A specific group acting as priests among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, the *bissu* are imagined to be hermaphroditic beings embodying female and male elements. For anyone interested in the study of sex and gender, the Bugis, the largest ethnic group of South Sulawesi, offers an exceptionally rich canvas for research.

In addition to the rich oral tradition of the Bugis, origin narratives have been recorded on lontar palm leaves from around the sixteenth century. One such recorded narrative tells of Sarawigading and WeCudai, the marriage of whom resulted in the birth of the first human on earth. Sarawigading desperately wanted to marry with WeCudai but lived on an island in the middle of the lake. Sarawigading had no way of getting to the middle of the lake but he knew he must. Sarawigading decided he must make a boat and paddle out to WeCudai. But how to make a boat? If only he could cut this massive tree down. But try as he might he was not powerful enough to do so. Sarawigading burst into frustrated tears and cried long into the night. He would never be able to cut this tree down and make a boat and he would never reach WeCudai. But there was a bissu in the heavens above who heard Sarawigading cry. The bissu descended and said, “Please don’t worry, I will cut the tree down and the help you make the boat.” And the bissu cut down the tree because s/he had the strength of both man and woman, and mortal and deity.

These origin narratives serve to demonstrate that the *bissu* have a primary position in the minds of the Bugis in their imaginations of the past. require a specific role and position in Bugis society. How do you become a bissu? It is believed that you are born with the propensity to become a *bissu*. Most auspiciously, this is revealed in a baby whose genitalia are ambiguous. Unsurprisingly, ambiguous genitalia alone cannot ensure that you become a *bissu*. Moreover, these ambiguous genitalia need not be visible; a normative male who becomes a *bissu* is believed to be female on the inside. By the age of about twelve, if a child demonstrates a close connection with the spirit world, he or she is groomed to become a *bissu*. In the past, such a child would be apprenticed to the royal court. Nowadays, a child will become the apprentice of an individual *bissu*. After many years of training, an apprentice *bissu* will undergo a number of tests in order to become a *bissu*. This includes, among many other tests, lying on a bamboo raft in the middle of a lake for three days and three nights without eating, drinking, or moving. If the apprentice survives this and wakes from the trance fluent in the sacred *bissu* language (Basa *Bissu* or Bahasa Dewata, language of the gods), he or she is then accepted as a *bissu*.

A study of the *bissu* and their role and position in Bugis society has the potential to make some substantial contributions to our understanding of how different societies organize and interpret gender. Not all societies acknowledge that there are just two genders, woman and man, attached respectively to two biological sexes, female and male. Some societies, such as that of the Bugis, acknowledge possibly four gender categories, in addition to a fifth para-gender group — the *bissu*. It is from the Bugis that we can learn much about acceptance and respect for a panoply of gender identities.

**Bibliography**


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Sharyn Graham, MA is a PhD candidate in the Departments of Asian Studies and Anthropology at the University of Western Aus- tralia. For the past few years I have been conducting anthropo-

For the past few years I have been conducting anthropological research into ideas and forms of gender in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. While initially I was concerned with men and women, upon arrival I realized that gender in South Sulawesi is much more complex than that. Among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, possibly four genders are acknowledged: a fifth ‘para-gender’ identity. In addition to male-men (*pirani*) and female-women (*makunrai*; categories that are similar to those in Australia), there are calabai, biological females who take on many of the roles and functions expected of men; calalai, biological males who in many respects adhere to the expectations of women, and *bissu*. In this arti-

I will focus on *bissu*, act as priests. The Bugis have an incredibly rich oral history, as well as an extensive history of written material. If you were to ask someone in South Sulawesi how they imagine their world came to be, you would probably be told a narrative in which the *bissu* play a central role.

You ask how this world came to be? Well let me tell you. Up there in the heavens, the gods decided they would bring life to this lonely planet. They therefore sent down one of their most aspiring deities, Batara Guru. But Batara Guru was not good at organizing things. To do all of this, two *bissu* were needed. So the gods sent down two *bissu* who flanked Batara Guru as he descended. And when he arrived, the *bissu* set about making everything blossom; they created lan-

The main role of the *bissu* thus is to bestow blessings. And blessings can be for just about anything. A *bissu* blessing is performed before planting rice and before har-

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Other articles contain much about acceptance and respect for a panoply of gen-

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Sex, Gender, and Priests in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

In contemporary Bugis society, *bissu* are known to perform the sacred ritual to the gods.

A *bissu* chanting a sacred ritual to the gods.

A *bissu* performing the *ma'giri*, or self-stabbing. To perform this, a *bissu* would first hold their skin with the *kris*.