

Structuralism and Imaginative Geography: Deconstructing Gorontalo Legends for Tourism Development

Sabrina W. J. Husain^{1*}, Muhammad Ilham Ali², Olga Rorintulus³, Herminus Efrando Pabur⁴

¹²³⁴⁾ Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia.

^{*}) Corresponding Author: sabrinahusain@unima.ac.id

Article History

Submitted : May 28th, 2025

Revised : June 15th, 2025

Accepted : June 25th, 2025

KEYWORDS

Tourism Literature,
Imaginative Geography,
Structuralism

ABSTRACT

This study examined three Gorontalo legends: *Asal-usul Orang-orang Boalemo dan Bagaimana Mereka Mendapat Kedudukan di Limboto*, *Asal-usul Bangsa Limboto*, and *Asal-usul Kerajaan Limutu*, to reveal how traditional narratives shape the representation of imaginary spaces in tourism areas. The research aimed to analyze mechanisms of cultural identity construction and spatial representation by integrating Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Edward Said's Imaginative Geography theory. A layered analytical approach was applied, combining structural narrative analysis with an examination of spatial representation. Structuralism revealed recurring patterns across the legends: initial equilibrium, disruptive transformation, journeys as rites of passage, and resolution through new order. Binary oppositions (origin vs. destination, sacred vs. profane) emphasized spatial reinterpretation. Character archetypes (founders, helpers) reinforced themes of power legitimacy and collective identity. Imaginative Geography analysis demonstrated how mental maps positioned Limboto as a narrative center, with supernatural and cultural exoticization creating a mystical distinction from conventional destinations. Boundaries clarified territoriality, framing visitors as "imaginary travelers". The integration of approaches demonstrated that imaginary space functions as a primary motivator in tourism decisions. These legends position Gorontalo as a culturally rich, historically layered destination, enabling tourists to envision transformative experiences as "cultural explorers" and "narrative inheritors." Findings underscore the role of local narratives in sustainable tourism development. By embedding spaces with spiritual and historical significance, legends offer authentic engagement beyond superficial attractions. This study implies that leveraging traditional narratives can enhance destination branding, fostering tourism that respects cultural heritage while appealing to travelers seeking meaningful experiences. Strategic use of such stories could redefine regional tourism paradigms, prioritizing narrative depth and community identity.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, cultural tourism in Indonesia has recorded significant growth as tourists, both local and international, have grown in interest in seeking experiences that combine natural beauty with the depth of traditional narratives. This phenomenon is in line with global trends that show a shift in tourist preferences from mass tourism to more meaningful and authentic forms of tourism (Melanie Smith & Mike Robinson, 2006; Richards, 2018). According to data from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia (2019), the cultural tourism sector experienced an average growth of 8.2% per year, with a significant contribution to national GDP.

In addition to physical attractions such as temples, museums, or traditional ceremonies, "folklore" is beginning to be recognized as an intangible asset that is able to build emotional and cognitive bonds between readers or listeners and a place. The concept of intangible cultural heritage developed by UNESCO (2003) emphasizes the importance of oral traditions, including legends and myths, as cultural heritage that has economic and social value (Dallen J. Timothy & Stephen W. Boyd, 2003; Kirshenblatt-gimblett, 2004). In the context of tourism, narrative tourism or literary tourism has become a rapidly

growing niche market with an annual growth rate reaching 15% in the Asia-Pacific region (Hoppen et al., 2014)

The concept of literary tourism, which was originally studied in the context of novels, poetry and modern travel writing, has now expanded to include oral literature including legends, myths and folklore, as a means of promoting destinations (Darmadali, 2022). Herbert in "Literary Places, Tourism and the Heritage Experience" defines literary tourism as a form of cultural tourism motivated by interest in authors or literary works associated with a particular place (Herbert, 2001). This concept was expanded by Busby and Klug (2001) who identified four categories of literary tourism: places written about in literature, places associated with writers' lives, literary festivals, and graves/memorials of writers (Busby & Klug, 2001)

Different from conventional tourist guides that only present information, literary tourism emphasizes narrative experience through text, readers are brought into an "imaginary space" that fosters a desire to visit. Oral literature, especially legends, plays a dual role, namely; preserving cultural heritage, while also establishing an imaginative bridge that invites the physical presence of tourists to the location being told (Kuswarini et al., 2022). This perspective emphasizes that tourism destinations are not only infrastructure and branding products, but also narrative constructions that carve aesthetic expectations and collective memory. Therefore, shifting the focus of literary tourism research from novels to popular to local legends as passed down from generation to generation in Gorontalo is crucial to understanding how "places" are experienced, idealized, and realized in cultural travel practices.

Geographically, Gorontalo is located at the northern tip of Sulawesi Island, facing directly to Tomini Bay, with a landscape that combines green hills, fertile valleys, and dark sandy beaches. Behind its natural beauty, this area is rich in folklore that forms the collective identity of its people. Three famous central legends are: (1) *asal-usul orang-orang Boelmo dan bagaimana mereka mendapat kedudukan di Limboto*, which depicts the migration of the Boalemo people from the coast to the highlands, placing them as village leaders; (2) *Asal-usul Bangsa Limboto*, which tells the story of ancestors who migrated to the widest lake in Gorontalo and left behind fishing traditions and traditional ceremonies on the shores of the lake.; dan (3) *Asal-usul Kerajaan Limutu*, which depicts the establishment of the first kingdom in the Gorontalo highlands, complete with a social system and rituals of respect for ancestral spirits (Ester Yunginger, 2007). These three narratives do not merely record moral values, but also map historical and sacred spaces, such as the shores of Lake Limboto, the village of Boalemo, and the ruins of the Limutu palace, which have great potential to be developed as cultural, historical, and ecotourism destinations. However, although these legends are rich in symbolism and exotic geographical settings, their use in tourism promotion is still limited to simple printed materials or community oral stories. Most literary tourism research in Indonesia is still focused on popular areas such as Bali or Lake Toba, while Gorontalo, with its wealth of myths, has not received adequate academic attention. In fact, understanding the narrative construction of Gorontalo legends can add a promotional dimension: not just showing photos or maps, but inviting tourists to "experience" the space through storylines, characters, and symbols that stimulate the imagination (Laxmiwati Dai et al., 2023).

Edward Said's Imaginative Geography theory is an appropriate analytical framework to examine how these legends shape spatial representations in the minds of readers. Imaginative Geography highlights how literary texts construct opposition between "here" (the familiar) and "there" (the exotic), then through the framing process emphasize the uniqueness of a region (Edward Said, 1978). Gregory in "The Colonial Present" further develops this concept by emphasizing that Imaginative Geography is not only passive representation but also an active construction that forms spatial practices and territorial knowledge (Johnston, 2005). In the postcolonial context, Taylor et al. further show that Imaginative Geography can function as a resistance strategy to build alternative spatial narratives that challenge dominant geographical discourses (Taylor et al., 1992).

In the context of Gorontalo, this theory allows for an in-depth analysis of how the narrator of the legend describes the landscape, from the mystical expanse of Lake Limboto to the dense forest around the village of Boalemo, and the stone framework of the former Limutu palace, as a magical space full of meaning. The process of spatial orientation, namely the placement of characters and readers in an imaginary map, and exoticization that emphasizes the uniqueness of culture and nature, become instruments for identifying narrative elements that transform geographical maps into maps of emotions and symbols. For example, the legend *Asal-Usul Kerajaan Limutu* does not merely map physical buildings, but also depicts traditional rituals that link humans with ancestral spirits, thus creating a spiritual attraction for potential tourists. By applying Imaginative Geography, this study not only captures "what" is told in the legend, but also "how" the story orchestrates space to create emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual resonance, an approach that fills the methodological gap in literary tourism studies in

Indonesia and offers a strategy for promoting Gorontalo culture that is rooted in local wisdom and the power of collective imagination.

Several studies of tourism literature in Indonesia have highlighted how literary works, especially novels and travel writing, shape destination images through narratives that combine descriptions of nature, culture, and local spirituality, but none have specifically applied the theory of Imaginative Geography to analyze spatial construction in traditional legends. For example, research in the Ubud area, Bali has examined how Elizabeth Gilbert's novel *Eat, Pray, Love* and other Indonesian literary works narrate the natural, cultural, wellness, and culinary attractions that encourage readers' imaginations to visit Ubud. However, this approach is still focused on modern novels and does not explore oral literary forms such as legends and does not integrate a theoretical framework that emphasizes the relationship between text and the structural construction of imaginary space (Ni Nyoman Arini & I Putu Tiana Raditya, 2023).

Likewise, the study of the role of literature in promoting Lake Toba through the novel *Toba Dreams* underlines the components of tourism, attractions, facilities, accessibility, and additional services, which are aesthetically depicted in the narrative, but does not dissect how the text actively shapes the reader's spatial perception through exotic framing and the opposition of "here" versus "there" (Simanihuruk et al., 2022). Likewise, research on the promotion of tourism in North Bali through the novels *Aku Cinta Lovina* and *Rumah di Seribu Ombak* highlights aspects of cultural interaction and captivating visual aesthetics, plus interviews with stakeholders, but is still limited to modern literary media and has not opened up discourse on the potential of folk legends as a medium for tourism promotion (Arini et al., 2021). From this review, it appears that there is an urgent need to expand the study of literary tourism to less academically explored areas, such as Gorontalo, and to conduct a spatial-narrative discourse analysis using Edward Said's Imaginative Geography theory. Thus, the theoretical framework of Imaginative Geography, which emphasizes the construction of "imaginary space" through the processes of orientation, exoticization, and cultural framing, can be a critical tool for understanding how Gorontalo legends, such as *Asal-Usul Orang-Orang Boalemo di Limboto* (the origin story of the Boalemo people in Limboto), *Asal-Usul Bangsa Limboto* (the origin of the Limboto Nation), and *Asal-Usul Kerajaan Limutu* (the origin of the Limutu Kingdom), narratively bring geographical maps to life into imaginative maps that captivate cultural tourists.

Identifying the research gaps above, it can be formulated that: first, there has been no specific study that raises Gorontalo traditional legends as a literary tourism medium; second, previous studies are still focused on contemporary novels and do not apply the theory of Imaginative Geography to reveal the narrative mechanisms that shape readers' spatial perceptions; third, current literature studies are still minimal in the aspect of remapping tourism space through oral narratives rich in symbolism; fourth, previous studies have not discussed the implications of the construction of the imaginary space of legends on cultural tourism promotion strategies based on local wisdom; and fifth, there has been no research that explicitly formulates and tests the formulation of the problem that emphasizes the representation of "here" versus "there" in Gorontalo legends. Based on the identification of these gaps, the formulation of the problem of this research is designed as follows: "How do Gorontalo legends form the representation of the 'imaginary space' of the tourism area in the eyes of readers?" This problem formulation guides the focus of the analysis on three main legends, the Origins of the Boalemo people and how they got their position in Limboto, the Origins of the Limboto Nation, and the Origins of the Limutu Kingdom, to explore the narrative process that creates the opposition between the familiar and the exotic, and to highlight the framing elements that emphasize the character of local culture and nature. Furthermore, the research objectives are formulated: first, to describe the construction of imaginative geography in the Gorontalo legend text; second, to identify narrative elements that play a role in building spatial appeal through the process of orientation and exoticization; third, to analyze the implications of the narrative representation on the potential for promoting cultural tourism destinations in Gorontalo; and fourth, to provide recommendations for promotional strategies based on legendary narratives rooted in the theory of Imaginative Geography to enrich the discourse of literary tourism in Indonesia.

This research is expected to provide dual benefits, academic and practical in the context of cultural tourism development. From an academic perspective, this study will enrich the literature on literary tourism by presenting a new perspective: the application of Imaginative Geography theory to oral literature, especially Gorontalo folk legends, thus opening up research horizons beyond the medium of modern written literature and popular tourism areas. This approach will also bridge the study of literary science, cultural studies, and tourism with a strong theoretical framework, and add methodological contributions through systematic spatial-narrative discourse analysis. In practice, the results of this study can be strategic input for tourism stakeholders, the Gorontalo Provincial Tourism Office, cultural

destination managers, local creative economy actors, and indigenous communities, in designing promotional materials that do not simply display photos or slogans, but build stories that captivate the imagination of potential tourists. Thus, Gorontalo tourism promotion can be based on authentic narratives that maintain cultural integrity and maximize the aesthetic and spiritual value of local legends, while increasing the competitiveness of destinations at the national and international levels. In addition, this research is expected to trigger further studies on the relationship between traditional narratives and sustainable tourism practices, especially in facing the challenges of overtourism and cultural preservation, so that its academic contribution is not only limited to theory, but also has a positive impact on the development of responsible and sustainable cultural tourism in Gorontalo.

METHOD

This research is designed using a literary structuralism approach equipped with the theoretical framework of Edward Said's Imaginative Geography. This aims to describe and interpret the narrative construction of Gorontalo legends in building "imaginary space. In addition, this research focuses on exploring the structural elements of the text in depth, mapping narrative patterns, symbolism, and relations between literary elements that underlie spatial construction (Rene Wellek & Austin Warren, 1962)

This study uses a literary structuralism approach that examines the structure in narratives, such as binary opposition, and character functions based on the thoughts of Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) in Structural Anthropology. Strauss (1963) stated that the concept of binary opposition is a basic structure of human thought that is manifested in myths and folklore (Claude Levi-Strauss, 1963). This approach was later enriched with Edward Said's theory of Imaginative Geography, in his books *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (Edward Said, 1993). Said explains that Imaginative Geography is a mental construction of space that creates a dichotomy between "us" and "them," "familiar" and "exotic" (Edward Said, 1978). By combining structuralism and Imaginative Geography, the analysis looks not only at internal narrative patterns (such as the sequence of events, characters, and themes), but also at how the text constructs the opposition "here" versus "there," positions the reader as an imaginary traveler, and highlights elements of exoticization and cultural framing of locations such as Limboto and Boalemo. This integrative approach is in line with Bhabha's (2004) thinking in *The Location of Culture* about hybridity and ambivalence in cultural representation (Homi K. Bhaba, 2004)

The main data of this research consists of the texts of Gorontalo legends: (1) *Asal-Usul Orang-Orang Boalemo dan Bagaimana Mereka mendapat Kedudukan di Limboto* (the legend of the origins of the Boalemo people and how they got their position in Limboto), (2) *Legenda Asal-Usul Bangsa Limboto* (the legend of the origins of the Limboto Nation), and (3) *Legenda Asal-Usul Kerajaan Limutu* (the legend of the origins of the Limutu Kingdom). These three manuscripts were taken from a collection of Gorontalo folk tales contained in the repository of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Ester Yunginger, 2007). The secondary data for this research are the theory of Imaginative Geography and the Structuralism approach.

This study applies two levels of layered analysis that integrate the structural approach and the theory of Imaginative Geography. First, structuralism analysis is conducted by breaking down each legend into narrative units, such as narrative function, character, and binary opposition. Second, Imaginative Geography analysis is applied by examining how narrative structures shape spatial representations through three main dimensions: Spatial Orientation, Exoticization, and Cultural Framing.

FINDINGS

The integrated analysis of three Gorontalo legends utilizing Lévi-Strauss' structuralism and Edward Said's Imaginative Geography theory is presented here. Traditional narratives create fictional places that support tourism development, according to the analysis. This study shows that legends shape place identity and tourist experiences by investigating narrative patterns, geographical representations, and their integration processes. Four analytical dimensions show how mythical narratives become tourism assets.

Table 1. Gorontalo Legends Tourism Construction Analysis

Analysis	Key Findings	Tourism Implications
Structural Patterns	Three legends follow transformation narratives (equilibrium→ disruption→ resolution)	Creates journey-based tourism experiences

Imaginative Geography	Binary oppositions create spatial hierarchy (center/periphery, sacred/profane)	Positions Limboto as a primary cultural destination
	Character functions establish hero journey models	Provides tourist identity as cultural explorers
	Mythemes emphasize divine legitimacy and supernatural intervention	Establishes authenticity through spiritual elements
	Mental mapping positions Limboto as a cultural center	Guides tourist movement and spatial expectations
	Consciousness creates "here" vs "there" orientation	Creates territoriality awareness for visitors
Integration Impact	Boundary construction separates sacred/profane spaces	Distinguishes Gorontalo from ordinary destinations
	Exoticism through supernatural, temporal, and cultural elements	Enhances wonder and mystical tourism atmosphere
	Structural principles provide the spatial framework for imagination	Develops story-based destination positioning
	Narrative transforms geographical facts into meaningful places	Creates expectation of authentic cultural encounters
	Exotic elements create pre-visit experiential projections	Motivates heritage tourism decision-making
Tourism Construction	Forms emotional-cognitive tourism maps	Shapes visitor behavior toward cultural respect
	Legends function as narrative assets for destination branding	Requires narrative preservation alongside physical development
	Three stories create comprehensive cultural tourism map	Supports cultural tourism packages with storytelling elements
	Imaginary space construction guides tourism infrastructure needs	Positions Gorontalo as living heritage destination
	Integration of myth and reality offers unique value proposition	Creates sustainable competitive advantage in cultural tourism market

DISCUSSIONS

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the three Gorontalo legends that are the focus of the research: (1) *Asal-Usul Orang-Orang Boalemo dan Bagaimana Mereka mendapat Kedudukan di Limboto* (the legend of the origins of the Boalemo people and how they got their position in Limboto), (2) *Legenda Asal-Usul Bangsa Limboto* (the legend of the origins of the Limboto Nation), and (3) *Legenda Asal-Usul Kerajaan Limutu* (the legend of the origins of the Limutu Kingdom). The analysis is conducted through a layered approach that integrates Lévi-Strauss' structuralism with Edward Said's Imaginative Geography theory to reveal how these legends shape the representation of the 'imaginary space' of the tourist area in the eyes of the reader.

Structuralism Analysis: Narrative Patterns and Binary Opposition

Analysis of three Gorontalo legends; The Origin of the Boalemo People, The Origin of the Limboto Nation, and The Origin of the Limutu Kingdom, reveals how each story builds a distinctive structure and is simultaneously interrelated in forming cultural identity and spatial representation. The Legend of the Origin of the Boalemo People opens through an initial situation where the community lives in harmony with nature. This equilibrium condition describes ecological and social balance, fertile plains, forests as a source of life, and a symbiotic relationship between humans and natural spirits. The narrative uses this phase as a benchmark, so that every subsequent change will appear contrasting and dramatic.

When disruption strikes, in the form of drought, inter-tribal conflict, or pressure from supernatural beings, the balance is destroyed. This conflict forces the main characters to leave their hometowns, pushing them into a transformation that is not only geographical but also psychological. Disruption becomes a turning point that ignites the fire of travel and the search for new meanings beyond old boundaries. In the quest and migration phase, the Boalemo journey turns into a rite of passage: a long exploration through forests and mountains, crossing rivers, until arriving at a new valley. Each route and obstacle functions symbolically, and symbolizes the challenges of growth, tests of faith, and collective maturity. This process of moving forms an imaginary map that guides the reader as if following the steps of the legendary figure. The resolution comes through the establishment of a new community in Limboto. The community settles, builds fields, and strengthens fellowship with ancestral spirits. Here a new equilibrium is created, a more complex but more powerful social order. Behind the narrative, there are

a series of binary oppositions: origin vs. destination, nomadism vs. sedentarism, chaos vs. order. which together emphasize the meaning of transformation and the reinterpretation of space.

Turning to the legend of the Origin of the Limboto Nation, the complexity of the narrative increases through the interaction of various character functions. The founder or hero figure leads the formation of the community, assisted by a helper who ensures the continuity of the mission, and a dispatcher who channels supernatural legitimacy. This structure emphasizes the theme of the legitimacy of power and the binding of collective identity through divine recognition. Furthermore, mythemes such as supernatural intervention, divine mandate, and founding rituals of the nation are repeated in each story. The repetition of these motifs reinforces the message that the Limboto community was born by the will of ancestral spirits and mystical powers. The binary opposition sacred vs. profane, founder vs. follower, origin vs. present, also underlines the difference between the special dimensions of the legend and the everyday reality that readers now enjoy.

The Legend of the Origin of the Limutu Kingdom then enters the realm of political legitimacy and social hierarchy. Through the functions of narrative divine selection, heroic transformation, and institutional establishment, this story acts as a charter myth that explains and justifies the royal order. Each scene, the election of the king by the spirit, the conquest of territory, to the establishment of the palace, carves out the exclusive rights of the ruling class. The structure of transformation in the Limutu story moves from a pre-political condition, namely the dependence of society on nature, to a political order with a formal government structure. Lévi-Strauss's perspective views this transition as a shift from nature to culture, marking the collective evolution of society from primitive to layered civilization.

At its most subtle, the Limutu legend displays the binary opposition royal vs. common, earthly vs. divine, and center vs. periphery. These contrasts emphasize the boundaries of power, reminding readers of the central role of the kingdom in maintaining spiritual and social harmony, and positioning the periphery as a boundary that must be assimilated into the political web. Overall, these three legends emphasize that Gorontalo traditional narratives not only collect origins, but also design "imaginary spaces" that define Gorontalo tourism areas. Through structural patterns, binary contrasts, character functions, and an emphasis on journeys and legitimacy, these legends transform into narrative maps that stimulate the imagination of readers, while providing a framework for the construction of culturally based tourism identities and strategies.

Imaginative Geography Analysis: Construction of Imaginary Space

Imaginative Geography analysis of Gorontalo legends begins the construction of imaginary space by creating a mental map that guides readers to navigate the area. Each narrative subtly places Limboto as the center of narrative gravity that gathers all elements of the story, while other areas are relegated to the periphery. This impression of spatial hierarchy emphasizes the meaning of "center" and "periphery" in the minds of readers, so that Limboto is perceived as the heart of culture and history, while Boalemo and its surrounding areas appear as exotic but less dominant supporting backgrounds.

The dynamics of the movement of the legendary figures further strengthen spatial orientation by creating directional consciousness: the flow of migration from the hometown through the jungle and rivers to reach a new valley shows that the journey itself is meaningful. The movement towards Limboto is not just a physical displacement, but a symbolic process that determines which is "here" as a safe and known area, and which is "there" as a region of testing, mystery, and possibility. In the reader's imagination, these directions are tied to cultural values regarding the superiority of the new land that is desired. Gorontalo legends actively construct boundaries, both geographically and culturally. Imaginary lines separate sacred and profane spaces, domestic nature, and magical forests, even between insider communities connected by blood ties and outsiders, who do not yet understand customary rules. This boundary-making process creates a sense of territoriality that clarifies who has the right to enter a particular space, while also giving readers an awareness of their status as visitors or "imaginary wanderers" in the story.

The exoticization of the area occurs through the mechanism of supernatural exoticism that places spirits, miracles, and divine intervention as the key to attraction. Narratives filled with extraordinary events, healing springs, talking trees, and guiding ancestral spirits, create a mystical aura that distances Gorontalo from the banality of ordinary tourist destinations. Readers are brought into an atmosphere of wonder as if entering another space where the laws of nature shift and anything can happen. Temporal exoticism adds a layer of uniqueness by placing the story in a mythical time, golden age or heroic age, which creates a temporal distance. Modern readers are positioned as contemporary witnesses who look back to the glorious past, reinforcing the impression of exoticism while also arousing a longing to "see" for themselves the remnants of the era of heroes and ancestors. This narrative frames Gorontalo as a

destination where history and myth intersect, captivating those seeking an integrated time experience. Finally, cultural exoticism presents traditional rituals, belief systems, and social structures as narrative materials that emphasize the uniqueness of local culture. Through authenticity framing, these legends function as authenticity markers, namely emphasizing historical depth and cultural continuity that add value to the tourism experience. The heritage discourse further establishes Gorontalo as a repository of living heritage, promising a real encounter with the past. By emphasizing the differentiation of identity between Gorontalo and other regions, these narratives create a strong reason for readers to choose Gorontalo as an authentic and unforgettable tourism destination.

Integration of Analysis: Imaginary Space as Tourism Construction

The integration of structuralism and Imaginative Geography analysis in Gorontalo legends shows how imaginary space is formed through a series of interrelated mechanisms. First, the structural principle provides a framework for the imaginative construction of binary oppositions such as sacred vs. profane, origin vs. present, and center vs. periphery as spatial foundations that differentiate various locations in the narrative. These oppositions emphasize the significance of certain areas, for example Limboto as a ritual and spiritual center, or Boalemo as a foreign region that triggers curiosity and mystery.

Furthermore, the narrative structure functions as an intermediary that transforms geographical facts into "meaningful places." Through character functions such as founder, helper, and dispatcher of supernatural mandates, as well as the repetition of mythemes of mystical intervention, divine mandates, and founding rituals, the narrative brings ordinary landscapes to life as sites full of stories. This process instills narrative memories in the minds of readers, making the location not just a point of coordinates, but a destination full of cultural meaning. In addition, the exotic element through supernatural elements, temporal exoticism, and cultural exoticism strengthens the imaginative projection that allows readers to experience the area before actually visiting. In their imagination, they can witness talking trees, healing water, and ancient traditional ceremonies that radiate a magical aura. This projection then forms the expectation of a tourism experience rich in wonder and authenticity.

This imaginative projection functions as the main motivator in making travel decisions. Before setting foot in Gorontalo, prospective tourists have built expectations for a deep cultural experience, the presence of living history, and spiritual encounters with ancestors. These expectations become a map of emotions and cognition, guiding tourist behavior while they are in the field. In terms of destination positioning, Gorontalo legends effectively position this region as a destination that is rich in culture, full of historical value, and full of religious meaning. The narrative that is built offers a unique proposition compared to other destinations in Indonesia: a story-based tourism experience that invites visitors to enter "another space" where the mythical past and the present blend. This uniqueness can be a competitive advantage in the cultural tourism market.

The representation of imaginary space in legends determines the type of experience that tourists expect. They come not only to see the natural scenery, but to experience the authenticity of the culture through traditional ceremonies, exploring legendary sites, and tracing mythical events. These expectations encourage tour organizers to design tour packages that include storytelling, cultural performances, and interactions with local communities. Equally important, these legends also shape visitors' identities as "cultural explorers" or "heritage holders." By imagining themselves as heirs of narratives, tourists are encouraged to respect customs, participate in rituals, and pass on stories to others. This identity guides their motivation and behavioral patterns during their visits while strengthening their emotional attachment to Gorontalo. This structural and imaginative integration underlines that tourism development in Gorontalo is not only about developing physical infrastructure but also maintaining and popularizing local narratives as primary assets. Through a deep understanding of the mechanisms of imaginary space formation, stakeholders can create authentic, meaningful, and sustainable tourism experiences, making Gorontalo legends not just stories of the past, but the foundation of the future of regional tourism.

CONCLUSION

The structural analysis of three Gorontalo legends demonstrates their significant role in shaping regional tourism identity via consistent narrative patterns and imaginary geography. Employing Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, the traditional narratives (*Asal-usul Orang-orang Boalemo dan Bagaimana Mereka Mendapatkan Kedudukan di Limboto*, *Asal-usul Orang-orang Limboto*, *Asal-usul Kerajaan Limutu*) exhibit binary opposition (sacred vs profane, center vs periphery), and transformation structures that transition from equilibrium through disruption to a new, complex order. Edward Said's Imaginative Geography framework illustrates how these legends construct exotic spaces through supernatural,

temporal, and cultural elements, positioning Limboto as the narrative center while surrounding areas become enigmatic supporters that delineate "here" as safe territory and "there" as regions of possibility.

The integrated approaches illustrate that Gorontalo legends serve as emotional and cognitive frameworks that shape tourist expectations and travel choices, thereby establishing the region as a culturally rich destination that provides authentic experiences unique to other Indonesian sites. The findings highlight that successful tourism development in Gorontalo necessitates both physical infrastructure and the preservation and promotion of local narratives as essential assets. Comprehending these hypothetical space formation mechanisms allows stakeholders to develop genuine, significant, and sustainable tourism experiences, converting Gorontalo legends from historical narratives into essential components for the region's tourism future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researchers would like to express their gratitude for all parties who supported and helped the researchers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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