

SANCTIFYING SYMBOLISM IN ISLAMIC PRACTICE AND ITS IMPACT ON FAITH

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examines the role of symbolism in Islamic practices, particularly focusing on the pervasive superstitions and their cultural and historical roots. The spiritual adoration and high respect for sacred sites and symbols display a vital position in the spiritual and cultural landscape of Islamic societies. By examining Islamic texts and comparing them with current practices in various Muslim societies, the paper highlights the conflict between authentic Islamic teachings and culturally embedded superstitions with a focus on symbolic lures. This study recognizes the desire for the immediate tangible representation of conviction and the test to refrain from wrong unchartered avenues which seem comforting but have a damaging outcome on Islamic integrity in the face of reliance and belief. By focusing our research on these dynamics and issues, our core faith is clearly defined. The integrity of Allah in terms of monotheism is clarified. The findings suggest that these superstitions not only contradict the core principles of Islam but also undermine spiritual integrity. The study highlights the need for increased religious education to address and correct these misconceptions. It aims to offer sensible recommendations for addressing the diversity of thought while emphasizing the need to align our practices with the fundamental precepts of Islam.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Superstition, Islamic Practices, Faith, Cultural Influence.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Symbols, inscriptions, and images play a significant role in the spiritual lives of people across different cultures and traditions around the world. In Islam, however, the reliance on such objects is a matter of theological debate. The creed of Islam is elemental in promoting a comprehensive way of life and explicitly emphasizes the purity of monotheism (*Tawhīd*) in all aspects of living and dealings. It rejects all angles leading to association (*shirk*). Our fundamental scripture, *The Qurān* and also the Prophetic *Ḥadīth* provide clear guidance on the rejection of shirk and reliance on Allah for all matters of life and our destiny. For example, the Qur'an categorically states associating partners with Allah is a grave sin (*Qurān* 4:48). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) vehemently declared clearly by examples and instances that the use of amulets, charms, and

other superstitions are clearly denounced in all matters and those who believe and engage in such matters are shirk

Despite this foundational and fundamental doctrine for which Islam stands for, inclinations and superstitions of the pre Islamic era and the societal influence of other cultures and customs have led to the incorporation of idols in various forms and have taken root in Islamic societies. These beliefs and practices have continued and endured in Islamic communities with the belief that the amulets, saints, and shrines, are protective and healing endorsements and with the belief that they should be venerated. The belief in blessings and reliance on symbols remains a pressing issue which contradicts the core principles of Islam and challenges the integrity of Islamic monotheism.

The tenacity of symbolic lures prevalent within Islamic thoughts and practice is not merely a theological consideration but it affects the sociocultural framework and an issue that has a deep connection to reliance in the face of reflecting on psychological and emotional needs. This paper aims to delve into the role of symbolic objects in Islamic practice, exploring the historical and cultural influences that have led to the incorporation of superstitious beliefs and practices. It will also discuss the theological implications of these practices and the clear Islamic teachings that oppose them. By scrutinizing this topic under the directions of the Islamic texts, such as the *Qurān and Ḥadīth*, and considering the current practices in Islamic lands. This study seeks to focus attention on the compatibility or conflict between true Islamic aims and acquired notions and superstitions.

The use of amulets and talismans, believed to be supposedly holding superpowers of healing and good luck can be seen evidently in religious experiences of Islamic societies. Such practices are not limited to Islam but can be observed in many religious traditions around the world. However, in the context of Islamic teachings, these practices often stand in stark contrast to the theological principle that Allah alone holds ultimate power and that no material object or person can influence one's fate independent of Allah's Will. A treatise on this conflict forms the crux of the current study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature surrounding the topic of symbolism in Islamic practice is both extensive and diverse, covering theological perspectives, cultural studies, and historical accounts. Classical Islamic texts such as the *Qurān* and *Ḥadīth*, serve as the primary sources for understanding the Islamic stance on symbols and superstitions. These texts categorically reject the notion that objects, talismans, or symbols possess any inherent power, emphasizing that all power and blessings come solely from Allāh (*Ibn Taymiyāh*, 2003; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2007).

However, despite these clear doctrinal positions, the persistence of superstitious practices and the reliance on blessed objects, observed in various Islamic cultures has been widely documented. Elaskary and Yun (2017) discuss the significance of *Zamzam* water and its substantial position in Islamic tradition along with the symbolism of 'holy water', highlighting how cultural interpretations often lead to practices that border on superstition. Similarly, Schielke (2008) examines

the euphoria of Muslim saints' cults in Egypt, where symbolic acts and superstitions play a significant role in religious practice.

Karkabi (2016) provides a detailed analysis of gender, religion, and public space in Cairo, focusing on how popular practices at Muslim shrines often incorporate superstitions and symbolic acts that are not sanctioned by Islamic teachings. These works collectively illustrate the complex interplay between cultural traditions and religious practices, demonstrating how deeply ingrained superstitious beliefs can become in certain Islamic communities.

The conceptual background of this research is further supported by the writings of Ahmed (2002) on iconoclasm in Islamic history, where the rejection of idolatry and symbolism is a recurring theme. Wahāb (1995) explores the historical destruction of shrines as part of a broader movement to purify Islamic practices from any form of shirk (association of others with Allāh), which often includes the rejection of superstitions and symbolic objects.

In summary, the literature reveals a persistent tension between Islamic doctrine, which strictly prohibits idols, the use of symbols, superstitions, and related cultural practices observed in various Islamic societies. This tension forms the basis for the current study, which seeks to analyze the reasons behind the continued reliance on symbolic objects and superstitions despite clear religious prohibitions.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this study involves a comprehensive review of Islamic texts, including the *Qurān* and *Ḥadīth*, alongside emotional inclinations and analysis of cultural practices in various Islamic societies. By examining religious scriptures and historical records, the study aims to highlight the disparity between Islamic teachings which denounce idolism in any form, and the superstitious practices observed in different regions. The paper also draws on existing literature to understand the socio-cultural dynamics that contribute to the persistence of these practices.

The research methodology involves a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis of primary Islamic texts and secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and historical records. The study examines how symbolic practices have evolved over time and their impact on Islamic beliefs. The methodology also includes a comparative analysis of different Islamic societies to understand the cultural variations in the adoption of superstitious practices. Data is gathered through a detailed literature review and is analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to symbolism and superstition.

3.1 Research Design

This research design for this study is intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of symbolism and superstitions in Islamic practices, highlighting the gaps between doctrine and practice and offering insights into the cultural and psychological factors that sustain these beliefs. The research design is qualitative and exploratory, aimed at understanding

the depth and complexity of superstitious practices within Islamic societies.

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data is gathered through an extensive review of Islamic texts, including the *Qurān and Ḥadīth*, to establish the doctrinal position on the tangible sanctity symbols. A secondary review of scholarly articles, historical documentation, and cultural dispositions provided practical analysis and data to discuss the inclination towards the physically approachable.

i. Sampling

The study employs purposive sampling to select relevant texts, studies, and cultural practices that best illustrate the intersection of superstition and Islamic beliefs. This approach allows for a focused examination of specific cases and contexts where these practices are most prevalent.

ii. Data Analysis

The collected data is analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and discrepancies between Islamic teachings and observed practices. The analysis also includes a comparative approach, examining different cultural contexts to understand the variation in superstitious practices across Islamic societies.

iii. Validation

Triangulation is used to ensure the validity of the findings by cross-referencing data from multiple sources. This method enhances the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the study

by verifying the consistency of the data across different contexts and sources.

iv. Content Analysis

The analysis section delves into the data gathered from the literature review and historical documents. It examines the prevalence of superstitious practices in various Islamic societies, exploring how these practices have persisted despite clear Islamic teachings that prohibit them. The analysis highlights the influence of cultural factors on religious practices, showing how certain superstitions have been integrated into Islamic rituals. The section also discusses the psychological and social reasons behind the continued reliance on symbolic objects and amulets.

4. DISCUSSION

The Islamic doctrine explicitly forbids the attribution of special powers to unasserted objects, places, or individuals. The integrity of the Islamic faith requires Muslims to place their reliance solely on Allāh, rejecting the notion that material tokens or intermediaries can influence their fate. The *Qur'ān* and the Prophetic *Ḥadīth* provide comprehensive guidance on this matter, strongly discouraging the belief in the efficacy of blessings derived from objects, places, or individuals, and warning against considering certain things as inherently cursed.

Various superstitious trends prevalent across human civilizations illustrate the susceptibility of societies to such beliefs. Frequently, individuals attribute special powers or blessings to certain objects, mementos, or talismans, believing them to be instrumental in achieving success or warding off evil.

These notions, deeply rooted in popular culture, transcend religious boundaries and can vary significantly depending on education, geographical location, and cultural influences.

In many traditions, symbols, inscriptions, or images are integral to spiritual practices. The belief in the efficacy of astrological signs and similar objects stems from this inclination towards the mystical. Common examples include individuals who cherish a "blessed" coin or a "lucky" shirt worn during competitions, or those who seek to gain spiritual benefits from the presence of a revered religious figure or from places associated with such figures. This predilection for the sanctification of objects and imagery is as pervasive today as it was in pre-Islamic times. For instance, the image of the *Ka'bah* on prayer mats may cater to this psychological need for a tangible representation of holiness.

However, Islamic teachings emphasize that all matters of destiny, whether favorable or unfavorable, are determined by Allāh alone, who grants blessings and wards off harm according to His will, independent of any material objects or persons. While certain locations, such as *Makkah*, and elements like the water of *Zamzam* hold particular significance as specified by Allāh SWT.

A pertinent *Ḥadīth* from the companion of the Prophet (ﷺ), 'Umar Bin Khattāb, reflects this perspective. When he approached the *Hijr Aswad* (Black Stone) and kissed it, he remarked, "Verily, I know you are only a stone with no power to harm or benefit me. Were it not that I saw the Prophet (ﷺ) kiss you, I would not have kissed you" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* H. no.1520, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* H. no.1270). This statement underscores the

principle that even objects held in high esteem within Islamic tradition do not possess intrinsic powers.

Moreover, Islamic teachings clearly state that acquiring a personal possession of the Prophet (ﷺ) or a piece of the *Kiṣwāḥ* (the cloth covering the *Ka'bah*) does not confer any special fortune upon the holder. The majority of scholars agree that *Āyat al-Kursī* should be recited, not inscribed on amulets. Islamic practice does not endorse the exaltation of material symbols; instead, it promotes direct supplication to Allāh. This is further illustrated by the *Qur'ān*'s rejection of the crucifixion of Prophet 'Isā (Jesus), thereby nullifying the symbolic reverence placed on the cross by Christians (Q-4:157-158).

Islam firmly denies the legitimacy of all charms and talismans, as evidenced by the teachings of the Prophet (ﷺ), who stated, "Paying attention to bad omens (*ṭayyarah*) is association (*shirk*). It has nothing to do with us. Allāh will remove it by reliance on Him" (*Al-Adab Al-Mufrad* 39:3). The exclusive reliance on Allāh, without resorting to material intermediaries, is a hallmark of Islamic faith. The Ḥadīth literature consistently discourages and condemns any form of symbolism or imagery that might be mistaken for a source of divine favor or protection.

Despite the clear Islamic directive to avoid idolatry, these cultural practices persist, often leading individuals astray from the monotheistic path. The human soul, always seeking spiritual fulfillment, can be misled into these practices, which may distract from the true reliance on Islamic rituals of prayer intended to bring serenity and a closer connection to Allāh. The long-term societal impact is significant, as these practices

may dilute the transmission of authentic Islamic ideologies to future generations.

Significantly observable and practiced beliefs are undoubtedly built upon local customs, and sometimes pure Superstition. In many regions, Islamic values have become intertwined with local customs and beliefs, often blending with elements from other religions. For instance, some Muslims in the Indian subcontinent have historically regarded the water of the Ganges as blessed, while simultaneously promoting the nourishing properties of *Zamzam* water—a practice indicative of syncretism between Islamic and local traditions. Folklore and Mythology, also play a significant role in shaping the spiritual practices of different communities. The modern generation, however, increasingly views these spiritual practices as mere relics of mythological traditions, often treating them as cultural curiosities rather than legitimate religious practices.

The celebration of saints' lives and the reverence for sacred sites also reflect a deep-seated human desire to connect with the divine through tangible, physical symbols. This inclination can be seen in the construction of mausoleums and other monuments that serve as focal points for spiritual devotion. However, such practices must be approached with caution to avoid the pitfalls of idolatry and to maintain the purity of Islamic worship. These structures, while significant, should not become objects of worship themselves but rather serve as reminders of the spiritual heritage they represent.

Human societies across the world have developed unique ethical, moral, and cultural values, often transmitted through folklore, mythology, and traditions. These elements, deeply

rooted in the historical and geographical context of a society, shape its identity and influence its standards of living. The spiritual history of many communities includes accounts of pious individuals who were believed to have been favored by God and capable of performing miracles, or who were associated with extraordinary events. These narratives, which have often persisted and evolved over time, continue to play a significant role in the spiritual lives of many people.

Despite this, the allure of saint veneration and sanctity for historical relics and sacred symbols persists. The adoration of saints, pious ancestors, and blessed locations predates Islam, stretching back to pre-Islamic Arabia.

The phrase - **“Make for us a *Dhātu Anwāt* like theirs,”**

These words were narrated in the *Ḥadīth* of *Abū Wāqid al-Laythī* (may Allāh be pleased with him): They went out from *Makkah* with the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) to Hunayn. The *kuffār* had a tree to which they would go and spend time (to seek blessings) and they used to hang their weapons on it, and it was called ***Dhātu Anwāt***. We passed by a large green tree and we said: ‘O Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ), make for us a *Dhāt Anwāt*’ at which the Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) said: “*Allāhu Akbar!* Verily, that which you have said – by Him in Whose Hand is my soul – is the same as was said by the Children of Israel to *Mūsā*: “Make for us a god such as the gods which they (the polytheist Egyptians) have.” Then he (ﷺ) said: “Verily, you are an ignorant people. These are ways that you will certainly follow as did those who came before you, step by step.” *Al-Tirmidhi* (2180), who said it is a *ḥasan saḥīḥ ḥadīth*.

According to a report narrated by *Ibn Abi 'Āsim* in *Kitāb al-Sunnah*, "And we were new in Islam (at that time)."

Numerous *Ḥadīths* also emphasize the importance of avoiding such symbolic or image-based practices. For instance, Imam Ahmad narrates in his *Musnad* that Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) rejected the allegiance of an individual who wore an amulet until he removed it, declaring that "Whoever wears an amulet has committed *shirk*." This underscores the prohibition of ascribing any special power to material objects. True Islamic practice requires that believers rely solely on Allāh and not on any object, regardless of its perceived spiritual value.

The removal of idols from the *Ka'bah* by Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) after the conquest of Makkah symbolizes the rejection of all forms of idol worship, which is fundamentally opposed to the monotheistic principles of Islam. The *Ka'bah*, the most sacred site in Islam, was cleansed of the pagan statues that had been placed there during the pre-Islamic era. This act of purification underscores the importance of maintaining the sanctity of Islamic worship by eliminating any forms of idolatry. While Islam came to abolish idol worship, the practice has not entirely disappeared; instead, it has been transformed into the reverence of inanimate structures rather than tangible idols.

Excessive respect of saintly sites and associated cults has been subjected to both verbal critique and physical actions. These efforts range from logical arguments to radical measures, all aimed at eradicating practices that involve intermediaries in seeking favors from Allāh. As a result, structures such as mausoleums, domes, and roofs built over graves have been targeted and demolished. Similarly, historical statues and

religious monuments from other faiths have been destroyed to prevent them from becoming sites of pilgrimage or paying homage.

In contrast, there are organizations dedicated to preserving the cultural significance of these practices, asserting that it is legitimate to revere these customs. Their stance is bolstered by placing these structures within the framework of ascetic mysticism. Furthermore, these efforts are strongly supported by anthropologists who study human trends, societies, and cultures, particularly focusing on cultural evolution. In a related manner, the preservation of historical sites by archaeologists has inadvertently supported religious adherents of these saints and sites. These sites are often protected as cultural landmarks, representing historical glory rather than religious significance. Consequently, the focus on epic narratives and artifacts by contemporary archaeology and anthropology, coupled with state interests, has provided substantial support to these traditions in the name of historical preservation.

Despite the clear directives in Islamic canonical texts, which emphasize monotheism, many individuals continue to stray from the correct spiritual path. This deviation often involves a misguided focus on supernatural avenues, which pose a significant risk by diverting individuals from true reliance on Allāh. The Islamic rituals of prayer, which are meant to provide spiritual serenity, are overshadowed by these distractions. As a result, those not deeply rooted in religious practices are often drawn towards psychic and supernatural directions, which can have detrimental effects on society and distort the true Islamic ideologies intended to be passed on to future generations.

In this context, it is essential to consider the psychology behind instances of iconoclasm carried out by Islamic zealots and movements. Iconoclasm, the act of destroying images, has historical precedents, such as the destruction of shrines by *Abdul Wahhāb* in the 18th century in the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, the destructive movements in Nigeria and the ruthless actions of the *Ṭālibān*, including the demolition of the historical Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan, illustrate this phenomenon.

4.1 Folklore and Mythology

Every human society has developed a set of shared ethics, morals, and cultural values, often rooted in mutual experiences and traditional customs handed down through generations. These values are unique to each society, shaped by historical experiences, local customs, and the attitudes of ancestors. These historical elements form the foundation of societal identity, influencing how individuals live and perceive their world.

In many regions of the world, Islamic values have become intertwined with local customs and the beliefs of other religions, leading to a blend of practices. For example, in the Indian subcontinent, some Muslims historically considered the water of the Ganges River to be blessed, alongside the Islamic belief in the sanctity of *Zamzam* water. This syncretism reflects the complex interplay between religious teachings and local traditions.

However, in contemporary times, many people view these spiritual practices and superstitious beliefs as outdated or even

mythological. The astrological compartmentalization of birth stars has lost its luster as fragmented knowledge is fed by intrigues.

Despite these modern developments, there remains a strong devotion to historical relics and sacred symbols, particularly those associated with revered figures or places. While Islam sought to abolish the worship of idols, the practice persists in various forms, even if the physical idols common in earlier times are no longer present.

The desire to connect with a revered past or to understand the origins of significant historical events continues to drive interest in these sacred sites. Modern technology and social trends have only amplified this interest, with new methods of celebrating and exalting these sites emerging in contemporary society.

Within this framework, there is potential to explore and map the mindsets surrounding saintly sites and their associated symbols, with a focus on historical and geographical contexts. Although Pakistan, particularly Karachi, has its share of reformists, hardliners, mystical sects, traditions, and folklore, this analysis will proceed by examining the general mentality within Islamic societies. This will involve a literal and historical evaluation of scholarly material related to the topic.

The presence of revered objects or places in Islamic practice, particularly in saintly sites, offers insights into the religious, artistic, and political ideologies of a society. The architecture of these sites, often marked by round domes, intricate ornamentation, and attached mosques or graveyards, stands as

a testament to the enduring human inclination to seek a connection between the mundane and the divine.

4.2 The Effigy of the Green Tomb Over Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) Gravesite

Retaining the discussion of symbolism associated with blessings (*barakāh*) and labeled as holy (*muqaddas*), there is a clear human inclination towards desiring an observable sacred entity that connects the individual with the divine.

The widespread recognition of the Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) tomb emblem as a source of *barakāh* (blessing) is an exact example that cannot be denied. The human inclination towards the tangible and the holy is deeply ingrained, as evident by the popular adoration of the green dome over the Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) grave in *Madināh*, which has become an emblematic structure much like the *Ka'bah* in *Makkah*. This desire for a visible and material connection to the divine highlights the ongoing relevance of sacred symbols in human culture. This evident global symbol of devotion highlights the enduring relevance of such structures in the collective consciousness of Muslims.

Across the world, the shrines of Muslim saints, whether large or small, tend to share common architectural features, such as round domes, blue ornamentation, and green curtains or grave coverings. Often, these shrines are accompanied by mosques or graveyards and are typically situated in prominent locations, standing as landmarks that bridge the earthly with the divine. An example of this phenomenon is the shrine of *Abdūllāh Shāh Ghāzī* in Karachi, Pakistan, where his lineage is proudly

displayed at the entrance to the shrine. This site, like many others, is a testament to the enduring legacy of saintly figures and their continued significance in the spiritual lives of Muslims.

The veneration of sacred sites, symbols, and emblems within Islamic societies, is not confined to a single region but is indicative of a broader human phenomenal experience. The symbolic presence of revered objects or locations hold substantial significance, functioning as tangible expressions of history, religious devotion, and cultural identity. The concept of sainthood, alongside the structures and artifacts associated with it, and the interactions of the general populace with these institutions and objects share similarities, making general inferences credible. The intellectual and emotional frameworks within which revered sites, symbols, and artifacts are conceptualized is a topic worthy of exclusive scholarly inquiry. These analyses can provide insights into the religious, artistic, and political ideologies of the societies that created them, thus holding a place in both archaeology and anthropology, not only for their historical significance but also for their role in the ongoing evolution of religious practices.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results reveal a notable discrepancy between Islamic teachings and the practices observed in many Muslim communities. This divergence is interpreted in light of previous research, which suggests that the persistence of superstitious practices often stems from inadequate religious education and the strong influence of cultural traditions. Despite Muslims being cognizant of the theological issues surrounding these

practices, cultural norms often outweigh religious considerations.

The paper upholds that while symbolism and superstitions have deep roots in various cultures, they directly contradict the teachings of Islam. Reliance on such practices undermines the integrity of faith and can lead to misguided beliefs highlighting the necessity for a more rigorous and strategic approach. The purity of *Tawhīd* (The Oneness of Allāh) is maintained by rejecting all forms of idols, whether explicit or implicit and by placing unwavering trust in Allāh alone. This is the benchmark of all steps undertaken.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the persistence of symbolic practices within Islamic contexts, despite clear doctrinal prohibitions, highlights the complex interplay between religion, culture, and human psychology. While Islamic teachings emphasize strict monotheism and reliance on Allāh alone, the allure of tangible symbols, relics, and sacred sites continues to captivate the human imagination, often leading to practices that blur the line between faith and superstition. The human desire for connection to the sacred through tangible symbols remains a powerful force, shaping religious practices and cultural identities across the Muslim world. Thus, the symbolic presence of revered objects or places in Islam is complex and must be navigated with care.

The Islamic stance is clear: symbolism and the reverence of objects, places, or individuals do not align with the monotheistic essence of the faith. Although tangible symbols serve as

important markers of religious and cultural identity, they must never replace the fundamental Islamic principle of worshipping Allāh alone. Understanding and addressing these dynamics requires a nuanced approach that considers historical, cultural, and psychological factors, and emphasizes the need to maintain the authority of Islamic monotheism.

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