

Islam and the Transformation of 'Sacred Gender'

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The early penetration of Islam in the Southeast Asia can be traced from the early thirteenth century till sixteenth century which covered the areas from Northern Sumatra to Borneo and southern Philippines. During this period Islamic polities built throughout Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi, and Moluccas. Then, later, the island of Kalimantan, the islands of Sulu, Mindanao, and Palawan also became part of Islamic world. (Wells 1986; Reid 1993). The conversion of Islam in Southeast Asia in peaceful fashion supported by the fact that the Islam accepted without erasing the existence beliefs which inherited from Hindu-Buddhist tradition including local animism. Thus, the traditional customs remained survived which in some degree could be found that “...of *blending new beliefs and cultures with pre-existing ones without exercising exclusion, intolerance, or fanaticism*” (Marsot 1992: 160). This flexible adaptation toward local cultures and existing beliefs result in the widespread of syncretism in practicing Islam. On the other hand, the conversion to Islam in Southeast Asia primarily reached the elites, and the coastal cities along the straits of maritime trades, in which the remote populations remained isolated and little touched by the new religion (Well 1986; Marsot 1992).

In addition, the arrival of Islam in the South Sulawesi particularly Bugis society in the early 17th century has brought about significant influence to the existing pre-Islamic custom (*Adat*). Islam widely accepted in the South Sulawesi when many traditional rulers who were embrace ancient religion had converted into Islam, such as the kings of Gowa, Luwu and Tallo. The process of Islamization in this region also has deep impact on the pre-Islamic tradition which had established in the Bugis society, particularly the belief in the cosmological myth of *La Galigo*. The cosmological myth of *La Galigo* commonly associated with the initial creation as well as the construction of gender identity among Bugis, including the significant role of *bissu* as the sacred priest in the structure of its polity (Pelras 1993).

This essay will address the question of the influence of Islam on the gender identity particularly the role of *bissu* in the Bugis society by examining the nature of Indonesian Islam; moderate and conservative ones. In this essay I argue that two mainstreams of Islam had an impact on the role of *bissu* among Bugis society. The customary Islam had been accommodated the localized gender identity by transforming it into a part of Islamic ceremony, while the conservative Islam had been justified the moral stigmatization on the sacred gender as the fake, immoral and deviant so they could no longer perceived as sacred priest as well as their sacred practices. This essay will be divided into three sections; first, essay will be exploring pre-Islamic gender pluralism in the archipelago, including the existence of *bissu* as sacred gender in the South Sulawesi.

Secondly, the essay will be examining nature of Indonesian Islam both customary Islam and conservative ones and how these both mainstreams have been contested in the history of modern Indonesia in defining the localized gender identity. Finally, the essay will end up with the discussion on the continuity of the conflicting ideas between two mainstreams of Islam on localized gender identity.

Ancient religion and Gender Pluralism

The recent study on the ancient religious cosmologies in Southeast Asia shows that there has been a strong connection between the sacred world and the order of gender identity. In these ancient religions, the sacred priests strongly associated with the 'sexual liminality' and their ambiguous status fits them in communicating the divine world. Thus, the priests in the ancient religions also believed have the spiritual powers and the capacity in mediating the mundane world and the divine beings (Andaya 2000; Blackwood 2005). The cosmological myth is important in understanding the gender identity of transgender ritual practitioners in the ancient religion and transgression of dichotomous gender identity in achieving the unity and oneness with the sacred beings (Roscoe 1993). Instead of producing the homosexual transgendered individuals, the religious practices, "*provided the symbolic system, people understood 'gender' and learned to see it as difference, that is, as masculine and feminine and therefore need combination*" (Blackwood, 857). Blackwood also suggests that transgender ritual practitioners defined by the cosmological myth that insisting ritual meaning and practices through sacred beliefs on the origin of creation and the sacred of human nature (Blackwood, 2005).

The idea of oneness, unity, the fusion of female and male elements in the religious ritual can be found in the islands on Southeast Asia regardless their variety of cosmological views. The fusion of opposite element; male and female spirit in these ritual practices also have been reflected, "*...the holy marriage that transcends the production of children into ensuring the fertility of the land and well-being of inhabitants*". (Wieringa, 2010: 149) There are some spiritual figures that associated with the sacred gender in these cosmological myths such as sacred personages, ritual healers, singers, and dancers who performed in various festivals and ceremonies (Kennedy 1993). These ritual practitioners also have significant role in their communities in maintaining the harmony with nature, spiritual well-being, and the fertility of the mother earth.

These ritual practitioners were well-recognized as the respected figures in the process of ritual practices as well as their social status in the everyday life such as the *manang bali* of the Iban Sarawak, the *bissu* in Bugis society South Sulawesi, the *Kodi* of the Island Sumba, women body guards and soldier's attire in Surakarta and Yogyakarta sultanate, and the myths of *Nyi Roro Kidul* as a queen of South Sea in the Javanese pre-Islamic syncretism. (Blackwood 2005; Peletz 2006). In addition, the fusion of male and female spirit in the ritual transgender practitioners represents the idea that supreme beings were neither male nor female in itself, but the union of the two spirits. The unity of mythical beings can be found in the ritual practices among *Ngaju Dayak* which perceived that the Water-snake represented the power of underground world and the Hornbill represented the power of upper world. The gods understood as the embodiment of the

characteristics of both sexes where only ritual transgender practitioners can fully participate in these cosmic ambiguities (Blackwood 2005; Wieringa 2010).

Although the deities contain the spirit of male and female, the deities are not androgynous. The deities represented the dynamic interaction between the male and female characteristics as well as men and women are born with the combination of feminine and masculine qualities. The power of high priests expressed the ability to control the tension of sexual energy in the ritual practices to maintain the “*balance of the world and ensures the fertility of crops and humans*” (Blackwood 2005: 858). The religious cosmologies of gender-ambiguous deities perceived as the primary source of the gender identity of human being which also contained the element of masculinity and femininity even though in a lesser degree and different from godhead itself. The ritual practices understood as a way to unite the separation of human’s feminine and masculine characteristics. In this respect, the existence of high priests needed in combining periodically both male and female energy to maintain the cosmic balance and harmony. The ritual practitioners take the high risk consequences in reuniting both female and male energy. This is because the ritual practices only can be performed by the specialist like *bissu* in the Bugis society or the *manang bali*, who have spiritual status to access the sacred deities (Andaya 2000; Blackwood 2005).

The cosmological myths in the Bugis culture result in the gender pluralism. The Bugis society acknowledged five genders: male, female, *calabai*, *calalai*, and *bissu*. *Calabai* are biological male who take the roles expected of women. *Calabai* has significant role in managing the wedding ceremonies until recently. *Calalai* are biological women who take many function and role expected of man. In many cases, *Calabai* transforms their role into *bissu*. A *bissu* has important role in conducting the ritual function. In other words, a *bissu* has its own gender and act as priest within the traditional ceremonies and religious ritual (Andaya 2000; Graham 2002).

The role of *bissu* in the Bugis society had been written in the *La Galigo*, the ancient narrative of the creation. In the earlier period, *bissu* were being considered as ritual practitioners and counted among the nobility in the Bugis society as their strong affiliation with the royal courts. In the cosmological myth, the *bissu* was sent by Batara Guru in order to organize the creature. The arrival of *bissu* on earth blossoming all things and they also created the language, culture, and custom which needed by the creature. It is the story of how the live on earth began. The *bissu* are the combination of male and female elements in one body as well as their clothes highlights male and female characteristics. The *bissu* also contained both human elements and spirit elements which enhance their ability in connecting to the world of spirit and making contact with the gods. In the religious ceremonies, the *bissu* perform the blessing for everything, but particularly in maintaining the fertility before planting and before harvesting rice. It is commonly believed that *bissu* are born with the propensity. The test is unconditionally applied in the process of becoming *bissu* including physical training as well as the spiritual training such as the appropriation of sacred *bissu* language, a language of gods (Andaya 2000; Graham 2002).

Recognition and Prosecution

The South Sulawesi was well known as a strongly Islamic region in the East of Indonesia. The arrival of Islam in this region brought about the tensions between the Islamic teachings and the ancient tradition. On the one hand, the customary Islam accommodated the ancient tradition and adopted it as a part of Islamic tradition while at the same time the conservative Islam rejected the ancient tradition which perceived as a polytheistic form of belief. Additionally, the customary Islam perceived that Islamic values and the local tradition are not in conflict, but are all parallel as guiding principles in a life of Muslim. As the consequence, Islamic values have been incorporated into the local wisdom and religious practices (Graham 2002).

This smooth incorporation reflected by the adoption of Islamic values into the local culture, which stated that their cultural guidance comprises five interrelated principles; custom (*'ade*), deliberation of knowledgeable person (*bicara*), civil law (*rapang*), rule of decent and hierarchy (*wari*), and Islamic law and institution (*shari'ah*). The accommodation of local tradition also has been showed in the modification of a cosmological myth of *La Galigo* by introducing the role of Muhammad inside the story. However, it obvious that not all Bugis who embraced Islam accepted the incorporation of Islam into the ancient tradition; more puritan or conservative Islam rejected the elements of ancient tradition and considered it as a polytheistic. The rebellion of Darul Islam (DI) in the late 1950s that aimed to make an Islamic state in a newly post-colonial republic of Indonesia provided the ideological banner in converting the pre-Islamic belief into Islam (Pelras 2002; Robinson 2011).

This rebellion led by Kahar Muzakkar, an aristocrat of Luwu, who participated the rebellion groups in the West of Java and Aceh who were advocating the same goals; an establishment of Islamic state. This rebellion controlled almost the region of Sulawesi including the remote areas, where many *bissu* communities were forced to convert to Islam or they will be killed. The movement enforced *shari'ah* law such as stoning women accused of adultery and cutting hand of thieves. In addition, the rebellion also banned the pre-Islamic practices which rooted in the ancient tradition because they regarded it as the innovation and seen it contradict the Islamic doctrine such as the free mixing of sexes in the circle dances that were common in the region before the arrival of Islam. On the other hand, the prominent figures of Darul Islam (DI) also were intolerant toward the *La Galigo* tradition, both oral tradition and the sacred manuscripts (Pelras 2002; Robinson 2011).

The rebels were considering that the sacredness of the manuscripts as heresy (*bidah*) including the *bissu* who have the sacred authority in the ritual practices, sexual ambiguity, and their anomalous gender identity. The rebel also persecuted the *bissu* during the period of Darul Islam rule and this persecution endangered the existence of the *bissu* community. Moreover, the sacred manuscripts including the corpus of *La Galigo* has been destroyed and burned as part of their religious campaign to purify the Islamic practices from the elements of impurities rooted in the ancient tradition. However, the customary Islam have seen that the Islam was incorporated into Bugis customary tradition as one of its core five principles and thus they suggested that *shari'ah* and local

custom are not in contradiction but complementing each other. Accordingly, the local wisdom which rooted in the ancient tradition is synonymous with the Islamic values and Bugis identities. Additionally, the customary Islam suggests that the ethical values in a cosmological myth of *La Galigo* can be seen as a moral basis for harmonious social relation and ethical conduct, as well as the symbol of local identity. The ethical values of *La Galigo* also support the modern ethical values such as the good governance, the ideas of tolerance and respect for difference, and social solidarity (Pelras 1993; Robinson 2011).

Moreover, the fluid exchange between Islam and local tradition also reflected in the role of *bissu* after the coming of Islam. In this respect, the main role of *bissu* is to bestow blessings which can be for anything. The *bissu* performs the blessing before planting and harvesting the rice, consecrate the marriages, including bestowing the blessings to people before they departure to Mecca for an Islamic pilgrimage. This smooth syncretism between Islam and local tradition allowed the Muslim accepted the existence of transgendered behaviour. Islam also modified the story of the sacred manuscript of *La Galigo* which called a god as Pa Totoe. Many Muslim in Bugis believe that Allah is *Pa Totoe* itself even in the different name. During the spiritual ceremony, *bissu* remain call the deities while at the same time praying to Allah. The coming of Islam also have been altered the ritual practices performs by *bissu* such as walking on the fire because it was perceived to be contradict to the Islamic teachings (Graham 2002).

Moreover, the incorporation of local wisdom into Islamic ones was a result of cultural encounter between Islam teachings and the culture of nobility in this region. The imposition of *shari'ah* in the early penetration of Islam had rejected by the nobility who were respected the sacred places or objects, drink palm-wine, opium smoking, and play the gambling. These activities deeply rooted in the ancient tradition; the gambling held in the communal festivals such as harvesting festivals and the wedding of prince. It was also the source of economic income for the rulers as well as the opium trade. The opium smoking had been popular in Bugis in order to encourage the soldiers before the war. In addition, visiting the sacred objects and places had been seen as means to increase the prosperity rather than superstitious activities. The opposition of the nobility toward the Islamic prohibition result in the compromise between the local culture and the Islamic teaching. The processes of Islamization in South Sulawesi consider the element of local wisdom as a part of Islamic tradition by modifying some elements of its practices (Pelras 1993; Blackwood 2005).

On the other hand, even though the region strongly rooted in the local tradition, nevertheless it was not an isolated world. The region also part of the network of trade in the archipelago, intellectually and politically strongly connected with the other Asian countries, including Muslim in the Middle East and India. The development of Islamic ideas in the other parts of Muslim world also echoes in this region. This close relation influenced the development of Islamic ideas in the region which brought by the student and the *Ulema* who studied in the Middle East. The intrusion of conservative Islam or puritan Islam began in the nineteenth century when the ruler of Wajo (1821-1825) tried to enforce the *shari'ah* law in this region. As the consequence, there were the fights against the local habits, sacred places were destroyed, and the effort in implementing the *shari'ah* law literally such as lapidating of adulterers, cutting hand of thieves and

considered the cosmological myth of *La Galigo* as heresy (*bidah*) (Pelras 1993; Blackwood 2005).

In addition, the intrusion of the puritan Islam has an impact on the existence of *bissu* in the South Sulawesi. The puritan Islam has been constructed the man and women as possessing radically different nature and rejecting the possibility of bridging gender identity while at the same time legitimized the gender inequality through the narrative of creation of men and women. The discourse of the innate creation of men and women introduced by the puritan Islam stated that those who went beyond the normative gender were considered as deviant, abnormal, and immoral. As the consequence, the existence of *bissu* no longer seen as the sacred practitioners who have the spiritual authority according to the mythological formulation which provided the justification the powerful model for the recognition of the transgender behaviour. The puritan Islam strongly opposed the formulation of gender in the mythical story of *La Galigo* due to strictly boundaries drawn between men and women in the Islamic doctrine (Peletz 2006; Robinson 2011).

In the level of social practices, the puritan Islam idealized women as mothers and wives under the leadership of their husbands. In this respect, women also have been seen weaker than men, while men are said to be the backbone of the sustainability of a family. Accordingly, women perceived to be more vulnerable to their lusts, while men are more rational in making decision. Thus, the discourse on gender formulated by the puritan Islam played dominant role in changing the sacred gender cosmologies, particularly when the ideas of *Wahabism* on gender introduced by the rulers and *ulama* since nineteenth century in this region. However, it is also important to note that there is no single set of Islamic belief and practices even the puritan Islam achieved the success in converting the local custom into Islamic ones. There has been the predominantly customary Islam in the region which reflected in the doctrine of Islamic mysticism (*sufi* Islam) and provided the basic tenet on spirit world and a room for ritual practitioners. The puritan Islam separated themselves from the mythical world, magic and a supernatural power as it is considered as a form of polytheistic inheritance while the customary Islam accommodate the spiritual elements in the local tradition in order to enrich the practices of Islamic mysticism (Woodward 1989; Hefner 1997).

The existence of sacred gender challenges the puritan Islam who emphasized the nature and the purposes of the sexes, creating pressure within the traditional communities to suppress such behaviour. The doctrine of puritan Islam on gender which emphasized the gender boundaries has been restricted women lives and discourages the magical powers arising from the transgressed sacred gender, including the capacity of humans to contain gender ambiguity. The puritan Islam has been established the patriarchal discourse on gender starting from the basic belief in the Islamic teaching; a belief in one almighty being, a masculinised god who created men and women according to their innate nature. This patriarchal discourse tried to replace the discourse on gender in the mythical creation of *La Galio* (Reid 1998; Andaya 1994).

According to the ancient mythical cosmologies, god embodied the dual genders which recouped by puritan Islam in a way that gender identity was a fixed, unchangeable, and god-given attribute to human which well known as the idea of *kodrat* (innate nature). In this respect, sacred gender no longer perceived as a normal, respected figure and has unique role in the ritual practices. On the other hand, the customary Islam in the South Sulawesi sought that *bissu* remain an essential part of royal tradition. They are still

having an important role in performing the spiritual practices in the traditional ceremonies. The acceptance of *bissu* by the customary Islam supported by the *sufi* tradition who perceived that the mystical outlook compatible with the Islamic teaching. The mystical outlook of *sufi* Islam was more easily incorporated into the cosmological myth of *La Galigo* worldview (Hefner 1997; Howell 2001).

Conclusion

Thus, the indigenous cosmological myth contributes to the transgression of gender category which has been limited to masculine and feminine. The recognition on highly respected position of transvestite ritual practitioners who combine the element of femininity and masculinity in one body implies that the gender category is not bound up with the genitalia, bodily appearance, and validated by the medical sciences. In addition, the acceptance of the ritual transvestite practitioners reflected that the gender category is not limited to the *bimorphic* model which accommodates the two-sexes as normative standard in determining the gender identity and considered 'the other' as the deviant or abnormal. The gender category in many the ancient of Southeast Asian religions base on the sacred gender model which recognized an alternative gender beyond the binary gender model. As the consequence, the ritual transvestite practitioners have significant position in term of myth creation and considered as essential part in maintaining the cosmic balance.

However, the arrival of Islam in the archipelago particularly in the South Sulawesi brought about the ongoing tensions between the proponents of customary Islam, who accommodate the local culture into the Islamic ones and the exponents of the conservative Islam or puritan Islam who have been seen the elements of local culture could threatens the purity of Islamic doctrines and Islamic ritual practices. In this respect, the Incorporation of Islamic teaching into the cultural core of Bugis society reflected that the Islamic doctrines and local wisdom are not contradict each other but would enrich each other. The elements of ethical value in the mythical cosmology of *La Galigo* sought by customary Islam as universal values, which enhance the ideas of good governance, respect and tolerance for the difference and cosmopolitanism. Moreover, the puritan Islam sought the existence of sacred gender, particularly *bissu* as deviant, immoral and fake due to the strict boundaries between men and women in the patriarchal discourse on gender. Finally, Islam has been incorporated the into the local culture by modifying elements of local culture as well as introducing the elements of Islamic teaching into the ritual practices performed by *bissu* while the intrusion of *Wahabism* into the region of South Sulawesi has been violated the local tradition, particularly the existence of sacred gender practitioners.

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