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RESEARCH

Dark Tourism, Beyond Fear and Sadness: Development of Contemporary Tourism Management in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This paper examines the tourist's experience and emotional responses to encountering dark tourism destinations in Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: Employing qualitative methods and a phenomenological approach, the study highlights the dual nature of dark tourism in creating both positive and negative emotions for tourists.

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FINDINGS: The negative emotions in Torajan death and burial traditions are transformed into positive motivations. Tourists often leave with a deeper cultural understanding and a renewed commitment to good deeds. Storytelling skills and experience of tour guides in conveying the rituals' religious and cultural philosophies are key to shaping tourists' emotions and transformative journeys.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE: This research examines the transformative emotional experiences of tourists in Tana Toraja's dark tourism context, emphasising how negative emotions are transformed into positive motivations and inspire good deeds.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: This research advocates for ethical tourism management strategies that respect local communities while promoting economic growth and cultural preservation.

KEYWORDS: Dark Tourism; Death Rituals; Local Wisdom; Criminology; Toraja

INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector has rapidly grown, with regions vying for visitors. The adoption of sustainability in tourism is a means of preserving and safeguarding environmental quality by preventing the overexploitation of resources (Zuvara *et al.*, 2022). Recently, interest in dark tourism, visiting sites linked to disasters, wars, or death, has surged (Stone, 2010). The Indonesian government is promoting dark tourism as a key sector; this is because conventional tourism, dominated by natural beauty, becomes less viable, pushing regions to seek non-traditional alternatives (Wardana *et al.*, 2023).

Tourists are increasingly drawn to sites linked to sadness, horror, or tragedy, offering a stark encounter with death and evoking emotions from sadness to fear. Examples include the Chernobyl disaster (Ukraine), Auschwitz (Poland), and the 9/11 Memorial (USA) (Mora Forero *et al.*, 2023).

Since its introduction, dark tourism has raised ethical concerns (Mora Forero *et al.*, 2023), particularly about exploiting tragedy and provoking negative emotions in visitors. While existing literature focuses on tourists' consumption, motivations, and experiences (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021), this paper explores the behavioural impacts of engaging in dark tourism. Our objective is to understand the dark tourism experience and explore the emotional impact of dark tourism and how visiting such sites fosters an appreciation for life, leading to positive behaviours such as caring for others. This study also examines the extent of death tourism in Toraja, Indonesia, offering a unique perspective by positioning the author as part of the experience.

Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, is a growing dark tourism destination. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism shows that dark tourism attracted 296,136 domestic and 34,865

foreign visitors in 2015 (Susanty, 2017). One of the key attractions in Tana Toraja is the Tongkonan house, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but the main draw for dark tourists is the Torajan death rituals, offering a unique cultural view of death. This case study highlights how dark tourism can transform negative emotions into positive motivations and encourage good deeds. Further research on tourist experiences in Tana Toraja can provide insights into emotional responses and behavioural changes linked to dark tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dark Tourism: Concept and Practice

Tourism impacts local communities' social and cultural aspects, with attractions such as natural beauty and eco-tourism driving growth (Rafi and Herdiansyah, 2020). In contrast, dark tourism, involving visiting sites related to death, disasters, and tragedy, evokes emotions of suffering and morbidity rather than awe (Zerva, 2021). It has gained negative connotations due to its association with death, macabre narratives, and violence. A prominent example is the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial in Poland, a poignant site of World War II extermination (Oren *et al.*, 2021). Dark tourism now extends beyond death-related sites to include unusual or unconventional places, with related terms such as "death tourism" (Fabros *et al.*, 2023), "conflict heritage tourism" (Arbay, 2021), and "post-disaster tourism" (Bataha *et al.*, 2021; Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017).

Seaton (1996) identifies dark tourism as driven by a desire to witness death, visit sites of tragedy, and engage with symbols of mortality. Research has focused on the motivational and experiential aspects of dark tourism (Yan *et al.*, 2016), factors driving dark tourism visits (Zerva, 2021), and the potential link between high crime rates and increased tourist arrivals (Mura, 2011).

Dark tourism involves tourists, managers, and residents (Stone and Morton, 2022), forming a network that sustains its activities. Insights into dark tourism can guide ethical practices, ensuring respectful stewardship and accurate historical representation. Integrating it into broader destination strategies diversifies offerings, attracts niche markets, and preserves historical memory through reflective experiences (Rasool *et al.*, 2025). Dark tourism provides location-specific narratives with historical depth, authenticity, compelling storytelling, and immersive experiences (Fabros *et al.*, 2023). See Figure 1 for a comparison with conventional tourism.

Higher level of tourist motivations (remembrance, curiosity)	Lower level of tourist motivations (education, sightseeing, recreation, family bonding, event venue)	
Dark	Light	
Purposeful activity	Non-purposeful activity	
Passive purposes of visiting dark tourism sites	Shallow purposes of visiting dark tourism sites	
Anthropogenic motivation	Socio-cultural motivation	
Historical sites	Heritage sites	

Figure 1: Differences Between Conventional and Dark Tourism

Source: Adapted from Fabros et al., 2023

While tourism positively impacts sustainable development, it faces challenges (Verances *et al.*, 2024). Despite the pros and cons, Vorina *et al.* (2024) highlight that dark tourism offers value in historical awareness, ethical concerns, growing interest, growing recognition, visitor behaviour, reflection of the past, future potential, educational value, unexploited potential, emotional impact, tourist profile, psychological resilience, and motivation.

Death Rituals as Dark Tourism

Dark tourism raises moral and ethical issues by addressing social taboos and the public display of death. In Western societies, death is often discussed privately (Sharma, 2022), while in many parts of Asia and Africa, especially in places of worship, death and related ceremonies are depicted openly. International research collaboration differs, with early studies from Australia and Western nations such as the Netherlands, Canada, and England. The USA and England have the most publications on the topic (Kiráľová and Šperková, 2024).

Religious diversity leads to varied death rituals. Mathijssen (2017) states that old and traditional rituals are not static and unchanging. Rituals serve specific purposes, often linked to ceremonies for the deceased. Ritualisation refers to the performance of prescribed actions in the hope that they will "express and improve social relations" and help to obtain mystical "blessings, purification, protection, and prosperity" (Cohen, 2002). Death rituals involve actions, gestures, objects, people and places that serve as symbolic elements. Walter (2009) identifies four key death-related relationships in dark tourism:

- 1. information about their death or life, for medical, scientific, or cultural purposes;
- 2. intercession, where the living prays to saints or spirits for help;
- 3. guidance to the living through practices like letter reading or séances;
- 4. care for the deceased.

Emotional Dimensions and Transformative Experiences in Dark Tourism

Dark tourism attracts visitors through the state of attractions and supporting evidence, such as photos and artefacts. These sites engage tourists' imaginations with compelling narratives and authentic evidence, linking disaster environments and evoking emotional responses. Stone (2010) argues that dark tourism drives social change by symbolically displaying the deceased. These sombre sites often provoke strong emotional responses, both positive and negative (Oren *et al.*, 2021). The core keyword is memorial. It also includes keywords such as suffering, reality, tragedy, pilgrimage, violence, victim, mortality, desire, genocide, spectacle, and crime (Királ'ová and Šperková, 2024).

Emotions govern the entire travel experience, whether during the pre-trip, on-site, or post-trip stages (Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Fesenmaier and Xiang, 2017; Nawijn and Biran, 2019). Before a trip, emotions can guide decision-making processes, such as trip planning. Emotions experienced on-site, i.e., during the visit, can influence overall visit satisfaction and the desire to revisit and recommend. The post-trip stage influences emotional recall, which can also affect the above loyalty behaviours (Szalaiova and Vidrinskas, 2023). Positive emotions associated with dark tourism include enthusiasm, interest, inspiration, determination, passion, pride, and energy (Oren *et al.*, 2021), while negative emotions encompass fear, guilt, anxiety, shame, and worry (Belo and Gustavo, 2023). Emotions play a pivotal role in shaping tourists' activities and decision-making processes.

Dark tourism allows tourists to become an Expert by Experience (McLaughlin, 2009). Compassion for others' suffering fosters prosocial behaviour (Pfattheicher *et al.*, 2016). Maruna and Liem (2021) found that understanding crime stories and narratives provides a better way to decide future behaviour. In short, dark tourism promotes positive behaviour and discourages negative actions.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore how dark tourism shapes tourists' emotions in Toraja. Smith *et al.* (2009) explains that phenomenology examines individuals' awareness and interpretations of their experiences. Toraja was chosen for its unique funeral practices, including body placements in caves and elaborate rituals, which are hard to replicate elsewhere.

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This research gathered data from secondary documents, participatory observation, and the researchers' experience. Sandars (2009) states that reflection involves four phases of the learning process approach. First, individuals describe and reflect on their experiences. Next, they identify learning needs, such as new information or emotions. In the final stage, they apply the knowledge gained.

These stages are key to studying tourists' emotional responses and potential behavioural changes in dark tourism, offering more profound insights into the sector and its broader implications.

FINDINGS

Tourists are drawn to dark tourism sites for their unique cultures, historical significance, or connection to tragic events (Stone and Morton, 2022). This paper highlights the tourist experience in the traditional death rituals of Sulawesi's Torajan people, a key part of their cultural heritage. Although potentially seen as macabre, these rituals reflect a deep respect for the deceased and attract tourists seeking cultural insights.

Tana Toraja is renowned for its unique and elaborate death rituals; these can be broadly categorised into cave burial practices (*rambu solo'*) and the secondary burial ceremony (*ma'nene*). These rituals highlight the region's rich cultural heritage and provide dark tourists with profound insights into the Torajan worldview, where death is perceived not as an end but as a pivotal passage in the cycle of life.

Although most Torajans are Christian, they still uphold animist traditions to maintain a connection between the living and the dead. As evidenced by Paulo Cirinda, who, despite passing away over a decade ago, remains a cherished family member (Figure 2), this enduring presence stems from the Torajan belief that the deceased resides in a spiritual realm and can still interact with the living (Zand, 2017).



Figure 2: Deceased Family Preserved at Home During Waiting Period

Source: https://lilpjourney.com/ma-nene-toraja/

In many cases, the deceased are not buried immediately after death but kept within the family home for a period of time over many years (Zand, 2017). Traditional preservation techniques often involve formalin, resulting in a distinct chemical odour within the house. This extended storage period allows the family to accumulate the substantial funds required for a proper funeral ceremony. Sayoga (2021) reports that funerals can last twelve days and involve the sacrifice of numerous buffalo and pigs, easily exceeding US\$50,000 – a sum ten times greater than the average annual income (Zand, 2017). Once sufficient funds are secured, the deceased are entombed within a cave in a process known as *rambu solo*'. After the funeral rites of *rambu solo*', the deceased are placed in tombs. Regularly, the deceased is cleaned and given new clothes as part of a care-for-ancestor ritual known as *ma'nene*. The frequency of *ma'nene* rituals varies according to the family agreement and can occur every one or two years, or at any other time deemed appropriate (Sayoga, 2021).

People can express and process their grief through rituals. Society can assist them in dealing with their loss at this point. Funeral rites are symbolic systems that reflect particular sociocultural practices of the human species; they are ways to scare away evil spirits, make it easier for the soul to reach its destination through religious or pagan acts, or stop the dead from showing up and upsetting the living (Coronado *et al.*, 2023). This kind of death ritual evokes diverse emotions in tourists. Some may feel fear or unease about preserved bodies. In contrast, others experience compassion and respect for the deceased and their families. They develop strong family and community bonds that can inspire empathy, respect, or even a sense of patriotism.



Figure 3: Tau-tau Wooden Doll Wall

Source: https://wonderfulimages.kemenparekraf.go.id/read/523/merasakan-langsung-sensasi-menyusuri-pemakaman-goa-londa-toraja-utara

Toraja also offers dark tourism spots, such as the Londa tourist attraction in Sandan Uai Village, Toraja, North Sulawesi. The name "Londa" means cave wall and serves as a burial site for the Torajan people. A visit to Londa evokes feelings of horror and sadness. Upon entering, visitors

encounter *tau-tau*, wooden effigies symbolising death, dressed in traditional clothing. Initially, tourists experience emotions of fear as they explore the site. However, these feelings of fear intertwine with awe when encountering the *tau-tau*, providing insights into local culture (Figure 3). The combination of dark tourism with indigenous knowledge places a strong meaning on the existence of relationships and highlights the region's uniqueness.



Figure 4: Coffin above the Cave

Source: https://wonderfulimages.kemenparekraf.go.id/read/523/merasakan-langsung-sensasi-menyusuripemakaman-goa-londa-toraja-utara

Passing the *tau-tau*, visitors must navigate through a narrow tunnel where stalagmites and stalactites can be found (Figure 4). This location embodies a sense of horror, with the conditions inside the cave enhancing the eerie atmosphere. The cave is dimly lit, with scattered skulls, bones, and visible coffins suspended from the ceiling. Tourists must bring flashlights or rent torches, further intensifying the tense atmosphere (Figure 5). Some of the wooden supports for the coffins have decayed over time, contributing to the unsettling ambiance inside the cave.

While *ma'nene* initially evokes fear and sadness in tourists due to the cave environment and funerary practices (Figures 4 and 5), the experience fosters positive interactions with death. Witnessing the Torajan people's elaborate death rituals, steeped in respect and love for their deceased kin, becomes a learning experience for tourists. This can lead to admiration and a deeper understanding of one's cultural values (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021).



Figure 5: The Atmosphere Inside the Cave

Source: https://wonderfulimages.kemenparekraf.go.id/read/523/merasakan-langsung-sensasi-menyusuri-pemakaman-goa-londa-toraja-utara

Boredom, however, can arise if the narrative presented at the site lacks emotional resonance (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021). Effective dark tourism experiences require a confluence of factors: location, atmosphere, and a compelling narrative delivered by local guides or descendants (Bataha *et al.*, 2021; Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017) and smaller tour groups (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021).

Tourists gain insights into Torajan culture, including traditional clothing, death ceremonies, and values such as love, respect, and identity. Dark tourism sites such as Londa foster reflection, critical thinking, and personal transformation (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021). For the Torajan, death is not taboo, and respectful photography is allowed, but visitors must follow customs, such as avoiding disturbance of remains.

Beyond the cave burials, Londa offers a glimpse into the *ma'nene* ritual – cleaning and redressing the deceased (Figure 5). This ritual evokes many emotions in tourists, including tension and courage. The mystical atmosphere surrounding the ritual can heighten the sense of awe and intrigue rather than fear. Each stage of the ritual *ma'nene*, from exhumation to cleaning and posing the body, can be emotionally charged for tourists (Suryana, 2023). Even long after burial, the respectful treatment of the deceased reflects the strong ancestral appreciation, family bonds, and community co-operation within Torajan society.

Tourist Emotions Formation

Tourists' emotional experiences in dark tourism are closely linked to heterotopia, spaces outside the normal social order (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017). Tour guides, as cultural intermediaries, use storytelling to transform historical events into vivid experiences, incorporating narratives and eyewitness accounts (Zerva, 2021), often from survivors or local communities (Bataha *et al.*, 2021). The ethical concerns arise when guides embellish stories for emotional impact, potentially compromising authenticity and historical accuracy (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017).

Tour guides employ various methods to shape tourist memory and imagination, which is heavily influenced by memory (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017). Stone and Morton (2022) further emphasise the importance of a guide's memory in facilitating the acceptance of unfamiliar events. However, tour guides in dark tourism play a pivotal role in shaping tourist emotions by employing storytelling, memory triggers, and various presentation techniques to facilitate meaningful emotional engagement and a cohesive experience with the past; these efforts should not distort historical facts. Ethical concerns regarding narrative authenticity and historical accuracy remain paramount.

Dark Tourism's Impact: Beyond Negative Emotions

Tourists encounter a range of emotions, with the formation of moral and emotional experiences being particularly multifaceted (Dresler, 2023). This formation often arises as tourists use their imagination to connect with the site's history (Bataha *et al.*, 2021). Empathy is a significant emotion as tourists seek to connect with victims (Bataha *et al.*, 2021; Oren *et al.*, 2021; Yan *et al.*, 2016). As Sharma (2020) noted, respect is crucial for ethical behaviour at dark tourism sites. While dark tourism presents ethical dilemmas, it offers a platform for moral discourse and revitalisation.

Memorials, statues, historical sites, and events all contribute to the cognitive landscape of dark tourism (Qian *et al.*, 2023). Yan *et al.* (2016) describe a unique cognitive and emotional space for tourists to gain education, knowledge, and personal learning. This space evokes emotions in both adults and children. Weaver *et al.* (2018) suggest it can promote patriotism in students. Aligned with heterotopia, it offers a unique place for learning and reflection. Many dark tourism destinations provide experiences that deepen understanding of historical events and cultural practices while fostering moral emotions among students about victims and perpetrators (Dresler, 2023).

Curiosity and the desire to learn drive strong emotional responses in dark tourism (Yan *et al.*, 2016). Dark tourism destinations should strive to provide a comprehensive knowledge base, incorporating storytelling, relics, visual evidence, and guided tours (Qian *et al.*, 2023). This highlights the link between cognitive and affective attributes. While these emotions may seem counterintuitive, they are vital in shaping tourist behaviour (Belo and Gustavo, 2023), emphasising the need to improve dark tourism experiences by fostering positive emotions.

Tourists experience positive and negative emotions simultaneously (Oren *et al.*, 2021; Yan *et al.*, 2016), shaping the overall experience. Exposure to suffering, horror, and death at dark tourism sites can trigger negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and guilt, often spurred by historical evidence such as war imagery (Dresler, 2023). However, dark tourism also evokes positive emotions such as love, hope, empathy, patriotism, tolerance, and gratitude (Oren *et al.*, 2021; Prayag *et al.*, 2013). For

instance, death camp visitors may feel grief and appreciation (Oren *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, studies show that experience beyond shock and sadness can evoke moral responses that inspire action against injustice (Weaver *et al.*, 2018), provide a space to confront death and related emotions (Oren *et al.*, 2021), and foster a deeper appreciation for life.

Tour guides shape tourists' emotions by providing information and narratives (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017), making fear a meaningful learning experience.

Suyadna and Fatanti (2017) emphasise how personal perspective shapes emotional responses. Dark tourism provides authentic, challenging experiences that foster historical connections (Handayani *et al.*, 2017). Witnessing history first-hand leaves lasting impressions (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017). While positive emotions such as joy typically enhance satisfaction (Prayag *et al.*, 2013), negative emotions, when managed well, can inspire gratitude and hope, enriching the experience (Suyadna and Fatanti, 2017). Positive emotional responses can also translate into a greater likelihood of revisiting or recommending the site to others through word-of-mouth (Prayag *et al.*, 2013).

DISCUSSION

The popularity of dark tourism is evident, but its ethical implications deserve attention. Some scholars criticise it for reopening wounds from past tragedies (Sharma, 2020), while others acknowledge its potential to contribute to economic revitalisation in disaster-stricken areas (Handayani *et al.*, 2017). A key concern is tourist behaviour, with studies noting instances of disrespect (Sharma, 2020), emphasising the need for education on respectful etiquette at dark tourism sites.

Dark tourism transcends mere sensationalism, providing insights into historical events and cultural practices. As Walter (2009) demonstrates, dark tourism in Toraja illustrates death-related customs, emphasising the community's unique rituals and wisdom in caring for the deceased.

As shown in the dark-light spectrum (Figure 6), Tana Toraja's dark tourism sites lean towards the darker end. Unlike memorial museums or videos, Toraja provides direct access to authentic death ceremonies at original sites with existing remains, enhancing the authenticity of the tourism experience.

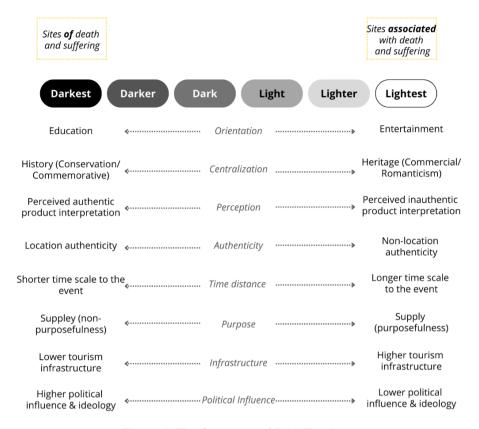


Figure 6: The Spectrum of Dark Tourism

Source: Adapted from Stone, 2006

Dark tourism in these locations aims to entertain and educate, highlighting cultural history and commemoration. Local managers intentionally designated this dark tourism location in Tana Toraja as a tourist site, leading to the development of basic tourism infrastructure.

Table 1: Spectrum Analysis in Tana Toraja

Indicators	Reflective Aspects	Spectrum
Orientation	Education	Darkest
Centralisation	History	Darkest
Perception	Perceived authentic product interpretation	Darkest
Authenticity	Location authenticity	Darkest
Time Distance	Medium time scale to the event	Dark
Purpose	Purposefulness	Lightest
Infrastructure	Not too low tourism infrastructure	Dark
Political Influence	Higher political influence and ideology	Darkest

Source: Constructed by Authors

Spectrum analysis in Tana Toraja reveals significant polarisation between aspects dominated by "darkness" and "brightness", with education, history, perception of authentic products, location authenticity and political influence showing strong dominance (Table 1). Visitors typically gain a deeper understanding of local culture, a renewed commitment to good deeds, and prosocial behaviour (Pfattheicher *et al.*, 2016).

Effective management of dark tourism sites in Toraja and optimised management strategies are keys to fostering patriotism, strengthening tourist identity, and promoting positive emotions such as tolerance and compassion. The educational value of dark tourism in Tana Toraja is evident as visitors engage with unique cultural practices and reflect on existential themes such as life, death, and family continuity. Combining cognitive learning (insight into Torajan culture) and emotional engagement (empathy and respect for the deceased) deepens tourists' understanding of cultural values and the shared human experience of loss. An ethical approach to dark tourism, encouraging respect for the site and its practices, is key to ensuring that the experience remains enriching rather than exploitative.

CONCLUSIONS

Dark tourism in Tana Toraja goes beyond morbid curiosity, offering personal growth, cultural insight, and a deeper connection to humanity. Witnessing these rituals can evoke profound empathy and respect. However, it is crucial to approach them with reverence to ensure their preservation for future generations.

Engaging with Torajan death rituals allows tourists to appreciate the cultural view of death as part of the life cycle rather than an end. While often perceived as morbid by outsiders, these rituals are deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual beliefs and testify to the Torajans' respect for their ancestors.

Dark tourism in Indonesia offers economic, cultural, and educational benefits, requiring effective management to empower local communities connected to the sites. This approach supports the local economy, promotes authentic narratives, and fosters positive social interactions. Additionally, dark tourism presents research opportunities, enriching the field's theoretical discourse in developing positive behaviour.

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