

# The Presentation of BISSU as the Fifth Gender and Their Tolerance in the Social Space within the Bugis Community

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## ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membahas peran Bissu sebagai gender kelima dalam masyarakat Bugis-Makassar dan toleransi mereka dalam ruang sosial. Masalah utama yang dibahas adalah bagaimana identitas dan peran sosial Bissu berinteraksi dengan norma dan nilai gender tradisional, serta tantangan yang mereka hadapi di tengah stigma sosial dan perubahan budaya. Keragaman gender di Indonesia, khususnya dalam masyarakat Bugis, mengungkapkan pemahaman yang kompleks di mana Bissu berfungsi sebagai titik temu antara identitas gender biner dan non-biner. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis kontribusi Bissu dalam melestarikan budaya dan tradisi, serta untuk menggali hubungan gender yang kompleks dalam masyarakat yang sering terjebak dalam pandangan biner. Melalui penelitian ini, diharapkan dapat mengungkap bagaimana Bissu berfungsi dalam struktur sosial yang lebih luas dan bagaimana mereka mendefinisikan diri mereka sendiri dalam masyarakat yang berubah. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan sosiologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi partisipan. Data yang dikumpulkan memberikan wawasan tentang bagaimana masyarakat Bugis-Makassar mulai menunjukkan keterbukaan dan toleransi terhadap keragaman gender. Hal ini dilakukan meskipun terdapat tantangan yang ditimbulkan oleh norma-norma agama dan stigma sosial yang masih ada dalam kehidupan sehari-hari masyarakat Bissu. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat Bissu dihormati sebagai penjaga keharmonisan sosial dan perantara antara dunia manusia dan dunia spiritual. Penemuan ini menyoroti pentingnya mengenali dan menghargai keragaman gender dalam masyarakat Indonesia dan mengajak pembaca untuk mempertimbangkan bagaimana norma-norma kolektif dapat berubah seiring meningkatnya kesadaran akan hak asasi manusia dan kesetaraan gender.

Kata Kunci : Bissu, Gender Kelima, Keberagaman Gender, Masyarakat Bugis Makassar, Toleransi Sosial

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of Bissu as the fifth gender in Bugis-Makassar society and their tolerance within the social space. The main problem addressed is how the identity and social role of the Bissu interact with traditional gender norms and values, as well as the challenges they face amidst social stigma and cultural change. Gender diversity in Indonesia, particularly within Bugis society, reveals a complex understanding where the Bissu serve as a meeting point between binary and non-binary gender identities. The purpose of this research is to analyse the contribution of the Bissu in preserving culture and tradition, as well as to delve into the complex gender relations within a society often trapped in binary views. Through this research, it is hoped to reveal how Bissu function within the broader social structure and how they define themselves in a changing society. This research uses a qualitative method with a sociological approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. The data collected provides insights into how the Bugis-Makassar community is beginning to show openness and tolerance towards gender diversity. This is done despite the challenges posed by religious norms and social stigma that still exist in the daily lives of the Bissu. The research findings indicate that the Bissu are respected as guardians of social harmony and intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds. This discovery highlights the importance of recognising and appreciating gender diversity in Indonesian society and invites readers to consider how collective norms can change as awareness of human rights and gender equality increases.

Key Words : Bissu, Fifth Gender, Gender Diversity, Bugis-Makassar Society, Social Tolerance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has a very rich and complex gender diversity. Indonesia has over 300 different ethnic groups and cultures, and each of these groups has different concepts and perspectives on gender (Hidayana, 2018). In Indonesian society, there are strong gender differences, which are generally based on the traditional roles of each sex. However, this does not mean that there are no other gender differences recognised and respected in society. Some examples of gender diversity in Indonesia include the existence of the transvestite or transgender tradition in the Bugis-Makassar culture of South Sulawesi, the hijra culture in Acehnese society, and the Bissu tradition in Bugis society (Davies, 2010). Additionally, there are also sexual minority groups such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, who are becoming increasingly open in society.

However, on the other hand, there is still stigmatisation and discrimination faced by gender minority groups in Indonesia. This is due to the public's lack of understanding and awareness of human rights and gender equality. Although there are still challenges and obstacles in fighting for minority gender rights in Indonesia, more and more people are realizing the importance of recognizing and appreciating gender diversity (Manalu, Simatupang, & Silaen, 2024). By strengthening this awareness, Indonesia can become a more inclusive society that is committed to human rights and equality. Gender is one of the aspects that greatly influences a person's daily life. Gender can affect how someone dresses, speaks, interacts, and even makes decisions in their daily life. Gender relations in daily life are very complex and are influenced by various factors such as culture, religion, norms, and environment.

In everyday life, gender often serves as the basis for dividing roles, tasks, and responsibilities. For example, in families, women are typically assigned to manage the household and children, while men are responsible for earning a living for the family. Gender can also affect a person's opportunities in terms of employment, education, and health (Eckert, 1998).

However, gender relations in daily life can also undergo changes and evolution. There are changes in norms and values that affect gender relations, such as gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination (Fatimah, Inayah, Suyudi, Hasbi, & Rasul, 2024). This can raise public awareness and understanding of the importance of respecting gender differences and providing equal opportunities for all individuals to thrive and achieve their goals. Therefore, it is important to understand gender relations in daily life to create an inclusive and just society for everyone (Padli, 2020).

## 2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach, which includes in-depth interviews and participant observation. The focus of this research is to explore the Bugis community's understanding of the Bissu identity as a non-binary gender and their contributions within the social and cultural context. The informants in the study are cultural figures and some Bissu with specific criteria. This research also analyses the changes that have occurred in the way society views and accepts the presence of Bissu in daily life.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### History and Philosophy of the Bissu

The Bissu are a group of people who play an important role in Bugis-Makassar society in South Sulawesi, Indonesia (Said, 2016). They have expertise in various fields, including religion, social, cultural, and spiritual (Latief, 2004). The history of the Bissu themselves is very long and complex, with many aspects that are still not known for certain. However, based on research and oral tradition, it can be concluded that the Bissu have existed since prehistoric times (Mattulada, 1985). Generally, Bissu are considered spiritual leaders or shamans in Bugis-Makassar society (Ammarell, 2002). They are also known as people with specialised knowledge and skills in religious and artistic practices, such as dance, music, and traditional weapon making (Holt, 1939). Bissu are also often considered mediators between humans and nature spirits (Lathief, 2014).

Bissu philosophy is based on concepts such as harmony, alignment, and balance (Gibson, 2005). They believe that everything in the universe is interconnected and influences each other. Therefore, harmony and balance must be maintained to prevent imbalances that could disrupt human and natural

life. One important aspect of Bissu philosophy is diversity. Bissu respects and values differences, whether they are differences in religion, culture, or gender (Syamsuddin, 2010). Therefore, Bissu are often considered a symbol of inclusivity and tolerance in Bugis-Makassar society. In religious practice, Bissu perform rituals involving music, dance, and prayer. They believe that through these rituals, they can achieve harmony with the universe and receive blessings from nature spirits (Trianto, 2003).

### **Recognising the Five Genders in South Sulawesi**

In an ideal gender composition, the gender spectrum is constructed in a binary way, with only men and women, and everything else is a biological deviation. However, in daily life, the actual gender composition has a more varied spectrum. Transgender (male bodies with female gender tendencies and vice versa) is connoted as a third gender in the Western perspective. However, in the context of South Sulawesi society, transgender individuals represent themselves as third and fourth genders. It was Sharyn Graham Davies (2010), an anthropologist who contributed to mapping gender in South Sulawesi into five genders through her captivating anthropological research in the 1990s. Sharyn Graham Davies and John Collier conducted research on Bissu, a non-binary gender tradition. His two-year research in the Soppeng and Tana Toraja regions was later published as a book titled "Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves" (Davies, 2010).

In their research, Davies and Collier composed gender in South Sulawesi into 5 (five), namely as follows:

1. Orawane (masculine/male)
2. Makkunrai (feminine/female)
3. Calabai (Calabai are born with male bodies but take on female gender roles, wearing dresses and makeup and growing their hair long).
4. Calalai (Calalai are born with female bodies but traditionally take on male gender roles; they may wear shirts and pants, smoke, cut their hair short, and do everyday work).
5. Bissu (a combination or blend of all genders); possessing both masculine and feminine traits. This gender is not interested in men or women. They firmly adhere to the philosophy of ancient Bugis society that a perfect human is one who possesses both feminine and masculine elements in a balanced and just manner.

The Bissu gender is considered by the Bugis community to be holy, spiritual, and to have a high role and status in society (Suliyati, 2018). Bissu are considered spiritual beings that embody both feminine and masculine power. Bissu, and similarly calabai and calalai, express their identity through clothing: they often wear flowers, a traditionally feminine symbol, but carry a kris, which is associated with men. Many Bissu are born intersex (a condition where an individual is born with sexual characteristics that do not conform to the traditional definitions of "male" or "female"). This occurs due to variations in chromosomes, hormones, or reproductive anatomy (Alodokter, 2024), but the term has implications beyond biology. Although Bugis gender is often depicted as a spectrum, the Bissu are considered above this classification: spiritual beings who are not in the middle between male and female, but rather embody the power of both simultaneously. In the beliefs of the Bissu, "it is said that after descending from heaven, the Bissu did not split and become male or female, like most people," Davies (2010) explains, "but remained a sacred unity of both."

Traditionally, the Bissu are considered to have a gender identity distinct from men or women, and they are often seen as a combination of both. They are also considered to possess non-binary or genderqueer characteristics, which are not easily understood within the binary gender framework common in the West. In practice, bissu are not bound by specific gender roles in Bugis-Makassar society. They can perform tasks typically considered male or female, and they have the freedom to express themselves in ways not bound by binary gender concepts. Some Bissu even choose to undergo surgery to remove or add body parts to match their gender identity. In terms of sexuality, the Bissu also have a different perspective from the concept known in the West. In Bugis-Makassar culture, sexuality is not only viewed as a relationship between men and women, but can also involve relationships between people with different gender identities or sexual relationships considered sacred. In the Bissu view, sexuality is seen as something not tied to a specific gender identity or sexual orientation.

### **Discussion**

Bissu Self-Presentation in a Tolerant Social Space

In the last two or nearly three decades, society has shown increasing openness and tolerance in understanding and accepting the existence of the Bissu. In their social lives, the Bissu are highly respected for their freedom of expression and gender diversity. Bissu are often perceived and positioned by society as individuals with high self-awareness and extraordinary wisdom in carrying out their religious and social duties.

Traditionally, the Bissu follow animistic teachings, which believe that nature has spirits and forces that must be respected and protected. They believe that humans must live in balance with nature and treat the environment with respect and appreciation. One way the Bissu maintain the relationship between humans and nature is by preserving the balance within the ecosystem. They teach about the importance of preserving forests and avoiding illegal logging, keeping rivers and seas clean, and respecting the existence of animals as creatures with the right to life. In addition, the Bissu also teach about appreciating and caring for plants and vegetation, and maintaining harmony between human life and nature. They also encourage the community to use natural resources wisely and responsibly, and to practice an environmentally friendly lifestyle.

In daily life, Bissu are also involved in activities that support environmental conservation, such as holding traditional rituals to ask for help and thank nature, and performing ceremonies as a form of respect for nature's existence. Bissu also participate in environmental protection campaigns, such as fundraising for forest conservation and efforts to save endangered animals. In the social and cultural context, the Bissu hold a very important role and duty in Bugis society, including:

1. In the religious field, the Bissu play an important role as spiritual leaders and guardians of the traditional beliefs of the Bugis-Makassar people. They act as mediators between the human world and the spirit world, and are responsible for performing religious ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and other traditional rituals. Bissu also helps maintain the trust and traditions of the Bugis-Makassar people, which have been passed down from generation to generation.
2. The Bissu also contribute to the social sphere. They play an important role in maintaining social harmony and resolving conflicts. Bissu also helps the community in overcoming various social problems and provides emotional support for individuals in need. Additionally, Bissu also provide religious and cultural education and training to help preserve Bugis-Makassar tribal traditions.
3. Acting as an intermediary between humans and the spiritual world: Bissu are considered to have the ability to communicate with ancestral spirits and deities. Therefore, they are often used as intermediaries between humans and the spiritual world.
4. Serving as spiritual teachers: Bissu also play the role of spiritual teachers for the Bugis community. They provide guidance and direction on how to live a correct and good life according to religious teachings and Bugis customs.
5. Performing traditional healing: Bissu also have abilities in traditional healing. They use esoteric knowledge and traditional remedies to cure physical and mental illnesses.
6. Being environmental guardians: Bissu also play a role in protecting the environment. They teach the Bugis community to preserve nature and respect other living beings.
7. Being volunteers: Although Bissu are considered sacred and possess spiritual power, they are also known as friendly and approachable figures. Bissu highly values diversity and is often involved in activities that help the community, such as assisting victims of natural disasters or providing social assistance to those in need.

Bissu is a term used to refer to a group of individuals who have the ability to act as intermediaries between the human world and the world of spirits or gods in the Bugis-Makassar tradition. In Bugis-Makassar society, the Bissu are considered respected and sacred figures because they are believed to possess strong spiritual power (Latief, 2005). Bissu typically present themselves as having a close relationship with the supernatural world and as intermediaries between the human and spirit realms. Bissu typically wear distinctive traditional clothing, such as shirts, pants, and sarongs. They also wear characteristic accessories like headbands, necklaces, bracelets, and rings (Perlas, 2021). Additionally, Bissu also possess knowledge of traditional rituals and ceremonies performed within Bugis-Makassar society. In daily life, Bissu serve as spiritual guides, healers, and protectors within Bugis-Makassar society. They are also often asked to lead traditional ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and other rituals.

Historically, especially in relation to how these gender groups freely express and present themselves in their social lives, there have been ups and downs. During the Darul Islam rebellion led

by Kahar Muzakkar in the 1950s, the Bissu were arrested, tortured, and forced to repent (Syahrul, 2013). Some Bissu had their heads shaved so they could be publicly humiliated, and some were killed. During the New Order era under President Soeharto (1967-1998), there was an initiative called Operation Taubat (Syamsuddin, 2010). All Bissu were forced to abandon their ancestral faith of To Latang, which was the traditional religion of the Bugis people, and were asked to choose one of the officially recognised religions in Indonesia.

The role and duties of the Bissu are very important in maintaining the continuity of the Bugis people's customs and culture. Therefore, they are considered highly respected and valued figures by the Bugis community. In short, Bissu presents themselves as figures who uphold local wisdom values, are friendly guardians of customs who are easy to get along with, and possess spiritual power that can help society in various ways.

### **Construction of the Bissu Gender Relation in the Socio-Cultural Space of the Bugis-Makassar**

Community Bissu is a gender concept in South Sulawesi, which combines elements of masculinity and femininity (Peacock, 1978). The construction of the Bissu gender relationship in their social life is very complex and full of cultural and religious nuances (Washilah, 2022). In building relationships with other genders, the Bissu have a unique approach because they are considered to have the ability to understand and respect a wide range of gender identities. Bissu are often considered mediators between the physical and spiritual worlds, and they are revered for their wisdom, intelligence, and ability to connect the human world with the spiritual realm (Hariyono, 2020).

In the social life of the Bissu, gender construction is viewed as a spectrum or continuum, not just based on the two traditional gender categories of male and female (Suliyati, 2018). A Bissu is seen as an individual who possesses both masculine and feminine strengths and qualities within them, allowing them to access the ability to function as an intermediary between the human and spiritual worlds (Ramli & La Basri, 2019). Traditionally, Bissu are respected and recognised as spiritual and cultural leaders (Makkulau, 2007). They play an important role in traditional ceremonies, such as weddings, births, and deaths (Trianto, 2003). Additionally, Bissu are also respected as guardians of social harmony and balance in society, as well as a link between humans and the spiritual world (Mujahiduddin, 2004).

Within the Bissu community, the construction of gender relations is not limited by traditional gender roles. Conversely, roles and responsibilities in social life are determined by individual abilities and their willingness to take on those responsibilities. Therefore, a Bissu can serve as a leader, teacher, healer, or even as a nurturing parent. In the social life of the Bissu, the construction of gender relations is also reflected in their clothing and appearance. Bissu usually wear clothing that combines masculine and feminine elements, such as attire worn by both men and women, as well as accessories with spiritual meaning (Wikipedia, 2024).

### **Bissu in a Sociological Perspective**

Bissu is a social and cultural tradition originating from the Bugis-Makassar tribal communities in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. From a sociological perspective, the existence of the Bissu can be seen as part of the complex and well-organised social and cultural system of Bugis-Makassar society. Historically, the Bissu were considered the guardians of harmony between the human and spiritual worlds. They play an important role in traditional rituals, such as wedding ceremonies, funerals, and various religious events. In Bugis-Makassar society, the Bissu are respected and considered to have a very high status (Latief, 2004). From a sociological perspective, the existence of the Bissu can also be seen as part of the social structure of Bugis-Makassar society. Like other societies, the Bugis-Makassar people have a class system and social strata consisting of various groups, such as aristocrats, merchants, farmers, and fishermen. Bissu themselves belong to a very high and respected class. Additionally, the existence of the Bissu can also be seen as part of the gender system in Bugis-Makassar society. Bissu are considered people who possess a balanced combination of masculine and feminine qualities (Davies, 2010). In Bugis-Makassar society, the Bissu are accepted and respected as part of gender diversity. The Bissu gender class is a social concept associated with the Bugis-Makassar society in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. This concept refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the conventional gender norms that are generally present in that society. Specifically, the Bissu gender class consists of

individuals who are considered to possess strong spiritual power and are recognised as leaders and guardians of harmony in Bugis-Makassar society (Mujahiduddin, 2004).

The Bissu gender class can be seen as an example of the variation in the social construction of gender identity. This social construction encompasses norms, values, and roles related to gender, which are produced by social interaction and maintained by the social system. In Bugis-Makassar society, the gender class of Bissu demonstrates how the social construction of gender identity can evolve and change over time. Although individuals belonging to the Bissu gender class may be considered unconventional within the context of Bugis-Makassar society, they are still recognised and respected for their contributions to maintaining social harmony (Ramli & La Basri, 2019).

Sociology also views the Bissu gender class as demonstrating that gender identity is not always tied to one's biological body. Gender identity can be formed through social interaction and through the roles individuals choose to play in society. Therefore, the Bissu gender class can serve as an important example in the study of the social construction of gender identity and gender roles in society. Overall, the existence of the Bissu can be understood as part of a complex and well-organised social and cultural system within Bugis-Makassar society. The Bissu are respected as guardians of harmony between the human and spiritual worlds, as well as being part of the unique social and gender structure within Bugis-Makassar society.

Some gender theories have strong relevance in explaining the existence of Bissu in the social world. Gender system theory emphasises that gender is not an innate or natural category, but rather a social construct learnt within society. This theory posits that gender is a system composed of three elements: gender identity, gender roles, and gender behaviour (Lorber, 1994). Culture and social structure influence how gender identity, roles, and behaviour are formed and maintained. Gender system theory was first proposed by George Murdock in 1949. However, this theory is better known through the works of Judith Lorber, a sociologist and feminist who has written extensively about gender and feminism. Besides Gender System Theory, Queer Theory aligns with Gender System Theory, particularly in its view of gender plurality as a social necessity that must also be socially accepted. Queer Theory emphasises that gender and sexuality are social constructs that can change and are not bound by fixed categories. This theory proposes that sexual orientation and gender identity do not have to conform to the heterosexual and cisgender binary categories, and that society must accept these differences as part of social and cultural diversity (Butler, 1990). Queer theory was proposed by a group of LGBT activists and academics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Judith Butler is considered one of the main originators of Queer theory. One of her famous works is "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," which was first published in 1990. In this book, Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity and states that gender is not something that is biologically determined or innate, but rather something that is continuously created and shaped through social actions and interactions (Butler, 1990).

The existence and role of the Bissu in society are entering a new chapter marked by global recognition. In 2019, UNESCO recognised the Bissu as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Bissu are a group of people who are traditional leaders in the Bugis tribal society of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. They play an important role in maintaining social harmony, particularly in terms of traditional and religious ceremonies. Unesco's recognition of the Bissu as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity aims to promote recognition of cultural diversity and raise awareness of the importance of preserving unique and valuable cultural heritage. Additionally, this recognition can also help strengthen the identity of the Bugis community and preserve the existence of Bissu as important traditional leaders in their society.

The number of Bissu is dwindling, and some authoritative sources suggest they are on the brink of extinction due to declining public interest in becoming Bissu. In Pangkep (Segeri), the number of Bissu is estimated to be only 7 (seven), and in Bone, their numbers are also dwindling. Besides demographic factors (death), the decline of the Bissu is also due to many people becoming interested in deepening their understanding of Islam. From an Islamic perspective, becoming a Bissu is considered a deviant and sinful decision.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This article explores the complexities of the Bissu gender identity within Bugis-Makassar society, describing how they function as a fifth gender that combines masculine and feminine elements.

Bissu are respected as spiritual leaders and play an important role in religious rituals and cultural preservation. Despite their history of challenges and rejection, there is currently increased tolerance and recognition of their existence, including international recognition by UNESCO.

The Bissu gender construction is recognised as an integral part of gender diversity in Indonesia, demonstrating that gender is not a binary category but rather a spectrum involving complex social and cultural relationships. However, their existence is also threatened by social change and modernisation. Therefore, further efforts are needed to protect and promote cultural diversity and gender identity in society, so that the Bissu heritage remains sustainable and valued in a broader context.

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