



Catholic Pilgrimage in Bali and Banyuwangi: A Multicultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT: The establishment of Catholic Marian shrines in predominantly non-Catholic areas is an interesting religious phenomenon in the context of multiculturalism in Indonesia. The Marian shrines of Air Sanih in Singaraja, Bali, and Jatiningrum in Curahjati, Banyuwangi, are situated within communities that are predominantly Hindu and Muslim. The existence of these Marian shrines demonstrates that Catholic devotional spaces can thrive and be accepted within socially diverse communities, thereby fostering open interfaith encounters. This study aims to understand the background of the cave's construction, analyze the forms of involvement of non-Catholic communities, and explain the social and symbolic meanings that emerge from interfaith pilgrimage practices. The method used is qualitative, involving data collection through in-depth interviews with local communities around the cave, cave users, religious leaders, and cave administrators, as well as observations and document studies. The study's results demonstrate that the Maria Cave possesses dual legitimacy, deriving from both spiritual legitimacy from the church and social legitimacy from the surrounding community. The involvement of the surrounding community in Jatiningrum affirms a pattern of human tolerance and appreciation of local culture. Airs Sanih is interpreted as a place of tranquility and social openness, while Jatiningrum is seen as a symbol of healing and hope.

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KEYWORDS:

Catholic pilgrimage, Maria Cave, tolerance, multicultural society

1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of Maria Caves in various regions of Indonesia, including in areas with a non-Catholic majority, is an interesting socio-religious phenomenon. Theologically, Maria Caves serve as places of devotion for Catholics, but in practice, they have developed into public places that are also accessible to people of other religions, thus creating broader social dynamics.

This is evident from two examples: the first Maria Cave established outside a church in Bali, namely the Maria Cave of Air Sanih in Singaraja, Bali, located in an area where the majority of the population is Hindu; and the Maria Cave of Jatiningrum Waluyo in Curahjati, Banyuwangi, East Java, situated in an area where the majority of the community is Muslim. Both sites demonstrate a unique dynamic between religious function, social acceptance, and daily practices of diversity (Moa, 2023; Musi, 2021).

This issue is worth studying because in many regions of Indonesia, the construction of minority places of worship often faces administrative obstacles. Cases such as the rejection of church construction in Cilegon (Putri *et al.*, 2025) and obstacles to the establishment of minority places of worship in various regions (Hakim, 2025) highlight the vulnerability of minority groups in expressing their faith. However, the phenomena in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum are contrasting because they have been accepted and maintained together with the surrounding community. This condition has become a model of social harmony and religious moderation within the community. Bali itself is a region with a multicultural society (Ardhana *et al.*, 2011).

The latest data shows that in 2024 there will be around 80 Maria Caves scattered across Indonesia, with their main function as centres of Catholic devotion and also spiritual tourist attractions. There are five Maria Caves in Bali and five in East Java. The average number of visitors varies across different regions in Indonesia. These sites are regularly visited as spiritual tourism destinations, with visitor numbers increasing significantly during May (Mary's Month) and October (Rosary Month) (Interview with Thomas Untung, Caretaker of the Jatiningrum Mary's Grotto, 2024)

Previous research on Maria Caves has primarily focused on Catholic-majority regions, examining devotional functions, architectural aspects, and spiritual tourism potential (Moa, 2023; Sigalingging, 2023; Krestanto, 2018). The study by Laksana *et al.* (2023) shows that Catholic pilgrimage sites function as shared sacred spaces that strengthen pluralism and interfaith cooperation. Moa (2023) emphasises the importance of the architecture and physical environment of the Maria Cave in deepening the spiritual experience of pilgrims. Meanwhile, Sigalingging (2023) found that the tradition of pilgrimage to Maria Cave is an important part

of Catholic identity and a means of strengthening faith and community. Iko *et al.* (2020) designed a catalogue of Maria Cave Puhsarang to enhance the appeal of religious tourism through visual media, while Krestanto (2018) explored the potential for spiritual tourism at the Maria Sendang Jatningsih Cave, supported by good facilities and accessibility.

Previous studies have provided valuable information, but their focus has been on predominantly Catholic areas. The involvement of non-Catholic communities has not been widely studied. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining the Maria Cave in two predominantly non-Catholic areas and analysing the contribution and significance of the Maria Cave for non-Catholic communities in their daily lives.

However, studies on the involvement of non-Catholic communities in supporting and interpreting Maria Caves remain limited. This research fills this gap by examining two cases in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum.

This study aims to analyse the existence of the Air Sanih Grotto in Bali and the Jatiningrum Grotto in Banyuwangi as Catholic devotions that also serve as spaces for interfaith dialogue. The results of this study are expected to be useful for the development of studies on the sociology of religion, religious moderation practices, and strategies for strengthening social cohesion in Indonesian society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in this paper is qualitative. Data was collected through observation in the vicinity of Maria Air Sanih Cave and Maria Jatiningrum Cave, interviews with parishioners, church leaders, and local communities, as well as literature studies from journal articles and books related to the existence of Maria Caves. The data was then analysed using the qualitative descriptive approach of Miles & Huberman (1994), namely through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This analysis aims to explore the meaning, patterns of interaction, and social dynamics that emerge around the Maria Cave, particularly in the context of the relationship between the Catholic community and the non-Catholic community in the Singaraja and Banyuwangi regions.

3. RESULTS

Establishment of Maria Air Sanih Cave and Maria Jatiningrum Cave

The Maria Air Sanih Cave is located in the traditional village of Yeh Sanih, situated on the northern coast of Bali in the Kubutambahan Buleleng district. It is situated on a 3-hectare plot of land purchased in 1991, often referred to as GOMAS, featuring a statue of the Virgin Mary created by Stefanus Bambang Triaji (Mardika, 2024). Demographically, the majority of Yeh Sanih's residents are Hindu. In 2021, the village became one of 15 traditional villages piloting the Sipandu Beradat programme, aimed at maintaining the security of traditional villages through collaboration between pecalang (traditional security guards), Babinsa (military personnel), and Bhabinkamtibmas (police officers). Security in the area has become a key asset for tourism development, including spiritual tourism such as the Maria Air Sanih Cave.

The village's topography includes coastal areas, fruit orchards, and gardens, creating a serene and conducive atmosphere for pilgrimage or spiritual retreat activities. In Air Sanih, some Hindu residents view the cave as a peaceful place to rest and calm the mind. This is reflected in the statement of a resident: "Although this is a Catholic place of worship, it feels like it belongs to everyone" (Interview with Wayan Sasta, a resident near the cave in Air Sanih, 2024). This statement reflects the perception of the cave as a public space that transcends religious identity boundaries.

Meanwhile, Maria Jatiningrum Cave is located in Grajagan Village at the southern tip of Banyuwangi Regency, covering an area of 4,658 hectares with a population of 10,377. This village has been the centre of Catholic growth in the Banyuwangi region since the early 20th century. This Maria Cave was built in 1956 with the name Maria Waluyaning Tiyang Sakit Cave, which means Mother Maria, the healer of the sick (Yayuk, 2025).



Figures 1 and 2 Maria Air Sanih Cave and Maria Jatiningrum Cave Documentation by Fransiska Dewi Setiowati, 2024.

Interfaith Social Dynamics

The existence of Maria Cave is not only a centre of devotion for Catholics but also attracts pilgrims from other faiths. At Maria Cave Jatiningrum, for example, there is a sacred well that is believed to have healing powers, attracting both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The cool atmosphere, along with meditation huts and guesthouses, creates opportunities for public spaces that directly engage with various communities.

Beyond its religious function, the selection of locations for the Maria Caves in both areas considers the environmental quality that supports prayer and meditation. The Air Sanih site is lush, near the beach and fruit plantations, while Jatiningrum features a cool, shaded atmosphere with clear, flowing rivers. The creation of sacred spaces in the architecture of the Maria Cave not only considers religious symbols but also the sensory experiences of pilgrims, such as the sound of water and the shade of trees, thereby enhancing the spiritual experience (Moa, 2023:89).

Historically, the Maria Cave at Air Sanih was the first cave in Bali established outside a church by Father Willy M. Batuah CDD. The planning and construction process was carried out with respect for the local Hindu culture, so the community accepted it as part of their environment. Meanwhile, the Maria Jatiningrum Cave in Curahjati was built by Father Borggreve O.Carm together with the local community, constructed using stones from the local river. The Bishop of Malang, Mgr. AEJ Albers O.Carm, then inaugurated and blessed the cave on 15 August 1956 (Yayuk, 2025). The Maria Cave was originally named 'Waluyaning Tiyang Sakit' before being renamed Maria Jatiningrum Cave in 1995.

The involvement of people from different faiths was evident at both locations. In Air Sanih, the support of the Hindu community was apparent from the early stages of construction, when Father Willy Batuah CDD established communication with local Hindus and respected local traditions. This relationship led the community to accept the Maria Cave as part of their environment. In Jatiningrum, non-Catholic involvement was even more intense, with holy water also used by followers of other religions as a means of healing, and Muslim residents participating in security activities. A non-Catholic visitor shared, "I heard that there is holy water here that heals. After I was healed, I promised to return today. Though I am not a Catholic, I still believe that all religions teach goodness" (Interview with Sundari, visitor to the Jatiningrum Maria Cave, 2024). This testimony affirms that the holy water available is not merely a symbol of devotion but also a recognised healing medium across religious boundaries.

Religious Activities and Pilgrimage Dynamics

The Maria Caves in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum serve as the main centres of Catholic devotion. Various regular activities carried out by the faithful at both caves include rosary prayers, the Way of the Cross, and Mass celebrations. These prayers and worship services are generally conducted alternately, depending on the available space around the caves.

The peak of visits usually occurs in May (Mary Month) and October (Rosary Month). During these months, Catholics pray the rosary every day, and the caves are crowded with visitors from various regions. The enthusiasm of the pilgrims is very high; they come individually, with their families, or in large groups using tourist buses. The number of pilgrims at the Air Sanih Maria Cave is 50-70 people per day, while during Mary's Month it can reach 200-500 people per week. At the Jatiningrum Maria Cave, there are 70-150 people per day, while during Mary's Month, it can reach 500-1,000 people per week. According to the caretaker of the Jatiningrum Mary Cave, Thomas revealed, 'The architecture of the Jatiningrum Mary Cave has a Balinese touch because for pilgrims from Java who have not been able to visit Bali, they feel as though they have been to Bali when they make a pilgrimage to the Jatiningrum Mary Cave.' In addition to regular activities, the Mary Cave has become a national pilgrimage site. Pilgrims from major cities across Indonesia, including Surabaya, Malang, Denpasar, and Jakarta, often make this cave their primary destination for spiritual journeys.

The communities around Maria Cave play a role in maintaining the sustainability of these sites. In Jatiningrum, local residents are directly involved in supporting pilgrimage activities by selling Banyuwangi specialities that can be taken home as souvenirs, providing affordable accommodation, and helping to maintain security in the area. The presence of the cave thus not only serves a religious function but also has a positive economic impact on the community.

Meanwhile, in Air Sanih, the Hindu community has been involved in the acceptance of the cave from the beginning, both by maintaining security and by welcoming Catholic pilgrims who come to visit. The pilgrimage experience strengthens the cave's appeal as a centre of devotion and spiritual pilgrimage, with many testimonials stating that their prayers were answered after visiting the Maria Cave.

4. DISCUSSION

Legitimacy of the Establishment of Maria Cave

The establishment of Maria Cave in a minority area affirms the symbol of the church's presence as well as the symbol of continuity of faith amid limited numbers of congregants (Musi, 2021:45). However, it should be noted that construction is not value-free. There are rules regarding the establishment of places of worship that apply to Maria Cave. As emphasised by Ino (2025), the construction of the Maria Cave must not be carried out arbitrarily but must follow the provisions of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. Canons 1230–1234 state that a cave may be recognised as a sacred place (sanctuary) only if it is designated by the bishop and has official

governance that does not conflict with its sacredness. The establishment of the Maria Cave stands between two legitimacies. It is not only the result of the initiative of the faithful but also the spiritual legitimacy of the church and the social legitimacy of the surrounding community. Among the approximately 80 Maria Caves recorded in Indonesia up to 2024, the Maria Caves of Air Sanih and Jatiningrum display a unique dynamic because they are located in the midst of a non-Catholic majority, thus serving as an example of interfaith openness.

Interfaith Social Dimension

The presence of the Maria Cave demonstrates interfaith openness. This indicates a more inclusive symbolic adaptation process. The symbolic adaptation process, such as the change in the meaning of holy water in Jatiningrum to become a means of interfaith healing, shows that Catholic devotion can be transformed into a more inclusive religious experience. The findings of Laksana *et al.* (2023) support this, indicating that interfaith cooperation fosters the creation of inclusive public spaces.

Furthermore, the potential for religious tourism integrated with natural beauty can encourage local community participation and boost the economy without diminishing the sacred value of the site (Sigalingging, 2023:102). Religious tourism connected to nature can encourage local community participation while preserving sacred values. Thus, Gua Maria Air Sanih and Jatiningrum are not only symbols of Catholic faith but also arenas for negotiating sacredness, interfaith openness, and economic development.

The Role of Non-Catholic Communities and Religious Moderation

The involvement of non-Catholic communities in the Maria Air Sanih Cave in Singaraja and the Maria Jatiningrum Cave in Curahjati demonstrates the important role of non-Catholic communities in maintaining the sustainability of Catholic devotional sites in non-Catholic areas. This support stems from social ties, historical relationships, as well as economic and cultural functions arising from pilgrimage activities. Within the framework of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000), interfaith relationships are formed through practical cooperation that transcends religious identity boundaries.

This finding confirms that the social relations that are built are not merely interfaith relations, but inclusive human relations. Rudiyanto's (2025) research on the Maria Sendang Jatiningrum Cave reinforces this finding. Pilgrimage practices at the cave not only deepen the faith of Catholics but also open up space for the involvement of the surrounding community as part of the religious ecosystem. In the context of Air Sanih and Jatiningrum, the involvement of non-Catholics serves to provide social legitimacy to Catholic devotion, so that the cave is not only recognised as an open space involving other religions. This is in line with the research by Dhewardari *et al.* (2025), which shows that pilgrimage customs are not solely determined by internal religious teachings but are greatly influenced by the social environment in which the practice takes place. An open and supportive social environment is a crucial factor for the sustainability of devotional practices.

When compared to other cases in Indonesia, interfaith support for Gua Maria is a contrasting phenomenon. Putri *et al.* (2025) show that there is resistance to the construction of churches in Cilegon, influenced by the dominance of the majority and the absence of religious moderation. Similarly, Hakim's (2025) research emphasises that the establishment of minority places of worship is often hindered by administrative and social barriers due to the strong dominance of the majority. This situation indicates that respect for local culture, interfaith communication, and practical cooperation can reduce the potential for conflict and strengthen religious moderation. The involvement of non-Catholics in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum aligns with Wiharjokusumo *et al.* (2023), who emphasise the importance of relational ties with the majority group for the Christian community to be accepted. This indicates that religious moderation is realised through interfaith practices, not merely normative discourse.

Support for the existence of these two Marian shrines reflects a pattern of 'everyday tolerance' that does not depend on formal theological discourse but is built through social practices, economic participation, and shared emotional experiences. This finding also reflects the principle of religious moderation, which is a balance in religion that rejects extremism and opens space for diversity (Putri *et al.*, 2025). Thus, the Maria Caves in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum can be understood not only as Catholic devotional sites but also as models of multicultural harmony, where the spiritual legitimacy of the church coexists with the social legitimacy of the interfaith community.

The Social and Symbolic Meaning of the Maria Cave for the Local Community

The existence of the Maria Cave in Air Sanih and Jatiningrum shows that devotion is not limited to the internal religious functions of Catholics but extends to become a social and cultural symbol for interfaith communities. The practice of Marian pilgrimage, as reflected in Handoko's (2023) analysis, truly mirrors the universal spiritual journey of humanity—living as a pilgrimage toward the Father's house (God) (SC 8; LG 48-51). The symbolic meaning of the Mary Cave aligns with Satrya *et al.*'s (2024) perspective, which views Marian devotion as open spiritual pathways across traditions. The holy water at Jatiningrum, used by both Catholics and non-Catholics, symbolises human solidarity while strengthening social cohesion. Thus, the involvement of Hindu and Muslim communities in using the cave is not seen as a deviation from devotion but rather as an expression of human solidarity in line with the essence of pilgrimage itself.

Each Marian cave has a unique spiritual message that enriches the faith of pilgrims. This uniqueness is evident in the context of Air Sanih and Jatiningrum. Air Sanih conveys the meaning of peace and social openness, while Jatiningrum emphasises the

symbol of healing and hope. This uniqueness expands the function of the cave from a space of devotion to a symbolic space across faiths, an experience of solidarity with others, especially those suffering from illness, enriching the religious experience of all visitors. Additionally, it serves as a means of sharing hope among interfaith communities facing suffering. Thus, pilgrimage can serve as a testimony of the Catholic community's faith to society that religious practices can align with local culture, remain open, and contribute to social cohesion.

5. CONCLUSION

The presence of the Air Sanih and Jatiningrum Marian Grottoes demonstrates that the construction of places of devotion in non-Catholic areas is not only initiated by the faithful, but also receives spiritual legitimacy from the church through canon law and social legitimacy from the surrounding community. This confirms that the sustainability of the grottoes is greatly influenced by the relationship between traditional structures, culture, and local community acceptance.

The involvement of Hindu and Muslim communities in supporting, utilising, and even helping to maintain the Maria Cave demonstrates everyday tolerance that transcends religious identity. This support proves that social legitimacy can be built through respect for local culture, practical cooperation, and human solidarity, thereby avoiding the potential conflicts that often arise in the establishment of minority places of worship.

Air Sanih is interpreted as a space of tranquillity and social openness, while Jatiningrum emphasises symbols of healing and hope. The uniqueness of each cave expands its religious function into a symbolic space of interfaith and humanitarian solidarity. Thus, the pilgrimage practices at both caves not only deepen Catholic faith but also serve as a means of sharing hope, interfaith spiritual experiences, and bearing witness to faith that aligns with local cultural values and social cohesion.

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