

The Construction of Religious Meaning Through Cultural Events

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of religious and cultural festivals, with a focus on their role as tourism commodities, particularly in the case of the Suroan and Larung Saji festivals in Malang Regency, Indonesia. It examines how religious meaning is embedded within these cultural festivals and how they contribute to the preservation of local traditions while promoting religious tourism. The research highlights the strong connection between religious beliefs and cultural practices, where these festivals serve not only as a spiritual expression but also as a significant driver of local economies through religious tourism. The study finds that the commercialization of these festivals has led to the creation of religious tourism destinations, attracting both local and international visitors. The research further identifies the role of cultural festivals in maintaining social identity, as they embody historical values and contribute to cultural preservation. Motivations for attending these festivals are largely driven by religious beliefs and cultural interest, with religious tourism playing a crucial role in sustaining these practices. Moreover, the research suggests that the development of tourism infrastructure and destination branding is vital for enhancing the economic and cultural impact of these festivals. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing tradition and commercialization, ensuring that the cultural and religious significance of the festivals is preserved while supporting the growth of the local tourism industry.

Keywords: *Cultural festivals, religious tourism, Malang Regency*

INTRODUCTION

The discussion regarding the celebration of religious holidays and their connection to cultural festivals naturally involves aspects of tradition and belief, as they are directly related to the dimension of spirituality (Piramanayagam and Seal, 2021). This provides an interesting perspective on how cultural festivals and their connection to religion, particularly in Indonesia, are deeply intertwined with traditional culture. The presence of a strong ideology is one of the factors that has allowed cultural festivals to persist until today. Strong beliefs, which are fundamentally based on religious aspects, make these traditions endure and be accepted by the community. Additionally, religious aspects and their guidance found in holy scriptures cannot be separated. Thus, cultural and religious festivals also become a factor of identity for their participants (Arshad, 2023).

It is important to understand how closely culture and religion, or religious factors, are interconnected, and how this connection is maintained even in the modern era. The source of culture is assumed to stem from religious aspects, and religiosity plays a key role in defining the boundaries of culture. Participation in cultural aspects is influenced by religiosity, and the identification with religion is the most significant factor (Lipnicka and Peciakowski, 2021). This explains the strong relationship when religious factors and cultural rituals are united in a social practice in the form of traditional culture.

As is known, cultural identity is crucial for a nation, including in Indonesia. The connection between cultural festivals and religion also has an economic dimension, as it leads to the formation of religious tourism. Religious tourism plays an important role in strengthening the structure of the overall tourism concept (Tsai, 2021). Similarly, the reality of cultural festivals in Indonesia, especially Javanese culture, is also linked to the concept of religious tourism, which relates to religious holidays and the ways in which they are celebrated according to customs and traditions, such as commemorating 1 Muharram, commonly known as Suroan, and the Larung Saji festival. Over time, these festivals have evolved not only as moments to celebrate religious holidays and preserve culture, but also as commodities for tourism, particularly in the Malang Regency.

Cultural festivals have become commonplace in contemporary society, offering a wide variety of events, occurrences, and spectacles that occupy both the social calendar and the cultural agenda. As festivals become more significant, they assume a broader range of functions, from supporting cultural groups to ensuring the acceptance of specific cultural discourses, to serving as a source of pride, identity, and revenue for communities (Valbona and Richards, 2007).

From the above assumptions, it is evident that cultural festivals in modern society hold various meanings, not just from a single aspect, but in how communities maintain noble cultural values that carry particular significance. These festivals are not merely spectacles; they also serve to support other social aspects such as culture, economy, and social life, and, of course, they serve as identity and ideology. Therefore, it can be seen that the connection between culture, which is rich in values and norms, and religious aspects, forms two complementary elements. This connection can be identified through how rituals and religion are practiced by the followers of these religions and cultures (Moira et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

The approach used in this study is a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is a research aimed at describing and analyzing phenomena, events, social activities, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts of people individually and in groups. This research is said to be qualitative because the data produced is descriptive by further exploring the data in the form of verbal statements narrated in writing (Moleong, 2009:3).

This study will adopt a descriptive-exploratory research design to investigate the relationship between cultural festivals, religious practices, and tourism. It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how religious meaning is embedded within cultural festivals and how these festivals, particularly in the context of Malang Regency, are transformed into tourism commodities.

Cultural and Religious Festivals as Tourism Commodities

Various studies discussing the relationship between culture and the celebration of religious holidays have become one of the main points in expanding the scope of academic knowledge. In reality today, religious holiday celebrations accompanied by traditional rituals are also inseparable from the tourism aspect, as previously explained. As a result, there is an element of

commercialization, which, on one hand, provides sustainability and resilience to the existence of these cultural practices (Yamamoto and Collins, 2024). Furthermore, the presence of the local community who are the primary users of religious rituals is an inseparable part. It is important to understand how the concepts of religion and tradition are forms of cultural heritage that have evolved into a part of the tourism concept. This provides a spiritual element not only for the local community but also for visitors to the area (Sestino, et al., 2021).

The celebration or cultural festival and its connection to religion, in some aspects, cannot be separated from the presence of animistic beliefs. In this sense, it is linked to the perspective of ancestors, which serves as the fundamental factor in how these cultural festivals are organized. It involves the balance between humans and nature, alignment of moral values, and the balance of modern knowledge with the context of historical interpretation (Onwuatuegwu, 2024). From this study, we can identify the connection between the construction of religious meaning and cultural festivals, as is also the case in Malang Regency with the Suroan and Larung Saji traditions, which also involve religious elements. As mentioned earlier, there is an economic factor that also supports the existence of these cultural and religious festivals, namely the concept of religious tourism. Religious tourism, along with pilgrimage sites, is an attractive and historically long-standing form of tourism that continues to grow over the years, despite the rise of new spiritual movements (Gedecho, et al., 2023; Luz, 2020; Nmah, 2017; Nyikana, 2017; Olsen & Wilkinson, 2016; Ron & Timothy, 2019; Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

In its development, Malang Regency has indeed moved towards the development of the tourism sector, including religious tourism with the existence of the Larung Saji and Suroan festivals at its tourist destinations. From an academic perspective, this is an aspect full of potential for research that deserves to be studied and developed, particularly regarding cultural festivals and their relation to religious tourism. Religious and cultural tourism aspects are crucial segments of the global tourism industry that can attract large numbers of tourists. Forms of tourism, such as visiting sacred sites, participating in religious and cultural festivals, and so on, are also a form of cultural heritage preservation (Nana, 2024). The aspect of cultural festivals and religious celebrations packaged as religious tourism is also very important in several countries worldwide. For example, in Japan, the conversion of Buddhist Otera to Hera Taka also strengthens religious tourism (Sulastri and Alleynisa, 2024).

From a scientific perspective, religion is a form of belief expressed through a set of rules for performing religious rituals. These rituals can involve worship practices or performing certain beliefs that are closely tied to specific cultural traditions. This aspect, from a social and economic standpoint, becomes a particular commodity, in the form of tourism. It can be said that cultural elements are commodified into tourism attractions (Prianta and Sulistyawati, 2024). In addition, the development of cultural festivals, which also have religious tourism elements, needs to be seen in terms of the factors that help them endure in the modern era. Several studies have pointed out some important factors accompanying this. These factors include religious motivation, cultural motivation, and religiosity as key aspects in the existence of religious tourism (Muthuswamy and Alshiha, 2023).

As part of the development of cultural festivals with religious elements towards the tourism industry, the location or venue where these cultural festivals are held plays an important role. The relationship between culture and tourism certainly also considers the location, which

can support the formation of destination branding. In line with this, the Larung Saji and Suroan festivals are held in Malang Regency, which is actively promoting its natural tourism aspect. Therefore, religious tourism also focuses on the location, as the place where religious rituals are held provides an opportunity for the community and visitors to experience local culture, spiritual concepts, and the beliefs upheld by the cultural and religious community (Kamath, et al., 2021). Continuing the discussion about the religious motivations of visitors attending these cultural and religious festivals, it provides an interesting insight into this point.

Image 1: Larung Saji Ritual Source: Instagram Reels @jokororokabmalang



As previously mentioned, the shift in cultural and religious festivals into tourism commodities should also be viewed from the aspect of the presence of tourists as the main sources and actors in the tourism field. What motivates them, beyond religious factors, becomes a very interesting issue. Studies on the motivations of the public in the field of tourism for cultural and religious tourism destinations confirm that religious motivation is a primary factor. Religious doctrines, along with the development of religious tourism areas, religious adherence, and enthusiasm for culture, are the main aspects shaping these motivations, despite the visitors' diverse backgrounds (Wang, et al., 2020). This presents an opportunity for the government and the local community to continue developing the tourism industry based on cultural and religious festivals.

Upon further examination of the connection between cultural festivals, religion, and the concept of tourism, it can be concluded that there are crucial elements in connecting these three aspects. For example, the aspect of religion. From an academic perspective, studies that explore the relationship between religion and tourism are still relatively limited, but existing research shows that religious belief, understanding, and interest in the cultural sites visited also influence tourists when choosing religious tourism destinations (Poria, et al., 2003). This also serves as a reference for how tourists understand the local culture and wisdom. As is known, the concept of culture and local wisdom is one of the factors in forming the identity of a community, often shaped through cultural and religious festivals. Religious festivals provide spiritual activities framed through local culture and heritage that influence this identity (Aung, 2020).

From this explanation, we can see how academic views interpret the potential of the tourism industry based on local wisdom as a result of cultural preservation with religious elements. This is reinforced by how communities, as tourists with strong constructions of religion, spiritual understanding, and cultural concern, fulfill their needs by visiting and participating in cultural and religious festival sites (Kamath, et al., 2021; Wang, et al., 2020). This makes the construction of religious meaning increasingly develop, not only as part of religious rituals but also influenced by cultural elements and the current social system.

Cultural and religious festivals, such as Larung Saji and Suroan, which were initially routine ritual practices, have become attractive tourist destinations drawing many visitors. This can be assumed to align with the Malang Regency government's agenda to strengthen the tourism sector. This requires in-depth research. It must be acknowledged that research on destination branding has been widely conducted and has made a significant impact, especially on tourism identity. The identity factor of a destination plays a very strong role and has become a primary focus of tourism research in recent years (Farfan, et al., 2023). This shift in construction is interesting to further examine, especially regarding how the tourism industry views religious factors as an attractive commodity, particularly for regions with high tourism potential.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion and explanation above, it can be concluded that the construction of religious meaning in cultural festivals is a form of religious ritual practice wrapped in cultural attributes. This certainly involves religious elements according to the beliefs of the community using that culture (Moirra et al., 2023). The existence of cultural festivals is one way to preserve the existence of these rituals, which leads to economic aspects or commercialization (Yamamoto and Collins, 2024), thus creating a tourism concept in the form of religious tourism. This is also the case with the Suroan and Larung Saji Festivals in Malang Regency, which is also seen in other countries that continue to preserve the cultural and religious festivals they believe in. This aims to preserve the cultural heritage from ancestors, which also plays a role as a factor in shaping the social identity of the cultural community.

Moreover, some key aspects of the existence and continuation of these cultural and religious festivals stem from religious motivation. This point is interesting for further discussion and research because religious motivation arises from the community's full awareness of the religious system, connected with cultural elements. Religiosity is not a foreign concept in the research world, especially when linked to culture. Discussions on this topic, from a research perspective, involve psychological aspects, particularly cultural psychology. Cultural psychology has enhanced religiosity and provided insights into studies on divine ethics, beliefs in the afterlife, spirituality, and global views on religion (Jensen, 2021).

As discussed in the above research, religious motivation becomes a driving force for existence while also having implications for the economic aspect of tourism, thus becoming a tourism commodity. This is relevant when considering how the tourism sector views the potential of communities that continue to uphold the cultural heritage of their ancestors, such as in Malang Regency, and even in other countries. When communities continue to preserve their ritual

traditions, another important factor is the location where the rituals are held and packaged as a festival, which can certainly attract tourists (Kamath et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). This moment becomes the shift in the construction of religious meaning.

Another interesting point from the discussion above that can also be concluded is how the belief aspect and religious motivation are so strong in preserving cultural heritage and rituals. This does not only occur in Indonesia, specifically in Malang Regency, but also in countries where the dominant mindset is more rational and empirical rather than spiritual. This means that when religious thinking is linked to cultural aspects, especially those with strong historical value, it can be said that empirical reasoning may be overshadowed by spiritual thinking. Of course, this assumption remains within the context of culture, religion, and the tourism sector in this discussion.

It is important to clearly see how the shift in the construction of religious meaning in these cultural festivals is heading toward the tourism industry sector. As mentioned earlier, the location also plays a significant role in framing religious tourism as an attractive destination. When faced with the industrial aspect, relevant stakeholders need to apply specific strategies along with regulations to attract large numbers of tourists. For example, Malang Regency, with its natural tourism potential, such as beaches that often serve as locations for the Larung Saji Festival, and Mount Kawi as the venue for the Suroan Festival, along with religious tourism, needs to be developed as a tourism destination. Therefore, the concept of destination branding should be considered by the Malang Regency government. This is clearly a factor that involves the thinking of stakeholders referring to economic and political aspects, in addition to identity aspects, while cultural actors tend to focus on social, cultural, and identity aspects (Valbona and Richards, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to focus and align the government as the authority and policy maker with the community and cultural producers in the context of cultural and religious festivals, especially in the development of tourism destinations.

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