

## The Potential of Mahligai's Tomb as a Religious Tourism Destination in Barus, North Sumatera

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**Abstract.** This article aims to examine the potential of the Makam Mahligai as a religious tourism destination in Barus, North Sumatera because it reviews its historical aspect and its location is very worthy of professional development so that it becomes one of the regional icons whose notabene is an early area that comes into contact with the propagator of Islam. It is carried out with a qualitative method that leads to content analysis as the end of the research activity. In addition to using literature studies, field studies were also carried out to the location that became the object of the study. The final result concluded that the Makam Mahligai in Barus, North Sumatera, is an important historical site that represents the beginning of the entry of Islam into the archipelago since the 7th century AD. Barus as a large trading port became the center of cultural and religious interaction between Muslim traders from Arabia, India and China with the local community. The Makam Mahligai has tombs with various types of tombstones that existed at the time as historical and cultural and archaeological evidence that can be realized as a religious tourist destination. The potential of the Makam Mahligai as a religious tourism destination is huge, because it combines spiritual, historical, and cultural aspects. It can even provide opportunities to enrich the spiritual experience of visitors, introduce local traditions, and encourage economic growth of the surrounding community. **For Future Research**, it is recommended to conduct a more in-depth study involving community participation and the role of local government in the development of religious tourism. Further research may also explore the visitor experience, sustainable tourism practices, and integration of technology in promoting and preserving the Makam Mahligai site

**Keywords:** Potential, Mahligai Tomb, Destinations, Religious Touris, Culture Heritage

### INTRODUCTION

The presence of Islam leaves many historical relics including buildings, mosques, former colonies, jewelry, customs, and even tombs that can be used as tourist potential. Many tours contain religious elements, one of which is a pilgrimage to the graves of scholars (Rohman, 2014). Islam as a religion has become the flesh and blood of a large number of the people of the archipelago. However, the exact date of the arrival of Islam in the archipelago is not known, but until now there have been four theories about the spread of Islam in the archipelago, namely Arabic, Persia, Indian and Chinese (Nury, et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the process of its spread is inseparable from the role of Muslim traders from Arabia, India and China in introducing the teachings of Islam to the population. This means that there is a strong social and cultural interaction between Islam and the local traditions of the people of the archipelago (Roza, 2024). Every society on earth inherits traditions from its predecessors. The relationship between a society and its predecessors is never completely lost. Mutual dependence is an important aspect of society. Today's society would not exist without a connection to its history. A society is a group of people who live together and

create a culture. Therefore, there is no society without culture, and conversely, there would be no culture without society as a place where culture grows and develops. (Gusrini & Agustina, 2025). Regarding the spread of Islam in the archipelago, Islam was definitely initially established in port cities.

Furthermore, the process of Islamization in the archipelago occurs through several possibilities, including (1) indigenous people who have contact with Islam and then adhere to it; (2) Asian foreigners such as Arabs, Indians, Chinese and others who have embraced Islam steadily live and settle in an area in the archipelago and then marry indigenous people so that a new family is formed and follows the religion brought by the immigrants (Ricklefs, 2007). As a result of this, there were villages and tombs where the spreaders of Islam were buried in the area. According to Hasibuan, et al, (2024) that the area of interest by domestic and foreign tourists is North Sumatera Province, namely the Central Tapanuli Regency area. In addition to beautiful and enchanting natural wealth, it also holds many historical relics, especially those related to evidence of Islamic civilization relics, such as the Mahligai Tomb.

The results of research on tombs as religious tourism destinations in Indonesia have been carried out extensively, such as those carried out by Supriadi et al (2022) who studied the tomb of Maulana Sheikh in Lombok. Then an article by Nur Indah Sari et al. entitled *Improving Spirituality Through Religious Tourism in the Sacred Tomb of Kwitang Jakarta*, published in the *Online Journal of Al-Qur'an Studies* Vol.14, no. 1 of 2018 which concluded that there is a significant impact of the development of religious tourism on the social and economic transformation of the surrounding community. Likewise, the study report on the Godog Tomb in Garut highlights the local economic aspect because religious tourism makes a positive contribution to opening local business opportunities (Saripudin and Saepul Bahri, 2022). In addition, policy and cultural approaches are also highlighted in the management of religious tourism carried out by Ellya Roza et al. (2023) regarding the Jami' Air Tiris Mosque as a religious tourism destination in Kampar, Riau.

Based on the study of these literatures, it turns out that the management of religious tourist destinations such as the Mahligai Tomb needs to be carried out with a holistic approach that not only focuses on physical and promotional aspects, but also considers spiritual, socio-cultural and economic dimensions in a balanced manner. This approach can maximize the potential of religious sites as a source of education, spiritual inspiration and local economic empowerment without undermining the historical value contained in them. Because value or meaning is a symbol that depends on specific individuals or groups and is often used and encountered as a concept within the cultural environment of a particular region. (Nora, 2024) Therefore, an article about the potential of the Mahligai Tomb as a religious tourism destination should be published so that the people of the archipelago know its existence and visit directly. Religious tourism is very much needed by the people of the archipelago in facing the era of digitalization which makes people feel lacking in the spiritual realm today.

Data collection techniques were carried out by participatory observation methods, semi-structured interviews and documentation. Data analysis is directed to content analysis with the procedure of (1) preparing all data and sorting out data; (2) read the collected data; (3) coding the collected data; (4) conducting the location and theme to be analyzed; (5) make a qualitative description; (6) the last to interpret (Creswell, 2014: and Bungin, 2022). With this method, it is hoped that the research can provide a comprehensive picture of the potential of the Mahligai Tomb as a religious tourism destination, as well as identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in its development, as well as its implications for cultural preservation and improving the welfare of local communities.

## METHOD

This article uses a qualitative descriptive approach to deeply understand the potential of the Mahligai Tomb as a religious tourism destination. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore phenomena holistically and contextually based on the data collected (Sugiyono, 2022). The object of this study is the Mahligai Tomb located in Barus, North Sumatera. This site was chosen because it has historical, religious, and socio-cultural value that has the potential to be developed as a religious tourist destination. The research focuses on aspects of the site's attractiveness, community participation, and challenges in managing it as a spiritual tourist attraction.

The data sources used are primary sources and secondary sources (Sugiyono, 2022, op.cit). Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with grave site managers, community leaders and visitors. In addition, direct observation was carried out on activities around the tomb, supporting facilities and socio-economic conditions of the local community. Meanwhile, secondary data is collected through literature

reviews, in the form of articles in journals, books and policy documents related to religious tourism and historical site management.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## Barus North Sumatera The Place of the Mahligai Tomb Site

Barus is an old city on the west coast of North Sumatera which has long been known as the initial gateway for the entry of Islam into the archipelago since the 7th century AD because at that time Barus had become an international port that was stopped by traders from the Middle East, India and other Asian regions. This port was known for camphor as a very valuable commodity at that time. The Muslim merchants who came not only brought merchandise but also spread Islamic teachings to the local population (Ilahi, 2024).

One of the important archaeological evidences is the discovery of ancient tomb complexes such as the tomb of mahligai, high board, the tomb of Ibrahim, the tomb of Makhudum and the tomb of Ambar in Barus. Some of the tombstones are thought to date from the 7th to 10th centuries AD, suggesting that Islam was already present and developed in this region long before its arrival in regions such as Aceh or Java. (Siregar et al., 2024). The early scholars who settled in Barus also established religious educational institutions and mosques, which became centers of learning and spreading Islam to the interior of Sumatera and other coastal areas (Rizal, 2018).

Geographically, Barus is located on the west coast of Sumatera Island which is bordered to the north by Andam Dewi District, to the south by Sosorgadong District. While in the east it is bordered by North Barus District and the Indian Ocean in the west. The area of Barus District is 21.81 km<sup>2</sup>, with a population of 18,919 people in 2021 (Putri, et al, 2025). Here you can see the position of Barus.

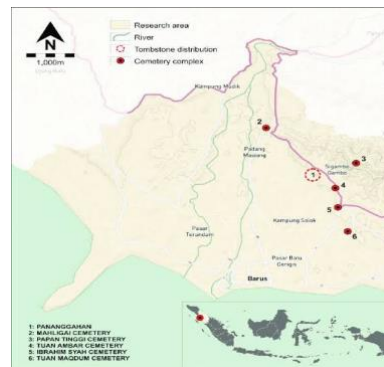


**Figure 1.** Map of the city of Barus

The city of Barus is known as a producer of camphor which was once exported to the Middle East, including Egypt and other cities. Camphor was used to preserve corpses or mummify, which was a tradition in Ancient Egypt. One famous example is the use of camphor to preserve the Pharaoh's mummies which can now be found in the Cairo Museum, including the Ramseh Museum, where his remains are still in a durable condition to this day. In addition to being famous as a producer of camphor, Barus City also produces various other commodities, such as frankincense, pepper, resin, animal skins, and other natural products, which come from the interior areas of Toba, Singkil, Tanah Karo, Simalungun, and surrounding islands. (Khairunnisa & Pane, 2019)

### Location of Mahligai's Tomb

The Mahligai Tomb Complex is located in Aek Dakka village, Barus District. Located on hills with an area of  $\pm 2$  Ha. To get to the Mahligai Tomb complex, it can be passed by four-wheeled and two-wheeled vehicles because the road is good and paved. The barbed wire fenced tomb complex was proposed by the North Sumatera Ministry of Education and Culture for the 1990/1991 fiscal year as well as the restoration of the complex (Silitonga & Anom, 2016). The following can be seen the location of the tomb complex.



**Figure 2.** Map of the Tomb of the Mahligai

The Mahligai Tomb is a site that is not only important in terms of history, but also has high religious value for the community. As a tomb believed to have links to revered historical figures in a particular religious tradition, the site offers more than just physical attraction. According to Widiastuti and Handayani (2016), tombs as religious sites can provide a deep spiritual experience for visitors who come to make pilgrimages, remembering religious leaders or their ancestors. The Mahligai Tomb, in this case, has historical value involving respected local religious or cultural figures, so it becomes a stopover center for pilgrims or tourists who want to explore spirituality in Indonesia. The following can be seen the shape of the Mahligai Tomb



**Figure 3.** The Mahligai Tomb

### Religious Tourism

Religious tourism is a type of tourism related to religious aspects. Religious tourism is interpreted as a tourist activity to a place that has a special meaning for certain religious people. Religious tourist attractions can be places of worship and historical places that have their own specificity and meaning compared to other cultural relics (Roza, et al., 2023). Some people consider religious tourism as a trip to locations that lead to pilgrimages to tombs that are considered sacred.

Pilgrimage comes from the Arabic *zaru*, *yazuuru*, *ziyaratan*. Pilgrimage can be interpreted as a visit to the living or to the dead. Nonetheless, visits to the graves or graves of deceased people are an important part of public understanding. According to Islam, grave pilgrimage is a form of *sunnah* worship, which means that grave pilgrimage is carried out when there is merit and there is no sin. The ritual of pilgrimage to the grave is designed to be easily understood, even if it existed before Islam. This custom is still followed to this day (Lase, 2023). In general, pilgrimage is a social phenomenon that always occurs throughout human tradition. Pilgrimage is not only a part of religious ceremonies but has also developed into the culture of the community. Therefore, pilgrimage is considered a cultural act that has a unique meaning and purpose for those who do it. This is in accordance with what the Prophet Muh taught.

Religious tourism is a trip or part of activities that are carried out voluntarily to enjoy tourist objects and attractions. Religious tourism is a journey to gain experience of religious and community lessons.

According to Jaelani (2017), religious tourism is a trip to places that are considered sacred, which not only reflects religious values but also provides economic potential for the local community. Religious tourism has an important role in national tourism because it is able to combine spiritual, cultural and economic aspects in one harmonious unit.

As explained by Nuraini (2023), the tomb as a religious tourist attraction is not only a place of worship, but also a space for historical and cultural reflection. In this case, for example, the Mahligai Tomb in Central Tapanuli, the existence of this respected tomb offers the potential to become a magnet for tourists interested in history, culture, and spirituality. Thus, good management can make the Mahligai Tomb a religious tourism destination that is rich in intellectual and emotional experiences for its visitors. The main attraction of the Mahligai Tomb as a religious tourism destination lies in the historical and cultural value contained in it.

The Mahligai Tomb as part of the cultural heritage in Indonesia not only provides space for religious practices but also provides an opportunity to get to know more about the local culture that is so abundant in this beloved country. This is in line with the view of Widyastuti (2015), who explained that religious tourist attractions are often a space to preserve cultural values that exist in society, especially in the context of spirituality and local history. This is especially relevant to the Mahligai Tomb which has a strong connection with the community and religious values that flourish around it.

Prihantoro (2016) explained that religious tourism is a type of tourism that is categorized into special interest tourism. Special interest tourism emphasizes the very special interest of tourists who "are traveling to learn a bout and experince particular specific features related to an area". This interest can be in the form of a specific hobby or pleasure manifested in the form of a tourist trip. Certain tourism activities can be categorized into special interest tourism, such as educational tourism, art and historical heritage tourism, ethnic tourism, adventure tourism, sports and health. and including religious tourism.

Religious tourism is also understood as a tourist activity to places that have a special meaning for religious people, usually several places of worship that have uniqueness. For example, in terms of history, the existence of myths and legends about the place or the uniqueness and architectural excellence of the building. Even with religious tourism, the goal of visitors or tourists is to obtain blessings, ibrah, tausiah and wisdom after returning from the place visited. Therefore, it can be said that religious tourism is a religious journey to quench spiritual thirst, so that the dry soul is re-wet with religious wisdom. Therefore, Chotib (2015:42) is of the view that there will be something different that can be felt by religious tourists, both when they depart, when they are at the location, and after the trip. Because religious travel can only be meaningful if the perpetrator has understood the meaning he wants.

### **The Potential of the Mahligai Tomb as a Religious Tourism Destination**

Tourism potential can be understood as the meaning of everything in the tourist area, and is an attraction so that people want to come and visit the place (Sukardi, 1998). Then Putra & Andiani, (2019) also expressed the same understanding of the potential for tourism to be useful for developing the tourism industry in an area. The tourism potential in question is historical heritage in the form of tombs that are relics of civilization such as merchants who are also spreaders of Islam.

Furthermore, Kompas (October 17, 2015) reported that many religious tourist attractions can be visited anywhere other than mosques, for example Borobudur Temple which is always visited by a large number of Buddhists both from within and outside the country on Vesak Day. In addition, it is also visited by the world community because of the uniqueness of the building. Likewise, temple buildings in various regions, not only its adherents come to visit, but the general public comes very much just to witness the beauty of the building.

Likewise with the Mahligai Tomb complex located in Barus, North Sumatera. The Mahligai Tomb which is very strategically located makes it very easy for visitors to visit there. As explained earlier, the Mahligai Tomb complex is one of the religious tourism that is crowded with tourists, both from within the country and tourists from abroad. This is because the Mahligai Tomb complex is the place where scholars, Islamic propagators and Arab, Indian and other traders who have collaborated with the local community in their lives are buried there.

The Mahligai Tomb Complex has 234 tombs consisting of 3 types of tombstones, namely: round shapes of 104 kali stones, flat shapes of andesite rock materials as many as 65 tombs and mace-shaped shapes of 65 tombs. The shape and type of headstone varies from simple shapes to shapes filled with ornamental patterns from small tombstones to large ones. The figures buried in the complex based on

information (wawancara with the caretaker of Mr. Ridwan's grave, October 26, 2024) include (1) Syech Rukumuddin; (2) Syech Zainal Abidin alias Syech Samsuddin; (3) Imam Syech Khatib; (4) Syech Siddik; (5) Tuanku Mahligai.

If you look closely at the location of the Mahligai Tomb, it should be used as a religious tourist destination because in addition to the historical aspect, there are also many other aspects that support it to be used as a religious tourism destination. As explained by Ati (2011), the functions of religious tourism are (1) For outdoor and indoor activities, individuals or collectives, to provide freshness and enthusiasm for life, both physical and spiritual; (2) As a place of worship, prayer, dhikr, and prayer; (3) As one of the religious activities; (4) As one of the tourist destinations for Muslims.; (5) As a community activity; (6) To gain inner and outer peace; (7) As an improvement of human quality and teaching. Basically, in the management of religious tourism, there are several things that must be considered, including (1) The establishment of a forum for local community rebuk to discuss the development of religious thematic religious tourism attractions/Muslim pilgrimages appropriately by paying attention to the potential of existing local cultural wealth; (2) Equipment is needed in the form of making a master plan for RTBL (building and environmental plan) and discussed cross-sectorally.

In addition, the existence of supporting facilities such as lodgings, information centers, and places of worship around the site can enhance the tourist experience. (Primadona & Fatimah, 2023). Good management of religious tourism involves careful planning related to facilities and services that can improve the comfort of visitors. Therefore, the development of adequate infrastructure around the Mahligai Tomb is very important to support a better visitor experience, both in terms of comfort and interaction with the cultural values that exist there.

The development of the Mahligai Tomb as a religious tourism destination has a significant positive impact on the surrounding community. Based on the author's observations in the field, if the Mahligai Tomb is arranged in such a way as to become a religious tourist destination, it is predicted to be one of the economic sources of the local community. In line with what Lase, et al., (2023) write, religious tourism destinations such as tombs and religious sites in Indonesia often make a major contribution to the local economy, by increasing the trade, service, and creative industries sectors. Local communities can benefit directly from the increase in the number of tourists who come, both in the form of income from the hotel, restaurant, and souvenir sales sectors. In addition, as a religious tourism destination, the Mahligai Tomb also has the potential to increase social and cultural awareness among the community. Tourists who come for a pilgrimage are not only interested in.

In addition, according to Fatimah (2011:38) there are several contents of da'wah in religious tourism, namely: (1) Al-Mauidhah Hasanah can be interpreted as an expression that contains elements of guidance, education, teaching stories, good news, warnings, positive messages that can be used as a guide in life in order to get salvation in this world and the hereafter; (2) Al-hikmah as a method of da'wah that is interpreted wisely, noble intellect, an airy chest, a clean heart and drawing attention to religion or God.

The management of religious tourism destinations is not easy because many obstacles occur, including suboptimal management, both in terms of marketing, the provision of adequate facilities, and training for local communities to be involved in the tourism industry (Sya'rawie, 2020). As stated by Murphy (1985), the main challenge lies in effective management so that cultural and religious values are not displaced by commercial interests. Therefore, the right strategy is needed so that religious tourism can provide economic benefits without sacrificing the spiritual meaning contained in it (Wiharjokusumo & Saragih, 2023).

In addition, the role of the government and the private sector in supporting the development of this destination is very important. The challenge in developing the Mahligai Tomb as a Religious Tourism Destination is the limited facilities that support visitors, such as comfortable lodging and easy transportation access. Good management of religious tourism requires careful planning related to infrastructure and facilities to ensure the comfort of visitors. As a religious historical site, the Mahligai Tomb attracts the attention of many visitors who want to feel the spiritual value and historical value contained in it (Resita & Qomaruzzaman, 2023). This is in line with the view of Koentjaraningrat (2009) who states that sacred places such as tombs have an important role in the social and cultural life of the community as a center of religious and traditional activities.

Based on the information above, it has actually been realized in the vision of the Central Tapanuli Regency Tourism and Culture Office which is prepared based on tourism potential which reads the realization of Central Tapanuli Regency as a Safe, Orderly and Enchanting tourist destination area. The meaning of the word safe is all elements of tourism such as security apparatus, the community must be able



to foster and maintain so that a peaceful atmosphere is created for the property of tourists. Then the meaning of the word orderly is expected to all elements of tourism such as public security apparatus to maintain public order such as order on the road, orderly parking, etc. Furthermore, the meaning of the word enchanting where all elements of tourism which include the community as tourism actors, tourist objects as tourist destinations such as Marine Tourism, Waterfalls, Natural Tourism, Religious Tourism must be able to give a stunning and awesome impression to tourists. Meanwhile, efforts and efforts to realize this vision, the mission is prepared, namely (1) Making the tourism sector one of the economic activities; (2) Exploring and preserving tourism potential; (3) Increasing community participation in tourism activities.

If observed, the number of tourist attractions in Central Tapanuli Regency is extraordinary. This is understandable because the factors of nature and the earth make the area have a nuance of beauty so that it is attractive to visit. Coupled with the existence of historical and cultural factors as relics of past civilizations that add to the treasures of tourists' knowledge if they visit. As explained before, the Mahligai Tomb is one of the forms of tourist attractions that have been managed by the local Government.

According to Law No. 10 of 2009, Chapter 1, Article 1 concerning tourism, it is explained that tourism is a variety of tourism activities and is supported by various facilities and services provided by the community, entrepreneurs, government and local governments. Therefore, tourism development is realized through the implementation of a tourism development plan by paying attention to diversity, uniqueness and peculiarities of culture and nature as well as human needs for tourism

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The Tomb of Mahligai in Barus, North Sumatra, is an important historical site that represents the beginning of the entry of Islam into the archipelago since the 7th century AD. Barus as a strategic port became the center of cultural and religious interaction between Muslim traders from Arabia, India, and China with the local community. The Mahligai Tomb Complex, which consists of 234 tombs with various types of tombstones, is archaeological evidence that strengthens Barus' position as the center of the early spread of Islam. The existence of this tomb not only holds spiritual value, but also historical and cultural richness so that it can be an attraction for visitors to the location of the tomb. Thus the Mahligai Tomb has great potential to be developed as a religious tourist destination, as it combines strong spiritual, historical, and cultural aspects. Religious tourism at this site provides an opportunity to enrich the spiritual experience of visitors, introduce local traditions, and encourage the economic growth of the community.

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