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Director's response

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Film Reviews

Dana RAPPOPORT, dir., *Death of the One Who Knows*. 82 mins. In Toraja and Indonesian, with English subtitles. Sulawesi, Indonesia (Le Miroir, Gabriel Chabanier; Planimonteur; Centre Asie du Sud-Est), 2021. Available through Documentary Educational Resources.

Death of the One Who Knows opens and closes with scenes from the funeral of an elderly traditional ritual specialist (Nene' Lumbaa) in the Toraja highlands of Indonesia. The filmmaker is ethnomusicologist Dana Rappoport, who worked with Lumbaa from 1993 until his death in 2018. He adopted her as a fictive daughter; she recorded and studied the traditional music and poetry about which he was an expert; she made several visits to his village; and, after his death, she created this 82-minute film from images, video, and audio recorded at various times over the three decades. The film presents a vivid and moving soundscape of Torajan ritual life (and of ambient sound and everyday life). In a mix of black and white and color, in both still shots and video, close-ups and wide-angle views, with both live sound and prerecorded audio, the film shows Lumbaa in the many different ritual settings in which he officiated and provides an accessible sampling of the traditional Torajan genres of music and chanting: from the quiet prayer spoken over a chicken about to be offered to the deities; to the loud solo declamation from a high platform or at the side of a young water buffalo about to be sacrificed; to the melismatic choral songs sung by men in colorful ritual attire at a house celebration or in the black of mourning at a funeral. The varied soundscape also includes Catholic and Protestant liturgy, Pentecostal church singing, and the loudspeaker-

enhanced announcements of the new secular 'speechmakers' (emcees). And in the final funeral scenes, the sound is turned to a low volume and instead we hear a voiceover in the form of a recording of the funeral song spoken by Lumbaa himself.

While much of the film consists of performed musical and spoken ritual, conversations about ritual practice are also salient, and, as a result, the film relies to a considerable extent on the written word: transcription, translation, and subtitles, often not accompanied by narration. Rappoport's conversations with her two key consultants, the elderly ritual specialist and Yans Sulo', a younger Catholic pastor, provide insight into the two men's different ways of interpreting ritual practice. The priest comes across as much more accessible: speaking slowly and mostly in Indonesian, with some Torajan expressions mixed in, he offers his theological and sociocultural interpretations in an outsider-friendly manner. He emphasizes the need to "explain" the "meanings" of the ritual words (e.g., the expression "to go downstream" at a funeral), which he claims most Toraja today no longer "understand." According to his view, traditional ritual speech instead is felt to have "energy" and "power" (he uses these English loanwords) to which people nowadays respond with what the translation calls "longing" (*BI merindukan*). Such interpretations differ from those offered by Lumbaa, from whose commentary three themes emerge: his evaluations of the cohesion or organization of the speech; his sense of himself as someone who gives moral advice; and the accommodations he makes with Christianity.

As an example of the first, in one scene early in the film, Rappoport and Lumbaa are work-

ing on a typed transcript of a ritual text when, prompted by Rappoport, Lumbaa disputes its correctness. Rappoport's intention seems to be to show that the knowledge of this poetic language has declined so much that he alone knows the correct words of the text. Yet the commentary that he volunteers shows how he evaluates ritual speaking. When Rappoport presses him on what is wrong with the transcription, she elicits responses like "it's not true" (translated "counterfeit") and "it's not original." He (along with an off-camera elder) adds that something has been "added" and "[the speakers] are boasting of their wealth." Later in the film, he complains (in reference to the words of a secular "master of ceremonies") that they mix elements that ought to be kept separate ("what is first is put last, what is last is put first").

In addition, Lumbaa emphasizes his role as "a place for asking" (as this is described poetically)—that is, as one who considers the moral consequences of human action and gives authoritative advice. A word that he uses repeatedly is *pakilala* (BT): "to remind, advise, warn." Throughout the film we see him telling assistants what to do as they set up a ritual space. We hear him inside the house advising a visitor from another village how many water buffalo to sacrifice on which days of the man's father's funeral. And we see him teaching his grandchildren how to clean and cook a chicken over the fire and how to read chicken entrails. When Lumbaa meets with Pastor Yans, the priest asks about offerings made in response to transgressions (BT *massuru*), a longstanding point of theological difference between Christianity and Aluk to Dolo. Lumbaa then replies that instead of doing sacrifices to atone for transgressions, people come to us and ask us "what does this mean?" (BT *apa batuannana?*), and we answer and then they pray (BI *sembayang*). In other words, he continues to give advice and moral guidance, even in the context of Christian practice.

We see more of this accommodation with Christianity and modernity nicely presented in a sequence filmed over New Year's 2015–2016. Before the festive meal is eaten, Lumbaa explains how in the past the "new year" happened after the rice was harvested (in September), but now it is the government who determines and writes down when the New Year happens. This sort of commentary and interaction reminded me of the kinds of interpretations I often heard from Aluk to Dolo people when I did fieldwork in the highlands in the early 1980s.

Given that this film is a tribute to Nene' Lumbaa, and as a counterweight to its tone of sadness and loss, it is fitting that the final scenes of his life are so beautifully presented. Near the end of the film, speaking to Rappoport and an off-camera grandchild, from the floor of the rice barn, he describes in poetic couplets the knowledge of ritual (BT *mangilala* and *pangissan*), which is inside the *to minaa* and emerges—like music—through the throat, tongue, and voice. And then the last time he appears, we see him from behind, walking barefoot with his cane slowly up a steep, narrow, partly paved road lined by stands of bamboo. He is wearing the handsome, red silk jacket that he was wearing when he met with Pastor Yans, along with a colorful traditional batik head covering. A motorcycle slows down, the driver greets him, and Lumbaa turns halfway to the camera so that the viewer sees his face, which is smiling and animated. Although the film has already presented several vivid juxtapositions of the old and the new, this quiet encounter of an elderly man on foot along a mountain road exchanging greetings with young people riding a modern mode of transportation suggests the resilience of this way of life and this way of making sense of life and death.

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On the ethnographic antonyms of loss and change

Death of the One Who Knows—or, as the original French title, *Quand un poète disparaît*, more aptly suggests—is a beautiful ethnographic and nearly lyrical meditation around loss. In this powerful documentary, ethnomusicologist Dana Rappoport masterfully attends to the intricacies of our experience with loss, understood here both as an existential event (i.e., the severing of intimate intersubjective entanglements ensuing from an individual's death) and as a collective and systemic phenomenon (i.e., the structural displacement and social discontents emerging from processes of cultural and linguistic shift).

The film kicks off with a deeply moving scene: 23 June 2018, interior day shot of a rural Toraja house, two women desperately wail over a coffin wrapped in red fabric; the older one, her head completely covered in a black cloth, intersperses her sobs with the singing of a mortuary chant. Rappoport's voice-over reveals that the deceased was a speech master, a ritual poet, an expert in officiating the rites of the East. His name was Ne' Lumbaa, but he was more often referred to as *burake Tattiku*, a title “reserved for those who had inherited the small snakeskin drum.” As Rappoport further explains, “masters like him were referred to by the names of musical instruments such as drums, gongs, flutes, or sitars, because their sounding voices connected the living with the invisible, the ancestors, and the deities.” Ne' Lumbaa was a *to burake*, a chief master of the rituals of the rising sun, and a *to minaa* (another ritual title, which literally means ‘the one who knows’); he was one of the last surviving experts of the Toraja indigenous religion, locally called *alukta* (‘our way’), or *aluk to dolo* (‘the way of the ancestors’).

Dwelling in the central highlands of South Sulawesi, in eastern Indonesia, the Toraja are renowned for their complex dualistic ritual

system: the rites of the East, associated with life and fertility and devoted to the deities, and the rites of the West, associated with death and addressed to the ancestors. Several ethnographers have documented the highlanders' intricate patterns of exchange and slaughtering of conspicuous amounts of pigs and buffalo, their elaborate forms of parallelistic speechmaking, and, above all, their sumptuous mortuary practices, which entail (for high-ranking individuals) lengthy two-stage funerals and the protracted storing of the corpse in the house of the living, before the performance of a secondary burial. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the arrival in the highlands (in 1913) of Calvinist missionaries from the Dutch Reformed Alliance and the subsequent incorporation of the region within the Indonesian post-colonial state in the mid-1940s have engendered important changes. On the one hand, the missionaries, aiming at purifying Toraja rituals of what they considered pagan and anti-economic elements, established strict inventories of ritual dos and don'ts and inflected a monotheistic bend into the local polytheistic religion by assigning theological prominence to Puang Matua (a creator deity) over other deities of the Toraja pantheon. On the other hand, the Indonesian state ideology (Pancasila) mandated that all citizens believed in one God, which (despite successful campaigns for official recognition of several indigenous religions, *aluk to dolo* included) de facto legitimized the cultural hegemony of world religions, stigmatizing local belief systems and promoting massive conversion to Christianity.

As the film unfolds, the viewer is introduced to an exquisite longitudinal account of Ne' Lumbaa's life and ritual undertakings during the long collaboration (1993–2018) he had with Rappoport. Delicate glimpses into the intimacy of the protagonist's domestic life are juxtaposed with momentous fragments of his powerful ritual performances, whereby we grasp a sense of his genealogi-

cal knowledge and verbal dexterity. Besides offering a rich sensorial rendition of the grain of everyday life in the highlands, the film is a precious source of ethnographic insights into local ideologies of eloquence and linguistic apprenticeship. As we get to know Ne' Lumbaa, we discover a stark contrast between his unintentional and effortless attitude toward his craft and the strenuous and deliberate endeavors whereby Catholic priests or Christian pastors seek to learn the ritual language. Though no longer organically used for its original purposes, the ritual register is still considered a prestigious code and is widely deployed at Christian ceremonies, often in an incongruous way: they "put at the beginning what should be at the end," says Ne' Lumbaa. Like other speechmakers I encountered during my own fieldwork in Toraja, Ne' Lumbaa represents his verbal expertise as a form of inherent consciousness and natural inspiration (*mangilala*), as a spontaneous recollection of the 'words of the ancestors'. Toraja ritual specialists often self-effacingly downplay their individual authorship and portray themselves as sounding boxes of others' words. Only priests, pastors, and professional emcees methodically study and struggle to learn ritual couplets and songs. Rappoport encounters a young Catholic priest (Yans Sulo Paganna') who is an eager student of the ritual register. Realizing that the priest shares her commitment to the words of the ancestors, she introduces him to Ne' Lumbaa. The two meet and talk, but they seem to belong to two different worlds and their encounter does not spark the promise of a lasting master-disciple rapport.

Ne' Lumbaa is a cultural emblem, his life and death and his forced conversion to Pentecostalism (in 2009) are allegorical representations of a broader collective narrative: the gradual—and yet inexorable—process of cultural and linguistic loss, triggered by the encounter with global forces. As Rappoport bluntly puts it: "This is the story of a world that is going to die, that has no more mouths

to tell it, no more wiggling tongues to sing it." From its late-nineteenth-century beginnings, the trajectory of the anthropological imagination has been characterized by a gradual shift from the trope of cultural loss to that of cultural change. After an initial impetus at documenting vanishing indigenous practices and languages on the verge of extinction—what historians of the discipline call 'salvage ethnography'—during the second half of the twentieth century, anthropologists have started to adopt a different approach: dismissing as problematic and outdated the earlier documentary efforts, they focused on the unpredictable outcomes of cultural contact and on the effervescent dynamics of social change. Transcending this disciplinary dichotomy, Rappoport's movie compellingly shows how cultural change is inextricably interlaced with cultural loss. Her camera has captured Ne' Lumbaa's beautiful chants along with majestic processions of precious ritual banners (*bate manurun*) made with sacred textiles, which were plundered by Western collectors, and ritual meat distributions to honor the ancestors performed from a raised bamboo platform (*bala kaan*), which can no longer be seen in the highlands. While marveling at these precious sounds and images, one wonders whether this film is not also the story of another imminent disappearance: that of a mode of doing fieldwork based on in-depth longitudinal research and on a radical commitment to a specific place and language. Rappoport's work is a powerful demonstration of the value of old-school, hard-core ethnolinguistic fieldwork, which entails the meticulous and time-consuming transcription and translation of high-quality recordings. We can only hope that this slow craft will not succumb to the ever-increasing demands for fast-paced research outputs posed by the quasi-corporate audit cultures, rampant in today's academic world.

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Director's Response

In response to my two colleagues, I'd like to pick up on an idea I was barely aware of when making this film, strange as it may seem: that of a double loss, the loss of a loved one and the loss of a collective socio-aesthetic memory. The loved one is the officiant Ne' Lumbaa, born before World War II. A ritual specialist whose practice has been outlawed by the Church since the early twentieth century, he was the guarantor of the relationship between the living and the unseen (ancestors, the deceased, and divinities)—a relationship made possible thanks to his ritual knowledge, his mastery of speech, songs, facts, and gestures. Since being forced by his community to convert to Protestantism (Pentecostal) in 2009, Lumbaa no longer officiated, but before that time, beginning in 1993, I was able to study a cycle of ritual songs and speech that he continued to recite and sing until his change of religion, albeit less and less often given the gradual extinction of the 'rule of the ancestors' (*aluk nene'*) rituals. Lumbaa, the last official of the Rising Sun rituals in Toraja country, entitled as *to burake*, was responsible for promoting fertility, prosperity, and the salvation of homes and large families.

Having been adopted by Lumbaa when I started out, our bond of affection was one of the driving forces behind this film, which I was only able to make after his death. I had always wanted to tell the story of this society through images but had never been able to. When I was still working there, it had been suggested that I should bring a film crew into this photogenic society, but the idea didn't seem right to me: how could a film crew enter into the intimacy woven over many years with my adoptive father? I was using my video camera all the time, but I never felt technically up to the task of making a film.

However, the despair I felt on my return to Toraja country in 2014 pushed me to tell the story, to recount the liquidation of a socio-aesthetic memory. There was nothing left for me to do but alert young 'poets'

who thought they were 'the one who knows' (*to minaa*) to study the words of the real *to minaa*. But how could I, the European, the intruder, have any right to teach them a lesson? So I went in search of the Toraja's feelings about their own society. In 2014–2015, I discovered that the Toraja themselves were shaken by the loss of their culture. At the end of the film, one scene is edifying: a young emcee takes the floor during a debate on my book. He speaks out against the loss of reference points and accuses the Church of responsibility. Another speaker addresses government representatives, pointing out that their actions are contrary to the preservation of traditional culture. Instead of preserving memory, they're building Christs all over the landscape. Both words, scathing and vibrant, also form the basis of the film. They show a real anger toward institutions, colonization, and the government's lack of action to preserve anything.

The origin of the film is thus linked to loss, announced right from the title of the film, in all the languages in which it is titled: French, English, or Indonesian (*Quand un poète disparaît*, *Death of the One who Knows*, *Hilangnya Pujangga Dewa*). What do humans do with loss? Societies have different answers. For the Toraja, loss is unbearable. This is one reason why death is so much a part of Toraja life. Here, the dead are transformed into ancestors so that something remains and nothing disappears, thus absence is transformed into presence, into vital energy, and it is recalled regularly (the dead are taken out with their bones from their coffin). If we look more widely, in the small societies of Southeast Asia that have resisted evangelization as best they can, we see that human beings counterbalance loss by creating something (a spirit, an ancestor, an effigy, a memory, a representation).

Loss seems to irrigate all my work as an ethnomusicologist—wasn't it also one of the driving forces behind the first ethnologists, and here I'm thinking of Franz Boas? Since 1993, in the 30 years I've been practicing my

profession, I've witnessed the pure and simple destruction of oral and traditional music, which is being struck down with an axe. How can we fail to react when there are possible ways forward? Just as the Toraja transform their dead into ancestors, I myself want to document this music so that it doesn't disappear forever. So that something remains of its absence.

In 2009, thanks to a collaboration with Elizabeth Coville and the late Stanislaus Sandarupa, we were able to publish a trilingual translation of the Toraja musical heritage I had collected. *Songs from the Thrice-blooded Land* brings together a corpus of songs and stories accompanied by their interpretation. The book was accompanied by a DVD, but over time this proved to be an unsustainable medium. Unfortunately! I was all about permanence and transmission, yet my medium became obsolete. But here I am again, 10 years later, converting all this work into a forthcoming website (Penanian – Toraja ritual music). Continuing to transform disappearance into something else. This work served as the groundwork for the film: the ritual poetry is widely deployed in the film, thanks to Elizabeth Coville's marvelous work.

Ethnographic research, the foundation of our work, seems to have fallen into disuse.

Perhaps because collecting oral heritage and translating it requires long-term work, often involving several journeys, several years. Nowadays, only thesis students or full-time researchers are lucky enough to be able to do this. In relation to such long-depth fieldwork, Aurora Donzelli mentions the term 'salvage ethnography'. Philip Yampolsky, a fellow ethnomusicologist, has remarked to me that the term is often used (though not by Donzelli) in a disparaging sense, to dismiss the work of documentation that he and I both do. The premise is that since the old ways of doing things (making music among them) are dying out, they are no longer of interest. This is a form of 'presentism': only what is current is worth studying, documenting the past is nostalgia. My work, in this film and in all my study of music, has the opposite premise: that the past must be remembered. I seek to record for future generations *ways of knowing* and *ways of expression* that are now being lost, to preserve the evidence of alternative ways that people have lived. That is the idea behind the title that Philip suggested for the English version of the film. *Death of the One Who Knows* tells of lost forms of knowledge and creativity.

Dana RAPPOPORT

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