Integrating Intercultural Communication and Religious Tourism: A Phenomenology Study of Cultural Worship at Loang Baloq Tomb, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experiences of religious tourism and intercultural communication at the Loang Baloq Tomb in West Lombok, Indonesia—a sacred site where spiritual pilgrimage and local cultural practices converge. Using a phenomenological approach, the research investigates how visitors, caretakers, and community members interact, perform rituals, and make meaning within a shared sacred environment. Drawing on interviews with 25 participants and field observations, the study identifies key motivations for visitation, such as spiritual healing, cultural curiosity, and ancestral reverence. It also uncovers the dynamics of intercultural encounters, including hospitality, symbolic interpretation, and negotiation of meaning across linguistic and cultural differences. The findings reveal that ritual acts at Loang Baloq function as a form of communication, fostering shared understanding despite diverse cultural backgrounds. Local communities play a central role in shaping visitor experiences, preserving spiritual values, and mediating tensions between tradition and tourism. This research contributes to both religious tourism and intercultural communication scholarship by illustrating how sacred spaces can become platforms for cultural exchange and relational meaning-making. Practical implications include recommendations for community-based tourism management that honor local wisdom and enhance intercultural sensitivity. The study concludes by suggesting avenues for future research, including digital religious tourism and comparative studies across sacred sites in the Indonesian archipelago.

1. Introduction

In the rich cultural landscape of the Indonesian archipelago, religious expression often blends seamlessly with local customs and ancestral traditions. This fusion of religiosity and local wisdom reflects a uniquely Indonesian phenomenon, where sacred spaces are not solely defined by theological orthodoxy, but by layers of cultural meaning, symbolic rituals, and communal memory (Goeldner & Richie, 2002). However, scholarly attention to how such sites function as both religious and intercultural spaces remains limited (Risqiani, 2024). There is a conceptual gap in understanding how religious tourism, intercultural communication, and ritual practice interact in these settings, especially in contexts where Islam is deeply rooted yet continually shaped by indigenous influences (Maghfiroh & Kewuel, 2020). One such site that exemplifies this synthesis is the Loang Baloq Tomb, located in West Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), Indonesia (Nugroho et al., 2022). While there are many Islamic pilgrimage destinations across the archipelago (Hidayati, 2019), Loang Baloq presents a distinctive case: it blends Islamic reverence for a historical figure with Sasak cultural rituals, interfaith engagement, and tourism practices. Its complex social dynamics, multicultural visitorship, and layered symbolism make it an important locus for exploring the interplay between intercultural communication and religious tourism within an Indonesian context (Supriadin & Pababari, 2024).

Situated near the Ivory Coast beach, the tomb offers both spiritual and scenic appeal. While this unique setting has contributed to the site's development as a destination for religious tourism, most scholarly attention has focused either on tourism development or religious practices, often overlooking the cultural and communicative dimensions that unfold at such sites (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). In particular, the potential of the Loang Baloq Tomb as a space of intercultural communication—where people from different ethnic, linguistic, and regional backgrounds meet and engage in shared rituals—remains largely underexplored (Hillenbrand, 2024).

This study addresses that gap by investigating how ritual communication practices facilitate intercultural encounters at the Loang Baloq Tomb. Rather than focusing solely on tourism's economic value, this paper emphasizes how sacred spaces like Loang Baloq foster cross-cultural understanding through shared spiritual

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experiences (Wawansyah, Sasmanda & Mu'aini, 2018; Rosada & Wawansyah, 2018). Pilgrims—who may differ in background but share common religious beliefs—participate in rituals that create a sense of unity, belonging, and mutual respect (Panchenko & Rizun, 2024).

By analyzing these interactions, the research contributes to both religious tourism studies and the intercultural communication field. First, it highlights how sacred rituals—such as prayers, offerings, and communal meals—act as communicative practices that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers (Eko & Putranto, 2019). These symbolic acts do not merely express individual faith; they also serve as a medium of intercultural dialogue and identity negotiation (Lightstone et al., 2006). Second, the study reveals how sacred sites like Loang Baloq become "contact zones" where cultural exchange naturally occurs through the convergence of diverse pilgrims.

While religious tourism does have economic implications for the local community, such as boosting small businesses and hospitality services, this study positions such impacts as secondary to the relational and communicative dimensions that emerge at the site (Sumiati, 2017; Fuaddah, 2022). Understanding how cultural and spiritual values are transmitted, negotiated, and shared at Loang Baloq offers a more holistic view of its significance.

In the broader context of Indonesia's rich religious and cultural diversity, Loang Baloq reflects the dynamic ways in which local Islamic traditions, Sasak culture, and global pilgrim movements intersect (Putri, Dewi, & Agustina, 2024). Even during challenging periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, sacred sites continued to function as spaces of resilience, connection, and cultural continuity (Korstanje, 2020).

Ultimately, this study repositions the Loang Baloq Tomb not just as a site of pilgrimage or economic opportunity but as a living site of intercultural communication, where diverse identities converge through ritual, belief, and shared sacred space. In doing so, it calls for greater scholarly attention to the communicative practices that animate religious tourism and deepen our understanding of cultural encounters in sacred settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Communication

2.1.1. Definition and Key Concepts

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). It involves not only verbal communication but also non-verbal cues, contextual understanding, and cultural interpretations that shape the way messages are delivered and received. According to Gudykunst and Kim (2003), intercultural communication is a process through which people from different cultural backgrounds create shared meanings by negotiating cultural differences. This process requires awareness of one's own cultural identity and sensitivity to others' cultural perspectives.

A foundational concept within intercultural communication is cultural identity, which shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others in communication contexts. Cultural identity is closely linked to beliefs, values, norms, and communication patterns inherited from one's community or group (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Another essential concept is communication style, which varies widely across cultures, ranging from direct to indirect, high-context to low-context, and formal to informal styles (Levitt, 2022). Understanding these styles is crucial to navigating potential misunderstandings in intercultural encounters.

In religious tourism settings, intercultural communication plays a significant role as sacred sites often attract visitors from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Mandelson et al., 2019). These interactions are not limited to verbal exchanges but are also embedded in symbolic practices such as shared rituals, dress codes, and spatial behavior. Rituals, in particular, become a medium through which intercultural meaning is co-constructed and experienced. The symbolic interactionist perspective, as outlined by Blumer (1969), helps explain how people interpret and respond to symbols in a social and cultural context, which is particularly relevant in pilgrimage activities.

Thus, intercultural communication in religious tourism is not merely about language or conversation; it is about navigating and negotiating cultural meanings through shared religious practices (Nadeem et al., 2017). This framework is instrumental in analyzing how visitors at the Loang Baloq Tomb engage with one another, express reverence, and construct spiritual meaning through culturally embedded communicative acts.

2.1.2. Relevance to Religious Tourism Contexts

Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in religious tourism, where pilgrims from diverse regions, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic groups converge at sacred sites (Sinde & Olsen, 2022). These interactions create unique opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, fostering understanding and collaboration (Shackley, 2022). Pilgrims bring with them distinct communication styles, cultural norms, and religious practices, which influence how they engage with each other and the site (González& Fernández-Álvarez, 2022). For instance, a pilgrimage site like the Loang Baloq Tomb, which attracts visitors from various parts of Indonesia and beyond, is a melting pot of cultural exchange (Putri et al., 2024). The rituals performed at the site, such as prayers, offerings, and

communal meals, are not only expressions of religious devotion but also serve as platforms for intercultural communication.

According to Andriotis (2009), stated that as visitors from different cultures come together, the role of communication in negotiating meaning becomes paramount. This negotiation happens both within the rituals themselves—through shared symbols and practices—and in the interactions between pilgrims (Bond, Packer & Ballantyne, 2015). For example, the act of prayer or the sharing of food can transcend language barriers, fostering a sense of unity and common purpose. In this context, intercultural communication helps pilgrims interpret and understand each other's experiences, beliefs, and cultural contexts, facilitating deeper connections and spiritual experiences.

However, this interaction is not always seamless. Differences in communication styles—such as verbal and non-verbal cues, religious symbolism, and even expectations about behavior at sacred sites—can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Understanding how these dynamics unfold and how meaning is negotiated is essential for enhancing the visitor experience and promoting harmonious interaction at religious tourism sites.

Despite the growing importance of religious tourism, there is a notable lack of research on intercultural communication at religious tourism sites, particularly within Indonesian pilgrimage contexts. While intercultural communication has been explored in general tourism and multicultural settings, studies specifically addressing how it operates within religious tourism are limited. This gap is particularly evident in Indonesia, a country with a rich diversity of cultures, languages, and religious practices. The complexities of intercultural communication at religious sites, especially when pilgrims from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds converge, remain underexplored. Addressing this gap would provide valuable insights into how communication practices at sacred sites shape the spiritual and cultural experiences of visitors.

2.1.3. Ritual Communication as a Subset

Ritual communication is a key aspect of intercultural communication, particularly in religious contexts where rituals serve as a powerful form of symbolic interaction. As defined by Carey and Adam (2008) and Lightstone et al. (2006), rituals are symbolic acts that convey shared meanings, values, and beliefs within a community. In religious tourism, rituals are central to how pilgrims engage with sacred sites and each other. They provide a structured means of communication that goes beyond words, incorporating gestures, symbols, and collective practices to convey deep spiritual and cultural messages. For instance, acts such as prayer, offerings, and the movement through sacred spaces are not only religious practices but also communicative acts that express a common belief system, reinforcing cultural identity and group solidarity.

The role of ritual in constructing shared meaning is particularly significant in religious tourism, where the convergence of people from various cultural backgrounds can create both opportunities and challenges for communication. Rituals offer a way to transcend language barriers and create a universal language of symbols and actions that pilgrims from different cultural contexts can interpret and engage with. Through participation in these rituals, pilgrims reinforce their individual and collective identities, and in the process, they foster a sense of belonging to a larger community that transcends national, ethnic, or linguistic boundaries. In this way, ritual communication acts as a bridge between the local and the global, allowing diverse cultural expressions to come together in a shared sacred experience.

Despite its importance, ritual communication remains an underexplored area within the study of religious tourism. Much of the existing research focuses on the religious or economic dimensions of tourism, with limited attention given to how ritual practices function as a form of communication, especially in multicultural pilgrimage settings. While the symbolic nature of rituals has been well-documented in communication studies, there is a lack of in-depth analysis regarding how these rituals specifically function in the context of religious tourism, where visitors from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds interact with and interpret the same rituals in different ways.

The exploration of ritual communication in religious tourism, particularly in multicultural pilgrimages, is limited. Few studies have addressed how rituals at religious sites facilitate communication across cultural divides or how these rituals are adapted or interpreted by different cultural groups. The dynamics of how rituals help to negotiate meaning and reinforce cultural and spiritual identities in the context of religious tourism remain under-examined. Research focusing on how ritual communication operates in multicultural religious tourism would provide deeper insights into the ways in which sacred practices function as a form of intercultural dialogue and collective meaning-making.

2.2. Religious Tourism

2.2.1. Definition and Key Concepts

Religious tourism, often interchangeably referred to as faith-based tourism, is a form of travel where individuals visit destinations that hold religious, spiritual, or cultural significance. According to Raj & Morpeth (2007) and Timothy & Olsen (2006), religious tourism is driven by a desire to engage with sacred spaces, participate in

religious rituals, or experience the cultural heritage associated with religious practices. This form of tourism is not solely motivated by leisure but is deeply intertwined with an individual's spiritual or religious needs. Pilgrims travel to sacred sites as an expression of faith, seeking religious fulfillment, solace, or connection to the divine.

A key distinction in the study of religious tourism is the differentiation between "religious tourism" and "pilgrimage." While both involve travel to sacred sites, pilgrimage is generally understood as a more purposeful, often long-term journey motivated by religious devotion and a specific spiritual goal, such as fulfilling an obligation, seeking healing, or experiencing spiritual growth. Religious tourism, on the other hand, can be broader, encompassing visits to sacred sites that are not necessarily tied to an individual's religious practice or spiritual purpose. For instance, tourists may visit religious sites out of cultural curiosity, historical interest, or to participate in specific religious events or festivals.

Motivational factors for religious tourism are multifaceted. For many, faith is the primary driving force behind their travel. Pilgrims are motivated by the desire to deepen their spiritual connection, seek divine intervention, or fulfill a religious obligation (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Others may be motivated by cultural curiosity, seeking to experience and understand different religious traditions and practices, which can provide valuable insights into local cultures and beliefs. Additionally, religious tourists may seek personal transformation or enlightenment through spiritual experiences, such as meditation or prayer, that are offered at religious sites. The mix of these motivations highlights the diverse nature of religious tourism, where personal beliefs and cultural factors intertwine to shape travel decisions and behaviors.

While there is a substantial body of research on religious tourism in general, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific motivations and behaviors of religious tourists, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. This region, which is home to a rich diversity of religious practices and sacred sites, presents unique opportunities and challenges for studying religious tourism. Further research is needed to explore the specific motivations of religious tourists in Southeast Asia, as cultural, social, and political factors may influence religious travel in ways that differ from those observed in Western or other non-Asian contexts. By focusing on Southeast Asia, scholars can gain a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between religion, culture, and tourism in this region, contributing to a more comprehensive theory of religious tourism.

2.2.2. Religious Tourism in the Indonesian Context

Indonesia, with its rich tapestry of religious traditions and cultural diversity, has become an increasingly significant destination for religious tourism (Hutabarat, 2023). As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Islamic heritage sites form a major component of Indonesia's religious tourism landscape (Soi et al., 2023). These sites, which include mosques, shrines, and historical Islamic landmarks, attract both domestic and international pilgrims seeking spiritual experiences or a connection to the country's Islamic heritage. In addition to Islamic sites, Indonesia is home to a variety of religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems, further enhancing its appeal as a religious tourism destination.

The development of religious tourism in Indonesia is deeply rooted in the nation's religious and cultural history. According to Sudarman et al. (2021) Indonesia has been a hub of Islamic scholarship and culture, particularly through the spread of Islam along trade routes and the establishment of influential Islamic kingdoms for centuries. This historical legacy is reflected in numerous sacred sites that continue to draw worshippers and tourists alike. Additionally, Indonesia's diversity of cultures contributes significantly to the appeal of religious tourism. For example, in West Nusa Tenggara, the Sasak culture offers unique insights into local traditions and customs that are often intertwined with Islamic practices, creating a distinctive religious tourism experience. The blending of Islamic teachings with local cultural values, rituals, and customs presents a rich cultural tapestry for visitors, enhancing the spiritual and educational dimensions of religious tourism (Mahmudulhassan, 2024).

A key aspect of religious tourism in Indonesia is the role of local wisdom in shaping the visitor experience. (Andari et al., 2020). For instance, the Sasak people of Lombok have integrated Islamic practices with indigenous traditions, creating a cultural-religious identity that is uniquely local (Nuruddin, 2023). Pilgrims and tourists who visit sacred sites in this region not only engage with the religious elements of their visit but also experience the cultural narratives that are integral to the community's worldview (Prunawamati, Jie & Hatane, 2022). This interplay of religious and cultural elements is central to the Indonesian religious tourism experience, allowing visitors to engage with both spiritual and cultural dimensions simultaneously (Vidal-Casselas, Aulet & Crous-Costa, 2019).

In the context of religious tourism and sacred site preservation in Indonesia, environmental conditions are not merely logistical or aesthetic concerns—they carry deep cultural and spiritual significance. Many pilgrimage destinations are judged not only by their spiritual efficacy but also by the environmental integrity of the site. Pilgrims and local communities alike often interpret cleanliness and ecological care as reflections of a site's spiritual legitimacy. Within this cultural framework emerges the "clear and clean" paradigm, a concept rooted in indigenous philosophies that equate physical purity (*clean*) with spiritual clarity or sanctity (*clear*).

The "clear and clean" principle is particularly salient in traditions such as Javanese and Sasak cosmologies, where nature is seen as sacred and cleanliness is integral to ritual practice. It reflects a holistic worldview where

the environment, spirit, and community are interlinked. For instance, in the Sasak context of Lombok, the local ethos of *lombok bersih* (clean Lombok) goes beyond public health campaigns; it resonates with spiritual responsibility and cultural identity. This paradigm provides a lens through which the management and lived experience of sacred sites like the Loang Baloq Tomb can be understood—not just as touristic locations, but as spaces that demand environmental stewardship as a form of worship.

Theoretically grounded in Tjahjani & Sondakh's (2023) exploration of Javanese philosophies that link environmental purity with spiritual sanctity, this study extends the analysis to the Sasak context through the lens of the *"clear and clean"* paradigm—an aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual ideal embedded in the local expression *lombok bersih* (clean Lombok). Empirical observations at the Loang Baloq Tomb reveal visible challenges in maintaining environmental cleanliness, including unmanaged waste accumulation around ritual zones, particularly during high visitor periods such as religious holidays. While local community members perform routine clean-ups every Friday as part of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), these efforts remain inconsistent and unsupported by structured policies or infrastructural support (e.g., waste bins, signage, or environmental guidelines). Compared to Bukit Kasih Kanonang's state-facilitated eco-pilgrimage framework—where interfaith harmony is symbolically reinforced through formal waste management and landscape zoning—Loang Baloq represents an informal, ritual-based ecological ethic that lacks institutional reinforcement. This discrepancy illustrates how the *clear and clean* principle functions not only as a cultural norm but as a critical metric for assessing the sustainability of sacred tourism sites. Without integrated environmental planning, Loang Baloq risks ecological degradation that may undermine both its spiritual authority and visitor experience in the long term.

While religious tourism in Indonesia has been the subject of some research, there remains an underexplored area regarding how Indonesian sacred sites function as intercultural spaces for visitors from different cultural backgrounds. As Indonesia attracts an increasing number of international tourists, especially from diverse parts of Asia, the Middle East, and beyond, the role of these sacred sites in facilitating intercultural interactions remains largely overlooked (Subaniyah et al., 2024). According to Lattu (2019), religious sites in Indonesia, which often serve as focal points for diverse religious and cultural expressions, offer unique opportunities for intercultural exchange and dialogue. However, there is limited research on how visitors from different cultural or religious backgrounds engage with these sites and the rituals performed there. Further investigation into how these sacred spaces act as platforms for intercultural communication could provide valuable insights into the ways that religious tourism fosters mutual understanding, respect, and shared spiritual experiences among diverse populations.

2.3. Integrating Intercultural Communication and Religious Tourism

Intercultural communication is central to understanding how individuals from diverse backgrounds interact within religious tourism contexts. Religious tourism often brings together people from different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds, which creates a unique environment for intercultural dialogue. At sacred sites, the communication process is not merely about verbal exchanges but involves non-verbal cues, rituals, symbols, and practices that communicate shared beliefs, values, and identities across cultures (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019).. Through this lens, intercultural communication becomes a dynamic process that facilitates mutual understanding and respect, as well as the negotiation of meaning between diverse cultural groups. This is especially pertinent in religious tourism, where visitors may engage in rituals, observe local customs, or participate in community events that carry deep cultural and spiritual significance.

Rituals serve as a unique form of symbolic communication that transcends cultural barriers. Ritual communication is an essential aspect of religious tourism as it plays a key role in shaping visitor interaction and meaning-making (Sharpley, 2022). According to Klyukanov (2020), through rituals—such as prayers, offerings, pilgrimages, and other religious practices—visitors engage in acts that convey shared beliefs, reinforce group identities, and create a collective experience. These rituals act as communicative acts that provide visitors with opportunities to express their spiritual experiences, connect with the divine, and build a sense of community. Ritual communication thus functions as both a form of cultural expression and an interactive space where meanings are negotiated and created between different groups.

In the context of religious tourism, the interpretation of rituals can vary across cultural backgrounds, and how these rituals are communicated plays a pivotal role in shaping visitors' experiences and understanding of sacred sites (Pande & Shi, 2023). The way visitors perceive and engage with rituals can influence their spiritual journey, as well as their broader interaction with local customs and beliefs (Tanjung & Tanjung, 2023). Understanding ritual communication, therefore, provides essential insights into how religious tourism fosters a deeper connection not only with the sacred but also between people from diverse cultural and religious traditions (Duda, 2019).

This combined approach highlights how the dynamic process of intercultural communication enhances the visitor's experience of religious rituals, enabling cross-cultural exchange, spiritual engagement, and deeper meaning-making at sacred sites. This integration framework will serve as a guiding lens in analyzing how visitors from different cultural backgrounds interact with religious rituals, the role of communication in facilitating these interactions, and the broader impact of religious tourism on intercultural understanding and spiritual experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how individuals experience and make meaning of intercultural communication and religious tourism practices at the Loang Baloq Tomb in Indonesia. Phenomenology is particularly suited for capturing lived experiences and the subjective realities of participants in culturally and spiritually rich contexts (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Rather than examining institutional structures or site management strategies, this research focuses on the personal, spiritual, and intercultural dimensions of pilgrimage and visitation. By investigating how individuals perceive and interpret their encounters at Loang Baloq, the study aims to uncover the meanings attributed to rituals, intercultural interactions, and religious motivations within a uniquely Indonesian sacred site.

3.2. Data Collection

This study utilized purposive sampling to select participants with firsthand experience of the Loang Baloq Tomb's cultural and religious significance. The sample was composed of local worshippers, tourists (both domestic and international), site caretakers, and community leaders. Purposive sampling ensured that participants represented diverse perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding religious tourism at Loang Baloq.

A total of 25 participants were selected based on their direct involvement with the site. Local worshippers were included to gain insights into the spiritual and cultural motivations behind pilgrimage practices. Tourists were interviewed to explore their intercultural engagement and experiences of religious tourism. Site caretakers and community leaders provided valuable perspectives on the management and preservation of sacred spaces.

The open-ended questions used in the semi-structured interviews were developed to align with the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the study, particularly focusing on the theories of intercultural communication and religious tourism. These questions were designed to probe the key research objectives, ensuring that the responses would provide insight into both the intercultural aspects of visitor interactions and the religious tourism experience. Some of the main question points included:

1. Motivations for Visiting Loang Baloq: What prompted you to visit Loang Baloq? What significance does the site hold for you personally? (This explores the spiritual, cultural, and recreational motivations behind religious tourism.)

2. Experiences of Religious Tourism: How do you experience the rituals and practices at Loang Baloq? How do you feel about the interaction with local worshippers and other visitors from different cultural backgrounds? (This addresses intercultural communication and ritual participation.)

3. Ritual Communication: Can you describe any rituals or practices you have participated in during your visit to Loang Baloq? What do these rituals mean to you? (This question examines ritual communication and its role in religious tourism.)

4. Cultural Preservation and Tourism Development: In your opinion, how is the site being managed to balance tourism development and cultural preservation? (This explores the intersection of tourism and heritage management.)

These open-ended questions allowed for in-depth responses that reflected the diverse experiences and viewpoints of the participants, while also ensuring alignment with the study's theoretical framework. Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The fieldwork took place over a three-month period to ensure prolonged engagement with the site and to capture a wide range of visitor behaviors and ritual activities.

A total of 25 in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring coverage of key topics. The interviews provided rich data on participants' motivations, experiences, and perspectives related to religious tourism, ritual communication, cultural preservation, and tourism development. All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in the representation of responses.

3.3. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was employed to ensure transparency and depth in data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis started with data familiarization. Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reviewing interview transcripts, field notes, and documents. Then the data were systematically coded using NVivo software to enhance consistency and traceability. Codes included "ritual symbolism," "tourist engagement," "sacred site commercialization," and "community role in preservation." Codes were clustered into broader themes relevant to the research questions. Key themes identified were: ritual communication (examining how verbal and non-verbal symbols reinforce religious and cultural identity); sacredness vs. commercialization (analyzing tensions between maintaining sacred authenticity and economic benefits); sustainable tourism (exploring local efforts to balance

preservation and tourism development). Themes were then analyzed in relation to theoretical frameworks on ritual communication, religious tourism, and sustainable heritage management.

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure respect for participants' rights and cultural practices. Measures included: obtaining informed consent from all participants; ensuring the voluntary nature of participation, with the option to withdraw at any time; anonymizing participant identities unless explicit permission was granted; adhering to local customs and religious protocols while conducting research to avoid disrupting sacred rituals.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overview of Participants' Demographics

A total of 25 participants were involved in this study, representing a range of roles and cultural backgrounds relevant to the context of religious tourism and intercultural communication at Loang Baloq Tomb. The following table summarizes key characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

Code	Role	Gender	Age Range	Background
P1	Local worshipper	Male	50–60	Sasak ethnic, lifelong resident
P2	Domestic tourist	Female	30–40	Muslim, visitor from Yogyakarta
P3	Site caretaker	Male	40–50	Involved in daily site maintenance
P4	Religious leader	Male	60–70	Local kyai, respected spiritual guide
P5	International tourist	Female	20–30	Muslim, Malaysian traveler
P6	Local worshipper	Female	40–50	Sasak, community prayer group member
P7	Domestic tourist	Male	25–35	Visitor from Surabaya, seeking spiritual healing
P8	International tourist	Male	30–40	Muslim, pilgrim from Singapore
P9	Site caretaker	Female	30–40	Works with family maintaining tomb area
P10	Local worshipper	Male	60–70	Regular Friday prayer visitor
P11	Religious leader	Female	50–60	Female ustazah, local teacher
P12	Domestic tourist	Female	20–30	Visiting with family, from Bandung
P13	Local worshipper	Female	30–40	Mother of three, part of local recitation circle
P14	International tourist	Male	40–50	Indonesian diaspora, visiting from Australia
P15	Domestic tourist	Male	35–45	Participant in local ziarah tour
P16	Site caretaker	Male	20–30	Young assistant to main caretaker
P17	Religious leader	Male	50–60	Imam of nearby mosque
P18	Local worshipper	Male	30–40	Market vendor, regular pilgrim
P19	Domestic tourist	Female	40–50	Participated in local pengajian trip
P20	International tourist	Female	50–60	Bruneian traveler on cultural-religious tour
P21	Local worshipper	Male	25–35	Young teacher, involved in youth dakwah
P22	Site caretaker	Female	40–50	Tomb cleaning and maintenance volunteer
P23	Domestic tourist	Female	60–70	Elderly woman seeking barakah visit
P24	International tourist	Male	30–40	Traveler from Middle East
P25	Community leader	Male	50–60	Head of village council, tourism committee

The diverse composition of participants provided a rich foundation for exploring the intercultural and spiritual dimensions of religious tourism. Local worshippers and community leaders offered insights into ritual practices, local interpretations of spirituality, and the socio-religious meaning of the site. Meanwhile, tourists—both domestic and international—shared experiences of encountering different religious expressions, cultural customs, and their motivations for visiting Loang Baloq.

The inclusion of caretakers added perspectives on how sacred space is maintained and mediated for diverse visitors. The range of genders and age groups also provided variation in worldview, generational perceptions, and depth of spiritual reflection, which enriched the phenomenological understanding of how individuals make meaning of their visit to Loang Baloq.

4.2. Religious Tourism Experience at Loang Baloq

Loang Baloq has long been recognized as a sacred pilgrimage site in West Nusa Tenggara, attracting a broad spectrum of visitors ranging from devout local worshippers to curious international tourists. Analysis of the 25 in-depth interviews and field observations reveals rich and layered experiences of religious tourism at the site, encompassing varied motivations, ritual practices, and emotional reflections.

Participants shared multiple motivations for visiting Loang Baloq. First, spiritual seeking. Many pilgrims, particularly local worshippers and domestic tourists (e.g., P1, P2, P7), sought closeness to Allah, hoping for healing, guidance, or barakah (blessings). Second, cultural heritage. Others (e.g., P5, P8, P14) were drawn by the site's historical and cultural resonance, wishing to connect with Islamic figures or explore Nusantara religiosity.

Third, curiosity and tourism. Some international and domestic tourists (e.g., P12, P24) came out of curiosity or as part of spiritual tourism packages.

All participants observed or participated in religious rituals at Loang Baloq. These included: prayer and supplication (du'a) at the tombs; cleansing rituals using spring water near the site; offerings such as incense, flowers, and traditional food items; and narratives of miracles and healing reported by locals (P6, P23)

Pilgrims described feelings of peace, spiritual elevation, and even awe when visiting the tombs. For instance, P15 stated:

"I feel very at peace here. Even though this is not an obligatory worship, I can focus more deeply here than elsewhere."

International visitor P20 added:

"There's something about the atmosphere here—it feels sacred, not just because of the rituals, but the people's faith, their stories, their reverence."

P2 (domestic tourist):

"I came here to ask for inner peace. There is a different aura in Loang Baloq."

P6 (local worshipper):

"Many people say that after visiting Datuk Laut's grave, their illnesses are cured. But what's important is that the intention is sincere."

P14 (diaspora tourist):

"I grew up hearing about this tomb from my grandmother in Java. Now seeing it in person feels surreal."

Field Note, 14 August 2022:

"Several families gathered near the Orphan's Tomb, whispering prayers while children bathed in spring water. A local guide recounted Sheikh Gaus' journey and his miracles."

Table 2: Emerging Themes from Participant Narratives on Religious Tourism

Theme	Participants	Brief Description
Spiritual motivation	P1, P2, P7, P10, P15, P23	Seeking healing, guidance, inner peace, barakah
Cultural-historical interest	P5, P8, P14, P20	Learning about the site's religious legacy and Islamic history
Ritual participation	P1, P6, P13, P18, P19	Engaging in du'a, cleansing, offerings
Emotional-spiritual resonance	P2, P11, P15, P20, P21	Describing personal transformation, spiritual clarity, emotional peace
Tourism experience (guided visit)	P12, P24, P19	Coming as part of a tour or out of curiosity
Witnessing or hearing miracle stories	P3, P6, P17, P23	Testimonials of spiritual or physical healing after visitation

The experiences at Loang Baloq reflect broader patterns in religious tourism literature. According to Timothy and Olsen (2006), religious tourism often combines spiritual practice with cultural exploration—precisely the fusion seen at Loang Baloq. Pilgrims do not only come to fulfill religious duties but also to participate in collective memory and cultural storytelling (Manalu, 2023).

Additionally, Cohen's (1992) concept of "pilgrimage-tourism continuum" is observable, as some visitors (e.g., P12, P24) engaged more with the touristic aspects, while others (e.g., P1, P15) immersed themselves deeply in worship. Loang Baloq represents a unique intersection where customary Sasak spirituality, Islamic legacy, and modern tourism infrastructure blend—echoing Timothy's assertion that sacred places often become hybrid spaces of negotiation between religion and tourism.

4.3. Intercultural Encounters and Communication

Loang Baloq, as both a sacred and touristic site, functions as a rich space for intercultural interaction. The fieldwork data reveal a complex web of communication between diverse actors: pilgrims from different regions of Indonesia, local Sasak community members, caretakers of the site, and international visitors (Hellman, 2019). Through these interactions, meanings are negotiated across religious, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

Participants consistently described intercultural interactions as frequent and significant. Caretakers (e.g., P4, P6) often serve as informal cultural mediators, translating the symbolic meanings of rituals for tourists unfamiliar with local customs. Locals express both pride in and concern about how their heritage is understood by outsiders.

P3 (site caretaker):

"When guests from outside the area come, they usually ask a lot of questions. We help explain—this tomb is not for worship, but to take wisdom and history from it."

P14 (foreign tourist):

"I didn't know what to expect. But the guide was very welcoming and explained things in a way that made me feel respectful, not intrusive."

Communication at Loang Baloq takes place not just through language, but also symbols, gestures, and non-verbal cues: the gesture of removing shoes before entering sacred spaces, offering incense or flowers as a sign of respect, and the use of local greetings like "Assalamu'alaikum" and hand-placing-on-chest as an acknowledgment of reverence.

Locals often adapt their language, switching between Sasak, Indonesian, and simple English when speaking with outsiders. Several participants noted moments of confusion, but also learning and appreciation.

P16 (young local vendor):

"Sometimes foreign guests ask questions, I understand a little English. We just learn from each other."

Some tourists misinterpreted rituals as superstitious acts, while locals worried about their practices being seen as non-Islamic. Yet, these moments became opportunities for learning:

P14 (diaspora visitor):

"I initially thought it was just a graveyard, but after talking with locals, I realized how deeply embedded the values are in the culture and religion."

Hospitality emerged as a strong cultural marker. Visitors repeatedly emphasized how warmly they were welcomed, even when misunderstandings occurred.

P3 (caretaker):

"We want guests to feel comfortable, but also understand that this is a sacred place, not a tourist attraction."

P20 (foreign backpacker):

"I felt unsure about taking pictures, but the local boy showed me where it was okay and where it wasn't. It made the experience much more respectful."

Field Note, 15 August 2022:

"A domestic visitor from Central Java asked about the practice of sprinkling flower petals. A Sasak guide explained its cultural roots while reinforcing its alignment with local Islamic tradition."

Table 3: Intercultural Themes from Participant Narratives

Theme	Participants	Brief Description
Intercultural curiosity	P5, P12, P14, P20	Tourists eager to learn about rituals, history, and spiritual meanings
Role of caretakers as mediators	P4, P6, P10	Locals guide visitors in understanding site etiquette and spiritual context
Multilingual and symbolic communication	P4, P9, P13, P21	Use of local language, religious phrases, gestures, and nonverbal cues
Cultural misunderstanding	P8, P12, P22	Misinterpretations of practices as superstition or animism
Expressions of hospitality	P2, P7, P14, P19	Visitors' appreciation of being welcomed and included in local activities
Religious-cultural negotiation	P6, P11, P15, P18	Locals balancing between Islamic faith and cultural expressions of spirituality

These intercultural experiences can be contextualized through Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (1995), which posits that effective intercultural communication occurs when individuals manage uncertainty and anxiety through mindfulness and empathy. Many participants (locals and tourists alike) displayed openness, curiosity, and adaptive behavior, aligning with this theoretical framework.

Additionally, Broeder's (2021) high-context vs. low-context communication styles are evident. The local Sasak community, with high-context communication (rich in implicit meaning and ritual), contrasted with low-context tourists needing explicit explanations. Successful interactions occurred when either party made efforts to decode or adapt to these communication styles.

Loang Baloq thus becomes not only a site of spiritual pilgrimage, but also a living classroom for intercultural understanding, where gestures, narratives, and hospitality play crucial roles in shaping meaningful cross-cultural engagement.

4.4. Ritual Communication as Shared Meaning-Making

At Loang Baloq, ritual communication emerges not merely as a set of religious practices but as a symbolic and participatory mode of meaning-making. Drawing on Carey and Adam (2008) ritual view of communication, which emphasizes communication as a process of maintaining society over time through shared beliefs and experiences, the rituals performed at this sacred site act as communal expressions of solidarity, reverence, and cultural identity. The rituals at Loang Baloq—including prayer recitations, cleansing in the sea, offering flower petals, and circumambulating tombs—are not only spiritual acts but also forms of non-verbal communication that transmit values, norms, and histories.

Participants often spoke of these acts as a way to connect with ancestors, feel divine presence, or express collective longing and healing.

P1 (local pilgrim):

"We came not only to pray, but to feel at one with history and people who came from various regions."

P12 (domestic tourist from Java):

"When I water flowers on a grave, it feels like I'm sending prayers and love, without having to speak."

These symbolic acts reinforce a sense of shared spiritual language, even when verbal languages or cultural backgrounds differ.

Despite the diverse origins of visitors—ranging from local Sasak residents, domestic pilgrims, to international tourists—the ritual format offers a common ground. Tourists are often guided informally by locals or caretakers in how to participate respectfully. In doing so, rituals become a platform of inclusivity.

P3 (caretaker):

"Sometimes they don't know what to do. But if we give them an example, they just follow along. Slowly they get the point."

P7 (visitor from Surabaya):

"I'm not a Muslim, but I pray as much as I can. What's important is that the intention is good and respectful."

This dynamic reflects the ritual view of communication as defined by Carey—emphasizing the power of shared participation in sustaining cultural meanings.

P6 (middle-aged Sasak woman):

"Even though we don't know the same prayer, the tears and emotion show that we understand each other."

P12 (youth visitor from Bandung):

"At first I just followed along, but when I prayed and scattered flowers, I felt at peace. It was like I was connected to the divine."

Field Note, 27 July 2022:

"During the Friday afternoon ritual, a group of Javanese pilgrims quietly followed the Sasak elder's movements. There was no spoken instruction, but the rhythm of gestures created a shared sacred atmosphere."

Table 4: Ritual Communication Elements and Their Meanings

Ritual Act	Symbolic Meaning	Common Participants
Sprinkling flower petals	Respect for the deceased, continuation of blessings	Locals, tourists, caretakers
Sea cleansing (ritual bathing)	Spiritual purification, releasing burdens	Pilgrims, healing-seekers
Circumambulating the tomb	Seeking barakah (spiritual energy), humility before God	Sasak elders, visiting Muslims
Lighting incense	Calling upon spiritual presence, honoring ancestors	Older local women, heritage tourists
Reading Qur'an at tombside	Blessing the soul of the deceased, merit-making	Devout Muslim visitors

This communal meaning-making through ritual communication aligns with Carey and Adam (2008) argument that the ritual model is not about the transmission of information, but the maintenance of belief systems, identity, and cultural continuity. Loang Baloq serves as a lived manifestation of such a communication model, where shared rituals communicate more than words ever could.

In such settings, rituals function as a cultural grammar, accessible to all through participation rather than doctrinal knowledge. Even when visitors do not share the same religion or language, they are invited into a shared affective and symbolic space, promoting spiritual empathy, intercultural understanding, and communal respect.

4.5. Role of Local Communities in Shaping Visitor Experience

The local community surrounding the Loang Baloq Tomb plays a crucial and multifaceted role in shaping the religious and cultural tourism experience. As hosts, guides, and cultural mediators, they act as bridges between sacred traditions and modern tourism dynamics.

Their active participation not only preserves local wisdom and spiritual values, but also ensures that visitors—regardless of origin—can engage meaningfully with the site. However, this role is not without tension, as community members often find themselves navigating between tradition and commercialized tourism expectations.

Local residents, especially elders, caretakers, and informal guides, contribute significantly by providing orientation, leading rituals, and interpreting cultural meaning.

P3 (local caretaker):

"Sometimes visitors come without knowing anything. We help them not to take the wrong steps, especially in a sacred place."

P4 (Sasak elder and religious leader):

"We consider this place not a tourist attraction, but a place of worship. So someone has to explain that to the guests."

Community narratives reflect a commitment to ensuring that rituals are respected and that visitors learn about the historical and spiritual value of Loang Baloq.

For many locals, the tomb is not just a tourist site—it is a center of ancestral connection, healing, and spirituality. They play an active role in maintaining cleanliness, organizing rituals, and transmitting oral traditions. This cultural stewardship sustains the intangible heritage of the site.

P9 (female herbal healer):

"From the past, people came here not just for a walk. They were looking for peace, or asking for healing. We taught them how to do it so they don't have wrong intentions."

P16 (youth volunteer):

"I help guard and clean the grave. So that when outsiders come, they will see that this is a respectable place."

Despite their vital role, community members express concern over the growing commercialization and superficial engagement of some tourists. These concerns highlight a fragile balance between maintaining sacred traditions and welcoming public interest.

P3 (caretaker):

"There are also those who come just for social media content. No prayers, no respect. That's what we fear: losing meaning."

Field Note, 28 July 2022:

"During a guided tour, a visitor attempted to climb the tomb fence to take a photo. A caretaker gently intervened and offered an explanation about respecting the space."

These moments illustrate the intercultural negotiation at play, with the local community taking on an often-unrecognized role as custodians of sacred conduct.

To deepen the understanding of Loang Baloq as a religious tourism site, it is essential to situate it within a broader comparative framework. While the site possesses unique intercultural and spiritual dimensions rooted in Sasak traditions, similar dynamics are observable in other religious tourism destinations across Indonesia and beyond. For instance, the structured pilgrimage model of Bukit Kasih Kanonang in North Sulawesi exemplifies how formal interfaith symbolism and environmental protocols—such as designated worship zones and organized waste management—can coexist within a state-supported tourism agenda. In contrast, Loang Baloq relies heavily on community-led rituals and informal environmental efforts such as Jumat bersih (Friday clean-up), reflecting a more organic and localized approach. Similarly, sites like Sendangsono in Central Java or Lingsar Temple in Lombok demonstrate varying degrees of intercultural and interreligious engagement, where Hindu and Muslim

communities co-participate in sacred events. These comparisons reveal both shared challenges—such as balancing sacredness with accessibility—and distinctive strategies of management and meaning-making. Integrating such comparative perspectives not only strengthens the analytical scope of this study but also highlights how Loang Baloq contributes a distinct model to the evolving discourse on religious tourism and intercultural communication in Southeast Asia.

A useful point of comparison is the *Wali Songo* pilgrimage network in Java, where the graves of Islamic saints have become prominent religious tourism destinations attracting both domestic and international pilgrims. Unlike Loang Baloq, where visitors' motivations are often diverse and include healing, personal vows, and heritage exploration, the *Wali Songo* sites tend to focus more heavily on orthodox Islamic pilgrimage practices (Sutopo & Subiyantoro, 2018). However, both types of sites demonstrate how cultural and spiritual traditions adapt to the influx of modern tourism. In Loang Baloq, local caretakers and elders act as mediators of meaning, offering informal explanations and guiding rituals that blend animistic, Islamic, and local beliefs—practices that may not always align with formal religious doctrine. This interplay reveals a distinct intercultural dynamic not always present in the more institutionally managed sites of Java, where religious orthodoxy is more firmly maintained. Thus, Loang Baloq provides an example of how religious tourism can foster more flexible and dialogic forms of cultural expression, especially in multicultural settings.

In the Southeast Asian context, sites like *Wat Phra That Doi Suthep* in Chiang Mai, Thailand, also provide instructive parallels. There, intercultural encounters between foreign tourists and local Buddhists often lead to tensions around dress codes, ritual behaviors, and photography (Cohen, 2008). The temple authorities have responded with multilingual signage, guided tours, and controlled spaces to manage these interactions. In comparison, Loang Baloq lacks such formal infrastructure but allows spontaneous intercultural communication to flourish through everyday interactions—such as shared meals during pilgrimage, informal storytelling, and local hospitality. While this openness can lead to misunderstandings, it also creates opportunities for deeper cultural exchange and mutual learning. As religious tourism continues to expand in Indonesia, Loang Baloq's model may offer a grassroots alternative to top-down tourism development, one that prioritizes community agency and localized intercultural negotiation over rigid institutional control.

Moreover, the comparative absence of rigid authority structures in Loang Baloq highlights a valuable insight for sustainable religious tourism. Scholars like Timothy and Olsen (2006) have long emphasized the role of local engagement and vernacular spirituality in sustaining pilgrimage sites. While places like Lourdes in France or Meiji Shrine in Japan benefit from state or religious institutional support, they also tend to homogenize visitor experience through standardized rituals and tourism flows. Loang Baloq's informal systems—ranging from family-based caretaking to community-organized cleaning rituals—present a contrasting but equally significant model. These practices reflect a hybrid approach to managing sacred spaces where intercultural and interreligious values can be continually negotiated rather than pre-defined. Such an environment not only accommodates diverse visitor experiences but also preserves local wisdom as a living and adaptive force in heritage management.

Literature on community-based tourism and heritage preservation emphasizes the importance of involving local communities not just as service providers, but as cultural agents (Moayerian et al., 2022). The experience at Loang Baloq aligns with these insights, demonstrating that local communities shape not only the visitor journey, but also the narrative and value of the site. Their cultural knowledge is central to sustaining the site's authenticity and spiritual integrity. Thus, empowering local voices is key to ethical tourism that honors sacred traditions. In this sense, Loang Baloq is not just a pilgrimage destination, but a living heritage space, continuously negotiated and co-produced by community actors.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the lived experiences of religious tourists and local actors at the Loang Baloq Tomb in Indonesia through a phenomenological lens, focusing on the dimensions of religious tourism and intercultural communication. Drawing on rich qualitative data—including participant interviews, field observations, and ritual encounters—the findings reveal that Loang Baloq is more than a site of pilgrimage or local worship. It is a vibrant cultural and spiritual space where religious devotion, local wisdom, and intercultural exchange converge in everyday practice.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the growing dialogue between religious tourism and intercultural communication scholarship. It demonstrates how ritual communication functions as a system of shared meaning-making across cultural boundaries, aligning with Carey and Adam (2008) ritual view of communication. Moreover, the findings emphasize the active role of local communities—not just as custodians of tradition, but as communicators and interpreters of sacred knowledge for visiting outsiders. This supports a more dynamic understanding of sacred sites as spaces where heritage, belief, and interaction are co-produced in real time.

Practically, these insights have important implications for religious tourism management. Site managers, cultural authorities, and tourism stakeholders must recognize that sacred spaces like Loang Baloq are not merely destinations, but deeply relational environments. Visitors engage in more than sightseeing—they participate in rituals, navigate symbols, and interact with local hosts in ways that reflect both curiosity and reverence. As such,

tourism planning should prioritize respectful engagement and community-centered practices (Kim, Kim & King, 2020). Strengthening the involvement of local residents as guides and educators, offering intercultural orientation tools, and protecting the integrity of ritual practices are key steps toward sustainable, inclusive site management.

Intercultural communication emerges in this context not as a separate agenda, but as an embedded reality of sacred tourism (Liu, Gallois & Volcic, 2023). Visitors and locals alike are constantly engaged in negotiating meaning, interpreting unfamiliar gestures, navigating language differences, and expressing spiritual connection. The Loang Baloq experience shows that, under the right conditions, sacred spaces can serve as bridges of understanding, fostering empathy and mutual respect across cultural lines. These insights are particularly relevant in a multicultural society like Indonesia, where spiritual practices are often entwined with diverse ethnic and cultural expressions (Hoon, 2017).

Looking forward, future research could expand this work by exploring other sacred sites across the Indonesian archipelago to identify shared patterns and local specificities. The emerging phenomenon of digital religious tourism—including online pilgrimages and virtual sacred experiences—also offers a promising area for further study, particularly in a post-pandemic world (O'Keeffe & Dowson, 2024). Additionally, investigating how youth engage with religious tourism and reinterpret sacred traditions may reveal how cultural transmission evolves across generations. Finally, examining post-visit reflections could shed light on how intercultural spiritual experiences are internalized, remembered, and transformed over time.

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