

Introduction

For five years from 1978 until 1983 my wife, my children, and I lived in a place called Mamasa in the Western part of the territory of the Toraja people of Southern Sulawesi. Mamasa is a little village in the centre of a district (*kabupaten*) with the same name. Until 2002 Mamasa formed a part of the district POLMAS, a name composed from the names of the coastal area of Polewali and the mountain area of Mamasa. On the northwest, Mamasa is bordered by the Mamuju district, on the south by the Enrekang, Polewali and Pinrang districts, on the east by Tana Toraja district, and on the north by the province of Central Sulawesi.

My work in the Mamasa region, especially in the area around the village of Mamasa itself, was mainly to provide the local church with assistance in training elders of the many small congregations.

The first time we arrived in the region, in February 1978, we were especially struck by the beautiful scenery of the terraces for growing rice made on the slopes of the mountains. However, the beautiful scenery was not matched by the condition of the road. The small and winding mountain road was almost completely ruined by heavy trucks, transporting goods, fertilizers and people from the coast to Mamasa and back. Most of the time, it was quicker and more comfortable to walk the muddy road full of big ruts instead of being stuck in a vehicle without the comfort of springs or cushions. Our first journey to Mamasa took a full day to cover a distance of sixty kilometres. Then the old World War II truck broke down. After sleeping on the wooden floor of a roadside house, we set out to cover the remaining thirty kilometres to Mamasa on foot.

The first day of that trip I met for the first time the schoolteacher Nicodemus, who would prove to be very helpful in studying the culture of Mamasa. He had just miraculously escaped death, because the truck in which he was travelling had slipped off the road and fallen into a ravine. When we arrived half an hour after the accident, we saw Nicodemus scrambling out of the cabin of the truck that had rolled over. We found a place for him and his luggage in our already fully loaded car.

A remark once made by visitors from Holland became very meaningful

to us: 'The Mamasa area is extremely beautiful! But don't expect much from the means of communication with the outside world.' During the years we lived in Mamasa we seldom had visitors. To go to Makassar, the main city of the province of South Sulawesi, took three days: two days to cover the distance of ninety kilometres to the town Polewali on the coast and another day to reach Makassar. In a tourist guide, we found a description of the road between Mamasa and the coast that did not surprise us very much: 'the road to Mamasa is "pure hell"'. Sometimes, when repairing a punctured tire on the muddy road, we would fully agree. However, most of the time we enjoyed the beauty of the mountains and the impressive rice fields on the mountainsides.

The first year we lived in Mamasa, we received an invitation to attend a synod meeting of the church in neighbouring Tana Toraja, to the east of the Mamasa area. To reach Rante Pao, the place where the meeting was held, we had to walk two days to a place called Bittuang, just across the border of the Mamasa area. There we found a truck going to Ma'kale, from where we travelled by taxi to Rante Pao. Our experience on this journey was characteristic of the difference in development between the two Toraja areas. While all the roads in Mamasa were muddy tracks, the asphalt road to Rante Pao was busy with traffic. People told us that plans to improve the connection between Mamasa and Rante Pao had existed for a long time but were never executed,



Figure 1. Rice fields on mountainsides in the Mamasa area



Figure 2. The road to Mamasa in 1980

because of negligence or corruption. When I travelled from Mamasa to Rante Pao in 2001, it was evident that nothing had been done to improve the situation. Even with a motorcycle the road was impossible to travel because of the many landslides. People who want to use a car from Mamasa to Rante Pao have to travel to the coast first. There they must go south until Pinrang or Pare-Pare, from where a good road runs to Rante Pao.

In 1982, the people of Mamasa were hopeful that the road to the coast would be improved. Bridges were built and the road was compacted and asphalted. For some time, it was relatively easy to travel to Mamasa. In 1985, the first minibuses began to operate to and from the coast. However, because of heavy rainfall, many landslides and the inferior quality of the asphalt, the road quickly deteriorated again.

During our stay in Mamasa, we had the impression that its isolation strongly contributed to the preservation of old traditions and rituals. This impression was strengthened thereafter during several visits I paid to Mamasa in connection with my anthropological research. This research took place during short trips of several weeks duration that I made in my spare time because I had a full-time job until 1994 in a congregation in Holland and thereafter in South Africa in a bible school for indigenous church leaders. From 2000 onwards I was able to give more attention to anthropological research, because I started to work in the Toraja Church of Mamasa, the

Gereja Toraja Mamasa, for two two-month periods each year. In my spare time I could conduct the interviews necessary to better understand the ancient beliefs of the Toraja people. The cooperation of Nicodemus, the schoolteacher I encountered on our first journey to Mamasa, was important. His father belonged to the high nobility. He was a *parengnge'*,¹ an *adat* leader or *hadat* who served under the Dutch Government as a civil servant. One of the last living female priests (*toburake*), named indo' Galo', who officiated in the Mamasa area, is a member of Nicodemus' extended family. The assistance of Nicodemus was very valuable to me in reaching the relevant people and encouraging them to explain things that normally could not be said outside the rituals to which they belong.

Several times I had the opportunity to witness women singing in a rice field, which used to be part of the *ma'dondi'* ritual (Chapter VIII). I was also present during many parts of a major death ritual, performed according to the old traditions in the Mamasa area in 2003. Besides death rituals, the only old ritual that survived until the beginning of the new millennium is the headhunting ritual *bulu londong*, although no heads are taken any more. Unfortunately, I was not able (in 1980 and in 2000) to attend this ritual, although Nicodemus was. He related many details to me (Chapter XII).

During the time we lived in Mamasa, dance groups would perform traditional dances for special events. We were especially impressed by the dances of young women dressed in beautiful clothes who were called *tobisu*, and by the dances of men announced as 'the courageous ones', which is *tobarani* in the Toraja language.

When I made some inquiries into the background of the dances, I was told that they belonged to ancient rituals that the Mamasa people used to perform. Many people still remembered the ritual in which the *tobisu* participated, *pa'bisuan*. Some people told me that they had been present at one of those rituals as spectators or even as participants. Although nobody was able to explain the meaning of the word *tobisu*, everybody I talked to made it clear that the *tobisu* were women who entered the forest during the first night of the ritual. The following morning they would be found dancing high above the ground on branches of a big tree, the *banyan* or *beringin* (*Ficus benyamina*), which is *barana'* in the Toraja language. *Pa'bisuan* was a female ritual, led by a female priest, the *toburake*. Men had no active role in the ritual. When the women rushed out of the village at the beginning of the first night, screaming and with dishevelled hair, it was absolutely forbidden for men to look at them or to ridicule them. There could be severe sanctions if they did so. The following nights, men could only be spectators when the *tobisu* performed

¹ The word *parengnge'* began to be used at the beginning of the Dutch rule. It means: 'somebody who carries the society'.

dances in a big hut outside the village.

In contrast to the typical female ritual *pa'bisuan*, the *tobarani* ritual was a male ritual. *Tobarani* were groups of men who, after a successful headhunting raid, returned to the village with one or more enemy heads. Informants told me that *tobarani* are still active in places where headhunting rituals are performed. Those rituals are called *bulu londong*: feather of the cock. Instead of heads, the performers today use empty coconuts or balls made of dried leaves of the palm-wine tree, *daun ijuk*. Nevertheless, the elements of the ritual are not altogether different from the ritual in former times. It has not become merely a play or a performance for tourists. As in former days, the ritual is still held for the deities, the *dewata*.

The information I received about these two dances and their ritual significance stimulated me to obtain more details, in order to understand the basic concepts of the Toraja traditional religion. Obviously, the rituals were still part of the religious awareness of many people in Mamasa. The elements of the rituals must have deep roots in the old religion, the *aluk toyolo*. Although the Christian religion has been very successful since the beginning of the twentieth century in converting people in the Mamasa area, the rituals of the *aluk toyolo* are still remembered and are sometimes performed. The most recent performance of the *bulu londong* ritual took place in the year 2000 in the village Battarirak, near Mamasa. The last time women danced in the *barana'* tree was around 1960. I have spoken with several women who actually danced on branches of the tree and claimed to have experienced a divine power that possessed them at that time.

Archaic belief systems

In an interesting monograph *Man and Menhirs; Contemporary megalithic practice of the Sa'dan Toraja of Sulawesi, Indonesia*, Eric Crystal (1974:117) has identified the belief system of the Southern Toraja in South Sulawesi as 'belonging to the viable indigenous religious systems that reflect constellations of belief and practice probably antecedent to the arrival of Hindu-Buddhist teachings to Indonesian shores some 1500 years ago'. After a short discussion of the use of megaliths in two rituals related to the cultivation of rice, Crystal comes to the conclusion that they 'reflect a fundamental cosmological principle widely expressed in the autochthonous religious systems of Indonesia – the dualism of male and female elements'. This is a fascinating statement, because it raises the question whether male and female elements in those religious systems can be related to male and female sources of blessing as well or even to deities who are perceived to be male or female.

In his study of 'written liturgical texts linked to an ancient and very little

Indianized native religion of Insular Southeast Asia',² Gilbert Hamonic identifies a strong relationship in ancient times between the Bugis and the Toraja: 'In the oldest times two big groups seemed to separate themselves from the comparison of already known mythologies: the ToLuwu' [...] and the Toraja. [...]. That those two 'kingdoms' have maintained a relationship in an old period is an almost certain fact.' (Hamonic 1987:12-3.)

Hamonic finds evidence for ancient religions of South Sulawesi in rituals performed until recent times in Toraja and, as we shall see in the discussion of the *pa'bisuan* ritual in Chapter XI, in particular in the Mamasa area.³ He mentions in this context the priestess who officiates in the *pa'bisuan* ritual, *toburake*, in connection with transvestite priests of the Bugis (Hamonic 1987:23; see Chapter X). About the proceedings of *pa'bisuan*⁴ he writes, 'it seems to confirm the picture of the oldest beliefs of South Sulawesi that I have tried to sketch, and which without doubt originally were familiar to the Bugis and the Toraja'.

Hamonic (1987:5, 184) sees in the resemblance between elements found in the liturgical *bisu* texts and the ritual *pa'bisuan* an indication that the texts reflect religious ideas going back to a time before Hindu and Buddhist religions started to influence the region. He writes (Hamonic 1987:183) that *pa'bisuan* was performed in the Mamasa area until recent time. We shall see in Chapter XIII that the ritual is still known in some parts of the Mamasa region under the name *malangngi'*. Because of the importance of *pa'bisuan* in understanding the archaic roots of religious thinking I will give a detailed description of the ritual in Chapter XI as it is remembered by the elderly people who used to take part in it.

Of course, rituals belonging to the old religion have changed and have been transformed in the course of time. The arrival of Christianity has especially had a tremendous impact on the religious ideas and practices of the Toraja. Nevertheless, elements in religious proceedings and in particular in rituals that are still remembered by elderly people can give clues for the understanding of older layers in the religion related to a dualism of male and female elements, as indicated by Crystal and Hamonic.

In this study I will compare in particular the ritual *pa'bisuan* in Mamasa with a corresponding ritual in Tana Toraja, *bua' kasalle*. Because of the historical and cultural bond between the Toraja people in Mamasa and in Tana Toraja (Chapter I) religious expressions often go back to the same roots. It is generally accepted, even by the Toraja themselves, that the people in Mamasa

² Explanation from the editor on the back cover of Hamonic 1987.

³ Hamonic 1987:183-4. The source of his information is an article of Manala Manangi 1970.

⁴ Hamonic uses the name that he found in the article of Manangi: *sajo to bisu*, meaning: 'the haggard flying up of the *bisu* women' performing in the ritual. The expression has to do with the way the women 'fly' into the forest. See the description in Chapter XI.

originated from groups that separated from the main population in the basin of the Sa'dan River. It must therefore be feasible to compare rituals in Mamasa and rituals in Tana Toraja, assuming that they developed from the same origin. This comparison can, I hope, produce some conclusions about transformations that took place. It will be instructive to consider both changes in the society and in the environment in relation to the differences in the rituals of the two areas. The changes can help us understand the adaptation of religious ideas, whereas differences in adaptation can point to structural elements in the religion. If, for instance, an aspect of the religion is related to a belief in transcendental qualities of the forest, religious dependency on and expectations of the deities of the forest will probably decrease or even disappear when the land becomes increasingly cultivated. Such religious transformations do not result from decisions made by religious leaders. Impulses for the direction of religious transformations are present in the structure of the religion. An important objective of this study 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, on the other hand, other elements fade away or receive a different meaning or emphasis.

Outline

Before embarking on the central part of the investigation, I will present a brief outline of the history and religion of the Toraja people, in particular the Toraja people in South Sulawesi who live in the Mamasa area, west of the territory of the well-known Sa'dan Toraja. Among the – somewhat forgotten – Mamasa Toraja, old rituals existed until recently, which can help us understand the background, structure and developments in the religion of the Toraja in general.

In a theoretical survey, Chapter II, I will place this study in a broader framework of contemporary research in which much attention is paid to religious ideas of the people themselves and the comprehension of ethnographic facts in relation to belief systems and their transformations.

In chapters III and IV which are about cosmology and the classification of rituals I will describe the framework in which the rituals of the Mamasa Toraja can be given their proper place. This framework is closely related to the belief in divine entities and the blessings that are expected by the people who perform the rituals.

The following discussion of some fundamental rituals elucidates the structural outline of the old Toraja religion. I will concentrate on death rituals in Chapter V and on rituals for marriage and childbirth in Chapter VI.

In Chapter VII I will discuss a very special part of the death rituals for high nobility, the erection of megaliths, in which the special status of the deceased is highlighted in relation to life on earth.

In Chapter VIII I will give attention to a particular ritual, *ma'dondi*, taking place in a certain stage of rice cultivation in the Mamasa area, performed to guarantee the fertility of the rice field.

In the subsequent part of this study I will discuss some rituals, *mekolong* and *pa'bisuan*, that are, in my opinion, fundamental to understanding the structure of the Toraja religion. In a separate chapter I will give attention to the office of the female priest (*toburake*) who officiates in these rituals. In Chapter XI I explain the male headhunting ritual *bulu londong*, which is still performed in a modified form in the Mamasa area. Thereafter it will be possible to discuss transformations together with driving forces that are working in the Toraja religion (Chapter XII).