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## The Politics of Indigeneity and Heritage: Indonesian Mortuary Materials and Museums

Kathleen M. Adams

*Loyola University Chicago*, [kadams@luc.edu](mailto:kadams@luc.edu)

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# The Politics of Indigeneity and Heritage

## Indonesian Mortuary Materials and Museums

*Kathleen M. Adams*

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article contributes to comparative museology by examining curation practices and politics in several “museum-like” heritage spaces and locally run museums. I argue that, in this era of heritage consciousness, these spaces serve as creative stages for advancing potentially empowering narratives of indigeneity and ethnic authority. Understanding practices in ancestral spaces as “heritage management” both enriches our conception of museums and fosters nuanced understandings of clashes unfolding in these spaces as they become entwined with tourism, heritage commodification, illicit antiquities markets, and UNESCO. Drawing on ethnographic research in Indonesia, I update my earlier work on Toraja (Sulawesi) museum-mindedness and family-run museums, and analyze the cultural politics underlying the founding of a new regional Toraja museum. I also examine the complex cultural, religious, and political challenges entailed in efforts to repatriate stolen effigies (*tau-tau*) and grave materials, suggesting that these materials be envisioned as “homeless heritage” rather than “orphan art.”

■ **KEYWORDS:** burial goods, heritage, identity politics, Indonesia, comparative museology, repatriation, tourism, homeless heritage, Toraja

In recent decades, museum studies scholarship has highlighted ways in which museums and museum-like heritage spaces are key arenas for articulating, negotiating, and amplifying identities, and for advancing particular (re-)visions of intergroup relations (Adams 2003b; Kaplan 1994; Karp and Lavine 1991; McLean 2008). As many have noted, museums and other heritage spaces are entwined with identity politics: they entail not only assertions of authority but can also embody struggles for power (Lowenthal 1996; Silva and Santos 2012; Smith 2006). Moreover, with postcolonial era power shifts, the growth of Indigenous movements, and the rise of a scholarly generation reared on “new museology” (Vergo 1989), we have witnessed increasing interest in avenues whereby museums and other exhibitionary complexes might be “decolonized” or engage in processes of restorative justice (Kreps 2019; Lonetree 2012; Macdonald et al. 2017; Peers et al. 2017; Phillips 2011; Simpson 2009; Tlostanova 2017). This article addresses these twin themes of identity assertion and the decolonization of exhibitionary complexes by drawing on ethnographic research with the Toraja community, an ethnic and religious minority in predominantly Muslim Indonesia (Figure 1). In the pages that follow, I examine how current-day socioeconomic and political conditions have spurred Toraja leaders to embrace particular tactics



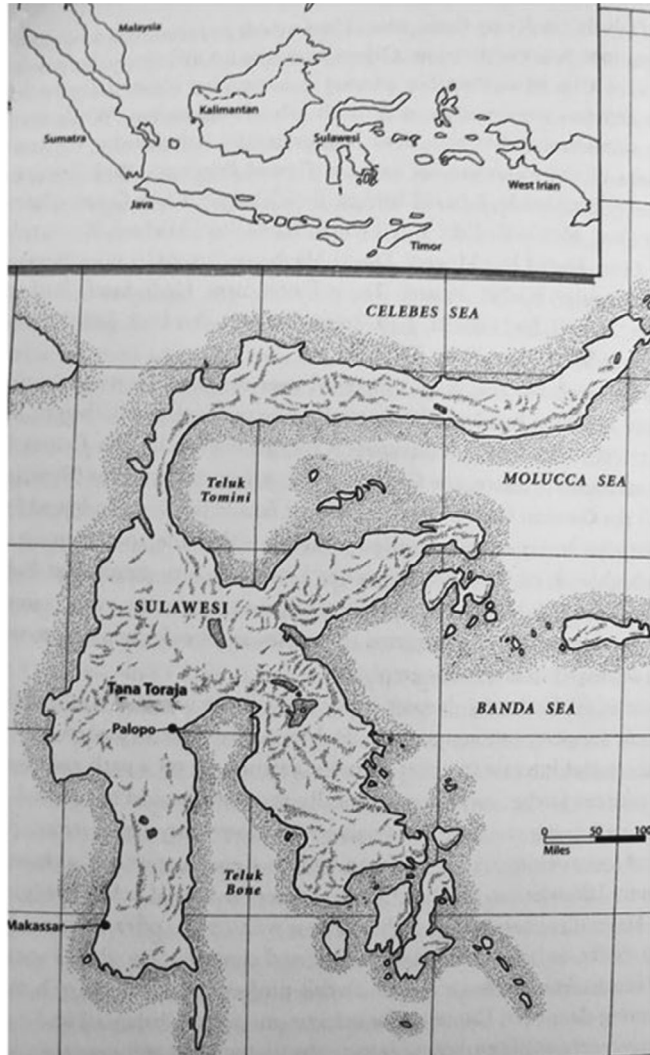


Figure 1. Map of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Drawing by Tom Willcockson.

for asserting new, more authoritative visions of identity via performative and representational practices in ancestral heritage spaces and locally run museums. The conditions at play here include the rise of domestic and international tourism in the Toraja homeland, the expanding tentacles of the international dark market for sacred “tribal” arts, and Indonesia’s nation-building investments in heritage complexes (especially regional museums).

I open with an ethnographic vignette embodying several of these key themes, then turn to elaborate on how the twin tropes of “indigeneity” and “ethics” inform Toraja strategizing about museums and the crafting of an authoritative ethnic identity. As this article suggests, museums and museum-like spaces have become creative stages for advancing potentially empowering narratives of indigeneity that are, in part, informed by broader globally circulating dialogues. However, these creative museum/“museumesque” spaces are far from monolithic: within (and beyond) Toraja society, they generate varying emotions and perspectives regarding either the objects they enshrine or the messages they deploy.

## Indigenous Rights and Misbehaving Tourists in a Museum-Like Space

In the spring of 2018, a story that transpired in an ancestral heritage space went viral on Indonesian social media. The story involved the arrest and subsequent traditional punishment of two young Indonesian tourists. Their crime? Posting photos on social media of themselves engaged in jocular “play” with sacred mortuary objects and bones while touring a cliffside burial ground in the Toraja highlands of Sulawesi, Indonesia. The “selfies”—one depicting a young woman guitar-strumming a human femur and one with her companion poised to kick a skull—quickly ricocheted across social media, garnering a growing online chorus of anger from rural, urban, and migrant Torajas. One irate commentator wrote: “They are so insolent/brazen, what kind of humans are they?” (*kurang ajar sekali mereka itu, apa jenis manusia itu*). Yet another observed: “Those tourists’ only goal is to be happy. But *ethics* [my emphasis] must also be maintained” (*wisata itu memang tujuannya untuk happy. Tapi etika juga harus dijaga*) (TV One News 2018). As Toraja outrage swept across social media, online newspapers, and television newscasts, it was soon evident that Torajas in the Sulawesi highlands perceived the tourists’ selfies as incendiary affronts to Toraja heritage and culture.

Within days, the pair was arrested off-island, transported to South Sulawesi’s capital for interrogation by provincial police, then delivered to the Toraja regional police nine hours north in the island’s mountainous interior. Ultimately, the local police escorted the two, now-notorious, tourists to a traditional leader in the hamlet where the affront had occurred. The elder (who also heads the village’s tourism foundation) declared that for the first time ever the community was asserting its “right” to dole out the traditional Indigenous punishment (*hukum adat*) to tourists. As the news spread, national Indonesian media teams descended on the village to document the tourists’ traditional trial and punishment, which entailed apologizing to the ancestral spirits at the cliffside graves and making offerings to both the ancestral spirits and affronted local families. These offerings consisted of betel nut leaves, tobacco, and lime powder, and a hefty pig (valued at r.p. 2.5 million (US\$165, just under Indonesia’s average monthly earnings in 2018) (Figure 2).

After the ritual reparations, the pair of tearful Indonesian tourists stated that they had learned two memorable lessons from their traditional punishment: “[First,] not to defy indigenous traditions (*adat*), [but rather] to respect historical heritage, especially where it concerns the graves of Toraja ancestors . . . and, second, to appreciate the[ir nation’s] history of relics and customs (*adat*)” (Kabar Toraja 2018). The village leader then declared the two tourists forgiven, and the rehabilitated pair posed for the media alongside village elders, local residents, and a police officer. As the two newly forgiven tourists explained to reporters, their actions had been “accidental”: they had only “wanted to show off to their friends that they’d made it to Toraja and were visiting the tourist village of Kete’ Kesu’, which had just recently been awarded the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism’s “Enchanted Indonesia Award” as the most popular traditional village in the nation.<sup>2</sup>

In the weeks following the tourists’ traditional ritual reparations, the social media pages of my rural, urban, and migrant Toraja friends and acquaintances buzzed with triumphant commentary and reposted video clips of the tourists’ punishments. While on the surface, this event appears to have little connection to museums and museum-like spaces, I submit that it cuts to the core of this special section’s focus on museums and culturalized identity politics.

First, implicit in this emotive event are distinctive Toraja ideas about gravesites as sacred, spiritually enlivened display zones, with their own behavioral codes for living visitors, as well as custodial requirements for the elders and ritual priests who serve as their *de facto* curators and conservators. One of this article’s aims is to contribute to what Christina Kreps has dubbed “comparative museology,” or the “cross-cultural study of museological forms and practices” (Kreps 2003: 141). Here, I suggest that understanding Toraja ritual and display practices transpiring in



Figure 2. Tourist performing ritual reparations at ancestral grave site.<sup>1</sup>

sacred ancestral spaces in terms of heritage management promises to enrich and expand our conception of museums. Moreover, such an approach produces more nuanced analyses of the cultural clashes that occur in these spaces as they become increasingly entwined with global institutions such as tourism and UNESCO.<sup>3</sup>

Along these lines, this article updates my earlier examination of Toraja public displays and memory-making, which analyzed a range of contexts wherein Toraja cultural identities and memories are invoked, enshrined, and publicly displayed (Adams 1997a). That article highlighted elite Torajas' growing consciousness of the authority-building power of museums and the mushrooming of aristocratic Toraja family-run museums in the 1980s and 1990s (what Kreps [2003] later termed the expansion of "museum-mindedness"). These privately initiated museums emerged in a period of Indonesian government focus on economic and cultural nation-building via the development of heritage complexes and tourism. Indonesia's president at the time (Suharto) expanded a project initiated by the country's first president: to foster national "unity in diversity" by promoting domestic tourism to an ever-growing array of provincial museums, national galleries, and cultural theme parks, all of which were designed to celebrate Indonesia's unified mosaic of cultural diversity (Adams 1997b, 1998; Hitchcock 1995; Pemberton 1994; Taylor 1995a). The state guidelines for government-run museum displays followed an established formula that tacitly underscored how the nation's tremendous ethnic diversity was "naturally" ordered by provincial and regional boundaries (Adams 2003a; Taylor 1995b). In short, state museums embodied visions of national identity imposed by Jakarta-based elites on the provinces (Taylor 1995b). In contrast, the private Toraja museums emerging in this period were



**Figure 3.** The Tante Ta'dung Museum in 1998 (a Toraja family-run museum). Photo is courtesy of the author.

informed by older Toraja frameworks for caring for collectively owned ritual paraphernalia and heirloom objects (some of which embodied supernatural powers and were sources of spiritual potency for the families that cared for them). These family-run Toraja museums served not only as storehouses and display spaces for these potent objects, but also as political instruments for reinserting their own families and ancestors into local and national history<sup>4</sup> (Figure 3). While influenced by the state's "museum-mania" and fueled by local elite desires to "cash in" on highland tourism, these private museums involved culturally distinctive approaches to caring for material heritage.

Since that time, much has changed in Indonesia. Thus, one aim of this article is to update the earlier project. In the pages that follow, I examine a recently established North-Toraja-Regency-run museum and Toraja debates concerning the museum's ability to properly accommodate local sensibilities regarding the realms of life and death, and to tend to ancestral bones and sacred mortuary materials recaptured from traffickers. As this article argues, the present operation and displays of this new government-funded, regency-run museum reflect the new post-Suharto political era of decentralization in Indonesia, wherein "regional autonomy" is promoted. A short segue to outline Indonesia's political shift to regional autonomy is warranted here. Following decades of an authoritarian political order centered on Java, a devastating financial crisis in Indonesia prompted global lending agencies (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) to push for Indonesia's decentralization. Hailed as the "world's largest decentralization project," Indonesia instituted regional autonomy laws in 1999 and launched its "Big Bang" decentralization of power and resources to its provinces and regencies in 2001 (EAPREMU 2003; Smith 2008). Envisioned as fostering democratization and governmental transparency, as well as rendering government services more accessible in remote areas, decentralization has transformed

Indonesia's political and economic terrain, ushering in new tensions (Erb et al. 2005; Nordholt 2004). Likewise, it has fostered the formal splintering of provinces and regencies into hundreds of new political districts, with new borders drawn to reflect (in theory) older, culturally based boundaries with the aim of minimizing ethnic and local elite rivalries. In Toraja, as elsewhere in Indonesia, these political changes have spurred traditional leaders and elites into frenzied political activity (De Jong 2009, 2016). As I will demonstrate in this article, it is in this broader political context that North Toraja Regency's new museum must be understood.

A second related theme highlighted here, and captured in the opening story of the tourists' traditional punishment for disrespecting a sacred Toraja ancestral space, concerns the emergence of new "rights-based discourses" in museum-like spaces (Coombe and Weiss 2015). That is, this article aims to spotlight how emergent social movements are parlayed, animated, performed, and objectified in these spaces. These rights-based discourses do not only derive from global Indigenous rights movements (although these are clearly important factors). As various scholars have observed, Indonesia's regional autonomy policies have revitalized Indigenous movements and fortified nostalgia for ancestral traditions and customs, which are referred to as *adat* (Davidson and Henley 2007). Classically, *adat* connotes not only ancestral practices, but is also associated with idealized visions of social order, consensus, and harmony (Erb 2007; Henley and Davidson 2007). Recently, however, *adat* has become linked to "activism, protest and violent conflict" (Henley and Davidson 2007: 1). In the Toraja highlands, traditional aristocratic leaders (who had been relegated to the fringes of the national political structure in President Suharto's era) perceived new possibilities for regaining authority as decentralization took root.<sup>5</sup> Some of these Toraja leaders pushed for the reinstatement of *adat* forms of governance in the Toraja highlands (De Jong 2009; Tyson 2010). In tandem with these developments, the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) was launched in 1999. AMAN (an acronym that translates as "safe") is a nongovernmental organization aimed at "promoting the rights and sovereignty" of Indonesian Indigenous peoples. In short, Indonesia's decentralization policy, and the birth of AMAN in the same year, created fertile ground and a rhetoric of indigeneity with which ethnic minorities could hope to promote their own agendas. Thus, my interest here is in examining how national political shifts and the rise of AMAN fuel new visions of the political potential of museums and museum-like spaces. As the Toraja case suggests, for Indonesia's minority group leaders (now allied as "Indigenous peoples") museums and museum-like spaces can be powerful zones for performative and visual assertions of authoritative identities.

Returning to the opening case, it is noteworthy that the aristocratic Toraja village elder invoked his community's cultural "right" to deploy traditional punishment (*hukum adat*) "for the first time ever" (Kabar Makassar 2018), despite hundreds of earlier episodes of tourist manhandling of grave relics and bones throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. This prompts the question of why this "right" was only being invoked in 2018 and not earlier. What has changed beyond the 1999 birth of the decentralization policy and AMAN? What other dynamics contribute to this new sense of local cultural empowerment? Here, I suggest that elite Torajas' decades of involvement with tourism and heritage officials (including UNESCO World Heritage site teams in the 2000s), as well as anthropologists and documentary filmmakers, have blossomed into what Rosemary Coombe and Lindsay Weiss have termed "heritagized" claims (2015: 43). In part, this article offers an ethnographically grounded micro-case that speaks to Coombe and Melissa Baird's call to "move beyond critiques [focusing] . . . primarily on [how] . . . heritage [including Indigenous museum-like spaces such as Toraja burial sites on the tourist trail] do or do not faithfully represent actual histories and culture as it is experienced, to embrace research agendas that examine the political and economic work that heritage is doing for diverse agents seeking multiple audiences" (2016: 350).

Keeping this in mind, let us now reconsider the opening case involving the village elder's assertion of the "right" to apply Indigenous punishment (*hukum adat*). His rights-based discourse targeted multiple audiences and embodied various political objectives. One audience was national: the predominantly metropolitan Indonesians of diverse ethnicities who in recent decades have come to see the Toraja highlands as their vacation playground: a tribal space where, for some visitors, normal rules of "civilized" comportment are suspended and Toraja graves become sites for playing out filmic *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001, Simon West) fantasies.<sup>6</sup> Another audience targeted by the village elder was local: nonelite Torajas and *nouveau riche* Toraja return migrants of lower social rank who reject the hereditary social stratification that long characterized Toraja society. For these Torajas, aristocratic burial sites featuring mortuary effigies and tombs are complicated cultural spaces. While sources of touristic celebrity and ethnic pride, they are also troubling visual reminders of that stratification. Hence, the elite Toraja elder's strategic deployment of the trope of traditional Indigenous (*adat*) rights served to reposition Torajas as a unified "we" pitted against the "they" of disrespectful neocolonialist tourist outsiders.

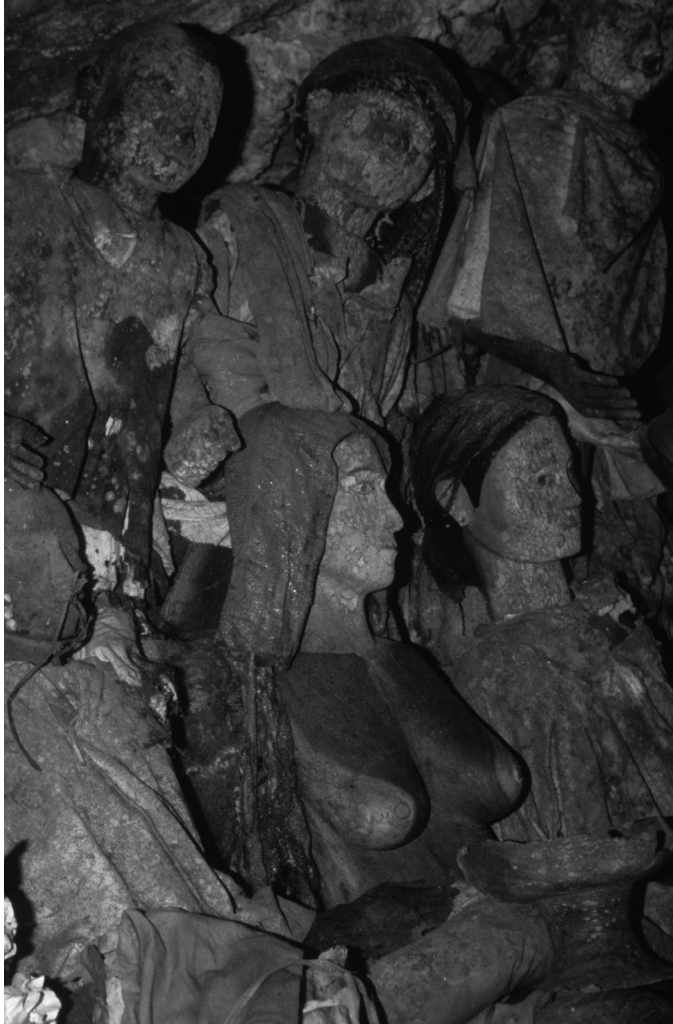
In recent years, a growing number of Toraja aristocrats have become champions of *adat*, embracing the idea of indigeneity. This is true not only of hereditary elites and elders in rural Toraja villages, but also holds true for some urban intellectual Torajas. In 2017, the top leadership role in the national AMAN was assumed by a wealthy Toraja aristocrat. As Karin Klenke observes, it is an ironic yet "creative and selective local engagement with a global discourse . . . [enabling] noble Torajas [to] . . . secure . . . [moral, political, and even economic] support for causes that also stabilized their hegemony within Toraja society" (2013: 164–165). In short, it seems that those Torajas embracing Indigenous rights discourses in order to broadcast injustices are rarely disempowered peasants and proletariats, but rather rural and urban Toraja elites grappling with challenges such as tourists' problematic treatment of their elite heritage objects in ancestral museum-like spaces.<sup>7</sup>

### Heritage Display Spaces and Tau-Tau Effigies of the Aristocratic Dead

I turn now to offer background on the objects and spaces that give rise to Toraja passion and prompt animated "Indigenous rights" discourse: Toraja effigies of the dead (Figure 4). To introduce them, I transport us back to a misty morning in 1985, when my fieldwork family and I were returning home from an overnight funeral. As we neared the family hamlet, a kinsman who had arrived home earlier stumbled toward us, choking out an agonized wail: "Our ancestors were abducted in the night! Fourteen are gone." The contagion of his distress was instant: family members gasped, some quietly sobbed, while others angrily raced to find their relatives: life-sized wooden portraits of their deceased elders. While the weathered bones and carved coffins at the mouths of the cliffside caves remained, many of the effigies just inside the caves had been ravaged: some were missing altogether, while others were decapitated, their sculpted bodies left behind as haunting reminders of what was lost.<sup>8</sup> The family scoured the ravaged burial caves in the hopes of finding clues that might lead them to the thieves. They found none. Later that day, the men hastily transported the remaining 13 ancestral effigies to the temporary-yet-ignoble security of a padlocked tourist latrine, where they would remain until the full family could gather to craft a better solution for safeguarding these sculptures.<sup>9</sup>

For Toraja adherents of the Way of the Ancestors (*Aluk to dolo*), ancestral statuary, called tau-tau ("little person"), house the spirits of the deceased. The tau-tau image renders the spirit visible—it is both a portrait of, and a receptacle for, the deceased ancestor's essence. Although today there are few remaining *aluk to dolo* Torajas, as most Torajas now practice Christianity,





**Figure 4.** Toraja tau-taus (effigies of the dead) in the Ke'te Kesu' burial area, circa 1984. Photo is courtesy of the author and taken with permission from community custodians.

many Christian Torajas periodically visit ancestral gravesites, bearing gifts and family news for their deceased kin.

Tau-taus also display social status, as only the elite were afforded the right to commission sculpted effigies for their deceased loved ones. Funerals involving tau-taus are costly affairs, necessitating a minimum of five to seven days of rites and the sacrifice of at least 24 water buffalo, a debt-inducing prospect for most Torajas. Moreover, as some Torajas explained, the tau-tau embodies the essence of what it means to be a good person, a “role-model,” as only those who were beloved can inspire surviving relatives to expend considerable resources and risk debt to stage the high-level funeral required for a tau-tau.

Today, affluent, high-ranking Christian Toraja families continue to commission non-consecrated tau-taus for deceased family members. They are used in Christian funerals and continue to be installed in burial cliffs and caves. These newer effigies are generally far more realistic than the older stylized *aluk to dolo* versions: their faces bear moles and wrinkles, and



**Figure 5.** Effigy of the deceased being installed in a family tomb in the Ke'te Kesu' burial area, 2012. Photo is courtesy of the author and reproduced with permission from the deceased's children.

some sport eyeglasses or tote Bibles. As Christian commissioners stress, these meticulously rendered details demonstrate the effigy's role as a "portrait" rather than a "pagan" soul receptacle.<sup>10</sup> These portrait-like effigies are generally not of interest to art traffickers and collectors, who prefer the stylized, weathered tau-taus.

In today's Christian funerals, as in the past, the effigy stands on a platform adjacent to the coffin, observing its own mortuary rites. At the funeral's conclusion, it is installed in open-air burial cliffs or modern cement tombs (Figure 5). There, it watches over the living and receives respectful offerings of betel nut, beer, cash, or candies. Periodically, in what were once small extended family rituals but have now blossomed into larger events, the effigies and bones are removed from the graves, cleaned, reclothed, blessed, and reinstalled in their scrubbed-clean, weeded spaces. In short, these effigies and their gravesites constitute museum-like spaces with localized curatorial practices. These lovingly executed practices signal prevalent Toraja sensibilities about these grave materials and sites: they are not merely touristic objects to be gazed



Figure 6. Ke'te' Kesu' burial area with padlocked effigy area visible in right-rear of photo. Photo is courtesy of the author and is used with permission.

upon, but ancestral embodiments requiring dutiful, ongoing human care. Just as art museums in Western history have long been associated with rituals pertaining to the care and nurturing of sacred heritage, so too is the case for these Toraja burial sites.<sup>11</sup>

Since that terrible homecoming so many years ago, Toraja touristic celebrity further accelerated the tau-tau's transformation into an internationally coveted art object. In the 1970s, thousands of these effigies stood adjacent to or above their bones and caskets, watching over highlander villagers. But today, though ancestral bones and disintegrating caskets remain adjacent to many now padlock-secured burial caves and graves, the majority of effigies have been spirited away by unscrupulous art dealers (Figure 6). Only a few hundred tau-taus remain in Toraja villages and cliffside burial sites, and most now stand just outside arm's reach, behind heavy bars. Torajas' relationship to the tau-tau has come full circle: once protected by these ancestors' spirits, they now find themselves in the reluctant role of tau-tau guardians.

### Dilemmas Posed by Homeless Heritage

In the years since that first enormous heist, Toraja police have captured dozens of tau-taus, burial wealth, and mummies. But locating the original "homes" of these human remains and stylized ancestral carvings has proven challenging. As stolen goods, they lack documented provenance and could have come from hundreds, if not thousands, of burial plots. This poses the quandary of what to do with these Toraja mortuary materials of unknown origins, which I term "homeless heritage." I prefer this designation over "orphaned art," which was used as the title of an Israel

Museum exhibit showcasing art looted during the Holocaust. Whereas the metaphor of “orphaned art” precludes the possibility of these materials ever finding anything more than foster spaces, “homeless heritage” underscores that these objects once had homes and still have the potential to be reunited with those homes.

Of course, restoration to their original homes may prove an elusive goal, as even if tau-taus’ or other stolen burial materials’ precise provenances are identified, there are additional local challenges entailed in reinstalling them in their original sites. In part, this is because these materials are considered the sacred legacy of large kin groups.<sup>12</sup> Thus, for tau-taus or other burial materials to be reinstated, the entire kin group must agree to stage an *aluk to dolo* rite to sanctify the return to the burial site. Since most Torajas are now Christian, there is always the possibility that some kin will object to dispensing family funds on what they deem to be a “pagan” ritual.

An alternative solution to the dilemma posed by Toraja homeless heritage has been proposed by some non-Toraja government officials: to return recuperated tau-taus and other burial materials of unknown provenance to the island’s provincial museum in Makassar, nine hours away from the Toraja homeland. Here, an analysis of culturalized politics becomes relevant. As a predominantly Muslim nation, in recent years Indonesia has witnessed a slow but steady shift from moderate Islam (which was more accepting of Indigenous spiritual practices) to more conservative Islamic orientations. Although the non-Muslim “pagan” traditions of Indigenous groups like the Toraja are recognized as tourism assets, some Torajas I interviewed expressed concern over the treatment their recuperated trafficked effigies might receive should they be housed in the provincial museum for safekeeping. As several Torajas explained, the provincial museum is located far from the Toraja homeland in Bugis/Makassarese lands, and the museum’s staff predominantly comprises Muslim Bugis and Makassarese. From the Toraja perspective, Muslim non-Torajas would be unlikely to offer repatriated effigies the loving treatment they had once enjoyed prior to their abduction from their home villages, due to Islam’s disapproval of these effigies as symbols of idolatry. Perhaps not surprisingly, one aristocratic Toraja even invoked the trope of indigeneity when dismissing the provincial museum as viable, declaring that their Indigenous *adat* was not respected by Indonesia’s Muslim majority. Moreover, this Toraja and several others I interviewed expressed added fear that effigies and burial materials repatriated to non-Toraja Indonesian museums would simply disappear once again into the dark networks of antiquities traffickers. Although this fear is most likely unfounded (no one could offer specific cases where this had happened in the past), the statements reflected general unease with non-Toraja settings as viable destinations for Toraja homeless heritage.

### **Poetics and Politics of a New Northern Toraja Museum**

This homeless heritage dilemma brings me to the politics (and poetics) of a new government-run museum that recently opened in North Toraja Regency. At first glance, this new museum could be envisioned as a simple manifestation of “museum-mindedness.” However, it embodies multiple layers of complexity and narratives aimed at multiple audiences. Named the “Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja,” the museum is housed in a government building designed to resemble an enormous Toraja ancestral house (Figures 7 and 8). The name celebrates a nationally recognized Toraja hero who took up arms to repel the first of the Dutch colonial missionaries to arrive in the Toraja highlands in the early nineteenth century. Now, in an ironic twist, the museum is ostensibly envisioned as an attraction for foreign and domestic tourists and as a repository for homeless heritage.



Figure 7. Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja side view (7) and entry lobby (8).  
Photo credits: Figure 7 by author, figure 8 by Desly Sarungallo.



Figure 8. Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja entry lobby, with staircase leading down to the smoke-descending realm (*rambu solo*) of death-related materials below. Upstairs, one finds Torajan exhibitions related to life-oriented activities or what is known as the smoke-ascending realm (*rambu tuka*). These materials generally center on harvest rites, food production, and ancestral house consecration rituals. Photo courtesy of the author and taken with the museum director's permission.

The new museum's name is telling in yet another way, as it underscores its identity as a "North Toraja" museum (and not simply a Toraja museum). Inspired by the Indonesian government's shift to regional autonomy, described earlier, North Toraja District split from the southern "Tana Toraja Regency" (of which it was once a part) in 2008. The split was ostensibly oriented toward making government services more accessible to Torajas in remote areas; however, it was also an outgrowth of long-standing rivalries between northern and southern elite families (Istania 2019). Soon after the split, newly installed North Toraja elite government officials began laying plans for monumental icons and public spaces that would signal their autonomy from the southern regency. It was in this context that plans for a new North Toraja Museum were hatched: in short, the museum was a product of a highly politicized process. It marked the institutionalization of a narrative of "northern Toraja identity" as set above and apart from "southern Toraja identity." Rooted more in newly crafted administrative boundaries than in everyday Toraja mindsets, the North Toraja Museum materializes a new imagined community. (At present, the southern capital of Tana Toraja does not have a government-run museum).

The core of the initial collection consisted of two mummies that were confiscated when grave robbers were arrested fleeing the southern Toraja border. Additional recaptured heritage—effigies of the dead of unknown origin—were added to this base. The design and organization of the museum's displays also reflect Toraja poetics concerning the realms of life and death (or what Torajas term "smoke-risking" and "smoke-descending" realms). In the Toraja ethos, these two realms must be separated. Thus, the lower floor of the museum is devoted to items associated with the death realm, mortuary objects and mummies (Figures 9 and 10). The entry lobby separates this sphere from the upper floor, which contains life-realm items: cooking baskets, eating bowls, decorative textiles for ancestral house renewal rituals, and so forth (Figures 11 and 12). In short, the museum embodies a uniquely Toraja perspective on the organization and management of heritage.



**Figure 9.** The basement floor of the Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja, the zone dedicated to the "smoke-descending" (or death) realm. Photo by author, taken with permission from the museum director.



**Figure 10.** Recuperated stolen effigies line the basement wall of the Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja. Photo is courtesy of the author and taken for publication with permission from Pong Tiku Museum officials.



**Figure 11.** The upper floor of the Pong Tiku Museum, which is devoted to the smoke-ascending realm. Depicted here are rice granaries and other life-oriented Toraja materials. Photo is courtesy of Desli Sarungallo.



Figure 12. Exhibit depicting eating utensils on the upper floor of the museum. Photo is courtesy of Ivan Sarungallo.

However, while accommodating Toraja sensibilities regarding life and death realms, in the eyes of some this was a problematic repatriation destination for tau-taus whose home graves could not be identified. As one young Toraja government worker who had previously been posted in the museum told me: “The effigies aren’t properly cared for here—a toe falls off and the custodian sweeps it away.” Moreover, as she added, days or even weeks may pass without visitors (as visitor records attested). Often, only the guard is present in the museum, upstairs on the main floor, and she felt sorry for (*kasihan*) these neglected effigies. In a similar vein, a Toraja effigy carver I interviewed lamented that putting repatriated tau-taus in the museum was akin to subjecting them to exile in a “lonely” place. His comments and those of several others signaled concern that despite the museum’s attempts to adhere to Toraja principles pertaining to the life and death realms, the impersonal, infrequently visited building in the heart of Rantepao’s little-trafficked municipal plaza did not offer these embodied ancestral objects the companionship they required. Unlike the burial sites adjacent to villages, where effigies enjoy periodic visits and ritual attention and watch over community members toiling in the fields and children trotting off to school, the museum’s tau-taus exist as lonely sentries in their windowless bottom-floor gallery. Moreover, as homeless heritage without known living descendants, these tau-tau have no one to fund traditional *aluk to dolo* rites essential to their care. While the Northern Toraja Regency government officials and tourism office supervisors I spoke with did not speak of the effigies’ loneliness, they were well aware of the rarity of visitors at the museum, and enthusiastically envisioned enhancing the museum’s visitor-drawing power by filling it up with repatriated Toraja homeless heritage.



## **Conclusion: Museums, Museum-Like Heritage Spaces, and Broader Politics**

In this discussion of Toraja mortuary objects, sacred heritage spaces, and museums, I have sought to expand our cross-cultural understanding of museum forms and practices, thereby contributing to the broader agenda of comparative museology (Kreps 2003). As a growing number of museum-oriented scholars are coming to recognize, decolonizing museums and museum studies is not only about shifting dynamics within the walls of museums in the West, it is also about expanding our understanding and appreciation of how other societies curate their sacred heritage spaces. Moreover, as I have suggested, knowledge of the rituals, conventions, and display practices in these non-Western heritage spaces as forms of museology is essential for gaining a more nuanced understanding of the cultural clashes that increasingly transpire in these spaces, as they become entwined with global forces such as tourism. It is only with such understanding that these conflicts can be effectively addressed and mitigated.

This article has also showcased a range of Toraja museums, from ancestral graves to family-run private museums, to a new government-run regency museum. Each of these represents cultural approaches to managing and caring for heritage. Each of these also represents avenues to authority and power, be it power (and protection) conferred by the proper treatment of guardian effigies of the dead in burial spaces, or aristocratic familial power enshrined in family-run museums, or regency-based authority asserted via the Pong Tiku Museum of North Toraja. In discussing these varied museums, I have sought to highlight how these spaces are infused with broader political dynamics. That is, these spaces do not exist in isolation. Rather, they—and the people who manage them—articulate with, borrow rhetoric from, and are even fueled by new national policies (including nation-building projects and decentralization) and broader social movements (such as AMAN).

Returning to the opening vignette concerning the two tourists who disrespected Toraja sacred heritage space, let us revisit the themes of Indigenous rights, resistance, and restorative justice invoked at the start of this article. As underscored, the village elder in this story drew on rights-based claims, invoking the trope of indigeneity to demand restorative justice in the form of “traditional punishment” (in the form of offerings made to the disrespected ancestral spirits in this museum-like burial space). One cannot but admire the brilliance of this elder’s intervention, which enabled him to regain a (momentary) measure of authority for his community and his long-marginalized ethnic group. Of course, this village elder was not quite the disempowered hinterland peasant we tend to imagine as an “Indigenous leader.” Rather, he was a politically savvy local aristocrat with decades of heritage broker experience, residencies as an “Indigenous artisan” at overseas museums, and close connections to ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists (myself included). His brilliant actions were not only calculated to garner much-deserved sympathy for Torajas’ diminishing abilities to protect their museum-like heritage spaces from disrespectful mass tourists, but were also calibrated to reaffirm his own position of aristocratic authority within his community in an era where older patterns of authority are often under assault. In unpacking celebratory imagery of Indigenous museums and museum-like spaces as blossoming sites of resistance for Indigenous minorities, it seems apt to invoke Lila Abu-Lughud’s (1990) classic caution against the seductive “romance of resistance.” As the Toraja cases suggest, we need richer, more grounded studies of not only the poetics but the politics at play in these museums and museum-like spaces.

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■ **KATHLEEN M. ADAMS** is Professor of Anthropology at Loyola University Chicago and Adjunct Curator at the Field Museum of Natural History. Her research addresses heritage, museums, tourism, arts, and identity politics in Southeast Asia (especially Indonesia). Her books include the award-winning *Art as Politics: Recrafting Identities, Tourism and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia* (2006); *Indonesia: History, Culture, Heritage* (2019); *The Ethnography of Tourism: Edward Bruner and Beyond* (2019, with Naomi M. Leite and Quetzil E. Casteñeda); and *Everyday Life in Southeast Asia* (2012, with Kathleen A. Gillogly). Adams's work addresses topics such as public interest anthropology in heritage sites, Indonesian memorials and museums, tourism and cultural identity in Indonesia, and ethnic/heritage arts. Email: kadams@luc.edu

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### NOTES

1. Screenshot from <https://sulsel.inews.id/berita/82202/injak-tengkorak-2-wisatawan-jalani-hukum-adat-di-toraj>.
2. As the village elder later reported to Kompas News: "Since [it turned out] their intentions were not to destroy, abduct, or pollute Toraja culture, we gave them a light punishment, just one pig" (Kompas News 2018).
3. The village of Ke'te Kesu' (where the traditional punishment of the two tourists transpired) is one of several traditional Toraja settlements listed for UNESCO World Heritage site candidacy as a "mixed site"/ living cultural landscape (Adams 2003, 2010; Klenke 2013).
4. The objects could be borrowed for display at relatives' funerals and house consecration rituals, but otherwise normally resided behind these museums' padlocked doors, which were opened periodically for paying tourists and official visitors.
5. Gerry van Klinken (2007) has referred to similar processes of Indonesian aristocrats pushing to (re-) claim traditional authority elsewhere in Indonesia as the "return of the sultans."
6. The Toraja highlands have been promoted for domestic and international tourists since the early 1980s, but in recent years the number of Indonesian visitors has soared to over one hundred thousand annually.
7. In a similar vein, discussing efforts to revive sultanhips elsewhere in post-New Order Indonesia (Toraja was never a sultanate), Van Klinken observes that drivers behind these efforts are often "not all sultans": instead, the majority are "informal cultural figures (*tokoh adat*) . . . *pangerang ratu* (slightly

- less august rulers than the sultan), *pemangku adat* (literally, bearer of custom), *raja* (non-Islamic king) or any of various other titles” (2007: 150). A number are “well-heeled urban-intellectuals,” some of whom become “weekend” sultans (2007: 150).
8. Several people I interviewed underscored that these partial effigies were especially distressing. Years after this event, in 2017, when I had returned bearing photographs of effigies housed in American museums and private collections in order to learn about Toraja desires for the fate of these objects, a young Ke'te' Kesu' resident tracked me down to view the photos. As he told me, one of his ancestors' tau-tau had been stolen. It was highly unique, depicting him atop his beloved horse, and the young man feared that the ancestor and horse were separated, since thieves would make more money selling them as two separate pieces. As he confided, this worried him terribly since the ancestor would be unhappy if separated from the horse.
  9. Ultimately, the remaining effigies were reinstalled at the mouth of the cave where they had long resided, and a locked grate was installed to protect them from thieves.
  10. Whereas the Catholic Church was generally willing to accept effigies at Catholic funerals, the Toraja (Protestant) Church was slower to allow adherents to display them at funerals. For more on debates pertaining to the use of tau taus by Christian Torajas, see Adams (1993, 2006).
  11. In keeping with the theme of comparative museology, refer to Carol Duncan's (1994) observations about the care and display of Western material culture in museums as a secular ritual of modern states.
  12. As Roxanna Waterson (1990) observed, Toraja kinship organization best fits with Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea of a “house society,” wherein houses established generations ago are key to reckoning kinship. Toraja extended family kin groups potentially consist of all individuals (male and female and their mates) who can trace ancestry to founders of named houses. Although in theory Torajas may belong to many named house families, they are selective about which ancestral house memberships they nurture due to the costs entailed in maintaining ties to one's houses. Houses are not only ritual sites, but they own property such as ancestral heirlooms. Thus, decisions pertaining to effigies and other burial treasures are generally not the purview of specific individual descendants. Instead, such decisions are determined via large meetings of house-family member representatives in which consensus is sought.

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