

Haul, Kyai, and Barakah: Integrating Ritual Theory and Sufi Psychology in *Pesantren* Studies

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Abstract

This article addresses a core concern of Living Islam: how lived rituals cultivate ethical selves and communal resilience. Focusing on the annual *haul* (memorial rite) for a *Pesantren* kyai, it asks why this practice endures and what it accomplishes for participants' inner life and social ties. The study combines non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews with alumni and organizers, and document analysis conducted in Bogor between March and September 2024. The data were analyzed using ritual theory and Sufi psychology, conceptualized through the inner faculties of *qalb* (heart), *nafs* (self), and *ruh* (spirit), as well as the formative sequence of *takhalli-tahalli-tajalli*. This approach highlights four interrelated dynamics: sustained affective ties between alumni and the kyai; a "psychospiritual technology" embedded in the *tahlil-pengajian-sedekah* sequence that structures attention, reinforces shared meanings, and directs prosocial engagement; processes of identity renewal that strengthen alumni social capital; and moral-spiritual transformation reflected in long-term practices of prayer, charity, and teaching. Conceptually, the paper reframes the *haul* from commemorative rite to mechanism of ethical formation by linking patterned repetition and symbol to attentional calm, value infusion, and embodied generosity. Practically, it suggests mosque- and school-based modules that synchronize annual rituals with weekly micro-structures (mentoring, *halaqah*, small service projects) and proposes simple indicators regular congregational prayer, volunteer teaching hours, infaq frequency to track sustained impact. By bridging philosophical analysis with empirical description, the study clarifies how a ritual ecology translates memory into obligation, love into service, and community into a durable infrastructure for lived Islamic ethics.

Keywords:

Barakah, Ritual theory, *Pesantren* studies, Ritual ecology, Sufi psychology

Article History:

Submitted : 23 June 2025
Revised : 27 September 2025
13 November 2025
Accepted : 26 December 2025

Introduction

Pesantren are Islamic educational institutions that shape the character and intellectual abilities of Indonesian Muslims. Within this ecology, *kyai* act as epistemic-spiritual authorities who guide knowledge transmission and character formation among *santri* (students). For many parents seeking noble character, *Pesantren* remain a priority choice, underscoring their social-cultural relevance and the academic-practical importance of studying the rituals practiced within them, including the *haul*.

The *kyai*'s position is normative and symbolic central to policy, exemplary conduct, and religious authority. Daily interaction through teaching, recitation, and worship nurtures enduring affection and obedience; consequently, *Pesantren* identity is often metonymically reduced to the *kyai*, helping explain persistent alumni-*kyai* bonds after graduation. At Nurul Imdad (Bogor), the annual *haul* commemorates KH. Ahmad Zaini Dahlan as a spiritual, cultural, and social gathering

of alumni. The founder's integrative motto "Be loyal to the teacher's mandate, prioritise religious knowledge, and do not neglect general knowledge" is internalized and reactivated during the *haul*.

Ritual studies frame *haul* as patterned, symbol-laden repetition situated in space and time (Post), where repetition is a dominant element (Grimes) and ritual validity rests on non-empirical beliefs (Turner). Read thus, *haul* produces and reproduces memory, solidarity, and religious habitus. A psychosufistic lens complements this by describing inner dynamics across *al-rūḥ*, *al-qalb*, *al-'aql*, and *al-nafs*, recognizing discursive reason and *kashf* (intuitive knowledge) through *tazkiyat al-nafs* and *riyāḍah* (Mujib & Mudzakir, 2016; Mujib, 2015; Fauzi, 2018; Noer, 2003; Tajuddin, 2015; James, 1974). The typical sequence *tahlil–pengajian–sedekah* functions as an "inner technology" that organizes attention, religious affect, and prosocial virtue (Fauzi, 2018; Mujib, 2015).

Empirically, *haul* commonly combines *tahlil*, Qur'an recitation, and almsgiving to bind social memory and Ahlussunnah wal Jamā'ah identity (Amin, 2020; Fadeli, 2007; Hanif & Muslih, 2006; Mustofa, 2015; So'an, 2002; Solikhin, 2010). In *Pesantren* ecologies, *kyai* embody institutional identity; interactional proximity fosters obedience and *mahabbah* that persist in alumni participation (Linarwati, 2016; Sabiq, 2022). Existing studies examine motives, solidarity, and local variation (Amin, 2020; Al-Hasan, 2013; Aspuri, 2009; Sopiya, 2022; Utami, 2022), but rarely integrate ritual theory with a psychosufistic framework to explain how inner experiences translate into moral spiritual habits and social capital. Addressing this theoretical–explanatory gap, the present study analyzes how *haul* generates durable ethical dispositions among alumni at Nurul Imdad.

Despite the extensive documentation of *haul* practices in Indonesian *Pesantren*, there remains limited analytical explanation of how ritual participation translates into durable inner dispositions and ethical practices among alumni. Existing studies tend to describe motivations or social functions of *haul* without clarifying the mechanisms through which affective attachment, ritual repetition, and inner spiritual experience are converted into sustained moral orientation and alumni engagement. This unresolved problem limits our understanding of *haul* not only as commemoration, but as a formative ritual ecology within lived Islamic education.

Building on the theoretical and empirical gap identified above, this study examines the *haul* at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Imdad as a lived ritual ecology that links affective attachment, inner moral experience, and sustained ethical practice among alumni. Specifically, it asks: **RQ1:** How do alumni of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Imdad experience and interpret the annual *haul* in relation to their enduring affective attachment to the *kyai*? **RQ2:** In what ways does participation in the *haul* reactivate memories, moral obligations, and alumni identity formed during *Pesantren* life? **RQ3:** How do the ritual components of *tahlil*, *pengajian*, and *sedekah* shape alumni understandings of *barakah* and motivate the continuation of ethical and social practices beyond the ritual context?

Accordingly, this study aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which the *haul* at *Pondok Pesantren* Nurul Imdad functions as a formative ritual ecology linking affective attachment to the *kyai*, inner moral experience, and sustained ethical practice among alumni. By integrating ritual studies with a psychosufistic framework and grounding the analysis in lived alumni experiences, this study contributes theoretically by clarifying how ritual repetition operates as an inner moral technology, empirically by providing an in-depth case of *Pesantren*-based alumni formation, and practically by offering insights into how religious rituals can sustain ethical orientation and social commitment beyond formal education.

To address this analytical gap, the present study employs an integrated theoretical framework that connects ritual theory, psychosufistic psychology, and social capital. This framework provides a conceptual map for explaining how the *haul* at *Pesantren* Nurul Imdad operates as a formative ritual ecology, linking patterned ritual practice, affective attachment to the *kyai*, inner moral experience, and sustained ethical engagement among alumni.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines ritual theory, psychosufistic psychology, and social capital to explain how religious rituals can mediate between collective practice, inner moral formation, and sustained ethical engagement. Each perspective contributes a distinct analytical function, and their integration enables a process-oriented explanation of how ritual participation shapes durable moral dispositions.

Ritual theory provides the structural and procedural account of how repeated, patterned actions organize collective attention and encode shared meanings. Scholars of ritual emphasize that repetition, symbolic sequencing, and bodily synchronization are central mechanisms through which rituals stabilize affect, reduce cognitive distraction, and inscribe communal values into memory. Through rhythmic recitation, coordinated movement, and scripted order, ritual practices create conditions of attentional focus and emotional alignment that make participants receptive to moral and normative instruction. In this framework, ritual efficacy does not depend on empirical verification but on shared belief and embodied participation.

Psychosufistic psychology supplies the intrapersonal mechanism through which ritual effects become enduring dispositions. Drawing on classical Sufi psychology, moral formation is understood as a gradual process involving the purification and reorientation of the self (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), articulated through stages such as *takhallī* (emptying vices), *tahallī* (adorning virtues), and *tajallī* (manifestation of moral clarity). Within this perspective, ritual practices influence the *qalb* (heart) by calming impulsive tendencies of the *nafs*, cultivating receptivity, and aligning intention with ethical ideals (Mujib, 2015; Mujib & Mudzakir, 2016; Fauzi, 2018; Noer, 2003). Moral learning thus occurs not only through discursive reasoning but also through affective and embodied experience.

Social capital theory complements these inner-oriented perspectives by explaining how individual moral orientation is sustained and extended through social structures. Ritual participation strengthens bonding ties within a community while simultaneously creating bridging channels that facilitate cooperation, coordination, and collective action (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 1990; Jackson, 2019). Recurrent communal rituals provide predictable forums for interaction, generate procedural trust, and support the institutionalization of shared norms, enabling ethical motivation to persist beyond episodic religious experience.

Integrating these three perspectives allows ritual participation to be conceptualized as a formative ecology rather than an isolated event. Ritual techniques stabilize attention and affect; psychosufistic processes translate inner experience into moral disposition; and social capital infrastructures sustain ethical commitment through collective practice and institutional continuity. Within this integrated framework, concepts such as *mahabbah* (affective attachment) and *barakah* (durable moral–social surplus) function as mediating categories that link spiritual experience to long-term ethical engagement, without reducing religious practice to either psychological states or social utility alone.

Methods

We employed a qualitative descriptive single-case design to capture lived meanings surrounding the annual *haul* of Kyai H. Ahmad Zaini Dahlan at Pondok *Pesantren* Nurul Imdad, interpreted through ritual theory and Sufi psychology. This design is suited to the study's questions about processes of ethical formation and community bonding enacted in a bounded ritual ecology. Fieldwork was conducted March–September 2024 in Bogor.

The setting is a *Pesantren*-based memorial rite that integrates *tahlil–pengajian–sedekah* and mobilizes alumni networks. The unit of analysis comprises the event and its participants (alumni and committee) as a ritual community. The study focuses on one *Pesantren* and one *haul* cycle, which constrains broad generalizability but allows depth on mechanisms.

Primary informants were alumni and haul committee members selected as knowledgeable insiders. A total of five informants participated in the study, consisting of one haul committee member and four alumni of Pondok *Pesantren* Nurul Imdad who were directly involved in organizing, supporting, or repeatedly attending the haul. Data sources included (a) non-participant observation notes, (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) documentation (programs, photos, archival notes).

Purposive sampling identified alumni/organizers directly involved in planning or executing the *haul*; selection prioritized role diversity (e.g., coordinators, ushers, MCs) to surface multiple vantage points until thematic sufficiency was reached.

Observation was conducted during the *haul*; interviews were held on-site or at informants' residences using a flexible guide probing meanings of *tahlil*, *pengajian*, *sedekah*, perceived "barakah," and post-ritual practices; documentation complemented and validated field accounts.

Analysis proceeded iteratively (coding–categorizing–synthesizing), aligning emergent themes with ritual studies and *psikosufistik* constructs (*qalb–nafs–ruh*) to explain pathways from attentional stabilization to prosocial action and identity consolidation.

Method triangulation (observation, interview, documentation) enhanced credibility; thick description of sequences and roles supports transferability. An audit trail of field notes and code iterations preserved dependability.

Participants provided informed consent; identifiers were anonymized in transcripts and reports. No minors were interviewed, and data were stored securely. Large language model assistance was used only for language polishing and formatting decisions, with all interpretations grounded in collected data.

Results

Enduring affective bonds: from daily discipline to lifelong attachment

Interview findings indicate that alumni of Pesantren Nurul Imdad develop enduring emotional bonds with the kyai that are grounded in everyday discipline and repeated interpersonal encounters during their years as *santri*. This attachment is not articulated as an abstract form of reverence, but rather as a relationship shaped through concrete experiences that continue to hold emotional significance long after alumni leave the pesantren. AR recalled that having his name mentioned by the kyai during the morning *tafsir Jalalayn* sessions left a strong personal impression. Although the interaction was brief, AR described it as increasing his motivation to study and reinforcing a sense of being personally noticed and guided by the kyai (Interview with AR, February 18, 2024).

DM described attachment emerging through sustained acts of service. As a *santri*, he regularly watered plants in front of the kyai's house, hoping to be acknowledged. When this effort went unnoticed for an extended period, DM experienced disappointment but continued the practice. He later interpreted the moment when the kyai greeted him and mentioned his name during a lesson as deeply meaningful, understanding it as a lesson in patience and sincerity (Interview with DM, February 18, 2024). UU reported a more intensive form of proximity through daily service in the kyai's household, assisting with cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks. He associated this long-term service with greater ease in learning and positive developments in his later life. At the time of the interview, UU was working as an *ustad* and viewed this role as a continuation of the moral orientation shaped through his years of service to the kyai (Interview with UU, February 18, 2024). Across interviews, alumni described attachment in relation to discipline, service, and experiences of recognition.

Haul as ritual reactivation of memory and obligation

All informants identified the kyai's *haul* at Pesantren Nurul Imdad as a significant moment for reactivating emotional memory and alumni identity. The *haul* was consistently described as more than a commemorative ritual, described by informants as a gathering where alumni reconnect with shared experiences and relationships. MMK, a member of the organizing committee, explained that the *haul* is prepared through alumni meetings with explicit aims of strengthening *ukhuwah* across generations and seeking blessing through remembrance of Kyai Haji M. Zaini Ahmad Dahlan. According to MMK, the event creates opportunities for direct encounters among alumni, allowing them to reconnect, exchange experiences, and renew their ties with the pesantren (Interview with MMK, February 17, 2024).

Alumni participants reported that attending the *haul* revived memories of discipline, closeness, and collective struggle experienced during their years in the pesantren. Being physically present in the pesantren environment made the kyai–*santri* relationship feel emotionally present again, despite the kyai's passing (Interviews with AR, DM, AS, UU, February 18, 2024). Several alumni reported feeling a renewed sense of responsibility after attending the haul, particularly in relation to the kyai's teachings.

Barakah as lived experience and moral motivation

Informants consistently referred to barakah as a central meaning associated with both the kyai and participation in the haul. Rather than defining barakah in abstract or doctrinal terms, alumni

described it through lived experiences, such as ease in learning, stability in livelihood, and clarity in moral direction. MMK explained that one form of barakah sought through the haul is the continuity of knowledge acquired during pesantren education. When practiced in everyday life, this knowledge was believed to produce benefits that extend beyond the individual, reaching family and community contexts (Interview with MMK, February 17, 2024).

UU explicitly linked his years of service to the kyai with what he described as a “kehidupan yang berkah.” He reported that learning felt easier and opportunities for service emerged more readily after leaving the pesantren. UU interpreted his current role as an ustad as evidence that barakah unfolds through sustained commitment rather than immediate reward (Interview with UU, February 18, 2024). AR and DM similarly described barakah as something that follows patience, effort, and respect toward the kyai. In their accounts, belief in barakah functioned as a source of motivation for continued engagement in religious practice and community involvement after completing their pesantren education (Interviews with AR and DM, February 18, 2024).

From ritual participation to life choices and service

Participation in the haul was reported to influence alumni practices and life orientations beyond the ritual context itself. Informants described gradual but sustained changes in religious routines and social engagement that they associated with their pesantren experience and continued involvement in haul activities. Alumni reported increased consistency in practices such as congregational prayer, charitable giving, and participation in teaching or da'wah. These practices were described as extensions of habits formed during pesantren life and reinforced through repeated attendance at the haul (Interviews with AR, DM, AS, UU, February 18, 2024).

Several alumni framed their vocational paths as forms of ongoing service inspired by the kyai. UU described his work as an ustad as a direct continuation of his earlier service, while other alumni referred to their professional and social commitments as efforts to mengikuti jejak kyai in different fields. Informants also acknowledged challenges, including work demands and fluctuations in motivation. In this context, the annual haul was described as a recurring moment that helps realign priorities and renew commitment, reinforcing alumni identity as former santri and sustaining engagement in religious and social life.

Discussion

Affective attachment and moral formation in the kyai–santri relationship

The findings suggest that the enduring emotional attachment between kyai and alumni at Pesantren Nurul Imdad is sustained less by formal pedagogical instruction than by lived proximity, practices of service, and moments of personal recognition. Alumni accounts indicate that attachment was shaped through everyday discipline—listening to lessons, engaging in small acts of service, and experiencing acknowledgment—rather than through doctrinal transmission alone. These patterns underscore that moral formation within the pesantren setting operates through relational and experiential processes.

Viewed from a *psikosufistik* perspective, this form of attachment reflects a gradual movement in which learning (*ta'allum*) becomes embodied as character (*takhalluq*). Mujib and Mudzakir (2016) argue that sustained discipline and companionship cultivate the *qalb* as a receptive moral site, enabling values to be internalized affectively rather than solely through cognition. The experiences reported by alumni of Nurul Imdad support this interpretation, as moral orientations acquired during pesantren life continued to shape decisions and commitments well beyond the period of formal education.

William James' (1974) discussion of the “after-effects” of religious experience further helps to illuminate these findings. Although many of the interactions recalled by alumni were brief—such as having one's name mentioned or receiving a short greeting—the emotional weight attached to these moments appears to have left lasting motivational imprints. Over time, these imprints informed ethical judgments, vocational trajectories, and orientations toward service.

The haul as ritual reactivation of memory and obligation

The Results indicate that alumni did not perceive the haul merely as a commemorative event, but as a practice that reactivates emotional memory and a sense of moral responsibility. Rather than serving as a venue for introducing new values, the haul appears to function as a periodic renewal of commitments that had already been internalized during pesantren life. Insights from ritual

studies are useful in interpreting this dynamic. In the case of Nurul Imdad, returning physically to the pesantren during the haul seems to re-anchor alumni identity as santri, rendering past relationships emotionally vivid and morally compelling.

Notably, alumni narratives suggest that the haul transforms remembrance into obligation. Recalling the kyai and pesantren life is not framed as passive nostalgia, but as a call to enact values associated with the kyai in present circumstances. This interpretation aligns with psikosufistik perspectives that view collective remembrance (*dhikr jamā'ī*) as capable of reorienting intention and renewing moral direction (Amin, [2020](#)).

Barakah as a bridge between spirituality and responsibility

One of the key contributions of this study lies in its empirical depiction of barakah as a lived and motivating concept rather than a purely metaphysical abstraction. Alumni consistently described barakah as emerging through patience, service, and continuity of practice. Experiences such as ease in learning, vocational stability, and expanded opportunities for service were retrospectively interpreted as outcomes of sustained moral discipline.

This understanding resonates with Kutsiyah's ([2020](#)) argument that barakah functions as a form of moral–social surplus that encourages active engagement rather than passive expectation. In the Nurul Imdad context, barakah legitimizes effort without justifying inaction, thereby linking spiritual aspiration with ethical responsibility. Such a framing challenges modern assumptions that religious blessing is detached from practical agency.

At the same time, alumni accounts caution against an instrumental reading of barakah. None of the informants portrayed service as a transactional strategy to secure benefit. Instead, barakah was recognized retrospectively, after prolonged commitment, reinforcing sincerity (*ikhlas*) as a central moral principle.

From ritual participation to sustained ethical practice

The Results further indicate that participation in the *haul* contributes to durable patterns of religious and social practice, including consistency in prayer, charitable giving, teaching, and community engagement. These developments were not described as abrupt transformations, but as gradual extensions of habits cultivated during pesantren life and reinforced through periodic ritual participation.

From a psychological perspective, this pattern supports James' ([1974](#)) observation that emotionally charged religious moments consolidate motivation when affect, cognition, and action are integrated. During the *haul*, recitation focuses attention, sermons articulate moral meaning, and acts of charity translate intention into practice. This alignment appears to strengthen memory and facilitate the stabilization of habits.

Nevertheless, the persistence of these effects depends on ongoing social reinforcement. Alumni networks, shared service initiatives, and continued interaction function as bridges between the heightened intensity of ritual moments and everyday life. This reflects *psikosufistik* emphases on *ṣuḥbah* (companionship) as a condition for moral continuity (Mujib, [2015](#)). In the absence of such communal support, affective residues risk remaining episodic rather than developing into enduring dispositions.

Boundary conditions and scope of interpretation

Given the limited number of informants and the single-site focus of the study, the findings should be understood as analytically rather than statistically generalizable. The study does not claim uniformity across pesantren or *haul* traditions. Instead, it demonstrates how, within the Nurul Imdad context, ritual practice, affective attachment, and alumni networks interact to sustain moral orientation over time. Alternative explanations—such as individual personality traits or prior family religious backgrounds—cannot be entirely ruled out. However, the consistency across alumni narratives suggests that the pesantren environment and the *haul* play a meaningful role in shaping long-term ethical trajectories.

Conclusion

This article shows that the *haul* functions as a structured ecology of moral–spiritual formation rather than a commemorative rite alone, linking attention, meaning, and prosocial action through the patterned sequence of *tahlil–pengajian–sedekah*. Interpreted through ritual theory and Sufi psychology, the sequence operates as a formative mechanism that stabilizes affect, renders virtues practicable, and consolidates enacted moral identity beyond the ceremonial moment.

The analysis clarifies how rhythmic *tahlil* focuses attention, *pengajian* provides an ethical–cognitive frame, and *sedekah* translates inward resolve into accountable action, allowing ritual effects to travel into everyday practices of prayer, charity, teaching, and ethical speech. Within this process, *barakah* is understood not as a diffuse metaphysical residue but as a relational force that becomes operative when memory is converted into responsibility and *mahabbah* (love) into service. Scholarly, the study advances an integrated account of ritual and Islamic moral psychology by specifying mechanisms through which symbols and rhythms generate durable ethical dispositions. Practically, it informs Pesantren-based education and community leadership by guiding how commemorative rites can be extended into repeatable micro-practices and transparent coordination that strengthen alumni social capital and communal resilience, situating the findings within global Living Islam debates on ritual, moral formation, and lived ethics.

Limitations and future research

This study is limited by its single-site design, potential social desirability bias in self-reported practices, and the absence of longitudinal evidence. Future research should compare variants of the *tahlil–pengajian–sedekah* sequence across Pesantren ecologies and trace behavioral carryover over time to assess durability and transferability of the identified mechanisms.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Research, Development, and Community Service Program (LITAPDIMAS), Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Kementerian Agama RI). We thank KH. Ahmad Wahid Mubarak and the leadership of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Imdad (Bogor) for granting access to the field site and facilitating data collection. We also acknowledge the assistance of [Affiliation/Office within Kementerian Agama RI] for administrative coordination, as well as individuals who contributed to interview transcription, data management, and language editing to ensure style consistency. We are further indebted to the alumni committee of the Haul KH. Ahmad Zaini Dahlan for logistical support and document sharing. Written permission has been obtained from all acknowledged parties. Any remaining errors are our own.

Declarations

Author contributions (CRediT)

Naan: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. **Muliadi:** Data Curation, Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing. **Muhlas:** Data Curation. **Ahmad Jais:** Data Curation.

Funding

This research was funded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia through the DIPA funding scheme for the year 2024. The funder had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Data availability

Due to ethical and privacy considerations, the interview data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics approval

This study involved adult participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical principles of social research. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. No minors were involved in the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Submission/originality statement

This manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere.

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