

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-20

Vanishing Act

23 Jalan AU5 C/3  
Lembah Keramat  
Ulu Kelang Selangor  
Malaysia  
19 September 1983

Mr Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover NH 03755

Dear Peter,

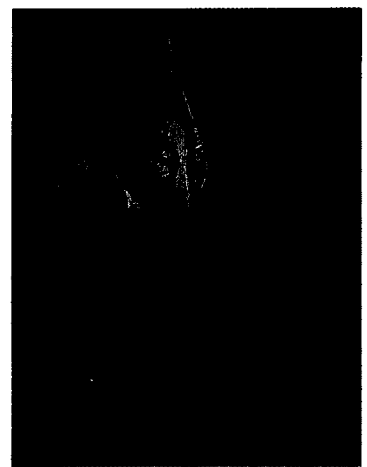
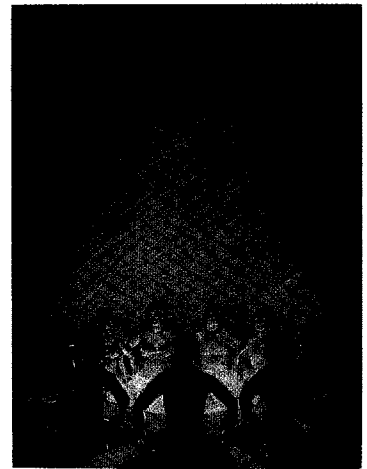
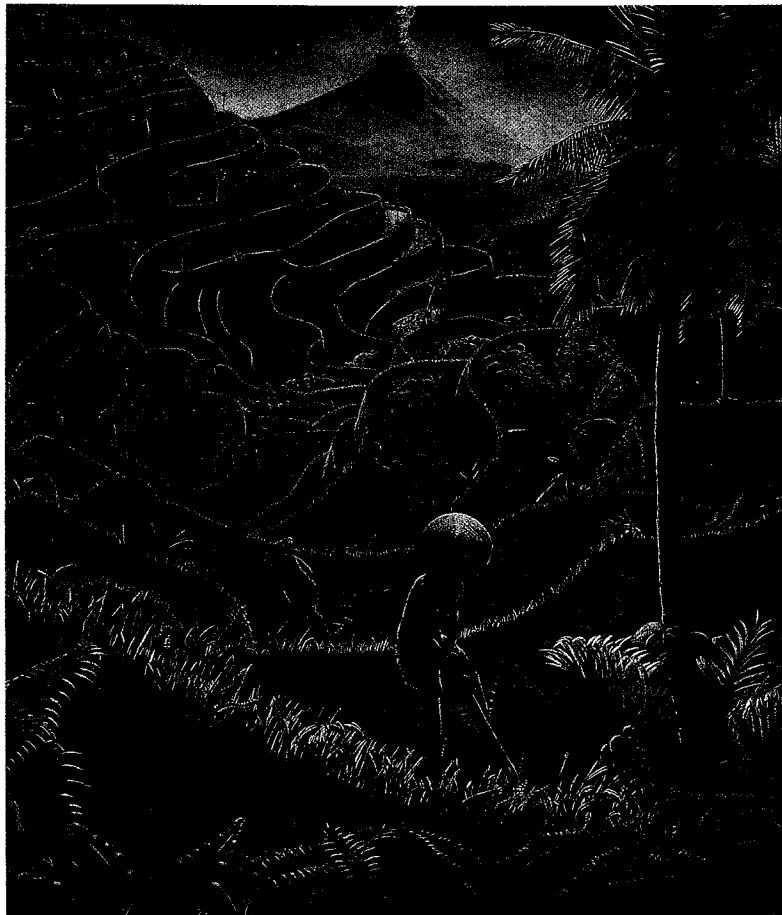
The French didn't come to Tanah Toraja this year. 1983 marked the first time in recent memory that these mainstays of the local tourist industry didn't show up. The hotels were empty, the restaurants barren, the locals despondent. The bubble had burst.

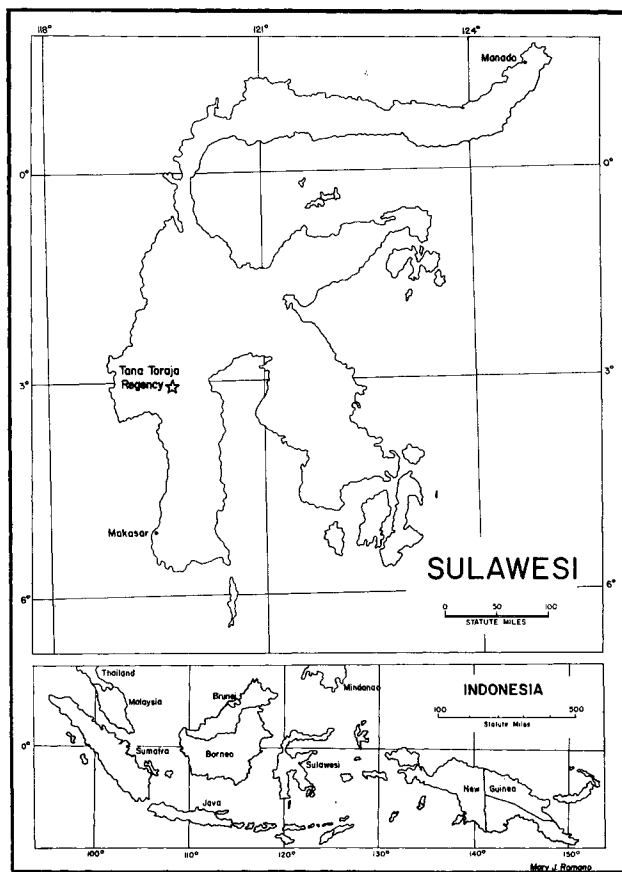
Tanah Toraja (Tator) is a small cultural enclave situated in the mountains of Sulawesi, a spider-shaped island east of Borneo. Of the island's nine million inhabitants, most (six million) live in the south-western province of Sulawesi Selatan. And, of the province's twenty-three Regencies, most (twenty-two) are dominated by Muslim Bugis and Makassans, the famed "sea gypsies" of inter-island commerce, piracy and adventure. One Regency, however, differs from the southern norm: Tanah Toraja, tucked among the limestone cliffs and rivers of the province's extreme north, has a population that is only five percent Muslim. Forty-five percent of the Regency's 320,000 inhabitants are Christian, either Protestants of the Toraja Church (thirty-five percent) or Catholics (ten percent). The balance hew to their ancestral faith, Aluk To Dolo (ceremonies of the ancestors), an elaborate religion marked by an unending round of spectacular funerary activity. Toraja scenery and Toraja funerals are the region's prime tourist attractions.

Toraja had been Indonesia's most up-and-coming tourist destination. Since 1969, Indonesia had actively promoted tourism as an important foreign exchange earner. Indonesia's first five-year plan, Repelita I, had stressed development only in relatively accessible north Sumatra, Java and the apical tourist goal, Bali. Repelita II, implemented in 1974, also sought to promote Indonesia's outer islands, including Sulawesi, including Tanah Toraja. The Toraja Regency government, however, had anticipated this admirable goal with a 1973 conference on tourist development. The meeting, attended by local civil servants, entrepreneurs and religious officials, had stressed the region's touristic potential. Local cooperation was solicited. The national, provincial and local governments produced posters, brochures and other promotional material. The hype began: Toraja was to be another Bali, another touristic goldmine.

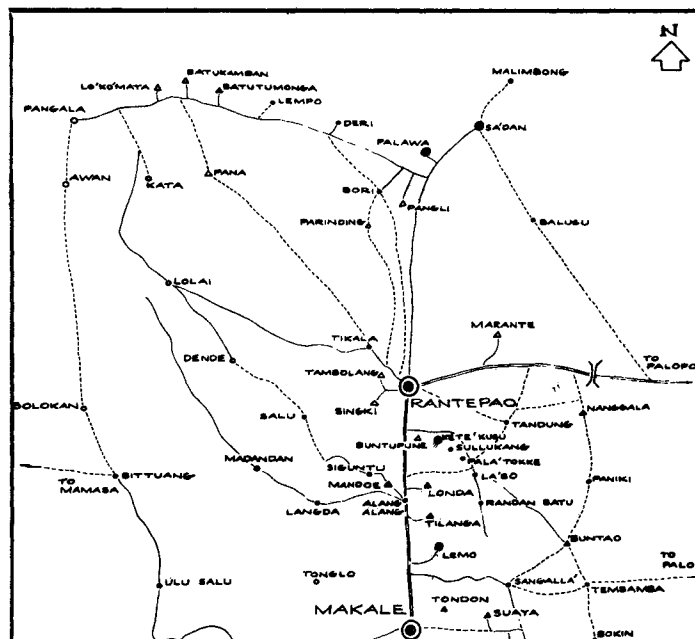
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1. Map of Sulawesi



2. Map of Tanah Toraja

For a time, the tourists obliged the politicians, vindicated the planners. Every year, more and more tourists arrived, from a mere fifty-eight in 1971 to 1,900 in 1974 to 12,000 in 1976 to over 23,000 in 1982 (a mere drop in the bucket compared to 350,000 tourists that annually visit Bali, but an increasing proportion of the Indonesian total).\* Most were French, most followed package charters, most had money to burn. They came from Paris via Jakarta, Bali and Surabaya, arriving via plane, first in the provincial capital of Ujung Pandang and then, via bus, in the district capital of Rantepao, the heart of Tanah Toraja. Five French nationals, stationed in Toraja from July to September, served as escorts and liaisons. Once the buses arrived, they took over, hustling the visitors onto the local travel circuit: the villages, the gravesites, the weaver's community, the markets, the padi fields. The tourists bought souvenirs from the villages, markets and curio shops, paid for guides to the gravesites, purchased a night or two in a traditional Toraja home, consumed food and drink in the local restaurants, taught the children Aloueta and tipped them to sing it, bloated the local economy with a seasonal glut of French-generated rupiah.

This French deluge evolved into an annual event, as rhythmic, as expected as the monsoon. The locals, attuned to this profitable cycle, took out annual bank loans in the pre-season to build hotels, construct or refurbish restaurants, lay in extra stocks of miniature Toraja houses, suitcase-size Toraja hats, applique weaving, carved bone knives and other popular souvenirs. Then they waited for July, when the French, and the money, would begin to roll in.

This July they waited. And waited. And waited. But: no deluge, no rupiah, no profits. The hoteliers, the restaurateurs, the souvenir hawkers: all those tied to the tourist trade were beside themselves. What could possibly have happened? Of course, the Torajans were aware of the resesi dunia (world recession). Every Indonesian within earshot of a radio had heard of that krisis. But only belatedly did they learn of French President Francois Mitterand's 1983 edict, restricting currency export from France to a mere 1000 francs (\$1,250) an act that effectively snuffed out much overseas French travel. The Mitterand government suggested French army camps as one indigenous, albeit grim, vacation alternative; many instead chose French-operated Club Mediteranee, paid for in francs, before departure. Club Med bloomed. Toraja wilted. The few French that did show up in Tator were either ultra low-budget travelers or the wealthy, canny few that had managed to smuggle out a portion of their hoard; neither were anxious to spend. Of course, the Toraja profited from the usual sprinkling of Germans, Australians, Swiss, Japanese and Americans. This, alas, was a mere pittance compared to the windfall years just past, and certainly not enough to pay off the loans. For, as the Toraja learned to their chagrin this year, the banks, like banks everywhere, demanded continued repayment, even when the good times were over.

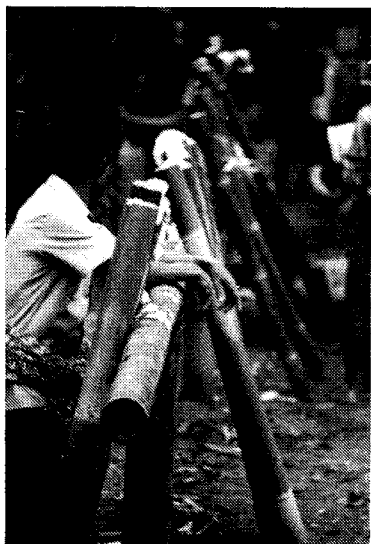
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\* 1981 was the actual peak for Toraja tourism (29,805 arrivals) as it was for all of Indonesia (600,151 arrivals). Total tourist arrivals dropped throughout the archipelago in 1982 (592,046), a phenomenon thought to due to the world recession.



3. Advertising comes to Tanah Toraja: the Rantepao entrance gate with National battery posts

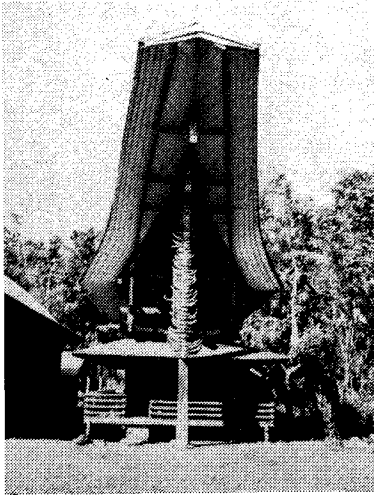
and operated. So are the sprinkling of restaurants catering to the foreign populace. The brunt of the tourist slump has been borne by these entrepreneurs in the relatively urbanized areas of Tanah Toraja. For others, only partially dependent on tourist income -- the village souvenir manufacturers and hawkers, the guides, the mini-bus operators -- economic deprivation has been less harsh; subsistence farming is a readily available alternative. For the average peasant, busy with the padi harvest, the "trickle-down" effects of the slump, like the boom, have been minimal. Life goes on as always, though with fewer of those foreign albinos -- always amusing diversions from the drudgery of the fields -- than in former years.



4. The tuak market, Rantepao, a popular male Toraja meeting spot. Men carrying green bamboo tubes topped with pink or white tuak froth are a common sight in Tator.

French tour operators are no doubt furious with the Mitterand government's currency export limitation they have reaped most of the profits from the Toraja tourist boom; monetarily they have the most to lose. For the Toraja, the economic effects of the slump have been less devastating, confined primarily to the major towns, Rantepao and Makale, where the tourist economy had become most entrenched. The Toraja Regency government, though ill-prepared for the huge influx of French tourists during the 1970's, wisely restricted most hotel construction to the Rantepao-Makale axis road. Non-Toraja capital investment was discouraged; thus most local hotels are in the towns and are Toraja-owned and operated.

Cultural change, however, has been more profound and less transitory than the current, limited economic hardship. The incursions of short-term intensive charter tourism, and modernity in general, have irrevocably transformed Toraja attitudes and Toraja ritual: culture has become a commodity that, like Tator's famed arabica coffee, is bargained away to the highest bidder. This attitude, this willingness to change in return for material gain, may continue, even if the French never return in their former numbers.



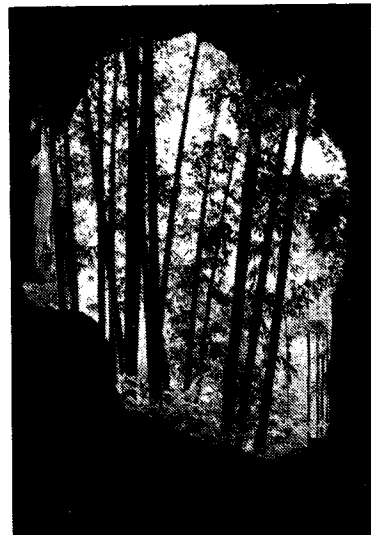
5. A traditional Toraja house near Rantepao. Water buffalo horns on the main roof post are the remnants of many funerals and a sign of prestige

members modified participation in Toraja funerary rites. For both Christians and traditonanalists, water buffalos and pigs, not heads, became the accepted sacrificial norm.

Though the strength of the Toraja Church is in part derived from its willingness to compromise with tradition, the persistence of Aluk To Dolo challenges its efficacy. Christian missionary efforts have been unrelenting but, thus far, unsuccessful in besting the majority faith. Even Christian supremacy in Toraja politics is now being challenged: once dominant local Christian parties were eclipsed in the 1970's by the secular national party, Golkar, whose local membership is heavily Aluk. National recognition of Aluk To Dolo as a legitimate faith and promotion of its rites as tourist attractions gave the traditional religion and the traditional leadership new importance.

The Toraja's three-tiered class system of nobility, tradesmen and peasantry-servants continued under the Dutch and remains intact, though weakened, today. The Tokapua (nobility) now constitute five percent of the population and own most of the land. The Tomokaka (tradesmen) make up twenty-five percent of the population and own little land. The Tobuda (peasants) are the balance, seventy

Change began long before the recent tourist invasion. Once a relatively isolated headhunting people, the Toraja finally succumbed to colonial Dutch administrative control in 1906. Health and educational institutions were introduced, a rudimentary transportation infrastructure established, and the traditional Toraja governing system subsumed within the colonial polity. Christian missionaries were part of the colonial package, but failed to gain many adherents until the Dutch prohibited headhunting and ritual funerary bone-cleansing, both important Aluk To Dolo ceremonies. Temporarily overwhelmed, the traditional religion lost many converts to Christianity; the two faiths were somewhat reconciled however, with the advent of the Toraja Church, which allowed its



6. A bamboo forest near the village of Kete'Kusu

percent of the population, tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The Tokapua, with money and influence, have benefited most from tourism: they have the best looking traditional homes, get the most overnight tourists and are best placed to open hotels and other capital-intensive ventures. The Sa'dan weaver's community near Rantepao is run and heavily funded by a Tokapua family. A few Tobuda serve as weavers.

Toraja material culture, heavily dependent on the region's bamboo and teak forests, has survived into modern times, but only just. Toraja is overpopulated; the forests are vanishing. Teak was traditionally used for the walls, stilts and floors of Toraja homes and rice barns. Planks were elaborately carved and painted with designs in black, white and red, strikingly similar to the house decorations of Sumatra's Bataks. Today teak is exported; the remainder is insufficient and too expensive for domestic Toraja needs. Cheaper plywood has become a popular alternative, but requires lower relief carving than traditional planking. Carving is also expensive; some families now forego this luxury and decorate their homes only with painted designs, spurning traditional soot, chalk and brick for artificial pigments. Poorer families build their homes with split bamboo, decorating the walls with templated, spray-paint designs.

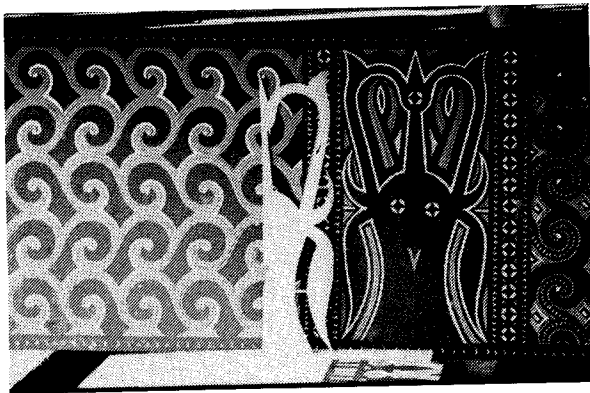
Bamboo, still used for water carriers and cooking vessels, is becoming rarer on domestic Toraja roofs. These sweeping, multi-layered structures give Toraja homes their imposing profile. Their meter-thick design requires immense amounts of bamboo, easily obtainable in former times, now scarce. Bamboo grows fast, but not fast enough to keep up with current demand, a situation exacerbated by hoteliers, whose traditionally-styled hostelrys compete with domestic needs. So scarce bamboo is now also expensive bamboo: the hotels can afford to pay more. Corrugated iron or shingles are the popular roofing alternatives. Fewer and fewer Torajas, however, are even bothering to build, much less occupy such expensive abodes these days; less onerous, less elaborate homes are becoming fashionable.

Tourism was the catalyst for Toraja souvenir art. Partially in response to tourist demands, partially the product of their own initiative, entrepreneurs in Rantepao and surrounding villages began to produce Toraja memorabilia soon after the tourist boom began. Curio shops sprang up along the main roads of Rantepao and Makale, one little different from the other. Smaller mom-and-pop versions appeared in tourist destination villages: Kete'Kusu, Londa, Lemo.

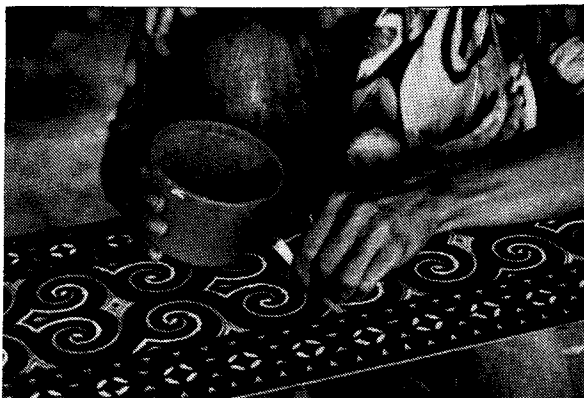
Most Toraja souvenir art was derived from Toraja domestic art. Scaled-down Toraja homes, built from native materials, were produced in a variety of easily transportable sizes. House-plank decoration was miniaturized and redirected into serving trays, bowls, coasters and boxes. Bamboo was crafted into flutes and fanciful wall decorations. Meter-wide sarong, woven rattan padi hats worn by Toraja women to the fields and during traditional rites, were reduced to more manageable suitcase-size dimensions. Traditionally, such hats were priced according to intricacy and refinement. This practice was continued in the tourist versions; the ante, however, was higher

(sarong should not be confused with sarung, the ubiquitous skirt-like attire of the archipelago). Though of fair quality by Southeast Asian standards, Toraja tourist art was considered rather pricey compared to the refined work of Java or Bali, but with so many tourists about, few souvenir sellers cared to haggle. Nor do they today, despite the paucity of buyers. Perhaps, having bought high themselves, they don't want to sell low.

Weaving, a Toraja speciality, has boomed along with tourism. The new production, however, is a far cry from traditional Toraja cloth. Once crafted on back-strap looms from naturally-dyed homespun cotton, Toraja cloth was thick, hardy and boldly designed. The back-strap looms are still used, but today, little cotton is grown in Toraja; natural dyeing is rare. Instead, cotton thread and aniline dyes are imported, as they now are throughout much of Southeast Asia. Consequently, contemporary Toraja weaving looks much like the souvenir cloth of Thailand, north Sumatra and Bali. The stiff, thin feel and the bright colors are the same; only the designs are different. In the Sa'dan weavers



7. A house plank carved with a Pa'tukkupare (rice) and Pa'tedong (water buffalo) patterns. The plank is first painted black, then the design is penciled on. After carving, white and red paint are applied in the grooves.

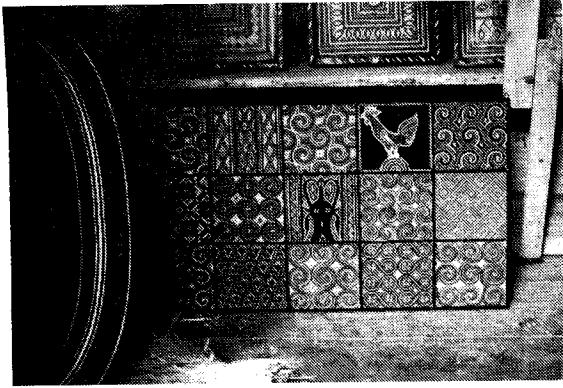


8. A house plank with a Pa'tangkelumu (moss) pattern. Red paint is being applied with a stick.

cooperative, workers, when queried, claim that the old methods are too time-consuming and not profitable. This may be so, but since naturally-dyed homespun cloths fetch two to three times the price of their gaudy, modern cousins on the tourist market, the extra effort would seem to be justified. The Toraja think otherwise; apparently, local consumers care as little for the old-fashioned cloths as the weavers; few Toraja actually wear old-style cloth, though this may be a matter of scarcity, not preference. Instead, modern Toraja cloth or more commonly, imported batik and screen-printed sarungs are ubiquitous in many parts of Tator, even at traditional fancy-dress funerals.

The funerals themselves are the pivot of Toraja culture and paradoxically, the focus of the most intense touristic interest. The most traditional area of Toraja life is thus subject to the greatest pressures for touristic accommodation. The motives and needs of the Toraja and the tourists are decidedly different: the former must adhere to tradition for a valid, acceptable rite, the latter prefer a ceremony in accordance

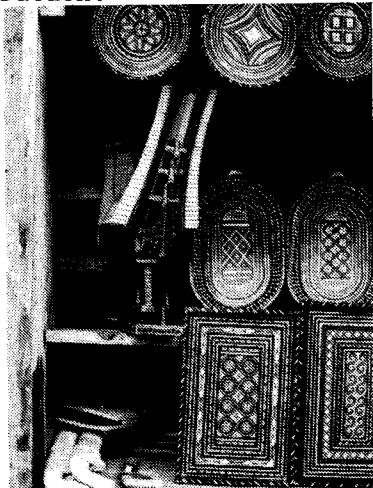




9. A souvenir plank, one-tenth the scale of full-size house planks. This plank, of plywood, displays a crazy-quilt of Toraja house decoration patterns.



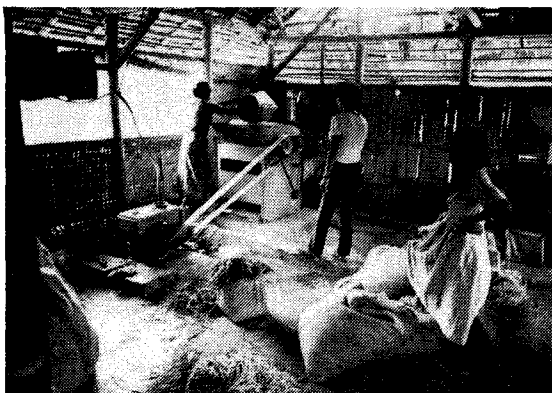
- 9a. Spray-painted split-bamboo house decoration.



10. Souvenirs at Kete'Kusu: a miniature Toraja house, plates, trays and knives

with their timetable, spectacular and convenient. Though traditional funerary procedure remains intact, tourist incursions are already apparent.

Toraja funerals honor the dead and reinforce traditional societal relationships through animal sacrifice and reciprocal meat exchange. A blend of solemnity and celebration, the ceremony is temporally separated from the event it commemorates, often by as much as a year. This hiatus gives the family time to notify distant relatives, and marshal their economic resources for the rite. The event, when it finally occurs, is inextricably linked to Toraja concepts of status: the splendour and length of the ceremony, the number of animals sacrificed, the amount of guests in attendance, all are in direct proportion to the rank of the deceased. Commoners are accorded a one night funeral, one buffalo and four pigs. Middle-class folk rate a three-to-five night fete, with up to eight buffalos and a few score pigs; dances are also held. Upper-class Toraja funerals run seven nights, including a variety of dances, bull and cockfights and seemingly endless slaughter: twelve, twenty-four, sometimes a hundred buffalos and many hundreds of pigs are sacrificed over the course of the event. Upper-class Toraja also rate tau-tau, life-size funerary effigies that reflect the sex but not the likeness of the deceased. Tau-tau are usually placed in cliff-side galleries near the requisite liang, cliff-side graves. Multiple rows of tau-tau and liang grace many of the



10a. A gasoline-powered rice husker near Kete'Kusu. This machine replaced a much older model that once supplied nearby house decorators with soot, a necessary pigment in traditional Toraja house painting. The newer model produces little soot, however, so now the carvers must rely on store-bought paint.

cliffs in the vicinity of Rantepao and are popular tourist destinations. Occasional hanging graves (erong), coffins affixed to the cliff-face with wooden poles, are also seen.

Large-scale Toraja funerals are gory events; tourists attend with a mixture of curiosity and horror. Dying buffalos and pigs provide aural accompaniment throughout the day: the buffalos merely low throughout their demise; the pigs, however, make their discomfort known from the time they are trussed until their eventual slaughter. Squealing, porcine death-throes are continual, and far more memorable than the gongs and chanting of the dances. The ranté, the ritual funeral ground, mirrors the soundtrack. It looks a veritable abattoir, sticky and red with blood, piled with meat,

viscera and dying animals, centerpiece to the continual processions of mourners, slung pigs and buffalos that circle the funeral ground in honor of the deceased. Children play among the pools of carmine. Blood-filled bamboo tubes are carried to and fro, the contents eventually cooked and served up as part of the funerary repast. After each round of slaughter, the meat is divided among appropriate recipients; the Toraja government also gets its share: 5,000 rupiah (\$5.20) per pig, 25,000 rupiah (\$26.00) per buffalo. Every eighth pig is donated to the government to be used along with the sacrificial tax, "for development".

Family members are expected to wear black at Toraja funerals. Guests, however, come in their best formal wear; women display their fanciest kebaya blouses, their finest sarungs, an occasional sequinned cocktail dress; men wear suits, sarungs or combinations thereof. Guests are also expected to bring gifts of betel-nut and cigarettes, for the aggrieved; vendors line the ranté entrance, for the forgetful.

Tourists are also expected to dress appropriately and bring the requisite gifts. After all, this is a rite of mourning, not a stage performance; guests are participants, not mere onlookers. Alas, though information on appropriate funerary behavior is widely available at most Toraja hotels, some foreign visitors treat the event as ethnic entertainment and arrive, be-cameraed, in shorts and tank-tops, bereft of gifts. Scorning the vendors, the intruders storm the ranté, in search of local color, then recoil in obvious disgust at the sanguinary tableau, more color than they can handle.



11. "Antique" Toraja cloths from Sa'dan, made from homespun cotton



12. Modern Toraja cloths at the weaver's cooperative, Sa'dan. The new cloths, like the old, are woven on back-strap looms. Some of the designs, such as the water buffalo patterns, are of recent invention. Each cloth takes a few days to a few weeks to weave, depending on the complexity of the design and the tenaciousness of the weaver.

Such insensitivity does not erdear the foreigners to the Toraja. Scantily-clad males are tolerated; offending females, however, are quickly wrapped in black sarungs. The ignorant are informed of their gift-giving responsibilities. Some, cowed, purchase the appropriate betel or tobacco. Others, infuriated, depart, cursing the "scam". Most, thankfully, abide by the funerary rules, requiring only some well-lit photogenic spectacle for contentment.

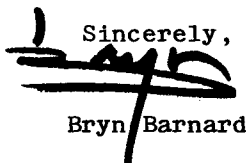
Funerals are considered an essential part of the Toraja tourist experience, an authenticating rite. The Toraja are willing hosts: tourists are given ready access to Toraja funerals and, despite their alien status, are treated much the same as local guests. Refreshments (tuak palm wine, cooked meat, rice) are served free to those who wish to partake. No admission is charged (a few years ago one enterprising Toraja did attempt to sell tourist tickets for a funeral; he was thwarted by outraged kinsmen). But, Toraja funerals do not always coincide with the usual two-to-five day tourist stay in Tator. Thus, in the past, tour groups have requested the rescheduling of funerary activity and, in at least in one case, the restructuring of the ceremony itself to create events that are shorter, more "dramatic" and, most importantly, on time. Traditionalists have objected to such modifications.

At the height of the tourist boom, such willingness to accommodate tourist needs and demands proved a strain on Toraja resources. In particular, gifts of meat, freely given to foreigners, diminished the amount of high-grade protein available to locals. To deny tourists this essential part of the funerary rite, even though they did not reciprocate in kind, was to violate the spirit of the event. Yet, foreign requests for re-scheduling and re-structuring challenged the very basis of these "ceremonies of the ancestors". Anthropologists, government officials and even some tourists feared that, in time, increasing foreign commercial pressure would force the Toraja to charge tourists for the right of participation - cash instead of kind. Worse, the Toraja might decide to serve up a debased "show" for tourist consumption, stripped of ritual content.

Thus far, neither has occurred. Few observers anticipated the rise of foreign, particularly French, charter tourism in Toraja; none could have foreseen its over-quick demise. Toraja's tourist economy, like that of any country bound to the sale of a single commodity, is suffering deprivation. Banks are demanding the repayment of their loans; some businesses verge on bankruptcy. But, such dislocations, hard as they are on the individual Toraja, are a reprieve for the culture. Without the pressures of touristic accommodation at their backs, the Toraja can, if they choose, review their cultural priorities, decide how to reconcile tradition with development. It is a rare opportunity.

France, no doubt, will one day recover; her tourists will probably return. Other nations may turn to Tanah Toraja for ethnic succor as well, soon, or perhaps a decade hence. In the interim, the Toraja should decide their fate, determine how much change their culture can tolerate. They may never get another chance.

Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard



13. Liang at Lemo. Some of the tau-tau effigies on these cliff-side graves are hundreds of years old and are considered sacred by the Toraja. Greed, however, has desecrated even this bastion of tradition: in 1982 a Toraja man stole seven tau-tau from the Lemo grave-site and sold them to an American collector. The tomeloko (grave robber) then fled to Bali, but was tracked down, taken out to sea and dumped overboard. The photos show the liang in 1976, before the theft, and in 1983. The missing tau-tau are circled.



14. Skulls litter the grave-site  
at Kete'Kusu



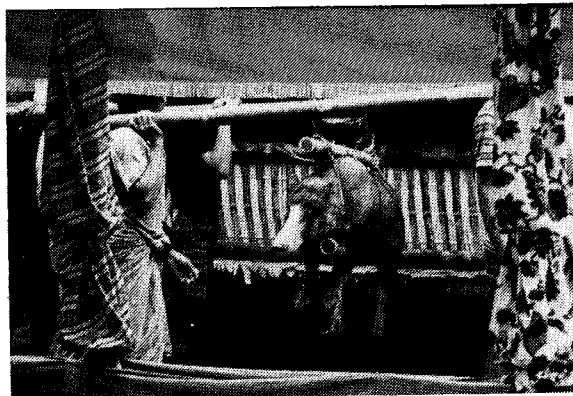
15. Tau-tau, Kete'Kusu



16. A funerary bullfight in Palawa  
village, near Rantepao



17. Trussed pigs awaiting their imminent demise at a Palawa village funeral



18. Sacrificial pigs entering the ranté, Palawa village



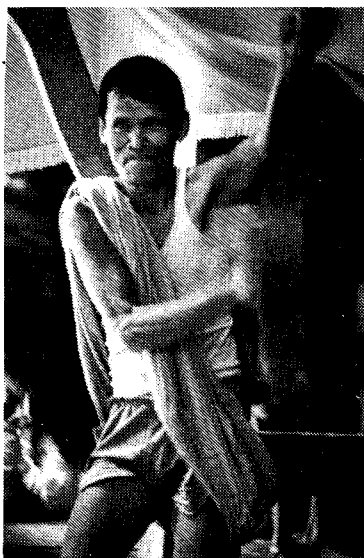
19. Sacrificial water buffalos entering the ranté, Palawa village



20. Women entering the ranté in their funeral-best, Palawa village



21. Family members serving refreshments to guests in pavilions surrounding the ranté, Palawa village

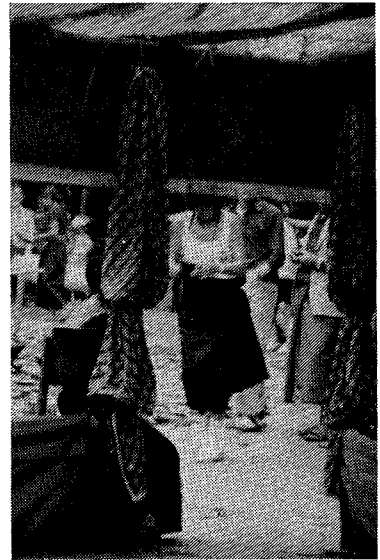


22. The funerary gong is struck to demarcate each step of the rite. At this particular funeral, the gong was the only live music available: a cassette recorder and public address system were used when other traditional music was required





23. A group of tourists, inappropriately dressed but tolerated, at the Palawa village funeral



24. A female tourist wearing hot pants is wrapped in a black sarung moments after her arrival at the ranté



25. A tourist surveys the carnage in the ranté, Palawa village

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