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Bringing the Legend to Life: Tourist Experience and Cultural Interpretation of the Sangkuriang Legend at Mount Tangkuban Parahu

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Abstract

This study examines how the Sangkuriang legend shapes tourist experiences and cultural interpretations at Mount Tangkuban Parahu, a volcanic destination in West Java with significant mythological heritage. These legendary narratives shape tourists' expectations before they visit and influence how they interpret the physical landscape they observe. This research aims to analyze the experiences of tourists who already have an understanding of the Sangkuriang story and identify the gap between expectations and the reality of cultural interpretation in the field. The method used is a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and participant observation with tourists who have a background in understanding this legend. The research results indicate that tourists hold high expectations for culture-based tourism experiences; however, they encounter significant limitations in the presentation of legendary narratives at the tourism site. The absence of adequate information boards, storytelling-based tour guides, and cultural attractions that foster immersive experiences constitute the primary barriers to a more meaningful tourism encounter. In addition, tourists feel that visual interpretation and landscape elements have not been fully optimized to strengthen the connection between the Sangkuriang story and tourist destinations. Therefore, innovative strategies are needed to improve cultural interpretation on Mount Tangkuban Parahu, such as strengthening the role of tour guides, developing thematic tourist routes, and utilizing digital technology such as augmented reality (AR) and interactive tourism applications. In addition, collaboration with local communities and academics is an important step in enriching a more authentic and sustainable cultural narrative. By implementing this strategy, Mount Tangkuban Parahu has great potential to become a leading cultural tourism destination that is visually attractive and provides an educational and interactive experience for tourists.

Keywords: folklore-based tourism, Sangkuriang legend, expectation-reality gap, cultural interpretation, heritage tourism experience, qualitative study, Mount Tangkuban Parahu.

A. INTRODUCTION

Mount Tangkuban Parahu occupies a central position in the tourism landscape of West Java, not only as an interesting geological site, but also as a cultural space filled with historical and mythological meaning (Berliana, 2019). The legend of Sangkuriang has contributed significantly to the attractiveness of this destination, constructing a more nuanced tourist experience than simply exploring the volcanic landscape (Kartika & Riana, 2020; Rinaldi & Yusuf, 2024). The existence of this narrative not only shapes tourists' expectations before visiting, but also enriches their interpretation of the physical landscape observed. This study seeks to analyze the experiences of tourists who have a previous understanding of the Sangkuriang story, in order to reveal the extent to which this narrative mediates their experience at Mount Tangkuban Parahu. Sangkuriang's story has wide appeal in Indonesian society, especially for domestic tourists who have known him since childhood through various educational and popular media. For many visitors, a trip to Mount Tangkuban Parahu is not just recreation, but a cultural pilgrimage to confirm the visual aspects of the narrative they have internalized (Supriadi, 2012). This curiosity creates a

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unique experiential dynamic, where tourists actively try to reconstruct the story in their minds based on the topographic elements they encounter (Carneiro et al., 2015; Humenyuk & Huk, 2024; Rickly-Boyd & Metro-Roland, 2010). Some of them even linked this visit with personal reflections on childhood memories and the influence of Sangkuriang's narrative on their understanding of Sundanese culture.

Furthermore, interactions between tourists and elements of the physical environment indicate a complex meaning construction process. The shape of the mountain that resembles an overturned boat, the wide craters, and the unique geothermal conditions are often interpreted through the lens of Sangkuriang's narrative. Tourists do not simply observe the landscape but also place it in a mythological context that they understand, thereby strengthening their affective experience of this destination (Anoegrajekti et al., 2020). In some cases, tourists actively look for certain points that are considered directly related to the story, such as the location where Sangkuriang is believed to have built boats. Most of them are encouraged to document this experience through various media, both as personal memories and as a form of participation in cultural reproduction through social media (Valk & Sävborg, 2018; Zhang & Xu, 2020).

However, the disconnect between tourists' expectations and the reality they face at the location is also a factor that influences their experience. This article is connected to previous research that discussed the role of folklore in enhancing the tourist experience on Mount Tangkuban Parahu. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Rinaldi & Yusuf (2024), highlight how the application of folklore in verbal and nonverbal forms contributes to a more memorable tourist experience. However, different from this approach, this article specifically examines the experiences of tourists who already have an understanding of the Sangkuriang story before visiting. The focus is on how these narratives shape expectations, mediate their interactions with the physical landscape, and shape their affective impressions of the destination. Thus, this research complements previous studies by shifting attention from the application of folklore in general to aspects of tourists' subjective perceptions and experiences that are influenced by this folklore. Some tourists expressed their disappointment with the lack of official interpretation efforts that could better facilitate this folklore-based experience. The absence of more explicit visual narratives, the lack of historical markers, and the absence of immersive experiences such as cultural performances or storytelling-based guides often make tourists feel that their visit does not fully meet Sari et al.'s (2022) expectations.

Despite the growing body of literature on folklore-based tourism, a significant research gap remains in studies that specifically investigate how pre-existing narrative knowledge shapes tourists' subjective perceptions and the extent to which on-site cultural interpretation meets those expectations. Prior studies have predominantly focused on the application of folklore in tourism promotion (Kartika & Riana, 2020) or the general role of legends in destination identity (Rinaldi & Yusuf, 2024), without closely examining the experiential gap from the tourists' perspective. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the subjective dimension of tourist experience, specifically the discrepancy between narrative-informed expectations and the interpretive reality encountered at the site. Thus, this research aims to examine in more depth how tourists who already have an understanding of the Sangkuriang story experience their visit to Mount Tangkuban Parahu. In addition, this study seeks to identify gaps between tourist expectations and interpretive reality on the ground, as well as provide recommendations for destination managers in optimizing culture-based experiences. It is hoped that the implications of this research can contribute to a wider discussion regarding cultural heritage interpretation strategies in the tourism context, as well as enrich understanding of how local narratives can be utilized to deepen more meaningful and sustainable tourism experiences.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interview methods and participant observation. Respondents were selected based on their knowledge of the Sangkuriang story, whether obtained from education, family or the media. Based on previous research, as many as 25 people specifically came to Mount Tangkuban Parahu with the aim of proving the truth of Sangkuriang's story (Rinaldi & Yusuf, 2024). Further interviews were conducted with 10 of the 25 respondents to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and impressions during the visit. The interview technique used was a semi-structured interview, which allows respondents to explain their experiences in detail while still referring to the research question guide. Interviews are conducted directly at tourist locations or via online communication for those who have completed their visit. Apart from interviews, participatory observation was also carried out by following the journey of tourists who were interested in the Sangkuriang legend. This observation aims to capture the spontaneous responses of tourists when they explore the Mount Tangkuban Parahu area.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all participants possessed prior knowledge of the Sangkuriang legend, thereby meeting the specific criteria relevant to the research questions. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached, a point at which new interviews produced no substantially new thematic insights. The data obtained was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes from meaningful segments, (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes, (4) reviewing and refining themes against the full dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Tourist experience patterns were grouped into main themes, such as expectations before the visit, experiences while at the location, and impressions after the visit. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing summary interpretations with selected respondents who confirmed the accuracy of the data representation. Investigator triangulation was also applied by cross-checking interpretations between the primary researcher and a co-researcher. With a combination of interviews and observations, this research provides a more comprehensive picture of how tourists who know the Sangkuriang story experience their visit to Mount Tangkuban Parahu and how their expectations of this destination are formed before and after their trip.

C. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Tourist Expectations and Their Influence on Tourism Experiences

Most tourists who visit Mount Tangkuban Parahu with a background of knowledge about the Sangkuriang legend have high expectations for this destination. The thematic analysis of interview data identified three distinct expectation profiles shaped by respondents' sources of narrative knowledge. However, these expectations are not always uniform, as they are influenced by the traveler's background and the source of their knowledge of the story. Tourists who know the Sangkuriang legend from formal education or books tend to have higher expectations of cultural interpretations at tourist locations, while those who know the story from popular media are more interested in the visual elements and interactive experiences that support the narrative. They imagine a more mystical atmosphere and rich cultural elements that support their understanding of this story. Tourists expect to find a deeper interpretation of the historical and mythological aspects of this place, including clearer visual symbols and more interactive story-based experiences. In interviews conducted, it was found that the majority of tourists knew the Sangkuriang story through formal education, folklore books, or popular media such as films and television. This creates expectations that tourist sites will have a more structured interpretive approach in conveying the narrative of the legend. Some tourists also hope to find interactive elements, such as digital information

boards, cultural exhibitions showing the history of Sangkuriang, or cultural performances that reconstruct stories in the form of traditional performing arts.

These tourists' expectations are influenced by their experiences in other tourist destinations that have implemented cultural narrative-based approaches more effectively (Rickly-Boyd, 2009; Soulard et al., 2021). Some tourists compare their experience at Mount Tangkuban Parahu with other destinations that have special guides to explain mythological elements, creating a more immersive and meaningful experience. Several tourists mentioned their experiences at Borobudur, where projection technology and the assistance of tour guides were used to enrich the historical narrative, thereby creating a more immersive experience (Konstantakis et al., 2021; Pai et al., 2021). Additionally, some tourists also want additional sensory elements, such as sound effects and thematic lighting at key locations associated with legends, to enhance their tourism experience. This approach has been applied at several culture-based tourism sites, such as the Parambanan Temple complex in Yogyakarta which integrates ballet performances to depict the Ramayana story (Irsha, 2018; Subagyo & Sari, 2020). Thus, applying a similar method on Mount Tangkuban Parahu has the potential to increase the attractiveness and experience of folklore-based tourism.

Furthermore, in Ponsignon & Derbaix's (2020) study on cultural tourism, it was found that strengthening narratives through interactive elements can significantly improve the tourism experience. This study shows that active interactive technologies in cultural tourism enhance social interaction, while passive technologies inhibit it. Hu's (2023) research shows that the integration of visual, audio elements and direct interaction with guides can help tourists better understand and appreciate the cultural heritage of a place. Thus, implementing a more in-depth interpretation model on Mount Tangkuban Parahu, such as a legend-based tourist route that connects key locations in the Sangkuriang story, can enrich the tourist experience and strengthen the connection between mythology and landscape. By considering various approaches, Mount Tangkuban Parahu has great potential to become a cultural tourism destination that not only offers natural beauty, but also educational and immersive experiences based on folklore heritage. Implementing a more comprehensive interpretive strategy can help bridge the gap between tourist expectations and reality on the ground, while strengthening the historical and cultural values inherent in this destination.

Interpretation of Landscape and Visual Elements in Support of Legendary Narratives

The interview data revealed that most tourists feel that the geographical elements of Mount Tangkuban Parahu, especially its shape, which resembles an overturned boat, provide a special attraction and enrich their experience. There are variations in their interpretation of this landscape; Some tourists feel that without a strong narrative, the relationship between geographical features and the Sangkuriang legend is less significant. They stated that these elements helped them envision the storyline more clearly. However, many tourists also regret the lack of information available at the location regarding the connection between the physical landscape and the Sangkuriang story. It was found that there was a gap between tourists' expectations and the reality they encountered at the location. Some tourists hope to find more information boards or visual clues explaining the relationship between the Sangkuriang story and the landscape of Mount Tangkuban Parahu.

This lack of interpretive elements detracts from the overall tourist experience. Some tourists suggested dioramas, murals depicting scenes from the Sangkuriang story, or interactive performances that could help them understand the relationship between mythology and landscape in more depth. However, this finding contradicts conditions in the field because, based on observations, it was found that several reliefs depicting the Sangkuriang story had been made. These reliefs, which are scattered at several points in the tourist area, are less effective in conveying narratives to tourists due to the lack of supporting

information and less striking designs. As a result, many tourists are not aware of the existence or meaning of these reliefs, so the visual elements that should strengthen cultural interpretations have less impact. Apart from that, the lack of maintenance and a design that is less attractive to modern tourists means that this relief is not the main attraction in the tourist experience. It would be better if this interpretation is strengthened with a more interesting approach, such as narrative-based guidance or digital technology. Examples of a similar approach have been applied at Borobudur Temple with the use of projection technology to enrich historical narratives (Pan et al., 2018, 2022), as well as at Prambanan Temple through performances of the Ramayana ballet which allows tourists to understand the cultural and historical context in more depth (Hidajat et al., 2022; Subagyo & Sari, 2020).

In addition, tourists who are more familiar with folklore state the need for a richer interpretive approach, including the integration of performing arts elements and direct storytelling by tour guides (Kutin & Telban, 2021). The application of this delivery method is considered more effective than just static information boards, because it can provide a more in-depth and emotional experience for visitors. Furthermore, interviews with tourists also revealed that some of them hoped that there would be a thematic tourist route that connected various locations associated with legends. This path can include main points that are believed to be related to the Sangkuriang story, such as the place where the boat was built or the location of interaction between Sangkuriang and Dayang Sumbi. With this route, tourists can better understand the geographical context and the relationship between stories and landscapes directly. In addition to location-based approaches, some travelers also suggest the use of digital technology to strengthen story interpretation. A similar approach has been applied in several other cultural tourism destinations. Previous studies show that the integration of digital technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), can increase the attractiveness of cultural tourism and deepen tourists' involvement in understanding narratives in cultural tourism (Bassano et al., 2019; Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2015). Therefore, implementing similar technology on Mount Tangkuban Parahu could be an effective strategy to revive the Sangkuriang story and increase the destination's attractiveness for tourists looking for an educational and immersive experience. Several other tourist destinations have adopted this technology using various methods. For example, at the National Museum of Indonesia, interactive technology is used to provide digital-based educational experiences, which have been proven to increase tourists' understanding of historical collections (Bramantyo & Ismail, 2021; Shaula Keumala et al., 2022). One of the proposals that emerged was the creation of a story-based tourism application that would allow tourists to hear live narratives when they visit important points in the legend. This application can provide various story choices based on different perspectives, for example, from the perspective of Sangkuriang, Dayang Sumbi, or even the local community who inherited the story.

It is also important to note that not all tourists have the same interest in the Sangkuriang legend. Based on interviews, some tourists are more interested in the geological and ecological aspects of Mount Tangkuban Parahu than its mythological elements. Some tourists also mentioned that they came because of the natural tourist attraction, while others admitted that they had an interest in folklore but felt that the interpretation at the location was less in-depth or less interesting. Some of them are more interested in the geological aspects and scientific history of Mount Tangkuban Parahu. To attract different types of tourists, a balance can be achieved by harmoniously integrating mythological interpretations and scientific approaches. For example, geological information about the process of mountain formation can be presented along with an explanation of how this landscape is associated with the Sangkuriang legend. This approach has been applied at several geotourism sites, such as Lake Toba, where scientific explanations about volcanic processes are accompanied by cultural narratives of local communities so that tourists gain a more comprehensive understanding of the natural and cultural heritage of a destination (Zakaria, 2022).

Therefore, a more flexible and multimodal interpretive approach is needed to cover various types of tourists with different preferences.

The Influence of Tour Guides and Cultural Narratives

Tourists who have a deep understanding of the Sangkuriang legend are generally looking for an experience that is more than just enjoying the natural scenery. They are interested in hearing stories from tour guides or finding symbols related to the legend. Based on interviews conducted, tourists who received direct information from tour guides stated that their experience was more memorable and meaningful. Some tourists stated that hearing Sangkuriang's story directly from a tour guide added a new dimension to their experience. One respondent stated that the tour guide provided deeper context regarding the differences between the version of the folklore they had heard previously and the local interpretation in Tangkuban Parahu. Other tourists expressed that the tour guide's lively and interactive storytelling style made them more emotionally connected to the legend, compared to just reading written information on an information board. They feel that narratives delivered in a storytelling style can strengthen the attractiveness of this destination as a cultural tourist attraction. On the other hand, some tourists felt that the information they received was too superficial and did not discuss historical and mythological aspects in more detail. Storytelling can enhance visitors' experiences at tourist destinations by connecting narratives and myths, thus improving the overall visitor experience (Calvi & Hover, 2021).

However, interviews with tour guides show that not all tourists are interested in exploring the mythological aspects of this destination. Some tourists prefer geological or scientific historical information about the mountain over its folkloric elements. This suggests the need for a more flexible approach to interpretation that can be adapted to tourists' preferences. Some tour guides suggest that they receive additional training in cultural and mythological aspects, so that they can tell stories more interestingly and relevantly to different types of tourists. They also highlighted the need for specialized training modules that could help them integrate local cultural elements into their scouting materials.

In addition, tourists who already have a deep understanding of the Sangkuriang story often feel that the information provided is too general and lacks detail. They proposed a special tour package focused on exploring the mythology of Mount Tangkuban Parahu, including visits to points considered to be related to the legend. As a comparison, a folklore-based tourism approach has been applied in several other destinations, such as the folklore trail in Northeastern India (Pariong, 2024), the story of Robin Hood at the Robin Hood Festival, England (Everett & John Parakoottathil, 2018). Furthermore, in Indonesia, travel routes based on folklore have developed, such as travel based on the stories of Joko Tingkir in Surakarta and Si Pitung in Jakarta (Harini, 2018; Kurniasih & Inderasari, 2020). Hemme (2005) explains that the interpretation given by the interpreter always travels along the thematic path, giving the impression of being face-to-face with an actual landscape representation, which can form an authentic experience.

From these various findings, it can be concluded that tourists who have an understanding of the Sangkuriang legend want a tourism experience that is more than just passive observation of the landscape of Mount Tangkuban Parahu. They expect experiences that are more narratively rich, educational and interactive. Therefore, tourism managers can develop deeper interpretation strategies, either through strengthening the role of tour guides, integrating performing arts, or using technology to enrich this folklore-based tourism experience.

Innovative Strategy in Interpreting the Sangkuriang Legend

Some tourists feel that their experience at Mount Tangkuban Parahu is not much different from other natural tourist destinations, mainly because of the lack of a more in-depth interpretive approach. They want innovation in storytelling, such as cultural performances or more interactive narrative-based

experiences. The implementation of this strategy is expected to increase the attractiveness of cultural tourism on Mount Tangkuban Parahu and deepen tourist involvement with the Sangkuriang story. Several other tourist destinations have adopted a more immersive storytelling-based approach, for example, with theatrical performances based on local legends or tour guides who use interactive methods to tell historical stories. Furthermore, tourism managers can collaborate with local cultural communities to organize annual festivals that showcase the Sangkuriang story in various forms of performing arts. Even though there have been Sangkuriang-themed performances held by communities in West Bandung Regency, the development is not very significant, and the last one was held in 2022. The annual traditional/ritual ceremonies in the Tangkuban Parahu area are usually held, which can increase the interest of special interest tourists who are interested in these traditional ceremonies. A similar concept can be applied to Mount Tangkuban Parahu to enrich the tourist experience. In addition, several tourists proposed the formation of a thematic route connecting points that have relevance to the legend, such as the location where Dayang Sumbi lived or the area where Sangkuriang is believed to have built the boat.

In addition to storytelling, several studies show that a more immersive tourism experience can be achieved by adding interactive technological elements. Several tourist destinations have adopted the use of mobile applications that provide audio narration based on tourists' locations within cultural tourism areas. This approach allows tourists to obtain information in a more flexible and personalized way, increasing their involvement in the legendary stories associated with the place. However, this needs to be balanced with the readiness of the location such as internet signals and technological logistics that can survive at mountain heights. This effort will not only increase the attractiveness of the destination but also enrich the tourist experience through a more authentic cultural approach. Some other proposals include the establishment of a cultural interpretation center that presents oral history, visual arts, and academic documentation regarding the evolution of the Sangkuriang story in Sundanese culture. Previous studies on cultural tourism in Indonesia show that active community participation in managing cultural narratives can increase tourist involvement and strengthen the educational value of a destination (Kurniawan et al., 2022).

To further increase the attractiveness of folklore-based tourism, several studies suggest that direct experience elements can increase tourists' attachment to the cultural heritage of a region (Bassano et al., 2019; Bendix & Hemme, 2004; Hemme, 2005). Therefore, programs such as legend telling tours, interactive art performances, and simulations of people's lives in the past can be part of the destination management strategy. By implementing innovation in storytelling, Mount Tangkuban Parahu can further develop as a tourist destination that not only offers natural beauty, but also a more in-depth, structured and research-based cultural experience, which allows tourists to not only enjoy natural beauty but also understand the historical context, mythology and cultural values inherent in the destination.

D. CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the legend of Sangkuriang has a significant role in shaping the tourist experience at Mount Tangkuban Parahu. Three primary findings emerge from this study. First, tourists who possess prior knowledge of the Sangkuriang legend arrive with distinctly higher cultural expectations, shaped by their sources of narrative knowledge (formal education, folk literature, or popular media). Second, a substantial expectation-reality gap exists at the site, manifested in the insufficient provision of interpretive infrastructure such as information boards, storytelling guides, and culturally immersive attractions. Third, while physical landscape features such as the mountain's boat-like shape are recognized and valued, their potential as narrative anchors remains largely underutilized due to the absence of structured interpretation strategies. Tourists who already have an understanding of this story tend to come with high expectations of finding strong cultural interpretations at tourist locations.

However, the gap between expectations and reality on the ground is still quite wide, especially due to the lack of interpretive elements such as clear information boards and in-depth narratives from tour guides, as well as the lack of cultural-based attractions that can enrich tourists' experiences. As a result, many tourists feel that their visit has not fully lived up to expectations regarding cultural and mythological exploration. To improve the tourist experience, concrete efforts are needed to strengthen cultural interpretation on Mount Tangkuban Parahu. One of the main steps that can be taken is to increase the capacity of tour guides so that they are better able to convey stories interestingly and educationally. In addition, tourism managers can provide thematic paths that connect important points in the Sangkuriang legend, as well as add art performances or cultural festivals that display this story in various formats. Technology can also be utilized through augmented reality (AR) or interactive tourism applications that allow tourists to get a more immersive and personalized digital-based experience.

Apart from efforts to improve tourism facilities and experiences, collaboration with local communities is also an important aspect in developing culture-based tourism. The involvement of artists, cultural figures and academic institutions can help create richer and more authentic interpretations. With this collaboration, tourism management will not only increase attractiveness for tourists but also empower local communities economically and socially. The sustainability of these culture-based programs also needs to be considered so that they remain relevant and can continue to attract tourists in the long term. In the future, further research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the interpretation methods used in this destination, including comparisons with other folklore-based tourist attractions in Indonesia. In addition, studies of the economic and social impacts of mythology-based tourism can provide greater insight into how this strategy can be managed sustainably. With a more comprehensive and research-based approach, Mount Tangkuban Parahu has the potential to become a superior cultural tourism destination that not only offers natural beauty, but also deeper educational and interactive experiences for tourists.

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