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**How Economy Matters to Indigenous Identity of *Bissu*,
Transgender Priests of South Sulawesi, Indonesia**

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How Economy Matters to Indigenous Identity of *Bissu*, Transgender Priests of South Sulawesi, Indonesia¹

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the *bissu*, the transgender priests of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, the article explicates the emergent indigenous transgender identity within the contemporary artistic and economic practices. The *bissu*'s interactions with the local clients, the state and global culture industry, as well as their representations on mass media and performing arts demonstrate that the *bissu* transgender priesthood serves as a trope of indigeneity, the trope mediated by the modern artistic constellation of estrangement and orchestrated by the colonial, capitalist and multiculturalist desire for an exotic and sovereign traditional community. Yet, any attempt to sustain the exotic and sovereignty of the *bissu* fails to discern the contradictions in the mediated representations. The contradictions emerge because the transgender norm the *bissu* provoke – the religious piety they perform – remains constrained by the local Islamic heterosexual traditions. The indigeneity does not delineate the *bissu* as a sovereign traditional community, instead it provides a discursive and social space where the *bissu* exists outside of the normative territory of the state, Islam and heterosexuality. It emerges within economic networks that permit interventions and negotiations. It subverts the essentialist and monolithic representation of indigenous people centered on the imagined sovereign territory.

¹ This article will not be polished and publishable without the help and advice from Sylvia Tiwon, Associate Professor of SSEAS at UC Berkeley and my dissertation committee chair.

The research projects in South East Asia (SEA) generally explore what they imagine as authentic local cultural practices. At the core of such projects, however, rests a comparative analysis with the West as the point of reference.² Such analysis is founded on binary oppositions: the West and the East, modernity and tradition, global and local, authentic and hybrid.

The research on transgender in Indonesia, and SEA generally, is aimed at postulating alternative interpretive frames, breaking away from binary oppositions.³ The researchers can be classified mainly into two groups.⁴ The first group of scholars is those who explore transvestite figures in Indonesian folk cultures such as *Warog-Gemblak* of Java,⁵ *Nganjuk* of South Kalimantan,⁶ and *Bissu* of South Sulawesi.⁷ *Warog - Gemblak* is a Javanese folk dance depicting spiritual, erotic (homosexual) and companionate relationship between *Warog* (prince) and *Gemblak* (transgender male). *Nganjuk* shamans are viewed to embody sacred androgynies. *Bissu* are popularly defined as transgender ritual specialists. In exploring the complexity of the local transgender identities, the scholars deploy local narratives and normative terms. While rejecting the popular perception that they engage in homosexual relationship by arguing that *Gemblak* provides companionship during *Warog's* exile, *Warog-Gemblak* dancers perform erotic gestures such as petting and kissing.⁸ A.L. Tsing describes that *Nganjuk* shamans view themselves as the embodiment of neither male nor female but a divine being.⁹ Matthew Kennedy, H.Th. Chabot, Leonard Andaya, Halilintar Lathief, and Sharyn Graham Davies define *bissu* as transgender priests.¹⁰ They emphasize different aspects of the *bissu* cultural practices. Kennedy accentuates the symbolic meanings and transgender markers of the *bissu* ritual costumes. Chabot asserts that *bissu* is a ritual role performed by men, women, and transgender *celibates*. Andaya, Lathief, and Davies explore *bissu* transgender performances in relation to local spiritual practices and myths.

² Ara Wilson, "Intersections: Queering Asian," *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, no. 14 (November 2006), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html>.

³ Rosalind C. Morris, "All Made Up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 3; Wilson, "Intersections: Queering Asian."

⁴ Morris, "All Made Up"; Wilson, "Intersections: Queering Asian"; Tom Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36 (2007): 17–35.

⁵ Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, "Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis," *New York*, 1942, 17–92; Margaret J. Kartomi, "Performance, Music and Meaning of Reyog Ponorogo," *Indonesia*, no. 22 (1976): 85–130.

⁶ Bateson and Mead, "Balinese Character"; Kartomi, "Performance, Music and Meaning of Reyog Ponorogo."

⁷ Halilintar Lathief, *Bissu: Pergulatan Dan Peranannya Di Masyarakat Bugis [Bissu: Their Struggle and Role in the Buginese Society]* (Depok: Desantara, 2004); Sharyn Graham Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders Among Bugis in Indonesia*, 1st ed. (Wadsworth Publishing, 2006).

⁸ Josko Petkovic, "Waiting for Karila: Bending Time, Theory and Gender in Java and Bali (With Reflections for a Documentary Treatment)," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no. 2 (1999), <http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/11668/>.

⁹ A. L. Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Matthew Kennedy, "Clothing, Gender, and Ritual Transvestism: The Bissu of Sulawesi," *Men's Studies* 2, no. 1 (August 1993): 1–13; H. Th. Chabot, *Kinship, Status and Gender in South Celebes* (Nederland: KITLV Press, 1996); Leonard Andaya, "The Bissu: A Study of a Third Gender in Indonesia," in *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Barbara Watson Andaya (Hawai'i: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, 2000), 27–46; Lathief, *Bissu*; Davies, *Challenging Gender Norms*.

The second group of scholars is those who explore the complexity of transgender practices under the rubric of diversity and difference.¹¹ Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, they demonstrate the discursive limitation that transgender individuals have in articulating their transgender identities. The integration of ethnography and historiography they deploy constitutes an interesting analytical frame where ethnographic research is aimed at deciphering the meanings of cultural practices in the lacuna of the discourses and performances of transgender. In their discussions, the diversity and difference of Indonesian articulations of transgender are explored under the rubrics of domesticity, housewifery and citizenship. To explicate how the local transgender individuals embody their transgender identities, they scrutinize the local vernacular terms and local appropriations of Western terms in which the practices are registered such as *banci* (male transvestite), *gai* (gay), *lesbi* (lesbian) and *tomboi* (female transvestite). Dede Oetomo argues that *banci* cannot be translated as *lesbian* without underscoring *banci*'s masculine characters such as aggressiveness and playing the male sexual role as penetrators; they might be translated as bisexual in the West, even though *banci* are still portrayed as feminine individuals.¹² Tom Boellstorff explores the distinct position of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians under the lens of the national media practices. He argues that *gay* and *lesbian* subjectivity in Indonesia is constituted as a form of dubbing culture in which "gay and *lesbi* individuals [see] themselves as part of a global community, but also as authentically Indonesian."¹³ Blackwood explicates the complicated articulations of transgender identity, especially *tomboi*, prescribed by heterosexual norms such as Islamic piety, citizenship, and domesticity.¹⁴

In the dichotomies constructed by the mainstream research, transgender communities in Indonesia play a central position as epistemic subjects in the development of theories on transgender subjectivity in the West. Yet, besides the diversity of approaches that the scholars deploy, the operating assumption remains the same: Indigenous identity resides in rural areas and survives despite the forces of urbanization and secularization. Pious, mythical, traditional, self-sufficiency, and sovereignty are the characterizations that perpetuate in the discussion of the so-called traditional transgender communities. The constant interaction between the state, global institution and market economy fundamental to the development of indigenous communities in Indonesia remain under-discussed.

¹¹ Michael G. Peletz, "Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 2 (April 2006): 309-40; Boellstorff, "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology"; Sharyn Graham Davies, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves* (Routledge, 2010); Evelyn Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbi World* (Hawai'i: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

¹² Dede Oetomo, "Gender and Sexual Orientation in Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 269.

¹³ Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 85.

¹⁴ Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbi World*.

In theoretical context, the scholars such as V. N. Voloshinov, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, Georg Simmel and Karl Polanyi remind us the dialectical relationship between economy and culture, suggesting that economy is the basis of existence.¹⁵ In social and historical context, village has been central not only to the colonial imagination of indigenous people, but also to the colonial economy and politic.¹⁶ In the colonized Indonesia, the Dutch maintains the traditional social structure to regulate agricultural industry and to alienate Islam from indigenous life. In the contemporary debate on culture in Indonesia, we find the reminiscence of the Dutch colonial politics of tradition in which Islam is considered to be antagonistic to indigenous traditions. In this article I argue against the autonomy of village; I view village as a contact zone, to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's term,¹⁷ where we can trace how tradition, colonialism, Islam and modernity interact and constitute conditions of possibility for the emergence of dynamic – often incoherent – indigenous identity.

I find that the reason the locals and scholars relegate economy in their discussions on indigenous communities lies on the assumption that economy taints the authenticity of local culture. Commodification and authenticity, globalization and locality, modernity and traditionality, secularization and religion, and urban and rural space are among analytical structures are deployed to discuss indigenous identity. Yet, these dichotomies often blur in indigenous everyday life. By maintaining the boundaries, we fail to identify the changes of values and meanings of indigenous traditions, we fail to describe how indigenous people survive, and we fail to explicate the complexity of culture production. More importantly, we fail to acknowledge the agency the indigenous people perform and to give credits for their effort and struggle to live their lives in their own ways.

This article explores how the *bissu's* indigenous identity emerges in economic interactions. It argues that *economy is integral to the bissu's indigenous transgender position, for it constitutes a social and discursive space that enables the bissu to claim their cultural belonging in contemporary South Sulawesi*. This article does not explore how the *bissu* sustain their traditions, but how the *bissu's* economic interactions open up conditions of possibility of their survival, the conditions that have potential to decenter the contemporary debate on transgender indigenous identity in Southeast Asia.

Bissu in the contemporary narrative is identified as *adat* community. The scholars of *adat* use *adat* in reference to a system of norms and etiquettes rooted in local customs, and to a system of traditional law and governance that regulates the social interactions in indigenous communities.¹⁸ When the

¹⁵ V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, Studies in Language (New York: Seminar Press, 1973); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984); Raymond Williams, "Culture Is Ordinary," in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, ed. Robin Gable (New York: Verso, 1989), 3-18; Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), 174-85; Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, 2nd Beacon Paperback ed (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).

¹⁶ J. B. Kingston, "Manipulating Tradition: The State, Adat, Popular Protest, and Class Conflict in Colonial Lampung," *Indonesia*, no. 51 (1991): 21-45; Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham, England: Spokesman Books, 2011).

¹⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, 1991, 33-40.

¹⁸ Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, trans. Richard James Wilkinson (late E. J. Brill, 1906); Taufik Abdullah, "Adat and Islam: An Examination of Conflict in Minangkabau," *Indonesia*, no. 2 (October 1, 1966): 1-24, doi:10.2307/3350753; P. Burns, "The Myth of Adat," *J. Legal Pluralism & Unofficial L.* 28 (1989): 1-127; Kingston, "Manipulating Tradition: The State, Adat, Popular Protest, and Class Conflict in Colonial Lampung"; Jamie Davidson and David Henley, *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism* (Routledge, 2007).

activists of *adat* mention masyarakat *adat* (*adat* community) they refer to a community that has distinct culture, sovereign land, subsistence-economic orientation, and autonomous governance.¹⁹ Yet, historically *adat* in the colonial and the national politics has been deployed to legalize the state's practice of inequality and injustice against villagers.²⁰ *Adat* law is enforced to those considered local commoners, while the Dutch law is applied to the local elites living in the urban centers.²¹ In this state's policy, the rights of indigenous people as citizens were not recognized.²² The autonomy of *adat* that the Dutch colonial and Indonesian state grants has been beneficial more to the state than to the indigenous communities, for it legalizes the state's practice of unpaid labor and monopoly over the rural natural resources.²³ For this reason, it is not coincident that the establishment of *bissu* as an *adat* institution occurred in 1931 during the period of the Great Depression and in 1999 during the Asian economic crisis.

I contend that it remains problematic to discuss *bissu* in terms of *adat* for two reasons. The first reason is the *bissu* do not have *adat* land, therefore they do not share the problem of *adat* communities such as land loss and resettlement. The second reason is the narratives of self-sufficiency, subsistence economy, and resistance to globalization and capitalism are absent in the expressions of the *bissu* indigeneity.

What does then *adat* mean to the *bissu*? *Adat* to the *bissu*, which I demonstrate in this article, is a site of struggle for their survival. Within this understanding of *adat*, I investigate the emergent indigenous transgender identity of the *bissu*. The *bissu*'s interactions with the local clients, the state and global culture industry, as well as their representations on mass media and performing arts demonstrate that the *bissu* transgender priesthood serves as a trope of indigeneity, the trope mediated by the modern artistic constellation of estrangement and orchestrated by the colonial, capitalist and multiculturalist desire for an exotic and sovereign traditional community. The *adat* – the indigeneity – the *bissu* provoke does not delineate the *bissu* as a sovereign traditional community, instead it provides a discursive and social space where the *bissu* exists outside of the heterosexual normative territory of the state and Islam. It emerges within economic networks that permit interventions and negotiations. It subverts the essentialist and monolithic representation of indigenous people centered on the imagined sovereign territory.

BISSU: A COMMUNITY?

When I arrived in Segeri²⁴ on September 2012, I found the *bola arajang* (regalia house) was empty. Nika, a 38 year-old *bissu*, told me that it was the *bissu*'s leader who was supposed to receive me, but the position had been vacant, and no one was available to take over the responsibility. Later, I was told this was happened for two reasons: the position has been cursed – those who held the position

¹⁹ They refer to indigenous people defined by the United Nation, International Labor Organization, World Bank, and AMAN (the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago)

²⁰ Kingston, "Manipulating Tradition: The State, Adat, Popular Protest, and Class Conflict in Colonial Lampung."

²¹ Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Duke University Press, 2007), 51.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Segeri is a district of Pangkep regency located around 47 miles from Makassar, the capital city of South Sulawesi.

suffered and died; second; and the position after the death of their charismatic leader, Saidi in 2011, is no longer paid by the local government. The house used to be the *bissu*'s 'office' to receive visitors and researchers has been abandoned. Finding no body in the regalia house, Nika contacted each *bissu* via cell phone and explained my intention to meet them. From Nika's house, which was located close to the Segeri market, we drove about forty minutes to one hour to the other *bissu*'s houses. This was the average distance for each *bissu*'s house we visited in that day. The *bissu* live in the different districts: Pangkep, Labakkang, Ma'rang, Segeri and Mandalle. Most of the young *bissu* live in the suburbs close to the markets or inter-province roads, while the old *bissu* live in the areas isolated from the main settlements. To reach the old *bissu*'s houses, we have to walk on the narrow paths, with the rice and fish ponds on their sides. This pattern of settlement reminds me of Claire Holt's story when she drove from Makassar to Segeri to record the *bissu* ritual dance in 1938. She writes:

The carpet of young rice shoots seemed to continue and pass under the dwellings and between the piles. The whole looked more like a big parade of houses on a vast green field than a settlement. One could not, at any rate, call it a village. We never saw this peculiar way of planting houses in the middle of rice-fields before or since.²⁵

I share Holt's first impression during my first visit. The distance apparently creates a sense of lack of liveliness and social interaction among the *bissu*. Later, Nika told me that they (I use *they* in reference to transgender *bissu* – in Indonesian language all pronouns are gender-neutral) rarely met the other *bissu*. The *bissu* gathered in the regalia house only when they received invitations to perform and when they hold the rice planting ritual, *mappalili*. Kirma, a woman in her 60, told me that the reason why the *bissu* lived separately in the isolated areas was to hide from DI/TII.²⁶ Many of them were killed during the repentance operation (*operasi toba*), a witch-hunt operation led by Kahar Muzakkar, the leader of DI/TII in South Sulawesi, in 1960s.

PRIEST OF CRISIS

The *bissu* danced during the inauguration of Andi Mapanjoekhi, the king of Bone,²⁷ in 1931.²⁸ After 25 years of exclusion, *bissu* was recognized as a royal institution. Again, in 2001, the *bissu* danced in the inauguration of their new leader, Saidi.²⁹ It was the outcome of the long process of the recruitment of *bissu* new members from 1998. Saidi was officially appointed by the government and *adat* council of Segeri. The restorations of the *bissu*, occurring in different years, show similarities. They happened during economic crises: The Great Depression and Asian economic crisis. During those crises, the *bissu* were incorporated into the national economic recovery project in their position as a state bureaucratic apparatus and as culture (art) workers. This bureaucratic role is not

²⁵ Claire Holt, *Dance and Quest in Celebes* (Paris: Les Archives Internationales de la Danse, 1939), 28.

²⁶ Darul Islam/ Tentara Islam Indonesia (Islamic State/ Islamic Armed Forces of Indonesia) is an Islamist separatist movement founded in 1949 by Sekarmadji Maridjan Kartosoewirjo. It aspires to establish Islamic Indonesian state.

²⁷ Bone is a regency located in the east coast of South Sulawesi, around 118 miles from Makassar, the capital city of South Sulawesi.

²⁸ *Inhuldiging van den nieuwen vorst van Bone, Andi Mapanjoekhi te Watempone op 2 April 1931 [Inauguration of the new prince of Bone, Andi Mapanjoekhi, in Watempone on April 2, 1931]*, Documentary (Amsterdam Koloniaal Instituut, 1931).

²⁹ Rhoda Grauer, *The Last Bissu: The Sacred Transvestites of I La Galigo*, Documentary, (2003).

new to *bissu*. In the 16th century *bissu* was a bureaucratic – spiritual – position. Antoni de Paiva, a Portuguese tradesman, in his letter written in 1545 to King John III of Portugal, explained that before his conversion to Catholicism, the king of Siang³⁰ (currently Pangkep regency) had to consult with the *bissu*.³¹

Bissu, according to the Segeri people, have a significant role in determining the cycle of rice plantation and harvest, through *mappalili*. While the Bugis texts and de Paiva never mention *mappalili*, it is interesting to bring up some coincidences suggestive of the intricate relation between politics and religion. In 1667, after the VOC and its ally, Arung Palakka (the king of Bone), defeated Gowa (currently Gowa regency), they annexed Segeri to Bone.³² Segeri and the other colonies were called *palili*. *Mappalili* is derived from the same root of *palili*, which in Bugis means rice farmer or land. Central to the performance of *mappalili* is *rakkala*, the sacred plough. It is believed that the *rakkala* has spiritual power to fertilize rice field. According to the local story, the sacred plough belonged to the Bone kingdom. It was missing during a big flood. Forty *bissu* were sent to search for the sacred plough. The *bissu* finally found it in Segeri, but the king of Segeri rejected to return it. Failing to persuade the king, the *bissu* finally decided to stay in Segeri to take care of the sacred plough. Currently only in Segeri, the *bissu* perform *mappalili*.

In contemporary Pangkep, I find that the *bissu*'s role to maintain the Bugis *adat* corresponds to their effort to sustain the economic relation with the communities and the global community of spectators. This is crucial for the *bissu* to resolve their decaying tradition and poverty, and to maintain their position outside of the modern labor practice. With the intervention of the state in which *adat* is incorporated into tourist industry, the struggle of the *bissu* to proclaim themselves as an indigenous religious community becomes complicated. The enforcement of strict code of conduct causes many young *bissu* leave and join the urban homosexual groups. On the other side, the emphasis on the pre-Islamic practices alienates the *bissu* from the Bugis Muslim communities. *Bissu* Sake in *The Last Bissu* says, "If [anyone doesn't] go to [mosque], [they] won't enter Heaven. So I said, 'This is my heaven. I have my house, my rice and my money.'"³³ In the film Sake wears veil and has the title of *haji* (the title given to Muslims who perform hajj) that indicates they practice Islam. But, why does Sake reject to perform prayers in mosque? The answer, as I elicit from the other *bissu*'s response, is that in mosque there is no space for transgender *bissu*; the lines of prayers are provided only for men and women. For this reason, many *bissu* and *calabai* (male transvestites) feel comfortable to perform prayers in their own houses.

³⁰ Currently, it is named Pangkep regency, one of the regencies of South Sulawesi located in the southern Sulawesi peninsula, about 31 miles from Makassar, the capital city of South Sulawesi.

³¹ Hubert Jacobs, *The First Locally Demonstrable Christianity in Celebes, 1544* (Portugal: Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos, 1966), 290.

³² Maddusila A.M., "Sililah Rumpun Keluarga We Tenrileleang Sultanah Aisyah Matinroe Ri Soreang [The Family Lineage of We Tenrileleang Sultanah Aisyah Matinroe Ri Soreang]" (Indonesia, 1998), 158.

³³ Grauer, *The Last Bissu: The Sacred Transvestites of I La Galigo*. The translation is from the English subtitle of the film.

PRIEST OF AS YOU WISH

All *bissu* are breadwinners. They own or rent houses and adopt their siblings' children. A few of them live with *to boto*.³⁴ They profess as *sandro* (traditional healer), farmer, beautician, *indo botting* (traditional wedding planner) and *sandro mappakiana* (traditional child-birth attendant). The jobs, as they tell me, require spiritual and traditional knowledge. "This is why we are different from *calabai*," said Nika. "When we do makeup, we chant to make the bride looks more beautiful. In choosing colors for the wedding gowns and altars, we are very careful, because the colors indicate the social status of the bride," they added.

The *bissu* gain their acceptance from their economic interaction with their clients. With the service they provide, the *bissu* interact with the community without any normative obstacle. Through this professional interaction, the *bissu* becomes a part of everyday life in Pangkep. Yet, outside the economic interaction, the local people's attitude towards the *bissu* remains ambiguous. This happens to Nika when a royal family (*Arung*) asked for their service as an *indo botting* for their daughter. Nika received it as an acceptance of their transgender identity, even though they were still confused with the family's acceptance. The *Arung* family, according to Nika, is conservative. "I am the first *calabai* comes to the village wearing a long dress," Nika says.

In performing their jobs, the *bissu* do not determine the price – except the works they do in their salons. It is the clients who determine the 'price'. They call this *cenning-cenning ati* (literally means as you wish). In this economic transaction, money does not function according to the capitalist logic in which money is viewed as a medium of exchange, but as representation of social class of the givers. The act of giving must follow a procession. It requires that the givers show respect to the *bissu* by putting the money on the ceramic or silver plate with betel leaves and an areca nut. When the money is given, the giver must bow their heads and shake the *bissu*'s hand with their both hands. The *bissu* receives the alms. In this economic interaction, the *bissu* maintain their sovereignty by rejecting to equate their service to money, and enforce the money to be the representation of the social class. Therefore, in this context, it is the givers who have authority to determine the 'price', and it leads to shame if the 'price' they offer does not fit within the social status they are expected to occupy. They might offer more but not less. For those who do not have royal lineages, they can move upwards in the social hierarchy when they offer 'high price'. *Cenning-cenning ati* creates a social ground in which the *bissu* and their clients interaction cannot be viewed merely as economic but both economic and ritual interaction that determines the social status of the *bissu* and their clients.

In contrast, the *bissu* find it is inconvenient, scandalous to conduct economic transaction in art productions for two reasons: they have no direct interaction with their audience, and the 'salary' they receive is the payment for their performance. Spectators come and buy ticket to watch the *bissu*'s performances. The ticket price and salary of the performers is determined not by the audience but by the culture industry agent. Money becomes scandalous in the absence of direct interaction between the *bissu* and audience. It creates distrust between the *bissu* who perform the job and the event organizers who receive the ticket payments. Among the *bissu*, it becomes the source of disintegration and conflict, since the money is distributed equally regardless of the social status of the *bissu* – those who perform occupy different social status: *puang matoa* (the highest rank in the *bissu* hierarchy), *puang lolo* (the second rank) and *bissu mamata* (novice *bissu*). The *bissu* expect that the salary must represent their social status. The higher status they have, the higher

³⁴ The common translation of *to boto* is professional helper or assistant. But, in the *lontaraq* (old Bugis texts), it means soul mate.

salary they expect to receive. Yet, this is not how money functions in the cultural events; money serves as a medium of exchange.³⁵ Moreover, the *bissu* also complain about the low salary they receive. During my interview with Makkasing, a *bissu* in their 60s, complains: "Watched by the crowd, we look like fools. Our bodies hurt,³⁶ and we are paid only for 50,000 or 100,000 [in rupiah]. I would rather do my current job or the other jobs than fool myself." Watched by the crowds and paid with low price, Makkasing feels humiliated. Makkasing is a *sandro* and a farmer. "My house is always open for clients who need help," Makkasing says. Makkasing also owns cattle and rice field.

Ciang, a 26 year-old *bissu*, does not agree with Makkasing. Ciang lives in suburban Mandalle, a district located thirty minutes by car from Segeri, where Ciang works as a beautician. Ciang is featured in Rhoda Grauer's *The Last Bissu: the Sacred Transvestites of I La Galigo*. Ciang tells me that the *bissu* have their own position among the Bugis people. They are honored, even feared. Ciang tells me that they like performing, and it is how they are recognized as a *bissu*. Mappajanci, a local scholar, agrees with Ciang. He says that *calabai* are motivated to become *bissu* because they like public attention.

AVANT-GARDE MUSICIAN

From 2003 to 2008, the *bissu* involved in the production of the theater of *I La Galigo* (the 14th century Bugis epic) directed by an eminent American avant-garde playwright, Robert Wilson. This provoked the national debate on the relation between art production and ethnic identity. It has a significant impact on (re)positioning the *bissu*. During the production of the theater, Wilson consults with the *bissu*, since, as Wilson says in several interviews that "the *bissu* know the story; they own the story."³⁷ "First of all, you have to respect the indigenous culture of South Sulawesi and the epic nature of the material," but he adds, "you have to be careful that you don't become a slave to it."³⁸ Wilson views his task as director is to provide "mega-structure" in which "various people can have different roles to play."³⁹ In constructing the structure, Wilson always listens to the *bissu*. "We are making the piece for them and with them," says Wilson.⁴⁰ With this statement, Wilson implies that his interpretation of the epic still sustains the symbolic values of the Bugis culture.

Yet, Wilson notes, "[the story] is visual. We are not limited by the spoken word; even when the ancient Bugis language is spoken, Indonesian people won't understand it."⁴¹ Apparently, what he does not realize is that the transformation of the narrative from the Bugis oral tradition to the avant-garde performing art creates a gap. The oral tradition that the theater depicts is the oral performance whose transformative force does not rely upon how the performance makes sense to the audience, but how it provides a distinct sensuous experience through listening and watching. For

³⁵ For more discussion on money in capitalist society, see Roland Barthes and Richard Howard, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life"; Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁶ The performance Makkasing refers to is *Ma'giri* in which the *bissu* drill their daggers on their palms, stomachs, and foreheads.

³⁷ Tan Shzr Ee, "All His World's a Stage," *The Straits Times*, March 1, 2004; "I La Galigo Berlabuh Di Makassar [I La Galigo Anchors in Makassar]" (Makassar, 2011), 35.

³⁸ Ee, "All His World's a Stage."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the audience, the sound offers a pleasure, listening to the sound that is unfamiliar for their ears. On the other side, Wilson tries to maintain the 'local' view in which the *bissu's* *massureq* (reading, singing the *I La Galigo* epic poem) is a performance of piety. It is represented in the way the *bissu* moves, sits, and finally reads the *I La Galigo*. The scenes portray that the relation between the *bissu* and the *I La Galigo* text is founded on a particular religiosity, the religiosity that is imagined still alive in the contemporary Bugis society, or at least among the *bissu*. But, as we learn from Salim later in our discussion, this religiosity no longer exists in the religious consciousness of the *bissu*, for now all *bissu* are Muslims.⁴²And, among the majority of the Bugis people, *I La Galigo* texts are no longer considered sacred.

On the stage, Saidi sits on the front left side and the musicians on the right back side of the main stage. Saidi's position indicates that a *bissu* has a distinct position, belonging to neither the dancers nor the musicians. In the opening scene, Saidi emerges on the stage gracefully, silently chanting. Still stands Saidi, when the musicians ascend the stage and bow their heads as they see Saidi. After receiving the salute, Saidi takes a seat on a mat. In front of Saidi, the *I La Galigo* text is placed on a wood stand. Silent. The audience is waiting. Saidi begins to read, sing. After several verses, the music intervenes, in some scenes Saidi's voice overlaps with the music. The audience is thrilled. Do they understand the verses Saidi read? *I La Galigo* is written in the old Bugis language. They are intelligible only for those who study the language and few among the elders. Within this constellation, I argue that Saidi's *massureq* is incorporated into the music to provoke a certain ethnic sentiment. It displays the affect of voice, the affect that invokes the *bissu's* piety. The *massureq* offers a different reality and unique experience to the audience. With this role, it should not surprise us when we see on the job description Saidi is listed under musician.

But, how is it possible for Saidi to perform the piety in the absence of indigenous religious consciousness? To answer this, we have to refer to the notion of piety among the Bugis people: Islamic piety. The sitting position Saidi takes is similar to the one the Bugis Muslim women take when they read the Qur'an; the mat Saidi sits on is similar to that the Bugis Muslims use in their prayers; the wood stand where the *I La Galigo* text is placed is similar to the one the Qur'an is placed; and Saidi's *massureq* sounds like the Bugis Muslims when they read the Qur'an. Moreover, reading and listening to somebody reading the Qur'an among the Bugis Muslims, and Indonesian Muslims, are performance of piety in which understanding is secondary. It is not uncommon to find Bugis Muslims listen attentively when the Qur'an is read, but they do not understand what they listen to. For the Bugis Muslims, listening is to feel the presence of God and gain His rewards; for the theater audience, to experience the sublime and gain pleasure. For others listening might foster a kind of catharsis in which the listeners relieve from emotional pressures, from the boredom of daily routines.

Outside of the theater, the response is different. Wilson's visual constellation receives a number of critiques from the Indonesian artists. Among them, Ratna Sarumpaet gains more attention because of either her fame, her position as the chair of Jakarta arts council, or the significance of her critique. Let us focus on the significance of her critique. She writes:

⁴² Muhammad Salim, "I La Galigo, 'Bissu', Dan Keberadaannya [I La Galigo, 'Bissu', and Their Existence]," *Kompas*, April 4, 2004.

[W]hen on stage we watch the *bissu* whose religion is Islam, which came to the region in 500 years ago, and the Pakarena dance that was invented in several decades ago, there is nothing I can say but "pitiful". . . . Using the *bissu* as an exotic instrument (again without energy) and deliberately ignoring the living tradition of *bissu* rites in the Bugis society are miserable.⁴³

Sarumpaet's critique reveals that even with the intervention of modern theater, the artists must maintain the local cultural meanings and prioritize the spirit of the local culture. Even though she rejects exoticism, Sarumpaet suggests that the Bugis traditions are located in the pre-Islamic tradition.

In the article, Sarumpaet uses the word *energy* (energy) interchangeably with *makna* (meaning), *jiwa* (soul), *daya hidup* (vitality), and *roh* (spirit). She criticizes the lack of energy in the dancing movements, meanings in the visual representations, and the soul or the spirit of the Bugis in the theater. Within this context, exoticism that Sarumpaet refers to is an artistic practice and representation that prioritize visual pleasure over cultural meaning. Her comment on the *bissu* thus must be understood as an attempt to bring on stage what she calls "the Bugis spirit." This spirit is located not in the living Bugis people but in the Bugis ancestors who lived for many centuries before Islam came in the region. The Muslim *bissu* cannot embody the "Bugis spirit". At this point, we might reject her notion indigeneity in a way that it provides no place for the living indigenous people. Yet, Sarumpaet's view of indigeneity remains relevant in the contemporary indigenous narratives. The indigenous movements in Indonesia place indigeneity as a sovereign identity outside of the territory of the Abrahamic religions. Authenticity and locality are measured and maintained through the selection of traditions against Islam. Thus, it is strategic in creating a discursive space for the revival of indigenous people and resistance to the Islamic conservatism.

However, we cannot extend Sarumpaet's understanding on indigenous identity to represent the everyday life of indigenous people, for it does not tell us the social reality of indigenous life. At this margin of social life, the question is not about how to sustain 'authentic' and 'local' traditions, but how to survive.

Salim, a prolific Bugis scholar, writes in his response to Sarumpaet:

The authentic story [of *I La Galigo*] almost extinct and forgotten as well as outdated. It has died, no spirit. Fortunately, Rhoda Grauer, Bali Purniati, Robert Wilson, and Change Performing Arts give it a new spirit and enable it to recover and live again. Even, it flies around the world witnessed by its masters. Among the masters, there are those who feel thrilled, moved, with tears in their eyes, and those who envy and complain.⁴⁴

Salim, who served as an advisor in the production of *I La Galigo*, rejects the authenticity of the *I La Galigo*, even points out the irrelevance of the story in the contemporary Bugis society. The spirit of *I La Galigo*, for Salim, no longer lives among the Bugis people. It takes a new form and meaning as it is adapted into the avant-garde theater. It now lives, as Salim implies, among the global spectators. In relation to the *bissu*, Salim asserts, "Nowadays, Puang Matoa wear a Muslim cap and veil. Some of them performed hajj, even in their *bissu* songs written in the old Bugis texts, they use the names of

⁴³ Ratna Sarumpaet, "'I La Galigo': Panggung Megah, Miskin Makna [I La Galigo': Glorious Stage, Poor Meanings," *Kompas*, March 21, 2004. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁴⁴ Salim, "*I La Galigo*, '*Bissu*', Dan Keberadaannya [*I La Galigo*, '*Bissu*', and Their Existence]."

the Islamic God, angels, and prophets. The *bissu* in South Sulawesi who can be counted by fingers are all Muslims.”⁴⁵ Salim problematizes Sarumpaet's notion of 'Bugis indigeneity' by demonstrating that Islam is fundamental to the contemporary identity of the *bissu*. On the other paragraph of his article, he asserts that the function of the *bissu* has changed. Different in the past in which the *bissu* perform only rituals, nowadays the *bissu* perform for tourists.⁴⁶

The local people who reject the participation of the *bissu* in the theater contend that by participating in performance arts, the *bissu* violate their ritual duty. They complain about the absence of the *bissu* during *mappalili*, especially those who are considered the high priests. They said that it is taboo for the *bissu* to travel during that time. The disintegration and the decline of the *bissu*, the local people asserts, is the consequence of the violation of the taboo.

The debate illuminates the indigenous positions of the *bissu*. The artistic intervention constitutes the *bissu* as a form of spectacle. The *bissu* is integral to the performance of the avant-garde artistic constellation in which cultural reference is no longer prioritized, except to provide unique theatrical experience to the audience. In the theater the *bissu* emerge in their “estrangement” to direct the audience’s attention to a particular sensory mode. Their chanting in an old Bugis language, unintelligible, provides the audience with a unique musicality. Excitement and curiosity what the *bissu* apparently expect from their audience.

The *bissu* represent the exotic other that remains mysterious for the audience. The mystery is enhanced with the scenes in which the *bissu* emerge in the main stage. But, at this time, the *bissu* are performed by the male actors. The graceful movements they perform and the costumes they wear invoke that the *bissu* are transgender. Surprisingly, the projection of the *bissu* transgender identity has no textual supports from the *I La Galigo* text. In the text the highest rank of *bissu* is occupied by the royal women: We Tenriabeng and We Tenridio.⁴⁷ It is We Tenriabeng who leads the rituals, one of them is the ritual of cutting down the sacred tree (*welenrengeng*), the scene central to the theater. She is not portrayed as a powerful but beautiful woman. Why do then in the scene the transgender *bissu* replace the royal female *bissu*? In response to this question, I offer three reasons: The first reason is that the view that all *bissu* are transgender is well established and widely circulated on media; the second reason is that transgender *bissu* marks the distinct position of Bugis *adat*, different from the state and the Abrahamic religions, especially Islam; and the third reason is that transgender priests will be visually enticed.

FROM FARM TO THEATER

From the local farms to the global avant-garde theater, the *bissu* struggle to survive, to maintain their identity as an indigenous Bugis community, as transgender priests. Their interactions with the local people, the state and the culture industry are not merely ‘cultural’ but mostly economic. The *bissu* deploy their economic interactions strategically to construct a discursive and social space in which their indigenous transgender priesthood remains relevant in contemporary South Sulawesi. Tradition, locality, Islam, modernity and globalization are intricately interconnected in the narratives of the *bissu*. Therefore, any attempt to sustain the exotic and sovereignty of the *bissu* fails to discern the contradictions in the mediated representations of the *bissu*, the contradictions that are

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Rudolf Arnold Kern, *I La Galigo: Cerita Bugis Kuno [I La Galigo: The Ancient Buginese Epic]*, Cet. 1 (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1989), 34 and 304.

constituted through interactions and interventions within multicultural and economic networks.

Tradition we learn from the *bissu* is a site of struggle to sustain their indigenous positions, to survive. The *bissu*'s politics of tradition aspires to create the condition of possibilities to exist outside of the heterosexual normative territory of the state and Islam. Yet, the aesthetic of piety in which the *bissu*'s transgender priesthood emerge cannot be liberated from the local Islamic heterosexual practices, the piety that the *bissu* inhabit in their everyday life. The aesthetic of *bissu* transgender body invokes that transgenderism serves as a trope of indigeneity, the trope that is mediated by the modern artistic constellation of estrangement and orchestrated by the colonial, capitalist and multiculturalist desire for an exotic and sovereign traditional community.

The farm where the *bissu* perform the rice planting ritual is no longer a rice farm;⁴⁸ and the stages where they perform their rituals are no longer their ritual stages. Their rituals and performances are no longer their own; they attract national and global interests, our interests. Unfortunately, we do not speak the same language and to the same audience. This is how – supposed to be – the *bissu* indigeneity is projected, refracted.

⁴⁸ It is now a private fishpond.

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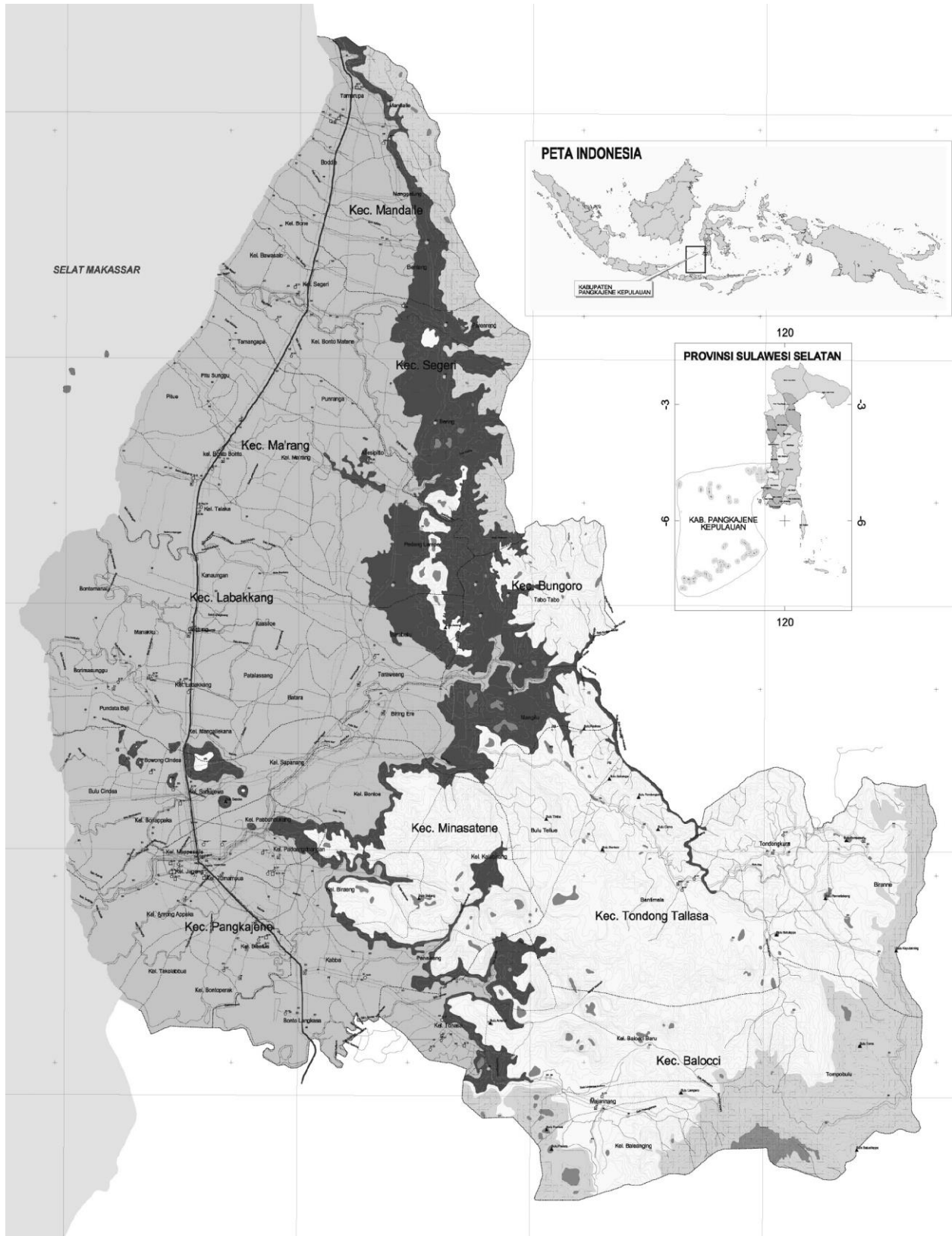
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APPENDIX



South Sulawesi



Pangkajene Kepulauan (Pangkep)