

THE TOURISM POTENTIAL OF KE'TE KESU VILLAGE AS A CULTURAL HERITAGE ATTRACTION AND HISTORICA ICON OF TORAJA

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the potential of Kete Kesu Village as a tourist attraction and historical icon of Toraja, South Sulawesi. The formulation of the problem studied in this research is what is the potential of Kete Kesu village as a tourist attraction in Toraja. The method used is a qualitative research method with a qualitative descriptive approach to understand what phenomena the research subjects experience. Meanwhile, the data collection techniques in this research are literature study and documentation. The results of this research show that Kete Kesu is one of the interesting tourist villages to visit in Toraja because it has interesting and unique tourism potential and has a history that was considered mystical and romantic in ancient times.

Keywords: Tourism Potential, Tourism Village, Uniqueness

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as a country rich in natural resources and cultural diversity. It is no surprise, therefore, that the country has become one of the world's leading tourist destinations, attracting visitors from across the globe. The tourism sector makes a significant contribution to the livelihoods of local communities, serving as one of the main sources of national foreign exchange. As a promising alternative economic activity, the tourism industry plays a vital role in improving community welfare. The development of this sector has positive impacts, such as the creation of new job opportunities, increased income, and the encouragement of regional governments to build and maintain infrastructure—all of which ultimately lead to a better quality of life for local populations.

According to Pitana (2009:81), tourism management should be based on the principles of environmental conservation, community empowerment, and the preservation of social and cultural values. This approach ensures that tourism not only offers enjoyable experiences for visitors but also delivers tangible benefits to the local population.

Cultural tourism development in Indonesia is rooted in Law No. 09 of 1994 on Tourism, which emphasizes that this type of tourism is based on the nation's rich cultural heritage. In this context, culture is not merely a complement to tourism activities but serves as a fundamental element that defines community identity. Cultural tourism highlights local traditions and values as the main attractions, while also providing an educational platform for visitors to learn about history and ancestral heritage. This is one of the reasons tourists often return to specific destinations—drawn by their cultural richness and natural beauty.

One such destination worthy of study is Toraja, located in South Sulawesi Province. While the majority of the Torajan population practices Christianity, a portion still adheres to Aluk To Dolo, a traditional belief system rooted in Hinduism. Toraja is widely regarded as an

iconic tourist destination in South Sulawesi, with one of its most notable attractions being Ke'te Kesu Village. Situated in Lembang Panta'na Kallolo, Kesu Subdistrict, North Toraja Regency, this village is well-developed in terms of infrastructure and easily accessible from Rantepao, the nearest city center—just 5 kilometers away and reachable by private or public transport.

Toraja's natural beauty, the warmth of its people, and its rich cultural traditions create a distinctive allure, prompting local authorities to focus on maximizing this potential. A region's tourism appeal must be examined and developed in an optimal manner to drive economic growth. The active involvement of multiple stakeholders—both direct and indirect—is crucial in this process. Tourism attractions and regional potential are closely interconnected, as both contribute significantly to local economic advancement.

Ke'te Kesu Village is widely recognized as a cultural heritage site that continues to uphold the traditional customs of the Torajan people. Visitors to this area can encounter historical relics such as ancient rock graves, which are over 500 years old, and traditional Tongkonan houses, which hold ancestral stories and values. These graves, often shaped like boats, contain human remains and are commonly suspended from cliffs or placed in caves. In some instances, visitors may encounter majestic tombs belonging to deceased Torajan nobility.

Given this background, the present study seeks to explore in greater depth the potential of Ke'te Kesu as a cultural tourism destination and historical icon in the Toraja region of South Sulawesi.

LITERATUR REVIEW

Yogi (2021), in his study entitled “Management of Taman Pecampuhan Sala as a Spiritual Tourism Destination Based on Tri Hita Karana in Sala Traditional Village, Bangli Regency,” explained that regional potential and tourism are two closely related aspects, as both play a significant role in driving regional development and growth.

The similarity between Yogi's research and the present study lies in the shared focus on the management of a tourism destination. However, the key difference lies in the subject of study: while Yogi's research was conducted in Bali, this study focuses on a cultural tourism site in Toraja. Yogi's research contributes to the present study by providing a conceptual reference for analyzing how a tourist attraction can be managed effectively.

Labib (2023), in his research titled “The Potential of Non-Vernacular Architectural Values in Bale Tani Traditional Houses in Lombok,” explored the architectural potential of Bale Tani traditional houses through the lens of non-vernacular architectural values.

The similarity between Labib's study and this research lies in the shared interest in exploring the potential of traditional houses. The main difference, however, is in the research location and the focus—this study emphasizes the tourism potential of Ke'te Kesu as a traditional village and heritage site. Labib's study provides valuable insight into how the potential of a cultural heritage site can be explored and presented, which supports the analytical framework of this research.

Suasapha (2020), in his study titled “The Tourism Potential of Penglipuran Tourism

Village According to Tourism Students of Bali Tourism Polytechnic,” discussed the tourism potential of Penglipuran Village based on the perceptions of tourism students. His study serves two important purposes: first, it highlights that Penglipuran’s development as a tourism village began with its designation as a conservation village, and second, it underscores how this approach differs from conventional tourism destination development.

The similarity between Suasapha’s research and the current study lies in the shared objective of identifying and analyzing the tourism potential of a specific destination. The difference lies in the location and thematic focus—this study centers specifically on the tourism potential of Ke’té Kesu Village in Toraja. Suasapha’s research contributes to the present study by offering a framework for assessing tourism potential from a heritage and cultural sustainability perspective.

METHOD

The type and approach of research used in this study is qualitative research, which aims to generate descriptive data that captures social realities and events related to community life (Sugiyono, 1992:2). In this research, the qualitative approach is employed to explore and describe the potential of Ke’té Kesu Village as a cultural tourism attraction, with the objective of increasing tourist interest and visitation. This is carried out while respecting the cultural ethics and social norms upheld by the Torajan community in South Sulawesi.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon the works of Pitana and Diarta (2009), who, in their book "Introduction to Tourism Studies", emphasized that tourism management should be grounded in principles that promote environmental sustainability, community involvement, and social values. These principles ensure that tourism not only provides an enjoyable experience for visitors but also contributes to the welfare of local communities.

Additionally, Madiun (2010), in his book "Development Model of Modern Tourism Areas", highlights that community-based tourism development serves to maintain balance and sustainability between the environment, resource utilization, and visitor satisfaction. This approach is achieved through the active participation and initiative of local communities.

These two references serve as key guidelines for the researcher in addressing the formulated research questions and in developing a comprehensive understanding of how Ke’té Kesu can be managed sustainably as a culturally significant tourist destination.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Ke’té Kesu Tourism Village

Tana Toraja is renowned for its breathtaking natural landscapes and its people’s strong commitment to preserving ancestral traditions and values. These characteristics make it one of the most compelling cultural tourism destinations in South Sulawesi. One of its flagship attractions is Ke’té Kesu, a traditional tourism village that maintains the

customary lifestyle and cultural heritage of the Torajan people. The village is located approximately 4 kilometers from the town of Rantepao, specifically in Banoran Village, Sanggalangi Subdistrict, North Toraja Regency. In Ke'te Kesu, visitors can witness firsthand the Tongkonan, traditional ancestral houses of the Torajan people. These wooden structures, many of which are over 300 years old, are adorned with symbolic carvings and rows of buffalo horns, which serve as markers of the family's social status. The houses are passed down through generations, and their bamboo roofs, now covered in moss, stand as a testament to their age and cultural significance.

Ke'te Kesu is also a central site for Rambu Solo', a traditional funeral ceremony considered by the Torajan people as a celebration of life rather than a mournful event. This elaborate ritual reflects the Torajan belief that death marks the beginning of the soul's journey to the spiritual world. In contrast to mainstream perceptions of death as sorrowful, the Torajan community honors it with large-scale ceremonies involving extended family and the wider community.

One of the most remarkable features of Ke'te Kesu is its unique burial complex. Located behind the row of Tongkonan houses is a limestone cliff, which serves as a repository for Erong—wooden coffins carved in the shapes of boats, buffaloes, or pigs. Some of these coffins date back over 700 years. Inside the natural caves, visitors will find human skulls and bones scattered across the stone surfaces, offering a powerful blend of mystical atmosphere and historical depth.

The site also includes Patane, modern tombs constructed in the shape of houses, and Tau-tau effigies, which are wooden statues representing the deceased. These figures play a vital role in Torajan funerary traditions and serve as both memorials and spiritual guardians. Due to its exceptional cultural richness and distinctive architecture, UNESCO has recognized Ke'te Kesu as a World Cultural Heritage Site. In addition to its cultural and architectural significance, Ke'te Kesu is also known as a center for traditional Torajan craftsmanship, particularly wood carving and statue-making. Local artisans produce intricately carved coffins and Tau-tau statues, which are available for viewing and purchase. The village also features numerous stalls selling Torajan handwoven textiles and locally grown coffee, both popular among tourists. The decorative carvings on the Tongkonan houses are imbued with philosophical meaning. For instance, the carving of a rooster symbolizes justice and its role in dispute resolution, while circular motifs reflect the community's belief in divine power. Every carving embodies aspects of Torajan life, belief systems, and social hierarchy. In essence, Ke'te Kesu offers not only scenic beauty but also a deeply immersive cultural experience. Its uniqueness lies in its ability to preserve and share the authentic identity of the Torajan people. This makes it not only one of the premier tourist destinations in the region but also a vital cultural heritage site that must be protected and preserved for future generations.

The Unique Torajan Perspective on Death and the Tourism Appeal of Ke'te Kesu

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Torajan people lies in their unique perception of death. For the Toraja community, death is not seen as the end of life, but rather as the beginning of a spiritual journey to the afterlife. This worldview profoundly

shapes the execution of funeral rituals, which are not conducted with somber grief as in many other cultures, but instead celebrated through a grand ceremony known as Rambu Solo'. This ritual serves as a festive farewell to the deceased and reflects the Torajan belief in life after death. As such, Rambu Solo' is not only a spiritual event but also one of the region's most distinctive cultural attractions.

Ke'te Kesu, located in North Toraja, is one of the most popular cultural tourism destinations in the area. Visitors can observe the Tongkonan, the traditional ancestral houses of the Torajan people, characterized by their high, curved bamboo roofs and elaborately carved wooden panels imbued with symbolic meanings. According to local resident Baso Rantekesu, the carving of a rooster found at the top of a Tongkonan symbolizes the role of a judge, a reference to ancient practices where disputes were settled through cockfighting. Beneath the rooster, a circular motif symbolizes the divine authority of God, highlighting the strong spiritual foundations of Torajan culture. Additionally, Tongkonan houses are adorned with buffalo horns affixed to the front pillars. These horns signify social status the more horns displayed, the higher the status of the household within the community.

A short walk behind the village approximately ten minutes from the Tongkonan area leads visitors to one of Ke'te Kesu's most remarkable features: its cliffside burial site. This complex consists of various types of graves, the most notable being the Patane, tombs shaped like miniature houses, often accompanied by Tau-tau wooden effigies representing the deceased. Prior to the use of Patane, the Torajans practiced a more ancient burial tradition involving Erong, boat-shaped wooden coffins placed in cavities carved into the cliffside. This method served both spiritual and practical purposes, particularly to protect the body and its valuable offerings from theft and wild animals. Today, the burial site at Ke'te Kesu features scattered human skulls and bones within caves and on cliff ledges. While the sight may seem eerie to outsiders, it offers a compelling, immersive experience for visitors interested in the history and deeply rooted traditions of the Torajan people. These rituals and burial customs have become a central feature of cultural tourism in Toraja, with Ke'te Kesu standing out as a site with unique characteristics not found elsewhere in South Sulawesi.

❖ **Tongkonan Traditional Houses**

One of Ke'te Kesu's most iconic features is the presence of Tongkonan, the traditional houses of the Toraja people. These houses are constructed with gracefully arched bamboo roofs meticulously arranged to be water-resistant and remarkably durable, often lasting for decades. This unique architectural form makes the Tongkonan a central attraction within Ke'te Kesu's cultural landscape. Historically, the evolution of Torajan housing reflects a deep cultural transition. In its earliest form, Torajan dwellings consisted of two supporting poles and a leaf roof, often propped against a cliff. As architectural knowledge progressed, Torajans moved into a transitional period marked by triangular pole structures, which eventually developed into the four-post structures that form the foundation

of modern Tongkonan. With this evolution came the introduction of symbolic ornaments and carvings, which serve as indicators of social hierarchy and spiritual belief. A key visual marker is the arrangement of buffalo horns mounted on the front of the house; the number of horns directly reflects the social standing of the family. The more horns displayed, the higher the family's rank within the Torajan societal structure.



Figure 1. Tongkonan Traditional Houses
Doc/Internet : Titin Hatma



Figur 2. Tongkonan Traditional Houses
Doc/Twitter.com : @Fedeltaliano76

Figure 3. Tongkonan Traditional Houses



Doc/Image Credit by Dewirieka.com

Figure 4. Tongkonan Traditional Houses



Image Credit by Backpackerjakarta.com

The Torajan community lives within a deeply rooted customary system that has been passed down through generations. This strong adherence to adat (customary law) directly influences the existence and function of their traditional houses, known as Tongkonan. These houses are not merely residential structures but serve specific roles based on the social hierarchy of Torajan society. There are three main types of Tongkonan: Tongkonan Layuk – This is the primary and oldest Tongkonan, functioning as the center for formulating customary laws and communal decisions. It holds the highest authority and serves as the cultural and spiritual heart of the Torajan community, Tongkonan Pekamberan (or Pekaindoran) – These Tongkonan are executive in nature, tasked with implementing customary rules, carrying out orders, and exercising local authority within specific customary territories, Tongkonan Batu Ariri – Although this type holds no formal customary authority, it plays an essential role in family relations, serving as a place to nurture kinship and preserve the legacy of the Tongkonan's founding ancestors.

In addition to their symbolic design, Tongkonan houses are accompanied by a granary structure called "Lumbung" or "Alang", which is another hallmark of traditional Torajan architecture. These granaries are used to store agricultural produce, such as rice and other staple foods, highlighting the community's local wisdom and sustainable practices in managing natural resources. This functional aspect further distinguishes Ke'te Kesu from other cultural tourism destinations in Indonesia.

❖ **Torajan Burial Practices**

Beyond the architectural significance of Tongkonan, Torajan burial customs represent another distinctive cultural attraction in Ke'te Kesu. The burial sites exhibit a wide variety of traditional grave types, ranging from house-like tombs with stone walls to boat-shaped stone coffins and circular grave structures. These tombs are carefully arranged along the hillsides near the main settlement of Ke'te Kesu, creating a powerful visual landscape steeped in cultural symbolism. One of the most striking features for visitors is the sight of ancestral wooden coffins placed in cliff niches or even suspended from rock faces. From a distance, these appear as hanging graves, forming one of the most iconic and visually dramatic elements of Toraja's funeral tradition. This practice stems from a longstanding belief system and deep reverence for ancestors—a cultural legacy that continues to be respected and preserved to this day.

The uniqueness of these burial practices serves as a major attraction for visitors to the region. Not far from the main settlement, tourists can observe rows of ancestral coffins belonging to the Torajan people, placed within cliff niches or even suspended from the rock face. From a distance, these resemble hanging graves, one of the most striking and visually distinct elements of the Torajan funeral tradition. This practice reflects the community's deep spiritual beliefs and ancestral reverence, which have been preserved and passed down through generations as an integral part of Torajan cultural heritage.

Figure 5. Cliffside Graves



Figure 6. Tana Toraja Burial Site



Doc/Internet : Gora Kunjana, 2016

Figure 7. Toraja Noble Graves



Doc/Internet: Novi Kusuma Yanti, 2018

Figure 8. Buffalo Head



Upon closer inspection, visitors will also encounter uniquely shaped coffins, some of which are designed to resemble the head of a buffalo, complete with carved horns on either side. These buffalo-head-shaped coffins symbolize strength, status, and connection to ancestral spirits. Remarkably, human skulls can often be seen placed atop these coffins—believed to belong to the deceased whose remains are held within. This practice, though unusual, embodies the deep respect and ritual symbolism with which the Torajan people approach death and the afterlife.

❖ Distinctive Torajan Woodcarvings

Every region possesses its own cultural uniqueness and identity, and Kete' Kesu' is no exception. One of the most prominent cultural features and a strong symbol of Torajan identity found in this village is its traditional Torajan woodcarving craftsmanship.

These carvings are meticulously crafted by local artisans who reside in and around the Kete' Kesu' tourism area. The carvings come in a wide variety of forms, including ornamental wall decorations, miniatures of traditional Tongkonan houses, and sheaths for traditional Torajan swords. Each piece reflects not only the aesthetic values of the Torajan people but also the cultural philosophy that has been passed down through generations.

❖ Traditional Wall Carvings

Torajan wall carvings possess distinctive features that set them apart from other regional crafts across Indonesia. Produced by skilled local craftsmen, these carvings showcase traditional Torajan motifs, often characterized by vibrant and contrasting colors that immediately capture attention.

These artisans aim to create pieces that are both aesthetically pleasing and meaningful, making them popular souvenirs for visiting tourists. The wall carvings are suitable for display in various settings, such as living rooms, offices, commercial spaces, or even as gifts for friends, family, or colleagues. Each carved item is not merely decorative—it serves as a cultural artifact that represents the artistic identity and heritage of the Torajan people.

Figure 9. Toraja Wall Carving



Doc.Internet/Antonius Haris: 2019

❖ Tongkonan Miniatures

In addition to wall carvings, another unique handicraft available in Kete' Kesu' is the miniature Tongkonan, a scaled-down replica of the iconic Torajan ancestral house. These miniatures are carefully handcrafted to mirror the authentic architectural details of a full-sized Tongkonan.

A distinctive feature of these models is their boat-shaped roof, which holds deep symbolic meaning. The roof design reflects a reverence for ancestors and is thought to symbolize the Torajan people's maritime origins, as their ancestors were historically known to be seafarers. These miniatures not only serve as attractive souvenirs, but also stand as meaningful symbols of cultural pride and ancestral legacy.

Figure 10. Tongkonan Miniatures



Doc/Wikipedia : Budaya Indonesia, 2017

❖ Traditional Sword Sheaths

Another culturally significant craft from Kete' Kesu' is the Torajan sword sheath, designed to hold traditional blades and adorned with intricate carvings. These sheaths are decorated with striking and exotic colors, making them particularly suitable as wall decorations, whether displayed at home or in professional spaces. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, the sheaths represent a deep-rooted cultural heritage and the artistry of Torajan craftsmanship.

Figure 11. Traditional Torajan Sword Sheath



Doc/WordPress.com: Tulisananakkos, 2014

I. CONCLUSIONS

Kete' Kesu' possesses unique cultural features that distinguish it from other tourist destinations in South Sulawesi, particularly through the presence of the traditional Tongkonan houses. These ancestral houses are easily recognized by their arched bamboo roofs and carry deep historical significance—evolving from early, modest dwellings into elaborately decorated structures that represent the social hierarchy within Torajan society. Tongkonan houses serve vital social functions and are classified into different types: Tongkonan Layuk, the primary and oldest house, serves as the center for traditional lawmaking, Tongkonan Pekamberan which functions as the executor of customary regulations and Tongkonan Batu Ariri, which acts as a familial gathering place and symbolizes lineage continuity.

A distinctive feature of the Tongkonan is the attached rice barn, known as Lumbung or Alang, used for storing agricultural produce. This functional element is not commonly found in other cultural tourism sites, further highlighting Kete' Kesu's uniqueness.

Another major cultural highlight in Kete' Kesu' is the variety of traditional Torajan burial forms, ranging from house-shaped tombs to boat-shaped stone graves. Visitors can witness the ancestral coffins suspended on cliff faces—some of which are ornately carved to resemble buffalo heads complete with horns, symbolizing the community's spiritual beliefs and ancestral reverence. Kete' Kesu' is also renowned for its traditional Torajan woodcarving craftsmanship, created by local artisans. These crafts include ornamental wall carvings, miniature Tongkonan houses, and decorative sword sheaths. The wall carvings feature intricate motifs and vibrant colors, making them ideal souvenirs suitable for display in living rooms, workspaces, or as thoughtful gifts.

The miniature Tongkonan models replicate the architectural features of the original structures, particularly the boat-shaped roof, which reflects the ancestral philosophy that honors their seafaring roots. Meanwhile, the Torajan sword sheath is designed not only for practical storage but also as a decorative item, featuring exotic carvings and vivid colors—ideal for display in homes or

offices. Together, these elements reflect the cultural richness and artistic depth of Kete' Kesu', making it a significant destination that preserves and promotes the intangible cultural heritage of the Torajan people.

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