

A Philosophical-Theological Study of To Makula in Gabriel Marcel's Thought

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Abstract

To makula, literally meaning “a sick person,” is a distinctive concept in Torajan culture referring to a person who has biologically died but whose funeral rites have not yet been completed. Rather than being regarded as dead, the individual continues to be recognized as a relational subject and remains actively integrated into family and communal life through practices such as offering food and drink, speaking to the deceased, and caring for the body within the family house until the funeral ceremony takes place. This study explores the philosophical and theological meaning of the relationship between the self and to makula, examining its existential significance within Torajan anthropology, its influence on everyday life, and its possible religious dimension. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research interprets the lived experience of to makula through Gabriel Marcel’s philosophy, particularly his concepts of being, presence, participation, and interpersonal communion. The findings indicate that to makula embodies an enduring relational existence in which death does not immediately dissolve human relationships but transforms them into a continuing presence sustained through love, memory, communal participation, and spiritual solidarity, thereby revealing a philosophical-theological understanding of personhood that transcends the biological definition of death

Keywords: Being, Having, Puya, Relationality, To Makula,

INTRODUCTION

Torajan anthropology approaches the human person through multiple dimensions. Human life is not interpreted merely through rational consciousness, but also through symbolic, religious, and relational dimensions. For the Torajan people, human existence is embedded within a network of meanings that transcends purely logical or empirical categories and is constituted through kinship, ritual participation, and cosmological relationships ((Tsintjilonis, 2000a), 2007). The human person is understood as a relational being whose identity is shaped not only by reason but also by participation in symbolic structures, spiritual realities, communal bonds, and enduring relationships with ancestors (Wellenkamp, 1988).

In contrast, Torajan anthropology approaches the human person through multiple dimensions. Human life is not interpreted merely through rational consciousness, but also through symbolic, religious, and relational dimensions. For the Torajan people, human existence is embedded within a network of meanings that transcend purely logical or empirical categories. The human person is understood as a relational being whose identity is shaped not only by reason but also by participation in symbolic structures, spiritual realities, and communal bonds.

The urgency and purpose of this research lie in uncovering the meaning of the relationship between the living and the preserved body laid in the house. This study seeks to explore the underlying conceptual framework embedded in the relation between the self (the living person) and *to makula*, a framework that profoundly shapes ritual practices and everyday life among the Torajan people. By illuminating the meaning of this relationality, the research aims to contribute to the development of a theological understanding that is more closely connected to lived human experience, particularly within the Torajan context.

Wellenskamp et al, in his research interviews, observed that the Torajan people do not fear death, because death is understood not as annihilation but as a transition from one realm to another. This perspective reflects a cosmological worldview in which death signifies movement

rather than termination, continuity rather than rupture. (Wellenskamp, 1996, p. 173). In his study of death, Panuntun interpreted *to makula* through the concept of the *sleeping soul* as an attempt to reconstruct a Christian theology that is responsive to Torajan culture. Nevertheless, his analysis remained focused on theological reconstruction and did not explore the existential relationship between the living person and *to makula* as a lived experience that shapes Torajan understandings of human existence. (Panuntun & Salewa, 2022). Meanwhile, Roni Ismail examined death rituals in the indigenous Torajan religion, *Aluk To Dolo*, and argued that death is understood as a transitional process toward *Puya*, in which a person is not regarded as truly deceased until the entire *Rambu Solo* ritual has been completed (Ismail, 2019). Sampe Buntu emphasizes that, within Torajan cosmology, human beings are understood to originate from the heavenly realm, and death is interpreted as a return journey to that primordial source (Sampe Buntu, 2025).

Taken together, these previous studies have provided important insights into Torajan understandings of death and funeral rituals. Nevertheless, the existential meaning of *to makula* and its significance for understanding relational human existence remain insufficiently explored.

The relationship between the self and *to makula* significantly influences religious perspectives. The religions currently embraced by the Torajan people, particularly Christianity, tend to view *to makula* (the preserved body laid in the house) merely as a lifeless corpse devoid of intrinsic meaning. In this sense, Christianity often approaches the body from a material standpoint, reducing it to biological remains. Consequently, the family's treatment of the preserved body is frequently interpreted as a form of syncretism rather than as an expression of an existential or theological worldview.

This study offers a novel contribution by interpreting *to makula* not merely as a preserved body or a cultural symbol, but as a relational presence that shapes the existential encounter between the living and the deceased. By bringing Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of being and participation into dialogue with Torajan anthropology, this research develops a philosophical-theological interpretation that broadens contemporary discussions on personhood, death, and relational existence. Based on this background, the central question of this study is: What is the meaning of the relationship between the human person and *to makula*? Furthermore, how does this relationality shape the everyday life of the community and influence the performance of ritual practices?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2014, p. 21). The term *phenomenology* was introduced by Edmund Husserl as a philosophical method aimed at returning “to the things themselves,” that is, to lived experience as it is consciously encountered (Robert Sokolowski, 2007, p. 2). The central objective of phenomenology is to uncover the meaning embedded within everyday human experience (*lived experience*), rather than merely describing observable phenomena at a superficial level (Riyanto, 2020, p. 101; Robert Sokolowski, 2007, p. 2).

Phenomenology does not focus on what simply appears externally, but on how reality is experienced, interpreted, and constituted in the consciousness of subjects within the context of everyday life. Its purpose is to disclose the meaning behind events by exploring the depth of subjective experience. In this sense, phenomenological research seeks to interpret the intentional structures, relational dynamics, and existential significance of lived reality as articulated by participants themselves. (FX.E Armada Riyanto, 2020, p. 101).

This methodological approach is frequently employed to examine religious experience, cultural practices, social interactions, and even political struggles, precisely because these

domains cannot be adequately understood through purely empirical or positivistic frameworks (Riyanto, 2020, pp. 101–102). By adopting a phenomenological perspective, this study aims to interpret the relational experience of individuals who have lived with *to makula*, in order to articulate the deeper existential and theological meanings underlying this Torajan practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical Findings: The Relational Meaning of *To Makula* in Torajan Society

As Jeanine Koubi observes in her research on Torajan society, death is not understood as an event that occurs automatically at the moment biological functions cease. Rather, it is conceived as a social, symbolic, and cosmological process that must be ritually affirmed. Koubi notes that within Torajan cosmology there exists a specific ceremony that formally declares that a person previously regarded as *to makula* has definitively transitioned into the status of *to mate* (the truly dead).

This affirmation is not merely individual but communal in nature, because death is understood as an event that involves the entire network of social and cosmological relations. Until the prescribed ritual has been performed, a person who has biologically died is not fully separated from the world of the living. Social and ethical relationships with family and community therefore continue. In this context, death is not reduced to a biological fact; it is an event that must be “ratified” through customary rites in order to establish a clear transition from *to makula* to *to mate*.

Koubi’s interpretation underscores that, within Torajan understanding, death signifies a transformation of ontological-relational status rather than a sudden rupture of existence. Ritual functions as a bridge between the world of the living and the world of the dead, structuring the human experience of transition within a coherent cosmological framework. Thus, *to makula* occupies a liminal position in which biological death has occurred, yet social and relational existence remains meaningfully active (Koubi, 1975).

The transformation of identity from *to makula* to *to mate* (the deceased) is ritually confirmed through the sacrifice of a buffalo. This rite is called *ma’karu’dusan*. The term derives from the root word *ru’du*, meaning “to die,” while *karu’dusan* refers to the moment of drawing one’s final breath (Ven, 1972). Through this ritual act, biological death is not merely acknowledged but formally and communally ratified within the social and cosmological order. The buffalo sacrifice functions as a symbolic marker of transition, signifying that the individual has definitively moved from the liminal condition of *to makula* into the recognized status of *to mate*. In this way, death becomes a socially constituted and ritually mediated transformation of ontological-relational identity.

The question then arises: once a person is designated as *to mate*, does the relationship with the deceased truly come to an end? The answer is no. This enduring relationality can be observed each year when Torajans visit the graves of their loved ones, expressing a bond that is never fully severed.

In several customary regions of Toraja, such as Pangala, Baruppu, and other areas, the ritual known as *ma’nene* is performed. *Ma’nene* is a ceremonial practice in which the bodies of those who have been buried for many years are exhumed and provided with new clothing. This ritual, typically carried out annually at the burial site, vividly demonstrates that the relationship with the deceased is not confined to biological existence. Rather, it reveals a continuing relational bond that transcends physical death and affirms an ongoing connection between the living and the dead. (Putra et al., 2023; Tsintjilonis, 2000b, 2004, 2007)

Within the Torajan worldview, relationality can be broadly categorized into four interconnected dimensions: the relationship with the divine, the relationship with the cosmos, the

relationship with fellow human beings, and the relationship with the ancestors (Ivan Sampe Buntu, 2024, p. 38). The dimension of relationality examined in this study is the relationship with the ancestors, particularly in the case of a preserved body that remains in the house. Such a body is not referred to as *to mate* (the dead), but as *to makula* (a sick person). The practice of keeping the deceased in the family home for months or even years continues to be maintained in Toraja. Although this tradition originates from the ancestral religion, it has persisted even after Christianity became the majority religion in the region.

The preserved body must not be regarded or addressed as *to mate*, but rather as *to makula*. This linguistic distinction carries significant ontological implications. Because the deceased is designated as “sick” rather than “dead,” the person must be treated as though still living—provided with food and drink, spoken to, and included in the rhythms of daily domestic life. In this way, relational continuity is enacted not merely symbolically, but through concrete, embodied practices that affirm the ongoing presence of the deceased within the household.

In an interview conducted by the author with Nenek Arsen (Sampe Koro'), a member of the Torajan community who once lived in the same house as *to makula*, she explained that *to makula* is treated as though still living. According to her testimony, she would speak to *to makula*, call them at mealtimes, and bring them food and drink as part of the household routine. She recalled the expression used when addressing them: “*Dipa'kadai kumua millik komi kumande, milik komi mangiru*” (“They are greeted at mealtime with the words: arise and eat, arise and drink”).

Furthermore, when evening approached and darkness began to fall, Nenek Arsen and her family would instruct their children to turn on the lights for *to makula*. She quoted the phrase: “*Lokomi padukkuan api nene'mi kalillinan dako*” (“Turn on the lamp for grandmother, so that she is not left in the dark”). These practices illustrate that relational continuity is not merely symbolic but enacted through concrete gestures of care, speech, and attentiveness, reinforcing the existential presence of *to makula* within domestic life.

The author also interviewed Y.L.L. and N.J (personal communication, 2025), who likewise lived in the same house as *to makula* for a period of two years. He explained that “*pa'kaboro lako to mate pada bangsia pa'kaboro lako to tuo*,” which can be literally translated as: “The relationship with the dead is the same as the relationship with the living.”

This statement was not merely rhetorical but was expressed through concrete daily practices. At mealtime, for instance, the family would first serve food to *to makula* before eating themselves. They would also provide coffee each day, just as *to makula* had customarily drunk coffee while alive. Moreover, whenever family members were about to leave the house, they would bid farewell to *to makula*, acknowledging their continued presence within the household.

These practices demonstrate that *to makula* is not treated as an inert body, but as a relational subject integrated into the rhythms of domestic life. The continuity of care, speech, and etiquette reveals that relationality persists beyond biological death, affirming an ongoing mode of presence within the family structure.

The treatment of *to makula* as described above clearly indicates that the relationship with *to makula* is regarded as equivalent to the relationship with the living. According to the informants, there is no fundamental difference between relating to the living and relating to the dead. The only discernible difference lies at the physical level—namely, that the deceased can no longer speak. Substantively, however, the relational bond remains intact. This conviction is expressed in the phrase, “*ia tu pa'kaboro, tae'na bisa ussapai kamatean*,” meaning that love and relational attachment to a person cannot be limited by death. Death cannot serve as a barrier to the expression of relational commitment toward the one who has died.

Such relationality cannot be understood solely within the framework of *having*; it must be interpreted within the horizon of *being*. Torajan relational existence is not confined to what is empirically visible. Even when a family member travels far from home, they remain mindful that

to makula has been left behind in the house, and this awareness generates a sense of responsibility to return. As expressed in the statement, “*Ia ke maleki mambela, inang mengkilalaki kumua tampena pale to matua dio mai banua,*” which literally means, “If I go far away, I still remember that there is an elder at home who has been left behind.”

This testimony reveals that relational presence persists beyond physical co-presence. The bond is not suspended by spatial distance or biological death, but continues as an existential responsibility rooted in love, memory, and fidelity.

At the communal level, this relational structure is equally evident. For example, during village gatherings in which meat is distributed, the first portion is given to *to mandarana*—literally, “the one who attends to the sick”—that is, the person who remains at home caring for *to makula*. Y.L.L. (personal communication, 2025) explains that the remaining portions of meat cannot be distributed to others unless *to makula* has first received their share: “*Ia tu duku senga, tu mangkanna di ira-ira tae’na bisa dipamale ke tae’pi naditawai tu to makula*” (“The other portions cannot be distributed if *to makula* has not yet been given their share”).

This priority reveals the profound significance of *to makula* within Torajan society. In every customary ceremony—whether *rambu tuka’* (rituals of life and thanksgiving) or *rambu solo’* (funerary rites)—*to makula* is accorded precedence. Just as within the household, where the living do not eat before serving *to makula*, at the communal level the same relational order is maintained. Even the greeting *ta kumande* (“let us eat”) is extended to *to makula*, reinforcing the continuity of relational participation.

Such practices demonstrate that the bond with *to makula* is not confined to private domestic life but is structurally embedded within the communal and ritual life of Torajan society. The relational presence of the deceased thus occupies a recognized and honored position within the social order.

When, then, is *to makula* finally recognized as *to mate* (the truly dead)? *To makula* is formally acknowledged as dead only after the prescribed ritual has been performed. As expressed in the statement, “*Tae’pa nadisanga to mate ke tae’pi nariai ada’, ditunumo to tu tedong pa’karu’dusan,*” meaning that a person cannot yet be called dead if the customary rite has not been carried out, specifically the sacrifice of the buffalo in the *ma’karu’dusan* ceremony.

The transition from *to makula* to *to mate* is thus inseparably bound to customary law (*adat*). The symbolic confirmation of death is marked by the sacrifice of a buffalo. As another expression states, “*Ditunupi tu tanda sa’bina namane disanga to mate,*” literally meaning, “Only after the buffalo is slaughtered as a sign may the person be called dead.”

At the moment the buffalo is sacrificed for *to makula*, a significant change also occurs within the domestic space: the sleeping position of *to makula* is altered. Previously oriented toward the West, the body is turned to face the South. In traditional religious understanding, facing South signifies that the deceased is preparing to embark on the journey to *puya*. *Puya* is understood as a temporary resting place, where the soul awaits subsequent rites before attaining the status of deified ancestor.

This ritual reorientation—both symbolic and spatial—visibly marks the ontological transition from liminal relational presence to ritually affirmed death within the cosmological order.

From another perspective, as explained by N.T (personal communication, 2012), the Torajan people may keep a body in the house for months or even years, during which time it is referred to as *to makula*. The designation “sick person” is not arbitrary; it reflects a fundamental spatial and cosmological understanding. In Torajan thought, the house is the dwelling place of the living, not a grave. Therefore, a body that remains within the domestic space cannot be categorized as belonging to the realm of the dead. The term *to makula* functions as a linguistic and ontological marker indicating that the person is still situated within the sphere of the living household rather than in the burial domain.

This distinction is further clarified through the Torajan conception of two types of “houses”: *banua tang merambu* and *banua merambu*. Literally translated, *banua tang merambu* means “the house without smoke,” referring to the grave, while *banua merambu* means “the house with smoke,” referring to the inhabited dwelling. The presence of smoke signifies ongoing life and activity. Consequently, as long as the deceased remains within the *banua merambu*—the living house—the person cannot yet be fully classified as dead in the social and cosmological sense.

This spatial-symbolic distinction reinforces the liminal status of *to makula*, situating the preserved body within a relational horizon that is neither fully of the living nor fully of the dead.

Thus, Torajan relationality encompasses both empirical and non-empirical dimensions, as it is not confined to what is visible or sensorially accessible. Relational existence in this context is not limited to perceptible interaction, but extends into a metaphysical horizon. The bond with *to makula* therefore cannot be interpreted within the framework of *having*, which presupposes objectification and empirical possession. Rather, it must be understood within the horizon of *being*, where relational presence transcends physical visibility.

In this sense, the formation and continuity of relational bonds are not determined solely by empirical conditions. Instead, they are grounded in an enduring form of love that exceeds material boundaries. Relationality is sustained not by physical proximity but by existential fidelity—an openness to presence that persists even beyond biological death.

Discussion: Interpreting To Makula through Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy of Being

The empirical findings presented in the previous section demonstrate that the Torajan concept of *to makula* cannot be adequately understood solely through a biological definition of death. This is because, within the Torajan worldview, death is not perceived as the end of human existence. Rather, biological death signifies a transformation in the mode of relational presence between the deceased and the living. The continuity of relational practices, communication, ritual participation, and social recognition evident in the treatment of *to makula* indicates that the deceased continues to occupy a meaningful place within the relational life of both the family and the wider community. These findings suggest that, in the Torajan understanding, death does not immediately terminate relational existence but instead transforms the way in which that existence is experienced and sustained.

Gabriel Marcel's existential philosophy provides an appropriate philosophical framework for interpreting this phenomenon. Marcel distinguishes between the modes of having and being. According to him, the logic of *having* is characterized by possession, objectification, and separation, whereas the logic of *being* is grounded in participation, presence, and communion (Ejike Emeka, 2024; Marcel, 1949, p. 12). The findings of this study clearly correspond to the latter. The relationship between the living and *to makula* is not maintained because the preserved body is regarded as an object of possession (*having*), but because the deceased continues to be acknowledged as a relational subject whose presence retains existential significance. In this sense, *to makula* is encountered not as something that one possesses, but as someone with whom one continues to exist in an ongoing relationship (*being*).

This interpretation also explains why the body of *to makula* is never reduced to a mere corpse. Marcel argues that the human body cannot be understood simply as an object external to the self, because embodied existence constitutes the primary mode through which a person is present in the world (Marcel, 1949, p. 12). The empirical findings of this study strongly resonate with this philosophical insight. The preserved body functions neither as an inert object nor merely as biological remains; rather, it serves as the visible medium through which relational presence continues to be acknowledged. Consequently, the practices surrounding *to makula* should not be interpreted as a denial of biological death, but as an affirmation that human existence cannot be reduced solely to biological categories.

The findings further reveal that the continuity of relationality is sustained through fidelity, rather than through physical proximity alone. For Marcel, fidelity is an existential commitment that preserves the presence of the other even after empirical presence has disappeared (Marcel, 1949, p. 32). Such fidelity is clearly reflected in the Torajan understanding of *to makula*, where the relational bond is maintained through enduring responsibility, remembrance, and participation. The significance of these practices lies not primarily in the ritual acts themselves, but in the existential conviction that authentic human relationships are not terminated by death. Relational presence thus becomes an ontological reality grounded in love rather than in physical coexistence. As Marcel expresses it, "In reality, I do not lose the person I love; I lose only something that I had" (Bertens, 2001, p. 78). This statement aptly captures the Torajan understanding that death does not sever relational existence but only transforms its mode of presence.

Another important implication emerging from the findings concerns the communal character of relational existence. Marcel's philosophical reflections primarily emphasize interpersonal participation between the "I" and the "Thou." The Torajan concept of *to makula*, however, demonstrates that relational presence is sustained not only at the personal level but also collectively through customary institutions, ritual obligations, and communal recognition. The continuity of relational being is therefore embedded within the social structure itself. In this respect, the findings extend Marcel's existential philosophy by showing that relational fidelity is expressed not only through individual consciousness but also through shared cultural practices that preserve the presence of the deceased within the life of the community.

Finally, the ritual transition from *to makula* to *to mate* further reinforces this existential interpretation of death. The findings indicate that biological death alone is insufficient to constitute complete death within the Torajan cosmological order. Death acquires its full social and ontological meaning only through ritual confirmation. This understanding challenges perspectives that reduce death to a purely biological event. Instead, death is understood as a relational process in which communal participation, symbolic actions, and shared cultural meanings collectively shape the transition from one mode of existence to another. Marcel's philosophy provides a valuable framework for interpreting this process, demonstrating that human existence is fundamentally constituted through relationships rather than merely through biological life.

Philosophical-Theological Implications of *To Makula*

These findings also have broader implications for philosophical theology. The concept of *to makula* suggests that the meaning of death cannot be reduced to empirical finality alone. Rather, death should be understood as a transformation in the mode of presence, through which the deceased continues to exist within networks of love, memory, fidelity, and communal responsibility. This interpretation does not deny the reality of biological death; instead, it situates biological death within the broader horizon of relational existence. From this perspective, the Torajan understanding of *to makula* offers a contextual theological perspective in which death is understood not as the end of relationality but as the continuation of existence through a different mode of presence.

Accordingly, this study contributes not only to a deeper understanding of Torajan culture but also to the development of contemporary existential philosophy and contextual theology. While Gabriel Marcel demonstrates that human existence is fundamentally relational, the empirical findings of this study show that relational existence can also be culturally embodied and institutionally sustained through ritual practices. In this respect, the Torajan tradition extends Marcel's philosophical insights by demonstrating that relational presence is preserved not only through individual fidelity but also through communal practices that sustain the existential significance of the deceased. The concept of *to makula* therefore offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary discussions on death, relationality, and the ontology of human existence.

In light of Gabriel Marcel's existential philosophy, the relationship between the Torajan people and *to makula* can only be adequately understood within the horizon of *being*, rather than *having*. A relation of *being* refers to deep existential involvement between subject and subject, whereas a relation of *having* positions the other as an object that can be possessed, managed, or relinquished. This distinction is crucial for understanding why *to makula* is not treated as a mere corpse, but as a person who continues to exist within a web of relational bonds.

Within Torajan culture, *to makula* is not perceived as a biological object that has lost its existence, but as a relational subject whose presence remains existentially acknowledged. Although empirically the body has undergone biological death, its being is not reduced to mere physicality. The presence of *to makula* continues to be lived out in daily family interactions—through greetings, gestures of care, and symbolic acts that affirm the continuity of relational existence.

Marcel insists that one never fully “loses” the person one loves. What is lost in death is only empirical or physical presence, not the relationship itself. Relational bonds—especially those grounded in love—are not entirely subject to the categories of space and time. Death, therefore, cannot be interpreted as the total rupture of personal relationality. For Marcel, love represents the deepest form of *being*-relation, because within it the “I” and the “Thou” mutually participate in openness and fidelity. Such a relation cannot be objectified nor reduced to psychological memory. The beloved continues to exist as *presence*—an existential presence that is real, even if no longer empirical.

Seen in this light, the Torajan practice of treating *to makula* as living cannot be interpreted as a denial of death. On the contrary, it is an affirmation that biological death is not identical with relational extinction. The bond between the self and *to makula* remains an *I–Thou* relation, not a subject–object relation.

This relational mode reveals that the Torajan understanding of death is existential rather than merely biological. Death is not perceived as an event that automatically erases relational significance; rather, it signifies a transformation in the mode of presence within the network of human relations. *To makula* thus occupies a liminal position—situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead—without forfeiting relational status.

By contrast, theological perspectives that reduce death to the absolute termination of human existence tend to operate within what Marcel calls the logic of *problem*. In this logic, death is treated as an objective event that is complete and final, rendering relational continuity irrelevant. Such an approach risks objectifying death and prematurely severing relational bonds at the theological level.

In contrast, the relation with *to makula* unfolds within the logic of *mystery*, as Marcel understands it. Mystery is not something irrational or incomprehensible, but a reality in which the subject is existentially involved and which cannot be reduced to objectification. Death, within the logic of mystery, is not confronted externally as a finished event, but experienced internally within the living fabric of relational existence.

It is precisely here that the concept of *to makula* opens new possibilities for philosophical theology. Death is understood as a relational event that still leaves room for presence, love, and ethical responsibility. The relationship with *to makula* demands fidelity, attentiveness, and reverence—not merely because of customary obligation, but because the relational bond itself continues to exist.

Thus, *to makula* may be read as a locus of contextual existential theology. It challenges theology not to remain confined within empirical and biological categories, but to open itself to the relational and metaphysical dimensions of human existence. In the light of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy, the Torajan relation with *to makula* demonstrates that death is not the end of relationality, but a transformation in the mode of presence within the horizon of being

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the relationship between the human person and *to makula* is fundamentally an existential relationship grounded in being rather than having, as articulated in Gabriel Marcel's philosophy. *To makula* is not understood merely as a preserved body or a cultural symbol, but as a continuing relational presence that sustains the I–Thou relationship beyond biological death. Consequently, death is interpreted not as the immediate termination of personhood but as a transformation in the mode of presence, where love, fidelity, and participation preserve relational continuity. This understanding profoundly shapes everyday Torajan life, as *to makula* continues to be addressed, cared for, included in family routines, and honored within communal and ritual practices until the funeral rites are completed. These practices reveal that relational existence extends beyond empirical reality into a metaphysical horizon in which social, ethical, and spiritual responsibilities remain active. The study therefore concludes that the concept of *to makula* offers a contextual philosophical-theological contribution by challenging biological and objectifying interpretations of death and by presenting human existence as fundamentally relational, where death transforms rather than abolishes the enduring bond between the living and the deceased.

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