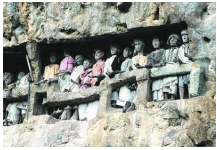


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By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor



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## **Toraja: The Burial that Can Ruin You**

### *An amazing ritual*

Indonesia makes the world's largest archipelago, with 17,000 islands. One of its largest islands is Sulawesi (Celebes), which is like a bridge between Australia and Asia. A particular universe in Sulawesi is represented by Tana Toraja ("the Land of the Highlanders"), in the southern part of the island, dominated by the Rante-Kombola peak, 3,455 m (11,516 ft) tall.

The Toraja people consider that the soul is the most important notion and their religion is connected to one of the most spectacular burial rituals in the world, aimed to save the soul of the deceased, easing its way to the other world, that of the gods and spirits of the ancestors.

Toraja myths say that Rante-Kombola is the place the first people descended from on a stone ladder. Soon, the gods broke it, and the rocks of Bamba Puang are just remains of the sky ladder.

In 1905, Dutch troops defeated the resistance of the Toraja warriors, after one year of fights. The courage of the famous and fierce head-hunter Toraja warriors could do nothing against the modern weaponry as they used spears, swords, shields or threw pepper towards the Dutch soldiers. The Dutch army was soon followed by missionaries of the Reformed Church, with the aim of converting the locals to Christianity and forbid the older customs and traditions.

The Dutch were especially worried with how whole families got ruined by the funerary ceremonies asked by dluak, the ancestral religion. The violent revolt of 1917 showed the church that tactics had to be changed and the conversion methods had to be more subtle. With all the efforts, during the colonial period, just 10 % of the Toraja shifted for Christian religion. Paradoxically, a massive conversion occurred after Indonesia achieved its independence in 1965, to reach 86 % in 1980.

### **The two-souled people**

Today, only few Toraja people follow the ancestral animist beliefs. For them, the world has three levels. The sky is the upper level, ruled by the supreme god Puang Matua, the creator of the people, animals and plants. The land is the intermediary level. The underground is the domain of the spirits, darkness and death.

Two other spheres influence the domain of the people. One is located in the southwest, being populated by the spirits of the ancestors, and the other in the northeast, belonging to the already deified ancestors.

The Toraja tradition says the people have 2 souls. The first is dewata, the divine soul, which leaves us when we die and ascends to Puang Matua, entering in its service, being put to watch at the compliance of the traditional religion canons, the way of the ancestors called "aluk to dolo".

The second soul is "bombo", the wandering soul of the dead, the terrestrial and human

side. It splits in two, one remaining in the tomb with the dead, and the other hanging around. To reach Puya, the kingdom of the dead, where they will keep on existing, the souls must bypass many obstacles, fact that turns possible only owing to the support of the close relatives, which will accomplish rigorously a whole array of rites, grouped in several stages.

From his death to the first ceremony, the man is considered ill and lain on the floor of the house, with the head to the west and feet to the east. Then, the body is prepared: it is washed, the intestines are emptied and it is anointed with palm oil, after which it is wrapped in stripes of white fabric. The relatives cry loudly, but nobody pronounces the word "dead".

### **The start of the ceremony**

The first ceremony starts immediately or after a while – sometimes weeks, months, up to one year, until all the necessary stuffs are gathered. It starts through animal sacrifices. First, buffaloes (kerabau), whose number varies depending on the caste of the dead, are sacrificed. In the case of the nobles, their number can be of 60-100. These massacres can ruin families. Dutch authorities tried to limit the number of the killed buffaloes to at most 40 and they also forbid one of the cruelest phases of the sacrifice, when the animals, still alive, were cut into pieces. The Indonesian government also limited drastically the number of sacrificed animals, imposing a high fee for each killed buffalo.

Only after the kill of the first buffalo, the person is considered dead. On the back of the second sacrificed buffalo, the soul of the dead leaves the village. The sacred animal of the Toraja accompanies them into the world of the spirits.

At the end of the ceremony, the horns of the sacrificed buffaloes will be strung on a pole in front of the house, the one supporting the roof, as a proof of the social status of the dead. Then, the alimentary mourning starts, when rice consume is forbidden, and the wake, with the pray reciting, songs and circle dances, the people holding each other's little fingers. This is Ma'Badong.

Relatives and friends start bringing offerings: buffaloes, pigs and rice. The flags of the deceased are raised in front of the house. The body is again wrapped in fabrics, taking the look of a large roll, due to the repeated coverings. Near the dead, a man carefully registers into a notebook each offering and its traits: the shape of the horns of the buffalo, its coat spots and so on. The quantity and quality of the offerings decide the inheritance share! Even the debts of the dead are inherited. But sometimes, the expense of the burial, together with the debts, may overmatch the value of the inheritance.

### **Megaliths on the sacred plain**

The sacrifice of the pigs is devoid of pomp and spectators. Knives pierce their hearts. Their death is necessary as the ceremonies require meat. The festivity and the dead move to the plain, Ranta, the sacred field of the aligned megaliths. These menhirs have the weirdest shapes: square, circular, puckered or prolonged. Each stone is a commemorative monument, proof of a mortuary festivity. Some menhirs are taller than 6 m (20 ft) and can reach 8 tonnes. Others are small, of 20-30 cm (0.6-1 ft). Then, the dead is brought back to his home.

### **The second ceremony**

[img=2]The next funerary ceremony takes place 9 days after the first one, or later – several months or several years (up to 20!), the deadline for the relatives to save the funds

necessary for the festivity. The dead remains all this time inside the house, his body has not touched the tomb, and his soul is still searching for its way...

The same rites are restarted. The festivity amplifies. The dead is put out of the house in a coffin that must not touch the ground, being carried on a hearse resembling a Toraja house. He is carried through the fields and rice paddies, in the sounds of the gong, in the vast field of Ma'Palolo. A long line of mourning people follow him. The buffaloes and the other animals to be sacrificed finish the cortege.

The coffin is placed among the menhirs, in a previously prepared platform. Around the sacred field, a village of huts has been built, for hosting the hundreds of guests. Buffaloes and pigs are sacrificed again, and the meat is shared between the guests. At the shadow of the trees, people eat and drink palm wine. Prays are recited. Ma'maraka is sung by vocalists; their words attempt to comfort the family, expressing, at the same time, the support of the community.

### **The last ceremony**

It takes place in the day called "towards the tomb". The dead will leave the field of menhirs. The coffin, located on the hearse, is carried on the shoulders of the men. After years of wandering, this is the last journey. The procession, accompanied by singing, reaches the funerary promenade. It is a large calcareous rock, in which liangs, the sepulchers of the families, are carved. A large ladder made of a tall bamboo stem with notches, will allow the ascend of the coffin to the liang. It is a difficult action, which requires skill and maxim effort. People go home. 30 days later, the relatives renounce to the mourning clothes. The soul of the dead has reached the kingdom of the spirits, watching for the wellbeing of the relatives and friends.

### **The funerary promenade**

The entrance into the liang is covered by a richly decorated wooden plate. Under the window of the liang, a horned buffalo head is figured. Amongst the liangs, there are lodges hosting Tau-tau nangka ("small characters"), effigy dummies, representations of the dead, made of the wood of the breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus*) and dressed in fabrics. They lean carelessly on the wood bar keeping them prisoners in the narrow space of their balconies. The dummies differ in facial expressions, clothing and size; the clothes are bleached by sun and rain. Some wear cigarettes in their mouths or imitate life postures, like tiredness.

Men wear a type of turban or hats, whiter shirts, and over the shirt, a jacket or tog. On the right shoulder, there is a sarong. The lower body is covered by trousers or a long skirt. The necks are adorned with traditional collars or talismans made of pig teeth. Women wear a black fabric around their heads and simple blouses.

Tau-tau nangka are sought today by many museums and collectors, and because of the massive thefts, many Toraja hid their dummies in caves or guard the lodges, which are closed with lattices, shutters and latches and only shown to group of tourists.

### **A different type of tombs**

Other tombs are located in natural grottoes, at tens of meters from their entrance, where the fabric rolls with the decomposed bodies pile. Some grottoes host huge coffins called erongs. They are the oldest necropolises in Tana Toraja. Erongs were cut in huge tree trunks and were box shaped with a lid, having the look of a boat and remembering the roofs

of the Toraja houses. The surface was carefully polished and decorated. A braid of curb lines was separated from space to space by lozenges or squares. The same motifs are today found on the Toraja houses. The tradition of the erongs is today long forgotten.