

Section 3 – Settlement

Drawing a Parallel: The Toraja

The Toraja people live on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia. They are agriculturalists and produce a variety of crops, especially rice. While their culture has been badly damaged by the activities of Christian missionaries, in modified form their traditional beliefs are still followed by about thirty percent of the population, or around 100,000 individuals.

The core of the culture is called ‘Aluk To Dolo’. This is a complex tradition that involves ancestor worship, animism and other beliefs. The Toraja believe that in the beginning the Earth and Sky were married, and there was darkness; then they were separated and there was light.

From the marriage of Earth and Sky were born the deities.¹ This has close similarities to other ancient mythologies, particularly the Sumerian, suggesting that there may be a common origin.² The Torajan pantheon contains both female and male deities. The cycle of life is separated into a part of fertility, light and life, and a part of death, decay and darkness. These are identified with the upper and lower worlds respectively.

The University of Durham’s *Philtar* site provides this description:

‘(Humanity’s) role is to help maintain equilibrium between the upper world and the underworld by rituals. There are two divisions of rituals. The ‘Rambu Tuka’, the Rising Sun or Smoke Ascending rituals are associated with the north and east, with joy and life. This includes rituals for birth, marriage, health, the house, the community, and rice. The ‘Rambu Solo’, the Setting Sun or Smoke Descending rituals are associated with the south and west, with darkness, night, and death. Healing rituals partake of both divisions. The most important Rambu Tuka ritual is the Bua’ feast in which the buraka, a priestess or hermaphrodite priest, petitions the gods of heaven to look after the community. The Merok feast is for the benefit of a large family. Rambu Solo’ rituals include great death feasts at funerals conducted by the death priest. These funerals are now the main feature of Toraja religion.’³

¹ <http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/indon/toraj.html> (Retrieved 14/11/2014.)

² We will discuss Sumerian mythology in depth in the next Section.

³ <http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/indon/toraj.html> (Retrieved 14/11/2014.)

It is important to the Toraja that the 'great feasts' and other funerary rites are properly respected, and in Toraja terms, this means spending large amounts of wealth on them. Many animals will be sacrificed and eaten. Since the Toraja are relatively simple hill-farmers, the families of the deceased may have to save for years to pay for these ceremonies. This leads to a phenomenon that is of interest here.

After death but before the official death feast and funeral, the dead are carefully wrapped in layers of cloth and placed temporarily under the tongkonan or family home. This causes their bodies to mummify. The corpses may remain there for years while the family saves for the funeral. Every August the bodies are unwrapped by the families in a ceremony called 'Ma'Nene'.⁴ They are washed and their clothes are repaired and changed and their hair gently tended. The mummies are then walked through the lands – always in straight lines – by their relatives. They are placed in positions of honour at the community feast, as observers, before being re-buried.

Finally, after their funerary celebrations, the dead are placed in coffins, which are buried in one of a number of ways, either in caves carved out from cliffs or suspended on ropes attached to them. The coffins of children may be hung from trees.

The parallels with what we have seen in Natufian, Çatal Hoyuk and Ain Ghazal cultures are striking. The dead are temporarily laid to rest under the family home. They are later exhumed (perhaps many times) and interact with their families and friends. They walk through their lands as they once did, assisted by family and friends, and then they are re-buried. While we cannot precisely know what specific rituals were being carried out in the ancient cultures, the Toraja provide us with a fascinating glimpse of what they were possibly like.

The division of life into two equal halves, that of life and light, Rambu Tuku, and that of death and darkness, Rambu Solo, is fundamental. Although Rambu Tuku has been suppressed because of the influence of Christianity and Islam, the two were once equal, symbolising harmony and balance. When this equilibrium is achieved, then harmony and peace will prevail. When one part of this is suppressed, the culture becomes unbalanced. Typically, this imbalance will allow bad things to happen, like natural disasters, famine, disease or crop failure.

Rambu Tuku, the half that deals with light, life and birth, is under the control of women. This is made clear by the gender of the officiating clerics. They are either natal women or 'hermaphrodites'. Since genuine hermaphrodites, who possess in full both female and male

⁴ As a result of tourism, this ritual now also happens at other times of year.

sexual and reproductive organs, are vanishingly rare in humans, this probably refers to transgender or possibly intersex women.⁵

We saw how the Red Lady of Paviland may have been a transgender priestess, and the same phenomenon is seen here. Why are transgender women involved in rituals such as this? The answer may be that transgender people symbolise change, evolution and transformation: transition. Transgender women represent the death of the male and rebirth as a woman, through the rejection of manhood and the embrace of femininity.⁶ In a fundamental sense, they are never fully one or the other and so represent the state of transition itself.

Transition is a recurring constant in life yet it is deeply mysterious. It exists at the point of birth and also of death, when we are neither one nor the other. Transition is a fluid state of being that defies rigid rules and classifications, and for most of us it is fleeting. Transgender people, on the other hand, are permanently at this point, constantly in transition. Because they personify this potent yet mysterious phase, they are not vilified in Goddess cultures but instead are revered as shamans, priestesses, bringers of good luck and blessing, and as servants of the Goddess.⁷

Rambu Tuku, then, is a celebration of the Divine Feminine, the Goddess as bringer of light and life. The other half of Aluk To Dolo, Rambu Solo, is concerned with death, decay and darkness. In pre-agricultural cultures, this was also under the aegis of the Goddess and the rituals would have been presided over by women. The Goddess was in charge of everything that had to do with the home life of the people, from birth to death, and this was a cycle: death leads to birth just as birth leads to death, and women are the key to this. One early expression of the transferral of power is that male deities take control of the afterlife.⁸ Rambu Solo death ceremonies are presided over by a male death-priest.

From all of these clues, we can identify the developmental point at which the overall Torajan culture sits, or at least sat before it was damaged by Christian and Islamic interference. It is sedentary, indeed settled, and agricultural, yet it has not developed the obsession with building 'monumental architecture' that patriarchal historians believe defines a 'civilised' culture. Torajans know the concepts of property, personal possessions and money, but they are bilineal,

⁵ Intersex refers to a range of conditions which may result in indeterminate sexual organs or parts of both female and male organs, not the complete possession of both.

⁶ We should emphasise that this is not by choice. While the specific causes of transgender are still unknown, it is now accepted that it is not a mental condition but a form of intersex. The American Psychiatric Association, along with other similar bodies, no longer considers it a 'disorder'. (American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)* American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.)

⁷ Transgender is relatively common in many parts of the world such as Asia, where later religious traditions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have been overlaid, often by force, on pre-existing cultures that had transgender people at its heart. In Indonesia such pre-existing traditions are called adat and may be accepted; see for example our discussion of the Minang people.

⁸ See the relationship of Nephthys and Set in Egypt for comparison.

meaning that both material property and names are inherited through both maternal and paternal lines.⁹ The female and male elements of the culture are equal, and within the society women and men are equal.

Their understanding of marriage is more one of partnership than possession, and it occurs within the context of extended, already-related families. The society is extremely close-knit, and Torajan villages are each effectively one extended family.¹⁰

Given the artefacts and what we know of how the people of Çatal Hoyuk and Ain Ghazal lived, as well as their precursors, the Natufians, it is reasonable to suggest that their cultures were similar to the Toraja. But this begs a question: if models like the Torajan have existed since at least the time of Çatal Hoyuk, why are they not the norm today?

As we explore the cultures that followed Çatal Hoyuk, we will see how gradual changes occurred, changes that eventually caused seismic shifts in the balance of power within the society. We will unravel the tale of how men, instead of sharing authority and status equally with women, assumed dominance over them. This resulted in millennia of war, genocide, colonial invasions, imperialism and plunder. Whole populations were killed or enslaved and any non-conformity or dissent punished with brutal severity. Within this new phase, men took control of everything. Through violence and the threat of it, they seized all political and religious power and material wealth. They destroyed the Goddess and deliberately, overtly, denigrated and devalued women. This phase is called the patriarchy, and it is important that we understand it; we live under it today.

⁹ This power to name – both in the sense of the name given to children and the title they earn by their life's efforts, is significant. It is regarded in many traditional societies as a way to confer special attributes or ward off evil spirits.

¹⁰ Torajans have special rules to prevent the marriage of those who are too closely related and whose offspring might be at risk of congenital defects.