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Traditional Defensive Landscapes as Traces of Past Conflicts in Toraya: An Approach to Conflict Archaeology and Collective Memory

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Abstract
Traditional defensive landscapes in Toraja, South Sulawesi, represent important archaeological traces of past conflict, yet they have received limited attention within Indonesian conflict archaeology. This study aimed to examine how traditional defense sites in Toraja reflect historical conflict, environmental adaptation, and collective memory. The research employed a qualitative approach by integrating archaeological survey, documentation of defensive structures, landscape mapping, semi-structured interviews with local informants, and analysis of archival and historical sources. The study focused on four main sites: Ka'do To'ria Fort, Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort, Buntu Pune, and Batu Tengan/Kandora Hill. The findings showed that these sites utilized mountainous topography, karst hills, vertical cliffs, narrow access routes, stone walls, wells, surveillance points, and defensive vegetation as strategic elements of protection. The remains indicate responses to intergroup conflict, regional political pressure, and Dutch colonial expansion. The discussion also revealed that oral traditions concerning Pongtiku, To Barani, and territorial defense continue to preserve these sites as symbols of identity, resistance, and communal memory. In conclusion, Toraja's traditional defensive landscapes are not merely physical remnants of warfare, but integrated cultural landscapes that connect material evidence, spatial strategy, and collective memory. This study contributes to conflict archaeology and supports community-based heritage preservation in Toraja.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a phenomenon inherent in the dynamics of human life since ancient times. From an archaeological perspective, conflict is not only understood as an event of physical violence, but also as a social process that leaves material traces in the form of defensive fortifications, settlement protection systems, weapons, changes in housing patterns, and landscape modification. Through the analysis of these material remains, archaeology is able to reconstruct the adaptation strategies of society, social organizations, and power relations that developed in the past. Conflict thus becomes one of the central aspects of archaeological studies because it reflects human capacity to build defense mechanisms in the midst of a threatening situation (Lipo et al., 2016).

The development of conflict archaeology as a field of study in itself shows an increasing attention to the relationship between violence, materiality, and social memory. According to Schofield, Johnson, and Beck (2002), conflict archaeology not only studies battlefields in a military sense, but also includes various forms of materiality produced by conflict—from

defensive fortifications, logistics lines, refugee spaces, to socially modified landscapes. Thus, conflict is understood as a process that creates spatial transformation and leaves traces that can be analyzed archaeologically (Carman, 2013).

In Indonesia, the study of past conflicts is still dominated by historical and ethnohistorical approaches, while conflict archaeology as a separate analytical framework has not been optimally developed. In fact, various regions in the archipelago hold defensive remnants that show the dynamics of complex conflicts—traditional fortifications in Maluku, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Nusa Tenggara are clear evidence of the ability of local communities to build defense strategies that are adapted to environmental conditions (Bulbeck, 1992; Tanudirjo, 2018; Prasetyo, 2020). The limitations of the study of conflict archaeology have led to defensive remains more often understood as static cultural objects without being analyzed as part of a social system born from the experience of conflict.

Toraja in South Sulawesi is an area that has great potential for the development of conflict archaeological studies. Behind the popularity of tongkonan culture and its death rituals, Toraja has a long history of territorial defense and resistance of indigenous communities (Manapa 2016; Wichmann *et al.* 2025). The Toraja people in the past faced a variety of threats—conflicts between local groups (interlembang), the expansion of kingdoms in South Sulawesi, and the pressure of Dutch colonialism in the early 20th century. This situation has led to the emergence of landscape-based defense systems that utilize the geographical conditions of mountains, karst hills, and narrow valleys as a means of defense (Fernández-Götz dan Roymans 2017).

The existence of Ka'do To'ria Fort (Pongtiku Fort), Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort, Buntu Pune, and Batu Tengan/Bukit Kandora Fort show that the Toraja people had a deep knowledge of the geographical conditions of their territory and were able to integrate it into an effective defense strategy. In addition to leaving material traces, past conflicts in Toraja are also recorded in oral traditions that still live today narratives about war, Pongtiku heroism, and the defense of indigenous territories continue to be passed down through rituals, family stories, and informal community education (Assmann, 2011). In the perspective of collective memory, these narratives are not merely passive recordings but rather social constructs that maintain group identity and connect current generations to past experiences (Erll, 2011).

This research aims to examine the traditional defense landscape in Toraja as a material trace of past conflicts through the integration of three approaches: conflict archaeology, landscape archaeology, and collective memory. The formulation of the problem answered includes: (1) What are the characteristics of the traditional Toraja defensive landscape and the environmental factors that affect it? (2) To what extent do the remnants of defense reflect past conflicts? (3) How does the collective memory of the Toraja people maintain the narrative of conflict and territorial defense? Through the integration of archaeological data, spatial analysis, and oral traditions, this research is expected to contribute to the development of the archaeological study of conflicts in Indonesia as well as enrich the understanding of the social history of the Toraja people.

The archaeology of conflict develops from the realization that conflict is an integral part of human history that has a significant impact on social, political, economic, and cultural change (Sorokin 2017; Siregar 2022). At the beginning of its development, this research was more directed at the identification of weapons, fortifications, and battle sites. However, since the 1990s, the orientation has shifted towards a more comprehensive understanding of how conflict affects social life and how conflict is represented through material culture (Arkush, 2011). In this perspective, conflict not only generates casualties and political changes, but also creates social responses that are manifested in spatial change, the construction of defensive structures, the modification of landscapes, and the development of defensive technologies (Carman, 2013).

In conflict archaeology research, there are a number of material indicators used to identify the existence of conflicts in the past. First, defensive structures in the form of fortifications, walls, trenches, and watchtowers indicate the collective need to control access to the area and improve community security (Lipo et al., 2016). Second, hiding locations in mountainous areas, caves, or hard-to-reach locations indicate survival strategies in times of conflict. Third, the pattern of defensive settlements on hilltops or karst areas reflects security considerations in the selection of living spaces. Fourth, weapon artifacts provide information about military technology and the intensity of conflicts, although they need to be analyzed in conjunction with other archaeological contexts (Carman, 2013).

In modern archaeological studies, the landscape is no longer understood only as a physical environment that is the setting for human activities. Knapp and Ashmore (1999) explain that landscape is a social and cultural construct that is formed through practices, experiences, symbols, and power relations. Ingold (1993) developed the concept of "dwelling perspective" which emphasizes that landscapes are formed through the process of habituation and direct involvement of humans with their environment. This approach allows researchers to understand how a society perceives, utilizes, and organizes its environment according to their social and cultural values.

A defensive landscape is a special form of cultural landscape that develops in response to external threats. Johnson (2012) explains that the defense landscape reflects the ability of communities to integrate environmental knowledge with collective security strategies. The selection of a location on a hilltop, karst area, or easily supervised path shows the critical role of topography in the formation of defense systems. Wheatley and Gillings (2002) emphasized that viewshed analysis and spatial accessibility are important components in understanding the function and meaning of a landscape-based defense system. Thus, in the context of Toraja, the defensive landscape can be understood as the result of the interaction between the social needs for survival and the utilization of the available mountain geographical conditions.

The concept of collective memory was first developed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992) who explained that individual memories never stand alone, but rather are formed and maintained through a social framework. People maintain memories of the past through traditions, rituals, symbols, and narratives that are passed down from generation to generation. Jan Assmann (2011) develops this concept through a separation between "communicative memory" which is informal and lasts for generations, and "cultural memory" which is structured and inherited through texts, rituals, and monuments. In the context of Toraja society, the two forms of memory work in a complementary way in maintaining the narrative of conflict and territorial defense.

The relationship between collective memory and materiality is one of the important themes in contemporary archaeology. According to Harrison (2013), objects, buildings, and cultural landscapes function as media that help people remember the past. Connerton (1989) added that social memory is not only stored in written documents or oral narratives, but also in bodily practices and physical spaces that are routinely visited and interpreted. In the context of conflict, fortifications and defense sites are often symbols that connect communities to their history of struggle. This approach allows researchers to understand how the materiality of conflict remains relevant in the social life of contemporary society, even after the conflict itself has ended (Erll & Nunning, 2010).

METHODS

Research Location and Site Selection

The research was carried out in the Toraja region which administratively includes North Toraja Regency and Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province. Four main defense sites were selected as research objects based on historical considerations, conservation conditions,

representation of defense types, and the existence of oral traditions that are still developing in the community.

Ka'do To'ria Fort (Pongtiku Fort) is located in North Toraja Regency, on the top of a mountain surrounded by vertical rock cliffs with access only through a narrow and steep path. This site has important historical value because it relates to Pongtiku's struggle against the Dutch colonial military expedition in 1905–1906. Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort in Mengkendek District, Tana Toraja, occupies the top of a stone hill at an elevation of about 500 meters above sea level, equipped with stone walls 1–1.5 meters thick, narrow stone gates, and old wells. Buntu Pune in the Kesu' region, North Toraja, is an isolated stone hill in the middle of a rice field that serves as a strategic surveillance post. Batu Tengan Fort/Bukit Kandora in the Mengkendek karst area applies dry-stone walling technology and utilizes natural features in the form of rock niches and karst caves as part of the defense system.

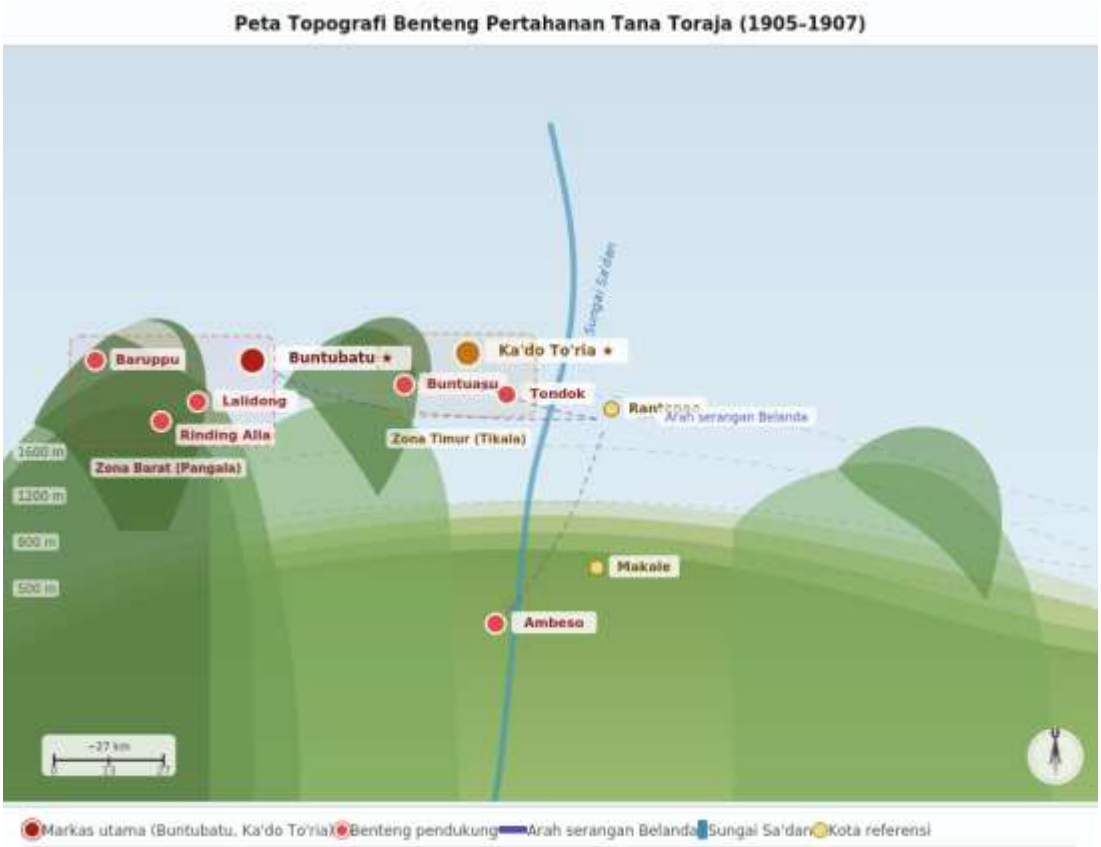

Figure 1. Topographic Map and Distribution of Traditional Defensive Forts in Tana Toraja, 1905–1907

Data Collection

The research uses a qualitative approach by combining archaeological data, spatial data, and ethnographic data. Primary data is collected through four main methods. First, archaeological surveys are conducted to identify site characteristics, environmental conditions, and the relationship between defensive structures and landscapes. Second, the documentation of the defense structure includes recording the shape, size, constituent materials, preservation conditions, and spatial relationships between defense elements through measurements, photography, and site sketches. Third, landscape mapping analyzes elevation, slope slope, visibility, water sources, and accessibility to identify the reasons for site selection. Fourth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with indigenous leaders, community elders, site

keepers, and local communities regarding oral traditions, conflict histories, and socio-cultural significance of sites (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Secondary data was obtained from Dutch colonial archives which contained information about the socio-political conditions of Toraja during the colonial period, archaeological research reports and inventories of previous cultural heritage, as well as historical literature of Toraja from pre-colonial to colonial periods. These sources are used to reinforce interpretation and provide historical context for field findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through four stages. Morphological analysis of defensive structures identifies the shape, size, construction techniques, and functions of various defensive elements. Spatial analysis evaluates the relationship between site location and environmental conditions, including topographic position, site distribution patterns, visibility, and accessibility. Narrative analysis of interview data identified key themes related to conflict, territorial defense, and the symbolic significance of sites in collective memory. The final stage is carried out through triangulation between material data, spatial data, historical sources, and oral traditions to improve the validity of interpretation and produce a comprehensive reconstruction of the traditional Toraja defense system (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Toraja Traditional Defense Landscape

The results of the survey show that all defense sites in Toraja occupy a strategic position on hilltops, mountains, or karst areas that have a low level of affordability and high visibility. This pattern is consistent with defensive principles identified in landscape archaeological research in other mountainous regions (Arkush, 2011; Johnson, 2012). The selection of the location shows the adaptation of the community to geographical conditions for the sake of planned defense.

Ka'do To'ria Fortress sits on a mountaintop surrounded by vertical rock cliffs, creating a very effective natural barrier. Access to the site is through only one narrow and steep path that can be easily defended by a small number of guards. Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort is located on the top of a rock hill at an elevation of about 500 meters above sea level with a visibility that covers the entire valley below and the main routes of human movement. Pune's Buntu is an isolated rock hill in the middle of a rice paddiment, allowing for thorough monitoring of lowland activities—a position that serves as an early warning system against external threats. Meanwhile, the Batu Tengan/Kandora Fort utilizes a karst area with stone recesses and natural caves that allow access control to customary territories through narrow lanes.

Defensive Structure and Tactics

Field observations reveal variations in the shape of defensive structures adapted to local environmental conditions, demonstrating a significant level of technical knowledge. In Ka'do To'ria Fortress, the main defensive element is a combination of natural stone cliffs and an additional stone arrangement as a barricade. The most prominent is the tradition of using tirrik pepper, which is a chili liquid sprayed on Dutch troops trying to climb a cliff—an example of the creativity of using local resources in warfare. The presence of stone mortars at the top of the fort indicates domestic activity that supports the long-term defense function.

Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort has neatly arranged stone walls with a width of 1–1.5 meters, a narrow stone gate as an access control, and a well inside the fort complex. The well is a critical logistical element that allows defense to take place in the long term despite being surrounded. In Buntu Pune, the defensive function is not realized through massive stone walls, but through the use of hills as natural watchtowers, equipped with thorny bamboo vegetation deliberately planted on the hillside as a barrier to life. At Batu Tengan/Kandora Fort, dry-stone

walling technology or an arrangement of stones without adhesive is used together with rock crevices as a hiding place for archers and spearthrowers.

Oral tradition data reveals the multi-layered defense pattern applied by the Toraja people. The first layer is in the forest and valley areas as a reconnaissance area; a second layer on a hillside with thorny bamboo obstacles and narrow paths; The third layer on the core fortress with stone walls, logistics, and water sources. This defense system demonstrates a sophisticated tactical understanding of the gradual management of threats.

4.3 Indications of Past Conflicts in Material Remains

Based on the analysis of archaeological data crossed with oral traditions and historical sources, these defense sites are closely related to various forms of conflicts that occurred in Toraja. The Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort is associated with defense efforts against internal conflicts between customary territories (Untulak Untu') as well as the threat of expansion from outside kingdoms such as Bone and Enrekang. The construction of narrow gates and thick walls indicates anticipation of organized attacks from greater external forces.

The Ka'do To'ria fortress provides the most explicit material evidence of large-scale conflict. This fort became a base for Pongtiku's defense in the guerrilla war against the Dutch colonial military expedition in 1905–1906. The use of rugged mountainous landscapes as a means of guerrilla warfare shows a high tactical adaptability on the part of the Toraja. The tradition of using poisonous chopsticks, rolling stones, and ambushes through hidden passages in karst areas is also recorded in oral tradition as an effective defense technique. The Batu Tengan/Kandora fort, in addition to a defense function, also has a high symbolic value in the tradition of origin (Tomanurung) of the Toraja people, showing that the defense space also functions as a sacred space.

Collective Memory Regarding Conflict and Defense

The results of the interviews show that the memory of past conflicts is still very strong in Toraja society. The narrative of Pongtiku and his struggle against the Dutch is a core part of the collective memory passed down through family stories, traditional texts, and community memorials. In addition, stories about inter-lembang wars, the construction of fortifications by mutual cooperation, and the courage of the To Barani (traditional warriors) continue to be inherited through oral traditions and traditional rituals. The sustainability of such memories suggests that traditional fortifications serve not only as archaeological relics, but also as markers of social identity and collective history that remain alive (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011).

Table 1. Synthesis of Characteristics of Toraja Traditional Defense Sites

Website	Defense Type	Conflict Context	Key Defensive Elements	Collective Memory Status
Ka'do To'ria Fortress	Defensive mountains	Dutch colonial resistance 1905-1906	Vertical cliff, pepper pull, single lane	Very powerful; Pongtiku's narrative lives an active life
Tangdi Rompo Fortress	Fortified stone hills	Inter-lembang conflict & government expansion	Stone walls, narrow arches, wells	Strong; The Story of the War Between Lembang
Buntu Pune	Surveillance post	Communal defence of Kesu'	Isolated hills, prickly bamboo	Medium; Tradition of the Territorial Guard

Kandora Hill	Karst defensive-sacred	Customary centre protection	Dry-stone walls, stone niches, karst caves	Strong; related to Tomanurung's narrative

Source: Field survey results and interviews, 2026

Defense Landscape as a Product of Social-Ecological Adaptation

The results show that the choice of the location of traditional forts in Toraja is greatly influenced by the interaction between defense needs and the characteristics of the local landscape. Relatively uniform patterns—locations with low affordability, high visibility, and strong natural protection—are consistent with archaeological findings of conflict in other mountainous regions of Southeast Asia, such as the Ifugao mountain fortress in the Philippines and the Toraja Raya defense system (Arkush, 2011; Bentley, 2019). From a landscape archaeological perspective, this condition shows that landscapes are not just the backdrop of human activity, but rather spaces that are actively shaped and utilized to meet the security needs of communities.

The characteristics of Toraja's defensive landscape show a typical adaptation strategy to the mountainous environment. In contrast to lowland communities who generally build massive fortifications with a system of trenches and walls on a large scale, the Toraja people rely more on hard-to-reach natural terrain as the main defense mechanism. This strategy allows groups with limited resources to defend their territory from greater threats—a form of ecological rationality in defense planning (Earle, 2017). Landscape modification through the planting of thorny bamboo, the construction of dry-stone walls, and the construction of wells in fortifications show that the community is engaged in long-term defense planning that is integrated with natural resource management.

Comparison with traditional defense systems in other regions of South Sulawesi shows the uniqueness of the Toraja approach. Meanwhile, the Bugis-Makassar royal forts were generally built in lowland or coastal areas with massive construction and oriented towards the control of trade routes (Prasetyo, 2020), Toraja fortress developed in a mountainous environment by relying on natural topographic features. These differences reflect responses to different threat characters: threats to coastal kingdoms are more expansive and maritime-oriented, while threats to Toraja mountain communities are more defensive to indigenous territories against outside penetration.

The Materiality of Conflict: From Defensive Functions to Political Representations

In the perspective of conflict archaeology, the remains of Toraja defense can be understood as the materiality of the conflict, which is physical evidence that reflects the historical experience of the community in dealing with situations of insecurity (Carman, 2013; González-Ruibal, 2018). Different from the traditional view that understands fortresses solely as military structures, this approach sees fortresses as social products that reflect political conditions, community organizations, and societal adaptation strategies. In this context, every structural element—stone walls, gates, wells, lookouts—has a social significance that goes beyond its physical function.

The Ka'do To'ria Fortress provides the most explicit example of the relationship between materiality and political conflict. The construction and use of this fort in the context of anticolonial resistance represents the resistance of the Toraja people to Dutch domination. Within the archaeological framework of the conflict, the site became not only a battle site but also a symbol of resistance that crystallized the values of courage and indigenous sovereignty. González-Ruibal's (2018) research on colonial conflict sites in Africa shows a similar pattern in which indigenous community defense sites serve as spaces for planned political resistance.

The Pune Deadlock case demonstrates another dimension of the materiality of the conflict: the surveillance network-based defense system. The existence of observation posts

integrated into the communal defense network shows a fairly high level of social coordination in dealing with threats. This is consistent with Keeley's (1996) argument that an effective defense system requires not only physical construction but also a social organization capable of collectively activating and managing defense resources. These findings show that the Toraja community has a social structure that supports community mobilization in crisis situations (Earle, 2017).

Collective Memory and the Transformation of Defense Site Meaning

The role of collective memory in maintaining the narrative of the Toraja conflict shows dynamics that are relevant to the theories of Halbwachs (1992) and Assmann (2011). The narrative of Pongtiku's struggle, the construction of the fortress by mutual cooperation, and the courage of To Barani is not only preserved as historical knowledge, but actively functions in the formation of today's social identity. Connerton (1989) explains that social memory is maintained not only through texts and narratives, but also through commemorative practices that connect the present with the past. In Toraja, traditional rituals that refer to historical conflict events serve as commemorative mechanisms that strengthen social cohesion and communal identity.

The transformation of the meaning of a defense site from a military space to a cultural heritage is a process that is well documented in the study of heritage studies (Harrison, 2013). In Toraja, this process is very clearly visible: fortifications that once served as a means of physical defense are now understood as symbols of history, cultural identity, and community pride. This transformation is not just a shift in function, but also a process of reproduction of meaning influenced by contemporary social needs. Toraja people selectively chose certain aspects of the history of the conflict—especially those related to courage, solidarity, and resistance to colonialism—to be highlighted in their collective identity narratives (Erll, 2011; Erll & Nunning, 2010).

These findings contribute to the debate in heritage studies about the relationship between "authorized heritage discourse" and "alternative heritage". Toraja defense sites do not receive the official recognition equivalent of tongkonan or tau-tau in the national cultural heritage narrative, but in local communities these sites have a strong historical resonance. This gap between official recognition and local memory shows the importance of a more inclusive and community-based heritage approach in the management of cultural heritage in Indonesia (Tanudirjo, 2018).

Implications for the Archaeology of Conflict in Indonesia

The Toraja case makes an important contribution to the development of the archaeological study of conflict in Indonesia because it shows that conflicts do not always leave evidence in the form of battlefields or large amounts of weapons artifacts. On the contrary, conflicts can be reconstructed through the analysis of landscapes, patterns of space utilization, defense structures, and oral traditions that are still developing in society (Carman, 2013; Tanudirjo, 2018). An integrative approach that combines conflict archaeology, landscape archaeology, and collective memory has been shown to yield a more comprehensive understanding than the analysis of each approach separately.

Methodologically, this study shows the importance of triangulation between archaeological data, spatial analysis, historical sources, and oral traditions, especially in societies that have limited written traditions but still maintain historical memory through social and cultural mechanisms. This model of approach has broad relevance to be applied in similar research in various regions of the archipelago, including traditional fortifications in Maluku, Nusa Tenggara, and Kalimantan that until now have received little attention in the archaeological framework of conflict (Prasetyo, 2020; Sofian, 2020). The analytical framework built in this study—conflict as a social process that produces materiality, materiality that shapes

the cultural landscape, and landscape that becomes a medium of collective memory—can be a reference model for the development of the archaeological study of conflict in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Based on the reviewed manuscript, the research concluded that traditional defensive landscapes in Toraja represented more than physical remains of past warfare; they functioned as integrated cultural landscapes shaped by geography, conflict experience, and collective memory. The study found that sites such as Ka'do To'ria Fort, Tangdi Rompo Silanan Fort, Buntu Pune, and Batu Tengan/Kandora Hill used mountainous topography, karst formations, narrow access routes, stone walls, surveillance points, wells, and defensive vegetation as strategic defense elements. These remains reflected the Toraja community's adaptive response to intergroup conflicts, external political pressure, and Dutch colonial expansion. Moreover, oral traditions concerning Pongtiku, To Barani, and territorial defense showed that these sites continue to serve as markers of identity, historical consciousness, and communal pride. Thus, the study contributed to conflict archaeology by demonstrating that material remains, spatial organization, and social memory can be integrated to reconstruct indigenous experiences of conflict and resistance.

Future research is recommended to strengthen the empirical and methodological dimensions of this study through more systematic spatial analysis, including GIS mapping, viewshed analysis, remote sensing, and comparative landscape modelling. Further studies may also expand the number of defensive sites observed across Toraja and compare them with traditional fortification systems in other regions of Indonesia or Southeast Asia to identify broader patterns of indigenous defense strategies. In addition, future research should involve deeper ethnographic documentation of oral traditions, community narratives, ritual practices, and local heritage management to ensure that archaeological interpretation remains grounded in community perspectives. Collaboration among archaeologists, local governments, cultural heritage agencies, and indigenous communities is also suggested to support conservation, education, and sustainable cultural tourism based on Toraja's defensive heritage.

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