

## **CHRISTIAN PELRAS AND HIS WORK: 17 AUGUST 1934–19 JULY 2014**

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Those of us who work in the human sciences are, of necessity, involved with the task of interpretation: interpreting the past to the present, interpreting the ways of "others" to our own society, or even interpreting our own society to itself. Bugis society in the second half of the 20th century was fortunate indeed to have had Christian Pelras as its interpreter. He himself describes the work of ethnology as "a dialogue between our culture and the culture of others" (Pelras 2010: 7). For the most part, he wrote for a scholarly Francophone audience but, as time went on, more of his writing appeared in English and some in Indonesian.

A strength of Pelras' work in Indonesia was his thorough education in western European culture, including its languages and literature. He had a firm foundation from which to conduct his "dialogue," and the dialogue went both ways. His research career in Indonesia was inter-twined with a parallel interest in Brittany. In December 1961, he returned from almost a year in Indonesia, his first visit, and was soon engaged in an interdisciplinary project at home. Much of the next few years were spent in Goulien, a tiny village in the extreme northwest corner of France, and his doctoral thesis, completed in 1966, deals with this research. A revised version, incorporating new fieldwork, was published in 2001. His memory is much cherished in Goulien and in November 2014 the new local library was named in his honour.

In 1967, Pelras went back to Indonesia and Malaysia. His immediate interest, with which he had been taken up for some time, was in weaving, but from the outset he was also attracted by the Bugis. After meeting Bugis migrants in Malaysia, he spent eight months between December 1967 and July 1968 in Singkang in South Sulawesi. His long report on this fieldwork, published with admirable dispatch in 1969, shows the broad scope of his vision and his command of the literature. This was the first of many visits not just to South Sulawesi, but also to other parts of Southeast Asia. Within South Sulawesi, there can be few roads he did not travel.

An appreciation of the work in Goulien is important for understanding his research in South Sulawesi. Its central feature was meticulous recording of data, including the material culture of daily life, but his understanding of ethnology extended to all aspects of the intellectual, imaginative and symbolic lives of the people he was observing. Early visits to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, which had done much to stimulate his initial interest in this view of the world, were handsomely repaid with a collection of artefacts from Sulawesi, all with extensive documentation. His 8 mm films from Goulien were matched a few years later by films of agricultural life around Parepare, the second city of South Sulawesi, and, in later years, the showing of both sets of film together both in Indonesia and in France occasioned much interest and reflection. He was committed to the task of interpretation in both directions, a commitment which arose from his active involvement in both Bugis and French society. He was highly esteemed by many friends in both France and Indonesia.

Over more than 30 years, a stream of publications on an astonishing range of aspects of Bugis experience appeared and in 2010 a selection of these were brought together in *Explorations dans l'univers des Bugis: Un choix de trente-trois rencontres* (Cahier d'Archipel 39). In long articles on particular topics, Pelras was able to bring together relevant observations and records, embedded in a secure frame of understanding the society and his command of the requisite languages. A reviewer of the revised edition of his book on Goulien respectfully noted that it was somewhat old-fashioned and stuck in the approaches of the 1960s (Augustins 2005). There is perhaps some force in this comment in relation to the work on Sulawesi too, but this is, in fact, its great strength. Pelras was on the ground, documenting everything which came to his notice. It is also worth remembering that travel was much more arduous and living conditions were far more difficult than they are today. The excellence of Pelras' ethnology—the field in which he saw himself to be engaged—needs to be emphasised since there are some weaknesses in the historical and prehistorical sections of the book for which

he is best known, *The Bugis*, 1996 (a revised Indonesian version was published as *Manusia Bugis* in 2006).

Though the overwhelming majority of his research and writing on Southeast Asia was concerned with the Bugis, even here he had wider interests. His role in the foundation and progress of the journal *Archipel: études interdisciplinaires sur le monde insulindien* was notable and, until his formal retirement in 1999, he played ever more important administrative roles in the various research bodies to which he was attached in Paris.

I first heard of Christian through reading *Archipel* and then in 1973 a letter from him invited me to contribute an article. For various reasons I had to decline, but we were in touch. In January 1974 I was filming Bugis manuscripts in the old National Library in Jakarta, still housed in the museum building, when he appeared and realised who I must be from what I was doing. From then on, we met occasionally in Indonesia, in Australia and in France and our correspondence makes up a considerable file. He had a talent for generous friendship.

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This article on "Orality and Writing among the Bugis" is a good example of Pelras' ethnology. It places Bugis practice in the context of the general question and, after explaining necessary details, proceeds to give specific examples that illustrate the oral and written materials and their interaction. The article in its original French is well-known among specialists and an English version may make it even more widely known.

The article also deserves an audience beyond specialists concerned with the Bugis and their literature. It bears on the whole question of literacy and its uses. As is the case for Javanese and Malay literature—and indeed across island Southeast Asia—the written expression of the literature has been essentially in the manuscript register, at least until the last century or so. This is not to say that the issues of Bugis literacy are the same as for those other traditions; indeed, it is the very specificity of Pelras' examples which allow us to see the many differences. The purposes and practice of writing—and orality—in each tradition have to be evaluated on their own terms and in their own cultural context.

Taking an even wider view, the Bugis case is instructive for the interaction between orality and writing in any tradition, especially when writing is in manuscript form. Printing a text gives it a certain degree of fixity, if only because of the number of identical copies, and there are certain manuscripts, notably the Bible and the Qur'an, over which the greatest possible care is taken to ensure fidelity to the model.

The vast effort of classical philology from the Renaissance on has been to discover the original texts of authors by repairing the errors of careless manuscript scribes down the centuries. The specific implications of this textual instability in Bugis manuscripts have been taken up elsewhere (Macknight 1984; Macknight and Caldwell 2001), but the more general questions of the interaction between orality and writing and the relationship between various written registers become increasingly pertinent in the light of modern technology. We still tell stories, of course, but we also record the spoken word and song and transcribe the texts faithfully; we can add a visual record with video cameras and we regularly watch live interviews; we are familiar with the shifts between printed page and cinema screen, and even more powerfully the television screen; the written record is no longer tied to paper with the availability of the monitor and tablet; editing programs mean that the text of a digital file can be revised at will and now computers can speak a text and produce a text from spoken dictation. The technology of language is evolving ever more rapidly.

In the 1970s Pelras was observing a world with simpler technology, but his meticulous ethnological record allows us to understand the subtle interactions of orality and writing among the Bugis at that time. His account provokes us to consider these issues in other contexts far removed in time and space.



Christian Pelras at Somba Opu, Makassar, December 1996  
(Photograph: Campbell Macknight)

## ENDNOTES

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