It was a long, blindingly bright ride out of Surabaya and past the salt flats—mile after mile of barren, bleached plots where the sun had seared away the seawater. Eventually, however, we found ourselves climbing up from the coast into the cool green of the hills. We were on our way to Gresik, the resting place of Sunan Giri, one of the *Wali Songo* (Nine Saints) of Java who are traditionally credited with bringing Islam to that Indonesian island during the fifteenth century. I was invited to visit the gravesite of this Muslim saint by my host and teacher Professor Dr. Haji Mohammed Koesnoe. Although he carried this distinguished set of titles before his name, he preferred that I simply refer to him as “Pak,” an Indonesian term for father that expresses both respect and affection. Having suffered a severe stroke just a few years earlier, Pak Koesnoe was unable to climb the steep stone stairs leading up to the shrine and cemetery. Instead, he sat in the shade below chatting with the sellers of prayer beads and Pepsi who daily set up shop just below the main gate. He told me to go up and to take my time.

Passing through the elaborately carved stone gateway, I began climbing the steep flight of well-worn stone stairs leading up the mountainside, passing dozens of graves that rested under a lush canopy of trees on both sides of the steps. At the top of the hill was a mosque built in the classical Javanese Muslim fashion, topped with a stacked pyramid roof of red tiles rather than a dome in the Middle
Eastern style. Nearby was a smaller structure, the wooden walls of which were carved with intricately stylized floral patterns. I crouched and crawled through its small wooden door, which was flanked by a pair of *nagas*, serpent-like creatures that have guarded sacred places in Java since before the arrival of Islam to the island. Inside I found myself in a crawl space that ran around a partitioned central chamber housing the grave of Sunan Giri. There were half a dozen others already inside, most bowed in silent meditation or prayer, reciting pious formulas in Arabic and repeating litanies of the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God—a practice popular among Muslims in many parts of the world. As I entered, one of them was placing an offering of tropical flowers on a tray kept near the gate of the tomb. I sat for a while in one of the corners, taking in the cool, dark, sweet-smelling peace of the place. After coming back outside, I passed by families picnicking on straw mats and in small pavilions scattered across the upper cemetery, with parents and grandparents snacking and sipping tea as children laughed and played nearby. As I descended the last few steps and met up again with Pak Koesnoe, he turned and asked me what I thought of the place, I responded, “Beautiful.” He said, “That is also Islam.”

Pak Koesnoe’s vision of Islam has had a tremendous impact on my thinking about religion and society, and in many ways it was because