



The Lived Experience of Barakah in Business: A Study of Muslim Entrepreneurs in Pesantren Communities

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ABSTRACT

Islamic business ethics has gained increasing attention as scholars seek to understand how spiritual values influence economic behavior. Within this context, the concept of barakah, commonly translated as “blessing,” remains underexplored as a lived and experiential reality among Muslim entrepreneurs in pesantren communities. While previous studies have focused on legal compliance and financial outcomes, little is known about how barakah is subjectively understood and manifested in daily business practices. This study investigates how pesantren-based entrepreneurs perceive and embody the meaning of barakah in their entrepreneurial lives. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study reveals that barakah functions as a multidimensional compass that shapes moral decisions, spiritual fulfillment, and communal well-being. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Muslim entrepreneurs affiliated with pesantren institutions in East Java, Indonesia. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following eidetic reduction and thematic clustering to extract the essential structures of experience. Four interrelated themes emerged: spiritual anchoring, ethical deliberation, communal responsibility, and transcendent purpose. These findings suggest that barakah is not merely a theological abstraction but a deeply internalized moral framework that guides business conduct beyond material success. The results contribute to a richer understanding of value-driven entrepreneurship in Islamic contexts, and offer a foundation for future research on the spiritual dimensions of economic life, Islamic ethics, and qualitative methods.



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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of Islamic business practices, aligning economic behavior with spiritual and ethical values has become increasingly central. This study aims to explore how Muslim entrepreneurs in pesantren (Islamic boarding school) communities perceive and experience the concept of barakah in their business lives. Specifically, it addresses the research question: How is barakah subjectively understood and embodied in daily entrepreneurial practices?

Islamic entrepreneurship in pesantren communities represents a distinctive model in which moral accountability and religious devotion are seamlessly integrated into commerce. Within these tightly knit cultural and religious environments, business decisions are not merely economic calculations but also expressions of faith, discipline, and social responsibility.

A central concept in this moral economy is barakah—often translated as “blessing,” but encompassing broader spiritual and qualitative dimensions. It is perceived as divine favor and a measure of value that transcends material success, manifesting as peace of mind, sustainability, fairness, and communal welfare. In pesantren-based contexts, barakah is frequently invoked to describe morally meaningful business outcomes, reinforcing the belief that sincerity and righteousness attract divine support.

Despite its significance, barakah remains underexamined in scholarly work on Islamic economics and business. Prior studies have typically emphasized Sharia compliance or institutional performance metrics, neglecting the lived experiences and cultural narratives of Muslim entrepreneurs. Yet, these inner experiences are crucial to understanding how Islamic commerce is spiritually enacted in everyday life.

Given this gap, there is a growing need for research that explores how individuals make sense of and embody concepts like barakah in their daily entrepreneurial practices. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on subjective experience and the search for meaning, offers a compelling framework to investigate such phenomena. By centering the voices and lived realities of Muslim entrepreneurs, this approach allows for a richer, more holistic understanding of how spiritual ideals are internalized, negotiated, and practiced within contemporary Islamic business contexts.

Research into how individuals experience and interpret spiritual concepts within Islamic economic life has become an increasingly important area of inquiry, particularly as scholars seek to understand the deeper motivations and ethical frameworks that shape entrepreneurial behavior in religious contexts. Within this domain, the lived experiences of Muslim entrepreneurs navigating the moral dimensions of business such as their understanding of barakah offer valuable insights into the intersection of faith, culture, and commerce.

However, attempts to investigate these experiences have often encountered significant methodological limitations. Much of the existing literature on Islamic business practices relies heavily on quantitative approaches, focusing on measurable indicators such as financial performance, legal compliance with Sharia, or customer satisfaction indices. While these methods contribute to evaluating formal outcomes, they fall short in capturing the inner meanings, emotional resonance, and contextual nuances of how concepts like barakah are understood and enacted in daily life.

Moreover, conceptual frameworks that prioritize external observations tend to overlook the rich, subjective realities embedded in the narratives of business practitioners. As a result, essential dimensions of the phenomenon such as the spiritual satisfaction derived from ethical decisions, or the community-oriented aspirations behind profit sacrifices remain insufficiently explored. These gaps highlight the inadequacy of conventional approaches in grasping the full essence of the phenomenon, particularly when it is rooted in deeply personal and culturally embedded experiences.

Given these methodological constraints, there is a compelling need for approaches that privilege the voice of the participant and allow the phenomenon to reveal itself as it is experienced. Descriptive phenomenology, with its commitment to bracketing assumptions and illuminating the lived meaning of human experience, provides a fitting lens through which the notion of barakah can be authentically and rigorously examined.

In addressing the integration of Islamic values within business practices, most existing solutions have emphasized compliance-based frameworks, such as adherence to Sharia law or the implementation of Islamic financial instruments. These practical approaches, while important, primarily focus on normative guidelines and observable behaviors, often neglecting the subjective dimensions of how spiritual concepts particularly barakah are perceived and lived by entrepreneurs in real-life contexts.

This instrumental orientation has led to a research landscape dominated by functionalist and quantitative methodologies that inadequately capture the rich and layered meanings associated with barakah. The spiritual, emotional, and communal resonances of this concept are frequently underrepresented, reducing barakah to a symbolic or theological abstraction rather than a lived and embodied reality. As a result, our current understanding remains conceptually narrow and disconnected from the everyday experiences of Muslim business practitioners, particularly those embedded in culturally rich environments such as pesantren communities.

To address this gap, a shift in epistemological perspective is necessary one that values the participant's voice and recognizes the significance of subjective meaning. Phenomenology offers such an alternative by enabling a deep exploration of how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences. Through this lens, barakah can be examined not as a prescriptive ideal but as a dynamic,

contextualized phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by the moral, social, and spiritual lives of entrepreneurs. This approach promises to enrich the scholarly discourse on Islamic business ethics by foregrounding lived experience and uncovering the essential structures of meaning that remain obscured in conventional empirical studies.

Previous studies have explored Islamic business practices primarily through normative and compliance-based perspectives. Some research has examined ethical behavior in Islamic finance, but few have addressed how entrepreneurs personally interpret spiritual concepts like barakah in their daily lives. The lived experience of business actors, especially those within pesantren communities, remains largely underrepresented. Existing literature lacks a clear understanding of how barakah functions as a source of meaning, motivation, and moral guidance in entrepreneurial contexts. This study builds on these gaps by focusing directly on the subjective meanings attributed to barakah by Muslim entrepreneurs.

To explore this phenomenon, a descriptive phenomenological approach is applied. This method allows the researcher to uncover how participants perceive and experience barakah without imposing external interpretations. It is chosen for its strength in revealing the essential structures of meaning within lived experiences. By using this approach, the study addresses the limitations of previous methods that failed to capture the depth and complexity of spiritual meaning. In doing so, it responds directly to the knowledge gap by presenting a holistic view of how barakah is lived, not merely defined.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the background, knowledge gap, and aims of the research. The next section describes the phenomenological design, including participant selection, data collection, and thematic analysis. Results are then presented in the form of thematic narratives supported by direct quotations from participants. A discussion follows to interpret the findings in light of existing literature and theoretical insights. The paper concludes with a summary of key contributions, implications, and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in the philosophical framework of Edmund Husserl, was employed to explore the lived experiences of Islamic entrepreneurs in pesantren communities regarding the concept of barakah (blessing) in their business practices. This approach was selected to allow for a deep and unbiased understanding of the essential meanings embedded in participants' subjective experiences. Phenomenology prioritizes the interpretation-free description of phenomena as experienced by individuals, emphasizing intentionality and consciousness. The descriptive design enabled the reduction of preconceptions and facilitated the identification of the core structures of meaning that participants attributed to barakah in their entrepreneurial decisions and practices.

Participants

Participants consisted of small-scale business practitioners affiliated with pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in East Java, Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify individuals who had at least three years of experience operating businesses guided by Islamic values and had formal or informal ties with pesantren communities. Inclusion criteria included adults aged 25 to 55 years, self-identifying as Muslim entrepreneurs with an expressed commitment to Islamic ethical principles. Exclusion criteria involved individuals whose businesses were not aligned with Islamic financial ethics or who lacked sufficient communicative ability to articulate personal experiences. A total of 10 participants (6 males and 4 females) were included, with an average age of 38.7 years. Their business domains ranged from retail trade to halal food production and service-based enterprises, providing a diverse representation of entrepreneurial experiences within Islamic cultural settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a flexible interview guide developed to elicit narratives related to the understanding and application of barakah in business contexts. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private locations familiar to the participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. With participants' consent, audio recordings were made and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The interview guide was refined following a pilot session, with minor adjustments made to enhance the clarity of questions. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within the framework of descriptive phenomenology. The process involved several iterative steps, including familiarization with transcripts through repeated reading, identification of significant statements, extraction of meaning units, and the clustering of these into themes that captured the essence of the experience. NVivo 12 software was used to organize and code the data, ensuring systematic categorization and traceability. Thematic reduction was applied to distill the essential meanings, and eidetic analysis was performed to uncover the invariant structures of barakah as described by participants. The findings were validated through triangulation with field notes and reflective memoing to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants after providing detailed information about the study's aims, procedures, and confidentiality safeguards. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms, and data were securely stored and accessed only by authorized personnel. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national research ethics guidelines.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of Islamic business practitioners within pesantren communities in interpreting and embodying the concept of barakah (blessing) in their entrepreneurial activities. Through descriptive phenomenological analysis, four interrelated themes emerged that captured the essence of their understanding and manifestation of barakah in business practices.

Barakah as Spiritual Anchoring in Business Decisions

Participants consistently described barakah as a non-material yet decisive factor in making business choices. Rather than relying solely on financial indicators, they evaluated success through a spiritual lens, emphasizing divine pleasure, inner peace, and ethical harmony.

“Even when profits were small, I felt peace in my heart because I knew I wasn't cheating anyone. That's barakah to me.” (Participant 3)

This anchoring shaped their resilience in facing uncertainty, especially during periods of economic downturn. The belief that barakah arises from honesty and intention reframed risk into a spiritual test rather than a business failure.

“During COVID, I lost a lot of customers. But I kept going because I believe as long as I'm honest, Allah will send barakah in other ways.” (Participant 7)

Balancing Spiritual and Financial Success in Business



Ethical Deliberation as a Pathway to Barakah

Participants viewed business as a moral endeavor. Their narratives revealed that the pursuit of barakah often guided them to reject practices deemed unethical, even when such choices posed financial disadvantage. Avoiding riba (usury), deception, and exploitative behavior were seen not just as compliance with Islamic law but as a means to attract divine favor.

“Sometimes a supplier offers cheaper goods, but their source is doubtful. I would rather earn less than lose barakah.” (Participant 2)

Such ethical deliberations were not imposed externally but internalized as spiritual discipline rooted in pesantren education.

Communal Orientation and Social Trust as Manifestations of Barakah

The concept of barakah was not confined to individual gain. Many participants associated it with communal benefit—serving the local economy, empowering others, and nurturing mutual trust. Business success was redefined through collective upliftment and the perceived spiritual well-being of the surrounding community.

“If my shop grows but my neighbors suffer, that’s not barakah. Real blessing is when everyone grows together.” (Participant 5)

Reciprocal trust within the pesantren community was highlighted as both a value and a resource, reinforcing sustainable business practices rooted in shared moral vision.

Barakah as Transcendent Purpose Beyond Profit

Finally, participants emphasized that business was a vehicle for serving a higher purpose. They perceived economic activity as an extension of religious devotion. Barakah, in this context, represented alignment between worldly effort and afterlife accountability.

“Business is my way of worship. If I work with sincerity, even small profits can become a big reward in the hereafter.” (Participant 1)

This eschatological dimension of barakah fostered a long-term, patient, and principled orientation in managing their businesses, often resisting market pressures that clashed with Islamic values.

The findings reveal that barakah, as experienced by pesantren-based entrepreneurs, constitutes a deeply embodied framework that redefines business success in spiritual, ethical, and communal terms. Rather than a fixed definition, barakah emerges as a lived moral compass that informs daily decision-making, mediates challenges, and elevates business into an act of devotion. These insights illuminate how Islamic spiritual values operationalize within microeconomic behavior and invite further theorization of spiritually grounded business models.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that barakah, as experienced by Muslim entrepreneurs in pesantren communities, is deeply intertwined with spiritual intentionality, ethical deliberation, communal responsibility, and transcendental purpose. These themes reflect the participants' understanding of business not only as a means of livelihood but also as an expression of faith, moral duty, and spiritual growth—answering the central question of how barakah is interpreted and manifested in daily entrepreneurial life.

The findings directly address the research question by illustrating how barakah operates as a guiding principle in entrepreneurial decisions and practices. Rather than viewing success solely in economic terms, participants emphasized spiritual peace, ethical clarity, and communal benefit as indicators of a barakah-centered enterprise. This perspective challenges dominant market-driven definitions of success, presenting an alternative framework where profit is balanced with purpose. Such insights contribute uniquely to Islamic business literature by situating barakah within a lived moral economy shaped by the socio-religious context of pesantren life.

The study's themes are both supported and expanded by prior research. For example, Noor and Wahid (2021) found that Muslim practitioners often internalize Islamic ethics through personal spiritual reasoning rather than institutional enforcement, aligning with this study's emphasis on barakah as a self-imposed spiritual compass. Similarly, Alimi and Syarif (2020) documented how pesantren entrepreneurs conceptualize business as an act of worship, which resonates with participants' view of commerce as a form of devotion. However, this study extends the discourse by unpacking the experiential dimensions of barakah in greater detail—showing not just what entrepreneurs believe, but how they feel, prioritize, and act based on that belief. Unlike quantitative assessments that focus on religious compliance, the phenomenological approach used here uncovers the nuanced moral negotiations entrepreneurs engage in when pursuing business in accordance with divine values.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the specific context of pesantren-based entrepreneurship. By revealing how barakah is internalized as a source of ethical guidance and spiritual fulfillment, the study offers a valuable lens for understanding Islamic business practices in culturally embedded environments. It suggests that integrating spiritual values into economic life is not merely a theoretical ideal but a lived reality that shapes decisions, relationships, and perceptions of success. These insights may inform the development of business training programs, policy frameworks, and ethical guidelines that align more closely with the spiritual aspirations of Muslim entrepreneurs, particularly in regions where religion plays a central role in everyday life. Moreover, the study contributes to a broader discourse on value-driven entrepreneurship, offering an alternative paradigm rooted in moral intentionality and community well-being.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The focus on a specific group of entrepreneurs within pesantren communities in East Java may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other Muslim business contexts with different cultural or institutional characteristics. Additionally, the use of descriptive phenomenology, while powerful in capturing lived meaning, inherently limits the scope for broader theoretical generalization or hypothesis testing. Language, translation, and cultural nuances may also influence the interpretation of barakah in ways that are context-dependent. Recognizing these limitations allows for a more cautious interpretation of the findings and underscores the importance of contextual sensitivity in future studies.

Future research could explore how the concept of barakah is experienced across diverse Islamic cultures, business sectors, and socioeconomic settings. Comparative phenomenological studies might examine how gender, geographic location, or educational background shape entrepreneurs' moral frameworks and perceptions of divine blessing. Further investigation could also integrate longitudinal designs to capture how these meanings evolve over time or in response to external pressures such as economic crises or regulatory shifts. Ultimately, the present study lays a foundation for deeper inquiry into the intersection of faith, commerce, and lived experience within the expanding field of Islamic business ethics.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Muslim entrepreneurs in pesantren communities experience and interpret the concept of barakah within their business practices. It revealed that barakah serves as a spiritual, ethical, and communal compass that guides decision-making, sustains moral integrity, and redefines success beyond material gain. The findings highlight how lived experiences of faith shape entrepreneurial behavior in ways not captured by conventional economic or compliance-based models. By using a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study addressed existing methodological gaps and offered a deeper understanding of spirituality in Islamic business contexts.

These insights hold significant implications for Islamic business education, particularly in integrating spiritual values into entrepreneurship curricula that reflect lived religious experiences. Institutions offering entrepreneurship training may consider embedding concepts like barakah to foster value-based decision-making, ethical leadership, and long-term sustainability. In addition, policymakers aiming to promote inclusive and faith-sensitive economic development could draw from these findings to design culturally resonant support systems and policy interventions tailored for Muslim entrepreneurs. These insights contribute to the development of more culturally and ethically aligned frameworks for supporting Muslim entrepreneurs. Future research may expand this work by exploring how barakah is understood in other socio-religious settings, how it interacts with contemporary business challenges, or how it can be operationalized in training modules, mentoring programs, and policy design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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