



**BEYOND ECONOMIC RATIONALITY: DEVELOPING SACRED TOURISM
ACCOUNTING THROUGH CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS IN TIMOR-LESTE**

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Abstract

This study critically examines the dominance of economic rationality in tourism governance and proposes Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory (STAT) as an alternative accountability framework. Drawing on critical hermeneutics—integrating Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons, Ricoeur's symbolic interpretation, and Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality—the research was conducted across five sacred tourism destinations in Timor-Leste. Through phenomenological hermeneutics with 45 informants, five thematic findings emerge: (1) Sacred Place Beyond Tourism, (2) Ancestral Accountability, (3) Resistance Against Commodification, (4) Spiritual Well-Being, and (5) Holistic Tourism Value. STAT proposes that tourism value is constituted by: Sacred Tourism Value = Economic Value + Spiritual Value + Cultural Value + Ancestral Value + Sustainability Value. This framework extends conventional tourism accounting toward Holistic Tourism Accountability—accountability not only to economic stakeholders, but to culture, ancestors, and future generations.

Keywords: Sacred Tourism Accounting; Critical Hermeneutics; Timor-Leste; Holistic Accountability; Cultural Value

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the world's most dynamic economic sectors, contributing substantially to employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, infrastructure development, and regional competitiveness. For many developing countries and small island states, tourism is increasingly positioned as a strategic pathway toward economic diversification and sustainable development. International development institutions have highlighted tourism's capacity to stimulate local entrepreneurship, strengthen human capital, and generate multiplier effects across multiple sectors of the economy (World Bank, 2023). In Timor-Leste, tourism has been identified as a priority sector for post-oil economic transformation, reflecting the government's efforts to reduce dependence on extractive industries and establish a more resilient development model (Timor-Leste Government, 2022). Nevertheless, the growing importance of tourism has intensified debates concerning how tourism success should be measured and which forms of value tourism governance systems are designed to recognise.



Contemporary tourism planning remains strongly shaped by economic rationality. Destination performance is predominantly assessed through quantitative indicators such as visitor arrivals, tourism expenditure, foreign exchange earnings, hotel occupancy rates, and contributions to gross domestic product. Although these indicators provide useful information for policy evaluation and investment decisions, they narrow the understanding of tourism value to what can be monetised and statistically represented. Critics have argued that the dominance of economic metrics obscures the social, cultural, environmental, and ethical dimensions of tourism development, resulting in forms of governance that privilege efficiency and market expansion over community wellbeing and cultural continuity (Sharpley, 2009; Weaver, 2006). From a cultural economics perspective, many forms of heritage value—including symbolic, spiritual, and identity-based values—cannot be adequately reduced to market prices or financial indicators (Throsby, 2001). Consequently, existing tourism evaluation frameworks often fail to account for the plurality of meanings embedded within destinations.

The limitations of economically driven tourism governance become especially visible in the context of sacred and spiritual tourism. Unlike conventional leisure tourism, sacred tourism involves experiences rooted in religious devotion, pilgrimage, self-transformation, and encounters with places regarded as spiritually meaningful. Sacred sites embody multiple layers of significance that extend beyond their exchange value, including symbolic meanings, ancestral relationships, collective memory, and moral obligations toward future generations (Smith, 1992; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Research on pilgrimage and spiritual travel demonstrates that visitors are often motivated by existential concerns, authenticity-seeking, and spiritual fulfilment rather than recreational consumption alone (Belhassen et al., 2008; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). As destinations become integrated into tourism markets, however, sacred places frequently undergo processes of commodification in which cultural and spiritual meanings are reformulated into consumable experiences (MacCannell, 1976). Such transformations generate persistent tensions between economic development objectives and the preservation of sacred values, raising important questions regarding authenticity, stewardship, and community agency (Olsen & Timothy, 2018).

These tensions are particularly pronounced in Timor-Leste. As one of Southeast Asia's youngest nations, Timor-Leste possesses a distinctive cultural landscape shaped by the interaction of Indigenous cosmologies, Catholic traditions, and memories of anti-colonial resistance. Sacred houses (*uma lulik*), ritual sites, pilgrimage routes, and memorial spaces associated with the struggle for independence continue to play a central role in the construction of social identity and community cohesion. Similar to other post-conflict destinations, heritage tourism development in Timor-Leste involves complex negotiations between economic reconstruction, identity formation, and the preservation of collective memory (Winter, 2007). Moreover, small island and emerging economies frequently encounter challenges in balancing tourism growth with cultural sustainability and local participation (Harrison, 2013). While recent policy initiatives have highlighted the country's untapped tourism potential, particularly in relation to cultural heritage and nature-based experiences (World Bank, 2023), existing tourism policies and performance



indicators continue to prioritise economic outcomes while providing limited mechanisms for recognising spiritual significance, community custodianship, and intergenerational responsibilities. Consequently, sacred places risk being redefined as economic assets rather than understood as living spaces of cultural and spiritual meaning.

This imbalance reflects a broader challenge identified within critical accounting scholarship. Accounting is not a neutral technology that objectively records reality; rather, it constitutes a social and political practice that shapes organisational priorities by determining what is considered visible, valuable, and accountable (Gray, 2002). Critical accounting scholars have long argued that accounting systems are socially constructed and embedded within broader institutional contexts and power relations (Laughlin, 1987). Consequently, conventional accounting frameworks tend to privilege measurable economic outcomes while marginalising intangible dimensions such as cultural identity, social relationships, and ethical commitments (Gallhofer & Haslam, 2003). Recent scholarship has therefore called for more dialogic and participatory forms of accountability capable of incorporating diverse stakeholder perspectives and plural conceptions of value (Bebbington et al., 2007; Brown & Dillard, 2015). Such concerns are particularly relevant in tourism contexts, where existing reporting systems frequently prioritise financial performance and destination competitiveness while neglecting the social and symbolic values associated with sacred sites (Cooper & Morgan, 2013).

Addressing these limitations requires an interpretive framework capable of engaging with the multiple meanings embedded in sacred tourism. Critical hermeneutics offers such a framework by integrating interpretive understanding with ideological critique. Gadamer (2004) argues that meaning emerges through historically situated dialogue in which understanding is shaped by tradition, language, and contextual experience. Ricoeur (1976) further suggests that symbols and narratives contain a surplus of meaning that exceeds literal interpretation, making hermeneutic inquiry particularly relevant for the study of sacred places and ritual practices. However, interpretation alone is insufficient if it fails to interrogate the power relations embedded within systems of representation. Habermas (1971) therefore emphasises that knowledge production is shaped by human interests and institutional structures that may distort communication and reinforce domination. Through the integration of interpretation and critique, critical hermeneutics enables researchers to examine not only how sacred tourism is experienced and understood but also how particular meanings become institutionalised within policies, reporting systems, and development agendas (Habermas, 1984).

Although previous studies have extensively examined pilgrimage motivations, destination management, authenticity, and sustainable tourism, limited attention has been devoted to the accounting implications of sacred tourism. Existing accounting frameworks remain insufficiently equipped to recognise cultural and spiritual values that resist monetisation (Throsby, 2001). While social and environmental accounting research has expanded accountability beyond financial performance, limited attention has been paid to tourism settings characterised by sacred meanings and plural value systems (Gray et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2015). Furthermore, tourism reporting



practices often serve strategic legitimacy functions rather than facilitating meaningful engagement with local communities and their value systems (Bebbington et al., 2008). Consequently, important dimensions of cultural stewardship, intergenerational responsibility, and spiritual significance remain underrepresented within tourism governance and accountability mechanisms.

In response to these limitations, this study proposes the concept of Sacred Tourism Accounting (STA) as an alternative framework for understanding and evaluating tourism development in sacred contexts. STA moves beyond economically centred models by incorporating spiritual, cultural, social, and intergenerational dimensions of value into processes of accountability and decision-making. Drawing upon critical hermeneutics, the framework conceptualises sacred sites not as commodities to be optimised but as socially constructed spaces of meaning embedded within histories, identities, and relationships. Accordingly, this study asks: how can critical hermeneutics contribute to the development of an accounting framework capable of recognising the multidimensional values of sacred tourism in Timor-Leste? By addressing this question, the study contributes to critical accounting research through the extension of accountability beyond financial metrics and advances sustainable tourism scholarship by offering a value framework that foregrounds sacredness, cultural continuity, and community stewardship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Beyond Economic Rationality

Tourism has become a strategic sector for economic growth and regional development, particularly in developing countries seeking to diversify their economic structures. International organisations and national governments commonly assess tourism performance through quantitative indicators such as tourist arrivals, tourism receipts, employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, and contributions to gross domestic product (GDP) (UN Tourism, 2024). Such indicators play an important role in policy evaluation and investment planning because they facilitate benchmarking across destinations and provide measurable evidence of tourism's economic contribution (World Bank, 2023). Consequently, tourism governance has become increasingly shaped by instrumental rationality, in which destinations are evaluated primarily according to their efficiency, competitiveness, and growth potential (Sharpley, 2009).

Despite their practical utility, economically centred approaches provide only a partial understanding of tourism value. Sustainable tourism scholars have argued that excessive emphasis on growth-oriented indicators frequently obscures the social, cultural, environmental, and ethical dimensions of tourism development (Weaver, 2006). Tourism destinations often generate symbolic, historical, and spiritual values that cannot be adequately represented through market-based metrics alone. From a cultural economics perspective, heritage assets embody multiple forms of value—including aesthetic, identity-based, and cultural significance—that resist monetary valuation (Throsby, 2001). Furthermore, tourism development may alter local meanings and community relationships over time, a process that remains largely invisible within conventional destination performance frameworks (Butler, 1980).



These limitations become particularly evident in destinations characterised by strong spiritual and cultural traditions. Sacred sites function not merely as tourism attractions but also as spaces of memory, ritual, and identity through which communities maintain relationships with ancestors, cultural heritage, and collective histories (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). When tourism governance relies predominantly on economic indicators, these dimensions often become marginalised because they cannot be easily translated into financial terms. Consequently, there is an increasing need for alternative approaches capable of recognising the multidimensional values embedded within sacred tourism contexts.

Sacred Tourism and the Challenge of Commodification

The growing literature on spiritual and religious tourism has challenged conventional assumptions regarding tourist motivations and destination experiences. Sacred tourism encompasses travel associated with pilgrimage, religious devotion, spiritual fulfilment, self-discovery, and existential reflection (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Rather than constituting distinct categories, tourism and pilgrimage increasingly exist along a continuum in which visitors combine recreational activities with spiritual aspirations and identity formation processes (Smith, 1992). Research has demonstrated that spiritual tourists are often motivated by the search for authenticity, meaning, and transformative experiences rather than purely hedonic consumption (Belhassen et al., 2008). Consequently, sacred tourism involves complex interactions among visitors, local communities, religious institutions, and culturally significant places.

The search for authenticity represents a central theme within sacred tourism studies. MacCannell (1976) argues that modern tourists seek authentic experiences as a response to the perceived alienation of contemporary life. In sacred settings, authenticity extends beyond material objects to encompass emotional, symbolic, and existential dimensions of experience. Sacred sites derive their significance not solely from physical attributes but from their connections to ritual practices, collective memory, and ancestral relationships (Norman, 2011). As a result, the meanings associated with sacred places are socially constructed and continuously negotiated among multiple stakeholders (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

However, the integration of sacred destinations into tourism markets creates tensions between economic development and cultural preservation. As destinations become incorporated into branding strategies and tourism promotion campaigns, spiritual meanings may be reformulated into consumable products designed to meet visitor expectations (Olsen & Timothy, 2018). This process risks transforming sacred places into economic assets while undermining the cultural and spiritual foundations that give them meaning. Although existing research has generated valuable insights into pilgrimage experiences, authenticity, and destination management, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how sacred values are represented within tourism governance systems and accountability mechanisms.



Critical Accounting and Sacred Value

Critical accounting scholarship challenges the assumption that accounting functions as a neutral technology for representing organisational reality. Instead, accounting is understood as a socially constructed practice that shapes priorities and power relations by determining what becomes visible, measurable, and accountable (Gray, 2002). Conventional accounting systems privilege economic values because they are designed primarily to support market transactions, managerial control, and financial performance evaluation. Consequently, intangible dimensions such as cultural identity, ethical commitments, social relationships, and spiritual meanings often remain excluded because they resist quantification (Laughlin, 1987).

In response to these limitations, social and environmental accounting research has sought to expand accountability beyond financial performance by incorporating broader stakeholder concerns and non-financial dimensions of value (Gray et al., 2010). Scholars have argued that accounting systems should facilitate stakeholder engagement and acknowledge plural conceptions of value rather than prioritising the interests of managers and investors alone (Bebbington et al., 2007). Dialogic accounting approaches further emphasise the importance of democratic participation, multiple perspectives, and the recognition of contested values within accountability processes (Brown & Dillard, 2015). From this perspective, accounting should function not merely as a mechanism of control but as a medium for negotiating diverse social interests.

Despite these developments, critical accounting scholarship has paid limited attention to contexts characterised by sacred meanings and cultural complexity. Existing studies have focused predominantly on environmental sustainability, corporate responsibility, and stakeholder engagement, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to the accounting implications of spiritual value, ancestral relationships, and cultural continuity (Bebbington et al., 2008). Tourism reporting systems continue to prioritise financial performance and destination competitiveness, thereby reinforcing forms of economic reductionism that render sacred values invisible (Cooper & Morgan, 2013). This gap highlights the need for alternative accountability frameworks capable of recognising the multidimensional values embedded within sacred tourism contexts.

Critical Hermeneutics as an Analytical Framework

To address the limitations of economically centred tourism governance and conventional accounting systems, this study adopts critical hermeneutics as its overarching theoretical framework. Critical hermeneutics combines interpretive inquiry with ideological critique, enabling researchers to explore both the meanings attached to social phenomena and the power relations that shape those meanings (Crotty, 1998). This approach is particularly relevant for sacred tourism because sacred sites are constituted through narratives, symbols, rituals, and historical experiences that cannot be adequately understood through positivist approaches alone.

The framework integrates the complementary contributions of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Habermas. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics emphasises that understanding is historically



situated and mediated through language, tradition, and prior assumptions (Gadamer, 2004). His concept of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) suggests that meaning emerges through dialogue among different perspectives rather than through objective observation. Ricoeur (1976) extends hermeneutic inquiry by arguing that symbols and narratives possess a surplus of meaning that exceeds literal interpretation. Sacred landscapes, rituals, and collective memories can therefore be understood as symbolic expressions through which communities construct identity and communicate relationships with ancestors, spirituality, and place.

While Gadamer and Ricoeur provide tools for understanding and interpretation, Habermas contributes a critical perspective for examining the institutional conditions under which meanings are produced and legitimised. Habermas (1971) argues that knowledge is shaped by underlying interests, while modern societies increasingly privilege instrumental rationality over communicative understanding. The dominance of visitor numbers, tourism receipts, and destination competitiveness metrics reflects this broader tendency, as economic efficiency becomes the primary criterion for evaluating tourism development (Habermas, 1984). Consequently, spiritual significance, cultural stewardship, and intergenerational responsibilities are often marginalised because they cannot be easily translated into economic terms. By integrating Gadamer's focus on understanding, Ricoeur's emphasis on interpretation, and Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality, critical hermeneutics provides a foundation for developing Sacred Tourism Accounting as a dialogic and interpretive framework capable of recognising multiple forms of value beyond economic rationality.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a critical-interpretive paradigm grounded in phenomenological hermeneutics. The research design combines interpretive inquiry with critical analysis to explore how diverse stakeholders construct, negotiate, and contest the meanings of sacred tourism in Timor-Leste. Rather than treating tourism value as an objective and measurable phenomenon, this study assumes that meanings associated with sacred sites are socially and historically constituted through language, symbols, rituals, and lived experience (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenological hermeneutics is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to understand informants' lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) while simultaneously examining the institutional conditions that shape those experiences. The approach integrates the interpretive traditions of Gadamer and Ricoeur with Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality. Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons facilitates dialogue among multiple stakeholder perspectives, Ricoeur's interpretive framework enables the analysis of symbols and narratives embedded in sacred places, and Habermas provides a critical lens for interrogating the dominance of economic rationality within tourism governance (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1976; Habermas, 1984).

Accordingly, this study does not aim to produce generalisable causal explanations. Instead, it seeks to generate contextually grounded insights into how sacred value is understood,



represented, and marginalised within existing tourism accountability systems, ultimately contributing to the development of Sacred Tourism Accounting (STA).

Research Sites

Timor-Leste was selected as a critical empirical case because it represents a post-conflict society undergoing economic diversification through tourism development while simultaneously maintaining strong Indigenous and religious traditions. The country offers a unique context in which sacred values, collective memory, and economic aspirations intersect. The coexistence of Indigenous cosmologies, Catholic traditions, and historical narratives of resistance makes Timor-Leste particularly suitable for examining tensions between sacred value and economic rationality.

Fieldwork was conducted across five culturally and spiritually significant locations selected through purposive sampling. Site selection was guided by four criteria: (1) the presence of places regarded as sacred by local communities; (2) active involvement of Indigenous communities in destination management; (3) evidence of potential tensions between economic and sacred values; and (4) relevance to the development of Sacred Tourism Accounting.

Table 1. Research Sites and Their Cultural Significance

No.	Location	Cultural significance
1	Dili	Capital city; intersection of independence history and religious heritage
2	Aileu	Highland ritual sites and Indigenous uma lulik (sacred houses)
3	Baucau	Cultural landscapes and ancestral ritual centres
4	Liquiçá	Coastal sacred sites and places of historical significance
5	Ermera	Coffee heritage landscapes and traditional governance systems

These sites represent diverse geographical, cultural, and institutional settings, enabling the exploration of multiple interpretations of sacred tourism across Timor-Leste.

Informants and Sampling Strategy

Data were collected from 45 informants using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling enabled the identification of individuals possessing relevant knowledge and experience related to sacred tourism, while snowball sampling facilitated access to community networks and cultural custodians whose perspectives might otherwise remain inaccessible.

The sampling strategy was designed to capture diverse stakeholder horizons and reflect the plurality of meanings associated with sacred tourism. Participants included religious leaders, Indigenous leaders, government officials, tourism business practitioners, international tourists, and local tourists.



Table 2. Informant Groups and Sampling Rationale

Informant group	Number	Rationale
Religious leaders	5	Custodians of spiritual values and religious interpretation
Indigenous leaders	6	Guardians of ancestral heritage and customary law
Government officials	7	Tourism policy actors representing institutional priorities
Business practitioners	10	Economic actors within the tourism value chain
International tourists	10	External interpreters of sacred destinations
Local tourists	7	Internal cultural stakeholders
Total	45	Subject to the principle of data saturation

Participant recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of themes and the absence of substantively new insights across stakeholder groups.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected between 2024 and 2025 through three complementary methods: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were guided by broad thematic questions concerning the meanings attached to sacred destinations, perceived tensions between economic and spiritual values, understandings of tourism success, and possibilities for balancing development with cultural preservation.

Participant observation was conducted at sacred sites, cultural ceremonies, community meetings, and tourism-related events to capture lived practices and contextual interactions. Field notes documented symbolic expressions, ritual activities, and stakeholder interactions associated with sacred tourism. Documentary materials included national tourism policies, government reports, UN Tourism statistics, local cultural documents, development strategies, and publications from international organisations covering the period 2015–2025.

Data analysis followed a critical hermeneutic process involving iterative movement between text, context, and interpretation. Analysis proceeded through four interconnected stages. First, Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons guided efforts to understand diverse stakeholder perspectives and identify shared meanings associated with sacred tourism. Second, Ricoeur's interpretive approach was employed to analyse symbols, narratives, rituals, and cultural practices in order to uncover deeper layers of meaning. Third, Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality was used to identify how economic assumptions shape tourism governance and marginalise non-economic values. Finally, insights from these stages were synthesised into the conceptual development of Sacred Tourism Accounting.

Coding was conducted iteratively through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout the process, analysis followed the hermeneutic circle, involving continuous movement between individual accounts, broader socio-cultural contexts, and emerging theoretical interpretations. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos documenting assumptions, interpretive decisions, and evolving understandings throughout the study.



To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement and member checking with selected participants. Transferability was supported through rich contextual descriptions of research sites and stakeholder perspectives. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting data collection procedures, coding decisions, and analytical reflections (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS

Analysis of interview transcripts, participant observations, field notes, and documentary evidence generated five interconnected themes. These themes emerged consistently across stakeholder groups and were refined through iterative movement within the hermeneutic circle, linking participants' narratives, socio-cultural contexts, and theoretical interpretation. Together, the findings reveal that sacred tourism in Timor-Leste is understood not primarily as an economic activity but as a multidimensional practice embedded in spirituality, ancestral relationships, cultural continuity, and collective identity.

1. Sacred Places Beyond Tourism: Sacred Sites as Spiritual Spaces

Participants consistently rejected the framing of sacred sites as purely economic assets or tourism products. Across all stakeholder groups, three dominant meanings emerged: sacred sites were understood as spaces of worship and divine encounter, repositories of ancestral heritage, and symbols of collective identity. Religious leaders emphasised the role of sacred places in sustaining spiritual relationships with God, while Indigenous leaders highlighted their responsibility to preserve ancestral traditions. Government officials and tourism practitioners acknowledged the economic potential of these sites but recognised that their value extended beyond market considerations.

Table 4. Coding Structure for Sacred Places Beyond Tourism

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Sacred places, houses of worship	Deep spiritual meaning	Sacred Value
Ancestral houses, cultural trust	Intergenerational heritage	Ancestral Value
Rituals, customary ceremonies, identity	Collective sacredness	Sacred Place

Field observations confirmed that uma lulik (sacred houses) and traditional ceremonies continue to function as living institutions rather than static heritage artefacts. Even in locations experiencing increased tourism activity, sacred rituals remained governed by customary rules and spiritual obligations rather than visitor expectations. For local communities, the value of a destination lies not in tourist volume but in its capacity to sustain relationships with ancestors,



maintain collective memory, and reproduce cultural identity. These findings challenge dominant tourism frameworks that conceptualise destinations primarily as economic products and support interpretive perspectives that view sacred places as socially constructed spaces of meaning.

2. Ancestral Accountability: Extending the Boundaries of Accountability

A second theme concerned the emergence of accountability relationships that extend beyond conventional institutional frameworks. Participants described accountability as operating simultaneously in three directions: vertical accountability to God, transgenerational accountability to ancestors, and forward accountability to future generations. Indigenous leaders repeatedly emphasised that obligations to ancestors possess moral authority equal to—or greater than—formal legal obligations.

Table 5. Coding Structure for Ancestral Accountability

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Ancestral trust	Cultural-spiritual responsibility	Ancestral Accountability
Preserving heritage, protecting sacred sites	Intergenerational stewardship	Intergenerational Responsibility
Customary restrictions, ritual obligations	Compliance with spiritual norms	Sacred Responsibility

Interview data revealed that the destruction or inappropriate use of sacred sites was understood not merely as cultural loss but as a violation of ancestral trust. Participants frequently described themselves as custodians rather than owners of sacred places, emphasising their responsibility to transmit cultural knowledge and sacred practices to future generations. This perspective broadens existing accountability frameworks by introducing forms of responsibility that cannot be adequately explained through relationships between organisations, governments, and stakeholders alone.

From a critical accounting perspective, these findings suggest that accountability extends beyond contemporary human actors to include ancestors, cultural heritage, and unborn generations. The concept of ancestral accountability therefore represents an alternative form of accountability grounded in spiritual obligations and cultural continuity rather than contractual or legal arrangements.

3. Resistance Against Commodification: Ethical Limits to Market Logic

Although participants generally supported tourism development and recognised its economic benefits, they consistently articulated ethical boundaries regarding the commercialisation of sacred spaces. Informants accepted tourism as a means of generating livelihoods and supporting local development but strongly opposed the transformation of rituals, sacred symbols, and ceremonial spaces into commercial spectacles.


Table 6. Coding Structure for Resistance Against Commodification

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Rituals are not performances	Ethical limits to commercialisation	Resistance Against Commodification
Rejecting cultural exploitation	Protection of spiritual heritage	Cultural Defence
Sacredness transcends markets	Critique of economic rationality	Anti-Commodification Logic

Participants identified several practices considered unacceptable, including the staging of rituals solely for entertainment purposes, unrestricted access to sacred spaces, and the use of Indigenous symbols detached from their cultural meanings. Indigenous leaders argued that economic benefits should never justify actions that compromise sacred values or violate customary norms.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a particularly revealing context for understanding these tensions. During periods of restricted mobility and declining visitor numbers, sacred rituals and community practices continued uninterrupted despite the absence of tourism revenues. Participants interpreted this experience as evidence that spiritual and cultural value exists independently of economic activity. From a Habermasian perspective, these findings reflect community resistance against the colonisation of the lifeworld by market logics. Rather than rejecting tourism itself, communities reject the subordination of sacred meaning to economic rationality.

4. Spiritual Well-Being as an Alternative Measure of Tourism Success

Participants across stakeholder groups consistently argued that the most meaningful outcomes of sacred tourism are experiential and spiritual rather than economic. Religious leaders, local communities, and both domestic and international tourists emphasised inner peace, cultural understanding, spiritual transformation, and social harmony as important indicators of tourism success.

Table 7. Coding Structure for Spiritual Well-Being

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Peacefulness, inner calm	Deep spiritual experience	Spiritual Well-Being
Self-reflection, new awareness	Personal transformation	Transformational Experience
Respecting and understanding culture	Socio-cultural awareness	Cultural Awareness

International and local tourists frequently reported that their most meaningful experiences derived not from tourism facilities or service quality but from opportunities to engage with local communities and learn about the spiritual significance of sacred places. Encounters with uma lulik, traditional rituals, and ancestral narratives generated experiences of reflection, connection, and cultural appreciation that extended beyond recreational consumption.



Through a Ricoeurian lens, these findings suggest that sacred symbols possess meanings that exceed their material form. Sacred tourism therefore generates transformational value that cannot be captured through conventional indicators such as visitor numbers, occupancy rates, or tourism receipts. The findings highlight the need for alternative evaluation frameworks capable of recognising spiritual well-being as a legitimate dimension of tourism value.

5. Holistic Tourism Value: Toward Sacred Tourism Accounting

The final theme integrates the previous findings into a multidimensional understanding of tourism value. While participants recognised the importance of economic benefits, they consistently rejected the idea that tourism success could be reduced to visitor arrivals, foreign exchange earnings, local revenue generation, or occupancy rates. Instead, five interconnected dimensions of value emerged across all stakeholder groups.

Table 8. Coding Structure for Holistic Tourism Value

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
Tourism receipts, local revenue, business income	Measurable economic outcomes	Economic Value
Sacredness, religiosity, faith	Essential spiritual value	Spiritual Value
Cultural preservation, local identity	Sustainable cultural value	Cultural Value
Ancestral trust, inherited obligations	Intergenerational value	Ancestral Value
Socio-cultural continuity	Holistic sustainability	Sustainability Value

Participants described these dimensions as inseparable rather than competing priorities. Economic benefits were considered important only when achieved in ways that respected sacred meanings, preserved cultural identity, and strengthened intergenerational relationships. Consequently, sacred tourism was understood as a multidimensional value system in which economic, spiritual, cultural, ancestral, and sustainability dimensions coexist and mutually reinforce one another.

The convergence of stakeholder perspectives provides strong empirical support for the development of Sacred Tourism Accounting (STA). The findings suggest that existing tourism measurement systems capture only a partial representation of destination value because they privilege economic indicators while neglecting the spiritual and cultural dimensions that local communities regard as fundamental. Sacred Tourism Accounting therefore emerges as an alternative accountability framework designed to recognise the plurality of values embedded within sacred tourism and to move tourism governance beyond economic rationality.



DISCUSSIONS

Theoretical Synthesis: Toward Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory (STAT)

The findings demonstrate that sacred tourism in Timor-Leste cannot be adequately understood through conventional tourism accounting frameworks that prioritise visitor numbers, tourism receipts, and destination competitiveness. Across stakeholder groups, participants consistently described sacred tourism as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing economic, spiritual, cultural, ancestral, and sustainability values. This convergence suggests that prevailing tourism measurement systems capture only a partial representation of destination value.

The five thematic findings collectively support the development of Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory (STAT), a framework that reconceptualises tourism accountability beyond economic rationality. Rather than treating sacred sites as economic assets whose value is determined by market performance, STAT recognises sacred tourism destinations as socially constructed spaces of meaning embedded within spiritual relationships, cultural practices, and intergenerational responsibilities. Accordingly, Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory can be formulated as follows:

“Sacred Tourism Value = Economic Value + Spiritual Value + Cultural Value + Ancestral Value + Sustainability Value”

This formulation extends existing tourism accounting frameworks in three fundamental ways. First, it shifts the focus from economic accountability toward holistic accountability by incorporating spiritual, cultural, and intergenerational dimensions of value. Second, it broadens accountability relationships beyond governments and investors to include local communities, cultural custodians, ancestors, and future generations. Third, it reframes accounting as a process of meaning-making rather than merely a technique of measurement, recognising that many forms of value are qualitative, symbolic, and ethically constituted.

By integrating these dimensions, STAT contributes to critical accounting scholarship by extending social and environmental accounting into contexts characterised by sacred meanings and plural value systems. The framework also advances tourism studies by demonstrating that sustainable tourism governance requires accountability mechanisms capable of representing multiple forms of value simultaneously.

A Habermasian Critique: The Colonisation of the Sacred Lifeworld

The findings provide empirical support for Habermas's argument that modern societies are increasingly shaped by instrumental rationality, whereby market and bureaucratic systems colonise domains of life traditionally governed by communicative action (Habermas, 1984). In Timor-Leste, tourism governance remains strongly oriented toward economic performance indicators such as visitor growth, tourism revenues, and destination competitiveness. These metrics represent the language of strategic action, privileging efficiency and economic expansion as the primary objectives of tourism development.



However, sacred sites operate according to fundamentally different rationalities. Indigenous communities and religious leaders understand sacred places through relationships of spiritual obligation, cultural stewardship, and ancestral responsibility. When these places are evaluated primarily according to their economic contribution, sacred meanings risk being displaced by market logics.

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a natural experiment that exposed this tension. Although tourism revenues collapsed during periods of restricted mobility, sacred rituals, community gatherings, and ancestral practices continued uninterrupted. The persistence of these activities demonstrates that spiritual and cultural value exists independently of market dynamics. Economic decline did not diminish sacred value; rather, it revealed the limitations of accounting systems that equate tourism success with financial performance.

These findings suggest that conventional tourism accounting frameworks contribute to the colonisation of the sacred lifeworld by rendering non-economic values invisible. Sacred Tourism Accounting therefore represents an attempt to reclaim communicative spaces within tourism governance by recognising forms of value grounded in dialogue, cultural meaning, and collective responsibility.

Gadamerian and Ricoeurian Perspectives on Sacred Meaning

The findings further demonstrate that sacred tourism is characterised by multiple and overlapping horizons of understanding. Government officials frequently emphasised visitor numbers, infrastructure development, and economic diversification. Business practitioners highlighted destination viability and long-term competitiveness. In contrast, Indigenous leaders prioritised ancestral continuity, religious leaders emphasised spiritual integrity, and tourists valued transformative experiences and cultural understanding.

From a Gadamerian perspective, these differing interpretations do not represent competing claims requiring resolution through a single authoritative framework. Rather, they reflect distinct horizons of understanding shaped by historical experience, cultural traditions, and institutional roles (Gadamer, 2004). Authentic tourism accountability therefore requires a fusion of horizons that recognises the legitimacy of multiple perspectives rather than privileging economic rationality as the dominant interpretive lens.

Ricoeur's symbolic hermeneutics further illuminates the meanings embedded within sacred tourism. The findings reveal that *uma lulik*, ancestral rituals, pilgrimage routes, and sacred landscapes function as symbolic reservoirs whose meanings exceed their material form. These symbols carry layers of historical memory, spiritual significance, and cultural identity that cannot be fully translated into economic equivalents (Ricoeur, 1976). Attempts to commodify sacred sites therefore risk reducing complex symbolic systems to simplified market representations.

Together, Gadamer and Ricoeur demonstrate that sacred tourism accountability cannot rely solely on quantitative indicators because sacred meanings are interpretive, contextual, and inexhaustible. Sacred Tourism Accounting responds to this challenge by acknowledging that some



forms of value are resistant to economic quantification and must instead be understood through dialogue, narrative, and cultural interpretation.

Theoretical Implications and Propositions

The findings generate several theoretical implications for tourism studies, critical accounting, and hermeneutic inquiry. First, they challenge the assumption that tourism value can be adequately represented through economic indicators alone. Second, they expand accountability theory by introducing responsibilities that extend beyond contemporary stakeholders to include ancestors, cultural heritage, and future generations. Third, they demonstrate the usefulness of critical hermeneutics for examining how competing systems of value are negotiated within tourism governance.

Building on these insights, the study proposes five theoretical propositions that form the foundation of Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory.

Table 9. Theoretical Propositions of Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory

Proposition	Statement
P1	The value of sacred tourism destinations is constituted through the integration of economic, spiritual, cultural, ancestral, and sustainability dimensions rather than economic value alone.
P2	Tourism accountability encompasses simultaneous responsibilities to economic stakeholders, cultural communities, ancestral heritage, and future generations.
P3	The greater the dominance of economic rationality within tourism governance, the greater the risk of sacred commodification and community alienation.
P4	The success of sacred tourism should be evaluated through indicators of spiritual well-being and cultural sustainability in addition to economic performance measures.
P5	Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory provides a conceptually coherent and empirically grounded alternative framework for governing sacred tourism destinations.

Collectively, these propositions reposition tourism accounting as a dialogic, interpretive, and emancipatory practice. Rather than treating accountability as a process of reporting economic outcomes, STAT conceptualises accountability as an ongoing negotiation of multiple values embedded within sacred places. In doing so, the framework offers a foundation for more culturally sensitive and socially inclusive approaches to tourism governance.



CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the dominant economic paradigm in tourism accounting provides only a partial representation of the value generated and preserved through sacred tourism. Through a critical hermeneutic inquiry conducted across sacred tourism sites in Timor-Leste, the findings reveal that sacred places are understood not merely as tourism assets but as living spaces of spirituality, ancestral connection, cultural identity, and collective memory. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a revelatory event that exposed the limitations of conventional tourism metrics: despite the dramatic decline in tourist arrivals and tourism revenues, sacred rituals, cultural practices, and community relationships with ancestral heritage continued uninterrupted. This empirical evidence demonstrates that spiritual and cultural values are autonomous from, and cannot be reduced to, economic indicators. The study therefore identifies five interrelated dimensions of sacred tourism value—economic, spiritual, cultural, ancestral, and sustainability values—which collectively form the foundation of Sacred Tourism Accounting Theory (STAT).

The study makes four principal contributions. Theoretically, it introduces STAT as a multidimensional accountability framework that extends tourism accounting beyond economic rationality and proposes the concept of ancestral accountability, which expands accountability relationships to include ancestors, cultural heritage, and future generations. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of integrating Gadamer's interpretive understanding, Ricoeur's symbolic analysis, and Habermas's critique of instrumental rationality for accounting theory development. Practically, the findings suggest that tourism governance should move beyond shareholder-centred models toward more holistic and participatory forms of accountability in which Indigenous and religious communities act as co-governors of sacred destinations. Accordingly, tourism performance indicators should incorporate measures of cultural continuity, spiritual integrity, and community well-being alongside economic outcomes. Future research should develop and validate measurement instruments for STAT across diverse cultural contexts, examine its applicability in other post-conflict and post-colonial settings, and explore governance mechanisms that enable the authentic integration of economic and sacred values within tourism planning.

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