

# LOVE AND CHOICE: HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE NATIONAL PERSONALITY

**Tom Boellstorff**

Department of Anthropology University of California, Irvine (USA)

I would like to thank the organizers of this panel and this conference for giving me the chance to speak today. I apologize that due to a busy schedule at my university, I haven't had time to translate this talk, so I'm giving it in English.

Homosexuality is often described as something personal, the result of a mistakes and bad habits. It is also described as something universal, for instance, the result of abnormal biology. Today however, I'd like to discuss how homosexuality is shaped by the nation. While many Indonesians still confuse the term "gay" with "waria" or "banci," *gay* Indonesians have existed for many years and are quite clear about who they are. Contrary to popular stereotypes, they are not always effeminate and are more likely to be poor than members of the jet-setting elite. They thus call into question views of globalization as a "top-down" phenomenon and force us to think about how sexuality intersects with many other cultural domains, in particular that of the nation. That is because one of the most remarkable aspects of *gay* identity in Indonesia is that *gay* men see themselves as *gay* Indonesians, not *gay* Javanese or *gay* Bugis and so on: it is seen as a nationwide identity, and is therefore strongly shaped by ideas of the nation. (It is not a coincidence that the *gay* character in *Arisan!* could not speak Batak, only Indonesian.) Today, I will talk briefly about some linkages between love, choice, sexuality, and national belonging.

Indonesia, the idea of the "national personality" has emerged since independence and is associated with choice. This includes voting to choose the government (democracy), but it also includes the idea that modern Indonesians should choose their husband or wife by falling in love with them. Historically, most marriages were arranged by the husband's and wife's families. The possibility that the husband or wife could have homosexual desires was not so crucial. However, while arranged marriages still take place, as well as marriages that fall



between arranged and chosen, marriages are becoming increasingly linked to choice and love in Indonesia. With a growing degree of socialization between the sexes (even among adolescents) has come a steady increase in the age of marriage in Indonesia. Between 1971 and 1990, overall age at marriage rose from 19.3 to 21.6 years for women; between 1970 and 1990 it rose from 23.8 to 25.4 years for men. During the social upheavals of the late colonial period, World War II, and the independence struggle, there were no detectable changes in age of marriage in Indonesia; these marriage trends are associated with persons born since the early 1960s, the same cohort in which *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities first appeared as national phenomena.

Marriage has long been a key institution shaping statecraft within the region, but historically, attention to marriage was largely limited to royal circles. With the rise of modern forms of governmentality that view societies in terms of national “populations”, interest shifted to the proper and successful marriage of each citizen, as Nancy Cott, following Foucault, argues, “no modern nation-state can ignore marriage forms, because of their direct impact on reproducing and composing the population.” In Indonesia this national vision of marriage has been shaped by family planning discourse and based upon the state’s family principle, which stipulates that the nation is made up not of citizens but families. The marriage envisioned by the state involves a single husband and wife where the husband is head of household, but increasingly the wife is to have a career in addition to her domestic duties. It assumes a middle-class conception of the self organized around responsibility, consumerism, and career, even if one is not middle-class oneself. For instance, when one *gay* man told me that “in Indonesia if you’re not married you’re not seen as mature in your thinking. Because you don’t shoulder any responsibility... you can just go wherever you want,” it is this national rhetoric of marriage “in Indonesia” that he references.

One day in Makassar when I was discussing marriage with Umar and Hasan, *gay* men who had been friends for years, Umar tried to sum up what he saw as the prevailing attitude by saying “here in Indonesia you have to marry to prove you can make a small, harmonious family.” Almost every term in Umar’s statement—“Indonesia” (rather than “Makassar” or “amongst the Bugis”), “small, harmonious family”—comes from the state’s family principle. I then asked: why is it that I’ve never seen a case anywhere in Indonesia of a *gay* man and *lesbi* woman marrying each other? Wouldn’t that solve all the problems? Hasan eyed me resignedly and shook his head: clearly I didn’t understand. “The most important reason why that doesn’t happen is that it wouldn’t be a real marriage. Marriage isn’t just for show, it isn’t



to hide who we are. It's something that you must take seriously." The model of love *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians internalize from childhood pivots around this ideal of *authentic* heterosexual marriage actualized through love and choice.

The meanings of marriage that circulate in Indonesian popular culture are strongly shaped by the state and mass media. Many scholars have commented on the decline of arranged marriages in Indonesia. While a range of marriage practices still exist, the dominant model of marriage is based on monogamous love and choice. The importance of this to *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities cannot be overstated. In Indonesian and many ethnolocalized languages the verb "to marry" can take active or passive forms: one can "be married off" or "marry someone." For decades the latter has been eclipsing the former, a process linked to conceptions of nationalism and modernity that also draws from Western models of romantic love transmitted through mass media. It strongly emphasizes notions of authenticity and choice; love should be true and freely chosen by individuals, not families.

Late colonial literature brought together nation, people, and language through the power of love, particularly around the conflict over "arranged" marriages, associated with tradition, versus "love" marriages, associated with modernity and nationalism. Such conflicts figure centrally in nationalist literature, condensing debates over tradition, modernity, and collective identity. Love and choice imply democracy, equality, and a horizon beyond the family and locality. This literature frames love as selfless when directed towards either the nation or hoped-for spouse: in Jim Siegel's words, "nationalism and love are linked because through it, peoples are mixed and a new authority is created." This is a love that "demands recognition" and is "inseparable from the struggle for progress." Properly chosen love makes you a proper citizen. It is for this reason that the failure of national-love is not barrenness, but sickness (*sakit*), an unnational love that can kill. In Jim Siegel's words once again,

What would the cure for love sickness be if not proper recognition, that is, recognizing cinta [love] for what it is: *the power to compel recognition*. More precisely, it is the power to compel recognition of desire transformed into idealism. That idealism is directed towards the advancement of the Indonesian people. At that time [in the 1920s and 1930s], this meant not independence and not equality. It meant rather *the possibility of having a certain identity*. One which marked one as progressive. A progressive person was in touch with the modern world outside the Indies.

This reveals what Susan Rodgers terms a "twin approach to constructing a modern self and imagining a modern society," whereby "in gaining a modern self, [Indonesians] gain a modern vision of the world, and vice versa. Selfhood becomes permeated with political meaning." While there are still arranged marriages, and many that fall between arrangement and choice, the ideal of chosen marriage now dominates images of the proper Indonesian



citizen. This is a love that does not just happen to you through arrangement, but is performed through choice.

Performatives depend on cultural context: only an umpire can declare “strike!” and only a judge or jury can pronounce someone “innocent” in a court of law. The ability of love to compel national recognition depends on a modern conception of heterosexual desire (termed, after all, with transformed English terms [*normal* or *hetero*] just like *gay* and *lesbi*). *Gay* or *lesbi* love does not get you national belonging: heteronormativity lies at the heart of national love. Indonesians who term themselves *gay* or *lesbi* mark themselves as in touch with the modern world outside the archipelago, but in terms of a love that receives no recognition. It does not belong.

The key point is that when marriage is arranged, sexual orientation is secondary, but sexual orientation comes to the foreground—to some extent, comes into being—through a language of choice. The failure to “be married off” is a failure of the family to see one of their members properly married. However, when marriage hinges on choice—on a relational, choosing self animated by love—that self and that love fail if not heterosexual. It is a failure of the self and a failure of citizenship. As one married *gay* man put it when advising unmarried *gay* men, “marriage is up to us.” To be national and modern, this choice must be heterosexual choice. It is through heterosexuality that self and nation articulate.

A heteronormative worldview can dismiss same-gender sex as devoid of deeper implication, but same-gender love leans dangerously close to kinship. Since many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians see their capacity for loving people of the same gender as their distinguishing characteristic, more than same-gender attraction (which is seen as ubiquitous), this hegemony can bring incredible pain and desperation. Many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians love their partners passionately: wed them in unrecognized ceremonies in the dead of night at the homes of sympathetic preachers, sleep cuddled in their arms, trade rings, go to the photographer’s shop for portraits which are carried in wallets until faded and scarred by creases. It is this love, far more than the actual sexual acts themselves, which is prohibited by dominant discourses of national belonging. The irony is that *gay* identity could be seen as one of the great success stories of the New Order: the clearest example of an identity that exists only at the national level, not in ethnic term. Gay Indonesians think both the local and the transnational through the national.



Unlike “traditional” non-normative sexualities and genders like *bissu* in South Sulawesi or *warok-gemblak* in East Java, it is clear that the term *gay* does not come from local tradition. It is a transformed Western term that Indonesians see as part of national culture. *Gay* Indonesians are thus part of national culture, but are also excluded from national culture because their choices and loves don’t fit the ideal of the national personality. In other words, although heterosexuality has become linked to the idea of the national personality, the ideal of the national personality can include more than heterosexuality. Indonesia is now at a very exciting time of great change in which there is great hope and great fear for the future. In my own country, where democracy is in great danger, George W. Bush treats gay people like a threat to the nation and wishes to ban same-sex marriage. For *gay* Indonesians, only time will tell if new visions of national belonging will be created that respect them as complete citizens of this great country as it struggles toward the dream of full democracy and social justice.

