

## **Land where Death is Revered, not Feared**

by Danielle Machotka

Following the slapping sound of our guide Yusuf's flip-flops, we wove between two bamboo platforms full of people, around a rice barn, and directly into three water buffalo heads lying on bloody ground under a canopy.

We had entered a Toraja funeral ceremony and stumbled upon one of their symbols of prosperity. Fortunately, Yusuf had prepared us.

Tana Toraja, or Toraja land, sits in the mountains of southern Sulawesi, a central Indonesian island shaped like a starfish in a heavy wind. A striking landscape of steep rice terraces, jagged mountains and bamboo forests provides a backdrop for the traditional culture, *aluk todolo*, which we had come to explore.

Because the average elevation is around 3000 feet, the climate is cooler and less humid than in lower-lying regions. Not exhausted by humidity, we were able to spend entire days following Yusuf through tiny villages, hiking in the mountains, wandering through colorful markets smelling of spices and coffee, and learning about the way the Toraja celebrate death. It is this aspect of their culture that occupies much of their time, and it did most of ours, as well.

Traditional Toraja culture, based on the concepts of *aluk todolo* or "the ways of the ancestors", is slowly disappearing as the young people move away or choose not to follow the strict customs. (A small but growing tourism industry is, paradoxically, reviving interest.) *Aluk todolo* guides those Toraja who practice it in everything from when to plant crops to how they

will be sent into the next world, directing them to bury babies in trees and plan lavish funeral ceremonies, complete with animal sacrifices.

Twenty-five generations ago, the Toraja came to Sulawesi by boat, from an island to the southwest. When the boats could navigate no further up the Sa'dan River, early Toraja settled on its banks, perhaps using the boats as their first dwellings.

Swooping dramatically towards the sky, the rooflines of today's Toraja houses, or *tongkonan*, punctuate the landscape like giant three-dimensional commas. As with all structures and customs in Tana Toraja, the *tongkonan* are full of meaning, from the intricate patterns carved on the outside walls to the organization of the rooms inside.

Captivated by photos of *tongkonan* and stories brought home by friends of the elaborate funeral ceremonies, we made the brief flight from Bali to Ujung Pandang, Sulawesi, and hopped on a bus for the eight-hour ride to Rantepao. Tana Toraja's distance from major urban centers and the main island of Java has fortunately allowed it to remain unaffected by the recent governmental upheavals in Indonesia.

We made Rantepao our base, as it lies a short distance from many of the villages and gravesites we wanted to see. To better understand the complex Toraja culture, we hired Yusuf, a middle-aged guide possessing excellent English skills, who had grown up practicing *aluk todolo*.

In two days, Yusuf exposed us to Toraja architecture, the five types of gravesites, a funeral ceremony, and information on everything from the meanings of the carvings on *tongkonan* to how to tell the difference between *arabica* and *robusta* coffee plants (*robusta* leaves are bigger). We also hired a driver, leaving Yusuf free to chatter with us between sites.

An enthusiastic ambassador, Yusuf gave us a preview of our sightseeing by explaining the five ways in which the Toraja bury their dead. Children who die before the age of six

months are buried in trees. Adults and older children have historically been buried either in graves carved into rocks, in coffins in natural caves, in coffins hanging on cliffs or trees, or in special houses built as mausoleums.

Because the Toraja bury the dead with their most valuable possessions, graves are often located out of easy reach, sometimes high on the face of steep rocks. Standing in "galleries" next to some graves, wooden effigies called *tau tau* receive the spirit of the dead, guard the graves and bestow blessings on the living.

We started by visiting rock graves at Lemo and Suaya that boast large collections of colorful *tau tau* standing in groups in niches carved into the rock. They are a moving reminder of what lies behind the small square doors arranged randomly in the sheer rock faces. Exchanging gazes with the *tau tau*, it is never entirely clear who is observing whom.

At Kambira, we walked into a forest where trees housing baby graves, perhaps the most gripping of the burial types, stand with the dignity of sentries guarding a royal tomb.

"When a person dies," Yusuf explained, "he or she rides into *puya*, the 'life hereafter,' on the backs of water buffalo and pigs slaughtered at the funeral ceremony. Children below the age of six months are too young to ride the animals, so they are buried in trees, which nurture them until they would have been sixteen years old. At that point, a ceremony is held and their spirit leaves the tree for *puya*."

The trees that can house babies must have white sap, representative of mother's milk. A hole is carved into the tree to accommodate the baby, who is buried standing up, and a matting covers the opening. The trees continue to grow normally around the babies; one tree was close to 40' tall and very healthy.

We saw a centuries-old collection of coffins in a natural cave at Tampangallo. The coffins had been opened at various times, with the perpetrators arranging skulls and bones artfully, if morbidly, around the cave. The beautiful, weathered wooden coffins are finely carved and resemble either the rooflines of *tongkonan* or animals, such as pigs.

On our first afternoon together, Yusuf took us to the funeral ceremony of a wealthy man who had died four months earlier. We brought the suggested gift of several packs of cigarettes to the family and spoke, through Yusuf, with the youngest son. He welcomed us with enthusiasm, erasing our fear of intruding on a private family event. Yusuf later explained to us that foreign visitors increase a ceremony's importance.

Toraja funerals last between one and seven days, according to the individual's status in the community, and can include hundreds of guests. Family members begin preparing for a funeral ceremony long before it is actually held. Because of the importance of sending the deceased into the next world with great wealth, in the form of pigs, water buffalo, gold and other possessions, it can take months or even years to prepare and save for the ceremony. The more wealth with which a person rides into the next world, the greater his chances of going to heaven.

After drawing his last breath, a person is embalmed and "lives" in the main bedroom of the house while relatives make preparations for his burial. Family members continue to bring food to the wrapped body and talk to it as if it is still alive.

At the beginning of the actual ritual, relatives slaughter pigs and a water buffalo and present a cooked liver to the embalmed body, which is only now considered dead. Family and friends then carry the coffin to the funeral platform and the procession of guests begins.

As we entered the ceremony, we saw brightly attired guests greeting the deceased's relatives, outfitted in elaborate ceremonial dress, before assembling on viewing platforms. The

procession of guests is an act of greeting, gift giving and debt payment. As we watched, guests brought a steady stream of squealing pigs strapped to bamboo poles and even a few water buffalo led by nose rings.

Each day of the surprisingly joyful ceremony has carefully prescribed spectacles, ranging from buffalo fights to chanting, dancing and the ritual slaughter of pigs and water buffalo. The meat from the slaughter is divided among the guests according to rank and status. Three water buffalo had already been sacrificed at this ceremony, as we had discovered on arrival, and their meat was being cut apart. Yusuf told us they would slaughter 22 more, a relatively high number, over the next few days.

We joined the guests in watching a large circle of men dressed in black, pinky fingers linked, chanting *Ma'badong*, the story of the deceased's life sung in high ritual speech. As I looked around, I was surprised to see that no one appeared to be grieving; the mood was definitely celebratory.

We left the ceremony filled with images of the beautiful procession of guests, the dignity of *Ma'badong*, and even the mayhem of the outdoor kitchen, which prepares a constant stream of food for the hundreds of guests. Relishing our interest in his culture, Yusuf took us to see purely traditional *tongkonan*, with bamboo roofs instead of the modern corrugated metal, at Maruang and Kete Kesu.

Kete Kesu also offers hanging graves and house graves, which are similar in scale to our mausoleums. Perched above our heads, the hanging graves were actually coffins set on two wooden supports sunken into the sheer rock face. The house graves took different forms, from small sheds to mini *tongkonan*, and were less compelling than any of the other grave types we saw.

On our second day together, Yusuf took us to the mountains north of Rantepao, where we enjoyed a 5-kilometer hike from Batu Tumonga to Tikale. We kicked up a cloud of dust on the thirsty trail, but saw incredible vistas of terraced rice fields and craggy sugar-loaf mountains and passed through several villages. We watched a blacksmith sharpening knives, the blades heated in a fire kept alive by a man using plungers to force air into two tubes--human bellows. A group of school children going home for lunch surrounded us at one point, shooting us a quick glance and collapsing into giggles.

Taking advantage of a couple of days to ourselves, we toured Rantepao and surroundings on foot or by *bemo*, the converted vans that carry everyone and their groceries everywhere in Tana Toraja. A very economical way to travel, *bemos* are also often exceedingly overcrowded and the drivers might not speak English. It's best to either know exactly where you're going or adopt a sense of adventure if you get off at the wrong stop. You can always flag the next one.

With a bit of bargaining, good deals lie hidden in all the markets. We bought carved boxes, vessels for betel nut, serving trays and even coffee. For the latter, Yusuf took us to a small, dark roastery on a side street in Rantepao. The bitter, nutty smell of roasting coffee surrounded us as we stepped over bags of beans lying like pillows around the shop; this was no ultra-clean Starbucks retail outlet. We told Yusuf how popular Sulawesi coffee is in our area of California.

"You drink this coffee?" he smiled broadly. Toraja culture may be unknown to most outsiders, but one element had crept into *our* daily lives, and the pride on his face was obvious.

### **If You Go...**

As a visitor to Tana Toraja, it is possible to experience all the aspects of Toraja life and death with a good guide and a healthy dose of curiosity. Most of the villages and burial sites mentioned are very close to Rantepao—no more than an hour's drive. It is also possible to trek between the sites; trails abound and the landscape and people are welcoming.

When we weren't with Yusuf, we toured Rantepao and surroundings on foot or by bemo, the converted vans that carry everyone and their groceries everywhere in Tana Toraja. An economical way to travel, bemos are also often exceedingly overcrowded and the drivers might not speak English. It's best to either know exactly where you're going or adopt a sense of adventure if you get off at the wrong stop. You can always flag the next bemo.

Prices quoted reflect an exchange rate of 3200rp/\$1; with the recent currency fluctuations, prices are likely to be lower.

**Resources:** The Passport Guide to Sulawesi, *Sulawesi: Island Crossroads of Indonesia*, covers Toraja culture in great detail and with extensive photographs. Once in Rantepao, the center of the Toraja tourist trade, you will find cheerful help at the Tourist Information Center on the main street, at 62 Jl. Ahmad Yani. Most hotel employees or homestay owners will eagerly suggest sites to see and even make arrangements for you.

**How to  
get there:**

We flew into Ujung Pandang, near the southern tip of Sulawesi, from Denpasar, Bali. After a taxi ride to the bus terminal, we were on our way to Rantepao on an air-conditioned bus with leg room. Several bus companies travel the eight hours or so between Ujung Pandang and Rantepao; we took Fa Litha, which cost roughly \$6 per person and was very comfortable. It is also possible to fly into the small airport at Rantetayo, near Rantepao.

**Where to  
stay:**

Accommodation options in Rantepao are numerous, and range from homestays for \$5/night to hotels for \$50/night for a double. The Indra II housed us with relative comfort and a beautiful garden for \$32/night, including breakfast and tax.

Phone: 011.62.423.21163. Fax: 011.62.423.21547.

The Madarana Hotel is newer and quite comfortable, but a little less centrally located than the Indra II. The buildings are shaped like *tongkonan* and the rooms are well appointed. When they first opened, they advertised a special rate of \$18.50 for double rooms, including breakfast. A 10% tax was extra. Phone: 011.62.423.23777.

**Where to eat:** Both vegetarians and carnivores can find something to love in the cuisine of Tana Toraja, which includes both typical Indonesian dishes and some local specialties. Our staple throughout Indonesia was Mie Goreng, fried noodles with vegetables and/or meat. We also enjoyed various meat and fish dishes, curries, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, and rice prepared almost any way you can imagine. In Tana Toraja, our favorite specialty was Pa' Piong, a mixture of

ginger, coconut, Indonesian spices, vegetables and either meat or fish, all stuffed into a foot-long bamboo stalk and cooked over a fire for a few hours. You must order this dish a few hours in advance, but it is well worth the planning. None of our meals in Indonesia were expensive by American standards.

Mambo Restaurant offers very good traditional Toraja cuisine from an extensive menu for reasonable prices; main courses, \$1- \$3. The service is extremely friendly. It is just down the street from the Indra II, at Jl. Dr. Ratulangi, #34. Phone: 011.62.423.21134.

Pia's Poppies has a menu full of creative dishes, also at very reasonable prices (main courses, \$1.25-\$3). The service is incredibly slow, but if you have the time, the food will reward your patience. The restaurant (there is also a hotel/restaurant by the same name just outside of town) is just off the large intersection in the center of town, on Jl. Ahmad Yani.

**Finding a guide:**

Guides can be incredibly useful in understanding Toraja culture. They are everywhere, if you let it be known that you are interested. Be aware that many of the guides, especially younger ones, know little about *aluk todolo*, and will give unwitting tourists false information, as Yusuf pointed out to us on occasion. The Tourist Information Office quoted us a price of \$25/day for car, driver and guide; we paid \$33 for Yusuf and the car and driver. Yusuf and other guides with similar experience work for the Planet Tourist Service at Jl. Ibu Tien Suharto, #11. Phone: 011.62.423.25225.