

Embodied Gender: Exploring Issues of Gender and Sexuality in a Globalised Sulawesi

Mewujudkan Gender: Penjelajahan Isu-isu Gender dan Sexualiti di Sulawesi

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Abstrak

Pengaruh globalisasi terhadap subyektivitas gender merupakan bukti yang jelas. Mungkin pengaruh yang lebih jelas seperti tidak ditemui dimanapun dalam subyektivitas gender. Waria (laki-laki transgender) bekerja sebagai penata rambut, ahli kecantikan, dan perancang busana, dan mereka turut serta dalam kontes kecantikan dan kompetisi aerobik. Dewasa ini, semakin banyak waria yang melakukan operasi kecantikan untuk memfemininkan tubuhnya. Akan tetapi, model femininitas yang dikehendaki waria bukanlah model femininitas lokal (yaitu sopan, pendiam, berpakaian yang tertutup). Sebaliknya, hampir semua waria meniru femininitas model Barat (yaitu berperilaku aneh, berpakaian terbuka, senang mengumbar nafsu). Makalah ini mengungkapkan makna gender, femininitas, dan maskulinitas, sebelum menganalisa bagaimana waria mengkonsumsi budaya gender global, mewujudkan, menampilkannya dan menciptakannya kembali. Secara spesifik, saya akan menjelaskan bagaimana waria menyatakan identitas gendernya yang khas.

The influence of global discourses on gendered subjectivities in Sulawesi is clearly evident. Perhaps nowhere is this influence more visible than in transgendered subjectivities. Waria (transgendered males) work as hairdressers, beauticians and fashion designers, and they participate in beauty pageants and aerobic competitions. Waria are increasingly undergoing cosmetic surgery to feminise their body. However, the model of femininity which waria desire is not the local model (i.e. demure, reserved, body-covering clothing). Rather, waria almost parody Western femininity (i.e. outlandish behaviour, scant clothing, overtly sexual). This paper explores local meanings of gender, femininity and masculinity, before moving on to analyse the ways in which waria consume global gender culture and embody it, perform it, and recreate it. More specifically, I examine ways in which waria assert a unique gendered identity.



Introduction

The inspiration for this paper comes from three directions. Firstly, during my PhD fieldwork I had the opportunity to get to know a number of *waria* (transgendered males). These individuals were simultaneously consuming global gender culture while presenting a gendered image inflected with local Indonesian notions of gender. Secondly, I was at a conference in Singapore recently and Karin Klenke, who gave her paper before mine, talked about heteronormativity, queer identity, and the body. She commented that women in rural Indonesia are increasingly being influenced by *waria* in terms of fashion and that *waria* are playing a large role in transformations of the local heterosexual gender system. Thirdly, the television series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, raises all sorts of questions for me about gender and sexuality. How do five gay men know how to make a straight man attractive to women? Moreover, what impact is this show, and its various manifestations, having on heterosexual gender systems here and elsewhere? So these three factors combined to inspire me to explore issues of global gender consumption and examine the influence of gay/transgender culture on dominant gender structures.

I have divided this paper into three sections. In the first section I introduce Sulawesi, the island where I lived when conducting my PhD fieldwork. In the second section I examine gender ideals in Sulawesi: what should a man be like? what should a woman be like? I do this in order to juxtapose normative gender models with those performatively constituted by *waria*. In the third section I introduce Santi, an individual who identifies as *waria*. Through Santi's narratives ways in which *waria* adopt and adapt global images of gender, and ways in which they manipulate the body, are revealed. I conclude the paper by arguing that through these processes of consumption and reformation, *waria* actually assert a unique gendered identity.

Sulawesi

Sulawesi is an orchid shaped island to the north of Indonesia's most populous island of Java. It was in the south of Sulawesi that I lived for a year and a half while conducting fieldwork on emic notions of gender. The largest ethnic group living in Sulawesi are Bugis. Legend has it that Bugis were such feared pirates that sailors roaming the seas around Southeast Asia used to warn their mates to beware of the Bugis pirate, which, as the story goes, became 'Beware of the Boogie



man.’ Whether or not this is the real etymology of the term, the Bugis were, and continue to be, great seafarers and there are records dating from the 12th century recording their exploits in Sumatra. As testament to this, a once infamous street in Singapore – now a much sterilised version of its former self – is named Bugis Street. The Bugis royal courts converted to Islam in the early seventeenth century and around 90% of the 3.5 million Bugis now identify as Muslim; pre-Islamic beliefs are still strongly held, however.

Men in Sulawesi

Local, national, and Islamic discourses combine to produce ideals of masculinity. Such discourses are pervasive and weave their way into most areas of everyday life. For instance, there are clear ideas about what constitutes appropriate men’s work. Men’s activities generally involve those that bring food, money, and services into the home (Millar, 1983, 1989). Similarly, Pelras notes, ‘Whether as a peasant, a fisherman, an artisan or a trader, the [Bugis] man’s main field of activity is outside the house, and he is the main income provider’ (1996:162). Specifically masculine activities include tillage, sowing, fishing from a boat, looking after cattle, gathering in the forest, tapping palm sap to make palm beer, hunting, carpentry, house- and boat-building, and working iron, gold or silver (Pelras, 1996:162). Men should also strive to impress the community with their intelligence and accomplishments. As such, additional occupations that are generally available to higher status men include religious instructor (*imam*), teacher, businessman, and government employee.

Men may work at daily tasks which require travelling some distance from the home, for instance, gathering forest products (such as wood and palm sugar sap), engaging in construction projects, or working as market vendors (Millar, 1983). Indeed, there may be a certain expectation placed on young men that they make extended trips to other parts of the archipelago in search of employment opportunities and good fortune (Acciaioli, 1989; Tol, van Dijk, & Acciaioli, 2000). A man returning home economically successful will be accorded a high degree of respect.

Travelling great distances also proves one’s bravery, a desirable masculine quality. From a young age, boys are encouraged to be brave. For instance, one day my five-year-old host nephew stood



at the top of the house ladder and refused to climb down, saying he was scared. His father loudly chastised him: ‘What, do you want to grow up to be scared like a girl?’ The same nephew was often criticised by older boys for spending too much time in the kitchen with women. Here masculine ideals are reinforced through negative commentary.

In addition to bravery, men should develop and exude qualities such as self-discipline, reason, and physical strength (cf. Peletz, 1995:93). Men are expected to marry heterosexually and assume the role of head of the household. Men are conceived of as the appropriate individuals to engage formally in public interactions and to represent the family as its head. Married men should formally initiate extra-domestic actions to defend and assert their families’ positions, for example, during honour situations and interfamilial marriage negotiations.

Within the household, there are certain expectations placed on men. Commoner men, in addition to their labour outside, are responsible for maintaining their house and house grounds. Higher status men may engage a lower status man to do this. While men may help carry wood and water, open coconuts, and carve carcasses, generally they should have little else to do with food preparation (Millar, 1983:487). Men carry loads on their shoulders with a pole, while women carry loads on their heads. Men are expected to sit cross-legged on the floor, while women sit either with both legs to the side or one leg bent to the side and the other bent with the knee raised. Men should roll over their sarong, whereas women should tuck in their sarong.

Intimate relations are also defined in dominant gender discourse. Within their own households men should continue to interact with others in a formal manner. Millar comments that men maintain a circumspect distance with all female relatives, except their wives, mothers, and very young daughters (Millar, 1983:487). Great emphasis is also placed on the fearful respect with which sons treat fathers and elder brothers (Millar, 1983:487).

It can be seen, then, that there are very clear notions of what being a man means in Sulawesi. For some male-bodied individuals, however, these ideals do not sit comfortably with their sense of self. In realising that ideal notions of masculinity are inappropriate, *waria* search for alternative



models to base their identity on. To a large extent, the most compelling model to follow is the model of femininity. In the next section I examine what being a woman in Sulawesi means.

Women in Sulawesi

The Indonesian government, local traditional custom, and Islam combine in their collective efforts to promote ideal gender types for women. State ideology is an important site for examination as it actively promotes the idea that a woman's greatest achievement, and indeed her natural role, is as wife and mother. It is through pursuing these functions that a girl becomes a woman, and hence, a legitimate and worthy member of the Indonesian nation-state. In New Order rhetoric, women were considered to be the affective centre of the family. The policy of promoting nuclear families and motherhood - termed *Ibuism* by some scholars - defined the five major duties of women:

1. Woman's duty as wife
2. Woman's duty as mother
3. Woman's duty as procreator
4. Woman's duty as financial manager
5. Woman's duty as a member of society

In Indonesia, women only properly become mothers within the institution of the family. Moreover, women only become individuals of the nation when they have carried out all of these duties.

Local traditional custom (*adat*) defines appropriate gender roles. *Siri'* (shame/honour), is a powerful concept in Bugis culture and it serves to regulate the behaviour of women. Women are seen as the embodiment of a family's honour and therefore must not damage their *siri'* (honour) or this damages the whole family's *siri'*. If a woman refuses to marry heterosexually and perform all the roles of being a good woman – e.g. dress and behave appropriately, maintain order within the household – she would potentially dishonour her entire family.

State religious offices and Islamic groups have actively sought to shape the image of Muslim women. Adherence to Islam is strong in South Sulawesi and the ability of this institution to shape



appropriate gender roles is therefore correspondingly effective. Islam recommends dress-styles, behaviours, and roles.

There are, then, very clear notions of what constitutes ideal womanhood. In rejecting conforming to ideals of masculinity, some male-bodied individuals adopt a number of aspects of ideal femininity; but *waria* certainly do not conform to all of these ideals. In the next section I want to introduce *waria* subjectivity and look at ways in which *waria* reject local ideals of masculinity, adopt some aspects of local femininity, and consume and reproduce global gender culture. Before doing this, however, I want to briefly discuss the issue of globalisation.

Globalisation

Globalisation is marked by rapid advances in information and communication technology. Such advances mean we are able to quickly disseminate particular values throughout the global community. One of the most concrete forms of globalisation is the present shape of mass media, which has the ability to transmit vast amounts of information through news broadcasts, advertising, music, and film. The resulting rapid dissemination of popular culture has a significant impact on the life of local communities in Indonesia and this has led life in various locales to appear increasingly homogeneous. However, various local communities have responded differently to newly introduced values resulting in globalisation in some cases accentuating diversity.

As a point of departure, we can start with a postcolonial frame as ‘the emergence of nations in the formally colonised world poses a new set of questions about belonging, citizenship, and the self’ (Boellstorff, 1999:476). Even though the impact of globalisation on gender and sexual identities has been great in Indonesia, that this has not meant that identities here are the same as those elsewhere. While *gai* and *lesbi* have appropriated terms from the West, their meanings have been reconfigured. For instance, many gay identified men in Indonesia marry women (Boellstorff, 1999:479). Moreover, some individuals resist Western derived terms, for instance many females do not like the term *lesbi*, arguing that it concentrates focus too much on sexuality at the expense



of other aspects of their identity. As one informant told me, 'I prefer the term *hunter* [to describe my identity rather than the term *lesbi*], because I hunt down love and then pounce of it'.

Boellstorff critiques two reductionisms which frequently occur in western views of non-western gay and lesbian subjectivities. The first is the assumption that non-western subjectivities are 'just like' lesbian and gay subjectivities in a homogenised 'west' (1999:478). These subjectivities, it is assumed, represent the 'transcendental gay or lesbian subject, characterised by a supposed sameness that has been there all along, hidden under a veneer of exotic cultural difference' (1999:478). The second reductionism that Boellstorff points out is the opposite to the first and it assumes that gay men and lesbians in non-western environments suffer from false consciousness and are traitors to their 'traditional' subjectivities, victims of (and, ultimately, collaborators with) a global gay imperialism. Furthermore, such subjectivities are viewed as representing the McDonalds-ised, inauthentic gay or lesbian subject (1999:478).

Rather than see queer subjectivity as an either/or equation, Boellstorff notes that identities are not becoming more the same or more different, but rather that transformations of the very yardstick used to gauge such expressions is changing. In effect, we can see change not as boundaries transgressed but rather boundaries blurred (1999:480). Boellstorff argues that *gay* and *lesbi* are translocal subjectivities for which the local-global binarism is conceptually and methodologically insufficient (1999:480). As Boellstorff affirms, 'Gay and lesbi Indonesians construct themselves as part of a community that, while it includes non-Indonesians in complex ways, transforms rhetorics of nationalism and locality as well' (1999:480). In many ways *waria* are incorporated into a local-national-global montage and I now want to explore *waria* subjectivity and embodied gender.

Waria

Santi was born male, but s/he neither identifies, nor is identified as, a man; nor does s/he identify as a woman. I have outlined above the very clear definitions of being a woman and of being a man in Sulawesi society. By not conforming to these, Santi is relegated to another category; that of *waria*. I want to look now at ways in which Santi, and other *waria*, consume global culture.



Indeed, while the influence of transnational discourses on gendered identities in Indonesia is clearly evident, nowhere is this influence more visible than in transgendered subjectivities.

The body has always been a site where gender is contested in Indonesia. However, many early travellers to the region noted that women and men appeared very similar, e.g. men and women both wore *sarong*. While everyone did, and still often do, wear *sarong*, there are subtle differences; for instance, women tuck their sarong in while men roll theirs down. Increasingly, though, gender differentiation is becoming more publicly marked and *waria* are at the forefront of this change.

Waria have long adapted feminine dress styles from overseas (see images 1-2: these early styles of dress were adopted from western norms of femininity). More recently, *waria* have taken on-board local images of femininity (image 3). However, the model of femininity which *waria* desire is not the local model (i.e. demure, reserved, body-covering clothing). Rather, *waria* almost parody Western femininity (i.e. outlandish behaviour, scant clothing, overtly sexual). Moreover, *waria* have adopted fashions of skimpy apparel worn on Western beaches; something women in a Muslim society would not tend to do (image 4). *Waria* also enter beauty pageants, thus their form of fashion permeates into mainstream society (image 5). In this way, *waria* presentation influences local fashions. *Waria* also work as hairdressers, beauticians and fashion designers, and they participate in aerobic competitions – all of these aspects influence mainstream norms of gender.

Waria are increasingly undergoing cosmetic surgery to ‘feminise’ the body. This is commonly achieved through make-up. Images 6 and 7 show the application of make-up. While women also apply make-up, it is often *waria* who exemplify such applications.

Waria also make more permanent changes to their body. Santi, like many *waria*, desires to feminise hir body. When I first saw hir after s/he returned from a trip to Malaysia, s/he was convinced more than ever of the need to make hir body more feminine:

In Malaysia lots of *waria* are having operations. They’re getting breasts, and some of them are huge! You know coconuts? Well they’re bigger than that, Serli [Sharyn]. My God (*Iya Allah!*) They’re massive! But it’s expensive, Rp600, 000 (US\$60) for one! And they’re having injections in their nose. See here [she



points to a pin size bruise at the top of her nose]? I've just had an injection (*disuntik*) to make my nose more prominent (*lebih mancung*). I've had four injections here and two in my chin to make it rounder ... and in my lips. Lips are only Rp30, 000 (US\$3). I think you can even get that done here [in Sulawesi]. And some *waria* are having operations. They're getting their penis cut off (*kontolnya dipotong*) and vaginas (*fagina*) made. I wouldn't mind an operation like that, but it's very expensive. To have breast implants and a vagina made costs around Rp17 million (US\$1,700). But I'm brave enough and I have the desire to do it ... I just have to find the cash (*duit*) (Santi).

Not many *waria* express a desire to undergo such radical surgery. Certainly a prohibiting factor is the cost of the operation. There is also the point that not all *waria* see their genitalia as being at odds with their idea of self. Moreover, some informants reveal that it is increasingly common for *waria* sex workers in urban areas to be requested to penetrate their clients (cf. Kulick, 1998, for a similar discussion of travesti in Brazil). Most *waria* do, however, aim to feminise their physical body. In fact, if *waria* in more urban settings make no attempt at this, they are often derided with snide remarks, such as, 'Where's ya tits (*tete' mu di mana loh*)?' Some *waria* take hormones, the most common of which is the Pill. Tilly, a rather vivacious *waria* in hir earlier twenties, who frequently sits around plucking facial hair with a pair of tweezers attached to a key-ring, notes that s/he takes hormone tablets in order to, 'make my breasts bigger, my voice higher pitched, and to get a more feminine body.' To enhance the effect, Tilly also injects silicon into hir hips to make them rounder. Silicon is commonly injected into other areas as well, including the nose, cheeks, lips, breasts, hips, and bottom. As one *waria*, Eka, reveals:

There are *waria* in [the small town of] Sengkang who get injections. Yayu is having injections in hir breasts to make them bigger. One session costs Rp100,000 (US\$10). Apparently the injection can last for a long time (*tahan lama*), but if you want it to last, it's more expensive (Eka).

When I questioned Eka why *waria* want to have injections and take hormone tablets s/he replied:

So they look like women ... look more beautiful. And more importantly, so men will be interested (*tertarik*) ... so men will find us attractive. You know, so it's easier to find men. There's a famous artist *waria* who has had an operation and now has a vagina (*fagina*). Her name is Doccé, and s/he lives in Jakarta (Eka).

It is not only the physical body that is manipulated in attempts to achieve femininity. *Waria* also dress in feminine clothing and tie their sarong in the fashion of women (tucked in rather than rolled). Many also grow their hair long and wear make-up. Beauty, appearance, glamour and



style are all incredibly important in *waria* constructions of identity (Boellstorff, 1999, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Klenke, 2003).

So it can be seen here that *waria* are adopting aspects of femininity from a global context and this involves both accessorising and manipulating the body. Moreover, *waria* are at the forefront of influencing gendered culture. But *waria* are certainly not copying global/western notions of feminine beauty unadulterated.

Conclusion

What I have sought to do in this paper is explore ways in which *waria* consume global gender culture, embody it, perform it, and recreate it. I have also argued that while *waria* do this, they also assert a unique gendered identity: they mix aspects of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, with global notions of gender, and manipulate the body in order to reveal this. Through the narratives of Santi and Eka ways in which *waria* adopt and adapt global images of gender, and ways in which they manipulate the body, are revealed. Through these processes of consumption and reformation, *waria* assert a unique gendered identity.

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