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Enhancing Pilgrim Experiences: Community-Based Religious Tourism and Spiritual Neuroscience in Tulungagung Indonesia

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Abstract

This research investigates the potential of community-based tourism (CBT) in enhancing the spiritual experiences of pilgrims in Tulungagung Regency. By applying a neuroscience perspective, the study aims to develop a management model for religious tourism that prioritizes spiritual well-being over material gain. Through ethnographic research, including observations, interviews, and document analysis, the study found that CBT can effectively improve both pilgrims' spiritual experiences and local communities' economic conditions. Key strategies for successful implementation include active community involvement, unique site management, and support from local stakeholders. The research concludes that CBT offers a promising approach to religious tourism development that can be replicated in other regions.

Keywords: Religious tourism, community-based tourism, pilgrim neuroscience spiritual experience

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

Religious tourism is a spiritual journey involving visits to sacred places, tombs of revered figures or leaders, and burial sites of religious figures often considered extraordinary and legendary (Rashid, 2018) ^[12]. It is a specialized form of tourism, where visitors have motivations distinct from conventional tourists. Their goals frequently relate to myths, legends, historical figures, or places held sacred by many. Visitors to religious sites usually seek to learn about the history and architecture of the buildings. However, most tourists prioritize seeking peace, offering prayers, and seeking blessings, hoping their wishes will be granted more quickly (Kim *et al.*, 2019) ^[7].

In this context, religious tourism should be better managed by involving local communities in planning, organizing, implementing programs, and evaluating management. This aligns with the concept of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), where local communities are directly involved in management, fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring the sustainability of the tourist site. This can benefit the community economically and enhance the spiritual experiences of pilgrims. Effective community involvement can lead to improved maintenance of religious sites and a deeper understanding and respect for local traditions and customs.

When religious tourism, such as visiting the tombs of religious figures, is well-managed, it provides comfort to

pilgrims in performing rituals like the remembrance of God, prayers, and meditation. This can enhance the spiritual experiences of pilgrims (Rinschede, 1992) ^[13]. Such enhancements can be attributed to a serene and conducive environment for spiritual activities, which is often achieved through meticulous management and community involvement. The sense of tranquility and sanctity preserved in these sites greatly influences the pilgrims' spiritual journey. The neuroscience of spirituality attempts to provide a scientific explanation for intangible spiritual experiences. For example, the case of Bapak Sukirman, a resident of Macanbang village, who claimed to have encountered a mystical figure during meditation, can be explained by brain functions responding to internal and external stimuli. Neuroscientific studies suggest that certain brain activities are associated with spiritual experiences, which can be triggered by the serene environment and rituals performed at religious sites. Understanding this can help in creating environments that enhance spiritual experiences.

Tulungagung, a regency in East Java, has significant potential for religious tourism, with sites like the tomb of Sheikh Basarudin and the tomb of Sunan Kuning. This research aims to explore the extent to which the community is involved in managing these religious tourism sites, aligning with the principles of Community-Based Tourism. The goal is to understand how community involvement can enhance the preservation of these sites, improve visitor experiences, and support the development of religious tourism. By studying the

local community's role, we can identify effective strategies for sustainable tourism management.

Involving the local community in religious tourism management not only preserves the sites but also fosters economic development. Local artisans, guides, and vendors can benefit from the influx of tourists, creating a symbiotic relationship between the tourists and the community. This economic boost can lead to improved infrastructure and services, further enhancing the tourism experience. Moreover, community involvement ensures that tourism development does not disrupt local traditions and lifestyles but rather integrates them into the tourist experience.

Community-Based Tourism also emphasizes the importance of cultural and environmental sustainability. By involving locals, religious tourism can be developed in a way that respects and preserves cultural heritage and natural resources. This approach ensures that tourism does not lead to the degradation of sacred sites or the local environment. Instead, it promotes the conservation of cultural practices and the natural beauty that often surrounds these sites, making them more attractive to visitors seeking authentic and meaningful experiences.

2. Literature Review

This research is inspired by the book "Wali Pitu and Muslim Pilgrimage in Bali, Indonesia" by Dr. Syaifudin Zuhri, published by Leiden University Press in March 2022. This ethnographic work examines the emergence of the Wali Pitu (seven saints) tradition and Muslim pilgrimage in Bali. Dr. Zuhri explores the trans-local connectivity between Java and Bali, the Islam-Hindu relationship, interactions among Muslim groups, and issues of authority and authenticity in saint veneration traditions. The book offers a new perspective on Bali, portraying the island as a site of cultural movement between Islam and Hinduism, characterized by the complexity of local figures and the unique identity of 'Balinese Muslims.' The study also highlights the relationship between religion and tourism, as well as between worship and the economy. The Wali Pitu tradition has helped transcend spatial and cultural boundaries. The Wali Pitu pilgrimage has become an attractive destination for tourists seeking both pilgrimage and vacation experiences. This tradition also has the potential to be developed as a Halal tourism destination in Indonesia. Travel agencies now offer affordable pilgrimage tour packages, which not only serve as religious tourism but also help boost the Balinese economy, which had been affected by the pandemic.

Further inspiration comes from the book "Bandits Saints of Java" by George Quinn, which depicts the author's exploration of the pilgrimage tradition in Java, filled with fantastic and contradictory stories about the saints. Quinn, an expert in Javanese literature and culture, began his interest in the 1970s. The book highlights the increasingly popular phenomenon of pilgrimage in Java, with saints often depicted as superheroes. Stories like those of Mbah Jugo at Mount Kawi and Ki Ageng Balak showcase the richness and diversity of local narratives, despite often being contradictory. This descriptive qualitative research employs various data collection techniques and emphasizes the importance of respect towards informants. Quinn asserts that the pilgrimage phenomenon has the potential to be developed into religious tourism that benefits the surrounding communities.

Furthermore, Hidayanti and Fitrianto (2022)^[5] observed the active participation of communities and economic improvement from tourism through the concept of

community-based tourism (CBT). The development of CBT involves local communities in the decision-making processes of religious tourism management, aiming to create sustainable tourism that benefits the government, communities, and private sectors. The role of local governments is crucial in enhancing community participation. This research utilizes observation, interviews, and documentation methods to study the role of communities in Kutorejo Village and business actors in the Sunan Bonang religious tourism area. The application of the CBT concept has proven to provide job opportunities and boost the local economy, as well as create multiplier effects on other sectors such as agriculture, trade, and services.

A study by Bandjar investigates the successful management of tourist attractions based on Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Eastern Indonesia, particularly Maluku Province, which has beautiful natural tourism potential but minimal development. This descriptive research employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches, using five analyses: location, attraction, perception and preference, CBT-based management, and success factors of CBT management. The results identify six out of ten factors influencing the successful management of Ngurbloat Beach tourism based on CBT (Bandjar *et al.*, 2022)^[1].

Research by Mansoor Moaddel in the article "The Study of Islamic Culture and Politics: An Overview and Assessment" (2002) discusses the broad role of Islam in contemporary politics compared to Confucianism, Hinduism, and Christianity. This research examines various views on the relationship between Islam and political modernity. Some traditions argue for a conflict between the two, while others see the potential of Islam in supporting political modernization and nation-building. This study also identifies four main traditions in the study of Islamic politics: the conflict between Islam and modernity, the role of Islam in modernization, macro social process analysis, and micro process objectification of religion. Additionally, the role of rentier economies is deemed important in the rise of Islamic politics.

An article by Kokkhangplu (2023)^[8] titled "Resident's Quality of Life through Community-Based Tourism" in the journal *Anatolia* discusses the impact of community-based tourism (CBT) on residents' quality of life (QOL). This research explores various aspects of CBT that affect QOL, including attitudes, physical, environmental, and social relationships. Through factor analysis, this study finds that factors such as the economy, public administration, technology, external actors, and social disparities influence residents' QOL. The results show that good management and implementation of CBT can reduce negative impacts and dynamically improve residents' quality of life (Kokkhangplu *et al.*, 2023)^[8].

3. Research Method

This research employs an ethnographic approach, a subset of qualitative research, aiming to obtain a detailed description and in-depth analysis of culture through intensive fieldwork. The goal is to provide a holistic portrayal of the research subject, emphasizing the everyday experiences of individuals who are observed and interviewed. Ethnography, which literally means "writing about a group of people," focuses on understanding the intricacies of cultural practices and social interactions within a community.

According to Creswell, ethnographic design is a qualitative research procedure aimed at describing and analyzing various

cultural groups, interpreting patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language used by a community over time (Hadi *et al.*, 2021) [3]. The purpose of ethnography is to comprehensively outline culture, encompassing material aspects such as cultural artifacts and abstract aspects such as experiences, beliefs, norms, and value systems. Ethnographic researchers typically spend extended periods conducting interviews, observations, and collecting documents to understand a group's culture (Witdiawati *et al.*, 2018) [15].

The research was conducted at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery in Tulungagung Regency. The choice of this site was influenced by its cultural and religious significance, making it an ideal location for studying the intersection of community practices and religious tourism. The research subjects include the cemetery's managers and the pilgrims visiting the site. By focusing on these groups, the study aims to capture the perspectives and experiences of both those who manage the site and those who visit it for spiritual purposes.

The sampling method used in this research is purposive and snowball sampling. This method involves selecting individuals based on their relevance to the research questions and gradually expanding the sample size through referrals from initial subjects. This approach ensures that the sample includes key informants with rich, relevant information. The process continues until a saturation point is reached, meaning no new significant information is being obtained from additional subjects.

In summary, this ethnographic study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery. By engaging with both the managers and pilgrims, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced interactions and shared beliefs that define this religious tourism site. Through meticulous data collection and analysis, the study aspires to contribute valuable insights into the role of community involvement in managing and preserving cultural and religious heritage.

4. Result and Discussion

A. Result

i). CBT-Based Religious Tourism Management in Tulungagung Regency

Religious tourism at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery in Tulungagung holds significant potential for attracting both local and external pilgrims. To optimize this potential, efficient and effective management is essential, particularly through the involvement of local communities in the development and administration of tourism. The unique aspects of the Sunan Kuning Cemetery include its rapid mosque construction and the historical role of Sunan Kuning in the propagation of Islam. These narratives not only enhance spiritual appeal but also provide valuable historical and cultural significance for pilgrims.

Key figures such as Mr. Asrori and Mr. Abdul Ghani, who manage each site, play crucial roles in organizing and directing site management. They mobilize financial and human resources to support tourism development. The involvement of local communities is vital in religious tourism management. Locals participate in various religious activities that can serve as tourist attractions, such as *Haul*, *Sholawatan*, and *Nyadran*. Their participation also helps preserve cultural heritage and improve local well-being. With the support of these key figures, site management becomes more focused and sustainable.

Engaging pilgrims in tourism development through feedback, suggestions, and participation in local activities can enrich the

tourism experience and support facility improvements. Initiatives such as expanding parking areas through endowment programs demonstrate how pilgrim involvement can aid in infrastructure development. Overall, the success of religious tourism at these sites relies on the active involvement of all parties—local communities, key figures, and pilgrims—in creating an authentic and sustainable experience. This active engagement fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility in preserving and developing the sites.

Village Fund facilitation for tourism is also adequately managed, with funds allocated to support the needs of tourism operators based on existing community activities. The Macanbang Village Government provides land to the site custodians, with the proceeds distributed among them. Additionally, the Department of Culture and Tourism provides monthly allowances. This financial support aims to enhance village tourism development and motivate tourism operators. Such financial backing is crucial for maintaining the sustainability of tourism programs and ensuring that all involved parties receive fair economic benefits.

Coordination with government bodies, local communities, business operators, non-governmental organizations, and tourists is essential for managing religious tourism. Stakeholders contribute to policy-making, infrastructure development, training, and promotion, as well as local community involvement in management and cultural preservation. All findings indicate that the engagement of various parties, financial support, and effective coordination are key to the development and sustainability of community-based religious tourism. Through close collaboration, religious sites can continue to grow and provide spiritual, cultural, and economic benefits to all stakeholders involved.

ii). Pilgrims' Rituals at the Tomb of Sunan Kuning

Pilgrims visiting the Sunan Kuning Cemetery often engage in various spiritual rituals. These activities include prayers, meditation, and other religious practices with spiritual, emotional, or physical objectives. Such rituals are not merely forms of homage to the sacred figures interred there but also serve as vital means for pilgrims to seek inner peace, communicate with the divine, and strengthen their spiritual connection with God. Each ritual holds profound meaning that aids pilgrims in their spiritual journey.

Pilgrims spend time in the Serambi Masjid Tiban area of the Sunan Kuning Cemetery to pray or meditate. They may sit in silence, recite prayers, or reflect to find inner peace and connect with the divine. These practices are often performed individually and can include reading *Yasin* and *Tahlil*, lying flat, or performing ablution. The serene and sacred atmosphere around the cemetery provides a conducive environment for pilgrims to contemplate their lives and draw closer to God.

Meditation and recitation help pilgrims focus and calm their minds, creating a soothing rhythm and reinforcing their spiritual bond with God. Neuroscience research indicates that such practices can enhance attention and tranquility while reducing stress and anxiety. These benefits are crucial for pilgrims seeking relief from the pressures of daily life. Through meditation and dhikr (remembrance of God), they can achieve a more peaceful and balanced mental state, which, in turn, strengthens their faith and improves their quality of life.

Pilgrims often visit in groups to engage in collective prayers, light incense or offer flowers at the gravesite. These practices reinforce spiritual and social connections, providing

emotional and psychological support. Congregational prayers help pilgrims cope with life's challenges, improve mental well-being, and enrich their spiritual experience. The communal nature of these rituals fosters a sense of brotherhood and solidarity among pilgrims, strengthening the community and creating important social support networks.

Some pilgrims participate in healing rituals using holy water, prayers, or traditional medicine. The old well within the Sunan Kuning Cemetery complex is believed to have healing properties, and pilgrims often collect water from this well for ablution or to take home. These rituals provide symbolic and psychological healing effects, helping pilgrims feel blessed and ready to start a new chapter in their lives. Research shows that belief in healing and spiritual experiences can trigger positive bodily responses, enhance faith, and provide inner peace. These rituals also help preserve local traditions and culture and strengthen social bonds among pilgrims.

In conclusion, the rituals at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery play a significant role in enriching spiritual experiences, preserving cultural traditions, and strengthening social bonds among pilgrims. Religious tourism managers should support and facilitate these practices to enhance the appeal and sustainability of their destinations. By supporting the local community and involving them in the management of sacred sites, managers can ensure that these traditions and spiritual practices continue to thrive and provide lasting benefits for future generations.

iii). Neuroscience Spiritual Experience of Pilgrims in Tulungagung Regency

The Community-Based Tourism (CBT) approach in religious tourism holds substantial potential for enriching pilgrims' spiritual experiences. By involving local communities in the management and preservation of sacred sites, pilgrims gain access to local knowledge and religious practices that deepen their spiritual engagement. This approach offers a more profound and meaningful experience, as pilgrims can connect more intimately with sacred places through stories and practices directly shared by residents. Additionally, this method helps maintain the cultural and spiritual integrity of religious tourism destinations.

The research reveals various spiritual experiences encountered by pilgrims. One form of such experience is a sense of connection with the divine. For instance, Mr. Sukirman Modin felt the presence of a figure in white robes during his recitations at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery, which he interpreted as a manifestation of Sunan Kuning himself. Similarly, Mbah Tolib experienced mental disturbances due to unresolved religious questions. After visiting the site and receiving advice, he felt he received guidance and tranquility from Allah.

Another form of spiritual experience identified is a sense of joy that transcends personal limitations. Mr. Darwanto, who visits the Sunan Kuning Cemetery daily, experiences a tranquility that he does not find elsewhere. He feels that his daily problems become lighter after his pilgrimages, demonstrating how such visits can provide relief and happiness that help pilgrims face daily life more effectively.

The research also found that many pilgrims perceive divine guidance following their visits. Mr. Suyut and Mr. Kolis reported receiving guidance and solutions to their problems after regularly visiting the site. Additionally, Mbah Roman reported spiritual experiences such as hearing dhikr and witnessing apparitions at the cemetery, which he considered signs of divine guidance. These experiences reinforce the

belief that Allah provides guidance and assistance in their daily lives.

Finally, some pilgrims feel the love and support of Allah after their pilgrimages. Mr. Misni reported experiencing peace and protection from Allah after regularly visiting the graves of the saints. Quranic students noted ease in memorization while at the cemetery, and Mr. Arif mentioned that his efforts became smoother after regularly visiting the site and seeking blessings there. These spiritual experiences offer comfort, hope, and deep meaning, strengthening the individual's spiritual relationship with the Creator. The management of CBT-based religious tourism can profoundly impact both pilgrims and local communities positively.

B. Discussion

This research reveals six distinct spiritual experiences reported by pilgrims at the Sunan Kuning Cemetery: Connection, transcendent joy, divine guidance, enhanced perception of God's love, and receiving divine assistance.

- i). **Connection:** Involves a clear sense of presence with Allah, such as interaction with the figure of Sunan Kuning. Neuroscientific research indicates that meditation or prayer focused on this connection can stimulate increased brain activity associated with affection, empathy, and happiness. This spiritual experience is often considered to strengthen faith and provide a new understanding of life.
- ii). **Joy Transcendent Sense of Self:** Describes the joy pilgrims experience during their pilgrimage rituals, allowing them to momentarily forget daily problems. This sense of happiness and peace frequently arises from feeling connected with a greater spiritual entity. Such experiences are derived not only from sacred places but also from interactions with fellow pilgrims.
- iii). **Divine Guidance:** Refers to the feeling of being directed or supported by a higher power in daily life. Pilgrims often report feeling encouraged or guided by this greater force, providing reassurance and calm in the face of challenges.
- iv). **Enhanced Perception of God's Love:** A profound experience that strengthens the relationship with God. Pilgrims frequently feel a deep closeness to the Creator during pilgrimages or worship, resulting in feelings of peace, affection, and forgiveness.
- v). **Receiving Divine Assistance:** In daily life offers a sense of confidence and trust. Pilgrims commonly report experiencing peace or seeing specific signs during their visits, which they interpret as manifestations of God's love and care.
- vi). **Negative Impact of Intense Spiritual Experiences:** The brain is also noted. Some pilgrims experience mental disturbances due to misguided intentions during their pilgrimage. Research by Amy D. Owen *et al.* suggests that life-altering spiritual experiences can lead to hippocampal volume reduction, associated with memory loss and increased stress. This indicates that intense spiritual experiences, especially in older age, may accelerate cognitive decline and elevate the risk of stress and depression.

In conclusion, this study provides insight into the complexity of spiritual experiences among pilgrims and their impact on various aspects of their lives. Understanding these spiritual experiences can aid communities and mental health professionals in offering better support to individuals

experiencing them. A spiritual neuroscience approach combines neuroscience principles with human spirituality to understand how spiritual experiences affect brain function and mental well-being, seeking scientific understanding of spirituality within a neurological context.

5. Conclusion

i). CBT-based Religious Tourism Management in Tulungagung Regency

Based on data and research studies in the field, it was found that the success of managing religious tourism based on Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Tulungagung Regency is supported by several factors as follows:

- a) The uniqueness of the location created by the village community;
- b) Involvement of the wider community as the main tourism actor;
- c) Facilitate aid funds for existing activity embryos;
- d) The existence of a driving figure;
- e) Links to relevant stakeholders.

ii). Pilgrims' ritual at the tomb of Sunan Kuning

Wirid and Meditation: Pilgrims often spend time alone doing *Wirid* (repeated *dhikr*) and silent meditation even until the early hours of the morning. This activity allows them to reflect, seek inner peace, and communicate with the divine. Based on data collected at Sunan Kuning *Wirid's* grave, what is often practiced is reading the Al Ikhlas letter as much as possible.

Congregational Prayer Pilgrimage: The pilgrims together take ablution first as a sign of respect, then read the *yasin* and *tahlil* led by one of the group leaders and pray for blessings (Ngalap Berkah).

Cleansing/Healing Ritual: A cleansing ritual involving holy water was found in Sunan Kuning's tomb, there is an Old Well which is believed to be used as an intermediary for healing from all diseases. Pilgrims take part in healing rituals that also involve the use of holy water, prayer, or traditional remedies believed to cure physical or emotional ailments.

iii). Spiritual Experience of Pilgrims in Religious Tourism in Tulungagung Regency.

In this context, researchers found several incidents that stood out, namely the experiences of pilgrims who were able to increase their faith and get closer to Allah, such as the emergence of Connection (connectedness with Allah), Joy Transcendent Sense of Self (Feeling of Joy), Divini Guidance (Guidance from Allah.), Perception of Divine Love (Perception of God's Love), and Divine Help (God's Help). However, some pilgrims experience mental disorders due to stress due to excessive expectations.

6. Suggestions

Considering the characteristics of "Community Based Tourism" (CBT) in management, religious tourism destinations can become places that enrich the spiritual experiences of visitors while optimizing the role of religious tourism managers. This should be done while maintaining the authenticity and sustainability of the environment and respecting existing cultural and religious values. The researchers recommend that future researchers further explore the implementation of CBT in the religious tourism sector in their respective districts or regions, taking into account the diverse characteristics and cultures of the local communities. Researchers remain open to constructive criticism and

suggestions, as our research is limited by references and sources of information. The researcher hopes for feedback to improve this research further. Researchers hope that this study can be beneficial and contribute to the development of academic theories in tourism studies, particularly in Tulungagung Regency, and generally for religious tourism managers wherever they are.

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