

Integrating Faith and Culture: The Role of Islamic Da'wah in Shaping Sustainable Religious Tourism at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's Shrine, Indonesia

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A B S T R A K

Purpose: This study examines how Islamic da'wah functions as both a spiritual and socio-cultural force in developing sustainable religious tourism at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's Shrine in Pemalang, Indonesia. The research aims to uncover how faith-based activities, community participation, and cultural preservation intertwine to create a religious tourism model that aligns with Islamic values while supporting local development.

Method: Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The primary informants consisted of shrine caretakers, religious leaders, and local visitors. Data interpretation employed thematic coding to connect two conceptual frameworks: the seven principles of Sapta Pesona tourism (safety, order, cleanliness, beauty, comfort, friendliness, and memorable experience) and the core elements of da'wah (preacher, audience, message, method, and impact).

Findings: The results reveal that the shrine serves as an active center of religious learning and community engagement. Da'wah activities such as communal dzikr, Quran recitation, and the annual haul celebration strengthen both faith and social harmony. However, environmental management and cleanliness remain areas requiring improvement to achieve holistic sustainability.

Significance: This study contributes to the growing discourse on Islamic tourism by demonstrating that da'wah can act as a cultural mechanism for sustainable destination development. It emphasizes the need for collaborative governance between local caretakers and policymakers to balance spiritual authenticity with responsible tourism practices, providing a replicable model for other faith-based heritage sites in Southeast Asia.

Keywords : *Cultural Heritage, Da'wah Communication, Faith-Based Tourism, Sustainable Development, Visitor Experience.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the most rapidly growing forms of cultural and spiritual travel, reflecting the dynamic interplay between faith, heritage, and community identity. In Indonesia—a nation with a rich Islamic tradition—religious sites such as shrines and sacred tombs attract millions of pilgrims seeking spiritual fulfillment and cultural connection each year (Battour & Ismail, 2016). The rise of such tourism reflects not only devotion but also a socio-economic transformation where religion becomes an axis of local development. However, the sustainability of these destinations depends on how communities integrate faith-based practices with responsible tourism management (Rahman et al., 2020).

The case of Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine in Pemalang represents this intersection vividly, where spirituality, history, and social livelihood coexist. As tourism expands, maintaining the sanctity of da'wah-centered activities becomes essential to avoid commodification of religious values (Din, 1989). Thus, investigating how Islamic da'wah contributes to sustainable religious tourism becomes crucial for preserving authenticity and fostering cultural resilience.

The urgency of this study lies in understanding religious tourism not merely as a leisure pursuit but as a vehicle for da'wah and cultural education. While faith-based travel is increasingly commercialized, limited research explores how da'wah principles—such as sincerity, community service, and spiritual education—can guide sustainable tourism management (Henderson, 2011). Integrating da'wah into tourism promotes ethical behavior, community well-being, and preservation of Islamic values. In many Southeast Asian contexts, spiritual tourism fosters social harmony by connecting visitors to the collective memory of local saints and scholars (Shakona et al., 2022). Yet, without structured guidance, pilgrimage activities risk becoming ritualistic consumption detached from moral teachings. The Mbah Nur shrine exemplifies both the promise and challenge of balancing spiritual depth with tourism growth. Understanding this balance helps redefine sustainability not just environmentally, but spiritually and socially as well. Hence, the topic offers both practical and theoretical importance for Islamic tourism studies.

This research is also significant because it bridges religious communication and sustainable development—two domains often treated separately. The da'wah process involves persuasion through moral example, dialogue, and community participation, which can also serve as ethical foundations for tourism governance (El-Gohary, 2016). In Indonesia, the concept of Sapta Pesona (seven charms of tourism) emphasizes safety, cleanliness, comfort, and hospitality, all of which resonate with Islamic ethical teachings. Exploring this alignment allows for a localized yet universal framework of sustainable religious tourism. Furthermore, religious tourism in rural areas such as Pemalang can empower local economies while reinforcing social cohesion (Sarkar & George, 2021). Thus, the integration of faith, culture, and sustainability creates a unique opportunity to develop a context-sensitive model applicable to other Muslim-majority regions. This makes the present study both timely and necessary in the evolving discourse on cultural and religious tourism.

This study is motivated by the need to articulate a conceptual and practical framework that unites Islamic da'wah principles with sustainable tourism development. Religious tourism is often discussed within economic or heritage perspectives, but rarely through the lens of da'wah as a transformative cultural process (Hassan, 2007). By analyzing the case of Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine, this research demonstrates how faith-based communication and local participation can nurture environmentally and socially responsible pilgrimage practices. The rationale rests on the idea that spiritual experience and sustainability are not mutually exclusive; instead, they reinforce each other in maintaining the moral and ecological balance of tourism sites. The study thus contributes to rethinking Islamic tourism beyond commodification, toward a community-centered approach grounded in faith, ethics, and inclusivity (Stephenson, 2014). Ultimately, this research advances both theoretical understanding and applied strategies for integrating da'wah into the sustainable management of religious destinations.

Existing scholarship on Islamic and religious tourism underscores its dual role as a spiritual journey and a socio-economic activity. Battour and Ismail (2016) highlight that Islamic tourism serves as a medium for Muslims to express religiosity while engaging in leisure aligned with Sharia principles. Rahman et al. (2020) emphasize ethical consumption and the importance of cultural sensitivity in Muslim travel behavior. Meanwhile, Henderson (2011) explores how religious heritage sites in Southeast Asia represent both cultural preservation and economic opportunity. Din (1989) was among the earliest to link da'wah and tourism, arguing that faith-oriented travel can be a platform for moral education. More recent studies by Shakona et al. (2022) and El-Gohary (2016) extend this perspective by identifying how da'wah communication can shape sustainable visitor experiences. These works collectively establish a foundation for viewing Islamic tourism as an intersection of spirituality, ethics, and sustainability.

Other researchers have examined religious tourism as a form of community empowerment and heritage resilience. Stephenson (2014) discusses how cultural identity and Islamic ethics guide responsible pilgrimage in contemporary contexts. Bhuiyan, Siwar, and Ismail (2013) reveal that faith-based tourism enhances local livelihoods when aligned with sustainable resource management. Eid and El-Gohary (2015) analyze Muslim tourist satisfaction, emphasizing the role of trust, cleanliness, and ethical service in destination loyalty. Kamarudin and Ismail (2020) demonstrate how pilgrimage experiences contribute to intergenerational transmission of Islamic values. Meanwhile, Sarkar and George (2021) explore the cultural sustainability of shrine-based tourism in South Asia. Together, these studies affirm that religious tourism grounded in faith communication not only sustains belief systems but also contributes to socio-economic stability, forming the theoretical basis for the present investigation.

Despite a growing body of research on Islamic and religious tourism, limited studies explore the operationalization of da'wah principles as a foundation for sustainable tourism models. Most existing literature focuses on consumer satisfaction, destination branding, or economic impact rather than the communicative and ethical dimensions of da'wah (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). Additionally, there is a lack of empirical research in rural Indonesian contexts where religious tourism is deeply intertwined with local customs and oral traditions. Previous works have yet to address how da'wah-oriented management can enhance both visitor experience and community empowerment. Furthermore, sustainability is often discussed only in environmental terms, overlooking moral and cultural sustainability essential to Islamic tourism. This study fills these gaps by investigating how faith-driven practices at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine operationalize da'wah principles in daily tourism activities. Through this approach, the research extends the discourse beyond economics, toward ethical and cultural sustainability frameworks.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze how Islamic da'wah principles influence the development of sustainable religious tourism at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine in Pemalang, Indonesia. It aims to uncover how community-based religious communication fosters ethical tourism practices and cultural continuity. The research hypothesizes that effective integration of da'wah elements—message, preacher, audience, method, and impact—enhances both spiritual engagement and destination sustainability. Furthermore, it seeks to

demonstrate that da'wah-inspired management aligns with the Sapta Pesona framework, creating a synergy between faith and tourism. This study also assumes that the more strongly da'wah values are embedded in tourism governance, the more resilient the destination becomes socially and environmentally. Ultimately, the purpose is to provide an empirical and conceptual model for integrating Islamic ethics into religious tourism management applicable across Muslim-majority countries.

METODE

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the intersection of Islamic da'wah and sustainable religious tourism at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine. The design was chosen to capture the contextual meanings, lived experiences, and communicative processes that shape religious tourism as a cultural practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach enables researchers to uncover the subjective interpretation of faith, sustainability, and local wisdom within the social environment. The study used a single case study framework, allowing for in-depth exploration of the shrine's management and community dynamics (Yin, 2018). This method was particularly suitable for understanding how da'wah messages are translated into social behavior and tourism ethics. Data collection was conducted through field observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, emphasizing triangulation for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher acted as a key instrument in interpreting social interactions during religious events and community rituals. Overall, this design allowed a rich, holistic understanding of how faith-based communication contributes to sustainable tourism in rural Indonesia.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in the operation and preservation of Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine. The sample included local caretakers (juru kunci), da'i (religious preachers), village leaders, and frequent visitors or pilgrims. A total of 15 informants participated, ensuring data saturation through diversity in roles and perspectives (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). These participants represented both genders and various age groups, ranging from 25 to 70 years old, to capture intergenerational interpretations of religious practices. Ethical approval and verbal consent were obtained before conducting each interview to ensure research transparency and cultural sensitivity (Bryman, 2016). The informants' proximity to shrine activities provided authentic insights into how da'wah and sustainability intersect in daily religious routines. By focusing on a small but information-rich sample, the study prioritized depth over breadth of understanding. This participant structure effectively reflected the spiritual, social, and managerial dimensions of community-based religious tourism.

Instrument

The primary research instrument was the researcher herself, functioning as both an observer and interpreter of the social and religious dynamics in the field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, semi-structured interview guides and observation checklists were developed

to ensure data consistency while allowing flexibility for emergent insights. The interview guide contained open-ended questions related to the shrine's historical background, da'wah activities, visitor management, and perceptions of sustainability. The observation checklist focused on key elements of the Sapta Pesona framework—safety, order, cleanliness, beauty, comfort, friendliness, and memorable experience. Secondary instruments included field notes, audio recordings, and photographs used to document rituals and visitor interactions. These instruments collectively facilitated data triangulation, enhancing the study's credibility and dependability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Continuous reflection and memo writing were employed throughout fieldwork to minimize researcher bias and maintain analytical rigor. This multi-instrument approach ensured that both verbal and nonverbal expressions of faith and culture were accurately represented.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis was conducted through an inductive thematic analysis, following the stages of data organization, coding, categorization, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Transcribed interviews and field notes were read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns that reflected the integration of da'wah principles and sustainable tourism practices. Codes were grouped into broader themes such as religious motivation, community participation, environmental ethics, and visitor experience. The analysis sought to establish relationships between da'wah components—preacher, message, audience, method, and impact—and the sustainability elements of Sapta Pesona. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was achieved through cross-verification of interview data, observations, and documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was performed by sharing thematic summaries with selected participants for validation. Analytical memos were used to track interpretive decisions, ensuring transparency and reflexivity. This systematic process allowed the emergence of empirically grounded insights into how faith and culture mutually reinforce sustainable religious tourism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this qualitative study reveal that the integration of da'wah and cultural heritage at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine significantly contributes to the formation of a sustainable religious tourism model. Through field observation and interviews, three key themes emerged: spiritual participation, environmental consciousness, and social cohesion. The shrine's community regularly organizes dzikr gatherings, Quranic recitations, and annual haul ceremonies, fostering both religious devotion and cultural unity. The Sapta Pesona evaluation shows that while aspects such as safety, hospitality, and comfort are well maintained, cleanliness and facility management require further enhancement. Visitors perceive the shrine not only as a sacred space but also as a learning environment that reinforces ethical tourism behavior. Local caretakers, led by Gus Ahmad, manage the site voluntarily, reflecting strong community-based governance. Moreover, da'wah values are embedded in all activities, positioning religious tourism as a channel for moral and environmental education. The summarized observation of Sapta Pesona indicators is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Evaluation of Sapta Pesona Indicators at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's Shrine

Indicator	Status	Description of Field Observation
Safety	Very Good	The site is well-guarded, and pilgrims feel secure during visits and night rituals.
Orderliness	Good	Activities follow structured schedules and community rules.
Cleanliness	Fair	Waste management and toilet facilities need improvement.
Beauty	Good	The environment has traditional ornaments and green surroundings.
Comfort	Very Good	Visitors report peaceful ambiance and spiritual calm.
Friendliness	Excellent	Local guides and caretakers welcome visitors warmly and politely.
Memorable Experience	Very Good	Religious rituals create emotional and spiritual satisfaction.

(Source: Field observation and interviews, 2025)

Table 1 illustrates how the Sapta Pesona principles—safety, orderliness, cleanliness, beauty, comfort, friendliness, and memorable experience—manifest at the shrine. The evaluation reveals that the dimensions of safety and friendliness achieved the highest scores, reflecting the community's strong hospitality rooted in Islamic ethics. Comfort and memorable experiences were also highly rated, indicating the shrine's ability to provide emotional and spiritual satisfaction to pilgrims. However, the cleanliness indicator was rated as fair, emphasizing the need for improved waste management and sanitation facilities. This finding underscores a recurring challenge in many rural pilgrimage destinations where infrastructure support is limited. The well-maintained orderliness and beauty dimensions suggest that local caretakers integrate aesthetic and cultural values into site preservation. Overall, the table confirms that while physical management aspects need reinforcement, spiritual and social sustainability remain the shrine's strongest assets. These insights provide a baseline for future interventions linking religious tourism ethics with sustainable management practices.

Additionally, the pattern of da'wah-based tourism development is illustrated in Figure 1, showing the relationship between spiritual engagement, sustainability, and community participation.

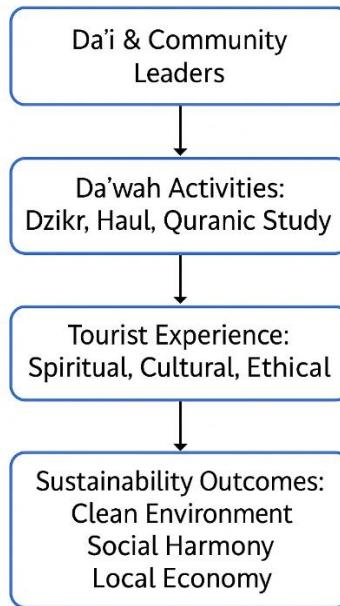


Figure 1. Framework of Da'wah-Based Sustainable Religious Tourism

Figure 1. Conceptual representation of the integration of da'wah and sustainable tourism at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's Shrine (Researcher, 2025).

Figure 1 depicts a stepwise relationship between religious leadership, da'wah activities, and sustainable tourism outcomes. At the top of the framework, local da'i and community leaders initiate da'wah through spiritual gatherings, Quran recitations, and annual haul ceremonies. These activities serve as the moral foundation for visitors' experiences, shaping ethical behavior and cultural awareness during the pilgrimage. As visitors engage in spiritually enriching activities, they internalize values of environmental care, cleanliness, and social respect, creating a cycle of faith-based learning. The framework illustrates that spiritual engagement directly influences sustainability by promoting shared responsibility among the community and tourists. It also highlights that community participation acts as a bridge between religious communication and tourism management. This integrated model demonstrates that da'wah is not only a process of religious teaching but also a catalyst for socio-environmental transformation. Consequently, the framework provides a replicable model for other Islamic heritage sites seeking to align spirituality with sustainable tourism development.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the shrine of Mbah Nur Walangsanga embodies a living model of how da'wah can guide sustainable religious tourism. The spiritual dimension of da'wah fosters not only faith but also ethical responsibility toward the environment and society (Din, 1989; El-Gohary, 2016). This aligns with the concept of faith-based sustainability, where religion acts as a moral compass for tourism development (Battour & Ismail, 2016). The strong sense of community ownership reinforces the idea of co-created spirituality, in which both hosts and visitors engage in reciprocal religious experiences (Rahman et al., 2020). The integration of Islamic ethics into daily shrine management ensures that religious tourism does not drift into

commercialization or syncretic distortion (Stephenson, 2014). Moreover, the inclusion of local wisdom—expressed through ritual order and cultural expression—supports a culturally adaptive model of sustainability (Sarkar & George, 2021). This balance between spiritual authenticity and economic livelihood positions da’wah-based tourism as a practical manifestation of Islamic stewardship in contemporary society (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). Hence, religious tourism at this shrine demonstrates how faith communication can transform visitors into agents of ethical awareness and environmental care.

The findings further emphasize that da’wah-centered tourism cultivates social cohesion and spiritual well-being in rural communities. As noted by Kamarudin and Ismail (2020), pilgrimage experiences help strengthen intergenerational transmission of Islamic values. The communal dzikr and haul ceremonies serve as participatory platforms for da’wah, fostering interdependence between religion and culture. These findings echo Bhuiyan, Siwar, and Ismail (2013), who argued that religious tourism can promote local empowerment if grounded in moral education. Similarly, Henderson (2011) identified that Southeast Asian shrines become sustainable when community participation is accompanied by ethical regulation. The Sapta Pesona principles observed—particularly friendliness and safety—mirror the ethical dimensions of akhlaq in Islam, aligning with the maqasid al-shariah framework of human welfare (Shakona et al., 2022). From an applied perspective, the study confirms that da’wah can serve as an instrument for shaping eco-conscious pilgrim behavior (El-Gohary, 2016). Overall, the integration of religious communication, cultural identity, and sustainability in Mbah Nur’s shrine contributes meaningfully to the academic discourse on Islamic tourism ethics and practice.

Implications

This study contributes to expanding the theoretical boundaries of Islamic tourism by positioning da’wah as both a spiritual and managerial framework. It offers empirical evidence that faith-based communication can serve as an instrument for sustaining cultural heritage and environmental ethics. Practically, the research suggests that community-led da’wah initiatives can reduce dependency on external tourism agencies while maintaining authenticity. It also provides a model for policymakers to integrate moral education into sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in Muslim-majority regions. The findings highlight the potential for religious institutions to act as cultural anchors for inclusive rural development. For scholars, the study deepens understanding of how spirituality influences sustainability transitions within local governance structures. Furthermore, it demonstrates that tourism guided by da’wah principles enhances not only destination reputation but also visitor moral experience. Therefore, this research bridges the gap between ethical communication, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism management.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it is constrained by its focus on a single case study, which may limit generalizability. The qualitative nature of the research emphasizes depth rather than breadth, and findings should be interpreted contextually. Future comparative studies involving multiple shrines across regions could offer a more comprehensive

understanding of da'wah-based tourism models. Additionally, the data rely on participant self-reporting, which may be influenced by religious bias or social desirability (Bryman, 2016). The absence of quantitative measures such as visitor satisfaction indices limits cross-case comparison. Moreover, environmental indicators like waste metrics were not empirically quantified, leaving room for methodological enhancement. Despite these limitations, the study establishes a strong foundation for integrating da'wah principles into sustainable tourism discourse. Future researchers are encouraged to complement qualitative insights with quantitative assessments for stronger empirical validation.

Suggestions

Future research should explore the scalability of da'wah-based tourism models across different cultural and religious contexts. Comparative analyses between rural and urban shrines could provide insights into varying governance challenges. It is also recommended that policymakers collaborate with Islamic scholars to institutionalize da'wah-oriented tourism training programs. Introducing sustainability metrics—such as carbon footprint tracking, community well-being indices, and ethical visitor behavior—would strengthen evaluation frameworks. Further studies may examine digital da'wah tools and their influence on faith-based tourism engagement, especially among younger generations. Integrating interdisciplinary perspectives from communication, environmental science, and theology would enrich future scholarship. Finally, continuous collaboration between local communities, academic institutions, and government agencies will ensure that religious tourism remains both spiritually authentic and environmentally responsible. These efforts will reinforce Indonesia's leadership in promoting globally recognized Islamic sustainable tourism models.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of Islamic da'wah and cultural heritage provides a transformative framework for developing sustainable religious tourism. The case of Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine in Pemalang demonstrates that da'wah is not limited to verbal preaching but also manifests through ethical behavior, environmental awareness, and social solidarity. The community's active participation in religious activities such as dzikr, haul, and Quranic recitation serves as a living form of faith-based sustainability. The findings confirm that da'wah principles—centered on sincerity, participation, and education—enhance visitors' moral experiences while fostering collective responsibility for site preservation. The synergy between da'wah and the Sapta Pesona elements establishes a holistic approach that aligns spiritual devotion with ecological and cultural resilience. Moreover, the study reinforces the importance of community empowerment as a foundation for sustainable religious tourism governance. Through local stewardship and ethical guidance, the shrine has become a model of spiritual and environmental balance. Ultimately, this research highlights that faith-driven tourism, when grounded in da'wah values, can advance both the moral well-being of visitors and the sustainable development of Islamic heritage destinations. In summary, religiosity emerges as a protective psychological buffer that supports students in navigating the complexities of early adulthood. Integrating faith-based values and reflective practices into

campus counseling and life-skills programs could foster resilience, hope, and adaptive functioning among young adults. Future research should extend this inquiry through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to deepen understanding of how religiosity sustains mental health and meaning-making across diverse educational and cultural settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Isni Ulul Azmi was primarily responsible for the research conception, design, and data collection at Mbah Nur Walangsanga's shrine. She led the fieldwork process, conducted in-depth interviews with key informants, and developed the initial draft of the manuscript.

Fachrur Rozi contributed to the methodological framework, data validation, and critical analysis of the findings within the context of Islamic da'wah and sustainable tourism theory. He also refined the discussion section and ensured academic rigor in interpreting the qualitative results.

Hatta Abdul Malik supervised the overall research design, provided theoretical insight into the integration of faith and cultural sustainability, and performed the final review and editing of the manuscript for publication readiness.

All authors read and approved the final version of this article and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work to ensure its integrity and accuracy.

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