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The I La Galigo poetry of South Sulawesi

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The I La Galigo poetry of Bugis speakers has at least been heard of by many students of traditional Indonesian cultures. This paper begins by reviewing the available material and the scholarly literature so far devoted to this. It then turns to the more speculative issues of the material's origin and function. Only by attempting some sort of answer to such basic questions is it possible to claim any understanding of the texts for literary, ethnological or historical purposes.

The form of the poetry is very simple. The language is structured into units of five, or more rarely four, syllables. Since the Bugis script allows only one *akṣara* for each syllable, this means a written form of five (or four) *akṣara*. The divisions between units are usually indicated by the main 'punctuation' sign of the script, the *pallawa* consisting of three vertical dots. Otherwise, texts are written continuously and often run to hundreds of pages.

The content of the material is a series of linked stories. Taking an overview, it is possible to discern a more or less coherent narrative within which the particular stories can be placed. This begins with the decision of Datu Patoto^{c}, the lord of the Upper World, to send his son, Batara Guru, down to earth in Luwu where the son marries a cousin, the daughter of the lord of the Lower World. The cast is extensive and there are many twists and turns in the stories that follow, but eventually after a sixth generation has been born, all (or nearly all in some versions) leave the earth again. A major character is Sawērigading, in the fourth generation, who has a son called I La Galigo, but it is not clear why this name has become attached to the whole corpus of material. These figures are not gods in the sense of being responsible for the origin and welfare of the world and their interests and activities on earth are essentially those of men and women. By the same token, they do have a divine element in their nature and can have some influence in each others' and perhaps human affairs.

Pelras has demonstrated in an important article (1983) that the knowledge of overall structure displayed in particular texts is remarkably consistent and coherent, but there are no grounds in the texts themselves for assuming that they are fragments of some now-lost unity. Indeed, as will appear below, the concept of a single work should be rejected.

None of the European sources on South Sulawesi before 1800 show any awareness of the I La Galigo material either in form or content. Though one might argue that literary and other cultural productions anywhere in the Indies received scant attention from contemporary Europeans, and that within South Sulawesi Makasar affairs the received greater attention than Bugis matters, the silence is worth remarking upon and we will return to it below. This does not mean, of course, that the stories were unknown before 1800. The chronicle of the major Bugis state of Bonē, which I believe to have been written for some more or less official purpose in the last three decades of the seventeenth century, firmly locates the origin of the state in its contemporary form with the appearance of a high-status figure seven generations after the re-assumption of the I La Galigo figures to other worlds (Mukhlis and Macknight, in prep.). The same distinction between an earlier 'I La Galigo period' and later history is also found in material from Soppēng, probably dating to the eighteenth century (Caldwell in prep.). This and other such material may indeed be directly linked with the Bonē chronicle.

The two earliest European references to the I La Galigo material are, happily, extremely useful. In 1808, John Leyden published an account of Bugis language and literature probably based chiefly on information collected in Penang in 1805-6. He lists 53 'of the most popular Bugis compositions': the names are mainly (and probably entirely) those of characters for the I La Galigo material, though it is not clear exactly what they signify.[1] In addition he provides a specimen (in Latin script) and translation of the 'Wépalétei', 'the only Búgïs story in my possession'. This is a typical fragment of I La Galigo poetry, comprising 44 metrical units arranged into 11 lines. From the transcription and translation (both of which are remarkably good), it seems to me that Leyden went through the first half page or so of his manuscript with a knowledgeable informant, writing down the sound of the Bugis and discussing its meaning in Malay, or perhaps even English.

Raffles in his 'Account of Celebes' is more general, but correctly isolates the differences of form and content between the I La Galigo material and other 'traditionary tales'.

> *La Galĭga*, the reputed son of *Sawĭra Gading*, is considered the author of the history of *Sawĭra Gading*, which is a kind of heroic poem...; and all books, even the most modern, which are written in the same manner, are called after him *Galĭga*, although properly speaking, the term should only be applied to the history of the heroes who are supposed to have lived previous to the seven generations of anarchy which subsisted at *Bóni*. (Raffles 1817,2:clxxxviii)

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[1] Matthes too, reporting in 1852 on his discoveries, had trouble finding any works corresponding with these names (van den Brink 1943:175).

It is significant that Raffles admits the possibility of 'even the most modern' books being called '*Galiŭga*', though he leaves unclear what content may be included in this form.[2]

The earliest dateable manuscripts now available appear to be two collected by Crawfurd from Bone in 1814 and now in London (BL Add. 12348 and 12352; Ricklefs and Voorhoeve 1977: xxiv, 27-8). These total almost 400 pages and are the only substantial items in British collections.[3]

The major collecting phase began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Schoemann, who probably visited Macassar in 1849, managed to get at least 18 I La Galigo manuscripts which are now in Berlin. Starting the previous year, and with many years at his disposal, Matthes had difficulty in getting as much as he would have liked, but finally managed to obtain the great 12 volume item now listed as NBG 188 in Leiden. (See quotation below on this.) Later in the century, Jonker, who was government linguist (*taalambtenaar*) in Macassar from 1886 to 1896, made an immense collection of copies and a few 'originals' which came eventually to Leiden as well. All these and a few other items in the European collections have been splendidly catalogued and summarized by Kern in a vast volume (1939).[4]

During the 1930s, the then *taalambtenaar*, Cense made a further collection of copies and a few originals for the Matthesstichting in Macassar and the I La Galigo items were also catalogued by Kern (1954). Though many of these are available on microfilm, some have now been lost. Other manuscripts in private hands have also been filmed, but there are undoubtedly a good many, perhaps of some importance, still to be found in South Sulawesi.[5]

Until recently, very little of this great mass of material had been published other than the 161 pages in Bugis script by Matthes (1864-72,2), so that most scholars have had to rely on the extensive summary by Matthes (1864-72,3) or Kern's catalogues. Even the 16 pages of Dutch translation by Kern (1947) (from an unspecified text) is not continuous. The last few years, however, have seen a new interest by local scholars. Most important is Dr Fachruddin's thesis (1983) which, after a long and helpful introduction, provides 343 pages of Bugis transcription, with a matching Indonesian translation. Drs Nyompa (198?) has supplied another 208 pages of transcription and translation. Other scholars, building on the work of A. Zainal Abidin (1971), have collected oral versions of the material from various locations (LBNvol, Pelly, Mukhlis

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[2]Some items in collections may answer to this description, being in the 5 syllable verse form, but concerning historical events. Likely examples are BL Add. 12373 and Berlin Ms. orient. fol.403.

[3]Ricklefs and Voorhoeve also list SOAS Ms. 12915, John Rylands Bugi 3 and 3a (which are both strip rolls), and possibly part of BL Add. 12373.

[4]See also Kern (1961).

[5]The A.N.U. Library has a major collection of material available on microfilm.

info).

It is now possible, in my opinion, to address some basic questions about the I La Galigo material and suggest answers, which can then be tested by further research.

One preliminary issue, the nature of the verse-form, has been dealt with most convincingly by Sirk (1986). He looks in detail at the stress patterns within the five and four syllable units and elucidates the reasons for variation in the basic five syllable unit. He also tests a range of possible combinations for these basic units and rejects any such larger structures in the verse. This demonstration of the simplicity of the verse is significant for any discussion of origin.

In my view, the central point to grasp in relation to all the I La Galigo material in its original form is its 'oral composition'. What we have in the manuscripts is a record of performance. (I leave aside for the moment the issues of copying existing manuscripts and prose versions.) Each performance is a fresh creation, constructed out of the performer's knowledge of particular narrative material and his or her skill in casting that into appropriate form.

Each performance meets the need of a unique occasion. 'Oral composition' in this sense has been definitively described by Lord (1960) and my ideas are based fairly closely on his. This is not, of course, to imply any direct link between the mainly European cases with which he is concerned and materials from the Indonesian archipelago or elsewhere, for, as was most usefully revealed in the 1981 conference on Oral and Written Transmission, the central concept has a powerful explanatory power in an extraordinarily wide range of situations.

Since this art of performance appears to have been lost in South Sulawesi and I know of no direct accounts of its practice, a demonstration of the material's 'oral composition' must come from the texts themselves. There are three parts to such a demonstration: the general technique of versification, the treatment of narrative in a single 'performance' as preserved in a manuscript and the comparison between 'performances' or manuscripts. There is not space here to analyse sufficient material to make a fully satisfying case, but the two examples in the Appendix suggest some of the points to be developed in a larger treatment. These include features such as standard epithets, repetition of longer or shorter units which express common information, and regular treatment of particular themes.[6] It should be possible to compare separate versions of the treatment of particular sections of narrative, that is the rendition of different 'performances', as Lord is able to do for Serbo-Croatian material, but I have not yet

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[6]In an unpublished paper, Roger Tol (1987) has very usefully opened up the whole issue of Bugis poetics in a number of genres.

isolated suitable sections in the manuscripts.[7]

If the material has, as I believe, been composed orally in its original form, that is 'performance', how then did it come to be written down? It is frustrating that those, such as Matthes, who may have been able to provide information on this vital question, choose not to do so. Here we may notice the apparent absence of external comment and manuscripts before the nineteenth century. It is tempting to suggest that the manuscript expression of the material derives in some way from requests by European, or other non-Bugis collectors for the texts of performances they had witnessed or heard about. Certainly that is one way of reading Matthes' statement:

> I had spent many years collecting as many fragments as possible, each of which could be seen as a separate manuscript. With the help of Arung Pancana Colliᶜpujiē,... who was extremely expert in this I La Galigo literature, it was possible for me to succeed in obtaining, after much trouble and exertion, a large linked portion of 2848 pages in manuscript folio. (after Matthes 1864-72,3:251)

I believe there is something to this argument, especially in relation to the larger collections. However, there are difficulties. Most obviously, it does not account for the manuscripts still to be found in Bugis hands and the 'original' items obtained by earlier collectors. After all, both Leyden and Crawfurd seem to have obtained manuscripts without special solicitation and Matthes infers that manuscripts of episodes were to be found. A feature I have noted in Schoemann's manuscripts is that the nature of corrections shows that the scribe was working from a written original. (The only escape from this argument is to suggest that all these 'original' manuscripts reflect the interests of non-traditional Bugis scholars or other interested 'locals'.)

It cannot even be argued that the availability of paper is a necessary condition for writing down the material. Matthes is the first to say that he had access to a version written on lontar, presumably a strip roll (Matthes 1864-72,3:263; cf. Macknight 1984:222).

We are left, therefore, with a problem to which I see no ready solution: what were the precise circumstances in which 'oral performances' came to be committed to writing? Perhaps we should not be too troubled by our ignorance on this point. After all, no answer can be supplied to this question for Homer or most other 'orally composed' literature around the world.

We may now turn to another difficult issue: what was the function of these

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[7] It is important to distinguish 'oral composition' in this sense from what one might call the 'oral consumption' of literature which is designed to be read or sung aloud to an audience. Sweeney (1980 and forthcoming) has written extensively on the 'oral consumption' of Malay texts and Pelras (1979) has an excellent discussion of related matters in a range of Bugis genres. Since an 'oral composition' is also intended - in the first and only instance in the composer's view - to be 'orally consumed' features such as parallelism (though that may have other origins as well), the frequency of direct speech, and standard marking words and phrases will also be found. Wherever possible, it is helpful to distinguish these two senses of 'orality' and their symptoms.

'performances' and texts in Bugis society? (The question is in the past tense since I know of no significant use of the material in modern South Sulawesi. Comparatively few people can read the script and real expertise now seems limited to scholars.) Matthes, after regretting the lack of 'a complete specimen of the poem', tells us that 'the native always satisfies himself with droning a small part of it, written on lontar or paper, from time to time, especially on the occasion of festivities' (after Matthes 1864-72,3:251). We should also note who seems to be well informed. Leaving aside Islam, the *bissu* are those in society charged with managing the supernatural. Yet, although *bissu* are clearly familiar with the I La Galigo material and their ritual language has many similarities with the lexicon of the I La Galigo texts (Matthes 1872:1-2; Sirk 1975), the 'performance' of I La Galigo material seems not to form part of their rituals, about which we now know a good deal, not only from Matthes, but also from the recent work of Harmonic (Ar 19, Objects&M1977; new book). The I La Galigo figures are not, after all, gods. The real experts were older, aristocratic women.

From Matthes' first meeting with Colli^{c}pujiē in 1852, he acknowledges her as an expert in linguistic matters relating to the I La Galigo material (van den Brink 1943:172). Four years later in Pare-Pare, he finds another old aristocratic woman similarly well-informed (van den Brink 1943:179), while later on the same trip, during his long stay in Lagusi, he gives a vivid picture of his opportunities, or lack of them:

> Yet the care of the queen [the local ruler] was not just limited to searching out manuscripts. she also gave orders to track down people who could not merely recite the I La Galigo poems and the *Mēnrurana* of Pĕtta Malampē^{c}ē Gĕmmĕ^{c}na in a fixed drone, but who also understood the poems word by word and were thus able to explain them. This was, however, no easy matter. Only after much fruitless trouble was she able to find two old women of whom one was fairly well-informed in the I La Galigo literature and the other had to act as teacher for reading the *Mēnrurana*, although as it turned out she actually understood very little. Fortunately, the lesson was given in the queen's house so that we could continuously seek the opinion of the old lady, who eventually emerged from her room and took over the instruction herself. Although she did not know how to resolve all the problems, she was nonetheless not completely inexperienced in deciphering the old literature. (after van den Brink 1943:183)

Matthes thinks he has to explain his behaviour to the mission society at home:

> You may well wonder why I am mainly using women in order to track down the sense of native poetry. Yet it is only too true that the women in general, and particularly the queens, are much more expert in Bugis literature than the men. The latter know only how to talk about cock-fighting, gambling, opium-smoking, waging war, theft and murder. (after van den Brink 1943:183-4)

While we can discount some of Matthes' complaints about the difficulty of finding people who could explain every detail, his comments show the extent to which, by the middle of the nineteenth century, this material had been reduced to a written form which had to be read and had become the province of the courts. Perhaps the most remarkable thing to notice is how unimportant it *seems* for the society at large.

My guess is that in the nineteenth century the I La Galigo material served two main functions. First, it provided entertainment, albeit at a rather high aesthetic level. Here was a repertoire of elaborate stories, told (or rather sung) at length in an elevated, but broadly comprehensible language. It is not hard to imagine such material filling in large slabs of time in long ceremonies - or even just the tropical night.

Secondly, the stories supplied what Havelock has called a 'tribal encyclopaedia', that is 'the tale itself is designed as a kind of convenience, ...it is put to use as a kind of literary portmanteau which is to contain a collection of assorted usages, conventions, prescriptions, and procedures' (Havelock 1963:66). Note the similarity of the description, which Havelock applies to Homer, to Matthes' comments on the I La Galigo material which, 'is of great interest for ethnology, since one repeatedly meets in it extensive description of the customary ceremonies held even up to the present day on the occasion of births, marriages and other daily events of human life' (after Matthes 1864-72,3:250). Pelras too says that:

> Although of divine birth, [the chief characters] are human - at least during the time they spend on earth - and *La Galigo* thus shows us a humanity that is primal and on a larger scale, a humanity wherein later generations could search for models. These models are not so much moral as societal and ritual. One could aspire to meet the models as closely as possible without, however, ever being able to match them entirely. That was something which could only be achieved by those humans of purely divine ancestry. The closest possible realization of the models would, of course, be kept for the reigning princes and the image would become more and more imperfect as one came down the ranks of the social hierarchy. Thus *La Galigo*, above all, offered the Bugis an ideal prototype of human society. (after Pelras 1983:63)

How can all this be true if, as I have just suggested, the material seems to have had little importance?[8] The answer lies in the joint effect of Islam and writing.[9] Whatever the level of accommodation with earlier beliefs - and this was clearly fairly high - Bugis society had been ostensibly Muslim since the early seventeenth century. Islam had, as it were, taken the high ground. Moreover, it is hard to maintain the vitality of an oral milieu when the performance becomes a text. If one carries back the two functions of entertainment and 'tribal encyclopaedia' to the pre-Islamic period, they appear rather more significant for the society.[10]

That still leaves open the question of when performances began to be taken down. It may be too speculative to suggest that a tradition of oral composition is only (or most

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[8]It is worth observing that two other possible functions are notably absent. It would be quite wrong (though by no means unknown in South Sulawesi today) to assign the poems any direct historiographical intent - though also see below on their possible uses to historians. Nor are they concerned, in the first instance, to explain how things come to be as they are. This is a somewhat complex question as there are some hints of this, especially in relation to the Spirit of the Rice.

[9]Note that these are *not* linked in South Sulawesi.

[10]The alleged importance of *wayang* for Javanese society comes to mind.

usually) reduced to writing as the social order which has sustained it is being transformed into one which will not require it. Indeed, the new cultural logic may be fundamentally opposed to the older elements, as Havelock argues for Plato against Homer. Yet somehow the old survives so that we do have the texts. What can *we* do with them?

In the first place, we can regard them as literature, admittedly and essentially oral compositions, but nonetheless products of creative imagination and aesthetic skill. The scholarly apparatus allowing us some understanding of the material may not be easy to use, but as I have set out above, it does exist. Even more difficult is the task of finding an appropriate style of translation, particularly into English or other languages very different from the Bugis. An essential point to bring out in any translation is the oral composition of the original.

Another use for the material is as a mirror of the composer's mind. As students of Bronze Age Greece well know, the 'historical' use of an oral composition is not straightforward. All information is 'atomized' so that it is impermissable to relate one detail to any other. We may, for example, hear of Portuguese and other merchants bringing ceramics from Malacca for sale in Sulawesi. From other sources, we know that some Portuguese from Malacca did reach the west coast of the peninsula in the 1540s and then later around the early seventeenth century, just as we know that ceramics were imported in vast quantity, but it would be quite wrong to cite such a passage as evidence of the content of Portuguese trade. For one thing, we also know a good deal of the sixteenth century political history of the area and can be certain that rulers and other features of the society described were not about at any date involving the Portuguese. It is very hard to break down belief in an 'age' of I La Galigo.

That is not to say that we should despair entirely. Some of what makes up the oral composer's stock of material does survive from a period before, say, the sixteenth century and, with care and a wide knowledge of the texts, it should be possible to find indications, at least, of the nature of that early society. Thus Pelras (1983) and Harmonic (1983,1987), taking the obvious point that this society was not yet Muslim, have set out to provide some account of its cosmology. I see no reason to doubt the conclusions on kinship, marriage and status that can be drawn from the integral part that such matters play in the stories. The details of the area of geographical awareness may be susceptible to revision in terms of the composer's later knowledge, but not the emphasis on travel by sea. However, to embark on a full-scale analysis of this type is a task for another day.

These two uses of the texts by us today are not, in essence, so far from those I have suggested for earlier times. If at times the sheer mass of the material seems daunting, it is worth reminding ourselves that scribes, with no access to word processors, thought it worth their while copying out the material. Perhaps any failure to find interest is more of a comment on ourselves.[11] I believe that it is worth struggling further with the

[11]After all, E.V. Rieu in the Penguin Classics translation manages to make even Homer tedious. A crime of serious proportions!

material for its own sake and for what it can tell us, through the mind of the composer, about long ago and far away.

Appendix

There is no extensive translation into English of the I La Galigo poems, though the work of Fachruddin (1983) and Nyompa (198?) mentioned in the paper have provided extensive translation into Indonesian. To give some idea of the nature of the material, I have taken two passages from Fachruddin. The first comes from pp.676-9 and is given in Bugis (adapted to the transcription style I favour) and in my translation. For the second I have used the translation of a section on p.802 as found in Tol 1987.

Passage A

Ta^{c}domēng-romēng	Hanging down
llao riolo	in front
kai ma^{c}diwu	in thousands upon thousands
bui^{c}-bui^{c}na	the sheets of
lē sompĕ^{c}ē,	the sail,
namala-mala	and golden
rigattungangngi	were the hangings
pēso^{c} batara.	the work of the lord.
Sala tanrapi^{c}	It almost reached
riBotillangi^{c},	to Botillangi^{c},
lolosu potto	the gilded mast
sētangngarĕnna	fitted to
Wēlĕnrēngngē.	Wēlĕnrēngngē.
Kua adanna	Thus the words of
I La Tiulĕng	I La Tiulĕng,
"Tarakkanao	"Get up
Toappanyompa	Toappanyompa
mupēma^{c}gai	and see
wakka ulawĕng	the boat of gold
lē ttompoē	which rises
makkatawarĕng!"	into the world!"
Ala mappulo	Then there were ten times
kĕttimuaga	ten thousand
joncongĕng mpĕkkĕ^{c},	great vessels
polingkajoē	rigged with
lolosu potto	gilded masts
baratĕng kading.	and ivory outriggers.
Sēkuato	As many also
banawa lĕ^{c}bi	mighty craft
polingkajoē	rigged with
sampano dusi	decking of the finest cloth
wisē tanrajo.	and flashing oars.

Passage B

Toappanyompa said:
"You all, commoners, go down
to bathe and wash your hair,
and let the fragrant dirt from
your skin flow away in the stream,
since we won't return to Alēluwu^{c}."
Sawērigading then spoke:
"Brother La Nanrang and cousins,
you too go down there and take a
bath to let the fragrant dirt from
your skin and sweat flow away,
since we won't return
to Alēluwu^{c} and Watamparĕ^{c}."
Sawērigading stood up and went
down to take a bath in the river.
Everybody went down to take a bath,
the nobles who managed the rich land,
the important princes,
pillars of the country, makers of decisions,
children of the rich and the commanders,
who curb the commoners,
the warriors who accompany and are accompanied,
who celebrate and are celebrated.
Sawērigading spoke in tears:
"Let us bathe in the stream, men,
to have our fragrant sweat flow away.
Let us bathe in the eddies,
let us have our fragrant sweat flow away,
since we won't return to Alēluwu^{c}."