

ANCIENT LOCAL CULTURE OF THE BUGINESE AND ISLAM: PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ACCULTURATION OF ISLAM AND THE BISSU TRADITION

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Abstract: The Bugis community in South Sulawesi, Indonesia has a pre-Islamic tradition called Bissu which still exists today and is acculturated to Islam. This culture is still deeply rooted in several regions and has even become a symbol of distinctive traditions. This study attempted to examine the relationship between local culture in Bissu cultural practices and Islam, to identify the impact of the acculturation of the Bissu traditions with the Islamic teachings. Using a phenomenological analysis approach, this research studied the Bissu cultural and traditional beliefs and practices, at the research location of the Segeri area, Pangkepene Regency, South Sulawesi Islands. The data was collected through primary and secondary data. The primary sources included interviews with the government officials and local residents, aiming at finding out how Bissu traditions have been integrated with Islam. The secondary data was retrieved from documents and research studies. The findings reveal that Bissu community had completely adhered to Islam and adapted the Islamic values and teachings in their ritual ceremonies. The local community also felt that the Bissu used Islam as their main pattern of life. The implication of this study lies in the fact that the Bissu traditional rituals are now part of local ancestral traditions that need to be cared for as cultural treasures in the Bugis society.

Keywords: Acculturation, Bissu, Bugis, Culture, Islam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bugis, one of the tribes in Indonesia, is an ethnic group originating in South Sulawesi. The main characteristics of this ethnic group are their language and customs. During its development, this community developed and formed several kingdoms which were known to have their own culture, language, script and

government and became the rulers of kingdoms in the archipelago (Ahmadin, 2021). Some classic Bugis kingdoms include Luwu, Bone, Wajo, Soppeng, Suppa, Sawitto, Sidenreng and Rappang. The term *bissu* comes from the Bugis language *bessi* or *mabessi* which means clean. Originally, the Bissu came to be identified as ancient religious priests who had two human elements, namely male and female and were able to occupy two realms, namely the human and spirit realms.

The Bissu in the Bugis community gained popularity in the medieval period for its cultural diversity and adherence to traditional beliefs (Rawe, 2020). The existence of the Bissu in South Sulawesi has been growing since the 14th century, playing an important role in society, and still exists today (Pattinama, Mawara, & Mamosey, 2020). Their role as a traditional leader was especially evident in several social and spiritual activities namely wedding ceremonies, pregnancy, births, circumcision, start of the rice planting process, and various other traditional (*mappalili*) ceremonies. Besides, the Bissu were considered custodians of customs, traditions, family genealogy, and were even entrusted the power to guard the royal lineages (Hamonic, 1986). Owing to their religious significance, they were also seen a mediator with gods as it was believed that the Bissu language was the sacred language (Bahasa *Tolangi*) sent down from heaven by the gods and therefore they could communicate with ancestral spirits and the gods.

In the modern times, the Bugis in Segeri still perform the Bissu rituals in the social and spiritual life cycle, which is seen as an attempt to preserve the Bissu culture. They participate in art and cultural events, organized by both private agencies and government. Its role in society went beyond the long history of the kingdom before the arrival of Islam, until Islam developed in South Sulawesi (Hasriani, 2018). With the advent of Islam in Indonesia, the Bissu adapted their social and cultural rituals to Islamic patterns, which is often termed as localization or indigenization (Marshall, 1974). This study calls it an attempt to achieve acculturation of the Bissu traditions and rituals according to the Islamic patterns.

There is a dearth of research on cultural acculturation and Islam in the context of the Bissu tradition. Hence, there is a need to fill this research gap. In addition, there are a few other reasons to examine the Bissu tradition. First, the Bissu tradition is still considered important in various traditional ceremonial processions in South Sulawesi. Second, since now all Bissu adhere to Islam, it is necessary to investigate the extent to which the acculturation or adaptation has taken place between Islam and the Bissu culture. It is locally believed that the Bissu tradition has grown according to the Islamic values and teachings, which is evident when residents perform social and spiritual

ceremonies in the community. Thirdly, this study would also see this adaptation or acculturation from the perspective of Islamic hegemony over the *Bissu* tradition. It is important to understand whether Islam made a dominant influence on the *Bissu* traditions, and reduced the role of the *Bissu* as traditional leaders. Fourthly, this issue of cultural transformation is seen from various perspectives which needs to be examined. For example, the residents see it with a gender perspective, the *Bissu* as the third gender in Indonesia and that it enjoys certain gender privileges (Andaya, 2018; Suliyati, 2018). Others review this acculturation from the perspective of the influence of Hinduism on *Bissu* or the influence of the Hindu civilization (Untara & Rahayu, 2020); while others approach it from a cultural perspective such as *Bissu* as maintaining and preserving classical Buginese culture (Syahrir et al., 2020).

The current study is an attempt to examine the ancient local culture of the Buginese as reflected in the *Bissu* tradition in the context of its acculturation with Islam and the Islamic teachings. This study adopted an interdisciplinary perspective to examine the existence of *Bissu* in South Sulawesi in a more comprehensive and multi-perspective way. The study established that even though in the past many people considered the *Bissu* tradition to deviate from Islam, but people are now being moderate in placing *Bissu's* position in the midst of society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

- *History of Bissu in Pre-Islamic Bugis Civilization in South Sulawesi*

The exploration of the history of *Bissu* in Bugis society can be traced through the ancient Bugis manuscript in the form of *Lontara* (Sumange, 2014). *Lontara* includes all kinds of writing that uses Bugis letters or is called "*Urupu Sulapa Eppa*". One *Lontara* that reveals a lot about ancient Bugis culture is *Lontara I La Galigo*, written in the 14th century. Among the Bugis people, *Lontara I La Galigo* is considered a very sacred book, because it contains many supernatural stories and basic principles from the messages of ancient wise men and kings (Rawe, 2020). According to Bugis people's beliefs, *Bissu* was present at the same time as the birth of the Bugis tribe (Nyompa, 1992). In the book *I La Galigo*, it is stated that the existence of *Bissu* is related to the legendary story about Batara Guru who was the forerunner of Bugis humans who came down from the "upper world" (*botinglangi*) to earth or the underworld (*bori'liung*) to meet his wife *We Nyili Timo*. When Batara Guru came down to earth, he was accompanied by a *Bissu* named *Lae-lae*. This *Bissu* helps Batara

Guru to regulate life on earth. Thanks to Bissu's help, social rules, norms and ethics were created on earth. Apart from that, language and cultural works and traditions are also created as a result of community activities.

The *Lontra La Galigo* also reveals that Bissu' had an important role in the religious sphere, which characterized the Bissu as intermediaries for humans to connect with the gods. The Bugis people believed that the Bissu had supernatural powers, and the Bissu were even considered magical humans. During this pre-Islamic kingdom era in South Sulawesi, there existed several Bugis kingdoms. Bissu's life was supported by these kingdoms which provided convenience in economic life and high social status. During this pre-Islamic phase of the Bugis community, a Bissu had a very important position and they had a high social status in society. The Bissu was also involved in all processes of the human life cycle starting from birth, marriage, war, and accompanying them on their journey to death.

However, this changed when the state government took the form of a republic, which regulated regional government carried out by regional heads in accordance with their hierarchical levels with predetermined terms of office. Since the change in the status of the kingdom to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, Bissu no longer had economic resources, because the *galung arajang* (heritage rice fields) as a source of income for Bissu had been taken over by the community or local government. The lack of economic resources caused the *bola arajang* (heirloom house) as the residence of the Bissu to become unkempt and began to fall into disrepair and was abandoned by the Bissu.

- *Role of Bissu in Bugis Tradition: Past and Present*

Traditionally, in South Sulawesi, the existence of Bissu was related to their important role in various aspects of community life. In the cultural structure of the classical Bugis people, Bissu's role is quite special. Bissu not only enjoyed the position of a custodian of the oral tradition of ancient Bugis literary texts (*Sure' Lagaligo*), but also acted as an advisor to the king (Azizah, 2022), including arranging all traditional ceremonies such as the *mappalili* ceremony, pregnancy, birth, marriage, vows. until death (Rahmat & Saleh, 2023). During the reign of pre-Islamic kingdoms in South Sulawesi, it was stipulated that every *ranreng*, namely a kind of traditional territory (now sub-district) was required to have a Bissu group. The Bugis community ever since had been known for its cultural diversity and traditional laws that are still maintained (Rawe, 2020).

These Bissu groups received special treatment because of their role in

determining the livelihood of the Bugis community. Specifically, their social role was related to the belief that they could communicate with ancestral spirits and the gods. People often asked for Bissu's services to connect them with ancestral spirits or the gods to fulfill their requests. Among the beliefs of local residents was that Bissu had its own language to communicate with the gods and to communicate between themselves. The Bissu language was called the sacred language (*Bahasa Tolangi*). The Bissu believed that this language was sent down from heaven through the gods. The local people also believed that the Bissu mastered *Basa Torilangi*, or the sky language, which only the Bissu and the gods understood. Therefore, Bissu always led everything related to traditions or rituals. Through this mystical language, Bissu recited mantras and prayers in various religious ceremonies, both state and community and family groups.

Hamonic (1986) states that the Bugis people really respected Bissu because Bissu had knowledge of customs, traditions, family genealogy, social life in the world and the life of the gods, masters medicine and mysticism. Cosmology was the basis of Bugis beliefs (Pabbajah, 2012). Mardanas (1985) stated that the Bugis-Makassar tribe long ago adhered to an ideology or belief (*Toriolong*) which taught a cosmological view. This view supported the idea that traditional Bugis society in the past strongly believed that if there was a king who Bissu did not pray for, then that king did not have the authority to lead his people. Both the public and royal family often asked Bissu for guidance, help, or treatment and learning. Thus, the Bissu played a decisive role in the life cycle of the Bugis people.

In the modern times, many Bugis people in Segeri still invite Bissu as ritual performers in the social life cycle. The Bissu is currently synonymous with having a profession as a traditional holder, namely Bissu carries out ancestral traditions so that their existence is maintained. Bissu's presence in society is no longer part of people's religious beliefs but has turned into a cultural movement. The Bissu currently plays a more important role in preserving the Bissu culture. Usually, they are invited to art performances, including being partners with the government in cultural activities where the Bissu usually perform art performances. The Bissu are also often invited to family celebration events, including arts activities organized by the government. During the event, they are asked to perform the Ma'giri' art performance. Ma'giri is an art performance performed by Bissu. This tradition is a special artistic skill that Bissu have practiced for a long time, so they are popular with various groups of society, including being preserved by the government as an effort to preserve the traditional wealth of the people of South Sulawesi.

The Bissu is also synonymous with the profession of *Indo Botting* (bridal make-

up artist), wedding decoration, costume or custom clothing rental service (Rahayu, 2021). At weddings, the Bissu play an important role in the *mappacci* event. They make up and wear bridal costumes; they even arrange to pick up the groom, because they are often asked by the family of the prospective bride and groom who ask for their services to take care of the rituals and stages of the event. The Bissu take part in various series of wedding ceremonies where they are entrusted not only to do the bride's make-up, but also to provide blessings with various rituals. Here, Bissu also gives a special prayer for the bride and groom which is believed to make the family of the bride and groom last forever in marriage.

- *Portraying Islamic and Cultural Acculturation in the Bissu Tradition*

Conceptually, acculturation can be understood as a process of maintaining one's own culture while simultaneously learning to understand the existence of other cultures (Al-Amri & Haramain, 2017). When social contact between groups occurs over a long period of time and mutual acceptance of one another, this can result in increased ethnic awareness and stronger group differentiation (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2016). This was clearly evident when the Bissu adapted their cultural rituals to Islamic patterns or with the colors of the local culture, according to the socio-cultural context that they faced. This is what makes Islam then undergo a process of what Marshall (1974) calls localization or indigenization. The completeness of the vision of Islam as a universal religion, according to Marshall, actually guarantees that Islam will never be completely the same between one place and another and between one time and another (Marshall, 1974).

In this context, it was inevitable that acculturation would be seen as an encounter between the Islamic and the Bissu traditions and rituals which are still found in the Bugis society. Several studies have introspected this perspective of acculturation in the context of sociology of religion. For instance, Umar (2008) perceived that the Bissu group is still strong in its traditional indigenous beliefs. Adnan (2018) asserted that, while the Bissu realized that Islam is a noble teaching and can apply universally, at the same time, they also believed that the entirety of Islamic teachings can be translated into their traditions. Such an acculturation of the Bissu culture and Islam certainly could not be separated from the process of interaction between the Bissu and Islamic teachings (Elmahady, 2020). Nuruddin (2018) also examined the Bissu culture and Islam in the traditions of local communities in South Sulawesi, especially in terms of Islamic encounters and the community's strong adherence to their customs and beliefs. He explained that

though the people of South Sulawesi, including the Bissu, accepted Islam openly for empirical reasons and even affirmed it as part of their identity, but local cultural elements did not necessarily disappear from their beliefs. All these studies enrich our knowledge regarding the acculturation of Islam and local culture such as the Bissu tradition.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (Hamzah, 2020). The research location was the Segeri, Pangkepene Regency, in South Sulawesi Islands. This area was chosen because the Segeri District was one of the Bugis inhabited areas where Bissu cultural traditions were still very strong. The performance of the Bissu ceremony is highly institutionalized by the Segeri community, and this area routinely holds special ceremonies (*mappalili*) in collaboration with the local government and local residents. Data was collected through interviews and document review. The interviews were conducted with a number of Bissu members, government officials and local residents. The in depth analysis of the interview findings revealed innumerable facts about Bissu traditions that had been integrated with Islam. The documentation review was carried out through studies and books and articles on the subject. After accumulating both the primary and secondary data, a few themes and categories were identified through content analysis methods. There were several references and interpretations about the meaning of Islamic acculturation. Conclusion were drawn about the Bissu culture in the context of these findings.

4. RESULTS

This study made evident that Bissu built adaptive awareness between religion and culture through a philosophy of life. The Bissu held firmly and guided themselves in their daily lives with the philosophy of life of *sara' sandre ada'* (customs following religion). For the Bissu community, the things indicated by religious law were also what was embedded in their customs and rituals. With the advent of Islam, there started the process of internalizing or acculturating the Islamic values and adapting the Islamic teachings with that of local culture started. In general, the Bissu developed the ability to articulate the relationship between religion and customs, and gave birth to acculturation of Islam with Bissu

cultural traditions.

After the advent of Islam and acculturation of the Bissu's cultural beliefs that resulted, the Bissu started interacting with the Islamic teachings and the Bissu tradition slowly began to be abandoned, though community traditions were not immediately eliminated but rather changes in form and substance. The manifestation of the interaction between Islam and Bissu culture could be seen when a Bissu carried out family or royal ritual ceremonies, both of a religious nature, namely when there is a party or celebration such as ceremonies celebrating births, whether the person set foot on the ground for the first time, circumcision, marriage, including *Mappalili* ceremony, start of the rice planting process.

To cite an example, in Islamic birth celebrations (*aqiqah*), when a Bissu was involved in offering prayers for the child's safety, it was discovered that the Bissu aligned themselves with Islamic rules. They stated that the prayers they offered were aimed at Allah SWT. The Bissu until now were taking a role in blessing for the good of life and safety for a child but now they adapted to the Islamic religious law. During the ceremony (*aqiqah*), the entire ritual remained in accordance with the Islamic law where Bissu and religious figures were the perpetrators. The Bissu believed that all the readings that were chanted were solely seeking blessings and directed towards Allah SWT.

The results of the study made it evident that after Islam entered the South Sulawesi region, Bissu cultural practices were gradually adapted to Islamic teachings. Currently, the Bissu community combines elements of the Islamic religion in traditional ceremonies held by the Bissu. Each ceremony, which is led and accompanied by the Bissu as a traditional leader, does not fail to highlight Islamic elements such as reading of the Qur'anic verses and performing prayers in the presence of local Islamic figures, such as mosque imams. They start by reading prayers, including the *Barzanji*. This has gradually developed as a ritual acculturation of the Bissu tradition. When the Bissu want to hold important events, such as the time to start planting rice, they often involve local religious figures to recite the prayers taught and other rituals that are often practiced in Islam. This shows that they have indirectly adapted Islamic values and norms in their ritual processions. The scope of acculturation of the Bissu tradition is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Scope of Bissu Acculturation with Islamic Values.

Acculturation Scope	Form of Acculturation	Islamic Values
<i>Mappalili</i> (season to start rice planting)	Before the Mappalili ceremony was held, the Bissu together with community leaders carried out Tudang Sipulung (sitting together) and religious leaders were involved	Discussing something important in Islamic teachings is part of the implementation of deliberation
Aqiqah/Birth	Blessing the newborn child for safety, and in this activity the <i>Barzanji</i> is recited	Giving prayers is part of Islamic teachings, including giving prayers.
Marriage	Bissu performs a ritual (<i>cenningrara</i>) so that a husband and wife will last forever	In Islam, married couples are prayed to become a <i>Sakinah, mawaddah, warahmah</i> family (prosperous family, happy world and afterlife)

The Bissu's adaptation to Islam as presented in the table is not surprising because the people of South Sulawesi are generally Muslims. Hence, it was easier for the Bissu to represent themselves as adherents of Islamic teachings, including presenting themselves with Islamic symbols such as white clothes and turbans. In subsequent developments, the Bissu in the modern times no longer completely has the same spirit as the Bissu known in pre-Islamic times. However, this is quite sure that the Bissu who emerged later were the Muslim Bissu who had adopted Islamic traditions, and are still continuing.

5. DISCUSSION

The acculturation of the Bissu traditions as representation of Islam is the evidence of the domination of the Islamic culture, and narrates how the Bissu community united with Islam. This also narrates how local cultures in South Sulawesi were integrated with each other through assimilation, acculturation and adaptation. This happened because religious teachings were in line with cultural norms. For example, Bissu often plays an important role in wedding ceremonies in society, especially in Segeri. They acted as spiritual intermediaries and bestowed blessings on the newly-weds. In these wedding ceremonies, after the assimilation and acculturation had effectively taken place, prayers and Islamic readings began to be integrated with the ceremonies. This reflected the respect for Islamic teachings in the context of traditional Bugis marriages.

In carrying out any activity, especially something very sacred such as starting a ceremonial or religious ritual, there are several steps that must be taken, one of which

is that you must start with prayer and fasting. In carrying out anything, it is required that one must first pray the Almighty for smoothness so that what is hoped for can be achieved well. This proves that even though the Bissu believed in and applied the beliefs of the ancients, they still sought blessings from Allah SWT, although in different ways. This cannot be said to be part of idolatry, because every person or group has a way to communicate with God Allah SWT. This is where acculturation occurs as a form of Bissu's negotiation and adaptation with Islamic beliefs.

In Indonesia, the integration of religion and culture has become commonplace, and the government even recommends accommodating local culture as an effort to maintain traditions and maintain national harmony (Pabbajah, 2012). This is the basis for local residents and Bissu si a perfect example as it protects the ancient religion and culture. This is consistent with the previous research studies (Adnan, 2018; Nuruddin, 2018; Umar, 2008) that showed how the Bissu believed that traditional norms called *pangadakkang* or *pangadereng* were merged with religious norms which were then called "sara." For this reason, violations of religious norms were identified as violations of customs.

The integration of Islamic teaching values with the customs of community life led to the birth of new value systems such as *ade'*, *rapang*, *wari*, talks and *sara'*. The elements of sara' were accepted into the *pangadereng* (social norms) of the Bissu community. Through the institution of sara', the process of accepting Islam took place which gave color to pangadereng throughout, so that among Bugis people such as the Bissu in Segeri, an understanding emerged that Islam was identical to Bugis culture. They generally also believed that being Muslims, they should carry out Islamic religious law like the Bugis community in general assimilating them in their daily lives.

Hence, the process of institutionalizing Islam in the Bissu ritual tradition in Segeri continues along with the acculturation of Islamic values and teachings in the life practices of the Bissu community. The ceremonies involving Bissu often combine Islamic elements with local traditions that display actions that have spiritual meaning. This is consistent with the findings of Triadi and Said (2020), who asserted that the Islamic model of society in the Segeri Pangkajene Islands generally had its own characteristics. The model for implementing Islamic law is also similar to the Islamic model of Nahdatul Ulama based in East Java, where too Islam has been acculturated with local cultures, known as Nusantara Islam (Luthfi, 2016)

6. CONCLUSION

As the general principle, this study concludes that the face of Islam in various

regions in Indonesia is not fully manifested in pure Islamic teachings. There is an integration of the local cultural identity and Islamic religious principles with each other. This phenomenon can be found in the relationship between Islam and the ancient Bugis beliefs. This study cited a few examples when Bissu ritual practices were seen going hand in hand with Islam. Even though in some areas there are those who are starting to abandon the ancient Bugis culture, it is difficult to completely eliminate this traditional Bugis culture in the social and religious activities of the community to this day. The Bissu tradition as part of the history of Bugis civilization is still maintained even though there are modifications to the Bissu culture to be in line with Islamic teachings. This can be understood because the Bissu believe in Islam as their main religion but, in reality, they still maintain their ancestral culture in responding to encounters with Islamic teachings. In this context, Bissu cannot always be considered contrary to Islam as long as the Bissu's *aqidah* maintains belief in God Allah SWT.

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