

Burial Traditions of Toraja: Reflections of Megalithic Belief and Social Stratification

Rosmawati¹

¹Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

*Correspondence: rsmawati@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the symbolic meanings of Toraja mortuary practices and their relationship to belief systems and social hierarchy. Drawing on ethnographic methods—participant observation of funeral ceremonies, semi-structured interviews, oral-tradition documentation, and archival research—the research examines burial forms at the Sillanan site in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi. The findings reveal that Toraja burials, including Liang Sillik, Liang Erong, Liang Tokek, Liang Pak, and Patane, along with coffin types (erong) shaped as rectangles, buffalo, or boats, reflect a megalithic belief system that emphasizes the powerful influence of ancestral spirits on human welfare. These practices also encode social stratification: lower social groups were interred in simpler caves, while high-ranking nobles used elaborately carved boat- or buffalo-shaped coffins placed in elevated locations. The mortuary system illustrates a worldview in which life and death form a continuous cycle, where the spirit world (puya) mirrors earthly society. For archaeology, the ethnographic data provide an important analog for interpreting material remains, offering insights into the ideological and social frameworks that inform the creation, use, and deposition of artifacts. This research highlights how Toraja burial technology and rituals embody enduring connections between the living and the dead, as well as between belief, social order, and material culture.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published September 18th 2025



KEYWORDS

Toraja Burial, Megalithic Belief, Ancestral Spirits, Social Stratification, Ethnographic Archaeology.

ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2025 Universitas Hasanuddin
Under the license CC BY-SA
4.0



1. Introduction

Archaeological research on burial systems in Indonesia—covering technological, social, and ideological aspects—still faces many obstacles, primarily due to limited data and methodological tools. The scarcity of archaeological data stems from data transformation factors, while the lack of methodological instruments arises from the absence of specific methods suitable for addressing issues related to Indonesian burial systems. Therefore, drawing on the potential of ethnographic data scattered across various regions of Indonesia—where traditional burial practices are still observed among different ethnic communities—offers an alternative source of analogy for solving diverse archaeological problems.

Ethnographic data can be obtained from a variety of sources, such as ethnographic writings in libraries that describe the lives of different ethnic groups. However, most of these writings cannot be fully utilized by archaeologists because they provide little information about material culture (technology). Consequently, archaeologists must conduct direct field observations, particularly among communities that continue traditional practices or at least retain knowledge that can help resolve archaeological questions. In addition to written accounts and living traditions, ethnographic data can also be derived from oral traditions that still thrive in society (Renfrew & Bahn, 1991, p. 305; Duli, 2001; Rahman, 2019). The use of ethnographic data as an analogical source in archaeology (ethnoarchaeology) not only aids interpretive models during explanatory research stages but can also be applied in observational and descriptive phases to acquire, identify, and process archaeological data (Duli, 1996; Mundarjito, 1981; Sahib et al., 2019; Dalyan et al., 2024).

In fact, ethnoarchaeology has been used since the early development of archaeology and became a recognized approach in the 1960s with the emergence of the New Archaeology or processual archaeology movement in the United States. However, since the 1980s, marked by the rise of post-processual archaeology, the relevance of ethnoarchaeology has been questioned. Post-processual archaeologists argue that ethnoarchaeology should serve only to support anthropology in tracing a society's cultural history, not as a source of theory or principles for archaeology. This view is based on the premise that culture is inherently unique, reflective, and historical (Hodder, 1991; Rahman et al., 2019). Yet many archaeologists consider this perspective overly skeptical, maintaining that ethnoarchaeology remains a valid

alternative approach in archaeology (Tanudirjo, 1995; Yuwono, 1996; Duli, 2002). This stance is grounded in the recognition that cultural transformations—whether technological, social, or ideological—are inevitable, particularly within traditional cultures.

Within archaeology, the most challenging problems to resolve concern the social and ideological systems of a culture. One alternative approach to address these issues is ethnoarchaeology. To obtain ethnographic data that closely reflects burial systems, particularly within megalithic cultures, it appears that the traditional cultures still practiced in Indonesia, many of which are based on megalithic concepts, offer valuable insights. An example is the traditional culture still practiced in *Tana Toraja*. According to Kaudern's ethnographic account of the Toraja people are an indigenous ethnic group whose ancestral territory once spanned the central interior of Sulawesi. Early ethnographic records, such as Kaudern's (1938) pioneering study, note that Toraja settlements historically stretched across what are now the provinces of Central Sulawesi and the northern part of South Sulawesi. Over time, political and administrative changes, migration, and the consolidation of communities led to the present-day identification of the Toraja primarily with Tana Toraja Regency in South Sulawesi Province. Despite this geographic redefinition, the Toraja maintain a strong sense of identity tied to their highland homeland, with its dramatic mountainous landscapes and terraced rice fields, which continue to shape both their livelihoods and their ceremonial life.

Central to Toraja culture is a traditional belief system known as *Aluk To Dolo* or *Alukta*, which places the veneration of ancestral spirits at the heart of spiritual and social practices. This indigenous religion teaches that the spirits of ancestors influence the prosperity, health, and harmony of the living, requiring continual rituals and offerings to maintain balance between the earthly and spiritual realms. Even though the majority of Toraja people today identify as Christian or, to a lesser extent, Muslim, many customary rites—especially elaborate funeral ceremonies—remain deeply rooted in these ancestral beliefs. These practices not only honor the dead but also reaffirm social hierarchies, strengthen kinship ties, and preserve a cosmological worldview in which the living and the dead are intricately interconnected.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach using ethnoarchaeology as the primary framework. David & Kramer (2001) stated that ethnoarchaeology was selected to explore traditional burial practices in Indonesia as analogs for understanding ancient megalithic burial systems. The research was descriptive–interpretive, aiming to gather rich cultural data and connect ethnographic observations with archaeological interpretation. Fieldwork was conducted in communities of Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, where traditional burial customs remain active and are grounded in ancestral veneration. These sites were chosen because their practices reflect key elements of megalithic culture and provide relevant comparative data for archaeological contexts.

2.2 Data Collection

Multiple techniques were employed to ensure data triangulation. Participant observation was conducted during funeral ceremonies and related rituals to capture the practices and symbolic meanings of the events in their natural context. Semi-structured interviews were held with key informants to explore the technological, social, and ideological aspects of burial practices in greater depth. Oral traditions, including myths and ancestral narratives, were carefully documented to provide insight into the cultural and spiritual beliefs surrounding these practices. In addition, archival research was carried out by examining ethnographic texts and historical records relevant to the Toraja and other megalithic cultures, offering supplementary perspectives and historical continuity to the field data.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures. First, all field notes and interview recordings were transcribed and thoroughly reviewed to ensure familiarity with the data. Next, initial codes were generated to capture key elements related to burial technology, social structures, and ideological beliefs. These codes were then organized into broader themes that highlighted connections between present-day practices and prehistoric burial systems. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to archaeological theory and comparative ethnographic studies to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the findings.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Traditional Toraja Belief System

Although most Toraja people today practice Christianity or Islam, remnants of their earlier faith remain alive, known as *Aluk Todolo* or *Alukta*. At its core, *Alukta* centers on the veneration of ancestral spirits and the belief in a continuous relationship between the living and the dead. The spirits of the deceased are thought to strongly influence the prosperity and well-being of the living, while the fate of the spirits in the afterlife (*puyah*) depends on the proper observance of customary rituals by surviving relatives. From this belief system emerge various social norms, taboos, and rituals that shape daily life.

Alukta teaches that humans must worship three sources of power. The first is Puang Matua, the supreme creator of the world and all within it, who can bestow safety, happiness, and strength based on human conduct. Neglecting worship invites Puang Matua's curse, while devotion brings blessings. The second is the *Deata-deata*, deities appointed by Puang Matua to safeguard nature and all creation. These deities are divided into three groups: rulers of the sky, rulers of the earth and its contents, and rulers of the underworld governing soil, water, and the sea. The third is *Tomembali Puang*, the ancestral spirits tasked with observing human actions and ensuring the well-being of their descendants.

This tripartite division shows influences from Hinduism and monotheistic religions (Tangdilintin, 1980). Field observations and interviews reveal that in practice, worship often focuses on ancestral spirits without clearly distinguishing among the three powers. A deeper look at *Toraja* mythology suggests that creator and creation are inseparable; the deity is also the ultimate ancestor. The *Tomanurun* myth illustrates this blurred boundary, a hallmark of megalithic belief systems. The three powers may represent a hierarchy of ancestors, with levels attained through perfect ritual performance and social status during life. Rituals for each of these powers differ in timing, place, and form.

Alukta rituals are divided into two main groups. *Rambu Tuka* ceremonies concern worldly safety and prosperity, including birth rituals, rice-planting ceremonies, harvest festivals, and weddings. *Rambu Solok* ceremonies focus on death and mourning, such as *rapasan* and *maknenek* rituals. Life and death, in *Alukta*, form a seamless continuum; death is viewed as a transformation from the mortal realm to the *puyah* (spirit world), where existence mirrors earthly life. To ensure a safe journey to *puyah* and become either *Tomembali Puang* or *Deata*, specific burial provisions and sacrificial rites must be performed by surviving kin. The type of grave goods and rituals closely reflects the deceased's social status in life.

3.2 Toraja Burial Practices at the Sillanan Site

Administratively, the *Sillanan* burial sites are located in Dusun Kampung Tua Sillanan, *Sillanan Village, Mengkendek* Subdistrict, Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province. Kampung Tua Sillanan lies west of the main Makassar–Makale highway, about 16 kilometers from Makale and 300 kilometers from Makassar. The site occupies a hilly area accessible on foot via a six-kilometer trail from *Mebali* to *Sillanan*.

Geologically, the *Sillanan* sites consist of limestone formations with a topographic slope of 35°–45° extending east to west. The village itself sits at an elevation of approximately 1,250 meters above sea level, nestled beneath the limestone *Suriak* Mountains, which rise between 1,300 and 1,800 meters with slopes ranging from 60°–90°. To the south of the site flows a small river and additional limestone hills, to the west stands the *Suriak* mountain range, to the north lie forested areas and community plantations, and to the east are farmland and village trails.

Based on field observations, the burial types found around the *Sillanan* site can be described as follows:

a. *Karopik*

Karopik is a square stone structure similar to an ancient grave platform (*jirat*). It is composed of irregularly sized limestone blocks arranged in a north–south orientation. At the center grows a banyan tree, symbolizing the source of life. The average size of each *karopik* is about 2 × 3 meters.

b. Liang Sillik

Liang Sillik (natural cave burial) refers to the practice of placing a corpse inside natural caves located at the foot of hills or limestone mountains. After the body is placed in the cave, the entrance is sealed with a pile of stones. Generally, no coffin is used; the body is simply wrapped and placed in the cave along with grave goods. Almost all natural caves at the base of the *Suriak* hills once served as Liang Sillik burials, with 11 still identifiable. Cave entrances measure 4–7 meters wide and 0.75–1.2 meters high. Many have deteriorated, leaving scattered human bones and skulls. This burial method is no longer practiced, and locals no longer know who was buried there.

c. *Liang Erong*

Liang Erong involves placing a wooden coffin (*erong*) inside a cave or rock shelter without sealing the entrance. These coffins rest on stone or wooden supports within the cave, usually at a higher elevation than *Liang Sillik*. The deceased is placed inside the *erong* with valuable possessions, while everyday items are arranged around it. *Erong* positions vary from elevated spots to lower cave floors. Many *erong* coffins have decayed; at *Sillanan*, only four remain, all fragile. One is rectangular, two are buffalo-shaped, and one resembles a boat. The buffalo and boat types are carved from hollowed tree trunks, while the rectangular type is built from wooden planks. Surfaces are decorated with carved motifs.

d. *Liang Tokek*

Liang Tokek uses a boat-shaped *erong* suspended from a cave wall or ceiling. At *Sillanan*, only one such example remains intact, reportedly renovated by descendants. In the past, many *Liang Tokek* existed, but most collapsed due to natural decay. Blackwood support beams can still be seen on cave walls and ceilings, 10–20 meters above the floor.

e. *Liang Pak*

Liang Pak is a rock-cut tomb carved into a cliff face. The interior chamber size varies, while the small entrance, about 1 × 1 meter, is closed with wood. The deceased may be placed in a coffin or simply wrapped in cloth, with grave goods stored inside or outside the chamber. Eight *Liang Pak* tombs have been identified at the *Sillanan* site.

f. *Patane*

Patane refers to a stone-cut tomb built beneath a structure resembling a Toraja ancestral house (*tongkonan*), or where the body is placed directly inside the structure. The body may be in a coffin or simply wrapped in cloth, with offerings placed inside or nearby. Four *Patane* tombs exist at the foot of the *Suriak* limestone hills, on the eastern side of the *Sillanan* site.

Local residents report that *Liang Sillik*, *Liang Erong*, and *Liang Tokek* have not been used since the Dutch colonial era, due to concerns about sanitation. Today, only *Liang Pak* and *Patane* remain in use in Tana Toraja, including at *Sillanan*.

g. *Erong*

A distinctive feature of Toraja burial customs is the coffin known as *erong*, made from teak or ironwood and carved into various shapes. The *erong* consists of two parts: the hollowed body and the lid. The cavity is usually smaller than a typical coffin because *erong* often serves as a secondary burial container, holding only collected bones. Average dimensions are 200 cm long, 100 cm wide, and 120 cm high, with an inner cavity of about 160 × 65 × 85 cm. Lids may be sculpted into buffalo heads (*erong kerbau*), boat shapes (*erong perahu*), or simple rectangles. Exterior surfaces are decorated with geometric patterns—triangles, parallel dots, circles—and buffalo motifs. Most *erong* at *Sillanan* are weathered and damaged, leaving bones scattered across cave floors and entrances.

3.3 *Karopik* as the First Burial Place of Toraja Nobility

The term *karopik*, used by locals, refers to a structure serving as the initial burial place for high-ranking nobles. Among the Toraja, funeral rites for nobles occur in two stages. The first, the *Makbatang* ceremony, is held at the family *tongkonan* (ancestral house). Afterward, the body is temporarily buried at *Rante Simbuang* or other sites near the settlement if the deceased lived far from the ancestral *tongkonan*. The second stage, *Makpalao*, begins later; the body is exhumed, and the old coffin (*erong*) and burial items are reinterred in the *karopik*, where a banyan tree is planted. The remains are then transferred to a new *erong* for final placement.

Not all nobles undergo temporary burial. If the second-stage ceremony follows soon after the first, the body may remain unburied between stages. However, even when the corpse is not temporarily buried, items such as the original clothing and coffin are still interred in the *karopik*. Thus, the *karopik* serves as a first-stage burial site or a repository for funeral objects before the final interment in the family's traditional tomb (*Liang*).

Karopik differs from *simbuang*, another burial marker, in its location. A *karopik* may be situated far from *Rante Simbuang*, especially if the family lives elsewhere or belongs to a different customary group. In contrast, a *simbuang* must be placed in the *Rante Simbuang* of the deceased's original ancestral community, regardless of residence or marriage

ties. This rule, especially for high-ranking male nobles, ensures that the second-stage funeral rites are performed in their ancestral homeland.

3.4 Symbolic Meanings of the *Liang* Forms and the *Erong* Coffins

Several types of burial chambers (*liang*) are found at the Liang site, including Liang Sillik, Liang Erong, Liang Tokek, Liang Pak, and Patane. Practically, these chambers serve as places for interment, either as primary or secondary burials. Secondary burials, especially for high-ranking nobles, use *erong* coffins shaped like buffalo or boats, which are placed in one of these chambers—Liang Erong, Liang Tokek, Liang Pak, or Patane.

The earliest burial types known in Tana Toraja were Liang Sillik, Liang Erong, and Liang Tokek; later, Liang Pak and Patane emerged (Duli, 1999). The types and spatial arrangement of these chambers are closely tied to social stratification. Liang Sillik, located at lower levels, was reserved for the lower social class (*tanak kua-kua*), while higher chambers were designated for higher social ranks. Square-shaped *erong* coffins were intended for the middle class (*tanak karurung*), buffalo-shaped *erong* for the nobility (*tanak bassi*) and high nobility (*tanak bulaan*), and boat-shaped *erong* for high-ranking nobles (*tanak bulaan*) regarded as the first settlers or founders of a village. Such figures were honored with a *Liang Tokek*, a hanging tomb where a boat-shaped *erong* is suspended from the ceiling of a cave or rock shelter.

After the introduction of Liang Pak and Patane, nobles were interred in these types of tombs. Today, all social classes use Liang Pak and Patane, with the size of the chamber reflecting the family's economic capacity.

A striking feature of Toraja burials is the use of *erong* coffins in various forms—square, buffalo, and boat—each reflecting social hierarchy. The buffalo-shaped *erong* signifies social status and is seen as the spirit's vehicle to the afterlife (*puya*). As described in the ethnographic data above, water buffalo symbolize wealth and status, and their sacrifice is central to death rituals. The more buffalo offered during funeral ceremonies, the easier it is for ancestral spirits to reach the level of the gods in *puya*. The boat-shaped *erong*, in addition to denoting high social rank (*tanak bulaan*), represents the soul's voyage to the afterlife, rooted in the belief that ancestors first arrived by boat and must therefore journey to *puya* the same way. *Erong* coffins are decorated with geometric motifs such as diamonds, swastikas, rows of dots, and circles, signifying noble status.

From these findings, it is evident that the types and layouts of the chambers, along with the forms of the *erong* coffins, convey several symbolic meanings: life in the afterworld mirrors earthly life, including its social hierarchy; the *liang* serves as a transitional realm between the mortal world and *puya*, a medium for attaining divine status; and *puya*, the dwelling place of the gods, is imagined as an ethereal realm—above the sky or beyond human perception. Ancestral spirits who achieve the level of gods are those of noble lineage. The spiritual world is inhabited by three tiers of deities: the supreme deity (Puang Matua), the second-tier *Deata-Deata*, and the third-tier *To Membali Puang*, all residing in *puya*. By contrast, spirits whose funerals were incomplete remain in an intermediate state (Bombo), wandering in specific places. These spirits often come from lower social classes or from nobles lacking the resources for proper rituals. Such spirits are considered dangerous to the living, requiring offerings and protective ceremonies to appease them and seek protection from the gods.

Overall, the Liang site functions as a family or community burial complex for a specific customary group, regarded by the Toraja as the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. To honor these spirits, the burial complex is designed to resemble their earthly homes, ensuring the ancestors feel as though they still inhabit their former residences. This belief in the *liang* as a reflection of their village life is evident in the types, layouts, and *erong* designs that represent social hierarchy. Toraja poetry also refers to the *liang* as *Banua Tangmerambu* ("house without smoke") or *Banua To Membali Puang* ("house of ancestral spirits"). Based on the customary rules, the *liang* must be located not far from the settlement (the *Tongkonan* or *Tongkonan Layuk*) and ideally to the west, usually on elevated terrain such as hills or purposely raised areas. This placement is meant to help the ancestral spirits (*To Membali Puang*) oversee and protect all human activities in the mortal world.

4. Conclusion

From the brief description above, it can be concluded that the various forms of burial in the Toraja mortuary system reflect both the belief system and the social system of the community. The belief system is rooted in a megalithic worldview, which holds that the spirits of ancestors exert a powerful influence on human success and well-being. Based on this ideological background, its implementation within the social system gives rise to specific rules and norms (*aluk todolo* or *alukta*), such as regulations regarding the treatment of the deceased in various rites, the relationship between the dead

and the living, and the connection between the earthly realm and the spirit world. The Toraja belief system and social order are symbolically manifested in the technology and mortuary practices of the society. The forms of burial are strongly shaped by faith, social stratification, environmental conditions, changing times, and external cultural influences.

For the discipline of archaeology, the use of ethnographic data as described above provides valuable analogies that serve as models for interpreting archaeological findings—especially those related to data acquisition and processing, as well as understanding the ideological and social systems underlying a technological system (artifacts). Archaeological methods of data collection and analysis can be informed and guided by ethnographic analogies, particularly in understanding the transformative processes of archaeological data (the processes of creation, use, and disposal).

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Dalyan, M., Suma, M., Sosrohadi, S., & Andini, C. (2024). Harmony and Sustainability: Traditional Ecological Knowledge Systems of the Kaluppini Indigenous People. *International Journal of Religion*, 5(6), 82-92.
- Duli, A. (1996, September 23–25). *Peranan masyarakat terhadap upaya pelestarian benda cagar budaya: Suatu studi kasus pada situs megalitik Bori Parinding di Kabupaten Tana Toraja* [Conference presentation]. Seminar Pemugaran dan Konservasi Benda Cagar Budaya, Magelang, Indonesia.
- Duli, A. (1996, March 6–11). *Bentuk dan fungsi batu temu gelang di Sulawesi Selatan: Suatu studi etnoarkeologi* [Conference presentation]. Pertemuan Ilmiah Arkeologi VII, Cipanas, Jawa Barat, Indonesia.
- Duli, A. (2001). *Peninggalan megalitik pada situs Sillanan di Kabupaten Tana Toraja Propinsi Sulawesi Selatan: Suatu rekonstruksi masyarakat megalitik berdasarkan studi etnoarkeologi* (Master's thesis). Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- Duli, A., & Hasanuddin. (2003). *Toraja dulu dan kini*. Makassar, Indonesia: Pustaka Refleksi.
- Hodder, I. (1991). *Reading the past: Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kaudern, W. (1938). *Ethnographical studies in Celebes: Results of the author's expedition to Celebes 1917–1920*. Göteborgs Museum.
- Mundarjito. (1981). *Beberapa metode analisis data arkeologi* [Several methods of archaeological data analysis]. Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional.
- Rahman, F. (2019, February). Save the world versus man-made disaster: A cultural perspective. In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 235, No. 1, p. 012071). IOP Publishing.
- Rahman, F., Akhmar, A. M., & Amir, M. (2019, May). The practice of local wisdom of Kajang people to save forests and biodiversity: A cultural-based analysis. In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 270, No. 1, p. 012038). IOP Publishing.
- Renfrew, C., & Bahn, P. (1991). *Archaeology: Theories, methods and practice*. Thames and Hudson.
- Sahib, H., Rahman, F., Duli, A., & Asba, A. R. (2019, May). Customary Forest Conservation through Informal Knowledge System of Ammatowa Community. In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 270, No. 1, p. 012042). IOP Publishing.
- Tanudirjo, D. A. (1995). *Arkeologi dan etnoarkeologi di Indonesia* [Archaeology and ethnoarchaeology in Indonesia]. Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional.
- Tangdilintin, L. T. (1980). *Aluk to dolo: Kepercayaan orang Toraja* [Aluk to dolo: The belief of the Toraja people]. Yayasan

Lepongan Bulan.

Yuwono, J. (1996). Etnoarkeologi sebagai pendekatan dalam penelitian arkeologi [Ethnoarchaeology as an approach in archaeological research]. Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional.