

# Religion and Cultural Identity Among the Bugis (A Preliminary Remark)

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bugis, also known as the Buginese, are the main ethnic group of South Sulawesi of Indonesia. Their dominance in number as well as the large area in which they live has made them the most influential ethnic group with regard to economic and political activities in the area. The other ethnic groups of the province are the Makassar, the Mandar and the Toraja. The Bugis are commonly known among their neighbors as having good motivation in promoting a better life, and this, together with the flourishing soil of their land, enables them to develop important roles coloring the local activities not only at the level of the province but also in the eastern part of Indonesia as well.

The coming of Islam to the Bugis world in the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked a turning point of the daily life of the Bugis. Moving from the so called pre-Islamic syncretism to Islamic formalism put them, to a certain extent, among those Indonesian people whose Islamic identity is strong. And from there on, religion has been an integral and essential part of the Bugis culture and way of life (Pelras, 1996:4).

Not surprisingly then, Islam has become a fundamental aspect of the Bugis culture. For the Bugis, holding ethnicity as the Bugis should also be coincident with the position of being Muslim. In spite of being devout Muslims, some of them still preserve their pre-Islamic beliefs that to a certain extent contradict their Islamic faith, particularly for those who follow Islamic orthodoxy. Most of those who still preserve this belief live particularly in remote villages

where Muslim proselytizers, have been unable to reach them due to the problems of communication and transportation.

This study aims at describing the relation between religiosity and cultural identity among the Bugis. Working in this field, I wish to present a brief description on the role religion plays in the identity of the Bugis.

#### THE MAKING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

The meaning of the word Bugis itself has never been known precisely. The word Bugis is the Indonesian or Malay absorption of the word *ugi'* or *ogi'*, the living term used by the Bugis addressing themselves. The early history of the Bugis is obscure due to the lack of historical records dealing with the origin and the early lives of the people. There are some oral accounts mentioning the origin and the early lives of the Bugis, but those accounts are different from one to another. It is very likely that those accounts were made to justify the superiority of the Bugis compared with other ethnic groups. The only widely referred written account commonly used to trace the origin of the Bugis, particularly its noble groups, is the epic *La Galigo* cycle. This work is actually a mythical exposition compiled to deal with the origin and the early history of the Bugis noble family. Many Bugis people believe that the events described really occurred in the early history of humankind.

It is difficult to trace the formation of the Bugis cultural identity. The obscurity of the history of the early lives of the Bugis together with the diversity of their sub-ethnic groups have contributed to the difficulty for anyone who wishes to uncover the distinctive culture of the Bugis. What one may possibly do with regard to the origin and the formative period of the Bugis culture is to sketch it in a general way.

Taking note of the fact that the general feature of the Bugis land comprises hilly and low land, one may assume that most of the Bugis are farmers, fishers, and traders. These professions have been important factors in the lives of the Bugis, and to a certain extent have shaped the cultural identity of these people. Both their spiritual and material lives have always functioned in accordance with the environmental features of their lands. Being farmers, for example, the Bugis are familiar with Sangiasseri, the name given to the rice deity. And Sangiasseri is none other than the daughter of the Datu Patotoe', the prince who allocates destinies (Pelras, 1996:90).

The Bugis are also known as prominent sailors. Many sources inform us that the Bugis boats were often seen all over the area known today as the Indonesian archipelago, from Singapore to New Guinea and from southern Philippines to north-western Australia, and they even sailed across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar. This

may well be true since the Bugis, as well as the Makassar, their fellow Bugis, have always been among the people most eager to cross the sea either to trade or to catch fish.

Unlike other ethnic groups of South Sulawesi, the Bugis have been known as people who like to travel to most parts of Indonesia and even to some parts of its neighbors such as Australia and Malaysia. Some of those have established Bugis villages or at least Bugis communities in the regions they visited. There are numbers of Bugis communities in several big cities of Indonesia such as in Jakarta and Surabaya. And it is not an exaggeration to say that the Bugis enterprises have dominated economic life in most parts on eastern Indonesia such as Ambon, Kendari, Kupang, Sorong and Jayapura.

The large area occupied by the Bugis has resulted in its division into various sub-communities in the past, as can be seen in the emergence of some Bugis kingdoms such as Luwu, Bone, Wajo, Soppeng and Rappang. These Bugis kingdoms had become the basis of the present day territorial and administrative boundaries. The Bugis reside in at least 12 regencies out of 24 regencies in the province. This means that half of the province is occupied by the Bugis. The Makassar live in 9 regencies, while 5 regencies are occupied by the Mandar, and 2 regencies are occupied by the Toraja.

Like many other ethnic groups, the Bugis have been known as people who always try to preserve their cultural heritage such as language, traditional festivals, customs, ethnic solidarity, and ethnicity pride. These cultural elements are still appreciated by most of the Bugis regardless of the intensity of modernization, which to a certain extent, brings about a decrease in appreciation for such entities.

#### THE BUGIS RELIGIOSITY

The only source available concerning the historical background of the Bugis religiosity is the *La Galigo Cycle*. There exists some information concerning the early life of the Bugis such as some notes made by Western travelers who mentioned the Bugis, but since they were mentioned only in passing, the information is rather scanty. The information given by the *La Galigo cycle* can be used as tentative materials, to a certain extent, though on the basis that the information is more fictitious than historical.

Based on the information given by the *La Galigo cycle*, it is clear that the indigenous religiosity may be rooted in both local and imported systems. The local belief grew gradually during a long period of time, starting from the very beginning of the history of the Bugis. This process introduced to the Bugis a number of belief

systems such as animism, dynamism, and polytheism before the coming of Hindu and Buddhism. The result of this process can be seen in the fact that there are still elements of these belief system practiced by some of the Bugis families. This process took place from the beginning of the Bugis history up to the time when the Christian missionaries first came to this area, which was almost the same time as the coming of Muslim proselytizers who tried to convert the Bugis to Islam.

The main religion embraced by the Bugis is Islam. About 95 percent of the Bugis are Muslims. There are a small number of the Bugis who do not take Islam as their religion. A Bugis community living in Amparita in the Sidenreng Rappang Regency remains in pre-Islamic belief and is called as Tolotang. Some Bugis converted to Christianity by means of marriage. But their number remained small.

The Bugis first came into contact with Islam some time before the end of the 16th century (Mattulada, 1983:216-219). Since that time, the process of Islamization has taken place throughout the Bugis area, conducted mainly by Muslim proselytizers who received much support from the Bugis Kingdoms.

According to some local accounts, the Islamization of the Bugis was conducted first by three Muslim proselytizers coming from West Sumatra. These three figures are traditionally known as datuk, a special term used mainly in Malay tradition. They are Datuk Sulaiman, Datuk Ri Bandang, and Datuk Ri Tiro. It might not be wrong if we assume that the process of Islamization of the Bugis took place over a very long period starting from the time when the people of this region, particularly those who conducted trade, came into contact with the people of western part of Indonesia that had converted to Islam. This is because Islam, like other missionary religions, obliges its follower to be proselytizers.

The process of Islamization of the Bugis was consolidated at the time the Bugis kingdoms officially accepted Islam as the formal religion of their kingdoms. This process took place in the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in three major phases:

1. The official acceptance of Islam as the formal religion of the Bugis kingdoms. This phase took place from the end of the 16th century until the beginning of the 17th century.
2. The institutionalization of Islamic teaching in the application of political power in each kingdom.
3. The integration and the implementation of the Islamic teachings in the daily life of the Bugis. This took place particularly during the independence period.

The acceptance of Islam, which in turn was treated as an integral part of pangngaderreng (a system of conduct), marked an important point of the Bugis life with regard to their religiosity. By accepting Islam as part of pangngaderreng, every single person in the Bugis community should try to understand Islam in order to be able to practice it in his or her life.

The integration of the Islamic law into the whole system of pangngaderreng enabled the process of Islamization to run smoothly. The acceptance of Islam by the Bugis has strengthened their cultural identity as can be seen in the formation of their worldview. There have been several main cultural concepts known among the Bugis as the essential basics of the Bugis cultural life.

Although the Bugis have experienced transition from the traditional to the modern through a long and complex process, many specific cultural elements inherited from the past are still alive. Some of those have been considered as important aspects of the cultural identity of the Bugis in terms of preserving and protecting the uniqueness of the Bugis culture.

This is a large and complex topic; therefore I will only elaborate here on some of the fundamental cultural values that have been perceived by most of the Bugis to be integral parts of their religious cognizance on the basis that those cultural concepts have also been brought forward by religion, and in particular, Islam.

#### SIRI': THE VALUE OF ONESELF

Siri' may mean honor, dignity or courtesy. In the daily life of the Bugis, siri' is applied in two main forms: siri' as personal honor, and siri' as communal honor. As personal honor, siri' indicates the value of a human being. This means that every single person has his or her own honor by birth. The higher the social status one has, the greater honor he or she bears. This means that one who has higher social status in a particular Bugis community would be protected from doing anything that may challenge his or her dignity as a highly respected member of society. Moreover, he or she has to try to keep his or her conduct in order not to do anything that may ruin his or her honor.

The important position of siri' in Bugis society has been outlined by Hamid Abdullah who says that siri' is the most basic element in the life of the Bugis as well as the three other main ethnic groups of South Sulawesi. For the Bugis, siri' is always identical with the value of life, and therefore they are ready to sacrifice everything, including their lives, for the sake of siri' (Hamid Abdullah, 1985:37).

Siri' as a virtue should go hand in hand with pesse which means painful feeling. The complete form of the term is pesse babua which

implies to feel painful in one's stomach as the form of sympathy. This indicates a deep feeling of compassion for someone who is in need of something such as food, medicine, compassionate and the like (Pelras, 1996:207).

Siri' is both an individual and a communal feeling. As an individual feeling, siri' stimulates one to observe good manners in his or her daily life. This also means that one should always work hard in order to be able to gain success in every aspect of life, including economics and politics. As a communal feeling, siri' plays an important role in supporting one's group or community to achieve a better livelihood.

To be frank, siri' can be misunderstood by either an individual or by a group of people, and therefore can lead to unlawful things. This may happen when siri' is understood in an extreme way. When a Bugis feels humiliated by someone, he therefore assumes that his siri' has been challenged. As a result, he would think that he has the right to retaliate as a way of protecting or restoring his siri'. One example that can be mentioned here is siri' in relation with marriage. If a Bugis man plans to marry a Bugis woman and his proposal is rejected, then he feels that his honor is dead. He will not have any way out except by making a plan to run away with the girl. And if this happens, the girl's family assume they have the right to protect their family honor, so they justify killing the culprit in order to restore the family's honor. It can be imagined that if the killing truly happens, then the implications will be more complicated (Pelras, 1996:206).

Cases such as the above-mentioned seem to have decreased following the implementation of law enforcement in society. But since siri' has such deep roots in the Bugis, the reaction may take other forms such as personal or communal humiliation. Thus it is very often that one inflicts damage, or even death, as a result of feeling offended by another.

The introduction of Islam to the Bugis seems to have modified the image of siri' among the Bugis. Siri' is no longer understood in the sense of showing force toward other people, but it is more understood as a mental condition that may motivate someone to behave in a good manner, as well as motivating them to perform hard work in order to improve the quality of life socially, politically or economically.

Siri' tends to enforce both individual and communal integrity. In the individual context, siri' gives motivation to abstain from doing anything that may challenge one's honor. Here, every single person in community should behave as an honorable person by observing good deeds. In the communal context, siri' implies the obligation of

supporting group solidarity among members of the community by having sympathy towards anyone in need in the society.

From the perspective of siri', there are some cultural concepts considered to be an integral part of the Bugis culture. These concepts have been perceived as the starting point with regard to responding to others. The implementation of siri' in daily social life of the Bugis is manifested in five principles of conduct:

1. Ada Tongeng (truthful wording)
2. Lempuk (honesty)
3. Getteng (steadfastness)
4. Sipakatau (mutual respect)
5. Mappesona ri dewata seuwae (submission to the will of God)

#### ADA TONGENG

Ada tongeng is the principle of wording in which one should speak the truth. This entails a moral imperative to every single person of the Bugis to be honest in telling anything. In addition, ada tongeng also means that every word expressed should always bring about good for life. One should always try to avoid any word that may cause harm for other individual or group.

#### LEMPUK

Lempuk is the principle of action in which one should always do right. He or she should try to avoid doing something that is not true. This principle entails an obligation for everyone in the Bugis community to be true in both words and action.

#### GETTENG

Getteng is the principle of attitude in which one should always have a distinct or firm attitude concerning one thing. For the Bugis, maintaining or defending a position which is believed as true, is a must. This results in the trend among the Bugis to be steady in whatever position he or she has chosen.

#### SIPAKATAU

Sipakatau is the principle of communication in which one should address another in the best way possible. This implies certain requirements that should be carried in dealing with other people. For the Bugis, a human being is actually a special and unique entity in the world and has to be responded to in full respect. This is because every single person has both rational as well as emotional aptitudes that have to be taken into account.

#### MAPPESONA RI DEWATA SEUWAE

Mappesona ri dewata seuwae is the principle of religiosity in which every human being has to submit himself or herself to the will of God. This principle implies that humankind has to subject everything concerning his life to the will of God. The implication of this principle is that every Bugis should have a religion and therefore should always follow the teaching of the religion he or she belongs to.

The above-mentioned principles have deep roots in the whole system of Islamic teaching, the religion embraced by the majority of the Bugis. The integration of siri' into the whole system of the Islamic ethics can be seen in the Bugis paseng:

*Tellui ri ala sappo*

*Tau'e ri dewata*

*Siri;'e ri watakkale*

*Siri;'e ri padatta tau*

There are three principles:

Belief in God

Respect for oneself

Respect for human beings (A.Moein MG, 1994:46)

La Side, a prominent Bugis thinker, states that siri' comprises two important elements: virtue and dignity (La Side, 1977:4). Virtue motivates one to be pure, thereby enabling one to live a blameless life. This state can only be reached by someone who tries to avoid doing sinful deeds. Dignity indicates that every single person has to be addressed in the way he or she wishes to be. And if every individual has the willingness to take these elements as the basis for his or her actions, then society will benefit in the form of stability and harmoniousness in life.

Any kind of disobedience to the value of siri' in society will cause disharmony and chaos. This is because whoever does not have any siri' consciousness may easily do something unlawful. And if this happens, then society will feel the effects. Those who do not have siri' can be considered to be an animal. There is a well-known Bugis proverbial saying:

*Naia tau de'e siri'na*

*Dek lainna olokolok'e*

*Siri' emmitu tariaseng tau.*

Whoever does not have siri'

Is nothing but animal



Only siri' makes one to be human (La Side, 1977:4).

The main role of siri' in the society is to protect all member of the community and enable them to live in harmony. If all members of community still appreciate siri' as the main reference in governing good conduct then all members of the community will enjoy the resulting benefits and will live in a good situation. On the basis of this point it is clear that the core values of the Bugis culture coincide with the universal message of all religions, which is bringing good for human beings.

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