

# The Toraja, the Indonesian people who keep their dead alive

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In the middle of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, lost in the green mountains, live a people with very particular funeral customs.

The beliefs surrounding the vision of life and death of this ethnic group differ in many ways from our Western traditions. For the Toraja, death is not the end. Death affects only the physical body: it simply represents a stage where the spirit persists, and continues its journey elsewhere. In order to accompany the deceased whose souls continue to surround them, Toraja funeral rituals possess many fascinating and disconcerting features.

The funeral, *tomaté*, takes place up to three years after the death. It lasts seven days and is most sacred. During this one to three year interval, the deceased's family watches over his body or coffin, most often stored in a room in the family home, patiently waiting for the first day of a long ceremony to arrive.

In some villages in northern Toraja, there is a ritual, the *ma'éné* or second funeral. According to local tradition, the bodies, previously embalmed, come out of their coffins to be maintained by the family. They are cleaned and changed. It is a time for the family to reconnect, to talk to them, feeling joy and sadness in a moment that in some ways can be disconcerting.

## Context & Beliefs

One starry evening in August, the Tinnong family gather in the Sa'dan Matallo mountains north of the town of Rantepao on the island of Sulawesi to celebrate the funeral of Marthen, the grandfather, dead three years ago at the age of 94.

The eight children of the deceased, about fifty grandchildren, and the rest of the family made the special trip, coming from the four corners of Indonesia to attend the seven days of funeral. Andi Tinnong, a Toraja, tells me, we can miss a wedding, a birth, a family event, but never a funeral.

The majority of Toraja have as their religion a mix of animism and Christian Protestantism. They say their custom goes back thousands of years, without being able to accurately estimate the date, as traditions are only passed on orally from generation to generation.

Marthen's eldest son, Musa Tinnong, is now head of the family. He is in charge of the final preparations, the various installations, and the decorations. Funeral protocol according to Toraja traditions is long and meticulous. Everything should be thought out and organised in advance so that the long week of the ceremony can take place without incident. He has been working with his wife and several of his brothers for five weeks to build the various temporary structures. A good funeral is one where the whole protocol is respected, maintaining the Toraja tradition. Each family member is given a role and a task that they take to heart.

Funerals are often the only opportunity to reunite all the members of a family. Contrary to what one might imagine at such a moment, the atmosphere is rather

relaxed and friendly. While finishing the preparations, everyone gives each other news and laughs over a glass of balok, the local palm wine.

After a meal of rice and spiced pork fat on a floor strewn with plastic cups, Musa suggests that people go and see Marten's coffin, which has been lying for three years in the room on the floor of the *tongkonan*, the Toraja house, with its typical architecture in the shape of an inverted canoe. Some do, others bring out a guitar or a deck of cards. The women stay together to talk.

On the *tongkonan* floor, the coffin is placed on the floor in the middle of the room. Three of his grandsons haven't eaten, preferring to take care of the sarcophagus decorations. The climate is relaxed, alternating moments of frank laughter and moments more conducive to reflection. The grandson busy stapling the fabric wrapping the coffin speaks to his grandfather in the present, telling him that he must be proud of everything that has been prepared, the number of animals that have so far been brought.

Quite different from the hushed style of our traditions, the atmosphere here is very free. Everyone has the right to express themselves as they wish, and to live the moment as they feel it. Toraja do not reprimand others, they do not feel the need, and that suits them. Moreover, Musa tells me, there is no reason, my father's body is dead, but his soul is still alive. His spirit is here, around us and in me now, because I am his son, so no, I'm not sad, I just want everything to go well.

Death among the Toraja does not correspond to a sudden moment, as is often the case in Western cultures. It represents here a slow process where the soul moves on in several stages. A dead person is not really dead, there is always a bond between the living and those who have left. Time does its work. This delay of several years between death and the organization of the funeral is dedicated to mourning, but is also necessary to reunite families, and get the funds necessary to organize large festivities. The custom demands much expense from anyone who wishes to organize a funeral worthy of the name.

The symbolism of the rituals and the grandeur of the festivities organised for the occasion is a marker of social differentiation. It expresses the family's place in society. The philosophy is simple: if one day you give, at your death you will receive in return. Thus, each family must bring pigs and buffaloes bought at great price in local livestock markets in order to be sacrificed. The prestige of families is measured by the quality of the animal, its colour and the size of its horns. A black buffalo (*tedong lotong*) is traded around €2600, a white buffalo (*tedong bulan*) is worth around €6500. A first class buffalo (*tedong saleko*), black on the back and white on the rest of its skin, can go up to €65 000. Musa does not receive a pension. He worked all his life in the nickel mines for a Canadian company. The Tinnong are not particularly rich, but each family spends a fortune to organise a beautiful funeral, sometimes at the cost of many daily deprivations.

## The Funeral Ceremony

On the morning of the first day, mist covered the *Buntu Lobo*, the central square where the funeral is held. Mountains and rice fields are lost in the grey of the horizon. One of the deceased's sons hastens to tell me that it is good that the weather is poor, it is a sign that a link is established with Marthen's spirit.

Despite the very early hour, everyone is happy, a spirit of celebration reigns, the funeral begins. Some guests arrive, settle under the roofs of metal sheets provided. Some bring a pig, others a buffalo. The animals are an attraction, they are admired, cared for, and compared. Some teenagers in the family are busy sharpening the buffaloes' horns with broken glass. The buffalo will be all the more aggressive in the fighting organised during the week. Two animals, placed in a rice field, face each other. The crowd around the stage grows impatient. The hostilities begin from the first shocks between the horns that resonate in the quiet wind. A kind of hysteria seizes the spectators who do not want to lose a bit of it. Buffalo fights are especially popular with the youngest, although adults are not to be outdone. In any case, the gains will not be financial, as the family have only allowed bets for card games, to the great displeasure of some.

In parallel with these intense moments, the animals, force-fed with fresh grass for the last three days of their lives, are no longer allowed to drink. The quality of the meat will be better, they say.

Almost every day, the family kills several pigs, sometimes a buffalo. The animals are raised to feed the guests and the soul of the deceased, which is why we eat seven times a day, but also because we are hungry, Risto, one of Marthen's grandsons, tells me with a frank smile.

Slaughtering the animals is at the heart of the ceremonial and serves to determine social status and family prestige. The youngest members of the family, armed with a long blade, take care of the killing of the pigs. Once they have breathed their last, they are immediately singed with a torch, gutted, and cut up. Some is offered to guests, the rest is placed to cook slowly in a Toraja oven, or as *pa'piong*, a meat and vegetable preparation marinated in a piece of bamboo, intended to be served at the most important meals.

Every day of a funeral offers its bloody moment. The buffaloes, until then pampered, are gathered in front of the *tongkonan*. Everyone takes a break from their respective activities so as not to miss this moment. Machete in one hand, the other holding the head of the beast upright, suddenly, the sharp weapon cleanly severs the animal's jugular. A stream of blood delights the crowd. Not for the faint-hearted. Once the animal is dead, the same ritual as for pigs is initiated. The *balulang*, the people in charge of butchering the animal, get busy. This time, a part of the carcass will also be offered to the government authorities as a tax. The skin and a small part of the meat will be sold to tanners and restaurants throughout the country.

As the days go by, the slow and unchanging protocol continues, with more families, neighbours and guests coming to watch the entertainment of this great local meeting. The elders take the microphone. They sing funeral songs to the rhythm of a throbbing gong that gets lost in the shadow of the mountains. They accompany the soul of the deceased to *The South*.

On the fifth day, the day of the most important processions, the family prepares more than usual. Traditional clothes are brought out for the occasion. Everyone takes care of their appearance. No less than 800 people made the trip. Each family, each guest walks past the altar dressed in black. The atmosphere is calmer this time, more solemn. People sit under the metal arbours and in the different spots provided for this purpose. This crowd that came to greet Marten has to be fed. The

words of the priest, the *to'mina*, who officiates with charisma have silenced those who now listen wisely. He recites some sacred texts, and caught in the momentum of his verb, compares the buffaloes (and therefore the families) that have been brought in, inducing the notion of hierarchy.

The *unnosong* or sung prayers announce the dreaded moment, the Buffalo Killing. A dozen buffaloes and about twenty pigs are gathered and sacrificed for the cause. The grass of the *Buntu Lobo* has changed colour, a smell of blood is spreading. People smile, greet each other, are happy to walk around these places while several small groups of *ballulang* are busy around the animal carcasses.

With a cup of tea or toraja coffee in hand, everyone spends a moment in front of the deceased's coffin, which has been taken down from the *tongkonan* by relatives. Red and decorated with bright colours, the coffin is moved several times during this week of rites.

During these movements, the heavy box, carried by hand in all directions, is shaken about, and joy is unconfined. These are great moments for the family. There is a certain ad-libbing when the group of carriers fails to place the coffin in its place on the balcony. The whole group, coming down together with the precious burden, turns around, some tripping over the body of a buffalo sacrificed earlier, before climbing the bamboo ladder. Despite these few setbacks, a spirit of camaraderie prevails in these funeral moments. It will make more of a joke to be told. The atmosphere remains serious and light at the same time. The coffin will be moved four times during its week of ceremony in order to respect Toraja customs.

The last day is the day of the big departure. Marthen will join his wife and some of his departed family members who are buried in the *patané*, the family vault, a few kilometres away. The wealthier Toraja families deposit their deaths in a *mata*, a hole dug in the rock.

After a period of ritual prayer, the coffin, placed on a solid decorated wooden structure, will leave its premises. Sadness and tears appear on the faces of some of the women in the family, the children play next door, an uncle takes a last selfie. The moment has a certain strangeness, peaceful, intense, and always respectful.

The order is given, the emotion rises. It can be seen in the looks, the behaviour. The little children once again grasp their grandfather's heavy carriage with pride, take one last tour of the central square before loading it onto a bamboo structure decorated with drapery. It takes no less than 30 people to carry the impressive structure, which will then be loaded onto a trailer. The procession sets off, all sirens screaming. Some of the deceased's grandchildren get into the truck to hold the coffin in place as it travels. Behind, an endless line of cars and scooters with roaring engines seizes the road, claiming right of way.

On arrival at the *patané*, the men take the coffin one last time for his last physical journey. The tomb is open. The family first conducts an inspection of the premises. They clean the pictures of the deceased, remove the dirt that has accumulated over time. Ten people are buried here. Marthen's coffin hardly passes through the small door of the vault. It is delicately stacked on top of another, where there is room. Musa puts the photos back in place, the children put bottles of water on the ground so that the deceased do not lack for anything. It is the moment of a last farewell, not a goodbye.

## Ma'néné

In some parts of the Tana Toraja, particularly in the localities of Lalikan and Pangala, another tradition endures, the *ma'néné*, or second funerals, although not all Toraja practise it. Those who do embalm the bodies after death, using formaldehyde. The bodies do not decompose, they are preserved mummified. The state of the corpse is an indication of its level of prosperity beyond the grave, and that of its living relatives.

During July and August only, the families who practise this ancient custom perform a strange ritual. They take the bodies of the coffins of their dearly departed loved ones out of the *patané* to maintain them at regular intervals, every one to three years according to local customs. For the Toraja, it is time to renew the fundamental bond that unites all members of a family, whether dead or alive.

Once opened, the crypt is first cleaned, the women sweep, the men remove the cobwebs that line the walls and corners. Outside, a few curious neighbours crowd in front of the entrance with a smartphone in their hands to make sure they don't miss anything of the performance.

Two of the nine coffins that lie in the *patané* come out during the day. It is a rare moment of great emotion, felt differently by the family members. When the lids are lifted, some feel a certain excitement, joy at the idea of seeing a brother or son again, while others, in tears, still feel the weight of the sadness at the disappearance of a loved one.

Several of the men take care to gently remove the bodies from their last repose before laying them down on the floor. Protective glove on his hand, a man removes the shroud that wraps the lifeless body. A face appears, a 6-year-old boy dead of an illness two years earlier. This is the first time the family has seen him since his funeral.

His younger siblings seem impassive and rather curious in the face of an emotional mother, and a father happy to see his son again. After the first few minutes spent observing and cleaning the face of the changes brought by the trials of time, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed, the voices become louder, a kind of normality towards this singular event is established.

The stiff body of the little Luther is put upright to get some air. The family organizes a photo session to keep a souvenir that will then be displayed on a piece of furniture in the living room.

The father takes off his child's dirty clothes and talks to him, normally. "Here, my child, I brought you your favourite Batman cap. You remember your bike, it's still there, you know? Wait, don't move, I'll put your yellow shirt on." The image is touching and troubling. The scene is disturbing, but the nobility and simplicity of the behaviour invite understanding.

The family places Luther in front of the splendid landscape dominated by the rice fields which he used to frequent as a child. It is time for contemplation. The ritual lasts like this for an hour before the body is wrapped again in its shroud, the cap still pulled down on its head, and placed back in the family vault.

Another coffin is open, but the body of the man who died at the age of 36 is too decomposed to be lifted. "It's a shame," says one of his brothers, "he liked to walk

around, it would have made him happy. I would have given him a cigarette, but we don't smoke lying down. Never mind, maybe next time." He thinks that his body may regenerate sufficiently before the next *ma'néné*.

The Toraja hope that these thousand-year-old beliefs will continue in the future. The younger generations do not seem to want to abandon rituals that are part of themselves. They are even reluctant to accept the concept of a quick burial, a sudden and painful mourning. The idea of letting time pass and making the acceptance process progressive is not meaningless.

On the one hand, it allows them to subscribe and gently adhere to the idea of the departure of a loved one, to make this phase of death intelligible, or at least more acceptable. It perpetuates the bond that always unites minds. It makes the notion of distance progressive, and allows the souls to travel in and beyond the physical universe, in accordance with their Toraj beliefs.