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# From Stories to Destination: The Potential of Literary Tourism on Asei Island, Papua

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## Abstract

*Asei Island is an ancient island located on Lake Sentani in Papua, Indonesia. According to myth and history, the island was inhabited by the ancient Sentani people, who originated from East Sepik, Papua New Guinea. Asei Island possesses a rich cultural and literary heritage expressed through its oral traditions, like myths, legends, fables as well as oral poetry and distinctive bark paintings. Despite this wealth of storytelling and symbolism, Asei's cultural assets remain largely untapped as a form of tourism. This article explores the potential of literary tourism as a sustainable approach to preserving and promoting the island's cultural heritages. It examines how oral narratives, visual literature, and local art can be transformed into meaningful tourism experiences that engage visitors while empowering local communities. This qualitative research was conducted from June to October 2025 on Asei Island and several villages along the shores of Lake Sentani. Data were collected through interviews with informants, including tribal chiefs, Sentani elders, and the Jayapura Regency Tourism Office. The data were also supplemented with published folklore documentation. Through initiatives such as storytelling and singing festivals, cultural trails, community-based workshops, literary tourism could strengthen cultural identity, enhance economic opportunities, and foster intercultural understanding. The article concludes that developing literary tourism on Asei Island represents not only a path to sustainable tourism but also a means of safeguarding the island's living traditions for future generations.*

***Keywords***: *Asei Island; cultural and literary heritage; Lake Sentani; literary tourism*

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## Introduction

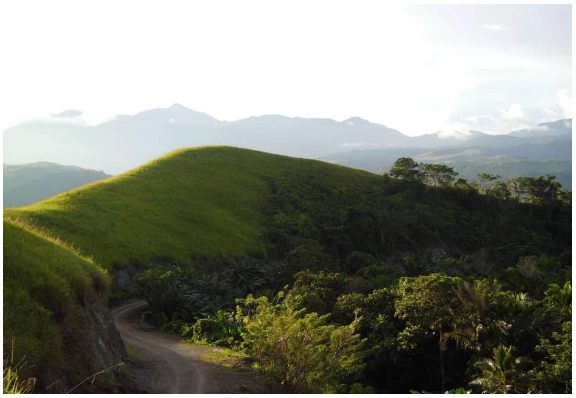
According to legends and myths recounted by informants, Asei Island in Lake Sentani, Jayapura, Papua, was the first island inhabited by the ancient Sentani people when they migrated from Mount Honong in East Sepik, Papua New Guinea (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). Therefore, Asei Island is known as the oldest island in Lake Sentani. It is said that at that time, the ancient Sentani people first lived on Yomokho Hill near Kalkhote on the lakeshore for quite a long time (Ohee, Pepuho, Hendambo, interview, 2024). Based on carbon dating results from excavation units at the Bukit Yomokho site in 2011, the ancient Sentani people have existed 2,590 years ago, or around 590 BC (Suroto, 2019). Eventually, after living on Bukit Yomokho for a long time, these ancient Sentani people decided to move to a place they felt was safer for them. They began to feel disturbed by the presence of other people to the north of their settlement, namely in the Cyclops Mountains region. They decided to move to an island in the lake, not far from Bukit Yomokho (Djami, 2024). At that time, there were no boats. Swimming was out of the question. As they were pondering how to reach the island, a great dragon appeared, willing to ferry them to their destination. Exhausted from ferrying people back and forth so many times, the dragon eventually sank (Yektiningtyas & Modouw, 2017; Yektiningtyas, 2019). Its body split into three parts. The head became Waiyo Island, the body became Asei Island, and the tail became Renaiyebei Island (Yuliana Ansaka, interview April 2024). There is also a version of the story that states that it was a crocodile that helped them (Ongge, Ohee, personal communication, May 2025). This relates to the crocodile, which is a mythical creature in Sentani culture and the totem of one of the tribes. These three islands are collectively known as Kampung Asei Besar. Picture 1 shows a view of the three islands.



**Picture 1.** Aerial view of Waiyo Island, Asei Island, and Renaiyebei Island (Google Earth, 2025)

The results of the excavation at Bukit Yomokho by archaeologists from the Papua Provincial Archaeological Office—which uncovered various artifacts, such as human skeletons, house posts made of soang wood (Xanthostemon sp.), shells as a primary food source, and kitchen tools (Suroto, 2010)—have captured the public's attention. They also linked these findings to the story of the ancient Sentani people's migration from Bukit Yomokho to Asei Island in the 11th century (Djami, 2024). Since then, Bukit Yomokho has frequently been visited by tourists eager to witness the historical evidence they associate with the Sentani ancestors' tales regarding the origins of their tribe. The influx of tourists to Bukit Yomokho is a fascinating phenomenon, demonstrating how legends and myths can serve as historical evidence while also becoming tourist attractions.

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**Picture 2.** Yomokho Hill (Doc. Suroto, 2021)



**Picture 3.** Archaeology students from Leiden University, the Netherlands, conducting fieldfieldwork at the Yomokho site. (Doc. Suroto, 2021)

In addition to folktales, Asei Island also owns a variety of other folklore, such as oral poetry, bark painting, and carving, which also recount the history, tribal origins, and other socio-cultural aspects related to the locale, flora, fauna, story characters, houses, boats, graves, old churches, and so on (Yektiningtyas et al., 2024; Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). Yet, despite this wealth of heritage, Asei Island remains relatively unknown beyond Papua's borders.

The archaeological findings at Bukit Yomokho in Asei Island demonstrate how historical narratives are embedded in and given meaning through particular places, allowing the landscape itself to function as a form of spatial literature. This intersection of narrative, history, and place provides a basis for literary tourism rooted in Asei's historical and socio-cultural values. Global interest in literary and cultural tourism continues to grow, offering new pathways for culturally grounded destinations. Within this context, Asei Island presents a distinctive opportunity to transform its narrative heritage into sustainable tourism experiences. By embedding local stories into visitor engagement, the island can reinforce its cultural identity while opening up meaningful economic prospects for the community (Yektiningtyas & Morin, 2020). This visit also functions as part of a broader effort to disseminate Sentani folklore to a wider audience beyond the region. The present study examines the richness of Asei's folklore, encompassing folktales, oral poetry, as well as bark painting and carving traditions. It further analyzes the island's potential for literary tourism and addresses the key considerations and challenges associated with its development. Although a number of studies have explored aspects of Sentani, including language, education, folklore, traditional games, tourism around Lake Sentani, traditional medicine, endemic fish, and local flora and fauna, a focused analysis of literature-based tourism remains notably absent.

Traveling to locations connected to literary works, writers, or fictional stories is known as literary tourism, which is a type of cultural tourism. Literary tourism emerges when literary works or authors get enough attraction to inspire readers to travel to places related to their creation or story settings (Hoppen et al., 2014). Accordingly, Busby and Klug (2001) contend that literary tourism arises when readers are motivated by literature to visit regions connected to the lives of authors or to the locales depicted in their works. These locations could be the birthplaces of authors, residences, graves, historical properties, museums, memorial sites, or landscapes that appear in books and poetry (Hoppen et al., 2014). By visiting the physical settings that influenced literary imagination and storytelling and by interacting both intellectually and emotionally with the cultural contexts connected to literary production, readers hope to experience

literature beyond the written page (Topler et al., 2024; Watson, 2006). According to Topler et al. (2024), literary tourism is also seen as an interdisciplinary field that combines literature, cultural studies, geography, history, and tourism studies. Readers can interact with the cultural environments that influenced writers and their works through literary tourism. By following sites mentioned in literary writings or exploring locales connected to writers' lives, visitors can turn reading into a geographical and immersive experience. In addition to underlining the cultural relevance of the locations involved, this interaction between literature and place enhances tourists' comprehension of literary works (Topler et al., 2024).

Literary tourism has grown over the past few decades to encompass a greater variety of cultural and economic activities in addition to typical author-related destinations. These include specialized travel routes that honor literary heritage, literary festivals, guided literary tours, and museums devoted to authors (Sudardi, 2024). By fostering cultural identity and drawing tourists interested in literature and tradition, literary tourism can also aid in the growth of a region. According to research, literary works that highlight specific regions, cultural activities, and storytelling can all influence how the public perceives a place and encourage travel (Sudardi, 2024).

So overall, literary tourism exemplifies the potent connection between literature and location. Literary tourism allows readers to interact with literature in a multimodal and spatial manner by turning places connected to writers and stories into tourist attractions. Literary tourism is still a significant field of study in both literary studies and tourist scholarship because of the dynamic interplay between narrative, culture, and location. According to recent media reports, literary-inspired travel is also becoming more and more popular as travelers look for cultural experiences that are significant and related to books, storytelling, and historical sites.

Papua possesses a wealth of folklore (Kamma, 1975) with great potential to be developed as part of literary tourism (Yektiningtyas et al., 2025). Literary tourism focuses not only on natural beauty but also on narratives, legends, and written works that give meaning to a place. In Papua, many local stories are alive in the oral traditions of the community and form a strong cultural identity.

These stories can serve as tourist attractions because they offer a deeper experience than a mere visual visit. The world-famous Raja Ampat tourism industry originated from the story of a woman who discovered seven magical eggs. Four of them hatched into kings who later ruled the four main regions: Waigeo, Salawati, Batanta, and Misool. The story of the Four Kings serves as a narrative foundation that enriches Raja Ampat's appeal (Malawat, 2018; Mentansan et al., 2022). The Manarmakeri legend of Biak has the potential to become a narrative-based tourist attraction (Fatubun & Raymond, 2017). Tourists visiting Biak not only enjoy the natural beauty and beaches but can also participate in cultural tours that recount the journey of Manarmakeri. Storytelling, traditional art performances, and cultural festivals can serve as a medium to bring this legend to life.

By utilizing the story of Manarmakeri as a cultural asset, tourism development in Biak is not only focused on natural aspects but also on the rich oral literature of its people. This legend demonstrates that traditional stories can serve as a strong foundation for building educational, meaningful, and sustainable literary tourism. Another example is the mythological tales of the Asmat people (Eko Susilo et al., 2018). Stories about ancestral spirits and the origins of humanity are reflected in the Asmat's distinctive woodcarving tradition. Each carving is not merely a work of art but also a storytelling medium rich in symbolic meaning. In the context of literary tourism, visitors can learn the stories behind these symbols, making the travel experience more educational and meaningful. In addition to being known for its natural beauty, Lake Sentani also features folk tales about the origins of local tribes, as well as stories of supernatural beings and ancestors believed to guard the area. These various tales are beautifully depicted in bark paintings and carvings. This cultural richness is often highlighted in cultural events such as local

festivals, so that tourists not only enjoy the lake's scenery but also understand the cultural values and beliefs of the local community (Kamma, 1975; Yektiningtyas et al., 2024; Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023).

## Methodology

This qualitative research was primarily conducted between June to October 2025 on Asei Island and in several villages off the island, namely (1) Kampung Harapan, (2) Kleblouw, and (3) Kampung Waena. These three villages share emotional and historical ties with Asei Island, as their residents originally came from Asei Island. They left Asei Island in search of better areas for farming and hunting. Additionally, the people of Waena left Asei Island to avoid a major family conflict (1954). Their story is recounted in the ehabla, one of the Sentani people's famous oral traditions. Accordingly, a qualitative descriptive approach was employed to provide an in-depth account of the oral traditions, myths, cultural meanings, and place-based narratives associated with Asei Island. The research sites were purposively selected based on their historical, cultural, and ancestral connections to Asei Island. The communities in the three villages share ancestral ties to Asei Island**.** According to Miles, et. al. (2014) qualitative research involves an interactive, ongoing process of data analysis consisting of three simultaneous, continuous, and cyclical steps: (1) data reduction, (2) data display, and (3) drawing conclusions or verification. In this study, the data includes complex oral narratives collected from the village elders through interviews and observations. Instead of eliminating information, data reduction involved the systematic selection, coding, and categorization of meaningful narrative units, particularly those related to myths, cultural values, significant places, key figures, events, and the relationships between narratives and the cultural landscape. Recurring meanings and patterns identified across informants' narratives were subsequently compared and organized into thematic categories. This process enabled the researchers to preserve the cultural meanings embedded in the oral narratives while focusing the analysis on aspects relevant to the relationships among oral traditions, place, and literary tourism.

Folklore data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with informants, such as tribal chiefs (ondofolo, khote, and akhona), Sentani elders, artists, and cultural figures, as well as through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Some folklore data were drawn from our previous research conducted between 1990 and 2020. Since some key informants do not reside on Asei Island, interviews were also conducted in several villages such as Waena, Kleblouw, and Harapan. Observations were carried out on Asei Island to study folklore-related aspects of community life and tourism activities. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted to gather folklore related to history, figures, places, and houses that could be linked to tourism. These informants are indigenous Sentani descendants who received stories directly from their ancestors who experienced the history and understand the socio-cultural context of the Sentani community. The folklore data collected is as shown in the table below.

**Table 1** Folklores from Asei Island and the surrounding areas

| No | Folklore | Titles |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Myths | 1. Lake Emfote<br>2. The Journey of Sentani People from PNG<br>3. The Journey of Ancient Sentani from Yomokho Hill to Asei Island<br>4. Tifa Kemagingging<br>5. Kisah *Ondofolo* Rasa |
| 2 | Legends | 1. The Origin of Lake Sentani<br>2. Kleublouw village |
| 3 | Fables | 1. Ebi dan Kandei |
| 4 | Oral Poem | 1. Calvin the Hunter<br>2. Perpindahan masyarakat Waena dari Yabansai |
| 5 | Folksong | *1. Kani blam kla bham* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *2. Igwa yo, huba yo* | |
| 6 | Bark paintings | Painting related to Sentani people history |
| 7 | Carvings | Carvings related to Sentani people history |

Meanwhile, a semi-structured interview guideline was used to collect data from the informants. The instrument consisted of six domains designed to explore the relationship between Asei's oral narratives, cultural landscape, and tourism potential, as summarized in Table 1. From a literary perspective, the interview questions were specifically designed to identify local myths, legends, folktales, place-based narratives, and processes of oral transmission, and to examine how these narratives are associated with particular sites and cultural practices that may contribute to the development of literary tourism. The complete interview guideline is provided in the Appendix.

Since some of the data was recited or narrated in the Sentani language, recordings were made and subsequently transcribed. The translation into Indonesian was reviewed by elders who are fluent in Sentani. In this study, Mr. Irenius Pepuho (68 years old) and Corry Ohee (64 years old) provided significant assistance in refining the translations. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to obtain validation, specifically to resolve differences of opinion and reach consensus on issues such as transcription discrepancies, translation accuracy, the meaning and message of the stories, and the interpretation of the meanings behind the bark paintings and carvings. The FGDs also addressed the community's orientation and readiness regarding the development of literary tourism on Asei Island, along with various supporting and hindering factors. The activity was conducted with (1) tribal chiefs, (2) Sentani community elders, (3) the Head of Asei Village, (4) the Jayapura Regency Tourism Office, (5) the Papua Customary Council, (6) Asei youth representatives, (7) church representatives, and (8) traditional school representatives. After approval by the FGD informants, the data were used in this study.

For a conceptual article, this is substituted by the headings related to the topics discussed. For a research paper, this part presents the methodology of the research that covers its approach, data collection, and data analysis. The author has to elaborate clearly how particular approach suits the data. The description of data collection and analysis should be thoroughly explained here.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Asei Island's Literary and Cultural Heritage

Asei Island is the oldest island in Lake Sentani. According to Suroto (2016), carbon dating indicates that the ancient Sentani people have inhabited Yomokho Hill for 2,590 years, or around 590 BC. Over this considerable period, the ancient Sentani people on the island developed various folklore that remains relatively well-preserved to this day (Corry Ohee, Ire Pepuho, Agus Ongge, interview, May 2025). The settings where the stories took place, the homes of the characters, and even their graves are still maintained by the local community. One legend that can be utilized for literature-based tourism is the story of the first *Ondofolo* on Asei Island, namely *Ondofolo* Rasa, who first received the Gospel in the 1920s (Irenius Pepuho, interview, July 2025), as recounted below.

> *In 1920, an evangelist named Ahasyweros Nari from Ormu came to preach on Asei Island. Ondofolo Rasa did not come immediately, but sent his advisor (abhu afa) to listen.*
>
> *After the first sermon, the abhu afa recounted that Jesus had fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Ondofolo felt he could do the same. He gathered the people on the beach and, through his power, caused fish to fill the shore. The people began to wonder whom they should believe.*
>
> *The following week, the abhu afa reported again that Jesus could calm a*

*raging storm. Ondofolo responded by demonstrating his own ability to quell a storm. The people grew even more uncertain.*

*The next week, the abhu afa said that Jesus could walk on water. Ondofolo demonstrated something similar by walking on a line of crocodiles in the water, so that from a distance it looked as if he were walking on a lake. The people's confusion grew even greater.*

*However, the following week, Abhu Afa announced that Jesus had raised Lazarus, who had been dead for three days. This time, Ondofolo fell silent and admitted that he was unable to do such a thing. He asked to meet the evangelist, declared his faith in Jesus Christ, and was baptized. After that, many people from Asei also came to believe and were baptized.*

That day marked a historic milestone in the arrival of the Gospel on Asei Island: July 1, 1928. To commemorate this event, a monument was erected on Asei Island, located right where visitors enter the island via the main pier. A church has been built on the site where the evangelist Nari preached; it has since become a heritage site protected by the Papua Regional Government. Likewise, the grave and the courtyard where the *ondofolo* performed "various miracles" are still vividly recounted by the community. This historic event is also commemorated annually. Visitors are taken on a tour to visit the sites associated with this significant event (Yektingtyas et al., 2025).

Several myths, legends, and fables, such as "The Journey of the Ancient Sentani People from Eastern Sepik, PNG, to Yomokho Hill," "The Migration from Yomokho Hill to Asei Island," "Lake Emfote," "The Story of Kleblouw Village," "Ebi and Kandei," and "Tifa Kemagingging" have left behind historical sites and locations such as lakes, hills, valleys, and cultural artifacts, including dwellings, boats, paddles, tifa drums, the graves of prominent figures, and cooking and dining utensils, that visitors can still visit and view. The myths in the stories above reflect the Sentani people's close cosmological relationship with nature, in which certain individuals are able to communicate with the natural world and nature responds in its own way. However, these beliefs gradually declined following the introduction of Christianity to Asei Island in the 1930s (Pepuho & Ohee, interviews, September 2025). This is also consistent with the views of Topler, et. al. (2024); Watson (2006); Malawat (2018); and Mentansan, et. al. (2022), who argue that literary tourism offers visitors the opportunity to personally experience what they have read and heard through literary works or folklore. For example, they can see the architecture of the story character's house and the materials used to build it.

The chant also demonstrates distinctive characteristics of Sentani oral poetry, particularly through the use of repetition and metaphor. The repetition of the phrase "I ask for" creates a rhythmic and interrogative structure while emphasizing the speaker's search for the past conditions of Ebaeit and Hayae. Meanwhile, the metaphor "what brings the village to life" portrays the landscape as a living entity, suggesting that the forest, lake, and land are not merely physical spaces but integral parts of community life and cultural identity.



**Picture 4** Wooden posts of traditional Sentani stilt houses on Asei Island, some of which have stood there for generations and remain in use today (Doc. Yektiningtyas, Suroto, 2025)

In the *ehabla*, a form of oral poetry still recognized by the Sentani people, various historical and socio-cultural events are recounted that can be traced back to the present day. An *ehabla* titled "Calvin, the Hunter" tells the story of a hunter who searches mountains, hills, forests, springs, valleys, rivers, lakes, villages, and islands in search of his beloved lost hunting dog. Although these places have changed, they can still be visited. Here is an excerpt.

*Buru foi neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Baeitnyei yoi ehayaele baeimiyale*
*Kara foi neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Hayaere yamji ehayaele baeimiyale*

(Through the wilderness I search
I ask for what brings the village of Ebaeit to life
Through the wilderness I search
I ask for what brings the village of Hayae to life)

*Okla neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Baeitnyei yoi ehayaele baeimiyale*
*Hakla neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Hayaere yamji ehayaele baemiyale*

(Among the trees I search
I ask for something that brings the village of Ebaeit to life
Among the trees I search
I ask for something that brings the village of Hayae to life)

*Kongkla neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Baeitnyei yoi ehayaele baeimiyale*
*Kalikla neiboi hineimiyale*
*Re Hayaere yamji ehayaele baeimiyale*

(In the thorny forest I search
I ask for what brings the village of Ebaeit to life
In the thorny forest I search
I ask for what brings the village of Hayae to life)

Visits by tourists to the places described in oral poetry encourage them to think critically about the differences between these places in the present and the past. As recounted by the informants (Agus Ongge, Irenius Pepuho, and Antoneta Ohee, interviews, May 2025), the dense forests of the past have been stripped bare by illegal logging, and the once-clear lakes are now polluted and shallow. Even the land described in the stories has now been sold and belongs to others. A similar phenomenon is described in "khani bham, khla bham" (the land and forest are no longer there), which expresses the sorrow of no longer being able to farm or hunt because the land and forest have changed hands (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). This situation also serves as a lesson for visitors to protect their environment.

The peaceful and prosperous atmosphere of the old Sentani community, full of joy, as described in the following chant, now appears quite different from that of the Sentani community on Asei Island, whose way of life has shifted. Here is an excerpt.

*Yabansai, kui-kuijo nukawale*
*Aka, we jo nare nukawale*
*Yabansai, yali-yaliyam nukawale*

*Aka, we yam nare nukawale*

(Yabansai, the village full of joy that I'm leaving behind
Sister, your village that I'm leaving behind
Yabansai, the village full of joy that I'm leaving behind
Sister, your village that I'm leaving behind)

*Yabansai, ekenaujo nukawale*
*Aka, we jo nare nukawale*
*Yabansai, holiangnauyam nukawale*
*Aka, we yam nare nukawale*

(Yabansai, the village bustling with life like the chirping of eke birds—
I'm leaving it behind
Sister, I'm leaving your village behind
Yabansai, the village bustling with life like the chirping of holiang birds—
I'm leaving it behind
Sister, I'm leaving your village behind)

Beyond its story telling and oral poems, Asei Island is also known as the "Island of Bark Painters." These paintings, traditionally made from tree bark and natural pigments, depict motifs and symbols drawn from ancestral stories, clan histories, and the natural environment. Each design tells a tale — of creation, of spirits, of the close relationship between humans and the lake. Below is the bark painting depicting a giant dragon who helped the ancient Sentani people move from Yomokho hill to Asei Island.



**Picture 5**
The myth of the dragon that ferried the ancient Sentani people across from Yomokho Hill is depicted in a bark painting (Doc. Yektiningtyas, 2024)



**Picture 6**
In their journeys from one place to another, the people of Sentani have chronicled their lives, for example through rock paintings that can still be found today (Doc. Djami, 2021)



**Picture 7** Painting showing the mythical migration of the Sentani people to Asei Island (Doc. Yektiningtyas, 2026)

These motifs should not be understood merely as decorative elements, as the meanings embedded within them contribute to the ways in which cultural narratives are communicated and remembered. In Picture 7, for example, the representation of the ancestral journey does more than illustrate an event; the canoe, human figures, and their spatial arrangement visually encode the collective migration narrative associated with the settlement of Asei Island. Read together, these visual elements condense characters, movement, place, and ancestral memory into a recognizable representation of the story.

In this sense, narrative is expressed not only through oral performance but also through material and visual forms, strengthening the connection between cultural expression, place, and literary tourism. Thus,

these motifs demonstrate that narratives can be expressed not only through oral performance but also through material and visual forms, thereby strengthening the connection between cultural expression, place, and literary tourism.

## 2. Opportunities for Developing Literary Tourism

Asei Island presents significant potential for the development of literary tourism that is both culturally grounded and economically beneficial to the local community (Sudardi, 2024; Yektiningtyas & Morin, 2020; Yektiningtyas & Wally, 2025). Central to this potential is the island's rich body of oral narratives, including myths, legends, and historical accounts, which can be transformed from intangible cultural heritage into place-based tourism experiences. In this sense, literary tourism in Asei represents a shift from story as cultural memory to story as destination, where narratives are not only told but also spatially and experientially anchored within the island's landscape. Several strategic opportunities can therefore be identified to translate Asei's literary heritage into meaningful and sustainable tourism offerings.

### a. Revitalizing the Obae as a Cultural Performance Space

One promising avenue is the revitalization and utilization of existing cultural infrastructure, particularly the *obae* (customary house). Based on field observations conducted during three visits by the research team, the island currently has two *obae*, one of which remains functional while the other requires only minor renovation. This underutilized structure presents a strategic opportunity to be repurposed as a venue for cultural performances. As a communal space traditionally used for gatherings and decision-making, the *obae* holds strong cultural legitimacy, making it an appropriate and meaningful setting for storytelling activities (Su & Wall, 2014).

Within the framework of literary tourism, the *obae* can function as a central narrative space where community members narrate ancestral legends, oral histories, and local myths that are closely tied to the identity of Asei Island. These storytelling sessions enable visitors to encounter stories in their original social and cultural context, thus anchoring narrative meaning contextually. In addition, the *obe* can serve as a venue for showcasing Asei's renowned artistic practices, including bark painting and wood carving, allowing visual and material culture to complement oral narratives. By doing this, the *Obe* becomes not merely a performance venue but a key site where stories are transformed into shared cultural experiences for visitors.

### b. Developing Cultural and Story Trails

Complementing this initiative is the development of cultural or "story" trails that connect the island's historical and cultural sites into a coherent narrative landscape. Rather than functioning solely as physical pathways, these trails can be designed as interpretive routes that map stories onto specific locations, allowing visitors to experience the island through its narratives. The island already possesses a range of culturally significant sites that can be curated and interpreted through the installation of informative labels. While culturally and geographically distinct from Asei, heritage interpretation practices in Japan provide an illustrative example of how place-based narratives can be made accessible to visitors through interpretive signage. As shown in Pictures 8 and 9, culturally significant sites such as the Hagoromo Pine and the Hagoromo Monument are accompanied by bilingual panels that connect particular locations with their associated historical and mythological narratives. The relevance of this example lies not in replicating the Japanese model, but in demonstrating an interpretive technique that could be locally adapted in Asei.






**Pictures 8 and 9** Bilingual signages at Hagoromo Pine, Miho Matsubara, Shizuoka, Japan, presenting myth and history (Doc. Yektiningtyas, 2026)

To enhance engagement, particularly among younger and digitally oriented visitors, these markers can be equipped with QR codes linking to extended online content, including audio recordings, visual documentation, and narrative explanations presented in Sentani, Indonesian, and English languages. This approach is feasible in Asei, where internet connectivity is generally adequate for accessing online content. Through this integration of physical and digital interpretation, stories are not only preserved but also expanded across multiple platforms.

The development of a dedicated website further supports this process by providing a centralized space where Asei's narratives can be documented and accessed. While local community members can ensure the authenticity and cultural accuracy of the content, collaborations with institutions such as Universitas Cenderawasih can support technical development and dissemination (Trencher et al., 2014a). In addition, training local residents as guides allows these story trails to be mediated through lived knowledge, positioning community members as storytellers who actively connect visitors to the island's narrative landscape (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012; Su & Wall, 2014).

### c. Designing Workshops and Experiential Learning Activities

Another potential opportunity lies in the design of workshops and immersive learning experiences that enable visitors to engage with stories through practice. Asei Island is widely known for its distinctive bark painting tradition, which can serve as a key entry point for experiential literary tourism (Yektiningtyas et al., 2025; Yektiningtyas & Wally, 2025). Visitors can participate in guided workshops that introduce not only artistic techniques but also the cultural meanings and narratives embedded in the motifs.

Additional activities, such as wood carving or learning to prepare traditional foods like *papeda*, further extend this engagement. These practices allow visitors to encounter stories not only as verbal accounts but as embodied knowledge transmitted through hands-on experience. In this sense, cultural practices become forms of storytelling, where meaning is communicated through action, material, and interaction with local artisans (Park & Widyanta, 2022). Such experiences deepen visitors' understanding of Asei's cultural heritage while reinforcing the connection between narrative and everyday life (Dang, 2021; Salazar, 2012).

### d. Fostering Collaborations with Writers and Scholars

In parallel, collaborations with writers, scholars, and cultural institutions offer important opportunities to transform oral narratives into documented and widely accessible forms. Asei's myths, legends, and historical accounts can be recorded, transcribed, and translated through collaborative efforts involving local knowledge holders and academic partners. Local writers from Asei Island play a crucial role in this

process as custodians and interpreters of their own cultural narratives. Their involvement ensures that the transformation of oral stories into written forms maintains cultural authenticity and local perspective. At the same time, institutions such as Universitas Cenderawasih can support writing development, editing, publication, and dissemination through both print and digital media. Such collaborations could produce concrete literary outputs, including bilingual or trilingual collections of Asei folklore, illustrated storybooks based on local myths and legends, curated collections of oral histories, and scripts for storytelling or theatrical performances. These products could serve both cultural preservation and tourism purposes, providing visitors with additional ways to encounter Asei's narratives beyond the physical sites themselves. Through these collaborations, Asei's stories can reach broader audiences while remaining rooted in their original cultural context (Trencher et al., 2014b). This not only strengthens the island's identity as a site of literary tourism but also positions it as a center of cultural production, where stories continue to be created, interpreted, and shared.

### e. Strengthening Community-Based Tourism Practices

These opportunities can be most effectively realized within a community-based tourism (CBT) framework, which ensures that local residents remain central to tourism development and directly benefit from its outcomes (Giampiccoli et al., 2014; Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). One practical approach is the establishment of homestay programs, where families host visitors in their homes. Given the island's unique setting, with houses built over the waters of Lake Sentani, such accommodations offer a distinctive and immersive experience. Within this setting, visitors can engage with daily life in the community, including fishing activities, traditional culinary practices, and customary processes such as ponding sago. These everyday experiences allow visitors to encounter stories as lived realities rather than abstract narratives.

Equally important, such community-based initiative should be aligned with Asei's existing customary and clan-based social structure. Individual families can receive income from accommodation and related services, but an agreed proportion of tourism revenue can be charged by the customary authority for communal activities, cultural preservation, and maintenance of shared facilities. Integrating customary governance into the management of tourism revenue would therefore not only strengthen local ownership of tourism but also address potential inequalities that may emerge as tourism activities expand.



**Picture 10** Traditional sago processing: crushing the sago pith using a wooden tool in Sentani (Jubi, 2024)



**Picture 11** A woman mixing the pith with water and extracting sago starch in Sentani (Jubi, 2023)

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## 3. Challenges and Considerations

To transform Asei Island's cultural assets into a viable literary tourism destination, a thorough critical examination of multifaceted challenges is imperative (Hoppen et al., 2014; Sudardi, 2024). Drawing from the interviews with the *ondofolo* and other stakeholders (Mei 2025), as well as field observations, several challenges and considerations are identified and categorized into four specific issues: (a) cultural sensitivity and narrative integrity, (b) infrastructural and environmental preservation, (c) community involvement and leadership, and (d) long-term sustainability and economic equity.

### a. Cultural Sensitivity and Narrative Integrity

One of the primary challenges in literary tourism is the risk of commodifying of sacred knowledge and traditions (Topler et al., 2024). Additionally, tourism may potentially lead to the "over-modification" of narratives to satisfy visitor expectations, alongside the potential for misinterpretation by tourists. Certain stories, particularly those containing specific details of clan origins, rituals related to the *ondofolo*, and narratives involving ancestral spirits, carry a specific weight that is not intended for mass consumption. Even when permission to share these tales is granted, they must be shared with strict adherence to customary protocols.

This protocol functions as a precaution by specifying the thresholds of cultural secrecy: surface-level exoteric elements of the dragon myth, for instance, exoteric artistic symbols or general community narratives, can be shared to outsiders to promote intercultural appreciation, whereas core esoteric elements, the inner sacred meaning of the stories, and meticulous ritual invocations remain subject to customary restriction.

Similarly, for the indigenous community, Asei's bark paintings *(maro)* and carving are not merely souvenirs; they are visual literature depicting clan histories and ancestral myths (Yektiningtyas, 2011; Yektiningtyas & Morin, 2020). For instance, the bark painting of a dragon serves as a visual account of the ancestral myth regarding the formation of Asei Island. Tourism development must ensure that these motifs are represented without losing their ontological meaning, are used only with permission, and that the community retains ownership over their symbolic heritage.

### b. Infrastructural and Environmental Preservation

As expressed in the *ehabla* "*Khani Bham, Khla Bham*", the loss of land and forest is already a source of communal grievance. The community's distress over lost forest and land highlights a major infrastructure challenge: developing tourism facilities without inflicting further ecological harm on Lake Sentani (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). Constructing "story trails" and visitor facilities and amenities requires careful planning to avoid disturbing the delicate ecosystem of Lake Sentani. Furthermore, increased tourism flow must be accompanied by robust waste management systems to prevent further environmental degradation of the very "locus" or the narratives.

When constructing access to Yomokho Hill, careful and considerate planning and management to preserve the archaeological integrity of the artifacts found there is crucial. To accomplish this devoid of damaging delicate sedimentary layers, structural construction must utilize eco-friendly construction methods, such as raised timber walkways supported by point-load foundations rather than extensive land shaping, alongside distinctly demarcated pedestrian trails that safeguard fragile sub-surfaces and prevent topsoil displacement. In addition, protecting the site demands enforcing rigorous carrying-capacity limits, for instance limiting daily tourist numbers and upholding group-size caps coupled with compulsory community-based guides.

Furthermore, the infrastructure must reflect the traditional aesthetics; for instance, the architectural forms of the ancient stilt houses should be preserved and the original position of ancient stilt house posts should be preserved *in situ* as visual historical markers.

These remnants are integral parts of the visual and spatial literature of the Asei community.

**c. Community Involvement and Leadership**

The success and sustainability of literary tourism on Asei depend on the degree of local agency and ownership (Sudardi, 2024; Susilo et al., 2018). The development process must be led by traditional institutions, specifically the *ondofolo*, *abhu afa*, and elders who serve as the custodians of the ancestral and historical memory of the island. It is imperative that the tourism model aligns with the customary law in order to secure the social license necessary for fruitful development.

To safeguard intergenerational sustainability, this leadership must be accompanied by capital self-sufficiency through a self-governed local enterprise. Importantly, cooperative governance frameworks must reconcile both traditional and contemporary stewardship: the *ondofolo* and customary elders vest customary sovereignty and veto authority over oral histories, living traditions, and customary spatial allocation, while the management governance tier, encompassing younger, skilled local stakeholders, administers commercial revenue and logistical execution. This co-governance framework is intended to ensure that commercial returns are fairly apportioned across customary lineages rather than centered among a monopolistic few, thereby actively mitigating modern-versus-traditional power struggles and anchoring communal synergy.

Complementing this traditional leadership, the longevity of literary tourism depends on the younger generation; therefore, the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills is critical. Should the younger generation fail to master the Sentani language and the art of chanting *ehabla*, or lack the ability to perform oral poems and interpret bark painting symbolism, these literary traditions will lose their primary medium of expression. Without active community agency, the "living archive" of Asei risks regressing into a static, museum-like display.

**d. Sustainability and Economic Equity**

To achieve genuine sustainability, tourism must offer tangible socio-economic benefits to the local community (Yektiningtyas & Morin, 2020; Zheng et al., 2024). Literary tourism models designed for Asei must move toward financial independence, shifting from donor dependency to a resilient, community-based economic model. Initiatives such as storytelling festivals, craft sales, guided tours, and workshops – where tourists learn bark painting directly from local artists – should be managed by local inhabitants to ensure that the economic impact remains within Asei Island. The viability of such local economic autonomy, however, is contingent upon a strategic alignment with local government strategic agendas. In this regard, collaborative endeavors between the Jayapura Regency Tourism Office and local institutions are essential to create a formal framework for literary tourism that safeguards community interests. Beyond initial funding, true sustainability depends on building local capacity through training and education. Establishing cultural champions and local storytellers is an instance of the efforts to ensure that Asei's "living archive" survives for future generations.

The key challenges and strategies discussed in the preceding sections are summarized in the strategic matrix for literary tourism mitigation below (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Strategic Roadmap for Literary Tourism Mitigation

| Issue | Potential Risk | Mitigation Strategy | Responsible Party |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Integrity | Commodification of sacred myths and unauthorized modification of stories | Collaborative curation and oversight with *ondofolo* and tribal elders | Indigenous Authorities (*Ondofolo*, *Abhu Afa*) & Customary Council |
| Infrastructure | Narrative-site degradation and environment pollution | Implementation of eco-friendly "story trails" using sustainable local materials | Jayapura Regency Public Works & Environmental Management |
| Community Agency | Outsider-led development and marginalization of local voices | Community-based leadership models and intergenerational training for youth | Local Community Administration & Community-Anchored Enterprise |
| Sustainability & Economic Viability | Prolonged dependency on external support and revenue leakage | Establishment of community-managed social enterprises and capacity building | Jayapura Regency Tourism Office & Locally Managed Enterprise Units |

The above strategic matrix serves as a roadmap for securing the social license and ensuring that Asei's literary tourism development remains culturally sensitive, economically resilient, and sustainable.

## Conclusion

This qualitative descriptive study examined Asei Island's cultural and literary heritage and its potential for the development of literary tourism. The findings demonstrate that Asei Island holds more than scenic beauty; its folktales, oral poems, bark paintings, and carvings provide a rich foundation for developing distinctive literary tourism experiences. The findings further indicate that Asei's oral and material cultural heritage can be transformed into meaningful tourism experiences by connecting narratives with cultural spaces, landscapes, and participatory activities. However, realizing this potential requires a community-centred approach that safeguards cultural integrity and the environment while ensuring local participation, leadership, and equitable benefits.

This study contributes to the field of literary tourism by demonstrating how oral traditions and culturally embedded narratives can be connected to specific places and understood as resources for literary tourism development in Indigenous community contexts. In doing so, the study broadens the understanding of literary tourism, which has traditionally tended to focus on written texts, by emphasizing the role of oral narratives, material cultural expressions, and place-based cultural memory in shaping literary tourism experiences.

This study is limited by its focus on Asei Island and three communities with historical and ancestral ties to Asei, as well as by its use of a qualitative descriptive approach. Therefore, the findings reflect the narratives, interpretations, and cultural contexts encountered during the research period and cannot be generalized to all Indigenous communities or tourism contexts in Papua. Future research could examine how tourists receive and interpret Asei's oral narratives, explore community perspectives on tourism development and the distribution of its benefits, and assess the feasibility and sustainability of specific literary tourism initiatives. Comparative studies involving other Indigenous communities in Papua could also broaden our understanding of the relationships among oral traditions, cultural landscapes, and literary tourism.

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## Appendix

**Table 1. Interview guide**

| No. | Interview Domain | Focus of Inquiry | Relevance to the Study |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Informant Profile | Age, occupation, education, length of residence, and community role | Establishes the informants' backgrounds and their relationship to Asei Island and its cultural knowledge |
| 2 | Local History and Stories | Folktales, legends, local figures, place-name origins, transmission of stories, and their existing use in tourism | Identifies oral narratives and local histories with potential relevance to folklore-based literary tourism |
| 3 | Tourism Potential | Cultural and historical sites, traditions, ceremonies, natural | Explores cultural, historical, and environmental resources |

| No. | Interview Domain | Focus of Inquiry | Relevance to the Study |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | environment, and tourist visits | that could support literary tourism |
| 4 | State of Tourism Development | Community support, existing tourism development, facilities, community participation, and institutional support | Assesses existing conditions and stakeholders relevant to the development of literary tourism |
| 5 | Impacts of Tourism | Economic benefits, community benefits, and potential negative impacts | Examines perceived implications of tourism development for the local community |
| 6 | Hopes and Suggestions | Future tourism development, preservation of folklore and culture, and community expectations | Identifies community perspectives on sustainable development and the preservation of Asei's narrative heritage |