

## A Study of Transvestites: The Self-Presentation of *Bissu*

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### Abstract

The objectives of this research were to determine how the front and backstage behind a *bissu* is and to investigate the self-presentation of *bissu* among societies in South Sulawesi. This research applied qualitative explorative with dramaturgy approach with 9 *bissu* as the informants disseminated in four regencies in South Sulawesi. The data were collected through observation, interview and documentation, and were analyzed using an interactive model with data validity checking techniques and triangulation. The result shows that based on their physical appearance, behaviour, and attitude within social environment in the front stage, *bissu* are loyal and obedient towards norms and values prevailed within societies through their roles as a priest of ancient Bugis. Meanwhile, their backstage which gets less attention of values and norms enables them to meet their financial needs, sex, and self-existence as *calabai* (waria) who still desire for a guy. Self-presentation as a *bissu* and beyond “*calabai*” (waria) shows the difference of each informant in managing roles and self-impression they want to display and perceive both in the front and in the back stage.

**Keywords:** Transvestites; Self-presentation; *Bissu*; Dramaturgy.



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### 1. Introduction

Transvestites in Bugis language are called *calabai*. This word comes from *sala baine*, which means "not female". Generally, in Indonesian, it is called as *waria* as Blackwood (2005) states that *members* of Indonesia's diverse male-to-female transgender community often describe themselves as *waria* – derived from the words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man). *Waria* are male bodied individuals with physical conditions against their nature who look and behave feminine in everyday life. In Bugis, if there are teenagers who become *calabai*, usually they will be suggested to become a *bissu*.

The existence of *bissu* was very close to the existence of the kingdom in the past. The position of a *Datu* (king) would not be perfect without the presence of *bissu*. *Bissu* acted as the king's advisor. In pre-Islamic times, they were considered traditional leaders and pastors of ancient Bugis religion. Among the Makassarese, at least through the 1940s, in the traveling troupes of entertainers, *masri* dancers aged 9 to 12 dressed like women and performed in front of a audience largely composed of adult men (Laurent, 2005). Furthermore, *bissu* was involved in the writing process of traditional royal weddings script which was mostly written in Indonesian mixed with Bugis terms, using *Latin* script (Koolhof, 1999).

The magic of Bugis transvestites was not only seen when holding Bugis rituals but in everyday life. Every *bissu* is believed to have the ability to make contact with the past and also into the future. As an executor in royal rituals, it was the *bissu* who determined a good day to start something, such as when to start working in the fields or when starting the construction of houses and places of worship (*Arajang* house). Even before leaving for war, for example, the king would always consult with the *bissu*.

In a way, the *bissu*, the clergy of the La Galigo, the times were outside the social system: shamans and specialists in trance rituals and they were heavenly mystic spouses. Some references written by Portuguese tell us that, from the last century, they were as they are today - for the most part, transvestites and very often homosexuals. The La Galigo texts offer no clue as to whether this had always been the case. There is no way they will be bored whether they were by the male birth or female; in a few cases, however, we do know of high-ranking ladies who became *bissu*, for example, Sawerigading's twin sisters, We Tenriabeng, and one of his daughters, We Tenridio (Pelras, 1996).

For the Buginese who value historic continuity, the *bissu* is an integral connection to the past, which maintains alongside Buginese identity and solidarity. The *bissu* communicate, through performance and garments, the rites of

relevance to Buginese and by doing so, so that the expression of Buginese cultural uniqueness and validity in the larger world. Further, the busses have existed through six hundred years of profound change; they persist, yet their place in the world is uncertain contemporary, not for the Buginese, then most definitely for the outside observer (Kennedy, 1993).

Becoming a *bissu* is not easy. There are several phases that must be followed to meet the criteria of being part of this community. Before deciding to become a *bissu*, a transgender person usually joins the *calabai's* community: the transgenders who generally work as an *indo' botting* or bridal makeup in beauty salons, and also transvestites who share are exactly the same style as women and "date a man". *Calabai* in the community tends to be perceived negatively because they are considered to behave defiantly e.g. doing sex with men who become their boyfriends. However, to be a *bissu*, there are several conditions that must be met such as stopping dating and willing to wear more conservative clothes. In addition, to become a *bissu*, a *calabai* must pass a long process and sacred ritual called *irebba* or *bissu* initiation. Usually, there are only a few *calabai* able to meet these requirements; even a number of *calabai* remain as a *calabai* because they consider that requirements to become a *bissu* are too difficult to be fulfilled.

The *bissu* phenomenon in South Sulawesi which still exists in 4 districts (Bone Regency, Soppeng Regency, Wajo Regency, and Pangkep Regency) has been becoming an interesting issue since hundreds of years ago. Through this dramaturgy study, researchers wanted to see how the front stage and the back stage and the self-presentation of *bissu* in the social environment in South Sulawesi.

## 2. Literature Review

American Psychological Association (2007) defined the *Transvestism* as

*"the habit, practised by men or women, of wearing the clothes of the opposite sex but without the sexual arousal that cross-dressing serves in the predominately male paraphilia, transvestic fetishism. Also called transvestitism. — transvestic adj. — transvestite n."*

*Bissu* is a tradition of transvestites in Bugis society. *Bissu* believes that their existence is due to supernatural vocation. Their identity is born through a long social process called construction of social relations. *Bissu* is considered a special identity because not everyone can bear it. The interesting fact about *bissu* is that they combine two elements, namely masculine and feminine in their daily lives. Anthropologist Hamonic (1975) sees the *bissu* representation as rather more neuter in their unification of masculine and feminine. This masculine and feminine elements later merge to create another gender identity.

One cannot conclude the discussion of this gender without referring to the existence and the importance of an, as it were, third gender the *calabai*, and the less well-known fourth one, the *calalai*. The *calabai*, etymologically 'false women', is male transvestites while the *calalai*, 'false men', is a female transvestite (Pelras, 1996). Becoming *bissu* was often not a choice but the result of a call by a supernatural being, who became the mystic spouse of the new *bissu*. Even today male transvestite *bissu*, who can be considered both male and female, in their ordinary, have a male husband and have two supernatural spouses, one male and one female. The call is often marked by psychosomatic phenomenon (sudden mutism, catalepsy) requiring a ritual cure; it must be followed by an initiation with a *bissu* master by consecration rites extensively described in some La Galigo texts which many of them are still performed by present-day *bissu* (Pelras, 1996).

Researchers under this topic were mostly foreigners from outside Indonesia. Among them was Kennedy (1993), who discussed the sacred cloth, Kris, and text combo, the creation of timelessness in *bissu* ritual, while the vagaries of foreign invasion and national rules require adaptability in practice and context. Notions of gender and sex roles became more globally uniform through Western penetration. As the sacred is cheapened and its meaning and symbolic authority are purged, the ritual in the social community is lost. The loss has diminished humankind. One of them, the *bissu*, has reminded us that we have long created indigenous organizations that could show the order and reason to fundamental human mysteries.

Another researcher was Graham (2004) who focused on notions and meanings of gender in South Sulawesi- the ways in which individuals are considered to become gendered beings. She argued that Bugis conceptualisations of gender are complex and it is posited to be constituted through the interplay of various factors, including biological and physical aspects, ideas and beliefs about spirituality, self-sense and subjectivity, work and roles, behaviour and manner of dress, and sexual orientation. Gender needs to be seen in a holistic sense. Each related factor is continuously tested to get more accurate results.

Furthermore, Thamrin (2015) examined the *bissu*, the transgender priests of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, and explicated the emergent indigenous transgender identity within the contemporary artistic and economic practices. The *bissu*'s interactions with the local clients, the state and global culture industry, demonstrate that the *bissu* transgender priesthood serves as a trope of indigeneity. The trope is mediated by the modern artistic constellation of estrangement and orchestrated by the colonial, capitalist and multiculturalist desire for an exotic and sovereign traditional community. Yet, any attempt to sustain the exotic and sovereignty of the *bissu* fails to discern the contradictions in the mediated representations. The emerge contradictions because the transgender norm the *bissu* provoke - the religious piety they perform - remains constrained by the local Islamic heterosexual traditions. The independent does not delineate the business of a sovereign traditional community, instead, it provides discursive and social space where the business is outside of the normative territory of the state, Islam and heterosexuality. It emerges within economic networks that permit interventions and negotiations. It subverts the essentialist and monolithic representation of indigenous people centered on the imagined sovereign territory.

None of the three researchers discussed the self-presentation, so I intended to analyze how dramaturgy is performed by *bissu* in their daily lives. This study used a dramaturgy approach which is a model for studying human behavior including how these humans determine the meaning of their lives and the environment where they are in order to maintain the self-integrity. According to Mulyana (2008), the dramaturgi is to understand the social dynamics that encourage people who participate in these interactions to *mask* the players to improve their performance. The essence of dramaturgy is to connect actions and their meaning rather than behavior with their determinants.

In the concept of dramaturgy, Goffman began by interpreting the "self-concept", where Goffman described a broader sense of self than Mead. According to Mead, an individual's self-concept is stable and continuous while forming a community based on a long-term basis. Meanwhile, according to Goffman (1956), self-concept is more temporary, in the sense that self is short-term and has the important role because it is always demanded by different social roles, with interactions in society take place in short episodes.

According to Goffman, the social life can be divided into "front region" and "back region". The front region refers to social events that allow individuals to style or display their formal roles. They are like playing a role on the stage in front of audiences. On the other hand, the back area refers to a place or event that allows them to prepare their role in the front region. The front area is like a front stage stage that is watched by the public while the rear area is like a back stage or a dressing room where players relax, prepare themselves or practice to play their roles on the front stage.

Furthermore, self-presentation according to Goffman is an activity carried out by certain individuals to create a particular definition and social identity for the actors and the social definition influences a variety of appropriate and inappropriate interactions for actors in the existing situation (Mulyana, 2008). Furthermore, self-presentation is an individual effort to cultivate a certain impression in front of other people by organizing behavior so that other people interpret their identity as what they want. In the process of producing the identity, there are considerations in determining the symbol attributes to be used accordingly and able to support the identity displayed in its entirety. According to Goffman (1956), most attributes, property or human activities are used for self-presentation, including the clothes we wear, the place to live, the homes we inhabit and the way we equip them (furniture and home furniture), the way we walk and talk, the work we do and the way we spend our free time. Furthermore, by managing the information we provide to others, we will control how we are perceived by others.

Then, Goffman (1956) explained that people's behavior in social interaction always represents particular information so that it will bring good or bad impression to others. This authenticity of non-verbal impression, according to Goffman (1956), must be checked. Goffman stated that life is a theater, the individual as an actor and the community as the audience. In its implementation, in addition to the stage where he performed the role, he also needed a dressing room which served to prepare everything. When an individual is confronted with the stage, he will use relevant symbols to strengthen his character's identity, but when the individual has finished his performance, then the behind the stage will show the full appearance of that individual.

Identity is divided into two dimensions, namely the Subjective Dimension (a feeling that comes from yourself) and the Ascribed Dimension (what other people say about you). Both dimensions interact in four series, namely: 1. Personal Layer; a sense of being in a social situation. 2. Enactment Layer; other people's knowledge of yourself based on what you do and have and how you act. 3. Relational; yourself is related to the existence of other individuals. 4. Communal; Individuals are bound to a larger group or culture (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009). In a simple term, a person can be said to behave defiantly if, according to the assumption of most people (at least a certain group or community), the behavior or action deviates the common habit, customs, rules, values or social norms that apply.

### 3. Methodology

The type of this research is qualitative with the Dramaturgy approach. Moleong (2007) defined qualitative methodology as a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written words or writings from people and observable behavior. According to them, this approach is directed at the background and the individual holistically (intact). So, in this case, we should not isolate individuals or organizations in variables or hypotheses.

Qualitative research is rooted in a natural setting as wholeness, relying on humans as a research tool, utilizing qualitative methods, and conducting inductive data analysis. Directing the research goals to find theory from the ground up, having a descriptive nature, prioritizing the process rather than results, limiting the study to focus, and having a set of criteria to check the validity of the data, lead the research design to be temporary and the results of the research agreed on by both parties: researchers and research subjects (Moleong, 2007).

In qualitative research, the reality is seen as a unified with many dimensions but the occurrence of some changes causes the study not to be arranged in detail. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach with a dramaturgy design that looked at the condition of a phenomenon. This study aimed to gain understanding and describe complex realities as described above. This method was chosen because, in addition to not using statistical figures, the researcher wanted this study to explain the self-presentation of *calabai* who acted as the *bissu* (Ancient Bugis Pastor) in more depth. The results obtained in this study would be very accurate because all processes relied on researchers as the instrument or in other words, researchers had the right to regulate the course of the study as they desired.

## 4. Results and Findings

Dramaturgy studies confirm that each individual processes and displays different performance between the front and back stages in their lives. The front stage is what and how they want to be seen and judged by all people based on applicable norms and values, while the back stage tends to show and present themselves intact and in person without heeding the norms and values expected by the community on the role or status inherent in them, and we can be sure the conditions on the rear stage will be very much different from the front stage.

### 4.1. The Front Stage of *Bissu* in South Sulawesi

Front Stage is a display full of settings. It is an ideal concept that someone wants to display in accordance with the expectations of the social community through their appearance and style. As a "*calabai*" that has the status of a *bissu*, the role and status as a *bissu* are the front stages that they must keep and manage in such a way that they are in accordance with the expectations and values prevailing in the community. Some components managed on the front stage of a "*calabai*" can, of course, be seen in terms of appearance, attitude, behavior and communication style.

#### 4.1.1. *Calabai's* Appearance as *Bissu*

*Calabai's* appearance as *bissu* tends to have no difference with other *calabai* in general. It is precisely here that the main point is how they are able to manage messages and impressions through their appearance. In this study, seven out of nine people chose to use sarongs in their daily lives. Sarong is a symbol that contains a charismatic meaning. It is actually used as a subordinate to Bugis men and women. In its development in the Bugis community, this Bugis sarong played a role in the lives of every layer of society regardless of their age, gender or social status. From the point of function and usage, the Bugis Holster consists of four groups, namely:

1. as a tool to withstand influences from the surrounding environment,
2. as a symbol of excellence and prestige,
3. a symbol that is considered holy,
4. as body jewelry.

While from a social standpoint, Bugis sarongs are generally described as a woman's weaving skill, based on the dominant of women in weaving activities. For Bugis people who still adhere to tradition, this is something that can be proud of. In this modern era, the shift in the function of the sarong is currently only as part of the local traditional clothing that is widely used in traditional events, especially marriage. But the *calabai* who chose to become *bissu* were still wearing sarongs in their daily activities. Besides that, he chose to use a sarong to look more *mallebbi* '(graceful) like the noble daughters of the past.

#### 4.1.2. Attitudes and Behavior of *Calabai* as *Bissu*

The attitude and behavior of the *calabai* while serving the role as *bissu* were also adjusted to the attitudes and behavior of *bissu* in general. Their habits while carrying out roles as *bissu* certainly cannot be displayed. The norms and values that exist in the social environment firmly bind each individual incorporated in them. Any behavior that is deemed inappropriate with existing values and norms will be followed up and punished according to the rules set.

In addition to the values and norms that apply in the social environment, there are local cultural values and norms that play a role in shaping appropriateness in the social environment of the community. For example, a *bissu* must maintain attitudes and behavior in front of the community both during ritual ceremonies and in their daily lives. The *bissu* are no longer tempting men like when they were still ordinary *calabai*. The propriety norms used, things that are considered taboo in the region do not apply to regulate the attitudes and behavior of each *bissu*.

Managing and serving the role of *bissu* on the front stage is a must for the *calabai* who have decided to become *bissu*. The demands from the community oblige them to fulfill the expectations attached to their chosen role on the front stage as *bissu*. Apart from their daily work as bridesmaids and shamans, they are at least demanded to take on the role of *bissu* who obey the customary rules of culture and role models for their followers to this day.

*Bissu* is a status which until now is still prestigious among the Bugis nobility. *Bissu* are valued by the Bugis community because they have many functions and knowledge and controls the intricacies of customs and family tree. People, especially the kingdom, asked for guidance, help, or treatment and they usually study to the *bissu*. Each *bissu* has magical powers to lure other people which is in the Bugis treasure known as *cenning rara*. This is what the *bissu* uses when dressing up the bride so that she looks graceful and charming. Apart from that, as a "holy man" or an ancient Bugis religious pastor, *Bissu* was treated very favorably by the noble family. A *bissu* who has been officially appointed will be given the title "*Puang*".

Management of identity as a *bissu* in terms of appearance, attitude and behavior is a benchmark that they must fulfill and perform on their front stage. They are required to always be alert and maximal in managing identity to be presented in their roles as *bissu* in addition to the fear known by the public. The point is the more simple their appearance, the more pious they look so that they will smooth out their plans to take on the role as *bissu* and cover up their conditions on the back stage as *calabai*.

### 4.2. The Back Stage of *Bissu* in South Sulawesi

Talking about the back stage is not as difficult as talking about their front stage as *bissu*, because on the back stage there is a tendency for the informants to show their original characters as *calabai*. Like removing their mask as *bissu*, the informants turned into themselves, seemed more relaxed, honest and open.

The low demand for compliance with existing rules and norms makes them seem more relaxed and as they are. They were also freer to express feelings and behave. Because in their real world or in the performances on the back stage there were no norms or rules that govern the right or wrong attitude of a person as a *calabai*.

Based on their appearance, attitudes and behavior on the back stage, the informants were more comfortable and of course pleasant compared to when they played their roles as *bissu*. They were free to present themselves and show attitudes or behaviors that reflect their true selves regardless of the background or the reason they became *calabai*.

#### 4.2.1. The Appearance as a *Calabai*

Taking a role as the *bissu* is a decision taken by the *calabai*. In this study, all informants acknowledged that being a *calabai* was not only based on economic needs because most of the *calabai* were a bridal bride (*indo 'botting*). The choice of being a *calabai* gives them the convenience of presenting themselves and choosing what they want to represent.

Generally, undergoing the role as *calabai*, the informants chose a look that was attractive and glamorous. This seems to be an obligation considering their profession as a bridal groom (*indo 'botting*). Their appearance is the main asset that must be maintained and maximized with the aim of attracting men who like same-sex.

A competition to be the prettiest, most expensive and most modern may not be verbally conveyed but it has become an unwritten rule. The most beautiful *calabai* will be the most attracting and even hated by other *calabai*. Both fair and unfair competitions are often found even with very little intensity. This competition becomes the motivation and benchmark for the *calabai* to improve their quality and appearance. *Calabai* usually conducts gifted transvestite contests in several districts in South Sulawesi.

In addition to clothing, services or bridal makeup services are also usually competed. Being famous for having a life partner (*toboto*) becomes an important thing that they mentioned to us. Usually, their partners help to work in an event that they organize. Besides that, they usually date and even live together with the men they love.

#### 4.2.2. Attitudes and Behavior as *Calabai*

As has been stated in the previous paragraph, on the back stage, norms and values that become the standard or strict rules on the front stage tend to be looser and can even disappear. Loose or lack of standard rules that bind their attitudes and behavior on the back stage makes them more free and flexible in expressing themselves especially in carrying out their daily lives or work.

In addition to fulfilling sexual needs, typical attitudes and behaviors that can only be seen on the back stage are consumerist attitudes and behaviors which can only be fulfilled when becoming *calabai*. The needs to buy and own glamorous items are two of many reasons why they seem to love and still survive the profession as *calabai* even though when they have decided to become *bissu*, they should appear very simply.

Their attitudes and behavior are formed based on what is considered important by the role they play on the back stage. Competition in physical appearance and the ability to have glamorous items shape their attitudes and behavior to be more competitive and consumptive. The absence of binding rules seems to open the way for them to compete and try their best to meet the needs in accordance with what is valuable or unvaluable on the back stage.

Talking about the attitudes and behaviors that are formed among the *calabai* means discussing the behavior agreed upon and carried out together by their fellows. The norms and values adhered to are modified or may be created by themselves according to their needs and interests. As what the researchers described earlier in the background of the study, the informants became *bissu* for the fact that they consciously chose to serve as *calabai* on the back stage.

Differences in conditions and situations on the front stage and the back stage require them to be able to adjust and maintain the boundaries between the two stages so that there are no mistakes that will later be fatal to them. It is not easy to cover up the conditions on the back stage while serving the role of *bissu* on the front stage and vice versa when they are on the back stage with their own rules and values they also have to maintain the front stage to remain perfect.

Maybe, sometimes they will be in a condition where there is a possibility of a collision between the interests of the front stage and the back stage, for example, the frequency to perform traditional ritual season on the front stage might reduce their activities on the back stage, and vice versa. The demand to keep and run the two opposite roles on the front stage and the back stage obligates them to maximize their abilities on each stage.

#### 4.3. The Self Presentation of *Bissu* in *Calabai*

The self presentation is an individual effort to grow a certain impression in front of other people by arranging behavior so that other people interpret their identity as what they want. In the process of producing the identity, there are considerations made regarding the symbol attributes that are intended to be used accordingly and are able to support the identity displayed in its entirety.

*Bissu* presents itself on the front stage with planning and management that includes attitudes and behaviors that expect an assessment that is similar to what he wants from the community. Taking on the role of a *bissu* well becomes one of the forms of self presentation that is sought and managed in such a way by them. The conditions in question are the demands of the front stage which must create an impression in accordance with what is expected by the values and norms adopted on the front stage.

They form an ideal concept that they will play on the front stage including to be active, to have the noble character, and to have the ability to balance the spiritual aspect well. They hope people around them or the public to

look, judge and accept them as they expect. This can be seen from how they manage messages based on physical appearance and attitude and behavior when playing the role of *bissu* on the front stage.

The ideal conditions on the front stage will change drastically and cannot be found on the backstage. The way they present themselves on the front stage is full of settings and planning. The ability to divide the two sides of their life which are very different leads them to be accustomed to display what is expected on each stage although it is not what they want.

Identity is divided into two dimensions, namely Subjective (feeling that comes from yourself), and Ascribed (what other people say about you). In carrying out the two roles on two different stages, basically, each individual will not display the original figure or present himself completely because each stage has similar dimensions in different forms. Different things can be seen in the identity displayed on the front stage and in what they feel and what they expect from the world of the front stage to the role they play. It is common to see a burden or, say, the responsibility that they must fulfill because of the expectations and needs created by the norms and values that apply on the front stage. In presenting themselves on the front stage there is also a discrepancy between the two dimensions.

However the *bissu* present themselves on the two stages they have, the ability to process messages on each stage certainly has its own consequences and challenges. At least the two stages that have far different characters must be performed with the same quality although the designation as *calabai* or "*bissu*" cannot well represent their actual selves on both stages. The difference in the image of each role both on the front stage and the rear stage leads them to be more severe and risky to get consequences in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

Some conclusions that can be drawn from this study include:

- a. The life of informants as *bissu* on the front stage is the result of managing messages and impressions that are formed and designed in such a way as to meet expectations, demands and existence as a social person adapted to the values and norms that apply on the front stage through *bissu* physical appearance and attitude management and behavior that is in accordance with the expectations of the community.
- b. The informants' life as "*calabai*" on the backstage is another deviant behavior by their front stage but not so on the backstage as it has minimum norms and rules which provide the opportunity for informants to fulfill economic, sexual and self-existence as a glamorous *calabai* and dating a man he loves. On this backstage, the informants were freer to show themselves and display the other side of themselves that was not bound by the rules of the front stage. The rules or norms in the backstage were made in acclamation and of course, benefited them more.
- c. The informant's self-presentation as *calabai* and *bissu* shows differences from each informant in managing the roles and impressions they want to display compared to when presenting themselves on the backstage which tends to have a smaller scope and fewer members compared to the front stage. In addition, this study also shows that the terms "*calabai*" and "*bissu*" are not appropriate for them, given that the two roles they play do not have different meanings if applied to other stages. For example, the term *bissu* which is pure and clean on the back stage, of course, cannot be displayed on the front stage and vice versa.

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