The living and the dead

In Tana Toraja, a remote Indonesian island, death is definitely not the end

BY SNIGDHA BHOWMICK

The dwindling rays of the sun cannot make their way inside as I head further into the Londa Caves. The hair at the back of my neck stands up. A whiff of sandalwood hits my nostrils. The first of the open graves becomes visible, and the first remnants of human bones come into view. The corpses are surrounded by sticks of incense, flowers, even cigarettes, left by visiting family members.

I am in Tana Toraja, a small regency in the southwest of Indonesia’s Sulawesi island. For the inhabitants here, the death of a dear one is not an occasion for sorrow or mourning, but a celebration. And they take the idea of rejoicing death to incredible levels.

The day I reach Rantepao, the village square is buzzing with activity. It is the day of a funeral and the streets are choked with a procession that carries the mortal remains of Mariassana Dante’s husband from his home to its final resting place in the Londa Caves.

Spirit’s essence

But the ceremonies did not start today. Dante’s husband died more than six weeks ago, and the family has since embalmed the body, dressed it and kept it on display inside the house all these days, while the family went about its daily activities. Dante’s youngest grandson, six-year-old Sakotayi, would sometimes lie next to his grandfather’s body, willing him to wake up. Although it might seem strange and shocking to our cultural sensibilities, the process of moving on after the death of a loved one is a prolonged affair for the Torajans.

And the preservation of corpses is not the only way the Torajans keep the memory of a departed one alive. I head to the village chieftain Yohana’s house. Although Yohana’s mother died more than three years ago, her essence lives on inside the house. Tau tau or wooden dolls made to look exactly like the deceased woman adorn the balcony on the first floor of the house. Yohana says, “Making tau tau is quite common among the richer families here. It has almost become a status symbol now.”

The economics of a funeral in the highlands of Sulawesi are quite mind-boggling. Yohana’s marriage had to be postponed for a couple of years because her mother’s funeral had severely drained the family’s resources.

On funeral day, the village bursts into a riot of colours, and traffic is dragged to a halt as a motorcade leads the funeral procession. The village street, usually empty in the afternoons, overflows with people today. The music rings loud and impromptu dances break out. Dante tells me about her mother’s funeral a few years ago. “The dances used to be much more classical some 10 years ago,” he says. “Professionals would be called in to perform. Today, youngsters dance to K-pop.”

As the procession nears Londa Caves, several able-bodied men haul the coffin and take it through the paddy fields, chatting and laughing along the way to the final resting place. As soon as the body is laid to rest, it is time for the feast. Family and visitors are all seated in a hall where piping hot buffalo curry is served along with steamed rice and sambal on the side.

Buffalo horns

Buffalo (kerbau) is a way of life in Tanah Toraja. Not only is it the staple meat, the buffalo holds tremendous importance in the Torajans’ social hierarchy. The higher you are on the social ladder, the greater the number of buffaloes sacrificed at your funeral, and more the number of buffalo horns that hang at the entrance of your home.

As the fever pitch of celebration dies down after the feast, loud music and cheers erupt from another part of town. A family is preparing for a loved one’s second burial.

This is usually conducted three years after the initial burial. The remains of the corpse are pulled out from the resting place, draped in fancy clothes, and again laid to rest. The grave is also restocked with snacks and cigarettes. Hoisted on stilts, these partly decomposed corpses are a ghastly sight and I go close with quite a bit of trepidation.

The Torajans are accustomed to seeing tourists baulk at the sight, and are amused. They encourage me to lay a packet of snacks at the corpse’s feet.

The writer is a history major who fell in love with capturing history and culture on her lens.