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# Building A Religious Tourism Village: An Ethnographic Study of the Emergence of Intellectual Authority

Ihsan Rahmat

*Da'wah Management, UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, Indonesia*

Armin Tedy

*Aqidah and Islamic Philosophy, UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, Indonesia*

Indra Pratama Putra Salmon

*Public Administration, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia*

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – The Indonesian government is promoting religious moderation as a counter-narrative to extremism and intolerance. The propagation of this ideology is facilitated by a variety of strategies, including the establishment of religious tolerance tourism villages. This article aims to elucidate the process of establishing a religious tourism village in Rama Agung Village, North Bengkulu Regency, Indonesia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research has been in progress since 2022, with data collection and analysis ongoing until 2024. During this period, we engaged in repeated fieldwork, which included conducting in-depth interviews and observations, as well as participating in a series of village activities. The ethnographic procedure was meticulously divided into four stages: preliminary fieldwork, fieldwork, data processing and analysis, and the presentation of findings. The collected data was then subjected to a rigorous analysis using a systematic coding, categorization, and placement system.

**Findings** – Despite initial rejection during its nascent stages, academics ultimately emerged as a pivotal element in the successful establishment of the five-religion tourist village in Rama Agung. This recognition was achieved after the village underwent various stages of development. The following stages were identified: 1) government support; 2) ideas and assistance from academics; 3) cross-sectoral coordination and the formation; 4) internal village coordination and the formation of the Interfaith Community Forum (FPUB); 5) tourist attractions; and 6) participation in competitions.

**Research implications** – This article presents significant findings for practitioners in the field of religious tourism, underscoring the necessity for academics to be entrusted with the authority to develop innovations tailored to the potential of villages. This authority will ultimately result in the establishment of FPUB as a counterbalance in decision-making, thereby reducing conflicts and jealousy in villages.

**Originality/value** – Research on religious tourism villages and tolerance villages remains sparse due to the nascent state of this model. Consequently, there is a necessity for efforts to document a variety of perspectives to increase knowledge. This is the inaugural study to delineate the process of establishing a tourism village based on five different religions.

**Keywords** Religious tourism, Tourism village, Stakeholders, Desa Rama Agung.

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Religious differences continue to be a significant source of social conflict in Indonesia (Regus, 2020; Wahjusaputri, 2015; Widyanto, 2002). The Setara Institute (2024) has released data on violations of freedom of religion or belief, which indicates an increase in such incidents. In 2021, there were 171 incidents, in 2022, there were 172, and in 2023, there were 217. The accumulation of cases has occurred in the context of disturbances at places of worship, instances of blasphemy, and expressions of intolerance by members of the community. The Indonesian

government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has sought to address religious extremism and intolerance through the promotion of religious moderation, as outlined in the 2020-2025 National Medium-Term Development Plan or RPJMN.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs employs a strategy of gradual implementation, seeking to align the views of all societal elements on the principles of religious moderation. This approach has been disseminated through various channels, including training for trainers, limited and public seminars in government agencies, religious moderation institutions on campus, community service, and *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB) at the district and city levels. Additionally, the Ministry of Tourism has extended support to the program by identifying villages with existing traditions of religious diversity and belief systems.

In the context of tourism, villages that are perceived to possess a distinctive character, a harmonious social environment, and a tolerant attitude towards religious communities are often promoted as tourist destinations. The designation of these villages has given rise to several appellations, including those on religion, nationality, tolerance, and Pancasila tourism. Each tourist village strives to showcase its distinctive features and characteristics, to provide an educational experience for tourists. The Pancasila Village in Ngadas exhibits a multifaceted cultural heritage, encompassing diverse tribal, customary, community, and religious traditions (Jati et al., 2022). The Nationality Tourism Village in Wonorejo incorporates religious and cultural rituals into a festival, along with the natural beauty of Baluran National Park and the sea (Windiardani et al., 2019). The Five Religions Tourism Village in Rama Agung presents a distinctive concurrent concept and replication of religious icons (Rohimin, 2019).

The Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung has undergone a distinctive process of formation. This is attributable to the community's multi-religious background, the participation of Islamic campus academics, and the involvement of village and district governments. According to the 2023 census data, the population of Rama Agung is 2,487 individuals, comprising 894 Muslims, 712 Hindus, 52 Buddhists, 847 Protestant Christians, and 102 Catholics (Aribowo, 2023). The considerable number of stakeholders involved did not impede the process of establishing a pilot village for religious harmony. This process is significant for the documentation of best practices. Furthermore, it challenges the view of Eisenhardt (1989) and Shapiro (2005) that a decision involving numerous actors will be inherently weak and flawed due to the presence of competing interests.

Prior to this research, other scholars have demonstrated interest in the Tourism Village in Rama Agung. For instance, Rohimin (2019) and Tawil & Rahmarini (2020) have elucidated the advantages and distinctive features of the tourism village. In contrast, Al Hady (2023) and Aji et al., (2024) concentrate on the social capital of the local community, which is the foundation of multiculturalism. A review of the literature reveals that research on religious tourism villages in Indonesia is comparatively limited in scope, particularly in comparison to studies on pilgrimage tourism. The objective of this study is to elucidate the processes of the formation of a religious tourism village that encompasses five distinct religious traditions in Rama Agung, North Bengkulu Regency, Indonesia. This article is of significant value, as it offers insights that are not only beneficial for practitioners and experts involved in the establishment of religious tourism villages, but also addresses the limitations of previous studies in this field.

## 2. Method

This research has been in progress for a considerable period (2022-2024). During this period, we conducted in-depth interviews and observations in the field, including participation in a series of village activities. The ethnographic procedure is meticulously divided into four stages: initial fieldwork, fieldwork, data processing and analysis, and presentation of research results, followed by validation of the research results. In the initial phase, the research methods employed included observation



and open interviews. The data collected encompassed historical records of the village's origins, observations of tourist attractions, and interviews with individuals who played a pivotal role in the establishment of the tourist village.

Secondly, field data collection employed a combination of in-depth interviews, follow-up observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on three primary questions: how the tourism village was constructed, what role various actors played in the process, and why these individuals were involved. Subsequent inquiries were formulated based on the informant's responses and tailored to elicit further details. In total, eight informants were consulted in the course of this research project. These included the village head, the head of Pokdarwis (Kelompok Sadar Wisata), representatives of FPUB (Forum Perwakilan Umat Beragama), representatives of FKUB of North Bengkulu Regency, and academics from UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, who were consulted as a team of experts.

Thirdly, the data was processed and the findings were documented in working papers. All data has been transcribed and is available in 10 files in Word format. The data processing was conducted following the guidelines set forth by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2018) and Creswell (2013). Accordingly, a coding, categorization, and interpretation mechanism has been established. The final version of the research results is presented herewith (Sa'adah et al., 2024). The descriptions of all field data have been incorporated into the working paper. The final step was to confirm the correctness and suitability of the sequence of establishing the Rama Agung Tourism Village to the village head and the head of the Pokdarwis.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Knowing the Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung

Rama Agung Village is situated within the boundaries of the Kota Arga Makmur subdistrict, which is located in the North Bengkulu Regency of the Bengkulu Province in Indonesia. The estimated travel time from Bengkulu City is approximately 1.5 hours, or a distance of 62.8 km. Rama Agung Village was established in 1963 as a result of the transmigration of Balinese people due to the eruption of Mount Agung. Over time, the village has become a diverse community comprising various tribes and religions. The population of Rama Agung Village is 2,925 individuals, including 1,501 men and 1,424 women, and 864 family heads.

**Picture 1.** The Religious Harmony Monument in Rama Agung



Source: Primary data, 2023.

The coexistence of diverse cultures and artistic traditions has led to the emergence of a rich tapestry of traditional processional dances and religious buildings belonging to the Batak, Balinese, Javanese, and Rejang tribes. Rama

Agung Village is home to five distinct religious groups: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity. This diversity is reflected in the village's religious infrastructure, which comprises five distinct houses of worship: two mosques, six Protestant Christian churches, one Catholic church, three temples, and one monastery. Notably, the locations of these houses of worship are close to one another, with some even facing each other.

The Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung was inaugurated in 2021 by the Regent of North Bengkulu Regency. Table 1 delineates the attractions that visitors may enjoy and learn from. To visit Rama Agung Village, tourists are required to complete some stages by the prescribed procedure. This was also observed by the research team upon their initial visit to Rama Agung Village. First, upon arrival in Rama Agung Village, tourists are required to report to the Village Office, where they must explain the purpose and objective of their visit. Second, the village provides directions to the FPUB (Forum of Religious Unity), which also serves as a tour guide, offering facilities and services by the tourists' needs. Third, the tour guide provides education and invites tourists to tour the village. The service time for tourists is adjusted according to the circumstances and conditions of both parties, namely, the tour guides and tourists.

### 3.2 Dynamics of Tourism Village Establishment in Rama Agung

Some events and actions were undertaken during the process of establishing the Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung. This research has identified six key stages that are considered to be pivotal in the establishment process. The initial stage is marked by the introduction of the religious moderation mandate in the RPJMN. The government's objective is to develop national character based on the ideology of Pancasila, to promote and preserve culture, to encourage religious moderation, to advance literacy, to foster innovation, and to promote creativity. About religious moderation, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the lead ministry in this area, has developed a strategy comprising several key initiatives. These include training for trainers, seminars, the establishment of institutions for religious moderation, community service, and the enhancement of the role of FKUB.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs published Technical Guidance Number 08 of 2021, which outlines the distribution of government assistance to the Work Unit Program of the Secretary General, Provincial Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Regency/City in the Field of Religious Harmony. One of the policy's objectives is to establish a harmony-oriented village in each province. In June 2021, Bengkulu Province designated Rama Agung Village as a pilot site. While the Governor's Certificate marked the inauguration, it did not necessarily signal the inception of a Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung.

Secondly, the concept of religious tourism villages was first proposed by academics. A year before the approval of the 2020-2024 RPJMN by the President of Indonesia, a research team from UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, chaired by Prof. Dr. Rohimin, M.Ag., conducted a study on the development of a multicultural-based religious tourism village with a community-based tourism approach in Rama Agung. The study yielded multiculturalism instruments for Rama Agung Village, including the principles of equality, freedom, unity, and brotherhood; peace; deliberation; justice; leadership; helping; defending; and defense principles (Rohimin, 2019). Following the approval of Technical Guideline No. 08 of 2021, Prof. Rohimin, chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Bengkulu Province and professor at UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, proposed Rama Agung as a pilot village for religious harmony to the Head of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Bengkulu. Subsequently, the proposal was forwarded to the Governor of Bengkulu.

Thirdly, the implementation of cross-sectoral focus group discussions (FGDs) and the formation of tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis) is to be undertaken. The FGD was initiated by the academic participants and facilitated by the village

officials. The meeting was attended by the Deputy Regent of North Bengkulu, representatives from the Tourism Office, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the FKUB. The discussion addressed several key points, including the presentation of the findings from the analysis of the village's potential for tourism, the establishment of collaborative partnerships and a unified vision, and the development of a roadmap for future actions. In the concluding session, all stakeholders concurred on the formation of Pokdarwis through the issuance of a decree by the Head of Rama Agung Village (No. 03 of 2022).

Fourthly, academic coordination was conducted with all elements of the village. Following the acquisition of external stakeholder support, a meeting was held by UIN Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu academics with all members of the community. The meeting was conducted by Pokdarwis at the Rama Agung Village Hall. During the presentation of the village's potential, the academics proposed the establishment of a FPUB to facilitate a unified perspective and the dissemination of information. The proposed mechanism entails the designation of a representative from each religious group within one week, with these individuals subsequently included in the management of the proposed tourism village. Until this data is collected, the FPUB is identified as the primary entity responsible for providing support in the implementation of daily operations, including the provision of tour guides and the organization of annual events.

Table 1. Attractions visited by visitors

Sn.	Sites	Product	Description
1.	The place where corpses are burned	Objek/Situs	The removal of human remains after death by burning them
2.	Beji	Object/Site	The place where the ashes of human bones are shredded
3.	Temple	Object/Site	Village temple, dalem temple and Mrajapati temple
4.	Mosque	Object/Site	Al-Kautsar Mosque and Al-Jihat Mosque
5.	Church	Object/Site	Mary and Santo Tomas Prayer Garden
6.	Vihara	Object/Site	Buddhist place of worship
7.	Public Cemetery	Hybrid	The grave place of all religious communities in Rama Agung
8.	Religious Monument	Hybrid	Introducing inter-religious harmony in Rama Agung
9.	Cultural Parade	Events	Religious Harmony Celebration and village anniversary

Sources: Primary data, 2024.

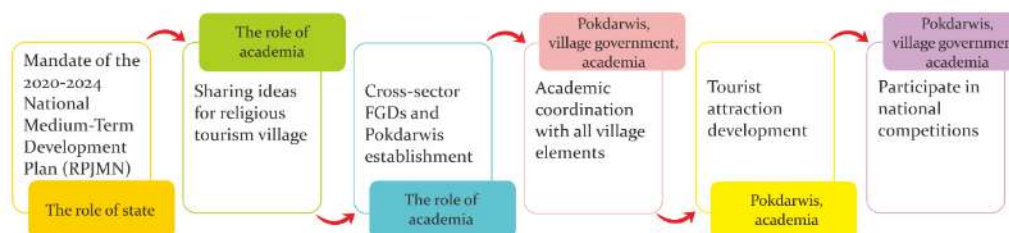
Fifth is the development of tourist attractions. Turtureanu (2005) distinguishes between two categories of tourist attractions: those that are natural and those that are man-made. Meanwhile, Law No. 10/2009 provides a categorization of tourism products, which are divided into three categories: natural, man-made, and cultural. Rama Agung Village has already established a robust foundation for educational tourism. In the process of mapping tourism products, academics place a particular emphasis on the cultural heritage of the communities in question. The available cultural products are classified into three categories: objects/sites, events, and a combination of the two, which I refer to as "hybrid." Table 1 illustrates the cultural attractions and product types categorised by Pokdarwis.

A sixth rationale for participation in national competitions is the desire to gain a sense of existence. The Moderation Tourism Village Competition, which is organized by the Ministry of Tourism, represents a valuable opportunity to foster collaboration and mutual understanding between tourism village stakeholders and the broader community. Even though the forms and data for the competition have been prepared by Pokdarwis and academics, it is necessary to obtain the support of the community to ensure the success of the various events. Community awareness can be fostered through events, tourist visits, and tourism development. The involvement of all elements has a positive impact on the village, which was awarded first place at the national level for the Moderation Village category in



2023. Since its establishment, this religious tourism village has received 13 awards at the provincial and national levels.

**Scheme 1.** Dynamics of tourism village formation and actor roles



Source: Primary data analysis, 2024.

A thorough examination of the stakeholders involved in the development and success at the national level reveals that academics constitute a pivotal group. As illustrated in Scheme 1, academia plays a pivotal role at each stage of the process of developing the Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung. Consequently, scholars have conceptualized frameworks and models for the management of religious tourism, encompassing guidelines and frameworks that governmental and local community entities can utilize. The argument is posited that the development of regions and localities, including rural areas, is inextricably linked to the role of academics. This phenomenon can be attributed to the transformative nature of knowledge, which catalyses societal change. Conversely, academics are unable to act without collaboration between the relevant actors. Attas et al. (2020) demonstrated that the triple helix approach to tourism in North Luwu Regency has the potential to revitalize the local economy. This finding corroborates Rahmat and Cahyadi (2019), which suggests that in the context of rural communities with limited access to education, experience, and information, the role of intellectual actors is particularly crucial. The expansion of community knowledge is contingent upon the provision of ongoing support.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has delineated the processes through which the Religious Tourism Village in Rama Agung came into being. The six processes that were followed were as follows: the state's desire to strengthen religious harmony, initiation and assistance by academics, cross-sector coordination, internal village coordination, tourist attraction development, and participating in national competitions. The existence of this initiative is inextricably linked to the pivotal role of academics, who were instrumental in conceptualizing the project, overseeing its implementation, and conducting its evaluation. This encompasses ensuring the village's readiness to become the leading Religious Tourism Village in Indonesia by 2023. This research offers a crucial recommendation for tourism village actors with similar characteristics: the formation of FPUB. This forum is regarded as a catalyst for balancing the perspectives of the five religious actors.

It is important to note that this research is not without limitations. These include a lack of data access to key figures, particularly policymakers; limited information from informants; and cost and time constraints. Consequently, future research should give careful consideration to the choice of research approach. We propose that ethnography, rather than case studies, would be a more appropriate methodology for the context of tourism villages. Furthermore, future researchers should investigate the sustainability of religious harmony tourism villages at the policy-making level, particularly in light of the 2020-2024 RPJMN.

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### **Corresponding author**

Ihsan Rahmat can be contacted at: [ihsanrahmat@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id](mailto:ihsanrahmat@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id)