

# The Architecture of Blessing: An Anthropological, Sociological, and Historical Analysis of the Ziyara Shrine in Middle Eastern Popular Religion

## Introduction: The Anatomy of Lived Religion

In the vast and highly heterogeneous landscape of Middle Eastern and Islamic religious practice, few institutions are as pervasive, deeply rooted, and sociologically complex as the local tomb-shrine. Known broadly across the Arabic-speaking world and beyond as the site of *ziyara* (visitation), these sanctuaries form the architectural and spiritual epicenter of popular, lived religion<sup>1</sup>. While normative, scholastic interpretations of Islam emphasize a standardized, textually driven, and largely aniconic monotheism centered on the obligatory *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca and the communal Friday prayers in the mosque, the phenomenon of *ziyara* represents a fundamentally divergent religious orientation<sup>3</sup>. It is the domain of localized piety, where ordinary believers seek direct, tangible interaction with the divine through the intercession of a revered saintly figure.

The term *ziyara*—derived from the Arabic triliteral root *z-y-r*, signifying to visit, meet, or call upon—denotes both the physical journey to a sacred site and the localized shrine itself<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the *Hajj*, which is a rigid, mandatory pillar of Islam demanding strict uniformity in practice and an orientation toward a single geographic center, *ziyara* is entirely voluntary, highly decentralized, and profoundly customized to the cultural and individual needs of the pilgrim<sup>3</sup>. It acts as a centrifugal force that disperses the sacred across the landscape, embedding holiness in the local soil. The destinations of these visitations encompass the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, Shi'i Imams, Sufi mystics, martyred warriors, and localized holy figures whose origins sometimes blur into pre-Islamic antiquity<sup>1</sup>.

The foundational rationale for *ziyara* traces back to the earliest periods of Islamic history. According to traditions recorded in Sahih Muslim (Hadith 977), the Prophet Muhammad initially prohibited the visitation of graves to curb pre-Islamic idolatrous practices, but later reversed this decree, stating: "I had forbidden you to visit graves, but now you may visit them, for they will remind you of the Hereafter"<sup>6</sup>. A subsequent, widely cited Hadith states, "He who visits my grave will be entitled to my intercession," cementing the spiritual legitimacy of tomb visitation in classical Sunni jurisprudence<sup>1</sup>. Following the Prophet's death in 632 CE, the practice expanded rapidly during the Umayyad Caliphate as territorial conquests generated numerous martyrs, prompting visitations to the graves of fallen warriors<sup>6</sup>.

By analyzing the conceptual foundations of sainthood, the materiality and spatial logic of the shrines, the deeply gendered sociology of visitation, the political economy of shrine mediation,

the syncretic crossing of ethno-religious boundaries, and the violent theological contestations surrounding these sites, this report unpacks how the local tomb-shrine functions not merely as a relic of rural folklore, but as a dynamic, indispensable socio-political institution.

## **The Ontological Framework: Sainthood, Intercession, and the Mechanics of Baraka**

To comprehend the mechanics of the *ziyara* shrine, it is necessary to deconstruct the theological and cosmological premises that validate its existence. At the core of popular shrine veneration is the concept of the *wali Allah* (plural: *awliya*), translating literally to the "friend of God" or "protector," a term roughly equivalent to the Western concept of a saint<sup>6</sup>. Unlike Christian canonization, which is formalized by a centralized ecclesiastical hierarchy, Islamic sainthood in the popular tradition is organically recognized by the community based on the individual's perceived proximity to the divine<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Substantive Nature of Baraka**

The operational currency of the *ziyara* shrine is *baraka*, a multifaceted concept denoting divine blessing, grace, and spiritual power<sup>2</sup>. While classical sociological frameworks, such as Max Weber's concept of "charisma," effectively describe the social authority of religious leaders, *baraka* extends far beyond interpersonal magnetism; it is viewed by devotees as a substantive, transmittable, almost physical force<sup>9</sup>. *Baraka* is an embodied sacred power that allows its holder to perform miraculous deeds (*karamat*), cure illnesses, ensure fertility, and mediate divine favor<sup>9</sup>.

Crucially for the institution of *ziyara*, *baraka* is not extinguished by biological death. According to widespread popular and Sufi belief, the saint remains spiritually alive in the grave, existing in a transitional state known as the *barzakh*<sup>1</sup>. In this state, their spiritual potency is frequently viewed as being amplified due to their unmediated proximity to God, stripped of the limitations of the physical body. The tomb, therefore, becomes a highly charged locus of *baraka*. This spiritual energy is believed to be contagious; it permeates the earth around the grave, the architecture of the mausoleum, the cloth draped over the cenotaph, and the genetic descendants of the saint<sup>8</sup>.

The transition from a living Sufi master (*shaykh*) to a deceased venerated saint underscores this continuity of power. Sufi epistemology views the taming of the selfish ego (*nafs*) as a form of death. Classical mystics such as Shaykh al-Qashani categorized spiritual progress into the green, white, red, and black deaths—where the "black death" represents the complete annihilation of the self in the divine, and the "green death" implies wearing the patched garment of poverty<sup>11</sup>. Because the true Sufi has already "died before dying," biological death is merely a spatial transition. Historical accounts, such as the chronicles of the Safavid Shaykh Safi spending the night in the deadly shrine of Abu Zur'at in Ardabil, illustrate the raw, dangerous power attributed to these tombs. The legend asserts that the *baraka* radiating from Abu Zur'at's grave was so intense it killed ordinary men who lingered after dark; only a saint of Shaykh Safi's caliber could absorb the luminous energy welling up from the tomb without

perishing<sup>13</sup>.

**Tawassul: The Transactional Logic of Intercession**

The primary religious act performed at the shrine is *tawassul*—the act of seeking intercession<sup>1</sup>. Pilgrims visit the shrine not to worship the entombed figure—an accusation frequently leveled by orthodox detractors—but to utilize the saint's elevated spiritual status as a conduit to God<sup>1</sup>. The underlying logic dictates that just as a peasant would approach a powerful sovereign through a favored courtier, the average believer, burdened by sin and the impurities of daily life, stands a far better chance of having their supplications answered if they are presented by a pure, saintly intermediary<sup>1</sup>.

The shrine is thus an active site of transactional piety, dominated by the practice of making vows (*nadhr*). A petitioner facing a crisis makes a conditional promise to the saint<sup>4</sup>. If the saint successfully intercedes to resolve the crisis, the pilgrim is obligated to fulfill the vow, which typically involves a sacrificial offering or a charitable act<sup>4</sup>.

**Typology, Terminology, and Architectural Syntax**

The *ziyara* shrine is an omnipresent feature of the Islamic architectural landscape, varying in scale from massive, mirrored complexes in major urban centers to humble, unadorned stone structures in remote rural hinterlands<sup>18</sup>. As art historian Oleg Grabar noted, the monumental tomb became one of the most distinctive features of Islamic architecture, reflecting a deep-seated cultural drive to memorialize despite early theological prohibitions against marking graves<sup>18</sup>.

The terminology used to describe these shrines varies geographically, pointing to the specific historical and cultural trajectories of regional Islamic practice.

| Regional Term | Geographic Area                        | Linguistic Root / Literal Meaning               | Cultural and Architectural Context                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Maqam         | The Levant (Palestine, Syria, Lebanon) | Arabic: "A place where one stands" or "station" | Often associated with biblical prophets, companions of Muhammad, or local patron saints. Typically a simple, cubic stone structure topped with a dome, found on hilltops or under |

|                          |                                          |                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          |                                          |                                                                                   | ancient trees <sup>7</sup> .                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Marabout / Zawiya</b> | The Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia)  | Arabic: <i>Murābiṭ</i> (one who is bound/stationed in a <i>ribāṭ</i> or fortress) | Initially referred to ascetic warriors on the frontier; evolved to mean Sufi saints and their lineages. The <i>zawiya</i> is the lodge/shrine complex serving as a center for education, healing, and tribal mediation <sup>15</sup> . |
| <b>Mazar</b>             | Broad usage (Iran, Central Asia, Levant) | Arabic: "A place of visitation"                                                   | A general term for a shrine, often denoting the tombs of Shi'i saints, nobles, or revered scholars <sup>1</sup> .                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Imamzadeh</b>         | Iran and Shi'i enclaves                  | Persian: "Offspring of an Imam"                                                   | Specifically denotes the tomb of a descendant of one of the Twelve Shi'i Imams. These are ubiquitous in Iran and serve as major nodes of local pilgrimage <sup>1</sup> .                                                               |
| <b>Dargah</b>            | South Asia, Turkey, Central Asia         | Persian: "Threshold" or "Doorstep"                                                | Refers to the tomb of a Sufi saint. The term emphasizes the shrine as a metaphysical threshold connecting the mundane physical world to the                                                                                            |

|  |  |  |                                                       |
|--|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  | spiritual realm of the interred master <sup>1</sup> . |
|--|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------|

## The Paradox of Materiality

The construction of elaborate structures over graves presents a historical paradox. The strictest interpretations of Islamic law, relying on canonical 8th and 9th-century Hadith collections, categorically prohibit plastering (*tajsis*), constructing (*bina'*), and inscribing (*kitaba*) on graves<sup>18</sup>. Yet, substantial material and textual evidence demonstrates that by the 9th and 10th centuries, monumental tomb architecture was firmly established<sup>18</sup>. This suggests that commemorative practices and prohibitive stances coexisted as interdependent phenomena from the religion's earliest centuries<sup>18</sup>.

Despite regional variations, the local shrine typically adheres to a recognizable architectural syntax. The core structure is almost universally a *qubba*, a cubic chamber topped with a hemispherical or conical dome, which serves as a visual marker on the landscape<sup>7</sup>. Within the chamber lies the cenotaph—a raised physical marker of the grave, though the actual biological remains are buried below ground level<sup>7</sup>. The cenotaph is invariably covered by a *kiswa*, a green or intricately decorated quilt, which pilgrims touch, kiss, or press their faces against to physically absorb the *baraka*<sup>7</sup>.

In highly developed urban shrines, such as the complex of Shaykh 'Abd al-Samad in Natanz, Iran, or the shrine of Zayn al-Din Yusuf in Cairo, the architecture develops organically over centuries<sup>24</sup>. A modest grave might first be marked by an unmarked stone, then enclosed by a simple brick wall. Over time, funded by the donations of grateful pilgrims or political elites seeking legitimacy, the site is expanded into a vast complex incorporating courtyards, minarets, mosques, and *khanqahs* (Sufi hospices), complete with muqarnas corbels and luster-painted star tiles<sup>24</sup>.

## From Vision to Structure: The Genesis of Sacred Space

The process by which a specific geographical coordinate is recognized as sacred and transformed into a *ziyara* destination reveals the dynamic, constructive nature of popular religion. Shrines are rarely decreed by central clerical authorities; rather, they are "discovered" or manifested through local, experiential phenomena<sup>22</sup>.

A highly documented mechanism for the genesis of a shrine is the visionary experience. In many Middle Eastern communities, a location transitions into a *ziyara* site after a local resident experiences a powerful, recurring dream in which a holy figure appears and demands that a specific plot of land be venerated<sup>22</sup>. This aligns deeply with Islamic epistemology, where dreams are considered a legitimate fraction of prophecy and a valid channel for divine revelation<sup>26</sup>. Alternatively, locals might report witnessing an unnatural, radiant light descending upon a specific mound or ruined structure at night<sup>13</sup>.

| Phase                   | Manifestation                                                         | Material Markers                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Epiphany             | Recurring dreams, visions, or sightings of divine light by locals.    | None initially. The site is recognized solely through oral narratives <sup>22</sup> .                                          |
| 2. Demarcation          | The community acknowledges the spiritual presence ( <i>baraka</i> ).  | Placement of deliberately arranged rocks, lighting of matches, burning of incense, and leaving small offerings <sup>22</sup> . |
| 3. Identification       | Consultation with local sheikhs to discern the identity of the saint. | Erection of a simple perimeter wall or a modest wooden cenotaph <sup>22</sup> .                                                |
| 4. Institutionalization | Accumulation of funds from vows and local patronage.                  | Construction of the <i>qubba</i> (domed building), formal signage, and appointment of a custodian <sup>22</sup> .              |

Before any mortar is laid, the site is demarcated by stones, incense, and candles. Only once the identity of the saint is discerned through ongoing visions and consultations with local religious leaders does the community pool resources to construct the formal *qubba*<sup>22</sup>.

## Ecological Syncretism: Sacred Landscapes, Trees, and Antiquity

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the rural *ziyara* shrine is its profound integration with the natural environment and its preservation of deep historical, often pre-Islamic, strata of belief. The pioneering ethnographic work of the Palestinian physician and scholar Dr. Tawfiq Canaan in the early 20th century provided an exhaustive catalog of these dynamics in the Levant<sup>27</sup>. Canaan observed that Palestinian *maqamat* were seldom isolated architectural units; they were deeply embedded in the rural ecology, almost invariably situated near ancient trees, rock-cut cisterns, or perennial springs<sup>7</sup>.

The association between the saint and the sacred tree is a hallmark of the rural Middle Eastern shrine. Specific species are venerated either as the literal abode of the saint's spirit or as entities imbued with their own intrinsic holiness. Canaan's ethnography categorized these botanical-sacred relationships:

- **The Meis Tree (*Celtis australis*):** Possessing long pointed leaves and black berries, this tree was viewed as highly beneficent. Local folklore maintained that no evil spirit could approach it, making it safe for travelers to sleep beneath its shade. Its wood was highly

prized for carving protective amulets<sup>29</sup>.

- **The Styra (Liquidambar orientalis):** Believed by some to be the source of the holy incense (stacte) mentioned in the biblical Book of Exodus, its fragrant resin linked the Islamic shrine to ancient Israelite temple practices<sup>29</sup>.
- **The Carob and Sycamore Fig:** Conversely viewed as uncanny or dangerous, these trees were often inhabited by malignant spirits (*djinns*) unless pacified by the presence of a powerful *wali*<sup>29</sup>.

According to local folklore, these trees are untouchable. It is strictly forbidden to cut their branches for firewood, and doing so invites immediate supernatural retribution from the *wali*<sup>29</sup>. Pilgrims frequently tie rags, threads, or pieces of clothing to the branches of these trees as a physical manifestation of a vow, leaving a piece of themselves in the presence of the *baraka* until their prayer is answered<sup>7</sup>.

Anthropologists and historians recognize in these practices the clear survival of ancient Semitic, Canaanite, and Greco-Roman traditions<sup>7</sup>. The veneration of "high places" and sacred groves, heavily condemned by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, was seamlessly integrated into Islamic popular piety. The pagan nature spirits and local deities were essentially "baptized" into the new monotheistic framework, recast as Muslim saints, *djinns*, or companions of the Prophet<sup>7</sup>. For instance, Canaan documented the shrine of "Badariya" near Beit Jala, a mysterious female saint widely suspected of being a syncretic continuation of the Canaanite moon goddess Ashtoreth<sup>29</sup>. The *ziyara* to a local spring to cure barrenness or to a specific stone to ward off the evil eye demonstrates a syncretic pragmatism where the landscape itself retains an enduring, pre-textual sacredness<sup>27</sup>.

## Gendered Sanctuaries: The Sociology of Women at the Shrine

A critical sociological function of the *ziyara* shrine is its role as a sanctuary for women. In traditional Middle Eastern societies, formal religious institutions—primarily the mosque—are heavily patriarchal and rigidly structured<sup>5</sup>. Women's access to mosques is often severely restricted; they are relegated to cramped balconies, hidden behind heavy curtains, or excluded entirely during menstruation due to strict ritual purity laws<sup>5</sup>. The mosque is the center of "official" religion, dominated by male clerics (*ulama*), abstract legalism, and hierarchical governance.

The local *ziyara* shrine, by contrast, operates as an alternative, informal religious sphere where women predominate<sup>14</sup>. Anthropologist Anne Betteridge's foundational research on women and local shrines (*imamzadehs*) in Shiraz, Iran, elucidates this dichotomy<sup>17</sup>. Betteridge observed that while men frequented the large, officially sanctioned mosques, women favored the small, often dilapidated, back-street shrines. During the day, when men were at work, the shrines became exclusively female territories<sup>17</sup>.

## Catharsis, Autonomy, and Social Networking

For women, a visit to the shrine serves multifaceted purposes that seamlessly blend the spiritual, the psychological, and the social. Firstly, it provides a highly respectable, religiously sanctioned justification to leave the confines of the domestic sphere<sup>17</sup>. A husband or father cannot easily forbid a woman from fulfilling a pious vow without appearing impious himself, granting women a socially acceptable mechanism to bypass domestic duties<sup>17</sup>.

Once inside the shrine, the behavioral norms shift dramatically. Shrines offer a space for profound emotional catharsis. Women are free to weep openly, wail, and unburden their psychological distresses—actions that are culturally coded as "female" and strongly discouraged in the austere, stoic environment of the formal mosque<sup>17</sup>. The saint acts as a supernatural therapist. Women often forge lifelong, intimate relationships with specific saints, particularly female saints or saints who suffered injustices mirroring their own lives. For example, a woman might visit a shrine dedicated to an unmarried female saint to pray for a husband, or a pregnant saint to pray for a safe delivery<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, the shrine serves as a vital hub for female socialization. In the courtyards, women share tea, distribute *halva* (sweet confections) to fulfill vows, network, arrange marriages, and exchange critical information about health and family matters<sup>14</sup>. It is a space of solidarity where trauma—domestic violence, wayward children, or financial ruin—is shared and validated by a community of peers. Betteridge also noted the presence of subversive social behaviors; the relative freedom of the shrine occasionally facilitated innocent flirtations, and in the Shi'i context, rumors of temporary marriages (*sigheh*) being arranged in the peripheries of the shrine<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, the *ziyara* constitutes a "religion of the heart"—an intuitive, highly individualized, and emotional expression of faith that circumvents the rigid scholasticism of the male-dominated religious establishment<sup>14</sup>.

## Ritual Dynamics: Mawlids, Moussems, and the Economics of Devotion

The routine, everyday visitations are punctuated annually by massive festivals commemorating the saint's birth or death. In Egypt, this is known as the *Mawlid* (birthday); in the Maghreb, it is called the *Moussem*<sup>10</sup>. These festivals, whose origins in Egypt date back to the Fatimid Caliphate in the 10th and 11th centuries, transform the area surrounding the shrine into a sprawling, chaotic, and deeply vibrant carnival that blends profound mystical devotion with secular commerce and entertainment<sup>33</sup>.

### The Sensory Experience of the Mawlid

During a *Mawlid*, such as the massive gathering for the 13th-century Moroccan saint Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta, Egypt—which attracts upwards of a million people—the urban infrastructure is temporarily overwhelmed<sup>33</sup>. Sufi orders (*tariqas*) set up large pavilions and tents in the streets surrounding the shrine. Inside these tents, adherents perform *dhikr*—the rhythmic, repetitive chanting of the names of God, often accompanied by swaying or whirling, aimed at achieving a state of spiritual ecstasy and annihilation in the divine<sup>35</sup>.

Simultaneously, the streets outside are lined with vendors selling specialized sweets, fake jewelry, toys, and amulets, alongside amusement rides, swings for children, and folk performances<sup>34</sup>. The *Mawlid* functions as a vital social valve. For impoverished rural communities, it offers a temporary suspension of daily hardships and rigid social hierarchies, allowing the masses to revel in a collective outpouring of joy, spiritual fervor, and communal identity<sup>35</sup>.

## **The Vow and Economic Redistribution**

The transactional core of shrine piety culminates during these festivals through the fulfillment of the *nadhr* (vow). A petitioner who promised a sacrifice to the saint for a cured illness or a successful harvest will bring an animal (a sheep, goat, or calf) to be slaughtered in the courtyard of the shrine<sup>4</sup>. The meat is then cooked and distributed to the poor, to the custodians of the shrine, and to other pilgrims<sup>4</sup>. This creates a robust micro-economy around the shrine, serving as a vital mechanism for wealth redistribution in impoverished areas and ensuring that the sacred space is intimately associated with communal feasting, conviviality, and physical sustenance<sup>14</sup>.

## **The Political Economy of the Shrine: Mediation, Markets, and Marabouts**

The local shrine is not merely a spiritual phenomenon; it is a highly effective political, legal, and economic institution, particularly in areas historically beyond the direct administrative control of a central state. This dynamic is most vividly illustrated in the Maghreb through the institution of *maraboutism*.

### **Ernest Gellner and the Saints of the Atlas**

In his classic anthropological work *Saints of the Atlas*, Ernest Gellner analyzed the structural role of the *zawiya* (shrine complex) and its associated hereditary saints (*igurramen*) among the Berber transhumant pastoralists of the central High Atlas in Morocco<sup>38</sup>. The environment Gellner studied was characterized by segmented tribal lineages, chronic feuding, and a complete lack of centralized state authority<sup>38</sup>.

Gellner identified a central sociological paradox: how does a heavily armed, anarchic society of shepherds manage to maintain necessary economic flows, facilitate trade, and organize seasonal migrations without tearing itself apart through perpetual warfare? The answer lay in the spatial and political placement of the *ziyara* shrine<sup>39</sup>. Sainly lineages deliberately established their shrines at the geographical frontiers and liminal intersections between rival tribal territories<sup>39</sup>. Because the saints were perceived as possessing divine *baraka*, they were viewed as neutral, pacifist outsiders who stood above the tribal fray.

The *zawiya* thus functioned as an inviolable sanctuary. Within its precincts, bloodshed was absolutely forbidden under threat of divine wrath. This allowed rival tribes to meet safely, trade at the local *suq* (market), and negotiate grazing rights<sup>39</sup>. The saint served as an indispensable

mediator and guarantor of oaths<sup>38</sup>. If a dispute over stolen sheep or murder arose, the accused could clear their name by swearing a collective oath at the saint's tomb. The profound fear of the saint's supernatural retribution ensured compliance<sup>39</sup>. Thus, the local shrine was the very bedrock of political order and legal arbitration in tribal North Africa<sup>39</sup>.

## Clifford Geertz and the Economics of the Bazaar

Building on the Moroccan context, Clifford Geertz's seminal works, including *Islam Observed* and his deep ethnographic studies of the Moroccan town of Sefrou, demonstrated how the concepts underlying *ziyara* permeated the economic sphere<sup>42</sup>. Geertz contrasted the "aesthetic, inward" nature of Indonesian Islam with the "ecstatic moral intensity" and activism of Moroccan Islam, embodied perfectly by the maraboutic saint<sup>43</sup>.

In his analysis of the Moroccan *suq* (bazaar), Geertz showed that the economy was not based on abstract Western market rationality, but was deeply culturally embedded<sup>42</sup>. The search for reliable information and the mitigation of risk in the chaotic market were underwritten by theological concepts like *baraka* (blessing) and *rizq* (predestined sustenance)<sup>42</sup>. The moral authority emanating from the local saints and their shrines provided the social glue—the interpersonal trust and ethical frameworks—necessary for the bazaar economy to function efficiently<sup>42</sup>. The shrine, therefore, was not a retreat from the world, but the moral anchor of the public square.

## Saints Without Borders: Inter-Communal Syncretism

Another profound sociological feature of the *ziyara* is its ability to blur the hard boundaries of formal religious identity. While dogmatic theology draws sharp distinctions between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, popular shrine veneration frequently ignores these borders, creating zones of remarkable inter-communal syncretism<sup>2</sup>. Because *baraka* is viewed pragmatically—if a saint successfully cures an illness, their theological affiliation is secondary to their efficacy—shrines often attract pilgrims from multiple faiths.

This phenomenon was historically widespread in the Levant and North Africa. In Morocco, the concept of sainthood is deeply shared between the Muslim majority and the historically robust Jewish minority<sup>16</sup>. The anthropologist Issachar Ben-Ami documented 126 saints in Morocco that were venerated jointly by both Muslims and Jews<sup>16</sup>. In many cases, a Jewish saint, such as Rabbi Abouhsira in the Draa-Tafilalet region, is visited by local Muslims who "Islamize" the figure, seeking his *baraka* for healing<sup>16</sup>. Conversely, Jews frequently venerated Muslim marabouts. During the annual *hilula* (the Jewish equivalent of the *mawlid*), the intermingling of the communities around the tomb highlighted a shared cultural and mystical heritage, rooted in the agrarian and tribal realities of the Maghreb rather than the theological disputes of the urban clerics<sup>16</sup>.

Similarly, in Mandate-era Palestine, Tawfiq Canaan and other ethnographers documented the shared veneration of figures like St. George, who was frequently conflated with the Islamic immortal figure Al-Khidr<sup>7</sup>. The shrine of Simon the Just in north Jerusalem—a prominent sage in the Jewish tradition—was heavily frequented by local Muslims during the spring festivals

known as *shat-hat al-Yahudiyya*<sup>20</sup>. Although the figure was never Islamicized into a Quranic prophet, Muslims, Christians, and Jews actively participated in the shared communal space, utilizing the site for physical healing and mental catharsis<sup>20</sup>. Although modern ethno-nationalism and sectarian radicalization have aggressively dismantled many of these shared practices, the historical reality of the *ziyara* reveals a deep, pre-modern framework of religious coexistence based on shared tactile piety and a common sacred landscape<sup>7</sup>.

## **The Iconoclastic Backlash: Salafi Critiques and the Erasure of Memory**

Because of its massive social influence, unorthodox rituals, and profound theological implications, the *ziyara* to local shrines has been the subject of fierce contestation throughout Islamic history. This friction is often framed as the conflict between "official" (or scripturalist) Islam, championed by urban scholars (*ulama*), and "popular" Islam, practiced by the rural and urban masses<sup>10</sup>.

### **The Theological Argument: Shirk, Bid'a, and Taswiyat al-Qubur**

The most rigorous ideological opposition to *ziyara* originates from the strict Hanbali school of jurisprudence, most notably articulated by the 14th-century scholar Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, and later weaponized by the 18th-century reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the ideological founder of Wahhabism<sup>2</sup>.

From the Wahhabi-Salafi perspective, the veneration of saints, the seeking of intercession (*tawassul*), and the construction of domes over graves are categorical violations of *Tawhid* (the absolute oneness of God)<sup>10</sup>. Because only God has the power to heal, grant children, or alter destiny, asking a dead saint for these favors is deemed *shirk* (polytheism or idolatry), the most egregious and unforgivable sin in Islam<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, specific rituals associated with the shrines—such as lighting candles, circumambulation, and celebrating birthdays (*mawlid*s)—are condemned as *bid'a* (reprehensible religious innovations) that were not practiced by the Prophet Muhammad or his immediate companions<sup>4</sup>. Salafi doctrine strictly limits the concept of *ziyara* to a solemn visit to a graveyard merely to contemplate one's own mortality, explicitly prohibiting the petitioner from speaking to the dead or seeking their aid<sup>6</sup>.

To counter the perceived threat of idolatry (*fitnat al-qubur*), the Wahhabi-Salafi tradition advocates for the religious duty of *taswiyat al-qubur* (the leveling of graves)<sup>23</sup>. The Saudi Permanent Committee of religious scholars issued explicit decrees mandating that rulers demolish structures over graves, viewing the architectural elevation of a tomb as a direct gateway to paganism<sup>23</sup>.

### **The Iconoclasm of the Shrine**

This theological critique has repeatedly manifested in campaigns of violent physical destruction aimed at eradicating the material presence of the shrines. Historically, this was seen when the first Saudi-Wahhabi state conquered the Hijaz in the early 19th century, and again in the 1920s,

resulting in the bulldozing of the Al-Baqi cemetery in Medina, which housed the tombs of the Prophet's family, early Imams, and companions<sup>23</sup>.

In the contemporary era, this iconoclasm reached unprecedented levels with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and affiliated Salafi-jihadist groups<sup>48</sup>. Between 2014 and 2017, ISIS systematically detonated, bulldozed, and sledgehammered dozens of highly venerated shrines across Iraq and Syria. In Mosul alone, they destroyed the Mosque of the Prophet Jonah (Nabi Yunus), the 12th-century Imam Awn al-Din shrine, and the Al-Arba'een Mosque<sup>49</sup>. Similar destruction occurred in Mali, where Al-Qaeda affiliates destroyed the ancient Sufi mausoleums of Timbuktu, and in Somalia, where Al-Shabaab militants desecrated the tombs of foundational Sufi leaders like Aw-Barkhadle<sup>23</sup>.

The sociological strategy behind this architectural genocide extends beyond pure theology. The local shrine is the repository of a community's historical memory, its distinct local identity, and its traditional power structures (such as the Sufi sheikhs and local tribal elders)<sup>48</sup>. By obliterating the shrines, radical groups attempt to erase localized, pluralistic identities, forcing the population to adopt a homogenized, puritanical version of the faith. Destroying the shrine is a deliberate attempt to reset "time zero," severing the population from their ancestors and monopolizing religious authority<sup>48</sup>.

## Conclusion

The *ziyara* to the local tomb-shrine is far more than a peripheral folk custom; it is a foundational pillar of lived religion in the Middle East, North Africa, and the broader Islamic world. The shrine operates at the nexus of the divine and the mundane. Theologically, it materializes the abstract concept of God's grace by localizing it in the *baraka* of the saint, rendering the divine accessible, approachable, and intimately concerned with the daily struggles of ordinary believers.

Sociologically, the shrine performs indispensable labor. It provides an egalitarian sanctuary that subverts the patriarchal structures of formal religious institutions, offering women a vital sphere for emotional catharsis, networking, and social agency. It bridges the chasms between rival tribes, establishing neutral zones of mediation and commerce, and historically spanned the boundaries between Muslims, Christians, and Jews, anchoring a shared, syncretic landscape. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the fierce, often violent efforts to eradicate these structures by puritanical reformists, the shrine remains a potent locus of political and ideological power. Despite the dual pressures of modern secularization and Salafi iconoclasm, the architecture of blessing endures, deeply rooted in the soil, the psychology, and the culture of the region.

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