

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Gay and Lesbian Indonesians and the Idea of the Nation

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4782668p>

Journal

Social Analysis, 50(1)

ISSN

0155-977X

Author

Boellstorff, Tom

Publication Date

2006

DOI

10.3167/015597706780886102

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

GAY AND LESBIAN INDONESIANS AND THE IDEA OF THE NATION

Tom Boellstorff

It is remarkable how few Westerners know that Indonesia is the fourth most populous nation (after China, India, and the United States), or that Indonesia is home to more Muslims than any other country. These basic facts should be enough to establish Indonesia's importance for current world affairs. In this essay, however, I argue for paying attention to the life-worlds of gay and lesbian Indonesians. While this might seem an unconventional topic, these Indonesians' lives provide valuable clues to how being 'Indonesian' gets defined and to the workings of nation-states more generally. They teach us how heteronormativity—the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal or proper sexuality—plays a fundamental role in forming nation-states as “imagined communities.”¹ In Indonesia and elsewhere, nation-states are modeled on a particular archetype of the nuclear family (husband, wife, and children, with the nation's president as parent). In line with this model, nation-states often portray themselves as made up not just of individual citizens but of families, which almost always are assumed to be nuclear families despite the staggering range of family forms found in the world's cultures. Restricting the family model to the heterosexual couple has been a key means by which the idea of the Indonesian nation (and other nations) has been promulgated and sustained. Thus, rather than see the exclusion of homosexuality as a latter-day response to an encroaching global gay and lesbian movement, this exclusion is most accurately understood as a point of departure by which the idea of 'Indonesia' comes to exist in the first place.

Many ideas are packed into that opening paragraph, and I will spend the rest of this essay fleshing them out. If Westerners have heard of Indonesia, it is most likely Bali. Images of timeless tradition—batik cloth, exotic dances, sandy beaches—remain common. These stereotypes often spill over into the domains of sexuality and gender, so that Indonesia is assumed to be a 'tolerant culture', where gay, lesbian, and transgendered persons are valued as shamans or performers. The truth is more complex. Contemporary Indonesia is a vast,



multi-cultural nation containing an estimated 670 ethnic and linguistic groups, some numbering in the millions, others with only a few thousand or even a few hundred members. Historically, some (but far from all) of these groups contained experts in ritual or performance who were men but who dressed as women while at work.² A few of these ritual or performance professions persist, but they have little to do with gay or lesbian Indonesians. They are, after all, professions not sexualities: they require some kind of training and are performed in circumscribed contexts. That these professions are associated with men who dress like women does not make them ‘third genders’ any more than the association of ‘nurse’ with women makes ‘nurse’ a gender. Distinguishing these professions from gay and lesbian Indonesians is a crucial first step toward understanding the significance of gay and lesbian Indonesians’ lives.

A second confounding issue is that since approximately the late nineteenth century, there have been men in the Indonesian archipelago who dress as women some of the time (since about the late 1970s, often all day long), but do not engage in ritual performance. These men often see themselves as having women’s souls and are called by a variety of names, including *banci* and *béncong* (which are derogatory), as well as *waria*, the preferred contemporary term. As is the case for Thai *kathoeyes* and other similar persons elsewhere in Southeast Asia and beyond, *warias* are much more visible in public life than gay or lesbian Indonesians. People often make fun of *warias*, but they are usually recognized as existing elements of Indonesian society.³

The Indonesian Situation

While the general Indonesian public still confuses *warias* with gay men, they are distinct, and it is with gay men (and lesbian women) that this essay is primarily concerned.⁴ It appears that some Indonesians started calling themselves *gay* or *lesbi* in the late 1970s to early 1980s (I’ll use these terms for the remainder of this essay). They tend not to learn about these terms from their parents, neighbors, or Islamic teachers. Instead, most Indonesians learn of the idea that one could be *gay* or *lesbi* through mass media, including gossip columns in magazines, newspaper reports (often sensationalistic stories of suicide, theft, or murder), and above all imported television shows and films. This recalls the crucial role of mass media in fostering a sense of shared nationalism in the modern era (see Anderson 1983). Because most *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians do not speak English (Indonesia was a Dutch colony) and do not travel to the West, the idea that one could be *gay* or *lesbi* has been formed in surprising isolation from Western *gay* and *lesbian* subjectivities, despite the links forged by mass media. From the predominance of Islam to expectations about marriage and ‘coming out’, the terms *gay* and *lesbi* have taken on a uniquely Indonesian cast.

I say “Indonesian cast” here because one of the most striking aspects of *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities (senses of selfhood) is that they are overwhelmingly understood as national. Inhabitants of this nation often identify in ‘ethnolocal’

terms—Achenese, Javanese, Madurese, Balinese, and so on.⁵ In some ways, such forms of identification have increased under the regime of local autonomy that has followed the forced resignation of the country's authoritarian president, Suharto, in 1998. Yet while on the face of things there is no reason why there could not be people in the archipelago who identify as lesbian Javanese, or gay Balinese, or so on—building ethnic-specific *gay* and *lesbi* networks, publishing local-language newsletters, and the like—*gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians see *gay* and *lesbi* as nationwide subjectivities, not limited to any one island, ethnic group, or language.

This might seem almost inevitable, since the idea of being *gay* or *lesbi* clearly does not originate in one's ethnic or local traditions. Yet there is a long history of all kinds of ideas becoming 'localized' in Indonesia over time. Additionally, it is striking that the concepts *gay* and *lesbi* are not seen as global subjectivities. *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians know that there are people describing themselves as gay or lesbian in some sense around the world, and they often feel connected to an intangible community or shared experience with them. But *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians have surprisingly little contact with gay or lesbian Westerners, given the usual assumption that persons outside the West using transformed versions of 'gay' or 'lesbian' must be jet-setting elites riding the crest of globalization. Instead, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians tend to see themselves as part of a national archipelago. This linkage between sexuality and nation is fascinating but not surprising, given that heterosexuality is so strongly promoted by the nation-state as the foundation of proper citizenship. The use of the nation-state as a kind of lens by which to understand sexuality did not originate with *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, but it has been redeployed by them in ways that the nation-state never anticipated.

With regard to many issues I have raised—including the key role of mass media and the relationship between the nation-state and sexuality—the parallels between *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are conspicuous. There are, of course, differences as well. One of the most significant is that since the time when the concepts of *gay* and *lesbi* began forming in Indonesia to the present, there have been no publicly visible female counterparts to *warias*. Thus, from the outset *warias* and *gay* men have seen themselves as distinct—as persons marked primarily by transvestism on the one hand and homosexuality on the other. In contrast, a named subjectivity for female-to-male transgenders (known most often as *tomboi*) is as recent as the *lesbi* subject position. Some *tombois* consider themselves as a sub-type of *lesbi* women, but others see themselves as distinct (often emphasizing that *tombois* "have a man's soul" just as many *warias* say they "have a woman's soul"). In any case, they do not have anything remotely like the social recognition of *warias* (even though the 'recognition' of *warias* often takes the form of disapproval and rejection).

At the level of day-to-day socialization, important differences between being *gay* and being *lesbi* emerge due to gender discrimination. There remains great pressure for *gay* men and *lesbi* women to marry heterosexually (and oftentimes they wish to do so, a topic to which I return below), but being a wife and mother typically involves duties very different from being a husband

and father. As the persons holding primary responsibility for the domestic sphere, wives find themselves with significant restrictions on their movement. To protect their ‘virtue’, women tend to be placed under greater scrutiny by their families even before they marry, and their mobility is thus limited. As a result, *lesbi* women for the most part cannot go out alone (particularly at night), whereas hanging out in parks, shopping malls, or each others’ apartments is a major means by which *gay* men meet each other and build community, aided by the advent of the Internet and particularly by cellphone use among rich and poor Indonesians alike. Despite these restrictions, many *lesbi* women manage to build rich and flourishing lives, ranging from open activism to the less visible but no less significant daily acts of friendship and love in the interstices of Indonesian society.

Sexuality and Nation

My discussion of *gay* and *lesbi* lives has repeatedly returned to the question of heteronormativity, and specifically to the linkages between heterosexuality, kinship, and the nation. These links run deep: ‘nation’, after all, shares the same Latin root as ‘natal’. It is hardly a coincidence that the two ways to become part of a modern nation—being born a citizen or becoming ‘naturalized’—are the same two ways to become part of a modern family—via birth or adoption. The nation-state is now the dominant means of organizing societies worldwide, and the heteronormativity of this form has proven a common element of many nation-states despite differences of religion, ethnicity, geography, and wealth. This binding together of heteronormativity and nationalism finds its ultimate expression in marriage. For instance, while Indonesians have married since long before the concept of ‘heterosexuality’ was named as such, the meanings of marriage have shifted greatly. The greatest shift has been the sea change from most marriages being arranged by one’s elders to most marriages being based on love. This shift, which in Indonesia dates only to the last 75 years or so, means that marriage is seen less as a contract between two families than as a chosen bond. Through love, you choose your husband or wife, just as in modern society you choose your leader (through democracy) and your possessions (through consumerism).

All of these acts of choice define you as a modern person and as a member of Indonesian society, so the failure to choose correctly carries steep consequences. When marriages are mostly arranged, sexual orientation is not a significant category (and historically there was no term in any of the languages of Indonesia for it), but when marriages are mostly chosen, then that ‘choice’ fails if it is not a heterosexual choice. Sexual orientation has come into being as a recognized aspect of one’s personality, and since the 1920s there has existed a conceptual linkage between choosing one’s husband or wife and being a modern Indonesian (rather than one shackled to local tradition). Small wonder that most *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians desire to marry, and small wonder that they often feel a sense of rejection by Indonesian society.

We live in an era when the topic of sexuality is discussed as never before yet at the same time silenced as never before. A handful of nations now recognize gay and lesbian marriage, but many others banish the thought of such marriages and articulate a vision of the nation that excludes non-heterosexual persons of any kind. These recognitions and exclusions take culturally and historically specific forms. We need to pay attention to them not just for what they teach us about sexuality per se but for what they teach us about transformations in conceptions of nationalism, society, and belonging.

It is no longer acceptable to write about Indonesia or any other place and speak only of men. One should either make a concerted effort to include men and women, or acknowledge that one's analysis is based upon men and consider the consequences of this fact. A similar shift is taking place with regard to sexuality. One should include heterosexual and homosexual (as well as bisexual) persons, or acknowledge that one's analysis is based upon heterosexuality and consider the consequences of this fact. At stake is much more than a simple question of inclusion, of listening to silenced voices. It is not an issue of adding more sexual subjectivity categories to one's data set; rather, it is an issue of addressing the significance of sexuality for a wide range of domains. This includes domains such as the nation-state—domains at the center of contemporary debates over our collective future in a world where globalization's strange and developing legacies include new forms of exclusion, ossified tradition, and far-from-splendid isolation.

Tom Boellstorff is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of numerous articles, co-editor of *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language* (2004), and author of *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (2005) and *Coincidence: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Critique* (2007).

Notes

1. The key text with regard to this issue is Anderson (1983).
2. More rarely, there could be found women dressing as men or acknowledged homosexuality. Sex with women was viewed by some men as a drain on their spiritual power, whereas sex with another man was not considered to be so damaging—or was not even seen as 'sex' at all. For a more detailed discussion of all of the topics raised in this essay, see my books *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Boellstorff 2005) and *Coincidence: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Critique* (Boellstorff 2007), and the references therein.
3. Historically, *warias* worked in lowbrow entertainment, as market traders or as sex workers, and now are strongly associated with hair salons and bridal make-up (see Boellstorff 2004).

4. The distinctiveness of these subjectivities does not mean that there are not various blurrings; for instance, there are some persons who move between being *gay* and *waria* (see Boellstorff 2005).
5. I discuss the term 'ethnolocal' in Boellstorff (2002).

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2002. "Ethnolocality." *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 3, no. 1: 24–48.
- _____. 2004. "Playing Back the Nation: *Waria*, Indonesian Transvestites." *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 2: 159–195.
- _____. 2005. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- _____. 2007. *Coincidence: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.