

Mujahadah as a Sufi Cultural Text: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis of Spiritual Ritual and Religious Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study examines mujahadah in Jam'iyyah Ta'lim Wal-Mujāhadah Jum'at Pon (JTMJP), Padang Jagad, Krapyak, Yogyakarta, as a cultural text through Roland Barthes's semiotics. Whereas previous studies have predominantly approached mujahadah as spiritual discipline or a means of religious character formation, this study asks how ritual meaning is produced through observable signs and how such meaning moves from denotation to connotation and myth. The study employs a qualitative approach combining field observation of ritual practice with a focused literature review. The units of analysis include dhikr, repeated litanies and prayers, tirakat, collective salawat accompanied by hadrah, Qur'anic recitation, collective performance, and the place of religious guidance within the ritual. The analysis shows that, at the denotative level, mujahadah signifies jihad al-nafs, spiritual discipline, and an effort to draw closer to God. At the connotative level, collective performance enables ritual signs to acquire meanings of communal piety, solidarity, religious identity, and interpretive authority. At the level of myth, particular connotations may become naturalized as apparently self-evident understandings of legitimate spirituality. The article also considers the possibility of instrumental or transactional readings of spiritual practice without treating them as evidence that JTMJP itself commercializes mujahadah. The study demonstrates that mujahadah can be understood simultaneously as devotional practice and as a socially situated process of cultural meaning-making.

Keywords: *Communal Identity; Jihad al-Nafs; Religious Semiotics; Ritual Meaning; Sufism*

INTRODUCTION

Mujahadah occupies an important place in Islamic spirituality, particularly within Sufi ethical traditions that understand religious life as sustained struggle against the lower self. Derived from the same root as jihad, mujahadah conveys earnest striving, disciplined effort, and the mobilization of one's capacities in pursuit of divine pleasure. In the Sufi vocabulary, this striving is closely associated with jihad al-nafs: the effort to restrain desire, cultivate moral vigilance, and orient the self toward God. Such an understanding makes mujahadah more than an isolated devotional act. It is a patterned practice through which bodily discipline, repeated remembrance, prayer, and ascetic effort are brought together within a moral-spiritual project.

Contemporary scholarship has generally approached mujahadah through its theological, ethical, pedagogical, and character-forming functions. Indonesian studies of majlis dhikr and Sufi ritual further show that collective remembrance is simultaneously devotional, embodied, and socially organized (Zamhari, 2009; Widiyanto, 2006; Rosidi & Antin, 2024). Badriyan, Hidayat, and Daheri (2024), for example, describe mujahadah as a religious practice that can support the formation of religious character in pesantren settings, linking it to obedience, responsibility, and spiritual development. Afaningtyas, Azwar, and Indrayani (2025), drawing on al-Qushayri, similarly emphasize mujahadah as struggle against base desire and discuss its relevance to the critique of hedonistic orientations. These studies are important because they clarify the normative and formative dimensions of mujahadah. Yet they tend to begin from the question of what mujahadah means or what it does for the religious subject.

A different analytical problem emerges when mujahadah is treated not only as a devotional discipline but also as a cultural practice composed of observable signs. Studies of lived and material religion emphasize that religious meaning is generated not only through doctrine but also through bodies, objects, repeated actions, spatial arrangements, and relations among participants (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020; Utriainen, 2020; Whitehead, 2020). Collective recitation, rhythmic repetition, bodily stillness, vocal intensity, the use of Qur'anic passages, salawat, hadrah, ascetic practices, spatial arrangements, and the guidance of religious authorities do not merely accompany a ritual. They participate in the public production of meaning. A ritual can therefore retain its theological orientation while simultaneously acquiring social meanings concerning piety, belonging, authority, prestige, solidarity, and legitimate religious conduct.

This possibility is especially relevant in Indonesian Muslim settings, where religious concepts and practices remain rooted in Islamic tradition while being continuously articulated within changing social environments. Research on religious habituation in Indonesian Islamic education similarly demonstrates how repeated practices can embed religious values in everyday collective life (Amin, Muid, & Faizin, 2024). Khoirin, Sugito, and Faizin (2025), in their genealogy of wasatiyyah, show that an Islamic concept may preserve a normative core while undergoing historical shifts in emphasis and social articulation.

Mujahadah and wasatiyyah are distinct concepts, but the broader methodological implication is useful: Islamic meanings are neither historically inert nor reducible to contemporary reinterpretation. They can be simultaneously inherited, performed, negotiated, and rearticulated.

Semiotics provides a productive framework for examining this process. Roland Barthes develops a model in which signs operate through more than one order of signification. At the first order, the relation between signifier and signified produces a denotative sign. At the second order, the first sign can itself function as a signifier and acquire connotative meanings grounded in cultural history, emotion, and ideology. When these historically produced connotations become naturalized and appear self-evident, Barthes describes their operation as myth. Myth in this sense does not simply mean a false story; it is a mode of signification that makes contingent cultural meanings appear natural.

Barthes's framework has been productively used in recent studies of religious and ritual meaning. Husain (2024) applies denotation, connotation, and myth to the Qur'anic term *wasilah*, demonstrating the analytical value of semiology for tracing how religious meanings become dynamic across interpretive contexts. Research on Javanese and local ritual objects likewise shows that Barthesian analysis can distinguish literal ritual functions from culturally layered meanings (Wijaya, Aryanto, & Sari, 2026; Jayadi et al., 2026). These studies support the use of semiotics for religious phenomena, but they also underscore the need to ground interpretation in identifiable signs rather than to impose ideological conclusions on a ritual from outside.

This study focuses on the collective *mujahadah* practice of *Jam'iyyah Ta'lim Wal-Mujāhadah Jum'at Pon (JTMJP)* Padang Jagad in Krapyak, Yogyakarta. The observed ritual includes *salawat* accompanied by *hadrah*, religious instruction, collective *mujahadah*, repeated prayers and litanies, and recitation drawn from Qur'anic passages. The practice is therefore particularly suitable for semiotic analysis because it brings together verbal, auditory, bodily, collective, and authoritative dimensions within a single ritual event.

The central problem addressed here is not whether *mujahadah* is theologically valid, nor whether its participants hold one uniform interpretation. Rather, the study asks how *mujahadah* operates as a signifying practice: What do its observable ritual signs denote? What social and cultural meanings can they acquire at the level of connotation? Under what conditions can these connotations be naturalized as myths of legitimate spirituality? By shifting the analytical question from what *mujahadah* means doctrinally to how meanings of *mujahadah* are produced and naturalized through ritual practice, this study seeks to contribute to Islamic Studies at the intersection of Sufism, semiotics, and lived religion.

The study employs a qualitative semiotic design based on field observation of JTMJP ritual practice and a focused literature review. Because the available field material does not include a documented interview corpus, the analysis does not claim to represent participants' private intentions or to generalize their individual beliefs. Instead, it treats observable ritual elements as the primary semiotic units and uses Barthes's denotation-

connotation-myth sequence as an interpretive procedure. This methodological boundary is important, particularly when discussing authority or potentially transactional interpretations of spirituality.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative semiotic approach to examine mujahadah as a culturally situated signifying practice. The field setting is the ritual activity of Jam'iyyah Ta'līm Wal-Mujāhadah Jum'at Pon (JTMJP) Padang Jagad in Krapyak, Yogyakarta. The original field material identifies direct observation of the ritual as the primary empirical source, supported by library research on mujahadah, Sufism, and Roland Barthes's semiotics. No interview corpus is documented in the source material; consequently, the present analysis does not attribute specific beliefs, motives, or experiences to individual participants.

The unit of analysis is the observable ritual sign. These units include collective salawat accompanied by hadrah, dhikr, repetition of litanies and prayers, recitation of Qur'anic passages, tirakat, collective participation, and the organization of religious guidance within the ritual. Treating these elements as signs allows the analysis to remain anchored in the empirical material while examining how literal ritual functions may acquire broader cultural meanings.

The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages. First, each ritual element is read at the denotative level by identifying the signifier and its immediate religious or practical signified. Second, the denotative sign is examined as a possible second-order signifier whose meaning is shaped by collective experience, cultural convention, and religious discourse. Third, the analysis considers whether recurring connotations become naturalized as myth in the Barthesian sense: meanings that are historically and socially produced but come to appear natural, obvious, or inseparable from the ritual itself.

The study uses relevant scholarship as an interpretive dialogue rather than as substitute evidence. Literature on mujahadah clarifies its Sufi and ethical vocabulary, while semiotic studies help refine the distinction between denotation, connotation, and myth. Literature on religious commodification is used only to illuminate the conceptual possibility of transactional spirituality; it is not treated as evidence that JTMJP commercializes religion. This distinction limits overinterpretation and preserves the difference between observable ritual data and theoretical inference.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Mujahadah as an Observable Ritual System

The JTMJP ritual is organized around a combination of salawat, hadrah, religious instruction, collective mujahadah, and recitations drawn from Qur'anic passages. These practices are performed collectively rather than as purely private devotion. At the most immediate level, they form an ordered sequence of devotional acts through which participants orient themselves toward God. Repetition, rhythm, voice, bodily presence, and

collective timing make the ritual perceptible not only as a set of beliefs but as an embodied and audible religious event.

From a semiotic perspective, the ritual is not reduced to symbolism. Its devotional function remains primary to its denotative intelligibility. The significance of the semiotic approach lies instead in asking what happens when these devotional forms are repeatedly performed in a communal setting. The same dhikr that denotes remembrance of God may also come to signify disciplined piety; collective salawat may connote belonging; the guidance of a kyai or ustadz may connote recognized interpretive authority. These second-order meanings do not cancel the first-order religious meaning. They accumulate around it.

First-Order Signification: Mujahadah as Jihad al-Nafs

At the first order of signification, the most visible signifiers are repeated dhikr, wirid and prayer, Qur'anic recitation, salawat, and tirakat. Their immediate signified is the disciplined effort to remember God, restrain the self, and pursue spiritual purification. The resulting denotative sign can therefore be summarized as mujahadah as sustained spiritual striving. This reading is consistent with Sufi understandings of mujahadah as struggle against the lower self and with recent scholarship that associates the practice with spiritual discipline and resistance to hedonistic desire (Afaningtyas et al., 2025).

The importance of this denotative level is methodological. A semiotic reading should not begin by assuming that a ritual secretly means something other than what practitioners publicly perform. The first analytical obligation is to recognize the practice on its own religious terms. In JTMJP, the observable combination of recitation, repetition, collective prayer, and ascetic orientation makes purification, surrender, and proximity to God the most defensible first-order meaning.

Badriyan et al. (2024) similarly emphasize that mujahadah can function as more than repetitive routine because it habituates religious discipline and responsibility. Their pedagogical emphasis differs from the present semiotic approach, but it helps clarify why the denotative sign is socially durable: repeated devotional action produces a recognizable form of religious seriousness. In Barthesian terms, that stable first-order sign can subsequently become the material from which second-order meanings are constructed.

Second-Order Signification: Communal Piety, Identity, and Authority

When the denotative sign of disciplined spiritual striving enters a collective setting, it can acquire connotative meanings. The repeated performance of mujahadah by a community makes individual discipline publicly visible. What denotes remembrance and self-restraint can therefore connote communal piety, solidarity, continuity of tradition, and membership in a shared religious world. This shift is not unusual in ritual systems: a practice performed together often signifies both devotion to the divine and belonging among participants.

The collective character of JTMJP is especially important. Recent research on Indonesian majelis taklim and Sufi da'wah likewise shows that dhikr practices can acquire ethical, relational, and social functions beyond the immediate act of recitation (Saude,

Kamridah, & Boulahnane, 2026; Riyadi, Ibrahim, Pimay, & Karim, 2026). Salawat accompanied by hadrah, synchronized recitation, and participation in a shared sequence produce a social form that is larger than individual prayer. The ritual becomes a recognizable cultural expression of Muslim spirituality in a Javanese-Indonesian setting. At this level, piety is not merely possessed by an individual; it is displayed, affirmed, and reproduced through participation.

Recent Barthesian studies of ritual objects support this distinction between immediate function and layered cultural meaning. Wijaya, Aryanto, and Sari (2026) show that objects in a Javanese srakalan tradition carry denotative functions while also acquiring connotations concerning relations among humans, society, nature, and the divine. Jayadi et al. (2026) likewise use denotation, connotation, and myth to analyze ritual instruments in the Besentulak tradition. The present study extends this logic from ritual objects to an integrated Sufi practice in which sound, repetition, bodily discipline, collective participation, and religious guidance operate together.

Religious authority also enters this second-order field. Studies of contemporary Indonesian Sufism show that religious authority is not simply inherited but is reproduced through networks, media, ritual practice, and recognized spiritual leadership (Hidayati, 2022; Rubaidi, Wahab, Yudi, & Juraidi, 2026). The presence of recognized religious guidance can connote legitimacy, continuity, and trust. It would be too strong, however, to infer from the available observational material that participants accept a kyai or ustadz as an absolute determinant of truth. What the ritual structure more cautiously supports is the idea of privileged interpretive authority: particular figures or inherited forms occupy socially recognized positions from which legitimate ritual meaning is articulated.

Barthes's critique of authorial sovereignty is useful here only as an analytical analogy. Ritual meaning cannot be reduced entirely to the intention of a single authority because meaning also emerges through repetition, reception, collective memory, and changing cultural contexts. This does not mean that religious authority disappears. Rather, authority becomes one component within a broader signifying process in which inherited teachings, ritual form, and communal reception interact.

From Connotation to Myth: Naturalizing Legitimate Spirituality

In Barthes's account, myth emerges when a historically produced connotation becomes naturalized. Applied to mujahadah, myth does not mean that the ritual itself is fictitious. It refers to the possibility that particular social interpretations of the ritual become so familiar that they appear inseparable from the practice. For example, if disciplined participation repeatedly connotes exemplary piety, the association between participation and recognized pious identity may eventually appear self-evident rather than culturally produced.

The same mechanism can operate around authority. When a particular interpretive arrangement is repeatedly embedded in ritual practice, its historical and institutional formation may recede from view. The arrangement can then appear as the natural form of legitimate spirituality. A Barthesian analysis makes this process visible without requiring

the researcher to declare the authority itself illegitimate. Its task is to distinguish theological claims from the social processes through which particular interpretations gain cultural obviousness.

This distinction is especially important in Islamic Studies. Islamic concepts can remain anchored in scripture and tradition while their public articulation changes. Khoirin et al. (2025) demonstrate this historical dynamism in their genealogy of *wasatiyyah*, showing how a concept can move across ethical-theological, reformist, and contemporary social registers. In the present case, *mujahadah* retains its Sufi orientation toward self-struggle while collective performance enables additional meanings concerning identity, solidarity, and authority to accumulate around it.

Transactional Spirituality as an Interpretive Possibility

The original manuscript also raises a provocative concern: the possibility that spiritual practice can be interpreted instrumentally, as though greater ritual intensity automatically guarantees measurable worldly rewards such as wealth, office, or popularity. This concern deserves analytical attention, but the available field material does not provide a sufficiently documented corpus of participant statements, sermons, promotional texts, or economic transactions to establish that JTMJP itself practices religious commodification. The claim must therefore be framed as an interpretive possibility rather than an empirical verdict.

A more precise formulation is transactional spirituality: a second-order reading in which devotional acts are understood primarily through an exchange logic between ritual performance and immediate worldly outcomes. In such a reading, an act denoting surrender, remembrance, or purification can be connotatively reorganized as an instrument for material success. If repeatedly normalized, this association may operate as myth by making the transactional relation appear spiritually obvious.

This analytical possibility resonates with, but should not be conflated with, scholarship on spiritual capitalism and religious commodification. Gonzalez (2012) uses the term spiritual capitalism in a different organizational context to examine the intersection of spiritual discourse and managerial-economic logics. More recently, Hidayat and Zulaiha (2026) analyze the institutionalization and commodification of the Qur'anic *mushaf* in Indonesia, showing how sacred symbolic value can be negotiated within market dynamics. These studies demonstrate that spirituality and economic logic can intersect, but they concern empirical contexts different from JTMJP. They therefore serve here as conceptual comparison rather than direct evidence.

The distinction matters ethically and methodologically. To label a religious community 'capitalist' or 'transactional' without sufficient evidence would transform a semiotic hypothesis into an unsupported characterization. The present analysis instead identifies a question for future fieldwork: under what circumstances do participants themselves connect *mujahadah* with worldly efficacy, and how are such connections articulated, accepted, contested, or limited within the community?

A Semiotic Model of Mujahadah

The findings can be summarized as a layered movement of signification rather than as a replacement of one meaning by another. The first-order devotional meaning remains present while social meanings accumulate around it.

OBSERVABLE RITUAL SIGN	DENOTATIVE MEANING	CONNOTATIVE MEANING	POSSIBLE MYTHIC NATURALIZATION
DHIKR, WIRID, PRAYER, QUR'ANIC RECITATION	Remembrance, devotion, spiritual discipline	Seriousness of piety and disciplined religious identity	Disciplined participation appears as a self-evident marker of legitimate piety
TIRAKAT / ASCETIC EFFORT	Self-restraint and jihad al-nafs	Spiritual commitment and moral endurance	Ascetic discipline becomes naturalized as a privileged image of authentic spirituality
COLLECTIVE SALAWAT AND HADRAH	Collective praise and devotional performance	Solidarity, belonging, communal religious identity	Communal form appears inseparable from legitimate religious belonging
RELIGIOUS GUIDANCE WITHIN RITUAL	Direction and organization of practice	Recognized interpretive legitimacy	A historically situated authority structure may appear naturally given
WORLDLY-EFFICACY NARRATIVES, IF EMPIRICALLY PRESENT	Hope for benefit or divine assistance	Instrumental reading of ritual efficacy	A transactional relation between ritual intensity and worldly success may appear spiritually obvious

The table deliberately labels the final column as possible mythic naturalization. This wording reflects the limits of the available data. A mythic reading in Barthes's sense is an analytical reconstruction of how meaning can become naturalized; it should not be confused with direct evidence of what every participant consciously believes.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that mujahadah is best understood as both devotional practice and cultural text. Its theological meaning is not displaced by semiotic analysis. Rather, the semiotic perspective reveals how a devotional core can support multiple layers of social meaning. This is the study's main contribution: it moves the analysis from a static definition of mujahadah toward an account of how ritual signs produce, circulate, and stabilize meanings within a living religious environment.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined mujahadah at JTMJP Padang Jagad, Kranyak, Yogyakarta, through Roland Barthes's semiotic framework. At the denotative level, observable practices such as dhikr, repeated litanies and prayers, Qur'anic recitation, salawat, hadrah, collective participation, and tirakat signify disciplined spiritual striving, jihad al-nafs, and an effort to draw closer to God. This first-order meaning provides the religious foundation of the ritual and should not be bypassed by cultural interpretation.

At the connotative level, the collective performance of these practices allows additional meanings to emerge. Disciplined devotion can signify communal piety; repeated

participation can signify belonging and continuity; and religious guidance can signify recognized interpretive legitimacy. When such connotations are repeatedly reproduced and come to appear self-evident, they can operate as myth in the Barthesian sense: historically situated meanings that are experienced as natural.

The study also distinguishes between evidence and interpretive possibility. The available observational material does not justify a factual claim that JTMJP commercializes mujahadah or that its religious authorities exercise absolute control over meaning. Transactional spirituality is therefore proposed as a question for interpretation and future empirical investigation, not as a label attached to the community. This distinction strengthens the ethical and methodological use of critical theory in the study of lived religion.

By treating Sufi ritual as a living signifying practice rather than a static repository of doctrine, the study contributes to contemporary Islamic Studies at the intersection of Sufism, semiotics, and lived religion. Future research should deepen the empirical basis through documented interviews, observation across multiple ritual occasions, analysis of sermons and community media, and participant accounts of ritual efficacy. Such data would make it possible to examine more directly how different actors accept, negotiate, or contest the meanings that gather around mujahadah.

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