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### Local Traditions, Global Influences, National Belonging: Conditional Acceptance of Cross-Gender Dance in Central Java, Indonesia

Calla Rhodes  
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# LOCAL TRADITIONS, GLOBAL INFLUENCES, NATIONAL BELONGING: CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF CROSS-GENDER DANCE IN CENTRAL JAVA, INDONESIA

Abstract: Indonesia has a long and rich history of cross-gender performance in which males embody femininity onstage. Until recently, these diverse, locally-specific traditions were a widely accepted cultural practice. However, modern negative associations with the LGBTQ+ community and, by extension, the West, threaten the survival of traditional Indonesian cross-gender dance. By investigating feminine male gender performance in Java, I will uncover how Indonesians draw from localized cultural traditions, as well as globalized practices like Western-style drag, to destabilize restrictive national constructions of gender. I posit that traditional cross-gender dance serves as a culturally-sanctioned outlet for male expressions of femininity that exist outside of both the stigmatized Indonesian category of *waria* (transgender woman) and Western queerness. However, modern-day acceptance of traditional cross-gender dance is tenuous at best, hinging on the incorporation of humor and an emphasis on local tradition which distances Indonesian cross-gender dance from its Western counterpart, drag.

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SIT Study Abroad Indonesia: Arts, Religion, & Social Change

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## I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Many thanks to Didik Nini Thowok, who graciously welcomed me into his studio and introduced me to the world of cross-gender dance. It was an honor and a privilege to gain insight into this rich cultural tradition from one of the greatest pioneers of its preservation. Your deep appreciation for the art form was a joy to witness.

I am also grateful to everyone at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger for welcoming me and allowing me to tag along with their organization's daily activities. Special thanks to Pak Gatot, who accompanied me throughout my visit and exposed me to so many facets of Banyumas' local culture. Thanks also to Mas Ivan, the PHD student who graciously offered English translation and insights from his own research.<sup>1</sup> Your kindness and generosity will not be forgotten.

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Of course, I must acknowledge the incredible SIT Indonesia staff members, each of whom taught me so much about Indonesian language and culture. Thank you to Dian for helping me translate my interview recordings and for giggling with Tali and I through language classes.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of this organization and the people associated with it have been omitted to protect it against potential reputational damage due to the sensitive nature of LGBTQ+ issues in Indonesia. For clarity, I will refer to it as "Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger," which translates to "Lengger Preservation Foundation" in Indonesian.

Finally, a huge thank you to Bu Ari. This program would not be the same without your warm presence, humor, and caring leadership.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Cross-gender performance is deeply rooted in Javanese cultural tradition dating back centuries. As Purdue University Anthropology and Women's Studies professor Evelyn Blackwood notes, the practice of "ritual transvestism" appears to have been widespread throughout Indonesia and other Southeast Asian islands since pre-Islamic times.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, ritual practitioners would adopt the behavior and dress typically associated with the other sex in the state of liminality accompanying ritual. Outside of the ritual context, however, the individual would return to a normative gender presentation. In other cases, gender transgression went beyond the ritual context, bleeding into the everyday status and identity of the practitioner.<sup>3</sup> This transcendence of ordinary human gender boundaries was not only socially accepted, but indeed valued within pre-Islamic Indonesian religious cosmologies as evidence of a connection to the supernatural.

In indigenous Javanese cosmology, God encompassed the duality of masculine and feminine, delicately balancing these two antagonistic forces. By transgressing the bounds of gender, ritual practitioners of the past took on the dangerous task of reuniting male and female into a divine whole. This earned them great respect and admiration.<sup>4</sup> The royal courts of 14th and 15th century Central and East Java revered Hindu-Buddhist gods and goddesses who switched between genders. These influences are evident in the Javanese *wayang* shadow puppet tradition, which is full of characters, both male and female, capable of transforming into the "opposite" sex.<sup>5</sup>

The Javanese tradition of gender-transgressive performance is not limited to religious

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<sup>2</sup> Blackwood, "Gender Transgression in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia," 849.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 850-851.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 858-859.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 856.

ritual. The observations of Theodore Pigeaud provide evidence of cross-dressing in masked dance, social dance, and popular theater shows in East Java from the 1820s to the early 20th century.<sup>6</sup> In Java, social acceptance of cross-gender performance in both religious and entertainment contexts is rooted in centuries-old tradition.

Cross-gender performance can thus serve as a socially-sanctioned outlet for subversive gender expression in a society that is increasingly hostile to LGBTQ+ identities. Roughly the equivalent of transgender women in America, *waria* (a portmanteau of “*wanita*” and “*pria*,” the Indonesian words for “woman” and “man”) are individuals who were born male but feel that they have a woman’s spirit and present in a feminine manner.<sup>7</sup> Unlike many American transgender women, however, most *waria* do not wish to be perceived as women in the same way as women who are born female, and they do not necessarily strive to “pass” as cisgender women. Instead, they conceptualize their identity as a distinct category, akin to a performance of femininity.<sup>8</sup> Christina Sunardi, a University of Washington professor who researches cross-gender dance in Malang, East Java, contends that the stage offers a space for male-born individuals who are unable to live openly as *waria* to embrace and embody their authentic feminine self.<sup>9</sup>

My research will focus on feminine gender performance by those who were assigned male at birth, encompassing both men, whose feminine personas are limited to the stage, and *waria*, who use feminine performance as a means of expressing their truest identity, with varying degrees of social acceptance. My focus on feminine gender expression is due in part to the fact that “male-to-female” gender transgression is more common in both traditional Javanese dance

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<sup>6</sup> Sunardi, “Pushing at the Boundaries of the Body,” 460.

<sup>7</sup> Boellstorff, “Playing Back the Nation; Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” 167.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Sunardi, “Pushing at the Boundaries of the Body,” 478.

and contemporary drag shows. *Waria* are also much more visible in Indonesian society than their masculine equivalents, known *tombois* or *hunters*. The relative invisibility of *tombois* and *hunters* in Indonesian society does not make their community any less worthy of academic study; however, it does make that study a more difficult task that I am prepared to undertake in less than a month of fieldwork. By investigating cross-gender performance in Java, I will uncover how feminine males negotiate a place in the modern Indonesian nation by drawing on both localized cultural traditions and globalized practices like Western-style drag. Further research is needed to unearth the nuances of how masculine female gender performance in Indonesia plays into this unsettling of rigid national constructions of gender.

Key questions I will explore include: How might cross-gender performance serve as an outlet for unconventional gender expression in a society that is still largely hostile to *waria*? To what extent is LGBTQ+ identity viewed as incongruent with Indonesian culture and values, and is this perception historically rooted? Are drag and traditional Javanese cross-gender dance distinct art forms, or do they overlap significantly? To what extent do drag performers in Java draw from Western drag tradition, as opposed to locally-specific Javanese cross-gender dance forms? How well does the Indonesian *waria* identity map onto Western conceptions of “transgender” identity? Do *waria* see themselves as part of a global queer community, or do they construct their identity in more national, or even local, terms?

### III. FIELD SITES

My quest to answer these questions brought me to three distinct, yet interrelated, field sites. The first was the studio of Didik Nini Thowok, one of Indonesia’s most celebrated and well-known cross-gender dancers. Tucked away in a quiet residential neighborhood in



Yogyakarta, Thowok's studio is instantly recognizable by the giant image of his female persona's face emblazoned on the front of the building. During our interviews, Thowok presents as a man, but he embodies a kind of demure femininity, with the characteristic prim posture and elegant mannerisms of a dancer. He is emotionally expressive, and at one point he is brought to tears when speaking about how surrendering to God sustains him through intolerance. Thowok is also soft-spoken, so much so that I worry the recording app on my phone won't fully capture our conversation. Offstage, Didik Nini Thowok identifies as a man, and he respectfully but firmly denies any personal connection to the LGBTQ+ community. Onstage, however, he transforms into a woman, dancing female-style choreography drawn from cultural traditions from across Indonesia and the globe. Thowok serves me tea and snacks as I ask him questions about his background, choreography, and experiences as an internationally-successful dancer. The next day, he invites me back to tour his extensive collection of costumes, props, press clippings, and other artifacts of his approximately five decade-long career as a cross-gender performer.

My second field site was Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, a cultural educational organization in Central Java dedicated to the preservation of *lengger*, a traditional female-style dance.<sup>10</sup> There, I observed a rehearsal of *lengger lanang*, as the organization was preparing for a large upcoming event that would be attended by an important local politician and presidential candidate. I also observed a performance of *arjuna*, a male-style dance traditionally performed by women which is based on the effeminate male hero of the great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*.

My final field site was Raminten Cabaret, a drag show located on Malioboro, a busy street at the center of Yogyakarta. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview any of the drag

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<sup>10</sup> The name and exact location of this organization have been omitted to protect it against potential reputational damage due to the sensitive nature of LGBTQ+ issues in Indonesia. For clarity, I will refer to it as "Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger," which translates to "Lengger Preservation Foundation" in Indonesian.

queens who perform at Raminten Cabaret, so my discussion of drag in Yogyakarta will be based entirely on observations after attending three shows with three different sets.

Together, these field sites provided insight into the diverse world of cross-gender dance in Indonesia. Didik Nini Thowok offered the perspective of a renowned dancer who specializes in traditional cross-gender dance from many different regional Indonesian and international cultures. My time at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger added a layer of nuance to my thinking, offering the perspective of dancers who specialize in one particular local dance that just so happens to be cross-gender. Finally, observing drag at Raminten Cabaret provided an interesting counterpoint to the more traditional dances of Thowok and dancers at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, shedding light on how globalization and interaction with Western culture have transformed the landscape of cross-gender dance in Indonesia.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY & ETHICS

The discussion that follows is largely rooted in primary data gathered through interviews and participant observation conducted in Yogyakarta and an unnamed village in Central Java, Indonesia. My interviewees included a well-known Javanese cross-gender dancer, three *lengger lanang* dancers, the vice secretary of an organization dedicated to the preservation of *lengger lanang*, and a transgender community organizer. My thinking was also informed and enriched by informal conversations with several LGBTQ+ individuals, including a transgender woman, an HIV-positive gay man, and a nonbinary lesbian. In person, I observed a performance of the male-style *arjuna* dance by a woman, a rehearsal of the female-style *lengger lanang* dance by a man, as well as three drag shows at Raminten Cabaret. I also watched a number of online videos of *lengger lanang* and Didik Nini Thowok's various cross-gender performances. The following

investigation draws from these interviews and observations, as well as the limited secondary scholarship available on the topics of Indonesian cross-gender dance and *waria* identity.

Throughout the process of conducting interviews, I was mindful of the sensitive nature of my research subject. LGBTQ+ identity is a controversial, stigmatized topic in Indonesia. Regardless of cultural context, gender identity can be deeply personal. For this reason, I made it clear to all of my interlocutors that participation was voluntary and that they could refuse to answer questions or revoke their consent to being interviewed at any time. In order to avoid any risk of harm as a consequence of their participation in my research, I have changed the names of all of my interlocutors except that of Didik Nini Thowok, who is a public figure and explicitly chose to be identified by name.

## V. A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this paper, I use the term “cross-gender” to refer to a style of dance in which individuals perform as the gender opposite to their biological sex. I landed on this term, borrowed from Christina Sunardi’s writing on cross-gender dance in East Java, for a few reasons. The term “cross-gender” is descriptive in a neutral way, making no assumptions about the possible motivations behind transforming into another gender onstage. It is also the English term that my interlocutors used across the board. “Cross-gender” is an imperfect term, as it may wrongly imply that all performers are “crossing” gender boundaries to perform as a gender that they do not identify with in their day-to-day life. In reality, some performers may be affirming their true gender identity by embodying a gender that does not align with their biological sex. However, it has clear advantages over other possibilities, such as “transgender dance,” which falsely implies that cross-gender performance is always connected to a deeper identification with

the gender being performed. On the other hand, “female impersonation” misleadingly suggests that cross-gender dance is always a mere performance disconnected from a dancer’s true gender identity. The term “cross-gender” is also preferable to something like “gender subversive” or “gender transgressive,” which have a more radical connotation than my research suggests is warranted. I generally avoid referring to cross-gender dance as a form of cross-dressing, because this does not encapsulate the more holistic transformation into a differently-gendered persona that cross-gender dance typically entails. I do not use the term “cross-dresser” at all, given its pejorative connotations in the English language.

I also use the Indonesian term “*waria*” rather than the equivalent English term “transgender woman.” This is to emphasize that *waria* is a distinctly Indonesian identity and does not translate exactly to American conceptions of what it means to be trans. The term *waria* is a combination of “*wanita*,” meaning woman, and “*pria*,” meaning man. This reflects an understanding of *waria* as a woman’s soul in a male body. My use of the Indonesian term is also to highlight that *waria* identity is not womanhood *per se*, but rather what Tom Boellstorff terms a kind of “male femininity” which “operates in the orbit of male gendering.”<sup>11</sup> Following Boellstorff’s logic, I also use the pronouns s/he and her/his to refer to *waria* in an attempt to approximate the gender-neutral Indonesian third-person singular pronoun *dia*.

## VI. *WARIA* & NATIONAL BELONGING

*Waria* occupy a visible position in Indonesian society, much more so than those who identify as *gay*, *lesbi*, or *tomboi/hunter* (the equivalents of gay, lesbian, and female-to-male transgender Indonesians).<sup>12</sup> They often work as makeup artists, hair stylists, performers, or sex

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<sup>11</sup> Boellstorff, “Playing Back the Nation; Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

workers— professions that allow them to exist in the public sphere as feminine males. They are present in popular media, including television, advertisements, and the news, and even in the political sphere.<sup>13</sup> However, visibility is not the same thing as acceptance, and *waria* frequently face familial rejection, discrimination, and sometimes violence when they dare to exist publically as *waria*.

Throughout my interview with a prominent *waria* community organizer in Yogyakarta, s/he repeatedly stressed the point that *waria* belong to the Indonesian nation. “We are part of the Indonesian people, so it is important to care about inclusion, about *interseksionalitas*. We know well that Indonesian people are homophobic with LGBTIQ, so that’s why our movement is [about] how to build perspective to people that we are part of this nation,” s/he told me. In response to nearly every question I asked, s/he echoed that same sentiment, harkening back to the idea of national belonging.

This insistence that *waria* be recognized as part of Indonesia is undoubtedly a reaction to their marginalization in the national sphere. The *waria* community organizer I spoke to shared that “Transgenders really know themselves as part of the nation. Anyhow they identify, they declare themselves as a different gender, but they feel that they are part of the family. They feel they are part of the society, part of the nation. Anyhow, the [law] is not accommodating.” This reflects a dissonance between transgender Indonesians’ feeling of national belonging and the reality of their exclusion. However, my *waria* interlocutor also highlighted the ways in which transgender people *are* included, saying, “We can still access anything, we can still access the public health, we can still access anything in the public as a transgender.” S/he tells me that she could change her/his legal name to match her/his preferred name, if s/he had the time. These rights seemed to validate for my interlocutor that her/his sense of national belonging is not

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<sup>13</sup> Boellstorff, “Playing Back the Nation; Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” 165, 177.

entirely unfounded, that the country s/he was born in does not completely disown her/him, even as it marginalizes and excludes her/him.

What do male-born individuals whose relationship to gender does not conform to cultural standards do in a nation like Indonesia? Certainly, some embrace membership in a global or national LGBTQ+ community, performing in Western-style drag shows and/or identifying with terms like *waria* even if it means exclusion from a sense of national belonging. Others find ways of embodying femininity in their day-to-day lives that don't incur such a severe degree of marginalization. I posit that cross-gender dance offers an outlet for non-traditional male gender expression in Indonesian society, allowing males to express their inner femininity through a (relatively) culturally-approved medium that is significantly less stigmatized than living as a *waria*. In making this argument, I do not intend to imply that any of my male interlocutors who perform as women are *waria*. To my knowledge, none of them identified as such. However, male femininity exists along a spectrum, and cross-gender dancers certainly share enough similarities with *waria* to be grouped together in a discussion of gender performance as it relates to tradition, globalization, and national belonging.

## VII. GENDER AS PERFORMANCE: THE MASKED DANCES OF DIDIK NINI

### THOWOK

The iconic Javanese cross-gender dancer Didik Nini Thowok routinely dances wearing a mask, transforming into different characters within the same performance in a nod to the complex and ever-shifting nature of identity. His choreography frequently includes sudden changes in music which mark abrupt shifts from one style to another. In Thowok's *dwimuka* ('two face') performances, he dons one mask on the front of his head and another on the back,

often tricking the audience into believing that the back of his body is the front. A single dance may include many transformations, as Thowok shifts between starkly contrasting characters. Just when viewers think they have figured out which side is which, Thowok turns to reveal a new face. This has a profoundly disorienting effect, blurring the distinction between the mask and Thowok's "real" unmasked face. Some of Thowok's dances are also characterized by seemingly impossible contortions of the body, heightening this sense of confusion.<sup>14</sup> Didik Nini Thowok's performances traffic in extremes, juxtaposing apparently opposite concepts: old and young, beautiful and ugly, foreign and familiar. This has a comedic effect, exposing the absurdity of rigid binaries. As Jan Mrázek writes, Thowok's dances "manifest the contradictions and incongruity between the inherited and the new, between the familiar and the strange, or what people often think of as 'Javanese' and 'foreign' values and ways of doing things."<sup>15</sup>

In discussing the development of his masked dance choreography, Thowok muses, "I just wanted to express the dualism in my own life experience. The person has dualism: male and female. And which is the dominant?" He points to the presence of feminine men and masculine women in society, as well as the existence of drag and other forms of cross-gender performance. "It means everybody has dualism. And also dualism of good and bad. It's always balanced, like yin yang." According to Thowok, all people encompass opposing forces of good and bad, black and white. Thowok compares the diverse spectrum of humanity to a gradient of color: "if you go on a landscape during sunrise and sunset, there is in between. Always beautiful. Not only black and white—there is gray in everything."

Thowok is himself a testament to this dualism. Ethnically, he is both Javanese and Chinese, a man yet he transforms into a woman onstage. His dances blend modern and

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<sup>14</sup> Mrázek, "Masks and Selves in Contemporary Java: The Dances of Didik Nini Thowok," 251-252.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

traditional elements, drawing from both regional Indonesian traditions and international cultures. Thowok's masked dance choreography destabilizes the rigid binary categorizations that suggest these qualities are mutually exclusive, making a mockery of the notion that individuals have a single fixed identity.

One product of these musings on dualism is Thowok's *dwimuka* ('two faces') choreography. Thowok recalls one particular dance, in which he wears a beautiful mask on the back of his head and an ugly mask on the front. According to Thowok, this *dwimuka* dance is intended to illustrate that things are not always as they appear. Humans have a tendency of confusing beauty for good character, but external appearance is not always a good indicator of what lies within. The lowly taxi driver may have great wisdom, Thowok cautions. By placing the beautiful mask on the back of his head, where his ability to dance freely is constrained, he reveals the limits of appearance. Thowok stands up to illustrate this point, demonstrating his limited range of movement when dancing with his back facing the audience, compared to the freedom he enjoys when he dances facing forward.

The masked dances of Didik Nini Thowok highlight the performative nature of gender, suggesting that femininity is itself a kind of 'mask.' External appearances are not a perfect indicator of either biological sex or an individual's conception of their gender identity. By allowing artists to embody a gender that does not align with their sex, cross-gender dance calls into question the idea of gender as fixed and biologically "real." The inclusion of masks in Thowok's choreography underscores this point, unsettling viewers' conception of reality and suggesting that gender is a performed identity.

## VIII. FEMININE MEN IN *LENGGER LANANG*



Like the cross-gender dances of Didik Nini Thowok, *lengger lanang* expands the bounds of acceptable male behavior. The definition of *lengger* lies in its name, derived from the Javanese *leng*, which translates to “hole” (a reference to the female vagina), and *jenger*, which translates to the crest of a rooster (a reference to the penis). This etymology evokes the gender-bending nature of the dance, in which a male dancer embodies the appearance and mannerisms of a woman. There are two types of *lengger*: *lengger lanang*, which is danced by men, and *lengger wadon*, which is danced by women.

The dance is believed to originate from the 18th century, and folk stories about the original reason why men performed the female-style *lengger* dance vary. Some say that the dance was originally performed by agricultural communities working in the fields as an act of appreciation for the goddess of fertility. Men danced female roles, because they were considered holier than women, untainted by monthly menstruation. Another version of the history of *lengger* holds that men performed the dance in order to spread Islam across Indonesia, because women are more limited than men in which spaces they are welcome in. Local folk history also suggests that male spies performed as women in order to gain intel on the colonial powers during Dutch colonization.

Today, the reasons why men continue to perform *lengger* have shifted. Pak Gatot claims that *lengger lanang* protects women from sexualization, as the dance involves somewhat seductive movements. The dancers at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger posit that *lengger lanang* serves a three-fold function in modern society: preservation of tradition, connection to spirituality, and, primarily, entertainment. They also emphasize that performing *lengger* is a livelihood, and many dancers view it as a practical means of earning the money necessary to survive.

To suggest that the dance historically served as an outlet for *waria* expression would be anachronistic, falsely assuming that there exists a kind of trans-historical, trans-cultural trans identity. It is impossible to know how the *lengger lanang* dancers of the past conceived of their gender identities in relation to their art, and the dancers I spoke to did not volunteer that queerness was a personal motivation for their own *lengger* practice in the present. To Pak Gatot's knowledge, none of the dancers at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger openly identify as *waria*, though many exhibit a distinctly feminine style of expression. However, when asked, current dancers did agree that cross-gender dances like *lengger lanang* can be a way for LGBTQ+ individuals to express themselves and earn an income in the face of social marginalization.

#### IX. *TARIAN* CROSS-GENDER: A CULTURALLY-ACCEPTED TRADITION IN JAVA

In Indonesia, cross-gender performance enjoys a surprising degree of cultural acceptance, given the stigma surrounding queerness. Recalling how he started out dancing in his Christian church as a child, Didik Nini Thowok remembers teachers encouraging him to dance in female roles because of his flexibility and elegance. His teachers told him that historically, female roles in traditional dance-dramas were often performed by men, because dancing in public could tarnish a woman's reputation. By invoking this element of Indonesian cultural history, Thowok's teachers gave him permission to engage in what could otherwise be construed as a subversive act. As a child, Thowok says that dancing as a woman gave him "self-confidence." His popularity today is a testament to some level of cultural consensus about the acceptability of cross-dressing in a traditional context.

The dancers I interviewed at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger expressed similar sentiments about the normality of cross-gender dance and a similar sense of connection to the historical

roots of the art form. They began dancing *lengger lanang* as young children, because they grew up surrounded by the art form at circumcision ceremonies, weddings, and other celebrations, and they wanted to preserve this piece of local culture. One dancer, who teaches dance classes to children, expressed the importance of mastering both male and female roles to him as an artist. For the dancers at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, the fact that *lengger lanang* is a female dance performed by men is a relatively unremarkable fact, certainly not an indication of radical intentions to upend the gender binary.

Indeed, I quickly discovered that my impulse to categorize cross-gender dance as meaningfully separate from other forms of dance was not necessarily one shared by my Indonesian interlocutors. When they spoke of traditional dance forms in which men perform female roles, my interlocutors used the English term “cross-gender” to modify the Indonesian word for dance (*tarian*), or else they simply referred to a specific type of cross-gender dance without grouping them all together. Didik Nini Thowok tells me that this is because a word for traditional cross-gender dance doesn’t exist in the Indonesian language, or Javanese for that matter. Perhaps this reliance on a non-Indonesian word suggests that the very concept of cross-gender dance as something notable and worth placing into its own distinct category is not an indigenous Indonesian one, but rather an idea imported from the English-speaking West.

As an American studying Indonesian culture from an etic perspective, I approached my research under the assumption that Javanese cross-gender dance would be subversive much in the same way that drag is subversive in the United States. However, I quickly discovered that cultural perceptions of cross-gender dance are not so black and white. Cross-gender dance *is* undeniably controversial in certain social spheres, but the controversy lies in its association with

the LGBTQ+ community, which is often constructed as an undesirable form of foreign (read: Western) influence. And, importantly, it was not always controversial.

As detailed above, Indonesia has a long and rich history of performances in which men transform into women in order to play female roles, and vice versa. Throughout our interviews, Didik Nini Thowok repeatedly invoked this history, naming numerous cross-gender dances from across the archipelago and regaling me with personal stories, pictures, and videos. He referenced *reog*, an East Javanese folk dance; *arja muani*, a popular form of Balinese theater combining opera, dance, and drama; *calon arang*, a dance-drama based on Balinese/Javanese folklore; and the Central Javanese *lengger lanang*, among others. He tells me that during Yogyakarta's seventh sultanate, which lasted from 1877-1921, all court performers were male, including those who performed female roles. These histories are at the root of contemporary social acceptance of cross-gender dance.

According to my interlocutors at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, *lengger lanang* receives broad support from the local community, in part due to an appreciation of its history. One dancer told me that 90%-95% of people are supportive, with the only opposition coming from conservative religious groups. Once people understand the history of *lengger lanang*, they typically become supportive of Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger's efforts to preserve it, if they were not already. During my brief visit, the approval of the community was evident in the large number of visitors the organization hosted, including local schoolchildren and college students from the area—although much-needed financial support was notably lacking.

## X. COMEDY, TRADITION, & THE LIMITS OF ACCEPTANCE

However, this acceptance of cross-dressing in a performance context is both limited and conditional. Cross-gender dance must be couched in comedy and rooted in cultural tradition in order to avoid negative associations with queerness and Westernization. Didik Nini Thowok tells me as much in our interview: “Many people in Indonesia, they accept my performance in the context of traditional and comedy. That’s why I always say, LGBT is different with cross-gender and traditional.” This persistent cultural association of cross-gender dance with the LGBTQ+ community seems to frustrate Thowok at numerous points throughout our interviews—not because he is intolerant towards the LGBTQ+ community, but because the association jeopardizes cross-gender dance’s position as an accepted piece of Indonesian national heritage.

Throughout his career, Thowok has learned that embodying a woman onstage is only culturally permissible in Indonesia if he blends traditional cross-gender dance with comedy. Referencing the discrimination he has faced because of his femininity, Didik says:

“Because of that, as a performer, I became a comedic dancer. Because, onstage, if I am dressing up as a woman, if I add comedy, accepted by the people, accepted by society. [...] If I dance very traditional things, they don’t like it. But, I love to learn traditional, because I have very strong basic traditional dance, not only from Central Java—I learn Jogja style, Solo style, Central Java, West Java, East Java, even Bali, Sumatra, from many different areas.”

While his true passion lies in the artistry of cross-gender dance, Thowok feels he must incorporate humor to capture audiences’ attention. This begs the question—what *exactly* are audiences laughing at? What is so comical—the rigidity of gender roles or the notion that someone born male may prefer to present themselves as a woman?

At times, it can be difficult to decipher whether audiences are laughing with or at comedic cross-gender dancers like Didik Nini Thowok. Jan Mrázek recalls a performance that

Thowok gave in a rural area of East Java, in which the audience's immediate reaction to seeing a man dressed as a woman was laughter. When asked about it, Thowok confirmed to Mrázek that he often detects a touch of derision in spectators' initial response. However, as the performance continued, mockery softened into respect for Thowok's artistry, as the audience became enraptured by the dance and began to imitate Thowok's graceful arm movements. They would have been very familiar with traditional dance similar to the East Javanese-style choreography Thowok was performing and thus able to fully appreciate his skill.<sup>16</sup> While audience members may harbor some level of disapproval of cross-dressing, they cannot help but respect Thowok's skillful embodiment of feminine characters.

Beyond comedy, connection to tradition is at the core of cultural acceptance of cross-gender dance in Indonesia. The audience members at Thowok's East Java performance tolerated cross-dressing in that instance not only because he offered them the opportunity to laugh at it, but also because it was recognizably part of a cultural tradition that they respected. The same mildly-disapproving spectators likely couldn't be found in the audience of a drag show for this very reason. Emphasizing the cultural and spiritual roots of cross-gender dance counterbalances its association with the LGBTQ+ community and lends an air of social acceptability, while comedy makes it appealing to a mass audience. Didik Nini Thowok confirms this in our interview:

“I develop my knowledge of traditional dance from many different areas. And besides that, for the money, because I need money for my living costs, right? I work as entertainment as a comedian. This is what made me popular. [...] This is why the people [are] always connecting my work in LGBT contexts, because if you see drag queens [they are] always doing comedy. But I'm not sure if drag queen has the basics of traditional dance. Sometimes not, right? Just imitate the

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<sup>16</sup> Mrázek, “Masks and Selves in Contemporary Java: The Dances of Didik Nini Thowok,” 264.

artists—they're very good. I've found that cross-gender people actually are very talented. They have a gift from God.”

While Thowok may appreciate drag queens' work as a fellow cross-gender dancer, the mainstream public does not necessarily agree with his sentiment about the holiness of transcending the gender binary, rooted in indigenous Indonesian spiritual tradition as it may be. In fact, in Jakarta, men are banned from performing female roles on TV unless it is in a “traditional” context. Initially, cross-dressing was forbidden altogether. When the rule was amended, Jakarta's minister cited Didik Nini Thowok as an example of acceptable cross-gender performance.

My interlocutors at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger expressed a similar sentiment about the acceptance of *lengger lanang* hinging on its connection to local cultural heritage. In their telling, *lengger lanang* is only polarizing before people learn its history and connection to local culture. Simply educating the public on this history is usually enough to win public support for Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger's work.

*Lengger* also gains cultural credibility by downplaying its association with gender transgression. In the modern day, according to Pak Gatot, *lengger* is performed by a mix of male and female dancers 95% of the time, presumably to avoid being characterized as a specifically “cross-gender” dance. A PHD student who has been conducting fieldwork at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger for the past seven months recalled a situation in which *lengger* dancers were hired to perform at a wedding. The host requested two female dancers and one “*banci*”—an outdated, derogatory term that is leveled at *waria*, gay men, and otherwise effeminate men. This reflects a desire to modulate the subversive undertones of *lengger* by outnumbering cross-gender dancers with normatively-gendered dancers.

## XI. ASSOCIATION WITH QUEERNESS & WESTERNIZATION

In Indonesia, there is a cultural association of queerness with (presumably unwanted) Western influence. Indeed, when asked about a somewhat critical comment he had made earlier about the LGBTQ+ community, Didik Nini Thowok directly stated, “I think the LGBT is Western culture.” He says that Westerners are very open about being gay when they come to Indonesia, which he says he was initially “slightly shocked” by. This is likely in part due to a cultural difference, as Indonesian culture prizes modesty and discreteness; unlike the U.S., public displays of affection are exceedingly rare in Indonesia, even in heterosexual relationships. Slowly, Thowok became familiar with the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s and 70s through media, which he describes as emanating from the West. Before then, queerness existed in Indonesia, but “without knowledge” or language to describe it.

This association of queerness with Westernization is not entirely unwarranted. Much of the language that Indonesia’s LGBTQ+ community uses to define itself is indeed in English or derived from English words, including the terms *gay*, *lesbi*, and *tomboi*, as well as the term LGBTQ+ itself. In a casual conversation with a gay man associated with a *waria* crisis center in Yogyakarta, he stressed the importance of learning English for LGBTQ+ people in particular for this very reason. He told me that the organization’s staff had begun taking weekly English classes in order to better serve their community and interface with English-speaking outsiders.

Both Didik Nini Thowok and my interlocutors at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger expressed a desire to avoid association with the LGBTQ+ community. Ignorance of the cultural and spiritual roots of cross-gender dance, paired with this association with the LGBTQ+ community, is what engenders intolerance, according to Didik Nini Thowok.



“Not many people, if they didn’t do research, [...] they don’t understand. They only know, oh this is drag, oh this is about LGBT [...] Cross-gender connecting with LGBT—for me it’s not true.”

I ask Thowok if he thinks people view cross-gender dance as a product of modern Western influence, and he says “sure, sure,” nodding along before launching into an explanation of its rootedness in Indonesian culture and history. He tells me that, in Indonesia, shamans were traditionally genderless, recounting an experience visiting the revered androgynous Bissu priests of South Sulawesi. By emphasizing these examples of queerness in Indonesian history and culture so heavily, Thowok is doing two things. First, he is validating his work as a cross-gender dancer as compatible with his culture as an Indonesian, and specifically Javanese, man. He is also distancing himself from a Western articulation of queerness, which is perhaps incongruent with certain Indonesian cultural values.

Several times throughout our interviews, Thowok described a tendency to “show off” within the LGBTQ+ community, drawing a stark line between their way of being and his as a cross-gender dancer. He tells me: “You don’t have to think that LGBT same with traditional cross-gender artists. It’s very different, different concepts. LGBT community—they show off. They want everybody [to] accept them.” In contrast, cross-gender dancers “just flow, [...] just follow nature.” In Didik Nini Thowok’s view, cross-gender dance is connected to spirituality in a way that LGBTQ+ identity is not. These statements betray Thowok’s desire to distance himself from the LGBTQ+ community, aligning himself with nature and indigenous Indonesian spirituality, rather than what he implies is an artificial, culturally-incompatible, Western-imposed conception of queerness.

In discussing whether or not I would identify Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger by its real name, a member of the organization’s leadership expressed a similar desire to avoid publicly

associating the organization with the LGBTQ+ community. Knowing that I was interested in cross-gender dance as a potential vehicle for queer gender expression, they asked that I stress the positive work the organization is doing to preserve a piece of local cultural heritage instead. Given the sensitive nature of my research topic, we ultimately agreed that the organization would not be named in order to avoid the possible reputational consequences of being associated with the LGBTQ+ community, which could include the loss of already-insufficient financial support.

In Indonesia, queerness is often culturally constructed as “modern” and of the West. This is largely a misconception, but it is a persistent misconception nonetheless. I argue that in order to avoid the liability of being too closely associated with Western LGBTQ+ identity, cross-gender dancers must present their craft as “traditional,” a piece of Indonesian (or Balinese, Javanese, Malangan...) heritage.

## XII. DRAG: A MODERN REPACKAGING OF CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION?

Every Friday and Saturday night, hiding in plain sight on the third floor of a batik store on Malioboro, the bustling street at the heart of Yogyakarta, there is a drag show known as Raminten Cabaret. Like the few other queer spaces I have had the honor of being welcomed into in Indonesia, Raminten Cabaret hides in plain sight, neither drawing attention to itself nor allowing cultural taboos to quell queer expression entirely. Despite its inauspicious venue, the show is not secretive. Raminten Cabaret is perhaps the epitome of what Didik Nini Thowok described as the LGBTQ+ community “showing off”: bold, unapologetic, unashamed, and at times provocative.

In some ways, the performances I witnessed were incredibly similar to drag shows in the United States. The general format was nearly identical, consisting of raunchy comedy, fabulously

elaborate (and usually revealing) costumes, and lip-synched impersonations of iconic singers. At least half of the songs were in English, mostly American hits like “Halo” and “My Heart Will Go On.” The lineup of drag queens included a Beyoncé impersonator, Ariana Grande, Adèle, Céline Dion, Nicki Minaj, and Miley Cyrus, among other American/British stars.

Although the show is in some ways derivative of Western drag, Raminten Cabaret is definitively not for a Western audience. The crowd was almost entirely Indonesian, with only a few *bule* (white tourists) in attendance other than me. Older hijabi women sat next to 20-something men drinking Bintang, and young kids squirmed in their seats. Audience members took their shoes off and sat in cushions on the floor, Indonesian-style, and ordered from a menu of exclusively Indonesian fare. The emcee spoke mostly in Indonesian, and the show included a bevy of Indonesian songs, which the audience enthusiastically sang along to.

Though it certainly draws heavily from American drag culture, Raminten Cabaret also embraces Indonesia’s history of cross-gender performance, seeming to situate drag in a long line of traditional dances in which individuals who were born male embody the feminine onstage. Both shows I attended included multiple performances of traditional Indonesian dances interspersed alongside impersonations of contemporary American and Indonesian pop stars. According to Raminten Cabaret’s Instagram, a special World Dance Day show on April 29th included traditional local dances from regions across Indonesia including Aceh, West Sumatra, West Java, Central Java, East Java, Kalimantan, Bali, and Papua. These dances were “packaged very modern yet still using traditional dance moves and the essence of traditional dance” (translated from Indonesian).<sup>17</sup> Raminten Cabaret is a study in the kind of dualism that Didik Nini Thowok spoke about: modern yet traditional, Western-influenced yet distinctly Indonesian.

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<sup>17</sup> @ramintencabaret. “HAPPY WORLD DANCE DAY.” *Instagram*, April 29, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CrmxGwSO9TX/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFiZA%3D%3D>.

### XIII. PRESERVATION IN THE FACE OF ANTI-LGBTQ+ SENTIMENT

In the face of mounting homophobia/transphobia and a persistent cultural association of cross-gender dance with queerness, both Didik Nini Thowok and the individuals at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger expressed a deep sense of the importance of preserving this element of their cultural heritage. Even Raminten Cabaret is playing a role in its preservation, incorporating traditional cross-gender dance from cultures across Indonesia into a Western-style drag show.

In Thowok's telling, cross-gender dance was not widely accepted, even by academics, in the early days of his career. He calls himself "the pioneer of cross-gender," referencing a Javanese expression about clearing trees in order to create a path. After more than a decade of hard work to cultivate public acceptance of the tradition, many other talented cross-gender dancers began to emerge. Pointing out the "pitiful" inaccessibility of information about this aspect of Indonesian cultural history, Thowok tells me that he wrote a book in order to educate the public about cross-gender dance and dispel misconceptions. He also keeps a careful record of his own performances, preserved for future generations.

The top two floors of Didik Nini Thowok's studio are a living museum dedicated to carefully cataloging the dancer's legendary five decade-long career. Rows upon rows of old costumes hang on racks, and masks from across Indonesia and the world peek out from their perch on shelves. Press clipping, photographs, and event posters are plastered across the walls, announcing performances with eye-catching titles like "TRANSEFORMATION." As Thowok leads me through the winding rows of artifacts, he tells me the stories of different choreographies he has performed, different cultural traditions he has studied. The collection is a testament to

Thowok's deep appreciation for the art form, as well as his desire to preserve the tradition for generations to come.

Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger is similarly dedicated to the revival of *lengger lanang*, a Central Javanese cross-gender dance that is considered an important piece of local heritage. The organization was founded in 2020 around an elderly *lengger* maestro, who was one of the last living examples of *lengger lanang*. Before the founding of Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, the dancers I spoke to characterized *lengger* as being at a "point of extinction" (translated from Indonesian). Their task is to ensure its survival by educating the public about local cultural heritage. Last year, Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger put on a *lengger* dance festival complete with performances and educational seminars. Unfortunately, people were far more interested in watching the dance than learning about its history, and only a few people attended the seminars. This is the one of the biggest hurdles to the revival of *lengger* dance: a lack of desire to learn about cultural traditions from the public.

Preserving traditional Javanese cross-gender dance is an unenviable task. According to the dancers at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, young people today are more interested in foreign culture than Javanese traditional values and culture. Pak Gatot echoed this sentiment, complaining that youth are too preoccupied with music and dance from abroad, like k-pop, to engage with their own local heritage. The dancers also pointed to social stigma that dissuades men from dressing as women, even in the context of traditional dances that bear religious and cultural significance.

Didik Nini Thowok had a slightly more optimistic outlook, expressing hope that the small, consistent steps he is taking to educate the public will be successful. He asserts that some young people are interested in preserving the culture, citing a group of university students that

had recently visited his studio to learn more about the preservation of traditional culture. However, when I asked if any of his male students were currently learning cross-gender dance, Thowok chuckled ruefully and said no, telling me that he does not push it onto his students.

The future of cross-gender dance is uncertain. Because of its negative association with the LGBTQ+ community, even iconic, well-respected cross-gender dancers like Didik Nini Thowok must be careful not to appear as though they are forcing the tradition onto the next generation of dancers. Meanwhile, the rise of a global youth internet culture means that many young people are too preoccupied by foreign music and dance to learn about their own cultural heritage. However, individuals like Didik Nini Thowok and organizations like Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger are working tirelessly to preserve cross-gender traditions, and they are successful in part because they distance themselves from queerness, instead emphasizing the tradition's rootedness in Indonesian culture. Even Raminten Cabaret, a show that embraces globalized Western queer influences, plays a role in the preservation of Indonesian cross-gender dance, repackaging those traditions in a modern entertainment context.

#### XIV. CONCLUSION

In the face of a rigid national construction of gender and rising anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, Javanese cross-gender dancers emphasize their connection to tradition, downplaying their association with queerness or even mocking it through the use of humor in order to maintain social acceptance. Aligning oneself with queerness, a concept viewed as distinctly Western, can be seen as a betrayal of both local and national identity. A quote by Didik Nini Thowok, said in a discussion about incorporating modern elements into traditional cross-gender dance, captures this idea nicely: "Acculturation is OK, but [...] don't lose the root. This is important. Because the

root of the traditional dance is like the identity of Indonesia.” Here, Thowok highlights the importance of preserving localized traditions, presenting globalization and contact with Western culture as a threat to authentic Indonesian national identity. The drag performances of Raminten Cabaret are a microcosm of these tensions between traditional and modern, globalized and Indonesian, presenting traditional Indonesian cross-gender dance alongside lip-synched renditions of American pop hits.

In “Playing Back the Nation; Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” Tom Boellstorff uses the concept of “playback” as a theoretical framework for understanding *waria* performance of femininity. Playback is a term used to describe performances by *waria* that involve lip-synching to a recording, like the drag performance I witnessed at Raminten Cabaret. Boellstorff argues that *waria* are “‘real-but-false’; they playback femininity in a manner that genders them and also stakes a claim to national belonging.”<sup>18</sup> By this he means that *waria*’s performance of idealized Indonesian womanhood is central to their bid for inclusion in the modern Indonesian nation. When a performer “plays back” femininity, their lips may match the recording, but the voice is not their own, and the audience knows this. The *waria* performer is not attempting to “trick” the audience into believing that she is *wanita asli*, a real/authentic/original woman. In Boellstorff’s words, “Playback does not aim for authenticity, nor is it deceptively false.”<sup>19</sup>

At Raminten Cabaret, there is an added dimension to this mismatch between voice and appearance: drag queens are not only performing femininity—they are, at least for half of the show, performing *Western* femininity. When the queens lip sync Indonesian songs, you can almost forget that they are not actually singing, that what you are hearing is a recorded track of someone else’s voice. In fact, you can almost forget that the drag queen was not born with a

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<sup>18</sup> Boellstorff, “Playing Back the Nation; Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” 173.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

female body. One of the queens sports a beard alongside her dress, makeup, fake breasts, and high heels as a cheeky reminder of this fact. However, when the drag queens lip sync English songs, the performance becomes less convincing. They stumble over the words, and their memory of lyrics not in their native tongue understandably betrays them more often. The performance is slightly but noticeably off-kilter, out of sync with the recording being imitated.

This is the double-bind that queer Indonesians face: embracing membership to a global LGBTQ+ community perceived to be centered in the West is construed as a denial of Indonesian national identity. Denying one's sexual orientation or gender identity appears to be the price of unequivocal national belonging, despite the fact that examples abound in Indonesian history of culturally-rooted, socially-accepted expressions of queerness. The incorporation of traditional Indonesian cross-gender dance into a Western-style drag show represents an attempt to reconcile these two competing identities. Performers find precedent for queerness within their own cultural history that is indigenous and therefore "authentic," untainted by modernity, globalization, and contact with the West. Traditional cross-gender dance thus resolves some of the tension between unconventional male gender expression and national belonging, offering feminine males a kind of conditional acceptance that is rooted in local culture and does not ask them to lip sync over the metaphorical track of Western femininity.



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## XVI. LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

I was greatly limited by cultural taboos surrounding queerness in Indonesia, as well as the inherently private nature of matters of gender and sexual identity. As a result of these cultural considerations, I was reluctant to ask direct questions about the LGBTQ+ community, and when I did, my interlocutors were often reluctant to answer directly. To my knowledge, none of the cross-gender dancers I interviewed openly identified as queer. However, it is entirely possible that some of my interlocutors may have simply been unwilling to volunteer that information to a near-stranger given the social stigma that lingers around Indonesia's LGBTQ+ community.

Time was another major constraint of my research. I was only in the field for three weeks, so I was not able to interview most of my interlocutors more than once or twice. I was only able to interact informally for a significant amount of time with my interlocutors at Yayasan Pelestarian Lengger, and even there our communication was greatly constrained by the language barrier. The sensitivity of the topic inevitably meant that people were hesitant to speak to a near-stranger. The depth of relationship-building necessary to surmount that barrier is impossible with less than a month of fieldwork. A longer research period also would have also afforded me the ability to interview a larger swath of people, making my research more accurately representative of general attitudes among Javanese cross-gender dancers.

My research was also limited by the fact that I was unable to interview the performers that I observed at Raminten Cabaret. Observation of the show alone was not enough to ascertain information about the performers' identities and perceptions of their work, which would have provided valuable insight into how drag differs from traditional Javanese cross-gender dance. Further research is necessary to properly explore the nuances of drag in Indonesia, particularly in

comparison with other forms of cross-gender performance that are less global and more culturally-bound.

Research on cross-gender dance in Indonesia is sparse, and there are many facets left to explore. My research primarily focused on male-to-female cross-gender dance, making only brief mention of the female-to-male *arjuna* dance. Future research could compare the two forms of cross-gender dance, teasing out any potential differences. My research also did not focus on the religious element of cross-gender dance, except as its historical function and a potential source of rising anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment today. Nonetheless, personal spiritual beliefs and practices connected to cross-gender dance featured heavily in my conversations with interlocutors. This is fertile ground for further research.