

Tourism as Devotion: Understanding Religious and Spiritual Travel Experiences in Indonesia

Sumandi

Master in international management and Marketing, University of Angers, France

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which religious and spiritual practices shape tourism experiences in Indonesia, focusing on how devotion, ritual, and meaning making intersect with travel. Religious tourism, encompassing pilgrimages, visits to sacred sites, and ritual participation, has become a growing segment of Indonesia's tourism landscape, reflecting the country's diverse spiritual traditions. Using a qualitative design, fieldwork was conducted at Islamic pilgrimage destinations in Lombok and Hindu temple sites in Bali, combining semi-structured interviews with pilgrims, local guides, and community leaders, alongside participant observation of ritual practices. Thematic analysis revealed three major dimensions of religious and spiritual tourism. First, participants described motivations rooted not in leisure but in faith obligations, spiritual renewal, and the search for blessings. Second, the experience of ritual participation provided a sense of communal belonging and emotional uplift, demonstrating how tourism can reinforce religious identity. Third, tensions emerged between devotion and commercialization, as some visitors expressed discomfort with the commodification of sacred spaces through ticketing, souvenirs, or staged performances. The findings suggest that religious tourism in Indonesia is not only a cultural and economic practice but also a deeply embodied form of devotion, where faith and travel converge to produce transformative experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious and spiritual tourism has emerged as one of the fastest growing sectors of global tourism, reflecting travelers' desires for meaning-making, spiritual renewal, and encounters with the sacred (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Yasin et al., 2025). Unlike leisure-driven tourism, religious tourism is often motivated by devotion, pilgrimage obligations, and participation in rituals that connect individuals to a larger faith community (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). These forms of travel blur the boundaries between religion and tourism, positioning sacred sites simultaneously as spaces of worship and destinations of economic and cultural significance.

In Indonesia, religious and spiritual tourism is particularly prominent due to the country's pluralistic religious landscape. Muslim pilgrimages to sites such as the tombs of wali songo (nine saints) in Java, as well as smaller-scale Islamic destinations in Lombok, are central to local religious practice (Howell, 2012). Similarly, Hindu rituals and temple visits in Bali form a major component of both domestic and international tourism, intertwining devotion with cultural performance (T.-L. Wang & Azizurrohman, 2025). These practices highlight how spiritual journeys serve not only religious obligations but also cultural identity and tourism development.

Scholars have emphasized that religious tourism must be understood as both spiritual and socio-economic. On one hand, pilgrims and religious travellers seek sacred encounters, healing, or blessings (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). On the other hand, destinations often commercialize religious sites, producing tensions between devotion and commodification (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). In Indonesia, these tensions are evident in ticketed access to temples, the sale of souvenirs in pilgrimage sites, and the staging of rituals for tourist consumption. Such practices raise questions about authenticity, sacredness, and the role of tourism in shaping religious experiences.

While research on Indonesian tourism has addressed cultural performances and heritage, fewer studies have examined the lived experiences of religious travellers and the meaning-making processes that define their journeys. This study addresses this gap by exploring how devotion, ritual, and faith identity shape tourism experiences in Indonesia. Focusing on Muslim pilgrimage in Lombok and Hindu temple tourism in Bali, the study

employs qualitative methods to investigate the motivations, practices, and tensions that characterize religious travel. In doing so, it contributes to debates on the intersections of tourism, religion, and spirituality, offering insights into how sacred journeys in Indonesia are simultaneously acts of devotion, community belonging, and cultural-economic practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious and spiritual tourism has been widely recognized as a distinctive form of travel in which motivations extend beyond leisure toward devotion, ritual practice, and the search for transcendence (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Pilgrimage, the most established form of religious tourism, has been examined both as a spiritual journey and as a socio-cultural practice embedded in networks of mobility, economy, and meaning-making (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Scholars increasingly view pilgrimage and religious tourism as overlapping categories rather than separate domains, with sacred journeys often encompassing both worship and consumption (Collins-Kreiner, 2020).

A key theme in the literature is the tension between devotion and commercialization. On one hand, sacred sites are experienced as spaces of worship, healing, and identity reinforcement. On the other hand, their incorporation into tourism systems introduces commodification through ticketing, souvenirs, and performances staged for visitors (Hardi et al., 2023; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). These processes raise questions of authenticity and sacredness, as visitors navigate between religious commitment and tourism spectacle (Cohen, 1992; Duc & Mujahida, 2024).

In Southeast Asia, religious tourism has been shown to serve not only individual spirituality but also collective cultural identity and economic development (Ayu Lestari et al., 2025; Shinde, 2010). In Indonesia, Islamic pilgrimages to the tombs of the wali songo (nine saints) represent important practices of devotional travel and heritage preservation (Howell, 2012), while Hindu temple ceremonies in Bali exemplify the fusion of ritual practice with tourism performance (Hitchcock & Putra, 2007; Picard, 1996). These cases highlight how religious tourism is embedded in pluralistic traditions, where devotion, community cohesion, and economic gain intersect.

Despite growing recognition of its significance, research on Indonesian religious tourism often emphasizes economic impacts or cultural commodification while underexploring the lived experiences of pilgrims and tourists themselves. There is a need to examine how motivations, practices, and tensions are articulated by religious travellers and communities, and how authenticity and sacredness are negotiated within tourism contexts. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Islamic pilgrimage in Lombok and Hindu temple tourism in Bali, situating religious travel in Indonesia as a practice of devotion that simultaneously reflects cultural, social, and economic dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how religious devotion and spiritual practices shape tourism experiences in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of motivations, meanings, and lived experiences, which are central to understanding religious and spiritual tourism. The research was conducted in two sites that represent Indonesia's religious pluralism and its integration with tourism: Islamic pilgrimage destinations in Lombok, particularly the tombs of revered saints, and Hindu temple complexes in Bali where rituals are central to both worship and tourism. These sites were selected purposively because of their prominence in attracting both domestic and international visitors, and because they exemplify the coexistence of devotion, cultural identity, and commercialized tourism.

Participants included religious travellers, local guides, ritual leaders, and community members involved in managing tourism activities at sacred sites. In Lombok, interviews were conducted with Muslim pilgrims, caretakers of shrines, and community organizers, while in Bali participants included Hindu priests, temple guides, artisans, and tourists attending rituals. A total of thirty-four participants were included in the study, comprising eighteen pilgrims and tourists, nine local leaders or ritual specialists, and seven tourism workers. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure diversity across gender, age, and role in tourism, while snowball referrals helped identify participants with deep involvement in religious practices.

Data collection took place over a four-month period in 2024, combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and ninety minutes, focusing on participants' motivations for travel, their perceptions of authenticity and sacredness, and their reflections on the relationship between devotion and tourism. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia or English, depending on participant preference, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Participant observation involved attending ritual ceremonies, processions, and temple visits, during which detailed field notes were kept on interactions, behaviours, and spatial practices. Observational data provided

valuable context for understanding how religious rituals were performed and experienced by different groups. Supplementary materials, such as brochures, posters, and temple guidelines, were also collected to triangulate the data.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Initial coding was inductive, identifying recurring motifs in how participants spoke about devotion, ritual, and commercialization. Codes were then refined into broader themes such as motivations for spiritual travel, communal belonging, and tensions between sacredness and commodification. NVivo software was used to manage the data and facilitate systematic comparison between sites. Themes were developed iteratively, with the researcher constantly comparing findings across different participant groups and cultural contexts.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies. Credibility was ensured by member checking with selected participants who were invited to review preliminary interpretations. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the sites and contexts. Dependability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail of coding and analytic decisions, while confirmability was reinforced through reflexive journaling in which the researcher acknowledged personal assumptions and positionality.

Informed consent was sought from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting. Given the sacred nature of the research sites, particular sensitivity was exercised to ensure respect for religious practices. Observations during rituals were conducted discreetly, and no photography was taken without explicit permission from ritual leaders and participants.

RESULTS

Motivations for Religious and Spiritual Travel

Participants consistently emphasized that their journeys to Lombok's pilgrimage sites and Bali's temple complexes were motivated less by leisure than by devotion, spiritual obligation, and the pursuit of blessings. Many Muslim pilgrims in Lombok framed their travel as part of religious duty, linking their visits to the graves of saints with broader commitments to Islamic practice. One respondent explained, "I come here because it is our tradition to honor the saints. By visiting, we hope for blessings for our family and forgiveness for our sins." Such narratives highlight pilgrimage as an act of faith and moral responsibility rather than tourism in a conventional sense.

Beyond obligation, participants described motivations of healing and spiritual renewal. Several visitors to Lombok associated pilgrimage with physical or psychological relief. A woman in her fifties recounted, "I was ill for many months, and my family brought me here to pray. After visiting, I felt lighter in my heart." Similarly, in Bali, Hindu participants linked temple visits to ritual purification, noting that ceremonies offered emotional and spiritual cleansing. A Balinese participant remarked, "Coming to the temple is not just for the gods but for ourselves, to make our spirit calm and balanced."

For some international visitors, motivations combined spiritual curiosity with cultural interest. A European traveler attending a Balinese temple ceremony explained, "I do not belong to this religion, but I wanted to feel the energy of the ritual. It is not only tourism; it is an experience of something sacred." This suggests that even among non-adherents, religious tourism can provide transcendent experiences that go beyond cultural observation.

Taken together, the findings reveal that motivations for religious tourism in Indonesia are multifaceted, encompassing obligations of faith, the search for blessings, healing, and spiritual renewal, as well as experiential curiosity. These motivations distinguish religious tourism from purely recreational travel and situate it within broader practices of devotion, identity, and meaning making.

Ritual Participation and Communal Belonging

Participation in ritual practices was described by participants as the most meaningful element of their religious journeys, reinforcing both individual devotion and a sense of belonging to a wider faith community. In Lombok, Muslim pilgrims emphasized collective prayers at the shrines of saints, with many describing the atmosphere as spiritually uplifting. A middle-aged pilgrim explained, "When we pray together at the tomb, I feel stronger in my faith. Alone I pray every day, but here the voices are united, and it makes my heart feel full." Such accounts highlight how religious tourism fosters communal solidarity, transforming travel into an act of shared devotion.

In Bali, Hindu participants similarly stressed the importance of ritual ceremonies in temple complexes. Offerings, processions, and dances were not only performances but sacred practices that reaffirmed religious identity. A Balinese woman who regularly participated in temple rituals explained, "When we carry offerings and join the prayers, we are not doing it for tourists. We are doing it for the gods and for our ancestors. The presence

of many people makes the ceremony stronger.” Her statement illustrates how ritual participation reaffirms cultural and spiritual belonging even when tourism is interwoven with sacred practice.

Tourists, both domestic and international, also expressed feelings of inclusion when joining rituals. A domestic visitor from Surabaya described joining a temple procession: “Although I am not Balinese, when I walked with them carrying offerings, I felt part of something bigger, like we shared the same respect.” An international tourist echoed this sentiment, noting, “Even if I do not fully understand the ritual, the emotion of being among so many devoted people moved me deeply.”

These experiences suggest that ritual participation transforms religious tourism into more than a site visit; it becomes a lived, embodied practice that binds individuals into a collective. Through prayers, offerings, and processions, religious travel provides participants with a sense of spiritual connection, cultural identity, and communal belonging that transcends individual motivations.

Emotional and Transformative Dimensions of Travel

Beyond fulfilling obligations of faith or participating in rituals, many participants described their journeys as profoundly emotional and, in some cases, life-transforming experiences. Pilgrims in Lombok often spoke of a sense of relief, joy, and renewed strength following visits to sacred shrines. A woman in her sixties reflected, “When I prayed at the tomb, I cried without knowing why. It was as if a burden lifted from my heart. I went home with a new peace.” This highlights how religious travel provided not only spiritual benefits but also psychological healing and resilience in the face of life challenges.

In Bali, Hindu participants emphasized the transformative power of ritual ceremonies, which they described as renewing balance between the individual, community, and divine. A young man participating in a temple festival explained, “After joining the ceremony, I feel purified. It is like starting life again with a clean spirit.” These accounts illustrate how spiritual tourism was experienced not simply as cultural performance but as renewal of self and reaffirmation of identity.

International visitors also expressed transformative experiences, often couched in terms of personal growth and meaning making. A European traveller noted, “Watching the prayers and hearing the chanting, I felt something I cannot explain like touching another dimension of life. It changed how I think about spirituality, even though I am not religious myself.” Such accounts reveal that religious tourism can generate existential reflections, producing impacts that extend beyond the immediate journey.

The emotional intensity described by both pilgrims and tourists suggests that religious tourism in Indonesia functions as a form of transformative travel, aligning with literature on pilgrimage as a catalyst for personal change. For many, these journeys were not only about reaching sacred destinations but about returning home with renewed emotional strength, spiritual clarity, and a redefined sense of self.

Tensions between Sacredness and Commodification

While participants emphasized devotion, ritual, and transformation as central to their religious journeys, many also expressed unease with the commercialization of sacred sites. In both Lombok and Bali, the presence of ticketing systems, souvenir stalls, and staged performances was perceived as intruding upon the sanctity of religious spaces. A Muslim pilgrim in Lombok commented, “We come here to pray, but before we can enter, we must pay. It feels like the blessing has a price, and that does not sit well with me.” This sentiment highlights the tension between spiritual obligation and economic management of pilgrimage sites.

In Bali, similar concerns were raised about the integration of rituals into tourist performances. Several Balinese participants described discomfort when sacred dances, originally part of temple ceremonies, were shortened or scheduled for tourist convenience. A temple priest noted, “The dance is prayer, but now it is also entertainment. We cannot refuse the tourists, but sometimes it feels like the gods are not the main audience anymore.” His words illustrate the ambivalence of balancing cultural pride, economic necessity, and religious devotion.

Tourists also recognized these tensions, though their interpretations varied. Some domestic visitors expressed disappointment at the presence of commercial vendors near shrines, describing it as distracting from spiritual reflection. An international traveller in Bali remarked, “I felt torn between being moved by the ceremony and being aware that it was arranged partly for us as tourists. It makes you question what is authentic.” These reflections demonstrate how commercialization can complicate spiritual engagement, introducing ambivalence into the religious tourism experience.

At the same time, some participants acknowledged the necessity of commercialization for site maintenance and community livelihood. A Balinese artisan explained, “Selling souvenirs or tickets helps us take care of the

temple and sustain our families. Without this, it is difficult to preserve the rituals.” This indicates that commercialization, while contested, is also seen as a pragmatic adaptation to tourism economies.

Overall, the findings reveal that tensions between sacredness and commodification are central to religious tourism in Indonesia. These tensions are not absolute oppositions but negotiated realities, as communities seek to preserve spiritual authenticity while accommodating the economic demands of tourism.

Negotiating Sacredness in Tourism Contexts

Despite the tensions between devotion and commercialization, participants described various strategies through which sacredness was preserved and negotiated within tourism contexts. In Lombok, pilgrimage site caretakers emphasized practices to maintain the spiritual atmosphere even as visitor numbers increased. One caretaker explained, “We allow vendors outside the shrine, but once people enter the sacred area, it must remain quiet and pure. That is our rule to protect the place of prayer.” This highlights how local actors actively delineate boundaries between commerce and sacred practice.

In Bali, priests and temple leaders similarly balanced ritual authenticity with the realities of tourism. Several described the use of “dual ceremonies,” where a shortened version was performed for tourists while the full ritual was reserved for the community. A Hindu priest reflected, “We show a part of the ritual to visitors so they can appreciate our culture, but the true ceremony is done with our people, for the gods. In this way, we do not lose our tradition.” Such strategies demonstrate how sacredness is managed through adaptation, ensuring continuity of devotion while accommodating external demands.

Tourists also played a role in negotiating sacredness. Some expressed willingness to follow local rules, dress codes, or restrictions on photography. An international traveller noted, “I appreciated when the guide told us we must wear a sarong and stay silent during the prayers. It made the experience feel more respectful and meaningful.” These moments of compliance reflect how visitors can be integrated into sacred spaces in ways that uphold local values.

At the community level, leaders described tourism not only as a potential threat but also as a resource for safeguarding heritage. A Balinese cultural organizer explained, “Tourism provides funds to maintain the temple and rituals. If we rely only on the community, it is difficult. So, we use tourism, but carefully, with limits.” This perspective suggests that tourism can be reframed as a supportive mechanism when managed under local control.

Overall, the findings reveal that sacredness in Indonesian religious tourism is not passively eroded by commercialization but actively negotiated through community rules, ritual adaptations, and visitor education. These negotiations illustrate the agency of local actors in maintaining spiritual integrity while engaging with tourism, demonstrating that religious tourism is a dynamic process where devotion and tourism intersect in constantly evolving ways.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex ways in which devotion, ritual, and tourism intersect in Indonesia, demonstrating that religious tourism is both a spiritual practice and a socio-economic activity. Across Lombok and Bali, participants framed their journeys not primarily as leisure but as acts of faith, obligations of devotion, and opportunities for spiritual renewal. These motivations align with research on pilgrimage that emphasizes its sacred orientation and transformative potential (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). However, the results also reveal that religious tourism extends beyond obligation, encompassing healing, emotional uplift, and existential meaning-making, suggesting that sacred travel is deeply personal while also embedded in communal identity.

Ritual participation emerged as central to the religious tourism experience, reinforcing the collective dimensions of spirituality. Shared prayers, offerings, and processions provided a sense of belonging that resonates understanding of pilgrimage as a space where community and sacred power are co-constructed. In Bali, ceremonies demonstrated how devotion is simultaneously spiritual and performative, Picard (1996) argument that religious rituals in Bali are inseparable from cultural display. Importantly, both pilgrims and tourists described ritual participation as emotionally powerful, reflecting Wang (1999) concept of existential authenticity, where meaning arises from personal connection rather than objective authenticity.

At the same time, tensions between sacredness and commodification were evident, echoing longstanding debates in the literature (Afifah et al., 2025; Cohen, 1992; Hardi et al., 2023). Ticketing, souvenir stalls, and staged rituals were perceived by some participants as undermining the purity of devotion. Yet, communities also recognized commercialization as necessary for sustaining sites and funding rituals. These findings confirm Olsen & Timothy (2006) observation that sacred sites are simultaneously religious and economic spaces, and extend this by showing how Indonesian communities actively negotiate these dual functions.

The study also illustrates that sacredness is not simply eroded by tourism but actively preserved through negotiation. Local leaders, priests, and caretakers implemented strategies such as spatial zoning, dual ceremonies, and visitor education to maintain ritual authenticity while engaging with tourism. These practices highlight the agency of communities in shaping the interaction between devotion and tourism, resisting simplistic narratives of cultural loss. Instead, sacredness emerges as a dynamic process, continually redefined through adaptation and negotiation.

Taken together, these findings contribute to debates on religious tourism by demonstrating that in Indonesia, religious travel is best understood as devotion practiced within tourism contexts, rather than tourism with religious elements added on. The results reinforce the need for nuanced frameworks that account for the interplay of faith, identity, and economy. They also suggest that religious tourism should be analysed not only as a site of tension but also as a domain of negotiation, where local actors preserve sacredness while engaging pragmatically with tourism markets.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of religious and spiritual travellers in Indonesia, focusing on Islamic pilgrimage sites in Lombok and Hindu temple tourism in Bali. The findings reveal that religious tourism is experienced foremost as an act of devotion, motivated by obligations of faith, the search for blessings, healing, and spiritual renewal. Ritual participation was described as the most meaningful dimension of travel, fostering communal belonging and reinforcing cultural identity. Many participants also articulated emotional and transformative outcomes, including psychological relief and a renewed sense of purpose. At the same time, tensions were evident between sacredness and commercialization, as visitors expressed discomfort with ticketing systems, souvenir sales, and rituals adapted for tourists. Nevertheless, communities were not passive in the face of commercialization; instead, they actively negotiated sacredness by setting spatial boundaries, maintaining “dual ceremonies,” and educating visitors on respectful behaviour. These strategies highlight the agency of local actors in preserving devotion while engaging with the tourism economy.

The study has limitations, including its focus on two sites that may not represent the full diversity of Indonesian religious tourism contexts. In addition, the qualitative design provides depth of insight but limits generalizability. Future research could adopt comparative and mixed method approaches across multiple regions to capture broader patterns of religious tourism in Indonesia.

Recommendations emerging from the study include designing policies that respect the primacy of devotion in religious tourism, ensuring that commercialization supports rather than undermines sacred practices, and strengthening visitor education to foster respectful engagement with sacred spaces.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have nothing to disclose.

Data Availability

The data is available upon reasonable request.

Author Contribution

The authors of this study contributed equally.

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