

Cultural Da'wah Strategies In Religious Tourism: A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis At The Pilgrimage Site Of Sunan Kalijaga

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Abstract

This study explores cultural da'wah communication practices in religious tourism, specifically at the Sunan Kalijaga pilgrimage site in Demak, Central Java. Using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and observation, the research investigates how religious messages are conveyed by caretakers and guides to pilgrims. The findings reveal that da'wah is presented through symbolic narratives, traditional rituals, and local cultural expressions, fostering inclusive spiritual experiences. This study highlights religious tourism as a potential medium for non-confrontational and contextual da'wah communication, relevant for diverse audiences.

Keyword: Da'wah Communication; Religious Tourism; Cultural Islam; Pilgrimage; Symbolic Interaction.

Introduction

Indonesia stands as a nation with profound cultural and religious diversity, where Islamic traditions are deeply embedded within local customs and societal practices. Religious tourism often occupies a unique space between sacred devotion and secular exploration, forming hybrid experiences that are both spiritual and experiential (Sharpley, 2009). Among the most significant expressions of this syncretism is religious tourism, particularly the pilgrimage to the tombs of the Wali Songo, the nine revered saints credited with the spread of Islam in Java. These pilgrimage practices serve not only as avenues for personal spiritual fulfillment but also as dynamic platforms for transmitting Islamic teachings in culturally resonant ways (Timothy, 2006). This aligns with the view that

religious travel shapes individual identity and collective memory through culturally mediated experiences (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990; Picard, 1997; Hasan, 2009). One of the most prominent pilgrimage destinations is the tomb of Sunan Kalijaga in Demak, Central Java, a figure historically recognized for his distinctive approach to da'wah through art, culture, and local wisdom (Azra, 2019; Susanto, 2018).

This study investigates the communicative strategies of cultural da'wah employed at the Sunan Kalijaga pilgrimage site. Anchored in the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, it explores how religious messages are conveyed through symbolic narratives, traditional rituals, and culturally embedded interactions between caretakers, guides, and pilgrims. The research seeks to address the following core questions:

1. In what ways is Islamic da'wah communicated through symbolic and interactive practices at the site?
2. What cultural elements are embedded in these communication strategies?
3. How do such practices shape the spiritual experience of pilgrims?

While the scholarship on religious tourism in Indonesia has largely focused on its economic, ritualistic, or sociocultural impacts (Henderson, 2011), studies that critically examine the communicative dimensions of da'wah within these contexts remain limited. Existing research often treats religious communication as either formal sermon delivery or doctrinal instruction, overlooking the symbolic and interactional processes occurring in lived tourism experiences. Such communication is often overlooked in conventional da'wah models that emphasize doctrinal transmission over social interaction (Geertz, 1960; Zuhdi, 2020).

This study fills that gap by foregrounding communication as the central mechanism in the cultural transmission of Islamic values, demonstrating how da'wah can operate in non-traditional, dialogic, and inclusive forms. Such dialogic da'wah strategies align with emerging practices in contemporary Islamic tourism that emphasize emotional connection and cultural negotiation (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010; Al Qurtuby, 2019).

By offering an empirical, field-based analysis of cultural da'wah at a major pilgrimage site, this research contributes to both da'wah communication studies and the broader literature on religious tourism. This resonates with the broader view that religious travel reflects not only ritual obligations but also identity and meaning-making (Eickelman &

Piscatori, 1990). It challenges rigid, monolithic conceptions of da'wah by highlighting its flexible, culturally adaptive, and symbolically rich expressions in contemporary Islamic practice.

Previous studies in Islamic communication emphasize the role of symbolic meaning-making in constructing religiosity in public spaces (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010; Goffman, 1959). In Southeast Asian contexts, cultural Islam enables da'wah to be communicated through ritual, performance, and collective identity (Al Qurtuby, 2019).

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology using a case study approach to examine the symbolic and cultural dimensions of da'wah communication at the Sunan Kalijaga pilgrimage site in Kadilangu, Demak. The case study design is appropriate for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena and enables a holistic understanding of communicative practices within a specific religious tourism setting (Yin, 2018). In tourism studies, this method enables researchers to analyze the semiological construction of space and its cultural interpretation by visitors (Hughes, 1991). This approach also allows the researcher to engage deeply with the site's socio-cultural dynamics and symbolic interactions, which are central to the research objectives.

Moreover, the qualitative case study offers flexibility in capturing nuanced meanings and lived experiences, especially in contexts where communication is mediated through ritual, narrative, and spatial symbolism. It facilitates the examination of how religious messages are co-constructed through interaction, not merely transmitted, which aligns with the symbolic interactionist perspective that underpins this study. By situating da'wah communication within the real-life practices of pilgrimage, the research contributes to a contextualized understanding of Islamic outreach that integrates local culture, embodied spirituality, and interpersonal engagement dimensions often underrepresented in conventional da'wah literature.

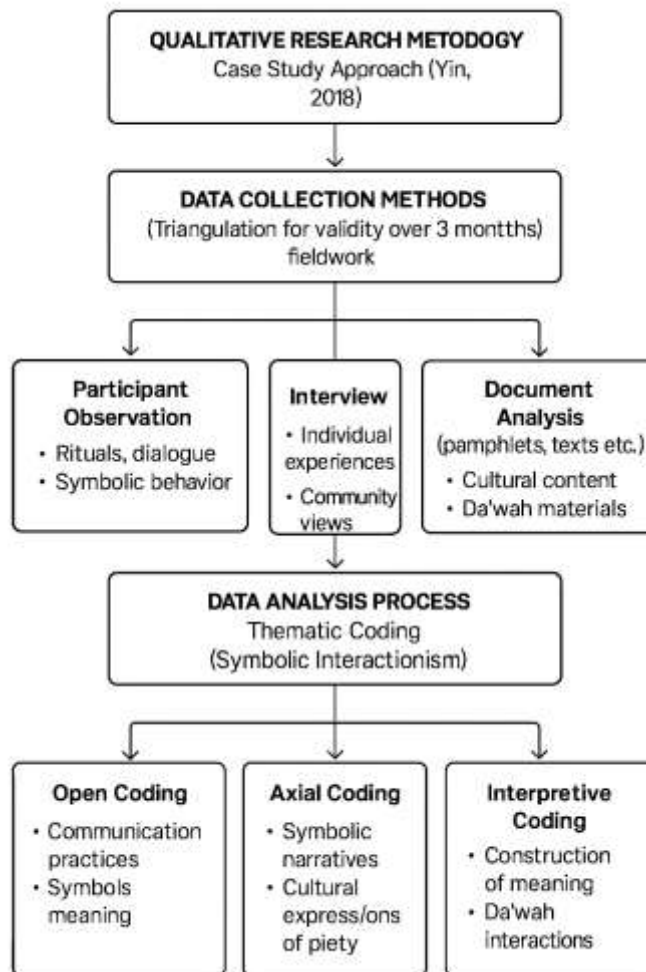


Figure 1. Research Design

Source: Adapted from Yin (2018), Spradley (1980), and Blumer (1969), developed by the author.

Data were collected through triangulated methods over a three-month fieldwork period:

1. Participant Observation

The researcher conducted non-intrusive observation of interactions between site caretakers, religious guides, and pilgrims during various activities such as ritual performances, guided tours, and informal dialogue sessions. This method facilitated the capture of symbolic behaviors, non-verbal communication, and ritual enactments (Spradley,

1980). Observational notes were recorded daily and used to trace recurring communicative patterns. The ethnographic and symbolic interactionist lens is suitable for decoding culturally embedded behavior and ritualized meaning in religious tourism (Spradley, 1980).

2. In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of eight participants were interviewed, consisting of three site caretakers, two religious tour guides, and three returning pilgrims. These informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active engagement in the site's da'wah communication processes. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged during the final interviews. Interviews explored participants' interpretations of da'wah, the role of culture in religious messaging, and their subjective spiritual experiences (Patton, 2002).

3. Document Analysis

Supplementary data were gathered from pamphlets, signage, historical texts, and oral narratives commonly delivered to visitors. These documents provided contextual background and helped triangulate findings from interviews and observations (Moleong, 2014).

The application of symbolic interactionism provides analytical depth for understanding the dynamic construction of piety, not just its representation (Goffman, 1959). It enables the researcher to interpret how religious meaning is actively negotiated through everyday interactions, symbolic acts, and cultural expressions. Data were analyzed using a thematic coding process guided by the principles of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Open coding, where all field notes and transcripts were reviewed to identify preliminary concepts related to communication practices, symbols, and religious meaning.
2. Axial coding, which grouped similar codes into broader themes such as symbolic narratives, cultural expressions of piety, and roles of communicators.
3. Interpretive coding, where symbolic interactionist theory was applied to explain how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and internalized through da'wah interactions. The theory served not only as an interpretive lens but also shaped the coding framework by emphasizing symbolic roles, social cues, and meaning-making in religious communication (Charon, 2010).

Ethical Considerations and Research Credibility, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave voluntary, informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and omitting personal identifiers. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation across multiple data sources was employed, along with member checking during the interview analysis stage to validate interpretations. The researcher also practiced reflexivity by maintaining a field journal to critically reflect on positionality, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

The following section presents the key findings of the study, structured into three main themes that directly address the research questions: (1) the communication strategies used in da'wah at the pilgrimage site, (2) the cultural elements embedded within these practices, and (3) the impact of these elements on pilgrims' spiritual experiences. Interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism, these themes illustrate how meaning is co-constructed through symbols, rituals, and social interactions in a religious tourism setting.

These findings not only illuminate the dynamics of religious messaging in a culturally embedded context but also reveal the layered processes through which religious understanding is shaped and internalized by pilgrims. By emphasizing the symbolic and interactive nature of da'wah, the analysis moves beyond a doctrinal perspective and highlights the importance of narrative, space, and tradition as communicative tools. This integrative approach offers a valuable contribution to the discourse on Islamic communication in tourism studies, demonstrating that cultural resonance and contextual sensitivity are essential for fostering meaningful religious experiences in pluralistic societies.

1. Forms of Da'wah Communication

At the Sunan Kalijaga pilgrimage site, da'wah is conveyed through narrative storytelling, ritual guidance, and symbolic spatial arrangements. These forms of communication reflect the broader performative nature of religious tourism spaces, where narrative and ritual shape spiritual experience (Hasan, 2009). They foster immersive engagement that goes beyond verbal instruction.

These forms are intentionally informal and interpersonal, contrasting with formal, institutional preaching. Such expressions of public Islam illustrate the shifting modes of piety and cultural performance in Indonesia’s religious spaces (Hasan, 2009). For instance, a guide may recount the story of Sunan Kalijaga’s conversion while leading visitors through the sacred gate, framing the spatial movement as both a historical and spiritual transition. The guide’s explanation links Islamic values (e.g., humility and repentance) to Javanese metaphors such as *kembang wijaya kusuma* (a mystical flower symbolizing spiritual awakening).

This experiential mode of communication embodies symbolic interactionist principles, wherein shared symbols and rituals become mediums for internalizing religious meaning (Blumer, 1969). These practices are summarized in Table 1, which categorizes the modes of *da’wah*, associated cultural elements, and communication forms. For example, the act of offering incense is not explained doctrinally but through its symbolic role in purifying intentions, inviting participants to construct personal meaning through cultural familiarity.

Table 1. Forms of *Da’wah* Communication and Cultural Elements

No.	Form of Da’wah	Cultural Element	Communication Mode	Interpretive Function
1	Ritual explanation	Javanese traditions	Oral, participatory	Facilitates symbolic participation; encourages shared spiritual meaning through ritual acts
2	Historical storytelling	Local folklore, legends	Narrative, symbolic	Transmits Islamic values through metaphor; reinforces cultural

No.	Form of Da'wah	Cultural Element	Communication Mode	Interpretive Function
				memory and moral reflection
3	Visual/spatial da'wah	Tomb layout, offerings	Visual, environmental	Communicates spiritual significance through sacred space; engages embodied interpretation

Source: Author's fieldwork, 2025

2. *Cultural Symbols in Da'wah*

The da'wah practices are deeply intertwined with Javanese cultural expressions, such as tembang Jawa, slametan, and tahlilan. These are not merely aesthetic elements but function as vehicles of religious messaging. During a slametan held on Jumat Kliwon, for instance, caretakers explain the ritual in terms of gratitude to God and community harmony, drawing from both Islamic principles and Javanese cosmology. These rituals reflect what scholars refer to as “pribumisasi Islam,” the localization of Islamic narratives to indigenous frameworks (Zuhdi, 2020).

This reflects the strategy of pribumisasi Islam, the localization of Islamic teachings to suit local cultural idioms (Azra, 2019). A parallel can be drawn with Bali, where cultural tourism contributed to the construction of regional religious identity (Picard, 1997). Historically, Sunan Kalijaga's da'wah adapted Islamic values into local traditions to reduce resistance and facilitate acceptance. In today's context, this approach remains relevant as it promotes inclusivity and emotional connection, especially for pilgrims seeking cultural affirmation alongside religious reflection. Spiritual tourism literature acknowledges this blend of cultural identity and religious intent as central to the motivation of modern pilgrims (Norman, 2013).

However, a critical tension arises between cultural accommodation and doctrinal purity. For instance, some caretakers acknowledged that external religious authorities occasionally question

the use of incense or offerings as potentially un-Islamic. This contradiction illustrates that while the da'wah is non-confrontational in delivery, it still operates within contested spaces of religious interpretation, an issue that warrants deeper exploration in future comparative studies. Pilgrimage sites often serve both sacred and touristic functions (Cohen, 1992), blurring boundaries between devotion and exploration.

3. *Pilgrims' Interpretations*

The third key theme addresses the pilgrims' reception of these communicative forms. Interviews reveal that most visitors perceive the pilgrimage site not merely as a religious destination, but as a space for reconnecting with their ancestral identity and Javanese Islamic spirituality. One respondent noted, "Saya tidak hanya datang untuk berdoa, tapi untuk merasakan kembali ajaran Islam yang damai dan membumi." This reflects the role of religious tourism as a site of learning and spiritual reflection, where visitors engage in both personal transformation and informal religious education (Olsen, 2011). These findings echo previous research on how embodied spirituality enables pilgrims to negotiate their faith through culturally familiar expressions and practices.

This reinforces the symbolic interactionist insight that meaning is co-constructed, not merely transmitted. Pilgrims frequently described the da'wah as "silent but powerful", where spiritual transformation occurred through atmosphere, rituals, and shared presence rather than explicit preaching. For many, the sacred space, adorned with traditional ornaments and narratives, served as a mirror to reflect on their personal journey of faith.

Furthermore, the site's multisensory and participatory environment, where touching holy water, smelling incense, and hearing poetic chants are part of the experience, engages visitors beyond the cognitive level. It facilitates embodied spirituality, aligning with the research question on how cultural elements influence spiritual experience.

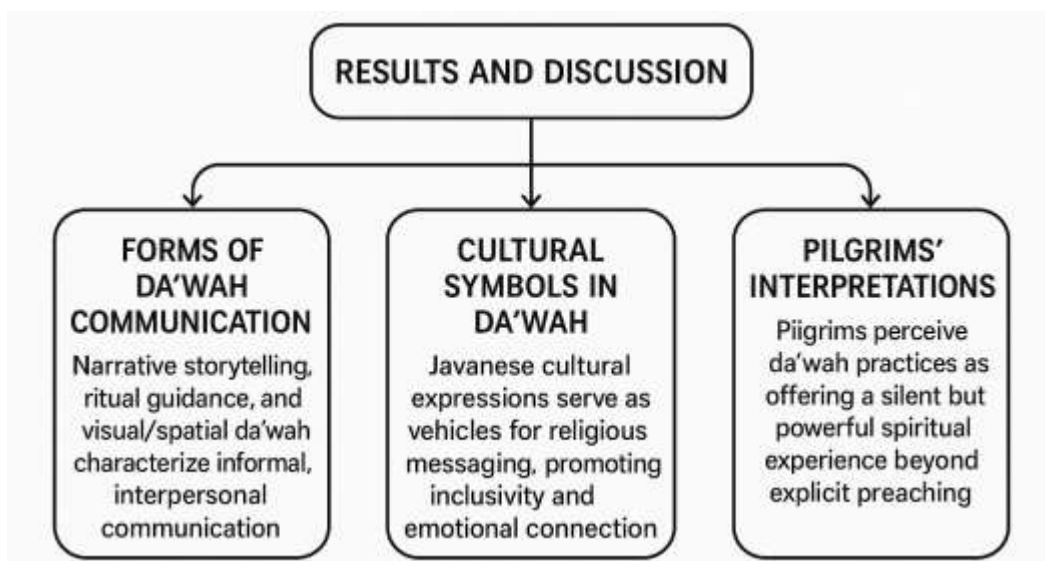


Figure 2. Key Themes in the Results and Discussion

Source: Developed by the author based on field findings and symbolic interactionism theory (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010)

Table 1 functions not only as a descriptive tool but also as an analytical framework that captures the layered dynamics of da'wah communication within a religious tourism context. Each communicative mode reflects the interaction between cultural expression and religious meaning, consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010).

1. **Ritual Explanation Javanese – Traditions – Oral, Participatory**
This form of *da'wah* occurs during guided rituals or ceremonies where caretakers or guides explain the meaning of specific practices such as incense offering, recitation of *tahlil*, and movement through sacred gateways. The explanations draw upon Javanese customs and cosmology, encouraging active participation by pilgrims. This method fosters inclusivity and reinforces communal spiritual values through direct interpersonal communication (Spradley, 1980; Charon, 2010).
2. **Historical Storytelling – Local Folklore, Legends – Narrative, Symbolic**
Religious guides and elders often recount mythical stories and historical accounts of Sunan Kalijaga's journey in spreading Islam. These narratives are embedded in local folklore and delivered in a symbolic manner, using metaphors and moral lessons relatable to the Javanese audience. This form of *da'wah* aligns with the narrative

tradition of oral societies, where meaning is co-constructed between the storyteller and the listener (Patton, 2002; Geertz, 1960).

3. Visual/Spatial Da'wah–Tomb Layout, Offerings – Visual, Environmental

The architectural layout of the site, the presence of sacred symbols, and the placement of offerings serve as a form of visual and environmental communication. These spatial arrangements operate as a semiological system that visitors interpret through lenses of cultural familiarity and religious expectation (Hughes, 1991). Elements such as the gapura (sacred gate), sendang (holy spring), and symbolic grave ornaments are not explicitly explained, yet they convey profound spiritual meaning through their spatial organization and ritual use. This mode of da'wah is particularly impactful for non-verbal learners or first-time visitors, allowing them to internalize religious significance through embodied, multisensory experiences (Blumer, 1969; Ricklefs, 2006). In such contexts, the boundaries between sacred devotion and symbolic tourism often blur, emphasizing the deeper communicative function of religious space as both cultural and spiritual medium (Vukonic, 1996). Pilgrimage architecture thus becomes more than a backdrop—it emerges as an active participant in meaning-making, offering aesthetic, symbolic, and emotional resonance for visitors (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

Overall, the table reflects how *da'wah* at this site is deeply contextualized, accommodating both spiritual and cultural sensibilities of the local population. These forms of communication also demonstrate the richness of Islamic propagation through indigenous frameworks, a practice that remains effective and meaningful in contemporary religious tourism.

Conclusion

This study affirms that cultural da'wah, as practiced at religious tourism sites such as the Sunan Kalijaga pilgrimage complex, serves as an effective and inclusive medium for conveying Islamic teachings. Unlike conventional didactic preaching, the da'wah observed at this site is deeply embedded in local traditions, symbolic rituals, and narrative storytelling, enabling spiritual engagement that is contextually meaningful and emotionally resonant for diverse audiences. This inclusive, non-confrontational mode of da'wah is consistent with Indonesian Islamic

traditions that emphasize harmony and religious pluralism (Al Qurtuby, 2019).

The integration of Javanese cultural expressions such as oral folklore, ritual symbolism, and spatial sacredness demonstrates a strategic model of da'wah that aligns Islamic values with local identity. This reflects a broader symbolic interactionist framework, in which meaning is co-constructed through culturally mediated symbols, non-verbal communication, and shared spatial experiences.

Importantly, this study highlights religious tourism as a platform for soft da'wah, a form of Islamic outreach that prioritizes dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and emotional connection over confrontation or rigid dogma. By leveraging cultural familiarity and participatory engagement, soft da'wah offers an adaptable communication strategy suitable for heterogeneous, modern Muslim societies. Such approaches resonate with contemporary needs for dialogic, emotionally engaging, and culturally sensitive religious communication (Madinier, 2015).

From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that religious tourism managers, da'wah practitioners, and policymakers should intentionally support culturally grounded communication practices such as training guides in symbolic storytelling, designing interpretive materials rooted in local values, and curating sacred spaces to enhance multisensory spiritual experiences. In line with this, managing Islamic tourism requires sensitivity to religious values and local cultural expressions (Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010).

Additionally, sustained collaboration between religious leaders, cultural experts, and tourism stakeholders is essential to ensure that da'wah remains inclusive, adaptive, and contextually meaningful within evolving socio-religious landscapes. As religious tourism continues to grow, such efforts will be critical in preserving authenticity while enhancing visitor engagement.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of da'wah communication studies by emphasizing the role of culture and interaction in religious messaging areas often underexplored in formal da'wah discourse. It also extends the application of symbolic interactionism to non-traditional religious spaces, offering a lens to study dynamic meaning-making beyond the mosque. These insights are aligned with evolving perspectives on pilgrimage as dynamic and multidimensional, shaped by contemporary cultural and social forces (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). For future

research, comparative studies across other pilgrimage sites in Indonesia are encouraged to identify patterns in communication effectiveness, cultural adaptation strategies, and visitor interpretation. Such studies could also reveal regional variations in da'wah practices shaped by distinct cultural and historical contexts.

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