

# NOTES ET DOCUMENTS

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## Colour and Anti-colour in the Death Ritual of the Toraja

For the Sa'dan Toraja of South Sulawesi <sup>(1)</sup>, the colour of mourning is black <sup>(2)</sup>. Yet their funerary rituals, at least those of some magnificence, make anything but a gloomy impression. This is especially true of the cor-tège, in which red and gold are the most conspicuous colours. To the Toraja, the celebration of the deceased is also a grandiose, spectacular manifestation of the family's prestige.

The last day of the lengthy ritual brings a ceremony that, in itself, is not so remarkable. Immediately before a return is made to everyday life, a small group of the deceased's relatives move to a nearby spot where they ritually immerse a few old garments in a bath of dye and mud to colour them black. This ceremony, the *ma'bolong* ('blackening of the clothes') is notable, above all, for its unusual timing. What is the point of introducing the colour of mourning at the end of the mourning period? In order to understand this, we must first present a brief overview of the funerary ritual in its entirety.

Rituals play a major role in the Toraja's ancient belief (*aluk to dolo*, 'the rites of the ancestors'). They are divided into those of the eastern domain

(*aluk rampe matallo* = the ritual of the rising sun) and those of the western domain (*aluk rampe matampu'* = the ritual of the setting sun). This division entails several oppositions: day against night, right against left, white, yellow, gold and red against black, rice against maize, life against death and, *en conséquence*, the rituals of life against those of death. The Toraja themselves stress that these oppositions are extremely important in their eyes. The systematic ordering of the oppositions should also be mentioned in this connection; we will return to this later.

Of all the religious solemnities, the death ritual has been most successful in holding out in modern times, and even Christian burials display diverse elements of the autochthonous interment ceremonial. It is therefore not surprising that these very funerary rituals have grown increasingly complicated and elaborate as time has passed, and that a clear hierarchy among types of ritual can now be discerned. We will offer a description of the highest order of funerary ritual, the *dirapa'i*, the 'interment ceremonial with an interval'. Both the *ma'bolong* rites <sup>(3)</sup> we attended were of this superior type.

The *dirapa'i* is preceded, as are all high forms of interment, by expensive and time-consuming preparations, such as the construction of quarters for the guests and arrangement of the two ceremonial areas. The first of these consists of the house of the deceased and the rice-barn(s) opposite it, and the second, at some distance from the first, of a flat area (= *rante*), on which the funeral tower (*lakkian*) and the scaffold for dividing up the meat (*bala'kayan*) will be set up. The latter area is also where the kerbaus are slaughtered. Dozens of these water buffaloes will end their lives here: their souls are said to accompany the deceased to the hereafter. The greater the procession of kerbaus, the higher is the prestige of those offering the ritual. The slaughtered animals are a gift from the relatives to the deceased. It is thanks to their efforts that he will ascend to heaven after interment and become a divinity who, as part of a constellation, will watch over man and his most important crop, rice.

Because of the many preparations, it is impossible to make an immediate start on the interment ceremonial. The deceased is temporarily placed upon a bed in the southern room of the house (*tongkonan*); he is referred to as 'the sick one'. Not until the funerary rituals begins officially, which is signalled by the priest of the dead beating on drums and a gong, does he become a dead man (*to mate*). The corpse, which in this initial phase lies in an east-west direction, is now transferred by six men to the central room and laid out in a north-south direction, with its head towards the south. (The living sleep with their heads to the north) Immediately after this, the official death, women dressed in mourning garb begin wailing, with their arms leaning on the roll covered with natural ecru in which the mortal

remains have been wound. The priest of the dead (*to mebalun* or *to ma'kayo*)<sup>(4)</sup> commences his task. He is assisted by the widow or widower and by three women: one of these cooks and serves the maize for the mourners and the deceased (*to ma'sanduk dalle*, 'the maize-server'); another watches over the corpse (*to dima'peulli*, 'she who gets the maggots out of the corpse'); and the third, a close relative of the deceased, must observe strict prohibitions: she may not leave the side of the dead person. This woman, the *to ma'pemali*, is the only one not to wear the usual black mourning attire during the ritual: she wears a long hooded cloak and a skirt of natural-coloured material (fig. 1).

It is taboo for any of these women to eat rice: they may only eat maize, since rice belongs to the domain of life and maize to the domain of death. Other relatives and friends may also submit themselves to this prohibition; as a group, these non-rice-eaters are referred to as *to maro*'.

The second phase begins with 'the awakening of the deceased' (*ma'tundan*). The priest of the dead again strikes the two drums and the gong as a sign to the deceased that the ritual for him has recommenced. Meanwhile, a start has been made on making the *tau-tau*, a large doll representing the deceased, which will later be taken to the grave in the rocks together with the remains. At the same time, they start constructing the bier, and also the litters on which the three women who play a part in the rite will be carried to the ceremonial area (*rante*).

The next solemnity is the transfer of the deceased from his house to the rice-barn opposite. The *tau-tau* is set up in front of this barn. The wailing recommences. The roll in which the corpse is wrapped has meanwhile been covered by a red cloth on which figures, cut from gold leaf, are now stuck. These figures have a symbolic significance. The colours red and gold indicate that the deceased is increasingly coming to be regarded as a divinity, that this is a prelude to his status as guardian of the rice. The transfer to the rice-barn points in the same direction: whereas rice and the deceased are initially kept strictly separate, they are gradually brought into closer contact with each other as the ritual proceeds.

After a few days, all activity moves to the *rante*. The cortège is headed by a procession of buffaloes and by warrior-dancers; the members of the family take up their places under a red cloth fastened to the bier. The cortège is followed by hundreds of other people, guests who have arrived in great numbers in the preceding days, bringing gifts, including kerbaus. By preference, they wear black for such visits of condolence; the women have a black hooded cloak (*pote*) on; the men wear a headband decorated with black beads and a tassel. Having arrived at the *rante*, they place the *tau-tau* on the first level of the funerary tower, while the remains are raised on a tall ladder to the second level. The women who have kept vigil by the

deceased will now continue to do so and climb up the ladder to the second level.

This is followed by kerbau fights. When these are over, the buffaloes are slaughtered. The next day, the deceased is removed from the funeral tower. The cortège assembles anew, in the same order as on the way to the *rante*. Now they go to the last resting-place of the deceased: the grave in the rocks, 'the house from which no smoke comes'. The remains are hoisted into the tomb via bamboo ladders; the *tau-tau* is placed before the grave. The chamber is sealed with a wooden door. After this *meaa* ('bringing away', i.e. of the deceased), most of the participants go home. Many months later, however, they still come together again. Then, in a new ritual, the deceased will be symbolically transferred to the domain of the east, so that he can become a divinity.

Only a few relatives return to the ceremonial place after the burial. They must perform one last task, the *ma'bolong*. This ceremony – we here summarize the essence of the two *ma'bolong* rites we observed – begins after twelve o'clock on the following day, i.e. still in the domain of the west. It is carried out by the priest of the dead with a few assistants and the group of non-rice-eaters, the *to maro*'. By way of preparation, the women pound *bilante* leaves in a stone mortar behind the deceased's house. *Bilante* is the name of a cultivated plant (*Homalanthus populnea*) from whose leaves the dark dye for the mourning attire is generally extruded<sup>(5)</sup>. Then the group go to a place to the west of the ceremonial area proper. They take with them a number of round-bottomed earthenware cooking pots, in which the *bilante* leaves are lying, as well as a rectangular tray, made from the bract of the spadix of the areca palm, and a bundle of clothes. The priest of the dead carries a set of burning bamboo torches and a chicken. (Usually torches serve to purify the atmosphere of evil influences.).

A small fire is lit on the place destined for the *ma'bolong*. The priest slaughters the fowl and lets the blood drip into a hollow in the ground. The breastbone is removed and cooked in a bamboo cylinder. This part of the chicken is intended for the deceased, the rest is for the participants in the ceremony. Now some maize, bananas and tubers are cooked in the pots; pieces of this food are then offered on a banana-leaf as a sacrifice without any prayer. Meanwhile those who remained in the ceremonial area have slaughtered a pig; its left hind-quarter is brought and is also cooked. In another pot the *bilante* leaves are cooked in water (fig. 2).

One of the men goes with the palm-leaf tray to a nearby *sawah*-field, where he fetches some bluish-black muddy clay. This slush is emptied into a hole made in the ground. The clothes brought along in a bundle are thoroughly immersed in the mud, then dried in the sun and finally washed in



Figures. 1. The *to ma'pemali*. 2. Cooking and preparing the sacrificial chicken. 3. The infusion of *bilante* leaves is poured into the mud in the hollow. [All photos by R. Schefold, Lea, 1983]

the *sawah*. Meanwhile the food is cooked and everyone eats. Then the boiling, brownish infusion of the *bilante* leaves is poured into the mud-hole (fig. 3), dried and washed (fig. 4). they are now 'black', but in fact only somewhat darker in colour.

The group returns to the house, where further people have meanwhile come together: soon cock-fights will take place. The clothes are laid on the ground, on the west side of the house; and the cooking-pots are placed next to them. Three tufts of rice are laid by each pot, 'just as each pot stands on three stones on the fire' (fig. 5). In front of the pots is a large rice-dish. Members of the deceased's family throw some money and betel-nuts into it. This is to reward the priest of the dead and the *to maro*' women. All the women are in black, even the *to ma'pemali* has now, at the end of the whole ritual, substituted a dark hooded cloak and skirt for the natural-coloured ones. The priest squats on one side of the rice dish and the *to ma'pemali* on the other. The man holds one of the women's fingers and mutters a prayer over the dish. Then the great drum under the house is beaten and the money is divided up (fig. 6). Finally, two men go to the ceremonial place and hew down the posts supporting the scaffold on which the meat of the slaughtered animals was portioned out (*bala'kayan*).

This is the end of the period of mourning. The *to maro*' may now again eat rice, and the *to ma'pemali* may permanently leave the deceased's house, in which she has kept vigil for so long. The second priest of the ritual, the *to minaa* <sup>(6)</sup>, stands in front of the rice-barn and celebrates the course of the deceased's life in song, giving him a new name. The dead person is now imagined as being on his way to Puya, the hereafter. Then the cock-fights take place, inspiring thoughts about the role played by the cock: on earth cock-fights decide the issue if no solution can be found to a quarrel; in the hereafter, in Puya, the dead are judged by Pong Lalondong, the Supreme Judge of the realm of the dead (*londong* = cock).

The succession of events in the *ma'bolong* is in essence very simple. A few clothes are ceremonially blackened. This is accompanied by a unpretentious sacrifice, a sign that a rite is being carried out. This rite marks the end of the mourning ceremonial: for the *to maro*', too, the period of food taboos is over, and the services of the priest of the dead are completed. Yet these facts contain a noteworthy antithesis. Whereas most of the events imply completion, the central act, the blackening, seems to point to the beginning of the mourning period. In this connection one attribute of the *to ma'pemali*, the woman who is possibly nearer to the deceased than even the widow or widower, acquires especial importance. Wherever she appears during the ritual, she is conspicuous on account of her light-coloured





Figures. 4. Washing the dyed clothes in the *sawah*. 5. Cooking pots and clothes are set down, together with tufts of rice, at the west side of the house. The *to minaa* priest dressed in white (centre) does not belong to the family (cf. note 2).



natural attire amid all the black-clothed guests. Why is this woman, who occupies such a prominent position among the mourners because of the strict prohibitions, then not wearing mourning attire?

The Toraja themselves cannot give a clear answer to this question. We will therefore venture our own interpretation. The natural apparel represents a way of referring to the special role of the *to ma'pemali* among the mourners in a manner which is conspicuous by virtue of the contrast but which is not essentially different. Both black and natural ecru are colours without hue, they are 'anti-colours'. As such they both belong to the domain of death, in contrast to brilliant white, yellow, gold and red. After death, the body is wrapped in natural-coloured cloths. The same anti-colour characterizes the woman who keeps vigil by the death-roll during the funerary ritual. Thus the *to ma'pemali* could be seen as mourned. Natural and black represent two different aspects of this mourning: the former emphasizes the relationship with the individual corpse in its decaying, i.e. impure state, the latter the ritual collectivity of the groups of relatives. At the end of the ritual the deceased disappears en route to Puya and receives a new name, which breaks the bodily bond with his family. The special role of the *to ma'pemali* is now terminated.

The *ma'bolong* marks this transition in a way which sums up the essence of the ritual in a nutshell: a solemnity outside the inhabited world in the domain of the west with various specifically associated characteristics, such as cooking *non-rice* crops and the *left* hind-quarter of a pig, dyeing with the *colour of mourning* and arriving at the *west side* of the house. It is here, at the west side, that the *to ma'pemali* appears for a moment, dressed, like all the others, in the collective black attire of mourning. By doing so, she indicates that her task is done: the bodily existence of the deceased is becoming blurred as he leaves for the realm of the dead.

It will now be clear that the making of mourning-black at the end of the mourning period is especially directed at the *to ma'pemali* for she was the only one not to share in the collective ritual mourning. Now she can join the other *to maro'*, who wore black clothes throughout the period of mourning. But this also signals the end of the ritual for the deceased: the *to ma'pemali*, the other *to maro'* and the priest of the dead are rewarded for their services, and the three tufts of rice by the cooking pots indicate the discontinuance of the food taboos. For everyone, the period of mourning is over.

In the introduction we referred to the systematic ordering of binary oppositions in the culture of the Toraja. Just as death is opposed to life, so the rituals events of the west are opposed to those of the east. The ques-





Figure. 6. The priest of the dead with a black sarong around his middle and the *to ma'pemali*, now also in black, receive their rewards.

tion arises whether the *to ma'pemali*, too, has a counterpart in the rituals of the east and whether our hypothesis about the nature of her special role can be supported in this way.

The most important ceremony in the domain of the east is a ritual for the flourishing of the community and its crops: the *bua'* festival. Participants in this ritual are not required to wear any special clothing. Everyone appears in festive attire; only black, the colour of death, is of course out of place. Yet in the *bua'* festival, too, there is one woman who is an exception to what generally prevails. This woman, the *tumbang*, occupies a central position in the ritual and must observe strict prohibitions. Her special role is emphasized by her clothing. Throughout her taboo-period all her clothes are yellow – the colour of the east. On her head she wears an old colourful *mawa'*-cloth, a sacral textile associated with life and the well-being of man and beast.

The *tumbang* thus appears to be a counterpart to the *to ma'pemali*. This applies right down to specific details. The *tumbang* may not eat any maize during the *bua'* ritual, nor any meat that has come from a funerary ritual.

Throughout this time she must remain in an important house (*tongkonan*). There she keeps vigil by a fetish (*anak dara*) set up near the central pillar of the house. This fetish is the symbol of woman in society and is associated with fertility and rice. It is decorated with young, light-yellow palm leaves. The fact that the clothes of the *tumbang* and the decorations of the fertility fetish are all yellow marks their special affinity in a way similar to the manner in which the natural 'anti-colour' shows the affinity between the *to ma'pemali* and the death roll.

After her year of isolation, the *tumbang*, hidden from view by a covering of *mawa'* cloths, is carried out of the house by men and is placed on the veranda. There she removes the cloths and climbs up a ladder to a little attic built high under the ridge of the roof on the north side of the house. The removal of her exceptional clothing is associated with the discontinuation of the *tumbang's* specific ritual involvement. She can now again take part in ordinary life.

At the end of the ritual, the fetish is 'buried' in solemn procession in a banyan-tree, with the exception of the eight bamboos that form part of it. Four of these bamboos are placed in the first paddy-field laid out by the *tumbang's* family; the other four are put next to the family's finest rice-barn, so that the rice may prosper! A parallel may be drawn between this and the care for the well-being of the rice which is bestowed by the deceased after his ceremonial burial.

(Transl. by J. LACHLAN-MACKENZIE)

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## NOTES

1. Some 325,000 Toraja live in Tana Toraja (a regency of the province of South Sulawesi, with an area one-tenth of that of the Netherlands). They live by the cultivation of rice, manioc, maize, ground-nuts, coffee and cloves and from breeding stock, mainly kerbaus and pigs. They now also derive income from tourism. Fewer than half the Toraja still adhere to the old faith (*aluk to dolo*); the majority are Christians, mostly Protestants. For more information on the Sa'dan Toraja see Nooy-Palm (1979 and forthcoming). The fieldwork on the ceremony described here was carried out in the autumn of 1969 and the summer of 1983. Our thanks go to the Wenner Gren Foundation, the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (ZWO foundation), the Dutch Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture and the Dutch Royal Institute for the Tropics for financial and administrative assistance. In particular we should wish to extend cordial thanks to Mrs A. Kalmeijer, Mrs P. Kruseman, Mrs U. Schulz-Dornburg and Mr J. Kis-Jovak for their support and cooperation.
2. Only for the three *puang*, the three princes who rule the mini-kingdoms of Ma'kale, Meng-

kendek and Sangalla' was the colour of mourning white. This was because of the high status of these princes, who were almost regarded as divinities. The same applies to three categories of priests, the *to burake*, the *to menani* and the *to minaa sando*, who are also fully associated with the domain of the east. For them, the colour of mourning is yellow. Koubi's (1975:118) remark that mourning attire is not worn until the end of the funeral ritual in our view erroneously generalizes a special requirement that applies to the participants in the ceremony described in this article to the entire community.

3. By Nooy-Palm in November 1969 in Tandung, Kesu' and by Schefold in July 1983 in Lea, Ma'kale – for additional information about the *ma'bolong*, see the bibliography.
4. *To mebalun* ('he who wraps', sc. the deceased). *Kayo* is the name of a dun or grey heron. *To ma'kayo*: 'he who is like the dune heron'. This dun colour and the natural colour of the material wrapped around the roll surrounding the corpse do not have a clear name. The remains are later draped in a red cloth. The original apparel of the priest of the dead was also grey or dun, an impression strengthened by the colour of his headgear, which was made from the withered leaves of the areca palm (withered = dead!). In Buntao, the priest's assistant is called *to ma'koko* 'he who gets the soil from the ground' (needed to blacken the clothes).
5. In the present day, imported materials are often used for mourning attire. For the widespread use of *Homalanthus populnea* for dyeing black in Indonesia, see Heyne (1950:959 ff.).
6. The *to minaa* has function in most Toraja rituals; his task in the death ritual concerns the more verbal aspects like litanies and prayers.

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