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*Powers of Blessing from the Wilderness and from Heaven:  
Structure and Transformations in the Religion of the Toraja  
in the Mamasa Area of South Sulawesi (review)*

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## Book Reviews

*Powers of Blessing from the Wilderness and from Heaven: Structure and Transformations in the Religion of the Toraja in the Mamasa Area of South Sulawesi.* By Kees Buijs. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006. 262 pp.

Inhabiting large portions of the highlands and upland valleys of South Sulawesi are the Toraja-speaking peoples of the Sa'dan, Masupu and Mamasa River systems. The best known of these peoples are the Sa'dan Toraja, who inhabit the present-day regency of Tana Toraja and have received considerable attention from tourists and scholars over the last three to four decades. From the early 1900s to 1950 the Sa'dan Toraja slowly absorbed Christianity, but under the pressures of Darul Islam and related militant Islamic expansionism in the 1950s to mid-1960s they quickly became a majority Christian people. The indigenous religion continued to heavily influence belief and ritual life in Tana Toraja, and received a boost from tourism and government support during the Suharto era, but only a tiny minority of people today identify themselves as adherents of the religion now known as Aluk Todolo.

The “Powers of Blessing from the Wilderness and from Heaven” is an earnest effort to explain the structure and transformation of the indigenous belief system of the ethnic Toraja inhabiting the Mamasa area of South Sulawesi, to the west of Tana Toraja. (In the decentralization process that has been occurring in Indonesia in the post-Suharto era, this area has been incorporated into the new province of West Sulawesi created in 2002.) The author, Kees Buijs, lived in Mamasa with his family from 1978 to 1983 conducting leadership training for elders of the Mamasa Toraja Church. He

returned to undertake formal anthropological research for two months each year from 2001–03, along with continuing his executive training work for the protestant church in Mamasa. Unlike Tana Toraja during the same span of years, Mamasa remained considerably isolated. Occupying the eastern, highland portion of the regency known until 2002 as Polewali-Mamasa (Polmas), Mamasa lacked influence in a government dominated by the more densely populated lowland section of the regency to the west, composed largely of Muslim, ethnic Mandar. With little investment going into Mamasa's infrastructure, roads remained barely passable and the region was cut off from the economic development occurring elsewhere in South Sulawesi including Tana Toraja, which in particular experienced a lively growth of tourism and benefited from remittances sent home by thousands of Torajans working outside the region.

While not a boon to economic growth, Mamasa's relative isolation helped to nurture and sustain its indigenous religion, called Aluk Toyolo, identical but for pronunciation to the name used by the Sa'dan in Tana Toraja. The slower penetration of outside influences provided Buijs not only with conditions conducive to studying the indigenous religion in Mamasa, but also a vantage point to comparatively view the vestiges of indigenous religion in Tana Toraja, its close cultural relative. The result, which requires some patience to mine, is a fascinating description and analysis of the transformation of essential religious structure and ritual under way in Mamasa, and reflections on how much further the process has proceeded in Tana Toraja.

Buijs makes sophisticated use of the pioneering published sources of Dutch missionary-scholars including N. Adriani, A.C. Kruyt, and linguist H. van der Veen; the meticulous work of Hetty Nooy-Palm; the excellent work of British, American, and French anthropologists; and — most critically — insightful local informants. The combination of accounts spanning nearly a century enables him to present a dynamic view of the roles of religious specialists, of the performance of specific rituals including, importantly, their orientation toward north, south, east, or west, and their intended purpose. He

views these changes, indeed transformations, in relation to shifts in society and environment over the past century among the Sa'dan and Mamasa Toraja. "An important objective of this study," he states in the introduction, "is to show these connections and to indicate elements in the religion which develop under certain circumstances and become prominent in the religious ideas of people, while ... other elements fade away or receive a different meaning or emphasis."

At the risk of over-simplifying this nuanced study, I summarize the author's conclusions as follows. The belief and practice of indigenous religion of the Mamasa and Sa'dan Toraja is aimed at bringing blessings of the gods to inhabitants on earth. In Mamasa, and at an earlier time in Sa'dan Toraja, these gods were deemed to inhabit the earth (envisioned as forest, or wilderness) as well as the sky (heaven). Rituals performed to gods of the earth, performed mainly by females, were intended to bring blessings in life, including good rice harvests, health, and human fertility. Rituals performed to gods of heaven, performed mainly by males, were intended to bring blessings to individuals in the afterlife. Fulfilling obligations in accord with one's status on earth led to achieving that status, or perhaps a higher one, in heaven. Ancestors in heaven could be called upon to help intercede with deities to provide certain blessings on earth. Over time, not coincidentally with the decline in forest cover and greater penetration of the outside world, the gods of the earth — of wilderness — have given way to gods of heaven. Among the Sa'dan in Tana Toraja this transformation already has largely occurred, with a few recognizable vestiges of the past. Now the indigenous religion there almost totally is oriented toward heaven, and its ritual specialists now are all male. This transformation is materially reflected in changes in architectural style in Tana Toraja, most strikingly through the increasingly steep pitching of roofs on the houses. One can see tendencies in this direction in Mamasa, with a declining religious role of women priests, though isolation has slowed this change in religious structure and architecture style.

Buijs describes a process that seems to coincide with a sharpening of the notion of a high, transcendent, god and decline of more

immanent, more immediate gods. His passing reference to an observation from 1917 that the role of female priests was disappearing among the Sa'dan suggests that this process had been at work there for some time. Since Dutch colonial administration first arrived in Sa'dan Toraja only about a decade earlier, and with the pace of social and environmental change still rather slow at this time, I suggest that these processes may have begun in the late nineteenth century during a turbulent period of coffee, arms and slave-trading with the Muslim Bugis. Interaction including intermarriage with these Muslims, most advanced among the Toraja elite, may have initiated the process of structural change in the indigenous religion. If that is the case, then Buijs' suggestion for the more rapid conversion of Sa'dan Toraja to Christianity — because they already were more oriented toward heaven and a more transcendent god than their Mamasa cousins (who had escaped the impact of the Bugis) — is quite intriguing.

The probing study of Kees Buijs makes an important contribution to our understanding of change in the indigenous religion of highland South Sulawesi. It would have been helpful to have included a map of Mamasa, Polemas, and the wider region encompassed in the present-day province of West Sulawesi as well as South Sulawesi including Tana Toraja. The author's substantial knowledge of Christianity in Mamasa as well as Aluk Toyolo presented a missed opportunity to include discussing the interaction between these two religions, and to assess how Aluk Toyolo is faring in Mamasa while in Tana Toraja it continues in rapid decline. Given the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Mamasa since it became a separate regency in 2002, and the wider conflict in and around Poso to the east, I also was longing to learn how adherents to Aluk Toyolo have been affected. One can hope that Kees Buijs will address contemporary topics including these in future publications.

Terance W. BIGALKE