

Sex, Gender, and Priests in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Research >
Southeast Asia

A specific group acting as priests among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, the *bissu* are imagined to be hermaphroditic beings embodying female and male elements. For anyone interested in the study of sex and gender, the Bugis, the largest ethnic group of South Sulawesi, offers an exceptionally rich canvas for research.



A *bissu* chanting a sacred ritual to the gods.

Sharyn Graham

By Sharyn Graham

For the past few years I have been conducting anthropological research into ideas and forms of gender in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. While initially I was concerned with men and women, upon arrival I realized that gender in South Sulawesi is much more complex than that. Among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, possibly four genders are acknowledged plus a fifth ‘para-gender’ identity. In addition to male-men (*oroane*) and female-women (*makunrai*) (categories that are similar to those in Australia), there are *calalai*,¹ biological females who take on many of the roles and functions expected of men; *calabai*,² biological males who in many respects adhere to the expectations of women; and *bissu*. In this article, I will focus on *bissu*, who act as priests.

The Bugis have an incredibly rich oral history, as well as an extensive history of written material. If you were to ask someone in South Sulawesi how they imagine their world came to be, you would probably be told a narrative in which the *bissu* play a central role.

‘You ask how this world came to be? Well let me tell you. Up there in the heavens, the gods decided they would bring life to this lonely planet. They therefore sent down one of their most aspiring deities, Batara Guru. But Batara Guru was not good at organizing things. To do all of this, two *bissu* were needed. So the gods sent down two *bissu* who flanked Batara Guru as he descended. And when they arrived, the *bissu* set about making everything blossom; they created language, culture, customs [*adat*], and all of the things that a world needs if it is going to blossom. That’s how the world began you see’ (Haj Bacco’).

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1 An individual example may clarify the concept of *calalai*. Rani works alongside men as a blacksmith, shaping *kris*, small blades, and other knives; wears men’s clothing; and ties *hir* sarong in the fashion of men. Rani also lives with *hir* wife and their adopted child. While Rani works with men, dresses as a man, smokes cigarettes, and walks alone at night, activities women are not encouraged to participate in, Rani is female and therefore not considered a man. Rani does not wish to become a man. Rani is *calalai*. Rani’s female anatomy combined with *hir* occupation, behaviour, and sexuality allows Rani to identify, and be identified, as a *calalai*.

2 *Calabai*, while adhering to expectations of women, do not consider themselves women, are not considered women, and do not wish to become women (either by accepting restrictions placed on women, i.e. not going out alone at night, or recreating their body through surgery). Whereas *calalai* tend to conform more to the norms of men, *calabai* have created specific roles for themselves in Bugis society, most notably in their role as Wedding Mothers (*indo’ boting*). As Wedding Mothers, *calabai* take charge of the total organization of weddings, including the food, decorations, seating arrangements, and the make-up and dress of the bride and groom and their retinue.

In addition to the rich oral tradition of the Bugis, origin narratives have been recorded on *lontar* palm leaves from around the sixteenth century. One such recorded narrative tells of Sarawigading and WeCudai, the marriage of whom resulted in the birth of the first human on earth.

‘Sarawigading desperately wanted to marry with WeCudai but she lived on an island in the middle of the lake. Sarawigading had no way of getting to the middle of the lake but he knew he must. Sarawigading decided he must make a boat and paddle out to WeCudai. But how to make a boat? If only he could cut this massive tree down. But try as he might he was not powerful enough to do so. Sarawigading burst into frustrated tears and cried long into the night. He would never be able to cut down this tree and make a boat and he would never reach WeCudai. But there was a *bissu* in the heavens above who heard Sarawigading cry. The *bissu* descended and said, ‘Please don’t worry, I will cut down the tree and help you make the boat.’ And the *bissu* cut down the tree because s/he had the strength of both man and woman, and mortal and deity.’

These origin narratives serve to demonstrate that the *bissu* have a primary position in the minds of the Bugis in their imaginations of the past. Recourse to such important roles allows the *bissu* to assert and maintain a revered position in contemporary Bugis society.

So who are the *bissu*? The *bissu* are imagined to be hermaphroditic beings who embody female and male elements. While it is enough that one’s body is imagined hermaphroditic, while often being anatomically male, *bissu* consciously dress in ways that highlight male and female characteristics. A *bissu* may carry a man’s *badi* (knife) but wear flowers in *hir* (his/her) hair like a woman. Not only do *bissu* have to combine female and male attributes, they must also combine human elements with spirit elements. It is essential that the *bissu* have good connections with the spirit world in order to make contact with the gods. To do this, *bissu* must be part spirit (*dewata*). In order for them to be possessed by spirits – so they can bestow blessings – *bissu* must also be part human (*manusia*). In essence, then, *bissu* are female/male, deity/mortal beings, who can be and often are possessed by spirits in order to confer blessings.

The main role of the *bissu* thus is to bestow blessings. And blessings can be for just about anything. A *bissu* blessing is performed before planting rice and before harvesting; *bissu* consecrate marriages; and – what may seem ironic, but actually is not – *bissu* give blessings to people before they set out on the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. There not being irony in this follows from the way in which the Bugis have managed to syncretize pre-Islamic beliefs with Islam, which forbids transgendered behaviour. For instance, before Islam the Bugis honoured a god called PaTotoe. Many Bugis have come to believe that Allah is actually PaTotoe but by a different name. Moreover, while the *bissu* do still call to deities to possess them, they always begin by seeking the blessing and advice of Allah. Lastly, the *bissu* have altered some of their practices such as walking on fire because it is believed to be contrary to Islam.

How do *bissu* bestow blessings? In order to bestow a blessing, a *bissu* needs to be possessed by an appropriate deity. Only *bissu* can become possessed because only *bissu* carry the required mix of mortal and deity, feminine and masculine. To awaken the deities, the *bissu* first perform an elaborate ritual involving chanting, music, and the offering of ritual foods. Once the deities have been awakened, they select from among themselves the one who is best able to offer the requested blessing. This deity will then descend and possess the *bissu*. When the *bissu* awaken from trance, their entire demeanour is different: they become irritable and aggressive. This change in demeanour, however, is not enough to convince the people gathered around – and more importantly, the person who has requested the blessing – that the *bissu* is now possessed. Proof of possession is sought. In response to this challenge, the *bissu* must then perform the *ma’giri*, or self-stabbing. To perform this, a *bissu* will take a sacred *kris* (knife) that has been passed down through many generations of *bissu*, and attempt to penetrate their skin with the *kris*. *Bissu* will even go to the extent

of lying on the floor with the *kris* pressed into their throat. Other places where the *kris* is aimed are the palm and temple.

If the *kris* does not penetrate the skin, the *bissu* is said to be *kebal* (impenetrable), and thus has proved *hir* invulnerability – a sure sign that the *bissu* has been possessed by a powerful spirit. The *bissu* host, and the deity who has possessed *hir*, are then able to offer blessings. If, however, the *kris* does penetrate, the *bissu* is said to be possessed by a weak, impotent spirit, or no spirit at all, and is therefore not allowed to bestow blessings.

How do you become a *bissu*? It is believed that you are born with the propensity to become a *bissu*. Most auspiciously, this is revealed in a baby whose genitalia are ambiguous. Unsurprisingly, ambiguous genitalia alone cannot ensure that you become a *bissu*. Moreover, these ambiguous genitalia need not be visible; a normative male who becomes a *bissu* is believed to be female on the inside. By the age of about twelve, if a child demonstrates a close connection with the spirit world, he or she is groomed to become a *bissu*. In the past, such a child would be apprenticed to the royal court. Nowadays, a child will become the apprentice of an individual *bissu*. After many years of training, an apprentice *bissu* will undergo a number of tests in order to become a *bissu*. This includes, among many other tests, lying on a bamboo raft in the middle of a lake for three days and three nights without eating, drinking, or moving. If the apprentice survives this and wakes from the trance fluent in the sacred *bissu* language (*Basa Bissu* or *Bahasa Dewata*, language of the gods), he or she is then accepted as a *bissu*.

A study of the *bissu* and their role and position in Bugis society has the potential to make some substantial contributions to our understanding of how different societies organize and interpret gender. Not all societies assert that there are just two genders, woman and man, attached respectively to two biological sexes, female and male. Some societies, such as that of the Bugis, acknowledge possibly four gender categories, in addition to a fifth para-gender group – the *bissu*. It is from the Bugis that we can learn much about acceptance and respect for a panoply of gender identities. <



A *bissu* performing the *ma’giri*.

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