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Sulawesi's fifth gender

What if there were not just two genders, but five? In Indonesia, there are

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I first went to Sulawesi in August 1998 on a reconnaissance trip to determine if this would be an interesting place to study gender relations. I had read a little about gender in Sulawesi, encouraged by my supervisors Dr Greg Acciaioli and Dr Lyn Parker, but I was not quite prepared for the richness of Bugis gender identities. In Australia we tend to assume that there are only two genders, woman and man, and two matching biological sexes, female and male. The Bugis acknowledge three sexes (female, male, hermaphrodite), four genders (women, men, calabai, and calalai), and a fifth meta-gender group, the bissu.

'Bissu' tends to be translated as 'transvestite priest', but this term is less than satisfactory. Transvestite implies cross-dressing, but bissu have their own distinctive clothing. Moreover, bissu do not go from one gender to another; they are a combination of all genders. To become a bissu, one must be born both female and male, or hermaphroditic. (To be precise, the Bugis believe that a bissu who appears externally male is internally female, and vice versa). This combination of sexes enables a 'meta-gender' identity to emerge.

*La Tenri Olli'
Aseng tongeng-tongeng
Mu ri langi
Mu nonno' ri lino
Mu riyaseng t*

Your name in the heavens
Is La Tenri Olli',
In the name of the buffalo,
Descend to earth.

Mariani begins her chant as the sun is setting behind the limestone cliff. The eerie chant is accompanied on the cylindrical drum called tumba, on cymbals (kancing), and metal rhythm sticks (ana' bacing).

Over 35 of us had squeezed into two small mini-vans and traveled for over an hour to reach this place. We then walked a few kilometres to the mouth of a small cave, which, as I was to find out, went deep into the mountain.

Blessing

We had come here to perform a ceremony. A woman I knew named Ibu Qadri wanted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. She needed the blessing of the spirits before she set off. Bissu have long conducted ceremonies like this. They are able to act as mediators between humans and spirits (dewata) because they are considered neither male nor female, and neither woman nor man, but a mix of all four of these.

This was one of my first bissu ceremonies. I was somewhat baffled as to why a pious Muslim would want a blessing from other spiritual beings. However, over the 15 months (until November 2000) that I lived amongst bissu, I learned that at least to the Bugis there really was no contradiction. They told me that Allah is the one and only God, but Allah has helpers, called dewata. The most

powerful of the dewata is the one Mariani is calling today. When Mariani is in contact, the dewata will arrange for the most appropriate lesser dewata to descend and take possession of Mariani. Only then can Mariani bestow blessings.

For the blessing to be a success, Mariani and three other bissu had to enter a cave. I too was invited in. We took off our sandals, and two of the bissu carried burning torches to light our way. I was urged to lead in front. I later found out this was so that I could take their photograph as they entered the cavern. After we had slid on our backsides down the entry passage, walked quite a distance, successfully avoiding treading barefoot upon the many scorpions surrounding us, we came into a large cavern. Here we squatted in a circle. Mariani began chanting. At appropriate times the other bissu joined in. The ceremony here was short. When the chant was over we returned to the opening of the cave.

While we were away, preparations had been made for the main ceremony. Mariani took her place (or 'hir' place, since she is both male and female) in front of the large assortment of ritual offerings that were to be offered to the dewata. These included cooked rice died into four different colours (songkolo), eggs, a hen and a rooster, cigarettes, bananas, and coconuts. Mariani again began to chant, but this time hir chanting became erratic and frightening. Hir body began to shake and s/he became very angry. 'Where are the siri leaves?' These are an important part of the ceremony, but there were not enough of them. The spirit that possessed Mariani was furious and refused to give the blessing. Through Mariani the spirit conveyed that we could, however, perform the ceremony at the woman's house. By the time we arrived at Ibu Qadri's house it was dark. The altar and the offerings were set up in her living room, and the bissu adorned themselves in their powerful, magical (sakti) clothing. The ceremony began again. Everything was complete.

Mariani and the three other bissu performed their chants. In order to honour the spirits who had possessed them, and hence bless Ibu Qadri's pilgrimage, the four bissu performed the ma'giri. Each bissu took their little dagger (kris) and tried to force it into their throat. If a powerful spirit has possessed them, and if the blessing is successful, the kris will not penetrate and they will not bleed. On this occasion, when Mariani had completed the ma'giri, I noticed blood coming from hir neck (see cover photo).

Not till many months later did I venture to question this. The reason was that the spirit who possessed Mariani had not been very powerful. However, with the combined efforts of the four bissu, Haji Qadri did make the pilgrimage to Mecca. On her return, she requested another bissu ceremony to give thanks to the dewata for protecting her on her journey.

Calalai

This brings us to calalai and calabai. Strictly speaking, calalai means 'false man' and calabai 'false woman'. However, people are not harassed for identifying as either of these gender categories. On the contrary, calalai and calabai are seen as essential to completing the gender system. A useful analogy suggested to me by Dr Greg Acciaioli is to imagine the Bugis gender system of South Sulawesi as a pyramid, with the bissu at the apex, and men, women, calalai, and calabai located at the four base corners.

Calalai are anatomical females who take on many of the roles and functions expected of men. For instance, Rani works alongside men as a blacksmith, shaping kris, small blades and other knives. Rani wears men's clothing and ties hir sarong in the fashion of men. Rani also lives with hir wife and their adopted child, Erna. While Rani works with men, dresses as a man, smokes cigarettes,

and walks alone at night, which are all things women are not encouraged to do, Rani is female and therefore not considered a man. Nor does Rani wish to become a man. Rani is calalai. Rani's female anatomy, combined with her occupation, behaviour, and sexuality, allows Rani to identify, and be identified, as a calalai.

Calabai, conversely, are anatomical males who, in many respects, adhere to the expectations of women. However, calabai do not consider themselves women, are not considered women. Nor do they wish to become women, either by accepting restrictions placed on women such as not going out alone at night, or by recreating their body through surgery. However, whereas calalai tend to conform more to the norms of men, calabai have created a specific role for themselves in Bugis society.

If there is to be a wedding in Bugis society, more often than not calabai will be involved in the organisation. When a wedding date has been agreed upon, the family will approach a calabai and negotiate a wedding plan. The calabai will be responsible for many things: setting up and decorating the tent, arranging the bridal chairs, bridal gown, costumes for the groom and the entire wedding party (numbering up to twenty-five), makeup for all those involved, and all the food. Rarely did I attend a village wedding with less than a thousand guests. On the day, some calabai remain in the kitchen preparing food while others form part of the reception, showing guests to their seats.

Bissu, calalai, and calabai challenge the notion that individuals must conform to one of two genders, woman or man, and that one's anatomy must support one's gender. Bugis gender reveals the diverse nature of human identity. It makes me question our own notions of gender. For example, why should Australia insist on a boring old two-gender system?

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Inside Indonesia