Space of Conflict in the Reproduction of Hindu Sacred Places into Spiritual Destination

I Gede Sutarya[†*] and I Ketut Arta Widana[†]

Abstract

Holy places used as spiritual tourism destinations are considered to have more value than merely holy places since they can produce economic benefits. Visiting holy places builds a positive tourist experience and often a positive vibe for the local community. However, in the case of Bali, various complaints have arisen regarding the arrival of spiritual tourists, resulting in overcrowding and long queues. This study reveals the use of religious shrines as spiritual tourism destinations and the entailed conflict regarding the division of space between the locals and the tourists to achieve a middle-way solution to this conflict.

This study collected data through observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The collected qualitative data were then analysed. The findings reveal that people use religious holy places as spiritual tourism destinations because they get economic benefits. Conflicts of interest, of course, arise due to crowding and long queues. This conflict is mediated by various proposals for dividing space between the two interests. The study contributes to the need for limits on the use of religious holy places as tourist destinations to ensure the destination's sustainability.

Keywords: Spatial Conflict; Reproduction of Hindu Sacred Places; Spiritual Tourism; Sustainable Tourism; Bali; Indonesia

[†] Universitas Hindu Negeri I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar, Indonesia
[*]Corresponding Author Email: igedesutarya20@gmail.com

Introduction

Spiritual tourism at Hindu holy places is often welcomed by the local communities because it is reckoned that spiritual tourism is an offshoot of cultural tourism. However, the growth in the number of tourists often plays the role of contestation amongst the local devotees. This is because qualitative findings of our research reveal that Hindu holy places filled with tourists make the local Hindu devotees feel crowded. Thereby, they become dissatisfied with performing rituals. Our study area findings unveil that with the increased number of tourists, the overcrowded long queue for taking a holy bath (*Malukat*) at Tirta Empul Tampak Siring Temple, Bali, which is open for 24 hours on Hindu holidays, makes the devotees uncomfortable for the long wait to take a dip in the holy water. This discomfort has emerged as a problem of spiritual tourism at Hindu holy places.

Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that the trend in expanding the meaning of holy places into spiritual destinations positively influences local communities and tourists. This broad meaning builds positive experiences for local people and tourists towards holy places. An example is the case of Italy, which builds positive experiences towards holy places (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019). Religious holy places in Thailand, Nepal and India are also tolerant spiritual tourism destinations (Ashton, 2018; Lane, 2019; Ormsby, 2021; Lunchaprasith, 2022). Conflicts about holy places as tourist destinations usually occur due to clashes with the interests of nature conservation (Rotherham, 2023) and management of holy places (Smith, 2022; Yitzhak, 2017). In a slightly different context, it is important to note here one of the most recent examples, which has been given more impetus to emerge as a destination of religious-spiritual tourism in India, is Ayodhya— a more than 500-year dispute— *Rāmā Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid* case settled on 09 November 2019 (Singh & Kumar, 2024a, b).

Contestations involving local communities' discomfort in accessing holy places, however, have gone unnoticed, so this study represents a new trend in the phenomenon of spiritual tourism using religious holy places.

The development of spiritual tourism has been massively organised in Bali. This massive development occurred because Bali was known as the centre of Hinduism. Hinduism is a religion that has re-emerged in the Western world in the form of a spiritual movement. This spiritual movement builds the potential of the spiritual tourism market. This market potential builds the assumption that the development of spiritual tourism will increasingly impact holy places. One of the impacts is the disturbance of comfort for the local devotees. This interference has caused conflict and opened room for dialogues to develop solutions. This study seeks to explain the contestation issues and the possible sustainable solutions. The study begins with a brief review of the literature. Following this, the methodological issues deployed in this study are discussed. Then, we discuss the results and findings of this study.

Literature Review

Space conflicts in sacred tourist destinations emerge due to additional utilisation of the sacred space vis-à-vis its significance embedded in that particular sacred place. Conflicts occur due to differences in understanding the sacred space between tourists and local communities. In other words, contestations of usage of the sacredscape occur because of various interests arising in that particular sacredscape. For instance, in the case of the Tanah Lot-Bali area, conflicts have emerged due to differences in interests in using this sacredscape for agriculture and tourism (Arisanjaya & Arimbawa, 2021). This land use conflict of interest is similar to the one that arose in Africa (Musavengane & Leonard, 2022). Besides land use conflicts, there are also examples of conflicts of interest in using areas between nature conservation and ecotourism (Blagajac, 2023; Pech et al., 2022). Moreover, scholars like Lozanovska (2021) argue that conflicts between the living area and the dead

monument concern spatially distinct building blocks of civilisation. Therefore, space conflict can be defined as a struggle for space for various user interests in the same place. The struggle for space for religious and for the purposes of spiritual tourism is also possible in spiritual tourism destinations, albeit religious and spiritual tourism have clear differences. Religious tourism is related to holy books, religious saints, history, and religious holy places (Hassan et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020; Rashid, 2018), while spiritual tourism is related to the search for spirit outside religious standards (Kujawa, 2017; Puad & Som, 2019). Regarding the use of religious holy spaces for spiritual tourism, conflicts occur over the use of holy places for religion and conservation. In the case of Italy, these religious and spiritual interests gave rise to an expansion of the meaning of holy spaces s but have not caused the conflict (Duda & Doburzyński, 2019) to date. In the case of England, there is a conflict over the use of national parks for conservation and religious activities (Rotherham, 2023). The conflict over the use of religious space for spiritual tourism is still outside the attention of researchers.

The use of Hindu holy places for spiritual tourism reproduces religious holy places into spiritual tourism. This reproduction occurs due to the expansion of the meaning of religious space to become a spiritual one. This expansion of meaning influences developments in understanding the spiritual world that are separated from the standards of religions (Bell, 2019; Mani et al., 2020). This causes the reproduction of the meaning of certain religious and ethnic holy places as spiritual tourism destinations. For example, holy religious places in Thailand, Nepal, and India have become spiritual tourism destinations (Ashton, 2018; Lane, 2019; Ormsby, 2021). These religious holy places receive visitors from outside the religion (Lane, 2019). However, people outside a particular religion also carry out religious activities in these holy places, as in the case of Thailand (Lunchaprasith, 2022). Based on this, the reproduction of Hindu holy places can be defined as constructing a new meaning for Hindu

holy spaces via the additional use of Hindu holy places.

Interestingly, the meaning of religious holy places has expanded in the modern era. This expansion of meaning has emerged because of the dynamics of society in re-viewing holy places. These societal dynamics influence the meaning of sacred places. Studies on the expansion of the meaning of religious holy places refer to the expansion of meaning to various religions, such as in the case of Israel. In this case, there was a conflict between religions to manage holy places (Smith, 2022; Yitzhak, 2017). In referring to expanding sacred spaces into tourism, the attitude of tolerance among the local people plays a key role (Addison, 2019). The conflict in Israel continues to occur because of a dispute over the management of holy places.

Spiritual tourism is a societal phenomenon, and people tend to seek the meaning of life by visiting spiritual destinations that are free from certain religious rules (Halim et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023; Willson, 2016). This spiritual tourism can include visiting religious places with the purpose of searching within oneself, such as a visit to Santiago, Spain (Lois-González & Santos, 2015). Based on this, spiritual tourism can be defined as tourist visits to tourist destinations to find the meaning of life, that is, searching within oneself.

Searching within oneself through visits to spiritual destinations is a new study. This phenomenon is a phenomenon in the modern era. This phenomenon emerged as a way of criticism of industrial societies, resulting in the development of tourist visits aimed at enjoying nature (Brown, 1994) resulting in studies on spiritual tourism related to nature as a medium of spiritualism (Wang et al., 2023) and medium of well-being (Buzinde, 2020). Nature is also an indicator of spiritual destinations (Kuralbayev et al., 2017). The conservation of nature is a tool for development strategies in the post-pandemic (Choe & Mahyuni, 2023). The study of the relationship between spiritual tourism and religious holy places is still missing from the attention. We argue that this study is one of the new studies, especially considering the conflict

over using sacredscapes as spiritual tourism destinations.

Methodology

This research discusses the problem of use, conflict, and division of space by deploying qualitative and phenomenological approaches. The use of religious holy places as spiritual tourism destinations concerns the experiences of local communities in interacting with tourists. These experiences can be explored qualitatively by phenomenology. An example is the feeling of being crowded with tourists experienced by the locals. The feeling of queueing for hours to take a holy bath is also an experience for the local devotees. These experiences are a type of qualitative phenomenology emphasising informants' experiences. The qualitative data comes from observations and in-depth interviews as primary sources. The secondary source is news regarding conflicts between local communities and tourists. These data sources can be approached more deeply using qualitative phenomenology.

We argue that the informant's experience proves that various problems emerge in using holy places as spiritual tourism. This robust evidence can only be extracted through knowledgeable and experienced informants. An example is the traditional village head, called a *bendesa*, who has experience and knowledge in managing sacred places. The chairman of the Gianyar Regency Parisada is also a figure with the knowledge and experience to solve various community problems. Senior tour guides also have knowledge and experience in taking tourists to Hindu holy places. These three informants are the main informants in this study because their experiences remain paramount in revealing evidence of the problems of the study area. In other words, this study stems from exploring the experiences of these informants.

As discussed above, this experience was probed using three stages, namely observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The initial stage was observing Hindu holy places used as spiritual tourism destinations. From our observations, we did find problems with crowds and space constraints. These problems of overcrowding and space constraints were explored using in-depth interviews with informants of the Manukaya Let Traditional Village Leader (traditional village leader), the Head of Parisada Gianyar, and a Senior Tourist Guide. The results of these observations and interviews were further explored using FGDs with nine sources consisting of youth leaders, Hindu religious activists, Hindu priests and Hindu intellectuals. These FGDs were then critically carried out to further explore and triangulate data so that this collected data validates our observations and interviews with that of the FGDs.

The collected data were then selected based on the categories of sacred place reproduction, conflict, and proposed solutions. These selected categories were then linked to explain the relationship of sacred site reproduction to conflict and solution. These relationships were then used to find solutions between the two competing interests of the study area— religion and tourism.

Results and Discussion

Notwithstanding, Hindu holy places have become spiritual tourism destinations. This trend has emerged because Hindu holy places have spiritual values that attract spiritual tourists. Indeed, tourist attractions to religious holy places are a tradition in religious communities. These tourist attractions, however, could be cultural, natural, and man-made (Robinson et al., 2020), which makes an economic impact on a particular sacredscape. The findings of our study show that this economic impact has triggered the reproduction of our study area (Tirta Empul Temple, Tampak Siring) into spiritual tourism destinations. This temple is used as a *Malukat* (holy bathing) place by spiritual tourists. This usage of this sacredscape as a spiritual tourism destination has created space constraints on certain days, making the local devotees uncomfortable. As already stated, in this study, we try to find a solution to this discomfort to accommodate the interests of religion and tourism.

Holy Places Become Spiritual Tourism Destinations

The promotion of Hindu holy places in Bali as spiritual tourism destinations began in 1927 after the publication of the book *New Journey in Old Asia* (Candee, 1927). This book noted that the Tirta Empul Temple, Tampak Siring-Bali has been declared as a place for holy bathing. This holy bath is called *Malukat* in Balinese tradition. The *Malukat* place is said to be a place to take holy water for healing (Candee, 1927). Although this 1927 book is regarded as a record of the development of this holy place into a spiritual tourism destination, its massive development, however, took place from around the 2000s since the publication of the novel *Eat Pray and Love* (Gilbert, 2006).

This novel tells the story of the opening of Hinduism in India to foreigners so that they can learn and be a part of Hindu spirituality (Gilbert, 2006). Hinduism in India became an open religion in the 19th Century AD, when holy Hindu philosophers, monks and teachers became known in the Western world. Swami Vivekananda (12 January 1863 – 4 July 1902) was a Hindu monk, philosopher and disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who first visited America in 1893 at the Parliament of the World's Religions on 11 September held at the Art Institute of Chicago (Hejjaji, 2022). In the 1960s, many Hindu-Indian teachers went to Europe and America to teach yoga (Bhavanani, 2017). This openness had an influence on Bali and Bali too opened itself up to foreigners to follow Hindu spirituality. This is what makes Hinduism, which was originally a certain kind of ethnic religion, become an open religion.

Starting from that moment of openness, Hindu holy places in Bali were opened to tourists to carry out spiritual activities. Hindus in Bali realise that foreign tourists are starting to follow Hindu spiritual practices such as yoga, so they can carry out spiritual activities in temples. Tirta Empul Temple and Mangening Temple in Tampak Siring, which were originally places of *Malukat* for the Balinese people, are now open to tourists. Tourists have begun to join the holy bath at this temple with local Hindus in Bali.

Critics indicate that the practice of taking baths together by both tourists and local devotees opened the road of Hindu holy places in Bali becoming spiritual tourist attractions. Linked to this argument, the observations of our research participants are as follows:

According to the senior tour guide (R1) Tampak Siring is the most favourite *Malukat* destination for tourists. This place is famous among tourists because of the advertisements and pictures in various foreign media. Therefore, tourists are always interested in visiting Tampak Siring. However, since this place remains very busy during the day, tourists often get the opportunity to visit at night, when the place is quiet, and tourists can freely practice *Malukat*. The cold sensation of the Tirta Empul holy water can be felt at night, so tourists are usually satisfied with the sensation of this *Malukat.*

Similarly, our second research participant, the head of Gianyar Regency Hindu community (R2) told us that the crowds of tourists visiting Tampak Siring for *Malukat* have caused problems in the past at the Mangening Temple shrine, Tampak Siring. The incident occurred in 2013 when tourists had sexual intimacy at Mangening Temple while taking a bath (Okezone.com, 2013). This news went viral in various media. However, the leaders of the temple management, villages, and the regional government (Gianyar Regency) drafted regulations for *Malukat* at Tampak Siring to avoid future problems due to the increasing number of tourists joining *Malukat* in Tampak Siring. However, these regulations are yet to be implemented.

Taking our grounded observations and findings into context, we framed our FDG questionnaire framework. The open-ended questions of the FDG framework entailed— setting up two systems, ways to make proper arrangements to avoid crowding and easy access for every visitor, including the local devotees, whether the sacredscape should be only for Hindu devotees during Hindu holidays; setting up distance while performing *Malukat* ritual and putting up the interests of the Hindus first; and whether the settings of the sacredscape (the study area) are

already good and whether there remains an aura in the assimilation process of the tourists with the local devotees.

Due to the increased number of tourists, one has to acknowledge the constraints in space in performing the *Malukat* ritual, thereby indicating that the holy place has been transformed into a tourist attraction based on the rationale of spiritual tourism. The majority of the FGD participants agreed with this change. One of the participants mentioned that the management of Mangening Temple shrine, Tampak Siring, should prioritise the Hindu devotees in performing the *Malukat* ritual. The majority of the participants agreed in principle about the transformation of the study area into a spiritual tourism destination; however, strict regulations and restrictions were put in place to manage the daily activities to avoid —crowding, long queues and unethical behaviours in the crowded queues— so that the comfort of Hindu devotees and their interests are not compromised.

Space Conflict

The government has been too slow in implementing these restrictions and regulations. The regional government, too, has failed to issue regulations regarding these restrictions until early 2024. Negotiations of various interests are still ongoing, although tough in government dialogues. The delay, however, continues to cause various problems. Our findings suggest that during quiet times, tourists have committed bad deeds (considered as wrongdoing within the premises of the sacredscape), causing Hindus to spend large sums of money carrying out purification ceremonies in this holy place (Okezone.com, 2023). These incidents further trigger the need for urgent restrictions and regulations to circumvent local conflicts.

Our findings, however, suggest reports of conflicts taking place because the traditional village (managers) does not pay attention to the interests and comforts of the Hindu devotees. This lackadaisical attitude stems from the large income these village people receive from the tourists. Income from the tourists ranges from entrance tickets and facility rentals at Tirta

Empul Temple and Mangening Temple in Tampak Siring in addition to income from other external facilities— hotels, car hires, restaurants, shopping and many others while the local Hindu devotees do not pay entrance fees. These activities generate large revenue from tourists and are considered perhaps much more significant than the discomfort faced by local Hindu devotees. The dilemma here is the conflict of interest —choosing between commercialisation and the interests of local devotees— whether to receive a large income or prioritise the interests of Hindus. Each tourist who visits Malukat, a traditional village, receives an income of IDR 50 thousand for an entrance ticket, IDR 10 thousand for renting a storage locker to store their valuables, including clothes, and IDR 10 thousand for renting traditional bathing suits. The total income is around IDR 70 thousand per tourist. On certain days, the income of traditional villages reaches IDR 300 million a day. Traditional villages receive a minimum income of around IDR 20 billion a year. However, compared to the tourists, income from Hindu devotees is meagre because as stated above local Hindu devotees do not need to pay an entrance ticket but only rent a locker for around IDR 10 thousand. Hindu devotees usually also arrange *sasari* (donation), which are only used for temple officials. The *sasari* is for ceremonies at the temple. Our research participants, however, have mentioned that the number of tourists has decreased post-COVID-19. As our participant said:

> Previously, there were up to six thousand tourists per day, so income was up to IDR 300 million per day. But now, after COVID-19, it's not like that. There are only 60 foreign tourists a day.

Nevertheless, contestation over the use of the Tirta Empul Temple between local Hindu devotees and tourists has started making them anxious, and they have taken this issue to social media — primarily Facebook. The trepidation was triggered by tourism agencies that marketed Tirta Empul Temple with Tirta Empul Booking. This Tirta Empul booking went viral on Facebook. Hence, Parisadha Hindu Dharma Indonesia

(PHDI) Gianyar (the highest institution for Hindus in Gianyar Regency) took this issue on the online media, Bali Express. The Parisada accused the Tirta Empul Temple of being commodified for tourism purposes. Therefore, bookings for Tirta Empul Temple must be stopped (Bali Express, 2018). This observation resonates with the observations of Cook (2018) in her study of remaking Thai Buddhism via international pilgrimage. This controversy has created emerging conflicts between the local Hindus and tourism agencies. The rationale linked to the cultural commodification of Tirta Empul Temple is also reinforced by I Ketut Putra Bagawarta, Public Relations of the Bali Province Interfaith Youth Forum in Bali Express (2018). Figures 1, 2 and 3 demonstrate the space constraints during the performance of *Malukat*.

Figures 1, 2 and 3: Space Constraints in *Malukat*, Tirta Empul Temple
Source: Authors

Division of Religious and Business Space

The ongoing contestation regarding the discomfort felt by the local Hindu devotees and vested economic interests amongst the tourism agencies warrants a permanent solution, which is perhaps possible through the division/restriction needed in terms of access to the religious space or time or both. Without the division of space/restriction, it is reckoned that there would be long queues, especially on holy days. Evidence suggests that long queues have caused the Hindu devotees freeze in the pond because of the queueing in deep water for too long before these devotees could get entry to the fountain for purification. Seeing this, a queue was made over the pond edge. The pond was limited to 30 people, but it was used by both Hindu devotees and tourists. This alternate queue has, of course, reduced the risk of getting cold in the pond. We, however, argue that this is simply a temporary solution. Our research participants reinforced this observation, too, as they said:

> Now, the queue is at the pond edge. Because of the long queues in the pond, some people used to catch colds and become sick (R3).

> There need to be strict rules so that tourists are comfortable and do not let any accidents happen, causing them to suffer in Bali's tourism image (R1).

However, to gain a permanent solution to these emergent problems, there must be a few changes in rules and regulations. The first regulation could be to divide time between tourists and Hindu devotees. The second regulation could be to divide the *Malukat* area between the Hindu devotees in Tirta Empul and tourists in Mangening. The third regulation is to restrict tourists from visiting Hindu holy days so that tourists are only given the opportunity beyond local holy days. Our research participants mentioned that these regulations are still being discussed at the Gianyar Regency Government since inputs from several stakeholders continue to pour in regarding the arrangement of this *Malukat* place.

> Various options are still being discussed at the Gianyar Regency Government. Still hearing input from various groups (R2).

> We need to sit down together and discuss it well. I agree in principle that we

want to comfort Hindu devotees while accommodating tourism interests as well (R3).

Our FGD participants also agreed to set options for different places, restrictions on holidays, and restrictions on visits. They buttressed that the interests of Hindu devotees should be the primary concern because this holy place is an asset for Hindus. However, this asset can be used for tourism purposes too without ignoring Hindu devotees' comfort, especially during holidays and *piodalan* (ceremonies) at Tirta Empul and Mangening Temples. On *piodalan* days, Hindu devotees visit the temple in large numbers, so it needs to be closed for tourists for a period of time. Hence, it remains paramount to formulate a grading solution. As discussed above, on normal days, there is a limit of 30 people entering the pool. We reiterate that on holy days and days of temple festivals, tourists visiting Mangening Temple and *piodalan* must be stopped or restricted to a particular time of the day. For example, on the holy day of *Banyupinaruh*, the Hindu devotees queue to pay from around 4 a.m. to 4 p.m. The queues are so long that one can see the queues from the car park to the point of entering the pond. As discussed above, at the pond, only 30 people are allowed at a time. The long queues indicate more waiting time for the devotees to dip themselves into the sacred fountains. Hence, there needs to be proper arrangements to comfort the Hindu devotees.

At the same time, in such overcrowded situations, tourists will be uncomfortable, so it is necessary to arrange a proper time to bring in tourists. Otherwise, the discomfort felt by the tourists might distort the tourism image of Bali. The issue of overcrowding might also cause friction with local residents. Our research participants have revealed these worrying situations. For instance, the research participant (R1) expressed that the overcrowded discomfort strife might give rise to instances of sexual abuse. Our second research participant (R2) is concerned that since non-Hindu tourists are not acquainted with the rituals and the logic behind these temple rituals, there is every possibility of

making mistakes. The third research participant (R3) is concerned about possible accidents among tourists that will harm the destination's image.

Hence, the stakeholders, namely traditional village heads and local governments, must make proper arrangements immediately for the health and safety of Hindu devotees and tourists and simultaneously sustain Bali's tourism business. Sustainable tourism is indeed a major development issue throughout the world, so tourism development must rely on elements of sustainability, namely environmental and socio-cultural conservation. Various tourism developments have experienced a decline because the authorities have failed to pay attention to elements of sustainability. Environmental and socio-cultural conservation of local communities is the most important element of tourism development.

It should be noted here that in the case of Hindu holy places in Bali, there was tolerance at the beginning, but conflict arose when the threshold was crossed. This Bali case is proof of strengthening sustainable tourism by paying attention to the socio-culture of local communities (Amado & Rodrigues, 2021; Citizenship & Business, 2022; Guo et al., 2019; Puad & Som, 2019). This shows that a balance point between the interests of tourism and local communities needs to be determined to build sustainable tourism.

Conclusion

This study aimed to probe the conflict in reproducing Hindu sacred places into a spiritual destination in Bali. The case of spiritual tourism in Tampak Siring, Bali, is proof of the socio-cultural conflict that occurred simply because of the neglect carried out by the stakeholders in maintaining the sociocultural nuances of the study area. Our research findings have shown that religious and spiritual interests often run in the same direction, but conflict occurs when economic interests become the goal. Conflict occurs because economic interests are pursued without considering the comfort of both the tourists and the locals. It is also well known that tourism brings environmental problems if

environmental carrying capacity is neglected. As the findings of the study area have revealed, tourism will also negatively impact local culture and community if socio-cultural carrying capacity is neglected. Sustainable tourism is perhaps the solution to this type of discord. The stakeholders of the Tampak Siring should carry out a careful planning process that considers environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacity to solve the problem of the study area. The findings of our study provide a basis for an in-depth study of developing sustainable tourism in Bali.

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Data Availability Statement

The collected data is already available in the text.

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