Identity, Heritage and Memorialization: The Toraja Tongkonan of Indonesia

Kathleen M. Adams

Loyola University Chicago, kadams@luc.edu

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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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 legitimation projects. For instance, the Mexican government strategically appropriated majestic images of the Aztec past (archaeological monuments and artefacts) to advance its nationalist legitimation project. 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'. 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 'founder 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. 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. While embraced by many as a memorial to the nation, the design of this symbolic structure was not free from domestic and international criticism.

In 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. 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. Through tracing the tongkonan's past and present associations with varied identities (rank, ethnic and regional), and by examining the ramifications of the touristic and governmental appropriation of the tongkonan, 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 cases such as these, it pays to note that these ironies are enabled precisely because of the multivocal quality of symbolic objects.

The Sa'dan Toraja are a small minority group in the predominantly Muslim nation of Indonesia. In a nation of over 242 million people, approximately 750,000 Torajans reside in their homeland of upland Sulawesi. 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 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 both 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 house-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'. 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. These 'house histories' tracing the deeds of familial

![Figure 7.1 A carved Toraja tongkonan. Photo by the author.](image-url)
ancestors are recounted at certain tongkonan rituals, further underscoring
the tongkonan’s memorializing dimension.

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. 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.

Torajan 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.
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 ‘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 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.

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
promoted 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, it
was lavishly decorated with carved tongkonan motifs and a carved
tongkonan structure was implanted adjacent to the main landing strip,
visible to tourists arriving from Bali. The outscropping of Toraja tongkonan
motifs in the homeland of their age-old ethnic rivals was taken by some
Torajans as a 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 amalgam of Bugis and
Toraja rooftops.

Finally 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. In traditional dances, costumes and
architectural differences, the state found exemplar[y] token[s] of safe ethnic
difference. 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.

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. 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.

Notes


5 Rosi, 'Papua New Guinea's new Parliament House'.


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.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Exchange and Value: The Material Culture of a Chumash Basket

Dana Leibsohn

Baskets are fragile things. Their fibres degrade with use, their colours fade in bright light. Yet the basket in Figure 8.1 – created in the early 1820s by a Chumash woman living on a mission in California – is largely intact. This is a basket that has been treated with care. Today it resides in a museum of anthropology, testimony to the craftsmanship of the Chumash, indigenous people that have long inhabited western California.

The basket design includes alphabetic writing and images that would have been familiar to many living in Spanish America in the early nineteenth century. The preference for such texts and imagery suggests an object embedded in networks of cross-cultural circulation and linked to histories of colonization and its economics. Baskets are traditionally made to hold and carry other objects; they can be transported with ease. During the first hundred years of this basket’s existence, it travelled an extraordinary distance: more than 2,000 miles, from the mission to Mexico City and on to New York City, and then west into California again. Beyond these basic facts, though, how does a basket register patterns of exchange and speak to the disparate meanings of value?

We can start with the basket’s physical form. It measures 41 cm in diameter and 16 cm in height, which is neither very large nor very small by Chumash standards. The basket takes an open form, with sloped sides. The coiled structure is composed of rushes (juncus textiles), a material that was