

Identity, Heritage and Memorialization: The Toraja Tongkonan of Indonesia

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All nations draw on an array of symbols and images culled from specific, selectively--chosen pasts to present visions of national identity and national heritage to both their citizenry and to the broader world. In multi--ethnic or multi--religious nations the task of selecting symbols for national memorialization is particularly challenging, as national monuments, material symbols deemed sacred by the state, and public architecture must resonate with multiple groups if they are to be effective, emotionally charged vehicles for imagining the nation. This chapter addresses these themes via a brief, general discussion of the interplay between heritage objects and nation building, followed by a more detailed illustrative case study of the carved ancestral house (*tongkonan*) of the Toraja people of Indonesia.

Some nations adopt and elevate artefacts associated with the past glories of indigenous minority groups to advance their legitimization projects. For instance, the Mexican government strategically appropriated majestic images of the Aztec past (archaeological monuments and artefacts) to advance its nationalist legitimization project.¹ Likewise, the Australian government has used aboriginal art and totemic imagery on its postage stamps, currency and institutional seals: these aboriginal motifs have become entwined in recent constructions of Australian national identity, the objects have come to represent 'something essential outside and before the nation that lies also at its heart, central to its identity'.² Other multi--ethnic countries invent new (sometimes touristically inspired) icons that allude to mythic pasts, thereby circumventing allusions to internal ethnic or religious divisions. The city--state of Singapore embraced the Merlion (a mythical lion--headed fish) as a symbol of its 'founding legend': today Merlion statues, monuments, and shops hawking Merlion T-shirts and chocolates adorn the cityscape, inspiring not only poetry, but also debate and ridicule from Singapore's citizenry.³ Still other nations draw on assemblages of material symbols associated with different eras and groups residing within their borders. For instance, Papua New Guinea's Parliament House was designed to embody a collage of architectural and iconic motifs associated with the various regions and indigenous cultures that comprise the nation.⁴ While embraced by many as a memorial to the nation, the design of this symbolic structure was not free from domestic and international criticism.⁵

Via cases such as these, we gain glimpses into the ways in which heritage objects of particular groups can become entwined in the crafting of sensibilities about history, as well as about broader regional and national identities. But, as some studies have illustrated, these are far from seamless processes.⁶ What role might heritage objects play in building not only inter--group bridges but also boundaries in multi--ethnic states? How do these sensibilities concerning the relationships between objects and group identities shift over time? And what happens when these heritage objects are paraded on the global stage?

I turn now to examine the nuances of these sorts of regional and national identity--building projects by drawing on the example of the *tongkonan*, an elaborately--carved traditional Toraja house structure that has been both miniaturized and monumentalized in various Indonesian locales. By tracing the *tongkonan*'s former and present associations with varied identities (rank, ethnic, and regional), and by examining the ramifications of the *tongkonan*'s touristic and governmental appropriation, I highlight the ways in which material objects can serve not only to construct a 'unity and diversity' image of national identity, but can also simultaneously challenge (for some groups) that unity. In such cases, it pays to note that these ironies transpire precisely because of the multivocal quality of symbolic objects.⁷

The Sa'dan Toraja are a small, largely Christian minority group in the predominantly Muslim nation of Indonesia. In a nation of over 242 million people, approximately 500,000 Torajans reside in their homeland of upland Sulawesi and perhaps twice as many Torajans have migrated to other parts of Indonesia and to other countries. Surrounded by lowland Muslim groups such as the Buginese and Makassarese, the Toraja have a

strong sense of their unique ethnic identity and of their minority religious status: many are highly conscious of their potential vulnerability in a nation that has experienced periodic outbreaks of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts in recent years. Since the 1980s, the Toraja have attracted tens of thousands of domestic and international tourists. Tourists are drawn by their elaborate mortuary rituals and graves, and by their spectacularly carved ancestral houses with sweeping bamboo roofs. In fact, since the 1970s a combination of factors including tourism, Indonesian governmental actions, and UNESCO lobbying have transformed these carved ancestral houses from symbols of elite familial status into icons of Toraja ethnic identity for both insiders and outsiders (Figure 7.1).

Known as tongkonans, these Toraja houses--of-origin are both physical structures and memorials to one's ancestral heritage. Today, as in the past, Torajans use houses as reference points in tracing their ancestry. Waterson convincingly argued that Toraja can be productively understood as what Claude Levi-Strauss called a 'house society'.⁸ Levi-Strauss developed this term to describe societies in which kinship organization is tethered to named houses founded by ancestors, where houses own property, and serve as the locus of ritual activities: all are the case with the tongkonan. Each Toraja tongkonan has a unique name and history and 'belongs' to all the descendants of its founding ancestor.⁹ These 'house histories' tracing the deeds of familial ancestors are recounted at certain tongkonan rituals, further underscoring the tongkonan's memorializing dimension.

FIGURE 7.1 *A carved Toraja tongkonan. Photo by the author.*

Not all tongkonans are equal. Older tongkonans founded by offspring of celestial ancestors are more prestigious than more recently established ones. As the kin group associated with a tongkonan grows with each generation, it splinters into smaller groups that erect new satellite tongkonans. Thus, each Torajan can count membership in multiple greater and lesser tongkonans, provided they maintain their ritual obligations to these structures.¹⁰ Extended family members associated with a named, carved tongkonan periodically organize large pageantry--filled consecration rituals for their tongkonan, thereby reinforcing the glory and prestige of the house and those affiliated with it.

Toraja tongkonans not only memorialize extended familial identities and histories, but they also index rank identities. Tongkonans adorned with elaborately--chiselled motifs were traditionally associated with the nobility.¹¹ Commoners could only carve specific sections of their tongkonan facades and, in the pre--colonial era (before the abolishment of slavery), slaves were barred from using carved embellishments. Thus, the elaborately--carved tongkonan was a material symbol of noble identity.

For much of the twentieth century, Dutch missionaries and subsequently Indonesian government officials viewed the tongkonan with ambivalence and even antipathy. For these outsiders, the tongkonan was often a symbol of cultural 'backwardness' and in the 1960s the Indonesian government mounted a campaign to encourage Torajans to abandon their tongkonans in favour of modern housing. However, in the 1970s and 1980s the tongkonan began to accrue additional new meanings for both outsiders and insiders. During this period, a growing number of churches designed with tongkonan flourishes appeared in the Toraja landscape. Likewise, Protestant Torajans began calling the Toraja Church the 'Big Tongkonan', reflecting both the endurance of the tongkonan as a key identity motif and the desire to integrate Torajan and Christian identities. This shift was partially linked to changes in Toraja Church leadership during this period. By the early 1980s, non--noble Torajan pastors had assumed church leadership positions: many embraced ideals of equality before God and hoped to eradicate Toraja practices that reinforced rank hierarchies. In clothing the church in the carved imagery and rhetoric of the tongkonan, these non--noble pastors were effectively loosening the carved tongkonan from its close association with the elite.

Likewise, as growing numbers of non--elites who made their fortunes away from the homeland returned to the highlands, some families sought to display their new--found economic status via traditional material symbols. Some non--noble families erected carved tongkonans while others incorporated carved tongkonan--derived motifs into their modern homes. While doing my initial research in the 1980s, on more than one occasion I heard elites grumbling about non--nobles who erected tongkonans.¹¹

Another set of developments with ramifications for the tongkonan began in the 1970s, when the Indonesian government gained a newfound appreciation of the touristic value of traditional architecture. Indonesian tourism promotional materials spotlighted the carved Toraja tongkonan and what was once exclusively a marker of noble familial status was held up to outsiders as a general symbol of Toraja ethnic identity. Thus began the proliferation of tongkonan imagery: tongkonan T-shirts and postcards were available for purchase, tongkonan statues and tongkonan topiary appeared at major intersections, and Indonesian schoolbooks illustrated chapters on the Toraja with sketches of carved tongkonans. The marriage of carved tongkonans with Toraja ethnic identity was firmly established for the next generation of Torajans, who were reared on this touristic imagery. The

proliferation of the carved tongkonan as an icon of Toraja ethnicity prompted new identity dialogues on the provincial stage. By the mid-1980s carved tongkonan--inspired architectural motifs were being incorporated into some hotels, banks, and other edifices in the lowland provincial capital of Makassar, nine hours away from the Toraja highlands (in the homeland of Torajans' historic rivals, the Makassarese and Bugis) (Figure 7.2).

When it became time to redesign Makassar's airport in the mid-1980s, the new building featured lavishly carved tongkonan motifs. In addition, the redesign entailed the installation of a diminutive tongkonan adjacent to the airport's main landing strip, which thereby became the first local structure encountered by tourists arriving from Bali. For some Torajans, the outcropping of Toraja tongkonan motifs in the homeland of their age-old ethnic rivals was a much-welcomed sign of a shift in the historic ethnic hierarchy on the island. However, by 1995 the airport was remodelled once again, this time echoing the shape of an enormous Bugis platform house. In a sense, with these successive reconstructions, we see an architectural battle being waged for ethnic symbolic predominance in South Sulawesi. The most recent airport remodel in 2008 offers an apparent truce in the symbolic architectural warfare: its soaring glass and steel roofline is a vague modernist amalgam of Bugis and Toraja rooftops.

Likewise, the Indonesian government has embraced the tongkonan for its own nation--building aims. By the 1970s Suharto's New Order government was celebrating regional diversity as a cornerstone of Indonesian national identity. As many observed, the process of Indonesian nation--building leaned heavily on aestheticization of the potentially divisive visions of the indigenous societies within Indonesia's borders.¹³ In traditional dances, costumes and architectural differences, the state found 'exemplary token[s] of safe ethnic difference'.¹⁴ Thus, by the 1980s, the Indonesian government had issued carved tongkonan embellished postage stamps and currency. For some Torajans, this represented a new level of ethnic legitimacy and respect, but ironically the government's appropriation of their architectural symbols also serves to subsume them into the nation.

Finally, the era of the internet has added a new avenue for projecting and promoting sensibilities about tongkonan-based heritage to new generations of younger Torajans reared by migrant parents in far-flung locales around the world. Today, social media sites such as Facebook feature dozens of specific named tongkonan groups. Torajans in the homeland invite migrant kin reared in distant nuclear families to join these Facebook tongkonan groups: and use them to foster pride in house-based heritage. In short, Facebook tongkonan pages strategically inculcate not only new broader ideas about familial identity, but also cultivate a sense of duty amongst second and third generation migrants to contribute remissions for tongkonan-based rituals.¹⁵

As Benedict Anderson observed, monuments and memorials look both backwards and forwards in time. Normally these structures 'commemorate events or experiences in the past, but at the same time they are intended, in their all--weather durability, for posterity'.¹⁶ As we have seen, for Toraja elite families, the tongkonan looks backwards in time memorializing founding ancestors and earlier generations, thereby serving as an icon of familial heritage and identity. Yet, tongkonans carry the expectation that future generations of kin will renew and celebrate them and with each successive generation their pedigree will become still more glorious. Likewise, as we have seen, in tandem with historical developments, colonialism, tourism development, return migration and nation--building, the tongkonan has accrued new meanings and come to be associated with newer, broader identities. Embraced by some and rejected by others, these newer sensibilities about whose heritage the tongkonan signals are not uncontested. Thanks to their multivocality, heritage objects such as the tongkonan are likely to continue to be potent icons for multiple visions of identity.

FIGURE 7.2 Carved tongkonan- topped police post at Makassar Airport entrance road in 2012. Photo by the author.

Notes

- 1 D. Brading (1985), *The Origins of Mexican Nationalism*. Cambridge: Centre of Latin American Studies; D. Brading (2001), 'Monuments and nationalism in modern Mexico', *Nations and Nationalism* 7 (4), pp. 521–31; T. Tenorio (1996), *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 2 F. Myers (1995), 'Representing culture: the production of discourse(s) for aboriginal acrylic paintings', in G. Marcus and F. Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 84.
- 3 B. Yeoh and T. Chang (2003), ' "The rise of the Merlion": monument and myth in the making of the Singapore story', in R. Goh and B. Yeoh (eds), *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents and Interpretative Experiences*. Singapore and London: World Scientific Publishing Co., pp. 29–50; L. Kong and B. Yeoh (2003), *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of Nation*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

- 4 P. Rosi (1991), 'Papua New Guinea's new Parliament House: a contested national symbol', *The Contemporary Pacific* 3 (2), pp. 289–324.
- 5 Rosi, 'Papua New Guinea's new Parliament House'.
- 6 Cf. L. Smith (2006), *Uses of Heritage*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge; K. Adams (2006), *Art as Politics: Re-crafting Identities, Tourism, and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- 7 As Turner observed, multivocality is one of several properties of symbols that are connected to their dynamic quality and their ability to serve as 'triggers of social action and of personal action in the public arena . . . Their multivocality enables a wide range of groups and individuals to relate to the same signifier--vehicle in a variety of ways'. V. Turner (1975), 'Symbolic studies', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4, p. 155.
- 8 R. Waterson (1990), *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp. 47–8. In recent years there has been much discussion of the idea of the house as a specific form of social organization. This proposition has captured the attention of many Austronesianists, as it appears to have a great deal of explaining power for many dimensions of kinship practices and orientations. See C. Levi-Strauss (1983), *The Way of the Masks*. London: Cape; (1987), *Anthropology and Myth: Lectures 1951–1982*. Oxford: Blackwell; Waterson, *Living House*; J. Fox (1987), 'The house as a type of social organization on the island of Roti, Indonesia', in C. Macdonald and members of IECASE (eds), *De La Hutte au Palais: Societes, "A Maison", en Asie du Sud-Est Insulaire*. Paris: CNRS, pp. 215–24; J. Fox (ed.) (1993), *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living*. Canberra: Comparative Austronesian Project, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University; J. Carsten and S. Hugh-Jones (eds) (1995), *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and M. Erb (1999), *The Manggaraians: A Guide to Traditional Lifestyles*. Singapore: Times Editions, for further explorations of this concept.
- 9 A given tongkonan is only occupied by one nuclear family, with members of the broader group gathering at the tongkonan for extended family meetings and rituals.
- 10 Torajans' sense of broader familial identity is so strongly tethered to these houses that Torajans encountering one another for the first time when far from the homeland will frequently enquire as to each other's house affiliations.
- 11 For more details on the tongkonan's transformation, see K. Adams (2006), *Art as Politics: Re-crafting Identities, Tourism and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- 12 L. Tangdilintin (1983), *Tongkonan Dengan Arsitektur dan Ragam Hias Toraja*. Ujung Pandang: Yayasan Lepongan Bulan, p. 59.
- 13 E. Bruner (1979), 'Comments: modern? Indonesia? culture?', in G. Davis (ed.), *What is Modern Indonesian Culture?* Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies; G. Acciaoli (1985), 'Culture as art: from practice to spectacle in Indonesia', *Canberra Anthropology* 8 (1–2), pp. 148–72.
- 14 W. Keane (1995), 'The spoken house: text, act and object in Eastern Indonesia', *American Ethnologist* 22, p. 109.
- 15 K. Adams (2015), 'Families, Funerals and Facebook: Reimag(in)ing and Curating Toraja Kin in Translocal Times,' *TRaNS –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia*. 3(2), pp. 239–266.
- 16 B. Anderson (1990), 'Cartoons and monuments: the evolution of political communication under the New Order', in B. Anderson (ed.), *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 174.