

The Symbolic Meanings of Toraja Carving Motifs

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian makna simbolik motif hias ukir Toraja ini dilaksanakan di sebuah komunitas pengukir kayu tradisional di Tonga Kecamatan Kesu Kabupaten Toraja-Utara. Pertanyaan penelitian dipicu oleh kenyataan tidak adanya lagi pengukir kayu yang berstatus tomanarang (ahli ukir dan sekaligus ahli budaya Toraja) di Tonga dan daerah sekitarnya yang berfungsi sebagai guru-ukir sebagaimana yang terjadi pada masa lalu. Metode penelitian ini adalah survey dengan menggunakan teknik wawancara mendalam. Wawancara dilakukan terhadap pengukir kayu tradisional Toraja yang bermukim di Tonga. Hasil penelitian ini menjelaskan para pengukir kayu tradisional di Tonga memiliki pemahaman yang amat kurang terhadap makna simbolik dari motif-hias ukir-kayu tradisional Toraja. Kurangnya pemahaman ini disebabkan oleh karena pengukir menganggap tidak perlu memahami makna simbolik tersebut. Bagi mereka, yang perlu dimiliki adalah kemampuan teknis dalam membuat ukiran-kayu. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan telah terjadinya perubahan orientasi nilai dari pengukir kayu tradisional Toraja.

Kata kunci: seni ukir kayu, makna simbolik, motif hias Toraja

ABSTRACT

The study on the symbolic meaning of the Toraja ornamental design was conducted in a traditional wood-carver community at Tonga, Kesu District of North-Toraja Regency. The study question was stimulated by the fact that, nowadays, there are no more wood-carver teachers with *tomanarang* status (expert in Toraja culture) at Tonga and surrounding areas as there were happened in the past. The method of this study was survey by using an in-depth interviews technique. The interview was conducted with the traditional wood-carvers at Tonga. The result of the study explained that the traditional wood-carvers at Tonga have a meager understanding of the symbolic meaning of the Toraja ornamental-designs. This lack of understanding is caused by the traditional wood-carvers' view that it is not necessary to understand the symbolic meaning of the Toraja ornamental designs. For them, technical skills in wood-carving are more important to be mastered. The results of the research indicate the occurrence of value orientation changes of Toraja wood-carvers.

Keywords: wood-carving, symbolic meanings, Toraja ornamental design

INTRODUCTION

Culture is dynamic; change, develop, or perish in accordance with the demands of the times. This is also reflected in Toraja culture. Toraja is an ethnic group living in Tana Toraja and North-Toraja of South-Sulawesi Province. The topography of this hilly area with an area of more than 3000 square kilometers is bordered by several districts whose inhabitants are indigenous Bugis, Luwu, Mamuju, Enrekang, Pinrang and Polewali-Mandar Districts. According to Sandra (1998: 1) the term *toraja* is actually a disparaging term used by the Bugis and Makassar who inhabit lowland of Sulawesi south-western peninsula to the people who live in highland mountainous areas. This is in line with what was proposed by Saleh Husain (2001: 122), that it was Bugis people who called this ethnic group Toraja (from the coastal languages' *to rajang* or *to riaja*, meaning people from west or north). Besides an ethnic name, the term *toraja* is also related to cultural artifacts produced by Toraja people like Toraja architecture (traditional house, rice barn) or visual art of Toraja (sculpture, carving, weaving).

Aluk Todolo as Indigenous Belief of Toraja People

The indigenous culture of Toraja people is based on a belief that is hereditary inherited by the Toraja ancestors from generation to generation. The belief is known as *Aluk Todolo* that means ancestor's belief. According to Tandilintin (2014: 54-57), *Aluk Todolo* was sent by the Creator, *Puang Matua*, to the first human ancestor named *Datu La Ukku* who lived in the sky. *Datu La Ukku's* descendant named *Pong Mula Tau* was the first man who lived on earth to spread *Aluk Todolo*. Basically, *Aluk Todolo* obligates human and the universe to glorify *Puang Matua*, the Creator, to exalt *Deata* (the god authorized by *Puang Matua* to control and take care the earth and its existing matters), and praise ancestors.

Glorifying *Puang Matua*, *Deata*, and ancestors are done through offerings in a solemn ritual. *Aluk Todolo* Toraja instills awareness in people's mind that worldly life is temporary and after life is eternal. Thus, it is not surprising that the Toraja people pay much attention to the offering ritual. According to the Stanislaus Sandarupa (2014: 5), the religiosity level of Toraja people can be measured by their conducts and participation in several offering rituals which they believed to be monitored by *Deatas*. In behaving, the Toraja people seek to establish harmony with *Puang Matua*, *Deata*, ancestors, fellow human beings and the environment (animals, plants). The efforts of building a harmonious relationship are centered on *tongkonan* which means "seat". It is a custom house of a noble family led by a community leader who owns *tongkonan*. *Tongkonan* is the center for a cultural continuation of Toraja people. Therefore, *tongkonan* must be built in accordance with *Aluk Todolo* belief. Mithen and Onesimus (2003: 300) who studied this said that *Aluk Todolo* is expressed in *tongkonan* building as seen in the orientation and building plan, construction, material structure, and decorative motifs of carvings. In *tongkonan*, various social and religious activities, such as having a discussion, listening to the sermon or command of a custom leader, ritual, etc., are held. Toraja people believe that if they behave well in this world as well as complete the ritual activities that they attend and implement, they will reach the level of life perfection called *kasa'tian* that can send them back to the sky as gods named *To Membali Puang* in the after life.

The culture of the Toraja people rooted in the past lives with all of its aspects confronted with the ever-changing ages. Toraja cultural aspects that are able to adjust to the situation will survive, while the aspects of Toraja culture that is not able to adjust to present situation gradually will become ex-

tinct. As a result of contact with the outside world, Toraja people today generally have embraced new religions namely Christian, Catholic, and Islam. Nonetheless, many of them who have embraced the new religion still carry out community activities or ritual of *Aluk Todolo* such as *Rambu Tuka* ritual (a sermon ceremony of joy such as marriage) or *Rambu Solo* ritual (a sermon ceremony of mourning for the death) and other rituals.

Carving Art and Traditional Toraja Engraver

Changes that occur in Toraja culture due to age development, as mentioned above, need to be examined because it is a repertoire of national culture at a time in a region. This study aims to determine one aspect of the present-day Toraja cultural phenomenon that is traditional wood-engraver's knowledge about philosophy aspects of the woodcarving that they produce.

Toraja's traditional wood carving, known as *passuraq* (literally means writing) is a form of Toraja's traditional artworks, which is unique and widely known. Toraja traditional sculpture has flat characters, decorative, colorful (black, red, yellow, and white) with decorative motives that have symbolic meanings within the context of *Aluk Todolo*. Toraja art of wood carving is called *passuraq* for the meaning that it contains like the writings. Toraja traditional carving is made of wood, bamboo or stone used as decoration with symbolic meanings in traditional houses (*tongkonan*, *alang*), coffins, or other objects. According to Tandilintin (2014: 242-252), at first, there were only four-decorative motifs of Toraja carvings that symbolize the four fundamental problems of life that embellished traditional houses (*tongkonan*). The four decorative motifs are the sun (*pa 'barra allo*) symbolizing unity and divinity; a rooster (*pa 'manuk londong*) symbolizing governance-law and the power of life given by God; a buffalo

(*pa'tedong*) symbolizing jobs and prosperity; as well a geometric decorative in form of an ordered vertical line (*pa 'sussuk*) symbolizing social life in front of God. These four principal decorative motifs later develop into hundreds of decorative motifs in line with the development of Toraja's society. Toraja carving motifs that originally intended only for sacred purposes are then also used for commercial purposes.

Symbolic aspects of Toraja carving within the sacred context, as mentioned above, are well understood by an engraver with status *to manarang*, that is the engraver who masters technical skills of carving and understands the intricacies of traditional Toraja, including philosophical and symbolical aspects of used decorative motifs. In the past, the engravers *to manarang* were teachers visited by students from all over places who wanted to learn carving through the informal apprenticeship system. According to Sofyan Salam, Muh Saleh Husain, and Tangsi (2015: 11) informal apprenticeship in traditional carving, with a teacher of *to manarang* status attended by those who want to learn to carve from various places, is no longer found in the present. The current transfer of carving expertise is in the form of (1) apprenticeship in the household environment with father, mother, or grandfather as teachers, and (2) youth working group where youth/adolescents share their expertise or experience in carving. In this neighborhood youth group, the members are still in the process of learning and become mentors for their more junior peers. The focus of transferring carving expertise in household and workgroup of neighborhood apprenticeship is on carving techniques only. This is what encourages researchers to investigate the extent of carvers' understanding toward the symbolic meanings of Toraja carving that they practice every day.

The carvers chosen as the object of the research is a wood-carver community living in Tonga, Kesu Sub-district, North-Toraja Regency. The traditional wood-carvers are those who still actively produce Toraja wood carving artworks with the same unique and artistic quality as their predecessor. The wood-carver community's settlement is not far from Ke'te'Kesu', an old settlement designated by UNESCO as a cultural heritage (2001: 90). Due to its close and strategic location, Ke'te'Kesu' becomes the market place for the carvers living in Tonga. These wood-carvers, as the Toraja people in general, have come into contact with the influence of outside cultures, either through formal education or through daily interactions. The wood-carvers in Tonga today are Christians and Catholics. Thus Toraja cultural values they espoused are no longer as pure as the Toraja cultural values embraced by their ancestors that simply based on *Aluk Todolo* belief.

METHOD

This research uses a survey method to reveal the comprehension of traditional wood-carver living in Tonga, Kesu Sub-district, North-Toraja Regency about the symbolic meaning of traditional Toraja carving decorative motifs. Therefore, the main data source of this research is the traditional wood-carvers living in Tonga. There are 19 carvers who can be qualified as competent carvers, while the other 25 carvers are still in the learning stage so that can not be categorized as carvers in the real sense. Out of the 19 carvers used as data sources, four of them were not in the research location during the time of data collection, so that the number of data sources are fifteen people. The number is considered quite representative.

Data collection was done through interviews to reveal how deep the carvers know names, representations (of presented objects), and symbolic meanings of the Toraja

decorative motifs. To avoid carvers being overwhelmed by too many questions, twenty selected decorative motifs (based on purposive sampling technique) were presented. In conducting the interview, the researcher was equipped with color photographs of 20 carving decorative motifs that were being asked. Further, the data collected were analyzed to reveal the carvers' comprehension about the symbolic meanings of Toraja-carving decorative motifs.

Matrix 1. Categories of carvers' knowledge/comprehension of names, representations, and symbolic meanings of Toraja-carving decorative motifs

1	Name of motif: <i>Pab-barre allo</i>	The motif name is known by 15 carvers (100%)
	Representation of motif: sun	The representation of motif is known by 14 carvers (93%)
	Meaning of motif: greatness, majesty, unity	The meaning of motifs understood by 1 carver (7%)
2	Name of motif: <i>pa'manuk londong</i>	The motif name is known by 15 people carvers (100%)
	Representation of motif: rooster	The representation of motif is known by 15 carvers (100%)
	Meaning of motif: symbols of rules and life force	The meaning of motif is understood by 6 carvers (40%)
3	Name of motif: <i>pa'tedong</i>	The motif name is known by 15 carvers (100%)
	Representation of motif: buffalo head	The representation of motif is known by 15 carvers (100%)
	Meaning of motif: venerable beast, prosperity	The meaning of motif is understood by 7 carvers (46%)
4	Name of motif: <i>pa'tangke lumu 'sirturu</i>	The motif name is known by 11 carvers (73%)
	Representation of motif: branches of the moss	The representation of motif is known by 2 carvers (13%)
	Meaning of motif: the necessity of families to live in harmony	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 people engraver (0%)
5	Name of motif: <i>pa'erong</i>	The motif name is known by 9 carvers (60%)

	Representation of motif: coffin	The representation of motif is known by 5 carvers (33%)		Meaning of motif: so that people live peaceful and rich	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: presumably spirits bless the family	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)	12	Name of motif: <i>Pa 'ulu karua</i>	The motif name is known by 6 carvers (40%)
6	Name of motif: <i>pa' kapu baku</i>	The motif name is known by 15 carvers (100%)		Representation of motif: head eight	The representation of motif is known by 1 carver (7%)
	Representation of motif: knot of a basket cover	The representation of motif is known by 4 carvers (26%)		Meaning of motif: ancestor, reverence, scientist	The meaning of motif is understood by 1 carver (7%)
	The meaning of the motif: it seems that the family is always harmonious	The meaning of motif is understood by 2 carvers (13%)	13	Name of motif: <i>pa'taku pare</i>	The motif name is known by 5 carver (33%)
7	Name of motif: <i>pa' daun bolu</i>	The motif name is known by 15 carvers (100%)		Representation of motif: the ducked paddy	The representation of motif is known by 4 carver (26%)
	Representation of motif: betel leaf	The representation of motif is known by 11 carvers (73%)		Meaning of motif: humble, respect for Dewi Sri	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: presumably god bless	The meaning of motif is understood by 2 carvers (13%)	14	Name of motif: <i>pa' daun paria</i>	The motif name is known by 10 carvers (66%)
8	Name of motif: <i>pat-tangki pattung</i>	The name of motif is known by 5 carvers (33%)		Representation of motif: <i>paria</i> leaf	The representation of motif is known by 8 carvers (53%)
	Representation of motif: stalk where to drink from bamboo	The representation of motif is known by 4 carvers (26%)		Meaning of motif: do not be bitter	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: bamboo is a versatile plant	The meaning of motif is understood by 1 carver (7%)	15	Name of motif: <i>pa 'sepu torongkong</i>	The motif name is known by 11 carvers (73%)
9	Name of motif: <i>pa 'bungkang tasik</i>	The motif name is known by 12 carvers (80%)		Representation of motif: a betel container in Torongkong	The representation of motif is known by 5 carvers (33%)
	Representation of motif: sea turtle	The representation of motif is known by 4 carvers (26%)		Meaning of motif: Torongkong is part of Toraja	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: a living can be earned in the sea	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)	16	Name of motif: <i>pa'bulintong sitebba'</i>	The motif name is known by 6 carvers (40%)
10	Name of motif: <i>pa 'lolo paku</i>	The motif name is known by 3 carvers (20%)		Representation of motif: swimming tadpoles	The representation of motif is known by 1 carver (6%)
	Representation of motif: shoots spikes	The representation of motif is known by 0 carver (0%)		Meaning of motif: may be derived peaceful/quiet	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: the heart is not bent like a shoot of <i>paku</i> plant	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)	17	Name of motif: <i>pa' bunga kaliki</i>	The motif name is known by 1 carver (7%)
11	Name of motif: <i>pa 'lolo gajang</i>	The motif name is known by 2 carvers (13%)		Representation of motif: papaya flowers	The representation of motif is known by 0 carver (0%)
	Representation of motif: handles of golden <i>keris</i>	The representation of motif is known by 1 carver (7%)		The meaning of motif: bitter advice that brings goodness	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
			18	Name of motif: <i>pa'lolo tabang</i>	The motif name is known by 9 carvers (60%)

	Representation of motif: bud of <i>lenjuang</i> (plants)	The representation of motif is known by 2 carvers (13%)
	Meaning of motif: healthy, medicinal leaves	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
19	Name of motif: <i>pa'salabbi dito' moki</i>	The motif name is known by 4 carvers (26%)
	Representation of motif: a fence with flowers	The representation of motif is known by 1 carver (7%)
	Meaning of motif: prevent a disaster, security	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)
20	Name of motif: <i>pa' kadang pao</i>	The motif name is known by 6 carvers (40%)
	Representation of motifs: mango hook	The representation of motif is known by 0 carver (0%)
	Meaning of motif: the heart is not bent like a hook	The meaning of motif is understood by 0 carver (0%)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research result

The comprehension of wood-carvers living in Tonga about the symbolic meanings of Toraja traditional wood-carving decorative motifs is revealed from their responses toward the presented twenty decorative motifs of Toraja carving (primary and popular). The carvers were asked to identify the name, the representation, and to explain the meaning contained in the decorative motifs.

As a reference in assessing the respondents' answer, reviews of some references-regarding Toraja traditional wood-carving decorative motifs were used. The reviews reveal that there are decorative motifs that have more than a symbolic meaning, such as *Pa' barre Allo* (a decorative motif representing the sun) that has two meanings: (1) the greatness and nobility of aristocracy and (2) the unity of life-based on *Aluk Todolo* belief. Another decorative motif which also has several meanings is *Pa'ulu Karua* (a decorative motif representing eight heads).

Table 1
Individual carver's comprehension of Toraja carving decorative motifs (based on 20 Toraja motifs that were presented)

No.	Respon- dent code	Number of decora- tive motif name that is known	Number of motif representa- tion that that is known	Number of decora- tive mean- ing that is under- stood
1	RAM	9	9	9
2	JOR	10	4	1
3	MIS	17	8	2
4	NIN	10	7	0
5	MYO	11	3	0
6	MOM	19	5	0
7	MIN	9	3	0
8	OKT	18	16	3
9	ARS	13	8	2
10	EMI	6	5	2
11	AGU	7	6	2
12	YUL	15	10	1
13	YOT	9	5	0
14	MIT	7	4	1
15	MUS	12	3	0

It has three meanings: (1) ancestors, (2) respect, and (3) knowledgeable people. For such motifs, all the meanings were used as references in assessing the carvers' answers regarding the meanings of the presented-decorative motifs.

In matrix 1, there are 20 motifs of Toraja carving including their names, representations, and meanings based on the reference and response category that depict the carvers' knowledge/comprehension of the decorative motifs.

The interview conducted reveals the individual carver's comprehension of the names, representations, and meanings of decorative motifs of Toraja carving as can be seen in tabel 1.

Based on the data shown in matrix 1 and table 1, there are some interesting things to note: first, in general, the carvers' knowledge about the names of decorative motifs and decorative-motif representations are-

better than their knowledge about the symbolic meaning of decorative motifs. There are 5 pieces of decorative motives whose name are known by all the carvers, namely *pa'barre allo*, *pa' manuk londong*, *pa'tedong*, *pa'kapu baku*, and *pa'daun bolu*. The popularity of these decorative motifs is probably because they are mostly used, and in terms of visual, the motifs (except for *pa' kapu baku*) represent easily-identified forms, such as the sun, rooster, buffalo, and betel leaf. Other decorative motifs whose names also well known by the carver are *pa'bukkang tasik*, *pa'ttangke lumu situru*, *pa'sepu torong-kong*, *pa'erong*, and *pa'lolo tabang*. The other nine motifs are less popular because they are only known by some carvers.

Second, the carvers' knowledge about the representation (the depicted object) of a decorative motif is influenced by its form. The representation of decorative motifs that have figurative forms such as *pa'barre allo*, *pa'manuk londong*, *pa'tedong*, dan *pa'daun bolu* is known by all carvers, while the representation of decorative motifs that are geometric-abstract is only known by a few carver. This is reasonable because the abstract-geometric motifs, in terms of visual, do not clearly show the objects that they represent.

Third, the carvers' comprehension of the symbolic meaning of decorative motifs, which is the main question of this study, can be categorized as "very lacking". Most of the motifs presented, 13 motifs altogether, are not understood at all by the carvers. Seven other decorative motifs known by a few carver are *pa'barra allo* (understood by 1 carver), *pa'manuk londong* (understood by 6 carvers), *pa'tedong* (understood by 7 carvers), *pa'kapu baku* (understood by 2 carvers), *pa'daun bolu* (understood by 2 carvers), *pa'tangki pattung* (understood by 1 carver), and *pa'ulu karua* (understood by 1 carver). Individually, 6 carvers do not understand the meaning of all (20 pieces) of the decorative motifs shown, 3 carvers only

understand the meaning of a decorative motif, 4 carvers only understand the meaning of 2 decorative motifs, 1 carver understands the meaning of 3 decorative motifs, and 1 carver understands the meaning of 9 decorative motifs. From the investigation, it was found out that the reason why the carvers lack knowledge about the symbolic meanings of Toraja decorative motifs is that they do not consider understanding the decorative motifs important because the buyers are only interested in the artistic aspect of carving forms and do not take their symbolic meanings into account. The carvings they produce are mainly carvings for tourists' souvenirs. The extinct of carver with *tomanarang* status (carvers who also master the intricacies of Toraja culture) in Tonga and its surrounding areas nowadays, as mentioned before, make the philosophical aspects of traditional Toraja carving slowly forgotten by the carvers. Apparently, the main reason why the carvers in Tonga choose carver as their profession is because of economic demand to earn income for their household needs. It is not surprised that the symbolic meaning of decorative motifs is not importance for them. If there is a carver who has an understanding of the symbolic meaning of a decorative motif, it is merely a coincidence depends on the carver's personal experience. The fact that carvers do not understand the decorative motif meanings is commonly happened in society as stated by Rizal Muslimin (2013: 781) that there is only a few people who really understand the hidden meaning of Toraja traditional decorative motifs. It is in line with Adam's finding (1998: 331) on his study about the meaning of Toraja carving decorative motif, which states "today, aside from some carvers and respected elders, few people were familiar with the names and meaning of more than a half-dozen motifs". Society in general only appreciates visual aspect (aesthetic dimension) of decorative motifs. Ideally, a carver as the one who

carves decorative motifs on a wood plane has a good comprehension of wood. Lack of comprehension of the symbolic meaning shows the shift orientation among carvers, from sacred-oriented to profane/commercial-oriented. This is an example of tourism industrial negative impacts as mentioned by Dibia (2009: 31) that tourism can degrade society's traditional culture. Fortunately, previous researchers have documented the meanings of Toraja carving decorative motifs rooted in *Aluk Todolo* belief.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the main question of this study about "How much traditional wood-carvers who live in Tonga, Kesu Sub-district of North-Toraja Regency understand the symbolic meanings of Toraja decorative motifs?" can be formulated as follows: the comprehension of traditional wood-carvers living in Tonga, Kesu Sub-district, North-Toraja Regency can be categorized as "very poor". Most of the decorative motifs are not known at all; while other motifs are known only by a few carvers. Individually, almost half number of the carvers do not comprehend any meanings of the presented motifs. Others only understand the meaning of one to three motifs. Only one carver who comprehends the meaning of nine motifs. Lack of comprehension of the symbolic meaning of Toraja decorative motifs is due to the fact that the carvers consider not to understand the symbolic meaning. For them, the most important thing is technical capability in making wood-carving, so that their works are favored by consumers. The result of this study indicate that there has been a change in the value orientation of a traditional Toraja wood-carver.

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Sofyan Salam, Muh. Saleh Husain, dan Tangsi

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