

Historical and Anthropological Comparison of Toraja and Mamasa Cultures: Origins and Identity Differentiation in the Sulawesi Highlands

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the historical and anthropological relationship between the Toraja and Mamasa communities in the highlands of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Although both groups share significant similarities in kinship systems, ritual structures, and cosmological orientation, they are often treated as distinct cultural entities with separate historical origins. Using a qualitative synthesis of ethnographic and historical literature, this article argues that Toraja and Mamasa are better understood as differentiated expressions of a shared highland cultural system. Their divergence is not interpreted as evidence of separate cultural origins but as the outcome of ecological adaptation, historical contingency, and uneven incorporation into colonial and missionary systems. Recent anthropological perspectives on relational culture and ecological anthropology are also integrated to strengthen the theoretical contribution. The study concludes that cultural similarity and difference in highland Sulawesi should be understood as relational processes within a single ecological-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Toraja, Mamasa, cultural ecology, identity formation, highland anthropology

1. INTRODUCTION

Highland societies in Southeast Asia are widely recognized for exhibiting a combination of cultural continuity and localized differentiation. Recent anthropological scholarship increasingly emphasizes that such patterns are not merely historical residues, but outcomes of ongoing relational processes shaped by ecological constraints, mobility, and political history (Ingold, 2021; Li, 2020; Vandenberg, 2022). Within this broader context, the highland regions of Sulawesi provide an important case for examining how cultural systems emerge, persist, and diversify under conditions of ecological fragmentation and historical entanglement. Studies on upland Southeast Asia have shown that highland societies often maintain strong

structural continuities despite significant variation in identity formation and external political incorporation (Andaya, 2021; Davidson, 2023).

The Toraja and Mamasa communities in the highlands of Sulawesi represent a particularly significant example of this pattern. Both groups inhabit contiguous mountainous environments and share structural cultural features, including descent-based kinship organization, ritual systems centered on mortuary practices, and cosmological orientations grounded in ancestor veneration (Nooy-Palm, 1979; Kato, 1989). These similarities indicate deep structural continuities that extend beyond surface-level cultural variation. Despite these shared characteristics,

Toraja and Mamasa are frequently treated as distinct cultural units in ethnographic and administrative classifications. This categorization often reflects historical processes of ethnographic framing and colonial administrative ordering rather than purely indigenous cultural discontinuities (Barth, 1969; Andaya, 2021). Contemporary studies on ethnic formation in Southeast Asia further demonstrate that identity boundaries are frequently produced through political and historical processes rather than fixed cultural essences (Davidson, 2023; Vandenberg, 2022).

Earlier ethnographic studies have already highlighted this complexity. Nooy-Palm (1979) provides detailed accounts of Toraja ritual and social organization, while Kato (1989) emphasizes the role of colonial governance and missionary expansion in shaping highland social transformation. These works collectively suggest that cultural difference may represent divergent trajectories within a shared structural foundation rather than independent origins. From a broader theoretical perspective, anthropology has increasingly shifted toward relational and process-oriented approaches. Ingold (2021) conceptualizes social life as a “meshwork of relations,” while Strathern (1991) emphasizes the partial and relational nature of social formations. These perspectives align with recent Southeast Asian scholarship that highlights how ecological fragmentation and historical asymmetry jointly produce both cultural continuity and differentiation (Li, 2020; Vandenberg, 2022).

Despite these developments, there remains a lack of integrative analysis that systematically situates Toraja and Mamasa within both classical ethnographic interpretation and contemporary relational anthropology. Existing studies tend to separate detailed ethnography from broader theoretical synthesis. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by re-examining Toraja and Mamasa as part of a shared highland cultural system in Sulawesi. It argues that similarities reflect long-term structural continuities shaped by ecological conditions, while differences emerge from uneven historical incorporation into colonial and postcolonial systems (Andaya, 2021; Davidson, 2023).

According to Steward (1955), culture is an adaptive system shaped by environmental conditions. Highland environments with geographical fragmentation encourage localized cultural stability while maintaining structural similarities across regions. Steward (1955) rejects unilinear evolution proposed by Tylor (1871), emphasizing that cultural development follows multiple pathways depending on ecological and historical conditions. Braudel (1972) introduces the concept of *longue durée*, emphasizing long-term structural continuity in historical processes. Kato (1989) shows that highland societies in Sulawesi maintain stable cultural structures

despite colonial disruption.

Geertz (1973) defines culture as a system of meaning expressed through symbols, while Radcliffe-Brown (1952) emphasizes social structure as a functional system maintaining equilibrium. Barth (1969) argues that ethnic boundaries are socially constructed through interaction. This is supported by Kato (1989), who highlights colonial and missionary roles in shaping ethnic identities in Sulawesi. Recent anthropological studies emphasize relational and process-based understandings of culture. Ingold (2021) describes social life as a “meshwork of relations” rather than bounded systems. Contemporary Southeast Asian studies also highlight that highland societies often show structural continuity despite cultural differentiation caused by historical and political processes (Li, 2020; Vandenberg, 2022; Davidson, 2023; Andaya, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to examine ethnographic and historical literature on the Toraja and Mamasa highland societies in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Meta-synthesis is selected as the primary methodological strategy because it enables the systematic integration and reinterpretation of findings from multiple qualitative sources in order to generate higher-order conceptual insights beyond individual ethnographic accounts (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The data corpus consists of three main categories of literature: (1) classical ethnographic works focusing on Toraja and related highland communities, such as those by Nooy-Palm (1979); (2) anthropological monographs and historical analyses addressing social transformation in the Sulawesi highlands, including Kato (1989); and (3) recent scholarly publications on highland Southeast Asia, ecological anthropology, and identity formation processes (e.g., Li, 2020; Andaya, 2021; Vandenberg, 2022; Davidson, 2023). These sources were selected based on their academic relevance, citation frequency, and contribution to understanding cultural continuity and differentiation in upland contexts.

The analytical procedure follows a three-stage interpretive process. First, a thematic extraction was conducted to identify recurring ethnographic patterns related to kinship systems, ritual practices, cosmology, and social organization across the selected literature. Second, a comparative structural analysis was applied to examine similarities and differences between Toraja and Mamasa cultural formations, with particular attention to ecological conditions and historical trajectories. Third, a relational interpretation was developed to synthesize these findings within a broader theoretical framework that emphasizes culture as a dynamic process rather than a bounded

entity. Rather than treating ethnographic accounts as static representations of discrete cultural units, this study approaches them as situated interpretations shaped by historical context, research perspective, and methodological orientation. In line with relational anthropology (Ingold, 2021; Strathern, 1991), cultural formations are analyzed as emergent outcomes of interactions between ecological environments, historical processes, and social relations.

The study does not involve primary ethnographic fieldwork. This limitation is acknowledged; however, the meta-synthesis approach is considered appropriate for addressing the research objective, which is to generate a comparative and integrative understanding of Toraja and Mamasa as part of a broader highland cultural system rather than to produce new localized ethnographic description. To enhance analytical rigor, triangulation was achieved through cross-referencing multiple ethnographic sources and comparing interpretations across different temporal layers of scholarship (colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary studies). This allows for the identification of both continuities and epistemological shifts in the representation of highland societies in Sulawesi.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Cultural Continuities in Toraja and Mamasa Highland Societies

The comparative synthesis of ethnographic and historical sources indicates that Toraja and Mamasa societies share a set of deep structural continuities. These continuities are evident in kinship organization, ritual life, cosmological orientation, and spatial-symbolic representations of social order. Both societies are characterized by descent-based kinship systems that organize social relations through extended family lineages. This pattern is consistent with ethnographic accounts of Toraja social structure, which emphasize the centrality of kin groups in regulating marriage, inheritance, and ritual obligations (Nooy-Palm, 1979). Similar structural principles are also observed in Mamasa communities, where kinship remains a primary organizing principle of social life (Kato, 1989).

Ritual systems in both societies further reinforce these continuities. Mortuary rituals, in particular, play a central role in structuring social relations, redistributing wealth, and reaffirming ancestral connections. The symbolic importance of death rituals suggests a shared cosmological framework in which ancestors occupy a central position in mediating relations between the living and the spiritual realm (Geertz, 1973). These similarities suggest that Toraja and Mamasa should not be understood as entirely separate cultural systems, but rather as variations within a broader highland cultural formation in Sulawesi.

3.2 Historical Differentiation and Uneven Trajectories of Change

Despite these structural continuities, the analysis also reveals significant differences in the historical trajectories of Toraja and Mamasa societies. These differences are not interpreted as evidence of distinct origins, but rather as outcomes of uneven historical exposure to external influences. One of the most significant factors contributing to differentiation is the varying intensity of colonial and missionary engagement. Toraja regions experienced relatively earlier and more intensive interaction with Dutch colonial administration and Christian missionary networks. This led to transformations in ritual practices, social organization, and administrative categorization (Kato, 1989).

In contrast, Mamasa communities appear to have experienced comparatively slower and less intensive incorporation into colonial and missionary systems. As a result, certain ritual and social practices in Mamasa demonstrate stronger continuity with precolonial forms, although this should not be interpreted as cultural isolation but rather as a different trajectory of historical engagement. Recent studies in Southeast Asian anthropology suggest that such uneven incorporation is a common feature of upland societies, where geography and accessibility significantly influence the intensity of external contact (Li, 2020; Vandenberg, 2022).

3.3 Relational Interpretation of Cultural Difference

Rather than treating cultural differences between Toraja and Mamasa as evidence of separate origins, this study interprets them as relational outcomes produced through interaction between ecological conditions and historical processes. From this perspective, culture is not a bounded entity but an emergent process shaped by continuous interaction between environment, history, and social relations (Ingold, 2021). The concept of "bounded culture" is therefore replaced with a relational understanding in which similarity and difference coexist within a shared structural field.

This interpretation is consistent with Barth's (1969) argument that ethnic boundaries are socially constructed through interaction rather than derived from essential cultural differences. In the case of Toraja and Mamasa, identity boundaries appear to have been reinforced through historical categorization processes rather than reflecting fundamental cultural discontinuities.

3.4 Ecological Fragmentation and Cultural Structuring

Ecological conditions in the Sulawesi highlands also play a critical role in shaping both cultural continuity and differentiation. The mountainous terrain creates natural barriers that limit mobility and interaction, thereby encouraging localized cultural stabilization while maintaining broader structural similarities across

regions. Recent anthropological studies have emphasized that ecological fragmentation often produces “distributed cultural systems,” in which similar structural patterns emerge across separated communities due to shared environmental constraints rather than direct historical transmission (Vandenberg, 2022). In this sense, the Toraja–Mamasa relationship can be understood as part of a wider highland pattern in which ecological conditions generate both cohesion and differentiation simultaneously.

3.5 Comparative Insight and Broader Anthropological Implications

When situated within a broader comparative framework, the Toraja–Mamasa case contributes to ongoing anthropological debates on cultural continuity and differentiation in upland societies. Similar patterns have been documented in other mountainous regions, where ecological fragmentation and historical asymmetry jointly shape cultural formations (Li, 2020; Andaya, 2021).

This suggests that highland societies should not be conceptualized as isolated cultural units but as interconnected relational systems shaped by shared ecological constraints and variable historical trajectories. The findings of this study therefore support a shift away from essentialist interpretations of culture toward more dynamic and relational models of cultural analysis in anthropology.

3.6 Summary of Key Findings

The main findings of this study can be summarized as follows: 1) Toraja and Mamasa share deep structural continuities in kinship, ritual, and cosmology, 2) Differences between the two societies are primarily the result of uneven historical incorporation into colonial and missionary systems, 3) Cultural identity in the highlands is relational rather than bounded or essentialist, 4) Ecological fragmentation plays a significant role in producing both cultural continuity and differentiation, and 5) The case contributes to broader anthropological debates on relational culture in highland Southeast Asia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Toraja and Mamasa communities in the highlands of Sulawesi should be understood as differentiated expressions of a shared cultural system rather than as entirely separate cultural origins. Their similarities in kinship structures, ritual practices, and cosmological orientations indicate long-term structural continuity shaped by common ecological conditions. At the same time, observed differences between the two groups are primarily the result of uneven historical trajectories, particularly varying degrees of exposure to colonial administration, missionary activity, and external socio-political integration. Overall, the findings support a relational understanding of culture in which similarity and difference are co-produced through

ecological constraints and historical processes. This perspective challenges bounded and essentialist notions of ethnic identity and highlights the importance of viewing highland societies as dynamic and interconnected cultural formations.

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