



Dark Tourism and Ethical Heritage Development in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing forms of special interest tourism in the contemporary tourism industry. This phenomenon refers to visits to places associated with death, tragedy, disaster, war, and human suffering. In Indonesia, dark tourism has developed through destinations such as Trunyan Village in Bali, the Bali Bombing Memorial, the Aceh Tsunami Museum, Lubang Buaya Museum, and Lawang Sewu in Semarang. This study aims to analyze the development of dark tourism in Indonesia and examine the ethical challenges surrounding the commercialization of tragedy and historical memory. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through literature review and document analysis from tourism studies, media reports, and previous academic publications. The findings reveal that dark tourism in Indonesia possesses significant educational, cultural, and economic potential, particularly in strengthening historical awareness and preserving collective memory. However, the increasing commercialization of mystical narratives, horror attractions, and sensational promotion has created ethical dilemmas, including distortion of historical facts, commodification of suffering, and reduction of educational value. In destinations such as Lawang Sewu, mystical branding often overshadows its historical significance as a colonial heritage site and symbol of anti-colonial struggle. Similarly, Trunyan Village demonstrates how indigenous funeral traditions can attract tourists while simultaneously risking cultural exploitation if not managed responsibly. This study concludes that sustainable dark tourism development requires ethical management, community participation, culturally sensitive interpretation, and balanced storytelling that prioritizes education and remembrance over sensationalism. Through appropriate governance, dark tourism can function not only as an economic resource but also as a medium for cultural reflection, historical learning, and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: Dark tourism, heritage tourism, historical memory, ethical tourism, Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most influential sectors in promoting economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional development across the world. Beyond its contribution to employment generation and destination competitiveness, tourism increasingly functions as a platform for cultural interpretation, heritage preservation, and social learning. In recent decades, the diversification of tourist motivations has encouraged the emergence of alternative tourism forms that extend beyond leisure and recreation. Contemporary travelers increasingly seek meaningful experiences that provide emotional engagement, educational value, and opportunities for personal reflection. Within this context, dark tourism has emerged as a significant niche tourism segment that attracts visitors to places associated with death, tragedy, suffering,

disaster, conflict, and collective trauma.^{1,2}

The concept of dark tourism has attracted growing scholarly attention because it reflects the complex relationship between tourism, memory, and heritage. Rather than merely observing historical sites, visitors to dark tourism destinations often engage with narratives of loss, remembrance, resilience, and human vulnerability. Recent studies suggest that dark tourism serves not only as a form of cultural consumption but also as a mechanism through which societies interpret difficult histories and negotiate collective memory.^{3,4} Consequently, dark tourism has evolved from a marginal tourism phenomenon into an important field of academic inquiry encompassing heritage studies, cultural geography, anthropology, and tourism management.

The global expansion of dark tourism has been facilitated by advances in digital

communication technologies, social media platforms, and online storytelling. Through digital media, historical tragedies, disaster sites, and supernatural narratives can rapidly gain international visibility, influencing tourist perceptions and destination image formation. Research conducted during the post-pandemic period indicates that tourists increasingly seek authentic and emotionally immersive experiences that foster historical understanding and cultural reflection rather than conventional sightseeing alone.^{5,6} As a result, destinations associated with war memorials, genocide museums, disaster sites, cemeteries, and sites of cultural death practices have become increasingly integrated into contemporary tourism markets.

Dark tourism is particularly significant within the broader framework of heritage tourism because it involves the

interpretation and preservation of difficult heritage. The concept of difficult heritage refers to historical legacies associated with violence, conflict, oppression, disaster, or social trauma that continue to shape collective identities and cultural memory.^{7 8} Such heritage sites often perform dual functions: they act as memorial spaces that commemorate victims while simultaneously serving as tourism attractions that contribute to local economic development. This duality creates an ongoing tension between educational objectives, commemorative responsibilities, and commercial tourism interests.

Indonesia presents a particularly rich context for examining dark tourism because of its complex historical experiences and diverse cultural traditions. The country possesses numerous sites connected to colonialism, political violence, natural disasters, religious conflict, and indigenous death-related practices. These experiences have generated a wide range of destinations that can be categorized as dark tourism attractions, including the Bali Bombing Memorial, the Aceh Tsunami Museum, Lubang Buaya Museum, Lawang Sewu in Semarang, and Trunyan Village in Bali. Collectively, these sites represent different dimensions of dark tourism, ranging from disaster remembrance and political history to cultural death rituals and supernatural heritage.⁹

Among these destinations, Trunyan Village represents a distinctive form of cultural dark tourism rooted in indigenous Balinese traditions. The village is internationally recognized for its unique mortuary practice in which deceased individuals are placed openly beneath the sacred Taru Menyan tree rather than being buried or cremated. This tradition reflects local cosmological beliefs concerning death, spirituality, and the relationship between humans and nature. While the practice serves important religious and cultural functions for the local community, it has also attracted tourists seeking unusual cultural experiences and encounters with death-related traditions. Recent studies suggest that the increasing popularity of Trunyan raises important questions regarding cultural authenticity,

visitor behavior, and the commodification of sacred practices within tourism development.^{10 11}

Similarly, Lawang Sewu in Semarang has become one of Indonesia's most prominent dark tourism destinations due to its historical association with Dutch colonial administration, Japanese occupation, imprisonment, and wartime violence. The site is also widely known through popular media representations emphasizing ghost stories, paranormal experiences, and supernatural encounters. As a consequence, public perceptions of Lawang Sewu are often shaped more strongly by horror narratives than by its historical significance as an important colonial heritage building. Recent research indicates that media-driven representations and commercial tourism promotion have transformed Lawang Sewu into a hybrid attraction where historical interpretation coexists with entertainment-oriented dark tourism experiences.

Despite its growing popularity, dark tourism remains one of the most ethically contested forms of heritage tourism. Critics argue that tourism development at sites of tragedy can result in the commodification of suffering, the trivialization of historical trauma, and the exploitation of collective memory for commercial gain.^{12 13} The increasing use of sensational marketing strategies, horror-based branding, and social media content may overshadow educational objectives and distort historical narratives. In some cases, visitors may become more interested in entertainment and spectacle than in understanding the social, cultural, or historical significance of the site. Such developments raise important ethical questions regarding how destinations should balance economic benefits with responsibilities toward victims, local communities, and historical accuracy.

Furthermore, contemporary debates surrounding ethical heritage management emphasize the importance of community participation, cultural sensitivity, and responsible interpretation in the development of dark tourism destinations. Sustainable dark tourism requires approaches that respect local values, preserve historical authenticity, and

encourage meaningful visitor engagement rather than superficial consumption of tragedy.^{1 14} This challenge is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where many dark tourism destinations are closely intertwined with living cultural traditions, collective memories, and ongoing processes of identity formation.

Given these considerations, this study examines the development of dark tourism in Indonesia through the lens of ethical heritage development. Specifically, it explores how historical memory, cultural identity, and tourism commercialization interact within Indonesian dark tourism destinations. The study seeks to analyse the cultural significance and educational potential of dark tourism while critically evaluating the ethical challenges associated with heritage commodification, historical representation, and sustainable destination management. By doing so, the research contributes to broader discussions concerning the role of tourism in preserving difficult heritage and fostering responsible engagement with the past.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research approach to examine the development of dark tourism in Indonesia and its relationship with historical memory, cultural identity, and tourism commercialization. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for investigating complex social and cultural phenomena because they facilitate an in-depth understanding of meanings, interpretations, values, and experiences embedded within tourism practices.¹⁵ In the context of dark tourism, qualitative inquiry enables researchers to explore how sites associated with death, tragedy, disaster, and collective trauma are interpreted, represented, and consumed by tourists, local communities, and tourism stakeholders.

The study is grounded within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human experiences, cultural narratives, and historical contexts. Dark tourism destinations are not merely physical spaces but also symbolic landscapes where memories of suffering, loss, and

resilience are continuously negotiated and reproduced through tourism activities.³ Consequently, understanding dark tourism requires an examination of the social meanings attached to heritage sites and the diverse ways in which these meanings are communicated and experienced.

Data collection was conducted through an extensive literature review and qualitative document analysis. Secondary data were gathered from peer-reviewed academic journals, books, conference proceedings, tourism policy reports, government publications, heritage management documents, media articles, and previous empirical studies related to dark tourism and heritage tourism. Particular attention was given to literature published between 2020 and 2026 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary debates concerning ethical tourism, heritage commodification, memory studies, and sustainable destination management. According to Bowen (2021), document analysis provides a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting textual materials to generate meaningful insights regarding social phenomena.¹⁶ This method is particularly valuable when investigating tourism narratives, historical representations, and policy frameworks that shape destination development.

The research focuses on selected Indonesian dark tourism destinations that represent different categories of dark tourism experiences. These include Trunyan Village in Bali, which reflects indigenous death-related cultural practices; Lawang Sewu in Semarang, which combines colonial history with popular supernatural narratives; the Aceh Tsunami Museum, which commemorates a major natural disaster; and the Bali Bombing Memorial, which serves as a site of remembrance for victims of terrorism. These destinations were selected because they illustrate the diversity of dark tourism manifestations in Indonesia and reveal varying interactions between heritage preservation, tourism commercialization, and collective memory.

To provide broader contextual understanding, the study also adopts a comparative perspective by examining the development of dark tourism in Sri Lanka,

particularly post-war memorial tourism associated with the country's civil conflict. Comparative analysis allows researchers to identify similarities and differences in how societies transform sites of trauma into tourism destinations while balancing remembrance, reconciliation, and economic development.⁵ The Sri Lankan case offers valuable insights into the role of ritual practices, community participation, heritage interpretation, and memorialization in promoting ethically responsible dark tourism. Previous studies have demonstrated that local involvement and culturally sensitive storytelling contribute significantly to the sustainability and legitimacy of dark tourism destinations in post-conflict societies.¹⁷

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative technique for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis was selected because it enables systematic examination of diverse documentary sources while maintaining sensitivity to cultural and contextual meanings. Following Braun and Clarke's framework, the analysis involved several stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and interpretation.

Through this process, five major themes emerged:

1. **Historical memory and heritage interpretation**, focusing on how tragic events and difficult histories are represented and communicated to visitors;
2. **Commercialization and commodification of tragedy**, examining the transformation of suffering and trauma into tourism products and experiences;
3. **Mystical narratives and tourist motivation**, exploring the influence of supernatural stories, horror tourism, and media representations on visitor interest;
4. **Ethical tourism management**, addressing issues of authenticity, historical accuracy, victim representation, and responsible destination governance;
5. **Community participation**

and cultural sustainability, analyzing the involvement of local communities in heritage preservation and tourism development.

The analytical process further incorporated concepts from dark tourism studies, heritage tourism, and collective memory theory to interpret relationships between tourism practices and broader socio-cultural dynamics. Theoretical perspectives developed by Stone (2021), Biran and Hyde (2021), and White and Frew (2023) were utilized to examine how tourism destinations simultaneously function as spaces of remembrance, education, heritage preservation, and commercial consumption.

To enhance analytical credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings across multiple documentary sources and scholarly perspectives. Triangulation contributes to methodological rigor by reducing the risk of bias and strengthening the consistency of interpretations derived from secondary data.^{18 19} Additionally, the study adopts a critical heritage perspective, recognizing that heritage narratives are often contested and influenced by political, cultural, and economic interests. This perspective is particularly relevant in dark tourism research because historical memory is frequently shaped by processes of selection, interpretation, and commercialization.

This research emphasizes interpretive and critical analysis to understand how dark tourism destinations in Indonesia operate as multidimensional spaces where remembrance, education, cultural identity, and tourism consumption intersect. By examining these interactions, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding ethical heritage development and the sustainable management of sites associated with tragedy, death, and collective memory.

DISCUSSION

The Growth of Dark Tourism in Indonesia

Dark tourism in Indonesia has experienced substantial growth over the last decade, reflecting broader global trends in which tourists increasingly seek meaningful, emotionally engaging, and educational

travel experiences. Unlike conventional leisure tourism, which primarily focuses on recreation and entertainment, dark tourism offers opportunities for visitors to engage with historical tragedies, cultural memories, sites of suffering, and narratives of human resilience. Recent studies suggest that contemporary tourists are increasingly motivated by the desire to understand historical events, explore cultural identities, and participate in reflective experiences that encourage empathy and critical thinking.^{3,5}

The expansion of dark tourism is also closely linked to changing patterns of heritage consumption in the digital era. Social media platforms, online storytelling, documentaries, and virtual tourism content have significantly increased public awareness of destinations associated with death, disaster, conflict, and supernatural narratives. According to Korstanje (2022), digital media has transformed dark tourism from a niche market into a globally recognized tourism phenomenon by facilitating emotional engagement and curiosity among potential visitors. Consequently, destinations that were once regarded solely as historical or memorial sites are increasingly incorporated into broader tourism networks.⁶

Indonesia possesses considerable potential for dark tourism development because of its rich historical and cultural diversity. The country's colonial legacy, political transitions, natural disasters, religious conflicts, and indigenous traditions have created numerous sites that embody difficult heritage and collective memory. These destinations include war and political tragedy sites such as Lubang Buaya Museum, disaster memorial tourism attractions such as the Aceh Tsunami Museum, terrorism remembrance sites such as the Bali Bombing Memorial, colonial heritage destinations such as Lawang Sewu, and culturally significant death-related sites such as Trunyan Village in Bali. Collectively, these destinations represent different dimensions of dark tourism and illustrate the multifaceted relationship between heritage, memory, and tourism development.⁹

From a heritage studies perspective, the increasing popularity of dark tourism demonstrates that tourism experiences

are no longer limited to pleasure-seeking activities. Visitors increasingly seek opportunities to encounter authentic histories, understand collective trauma, and engage with narratives that connect the past to contemporary social realities. Such motivations support the argument that dark tourism can serve educational and commemorative functions while simultaneously contributing to destination competitiveness and local economic development.⁴ However, the growth of dark tourism also raises important concerns regarding authenticity, interpretation, and ethical management, particularly when tragic histories become commercial tourism products.

Trunyan Village and Cultural Dark Tourism

Trunyan Village in Bali represents one of the most distinctive examples of cultural dark tourism in Indonesia because it combines indigenous spirituality, ancestral traditions, and death-related ritual practices within a living cultural landscape. Unlike many dark tourism destinations that focus on historical disasters or political violence, Trunyan offers visitors an opportunity to observe an ongoing cultural practice that reflects local cosmological beliefs concerning life, death, and the spiritual relationship between humans and nature.

The village is internationally recognized for its unique mortuary tradition in which deceased individuals are placed openly beneath the sacred Taru Menyan tree rather than being buried or cremated. According to local beliefs, the tree emits a natural fragrance that neutralizes the odor of decomposition. This practice reflects the indigenous worldview of the Bali Aga community, whose cultural traditions predate many aspects of mainstream Balinese Hindu culture. As a result, the burial site functions not merely as a tourism attraction but also as a sacred cultural space that embodies collective identity and ancestral heritage.

The attraction of Trunyan Village extends beyond its unusual funeral practice. Visitors are often drawn by the village's mystical atmosphere, sacred narratives, and cultural authenticity. Local customs require tourists to

behave respectfully, follow community regulations, and avoid actions that may disturb sacred spaces. Such restrictions demonstrate that tourism activities remain embedded within cultural and spiritual frameworks rather than being entirely shaped by commercial considerations.

From an anthropological perspective, Trunyan illustrates how dark tourism can contribute to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that intangible heritage includes rituals, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices transmitted across generations. Tourism can support the preservation of such traditions by increasing public awareness and generating economic incentives for cultural conservation. Recent studies indicate that community-based cultural tourism can strengthen local identity and encourage younger generations to maintain traditional practices in the face of globalization.

Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of Trunyan also raises significant ethical concerns. One of the most prominent challenges is the commodification of sacred cultural practices. Heritage scholars argue that when rituals associated with death become tourism attractions, there is a risk that visitors may interpret them as exotic spectacles rather than meaningful cultural expressions.⁷ Excessive commercialization may encourage the simplification or dramatization of cultural narratives to satisfy tourist expectations, thereby undermining cultural authenticity and community values.

The case of Trunyan therefore highlights the delicate balance between heritage preservation and tourism development. Sustainable management requires active community participation, culturally sensitive interpretation, visitor education, and regulations that protect sacred spaces from exploitation. Such measures ensure that tourism contributes to cultural sustainability while respecting local traditions and spiritual beliefs.

Lawang Sewu and the Commercialization of Horror

Lawang Sewu in Semarang represents another important dimension of dark tourism in Indonesia, illustrating the

complex interaction between historical heritage, collective memory, and tourism commercialization. Constructed during the Dutch colonial period as the headquarters of the Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij (NIS), the building later became associated with imprisonment, torture, and executions during the Japanese occupation. Consequently, Lawang Sewu embodies multiple layers of historical significance related to colonialism, war, and national struggle.

Despite its historical importance, contemporary public perceptions of Lawang Sewu are frequently shaped by supernatural narratives. Stories concerning underground prisons, ghost sightings, unexplained sounds, and paranormal experiences have become integral components of the site's tourism image. Television programs, horror films, online content creators, and social media influencers have further amplified these narratives, transforming Lawang Sewu into one of Indonesia's most recognizable horror tourism destinations.

The popularity of horror-based tourism at Lawang Sewu reflects broader changes in tourist behavior, particularly among younger generations. Research indicates that many tourists seek emotionally stimulating and immersive experiences that combine entertainment with historical exploration.¹³ Horror narratives often increase visitor interest because they create anticipation, excitement, and curiosity. Consequently, supernatural storytelling has become an effective marketing tool for attracting visitors.

However, the commercialization of horror raises important ethical concerns. Several studies have highlighted that excessive emphasis on paranormal narratives can overshadow historical interpretation and reduce public understanding of the site's actual historical significance.¹² As a result, visitors may become more familiar with ghost stories than with the experiences of individuals who suffered during colonial occupation and wartime violence.

This commercialization generates several interconnected ethical challenges. First, exaggerated supernatural narratives may contribute to historical distortion by

replacing evidence-based interpretation with sensational storytelling. Second, the commodification of suffering transforms traumatic historical experiences into tourism products designed for entertainment and profit. Third, excessive focus on horror may weaken the educational and memorial functions of heritage sites. Finally, sensational representations risk diminishing respect for victims and communities connected to historical tragedies.¹³

Nevertheless, dark tourism should not be viewed solely through a negative lens. Contemporary dark tourism scholarship emphasizes that emotionally engaging experiences can enhance historical learning when supported by effective interpretation and responsible management.¹ In the context of Lawang Sewu, curiosity generated by horror narratives can serve as an entry point for deeper engagement with historical knowledge. Guided tours, museum exhibitions, archival displays, digital interpretation technologies, and educational programs can transform visitor interest from superficial entertainment toward critical reflection on colonial history and national memory.

Furthermore, ethical heritage development requires tourism managers to balance commercial viability with historical responsibility. Rather than eliminating supernatural narratives entirely, management strategies should contextualize them within broader historical interpretations. Such an approach acknowledges visitor interests while ensuring that heritage values remain central to the tourism experience. This perspective aligns with contemporary heritage management frameworks that advocate for inclusive storytelling, historical accuracy, and respectful representation of difficult pasts.⁷

The case of Lawang Sewu ultimately illustrates the broader challenges confronting dark tourism development in Indonesia. As destinations seek economic benefits from increasing visitor demand, they must simultaneously preserve historical authenticity, respect collective memory, and maintain educational integrity. Achieving this balance is essential for ensuring that dark tourism contributes not only to tourism growth

but also to cultural understanding, historical awareness, and ethical heritage preservation.

Ethical Challenges in Dark Tourism

One of the most widely debated issues within dark tourism studies concerns the tension between tourism commercialization and ethical responsibility. While dark tourism destinations can generate significant economic benefits, educational opportunities, and heritage preservation outcomes, they also raise complex ethical questions regarding the representation and consumption of death, suffering, tragedy, and collective trauma. Contemporary scholars argue that the growth of dark tourism has intensified concerns about how difficult histories are interpreted, marketed, and transformed into tourism products.^{3,12}

At the center of these debates is the challenge of balancing commercial tourism objectives with the moral obligation to preserve historical integrity and respect the memory of victims. Dark tourism sites frequently occupy a dual role as both memorial spaces and tourism attractions. This duality creates tensions between remembrance and entertainment, education and consumption, and heritage preservation and market-driven development.¹

Previous studies have identified three major ethical risks associated with dark tourism development:

- 1. Commodification of tragedy and human suffering;**
- 2. Distortion or simplification of historical narratives;**
- 3. Physical and cultural degradation of heritage resources.**

The commodification of tragedy occurs when experiences of death, conflict, disaster, or collective suffering are transformed into marketable tourism products primarily designed to attract visitors and generate revenue. While commercialization is an unavoidable component of tourism development, ethical concerns emerge when destinations prioritize entertainment value over historical remembrance and educational significance. Farmaki (2021) argues that excessive commercialization can reduce sites of suffering to consumable

attractions, thereby diminishing their commemorative and cultural functions.¹²

In many dark tourism destinations, sensational marketing strategies are frequently employed to increase visitor interest. Horror-based branding, paranormal storytelling, ghost tours, and supernatural narratives often attract larger audiences than historical interpretation alone. Although such approaches may successfully increase visitor numbers, they can also encourage superficial engagement with the past. Visitors may become more interested in frightening experiences or unusual stories than in understanding the historical circumstances, social consequences, or human suffering associated with a site.¹³

The case of Lawang Sewu illustrates this dilemma. The site's reputation as one of Indonesia's most haunted buildings has generated considerable tourism demand, yet scholars have noted that public discussions often focus more on ghost stories than on the site's historical role during the Dutch colonial period and Japanese occupation. Such trends demonstrate how tourism commercialization can shift public attention away from historical education toward entertainment-oriented consumption.

A second ethical challenge involves the distortion of historical narratives. Heritage scholars emphasize that dark tourism sites play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and public understanding of historical events. However, tourism marketing often simplifies complex histories into easily consumable narratives that align with visitor expectations and commercial objectives.⁷ As a result, historical events may be selectively interpreted, exaggerated, romanticized, or even mythologized.

The distortion of historical narratives can be particularly problematic in destinations associated with political violence, war, colonialism, or social conflict. Selective storytelling may exclude certain perspectives, marginalize affected communities, or overlook controversial aspects of the past. According to Biran and Hyde (2021), responsible dark tourism requires inclusive and evidence-based interpretation that acknowledges the complexity of historical events while

encouraging critical reflection among visitors.⁴

The third ethical concern relates to the physical and cultural degradation of heritage sites. Increasing visitor numbers can place significant pressure on fragile historical environments, memorial sites, and sacred cultural spaces. Beyond physical deterioration, tourism may also contribute to cultural degradation when sacred rituals, indigenous traditions, or community memories are transformed into commercial spectacles. This issue is particularly relevant in destinations where cultural practices associated with death remain part of living traditions rather than historical relics.

For example, Trunyan Village in Bali represents a sacred cultural landscape where mortuary practices continue to serve important spiritual and communal functions. While tourism can contribute to cultural preservation and economic development, excessive visitor intrusion may threaten the sanctity of rituals and alter community perceptions of cultural traditions. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires respect for community values, cultural autonomy, and local knowledge systems. Consequently, tourism development should support rather than undermine the cultural meanings embedded within heritage practices.

Another important ethical issue concerns the emotional experiences of local communities. Residents may experience discomfort when sites connected to historical trauma, disaster, conflict, or sacred rituals become tourism attractions. In some cases, communities may perceive tourism activities as exploiting painful memories for commercial purposes. Research on post-conflict memorial tourism in Sri Lanka demonstrates that sustainable dark tourism depends heavily on community participation, cultural sensitivity, and recognition of local perspectives regarding remembrance and reconciliation.¹⁷

The Sri Lankan experience highlights the importance of involving local stakeholders in tourism planning and heritage interpretation. Community participation helps ensure that tourism

narratives remain culturally appropriate and historically accurate while promoting a sense of ownership over heritage resources. Such approaches align with contemporary principles of ethical tourism management, which emphasize inclusivity, respect, and social responsibility.¹⁴

Therefore, ethical dark tourism management should incorporate several key principles:

- Active community participation in tourism planning and decision-making;
- Respect for local beliefs, rituals, and cultural values;
- Accurate and evidence-based historical interpretation;
- Educational programming that promotes critical reflection;
- Visitor codes of conduct that encourage respectful behavior;
- Balanced marketing strategies that avoid excessive sensationalism;
- Heritage conservation measures that protect both tangible and intangible cultural resources.

By integrating these principles, dark tourism destinations can achieve a more sustainable balance between economic development, historical remembrance, cultural preservation, and ethical responsibility.

Dark Tourism as Educational Heritage Tourism

Despite the ethical controversies surrounding its development, dark tourism possesses substantial educational value and can serve as an important form of heritage tourism. Unlike conventional tourism attractions that primarily emphasize entertainment and recreation, dark tourism destinations offer opportunities for visitors to engage with difficult histories, collective memories, and significant social events. Through such encounters, visitors are encouraged to reflect upon themes of mortality, human suffering, resilience, conflict, justice, and cultural identity.¹

From an educational perspective, dark tourism sites function as informal learning environments where historical knowledge is communicated through direct engagement with places, objects, narratives, and commemorative practices.

Heritage scholars argue that experiential learning within authentic historical settings can foster deeper understanding than traditional classroom-based instruction because visitors are able to connect emotionally and intellectually with historical events.³

Sites associated with disasters, wars, terrorism, and cultural death rituals often provide opportunities for visitors to explore complex social and historical issues. Through guided interpretation, exhibitions, memorial ceremonies, and storytelling, dark tourism destinations can encourage critical reflection on the causes and consequences of human suffering. Such experiences contribute to historical consciousness and promote empathy toward individuals and communities affected by tragedy.⁷

Research conducted in Sri Lanka demonstrates that ritual activities, memorial ceremonies, and commemorative practices play an important role in enhancing visitors' understanding of historical suffering and collective memory.¹⁷ Rather than merely observing historical sites, tourists participate in symbolic acts of remembrance that strengthen emotional engagement and facilitate deeper learning experiences. These findings suggest that dark tourism can contribute to peace-building, intercultural understanding, and reconciliation when supported by appropriate interpretive frameworks.

In Indonesia, similar educational opportunities exist across a range of dark tourism destinations. The Aceh Tsunami Museum, for example, functions not only as a memorial space but also as a center for disaster education and community resilience. Through exhibitions and interpretive displays, visitors learn about the social, environmental, and humanitarian impacts of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Likewise, the Bali Bombing Memorial provides opportunities to reflect upon terrorism, global security, and social resilience, while Trunyan Village offers insight into indigenous perspectives on death, spirituality, and cultural continuity.

Dark tourism may also play a particularly significant role in promoting historical literacy among younger generations. As digital natives, members of

Generation Z increasingly seek immersive and emotionally engaging experiences that combine learning with participation. Recent tourism research indicates that younger visitors demonstrate strong interest in heritage destinations that incorporate interactive storytelling, digital interpretation technologies, and experiential learning opportunities.¹⁴

However, educational outcomes are not automatically achieved through visitation alone. Curiosity generated by horror narratives, mystery, or tragedy does not necessarily translate into meaningful understanding. Without effective interpretation, visitors may focus primarily on entertainment or sensational aspects of a destination while overlooking its broader historical and cultural significance.¹³ Consequently, tourism managers have a responsibility to ensure that visitor interest is directed toward critical engagement with historical realities rather than superficial consumption of tragic experiences.

Educational dark tourism therefore requires carefully designed interpretation strategies that encourage reflection, dialogue, and contextual understanding. Such strategies may include guided tours, museum exhibitions, digital storytelling platforms, archival materials, survivor testimonies, interactive learning experiences, and community-based heritage interpretation. These approaches help visitors understand not only what happened in the past but also why such events remain relevant to contemporary society.

Dark tourism possesses considerable potential as a form of educational heritage tourism. When managed ethically and responsibly, dark tourism destinations can function as spaces of remembrance, historical learning, cultural preservation, and social reflection. Rather than merely commodifying tragedy, they can contribute to the development of historical awareness, intercultural understanding, empathy, and collective responsibility. In this way, dark tourism can support broader objectives of sustainable heritage development while preserving the integrity of historical memory and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

Dark tourism has become an increasingly

significant segment of Indonesia's tourism industry. Destinations such as Trunyan Village, Lawang Sewu, the Bali Bombing Memorial, and the Aceh Tsunami Museum demonstrate how historical tragedy, disaster, spirituality, and cultural memory can be transformed into tourism attractions.

This study reveals that dark tourism offers substantial educational, cultural, and economic opportunities. It contributes to historical preservation, collective remembrance, intercultural understanding, and regional tourism development. At the same time, dark tourism also presents serious ethical challenges, particularly regarding commercialization of suffering, distortion of historical narratives, and exploitation of cultural trauma.

The cases of Trunyan Village and Lawang Sewu illustrate the importance of balancing emotional tourism experiences with historical accuracy and cultural respect. Mystical narratives and horror-based marketing may increase tourist interest, but excessive sensationalism risks reducing the educational and memorial significance of dark tourism destinations.

Therefore, sustainable dark tourism development in Indonesia should prioritize ethical management strategies that include community participation, culturally sensitive interpretation, historical education, and responsible tourism promotion. Dark tourism should not merely function as entertainment based on tragedy, but as a reflective cultural practice that preserves memory, respects victims, and strengthens historical awareness among future generations.

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