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The Existence of *Bissu* in Bugis Culture in the Contemporary Era

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Abstract

This research aims to determine the form of existence and how to maintain the existence of Bissu in Bugis culture in the Contemporary Era. This research is a qualitative type with a case study research design. Data sources are the results of interviews and literature studies. The research results show that Bissu in Bugis culture in the contemporary era still has an existence which is manifested in the form of Bissu involvement in the cultural realm. Bissu often receives invitations to activities such as commemorating the anniversaries of various regions in South Sulawesi. Besides that, another way to maintain the existence of the Bissu community in Bone Regency is by holding meetings with fellow Bissu members in South Sulawesi. Meanwhile, another way that the Bissu community maintains its existence in the contemporary era is by carrying out various activities in the community, including being a bridal make-up artist, cooking, performing rituals or performances when moving house and circumcision. Also, the Bissu community in Bone Regency also carries out open member recruitment. From the various existences and ways Bissu maintains the existence community in Bone Regency, the Bissu community is also challenged in Bugis culture in the contemporary era with the clash between religious values and cultural rituals carried out by Bissu and as LGBT issues directed at Bissu.

Keywords: Existence, Bissu, Culture, Bugis.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui wujud eksistensi dan cara mempertahankan eksistensi Bissu dalam kebudayaan Bugis di Era Kontemporer. Penelitian ini merupakan jenis kualitatif dengan desain penelitian studi kasus. Sumber data berupa hasil wawancara dan studi literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Bissu dalam kebudayaan Bugis di era kontemporer masih memiliki eksistensi yang diwujudkan dalam bentuk keterlibatan Bissu dalam ranah budaya dan Bissu pun masih sering mendapat undangan untuk berkegiatan seperti saat memperingati hari jadi berbagai daerah yang ada di Sulaweisi Selatan, bahkan. Tidak hanya itu, cara lain dalam mempertahankan eksistensi komunitas Bissu yang ada di Kabupaten Bone adalah dengan melakukan pertemuan sesama anggota Bissu yang ada di Sulawesi Selatan. Sementara itu, cara lain yang dilakukan oleh komunitas Bissu dalam mempertahankan eksistensi di era kontemporer adalah dengan melakukan berbagai aktivitas di tengah-tengah masyarakat termasuk menjadi perias pengantin, juru masak, melakukan ritual atau pementasan saat pindah rumah dan khitanan. Tidak hanya itu, komunitas Bissu yang ada di Kabupaten Bone juga melakukan perekrutan anggota yang dilaksanakan secara terbuka. Dari berbagai eksistensi dan cara Bissu mempertahankan eksistensi komunitas yang ada di Kabupaten Bone, komunitas Bissu juga mendapat tantangan dalam kebudayaan Bugis di era kontemporer dengan adanya pembenturan antara nilai agama dan budaya ritual yang dilakukan oleh Bissu serta isu LGBT yang diarahkan kepada Bissu.

Kata Kunci: Eksistensi, Bissu, Budaya, Bugis.

Introduction

In general, *Bissu* can be interpreted as a community figure who has spiritual abilities that are sacred in Bugis culture. The figure of *Bissu* is also considered as a Bugis priest or customary leader who has supernatural abilities that can connect the human world with the supernatural realm. The existence of *Bissu* has been present and recorded in the *lontara* text of the La Galigo epic. Lontara La Galigo positions the figure of *Bissu* in a middle position. Not as ordinary people, nor as part of the descendants of the gods. Even so, there are descendants of the gods who become *Bissu*, but do not live on earth.¹ The role of *Bissu* in the lontara text of the La Galigo epic is quite central. This is because *Bissu* is a liaison or intermediary for receiving messages between the *dewata* in the sky and the ruling king on earth.

One of the cultural identities of the Bugis people in South Sulawesi is the presence of the *Bissu* community. Talking about *Bissu* as a cultural heritage of Bugis society cannot be separated from the La Galigo epic. Reading the La Galigo epic means also reading the role of *Bissu* in Bugis society that can survive until today. Regarding the terminology of *Bissu*, Anwar revealed that the word *Bissu* can be traced from the word *Bessi* or *Mabessi* which means clean, holy, and not dirty. This refers to the figure of *Bissu* who does not have breasts and does not experience menstruation.² Meanwhile, Perlras expressed a different opinion regarding *Bissu* in Bugis society. Perlras says that *Bissu* is a priest. The word *Bissu* comes from the word *Bhiksu*, which Perlras considers that the Bugis community in South Sulawesi has been influenced by Buddhism in the past.³

The existence of *Bissu* in Bugis culture has been a long process. Various impermanent events have affected the existence of the *Bissu* community in Bugis society. One of the upheavals recorded in history was the DI/TII event that took place during the 1950s in Sulawesi. In this decade, the *Bissu* community experienced a significant decline. This was because the *Bissu* community was considered to have contradicted the teachings of Islam. So that many activities and equipment in performing *Bissu* rituals were destroyed. Not only that, there were also *Bissu* who were killed on the grounds that they were not in accordance with nature and did not want to repent.⁴ This is one of the

¹ Alvin Shul Vatrcik, *Romansa Purba dalam Stansa I La Galigo* (Luwu Sulawesi Selatan: Aden Jaya, 2021), 573-575.

² Idwar Anwar, *Ensiklopedi Kebudayaan Luwu* (Makassar: Pustaka Sawerigading, 2007), 9.

³ Christian Pelras, Manusia Bugis (Jakarta: Nalar, 2006), 97-98.

⁴ Halilintar Latief, *Bissu; Pergulatan dan Peranannya di Masyarakat Bugis* (Depok: Desantara Utama, 2004), 79.

factors that caused the *Bissu* community in Bugis society to experience a drastic decline.

In the contemporary era, the existence of the *Bissu* community continues to experience degradation in the realm of culture. The negative view of society also affects the existence of the *Bissu* community. In addition, the *Bissu* community is considered contrary to the values of society and the teachings of Islam, including their gender identity, neither as women nor as men or non-binary. Thus, the *Bissu* community has the potential to be ostracised and potentially eliminated from society and culture.⁵

It is important to recognise that this is a problem due to the lack of understanding of the *Bissu* community in certain areas of culture. Thus, the existence of the *Bissu* community is considered unremarkable. It is even considered as a different group of people in social life, especially with their gender identity.

Finally, it is important to discuss the existence of the *Bissu* community. This is not only because of the lack of information and knowledge about the *Bissu* community. It is also because this contemporary era is also known as the digital era. One of the points of the digital era is characterised by the migration of people from the real world to the virtual world.⁶ Where the virtual becomes visible reality in an artificial way, it becomes a challenge for the community to maintain their cultural values to be passed on to the next generation. Not only that, the digital era has changed the pattern and behaviour of society. This can be seen in various social spaces that can actually be transformed into the world of digital information. Both at the level of groups, individuals with other individuals, and the individuals themselves. This can be realised in a new face known as cyberspace.⁷

Not only that, the existence of the *Bissu* community is important to know especially with Bone's 692th anniversary, where for the first time in history, the role that has been embedded by the *Bissu* community was eliminated. The role that had been performed by the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency was replaced by the former *Paskibraka*. Likewise, the dances were

⁵ Adi Mirsan, "Eksistensi Bissu di Sulsel, Diakui Dunia Diabaikan Pemerintah," *Fajar*, 2022, https://fajar.co.id/2022/09/23/eksistensi-bissu-di-sulsel-diakui-dunia-diabaikan-pemerintah/.

⁶ Aswan Aswan, "Tekno-Culture: Memahami Kondisi Masyarakat Masa Depan," *Palita: Journal of Social-Religion Research* 2, no. 1 (2018): 25–36, https://doi.org/10.24256/pal.v2i1.65.

⁷ Yasraf Amir Piliang, "Masyarakat Informasi Dan Digital: Teknologi Informasi dan Perubahan Sosial," *Jurnal Sosioteknologi* 11, no. 27 (2012): 143–55.

replaced by women.⁸ On the other hand, it was revealed that Bugis society has norms and culture that are upheld and implemented for generations so that these values become an integral part of Bugis society.⁹ From this phenomenon, it is considered important to conduct research related to the existence or existence of the *Bissu* community in Bugis culture and how the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency maintains its existence in the contemporary era.

Research that has similarities with that conducted by researcher Suliyati "Bissu: Gender Privilege in Bugis Tradition". The research was conducted using a historical approach whose work steps began with heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The results obtained are that there is a close social relationship between Bissu and society. The social ties show that there are Bissu activities in the community, which are represented in every traditional ceremony. The implementation has a meaning of hope for prosperity and prosperity.

The next research related to Bissu was conducted by Triadi with the title "Bissu and Toboto Domain; Landscape, Islam, and Negotiation." ¹¹ with the research method used is ethnographic method. The result is that in general Bissu becomes a legal reason for the form of deviation related to culture. In the end, what Bissu groups do is a humanising activity in helping their relatives who have low economic income.

The research conducted with previous researchers has differences. The difference lies in the object of study and research methods. The research conducted by the researcher uses a qualitative method with a case study research design that focuses on how *Bissu* maintains its existence after not being involved in Bone's 692th anniversary.

Method

The research approach taken in this study to answer the formulation previously described is to use qualitative methods. Qualitative methods is research that provides an overview of phenomena, symptoms, and human

⁸ Agung Pramono, "Disebut Tolak Bissu di Hari Jadi Bone ke-692, Begini Respons Andi Sudirman," *Detik.com*, 2022, https://www.detik.com/sulsel/berita/d-6004638/disebut-tolak-bissu-di-hari-jadi-bone-ke-692-begini-respons-andi-sudirman.

⁹ Ahmad Rifai Ridwan, Ahmad Sultra Rustan, dan A Nurkidam, "Pappasang dalam Komunikasi Budaya Masyarakat Lokal Suku Mandar," *Palita: Journal of Social Religion Research* 7, no. 2 (2022): 129–38, https://doi.org/10.24256/pal.v7i2.3067.

¹⁰ Titiek Suliyati, "Bissu: Keistimewaan Gender dalam Tradisi Bugis," *Endogami: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Antropologi* 2, no. 1 (2018): 52, https://doi.org/10.14710/endogami.2.1.52-61.

¹¹ Feby Triadi, "Bissu and Toboto Domain; Lanskap, Islam, dan Negosiasi," *ETNOSIA*: *Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia* 4, no. 1 (2019): 73, https://doi.org/10.31947/etnosia.v4i1.6163.

behaviour.¹² The design used in this research uses a case study approach. The procedures used by conducting a literature study related to *Bissu* in the realm of Bugis culture and making a list of interviews which include (1) How is the role of the *Bissu* community in Bugis culture? (2) How do members of the *Bissu* community maintain their existence in the contemporary era? (3) How do members of the *Bissu* community carry out daily activities in the midst of a dominant society that is gender different from themselves? The subjects of this research are members of the *Bissu* community in the Bugis region, especially in Bone Regency.

The data collection technic conducted in this research is by conducting a systematic interview process to members of the *Bissu* community. The way of data processing is done by structured interviews from the interview list that has been made. The results of interviews conducted, both in recorded and written form were transferred to a laptop which was then followed up in the form of grouping questions according to the needs of the researcher. Data analysis techniques carried out on raw data obtained through a three-level series. Namely, by sorting or reducing, then presenting data, and the last is making conclusions.¹³

Results and Discussion

1. Bissu and Gender Identity

Based on the data obtained, it can be seen that the gender identity of the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency can be divided into three categories. The first category is *Bissu* who originally came from a transvestite. Before becoming a member or entering the *Bissu* community, the gender attached to *Bissu* was a transvestite. It should be noted that not all transvestites are *Bissu*. But *Bissu* are generally from a transvestite. ¹⁴ The difference lies in the activities and taboos that a *Bissu* must adhere to, including sexual relations and how to dress. Dressing here means no longer wearing miniskirts. ¹⁵

The second category is women who become *Bissu*. The woman referred to here is the female gender that is generally pinned by society. Women who become *Bissu* are only distinguished by the desire not to have a husband or not to get married. From the results of the interviews conducted, women who become Bissu currently no longer exist. However, this once existed in the

¹² Sugiyono, Metodelogi penelitian pendidikan (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2013), 13-14.

¹³ A. Muri Yusuf, *Metode Penelitian* (Jakarta: Prenadamedia Group, 2014), 408-409.

¹⁴ "Wawancara Narasumber Bissu Inang," 2023.

¹⁵ Ibid.

history of *Bissu*. Women who become *Bissu* are usually called *Bissu Pance*. It is also seen in the text of I La Galigo, the female figure who became *Bissu* was Sawerigading's twin sister. Namely, We Tenri Abeng. 17

The third category is men who become *Bissu*. Men who become *Bissu* have similarities with women who become *Bissu* or what is commonly referred to as *Bissu* Pance. Men who become Bissu are the same as men in general and the gender that is pinned on men. The difference lies only in the desire not to have a wife and not wanting to get married. Men who become *Bissu* do not exist anymore. However, it once existed. Men who become *Bissu* are referred to as *Bissu Jangka*.

In the contemporary era, it is important to look at the gender identity attached to *Bissu*. As it is known that *Bissu* in the contemporary era generally come from transvestites. Meanwhile, it cannot be denied that there are still people who underestimate this. Thus, the existence of *Bissu* in the midst of society has its own challenges related to the gender inherent in a *Bissu*. As revealed by Davies, the gender identity of *Bissu* in the Bugis tribe cannot be seen only in biological aspects. Rather, it also needs to be seen from various aspects, including character, spirituality, and the role played by *Bissu* in the social order of Bugis society. Davies goes on to explain that the Bugis recognise *Bissu* as demigods who have given up all worldly desires, including sexual desires.

2. Existence of Bissu

The form of existence of the *Bissu* community or group in Bone Regency is implemented in various types of activities of the *Bissu*. Both in the cultural realm and the personal realm. One of the most common activities performed by *Bissu* is the *Magiri* dance. *Magiri* or *Sere Bissu* dance is a typical dance performed by *Bissu*. *Magiri* or *Sere Bissu* dance is only performed by *Bissu*. This *Magiri* dance cannot be performed by all dancers in general because *Magiri* dance, can be said to be a dangerous dance to be performed by ordinary people. This is because the *Magiri* dance uses a sharp object in the form of a kris or *kawali* which is then stabbed into the dancer's body. Before performing the *Magiri* dance, the *Bissu* first face or *Mangolo Puang Matoa* to get a blessing

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pelras, Manusia Bugis.

¹⁸ Sharin Graham Davies, *Keberagaman Gender di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2017), 108.

¹⁹ Ibid.

or *bara'ka* so that when performing the dance does not cause injury to the dancer.²⁰

One form of *Bissu's* existence in the realm of culture is when commemorating regional anniversaries. When commemorating regional anniversaries, *Bissu* have a fairly central role, including an inseparable part of the heirlooms of the kingdom.

When commemorating regional anniversaries, in relation to royal relics, *Bissu* have a role including taking holy water in seven wells. Taking holy water is commonly referred to as *Malekke Uwae*. The seven wells are taken from various regions, including well water in *Laccokong*, *Manurunge*, *Lassorong*, *Lemoape*, and in *Lampoko*.

Furthermore, after taking holy water or *Malekke Uwae*, the next role of *Bissu* is to wake up the royal relics or *Mattedu arajang*. *Mateddu Arajang* or waking up the heirlooms is carried out by *Puang Matoa* accompanied by *Bissu Inang*.

The next role of *Bissu* after performing the *Mattedu Arajang* ritual or waking up the heirlooms is to clean the heirlooms or what is commonly called *Matompang Arajang*. The objects that are cleaned include krises, machetes, spears, and also gold sashes. It is these heirlooms that are jumped or cleaned by *Bissu*. The next series after *the Matompang Arajang* process, usually *Bissu* has a role as an *Arajang* carrier to be shown to invited guests or paraded.²¹

The last series in relation to royal relics, *Bissu* is tasked with putting the *Arajang* back in its place. Usually called Mapatinro Arajang. In the history of Bugis culture, especially when commemorating regional anniversaries. The role of *Bissu* is closely related to heirlooms or *Arajang*. The existence of *Bissu* and heirlooms can be said to be an inseparable part of each other. Especially during regional anniversary events. However, it cannot be denied that the existence of the *Bissu* community has been challenged, including the rejection of the *Bissu* community.²²

The rejection of the role of *Bissu*, which has become part of the culture associated with the relics of the kingdom, occurred in 2022, when Bone's 692th anniversary was celebrated. The role of *Bissu* that had been carried out, was then eliminated. From the results of the interview, the *Bissu* were willing to look male and not wear makeup. However, this was rejected so that the role

²⁰ "Wawancara Narasumber Bissu Inang."

²¹ Ihid

²² Agung Pramono, "Polisi Minta Pentas Seni Bissu Dituding LGBT Ditunda Sampai Ada Izin Disbud," *Bone*, 2023, https://www.detik.com/sulsel/berita/d-6893413/polisi-mintapentas-seni-bissu-dituding-lgbt-ditunda-sampai-ada-izin-disbud.

of *Bissu*, which has been associated with *Arajang* or heirlooms from the kingdom, was replaced.²³ This then becomes a challenge faced by the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency in maintaining its existence in relation to the Bugis cultural sphere.

Based on the results of the research, when the role of Bissu in Bone's anniversary in 2022 was not given its role in relation to the royal heirlooms. Thus, Bissu in Bone Regency still purify or Matompang the heirlooms of Puang $Matoa.^{24}$

Not only as part of Bugis culture, the *Bissu* community can show its existence in the personal or family sphere. *Bissu* usually receive invitations to attend circumcisions, or housewarming events. The role of *Bissu* at these events is in the form of performances or rituals. But the right is determined by the family who invites.

Nurhayati through Marzuki revealed that *Bissu* are part of the rich civilization of South Sulawesi society. Thus, it is not appropriate to use religion as a tool to judge a cultural product. As long as the community needs *Bissu*, *Bissu* will exist.²⁵ So, it can be said that one of the elements supporting the existence of *Bissu* in Bone Regency lies in the role of the community in maintaining the existence of *Bissu* as part of culture. *Bissu* as part of culture has been internationally recognized since 2011 as an intangible cultural heritage. Meanwhile, in 2020 the Bone Regency government was awarded the ritual stage from Unesco as an intangible heritage.²⁶

The challenge faced by the *Bissu* community in maintaining its existence in the contemporary era is not the advancement of digital information technology. Based on the results of interviews conducted, the advancement of information and technology is not a major threat that can erode the existence of *Bissu* in the realm of culture.²⁷

A major challenge faced by *Bissu* communities or groups in the contemporary era in maintaining their existence is the clash between religion and culture. As happened on August 19, 2023, there was a dissolution of the "*Rindu Bissu* Monologue" art performance in Bone Regency. As revealed by Baharuddin through Mustang, the issue of licensing already exists from several

²³ "Wawancara Narasumber Bissu Inang."

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ridawan Marzuki, "Bissu Tak Tampil di Acara Sakral, Agama Campuri Kebudayaan?," *Harian Fajar*, 2022, https://harian.fajar.co.id/2022/03/29/bissu-tak-tampil-di-acara-sakralagama-campuri-kebudayaan/.

²⁶ Mirsan, "Eksistensi Bissu di Sulsel, Diakui Dunia Diabaikan Pemerintah."

²⁷ "Wawancara Narasumber Bissu Inang."

agencies. However, when the performance was to be held, the monologue was prohibited from performing. This was due to the involvement of *Bissu*.²⁸

Regarding the existence of *Bissu* in Bone Regency, as expressed by Nurhayati through Marzuki, *Bissu* is Indonesia's cultural capital that must be preserved. Not only that, Nurhayati further revealed that the *Bissu* Community can create its own activities or events and it is believed that many visitors will come.²⁹ However, on the other hand, it shows that the challenges faced regarding the existence of *Bissu* in Bone Regency are issues associated with LGBT. As happened in the dissolution of the "*Rindu Bissu* Monologue", it was said that the activity was accused of displaying LGBT elements.³⁰

The omission of *Bissu* in the realm of Bugis culture, especially when commemorating regional anniversaries and the dissolution of art performances because *Bissu* are present in them, has the potential to threaten the existence of *Bissu* in the contemporary era. As a product of art and culture, it is necessary to place it in the corridor of art and culture, so that the actors of art and culture themselves still have an existence. As expressed by Sartre through Siswanto, humans must submit to the freedom they have. With freedom, human existence does not become absurd. Freedom must be attached to human beings and also in the form of actions as a form of expression of their freedom. Both in shaping oneself, as well as the freedom to choose what is best and not good for oneself. Siswanto further explained that the life lived by humans will be more authentic if humans are personally truly free. Not relying on objective values and norms.³¹

3. How Bissu Maintain Their Existence

The results of the research conducted, the way the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency maintains its existence in the face of advances in information and technology in today's contemporary era by carrying out various activities in order to continue to exist. Both individually and in groups. This is manifested in the practice of recruiting members, holding meetings, performing, and also carrying out activities outside *Bissu* activities, including as a cook (*Jennang*) and bridal makeup (*indobotting*).

²⁸ Musriandi Mustang, "Teater Monolog Rindu Bissu Dibubar Paksa, Panitia; Bissu Dicekal Gubernur Sul-Sel Untuk Tampil," *Listing Nusantara*, 2023, https://listingnusantara.com/teater-monolog-rindu-bissu-dibubar-paksa-panitia-bissu-dicekal-gubernur-sul-sel-untuk-tampil/.

²⁹ Marzuki, "Bissu Tak Tampil di Acara Sakral, Agama Campuri Kebudayaan?"

 $^{^{\}rm 30}$ Pramono, "Polisi Minta Pentas Seni Bissu Dituding LGBT Ditunda Sampai Ada Izin Disbud."

³¹ Joko Siswanto, dari Aristoteles Sampai Derrida (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1998).

One of the ways the *Bissu* community in Bone maintains its existence is by recruiting members who want to become *Bissu Inang*. Based on the results of interviews conducted, that recruitment to become a *Bissu* member is carried out openly. As it is known that the recruitment of members carried out in 2022 the number of members who entered to become *Bissu* was approximately fifty people. This number is promising that the *Bissu* community in Bone Regency will continue to exist. However, on the other hand, it shows that of all the new members who enter *Bissu*, not all of them remain members. There are also members who leave the *Bissu* community or group. Based on the results of interviews related to the recruitment of members, that of all incoming *Bissu* members are transgender women.³²

Based on the results of the research conducted, that another way used to maintain the existence of *Bissu* in Bone Regency is to hold meetings between *Bissu* members. Both those in Bone Regency, as well as *Bissu* in other regions. In addition to holding meetings, *Bissu's* way of maintaining their existence in the contemporary era is to perform. The form of the performance is based on the invitation given. However, generally what is done is the *Sere Bissu* performance. Some of the performances performed by *Bissu* are performed in Bone Regency, while others are performed in other areas.³³

The next way that *Bissu* members maintain their existence in the contemporary era is by working as bridal makeup or *Indo Botting* and some work in salons. Like *Bissu Inang* who became the researcher's source, the work done if there are no activities related to *Bissu* is to open a salon that she owns and become a bridal makeup or *Indo Botting*. Related to the wedding party, in addition to dressing the bride or *Indo Botting*, there are also *Bissu* members who work as cooks or *Jennang*.³⁴ These activities outside of culture are carried out by Bissu in Bone Regency as a way to maintain existence, both individually and as a group.

Conclusion

Based on the results of research conducted related to the existence of *Bissu* and how to maintain the existence of *Bissu* in Bugis culture in the contemporary era in Bone Regency, it can be concluded that *Bissu* still have an existence in the form of performances and rituals. Although *Bissu* still exist, *Bissu* in Bone Regency are challenged in the contemporary era in relation to religion and gender identity which leads to indications of LGBT issues. The way

^{32 &}quot;Wawancara Narasumber Bissu Inang."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Bissu maintain their existence in the contemporary era is by carrying out various activities outside of culture, including as bridal dressers, as cooks, and working in salons, as well as recruiting members

This research still has shortcomings in the sources. Where this research only takes information from the *Bissu*. Thus, future researchers are expected to take sources from various circles, including the local government related to the existence of *Bissu* in Bugis culture.

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