

Bugis Women

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I. Introduction

Brief overview of Bugis people and their location

The Bugis people, native to the province of South Sulawesi in Indonesia, are a dynamic and influential ethnic group known for their rich cultural heritage and historical significance in the Malay Archipelago (Ooi, 2004: 286; Joshua Project, n.d.). Primarily concentrated in the Tellumponcoe region, which encompasses the regencies of Bone, Soppeng, and Wajo, the Bugis have also established communities across various parts of Indonesia and even Malaysia due to their highly mobile nature (Joshua Project, n.d.).

This paper explores the unique status and roles of women in Bugis society, focusing on their sources of power and influence. Despite the predominance of Islam among the Bugis, with a small minority adhering to Christianity and pre-Islamic beliefs, their culture exhibits a remarkable recognition of feminine power that challenges conventional notions of gender roles in patriarchal societies (Peletz, 2009; Joshua Project, n.d.).

Thesis statement on the unique status of women in Bugis society

The thesis of this study posits that Bugis women have historically wielded significant influence through both traditional and evolving channels, shaping their society in profound ways.

Importance of studying feminine power in non-Western contexts

Examining feminine power in non-Western contexts, particularly within the Bugis culture, is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a counterpoint to Western-centric narratives of gender dynamics, offering insights into alternative models of social organization and power distribution. Secondly, the Bugis' complex understanding of gender, which recognizes five distinct gender identities, presents a unique lens through which to explore the nuances of feminine power beyond the typical male-female binary (Ooi, 2004). Lastly, studying the sources of Bugis women's influence – from their roles as household managers to their participation in politics and spiritual leadership – contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse manifestations of

feminine power across cultures. This research not only enriches our knowledge of Southeast Asian societies but also challenges simplistic notions of gender roles and power structures in global contexts.

I. Introduction

Background on Bugis society and culture

The Bugis people, originating from the southwest region of Celebes (now Sulawesi), have a rich and complex history that spans millennia. Known for their maritime prowess and adventurous spirit, the Bugis have played a significant role in shaping the cultural and political landscape of the Malay Archipelago (Britannica, 2024). Their Austronesian ancestors settled on Sulawesi around 2500 B.C., with evidence suggesting possible ultimate ancestry in South China (Pelras, 1996: 39).

Historically, the Bugis were early converts to Buddhism, adopting many Indian customs including a hierarchical society and a sophisticated writing system. In the early 17th century, they converted to Islam, which remains the predominant religion among them today (Britannica, 2024). Despite these external influences, the Bugis maintained a distinct cultural identity, particularly evident in their unique understanding of gender roles and social structures.

Thesis statement on the unique manifestations of feminine power in Bugis culture

This paper argues that Bugis culture exhibits exceptional manifestations of feminine power, rooted in their traditional social structures, spiritual beliefs, and adaptability to changing historical circumstances. These manifestations challenge conventional understandings of gender roles in Southeast Asian societies and offer a nuanced perspective on the interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping women's status and influence.

Significance of the study in the context of gender studies and Southeast Asian cultures

Examining the feminine power in Bugis society is crucial for several reasons.

Firstly, it provides a counterpoint to Western-centric narratives of gender dynamics, offering insights into alternative models of social organization and power distribution. Secondly, the Bugis' complex understanding of gender, which recognizes multiple gender identities, presents a unique lens through which to explore the nuances of feminine power beyond the typical male-female binary. Lastly, studying the sources of Bugis women's influence – from their roles in traditional hierarchies to their participation in trade and politics – contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse manifestations of feminine power across cultures. This research not only enriches our knowledge of Southeast Asian societies but also challenges simplistic notions of gender roles and power structures in global contexts.

II. Methodology

Analysis of I La Galigo epic

The I La Galigo epic serves as a primary source for understanding traditional Bugis gender roles and power structures. This study employs a critical textual analysis of the epic, focusing on the portrayal of female characters, their roles in decision-making processes, and their influence on societal affairs. Particular attention is paid to key female figures such as We Nyili' Timo and We Datu Sengngeng, who exemplify the expected behaviors of Bugis women (Mahmud, 2014). The analysis also examines the epic's depiction of gender interactions and power dynamics, providing insights into early Bugis conceptions of feminine power.

Review of ethnographic accounts

This research draws upon ethnographic studies conducted in Bugis communities, with a focus on works that explore gender dynamics, marriage practices, and social structures. Of particular importance is the ethnographic work of Nurul Ilmi Idrus, which provides detailed accounts of Bugis practices related to gender, sexuality, and marriage (Nurul, 2003). These ethnographic sources offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of Bugis people and how traditional concepts of gender and power manifest in daily life.

Examination of recent sociological studies

To understand contemporary manifestations of feminine power in Bugis society, this study incorporates recent sociological research. This includes an analysis of studies on gender diversity in the Bugis community, such as the research conducted by UGM students on the acceptance of gender minority groups in Bonto Matene Village (Salma, 2023). Additionally, the study draws upon Sharyn Graham's work on the five gender categories recognized in Bugis society (Graham, 2001). These recent studies provide crucial context for understanding how traditional concepts of gender and power have evolved in response to modernization, religious influences, and changing social norms.

The methodology combines these three approaches to provide a comprehensive view of feminine power in Bugis society, from its historical roots to its contemporary manifestations. By triangulating data from the ancient epic, ethnographic accounts, and recent sociological studies, this research aims to present a nuanced understanding of the unique expressions of feminine power in Bugis culture and how they have adapted over time.

III. Historical and Cultural Context

Overview of Bugis history

The Bugis people have a rich and complex history that spans millennia. Originating from the southwest region of Sulawesi (formerly Celebes), their Austronesian ancestors are believed to have settled on the island around 2500 B.C., with possible ultimate ancestry in South China (Facts and Details, 2018-2019). The Bugis were early converts to Buddhism in the region, adopting many Indian customs, including a hierarchical social structure and a sophisticated writing system (Britannica, 2024).

By the 16th century, the Bugis had established powerful kingdoms in South Sulawesi. However, their dominance was challenged by the Makassar people in the 17th century. In 1667, the Bugis allied with the Dutch to overthrow the Makassar, leading to a period of Bugis expansion and influence across the Malay Archipelago (Facts and Details, 2018-2019).

The Bugis were renowned for their maritime prowess and adventurous spirit. They established settlements in various parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, often

interfering with Dutch trade and exerting significant influence in the region (Facts and Details, 2018-2019). In the early 17th century, like many other peoples in the area, the Bugis converted to Islam, which remains the predominant religion among them today (Britannica, 2024).

Traditional gender roles and expectations

Traditionally, Bugis society recognized complex gender roles that went beyond the typical binary system. While the majority of Bugis individuals identified within the conventional male-female binary, their culture allowed for greater flexibility in social roles and expectations (Stables, 2021).

In Bugis society, men were traditionally expected to be *warani* (brave), while women were expected to be *malebbi'* (modest) (Williams, 2020). However, these expectations did not preclude individuals from adopting roles or behaviors associated with other genders. The Bugis concept of gender was more fluid and accommodating than many Western or even other Southeast Asian cultures (Davies, 2016).

The concept of five genders in Bugis society

One of the most distinctive aspects of Bugis culture is their recognition of five genders, a concept that has been a key part of their society for at least six centuries. These five genders are (June, 2015):

1. *Makkunrai*: Comparable to cisgender women (June, 2015).
2. *Oroané*: Comparable to cisgender men (June, 2015).
3. *Calabai*: Generally assigned male at birth but take on the role of heterosexual women. They often play important social roles, particularly in ceremonial contexts like wedding planning (June, 2015, Britannica, 2024).
4. *Calalai*: Biological females who live and work more like men in society. Unlike transgender men in Western contexts, calalai typically do not desire to fully transition to male identity (Anderson, 2016).
5. *Bissu*: Considered neither male nor female but representative of the

totality of the gender spectrum. *Bissu* are revered as spiritual leaders and are seen as embodiments of male, female, mortal, and deity combined (Anderson, 2016; Stables, 2021).

This five-gender system reflects the Bugis belief that all these genders must coexist harmoniously for their community and the wider world to be in balance (Williams, 2020). The recognition of these diverse gender identities is deeply ingrained in Bugis culture and traditions, influencing various aspects of their society, from daily life to spiritual practices.

The concept of five genders in Bugis society demonstrates a nuanced understanding of gender that challenges binary notions and offers insights into alternative models of gender expression and social organization. This unique perspective on gender has played a significant role in shaping Bugis culture and continues to influence their society today, even as they navigate the challenges of modernization and changing religious interpretations.

II. Historical and Cultural Context

The Bugis people have a rich and complex history that has shaped their unique cultural identity and gender dynamics. Originating in the southwest region of Celebes (now Sulawesi), the Bugis have long been renowned for their maritime prowess and adventurous spirit (Britannica, 2024). Their influence extended far beyond their homeland, as they established settlements across the Malay Archipelago, including areas in the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Historically, the Bugis were early converts to Buddhism in the region, adopting many Indian customs, including a hierarchical social structure (Britannica, 2024). This system ranged from the raja at the top through various levels of nobility and officials down to village heads. The Bugis also developed a sophisticated writing system in which they recorded their rich literature (Britannica, 2024). However, in the early 17th century, like many other peoples in the region, the Bugis converted to Islam, which has since become the predominant religion among them (Britannica, 2024).

Traditional gender roles and expectations in Bugis society are notably complex

and fluid compared to many other cultures. While the majority of Bugis individuals identify within the conventional male-female binary, their culture recognizes five distinct gender identities. These include *oroané* (cisgender men), *makkunrai* (cisgender women), *calabai'* (masculine females), *calalai'* (feminine males), and *bissu* (gender-transcendent individuals) (Anderson, 2016). This nuanced understanding of gender has historically allowed for greater flexibility in social roles and expectations.

The *calabai'* and *calalai'*, for instance, occupy unique positions in Bugis society. *Calabai'*, biologically male individuals who live and dress as women, often perform traditionally feminine roles in the community. *Calalai'*, biologically female individuals who adopt more masculine lifestyles, may take on roles typically associated with men. These non-binary identities are generally accepted within Bugis culture, reflecting a level of gender diversity that predates modern Western concepts of gender fluidity (Anderson, 2016).

Central to understanding Bugis culture and their conception of gender is the epic known as *La Galigo* or *Sureq Galigo*. This monumental work, considered one of the largest pieces of literature in the world, is a creation myth that also serves as a practical everyday almanac for the Bugis people (Abidin and Macknight, 1974). Composed in pentameters, *La Galigo* evolved primarily through oral tradition and continues to be sung on important occasions (Abidin and Macknight, 1974).

The significance of *La Galigo* extends beyond its literary value. It provides crucial insights into the cosmology, social structures, and gender concepts of pre-Islamic Bugis society. The epic's content is of an epic-mythological nature, offering a window into the spiritual and cultural beliefs that have shaped Bugis identity over centuries (UNESCO, 2011).

Written versions of *La Galigo* date back to the 18th century, though the oral traditions it's based on are much older, possibly originating around the 14th century (UNESCO, 2011). The sheer scale of the work - an estimated 6,000 folio pages or 300,000 lines of text - speaks to its comprehensive nature and its importance in Bugis culture ((Abidin and Macknight, 1974; UNESCO, 2011).

In 2011, *La Galigo* was inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, recognizing its global significance as a masterpiece of human creative genius (UNESCO, 2011). This recognition underscores the epic's value not only to Bugis culture but also to world heritage, offering unique perspectives on gender, spirituality, and social organization that continue to be relevant in contemporary discussions of cultural diversity and gender identity.

III. Sources of Feminine Power in Bugis Society

The Bugis society presents a unique case study in the manifestation of feminine power across various spheres of life. From the domestic realm to political arenas, Bugis women have historically wielded significant influence, shaping their communities in profound ways.

A. Domestic sphere

1. Women as household managers

In Bugis households, women traditionally occupy a position of considerable authority as household managers. This role extends far beyond mere domestic chores, encompassing the overall organization and smooth running of the family unit. Bugis women are often responsible for managing daily household affairs, including overseeing food preparation, child-rearing, and maintaining social connections within the community (Kesuma, Manda and Najamuddin, 2019). This managerial role provides women with a platform to exert influence over family dynamics and decision-making processes.

2. Control over family finances

A key aspect of feminine power in Bugis society is the control women often exercise over family finances. Many Bugis households operate on a system where women are entrusted with managing the family's economic resources. This includes budgeting for daily expenses, saving for future investments, and making financial decisions that impact the family's well-being (Kesuma, Manda and Najamuddin, 2019). Such financial responsibility not only demonstrates trust in women's capabilities but also grants them significant leverage in family affairs.

3. Decision-making in family matters

The authority of Bugis women extends to crucial decision-making processes within the family. This includes decisions regarding children's education, family investments, and even marriage arrangements. In many Bugis households, major decisions are made through a process of consultation where women's opinions carry substantial weight (Kesuma, Manda and Najamuddin, 2019). This collaborative approach to family governance underscores the respected position of women in Bugis domestic life.

B. Ceremonial and ritual roles

1. Women's central role in wedding ceremonies

Bugis wedding ceremonies provide a prominent stage for the display of feminine power and influence. Women play central roles in these events, from planning and organizing to performing key ritual functions. The *calabai*, who are often involved in wedding planning, are responsible for many aspects of the ceremony, including setting up and decorating the tent, arranging the bridal chairs, bridal gown, costumes for the wedding party, makeup, and food preparation (Davies, 2010: 120-37). This role not only showcases women's organizational skills but also their importance in maintaining cultural traditions.

2. Participation in other important rituals

Beyond weddings, Bugis women participate actively in various other rituals and ceremonies that mark important life events and community gatherings. These may include birth rituals, harvest celebrations, and religious festivals. Women often lead or play crucial roles in these events, further cementing their status as cultural custodians and community leaders.

3. Spiritual leadership roles (e.g., *bissu*)

One of the most unique manifestations of feminine power in Bugis society is the role of the *bissu*. These gender-transcendent spiritual leaders, often biologically male but embodying both masculine and feminine qualities, hold revered positions in Bugis culture. *Bissu* are considered

intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds, performing crucial roles in various rituals and ceremonies (Graham, 2001). While not exclusively female, the *bissu* role exemplifies the fluid nature of gender in Bugis society and the respect accorded to feminine qualities in spiritual matters.

C. Economic power

1. Women in traditional markets and trade

Bugis women have long been active participants in the economic sphere, particularly in traditional markets and trade. Many Bugis women engage in small-scale commerce, selling goods in local markets or participating in regional trade networks. This economic activity not only provides women with a degree of financial independence but also allows them to build extensive social networks, further enhancing their influence within the community.

2. Modern entrepreneurship and business ownership

In contemporary Bugis society, women's economic power has expanded into modern forms of entrepreneurship and business ownership. Many Bugis women now own and operate businesses ranging from small enterprises to larger companies. This shift towards formal business ownership has further solidified women's economic standing and provided new avenues for exerting influence in both local and broader economic contexts (Ridha and Najamuddin, 2018).

D. Political influence

1. Historical examples of female rulers

The Bugis have a rich history of female leadership, with several notable examples of women who held significant political power. The recognition of women's leadership capabilities in Bugis society is evident in their cultural traditions and social structures (Caldwell, 1995).

2. Women's participation in modern politics

In contemporary times, Bugis women continue to be active participants in formal political processes. Many Bugis women engage in local and

national politics, running for elected offices and participating in political parties. This involvement extends from grassroots community organizing to representation in national legislative bodies. The active participation of women in modern Bugis politics reflects both the continuation of historical traditions and the adaptation to contemporary democratic structures (Choi, 2019; Aspinall, White and Savirani, 2021).

3. Female legislators and community leaders

Bugis women have made significant strides in achieving positions of formal political power, serving as legislators at various levels of government. In local councils, provincial assemblies, and even the national parliament, Bugis women have secured representation, advocating for their communities and contributing to policy-making processes. Beyond formal political structures, many Bugis women serve as influential community leaders, heading local organizations, leading advocacy groups, and shaping public opinion on important social issues (see, e.g., Bukhari, 2021).

The multifaceted nature of feminine power in Bugis society demonstrates a complex interplay between traditional cultural values and evolving social norms. From their influential roles in domestic affairs to their participation in economic activities and formal politics, Bugis women have consistently carved out spaces of authority and influence. This rich tapestry of feminine power not only challenges simplistic notions of gender roles in Southeast Asian societies but also provides valuable insights into alternative models of gender dynamics and social organization.

IV. Gender Fluidity in Bugis Culture

A. The five genders recognized in Bugis society

As mentioned above, the Bugis society of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, is renowned for its recognition of five distinct genders, a concept that has been integral to their culture for at least six centuries. This unique gender system demonstrates a level of gender fluidity and acceptance that challenges Western binary concepts and offers valuable insights into alternative models of gender

expression and social organization.

B. Calabai (feminine males) and their social roles

Calabai are individuals who are generally assigned male at birth but take on the role of heterosexual women in Bugis society. Their gender expression is distinctly feminine, though it may not directly match that of "typical" heterosexual women. Calabai play important social roles, particularly in ceremonial contexts. They are often involved in wedding planning, including setting up and decorating the venue, arranging bridal attire, and preparing food

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.Calabai fashion has been influenced by both traditional Bugis culture and external sources, such as Islamic and Christian styles. They may exhibit behaviors that would be frowned upon in makkunrai women, like wearing miniskirts, smoking, and acting in a more outwardly sexualized manner

2

.C. Calalai (masculine females) and their place in society

Calalai are biological females who live and work more like men in Bugis society

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. Unlike transgender men in Western contexts, calalai typically do not desire to fully transition to male identity. Instead, they occupy a unique gender space that allows them to embody masculine traits while retaining aspects of their female identity

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.Both calabai and calalai are generally tolerated in Bugis society, even seen as playing important roles, and are not typically persecuted by their own community

2

. However, they may struggle with their sexuality and sense of self, particularly in relation to religious beliefs

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.D. Bissu as androgynous spiritual leadersBissu occupy a particularly revered position in Bugis society as androgynous spiritual leaders. Considered to embody elements of all genders, bissu are viewed as "meta-gender" or "gender-transcendent"

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. This blending of genders is believed to bestow special spiritual powers upon them, allowing them to serve as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds

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4

.Bissu play crucial roles in various ceremonies and rituals, including blessing pilgrimages to Mecca, healing the sick, officiating at weddings, and bestowing ritual blessings upon community members

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. Their unique gender identity is seen as essential to their spiritual function, as they are believed to be able to communicate with deities without participating in the power dynamics associated with binary gender roles

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.E. Impact of gender fluidity on perceptions of feminine powerThe recognition of multiple genders in Bugis society has a profound impact on perceptions of feminine power. By acknowledging gender identities beyond the binary, Bugis culture creates space for diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity. This

flexibility allows for a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and social roles. The respected positions held by calabai in wedding ceremonies and the spiritual authority of bissu demonstrate that feminine qualities are highly valued in Bugis society, regardless of biological sex. This appreciation for feminine attributes across various gender identities contributes to a cultural context where women's power and influence are recognized and respected. However, it's important to note that the Bugis concept of gender fluidity has faced challenges in recent times, particularly due to political and religious influences that have sought to impose more binary gender norms

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. Despite these pressures, many aspects of Bugis gender diversity persist, continuing to shape perceptions of power and social roles in their society. References:

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