

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

THE BISSU
(Transvestite Priests of South Sulawesi)
From Mystics to Businessmen?

by

Puspasari Dewi Suzanne Hopley

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Photo 1: A group of *bissu* in Singkang

ruler were able to use and understand (Hamonic, 1975:126). The ability to use and understand it not only provided means to confidentiality but also clearly distinguished people of high status. These days only a handful of people are able to read it and not without its difficulties. This language is still used by the *bissu* today, when attempting communication with the *rewata* through songs, prayers or mantras.

From my research in Sulawesi, I have found that *basa bissu* is not as exclusive as it once was and the ordinary *calabai* are using it and have been moulding it to their own vocabulary. To me this suggests that after the abolition of kingdoms, the *bissu* found themselves stripped of their importance and occupation in the palace. Therefore it would have made sense to attach themselves to the *calabai* community, as they had more in common with them than with the rest of society (some *bissu* probably felt detached from society after living most of his life in the palace). In return, increased relations between the two had produced an exchange of characteristics. The *bissu* probably contributed more to this merger than the *calabai*. The *calabai* began to make use of some of the skills they had learnt off the *bissu* such as the symbolic decoration of the living space (mainly reserved for wedding ceremonies). The *calabai* also learnt some of the *bissu* dances and songs, and of course picked up some of the *basa bissu*.

The Cult of the Regalia

Being the guardians of the regalia was probably the most important job the *bissu* were assigned to do and thus increased their prestigious status in society. Royal regalia is still believed to contain the powerful *sumange* of the *rewata* (and other previous owners), from whom the regalia came from, and is designed to protect the royal owner from danger (Morrell, 1998:159). The ruler held the same status of a divine king, and his actions and state of being affected the balance of the cosmic world that in turn influenced the state of his kingdom. Therefore having the regalia regularly guarded and looked after was of utmost importance in terms of public safety.

Traditionally, either the *Pua Matoa* or the ruler would personally handle the regalia. In Bone, the responsibility now lies in the hands of Andi Mappassissi mainly because he is a descendant of royal blood. He also acts as the *ketua adat* (expert in traditional customary law) and is among a handful of people who are trying to keep old Bugis customs and history alive.

I interviewed him at his 'palace' (a Dutch colonial building now renovated into the Lapawawoi Museum) and he told me that there are now no more *bissu* in Bone and that he has had to take over some of their more important roles. For example, it is normal to see a stream of visitors coming to him every day seeking advice and help. He has, at the back of the palace, a room that contains different altars for the *bissu*, and that of the rice goddess *Sri Dewi*. This is basically a consultation room where Andi Mappassissi prepares offerings and prayers to the *rewata* (and of course Allah) on behalf of the people who come to see him. He is also knowledgeable in concocting traditional 'medicine' for those who require it. He is not a *bissu* but has merely taken aboard some of their traits to satisfy the needs of his 'people' (he still holds an enormous amount of respect from the older generation). He can probably be classed as a royal *sanro*. Not everyone is permitted to become this. Being the only influential person of royal blood left (and also a willing one) is enough to qualify him to do this.

Each year Andi Mappassissi is required to bring the regalia out of their own designated building (at the *Bupati's* residence). They consist of, among other items, a jewel-encrusted crown and *keris* (Indonesian style dagger) which must be ritually cleansed by Andi Mappassissi (traditionally this is done with chicken's blood). This ceremony, called the *upacara mallangi arajang* (the cleansing of the regalia), is a big event in Bone and people of importance, including government officials are present. This ceremony insists on the presence of the *bissu*, who nowadays are hired from the Pangkep area and other parts of South Sulawesi (usually numbering up to 20 of them). The troupe predominantly consists of the *bissu ponco* class. They are essentially the least knowledgeable members of the organisation, and so are normally used in rituals requiring traditional dancing and

singing (which is used to attract the attention of the *rewata* as well as scare away the evil spirits).



Photo 2: *Upacara mallangi arajang* (Andi Mappassissi, far right), Watampone

In Segeri, the regalia consists of 3 sacred ploughs, one of which once belonged to a royal prince in the era of Batara Guru. They can be found in the *bola arajang* (house of the regalia), which is now a dilapidated traditional Bugis house situated opposite the *Pua Lolo*'s house. With it are two more sacred ploughs that have been made and used since the original became too fragile to use. The one being used today is still considered to be as powerful as the original because it is believed that should a potentially 'magic' object come into contact with another object, the *semange* will then be automatically transferred. They are wrapped in the same piece of white cloth and suspended from the ceiling (near to the heavens, their place of origin) in order to conserve their energy as well as their purity. Beneath is a cart that holds several offerings for the *rewata* (sirih leaves, money, incense) and bottles of holy water that is used to cure the sick with.

The *pesta mapalili*, a fertility ritual featuring the sacred plough, is carried out every year before the tilling of the land. This is one of the biggest traditional *bissu* events that occurs and is one of the very last ceremonies left over from the glorified days of *I La Galigo*. The first part of the ceremony requires the *bissu* to 'awaken the regalia' (to activate the *semange* within) by chanting repeatedly and dancing around the plough. Then the plough is taken down, washed and placed in the middle of the *bola arajang* (regalia house) which is decorated appropriately for that event. The *bissu* begin playing their instruments which consists of drums, cymbals, and other *bissu* tools in order to ward off any evil force that may be around at the time and also to prepare an environment suitable for the *rewata* who are about to descend. After more prayers and dancing, approximately, seven *bissu* enter trance and are then possessed by the *rewata*. Sometimes this could be an ancestor, sometimes a deity. This automatically makes them immune to any harm and to prove this they perform *magiri* in which they try to pierce their skin by stabbing themselves with their *keris* (Rahim, 1975:2-5).



Photo 3: *Aloso*, *bissu* instrument



Photo 4: *Bola Arajang*, Segeri

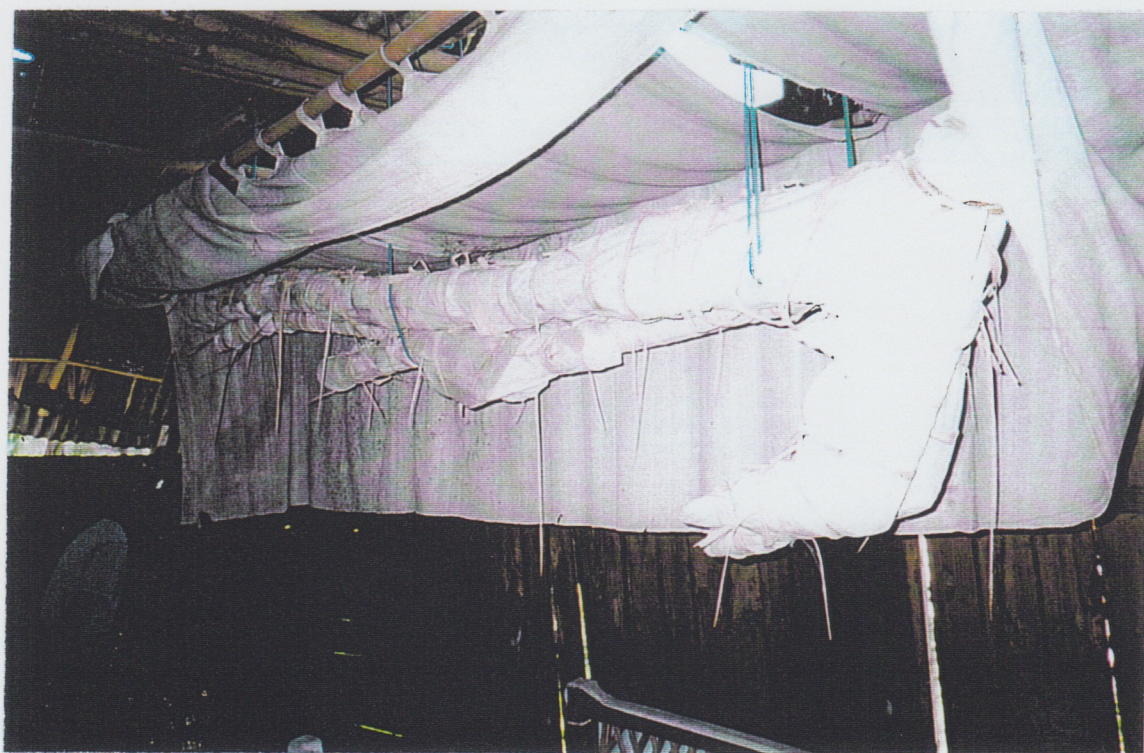


Photo 5: The 3 sacred ploughs in the *Bola Arajang*, Segeri

After a while a *sanro* from the *bissu* organisation is needed to help the *bissu* out of their trance safely. This whole process used to take seven days and seven nights. Now it is probably done within three days probably due to insufficient funding. The government is supposed to be providing funds for the *bissu*, so that they are able to maintain their traditional way of life (within governmental guidelines of acceptability) as well as the maintenance of their *bola arajang*. The reality is that a certain degree of contention has arisen on the part of the *bissu*, as they say that they are still waiting for sufficient funds that were promised to them. Although much pomp and ceremony accompany regalia rituals, I believe it only to be on a superficial level on the government's part, and a flagging effort of cultural revival from the *bissu*.

Most of the precious regalia (jewels, keris, crowns) are now owned by the government and not by former members of royalty. Some of these members do not object to this and believe the regalia is actually safer in government hands. Others, however, resent the fact that they along with the public have limited access to see the regalia, as in most regions, it is now locked away and only taken out occasionally.

PART II: THE *BISSU* ORGANISATION AND THEIR SOCIAL STANDING

Hierarchical Structure of the Organisation

Typically of the Bugis, the *bissu* have a system of hierarchy that resembled something like an organisation. From my own findings, I gathered that the *bissu* acquire their skills gradually, sometimes up until their death. Basically, the more one knew the more respect and status he received. There was of course a limit to how far one could rise up the ladder. For example, a *bissu* disciple, such as a *bissu ponco* could only reach the status of *Pua Lolo* only if the present one died, and not before a general consensus among the rest of the *bissu* (Hamzah, 1978:10). However, should the *Pua Matoa* die then it is generally assumed that the *Pua Lolo* would take over unless there was a strong enough resistance among the other *bissu*. The following table represents a general guide of the main divisions within the modern *bissu* organisation, starting from the highest rank down to the lowest (by consultation with Andi Mappassissi).

Title	Duty
<i>Pua Matoa</i>	Head Bissu – male transvestite; knows complete knowledge of <i>bissu</i> teachings off by heart; has gone through all the initiation rituals required; heads all <i>bissu</i> ceremonies and has full power over the rest of the organisation.
<i>Pua Lolo</i>	Deputy to the Pua Matoa - male transvestite; extremely knowledgeable; qualified to take over duties that <i>Pua Matoa</i> is unavailable to do; assists him in rituals.
<i>Bissu Tanre</i>	Bissu of High Knowledge – male transvestite; disciples to the <i>Pua Lolo</i> and <i>Pua Matoa</i> ; still in a process of learning; has a higher knowledge of spiritual matters than the <i>bissu ponco</i> .
<i>Bissu ponco</i>	Bissu of Low Knowledge – consist of male transvestites and male and female non-transvestites; disciples to the <i>Pua Lolo</i> and <i>Pua Matoa</i> ; still in a process of learning; not as spiritually knowledgeable as the rest but are able to enter trance; some have families (but must don role of <i>bissu</i> during ceremonies when required)
Sanro	Holy people – can be transvestites or non-transvestites; assist the rest of the <i>bissu</i> during times of trance, can themselves perform rituals of exorcism and purification, mostly work in the area of curing illnesses



Photo 6: *Sanro*, Watampone



Photo 7: *Bissu tanre*, Watampone

All of the above would be familiar with ceremonial dances and songs, and would also have at least a basic level of understanding of *basa bissu*. Many experts have quoted that around 20 *bissu* still exist (I am even doubtful of that number, believing it to be less), and I have no doubt that some of them belong to the category of the *bissu tanre*. However, I believe that the bulk of *bissu* participating in ceremonies belong to the *bissu ponco* level.

I once interviewed an ex-*bissu* in Pare-Pare called Haji Zainuddin. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca a few years ago, is now a Haji and now considers himself an expert on *bissu* matters, as well as being one of their patrons. He told me that he did not take the *bissu poncho* seriously because he believes that they are full of 'impostors' who have nothing better to do but emulate the actions and life of a *bissu* (in order to gain some status). He carried on to say that they did not respect the oath of celibacy and accused them of 'hiding under the *bissu* umbrella and using it as justification for their choice of sexuality' (mainly referring to their homosexuality which most of them are). As for the *Pua Lolo*, I am only aware of the one living in Segeri, and the *Pua Matoa* for that region died several years ago. No replacement has been decided yet.

Training

One does not choose to become *bissu*, one is simply chosen by the *rewata* or 'marked by the gods' (Hamonic, 1977:42), normally physically. They are in their late seventies and early eighties respectively and would have received thorough and very strict training during the time of their apprenticeship. This is because their teachers would have come from a generation that was more deeply connected to their pre-Islamic past, even though Islam settled in South Sulawesi in the seventeenth century. Most of them have died now, leaving very few (and very old) experienced *bissu* to pass on the legacy of the old customs and secrets.

The training that the *bissu* disciples received was not an easy one. A crucial part to their learning was the ability to memorise an enormous amount of information concerning every aspect of Bugis life that traditionally would have been orally passed down from

generation to generation. Such information that was drummed into memory included a plethora of legends, a solid knowledge of the royal genealogy, cosmology, social etiquette and ability to cure people. I was told that a book did exist that contained all the remedies to illnesses which a *bissu* was required to know (private interview with the *Pua Lolo* of Segeri) but I could not gain access of it and am doubtful that it ever existed. Either that or the *Pua Lolo* was being secretive, which was a characteristic I often came across when I talked with the *bissu*. The most important part they had to learn concerned the spiritual part of being a *bissu*. This mystical aspect of themselves was deeply entrenched with rituals of exorcism and purification (in relation to the presence of evil or *rewata*), respectively and almost always required entering trance.

In order to reach the next level one would have to undergo several initiations. An important one, which I learnt through Andi Mappassissi, is called *marebba* which literally means 'to fall' (in this case, into a catatonic state of consciousness). An extreme level of concentration and a well-balanced state of being are instrumental for this ritual, otherwise the initiate could die. The initiate had to lie down while a group of *bissu* led by the *Pua Matoa*, danced, sang and played their instruments around the body, shielding him from the bad spirits yet drawing the good ones into the circle. These spirits were to eventually possess the initiate's body and take away his *semange*. This 'astro-travelling' is meant to test the sincerity and skill of the *bissu* as well as bringing his *semange* and the spirits together for communication.

I was informed that the Dutch banned this initiation rite during the colonial times for being too dangerous. Sometimes the spirit did not come back and this led to the death of the initiate. The ban was later reinforced during the New Order for being heresy. Today, rumours are still in circulation about *marebba* but there has been no substantial evidence that it is still in practice.

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Photo 8: Pua' Lolo of Segeri

Transvestism and Cosmology

Transvestism (in relation to cosmology), in most ancient cultures around the world normally symbolised a state of balance. Furthermore, in order to connect with the upper and lower worlds one had to achieve a neutral state of mind and so naturally transvestites were believed to be qualified for this job. In a way the bissu acted as the middleman between two parties (being earth and the spirit world), negotiating deals between the two and making sure that nothing will interrupt the procedure.



Photo 9: Offerings

They had to always pay homage to the deities through prayers, and placating them with offerings. Purification rituals are an essential part of their routine and, of course, this also maintains the right amount of cosmic balance within the Bugis universe. An enormous amount of symbolism is attached to this cosmic balance and these symbols represent reminders of an idealised past (portrayed in *I La Galigo* for example). These symbols can often be seen in popular ceremonies, especially during rites of passage.

The symbolic structure of the cosmic order in Bugis society has always been dominated by dichotomies of nature. Many of these can be found in ancient myths. For example,

‘*Batara Guru*, eldest son of the principal god of the heavens, *Datu Patoto*, descended to earth encased in a bamboo pole, sliding down the length of a rainbow ... and married *We Nyilitimo*, daughter of the principal god of the lower world, *Guru Ri Selleng*, ... who came from the sea.’

(Hamonic, 1975:129).

Here, Hamonic points out that the upper world contains the male characteristics and its point of access is symbolised by bamboo, whereas the lower world contains female characteristics while depicting water as its point of access.

The symbolic significance of this dichotomy of male and female, water and bamboo, is very often reflected in Bugis society, as Susan Millar (1989) has successfully shown through her extensive studies of Bugis weddings. Naturally, the *bissu* were always present during royal weddings and were particularly significant during the ceremony of *malawolo*. This is a symbolic event where a member of the *bissu* (normally the *Pua Matoa* or *Pua Lolo*) must confirm whether the groom is of noble stock, mediating between the bride and groom’s family. The *bissu* essentially represented the bride’s party. The *bissu* takes part by holding one end of a *lawolo* (a rope, made of patola cloth and a white cloth which are braided together) while the groom holds the other end. A series of questions are asked and once he is convinced of the groom’s status, the *bissu* then leads the groom to the bride and officially unites them.

The two pieces of material, once again, represents the male (patola cloth) and female (white cloth) elements of cosmology, and their presence in the wedding is a visual reminder of the cosmic forces that are ever present in society. Bugis weddings are particularly lengthy affairs and almost every part of it is symbolic in some way of the ancient past. These weddings were also public advertisements of the wealth and status of the two families involved, as well as their wedding guests.

Traditionally, the *bissu* were only supposed to serve at royal weddings. Pelras, however, states that,

‘Since the abolition of traditional political power in the present century, no one has the authority to enforce the customary rules, and so some wealthy commoner families who are prepared to brave the resulting gossip have started to use social symbols in weddings which were formerly reserved for the nobility.’ (Pelras, 1996:160).

I found that this was indeed the situation. In my quest to track down an extremely powerful and much sought after *bissu* called Saidi, I found out, through his house boy, that the *bissu* in question had already left for Timor to organise a large wedding for a wealthy Bugis family (not of noble origin). Apparently they had heard about his reputation as being a very skilled *bissu* and immediately hired him to participate in their wedding. They covered his flight to Timor and offered him around ten million rupiah (approximately £1000) for his services. This example stresses the point that gaining status is very much an integral part of Bugis life, and to exhibit it is perhaps the more important part of it, irrespective of how one achieves it.



Photo 10: Royal wedding pagoda, Lapawawoi Museum, Watampone

The Bissu and Family Life



Photo 11: *Haji Lacce* (right) and *bissu* friend

I have learnt that Bugis society is a surprisingly tolerant one. Almost everyone I interviewed knew about the *bissu*, including the younger generation, and the responses I would receive were always positive and never negative. Today, the *bissu* are still respected because of their ability to heal people but mainly because of their royal connections. Their sexual orientation is not really regarded as too much of a deviation from normality, in fact it is accepted.

Prospective candidates of the *bissu* must all start off as *calabai*, which is the first sign, or 'mark' from the gods (however, not all *calabai* become *bissu*). Women were also allowed into the organisation, but only if they were *calalai* and a member of the aristocracy. The only examples of *calalai* that I have come across are in *I la Galigo*, being We Tenriabeng (twin sister of one of the main protagonists, Sawerigadeng, a Bugis prince) and Sawerigadeng's daughter We Tenridio. Hamonic (1987) noted that these particular women escaped the process of initiation that was required of the other *calabai*, simply because they were of pure royal blood. These days they no longer exist.

Characteristics of transvestism can normally be recognised by the family and child himself early on in life. Probably because of practical reasons as well as gaining some prestige, it would have been normal to present the child at the royal court in hopes of training him to become a *bissu*. This was one of the explanations I was given when I

asked how one becomes a *bissu*. The other explanation was that a *calabai* could suddenly find himself in a temporary psychosomatic state which would be considered another sign from the gods. To relieve himself from this 'attack', the *bissu* must accept his destiny, which he is forced to do because he has no choice in the matter.

I am of the opinion, however, that most of the *bissu* candidates probably started out as *calabai* from an early age and progressed from there, rather than enter a psychosomatic state. During my personal research, I did not once come across anyone who had known a *bissu* to enter this state. The two *bissu* (*Haji Lacce* from Singkang and the *Pua Matoa* of Segeri) that I interviewed, both said that they were 'chosen' (by Allah, these days) to become *bissu*. Each was aware of their sexual orientation and found themselves as disciples to the organisation before they reached puberty.

I have mentioned earlier on that the *bissu* must keep to the strict code of celibacy and therefore are not allowed to marry or have children. In truth they do have a spouse, or rather they have two. They are not human, but of celestial origins consisting of one male and female spouse (again the duality of male and female elements appear, working together). However I noticed a certain amount of reluctance on the *bissu*'s part, to disclose any information about their private life. The reality is that most of the *bissu* are homosexual and some of them do partake in relationships, which explains their reluctance to talk about their private life, as I found out!

One of my sources in Singkang informed me that a male *bissu* is actually allowed to have a relationship with another man but only up to seven years (some do not normally last that long). After that he must stop the relationship so that his partner 'can have the chance to go back to a more normal life'. I asked, what if they did not want to stop the relationship? My source said that they would have no choice, they had to break up whether they wanted to or not. If the *bissu* wished to continue on with another relationship, then he could do so but with a different man (a relationship with a female was absolutely forbidden). In most cases men who were involved with a *bissu*, eventually did get married to women and had families of their own, but only because it

was expected of them. And if a *calabai* had previously been married and had children, he would not be allowed into the organisation.

If a *bissu* has a relationship with another man (or woman even) surely would this not disrupt their ability to connect with the spirit world? The issue, here, is homosexuality which, in Bugis society, is not as acceptable as transvestism simply because it does not have any particular function in this kind of society. Transvestism is accepted because it has been part of society since the beginning of Bugis existence and is intricately woven into their system of cosmology. It would be true to say that nowadays there is an emergence of a new generation of *bissu* (earlier I called them as being of the *bissu ponco* class) who are not as mindful of the old ways and possess a modern attitude towards relationships with other men. Very few are able to take the oath of celibacy.

PART III: THE MODERN DAY *BISSU*

Islamic Influence

‘In the name of Allah, Most Gracious,
Ever Merciful.

Thee alone do we worship and Thee
Alone do we implore for help.
Guide us along the straight path –
The path of those on whom Thou hast
Bestowed Thy favours,
Those who have not incurred Thy displeasure, and
Those who have not gone astray.’
(The Quran, 1981:5)

Earlier on I asked the question, ‘How has Islam integrated into *bissu* culture?’. It appears to me that pre-Islamic activities are able to justify themselves by containing some token Islamic presence. This appears to be Andi Mappassissi’s case. He is fully aware that his pre-Islamic activities do not altogether correspond with Islamic doctrine. He is a loyal Muslim and regards Allah as the only god and Mohammed as the first prophet, yet he is also deeply devoted to his work for the people and believes that if they are benefiting from his services then Allah would forgive him. He has incorporated Islam into his routine by opening up each consultation with a prayer of forgiveness from Allah, asking him for his blessing. A small book of the Quran is also placed on the same dish of offerings (for the *rewata*) in the *bissu*’s altar.

During the centuries, the original structure and ideals of the *bissu* have gradually eroded away because of political, religious and economic transformations in South Sulawesi. But in its place we are beginning to see the emergence of an increasingly modern kind of *bissu*, with a tougher attitude towards survival. One of the major influences that had placed the organisation into a compromising position was the establishment of Islam.

The Bugis had always been aware of Islam, having been in contact with foreign traders for centuries. It was these traders (especially from the Middle-East) that sowed the seeds of Islam and it appeared they grew from the lower class. Chabot suggests that,

‘... trade favoured the birth and development of a commoner trading class (one could say, a kind of Bugis bourgeoisie) more prone to reject ancient religion and mythology, open to a more egalitarian Islamic ideology, and more receptive to an ethic of individual responsibility.’ (Chabot, 1996:25)

However, Islam officially established itself in South Sulawesi around the beginning of the seventeenth century. Its influence firstly affected Luwu and continued to spread out rapidly to the rest of the region for the next decade (Pelras, 1997:35). Before the establishment of Islam, South Sulawesi (as well as the rest of Indonesia) was divided into kingdoms which were ruled by kings who had absolute power over their own realms. This meant that the people had no right to anything, including their land which, for example, could be taken away from them at any time. Therefore it was not so surprising to find most of the population were ready to accept Islam. Islam taught people that Allah saw all men were made of the same stock and so were equal to each other.

In the past, the Bugis had to appease several deities as well as their own ancestors in order to avoid any suffering. There was no one particular god they could contact as such, and even if they did wish to directly contact him, they would have to use a medium. In addition the feudal system was highly hierarchical and allowed little room for upward manoeuvring of social class. Islam, in comparison provided a simpler solution. Each man was equal, no middleman was involved therefore direct contact between the individual and Allah could be achieved.

Of course, this was a great blow to the nobility because Islam was rejecting almost everything they stood for and believed in: their social stance, their past, and their divine connections. Naturally they would have been appalled that commoners were now allowed to attain the same level as themselves. As a result, the *bissu* were also affected

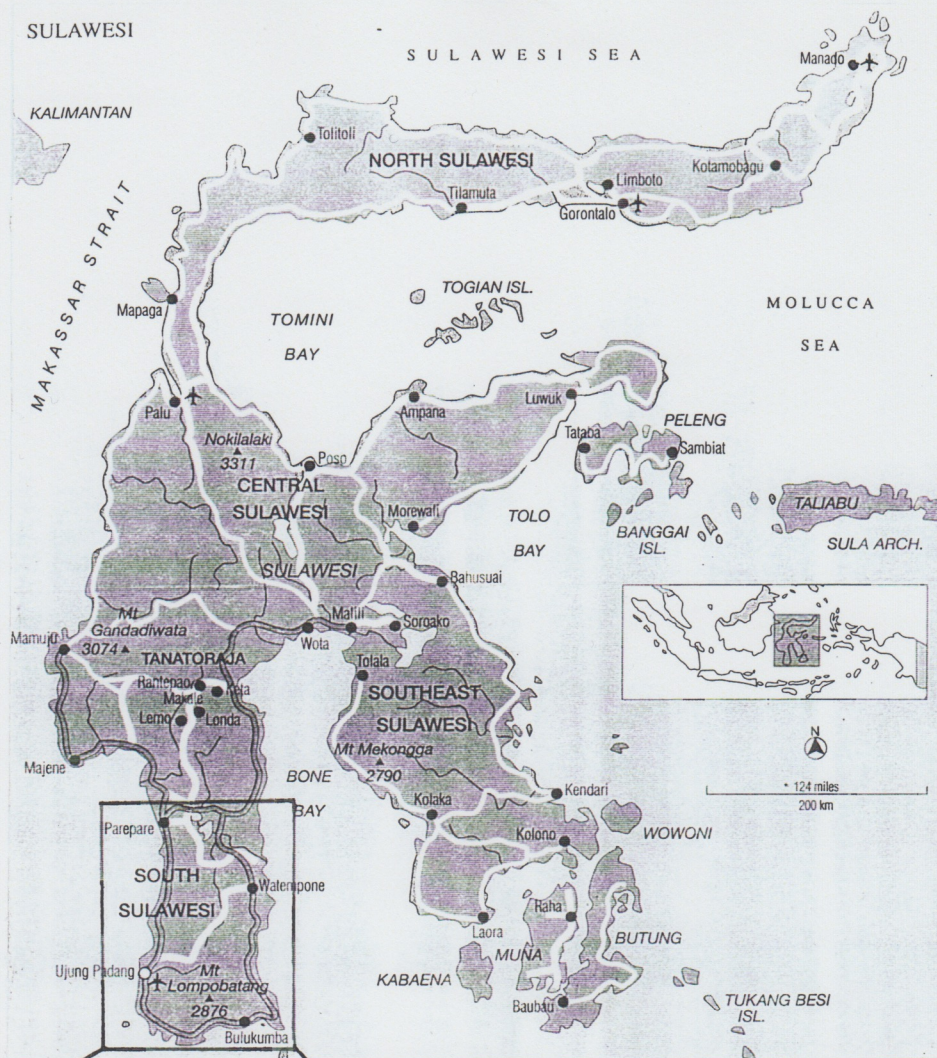
and were seen as pagans by some zealots. They were stripped of 'their quasi-divine qualities...' (Hamonic, 1987:50) and were probably regarded more as ordinary *dukun* rather than descendants of celestial beings. There were always attempts from fundamental groups to totally abolish traditional Bugis customs but they were never successful because people still believed in them. Therefore, this indicated that the old ways were not totally rejected by society. Those who embraced Islam still respected Bugis *adat* and the former members of nobility, but they also recognised that a better quality of life was being offered.

One would have expected the numbers of the *calabai* community to decrease, but this has not been the case. It is quite common to come across many *calabai* and *bissu* who are devout Muslims and have made the pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca. At the same time they also divulge in pre-Islamic activities, and the fact that they have overstepped the 'normal' boundaries of gender (which does not correspond to Islamic teachings) immediately indicates an enormous contradiction in terms. How do Muslims justify this?

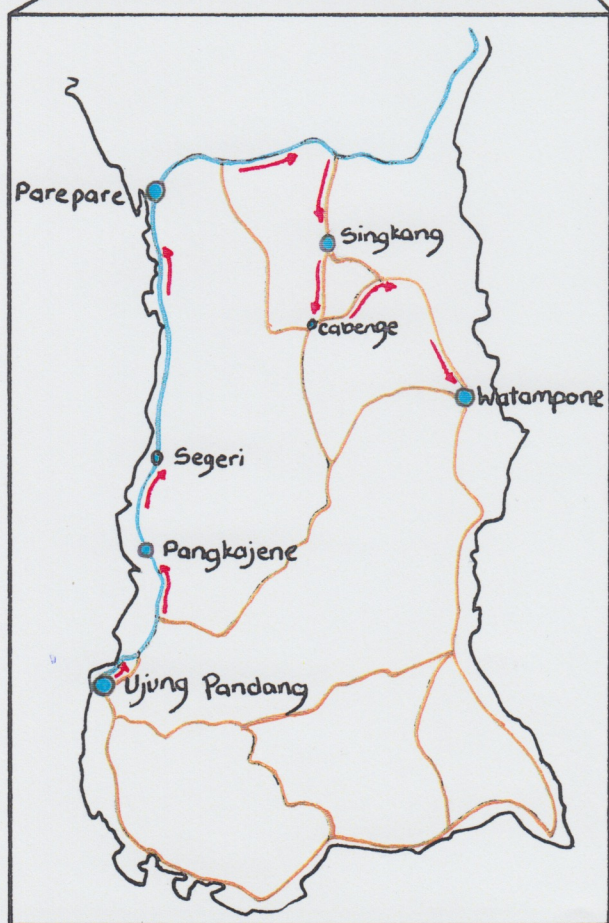
Today, I would say that religion in South Sulawesi is without a doubt dominated by Islam and is confidently incorporating the remnants of indigenous Bugis beliefs into its faith. The *bissu* (along with most of the Bugis) practice what Pelras has termed as 'practical syncretism', which is basically the manipulation of indigenous rituals in order to conform to Islamic standards. He sets the following example that,

'... some people identify them [ritual practices] with the *rewata* or divinities of old, while others prefer to view them as *jinn* (genies) or *mal'ika* (angels): belief in genies and angels, but not, of course, their worship, is part of orthodox Islam.' (Pelras, 1996:197)

Practical syncretism is a vague concept and as such provides no kind of formulated doctrine and I would agree, portrays religion in Bugis society today. One of my standard questions I used to ask a *bissu* would be 'How would you justify your position as a



Sulawesi



Area of research

- Trans-Sulawesi Highway
- main road
- route used
- towns and villages visited

transvestite priest, practising traditional ceremonies, in today's Islamic society?'. I would always be answered with 'Allah decrees it', which for Muslims would be considered as the model answer. It indicates that the *bissu* have accepted Islam as their main religion, but still find difficulty in letting go of the past.

Ever since Islam successfully took over South Sulawesi, the *bissu*, consciously or unconsciously, began their ongoing search for a new identity. They are still in that stage of transition but I believe that they may be coming towards the end of it. Reports regarding the declining state of the *bissu* organisation have been recorded for almost two centuries now, and the *bissu* realise that they cannot fight against the tide of Islam. It is only a matter of time until Islam will completely engulf the last remains of indigenous Bugis religion, of which the *bissu* will be the first to disappear. One could be forgiven, therefore, for criticising them for diverting most of their efforts to secure a better financial future for themselves, rather than preserving their old customs, as I have found.

A New Enterprise

In the past, any *bissu* who had ever lived in the palace would no doubt have enjoyed a substantially luxurious life. This lifestyle very much depended on society's need for the *bissu*. As long as people continued to believe in their own spiritual wellbeing, the longer the *bissu* were able to exist. These days, mainly because of Islam, their position has changed and has caused them to consider another mode of living that corresponds to their financial situation.

Some *bissu* eked out a modest living by providing their services to society regarding spiritual matters. For example, this would include the search for somebody's lost *semange* in cases of illnesses (by consultation with the *rewata*). This is still present in today's society. Most of their earnings would usually come from the nobility because their services were mostly directed to that kind of class. However, the *bissu* mostly depended on the king's generosity. From him they would sometimes receive a certain sum of money, as well as a monthly quota of rice. Fundamentally, the *bissu*'s main duty

was to take care of their ruler and this meant offering prayers of protection for him, to the gods above and below, and making sure the regalia was properly guarded. Because they looked after his spiritual wellbeing, the ruler became the *bissu*'s main patron, and made sure that they were never short of whatever they needed.

They still receive small donations given by some of the remaining (older generation) of royal descendants, such as Andi Mappassissi and Datu Bellasari. Andi Mappassissi informed me that he felt bound to look after the welfare of the *bissu* because they still perceive him as a significant figure in their world. Their altar, housed in his consultation room, is specifically used by them to make offerings to the *rewata* in return for their protection of Andi Mappassissi and his family.

However, since the abolition of traditional powers in 1950 (when Indonesia became a republic) the financial security that the *bissu* have enjoyed has evaporated and since then they have had to use their own initiative in order to survive. Some have gone into the wedding business that would involve decorating the venue and donning the role of a make-up artist for the wedding couple among other duties. This can be an extremely lucrative vocation as I found out in *Saidi's* case. Other *bissu* have capitalised on their skills as healers and often have to travel all around South Sulawesi at people's requests. I have been told that people would be more willing to consult a *bissu* first rather than a *sanro*, because the *bissu* has more prestigious connections than a *dukun*.

Private showings of ceremonies, involving dancing, singing and traditional costumes, can also be hired for the right price. These private showings usually performed for several tour companies who take tourists to see the cultural aspects of South Sulawesi. These performances have not only been offered to tourists, but also to academics and the media. Normally the amount one would expect to pay for a performance, would be no less than three million rupiah (approximately £300), which is quite a substantial sum of money in Indonesia.

Government Cultural Festivals

However, their main source of income these days come from cultural shows that are normally financed by the Department of Education and Culture of South Sulawesi. During the mid-1970s, there was a resurgence of interest in maintaining indigenous cultures throughout Indonesia aimed to attract tourism and consequentially boost the economy. On a political level, it was an exercise that involved cultural reinvention, in order to strengthen the New Order's dogma, 'unity in diversity'. Robinson explains,

'In contemporary Indonesia, official state doctrine emphasises sanitised and authorised versions of cultural difference subservient to national goals, national unity. Official policy is caught in the contradiction between the desire to stamp out differences which could become the basis of challenges to centralised state power, and the harnessing of those differences in the pursuit of national/state agenda...'

(Robinson, 1997:71).

A prime example of this can be seen particularly in a cultural show or festival. *Bissu* dances, these days, are very much different to the ones of the past. They are much shorter, a lot of the ceremony and religious meaning has been taken away, and women are able to perform these dances.

This exercise should not however just be seen as a governmental move for political and economical gain. It was perhaps the first time in decades that extensive research into the *bissu* and their past had been carried out, with the exception of the Dutch during their colonial occupation at the beginning of the century. It activated museums, university anthropological departments and local government cultural departments to publish their findings, such as the 'Mapalili festival of Segeri' (published by the Department of History and Anthropology of South Sulawesi), and '*Bissu* and their Instruments' (a result of a project aimed to heighten the development of museums). Since then serious efforts, mainly from Indonesian and Western scholars, were made to preserve local tradition and

uncover the history and origins of ancient Bugis life. In South Sulawesi this was termed as 'Lagaligologi' which was taken from the epic story, *I La Galigo* (Robinson, 1997:71).

The past couple of decades have seen many attempts by the government to promote social values, tourism, and preservation of cultural heritage, by creating festivals in celebration of ethnic diversity in Indonesia. For example, a year before 'Visit Indonesia Year' (1991), a cultural festival was exhibited in Ujung Pandang to celebrate the diverse ethnic cultures that existed in South Sulawesi. This of course included a group of *bissu* (hired from Segeri) who performed several dances and also an adapted version of the *magiri* which is a dance which requires the *bissu* to fall into trance and pierce themselves with the *keris*. The following year, some of the *bissu* were paid to go to the United States along with other ethnic groups from all over Indonesia, in order to promote 'Visit Indonesia Year'.

In July of 1997, the second Kraton Festival took place at Cirebon in West Java (the first one was held in Yogyakarta in 1995). Again, it was another government-funded project to promote this time awareness of old customs in society, said to 'increase their sense of belonging.' The vice-president at that time, Try Sutrisno stated that '... as a nation we must keep to our own identity and not be swayed by outside influences.' (Travel Magazine, 1997: 22). Here, 23 royal courts from all over Indonesia attended. Two of them came from the Palace of Saoraja of Bone and Palace of Lompoe of Gowa, from South Sulawesi. Each one was fully equipped with its own courtiers and troupe of *bissu* complete with the royal regalia.

Considering the importance of these festivals and the need to exhibit them to society, is the partnership between the *bissu* and the Government a good one? One could take the cynical argument that the Government are taking advantage of the *bissu* and are in fact gaining political benefits for themselves and not really caring about whether or not the *bissu* tradition survives, as long as there is order in society. Judging by past records of controlling society, there is an element of truth in this. However, one cannot totally dismiss the effect this resurgence of cultural awareness has had on the *bissu*.

Festivals, have given the *bissu* a sense of purpose and have reinstalled their pride in themselves and their culture. The actual events might pose as being a little superficial and commercial but it is the fact that they are public events that the *bissu* thrive on. They are, some people would, say entertainers who need their audience in order to exist. Holt suggests that,

‘It would seem under these circumstances, if *bissu* continue to exist as a separate class for another few decades, they are well under way of becoming merely entertainers. Perhaps theirs is the lot of turning from priests into clowns.’ (Holt, 1939:53)

I do not believe this will happen because the *bissu* are already aware of their position in society and I would say are preparing themselves for the time when they will have to admit defeat. Until then they are in no hurry to speed up the process.

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CONCLUSION

So how has the *bissu* identity changed? There is no doubt that their previous identity as mystics is now giving way to a more business orientated attitude. There seems to be no other alternative. They cannot conserve the original components of their pre-Islamic past, and they cannot keep them alive in Bugis society today because Islam will not allow it. Additionally, the Indonesian government is still working towards finding an 'Indonesian culture' that all ethnic groups can share and identify with. Therefore, they cannot allow elements of indigenous beliefs to deviate too far away from the main religions in Indonesia (Islam, Christianity, Hinddu/Buddhism). In South Sulawesi, indigenous Bugis beliefs are allowed to co-exist with Islam but in moderation and must conform to certain boundaries set by Islam. This has led to variations of dances, for example, that have significantly strayed from their original format and meanings. And I agree that Pelras's term, 'practical syncretism' would be very much appropriate here.

It would appear that they do not hold as much relevance in today's society as they once did in the past. They are living among a society that consists of a reminiscent older generation giving way to a more unsympathetic younger one. Where do the *bissu* fit in? The *bissu* are still in a transitional mode of identity, but while they are trying to find a new one, they must concentrate on their survival. If this means having to sacrifice some connections with their past, then I believe that it will not be a difficult choice to make.

The older generation of *bissu* (numbering only a handful), have come to terms with the fact that they are a dying breed and that eventually they will exist no more. I got the impression that they even have little faith in the *bissu* of today. Modernisation has made a deep impact on Bugis society and this has produced a sense of individuality, I found, among the *calabai* especially. There are those who are rejecting tradition and the *bissu* path and embracing Islam, the world of disco and modern trinkets and attitudes. This would explain the decrease in numbers of *bissu* disciples. On the other hand, some *calabai* have increasingly adopted elements of *bissu* culture to suit their own financial needs.

As a result of this 'invasion' the exclusivity of the bissu lifestyle and mystique has eroded away. It seems that many *calabai* are willing to call themselves *bissu*, but are in fact not, therefore this means that the bissu identity is changing in terms of gender as well. Even today, people are mistaking the *calabai* for the *bissu*, and in turn this suggests that *bissu* are just transvestites and homosexuals who know a few traditional dances and songs and occasionally performs them at local festivals. Pre-Islamic elements are stripped away, projecting them, as being a mere tourist attraction.

However, while they still exist, the bissu have made efforts to adapt to modern day society by involving themselves in small 'businesses' in order to keep themselves financially secure. They have capitalised on their knowledge that they have acquired by being a *bissu*, and most of their jobs (like the cultural festivals) reflect this. Apart from a couple of ancient ceremonies (such as *mapalili*) that are still enacted, the *bissu* are receiving less and less opportunities to truly express themselves religiously. Living in the twentieth century is a continuing process of compromises (especially on issues of religion) on the part of the *bissu*, which takes them further away from who they are and what they used to represent in the past. They are now surviving as individuals, rather than as a group dependent on each other, and it will only be a matter of time before we know what they will transform into, in the future.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my Bugis family and friends, who I met along the way and provided me with invaluable information that led me to the right places. Their friendliness made me feel at home and proud to have Bugis ties. I also extend my thanks to Peta Bellasari who was kind enough to direct me to her own personal *bissu*, *Haji Lacce*. I also owe her staff a debt of gratitude for making me feel at home.

Special thanks however must go to Andi Mappassissi, royal descendant of Arung Palakka, and curator of the Lapawawoi Museum in Bone. He set aside several hours out of his busy schedule to answer my endless questions, and let me roam around his museum taking photos. His kindness and hospitality was boundless to say the least. I am particularly thankful for his honesty and it is to him and his family that I dedicate this project to.

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Preface

My reason for choosing South Sulawesi as my area of research derives from my need to learn more about my Bugis heritage. I was able to do this by drawing together my interest in gender and shamanism (the latter having been introduced to me in one of my first year modules) and a professor of mine came up with the suggestion that I should look into the *bissu* (transvestite priests). This was to be my focus, but at the same time it allowed me to divert to other aspects of Bugis life.

Initially I had always believed that South Sulawesi today, had perhaps become too Islamic and had left no more room for Bugis culture. I was wrong. Pre-Islamic and Islamic beliefs still run parallel to each other in today's South Sulawesi, but at what cost? This juxtaposition highlights issues concerning the effects of modernisation on Bugis society and also questions how far people are willing to go to either give up or retain their past, for the sake of economical and social progression. In short, this project is designed to show how Bugis values are changing, using the *bissu* as a paradigm.

Visual sources

Home video of Pesta Palili, (1997), Segeri
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Pictorial sources

Haji Lacce for letting me reproduce Photos No 1 and 11.

Andi Mappassissi for giving me Photos No 2, 6 and 7 (taken at last year's *upacara
mallangi arajang*)

My Uncle Alimuddin for giving me Photo No 12 (taken in 1990 during a cultural festival
in Ujung Pandang)

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Photo 12: Saidi enacting *magiri*, Ujung Pandang

Methodology

My research in South Sulawesi lasted the duration of 6 weeks between the months of April and May, 1999. I had already read extensively on the subject beforehand mostly from French and Indonesian sources (very few are in English, the majority of sources are in Dutch). This provided me with a good background knowledge of the *bissu* and proved to be extremely useful during interviews (because it earned me trust from the *bissu*, who are usually so secretive). The reading, however, did not provide me with information on the *bissu* of today. This gap in my findings was to be my basis for my project. In particular I wanted to know more about how the *bissu* have fared with a more modern and Islamic Bugis society.

My findings took me all around South Sulawesi from Ujung Pandang to Segeri, Pare-Pare, Singkang, Cabenge and Watampone. I talked to anyone who would have the time for me, and they included my family, the general public, Indonesian friends as well as the *bissu* themselves (*Haji Lacce* in Singkang, the *Pua Lolo* of Segeri, and ex-*bissu* *Haji Zainuddin* in Pare-Pare). Another very helpful and useful source was Andi Mappassissi, a descendant of the royal family of Bone. These interviews were conducted entirely in Indonesian as very few of the people I met were unable to communicate in English.

INTRODUCTION

For those who have ever had an academic interest in South Sulawesi, the *bissu* are probably one of the most fascinating subjects to study. They are the last remnants of a religion that originated from a past that was steeped in animistic belief. Moreover, they are well known as transvestite priests who still practice some pre-Islamic ceremonies today. Interestingly, they also live in a society that is heavily influenced by Islam (that fundamentally rejects what characterises the *bissu*) and are themselves Muslims. So how have they survived Islam? And why do they still exist in a society that is becoming more and more influenced by modernisation? Past studies of the *bissu* have been minimal but significant, thanks to the likes of South Sulawesi academics Gilbert Hamonic, Christian Pelras, and Dutch Orientalist B.F. Matthes.

In the past, each royal court normally numbered around 40 *bissu*. Originally they consisted of *calabai* (male transvestites) and *calalai* (female transvestites). As far as I am aware the latter no longer exist and the few *bissu* who are left, are all *calabai*. The *bissu* once held highly esteemed roles within ancient Bugis society. They were after all, according to the epic story of the Bugis, *I La Galigo*, part of the first royal party to accompany *Batara Guru* (Bugis ruler and hero) on his descent to earth. With such divine connections they earned respect and were considered to possess spiritual powers that qualified them to work within the palace.

Another element that added to their prestige was their knowledge of *basa bissu*, which is a remnant from their celestial days of the upper world. This language was also instrumental in communicating with the *rewata* (spirits) usually after having entered trance. It was also used between the *bissu* and the king (who was equally as knowledgeable of it), especially if they wished to discuss private matters. The *bissu* had a very close relationship with their royal counterparts as a result. Because of their neutrality of gender they were deemed as impotent and as this would have posed no threat to anyone, they were allowed to move freely about the palace.

Their 'purity' also represented a balance of energies between male and female traits, which in turn was needed in order to handle any affairs that linked to the cosmic balance. Therefore duties that carried a lot of responsibility were normally assigned to the *bissu* as this was believed to reduce the risk of upsetting the cosmic equilibrium. Other duties included looking after the sacred royal regalia, organise any royal events and *adat* (traditional customary law) ceremonies.

These days the *bissu* clergy can normally be found scattered around the central area of South Sulawesi, not too far away from where the old Bugis kingdoms used to be (Luwu, Soppeng, Tempe, Cina for example). Although they used to number around forty within each troupe, these days their number can only be guessed to be around less than twenty throughout South Sulawesi.

This project has been divided into three parts. The first part is an introduction to the *bissu* of the past, and here I have distinguished the three main elements of Bugis history that the *bissu* are usually identified with. The second part will be an exploration of who they are, in relation to being in an 'organisation', as well as who they are regarding their sexual orientation, and its significance in Bugis cosmology. The final part is concerned with more contemporary issues that have influenced the *bissu*'s position in society. I have mainly concentrated on Islam, their change of lifestyle due to economic circumstances, and the effects of the Government's efforts to revive culture. Finally, the conclusion will answer the questions that I came up against while I was researching this subject: how has Islam integrated into *bissu* culture? Has their identity changed in any way? What are the social and financial advantages of being a *bissu* today? How many are there left? What is their relevance today?

PART I: THE HISTORICAL MAKINGS OF A *BISSU*

I La Galigo

The *I La Galigo* is an epic cycle, around 6000 pages long about the origins and history of Bugis society in pre-Islamic Luwu (Sulawesi, 1995:49). There is some controversy as to when it was written. Some have said it was written between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (Pelras, 1996:10), while others have said it was written after the fourteenth century. Lack of substantial evidence has misted over the true age of *I La Galigo*. What can be said however is that it was written after a time considered by the Bugis as the 'golden age' of their civilisation.

Covering the duration of 5 generations of numerous divine princes and their descendants, the *La Galigo* is set against a time when spirits, deities and humans were able to integrate with each other. They also moved freely between the three cosmic plains of the upper, middle (earth) and lower worlds of the Bugis universe. It describes how the human race appeared on earth as a result of the union between *Batara Guru* (from the upper world) and *We Nyilitimo* (from the lower world), both of whom the *bissu* usually contact during a state of trance. Chaos ensued and the second part of the chronicle reveals how their descendants re-organised earth and incorporated it into the cosmic order.

The *La Galigo* also acts as a kind of guide to social etiquette, which along with hierarchy dominated Bugis society. This could be seen at traditional ceremonies, from how food was prepared and presented to the people who attended them. It was the *bissu* who were normally responsible for the preparation of these ceremonies. Even today, descendants of nobility still try to use the *bissu* for special occasions. In Singkang, the local princess, *Peta Bellasari*, still hires a local *bissu*, *Haji Lacce*, to organise traditional entertainment (mostly for commercial purposes) as well as laying out the crockery and food dishes in the correct manner.

The origins of *I La Galigo* is yet unknown. We know that it originally belonged to an oral tradition of storytelling, that later found itself in the form of manuscripts. Some scholars believe that the *bissu* had a part in its creation, and the *bissu* of today would certainly agree with that. However, this has yet to be proven.

These manuscripts were and still are believed to contain strong 'magical properties'. This 'magic' manifested itself when people did not respect certain rules when in contact with the manuscripts. The *Pua Lolo* of Segeri informed me that in the past, should anyone disregard these rules, they would enter an immediate state of trance and a their *semange* (spiritual essence) would be at the mercy of punishment from the gods. The *Pua Lolo* also added that normally the *bissu* had to be present during these readings, because their presence helped to neutralise any imbalance in the atmosphere.

The recovery of *I La Galigo* manuscripts were mainly due to the Dutch East Indies Company. The anthropological and linguistic work made during the Dutch occupation greatly contributed towards uncovering the truth about Bugis history and society. Its main protagonists were Dr B.F. Matthes, Dr A. A. Cense and Dr J.C.G. Jonker who were really the first group of people who made the effort of gathering together evidence of an ancient past, which also included collecting the manuscripts of *I La Galigo* (Kern 1993:ix).

The *La Galigo* is met with a considerable amount of scepticism in regard to it as a useful source of information. The problem is that when dealing with ancient Bugis society, we are faced with a vague notion of time and questionable validity of sources. But to the Bugis, especially the *bissu*, this is of no concern to them as they believe the *La Galigo* to be a legitimate source of their history and, are proud to have such a heritage.

Language

The language used in *I La Galigo* is a mixture of present day and ancient Bugis, and also from a sacred language, *basa bissu* (said to be the tongue of the gods) that the *bissu* and