



# BISSU IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION IN SOUTH SULAWESI

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role and challenges of Bissu in the context of the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi. Bissu, as a social group that has an important role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Bugis people, faced significant changes along with the entry of Islam into the region. The formulation of the problem in this study is how the role of Bissu in the history of Islamic civilization and what challenges they face in maintaining their traditions amidst the dominance of Islam. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a descriptive historical approach, which prioritizes data collection through field observations, in-depth interviews, and analysis of historical documents. The results of the study show two main points: first, the role of Bissu in Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi is related to their efforts to maintain Bugis cultural values and spiritual traditions, even though Islam has a major influence on social structures and ritual practices. Second, the challenges faced by Bissu include the conflict between monotheistic Islamic teachings and their animistic traditions, as well as social pressure from the more dominant Islamic society. Nevertheless, Bissu managed to adapt by integrating Islamic elements into their practices, while still maintaining most of their traditional cultural identity. This study provides insight into the dynamics of cultural and religious diversity in South Sulawesi.

**Keywords:** Bissu; local indigenous; Islamic civilization; South Sulawesi

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Bissu* are a group of individuals who have a very important spiritual and social role in Bugis society, South Sulawesi. They are known as holders of traditional traditions that are closely related to animistic and polytheistic beliefs (Alamsyah, 2021). However, with the entry of Islam into South Sulawesi in the 16th century, their role in society changed (Harahap, 2020). Islam has a major influence on culture and social structure in South Sulawesi, which challenges the existence of old traditions, including the role of *Bissu* (Ismail, 2019). This study aims to examine the role of *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi and the challenges they face in maintaining their traditions amidst the dominance of Islamic teachings.

The main problem in this study is how the role of *Bissu* developed in the context of Islamic history in South Sulawesi, as well as the challenges they face in maintaining their cultural identity amidst the great influence of Islam. How *Bissu* can maintain their traditions despite being in an environment increasingly dominated by Islamic teachings is an important issue in this study. This study is expected to reveal the dynamics of interaction between Islam and local Bugis culture practiced by *Bissu*.

The background of this study is based on the fact that the entry of Islam into South Sulawesi had a major impact on the social and cultural structure of society. Since the 16th century, Islam has grown rapidly in this region and replaced many existing traditional beliefs. One of them is the belief held by the *Bissu* (Muhammad, 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand how the *Bissu* adapt to Islamic teachings and how these changes affect their existence and role in society.

The motivation for this research arose because of the importance of understanding how traditional social groups such as the *Bissu* were able to survive amidst the major changes brought by Islam (Firdaus, 2023). This research also aims to provide a deeper perspective on how traditional groups can adapt to religious change without losing their identity and cultural values. In addition, this research is expected to contribute to the understanding of plurality and tolerance in the context of religious diversity in Indonesia, especially in South Sulawesi.

The purpose of this study is to identify the role of *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi and the challenges they face in maintaining their traditions. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a descriptive historical approach, which allows researchers to explore data from primary and secondary sources such as interviews with *Bissu* figures and literature studies. Through this method, it is hoped that the study can present a clear picture of the role of *Bissu* in facing the changes brought by Islam.

This study prioritizes data collection through field observations and in-depth interviews with members of the *Bissu* community and the surrounding community. This study will also rely on historical documents that record the development of Islam in South Sulawesi. Through this approach, researchers hope to find patterns of change that occur in traditional *Bissu* practices that were previously heavily influenced by animism and local beliefs.

The expected outcome of this study is a better understanding of how the *Bissu* adapt to Islamic teachings. As a group that is very attached to traditional rituals and beliefs, the *Bissu* face great challenges in maintaining their existence in a larger society that is predominantly Muslim (Nasution, 2023). On the other hand, the *Bissu* also show flexibility in adjusting some of their practices so as not to conflict with Islamic teachings, for example by integrating Islamic values into their rituals (Taufik, 2021).

In addition, the challenges faced by *Bissu* are also related to the views of the Islamic community which sees them as a group that has the potential to conflict with Islamic teachings (Putra, 2020). The dominant Islamic community often considers that the rituals carried out by *Bissu* are practices that are not in accordance with the principles of monotheism in Islam (Lestari, 2019). However, *Bissu* strive to continue to carry out their function in society as guardians of tradition and mediators between the spiritual world and the human world, although in the context of a more monotheistic Islamic religion (Kurniawan, 2021).

This study provides important insights into how traditional groups can survive amidst the strong influence of new religions, and how Muslim communities in South Sulawesi respond to the presence of *Bissu*. The results of this study will also enrich studies on the dynamics of culture and religion in Indonesia, especially in the context of the history of Islamic civilization and cultural

diversity in South Sulawesi. Through this study, researchers hope to demonstrate the importance of cross-cultural and religious understanding in a pluralistic society like Indonesia.

## 2. METHODS

The research method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative method with a descriptive historical approach. The descriptive qualitative method was chosen because the purpose of this study is to describe in depth the social phenomena that occurred in the context of the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi, especially regarding the role and challenges of *Bissu* in Muslim society. This approach allows researchers to collect and analyze data in depth without providing generalizations or numerical statistics. This study prioritizes understanding the meaning, experience, and perspectives related to the subject being studied.

A descriptive historical approach is used to explore and analyze the changes that occurred in the history of the development of *Bissu* in South Sulawesi in the context of Islamization. With this approach, researchers try to describe historical events related to the process of the entry of Islam and how *Bissu* adapt or face challenges in maintaining their traditions. This study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the interaction between local Bugis traditions and Islamic teachings that have developed in the region since the 16th century.

The steps taken in this study began with determining the topic and formulating the problem, which was then continued with collecting primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with *Bissu* figures, Bugis people, and local ulama or religious figures. Secondary data was obtained from historical documents, literature, and journals relevant to the research topic. The next step was to analyze the data by identifying patterns that emerged from the interviews and documents collected, to then be presented in a clear and structured narrative form.

The research techniques used in this study are in-depth interviews and participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain more detailed information regarding the views, experiences, and perceptions of informants regarding the role of *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi. Participatory observation was conducted to directly observe *Bissu* cultural practices in everyday life and in the context of their rituals. Both techniques were used to obtain authentic and relevant data with the focus of the research.

The research instruments used were interview guidelines and field notes. The interview guidelines contained open-ended questions designed to explore information about the research topic, while field notes were used to record the results of observations made during the research. This research design is flexible and open, allowing researchers to adapt research procedures according to field needs and data developments found during the research process. The data collection procedure involved the preparation stage, data collection in the field, and data analysis stage which were carried out continuously throughout the research.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Role of *Bissu* in the History of Islamic Civilization in South Sulawesi

The role of *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi is very complex, considering their position at the crossroads between the Bugis cultural tradition which is thick with animism and the teachings of Islam that came in the 16th century. As a central figure in the social structure of Bugis society, *Bissu* play an important role in maintaining the harmony of rituals

and traditional culture, even though they are faced with the challenge of the increasingly dominant influence of Islam. On the one hand, *Bissu* act as guardians of tradition and culture, but on the other hand they must adapt to the teachings of the new religion that is starting to take root.

Historically, *Bissu* are individuals who have high status in Bugis society, even before the arrival of Islam. They are considered spiritual leaders who not only carry out religious rituals, but also maintain social stability and maintain relations between humans and the spirit world. In the context of Islamic civilization, *Bissu* act as mediators between two worlds: the traditional world and the Islamic world which comes with very different doctrines. Although Islamic teachings prioritize monotheism, *Bissu* in their own way try to integrate Islamic elements into existing rituals.

*Bissu* also play an important role in carrying out various life rituals, such as marriage, birth, and death, which usually involve various ceremonies and prayers. In the increasingly Islamic Bugis society, *Bissu* adapt by incorporating Islamic elements into these ceremonies, such as reciting prayers that are in accordance with Islamic teachings. This adaptation is not only seen as a way to maintain their existence, but also as a form of appreciation for Islam that has been widely accepted by the Bugis community.

The role of *Bissu* in maintaining social peace in Bugis society is also no less important. They function as mediators in social conflicts, both between individuals and between groups in society. As respected figures, *Bissu* are often called upon to provide advice or solutions in situations that require a wise approach. Their ability to maintain a balance between religious and customary demands allows them to continue to maintain their relevance in society even when faced with major social changes.

As time went by, the *Bissu* began to face greater challenges in maintaining their existence. Although they tried to adapt to Islamic teachings, their role in the social and religious life of the Bugis community began to be marginalized by new forces, such as the influence of Islamic boarding schools and Islamic educational institutions. In this context, the *Bissu* tried to maintain their role as protectors of tradition and at the same time as interpreters of Islamic teachings in the context of Bugis culture.

In many cases, *Bissu* also serve as a valuable source of knowledge regarding the history, mythology, and philosophy of the Bugis people. They maintain many oral stories that tell the origins of the Bugis people, as well as legends that contain moral and social values. This knowledge is passed on to the younger generation through informal education carried out by *Bissu* in everyday life, such as through teaching folklore and mythology.

One of the significant contributions of *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi is their role in bridging two different worlds: the traditional world and the Islamic world. Despite the tension between the two, *Bissu* managed to maintain a balance by adapting Islamic teachings without completely abandoning their traditional traditions. This shows that *Bissu* has high flexibility in dealing with change, while still maintaining their cultural identity.

Symbolically, *Bissu* also becomes a symbol of irreplaceable traditional power in Bugis society. Although Islam is the majority religion, *Bissu's* high social position in the customary structure is still respected. They are considered as a link between the human world and the spiritual world, although Islamic teachings emphasize a direct relationship between people and God without intermediaries. Therefore, *Bissu* still play an important role in many aspects of Bugis society.

In addition, in some cases, *Bissu* also play a role in political matters. As respected community figures, they are often asked to provide views in decision-making by Bugis leaders or kings. With the spiritual influence they have, *Bissu* are often considered to have the wisdom needed to lead society towards prosperity, both in religious and social aspects.

However, although the *Bissu* continue to play an important role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Bugis people, their influence is diminishing with the increase in formal education and the spread of more conservative Islamic teachings. This leaves them facing challenges in maintaining their relevance in the context of an increasingly modern society that is divorced from traditional values.

### **Bissu Challenges in the History of Islamic Civilization in South Sulawesi**

The challenges faced by *Bissu* in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi are very varied, both in religious, social, and cultural aspects. One of the biggest challenges for *Bissu* is the tension between the monotheistic teachings of Islam and the polytheistic traditions they hold. The majority Muslim community often views *Bissu* practices as a deviation from the teachings of monotheism, which ultimately causes conflict and social tension.

Socially, *Bissu* often experience discrimination from more conservative groups in Islamic society. The view that their practices are not in accordance with Islamic principles makes *Bissu* a marginal and marginalized group. This further worsens their social position, which was previously threatened by the shift in values in society that prioritize orthodox Islamic teachings.

In addition, *Bissu* also face major challenges in maintaining their position in an increasingly modern society influenced by globalization. The influence of mass media, modern education, and technology has changed the way the younger generation views local traditions and cultures. Many of the younger generation prefer to follow formal education and become closer to more structured Islamic teachings, leaving behind the traditional traditions maintained by *Bissu*.

Although they have attempted to adapt to Islamic teachings, the more rigid and dogmatic teachings often prevent the *Bissu* from practicing their traditions freely. Islamic communities in South Sulawesi often view the existence of the *Bissu* as a threat to the purity of Islamic teachings, causing them to be isolated from wider religious life. This is a major challenge, given the *Bissu's* previously highly respected role in maintaining the social and spiritual balance of Bugis society.

In some cases, the *Bissu* also face pressure from within their own indigenous communities. Some indigenous groups have begun to view *Bissu* practices as old-fashioned and no longer relevant to modern times. This view is exacerbated by the growing influence of Islam, which has led to old traditions being considered inconsistent with religious teachings. This internal pressure further worsens the *Bissu's* position in a society that is already fragmented between traditional and Islamic groups.

In addition, the role of *Bissu* in traditional education is also increasingly disrupted by the development of a formal education system that prioritizes Islamic teachings. Communities that are increasingly open to modern education tend to abandon oral and informal education, such as that carried out by *Bissu*. This causes the oral tradition and cultural knowledge inherited by *Bissu* to be at risk of being lost, along with the decreasing number of followers and successors to their traditions.

Another challenge is the diminishing role of *Bissu* in life rituals. In wedding, death, or birth ceremonies, *Bissu* who previously played a central role are now being replaced by Islamic scholars or religious figures. Muslim communities in South Sulawesi tend to adopt rituals that are entirely

based on Islamic teachings, which sidelines the role of *Bissu* in these practices. This has resulted in fewer traditional rituals involving *Bissu* being performed.

Overall, the challenges faced by the *Bissu* reflect the complexity of the interaction between local traditions and new religious teachings. They must struggle to maintain their existence amid ongoing social and religious changes. These challenges also illustrate the shifting values in South Sulawesi society, where cultural diversity and plurality

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that *Bissu* has a very important role in the history of Islamic civilization in South Sulawesi, especially in maintaining and preserving the Bugis cultural traditions that have existed since before the arrival of Islam. They act as guardians of customary rituals, mediators between the traditional world and Islam, and as sources of knowledge and wisdom in society. However, *Bissu* also face significant challenges, such as tensions between more orthodox Islamic teachings and their traditional practices, social discrimination, and shifts in values caused by modernization and the influence of formal education. Nevertheless, *Bissu* continue to strive to adapt to Islamic teachings without abandoning their cultural identity, even though their role is increasingly marginalized in a society that is increasingly dominated by more structural Islamic teachings. These challenges illustrate how local traditions can survive or undergo transformation in the context of religious development and social change.

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