

Bugis culture: a tradition of modernity

Everybody familiar with Indonesia and Malaysia has an idea of the Bugis, and most people would agree about a few of their dominant traits, which however may or may not tally with facts. Their usual image is that of a fierce seafaring people who formerly indulged in slave trade and piracy and have become devout Muslims and successful traders. However, from a closer look at them and at their history, it appears that only a small proportion of them has ever been engaged in maritime activities and almost none in piracy, while trade, cash crops and rice culture have been central to their economy. And although it is true that Islam has since the 17th century shaped their collective personality, many remnants of their pre-Islamic past are still very much alive. This is but one of their contradictions. One of them, of which I became more and more conscious recently as I was writing a book about their socio-cultural history, appears to be the coexistence of a strong attachment to their tradition and remarkable elements of modernity which have been at work in their society since the very beginning of their history. This may come as a paradox to those who assume that peoples living outside of recognized spheres of high civilization are necessarily archaically-minded, ossified and backward, but the Bugis seem to have for centuries been predisposed to the modernization movement of the present day, and even to have in some cases anticipated it.

The shaping of Bugis culture as of any other culture has been the result of a long historical process. However, with regard to many cultures throughout the world, reconstituting this process before European presence seems almost impossible, so that most anthropologists analyse them as if they had been unchanging before meeting European influence. With regard to the Bugis, however, there are enough sources and evidence to attempt such a task, and it is precisely in doing that, that I found out that since the very beginning of Bugis history, alongside permanent elements of traditionality, seeds of modernity had been at work as well.

In fact, the transition from traditionality to modernity has been for the Bugis a long and still unfinished fade-out, fade-in process. Many specific elements of culture they inherited from the past are still alive; others have in the last century undergone a slow process of transformation into new ones, which however show undubitable signs of continuity with past facts and have become part of a modern Bugis culture. Meanwhile, others have disappeared while unprecedented new objects, facts, norms, patterns of behaviour, successively made their appearance, which mostly have nothing to do any longer with a particular Bugis identity and at most represent the particular South Sulawesi, Indonesian or

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Southeast Asian manifestations of elements of a world culture. All these heterogeneous but intermingled elements make part nowadays of the global environment of the Bugis. Now, in spite of the leading role played by Europe and models of Western origin in this worldwide process of modernization, one should not simplistically consider it just as a process of Westernization or the advent of a Western-dominated world culture. There seems in fact to be several inter-connected and overlapping worldwide subcultures including the Islamic one(s), of which Bugis society nowadays partakes.

Whatever it may be, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially since such successive dramatic turning points as colonization, Indonesian and Malaysian independence and the implementation of a policy of development by the government, movement towards modernization was of course accelerated, through external political relations, as well as through the progress of Islamization, the development of literacy and education in Indonesian (or Malaysian for those Bugis who live there) and an increasing integration into a worldwide economic system. But the Bugis appear to have been particularly well prepared to cope with it, thanks to the presence in their very tradition of such features as are usually considered specific of modernity, which have been at work all along in their history. But what kind of features do I have in mind here?

Features of modernity

Whatever our assesment of the historical developements which have produced the world where we are living now, and our opinions about modern progress or decline of our societies, an agreement may be achieved about a number of general features which make up modernity. These include:

- development of *rational thought*, supported by generalization of *literacy*, especially in the fields of *technology* and *general knowledge*, giving way to *technological innovation* and *progress of knowledge*;
- the shifting from *production* activities with the sole purpose of self-sufficiency to more and more *exchange-oriented* ones, leading to a more-or-less market economy, and making of *trade* and *money* two important aspects of social life;
- emergence of *technologically specialized trades* (from craft industry to big industry) and development of *cities*;
- *primacy of the individual* over community, linked with *individual mobility*, *individual freedom*, *individual responsibility* and *individual rights and duties*;
- transition from societies primarily based on kinship groups and local communities, to societies more based on *relationships between persons* and *between functional groups* taken in the framework of smaller or larger *political units*, often governed with the help of *written law* through the intermediary of a constituted *bureaucracy*, and giving way progressively to the idea of *citizenship* and to the development of *political opinion*;
- adoption of *worldwide cultural models, ideas, systems of thought or creeds*;
- increasing *interconnection of the world's societies*, thanks to easier travelling from one place to another and to increased, direct or indirect, contacts between distant peoples, or common adherence to world religions or ideologies, bringing forth mutual knowledge, a feeling of international solidarity as well as clearer consciousness of one's place in the world.

Modernity within tradition in Bugis culture

We shall see now how most of these features have much earlier than any Western influence, found their place in Bugis culture. And first of all, *literacy*.

The Bugis have always had a marked attachment to tradition, wich is not only preserved by oral tradition, but which they have recorded, probably from the 14th century on, in a vast number of

handwritten volumes (*lôntara*'), which have been kept by many families in almost all Bugis villages in South Sulawesi. This fact bears evidence to the prevalence, since the 18th century at least, of a relatively high level of literacy even among village people. Now, although these *lôntara*' fulfil the function of maintaining tradition, since they record history (in Bugis : *a'toriolong*, or "what pertains to people of old"), law, custom, rituals and traditional knowledge about agriculture, astronomy, navigation, boat and house construction, etc., they also have always given some place to *innovation*. Not only these texts are keen to recall the names of rulers under whose reign this or that innovation was first introduced, but they have also themselves been a means to diffuse borrowed innovations which, later, became part of tradition — be it in the religious or in the technical fields — for instance, in the 17th century, teachings of famous South Sulawesi *ulama*, or Portuguese knowledge about fire arms, or Western notions about time reckoning.

Most of these innovations were introduced through the nobility, then came to be progressively diffused through the society at large, because there was no cultural barrier between Bugis nobility and common people. That other innovations, mostly in the field of material culture, did take place in the course of past centuries can be ascertained through combined evidence of linguistics and comparative technology, although the process of their introduction is not known. Although it would take too long to detail them, I will mention here briefly, for instance, boat and house construction, weaving and agriculture as fields which have witnessed important changes during the past 200 years, and not only in the last decades. All these innovations bear witness to the presence in Bugis mentality of an important share of *pragmatism*. Contrary to what a casual observer might think, the Bugis do not practise their so called "traditional" activities in the same way as their fathers and forefathers did before them, just as a routine: they indeed do so if the technique they use suits their actual needs and the present situation. But if these change, they are certainly apt to adapt to changing conditions and have proven it many times by making innovations or adopting them from outside, independently from any outside intervention, but often of course thanks to their knowledge of and contacts with the outer world.

Among the dominant and permanent features of the Bugis one of the most important indeed is their being engaged, probably since their very origin in the early centuries of the first millennium, in an *exchange-oriented economy*. It seems in fact that at least part of their ancestors — in any case those who spoke a proto-language from which not only present day Bugis but also Makassar, Toraja and Mandar are derived — either came from east or southeast Borneo or were established on both sides of the Makassar strait in the process of expansion of a trading network which extended to southeast Sumatra, through which they were in indirect contact with south Asia and the western parts of the Indian Ocean. Later, from the 11th century on, finds of Chinese ceramics in a number of important archaeological South Sulawesi sites, even in the hinterland, bear evidence to indirect connections with China, possibly through the intermediaries of both southern Sumatra and the southern Philippines. Trade wares which were sought after in South Sulawesi included metal ores (particularly gold and iron), forest and mangrove products (such as sandalwood, sappanwood, beeswax, honey, vegetal dyes, poisons, medicines, etc.) and sea products (such as tortoiseshell, mother of pearl, trepang, etc.). This trade was probably controlled by a few leading persons who are at the origin of the South Sulawesi nobility, and the wealth which it generated is probably what gave birth to the early Bugis civilization, so brilliantly pictured in the *La Galigo* epic cycle, one of the major literary works of all Indonesia. From the 14th century on, in the wake of local developments, probably linked with *technological progress* and *demographic increase*, agricultural products, especially rice, cattle, and two products of craft industry, cloth and iron weapons, became important export commodities, whose control, again contributed to the prosperity of major kingdoms. The 17th century saw the beginning on a large scale of an activity which came to be emblematic of South Sulawesi peoples and especially of the Bugis, i.e. sea trade, although in the beginning they were only navigators among others. But from the beginning they were not just navigators — a fact mirrored by the many

meanings of the expression *llao sompe*. Although literally this means "to set sail", this can also imply wandering, looking for venture, trading, migrating or settling overseas, all of this "in search of good fortune" (*sappa' dallé*). In fact, that period saw the beginning of Bugis expansion all over the Archipelago and the Malayan peninsula. It was usually linked, either to their settlement in trading communities scattered in a great number of major or minor ports, or to their establishment in a place where, depending on the situation and conditions of the time, they could expect profit from the control or the production of one particular product — successively or respectively: forest products, sea products, ores such as gold, iron or tin, or cash crops such as pepper, tobacco, coffee, coconut, oil palms and, recently, cocoa. More generally, they engage in navigation, trade, agriculture, plantation work or forestry — whatever occupation they feel most rewarding and appropriate to time and place. In brief they are economically-minded people who are quick to see economic gaps, quick to jump at them and quick at adapting themselves to the particulars of any activity still new to them. This, in turn, makes them receptive to any innovation they need to use to achieve their economic goals.

The world of the Bugis was far from being limited to Sulawesi, or even to those places in the archipelago, where they used to sail. They have since long ago been open to the outside world. By the end of the 18th century, the British navigator Forrest found that they had maps with captions in their own language, showing the whole of Southeast Asia; and when the White-Raja-to-be, James Brooke, visited Wajo' in 1840, he was asked about the political situation in Turkey and about Napoleon's fate. And already in *La Galigo* times (i.e. before the 14th century) they had some idea, fantastic as it may have been, about the lands west of the Indian Ocean, which they called Jengki (i.e. Zanj). In fact, indirectly, they were part of a trading network which extended to the Middle East on one side, to China to the other side, while they had special links with the Malay trading kingdoms. Their adoption of Islam in the beginning of the 17th century made them part of a new network which put them in contact with half the world (of this, those among them who have made the pilgrimage are particularly conscious) and has brought into their culture many more elements of modernity. It is also important to take in account the fact that in the Malay world, the expansion of Islam was closely linked with the existence of trading networks, of which the Bugis traders and migrants were also part. In Europe itself, "modern" mentality has also for a large part been fostered in the late Middle Ages by the trading bourgeoisie. Among the Bugis, however, trade was not exerted mainly by commoners; the nobility had also an important role in it. However, it 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 and enterprise.

This leads us to another point of importance in Bugis culture, that is to say *individualism*, which does not preclude a marked sense of solidarity. Islamic influence, with regard to this aspect, came on a favourable ground. Kinship had not, among the Bugis, the same importance as in other Indonesian societies. The Bugis kinship system, being cognatic, does not favour the formation of discrete kin groups as those which play such an important role among, say, the Batak or among peoples of eastern Indonesia and they do not have, either, bilateral groups acknowledging the same origin, as is the case with the neighbouring Toraja. Instead, Bugis society has, probably for centuries, been structured by a system of pervasive and interlocking networks of clienteles. Basically, the relationship between a leader and a follower, or of a patron with a client is a relationship between individuals. Their strong sense of individuality is the more striking if one takes in account the fact that Bugis society is one of the most complex and apparently rigidly hierarchical of any in the archipelago, with several distinct strata comprising several degrees of nobility, whose highest members were considered as white-blooded descendents of the pre-Islamic gods. By birth, one pertains to a specific rank and this cannot be changed. Yet, social mobility is possible, either through marriage strategies, which allow one's descendants to be higher than oneself on the hierarchical ladder, or through self-entreprise, which allows somebody, in certain conditions, to be equated with higher ranks through his individual

performances as a brave person (*to-warani*), a rich person (*to-sugi*'), a clever or wise person (*to-acca*), or a religious person (*to-panrita*). In other words, in certain conditions, social recognition equal to that given to the nobility could be given to victorious warriors (nowadays to army officers), to rich traders (nowadays to successful entrepreneurs), to persons well-read in the *lontara*' (nowadays to graduates or academics) and to *ulama*. Competition to achieve such positions has thus ranked high among their motivations. Besides even among the nobility competition for office was intense, since succession to office was not ruled by strict inheritance but was for a large part elective. All this again created favourable conditions for the emergence of a modern-minded "bourgeoisie". However, unlike the European bourgeoisie, the Bugis was *not city-based*. Strange as it may appear, Bugis modernity was born in a rural and sea-trading village society.

Indeed, there were before the Dutch takeover, no real cities in South Sulawesi. Even 17th century Makassar was not a real unified city, but a complex of still almost rural villages scattered among ricefields and coconut plantations, belonging to different domains with different names under different lords. In the hinterland domains or kingdoms, the head settlements were just fortified areas, surrounded with an earthen talus, which likewise were not completely built-up but included fields, plantations, gardens and a few settlements of houses on stilts, easy to move. Villages, themselves, did not constitute basic social units. The Bugis did not have real village community institutions like those described, for instance, for Balinese *desa*, and thus did not practise village democracy in the perhaps rather idealized form which has been described by former scholars writing on Indonesian societies. But deliberative bodies were found at higher levels, those of the *wanua* — domains placed under an elected lord (*arung*) — and those of federative kingdoms, which led some 19th century observer to speak of "aristocratic democracy". The permanence of a federative principle as the basis of kingdoms, joined to the pervasive existence of nets of clienteles was perhaps what prevented the constitution of a *bureaucratic form of government* such as it could be found in Java. There were of course differences between different local situations, with most centralized authority exerted in the kingdom of Boné, and probably the most decentralized (and perhaps most originally Bugis) system being found in the neighbouring kingdom of Wajo'. In the latter kingdom, two sayings were basic to the social system. The first one was: "The council's decision prevails over the ruler's; the people's leaders' (*anang*) decision prevails over the council's; the people's decision prevails over the people's leaders'". The other one was "The people of Wajo' are free (*maradéka*); their only master is law". What I translate here by "law" is *ade*' (customary law), which was written in *lontara*' in the form of legal codes, then discussed in councils (*bicara*) of legal experts (*pa'bicara*) who compared them, if deemed necessary, with provisions of Islamic law (*sara*') and based their appreciations also on precedents (*ade' pura onro*), without hesitating to establish precedents themselves — thus a situation quite similar to modern legal practice.

The situation I have briefly described here seems thus to have made the Bugis particularly ready to meet the global world of nowadays. The economic tradition of the Bugis — a tradition specifically open to change — has been very important for shaping a "modern" mentality. This I say without making any value judgment. I am not saying either that "modern" is good or that it is not. I am merely making the observation that such a mentality prepares them better to cope with contemporary developments insofar as they are influenced by worldwide modern models of behaviour, mostly although not only of Western origin. In fact the most valuable assets of the Bugis are certainly their versatility and adaptability which have enabled them to survive over the centuries, always changing and always the same.