

Cultural heritage, religious tradition, and tourism potential: The Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam Muslim community in Langkat, Indonesia



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Abstract This study aims to explore the cultural heritage and religious traditions of the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam Muslim community in Langkat, North Sumatra, and examine its potential as a historical and religious tourism destination. The method used is a qualitative approach, with data collection techniques including literature review, field observations, and in-depth interviews with community leaders and members of the congregation. The results indicate that Babussalam holds significant historical value as a center for the spread of Islam and the congregation in East Sumatra since the 19th century. The Babussalam complex serves not only as a spiritual center but also as a space for social interaction and the preservation of religious traditions, including dhikr rituals, *haul* (annual commemoration of the death of a religious figure), and *tarekat* (Islamic recitation) recitations. These cultural and spiritual values position Babussalam as a unique religious heritage with a strong appeal for tourists interested in Islamic history, Sufism, and local wisdom. However, developing this area as a tourist destination requires strategies that are sensitive to the community's spirituality to avoid compromising its primary function as a place of worship. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural heritage preservation and community-based tourism development to support social, cultural, and economic sustainability in Langkat, Indonesia.

Keywords: cultural heritage, religious tradition, religious tourism, Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam

1. Introduction

Religious heritage is an important dimension of cultural history, particularly in regions where spirituality and tradition remain an integral part of social life. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, religious communities not only play a role in shaping belief systems but also contribute to local identities and cultural landscapes (Allerton, 2009; Bouma et al., 2010; Pedersen, 2016; McCloud, 2018). As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia offers diverse examples of how Islamic practices, religious institutions, and spiritual traditions are integrated into daily life (Pohl, 2006; Ali, 2011; Raihani, 2018). Among these traditions, Sufism and the Sufi orders (*tarekat*, religious order) have played a significant role in the history of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago (Howell, 2001; Nur & Abdurahman, 2017; Ismail & Uyuni, 2020). The Naqshbandiyah order, in particular, has had a significant influence on Muslim communities in Sumatra, including in Babussalam, Langkat, North Sumatra (Azhar & Sahfutra, 2022; Rubaidi et al., 2023; Alfurqan et al., 2025).

The Naqshbandiyah Babussalam Complex, Langkat, is one of the most influential Islamic religious centers in the region. Founded in the late 19th century, Babussalam served not only as a spiritual center for followers of the Naqshbandiyah order, but also as a socio-cultural hub that shaped community life. The site is closely linked historically to the leadership of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan, a revered cleric and murshid of the order, whose teachings continue to influence the religious practices of thousands of Muslims in Sumatra and beyond. Over time, Babussalam developed into a vibrant community, where worship practices, *haul* (annual commemoration ceremonies commemorating the death of a religious figure, such as a cleric, kyai, or saint), congregational dhikr (remembrance of God), and *tarekat* recitations are regularly held. These practices represent a valuable intangible heritage, integrated with the tangible heritage of religious buildings, tomb complexes, and the overall cultural landscape of Babussalam.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in developing religious heritage sites as historical and cultural tourism destinations (Sardak et al., 2020; Mekonnen et al., 2022; González-González & Fernández-Álvarez, 2022). Religious tourism is a rapidly growing sector globally, encompassing both spiritual journeys (pilgrimages) and heritage-based tourism (Olsen, 2003; Chhabra, 2021; Bellia et al., 2021; Timothy, 2024). While pilgrimages are driven by spiritual motivations, heritage tourism emphasizes the historical and cultural aspects of religious sites. In the context of Babussalam, these two dimensions coexist. On the one hand, Babussalam remains an active religious space, where spiritual practices are carried out daily. On the other

hand, it also offers a rich historical and cultural narrative, attracting the attention of researchers, cultural tourists, and visitors interested in the history of Islam and Sufism in Indonesia.

The dual role of Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam—as a spiritual center and a potential tourist destination—raises important questions regarding preservation, authenticity, and community participation. Experts emphasize that the commodification of sacred spaces for tourism purposes must be carefully managed to avoid diminishing their spiritual value (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Aulet & Vidal, 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019; Li et al., 2025). However, at the same time, heritage-based tourism can open up economic opportunities for local communities, strengthen cultural education, and support the preservation of traditions vulnerable to modernization. Thus, Babussalam serves as an important case study for examining how religious heritage can be positioned within the framework of cultural tourism and sustainable development.

Langkat, North Sumatra Province itself is known as a region with high cultural diversity, inhabited by ethnic Malays, Batak, Javanese, Chinese, and various other groups (Tanjung et al., 2022). Langkat Regency, where Babussalam is located, has historically been a meeting point for these various cultural currents. In this pluralistic environment, Babussalam emerges as a center of distinctive Muslim identity with its Sufi traditions. The recognition of Babussalam as both a religious site and a cultural heritage site reflects not only the resilience of local religious traditions but also the role of Islam in shaping regional identity. The study of the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam, therefore, makes an important contribution to the broader discussion on the relationship between religion, culture, heritage, and tourism in Indonesia's multicultural landscape.

Discourse on cultural heritage management increasingly emphasizes the need to integrate religious heritage within a framework of sustainable tourism. The UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Convention highlights the importance of simultaneously protecting tangible and intangible heritage (Hüfner, 2000). In the context of Muslim societies, intangible heritage such as dhikr practices, religious study groups, and Sufi teachings cannot be separated from the religious spaces in which they are carried out (Zamhari, 2010; Raverty, 2020; Ahmed, 2021; Nasser, 2022; Bozbaş & Bozbaş, 2025). Babussalam is a clear example of how the continuity of spiritual traditions maintains the cultural significance of the site. Babussalam's potential as a tourist destination lies not in its commercial transformation but in its ability to showcase the coexistence of tradition, spirituality, and community resilience.

Besides its local significance, the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam also holds relevance in global discourses on the role of Sufi orders in contemporary Muslim societies. Across the Islamic world, Sufi communities continue to serve as guardians of spiritual traditions while adapting to the challenges of modernity. In Turkey, Morocco, and South Asia, Sufi orders and centers attract both pilgrims and cultural tourists, sparking debates about the commodification of spirituality, the role of state policy, and local community participation in tourism initiatives (Berriane, 2015; West, 2022). Babussalam offers an Indonesian perspective on these discourses, demonstrating how local Muslim communities negotiate the relationship between preserving spiritual traditions and engaging in heritage tourism. Furthermore, locating the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam within the narrative of Islam in Southeast Asia emphasizes Indonesia's unique contribution to global Islamic civilization. The spread of Sufism in the archipelago played a crucial role in the process of Islamization, deeply rooting it in local cultures (Syam & Ilaihi, 2023). The survival of communities like Babussalam demonstrates the tradition's resilience amidst modernization, globalization, and changing religious discourses. The study of Babussalam as a religious heritage tourism destination is thus not only locally important but also enriches comparative studies on Islam, cultural heritage, and tourism in the Muslim world.

Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam is a living religious heritage site with high historical, cultural, and spiritual value. Babussalam's dual identity as both a sacred space and a potential tourist destination makes it an important object of study in the fields of religious studies, heritage management, and tourism development. By analyzing Babussalam within this interconnected framework, this article seeks to contribute to both academic discourse and practical policy discussions on how religious heritage can be preserved, promoted, and integrated into sustainable cultural tourism in Indonesia and globally.

Babussalam demonstrates how local Muslim communities negotiate the relationship between preserving spiritual traditions and engaging in heritage tourism. While numerous studies have been conducted on Sufi orders and communities in Indonesia, most research focuses on aspects of spirituality, socio-religious roles, and internal community dynamics (Howell, 2001; Zamhari, 2010; Nur & Abdurahman, 2017). Several other studies highlight the dimensions of orders in the formation of local identities and transnational networks (Van Bruinessen, 2007; Rubaidi et al., 2023), while research on religious tourism in Indonesia generally examines pilgrimage practices and the spiritual economy separately from the order context (Olsen, 2003; Timothy, 2024). In this context, this study seeks to advance the existing discourse by integrating two often disparate research domains—namely, studies on Sufi communities and studies on religious heritage tourism—through an empirical study of Babussalam Naqsyabandiyah in Langkat.

This approach offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study broadens the understanding of how Sufi communities adapt to the dynamics of tourism and modernity without losing their spiritual authenticity. Practically, this study provides a conceptual model for how living religious heritage can be sustainably managed through community participation and the preservation of spiritual values. Thus, Babussalam is not only a local example of the interaction between Sufi traditions and tourism, but also a representation of how Islamic heritage can be reconceptualized within the framework of sustainable cultural development in the contemporary Muslim world.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative approach, collecting data through field observations, interviews with religious leaders and community members, and a review of literature related to religious tourism, cultural heritage, and Sufism in Indonesia. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam as both a living religious community and a cultural heritage landscape. The research findings are expected to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to the formulation of policies and practical strategies for developing heritage-based tourism in Muslim regions. This study aims to explore three main dimensions of Babussalam in Langkat: (1) its historical and cultural significance as the center of the Naqsyabandiyah order in Sumatra; (2) the continuity of religious traditions that shape local Muslim identity; and (3) It has potential as a religious heritage tourism destination within the framework of sustainable cultural development. By focusing on these dimensions, this study is expected to provide insights into how religious heritage sites can maintain spiritual integrity while opening up space for tourism development, thereby contributing to cultural preservation and the well-being of local communities.

2. Materials and Methods

This research employed a qualitative method with a case study approach, as the focus of the study was on the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam Muslim community in Langkat, North Sumatra, which is viewed as a unique and complex socio-religious phenomenon. The case study approach was chosen to enable the researcher to fully understand the historical dynamics, religious practices, and religious tourism potential inherent in this community in a real-life context (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Smith, 2015). The research design was developed in stages. The initial stage began with problem identification through a literature review related to cultural heritage, Sufi orders, and religious tourism. From this process, the researcher formulated the research focus and prepared interview guidelines, observation instruments, and documentation strategies to be used in the field. The next stage was data collection at the research location, the Babussalam area. During this stage, the researcher conducted direct observations of religious activities, in-depth interviews with key figures, and documentation of religious activities and artifacts. The collected data was then analyzed in stages through reduction, presentation, and conclusion (Huberman & Miles, 1983). To ensure the validity of the research results, triangulation of sources and methods was conducted, and the findings were confirmed with informants.

The sample size in this study is flexible and follows the principle of data saturation. During the research process, the researchers successfully interviewed 21 key informants consisting of: 3 religious leaders (mursyid and ulama tarekat), 5 Babussalam administrators, 8 active congregation members, 3 local residents who interact directly with the community, and 2 officials from the Langkat Regency tourism and culture office. This number is considered sufficient to reflect the diversity of views and experiences relevant to the research focus. In addition, informal discussions with approximately 10 residents and pilgrims were conducted as supplementary data to understand the social context and public perceptions of Babussalam.

Data collection techniques were combined. Participatory observation was conducted by attending religious activities in Babussalam, such as congregational dhikr (remembrance of God), *haul*, and *tarekat* (Islamic study groups). This method allowed researchers to record the congregation's interaction patterns while also observing the spiritual nuances that animate the community. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format for flexibility, allowing researchers to explore personal experiences, historical narratives, and informants' perspectives on the potential for religious tourism. Supporting data was obtained through documentary studies, including historical archives, manuscripts, and government policies related to cultural heritage management and tourism. Informal discussions with the congregation and the surrounding community were also conducted to broaden understanding of Babussalam's social and religious context.

The data analysis process was based on the model of Miles & Huberman (2014), which emphasizes three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data from interviews, observations, and documentation were first selected to identify relevant information. The focused data was then presented in the form of a thematic narrative, matrix, or organized notes. The final stage of interpretation is carried out by looking for patterns and themes that explain the relationship between cultural heritage, religious practices, community identity, and the potential for religious tourism in Babussalam. The theme identification process was conducted through a thematic analysis approach, following the steps outlined by Clarke & Braun (2017). The first step was data familiarization, in which the researcher reread all interview transcripts and field notes to understand the general context and narrative tone of each informant. Second, the researcher conducted initial open coding to identify data segments related to key topics, such as cultural heritage, tarekat practices, religious identity, and religious tourism. Third, these codes were then grouped into thematic categories based on shared meanings and conceptual relationships. From this process, several key themes emerged, including: Babussalam as a living spiritual space, the social transformation of tarekat communities, and the potential and challenges of developing religious tourism.

Theme validation was conducted through several mechanisms. First, peer debriefing was conducted to review the alignment between the data and the resulting themes, in order to reduce interpretive bias. Second, cross-checking was conducted by comparing findings across data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) to ensure consistency. Third, the results of theme identification were reconfirmed with key informants through a member checking process to ensure that the researchers' interpretations aligned with their experiences and perspectives. This procedure strengthened the validity of the findings and ensured the transparency of the qualitative analysis.

To maintain the credibility of the research, several validation strategies were employed. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from religious leaders, congregation members, the community, and the government. Method triangulation was carried out by combining interviews, observations, and documentation (Santos et al., 2020; Natow, 2020; Schlunegger et al., 2024). Furthermore, interview results and researcher interpretations were reconfirmed with informants using member checking techniques. All field notes, interview transcripts, and supporting documents were kept as part of an audit trail to ensure the traceability of the research process.

Ethical aspects were also considered throughout the research. Prior to interviews, the researcher obtained the informants' informed consent and explained the research objectives (Xu et al., 2020). The informants' identities were kept confidential, except for public figures who agreed to be named. The researcher also maintained respect for the religious traditions in Babussalam and ensured that their presence did not disrupt worship activities. With this methodological design, the research is expected to produce a comprehensive picture of Babussalam as a cultural and religious heritage, while also providing an in-depth analysis of its potential as a historical and spiritual tourism destination in North Sumatra, Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Babussalam as a Center for Cultural and Religious Heritage

The Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam in Langkat Regency is a center for cultural and religious heritage that played a significant role in the history of Islam in North Sumatra. Founded by Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan in the late 19th century (Van Bruinessen, 2007; Zailani & Amalia, 2022; Azhar & Sahfutra, 2022), Babussalam served not only as a center for the dissemination of the Naqsyabandiyah order, but also as a space for preserving religious traditions and establishing the identity of the local Muslim community. The Babussalam complex, consisting of a mosque, a prayer room (*surau*), traditional houses, and the tombs of Islamic scholars, continues to be a pilgrimage destination for thousands of pilgrims each year, especially during the Hajj commemoration.

Figure 1 shows the field data collection process conducted by researchers through in-depth interviews with Babussalam administrators and direct observation around the tomb of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan. This tomb is a religious site of high spiritual and historical significance for the people of Langkat, North Sumatra, and serves as a center of pilgrimage activities and religious practices for the Naqshbandiyah community. The researchers' presence at this location enabled a contextual understanding of the relationship between sacred space, religious practices, and the social dynamics of the local community. The tangible cultural values of traditional architecture are closely integrated with the intangible cultural values of dhikr rituals, religious studies, and the spiritual discipline of the congregation, which have been consistently practiced across generations. This combination makes Babussalam not just a historical site, but also a center of religious life that is still alive and relevant, as well as a vital asset in the integration of cultural heritage preservation and spirituality-based tourism development. Babussalam administrator, AE, explained that Babussalam functions not only as a place of worship but also as a center of spiritual heritage: "For us, Babussalam is not just a place of worship, but also a center of spiritual heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation since the time of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan. All the activities here, from dhikr (remembrance of God) to the *haul*, to religious studies, are part of our identity. We welcome Babussalam's wider recognition, but we hope that tourism development will not diminish the sacredness of this place. Our priority remains preserving the religious values inherited from the ulama." (Interview with AE, one of Babussalam's administrators, August 20, 2025).



Figure 1 Naqshbandiyah Order in Langkat, North Sumatra.

An official at the Langkat Regency Tourism Office, BE, described Babussalam as a crucial cultural and religious heritage asset, not only for Langkat but also for North Sumatra:

"We see great potential for development as a religious and historical tourism destination, given its historical value and spiritual appeal. However, we recognize that this development must be approached with caution. Our principle is to maintain

a balance between cultural preservation and community economic development. Therefore, the government is committed to involving religious and community leaders in Babussalam in every planning process." (Interview with Langkat Regency Tourism Office official, BE, August 22, 2025).

Regarding the reasons or motivations for the large number of visitors to Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam, we can learn from the following from the MK congregation, a member of Riau Province, and BA from Medan:

"I come to Babussalam every year to observe the anniversary of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan. It feels different; the religious atmosphere here gives me inner peace. Besides making pilgrimages, I also learn a lot about Islamic history and the Sufi order. I think Babussalam deserves to be more widely known, but it shouldn't become just another tourist destination. Its sacredness must be maintained." (Interview with MK, August 20, 2025).

"This is my first time visiting Babussalam. I was impressed by its strong spiritual atmosphere, and I was amazed by the well-maintained mosque and complex. I believe this place is not only important for Muslims, but it can also be a historical destination that enriches the knowledge of the younger generation." (Interview with BA, August 20, 2025).

The interviews revealed that Babussalam Naqsyabandiyah in Langkat holds strong historical significance as a center of the Sufi order since the late 19th century. The existence of this complex is inseparable from the role of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan, a charismatic cleric who played a major role in the spread of Islam in East Sumatra. His tomb is now a busy religious pilgrimage center, especially during the annual *haul* celebration, which brings together thousands of worshippers from various regions. The mosque, prayer room (*surau*), and traditional houses still preserved in Babussalam represent tangible cultural heritage. Meanwhile, religious practices such as congregational dhikr (remembrance of God), Sufi recitation (*tarekat*), and the daily spiritual disciplines of worshippers demonstrate a vibrant and ongoing intangible heritage. This combination of physical and spiritual elements strengthens Babussalam's position as a religious site that not only holds historical value but also serves as an active religious space to this day.

Field findings in Babussalam indicate that preserving religious heritage and developing religious tourism potential do not operate in isolation, but are rooted in the principle of strong community participation. Within the context of community-based tourism (CBT) theory, as proposed by Tosun (2023) and Goodwin & Santilli (2009), the success of tourism destination development depends heavily on the extent to which local communities control resources and directly benefit from tourism activities. This is clearly reflected in Babussalam, where administrators and congregations actively play a central role in organizing religious activities and determining the boundaries of tourist involvement. The attitudes of AE and MK, for example, demonstrate the community's awareness of the importance of maintaining the sanctity of religious spaces while remaining open to outside visitors. Within the CBT framework, Babussalam presents a model of balance between spiritual and socio-economic empowerment, where community involvement is not merely as recipients of impacts, but also as managers of the heritage itself.

Furthermore, the results of this study also strengthen the relevance of sustainable heritage management theory, which emphasizes three main dimensions: social, cultural, and environmental sustainability (Nocca, 2017). In the Babussalam context, social sustainability is evident in the community's commitment to involving all levels of society—clerics, congregations, and local residents—in maintaining the site's religious function. Cultural sustainability is reflected in the consistent implementation of religious rituals and the maintenance of the tarekat traditions that have been passed down across generations. Meanwhile, environmental and spatial sustainability are realized through the maintenance of the mosque, tombs, and traditional houses that are part of the Babussalam spiritual landscape. The perspective of the Tourism Office (BE) officials demonstrates the local government's awareness of the need for cross-actor collaboration so that tourism development does not sacrifice spiritual values, in line with the principles of heritage stewardship (Graham et al., 2016).

Thus, Babussalam can be understood as an example of a living heritage site that represents the integration of tangible and intangible heritage, as emphasized by UNESCO in the 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention. This finding broadens the understanding of the community-based heritage management model in the Muslim community of the archipelago, which emphasizes not only physical conservation but also the continuity of spiritual practices as the core of the heritage itself. This approach also confirms the views of Bowers & Cheer (2017) that the success of spiritual tourism destinations depends on the ability of local communities to negotiate the boundaries between sacredness and commodification. In the context of Babussalam, this negotiation is evident through a social agreement to maintain the priority of tarekat rituals and zikr activities, while tourism activities are facilitated within a framework of respect for religious values and traditions.

3.2. Religious Traditions and Community Identity

The Babussalam Congregation has long practiced traditional Islamic traditions, which have become the community's identity. AE, a member of the Babussalam Congregation, explained:

"The traditions of dhikr, *wirid*, and religious study that we practice at Babussalam are a direct legacy from Sheikh Abdul Wahab Rokan. For the congregation, these are not just rituals, but a way to draw closer to God and foster unity among community members. For hundreds of years, these traditions have been maintained and passed down to the younger generation to preserve our identity as part of the Naqshbandiyah." (Interview with AE, current administrator of the Naqsyabandiyah Order, August 20, 2025).

A congregant or visitor participating in traditional Islamic traditions at Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam explained:

“I’ve been accustomed to participating in dhikr (remembrance) at Babussalam since I was little, because my parents always brought us here. I feel a strong spiritual bond with this place, as if I were part of an extended family. The religious traditions at Babussalam give me a sense of identity as a Muslim, connected to the long history of the congregation.” (Interview with a local congregant, August 20, 2025)

“As a visitor from outside the area, I feel a different religious atmosphere when participating in the congregation activities at Babussalam. The congregational dhikr and religious studies here are very solemn, and I can feel how these traditions bind the community together. It’s an experience that is not only spiritual, but also cultural.” (Interview with a visitor from Aceh, August 20, 2025).

Religious traditions in Babussalam are a key element in shaping the identity of the local Muslim community. Congregants of the Sufi Order view the practices of dhikr (remembrance of God), *wirid* (recitation of God), and *pengajian* (religious study) not merely as rituals, but as forms of spiritual discipline that lead them to collective awareness and closeness to God. Religious activities are carried out routinely with the participation of people of all ages, so these traditions are passed down from generation to generation and remain relevant amidst the tide of modernization. Religious rituals in Babussalam also serve as a means of social cohesion. The *Haul* of Sheikh Abdul Wahab Roka, for example, is not only a religious occasion but also a cultural festival that brings together people from various regions, strengthens social networks, and enriches collective religious experiences. Babussalam functions as both a spiritual center and a community hub, maintaining social cohesion through religious practices. Findings on the role of the traditions of dhikr, *wirid*, and religious studies in Babussalam indicate that this community not only maintains the continuity of religious rituals but also maintains a social and economic structure rooted in collective participation. Within the framework of community-based tourism (CBT), as explained by Tosun (2006) and Goodwin & Santilli (2009), success of a tourism destination depends on the active involvement of the community in planning, management, and distribution of benefits. Babussalam reflects this principle: religious activities and rituals are not managed by external parties, but by local congregations and administrators who hold both moral and social authority. This participation strengthens a sense of ownership of Babussalam's spiritual heritage, which in turn serves as a foundation for the development of ethical and sustainable religious tourism.

From the perspective of sustainable heritage management, the Babussalam religious tradition demonstrates what Taylor (2017) calls the continuity of cultural practice, namely the continuity of cultural values and meanings through collective action across generations. The routine practices of dhikr (remembrance day), *haul*, and religious studies are not merely forms of ritual conservation, but also mechanisms for transmitting spiritual and social values that maintain community vitality. Thus, Babussalam serves as a living religious heritage site—a heritage site that is not frozen in the past, but continues to live through religious practices that adapt to the times. This reinforces the findings of Hribar et al. (2015), that sustainable heritage management requires community involvement in maintaining a balance between the preservation of spiritual values and local economic needs.

In this context, the *haul* and congregational dhikr activities at Babussalam can also be interpreted as a concrete form of spiritual community tourism, where tourists or pilgrims come not only to observe but also to participate in and learn from the local community's religious practices. This finding aligns with Bowers & Cheer's (2017) view that community-based spiritual tourism enables the exchange of values between visitors and local communities without compromising the site's sacredness. Traditions passed down from generation to generation serve as a means of cross-cultural and cross-generational learning, strengthening Babussalam's position as a model for the integration of spirituality, cultural heritage, and sustainable tourism in Indonesia. These findings not only enrich our understanding of the Naqshbandiyah practice in Sumatra but also contribute theoretically to the global discussion on how religious communities can play a key role in heritage management and sustainable tourism. Babussalam presents a management model that combines Islamic spiritual values with the principles of CBT and cultural sustainability—a form of local wisdom in heritage governance relevant to the challenges of modernization in the contemporary Muslim world.

3.3. Religious Tourism Potential and Challenges to Its Development

Babussalam has significant potential for development as a religious and historical tourism destination. This potential lies in its rich tangible heritage (architecture, tombs, traditional landscapes), intangible heritage (*tarekat* teachings, rituals, dhikr), and its historical value as a center for the spread of Islam in East Sumatra. An official from the Langkat Regency Tourism Office stated:

“We view Babussalam as a highly potential religious tourism asset in Langkat. The historical value, religious traditions, and cultural heritage here can attract tourists, both domestic and international. However, the main challenge is how to develop tourism without diminishing the sacredness and religious function of Babussalam. Therefore, our strategy always emphasizes a community-based approach, so that the community and tarekat administrators remain the primary stakeholders in management.” (Interview with BE, August 22, 2025).

Access to Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam for tourists and visitors is one aspect that requires attention, as expressed by an official in Padang Tualang District:

"The infrastructure leading to Babussalam still needs to be improved, as do supporting facilities for tourists. However, we are careful to ensure that the development of these facilities does not damage the religious atmosphere that is Babussalam's main attraction. Collaboration between the government, congregational leaders, and the community is crucial to realizing the tourism potential while remaining in line with the spiritual values upheld by the community." (Interview with TP, Padang Tualang District official, Langkat Regency, August 22, 2025).

The interview results above demonstrate the local government's recognition of the importance of an approach that emphasizes not only economic aspects but also safeguards the sacredness of Babussalam as a religious center. This aligns with the concept of community-based tourism (CBT), where local communities play a key role in tourism planning, management, and utilization.

Figure 2 shows a souvenir kiosk located in the Naqsyabandiyah area of Babussalam, which sells various religious paraphernalia, Muslim clothing, prayer beads, and other religious souvenirs. The existence of this souvenir shop reflects the economic dimension of pilgrimage activities and religious practices in Babussalam, while also demonstrating how the local community utilizes the flow of pilgrims as a source of livelihood. In the context of community-based tourism, this economic activity represents a form of local community participation in the management of religious tourism, as long as it remains within the bounds of respect for the sacredness of religious sites. According to Murphy (1988), Scheyvens (1999), and Dangi & Jamal (2016), CBT emphasizes the principle of community participation so that tourism development does not lead to alienation, but instead strengthens local identity and provides direct benefits to the community. Community-based tourism (CBT) places active participation and capacity building as prerequisites for equitable and sustainable enjoyment of the economic benefits of tourism (Jackson, 2025; Ramaano, 2025). Scheyvens emphasized that empowerment means giving communities control over resources, decision-making, and access to economic benefits—a process that often requires interventions such as education, tourism management training, service skills, and entrepreneurship.



Figure 2 Souvenir Shop at Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam.

Education/training programs are not simply the transfer of technical knowledge (hospitality, guiding, marketing), but also foster awareness of local cultural values and shared governance so that community involvement does not become exploitative (Monika et al., 2024; Bindawas, 2025). In the Babussalam context, the CBT approach requires training that is sensitive to the religious dimension: not only the ability to serve visitors, but also an understanding of visitation ethics, the zoning of sacred spaces, and mechanisms for regulating visits to ensure the primary function of worship remains.

In the context of the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam, statements by tourism officials demonstrate efforts to maintain a balance between tourism infrastructure development and the preservation of spiritual values. The challenges outlined, namely limited infrastructure and concerns about the loss of sacredness, demonstrate that the success of Babussalam's development as a religious tourism destination depends heavily on the extent to which the community of the Sufi order is involved. Therefore, the CBT approach is not only theoretically relevant but also practically necessary to maintain Babussalam as a religious center and to develop it as a sustainable tourism destination.

Figure 3 displays the Heritage Map website developed by the authors as a supporting tool for visits to the Naqsyabandiyah Babussalam complex in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province. This platform provides integrated information about each heritage object, including visual documentation, location maps, narrative descriptions, audio versions, and historical explanations. The site not only facilitates access to information for visitors but also serves as a medium for interpreting cultural heritage. From a community-based tourism (CBT) perspective, this initiative reflects efforts to empower local communities through the management and presentation of heritage narratives sourced from the community itself, thereby strengthening local ownership and control over the development of religious tourism destinations. As stated by Tosun (2006) and Goodwin & Santilli (2009) community-based tourism management positions local communities as key actors in the planning, interpretation, and utilization of economic outcomes. In the Babussalam context, the involvement of administrators and congregations in the development of digital narratives on the Heritage Map strengthens a sense of ownership of their

spiritual heritage. The community becomes not only a tourist attraction but also a subject that determines how their heritage is understood and respected by the public. This aligns with the principles of CBT, which emphasize independence, active participation, and equitable distribution of benefits among community members.

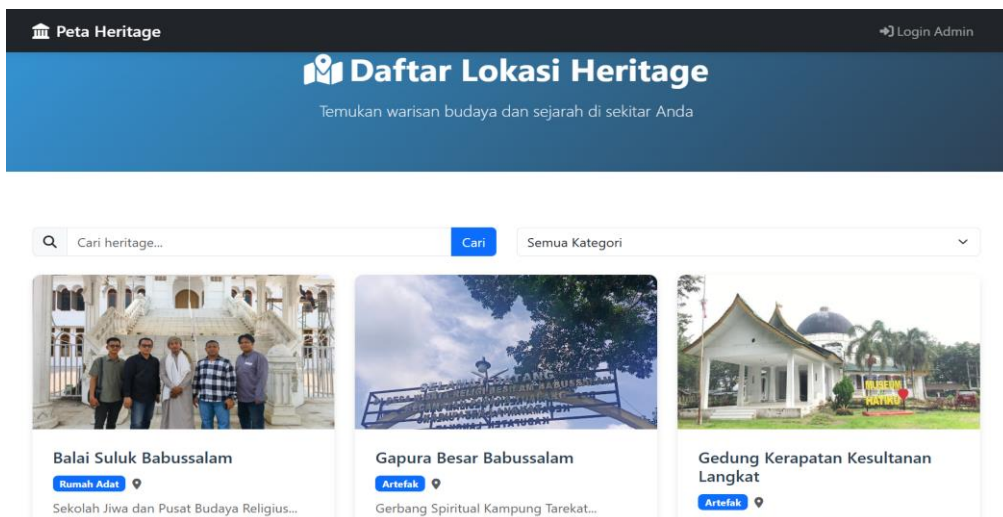


Figure 3 Heritage Site List.
 Source: Petawisata Religius Langkat (2025).

From the perspective of sustainable heritage management, the development of the Heritage Map reflects the simultaneous integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage preservation. As Hribar et al. (2015) argue, heritage sustainability encompasses not only physical conservation but also the continuity of cultural practices and values inherent within it. Through digital narratives and audio-interpretations featuring prayers, dhikr (remembrance of God), and the history of the order, this platform maintains the continuity of the Babussalam spiritual tradition while expanding its educational reach to a wider audience. This demonstrates that technology can be a means of preserving spiritual values and cultural identity without diminishing their sacredness.

However, strengthening digital access through platforms like Peta Pusaka also poses new challenges that need to be carefully managed to align with CBT principles and heritage sustainability. Increased site visibility could potentially trigger overtourism or shift the balance between spiritual and tourism functions. Therefore, community-based management is crucial to ensure that decisions regarding visitor capacity, sacred area zoning, and economic benefits are participatory and governed by the Babussalam community and the local government. This cooperative approach aligns with the concept of heritage stewardship, namely heritage management through shared responsibility between the community, government, and other stakeholders.

3.4. Integrating Conservation and Sustainable Tourism

The results of this study confirm that the development of Babussalam as a tourist destination can only be successful if carried out with an approach that is sensitive to the spiritual and social aspects of the community. The concept of community-based tourism is relevant to ensure that local communities retain control over the direction of development. In this way, the community can directly benefit from the economic benefits, while maintaining Babussalam's religious function. A community-based approach can be implemented through a series of steps involving active community participation in maintaining, managing, and developing the Muslim area of the Naqsyabandiyah Order of Babussalam as a historical tourism destination (Haslinah et al., 2023; Rusyidi & Fedryansah, 2019). This process begins with mapping the potential and challenges faced by the local community (Suriadi et al., 2023). Through focus group discussions with religious leaders, community leaders, and local residents, various aspects of cultural heritage that can be developed are identified (Firman, 2021). In the discussion, the community also shared the challenges they face, both in preserving historical sites and in their involvement in the tourism industry.

To optimize the economic benefits of religious tourism, the community is encouraged to play an active role in various sectors supporting this industry. They are empowered through the development of culture-based businesses, such as producing unique souvenirs, providing traditional culinary delights, and establishing homestay-based accommodation services. Thus, the Babussalam area is not only a historical tourism destination but also a space for the community to improve their well-being through direct involvement in economic activities based on local potential.

Figure 4 represents the community-based tourism analysis framework used in this study to understand the management of the Babussalam Naqsyabandiyah religious heritage in Langkat. The potential and problem mapping stage reflects the identification of historical values, religious practices (*zikir, haul, and tarekat*), and the challenges of spiritual

commodification. Community education and training reflect efforts to increase the capacity of administrators and congregations in ethically managing the flow of pilgrims and tourists. Strengthening the tourism-based economy is demonstrated through local economic activities, such as the provision of services, religious souvenirs, and services for pilgrims. Collaboration with stakeholders—including local government and religious leaders—as well as ongoing monitoring and evaluation, serves as mechanisms to maintain a balance between preserving sacredness and economic benefits. This overall process positions the Babussalam community as a key actor in the management of cultural and religious heritage, in line with the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) and sustainable heritage management that serve as the theoretical foundation of this study. To ensure sustainable management of this area, collaboration with various stakeholders is a crucial element of the development strategy (Berliandaldo et al., 2021; Maturbongs, 2020; Adinugraha et al., 2024). Local governments, academics, and tourism industry players are involved to support the preservation and promotion policies of the Babussalam area. This collaboration also aims to integrate Babussalam into the national historical and religious tourism network, thereby attracting more tourists from various regions.

The literature suggests several operational principles for designing educational programs at religious heritage sites (Duff et al., 2016; Chang & Chuang, 2021; Mekonnen et al., 2022; Balme, 2023; Abdurahiman et al., 2024): (a) co-designing the curriculum with administrators and congregants to ensure relevant and accessible material; (b) modularity—separating spiritual/ethical modules for visits from technical modules (hospitality, guiding, conservation); (c) involving the younger generation to ensure the sustainability of practices; (d) multi-sectoral collaboration (government, educational institutions, NGOs) to provide resources and market access; and (e) monitoring and evaluation to assess socio-cultural and economic impacts. The literature also highlights the need for protective policies for sensitive elements (sacred zoning, restrictions on commercialization) as part of a training package to equip communities to enforce local regulations.

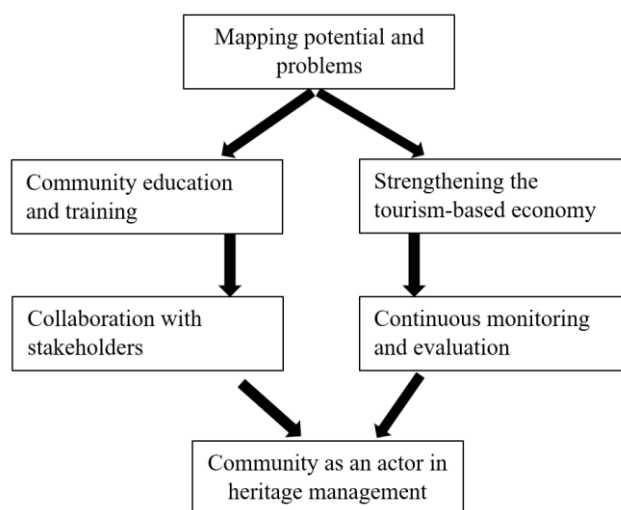


Figure 4 Community-Based Approach.

As part of an ongoing process, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are implemented periodically. The community, along with stakeholders, reviews the effectiveness of implemented strategies so that the approach can be adapted to evolving developments and needs. Thus, through a community-based approach, the community becomes not only the beneficiary of historical tourism development but also the primary actor in safeguarding and managing their own cultural heritage (Simorangkir et al., 2020; Suparjo et al., 2024).

The preservation of Babussalam's cultural heritage requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects. The maintenance of mosques, prayer houses, and tombs must go hand in hand with the revitalization of the traditions of dhikr (remembrance of God), *haul*, and pengajian (religious study). This strategy aligns with the UNESCO framework for cultural heritage protection, which emphasizes the integration of tangible and intangible heritage. UNESCO (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003) emphasizes that effective heritage preservation encompasses both tangible (buildings, tombs, artifacts) and intangible (rituals, knowledge, practices) (UNESCO, 2003).

The findings at Babussalam enrich the academic discourse on the relationship between religion, culture, and tourism. As Olsen (2003; 2011) argues, religious tourism always involves a negotiation between spiritual values and economic interests. In the case of Babussalam, this negotiation is evident in the effort to maintain a balance between religious functions and tourism potential. Studies on religious tourism highlight two central issues: (1) how to maintain the sacredness of the site when visited by the public, and (2) the risk of commodification of religious practices. D. Timothy & Olsen (2006) and related works suggest that community education (and also visitor education) plays a crucial role in limiting negative impacts—e.g., training local guides to convey the spiritual context to tourists and developing a code of conduct for visitors. This requires training

modules that encompass cross-cultural communication and managing the visitor experience to ensure interactions remain respectful and educational.

At Babussalam, where ritual functions remain intense, community education can help design visiting policies (hours, zoning, dress/behavior guidelines) that align with the needs of the religious community. Theoretically, Babussalam can be positioned as a model for the integration of spiritual heritage and heritage tourism in Indonesia. This is relevant to Weismann (2007) studies on the role of Sufi orders in contemporary Islamic societies, where Sufi centers serve dual functions as spiritual sites and cultural destinations. The literature on Sufi orders emphasizes that Sufi centers are not only places of worship but also informal educational institutions and social networks (Böttcher, 2014; Bozbaş & Bozbaş, 2025).

Numerous case studies in Southeast Asia and Indonesia demonstrate that participatory training programs improve destination management outcomes—e.g., improved service quality, local product development, and community acceptance of tourism (CBT literature, regional studies) (Nair & Hamzah, 2015; Singer et al., 2019; Fauzi & Sumirat, 2023). Critical success factors include: the relevance of training materials to the local context, participatory learning methods (workshops, fieldwork), follow-up support (mentoring, access to micro-capital), and stakeholder involvement in curriculum design. Conversely, programs that are top-down or ignore local values risk generating resistance. For Babussalam, effective training must be action-oriented, combining religious values education with ethical tourism management and marketing skills. Based on the theoretical studies and empirical evidence above, educational programs in Babussalam should be designed as empowerment processes that respect the authority of the congregation and spiritual values. Programs should be participatory (co-designed), combining heritage education (the history of the congregation, the meaning of rituals), service skills (guiding, visitor management), and heritage governance (simple conservation, documentation). The success of such initiatives is expected to not only increase the community's readiness to manage tourism flows but also strengthen Babussalam's position as a religious heritage maintained by its own community—not simply a tourist attraction.

4. Conclusions

This study confirms that the Babussalam Naqsyabandiyah in Langkat, North Sumatra, is a cultural and religious heritage with high historical, spiritual, and social value. Since its founding in the 19th century, Babussalam has served as a center for the spread of Islam, the Sufi order, and spiritual education, passed down through generations. These values are reflected in religious practices such as congregational dhikr (remembrance of God), *haul*, and religious study groups, which not only shape community identity but also strengthen social cohesion at the local and regional levels. Beyond its religious value, Babussalam has great potential to be developed as a religious and historical tourism destination. Its unique architecture, the presence of the tombs of charismatic clerics, and its vibrant religious traditions are all attractive to tourists. This research contributes to academic studies on the relationship between heritage, religion, and tourism. Babussalam serves as a concrete example of how Sufi religious heritage can be transformed into a tourism asset without losing its spiritual function. This study reinforces the theory of religious heritage tourism, which emphasizes the importance of balancing spiritual and economic values, and expands discussions on the role of Sufi orders in contemporary society. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the relevance of an integrated approach to tangible and intangible heritage in the preservation of religious sites. Babussalam is not only a historical monument but also a vibrant center of spiritual life. Therefore, the preservation of this site must encompass both the physical structure and the practice of religious rituals and traditions. Practically, this study offers several recommendations: 1) Local Community Involvement. The Babussalam community must be actively involved in every stage of tourism planning and management to avoid alienation from their site; 2) Strengthening Infrastructure and Accessibility. Local governments and stakeholders need to improve tourism-supporting infrastructure, such as transportation, accommodation facilities, and information centers, without damaging the sacred character of the area; 3) Spirituality-Based Management Strategy. Tourism development must maintain Babussalam as a primary place of worship. Therefore, visitation regulations, activity zoning, and event management need to be regulated so that religious functions are not disrupted; 4) Educational Promotion. The potential of Babussalam can be introduced through educational tourism programs based on Islamic history and Nusantara Sufism. This strategy can attract tourists while strengthening cultural and religious literacy; 5) Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration. The development of Babussalam requires synergy between the government, academics, local communities, and the private sector to create a sustainable tourism model that can preserve cultural heritage while providing economic benefits. Therefore, Babussalam Naqsyabandiyah in Langkat can be positioned as a model of integration between religious heritage and sustainable tourism in Indonesia. This research opens up space for further studies on how Sufi orders and centers in the Nusantara adapt in the context of modernization and globalization, while providing policy direction for the development of inclusive and sustainable community-based tourism.

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Ethical considerations

The subjects' ethical consent was acquired before the study started. By giving the participants information sheets and consent forms, the problem of informed consent was resolved. Every attempt was made to protect the participants' comfort and privacy. The researcher approached each selected participant one-on-one, explained the study's goals and the advantages of taking part, and reassured them that confidentiality would be scrupulously maintained when collecting and recording their answers. Participants are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time if their rights are infringed, the researcher said, and participation is entirely voluntary.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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