Transformation of traditional ceremony as rational choice: 
A case study of Toraja society in Indonesia

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Abstract. Every ethnicity around the world has a different tradition of funeral ceremony. One of these in Indonesia is called rambu solo' performed by Torajan people in Toraja (or Tana Toraja). Rambu solo' is a traditional funeral ceremony, which aims to respect the spirits in returning to the immortality life with their ancestors. This study thus aims to understand the motives and the decision making process with regards to the chosen form of the rambu solo' ceremony from the rational choice perspective. The study adopts the qualitative approach. Data was collected through indepth interviews and field observations, as well as documentation related with the traditions and culture of Toraja community. The research findings indicate that the motives for social status value did not reflect rational choice. Nevertheless, these factors social status value is the most cited reason why informants chose a certain form of rambu solo' ceremony. On the other hand, it was found that economic motive reflects rational choice. It was, however, the least cited factor by informants on why they chose a certain form of rambu solo' ceremony.

1. Introduction
Every ethnicity around the world has a different tradition of death and funeral practices. This tradition consists of values and cultural identity which are believed and performed as ritual. The study conducted by Hoy found that death rituals have been practiced in many parts of the world, based on various religious traditions and cultures [1]. This practice aims to honour the deceased in the community and encourage the people left behind to connect and support each other and tell the stories about the transformation of life. In Africa, for example, death rituals are seen as a social event for the community, functioning as a reunification of long-separated families and people regardless of their differences such as believers or non-believers. It serves as a social glue which can bring people to come together in more inclusive sense [2]. Death and funeral practices in Australia are a common, everlasting tradition for many Aborigins and these practices are now developed with the use of online social media, where it used to be face to face interaction [3]. In Indonesia, Torajan people, one of the ethnic groups, has long been practicing a very unique death ritual, named as rambu solo’. The rambu solo' is a funeral ceremony as a manifestation of Torajan life philosophy and their indigenous worship
Toraja people have indigenous beliefs called Aluk Todolo. It is polytheistic belief based on ancestral principles and forces of nature. However, many members of the Torajan community have converted to Christianity.

According to Sitonda, in the context of Aluk Todolo's belief, the rambu solo' ceremony in the past was aimed to honor and deliver the spirit of the deceased to the spiritual realm along with their ancestors located at the Puya (afterlife) [5]. This traditional ceremony has since been refined, because the deceased individual(s) is/are considered truly dead only after the entire ceremony procession is completed. This is when his/her soul reaches the level of god (To- Membali Puang), to then become deity God (Deata) and giver of blessing to his/her descendants.

Rambu Solo’ ceremony is a complex ceremony involving elaborate funeral and burial rituals. This complexity reflects the Torajans’ philosophy of life and their views towards death, deceased persons and the afterlife. In the beginning, Rambu solo’ was mainly associated with traditional beliefs relating to Aluk Todolo. However, as time passed by, the beliefs underwent some changes, which impacted the people’s perspective on Rambu solo’.

Some people assumed that these changes happened due to the spread of Christianity through education in Torajan society. This situation could be seen from the socio-cultural change theory, which explains the change through the process of diffusion [6]. With this change, the decision making and performance of rituals are subjected to other motives, namely social status, economic and cultural motives. This subjectivity in decision making has led to the emergence of different forms of rambu solo’ rituals [7]. The problem is whether the choice of a certain form of rambu solo’ ceremony could be said to reflect a rational choice or otherwise.

The study area is located within the Tana Toraja District. The distance of Tana Toraja district from Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi Province, is approximately 329 km. The size of Tana Toraja Regency is about 2,054.30 km². Tana Toraja is between 600 m - 2,800 m above sea level. The location of Tana Toraja district can be seen in figure 1 (red circle sign).

![Location of Tana Toraja](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Research Site - Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia
Source: Central Bureau of Statistics of South Sulawesi, 2016
2. Methods
This research was conducted at Lemo Village, North Makale Sub-district, Tana Toraja Regency, Province of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The study employed qualitative method [8], with phenomenology approach [9]. Primary data were gathered by interviewing six informants, and also through direct observation [10]. Selected key informants were adat stakeholders and religious leaders. In terms of age, they are over 60 years old and have had experiences in conducting rambu solo’ rituals. In addition, secondary data were obtained from various written sources and documents about Toraja. Forms of rambu Solo’ ceremony can be classified into two categories, namely non rapasan and rapasan. The former refers to ditallung bongi ceremony which requires three to five buffalos, dilimang bongi ceremony with 6 to 11 buffalos, dipitung bongi ceremony with 12 to 17 buffalos. For the rapasan category, it consists of rapasan layu-layu, which requires 18-23 buffalos, rapasan sundun with 24-50 buffalos and rapasan sapu randanan with up to 51 buffalos. The informant’s motive to choose a certain form of rambu Solo’ ceremony was based on the verstehen approach introduced by Weber and Schutz [11]. In the context of this study, the actions of informants to choose one form of rambu solo’ ceremony were much influenced by motives of social status and economic. Rational choice theory is a theory of how individuals make their choices based on their personal inclinations [12].

3. Results and Discussion
3.1. Rambu solo’ Ceremony: Motives of Social Status and Choice
Motives can be interpreted as the power or desire within individual that causes him/her to act. Social status, on the hand, is defined as a person's position within a social group [13]. According to Soerjono Soekanto, generally, there are three ways to obtain social status in society, as follows:

a. Ascribed status, which refers to social status gained from heredity
b. Achieved status, which refers to social status gained from personal efforts
c. Assigned status, referring to social status which is granted to individual

In the context of choosing the form of rambu solo’ ceremony, one's social status plays a crucial determination. The social status prevailing in the execution of rambu solo’ ceremony was originally based on ascribed status. However, with modern development, the implementation of these cultural rituals at present is not only based on ascribed status, but also based on social status gained by one’s achievement, in particular, economic and wealth achievement of an individual as described in achieved status. This change, however, is considered to be an ignorance and not in accordance with customary rules, as explained by Jamilus Payung (pseudonym), an Adat Coordinator of Makale Sub-district, as follows:

“The implementation of Rambu Solo’ ceremony has been determined by adat (custom), according to the social class of individual called tana’. Tana’ determines the form of Rambu solo’ ceremony that someone is allowed to do. But today, the customary rules are sometimes not followed by the family in the practice of this ritual ceremony”.

Jamilus Payung’s explanation of the function of tana’ (social class) in determining the form of rambu solo’ ceremony is a manifestation of social status for someone in carrying out the ceremony rituals. According to Jamilus Payung, in the past, the social status of a person in Toraja society was only obtained through heredity, but now one's social status can also be obtained through achievement, particularly in economic success. This can be seen in rambu solo’ rapasan ritual, which not only can be performed by the nobility, but the non-noble classes are also not prohibited if they are economically capable. Jamilus Payung's explanation of the change in the way of social status is gained in Toraja society is the social change from the ascribed status to the achieved status through the implementation of rambu solo’ ceremony.
Social status in Toraja society can be seen from the so-called *tana’* class (level of social class) [14], as described below:

a. *Tana’ bulaan* (high noble class) - the form of ceremony is *rapasan sapu randanan* (up to 51 buffalos) and *rapasan sundun* (24 to 50 buffalos)

b. *Tana’ bassi* (middle noble class) - the form of ceremony is *rambu solo’ rapasan layu-layu* (18 to 23 buffalos), *dipitung bongi* (12 to 17 buffalos), and *dilimang bongi* (6 to 11 buffalos)

c. *Tana’ karurung* (ordinary people [pa’tondokan]) - the form of ceremony is *rambu solo’ ditedong tungga* (1 to 2 buffalos) and *ditallung bongi* (3 to 5 buffalos)

For the case of informant, Kundang Masola (pseudonym): he explained that he had performed six ceremony rituals in the form of *rapasan sapu randanan* and *rapasan sundun*. The number of animals that he had to provide himself for the ceremony was 102 buffalos and approximately 300 pigs. From the social status dimension and the form of *rapasan* ceremony Kundang Masola had performed, it can be said that he chose *rambu solo’* ceremony based on emotional consideration. Kundang Masola’s father came from the social status of *tana’ bulaan*, when his mother was named *Puang Indo’ Sa’dan* who was the daughter of *Puang Makale*. According to Kundang Masola, Toraja society and their behavior should conform to *adat* provisions as long as it did not contradict the religion. In performing *Rambu solo’* ceremony for his parents, Kundang Masola explained as follows:

“I have performed *rambu solo’* ceremony for my parents in accordance with their social class as nobles. I chose *rapasan sapu randanan* ceremony for my late father and *rapasan sundun* for my late mother's mourning because of their nobility status. As a child, despite the difficult and heavy economic conditions to perform this ceremony, I was trying to carry out the ceremony as an obligation and respect for my parents”.

According to rational choice theory, Kundang Masola’s choice indicated that he was aware of the impact of social status of *Rambu solo’ rapasan* ceremony. The proper form of ceremony for his deceased's parents was *rapasan sundun* and *rapasan sapu randanan* ceremony, indicating that he understood the action he took to conduct these ceremonies. The choice of ceremonial forms of *rapasan sundun* and *sapu randanan* was derived by his desire to show the social status of his noble family. However, this did not conform with rational choice theory as the choice of ceremonial form is carried out to satisfy only three of the six conditions in rational choice theory explained by Coleman. Kundang Masola’s explanation above are actions that were based on the motives of social status.

Another case was explained by an informant, Suleman Pabia (pseudonym). He explained that he had performed *rambu solo’* ceremony for his late mother in 2004 at Tambolang, an area in Lemo Village where many noble families resided. As a person from half-born of Tambolang, Suleman Pabia conducted *rapasan sundun* ceremony, where he sacrificed 25 buffalos and around 300 pigs. The reason why Suleman Pabia performed *rambu solo’* ceremony in the form of *rapasan sundun* could be seen as follows:

“I have practiced *sambu solo’* ceremony for my late mother in the form of *rapasan sundun* as a sign of affection to her. In addition, I did the ceremony rituals for the good and social respect, which in Toraja is called "nallianki kameloan sola taruk sioso’ta, na dipopa’dokko melo tu toma’parenta sia to ma’alan ada’ (strives for the good of the self and the descendant, and respects government and community leaders)”.

In the context of rational choice theory, Suleman Pabia's explanation above shows that he realizes the impact of social status from conducting *rambu solo’ rapasan* ceremony. The choice to conduct that specific form of ceremony ritual indicated that he understood the action chosen. The choice of ceremony in the form of *rapasan sundun* was due to the reason for achieving the social status of the family as *to makaka*. However, this did not conform with rational choice theory because the choice of ceremony form of *rambu solo’* made by Suleman fulfilled only three of the six conditions in rational choice theory. Yet Suleman Pabia had tried to achieve the social status of the family as *to makaka* and
gain recognition both from adat and the community. Suleman Pabia’s explanation was a form of explanation of actions that were socially motivated.

In rapasan sapu randan and rapasan sundun ceremonies, one of the conditions in performing the ceremony is to provide some buffalos (saleko) which can cost more than IDR. 600,000,000. In contrast, rapasan layu-layu requires some buffalos (bonga) which costs around IDR. 300,000,000. The type of bonga buffalos is cheaper than saleko and those types can be seen below.

3.2. Economic Motive and Choice

In the context of this study, economic motives can be understood as desire derived from inside the individual or outside the environment that encourages individuals to take economic action [15]. In rambu solo’ ceremony, the economic principle that prevails is, for instance, frugal habit, in which with regard to conducting rambu Solo’ rituals, one often avoids being extravagant. The way to do this is to conduct rambu solo’ ceremony and simplify its procession. This can be done by shortening the number of days of rambu solo’ ceremonies, reducing the number of cottages (lantang), reducing the number of buffalos that are sacrificed by following customary rules, and ignoring the prestige factor. This can be achieved if a person or family can reduce the desire and minimize any risk of loss.

The informant Yohani Pala’ (pseudonym) who has economic capability and can be classified into social class of tana ‘bassi has a different story. Yohani Pala’ comes from Tambolang (a noble area in Lemo). She has performed rambu solo’ ceremony for her late husband Simon on February 13, 2014 in Lemo village. When her husband was alive, he had served several important positions, namely as Head of Upper Secondary School (SMEA) at Makale and Head of Education and Culture Department of Tana Toraja Regency. With these positions, the deceased can be categorized as to makaka and classified in the social class of tana ‘bassi (middle noble class). By taking the role and social status that the late Simon possessed into account, the deceased should actually have had a ceremony in the form of rambu solo’ rapasan. However, his wife and children agreed to conduct rambu solo’ dipitung bongi ceremony instead of rapasan, with 14 buffalos to be sacrificed. The reason for choosing this form of ceremony is explained by Yohani Pala’ as follows:

“At first, I and my children chose dilimang bongi ceremony with the sacrifice of 11 buffalos, following the message of my deceased husband during his lifetime that later when he died he asked us to conduct only a simple ceremony. But due to the pressure of our big family and given the status and role of the deceased during his life, finally I and the children agreed to choose the form of dipitung bongi ceremony with the sacrifice of 14 buffalos”.

In the context of rational choice theory, Yohani’s explanation about the choice of dilimang bongi ceremony shows that she realized the economic impact of conducting rambu solo’ ceremony. The
proper form of the ceremony for her deceased husband is rapasan ceremony, but she chose to conduct dilimang bongi ceremony, indicating that she understood the action chosen. The decision for conducting dilimang bongi ceremony was because she wanted a simple ceremony. The action was due to economic consideration and the consequences of the economic reason had been considered. She was concerned with the consequences, as she referred to cost-effective consideration on the one hand, but gave less social recognition of her social status on the other. Furthermore, she was able to distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of various ceremonial forms and decided to conduct actions that were economically beneficial. Having considered all factors, this conforms with rational choice theory because the form of rambu solo’ selected fulfilled all the conditions in rational choice theory. The explanation of Yohani Pala’ in choosing a form of rambu solo’ ceremony could be seen as economically motivated.

Another case was also explained by the informant Paul Pattung (pseudonym) who was chosen by the community to be chairman of adat institution of Lion Tondok Iring Village. As he holds an important position in his community, it can be said that Paul Pattung is to makaka which can be classified into social class of tana' bassi. Paul Pattung has conducted rambu solo’ ceremony four times and these were not in the form of rapasan rituals. There were also relatively few animals sacrificed, with seven buffalos and about 30 pigs. With his occupation as a civil servant at that time and the status of his father as siambe’, Paul Pattung should have conducted rambu solo’ ceremony for his parents in the form of rapasan ceremony. But he did not do it as explained below:

“my family and I have done rambu solo’ ceremony four times, that is one for my biological father dipitung bongi (with 12 buffalos to be sacrificed) in 1983, for my biological mother dipitung bongi (with 14 buffalos) in 1995, for my father-in-law dilimang bongi (with 8 buffalos) in 1998 and for my mother-in-law dilimang bongi (with 10 buffalos) in 2009. If you see the social status of my father during his lifetime as siambe’, of course the ceremony that should be conducted for my mother and my father is in the form of rapasan ceremony, but we did not do it. The reason is we balanced between need for customary ceremony, educational needs of my children, and other household needs”.

Based on rational choice theory, Paul Pattung’s explanation about dipitung bongi and dilimang bongi ceremony that he chose to conduct for his deceased mother and father and his father-in-law and mother-in-law showed that he was aware of the economic impact of celebrating rambu solo’ ceremony. The proper form of rambu solo’ ceremony for his mother and father was rapasan ceremony, but he decided to conduct dipitung bongi ceremony, indicating that he understood the action chosen. The choice of conducting dilimang bongi ceremony was because he wanted to do simple ceremony and it was due to economic considerations. The economic consequences for his decision in terms of choosing dilimang bongi ceremony had been considered and it confirmed that he paid attention more to economic reason and less to the recognition of social status. He was able to distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of the ceremonial forms available and chose the actions that were economically motivated. This is thus in line with the context of the rational choice theory as it conforms to all the requirements in rational choice theory. Thus, Paul Pattung’s explanation can be illustrated as a decision that was mainly driven by economic consideration.

4. Conclusion
Overall, the results of this study indicate that in terms of the motives of social status, informants chose the form of rambu solo’ ceremonies for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to preserve the social status obtained by heredity (ascripted status). Secondly, it was to achieve social status obtained through deliberate effort (achieved status). It can be defined that these two groups chose the form of rapasan ceremony which was emotionally motivated due to the satisfaction of social status. Hence it did not meet the context of rational choice theory. In terms of economic motives, informants chose the form of rambu solo’ ceremony also for two reasons. The first was based on frugal reasons cited by informants
from middle to upper economic class. The second was based on financial ability for middle- and lower-level informants. It can be argued that these two groups chose the form of non rapasan ceremony rather than rapasan as a rational choice for cost-saving reasons. This therefore complied with rational choice theory. As mentioned above, from the standpoint of Coleman's theory, it can be concluded that the motives of social status do not refer to rational choice. However, both motives are considered to be the main reason why Toraja people choose a certain form of rambu solo' ceremony over other forms. Although economic motives are in accordance with rational choice, nevertheless, rational choice is not given priority when it comes to deciding the most appropriate form of rambu solo' ceremony.

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