

Transformation of Rambu Solo' Rituals and Toraja Cultural Identity in Global Tourism: A Literature Review (2010–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews 45 articles published between 2010 and 2025 to examine the transformation of the Rambu Solo' funeral ceremony in Tana Toraja from a sacred ritual to a cultural tourism commodity. The objectives are to analyze shifts in ritual function, evaluate socio-economic impacts on local families, and identify cultural preservation strategies employed by the Toraja community. Using a qualitative approach with Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and thematic analysis, the study synthesizes patterns of ritual adaptation, cultural commodification, identity negotiation, and community-based preservation initiatives. Findings reveal that Rambu Solo' now serves both spiritual and socio-economic purposes, with tourism generating income and cultural pride but also creating financial pressures and social competition. Community-based tourism, cultural festivals, educational programs, and heritage documentation are employed to maintain the sacred essence of rituals while adapting to global economic realities. The study underscores the novelty of empowering local communities to curate their cultural narratives, balancing authenticity and economic pragmatism. These insights provide guidance for sustainable cultural tourism development that preserves Toraja's spiritual and social identity amidst globalization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Rambu Solo' ceremony is widely regarded as the most sacred and emblematic intangible cultural heritage of the Toraja people. Traditionally, it functions not merely as a funeral ritual but as a conduit for guiding the deceased from the mortal world to the ancestral realm, while simultaneously reinforcing family solidarity and social status within the Aluk Todolo belief system (Volkman, 1984; (Adams, 2006) ("Rambu Solo' as Unifying Cultural Custom," 2023) (Volkman, 1984). "Why do we still uphold such lavish ceremonies in the modern era?" one might ask. For the Toraja, the answer lies in the intertwining of cosmology, kinship, and societal hierarchy: the number of buffaloes sacrificed, the

structure of tongkonan houses, and the effigies of tau tau all communicate respect for ancestors and reflect the social prestige of the family (Volkman, 2010); (W. Hasyim, Wekke, & Akib, 2019); (“Kepercayaan Masyarakat Dalam Upacara Tradisi Rambu Solo,” 2022)). Rambu Solo’ also integrates social symbolism and collective ritual performances that reinforce communal identity and social cohesion across caste lines (“Paradigma Perubahan Sosial Dalam Rambu Solo’,” 2022). Recent ethnographic work highlights how these symbolic practices remain central to Torajan identity even amidst changing economic and religious landscapes (“Perceptions of Rambu Solo’ as a Torajan Cultural Identity,” 2025); (“Transformasi Sosial Pada Upacara Rambu Solo’,” 2021)).

Yet, as globalization and cultural tourism have intensified, Rambu Solo’ has gradually transformed from a sacred practice into a commodified cultural event. Since Tana Toraja was recognized as a national strategic tourism destination, this transformation has accelerated. Kausar & Gunawan (2017) note that ceremonies once conducted according to customary cycles are now increasingly timed to coincide with tourist seasons (F. Kausar & Gunawan, 2017) (R. Kausar & Gunawan, 2017), while Paganggi, Baharuddin, and Sari (2020) highlight that families often stage grander rituals to both assert social status and attract visitors (Paganggi, Baharuddin, & Sari, 2020). Research on social transformations in Rantepao shows that certain segments of Rambu Solo’—once a rite of mourning limited to nobility—have evolved into public spectacles with economic and status dimensions, reflecting shifts in social values and power relations among traditional leaders and government actors (“Potensi Tradisi Budaya Megalitik Di Tana Toraja,” 2022); (“Rituals and Myths at the Death Ceremony of the Toraja People,” 2020)).

This raises a critical question: to what extent does the presence of tourists alter the ritual’s original meaning? Greenwood (1989) and Adams (2006) conceptualize this as cultural commodification, whereby sacred rituals are transformed into marketable performances (Greenwood, 1989). Since the 1970s, Tana Toraja has been perceived as a “living museum,” where the performative aspects of Rambu Solo’ are emphasized for the benefit of outsiders rather than the spiritual needs of the community itself (Volkman, 2010; (“Menavigasi Persimpangan Modernitas Dan Tradisi,” 2023)). Studies of other indigenous rituals recontextualized for tourism similarly suggest that such shifts can dilute spiritual significance even as they generate economic opportunities, raising broader questions about authenticity and cultural agency in global heritage tourism (“Integrated Torajan Indigenous Culture in English for Tourism,” 2024).

Multiple studies have examined the socio-economic consequences of this shift. Srisetyawanie, Saillela, and Indrijawati (2020) conducted ethnographic research showing that Rambu Solo’ simultaneously strengthens communal bonds and imposes substantial financial pressures on hosting families (Srisetyawanie, Saillela, & Indrijawati, 2020). Research on Toraja migrants also demonstrates that even outside the homeland, Toraja people maintain ritual obligations despite high economic costs, reflecting deep cultural commitments that transcend locality (Perception of Traditional Death Ceremony on Financial Management for Toraja Migrants, 2024). Baharuddin (2016) observes that while tourism offers economic opportunities, it also creates uneven benefits and often leads to household debt. Nadiroh & Setiawan (2021) corroborate this, emphasizing that commercialization can trigger value conflicts (Nadiroh & Setiawan, 2021), as some residents perceive the erosion of spiritual meaning in favor of economic gain. One wonders, then, whether the ceremony remains a sacred ritual or has evolved into a status driven spectacle—an ambiguity that continues to concern both scholars and local communities.

Another dimension is the perception of the younger generation. Qalbi, Mukramin, and Ismail (2024) report that Toraja youth often face a dilemma between upholding traditional values and embracing modern economic incentives (A. Qalbi, Mukramin, & Ismail, 2024) (H. Qalbi, Mukramin, & Ismail, 2024). Suryanti, Damayanti, and Martinihani (2023) note that not only rituals but also cultural symbols—such as tongkonan houses and tau tau effigies—are increasingly treated as tourism attractions and instruments of cultural branding (Suryanti, Damayanti, & Martinihani, 2023) (Suryanti et al., 2023). This observation echoes MacCannell’s (1999) notion of ritual as performance (MacCannell, 1999), where sacred ceremonies are transformed into spectacles designed for public consumption

(Akomodasi Nilai Nilai Pluralisme Dalam Acara Adat Rambu Solo', 2023). Rambulangi, Palinggi, and Yusuf (2023) further reveal that this commodification generates value conflicts within the community (Rambulangi, Palinggi, & Yusuf, 2023b): while some perceive it as cultural adaptation, others see it as a threat to spiritual integrity (Rambulangi, Palinggi, & Yusuf, 2023a). Studies on the pluralistic accommodation of Rambu Solo' also show that differences in class, ritual forms, and plural social values contribute to diverse interpretations and practices of the ceremony across Toraja society.

Tourism's role in reshaping Toraja culture is thus double-edged. On one hand, Adams (2006) and Greenwood (1989) describe how staged authenticity enables the presentation of curated cultural experiences that satisfy tourist expectations (Greenwood, 1989), potentially enhancing global recognition. On the other hand, Baharuddin (2016) (Baharuddin, 2016) and Nurfaida, Sari, and Wulandari (2022) emphasize that excessive commodification may erode the ceremony's sacred essence (Nurfaida, Sari, & Wulandari, 2022). Digital ethnographies of Rambu Solo' content also suggest that global audiences' engagement through media can both promote cross-cultural understanding and risk simplifying ritual complexity for consumption (Identifikasi Budaya Rambu Solo', 2024). As one elder explained during an interview cited in Srisetyawanie et al. (2020), "We want tourists to see our culture, but we fear they only see the spectacle, not the spirit behind it." This remark captures the tension at the heart of cultural tourism: balancing economic opportunities with the preservation of intangible heritage.

In response to these pressures, Toraja communities and local governments have implemented various preservation strategies. Community-based tourism programs aim to retain control over cultural practices while distributing economic benefits equitably (R. Kausar & Gunawan, 2017). Junaid, Mulyadi, and Sari (2023) highlight the establishment of customary foundations, cultural festivals such as the Lovely Toraja Festival, and intergenerational education as mechanisms to maintain ritual integrity while engaging tourists (Junaid, Mulyadi, & Sari, 2023). Hasyim, Wekke, and Akib (2019) underscore the importance of cultural symbols, including tongkonan houses, tau tau effigies (R. Hasyim, Wekke, & Akib, 2019), and traditional ornaments, as tools for branding Toraja identity internationally without fully sacrificing sacred values (Potensi Tradisi Budaya Megalitik Di Tana Toraja, 2022). Rahmawati & Wijayanti (2022) (Rahmadani, Ysh, & Wijayanti, 2024) and (Suryanti et al., 2023) emphasize that documentation, ritual revitalization, and cultural education are crucial for long-term sustainability, ensuring that the spiritual essence of Rambu Solo' persists even as ceremonial practices adapt to tourism demands (Rituals and Myths at the Death Ceremony of the Toraja People, 2020).

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research (Sugiyono, 2018) approach using the Systematic Literature Review (Sugiyono, 2011) (Moleong, 2003) (SLR) method to examine the transformation of the Rambu Solo' traditional funeral ceremony and the cultural identity of the Toraja people in the context of global tourism. The SLR approach was chosen because it allows for a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of diverse prior studies (Demir, 2021), integrating theoretical and empirical perspectives on complex socio-cultural phenomena (Snyder, 2019). This method has been previously applied in studies of cultural commodification and tourism transformation, such as (Greenwood, 1989) and Kausar & Gunawan (2017), providing a suitable framework for analyzing ritual adaptation and cultural identity negotiation.

The data for this study were obtained from secondary sources, including 58 peer-reviewed journal articles (SINTA 2–6), reputable international journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, scholarly books on anthropology, conference proceedings, and relevant research reports published between 2010 and 2025. Classical references, such as (Volkman, 2010) and (Adams, 2006), were included as theoretical foundations. Literature inclusion criteria focused on publications discussing Rambu Solo', cultural transformation, cultural tourism, and heritage preservation strategies, while opinion pieces, popular publications, and pre-2010 studies without clear theoretical relevance were excluded. Literature collection was conducted in three stages: (1) identification using keywords such as "Rambu Solo',"

“Toraja Culture,” “Cultural Transformation,” “Tourism Commodification,” and “Heritage Tourism” across databases including Google Scholar, Garuda, DOAJ, SINTA, and Scopus; (2) screening titles, abstracts, and full texts to ensure alignment with the research focus; and (3) classification into four thematic groups: transformation of Rambu Solo’, Toraja cultural identity, impacts of global tourism, and preservation strategies. A PRISMA-style flow diagram was prepared to illustrate the study selection process, showing that 58 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed. Reviewer bias was minimized through source triangulation, peer-checking interpretations, and preparing transparent summaries for each study ((Snyder, 2019); (Xiao & Watson, 2019)).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing the identification of patterns, categories, and recurring themes across the literature. Each study was examined to uncover interconnections and consistency among findings, such as the shift of Rambu Solo’ from sacred ritual to social and economic symbol (Paganggi et al., 2020), the socio-economic burdens of hosting ceremonies (Srisetyawanie et al., 2020; Baharuddin, 2016), and strategies for cultural identity negotiation and heritage preservation (Adams, 2006; Hasyim et al., 2019). This methodological framework ensures a rigorous and accountable synthesis, providing a comprehensive understanding of how the Toraja navigate the tension between ritual sanctity, tourism pressures, and cultural sustainability.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In the context of Tana Toraja, the Rambu Solo’ traditional funeral ceremony has undergone profound transformations over the past decades, particularly under the influence of globalization and tourism. Traditionally, the ritual was deeply rooted in the Aluk Todolo belief system, serving as a sacred practice to honor ancestors and reinforce social hierarchies. However, contemporary studies reveal that the ceremony now functions on multiple levels, encompassing both spiritual significance and socio-economic dimensions. Families increasingly stage elaborate ceremonies to display social prestige, while tourism interests shape the timing and presentation of rituals. At the same time, community-based strategies have emerged to preserve cultural identity and negotiate the balance between tradition and modern economic opportunities. The following table synthesizes key findings from relevant studies between 2010 and 2025, highlighting patterns of ritual transformation, cultural commodification, socio-economic impacts, preservation strategies, and identity negotiation.

Table 1. Key Findings on the Transformation of Rambu Solo’ Ritual and Cultural Identity (2010–2025)

Theme	Key Findings	Source	Note
Transformation of Ritual Function	Rambu Solo’ shifted from sacred ritual to marker of social prestige; timing often adjusted to tourist seasons	Paganggi et al., 2020; Hamsinah, 2016; Volkman, 2010	Ritual now has dual function: spiritual + social/economic
Cultural Commodification	Ritual staged for tourists; spiritual meaning diluted	Adams, 2006; Greenwood, 1989; Nadiroh & Setiawan, 2021	Market-driven performance increasing
Socio-Economic Impacts	Increased family debt; social competition; youth interpret ritual economically	Baharuddin, 2016; Srisetyawanie et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Wijayanti, 2022	Economic benefits uneven, social burdens high
Cultural Preservation Strategies	Community-based tourism, cultural festivals,	Kausar & Gunawan, 2017; Junaid et al.,	Adaptive strategies maintain identity

	intergenerational education, documentation	2023; Hasyim et al., 2019	while leveraging tourism
Identity Negotiation	Toraja communities actively curate rituals to balance sacredness and economic opportunity	Rahmawati & Wijayanti, 2022; Suryanti et al., 2023	Negotiation ensures continuity amid globalization

The table illustrates that the transformation of Rambu Solo' encompasses multiple dimensions. Ritual functions have evolved to accommodate both spiritual and social-economic purposes, while cultural commodification reflects the pressures of tourism. Socio-economic impacts reveal both benefits and challenges, including increased family debt and generational shifts in perception. Adaptive strategies such as community-based tourism, cultural festivals, and educational initiatives serve to preserve the sacred elements and cultural identity of the Toraja community. Finally, identity negotiation demonstrates that local communities actively curate and manage their traditions to maintain continuity and relevance amid globalization pressures.

Discussion

The transformation of the Rambu Solo' traditional funeral ceremony in Tana Toraja reflects a complex socio-cultural process influenced by globalization, modernization, and the growth of tourism. Historically, Rambu Solo' was a deeply sacred ritual, embedded within the Aluk Todolo belief system, functioning as both a spiritual obligation and a marker of social hierarchy (Volkman, 1984)(Volkman, 2010). The ritual involved careful attention to cosmological cycles, ancestral veneration, and community solidarity, with the number of sacrificial buffaloes and pigs symbolizing family honor and adherence to tradition. As Volkman (1984) emphasizes, Rambu Solo' was not merely a funeral, but a cosmological event that reaffirmed familial and social bonds while ensuring the deceased's soul reached the ancestral realm.

In the contemporary context, the literature reviewed demonstrates a significant shift in both the function and perception of the ritual. Paganggi, Baharuddin, and Sari (2020) report that families increasingly conduct Rambu Solo' to display social prestige, often staging more extravagant ceremonies to attract attention from both community members and tourists. This reflects a broader trend of ritual commodification, where sacred practices are adapted to external audiences. Hamsinah (2016) and Volkman (2010) note that ceremonies are frequently scheduled to coincide with peak tourist seasons, a practice that diverges from traditional cosmological timing and indicates the influence of economic considerations. This finding aligns with MacCannell's (1999) theory of "ritual as performance" and Adams' (2006) concept of staged authenticity, in which local communities selectively perform cultural practices to meet outsider expectations. These theories provide a framework to understand the duality of Rambu Solo' as both a sacred and a socio-economic event.

Cultural commodification, while providing visibility and economic benefits, introduces new challenges for the Toraja community. Greenwood (1989) cautions that commercialization can dilute the spiritual essence of traditional practices. This concern is supported by Nadiroh and Setiawan (2021), who observe that the ritual's increasing orientation toward tourist consumption may compromise its sacredness. The tension between maintaining spiritual integrity and leveraging economic opportunities is a recurrent theme across the literature. While tourism generates tangible benefits, including employment, local income, and enhanced cultural pride (Srisetyawanie et al., 2020), families often face significant financial pressures, particularly when ceremonial scale is tied to social competition and tourist expectations (Baharuddin, 2016). This paradox underscores the ambivalent nature of cultural tourism: it simultaneously promotes cultural preservation and risks eroding the very values it seeks to showcase.

The socio-economic implications of these transformations extend to generational perceptions and social norms. Rahmawati and Wijayanti (2022) report that younger Torajans increasingly interpret Rambu Solo' through economic and prestige-driven lenses, prioritizing social visibility and tourism

appeal over spiritual obligations. This generational shift is critical, as it reflects broader changes in value systems under the influence of globalization. Suryanti, Damayanti, and Martinihani (2023) note that youth engagement with the ritual is often mediated by exposure to global media and tourism narratives, which can both empower and challenge traditional cultural norms. Thus, the transformation of Rambu Solo' is not merely a ritualistic change but a complex negotiation between tradition, modernity, and economic realities.

To manage these pressures, the Toraja community has implemented adaptive strategies aimed at preserving cultural authenticity while benefiting from tourism. Community-based tourism (CBT) emerges as a central mechanism, providing local control over ritual performance, economic distribution, and decision-making (F. Kausar & Gunawan, 2017). By situating Rambu Solo' within a CBT framework, communities can retain adherence to adat (customary law) while generating tourism revenue. This approach reflects the practical application of Adams' (1995, 2006) theory of cultural identity negotiation, in which communities strategically adapt traditions in response to external pressures without completely abandoning core spiritual values.

Cultural festivals serve as another key preservation strategy. Junaid, Mulyadi, and Sari (2023) document the organization of events such as the Lovely Toraja Festival, which integrates Rambu Solo' rituals with local performing arts, handicraft exhibitions, and culinary showcases. These festivals function as platforms for intergenerational knowledge transfer, enabling youth to learn ritual significance while participating in tourism-related economic activities. Hasyim, Wekke, and Akib (2019) further highlight the importance of cultural symbols—such as tongkonan houses, tau-tau effigies, and traditional ornaments—in reinforcing Toraja identity and creating a coherent tourism brand. The strategic use of these symbols ensures that cultural representation is consistent, authentic, and recognizable in the global tourism market.

Documentation and educational programs complement these strategies. Rahmawati and Wijayanti (2022) emphasize the need to record ceremonial procedures, oral traditions, and local narratives as a means to safeguard intangible heritage. These efforts are crucial not only for preserving spiritual meaning but also for providing interpretive frameworks for tourists and younger generations. By embedding heritage preservation within formal and informal education, the community mitigates risks of commodification-induced value loss and fosters a sustainable understanding of Toraja cultural practices.

Despite these adaptive measures, challenges remain. The economic pressures associated with tourism-driven spectacle can exacerbate social inequalities within communities, as wealthier families are better positioned to host elaborate ceremonies (Baharuddin, 2016; Nadiroh & Setiawan, 2021). Additionally, staged performances may unintentionally prioritize tourist satisfaction over ritual authenticity, leading to potential conflicts between traditional leaders and local youth. Rambulangi, Palinggi, and Yusuf (2023) highlight these value conflicts, noting that some community members perceive adaptation as positive cultural evolution, while others view it as commodification that undermines sacred traditions.

The reviewed literature demonstrates both affirmation and critique of prior findings. For instance, Srisetyawanie et al. (2020) affirm that tourism enhances local economic opportunities and cultural pride, supporting earlier observations by Volkman (2010) and Adams (2006). Conversely, Baharuddin (2016) and Nadiroh & Setiawan (2021) present an antithesis by documenting the socio-economic strain and spiritual dilution resulting from ceremonial commercialization. This dual perspective underscores the necessity of integrating preservation strategies with economic planning, ensuring that tourism benefits do not come at the cost of cultural authenticity.

In synthesizing these findings, it becomes clear that the transformation of Rambu Solo' represents a multidimensional phenomenon involving ritual recontextualization, socio-economic pressures, intergenerational value shifts, and identity negotiation. The Toraja community's adaptive strategies—CBT, cultural festivals, heritage documentation, and educational initiatives—exemplify a proactive approach to managing these challenges, reflecting a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. This synthesis contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced understanding of how

cultural communities can negotiate authenticity, economic opportunity, and spiritual integrity in the era of global tourism.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights three main insights: first, the shift from sacred ritual to socio-economic performance underscores the influence of globalization and tourism on cultural practice; second, cultural commodification presents both opportunities and risks, generating income while potentially eroding spiritual meaning; third, adaptive strategies grounded in community participation, cultural festivals, and heritage education provide pathways for sustainable preservation and identity negotiation. These insights affirm and extend previous research (Volkman, 2010; Adams, 2006; Paganggi et al., 2020; Srisetyawanie et al., 2020; Junaid et al., 2023), offering practical and theoretical guidance for balancing cultural preservation with tourism development in Tana Toraja.

4. CONCLUSION

The transformation of the Rambu Solo' funeral ceremony in Tana Toraja illustrates a complex process of cultural adaptation influenced by globalization, modernization, and tourism. Traditionally, Rambu Solo' was a sacred ritual deeply rooted in the Aluk Todolo belief system, functioning to honor ancestors and maintain social structures. Over time, the ritual has evolved to serve a dual purpose, acting both as a marker of social prestige and as an attraction for tourists. This shift has led to cultural commodification, generating economic benefits and fostering local pride while simultaneously imposing financial and social pressures on families, some of whom incur debt to meet both customary obligations and tourism expectations. In response, the Toraja community has developed adaptive strategies, including community-based tourism, cultural festivals, and heritage education programs, which allow them to retain key sacred elements of the ritual while leveraging economic opportunities. These findings suggest that local cultural practices can navigate the challenges of globalization without entirely losing their spiritual essence. From a policy and managerial perspective, these insights highlight the need to empower communities to manage heritage sustainably, regulate ritual commercialization, provide financial support to families, and implement responsible tourism practices that balance visitor engagement with preservation of sacred values. Despite the comprehensive literature review, this study is limited by its focus on publications between 2010 and 2025 and the reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of families participating in Rambu Solo'. Future research could employ ethnographic or participatory approaches to explore intergenerational perceptions of the ritual, assess the long-term social and economic impacts of its commodification, and conduct comparative studies with other indigenous communities experiencing similar globalization pressures. Such studies would provide valuable insights for sustaining cultural identity while promoting heritage tourism in a way that respects both tradition and modern economic realities.

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