

## Religious Experience Behind Repeated Umrah: A Phenomenological Study of Umrah Pilgrims in Sumberlawang District, Sragen Regency

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study aims to analyze the motivations and religious experiences of pilgrims performing repeat Umrah in Sumberlawang District and identify their impact on the quality of worship and social life

**Method** – The study used a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological method. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews and filling out a Google Form, with informants determined by purposive sampling.

**Findings** – The results show that the primary motivation for repeat Umrah is driven by a belief in the great value of rewards, a spiritual longing for the Holy Land, and a desire to increase closeness to God. The religious experience felt includes inner calm, increased reverence, and a strong sense of spiritual encounter. The impact is seen in the improved quality of worship, a balance between life orientations between this world and the afterlife, and growing social awareness in the surrounding environment. Thus, repeat Umrah becomes a process of spiritual and social transformation that shapes the pilgrims' religious awareness more deeply.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Umrah pilgrimage is often referred to as al-hajj al-ashghar, or the “minor pilgrimage.” From a juridical (sharī‘ah) perspective, Hajj and Umrah share several ritual components, such as entering into ihram, performing tawaf, and undertaking sa‘ī. However, unlike Hajj, which is strictly bound to a specific time in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah and includes additional rites such as wuquf

in Arafah, mabit in Mina, and staying overnight in Muzdalifah as integral pillars of the pilgrimage (Ihsan et al., 2022), Umrah serves as a more flexible form of spiritual journey. It offers Muslims the opportunity to attain profound spiritual experiences and can be performed at any time throughout the year.

Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs indicate a significant surge in the number of Umrah pilgrims since 2015. A notable increase occurred during 2022 to 2023, when 1,170,027 Indonesians performed Umrah. According to Datahub (2023 to 2024), approximately 780,000 pilgrims departed, while in 2024 to 2025 the number rose sharply to 1.8 million pilgrims (Kompas.com). A considerable number of these individuals perform Umrah more than once. This pattern of repeated pilgrimage raises intriguing questions regarding the motivations and meanings underlying such intentions. This is further supported by Marjoko, a tour leader from KBIH Muhammadiyah Sragen, who notes that many people show strong interest in performing Umrah repeatedly, typically every three years.

A deep sense of love rooted in the heart often gives rise to longing (Ghifrillah and Nurhadi, 2016). For Muslims worldwide, Mecca and Medina are not merely cities but spiritual centers possessing a powerful magnetic pull. This generates a profound sense of yearning, an inner drive that does not easily fade. The more frequently one visits, the stronger the desire to return. The exceptional virtues and sacred status of these holy cities become primary factors fueling this recurring longing.

As inherently limited beings, humans are called to devote themselves fully to the Almighty, Allah. The sacrifices of mental strength, financial resources, and physical endurance required for Umrah embody values of sincerity and patience. In the sight of Allah, all human beings are equal. Through rituals such as sa'i, tawaf, wuquf, and the stoning of the jamarat, Muslims are reminded of the oneness of God (Indra et al., 2024). Umrah, as an act of worship with profound theological significance, becomes a means for individuals to strive toward self transformation and moral improvement. It is not merely a physical activity but one that deeply engages the spiritual dimension, encouraging individuals to reflect on life, renew their intentions, and draw closer to Allah (Al Kahfi, 2024).

According to William James, religious experience can be understood as an acknowledgment of a transcendent power beyond the self, which serves as a source of enduring moral values governing human life and the universe. The concept of religious experience refers to an individual's subjective awareness of the presence of God, often accompanied by feelings of awe, surrender, and spiritual peace (Yuliyanti, 2012).

This study adopts William James's theory of religious experience, which outlines several key characteristics. First, ineffability, meaning that such experiences are difficult to articulate in words, and individuals often feel that what they experience cannot be fully expressed. Second, the noetic quality, referring to the sense that the experience imparts profound, convincing inner knowledge or insight. Third, transiency, indicating that although the experience is typically brief, its impact can endure over a long period. Fourth, passivity, wherein individuals feel as though they are being influenced or overtaken by a force greater than themselves.

However, the increasing number of Umrah pilgrims in Indonesia each year is not always accompanied by a deeper understanding of its spiritual meaning. In practice, some pilgrims who have traveled repeatedly to the Holy Land have not fully internalized the spiritual values that constitute the essence of Umrah. Rather than being understood as a transformative spiritual journey, Umrah is, in some cases, shifting toward a form of religious lifestyle or social status symbol. Consequently, its spiritual depth and reflective dimensions receive less attention.

A phenomenological approach in the study of religion seeks to understand religious experiences as they are directly lived and perceived by individuals. In this context, the religious experiences of Umrah pilgrims can be interpreted as an inner encounter between human beings and the transcendent reality they believe in. This perspective aligns with William James's view that the core of religion lies in personal experience and one's felt relationship with God. He argues that religious experience is often marked by feelings of peace, inner tranquility, gratitude, and a deeper self awareness regarding the meaning of life.

Research conducted by Aniska Septi Sabena and colleagues in Batu Ponco Village found that informants generally reported an increase in faith, a stronger sense of closeness to God, and observable changes in their daily religious behavior after performing Umrah. The spiritual experiences gained in the Holy Land served as reflective moments that strengthened their religious awareness. Nevertheless, this increase in religiosity was not solely influenced by Umrah. Other factors such as social environment, religious education, and personal life experiences also played significant roles. Despite this, Umrah remains a significant experience in shaping and enhancing individual religiosity. Thus, it can be concluded that Umrah plays an important role as a spiritual experience that encourages positive transformation in religious life, although it is also influenced by various other factors.

This study focuses on analyzing the aspect of repetition in Umrah practices. It seeks to understand how spiritual experiences are re experienced by individuals who perform Umrah multiple times. The main problems addressed in this research are twofold. First, what motivates pilgrims to undertake repeated Umrah. Second, what experiences and transformations they undergo after performing the pilgrimage. The objective of this study is to comprehensively understand the meaning of religious experience behind repeated Umrah and to identify the forms of spiritual, emotional, and social transformation experienced by pilgrims.

Ultimately, this study aims to serve as a reflection for society, encouraging Umrah to be understood not merely as a religious journey but as a means of moral and spiritual transformation in everyday life. From a social perspective, it also highlights the importance of community in strengthening religious experiences, thereby contributing to the development of social awareness regarding the values of solidarity and communal support in daily religious practice.

## **METHOD**

Qualitative research methods constitute an approach used to understand meanings, experiences, and the subjective perspectives held by individuals or groups within a particular social context. This approach emphasizes an in depth exploration of phenomena occurring in social life

(Fadila et al., 2025). Such understanding is presented in the form of descriptive narratives using words and language, conducted in natural settings or real life situations, and utilizing various naturalistic methods (Abdul Fattah, 2023).

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly through in depth interviews with pilgrims who have performed Umrah repeatedly within the period of 2010 to 2025. In addition to interviews, this study also employed open ended questionnaires distributed through Google Forms to collect responses from a broader range of participants. Secondary data were derived from academic literature.

The informants in this study involved 11 individuals from Sumberlawang District who have performed Umrah more than once. The data analysis technique used the model developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Risnita et al., 2024).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the context of the Umrah pilgrimage, such experiences may arise when pilgrims are present in sacred spaces such as Masjid al Haram, when gazing upon the Kaaba, or while performing the rituals with deep devotion and concentration. Moreover, the religious experiences of pilgrims often do not end during their time in the Holy Land, but continue to influence their lives after returning to their social environments. Many pilgrims experience changes in attitudes and behavior, such as increased awareness in worship, the development of patience and humility, and a growing sense of social concern for others. This shows that religious experience in Umrah has the potential to serve as a means of spiritual formation that is not only individual in nature but also has an impact on one's social and religious life.

Therefore, understanding the religious experiences of Umrah pilgrims is important in order to examine how this act of worship is subjectively interpreted by those who perform it. Through a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to explore more deeply the inner experiences of pilgrims, how they perceive spiritual presence while performing rituals in the Holy Land, and how these experiences influence their religious awareness and behavior in everyday life. This approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the spiritual dimension of Umrah, not only as a religious ritual but also as a lived religious experience that shapes inner transformation.

Visits to holy lands exist in every religion, each having sites that are highly revered. This distinctiveness is not limited to places of worship but also includes locations considered sacred or historically significant according to religious beliefs. In almost all religions, visiting sacred sites is a long standing tradition among followers. This is also true in Islam. Journeys to sacred places, including Mecca, have existed since ancient times. These sacred locations serve as a major attraction for believers to undertake pilgrimages and spiritual rituals (Fawaid, 2010).

Mecca and Medina are known as two religious cities whose meanings extend beyond mere geographical locations. Both are regarded as sacred areas within Islamic teachings and contribute significantly to the religious experiences of pilgrims. The virtue of Mecca is specifically related to its role as the central place of worship in Islam. The presence of Masjid al Haram surrounding the

Kaaba, the direction of prayer for all Muslims worldwide, and its role as the main destination for Hajj and Umrah as pillars of Islam, affirm its position. Muslims believe that acts of worship performed in Mecca hold immense spiritual value, as the Kaaba is seen as the spiritual center of the Muslim community and a symbol of unity among Muslims around the world. Therefore, Mecca becomes a primary destination of faith, motivating millions of Muslims from various countries to visit despite physical, financial, and geographical challenges (Zarkada et al., 2025).

The uniqueness of Mecca is particularly evident in its role as the center of Hajj and Umrah rituals, which hold high normative value in Islamic law. Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam and is obligatory for every Muslim who is physically and financially capable at least once in a lifetime. Umrah, although not obligatory, is still considered highly virtuous and carries deep spiritual significance. Another study by Indra et al. (2024) found that the performance of Hajj and Umrah has a significant impact in building deep spiritual awareness among Muslims and, socially, strengthening unity and solidarity among pilgrims from different countries. This study emphasizes that Hajj and Umrah are not only ritual activities but also religious practices that shape religious identity and create strong spiritual experiences.

A phenomenological study of these two cities also shows differences in the nuances of religious experiences felt by pilgrims. Mecca tends to be associated with the intensity of ritual worship that requires patience and surrender to Allah through a series of demanding physical and spiritual practices such as tawaf, sa'i, and wuquf in Arafah, while Medina is often viewed as a spiritual oasis that calms the heart and provides space for contemplation as well as emotional closeness to the life history of the Prophet. These differences in spiritual experience enrich the overall meaning of the pilgrimage and become part of the pilgrims' subjective interpretation of these sacred places, both collectively and individually (Detik.com).

وَاللّٰهُ اِنَّكَ لَٰخَيْرُ اَرْضٍ اَرْضِ اللّٰهِ وَاَحَبُّ اَرْضِ اللّٰهِ اِلَى اللّٰهِ وَلَوْلَا اَنِّيْ اُخْرِجْتُ مِنْكَ مَا خَرَجْتُ ”رواه احم

By Allah, you are the best land of Allah and the most beloved land to Allah. If I had not been expelled from you, I would not have left you. Narrated by Ahmad.

اِنَّ اَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِيْ بِبَكَّةَ مُبْرَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعٰلَمِيْنَ

Indeed, the first house of worship established for mankind is that at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all worlds (Ali Imran 96).

The findings of this study indicate that the desire of pilgrims to perform Umrah repeatedly is not merely driven by financial capability, but by a deeper factor, namely a profound religious interpretation of the value of Umrah itself. William James states that the essence of religion lies in personal experience in feeling a relationship with God. According to him, religious experience is often marked by feelings of peace, inner calm, gratitude, and a deeper awareness of the meaning of life.

“Because it is a calling from Allah, we want to seek as much reward as possible, since we are sinners but we must continue to worship. The most important thing is that the rewards there are multiplied thousands of times” (Bangkit, 2025). “What motivates me is first the value of worship and its immense rewards. Second, worship feels more focused and closer to Allah SWT” (Wuryani, 2025).

Bangkit’s statement reflects an awareness that Umrah is understood as a calling from Allah and as a means to increase good deeds in order to draw closer to Him. The desire to seek as much reward as possible and the belief that rewards in the Holy Land are multiplied many times show that pilgrims interpret Umrah not merely as a formal ritual but as a valuable opportunity to improve spiritual quality and make up for shortcomings in everyday religious practice.

Prayer is an essential element that connects believers with God. In this sense, *khushu* can be understood as a religious emotion expected from Muslims. However, experiencing *khushu* is deeply personal, and therefore it is a spiritual condition that can only truly be felt by the individual, as a state of the believer’s heart. Wuryani’s statement, having performed Umrah five times, shows that the value of worship and its great rewards are the main driving factors for repeated Umrah. She also emphasizes the aspect of devotion and the stronger sense of closeness to Allah felt while performing worship in the Holy Land.

### **Religious Experience**

The religious experiences of pilgrims while in Raudhah and around the Kaaba become deeply personal and profound inner moments. Experience can be understood as an event that has been lived and is remembered by an individual (Ferlina, 2022). William James describes religious experience as a moment when a person feels a direct encounter with a higher reality or God. For Muslims, this moment often occurs during acts of worship in the Holy Land, including Umrah. Thus, religious experience can be understood as a memorable event in which a person feels a direct encounter with God.

“In Raudhah, it really feels like being so close to the companions and our beloved Prophet” (Azzahidah, 2025). “There is a sense of inner peace because of feeling close to Allah” (Rachmadani, 2025). Pilgrims feel a different atmosphere compared to other places of worship, where the heart becomes calmer and the mind more focused in worship. Emotional closeness to Prophet Muhammad and his companions is felt as if they are very near, creating a sense of peace and tranquility. In this condition, worship can be performed with full focus without many worldly distractions. The experience of being in Raudhah and around the Kaaba is ultimately understood as a spiritual moment that strengthens faith and leaves a deep impression on pilgrims.

Informant M5 is a female private sector employee who embraced Islam out of deep curiosity. She often asked questions about Islam before eventually declaring her faith. The opportunity to perform Umrah came from a friend who owned a travel agency, and she considered it as a calling from Allah SWT. Her main motivation was to fulfill the pillars of Islam. Although she was not yet fluent in reading the Quran and performing prayer, she still departed due to a strong inner drive. In Mecca, she felt both fear and awe toward the greatness of Allah SWT. During tawaf, she worshipped

with full devotion, recited the talbiyah, and prayed. She did not kiss the Hajar Aswad due to the conditions not allowing it (Hakim and Muhajarah, 2024).

### **Impact on the Quality of Worship and Social Aspects**

“The inner satisfaction is extraordinary and cannot be expressed in words, and it improves the quality of worship. In terms of social impact, poor neighbors are also helped, because every time before departing for Umrah I invite them to my house to give charity and ask for their prayers. We should not repeatedly go for Umrah while our neighbors around us lack food and we are unaware” (Sumantri, 2025). “The influence of Umrah on myself is that it brings me closer to Allah and makes me realize that life must be balanced between worldly matters and the hereafter” (Bangkit, 2025). “There is certainly a positive impact, increasing the desire to improve both obligatory and voluntary worship, and motivating relatives and neighbors to perform Umrah” (Nugroho, 2025).

The interview results show that Umrah provides deep inner satisfaction for pilgrims. This inner satisfaction is felt as peace of heart and tranquility of the soul that are difficult to express in words. These feelings lead to changes in the quality of worship after returning from Umrah. Worship is no longer carried out merely as an obligation but becomes an inner need performed with greater awareness and devotion. Pilgrims feel more connected to Allah, which encourages them to maintain obligatory worship and increase voluntary acts of worship in daily life.

In addition to its impact on inner and worship aspects, Umrah also has a real influence on the social lives of pilgrims. The spiritual experiences they undergo encourage greater concern for their surrounding environment, especially for less fortunate neighbors. Pilgrims do not want Umrah to be merely a personal journey without social benefit. This is reflected in the practice of inviting neighbors to their homes before departure to give charity and ask for prayers. This action reflects the awareness that the blessings of worship should also be shared with others, especially those in the closest environment.

Furthermore, Umrah shapes the way pilgrims view life as a whole. They feel closer to Allah and realize the importance of balancing worldly life and the hereafter. This awareness makes them more cautious in their behavior, not only focusing on material achievements but also paying attention to spiritual values and social responsibilities. Umrah becomes a moment of self reflection that encourages pilgrims to reorganize their life priorities. Another positive impact is the emergence of motivation, both for the pilgrims themselves and for those around them. Pilgrims become more enthusiastic in improving the quality of both obligatory and voluntary worship, while also inspiring family members, relatives, and neighbors. The experiences and behavioral changes after Umrah often encourage others in their environment to also desire to perform Umrah.

Overall, Umrah provides comprehensive impacts, ranging from inner satisfaction and improved quality of worship to the growth of social awareness and motivation. Umrah is not only understood as a spiritual journey but also as a process of self formation that brings positive changes in both personal and social life.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that the practice of repeated Umrah in Sumberlawang District is not merely based on economic factors or financial capability, but rather on deep religious motivation and strong spiritual experiences. The main motivation of pilgrims in performing Umrah repeatedly is rooted in an awareness of the great spiritual rewards, belief in the blessings of worship in Mecca and Medina, and a spiritual longing to once again feel closeness to Allah SWT. Umrah is interpreted as a “divine calling” as well as a moment for self-improvement, atoning for spiritual shortcomings, and enhancing the quality of faith.

The findings also reveal that the religious experiences of pilgrims are highly personal and emotional. Moments spent in Raudhah and around the Kaaba are perceived as inner encounters with divine reality, in line with the concept of religious experience proposed by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Pilgrims feel inner peace, deeper devotion in worship, and a sense of spiritual closeness that is difficult to find elsewhere. This experience reinforces the meaning of Umrah not merely as a physical ritual, but as a spiritual transformation that leaves a lasting impact on daily life.

The impact of repeated Umrah does not stop at the individual spiritual level, but also extends to the social dimension. Pilgrims experience an improvement in the quality of worship, both obligatory and voluntary acts, along with a growing awareness of maintaining balance between worldly life and the hereafter. In addition, the Umrah experience fosters greater social concern, such as the habit of giving charity to neighbors before departure and increased empathy toward surrounding communities. Thus, repeated Umrah contributes to shaping individuals who are more reflective, religious, and socially aware.

Most studies on journeys to the Holy Land generally emphasize religious experience as the main factor encouraging individuals to return. However, in reality, there may be other factors influencing this decision, such as social status, occupational needs, or even tourism-related motivations. Therefore, this study seeks to further examine whether religious experience truly serves as the dominant factor, or whether other social and practical factors also play a role in such decisions.

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