



Indonesia by Tom Boellstorff

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The islands making up present-day Indonesia have never been remote, since the archipelago lies on the great trade routes between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world to the West, and China, Japan, and Korea to the East. Indonesia was a Dutch colony for almost 350 years, though the intensity of the Dutch presence varied substantially. Since 1945 Indonesia has been independent; it is now the fourth most populous nation and home to more Muslims than any other country.

With over 3,000 inhabited islands, it is not surprising that a great range of non-normative sexualities and genders can be found in the archipelago. Ritual or dramatic professions that involve cross-dressing (usually men wearing women's clothes or a mix of men's and women's clothing), same-sex relationships, or both have existed in some parts of the archipelago since oral and written records have been kept.

Despite the fact that Westerners (and occasionally, Indonesians) seize upon this history to claim a legacy of tolerance or fluidity in the archipelago, such claims say much more about the contemporary politics of multiculturalism than they do about these professions themselves.

In general, these ritual or dramatic professions are not sexualities or genders as typically understood in the West: they are typically only for men, for only part of the life span, and do not usually release the persons who take them up from the obligations of heterosexual marriage. More recently, however, Western ideas of gender and sexuality have made an appearance in Indonesia and have been adapted to the Indonesian context.

Bissu

Perhaps the best-known case of ritual or dramatic professions that include cross-dressing involves ritual specialists known as *bissu*, found among members of the Bugis ethnic group on the island of Sulawesi (Celebes). *Bissu* were usually men (but sometimes women as well) who guarded sacred objects in the royal courts and who would for certain purposes dress in a manner combining male and female clothing. As is the case for many ritual or dramatic professions in the region, sexual asceticism was often seen as a way for *bissus* to increase their mystical powers.

Some ritual or dramatic professions (including *bissu*), persist to the contemporary period in some form; others have been discontinued due to the influences of colonialism and religions like Islam and Christianity, and are known only through historical texts.

Warias

Distinct from these ritual and dramatic professions is the male transvestite *waria* (better known to the Indonesian public as *banci* or *béncong*, terms most *Warias* consider offensive). *Warias* are persons born as men who typically dress in a feminine style (though they do not usually try to "pass" as women). From childhood, most believe that they have women's souls or a soul that is both male and female.

From available information, it seems that *Warias* first appeared in the archipelago in the nineteenth century. From the beginning they were not associated with any particular ethnic group, but were associated

with popular entertainment, market trading, and other lower-class urban work.

It appears that around 1980, *Warias* increasingly began dressing as *waria* twenty-four hours a day, and also increasingly began to make permanent modifications to their bodies, such as taking female hormones or receiving silicone injections (sex reassignment surgery involving the genitalia remains rare).

Warias are now particularly associated with the salon profession and are fairly visible; for instance, they appear on television and perform at a range of events. However, *Warias* are not treated as equal members of Indonesian society and often suffer discrimination from family and neighbors; the range of jobs open to them is quite limited.

Most *Warias* have romantic and sexual relationships with men who see themselves as "normal," rather than with women or other *Warias*.

Gay, Lesbi, and Tomboi

Beginning around 1970, some Indonesians who participated in same-sex sexual relationships began using terms like *gay* and *lesbi* to describe themselves, and by the 1980s a national network of gay and lesbian groups existed in the archipelago, though many were quite small, and lesbian groups were in a distinct minority.

In contrast to members of ritual or dramatic professions, as well as those who embrace the *waria* form of selfhood, these Indonesians calling themselves *gay* or *lesbi* do not learn about these concepts from their traditional or local background. Consequently, mass media play an important role in how most *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians come to think of themselves as *gay* and *lesbi* in the first place. Often it is through a newspaper or television show that hitherto indistinct desires for the same gender become understood as an "identity."

The concepts *gay* and *lesbi* are understood to be Western terms, or more accurately, Western terms that have been transformed in the Indonesian context.

One of the most important differences between the concepts *gay* and *lesbi* is that no female equivalent to *waria* existed at the time *gay* and *lesbi* became established in the archipelago. As a result, while most *gay* men and *waria* understand themselves as distinct communities (even if they are on friendly terms), masculine women (known most widely as *tomboi*) are sometimes classed as a kind of *lesbi* woman, sometimes as a distinct category of person.

While *gay* men and *Warias* rarely have sex with each other, feminine *lesbi* women and *tombois* are mutually ideal partners. This demonstrates how national or local contexts can transform what otherwise appear to be uniformly globalizing concepts.

In the early 2000s, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians experienced both a notable increase in press coverage, some of it relatively tolerant, and an increase in anti-*gay* and anti-*lesbi* sentiment, including the threat of anti-homosexual legislation and cases where youth groups attacked public performances that included *gay* men and *Warias*. What the future holds for Indonesia's sexual and gender minorities remains hopeful but uncertain.

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About the Author

Tom Boellstorff is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He has worked with gay, lesbian, and transgendered Indonesians as an ethnographer and activist since 1992. Much of his activist work has been in the domain of HIV prevention. From 2002 until 2004 he was national co-chair for the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists. He is the author of a number of books and articles, including *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*.