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Recommended Citation

Adams, Kathleen M. (2018). Leisure in the “Land of the Walking Dead”: Western Mortuary Tourism, the Internet, and Zombie Pop Culture in Toraja, Indonesia. In *Leisure and Death An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death, and Dying*, A Kaul and J. Skinner (eds.). Denver: University of Colorado Press.

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Leisure in the “Land of the Walking Dead”

Western Mortuary Tourism, the Internet, and Zombie Pop Culture in Toraja, Indonesia

KATHLEEN M. ADAMS

Do any research into the Torajan culture and you are bound to hear the rumors about real-life Zombies, and as they say, seeing is believing, my search was on.

—OPENING PARAGRAPH, “TRAVELLING AMANDA” BLOG, MARCH 24, 2013¹

In fall 2012, as I packed up my bags after a class lecture on my research among the Sa’dan Toraja of Sulawesi, Indonesia, a sophomore bounded up enthusiastically and asked if he could volunteer as a research assistant on my next return to the Toraja highlands. “I’m *dying* to go there. I’d do whatever it takes—learn the language, work long hours, carry heavy bags—anything!” he begged. Assuming that his fervor was inspired by the same Toraja icons that have drawn both anthropologists and tourists for decades, I queried, “Tell me, was it the PowerPoints of Toraja carved houses, sculpted graves, or funeral rituals that grabbed your attention?” His answer took me by surprise: “No, I want to see the zombies.”

American zombie mania was not unknown to me at the time: I’d caught a few episodes of TV’s *The Walking Dead*, thumbed through a bookstore copy of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen and Grahame-Smith 2009), and observed students dashing around the campus parking lot playing *Humans versus Zombie*. But this was the first I’d heard of “Torajan zombies” in three decades of conducting research on the Sa’dan Toraja. Perplexed, I returned to my office, googled “Toraja

zombie,” and found a bonanza of Web articles and blogs offering photos and descriptions of “The Creepy Walking Dead of Tana Toraja”² as well as video clips of “real Toraja walking zombies” bearing warnings advising “viewer discretion.”³ Alongside the haunting mix of online images and sensational descriptions were travel blogs titled “Searching for Zombies in Tana Toraja, Finding Bliss in Sulawesi,”⁴ “Tana Toraja: Land of the Divine Kings . . . and Zombies?!?”⁵ and “Take the Kids Zombie Hunting in Tana Toraja, Indonesia.”⁶

This chapter offers a critical analysis of the burgeoning cottage industry of cyber and actual Toraja zombie tourism. Various studies have chronicled tourists’ fascination with cadavers and with touring the purported haunts of the undead (cf. Light 2009; Linke 2005; Stone 2011a), yet the ways in which new death-oriented leisure zones not only arise but become fetishized remain understudied. This chapter responds to the recent call for new research on the relationship between the media and dark tourism sites (Stone 2011b, 327). In the following pages I draw on data culled from fieldwork in the Toraja highlands of Indonesia and Web-based sources to demonstrate the role of both the internet and the anthropological imagination in this process. As I aim to show, decontextualized photographs and video clips in tandem with anthropologized narratives are central to the emerging association of Torajans with zombies, an association born and bred on the internet. Moreover, as my introductory vignette suggests, it is through leisure-time Web surfing that some zombie enthusiasts such as my student become entranced by the possibility of having their own firsthand touristic encounter with the (un)dead. It is also through pre-trip Web surfing that more mainstream tourists planning Indonesian vacations stumble upon the zombie narrative that further embellishes their pre-departure visions of their holidays in the Toraja highlands. Thus, one of my aims is to unpack how media and pop culture imagery are interwoven into the varied narratives underpinning cyber and touristic voyagers’ accounts of the Toraja mortuary world.

A second theme in this chapter entails examining the often contradictory emotional dynamics underlying the pursuit of fun and fright by vacationers in what is touted as one of the most death-obsessed cultures on the planet. Many scholars have theorized about how dark tourism enables meditations on dying through firsthand leisure-time encounters with the physicality of death (cf. Seaton 1996, 236; Lennon and Foley 2010). Still others have hypothesized that our own cultural segregation of death from everyday life has fostered yearnings for leisure activities that mediate life and death through playful and serious encounters with cadavers (Durkin 2003; Stone and Sharpley 2008).⁷ Cultural studies scholars have also analyzed the Western fascination with zombies and reanimated corpses (such as Frankenstein). Some have argued that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and filmic tales of reanimated dead derive from our fear of science unharnessed and express anxieties of life in

the post-atomic era (cf. Boon 2011; Christie and Lauro 2011). Others theorize that the popular culture interest in zombies stems from our postcolonial imperialist histories, since Hollywood zombies "represent enslavement at its most basic levels" (Bishop 2010, 66).⁸ However, ethnographically based studies of the complex emotional terrain entailed in these firsthand encounters remain limited. In this chapter I contribute to our understanding of the emotional dynamics embodied in touristic pilgrimages to observe the mortuary rituals of another culture. In particular, I aim to highlight the simultaneous dimensions of attraction and revulsion revealed in tourists' actions and narratives, a theme echoed in many of the online commentaries about Toraja mortuary practices made by virtual tourists at "real zombie"-oriented websites.

This brings me to a third point. This is a chapter about what some might call a Western voyeuristic fascination with dead (and potentially undead) corpses, or what Geoffrey Gorer (1955) has so famously termed the "pornography of death." However, I am not interested in fueling the sensationalized imagery of yet another dark group in a dark place where dark activities are seemingly a part of everyday life. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois's cautions regarding "pornographies of violence" as captivating yet repelling chronicles of violence that circumvent critical analysis strike me as equally apt for discussions of this particular genre of dark tourism (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003, 1). What I term "pornographies of the macabre," like pornographies of violence, can reify stigmatized perceptions of subordinated peoples while neglecting to spotlight the "chains of causality . . . link[ing] structural, political, and symbolic violence . . . buttress[ing] unequal power relations" (Bourgois 2003, 433). Thus, not only does this chapter aim to examine *how* the Toraja homeland emerged as a magnetic site for Western travelers pursuing encounters with the dead and the undead but also *why*. That is, one of my aims is to explore the cultural "logic" and structural, political, and symbolic asymmetries that buttress outsiders' sensationalized zombie-themed references to Toraja mortuary traditions, references that have lent the Toraja a new kind of global notoriety.

In striving to avoid fueling a pornography of the macabre, I also hope to foster a more complex portrait of the local experience by examining how Torajans deal with their new zombie notoriety. This chapter closes with a preliminary discussion of how Torajans make their own meanings out of their emergent status as both the "capital of the walking dead" in the Western imagination and a source of symbolic capital for dark tourists. From these preliminary examples, we can harvest more positive images of Torajans as active agents drawing upon Western misunderstandings of their mortuary rites to carve out new sources of revenue.

My data derive from over three decades of anthropological field research in the Toraja highlands beginning in the mid-1980s, with most recent follow-up fieldwork in summer 2012. I employed a mixed-methods approach (Bernard 1998), which included

qualitative open-ended interviews and participant observation in various locales, including funerals, tours, and tourism planning meetings (Pelto and Pelto 1981). I supplemented this qualitative research with archival research, photo-documentation of tourists partaking in mortuary rituals and grave tours, and critical discourse analysis of tourists' commentary and internet pages concerning Toraja zombies.⁹

This chapter begins by tracing the shifting tourism imagery of the Toraja from the early 1980s to today. I then examine Western mortuary tourists' range of responses to their vacation encounters with death, from contemplative to playful to a compelling mixture of attraction and revulsion. Next, I examine the role of social media in the rise of Toraja zombie tourism. Finally, I offer a glimpse into Torajan ways of navigating their newfound zombie notoriety.

BACKGROUND: MORTUARY TOURISM AND TOURISTIC IMAGERY OF THE SA'DAN TORAJA

The Sa'dan Toraja are a Christian minority group of over 750,000 whose homeland is in the highlands of South Sulawesi. While Torajans have migrated throughout Indonesia and beyond, those remaining in the homeland work as farmers, small business employees, in the tourism sector, and as civil servants. Within Indonesia, the Toraja are renowned for their pageantry-filled mortuary traditions, which draw thousands of guests and can last up to a week (depending on the rank and wealth of the deceased). They are equally celebrated for their exquisitely carved ancestral houses and effigies of the dead. Although adventure travelers have been making the bone-shaking nine-hour bus ride to the Toraja highlands since the late 1970s, it was not until the 1980s, after the Indonesian government began promoting the region as the "next destination after Bali," that larger-scale domestic and international tourism began to flourish (Adams 2006). Whereas in 1972 only 650 foreign tourists visited the Toraja highlands, by tourism's heyday in the mid-1990s the region was hosting 59,388 foreign tourists and 176,949 domestic tourists annually. Following a period of Indonesian political and economic instability in the late 1990s and early 2000s, tourist visits plummeted. However, tourism to the Toraja highlands is rebounding, and in 2013 the region received 19,324 foreign and 42,319 domestic tourist visits (Adams 2006; data collected in the Tana Toraja Provincial Office of Statistics).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, tourist brochures heralded Tana Toraja as the "land of the heavenly kings"—a realm where people "believe that life is only a celebration before a happy eternity in heaven, [and] death a joyous occasion" (Hemphill Harris 1981). Likewise, more recent magazines and tourist-oriented Web articles spotlight the possibility of witnessing a Toraja mortuary ceremony replete with displays of coffins, corpses, and effigies of the dead as the *pièce de résistance* of a

trip to the highlands (Adams 1991). Returning tourists I've interviewed all declared their experiences at Toraja funeral rituals as the highlight of their vacation visits. Descriptions of firsthand encounters with corpses, bloody animal sacrifices, and burial bones featured prominently in their travel reminiscences, as did accounts of excitement, confusion, and discomfort at being in the midst of what visitors often erroneously assume are "pagan" funeral rites, assumptions cultivated by the travel literature they had read prior to their trips (Adams 1984, 1993; Volkman 1987). As one blogger writes, "Torajans are all about death—This is . . . the grim reaper's playground—but in a good way. The main reason I had to visit Sulawesi was to see the Torajan culture, which intrigued me."¹⁰

Today, many Western tourists' comments echo the travel brochure and guidebook imagery of Torajans as Rousseauian exemplars of a more pristine era in human history: tourists I interviewed often spoke admiringly of Torajans as "living in harmony with the environment" and as enjoying "more authentic" lifestyles. For many tourists, this unique harmony is epitomized by Toraja attitudes toward death. A thirty-one-year-old Dutch woman's comments are fairly typical: "The people are so close to nature . . . even the way they treat their dead." And a journalist planning a Toraja vacation explained, "I want to go to Toraja because they don't seem to have the hangups we have about death. Their lives are not separated from death, and it does not seem to cause them anxiety."¹¹ For these tourists, a visit to Toraja seems to beckon as a kind of time travel to an imagined earlier era when death was more integrated into peoples' everyday lives. As one blogger writes, "We visited . . . a small village of traditional . . . houses, hanging graves, cave graves, rice paddies, collections of bones in open coffins with skulls placed to watch the goings and comings. It's a great example of how the Toraja . . . treat the dead like the living and shows their traditions have been the same for thousands of years."¹² As these comments suggest, tourists' narratives frequently bundle Torajans' unique mortuary practices with assertions about their timelessness. Ironically, bloggers and interviewees rarely note that most contemporary Toraja funerals feature Christian hymnals, loudspeakers, family videography sessions, and other modern-era accoutrements.

CONTEMPLATIVE AND PLAYFUL TOYING WITH DEATH

For many travelers, a visit to Toraja represents a way to positively engage with death, sometimes playfully and sometimes more contemplatively (figure 4.1). A major theme in tourist interviews and travel blog narratives was that witnessing a Toraja funeral, observing children playing with ancestral bones, or viewing cliff-side tombs and babies' tree graves offered life-and-death lessons.¹³ As one visitor observes: "On the surface, it seems . . . Torajans are obsessed with death. But really, it's just the



FIGURE 4.1.

opposite. They are celebrants of life in some of the most beautiful ways. When their people die, they keep them in the house for a long time, allowing time to grieve, time to let go, time for life and death to fade together gently. Death isn't the sharp cutting of a cord and immediate detachment that quick burial is. I kind of like that."¹⁴

Another blogger writes: "As my stay among these hospitable people drew to an end, I pondered what I had learnt about their magical philosophy, their constant efforts to balance the opposing forces of life and death [and] . . . I was just glad that I, as a western visitor . . . had been . . . the privileged observer of the expression of such unique spiritual beliefs."¹⁵ As these typical quotes suggest, for some, Toraja mortuary tourism dangles the promise of a more comfortable way of living with mortality. Perhaps not surprisingly, accounts of Torajan death-related practices are now featured on New Age blogs about embracing life's end¹⁶ and have even become the subject of a TED talk.¹⁷

Benedict Anderson's observation concerning how national monuments face simultaneously backward and forward in time may help us understand these tourists' perceptions of Toraja mortuary practices (Anderson 1990, 174). As Anderson notes, monuments mediate between particular types of pasts and futures. Likewise,

mortuary tourism may be understood as a way of mediating between the past and the future. That is, the potency and appeal of Toraja mortuary tourism may lie in its ability to offer tourists an opportunity to both contemplate the past and foresee the future of lived existence. In touring a culture imagined to embody a more pristine human past and in seeking firsthand encounters with death, Western tourists are simultaneously confronting human pasts and futures. That is, on the one hand they are envisioning Torajans as representative of humanity's living past, evocative of an earlier, simpler era when we were all presumably more comfortable with the natural processes of life and death. Yet these touristic pilgrimages to a "death-celebrating" culture are also future-looking: in their close encounters with corpses, blood, funerals, and graves, tourists can be said to be looking ahead to that which makes them most anxious—death. The underlying logic animating these Western mortuary tourists' experiences, then, is that if Torajans (as exemplars of our human past) can be so at ease with death and corpses, then perhaps even tourists' own fears evoked by death and "zombies" can be reframed, then tamed.

It is noteworthy that not all the mortuary tourists I encountered engaged in serious contemplation: some toured death in a more frivolous fashion. I occasionally witnessed younger male tourists at cliff-side graves snatch up human bones and wave them ghoulishly in the direction of their friends. Likewise, groups of friends sometimes jovially posed for pictures alongside rows of skulls and weathered wooden coffins at the base of burial cliffs. On occasion, these groups of younger Western tourists invoked "Indiana Jones" or "Laura Croft, Tomb-Raider" as they posed at the mouths of bone- and coffin-littered caves, but more often the laughter and bravado seemed edged with awkwardness or nervousness. In this regard, these playful and very physical interactions with the material world of death seemed to be small acts of defiance of the ultimate reality of our existence. For these more spirited tourists, the Toraja homeland appeared to function as a space where it was permissible to mock and physically toy with death. Whereas at home, frolicsomenely handling human bones would be unthinkable, for these vacationers the touristic framing of Toraja space as a land of "death cultists"¹⁸ offered an exotic, taboo-free zone where skulls and coffins became ludic settings for photo ops. In short, Torajaland serves as a mortuary-themed play-scape (Junemo 2004) for enacting and commemorating prior cinematic texts, dark adventurer fantasies, and cultural inversions.

SEEKING DEATH, FINDING AMBIVALENCE

Although lured by their fascination with death, a pervasive theme in many tourist narratives is that of ambivalence and sometimes even revulsion. As one traveler writes of his Toraja funeral experience:

[Standing] ankle-deep in mud, I watched one of the most confusing, engrossing, and disturbing spectacles I've ever seen. The houses were arranged around a muddy square with a buffalo carcass with a gash across the throat . . . in front of a house with a cylindrical coffin. In front of the dead buffalo . . . was a man standing with a live buffalo and about ten pigs lying on the floor tied up . . . The pigs' screaming for everything that their lives were worth was bone-chilling. In front of the [livestock] was a circle of men chanting and . . . making more noise than the screaming pigs . . . Peter encouraged us to join this group's procession into the pavilion and I reluctantly accepted . . . The male relatives of the deceased . . . offered us cigarettes, followed by the women who came . . . with plates of cakes, tea, and coffee . . . in almost complete silence. The uncomfortable feeling of being an intruder and a voyeur of something I didn't understand never left.¹⁹

Added to the ambivalence entailed in being a tourist intruder is revulsion at the sight, sounds, and smells of the animal slaughters. The visceral experiences with blood, excrement, and death that are part and parcel of the Toraja funeral scene are often a focal point of touristic accounts. As a Spanish tourist wrote: "Finally the ritual of killing buffaloes . . . The Toraja people put in line several dozens of buffaloes and started killing them with a machete in a brutal way. I had pity for them. The blood of the buffaloes would sprinkle to the faces of the numerous tourists that came close to take pictures. I did not want to see more slaughter of buffaloes . . . I am happy that in spite of their commercialization and disgusting slaughtering of buffaloes, I saw the Toraja funeral ritual."²⁰

This combination of fascination and revulsion is an underlying theme in Toraja mortuary tourism. During their interviews with me, some tourists were apologetic about their squeamishness, often noting that at home they were unnaturally shielded from the slaughter of the animals they consume. Online, however, the "revulsion" dimension of tourists' experiences seems to find fuller expression.²¹ For example, the author of a Toraja trip blog titled "The Macabre and the Massacre" describes her long-awaited arrival at a funeral arena:

As we walked about the setting, there were some horrifying scenes. Pigs being carried into the central ring, suspended by their legs and screaming as they went, to be then dumped on the ground and left to wait for their ultimate slaughter. Over in the second ring, the massacre was already under way! As we walked we passed buffalo heads and disemboweled pigs, vast quantities of blood staining the earth red and stifling the surrounding air with the smell of death. And as horrifying and outdated as some of these actions and traditions may seem, it was very difficult to take your eyes away!²²

Another tourist blog, "Toraja: A Culture Whose Views on Death Will Blow Your Mind," describes the Toraja funeral he witnessed as a "fascinating yet gruesome

event" and goes on to recount the rumor that "some outlying villages still maintain an ancient practice where a Shaman puts a spell on the body at the end of the funeral and the deceased 'walk themselves' to their graves!" As proof, this tourist blogger cites the gruesome zombies yielded by googling "Toraja Death."²³ In this blog we glimpse how a tourist's experience with the "world of corporeal, physically encountered reality" can imaginatively meld with a fantasy-geography to "produce a sense of reality that . . . visitors . . . appropriate," a process Jorgen Bærenholdt and Michael Haldrup term "fantastic realism" (Bærenholdt and Haldrup 2004, 86). That is, we see the blogger's up-close, physical encounter with Toraja mortuary sacrifice, death, and blood bridged to the realm of fantasy and zombies.

RISE OF THE TORAJA ZOMBIE (OR LOST IN TRANSLATION . . .)

Let us now turn to these so-called Torajan zombies, the characters that so fascinate tourists and which embody one of the most intense postmodern fears: disfigurement and unresolved semi-death. The imagery of Torajans as a land of "zombie love"²⁴ is a relatively recent accretion that builds on the much longer tradition of Toraja mortuary tourism. As John Urry observed, "Places [to play] are not fixed and unchanging . . . [they] are economically, politically and culturally produced through the multiple mobilities of people but also of capital, objects, signs and information moving at rapid yet uneven speed across many borders" (Urry 2004, 205). As in an earlier era when Indonesia's tourism promotion machinery helped transform the Toraja highlands' image from that of a relatively unknown (beyond anthropological and adventure travel circles) "hinterland" of Indonesia into a celebrated "land of heavenly kings," in the past few years various factors have added a new wrinkle to the touristic portrait of Torajans. These factors include the expansion of the internet's reach and a renewed Western obsession with zombies.

As best I can ascertain, the first online mentions of Toraja "walking dead" began in Indonesian-language blogs in 2006. Generally, most of these blogs recounted how Torajans use black magic to walk the dead back to their home villages for their funerals and how corpses laid to rest in Toraja caves did not decay. Although the ethnicity of the Indonesian bloggers cannot be ascertained, significantly, this earliest wave of writers did not use the term *zombie* (although subsequent Indonesian bloggers use this English-language expression). Rather, they employed the Indonesian expression "*mayat berjalan*" (walking corpse). Lacking photos, these Indonesian language blogs did not gain much traction. It was not until 2010 (in the midst of the most recent Western wave of zombie television shows and films) that the online circulation of Toraja "zombie" images arose in full force. By 2011, net traffic on "Toraja zombies" had erupted: postings appeared on a wide array of internet

sites, from blogs on Oddity Central to a National Geographic forum discussion of Torajan “walking dead rituals” to Zombie Research Society Web pages featuring research on whether “real walking dead” were to be found in the Toraja highlands.²⁵

Most of these blogs and Web discussions feature the same photograph of a wrinkled, moldy faced Toraja woman with unkempt hair flowing to her knees. Her shriveled arms are crossed at her waist, and she is clad in a teal sarong and top. Uncropped versions of the image show her being assisted by a male sporting a red T-shirt, with one younger spectator slightly behind the woman and another younger spectator standing on the hillside in the background. In the foreground one can discern the edge of a raised hand clasping a cell phone to capture an image of the purported “zombie” (figure 4.2). Contrary to what one would expect, the people in the snapshot do not seem frightened—rather, they appear solicitous. For the past few years, this image and others like it have circulated on the Web, sometimes accompanied by a video depicting another “Toraja zombie.” This walking dead photograph has been cut and re-posted on countless personal blogs and Pinterest sites.²⁶ It has also materialized on internet sites devoted to the supernatural or to “incredible” or “amazing things” (e.g., see the account of “Real Zombies Walking in Indonesia” at <https://www.vyperlook.com/odd-strange/real-zombies-walking-in-indonesia>). Snopes, the website dedicated to assessing the veracity of Web-circulated urban legends, summarizes the typical narrative: “Only in Indonesia (especially Toraja), a corpse is usually being [*sic*] carried up to the grave, but in Toraja, the corpse is woken up; letting it walk to its grave (is rarely performed anymore). The corpse is woken up using black magic. This is done because in Toraja the graves/cemeteries [*sic*] is [*sic*] placed above limestones [*sic*] mountains. The corpse walks by itself, and its [*sic*] guided by an expert in black magic behind it. But there is one prohibition, the corpse shouldn’t be pointed [at], once pointed, the corpse falls down and isn’t able to walk again.”²⁷ As early as September 2010, Snopes offered its assessment of these “Toraja zombie” accounts, as did the Zombie Research Society website. Both sites outline that these supposed “zombies” are actually corpses being re-clothed several years after entombment, in keeping with the Torajan *ma’nene’* ritual.²⁸ Citing anthropological sources, these sites explain that the *ma’nene’* ritual does not entail reanimating the dead. Rather, these are snapshots of people supporting bodies as they are moved for a re-clothing ritual that occurs months or years after death.

How, then, did these ritual images come to proliferate the internet as “zombies”? Preliminary research suggests that these images were most likely photos taken by younger Torajans and by migrant Torajans returning home for family visits and heritage-oriented tourism. Over the past decade, as Indonesian cell phone connectivity expanded, Indonesians enthusiastically embraced social media, to the point that observers have declared Indonesia the world’s most social media-oriented nation



FIGURE 4.2.

(Reed 2013).²⁹ As growing numbers of younger Torajans share their lives on social media, photos of Toraja family rites, including the *ma'nene'* ritual, have come to populate Facebook, Twitter, and other feeds, where they are shared and re-shared, often without contextual information.

Here, additional background on the *ma'nene'* ritual is warranted. My experiences with *ma'nene'* ceremonies suggest that, unlike funerals, they are much smaller affairs: though they draw extended family members, they are generally not promoted for tourists. In the Northern Toraja valley region where I've based my fieldwork, *ma'nene'* rituals are Christianized and often simply entail gravesite sweeping and cleaning, followed by a collective meal, prayers, and hymnals. If there are effigies of the dead (only elite individuals whose funerals adhered to certain ritual requirements are entitled to effigies), they are removed from the familial burial areas for

dusting and re-clothing in “new” apparel, then returned to their original gravesite locations upon completion of the ritual. Some Christian families also clothe the deceased in new garments, something that was once part of the pre-Christian version of the *ma’nene’* ritual. In the *ma’nene’* rituals I observed, however, if coffins were opened for corpse dusting, families simply tucked the new apparel into the coffin.³⁰

However, Elizabeth Coville (an anthropologist who works in Sa’da Toraja’s western hills) reports that in the 1980s *ma’nene’* rituals she observed, Torajans removed corpses from graves for cleansing and re-clothing (Elizabeth Coville, personal communication, September 25, 2014). In this era, the bodies remained horizontal during cleansing. It wasn’t until 2012 that Coville witnessed bodies raised to standing positions so Toraja family members and visiting migrant kin could snap cell-phone “selfies” of themselves alongside the corpses (a selfie is a snapshot of oneself taken for sharing on social media). It seems reasonable to deduce that migration, social media, and the rise of the selfie converged and produced a flow of internet images of the so-called Toraja walking dead. As the original posters’ social media “friends” re-shared these images, it seems that eventually these decontextualized selfies and video clips found their way into net zones frequented by Western zombie aficionados, and the images went viral. The snapshots of *ma’nene’* rituals were rapidly embraced as “proof” that zombies can and do exist.

English-language blogs about Toraja mortuary practices and zombies are rife with anthropologized narratives depicting the Toraja as an “isolated tribe” and as practitioners of “black magic” and ancient “supernatural rituals and traditions.”³¹ Torajan Christianity rarely surfaces in these online zombie-oriented narratives, and allusions to modernity are generally absent: there is no mention of the daily rush hour traffic jams in Toraja’s largest towns or of the multitude of churches, hotels, shops, banks, and karaoke bars. We hear nothing of Torajan middle-class civil service workers, teachers, and engineers or of the many Torajan migrants who reside throughout the world. If modernity surfaces, it is usually invoked as an explanation for the difficulty of finding rituals in which Torajans use magic and mystical powers to awaken corpses so they can walk to their own graves. For instance, one blogger writes, “Today, there are roads and cars in Toraja and raising the dead is no longer needed to transport the body. Sometimes the villagers like to prove that they still know how to raise the dead so they use their rituals on dead animals.”³² However, far more zombie-oriented blogs paint a portrait of the Toraja highlands as a realm of timeless rural villages where people still practice an “ancient belief system” and “shamans” have the ability to reanimate the dead. In short, many online accounts of Torajan zombies traffic in tropes that would delight a budding structuralist: these accounts foster musings about the place of the zombie in the Western mind, along the lines of North : South : Life : Death (or, “Is the North to the South as Life to Death as Culture to Nature?”).

However, my pilot survey of twenty-three college students on "zombie imaginaries" muddies these quasi-structuralist waters. Many of these students who self-identified as "interested in" or "curious about" zombies volunteered that they associated zombies with "tribal," "organic," "remote," or "barbaric" places. As one student wrote: "Voodoo is strong, mainly in countries of older origin and countries that believe strongly in the "organic" (herbal medicines, spirits of the Earth). In my mind, these countries [where zombies might be found] would be some African countries and particular African tribes and some areas of Mexico and Spanish areas." Another wrote: "For some reason I associate Siberia with Zombies. I would love to travel there. I feel like because of its location, rough terrain and harsh climate [*sic*]. It is one of the places in the world not very well-known or explored." A third student wrote:

I definitely would associate indigenous people and tribes with zombies. For example the indigenous people of South America or the remote areas of Asia. These people are still barbaric and even their facial structure isn't normal. They tend to have bigger features and look mean. There [*sic*] way of life isn't like that of the 21st century. Many wear minimal clothing and still conduct in [*sic*] rituals and traditions that seem to encompass the idea of spirits within the body and transcending into another being. This seems the closest to what a "zombie" in our world today would be like.

Yet other students' answers disrupt these crude North-to-South/Life-to-Death equations. Some point simultaneously to "tribal areas" and to "cities like New York" or states like California or even post-nuclear disaster locales like Chernobyl as imagined zombie zones. As one student wrote of her conversation with a "zombie-fanatic" friend, "I think those places . . . like Indonesia and other Indigenous places are associated with zombies . . . I can't really understand why, but their culture is really adaptive to zombies. Also, America is huge with zombies! So many people here believe in them. Legends and myths point to places like Thailand, Indonesia and Southern Africa. It would be amazing to travel there."

Several of the students mentioned spending leisure time playing *Humans versus Zombies* with friends on campus, while others noted that they enjoyed online zombie-themed gaming. Given the popularity of these games (which feature humans battling hordes of ravenous zombies), it seems likely that zombie gaming websites (e.g., www.zombiegaming.org and www.zombiegames.net) have not only enlivened students' imaginations regarding geographic locales associated with zombies but have also prompted some to explore additional online zombie sites. Most zombie gaming websites feature discussion forums where members can exchange zombie book and film recommendations, as well as news items about "real-life zombies." The image of the teal-clad female Toraja zombie is a frequent celebrity on these

discussion forums. Even the “off-topic” discussion board of a broadly focused site devoted to “hardcore online gamers” (www.neogaf.com) has a particularly lengthy discussion thread devoted to the Toraja “walking corpse” ritual.³³

Whatever the sources of their “zombie geographical imaginaries,” my more zombie-obsessed students’ yearnings to graduate from their leisure-time zombie play and travel to actual places where “real” zombies may roam is telling: their desires offer a window onto the new type of mortuary tourist now surfacing in the Toraja highlands. The twin tropes of primitivity/tribalism and remoteness that dominate most of my zombie-oriented students’ imagery suggest a broader cultural imaginary wherein the extreme cultural “other” lives in close proximity with the supernatural world of the undead.³⁴ I suggest that it is these sorts of images that spark the imagination of zombie tourists long before they purchase tickets to the Toraja highlands.

TORAJA REFRAMINGS OF THE WALKING DEAD: EMBRACING THE ZOMBIE

I now examine how Torajans make their own meanings out of their emergent status as the “center of the walking dead” in the Western imagination. There is a certain irony to this new twist to Torajans’ international celebrity. Before the advent of large-scale tourism to the Sulawesi highlands, Torajans were frequently disparaged by other Indonesian groups as “primitives” only a couple of generations removed from head-hunting. Seen as “uncultured” and “backward,” Torajans were a routine target for development projects designed to pull them into the “modern” world. However, by the late 1980s and 1990s, Torajans were successfully drawing on their international touristic fame to escape these stereotypes of yore (Adams 2006). Yet it is precisely because of the current flow of tourists, global migrants, and photographic images in and out the highlands that Torajans find themselves newly anointed as “zombie chic.”³⁵

As more tourists arrive in the Toraja highlands with zombies on their minds, some evidence suggests that their interests are sparking a certain degree of zombie entrepreneurship on the part of some business-savvy Torajans. While “zombie tours” are not yet a routine part of the Toraja tourism landscape, the Facebook page of one Toraja-owned mountaintop homestay features an image of the teal-clad female Toraja zombie. In addition, at least one guide claims that, for the right fee, he will locate someone who will demonstrate the zombification process on an animal. A 2013 series of Twitter “tweets” from one aspiring Toraja zombie tourist and adventure travel blogger who boasts of having “Danced with Corpses in Africa, Hitchhiked across Saudi Arabia, [and] Lived with Sea Gypsies, Tattoos Hammered in by Headhunters”³⁶ offers a glimpse of the genesis of zombie commodification by Torajans. As this potential Toraja zombie tourist tweets: “Thanks for the tip

on the creepy Toraja walking dead voodoo ritual! I found a guy who swears he can demonstrate this and show me . . . the guy says he can kill a pig and reanimate it, zombie style . . . and teach me how. I'm a little skeptical . . . It's a bit complicated, the competing magicians must allow it and they must counteract the black magic to prevent a bad harvest." A day later he reports: "So, unfortunately they want 40 million to reanimate a dead pig. That's too much, so I will come back if they soften their position . . . the guide will work with them to show the positives. This can legitimize what they do and create a new source of tourism for them . . . We agreed on a price and Torajan magicians will zombify a dead pig using black magic and make it walk around the room and teach me!"³⁷

Although his tweets end without a report on the zombification demonstration, his postings nevertheless offer further testimony that some Torajans are now embracing the zombie imagery for economic advancement.

When I began my research in the Toraja highlands in the 1980s, Torajans frequently warned me not to travel to the adjacent (yet more remote) region of Mamasa because it was "not safe." As they told me, when Christianity arrived in the early 1900s, it "drove all of the black magic off into the Mamasa Toraja hills" (also known as "Western Toraja" and locally considered a similar yet distinct group). The Sa'dan Toraja homeland was safe and civilized thanks to Christianity, they assured me, but the Mamasa region was the place where priests of the old religion could still make the dead walk and where magic still animated the world. Just as westerners envision the Sa'dan Toraja homeland as a space on the margins of the earth and therefore a logical zone for the undead, so, too, were the Sa'dan Toraja implicating the culturally and geographically more marginal Mamasa Toraja. As tourists arrived in the Toraja highlands seeking zombies, I observed Toraja guides and touts point toward the neighboring Mamasa mountains and declare that the walking dead might still be found in those rugged lands. Some invariably added that, for a fee, they could organize a private trekking expedition to this "remote" and more culturally pristine zone.

Comparatively difficult to access, the Mamasa area had long been dismissed by provincial-level government officials as relatively uninteresting for tourists. Thus, this region has never received the touristic stardom enjoyed by the Sa'dan Toraja area.

However, certain Mamasa developers have recently seized upon zombie fanaticism as a possible path for economic development. Some are now embracing the negative imagery that once plagued them and exploring re-branding as a more authentic zombie homeland than that offered by their Sa'dan Toraja neighbors. In November 2009, Mamasa regency began promoting its "flagship walking corpses" (Stephanus 2009). While it is too early to determine whether this strategy will bring a significant influx of tourist dollars, it is clear that Mamasa tourism planners

see this as their opportunity to best their neighbors at their own game: as one news article (titled “Mamasa’s Walking Dead Tourism Potential”) proclaimed, “Mamasa is regarded as the greatest center of mystical power for ethnic Torajans. Many Toraja admit they are reluctant to face the mystical powers of Mamasa, which are far stronger than that [*sic*] found in Tana Toraja” (Stephanus 2009). It should not surprise us that accompanying this article was the now ubiquitous photo of the so-called female Toraja zombie.

CLOSING OBSERVATIONS: FANTASTIC REALISM AND THE EMOTIONAL TERRAIN OF ZOMBIE TOURISM

The late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century fascination with death-related destinations has produced a flurry of scholarly work, including a small body of speculative work on the allure of the reanimated dead, largely by cultural studies and literary scholars. While explanations for the surge of interest in death-oriented leisure zones vary, the Toraja case reaffirms Lennon and Foley’s observations that global communication technologies play a key role in propagating initial interest in dark tourism vacations (Lennon and Foley 2010, 11). Not only does the internet (and social media platforms) enable cyber-tourists to see photographs and videos of Toraja zombies, but the internet has also enlivened Torajans’ association with zombie imagery in the global imaginary.

While the internet serves as an amplifier of potential leisure zones pertaining to death and zombies, the bigger question remains, why click on such links in the first place? And why make the considerable financial expenditure to travel halfway around the world to witness funerals for strangers or to pursue the undead? While some might aptly suggest that the pursuit of cultural capital lies at the heart of the matter, I believe the allure of death and zombie tourism involves far more than the simple pursuit of social capital. Despite the relatively small number of leisure-time zombie aficionados purchasing costly tickets to visit the Toraja homeland, their activities and fascinations reveal broader patterns in Western imaginings of distant lands. I suggest that zombie tourism represents an extreme case of the dynamics of ethnic tourism, where Othering is a key theme (Adams 1984; van den Berghe 1994). As Michael Hitchcock, Victor King, and Michael Parnwell summarized, “For the vast majority, otherness is what makes a destination worthy of consumption” (Hitchcock, King, and Parnwell 1993, 3). In zombie tourism, cyber and actual travelers pursue the ultimate Other: the undead.

My analysis suggests that the prospect of leisure-time encounters with alleged “zombies,” human bodies, and sacrificial animal blood in so-called tribal societies enables the mediation of life-and-death narratives. Moreover, the “tribal” context

promises heightened levels of "frisson" beyond the levels prompted by touristic encounters with death at home.³⁸ Just as Transylvania became a fitting homeland for a menacing supernatural creature because of its location on Europe's periphery, which resonated with established myths about peripheral zones as marginal, backward spaces (Seaton 2000; Light 2009, 243),³⁹ so, too, does Toraja's "remote" tropical location in a "developing" nation render it a space where the normative Western order of life and death may be plausibly or playfully imagined as inverted.

Moreover, as I have suggested in this chapter, mortuary tourism to rural zones on the periphery of the Western postindustrial world may also be productively envisioned as a way of mediating between the past and the future in a broader sense. In their touristic forays to Toraja, Western mortuary tourists pursue a locale where our shared human past is imagined as preserved and available for sampling, even as our shared human future of death takes center stage. In a sense, then, mortuary tourists to peripheral zones may be unconsciously engaging in a kind of fantasy time travel, simultaneously backward and forward on the human time line.

Bærenholdt and Haldrup's notion of fantastic realism also bears relevance for Toraja mortuary and zombie tourism. As noted, fantastic realism refers to instances where visitors' physical experiences reinforce an imaginative geography and enable tourists to "appropriate the experience and make it a part of their lives and identities" (Bærenholdt and Haldrup 2004, 86). In the Toraja case, dark tourists' first-hand sensory encounters with funerals, bones, graves, sacrificial animals, and (occasionally) corpses meld with their pre-departure diets of sensational online tales of native sorcerers reanimating the dead: in this manner, their tours serve to animate both the imaginative geography of zombies as well as tourists' primal emotions triggered by the realm of death.

It is worth underscoring the role of emotion in these macabre journeys, both cyber and actual. Despite a growing corpus of work addressing the ideological underpinnings, machinations, branding, and drawing powers of death-oriented leisure sites, the emotional dynamics entailed in touristic pilgrimages to these sites remain understudied. My ethnographic data suggest that emotional ambivalence is common among travelers engaged in Toraja mortuary tourism. Interviews and tourist observations in the field, as well as traveler narratives and even "armchair zombie tourist" Web commentaries on photos of Toraja "zombies," generally reveal equally potent doses of attraction and revulsion. Emotional attraction and revulsion may well be characteristic of much of postindustrial Western tourism to witness non-Western mortuary rites as well as other culturally unfamiliar practices entailing physical pain (or what might be perceived as "bodily mutilation"). Erik Cohen's description of tourists' reactions to observing Vegetarian Festival religious devotees parade through the streets of Phuket (Thailand) with knives, guns, and other sharp

objects piercing their bodies suggests a similar set of tourist emotions and appears to reinforce this hypothesis (Cohen 2001, personal communication, 2012). As the Toraja case demonstrates, such dark travels elicit potent emotions, not all of them pleasurable. Even years after their travels, some tourists' vivid remembrances of the intense emotional discomfort they experienced as funeral "intruders" and of their difficulties averting their eyes from slaughtered animals and corpses suggest that the experience of these sorts of enlivening emotions is an important dimension of their dark travels. For anthropologists of tourism, the attraction and revulsion enacted and narrativized by mortuary-zombie tourists and bloggers offer a revealing meta-commentary on our own metaphysical anxieties. Clearly, we need more studies of the emotional terrain of death-oriented leisure pursuits.

EPILOGUE

In 2014, some months after I presented a draft of this chapter at a conference, a journalist writing a piece for the *New York Times's* high school supplement *Up Front Magazine* contacted me for an interview. She explained that she was drafting an article aimed at uncovering the "real story" of the ubiquitous Torajan "walking dead" meme. Eager to correct the sensationalized, Orientalist imagery surrounding the teal-clad Torajan "zombie," I agreed to an interview. In the lengthy interview, I explained how the so-called zombie photos were misunderstood images of a post-burial corpse- and grave-cleansing ritual. At the close of our conversation, the journalist asked, "If there were only one thing I could stress for the story, what would it be?" I responded that most important of all would be to emphasize that the Toraja people are almost entirely Christian today and that these rituals are not pagan reanimations of the dead but rather Christianized rituals where people show their respect and affection for deceased kin by cleaning graves and lovingly re-clothing the corpses.

Several months later, a colleague left a copy of the publication in my mailbox. I was stunned to see an enormous two-page photo depicting a male Toraja "zombie" surrounded by living kin, bearing the bold caption "The *Real* Walking Dead" ("The Big Picture" 2015). Several small text boxes had been added to the image, noting the identity and age of the corpse, mentioning that today Torajans take pictures of the corpses and post them on social media, and explaining how Torajans once used leaves to preserve the bodies. Yet another text box described the Toraja homeland and the rituals involving mummified corpses. A small box contained more extended explanatory text: my heart sank when I read the closing line, which offered an oddly mysterious quote from me ("the anthropologist") about how the line between life and death was "much thinner" for the Toraja.

With the exception of the allusion to social media, nowhere was there any mention of the fact that these were Christianized rituals performed by people who are very much a part of the global world. Moreover, the enormous zombie image trumped the small text, and I had visions of high school teens distractedly thumbing through the magazine during social studies classes and retaining only the image and the large caption. So much for my intentions to correct the record. Perhaps the moral of this story is that it is hard to kill the walking dead.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Andrew Causey, Elizabeth Coville, Erik Cohen, and this volume's editors for their wise suggestions. I also thank Peter Sanchez and Maribeth Erb for their support and Kristen Krueger for gifting me with her copy of the *Up Front Magazine* article.

NOTES

1. <https://travellingamandablog.wordpress.com/2013/03/24/searching-for-zombies-in-tana-toraja-finding-bliss-in-sulawesi/>, accessed October 12, 2013.
2. <http://forums.steroid.com/anabolic-lounge-off-topic-discussion/456752-real-walk-ing-dead-indonesia.html>, accessed January 12, 2014.
3. For instance, see <https://www.vyperlook.com/odd-strange/real-zombies-walking-in-indonesia>, accessed November 8, 2014.
4. <https://travellingamandablog.wordpress.com/2013/03/24/searching-for-zombies-in-tana-toraja-finding-bliss-in-sulawesi/>, accessed October 12, 2013.
5. <http://jdsteely.blogspot.com/2013/06/tana-toraja-land-of-divine-kings-and.html>, accessed October 30, 2013.
6. <http://www.itcheefee.com/blog/travelling-with-kids-2/take-the-kids-zombie-hunt-ing-in-tana-toraja-indonesia>, accessed October 30, 2013.
7. Lennon and Foley (2010, 5) counterbalance this "segmentation" argument, noting that our postmodern media-saturated world enables us to consume graphic depictions of death on a daily basis. While certainly true, it is important to underscore that such media-based encounters with death are *secondhand* encounters. The mortuary tourists I interviewed sought *firsthand* encounters with funerals, corpses, and graves.
8. I am skeptical about the cross-cultural applicability of this "imperialist condition" hypothesis. Younger urban Indonesians appear equally fascinated by zombies, yet Indonesia was a Dutch colony and younger Indonesians tend to have scant awareness of Indonesia's own recent imperialist ventures in Timor L'Este and West Papua.

9. Critical discourse analysis was particularly salient, given its premise that “certain discourses are more powerful than others [and that these dynamics] can be revealed in the grammatical, semantic, and visual construction of texts and images” (Waterton 2009, 46).

10. <http://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/Sulawesi/Tana-Toraja/blog-778051.html>, accessed November 12, 2013.

11. She was disappointed when I explained that death is a source of great anxiety for Torajans, largely because of the exorbitant costs of funerals, which can plunge families into crippling debt.

12. [https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/Sulawesi/Tana-Toraja/blog “Rantepao by Scooter,”](https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/Sulawesi/Tana-Toraja/blog-Rantepao%20by%20Scooter) accessed November 12, 2013.

13. The tourists I interviewed before, during, and after their visits generally conveyed an array of impressions of the Toraja highlands, including comments on tranquil landscapes and reflections on the disrupting forces of modernization, tourism, capitalism, and Christianity. However, most underscored mortuary tourism as a dominant travel motive. Likewise, in the Toraja travel blogs I surveyed, well over 50 percent of the photos included featured mortuary-related themes (funerals, graves, ritual animal slaughter).

14. <http://edventureproject.com/death-in-tana-toraja>, accessed November 19, 2010.

15. Chris Dunham, 2008 Online Travel Writing Contest runner-up, http://www.transitionsabroad.com/listings/travel/narrative_travel_writing/life_and_death_in_tana_toraja_indonesia.shtml, accessed October 4, 2013.

16. E.g., <http://blog.sevenponds.com/cultural-perspectives/tana-toraja-indonesia-where-death-is-never-a-severe-goodbye>, accessed October 22, 2014.

17. https://www.ted.com/talks/kelli_swazey_life_that_doesn_t_end_with_death.html, accessed September 26, 2014.

18. <http://benedante.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-death-cultists-of-toraja-and.html>, accessed October 23, 2014.

19. <https://robpacker.wordpress.com/2009/10/17/death-in-toraja/>, accessed October 1, 2014.

20. <http://mosttraveledpeople.com/Locations.php?Locid=549&Location=Sulawesi&q=Sulawesi>, accessed October 13, 2013.

21. Perhaps this is not surprising, since the Western tourists I interviewed were cognizant of my identity as an anthropologist and may have presumed I was desensitized to the blood-spattering that is part and parcel of these funerals. Thus, these tourists may have minimized their revulsion in their interviews with me. Nevertheless, the theme of revulsion in the context of funeral visits (and sometimes in the context of burial cave visits, upon seeing scattered bones of the dead) is palpable in the fieldwork interviews, albeit slightly attenuated in comparison to some travel blogs.

22. [https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/Sulawesi/Tana-Toraja/blog, “The Macabre and the Massacre,”](https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/Sulawesi/Tana-Toraja/blog-The-Macabre-and-the-Massacre) accessed November 13, 2013.

23. <http://www.aaronswwadventures.com/2013/10/tana-toraja-death-culture/>, accessed November 25, 2013.

24. <http://strangesounds.org/2014/09/zombie-love-torajas-dig-relatives-freshen-ancient-ceremony-cleaning-corpse-mainene.html>, accessed November 1, 2014.

25. For the Oddity Central account of Toraja zombies, see <http://www.odditycentral.com/pics/the-creepy-walking-dead-of-tana-toraja.html>, accessed May 21, 2015. The Zombie Research Society website has updated its page on Toraja "real walking dead": the site now declares the "mystery solved." See <http://zombieresearchsociety.com/archives/24871>, accessed May 21, 2015. Similarly, the National Geographic discussion forum is now removed, though National Geographic's site hosts a four-minute film clip on the Toraja titled "Corpse Lives with Family." See http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/indonesia_corps_eliveswithfamily, accessed May 21, 2014.

26. Pinterest is a visually oriented site where members save images that interest them. Typically, Pinterest sites displaying these images bear headings such as "Unexplained Mysteries" and include a Web link to the image source. Occasionally, the Pinterest compiler will also include commentary. For example, one Pinterest compiler accompanied the cut-and-pasted image of the blue-clad female zombie with this commentary: "Indonesian Real Zombie Photo: Walking Corpse in Toraja—Toraja people do practice something akin to the rising of the dead. It seems that the people believe that death is a long process, sometimes taking years as the deceased gradually works their [*sic*] way toward Puya (the afterlife). Very elaborate measures must be taken during the funeral to ensure that the loved one makes it safely to that destination." See <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/527695281308773788/>, accessed May 21, 2015.

27. See <http://message.snopes.com/showthread.php?t=65203>, accessed October 10, 2014.

28. See <http://message.snopes.com/showthread.php?t=65203> and <http://zombieresearchsociety.com/archives/24871>, accessed November 10, 2014.

29. Indonesia has over 74.6 million internet users, most of whom access the Web through cell phones (Markplus Insight 2013). Indonesia also outscores other nations in Twitter usage and is ranked as the world's fourth-biggest Facebook nation, with 64 million active Facebook users in 2013 (Grazella 2013; Lim 2013, 146).

30. In her 1986 book based on 1970s Torajan research, Nooy-Palm also reports observing people tucking new garments into coffins but does not mention bodies being removed from coffins (Nooy-Palm 1986).

31. <http://freshinfos.com/2011/11/17/have-you-ever-seen-a-real-zombie/>, accessed November 11, 2013.

32. <http://zazenlife.com/2012/03/15/real-life-zombies-walking-dead-toraja/>, accessed November 4, 2013.

33. <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=422988>, accessed May 22, 2015.

34. Likewise, Chernobyl and other post-nuclear disaster zones can be similarly imagined as remote spaces, beyond the familiar and taming reach of Western society.
35. <https://thedancingrest.com/2014/09/06/zombie-chic-indonesian-villages-bizarre-annual-ritual-of-digging-up-its-dead/>, accessed September 12, 2014.
36. See <http://mywanderlist.com/>, accessed May 21, 2015.
37. See <https://twitter.com/mywanderlist/status/381024991564689408>, accessed May 21, 2015.
38. See Desmond's discussion of frisson, this volume.
39. Albeit based on the actual iron-deficient impaler Vlad Tepes.

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