

*Case Study*

**‘Ziarah Puyang’, Pilgrimage to Graves: A Case Study in South Sumatra**

**Muhajirin**

*Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Thought, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang 30126, Indonesia*

**ABSTRACT**

“Ziarah Puyang” in Indonesia means pilgrimage to a sacred grave. It is a compulsory tradition that must be carried out by every Muslim bride in some regions in Indonesia. It is a belief that a sacred grave holds considerable power, and prevents difficulties, failures and disasters from befalling the households of brides who make such pilgrimage. This long-standing tradition is practiced to this day in the village of Lubuk Rengas Banyuasin in South Sumatra and has been passed down from generation to generation. Those who practise this ritual are often termed as deviants because it is considered anathema and anti-Islam by the *ulama*. Despite this, the tradition continues to flourish in this village. It is therefore interesting to study: (1) how and when the tradition of *ziarah Puyang* began; (2) how this practice became ingrained into the faith of Indonesian Muslims and; (3) what are the Islamic views (Hadith) on this tradition. This study shows that *Ziarah Puyang* is a longstanding tradition in the village of Lubuk Rengas and which precedes the existence of the village itself. Secondly, it shows that the strong faith of the local community in this tradition has ensured its continuity till today although some of it runs against the tenets of Islam and violates the Islamic Law.

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*E-mail address:*

[muhajirinhebat@gmail.com](mailto:muhajirinhebat@gmail.com)

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**INTRODUCTION**

Indonesia is a country that is synonymous with diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity,

race and religion. Despite the influences of foreign cultures, some remote Indonesian regions still preserve unique indigenous cultures. Cultural and social diversity of Indonesian society, according to Azra (2007), are gifts which must be optimized in order to maintain the integrity of the Indonesian nation itself. In addition, diversity and pluralism existed long before the colonial era and even much earlier than the presence of Islam (Suparlan, 2004). It may then be said that diversity and pluralism have become rooted in Indonesian society since its birth, and later became tradition that came to pass from generation to generation. Based on this, it can be inferred that it is not easy to change a deeply ingrained tradition in a particular community. Hence, from a religious perspective, this particular tradition would certainly raise the wrath of *ulama* and certain segments of society as Islam prohibits the pilgrimage to and worship of a grave, however sacred it may be.

The rich diversity of rituals, cultures, traditions and customs of the Muslim majority in Indonesia can be combined with the spirit of nationalism and religion to reflect its ethos. Religious traditions that counter the teachings of Islam however will give rise to conflicts and recriminations. The marriage of culture, tradition and religion should find the middle path so as to overcome any problems that may occur. As such, an adequate formulation of this middle path should be realized immediately, without recrimination and certainly not contrary to the *aqidah* or beliefs propagated by Islam.

One form of tradition or ritual practiced by Indonesian society is a pilgrimage to the places (usually graves) that are considered 'sacred'. This tradition has been in existence for a long time and handed down from generation to generation. The number of graves in Indonesia that are considered sacred are aplenty, for example, graves of saints and clerics, graves that are considered to have a unique history and thought to contain certain myths like bringing forth *karomah* or fortune. This tradition exists in various forms and rituals, in most Indonesian territories and in the Province of South Sumatra as well (Rosidin, 2016).

*Ziarah Puyang* tradition is still widely practiced by the South Sumateran communities in Burai village, Ogan Ilir regency, Muara Enim village, Semende Darat village, Semende Lebak village and several others, including the village of Lubuk Rengas, in the Banyuasin regency of South Sumatra Province (Feriyanto, personal communication, April 12, 2016). The location of the village in this research is not far from the capital city of South Sumatra, Palembang. Despite considerable progress and development in the city of Palembang, such as in its economy, infrastructure, territorial expansion, entertainment venues and attractions, malls and cafes, the communities in Lubuk Rengas village still cling to the traditions of their ancestors, namely the pilgrimage to *Puyang*. *Puyang* means a great-great-grandmother who is respected and valued by the community. Most people believe that the *Puyang* has sacred powers and is capable

of helping and praying for those who seek her blessings. While the tradition of *ziarah Puyang* in several other areas in South Sumatra is no longer rigidly adhered to, it is believed that the majority of the populace has chosen to do away with this old tradition because it is not practiced in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

However, *ziarah Puyang* in Lubuk Rengas village is still carried out by every bride and groom, including delegates or representatives of families of both the bride and groom. This tradition has been preserved and religiously adhered to since generations of the past. In fact, all the followers are Muslims who have described in detail how the pilgrimage should actually be done. Surprisingly, *ziarah Puyang* in Lubuk Rengas is led by *ulama* who should, in fact, be more knowledgeable as to its execution (as he would be aware if there are practices not acceptable to Islam). Although it is a tradition that is maintained, its aim is not to violate the rules of religion.

The tradition of *ziarah Puyang* in some other areas in South Sumatra is still carried out, but not according to the old tradition. It is interesting to study why people in the Village of Lubuk Rengas practice the tradition of *ziarah Puyang* and strictly adhere to the traditions of the past. The focus of this study is to determine: 1) what lies behind the tradition of *ziarah Puyang*; and 2) how Islam views this tradition?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditions and customs in Indonesia are very much alive. Researchers in and outside

the country have been trying to explore a variety of customs and traditions. For example, research on 'Azan in Grave', a local Islamic tradition in Indonesia' (Gafar, 2016) concludes that this tradition has long existed, is still retained by most of the Indonesian Muslim community and is passed down from generation to generation. This tradition too may not conform to the teachings of Islam but is practiced, nevertheless. Similar studies were carried out by Muhaimin (2002) on 'Local Culture of Cirebon', 'Takziah' and the post burial process ('*slametan*'), and Syahdan (2017) *Pilgrimage from the Cultural Studies Perspective* (Study on the Mbah Priuk Grave Site in North Jakarta). Suharti's (2012) research on crocodile handlers in the Islamic Review (Case Study of Rural Community: Pemulutan Ulu and Ogan Ilir) details a tradition of the villagers of Pemulutan about their trust in alligator handlers who are pertinent to community life in Pemulutan. They believe that the alligator handler is able to overcome all sorts of calamity and danger.

In actuality, research on *ziarah Puyang* in the village of Lubuk Rengas Banyuasin has never been done on a wider scale, although it is very likely that this is because the practice of *ziarah Puyang* faces much criticism and rejection in other areas (Gunawan, personal communication, May 15, 2016). This tradition does not only apply to the village of Lubuk Rengas but is also found in several other villages in South Sumatra. *Ziarah Puyang* tradition postulates that it is deeply ingrained and generational.

Therefore, it is a rich tradition and many feels that it should be preserved because it has been adopted by the majority of the local community.

People are always in a process of change because change is something that is inherent in society. Changes in a tradition and new spins on old traditions can bring an end to certain long existing traditions. The tradition of *ziarah Puyang* also appears to have stemmed from a long saga in the city of Palembang in 1756. This saga began with the presence of someone who was able to tame a wild elephant, and therefore came to be considered holy. This person had also convinced the locals about his ability to correctly predict events. Even after death, his grave was visited upon to seek blessings; his legacy has since been sanctified by the community. Since then, the *ziarah Puyang* ritual gained importance, and was deemed to bless and protect those who came to partake in its prayers, especially new brides. Over time, this tradition underwent the process of enculturation.

In theory, a strong belief in something will manifest that belief. Hence for the majority, this manifestation, which is either seen or felt, becomes a strong conviction of their faith. This faith then becomes an oral tradition which is passed down from generation to generation. In Islam as well, there are beliefs that do not require a theory but must be accepted by blind faith, such as the existence of the Hereafter and angels, among others.

## METHOD

All studies that pertain to the past beg questions: Why, When, Where, How, Who and everything else related to the object of the past, which as a matter of course, cannot be separated from its history (Moleong, 2005). In order to reconstruct the events of *ziarah Puyang* undertaken by rural communities in Lubuk Rengas Village, Banyuasin District, preliminary research conducted by Erwas finds a variety of resources and information from the key factors associated with the cultural tradition of *ziarah Puyang*, which later became historical data (Gottschalk, 1985; Kuntowijoyo, 1994, 1995; Yatim, 1999). As this was done in the absence of written records, verbal history thus becomes an alternative, as well as provider of a source of information that has since become increasingly important (Huen et al., 2000; Thompson, 1978) either through interviews or through the discussion method (Muhadjir, 1998). These data have led to various interpretations and perceptions. The researcher then systematically compared this data with that derived from different sources in order to gather historical facts that are considered to contain meaning which is most appropriate and most reasonable (Abdurrahman, 1999; Satibi, 2008).

In addition to field studies, the researcher also used literature study (library research) from a variety of sources, both primary and secondary and other sources that can be accounted for, in order to gather information on other forms of *ziarah Puyang*, and also the arguments put forth in both the Qur'an and *hadith*. The writer then argues on

whether *ziarah Puyang* practiced by the community in Lubuk Rengas violates the concept of pilgrimage prescribed by Islam.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Some Traditions of *Ziarah Puyang*

Although not as many as Javanese traditions and customs, South Sumatra also has a variety of traditions (Oktovianny, 2012). One of them is *ziarah Puyang*, which is a pilgrimage to an ancestral grave that is considered sacred. Each *Puyang* (existing in several areas in South Sumatra) has differences in characteristics and procedures. There are people who generally make this pilgrimage without any offerings or special prayers. There are also those who make the *ziarah Puyang* at certain times with special prayers. In fact, some are required to make the pilgrimage before carrying out certain ceremonies, as is often done by people in Lubuk Rengas, (the ones I will describe specifically in this research).

In some areas and districts of South Sumatra, *ziarah Puyang* procedures are not contrary to Islamic law. For example, *Puyang Kodir Serimbang* and *Puyang Natakerti* also have a feast after *zhuhur* (noon) prayers, in a ritual called 'Eat Rice *Sekulak*'. In the evening, they hold the *khatam* al-Qur'an which is a recitation of the Qur'an from beginning to end. The main purpose of the *ziarah Puyang* is community bonding and strengthening the religious brotherhood. It is for these reasons that the *Puyang* pilgrimage in Semende Darat needs to be preserved (Puyang Natakerti, n. d.).

*Puyang Natakerti* is a descendant of the *Puyang Kencana Dewa Natakerti*. As with descendants of *puyang Kodir Serimbang*, descendants of *puyang Natakerti* comprised public figures and luminaries in various fields. *Puyang Burai* and *Komering* are not extraordinary, as people just pray for their ancestors. Usually they recite *Surah al-Fatihah* and *Surah Yasin* prayers which are in accordance with Islamic law. These traditions contrast vastly with the Pilgrimage *Puyang Ayat Bin Janggut* that takes place in Banyuasin Regency; this Regency was formed from the division of Musi Banyuasin (Republic Act No. 6 of 2002) (Community of Banyuasin), in the 1960s, and consisted of various tribes with diverse customs, traditions and cultures (Banyuasin, 2014).

### History of Grave Pilgrimage in Islam

Some traditions, borne of ignorance are hard to break, including grave pilgrimage rituals that took place in the early period of Islam wherein burials were the monopoly of the polytheists and idolaters. Therefore, this culture of ignorance features the 'wail of grief', (Subhani, 2006) where the pilgrims not only pray for the deceased, but also provide offerings, hold a special ritual, ask for intercession, and burn incense or *tawassul*. In essence, this form of dedication and idolatry is contrary to Islamic law and the Prophet's teachings. In order to avoid such practices, the Prophet (PBUH) ordained that all Muslims be prohibited from such rituals until they were really to carry out his hadith: "In the past, I forbade you to perform religious visits to the grave,

however, now I suggest that you carry out a religious visit to the grave but do not convey the words that are not polite” [Muslim (1955), no. 977 & Hanbal (2001), no. 1236].

Why? What was the reason for such a prohibition earlier? It was certainly meant to instil the *aqidah* (beliefs) of Muslims and prevent Muslims from *shirk* (idolatry), because faith and unity preached by the Prophet (PBUH) to his followers in the initial stages, had yet to be ingrained in their psyche. Furthermore, this prohibition by the Prophet (PBUH) was also to lift the veil of ignorance of his followers.

After strengthening the Muslim faith by removing their ignorance (towards committing *shirk*), and encouraging them to lift their arms in supplication while reciting the holy verses of al-Qur’an, the Prophet (PBUH) then allowed his followers to carry out grave pilgrimages - this was to remind Muslims of their mortality, and to always remember Allah and his Prophet (PBUH) in all their endeavours [Daud (2009), no 3234; Ibn Majah (1998), no 1571; Ahmad, no 1236]. Since the grave pilgrimage is no longer forbidden and is even commanded, Muslims must pay religious visits to the graves of their relatives, friends and loved ones.

### **History of *Puyang Ayat Bin Janggut***

The absence of written information about *Puyang Ayat bin Janggut* in rural communities in Lubuk Rengas, Banyuasin Regency, necessitated the visit to seek assistance of certain authorities, elders, and government and local communities, about

information pertaining to the above. After conducting interviews with the Department of Tourism Banyuasin, Abdurrahim (personal communication, May 15, 2016), informed that *Puyang Ayat bin Janggut* still has descendants from *Puyang Banyuasin*. According to Abdurrahim, the name of their *Puyang* is *Puyang Ayat* and his father was named Janggut. He narrates that in 1756 AD, in Palembang, a man named Cek Bahar was imprisoned for dabbling in black magic. He then put a curse on the villagers that took the form of conflict with wild elephants that roamed the village. It is said that no one dared to leave their house for fear of being attacked by these wild beasts.

*Puyang Ayat* had come to Palembang to escape the war in his native Java. Long after having settled in Palembang, *Puyang Ayat* came to hear about the existence and fury of these wild elephants. Finally, he met and fought with the leader of the elephants. He was hugely applauded for his bravery in defeating the elephant and breaking its ivory tusk. When the Netherlands attacked Palembang, *Puyang* went into hiding in the area of Banyuasin. This place did not have a name then, but since the *Puyang* dwelt in the region, history dictates that in 1935, the village of Maja Pani, changed its name to Lubuk Rengas Village (Abdurrahim, personal communication, May 15, 2016).

When *Puyang Ayat* died, he was buried in the village but soon thereafter, his grave was destroyed by an elephant: its prophecy for revenge had become a reality. This incident is estimated to have happened 110 years ago. This elephant was then shot by

Sima Bakri, who took its one remaining ivory tusk (Abdurrahim, Sunday, May 15, 2016).

*Puyang Ayat* was also believed to have been able to prophesize events before they took place, an ability called "*mandi ngucap*". His predictions were so accurate that it became a powerful myth in the Lubuk Rengas community and other surrounding areas.

In 1970, a man named Sirrin had experienced a prolonged trance after his marriage took place. All the shamans (*pejayo*) who had treated him opined that his predicament was a result of his not having made a pilgrimage to Puyang. After making the pilgrimage with his wife, he was completely cured. In an almost similar case, in the year 2000, Nafsiah, the wife of a man from Lubuk Rengas had become possessed by an evil spirit. After she performed this pilgrimage, Nafsiah was never again possessed.

Oral histories which were narrated by Abdurrahim, the caretaker of *Puyang*, and who is also the ninth descendant of *Puyang Ayat*, eventually became powerful myths in the community. Although these were handed down from generation to generation by oral tradition, not everyone chose to believe them, or perform the *ziarah Puyang*.

### **Process and Ritual of the Puyang Pilgrimage**

In the study of anthropology of religion, ritual is also often referred to, and is closely linked to religious beliefs. Simultaneously it occupies an important position in preserving

the religion. According to Connolly (2002), a ritual certainly has elements of meaning and spiritual values, as does the tradition of *ziarah Puyang*. Initially, the *ziarah Puyang* performed by the villagers of Lubuk Rengas was similar to other pilgrimages. The Indonesian Muslim community often makes this pilgrimage, and especially when welcoming the month of Ramadan.

According to Abdurrahim, no special ritual is performed when undergoing it. However, a pilgrim must use white clothes and carry a glass of water over which prayers have been recited, remove their footwear before entering the cemetery, and sit cross-legged in prayer and adorn a plain black skull cap and so forth.

The caretaker's version differs from what the researcher had heard from some other sources (especially the common people). The ritual of *ziarah Puyang* is a long standing one, where brides-to-be are obliged to carry out, bringing with them offerings of food and beverages for the *Puyang*. This form of prayers offered to *Puyang* suggests *shirk* (idolatry) because they do not pray according to the will of Allah for peace and wellbeing. These prayers during the pilgrimage offered by Lubuk Rengas villagers run contrary to the religious guidelines outlined in the al-Qur'an and hadith. Dialogue with the *Puyang* cemetery caretaker reveals that his version of *ziarah Puyang* differs from other sources of information. Perhaps his version was from the perspective of how it should be done (the Islamic way)

Eventually, new knowledge gained from the rapid flow of information attracted the attention of some historians of the *ziarah Puyang* tradition in the village of Lubuk Rengas. One such authority is Abdurrahim, of the *Puyang Ayat bin Janggut* lineage, and official caretaker of the puyang cemetery. His knowledge on these matters is recognized by all in Lubuk Rengas, including the village head, village elders and the local clergy.

The responsibility entrusted to Abdurrahim by the local community has led him to unearth much information on the various forms of ritual pilgrimages undertaken, and prayers offered by pilgrims. To avoid any such behaviour that violates the norms of religion (al-Qur'an and hadith), he advises them to avoid all forms of *shirk* (idolatry).

This appeal is not binding on the pilgrims; they can choose to make a ritual pilgrimage, as long as it does not make *Puyang* the object of worship because this is contrary to Islamic teachings. Thus, the conflicting information received on this ritual should not disallow its long existing practice. According to local community, these pilgrimage rituals are performed by the Muslim majority.

### **The Islamic View on *Puyang Ayat* Pilgrimage**

In the history of Islam, the Prophet (PBUH) himself prohibited grave pilgrimage for a variety of reasons, most important of which are polytheism and the practice of making

the deceased *wasilah* (intermediary) in prayer.

To perform this ritual, there is no need for offerings of food and drinks. Since this matter is of great concern to Abdurrahim (personal communication, May 15, 2016), he strongly advises local communities to avoid *shirk*. According to Abdurrahim, *Puyang Ayat* is similar to grave pilgrimage but without the frills and does not contradict nor violate the rites of pilgrimage in Islam in general. But when it is based on an incorrect understanding which leads to other rituals, they are deemed unsuitable in Islam.

The initial perception associated with the long-standing tradition of *ziarah Puyang* observed by the Lubuk Rengas village community is one of blind acceptance. It is only natural, then, that the local community in general is still bound by this tradition of *Ziarah Puyang* pilgrimage; there is also the fear associated with ignoring the tradition all together.

Prayer conducted at the grave site is *sunnah* (way of the Prophet). He often visited the *Al-Baqi* cemetery to beseech forgiveness of Allah for the dead. "I used to forbid you to ever make a pilgrimage to the grave, but now, go on pilgrimage" [hadith narrated by Muslim (1955), number 977; At-Tirmizi (1975), no 1054]. However, when one deviates from the norm of just simple prayers and involves oneself in offerings and frills, then obviously the ritual of performing *tawassul* at the graves of those who are

considered sacred is a throwback to Pagan worship in the days of Noah a.s. So religious visits to the grave in order to beseech goodwill of the spirits to bestow peace and prosperity in one's life is archaic. These practices should not be associated with true worship. So when polytheism creeps into a monotheistic religion such as Islam, then such worship is deemed corrupted worship, as in the case of *ziarah puyang* (in some cases), where there are offerings of incense, food and drinks alongside prayers to appease the dead. In the teachings of Islam, rituals of this kind are categorised as *shirk*. This is stated in the Qur'anic verses (An-Nisa: 48 and 116).

These verses reflect that *shirk* is the greatest sin because Allah explains that He does not forgive idolatry for the unconverted (before his death). Thus, it is mandatory for every slave of Allah to fear idolatry which is a great sin Qur'an, (Al-Maidah: 72).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

*Ziarah Puyang* conducted by the Lubuk Rengas villagers started a long time ago, particularly after the mythical magic of the *Puyang* legend which was passed down from generation to generation. Over time, the *puyang* grave became sacred to a generation of brides and grooms who beseeched its powers to grant peace and prosperity, through various offerings. It was common practice then for Muslims to perform this. But according to the rules of Islamic law, making offerings with prayers in worship of the dead is against the teachings of the

Qur'an and the Prophet (PBUH). Through the intervention of the religious *ulama* and also the caretaker of the *puyang*, the ritual of offerings slowly began to cease; now *ziarah Puyang* is sustained as a tradition of grave visitation by family, through simple prayers only, which is in line with Islamic law.

The Tourism Ministry and local authorities are now working towards preserving this tradition in Lubuk Rengas, as part of Indonesia's cultural traditions.

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