

Conference Paper

Mapata's Transformation of Gender Identities in *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat*

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Abstract

Differing from other tribes in Indonesia, the Bugis tribe classified human gender into five categories, namely oroane (man), makunrai (woman), calabai (trans man), calalai (trans woman), and *bissu* (androgynous shaman). Originally, the *Bissu* occupied the highest position in Bugis community. However, as the majority of Bugis people have converted to Islam, the belief on such gender diversity is gradually declining. Issues pertaining to the fifth gender are explored by a literary work written by Faisal Odang. Titled *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat*, the novel examined transformations of a *bissu*'s gender identity. Concepts of identity, gender, and objectification were applied in this research to discover the story's narrative structure. The purpose of this research is to understand transformations of gender in the character of Mapata, who underwent changes from being a calabai, an oroane (toboto), to becoming a *bissu*. Based on the analysis in this research, it is concluded that during the transformations, there were objectifications performed by Islamic fundamentalist groups toward *bissu*. Practices of objectification in fact were performed by not only external parties, but also other *bissus*.

Keywords: Bugis, *bissu*, calabai, gender identity, Islam, objectification.

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1. Introduction

The Bugis tribe is one of the most unique tribes in the world for its concept of gender diversity. According to the Bugis people, there are three genders in addition to male (oroane) and female (makunrai). These are calabai (trans men), the third gender; calalai (trans women), the fourth gender; and *bissu* (androgynous shaman). Such gender diversity is recorded in the book of sureq I Lagalilo, an epic native to Bugis people, and this epic is the longest one there is in the world, surpassing the length of Mahabharata (Pelras, 1996: 3).

One of the researchers who had conducted a study on Bugis people in 1998 was Sharyn Graham Davies, a professor at the School of Social Science and Public Policy, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Davies found that calabai, calalai, or *bissu* could not be understood as transgenders in a sense that a person who was

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trapped in the wrong body and felt the urge to break free from the bodily prison. In Bugis culture, being a calabai, calalai, and *bissu* is one's nature. The construction of gender identity is not merely influenced by bodily and biological factors. Therefore, calabai, calalai, and *bissu* are understood as autonomous subjects. The distinguishing characteristic of the Bugis People is that transgenders have particular positions and roles, and these legitimate their gender identities.

Bugis people believe that gender construction is influenced by a number of factors, particularly spirituality, sense of self, role, attitude, occupation, outfit, sexuality, and subjectivity (Davies, 2012). An example of gender identity that is constructed by particular roles would be a calabai, whose role is not only a make-up artist for brides and grooms, but also an indo botting (the groom's acting parent). A calabai has to master the art of *cenning rara*, a grooming skill which makes a bride appear more elegant. Additionally, outfits also take a role in constructing gender identities of calabai and calalai. However, a calabai who is wearing female outfit is not automatically perceived as a female. In determining gender identity, the elements of spirituality, role, and subjectivity must also be taken into account.

Meanwhile, *bissu* is considered as a human being that is chosen by the gods. In a research on *bissu*'s spells and rituals, Hamonic (Makkulau, 2008) found that a *bissu* had two genders, which are male and female calabai or a calalai has an opportunity to become a respected *bissu*. The greatest opportunity would be owned by calabais who are belong to a level of calabai *tungke'na lino*, a group of calabais who have met certain requirements and received blessings from the gods. This finding is also supported by another research, in which becoming *bissu* "was often not a matter of free choice but the result of a call by a supernatural being, who became the mystical spouse of the new *bissu*." (Pelras, 1996: 83).

Culturally, *bissu* has a prestigious role, function, and position in the Bugis community. The pre-Islamic periods were the golden age for *bissu* as they occupied an important role in both the society and the kingdom of Bugis. No traditional ceremony or royal ritual was conducted without the presence of a *bissu* as its leader (Farid, 2008: 17) The existence of *bissu* in the Bugis history is considered to be parallel with the birth of Bugis people themselves.

The belief in gender diversity gradually faded when Islam was accepted by the kingdom of Bugis. The Bugis society slowly left their ancestors' system of belief despite the continuation of several rituals (Pelras, 1996: 201). However, *Bissu* was still relied on by the people of Bugis, but their roles were limited to leading wedding rituals and being *sanro*' (a shaman who is capable of curing a range of ailments). Among the royal

family, the group who lost their prestige and role was not only *bissu*, but also the nobles, whose position was replaced by people who were appointed by a centralized national government (Davies, 2018: 332). The era was also a witness of the development of an extremist Islamic movement in South Sulawesi that was led by Kahar Muzakkar.

After the independence, guerillas of Kahar Muzakkar took arm since they were not allowed to be members of TNI/APRIS. In addition to this, occupying the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in Java, Kahar Muzakkar was seen by his supporters as the most suitable candidate for the commander of TNI (the Indonesian National Armed Forces). The bad blood in the National Armed Forces eventually led to a rebellion (The Rebellion of Kahar Muzakkar). During the rebellion of Kahar Muzakkar (1950) the power of *bissu* declined even further. Through operation Toba (operation pertobatan/operation repentance), Kahar Muzakkar guerillas went down mountains and caught calabais, calalais, and *bissus* for allegedly defying against religious norms, worshipping idols, and resurrecting feudalism. Ritual and ceremonial artifacts were burned, and the ashes were scattered to the sea. As many *bissus* were forced to become hardworking men, some of them chose death over betraying their culture by becoming men. In the late period of the New Order regime (1995), the Arajang (Bugis people's traditional house) was destroyed by a youth radical group for allegedly becoming a shelter for members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (Latief, 2004: 79).

Currently, the gender diversity of the Bugis people has gained attention of common people and researchers alike. Such diversity is believed to give an alternative to the world's concepts of gender diversity. This rising amount of attention is in line with the proliferation of LGBT discourses. In Indonesia, the discussion about LGBT has actually begun since 1960 when an association of transpeople was first established in Jakarta (Suvianita, 2013: 2). This social phenomenon also attracts the attention of writers and prompts responses from Indonesian literary activists, particularly those coming from South Sulawesi. IN 2016, Pepi Al-Bayqunie published a novel titled Calabai. Written by Faisal Oddang, *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* is another book which brings forward the theme of gender diversity in the Bugis tribe, and the book was published in 2018.

2. Literature Review

There was research on Faisal Oddang's *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* (2018). One of them would be the writing of Lestari, et. Al (2019), and the writing explores the protagonist of the novel using Abraham Maslow's concept of Humanistic Psychology. The research reveals that the protagonist's conflict revolves around social issues related to religiosity,

love, and gender. These issues create obstacles which obstruct the protagonist's quest for self-actualization.

Meanwhile, Zakky, et. Al (2019) applies Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity to understand the intersection between Islam and the native religion of Bugis people. The research reveals that the encounter between Islam and Bugis culture results in a form of hybrid culture. This culture is then implemented in Bugis people's social practices in daily life, sacred ritual, and responses to political situations.

This research focuses on the transformation of a calabai's identity in the Bugis tribe as represented in the protagonist of the novel, Mapata. As stated in the previous section, the Bugis' social order changed when Islam was first accepted by the Bugis society. Islam's influence has also affected the existence of the three genders in Bugis culture. Such circumstance creates the necessity for the discussion on the construction of gender identity, particularly in the Bugis society. With this urgency, by discussing the novel *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat*, this research investigates issues pertaining to gender identity.

3. Research Method

This research uses the method of textual analysis through the application of close reading. The research steps are described as follows. First, Mapata's transformation of gender identity is identified and classified. The analysis is equipped with Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 1999). The second step involves analysis on the practices of objectification against *bissu*. Here, the research owes the concepts of objectification as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), Collins (1989), and Strelan & Hargravears (2005).

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. The transformation of Mapata's gender identity

Identity is defined as an element that is in a constant process. Therefore, one's identity is something that may change depending on how the subject articulates him/herself. In his/her performativity, a person does not have an ontological status that is separated from numerous actions constructing his/her own reality (Butler, 1999). During the analysis, it was found that Mapata's transformation of identity is influenced by existing socio-cultural contexts. In addition, the objectification that Mapata had to endure as a calabai

in the middle of patriarchal and religious domination is a factor which influences how Mapata performs gender identity. Mapata's gender transformation can be analyzed by examining not only its performative aspect, but also the element of self transformation through particular motives. This argument will be described with more details in the following sections.

The novel *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* (2018) tells a story of how a calabai named Mapata, who lives in the land of Bugis people. Mapata's life is very complex as the transformation of gender identity keeps occurring from his childhood to adulthood. During the childhood phase, he was introduced as a calabai. However, Mapata one day decided to be a toboto, a male apprentice of *bissu*. The process of gender transformation from calabai to toboto is unique and rather unusual. In the Bugis culture, a calabai should not be able to become a toboto. The decision was underlied by a particular motive: Mapata wished to master Bugis arts of *bissu* so that he can avenge his father's death.

The complexity of Mapata's characters becomes more striking as he chose to change his identity into a *bissu*, who – according to Bugis tradition – is believed to be a holy demigod. Mapata's decision to change his gender identity to become a *bissu* is also motivated by a desire for resistance to *bissu* Rusmini, who had made him a sexual object. In the end, Mapata chooses to stop being a *bissu* upon realizing that the *bissu* circle has become toxic.

4.1.1. Mapata's identity as Calabai

The search of identity is closely affected by one's social-cultural context. According to Hall (1990), identity is constructive as it goes on as a continuous process. Character Mapata has been searching for his identity since he was a little kid, since he was in primary school. Mapata has gone through inner conflict as he keeps on questioning his sexual orientation. In the story, Mapata is explained as somebody who understands that he has peculiar traits as well as different sexual orientation compared to his friends. When his stepfather molested him, he did not resist. Even though he realized that he was a victim, he was fond of what his stepfather did to him.

Socially and culturally, Bugis people who have accepted Islamic teachings tend to marginalize calabai. This issue is tightly tangled with the history of the emergence of Islam. In the beginning, the emergence of Islam in Buginese kingdom did not necessarily change the social and cultural order among the Bugis people. In the mid of 16th century, Islam was well accepted by the Bugis society as it successfully merged two cultures. As

a result, the Bugis people believe in the hybrid of Islamic teachings, and at the same time, perform Buginese rituals.

Mapata's performativity as a calabai is limited to existing social-cultural space. In a social-cultural space, Mapata is described as a person with low self-esteem, who was initially not brave enough to admit his homosexuality. A woman named Batari was attracted to Mapata, and she intended to help Mapata regarding his sexual orientation because she thought he deviated from what he was meant to be. When Batari confessed her love to Mapata, he said:

"I do not like women." I did not intend to yell at her, but my tears fell down as she was stunned for what she heard. "I do not like you, I do not like all women. Batara, forgive me, to be honest, I love it when my father touches me. I also miss Aco and Allang—the two male friends I met at school who left me as they figured out that I am effeminate. (103)

The quotation above shows Mapata's sexual preference as a calabai. He was harsh at Batari because he could not control his emotions. As his attempt to help Mapata, Batari forced him to have a sexual intercourse. What Batari did to him shows how much she wanted to impose her own point of view and refused to recognize Mapata's spectrum of sexuality, which is beyond a male/female dichotomy.

Looking into the time setting and existing texts, rejection toward minority groups is correlated to Buginese historical context. In 1957, the palace of Buginese Kingdom no longer politically functioned although other traditions regarding culture were still implemented in the palace. Aristocrats no longer had the power to control political climate as they had been replaced by government workers. In this period, we can also look into the way Islam hardliner movement, Kahar Muzakkar, tried to implement Islam as "kaffah" (perfectly) in South Sulawesi.

In narrative text, the position of the five genders was still accepted. However, despite the fact that the society still accepted gender diversity, Mapata still had to negotiate and strategized in expressing himself. It can be shown through conversation between Batari and Mapata, such as when Batari told Mapata about the past, when Islam forced the Bugis people to leave their beliefs. They often penetrated villages and forbade the people to do their rituals. Abba, an Imam, was forced to go to the forest if he refused to leave his Buginese belief although it was still commonly performed by the people. (75)

The passage above shows the discussion about Islam and Bugis people's native belief system. The name Abba itself means "father" in Arabic, and at the same time, a symbol for Islamic religion. On the other hand, "selamatan" refers to the combination

of Islamic teachings and local traditions. Both proved how much Bugis culture can coexist peacefully with Islam. Unfortunately, the harmony was destroyed and replaced by troubles during the regime of Kahar Muzakkar, forcing people to leave the village to be soldiers so that they would leave their local beliefs, which are considered as a transgression.

The position and role of calabai and *bissu* among the Bugis people have been appreciated since a long time ago. However, they are forced to erase their tradition and belief with the reason of religious norms violation and deviation against human nature. As Mapata went through discrimination and marginalization in his social environment (such as school and family), and this caused him to experience inner struggles and conflicts. On one hand, he is a calabai, while on the other hand, the social and religious norms consider calabai as sinners.

At last, Mapata is portrayed as a person who is true to himself, but he is only brave enough to be himself when he is with his stepfather. In the private space, when his stepfather molested him, he actually enjoyed it, he felt like he wanted relive the experience over and over again. The private space becomes the only place where he can express his gender identity. However, because it happened merely in private space, it cannot be easily accepted as a part of Mapata's performativity. As a subject, Mapata does not have the agency to show himself as a calabai. "I stay silent. And that's how it's going to be for long. I feel there is a woman inside my body. I also miss Sukeri's exorcism. I never miss my mother, not even once (89)". Mapata always needs another figure to recognize the female self inside his body, and especially when he is sexually connected to calabai or *bissu*. It can be shown by how Mapata has been trapped in his private space while his social space rejects his existence as a calabai.

The complexity that Mapata has to face cannot be separated from his sociocultural context. Moreover, when he realized that his father was killed by one of the aristocratic families in his village, Mapata holds a grudge over his father's death. Both reasons made him eventually retaliate. His yearning to avenge his father forced him to put off his identity as calabai, and started becoming a toboto (true man).

4.1.2. Mapata's identity as Toboto

Mapata's indecisiveness regarding his gender as a calabai continued until he grew up. His decision to become a toboto shows that he is brave enough to take the risk to leave his identity as a calabai. By becoming toboto, Mapata has to do his job as a man to assist the works of *Bissu* Rumini, a religious leader.

Mapata's inclination to become toboto is not exactly what he wanted. He simply thought that after becoming a toboto for *Bissu* Rusmini, Mapata would be able to live in a bola arajang (traditional house) together with the sacred *Bissus*. Other than that, Mapata also had the opportunity to learn knowledge of bewitching his enemies that he thought would help him avenge his father. Becoming a toboto is just his strategy to reach his goal. His decision cannot be separated from its sociocultural context, and Mapata's agency as a subject is limited. Mapata does not have the freedom to express himself as he is restricted by social and religious norms.

His journey to become toboto is not exactly easy. Mapata has to, again, become a sexual object and this time he has to put up with *Bissu* Rusmini. Before becoming *Bissu*, Rusmini was a calabai (50). *Bissus* are not supposed to do a sexual intercourse because their body is too sacred and holy. However, *Bissu* Rusmini has been doing intercourses, reasoning that he has to copulate with Mapata as an irreplaceably mandatory part of the ritual for the gods.

“Open your eyes, Pata”

I obeyed. I look at her naked, right on top of my body. “Give up your self, Pata”. I said yes. “Let go, Pata.” I let go. “Be one with His soul.” I was trying. “Be gone with the light”. I tried. “Find yourself inside yourself”. My body trembles as Rusmini's body goes up and down. “Light inside light, you inside you, let go, Pata”. I let go and Rusmini becomes weak on top of my body. (159)

The passage above shows the domination of *bissu* Rusmini over Mapata's body. The word “let go” was repeatedly said by *bissu* Rusmini so that Mapata does not resist her. Just like many other rituals, letting go to the gods is a must to show unshaken belief. Mapata is portrayed as experiencing sexual abuse by *bissu* Rusmini. He thought that it was a proof of his faith as toboto, that he was not positioned as the object of *bissu* Rusmini (who with the name of rituals, unleashed her sexual desire).

In the new private space, Mapata as toboto is portrayed as not resisting at all although throughout the time he was sexually abused by *bissu* Rusmini. The text shows how Mapata realizes that sexual practice can be enjoyed.

I know that as toboto, I would also be harassed, but fire has been burning with heat, and I will not have my revenge with half a heart. I have learned a lot from Puang (*bissu* Rusmini), all knowledge regarding manliness, immunity, and enchantment, as well as “assikalaibineng” for sexual intercourse. I've learned almost all of them. Puang was very kind to teach me everything. She

always asks to do the sexual intercourse ritual every time she teaches me something new – which I soon understand was her subterfuge. But I do not care, I enjoy it; I enjoy Puang's body, as well as her knowledge (193).

The narration above shows how Mapata cannot leave neither his identity as a calabai, and nor as a man. His attempt to become a real man by becoming toboto is shown as unsuccessful throughout his journey. His strategy to become toboto may work in his social-cultural space, but not in his private space.

4.1.3. Mapata's identity as a Bissu

When becoming a toboto, Mapata pretended to receive a dream from the gods. He said that he received a divine guidance, and that made him a *bissu*. The news was welcomed by *bissu* Rusmini. As the leader of *bissus*, *bissu* Rusmini was relieved as a successor had emerged. A person who received a guidance to become a *bissu* had to go through several ritual processions before becoming a legitimate *bissu* who is capable of doing particular tasks and occupying a special position in the Bugis society's sociocultural space. The ritual is named irebba, which can be translated as "lying down". Irebba depicts a process where a *bissu*'s spirit ascends to heaven just as the spirit leaves a body. As a leader, *bissu* Rusmini is responsible for legitimizing Mapata's status as a *bissu*. However, when the irebba took place, Mapata once again became *bissu* Rusmini's sexual object (p. 160). The consummation is depicted as a part of the ritual to be one with the gods.

"This Bugis sarong and cloth are now yours. Now, you have become a *bissu*. Remember, Pata, a *bissu* is neither a calabai nor a masculine woman, neither a calabai nor a feminine man – no. Know this, Pata, that as Bugis people, we know five kinds of human beings: men, women, calabai, calalai, and *bissu*. Now, your name, your *bissu* name shall be Laela. You are no longer Mapata. Mapata shall be forgotten." (161)

Mapata's role and position changed when he became a *bissu*. The name substitution from Mapata to Laela is a symbol of identity transformation. The text classifies genders of men, women, calabai, calalai, and *bissu*. Dichotomies are based on a person's appearance, body shape, and body language. The text shows acceptance to gender diversity, but the gender constraints are still based on stereotypes: masculine men, feminine women. Hence, an effeminate man is called calabai.

In the Bugis tradition, a person's gender identity is not merely shaped by a masculine or feminine appearance. According to the custom's ritual, a *bissu* can show *bissu's* identity as the fifth gender where male and female co-exist in one body. The ritual of Mapata's transformation as conducted by *bissu* Rusmini is depicted in a peculiar way; thus, Mapata started questioning *bissu* Rusmini, who is supposed to be an example for being a leader of the people.

"Human beings are destined to be wrong, kid.," so was the indisputable saying of Puang Matua Rusmi when I enquired about his fault. Puang only realized his fault after I have become a *toboto* for three months. "The revelation that came to me is a hint that the gods want me to appoint you as a *bissu*," he said. (157).

Mapata's identity as a *bissu* has a strong relation with the sociocultural context where Mapata lives. This power relation also influences how Mapata positions himself as a *bissu*. Although Mapata has become a *bissu*, there is still an inner conflict within him. Mapata's transformation of gender identity to become a *bissu* is depicted by the text to involve a chain of past memories of when Mapata was still a *calabai*.

4.2. Bissu's cycle of objectification

Strelan & Hargraves (2005) coins the phrase the vicious circle of objectification. An example of this would be women who objectify other women because they are first objectified by men. The text *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* also displays a similar cycle. Before he became a *bissu* leader, *bissu* Rusmini had been an ordinary *bissu*. During the first moments he became a *bissu*, his village was invaded by the army of Kahar Muzakkar. At the time, every *bissu* was considered to be sexually deviant, so they were forced to be men. *Bissus* who refused the coercion would be murdered. *Bissu* Rusmini was one of the surviving victims of the incident. He managed to escape when *arajang* (the Bugis traditional house) was burned. However, his lover died in the attempt of saving *bissu* Rusmini. The incident became a seed of vengeance that *bissu* Rusmini could never forget. It ends with a resistance made by *bissu* Rusmini, particularly by killing the army of Kahar Muzakkar.

Bissu Rusmini is a victim of Kahar Muzakkar. As a survivor, he eventually did the same oppression to Mapata. The text depicts *bissu* Rusmini not as a sacred figure who has received divine guidance since as a *bissu*, he actually fell into the same vicious cycle.

5. Conclusion

Faisal Oddang's novel *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* (2018) discusses the issue of gender diversity and displays the problems related to the existence of *bissus*. The text shows the shift of *bissu's* role from sacred to profane. The objectification that Mapata had to experience proves the complexity of life that he had to face. The vicious circle of objectification is depicted as a circle that one cannot escape from. Through the character of Mapata, the text reveals issues that a *bissu* has to face: from the society's rejection of *bissu's* existence to the dynamic changes of a *bissu's* role.

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