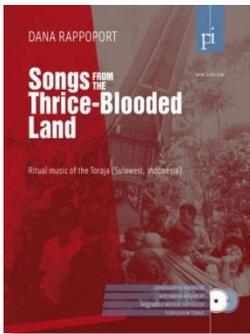


[Review] *Songs from the Thrice-Blooded Land: Ritual Music of the Toraja (Sulawesi, Indonesia)*, by Dana Rappoport

MATT MENDER

Matt Menger has bachelor's and master's degrees in music from the University of Houston, and continued his studies with courses in World Arts at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics. He is an Arts Consultant with SIL and has worked in Southeast Asia for the past eight years. Matt has a particular interest in the interaction of local arts and religion, as well as in arts revitalization movements. He is a member of the Society for Ethnomusicology, the International Council for Traditional Music, and the International Council of Ethnodoxologists.



Rappoport, Dana. *Songs from the Thrice-Blooded Land: Ritual Music of the Toraja (Sulawesi, Indonesia)*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2009. 216pp. + 192pp. + DVD. ISBN 978-2-7351-1260-9.

Songs (and an innovative approach) from the Thrice-Blooded Land

The Toraja (more specifically, the Toraja-Sa'dan), a large group of over 750,000 speakers in the highlands of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, are renowned for their rich culture ("Toraja-Sa'dan" 2017). They are famous for their intricate funeral ceremonies and cliffside burial sites and are also known for their vibrant sense of identity. The Toraja are still a tightly knit group, and various aspects of their culture, such as a distinct architectural style for their homes and an intricate system of mutual debt, bind them together. Because of the remoteness of their homeland in the highlands of Sulawesi, many aspects of their culture, language, and arts have not only survived but have thrived, compared to many of their lowland neighbors.¹ They have resisted conquest and were not subdued by colonial Dutch forces until 1906 (Ricklefs 2008). The Toraja are proud to be identified as such, and those not living in their homeland frequently return to maintain familial ties and societal relationships. Perusing major academic journals reveals that they have been studied, analyzed, and written about extensively. Through the years, anthropologists have visited and written substantial ethnographies and, considering that Indonesia boasts around 700 languages, one might even say that the Toraja have been over-researched in comparison to others.

Dana Rappoport's book, *Songs from the Thrice-Blooded Land*, is divided into three volumes: the first is the Ethnographic Narrative, the second is a florilegium of Toraja poetry, and the third is a DVD including the

¹ The Toraja language is rated a 5 (Developing) on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Lewis and Simons 2010).



author's extensive documentation of Toraja culture. The comprehensive nature of this study is striking; Rappoport gives not only a written anthropological introduction to Toraja music, poetry, and ritual but has also provided us considerable background information, a massive corpus of Toraja poetry (the entire second volume), and other multimedia documentation for the reader to engage with. The third volume, on DVD, provides an interactive opportunity for the reader to encounter the entire musical corpus, hear and see each of the different Toraja instruments, view photo and video examples of rituals described in the text, and examine charts and diagrams which further explain and support the author's conclusions in the ethnography. This format is relatively unique: Rappoport has essentially surrendered the majority of her field research for the world to examine. Often an ethnography asks for the reader's trust and acceptance of the author's conclusions; here it can be verified and cross-checked freely. In a sense, Rappoport has open-sourced her research. In addition, this ethnography is available in English, French, and Indonesian editions.

Rappoport's focus is on the music and poetry, an area comparatively under-researched for such an extensively documented group. The book brings together the research of many anthropologists, and when another author has already documented something elsewhere, Rappoport generally refers the reader to the original source. She wants the reader to have a more holistic interaction with and understanding of Toraja culture:

By reading only the book, the reader will perceive the nature of the data indistinctly. By consulting only the DVD, the reader may prefer to understand them in a different way. Today there is one thing I am sure of: music makes sense as much through the eyes as through the ears, as much by poetry as by sounds; comprehension arises through several senses. . . . One of the aims of this publication is to unveil the interweaving of musical with ritual knowledge, the power of oral poetry and its performance, the memory in song of these "quivering tongues." (29)

The research is exhaustive, the writing straightforward and clear. For anyone looking for comprehensive information on Toraja music and rituals, this is an authoritative source. But this ethnography also represents an innovative way to present the results of research and is recommended for anyone doing ethnographic work. The interweaving of the text with the DVD is invaluable in presenting the information quantifiably; the reader can not only read a description of an instrument but can also see a close-up photo, watch a video clip of it being played, and hear the timbre and tone through the recordings. This approach is less dependent on the ethnographer's writing style and ability to describe sound and image with her words; instead it presents the raw data alongside an analysis. Where many ethnographies view the community through the author's eyes and experiences, in this book the reader interacts with qualitative insights and quantitative documentation.

In a unique joining of the etic and the emic, Rappoport describes the music of the Toraja through what she sees as an important binary distinction: *rambu solo'*, associated with the West/setting sun/death/downstream, versus *rambu tuka'*, associated with the East/fertility/rising sun/upstream. She applies this distinction to the arts as a lens to make sense of a complex corpus of poetry, ritual, and music, and to describe for the reader not only the etic aspects of the music, such as scale, tone, timbre, and rhythm, but also placing that music into its emic cultural context. Understanding the binary relationship of these two opposing meta-rituals is critical in understanding the poetry and music of the Toraja; most musical instruments and song styles are exclusively associated with one or the other. Both the etic and the emic are necessary to properly grasp the cultural significance of the arts Rappoport describes; as in many cultures, the Toraja arts cannot be divorced from their context. Without explicitly stating this, she has found a way to present the Toraja arts within their culturally specified artistic domains rather than attempting to follow Western patterns of categorizing the arts into the domains of music, dance, poetry, and so forth. Through this style of ethnography, she allows the reader to see Toraja arts as closely as possible to the way the Toraja themselves see them.

This multimedia and context-rich style of presenting research is also to be commended for its practical usefulness to the community described. Rather than being limited to stories, opinions, and distillations (although these are present) that are entertaining and enlightening primarily for the outsider, this raw documentation of the culture benefits the community members themselves, and they can pass that information along to subsequent generations. In my own interactions with the Toraja, I witnessed this transmission firsthand.

In the second half of 2016 I was invited to help facilitate a local music workshop with a major Toraja church denomination, and when I was presented with the opportunity to review this book around that same time it seemed like a serendipitous occasion not only to prepare for the workshop with some much-needed background research but also to review an ethnography from an unique perspective: I would have the opportunity to directly interact with the community described in these volumes and even with some of the individuals who helped to inform its contents.

I was fortunate to be asked by a Toraja church to facilitate a songwriting workshop with the purpose of encouraging local musicians to write original Toraja songs to accompany their new Toraja-language children's Sunday school curriculum. The church's desire was to holistically encourage mother tongue use and cultural understanding amongst their children, while also teaching biblical lessons and stories so that the church would

contribute as much as possible to the maintenance of Toraja language and culture (more specifically, revitalizing those aspects of their culture which are compatible with their Christian theology or are able to be brought into alignment with them). They are grappling with the issue of critical contextualization and how to maintain their Toraja identity and values as Christians who no longer hold to the traditional *Aluk To Dolo* religion, and this workshop was a part of their program of integrating Toraja culture with Christian beliefs.

I began reading Rappoport's book in preparation for this workshop and was immediately struck by her thoroughness. Musical examples, photographs, and video clips were invaluable in gaining a general overview, as well as quick review material in the days leading up to the event. During planning sessions the day before the workshop began, I had the opportunity to meet with several church leaders and musical experts from the surrounding community and I was impressed that one musician brought his personal copy of the book to the meeting; he was one of Rappoport's sources for her material and I was fortunate to meet him and benefit from his role as a co-facilitator during this workshop.² Not only did he bring the book, but he frequently used it as a reference and used the DVD during the workshop to play samples and show pictures and video to the other participants, using a projector and speakers so that they too could see the images and hear the recordings of some of the rarer instruments and musical styles. In several informal conversations throughout the week he spoke highly of Rappoport's thoroughness and accuracy.

Another workshop participant also brought her copy of the book as a reference, and several others mentioned that they have copies at home. All of this, combined with various informal interactions during the week, demonstrates the respect that Rappoport has gained among the Toraja, even amongst the Christians who hold a somewhat progressive view of their culture and are not as interested as she is in the future of the *Aluk To Dolo* animistic belief system. Although the focus of the workshop was on Christian music for those who have already left behind *Aluk To Dolo*, the two meta-rituals of East/fertility/rising sun/upstream vs. West/setting sun/death/downstream were still very relevant to this workshop and were discussed at length during the first days. The participants recognized that while they would like to maintain as much of their culture as possible, as Christians they could more easily focus on the traditions of West/setting sun/death/downstream, because these were more readily compatible with Christian theology and practice. When examining the current state of Toraja culture, it is evident that the Western meta-ritual is still much more widespread and prevalent, while the Eastern set of rituals is rarely performed, due to a range of factors: the spread of Christianity, tourism, and more. Rappoport also noticed this trend in her research and spent much of her time documenting the quickly fading Eastern rituals in order to preserve them for future generations of Toraja. In my personal interactions

² Tikurari, mentioned in the acknowledgements (9).

with the Toraja I was thankful for her thorough description of this important duality, and also pleased to observe firsthand that the Toraja themselves view their rituals from this binary perspective.

I have one concern about the respect and authority that this book has gained within the Toraja community, and it is not limited to this study alone but is a more general question for all publications like this: What change has documentation brought to Toraja music? How has the publication of such an excellent and authoritative book affected the Toraja and their understanding of their own culture?

In his introduction to the book, Philip Yampolsky asserts,

What the ethnomusicologist can do is demonstrate to Toraja how rich, powerful, and meaningful their music is. In so doing, she may restore their respect for it, their willingness to resist the forces—“modernizing” pressure from the government, opposition from world religions, ridicule from urban media—that encourage them to discard it. And even if those forces prove too strong to resist, Rappoport’s documents and analyses will enable Toraja to retain awareness of their cultural distinctiveness and of the practices and beliefs that informed the lives of their parents and grandparents and ancestors. (23)

While I generally agree with Yampolsky’s ideas here, I wonder if “demonstrate” is a sufficiently strong action. Through reading this book and then interacting with the Toraja who know Rappoport, her passion and love for Toraja music and culture is clear. While I appreciate all that she has done, I wish she would not have stopped there but would have taken further steps to help the community wrestle with sustainability. For all the comprehensiveness and concern, it feels as though it stops one step short.

Without Rappoport's research, it's safe to assume that many Toraja rituals and musical styles would soon be lost, as there are very few people who still cling to the *Aluk To Dolo* religion and other older traditions. Even in the 1990s, as she was conducting her field research, many of the rituals and their corresponding musical styles were becoming ever less frequent. Preserving a record of the way things used to be is sometimes the best that can be hoped for in this type of situation; this creates a reference for the Toraja and leaves open the potential for a future revival of Toraja musics and rituals.

What of that future? Is Toraja music and ritual now in a solidified, canonized state as a result of this book? Will innovation and change be welcomed or discouraged? Perhaps authoritative documentation such as this book

stifles innovation and creativity and thus adversely affects the future of local musical traditions. Conversely, documentation may be the necessary spark that fans the flames of revival and provides the necessary foundation for creativity and innovation to flourish. Whatever the case, this book reminds me that documentation is not a neutral activity. We as researchers must be aware of the effects of our work, and even our presence, in a community—whether or not we are intentionally working from an applied approach to our discipline.

What to do, then? Perhaps this illustrates an inherent difficulty in applied ethnomusicology: rather than looking to the past, the original, the purest, the applied ethnomusicologist looks to the future and asks how she can walk alongside a community to help them toward their preferred future. Often one is tempted to romanticize “the way things used to be,” but is that a realistic or helpful view? I argue that lively innovation and vibrant creativity are keys for the future of many minority cultures, rather than a cultural concretization of a specific time when the researcher happened to encounter an artistic form, as if our snapshot of a culture is the authoritative picture of how that tradition has always been and should continue to be. If our research is done with the involvement of the local community (or better yet, conducted by the community itself³), we must approach everything—including what is written and published by us—from an attitude of humility and service, not of judgement.

We can love a community by asking insightful questions and offering our knowledge and expertise to partner with them as they grapple with their vision of a preferred future. All of this begins with understanding the situation through observation, and although it is difficult to create a universal model for evaluating the viability of endangered musics, Catherine Grant (2014), Robin Harris (2012), Neil R. Coulter (2007, 2011), and Todd Saurman (2012) have done commendable jobs examining the issue through different lenses and experiences. These are excellent starting points to take the next step beyond documentation and observation.

Although I wonder what further steps Rappoport might take were she to suggest an applied approach, I’m grateful for her remarkable service of documenting and preserving nearly-forgotten Toraja musics and rituals for future generations to interact with. The best endorsement of the quality of her book comes from the Toraja themselves: not only do they use her book, but the way they speak of Rappoport conveys the love and respect they have for her and her years of work in service to the Toraja themselves. It is up to the Toraja what they will now do with the wealth of information she has bequeathed to them, and up to us to decide how best to do research in service to communities around the world.

³ Todd Saurman calls this “autogenic research.”

Bibliography

- Coulter, Neil R. 2007. "Music Shift: Evaluating the Vitality and Viability of Music Styles Among the Alambak of Papua New Guinea." Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University.
- . 2011. "Assessing Music Shift: Adapting EGIDS for a Papua New Guinea Community." *Language Documentation and Description* 10: 61–81.
- Grant, Catherine. 2014. *Music Endangerment: How Language Maintenance Can Help*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, Robin. 2012. "Sitting 'Under the Mouth': Decline and Revitalization in the Sakha Epic Tradition Olonkho." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.
- Lewis, M. Paul, and Gary F. Simons. 2010. "Assessing Endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS." *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 55: 103–20.
- Ricklefs, M. C. 2008. *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*. 4th ed. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Saurman, Todd. 2012. "Singing for Survival in the Highlands of Cambodia: Tampuan Revitalization of Music as Cultural Reflexivity." In *Music and Minorities in Ethnomusicology: Challenges and Discourses from Three Continents*, edited by Ursula Hemetek, 95–103. Wien: Institut für Volksmusikforschung und Ethnomusikologie. <http://www.mdw.ac.at/ive/?PageId=3650>.
- "Toraja-Sa'dan." 2017. *Ethnologue*. Accessed April 12. <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/sda>.