

The Intricate Tapestry of Toraja Spirituality: An Exploration of Animism, Ancestor Veneration, and Symbolic Rituals

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices of the Toraja people through a qualitative research design. Aligned with the study's objective of unraveling the multifaceted layers of ritual and understanding the connections between tradition and modernity, an ethnographic approach is employed. Researchers immerse themselves in the Toraja community to gain a deep understanding of cultural practices, beliefs, and values. This immersive experience involves participant observation and engagement with community members. In-depth interviews with key informants, such as elders or individuals knowledgeable about the ma'nene' or corpse preservation tradition, provide insights into cultural nuances, symbolism, and changes over time. Audio-visual documentation, including recording rituals, interviews, and cultural events, enriches the study's depth and authenticity. Thematic analysis identifies and analyzes themes related to the ma'nene' tradition, such as cultural preservation and the role of ritual in shaping collective identity. The discourse surrounding the ma'nene' tradition reflects a complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices of the Toraja people, blending elements of animism, ancestor veneration, and a deep connection to the natural landscape. Specific items in offerings and their ritualistic consumption highlight the importance of symbolic actions in religious ceremonies. These findings extend beyond academic curiosity, impacting cultural appreciation, academic research, interfaith relations, and cultural heritage preservation positively. Through this comprehensive exploration, the study contributes to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Toraja spirituality and culture.

Keywords: Intricate Tapestry, Toraja spirituality, Animism, Ancestor veneration, Symbolic rituals.

INTRODUCTION

Toraja is one of the ethnic groups in South Sulawesi, alongside the Makassar, Bugis, and Mandar. According to the legend of *puang lakipadada*, these ethnic groups are bound by a kinship. *puang lakipadada* has four children: *patta la bantan* (in the land of Sangalla'), *patta la bunga'* (in the land of Luwu), *patta la merang* (in the land of Gowa), and *patta la didi* (in the land of Bone) (Baan et al., 2022; Sihombing, 2022a). Additionally, Toraja possesses a remarkable and enchanting array of customs and culture that are to be cherished and preserved (Sandarupa et al., 2021). Various traditional ceremonies are conducted, both in the form of joyous ceremonies or *rambu tuka'* and mourning ceremonies or *rambu solo'* (Zakaria, 2018). These ceremonies in each traditional region in Toraja have their own unique characteristics. This diversity is an invaluable richness, a treasure of the Toraja ethnic group (Sudarsi et al., 2022). When visiting one traditional region and moving on to another, each exhibit distinctive yet harmonious traits.

Ma'nene' or corpse preservation tradition is one of the mourning rituals in Toraja. *Ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition is a ceremony conducted around graves, involving the cleaning of the burial pit, offering prayers to the ancestors' spirits, providing new wrappings for the deceased if the old ones are worn out, and replacing the decaying *tau-tau* or wooden statue clothing (Tahir et al., 2020). This ceremony typically takes place after the harvest. In some areas of Toraja, the ritual is an integral part of the *aluk rambu solo'* or mourning ceremonies and is performed after the next harvest following the burial (Putra et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in some other areas, this ritual is not conducted regularly, meaning it takes place based on opportunities, whether it be the following year or several years later (Coville, 2020). In some regions, this occasion is used to supplement or

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add offerings for those who have been buried but may lack provisions when they were interred. The ceremony in *Pantilang* Toraja is called *ma'tollongi* or *ma'paundi* signifying the act of supplementing or adding offerings.

Ma'nene or corpse preservation tradition has two meanings, the term *ma'nene* originates from the nickname *nene* or grandmother or from ancestors and elders. Some interpret it slightly differently, where *nene* also means death. Both the elderly and the young who have passed away are referred to as *nene* (grandmother). The term *nene* is then preceded by ghost, and when combined, it can be interpreted as 'viewing the corpse.' *Ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition is a part of the ancient *rambu solo* or funeral ceremony, in the Toraja tradition. On the designated day, families go to the cemetery. The deceased can be kept clean in a coffin, washed, and wrapped. In stone, the significance of financial belief is understood as a stone that is said to symbolize "strength and eternity." Confirmations stored there will last longer and not deteriorate as quickly as if buried in the ground (Adams, 1993a; Sandarupa et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2020). The purpose of *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition is to express gratitude to the ancestors who have protected them from various disasters, pests, and diseases that could hinder crops and bring misfortune in life, securing a bountiful harvest. *Ma'nene* is a traditional ceremonial event that combines death rituals, art, and expressions of love for ancestors, prominent figures, or loved ones. This ceremony also serves as a form of social status reinforcement for the Toraja community (Sihombing, 2022a). This activity has been developed through generations and is still preserved and practiced by the Toraja community, although not many people are aware of it.

As for the symbols in the implementation of the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition ceremony, such as cloth, sacrificial animals (buffaloes and pigs), rice, offerings (snacks, cigarettes, betel leaves, and candy), the venue, and the schedule of the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition. Cloth is the most important symbol in the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition, as the corpses, once taken out from the grave, will be wrapped in cloth without removing the fabric attached to the incomplete body (Coronado et al., 2023). The Toraja community does not specify the type of cloth used; however, the color must not be arbitrary, and black is strictly forbidden for wrapping the deceased. Offerings are also crucial in this ritual. The Toraja community, who previously adhered to *aluk todolo* or Torajan ancestral belief, believed that the offerings they brought were a tribute to their ancestors. They believed that the offerings would be tasted by their ancestors and should not be consumed by the family or the community conducting the ritual. Offerings used in the Christian version of *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition, such as cigarettes, buffalo, pig snacks, and betel leaves, have undergone slight changes.

Livestock is one of the symbols in the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition. Livestock, in this context, refers to pigs and buffaloes. The Toraja community of the past considered this symbol as their offering to their ancestors, sacrificing these animals in their ancestors' name. Furthermore, they slaughtered livestock not as an offering to their ancestors, but as a dish consumed after the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation procession in the burial area and as food when feeding their ancestors. This difference is due to religious factors (Sudarsi et al., 2022). The community in the past conducted this ritual in line with the *aluk todolo* or ancestral belief context, while the majority of Toraja people, who are now Christians, perform the ritual in accordance with the Christian religious context. The venue is a crucial element in the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition. This ritual takes place in the burial area, and people are not allowed to enter the burial area before the scheduled time for the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition, which occurs in September every three years, except if a corpse is brought to the cemetery and pilgrimages are made in the twelfth month for Christmas (Sumiaty et al., 2023). The Toraja community believes that the deceased and the living occupy different spaces, with the dead in the burial area and the living outside it. They establish a boundary between the world of their ancestors and their own, imposing a strict prohibition on entering the burial area arbitrarily.

Research related to the *ma'nene* ritual has been carried out by several researchers. Symbolic meaning in *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition (Putra et al., 2023; Sumiaty, 2021), Toraja is described as a city full of rituals and *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition is elaborated in depth in this study (Sandarupa et al., 2021), Torajan people's perception of *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition (Saputri & Pramiyanti, 2021), The *ma'nene* or corpse preservation tradition is described as a walking dead (Kaul & J. Skinner, 2018) and stages of the *ma'nene* or corpse preservation procession (Alifvia et al., 2021). In this present study, the researcher focused to

comprehensively explore and analyze the intricate cultural significance and enduring relevance of the Toraja death feast rituals, *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition.

Current developments indicate that the symbols embedded in these rituals are now comprehended by only a select few, predominantly the elderly members of the community. In contrast, most of the population has adapted the execution of these rituals to align with their capabilities and evolving beliefs. This shift raises concerns about the potential erosion of cultural ties within the society (Akhrani & Eka, 2019). It is worth noting that the Toraja people lack a written tradition, despite their consistent practice of transcribing mental concepts into distinctive and artistic symbols. The dwindling understanding of ritual symbols among the younger generation implies a potential loss of cultural heritage. As the torchbearers of tradition age and gradually diminish in number, the risk of these rich cultural practices fading into obscurity becomes more imminent. The transmission of cultural knowledge is crucial for the preservation of a community's identity, and the current disparity in understanding raises questions about the sustainability of these unique rituals in the future (Coronado et al., 2023). Additionally, the absence of a written tradition poses a challenge in documenting and passing down the intricacies of these rituals (Coville, 2020). While the Toraja people have expressed their thoughts through intricate symbols, the lack of a written record makes it challenging for future generations to fully grasp the nuances and significance of the cultural practices. Efforts to bridge this generational gap and preserve the cultural legacy of the Toraja people are essential to ensure the continuity of their unique traditions and customs. The research aims to explore the complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices of the Toraja people. By delving into the multifaceted layers of these rituals, the study seeks to unravel the intricate connections between tradition and modernity, while also fostering a deeper understanding of how cultural practices can shape and perpetuate the collective identity of a community over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"The Intricate Tapestry of Toraja Spirituality: An Exploration of Animism, Ancestor Veneration, and Symbolic Rituals" delves into the profound spiritual beliefs and practices of the Toraja people.

1. **Animism:** This aspect explores the belief system of animism, which is the idea that all natural objects, phenomena, and the universe itself possess a spiritual essence or soul. In the context of Toraja spirituality, animism likely encompasses the belief in spirits inhabiting natural elements such as trees, rivers, and mountains, as well as the notion of a spiritual interconnectedness between all living beings and the environment.
2. **Ancestor Veneration:** Ancestor veneration is a fundamental aspect of many traditional cultures, including the Toraja. It involves honoring and revering deceased ancestors through various rituals and ceremonies. In Toraja culture, this could involve rituals to communicate with ancestors, seek their guidance, and ensure their well-being in the afterlife. Ancestor veneration may also include practices related to lineage, family heritage, and maintaining connections with past generations.
3. **Symbolic Rituals:** Rituals play a significant role in Toraja spirituality, serving as symbolic expressions of beliefs, values, and cultural identity. These rituals may include elaborate funeral ceremonies, harvest celebrations, and rites of passage marking important life events. Each ritual likely incorporates symbolic elements, gestures, and objects that hold deep cultural and spiritual meaning for the Toraja people, reinforcing their connection to their ancestors, the natural world, and the divine.

Overall, the literature aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of Toraja spirituality, shedding light on the intricate tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and traditions that shape the spiritual landscape of the Toraja people. Through this exploration, readers gain insight into the richness and complexity of Toraja culture, as well as the enduring significance of spirituality in their lives.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The methodological approach of this research involves a comprehensive exploration and analysis of the intricate cultural significance and enduring relevance of Toraja death feast rituals, with a specific focus on the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition. The method is a qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2016), aligned with the study's aim to unravel the multifaceted layers of the ritual and understand the connections

between tradition and modernity. The study employs an ethnographic approach (Kurczewski, 2023; Malinowski, 2007), immersing the researchers in the Toraja community to gain a deep understanding of their cultural practices, beliefs, and values. This immersive experience includes participant observation and engagement with community members. In-depth interviews with key informants, such as elders or individuals with significant knowledge about the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition, are conducted to provide insights into cultural nuances, symbolism, and changes in the ritual over time. A symbolic analysis approach is employed to understand the meanings and representations of various elements in the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition, including cloth, sacrificial animals, offerings, and other ritual components. The researchers conduct extensive fieldwork in Toraja, actively participating in or observing *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition, ceremonies, and other cultural events. This immersive experience is crucial for gaining first-hand insights into cultural practices. The study also involves the use of audio-visual documentation, such as recording rituals, interviews, and cultural events. This serves as a valuable resource for capturing the visual and auditory aspects of the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition. Thematic analysis is employed to identify and analyse themes and patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2017) related to the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition, including cultural preservation, changes over time, and the role of the ritual in shaping collective identity.

RESULT

During the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation procession, *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader summons the spirits of the dead. The spirits are invited to eat series and eat offerings brought by the family. When inviting spirits, *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader utters a discourse like the one mentioned below:

“O you who sleep in a hollow rock.
Who sits in an impressive stone tub?
I'll wake you up as a sleeper.
I will shake you like a sound.
For you we prepare betel nut
For you are the offering tobacco
And turmeric-marked rice
And sustenance is yellow.
And selected black-colored pigs.
Pigs have no spots.
Gather as many as you can in the west!
Gather infinitely on the horizon of the setting sun!
Let you get this pig's bile.
Point the inside!
For those seeking peace
To be delicious landed on the neck, above the venue of the reed performance.
So that it tastefully passes through the esophagus
over the webbing of the lead containing offerings
I say to you I have set a time.
To get a lime betel presentation
Have accepted the conditions when receiving betel leaf sheets.

No more you outside the walls
No more behind the house halls
So, you should all eat.
All who shed their blood on us.
Eat all of you whose blood flows in our bodies!
So that we put down your gold and eat the rest
That we noble shoots chew the excess of your esophagus
To be a reinforcement of our body
To hijack our bodies
So that the children are like bamboo clumps.
Creeping like a clump of bamboo”

For the people of Toraja, the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition is an annual event held after harvest, this is a mass ceremony for all Barupu' Toraja families both living within the area and those outside the area. Therefore, this opportunity is also used to hold family reunions, reunions of the *Baruppu'* Toraja community, especially for nomads. Because *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition is a tribute to all spirits whose bodies are in the grave in *Baruppu'*, so this ceremony includes all *Baruppu'* people'. When the funeral was held a long time ago, maybe many families did not have time to attend because they were outside the area, so on this occasion they used to express their condolences. At the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition, it was the opportunity for the nomads to condolence and hold family reunions both in the village and those who came from various overseas areas. Here is an exploration of the complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices of the Toraja people:

DISCUSSION

a. Invocation of a Supernatural Being

The *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition begins with the procession of *ma'bukka' liang* or opening the burrow. Then *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader begins the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition by saying hymns or prayers by communicating with spirits in the grave. At the beginning of the discourse spoken by *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader, the spirits of the deceased are greeted and even awakened using beautiful and mystical discourses, as in the following quote:

“O you who sleep in a hollow rock.
Who sits in an impressive stone tub?
I'll wake you up as a sleeper.
I will shake you like a sound.”

The language used by *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader in greeting and awakening spirits is very polite in Torajan culture. With a soft voice and as if asking using the rhetorical question "Who sits in an impressive stone tub? when in fact *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader understand and know well the name of the body in the grave. Then *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader ask permission for the spirit to be awakened using the simile figurative language "I'll wake you up as a sleeper". *To minaa* or Torajan traditional leader still considers the body like a person who is asleep and will be awakened. A belief that shows that there is a relationship between living Torajan people and the dead (Sumiaty, 2021). Furthermore, *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader wants to wake up also with a loud voice so that the spirit really wakes up and is present together with family and guests who are present at the ritual. According to the participant when interviewed that the actual chanting of prayers or communication between *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader and spirits in the discourse shows a form of family

appreciation for their ancestors. "...one of the ways Torajan people show love and appreciation for their ancestors is through the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition". [interview with participant 1, December 2023].

The language used suggests a call to a divine or spiritual being associated with rocks and an impressive stone tub. The entity is addressed as one who sleeps and is urged to wake up. The indigenous people of Toraja believe that bodies that has been buried for a long time is still like humans in general only considered sleeping and can be awakened, one of which is in the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition (Mageo & Howard, 1996).

b. Offerings

The assumption of the Torajan people in the context of *aluk todolo* or ancestral belief that their ancestors did not really die, they only slept and could communicate with living families. This can be seen from the ornaments that adorn the *ma'nene'* or **corpse preservation** procession. Grave is kept clean, flowers are planted and a flower garden is formed like a house. They considered the grave a home for their deceased family. This is evidenced by the discourse of hymns spoken by *to minaa* or **Torajan traditional leader** in the following quote:

“For you we prepare betel nut.
For you are the offering tobacco
And turmeric-marked rice
And sustenance is yellow.
And selected black-colored pigs.
Pigs have no spots.”

The discourse describes offerings made to this supernatural being, including betel nut, tobacco, turmeric-marked rice, and specially selected black-coloured pigs without spots. The offering ritual involves gathering pigs in the west and extracting pig's bile for a specific purpose. Pigs are also very important in death rituals in Toraja. In the belief of *aluk todolo* or ancestral belief, the Toraja indigenous people believe that pigs become provisions for deceased ancestors to be able to reach one place, namely *puya* or heaven . The more and better the quality of the cattle sacrificed, the easier it is to reach *puya* or heaven (Lebba & Kaharuddin, 2023; Muslich et al., 2023). Food offerings show faith and hope that never breaks between the living and the deceased ancestors. Related to this, participants through interviews revealed that “this Torajan custom has become a common thing to do also when making a pilgrimage to the grave at any particular moment” [interview with participant 2, December 2023].

For the indigenous people of Toraja, offerings are very important in death rituals including the implementation of *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition. The offering of food and other objects became a symbol of the close and inseparable relationship between the living and the deceased families (Sihombing, 2022b). Definitely, this food offering also shows the social spirit of Torajan people who care so much about others (Kombongkila et al., 2023). This can be seen in the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition as in death rituals in general in Toraja, the family distributes food to everyone present in the ritual.

c. Unity and Ancestral Connection

One of the things that makes human relations break is death. Death becomes the fact that whatever happens whether it is the problem faced, happiness, and all events during life will end when death occurs. But not with *napa* believed by the Torajan people who carry out the *ma' nene'* ritual. The unity between the living and the dead is preserved through this ritual. Thus their relationship remains close and maintained, this is evident through the hymn conveyed by *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader in the following discourse quote:

“So, you should all eat.
All who shed their blood on us.

Eat all of you whose blood flows in our bodies!
So that we put down your gold and eat the rest
That we noble shoots chew the excess of your esophagus
To be a reinforcement of our body
To hijack our bodies
So that the children are like bamboo clumps.
Creeping like a clump of bamboo”

The discourse emphasizes a sense of unity and connection with ancestors. The act of consuming the offerings is portrayed as a way of incorporating the essence of those who shed their blood on behalf of the community. *To minaa* or Torajan traditional leader asks the spirits to eat together with the families and communities present at the ritual. It is one of the representations of the unbroken unity between the living and the dead. The spirit is considered to be able to do something like eat like a living human (Adams, 1993b). This indirectly shows a deep attitude of respect and love for ancestors who have given birth, raised, and even taught the values that guide the life of living families (Waterson, 2009). This was expressed by *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader by stating that it was the ancestors who had flowed blood in their bodies (families). According to the participant in the interview that "this ritual is not just about cleaning the corpse but more than that. The *ma' nene* ritual illustrates the importance of relationships with families who have died before." [interview with participant 3, December 2023].

To Minaa or Torajan traditional leader also said that after the spirits eat the offering, the family will eat the rest and it is believed that this will strengthen the family's body to live their lives. In addition, the rest of the meal is also a blessing for the family to grow and multiply which is analogous to a bamboo clump. There is a metaphorical expression of the descendants being like bamboo clumps, connecting generations. Torajan people also believe that the more children, the more their fortune will be (Coville, 2020). This makes sense because death parties in Toraja are not cheap (Kaul & J. Skinner, 2018). Many sources of funds are needed for the organization of a traditional feast, especially a death party. Of course, if there are more children and grandchildren, the greater the opportunity for families to carry out a festive party because many families will work hand in hand in financing the ritual.

d. Spatial Restrictions

Although the belief in family unity and respect towards ancestors is maintained, they are aware of one thing. There is a dividing space between them. There are things that can no longer be touched, living and dead souls are separated by a space. No more sound and all that remains is a memory and love that never ends. This is conveyed by *to minaa* or Torajan traditional leader as follows:

“No more you outside the walls

No more behind the house halls”

To minaa or Torajan traditional leader eagerly asked and called all the spirits in the cemetery to be present Together with the family of course to enjoy the food offerings prepared. *To minaa* or Torajan traditional leader asks the spirits not to be outside the walls (cemetery) and behind the house (cemetery). This symbolize a boundary between the spiritual realm and the human living space (Lebba & Kaharuddin, 2023; Putra et al., 2023). This implies that communication with the spirits is already limited (Alifvia et al., 2021; Kaul & J. Skinner, 2018; Sihombing, 2022a). There is a boundary between the life of living humans and the spirit world. But this is also a sign that the Torajan people who carry out the *ma' nene'* ritual believe that even though there is a boundary of space and time between the mystical world and the human world, their relationship can still be established. Beliefs that are indeed complicated to understand but provide a universal value of unending love between humans, especially Torajan people. Let alone When they were alive, even many years had died, they were still remembered.

The complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices associated with the Toraja people's *ma'nene'* tradition offer a rich tapestry of cultural, religious, and social elements. Through the invocation of supernatural beings, the presentation of offerings, the emphasis on unity and ancestral connection, and the imposition of spatial restrictions, the Toraja people demonstrate a deep and intricate understanding of the relationship between the living and the spiritual dimensions of existence.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the discourse of *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition reflects a complex spiritual belief system and ritual practices of the Toraja people, blending elements of animism, ancestor veneration, and a deep connection to the natural landscape. The use of specific items in offerings and the ritualistic consumption of these offerings highlight the importance of symbolic actions in their religious ceremonies.

The implications of this finding extend beyond academic curiosity and can positively impact cultural appreciation, academic research, interfaith relations, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Encourage further research and documentation on the *ma'nene'* or corpse preservation tradition and related spiritual practices. This can include detailed studies, audio-visual documentation, and archiving of cultural materials. Such efforts contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the rituals and their significance.

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