

The Local Community's Cultural Adaptation to the Influx of Religious Tourists

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cultural adaptation of local communities in religious tourism areas in Indonesia as a social process involving adjustment, the negotiation of meaning, identity and economic interests. This study aims to analyse how local communities respond to the development of religious tourism and its impact on sacred values, cultural practices and economic sustainability. This study employs a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design and an interpretative-constructivist perspective. The findings indicate that cultural adaptation proceeds in an ambivalent manner. Religious tourism can open up economic opportunities, broaden social interactions and enhance the visibility of local culture. However, such development can also lead to the commodification of sacred values, changes in ritual practices, inequitable distribution of economic benefits, and tensions between local communities, tourism operators, and managing authorities. These findings emphasise that the sustainability of religious tourism must be assessed not only in terms of growth in visitor numbers or revenue, but also in terms of protecting sacred meanings, ensuring cultural justice, and involving local communities in decision-making. The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on local communities as active agents in interpreting and negotiating the boundaries between sacred values and commercial interests. Consequently, the governance of religious tourism needs to be more participatory, equitable and sensitive to local cultural values.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of religious tourism in Indonesia demonstrates that tourist mobility not only drives economic activity but also brings about social, cultural and religious changes amongst local communities around pilgrimage sites (Uyuni et al., 2024). As the data under discussion relates more closely to the Indonesian context, the scope of this study is best focused on the Islamic Wali Songo religious tourism areas in Java, such as the pilgrimage sites of the tombs of Sunan Ampel, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Bonang, or other sites with similar characteristics. In this context, the local communities involved include not only traders, service providers, site managers, caretakers and small business owners, but also religious leaders, residents and pilgrims who collectively shape the social significance of the pilgrimage sites.

Empirically, the Wali Songo pilgrimage sites reveal a complex relationship between religious practices and economic activity (Rohwati, 2025). On the one hand, the increase in the number of pilgrims provides economic opportunities for the local community through the sale of food, souvenirs, parking services, accommodation, local transport and pilgrimage support services (Rahman & Anwar, 2022). These activities help to bolster household incomes and create informal employment opportunities for residents. On the other hand, the intensification of religious tourism can also drive changes in the meaning of sacred spaces as rituals, religious symbols and local traditions are increasingly presented in forms easily consumed by tourists (Chen et al., 2024). In this context, local communities do not merely accept these changes passively. They select, adapt and negotiate specific cultural elements so that they retain their religious value whilst remaining relevant to economic needs.

Cultural adaptation within the Wali Songo religious tourism area can be seen as a gradual, uneven process. Some members of the community embrace the economic opportunities offered by tourism as they provide direct benefits to their daily lives (Bakalo et al., 2025). However, this acceptance does not necessarily imply a loss of awareness of sacred values. In many cases, the community continues to strive to uphold moral standards and the etiquette of pilgrimage, such as maintaining modesty in dress, respecting the gravesite, restricting behaviour deemed inappropriate, and preserving the traditions of prayer, tahlil, and reverence for the Wali as the core of the religious experience. This demonstrates that cultural adaptation is not always synonymous with full-scale commercialisation. Adaptation is more accurately understood as a process of negotiation between economic sustainability and the preservation of religious meaning.

From a theoretical perspective, this process can be explained through the concepts of acculturation, cultural hybridity, and staged authenticity. Acculturation explains how local communities interact with tourists' values, behaviours, and expectations without necessarily losing their fundamental identity (Ward & Szabó, 2023)s. Cultural hybridity demonstrates that the convergence of local traditions, religious practices and the tourism industry can give rise to new social forms, such as pilgrimage service models, religious tourism packages, symbolic commodities and destination layouts that combine the functions of worship, the economy and recreation. Meanwhile, staged authenticity helps to interpret how certain cultural elements or rituals can be selectively presented to align with tourists' expectations (Gardiner et al., 2022). However, these concepts must be applied with caution, as not all cultural adaptations constitute falsification. Within local communities, such adaptations often serve as survival strategies whilst also ensuring the continued relevance of traditions amid changing social circumstances.

Previous research on tourism and cultural change has provided a vital foundation for understanding these phenomena. Liu (2025) demonstrates that tourism can encourage the

selective display of culture to meet tourists' expectations. Cheraghi et al. (2026) emphasise that religious tourism can strengthen local identity, but may also trigger tensions if tourists' behaviour does not align with community norms. Sailesh and Kiran (2023) highlight the role of local communities in safeguarding the cultural and religious integrity of destinations. In the Indonesian context, Ramadhan et al. (2025) demonstrate that pilgrimage sites, such as Wali Songo, have changed religious practices due to the commercialisation and digitalisation of tourism. Nevertheless, much of the existing research continues to focus predominantly on the socio-economic impacts of tourism, whilst the mechanisms of cultural adaptation at the community level remain poorly understood.

The research gap in this study lies in the limited number of studies that specifically explain how local communities around the Wali Songo pilgrimage site negotiate the boundaries between sacred values and economic interests. Previous studies have discussed the impact of tourism on local culture, the economy, and identity. Still, few have positioned local communities as active agents with strategies, moral considerations, and interpretative capacities in responding to change. Furthermore, previous studies have tended to discuss religious tourism within the framework of general impact, rather than as an adaptation process involving the interaction among religious traditions, commodification, destination management, and community agency (Cheraghi et al., 2026; Shinde & Olsen, 2022). Another limitation lies in the use of the term Asian, which is too broad if the data analysed do not truly encompass the comparative diversity of religious traditions and regions across Asia. Therefore, a focus on the Wali Songo pilgrimage sites in Java is a more appropriate methodological approach and is stronger empirically.

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to understand the cultural adaptation of local communities in Wali Songo religious tourism by integrating religious, economic, and cultural dimensions within a single analytical framework. This novelty does not lie in the claim that religious tourism or the Wali Songo have never been studied, as these themes have been extensively examined. A more significant contribution lies in the emphasis that local communities are not merely groups affected by religious tourism, but also active agents who interpret, select and negotiate change. This study also examines how sacred values are maintained, altered or negotiated in everyday practice as pilgrimage sites become increasingly linked to the tourism market.

This study aims to analyse the process of cultural adaptation amongst local communities in the Wali Songo religious tourism area in Java, identify the religious, economic, social, and institutional factors influencing this adaptation, and explain its implications for cultural sustainability and local identity. The significance of this study lies in its ability to explain religious tourism as a space for social negotiation rather than merely an economic sector or a spiritual activity. Theoretically, this study enriches the field of religious tourism by positioning religiosity and community agency as key elements in cultural adaptation. In practical terms, it emphasises the need for participatory, equitable and sacred-value-sensitive governance of religious tourism, ensuring that destination development not only pursues growth in visitor numbers but also preserves cultural significance and the social sustainability of local communities.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design and an interpretative-constructivist perspective. This approach was chosen as it is well-suited to understanding the dynamics of cultural adaptation amongst local communities in religious

tourism areas characterised by symbolic meaning, sacred values and socio-religious practices. The focus of the study is on the process of cultural adaptation among local communities, observed through changes in socio-religious practices, strategies for negotiating values, patterns of interaction with tourists, and forms of cultural hybridity emerging in everyday life. Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in religious tourism activities, the intensity of their interactions with tourists, and their social standing within the community. Key informants included religious leaders, traditional or community leaders, local business owners, destination managers, site custodians or guardians, and residents involved in economic activities and rituals around the religious tourism area. The snowball sampling technique was used to expand the pool of key informants by recruiting individuals recommended by initial informants deemed to possess knowledge relevant to the study's focus.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation and documentation. Interview guidelines were developed based on a review of the literature and the research focus, and then used to explore local communities' experiences, perceptions, adaptation strategies, and views on cultural changes resulting from the development of religious tourism. Participatory observation was conducted to understand social practices, economic activities, forms of interaction and patterns of use of sacred spaces in everyday life. Documentation was used to supplement field data through notes, photographs, local archives, tourism promotional materials, destination management regulations, and other relevant documents. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques and time periods to ensure that the findings were not based solely on a single type of data or a single group of informants.

The data collection process was carried out in stages: an initial exploration to identify the site's social context and characteristics, followed by intensive data collection through interviews and observation, and concluding with the verification of findings with key informants (Amadi, 2023). Data analysis utilised the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, which involves data condensation, data presentation, and the cyclical drawing and verification of conclusions (Salmona & Kaczynski, 2024). Data condensation involved selecting and grouping information according to key themes, including changes in cultural practices, the negotiation of sacred values, commodification, cultural hybridity, and the role of local communities. Data presentation took the form of thematic narratives to illustrate the contextual relationships between phenomena. Conclusions were drawn in stages by comparing findings across sites, enabling this study to yield a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural adaptation of local communities within religious tourism areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Commodification of the Sacred and the Transformation of Ritual Meaning

The growing influx of religious tourists to various sacred sites in Indonesia has driven changes in how local communities interpret religious spaces, practices, and symbols (Sumandi, 2024). Sites such as the tombs of the Wali Songo, historic mosques, Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries and local pilgrimage sites, which originally served primarily as spaces for worship and spiritual practice, are now also evolving into public visitor destinations linked to the tourism economy. This shift is particularly evident in the Wali Songo pilgrimage area in Java, the major Hindu temples in Bali, and several other religious sites that receive large numbers of tourists. In this context, local communities are not only confronted with the presence of tourists as outsiders, but also with outsiders within their communities. Still, they

must also negotiate the boundaries between sacred values, economic needs, destination management and the sustainability of traditions.

The transformation of sacred spaces into tourist destinations does not necessarily signify the loss of religious meaning. Such changes are better understood as a process of recontextualisation, whereby religious practices and symbols retain certain spiritual values whilst also acquiring new functions within the tourism economy. Within the framework of the theory of cultural commodification proposed by Appadurai and Kopytoff, objects, symbols and practices that previously belonged to the realm of ritual value can acquire exchange value when they enter the market system. However, this process does not necessarily erase their original meaning. In religious tourism, prayer, pilgrimage, ritual attire, religious souvenirs, narratives of saints' lives, and sacred spatial arrangements may take on broader meanings, understood not only as expressions of faith but also as part of the tourist experience for visitors.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through the concept of staged authenticity, in which cultural or ritual elements are selectively arranged and presented so tourists can understand them. In some religious tourism areas, practices that were previously conducted more privately or performed only by specific communities may now be presented more openly. These adaptations may take the form of organising visit schedules, simplifying explanations of rituals, using tour-guide narratives, rearranging pilgrimage spaces, or providing cultural products that are easily purchasable by tourists. This process is not merely technical. It also shapes how local communities understand the relationships among ritual, the economy, and cultural identity.

From the perspective of Goffman's social dramaturgy, these changes can be understood as a partial shift of practices from the 'backstage' to the 'frontstage' (Gordon, 2023). Practices that were previously more intimate and community-bound can now be presented to visitors with the awareness that an external audience is observing, evaluating, and consuming the experience. However, the commodification of sacredness need not be simplistically understood as a degradation of religious values. In many cases, local communities actually utilise the opportunities presented by religious tourism to preserve sites, fund the upkeep of places of worship, boost household income, and raise public awareness of local traditions.

The commodification of the sacred still carries risks. When economic considerations become too dominant, religious practices may undergo a simplification of meaning. Ritual elements that are less visually appealing or do not align with tourists' expectations may be marginalised. Conversely, elements deemed attractive may be showcased more frequently, even if they do not always represent the full spiritual significance. In such circumstances, rituals risk being understood merely as cultural attractions rather than as religious practices with historical, social, and theological depth. This risk is exacerbated when destination management is largely controlled by external actors, such as tour operators, investors or the government, without meaningful involvement from the local community.

The local community's response to the commodification of sacredness is not uniform. Some residents, particularly those who derive direct benefits from tourism activities, may view these changes as an economic opportunity. Traders, car park operators, accommodation providers, local guides and small business owners often profit from the increasing number of visitors (Gao, 2025). However, other residents may view these changes as a threat to the tranquillity of places of worship, the propriety of rituals, or the depth of religious meaning. These differing responses demonstrate that local communities cannot be viewed as homogeneous. Social position, economic access, age, proximity to religious authorities, and

involvement in the tourism sector all influence how they assess these changes. Within the framework of cultural hybridity, the adaptation of local communities gives rise to new practices that blend elements of tradition, economic needs, and the demands of modern tourism. For example, the historical narrative of a sacred site may be rephrased in more accessible language, souvenir products may incorporate local religious symbols, and pilgrimage services may be organised through a more structured system to accommodate large numbers of visitors. These new forms do not necessarily signify a loss of authentic identity. On the contrary, hybridity can be a way for communities to keep traditions alive within a changing social context. However, hybridity still needs to be examined critically, as not all changes occur on an equal footing. Some groups reap greater benefits, whilst others are merely spectators to the economic processes unfolding in their own region.

The younger generation plays a vital role in this process of transformation. They often act as a bridge between local traditions and the digital world. On the one hand, the younger generation can help promote religious sites through social media, create educational content, introduce local history, and expand tourism's reach (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025). On the other hand, the use of digital media can also accelerate the commercialisation of sacred symbols, as religious values are often packaged in shorter, more visual, and easier-to-market formats. This situation places the younger generation in an ambivalent position. They can act as agents of preservation, but may also become agents of commercialisation if digital promotion prioritises market appeal over spiritual significance.

In the long term, the commodification of sacredness may affect the social structure of local communities. Actors with access to capital, tourism networks, digital technology, or destination management authority tend to gain a stronger position. Conversely, residents without access to these resources may face marginalisation (Nazar et al., 2026). These changes can shift power dynamics within communities and influence who has the right to determine the meaning, rules and direction of development for sacred sites. Therefore, the key issue in religious tourism is not merely how to increase visitor numbers, but also how to ensure that local communities play a significant role in decision-making.

The commodification of sacredness in Indonesian religious tourism must be understood as an ambivalent process. This process can support the local economy, broaden cultural promotion, and help maintain sacred sites. However, the same process can also lead to the simplification of ritual meanings, economic inequality, and a shift in religious orientation if not managed carefully. Therefore, the governance of religious tourism must position local communities as key actors in defining the boundaries between the sacred and the commercial. Destination development must not be directed solely towards increasing visitor numbers, but must also safeguard spiritual significance, economic justice and the cultural sustainability of local communities.

The Negotiation of Cultural Identity between Resistance and Adaptation

Against the backdrop of increasing interaction between local communities and religious tourists in Indonesia, the negotiation of cultural identity emerges as a complex social process. This process not only demonstrates local communities' ability to adapt to the presence of tourists but also highlights their efforts to preserve cultural values, symbols, and practices they consider important. As a multicultural nation, Indonesia boasts a diverse array of religious tourist sites, such as the tombs of the Wali Songo in Java, the sacred temples of Bali, the Catholic pilgrimage site in Larantuka, historic Buddhist monasteries, and ancient mosques that serve as spiritual and cultural centres for the community.

The presence of tourists in these spaces creates encounters among local traditions, religious values, economic interests, and tourists' expectations. In such situations, local communities cannot be understood as passive recipients of external influences. Rather, they play an active role in selecting, interpreting and adapting the cultural elements presented to tourists. In the Wali Songo pilgrimage area, for example, local communities can maintain practices such as prayer, tahlil, visiting graves, and paying respects to the Wali figures, whilst developing economic activities such as souvenir sales, food and drink, parking services, accommodation, and pilgrimage guides. In Bali, local communities also negotiate the boundaries between sacred Hindu religious rituals and tourists' needs to observe or document cultural practices. This phenomenon demonstrates that cultural identity is not static but continually shaped through social interaction, public representation, and everyday practices.

Theoretically, the negotiation of cultural identity can be explained through a social constructivist approach, which views identity as the result of symbolic interaction. In the context of religious tourism in Indonesia, local identity is constructed through encounters between local communities, tourists, destination managers, the government, business operators and religious leaders. These interactions create a space for the negotiation of meaning, particularly when sacred values must contend with the demands of tourism services, destination promotion and economic needs. Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity is relevant for understanding how local identity is not necessarily lost through religious tourism, but can transform into new forms that blend tradition, modernity, and market interests.

The main issue in negotiating cultural identity lies in local communities' efforts to preserve cultural authenticity and integrity amid pressure to meet tourists' expectations. The adaptations made by communities are not neutral. They often select specific cultural elements to showcase, adjust the language of communication, organise spatial arrangements, or package historical narratives and rituals to make them more accessible to visitors. However, not all cultural elements are open to negotiation. Sacred values, norms of decorum, dress codes, protocols for entering places of worship, and certain prohibitions are maintained as boundaries of identity that must not be breached.

From a performativity perspective, the cultural identity of local communities in Indonesia's religious tourism areas is often presented in forms tailored to the local context. Communities may showcase hospitality, cultural symbols, traditional attire, historical narratives, or specific ritual practices as part of the tourist experience. However, such displays do not necessarily mean that the culture has lost its original meaning. In many cases, communities continue to distinguish between cultural spaces open to tourists and sacred spaces reserved solely for the community or for specific religious activities. This distinction demonstrates social awareness in managing the boundaries between the identity displayed and the identity safeguarded.

Local communities' resistance does not always take the form of open rejection of tourists or the tourism industry. Resistance can manifest in more subtle ways, such as preserving the local language in community spaces, upholding ritual practices, restricting tourist access to certain areas, rejecting changes deemed to undermine sacred values, or continuing to prioritise religious functions over tourism. James Scott's concept of 'everyday resistance' can be used to interpret these small-scale practices as forms of community agency in the face of external pressures. In the Indonesian context, this form of resistance is significant because many local communities continue to require the economic benefits of religious tourism, yet at the same time do not wish to lose control over the cultural and religious meanings they have inherited.

Power relations also shape the process of negotiating cultural identity in Indonesia's religious tourism areas. Local governments, tourism industry stakeholders, investors, site managers, religious leaders and local communities have interests that do not always align. The government tends to emphasise increasing visitor numbers and local revenue. Tourism industry stakeholders emphasise the destination's appeal and visitor satisfaction (Nian et al., 2023). Religious leaders and local communities more often emphasise the protection of sacred values, the order of rituals, and the sustainability of traditions. Tensions arise when the official narrative about local culture is geared more toward tourism promotion than toward seeking out the community's lived experiences and values. In such circumstances, local communities may face pressure to present an identity that aligns with market demands, even though such representations do not always capture the true diversity of meaning.

In everyday practice, the negotiation of identity manifests through various forms of simple interaction. Local communities adapt their language, gestures, service protocols and the way they explain traditions to tourists. At Islamic pilgrimage sites, for example, residents and site managers may provide guidance on pilgrimage etiquette, dress codes, prohibitions on disrespectful behaviour, and the maintenance of the sanctity of burial grounds. In Bali, indigenous communities may establish rules regarding the use of cloth, access restrictions to temple grounds, and protocols for participating in ceremonies. These practices demonstrate that local communities establish both unwritten and written codes of conduct to regulate interactions with tourists without sacrificing their cultural and religious identities.

The younger generation plays a vital role in negotiating cultural identity in Indonesia's religious tourism areas (Ningrum & Abdullah, 2025). They often act as a bridge between local traditions and the needs of digital promotion. Through social media, the younger generation can showcase religious sites, create content on local history, promote cultural products, and expand tourism networks. This role offers opportunities for cultural preservation in a format that is more accessible to the public. However, the use of digital media also carries the risk of oversimplifying meaning, as religious practices may be packaged as visual content that emphasises appeal rather than spiritual depth (Zhang, 2025). Consequently, the younger generation's position is ambivalent. They can act as agents of both preservation and commercialisation, depending on how they understand the boundary between cultural promotion and the protection of sacred values.

In the long term, the negotiation between resistance and adaptation may shape a new cultural identity that is neither entirely traditional nor entirely modern. This identity emerges from local communities' ability to persevere, innovate, and adapt to developments in religious tourism without completely abandoning their cultural roots. However, this process still carries risks if economic pressures, tourism promotion and the interests of external actors become too dominant. Such risks may include the simplification of rituals, the commercialisation of sacred symbols, economic inequality and the weakening of local communities' authority in determining the direction of destination development.

Negotiating cultural identity within Indonesia's religious tourism must be understood as an ongoing process. Local communities not only adapt to change but also engage in selection, restriction, reinterpretation and resistance towards elements perceived as threatening cultural and religious values. These findings underscore that the development of religious tourism in Indonesia must position local communities as key actors, rather than merely as an adjunct to the tourism industry. Destination governance must provide scope for community participation, the protection of sacred values, economic justice, and cultural representation that does not reduce the complexity of local identities.

Power and Economic Inequality in Religious Tourism

Religious tourism in Indonesia cannot be separated from the dynamics of power and economic structures involving local communities, the government, industry stakeholders, site managers and tourists (Yamin et al., 2026). Sites such as the tombs of the Wali Songo in Java, the sacred temples in Bali, the Catholic pilgrimage area in Larantuka, historic mosques, Buddhist monasteries and other local pilgrimage sites are not merely spiritual spaces, but also social and economic spaces that are constantly evolving (Muhajir et al., 2024). The flow of religious tourists to these sites demonstrates that spiritual mobility often goes hand in hand with the circulation of capital, services, cultural commodities, destination promotion, and regional development interests. In this context, religious tourism not only creates economic opportunities but also exacerbates inequalities in the distribution of benefits and decision-making power.

Within the political economy of tourism, the development of religious tourism in Indonesia is often driven by the logic of economic growth. Both local and central governments view religious tourism as a sector with the potential to boost local revenue, expand employment opportunities, strengthen a destination's image, and attract investment. Infrastructure development, digital promotion, area planning, and the provision of tourism services are typically aimed at increasing visitor numbers. However, this growth-oriented approach does not always align with the interests of local communities, who have long served as the guardians of the cultural and religious values of these sites. Local communities often derive economic benefits, but these are not always commensurate with the social, cultural and environmental burdens they bear (A et al., 2025; Rifa'i et al., 2025).

The main issue in the development of religious tourism in Indonesia is the unequal distribution of economic benefits. The profits from increased tourist visits are often more readily accessible to actors who possess capital, business networks, management licenses, and close ties to the structures of power (Karimullah et al., 2025). These actors may include investors, travel agencies, owners of large accommodation facilities, transport operators, formal business operators, or area management institutions. Meanwhile, local communities often find themselves in a more economically vulnerable position, for example, as small traders, car park attendants, informal service providers, local guides, cleaners, or seasonal workers. This situation demonstrates that the presence of tourists does not automatically result in economic justice for the communities surrounding religious sites.

Such inequalities are evident in several areas of religious tourism experiencing rapid growth. Around the tombs of the wali, for example, local communities may earn an income from the sale of souvenirs, food, accommodation services and local transport. However, if the management of the area is largely determined by external actors or certain local elites, community groups lacking access to capital and business networks may be marginalised. In Bali, the management of temples as tourist destinations also raises the need to balance sacred functions, ceremonial requirements, tourism revenue, and the interests of indigenous communities. In Larantuka, the Semana Santa tradition holds strong spiritual significance. Still, the rise in visitor numbers also demands better regulation of space, services, and security, as well as a fairer distribution of benefits. These examples demonstrate that religious tourism in Indonesia must be understood as both an economic arena and a sphere of power.

In addition to economic inequality, the marginalisation of local communities in decision-making is a significant issue. Destination development policies are often designed through a top-down approach, particularly when the government or external agencies prioritise visitor

targets, area planning, and tourism promotion. In such situations, local communities may be involved administratively, but do not always have a real say in determining the direction of management. Merely symbolic participation can result in the community's aspirations going unmet, particularly regarding the protection of sacred values, restrictions on tourist access, visitor etiquette, and the use of ritual spaces. However, local communities possess the most intimate knowledge of the history, norms, and sacred boundaries of the sites they safeguard.

Power relations within Indonesia's religious tourism sector are also evident in the way local culture is represented. The government and the tourism industry often market religious sites through narratives of uniqueness, harmony, spirituality and cultural appeal (Doan et al., 2026). Whilst these narratives are useful for promotion, they risk oversimplifying the complexity of local meanings. Rituals, symbols and traditions may be selected based on their marketability, whilst deeper dimensions, such as community ethics, customary rules, histories of conflict or sacred boundaries, are given less attention. From a critical perspective, this process can lead to cultural commodification, in which religious and cultural values are transformed into tourism products that visitors can more easily consume.

The debate regarding the direction of religious tourism development in Indonesia reveals two main trends. The first trend emphasises economic growth. This view sees religious tourism as a strategic opportunity to increase revenue, expand local businesses, improve infrastructure, and strengthen destinations' competitiveness. The second trend emphasises social and cultural justice. This perspective argues that economic growth is insufficient if local communities do not receive fair benefits, are not involved in decision-making, or lose control over the sacred significance of the sites. These two perspectives need not be seen as mutually exclusive. However, the sustainable development of religious tourism must ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of justice, sacred values, and the rights of local communities (Rembulan et al., 2025).

A critical approach views religious tourism as a space of contestation. Within this space, local communities are not entirely passive. They may negotiate, adapt to, or resist tourism policies and practices deemed incompatible with local values. This may take the form of regulating pilgrimage procedures, restricting access to certain areas, community-led management, opposition to excessive commercialisation, or efforts to preserve the role of religious and traditional leaders in site management. However, communities' ability to negotiate depends heavily on the strength of local organisations, access to information, policy support, social capital, and legal recognition of community authority.

In the long term, power and economic imbalances in religious tourism can affect the socio-cultural sustainability of local communities (Nurizka et al., 2025). If economic benefits are not distributed fairly, communities may lose support for tourism development (Murthi et al., 2025). If decision-making remains dominated by external actors, the community's sense of ownership of the site may weaken. If rituals and sacred symbols are overly driven by market logic, religious meanings may be simplified. Consequently, the key issue in Indonesia's religious tourism is not merely increasing visitor numbers, but also ensuring that the distribution of benefits, the protection of sacred values, and the participation of local communities are balanced (Yamin et al., 2026).

The development of religious tourism in Indonesia must be directed towards a more inclusive and equitable governance model. Local communities must be positioned as the primary stakeholders, not merely as support staff or objects of cultural promotion. The government needs to ensure that destination policies do not merely pursue economic growth, but also protect sacred spaces, strengthen local enterprises, guarantee community

participation, and prevent the dominance of large capital-backed actors. Sustainable religious tourism can only be built if economic benefits, cultural authority and spiritual significance are managed fairly by all the actors involved.

CONCLUSION

The cultural adaptation of local communities in Indonesia to the growth of religious tourism can be understood as a process of negotiation involving economic interests, sacred values, cultural identity and power relations. Local communities in Indonesia do not merely adapt passively to the influx of tourists, but also actively select, preserve, and reinterpret cultural practices in line with changing social contexts. This study demonstrates that religious tourism can provide economic benefits and enhance cultural visibility. Still, it can also drive the commodification of sacredness, the inequitable distribution of benefits, and shifts in the meaning of rituals. The contribution of this study lies in its effort to link perspectives on religiosity, political economy, and cultural hybridity to explain local agency alongside the structural pressures influencing it. In practical terms, these findings underscore the need for participatory, equitable and sacred-value-sensitive governance of religious tourism. However, as this study is based on a qualitative, context-specific approach, further research should be conducted using a comparative, cross-national design or a mixed-methods approach to enable a broader and deeper understanding of the dynamics of cultural adaptation in religious tourism.

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