

BOOK REVIEWS

Feasts of Honor: Ritual and Change in the Toraja Highlands. By Toby Alice Volkman. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985. 216 pp.

Feasts of Honor does not aim to be a comprehensive ethnography of the Toraja, but it gives us, nonetheless, a sense of having penetrated to the very heart (or as Toraja would say, the navel) of this way of life. The focus is on funerals and on the status system for which they are a vehicle, but Volkman starts outside and works into this centre, beginning with geography, history, and social structure. Funerals and the politics of meat distribution occupy the middle of the book. Then Volkman again circles outwards to place funerals and status competition within a current context of religious conversion, migration, and tourism. At the end of this journey to the centre and back out again, we have learned as much about change as about traditional Toraja society.

The term Toraja encompasses diverse groups of peoples who occupy the highlands of South Sulawesi. Although Europeans did not press into these highlands until the end of the nineteenth century, the Toraja were not isolated from external influences. They traded in coffee and slaves with lowland sea-faring kingdoms such as Goa, Makassar, and Luwu, but unlike these, resisted conversion to Islam. The Dutch annexed the Toraja highlands in 1905-06, eliminating slave-raiding and warfare, and bringing schools, missionaries, taxation, and a cash economy. In the process, the status hierarchy of Toraja society took on a new rigidity.

Toraja were traditionally ranked as nobles, commoners, and slaves, and while there were various categories of slaves, the essence of their status was dependency. Nobles owned large amounts of land and also amassed wealth in pigs and water buffaloes. Slaves worked for nobles in return for subsistence. Although these status distinctions were inherited and thus based on supposedly immutable qualities of "blood",

in fact there was room for some manoeuvring, for slaves could acquire land and freedom as gifts, and “big men” had to constantly validate and recreate their nobility through oratory, generosity, feasting, and house-building. Through competition and sometimes bad luck, a family’s property and power, in Toraja terms, their “umbrella-dom” (*kepayungan*) could shrink. If these statuses became somewhat fixed during Dutch rule, they became much more flexible after the revolution, when slavery was condemned as feudalistic, and new avenues of social mobility opened for everyone. Although slavery no longer exists in a legal sense, the hereditary ranking continues to operate socially, regulating marital choice and other kinds of interaction. Volkman, taken in as a “daughter” in an élite family, found her work constrained by this ranking, as descendents of slaves or other lower-status people could not easily talk to her.

The social unit to which status accrues is called *tongkonan*, a term that means “house.” A *tongkonan* is at once the distinctive Toraja dwelling with saddle-shaped roof and a painted “face” decorated with the buffalo horn trophies of past rituals, and also the social entity consisting of all those who identify with the house’s founding ancestor. This group thinks of itself as “one blood, one bone.” As the Toraja reckon descent bilaterally, a *tongkonan* is a cognatic descent group. A person may identify with more than one such “house”, but usually no more than four or five, since identity requires continuous participation and contribution. Certain house-related rituals enhance the status of the *tongkonan*, one of these is a year-long sequence during which the house is “pregnant”. Those who contribute labour, livestock, rice and money towards such rituals share likewise the prestige and blessings of the house.

The arena in which status is most sharply delineated, however, is the division of meat of animals slaughtered at funerals. The group that shares meat is called a *saroan*, a group that overlaps with the ancestral house. While the core of the group that shares meat is descended from a common *tongkonan*, the *saroan* includes also neighbours and “other people” who contribute to the group’s activities. In the past, the meat-sharing group organized co-operative labour in construction and agriculture. Today *saroan* build the shelters for funeral guests and carry out all the other preparations for rites of other

kinds. For large funerals, the preparations sometimes take months. Each *saroan* has at least one “big man” who represents the group to outsiders and apportions meat shares within it.

The meat distribution is the culmination of a series of rituals and events that occupy two weeks. On the day of the division, processions (here equivalent to *saroan*) enter the village in their finest dress, sometimes leading a buffalo as a gift, or carrying pigs suspended on poles. The children of the deceased also contribute buffalo which entitles them later to a share of the estate. Meat distribution depends on complex histories of debts as well as calculations of status. Exact records are kept of who brings what to any funeral, and reciprocity is closely monitored in terms of past contributions. But some funeral offerings also repay kindnesses and favours or mark a special bond with the deceased which is hardly amenable to calculation and record keeping. In general, the number of animals slaughtered and the size of the funeral index a family’s social network, its past record of generosity and exchange, and its prestige.

Meat distribution takes place in a highly charged atmosphere in which questions of *siri*, a term that compounds the senses of both honour and shame, are paramount. Here intangible honour and shame are carved into tangible forms – in the sizes and cuts of meat, and in the ranked order in which shares are distributed. Tempers flare, and “meat fights” break out spontaneously during this division, with people throwing their portions of meat and also buffalo excrement at others in protest and defence of their *siri*.

The old correspondence of rank, wealth, and land ownership has begun to dissolve. Education and job opportunities in regional urban centres draw young Toraja away from the highlands in increasing numbers, creating a shortage of labour for those who own land, and at the same time giving commoners and slaves access to new sources of wealth. Some of this new wealth comes back to the highlands when migrants return home to sponsor funerals and other rituals on a scale once limited to persons of the highest rank. Many old nobles see this new era as a time of chaos, and all agree that *inflasi* (inflation) has eroded the meaning of the status spectacles. The Toraja recently have become more self-conscious and reflective about their rituals, which are synonymous in their minds with culture, and Volkman observes

a “rethinking” of these ritual forms. On the one hand, some criticize the extravagance of spending thousands of dollars (the most expensive funeral going up to US\$225,000) to fête the dead and bolster family prestige. On the other hand, these events have become tourist attractions, luring between 10,000 and 25,000 visitors annually to the region and providing an important source of local income.

Volkman says a Toraja funeral is a “story about status”, and in describing funerals in their contexts past and present, she reveals herself to be a gifted story-teller. This is not one of those anthropological accounts of anonymous custom and bloodless social structure, but rather a densely peopled book in which personalities, life histories, and even Volkman herself appear deftly drawn. The book exemplifies how biography enhances ethnography, especially ethnographies of change. Volkman’s prose is always clear, and often elegant and witty. She has an almost perfect sense of the appropriate tone: poignant without drifting into sopiness, wry but never condescending.

This pleasurable read is a valuable contribution to Indonesian ethnography. It would be a useful text even for undergraduate courses were it not so expensive. From *Feasts of Honor* students would see how anthropologists work in the field, while learning, too, that anthropology is about change and contemporary challenges as much as arcane exotica.

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