

## The Transformation of Tarutung City into a Religious Tourism Destination, 1880–1990

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the spatial transformation of a region from an agrarian area into a centre of religious significance. The material object of this research is Tarutung City, which, based on its etymological origin, should have been recognised as the “Durian City.” However, over time, Tarutung has become widely recognised as a religious tourism destination. This transformation is closely linked to the activities of German missionaries since the 1860s, who established Tarutung as a central hub of zending activities in the Silindung region. From the period of Indonesian independence to the present, Tarutung has been predominantly identified as a destination for spiritual tourism, while its original association with durian has gradually faded. This study employs the historical method to trace the socio-cultural and physical changes that illustrate the city's transition from an agrarian landscape into a centre of Protestant Christian spirituality. The preliminary assumption suggests that Tarutung was strategically managed within a colonial regional policy aimed at separating Islamic movements in Aceh and Minangkabau. This spatial policy not only persisted but became further consolidated after Indonesia's independence, positioning Tarutung as a prominent Protestant religious centre that continues to endure to the present day.

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### INTRODUCTION

The city of Tarutung serves as the capital of North Tapanuli Regency and is widely recognized as a prominent centre of Protestant Christianity in Indonesia. More specifically, it functions as the core of Batak Protestant Christianity, represented by the *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan* (HKBP), whose headquarters are located in the village of Pearaja. Among the figures whose legacy endures in collective memory is Nommensen, a German missionary who played a pivotal role in spreading Protestant Christianity across the Batak region. However, it is often overlooked that Tarutung was not originally established solely as a missionary centre or an administrative capital. In its early phase, the town developed into a trading hub and, notably, a significant durian producer.

Etymologically, the term "Tarutung" itself signifies "*durian*." However, the precise moment when the name "Tarutung" began to be used as the town's designation remains uncertain. In a range of colonial and traditional records prior to 1880, the name Tarutung does not appear. It was only in the late 1880s—specifically around 1887 or 1888—that the name began to surface in travel accounts, official government documents, and contemporary newspapers. The magazine *Immanuel*, published in 1887 and 1888, is regarded as the earliest known source to employ the name Tarutung (M. Tanjung et al., 2023). M. Joustra later incorporated the name Tarutung, along with a corresponding map, in his travel notes published in 1913 (Mededeelingen van Wege Het Nederlandsche Zendelinggenootschap: [Bijdragen Tot de Kennis Der Zending En Der Taal-En Land- En Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië], n.d.; Winkler, 1925). Earlier colonial figures, including Nommensen himself, had previously referred only to the village settlements within the Silindung Valley.

Following the conclusion of the Batak War in 1907, Tarutung underwent a series of significant administrative transformations. The area was designated as the capital of the *Bataklanden* District and simultaneously developed into a strategic military hub, marked by the establishment of barracks in *Hutatoruan*. This village now constitutes the city centre. During the transitional phase of colonial rule, the Japanese authorities also utilized this site for military purposes. Since Indonesia's independence, these barracks have remained in place. The notion of Tarutung as a "Spiritual City" began to take shape only in the late 1980s, coinciding with the initial plans to build the Cross of Love (Warneck, 1925). The municipal government has since advanced the view that Tarutung has functioned as a principal mission field since



the early nineteenth century and continues to do so. This framing, however, has not gone uncontested, as the transformation of Tarutung into a spiritual tourism destination continues to generate critical questions. The designation itself is anchored in a conceptual framework that stands apart from the original meaning of "Tarutung," which denotes "durian."

A considerable body of scholarship has examined Tarutung from various perspectives. Most studies, however, foreground missionary activity as their central analytical focus. Manurung's (2021) thesis, for instance, investigates the healthcare facilities established by missionaries in Tarutung, demonstrating how medical services contributed to the spread of Protestant Christianity. However, it does not engage with the formation of the urban area itself. Siahaan's (2020) thesis traces the city's historical development in relation to missionary influence and colonial intervention. However, it stops short of analysing the processes through which Tarutung evolved into a spiritual tourism destination. The only study that explicitly links Tarutung to tourism is Dhinardo's (2016) thesis, which surveys tourist destinations in the area; however, this work is largely descriptive, focusing on the identification and classification of historical sites rather than examining their transformation into a coherent tourism framework.



**Figure 1. Origin of the word "Tarutung"**

Source: Personal document

Beyond mission-oriented studies, other scholarly works approach Tarutung's urban landscape through the lenses of ethnicity and religious plurality. Harahap (2024), for example, explores the development of the Muslim community within a predominantly Christian context since the end of the Old Order. Sembiring (2023) examines patterns of Minangkabau migration into Tarutung, while Limbong & Batubara (2024) investigate the historical trajectory of the parish from the late Old Order period onward. Although these studies provide valuable insights into social dynamics, they do not address the broader process of urban formation nor account for the transformation of an agrarian landscape into a spiritual tourism destination.

On a broader analytical scale, numerous studies examine themes such as missionary activity, regional identity, and ethnicity in North Sumatra. Anwar (2024) focuses on religious identity in East Sumatra, while Pohan (2020) analyses tensions between indigenous belief systems and Christianity. Natalia & Aditya (2020) and Aritonang (1988) examine the historical role of missionary work in the development of education. These contributions enrich the understanding of religious and social transformations in the region. However, they do not specifically address the emergence of spiritual tourism, as their scope remains focused on broader patterns of religious development in North Sumatra and North Tapanuli.

Kozok (2010) offers a comprehensive examination of missionary activity in Tarutung and North Tapanuli, situating it within the broader political realities that shaped historical conflicts. His analysis, however, does not sufficiently engage with regional differentiation, particularly in relation to spiritual tourism zones. Similarly, Perret (2010) concentrates on

the formation of ethnic identities, with only brief references to missionary influence and regional dynamics. The “region” in this context refers more broadly to Northeast Sumatra rather than to the specific urban development of Tarutung.

In addition to historically grounded works, a range of sociological, anthropological, and political studies contribute to understanding the contemporary dynamics of the Tarutung area. Studies by Chintya (2020), Sirait et al. (2024), and Anwar (2023) examine interdisciplinary relationships and the social forces shaping the city’s physical and cultural landscape. While these works illuminate present-day realities, they do not provide a sufficiently grounded historical framework for interpreting Tarutung as a city that has evolved within a spiritual tourism paradigm.

Taken together, the existing literature underscores the centrality of missionary activity in shaping North Tapanuli, in general, and Tarutung, in particular. However, very few studies directly address the city’s transformation into a spiritual tourism destination—the work of I. L. Tanjung et al. (2016) come closest by examining urban development from a historical perspective; however, it does not explore the terminology or etymology of “Tarutung” as a regional designation. More importantly, it does not analyze the processes through which a region once defined by its agricultural base and cultural traditions came to be reconstituted as a spiritual tourism destination. This gap points to an unresolved dimension in understanding the formation of the region—one that has already undergone substantial transformation but remains insufficiently theorized.

Urban transformations of this nature have been extensively documented in other contexts. Foundational works such as those by Sedyawati et al. (1987), Sofwan et al. (1987), Ekadjati et al. (1985), and Padmo (2007) offer important insights into the historical processes of urbanisation in Indonesia. Basundoro’s (2012) contribution is particularly significant, as it articulates a theoretical framework for urban history that has become a key reference point for scholars. Despite their relevance, these studies do not directly address the specific trajectory of Tarutung’s development—from an agrarian and cultural centre to a city identified with spiritual tourism. Numerous additional studies on urban, regional, and tourism history in Indonesia further enrich the field. However, none specifically examine how religious realities shape the physical form of a city to the extent that it becomes formally identified with the dominant religion of its inhabitants.

The acceptance of Protestant Christianity among the Batak people was itself marked by profound tensions. These tensions culminated in the Batak War, a major conflict between Dutch colonial forces and indigenous Batak communities. Historical accounts indicate that Nommensen, widely regarded as a central figure in the spread of Protestant Christianity in Tarutung, aligned himself with the colonial administration against Sisingamangaraja XII, who led indigenous resistance against Dutch expansion. Some accounts also suggest that Sisingamangaraja XII resisted Christianization in Batak territories. The conflict was further complicated by alliances, including that between Sisingamangaraja XII and the Sultanate of Aceh. The prevailing indigenous belief system during this period, *Parmalim*, exhibited affinities with Islamic traditions rather than with Christianity. The historical development of Silindung—later recognised as Tarutung as a spiritual centre—reveals a complex, non-linear trajectory that invites further critical inquiry.

One dimension that has received limited attention is the significance of durian to Tarutung’s identity. Situated in the Silindung Valley, the region has historically relied on agriculture as its primary economic foundation. The Dutch colonial administration utilised this area primarily as a strategic military base rather than an economic centre, aiming to contain the spread of Islam from Aceh into the Minangkabau region. From this perspective, the formation of Tarutung as a spiritual region appears less as a natural cultural evolution and more as a politically driven construct. It is plausible to suggest that the development of Tarutung was deliberately shaped in ways that obscured the underlying strategic objectives of colonial power.

## METHOD

The research method employed in this article adopts the historical approach as formulated by Kuntowijoyo (2013), encompassing four main stages: heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. In the heuristic phase (source collection), this study draws upon a range of archival materials, including *Verslaag* (reports), *Gewestelijke Archieven* (Regional Archives), *Memorie Van Overgave*, and *Algemeene Secretarie*, all of which are treated as primary sources. In addition, both oral and written traditions preserved within indigenous communities are accorded equal status as primary sources, recognizing their significance in reconstructing historical realities.

For secondary sources, this study utilizes contemporaneous newspaper reports and written works that describe the same historical period. Examples include Si Batak Hoda (1938) and Werneck (1909), both of which provide valuable insights into the social conditions of the time. These materials complement and contextualise the primary data, offering a broader interpretive framework for understanding the historical setting under investigation.

Source verification is conducted through a rigorous process of cross-examination, whereby the credibility of sources is assessed by comparing narratives, news accounts, and official reports with documented social conditions and parallel sources from other archival collections. This process also involves systematic comparison with relevant secondary sources—such as books and scholarly articles—that depict the same historical period, ensuring the reliability and coherence of the reconstructed narrative.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Transformation of Tarutung into a Protestant Christian Centre through Early Missionary Efforts

The transformation of Tarutung into a centre of Protestant Christianity cannot be understood apart from the missionary activities of the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* since the mid-nineteenth century. The presence of the mission—particularly through the pivotal role of Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen—demonstrates that missionary endeavours extended beyond the mere dissemination of religious doctrine, exerting far-reaching influence on the social, cultural, and spatial configurations of Batak society in Tarutung.

From a spatial perspective, the findings indicate that the missionary movement positioned the church at the centre of the reorganization of urban space. The establishment of the first church in Tarutung in the 1860s marked the emergence of a new settlement pattern oriented around ecclesiastical institutions. In this setting, the church functioned not only as a place of worship but also as a centre for administration, education, and social interaction. This pattern reflects what may be termed a “mission settlement” model, in which spatial arrangements are deliberately structured to support religious propagation and the consolidation of a Christian community. This development gradually displaced traditional Batak settlement patterns, which had previously been organised around kinship and village structures and replaced them with a more institutionalised spatial order (Purba, 2023).



Figure 2. Construction of a Hospital During the Colonial Era

Source: kitlv.nl

Beyond spatial transformation, the mission also played a decisive role in advancing modern education in Tarutung. Schools established by missionaries became primary instruments in the processes of Christianization and social modernization. Through these institutions, Batak communities were introduced to literacy, Protestant ethical frameworks, and forms of Western knowledge. The evidence suggests that education served as an effective hegemonic medium in shaping new forms of social consciousness, while simultaneously fostering the emergence of an educated

local elite that would later act as agents in disseminating Christianity to other regions. Within this context, Tarutung evolved into a significant centre of Christian education with influence extending across the Tapanuli region (Marpaung et al., [2024](#)).

In healthcare, the mission introduced modern medical systems that progressively supplanted traditional healing practices. The establishment of hospitals and clinics, and the training of local medical personnel, formed part of a broader missionary strategy aimed not only at improving public health but also at reinforcing the mission's legitimacy among the Batak population. This transformation reflects a broader process of rationalisation within the health sector, aligned with the values of Western modernity brought by missionary actors (Safitri et al., [2024](#)).

Missionary initiatives also extended into the sphere of social and cultural engineering. Missionaries introduced new normative frameworks, including monogamy, work discipline, and lifestyle ethics aligned with Protestant teachings. This process unfolded through an *inculturation* approach, whereby Christian values were adapted and integrated into local Batak cultural contexts. The outcome was the emergence of a hybrid identity, described as Batak-Christian, combining indigenous traditions with elements of modern religious life within a reconfigured social structure.

At a broader level, Tarutung developed into a strategic missionary hub within Batak Land. From this centre, missionary activities were organised and disseminated to surrounding regions through networks of teachers, pastors, and medical personnel. Tarutung thus functioned not merely as a local religious centre but as a critical node within a wider regional missionary network (Ayu, [2021](#); Raben, [2020](#)).

These findings demonstrate that early missionary efforts in Tarutung generated multidimensional transformations encompassing spatial, institutional, and cultural domains. The impact of these transformations extended beyond the city's physical reconfiguration, shaping new social structures and collective identities. From the perspective of social and cultural history, this case underscores the capacity of religious missions to serve as powerful agents of change in modernisation and the construction of local identities in Indonesia.

### The Intensity and Scope of Missionary Efforts in Establishing Protestant Christian Influence in Silindung

Based on the research findings, the Silindung region—with Tarutung as its centre—emerged as the principal locus of Protestant missionary success in Batak Land from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Missionary activities conducted by the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft*, particularly through key figures such as Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen, indicate that the spread of Protestant Christianity in Silindung unfolded in a systematic, carefully planned, and multidimensional manner. The extent of missionary influence can therefore be understood through analysis across three principal domains: religious, socio-institutional, and cultural.

In religious terms, missionary efforts succeeded in establishing a relatively stable and enduring Christian community. The process of Christianization did not proceed through coercion, but rather through a persuasive and adaptive engagement with Batak social structures. This approach included translating Christian teachings into the Batak language, employing local symbols, and building personal relationships with traditional leaders (Laia & Halawa, [2024](#)). As a result, Silindung developed into a region characterized by a comparatively high rate of religious conversion relative to other Batak areas during the same period. This success was further reflected in the formation of local congregations, which later served as the foundation for the church's institutional consolidation, eventually developing into *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan*.

Within the socio-institutional domain, the mission's influence became evident through the establishment of a range of modern institutions that supported community life. Education functioned as the primary vehicle for extending this influence. Mission schools not only imparted religious doctrine but also introduced literacy, Western systems of knowledge, and Protestant ethical values such as discipline, diligence, and rationality. Through these educational initiatives, an educated Batak elite emerged, serving as crucial local agents in disseminating both the religion and its associated values (Lauterboom, [2019](#)). The establishment of healthcare facilities—including clinics and hospitals—further reinforced the mission's position as an agent of social advancement. The influence of the mission thus extended well beyond the spiritual sphere, encompassing broader institutional transformations in society.

In the cultural domain, the mission gradually reconstructed Batak social values and normative frameworks. Cultural practices perceived as incompatible with Christian teachings—such as animistic beliefs and certain ritual

traditions—were progressively reduced or reinterpreted. At the same time, new values, including monogamy, Christian family ethics, and a more structured social life, were introduced and internalised. This transformation did not occur through confrontation but through *inculturation*, in which Christian teachings were adapted to the local cultural context. The outcome was the emergence of a distinct Batak-Christian identity, integrating indigenous traditions with Protestant values into a relatively coherent and balanced system.

Research findings also suggest that missionary influence did not entirely displace existing social structures. The kinship system based on clan relations (*dalihan na tolu*) persisted and was, in many cases, incorporated into church life. This indicates that the process of Christianization in Silindung was fundamentally adaptive, involving ongoing negotiation between local traditions and newly introduced religious teachings. The success of the mission thus lay not in the wholesale eradication of local culture, but in its capacity to accommodate and transform it.



**Figure 3. The early church in Pearaja, which became the center of the HKBP**  
Source: kitlv.nl

From a broader perspective, Silindung can be understood as a “social laboratory” for the success of the Protestant mission in Batak Land. From this region, Christian influence spread to other areas through a network of teachers, evangelists, and educated local pastors. Thus, the mission in Silindung can be categorised as highly successful, both in terms of the number of adherents and the depth of internalisation of Christian values in community life.

For this reason, the mission’s efforts to instil Protestant Christian influence in Silindung achieved a significant and sustainable level. This success is marked by (1) the formation of a well-established Christian community, (2) the development of educational and health institutions as instruments of modernisation, and (3) the occurrence of cultural transformation that gave rise to a Batak-Christian identity. Thus, the mission not only served as an agent of religious propagation but also of social change, profoundly shaping the structure and identity of Silindung society.

### **The Acceptance of the Batak Community in Tarutung and the Construction of Protestant Identity as the Basis for Spiritual Tourism**

Research findings indicate that the Batak community’s acceptance of Protestant Christian teachings in Tarutung did not stop at the stage of religious conversion but evolved into a continuous process of value internalisation, ultimately forming a strong collective identity. Since the missionary activities pioneered by the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* and figures such as Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen, the Batak community in Tarutung has demonstrated an adaptive, selective, and integrative pattern of acceptance toward these new teachings. This process laid the foundation for a Protestant identity that is not merely theological but also social and cultural (Napitupulu et al., [2024](#)).

In the socio-cultural sphere, the acceptance of Protestantism occurred through a process of negotiation between local values and Christian teachings. The Batak social structure, rooted in the *dalihan na tolu* kinship system, was not abolished but rather accommodated within church life practices. This is evident in various religious activities that continue to involve clans, kinship relations, and traditional structures in the performance of church rituals. Thus, the Protestant identity of the Batak community in Tarutung is not exclusive but rather a synthesis of local traditions and Protestant values.

Furthermore, in institutional terms, the community's acceptance of Protestantism is reinforced through the role of the church, particularly the Huria Kristen Batak Protestant, as an institution that regulates not only spiritual but also social life. The church functions as a centre for moral guidance, education, and the strengthening of community solidarity. The intensity of community involvement in church activities—such as regular worship services, celebrations of major religious holidays, and outreach activities—indicates that Protestant identity has taken root in the daily lives of the people of Tarutung. In other words, religion is no longer positioned as an external entity but has become an integral part of the community's social habitus (Parera et al., [2025](#)).



**Figure 4. The Cross of Love from a Distance**

Source: Personal document

In the context of identity continuity, the Batak community in Tarutung has demonstrated sustained and active efforts to preserve Protestant values amid changing social conditions. This is reflected in the consistency of religious practices across generations, the central role of the family in transmitting religious values, and the ongoing presence of church-based educational institutions. These dynamics point to a shared collective awareness to maintain Protestant identity as an integral component of communal self-understanding. Protestant identity in Tarutung, therefore, does not remain fixed; it is continuously reproduced through recurring social practices (Sibagariang et al., [2025](#)).

This process of internalisation subsequently finds expression in externalised symbolic and spatial forms that shape the region's identity. Tarutung has developed into a locality with a distinct religious character, as evidenced by historic churches, sacred sites, and a social landscape deeply embedded in religious activity. Over time, these features have contributed to Tarutung's reputation as a spiritual tourism destination, which has been formally recognized as part of the religious tourism zone in North Tapanuli Regency (Simaremare, [2023](#); Syahputra et al., [2025](#)).

From a tourism perspective, the Protestant identity of the Batak community in Tarutung constitutes a valuable cultural asset. Lived and visible religious practices, the existence of historical sites associated with Protestant missions, and the historical narrative of Christianization together form distinctive attractions, particularly for religious tourism. This suggests that religious identity functions not only as a social marker but also carries economic and symbolic significance within the broader framework of tourism development (Samosir, [2025](#); Simanullang et al., [2024](#)).

The findings also reveal a set of challenges, particularly in maintaining a balance between preserving religious values and the pressures of commodification in the tourism sector. The transformation of religious identity into a tourism product carries the risk of diluting its spiritual significance if not carefully managed. The involvement of local communities and church institutions becomes essential in ensuring that the development of spiritual tourism remains anchored in authentic religious values.

The Batak community's acceptance of Protestantism in Tarutung has ultimately evolved into a robust and enduring collective identity. This identity is sustained not only through social and institutional practices but also through its manifestation in spatial and symbolic forms that support Tarutung's position as a spiritual tourism destination. The success of the missionary movement thus extends beyond the moment of conversion, encompassing the community's capacity to internalise, preserve, and reproduce Protestant identity across multiple dimensions of social life.

## CONCLUSION

The transformation of Tarutung and the Silindung region into a centre of Protestant Christianity represents the outcome of a systematic, multidimensional, and sustained missionary process that began in the mid-nineteenth century, led by the *Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft* through figures such as Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen. Missionary efforts extended beyond the propagation of religious doctrine, functioning as agents of social change capable of reshaping the spatial, institutional, and cultural structures of Batak society. In Tarutung, these efforts gave rise to a "mission town" model in which the church became the central axis of social life, education, and administration. This transformation was accompanied by the development of modern institutions, including schools and healthcare facilities, which accelerated modernisation and helped foster an educated local elite.

Within the broader Silindung region, the mission achieved notable success, as reflected in the formation of a well-established Christian community, the expansion of social institutions, and the deep internalisation of Protestant values in everyday life. The process of Christianization unfolded through adaptive strategies, particularly through mechanisms of *inculturation*, ensuring that traditional social structures—such as *dalihan na tolu*—were not entirely displaced but instead integrated into the practices of church life. The acceptance of Protestantism among the Batak community in Tarutung thus developed beyond formal religious conversion into a strong and enduring collective identity. This identity is continuously reproduced through social practices, the central role of church institutions such as the *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan*, and the intergenerational transmission of values. At a subsequent stage, this Protestant identity was externalised in symbolic and spatial forms, shaping the broader image of Tarutung as a religiously defined region.

This religious identity now functions not only as a socio-cultural marker but also as cultural capital in the development of a spiritual tourism brand in North Tapanuli Regency. At the same time, this transformation introduces new challenges, particularly the risk of commodifying religious values, which necessitates an active role for both the community and church institutions in maintaining a careful balance between preserving spiritual meaning and advancing tourism development. The success of the mission in Tarutung and Silindung cannot, therefore, be measured solely in terms of the quantitative spread of religion, but more fundamentally in the depth of social and cultural transformation that has shaped a Batak-Christian identity and enabled its reproduction as an integral component of contemporary social and economic life.

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