Edwin de Jong


Tana Toraja is best known to the outside world for the spectacular nature of its funeral ceremonies, which for wealthy aristocratic families are divided into two stages, involving the sacrifice of dozens or even hundreds of pigs and buffaloes. These rituals remain the most salient of Toraja social occasions, and have even become a tourist attraction. It is no surprise then that anthropologists have devoted considerable attention to them in ethnographies produced over the past few decades. Much of this work has focused on the ritual and symbolic, rather than economic, aspects of the system. Edwin de Jong’s research represents a novel contribution, since he approaches the ritual system from a different theoretical angle, that of development studies and economic anthropology. His work also pays specific attention to the Toraja diaspora; he makes the important point that ‘the contemporary Torajan social field is much larger than Tana Toraja’, encompassing networks that are scattered all over the world (p. 284). Migrants retain a strong sense of connection to their family houses of origin, the tongkonan, which are the locus of ritual celebrations and family prestige; they have often left the highlands with the express goal of earning money to be fed back into the ceremonial economy in order to help their family maintain or enhance its status at home. Those who have pursued prestigious careers in Jakarta or elsewhere also continue to wield considerable influence in local politics.

When de Jong started his fieldwork in 2001 he sought to address a seemingly simple research question: how were Torajans weathering the Indonesian financial crisis of 1997–98? He was surprised to discover that they seemed almost unaffected by it. Not only had they benefitted, at least temporarily, from improved prices for cash crops such as cloves, coffee, chocolate, and vanilla, but the ceremonial economy was clearly continuing to flourish. It was even undergoing inflation, with many origin-houses being renewed, and almost 2,000 funerals being carried out each year, causing a continuous escalation of livestock prices. De Jong commenced his analysis from the ‘livelihoods’ perspective that has been influential in development studies. But he soon realised the limitations of this approach, which tends to concentrate solely upon economic factors such as income, employment, basic needs, and consumption. As he puts it, ‘much more is at stake in Torajan lives [...] than economic rationality’ (p. 30), and no sort of rational calculation can account for why people would be prepared to spend most of their household budget, and even go into debt,
to fulfil ceremonial obligations, at the expense of other requirements such as food, health, and education. Determined to offer a more holistic analysis, the author then plunged into a social world more vast and complex than he had anticipated. By offering a thick description of historical, political, and cultural contexts, he has succeeded in weaving together a satisfyingly complex picture of present-day Toraja society.

A strength of the study is its multi-sitedness. The search for a ‘representative’ community in which to base his study made de Jong aware of the extent of variation between districts and villages within the Toraja highlands, in terms of degrees of inequality, patterns of land distribution, the range of economic activities pursued, and even the motivations for migration. He eventually chose to study two contrasting villages, one in the north and one in the south, while also including a consideration of the migrant networks in the provincial capital Makassar (which hosts the largest of the many expatriate Toraja communities scattered across Indonesia), in Jakarta, and in Sabah (eastern Malaysia). A long chapter is devoted to migrant networks and their well-organised associations for mutual support. Interesting case studies are produced as he follows individual migrants to their families in the highlands, or vice versa, tracing their motivations for leaving, the help received from relatives in the diaspora, and the maintenance of ties with the homeland. Other chapters examine the chequered history of the formation of ‘Tana Toraja’ as a political and administrative entity since the colonial period, and the still emergent formation of a ‘Toraja’ ethnic identity. This includes the changes brought about by processes of devolution and fragmentation since the end of the Soeharto era, one effect of which has been the splitting of Tana Toraja regency into two parts in 2008. Given the recency of this development, and the continuing tensions that exist between the impulse to divide even further, and the occasionally resurgent expansionist visions of a ‘Greater Toraja’, first mooted in the 1930s, it might not be warranted to conclude, as the author does, that ‘after’ the long process of power politics that has played out at local, regional and national levels, ‘Tana Toraja has settled into its present geographic identity’ (p. 288). That sounds rather too definitive for what remains an evolving scenario.

De Jong pays close attention in his analysis to the integration of the kinship and ritual systems, much of the data on kinship being drawn from previous ethnographies. Anthropology has shown that no economic analysis can be complete without a consideration of the emotions as motivating forces. Here, the discussion of siri’ (‘honour and shame’) is not as strong as it could be. While the author notes that this concept is found throughout South Sulawesi, it is more specifically a Bugis and Makassarese notion, and has a rather different, individualist content in the lowlands. The more distinctive Toraja concept of
longko’ receives little mention here, with its link to the maintenance of face within the kin group through willingness to share ritual expenditure. The need to uphold social distinction through repeated ritual performance is well dealt with, as are the changes in the subsistence economy since the beginning of the twentieth century. The cluster analysis of present-day ‘livelihood styles’ and ritual expenditure in the two study sites of Palipu’ and Kondo’ offers some fascinating insights. Given the social difficulties of trying to extricate oneself from the ritual system, a point of interest is the divergent ways in which different segments of these communities cope with its demands. In Palipu’, the poorest inhabitants (often the descendants of slaves) have opted out by converting to Pentecostalism, which conveniently prohibits animal sacrifice (though I have never heard that Pentecostalists are vegetarian, as asserted on p. 207). The analysis illuminates which groups within each community are ‘big’ or ‘small’ spenders in the ceremonial arena, and the extent to which they choose to channel remittance money into ritual expenditure, or resist doing so. The analysis thus offers a close-textured picture of how individuals and households make decisions and exert their agency, within the structural constraints of class and rank.

De Jong’s ethnography offers a fresh contribution to Toraja studies, as well as a useful critique of livelihood studies, giving us a richly contextualised, multisited and translocal perspective on economic decision-making in a culture where ritual plays such a vital role in social relations.

Roxana Waterson
National University of Singapore
socroxan@nus.edu.sg