



Tropical Indigenous Queer as Guardians of Tradition: The *Bissu* of Bugis Society, Indonesia

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Abstract

Bissu means neither a man nor a woman, but a holy person representing all genders. The *Bissu* are unique to the Bugis society of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Traditional Bugis culture, as told in the ancient *La Galigo* epic, acknowledges five genders: *uruwane* (male), *makkunrai* (female), *calabai* (male who has female traits), *calalai* (female who has male traits), and *Bissu* (all genders). The *Bissu* have sacred roles in Bugis society. At the royal level, they bridge the relationship between God and king. They are the priestly protectors of the royal heirlooms, without which the king cannot ascend to the throne. At the agricultural level, *Bissu* perform the *mappalili* ritual as part of rice cultivation. This shamanic ritual, performed during the tropical monsoon season, is to ensure a bountiful harvest. However, the *Bissu*, and their sacred roles, have faced challenges in modern Indonesia, especially during waves of conservative Islamism. In recent times, *Bissu* have also received condemnation under the label of LGBTQ. Such actions, although deadly serious, have not had a lasting impact at the local level where the *Bissu* continue to preserve Bugis culture and traditions. Thus, while LGBTQ groups across Indonesia fight for their rights for social acceptance through legal and political advocacy; the *Bissu* of Sulawesi, fight for their cultural role as guardians of Indigenous *Bugis* traditions, highlighting their identity a "the fifth gender". This cultural strategy contributes to practices of queering the tropics.

Keywords: *Bissu*, five genders, LGBTQ, Bugis society, Sulawesi Indonesia, queer tropics, Indigenous queer

Introduction: Queer Tropics

The intersection of culture, religion, region, and minorities, has not received sufficient attention in Indonesian studies. Existing studies predominantly focus on one aspect of analysis, rather than using a multidisciplinary approach. The archipelago of Indonesia stretches along the equator where its 17,000 islands encompass not only a wide variety of regional tropical environments, but also 1,300 distinct ethnic groups whose continued existence involves an enormous range of cultural practices (Na'im & Syaputra, 2010). In turn cultural rituals are intimately entwined with local climates and environments, which impact various agricultural or fishing traditions. At the same time, the modern Republic of Indonesia has been facing dynamic social change that is also shaped by socio-religious values. These values are determined by the majority politico-ethnic group. Consequently, the position of Indigenous and minority groups has been made increasingly vulnerable because they do not share the same cultural background as the majority population. This has resulted in a series of conflicts in which culture and religion have been used to persecute minorities. Heightened identity polarization, and an intergenerational gap in education and employment, has made the cultural relationship between majorities and minorities consistently unequal (Jati, 2022; Jati et al., 2022). More importantly in the recent Indonesian context, persecution and discrimination continue from staunch Islamic groups, including Ahmadiyya and Shia. Consequently, the *Bissu* of the Bugis tribe of South Sulawesi, along with other gender diverse Indigenous peoples, have been marginalized as queer minorities, as have various other LGBTQ communities.

The growing number of studies regarding LGBTQ communities are widespread globally, including studies related to exclusion, discrimination, and stigma (Denison et al., 2021; Kaniuka et al., 2019; Kannout & Du Bois, 2023; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2021), mental health (Cabral & Pinto, 2023; Ventriglio et al., 2022), and social tension between LGBTQ identity and religion (Anderson et al., 2022; Ghazzawi et al., 2020; Golriz, 2021; Tan, 2022). Adding to this research, are anthropological studies of LGBTQ communities, including research which focuses specifically on Indigenous queer in various regions of the tropics (Pereira, 2019; Davies, 2001; 2010; 2015).

In the context of Indonesia, the study of Indigenous gender diversity is important for the following reasons. Firstly, Indonesia has numerous Indigenous cultures that demonstrate a range of gender diversity. These cultures are spread widely across islands of the archipelago, and include: the Rato Nale priests of Kodi in West Sumba who combine both male (metal worker) and female (weaver) souls (Hoskins, 1990; 1993); the *Balian* and *Basir*, female and male ritual transgender specialists of the Dayak Ngaju cultural group of central Kalimantan, Borneo (Andaya, 2018); the *Gemblak*, a young man in sexual and dance relations with the male lead during performances of the Réyog Ponorogo of East Java (Krismawati et al., 2018; Wijayanto

et al., 2018); as well as the *Bissu* of the Bugis society of South Sulawesi, who embody five genders. Secondly, Indigenous queer studies reveal how important the role of gender diversity is in various cultures across Indonesia. In effect, gender diverse people and groups are essential in maintaining heritage and ancestral traditions, thus preserving the tropical cultural diversity for which Indonesia is famous. Thirdly, Indigenous queer strategies of survival—both in maintaining various gender identities and their ancestral traditions—amidst the onslaught of modernity, religion, and heteronormativity, is an important example for other minority groups, including the broader LGBTQ community.

Figure 1. Map of Indonesian Islands and Provinces



Source: World Atlas <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/indonesia>

One of the Indigenous queer communities that still survive and remain the custodians of an extraordinary tradition are the *Bissu* of the Bugis society of South Sulawesi. This article focuses on the *Bissu*, elaborating their position and roles in maintaining various Bugis community traditions and how these intersect with the tropical monsoon climate and agricultural rituals. The article outlines the unique qualities of the *Bissu*, their mythic origins as first peoples, their cultural roles and rituals, their persecution, and their survival. Historically, we follow their origin story from the famous epic of *La Galigo*, to early colonial documentation of their presence in the Bugis pre-Islamic Kingdoms, and to their current roles in contemporary Muslim-majority Bugis society. The article places emphasis on the *Bissu* cultural strategies to maintain their ancestral rituals and identity in contemporary Bugis and Indonesian culture.

The *Bissu* have come to the attention of many academics and LGBTQ activists, and studies of this community are numerous. Of particular significance for this article which intersects culture, religion, region, and minority studies, are the works of Davies (2001, 2007, 2010, 2015) and Lathief (2004, 2005, 2021a, 2021b) from anthropological

perspectives; that of Andaya (2018) from cultural history; and works by Syamsurijal *et al.* on religious culture (2009; 2010; 2022; 2023). The *Bissu* remain important because the cultural strategy they employ in order to protect ancestral traditions and maintain their gender diverse identity is necessarily dynamic and fluid. The *Bissu* Indigenous queer community relies on ancestral knowledge of the sacred myths, language, and history of the Bugis tribe, and on rich and multifaceted ritual practices—including agricultural rituals which are steeped in an understanding of the tropical monsoon climate of the Bugis districts of South Sulawesi.

Figure 2. Map of South Sulawesi Provinces



Source: Wikipedia commons

***Bissu* as Indigenous Queer in Bugis Society**

***Bissu* and the Five Genders**

Bissu are recognized as spiritual leaders who are neither man nor woman, and yet display all the genders of Bugis society. Consequently, researchers note that Bugis society acknowledges five distinct genders: *uruwane* (men), *makkunrai* (women), *calabai* (man with female traits), *calalai* (women with male traits), and *Bissu* (Davies, 2007a; Nurohim, 2018; Suliyati, 2018). The *Bissu* not only transcend gender, but also

the earthly realm, for they are the link between humans and the ancestral gods. This perspective highlights the complexity and richness of gender diversity within Bugis culture.

Recent studies on the etymology of the term *bissu* have been subject to varying interpretations by different scholars. One notable study suggested that the term "*Bissu*" might have origins in Sanskrit, possibly derived from the word for monk (*bhiksu*) (Pelras, 1996). However, this initial hypothesis has been refuted by *Bissu* themselves. Puang Matoa Saidi (1958-2011), a prominent *Bissu* leader until his passing, emphasized that *Bissu* should not be equated with monks or their title derived from the term "monk," despite both *Bissu* and monks being religious experts. According to Puang Matoa Saidi, *Bissu* are considered holy individuals, known in Bugis as "mabessi" (clean and holy), due to their spiritual qualities and their behavior resembling that of a woman who does not menstruate. The term "mabessi" evolved into "bessi," and eventually to "Bissu." Lathief (2021) similarly explained, drawing on insights from the traditional Bugis figures Andi Palinrungi and Andi Angkong Petta Rala, that the term "Bissu" originates from "mabessi," signifying holiness and purity. This understanding underscores the unique nature of *Bissu* individuals, who, possessing a feminine essence, do not menstruate and are considered pure as they continue to engage in ritual practices.

Although *Bissu* are considered to combine all gender types known in Bugis society and are thereby considered to embody five genders, and to be neither man nor woman, it should be noted that there is further gender dynamism embodied by individual *Bissu*. For instance, there are male *Bissu*, namely, Sawerigading a prince of the Ancient Luwu Kingdom; and there are female *Bissu* (known as *Bissu core-core*) namely, We Tenri Abeng (Sawerigading's twin sister) (Munawar, 2022; Pelras, 1996). It is recognized that the majority of *Bissu* are *calabai*, someone who is physically male but whose feelings, attitudes, and sexual orientation are feminine. According to Davies (2012) a *calabai* is someone who is physically male but does not identify as a man, even though they do not aspire to be a woman. Thus, although *calabai* is also sometimes translated as transwoman (and *calalai* as transman), this term is not accurate. The Bugis people refer to *calabai* with the terms *kawe-kawe* and *bencong*. *Kawe-kawe* means 'close', referring to a man whose attitude and behavior is close to or similar to a woman. Meanwhile, *bencong* is a slang term that is mostly used in the Bugis *calabai* environment. It is possible that the word *bencong* comes from *gencong* (lipstick) because they like to use lip rouge. In Bugis society these terms are used interchangeably, but according to Boellstorff (2007) they are more often called *calabai*, especially in their family circles.

The majority of *Bissu*, from the period of the ancient kingdoms until contemporary times, have been *calabai*, thus, the notions of *calabai* and *Bissu* often overlap.

However, as explained by Puang Matoa Nani, a *Bissu* leader since 2017, not all *calabai* can become *Bissu*. Only *calabai* in the *calabai tungkena lino* category (*calabai* by birth/*calabai* by nature) can become *Bissu*. Among the *Bissu* themselves there is a further division of what constitutes *calabai*. Puang Matoa Saidi divides *calabai* into three categories. First, *calabai tungkena lino*, often also called *Bissu Eka* or *calabai dewatae*, namely those who become *calabai* because of nature or God's provisions. Since they were born, they were destined to be physically male, have a male sex, but have female souls. This does not necessarily mean they are born with double sex (hermaphrodites). Second, *calabai kedo-kedonami*, namely those who are born as men, but in the process of growing up they associate with *calabai* and end up imitating *calabai* behavior. This imitation process could be just a lifestyle or economic motive. Third, *paccalabai*, refers to *calabai* who are likened to both men and women at the same time. Lathief noted that in the district of Segeri-Pangkep, they were called AC/DC or like a razor blade with two sharp edges (2004).

Even though the majority of *Bissu* originate from *calabai tungkena lino*, in ritual events, especially when they dance the mystical *sere bissu* and *maggirik* dances, their characteristics as male, female, *calabai* and *calalai* appear alternately. One female *Bissu*, (*Bissu core-core*) named Mak Temmi, explained that in the *sere bissu* dance performance a *Bissu's* identity as metagender is displayed. Thus, in her case, the dance movements sometimes display the characteristics of *uruwane*, at certain times *makkunrai*, and at other times those of *calalai*.

The process of a *calalai* or *calabai* becoming *Bissu* is hard to achieve. They have to go through the '*makanre guru*' process, which involves an apprenticeship to join the senior *Bissu* (*Bissu dewata*). *Bissu* Juleha explained that a *calabai* who is going to *makanre guru* must first receive a magical summons from an *arajang* (heirloom object) which is usually obtained through dreams. The magical summons will be conveyed to the Puang Matoa (the leader of the *Bissu*) and the Puang Lolo (deputy leader of the *Bissu*). After that, they will *makanre guru* (learn from an experienced *Bissu*) and are called *Ana Bissu*. *Ana Bissu* means a *Bissu* who is still in the process of learning from an experienced *Bissu*. They will join senior *Bissu* and learn various sacred ways ranging from Bugis customs, ritual procedures, and the ancient Bugis language of *To Rilangi* (ritual language). The *guru makanre* process can take a long time, it can also be short, depending on the *pammaseña dewatae* (almighty blessing). The process is considered sufficient when the person concerned has begun to understand the sacred knowledge and can resist the temptation of worldly excitement, including controlling sexual desires and no longer dressing up excessively (Syamsurijal, 2010).

Once a *calabai* is deemed to have received sufficient understanding of the *makanre guru* process he will be delivered into a *Bissu* through a sacred ceremony called *irebba*. Before the ritual begins, the *calabai* to be inaugurated is told to fast for 40 days

or sometimes they are told to only eat fruit. After that, the *calabai* who will be initiated, will make a *mattinja* (vow) which will later be fulfilled during the *irebba* ceremony. The *calabai* is washed and shrouded like a corpse. He is then laid to rest in a room in an unconscious state, neither eating nor drinking. The length of time to be 'buried' depends on their *feces* (vow), but usually three nights. Just above the head of the prone initiand hangs a jar filled with water, and the roof of the house above is open directly to the sky. On the third day, the *calabai* who was *diirebba*, is revived (*dipateddu*). The Puang Matoa recites spells to call back his soul which had drifted away (*pakkurru sumange*). As the spells are finished being recited, the urn above their head is broken with a spear. The water in the jar spills out and wets the *calabai* who regains consciousness, and the *irebba* ritual ceremony is complete. The *calabai* is now considered to have officially become *Bissu*. He/she is then allowed to wear *Bissu* clothing. During the *irebba* process, the drum continues to be beaten. According to the explanations of Bissu Eka and Bissu Lolo Puang Upe, the sound of the drum is the only thing that can be heard faintly by the initiand in *irebba*. It is this sound of the drum that connects him with the human world (Syamsurijal, 2010).

In society, *Bissu* are considered part of the queer community as described by Spargo (2009). They are respected for the difference and uniqueness of their gender identity, which is not limited to labels such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. As noted by Davies (2010) in her ethnographic research amongst the Bugis, *Bissu* communities themselves reject the imposition of these categories. Across Indonesia there has been a lack of understanding in the use of terms such as lesbian or gay, which have been seen as derogatory or as associating identities with undesirable stereotypes (Murray, 1999). In more recent years, due to support from various organizations, this situation is somewhat changing and many individuals are starting to feel more comfortable in openly expressing their queer identities (Blackwood, 2005a; 2005b). Nevertheless, among the local Bugis communities in South Sulawesi, where there are distinctive queer gender variations, the LGBT concept is not well known. Even though the Bugis do not use the term LGBT, they still respect gender diversity and understand the existence of the *Bissu* and their importance in carrying out various traditional Bugis rituals. *Bissu* are considered the link between society and the spiritual world through their unique queer identity (Ahmed, 2020; Fonseca, 2024).

However, it is important to note that the use of the term queer in the *Bissu* context does not indicate a rejection of essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality. Queer is often understood as a theory that challenges the essentialism of sexuality and encourages acknowledgment of the diversity of sexual orientations (Ahmed, 2020; Fonseca, 2024). Yet, *Bissu* still believe that individuals with a particular gender identity can have a normative sexual orientation. They also do not oppose the institution of marriage in Islam which is limited to relationships between men and women. When Bugis society recognized only heterosexual marriage as valid, the

Bissu raised no objection. On the contrary, they support it in a way that they consider appropriate while still maintaining the uniqueness of their sexuality that is different from heterosexuals and carrying out their role as *Bissu calabai* or *Bissu calalai* in society.

Origin Story and History of the Bissu

The *Bissu* is an important figure in the origin story of Bugis society and are often mentioned in the *La Galigo* (Kern, 1989; Toa, 1995). The *Lontara* (manuscript) *La Galigo* is considered the source of knowledge relating to the cosmology, myths, history, culture, and daily life of the Bugis people. In the myth of the beginning of life in the world, a *Bissu* is sent down to earth to help Batara Guru, the deity who came from heaven to earth to become the first man. The Buginese universe consists of three levels: *Botting Langiq* (Upperworld), *Lino* (Middleworld), and *Boriq Liu* (Underworld). *Bissu* came from *Botting Langiq*, the world of the Gods to earth and are thus Indigenous people.

According to the *La Galigo* origin story, *Lino* (the Middleworld) was uninhabited, without a single creature. As described in the *Lontara La Galigo*: "*kipemmaga lo'bang linoe, bere-bere tenglolo tona, manu-manu teluttu tona* [We found the earth in a state of emptiness, not even an ant crawling. Not a single bird soaring in the sky]" (Toa, 1995). To fill the *i* (world), Patotoqé (the supreme God) sent his son Batara Guru who descended from *Botting Langiq* (the Upperworld) to the land of Luwu. He was then met by the princess Wé Nyiliq Timoq from *Boriq Liu* (the Underworld), who arose from the ocean. She is also called To Tompoqé ri Busa Empong—she who emerged from the foam of the waves (Andaya, 2018; Imran, 2019). They marry and have progeny.

Even though the earth is now inhabited by humans, nature is still unstable; storms are rampant and lightning is striking. Patotoqé then sends *Bissu* from the Upperworld to complete the Middleworld. *Bissu*, who are considered the embodiment of all genders, perfect life in the world. Furthermore, *Bissu* will be the link between humans inhabiting earthly *Lino* and the Gods in *Botting Langiq* (heaven). After the arrival of the *Bissu*, storms subside, lightning no longer strikes, and *Lino* becomes calm. As explained in the *La Galigo*:

At midday it was pitch black, typhoons and storms descended. Puang Matowa Bissu from Lae-Lae, We Salareng and We Apanglangi, the head of the *bissu* from Ware and Luwu went down with his equipment, the typhoon and storm subsided. (Kern, 1989, p. 34)

After the *La Galigo* era (marking the origin story of the earth), the history of the *Bissu* continues into the era of the Pre-Islamic Kingdoms. In every kingdom and even at the

ranreng level (traditional areas) there must be a *Bissu* present as a spiritual leader. *Bissu* is the link between Patotoqé (the supreme God) and earthly humans. *Bissu* are the ones who can speak the sacred Bugis *To Rilangi* language to communicate with the Gods. This language is not understood by the ordinary people.

Bissu stories of the Ancient Luwu Kingdom (the first kingdom) were mostly told in the early period during the reign of Sawerigading, the son of Batara Guru and Wé Nyiliq Timoq. Sawerigading himself had a child named La Galigo, whose name eventually became the title of the *Lontara* (manuscript) *La Galigo*.¹

From the Luwu Kingdom, *Bissu* spread out to become important figures in the Bone Kingdom, Wajo Kingdom and Soppeng Kingdom. In the Segeri Kingdom, the existence of *Bissu* is closely related to the *Bissu* of the Bone Kingdom, as the *Bissu* in Segeri originally came from Bone (Syamsurijal et al., 2022). There is a story that describes this migration and simultaneously explains the importance of the *Bissu* as protectors of the sacred heirlooms. According to Puang Lolo Upe, it started with the disappearance of the *rakkala dewata* (God plow) which was an *arajang* (royal heirloom) in the Kingdom of Bone. The plow was discovered by La Tenri Sessu, a prince of the Luwu Kingdom, son of We Tenri Leleang or the 23rd Sultanah Aisyiah Pajung ri Luwu. The prince was expelled from Luwu because he was naughty and liked to go on rampages to test his supernatural powers. As prince La Tenri Sessu was sailing the seas around Sulawesi a plow-shaped piece of wood was suddenly pushed up by the waves onto the boat. The plow was thrown back into the sea, but again the waves pushed it back onto the prince's boat. This happened several times. The exiled prince realized that this object was important. He had once dreamt of receiving an heirloom object, perhaps that is what it was. Many years later La Tenri Sessu became king of the Segeri Kingdom (1805-1835) and *rakkala* became his royal heirloom (Lathief, 2004; Syamsurijal, 2020).

During the time of La Tenri Sessu's reign, the king of Bone—whose sacred heirlooms had disappeared—sent 40 *Bissu*, led by Sanro Lauba, to Segeri to look for the heirloom. The forty *Bissu* found the *rakkala*. However, it was not easy to seize from the Kingdom. It was also impossible for the *Bissu* to return home empty-handed because the king of Bone had warned: "If you don't find the heirlooms, your life is at

¹ The *Lontara* (manuscript) *La Galigo* is the longest literary work in the world and was registered in the UNESCO Memory of the World in 2011. Originally in the form of oral myth from the 14th century Luwu Kingdom, the manuscript was inscribed in the 19th century on *lontar* (palm leaf) in the form of poetic pentameter verses in traditional ritual language. It has since gained prominence as an historical document and almanac of Bugis daily life. Today, only a few *Bissu* remain who can read the sacred script. However, there has been a revival of the epic. In 2004 the origin story chapter was adapted to music-theatre work called *I La Galigo* by Robert Wilson and has toured internationally as well as in Indonesia. *Bissu* Puang Matoa Saidi performed in one of the stage productions.

stake." La Tenri Sessu offered for the *Bissu* to stay in Segeri, guard and care for the heirlooms, and lead the rituals related to them. This was the beginning of the tradition of the *Bissu Patappuloe* (the Forty *Bissu*) who have become known as the keepers of the heirlooms, including the *rakkala* (sacred plow) (Syamsurijal & Mabur, 2010).

The main accounts of the history of the *Bissu* come from mythico-stories; there is, unfortunately, a dearth of accounts to be found in the colonial records. One notable exception, however, is the early description of *Bissu* written by Antonio de Veiva, a Portuguese trader-missionary who made several visits to the Bugis Kingdoms of South Sulawesi in the 16th century. On a visit to the kingdom of Siang, he noted that the *Bissu* was a respected Bugis spiritualist and a priest to royalty (Andaya, 2004; 2018; Baker, 2005). From this colonial account it becomes evident that the *Bissu* were important advisors and spiritual leaders during the era of the Bugis kingdoms.

Bissu as Guardians of Heirlooms and Ancestral Traditions

Bissu as spiritual leaders in the time of the Bugis Kingdoms connected *Lino* (earth) and *Botting Langiq* (heaven) through various rituals. The Puang Matoa (leader of the *Bissu*), performed daily rituals, including, *maddenari* (ritual for the last third of the night until dawn), *matanre asso* (ritual when the sun begins to rise), *metengnga asso* (midday ritual), *mallabu asso* (dusk ritual) and *matengnga benni* (evening ritual).

Thus, the existence of *Bissu* in the world, and the practice of their rituals, is spiritual and religious. As noted by Makkulau (2007) *Bissu* are involved in ancient religious traditions. Likewise, Hamonic (1977) pointed out that the traditions practiced by the *Bissu* were none other than the traditions of the ancient Bugis religion. The worship rituals carried out by the *Bissu* in Bugis society are called *massompa*, that is, the ceremonial practice of ancestral heritage (Lathief, 2021b). Through their role, the *Bissu* became important figures in both the royal courts and general society. They were not only welcome, but needed.

In the royal courts, *Bissu* held several important roles. They were tutors to the princes, teaching them palace protocols, customs, and how to wear royal clothes. The *Bissu* were also tasked with guarding and caring for royal heirlooms or magical heirlooms handed down by the Gods. Sacred heirlooms (*arajang*) stored in the *Bola Arajang* (heirloom house) include spears, keris (sacred Indo-Malay dagger with a wavy blade), and swords, as well as divine plows. These heirlooms were guarded by the *Bissu* who are considered to have the ability to care for items containing mystical elements (Nur lman et al., 2021). *Bissu* would also regularly perform rituals related to the various *arajang*, including the *mallangi arajang* (washing the *arajang*), or *mattompang arajang* (cleaning the *arajang*) ceremonies. These ceremonies are usually held once year, but may additionally be enacted on occasions of a disease outbreak or during a long

drought. There is also the *maccera arajang* ceremony, which entails slaughtering certain animals and anointing their blood on the *arajang* during the ceremony of the *mattoana arajang* (offerings to *arajang*) (Lathief, 2021a).

In everyday Bugis society, *Bissu* are considered *sanro*, shaman who can treat illnesses. Apart from treating physical ailments, they can also treat sexual problems. According to Bissu Eka, they previously helped mothers who had difficulties during childbirth. Spells cast on water could help make the birth easier. In terms of shamanism, it is the *Bissu*'s hermaphroditic gender (most *Bissu* are not androgynous, however, they are assumed to be), or their queer status, which gives them their power (Purday, 2013). This role as shaman still exists today (except for assisting mother's during labor). The *Bissu* shamanic practice usually involves the performance of certain rituals to determine what a person's illness is.

Bissu also led various community ceremonies, for example the *Mattola Bala* (Tolak Bala) prayer, *Mapaleppa Tinja* (votive fulfillment ritual), life cycle rituals, and rituals related to agriculture. There are two major ceremonies related to agriculture in which *Bissu* play an important role, the *mappalili* (a ceremony before planting rice) and the *mappadandang* or *mappaddekko ritual* (a ceremony after the rice harvest). These ancient agricultural ceremonies are still carried out today in several Bugis communities, although they are under threat of disappearing. The *mappadandang* is held after the harvest in several Bugis areas, for example Maros, Pangkep, Pinrang and Sidrap. However, sometimes it is not held, and sometimes it doesn't involve *Bissu*. The *mappalili* planting rice ritual is still routinely held every year in December, especially in the sub-district of Segeri. This ceremony, which is held over three consecutive days, is organized and led by *Bissu*.

Through observation of these various ceremonies, it becomes evident that the Bugis people clearly respect the various genders. Even though the leader is *Bissu*, the other genders of *uruwane*, *makkunrai*, *calabai* and *calalai* each have equally important roles. This fact confirms both Ismoyo (2020) and Đorđević's (2022) views that in Bugis society, diverse gender identities are not opposed to each other; rather, they are interconnected and their functions in society are carried out based on the mutually supportive relationship between one gender and the others. This point was reflected in a *mappalili* (preparation for rice planting) ritual witnessed in December 2022. *Bissu* were involved in leading the ceremony helped by *calabai*, while *uruwane* (men) and *makkunrai* (women) also took part in the ritual process. The ritual was held for three nights in a row, and well attended by many people. On the first day, the *maleko wae* ceremony was carried out. This ritual involves taking water from an old well. At the well, offerings must be made. The *Bissu* lead by chanting mantras, which are accompanied by the beating of the drums by the *uruwane* (men), while the *calabai* present the offerings, which are brought by the *makkunrai* (women) (Syamsurijal et

al., 2022). On the second day, the *matteddu arajang* ritual (awakening the heirloom) is performed. This process begins with recitation of the appropriate mantra while *madupa* (reading incense), then the *rakkala* (heirloom plow) is anointed with fragrant oil, and *rijempoi* (bathed). Once this process is complete, the *rakkala* is then laid down (*niparebba*). During this entire process *Bissu* lead the ritual while the *calabai*, *calalai*, *uruwane* (men), and *makkunrai* (women), are the supporters of the ritual elements. *Calabai* (who are preparing to become *Bissu*), act as a manager who organizes the preparations and equipment for the event. However, of the entire series of ceremonies, the one that residents and guests are most interested in is the third night ritual which features the *sere Bissu* and *maggirik* dances in which *Bissu* express all genders. Those attending this particular event included local residents as well as government officials and local religious figures. They were particularly enthusiastic about watching *Bissu* and *calabai* perform the *maggirik* dance. This dance is also called *maggirik dewata*, because it is part of the sacred ritual. *Bissu* dance holding a *keris* (Indo-Malay dagger) with which they ritualistically stab parts of their own body. However, the *keris* cannot cut into their skin. Witnessing this, all the guests, including religious and government figures, were amazed (Syamsurijal et al., 2022).

Today, *Bissu* are still located in four districts of the Bugis regions of South Sulawesi: Soppeng, Wajo, Bone, and Pangkajene Kepulauan (Pangkep), including the sub-district of Segeri (Segeri-Pangkep). The *Bissu* continue to protect the sacred heirlooms and to practice rituals to ensure, health, harmony, and abundance in rice harvests. However, the very existence of the *Bissu* and their rituals, came under grave threat with the rise of Islam in the Bugis Kingdoms, the dismantling of the Ancient Kingdoms, and the modernization policies of the Republic of Indonesia.

Bissu Persecution—Religion and Republic

With the arrival of Islam in the Bugis Kingdoms, the roles of *Bissu* began to change. In some cases, the *Bissu*'s function as spiritual leader was taken over by the *Puang Kali* (*qadi*), in the role of legal-religious organizer in Islamic society. Lathief (2021b) stated that several functions of the *Bissu* and *calabai* in life cycle ceremonies were taken over by the *Puang Kali* who led the prayers at such celebratory events. In the early stages of Islamization there was still space given to the *Bissu*, however, the position of the *Bissu* came under greater scrutiny, and later, some Islamic groups would not grant *Bissu* a place in the community because they were considered to violate nature (by being neither man nor woman) and because they still carried out ancestral rituals (*massompa*), which were considered to contain elements of idolatry.

The kingdom era ended as the modern Indonesian state came into power. In 1950, Sukarno, proclaimed the unitary Republic of Indonesia, and became its President.

Seven years later, in 1957, Bugis royal courts were formally disbanded ending the Ancient Kingdoms.

With the ending of the kingdoms, and as Indonesia became a nation state, the *Bissu* came under increasing pressure, particularly from puritan religious groups. Even though *Bissu* had converted to Islam, they were often accused of being heretical because they maintained their ancestral traditions and rituals, and because they do not reflect mainstream binary gender identities (Imran, 2019; Suheri et al., 2021).

In the modern history of the *Bissu* two waves of violence have made the most lasting impression. The first was carried out by the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic Army) (DI/TII) between 1955-1965. The DI/TII were a radical Islamic group of army rebels engaged in guerrilla warfare. The group opposed both Indigenous communities, as well as transgender and gender diverse groups. As part of their operations, they instigated *rikelluna bissu*, in which all *Bissu* were forced to shave their hair, indicating they were reduced to one gender—male. At the same time, *Bissu* were had to abandon various traditional rituals, and the *Bola Arajang* (the sacred heirloom house) was burned down. Many *Bissu* were massacred. Puang Matoa Saidi stated that at that time many *Bissu* and *calabai* were killed and most of them fled into the forest and hid in caves. After the DI/TII rebellion was extinguished, another form of persecution arose in the form of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Although the communist party did not carry out killings, they were adamant that the *Bissu* should become one-sex, that is, male (Lathief, 2004, 2005, 2021; Syamsurijal, 2009).

The second major violent event was when military and Islamic youth organizations launched *Operasi Mappatoba* (repentance operation) between 1965-1966. This operation was part of the New Order government under the regime of Suharto, who became the second president of the Republic of Indonesia in 1966. This operation targeted all traditional communities or groups that maintained ancestral teachings and rituals. The movement was part of the cleansing of Indigenous communities from (suspected) elements of communism. At that time *Bissu* were forced to abandon all beliefs and rituals inherited from their ancestors. Any *Bissu* who persisted in carrying out the teachings of their ancestors, were deemed irreligious (Lathief, 2004, 2005, 2021; Syamsurijal, 2009). Across Indonesia, the government and military forced local Indigenous communities to abandon animist beliefs and to choose one religion from five recognized state religions (Ricklefs, 2012a; 2012b).

Bissu and LGBTQ people continue to be persecuted by specific religious communities in Indonesia, especially conservative Islamic groups, because their non-binary gender is considered an act that violates both nature and the nation's morals. Groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front, or Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), prior to their disbanding in 2017, often campaigned that LGBTQ had grown into a movement that deliberately

attacked heterosexual culture in society (Tajib & Ferdiansyah 2022; Sarbini & Bintang P. Has, 2019) This rejection of LGBTQ people in Indonesia reflects a situation that Rodríguez and Murtagh (2022) call a 'moral panic'. That is, the emergence of conservative groups who campaign against the perceived dangers of LGBTQ people in the belief that they threaten moral values and they will lead to the moral collapse of society.

Conservative Islamic groups have targeted the LGBTQ community across Indonesia. Throughout 2017, for example, as many as 973 LGBTQ people experienced stigma, discrimination, and violence, based on sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. The largest number of victims came from the transgender group, with 715 people reporting cases, followed by gay males, with 225 people reporting, and the lesbian group with 29 women reporting (Zakiah, 2018). As many LGBTQ people prefer to hide their identity rather than suffer persecution, crimes are under-reported and thus the above numbers are far lower than actual cases. In South Sulawesi, rejection of LGBTQ people emerged from conservative Islamic circles, such as the Forum Umat Islam (FUI). The group disrupted a 'waria festival'² in Soppeng in 2017, and another in Bone in 2018 (Triadi, 2020). In 2022, a commemoration of the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOBIT) was planned by the Sehati Community,³ but was rejected by religious organizations and the government. In the same year, the *Bissu* were not invited to be involved in the traditional ceremony to commemorate the birthday of Bone district, one of the ancient Bugis areas. In the years 2022-2023, numerous draft regional regulations (*ranperda*) emerged across Indonesia that rejected LGBTQ people. One of the regions which drafted an anti-LGBTQ regulation was Makassar, the capital city of the province of South Sulawesi, and the homeland of Bugis society (Puspitasari, 2019; Syamsurijal et al., 2023).

The above incidents indicate that an understanding of *Bissu* as Indigenous queer is increasingly important, for the above rejections contradict the fact that this group has been accepted in Indonesian culture since time immemorial. In Bugis society, *Bissu* are queer Indigenous individuals who have an important position in the history of this tribe. Still today, the *Bissu* is an important figure in traditional ceremonies of the Bugis community, especially those related to agricultural rituals. The *Bissu* leads agricultural ceremonies, both before planting rice (*mappalili*) and after planting rice (*mappaddekko/mappadendang*). Still today, *Bissu* are called upon in the arranging of marriages of kings and guardian families and they are the caretakers of the traditional heirlooms (*arajang*). Because of their strong position in the local customs and traditional systems in Bugis society, even though they have repeatedly experienced pressure from puritan religious groups (including in the form of persecution and cultural

² Gay festival. The term *waria* is literally from *wanita-pria* (woman-man), but often translates as 'shemale'.

³ Community of one heart (*sehati*), an NGO that focuses on LGBT rights in Makassar, South Sulawesi.

genocide), the *Bissu* have not been eliminated. Within Bugis society, *Bissu*, as Indigenous queer, are still respected and are considered the guardians of the ancient Bugis traditions, including the important rituals that are necessary to ensure a bountiful rice harvest, which remains the major agricultural practice of the Bugis tropical region.

Bissu and the Revival of Tropical Agriculture

South Sulawesi's tropical monsoon climate has made the Bugis districts fertile wet-rice growing lands. Archaeological excavations at the earliest palace site in South Sulawesi recovered rice husks which demonstrate that rice cultivation was central to the origin and development of the Bugis Kingdoms after the 13th century (Bulbeck & Caldwell, 2008).

The four remaining Bugis districts of Soppeng, Wajo, Bone, and Segeri-Pangkep have a characteristic wet tropical climate. These areas have two seasons: the rainy and the dry. *Sawah* (wet-rice field) agriculture was well developed in these areas in tune with the seasons of the tropical climate. As Pelras (1996) notes, the Bugis people are traditionally farmers rather than fishermen. Furthermore, the rituals and offering ceremonies performed by the community are closely related to rice agriculture. In turn, *Bissu* have always played an important role as ancient priests in the rituals associated with rice cultivation.

In the 1960s, the Republic of Indonesia experience serious rice shortages across the archipelago, and was forced to import rice to feed its large population. Indonesia became a major rice importing country. The government, in an effort to achieve rice self-sufficiency, implemented Green Revolution technologies and techniques through the nationwide promotion of modern rice agricultural practices, including in the province of South Sulawesi.

The Green Revolution, which became the agricultural policy of the New Order government, contributed to the disintegration of the sacred traditions that had been maintained by *Bissu*—and thus of an important role of *Bissu* in Bugis society. The Green Revolution was developed in Indonesia for wet-rice (*sawah*) production under the rubric *Panca Usaha Tani* (five farming efforts), namely: (1) the use of high yielding rice varieties, (2) the use of inorganic chemical fertilizers, (3) the use of synthetic pesticides, (4) the improvement of irrigation, and (5) improvement of rice planting methods. This program was then developed in the 1960-1970s with a mass intensification process (Nugroho, 2018). With this program, the rice seeds of traditional farmers, were replaced with 'superior' rice seeds, and thus the indigenous seeds used by South Sulawesi farmers that had been purified by various ceremonies, were abandoned. One such ritual was the *maddoja bine* for the storing of rice seeds, which will later also become seeds for planting. In this ritual, the *sureq* (rhythmic script)

sangiang Sri (the goddess of rice) and *meow palo karallae* (three-colored cat friend of Dewi Sri) are usually recited. This *sureq* comes from part I of the *Lontara La Galigo*. This ritual disappeared as indigenous rice seeds were replaced by new, high yield, varieties. The Green Revolution also eradicated the traditions of *mappalili* (ceremony to prepare planting rice) and the *mappadendang* (the rice harvest ritual). Both ceremonies were unnecessary to modern agriculture. Puritan religious figures supported the demise of the traditional rice production as such rituals were considered to encourage the Bugis community to remain polytheists.

The implementation of the Green Revolution succeeded in making Indonesia a rice surplus in 1984-1989, but at the same time it had a detrimental impact on farmers and the environment (Nugroho, 2018). Seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers had to be purchased, there was a lack of variety of rice which led to large outbreaks of pests across monocultural rice crops, pesticide spray triggered the emergence of new pests, and the use of inorganic fertilizers made the soil infertile. Farmers began to see and report the detrimental impact of the Green Revolution across the tropical archipelago of Indonesia. For instance, in Bali, the famous *subak* (water irrigation) system and the ancient rice fields were in collapse (see Lansing, 1995). The Balinese believed this was due to new technological pattern of rice farming which was out of sync with the ancient calendar set by the temple priests and the worship of the rice goddess, Dewi Sri. They returned to their Indigenous traditions. Similarly, after an initial rice surplus, farmers in Segeri and several other districts in South Sulawesi began to experience crop failures. They believed this happened because the *mappalili* and *mappadendang* traditions and rituals were no longer carried out. They called upon the *Bissu* in order to rectify their ancient agricultural rituals. Today they combine traditional and modern rice planting processes.

Here the link between the tropical monsoon climate, *sawah* wet-rice agriculture, and the *Bissu* as keepers of the sacred traditions—including *maddoja bine* (blessing rice seeds), the *mappalili* and *mappadendang* rituals for rice planting and harvest, rituals for the *rakkala* (the heirloom plow), and recitation of the sacred *sureq* for the rice goddess Dewi Sri—become of primary importance. The *Bissu* as tropical Indigenous queer spiritual leaders are necessary to the survival of Bugis society.

Bissu Cultural Survival

Although the *Bissu* resumed various ancestral traditions, they understood that the conditions in Indonesia, and therefore their roles in society, were now different. In order to be socially accepted as queer and the keepers of traditions, *Bissu* had to adapt. Puang Matoa Saidi said that it was impossible for them to reject developments, including Islamic teachings, because they too are Muslim: "*Iamanenna Bissue selleng, tapi sellenna selleng ugi, tennia selleng ara*" [Bissu is all Islamic, but Islam is Bugis

Islam, not Arabic Islam] (Syamsurijal, 2009, p. 407). This statement shows that *Bissu* do not reject Islam or the modern Indonesian nation, but at the same time will not abandon tradition. What they will do is compromise (Imran, 2019; Nurfadillah, 2019; Syamsurijal, 2009). In their position as *calabai*, which is always stigmatized by puritan Islamic groups, they do not take legal action (which is the action sought by the LGBT community); instead, they try to show that they are victims of God's nature. That is why *Bissu* call themselves *calabai tungkena lino* (*calabai* by birth/*calabai* by nature—that is, by God's will). They seek to show that as *calabai tungkena lino*, their orientation is to maintain ancient Bugis traditions and spirituality (Hamonik, 1977; Makkulau, 2007).

Religious adaption by the *Bissu* involves harmonizing the traditional rituals that they carry out with the values of Islam. *The masongka bala* ritual (rejecting evil), for example, is carried out by also including the village *ustaz* (religious teacher) or *qadi* (judicial administrator). The *Bissu* leads the traditional rituals, the *ustaz* or *qadi* leads the prayers and reading of the *barzanji* (recitation). *Bissu* have recreated the traditional Bugis rituals so that they meet Islamic teachings, and thus can be accepted in the wider society. Therefore, *Bissu* are instrumental in being 'cultural brokers' in the encounter between religion and tradition (see Geertz, 1960).

Bissu ritual practices that try to negotiate with Islam are not only visible in the form of rituals, but can also be seen in *Bissu's* appearance in these rituals. Lathief gives the example of a *malleppa tinja* (taking vows) ritual held by a haji in 1999. In this ritual the *Bissu* appeared in white clothes. A white turban wrapped around the head replaces the royal princess-style crown, and the clothes usually worn by royal princesses are replaced with white robes (Lathief, 2021a). They danced *maggirik* covered in shades of white that radiated Islamic magic.

Bissus' appearance in general public spaces has also changed. They began to frequently wear Muslim clothing. If in the past they always wore sarongs similar to those worn by women, now they occasionally wear skullcaps and turbans. Although, significantly, their hair is still long and their lips are often rouged. Davies (2007) notes that *calabai*, including *Bissu*, still want to appear feminine. Their bodies want to be seen as feminine. Some of them wear bras and stuff them to give the impression of breasts. They also wear eye shadow, use lipstick, and powder their cheeks. Of course, a *Bissu's* style and behavior remains feminine. They always present their feminine bodies politely, thus, when they leave the house, they wear modest sarongs and their heads are covered with some kind of headscarf or turban. Meanwhile, their sexual orientation towards members of the same sex is never flaunted in public. Iman et al. (2018) explain that *Bissu* and *calabai* show different personas in public (*front stage*) from personal tendencies behind the scene (*back stage*). *Calabai*, especially in Segeri, will not publicly display same-sex sexual tendencies. What appears to the public, is a

calabai who is hardworking and ready to help at every event. They even call themselves '*babunna papestae*' (waitresses at parties). The *calabai* do have male friends who accompany them every day, whom they call *toboto* or *kai* (male partner). However, out of respect for the culture of heteronormativity and Islamic teachings, they do not appear to society as lovers. The term *toboto* or *kai* from the word *lakkainna* (husband) only exists among themselves. In the view of the public, the men who accompany the *calabai* are not considered partners or lovers, but people who help with work that is usually done by men.

Adaption to the modern Indonesian state, includes abiding by government policies that make *Bissu* into tourism entertainment. As Bissu Eka said, they need government protection and therefore cannot challenge such policies. But even so, Bissu Eka clarified, they create different performances for tourism. The *maggirik* dance, for example, which is performed in festivals and tourism events, is different from the *maggirik* dance in rituals. As Bissu Pajja confirmed: "We call it *maggirik mamata* when danced at festivals, while at ritual events it is called *maggirik dewata*" (Syamsurijal et al., 2022, p. 7). Thus, the Indonesian nation has become more accepting of the *Bissu*, however, this is mainly because they are considered to be attractive for tourism. In this case, the *Bissu* are legally commodified. The sacredness of the ceremonies carried out by *Bissu* is changed by packaging traditional performances with religious value into art that can be shown to tourists (Triadi, 2019). This adaptation has enabled *Bissu* to perform not only in South Sulawesi, but to also accept invitations to hold performances in other parts of the Indonesia archipelago and internationally (Makkulau, 2007). This has increased their recognition not only internationally and nationally, but also in their home districts.

Through their strategies of compromise and adaptation, *Bissu* and other *calabai*, particularly in Segeri and Bone, are relatively accepted by Bugis society. They are also more accepted as Indigenous queer people in Indonesia. Nevertheless, there remain some puritan Islamic groups that still strongly reject them.

Conclusion: Tropical Indigenous Queering

This article discusses the important role of Indigenous queer groups in preserving Indonesian traditions and their contribution to existing concepts of queerness. It highlights the unique perspectives and contributions that *Bissu* bring to Bugis society, and challenges the notion that queer communities are incompatible with mainstream cultural values. The arrival of Islam and the rise of Indonesian nation have brought many changes and challenges for the *Bissu*. Facing these challenges, they strategized through two methods. Firstly, in order to gain acceptance in Islam they adapt their clothing to symbolically dress like Islamic figures in their ritual practices. Secondly, in

order to maintain government protection, they adapt their performances for tourism purposes.

This study contributes to tropical queer studies in two ways. Firstly, practically, the findings of this study can be used by LGBTQ groups in other regions to consider the methods used by *Bissu* to gain social recognition. Secondly, theoretically, this study contributes to expanding and reworking existing concepts of queerness, connecting them with Indigenous queer, and with the queer tropics. The *Bissu* thus play an important role in revitalizing and expanding the concepts of gender and sexuality and in showing how Indigenous queerness is connected with ancestral cultural knowledge.

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