In memoriam, Gumbay Sulan, August, 2004

a most talented and devoted T'boli bamboo zither musician
In the mountain of Cotabato lives a colorful ethnic group known as **Tboli**
or also known as Tagabili

- The T'Bolis occupy an area of about 750 square miles where the Southern ends of the Southwest Coast Range and the Cordillera, also known as the Tiruray culture Highlands, merge. The center falls more or less in the central part of a triangle whose points are the towns of Surallah, Polomolok and Kiamba. Within this triangle are three major lakes: Lake Sebu, Lake Lahit and Lake Selutan.
The T'Bolis are people of medium build. They are light in complexion. Some of them are square-jawed. Their hair may be curly or straight. T'Boli women dress in a long sleeved, tight-fitting, waist length, collarless blouse which is in plain black, dark or navy blue. Their tubular skirt is ankle length. For special occasions, the T'Boli woman is dressed in a pin-striped linen skirt. T'Boli men, no longer wear traditional attire. Today, they normally go about in ordinary pants and skirts, with the typical T'Boli sword which they always carry at their side.
They have been known for their wealth of craft, elaborate traditional dresses, and vivacious dances and music. Today, they are also known for their unusual tie-dyed and woven abaca cloth called tinalak used for dresses during ceremonies and festivities. The intricate process in making the tinalak includes dyeing and painstaking weaving on back-strap looms. They are also known for their brass casting of human and animal figures, bells, and metal boxes.
In a T'Boli family, the father is the head of the family. All his orders are followed and he makes all the decisions. The wife can also give her suggestions or opinions. Depending upon his economic resources and ability to support, a husband can have a number of wives. To them, it is prestigious to have several wives. A wife though cannot enjoy the privilege of the former. However, a husband who wishes to marry again must seek the permission of the first wife. All the wives live under one roof. The first wife always assumes the responsibility of apportioning equally among the wives all the household chores, and the work in the fields.
Houses are spread sparsely over the entire T'Boli area. They come in isolated clusters of three or four, since there is a close interaction among relatives. The house is raised about six feet or more above the ground with the side always barely more than three feet high. The roof is made of cogon or other dried grass which is strung and sewn down to the bamboo rafters with strips of raw abaca or rattan. The posts are of bamboo except for the three stump still rooted to the ground that are occasionally utilized as posts for the inner portion of the floor. The walls of the house are of bamboo split from the inside and flattened out or of woven bamboo strips called lahak.
Like other hill people, the T'Boli subsist on hunting, fishing and cultivation. The rivers, lakes and marshes of the region have always been the source of the fish caught by using fishing rods, spews, nets and other traps. Mudfish, catfish, fresh water shrimp and snails are common food items. Ducks are also raised along the lake's shores.
T'Boli society is ruled by a datu who assumes several roles. He has social, economic, religious and political functions. There are a number of datus in the T'Boli society with varying degrees of power, fame and status achieved or ascribed by the datus to themselves and recognized by their followers.

The position of datu is not hereditary. No datu enjoys primacy over the others, nor does he exercise specific jurisdictional control over specific areas or groups. Other datu might accord deferential treatment to one of their members, but this is not a sign of his superiority over them.
T'Boli *kesiyahan* or marriage is a long process that may be conducted in three major stages: childhood, puberty and adolescence and the crowning celebration called *moninum*. Marriages are prearranged by the parents and may be contracted at any age, even immediately after the child's birth. The *moninum* is a series of six feasts, hosted alternately by the families of the bride and the groom. Done over a period ranging from 2 to 6 years, the *moninum* is an optional celebration which only wealthy T'Bolis can afford. Each feast runs for 3 to 5 days and nights. Polygamy is allowed among the T'Boli, a practice resorted to especially by the chieftains and the wealthy. The grounds for divorce include incompatibility, sterility or infidelity.
The T'Bolis do not regard death as inevitable, rather it is a trick played by the busao or evil spirits, or punishment inflicted by gods. This is rooted in the belief that one's spirit leaves one's body when one is asleep, and one awakens the moment the spirit returns. Thus, should the spirit not return, death occurs.
The T'Bolis' supreme deities are married couple, Kadaw La Sambad, the sun god and Bulon La Mogoaw, the moon goddess. They reside in the seventh heaven. They beget seven sons and daughters who end up marrying each other. Cumucul, the eldest son is given a cohort of fire, a tok (sword), and shield. Cumucul is married to Boi Kabil Sfedat, the second is married to the second daughter, Bong Libun.
One of the most influential figures in the T'Boli pantheon is the *muhen*, a bird considered the god of fate whose song when heard is thought to presage misfortune. Any undertaking is immediately abandoned or postponed when one hears the *muhen* sing.
The T'Boli also believe in *busao* (malevolent spirits) which wreak havoc on the lives of human beings, thus causing misfortune and illness. *Desu* or propitiatory offerings of *onuk bukay* (white chicken) or *sedu* (pig) are made to placate or gain favors from these evil spirits. T'Boli rites are normally presided over by a morally upright leader who is proficient in their tradition. Often enough, the datu themselves preside...
The T'Boli metalcraft tradition distinguishes T'Boli culture and is linked to Glinton, the god of metalwork, who occupies a stellar place in the T'Boli pantheon. T'boli metalwork consists of bracelets and solid anklets. A recent product of the metalwork tradition is the T'Boli figurine. T'Boli weaving is another skill that has been raised to the level of art. Their traditional cloth, the *t'nalak* is made of *krungon* (abaca fiber) extracted from the mature fruit bearing, wild abaca.
- T'Boli folk literature reflects the typical beliefs, customs and traditions of their society. Practically every aspect of T'boli life is governed by folk beliefs and sayings. The epic *Todbulol* is the core of T'Boli folk literature and the foundation on which T'Boli identity rests. The epic is sung in its entirety only at important occasions like weddings. This may last up to 16 hrs, depending on the number of versions sung.
• Just as the wealth of T'Boli folklore is amazing and the sophistication of their music, so is the variety of their dances. T'Boli children learn these dances from old members of the household at a very early age.