

# Boatbuilding Myth and Ritual in South Sulawesi

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For many centuries before European colonial powers came to Indonesia, trade was carried on throughout the archipelago. Makassarese and Buginese islanders traveled by sea throughout Southeast Asia and even to China. Only after the Portuguese and Dutch arrived in the late 16th century was the sea trade lost to European fleets, which forced local cultures to submit to the monopoly of the Dutch East India Company. Local boatbuilding traditions adapted to the arrival of Europeans, and they have continued to evolve to this day. For centuries now, particular ethnic groups have been building boats of many sizes and sailing them in inter-island and intercontinental trade.

C. C. Macknight (1979) writes that there are four principal boatbuilding traditions in Indonesia. The first is found among coastal peoples living in Sumatra and on the west and south coasts of the Malay peninsula. A second boatbuilding tradition is found in the port towns and fishing villages of the north coast of Central Java, in the port of Gresik in East Java and on the island of Madura. The third and fourth traditions are found in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago: the South Sulawesi tradition and the tradition of boatbuilding found in Moluccas, Aru islands, and southern Philippines. In this article we examine the South Sulawesi tradition of boatbuilding.

South Sulawesi boatbuilding is still connected in the minds of many people to the following myth of origin called Sawerigading. It is told in the Buginese legend of I Lagaligo that one day Sawerigading, a prince of Luwu, a kingdom in South Sulawesi, fell in love with a beautiful girl, We Tenri Abeng. The two lovers were to be married, but the young girl learned that she was really Sawerigading's twin sister. Seeking a way out, We Tenri Abeng suggested that her twin look for another girl who resembled her — We Cudai, a princess of a neighboring kingdom to the southwest.

We Tenri Abeng had given a very difficult task to Sawerigading, because it would take a large boat and a long time to sail to We Cudai's kingdom. We Tenri Abeng showed Sawerigading a big tree called Walenrang growing in the forest. A boat for the journey could be made from this tree. Sawerigading resolved to follow his twin's suggestion. But although he tried for days to cut down the Walenrang tree he was not successful. In despair Sawerigading went to his grandfather, La Toge Langi Batara Guru, who lived in heaven. He told him what had happened. After hearing the story, La Toge Langi Batara Guru told Sawerigading to return to the world and to wait by the sea.

La Toge Langi Batara Guru used his supernatural power to fell the Walenrang tree. It disappeared into the earth and reappeared suddenly on the shore, in the form of a large boat. Sawerigading named his new boat "La Walenrang." Before sailing across the ocean to find his bride, he swore an oath that after he married We Cudai, he would never return to Luwu.

Soon after Sawerigading arrived at his destination, he found his princess, We Cudai, married her and settled in her kingdom.

One day he felt homesick, so he gathered his wife and followers together and sailed his boat back across the sea to his home kingdom of Luwu, thus breaking the oath he had sworn. Before he could arrive, a fierce storm smashed his boat "La Walenrang" to pieces. All its passengers were drowned. The waves beached the keel of his boat on one of the islands to the south, the mast in a different coastal village, the shattered pieces of deck nearby, and the hull on a shore in the same region.

The people who lived nearby collected all the sea-strewn pieces of the boat. Thus it was that from the wreck of Sawerigading's boat "La Walenrang," the ancestors of the Buginese people learned to build large boats, which they have been building for generations ever since.





*Above: Sulawesi boatbuilders are renown throughout Indonesia. This boatbuilder near Majene, South Sulawesi, works with simple tools. The dowels are made of ironwood and the caulk of crushed coral and oil. The large ship he is building will carry cattle and passengers between Kalimantan (Borneo) and Sulawesi. Photo by Charles Zerner*

*Right: Sulawesi navigators have directed their boats through the seas of Indonesia for centuries. Pua' Haji Saniaya, a Mandar captain and navigator, sails to fishing waters offshore from his home in Majene, South Sulawesi. Photo by Charles Zerner*



This myth tells the origin of boatbuilding in South Sulawesi. A typical *prau* (sailboat) from this region has curving stem posts and a broad hull. The mast is a tripod, easily lowered by releasing the front legs so the other two legs can pivot on pins that provide the main footing. The sail is rectangular and slung at an angle.

The initial steps in building a boat are marked by ceremonial and ritual activities. The tree used for a boat must be of a specific type. When cut down, it must topple in the direction decided by a *panrita* (boatbuilding master). If the tree falls otherwise, it should be abandoned. Before starting to saw up the tree, people gather at the boatyard for a ritual. On what will be the rear section of the keel they put traditional Buginese cakes including *onde-onde* (marble-shaped cake with palm sugar filler), *songkolo* (sticky rice), *cucur* (disc-shaped, wrinkle fried brown sugar and sticky rice flour cake), *baje* (steamed sticky rice with palm sugar) and bananas. The keel is then sawn to length with a tool that has been given supernatural power by the master craftsman. It must be cut through without stopping by one man alone.

The night before the boat is launched, another public ceremony takes place. People gather at the boatyard throughout the evening. They are served the traditional Buginese cakes. Everyone who attends this ceremony also comes the following day to help the launch, which is led by a *punggawa* (a traditional respected leader in boatbuilding). The *punggawa* starts the work by drilling into the middle of the keel for about one centimeter. The dust from the drill is then given to the owner of the boat, publically declaring his

identity, which was kept secret until this moment. Then, the *punggawa* mounts the front deck and gives the command to launch the boat. A song in the local dialect is sung that encourages and gives spirit to the people pushing the boat into the water.

Myths and ritual in boatbuilding in South Sulawesi still exist in the knowledge and practice of traditional experts, even though their traditional ways face challenges from ever-increasing modern technology.

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#### *Citations and Further Readings*

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