

The Cosmic World of Toraja

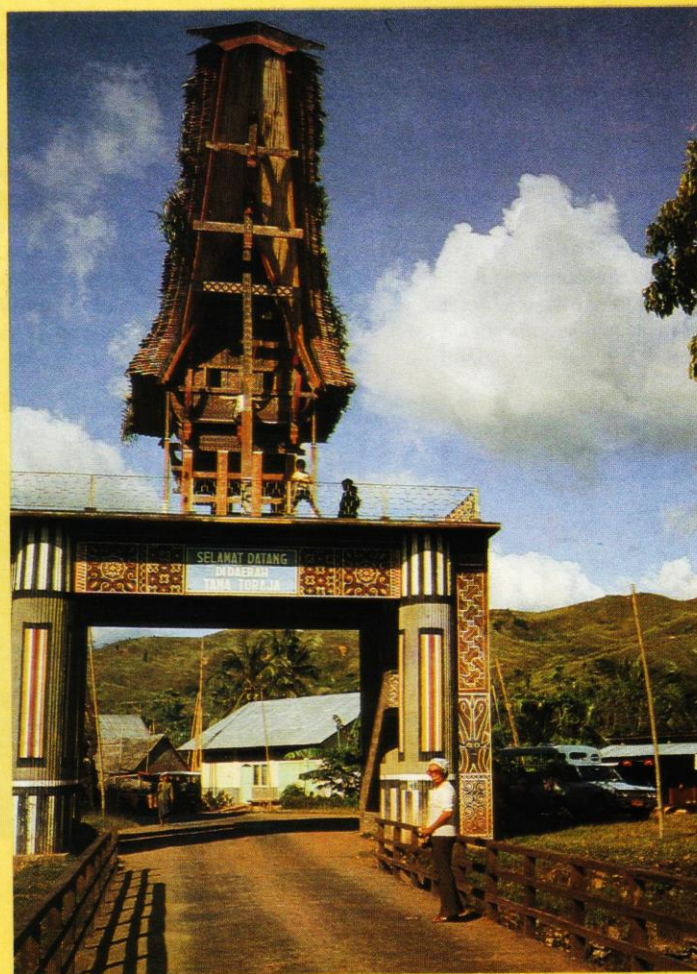
The sightless eyes stare intently over the lush green paddyfields toward the high mountains. They seem almost real, imbedded in their bodies of wood, which are attired in traditional costumes, standing high on balconies hanging on sheer cliff faces of the mountains of Toraja. These are the *tau-tau* or effigies of the dead who guard the entrances to the burial-caves that are among the attractions of this northern part of South Sulawesi.

Tana Toraja or Toraja land is one of the most exciting destinations in Indonesia with one of the most unusual cultures that are drawing tourists by the thousands in spite of its remoteness.

The graves of Toraja and their funeral ceremonies and feasts are a part of the people's cultural heritage which have existed for many centuries and are preserved to this day. As it is in Bali, rites for the dead are the most important occasions in the passage of life, and are not considered to be morbid, but signal the start of another life. In Toraja they are festive occasions and there are several forms of burial, in cliff graves, either in caves or hanging, in special houses built for the dead and even in trees for stillborn infants. Coffins are also left on mountain ledges. All these are sacred grounds usually located in places which are not always easy to reach, in order to protect the earthly goods that are part

of the burial, to help the souls of the dead make their journey to the afterlife.

In spite of modern influences and conversion to Christianity, these ancient traditions are still followed by the people though the majority now bury their dead in cemeteries. However, much of the traditional ceremonies are retained according to the ancient heritage which has been passed down from generation to generation.



Gateway to Tana Toraja with a replica of a Tongkonan rising above it.

Aluk Todolo, the ancestral religion is the basis from which the traditions evolved, together with Toraja mythology that make the art and culture of these people a fascinating subject for study.

For the Torajans, the cosmos is divided into an Upper World, the World of Men and the Underworld. The World of Men set between the two spheres has to maintain an equilibrium by not transgressing taboos and carrying out rituals that have been formulated by the ancestors.

According to these ancient beliefs, the earth has a head (*ulu*) which faces north and tail (*likko'*) which points to the south. Furthermore the east where the sun rises is linked with life and the west, sundown, with death. Based on these directions, the northeast is the abode of the gods (*deata*) while the southwest is the lands of the souls, *puya*, from where the souls can ascend to the level of deities after the proper ceremonies.

monies.

The directions are important in the construction of houses which are built with their tall roofs facing to the northeast in respect to the gods, also in all ceremonies which take place, and in the division of the rooms.

Hilltops are also considered sacred as according to mythology, the first ancestors descended from heaven to the top of mountains.



A towering cliff with burial caves carved into the limestone wall. Inset is a close-up of a cave at Lemo. Effigies or "tau-tau" of the dead, fill the entrance to the cave.

THE BEGINNING

A legend tells of the *tomanurun*, celestial beings, who descended on mountain peaks and Tomanurun Tamboro Langi' who lived in Kandoro and through him the royal dynasty spread through the land.

His grandson, Lakipadada, went in search of eternal life and arrived in Gowa (the mighty kingdom to the south) where he so impressed the king with his magical feats that he was given the princess in marriage. His three sons grew up to be the *Tallu Botto* or top three, and ruled Toraja, Gowa and Luwu.

Legend and actual history seem to be interwoven as the royal regalia now found in Kaero Sanggalla are believed to belong to Patta Labantan, the first son of Lakipadada, who ruled Toraja.

Men and women attired in traditional costumes, dance and chant at a funeral ceremony. In foreground is a pig, one of the animals to be sacrificed to pave the way for the deceased's soul's journey to "puya".

Other legends tell of the coming of the early settlers in eight *lembang* (canoes) from the mythical land of Pongko in the southwest or from what was Annam (now Vietnam). To shelter their families they turned their boats into dwellings. To this day, the Torajans build their traditional houses or *tongkonan*, with the roofs shaped like the prow of boats in memory of the migration and early settlement of their ancestors.

The Torajans are divided into several sub-groups of which the most widespread are the Sa'dan.

TONGKONAN

Living on hilltop villages, till they were forcibly removed by the Dutch who invaded the land in the early part of this century, the *tongkonan* represented a *ramage* or clan to which the people belonged.

Originally built only for the nobility, they were handed down from generation to generation, to signify their status in the community. Later new *tongkonans*

were founded according to the hierarchy of the clan.

To represent the cosmos, they are still built as they have been for centuries with the front part of the roof facing the north in respect of the gods and the rear directed south where the chamber for the "sick" is located. The "sick" refers to the dead who are kept in the south room till the rituals start, leading to the final burial ceremony.

Made of wood with a bamboo roof, the *tongkonan* is raised on stout wooden posts, and built without the use of nails.

The outer walls consist of engraved panels in geometrical designs or drawing of animals in four colours: black, white, red and black. Drawings of buffaloes and roosters symbolise leadership and are found only in those houses belonging to *adat* or traditional leaders.

Adding more prestige to the *ramage* or clan are the number of buffalo horns which decorate the gable, and is a sign of wealth or status depending on their number.

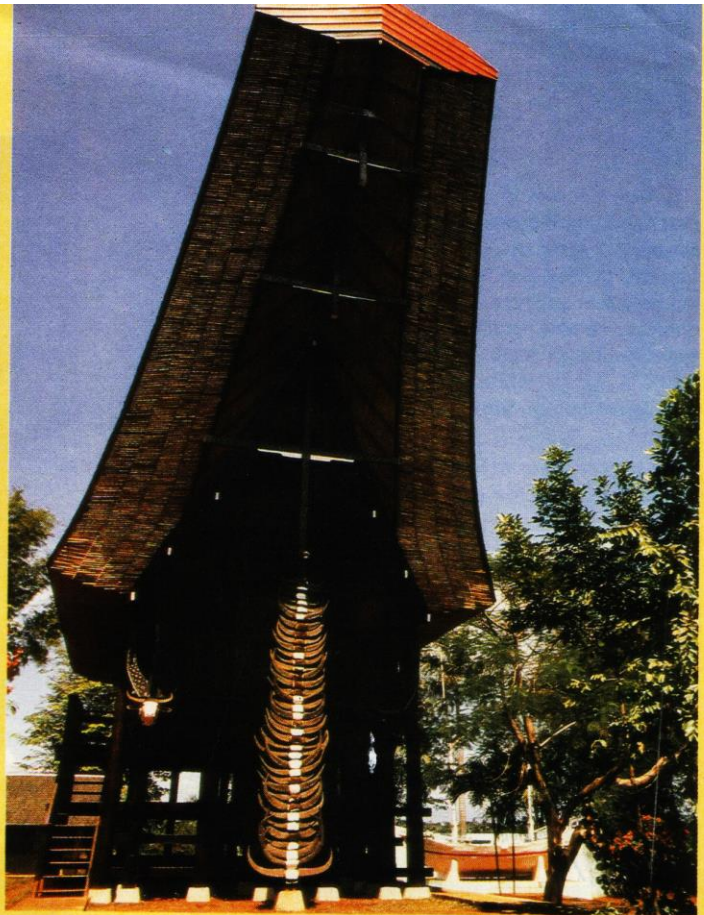




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The spotted buffalo being lead to the sacrificial stone at the funeral ceremony.

The roof of the tongkonan sweeps upward like the prow of a boat which is believed to have brought the tribes of Toraja to their present homeland. Buffalo horns adorning the front of the house symbolise the position of prestige in the community of the owner. >

A "rante" or temporary village where the funeral ceremonies are held. Stones in foreground are where animals are tied for sacrifice. v



The geometric designs are traditional symbols which have special meaning. Altogether there are 150 patterns divided into four groups depicting different aspects of social life. The colours are also significant as black is associated with death, yellow represents God's blessings, white for purity and red stands for human life.

No tongkonan is complete without a rice barn or *alang* which is further proof of the wealth of the owner.

Built of wood and standing on smooth palm tree trunks, the upper floor is where the grain is stored. The lower floor is open and used for family gatherings or to entertain guests who are seated on mats spread on the wooden floor and served either black Toraja coffee or *tuak*, a frothy toddy made of palm.

Since tongkonans are too costly to build today, they are preserved as clan houses where traditional ceremonies are held. Any new ones being constructed have to adhere to the ancient traditions, and comply with the necessary ceremonies.

Previously the prerogative of nobility, the tongkonan still retains a prestigious position although the social structure of old is vanishing except during the funeral ceremonies in which class lines cannot be crossed.

The social classes were divided into four: the *tana' bulaan* (highest nobility), *tana' bassi* (lower nobility), *tana' karurung* (free people) *tana' kua-kua* (the slaves). The system not only outlined the

positions for a man or woman, but the ceremonies that they could hold.

RAMBU SOLO'

The class system is particularly

evident in the burial ceremonies or *rambu solo'*. The higher the class the more elaborate the ceremonies and those of the slave class were simple rituals.

Today, the *rambu solo'* have become tourist events, particularly those of the nobility which continue for days. Since the rituals are very costly, they are postponed for months after the person has died to allow the family to gather, and collect the necessary funds. Till then the corpse is kept embalmed in the south room.

There are several rituals that must be performed starting with a buffalo sacrifice to indicate real death. Before that the deceased is considered a "sick" person and is attended to as such.

The climax of the funeral ceremony is when the corpse is removed from the house and taken to the *rante*, the ceremonial field where temporary houses of bamboo matting are built to house guests. The *rante* has several ceremonial stones *simbuang batu* where animals for sacrifice are tied, brought by relatives and friends as gifts together with rice and *tuak*.



At the village of Kete, bamboo ornaments, beads and some antiques are on sale at one of the old tongkonans.

Weaving, a popular handicraft among the Toraja people.





Animals and geometric designs are carved on wood and painted in the traditional colours of black, white, yellow and red for decoration in the houses.

A tower for the dead is erected in the shape of a tongkonan and a tau-tau carved in the image of the dead.

Gongbeaters, war dancers and the family accompany the bier from the tongkonan to the rante. Here entertainment is offered, the animals are slaughtered and the meat distributed. All the guests are fed during the feast which can last for days and they take part in the prayers and dancing.

According to the Torajan traditional laws, the descendant who contributes the most for the funeral ceremonies, receives the largest portion of the inheritance, whether male or female.

On the last day the coffin is taken to the gravesite usually a cave dug into a high cliff which is reached by a succession of ladders and the corpse deposited there. The tau-tau follows to take its place among those standing on the balcony.

According to Alok Todolo, the soul rides to heaven on the souls of the buffaloes and pigs which have been sacrificed. The most sought-after animal is the spotted buffalo with a big hump and long horns, strong enough to pass the many high mountains and valleys on the way to puya.

A year later another ceremony is held for the soul of the deceased to attain the level of *tomebali puang* or deity and more animals are sacrificed. A deity is believed to have the power to help and bless his or her family and bring them prosperity.

Even with the trend toward modernisation, the cliff, hanging and other traditional grave sites are preserved and continue to be attractions for tourists. The huge funeral ceremonies are festive events which are open to visitors if they adhere to the local customs. However, as they depend on circumstances, exact dates are not available.

As wood and bamboo carving, beading and embroidery are part of the traditional culture, they have been expanded to produce handicraft for tourists. The Torajans also have distinctive forms of performing art. Formerly only for religious ceremonies they are now staged for the public.

Tana Toraja can be reached from Ujung Pandang either by road, which takes 8 hours, or by air. Merpati presently has three flights a week from Ujung Pandang to Makale, the district capital and from there it is about half an hour's drive to Rantepao, the tourist centre of Toraja which has access to many places of interest. ©



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P.O. Box 169 · CH-1226 Thônex-Genève
Tél. (022) 480204 · Télex 418570 cda · Fax (022) 498412