



The Commodification of Pilgrimage Tradition: An Ethnographic Study of Sunan Bonang Tomb Tuban

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Received: 20 Jun 2024; Received in revised form: 21 Jul 2024; Accepted: 30 Jul 2024; Available online: 06 Aug, 2024

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Abstract— Over time, pilgrimage is perceived to be a part of tourism and recreational activities. Besides facilitating people to commemorate and pray for the ones inside the tomb, this tradition also opens up the local economic circulation. This study aimed to examine the idea of commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb from sacred space to religious tourism. It is grounded on a series of field studies from September 2022 to January 2023 in which researchers observed pilgrimage ritual activities at Sunan Bonang Tomb, Tuban, Indonesia interviewed 17 pilgrims and 9 key informants - the administrators of the Sunan Bonang Mabarro Foundation, religious and community leaders, artists or cultural observers, and representatives of the Tuban Regency government- and reviewed old archives, published articles, and books. It employed an ethnographic study. The study found that the commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb reflected changes in people's views and attitudes towards pilgrimage traditions. The pilgrimage used to be performed for respect and devotion to the ancestors and holy places, yet now it has become a religious tourist attraction for commercial purposes and public tourism. Commodification does not necessarily happen the way it is but is supported by some stakeholders, such as foundations, governments, religious leaders, investors, and local communities. Although the commodification promises economic benefits to the local area, it is necessary to preserve the sacred and cultural values attached to the tomb.



Keywords— Commodification, Sunan Bonang tomb, religious tourism, pilgrimage.

I. INTRODUCTION

A tomb of a distinguished figure is one of the prominent sacred loci in the Islamic tradition of the archipelago (Syam, 2005). It becomes a place for ritual activities to God, so it has a very strategic position in the life of the Javanese Muslim community (Marwoto, 2018). Besides a place of ritual, the tomb is also a place where people gather to remember the merit of the ancestors, scholars, religious leaders, and the close families who have

died (Anam, 2015). In the tradition of Javanese Muslim society, it is perceived as a place for rituals to God, such as *shalah*, pilgrimage, and prayer. The tomb has spiritual and social significance for the community, a place to attain blessings and build friendship. The tomb is also a part of a fundamental cultural and historical heritage for the Javanese Muslim community (Laksana, 2016).

Pilgrimage traditions is an activity performed by the community by visiting tombs or places considered sacred.

It has been performed since ancient times by many communities and religions. The tradition dates back to pre-Islamic times, when Pagan Arabs visited the graves of their ancestors as a form of respect and reverence (Anam, 2015). After Islam entered Arab, this tradition evolved into pilgrimages to the tombs of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and to holy cities, such as Mecca and Medina. To date, the tradition of pilgrimage is practiced by people in many religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, as an expression of respect and reminder of the majesty of the past (Chambert-Loir & Guillot, 2007).

The shift in the purpose of pilgrimage to religious tourism shows a change in the views and attitudes of the community towards pilgrimage (Abdurrahman, 2010). In early traditions, pilgrimages aimed to extend respect and reverence for religious heroes or holy places (Nugroho, 2011). However, over time, there has been a shift in the purpose of pilgrimage, viewed more as religious tourism, that visiting the holy places is a part of tourist and recreational activities (Arifin, 2020). It shows a change in people's views and attitudes towards pilgrimage traditions, and often leads to commodification, and mass tourism in holy places, such as mosques, has become an industry and tourist attraction (Mansor et al., 2015). In this process, the tomb is believed as a product that offers a market value. The commodification of tombs often occurs along with their commercialization. It brings about a negative impact on pilgrimage traditions and the perception towards the tombs as sacred places (Komariyah, 2015).

The pilgrimage tradition not only serves as a way to commemorate and pray for the people in the tomb but also opens up the local economic circulation (Latif & Usman, 2021). Pilgrimage can help boost the economy up through the pilgrims' purchase of food, beverages, and souvenirs around the area. The practice of pilgrimage is also often one of the sources of income for local communities, and it depicts how spiritual activities can exert a positive impact on the economy of a region (Rodli, 2013).

This article aimed to examine the idea of the commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb from sacred space to religious tourism, the tradition of Sunan Bonang Tomb pilgrimage, the involvement of actors in the commodification process, and the agreement on the Tomb of Sunan Bonang commodification. It is expected to provide an idea of how culture and religion affect people's habits and how they maintain traditions around the area.

To date, the study of Wali Songo about the spread of Islam in the archipelago that specifically discusses Maulana Makdum Ibrahim, Sunan Bonang Tuban is scarcely found. Makdum Ibrahim Sunan Bonang is one of the most popular guardians in the Islamic history around

Java Island. He was a prominent figure involved in popularizing and disseminating Islamic teachings in the region. Sunan Bonang was known as a great scholar and spiritual leader who had great influence in Javanese society in his time (Darban, 2010). The policies he enforced successfully united the people and strengthened the position of Islam in the region. That is one of the reasons why Sunan Bonang is remembered and respected as a prominent figure in the history of the spread of Islam in Java (Sunyoto, 2020).

II. METHOD

This research employed ethnographic study, one of the methods of social research that focuses on the study of society and culture (Yusanto, 2020). Ethnography can also refer to a tool, a method for researchers of different academic disciplines to understand certain parts of social life (Gullion, 2021). This ethnographic study at the Tomb of Sunan Bonang aimed to investigate how the local people understand and respect Makdum Ibrahim Sunan Bonang as the guardian of God and also the cultural practitioner. The researchers conducted direct field observations and interviews with pilgrims, local communities, and religious leaders to gather information about the traditions, beliefs, and practices associated with ritual traditions at the tomb.

This is descriptive research with a qualitative approach to explore the idea of commodification of the pilgrimage tradition of Sunan Bonang Tomb from sacred space to religious tourism. In this case, the researchers investigated a cultural group in a sufficient period of time according to the conditions in the field (Creswell, 2016). This study also adopted a direct method to obtain naturally occurring activities in the field. In the data collection process, the researchers were actively involved in activities and mingled with pilgrims, local communities, and selected informants who had the capacity according to their roles to provide comprehensive information.

The study was based on a series of field studies from September 2022 to January 2023 in which the researchers observed pilgrimage ritual activities at the Sunan Bonang Tomb Tuban, interviewed visitors, administrators of the Mabarrot Sunan Bonang Foundation, community, and religious leaders. Artists and cultural observers also reviewed old archives, articles, and books that have been published and 20 pilgrims, 3 administrators of the Mabarrot Sunan Bonang Foundation have been interviewed. The selection of the pilgrim informants from various regions and deputy treasurer of the foundation board in this study methodologically served as a triangulation data to check the accuracy of the research results.

This research was conducted at the Tomb of Sunan Bonang located on Jl. KH. Mustain Kutorejo Tuban, Tuban Regency East Java 62311, Indonesia. The Data used in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. The data sources of this study were (1) informants, (2) places and events, (3) documents. The informants were selected through purposive sampling as it is appropriate for qualitative research. The inclusion criteria is that they are well informed about the Tomb of Sunan Bonang.

The data were collected with (1) in-depth interview, (2) participation and observation, and (3) document study. Interviews were conducted to obtain information through dialogue with the research informants. The key informants in this study are (1) religious leaders; (2) management of the Sunan Bonang Mabarro Foundation; (3) Abdi Dalem (officer) of Sunan Bonang tomb in Tuban, East Java; (4) Cultural Heritage Management Agency (Badan Pengelola Cagar Budaya/BPCB) and the Tuban Regency tourism office; (5) pilgrims or visitors; and (6) culturalists and artists. The observation in this study focused on the participants' activities. The researchers were actively involved in the communities (Pratiwi et al., 2018). The researchers also acted as instruments by collecting data themselves through documentation, behavioral observation, or interviews with participants (Creswell, 2016). The language and behavioral patterns of the community were studied all the time (Fetterman, 2019).

The research instruments were in the form of (1) researchers, (2) interview guide, (3) field notes, and (4) recording tool (Sugiyono, 2010). The interview guidelines were based on indicators: 1) portrait of pilgrimage practices at Sunan Bonang Tomb; 2) forms of commodification added to facilities for visitors; 3) management of Sunan Bonang Tomb; 4) government budget allocation for Sunan Bonang Tomb; 5) origin or idea of commodification; 6) involvement of investors in the commodification process; 7) actors involved in the commodification process (power relations); and 8) opinions of the government, community, religious leaders, artists and culturists towards the changes that occurred at Sunan Bonang Tomb (positive and negative). The data were validated by re-comparing them with other data from the other sources, such as managers (Mabarrot Sunan Bonang Foundation), pilgrims, government, religious leaders, cultural practitioners, and artists. The data analysis was performed in six stages: (1) processing and preparing the data, (2) reading the entire data, (3) analyzing in more detail by coding, (4) applying the coding process to describe the setting, (5) demonstrating how the description and themes will be restated in a narrative or qualitative report, (6) interpreting the data.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Initial Idea of Religious Tourism Commodification

The term commodification in the era of globalization is currently an issue that is highly compelling (Maulida & Witro, 2022). Commodification in cultural products, such as tombs into religious tourism, has also been going on for a long time (Pramestisari et al., 2023). It is a process of changing goods or services that previously followed non-market social rules into subjects that follow market rules, and it is one of global capitalism that accumulates capital and has successfully transformed use values into commercial exchange values (Irianto, 2016).

The large number of pilgrims to the tombs of the guardians have been going since the distant past. Cultural resistance of the spiritual area has its own appeal compared to the formal structural areas, such as the region Masyhad (The Tomb of Hazrat Ali in Afghanistan) that has managed to surpass Balkh, which is the center of the government. The crowd also happens at the Tomb of Sunan Ampel Surabaya, in which every day is never empty of visitors compared to the heroes of Surabaya monument. The tomb of Sunan Bonang is also more crowded compared to Tuban City Square (Wahid, 2010). This phenomenon is justified by Endraswara (2003) that the tradition of pilgrimage or visiting sacred places in Javanese society stems from the belief in *kejawen* mystics (Javanese local cultures), that believes in visiting their graves as a form of devotion to their ancestors.

In the beginning, pilgrimage was an activity that was sacred and only oriented to things that were religious rituals (Rosmalia et al., 2017). Along with the changes of times, some facilities for the pilgrims are provided by business owners, such as travel agencies which then encourage the interest and enthusiasm of the public to visit the tombs. The tourism bureau provides transportation, accommodation, skilled and experienced tour guides making it easier for people to organize their pilgrimage trips and provide a sense of comfort during the trip (Wahid, 2010), so the pilgrims to the tombs of the guardians increase in number from year to year.

The rapid development of Islam in countries around the world with population growth in 200 countries through emigration and migration also affects the increase in the number of travel levels of Muslim communities in traveling, domestically and internationally. This trend is welcomed by tourism operators in each country as the potential to generate economic (Muhamad et al., 2019).

The idea of commodification of the Sunan Bonang Tomb pilgrimage ritual in its development allegedly began in the 1990s along with the New Order government program with the Minister of Tourism for posts and

telecommunications, Soesilo Sudarman, assisted by Director General of Tourism, Joop Ave, in improving tourism performance in Indonesia. Along with the concept of *Sapta Pesona* that encouraged the widespread until the tomb of the whole guardians became crowded with visitors. In addition to the government, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) as a religious figure is also considered to pose an influence on the development of interest in the pilgrimage of the guardians' tomb in Indonesia. After the Nahdlatul Ulama Congress in Situbondo in 1984, Wahid was also diligent in visiting the tombs of not only Wali Songo but also the graves of wali who most ordinary people did not know. He gave an example and was widely followed by the public at large, such as the pilgrimage to the Pandanaran tomb in Mount Jabalkat Bayat, Klaten (M. Ilham, February 4, 2023).

The increasing trend of pilgrimage to the guardians' tombs affects the shift in meaning and mindset of the community towards the meaning of religious tourism and tourism in general. In the past, the public interpreted tourism synonymous with recreation, which was for pleasure only, but now it has turned into religious tourism, spiritual tourism, even lately followed by the term healing.

Sunan Bonang tomb was affected by a transformation from a religious pilgrimage to religious (pilgrimage) tourism. Lexically, the commodification in the tradition of pilgrimage at the Tomb of Sunan Bonang has long been made by Makdum Ibrahim Sunan Bonang. Not only all that has been converted into commodities can be interpreted as commodification but changing a tradition that is considered inappropriate can also be categorized as commodification, in terms of meaning.

The Pilgrimage Tradition to Sunan Bonang Tomb

Hindu-Buddhist civilization, which was initially embraced by the people of Java along with their fanaticism to the ancestors' teachings of animism and dynamism, slowed down the mission of the merchants from Gujarat that belonged to Shafi'i sect to spread Islam (Masduki, 2015). Besides their prominent role in the world economy, Tuban in 1292 became a stopover for Tartar soldiers who would invade the Singosari Kingdom.

Makdum Ibrahim Sunan Bonang utilized certain traditional relics as a medium to introduce Islam to the Javanese, including festivities. The tradition was the teaching of Tantrayana from the Bairawa sect of the tantric school that worshiped Goddess Durga with its rituals, *Panca Makra*, conducted on the land while they were naked (*Ksetra*) with dishes from meat (*Mamsa*), fish (*Matsya*), liquor (*Madya*), free sex (*Maithuna*) and Samadhi (*Mudra*). The ceremony and rituals were adjusted and refined by Sunan Bonang according to the guidance of

Islamic teachings with an event similar to the *Panca Makra* ritual (Sunyoto, 2011). The ceremony was successfully modified by Sunan Bonang without removing its fundamental elements in a circular manner; the dishes were replaced with rice cone, *ingkung* chicken meat, fish, regular drinks, then verses of the Qur'an and prayers (*kalimah thayyibah*) to replace the spells. The ceremony was later known as *selamatan* or *kenduri* which is, to date, still preserved by the community as a result of Sunan Bonang teachings (Sunyoto, 2020). It is one of the attractions of the community to remember the history and recognize the guardianship of Sunan Bonang, leading to a continuous stream of pilgrims to his grave.

The commodification pattern by Sunan Bonang is similar to that by Sunan Ampel, replacing the ritual substance manifested into the composition of the ritual core of *mo-limo* into five ethical human behavior: by leaving all forms of *moh-main* deeds (no gambling), *moh-drink* (no drinking liquor), *moh-maling* (no stealing), *moh-addict* (no drunk or addicted), and *moh-madon* (no flirting). The commodification pattern made by Sunan Bonang represents the ethical-universal tendency of Islam. In addition to the transformation of Islamic teachings with non-violence, there is a fundamental inherent ethic. Sunan Bonang does not shift the local cultures that have already grown and developed. They are commodified through accommodation so that they become new religious traditions that correspond to the Islamic teachings (Mukaffa, 2017).

The transformation process from the tradition of sacred pilgrimage to religious tourism did not necessarily happen. It had undergone a long process and involved several actors behind it. The government represented by the Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation (BPCB) also played a leading role in the commodification process, also religious leaders who supervised and provided knowledge related to sacred and profane boundaries. The commodification process in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang was unstructurally supported by the district government. The support was provided through, for example, the construction of access roads and traffic flow to the Sunan Bonang Tomb, the construction of canopies around the area outside the Sunan Bonang tomb for pilgrims and local people to trade, and parking areas for pilgrims.

Involvement of Parties in the Commodification

The long series of commodification processes of Sunan Bonang Tomb could never run without the involvement of several parties. The mabarrot Sunan Bonang Foundation fully authorizes the management of Sunan Bonang Tomb, yet the foundation cannot run alone

without contributions from other parties, such as the government, religious leaders, and the community.

The government, represented by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Board (BPCB), acts as a supervisor to ensure that the changes around the area meet the legal standards and requirements, legislation, and regulations. Scholars provide religious views and understanding related to the transformation limits from the sacred to religious tourism while maintaining the values of the sacred cultural products.

Specifically, the additional facilities around the area of Sunan Bonang Tomb were made on purpose. The commodification was supported by the district government. The support was provided through, for example, the construction of access roads and traffic flow to the Sunan Bonang Tomb, canopies around the area outside the Sunan Bonang tomb for pilgrims and local people to trade, and parking areas for pilgrims.

“Eeeee, it obviously exists. We cannot organize this without the help of others. And, we are still requested or else there is intervention from other parties, from either local governments or tourism sectors, e.g. travel agents, or from visitors” (M. Ilham, February 4, 2023).

From the above statement, we can conclude that the long series of commodification processes in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang cannot be made independently. Although Sunan Bonang Mabarro Foundation has full authority over the management of the tomb, the commodification processes cannot run alone without the contribution of external parties.

The commodification process is also supported by the involvement of investors. The increasing number of visitors is an opportunity that can be converted into economic value by developing businesses around the tomb site. They can build hotels or inns for visitors, open shops, stalls, or even shopping centers to attract the pilgrims.

Obviously, their involvement in the existing businesses around the tomb must be strictly regulated and consider the ethics, cultural heritage preservation laws, and rules of cultural values by the local community. Investors should pay attention to the social and environmental impact of their business, as well as ensure that the business profits do not harm the surrounding community.

Investors should also follow the government regulations and policies related to the management of historical and religious tourist attractions, including the management of Sunan Bonang Tomb. Good and regular management help the preservation of the tomb and ensure the pilgrims feel comfortable and safe. This opportunity is,

of course, not only a profit-oriented opportunity but also a medium for spreading awareness of cultural treasures (Munajim et al., 2021).

The commodification process, according to the previous chapter, tends to occur naturally because of the circumstantial demand. The urgency is grounded to the government programs from the 1990s to increase tourism potential nationally. The additional large cupola in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang is a need to accommodate the increasing pilgrims, as one of the supporting reasons of commodification, and it is purely on the initiation of the foundation board, involving no investors or other parties in the construction.

“No, nothing ... So, it is purely from the pilgrims. If there is a small donation, it is directly submitted into the charity box ... for example, when we are reconstructing the back Cupola building, the rich come to help, not investors ... and this building is all backed up by a single entrepreneur” (M. Ilham, February 4, 2023).

Similar opinion regarding the commodification and transformation from the sacred to religious tourism was delivered by Riyadh Tsauri, that community brings about a strong influence on these changes. The term religious tourism is widely heard when the tomb becomes a part of the tourist attraction. People no longer visit the natural attractions, such as beaches, parks, but they come to certain tombs while they used to be sacred places.

“In the past, the tomb used to be a sacred place only, right? How can it be a tourist commodity ... yes, maybe the community themselves make it a tourist commodity ... so, the term becomes pilgrimage tourism ... the tour is not visiting the beach, garden park, but to the tomb” (R. Tsauri, February 5, 2023).

In the early history, from the 1980s, or around 1982, the Tomb of Sunan Bonang charged for retribution to the pilgrims who came in groups. The policy was managed by the district government, the Department of Tourism and Culture. The retribution was used to pay for the cleanliness of the tomb because the idea of installing the charity and *infaq* box was not found yet. It happened because the foundation management did not work optimally.

After the foundation was led by Kia Moertadji, continued by K.H. Kholilurrohman, and up to Ahmad Mundzir, management of the Mabarro Foundation was rearranged and several facilities were constructed. The development process did not run smoothly because there was a dispute between the manager of Sunan Bonang Tomb and the district government regarding the authority of the tomb.

"The foundation at that time, in the 1980s, had been established. At that time, the holding was authorized to Yai Moertadji himself, Haji Maksum. During the years, he was leading the management, and then submitted to Mr. Kholil, down to Mr. Mundzir, ... the modernization process was made during his leadership when the management was complete... yes, even though the construction process took a very long process to start due to a dispute with the district government. The government wanted control over us, and we didn't want it to happen.".... (R. Tsauri, February 5, 2023).

It means that the changes in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang began from the period of Ahmad Mundzir as the chairman of the foundation. The change was carried out by the Mabarro Foundation itself without any intervention from other parties, either government or private organization. There were indications from the district government to intervene in the management but there was a rejection from the foundation. The management of the tomb around 1982 was completely separated from the district government, so the government of Tuban Regency took off the responsibility to participate in the management.

"Yes, it used to be managed by the government, but now it is authorized by the foundation. In 1982, the government took no more authority in the management of Sunan Bonang. It had been fully restored to the foundation because the foundation received a decree from Trowulan BPCB" (R. Tsauri, February 5, 2023).

Riyald also confirmed that there is no party from outside or even investors who participate directly in the process of commodification around the Tomb of Sunan Bonang, and the one who is involved in the commodification process is Ahmad Mundzir.

"No, no, no.... There has been no transaction of land in Sunan Bonang.... and the foundation supports the process (commodification from sacred to religious tourism). Mr. Mundzir should have been well informed about it. I am new to structural administration. Since the leadership of Mr. Kholil, I have been involved in the management of this tomb, but as the subordinate. At that time, I was in charge of the spiritual division, accompanying the pilgrims" (R. Tsauri, February 5, 2023).

Commodification Agreement at Sunan Bonang Tomb

Religion is vital for human life as it serves as a fundamental medium for fostering bonds and strengthening social cohesion. Once we find ourselves amidst a religious community that happens to share a

similar faith, the interconnectedness and commonality of the religion can serve as a source of social cohesion, fostering not only formal interactions but also generating strong emotional bonds among its members. Therefore, religion becomes a reinforcement variable of social life that offers benefits for each community (Kamiruddin, 2011).

Sunan Bonang tomb is a cultural product that most Muslims believe as a vital locus for meeting diverse interests, not only ritual but also economic matters. Grounded from one of non-material social facts, collective representation, which means 'being' or expression that represents collective beliefs, norms, values, such as "grave pilgrimage" that encourages adaptation to the common ground. The tradition of Sunan Bonang Tomb pilgrimage is the cause of non-material social facts; collective representation unintentionally forms an agreement to make the tradition of pilgrimage as a commodity (Wirawan, 2012).

The board of the Mabarro Foundation as the manager, community or pilgrims, religious leaders, community leaders, government, artists, and cultural practitioners agree with the commodification of pilgrimage traditions in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang. The commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb, Sunan Bonang pilgrimage tradition, is legitimate as long as it maintains the sacredness, spiritual values, the ancestors have preserved along the times. The phenomenon that occurs today in the tradition of pilgrimage to the tombs of the guardians is undeniable. The economic and spiritual interests are like children in one lap, which are equally noteworthy (F. H. Panatapraja, 2023).

Some spiritual pilgrims feel that there has been a shift and even predict to lose the quiet space in the future. On the other hand, the blow of economic interests that almost all support the commodification of the pilgrimage tradition makes connoisseurs of the silence and sacredness of the pilgrimage tradition unable to maintain the situation.

The researchers indicated an agreement on the commodification of pilgrimage traditions in the Tomb of Sunan Bonang with some key considerations: being careful in managing and preserving the traditions that have existed for a long time, which basically become a selling point so that a lot of people are interested in visiting the site.

IV. CONCLUSION

The commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb is a phenomenon that reflects the evolving views and attitudes of society towards pilgrimage traditions. Initially, the

pilgrimage was made as an expression of respect and devotion to the ancestors and sacred places. However, as time progresses, the pilgrimage practice undergoes significant transformations. Pilgrimage now tends to be a religious tourism site directed at commercial purposes. Upon the commodification process, the government, religious leaders, and investors play a significant role. Although it offers economic benefits to the local area, ensure that the sacred and cultural values attached to the Sunan Bonang tomb are well preserved.

Sunan Bonang Tomb became one of the popular pilgrimage destinations in the history of the spread of Islam in Java. The commodification process of the tomb corresponds to the changes and religious developments in the community, as well as the values brought by the figure, Sunan Bonang. The commodification exerts complex impacts and potentially sparks debates among stakeholders. On the one hand, the development of religious tourism can help introduce cultural and historical heritage to more people and promote the local economy. On the other hand, however, it is vital to maintain a balance between the commercial aspect and the sustainability of the spiritual and religious values represented by the tomb.

The commodification of Sunan Bonang Tomb illustrates the paradigm change and dynamics in the practice of pilgrimage and religious tourism. This process reflects social and economic changes in society. Also, it raises responsibility to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the sacred place and consider the underlying spiritual values. It is essential to involve relevant stakeholders and ensure that the preservation of cultural and spiritual values inherent in Sunan Bonang tombs outweighs the potential economic advantages.

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