

THE UNIVERSITY OF WALES, TRINITY ST. DAVID

**Shamanic gender liminality with
special reference to the *NatKadaw* of
Myanmar and the *Bissu* of Sulawesi.**

being a dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of M.A. in Social Anthropology at the University of Wales, Trinity
St. David.

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Declaration Form



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List of contents

Declaration Form	1
List of contents	2
List of illustrations	4
Acknowledgements	5
Abstract	6
Note	6
1. Introduction	8
1a: Shamans as ‘in between’ people.	8
1b: Shamans as mediators between male and female	19
2. Methods of investigation	32
2a: Theoretical framework	32
2b: Design.....	33
2c: Sample	34
2d: Data collection – the interview framework.....	35
2d: Data collection – the interview procedure	35
2e: Ethical issues.....	36
3. The <i>NatKadaw</i> of Myanmar	37
3a: The background	37
3b: The <i>NatKadaw</i>	40
3c: Why have co-gendered <i>NatKadaw</i> become so numerous in recent years?	49
i) The mass lay meditation movement.....	49
ii) The female role of the <i>medaw</i>	51
iii) The increase in the number and importance of female <i>nats</i>	52
iv) Hybridisation between religion and the market economy	53
v) The growing importance of Aung San Suu Kyi	56
vi) The suitability of co-gendered people for the role of <i>NatKadaw</i>	58
vii) Co-gendered <i>NatKadaw</i> may be unusually talented in trance.....	58
viii) The role of <i>NatKadaw</i> as a prestigious position open to co-gendered people ...	61
ix) A co-gendered <i>NatKadaw</i> gains a sympathetic family.....	65
x) The psychological fit between being co-gendered and becoming a <i>NatKadaw</i>	66
xi) Buddhism accepts first-gender – third-gender relationships for the laity	66
xii) In Buddhism being co-gendered can be seen as the result of <i>karma</i>	69
4. The <i>Bissu</i> of Sulawesi	72
4a: The background – the Bugis people	72
4b: The <i>Bissu</i>	77
4c: Why are there so few <i>Bissu</i> left on Sulawesi?.....	82
i) The traditional Bugis worldview is fast disappearing	82
ii) The role of the <i>Bissu</i> is associated with the feudal past	83
iii) The removal of state support means that <i>Bissu</i> have to earn their living.....	84
iv) The Bugis acceptance of Islam set up tensions with traditional beliefs	86
v) Islam has two different views on third gender people	87

vi) The rise of Wahhabism has made holding syncretist views more difficult	88
vii) The Dutch support for Bugis beliefs proved problematic at independence	89
viii) Since independence there have been virulent attacks on traditional beliefs	89
ix) Being a <i>calabai</i> is an alternative role for co-gendered biological males.....	91
x) The pornography law of 2008 is so widely worded that it could cover <i>Bissu</i>	92
xi) <i>Adat</i> – custom – no longer includes civil or religious authority	93
xii) <i>Adat</i> – custom – is coming to mean little more than <i>budaya</i> – the arts.....	94
5: Discussion – the differing fortunes of <i>NatKadaw</i> and <i>Bissu</i>	96
6: Conclusion	102
7: Sources	105
7a: Bibliography.....	105
7b: Filmography	129
8. Appendices	131
8a: Appendix 1: Interview Outline and Release Permission	131
8b: Appendix 2: The question framework employed in the interviews.....	132
Semi-structured interview – starting questions in English	132
Semi-structured interview – questions in English and Burmese	133
Semi-structured interview – questions in English and Bahasa Indonesia	134
8c: Appendix 3: Bissu as performer	135
8d: Appendix 4: Natkadaw and Bissu interviewed.....	137
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Thain Htay	137
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Li Tin MOUNG	138
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Daw Kyin Saing	140
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Nay Win Aung.....	141
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Knowknow	143
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Sei MOUNG MOUNG.....	146
<i>Natkadaw</i> : San Htoo.....	147
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Ko Min Min and his spiritual sister Ei Sabei.....	149
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Soe Lay.....	151
<i>Natkadaw</i> : Aung Ko Latt.....	153
<i>Natkadaw</i> : U Htay	155
<i>Bissu</i> : Zulaiha.....	157
<i>Bissu</i> : Usman	158
<i>Bissu</i> : Nani	160
<i>Bissu</i> : Sampo	161
<i>Bissu</i> : Zalmah	161
<i>Bissu</i> : Sanro Temmi.....	163
<i>Bissu</i> : Sanro Nisa	166
8e: Appendix 5: Interpreters and other people interviewed.....	167
May Htay Myint – interpreter in Myanmar	167
Syarful Charmain (Joko) – interpreter on Sulawesi	168
Daw Khin Nyein (Alice) in Myanmar	169
Puang Tappa on Sulawesi	170
Sanro Hasan on Sulawesi	171

List of illustrations

All photographs are by the author except no. 8 which was given to the author by Nay Win Aung and nos. 11 and 31 which were taken by Mr. Syarful Charmain using the author's camera.

1. A NatKadaw at the Taungbyon Festival.....	7
2. Enkhtuya, a Tsaatan xam, shaman, with her son.....	11
3. Jabzaa Udgan entering a trance by gently playing the amaan khuur – trump.....	12
4. Llagva Zairan launching himself into a trance using a drum.....	13
5. Kyai Haji Asnuri, a dukun on Java.....	16
6. Daw Kyin Saing with her set of cowry shells used for divination.....	55
7. NatKadaw at Taungbyon rapidly inhaling tobacco smoke to induce a trance state.....	61
8. Nay Win Aung dressed as the female nat Ah May Yah Yin.....	63
10. Zulaiha as wedding mother at a Bugis wedding.....	99
11. Sanro Temmi in a trance contacting the spirit world.....	100
13. Li Tin MOUNG.....	139
14. Daw Kyin Saing.....	140
15. Nay Win Aung.....	142
16. Knowknow.....	143
17. Knowknow in full regalia.....	145
18. Sei MOUNG MOUNG.....	146
19. San Htoo.....	148
20. Ko Min Min.....	150
21. Ei Sabei wearing the traditional Burmese thanaka beauty cream.....	151
22. Soe Lay.....	152
23. Aung Ko Latt.....	154
24. U Htay.....	156
25. Zulaiha.....	157
26. Usman.....	159
27. Nani.....	160
28. Sompo.....	161
29. Zalmah.....	162
30. Sanro Temmi.....	164
31. The shrine in the home of Sanro Temmi.....	165
32. Sanro Nisa.....	166
33. May Htay Myint – interpreter in Myanmar.....	167
34. Syarful Charmain (Joko) – interpreter on Sulawesi.....	168
35. Daw Khin Nyein (Alice) in Myanmar.....	169
36. Puang Tappa on Sulawesi.....	170
37. Sanro Hasan on Sulawesi.....	171

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Kevin M. Purday

Abstract

This piece of research sets out to discover why co-gendered shamans are flourishing in Myanmar but have all but disappeared on Sulawesi. A review of the literature, firstly, on shamanic liminality in general and, secondly, shamanic gender liminality in particular, reveals that there are three main ways of linking gender liminality with becoming a shaman. In the first the calling comes beforehand and becoming co-gendered follows afterwards. In the second being co-gendered comes first and the calling follows. In the third, there is no intrinsic link between gender liminality and becoming a shaman. The first type seems no longer to exist. Fieldwork among the Bugis people on Sulawesi reveals that the second type is just surviving while fieldwork in Myanmar shows that the third type is flourishing but with co-gendered shamans now forming the majority. By interviewing *NatKadaw*, Burmese shamans, and studying the nature of society in Myanmar, it becomes apparent that there are many reasons to explain why co-gendered *NatKadaw* have become so numerous and so popular. Buddhism, however, is the over-arching factor. On Sulawesi, once again a combination of interviews and a study of the island's history reveals the complexity behind the decline in numbers of the *Bissu*, the Bugis shamans. Again religion is the over-arching factor – in this case Islam. The study concludes, however, that in spite of the differences between the *NatKadaw* and the *Bissu*, there is a tendency for both to become entertainers albeit that the *NatKadaw* are popular entertainers while the *Bissu* were until recently involved largely in high art. At the moment, however, the *Bissu* are rejecting the entertainment route and are developing in two different directions.

Note

The research into the liminal status of the *NatKadaw* of Myanmar and the *Bissu* of Sulawesi has been an enormous and exciting voyage of discovery. With the blessing of Dr. Penny Dransart this dissertation employs the Chicago form of referencing in preference to the Harvard style in the hope that the reader will be able to share more vividly in the excitement of that journey.

**Shamanic gender liminality with special reference to the
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1. A *NatKadaw* at the Taungbyon Festival.

1. Introduction

1a: Shamans as 'in between' people.

“The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”¹

The term ‘shaman’ derives from the language of the Tungus speaking Eveny and Evenki reindeer herders of northern Siberia.² The term refers to “persons of both sexes who have mastered spirits, who at will can introduce those spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people...”³ However, the word has been applied to any “communal leader chosen and trained to work for the community by engaging with significant other-than-human persons.”⁴ Those other-than-human persons may be animals, plants, ancestors or any of a range of deities. The societies in which they live are profoundly different from those of the so-called Western world so that inhabitants of the Western world find it difficult to appreciate the worldview of shamanic societies. The difficulty is not just in the label ‘animist’ that Westerners give to those societies. “The difficulty is rather that we have, for ourselves, through the material conditions of our lives and

¹ V. Turner (1969), *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge and Kegan

² It comes from the Turkic-Tungusian word *šamán*. See B. Laufer (1917), ‘Origin of the Word Shaman.’ *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 19 (3) (July-September), 361-371. For the Eveny and Evenki see P. Vitebsky (2005), *Reindeer People*. London: HarperCollins.

³ S. Shirokogoroff (1935), *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, 269. There are scholars who oppose such a broadening of the term ‘shaman.’ See A. Kehoe (2000), *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

⁴ G. Harvey (2003), General Introduction in G. Harvey (ed.), *Shamanism: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-23: 1. The concept of “other-than-human persons” originated with A.I. Hallowell (1960), ‘Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View.’ In S. Diamond (ed.), *Culture in History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 19-52.

the relation with the natural world that comes from that, made their kind of relation with the animals and the trees and the waters profoundly incomprehensible.”⁵

Shamans function naturally in societies where a belief in the powers of animals or plants or ancestors or multiple deities is indigenous. New age or neo-shamans attempt to do something similar in societies where such a belief is not indigenous.⁶

Every society that has an indigenous belief in the powers of animals or plants or ancestors or multiple deities also has its own name for the role of the person who acts as an intermediary between the human world and the world of those powers – *bomoh, dukun, kyai, yadgan, mudang, angakoq, manang, machi, nyipa, !gi:xa, malang*.⁷ All shamans in these societies act as intermediaries but how they go about

⁵ A.T. Campbell (1995), *Getting to Know Waiwai*. London: Routledge, 208. The chapter with this quotation, chapter 7 ‘Submitting’, was later published in G. Harvey (ed.), (2003), *Shamanism: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 122-144.

⁶ For a discussion of traditional shamanism, the revival of shamanism in indigenously ‘animist’ societies and the practice of shamanism in ‘non-animist’ societies see P. Vitebsky (1995), ‘From cosmology to environmentalism: Shamanism as local knowledge in a global setting.’ In R. Fardon (ed.), *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 182-203. This was subsequently published in G. Harvey (ed.) (2003), *Shamanism: A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 276-298. In cultures where there was an ‘animist’ tradition, a revival is possible. See B. Tedlock (2005), *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body*. New York, Toronto, London. Sydney and Auckland: Bantam Books, 272-276; M.M. Balzer (2006), ‘Sustainable faith?: reconfiguring shamanic healing in Siberia.’ In J.D. Koss-Chioino and P. Hefner (eds.), *Spiritual Transformation and Healing: Anthropological, Theological, Neuroscientific, and Clinical Perspectives*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 78-100. It is also available at: <http://sakhaopenworld.org/aleksejev/festschrift4.html> Last accessed 17/08/12; and M.M. Balzer (2011), *Shamans, Spirituality, and Cultural Revitalization*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. For the example of Mongolia see J. Hangartner (2006), ‘The Resurgence of Darhad Shamanism.’ *Tsanta* 11, 111-114. Available at: http://www.anthro.unibe.ch/unibe/philhist/anthro/content/e264/e1367/e1380/e3724/linkliste3725/tsantsa11-hangartner_ger.pdf Last accessed 24/01/13.

⁷ *Bomoh* is the Malay word for a shaman – see C. Laderman (1991), *Taming the Wind of Desire*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and Oxford: University of California Press for a fascinating account of Malaysian shamans. *Dukun*, also used in Malaysia, is more widely used in Indonesia and *kyai* refers specifically to an Indonesian Muslim practitioner. *Yadgan* is the Dagur name. *Mudang* is what the Koreans call a shaman. *Angakok* is the Inuit name. *Manang* is the name used for a shaman among the Iban of Borneo although they also use the terms *bomoh* and *dukun* – see K.E. Schmidt (1964), ‘Folk Psychiatry in Sarawak: A Tentative System of Psychiatry of the Iban.’ In A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith, and Healing*. New York and London: The Free Press, 139-155. *Machi* is the term for shaman employed by the Chilean Mapuche. The Akha people of S. China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand call their shaman a *nyipa*. *!gi:xa* is the word used for a shaman among the /Xam San people of South Africa. *Malang* is the word for an Afghan Muslim shaman. See M.H. Sidky (1990), ‘*Malang*, Sufis, and Mystics: An

doing so varies from one society to another. It used to be quite common to distinguish shamanism from both spirit possession and spirit mediumship.⁸ However, it is now acknowledged that spirit possession is one way in which shamans can mediate between the spirit and the human worlds. This way is common, for example, among the Macha Oromo people in Ethiopia whose shamans, *kallu(s)*, are possessed by spirits who are regarded as emanations of the divine.⁹ Spirit mediumship with the shaman being the mouthpiece of the spirit(s) is well exemplified by the practice of the Darhad shamans in Mongolia. A Darhad shaman, an *udgan* if female or *zairan* if male, believes that her/his spirit, *ongon*, speaks through her/him as was made clear by Baljir Udgan in an interview in 1994.¹⁰ The third method of mediation with the spirit world is by means of soul travel. The shamans, *xam*, of the Tsaatan reindeer herding people in the very north of Mongolia exemplify this beautifully. They believe that their drum, which they call a *henggereg*, becomes a mount on which they ride to meet their helping spirit, their *ongod*¹¹ just like the drum bears the Evenki shaman to the “twelve, or more levels of the heavens.”¹²

Ethnographic and Historical Study of Shamanism in Afghanistan.’ *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 49, 275-301.

⁸ See P. Graham (1987), *Iban Shamanism*. Canberra: The Australian National University, 2, for a summary of this distinction and the further distinction from spirit mediumship. The distinction was first made by C. Firth (1959), ‘Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion.’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 89, 129-148.

⁹ See H.S. Lewis (1984), ‘Spirit-possession in Ethiopia: an essay in interpretation.’ In S. Rubenson (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Ethiopian Studies*. Addis Ababa, Uppsala and East Lansing, MI: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 419-427.

¹⁰ See O. Purev and G. Purvee (2008). *Mongolian Shamanism*. Edited by R. Lawrence and E. Cheng. Ulaanbaatar: Admon, 145.

¹¹ See S. Badamhatan (1965). *Hövsgöliin Darhad Yastan*. (*Hövsgöl’s Darhad Society*). Ulaanbaatar: Shinshleh Uhaani Akademiin Hevlel.

¹² P. Vitebsky (2005), 13.



2. Enkhtuya, a Tsaatan *xam*, shaman, with her son.

Just as there are various ways of contacting the spirit world, so too there are several ways for the shaman to prepare her/himself for that contact. A common form of preparation is entry into a trance. However, what exactly constitutes a ‘trance’ varies enormously from one society to another and it is important to be careful not to impose one etic definition on a phenomenon that may be viewed quite differently across cultures from an emic perspective.¹³ The single most important aspect of shamanic trance is that it refers “not to a specific physical or psychic state, but to the shaman’s being in *direct contact with the spirits*.”¹⁴ The Australian aboriginal shaman,

¹³ This point was strongly emphasised by E. Bourguignon (1973), ‘Introduction: A Framework for the Comparative Study of Altered States of Consciousness.’ In E. Bourguignon (ed.), *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 3-35; and E. Bourguignon, A. Bellisari and S. McCabe (1983), ‘Women, Possession Trance Cults, and the Extended Nutrient-Deficiency Hypothesis.’ *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 85 (2), 413-416.

¹⁴ R. N. Hamayon (1994), ‘Are ‘Trance,’ ‘Ecstasy’ and Similar Concepts Appropriate in the Study of Shamanism?’ In A.A. Znamenski (ed.), *Shamanism: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, Vol. 3. London and New York: Routledge/Curzon, 243-260: 246. The italics are in the original. This article was originally published in *Shaman* 1 (2), 1993, 3-25.

known as a *karadji*, *margidbu* or *mulla-mullung*, has often managed to go into a type of trance through sheer mental focus and without the use of drugs, music or dance.¹⁵

The Mongolian Darhad shaman, *udgan* or *zairan*, may enter a trance merely by gently playing on a trump – an instrument they call an *amaan khuur* and which is often



3. Jabzaa Udgan entering a trance by gently playing the *amaan khuur* – trump.

known as a Jaw's Harp in the West. Some Mongolian Darhad shamans, on the other hand, use a drum¹⁶ and may consume alcohol to aid their entry into a trance. Shamans

¹⁵ See A.P. Elkin (1994), *Aboriginal Men of High Degree: Initiation and Sorcery in the World's Oldest Tradition*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International; and J. Halifax (1979), *Shamanic Voices*. Harmondsworth, New York, Ringwood, Ontario and Auckland: Penguin. However, some aboriginal shamans do use a trance-inducing drug – pituri derived from the shrub *Duboisia hopwoodii*. See Australian Institute of Parapsychological Research (2002), 'Psychic and Mystical Experiences of the Aborigines.' Available at: <http://www.aiprinc.org/aborig.asp> Last accessed 22/07/12; and P.L. Watson, O. Luanratana and W.J. Griffin (1983), 'The ethnopharmacology of pituri.' *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, Vol. 8, Issue 3 (September), 303-311.

¹⁶ A monotonous rhythm beaten out, for example, on a drum, is a common way of entering a trance-like state. See A. Rock, G. Abbott and N. Kambouropoulos (2008), 'Altered Experience Mediates the Relationship between Schizotypy and Mood Disturbance during Shamanic-Like Journeying.' *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 371-384.



4. Llagva Zairan launching himself into a trance using a drum.

in other cultures, for example, the San and !Kung shamans of the Kalahari Desert area of southern Africa, employ a highly rhythmic dance with dried cocoons filled with small stones attached to their legs as dancing rattles¹⁷ in order to enter a trance.¹⁸ The *nyipa*, the Akha shaman, while singing a repetitious chant and with one foot on the bamboo floor drumming out a beat like a horse's hooves, sets her/himself "travelling swiftly into time-space on a winged horse."¹⁹ Finally, shamans from many cultures employ drugs of one sort or another. The sheer range of naturally occurring trance-inducing drugs is overwhelming.²⁰ In Mexico alone the Huichol Indian shamans

¹⁷ See D. Lewis-Williams (1991), *Bushmen: A Changing Way of Life*. Photos by A. Bannister. Cape Town: Struik, 74-75.

¹⁸ See K. Kalweit (2000), *Shamans, Healers and Medicine Men*. Boston and London: Shambhala; and B. Keeney (2005), *Bushman Shaman. Awakening the Spirit through Ecstatic Dance*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

¹⁹ F.V. Grunfeld (1982), *Wayfarers of the Thai Forest: The Akha*. Amsterdam: Time-Life Books.

²⁰ For a good overview see T. McKenna (1992), *Food of the Gods. The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge*. New York: Bantam Books. Shamans in most cultures usually have one drug of choice but the Yanomamö call whatever they use *ebene* even though the ingredients may come from the *yakowana* tree, the *hisiomö* tree or from *justicia* bushes. See N.A. Chagnon (1992), *Yanomamö*, 4th edition. Fort

consume either the hallucinogenic peyote cactus which contains mescaline²¹ or the mushroom known as *Psilocybe cubensis* which contains psilocybin.²²

Whatever the means shamans throughout the world employ to contact the spirits, they use that contact to help their communities. That help can come in many forms but the most common is probably that of curing the sick.²³ The precise nature of the healing process depends on the perceived cause of the illness. In traditional, so-called ‘animist’ societies, the cause is always more complex than in the Western biological model. The Western model often cannot explain why one person contracts an illness while another person does not; the concepts of ‘chance’ and ‘probability’ are brought in to fill the explanatory gap. ‘Chance’ and ‘probability’ tend not to be acceptable explanations in traditional societies – there has to be a reason why someone contracts an illness – normally the breaking of a taboo, someone’s ill will or offending an ancestor or spirit.²⁴ The shaman’s cure will depend on the precise aetiology that s/he has divined and may include, among other things, music, for example drumming, herbal remedies and massage.²⁵ Curing methods have evolved in interesting ways in

Worth, Philadelphia, San Diego, New York, Orlando, Austin, San Antonio, Toronto, Montreal, London, Sydney and Tokyo: Harcourt Brace, 53-55 and 117-118.

²¹ See B.G. Myerhoff (1976), *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

²² See R.G. Wasson (1968), *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. The Hague, Paris and New York: Mouton; R.G. Wasson (1980), *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*. New York: McGraw-Hill; and A. Estrada (1977), *Vida de Maria Sabina, la Sabia de los Hongos*. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores.

²³ That is not to say that all shamans use their powers for good. In some cultures it is believed that a shaman may use her/his powers for evil e.g. to inflict illness. See J.A. Grim (1983), *The Shaman: Patterns of Religious Healing among the Ojibway Indians*. Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma Press.

²⁴ “Thus, though modern medicine with its studies and machines and medications focuses its considerable power on our suffering human condition, it does not struggle with questions of meaning.” E. Tick (2001), *The Practice of Dream Healing*. Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 157.

²⁵ See, for example, A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), *Shamans of the Foye Tree*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

those societies that have had extensive contact with, for example, Christianity. Inuit shamans have had to adapt their methods²⁶ and in the Philippines their traditional shamans, *mananambal*, have “sublimated an ancient system of shamanic healing into the mission of Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Although psychic surgery has been practised elsewhere,²⁸ a fusion of traditional shamanic practice with Christian faith healing currently flourishes as psychic surgery in the Pangasinan region of the Philippine island of Luzon.²⁹ Symbolically extracting the illness is quite common. Kwakiutl shamans produced bloodied bird’s down from their mouths as though it had been sucked out of the patient’s body³⁰ while Inuit³¹ and Indonesian shamans, *dukun(s)*, still employ a wide range of simulations.³²

²⁶ See F.B. Laugrand and J.G. Oosten (2010), *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity*. Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

²⁷ H. Martin (1998), *The Secret Teachings of the Espiritistas*. Savannah, GA: Metamind Publications, 56.

²⁸ E.g. by Stephen Turoff in London – see G. Solomon (1997), *Stephen Turoff: Psychic Surgeon*. London and San Francisco, CA: Thorsons; and Brighton by Jesse Thomas – see J.J. Thomas (1957), *Psychic Surgeon*. London: Arthur Baker Ltd.

²⁹ See J. Bryan (2007), *Psychic Surgery and Faith Healing in the Lowlands of Pangasinan*. Talent, OR: Lompico Creek Press; and Department of Psychic Surgery Research (1973), *A Guide to Spiritual & Magnetic Healing & Psychic Surgery in the Philippines*. Los Altos, CA: Department of Psychic Surgery Research. Psychic surgery also flourishes in a fusion of traditional and Christian beliefs in Brazil. See A. Dooley (1973), *Every Wall a Door*. London: Abelard-Schuman; and H. Cumming and K. Leffler (2007), *John of God*. New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Atria Books. For an overview of psychic healing see A. Stelter (1976), *Psi-Healing*. New York: Bantam Books.

³⁰ See F. Boas (1930), *Religion of the Kwakiutl Indians, Part II – Translations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 29. The symbolic extraction of illness has to be viewed within the society’s framework of cosmology and psychology/aetiology. For Kwakiutl cosmology see S. Walens (1981), *Feasting with Cannibals: An Essay on Kwakiutl Cosmology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, especially 24-25. For the psychology/aetiology of illness and its curing among the Kwakiutl and other shamanic societies see M. Taussig (1998), ‘Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic.’ In N.B. Dirks (ed.), *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 221-256: especially 238. Versions of this article are also to be found in (2003), B. Meyer and P. Pels (eds.), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 272-306; and in (2006), M. Taussig, *Walter Benjamin’s Grave*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 121-156.

³¹ See J.M. Murphy (1974), ‘Psychotherapeutic Aspects of Shamanism on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska.’ In A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith, and Healing*. New York and London: The Free Press, 53-83: 59-60 and 70.

³² As was confirmed by an extremely interesting meeting between the author and a *dukun*, Kyai Haji Asnuri, on Java.



5. Kyai Haji Asnuri, a *dukun* on Java.

In societies still relatively untouched by non-indigenous religions, traditional shamanic healing practices persist even if they do sometimes sit uneasily alongside mainstream

religion. An example of this tension is the continuation of traditional healing practices by the shamans, *barwa(s)*, among the Balahis of Central India.³³

Another way in which shamans help their communities, most especially in hunting or hunter-gatherer societies, concerns the food and most specifically the protein supply. However, in order to understand this aspect of their role one has to appreciate the cosmology of shamanic societies. This is a subject that has been written about by several authors³⁴ but the cosmology of one shamanic society has been written about both extensively and in depth.³⁵ The Tukano people live in Colombia mainly around the Vaupés River in the northwest of the Amazon. Their cosmology is heliocentric with the sun being the male creator. The earth, regarded largely as female, lies between the heavens above and an underworld of happiness below. The sun god “peopled the land and created animals and plants, giving to each species a set of rules according to which they were to live and multiply.”³⁶ The Tukano are highly aware that the earth’s resources are finite and that there is a limited amount of energy that flows between all parts of the universe. The energy level must be maintained so far as is possible in order to slow down the inevitable entropy. This sense that the cosmos is on the wane is “an existential anxiety that forms part of native cosmology and

³³ See S. Fuchs (1984), ‘Magic Healing Techniques Among the Balahis in Central India.’ In A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith, and Healing*. New York: The Free Press, 121-138.

³⁴ Most notably I.M. Lewis (2003 [1971]), *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. London: Routledge; and P. Vitebsky (1995).

³⁵ G. Reichel-Dolmatoff: (1974), *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; (1975), *The Shaman and the Jaguar: A Study of Narcotic Drugs Among the Indians of Colombia*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; (1976), ‘Cosmology as Ecological Analysis: A View from the Rain Forest.’ *Man*, New Series, Vol. 11, Issue 3 (September), 307-318; (1990), *The Forest Within: The World-view of the Tukano Amazonian Indians*. Dartington: Themis Books; (1997), *Rainforest Shamans*. Dartington: Themis Books. For other aspects of Tukano shamanism see G. Reichel-Dolmatoff: (1970), ‘Notes on the Cultural extent of the Use of Yajé (Banisteriopsis Caapi) among the Indians of the Vaupés, Colombia.’ *Economic Botany*, 24, 1, January-March, 32-33; and (1978), *Beyond the Milky Way: Hallucinatory Imagery of the Tukano Indians*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Latin America Center.

³⁶ G. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976), 309.

philosophy ... based upon the close and daily observation of the biological cycles of growth and decline.”³⁷ Most importantly, they believe that man is not master of nature; humans are merely part of nature. Maintaining the energy flow means rationing sexual energy and thus limiting the size of families. Shamanic ceremonies are occasions when the Tukano emphasise the links and interdependence between humans and the animal and plant world, between humans now and the ancestors, and make plain the links between what humans do now and how the world will appear to their descendants. The world will be a hospitable place for future generations only if the energy flow is maintained and no more is taken out of the system than is put back in. The shaman is crucial in all of this by restricting hunting to certain times and places, by placing restrictions – including sexual restrictions – on who can hunt and when, by controlling how much wood can be obtained and how much plant material can be harvested. Only as much may be taken as can be returned in an alternative energy form. The shaman is the repository of a vast storehouse of wisdom collected over centuries. In a trance or dream – another state in which contact with the spirit world can be made – the shaman comes to discover the correct course of action. It is usually in a narcotic trance that the shaman approaches the Master of Animals to ask for the release of some animals so that a successful hunt can be undertaken. In this way the shaman acts as a mediator between humans and animals and plants but the shaman is more than that. The shaman “is at once a cosmic traveller, a healer, a master of spirits, a psychopomp, an oracular mouthpiece.”³⁸ The shaman is the maker of meaning and the mediator between all aspects of life: the present and the past, the present and the

³⁷ G. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976), 317.

³⁸ C. Blacker (1999), *The Catalpa Bow*. Richmond: Curzon Press Japan Library, 26.

future, the living and the dead, the lower and upper worlds, between sickness and health, between sanity and madness,³⁹ between humans and animals, between humans and plants, and between the male fertilising element and the female reproductive element. The shaman is thus the mediator par excellence and acts as a go-between, shuttling between what are considered the different poles looked at from a dimorphic point of view. The shaman is truly a liminal person because s/he can step either way; s/he is a bridge between worlds.

1b: Shamans as mediators between male and female

Which worlds a shaman bridges will depend on the particular society. For some societies the human – animal bridge is the most important.⁴⁰ However, it is interesting that the role of a co-gendered shaman,⁴¹ one who bridges the male and the female worlds, has both a long history and a wide geographical spread. This seems to be because “Shamans embody and perform the tasks of multiple social and spiritual

³⁹ See J.M. Murphy (1974), 76.

⁴⁰ See the beautiful description of the shaman’s human – animal bridge in R. Willerslev (2007), *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, especially 125ff. The shamanic ability to ‘become’ an animal is normally called ‘transformation.’ See D. Riboli (2004), ‘Transformation.’ In M.N. Walter and E.J. Fridman (eds.), *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*. Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO, and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, Vol. 1, 255-259.

⁴¹ The term ‘co-gendered’ is that used by B. Tedlock (2005), 247. It is used here because it is non-judgmental, transparent and neutral. Other terms such as ‘trans(s)exual’ or ‘bisexual’ (M. Ripinsky-Naxon (1993), *The Nature of Shamanism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press: 84) have connotations in Western language that are often inappropriate in other contexts. The term ‘androgynous’ (J. Halifax (1980), *Shamanic Voices*. Harmondsworth, New York, Ringwood, Ontario and Auckland: Penguin: 23; and M. Stutley (2003), *Shamanism: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 12-15) is less problematic. The phrase ‘sexual polymorphousness’ (R.C. Morris (2000), *In the Place of Origins. Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 121) seems rather opaque. The term ‘transformed’ (G. Edson (2009), *Shamanism. A Cross-Cultural Study of Beliefs and Practices*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 198) can also apply to human > animal transformation – see R. Willerslev (2007), 89ff.

genders, regardless of their anatomical sex and sexual practices.”⁴² The area of modern day Russia and Ukraine has a two and a half thousand year history of such shamans. Shamans called by the Greeks *Enarëes* or *anandrieis*⁴³, meaning unmanly, served the pre-Scythian goddess Artimpasa probably entering trance states through the use of cannabis.⁴⁴ At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries “Northeastern Siberia is the region where practices of co-gendered shamans are best documented, among the Chukchi, Koryak, Itelmen (Kamchadal), and Siberian Eskimo (Iupik), plus, less definitively, among the Northeastern Yukagir, and the Amur Region Nivkh (Gilyak) and Nanai (Gold)”.⁴⁵ The co-gendering exhibited by a male ranged from simply the arranging of hair in a woman’s fashion to dressing as a woman but to acquire extraordinary power the male shaman underwent physical and psychic changes and became, to all intents and purposes, a woman⁴⁶ - “a ‘soft man,’ or ‘similar to a woman’”.⁴⁷ Female shamans could undergo a similar process from female to male and

⁴² B. Tedlock (2005), 248.

⁴³ Ἐνάρεες or Ἀνανδρίεις are described by Herodotus in *The Histories* 1, 105 and 4, 67 – translated by A. de Sélincourt (2003). London *et alibi*: Penguin, 49 and 261. In 4, 67 he calls them ἀνδρόγυνοι – ‘androgynes’. Hippocrates describes them as ἀνανδριεῖς – ‘unmanly men.’ In *Hippocratic Writings*, translated by J. Chadwick and W.N. Mann (1983), ‘Airs, Waters, Places’, 22. Harmondsworth *et alibi*: Penguin, 165-166.

⁴⁴ See R.P. Conner (1993), *Blossom of Bone*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 138-141. M. Delcourt (1961), *Hermaphrodite*. London: Studio Books, 40, comments: “It is in the bisexuality of the shamans that the explanation of the mysterious *Enarëes* must lie ... Hippocrates ... describes the *Enarëes* precisely enough for us to recognise in them shamans similar to those of Eastern Asia.”

⁴⁵ M.M. Balzer (1996), ‘Sacred Genders in Siberia: Shamans, bear festivals and androgyny.’ In S. P. Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge, 164–182: 165. This was later reprinted in G. Harvey (ed.), (2003). *Shamanism: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 242–61. See also V.N. Basilov (1978), ‘Vestiges of Transvestism in Central-Asian Shamanism.’ In V. Diószegi and M. Hoppál (eds.), *Shamanism in Siberia*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 281–89 for his speculation that ‘transvestism’ was part of the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal type of religion.

⁴⁶ See W. Bogoras (1907), *The Chukchee - Religion*. Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History. Vol. XI, Part II. Reprinted from Vol. VII (1904) of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, edited by Franz Boas. Leiden: E.J. Brill and New York: G.E. Stechert. Available at <http://digitallibrary.amnh.org/dspace/handle/2246/5745> Last accessed 10/08/12. Chapter xv is entirely about Chukchee shamanism and the section on transformed male and female shamans is 449-457.

⁴⁷ “Similar to a woman” – *ne’uchica*. M.M. Balzer (1996), 165.

become “similar to a man”.⁴⁸ These traditions appear to have been quite widespread and were reported for many Siberian groups but especially the Koryak.⁴⁹ What is extremely interesting is that ethnographers began to speculate on how these co-gendered shamans acquired their extraordinary powers. One theory was that the co-gendered shaman was married to a male spirit who communicated his orders through his co-gendered wife.⁵⁰ This led one ethnographer to postulate that sexual power acquired through the process of becoming co-gendered lay at the centre of shamanism.⁵¹

On St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, vestiges of the co-gendered shaman were still to be found in the middle of the twentieth century.⁵² Many Native North American cultures “recognized a spiritual dimension associated with institutionalized gender variance”⁵³ and so abounded with co-gendered shamans although the phenomenon is much more rare now. Research among the Inuit of Canada’s central

⁴⁸ “Similar to a man” – *qa’chikicheca*. M.M. Balzer (1996), 165.

⁴⁹ See W. Jochelson (Vladimir Ioklason) (1908), *The Koryak*. New York: Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 10. A reprint of the (1905) Jesup North Pacific Expedition, Vol. VI, edited by Franz Boas. Leiden: E.J. Brill and New York: G.E. Stechert. Part 2, p. 458 mentions “men ‘transformed’ into women (kavau)” using the women’s exit from the underground house. Parts 1 and 2 available at: <http://digitallibrary.amnh.org/dspace/handle/2246/27> Last accessed 10/08/12. In Part 1, pp.52-54, Jochelson has a section entitled ‘Shamans that change their sex’ but he states that the tradition had already died out by the end of the nineteenth century. For a near contemporary overview of Bogoras’ and Jochelson’s work see M. Czaplicka (1914), *Aboriginal Siberia*. London: Oxford University Press. For extracts from all these works and a modern overview see S.O. Murray (2002), *Pacific Homosexualities*. San Jose, New York, Lincoln, NE and Shanghai: Writers Club Press, 157-202.

⁵⁰ See W. Bogoras (1909), 448-459. For a summary of Siberian shamanism and gender see S. Tomášková (2007), ‘Yes Virginia, There is Gender: Shamanism and Archaeology’s Many Histories.’ In R. Williamson and M. Bisson (eds.), *The Archaeology of Bruce Trigger: Theoretical Empiricism*. Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 92-113.

⁵¹ L. S(h)ternberg (1925), ‘Divine election in primitive religion.’ In. *Congrès International des Américanistes, compte-rendu de la XXI^e session, Deuxième Partie, tenue à Goteborg en 1924*, 476-512: 476-480.

⁵² In their language, Yupik, the “term for ‘soft man’ or ‘womanly man’ is *anasik*, and the counterpart for women is *uktasik*.” J.M.Murphy (1974), 75.

⁵³ A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 133. In her note on 268 she lists examples among the Lakota, the Cheyenne, the Inuit and Ingalik, the Bella Coola, the Flathead and Klamath as well as among the Pueblo and the Zuni. For an overview see S.E. Hollimon (2001), ‘The gendered peopling of North America: Addressing the antiquity of systems of multiple genders.’ In N.S. Price (ed.), *The Archeology of Shamanism*. London and New York: Routledge, 123-134.

arctic area in the second half of the twentieth century showed that shamanic co-gendering could easily be explained by the Inuit belief in the fluidity of gender with about two per cent of the population ostensibly changing sex (*sic*) at birth and fifteen per cent or more changing gender during childhood.⁵⁴ People who changed gender, co-gendered people, because they straddled the gender boundary were hypothesised to be in a good position as shamans to straddle all boundaries.⁵⁵ However, not all shamans were co-gendered and many co-gendered people were not shamans.⁵⁶ Despite assertions that co-gendering was an essential prerequisite for being a shaman,⁵⁷ we now know that co-gendered people or “women-men practiced the occupation of ‘shaman’ in twenty-one Native American cultures”⁵⁸ while they did not do so in twenty-seven such cultures.⁵⁹ Co-gendered men and women could serve as shamans but only if one or more conditions were met. For the St. Lawrence shaman the calling was “On the basis of visions which called a woman-man especially to become a ‘shaman’ and at the same time required a gender role change.”⁶⁰ For all the other native North American cultures, women-men exercised the function of shaman:

⁵⁴ See B. Saladin d’Anglure (1992), ‘Rethinking Inuit Shamanism through the Concept of ‘Third Gender,’ in M. Hoppál and J. Pentikäinen (eds.), *Northern Religions and Shamanism*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 146–50. Reprinted in G. Harvey (ed.) (2003), *Shamanism: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 235–41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* See also J. G. Taylor (1989), ‘Shamanic Sex Roles in Traditional Labrador Inuit Society.’ In M. Hoppál and O. von Sadovsky (eds.), *Shamanism Past and Present*. Part 2. Budapest: Ethnographic Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Fullerton, CA: International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 297–306.

⁵⁶ See W.L. Williams (1992), *The Spirit and the Flesh*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 35.

⁵⁷ See H. Baumann (1955), *Das doppelte Geschlecht: Studien zur Bisexualität in Ritus und Mythos*. Berlin: Reimer.

⁵⁸ S. Lang (1998), *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*. Translated from the German original (1990, *Männer als Frauen, Frauen als Männer: Geschlechtsrollenwechsel bei den Indianern Nordamerikas*. Hamburg: Wayasbah) by J.L. Vantine. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 167.

⁵⁹ See the table of cultures in S. Lang (1998), 154–155. “In North America, shamans or medicine people were distinct from berdaches; berdaches were sometimes shamans, but separate terms distinguished the roles.” W. Roscoe (2000), *Changing Ones*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 203.

⁶⁰ S. Lang (1998), 168.

1. Within the framework of their feminine gender role.
2. On the basis of visions that became manifested in the external, visible symbol form of gender role change, making the woman-man a holy/sacred person and destining him to become a healer or medicine man.
3. On the basis of visions or dreams which conferred on the woman-man supernatural healing capabilities, independently of a certain gender status or of his gender role change.⁶¹

In other words, Native North American shamans, with the exception of the St.

Lawrence shamans, either acted out their role simply as though they were women or

their co-gendered status was not a *sine qua non* of their shamanic status. The

distinction could be a fine one especially since it was the view of the “vision-stressing

cultures on the Prairies and Plains that women-men were regarded as holy persons”⁶²

and that a co-gendered shaman in those cultures “had access to latent spiritual power,

part of which was reserved for him on account of his gender status.”⁶³ Nonetheless, it

was only on St. Lawrence Island that co-gendering was an absolute precondition for

the acquisition of shamanic power.

In South America, although there are several examples of co-gendered

shamans or co-gendered people performing what is recognisably a shamanic role,⁶⁴ it

is the shamans of the Mapuche people of Chile and Argentina who have been the most

widely studied.⁶⁵ Nearly four hundred years ago a young man called Francisco Núñez

⁶¹ S. Lang (1998), 168.

⁶² S. Lang (1998), 167.

⁶³ S. Lang (1998), 168.

⁶⁴ There are, for example, some extremely interesting examples in African-American religions. See C. Larsen (2012), *Queer Brazilian Participation In Candomblé Spirit Possession*. Available at:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/99950476/Queer-Brazilian-Participation-In-Candomble-Spirit-Possession>

Last accessed 9/08/12; and P. Fry, (1986), ‘Male Homosexuality and Spirit Possession in Brazil.’

Journal of Homosexuality, 11 (3-4), 137-153.

⁶⁵ Early work was undertaken by A. Métraux: (1942), ‘Le shamanisme araucan.’ In *Revista del Instituto de Anthropología de la Universidad Nacional de Tucumán*, 2 (10), 309-362; (1967), *Réligions et magies*

de Piñeda y Bascuñán watched as a Mapuche co-gendered shaman, a *machi weye*, healed a native boy.⁶⁶ In the period since then, the Mapuche shaman, *machi*, has evolved into an extremely complex figure thanks to colonial and Christian influences with their three binary views on biological sex, penetration and gender.⁶⁷ Whatever Mapuche co-gendered shamans were like, “Contemporary male and female *machi* engage in ritual performances of feminine, masculine, and co-gendered roles.”⁶⁸ The term ‘co-gendered’ is being used in this case with a connotation of fluidity between masculine and feminine.⁶⁹ Here it is vital to understand the Mapuche cosmology.

Disruptions or transgressions of social or moral norms and failure to fulfil commitments to kin, ancestor spirits, and the Mapuche deity Ngünechen produce individual and social illnesses as well as cosmological chaos. To help prevent or repair such disruptions, *machi* use gender and generational categories to link the human world with spiritual realities. By mimicking and manipulating the gender and generational categories inherent in the fourfold deity Ngünechen, *machi* unleash cosmic powers in an effort to convert illness into health, disorder into order, and scarcity into abundance.⁷⁰

The picture is complicated by Mapuche beliefs about from where the shaman’s, *machi*’s, powers are derived. Both anatomically male and female *machi* derive their power either from their *machi püllü*, an individual spirit, or the *filew*, an

indiennes d’Amerique du Sud. Paris: Gallimard; and (1973), *Religión y magias indígenas de América del Sur*. Aguilar: Ediciones Madrid. M. Titiev (1951), *Araucanian Culture in Transition*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; and (1968), ‘Araucanian Shamanism.’ In *Boletín del Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Chile*, 30, 299-312. M. Eliade (1972), *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 122-125 summarises some of this material. See the bibliography for the huge amount of research undertaken among Mapuche shamans, *machi*, by A.M. Bacigalupo.

⁶⁶ Account in A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 111. The event took place in 1629.

⁶⁷ See A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 136-137.

⁶⁸ A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 137.

⁶⁹ “I use the term *co-gendered* to refer to *weye* to reinforce the idea that the identity of *machi weye* continually fluctuated between the masculine and the feminine.” A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 132.

⁷⁰ A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 44.

ancestral spirit of all *machi*.⁷¹ A spirit may call on a young man or woman to be the spirit's 'bride' and may cause physical or mental illness if the call is ignored.⁷² The relationship is seen as sexual and is described in terms of 'seduction.'⁷³ After the initiation or 'marriage' the spirit is extremely possessive of the human 'bride' and tries to keep the relationship exclusive as well as demanding no contact with modern technology.⁷⁴ The spirit gives power to the *machi* and temporarily assumes a dominant role during possession when the spirit speaks through the *machi*. Experienced *machi* are enabled by their spirit to engage in ecstatic flight – a deep trance state called *küymi*. "When the *machi* is in *küymi*, the *machi püllü*, *filew*, and Ngünechen are the same."⁷⁵ What is most important about the Mapuche *machi* is that what they are and what they do cannot be captured by Western essentialist and binary language.

Machi-hood is a site for gender differentiation and gender fusing. *Machi* practice marks the difference between the feminine and the masculine in cosmology, society, and politics, but it also fuses genders to gain control over the world and transform illness into health, scarcity into abundance, and marginality into participation.⁷⁶

Mapuche male or female shamans may be 'brides' when they are in a trance but that does not necessarily impact on their gender status outside their ritual role. However, these days the type of fully co-gendered shaman, the *machi weye*, whom Francisco

⁷¹ See A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 24 and 99.

⁷² For a study of the ways in which someone may be called to be a shaman see E.L.B. Turner (2006), 'The Making of a Shaman: A Comparative Study of Inuit, African and Nepalese Shaman Tradition.' In J.D. Koss-Chioino and P. Hefner (eds.), *Spiritual Transformation and Healing: Anthropological, Theological, Neuroscientific, and Clinical Perspectives*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 101-116.

⁷³ See A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 87.

⁷⁴ Transgressing these rules may well end in illness and suffering. See A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 99.

⁷⁵ A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 102.

⁷⁶ A.M. Bacigalupo (2007), 256.

saw in 1629, no longer exists in Chile having been ousted by a combination of Christian and non-Mapuche values.⁷⁷

Co-gendered shamans, although called by local names,⁷⁸ also survived into at least the early part of the twentieth century in many parts of Africa.⁷⁹ There are several reports of co-gendered shaman-like practitioners among the Ovambo people of southern Angola and northern Namibia. Among the Ovambo group known as the Ndonga many *eshenga*, co-gendered males, were *oonganga*, shamans, and in the same area among the Ukuambi there still may be such practitioners.⁸⁰ Well into the twentieth century the Ovambo Kwanyama speaking people in Angola and Namibia had co-gendered practitioners called *omasenge kimbanda* whose co-gendered status was due to having been possessed by female spirits since they were children.⁸¹ In Uganda there were practitioners called *jo apele*⁸² while in both Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo among the Lugbara people co-gendered male practitioners were called “*okule* (‘like women’)” while the co-gendered female practitioners were called “*agule* (‘like men’).”⁸³ The Meru in Kenya had their

⁷⁷ A.M. Bacigalupo (2011), ‘El Hombre Mapuche que se convirtió en Mujer Chamán: Individualidad, Transgresión de Género y Normas Culturales en Pugna.’ *Scripta Ethnológica*, 33, 9-40: 9. Available at: <http://www.redalyc.org/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=14820902001> Last accessed 31/07/12.

⁷⁸ Sangoma and isangoma are quite common African terms but each culture had its own nomenclature – “*jo apele*, the *mwammi*, the *omasenge kimbanda*, the ‘*yan Daudu*, and others.” R.P. Conner (1993), 38.

⁷⁹ See R.P. Conner (1993), 40-44 for a short but comprehensive overview.

⁸⁰ See S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe (1998), ‘Central Africa – Overview.’ In S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe (eds.), *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*. New York: Palgrave, 141-148: 147-148.

⁸¹ See C. Esterman (1976), *The Ethnography of South-western Angola*. New York: Africana Publishing. For the spirit – human marriage relationship see I.M. Lewis (1999), ‘Shamans and Sex: A Comparative Perspective’ which is chapter eight of his *Arguments with Ethnography*. London and New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 106-114.

⁸² See J.H. Driberg (1923), *The Lango: A Nilotic Tribe of Uganda*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.

⁸³ R.P. Conner (1993), 41. See J. Middleton (1969), ‘Spirit Possession among the Lugbara.’ In J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 220-232. See also J. Middleton (1965), *The Lugbara of Uganda*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

*mugawe*⁸⁴ while the Ila people of Zambia had their *mwammi*.⁸⁵ The Maguzawa, who are a non-Muslim subsection of the Nigerian Hausa, until recently had a *bori* – spirit – possession cult where marginal people including the gender-variant were among the chosen.⁸⁶ There was even a tradition of co-gendered male and female healer-diviners, *izangoma*, among the Zulus.⁸⁷ There is still a tradition of co-gendered shamans, gatekeepers, among the Dagara people of Burkina Faso and they have a famous and well-published spokesperson.⁸⁸

Asia abounds with incontestable examples of co-gendered shamans. The island of Borneo, divided between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Sultanate of Brunei, is home to the Iban people, formerly and rather misleadingly known as the Sea Dyak.⁸⁹ People in the West were informed in 1848 that there were three types of practitioners whom we would now call shamans – male – *manang laki*, female – *manang indu*, and unsexed males – *manang bali*.⁹⁰ The *manang* of Borneo have proved to be a fertile ground for Western theories – the shaman as a fraud or a mad person,⁹¹ the shaman's

⁸⁴ See D.F. Greenberg (1988), *The Construction of Homosexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁸⁵ See E.W. Smith and A.M. Dale (2010/1920), *The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*. Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar. The 2010 version is a reprint of the 1920 edition: London: Macmillan.

⁸⁶ See F.E. Besmer (1983), *Horses, Musicians, and Gods: The Hausa Cult of Possession-Trance*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

⁸⁷ See S.G. Lee (1969), 'Spirit Possession among the Zulu.' In J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 128-156; and H. Ngubane (1977), *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine*. New York: Academic Press.

⁸⁸ Malidoma Patrice Somé. See his book (1994a), *Of Water and Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.

⁸⁹ See P. Graham (1987), 3-5 for the background.

⁹⁰ This information was conveyed by H.B. Low (1848), *Sarawak*. London: Bentley. For an overview of transformed shamans on Borneo see S.O. Murray (2002), 212-226.

⁹¹ G.A. Wilken (1887), 'Het shamanisme bij de volken van des Indischen Archipel.' (Shamanism among the Peoples of the Indonesian Archipelago). *Bijdragen tot de Taal-Land en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Indië*, 36, 427-497. See P. Graham (1987), 17-18 for an analysis and critique of Wilken's ideas.

role as an escape route for the inadequate and abnormal,⁹² and the *manang*'s spirit possession as a tactic employed by a society's weakest members.⁹³ More sympathetic views of the *manang bali* have also emerged including the suggestion as regards the co-gendered shaman that "While exhibiting aspects of male and female human behaviour, he also belongs partly to another world, the world of his spirits."⁹⁴ The most recent in-depth investigation into the *manang bali* makes a similar point and suggests that "the Iban ... have construed ritual transformation of gender as an analogue of the shamanic power to transcend 'the human condition' (*tuboh*) and take on at will 'the spirit condition' in order to deal directly with souls (*semengat*), soul-counterparts (*ayu/bungai*), and spirits (*antu*)."⁹⁵

Elsewhere on Borneo there are at least three other groups that have, or did have until recent times, shaman-like practitioners who are co-gendered – the *Ngaju*, the *Buluy Kayan* and the *Melanau*.⁹⁶ On nearby Sulawesi there were co-gendered shaman-like practitioners among the Tora(d)ja in the early twentieth century⁹⁷ and there are still a few *Bissu* among the Bugis.⁹⁸ There is evidence that there were co-gendered shamanic specialists called *pawang* who existed in Malaysia well into the twentieth

⁹² V.H. Sutlive (1976), 'The Iban *manang*: an alternate route to normality.' In G.N. Appel (ed.), *Studies in Borneo societies: social process and anthropological explanation*. Center for Southeast Asian Studies. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 64-71. See P. Graham (1987), 19-20.

⁹³ I.M. Lewis (1989). See P. Graham (1987), 20-21.

⁹⁴ E. Jensen (1974), *The Iban and their Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 145.

⁹⁵ P. Graham (1987), 118-119.

⁹⁶ See S.O. Murray (2002), 220-223.

⁹⁷ See S.O. Murray (2002), 224. The main sources of information are N. Adriani (1932), 'De Toradjasche Vrouw als Priesteres.' *Verzamelde Geschriften*, 2. Haarlem: De Erven F. Bohn, 190-215; and R.E. Downs (1956), *The Religion of the Bare'e-Speaking Toradja of Central Celebes*. The Hague: Uitgeverij Excelsior, 48. See also M. Eliade (1972), 353.

⁹⁸ See the bibliography for the research undertaken by S. Graham (S.G. Davies after her marriage) into the Bissu and gender issues more widely among the Bugis on Sulawesi. For research published in Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) see the bibliography for the research of H. Lathief.

century.⁹⁹ Further north, in the Philippines, there used to be co-gendered shamans called *bido*, *asog* or *bayoc* but the custom seems to have ceased early in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁰ Co-gendered shamans called *paksu mundang* still operate in Korea¹⁰¹ and in Myanmar Burmese practitioners, known as *NatKadaw*, are flourishing.¹⁰² In Thailand too, especially northern Thailand, there seems to have been a growth in shamanic activity especially in urban centres with many of the shamans, or spirit mediums as they are often called, being co-gendered.¹⁰³ There appears to be a flowering of shamanism/mediumship including that by co-gendered shamans/mediums in Vietnam and a growing number of studies of the phenomenon.¹⁰⁴ There were at least until recently a few co-gendered male shamans, *wikiga-winagu*, among the vast

⁹⁹ See M.G. Peletz (2006), 'Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times.' *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April), 309-325 and 333-340: 322.

¹⁰⁰ See S.O. Murray (2002), 226-234. For the evidence of co-gendered shamans at the time of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines see C. Brewer (2004), *Shamanism, Catholicism and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521 – 1685*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 127-141; and her earlier (1999) article 'Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy: Gender, Sexuality and the Sacred in Earlier Colonial Philippines.' *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 2 (May). Available at: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html> Last accessed 26/09/12.

¹⁰¹ See L. Kendall (1985), *Shamans, Housewives and Other Restless Spirits*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; and J.-Y. Lee (1981), *Korean Shamanistic Rituals*. The Hague: Mouton.

¹⁰² See the bibliography for the extensive research into the *NatKadaw* undertaken by B. Brac de la Perrière.

¹⁰³ For the growth of Thai shamanism/mediumship in general see R.C. Morris (2000). For co-gendered shamans see G. Wijeyewardene (1986), *Place and Emotion in Northern Thai Ritual Behaviour*. Bangkok: Pandora; P.A. Jackson (1993), *Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist Tradition*. A Version of a talk presented in England in 1993. Available at:

www.enabling.org/ia/vipassana/Archiv/J/Jackson/homoBuddhaJackson.html Last accessed 10/10/12; and A. Matzner (no date), *Transgenderism and Northern Thai Spirit Mediumship*. Available at: <http://www.transgenderasia.org/TGinThailandSpirit.htm> Last accessed 10/10/12.

¹⁰⁴ See P. Taylor (2007), *Modernity and re-enchantment: religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Ngo Duc Thinh (2003), 'Len Dong: Spirits' Journeys.' In Nguyen Van Huy and Laurel Kendall (eds.), *Vietnam: journeys of body, mind, and spirit*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 252-272; K. Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (eds.) (2006), *Possessed by the Spirits: Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*. Southeast Asia Program, SEAP 23. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; and Nguyen Kim Hoa (2007), *Spirit Worship and Sexuality in Vietnam*. Master's thesis with the National University of Singapore. Available at: <http://scholarbank.nus.edu/bitstream/handle/10635/13085/new%20thesis.pdf?sequence=4> Last accessed 06/10/12.

majority of female shamans in Japan and others called *uranai* on some of the chain of islands normally called the Ryūkyū Islands.¹⁰⁵

Europe has only the slightest of vestiges of co-gendered shamans due to its very long history of Christian orthodoxy and a rather shorter history of rationalism. In Hungary, for example, there are signs that there may have been a tradition of the co-gendered shaman called a *táltos*.¹⁰⁶ There is also the possibility that there were co-gendered shamans called *seiðmenn* in a form of Scandinavian religious practice known as *seiðr* which looks very similar to more recognisable shamanic practices but which may not have been a genuine example of shamanism.¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere, whatever may have existed is so thoroughly submerged that no sound argument for its existence can be put forward.

¹⁰⁵ For Okinawa see S.S. Sered (1999), *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa*. New York: Oxford University Press and for the Ryūkyū Islands see her (1994), *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. As regards India, the *Hijras* can certainly not be classified as shamans because they do not enter a trance state of any type and do not regard themselves as contacting the spirit world. However, it is intriguing that *Hijras* regard their role as sacred and they do think that their gender ambiguity gives them the divine power to bless and to heal. This was amply confirmed in a conversation with Bharti, the guru of a *Hijra* community in Mumbai.

¹⁰⁶ See L. Kürti (1996), 'Eroticism, Sexuality, and Gender Reversal in Hungarian Culture.' In S.P. Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge, 148-163: 154-157; R. Hutton (2001), *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination*. London: Hambledon and London; D. Pais (1958), 'A táltos meg az orvos'. Budapest: *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia I. Osztályának Közleményei*, 12, 261-295. For the links between the traditional táltos and the contemporary neo-shamanic táltos see I. Lázár (2005), 'The táltos tradition and the postmodern Táltos.' In H. Johannessen and I. Lázár (eds.), *Multiple Medical Realities: Patients and Healers in Biomedical, Alternative and Traditional Medicine*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 40-53.

¹⁰⁷ See Tolley, C. (2009), *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*. Vol. 1. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia; A. Stone (2003), *Explore Shamanism*. Loughborough: Explore Books/ Heart of Albion Press; Ström, F. (1974), *Nið, ergi and old Norse moral attitudes*. Originally delivered as The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College, London in 1973. London: Viking Society for Northern Research; R. Grambo (1989), 'Unmanliness and Seiðr: Problems Concerning the Change of Sex.' In M. Hoppál and O. von Sadovszky (eds.), *Shamanism: Past and Present*, Part 1. Budapest: Ethnographic Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Fullerton, CA: International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 103-13; and J. Blain and R.J. Wallis (2000), 'The 'Ergi' Seidman: Contestations of Gender, Shamanism and Sexuality in Northern Religion Past and Present.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 (3), 395-411.

This brief survey shows that there are three main ways of linking gender liminality with becoming a shaman. In the first, the person is chosen by the spirit(s) and has to accept the calling (which includes changing gender wholly or partially) or run the risk of madness or even death; in other words, the calling comes first and becoming co-gendered follows. In the second, the person is already co-gendered¹⁰⁸ and acquires the shaman's power by virtue of that fact; in other words, being co-gendered comes first and the calling follows. In the third, there is no intrinsic link between gender liminality and becoming a shaman; in other words, shamans may be male or female or co-gendered. The first type seems to be dying out or may actually have died out. The second type is surviving – only just surviving in the case of the *Bissu* on Sulawesi. However, the third type is flourishing. In Myanmar the number of co-gendered *NatKadaw* has expanded hugely in the last thirty years.¹⁰⁹ This dissertation sets out to discover why the second route is still operating when the first seems to be closed. At the same time it will try to uncover the factors that account for the decline in numbers of the *Bissu* and the huge expansion in the number of co-gendered *NatKadaw*. Along the way, it is hoped that the nature of the relationship between gender and shamanic power in these two cultures will be clarified.

¹⁰⁸ Or arguably fifth gender in the case of the *Bissu* of Sulawesi. See S. Graham, (2001b), 'Sulawesi's Fifth Gender.' *Inside Indonesia*, 66, April-June, 16-17; S.G. Davies (2007a), *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders among the Bugis in Indonesia*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth; and S.G. Davies (2010a), *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam, and Queer Selves*. London: Routledge. *N.B.* - she was known as Sharyn Graham up to and including 2004 and subsequently as Sharyn Graham Davies.

¹⁰⁹ See T. C. Ho (2009), 'Transgender, Transgression, and Translation: A Cartography of Nat Kadaws: Notes on Gender and Sexuality within the Spirit Cult of Burma.' *Discourse*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Fall, 273-317: 274.

2. Methods of investigation

2a: Theoretical framework

There is one theoretical framework that seems ideal for researching the links between gender status and shamanism and that is a feminist social constructionist approach.¹ This way of looking at the world avoids Western essentialist and binary language and – most importantly for a study of co-gendered shamans – allows for gender blending.² It also encourages a view of gender as a category dependent upon the culture³ while simultaneously allowing for an individual's gender to be a “a subjective experience” and “a subset of possible social identities”.⁴ Finally, if it turns out to be useful, it permits the object of sexual desire to be free of gender constraints so that same sex *and* other sex relationships are equally possible.⁵

A feminist social constructionist approach looks at the world through an idealist rather than a materialist lens since it is mainly concerned with how individuals make sense of their lives. It sees individuals as agents creating meaning for themselves with the structure of their society forming the backdrop. It tends therefore to be more

¹ A particularly interesting example of such an approach is to be found in M.S. Kimmel (2007), *The Gendered Society*. Third edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. This is all the more interesting because the author is male and the book deals with construction of gender across the complete spectrum.

² See B. Bullough, V. Bullough and J. Elias (eds.) (1997), *Gender Blending*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus; and H. Devor (1989), *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

³ An interesting example is J.F.P. Poole (1996), ‘The Procreative and Ritual Constitution of Female, Male and Other: Androgynous Beings in the Cultural Imagination of the Bimin-Kuskusmin of Papua New Guinea.’ In S. Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 197-218.

⁴ E. Blackwood (2006), ‘Tombois in West Sumatra: Constructing Masculinities and Erotic Desire.’ In E. Lewin (ed.), *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader*. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 411-434: 412. This was originally published in *Cultural Anthropology*, 1998, 13/4, 491-521.

⁵ An illuminating example is G. Wekker (2006), ‘“What’s Identity Got to Do with It?” Rethinking Identity in Light of the *Mati* Work in Suriname.’ In E. Lewin (ed.), *Feminist Anthropology: A Reader*. Malden, MA, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 435-448. This was originally published in E. Blackwood and S.E. Wieringa (eds.) (1999), *Female Desires: Same-Sex and Transgender Practices across Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press, 119-138.

interpretivist than positivist. Feminist social constructionism rejects universalistic assumptions about sex and gender and argues that individuals create meaning, including the meaning of sex and gender, for themselves in particular ways depending on the society they are in and the subset of society to which they attach themselves. There are usually elements of both cohesion and conflict in this approach for there are often strands of conflict between certain subsets of society and the society as a whole while there are strong strands of cohesion among the members of each subset. Finally, feminist social constructionism may be either diachronic or synchronic. Because one of the aims of this study is to discover why certain forms of shamanism are disappearing while others are flourishing, a combination of diachronic and synchronic is going to be necessary: tracing the history of a shamanic practice as far as the records will allow and taking an in-depth look at current practice.

2b: Design

Although this study starts with both a statement that certain forms of shamanism have disappeared or are fast disappearing and a question as to why this is happening, no hypothesis as regards the possible answer was formed prior to the fieldwork in order to ensure that the research was open-ended and without presuppositions. Accordingly the decision was made to use what is often called the Qualitative Heuristic Approach⁶ where the rules are openness of the researcher,

⁶ See G.Kleining and H.Witt (2000), 'The Qualitative Heuristic Approach: A Methodology for Discovery in Psychology and the Social Sciences.' *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(1), Art. 13. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1123/2495> Last accessed 24/10/12; and (2001), 'Discovery as Basic Methodology of Qualitative and Quantitative Research.' *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(1), Art. 16. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/977> Last accessed 24/10/12.

openness of the research topic, maximum variation of perspectives, discovery of similarities and integration of all data.

The richest picture would be obtained by a combination of interviews with *NatKadaw* in Myanmar and *Bissu* on Sulawesi with research into the background and history of co-gendered shamans in general and those two groups in particular. The information gained from the interviews should be reliable so long as the questions were genuinely open⁷ and the final conclusions should be valid so long as all the data from both interviews and research were fully interrelated and integrated.

2c: Sample

There was no problem finding *NatKadaw* to interview at the week long Taungbyon Festival in Myanmar. There were literally hundreds on the festival site. The problem was how to select certain of them for interview. During the course of the week it became apparent that the most important thing was to interview some first gender, some second gender and a good number of co-gendered *NatKadaw*. If this balance were to be achieved, then it would be likely that a good cross-section of views would be obtained. It was not always easy to know before an interview actually started who was first gender and who was co-gendered. Three people were interviewed who claimed to be first gender. Second gender *NatKadaw* were less of a problem and two were interviewed. Seven of the *NatKadaw* interviewed openly claimed to be co-gendered.

The problem was quite different as regards interviewing *Bissu* on Sulawesi. All of them are supposed to be by definition fifth gender but there are relatively so few of

⁷ See Appendix 2 for the question framework employed in the interviews.

them that convenience/opportunity sampling was the only option. However, when the purpose of the exercise is to produce what Geertz called a “thick” account,⁸ such an approach to sampling did not seem inappropriate. A total of seven *Bissu* were interviewed five of whom were biologically born male and two female.

2d: Data collection – the interview framework

The aim in collecting data from the interviews was to discover as much as possible especially about the links between gender and shamanic status. The main focus was potentially therefore an area of some sensitivity. A semi-structured interview technique was employed but, because no presuppositions existed, the questions were open-ended.⁹ Additionally, depending upon the initial replies, subsequent questions could follow up on individual issues.

2d: Data collection – the interview procedure

There were some less than perfect aspects to the interview procedure. Firstly, an interpreter had to be used both in Myanmar and on Sulawesi. The Burmese interpreter, a lady,¹⁰ was extremely interested in the research and very sensitive to the issues. The problems associated with the use of an interpreter were thus minimised. Additionally, she is a Burmese scholar so whenever there was an issue concerning the denotation and most especially the connotations of a Burmese word, she took great care when discussing the meanings. Secondly, all the interviews with *NatKadaw* took place in their booths at the Taungbyon Festival a few miles outside Mandalay. Thirdly, since the interviews were searching for information about issues very close to the

⁸ C. Geertz (1973), ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.’ In C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 3-30.

⁹ See Appendix 2 for the questions in English, Burmese and Bahasa Indonesia.

¹⁰ May Htay Myint. See Appendix 5 for details of the interpreters.

interviewees' core beliefs about themselves, the interviews had to be conducted extremely sensitively.

There were far fewer *Bissu* available to be interviewed. The interpreter, a man this time¹¹, was also extremely sensitive about the issues being discussed and his sensitivity plus his fluency in Bahasa Indonesia and Basa Ugi made him an ideal intermediary. All the *Bissu* were interviewed in southwest Sulawesi either at the *Bissu* communal base at Segeri or at their home.

2e: Ethical issues

The main ethical issue was the fact that the interviews were by their very nature probing into the way that *NatKadaw* and *Bissu* perceive themselves. All of those interviewed freely consented to be involved in the research. All interviewees gave full permission to use the interviews for the purposes of this research. In addition, all interviewees gave permission for their real names to be used and for their photographs to be incorporated.

¹¹ Mr. Syarful Charmain, known to his friends as Joko. See Appendix 5 for details of the interpreters.

3. The *NatKadaw* of Myanmar

3a: *The background*

Although Myanmar is officially a Buddhist country, the religious beliefs to be found in the country are a rich mixture of pre-Buddhist animist beliefs and superimposed Theravada Buddhism with a large dash of astrology and fortune telling.¹ Furthermore, when one talks about the country of Myanmar, one has to bear in mind that there are over a hundred indigenous languages even without taking into account the use of Mandarin or English or Hindi or Bengali. This is why the country is officially called Myanmar Naing-Ngan – the Union of Myanmar. Animist beliefs appear to predate the introduction of Buddhism by hundreds if not thousands of years and still seem to be common among all of the ethnic groups in Myanmar. The Padaung in the southwest of the country call their protective spirits *Yaula*² while the Burmans and the Kachins call them *nats*.³ All the ethnic groups seem to agree on the concept of the human life-force or spirit as a butterfly-like immortal element which the Karen people call *la*, the Chin people call *klo*,⁴ the Kachins call *minla*⁵ and the Burmans or Bamar people call *lei'pja* which actually means butterfly as well as spirit. The spirit of

¹ See Maung Htin Aung (1958), 'Folk-Elements in Burmese Buddhism: Alchemy, spirits, and ancient rituals.' *The Atlantic*, February. Available at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/02/folk-elements-in-burmese-buddhism/306833/>
Last accessed 03/10/12.

² See P. Khoo Thwe (2003), *From the Land of Green Ghosts*. London: Flamingo, 62.

³ See Taw Sein Ko (2009 [1913]), *Burmese Sketches*. A reprint of the version published at Rangoon by British Burma Press. Charleston, SC: BiblioLife, 155ff. For the Kachins see A. Gilhodes (1996 [1922]), *The Kachins*. Bangkok and Cheney, WA: White Lotus, 37-38 and 87. For the most beautiful illustrations of the Burmese *nats* see R.C. Temple (1991 [1906]), *The Thirty Seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit Worship Prevailing in Burma*. Bangkok: Orchid Press.

⁴ Taw Sein Ko (2009 [1913]), 157.

⁵ See A. Gilhodes (1996 [1922]), 101-102.

a human unjustly killed, especially if by royal order, was believed to be able to roam the land causing enormous mischief. Burmese kings starting with King Anawrahta, who ruled Myanmar⁶ from 1044 to 1077, started the custom of transforming these wronged spirits into highly honoured patrons. These patrons were to be the official *nats* while he tried to stamp out all the others in an attempt to impose an orthodox version of Theravada Buddhism on the country.⁷ He succeeded in his first aim – the official *nats* have remained extraordinarily important – but he failed in his second aim – the other *nats* have survived and arguably are flourishing especially in rural areas.⁸ There are thus three main groups of *nats*. “First, there is a type that comprises nature spirits of various kinds – spirits with differing degrees of power, of jurisdiction, of character, and of prominence, all of whom, however, are associated with such natural phenomena as trees, waterfalls, hills, paddy fields, and so forth.”⁹ The second group is made up of the guardians of Buddhism – *byahma devas* who are godlike, have little to do with humans and who reside in the outer planes of existence plus *thamma devas* who too may be godlike or, to use a Western term, saintly, exist in more proximate planes of existence and who can be invoked for help.¹⁰ The third category is the *thounze khunna min nat* – “the thirty-seven chief nats”¹¹ There is a list of the official

⁶ His empire is technically known as the Bagan (ꠘꠌꠞ), previously written ‘Pagan’, Empire after the town which was its centre. See E.R. Leach (1990 [1954]), *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: The Athlone Press, 240.

⁷ See N. Lewis (1954), *Golden Earth*. London: Jonathan Cape/Readers Union, 101ff. and Maung Htin Aung (1962), *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*. London, Bombay, New York and Karachi: Oxford University Press, 73ff.

⁸ For a beautiful and “short account of what *nats* and rituals mean to someone who is born and bred a Buddhist and also very much emotionally involved in them” see Khin Myo Chit (1983), *Colourful Burma*. Rangoon: Daw Khin Myo Chit, 62-74. The quotation is from 74.

⁹ M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), *Burmese Supernaturalism*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 42.

¹⁰ See M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), 43-44.

¹¹ M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), 51.

thirty-seven as drawn up under the last king of Burma but there has always been some fluidity surrounding them.¹² To make things even more complicated, in addition to the official or inner (*atwin*) thirty-seven there is also an unofficial or outer (*apyin*) thirty-seven of whom there are probably more than a hundred!¹³ Some of the *nats* are village protectors, one (Min Mahagiri)¹⁴ is the household guardian for every Burmese home, some are family or hereditary *nats* and some are even personal *nats*.

The nature spirit *nats* and the inner (*atwin*) thirty-seven and the outer (*apyin*) thirty-seven *nats*, but not the *byahma* or *thamma devas* (who can do only good), are capable of inflicting harm if offended and extending protection if venerated so there is a widespread cult of these figures.¹⁵ Although ghosts and witches may also cause harm and there is a range of possible specialists in diagnosing and curing complaints,¹⁶ this study focuses on those Burmese practitioners¹⁷ who specialise in divining the will of the *nats*, placating them and, whenever possible, averting any possible ill-will from them.

¹² See Maung Htin Aung (1962), 83-84. For the official list see B.Brac de la Perrière, (1989), *Les rituels de possession en Birmanie: du culte d'Etat aux cérémonies privées*. Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française (ADPF), 31.

¹³ See M.E. Spiro (1996), 52.

¹⁴ Min Mahagiri (မင်းမဟာဂိရီ), Lord of the Great Mountain, is one of the most senior of the official thirty-seven *nats*.

¹⁵ For an account of the good and harm they can cause explained within an orthodox Buddhist framework see U Nu (1988), 'NATS'. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1-12.

¹⁶ There are those who perform the role of astrologer (*nekkhath-saya*), traditional doctor (*hsei hsaya*), exorcist (*ahtelan hsaya*), herbalist (*hsei hsaya*) as well, of course, as the modern doctor (*hsaya wun*). See M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), 148, n. 3.

¹⁷ Other ethnic groups in Myanmar have similar practitioners, e.g. the Kachins have a practitioner whom they call a *myihloi*. See O. Hanson (1913), *The Kachins, their Customs and Traditions*. Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 131-138. Available at: http://www.archive.org/stream/kachinstheircust00hansrich/kachinstheircust00hansrich_djvu.txt Last accessed 29/09/12. See also See E.R. Leach (1990 [1954]), 192-194.

3b: The *NatKadaw*

The word *NatKadaw*¹⁸ etymologically means a woman who has been chosen as the consort or bride of a *nat*.¹⁹ As U Tin Moun²⁰ pointed out, *NatKadaw* were originally female dancers who performed in front of the king in honour of the *nats* and who danced in stockinged feet as *NatKadaw* still do to this day. The transformation of these dancers into wifely spirit-mediums is thought to have occurred as a result, first, of a decline in Burmese royal authority and finally the fall of the Burmese monarchy.²¹ What is of most relevance to the present study is, firstly, that all *NatKadaw* appear originally to have been women and continued to be so up until the First World War;²² secondly, that there was a tiny proportion of biologically male *NatKadaw* in the middle of the twentieth century;²³ thirdly, by the 1980s about half were biologically male;²⁴ and, fourthly, that by 2012, according to one estimate, only thirty percent of

¹⁸ In Burmese it is a compound noun - နတ်ကတော် - made up of the noun နတ် (*nat*) and the noun ကတော် meaning ‘consort.’ It is rendered as *NatKadaw* throughout this study to show that a) in Burmese thought and language it is one term but b) it is made up of the two parts. The use of an Anglicised plural (by adding an ‘s’ to the noun) has been avoided so the word *NatKadaw* is used as both a singular and a plural noun.

¹⁹ Such ‘marriages’ still occur and the ‘wedding’ is announced in the newspapers. See Yeni (2004), ‘Where Spirits Dwell.’ *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 12, No. 8, August. Available at: http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=4030 Last accessed 03/10/12.

²⁰ See Appendix 4 for a mini biography of U Tin Moun.

²¹ This point was made by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière in a talk she gave at a conference called ‘Burmese Buddhism and the Spirit Cult Revisited’ – An Interdisciplinary Conference on Religion in Contemporary Burma, held at Stanford University on 22 – 23 May 2004. A draft (but only a draft) of her talk entitled *The Spirit-possession Cult in Burmese religion* is available at http://www.dhammadownload.com/books/Cult_in_Burmese_Religion.pdf Last accessed 03/10/12.

²² “...*natkādaws*, or wives of *nats*. These are women from all over Burma who follow the profession of fortune-tellers; or rather mediums, for they foretell the future after working themselves into a trance.” R. Grant Brown (1915), ‘The Taungbyon Festival.’ *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 45 July – December, 355-363: 358.

²³ M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), 205, writes “experts at Taungbyon estimate that 3 to 4 per cent are male” but that “the overwhelming majority are women” and that therefore the *NatKadaw* “will be referred to here as female.” T.C. Ho (2009), 301, n. 13, quotes a source as saying that “Most of them are straight women and they are not allowed to marry another person.”

²⁴ See B. Brac de la Perrière (2007), ‘To Marry a Man or a Spirit? Women, the Spirit Possession Cult and Domination in Burma.’ In M. Skidmore and P. Lawrence (eds.), *Women and the Contested State, Religion, Violence, and Agency in South and Southeast Asia*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 208-228: 209. Even in 2004 one report could state that at the Taungbyon Festival “The

NatKadaw are biologically female while ten percent are male by sex and gender and sixty percent are co-gendered biological males.²⁵ If all *NatKadaw* were originally women and the wives or consorts of the *nats*, the current situation seems radically different and very complex. Although the word *NatKadaw* literally means a ‘*nat* consort/wife’, these days it “refers to people who are possessed or ‘loved by’ one or more supernatural beings called *nat*.”²⁶ Of the twelve *NatKadaw* interviewed at the Taungbyon *nat-pwè* or ‘*nat* festival’ in August 2012, the two women, Daw Kyin Soung and Ei Sabei,²⁷ both regarded themselves as *nat* consorts/wives as in the older tradition while of the men one, Li Tin MOUNG, dissociated himself from most of the *NatKadaw* traditions; four, Thain Htay, Nay Win Aung, Knowknow and Soe Lay, regarded themselves as the son of a female *nat*; two, San Htoo and Ko Min Min, regarded themselves as the husband of a female *nat* wife; two, Aung Ko Latt and U Htay, regarded themselves as the brother of a *nat* or *nats* (the former as the brother of the The Taungbyon Brothers – Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw – and the latter as the younger brother of a female *nat*; and one, Sei MOUNG MOUNG, described himself as having a *NatKadaw* relationship with The Taungbyon Brothers and their mother Popa Medaw who is also known as Mei Wunna.²⁸ It would therefore seem that the present situation is very complicated with the women still performing the ‘*nat* consort/wife’ role while the men can play out one or more roles from a wide

festivities are arranged and led mostly by the so-called *nat kadaw*, women “married” to *nats*.” Aung Lwin Oo (2004), ‘Festival Time at a Nat Shrine.’ Photographs by Livier Pin-Fat. *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 12, No. 8. Available at: http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=4029 Last accessed 07/11/12.

²⁵ This was the estimate of San Htoo (see Appendix 4 for a mini biography of San Htoo) which seemed well supported by the evidence on the ground.

²⁶ T.C. Ho (2009), 274.

²⁷ See Appendix 4 for mini biographies of all the *NatKadaw*.

²⁸ Although not one of the official thirty seven, Popa Medaw (ပုပ္ဖာမေတ္တာ) is an especially important *nat* especially at the Taungbyon festival where her two sons are the major *nats*.

range of possible relationships with the *nats*. It would also seem important to avoid jumping to conclusions about the gender status of contemporary *NatKadaw*. One quite famous article²⁹ seemed to conflate the role of *NatKadaw* with being what was termed an *acault* – a version of the Burmese term *achauk* which actually translates as “ ‘dry one,’ the complement to a colloquial expression for ‘woman’ that literally translates to ‘wet one’ ”³⁰ – in other words, homosexual. The same article linked homosexuality with being a *NatKadaw* by stating that a female *nat* called Manguedon “intercedes in the lives of the Burmese through certain males whom she decides to possess, evidenced by their cross-gender traits.”³¹ More recent and more in-depth studies of the relationship between, firstly, being a *NatKadaw* and the whole issue of gender and sexuality and, secondly, becoming a *NatKadaw* and the issue of inheritance or choice, confirm that the situation is a great deal more complex.³²

The first question to ask is what the *NatKadaw* themselves think about the link between gender and being a *NatKadaw*. The two female *NatKadaw*, Daw Kyin Saing and Ei Sabei, saw themselves as belonging to the long tradition of women being possessed and loved by male *nats*. Daw Kyin Saing had been married to a human husband but he died when she was only thirty-five years old. It was seventeen years

²⁹ E. Coleman, P. Colgan and L. Gooren (1992), ‘Male Cross-Gender Behavior in Myanmar (Burma): A Description of the Acault.’ *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 21 (3), 313-321. Reprinted in G.D. Comstock and S.E. Henking (eds.), *Que(e)rying Religion*. New York: Continuum, 287-293.

³⁰ T.C. Ho (2009), 287.

³¹ E. Coleman, P. Colgan and L. Gooren (1992), in G.D. Comstock and S.E. Henking (eds.), *Que(e)rying Religion*. New York: Continuum, 288. The so-called ‘Manguedon’ is the female *nat* Ma Ngwe Taung – The Lady of the Silver Wings.

³² Most notably for gender issues T.C. HO (2009) and for inheritance/transmission issues B. Brac de la Perrière especially, for example, her (2009a), ‘Nat’s Wives’ or ‘Children of Nats’. From Spirit Possession to Transmission among the Ritual Specialists of the Cult of the Thirty-Seven Lords.’ *Asian Ethnography*, 68 (2), 283-305. Available at: [www.thefreelibrary.com/"Nats%27+Wives"+or+"Children+of+Nats"%3A+from+spirit+possession+to...-a0221919982](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/) Last accessed 04/08/12.

afterwards that she had a dream about being married to The Brothers and afterwards went through the ceremony of actually marrying them. She is the classic *NatKadaw* – she is the *nat*-wife of, in this case, two male *nats*, is possessed by them and gets all her power from them. Ei Sabei is also a classic *NatKadaw*. She is the wife of the younger of The Brothers. As far as both of them are concerned, they are females married to male *nats*. These are examples of the classic male *nat* + female human relationship. It is impossible to be sure that there were never female *nat* + male human relationships but, as has already been pointed out, there were extremely few male *NatKadaw* even in the mid-twentieth century and one account of the Taungbyon Festival from that time records only “a corps of female mediums”.³³ However, it is important to realise that of the thirty-seven *nats* in the official list, ten are female.³⁴ In addition, of course, there are numerous unofficial female *nats* some of whom have widespread importance and all of whom have local importance. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that these female *nats* have been acquiring husbands, sons and brothers. Thain Htay regards himself as a son of one of the lesser female *nats*, Ah May Yay Yin, whose annual festival is held west of the town of Monywa. Thain Htay stated very clearly that he regarded the gender of the *NatKadaw* as totally dependent on the *nat* who is making the choice. He said that sometimes the *nat* chooses a biological male who is already co-gendered and sometimes the *nat* insists on the chosen man becoming co-gendered. In his own case, if he had not already been co-gendered, he would have had to become

³³ N. Lewis (1954), 102.

³⁴ In the official list as given by Maung Htin Aung (1962), 107-108, they are Princess Golden Face, Lady Golden Sides, Lady Three Times Beautiful, The Little Lady with the Flute, The Royal Mother, the Lady Bandy-Legs, the Lady Golden Words, The Queen of the Western Palace, The Lady Bent, and The Lady of the North.

so.³⁵ Nay Win Aung is also the son of the female *nat* Ah May Yay Yin but he has a slightly different view of the gender issue. He pointed out that at times, especially when he is possessed, his spirit, his *lei'pja*, is replaced with hers. At those times Ah May Yay Yin's *lei'pja* is actually resident in his *NatKadaw* body. He also added that at times he becomes possessed by one or other of The Brothers. In other words, sometimes the *lei'pja* resident in his *NatKadaw* body is that of a woman and sometimes that of a man. Co-gendering makes a lot of sense under these conditions. Knowknow is the son of the important female *nat* Popa Medaw.³⁶ He was adamant that there is no connection between gender and being a *NatKadaw*. He emphasised that one may be a man or a woman or co-gendered and one may or may not be a *NatKadaw*. There is simply no link according to him. However, he did agree that he has to play the role of a male *nat* or a female *nat* on the third day of the Taungbyon Festival. If the music so dictates, he even has to dance as the alcoholic *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. However, he insisted that none of the roles that he acts out has any connection with his gender status. Sei MOUNG MOUNG also denied that there is any link between being a *NatKadaw* and gender status. San Htoo put forward another angle. He said that he regarded his co-gendered status as a punishment for bad behaviour in a previous incarnation. However, he also stated that when he is possessed, his spirit – *lei'pja* – is replaced by the *lei'pja* of the possessing *nat*, in his case Ah May Yay Yin, Popa Medaw or, most usually, Ma Ngwe Taung. Ko Min Min also stated that he was the husband of the female *nat* Ma Ngwe Taung. However, like Knowknow and Sei

³⁵ If this actually happened it would be an example of the first route – shamanic call of a first gender male followed by compulsory transition to co-gendered status. There seems to be no evidence that this actually happens although, if Thain Htay is right, it remains a theoretical possibility.

³⁶ Also known as Mei Wunna, Miss Gold, the mother of The Brothers.

Moung Moung, he denied that there is any intrinsic link between being a *NatKadaw* and gender status. He said that he became a *NatKadaw* purely out of choice while other co-gendered people become florists or choose from a wide variety of jobs open to co-gendered people. However, he did also state that when Ma Ngwe Taung possesses him it is she who is speaking, not he, but he denied any link between that fact and gender status. Soe Lay also vehemently denied any link between being a *NatKadaw* and gender status. He is the son of the female *nat* U Min Gyaw.³⁷ He stated that he is co-gendered but he was adamant that this had no link with his being a *NatKadaw*. Aung Ko Latt was an exception among those interviewed insofar as he is co-gendered but his relationship is that of brother not to a female *nat* but to The Brothers. He too was adamant that there is no connection between gender status and being a *NatKadaw*. Finally, U Htay is the younger brother of the female *nat* Ma Ma Hne. U Htay had a lot to say about gender status and being a *NatKadaw*. He said that he is not co-gendered and that is why he was chosen by Ma Ma Hne as her brother. If she had wanted a husband then she would have chosen a co-gendered person. He also emphasised that when a first gender person is chosen (as a son or brother) by a female *nat*, then he becomes extremely gentle and tends, like U Htay himself, to have no sexual interests. Co-gendered males tend to be chosen by female *nats* as husbands. On the other hand, if a second gender person is chosen by a male *nat* then she becomes extremely rowdy. If a first gender person is chosen by a male *nat*, then it can go either way. It is interesting that he did not mention the case of a second gender person being chosen by a female *nat* presumably because that scenario does not occur. At the same

³⁷ Also known as U Min Kyaw, Ko Gyi Kyaw, Ba Ba Kyaw, Pakhan Kyaw, Min Kyaw Szwaw and Min Kyawzwa.

time as making these interesting links between becoming a *NatKadaw* and a person's gender status, U Htay also stated that there is no firm link between the two.

It is difficult to reconcile these conflicting views. The pattern seems to be that female *NatKadaw* tend to follow the classic route of becoming the wife of one or more male nats but further research might discover other relationships such as sister or daughter to either male or female *nats*. Biologically male *NatKadaw* appear to have a wide variety of possible roles. Despite what U Htay said, co-gendered males may be chosen as husbands or sons or brothers of female *nats* but only one of the sample, Aung Ko Latt, was co-gendered *and* had a relationship only with male *nats*. All the other co-gendered male *NatKadaw* had a relationship with only a female *nat*. Sei Moun Moun stated that he was first gender and that he had a relationship with both female and male *nats*.

Research undertaken elsewhere into the links between gender and being a spirit medium or shaman has shown that, despite the existence of a clear pattern, practitioners themselves can deny the existence of any linkage. This was the case among the Wana shamans on Sulawesi³⁸ and Vietnamese spirit mediums.³⁹

It is very difficult to trace the history of the link between gender and being a *NatKadaw*. If it is true that the trend from being a court dancer towards being an

³⁸ "When asked to explain why most shamans were men, people resisted the suggestion that gender was a qualification for shamanship or other ritual activities." J. M. Atkinson (1989), *The Art and Politics of Wana Shamanship*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and Oxford: University of California Press, 281.

³⁹ "The ritual participants I spoke to were generally resistant to the idea that the Mother Goddess religion should be considered to be a 'women's religion' or only of interest to women. Nevertheless, when I pressed them about the reasons why more women than men became mediums and participated in mediumship rituals, they gave a variety of responses..." B. Norton (2006), "'Hot-Tempered' Women and 'Effeminate' Men: The Performance of Music and Gender in Vietnamese Mediumship." In K. Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien (eds.), *Possessed by the Spirits. Mediumship in Contemporary Vietnamese Communities*. Southeast Asia Program Publications. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 55-75: 57.

independent medium/shaman began with the fall of the Burmese monarchy, why was there such a huge increase in biologically male, with perhaps many being co-gendered, *NatKadaw* in the second half of the twentieth century? One feasible hypothesis to explain this has been advanced. When Burma gained its independence from Britain in January 1948, there started a period of fourteen years when, as an independent republic led by President U Nu, there was a good deal of respect for Burma's cultural heritage. The Burmese/Arakenese scholar U Khin Maung Saw states that "during U Nu's era [c. 1948-1962], most of the mediums were straight women and men ... but rarely achauk."⁴⁰ That all changed after the military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962. "Superstitious and xenophobic, ruthless and maniacal, Ne Win assumed dictatorial control of Burma, beginning almost three decades of one of the most brutal and repressive governments in the world."⁴¹ Ne Win may have been incredibly superstitious to the extent that "the economic fortunes of the country lay in the hands of fortunetellers"⁴² but he and his so-called Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) also "criminalized the supernatural, forcing its articulation underground."⁴³ Attempts were made to bring Burmese Buddhism into line with BSPP political goals but it was the government's economic policies that indirectly had the most influence on belief in the *nats* and on the role of the *NatKadaw*:

One result of the policies pursued during the past four decades is that much of the population is still heavily committed to agricultural pursuits

⁴⁰ Quoted in T.C. Ho (2009), 286. U Khin Maung Saw is best known for her linguistic and etymological work. See her (2009), *(Mis)Interpretations of Burmese Words: Part I: In the case of the term 'Kala' (Kula)*. Available at:

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/24696342/Misinterpretations-of-Burmese-Words-1> Last accessed 05/10/12.

⁴¹ A. Clements (1992), *Burma: The next killing fields?* Berkeley, CA: Odonian Press, 19.

⁴² K. Tosa (2005), 'The Chicken and the Scorpion. Rumor, Counternarratives, and the political Uses of Buddhism.' In M. Skidmore (ed.), *Burma at the Turn of the 21st Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 154-173: 154.

⁴³ T.C. Ho (2009), 286.

and to animistic beliefs, ritual practices, and more encompassing moral and cosmological precepts long associated with them. Partly for this reason, during the 1980s and 1990s transgendered ritual specialists commonly involved in same-sex relations (and generally known as *nat kadaw* and/or *acault*), though viewed with ambivalence, were still accorded great esteem and critically important roles both in rural communities and in urban settings.⁴⁴

This economic explanation is almost certainly part of the answer as to why *NatKadaw* retained or even increased in status. A second feasible explanation lies in the relationship between official Buddhism as the main morality religion and *nat* worship as a peripheral cult.⁴⁵ The *nats* can be capricious and *NatKadaw* do become possessed so treating *nat* worship as a peripheral possession cult seems justified. Such peripheral possession cults generally attract “the socially dispossessed”, the “psychologically disturbed” and “those sections of society which are most strongly subject to social discrimination and subordination.”⁴⁶ Co-gendered males would certainly meet the last criterion and so the peripheral possession cult theory also helps to explain the rise in the of co-gendered *Natkadaw*. However, the pertinent questions are, firstly, why are co-gendered *NatKadaw* apparently so accepted in this role in Myanmar and, secondly, why have they increased in number so dramatically in recent years? The two questions have one answer but with many closely interwoven strands.

There appear to be twelve strands to the answer:

1. The first strand is that the transfer of women’s loyalties from *nat* worship to the mass lay meditation movement has led to much lower numbers of women becoming *NatKadaw*.

⁴⁴ M.G. Peletz (2006), 318.

⁴⁵ See I.M. Lewis (1999), 80-96, chapter 6, ‘Present & Past in North-East African Spirit-Possession’.

⁴⁶ I.M. Lewis (1999), 83. For Buddhism as the main morality religion see B.Brac de la Perrière (2011b), ‘Being a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Burma.’ In K.W. Endres and A. Lauser (eds.), *Engaging the Spirit World*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 163-183: 167-168.

2. The second strand is the new role which has opened up for women – that of a *medaw*.
3. The third strand is the increase in both numbers and importance of female *nats*.
4. The fourth strand is that, by analogy with what is happening in Thai Buddhism, there seems to be a process of hybridisation going on in Myanmar, most especially the interaction between religion and the informal market economy making spirit worship quite commercialised and at the same time prosperity-oriented.
5. The fifth strand is the growth in importance of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement.
6. The sixth strand is the sheer suitability of co-gendered *NatKadaw* to fulfil the role.
7. The seventh strand is the possibility that co-gendered *NatKadaw* possess a capacity for trance to an unusual degree.
8. The eighth strand is that the role of *NatKadaw* is one of the few genuinely prestigious positions available to openly co-gendered biological males.
9. The ninth strand is that by training to be and then becoming a *NatKadaw* a co-gendered person gains a sympathetic and understanding family.
10. The tenth strand is the superb psychological fit between being co-gendered and becoming a *NatKadaw*.
11. The eleventh strand is that Buddhism on the whole is no more against male – male or first-gender – third-gender sexual liaisons than first-gender – second-gender sexual relationships for the laity.
12. The twelfth strand is that the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* means that *NatKadaw* can believe that their co-gendered status is the result of misdeeds in a previous life.

3c: Why have co-gendered NatKadaw become so numerous in recent years?

i) The mass lay meditation movement

Strand one concerns the sense in which the *nat* festivals are part of a process of standardisation by which *nat* worship has been made part of the national cult.⁴⁷ Just as the origins of *nat* worship lay in the transformation of heroic figures – violently killed usually by order of the king – into local or regional protectors under the authority of the king, so too today there is a feeling, especially among women, that *nat* worship no longer provides a moral basis from which to critique society and especially its military

⁴⁷ See B. Brac de la Perrière (2007), 223.

leaders. Millions of Burmese, most of them women, have transferred their loyalties to the Buddhist mass lay meditation movement which “has shaped new dimensions in Buddhist practice and has asserted a sacred public sphere critical of the coercive power of the regime.”⁴⁸ At first sight this may seem strange since the government does not officially support *nat* worship “on the grounds that the practices involved are mere superstitions, whose persistence is explained as remnants of pre-Buddhist practices.”⁴⁹ However, in fact “Burmese officials do participate in it” which “is why the most influential spirit mediums are those who have high-ranking military officers or their wives among the clients.”⁵⁰ In contrast, the pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is well known for and even regarded as “dangerous because of her skills in Buddhist techniques of meditation and her devout asceticism.”⁵¹ Although not overtly set up as one of the weapons of the weak,⁵² the Buddhist mass lay meditation movement nonetheless serves as a vehicle for the quiet criticism of the military regime most especially by women. The transfer of their loyalties from *nat* worship to the mass lay meditation movement has led to much lower numbers of women becoming *NatKadaw*.

⁴⁸ I. Jordt (2007a), ‘With Patience We Can Endure.’ In M. Skidmore and P. Lawrence (eds.), *Women and the Contested State*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 188-207: 201. See also I. Jordt (2007b), *Burma’s Mass Lay Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

⁴⁹ B. Brac de la Perrière (2007), 219.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ M. Skidmore (2007), ‘Buddha’s Mother and the Billboard Queens.’ In M. Skidmore and P. Lawrence (eds.), *Women and the Contested State*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 171-187: 184.

⁵² This is a reference to J. Scott’s argument that the oppressed and physically powerless develop their own methods of undermining the hegemonic power. See J. Scott (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. The link between the growth of the meditation movement and Scott’s argument is made by I. Jordt (2007a), 201.

ii) The female role of the *medaw*

The second strand, quite tightly interwoven with the first but still a separate strand, is the new role which has opened up for women – that of a *medaw*. The *medaw* is the female equivalent of a role with a much longer pedigree – the grandfather figure known as Bo Bo Gyi. Whereas the latter “has become politically neutral”⁵³ the role of *medaw*, literally ‘grandmother’, has rapidly become quite powerful possibly because of the enormous symbolic power held by that *medaw* who is known everywhere in Myanmar simply as The Lady.⁵⁴ Although a *medaw* may draw her power from the spirit world and specifically from a *nat medaw*, “Her power comes from and is legitimated by the Sayadaws⁵⁵ who sit at her feet, the Buddhist objects that seek her proximity, and her benefactor, Buddha’s mother, Queen Maya.”⁵⁶ A *medaw* is of much higher status than the pink robed *thilashin*, the non-ordained nuns. She is effectively a bridge between the world of holy asceticism and the world of faith healing and may even lead a *gaing*, a healing sect.⁵⁷ Her role has become much more powerful than that of a *Natkadaw*, has the advantage of being more firmly within the orthodox Theravada Buddhist tradition and is potentially more subversive:

“By refusing to be spirit wives (Natkadaw) and instead being spiritually superior to Sayadaws, akin to Buddha’s mother, they are closer to bodhisattva, or Buddhas-to-be; they are women beyond the control of the military council, answerable only to the Buddha, and deriving their power in this world from sources that are undeniable and untouchable by Buddhist generals.”⁵⁸

⁵³ M. Skidmore (2007), 180-181. See M. Sadan (2005), ‘Respected Grandfather, Please Bless This Nissan.’ In M. Skidmore (ed.), *Burma at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, 90-111.

⁵⁴ Aung San Suu Kyi. This link is the hypothesis of M. Skidmore (2007), 181.

⁵⁵ *Sayadaws* are Buddhist abbots.

⁵⁶ M. Skidmore (2007), 181.

⁵⁷ See M. Skidmore (2007), 183.

⁵⁸ M. Skidmore (2007), 185.

iii) The increase in the number and importance of female *nats*

The third strand is the increase in both numbers and importance of female *nats*. Originally, despite the existence of several female *nats*,⁵⁹ the vast majority if not all *NatKadaw* were women married to male *nats*. For a variety of reasons female *nats* have assumed greater importance over the last quarter of a century. Sometimes the causal link or correlation may involve the increase in the number of co-gendered *NatKadaw* coming before the increase in the numbers of female *nats* being worshipped but that is certainly not always the case. An example of a *nat* assuming great importance irrespective of *NatKadaw* of any gender is the case of the female *nat* called Amei Kyan. She had her shrine in the village of Ethigon and her annual festival was celebrated in June. In the 1990s the military government decided to relocate Mandalay airport to the hilly area around Ethigon which was considered by the locals to belong to Amei Kyan. It is said that when the area was surveyed from the air by military officials, the hill where she had her main shrine was “crawling with serpents.”⁶⁰ The contractors had to spare that hill and another with a pagoda on it, build a new temple in the displaced village of Ethigon and pay for a ceremony to the thirty-seven official *nats*. As a result, Amei Kyan gained in status and her local *pwè* – festival – grew enormously thanks partly to the new roads around the airport and the larger new temple but mainly due to her fame for thwarting the government planners’ decision to flatten her sacred hills. Her festival had originally been extremely important – a *pwèdaw* or royal festival – and now the festival has assumed much of its former splendour. What is important for our purposes is that “the story is told by spirit mediums as the story of how they rediscovered the Lady’s potency, hence their arrival

⁵⁹ See above note 34 for a list of the female *nats* in the official list.

⁶⁰ B.Brac de la Perrière (2007), 222. This is the major source for this story.

in growing numbers at the festival.”⁶¹ Sometimes the growth in importance of a female *nat* starts with a less public event. The story is told⁶² of how a young film actor, Ko Maung, appears in a film in which the female *nat* Popa Medaw features as a character. His mother had died a year earlier and he was deeply touched by the film. While giving a rose to the actress who was playing the part of Popa Medaw, he fell unconscious and, upon resuming consciousness, believed that he had been possessed by the *nat*. As a consequence he began to dance for Popa Medaw and subsequently for other female *nat* mothers such as Khin Ma Tha and Thoun Ba Hla. Whether by highly public or more personal reasons, there is no doubt that female *nats* have gained extra prominence in the last quarter of a century.

iv) Hybridisation between religion and the market economy

This leads to a fourth strand which is that, by analogy with what has been described in Thai Buddhism,⁶³ there does seem to be a process of hybridisation going on in Myanmar. Changes in the spirit medium cults in contemporary Thailand have been traced through a combination of Buddhist millennialism, rural-to-urban migration, the influence of court Brahmanistic rituals, and the influence of Chinese

⁶¹ B. Brac de la Perrière (2007), 224.

⁶² The story is told by Sarah M. Bekker (1994), ‘Talent for Trance: Dancing for the Spirits in Burma.’ In U. Gärtner and J. Lorenz (eds.), *Tradition and Modernity in Myanmar. Culture, Social Life and Language*, Vol. 2. Berlin: Berliner Asien-Afrika-Studien, 287-298.

⁶³ Studies in Thai Buddhism and most especially Thai spirit worship first pinpointed a late twentieth century development of eclecticism which developed into syncretism and then full-blown hybridisation. See S.J. Tambiah (1970), *Buddhism and the spirit cults in Northeast Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; M. Guelton (1995), *Thailand – into the spirit world*. Singapore: Times Editions; P.A. Jackson (1999a), ‘The enchanting spirit of Thai capitalism: The cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism.’ In *South East Asia Review*, 7, 1, 5-60; P.A. Jackson (1999b), ‘Royal spirits, Chinese gods, and magic monks: Thailand’s boom-time religions of prosperity.’ In *South East Asia Review*, 7, 3, 245-320; Pattana Kitiarsa (2002), ‘You may not believe, but never offend the spirits: Spirit-medium cults and popular media in modern Thailand.’ In T.J. Craig and R. King (eds.), *Global goes local: Popular culture in Asia*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 160-176; Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), ‘Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand.’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36 (3) October, 461-487.

and Indian communities.⁶⁴ Not all of these factors would appear to apply to Myanmar. For example, there is little evidence to suggest that Buddhist millennialism is having much effect in Myanmar. Nonetheless, as in Thailand, there is a feeling that the country is going through troubled times, that “Divine spirits see the human world in its liminal state, filled with moral chaos, suffering and decay ... but that ordinary people can reach those spirits only through mediums and their rituals.”⁶⁵ Rural-to-urban migration no doubt is a factor but whether it is as important a factor in Myanmar as it is in Thailand is questionable. In Myanmar it is not so much Brahmanistic court ritual as the ritual from the court of the Burmese kings which is being re-activated in the *nat* festivals. Chinese and especially Indian influence, however, is quite visible in Burmese spirit worship. An example is the shrine to Kali under the title Kali Medaw in a village north of Rangoon where a whole family of practitioners “in her name performs healings, cures bewitchings, and generally nurtures the health of the village inhabitants.”⁶⁶ There are yet more aspects to this hybridisation with many of them bearing an uncanny resemblance to what is happening in Thailand: people looking to make religion more meaningful for themselves and the subsequent resurgence of supernaturalism and spirit cults filling a spiritual vacuum. However, for the purposes of explaining the huge growth in the number of co-gendered *NatKadaw* in Myanmar the most pertinent aspect is probably the interaction between religion and the informal market economy making spirit worship quite commercialised and at the same time prosperity-oriented. If hybridisation is “a temporal moment and site of contestation for

⁶⁴ See Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 469-475.

⁶⁵ Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 470.

⁶⁶ M. Skidmore (2007), 182.

spiritual meanings and relevance”,⁶⁷ then the last quarter of a century has been the time and *nat* worship has been the focus for a re-evaluation of the role of the *NatKadaw* in Myanmar society. The increasing prosperity-orientation of *nat* worship has allowed and even encouraged a huge commercialisation of the role of *NatKadaw*. It emerged from the interviews that even by western standards large sums of money have to be paid by *NatKadaw* to the organisers of each festival in return for being allowed to have a booth and having the opportunity to dance at the main shrine. These sums have to be recouped from the clientele of each *NatKadaw* so each and every *NatKadaw* these days has to be extremely entrepreneurial. This entrepreneurial role is one that co-gendered *NatKadaw* have been extremely good at filling for reasons that will be dealt with shortly. This commercialisation centres largely on the *NatKadaw*’s use of cowry shells for divination. This intriguing aspect of the *NatKadaw*’s role combines contact with the spirit world through the cowry shells with the foretelling of



6. Daw Kyin Saing with her set of cowry shells used for divination.

⁶⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa (2005), 475.

the client's future prosperity through the combination of shells falling with the opening facing downwards and the opening facing upwards. *NatKadaw*, both female and co-gendered, are extremely adept at casting the shells.⁶⁸ As a generalisation there seems to have been a "growing professionalization of spirit mediumship"⁶⁹ which has been replacing the hereditary female tradition of *NatKadaw*.

v) The growing importance of Aung San Suu Kyi

The fifth strand is the growth in importance of Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement. This has already been referred to in connection with the increased influence of the *medaw* but it is possible to see her as having an even wider effect. She is linked with the very highest levels of Buddhism in other ways as well. For example, whilst the Buddhist monk, Thamanya Sayadaw, who was regarded as an *arahat* or living saint, refused to travel to Rangoon to be honoured by the military regime, he gladly received Aung San Suu Kyi.⁷⁰ She is the daughter of General Aung San, the great Burmese leader who was assassinated, but it is his daughter who has the mantle of Buddhist saintly approval. However, it is not only that or her status as a political *medaw* that links her with religious authority. There is also a strange sense in which the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize Winner is a still living *nat* herself. She is a martyr

⁶⁸ Whether the casting of cowrie shells for divination purposes is indigenous or not is a moot point. See W. van Binsbergen (2012), 'The relevance of Buddhism and Hinduism for the study of Asian-African transcontinental continuities.' The draft (and only the draft) of a paper delivered at The International Conference *Rethinking Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and protohistory*, at the African Studies Centre, Leiden University, 12-13 April 2012. Available at: http://www.shikanda.net/Rethinking_history_conference/wim_leiden_2012.pdf Last accessed 11/11/12. The use of cowry shells for contacting the spirit world is very common in West Africa – see M.P. Somé (1994b), *Cowry Shell Divination: Listening to the Spirit Guides*. Columbus, NC: Swan Raven and Co. From West Africa the practice has spread to the Caribbean and South America – see O. Lele (2000), *The Secrets of Afro-Cuban Divination: How to Cast the Diloggún, the Oracle of the Orishas*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

⁶⁹ P.-A. Berglie (2005), 'Shamanic Buddhism in Burma,' *Shaman, Journal of the International Society for Shamanistic Research*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1 and 2, Spring and Autumn, 41-59: 47.

⁷⁰ See I. Jordt (2007a), 197.

for her people because of her sufferings, her inability to leave the country even when her husband was dying for fear of not being allowed back in, her decades of house arrest and the constant hounding she has had to endure. As a living *nat* she has heightened people's awareness of those female *nats* who had their children or husbands killed and who suffered grievously for those dearest to them. "In spirit cults around the world, mediums often give voice to political dissent and veiled resistance, but the Burmese Nat cult offers women no such respite from authoritarianism."⁷¹

However, because of the inability of women to use the role of *NatKadaw* in a subversive fashion, co-gendered *NatKadaw* have stepped in to fill the gap and use the role subversively in two ways. First of all, their co-gendered nature is subversive in itself – it goes against the politically accepted norms of Burmese society. Secondly, by becoming the *NatKadaw* of mainly female *nats*, they are tacitly undermining the state support for, some might say control of, the male-centred *nat* worship. An example of state sponsored male *nat* worship is the dedication of an image to Min Mahagiri by the Prime Minister, U Nu, in the 1950s. However, after General Ne Win seized power in 1962, the festival became transformed so that Min Mahagiri was sidelined and the main focus became Popa Medaw. This was due to a famous monk who dedicated a shrine to her and actually invited two famous *NatKadaw* to perform there. "What is striking here is that this shift of ritual focus marks both the dramatic political change that occurred in 1962 when U Ne Win took power and the end of recognized governmental initiatives in the sponsorship and expansion of the cult."⁷² This example

⁷¹ M. Skidmore and P. Lawrence (2007), 'Encounters with the Mysterious: Alternative Power Structures in Authoritarian Burma.' In M. Skidmore and P. Lawrence (eds.), *Women and the Contested State*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 167-169: 169.

⁷² B. Brac de la Perrière (2007), 221.

shows the subtle ways in which the worship of female *nats* subverts the traditional (and state approved) male *nat* worship and establishes a gentle mirroring between the female *nats* and Aung San Suu Kyi.

vi) The suitability of co-gendered people for the role of *NatKadaw*

The sixth strand is the sheer suitability of co-gendered *NatKadaw* to fulfil the role. Being a *NatKadaw* involves being the husband/wife, brother/sister or son/daughter of a *nat*. Therefore any male bodied *NatKadaw* who has a relationship with a female *nat* enjoys the male side of the relationship as husband, brother or son. However, when she possesses him, his spirit – *lei'pja* – is replaced by hers so at that time he embodies her and it is she who speaks through him. Some of those interviewed stated that *NatKadaw* may or may not be possessed at the time that they dance at the *nat* festival – *natpwe* – but, either way, at that time too they embody the female *nat* who is their wife or sister or mother. In other words, the *NatKadaw*'s co-gendered status beautifully enables him at one moment to be the husband or brother or son of a female *nat* and at the next moment to be the female *nat* herself⁷³ and as such he may “acquire the sexual orientation of the *nat*.”⁷⁴

vii) Co-gendered *NatKadaw* may be unusually talented in trance

The seventh strand is a piece of psychological theory. It has been speculated that the *NatKadaw* who dance their roles at the *natpwe* “seem to possess a capacity for

⁷³ It is interesting that this ability to be now one person and now another is also reflected in Burmese language where one describes oneself according to the person one is addressing. This is explained by S.M. Bekker (2007), in her video *Dr. Sarah Bekker on the Nat Pwe*. Available at: http://www.blinkx.com/watch-video/1-8-dr-sarah-bekker-on-the-nat-pwe/ajP3ijeoHn_cat1RRIEAZg Last accessed 02/11/12.

⁷⁴ G. Van Driem (1996), ‘Lexical Categories of Homosexual Behavior in Modern Burmese.’ *Maledicta*, 12, 91-110: 98.

trance to an unusual degree.”⁷⁵ It seems very likely that being co-gendered enables a *NatKadaw* to respond to possession by either male or female *nats* and that this is part of the ability that underlies the “capacity for trance”. However, there is a psychological theory that goes much further. It is possible that “ ‘trance-proneness’ or the ability to learn or otherwise respond to ecstatic techniques is the psychology underlying the near-universal selection of effeminate males as shamans and that this is a ‘Geschwind-Galaburda-type talent’ and directly related to the widely observed penchant for the performing arts observed in homosexual cultures in the modern world.”⁷⁶ The mention of a ‘Geschwind-Galaburda-type-talent’ is a reference to work done on cerebral lateralisation by two neurologists.⁷⁷ The Geschwind-Galaburda hypothesis is that a foetus subject to variations in the level of hormones, especially testosterone, may have asymmetric brain development with the right hemisphere developing much more strongly than the left. This asymmetry is then linked with a range of results that include sexual orientation, left handedness and any number of skills as well as possible deficits. Recent research has confirmed that what the authors call ‘transsexuality’ may be produced by these hormonal fluctuations⁷⁸ but that still

⁷⁵ S.M. Bekker (1994), 298.

⁷⁶ W. Dragoin (1997), ‘The Gynemimetic Shaman: Evolutionary Origins of Male Sexual Inversion and Associated Talent.’ In B. Bullough, V.L. Bullough and J. Elias (eds.), *Gender Blending*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 227-247: 238.

⁷⁷ See N. Geschwind, and A. Galaburda (1985a), ‘Cerebral lateralization: Biological mechanisms, associations, and pathology: I. A hypothesis and a program for research.’ *Archives of Neurology*, 42, 428-459; (1985b), ‘Cerebral lateralization: Biological mechanisms, associations, and pathology: II. A hypothesis and a program for research.’ *Archives of Neurology*, 42, 521-552; (1985c), ‘Cerebral lateralization: Biological mechanisms, associations, and pathology: III. A hypothesis and a program for research.’ *Archives of Neurology*, 42, 634-654; and (1987), *Cerebral Lateralization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁷⁸ I. Savic, A. Garcia-Falgueras and D.F. Swaab (2010), ‘Sexual differentiation of the human brain in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation.’ In I. Savic (ed.), *Sex Differences in the Human Brain, their underpinnings and implications*. Amsterdam, Oxford and New York: Elsevier, 41-62. For an earlier overview of the biological processes determining foetal sex see H. Devor (1989), *Gender*

leaves open the question of whether females or biological males with asymmetric brains have “trance-proneness”. Biological theories have been put forward before to explain phenomena similar to the *NatKadaw* role⁷⁹ but on the whole, because of the variations in cultural phenomena, cultural explanations are more convincing.⁸⁰ It also seems unlikely that the co-gendered *NatKadaw* have a biological predisposition towards the short⁸¹ nicotine-induced trance which is quite common among *NatKadaw* and which both women and co-gendered *NatKadaw* at the Taungbyon Festival use.⁸² It seems much more likely that for all *NatKadaw* “The public display of trance manifests an identity with a spirit and thus provides the member with a proof of sorts that he/she is truly a member of the cult.”⁸³ The trance is also linked to the Burmese belief in the replacement of the *NatKadaw*’s spirit – *lei’pja* – by the *nat*’s when the latter wishes to be embodied in and speak through the former.⁸⁴

Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1-22.

⁷⁹ E.g. A.B. Kehoe and D.H. Giletti (1981), ‘Women’s Preponderance in Possession Cults: The Calcium-Deficiency Hypothesis Extended.’ *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 83, Issue 3 (September), 549-561.

⁸⁰ E.g. the explanations put forward for the Zar possession cult by I.M. Lewis (2003 [1971]), 91-92; R. Natvig (1988), ‘Liminal Rites and Female Symbolism in the Egyptian Zar Possession Cult.’ *Numen*, Vol. 35, Fasc. 1 (July), 57-68; and J. Boddy (1989), *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

⁸¹ Nicotine seems to produce shorter trance states than other drugs. See J. Goodman (1993), *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence*. London and New York: Routledge, 25ff.

⁸² Female shamans generally seem to use nicotine less frequently than male shamans but this appears to be merely a cultural state of affairs. In South America, where nicotine is most widely used as a drug to induce a trance, more men than women are shamans but there are instances of female shamans using nicotine to induce a shamanic trance. See J. Wilbert (1993), *Tobacco and Shamanism in South America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

⁸³ I.M. Lewis (2003), ‘Trance, Possession, Shamanism and Sex.’ *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 14 (1), March, 20-39: 25.

⁸⁴ See I.M. Lewis (2003), 28 where he writes of the “most common explanation of trance ... involving the displacement of the host’s soul by the alien spirit.” See also B. Brac de la Perrière (1989), *Les rituels de possession en Birmanie: du culte d’état aux ceremonies privées*. Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 91-99.



7. *NatKadaw* at Taungbyon rapidly inhaling tobacco smoke to induce a trance state.

viii) The role of *NatKadaw* as a prestigious position open to co-gendered people

The eighth strand is that the role of *NatKadaw* is one of the few positions available to openly co-gendered biological males. Hairdressing is one such role as was sensitively portrayed in the film ‘Burmese Butterfly’ about a co-gendered hairdresser called Phyo Lay.⁸⁵ Some films such as ‘The Legend of Lady Hill’⁸⁶ tend to show the conventional view of *NatKadaw* as women or straight men although the depiction of female *NatKadaw* in ‘The Legend of Lady Hill’ does “challenge the dominance of an

⁸⁵ Hnin Ei Hlaing (Director) (2011), Film: *Burmese Butterfly*. Director: Hnin Ei Hlaing; Camera: Khin Khin Hsu & Su Su Thaing Win; Sound: Hnin Ei Hlaing; Editor: Hnin Ei Hlaing.

⁸⁶ U Hein Soe (Director) (2005), Film/DVD 131 minutes: *The Legend of Lady Hill*. Translated by San Tun Aung and Bryce Beemer. Produced by U Zaw Myint. Burmese language film with English subtitles. Distributed by the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i.

abusive, masculinist centralized authority.”⁸⁷ A greater insight into co-gendered *NatKadaw* is shown, albeit subtly, in the film ‘Friends in High Places: The Art of Survival in Modern-Day Burma’⁸⁸ and the film ‘Esprit Es-Tu Là?’⁸⁹ but much more explicitly in the film ‘Nat Pwe: Burma’s Carnival of Spirit Soul’⁹⁰ and the Burmese novel, ‘Smile as they Bow’⁹¹ both of which really reveal the perfect match between being co-gendered and being a *NatKadaw*. It is not surprising that the novel was suppressed by the military government for more than ten years because its hero is a co-gendered *NatKadaw* called U Ba Si but who is usually known as Daisy Bond and the Taungbyon Festival is described as a festival for transvestites: “*Meinmasha*, beautifully made up and frocked in blouses and *longyis* tucked to one side in female fashion, come from all over Burma and are everywhere here. This is their festival of festivals.”⁹² The word *meinmasha* has a long history rather like the Indian term *hijra*. Starting as a term to describe transvestite or transgendered males who had a special status at the Moghul courts, the word has now come in the vernacular to mean “‘cross-dresser,’ ‘transvestite,’ ‘sissy.’ or ‘pansy.’”⁹³ So to describe the Taungbyon Festival as a *meinmasha* festival of festivals is to lay enormous emphasis upon its being a gay

⁸⁷ T.C. HO (2010). ‘Film Review: The Legend of Lady Hill.’ *Visual Anthropology*, 23, 254-257: 256.

⁸⁸ L. Merrison (2001), Film/DVD 88 minutes: *Friends in High Places: The Art of Survival in Modern-Day Burma*. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources. Also available on YouTube: http://youtu.be/O7-wzEs_1Lo Last accessed 02/11/12.

⁸⁹ Y. Rodrigue (1991), Film/VHS 80 minutes: *Esprit Es-Tu Là?* Produced by Utin Pe Win. Meudon: CNRS Audiovisual. There is also a book that arose largely out of the making of the film:

Y.Rodrigue (1993), *Nat-Pwe: Burma’s Supernatural Sub-Culture*. Photographs by the author and P. Strachan, illustrations by N.F. Singer and translated by R. Flotats. Gartmore: Kiscadale.

⁹⁰ R. Bishop, A. Bishop and R. Millis (2003), Film/DVD 85 minutes: *Nat Pwe: Burma’s Carnival of Spirit Soul*. With notes by A. Bishop. Seattle, WA: Sublime Frequencies. The film has the music and all the sounds of the Taungbyon Festival but no commentary.

⁹¹ Nu Nu Yi (2008), *Smile as they Bow*. Translated from the Burmese by Alfred Birnbaum and Thi Thi Aye. New York: Hyperion.

⁹² Nu Nu Yi (2008), 4-5.

⁹³ M.G. Peletz (2009), *Gender Pluralism. Southeast Asia Since Early Modern Times*. New York and London: Routledge, 155.

celebration. A *longyi* is a two metre long piece of cloth worn in wrap around fashion by both men and women. However, both the way it is worn and the pattern of the material differ depending on whether it is a man or a woman who is wearing it. In Burma, *longyis* worn by males are described as *paso*⁹⁴ which means that the folds are tucked in at the middle of the front just below the navel whereas *longyis* worn by females are described as *htamein*⁹⁵ which means that the folds are tucked in at one side or the other. The weave and the pattern have traditionally also differed between the man's and the woman's *longyi*. However, for the novel to describe the Taungbyon Festival as a gay celebration *par excellence* is to oversimplify the situation. The co-gendered *Natkadaw* combine within themselves both male and female elements



8. Nay Win Aung dressed as the female *nat* Ah May Yah Yin.

⁹⁴ *Paso* - ပုဆိုး.

⁹⁵ *Htamein* - ထဘီ.

which they not only can but have to express as part of their role as *NatKadaw*. Soe Lay expressed this very beautifully when he said during interview that he has the body of a man but the heart and head of a woman and he loves like a woman. In other words, he is genuinely third gender⁹⁶ or gender liminal.⁹⁷ The role of *NatKadaw* allows such gender liminal people, biological males in this case, to express themselves much more fully than being a hairdresser or florist would allow. What does seem to be true about the Taungbyon Festival is that it attracts a very large proportion of third gender worshippers. Whether has been caused by the growth in co-gendered *NatKadaw* or whether the two phenomena have evolved together is difficult to know. Reliable



9. Co-gendered worshippers at the Taungbyon Festival.

⁹⁶ So long as one accepts the idea of four (or even five) genders. See S.G. Davies (2010a), 41-49. See also A. Fausto-Sterling (1993), 'The Five Sexes: Why male and female are not enough.' *The Sciences* (March-April), 20-24; and (2000), *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.

⁹⁷ This is the term preferred by N. Besnier (1994), 'Polynesian Gender Liminality Through Time and Space.' In G. Herdt (ed.), *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. New York: Zone Books, 285-328; and his (1997) 'Sluts and Superwomen: The Politics of Gender Liminality in Urban Tonga.' *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 62 (1-2), 5-31.

sources inform us of the relatively recent increase in co-gendered *NatKadaw*⁹⁸ but they are either silent on the subject of the worshippers or they emphasise first gender bawdiness.⁹⁹ It is difficult to know whether the increase in third gender worshippers has been caused by the massive increase in co-gendered *NatKadaw* or whether the two phenomena are correlated to yet other factors.

ix) A co-gendered *NatKadaw* gains a sympathetic family

The ninth and tenth strands are linked with the previous strand but it is worth teasing them out. The ninth strand concerns family. When a boy or young man starts out on the road to becoming a *NatKadaw*, he usually has a senior *NatKadaw* or *Nat* Master as his teacher and guide. He may well also have companions training to becoming *NatKadaw*. When he himself becomes a *Nat* Master, he will almost certainly have one or more young men under his care training to become *NatKadaw*.¹⁰⁰ These young men are often treated as his sons. In other words, becoming a *NatKadaw* provides a co-gendered person with the opportunity to become part of a small community like a family as well as the wider community of all the co-gendered *NatKadaw*. Since young co-gendered males may well be ostracised by their natal families when they start on their training to be a *NatKadaw*, the *Nat* Master may become a surrogate father and the other trainees may become surrogate siblings.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ E.g. B. Brac de la Perrière (2005a), 'The Taungbyon Festival : Locality and Nation- Confronting in the Cult of the 37 Lords.' In M. Skidmore (ed.), *Burma at the Turn of Twenty First Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 65-89.

⁹⁹ "The incidence of drunkenness, especially among young men, is high. Their (consequent) sexual banter and teasing (involving fairly raw obscenity) as well as sexual fondling (especially of the female buttocks) are a traditional feature of the festivities." M.E. Spiro (1996 [1967]), 119.

¹⁰⁰ See B.Brac de la Perrière (2011b), 164-165.

¹⁰¹ Soe Lay clearly stated that this was the case for him while Aung Ko Latt told the story of how his natural father frequently used to strip him of his clothes and beat him.

x) The psychological fit between being co-gendered and becoming a *NatKadaw*

The tenth strand, tightly interwoven with the previous two, is the superb psychological fit between being co-gendered and becoming a *NatKadaw*. That fit or match has been described as one which allows them to:

- (1) Release strong emotion in a fashion sanctioned by tradition.
- (2) Participate in a ceremony where superhumanly powerful figures, often viewed as protective family members, show their personal concern.
- (3) Become a member of an affectionate group of like-minded members who physically and psychologically care for one another.
- (4) Respond to the esthetic and dramatic features of music, dance, fine costume, glittering spectacle.
- (5) Make sense of the unpredictable; have firmer control over one's own life through understanding (*sic*) of what has seemed incomprehensible.
- (6) Solve practical problems – obtain advice on current activities, future plans. Have illnesses diagnosed or cured.
- (7) Increase one's future luck and wealth by expiating for past offenses to the nats; increase one's future luck and wealth by making offerings or doing favors for the nats in anticipation of their help.
- (8) Expand the enjoyment of life. The natpwe, like any other pwe, is a social entertainment. The nats are invited, fed, entertained, and sent home happy. They are supposed to enjoy the occasion and so are the human participants.¹⁰²

Taken on their own each of these eight points does not apply only to co-gendered *NatKadaw*. However, when linked with the other strands, it is possible to see why co-gendered biological males are extremely attracted and well adapted to the life of a *NatKadaw*.

xi) Buddhism accepts first-gender – third-gender relationships for the laity

The eleventh strand has to do with Buddhism. "Buddhism is a complex tradition and there is no single canonical or scripturally sanctioned position on

¹⁰² S.M. Bekker (1994), 297.

homosexuality”¹⁰³ and “as a whole Buddhism has been for the most part neutral on the question of homosexuality.”¹⁰⁴ The term ‘homosexuality’ is being used in these two quotations as a catch-all word as Buddhist scriptures have not made the distinctions between sex, gender, and the object of sexual desire that are currently normal especially in feminist social anthropology. Some Buddhist cultures have been more tolerant towards sexual relationships other than the straight male – female type than others but that is due to the meeting of Buddhism with particular cultural traditions.¹⁰⁵ What is extremely interesting is that Burmese Buddhism, although it may accept the tradition that there are five types of “lacking maleness”,¹⁰⁶ “agrees for the most part with Indian medical thought in seeing it as being essentially an organic disorder, although one with an important psychological component.”¹⁰⁷ For example, the most important Theravada Buddhist scholar, the fifth century Indian commentator Buddhaghosa, accepted that there was a “cause of the sexual organs (*byañjanakaranam*)” quite distinct from the “power of femininity (*itthindriya*)” and the “power of masculinity (*purisindriya*)” and that these powers are themselves not the

¹⁰³ P.A. Jackson (1998), ‘Male Homosexuality and Transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist Tradition.’ In W. Leyland (ed.), *Queer Dharma. Voices of Gay Buddhists*. San Francisco, CA: Gay Sunshine Press, 55-89: 84. This article is also available at:

<http://www.enabling.org/ia/vipassana/Archive/J/Jackson/homoBuddhaJackson.html> Last accessed 07/11/12.

¹⁰⁴ J.I. Cabezon (1998), ‘Homosexuality and Buddhism.’ In W. Leyland (ed.), *Queer Dharma. Voices of Gay Buddhists*. San Francisco, CA: Gay Sunshine Press, 29-44: 30.

¹⁰⁵ A.L. De Silva points out that in Myanmar/Burma there were “no legal statutes against homosexuality between consenting adults until the colonial era when they were introduced by the British.” A.L. De Silva (no date), ‘Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism’, 4. Available at:

<http://www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm> Last accessed 19/11/12.

¹⁰⁶ Lacking maleness – *napumsaka* in Pali. See L. Zwilling (1992), ‘Homosexuality as Seen in Indian Buddhist Texts.’ In J.I. Cabezon (ed.), *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 203-214: 205. The five types are, in Pali, *napumsakapandaka* (permanently impotent), *u(s)suyapandaka* (voyeur), *pak(k)hapandaka* (temporarily impotent), *assitta(ka)pandaka* (fellator), and *opakkamikapandaka* (post-natal eunuch). See L. Zwilling (1992), 204 and P. A. Jackson (1996), ‘Non-normative Sex/Gender Categories in the Theravada Buddhist Scriptures.’ Available at: <https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41884/1/theravada.html> Last accessed 16/11/12.

This paper was originally published in *Australian Humanities Review*, April 1996.

¹⁰⁷ L. Zwilling (1992), 206.

“cause of the sexual organs (*byañjanakaranam*).”¹⁰⁸ In other words, the Theravadin tradition has long acknowledged that a baby can be born with a male set of genitals but with the “power of femininity” which is extremely close to the contemporary neurological finding that a baby can be born with male genitalia but a female brain.¹⁰⁹ Such people, known by the catch-all term *pandaka* in Pali, have not been and are still not allowed to be ordained into the *Sangha*, the Buddhist monastic order.¹¹⁰ The main code of conduct for Buddhist monks, the *Vinaya*, also recognises a type of person known as a *ubhatobyanjanaka* meaning “a person with signs of both sexes/genders” or “persons who combine culturally ascribed male and female sexual or behavioural characteristics.”¹¹¹ Both the five varieties of *pandaka* and the *ubhatobyanjanaka* have traditionally been unwelcome in the *Sangha*. However, because the “textual sources ... are at least consonant with a contemporary view of homosexuality (*sic*) as a probably organically or genetically based orientation, with the same moral significance (or insignificance) of heterosexuality”,¹¹² there is no more stigma attached to any form of non-normative sexual leaning or liaison than there is to heterosexual sex within marriage. This is because there is a sense in Buddhist doctrine in which all sexual desire is a form of clinging to the material and bodily world and therefore a hindrance to achieving *nirvana*. The co-gendered *NatKadaw* is therefore no more to be blamed than the married man or woman. The Buddha used the term *kusala* meaning ‘skilful’ or ‘appropriate’ when he was describing how someone should go about

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See I. Savic, A. Garcia-Falgueras and D.F. Swaab (2010), ‘Sexual differentiation of the human brain in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation.’ In I. Savic (ed.), *Sex Differences in the Human Brain, their underpinnings and implications*. Amsterdam, Oxford and New York: Elsevier, 41-62.

¹¹⁰ See L. Zwillling (1992), 207-209.

¹¹¹ P. A. Jackson (1996).

¹¹² L. Zwillling (1992), 210.

making an ethical decision. The Theravada tradition has always been that “In Buddhism we could say that it is not the object of one’s sexual desire that determines whether a sexual act is unskilful (*akusala*) or not, but rather the quality of the emotions and intentions involved.”¹¹³ It must also be borne in mind that flux is very much part of the Buddhist world view and that therefore, like everything else, “Gender is relative; it is not permanent, fixed, or immutable... Gender, like all forms, is impermanent.”¹¹⁴ In some cultures such as that of the Vezo of Madagascar, co-gendered biological males may see themselves as female by gender and behave in every way as women and yet, although they are known as ‘images of women’ (*sarin’ampela*), they are still regarded as essentially male.¹¹⁵ This idea of essence is alien to Buddhism with its belief in impermanence. Therefore being co-gendered in a Buddhist society such as Myanmar is merely part of the great flux of being and in itself not worthy of any blame. One final point as regards this strand: Buddhist monks were very much in evidence at the Taungbyon Festival thus also indicating Buddhism’s tacit acceptance of co-gendered *NatKadaw* and worshippers.

xii) In Buddhism being co-gendered can be seen as the result of *karma*

The twelfth strand is also linked to Buddhism. The Buddha taught quite a complex idea of *karma* whereby “nothing has any ‘self-existence’ because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent on other things, and

¹¹³ A.L. De Silva (no date), 2.

¹¹⁴ R. Shore-Goss (2011), ‘Queer Buddhists: Re-visiting Sexual Gender Fluidity.’ In D.L. Boisvert and J.E. Johnson (eds.), *Queer Religion*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 25-50: 34.

¹¹⁵ See R. Astuti (1998), ‘ ‘It’s a boy,’ ‘it’s a girl!’: Reflections on sex and gender in Madagascar and beyond.’ In M. Lambek and A. Strathern (eds.), *Bodies and Persons: Comparative Perspectives from Africa and Melanesia*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 29-52.

so forth.”¹¹⁶ However, a much more simplistic¹¹⁷ idea of *karma* has become widespread not just in Myanmar but in many Buddhist cultures:

In most popular understandings, the law of karma and rebirth is a way to get a handle on how the world will treat us in the future, which also implies, more immediately, that we must accept our own responsibility for whatever is happening to us now, as a consequence of something we must have done earlier. ‘If I was born blind, well, it must be my fault.’¹¹⁸

This overly simplistic view has taken hold and can even be “used to explain various differences between people, including physical appearance and economic inequality.”¹¹⁹ Although open to abuse by being “used to rationalize racism, caste, economic oppression, birth handicaps”¹²⁰ and other conditions that should not be justified in that or any other way, this popular view of *karma* has helped co-gendered people to accept themselves and has helped others to accept them. It is not uncommon to hear co-gendered people say that they must have done something wrong in a previous existence and that is why they are co-gendered in this incarnation.¹²¹

There is a second aspect to *karma* that is more in line with the Buddha’s emphasis on the importance of intention. Several *NatKadaw* said that their role enabled them to do a lot of good because not only did they worship the *nats* but they also comforted the sick and gave hope to people who came to consult them. They believed that although their co-gendered status may have been the result of poor decisions in a previous existence, their role as *NatKadaw* gave them a wonderful

¹¹⁶ D.R. Loy (2008), *Money, Sex, War, Karma*. Boston and Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 56.

¹¹⁷ There are some Pali texts in the Buddhist Canon that do support a largely deterministic view *e.g.* the *Culakammavibhanga Sutra*. See D.R. Loy (2008), 59.

¹¹⁸ D.R. Loy (2008), 61.

¹¹⁹ D.R. Loy (2008), 58.

¹²⁰ D.R. Loy (2008), 55.

¹²¹ That is precisely what San Htoo said about himself.

opportunity to do good for others and thus accumulate good *karma* for themselves. It has also become customary in Theravada Buddhism for members of the *Sangha* – the monks – to practise absolute restraint (*sila*) including, of course, sexual restraint, in the hope of achieving *nirvana* while the laity, although practising moderate restraint, concentrate on practising *dana* – “giving to religious recipients”¹²² in the hope of a better rebirth. Several *NatKadaw* explicitly mentioned how they gave to the *Sangha*.¹²³ All of the *NatKadaw* saw themselves as performing good deeds both for the *nats* and for their fellow human beings.

Some of these twelve strands help to explain why co-gendered males have become *NatKadaw* while other strands go some way to explaining the recent explosion in the number of co-gendered *NatKadaw*. There is no doubt that co-gendered males are extremely talented as *NatKadaw* and equally no doubt that the openness exhibited towards them in Myanmar has encouraged many of them to adopt that role.

¹²² J. Egge (2002), *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism*. Richmond: Curzon/Routledge, 1.

¹²³ E.g. Thain Htay has sponsored an umbrella on top of a pagoda and Li Tin Moun has contributed to the building or rebuilding of many Buddhist shrines.

4. The *Bissu* of Sulawesi

4a: The background – the Bugis people

Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country, is a nation state of the most amazing diversity. The world's largest archipelago, Indonesia is made up of over eighteen thousand islands. Each island has a unique culture or blend of cultures so generalisations about Indonesia's quarter of a billion inhabitants are impossible. Bali's still vibrant culture is based on Hinduism¹ while Java's is based on a mixture of Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism with a terrible history of persecution of those Javanese termed *abangan* – anyone nominally Muslim but holding syncretist views.² Sulawesi, formerly known as Celebes or Célèbes, the home of the Bugis shamans known as *Bissu*, is a veritable Smörgåsbord of cultures. This is hardly surprising since Sulawesi is the world's eleventh largest island and has a population of about eighteen million who speak five main languages, in addition to standard Indonesian, and many different dialects.³ Plundered by the Portuguese, colonised by the Dutch, invaded by the Japanese, Sulawesi's history is marked by conflict.

The Bugis people number about five million and are to be found mainly in South Sulawesi but there are quite sizeable concentrations elsewhere in Indonesia and

¹ See H. Geertz and C. Geertz (1975), *Kinship in Bali*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 8 – 44.

² See N. Mulder (1998), *Mysticism in Java: Ideology in Indonesia*. Amsterdam and Singapore: The Pepin Press, 13-28.

³ The main languages are Buginese, Makassarese, Lemolang, Seko and the Northern group whose main form is Toraja. Seko comes in two forms and Toraja in five. Even Makassarese has two dialects apart from mainstream Makassarese - Konjo and Selayar. See K.A. Adelaar and N. Himmelmann (eds.) (2011), *The Austronesian Languages of Asia and Madagascar*. London and New York: Routledge.

also in Malaysia.⁴ The Bugis attracted the attention of Dutch anthropologists during the colonial period⁵ but it is a contemporary, polyglot, French anthropologist who has done the most to tell the world about this fascinating group of people.⁶ The Bugis speak a language that they call *Basa Ugi* but which other Indonesians tend to call *Bahasa Bugis*. Their language is closely related to those of the Makassar, Mandar, Toraja and Ma'sénrémpulu'.⁷ However, what is of most interest is that not only have they preserved their own language but they have also maintained some beliefs and traditions that must go back to the pre-Islamic period.

There is considerable evidence that the Bugis were influenced by both Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Buddhist bronze images have been found in South Sulawesi⁸ whilst the Hindu influence is most clearly seen in Bugis loan words from Sanskrit. These are particularly obvious in the *I La Galigo* cycle of epic poetry and from early priestly texts.⁹ These influences combined with the autochthonous beliefs gave rise to an amazingly rich amalgam of beliefs and customs. A fascinating example is the Bugis belief that certain monitor lizards are not only human but actually messengers of God:

According to Bugis tradition, a long time ago on the Island of Sulawesi, the queen of the kingdom of Gowa ... gave birth to twins,

⁴ See L. Suryadinata, E. Nurvidya Arifin and A. Ananta (2003), *Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 58-62.

⁵ B.F. Matthes (2011 [1875]), *Bijdragen Tot de Ethnologie Van Zuid-Celebes* ('A Contribution towards the Ethnology of South Sulawesi'). Originally published: 's-Gravenhage (The Hague): Belinfante. Republished: Charleston, SC: Nabu Press; and (1872), *Over de Bissoe's of heidensche priesters en priesteressen der Boeginezen* (About the Bissu or pagan priests and priestesses of the Bugis). Amsterdam: C.G. van der Post. This work was later included in the 1943 anthology entitled *Dr Benjamin Frederik Matthes* edited by H. van den Brink. Amsterdam: Nederlansch Bijbelgenootschap; also H. Th. Chabot (1950), *Verwantschap, Stand en Sexe in Zuid-Celebes*. (Kinship, Status and Sex in South Celebes.) Groningen: J.B. Wolters.

⁶ Christian Pelras. See the bibliography for a list of his works about the people of South Sulawesi and the Bugis in particular.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the development of the Bugis identity see C. Pelras (1996), *The Bugis*. Oxford: Blackwell, 39ff.

⁸ See C. Pelras (1996), 25, 44, 47, 54, and 71-72.

⁹ See C. Pelras (1996), 30-35.

one of which was a monitor lizard. Unfortunately, the infant died at birth, but the reptile survived. A week later, the monitor lizard left and went far away from man. The tradition recounts that the water monitor was to let people know through a dream when he intended to return to the company of humans. Since that time, Bugis tradition holds the view that some monitor lizards have an animal's body but a human spirit.¹⁰

This belief still persists and recently a beautiful film was made of a family with a monitor lizard 'child' who is believed to be the twin sister of the human son.¹¹ The film's soundtrack contains the line "The Varanus is the messenger of God because the Varanus is human" which aptly illustrates the syncretism between ancient animistic beliefs and more modern monotheism.¹²

¹⁰ A. Koch and G. Acciaioli (2007), 'The Monitor Twins: A Bugis and Makassarese Tradition from SW Sulawesi, Indonesia.' *Biwak* ((the official journal of the International Varanid Interest Group) 1 (2), 77-82: 77. Varanus is the generic name for the water monitor lizard. The species found on Sulawesi is *Varanus togianus*.

¹¹ J.-M. Corillion (1999), *Les hommes varans*. (English trailer: *Messengers of Sulawesi*). Film 52 minutes. Produced by O. Lelièvre. Paris: ZED/AB Productions. In *Basa Ugi* the monitor lizard is called a *buaja* (*buaya* in *Bahasa Indonesia*) which also means crocodile (A. Koch and G. Acciaioli [2007], 79) so 'lizard children' are sometimes called children "enveloped in the crocodile form." G. Hamonic (1991), 'God, Divinities and Ancestors.' *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (June), 3-34: 7.

¹² A similar human-animal relationship exists between the inhabitants of Komodo Island (in the Lesser Sunda islands just south of Sulawesi) and the monitor known as the Komodo dragon – *Varanus komodoensis* – see A. Koch and G. Acciaioli (2007), 79-80. Other peoples in the region have a similar belief which may go back thousands of years. See C. Pelras (2010a), 'Au pays des enfants-lézards et des crocodiles humains: La perméabilité entre monde humain et monde animal.' In C. Pelras, *Explorations dans l'Univers des Bugis*. Cahier d'Archipel 39. Paris: Association Archipel, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 307-314: 313-314. There seems to be no discernible connection between these beliefs on Sulawesi and those in Malawi but the similarity is interesting. It is believed in Malawi that the Nile monitor lizard (*Varanus niloticus*) "is associated with the supreme deity, and often shares its name, *chiuta*, *mphambe*... is thought of as living above the clouds, and is linked to such phenomena as lightning and thunder." B. Morris (2000), *Animals and Ancestors*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 190-191. The Bugis were, however, amazing sailors and forged, for example, strong links with Aboriginal peoples in northern Australia so a link with Malawi is not impossible. For the Australian link see A. Tuwo and J. Tresnati (2012), *The Bugis-Makassar: From Agrarian Farmers to Adventurous Seafarers*. A lecture given at the Symposium in Macassan History and Heritage at the Australian National University, Canberra, 9 – 10 February. Available at: <http://repository.unhas.ac.id/handle/123456789/905> Last accessed 20/12/12.

The pre-Islamic religion of the Bugis seems to have been centred on the worship of the sun and moon¹³ but there was a whole range of divine and semi-divine figures such as the rice deity Sangiasseri¹⁴ or Sangiang Serri.¹⁵ In fact the Bugis engaged in what has been termed “prolific religious thinking”¹⁶ meaning that the Bugis believed in a universe populated by a wide range of beings above, on and below the earth. It is because of the belief in “beings descended from the heavens,” *tomanurung*¹⁷ that there were especially strong links between the Bugis nobility and traditional beliefs because the nobility traced their ancestry from such *tomanurung*. These links remained strong for a long time in South Sulawesi although it is less clear about how strong they were in the areas to which the Bugis migrated.¹⁸

These beliefs were first seriously challenged when Islam was embraced by some of the rulers in South Sulawesi. The year 1605 is the time when Islam officially entered Sulawesi when the ruler of Tallo’ – the ‘Old Prince’ (*Karaéng Matoaya*) – and the ruler of the twin state of Gowa – his nephew Manga’rangi¹⁹ – converted to Islam. There followed a period when Islam spread to the whole of South Sulawesi²⁰ with the exception of the Toraja mountains. However, the Bugis people who were part of the

¹³ See C. Pelras (1981), ‘Célèbes-sud avant l’Islam, selon les premiers témoignages étrangers.’ *Archipel*, 21, 153-184: 168-169.

¹⁴ See N. Said (2004), ‘Religion and Cultural Identity among the Bugis.’ *Inter-Religio*, 45, Summer, 12-20: 13. Available at: <http://www.sabrizain.org/malaya/library/bugisreligion.pdf> Last accessed 25/11/12.

¹⁵ G. Hamonic (1991), 8.

¹⁶ G. Hamonic (1991), 3.

¹⁷ G. Hamonic (1991), 5.

¹⁸ For a detailed study of Bugis migration and adaptation see G. Ammarell (2002), ‘Bugis Migration and Modes of Adaptation to Local Situations.’ *Ethnology*, Vol. 41, no. 1 (Winter), 51-67.

¹⁹ See C. Pelras (1985), ‘Religion, Tradition and the Dynamics of Islamization in South-Sulawesi.’

Archipel, Vol. 29, 107-135. Available at:

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/arch_0044-8613_1985_num_29_1_2226 Last accessed 02/09/12.

²⁰ See F.D. Bulbeck (1996), ‘The Politics of Marriage and the Marriage of Politics in Gowa, South Sulawesi, During the 16th and 17th Centuries.’ In J.J. Fox and C. Sather (eds.), *Origins, ancestry and alliance: Explorations in Austronesian ethnography*. Canberra: Department of Anthropology, Australian National University, 283-318.

Kingdom of Gowa at this time and whose religion had previously focused on the “worship of ancestors and spirits, to whom offerings were made through specialist intermediaries”,²¹ seem to have managed to assimilate Islam while keeping alive some of their earlier animist beliefs and practices just as has happened elsewhere.²² Part of the reason for this is that conversion to Islam was not undertaken purely for reasons of belief. The coastal peoples of Sulawesi traded with both Christian and Muslim merchants so there were also commercial reasons for the mercantile class to convert.²³ Trade with the Portuguese inclined Bugis merchants towards Christianity²⁴ and on the whole Christianity suited the aristocracy better because it allowed them more easily to maintain the “political myth which explains the origin of a dynasty as founded by a king or queen descending from heaven.”²⁵ Christ as the Son of God born on earth paralleled royal beliefs that they were descended from a king known as a *tomanurung* – “he who came from the sky”²⁶ and their chronicles²⁷ described how the aristocracy, distinguished by the “greater whiteness of their blood”,²⁸ traced their ancestry back to

²¹ C. Pelras (1996), 47.

²² An interesting parallel is the Sudanese Muslim community where the Zar possession cult has persisted. In their religious pantheon “At the top is Allah, next in importance is the prophet Muhammed, and third-ranked are Awliya (saints). Sudanese Muslim cosmology also includes aerial spirits, nature (plants, animals, mountains, etc.), the human world, and the underworld.” B.B. Muhammed (1993), ‘The Sudanese Concept of Beauty, Spirit Possession, and Power.’ *Folklore Forum* 26, 1/2, 43-67: 46.

²³ C. Pelras (1985) is extremely good at exploring all the reasons for conversion to one set of beliefs or another.

²⁴ See C. Pelras (1996), 125-130.

²⁵ A.Z. Abidin (1983), ‘The Emergence of Early Kingdoms in South Sulawesi.’ *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No.4, March, 455-491: 455. Available at: <http://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2433/56113/1/KJ00000133875.pdf> Last accessed 08/12/12.

²⁶ A.Z. Abidin (1983), 456.

²⁷ Of which the best known is the *I La Galigo* epic. See A.Z. Abidin (1974), ‘The I La Galigo Epic Cycle of South Celebes and Its Diffusion.’ Translated and adapted by C. C. Macknight. *Indonesia*, 17 (April), 161–169. Available at: http://cip.cornell.edu/DPubS?service=Repository&version=1.0&verb=Disseminate&view=body&content-type=pdf_1&handle=seap.indo/1107130756# Last accessed 08/12/12.

²⁸ G. Acciaioli (2009), ‘Distinguishing Hierarchy and Precedence: Comparing status distinctions in South Asia and the Austronesian world, with special reference to South Sulawesi.’ In M.P. Vischer (ed.), *Precedence: Social Differentiation in the Austronesian World*. Canberra: The Australian National

the gods or spirits – *dewata* – who were the offspring of the “primordial, divine couple”.²⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bugis managed to preserve many aspects of their ancient cosmogony and set of cultic practices³⁰ as *adat*, custom, and merge them with a monotheistic religion when Islam took hold.

4b: The Bissu

The Bugis shamans/priests known as *Bissu* can trace their role back many centuries to the *I La Galigo* epic cycle which existed as an oral tradition as early as the fourteenth century before gradually being committed to writing.³¹ In order to understand how the *Bissu* are viewed, it is vital to grasp the Bugis cosmogony in which there is an androgynous creator deity who gives birth to the male sun and female moon both of which have hermaphroditic qualities because both “are capable of self-impregnation.”³² The sun turns out to be sterile but the moon gave “birth to the stars, certain metals (gold, iron), and to the first generation of ‘monstrous’ plants, animals and other creatures... The Bugis cosmogonic myth counts the *bissu* among the ‘monstrous’ creations, which are all replete with sacred powers.”³³ These monstrous creations are themselves part of the primeval chaos and are both asexual and sterile.

University, 51-90. Available at: <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ch0371.pdf> Last accessed 08/12/12.

²⁹ C. Pelras (1985), 117.

³⁰ For a detailed analysis of these see G. Hamonic (1983), ‘Pour une étude comparée des cosmogonies de Célèbes-Sud. A propos d’un manuscrit inédit sur l’origine des dieux bugis.’ *Archipel* 25, 35-62; and (1987), *Le Langage des Dieux. Cultes et pouvoirs pré-islamiques en Pays Bugis, Célèbes-Sud, Indonésie*. Paris: Editions de Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS).

³¹ C. Pelras (1996), 56.

³² L.Y. Andaya (2000), ‘The Bissu: Study of a Third Gender in Indonesia.’ In B.W. Andaya (ed.), *Other Pasts: Women, Gender, and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai’i Press, 27-46: 35. The endnotes to this article are on 274-280.

³³ *Ibid.* The crocodiles and other reptiles such as the monitor lizard are linked to these primeval monsters.

Only in a further round of creation did fertile males and females emerge when the divine couple was produced who in turn produced numerous gods – *dewata* – from whom came the divine kings – *manurung* – who are the forebears of the white-blooded nobility while their servants are the forebears of the common folk.³⁴ The *Bissu* thus predate all other humans both noble and commoner and are still “believed to be capable of returning to this sacred time to ‘recreate’ or ‘create’ for the benefit of society.”³⁵

In the *I La Galigo* epic stories there were three types of *Bissu*: noble, white-blooded *Bissu* – *Data Bissu*; landowning *Bissu* – *Bissu Lolo*; and the *Bissu* who have solely a religious role as shamans, whose leader bears the title *Puang Matoa* – Elder Lord³⁶ – and who are the only type in existence now.³⁷ Although according to the myth they have to be androgynous, *Bissu* may be biologically male or female and many *Bissu* have in the past been biologically female and at one stage in the past the majority of *Bissu* seem to have fallen into that category.³⁸ There are very few

³⁴ See C. Pelras (1985), 117.

³⁵ L.Y. Andaya (2000), 40.

³⁶ L.Y. Andaya (2000), 37.

³⁷ It is presumably this last category that originally acquired the title ‘*Bissu*’ probably from the Buddhist Sanskrit term *bhikṣu* meaning ‘monk.’ See C. Pelras (1996), 71; and U. Umar (2008), 6. However, contemporary *Bissu* often link the word *Bissu* with the beautiful Arabic phrase Bismillah al rahman al Rahim (بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ) normally translated as ‘In the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Compassionate.’ Sanro Temmi, backed up by Sanro Hasan, made this link.

³⁸ Female *Bissu* were known as “*bissu makkunrai* or *core-core*” - T. Boellstorff (2005), *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 38. See L.Y. Andaya (2000), 279, note 62 where he estimates that only three out of eighty *Bissu* were biological males. See also E. Blackwood (2005), ‘Gender Transgression in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia.’ *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (November), 849-879: 854. These days they are often wrongly identified merely as transvestites. See M. Kennedy (1993), ‘Clothing, Gender, and Ritual Transvestism: The *Bissu* of Sulawesi.’ *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, August, 1-13.

biologically female Bissu now but this appears to have been the case for quite some time.³⁹

The *Bissu* were probably the authors of the *I La Galigo* epic stories and to this day they are the experts in the literature.⁴⁰ However, their main role was when they “as priests, shamans and specialists in trance rituals mediated between humankind and the world of the gods” and as part of this role “they had heavenly beings as mystic spouses.”⁴¹ Several *Bissu* to this day go through a ritual called *ma'giri* when they go into a trance and stab themselves with a *k(e)ris* – dagger – without the blade penetrating while others walk on hot coals without pain because they are possessed by spirits who are protecting them.⁴² They are also responsible for major events such as *mappalili* – the ceremony that precedes rice planting⁴³ and the ceremonies connected with the building of houses and boats plus various rituals linked to ancestor worship.⁴⁴ In the past the *Bissu* were closely tied to the royal and aristocratic families and since it was believed that the *arajang* – royal regalia – had descended from heaven and were “often entered by the spirits of ancestors”⁴⁵ it was the job of the *Bissu* to be “in charge of the cult of these *regalia* and of princely ceremonies”.⁴⁶

³⁹ G. Hamonic stated that even in 1975 “les femmes bissu ont pratiquement disparu du pays bugis” (“the female *Bissu* have virtually disappeared from Bugis territory”). G. Hamonic (1975), ‘Travestissement et Bisexualité chez les ‘Bissu’ du Pays Bugis.’ *Archipel*, 10, 121-134: 126.

⁴⁰ See C. Pelras (1996), 56-57. However, there is a theory that the *I La Galigo* stories were collected and put into written form by Bugis noble women. See T. Gibson (2000), ‘Islam and the Spirit Cults in New Order Indonesia: Global Flows vs. Local Knowledge.’ *Indonesia*, 69 (April), 41-70: 62.

⁴¹ C. Pelras (1996), 82-83.

⁴² See the detailed account given by S.G. Davies (2010a), *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam, and Queer Selves*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 191-197. See the bibliography for the extensive research into Indonesian gender issues that she has published. Her work was published under the name of Sharyn Graham until 2004 and subsequently under the name of Sharyn Graham Davies.

⁴³ See S.G. Davies (2010a), 190-191.

⁴⁴ See C. Pelras (1985), 108.

⁴⁵ Soedarsono (1974), *Dances in Indonesia*. Jakarta: P.T. Gunung Agung, 226.

⁴⁶ C. Pelras (1985), 108.

The *Bissu* belong to the second category of co-gendered shamans – those who are already co-gendered before they receive the calling to become *Bissu*. All of the *Bissu* interviewed agreed that being androgynous is an absolute precondition for becoming a *Bissu*. All of the male bodied but female minded *Bissu* interviewed stated that they knew from an early age that, although they were biologically male, they were mentally and emotionally female. Nani⁴⁷ said that s/he knew by the age of ten not only that s/he was co-gendered but that s/he was destined to be a *Bissu* while Sompo knew the same at the age of twelve. None of the male-bodied *Bissu* who were interviewed said that they had ever been other than co-gendered. It was also made plain by Zulaiha that this is a major difference between *Bissu* and *calabai* – third gender anatomical males whose object of desire is male. *Bissu* are irrevocably androgynous whereas *calabai* may be temporarily androgynous but then embark on a heterosexual marriage. However, it is interesting that there was a striking difference with one of the two female-bodied *Bissu* interviewed. Sanro Temmi had been in a heterosexual marriage for many years and had borne his husband eight children. It was only after the husband's death and his near death experience that s/he became androgynous and after that a *Bissu*. S/he says that she is now irreversibly androgynous so s/he meets the criteria to be a *Bissu*. Another very striking difference between the male-bodied and female-bodied *Bissu* is that the former all had their calling to be a *Bissu* confirmed by a dream – a common way of receiving the shamanic calling – while the latter both had their calling confirmed by a serious illness, Sanro Temmi by a physical illness and Sanro Nisa by a mental illness. Such serious illnesses are another way of receiving the

⁴⁷ See Appendix 4 for the details of the *Bissu* interviewed.

summons to be a shaman.⁴⁸ It is interesting that the male-bodied and the female-bodied *Bissu* received their call in different ways but the sample is too small to draw any conclusions.

The interviews with the *Bissu* made it very clear that they do fall into the second category of co-gendered shamans – those who are fully and permanently androgynous before receiving the call to be *Bissu*. The interviews also made it clear that the *Bissu* are living in comparative poverty⁴⁹ and that, compared to the situation prior to Indonesia's independence, there are very few of them and, although they are respected within their immediate Bugis community, they face rejection by the wider Indonesian society. The pertinent questions are, therefore, firstly, why are co-gendered *Bissu* facing such opposition and, secondly, why have they decreased in number in recent years? As with the question about the *NatKadaw*, there is no one simple answer but many closely interwoven strands.

There appear to be twelve strands to the answer:

1. The *Bissu* belong to a worldview that is fast disappearing.
2. The *Bissu* are closely associated with the royal courts and nobility both of which are largely thought of these days as part of the feudal past.
3. The removal of the royal lands which formerly gave a source of income to the *Bissu* has meant that they have to undertake a daytime job to support themselves and this has blurred the distinction between *Bissu* and *calabai*.
4. The acceptance of Islam by the Bugis inevitably set up a tension between traditional Bugis beliefs and Muslim monotheism.
5. The introduction of Islam with its two very different views of third gender people depending on one's school of thought placed *Bissu* in an anomalous position.
6. The rise of Wahhabism and decline of Sufism has exacerbated the rift between Islam and traditional Bugis beliefs and customs.

⁴⁸ One female shaman and western trained medical doctor, Ura *udgan*, interviewed in Mongolia, told how she had several serious seizures and became temporarily insane. It was only when she started to practise fully as a shaman that she recovered her physical and mental health,

⁴⁹ Especially the male-bodied *Bissu*.

7. The traditional Bugis beliefs were encouraged by the Dutch colonisers as a way of counter-balancing the rise of anti-colonial Islam but that left the *Bissu* in an unenviable position at independence.
8. In the twentieth century the virulent attacks on traditional beliefs in general and the *Bissu* in particular led to the forced rejection of their role by many *Bissu* and the murder of several including a *Puang Matoa* – Head *Bissu*.
9. There is an alternative role in society for co-gendered biological males – that of *calabai*.
10. The passing in 2008 of Law No. 44 concerning pornography is so widely worded that any public display of sexuality contrary to social norms could be used to outlaw appearances by *Bissu*.
11. Bugis beliefs including acceptance of the *Bissu* became part of *adat* – custom – but *adat* has now been separated from both civil (from king to government) and religious (from traditional belief to Islam) authority thus leaving the *Bissu* with no civil or religious authority.
12. *Adat* – custom – is gradually coming to mean *budaya* – culture in the sense of the arts and in particular dance, music and drama thus reducing the role of *Bissu* to performers in cultural events laid on for locals, tourists or international audiences.

4c: Why are there so few *Bissu* left on Sulawesi?

i) The traditional Bugis worldview is fast disappearing

Strand one is about the changing worldview within which the *Bissu* operate now.

In the pre-Islamic period and for a long time afterwards the *Bissu* were essential in order to “perform the blessing for everything, but particularly in maintaining the fertility before planting and before harvesting rice.”⁵⁰ These blessings were all part of a creation myth in which the *Bissu* were “considered an essential part in maintaining the cosmic balance.”⁵¹ These days, although some people still adhere to the old customs,⁵² most people have a pragmatic attitude. They adopt the view that “it’s

⁵⁰ A. Hakim (2011), *Islam and the Transformation of ‘Sacred Gender’*, 3, Available at: <http://indonesiasynergy.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/islam-and-the-transformation-of1.pdf> Last accessed 05/09/12.

⁵¹ A. Hakim (2011), 7.

⁵² “My husband only dares to go to the paddy fields after the Mappalili ritual.” The testimony of a lady called Nurasia. Irmawati (2010), ‘South Sulawesi Vanishing High Priests.’ *Jurnal (sic) Irmawar: Outreach, Tempo English Edition*, December 22-28, 1. Available at: <http://shamawar.wordpress.com/south-sulawesi-vanishing-high-priests/> Last accessed 29/12/12.

enough to watch the season. When it begins to rain, we go plowing.”⁵³ The younger as well as the older generation share this pragmatism. In November 2010 “As *Arajang* – a sacred heirloom plow – was paraded along the village, several youths mixed mud water with cow dung and then showered the *Bissu* master of ceremony (*sic*) with it.”⁵⁴ The old Bugis way of looking at the world is rapidly dying out although, as Zalmah pointed out, the Segeri community of *Bissu* still maintains the tradition of parading the sacred plough every November.

ii) The role of the *Bissu* is associated with the feudal past

The second strand is linked to the first. Before the Indonesian archipelago became the independent state of Indonesia, the islands were made up of numerous feudal kingdoms. *Bissu* are closely associated with those royal courts and the white-blooded nobility both of which are largely thought of these days as part of the feudal past. Although a commercial middle class emerged during the nineteenth century,⁵⁵ the aristocracy clung to power by, for the most part, aligning themselves with the Dutch colonisers who “entrenched the hierarchical system further, with its codification into a bureaucratic structure”.⁵⁶ Between 1945 and 1950 most⁵⁷ of the Bugis nobility continued to support the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration and the Royal Netherlands Indies Army against those who wanted a unified and independent Indonesian Republic.⁵⁸ In the war of independence the rebels who opposed Dutch rule homed in on the Bugis aristocracy but “in their declared war on ‘feudalism’ the rebels

⁵³ *Ibid.* The testimony of a sixty year old farmer called Symasul.

⁵⁴ Irmawati (2010), 2.

⁵⁵ See C. Pelras (1996), 327.

⁵⁶ C. Pelras (1996), 328.

⁵⁷ But not all. See C. Pelras (1996), 280.

⁵⁸ See T. Gibson (2000), 54-55.

targeted their hostility more at the permanent symbolic bases of the old society, such as sacred places where dynastic ancestors were revered or the regalia from which rulers drew mystic energy, rather than at the actual individuals who were the transitory holders of power.”⁵⁹ The nobility finally lost all political clout in 1960 when the central Indonesian government abolished all the quasi-independent petty kingdoms over which they had ruled. Most of them had backed the losing side and just as the nobility were discredited so too were the *Bissu* whose *raison d’être* was so closely linked to them. “In the Bugis society of today, power based on belief in the divine origin of a few has definitely come to an end.”⁶⁰ Because the influence of the *Bissu* derived largely from this belief, their power base has been substantially eroded.⁶¹

iii) The removal of state support means that *Bissu* have to earn their living

The third strand follows on from the second. The Bugis nobility derived its wealth partly from land and partly from trade. The *Bissu* used to receive stipends in return for their work for the royal courts and they also had royal land whose crops were allocated to them. Some of the nobility set up trading bases outside South Sulawesi and thus became part of the large Bugis diaspora but those who stayed put lost their lands, their formal positions and the income that was derived from both sources in 1960 when the autonomous regions were abolished.⁶² The land that was allocated to the *Bissu* was

⁵⁹ C. Pelras (1996), 329-330. For the link between the traditional nobility and what became perceived as feudalism, also see C. Pelras (1985), 129; and M.G. Peletz (2009), 141.

⁶⁰ C. Pelras (1996), 334. However, it is interesting to note that both Sanro Temmi and Sanro Nisa believed that their power as *Bissu* has as its source their aristocratic lineage.

⁶¹ See L. Andaya (2000), 44.

⁶² See C. Pelras (1996), 330. Many of the nobility had lost their lands even earlier because those lands were in rebel held territory.

either taken away from them⁶³ or has deteriorated so much that it no longer provides an income.⁶⁴ The result is that what *Bissu* there are have to earn a wage to supplement their meagre income from donations. They have turned to bridal dressing and/or wedding equipment rental,⁶⁵ hairdressing⁶⁶ and floristry while some have become “cooks, bakers, traders, traditional healers” while “others even become primary school teachers.”⁶⁷ Zulaiha, the head of the Segeri community of *Bissu* earns hir living as an *Indo’ Botting* – ‘Wedding Mother.’ Sanro Temmi is a traditional healer. This means that many of them are now employed in ways that substantially overlap with the roles usually undertaken by Sulawesi’s third gender community.⁶⁸ These people, known as *calabai*, work in very similar areas but they are most famous as *Indo’ Botting* – ‘Wedding Mothers’ – who organise and manage weddings, dress the bride and groom, attend to the bride’s hair and make-up, cook the wedding food, and provide the entertainment.⁶⁹ Most weddings have *calabai* as organisers⁷⁰ and *Bissu* have always

⁶³ See H. Lathief (2004), *Bissu: Pergulatan dan Peranannya di Masyarakat Bugis* (Bissu: Their Struggle and Role in Bugis Society). Depok: Desantara untuk Latar Nusa, 87-89; S.G. Davies (2010a), 184; and T. Boellstorff (2005), 39.

⁶⁴ See Irmawati (2010), 2.

⁶⁵ Irmawati (2010), 2-3.

⁶⁶ Irmawati (2010), 3.

⁶⁷ Irmawati (2010), 4.

⁶⁸ The terms ‘third gender’ and ‘fourth gender’ are being used as defined by W. Roscoe (1996), ‘How to Become a Berdache: Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender Diversity.’ In G. Herdt (ed.), *Third Sex Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*. New York: Zone Books, 329–71; and (2000), *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin: 7 and 73-74. Sulawesi has four or, if one includes the Bissu as a separate group, five distinct and generally accepted genders. These are described at length by S.G. Davies (2007a), *Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders among Bugis in Indonesia*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth; and S.G. Davies (2010a). The traditional genotype/phenotype distinction is too simplistic to describe gender variations. See J. Roughgarden (2009 [2004]), *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 81 and 200-201. The most practical distinction is between morphology and behaviour so third gender covers those who are morphologically male but behaviourally female; fourth gender those who are morphologically female but behaviourally male; while fifth gender would cover those who are ambiguous both morphologically and behaviourally. See J. Roughgarden (2009 [2004]), 35-36.

⁶⁹ See S.G. Davies (2007a), 118-128. The entertainment, *wardut*, is basically karaoke.

been essential as ministers at important weddings⁷¹ but for the *Bissu* to earn their living as *Indo' Botting* – ‘Wedding Mothers’ – is most definitely to blur the distinction between *Bissu* and *calabai*.⁷² This blurring has been exacerbated by the fact that there are now often not enough *Bissu* to form a group of forty as required for certain ceremonies and so they have had to recruit *calabai* to fill the vacancies.⁷³ *Bissu* are meant not to be able to “expel bodily fluids such as semen or menstrual blood”⁷⁴ as a sign of their fifth gender hermaphrodite status so the fact that some *Bissu* also behave in a libidinous way as is much more common among *calabai* also undermines people’s perception of *Bissu* as a separate and sacred group.⁷⁵

iv) The Bugis acceptance of Islam set up tensions with traditional beliefs

The fourth strand concerns religion. The acceptance of Islam by the Bugis inevitably set up a tension between traditional Bugis beliefs, which were patently polytheistic, and Muslim monotheism. When the first rulers converted to Islam there was a great deal of opposition including the desecration of the first royal mosque with

⁷⁰ S.G. Davies has attended about sixty weddings and estimates that about 75% had *calabai* as organisers or helpers thus disagreeing with S. Millar (1989), *Bugis Weddings: Rituals of Social Location in Modern Indonesia*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, who puts the number much lower. See S.G. Davies (2007a), 119-120.

⁷¹ See S.G. Davies (2007a), 104-118.

⁷² Some authorities have found little difference between *Bissu* and *calabai*: “Sur le plan social et dans le vocabulaire lui-même, il n’y a donc pas de distinction tranchée entre *bissu* et *calabai*. Apparemment leur ‘travestissement’ est semblable, et tout *calabai* peut théoriquement devenir *bissu*.” G. Hamonic (1977), ‘Les ‘fausses-femmes’ du pays Bugis (Célèbes-Sud).’ *Objets et Mondes*, 17 (1) Printemps, 39-46: 41. “In the social scheme and in their very vocabulary, there is no distinction drawn between *Bissu* and *calabai*. Apparently their cross-dressing is similar and all *calabai* can in theory become *Bissu*.” Author’s translation.

⁷³ One study in 2004 estimated that there were then forty or more *Bissu* in each district – H. Lathief (2004), 75. For dissenting views, see L. Andaya (2000), 44; U. Umar (2008), 13; G. Hamonic (1977), 42; and M. Jaffer (2000), ‘The *Bissu* are more than men dressed in women’s clothes.’ *Jakarta Post*, July 17. Available at: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-63505034/bissu-more-than-men.html> Last accessed 10/01/13.

⁷⁴ S.G. Davies (2007a), 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* G. Hamonic (1977), 42, comments that “Une chasteté sexuelle absolue semble être de rigueur.” “Absolute sexual chastity seems to be essential.” Author’s translation. Of the male-bodied *Bissu* interviewed one, Nani, has been married four times in common law (*adat*) to biological males. Her current husband is no more than a teenager. See Appendix 4 for details of the *Bissu* interviewed.

pig's blood. Some *Bissu* were forced into exile at this point.⁷⁶ When the Bugis nobility realised that Islam was there to stay, they ensured that "All offices such as *imam*, *khatib*, *bilal*, *kadhi*, were handed over to people of high nobility."⁷⁷ They ensured that Islam was merged with traditional beliefs and thus maintained their political status in Bugis society. "Most of them must have seen that equilibrium as ideal, and have been hoping to carry on the *status quo* for ever."⁷⁸ However, the seeds of disenchantment with traditional Bugis beliefs had been sown and even during the seventeenth century within a Sufi influenced Islamic framework, there were times when the *Bissu* were discarded.⁷⁹

v) Islam has two different views on third gender people

The fifth strand follows on from the fourth. Islam has in fact always recognised a third gender position.⁸⁰ The Prophet, although he did not favour male homosexuality,⁸¹ certainly did recognise that certain biological males are "without the defining skill of males".⁸² These people were allowed into and worked in the women's quarters so long as they maintained their indeterminate position and showed no sexual interest. If they made lascivious comments the Prophet said that they should be ejected

⁷⁶ See C. Pelras (1985), 121.

⁷⁷ C. Pelras (1985), 122. *Imam* is the title of the person leading the worship in the mosque; *khatib* someone who gives a sermon; *bilal* is a mosque assistant named after the devoted attendant of the Prophet; *kadhi* is an expert in Muslim law.

⁷⁸ C. Pelras (1985), 123.

⁷⁹ Such a case took place in 1631 -1644 when the ruler of Boné in South Sulawesi enforced a strict interpretation of Islam. See C. Pelras (1985), 124.

⁸⁰ In the Arabic Hadith such people are described as *mukhannathun* (مُخَنَّثُونَ) [singular = *mukhannath* (مُخَنَّثٌ)] which roughly translates as 'effeminate one(s)'. See F. Malik, (no date), *Queer Sexuality and Identity in the Qur'an and Hadith*. Available at: <http://www.well.com/~aquarius/Qurannotes.htm> Last accessed 10/01/13.

⁸¹ Qur'an 7,81; 26,165-166; 27,55; 29,28-29.

⁸² Qur'an 24,31. : غَيْرِ أُولَى الْأَرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ

from the women's quarters.⁸³ Unfortunately there are also Hadith⁸⁴ where the Prophet rails against "female-impersonators" and "male-impersonators although it is open to interpretation as to whether these apply to those genuinely "without the defining skill of males".⁸⁵ It was this tension, firstly, between what was written in the Qur'an and what was recorded among the Hadith and, secondly, between an interpretation of the Hadith that was favourable to third gender people and an interpretation that was not, that existed from the moment that Islam became the official religion of the Bugis thus placing the *Bissu* in an anomalous position.

vi) The rise of Wahhabism has made holding syncretist views more difficult

The fifth strand leads directly to the sixth. So long as there existed in South Sulawesi a form of Islam that was happy to accommodate old polytheistic beliefs, the *Bissu* could survive. However, South Sulawesi has a long history of Islamic strands that were inimical to syncretism.⁸⁶ From the Khalwatiyah mystic strand⁸⁷ in the seventeenth century to the Wahhabi influenced strand in the early nineteenth century,⁸⁸ from the Sammaniyah⁸⁹ mystic strand in the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth century Wahhabi influenced Muhammadiyah movement which spread its beliefs

⁸³ The Sahih Muslim (which is the Hadith collection made by Imam Muslim ibn al-Jajaj al-Naysaburi) Book XXVI, Chapter 12, 5415-5416. See F. Malik (no date), 2.

⁸⁴ The so-called Bukhari Hadith *i.e.* those collected by the ninth century Persian Muslim scholar Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari Book LXII, 61 and 62. See F. Malik (no date), 3.

⁸⁵ For the problems that arise over interpretation with regard to sex/gender issues see M. Hendricks (2010), 'Islamic Texts: A source for acceptance of queer individuals into mainstream society.' *The Equal Rights Review*, Vol. 5, 31-51. Available at:

<http://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/muhsin.pdf> Last accessed 10/01/13.

⁸⁶ See C. Pelras (1985), 124ff.

⁸⁷ The Khalwati strand was a branch of Sufism founded in Persia by Umar al-Khalwati and introduced into Sulawesi by Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari, known to his followers as *Tuana Salamaka* ("our Gracious Master"). See H.M. Federspiel (2007), *Sultans, Shamans, and Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 62; and C. Pelras (1985), 123-124.

⁸⁸ See C. Pelras (1985), 125-126; and M.F. Laffan (2003), *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 29-30.

⁸⁹ The Sammaniyah strand was founded by Sheikh Muhammed ibn Abdul Karim al-Samman as an offshoot of the Khalwati strand and thus another branch of Sufism.

largely through numerous educational establishments,⁹⁰ strict monotheistic views have been promulgated – views that totally excluded the cosmology that justified the existence of the *Bissu*.⁹¹ It is the gradual ascendancy of these views that has made the position of the *Bissu* almost impossible – not because of their gender status but because of the cosmology that underpins their role.

vii) The Dutch support for Bugis beliefs proved problematic at independence

The seventh strand is that traditional Bugis beliefs were encouraged by the Dutch colonisers as a way of counter-balancing the rise of anti-colonial Islamic views – views that largely coincided with the strictly monotheistic strand of Islam. Even in the period after 1945 most of the nobility and those holding syncretist Islamic beliefs opted for a Dutch inspired East Indonesian State rather than an independent and unified Indonesian Republic which was supported by most Muslims holding to strict monotheistic Islamic beliefs.⁹² When the Dutch finally ceded independence in 1949 to a unified Indonesia, apart from Dutch New Guinea⁹³, those in favour of regional autonomy together with the pro-Dutch nobility with their syncretist Muslim views, and along with them the *Bissu*, were, to a large extent, the losers.

viii) Since independence there have been virulent attacks on traditional beliefs

The eighth strand is that even after independence there was an unpleasant period of confusing civil war in the 50s and early 60s when groups such as the

⁹⁰ See C. Pelras (1996), 328; and (1985), 127-129.

⁹¹ Wahhabism, the form of Islam named after Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703 – 1791), which often has a bad press among non-Muslims in the West, is best known among Muslims mainly for its stringent monotheism – *tawhid* (توحيد). See N.J. DeLong-Bas (2004), *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*. Oxford, New York, *et alibi*: Oxford University Press, 56-61.

⁹² See C. Pelras (1985), 129.

⁹³ Which eventually became part of the unified Indonesia in 1969 and now form the two provinces of Papua and West Papua. The eastern part of the island is the independent state of Papua New Guinea.

Sulawesi branch of *Daru'l Islam*⁹⁴ led by Kahar Muzakkar fought Christian groups and more syncretist Muslim groups.⁹⁵ During this period the *Bissu* were targeted partly because their activities were regarded as un-Islamic but also because they were accused of links with the Communist Party.⁹⁶ They were forced to renounce their role, the *Puang Matoa* of the Boné region, Sanro Makgangke, was decapitated and his head publicly displayed, many others were killed, *I La Galigo* manuscripts were burned and *shari'ah* law was introduced.⁹⁷ This period exemplified the problems inherent in the very nature of Indonesian Islam for “Although Muslims formed the majority, most were only nominally so (the *abangan*), while a minority were orthodox *santri* Islamists embracing the ideal of the Islamic state (*Negara Islam*).”⁹⁸ As Geertz pointed out in his 1960 study of Javanese religion, the “*abangans* are fairly indifferent to doctrine but fascinated with ritual detail, while among the *santris* the concern with doctrine almost entirely overshadows the already attenuated ritualistic aspects of Islam.”⁹⁹ In 1965 the rebel groups were defeated and South Sulawesi was integrated into a unified and independent Indonesia. However, many *Bissu* had fled, given up

⁹⁴ The ‘House of Islam.’

⁹⁵ See J. Braithwaite, V. Braithwaite, M. Cookson and L. Dunn (2010), *Anomie and Violence: Non-truth and Reconciliation in Indonesian Peacebuilding*. Canberra: Australian National University University E Press, 244-245. Chapter 4 (243-289) available at: <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/ch0418.pdf> Last accessed 12/01/13.

⁹⁶ See T. Boellstorff (2005), 39.

⁹⁷ See A. Hakim (2011), 4-5. These actions were all in accordance with what was called the ‘Makalua Charter’ promulgated by the group in 1953. See C. Pelras (1996), 284.

⁹⁸ P.R. Demant (2006), *Islam vs. Islamism. The Dilemma of the Muslim World*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 57.

⁹⁹ C. Geertz (1967 [1960]), *The Religion of Java*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 127. Geertz did not invent the terms ‘*abangan*’ and ‘*santri*’ but he did make them part of common parlance. The terms strictly applied to Javanese religious attitudes and not even Java as a whole – see R.B. Cruikshank (1972), ‘Abangan, Santri, and Prijaji: A Critique.’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March), 39-43. The terms, although still especially applicable to Java, are, by extension, useful elsewhere in Indonesia. However, for a critique of the terms see S. van Wichelen (2010), *Religion, Politics and Gender in Indonesia: Disputing the Muslim body*. London and New York: Routledge, 119, note 5; and M. Ali (2011), ‘Muslim diversity: Islam and local tradition in Java and Sulawesi, Indonesia.’ *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* (IJIMS), Vol. 1, No. 1 (June), 1-35: 7.

their role or been killed. The religious climate in South Sulawesi would never be quite the same as it had been before the persecution of the *Bissu*.

ix) Being a *calabai* is an alternative role for co-gendered biological males

The ninth strand leads on from the previous one. During the period of the civil war Operation Repent, *Operasi Tobat*, was one of the methods employed by *Daru 'l Islam* to convert people from a syncretist to a strict performance of Islam.¹⁰⁰ When confronted, the *Bissu* were given the option of renouncing their role or death. Many of them seem to have joined the ranks of the *waria/calabai*.¹⁰¹ Indonesia has a long history of tolerance, if not total acceptance, of those who “see themselves as men with women’s souls who therefore dress like women and are attracted to men.”¹⁰²

Technically speaking, *Bissu* are androgynous hermaphrodites who are part human and part divine shamans but since Indonesians see humans on a continuous spectrum from *oroané* (male-masculine men) – *calabai* (female-feminine men)– *Bissu* (androgynous hermaphrodites) – *calalai* (male-masculine women) – *makkunrai* (female-feminine women),¹⁰³ since there have been and still are a few *Bissu* on the *calalai* as well as the *calabai* sides of the spectrum,¹⁰⁴ and since *calabai* are enrolled as *Bissu*, it is not

¹⁰⁰ See T. Boellstorff (2005), 39.

¹⁰¹ Some authors like T. Boellstorff employ the term *waria* while others like S.G. Davies prefer the term *calabai*. *Waria* is an Indonesian composite word made up of *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man). Individuals may prefer to call themselves either *waria* or *calabai*. *Banci* and *béncong* are derogatory terms used by those who do not see themselves as *waria*. See T. Boellstorff (2004), ‘Playing Back the Nation: *Waria*, Indonesian Transvestites. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 19, Issue 2, May, 159-195: 162; and (2005), 9 and 57; also S.G. Davies (2007a), 49.

¹⁰² T. Boellstorff (2005), 57. Some *calabai* see the *calabai/waria* culture as deeply rooted in Bugis culture. See T. Boellstorff (2007), *A Coincidence of Desires*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 104.

¹⁰³ See S.G. Davies (2007a), 22.

¹⁰⁴ See above note 38 on female *Bissu*, *core-core*. There certainly were *core-core* in the past but they are rarely found now and there seems to be some confusion as to whether they are really *Bissu* or actually *calalai* pretending to be *Bissu* or *Bissu ponco*’ i.e. lower grade *Bissu*. See S.G. Davies (2010a), 84. Two biologically female *Bissu* were interviewed, Sanro Temmi and Sanro Nisa. See Appendix 4.

surprising that many people perceive little difference between *Bissu* and *waria*.¹⁰⁵

Zulaiha made it clear that younger *calabai* prefer not to make the transition to *Bissu* because being a *calabai* keeps more options open and there are plenty of employment opportunities these days for *calabai*. However, those *Bissu* who have transformed themselves into *waria/calabai* still face opprobrium, this time for their sexual orientation and transvestism rather than their beliefs.¹⁰⁶ Being a *calabai* and doing one of the many jobs open now to *calabai* was the major reason advanced by the male-bodied *Bissu* interviewed for the contemporary scarcity of *Bissu*.

x) The pornography law of 2008 is so widely worded that it could cover *Bissu*

Following on from strand nine, the tenth strand concerns the Indonesian Law No. 44, passed on 30 October 2008, called the Bill against Pornography (*Rancangan Undang-Undang Pornografi*). Despite massive protests that it would outlaw cultural events such as various forms of Balinese and Javanese dance,¹⁰⁷ the law was passed, subsequently challenged in the country's constitutional court and finally upheld in

¹⁰⁵ One such person is T. Boellstorff (2004), 177 where the evidence of a *waria* named Tri seems to support the view that there is little if any difference between a *waria* and a *Bissu*. Others, while acknowledging the complexity, would still see a difference between *Bissu* and *calabai*. See U. Umar (2008), *Dancing with Spirits: Negotiating Bissu Subjectivity through Adat*. Master's thesis in Religious Studies at the University of Colorado, 81ff.

¹⁰⁶ The main organisation opposed to LGBT people is the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam* widely known simply as the FPI). See, for example, A.Q. Bastian (2012), 'FPI Shuts Down Transgender Festival in Jakarta.' *Jakarta Globe*, December 4th. Available at: <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/fpi-shuts-down-transgender-festival-in-jakarta/559733> Last accessed 15/01/13. During the 1945-1965 civil war there were attacks on *calabai* including a well-known one on a *calabai* acting as an assistant to the *Bissu*. The attackers were driven off partly with the threat of powerful spells. See C. Pelras (2010b), 'The position of the male and female transvestites of South Sulawesi with regard to the male and female gender.' In C. Pelras, *Explorations dans l'Univers des Buges*. Cahier d'Archipel 39. Paris: Association Archipel, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 343-354: 349-350. This was formerly published in 1997 as 'Geschlechterrollen und Transvestiten bei den Buginesen in Südsulawesi, Indonesien' in G. Völger (ed.), *Sie und Er: Frauenmacht und Männerherrschaft im Kulturvergleich*. Köln: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde, Band 2, 109-120. For attacks on transvestites during this period see H. Lathief (2004).

¹⁰⁷ Hence the strong protest made by the governor of Bali. See S. van Wichelen (2010), 105.

March 2010.¹⁰⁸ The law does clearly say that it wants to protect local customs¹⁰⁹ but the worry is that, since the law also states that individuals have the right to report alleged infringements of the law and since anti-LGBT groups such as the FPI¹¹⁰ were avid supporters of the bill,¹¹¹ *Bissu* could once again be targeted.¹¹²

xi) *Adat* – custom – no longer includes civil or religious authority

Strand eleven concerns the growing gap between *agama* – religion – and *adat* – custom. Indonesia, although it is the world's most populous Muslim nation, actually has six official religions.¹¹³ Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the processes of interaction between these religions and various forms of syncretism are complex.¹¹⁴ However, the growing gap between religion and custom has clearly arisen, somewhat ironically, from the cornerstone of Indonesian politics – the so-called *pancasila* or 'five principles'.¹¹⁵ Since monotheism is the first of these, anything that

¹⁰⁸ See K. Vaswani (2010), *Indonesia upholds anti-pornography bill*. BBC News, Jakarta. March 25. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8586749.stm> Last accessed 16/01/13.

¹⁰⁹ Article 3b states: 'This Law aims to: [...] respect, protect and preserve the artistic and cultural values, [regional] cultural practices and religious rituals of the pluralistic Indonesian society'. Quoted in H. Pausacker (2008), 'Hot debates: A law on pornography still divides the community.' *Inside Indonesia*, Weekly Articles (94), 14 December. Available at: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles/hot-debates> Last accessed 16/01/13.

¹¹⁰ See above note 105.

¹¹¹ See S. van Wichelen (2010), 102.

¹¹² Strand five sets out the Qu'ranic acceptance of those who are "without the defining skill of males". However, there are vocal Indonesian Islamic and Christian scholars who put forward the view that anything but straight heterosexuality is a psychological disease. See Editorial (2008), 'Religious leaders say homosexuality 'not from God''. *The Jakarta Post*, April 1. Available at: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/03/31/religious-leaders-say-homosexuality-039not-god039.html> Last accessed 16/01/13.

¹¹³ Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. See U. Umar (2008), 29.

¹¹⁴ See A. Hornbacher and V. Gottowik (2008), 'Zwischen Synkretismus und Orthodoxie. Zur religiösen Dynamik Südasiens.' (Between Syncretism and Orthodoxy. On the Religious Dynamics in Southeast Asia). *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 133, 19-29.

¹¹⁵ The five principles – *pañca* (five) *sila* (principles) – are monotheism, humanitarianism, unity, democracy and social justice. However, they are interpreted in a very pan-national and yet specifically Javanese fashion. See B.D. Magenda (1988), 'Ethnicity and State-building in Indonesia: The cultural base of the new order.' In R. Guidieri, F. Pellizzi and S.J. Tambiah (eds.), *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*. Houston, TX: Rothko Chapel and Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 345-361.

is linked to polytheistic beliefs has been shunted out of *agama* – religion – and into *adat* – custom. This has had the result that the *Bissu* have lost the religious authority linked to the ancient Bugis worldview.¹¹⁶ *Bissu* are now Muslims and many possess the title ‘Haji’.¹¹⁷ Although a few people still think that the *Bissu* are essential for the performance of certain rituals¹¹⁸ and although some Bugis manage to combine Islam with a belief in the spirits, *dewata*, of the ancient worldview,¹¹⁹ religious authority now rests with the Islamic jurists just as governmental authority rests with the central government in Jakarta.¹²⁰ Any residual authority that the *Bissu* have is linked to *adat* but that has been stripped of both civil and religious aspects. Nani claims that hir marriages to males are covered by *adat* but such a use of *adat* no longer has much persuasive power.

xii) *Adat* – custom – is coming to mean little more than *budaya* – the arts

The changing nature of *adat* forms strand twelve. *Bissu* rituals and all forms of activity formerly assumed under the name of *adat*, custom, now come under the heading of either *upacara* which is perhaps best translated as ‘festivities’¹²¹ or *kebudayaan/budaya* – culture. However, many Indonesians feel that their culture has been commoditised and either given a purely financial value or assigned a symbolic or significative value within a framework of symbolic and significative values that have little or no link with traditional beliefs and which are created by the

¹¹⁶ An opinion expressed on and about Sulawesi is “adat should be based on sharia, and sharia on the Holy Koran” (adat bersendikan sharia dan sharia bersendikan kitabullah). M. Ali (2011), 26.

¹¹⁷ الحَاجِي meaning that they have they have been on the Hajj – the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca. The title for a man is Haji (with one ‘j’) while the title for a woman is Hajjah.

¹¹⁸ For example, for the induction of a regional governor. See S.G. Davies (2010a), 77.

¹¹⁹ See C. Pelras (1985), 131.

¹²⁰ See U. Umar (2008), 38.

¹²¹ See U. Umar (2008), 29.

advertising/marketing people.¹²² Both *upacara* and *kebudayaan/budaya* are part of the Indonesian national rather than local landscape so communities like the Bugis struggle to keep local meanings linked to festive or cultural events presented as culture.¹²³ The Indonesian Ministry of Culture and Tourism is doing its utmost to preserve local customs and has set up an inventory of what it calls Indonesia's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage.'¹²⁴ "As a result of government persuasion, positive social reception and bissu initiative, bissu have engaged in extensive public activities in the last few years."¹²⁵ The relationship between religion and culture is constantly being negotiated.¹²⁶ At the moment "*adat* remains a potential social space for the *bissu* to perform their supernatural power and constitute their authority as priests"¹²⁷ but at the cost of their being little more than actors on a national and increasingly international stage.

¹²² One author comments about Balinese *kebudayaan*, culture, that it is "a kind of object which Balinese possess but over which they no longer have sole control because it is being shaped partly to suit the interests of the market and foreign investors." L. Howe (2005), *The Changing World of Bali: Religion, Society and Tourism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2. For the concepts of functional values, exchange values and symbolic or significative values see J. Baudrillard (1981 [1972]). *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Translated from the French *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* by C. Levin. St. Louis, MO: Telos; (1998 [1970]). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Translated from the French *La société de consommation* by C. Turner. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: Sage; and (2005 [1968]). *The System of Objects*. Translated from the French *Le système des objets* by J. Benedict. New York and London: Verso Books.

¹²³ Some communities, such as the mainly Christian Toraja people in the highlands to the north of the Bugis, have arguably gained as much as they have lost in the process of commoditisation. See K.M. Adams (2006), *Art as Politics: Re-crafting Identities, Tourism, and Power in Tana Toraja, Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. Because they are Christian and Christianity is recognised as one of the official six religions, the Toraja have had a large role in decision making - see R. Waterson (2009), *Paths and rivers. Sa'dan Toraja society in transformation*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

¹²⁴ See <http://www.budaya-indonesia.org> and the registration system at http://www.irci.jp/assets/files/ParticipantsReports/Indonesia_Report.PDF

¹²⁵ S.G. Davies (2010a), 205.

¹²⁶ See the discussion of the tensions between the two on Java in M. Woodward (2011), *Java, Indonesia and Islam*. Muslims in Global Societies Series 3. Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London and New York: Springer, 3-7.

¹²⁷ U. Umar (2008), 88.

5: Discussion – the differing fortunes of *NatKadaw* and *Bissu*

There are clearly very different forces at work in Myanmar and Sulawesi. An attempt has been made to explain why co-gendered males have come to form an increasing proportion of the *NatKadaw* in Myanmar to such an extent that they now appear to form the majority. The twelve strands to the explanation go a long way to explaining the causal factors but what has been the overall result? The film ‘Nat Pwe: Burma’s Carnival of Spirit Soul’¹ captures perfectly the atmosphere of the Taungbyon Festival and the comment of a visitor from the U.S.A. to the effect that it is “the Woodstock of Spirit Possession”² suddenly seems very relevant. More than half a century ago there was an interesting study published about the Zar possession cult in Ethiopia.³ That research concluded that the Zar possession cult was developing towards theatricality, comedy and entertainment.⁴ It is precisely this that has happened with the worship of the *nats* in Myanmar:

Music and song used to call on the spirits are at the same time the means for creating an ambience and for arousing enthusiasm [in both senses of the word] in the crowd. As for the dances, if they are attributed with a healing force to the extent that the spirit finds satisfaction in them, they are in and of themselves an entertainment and a show.⁵

¹ R. Bishop, A. Bishop and R. Millis (2003).

² Quoted in T.C. Ho (2009), 278.

³ M. Leiris (1958), *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez le Éthiopiens de Gondar*. Paris: Librairie Plon. The research for this study was undertaken even earlier – in the early 1930s.

⁴ “Bien que les réunions et autres cérémonies auxquelles donne lieu le culte du zâr soient loin d’avoir une fonction essentiellement théâtrale, on voit donc que ce culte contient les germes d’un développement possible dans le sens du théâtre: non seulement ses tenants sont dressés au cours de leur traitement à des trances tant soit peu ‘théâtrales’ dans la mesure où elles sont stylisées conformément au caractère du personnage qu’il y a lieu d’incarner, non seulement il leur faut sur le plan du rituel oral être à même de réciter les sortes de tirades semi-improvisées que sont les fukkarâ, devises ou poèmes de circonstance au formules stéréotypées, mais le culte leur fournit des occasions nombreuses de s’engager avec plus ou moins de bonne foi dans des manières de comédies, alors même qu’il ne s’agit pas de jouer expressément quelque saynète pour divertir l’assemblée.” M. Leiris (1958), 105-106.

⁵ “Musique et chant employés pour évoquer les esprits sont en même temps les moyens de créer une ambiance et de susciter un enthousiasme [au double sens du terme] dans l’assemblée. Quant aux danses,

The picnic food, alcohol and cigarettes along with the carnival atmosphere and the throbbing music make the Taungbyon Festival into a cross between a fair and a pop festival. The beautiful clothes worn by the *NatKadaw*, the music and the dance are all extremely attractive features. “This aesthetic dimension ... is very much in favour among the current urban public”.⁶ In this context it is interesting to note that “The administration of mediums by the Department of Culture rather than Religious Affairs is based on formal similarities between spirit possession ceremonies and other traditions of performing arts in Burma, mainly dance, music, and drama (known as *zat pwe*).”⁷

An attempt has also been made to explain why co-gendered *Bissu* have diminished so dramatically in numbers on Sulawesi to such an extent that they now appear to form a tiny group with little influence. The twelve strands to this explanation also go a long way to explaining the causal factors but, compared to the *NatKadaw* in Myanmar, the end result now in 2013 is very different from what one would have predicted in 2011. Bearing in mind the twelve strands detailing the factors accounting for the diminution in the number of *Bissu*, back in 1939 the following observation was made:

It would seem that under these circumstances, if *bissu* continue to exist as a separate class for another few decades, they are well under way of becoming merely entertainers. Perhaps theirs is the lot of turning priests into clowns⁸

si on leur attribue une valeur curative dans la mesure où le zâr y trouve satisfaction, elles sont par elles-mêmes un divertissement et un spectacle.” M. Leiris (1958), 106-107. Author’s translation.

⁶ B.Brac de la Perrière (2011b), 176.

⁷ B.Brac de la Perrière (2011b), 170.

⁸ C. Holt (1939), *Dance Quest in Celebes*. Illustrated by Rolf de Maré. Paris: Les Archives Internationales de la Danse, 35.

This indeed seemed to be what was happening during the period 2001 to 2011 when Saidi was Puang Matoa of the Segeri *Bissu* community.⁹ However, since hir death in 2011 and hir successor's death in 2012, there has been a complete change of emphasis away from entertainment. Several *Bissu* interviewed spoke very critically of what Saidi did in making the *Bissu* role a form of high art.¹⁰ There are currently two reactions against *Bissu* as national and international entertainers. Firstly, the male bodied (but female minded) *Bissu* are trying to re-establish links with the local Bugis community by combining the traditional *calabai* role of wedding mothers (*Indo' Botting*)¹¹ with the equally traditional *Bissu* role of blessing and consecrating the marriage – a role that, it is believed, can be undertaken only by those who are truly androgynous.¹² There are dangers in this approach, most notably the blurring of the

⁹ See Appendix 3 for an account of Saidi's rise to prominence by starring in films and plays.

¹⁰ Zulaiha and Sanro Temmi were particularly critical of Saidi. See Appendix 4 for details of the *Bissu* interviewed. It must be remembered that many people thought very highly of Saidi. See A. Hajramurni (2011), 'The demise of La Galigo's guardian, Saidi.' *The Jakarta Post*, Saturday, July 09, 2011. Available at: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/07/09/the-demise-la-galigo%E2%80%99s-guardian-saidi.html> Last accessed 27/02/13.

¹¹ See S.G. Davies (2010), 46 and 154.

¹² See S. G. Davies (2010), 73-76.



10. Zulaiha as wedding mother at a Bugis wedding

boundary between *Bissu* and *calabai* but it is a real attempt to carve out a *Bissu* identity that is rooted in the community. Secondly, the female bodied (but male

minded) *Bissu* are trying to merge the traditional role of healer –*sanro*¹³ – with a recognisably shamanic role as a liminal person who, by going into a trance, can contact the spirits – *dewata* – and bring back answers for those asking for the shaman’s help. Sanro Temmi and Sanro Nisa trace their lineage back to the white-



11. Sanro Temmi in a trance contacting the spirit world

¹³ See, for example, the example quoted by R.A. Hahn (1995), *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 40. What they are trying to do is to create a role similar to that of the Hispanic *curanderas* of northern New Mexico but with contact with the *dewata* rather than with the Christian saints. See B. Perrone, H.H. Stockel and V. Krueger (1989), *Medicine Women, Curanderas, and Women Doctors*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 87-88.

Blooded Bugis aristocracy and claim thereby to have direct access to the spirits – *dewata* – but their trance states and *ma'giri* – self-stabbing – performances convince the local community. Judging by the streams of visitors, all bearing gifts of food, Sanro Temmi and Sanro Nisa are very successfully realigning the role of *Bissu* and seem deeply embedded within their local community.

6: Conclusion

This small-scale piece of multisited ethnographic research started with the observation that of the three types of relationship between gender and being a shaman, the first route, where the shamanic call comes to a putative first or second gender person and becoming co-gendered has to follow, seems to have disappeared completely.¹ It is not possible from the accounts² to be certain that becoming co-gendered was really undertaken unwillingly but, if that were the case, it is hardly surprising that the custom has died out. The second route, where the person has already to be co-gendered and the call follows, is still open and operating among the Bugis people of Sulawesi. The third route, where there is no intrinsic link between the shamanic call and gender is very much open and flourishing especially in Burma.

Using a feminist social constructionist approach it is possible to see how individuals make sense of their lives within their community and create a meaningful space for themselves.³ The second route is open on Sulawesi to people who are anatomically either male or female but being and committed to remaining androgynous is compulsory. There is an absolute link between being co-gendered and receiving the call to be a *Bissu*. This cuts down their options and makes the transition to becoming a *Bissu* unattractive especially as there are accepted third (*calabai*) and

¹ However, see above 43 – 44 and note 35 for the discussion concerning Thain Htay's comment that it is theoretically possible for someone of first gender to receive the call as a *NatKadaw* and subsequently have to become co-gendered.

² See, for example, the summary given by M.A. Czaplicka (2007 [1914]), *Shamanism in Siberia*. Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 99-114; and the discussion in chapter 6, 'Changed Men and Changed Women' of S. Tomášková (2013), *Wayward Shamans: The Prehistory of an Idea*. To be published Berkeley, CA: University of California Press but chapter 6 is already available at: <https://csees.unc.edu/news-and-events/CarolinaSeminarTomaskovaCh6.pdf> Last accessed 05/03/13.

³ An idea well explored with reference to the north Sudanese Zar cult by J. Boddy (1988), 'Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance'. *American Ethnologist* 15 (1), 4 – 27.

fourth (*calalai*) gender roles on Sulawesi. Aspects of Indonesian history also contribute to making the transition troublesome but it is how Islam is interpreted which arguably is a major deterrent to co-gendered people, especially biological males, accepting the call to become *Bissu* instead of simply remaining *calabai*. The few biologically female *Bissu* seem to be achieving a workable amalgam of Islam and traditional Bugis beliefs by combining the long standing role of traditional healer – *sanro* – with a recognisably shamanic role of going into a trance, contacting the spirits – *dewata* – and helping the members of their community.

The third route, where there is no intrinsic link between the shamanic call and gender, is very much operational in Myanmar but with co-gendered *NatKadaw* apparently forming the largest proportion. Religion is a major positive influence in this case as Buddhism with its acceptance of the gender spectrum and its doctrine of *karma* looks kindly on the *NatKadaw*. *NatKadaw* can believe that their co-gendered status is the result of bad deeds in a previous incarnation but they can make up for that by helping others as a *NatKadaw* in this incarnation. Although there are alternative roles for co-gendered people in Myanmar just as there are on Sulawesi – florist, hairdresser, beautician, *etc.* – being a *NatKadaw* is a high status role and can provide a decent living. Co-gendered *NatKadaw* are perfectly positioned to embody now a male and now a female *nat* as their role dictates. There is one last factor explaining the huge expansion in the numbers of co-gendered *NatKadaw* and that is quite simply the rather pragmatic reason that the co-gendered people who choose to become *NatKadaw* are just extremely talented in enacting their role as embodiments of male and/or female

nats. They may be fairly anonymous from day to day but at the many *nat* festivals – *nat pwè* – they are as famous and fêted as film or pop stars.

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7b: Filmography

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8. Appendices

8a: Appendix 1: Interview Outline and Release Permission

University of Wales, Trinity St. David Interview Outline & Release Permission

“Shamanic gender liminality with special reference to the *NatKadaw* of Myanmar and the *Bissu* of Sulawesi.”

An M.A. Dissertation Research Project by Kevin M. Purday

N.B. All interviews will be conducted in Burmese in Myanmar and Bahasa Indonesia or Basa Ugi on Sulawesi through a trusted interpreter. Both interpreters, a lady in Burma and a man on Sulawesi, are not only fluent speakers of the relevant languages but are, most importantly, sympathetic to the subject of research. Both interpreters will have a copy of the semi-structured interview starting questions in advance. Once the conversation is underway, the interview will become even less than semi-structured as we (the interpreter and I) will have to respond to what is said. However, the main aim is to understand, firstly, the nature of the link between the call to be a shaman – a *NatKadaw* in Myanmar and a *Bissu* on Sulawesi – and, secondly, the reasons behind the huge growth in co-gendered *NatKadaw* in Myanmar and the large decline in the numbers of *Bissu* on Sulawesi.

I am undertaking an M.A. dissertation research project in an aspect of social anthropology and I am hoping that you will be willing to talk through your experience with me.

The purpose of my project is to investigate the relationship between the call to be a *NatKadaw/Bissu* and the gender of the person who receives the call. Depending on your answers I would also like to discover why there are so many co-gendered *NatKadaw* now as compared with years gone by/why there are now so few *Bissu*.

Through your participation as a co-researcher I hope to understand the relationship between someone being a *NatKadaw/Bissu* and the gender that the person is expected to/must have.

Are you happy to take part? May I have your permission to take some photographs of you? They will be used only for my university work and not published, for example, on the internet. May I use your real name or would you prefer that I use a pseudonym?

University of Wales, Trinity St. David

Interview Framework

“Shamanic gender liminality with special reference to the *Natkadaw* of Myanmar and the *Bissu* of Sulawesi.”

An M.A. Dissertation Research Project

by Kevin M. Purday

Semi-structured interview – starting questions in English

Introductory questions

1. How long have you been a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
2. When did you know that you had a calling to be a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
3. What was the process by which you became a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
4. Has it been an easy or a difficult path for you?
5. What is your role as a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
6. How much of your time does your role as a *NatKadaw/Bissu* take up?
7. Who are the people who come to you for help?
8. What sort of help are they asking for?
9. What do you do to help them?
10. What powers are you calling on to help you in your role?
11. How do you contact those powers?
12. In what ways do those powers assist you?

Main questions

1. Why do you think that you were chosen to be a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
2. What is the relationship between your role and your gender status?
 - Is your gender status essential to the role of *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
 - How does your gender status empower you?
 - Why could people of a different gender status not become a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
3. How does the community view your role as a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?
4. Does your sacred role give you a high status in the community?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages for you of being a *NatKadaw/Bissu*?

Semi-structured interview – questions in English and Burmese

Semi-structured interview - starting questions

Introductory questions မိုးဒါန့်အမေး

1. How long have you been a NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော်ဖြစ်တာ ဘယ်လောက်ကြာပြီလဲ။
2. When did you know that you had a calling to be a NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော်ကောက်ခံရတာ ဘယ်အချိန်ကသိလဲ။
3. What was the process by which you became a NatKadaw?
ဘယ်ကနဦးမှာ နတ်ကောက်ခံခဲ့ရတာလဲ။
4. Has it been an easy or a difficult path for you?
သင့်အတွက် လွယ်ကူခဲ့လား၊ ခက်သလား။
5. What is your role as a NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော် အခန်းကဏ္ဍက ဘယ်လိုလဲ။
6. How much of your time does your role as a NatKadaw take up?
နတ်ပူတာ အချိန် ဘယ်လောက်ကြာပါလဲ။
7. Who are the people who come to you for help?
ဘယ်လိုလူစားမျိုးတွေ နတ်ကတော်ရဲ့အကူအညီလာရောက် တောင်းခံလေ့ရှိသလဲ။
8. What sort of help are they asking for?
မည်သည့်ကိစ္စအကူအညီများတောင်းခံလေ့ရှိသလဲ။
9. What do you do to help them?
နတ်ကတော်က ဘယ်လိုကူညီပေးသလဲ။
10. What powers are you calling on to help you in your role?
နတ်ကတော်၏ ကဏ္ဍမှ မည်သည့် (စွမ်းအင်) မျိုး တောင်းခံရယူ၍ ကူညီလေ့ရှိသလဲ။
11. How do you contact those powers?
ငိုင်းဝိဇ္ဇာဉ်/ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်/စွမ်းအင်များနှင့် ဘယ်လိုဆက်သွယ်သလဲ။
12. In what ways do those powers assist you?
ငိုင်း ဝိဇ္ဇာဉ်/ ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်/ စွမ်းအင် များက ခင်ဗျားကို ဘယ်လိုနည်းလမ်းများနှင့် ကူညီသလဲ။

Main questions အဓိကမေးခွန်း

1. Why do you think that you were chosen to be a NatKadaw?
ဘာကြောင့်ကြောင့် သင့်ကို နတ်ကတော် အရွေးခံရတာလို့ ထင်သလဲ။
2. What is the relationship between your role and your gender status?
ခင်ဗျားရဲ့ နတ်ကတော်ကဏ္ဍနှင့် ယောက်ျား/မိန်းမဖြစ်ခြင်းက ဆက်စပ်မှု ရှိသလား။
 - (a) Is your gender status essential to the role of NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော်ဖြစ်ရန် ယောက်ျား/မိန်းမ/ မိန်းမလျာ ဖြစ်ခြင်းက အရေးကြီးလိုအပ်သလား။
 - (b) How does your gender status empower you?
ခင်ဗျားရဲ့ လက်ရှိ ယောက်ျား/မိန်းမ အခြေအနေက ဘယ်လို စွမ်းအင်တွေပေးသလဲ။
 - (c) Could people of a different gender status not become a NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော်ဖြစ်ခွင့်မရရင် ယောက်ျား/ မိန်းမ အသွင်သဏ္ဌာန် ကွဲပြားမှုရှိတာလို့လူတွေပြောနိုင်သလား။
3. How does the community view your role as a NatKadaw?
ပတ်ဝန်းကျင် အသိုင်းအဝိုင်းမှ နတ်ကတော်ကို ဘယ်လိုအမြင်ရှိသလဲ။
4. Does your sacred role give you a high status in the community?
ခင်ဗျားရဲ့ နတ်ကတော် အတွတ်အမြတ်ဘဝက ပတ်ဝန်းကျင်အသိုင်းအဝိုင်းမှာ ရိုသေလေးစားမှုခံရလား။
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages for you of being a NatKadaw?
နတ်ကတော်ဘဝရဲ့ အားနည်းချက် အားသာချက်တွေကို ပြောပြပါ။

Semi-structured interview – questions in English and Bahasa Indonesia

Introductory questions – Pertanyaan Pengantar:

1. How long have you been a *Bissu*?
1. Sudah berapa lama Anda menjadi seorang Bissu?
2. When did you know that you had a calling to be a *Bissu*?
2. Kapan Anda tahu bahwa Anda terpenggil menjadi Bissu?
3. What was the process by which you became a *Bissu*?
3. Bagaimana prosesnya sehingga Anda menjadi seorang Bissu?
4. Has it been an easy or a difficult path for you?
4. Apakah itu sebuah proses yang gampang atau sulit untuk Anda?
5. What is your role as a *Bissu*?
5. Apa peran Anda sebagai seorang Bissu?
6. How much of your time does your role as a *Bissu* take up?
6. Berapa banyak waktu Anda yang tersita untuk berperam sebagai Bissu?
7. Who are the people who come to you for help?
7. Siapa saja yang datang kepada Anda untuk meminta pertolongan?
8. What sort of help are they asking for?
8. Pertolongan apa saja yang mereka minta?
9. What do you do to help them?
9. Apa yang Anda lakukan untuk menolong mereka?
10. What powers are you calling on to help you in your role?
10. Kekuatan apa yang Anda panggil untuk menolong Anda sebagai seorang Bissu?
11. How do you contact those powers?
11. Bagaimana Anda menghubungi kekuatan-kekuatan itu?
12. In what ways do those powers assist you?
12. Dengan cara apa kekuatan-kekuatan itu membantu Anda?

Main questions – Pertanyaan Utama:

1. Why do you think that you were chosen to be a *Bissu*?
1. Kenapa Anda berpikir bahwa Anda yang dipilih menjadi Bissu?
2. What is the relationship between your role and your gender status?
 - Is your gender status essential to the role of *Bissu*?
 - How does your gender status empower you?
 - Why could people of a different gender status not become a *Bissu*?
2. Apa hubungan antara peran sebagai Bissu dan status gender Anda?
 - Apakah status gender merupakan hal yang pokok terhadap peran Bissu Anda?
 - Bagaimana status gender Anda menguatkan wewenang Anda?
 - Apakah orang dari status gender yang berbeda tidak dapat menjadi seorang Bissu?
3. How does the community view your role as a *Bissu*?
3. Bagaimana masyarakat melihat Anda sebagai Bissu?
4. Does your sacred role give you a high status in the community?
4. Apakah peran sakral Anda memberikan nilai status yang tinggi dalam masyarakat?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages for you of being a *Bissu*?
5. Apa kelebihan dan kekurangan terhadap Anda menjadi seorang Bissu?

8c: Appendix 3: Bissu as performer

During the period 2001 to 2011 when Saidi was Puang Matoa of the Segeri community of *Bissu*, the role of the *Bissu* underwent a substantial change. Saidi became a nationally and indeed internationally known star of stage and screen. However, there was an essential difference between what is happening with *NatKadaw* as entertainers in Myanmar and what was happening with *Bissu* as entertainers on Sulawesi. The former is a grass roots phenomenon driven from the bottom upwards and has the support of a massive cross-section of society especially the young. The latter was a top-down phenomenon driven by local and national government in order to display the *kebudayaan/budaya* – the artistic culture – of South Sulawesi especially the dance, drama and music.¹ One author² has listed the following cultural performances by and appearances of *Bissu* since 1998:

- a) *Adat* performances at festivals in Bali and Java
- b) An occasion in Jakarta promoting tourism in South Sulawesi
- c) La Galigo International Conference in 2002
- d) International traditional customs festival in Japan in September 2002
- e) The *Festival de l'Imaginaire* in Paris in 2006
- f) The 2006 Miss Waria Indonesia pageant

The most famous film about the *Bissu* is no doubt Rhoda Grauer's 2005 *The Last Bissu: Sacred Transvestites of South Sulawesi*.³ This is a portrait of Segeri's then *Puang Matoa* (Elder Lord, that is, Head *Bissu*) Saidi⁴ and gave a full account of his life and attempts to keep the *Bissu* tradition alive. The most famous of all theatrical productions about the *Bissu* has to be Robert Wilson's production of *I*

¹ The problem is that by choosing to take part in these 'top-down' performances, *Bissu* "may appear to manifest resistance to contemporary changes" but these choices "may have unpredictable effects on the forms of cultural expressions." K. Robinson (1993), 'The Platform House: Expression of a Regional Identity in the Modern Indonesian Nation.' In V.M. Hooker (ed.), *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*. Kuala Lumpur, Oxford, Singapore and New York: Oxford University Press, 228-242: 239.

² S.G. Davies (2010a), 205.

³ R. Grauer (2005), Film 57 minutes: *The Last Bissu: Sacred Transvestites of South Sulawesi, Indonesia*. A documentary. Produced by Shanty Harmyn; Camera by Yudi Datau; Editor Mario Gianni. New York: Manitou Media Ltd. and Jakarta: Salto Films.

⁴ Sadly s/he died of typhoid on June 28, 2011.

La Galigo.⁵ This three hour extravaganza is based on a section of the *I La Galigo* epic cycle and had an orchestra of thirteen playing seventy instruments plus a cast of forty dancers and with *Puang Matoa Saidi* as the narrator. It has been widely staged: March 2004 – Singapore; May 2004 – Amsterdam; May 2004 – Barcelona; May-June 2004 – Madrid; June 2004 – Lyon; June 2004 – Ravenna; July 2005 – New York; December 2005 – Jakarta; October 2006 – Melbourne; February 2008 – Milan; August 2008 – Taipei; and April 2011 – Makassar. However, this production epitomises the problems associated with performances involving *Bissu*. Reviews found that “the play was devoid of any authentic performance of Bugis tradition” and that “Bugis culture and identity were artificially homogenized”.⁶ The performers came from all over the Indonesian world and deliberate use was made of Javanese and Balinese themes thus making it a pan-Indonesian work at best and a form of cultural neo-colonialism at worst.⁷ The Wilson production of *I La Galigo* was ‘high art’ – the product of what has been called “aestheticization”.⁸ The *Bissu* were also central to some straightforward documentaries⁹ but more and more they were being viewed through the lens of art whether musical, dramatic or terpsichorean.¹⁰

⁵ R. Wilson (2004), *I La Galigo*. Based on a script by Rhoda Grauer with music by Rahayu Suppanggah. See also R. Wilson (2004), *I La Galigo Stage Play*. A booklet and CD. Singapore: Change Performing Arts.

⁶ S.G. Davies (2010a), 212 based on the reviews of U. Chaudhuri (2005), ‘Foreign Gods.’ *The Village Voice*, Tuesday July 12, 2005. Available at: www.villagevoice.com/2005-07-12/theater/foreign-gods/ Last accessed 09/03/13; and J. Lindsay (2007), ‘Intercultural Expectations: *I La Galigo* in Singapore.’ *The Drama Review*, 51 (2), 60-75.

⁷ For the criticisms aimed at the production see C. Pelras (2010c), ‘La Galigo. Un monument littéraire longtemps méconnu enfin révélé au monde. Du mythe identitaire bugis à la production scénique internationale.’ In C. Pelras, *Explorations dans l’Univers des Bugis*. Cahier d’Archipel 39. Paris: Association Archipel, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 455-490: 472-474.

⁸ R.A. Sutton (2002), *Calling Back the Spirit: Music, Dance and Cultural Politics in Lowland South Sulawesi*. New York: Oxford University Press, 48-68.

⁹ Such as the National Geographic (2008) film *Five Genders* featured at <http://youtu.be/K9VmLJ3niVo> Last accessed 29/12/12; and the National Geographic (2012) film *Taboo: The Third Sex* featured at <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/taboo/episodes/the-third-sex/> Last accessed 29/12/12.

¹⁰ See Gerard Mosterd (2012) film *Bissu Priests, Transgender Priests from the Bugis in Southern Sulawesi*. The first part is available at: <http://youtu.be/ZFig-7Gsk84> and the second part is available at: <http://youtu.be/48R-iDfjU> Gerard Mosterd is a Dutch-Indonesian choreographer and director of Kantor Pos in Utrecht. See also Andi Reski Azhari (2012). *Bugis Culture of South Sulawesi*. A set of slides of Bissu performing the *ma ‘giri’* ritual in Makassar. Posted by Andi Reski Azhaari, November 25th. Available at: <http://www.demotix.com/news/1633709/bugis-culture-south-sulawesi#media-1633698> Last accessed 31/12/12. A similar set of slides was posted by Adwit B. Pramoni (2012), *Bissu*

8d: Appendix 4: Natkadaw and Bissu interviewed

Natkadaw: Thain Htay

Thain Htay is the *NatKadaw* in charge of the Taungbyon shrine where fried hare/rabbit and toddy juice (an alcohol derived from the Palmyra palm) are presented to the *nats* known as The Brothers – Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger) also known as Shwehpyingyi and Shwehpyinnge (the elder brother of gold and the younger brother of gold) who had been Muslim warriors in the army of King Anawrahta. The shrine is in the hereditary ownership of a family who pay for its upkeep. Two young ladies from the family were present at the interview with Thain Htay. He is thirty years old and is from Mandalay.



12. Thain Htay

performing a Mabbisu dance. A set of slides – *Bissu* as performers. Posted November 25th. Available at: <http://www.demotix.com/news/1634164/mabissu-ritual-dance-bugis-people#media-1634088> Last accessed 01/01/13.

He has been a *NatKadaw* since he was thirteen years old. There is a slight hereditary element to his being a *NatKadaw* insofar as his paternal grandmother was also a *NatKadaw*. As a boy he made a vow that he would become a *NatKadaw* if particular wishes of his were fulfilled. Every single wish was fulfilled – including the winning of a lottery! He used part of his winnings to contribute to the maintenance of the pagoda at Taungbyon and set out on the path to become a *NatKadaw*. He was chosen by a female *nat* called Ah May Yah Yin (also known as Amay Yay Yin or Anauk Medaw) to be her son. She has a big festival each year to the west of Mon Ywa and Thain Htay is an important celebrant at that festival. His power as a *NatKadaw* comes from her and she may either use him as a medium, speaking through him, or she may possess him in which case he believes that his spirit is temporarily replaced by hers. It is also through her power that he uses cowrie shells to predict the future and to answer questions that devotees ask him. He is co-gendered and has never been married.

Natkadaw: Li Tin MOUNG

Li Tin MOUNG looks much younger than seventy-five which is his actual age. His position in the *nat* hierarchy is hereditary and he says that his parents formerly held important posts. His mother is ninety-two years old and still alive. Interestingly, he was at one time a Muslim but converted from Islam to Buddhism. He does not regard himself as a *NatKadaw* in the same way as most of the practitioners do. He prefers to call himself a “*nat* guardian” or a “preserver of the *nat* tradition.” He sees himself as continuing a long tradition in which homage is directed towards the Buddha and the *nats* are regarded purely as guardians and not as recipients of homage. He therefore distances himself from what he regards as the “modern movement” which tends to view the *nats* as objects of devotion. He has been a “*nat* guardian” since the age of fourteen. He views *NatKadaw*, as opposed to “*nat* guardians”, as being a continuation of the ancient tradition of entertainers whose job it was to entertain the king. He points out that to this day they dance in stockinged feet just as they used to

do in royal times. He is somewhat sceptical about the motives of those who attend the



13. Li Tin Moun

Taungbyon Festival, saying that many people attend the festival purely for economic reasons. Li Tin Moun himself has a full-time job as a dealer in precious gems, especially diamonds so the time spent as a “*nat* guardian” is not for economic reasons although he does do some trading during the festival period. He performs his hereditary role at the festival as a way of making up for his past mistakes – like all Buddhists he strongly believes in *karma*, the idea that the good one does will benefit both others and also oneself in the future including in a future life. He gave the impression of being a very accomplished “people-watcher”, an amateur but astute psychologist who could “read” people very accurately. He is a devout Buddhist and has donated significant sums towards the rebuilding of many Buddhist shrines. He regards himself as first gender.

***Natkadaw*: Daw Kyin Saing**

Daw Kyin Saing is a well-preserved seventy-two year old from Mandalay. Her position as a *NatKadaw* is hereditary – her mother, maternal grandmother and maternal great-grandmother were all *NatKadaw*. Her human husband died when she



14. Daw Kyin Saing

was thirty five but she chose to be a *NatKadaw* only when she was fifty-two years old after she had a dream in which she was married to The Brothers – Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger). She then became a *NatKadaw* and is, therefore, a *NatKadaw* in the most literal sense – she is a “*Nat Consort*”. Her two *nat* ‘husbands’ look after her and at times possess her for short periods. While possessed her spirit is replaced by the spirit of whichever brother is possessing her and she is aware of herself only when the possession is over. People come to consult her about a wide range of problems and her ability to help them comes solely from The Brothers. She can trigger possession by smoking two or more cigarettes simultaneously which is a method common to many *NatKadaw*. She is second gender.

Natkadaw: Nay Win Aung

Nay Win Aung, from Mandalay, is the second eldest of five brothers but started to dress in girl’s clothing when he was very young. There was no tradition of anyone in his family being a *NatKadaw*. He has been a *NatKadaw* since he was fifteen. At that age he suffered from an illness that resulted in excessive swelling. His mother vowed to the *nats* that if they cured him he would become a *NatKadaw*. Within three days his illness disappeared and he was completely cured. He then had two



15. Nay Win Aung

NatKadaw 'parents' who spiritually adopted him and introduced him to the world of the *NatKadaw*. He is now fifty-one years old. His main nat relationship is with Ah May Yah Yin (also known as Amay Yay Yin or Anauk Medaw) who is like a mother to him and he is like a son to her. However, when he is possessed he usually becomes Ah May Yah Yin meaning that his spirit is replaced by hers. At these times he dresses and behaves like her. At other times he becomes possessed by one or other of The Brothers. He says that at the festivals when he has to dance and the traditional musical instruments are being played he does go into a trance. However, whenever he foretells the future using a set of cowrie shells, this is not done through trance but through the use of extreme concentration. He is thankful for his life as a *NatKadaw* because all his needs are met. He prays to the Buddha, says his beads, eats no meat and, as a result, he is blessed with offerings and gets good money for his fortune telling. He also helps people with their business problems and especially with health issues. However, being

a *NatKadaw* is not his only source of income – his daytime job is as a gas salesman. He is co-gendered.

Natkadaw: Knowknow

Knowknow is a sixty-four year old from Mandalay. When he was eight years old he developed a massive skin allergy. He was taken to a *NatKadaw* who gave him holy or ‘vow’ water (water that has been poured over a statue of the Buddha) to drink. Doctors were amazed when the allergy disappeared within three days. As a boy he says that he fancied girls but at the age of sixteen he felt like dancing and some changes started to take place within him. At this time he had a dream in which he was



16. Knowknow

pushed into a pool of faeces. Looking up from the pool he saw the face of an ugly but compassionate woman who was squatting and looking at him. This was followed by many dreams about her. He told his *nat* master, a senior *NatKadaw* who has *nat* children/pupils, that he wanted to be the son of this woman who turned out to be Popa Medaw (also known as Me(i) Wunna) who is the mother of The Brothers – Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger). Popa Medaw (‘Queen-Mother of Popa’ or ‘Lady of Popa’) is not one of the official thirty-seven nats herself but is the mother of two and is an extremely popular minor *nat* especially in the vicinity of Mount Popa. She was often described as a flower-eating ogress and contemporary folk dancers to this day portray her in green clothing and with the mask or headdress of an ogress. Knowknow spoke of her as the *nat* of the flowers and said that Popa Medaw ordered him to eat flowers whereupon he was transformed into a *NatKadaw*. Knowknow explained that in Burmese dream interpretation, the meaning is to be found in the opposite of the dream imagery so falling into a pool of faeces means becoming wealthy and Popa Medaw has, he said, most certainly rewarded him with both wealth and high status. He is currently one of the ministers in the *nat* court or palace hierarchy and thus one of the most senior



17. Knowknow in full regalia

NatKadaw in Myanmar. Although he is the son of Popa Medaw, which *nat* he becomes and dances as at the festival depends entirely on the music. He has become

both male and female *nats* and upon occasion he has become the alcoholic *nat* Ko Gyi Kyaw. He is co-gendered.

Natkadaw: Sei MOUNG MOUNG

Sei MOUNG MOUNG is a thirty-three year old from the town of Taung Dwin Gyi. His position as a *NatKadaw* is not exactly hereditary but there are family links as his great great-grandmother was a senior *NatKadaw* in the region from which the family comes. He first came to the Taungbyon Festival when he was young but he was about twenty when under the guidance of a *NatKadaw* he drank holy or ‘vow’ water (water that has been poured over a statue of the Buddha) and, in a type of fortune-telling ritual, drew two lucky slips – one for Popa Medaw (also known as Me(i) Wunna) who is the mother of The Brothers and the other for The Brothers themselves, Shwe Hpyin



18. Sei MOUNG MOUNG

Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger). He then had to go through a ritual whereby he was obliged to stay within the sacred precinct for seven days and nights leaving only – and then only after a special prayer and the granting of permission – to go to the toilet! From that time on he was a *NatKadaw* and has had a special relationship with The Brothers as well as with their mother and uncle. He says that he can be possessed by any one of them and during this time – each possession lasts about ten minutes – what he says is entirely them speaking through him. When he dances as part of the official *nat* celebrations, he is not possessed. However, he stated that there is another particularly important channel of communication between him and the *nats* and that is dreams. For him dreams are a way for him to contact the *nats* and for them to relay all sorts of information to him. His ambition is to rise up the *NatKadaw* hierarchy. In the not too distant future he would like to become a *nat* master and so have his own *nat* sons whom he would guide on their way to becoming *NatKadaw*. He says that he is first gender and is unmarried.

Natkadaw: San Htoo

San Htoo is a thirty-four year old from Mandalay. His role as a *NatKadaw* is at least partly hereditary as his mother used to be a *nat* mistress with a complete set of *nat* statues in her possession and under her protection. He used to be an assistant teacher in a primary school but unfortunately his place of work was an hour's journey away from Mandalay. Within days of his father's death, he had an argument with his mother, left and, since he was a Hindu in those days, went off to the nearest Hindu temple. While he was away his mother had a brain haemorrhage and died within a week of her husband's, San Htoo's father's, death. San Htoo was filled with remorse.



19. San Htoo

He gave up his job as a teacher and became a poor vegetable seller. He attended a *nat* ceremony and drank holy or ‘vow’ water (water that has been poured over a statue of the Buddha). Subsequently he had a dream about a winning lottery number. As a result he used his last two thousand Kyat (about one pound forty pence) to buy a lottery ticket and, sure enough, he won a million Kyat (about seven hundred and ten pounds) – a fortune for a poor vegetable seller. He did not give up his lowly paid job immediately but he got extremely little return for his hard work. He believed that the *nats* were testing him during this time so after about a year he went through the rituals to become a *NatKadaw*. He had to spend seven days and nights in the sacred precinct under the watchful eye of his *nat* master. He had to sleep on a mat and a pillow next to the mat and pillow of his *nat* wife who is Ma Ngwe Taung – one of the lesser but much loved female *nats*. He is also has a close relationship both with Popa Medaw (also known as Me(i) Wunna) who is the mother of The Brothers and with Ah May Yah Yin (also known as Amay Yay Yin or Anauk Medaw). San Htoo is a *NatKadaw* in the most literal sense – he is a ‘Nat Consort’. He was very forthcoming on the

nature of the possession states that he occasionally undergoes. He says that he prays first to the Buddha and then to the *nats*. First of all his hands start to tremble and then his whole body starts to rock and at that point he becomes possessed. The possession state last about ten to fifteen minutes. He needs no nicotine, alcohol or other drug in order to enter a possession state. However, he does have to smoke and drink if he is possessed by a *nat* who himself does smoke and drink such as Ko Gyi Kyaw. This reinforces the fact that when a *NatKadaw* dances at the festival ceremonies, s/he is not acting out the role of *nat* consort or friend or son or daughter but is actually embodying the possessing *nat* whether that *nat* be male or female. San Htoo's luck changed about a year after he became a *NatKadaw* and soon he was prospering to such an extent that he was able to support his sister's family and several friends – a total of eight people. He has continued to prosper to this day. He is co-gendered.

Natkadaw: Ko Min Min and his spiritual sister Ei Sabei

Ko Min Min is a forty-two year old from Yangon. Life was very difficult for him when he was young because he has felt like a woman since he was as young as five. Not only is he co-gendered but he is openly gay. When he was about seventeen he dropped out of high school and entered the *NatKadaw* world. He made an offering to the *nats*, and then a set of three offerings, then a set of five and finally a set of seven offerings. He was then given holy or 'vow' water (water that has been poured over a statue of the Buddha) to drink. This was followed by the seven day and seven night stay within the sacred precinct of the *nat* shrine. Ma Ngwe Taung – one of the lesser but much loved female *nats* – is the one to whom he is dedicated and whom he regards as his wife. This came about through the system of the sacred draw in which he drew a lot with her name on three times. His wife, the *nat* Ma Ngwe Taung, gets very angry with him if he is unfaithful to her and punishes him by temporarily completely disorientating him. When she is not angry with him she may possess him and on these occasions when he speaks it is she who is speaking through him. He normally dresses



20. Ko Min Min

like a man but at the festival ceremonies when he dances, he dresses as a woman because on those occasions he is embodying his *nat* wife, Ma Ngwe Taung. Becoming a *NatKadaw* has turned out to be very beneficial for him. He has no source of income other than being a *NatKadaw* and, although it is expensive to take part in all the ceremonies, he makes a good living.

Ei Sabei is his *nat* or spiritual sister. The two of them share a rented booth at the Taungbyon festival since the rents are, by local standards, very high. She is the wife of the *nat* Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (the younger of the two Shwe Hpyin Brothers).



21. Ei Sabei wearing the traditional Burmese *thanaka* beauty cream

She can be possessed by him so that he speaks through her but when she dances at the festival she dresses as a man because she is embodying him during the ceremonies.

Natkadaw: Soe Lay

Soe Lay is a sixty-two year old from Mya Waddy near the Thai border. He has three brothers and two sisters. His role as a *NatKadaw* started when he was as young as eighteen because it was then that he became what he terms a ‘junior *Natkadaw*.’ He became a *NatKadaw* so young not because the post was hereditary in his family but

because an older friend, who was himself a *NatKadaw*, advised him to become one. His ambition was to become a trader because that was both extremely possible and highly lucrative living, as he did, on the border with Thailand. Therefore he was very reluctant to become a *NatKadaw*. However, at a *nat* shrine he went through a ritual rather like the worldwide custom of cups and balls which in most parts of the world is performed as an example of prestidigitation or legerdemain (Ammar, 1998). In the *nat* tradition the cups or glasses are quickly switched around and if the participant chooses the cup or glass with the same message underneath it three times, then that message refers to him or her. Soe Lay chose and three times the message was the name of the *nat* Li Min Kyaw. He also got the same result in the sacred draw where he always drew the name of Li Min Kyaw. This *nat* also goes under the names of U Min Gyaw, Ko Gyi Kyaw, Ba Ba Kyaw, Pakhan Kyaw, Min Kyaw Szwaw and Min Kyawzwa. He



22. Soe Lay

is a hard-drinking *nat* who in his lifetime was well known for drinking, cock-fighting and in general, hard living! Since the *nats* were making their decision clear, Soe Lay reluctantly gave up his ambition to become a trader and assumed the role of *NatKadaw*. His life has not been easy. His parents strongly disapproved of his choice and he had to stay close to his *nat* master for protection. He also made it clear that it is not easy to run a business as a *NatKadaw*. Perhaps this is not surprising since Soe Lay's relationship with Li Min Kyaw is that of son to father. To foretell the future he has to invoke his father, Li Min Kyaw, but he can also call on The Brothers Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger). When he is possessed it is usually by his *nat* father, Li Min Kyaw, and at these times he – or his father through him – has to drink considerable quantities of alcohol. He is co-gendered.

Natkadaw: Aung Ko Latt

Aung Ko Latt is a forty-four year old from Mya Waddy near the Thai border. His position as a *NatKadaw* is not hereditary but indirectly due to a childhood illness. When he was thirteen he suffered from an intermittent sickness. The ordinary medical doctors could do nothing for him so his parents brought him to a shrine of the *nats* who quickly cured him. He immediately gave up schooling and became attached to *nat* worship although originally not to any particular *nat* or *nats*. After a while his *nat* master encouraged him to go through with the sacred draw in which he picked The



23. Aung Ko Latt

Brothers, Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw (Shwe Hpyin the elder) and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw (Shwe Hpyin the younger), three times in a row. In this way he became the brother of The Brothers. At the age of sixteen he started his three-year ‘apprenticeship’ under the guidance of his *nat* master and at the end of this period he became a fully-fledged *NatKadaw*. At first his life was not easy but now he makes a reasonable living as a *NatKadaw* with his main source of income coming from predicting the future using, among other methods, a set of cowrie shells (*Monetaria* or *Cypraea moneta*) – a very ancient and widespread means of foretelling people’s futures (Wallace Douglas, 2012). He is co-gendered, dresses as a man and although he dresses up in fabulous

pink clothes for the festival celebrations, the clothes he wears are those of a prince, namely one or other of The Brothers.

Natkadaw: U Htay

U Htay is a sixty-three year old from Taung Gyi in Shan State. He was only fourteen when he began to be possessed on and off by various *nats*. One day a *NatKadaw* came to his village to heal a Buddhist monk so U Htay took the opportunity to ask the *NatKadaw* about his intermittent possession. He was actually possessed standing in front of the *NatKadaw* who promptly told him that the *nats* were waiting for him. The *NatKadaw* became his *nat* master although at this time U Htay still earned a living as a tradesman. At one stage he had to drink the holy or ‘vow’ water (water that has been poured over a statue of the Buddha) and at another stage he had to make an offering to the *nats*, and then a set of three offerings, then a set of five and finally a set of seven offerings. Finally, at the age of twenty, he became a full-time *NatKadaw*. His particular *nat* is Ma Ma Hne who is also known as Ma Hne Galay, Ma Hne Mi, Ma Hne Lay, Shin Nemi or Shin Mihne. She is one of the seven house guardian *nats*. He discovered that she was his tutelary *nat* through the ritual of the glasses/cups – he chose the glass/cup with her name underneath three times in a row. He expressed their relationship in particularly beautiful terms. He said that Ma Ma Hne’s soul attached itself to him. In Burmese the word for soul, *lei’pja*, is also the word for butterfly so the imagery is particularly striking. However, he does not regard himself as her consort but rather as her younger brother. He says that very few *NatKadaw* have been chosen by Ma Ma Hne; he knows of only two others. However, she has been extraordinarily kind to him in return for his promise not to get married.



24. U Htay

He gives as an example how one day he stubbed his big toe on something and, on looking down, he spotted a packet that turned out to contain five carats of diamonds. He used the money from the sale of these to buy a house. He has kept his promise not to get married even though he has been in love. When he was thirty, his *nat* master died and U Htay obtained his position. He regards meditation as being of extraordinary importance and he spends a lot of time meditating. He regards himself as of first gender.

***Bissu*: Zulaiha**

Zulaiha was born in 1967 and became a *Bissu* when s/he was twenty. S/he is currently the Puang Matoa elect of the Segeri community. S/he succeeds Puang



25. Zulaiha

Upe who was Puang Lolo and Puang Matoa elect when s/he died on August 31 2012. S/he in turn was the successor of Puang Matoa Saidi who died on June 28 2011. Zulaiha tells the story of how s/he became a *Bissu* by relating how as a teenager s/he was adopted by a *Bissu*. When in 1987 s/he had a dream and described it to hir

adoptive parent, s/he was told that the dream portended hir future as a *Bissu*. S/he spent the next three years as a *Bissu* and then underwent the initiation ceremony known as *irebba* as part of which s/he took an oath never to marry a woman. When asked about the difference between a *calabai* and a *Bissu*, s/he emphasised the fact that many *calabai* are only temporarily in same-sex relationships but then go on to enter a heterosexual marriage whereas, once they have taken the oath, *Bissu* cease totally to be male and become only female in terms of desire. Their ambivalent status is shown, however, by their having to go to Friday prayers at the mosque dressed as a man. Zulaiha explained this neatly by saying that s/he, like all *Bissu*, is Muslim and respects the fact that Islam categorises men and women by their physical biology but all *Bissu* also respect the fact that they are more female than male. When asked why there are so few *Bissu* in contemporary Sulawesi, s/he explained that *calabai* have so many jobs open to them that they no longer wish to make the transfer to *Bissu* status. S/he said that s/he is trying hard to persuade some younger *calabai* to join the Segeri *Bissu* community but so far in vain. S/he had some extremely interesting things to say about Puang Matoa Saidi. S/he made it very clear that Saidi did a great disservice to the cause of the *Bissu* by thrusting them into the limelight and making *Bissu* traditions into high art. S/he emphasised that s/he is trying to rebuild the *Bissu* community by firmly embedding it within Bugis society. Zulaiha is biologically male but mentally and emotionally female.

Bissu: Usman

Usman was born in 1964 even though s/he looks much younger than that date of birth would lead one to expect. Saidi became hir guru in 1987. As with Zulaiha, s/he received her call in the form of a dream which Saidi interpreted as a call to be a *Bissu* and s/he finally became a *Bissu* in 1991. However, s/he has not undergone the initiation ceremony known as *irebba*. Usman is biologically male but mentally and emotionally female.



26. Usman

Bissu: Nani

Nani knew from a very early age – as young as ten – that s/he was destined to be a *Bissu*. When still very young s/he left home and moved in firstly with a group of *calabai* and then with the Segeri community of *Bissu*. Hir guru was Sanro (Healer) Seko who was the Puang Matoa before Saidi. Like all the anatomically male *Bissu* interviewed s/he had a dream which s/he revealed to Sanro Seko who told hir that the dream meant that s/he was destined to become a *Bissu*. S/he underwent the initiation ceremony of *irebba* at the tender age of fifteen. Nani has been married to males four times and claims that hir marriages are valid under *adat*; in other words, s/he regards them as common law marriages. S/he is Zulaiha's deputy in the Segeri community. Nani is biologically male but mentally and emotionally female.



27. Nani

Bissu: Sompo

Sompo was born in 1969. S/he knew even at the age of twelve that s/he wanted to become a *Bissu*. Like so many *calabai* and *Bissu* s/he had to leave home because of the strong opposition of hir family. S/he became the pupil of *Bissu* Haji Jaime and became a *Bissu* hirself at the tender age of fourteen. Despite the fact that s/he has not undergone the initiation ceremony of *irebba*, Sompo does perform the self-stabbing ritual known as *ma'giri*'. Sompo is biologically male but mentally and emotionally female.



28. Sompo

Bissu: Zalmah

Zalmah was born in 1966. Once again s/he knew quite early that she wanted to be a *Bissu*. S/he had several *Bissu* as hir guru before s/he finally came under the

guidance of Saidi. Zalmah actually became a *Bissu* himself at the age of seventeen. S/he has not undergone the initiation ceremony of *irebba*. For some years now s/he has been the housekeeper of the Segeri *Bissu* traditional home. Zalmah made it clear that, although they are poor, the *Bissu* are held in very high regard by the Bugis community. She also said that the Segeri *Bissu* community still carried out the traditional rituals such as *mappalili* – the announcing of the start of the annual ploughing season by taking out the sacred plough, stored in the traditional home, in November one month after the start of the rainy season. Zalma is biologically male but mentally and emotionally female.



29. Zalmah

Bissu: Sanro Temmi

Sanro (Healer) Temmi is one of those very rare phenomena – *Bissu* who are biologically female but mentally and emotionally male. S/he was born in 1949. For many years s/he was married to a man and gave birth to eight children. Around the time that hir husband died, s/he became so seriously ill that at one stage hir family thought that s/he was actually dead. S/he recalls that bright lights descended from heaven and stayed reflected in the mirror of the room where s/he was thought be dying. After the descent of the lights she began slowly to recover. Upon recovery s/he says that s/he found himself a changed person. S/he no longer had any heterosexual desire and did not want to be touched by men. S/he made it quite clear that s/he was now a *calalai* – someone with a biologically female body but with the mind and feelings of a man. It was this androgynous status that enabled hir to become a *Bissu* which s/he did in 1986. Sanro Temmi quoted ancient Bugis beliefs in a goddess who originally descended from heaven and became the first *Bissu*. S/he also recounted



30. Sanro Temmi

how, according to one version of the Bugis myth, the very first human was a woman and how women formerly held the highest positions. S/he cited the fact that the first monarch of the Bugis kingdom of Gowa was a woman. All of this was a prelude to hir statement that s/he was descended from the ancient white-blooded aristocracy and that hir powers come directly from the spirits – *dewata*. S/he therefore never needed to undergo the initiation ceremony of *irebba*. She does undertake the ritual self-stabbing – *ma'giri*'. To be a *Bissu* one has to be both man and woman. Sanro Temmi said that

as a *calalai* that is precisely what s/he is and s/he wears clothes that include elements of both male and female clothing to illustrate that fact. S/he was called to be a *Bissu* by Saidi in the days before the latter became Puang Matoa. However, s/he was very critical of Saidi after he became Puang Matoa. S/he said that Saidi came from Pangkep Regency, the Bugis heartland of the *Bissu*, but by becoming a star Saidi left behind and forgot the other *Bissu* in the town of Segeri or the tiny village of Sampakang in the district of Labbakkang where s/he, Sanro Temmi, lives. S/he also made a strong point of denying that hir little community of female bodied but male minded *Bissu* earn their living as wedding mothers (*Indo' Botting*) thus drawing a clear line between hir group and the Segeri group of male bodied but female minded *Bissu*. Instead, in hir home s/he has a shrine that bears an uncanny resemblance to a *NatKadaw* booth except that there are no statues. There are ritual umbrellas, piles of fruit and all sorts of food, candles and bowls of red-hot charcoal smoking with incense. During the three hour interview with Sanro Temmi



31. The shrine in the home of Sanro Temmi

streams of local people arrived bearing gifts of food and asking hir for advice on a wide range of matters. At one point s/he changed into hir official *Bissu* dress and invited everyone into the shrine where s/he went into a trance, contacted the spirits (*dewata*) and spoke in the special language known only to *Bissu*. After such trances

and having contacted the spirit world, s/he is able to give advice to those who flock to hir for help. Hir title, Sanro – healer – indicates that healing is a major part of hir role. S/he also made a point of emphasising that s/he and the other *Bissu* in hir little community wear white to symbolise their celibacy, chastity, holiness and cleanliness. This was a pointed reminder of the difference between hir community and the Segeri group of male bodied but female minded *Bissu* who are allowed or who allow themselves liaisons with males.

Bissu: Sanro Nisa

Sanro Nisa says that s/he has felt like a *calalai* since was s/he was seventeen. S/he has never married but decided to join Sanro Temmi's little community only in 2006. Like Sanro Temmi, s/he says that hir power comes directly from the spirits – *dewata* – so s/he has never needed to undergo the initiation ceremony – *irebba*. Despite that and like Sanro Temmi, s/he does perform the self-stabbing ritual – *ma 'giri'*. When asked how s/he knew that s/he was destined to be a Bissu, Sanro Nisa replied that s/he went through a phase when s/he lost her mind. This was a sign for hir to become a *Bissu* and since s/he did so s/he has had no recurrence of the mental illness.



32. Sanro Nisa

8e: Appendix 5: Interpreters and other people interviewed

May Htay Myint – interpreter in Myanmar



33. May Htay Myint – interpreter in Myanmar

May Htay Myint was extremely interested in the research into the *NatKadaw* and their relationship with gender. She was very sensitive to the issues surrounding gender. She is a Burmese scholar so she was also extraordinarily sensitive to the meaning of words. One could not have wished for a better interpreter.

Syarful Charmain (Joko) – interpreter on Sulawesi



34. Syarful Charmain (Joko) – interpreter on Sulawesi

Joko, as he is known to all his friends (the word Joko means ‘single’ in Javanese which is a ‘joke’ to his friends because he is married!), was the perfect interpreter as he is fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, Basa Ugi, Makassarese and, of course, English. He was also extremely sensitive to gender issues and dealt with the male-bodied and female-bodied *Bissu* who were interviewed with the utmost tact. He also knew Sulawesi like the back of his hand. He is the field worker’s dream of an interpreter.

Daw Khin Nyein (Alice) in Myanmar



35. Daw Khin Nyein (Alice) in Myanmar

Daw Khin Nyein, widely called by the name of Alice, is a delightful seventy-four year old lady who is the mother of the owner of a beautiful homestay in Mandalay. She was educated by nuns and it was at that time that she acquired the name Alice. She is a Christian but she was very open about the fact that she and other Christians, as well as orthodox Buddhists, treat the *nats* with great respect and do not take any chances by slighting them in any way. She made it clear that even highly educated people do not dare to show disrespect to the *nats* just in case that might trigger misfortune.

Puang Tappa on Sulawesi



36. Puang Tappa on Sulawesi

Puang Tappa is the male guardian of the *Bissu* community at Segeri. Much of his role is analogous to that of a social worker insofar as he is the contact person for boys who have run away from home because they identify themselves as *calabai* and they have been rejected by their family. He acts as an intermediary with the families and tries to ensure that the boys are looked after. He also supports the *Bissu* community although it is interesting that the boys who have left home stay within the *calabai* community and none so far has migrated from there to the *Bissu* community despite Zulaiha's efforts.

Sanro Hasan on Sulawesi



37. Sanro Hasan on Sulawesi

Sanro Hasan is a nephew of Sanro Temmi. Like him he is a traditional healer – Sanro. He lives a few doors away from him and is clearly part of the special atmosphere in the little village of Sampakang. He spoke very supportively of the work of Sanro Temmi. When Sanro Temmi invited his guests into the shrine to witness his trance and communication with the spirits – *dewata* – he sat next to him and led the responses. A devout Muslim he also manages to combine a deep faith in the *dewata* and the *Bissu*'s ability to communicate with them for the good of the community.