

***Rambu Solo'*: the Toraja Cult of the Dead and Embodied Imagination**

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Introduction

The funeral ceremonies of the Toraja of Sulawesi are lavish and ornate, in some cases lasting several years beyond physical death. One particularly fine study of the cult of the dead in Toraja society, Jeannine Koubi's *Rambu Solo'*, "*La fumée descend*": *le culte des morts chez les Toradja du Sud*, presents a wealth of detailed description of carefully observed ritual. Koubi's untranslated French ethnography, a 536-page tome, is a monumental work, presenting in exhausting detail descriptions of the various funerary rites that comprise the fullest expression of the Toraja Cult of the Dead still practiced today.¹ It aims at reconstructing a fully representative sequence of these extraordinary funerary processes that can last for years and include living with the decomposing cadaver, repeated blood sacrifice, and a double burial ceremony. While the details are fascinating, Koubi does not offer much interpretation beyond the etymology of the names of the rituals and occasional reference to associated myths recounted separately in the latter chapters of her book.² A study such as this one puts in relief the rituals themselves, seemingly in their most "raw" form, devoid of the intrusive overlay of an outsider's construal. However, historians of religions, unlike ethnographers, are not concerned primarily with description but with eliciting meaning, which is an interpretive enterprise.

¹ Toraja customs have become a major tourist attraction, especially in light of the Indonesian government's successful promotion of the Toraja funerary ceremonies and their tombs as tourist sites.

² This second section also presents other Toraja oral literature, including poems, lyrics, incantations and prayers. Koubi's 100-page appendix includes a transcription of the texts in the Toraja language.

Moreover, in the wake of post-modern awareness that scholarship always involves the observer as well as the observed, the challenge of the interpreter is to strike a balance between allowing the indigenous meanings of the “other” to speak “in their own terms,” and bringing one’s own insights to bear on them. Such an engagement with the material asserts that interpretation is possible because all cultures speak to our shared humanity.

What speaks more profoundly to the basic human condition than death? It is perhaps the awareness of our mortality and our struggle to defy it (symbolically, if not actually) that singles us out from the rest of the animal kingdom. The Toraja’s elaborate and extensive mortuary customs underscore the degree to which every aspect of our lives is infused with a consciousness of our mortal condition, and every aspect of religion with efforts to gain control over the threat of chaos that may be introduced by death.

While one of Koubi’s stated aims is to show “the irreducible unity” (3) of myths, rites and beliefs, in fact, the connection between them is not the subject of her scrutiny. My own aim in working with the dense and detailed data she presents is to show that the rituals in fact do not require complementary myths to “explain” them, nor is ritual a “re-enactment” of myth, but that rituals speak eloquently in their own right. Ritual embodies imagination. Ritual is literally sensational. It startles the habitual mind and provokes a new relationship to the real matter of life that is its medium. It forces participants into a bodily way of knowing that is more substantial, persuasive and credible than the abstractions of myth. The Toraja funerary ceremonies give testimony to the vivid expressive capacity of ritual and its ability to convey in material form complex religious ideas.

In her preface, Koubi alerts the reader to the fact that the Toraja figured prominently in early ethnological studies of such towering figures as Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss and furnished the basis for arguments that they formulated about the “primitive.”³ At the heart of these 19th and early 20th century projections about the differences between the Western “us” and the exotic “them” was the idea of an irreducible divide between thought and action, between those with self-reflexive awareness who elaborated systems of abstract belief, and those who merely repeated the rote acts of tradition. The stereotype of the “primitive” reinforced the sense that myth is the expression of critical reflection while ritual is, at best, its enactment and, at worst, the mute and unreflected manifestation of a more “primitive” mind. This divide endures in popular imagination, fostered in part by the tourism industry that promotes non-Western people as living fossils of an earlier time. Travel brochures tout the Toraja as living in an unchanging condition, in a “land where time stands still” (Adams, “Cultural Commoditization”). The image holds wide appeal. As one observer notes, “Most tourists from most countries tend to regard the Toraja as a ritual being” offering “the chance to be in close contact with some version of the Other, the Exotic, the Primitive” (Volkman 3). Currently, in 2006, a brief article describing a contemporary Toraja funerary ritual is posted to an on-line publication, “Wild Asia,” a journal dedicated to “bringing you closer to Asian nature” (Price). The

³ At the time of Koubi’s research and publication in the early 1980s, few extensive field investigations of the Toraja had been conducted. Since then, there has been a plethora of anthropological writings on their culture. Recent intensive focus on the Toraja, combined with the emergence of a related tourist industry, have made of them “international celebrities, their culture an entity to be studied, dissected, photographed, and packaged for export” (Adams, 1995).

inference is that observing ritual is close to surveying the behavior of untamed animals. Precisely for this reason, it is all the more compelling a task to underscore the self-conscious, reflexive dimension of ritual.

I maintain that ritual is more than instinctual action or a haphazard invention, but a deliberate act, mindfully undertaken. Ritual is culturally constructed, intentionally designed to reflect an interpretation of existence and to bring it to bear on the present moment. In studying ritual, one does not merely determine how it recapitulates myth. Like myth, ritual is an expression of the imaginal mode of being, equal to myth in its capacity to make what is most essential to the psyche real and significant. My aim in analyzing the Toradja Cult of the Dead, therefore, is to blur the conceptual boundary between myth and ritual that persists even in Religious Studies, a field that still privileges the abstract word over embodied performance.

As gripping and even gruesome as some of these funerary practices may seem to the Western observer, the Toraja Cult of the Dead is far from a macabre preoccupation with the frightening or repugnant aspects of death. Rather, the rituals of “Rambu Solo” provide a means for Toraja culture to assert control and meaning over the fact of death. The carefully constructed and deliberately measured funerary rituals ultimately reveal life and death to be mirror images of one another in a constant reciprocating tension.

The Toradja

The Toraja are a people of Indonesia, more specifically, of the island of Sulawesi (formerly Celebes) situated south of the Philippines and north of Java in

the Indian Ocean. The Toraja, whose population now numbers about 650,000 people, are in fact comprised of a number of distinct regional and village groups with which they more readily identify themselves. “With the exception of a brief period of unification in the seventeenth century, political allegiance rarely extended beyond the hamlet or village” (Hollan and Wellenkamp, 7). The name *Toraja* literally means “man from above,” referring to the mountainous terrain of the region in which they live, and was given to them by the Bugis, one of the dominant ethnic groups living along the Sulawesi coast. At the end of the 19th century the Dutch colonists adopted the name to apply to these agriculturalists of the highlands. It was not until Dutch control that a Toraja collective identity began to emerge, though regional alliances remained primary.

Rice agriculture has been the traditional basis of the economy of the Toraja society.⁴ It constitutes the daily food and is “given such value and significance that the interdiction to consume rice as a sign of mourning is considered a fast and corresponds to a true sacrifice” (Koubi 12). Animals raised include fowl, pigs and buffalo; however, buffalo are not used for agricultural labor, but are raised primarily for sacrifice. “The buffalo is the sacrificial animal par excellence; on the economic plane...it is the number of buffalo by which the value of all things is evaluated; symbol of wealth, it witnesses equally to the nobility of its owner” (Koubi 15).

⁴ In recent years, the commodification of Toraja culture for tourists has resulted in the development of a tourism-based economy. According to Adams (1995) “Whereas in 1973 only 422 foreigners voyaged to the [Toraja] highlands, by 1991 over 215,000 foreign and domestic tourists were visiting the region annually.”

Toraja society is highly stratified, and organized on the basis of age, descent, wealth, and occupation. Traditionally it is divided into four hierarchical classes. The “class of gold” is the high noble class constituted by the wealthy. They are considered to possess the traits of courage, justice and knowledge. Principal ritual specialists as well as traditional chiefs originate from this class. The secondary class of nobles, the “class of iron,” is subdivided in degrees, while the greatest number of Toraja belong to the “class of palm tree wood.” In former days, slaves included those born into the “class of grass” as well as prisoners captured in war or those made slaves by debt. These could regain their freedom by repaying the debt while undertaking the celebration of the costly ritual of passage into their new status. While the Dutch colonial government officially abolished slavery in 1909, the descendents of slaves still identified with this class retain duties towards their former masters, including some related to ritual functions of the cult of the dead. The conversion of many Toraja to Christianity, especially those of the slave class, contributed to a reduction of class distinctions.⁵ Nevertheless, class remains the single most important feature of Toraja society.

Toraja villages are comprised of small hamlets grouped together at the summit of hills. The “houses of the ancestors” reserved for nobility (*tongkonan*) are built in the very ornate traditional style. Noted for the striking, elegantly sloped roofs and their boat-like form, these edifices are said to symbolize the

⁵ Having been aggressively missionized by the Dutch Reformed Church in the early 20th century, partially in response to the growth of Islam in the lowlands of South Sulawesi, the majority of the Toraja population today is officially identified as Christian. Although ninety per cent of Indonesia’s population describe themselves as Muslims, only 6% of Toraja do. (Adams 1995). However, the mission failed to subjugate the indigenous religious culture and local traditions remained strong.

vessel used by the ancestors who came from the North. The image of a stratified society organized on a hierarchical spatial plane is reiterated in the afterlife, which is ritually depicted in provisional buildings constructed for funerals to receive the dead. The facades of these ritual buildings, like the coffins fashioned after them, are highly decorated. According to Koubi, the motifs contribute to the sacralization of the building and ensure the protection of its occupants (Koubi 17).

The Religious System

The ensemble of cult, ritual rules and sacred prescription is known as “Aluk To Dolo,” translated by Koubi as the “religion of the ancestors” (25)⁶ This religious system is divided into two principal parts. The first is known as “the religion of the rising sun” or “the smoke rises.” Its practices are reserved for those rituals concerning the living, as well as the “living dead,” the ancestors, and the divinities from whom health, protection and prosperity are solicited with burnt sacrifice. These rituals are performed to the East of the village, towards the rising sun, in daylight. Their spatial orientation corresponds with the new beginnings hastened by rites of passage including: marriage, purification, healing, agricultural rites, rites for constructions and buildings. The second category is called “the religion of the setting sun,” or “cult of the dead,” or more generally, “*Rambu Solo*” (“the smoke descends”). *Rambu Solo*’ refers to the ensemble of rituals

⁶ The Indonesian government guarantees religious freedom to five religions recognized by the state: Islam, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. In 1969, when the Toraja sought official recognition of *Aluk To Dolo*, it was classified as a sect of the *Agama Hindu Dharma* religion, the formal name of Hinduism in Indonesia.

associated with the dead. “The metaphor 'the smoke descends' around which the multiple mortuary prescriptions are organized ... evokes at the same time a dying fire symbolizing the passage from life to death, the sacrificial rites and a certain conception of the afterlife” (Koubi 2).

Koubi understands the phrase “the smoke descends” to refer to an esoteric conception of life in the hereafter as an inverted form of earthly existence. This lesser-known belief derives from myths about the living who succeeded in visiting the realm of the dead and found it a world in reverse: The dead eat earth, worms and wild weeds; there is no food culture (Koubi 318). There is no light in the domain of the dead except that emitted from burn marks on the forearm, which are the scars of initiation rituals (in other words, light emitted from an extinguished fire). According to this mythic version, the dwellings are isolated and existence is solitary, uniform and morose. This view of the afterlife makes no reference to social hierarchy since wealth loses its meaning and value in a static and isolated world. In this backwards existence, Koubi surmises, smoke does not rise but descends.

The more widespread belief about the afterlife, however, is that it is identical to the Toraja society and includes meetings, discussions, dancing, singing, cooking, and marriage all of which replicate aspects of the living community. From this perspective there is no rupture with the institutions or reversal of the patterns of earthly life. This permanent continuity with society is underscored by the idea that the realm of the dead includes a market -- the most active place of social interaction -- that trades the objects of value placed in the

tombs and the sacrificial animals slaughtered for the dead (Koubi 319).

According to this popular conception of the afterlife, there is no judgment or retribution; rather, wealth and social status is maintained. Material standing is so critical that admission to the realm of the dead depends on what the descendants of the deceased sacrifice on his or her behalf (Koubi 320). The deceased must not arrive empty-handed, for admission would be denied, and the dead would be forced to wander as a miserable ghost, and worse yet, might cause the survivors to pay for their negligence with their lives (Koubi 276-277)⁷.

This reiteration of the importance of wealth and social standing in the afterlife is played out in the hierarchy of funerary rituals. For example, in the first of the series of funerary rituals undertaken for a person of noble rank, the opening rite is called “make the cat commit suicide.” The cat belonging to the deceased is caught and placed on the platform or bed with the body, while the celebrants call for it to kill itself and follow its good master. The cat is “thrown” in a gesture miming a suicidal leap. According to one of the myths included in Koubi's collection of oral literature, the cat, the “guardian of wealth,” is mistreated by his master. Offended, the cat leaves. All the master's wealth - a buffalo, pig, dog, chicken and gold – take on human form and follow the cat, leaving the thoughtless master poverty stricken (Koubi 326). Significantly, during the rite the cat is not actually killed (as the name of the rite suggests), but is made to take leave (in keeping with the myth) with a symbolic gesture of suicidal self-sacrifice.

⁷ In recent interviews with Toraja villagers, they claimed that *Puya*, the traditional land of the dead, and heaven are separate places, “a belief that deters some Alukta adherents [adherents to the traditional way] from converting to Christianity because they do not wish to be separated in the afterlife from their deceased Alukta relatives” (Hollan and Wellencamp, 180).

It seems that the aim is to make the wealth of the deceased follow the cat, as its guardian, into the afterlife along with the good master. The ritual allusion to this myth reinforces the popular belief about the nature of the afterlife (over the esoteric version), suggesting that there is a continuity of social status and that wealth is as important in the realm of the dead as in that of the living.

What of the metaphor of the descending smoke? Rather than representing the inversion of the order of the land of the dead to that of the living, I propose that this image can be best understood as a symbol of mutual dependence and reciprocity between the realms of living and dead. Reciprocal gesture, I will show, is a leitmotif in Toraja culture, one that permeates the whole of the funerary process.

From the beginning of the funeral to the final rite, an onslaught of sacrifices literally “go up in smoke” as offerings and appeasements to the dead. In this way the burnt offerings “rise” to the gods and ancestors. Yet these costly offerings do indeed “return” to the community as blessings that “descend” in direct proportion to the honor conferred on the dead. Effigies of the dead are uniformly constructed with one palm upturned to receive an offering of homage from decedents and in petition for favor from the divinities, while the other hand is turned downward in a gesture of blessing. The gesture presents in iconographic form the reciprocal “feeding” that, as we shall see, is a central theme in the Toraja funerary cult.

Because the rites assure the protection by the dead and secure their favor in effecting fertile harvests and communal harmony, the cult of the dead is also a

fortification of the community of the living. Sacrifice is such a critical aspect of every ritual that the Toraja call sacrifices the “articulations or joints of Aluk,” the original ancestors (Koubi 39). Just as joints hold the body together, so sacrifice unites the social body. The reciprocal nature of sacrifice is evident in the fact that such ritual offering literally supports the living; the traditional Toraja economic system is based on debts incurred and “repaid,” in part, as sacrifice upon the death of the creditor. Thus, the Toraja “cult of the dead,” far from being a horrifying or morbid preoccupation with death, actually affirms the continuity between the animated world of the living and the spiritual world beyond on which it depends.

However, such interdependence also implies the necessity for distinction. The very fact that all rituals pertaining to the dead are separately classified as *Rambu Solo*’ underscores the need to set the dead apart from the living. Careful temporal and spatial distinctions are made between the categories of ritual pertaining to the two realms. Precautions are taken to separate when and where they are performed. For example, funerary rites must be performed between sunset and sunrise (Koubi 40). Preparations for the celebration of these rites, however, can be done in the day since these acts belong to the other half of the system of meaning: the living community. Preparations are made in the East, while the rites of *Rambu Solo*’ are carried out to the West of the village.

I suggest that the rituals of *Rambu Solo*’ do not only pertain to death but also provide a means for bridging the critical divide between the two cosmic realms. According to one Toraja myth of creation, the division of heaven and earth gave birth to the two primordial divinities whose marriage produced a

pantheon of offspring who rule over every cosmic domain. This pantheon is not rigid and fixed: “it is open and certain ancestors can have access to it. They are then called gods (or divinized ancestors) ... they have the same attributes and powers as other divinities” (Koubi 25). It would appear then, that an important aim and duty of the funerary ceremony is to help the most worthy deceased gain access to this pantheon. Nothing could better ensure blessing upon the living progeny.

The idea that there can be a continuum between the “living-dead,” that is to say the ancestors, and the divinities is supported by the Toraja belief that all beings, mortal and immortal, share the same “vital principle.” *Sumanga* is the vital force that is “invested into the carnal envelope at birth.” It is also synonymous with the physical duration of a human life. *Deata* (*dewata*) is a Toraja term derived from Sanskrit meaning “divinity,” but it is used to mean simply the “vital principle” or “active force” (Koubi 25). By stark contrast, death is the definitive absence of this vital principle. The sick are thought to suffer a waning of the vital principle but not a definitive separation. The vital principle can leave the body temporarily in sleep, or it can be jolted from the body by intense emotions such as surprise, anger, sadness or suffering, and result in immobility resembling death. One does not wake a sleeper abruptly for fear of compromising the return of the vital principle to the body. This conception of the location of the vital principle lends insight into the complexity of the Toraja funerary rites. They are designed to minimize the abrupt disjunction between living and dead, and instead control the moment when the vital principle takes

definitive leave of the body and the community to join the ancestors in the hereafter.

According to the Toraja, the dead are not immediately alienated from the living by the separation of the vital principle from its physical “envelope.” The *bombo*, the ghost or vital essence of the deceased, is thought to hover near the cadaver, visible to those with the powers of insight into other realms, until the completion of the funerary cycle when it is no longer a forceful presence in the living community. During this time (up to almost a year) it is forbidden to refer to the deceased as “dead.” Instead, he must be said to be “sick” or is referred to as “he who sleeps” (Koubi 28). Just as one does not wake a sleeper abruptly, the Toraja do not dispatch the dead with haste, perhaps for the same reason: fear of compromising the intended journey, and in this case, causing the vital principle to return or wander rather than achieving its appropriate destiny in the realm of the dead.

That death is not a state or condition but rather a transition to another cosmic realm is evident in a Toraja myth (Koubi 328). According to this myth, the offspring of the two original primordial divinities wanted to marry but could not find suitable wives. So, Puang Matua, the “old god,” created a woman from the earth and called upon the wind to penetrate her body to give her life. The wind said: “I would like to be able to go back to my place of origin, since I would not like to rot and be eaten by worms; I ask therefore that this woman die when her time comes.” This is how human beings became mortal. The essence of human life is an immortal primordial element, fluid and invisible. The vital

principle is the wind, which departs when a life has reached the apex of its “ladder” of life (Koubi 338).

Regulating Death in Time and Space

On the night of a death, close relatives of the deceased bathe the body and massage the abdomen with coconut oil. He or she is dressed in beautiful new clothes made or purchased by the deceased for this purpose, and adorned with jewelry (Koubi 56). The body is set out for viewing in a seated position, propped up by bamboo. In the Western region, the body is seated against a ladder with up to five crossbars, depending on the social status of the deceased. A hollow bamboo is placed in the mouth so that the liquids from the decomposing body can drain. The exposition lasts two days. The body is then laid in a horizontal position and enveloped, tightly bound with woven strips. It is brought into a bedroom at the southern end of the house, placed on a mat or low platform, and covered by a blanket like a sleeper. Beneath the mat are leaves to catch and soak up liquids that seep from the decomposing body and that the heavy binding does not absorb (Koubi 55). This preparatory ritual toilette -- the dressing, enveloping and exposition of the body -- is not considered part of the funeral *per se*. In fact, during this stage, the deceased is still considered to be “sick.” For up to a year, until the first funeral festival is held, the cadaver remains in the house. During this time, food and drink are offered to the deceased as if he or she were still among the living.

According to Koubi's account, "no one seems troubled in the least by the rapid decomposition of the body...(or) the suffocating odor that invades the house and even more strongly in the funerary bedroom" (Koubi 56). Her observation of this "anomaly" is notable in two ways: it is one of the only overt interjections of the author's voice or reference to her concrete presence at these ceremonies. More importantly, it offers a significant clue into the Toraja's conception of death, not as an end but as a metamorphosis that leads to life. The Toraja can endure the symptoms of this bodily transformation, devoid of the horror of a decay that signals the irrevocable undoing of life, because these changes herald a passage towards that which will sustain the living. The funerary ritual is the vehicle for that passage and regulates death in time and space. The feeding of the dead is the first of a succession of ritual acts that makes death conform to the Toraja cultural standard. It is a deliberate constructive blurring of the categories of living and dead that obscures the moment of physical death as a natural occurrence, and at the same time reveals that death can only be a culturally proscribed event. The purpose of the funeral is to orchestrate the controlled release of the spiritual life force of the deceased and to conduct it safely to the realm of the ancestor and divinities. Until that time, the newly dead must be fed as the living.

Despite the refusal to allow death to be an instantaneous occurrence, the Toraja must contend with the vacuum inevitably created by the sudden absence of a member of society. The prolonged period of preparation for the final separation is one means of controlling and regulating what would be otherwise a chaotic disjunction. "At death the elements of a personal and social life no longer

congregate in a viable way, for the space of a body no longer symbolizes their full presence” (Sullivan 481). Toraja funerary rituals redefine the temporal and spatial parameters of life. The slow physical decomposition correlates with the gradual disintegration from social space. By the end of the second funerary festival, the remains, desiccated and heavily wrapped, have undergone a complete metamorphosis and can be left in the sepulcher at the boundary of social space. Before this ultimate dispatch, however, the reach of the deceased is ritually shown to extend throughout the domain of the living. During the second funeral festival, a length of wrapping sheets is extended from the body, through the house, out the window, around the sacrificial buffalo, to the sacrificial platform (Koubi 160). The extension of the fabric also marks a passage that the body eventually follows through the geography of the village, from the “womb” of the house (where the most dramatic physical transition takes place) to the platform on the sacrificial field outside and to the South West of the village where a provisional ritual village has been built. It foreshadows the deceased’s ultimate destination: the realm of the dead. Symbolically interwoven in this way, “the space of the village is consubstantial with the space of the body” (Sullivan 482).

The customs surrounding death both veil its process and reveal its meaning. The funerary rituals make the body the focus of spectacle during which its impressive transformation is staged and witnessed. “Ironically, high visibility and conspicuous display also cover over a mysterious mode of existence” (Sullivan 491). In the Toraja funeral, even while the body is displayed and represented, at successive stages of the funeral it is increasingly enveloped and

obscured. The various ritual representations of the deceased vividly depict the dissolution of the person from a being with social identity and recognizable embodied state to a vague and immaterial persona of the ancestral realm.

Taking my cue from the Toraja ritual imagery, I illustrate this metamorphosis as ladder that the vital principle must scale in order to enter the afterlife:

BOMBO =====	Vital Principle, essence of life
CADAVER =====	Personal Identity
CADAVER WRAPPED ===	Transition/transformation
BAMBOO EFFIGY =====	Social Identity
BUFFALO =====	Guardian/Vital Principle
BUFFALO SACRIFICED ==	Transition/transformation
TOMB EFFIGY =====	Cosmic Identity/Ancestral Presence

At the outset the invisible *bombo*, the ghost or vital essence of the deceased, must be dissociated from the body. The seated cadaver, wearing the funerary regalia that will similarly adorn the tomb effigy, is bound to a bamboo ladder in order to be placed on view. Soon, however, it is encased in funerary wrappings and no longer recognizable. Swathed in strips of binding cloth, the body takes on a perfect cylindrical form. Within this enclosure, the body undergoes the irreversible physical transformation of decay. Although it is the object of ritual spectacle, the body becomes more and more eclipsed, less and less a visible and recognizable entity.

The first simple bamboo effigy is therefore the deceased's identifiable stand-in, called the "visible double." The effigy represents the persona, still an

active presence in society. It is placed at the door of the house in mourning to enable the deceased to “participate,” direct, consult and intercede in the events of the festival.

At the second funeral, the vital principle of the deceased is transferred from this effigy to the buffalo. At first the buffalo is represented as a “guardian of the vital principle” and psychopomp who will accompany the deceased on the path to the afterlife. However, at the moment of its sacrifice the buffalo is more closely identified with the deceased. This is the moment when the death is culturally defined and acknowledged. The death of the sacrificial animal is tantamount to the death of the person whose transition is now complete and irrevocable. In this way death is symbolically controlled. Through the ritual management of death’s time and place the deceased is ensured a properly regulated termination of life.

The tomb effigy, a more realistically sculpted figure garbed in the clothing of the deceased, is mounted in the galleries of the cliff-side sepulcher and left there to indicate that the deceased has taken a permanent place among the ancestors.

Thus, the metamorphosis from person to ancestor is visually depicted in the reconfiguration of the body and *bombo*/vital principle, with the former becoming more and more eclipsed and the latter made more and more conspicuous. Ultimately, the immaterial essence of the deceased has the greater substance and is displayed as the permanent effigy. The image of the deceased in the afterlife depicts the extension of identity into the ancestral realm, enjoying the

reach as far as that of the divinities, into cosmos. The tomb effigies display the dead as a visible, and therefore effective, presence. The characteristic posture of gift and bestowal of blessing indicates the dynamic of reciprocity established between the living and dead.

Consumption and Control

Interestingly, the effigies are not approached in supplication but remain distant emblems of the deceased's new immaterial condition. Like the dead themselves, the effigies are simultaneously held as sacred and dreaded. The Toraja funeral ceremony suggests that the boundary between living and dead is ambiguous, yet such ambiguity "reveals itself as a condition akin to primordial chaos... absolute and unbounded... overwhelming and consumptive" (Sullivan 492). As the following excerpt from a Toraja funeral lamentation, the *londe*, reveals, sustaining too intimate and prolonged an association with the dead is untenable.

You are at the edge of the sky,
Me, I am here and there,
You walk on the clouds
I walk on the fog.
...
Their houses are apart
Their villages are separated
But inside, their hearts are confused
Like the fog in the morning. (Koubi 126).

The "fog" in which the living who mourn exist is tantamount to the "clouds" where the dead reside. With "hearts [that] are confused" the living and the dead

both are like “fog in the morning,” indistinct and indistinguishable. In order to cut through this menacing chaos, *Rambu Solo*’ must reassert control. One way that the Toraja ritual establishes control over this intolerable existential situation is by deliberately managing the boundaries of the body, specifically by regulating the patterns of consumption: eating and fasting.

The first funerary festival ritually opens with a seemingly enigmatic gesture that signals the importance of consumption and its possibility: An elder throws a chick against the cornerstone of the deceased’s house or clubs it with his pestle and throws its body under the funerary house. A Toraja myth, which Koubi recounts in the latter part of the book as a popular account of rebirth, may lend insight into the significance of this rite (Koubi 369-389). Tulangdidi is a young girl whose father, in a rage over her having accidentally killed his dog, heartlessly condemns her to die. Tulangdidi’s mother gives her a chicken egg to take with her to the place where she was to be slain. When the chick is newly hatched, it scratches at her body’s remains, feeding on its worms. When the chick grows to be a cock, it crows three times and regurgitates Tulangdidi’s remains. From these consumed remains, her body is reconstituted. The revived Tulangdidi is able to avenge her own death.

Certainly, the ritual act of killing the chick does not recapitulate the myth since the hatchling does not feed on the body but is killed. What the myth and rite both acknowledge, however, is that life and death mutually feed one another. The act of ingesting and digesting, like death itself, transforms physical substance into a life-sustaining force. “Eating is an important threshold experience, a rite of

symbolic passage in which important changes occur” (Sullivan 420). Through ritual feeding and fasting participants in *Rambu Solo*’ rites experience this mythic reality acutely. At the apex of the funeral ceremony, the deceased is identified with a sacrificial buffalo that is consumed by the gods in smoke, then fed to the community in a ritual meal. The ritual consumption of the meat, symbolic of the body of the deceased, brings participants to experience the most intimate unifying bond possible with the dead: the incorporation of the deceased within the very bodies of living. This is the act that resonates with the myth and its expression of hope for renewed life, not in actual resurrection, but through the living community. While death eventually consumes the living, the ritual meal effects a radical reversal: the living consume the dead, and find sustenance for the community in this feeding.

The rituals of *Rambu Solo*’ make repeated reference voracious forces of life and death and their mutual feeding. It is a theme that is culturally familiar and expressed even outside the ritual frame. For the Toraja one indication that death is approaching is a craving for unusual foods. A dying person makes “requests for what are considered luxury food items, such as poultry, water buffalo milk, palm wine and various kinds of fruit” (Hollan and Wellenkamp, 182). Desire for such lavish and costly things indicates the beginning of the final shift in ontological condition. At the moment of death, the dying person is not left lying down, but ideally, is cradled in a relative’s arms and held “just like...when a child is given the breast” (Hollan and Wellenkamp 183). In this

gesture, the newly dead are symbolically “fed” as one would feed a newborn baby.

In the Western region, the first funeral festival begins with the killing and preparation of all the important sacrificial animals (buffalo, pig, dog, chicken). “An offering is placed at the feet of the deceased whose tongue hangs out, whose body is beginning to decompose” (Koubi 128). The image is disturbing to the Western mind, evoking all the horror of death as a vast and voracious abyss into which one is swallowed. It calls to mind Paul Vernant's portrait of the Greek mask Gorgo, the image of the horror of consumption and metamorphosis. Its mouth is that of a monstrous devourer whose tongue “instead of remaining hidden in the inside of the mouth, protrudes outside like the male sex, displaced, exhibited, threatening” (Vernant 79). A cosmos predicated on the consumptive process threatens to devour itself and return to its primordial state of undifferentiated chaos. But while Gorgo may represent a Western conception of death as menacing violation and devouring chaos, the Toraja ritual act of feeding the dead suggests that the death is a process of transition that requires nurturance.

At the same time, the association of sacrificial food and feeding with death implies that there is a mutually sustaining reciprocity between the living and dead. Ritual sacrifice and feasting are introduced periodically throughout the funeral ceremony. The imposition of death as sacrifice that feeds the community, the sharing of sustaining meals and the feeding of the dead in the presence of the living all serve to assert the primacy of order and to keep at bay the potentially totalizing force of consumption.

I suggest that the deliberate and ritually managed feeding restricts death's devouring threat. In this way, the funeral ceremony offers reconciliation with both the terror of consumption and the dread of the dead through repeated emblematic experiences of mutual feeding. In *Rambu Solo*, the process of consumption is fragmented into ritual segments, contained as a life-sustaining act, and thereby controlled.

Once the deceased is finally placed in the sepulcher and the effigy is erected on the open gallery, representing the integration of the dead among the ancestors, his hat and dish are thrown to the foot of the cliff. The deceased's social being has been absorbed into the collective ancestry and no longer needs to be literally fed (Koubi 209). Moreover, the final transition of the deceased from the midst of the living eliminates the threat of death's devouring force.

The Funerary Rites, a Ritual Ladder

Toraja life is conceived as a series of steps or periods marked by ritual passage and scaled to varying heights, according to social status. So too death is not an occurrence in one moment in time, but an incremental passage, marked by the proper celebration of prescribed funerary rituals.

Funerals highlight the reality and importance of Toraja social stratification. The funerary rites are explicitly compared to a ritual ladder scaled to varying heights, depending on the social status of the deceased. The uppermost rungs comprise a category of rites reserved for nobles. "Nobles can celebrate the

most simple rituals reserved for the lower classes; the opposite is considered a serious transgression. We see the importance of the link between the funerary rites and social stratification” (Koubi 38). The ladder is also the prevailing metaphor of ritual itself, in that it represents both the ordeal of passage and the successive steps of ritual prescription. Their proper celebration in prescribed stages is essential to a successful passage to the afterlife and the attainment of the deceased’s rightful place there. “One must be attentive not to skip a step if one wants to achieve the symbolic construction with a tranquil mind - without fear of reprisals...” (Koubi 38). The efficacy of ritual is paramount. Its failure would be of consequence not only for the situation of the deceased, but also for his/her descendents.

A fundamental aspect of the Toraja funerary celebration given scant analysis by Koubi is the fact that it is a double ceremony, with two funeral festivals held for every death, separated by an interval period of indeterminate duration. The first and second funerals in many ways parallel one another in both structure and content. Koubi analyzes the proceedings of both ceremonies using a straightforward tripartite division: opening, ceremony proper, and closure. This division, however, is overly simplistic and obscures the inherent structure that produces ritual efficacy. Each of the two funerary festivals is comprised of many subordinate rites marking the “rungs” of their progression, and even when the action or function of a given ritual in the first festival is similar to one in the second, the rituals are nevertheless identified by different names. The names

differ from region to region as well, and Koubi, in her effort to provide an encyclopedic account, includes all these variations.

A complete outline of the double ceremony's many rites not only betrays a significant repetition of themes in the two funerary festivals but also reveals an interesting chiasmic arrangement in the ritual sequence. A chiasm is an X-shaped configuration; This structure was the pattern often used in classic Hebrew poetry, in which the lines in the first part are mirrored by counterparts in the second that echo their meaning (e.g.: a, b, c, d, c¹, b¹, a¹), and where the central line or "turning" point (d) is the most significant. In the Toraja funerary festival, a similar organizing structure applies. At the center of the second ceremony, the order of events is reversed. The repetition of the pattern of the two funeral festivals reinforces the Toraja idea that life and death are two sides of a ladder to be ascended and descended. The reversal underscores the critical turning point, which is the definitive rupture between the living and the dead.

What follows is an outline of the sequence of the three sequential ritual periods and their constituent rites organized as Jeannine Koubi presents them. The subsequent structural analysis shows the entirety of the double funeral ceremony to be the community's accompanying passage to the realm of the dead and back, as well as a process of leave-taking of the deceased once he or she has been properly dispatched to the ancestral realm. The numbers in bold to the far right and left identify the overarching structural parallels and repeating themes that I have identified and will discuss below.

Funeral Rites of the Toraja

The Death: Drums stop beating and lamentations announce the death, and visits and offerings begin. The body is prepared: washed, dressed, exposed, and enveloped in fabric wrappings.

I. First Funeral Festival (held 10-12 months after death)

- A. The Opening
 - 1. divinatory consultation (1)
 - (A) 2. opening rituals are linked with myth: “sacrifice” of animal guardians/psychopomps (day old chick/”suicide of the cat”) (2)
- B. The Ceremony
 - 1. *Ma’puli*, “to die at that instant”: a passage from “sickness” to “death”
 - a) sacrifice of 2 buffalo represents physical death and loss of the vital principle (3)
 - b) start of ritual fasting
 - c) lamentations and recitation of oral literature
 - 2. *Ma’basse* “go suspend” and *Mabalun* “to envelope”
 - a) effigy made and displayed (4)
 - b) cadaver wrapped
 - c) intensification of ritual fasting: only raw food eaten by widow(er) (5)
 - (B) 3. *Ma’batang* “that which is essential” or *Ma’tombi*, “to raise the flags”
 - a) family and entourage sacrifice buffalo and pigs in the sacrificial field, recite invocations (6)
 - b) cardinal points are marked on distribution platform
 - c) conciliation of primordial ancestors at the moment when the deceased prepares to join them.
 - 4. *Ma’patama kayu* – “to place in wood”
 - a) cadaver placed in wooden coffin (7)
 - b) provisional “burial” (within house)
 - c) posthumous name given to the deceased; name passed on to a living descendent
- C. The Closure
 - 1. *Mangombo*, “the beginning of mourning”
 - a) duration of one day to one month
 - (C) b) restrictions and symbolic emblems of grief respected (8)
 - 2. Triple sacrifice: pig, chicken, dog completes festival (9)
 - a) purification and separation from deceased (10)

II. The Interval Period: Duration, Myths and Rites

- A. Period of Quest: minimum of nine months
 - 1. Association with the myth of *Babu’ Sonlong*

2. Family, especially children of deceased, must strive to meet ritual obligations, and prepare for the second festival

B. Rites of Interval

1. Periodic sacrifice and drumming
2. “Central Pillar”: middle interval sacrifice
3. “Ritual Market”: exchanges at sacrificial field prepare for second ceremony
4. Cock fights – ritual “game” enacting ordeal of the dead

III. Second Funeral Festival (must be celebrated after the harvest)

A. The Opening

- | | | |
|-------------------|--|-------------------|
| (A ¹) | 1. <i>Ma’Tundan</i> – “to take up the ceremony again” | (1 ¹) |
| | a) sacrificial rite at East to obtain authorization to proceed | |
| | 2. Construction of ritual buildings and provisional housing | (2 ¹) |
| | 3. <i>Mangaro</i> – “to wake a sleeper” | |
| | a) deceased removed from coffin in order to “participate” in festivities | (3 ¹) |
| | b) body wrapped again within larger cylinder | |
| | c) final effigy mounted at house along with guardian ox | (4 ¹) |
| | d) body placed on pillared platform | |
| | e) posthumous name attributed to deceased | (7 ¹) |

(B¹)

B. The Ceremony

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|-------------------|
| (6 ¹) | 1. Cortege to sacrificial field/miniature provisional village | |
| | 2. “Sacrifice in the night”; homage to the deceased | (6 ¹) |
| | 3. “Day of Meat”: culmination point; great sacrifice and distribution of meat | |
| | 4. Sacrifice of “guardian of Effigy” (ox) | |
| | 5. Last ritual “meal” with the dead; not consumed | (5 ¹) |
| | 6. Placing of body in Sepulcher along with final effigy (<i>tau-tau</i>) | (4 ²) |

C. The Closure

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|
| (8 ¹) | 1. Purification ceremony | |
| (C ¹) | 2. Lifting of mourning restrictions and fast | (8 ¹) |
| | 3. Final sacrifice | (9 ¹) |
| | 4. Destruction of provisional buildings; separation from the dead | (10 ¹) |

It is often the case that in ritual the most critical act is neither the first nor final, but the one that occurs at the apex of the dramatic movement, at the center of the ritual structure. This is a time of intense ritual ordeal intended to effect

transformation. Interestingly, the central crossing point between the two Toraja funerary festivals is an interval, known as a time of “quest.” Certainly, this is the liminal period when the status of the deceased is ambiguous, when his or her ultimate fate is not yet achieved and so must be supported by the family’s observance of ritual injunctions and sacrifice. Significantly, the duration of this interval is a minimum of nine months; the deceased undergoes a critical “gestation” in an occluded state. During this ritual period, however, it is the child and not the mother who bears the responsibility for the parent’s transformation into a new ontological condition. By meeting their ritual obligations and observing injunctions, the children support the deceased through the ordeals that he or she is thought to endure in passage to the realm of the dead. The ordeals themselves are enacted symbolically at this time in the cockfights.⁸

As the physical death of a noble approaches, the Toraja sound the drums ceaselessly until, at the moment of death, the beating suddenly stops; “It is the silence, interrupted by lamentations that announces the death” (Koubi 54). By contrast, during the interim period a drum is beat at the time of each sacrifice. During the otherwise indeterminate interval period, sacrifice is made during the evening wake every three or seven nights. In this way sacrifice delineates distinct periods of time. It cuts through the embodied life of a victim just as the sound of the drum cuts through silence. With drumbeat and sacrifice, the interval is kept from having an unbounded quality, but is made a period of vigilant control and

⁸ For possible insight into the significance of the cockfight in this context as a means of negotiating the new identity and social standing of the deceased, see the seminal anthropological work by Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” *Daedalus* 101 (1972) 1-37.

expectation. Moreover, sacrifice imposes order on time by controlling its symbolic end: death. Ritual sacrifice determines the moment of death, and makes death occur repeatedly in regulated periods of time.

Both the first and second funerary festivals open with a rite that authorizes the action to proceed (#1 and #1¹). Both then perform acts associated with Toraja myth: In the first case, animal guardians are symbolically sacrificed (“suicide of the cat”) and in the second, buildings are constructed to represent the realm of the dead (#2 and 2¹). The third immediate structural parallel involves marking the transition of the deceased. In the first instance *Ma’puli* (“to die at that instant”) ritually establishes the moment of death; a sacrificial buffalo is killed and said to “mime the death of the deceased” (Koubi 63). A joyful rush of children to collect the blood of the animal in dishes or bamboo marks the moment as an “act of thanksgiving” (Koubi 63). The meat of this sacrificial animal, so closely associated with the departed, is not offered to the deceased, nor are members of the family permitted to consume it. However, the rest of the community partakes of the meat. “Once the body is eaten, the soul no longer has a proper place in this world” (Sullivan, 518). It is only at that point when the “body” is ritually consumed that the death is culturally acknowledged. This act, however, signals the beginning of a process, not a definitive end. In the second festival, the parallel ritual, *Magaro* (“to wake a sleeper”), corroborates this claim. It involves removing the body of the deceased from its provisional coffin in order that he might participate in the festivities (#3 and 3¹).

The next rung of the ritual ladder makes the physical body invisible while making the social and spiritual body more concrete. In the first funerary ceremony during the rite of *Mabalun* (“to envelop”) the cadaver is wrapped in

winding sheets by a specialist, the *To Mabalun*, and in *Ma'basse* (“to suspend”) an effigy is suspended in front of his/her house (#4). The sequence is paralleled in the second ceremony when the body that has been removed from its provisional coffin is wrapped again while a more ornate and realistic effigy (*tau-tau*), as well as his/her “double,” the guardian buffalo, is mounted outside the home of the deceased (#4¹). In an even closer parallel action, the occultation of the dead to a place of transformative enclosure occurs at the culmination of the second funeral ceremony proper, when the body is placed in the sepulcher and the effigy is left on the cliff-side gallery overlooking the village (#4²).

At this juncture the ritual proceedings intensify until the closing of the festival (ritual movements # 5, #6 and #7). It is interesting that in the second funerary festival the order of the parallel ritual actions (# 5¹, #6¹ and #7¹) are undertaken in *reverse*. It renders the overall mirroring arrangement of the two parallel festivals imperfect but at the same time this “chiasm” underscores the ultimate purpose of the second ceremony, which is to take leave of the deceased and separate once and for all the living from the dead.

In the first festival, the widow, already observing the mourning fast that forbids eating of the staple food, rice, is no longer allowed to eat cooked food, that is, food “touched by fire” (#5). More particularly, she is forbidden to consume rice or have contact with the cereal grains. These are the fundamental sustainers of life as the staple food of the community, but as regenerative seeds such foods would be inappropriate for consumption by the dead. Therefore, those accompanying the deceased through the ritual fast must also abstain from them.

Her shunning a diet of cooked food in favor of raw food can be interpreted as a signal that the deceased, with whom she is intimately associated, is withdrawing from civilized society. The simplification of the diet is a reversal of the processes of culture and symbolizes the advancement of death. In a sense, she has entered into death with her companion, whose “fire is extinguished,” a Toraja metaphor for death (Koubi 81). In the second ceremony, the parallel linking of consumption with death occurs in the last ritual meal shared with the dead just prior to his final departure for the sepulcher (#5¹). Unlike the other meals and offerings taken alongside the cadaver, this meal is in fact not consumed, but as Koubi points out, in this instance the living, like the dead, do not diminish the quantity of food of which they ritually partake. This notable abstinence calls to mind the archetypal theme found in the world’s myths (and most notably in the myth of Persephone in the underworld) in which the living are enjoined not to eat in the land of the dead. In this case, the “fast” protects the living and prepares for a definitive separation from the dead.⁹

During the next set of rites, *Ma’batang* (“that which is essential”), the family sacrifices a buffalo and pigs, while invocations are recited to the ancestors inviting them to share in the feast. Flags are raised to mark the cardinal points on the platform where the meat is offered (#6). These actions find their corollaries in the “Sacrifice of the Night” and the “Day of Meat” (#6¹). However, while in the

⁹ Another study of the Toraja of the North-West area (Hollan and Wellenkamp) reported that at this point, mourning regulations were lifted with the *sipakendek* ceremony, a marriage ceremony between the surviving spouse and another widowed person. The couple “stay together for a few nights, during which time they are permitted, but not required, to have sexual relations” (190). If they don’t wish to remain together a simple divorce is performed. The ritual makes definitive the dissociation of the widow(er) from the deceased spouse.

first instance, sacrifice is made to conciliate the primordial ancestors and performed in the day, in the second instance the sacrifice pays homage to the deceased and is performed “in the night,” at the time appropriate to all things concerning the dead. Nevertheless, the meal itself is consumed on the “Day of Meat,” in the time reserved for the living. The distinction between the first and second ceremonies is significant. Sacrificing for the deceased in the night presents a critical acknowledgement that the deceased belongs with the dead and is “fed” accordingly. Here again, the acts of sacrifice, eating and consumption serve to reconcile the living to the dead even as they differentiate the living from dead.

Most importantly, at this point in the second festival, the buffalo that has served as the “Guardian of the Effigy” is slaughtered as well. This sacrifice is not consumed. It is too much identified with the deceased to serve as a meal, but as the stand-in for the deceased, it is definitively dispatched to the realm of the dead. To dispatch the deceased is the ultimate purpose of the funeral festivals, and so fittingly, the act of the sacrifice of the Guardian of the Effigy occupies a critical place in the order of the rites, at the crux of both the first and the second funeral ceremony.

The final movement of the first ceremony proper is the rite called *Ma'patama Kaya*, meaning “to place in wood” (#7). In the middle of the night, the cadaver is placed in a coffin sculpted from a hollowed tree trunk. In the Western region the bottom of the coffin is called “the man,” the opening called “the navel,” the top called “the woman.” The coffin is carved “like a [traditional Toraja noble’s] house [the *tongkonan*], in the form of a boat” (Koubi 127). A

provisional “burial” is celebrated by a rite called “to bring together,” in which the two parts of the coffin are united and sealed with honey, a substance associated with fertility (Koubi 130). The coffin is left in the house and “sometimes a bamboo is inserted into the ‘navel.’ This bamboo traverses the floor to enter directly into the earth or opens into a recipient to function as a canal and absorbs the liquids from the decomposing body” (Koubi 130). The bamboo “umbilical chord” mediates between the dead in the ancestral realm and the “sleeper” who is not-yet-among-the-dead, just as an actual umbilical chord links the living mother to the not-yet-among-the-living fetus in her womb. The imagery relates sexual union, fertility and gestation with death. The coffin, like the womb, is a vehicle for the transformation of physical existence, a metamorphosis that leads to new life. The placement in the coffin is only a provisional burial, just as the gestation period within the womb is only a temporary enclosure in which physical transformation transpires.

Also at this time a posthumous name is given to the deceased in preparation for life in the hereafter, and his/her given name is ascribed to a living relative (#7). For both, the new name indicates a new ontological condition: “the passage from one state to another; new names are given at birth, after childhood ritual, after childbirth, and posthumously” (Koubi 107). This naming is reiterated in the second festival, but occurs much earlier on, at the moment of the ritual “waking the sleeper” when the body is placed on a platform so that the deceased may participate in the ceremonies in his honor (#7¹). Following this, the wrapped

body is placed in the final sepulcher and the effigy portrait, dressed in the deceased's clothing, finds its permanent place in the gallery of other departed.

Both festivals close with parallel rites of purification. In the first instance, they mark the "beginning of mourning" while in the second they signal the lifting of the mourning taboos established at the close of the first festival. The final separation from the deceased is symbolized by the destruction of the provisional buildings.

The progression of the first festival might be understood as an ascent on the ladder toward the interim period of occultation and initiatory transformation. The reversed order of the rites in the second festival could be likened to a ritual descent on the other side of the ladder as the deceased takes his definitive place among the ancestors. Most significant, however, is the critical reversal at the center of the second ceremony when the living must turn back, making the necessary definitive break between the living and the dead. Taking a meal apart from the deceased during the day, and leaving the last sacrificial animal to decay, the living community distinguishes itself from the dead and from the one it has accompanied to the sepulcher, and returns to receive its nourishing blessing from across the divide of death.

Conclusion

Death, a fundamental, inevitable, physiological fact, points to the most objective aspect of human existence: that we are material creatures subject to the conditions of the physical world. Physiological being is the most concrete,

absolute “fact” of our human existence, and our physical experience is the source and context of meaning that we ascribe to existence. So death as a material fact of reality is also one of the most profound gages of meaning.

In ritual, death is made a “symbolic fact.” Expressed in the terms of culture, death can be conceived and evaluated, for in culture there is no fact without symbolic value. Death in Toraja traditional culture is made such an important symbolic fact that it defines an entire category of religious expression and meaning, representing half of the symbolic matrix of Toraja society: “the smoke descends.” In Rambu Solo’ the ultimate emblem of death is the gesture of the effigy, simultaneously seeking sacrifice and conferring blessing. In this image, death refers back to life.

Death makes visible time's inescapable transforming effect on the human body, but the Toraja make the body an icon of change that promises new life. Like gestation before birth, death relies on time and enclosure to affect its transformation. The cylinder of the enveloped cadaver expands in ritual time, as does the womb doing its generative work: ultimately the dead as ancestor blesses and sustains the living. *Rambu Solo’* shows death to transcend the reductive material end. The consistent motif of feeding, fecundity and gestation reiterated iconographically throughout the cult of the dead makes death a passage to life, not a devouring monster. Through the persuasive force of its ritual, the Toraja Cult of the Dead triumphs over the physical fact of death and the chaos that it threatens to impose. The rituals of *Rambu Solo’* bring the living through a transformative process, as powerful as the transforming nature of death itself.

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