. Contestation occurred primarily through negotiation, reinterpretation, accommodation, and differential recognition rather than overt conflict. Lived religious practices subsequently generated experiences and narratives that re-entered processes of collective remembering and oral transmission. The study demonstrates that oral tradition becomes epistemically consequential not through transmission alone but through its interaction with collective memory, recognised authority, lived experience, and social-religious legitimation. These relationships are synthesised in the Religious Authority Contestation Model for the Production of Religious Knowledge, which conceptualises religious knowledge production as a recursive process of transmission, negotiation, legitimation, enactment, and narrative reproduction.
Keywords: collective memory; oral tradition; religious authority; religious knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Religious knowledge is often institutionally authorised through scriptural interpretation, formal religious education, and recognised religious scholars. Yet religious authority is not constituted through textual expertise or institutional position alone; it is also assembled and sustained through social relationships, genealogies, practices, institutions, and interactions through which particular religious claims become recognised as legitimate (Alatas, 2021; Chaplin, 2025; Rosidi et al., 2024). This perspective converges with scholarship on *lived religion*, which emphasises that religion is enacted and interpreted through everyday practices, experiences, material settings, narratives, and social relations rather than being reducible to formal doctrine or institutional prescription (Ammerman, 2021; Meyer, 2025). From this perspective, religious knowledge may be

understood as socially recognised understandings through which communities interpret sacred persons, places, practices, experiences, and claims of religious legitimacy. The critical question, therefore, is not simply where religious information originates, but how particular narratives and interpretations acquire sufficient authority and legitimacy to be recognised, transmitted, and acted upon as religious knowledge.

Indonesia provides a particularly productive context for examining this problem because Islamic religious life has historically developed through sustained interaction among textual traditions, local cultural practices, communal memories, religious authorities, and everyday experience (Alatas, 2021; Ismail & Asso, 2024; Supriyanto et al., 2024). Within many Muslim communities, oral tradition plays an important role in preserving accounts of religious figures, transmitting ethical values, maintaining the significance of sacred places, and linking present communities with remembered religious pasts. Oral tradition is therefore more than a vehicle for transmitting information. Epistemological scholarship has shown that orally transmitted knowledge may involve processes of epistemic trust, communal dependence, and socially recognised custodianship through which knowledge is acquired, preserved, and transmitted across generations (Ikuenobe, 2018). Studies of religious tourism and local traditions similarly suggest that oral narratives help connect religious places, historical memory, and contemporary religious experience (Schweinsberg & Sharpley, 2024). In Central Java, collective memory, ritual, and symbolic practices also continue to contribute to the reproduction of traditional Muslim identity (Kholiludin, 2025). The epistemic issue is thus not merely that communities preserve stories, but how some orally transmitted narratives become credible, authoritative, and durable enough to organise religious interpretation and practice.

This issue becomes especially visible in Muslim grave visitation (*ziarah*), where sacred history, religious experience, collective memory, and theological evaluation intersect. Pilgrimage to the graves of saints and respected religious figures remains an enduring feature of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia and other Muslim societies, although its meanings cannot be reduced to a single theological or cultural interpretation (Luz, 2023; Madjid et al., 2022; Meyer, 2025). For some participants, grave visitation is associated with remembrance, prayer, moral reflection, attachment to pious predecessors,

and experiences of spiritual benefit. Other Muslim actors critically evaluate particular practices associated with mediation, saint veneration, *tawassul*, or expectations of *barakah*, and may interpret some forms of grave-related ritual through theological categories such as *bidʿah* or, in more critical readings, *shirk* (Nurhanifah et al., 2025). Indonesian studies further show that sacred-grave pilgrimage involves dynamic relationships among ritual communication, social actors, local narratives, and institutional or cultural structures (Dharma et al., 2024). Pilgrimage sites are consequently not merely locations where established religious meanings are performed; they are also arenas in which sacred histories, experiential claims, and competing criteria of religious legitimacy are interpreted and negotiated (Luz, 2023; Meyer, 2025).

The Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage site in Sukoharjo, Central Java, offers an analytically revealing case through which to examine these processes. The site is embedded in orally transmitted accounts concerning Ki Ageng Balak, practices of grave visitation, collective memories maintained by local communities and shrine custodians (*juru kunci*), and cultural practices such as the Wulung Langse tradition. At the same time, the religious significance of the site is interpreted through concepts such as *barakah*, prayer, sacredness, and *tawassul*, all of which may be evaluated through different understandings of Islamic legitimacy. Such a setting raises a broader epistemic puzzle: how does religious knowledge acquire and retain legitimacy when the narratives through which it is transmitted and the sources of authority through which it is evaluated are plural rather than singular? Addressing this question requires moving beyond an opposition between "local tradition" and "normative Islam." Research on Islamic Java demonstrates that relationships among grave visitation, belonging, religious memory, and doctrinal orientation are considerably more complex than a simple traditionalist–modernist or local–normative binary would suggest (Meyer, 2025).

Existing scholarship provides important but only partially connected explanations of this problem. Research on oral tradition has demonstrated how narratives preserve collective knowledge, cultural identity, ethical values, and intergenerational memory (Ikuenobe, 2018; Ramli et al., 2024; Schweinsberg & Sharpley, 2024). Studies of pilgrimage and lived religion, meanwhile, show how sacred places become sites where memory, embodied practice, spiritual experience, and belonging are produced and

renewed (Ammerman, 2021). A related body of scholarship demonstrates that Islamic religious authority is neither inherently singular nor automatically secured through formal institutional status. Rather, authority may be cultivated, assembled, and negotiated through genealogy, religious expertise, social relationships, institutional infrastructures, local embeddedness, and competing claims to legitimacy (Chaplin, 2025; Rosidi et al., 2024). The expansion of digital media has further complicated these processes by enabling religious interpretations and knowledge claims to circulate beyond established local and clerical structures (Rusli et al., 2020; Whyte, 2022). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that oral transmission, lived experience, collective memory, and plural religious authority all matter for understanding contemporary religious life.

What remains less clearly explained is the mechanism through which these processes interact to transform orally transmitted narratives and lived religious experiences into socially recognised religious knowledge. Studies of oral tradition tend to illuminate transmission and preservation, while studies of lived religion foreground practice and experience, and scholarship on religious authority explains how religious claims acquire or lose legitimacy. Less attention has been devoted to how these processes operate together within a specific pilgrimage community: how narratives enter collective memory; how different actors make claims about sacred history and practice; how such claims are evaluated against experiential, communal, and theological sources of legitimacy; and how accepted or contested interpretations are subsequently reproduced as religious knowledge. Collective memory is particularly important within this process because religious remembering does not simply retrieve information about the past; ritual and narrative can make remembered pasts meaningful within the present life of a community (Cockayne & Salter, 2021). In this sense, collective memory can function as an epistemic bridge between inherited oral narratives and contemporary religious interpretation rather than merely as a repository of historical information.

To address this gap, the present study brings scholarship on religious knowledge into dialogue with two complementary analytical perspectives: religious authority and lived religion. Religious authority is understood here as the socially recognised capacity of particular actors, positions, or traditions to advance claims about religious meaning that others regard as legitimate (Alatas, 2021; Chaplin, 2025). Lived religion directs

attention to how such meanings are enacted, experienced, modified, and reproduced within everyday religious practice (Ammerman, 2021). Within this analytical framework, oral tradition is examined not as an epistemic mechanism *a priori*, but as a social practice whose potential epistemic role must be established empirically. Collective memory is treated as a process through which transmitted narratives are preserved, actualised, and made meaningful in contemporary social life. Similarly, "contestation" does not necessarily refer to overt religious conflict; in this study, it refers to the coexistence, evaluation, negotiation, and differential legitimation of claims concerning sacred history, religious practice, and theological validity. Importantly, normative Islamic discourse is therefore treated not as an actor equivalent to shrine custodians or pilgrims, but as a discursive source of theological evaluation that actors may invoke when establishing or challenging religious legitimacy.

Accordingly, this study investigates three interrelated questions: (1) How is religious knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak produced and transmitted through oral tradition and collective memory? (2) How do different actors and sources of religious authority negotiate and legitimise competing interpretations of sacred history, pilgrimage practice, and religious meaning? (3) What conceptual mechanism explains the continuing reconstruction of religious knowledge within the Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage tradition? By addressing these questions through an interpretive qualitative case study, this research seeks to make three related contributions. First, it examines whether and through what processes oral tradition performs an epistemic function beyond cultural transmission. Second, it extends discussions of religious authority by investigating authority as plural, relational, and locally embedded within the social life of a pilgrimage site. Third, it connects oral transmission, collective memory, lived religious experience, authority negotiation, and social legitimation within an empirically grounded explanation of religious knowledge production. Rather than assuming in advance the structure of that explanation, the study develops its conceptual model from the interaction between empirical patterns and these analytical perspectives. In doing so, the study shifts attention from whether oral tradition merely preserves religious culture to how religious narratives, experiences, and claims of authority become recognised, negotiated, legitimised, and reconstructed as religious knowledge within contemporary Muslim communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Religious Knowledge and the Epistemic Role of Oral Tradition

Religious knowledge extends beyond doctrinal propositions, sacred texts, or factual information about religious figures. In socially embedded religious contexts, it also encompasses collectively recognised understandings through which communities interpret sacred persons, places, practices, experiences, and claims of religious legitimacy. This distinction is important because religious information does not automatically become religious knowledge. Narratives concerning sacred history or spiritual experience acquire religious significance when they are regarded as credible, incorporated into communal interpretation, and used to orient religious practice.

Oral tradition constitutes one important context in which such knowledge may be transmitted. Its epistemic significance, however, depends not merely on repetition but on the social conditions under which narratives are recognised as credible. Ikuenobe (2018) emphasises the role of epistemic trust, epistemic dependence, and communal recognition in orally transmitted knowledge. Individuals often rely on elders, custodians, or narrators whose credibility derives from their recognised position within established networks of memory and transmission. Oral tradition is therefore not epistemically neutral: the status of a narrative depends partly on who transmits it, how its transmission is socially authorised, and whether it is recognised within the community.

Research across religious and Indonesian cultural contexts supports this view. Oral transmission can shape religious dispositions and interpretive practices, connect inherited narratives with contemporary sacred landscapes, and sustain culturally significant knowledge across generations (Dweirj, 2023; Ramli et al., 2024; Schweinsberg & Sharpley, 2024). These studies collectively suggest that oral traditions operate through socially embedded forms of transmission rather than through repetition alone. Yet transmission does not by itself establish religious legitimacy. The central analytical problem is therefore not simply how narratives survive, but how they become recognised as credible religious knowledge. This study consequently treats oral tradition as a social practice whose epistemic significance must be established through its relationship with memory, lived experience, authority, and legitimation.

2.2 Collective Memory, Pilgrimage, and Lived Religion

Collective memory helps explain how orally transmitted narratives remain meaningful across generations. Rather than representing the aggregation of individual recollections, collective memory is a social process through which communities preserve, reinterpret, and actualise representations of the past. Cockayne and Salter (2021) show that religious remembering can make the past socially present through ritual and shared narrative. The significance of remembered religious figures therefore depends not only on historical reconstruction but also on how their memory is continually enacted in contemporary communal life.

Pilgrimage sites provide particularly important contexts for this process because sacred histories are embodied through prayer, ritual movement, material objects, commemorative practices, and interpersonal storytelling. Studies of pilgrimage demonstrate that sacred sites function as dynamic arenas in which collective memory, ritual performance, religious belonging, and relationships with revered figures intersect (Dharma et al., 2024; Luz, 2023; Madjid et al., 2022). In Islamic Java specifically, Meyer (2024) shows that grave visitation involves narrative, ethical, affective, and relational dimensions of belonging that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between local tradition and doctrinal Islam. Pilgrimage therefore provides a setting in which the religious past is continually interpreted through contemporary social relationships and practice.

The perspective of lived religion further clarifies how these meanings become embodied. Ammerman (2021) argues that religion is constituted not only through doctrines and institutions but also through everyday practices, relationships, narratives, and embodied experience. In pilgrimage settings, concepts such as sacredness, blessing, prayer, remembrance, and spiritual benefit are therefore encountered not simply as theological abstractions but as meanings realised through practice and experience.

Lived religion does not, however, imply the absence of doctrinal evaluation. Everyday religious practices remain connected to theological norms and socially recognised standards of legitimacy. Sacred-site practices may be interpreted differently in relation to *tawhid*, *bidʿah*, intercession, and saint veneration (Nurhanifah et al., 2025). Such theological perspectives are relevant here not as external standards for judging participants, but as discursive resources that religious actors may invoke when affirming,

modifying, or challenging particular practices. Collective memory thus helps explain the continuity of inherited narratives, while lived religion explains their enactment and experiential meaning. Neither alone fully explains why some interpretations become more legitimate than others, making religious authority a necessary analytical dimension.

2.3 Religious Authority, Contestation, and Legitimation

Religious authority refers to the socially recognised capacity to advance claims about religious meaning that others regard as credible or legitimate. Contemporary scholarship increasingly treats such authority as relational rather than merely institutional. Alatas (2021) shows that Islamic authority in Indonesia is cultivated through historically embedded relationships, genealogies, practices, institutions, and community recognition. Chaplin (2025) further emphasises its spatial and relational character, while Rosidi et al. (2024) demonstrate that traditional religious authority may be negotiated rather than remaining fixed or monolithic. Authority therefore depends not only on formal status or textual expertise but also on sustained recognition within particular social settings.

Authority and legitimacy are analytically distinct. Authority refers to the recognised capacity to advance credible religious claims, whereas legitimacy concerns the process through which those claims become socially or religiously accepted. Religious authority is therefore relational because claims become effective only through processes of recognition, negotiation, reinterpretation, or rejection.

The concept of contestation is similarly important but should not be equated with overt conflict. Contestation is understood here as the coexistence, evaluation, negotiation, accommodation, and differential legitimation of competing religious claims. Different sources of legitimacy may operate simultaneously within such processes. Genealogical succession can support custodial or historical credibility; community recognition can sustain collective legitimacy; lived religious experience can provide experiential testimony; and theological reasoning can supply criteria for evaluating ritual or doctrinal validity. The central analytical issue is therefore not simply who possesses authority, but what kinds of legitimacy different sources contribute to the recognition of religious meaning.

Digital communication may further diversify these authority fields by enabling religious claims and alternative narratives to circulate beyond locally embedded custodial

structures (Rusli et al., 2020; Whyte, 2022). However, digitalisation need not replace traditional authority; it may instead introduce additional sources of interpretation that interact with existing forms of religious credibility. Importantly, normative Islamic discourse should not be treated as an actor equivalent to shrine custodians, pilgrims, or local communities. It is more accurately conceptualised as a theological and discursive resource that actors may invoke when validating or challenging particular interpretations.

2.4 An Integrative Analytical Framework for Religious Knowledge Production

Taken together, these perspectives provide an integrated framework for analysing religious knowledge as a socially produced and legitimised form of understanding rather than as a self-evident body of information (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this framework, religious knowledge constitutes the phenomenon to be explained. Oral tradition represents the principal social practice through which narratives are transmitted and sustained through relations of epistemic trust and communal recognition (Ikuenobe, 2018), while collective memory functions as a social-epistemic process that connects inherited narratives with present meanings through continuing acts of remembrance and reinterpretation (Assmann, 2011). Religious authority provides the primary analytical lens for examining claims to credibility and recognition (Alatas, 2021), whereas lived religion offers a complementary lens for understanding how religious meanings are embodied, enacted, and experienced in everyday practice (Ammerman, 2021). Within this conceptual architecture, legitimation refers to the process through which particular interpretations acquire social or religious recognition, while contestation captures the evaluation, negotiation, accommodation, and differential acceptance of competing claims.

These concepts suggest an analytical sequence without presupposing a fixed causal relationship. Orally transmitted narratives may enter collective memory and become resources for claims concerning sacred history, religious practice, and legitimate religious meaning. Actors may draw on different bases of authority when advancing or evaluating such claims, while processes of negotiation and contestation shape whether particular interpretations gain, retain, or lose legitimacy. This relational understanding is consistent with scholarship showing that Islamic religious authority is historically embedded, socially cultivated, and continually negotiated through relations among actors,

communities, practices, and sources of recognition (Alatas, 2021; Chaplin, 2025; Rosidi et al., 2024). Through lived religious practice, meanings that acquire legitimacy may subsequently be enacted and experienced, generating further narratives and memories that can re-enter processes of oral transmission and collective remembering.

The framework does not assume that oral tradition automatically produces religious knowledge or that collective memory necessarily guarantees legitimacy. Instead, its concepts function as sensitising devices within an abductive analytical strategy. Sensitising concepts provide theoretical directions for examining empirical phenomena without imposing rigid classificatory definitions in advance (Blumer, 1954), while abductive analysis enables iterative movement between empirical observations and existing theoretical explanations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Accordingly, the framework directs attention to how narratives are transmitted, memories reproduced, authority claims advanced, legitimacy invoked, interpretations negotiated, and religious meanings enacted, while remaining open to relationships and patterns emerging from the empirical material. The literature-derived framework therefore guides interpretation without predetermining the structure of the resulting empirical model.

Religious knowledge production can consequently be conceptualised as a dynamic and potentially recursive process in which meanings are transmitted, remembered, evaluated, legitimised, enacted, and reproduced. This perspective connects the social construction and legitimation of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) with the continuing reproduction of collective memory (Assmann, 2011), relational religious authority (Alatas, 2021), and lived religious experience (Ammerman, 2021). Rather than treating pilgrimage communities as passive recipients of fixed religious meanings, the framework positions pilgrimage sites as social arenas in which claims concerning sacred persons, places, practices, and religious legitimacy are continuously produced, evaluated, negotiated, enacted, and potentially reconstructed. The precise relationships among these processes, however, remain an empirical question to be established through analysis rather than assumed in advance.

RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

This study adopted a constructivist–interpretive paradigm, which views religious knowledge as socially constructed through interaction, cultural experience, collective interpretation, and the negotiation of meaning among social actors (Crotty, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This orientation was appropriate because the study did not seek to determine whether pilgrimage practices associated with Ki Ageng Balak were theologically correct or incorrect. Instead, it examined how knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak, the religious significance of the site, pilgrimage practices, and related meanings was produced, negotiated, and legitimised within community life.

Within this paradigm, the researcher functioned as the primary research instrument and interpreted participants' accounts reflexively throughout data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher therefore remained attentive to the distinction between participants' perspectives and subsequent analytical interpretation.

The study employed an interpretive qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage site was treated as the bounded case because it constitutes a setting in which oral tradition, collective memory, pilgrimage practice, religious experience, and different sources of religious authority intersect. The neutral term *pilgrimage site* was used because differing accounts concerning whether the location represents a tomb or a *petilasan* formed part of the phenomenon under investigation. This design enabled an in-depth analysis of religious meaning-making within its cultural and social context (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at the Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage site in Bendosari District, Sukoharjo Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The site was selected purposively because it remains an active pilgrimage centre, preserves a living oral tradition, and contains diverse interpretations concerning Ki Ageng Balak's historical identity, the sacred status of the site, *barakah*, and pilgrimage practices.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in the pilgrimage tradition (Patton, 2015). Four groups were included: shrine custodians (*juru kunci*), community leaders, local residents, and pilgrims. Shrine custodians were selected because of their responsibility for maintaining the site

and transmitting narratives; community leaders because of their knowledge of local history and culture; local residents when they had lived in the area for at least ten years; and pilgrims when they had visited the site at least three times. Data collection continued until additional interviews no longer generated substantively new information, categories, or themes relevant to the research questions (Saunders et al., 2020).

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Participant Group	Selection Criteria	Principal Information Focus
Shrine custodians (*juru kunci*)	Responsible for managing the site and related rituals	Oral tradition, historical narratives, and religious authority
Community leaders	Possess knowledge of local history and culture	Collective memory and cultural legitimacy
Local residents	Have lived in the area for at least ten years	Perceptions of sacredness and pilgrimage practices
Pilgrims	Have visited the site at least three times	Religious experience and the meaning of *barakah*

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and the collection and comparison of oral traditions. Combining these sources enabled methodological and source triangulation across observed practices, participants' accounts, documentary evidence, and locally transmitted narratives (Denzin, 2009).

Participant observation was conducted during pilgrimage activities and focused on ritual practices, religious symbols, interactions among pilgrims and local actors, and the ways religious meanings were expressed in practice. Observation also provided contextual information for interpreting interview narratives.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' accounts of Ki Ageng Balak's history and identity, the perceived sacredness of the site, pilgrimage practices, religious experience, and processes of religious legitimation. The flexible format allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences and alternative narratives while maintaining consistency across the main research topics. Interviews lasted approximately

45–90 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and were transcribed verbatim (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Document analysis included historical archives, local manuscripts, photographs, and other materials related to the site. These materials were used to contextualise oral narratives and examine how representations of Ki Ageng Balak were preserved and circulated. Oral narratives provided by shrine custodians, community members, and other participants were also compared to identify patterns of transmission, continuity, variation, and intergenerational reproduction. Narrative differences were treated as analytically meaningful because the study sought to understand how religious knowledge was socially negotiated rather than to establish a single definitive historical account.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using an abductive thematic approach combining systematic data organisation with interpretive theme development. The procedure drew on Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive qualitative analysis principles and Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The abductive orientation enabled iterative movement between empirical evidence and the conceptual perspectives developed in the literature review.

Analysis began with data condensation through repeated examination and organisation of interview transcripts, observational material, documents, and oral narratives. Initial coding identified meaningful units related to oral transmission, historical narratives, sacredness, religious experience, pilgrimage, authority, and legitimacy. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories.

Categories were compared across participants and data sources to generate major themes. Particular attention was given to variations concerning Ki Ageng Balak's identity, the status of the pilgrimage site, barakah, and pilgrimage practices. Rather than treating these variations as inconsistencies requiring elimination, they were analysed as evidence of negotiated religious meaning.

At the interpretive stage, emergent themes were examined in relation to the literature review. Religious knowledge constituted the phenomenon to be explained, while religious authority and lived religion served as complementary analytical perspectives. Oral tradition and collective memory were examined as processes of

narrative transmission and reproduction, whereas legitimation and contestation were used to interpret how particular meanings gained religious recognition. The final stage synthesised empirically supported thematic relationships into a conceptual model of religious knowledge production.

Table 2. Stages of Data Analysis

Stage	Analytical Activity	Output
Data condensation	Selecting and organising relevant field data	Organised data corpus
Initial coding	Identifying meaningful units across data sources	Initial codes
Focused coding	Grouping conceptually related codes	Analytical categories
Theme development	Integrating categories and comparing patterns	Major themes
Interpretative analysis	Relating themes to religious knowledge, authority, lived religion, collective memory, and legitimation	Conceptual interpretation
Model development	Synthesising empirically supported thematic relationships	Conceptual model of religious knowledge production

3.5 Trustworthiness and Research Ethics

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. Transferability was supported through contextual description, dependability through an audit trail, and confirmability through peer debriefing and researcher reflexivity.

The study also followed established principles of qualitative research ethics (Israel & Hay, 2006). Informed consent was obtained before data collection, participants were informed about the research purpose and academic use of their information, and confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms. Because the study was conducted in a religiously and culturally significant setting, the researcher respected local norms, avoided interfering with rituals, and did not evaluate participants' beliefs according to a

predetermined theological position. Divergent interpretations were instead analysed as culturally situated perspectives on the production, negotiation, and legitimation of religious knowledge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4. Results

4.1 Oral Transmission and Narrative Plurality

The findings reveal that knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak is transmitted through multiple, overlapping channels of oral communication. A recurring pattern involved the intergenerational transmission of narratives through the families of shrine custodians (*juru kunci*), whose position provides continuity in the preservation and circulation of local accounts. Bu Siti explained that her position as *juru kunci* was inherited from her mother: “I am Bu Siti. I became the *juru kunci* after replacing my mother, Ibu Siti. The position of *juru kunci* must be passed down from one generation to the next.” Her account indicates that genealogical succession is closely connected to responsibility for preserving and communicating narratives about Ki Ageng Balak. A similar pattern was reported by Pak Selamet, who described receiving narratives from his great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents.

Knowledge about Ki Ageng Balak, however, was not restricted to the families of shrine custodians. Participants also described learning about the site through village elders, local residents, pilgrims, and everyday interactions within the surrounding community. Oral transmission therefore operated through both genealogically structured custodianship and broader community networks. These overlapping channels enabled accounts concerning Ki Ageng Balak to circulate beyond those formally responsible for maintaining the site.

The data further show that these orally transmitted narratives are not uniform. Participants associated Ki Ageng Balak with several historical accounts. One version identified him with Raden Sujono of the Majapahit lineage, who was said to have received the title Ki Ageng Balak after overcoming a severe epidemic. Other accounts connected him with the period of Prince Diponegoro or described him as a local figure who once used the area as a place of refuge. Participants also reported variations concerning the figures believed to have accompanied him.

These differences were not described by participants as necessarily invalidating the religious or cultural significance of the site. Instead, multiple accounts continued to circulate within the same social setting. Within this case, therefore, the social credibility of narratives appeared to depend less on complete historical uniformity than on continuity of transmission, the recognised position of narrators, and the continued circulation of the narratives within the community.

Oral transmission was also connected to narratives of spiritual significance. One account transmitted within Bu Siti's family concerned an ancestor who reportedly heard an invisible voice instructing that the location should be preserved because it would bring blessings to future generations. Participants referred to such inherited accounts when explaining the perceived significance of the site. Pilgrims' narratives concerning inner peace and the perceived fulfilment of personal aspirations provided an additional layer of experiential testimony that circulated alongside inherited historical narratives.

Taken together, the findings identify three interrelated forms of transmission: genealogical transmission through *juru kunci* families, communal circulation through local social networks, and experiential narration through pilgrimage. These forms did not produce a single standardised historical account. Rather, they sustained a plural narrative field through which knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak continued to be communicated and interpreted.

4.2 Sources of Religious Authority and Legitimacy

The findings show that the interpretation of Ki Ageng Balak and the pilgrimage site was not controlled by a single source of authority. Instead, several forms of legitimacy operated simultaneously. The *juru kunci* occupied an important position because of genealogical succession, their responsibility for maintaining the site, and their familiarity with orally transmitted narratives. Their authority was therefore closely connected to custodianship and continuity of local memory.

Pak Selamet's response to alternative historical accounts illustrates this custodial claim to narrative credibility. Referring to stories circulating on digital platforms, he stated, "There are different stories on YouTube, but they are all misconceptions... other people give them strange titles." His response did not simply indicate disagreement over historical detail. It also demonstrated an attempt to distinguish narratives regarded as

locally inherited from versions perceived as externally produced or insufficiently grounded in the site's oral tradition.

At the same time, participants did not describe the *juru kunci* as the only source from which knowledge could be obtained. Local residents and community members also drew on village elders, family narratives, social interaction, and their own familiarity with pilgrimage practices. Community recognition therefore contributed a second basis of legitimacy by sustaining particular understandings through repeated circulation within local social networks.

Pilgrims contributed a different form of credibility through lived religious experience. Participants associated pilgrimage with experiences such as inner peace, perceived economic improvement, employment opportunities, or the fulfilment of personal aspirations. When these experiences were narrated and shared, they provided experiential claims that could reinforce understandings concerning the religious significance and *barakah* associated with the site. The analytical significance of these accounts lies not in independently verifying the efficacy attributed to pilgrimage but in showing how personal experiences entered the social circulation of religious meaning.

A further source of evaluation involved Islamic theological language. Participants referred to concepts such as prayer to Allah, *tawhid*, *tawassul*, and the boundaries between respect for a revered figure and inappropriate veneration. Normative Islamic discourse therefore did not operate as a social actor equivalent to the *juru kunci*, local residents, or pilgrims. Rather, it functioned as a theological resource through which participants could evaluate, defend, qualify, or reinterpret particular practices and meanings.

The findings thus point to three principal social loci involved in religious knowledge production—the shrine custodians, the local community, and pilgrims—together with theological discourse as an important evaluative resource. These different sources contributed different forms of legitimacy: custodial and genealogical continuity, communal recognition, experiential testimony, and theological reasoning. No single source completely displaced the others.

4.3 Negotiating Sacredness, Barakah, and Pilgrimage Practice

Differences in authority became particularly visible in interpretations of the status and religious meaning of the Ki Ageng Balak site. One important example concerned whether the location should be understood as an actual grave or as a *petilasan*. Bu Siti described the site as a *petilasan* because, according to the oral tradition transmitted in her family, Ki Ageng Balak attained *muksa* rather than undergoing an ordinary physical death. Pak Selamet, by contrast, maintained that Ki Ageng Balak died and was buried at the site.

These competing accounts demonstrate that interpretive plurality existed even among custodians of local tradition. Participants did not describe these differences as producing overt conflict within the local setting. Instead, both interpretations remained part of the narratives through which the site was understood. The religious significance attributed to the location therefore did not depend on complete agreement concerning its historical or ontological status.

Negotiation was also evident in interpretations of *barakah*. Pilgrims associated visits to the site with prayer, tranquillity, personal aspirations, and gratitude. Pak Selamet's account located the meaning of such experiences within prayer to Allah and the moral significance associated with Ki Ageng Balak rather than in an autonomous supernatural power attributed to the physical site. Such accounts illustrate how participants articulated locally meaningful understandings of *barakah* while simultaneously framing them in relation to Islamic theological commitments.

Similar negotiation appeared in explanations of pilgrimage itself. Participants described pilgrimage as an occasion for prayer, remembrance, respect for Ki Ageng Balak, reflection, and requests for well-being or assistance with personal difficulties. When pilgrims believed that their prayers or aspirations had been fulfilled, some returned to participate in *bancaan*, or communal thanksgiving meals. At the same time, the *juru kunci* emphasised that supplication was directed to Allah and that Ki Ageng Balak was respected rather than worshipped. These formulations provided participants with a way of presenting pilgrimage as compatible with their understanding of *tawhid*.

The local Wulung Langse tradition provides another example of this negotiated relationship between cultural practice and religious meaning. Participants associated activities surrounding the tradition—including processions, replacement of the cloth

covering the site, cultural performances, communal prayer, and *bancaan*—with respect for Ki Ageng Balak, social solidarity, cultural continuity, and gratitude. Within participants' accounts, these cultural elements were distinguished from worship directed to Allah. The distinction allowed ritual-cultural practices to retain local significance while being interpreted within an Islamic religious framework.

Overall, three forms of negotiation were evident. Historical negotiation concerned differing narratives about Ki Ageng Balak and the status of the site. Ritual negotiation concerned how local cultural practices were interpreted in relation to religious commitments. Theological negotiation concerned concepts such as *barakah*, prayer, *tawassul*, and *tawhid*. Rather than producing a single standardised interpretation, these processes enabled multiple meanings to coexist and be continually evaluated within the pilgrimage setting.

4.4 Reproduction and Reinterpretation of Religious Knowledge

The findings further indicate that religious knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak is reproduced through the interaction of inherited narrative, collective memory, religious practice, and experiential testimony. Participants described the site simultaneously as a place associated with local history, pilgrimage, prayer, social interaction, and cultural memory. Its significance therefore cannot be reduced to a single historical or ritual function.

The Wulung Langse tradition illustrates this relationship particularly clearly. Participants associated the practice not only with respect for Ki Ageng Balak but also with the maintenance of collective memory, cultural identity, social solidarity, and communal religious expression. Cultural processions, the replacement of the cloth associated with the site, traditional performances, communal prayer, and *bancaan* provided contexts in which narratives concerning Ki Ageng Balak could be publicly recalled and socially reproduced.

Experiential narratives also contributed to this process. Pilgrims' accounts of tranquillity, perceived blessings, economic improvement, employment, and fulfilled aspirations were circulated through interpersonal interaction. Such testimony provided additional interpretive material through which the religious significance of the site was

communicated. Personal experience thereby became socially consequential when narrated, shared, and incorporated into broader understandings of pilgrimage.

Participants also referred to alternative narratives encountered through YouTube and other digitally circulated sources. These accounts introduced additional versions of Ki Ageng Balak's history into an already plural narrative environment. Because digital content itself was not systematically analysed in this study, these findings concern participants' encounters with digitally circulated narratives rather than the structure of digital religious authority itself. Nevertheless, participants' responses indicate that digital circulation can introduce competing narrative claims that local actors subsequently evaluate against inherited oral accounts.

Across these findings, religious knowledge was reproduced through four interconnected processes: the continued circulation of historical narratives, the collective remembrance of Ki Ageng Balak through ritual and cultural practice, the interpretation and sharing of lived religious experiences, and the evaluation of alternative accounts through locally recognised and theological criteria of credibility. The findings therefore point toward a recursive process in which narratives, memory, practice, experience, and authority continually interact in the interpretation of Ki Ageng Balak and the pilgrimage site.

Table 3. Summary of Empirical Themes and Sources of Legitimacy

Empirical theme	Principal pattern	Main social source	Basis of legitimacy
Oral transmission	Narratives transmitted through families and community networks	*Juru kunci*, elders, local residents	Genealogical continuity and communal circulation
Narrative plurality	Majapahit, Diponegoro-era, local-figure, grave/*petilasan* accounts	Custodians and community narratives	Continuity and social recognition rather than narrative uniformity

Experiential testimony	Inner peace and perceived fulfilment of aspirations	Pilgrims	Lived religious experience
Theological negotiation	Prayer, *barakah*, *tawassul*, and *tawhid*	Participants drawing on Islamic discourse	Theological reasoning
Ritual-cultural reproduction	Wulung Langse, *bancaan*, communal prayer, cultural performance	Local community and pilgrimage participants	Collective memory and communal practice
Digitally encountered narratives	Alternative historical accounts encountered online	Participant-reported digital sources	Competing claims evaluated against locally transmitted narratives

5. Discussion

5.1 From Oral Transmission to Epistemic Legitimacy

The findings clarify that the significance of oral tradition in the Ki Ageng Balak pilgrimage setting lies not simply in its capacity to preserve narratives but in the processes through which those narratives become credible and socially consequential. This distinction is important because transmission alone does not transform a story into religious knowledge. Within this case, orally transmitted accounts acquired significance through the interaction of custodial continuity, collective circulation, lived experience, and social recognition.

This finding resonates with Ikuenobe's (2018) account of oral knowledge as dependent on epistemic trust, communal dependence, and socially recognised knowledge holders. The genealogical succession of *juru kunci* provides a local example of such epistemic dependence: their credibility is connected not solely to the content of what they narrate but also to their recognised position within an intergenerational chain of custodianship. At the same time, the circulation of narratives beyond the *juru kunci*

families shows that epistemic recognition is not confined to a single custodian. Local elders, residents, and pilgrims also participate in sustaining the narrative field.

The findings similarly extend scholarship that approaches oral tradition as a mechanism of intergenerational cultural transmission (Dweirj, 2023; Ramli et al., 2024; Schweinsberg & Sharpley, 2024). In the Ki Ageng Balak case, oral transmission does more than conserve information about a religious figure. It contributes to the conditions under which claims concerning history, sacredness, *barakah*, and legitimate pilgrimage practice remain available for contemporary interpretation.

Collective memory plays a central role in this process. Cockayne and Salter (2021) argue that religious remembering can actualise the past within present communal life rather than merely retrieve historical information. The coexistence of different versions of Ki Ageng Balak's identity supports this distinction. Participants did not require complete narrative uniformity for the figure or site to retain religious significance. What mattered socially was that narratives remained embedded within ongoing relations of memory, custodianship, ritual, and community recognition.

This finding does not imply that historical accuracy is irrelevant. Rather, it distinguishes historical verification from social-epistemic legitimacy. Academic historical inquiry may evaluate accounts according to documentary consistency and evidentiary standards, whereas locally recognised religious knowledge may acquire credibility through somewhat different processes, including intergenerational transmission, recognised custodianship, shared memory, and lived religious experience. The contribution of the present case therefore lies in showing how these forms of recognition interact without treating social acceptance as equivalent to historical proof.

Oral tradition can consequently be described as epistemically consequential in this setting because it participates in at least four processes: the transmission of claims, attribution of credibility to particular narrators, communal recognition of meanings, and the incorporation of those meanings into religious interpretation and practice. It is through these interrelated processes, rather than transmission alone, that oral tradition performs the epistemic role identified in this study.

5.2 Plural Religious Authority and Differentiated Bases of Legitimacy

The findings also refine understanding of religious authority by showing that different social actors contribute different forms of legitimacy to the production of religious knowledge. Religious authority at the Ki Ageng Balak site is therefore better understood as differentiated and relational rather than as a single hierarchy in which one actor possesses complete control over religious interpretation.

This interpretation is consistent with Alatas's (2020) argument that Islamic religious authority is cultivated through historically embedded relationships, institutions, genealogies, practices, and community recognition rather than being reducible to formal institutional office. In the present study, the authority of the *juru kunci* similarly rested on a combination of genealogical continuity, custodianship of the site, and recognised familiarity with its oral narratives. The case extends this discussion beyond conventional clerical authority by demonstrating the significance of local custodians of sacred narratives as participants in the production of religious knowledge.

Chaplin (2025) further conceptualises religious authority as relational, spatially embedded, and dependent on meaningful engagement within particular communities. This relational quality is visible in the Ki Ageng Balak case because custodial authority did not operate independently of community recognition. Local residents continued to obtain knowledge through elders and social interaction, while pilgrims introduced experiential claims into the same interpretive field. Rosidi et al. (2024) likewise show that traditional religious authority in Indonesia can be negotiated rather than functioning as a fixed or monolithic structure.

The present findings advance this literature by showing that plural sources of authority perform different epistemic functions. The *juru kunci* contribute custodial continuity and narrative credibility; community members contribute collective recognition and social memory; pilgrims contribute experiential testimony; and Islamic theological discourse provides criteria through which practices and interpretations can be evaluated. Plurality therefore concerns not only the number of actors involved but also the distinct forms of legitimacy they contribute.

This distinction also clarifies the meaning of contestation in the present study. Contestation does not necessarily refer to overt conflict. Instead, it refers to situations in which different claims to historical, ritual, experiential, or theological legitimacy coexist

and are differentially recognised, negotiated, defended, or challenged. The grave/*petilasan* distinction, alternative historical versions, disagreements concerning online narratives, and the reinterpretation of pilgrimage within the language of *tawhid* all illustrate this broader form of contestation.

Normative Islamic discourse should consequently not be conceptualised as a fourth social actor equivalent to the *juru kunci*, local community, or pilgrims. Its role is more accurately understood as a theological and discursive resource that participants may invoke when legitimising or questioning religious practices. This distinction separates who makes a claim from which religious resources are used to legitimate that claim, providing a more precise understanding of authority within the case.

Participants' references to online narratives add another dimension to this plural field. Studies have shown that digital communication can reshape the circulation of Islamic knowledge and authority (Rusli et al., 2020; Whyte, 2022). In the present case, however, digital materials were not independently analysed. The findings therefore support only the more limited conclusion that participants encountered digitally circulated alternatives that entered local negotiations of narrative credibility. Whether these digital narratives constitute an independent form of religious authority requires further investigation.

5.3 Lived Religion as Enactment and Experiential Legitimation

The findings further demonstrate the value of a lived-religion perspective for understanding how religious knowledge becomes meaningful through practice and experience. Ammerman (2021) emphasises that religion is lived through embodied practices, narratives, relationships, material environments, emotions, and everyday experience rather than existing solely as formal doctrine. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Ki Ageng Balak setting, where concepts such as *barakah*, remembrance, prayer, and sacredness are interpreted through participation in pilgrimage and communal ritual.

Pilgrims' accounts indicate that lived religious experience performs more than an expressive function. Experiences of tranquillity, perceived blessing, or the believed fulfilment of personal aspirations can also become experiential claims that contribute to the credibility of religious meanings when they are narrated to others. Such testimony

does not independently establish supernatural efficacy. Its analytical importance lies instead in the way personal experience is converted into socially circulating evidence through narration and communal interpretation.

This observation extends the lived-religion perspective by showing that experience can function simultaneously as the enactment of religious meaning and as a form of experiential legitimation. Pilgrimage participants do not merely enact previously established beliefs; their experiences can become new narrative material through which understandings of *barakah*, sacredness, and pilgrimage are reinforced or reinterpreted.

The finding is consistent with studies showing that pilgrimage sites connect religious experience with memory, belonging, and sacred narratives. Luz (2020) demonstrates that Islamic pilgrimage sites operate as dynamic places of memory whose meanings are continually reconstructed. Madjid et al. (2022) similarly show how pilgrimage and cultural performance can sustain memories of revered religious figures in Indonesia. Meyer's (2024) analysis of Islamic grave visitation in Java is especially relevant because it demonstrates that encounters with graves involve complex narrative, relational, ethical, and affective dimensions that cannot be adequately explained through a simple opposition between local tradition and doctrinal Islam.

The Ki Ageng Balak findings likewise caution against treating local tradition and Islamic commitment as mutually exclusive categories. Participants frequently framed pilgrimage and cultural practice through Islamic theological language. The insistence that prayer is directed to Allah, the reinterpretation of *barakah*, and the distinction between respect and worship are examples of how participants negotiated cultural and theological meanings rather than simply choosing between them.

The Wulung Langse tradition further demonstrates this process. Cultural processions, communal meals, ritual care of the site, traditional performance, and communal prayer provide material and social settings in which collective memory is enacted. At the same time, participants interpreted these practices through distinctions that allowed cultural continuity and Islamic commitment to coexist. Lived religion therefore provides the arena in which inherited narratives, theological considerations, and everyday experience are practically negotiated.

5.4 Religious Authority Contestation Model for the Production of Religious Knowledge

The synthesis of the findings supports the Religious Authority Contestation Model for the Production of Religious Knowledge, which conceptualises religious knowledge production as a recursive process rather than a linear transfer from authoritative source to passive recipient. The model does not propose that every oral tradition necessarily produces legitimate religious knowledge. Rather, it identifies the processes through which orally transmitted claims can acquire, maintain, lose, or renegotiate legitimacy within the Ki Ageng Balak case.

The process begins with oral narratives concerning Ki Ageng Balak, his historical identity, the status of the site, pilgrimage, and religious significance. Through repeated transmission, some narratives become embedded in collective memory, providing a shared but not necessarily uniform repertoire through which the community relates the past to the present.

These narratives generate religious meaning claims concerning sacredness, *barakah*, legitimate pilgrimage, the identity of Ki Ageng Balak, and the status of the site. Such claims are evaluated through several differentiated bases of legitimacy. Genealogical and custodial authority contributes continuity and narrative credibility; communal recognition contributes collective validation; lived religious experience contributes experiential testimony; and theological reasoning provides criteria for interpreting compatibility with Islamic commitments.

Because these sources do not always produce identical interpretations, religious meaning claims enter processes of negotiation and contestation. Contestation in the model encompasses coexistence, disagreement, reinterpretation, accommodation, and differential recognition rather than necessarily implying open conflict. Through these processes, particular interpretations may acquire social-religious legitimation and become recognised within the community as religious knowledge.

Religious knowledge is subsequently enacted through lived religious practice, including pilgrimage, prayer, remembrance, *bancaan*, and culturally embedded ritual practices. These practices generate additional experiences, narratives, and memories that

may subsequently enter renewed processes of transmission. The model is therefore recursive:

Oral Narratives → Collective Memory → Religious Meaning Claims → Differentiated Bases of Legitimacy → Negotiation/Contestation → Social-Religious Legitimation → Religious Knowledge → Lived Practice and Experience → Narrative Reproduction and Reinterpretation → Oral Narratives.

This model makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it specifies the conditions under which oral tradition becomes epistemically consequential. Its epistemic role derives not from oral transmission alone but from the interaction of transmission, recognised custodianship, collective memory, experiential corroboration, and processes of legitimation. This extends scholarship on oral tradition by explaining how orally circulated narratives can participate in religious knowledge production rather than functioning solely as repositories of cultural heritage (Ikuenobe, 2018; Ramli et al., 2024; Schweinsberg & Sharpley, 2024).

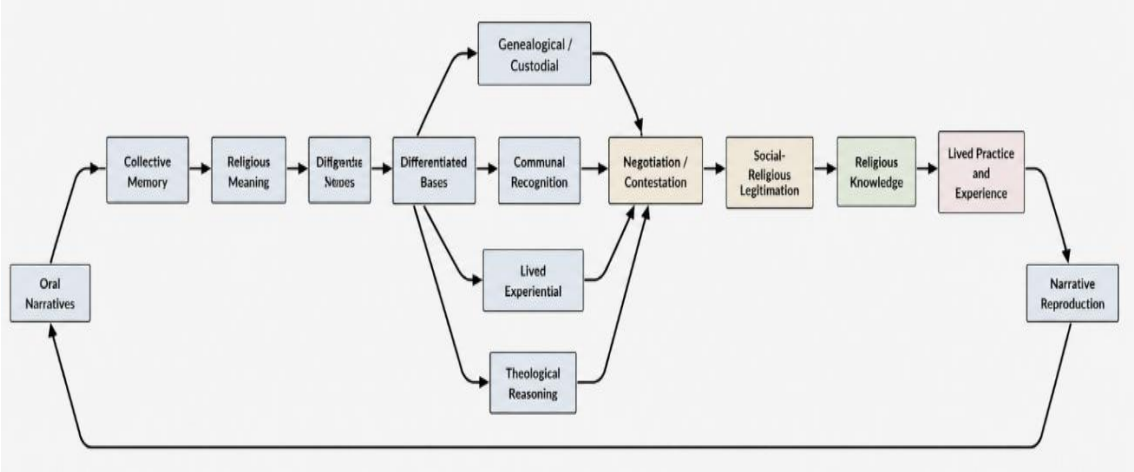
Second, the model extends current scholarship on religious authority by distinguishing plural authority from differentiated legitimacy. The significance of multiple authorities lies not merely in their coexistence but in the different kinds of credibility they contribute to religious knowledge. Genealogical continuity, communal recognition, experiential testimony, and theological reasoning perform different functions within the same field of religious meaning (Alatas, 2021; Chaplin, 2025; Rosidi et al., 2024).

Third, the model extends the lived-religion perspective by identifying lived experience not only as the arena in which religious meanings are enacted but also as a source of experiential legitimation. Religious experience becomes epistemically relevant when personal accounts are narrated, circulated, and incorporated into collective interpretations. This connects lived religious practice with the continuing reproduction of religious knowledge (Ammerman, 2021; Meyer, 2025).

The proposed model should nevertheless be interpreted as an empirically grounded conceptual explanation derived from a single pilgrimage-site case rather than as a universal causal model of religious knowledge production. Its principal value lies in identifying a set of relational processes that may be examined comparatively in other

pilgrimage traditions. Moreover, because digitally circulating materials were encountered through participants' accounts rather than systematically analysed as an independent corpus, the role of digital authority remains a boundary of the present explanation rather than a fully established component of the model.

Figure 2. Religious Authority Contestation Model for the Production of Religious Knowledge



CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how religious knowledge concerning Ki Ageng Balak is transmitted, negotiated, legitimised, and reproduced within a pilgrimage setting shaped by oral tradition, collective memory, lived religious experience, and multiple sources of authority. The findings show that oral narratives circulate through genealogical transmission among juru kunci, community networks, and pilgrims' experiential testimonies. These narratives do not necessarily converge into a single historical account. Instead, their social credibility is sustained through continuity of transmission, recognised custodianship, communal recognition, and continuing relevance within religious practice. Religious authority therefore operated through plural and relational sources of legitimacy: shrine custodians contributed genealogical and custodial credibility, communities sustained collective memory, pilgrims provided experiential testimony, and Islamic theological discourse functioned as an evaluative resource for interpreting barakah, tawassul, pilgrimage, and tawhid.

The principal theoretical contribution of the study lies in explaining the conditions under which oral tradition becomes epistemically consequential. Oral transmission alone

does not transform narratives into religious knowledge. Its epistemic role emerges through the interaction of narrative continuity, collective memory, recognised authority, lived experience, negotiation, and social-religious legitimation. Different sources of authority also perform differentiated epistemic functions: custodial continuity supports narrative credibility, communal recognition sustains shared meanings, lived experience contributes experiential legitimation, and theological reasoning provides criteria for evaluating religious validity. Lived religion therefore operates not only as the arena in which religious meanings are enacted but also as a source of testimonial meaning when personal experiences are narrated and incorporated into collective interpretation.

These relationships are synthesised in the Religious Authority Contestation Model for the Production of Religious Knowledge, which conceptualises religious knowledge production as recursive rather than linear. Oral narratives enter collective memory and generate religious meaning claims that are evaluated through differentiated bases of legitimacy. Through negotiation, contestation, accommodation, and reinterpretation, some meanings acquire social-religious legitimacy and become recognised as religious knowledge. These meanings are subsequently enacted through pilgrimage, prayer, remembrance, bancaan, and other culturally embedded practices. Lived practice and experience then generate further narratives that re-enter processes of transmission and collective remembering. Contestation therefore refers not necessarily to overt conflict but to the coexistence and differential legitimation of competing historical, ritual, and theological interpretations.

Practically, the findings suggest that safeguarding pilgrimage traditions should recognise narrative plurality rather than require the standardisation of a single authoritative account. Shrine custodians, cultural institutions, heritage managers, religious leaders, and local communities may benefit from documenting multiple oral narratives while distinguishing historical documentation, collective memory, lived experience, and theological interpretation.

Several limitations delimit these conclusions. The study focused on a single pilgrimage site in Central Java, so the model should be understood as analytically transferable rather than universally generalisable. Normative Islamic discourse was examined primarily through participants' accounts rather than through systematic

investigation of formal religious institutions or scholars, while digitally circulated narratives were not independently analysed through digital ethnography. The study also did not seek to establish a definitive historical biography of Ki Ageng Balak. Future research should therefore compare different pilgrimage sites, include institutional and religious actors more systematically, examine intergenerational transmission, and investigate how digitally mediated narratives interact with local religious authority and collective memory.

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