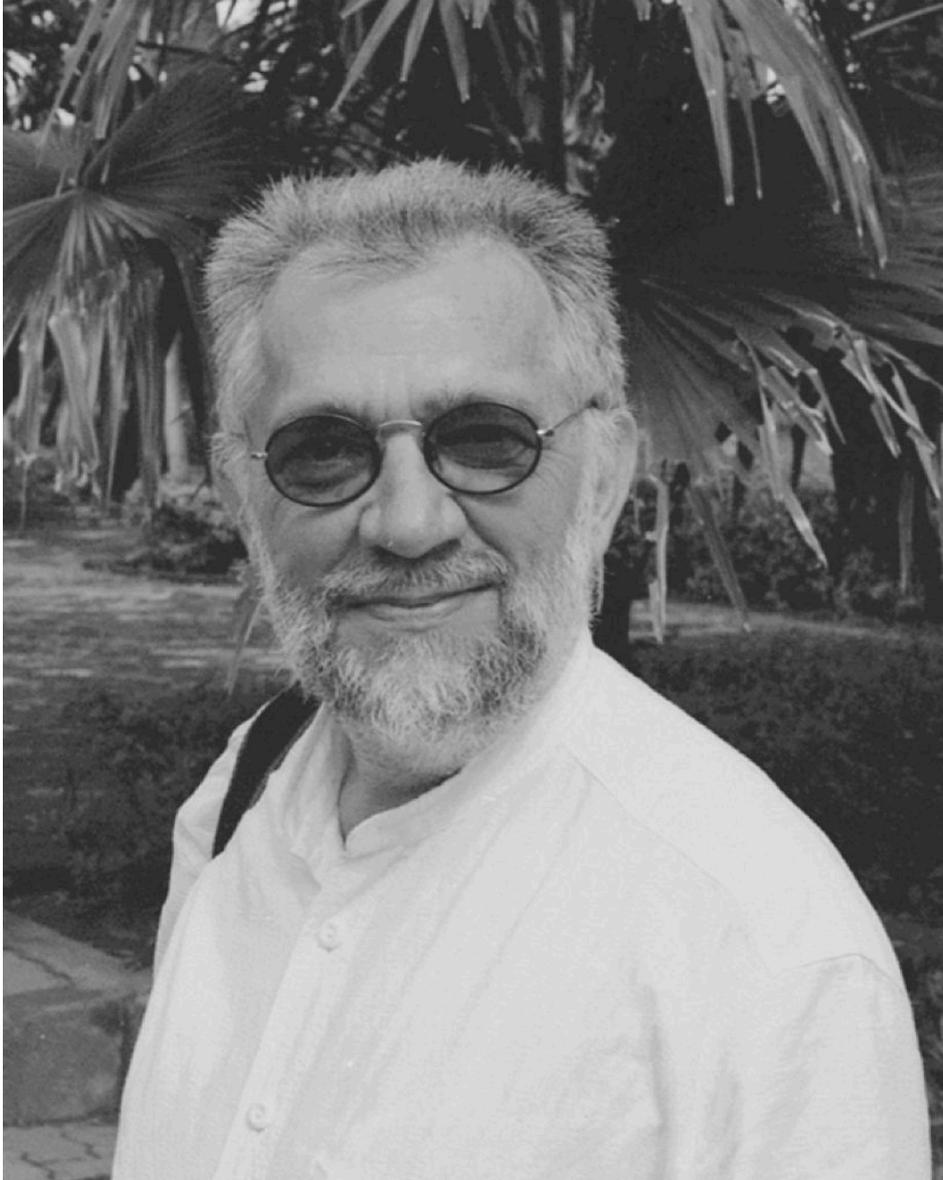


OBITUARY

Christian Honoré Louis Pelras

17 August 1934–19 July 2014



Christian Pelras at Somba Opu, Makassar, December 1996

Christian Pelras' interest in Indonesia began in 1960 when a friend drew his attention to scholarships being offered by the Indonesian government to stimulate research. This led to his first visit to Jakarta and the beginning of his effortless command of Indonesian. Rarely can a government initiative have had such a fortunate outcome. The quantity and quality of the research on Indonesia which Christian undertook over nearly fifty years is truly remarkable.

His approach was that of the ethnologist who, in his view, was responsible for a dialogue between his own culture and that of others. Once, in joking about the image of French anthropology being excessively theoretical and literary, he told me

of his debt to André Leroi-Gourhan and this influence can be seen in his strong interest in technology. When he returned to Indonesia in 1967, his first research interest was in weaving. Before this, however, he had been a member of team studying local society in Brittany and it was in this area that he wrote his doctoral thesis, later published as a major book. He came back to this interest late in his career.

In 1967 too Christian first met Bugis migrants in west Malaysia and followed the trail back to South Sulawesi where he lived from December 1967 to July 1968 in Wajo. The report on this trip already shows the breadth of his interests and his command of the sources. The seeds had been sown for many later articles as he deepened his understanding and explored a wider range of data.

His position in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and later attachments with various other institutions in Paris, gave him time and opportunity, once he had found his field of speciality, to pursue more and more aspects of Bugis history, culture and society. He was known and liked across South Sulawesi. I remember travelling in relatively remote areas in 1972 when, as a *bule* with research interests, I was welcomed and assumed to be *Perancis*; Christian had been there before me. He returned again and again to the field and to engagement with local scholars, most notably for two years as the foreign expert attached to the Pusat Latihan Penelitian Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial at Universitas Hasanuddin. He was often accompanied by his wife Marie-Thérèse and their son Frédéric; if Christian aspired to live as much as possible as one of the people he was studying, that did not always make it comfortable for the family.

Christian was no narrow specialist in discipline or area of interest. Most importantly, in 1971, together with his friends Denys Lombard and Pierre Labrousse, he founded the journal, *Archipel: études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien*, which has flourished as outlet for scholarship which is both lively and profound. He also had significant responsibilities for research management in Paris.

Christian's name is best known to Anglophone readers from his book *The Bugis* (1997). An Indonesian translation, *Manusia Bugis*, appeared in 2006 and incorporates significant revisions and improvements. To my mind, his scholarship is better shown in long articles on particular issues, where he had the space to display the full range of his command of material. In 2010, friends prepared — under his name — a volume which brings together the most important of these articles, *Explorations dans l'univers des Bugis: un choix de trente-trois rencontres (Cahier d'Archipel 39)*. It is a huge and indispensable scholarly resource, dazzling in the variety of topics covered: political and social structure, houses, religion, folk tales, clothing, cuisine, agriculture, literature, history and, above all, a fascination with the world of La Galigo. Another major legacy is his collection of artefacts, all carefully annotated, in the Musée de l'Homme; one sees there the result of his early influences. It is much to be hoped that his extensive archive of sound recordings, films and papers can be appropriately preserved.

The final years were shadowed by cruel and distressing illness. Our sympathy goes out to his family and the friends who supported him. But it is a joy to remember Christian in Indonesia, in France and on his several visits to Australia as the most collegial of colleagues and the kindest of friends.

Campbell Macknight
5 August 2014