Love American style and divorce Toraja style: lessons from a tale of mutual reflexivity in Indonesia

Kathleen M. Adams

Version of record first published: 28 Jun 2012

To cite this article: Kathleen M. Adams (2012): Love American style and divorce Toraja style: lessons from a tale of mutual reflexivity in Indonesia, Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies, 26:2, 150-161

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2012.684436

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Articles
Love American style and divorce Toraja style: lessons from a tale of mutual reflexivity in Indonesia

Kathleen M. Adams

Abstract
The author recounts an episode from her ethnographic research in Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia, when she was obliged to shed her comfortably familiar ‘fieldworker’ role and stray from a pre-plotted research agenda into emotionally dangerous terrain. She explores the serendipitous insights that can emerge only when the classic division between the realm of research and one’s private life is muddled. By recounting some Toraja responses to the news of her impending divorce, the author examines the unexpected and occasionally destabilising understandings that emerge from these personal exchanges. The unanticipated insights concern both Toraja and American conceptions of marriage and its unravelling, and evoke visceral appreciation for the vulnerabilities inherent in violating the borders of acceptable anthropological genres. The story shared here seeks to explore the ways cultural knowledge can derive from a personally revealing approach to fieldwork, embracing rather than fleeing the research side-roads opened up by emotional challenges.

Keywords: divorce, ethnography of emotion, Indonesia, reflexivity, Sulawesi, Tana Toraja

Introduction: roadmaps and the romance of fieldwork
Reflecting on my 26-year relationship with the Indonesian highland region of Tana Toraja, I am struck by the parallel and sometimes convergent flows in fieldwork and in marriages. My early ‘courtship’ days of learning about Toraja were not unlike

Kathleen M. Adams is Professor of Anthropology at Loyola University Chicago. kadams@luc.edu
those initial days of a new romance, where even trivial, seemingly inconsequential, ethnographic details rendered me mesmerised. In time, I had plotted a long-term roadmap of my future relationship to Toraja – a roadmap oriented towards studying and writing about Toraja art, tourism and identity politics. With each return to the field, as with each successive year in a marriage, I felt I was gaining a more nuanced understanding of the terrain. It was not until I unexpectedly found myself stumbling down an ethnographic side-road that I came to appreciate how much road maps, in shaping expectations, can sometimes obscure deeper understandings.

This article explores the challenges, vulnerabilities, risks and rewards of taking an unanticipated detour down a personally painful side-road during the course of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. In recounting an episode where I was obliged to shed my comfortably familiar ‘fieldworker’ role and stray from my pre-plotted research agenda into emotionally dangerous terrain, I aim to explore the serendipitous insights that can emerge only when the classic division between the realm of research and one’s private life is muddied. The story I share here embodies a push for an appreciation of the ways in which cultural knowledge can also derive from a far more personally revealing approach to fieldwork, wherein we embrace rather than flee the research side-roads opened up by our own emotional challenges. Since mental states are central to this fieldwork detour, this is a tale that can only be told in the first person.

Following a decade of ethnographic research in Indonesia, in 1995 I returned to the Sulawesi highlands to update my work while in the midst of a marital dissolution. Through recounting my well-meaning Toraja friends’ disturbing responses to the news of my impending divorce, I aim to examine the unexpected and occasionally destabilising understandings that emerged from these personal exchanges. These unanticipated insights concern both Toraja and American conceptions of marriage and its unravelling. In telling this tale, I also hope to evoke a more visceral appreciation for the vulnerabilities inherent in violating the borders of acceptable anthropological genres. It is no accident that it took me over a decade to decide to write about what not only silhouetted the limits of ethnographic understanding, but also revealed deep mutual desires to bridge these gaps. This tale is not only about a situation where I felt bare: it also tells a story that long seemed risky to bear to my professional peers. As a celebrated senior female colleague observed when I confided my intentions to write about this personal episode, women anthropologists of her generation understood that to discuss their own marital status and families in academic settings would compromise the potency of their professional identities. And as I sat down to write this story of divorce and fieldwork side-roads, I wondered if her counsel was not also a gently veiled warning that some things might not have changed as much as I had assumed. Was detouring from the mainstream path into a more personal and confessional realm of ethnography still unwise for female anthropologists? In this
regard, this article is in keeping with the recent feminist call for ‘deterritorialised ethnography’, that is, a critical practice approach ‘that deals with inequities not only in that other place but in one’s “own” community’ (Behar 1995: 22). In short, this is a tale of mutual reflexivity, as it traverses between my American experience of divorce and Toraja friends’ conceptions, expectations and experiences.

**Divorce tales: Summer 1995**

It had been an atypically long bus ride up from South Sulawesi’s lowland capital to the Toraja highlands town of Rantepao – ten hours of slow jostling and bouncing along soggy roads. But by 9 pm the last of the exhausted Toraja passengers and tourists had alighted at their Rantepao lodgings. The bus driver then steered me out to the Toraja hamlet where I had spent most of my summers for the previous ten years, ever since my 22 months of graduate student field research in 1984–1985. My adoptive Toraja family were already waiting on their front veranda, alerted to my arrival by the lumbering clamour of the bus as it traversed the wet-rice fields along the small road to their village. Almost two years had passed since my last visit, and my stomach tightened with excitement and anxiety as I gathered up my belongings, tucked some ‘cigarette money’ into the driver’s palm and tentatively began my descent from the bus. As the bus door creaked open, a couple of my adoptive Toraja brothers dashed through the drizzle to shepherd my bags and me into the family’s colonial-era cement home. There was a quick round of embraces, along with chattered assessments of weight shifts (associated with mental states by many older Torajas, plumpness belying contentedness). With a meaningfully inquisitive arch of her brows, my adoptive Toraja mother noted my thinness, and I evasively complimented her on the extra pounds she’d added to her small frame since my last visit. We settled into crushed velveteen chairs and, as someone fetched sticky rice treats and coffee, family members volunteered updates on which relatives had perished and who had produced babies in the two years since my last research visit. Then, the inquiries I had been dreading began. ‘Is it really true you are getting divorced?’ ‘Why did it come to this?’ ‘Your husband seemed so good-hearted when you brought him to meet us … ’ ‘What happened that could not be repaired?’ ‘And your mother and brothers? What did they do about this?’

Groggy from the travel yet anxious to be done with the divorce questions, I offered my stock answer: ‘We drifted apart – we were no longer as close as we had once been.’ Following a chorus of tongue-clicking, signalling a mixture of pity and sympathy, my adoptive Toraja mother, Indo’ Ramp, gently laid her hand on my knee and said: ‘Yes, yes, we know that from your letter, but what really happened?’
Everyone in the room seemed to lean inwards, awaiting my answer. I feebly offered: ‘Well, we fell out of love. He stopped liking how I did things and grew critical of my ways.’

A few puzzled looks were shot in my direction, and an in-law queried: ‘Yes, but what happened? Did he start drinking a lot and being lazy, not contributing to the household?’

‘No, not at all – he was a hard worker and he never drank,’ I replied.

‘Were you fighting all the time? Did he start beating you?’ asked another.

‘No, no,’ I assured them, ‘We rarely fought.’

‘Was he gambling away your savings?’ suggested an elder whose own youthful escapades with gambling had once caused some marital discord.

‘No, not at all,’ I answered.

‘Was it because you haven’t produced a child, Katlin?’ gently queried a sister-in-law in the softest of voices.

‘No, we both wanted to wait before starting a family, until I had job security,’ I answered.

‘And he really didn’t mind that?’ asked one of the older brothers sceptically.

‘No, no, that wasn’t an issue. As I said, the problem was that we drifted apart. We were no longer close,’ I repeated.

At that point, my adoptive Toraja mother shook her head wearily and counselled: ‘But Katlin, you know one doesn’t look for closeness in a husband. You look for industry and good temper, you look for faithfulness, but not for closeness. Closeness you get from your sisters and your female cousins … You should know that by now.’

There were a few stifled chuckles, presumably about my cluelessness, then the topic was put aside and we all headed for bed. As I lay in bed that night, listening to the reassuring chorus of crickets in the adjacent rice field, the voice of my Toraja sister called out in the dark from the other side of the room: ‘Katlin, it’s just us now – you can tell me what really happened. Was it another woman?’

‘No, no, Emi. There was no other woman. He wasn’t one to play around,’ I replied.

‘But maybe there was another woman who liked him, who wanted him for herself. Maybe she used love-magic to lure him away?’ she offered.

‘No. I don’t think so. He is alone now and says he’ll never marry again,’ I replied.

Emi clicked her tongue in pity and we both fell into silence. Then, a few moments later, when I thought she had fallen asleep, Emi proposed one last explanation: ‘Katlin, maybe another woman was jealous of the two of you for being happy … Maybe she didn’t want him for herself, but did the magic out of jealousy …’

I fumbled for an answer that could bridge the cultural gulf: ‘No, Emi. People don’t know about that kind of magic where I live. In the United States most people get married for love, and when they stop loving each other, they often get divorced.’
‘But that makes no sense,’ she protested. ‘If you are lucky you have love, but if you don’t or if it goes, that is no reason to divorce. If you have a husband who is good, who works hard for the family, and doesn’t drink or gamble, then you are wrong to divorce him, Katlin. We must help you fix this.’

Sleep did not come easily to me that night, as I struggled with conflicting emotions and mounting frustration at being unable to explain my divorce in a way that made sense to my hosts. My own shortcomings as an anthropologist were also troubling me, as it dawned on me that, in my dedication to researching Toraja art and identity politics, I had never paid great attention to Toraja conceptions of divorce. From the work of other anthropologists, I knew that divorce was not infrequent in Toraja and that remarriage was common (Hollan & Wellenkamp 1994; Koubi 1988).

I remembered one Toraja friend from my early fieldwork days who had left her womanising husband and eventually remarried. Although her decision had been fodder for many market-day gossips at the time, all who knew my friend applauded her actions (particularly, since her first husband had made no effort to conceal his dalliances). And I recalled another woman whose husband had beaten her and whose family members routinely shielded her from his rampages, encouraging her to divorce him, which she eventually did. I knew that my adoptive Toraja father had been married several times before settling down in an arranged marriage with his much younger cousin, Indo’ Ramp. He delighted in boasting of Indo’ Ramp’s beauty and occasionally reminisced about how he had pursued her when she was a teen. Indo’ Ramp, in turn, had confided that although she had initially fled his advances in the weeks following their marriage, after several years of marriage she had finally come to feel love for her husband. As she had once told me: ‘That is how it is for many women of my generation, Katlin: first marriage and then, maybe, love.’

As I restlessly tossed around in bed that first night back in the village, I tried to will my mind to cease its rumblings about marriage, partnerships, love, alienation and divorce. I attempted to focus on the lulling pattering of rain on the tin roof, and then when that failed, I tried to quiet my thoughts by following the rhythmic breathing of Emi who was, by then, sleeping soundly in the bed opposite mine. Instead, I found myself recalling the late-night whispered conversations I’d shared with Emi and her high school and college-aged Toraja cousins and friends during my early days of fieldwork in the mid-1980s, when Emi and I were in our mid-20s. Our occasional Saturday night sleepovers entailed gathering with female friends and relatives to watch Indonesian and imported television movies on the family’s flickering, generator-run black and white television. Sometimes, a female cousin would bring along a well-thumbed Femina magazine, which we would flip through together, reading the advice columns out loud, salivating over recipes, and volunteering commentary about the very different lives of the urban Indonesians highlighted in the issue. Invariably, these evenings were the occasion for giggled
teasing about hotly-denied love affairs, or cautious confessions about crushes and secret romances they hoped would blossom into marriages. So, clearly, romantic love was not outside the Toraja cultural repertoire. However, at least in the mid-1990s, the erosion of love did not seem to be a valid reason for divorce. Was there, perhaps, something to be learned from this? In basing our marriages on what could sometimes be a fickle emotion, were we Americans expecting too much? It seemed my Toraja surrogate kin felt that way.

Early the next morning, I went to visit my mentor – an artist and surrogate family member who had become a close friend over the years. The pounding of carvers’ mallets echoed in the bamboo glen as I came down the narrow path leading to Ambe Landang’s home and studio. I found Ambe Landang seated at an old plywood table on the veranda of his breezy workshop, his head bent over a partially carved board. Upon hearing my voice he jumped up to greet me, and called out to his wife who emerged from the house. As she came forward to embrace me, I could see tears pooling in her eyes. She quickly excused herself to go and prepare coffee while Ambe Landang and I settled into the moulded plastic chairs on the veranda and began catching up. Soon, we were on the topic of my divorce. ‘Probably it’s hard for Torajas to understand my reasons for divorce?’ I volunteered in response to my friend’s gentle query about the unravelling of my marriage. Ambe Landang agreed: ‘It’s hard to understand because we Torajas, when we learn you are getting divorced, we approach the news from our own perspective.’ The sound of someone making their way down the hillside path prompted Ambe Landang to pause, look around and lower his voice. ‘Let’s go inside and talk more,’ he suggested.

Once inside his living room, he quietly recounted his wife’s reaction to the news: ‘She feels very sorry and sad for you. She doesn’t approach it from the American perspective, but from the Toraja perspective. She knows you are the daughter of a divorced mother and when she learned you are now getting divorced, she worried that there was no one to care for you. No father, no husband, no children. When you are old, what then? ... And who will bury you?’ As he spoke, he illustrated his point about the broken family chain by laying a vertical row of matches on the coffee table, one at a time. He was just setting down the final match (representing me) when our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a neighbour. However, over the next few weeks, Ambe Landang found other occasions to convey his family’s concerns.

A few days later, in the sticky heat of the afternoon, when most of the family took afternoon naps, I awoke from my slumber to the hushed voice of my adopted Toraja mother, Indo’ Rampo. ‘Katlin,’ she called through the fluttering privacy curtain in the bedroom doorway, ‘Are you alone?’ A moment later, Indo’ Rampo slipped into the room, glancing behind her to make sure she had not been spotted. ‘Now there aren’t others around to hear – you can finally tell me the truth,’ she whispered. ‘We’ve been worrying that perhaps your husband wants a divorce because you gave us money
for funeral buffalo and for the children’s education … we feared that he might have thought it was too heavy a burden. Did the money you sent us for these things anger your husband?’

I assured her that although Toraja marriages could unravel due to spousal tugs of war over family funeral funds, this was not the issue in my case. In fact, my soon-to-be ex had contributed some of the school funds I had brought them on this visit, even though we were in the midst of a divorce. Her jaw dropped in surprise at this revelation, and again she gently prodded: ‘Then why? You can tell me the real reason.’ How could I convey the actual reason, when it was one that was not culturally recognised? Had my divorce been due to beatings, womanising, gambling, sterility, love-magic or quarrels over family funeral funds, then mutual understanding would have been possible. But instead, my hosts interpreted my mantra of ‘divorce due to “loss of love”’ as unwillingness to trust them with an honest answer. Despite strong desires for mutual comprehension, the gulf of ethnographic understanding seemed unbridgeable.

My education in what constituted acceptable Toraja expectations for marriage and reasonable reasons for divorce continued over the next few weeks. Despite my assiduous attempts to steer conversations towards an emotionally neutral pre-charted terrain of research agendas, Toraja friends, mentors and acquaintances persistently returned to the topic of my impending divorce. As the days passed and word spread of my unfathomable explanation, there was a new development. Questions about the reasons for the divorce subsided, and instead my Toraja kin began volunteering reassurances that they knew that my soon-to-be ex was missing me and still loved me. Each time I set off to Rantepao for my weekly trip to the post office, a kinsperson would invariably tease me that my estranged husband’s letters of love and longing were bound to be awaiting me. When I returned after a day of interviewing carvers, my adoptive siblings slipped Dolly Parton and other Country and Western singers’ cassettes into a tape deck. As verses chronicling romantic mishaps and ‘rekindled love’ filled the air, my surrogate Toraja family members reassured me that I needn’t divorce – my marriage would heal from its stumbles. As in these songs, my estranged husband’s love would return. Initially, I was bewildered, stung and irritated by these daily ‘love pep-talks’.

To my American sensibilities, their insistent playfulness about the disarray of my marriage seemed supremely insensitive. After many days of silently enduring their teasing, I was growing visibly cross. Why, I wondered, were they so intrusively poking, nudging and prodding into my failed marriage, when it was a matter that should concern only me and my soon-to-be ex? They, on the other hand, seemed equally perplexed by my annoyed evasiveness: Did I not understand that families do not begin and end with couples, but involve entire communities of kin? Why was I so stubbornly resisting their efforts to repair what they had deemed to be a
still-mendable marriage, their puzzled expressions seemed to say when I softly but emphatically voiced my pessimism. Clearly, we had very different roadmaps for comprehending and negotiating divorce.

**Familial duties: the art of rekindling marital discord**

It was about that time when one of my adoptive kinsmen, Paulus, brought me two carved wooden tissue boxes ornately embellished with Toraja motifs. Handing me the finely chiselled containers, he instructed that one was a gift for me and the other for my ‘husband’. With a sly smile he added that I had to promise to personally deliver this gift to my husband upon my arrival back in Chicago. ‘Just like the couple, the pair of boxes will be reunited [sitama] before too long!’ he teased. Others present joined in the joking until, in a moment of exasperation, I prickly declared that while I was grateful for the gifts, it was highly unlikely that the boxes would ever be together in one household. The marriage was over. Beyond hope. DEAD! There was a momentary silence – a silence so heavy that I suddenly noticed the scratching sound of the chickens, the low whine of the family dog and the distant hum of the rice mill. Then Ambe Landang, who had assumed the role of family elder, addressed me slowly and deliberately in the firm, instructional tone that I had heard him use with his rambunctious youngest son: ‘Katlin, this is what we Torajas do when couples quarrel. The entire family works together [with the aid of elders] to help heal the problems, so that the couple will want to stay married. It is our place to—’

Moved by his words and ashamed of my irritable outburst, I finally came to grasp on an emotional level what I had previously understood only in a textbook fashion: that in Toraja, marriage was a collective concern. It was not the American ‘couples-only’ private side-road, but rather like an eight-lane Los Angeles freeway, where large and dedicated teams routinely repair potholes (at least in an ideal world). Most Toraja couples residing in rural Kesu area hamlets knew that they could rely on the interventions, assessments and mediations of extended family and community members when encountering marital discord. This is not to say that extended families provided magical marriage repair services (as noted earlier, divorce is as common and un-stigmatised there as in the United States). Rather, members of one’s kin-group are not shy about intervening, and join in assessing the problems faced by a couple. If it is not deemed possible or desirable to re-cultivate harmony between the two, then the marriage is left to dissolve. It seemed my vague (to them) American reasons for divorce and their assessment of my husband as a reasonable partner led them to believe they could help repair our marital potholes.
Later that evening the family took me into town to visit a recently-opened karaoke parlour (at the time a novel institution in the Toraja highlands). It was the night before my return to the United States and they were determined to make my send-off festive, despite my poorly concealed glumness. At the plywood and tin-roofed bar we shared bakso noodles, the women sipped Sprites and Cokes, and the men drank beer and palm wine. Fuzzy images of Lorenzo Lamas in Kung Fu mode flickered on the oversized screen in front of us. When the video ended, my Toraja adoptive ‘brothers’ leapt from their seats to kick off the karaoke portion of the evening. Huddled around the bar’s lone microphone together, they dedicated their first song to my husband in America. Then, flashing a mischievous grin in my direction, one of the brothers introduced the song they were about to sing by declaring: ‘This is what Katlin’s husband is thinking right now ….’ A moment later, the melody to Elvis Presley’s ‘Don’t be cruel to a heart that’s true’ could be heard over the static-laced speaker, as my surrogate brothers began gently swaying and crooning: ‘Baby if I’ve made you mad, something I might have said, please let’s forget the past, the future looks bright ahead, don’t be cruel to a heart that’s true, I don’t want no other love, Baby it’s just you I’m thinking of ….’ This time, their attempted intervention in my crumbling marriage did not sting, as I finally appreciated that while reasons for divorce may get lost in cross-cultural translation, the warmth of familial concern can radiate across the cultural divide.

Finis

When I think back now to the events that transpired, my return to Toraja, my joy at seeing old friends, my endless parrying of their persistent questions, my confusion and distress about my divorce, I can finally appreciate the value of tumbling down this particular fieldwork side-road. Involuntarily shedding a comfortably familiar ‘fieldworker’ role and straying from a pre-plotted research agenda into emotionally awkward terrain opened the door to serendipitous insights – not only about Toraja conceptions of marriage and divorce, but also about my own cultural expectations. Now, from the comfortable vantage point of 15 years later, I look back on this ‘divorce detour’ as a potent moment of grappling with the limits and possibilities for cross-cultural understanding. This was an episode in which both my Toraja friends and I found ourselves stretching and straining, even inadvertently bruising and rejecting one another in misguided attempts at intimacy. But it was also an episode that gave me a more visceral appreciation of the all-encompassing contours of Toraja extended families, and of my own persistent and potentially pernicious culturally-framed presuppositions regarding the autonomy of couples. Although not so willingly pursued, this particular fieldwork side-road led to new terrains and
understandings that can only emerge when the habitually guarded walls between ‘the personal’ and ‘the professional’ are eroded.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Andrew Causey and Jill Forshee for their careful readings of this article, and for their thoughtful suggestions. In addition, my gratitude goes to Alice Kehoe for her encouragement along this particular writing pathway. I also wish to acknowledge Kirin Narayan, who served as the discussant at the American Anthropological Association panel where an earlier version of this article was originally presented as a paper. Finally, my deep appreciation goes to my adoptive Toraja family, whose patience, concern and familial love continue to warm my heart.

**Notes**

1 Here, I would be remiss not to nod to the work of others who opened up spaces for understanding that can only emerge when the habitually guarded walls between ‘the personal’ and ‘the professional’ are eroded.

2 In this regard, this article shares some terrain with Renato Rosaldo’s article ‘Grief and a headhunter’s rage’ (1993). In this article, Rosaldo recounts how he finally comes to grasp the emotions underlying an Illongot head-hunting ritual through his own reactions to his wife’s unexpected death from a tragic fall in the Philippines. His personal experience is what enables him to realise the sterility and inadequacy of his earlier analyses of the ritual.

3 Sterility is considered a valid reason for divorce in Tana Toraja (cf. Koubi 1988: 18–19).

4 As Hollan and Wellenkamp (1994: 166) note, envy is thought to motivate some Torajas to use malicious magic. As one of their interviewees explained: ‘For example, [if] a husband and wife are content … very often someone will use magic [against them] … so that they will suffer and become sick.’ While they worked in the Sesean region of Tana Toraja, their findings bear relevance for the valley region of Kesu, where I worked.
According to interviews conducted by Hollan and Wellenkamp (1994: 163) in the Sesean area of Tana Toraja, adultery is one of the main reasons for divorce in Tana Toraja. Although not all infidelities result in divorces and there are certain situations in which affairs are tolerated (cf. Waterson 1981), most people interviewed by Hollan and Wellenkamp (ibid: 163) confided that the discovery of a spouse’s infidelity was one of the most humiliating life experiences imaginable.

Similarly, Hollan and Wellenkamp (1996: 110) report that their interviews of Toraja women of the Sesean area affirmed that Toraja women would divorce husbands who physically abused them.

In fact, despite my adoptive Toraja mother’s experience in her arranged marriage, Toraja ancestral tales also offer evidence of romantic love as a long-standing cultural motif. For instance, one much-recounted Toraja story tells of a ghost who would not rest until his body was disinterred and moved to be buried in one grave with the body of his beloved (see the story of Dodeng, Parengan and Lebonna in Adams 2006, Ch. 2).

Funeral expenses are sources of major debts for Toraja couples, and hence can provoke serious discord within the family. Hollan and Wellenkamp (1996: 106) quote a Sesean man as explaining that ‘if a relative of the husband dies and then the husband goes and secretly borrows a pig or a buffalo [as a funeral offering] without telling the wife about it until after the funeral, then the wife will be angry’. Likewise, in her research in both Tana Toraja and the adjoining region of Mamasa, Koubi (1988: 15) found that a spouse’s refusal to participate in making offerings for the funeral rituals of their spouse’s kin was considered a serious offence, justifying divorce.


References


