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QUR'ANIC MANUSCRIPT, MYTHMAKING, AND THE CULTURAL ECONOMY IN MADURA

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Abstract: This study explores how sacred Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura, Indonesia, are embedded in local mythological narratives and transformed into cultural and economic resources. Although these manuscripts are preserved as religious artifacts, they also function as "living texts" that circulate meaning and power within spiritual, cultural, and touristic contexts. The research aims to examine how local myths surrounding these manuscripts mediate between faith, authority, and contemporary cultural tourism. Using a qualitative approach that includes participant observation and semi-structured interviews with manuscript custodians, religious leaders, and visitors, the study analyzes how stories of miraculous origins—such as manuscripts written in one night or underwater—shape public perception and enhance symbolic value. The findings reveal that these narratives serve not only as expressions of belief but also as strategies of cultural preservation and commodification, turning sacred texts into heritage objects that attract visitors and generate community pride. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how religious heritage in Muslim societies is continually reinterpreted through narrative, economy, and local identity.

Keywords: Qur'anic Manuscript; Madura; Myth and Tourism; Cultural Commodification; Hyperreality.

Introduction

Madura, as a distinctive cultural entity within Indonesia, harbors a wealth of Islamic manuscripts that have yet to be extensively

explored. One particularly intriguing phenomenon is the presence of ancient Qur'anic manuscripts, which are not only preserved as literary or spiritual relics, but also enveloped in mythological narratives that amplify their sacred and symbolic value. At the Sumenep Palace Museum, for instance, there exists a colossal Qur'anic manuscript allegedly written by Sultan Abdurrahman in a single night. Although logically implausible, this story is nonetheless believed and disseminated by museum caretakers as part of a grand historical legacy. In other locations, such as Lembung Village in Pamekasan, a legend circulates about a *musḥaf* supposedly written by a religious scholar while immersed in water (Madura: *lembung*)—a form of miraculous powers (*karāmah*) that ultimately became the source of his name: *Kiai* Lembung. Such narratives, infused with miraculous and religious symbolism, not only enrich the collective memory of local communities but also offer new dimensions in understanding the interplay between sacred texts and local culture.[1]

What is particularly noteworthy is that these manuscripts are no longer preserved solely for their sanctity as religious objects, but have also undergone a functional shift, becoming integral to the cultural tourism appeal of the region. Museums, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and even private homes that house old *musḥafs* have begun opening their doors to the public—for purposes of academic research, spiritual visitation, or educational tourism. Within this context, the mythological narratives surrounding the manuscripts function not merely as folklore or expressions of localized spirituality, but also as cultural tools that frame the manuscripts' marketable value to broader audiences. In many cases, in fact, myth becomes the very mechanism by which a *musḥaf* is transformed into a cultural commodity—something symbolically "consumed" by tourists, researchers, or pilgrims in search of spiritual or aesthetic experiences.[2]

From this phenomenon arises a set of critical questions: how do mythological narratives shape and mediate the commodity value of Qur'anic manuscripts within the local context of Madura? Are these narratives a form of cultural preservation, a symbolic strategy,

[1] Interview with Anton (pseudonym), the caretaker of Sumenep Palace Museum, April 13, 2024; field visit to Lembung Village, Kadur, Pamekasan, April 22, 2024.
[2] D. Preziosi and C. Farago, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

or rather a new mode of religious commodification? How are such narratives reproduced, and who benefits from them? These questions serve as entry points for understanding the complex relationships between sacred manuscripts, local myth, and contemporary socio-cultural and economic dynamics. This study does not aim to refute or delegitimize the veracity of these stories; rather, it seeks to examine the social, symbolic, and economic functions of the narratives that surround the *musḥaf* as a living object within local culture.

This research aims to critically analyze how Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura are narratively constructed through local myths and how these constructions are linked to the practices of cultural and religious tourism. By drawing upon theories of cultural commodification, the production of sacredness, and symbolic consumption, this study seeks to reveal how the *musḥaf*, as a sacred text, undergoes transformations in meaning and function within society. The central research questions are: (1) How are mythological narratives constructed and disseminated in relation to Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura? (2) How do these narratives contribute to the manuscripts' commodity value within the domain of cultural tourism? and (3) What are the social and religious implications of this commodification of religious manuscripts for the local community? This study is significant in broadening our understanding of the intersection between religiosity, narrative, and cultural economy in contemporary Muslim localities.

Research on Qur'anic manuscripts in Southeast Asia has developed significantly over the past decade, with numerous studies highlighting aspects of art, material history, and global market dynamics. Annabel Teh Gallop, in one of her seminal articles, investigates the diversity of illumination styles in Qur'anic manuscripts from Java and concludes that there is no singular "Javanese" style, but rather a plurality of artistic forms reflecting the local contexts and cultural networks of each producing community. This study positions the *musḥaf* as an aesthetic object and an expression of regional identity, yet it does not delve deeply into its religious and economic dimensions in local contemporary contexts such as that of Madura.[3] In another work, Gallop traces Southeast Asian Qur'anic manuscripts housed in British collections and demonstrates the importance of

[3] Annabel The Gallop, "The Art of the Qur'an in Java," *Suhuf* 5, no. 2 (2012): 215-229.

the manuscript-copying tradition in shaping Islamic intellectual practice in the Malay world. This study frames the *musḥaf* as a heritage artifact and a medium of scholarly transmission, but it does not address how these manuscripts function within present-day popular religious settings.[4] Meanwhile, in her article "Fakes or Fancies?", Gallop highlights how the international market constructs the perception of manuscripts as "Islamic" primarily through their visual association with Arabic script, regardless of textual content. She observes how the logic of the global art market—particularly in London—transforms manuscripts into symbolic commodities, even when their authenticity and meaning are called into question.[5] While this study critically addresses commodification, it does not explore how similar processes unfold at the local level, where miracle narratives act as symbolic catalysts. In contrast, Ali Akbar introduces a conceptual framework for what he terms "Quranic Archaeology," emphasizing the importance of archaeological approaches to understanding the physical and historical dimensions of the *musḥaf*, especially within the Nusantara context. Although still largely conceptual and not yet grounded in extensive field data, this approach opens up possibilities for viewing the *musḥaf* as a living artifact that shapes social dynamics—an orientation this study also seeks to pursue, particularly in relation to manuscripts, narrative, and the local economy.[6]

In comparison to the aforementioned studies, this article offers a relatively unexplored perspective: how sacred Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura are transformed into "living objects" that not only carry spiritual value but are also narratively constructed through miracle stories into objects of cultural tourism and religious commodification. The focus is not limited to artistic, historical, or international market aspects, but rather centers on the circulation of meaning and authority of the manuscripts within local communities—a convergence of sacrality, symbolic economy, and religious tourism that calls for a multidisciplinary approach.

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[4] Annabel The Gallop, "Qur'an Manuscripts from Southeast Asia in British Collections," in *Malay-Indonesian Islamic Studies: A Festschrift in Honor of Peter G. Riddell*, eds. Majid Daneshgar and Ervan Nurtawab (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

[5] Annabel The Gallop, "Fakes or Fancies? Some 'Problematic' Islamic Manuscripts from Southeast Asia," *Manuscript Cultures* 10 (2017): 101-128.

[6] Ali Akbar, "Quranic Archaeology as a Knowledge Branch of Archaeology," *Heritage of Nusantara* 1, no. 1 (2012).

This study employs an exploratory qualitative approach to examine the meanings, narratives, and social functions of old Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura within the framework of local cultural contexts. This approach is selected due to the nature of the object of inquiry—not merely as material artifacts, but as the focal points of mythological narratives and symbolic practices embedded in the community. Data collection techniques include participant observation and semi-structured interviews with a range of key informants, such as manuscript custodians, religious figures, and site visitors. Research locations were purposively selected, with initial focus on the Sumenep Palace Museum and Lembung Village in Pamekasan. The overall methodology is designed to capture the complexity of the relationships among manuscripts, communities, and symbolic meanings that are continuously shaped and exchanged through social and cultural interactions.[7]

In interpreting the phenomenon of Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura—surrounded by extraordinary narratives, from being inscribed overnight by a sultan to being copied in water by a *kiai*—the framework of cultural commodification becomes indispensable. Arjun Appadurai, in his concept of *the social life of things*, reminds us that the value of an object is not inherently fixed but is constituted through the social, historical, and economic contexts that surround it.[8] In this regard, the *muṣḥaf* is not only a sacred text, but also a cultural object with a "social career"—transitioning from sacred worship spaces to museum displays, from religious consumption to touristic consumption.[9] This approach is further enriched by Jean Baudrillard's notion of *simulacra* and *hyperreality*, wherein representations of reality become more "real" than the reality itself.[10] In the context of Madurese manuscripts, such mythological narratives—

[7] N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); S. Kvale and S. Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 3rd edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015.

[8] A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[9] I. Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

though perhaps historically unverifiable—have become lived realities that are believed in, celebrated, and even commodified within the framework of local tourism.

On the other hand, to comprehend the production of meaning and sacrality surrounding these manuscripts, this study adopts Clifford Geertz's framework, which views religion as a system of symbols that represents a cultural order of meaning within a community.[11] In this context, the *muṣḥaf* and its accompanying narratives function as symbols that mediate between lived experience and religious belief among the Madurese people. The use of extreme symbolic motifs—such as "writing in water" or "copying while riding a horse backward"—serves not only as a form of spiritual glorification but also as a mode of collective meaning-making that reinforces the manuscript's position as a sacred object. Émile Durkheim's theory of the sacred and the profane, along with Peter Berger's notion of the social construction of reality, are equally pertinent in analyzing how communities actively construct a sacred world through narratives, rituals, and institutionalized collective perceptions embedded in local culture.[12] These theoretical frameworks help illuminate how the manuscript is not merely a text, but a convergence point of spirituality, local identity, and even market logic.

Data validity is ensured through narrative triangulation—by comparing multiple versions of stories from different informants—and contextual triangulation—by linking the narratives to the physical condition of the *muṣḥaf* and its social setting. The researcher's critical self-reflection on their positionality is also a crucial part of this process, in order to avoid reductive interpretations or personal bias. This methodology is intended to reveal how Qur'anic manuscripts, through mythological narratives and symbolic practices, serve as vehicles for articulating spirituality, collective memory, and even the cultural economy of contemporary Madurese society.[13]

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[11] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[12] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990)

[13] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); U. Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th edition (London: SAGE, 2018); L. Finlay, "Negotiating the Swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice," *Qualitative Research* 2, no. 2 (2002): 209-230; A. Ap-

Central Myths: The Production of Miraculous Narratives

One of the most prominent narratives within the mythologization of Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura is the story that Sultan Abdurrahman of Sumenep transcribed a complete 30-juz *musḥaf* in a single night. This tale is not only circulated among the caretakers of the Sumenep Palace Museum but is also frequently retold by tour guides as evidence of the Sultan's spiritual grandeur and supernatural prowess. Rationally, the claim of copying the entire Qur'an in one night is patently impossible. However, within the socio-cultural framework, this narrative functions as a representation of *karāmah*—an extraordinary ability believed to be divinely granted to saintly figures.[14] In the context of the Islamic tradition in the Indonesian archipelago, kings are often regarded not merely as administrative leaders but also as holders of spiritual authority. This narrative reinforces the Sultan's symbolic status as a *waliyyullah*, thereby rendering the manuscript not only a historical artifact but also a magical and blessed object. As Michael Peletz has noted, such narratives form part of the "drama of authority" in Southeast Asian Muslim societies, which blurs the lines between political power and spiritual legitimacy.[15]

A similar story of *karāmah* appears in the narrative of Kiai Lembung, a local figure from the village of Lembung, Kadur, Pamekasan, who is believed to have written a complete *musḥaf* while submerged in water—reportedly within a spring or pond that later came to be known as *lembung*. This story is orally transmitted by the manuscript's custodial family and the surrounding community, and it contains elements of bodily transcendence. The act of writing a *musḥaf* under such extreme conditions not only reflects a miraculous feat but also constructs recognition of the sacredness of the site and the spiritual power of its scribe. In his study of *karāmah* within *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), Zamakhsyari Dhofier notes that

padurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[14] Jamhari, "In the Center of Meaning: Ziarah Tradition in Java," *Studia Islamika* 7, no. 1 (2014).

[15] M. G. Peletz, "Islam and the Cultural Politics of Legitimacy: Malaysia in the Aftermath of September 11th," In *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

such practices constitute a form of moral authority production rooted in spiritual miracles and the creation of localized sacred spaces.[16] The belief in the sanctity of the water in which the *muṣḥaf* was written also reflects local values that regard water as a symbol of purity, blessing, and a bridge between the physical and metaphysical realms. Thus, the manuscript functions not merely as a sacred text but as a *collective amulet* that unites the community through an institutionalized religious experience.

The third and equally astonishing narrative also originates from the village of Lembung, where it is said that a religious figure once transcribed the Qur'an while riding a horse in reverse—his head and torso suspended beneath the animal's belly, with his legs wrapped around its torso like a saddle strap. This tale, bizarre and even absurd as it may sound, derives its mythic power precisely from its implausibility. The body's "illogical" posture embodies the logic of *karāmah*, wherein spirituality is believed to transcend the laws of nature. In the study of religious mythology, Eliade asserts that such *mirabilia* function to "collapse the boundary between the human and the Divine," thereby affirming the presence of sacred power within the profane world.[17] This narrative not only elevates the manuscript's scribe to the status of a saintly figure but also legitimizes the manuscript itself as a "legacy from the celestial realm." Like the previous two narratives, this myth does not exist in isolation; rather, it thrives within a value system that esteems supernatural prowess as evidence of spiritual and social legitimacy.

In the context of cultural and religious tourism in Madura, narrative functions as the primary medium through which Qur'anic manuscripts are transformed from sacred texts into objects with significant public appeal. The Sumenep Palace Museum, for instance, not only displays the grand *muṣḥaf* allegedly written in a single night but also actively frames this story as part of an educational and spiritual tour. Museum guides often recount the tale in a dramatic style, blending historical and legendary elements to evoke awe among visitors. Local festivals and regional tourism campaigns further amplify this allure, positioning the manuscript as a "local miracle icon"

[16] Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1982).
[17] M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

across brochures, billboards, and social media. As MacCannell explains, modern tourism involves a process of reverse sacralization, whereby an object becomes "sacred" through its role in the tourist experience.[18] In this case, narrative not only extends the manuscript's social lifespan but also constructs new meanings relevant to contemporary modes of public consumption.

Figure 1. Qur'an Manuscript of the Sumenep Palace Museum (seource: https://nativeindonesia.com/destinasi-wisata-sejarah-museum-keraton-sumenep-jawa-timur, accessed June 16, 2024).

The transformation of the manuscript from an object of worship into a cultural commodity reflects a shift in religious value toward economic and symbolic capital. A *muṣḥaf* once recited in ritual devotion is now also "read" as an economic resource through its contribution to the local tourism industry. Regional governments, through departments of culture and tourism, actively promote the inclusion of such manuscripts in their branding agendas, recognizing their high marketability as representations of exotic local spirituality. Within this framework, the manuscript becomes part of the cultural economy, wherein its spiritual value is repackaged through narratives consumable by tourists, while simultaneously reinforcing

[18] D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

regional cultural identity.[19] According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, cultural artifacts become "heritable property" curated through narrative techniques that blur the boundaries between heritage and spectacle.[20] In this process, the sacredness of the *muṣḥaf* is not erased but rather rearticulated in a form that serves economic interests, local pride, and cultural diplomacy. Such a transformation marks the manuscript's life not only in the spiritual domain but also within an evolving circuit of symbolic capital.

Within the landscape of religious tourism in Madura, visitors often arrive not merely to view manuscripts as historical relics, but to experience what they perceive as a spiritual encounter—an experience that, in reality, has been orchestrated through narrative construction, visual staging, and collective expectation. In the exhibition space of the Sumenep Palace Museum, for instance, a giant *muṣḥaf* is displayed within a large glass cabinet, illuminated to highlight its physical grandeur, while museum attendants narrate the tale of King Abdurrahman composing it in a single, uninterrupted night. This account, though historically unverifiable, is readily accepted by many visitors as it fulfills their longing for miracles and the marvels of a sacred past. In this framework, what visitors seek is not historical authenticity, but a sense of the sacred—curated through narrative and visual techniques. Jean Baudrillard refers to this phenomenon as *simulacrum*, wherein the representation becomes more "real" than the reality itself.[21] Rather than tracing the actual origin of the manuscript, visitors become immersed in an experience mediated by stories, symbols, and atmospheres deliberately constructed to produce a consumable aura of spirituality.[22]

This phenomenon reveals that religious tourism has shifted from direct engagement with sacred sites toward the consumption of sacred imagery, reproduced aesthetically and symbolically. At this juncture, as Baudrillard posits, *hyperreality* prevails—when "the real" is shaped by copies that have lost their original referents.[23] The manuscript on display is no longer a text ritually recited, but a "sign" of

[19] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.
[20] B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[21] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.
[22] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).
[23] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

sacrality continually renewed through storytelling and public expectation. This is particularly evident in communal efforts such as *musḥaf* festivals or symbolic pilgrimages to the manuscript owner's residence, where the manuscript itself is not always revealed, yet remains the focal point of a religious and cultural event. Experience becomes a product, and spirituality becomes packaging—not because the Madurese people are no longer religious, but because they have found ways to negotiate their spirituality with the demands of spectacle, identity, and local economy. As Carole M. Cusack demonstrates in her study of invented religions, new forms of belief are often shaped by constructed narratives and rituals, yet they maintain a tangible social vitality.[24] In this regard, the Qur'anic manuscript in Madura is transformed into the core of a hyperreal experience, no longer bound to the physical codex itself, but to the stories and sensations it evokes.

The Role of Social Actors: Museums, Religious Scholars, and Local Communities

The narratives surrounding the ancient Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura are not naturally occurring phenomena but are socially constructed discourses shaped by various actors with differing positions and interests. At the institutional level, entities such as the Sumenep Palace Museum serve as curatorial gatekeepers, selecting which stories to highlight while omitting others, and weaving them into curatorial texts, informational leaflets, and oral explanations. However, the museum is not the sole source of these narratives. In rural areas, stories about the *musḥaf* are orally transmitted and preserved by local *kiai* and the families who own the manuscripts, many of whom claim genealogical or spiritual ties to the original scribe. These narratives live on through oral tradition and ritual practices and are often reinforced by the testimonies of pilgrims who believe in the manuscript's *karāmah*. The dissemination of these stories is inherently dialogic, involving local communities as both conveyors and recipients of meaning—rendering them part of an "interpretive community," as articulated by Stanley Fish, a social group that both

[24] C. M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

forms and is formed by the meanings it collectively produces.[25] In this context, narrative functions not merely as information, but as a conduit linking identity, belief, and structures of power.

The motivations behind the construction and reproduction of these narratives are far from monolithic. Many are indeed rooted in a desire to preserve spiritual legitimacy—whether for manuscript-holding families with religious lineage or for institutions like museums seeking to assert cultural authority. Nonetheless, the economic dimension cannot be overlooked. In certain locations, the presence of a manuscript is accompanied by voluntary visitor donations, souvenir sales, and local festivities that stimulate the informal economy. Here, narrative becomes a form of "symbolic capital," convertible into social and economic assets.[26] As cultural and religious tourism gains prominence in Indonesia, as noted in the study by Susan Blackburn and Bianca Smith, local communities increasingly participate in narrative management as a strategy for self-representation and the preservation of local identity.[27] In this regard, the manuscript is no longer merely a religious text to be inherited but becomes a cultural resource actively negotiated within contested spaces of meaning and interest. Such practices align with Michel de Certeau's notion that local narratives often function as tactical responses by ordinary people to navigate dominant structures, thereby creating symbolic spaces that reinforce their position amid social transformation.[28]

While institutional actors such as the Sumenep Palace Museum often advocate for openness and public engagement, religious custodians sometimes resist aspects of this exposure. As *Kiai* Ahmad Saifullah, a keeper of a 17th-century Qur'anic manuscript in a village near Sumenep, explained, "If the manuscript is handled like a museum exhibit, it loses some of its barakah—people will visit, but the

[25] S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
[26] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).
[27] S. Blackburn, B. J. Smith, and Siti Syamsiyatun (eds.), *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: How Women Negotiate Their Muslim Identities* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University Press, 2008).
[28] M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

spiritual presence suffers."[29] This tension is especially acute when curatorial practices demand visual display or photographic reproduction for tourism or promotional materials. Museum staff argue that such visibility increases cultural awareness and raises funds for conservation, whereas kiai and families fear commodification dilutes religious sanctity. In many observed cases, compromises are negotiated—such as limiting photography, restricting access during certain ritual times, or using controlled storytelling in museum narratives. These negotiations reveal how power and meaning are contested among actors with different values (spiritual vs. cultural vs. economic) in the circulation of these manuscripts.

In recent years, digital media has become an increasingly important arena for distributing stories about Madura's Qur'anic manuscripts. Local residents often share short video clips on WhatsApp, Instagram Reels, or TikTok narrating miraculous traits—such as manuscripts surviving floods or sea voyages—serving both as devotion and promotion. *Bu* Laila, a villager whose family has cared for a manuscript, remarked in an interview, "When somebody shares a video of our muṣḥaf in the mosque, I see not only voices praising its holiness but comments asking how to visit, how to see it. Suddenly the sacred becomes accessible, even globally."[30] This echo finding in studies of religious literature digitalization in Indonesia, where social media platforms mediate shifts in religious authority and public religious expression.[31] The effect is double-edged: while digital dissemination expands audience and symbolic capital, it also risks misinterpretation, dramatization, or simplification of complex religious meanings—sometimes reducing sacred narrative into shareable content.

Symbols, Simulacra, and the Circulation of Sacredness

[29] Interview with *Kiai* Ahmad Saifullah (pseudonym), Kolor Village, Sumenep, June 15, 2024; for discussion of spiritual custodians and curatorial tension in manuscript preservation, see Moh. Nor Ichwan, Faizal Amin, Abdullah Khusairi, and Bob Andrian, "Digitalization and the Shifting Religious Literature of Indonesian Muslims in the Era of Society 5.0," *Islamic Communication Journal* 9, no. 2 (2024): 245-66.

[30] Interview with *Bu* Laila (pseudonym), Aeng Panas Village, Suemenp, July 2, 2024.

[31] Ichwan et al., "Digitalization and the Shifting Religious Literature."

This discussion arises from an attempt to reconcile field findings with a number of theoretical frameworks previously outlined. The Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura—locally believed to possess *karāmah* (miraculous power)—must not be read solely as philological artifacts or inherited objects, but as social entities whose existence is constructed through narrative, practice, and surrounding power relations. Arjun Appadurai's concept of *the social life of things* provides an essential initial lens: objects, including sacred manuscripts, live within social networks that reshape their meanings as they move through different spaces, actors, and value systems.[32] These manuscripts circulate within a continuum between the sacred and the profane, between spaces of worship and of tourism, between ritual function and symbolic function. It is within this spectrum that Durkheim's theory on the separation between *the sacred and the profane* becomes relevant: manuscripts once owned by *kiai* and used in religious rituals are now displayed at cultural festivals, captured through camera lenses, and accessed by non-Muslim visitors—a transformation laden not with neutrality, but with layered interpretations.[33] In this context, the manuscript is not merely a text, but a nexus of contested meanings, authority, and economic value.

Furthermore, these manuscripts must be understood as living objects—not in the biological sense, but in the anthropological one: they possess histories, relationships, and social agency. Clifford Geertz emphasizes that religion operates through symbols, and that such symbols are not neutral; they evoke emotion, shape behavior, and frame reality.[34] A manuscript enveloped in miraculous narratives—shrouded in cloth, enclosed in glass cases, sprinkled with flowers, and recounted in reverent tones—has become a symbol that transcends its textuality; it functions as a mediator between humans and the transcendent, and simultaneously between humans and the cultural marketplace. Within this network, the manuscript assumes a dual position: it is both a scripture recited in worship and an artifact exhibited in village museums or local tourism stalls. Peter Berger, in *The Social Construction of Reality*, reminds us that reality is a social product: what is considered "sacred" or "valuable" is not inherent in the object itself, but constructed and legitimized by society

[32] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*.
[33] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.
[34] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

through the institutionalization of meaning.[35] Hence, a manuscript once hidden in a *kiai*'s drawer has now become an object to be unveiled, photographed, and elevated as a symbol of local wisdom—an evolution that is far from accidental, but rather the result of deliberate social construction.

The miraculous narratives accompanying the Qur'anic manuscripts—such as claims that the text does not blur despite being written underwater, or that it retains artistic precision despite being inscribed while hanging from a moving animal—are not merely expressions of traditional belief, but also function as powerful symbolic strategies for framing the tourist experience. As Edward Bruner has demonstrated, narratives in tourism are not only told but also performed; they become part of a *staged authenticity* that generates the illusion of originality within a space that is, in fact, constructed.[36] In the Madurese context, these narratives are relayed by local guides, manuscript custodians, and even visitors who document their testimonials on social media. This mirrors Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulacra*: the manuscript encountered by tourists is no longer the Qur'an in its function as divine revelation, but rather a spectacle of wonder—a copy without an original.[37] Visitors do not come to read the text but to experience its aura, to touch its sacredness, and to bring home a spiritual tale. Thus, the touristic encounter with the manuscript transforms into a hyperreal experience, wherein what is offered is a fabricated sacredness rather than authentic faith.

Yet within this process lies an inevitable tension between sacredness and commercialization. The manuscript's sacrality—once protected in traditional communities by rules, reverence, and prohibitions—now confronts the demands of openness, spectacle, and even exoticization for outside visitors. A text once handled only by *santri* or *kiai* is now unveiled to the public as part of a cultural tourism package. On one hand, this practice may be understood as a form of preservation and cultural diplomacy; on the other, it signals a shift in orientation: from worship to consumption. As Chris Barker notes, when cultural products enter the circuits of capital,

[35] Peter L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996).
[36] E. M. Bruner, "Tourism, Creativity and Authenticity," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 3 (1977): 291-305.
[37] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

their meanings are never free from the negotiation of power and market forces.[38] Within this dynamic, local communities often find themselves caught in a dilemma between safeguarding religious authenticity and responding to the economic opportunities presented by the tourism industry.

This raises an urgent ethical reflection: where should we draw the line between cultural promotion and the reduction of religious value? When a Qur'anic manuscript is positioned as a "local icon" in tourism promotion, the question should not only concern its effectiveness as an attraction, but also its integrity as a spiritual medium. Talal Asad warns that when religious discourse is reframed within a cultural paradigm, the result is not merely secularization, but a reconfiguration of meaning that may strip faith of its vitality.[39] For this reason, it is imperative for both communities and scholars to ensure that all forms of cultural promotion remain sensitive to spiritual sensibilities, historical value, and the voices of the manuscript-owning communities. Without such safeguards, we risk turning revelation into spectacle, and the *muṣḥaf* into a symbolic souvenir of a spirituality emptied of its meaning.

Conclusion

The old Qur'anic manuscripts in Madura, as evidenced by the cases analyzed, do not merely function as religious relics or textual artifacts, but also serve as central nodes in active processes of social construction—where myth, belief, and cultural economy intersect. The findings of this study reveal that the miraculous narratives surrounding these manuscripts are not neutral or passive inheritances, but the result of ongoing cultural labor: they are constructed, negotiated, and performed within specific social contexts. Within the framework of Arjun Appadurai's *social life of things*, these manuscripts participate in a circulation of values that is not only spiritual, but also economic and symbolic. Miracles are not merely believed in; they are also packaged, curated, and marketed as integral components of touristic experiences and local identity.

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[38] C. Barker and E. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2016)

[39] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

The implications of these findings underscore the importance of a narrative-ethnographic approach in the study of local religious manuscripts. Analyses of classical Islamic texts can no longer rely solely on philological or historical methods; rather, they must also accommodate the lived realities of manuscripts within their communities: how they are perceived, cared for, and discussed. This approach allows researchers to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the symbolic uses of manuscripts during festivals, local rituals, or religious tourism. By positioning narrative as a central element of analysis, we trace not only what is said, but also how, when, and for whom such narrative's function. In this light, the manuscript emerges not merely as a cultural object, but as a cultural actor that shapes social and economic relationships within the community.

To broaden the horizon of understanding regarding similar phenomena, further research is strongly encouraged across regional contexts—particularly in other parts of Indonesia with a strong tradition of Islamic manuscript preservation. Comparative studies may illuminate recurring patterns or, conversely, reveal the diversity of practices and narratives surrounding ancient manuscripts. Moreover, the involvement of manuscript custodians—both formal actors such as museum curators and informal ones such as spiritual guardians and families entrusted with manuscript care—should be integrated into scholarly inquiry. Such a collaborative approach will not only enrich the empirical data but also contribute to the formulation of preservation policies that are ethical, inclusive, and sensitive to the religious values that animate these communities.

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