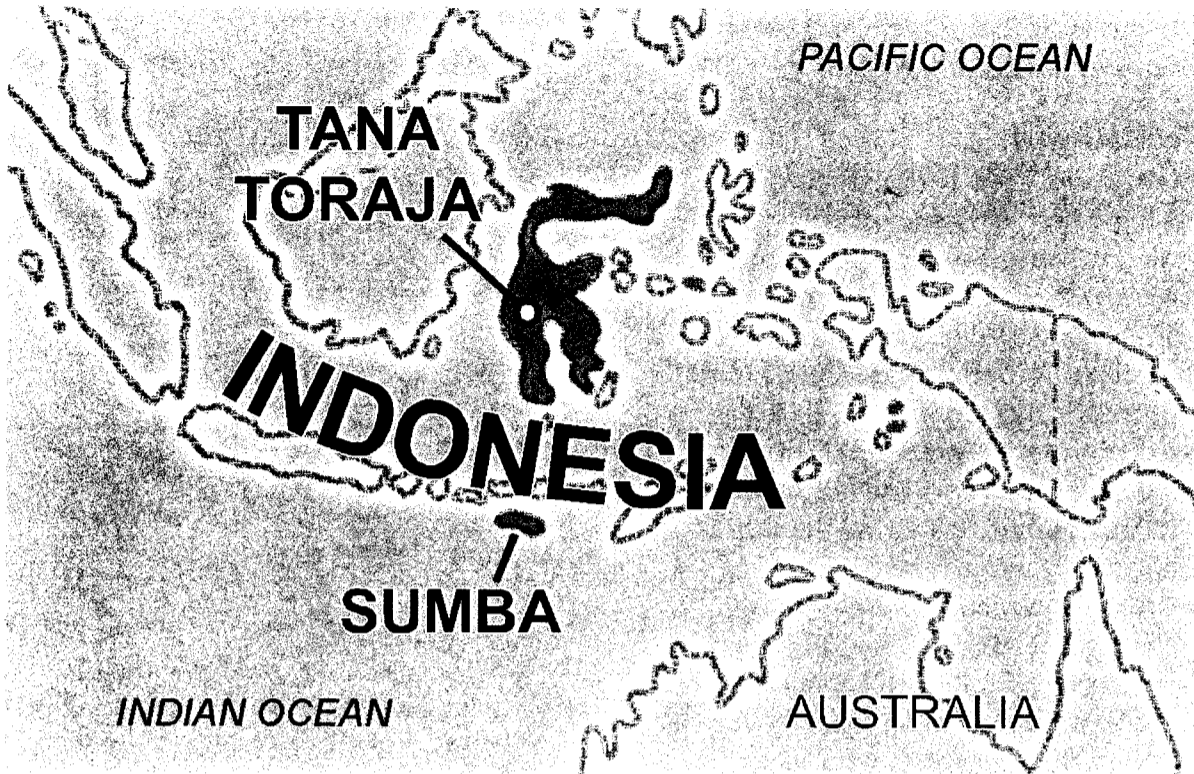


# Indonesian Funerary Traditions



## “Unity in Diversity”

Indonesia is a huge country. It has over 17,000 islands spread out over an area larger than the continental US. It also has a large population with over 220 million people, making it the world’s fourth most populous nation.

Any country this size would be diverse, but Indonesia is exceptionally so. People speak hundreds of different languages (as many as 669), represent all of the world’s major religions, and come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. All call themselves Indonesians; their national motto is “unity in diversity.”

## Ancient Connections

In *Reverent Remembrance* we have chosen to exhibit something about the ways people remember the dead from just two small parts of Indonesia—the island of Sumba, and Tana Toraja in the central interior of Sulawesi. While nearly 90% of Indonesians consider themselves Muslim (and there are, in fact, are more Muslims in Indonesia than any other nation in the world), the customs practiced in Sumba and Tana Toraja are similar to those practiced in other parts of Indonesia before Islam and urbanization had a major influence. Indeed, Sumba and Tana Toraja became relatively isolated from the pathways of early Islamic influence beginning in the 16th century. Islam was introduced to Indonesia by seafaring traders. Tana Toraja, located deep



Produced by The Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, October, 2003

page 1 of 2

inside the mountains of central Sulawesi, was rarely visited by the Muslim traders who plied the coast. Sumba is south of what were the main trading routes for spices, which ran along the northern coasts of Java, Flores and out to the spice islands of Eastern Indonesia.

### **Living Traditions**

People in Sumba and Tana Toraja are not, however, “living relics” of some otherwise lost culture. While they were outside the sphere of early Islamic conversion, they have certainly been well connected to the rest of the world for the past century. In both places, Christianity has had a major influence on people’s lives for at least a hundred years. Other forces help keep their traditions alive and well—and constantly changing—including those honoring the dead. Tourism, interestingly enough, may be one of those forces. Many international tourists visit the beautiful villages of Tana Toraja, and many hope to get a glimpse of a funeral ceremony. Their presence is not unwelcome, since having large numbers of funeral guests who have traveled from long distances is a sign of prestige in Tana Toraja. Similarly, the beautiful hand woven cloths of Sumba, as well as the dramatic Pasola festival, have attracted international attention and injected new cash into the economy.

Despite the forces that have helped sustain their funerary traditions, both the Dutch colonial regime that ruled Indonesia before World War II and the Indonesian government since then have tried to limit and control these ceremonies. Both governments have seen them as threatening examples of local autonomy that exist outside of accepted “world religions” and have found them a distraction from economic development. Incredibly, these community-based traditions continue to thrive, helping survivors remember and honor their dead in culturally relevant and meaningful ways.

