

A New Archipelago Concept for the *Era Reformasi*?¹

Tom Boellstorff

(University of California-Irvine, USA)

To be presented at the conference on “The Beginning of the 21st Century: Endorsing Regional Autonomy, Understanding Local Cultures, Strengthening National Integration.” Hasanuddin University (Makassar, Indonesia), 1-4 August 2000.

I would like to thank the Organizing Committee for inviting me to speak at this conference. My goal today is to argue that ways of thinking which originate from sources we may not like can be transformed in unexpected ways. My message is thus a positive message of hope, tolerance, and bright futures. If anything I say offends you, I apologize and hope that you will hear my words in the spirit they were intended.

¹ This paper was published in *Jurnal ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA* 24 (63): 109-116

Let me begin by locating myself and my research. As a socio-cultural anthropologist I study “culture.” As you already know, “culture” to an anthropologist means not only dances, rituals, and art, but systems of thinking and interacting in everyday life. As a result, anthropologists do not just study isolated groups; they can also study people in urban areas, people who are rich, people who are migrants, and so on.

I study gay and lesbian identity in Indonesia. I have conducted this research since 1992 in Makassar, Bali, and Surabaya, and also for short periods in Samarinda, Balikpapan, Kediri, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Solo, and Jakarta. My research focuses on Indonesians who identify as gay or lesbi—that is, homosexual people, who are sexually attracted to the same sex, but have what we might call a “normal” gender identity. I do not focus on transgendered people—people who are usually called things like waria, banci, kedi, or bissu. The people I study do not identify themselves with a transgender term like “waria;” instead, they use the ostensibly “foreign” terms “lesbi” and “gay.”

Many ordinary Indonesians still do not know what “gay” and “lesbi” mean. They think they are English words for “waria,” or refer only to foreigners. Those Indonesians who do know what “gay” and “lesbi” mean often think of these people as “deviants,” people who go outside the norms of society.

In my research, I have spent many days with lesbian and gay people. I have met their lovers, their parents, and their friends. I have spent time with them in parks, apartments, and shopping malls. I have visited small villages where gay men or lesbi women live. What I want to share with you today is my discovery that in one sense, these Indonesians are not deviants. Their culture—their way of thinking—actually reflects many central assumptions in contemporary Indonesian society.

No matter what you may think about gay and lesbi identity personally, I would like to ask you to consider the possibility that they can be useful as a “guinea pig” for analysis in this conference. This is because they are a perfect example of a truly national identity, integrated across ethnicity and religion, that was born from the time of the New Order but now continues on quite happily without the New Order. If we look at the style of thinking of lesbi and gay people more closely, we find it to be surprisingly compatible with an Indonesia where civil society is rejuvenated and tolerance is more valued. To illustrate this point, let me tell you a story that begins in a field in Makassar.

It is four o’clock in the afternoon and it looks like it might rain; there are dark clouds to the east, but no one seems to mind. The field is full of hundreds of people, mostly young men, playing volleyball and basketball, having a good time. In the center of the field is a group of 20 gay men who come here almost every afternoon to play volleyball. There are six gay men on each team playing; along the sidelines the rest of

us sit and talk. We are laughing and talking loudly, but no one else on the field seems to mind. A couple “normal” men come over from the basketball court to watch us play, laughing if someone screams in an effeminate manner. One of my gay friends looks at them watching us and says “wherever we go, we’re visible.” But the men watching us don’t bother us and soon return to their basketball game. Now it is starting to rain, so we run to find a pete-pete that will take us back to my house.

Back at the house, a couple gay friends are watching the show “Word Quiz” on the television. I sit down with them and after a few minutes I ask them if they like the show. They reply that it’s one of their favorites. I then note that there is a show like this one in the United States. My friends nod and say “that’s true. It’s like that with so many of the shows. It’s like there are no new ideas here - we just use ideas from the West.” After the show, we sit down to eat. After a few minutes, another gay man enters the house. He has just come from a conference very much like this one, about using a religious and cultural perspective for public health. He is worried that when the discussion turns to the topic of gay men on the following day that people will be intolerant. He is worried that they will say that gay men are not real Indonesians. He then says: “Culture is something that is created by humans and then believed. There are people in Indonesia who have created ‘gay’ here in Indonesia and believe in what they have created. Thus, gayness is part of Indonesian culture.”

In this story we see gay Indonesians living their lives in the midst of society, and reflecting on the fact that they, like most Indonesians, are experts at taking ideas from elsewhere and transforming them for the Indonesian context. My friend’s statement that “gayness is part of Indonesian culture” is profound for several reasons. It is significant that this gay man referred not to “Bugis culture” or “Makassar culture,” but “Indonesian culture.” One of the most interesting things about gay and lesbi identity is that it is transethnic. “Transethnic” is not the same thing as “between ethnicities;” “Transethnic” refers to the idea of something that brings together people from different ethnic groups. Clearly, there are lesbi and gay Indonesians from every ethnic group: Javanese, Bugis, Balinese, Makassar, Minangkabau, Torajan, and so on. There are also gay and lesbi Indonesians from every religion found in Indonesia. However, while gay and lesbi Indonesians are certainly aware of their various backgrounds, in terms of their sexuality they identify themselves not as gay or lesbi Javanese, or gay or lesbi Bugis, but as gay and lesbi Indonesians. There are no specifically ethnic local gay and lesbi identities and networks. This does not mean that gay and lesbi identities are the same everywhere in Indonesia: far from it! But lesbi and gay Indonesians themselves say that they see these differences as subsumed within a national identity.

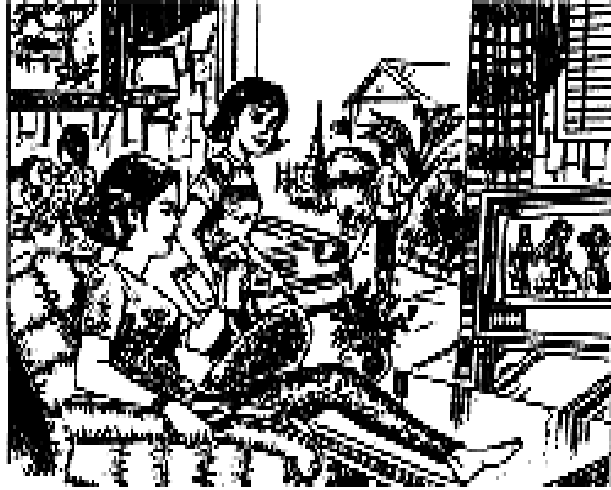
The fact that a transethnic and translocal identity like

this could have developed in Indonesia in the last twenty years raises a number of very important theoretical, methodological, and political issues. The only other clearly transethnic identities in Indonesia are religious and nationalist, but in each of these cases there are powerful institutions that help sustain these identities. One important question then, is how gay and lesbi identities, which have never yet enjoyed this kind of institutional support, are nonetheless transethnic. One factor is that gay and lesbi identity is clearly something new, something that does not come directly from tradition, parents or other members of local communities. The national character of lesbi and gay identity is thus linked to modernity and to mass media.

The fact that gay and lesbi identities are clearly not part of tradition, however, still does not tell us how gay and lesbi Indonesians understand their own identities. It is not the case that gay and lesbi, or any other identity, is ever just “imported” into Indonesia. It is always transformed in the process, changed to fit new circumstances. In the case of gay and lesbi identities, one important aspect of this transformation is that gay and lesbi Indonesians use metaphors of an “archipelago” when they think about their identities. Sometimes this is explicit. For instance, the national network of gay and lesbi organizations, based in Surabaya, is called “GAYa Nusantara.” *Gaya* means “style,” but when the first three letters are capitalized it can also mean “gay.” “Nusantara” means archipelago, but it can also mean “Indonesia.” In Indonesian, nouns come before adjectives, while in English they come after adjectives; since “GAYa” is both English and Indonesian in this phrase, “GAYa Nusantara” can have four meanings: “archipelago style,” “Indonesia style,” “gay Indonesia,” and “gay archipelago.” The idea of a gay archipelago is also found in the fact that local groups often keep the first term “GAYa” and then add a term with a local flavor, like *GAYa Dewata* in Bali, *GAYa Celebes* in Makassar, *GAYa Semarang* in Semarang, *GAYa Betawi* in Jakarta, *GAYa Priangan* in Bandung, *GAYa Siak* in Pekanbaru, and *GAYa Khatulistiwa* in Pontianak. (Note that not all members of these groups are gay or lesbi, and many of these groups undertake activities focused on public health or other goals.)

These names, however, would not have much meaning if the thinking behind them were not also reflected implicitly in the daily lives of thousands of lesbi and gay Indonesians. While these Indonesians recognize and comment on differences between lesbi and gay identity in different parts of Indonesia, most are firm in their conviction that this diversity is enclosed within a great unity—that gay and lesbi are fundamentally Indonesian identities, not the property of any one area or ethnic group. The idea is that all gay and lesbi Indonesians are part of a national archipelago of diversity within sameness, and that on another level they are all one “island” in a global archipelago of gay and lesbi identity that includes other “islands” like Holland, Thailand, and the





24
