


Tau-Tau in the narrative of spatial awareness of the Toraja community: A sociological review

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of Tau-Tau (wooden statues depicting the deceased) in the narrative of spatial awareness among the Toraja people. Using a sociological approach, this study explores the existence of Tau-tau, which not only serves as a physical representation of the deceased, but also acts as a symbolic marker that actively shapes the collective understanding of space. In this context, the spaces referred to are sacred spaces (the spirit world), social spaces (settlements and ceremonial sites), and cosmological spaces. The research method used is qualitative, with data collection techniques involving participant observation and in-depth interviews with traditional elders, families who own Tau-Tau, and the general public in Tana Toraja. The results of the study reveal that the presence of Tau-Tau on the cliffs of burial grounds in the hills creates a cultural landscape that connects the world of the living with the world of the ancestors. Tau-tau become silent but powerful narrators that affirm social hierarchy, family status, and the continuity of the relationship between the living and the dead. In the context of Toraja community spatial awareness, this is a complex socio-cultural construction, in which tau-tau function as key elements in interpreting, regulating, and animating that space. The main contribution of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of local communities, particularly regarding the interrelationship between symbols, space, and social structures.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna simbolik Tau-Tau (patung kayu yang menggambarkan almarhum) dalam narasi kesadaran ruang masyarakat Toraja. Melalui pendekatan sosiologis, studi ini mengeksplorasi keberadaan Tau-Tau yang tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai representasi fisik dari orang yang telah meninggal, tetapi juga berperan sebagai penanda simbolis yang aktif membentuk pemahaman kolektif tentang ruang. Dalam konteks ini ruang yang dimaksud adalah ruang sakral (alam arwah), ruang sosial (permukiman dan tempat upacara), dan ruang kosmologis. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui observasi partisipan dan wawancara mendalam dengan para tetua adat, keluarga yang memiliki Tau-Tau, dan masyarakat umum di Tana Toraja. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa keberadaan Tau-Tau pada tebing-tebing pemakaman di perbukitan menciptakan lanskap kultural yang menghubungkan dunia orang hidup dengan dunia leluhur. Tau-Tau menjadi narator bisu namun powerful yang menegaskan hierarki sosial, status keluarga, dan kelangsungan hubungan antara yang hidup dan yang mati. Dalam konteks kesadaran ruang masyarakat Toraja, hal ini merupakan konstruksi sosial-budaya yang kompleks, di mana tau-tau berfungsi sebagai elemen kunci dalam memaknai, mengatur, dan menghidupi ruang tersebut. Kontribusi utama penelitian ini memberi pemahaman lebih mendalam tentang dinamika sosial-budaya masyarakat lokal, khususnya mengenai interelasi antara simbol, ruang, dan struktur sosial.

Keywords

Tau-Tau, symbolic meaning, spatial awareness, Toraja society, cultural landscape

1. Introduction

The Toraja people, as one of the four main ethnic groups in South Sulawesi and West Sulawesi (alongside the Makassar, Bugis, and Mandar), are known for their distinctive traditions and culture, rich in symbolic meaning. One interesting aspect to study is the existence of Tau-Tau, wooden statues that represent the physical form of the spirits of the deceased (Girik Allo, 2024a). Sociologically, the existence of Tau-Tau is not only seen from its function as a form of respect for ancestors, but more than that, it constructs a narrative of spatial awareness (Sylaiou et al., 2010) that connects the world of the living and the dead, both in physical and virtual dimensions (Wunn & Grojnowski, 2016a). This study focuses on the burial grounds of the Toraja people, which are believed to be sacred and symbolic spaces, where Tau-Tau serve as a symbolic medium between the real world for the living and the spirit world for the dead (Girik Allo, 2024a).

The purpose of this study is to contribute to expanding understanding of Toraja cultural symbolism amid social change and technological advances (Mada et al., 2025). Through a study of the symbolic meaning of Tau-Tau in both physical and virtual contexts (Jayadi, 2018a), it is possible to reveal how the Toraja people maintain intergenerational relationships and preserve their cultural identity in the digital age. In addition, the results of this study are expected to serve as a basis for formulating cultural preservation strategies in line with the times (Marontate, 2005). This is important because, in its development, the study of Tau-Tau faces challenges in the modern era, marked by traditional symbolic meanings confronting the realities of social change and technological progress. The emergence of the phenomenon of cultural digitization and virtualization has created new dimensions, including the interpretation of Tau-Tau, while also opening up new opportunities for cultural preservation in the digital age.

Referring to the results of the identification of issues surrounding this symbolic meaning, this study recommends an interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural studies, spatial sociology, and information technology to optimize the symbolic meaning of Tau-Tau. This study provides an opportunity for the Toraja community to utilize virtual space as a means of cultural preservation while strengthening awareness of the important value of traditional symbolism in modern life.

2. Method

This study applies a qualitative approach (M. Ahmadin, 2022) in terms of both data type and analysis, and uses ethnographic methods in data collection (Rahman et al., 2022). The aim is to explore the various symbolic meanings of Tau-Tau within the framework of spatial awareness narratives in Toraja society. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study is to gain a deep understanding of cultural phenomena that are complex and rich in symbolism, which cannot be measured numerically using quantitative methods (O'reilly, 2012).

2.1 Research Subjects

This research was conducted in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province, which is historically known as a center of unique culture and traditions. The research subjects included traditional leaders, families who owned Tau-Tau, and local communities who directly participated in death rituals and efforts to preserve the Tau-Tau culture. The key informants in this study were Toraja traditional leaders and cultural experts, who were involved in order to obtain a more comprehensive perspective.

2.2 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using several techniques, as follows: (1) Participatory observation, in which researchers were directly involved in the funeral ritual process and activities related to Tau-tau to understand the symbolic functions and social interactions that took place in physical and virtual spaces (Gottschalk, 2010); (2) In-depth interviews, which are semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants to explore their views on the meaning of Tau-Tau, spatial awareness, and changes in symbolism in the context of today's technological advances (Barrantes, 2022); and (3) Documentation studies, namely studies of related documents, such as cultural literature, photos, ritual videos, and digital content (social media and online forums) that represent Tau-Tau in virtual spaces (Hodge & Kreps, 2024).

2.3 Data Analysis

The collected research data was then analyzed using thematic analysis methods (Usman, 2024) to find patterns of meaning and relationships between Tau-Tau symbols and narratives of physical and virtual space awareness. This analysis process included the stages of data coding, theme grouping, and interpretation based on the theoretical framework of social space and cultural symbolism (Knigge & Cope, 2006).

2.4 Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure data validity, this study used triangulation techniques by comparing various observation results, interviews, and documentation studies (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). In addition, member checks were also conducted on informants to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation (McKim, 2023).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Function and Meaning of Tau-Tau in Toraja Society

Based on the results of research conducted through field data collection, relevant literature reviews, and data analysis, it can be seen that Tau-Tau plays an important cultural role in Toraja society, particularly in terms of the physical representation of “eternity” in the form of memories and a spatial awareness that connects two realms, namely the living and the dead. These functions can be explained in detail as follows.

First, Tau-Tau serves as a physical representation and personification of the deceased (Jayadi, 2018b). These wooden statues are made to resemble the deceased when they were alive, complete with details that describe their personal identity, such as traditional clothing and other distinctive features (Serres, 2014). This fact shows that Tau-Tau is not just an inanimate object, but a tangible manifestation of the presence of the deceased in physical space. Through this medium, families and the community at large can symbolically “communicate” with their ancestors (Hodge & Kreps, 2024). The existence of Tau-Tau placed on graves on the cliffs of the Toraja region creates a narrative that shows the continuity of the relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Luckhurst, 2025).

Second, Tau-Tau serves as a form of respect and a symbol of remembrance for families and communities (Krpmotich, 2010). These statues are a visual medium that immortalizes the services, kindness, dignity, and life journey of those who have passed away (Edensor, 2019). For the Toraja people, the existence of Tau-tau reminds the community of ancestral values and strengthens their respect and emotional bond with them (Mawardi, 2025). In addition, it becomes the center of attention in funeral rituals that strengthen social solidarity and relationships between community members.

Third, Tau-Tau is also believed and perceived as a guardian of the tomb as well as a symbolic presence of the spirit. Tau-

Tau is imagined as a guardian of the tomb who continuously “watches over” and protects the final resting place of the deceased (Sumiaty et al., 2023). The Toraja people culturally believe that Tau-Tau is the embodiment of the presence of spirits that guard the tomb from disturbance while also protecting the honor of their ancestors (Lange, 2020). This reinforces the belief that Tau-Tau are not merely inanimate objects, but entities that live in the collective consciousness of the community and play an active role in maintaining spiritual and social balance in the cemetery area (Wunn & Grojnowski, 2016b).

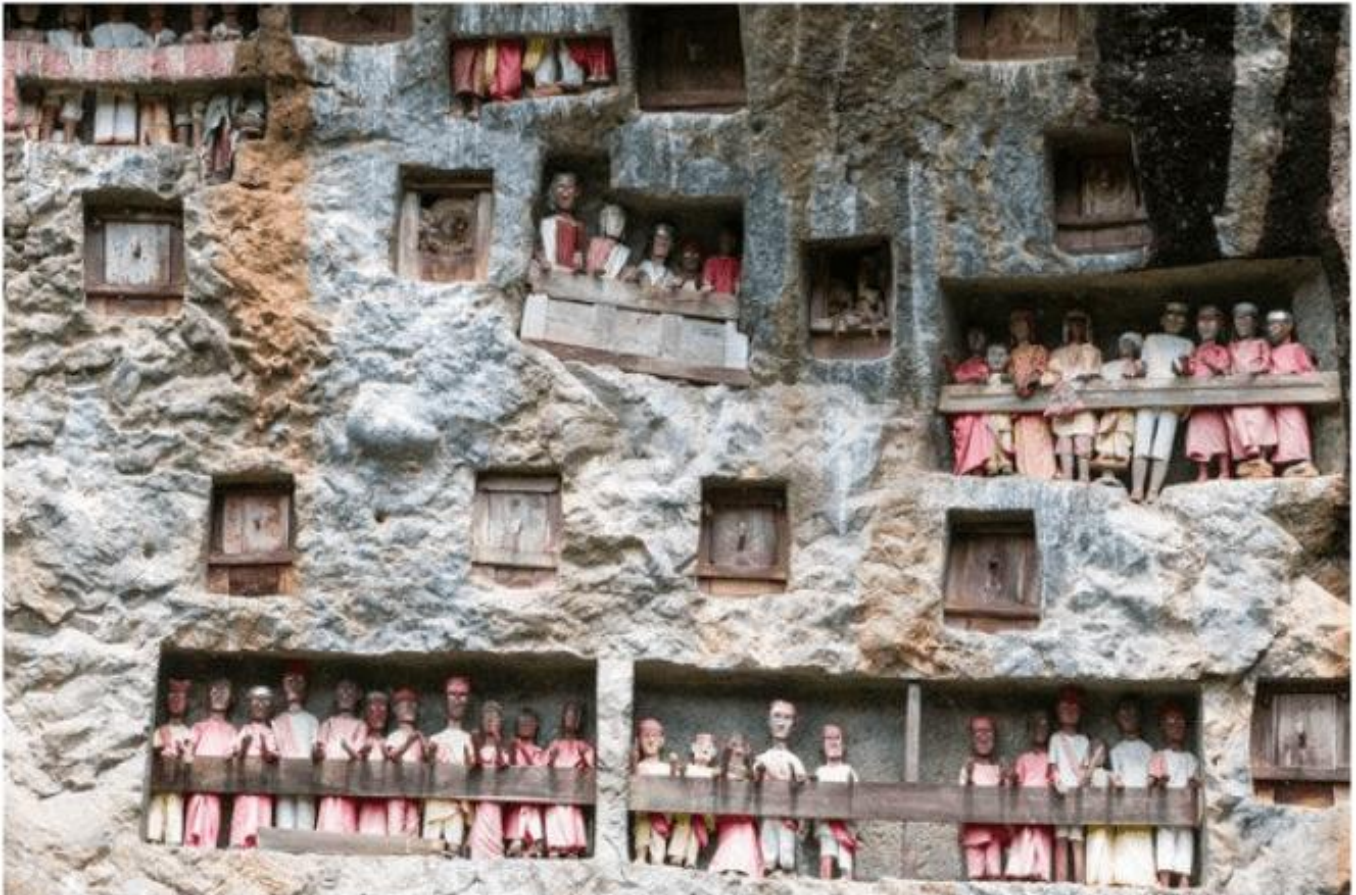


Fig. 1 Tau-Tau on a rock cliff in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia (Sources: <https://mangosteensmartlets.wordpress.com/>)

Another source explains the function and meaning of Tau-Tau as follows: First, as a marker of boundaries and spatial hierarchy, tau-tau serves as a clear spatial marker between the profane world (settlements) and the sacred world (cemeteries). This barrier is not an absolute divider, but a liminal space that connects the two worlds. The position of the Tau-Tau facing the village, called Banua, confirms that the spirits of the ancestors remain part of the community and watch over the lives of their descendants. Its relationship with the spatial awareness of the Toraja people is hierarchical-integrated, where sacred spaces occupy a high position (literally on a cliff) and have symbolic authority over profane spaces.

Second, the narrative of social status in the vertical landscape, namely the placement of Tau-Tau on cliffs, not only signifies closeness to the spirit world, but also serves as a permanent display of status (Coville, 2020). The noble family known as Tongka will place Tau-Tau in higher, more difficult to reach, and more visible graves. Conversely, Tau-Tau for ordinary people occupy lower positions. It is understandable that social stratification in Toraja society does not end with death or when a person passes away, but remains physically and visually imprinted in the vertical landscape (de Jong, 2008). This is what causes Tau-Tau to emerge as a silent narrator that constantly reminds everyone of the social structure that prevails

in Toraja society.

Third, there is a transformation of meaning and spatial conflict, namely, dynamics and tensions in spatial narratives, such as the practice of commercialization (McManus, 2009) in several popular tourist locations. What is worrying is if there are actions to place Tau-Tau figures for visibility for the sake of tourists' cameras and then ignore traditional cosmological aspects. Another problem is generational conflict (Connolly, 2019), marked by the emergence of a tendency among some younger generations to be influenced by modern values and universal religions. They have begun to question this practice, considering it contrary to religious teachings or impractical in nature. If this occurs, it will cause tension in the collective consciousness, where the meaning of sacred space is no longer fully agreed upon. Another interesting thing is resistance (Raby, 2005), marked by the tendency of traditional leaders and nuclear families to increasingly emphasize the importance of the proper placement of Tau-Tau, which can be perceived as a form of cultural resistance against the homogenization of modern values.

Fourth, Tau-Tau is not just a statue, but can also be seen as a medium of dialogue with ancestors for traditional Toraja communities (Tahir et al., 2020). This medium enables symbolic communication between them and their ancestors. For example, activities such as cleaning Tau-Tau, offering sacrifices during the Ma'Nene' ceremony (a ceremony to cleanse corpses) (Girik Allo, 2024b), or simply visiting them, are actually forms of dialogue with their ancestors. Interaction through the medium of Tau-Tau is actually an effort to transform silent stone cliffs into active and living socio-religious spaces. The role of Tau-Tau can change space (physical space) into place (a meaningful place).

3.2 Analysis of Spatial Awareness

The spatial awareness (A. Ahmadin, 2025) of the Toraja people, as represented by the existence of Tau-Tau, should not be interpreted as a neutral and empty space. The burial space in the form of a stone cave or stone tomb is an orderly and meaningful cosmos. It is interesting to discuss its relationship with the concept of social space or Espace Social according to Henri Lefebvre's view (Haffner, 2013). To understand the existence of burial space further with the Triad Spatial theory approach (M. Ahmadin, 2025), the following can be seen.

First, spatial practice relates to physically produced and utilized space (Lefebvre, 2012). This is reflected in the carving of rock cliffs by the Toraja people to create caves as places to put Tau-Tau. Sociologically, this kind of practice is not only technical, but also a ritual laden with meaning. The paths or routes leading to the burial site, the process of carrying the body, and the condition of the burial site form a kind of network of regular spatial practices.

Second, the representation of space, which is usually conceptualized by architects and those in power (Lefebvre, 2012), in the context of Toraja society is related to the role of To Ma'dika (nobles/traditional leaders) and Tominaa (ritual leaders) in understanding and planning burial spaces based on the teachings of Aluk To Dolo. The burial space is represented as a cosmological map that separates and connects the human world and the world of ancestors. The dimension of spatial representation lies in the hierarchical placement of Tau-Tau based on social status.

Third, the space of representation is a space that is experienced vividly through symbols and collective imagination (Pallasmaa, 2013). It is in this context that Tau-Tau plays a major role, where the space around Tau-Tau is not just a rock cliff, but a living meeting point. It functions as an imagined space that represents the presence of ancestors, where communication takes place through rituals mediated by Tau-Tau. In addition, this space is also a means of strengthening identity, as it is laden with narratives, emotions, and collective memories, making it an active and meaningful space of representation.

The burial grounds and Tau-Tau are also interesting to study in relation to sacred and profane spaces, referring to Mircea Eliade's concept (Shepherd, 2012). For the Toraja people, settlements and rice fields, as places of daily activity, are profane spaces, while burial complexes and Tau-Tau are the axis of the world, intermediaries between earth and sky (the world of ancestors). The function of Tau-Tau as a marker of sacredness physically sanctifies the rock cliffs that were originally profane.

Referring to Michel Foucault's concept of space (Topinka, 2010), the Toraja community's cemetery complex with its Tau-Tau is a reflection of heterotopia, a real space that functions differently from all other sites, reflecting and challenging the surrounding spaces. *First*, from a critical heterotopia perspective, the cemetery is seen as a place for individuals in crisis, namely the transition from death to ancestor status. *Second*, from the perspective of deviant heterotopia, the cemetery accommodates corpses, which in many cultures are considered deviant behavior from the order of life, and gives them a place of honor. *Third*, as a heterotopia, the cemetery space is a meeting point between humans and the universe, but in the context of an isolated space separated from everyday life. In short, Tau-Tau symbolically creates a dialectic between closeness (virtually) and separation (physically and ritually).

The Toraja people's spatial awareness is brought to life through the existence of Tau-Tau as a form of holistic, hierarchical, and symbolic awareness. In relation to spatial theory, burial spaces can be perceived as a social process whose existence is not provided by nature, but rather is the result of a continuous socio-cultural production process that is renewed through rituals and memory. In addition, space can also be seen as a cosmological text, particularly in terms of layout, orientation, and markers such as Tau-Tau, which can be read to understand cosmology, social hierarchy, and the relationship between humans and the universe. Space is then also imagined as a living entity that actively communicates (Pallasmaa, 2013) through the presence of Tau-Tau. It is not a dead place, but a place for ancestors to continue to be present, watch over, and maintain the spiritual balance of the Toraja community. In short, Tau-Tau functions as a catalyst that transforms physical space into a space of cosmological experience, where the boundaries between the living and the dead, the profane and the sacred, become fluid and meaningful.

4. Conclusion

Tau-Tau, as wooden sculptures in the narrative of Toraja society's spatial awareness, can be seen in the context of symbolic meaning. Tau-Tau, with its aesthetic appearance, not only functions as an object of art or culture, but also as a physical representation and personification of people who have passed away. Furthermore, Tau-Tau is also imagined as the tangible embodiment of the soul and identity of the deceased. Tau-Tau is not merely a decorative ornament, but more than that, it revives their memory and spiritual existence. In addition, Tau-Tau is also a symbol of deep respect and eternal memory in the collective memory of the Toraja people. Symbolically, Tau-Tau also represents the spiritual presence of the soul and determines social status. The carefully carved and meaningful shapes and appearances of Tau-Tau make them believed to be able to guard and protect the spirits of the deceased from disturbances from the other world. This function emphasizes the importance of Tau-Tau as an intermediary between the real world and the spirit world, which strengthens the spiritual dimension in the daily lives of the Toraja people.

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