



Role and Cultural Persistence of Tominaa in Toraja Funeral Traditions

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Abstract:

Background: Research on the dynamics of Toraja death rituals has generally emphasized visual aspects such as Tongkonan architecture, the slaughter of sacrificial animals, or mass processions. However, the role of the *Tominaa* as guardians and preservers of ritual traditions has not been sufficiently explored.

Purpose: This study aims to investigate the presence of *Tominaa* in the funeral traditions of the Toraja people, which have changed over time. As indigenous oral poets, *Tominaa* lead ceremonies by chanting sacred verses known as *kadong badong* or *tumba* and serve as crucial pillars in preserving the cosmology and values of *Aluk Todolo*, the ancestral faith.

Method: The research employs a literature review approach, analyzing previous scholarly works, theoretical frameworks, and key findings related to the role of *Tominaa* in Toraja funeral traditions.

Results: The findings indicate that the role of *Tominaa* extends beyond ceremonial leadership, encompassing cultural guardianship, the preservation of identity, and the safeguarding of Toraja spirituality.

Theoretical implications: This study enriches the understanding of Toraja culture and provides a living laboratory for abstract Social Studies concepts, thereby deepening comprehension of Indonesia's sociocultural dynamics.

Practical implications: Recognizing the *Tominaa* as custodians of ritual knowledge underscores the need for cultural preservation efforts through intergenerational transmission, integration into local education, and supportive policies, ensuring the continuity of Toraja's intangible heritage amidst modernization.

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1. Introduction

Death is an inseparable part of human life. While death is a universal event that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, how different communities confront and commemorate it varies widely. Each region develops distinctive traditions that reflect its cultural identity. According to Musdalifa et al. (2024), traditions and rituals often embody local wisdom that characterizes a community.

One of the ethnic groups in Indonesia known for their complex and meaningful death traditions is the Toraja people of South Sulawesi. Tangkelayuk et al. (2021) note that Torajan culture continues to survive and serves as a marker of identity. Tappi (2022) further emphasizes that Torajans remain strongly committed to ancestral customs, making their culture particularly distinctive. The Toraja people call the death ritual *Rambu Solo'*. According to Lumbaa et al. (2023), *Rambu Solo'* is a funeral ceremony that also serves as a communal mourning ritual. Earlier, Suhamihardja (1977, as cited in Kondongan, 2019) observed that the Toraja are well known for their strong adherence to traditions such as *Rambu Solo'*.

The *Rambu Solo'* ceremony is not merely a funeral; it represents a totality of life that reflects Torajan beliefs, social structures, and worldviews. For the Torajan people, it is a sacred, highly significant, and often costly ritual. Kondongan (2019) notes that it is usually performed by the nobility and middle classes, since it requires considerable financial resources. In the *Aluk Todolo* religion, only noble families are entitled to hold elaborate and lavish funerals (Musdalifa et al., 2024). Moris and Rahman (2022) also report that the expenses can reach billions of rupiah, given the series of rituals and the large number of buffaloes sacrificed. At the heart of this complexity is the figure of the *Tominaa*, who leads the rituals, guides the spirit of the deceased to *Puya* (the afterlife), and maintains the cosmic balance between the living and the dead.

Previous research on Toraja death rituals has often focused on visual aspects such as Tongkonan architecture, animal sacrifices, or mass processions. However, the role of the *Tominaa* as guardians and preservers of tradition has received less attention. A *Tominaa* is not only a ceremonial leader but also an expert in oral literature, sacred prayers, and ritual procedures passed down through generations. As highlighted by Anggraeni and Putri (2020), traditional ceremonies involve symbolic elements ranging from attire, chants, and prayers to dances and ritual objects, each carrying specific meanings. The presence of the *Tominaa* is therefore essential for ensuring harmony between ancestors and present generations.

This study seeks to examine in depth the existence of the *Tominaa* in Torajan death rituals, which have evolved. As traditional speakers who lead funerals with the recitation of sacred verses known as *kadong badong* or *tumba*, *Tominaa* play a pivotal role in safeguarding the cosmology and values of *Aluk Todolo*. By situating the role of *Tominaa* within the context of social change and modernization, this study explores how their oral traditions and ritual practices have been sustained and adapted. Beyond contributing to the understanding of Toraja death traditions, the study underscores the importance of preserving local knowledge and highlights the resilience of cultural vitality amidst globalization, offering new perspectives on cultural resistance and the adaptation of traditions in the contemporary era.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach through a literature review to examine the existence of *Tominaa* in Torajan funeral traditions. The review encompasses theoretical frameworks and key findings from previous studies. As noted by Munib and Wulandari (2021), a literature study involves examining data from reference books and relevant research results to establish a theoretical foundation for the problem under investigation.

The data sources in this study consist of books, national and international journal articles, and academic theses or dissertations that are directly relevant to the research theme. Data analysis followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, conducted through a critical, in-depth, and systematic review process to obtain valid and comprehensive findings.

The use of a literature review method is particularly relevant in this context because the role of *Tominaa* in Torajan funeral traditions has often been documented through anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies rather than experimental or quantitative approaches. By synthesizing these works, the present study provides a broader understanding of how the *Tominaa* function both as ritual leaders and as custodians of cultural identity. Furthermore, this method allows for the identification of changes, continuities, and challenges faced by the *Tominaa* in contemporary society, offering insights that can be compared across different periods and scholarly perspectives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The existence of *Tominaa*'s role in the structure of Toraja death rituals

Tominaa is a central and indispensable figure in the entire series of *Rambu Solo'* activities. The *Tominaa*'s presence is not merely symbolic but functions as the core authority, providing legitimacy and ensuring that each ritual aligns with ancestral teachings. In this sense, the *Tominaa* serves not as a complement but as a pillar supporting the legitimacy, continuity, and smooth execution of the tradition.

Table 1. The roles of *Tominaa* in Toraja death rituals

Role	Description	Supporting references
Leader, guardian, and interpreter	Recites ancient mantras (<i>patundan</i>) and prayers; preserves collective memory; ensures ritual legitimacy	Rima (2019); Kondongan (2019)
Organizer and director	Coordinates all ritual elements, offerings, chants, dances, and processions to prevent deviation	Kondongan (2019)
Guide and advisor	Provides spiritual guidance to the bereaved family; explains the philosophical meaning of each ritual	Kondongan (2019)

Role	Description	Supporting references
Heir of oral knowledge	Transmits oral traditions, including prayers and symbolic language (<i>simune tallang</i>), across generations	Rima (2019); Rismayanti & Nusantarariya (2021); Salamba et al. (2023); Langi' (2019)

Source: Processed research data, 2025.

One of the fundamental roles of the *Tominaa* is as a leader, guardian, and interpreter of ritual dogma. Traditions consistently practiced by a community evolve into a culture that reflects shared ideas and values. As noted by Rima (2019), every society develops its own cultural rules that guide daily life, and in Toraja, these traditions are inherited from ancestors through oral transmission. In death rituals, the *Tominaa* is fully responsible for reciting ancient mantras (*patundan*) and prayers that accompany the deceased's soul to *Puya* (the afterlife). As guardians of collective memory, *Tominaa* function as living libraries, preserving and interpreting the oral heritage of the Toraja people, and maintaining communication between the human and divine worlds. This is reinforced by Kondongan (2019), who observed that in Torajan society, violating tradition is regarded as taboo and socially reprehensible, especially in the context of death ceremonies, thereby underlining the necessity of the *Tominaa*'s leadership role.

Beyond ritual recitation, the *Tominaa* also acts as an organizer and director of ceremonies. He ensures that the sequence of activities, from offerings and chants to dances and processions, proceeds according to customary provisions. The *Tominaa* orchestrates each element of the ritual, directing its flow to prevent deviations from ancestral norms. As Kondongan (2019) emphasizes, all ceremonial components must be executed properly, since neglecting or altering them is considered a grave violation of custom. Given that *Rambu Solo'* celebrations can extend over several days and involve an elaborate series of events, the role of the *Tominaa* as an organizer is indispensable.

The *Tominaa* also serves as a guide and advisor to the bereaved family, explaining the philosophical meaning of each ritual and providing counsel to help the family achieve spiritual peace. Each type of ceremony must be performed in the proper order, without mixing or skipping stages, and the *Tominaa* ensures adherence to this structure (Kondongan, 2019). Through this advisory role, the *Tominaa* mediates between the demands of tradition and the needs of the family.

Equally significant is *Tominaa*'s position as an heir to ancestral oral knowledge. The continuity of this role relies heavily on oral transmission, often through kinship ties or apprenticeships. As Rima (2019) notes, customs reflect attitudes and practices that develop over time and are preserved across generations, while Rismayanti and Nusantarariya (2021) argue that custom embodies the soul of a nation. Within the *Rambu Solo'* tradition, the oral transmission of prayers and ritual knowledge is vital for sustaining cultural continuity. Salamba et al. (2023) highlight the uniqueness of Toraja oral literature, particularly the use of *simune tallang*, synonymous words with figurative meanings that enrich the ritual language. Langi' (2019) further observes that, despite the pressures of modernity, the Toraja people continue to uphold ancestral customs and culture. These findings reinforce *Tominaa*'s importance as the custodian of oral traditions that secure the survival of Toraja identity and values.

3.2. The dynamics and challenges of *Tominaa*'s existence in the structure of death rituals in Toraja

The existence of the *Tominaa* in Toraja death rituals is dynamic and continually shaped by changes, adaptations, and challenges within the contemporary social context. Their role in the *Rambu Solo'* tradition is not static, but evolves in response to shifting sociocultural dynamics. Based on the reviewed literature, several key factors contribute to both the challenges faced by the *Tominaa* and the strategies required to sustain their cultural role.

Table 2. Dynamics and challenges of the *Tominaa* in Toraja death rituals

Factor	Description	Supporting references
Religious influence	The spread of Christianity and Islam has led to syncretism and partial rejection of ancestral rituals, creating dilemmas for the <i>Tominaa</i> in balancing tradition with new religious beliefs.	Oroh et al. (2023)
Modernization and education	Increased access to formal education and modernization reduces younger generations' interest in oral traditions, causing regeneration challenges.	Imanuella (2017); Oroh et al. (2023)
Commercialization of rituals	Tourism growth transforms sacred rituals into spectacles, reducing their spiritual depth and shifting the <i>Tominaa</i> 's role.	Patadungan et al. (2020)
Government and institutions	Local governments and traditional institutions attempt cultural revitalization, though policies face obstacles and shifts in community perception.	Rima (2019)

Source: Processed research data, 2025.

One of the most significant dynamics affecting the *Tominaa* is the influence of religion. The arrival of Christianity and Islam has changed how the Toraja community perceives ancestral rituals. Some elements are adapted to align with the teachings of the new religions, while others are rejected as inconsistent with spiritual doctrines. This creates a dilemma for the *Tominaa*, who must navigate between traditional obligations and the evolving beliefs of their community.

Another challenge comes from modernization and the accessibility of formal education. While education brings many benefits, it has also contributed to a decline in younger generations' interest in mastering traditional knowledge and ritual practices. This has resulted in a regeneration crisis, where successors with the same dedication and depth of knowledge are increasingly difficult to find. Imanuella (2017) emphasizes that memories of the past expressed through songs, narratives, and ritual practices must be preserved to ensure cultural continuity. Similarly, Oroh et al. (2023) note that funeral ceremonies serve not only to honor the deceased but also to safeguard ancestral legacies.

The commercialization of rituals presents yet another challenge. The development of Toraja as a cultural tourism destination has transformed sacred ceremonies into spectacles for visitors. While this draws attention to Toraja culture, it risks diminishing the spiritual significance of *Rambu Solo'* and shifting the *Tominaa's* role toward performance rather than ritual guidance. Patadungan et al. (2020) remind us that culture, as a set of principles and inherited practices, must be maintained authentically if it is to remain meaningful for the community.

The role of government and traditional institutions is crucial in sustaining the *Tominaa's* cultural presence. Various policies and programs aimed at revitalization demonstrate recognition of their importance. However, Rima (2019) found that both traditional leaders and local officials perceive shifts in how *Rambu Solo'* is conducted, reflecting broader challenges in implementing preservation policies effectively.

3.3. The impact of cultural sustainability as a result of the dynamics of *Tominaa's* existence

The future of cultural sustainability in Toraja death rituals, particularly *Rambu Solo'*, is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of the *Tominaa's* existence. As central figures and custodians of philosophical and spiritual values, the *Tominaa* are not only responsible for preserving ritual procedures but also for safeguarding the symbolic depth that shapes the identity of *Rambu Solo'*. The challenges they face, ranging from religious influences and modernization to commercialization and policy shifts, inevitably affect the sustainability of these rituals and the survival of the intangible heritage they embody.

Table 3. The impact of *Tominaa's* dynamics on the cultural sustainability of *Rambu Solo'*

Impact area	Description	Supporting references
Erosion of symbolic meaning	Weakening of spiritual depth if the <i>Tominaa's</i> role is marginalized, leading to rituals reduced to social formality	Rakhmayanti et al. (2024); Sapril (2016); Pane et al. (2024); Imanuella (2017)
Transformation of ritual form	Modernization and religious pressure may shorten or simplify rituals, reducing their uniqueness and identity	Dewi (2014); Putra (2024)
Challenges to cultural identity	Decline in <i>Tominaa</i> presence risks weakening one of the main pillars of Torajan identity and social cohesion	Rima (2019)
Adaptation and revitalization efforts	Initiatives by communities, academics, and government to document, transmit, and revitalize <i>Tominaa</i> traditions	Imanuella (2017)

Source: Processed research data, 2025.

The erosion of symbolic and substantive meaning becomes apparent when the role of the *Tominaa* is diminished. Literature highlights that without their presence, the *Rambu Solo'* ceremony risks losing its sacredness and transforming into a mere social formality. The prayers and chants (*patundan*) recited by the *Tominaa* are considered the essence that connects the deceased's soul to the cosmology of Toraja. Beyond the spiritual dimension, the rituals also function as a space for kinship, inheritance, and cooperation, strengthening social bonds among families and communities (Rakhmayanti et al., 2024; Sapril, 2016; Pane et al., 2024; Rima, 2019).

Modernization and religious transformation further accelerate changes in ritual practices. As Dewi (2014) notes, society and culture are inseparable, and without firm guidance from the *Tominaa*, funeral rituals risk being simplified and shortened, deviating from ancestral teachings. This shift, as argued by Putra (2024), can lead to the loss of distinct characteristics that once defined the identity of *Rambu Solo'*.

The weakening of the *Tominaa's* existence also poses a direct challenge to Toraja's cultural identity. For the Torajan people, *Rambu Solo'* is more than a funeral ceremony; it is the most visible manifestation of their cultural identity and a determinant of the deceased's spiritual status in the afterlife (Rima, 2019). If the role of the *Tominaa* continues to erode, it could diminish social cohesion and weaken the collective sense of ownership over their ancestral heritage.

Nevertheless, the literature also documents adaptation and revitalization efforts. Communities, academics, and local governments have initiated programs such as formal documentation, workshops, and public recognition of the *Tominaa's* importance. These efforts, however, face the persistent challenge of motivating younger generations to continue the legacy. As Imanuella (2017) observes, traditional ceremonies not only preserve collective memory but also equip the Torajan people with ancestral wisdom to face the future.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the existence of the *Tominaa* plays a pivotal role in sustaining the preservation of Toraja death traditions. As ritual experts, guardians, and custodians of traditional knowledge, the *Tominaa* are not merely ceremonial leaders but key figures in ensuring the continuity of ancestral values and the cultural identity of the Toraja people. Their presence demonstrates that death rituals, particularly *Rambu Solo'*, are not only religious or social events but also serve as manifestations of the Torajan worldview on life, death, and cosmology. The dynamics of modernization, religious transformation, and commercialization have indeed posed challenges to the sustainability of this tradition. Nevertheless, the adaptability and resilience of the *Tominaa* highlight the vitality of Toraja culture in negotiating between continuity and change. Preserving the role of the *Tominaa* is therefore crucial, not only for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Toraja but also for contributing to Indonesia's broader cultural wealth in the face of global transformations. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data through a literature review. It does not include direct fieldwork or ethnographic observation, which may provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of the *Tominaa* and Torajan communities. Future research should incorporate empirical approaches such as interviews, participant observation, and documentation of oral traditions to enrich the understanding of the *Tominaa's* role. In addition, collaboration between local communities, academics, and policymakers is

recommended to develop sustainable cultural preservation strategies, ensuring the transmission of traditional knowledge to younger generations.

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