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From Cultural Identity to Tourist Destination: The Representation of Batak Toba Heritage in *Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja*

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Abstract

This article examines how Batak Toba cultural identity and heritage are represented in Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja (2024), a film produced through a collaboration involving the Lake Toba Authority Agency (BPODT). Rather than treating the film merely as entertainment or a promotional instrument, the article approaches it as a cultural text through which ethnic identity, ancestral connections, and destination imaginaries are articulated. The analysis focuses on the narrative of Jerry Tan, a university student who travels to the Lake Toba region to research the history of national figure D.I. Panjaitan, while confronting his own relationship with his Batak clan identity. Using qualitative film-text analysis and document analysis, the article connects the film's narrative premise and production context with recent scholarship on film-induced tourism, cultural heritage, destination representation, and tourism development around Lake Toba. It argues that the film creates a representational link between personal identity formation and the tourism value of cultural heritage. This relationship, however, should not be understood as automatically producing community empowerment or sustainable tourism. When cultural identity becomes a resource for destination promotion, questions arise concerning who selects the cultural elements to be represented, whose interpretation becomes authoritative, and how local communities participate in defining the meaning of their heritage. The article contributes to tourism anthropology by examining regional cinema as a site where cultural heritage is translated into destination imagery, while highlighting the tensions between cultural recognition, tourism promotion, and community authority.

Keywords : Tourism Anthropology; Batak Toba; Film-Induced Tourism; Cultural Heritage; Lake Toba

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is not simply a matter of travelling from one place to another. It is also a process through which places, people, histories, and cultural practices acquire particular meanings. A destination is rarely encountered by visitors as an entirely unfamiliar geographical space. Before arriving, potential visitors may already have formed impressions through photographs, films, television programmes, promotional campaigns, social media,

and stories circulated by other travellers. These representations influence what people expect to see, what they consider attractive, and how they interpret the places they visit. Tourism therefore involves not only the movement of people but also the circulation of images and cultural meanings.

This relationship between representation and tourism has become increasingly important in the study of film-induced tourism. Films can introduce landscapes, historical narratives, local customs, and everyday cultural practices to audiences who may never have visited the locations represented on screen. Research on film-induced tourism has examined how cinematic images contribute to destination image formation and how audiences may develop an interest in visiting places associated with particular films. Araújo-Vila et al. (2024), for example, discuss the relationship between film narratives, destination image, and tourism promotion, demonstrating how cinema can function as a medium through which destinations become recognisable and desirable. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) examine the relationship between film-induced destination images and heritage conservation intentions, showing that cinematic representation can have implications beyond the immediate viewing experience.

Nevertheless, the relationship between cinema and tourism should not be reduced to a straightforward assumption that the appearance of a destination in a film will automatically increase visitor numbers. The influence of film is mediated by the narrative, the audience's interpretation, the existing reputation of a place, and the tourism infrastructure available at the destination. Nakayama (2023), in examining destination marketing through film-induced tourism, demonstrates the importance of understanding how a film becomes connected to a destination's broader promotional strategy. Film is therefore not merely a visual advertisement. It can also become a cultural narrative that selects particular aspects of a place and gives them meaning.

From the perspective of tourism anthropology, this process raises important questions. What kinds of cultural identities are made visible through tourism-related representations? Which histories and traditions are selected as appropriate for public presentation? Who has the authority to explain the meaning of a cultural practice? And what happens when cultural heritage becomes part of a destination's economic and promotional value? These questions are particularly relevant when tourism promotion involves ethnic identity and traditions that are closely connected to family relations, ancestral histories, and local systems of belonging.

The film, Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja (2024), tells the story of Jerry Tan, a university student whose academic research takes him to the ancestral region around Lake Toba. His research concerns the history of D.I. Panjaitan, a national figure, and the journey also brings him into contact with the cultural and social environment of the Batak community. The film's central character is described as someone who feels embarrassed about using his Panjaitan clan name. This narrative detail introduces a tension between contemporary self-identification and inherited ethnic belonging. The film is particularly relevant because its production is connected to an institution responsible for the development and promotion of the Lake Toba tourism area. BPODT's official press release describes the film as a collaborative production and explicitly connects its public presentation with the ambition to introduce the region's cultural and social characteristics to a wider audience (Badan

Pelaksana Otorita Danau Toba [BPODT], 2024). The film was released in Indonesian cinemas on 11 July 2024 (Indonesian Film Center, 2024). Its production context therefore provides a clear basis for examining the relationship between regional cinema and destination promotion. The narrative also offers an opportunity to examine how cultural identity becomes connected to place. Jerry's journey is not simply an academic trip to collect historical information. It is also a journey towards an ancestral landscape associated with his clan identity. The movement from an urban university environment to the Lake Toba region creates a narrative structure in which geographical mobility becomes connected to cultural discovery. The ancestral region is represented not only as a location for research but also as a space through which the protagonist may reconsider his relationship with his own background.

This relationship between identity and place is important in tourism anthropology. A destination may be promoted through natural scenery, historical landmarks, and cultural attractions, but its meaning for local communities may be rooted in kinship, memory, ancestry, and everyday social relations. These meanings cannot always be translated into the language of tourism promotion without some form of selection or simplification. A clan name, for example, may function as a marker of genealogical belonging and social relations within Batak society. When presented to a wider audience, however, it may also become a recognisable sign of ethnic identity and cultural difference. The same cultural element can therefore carry different meanings depending on the social context in which it is used. The transformation of cultural heritage into a tourism resource requires critical attention. Cultural heritage is not simply a collection of objects, traditions, or historical facts waiting to be displayed. It is also produced through processes of selection, interpretation, recognition, and institutionalisation. What becomes recognised as heritage may depend on the interests of government agencies, tourism organisations, cultural institutions, local communities, and other actors. In this sense, heritage-making involves questions of authority: who has the right to define cultural significance, whose memories are included, and which aspects of the past are considered suitable for public representation. The relationship between heritage and tourism can also produce tensions around authenticity. Cui and Song (2024) examine staged and existential authenticity in film-related cultural heritage tourism. Their research shows that the presentation of heritage for tourist consumption raises questions about how authenticity is constructed and experienced. Although their case concerns a different geographical setting, the discussion is useful for analysing how cultural traditions and historical narratives may be selected and presented in tourism-related media. In the Lake Toba context, the question is not simply whether a film accurately represents Batak culture. It is also whether the cultural elements selected for representation provide a sufficiently complex understanding of the social relationships and meanings that sustain them. A related concern is the commodification of culture. Cultural commodification occurs when cultural practices, symbols, histories, or identities acquire exchange value within economic and tourism systems. This process does not necessarily mean that cultural practices lose all meaning for local communities. Rather, it suggests that cultural elements may be interpreted and used in different ways by different actors. A traditional house, a clan name, a historical figure, or a local narrative may be meaningful within a community while also becoming part of a tourism

product or promotional image. The important analytical question is how these different meanings interact and whether local communities retain authority over the representation and use of their heritage. The novelty of this article lies in bringing together three dimensions that are often examined separately: the representation of Batak Toba identity, the narrative of return to an ancestral region, and the institutional context of tourism promotion. Rather than measuring the film's actual impact on tourist visits, the article investigates how the film can be read as a cultural text that links identity formation with destination imagery. It also considers the limits of this relationship by asking whether cultural representation necessarily gives local communities control over the meanings attached to their heritage. Accordingly, this article examines how *Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja* represents Batak Toba cultural identity and heritage, particularly through the relationship between ancestral belonging and the Lake Toba landscape. It further explores how the film connects cultural heritage with the construction of Lake Toba as a tourism destination, while considering the tensions that may emerge when ethnic identity and local cultural values become part of tourism promotion. By addressing these interconnected issues, the article seeks to understand how regional cinema participates in shaping destination imaginaries and how the representation of cultural heritage raises questions about interpretation, recognition, and community authority.

METHOD

This article employs a qualitative interpretive approach combining film-text analysis and document analysis. The film Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja (2024) is treated as a cultural text rather than as a transparent record of Batak Toba social life. This distinction is important because a film is a constructed narrative. Its characters, locations, conflicts, and cultural references are selected and arranged through cinematic decisions. Consequently, the analysis does not assume that the film provides a complete or universally representative account of Batak Toba culture.

The primary material consists of the film's publicly documented narrative, its production context, and its stated relationship with the Lake Toba tourism agenda. The film's production and release information is drawn from the official BPODT press release and the Indonesian Film Center's film record (BPODT, 2024; Indonesian Film Center, 2024). Secondary materials include recent academic publications on film-induced tourism, cultural heritage tourism, destination representation, local narratives, and tourism development in the Lake Toba region. The analysis is organised around three interconnected themes: (1) the representation of ethnic identity and ancestral belonging; and (2) the relationship between heritage representation, tourism promotion, and community authority. These themes are examined through an interpretive reading of the film's narrative premise and institutional context, and are compared with the issues identified in recent tourism scholarship. The study does not measure audience responses, visitor numbers, or the economic effects of the film. It therefore does not claim that the film has caused an increase in tourism to Lake Toba. Nor does it claim to establish how local residents interpret the film. The purpose is narrower: to analyse the representational relationship between a regional film, Batak Toba cultural identity, and the construction of a tourism destination. A complete submission should

supplement this documentary reading with a systematic viewing log recording scenes, dialogue, locations, and timestamps from the film itself.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ethnic Identity as a Narrative of Rediscovery

One of the most important elements in Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja is its use of a personal identity narrative as the entry point to Batak Toba culture. The central character, Jerry Tan, is described as a university student who feels embarrassed about using his Panjaitan clan name. His academic research on D.I. Panjaitan takes him to the ancestral region around Lake Toba, where the journey also becomes an encounter with the cultural environment associated with his family background (BPODT, 2024).

This narrative premise is significant because it connects ethnic identity with movement across geographical and social spaces. Jerry's journey is not simply a movement from a university environment to a research location. It can also be interpreted as a movement from distance towards recognition: distance from a clan identity that he feels uncomfortable displaying, followed by an encounter with the historical and cultural context associated with that identity. The ancestral region becomes meaningful not only because it contains information relevant to his academic research but also because it offers a setting in which questions of belonging can be reconsidered.

From an anthropological perspective, identity is not merely an individual attribute. It is shaped through social relations, shared histories, family connections, and cultural practices. A clan name, in this context, should not be reduced to a label that identifies a person as Batak. It may also connect an individual to a wider network of genealogical relations, collective memories, and expectations concerning social belonging. The narrative premise therefore introduces a tension between an individual's contemporary self-presentation and the inherited social categories through which a community may recognise that individual. The significance of this tension becomes clearer when considered in relation to mobility and urban life. Individuals who grow up or study outside their ancestral region may experience cultural identity differently from those whose everyday lives remain closely connected to local kinship networks. Distance can weaken familiarity with particular practices, but it does not necessarily eliminate the social importance of ancestry. Instead, identity may become more visible at particular moments, such as family gatherings, visits to ancestral places, or encounters with people who share the same clan background. Jerry's journey can thus be read as a narrative of re-encounter rather than a simple return to an unchanged cultural origin. The ancestral region is not necessarily presented as a place where identity has been preserved in a fixed form. Rather, it becomes a setting in which the protagonist's relationship with his background can be reconsidered. This interpretation is useful for tourism anthropology because travel to ancestral places may involve several overlapping motivations: academic research, family history, cultural curiosity, emotional attachment, and the desire to understand one's origins.

The film's narrative also invites a distinction between cultural identity as lived experience and cultural identity as public representation. For the protagonist, the clan name is initially associated with personal discomfort. In the broader tourism context, however, clan

identity and Batak cultural references can become recognisable signs through which a destination is presented to outsiders. The same identity marker may therefore carry different meanings in different contexts. It may be a source of personal hesitation, a marker of kinship, an element of cultural heritage, or a sign used in destination promotion. This distinction prevents the analysis from treating ethnic identity as a fixed cultural product. If the film is interpreted only as a story about a young man rediscovering his Batak identity, the discussion risks presenting cultural belonging as a straightforward return to tradition. A more critical reading recognises that identity is negotiated. People may identify with their ancestral background while also adopting contemporary lifestyles, pursuing education outside their home region, and developing social relationships beyond their ethnic community. These experiences do not necessarily make their cultural identity less authentic.

The issue is particularly relevant in the context of tourism because destinations are often promoted through recognisable cultural markers. Ethnic names, traditional architecture, clothing, food, music, and historical figures can be used to distinguish one destination from another. Yet these markers do not fully represent the complexity of the people whose lives they are supposed to describe. When identity becomes a visible component of destination branding, there is a risk that its relational and historical dimensions will be simplified into a collection of attractive cultural signs. The film's narrative premise provides an opportunity to question this simplification. Jerry's discomfort with his clan name suggests that ethnic identity cannot be understood only through the visibility of cultural symbols. It also involves personal feelings, social expectations, and the meanings attached to inherited affiliations. The story therefore offers a potentially productive contrast between the internal experience of identity and its external presentation as cultural heritage. This contrast is central to the article's argument. The tourism value of Batak Toba culture does not arise simply because cultural symbols are visually distinctive. It also depends on the histories and social relationships that make those symbols meaningful. A clan name may be promoted as a sign of ethnic identity, but its significance cannot be fully understood without considering the kinship system and collective history to which it refers. Tourism representation becomes more meaningful when it acknowledges these relationships rather than presenting cultural identity as a decorative feature of a destination.

Ancestral Landscape and the Construction of Lake Toba as a Cultural Destination

The connection between Jerry's academic journey and the ancestral region around Lake Toba provides a second important dimension of analysis. The film's narrative links the search for historical information with physical movement towards a particular landscape. This connection makes the destination more than a background for the story. It becomes part of the narrative through which the protagonist encounters his cultural identity.

In tourism anthropology, landscapes are not understood only as physical environments. They are also social and cultural spaces shaped by memory, historical narratives, local knowledge, and everyday practices. A lake, a village, a traditional house, or a historical site may have different meanings for local residents, visitors, tourism authorities, and cultural organisations. What a tourist sees as an attractive landscape may also be a place of residence, livelihood, family memory, or ancestral significance for the people who live there. Lake Toba is particularly relevant because its tourism identity is built through the

combination of natural and cultural attractions. The lake's geological characteristics and scenic landscape are central to its destination image, but cultural narratives also contribute to how the region is understood and promoted. Sibarani et al. (2025) demonstrate that folk discourses associated with Toba Caldera Geosites contain geographical, legendary, ecological, and cultural elements that contribute to collective memory and tourist appeal. Their research suggests that the meaning of a destination cannot be separated from the stories through which people interpret it.

This perspective is useful for reading Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja. The film's narrative premise links the Lake Toba region with historical research, clan identity, and ancestral belonging. In this sense, the destination is not represented solely as a scenic place to be visited. It is also connected to a history that can be explored and a cultural identity that can be reconsidered. The landscape acquires narrative significance because it is associated with the protagonist's search for historical knowledge. The relationship between landscape and identity also raises a question about whose interpretation of place becomes visible. Tourism promotion often selects particular features to construct a coherent destination image. Such selection is necessary for communication, but it can also create a simplified representation. A destination may be presented through its most recognisable scenery, a small number of cultural traditions, or a limited set of historical narratives. These representations can attract attention, but they may not communicate the diversity of local experiences and interpretations. Sibarani et al. (2025) provide a useful counterpoint by showing that local narratives are not incidental additions to the landscape. They are part of the cultural knowledge through which places become meaningful. The stories associated with geosites connect geographical features with collective memory and local understandings. In tourism practice, such narratives can enrich visitor experiences, but their presentation also requires attention to the people who preserve and interpret them.

A similar issue emerges in the relationship between the film's narrative and the Lake Toba tourism landscape. When a film connects a protagonist's identity journey with a particular region, it contributes to the production of a destination image in which place and cultural meaning are closely associated. Viewers may begin to understand the region through the historical and cultural themes presented in the narrative. However, this does not mean that the film captures every dimension of local life. Its representation remains selective and shaped by the demands of storytelling. The distinction between landscape as scenery and landscape as lived place is therefore important. From the perspective of destination marketing, scenic views may be used to create an attractive image. From an anthropological perspective, however, the same landscape must be understood in relation to the people who inhabit it, the histories they associate with it, and the social practices that take place there. A tourism destination is not an empty stage waiting for visitors. It is a lived environment in which tourism becomes one activity among many.

The film's connection to the Lake Toba region may help audiences associate the destination with Batak Toba history and identity. Yet the wider tourism implications depend on how such associations are interpreted and used. If the destination is presented mainly as a place where visitors can consume cultural difference, the social context of that culture may be marginalised. If, on the other hand, cultural narratives are communicated with attention to

local history and community interpretation, tourism representation may contribute to a more informed understanding of the region. This distinction is particularly relevant in a destination where cultural and natural heritage are promoted together. The combination can create opportunities for visitors to understand the relationship between landscape and local culture. At the same time, it can encourage the assumption that cultural heritage exists primarily to enhance the attractiveness of the landscape. Tourism anthropology challenges this assumption by asking how local communities understand the relationship between their cultural practices and the places in which those practices are embedded. The film can therefore be interpreted as participating in the construction of Lake Toba as a cultural destination through narrative association. It connects the region with historical inquiry, clan identity, and the possibility of personal rediscovery. Its contribution is not necessarily that it provides a complete representation of the region, but that it offers a particular way of seeing the relationship between a person, an ancestral landscape, and cultural history.

Who Has the Authority to Represent Batak Toba Heritage?

A central concern in tourism anthropology is the distribution of authority over cultural representation. Tourism destinations are often developed through cooperation between government agencies, private businesses, tourism operators, cultural institutions, and local communities. These actors may share an interest in attracting visitors, but they do not necessarily possess the same power to define the meaning of cultural heritage. The production of Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja through a collaboration involving BPODT illustrates the relationship between cultural storytelling and institutional tourism development. Such collaboration can make regional stories more visible and provide a platform for local cultural narratives. At the same time, it raises questions about how the content of those narratives is selected and whose understanding of Batak Toba identity becomes most visible. These questions are not an argument against institutional involvement. Tourism authorities can play an important role in supporting cultural documentation, providing resources, improving access to cultural sites, and connecting local communities with wider audiences. The issue is whether institutional promotion creates meaningful opportunities for community participation or whether local culture is primarily used as a resource for destination branding.

Setiawati et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of community readiness and local support in the development of Lake Toba as an international tourism destination. Their findings indicate that the involvement and acceptance of local people are important dimensions of tourism development. This is relevant because the success of a destination cannot be assessed only through visitor numbers or promotional visibility. It also depends on the relationship between tourism activities and the everyday lives of the communities who inhabit the destination. Community authority involves more than inviting local people to perform cultural activities or participate in tourism events. It includes the ability to determine how cultural knowledge is interpreted, which practices may be presented publicly, how sensitive information is protected, and how the benefits of tourism are distributed. In the context of cultural heritage, local participation should include the authority to disagree with external interpretations and to maintain practices that are not intended for tourist consumption. The film's narrative about clan identity provides an opportunity to reflect on this issue. A clan name is not simply an attractive cultural marker that can be detached from its

social context. It is connected to genealogical relationships and forms of belonging that may carry specific meanings within Batak society. When such an identity marker becomes part of a tourism narrative, its representation should be understood in relation to the social structures that give it significance. The same principle applies to historical narratives. The story of D.I. Panjaitan may provide a point of connection between national history and local identity. However, historical figures can be interpreted differently by families, local communities, historians, educational institutions, and tourism organisations. Their inclusion in destination promotion may increase public recognition, but it can also privilege particular interpretations of the past. A responsible tourism narrative should therefore acknowledge that historical meaning is not always singular.

Sibarani et al. (2025) offer an important perspective by demonstrating how local narratives contribute to collective memory and the interpretation of Toba Caldera Geosites. Their research suggests that local knowledge is not merely supplementary information for tourism promotion. It is part of the cultural foundation through which the destination is understood. This has implications for film-based tourism representation: stories about a place should not be separated from the people and knowledge systems through which that place acquires meaning. A further issue concerns the difference between representing a community and representing the idea of a community. A film may use cultural symbols to establish a recognisable sense of place, but this does not mean that all members of the represented community share the same experiences or interpretations. Batak Toba communities are not culturally uniform. Differences in generation, geographical location, religious affiliation, education, occupation, and mobility may shape how individuals relate to their ethnic identity. A film narrative necessarily focuses on selected characters and events; it cannot be expected to represent every position within a diverse community. This limitation is not unique to cinema. Tourism campaigns also simplify complex social realities because they are designed to communicate a destination through a limited number of images and messages. The anthropological task is to make this process visible and to examine its implications. Instead of asking whether a film represents an entire community, the analysis should ask which aspects of community life are selected, how they are framed, and what remains outside the representation. For Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja, this means examining how the film connects an individual character's relationship with his clan identity to a wider image of Batak Toba culture and the Lake Toba region. The film's production context makes this connection relevant to tourism promotion, but it does not establish that the film speaks on behalf of all Batak Toba communities. Its representational authority must be understood as partial and situated.

This leads to an important distinction between institutional authority and cultural authority. BPODT may have an institutional mandate to promote the Lake Toba region, while local families, cultural practitioners, historians, and community organisations may possess different forms of knowledge and authority concerning particular cultural traditions and histories. These forms of authority can complement one another, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. Institutional responsibility for destination promotion does not automatically confer authority to define every aspect of local cultural meaning. A more participatory approach to film-related tourism would recognise this distinction. Local

communities should be involved not only as subjects or visual elements in promotional narratives but also as interpreters and decision-makers. This may involve consultation during the development of cultural content, collaboration with local historians and cultural custodians, transparent arrangements concerning the use of cultural materials, and mechanisms through which communities can benefit from tourism-related activities. The significance of this argument extends beyond the film itself. It points to a broader challenge in the development of cultural tourism around Lake Toba: how to promote cultural heritage without reducing it to a visual or commercial resource. The answer requires more than accurate images. It requires institutional arrangements that recognise community knowledge and allow local people to participate in defining the meaning and use of their heritage.

Film-Induced Tourism and the Limits of Promotional Representation

The relationship between film and tourism is often discussed through the concept of film-induced tourism. This concept generally refers to tourism activities influenced by films or other screen media, including visits to locations associated with film narratives. Research has examined the relationship between film exposure, destination image, visitor motivation, and heritage conservation. Zhang et al. (2023), for example, investigate how film-induced destination images can influence intentions related to heritage conservation. Araújo-Vila et al. (2024) also highlight the role of films in destination image formation and tourism promotion. These studies provide a useful framework for understanding why regional cinema may be relevant to destination development. A film can create an association between a place and a particular story. It can introduce viewers to landscapes, historical narratives, and cultural practices that may encourage further interest. However, the relationship between viewing a film and deciding to travel is not automatic. Audience interest is influenced by many factors, including the film's reach, the viewer's personal interests, travel costs, accessibility, and the availability of tourism services.

For this reason, the contribution of Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja should be discussed carefully. Its collaboration with BPODT establishes an institutional connection to Lake Toba tourism promotion. Its narrative also links the protagonist's journey with the region's history and Batak Toba identity. These features make the film relevant to the discussion of film-induced tourism. Nevertheless, they do not provide evidence that the film has generated a measurable increase in tourist visits or changed audience perceptions. The distinction between promotional intention and promotional effect is essential. A film may be produced with the intention of introducing a destination to a wider audience, but the actual reception of the film must be studied separately. Audience surveys, interviews, digital engagement data, and tourism statistics would be needed to establish whether viewers developed an interest in visiting the locations represented. Without such evidence, claims about the film's direct tourism impact would be speculative.

A more defensible argument is that the film participates in the representational environment through which Lake Toba is made visible as a cultural destination. It contributes a narrative connecting the region with historical inquiry, ancestral identity, and Batak Toba culture. This is a meaningful contribution even if its measurable effect on tourist behaviour remains unknown. The distinction also helps avoid reducing film-induced tourism to destination marketing. From a tourism-anthropological perspective, the more significant issue

may be how a film shapes the cultural meanings attached to a destination. A film can contribute to the public recognition of local history and identity, but it can also reinforce selective narratives. The question is not only whether viewers want to visit a location but also what they expect to encounter when they arrive. If audiences understand Lake Toba mainly through scenic imagery, they may approach the region primarily as a landscape for visual consumption. If they encounter narratives about clan identity, historical figures, and local cultural knowledge, they may develop a broader interest in the region's social and historical dimensions. Yet this possibility depends on the complexity of the representation and on the availability of interpretation beyond the film itself.

Tourism institutions therefore have a responsibility to connect promotional media with meaningful cultural interpretation. Film-based promotion could be complemented by community-led storytelling, local museums, heritage interpretation, guided cultural experiences, and educational materials developed with local knowledge holders. Such initiatives would help ensure that the destination is not reduced to a cinematic image detached from the social context of its heritage. This is particularly important in the Lake Toba region, where local narratives and cultural knowledge contribute to the meaning of the landscape. Sibarani et al. (2025) demonstrate that folk discourses associated with Toba Caldera Geosites are connected to collective memory and tourist appeal. Their research suggests that tourism interpretation can become richer when local narratives are treated as meaningful knowledge rather than merely as promotional content. A similar principle applies to the representation of Batak Toba identity in Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja. The film's narrative may invite audiences to associate the region with ancestral history and cultural belonging. However, the depth of that encounter depends on whether audiences are encouraged to understand the social relationships behind the cultural references. Tourism promotion becomes more responsible when it creates opportunities for learning rather than simply presenting cultural difference as something to be consumed.

Towards a More Critical Understanding of Cultural Film Tourism

The discussion above suggests that Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja can be understood through three connected processes: identity narration, destination representation, and heritage promotion. These processes do not operate independently. The protagonist's journey connects personal identity with an ancestral landscape, while the film's institutional context connects cultural storytelling with the promotion of Lake Toba. Together, these elements create a narrative in which ethnic identity and destination image become mutually associated. This relationship offers a useful contribution to tourism anthropology because it shows that destination-making is not limited to physical infrastructure, tourism services, or promotional campaigns. It also takes place through cultural narratives. Films, local stories, historical accounts, and representations of ethnic identity contribute to the ways destinations are imagined and understood. They can influence what visitors expect to see and how they interpret the relationship between people and place. However, the process should not be celebrated without qualification. The promotion of cultural heritage may increase recognition, but it may also create selective representations. A destination image can become attractive precisely because it simplifies complex histories and identities into easily recognisable signs.

Such simplification may be commercially useful, but it can limit public understanding of local culture.

The central challenge is therefore to distinguish between cultural visibility and cultural authority. Visibility refers to the presence of local culture in public representation. Authority concerns who has the power to define what that culture means and how it should be presented. A film may increase the visibility of Batak Toba identity, but this does not automatically mean that local communities control its interpretation or benefit from its promotional use. The distinction also has implications for sustainable tourism. Sustainability should not be understood only through environmental protection or the long-term viability of tourism businesses. It also involves the continuity of cultural knowledge, the recognition of community rights, and the ability of local people to determine how their heritage is used. Setiawati et al. (2024) highlight the importance of community readiness and local support in tourism development around Lake Toba. Their findings reinforce the argument that destination development should be connected to local social conditions rather than assessed solely through external tourism objectives. A critical approach to film-related cultural tourism would therefore involve several principles. First, cultural representation should be informed by local knowledge and should avoid reproducing stereotypes. Second, tourism institutions should recognise that local communities are not simply providers of cultural attractions but also holders and interpreters of cultural knowledge. Third, promotional activities should create opportunities for local participation and benefit-sharing. Finally, the representation of heritage should acknowledge that cultural practices may have meanings that extend beyond tourism and may not always be appropriate for public display.

These principles are relevant to the film's potential role in promoting Lake Toba. Its narrative connection between personal identity and ancestral history provides an opportunity to introduce audiences to the cultural significance of the region. Yet the film should be understood as one contribution to a wider representational process, not as a comprehensive account of Batak Toba culture. The responsibility for cultural interpretation cannot rest on cinema alone. It must also involve local institutions, community organisations, cultural practitioners, and tourism authorities. The article's main contribution is to shift the discussion from the question of whether a film can promote a destination to the question of how a film participates in constructing the cultural meaning of that destination. This shift is important because it places questions of representation, authority, and heritage at the centre of film-induced tourism research. It also provides a way to examine regional cinema beyond its promotional function. In this sense, Harta, Tahta, Boru Ni Raja can be read as a cultural text that connects the protagonist's negotiation of ethnic identity with the public representation of Lake Toba. The film's significance lies not only in its potential to attract attention to the region but also in the questions it raises about the relationship between ancestry, cultural recognition, and tourism development. The challenge for tourism institutions is to ensure that cultural heritage remains connected to the communities and histories that give it meaning, rather than becoming merely an attractive image in the promotion of a destination.

CONCLUSIONS

The article's contribution lies in connecting three dimensions that are often examined separately: ethnic identity in film narratives, ancestral landscapes, and the institutional promotion of cultural destinations. It shifts the discussion of film-induced tourism from the question of whether cinema attracts visitors towards the question of how cinema participates in constructing the cultural meaning of a destination. This perspective offers a more critical understanding of the relationship between film, heritage, and tourism. The analysis also has limitations. It does not establish the film's actual influence on audience perceptions or tourist visits, nor does it claim to represent the views of Batak Toba communities. Ultimately, the value of cultural film tourism should not be measured only by the visibility it creates for a destination. It should also be assessed through its capacity to communicate cultural meanings responsibly, recognise local knowledge, and respect the authority of communities over their heritage. In the case of Lake Toba, the challenge is not simply to make Batak Toba culture more visible, but to ensure that its representation remains connected to the people, histories, and social relationships that give it meaning.

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