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# Waria of Yogyakarta: Islam, Gender, and National Identity

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WARIA OF YOGYAKARTA:  
ISLAM, GENDER, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Indonesia: Arts, Religion, and Social Change  
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## INTRODUCTION

It took me a while to find Bu Yuli. It was starting to rain, and I mostly nodded and smiled as I struggled to understand the directions I asked of people on the street. It was a crowded neighborhood, and I couldn't make sense of the house numbers. When the rain started to get stronger, a woman insisted that I sit under her porch roof until it slowed down. I sat with her husband as she brought us hot tea. I decided to try one more time- I held up the notebook with Bu Yuli's address and asked if he knew the house. He recognized it right away. "*Waria?*" he asked, curious but unsurprised. When the rain stopped, the man walked me to Bu Yuli's house, where the two greeted each other with friendly familiarity. I was struck by the fact that there was no tension or awkwardness; it was like any interaction between two neighbors.

As I found out soon after, you don't have to go out looking to find *waria*<sup>1</sup>. At a restaurant near Malioboro Street, many men and women would come up to customers begging, some of them singing or playing a tambourine. One *waria* in her late twenties or early thirties walked up to the restaurant in a short jean skirt, and a tight feminine top. Her long, styled hair was down,

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with common practice I italicize "*waria*" only the first time

and she wore light eye makeup. She started to sing and dance for the customers, and was received unsurprised, though with some amusement because of her dance moves. Her singing was high, clear, and unreserved, and she knew how to make people laugh. She worked the crowd; at one table she paused to take a picture with a tourist family's young daughter, and as she left she made a show of hugging the father of the family to the hilarity of everyone at his table. No one was shocked or alarmed by her presence, in fact she made a lot of money on this short stop. People in Yogyakarta are accustomed to seeing waria around.

### **What is Waria?**

Waria are male-bodied individuals who generally dress and act in a normatively feminine manner on a daily basis. Waria are often self-described as having the body of a man, but the soul of a woman (Boellstorff 2007, 1966). "To bring the body into alignment with the soul by wearing women's clothes, make up, and so on is a source of pleasure for warias" (Boellstorff 2007, 1969). Like any group of people, waria come in many shapes and sizes. Some wear tight tops and short skirts, some wear t-shirts and fitted jeans, some wear dresses, some look androgynous, some even wear the *jilbab*. Many wear make-up, some wear fake eyelashes, some paint on their eyebrows. Many have long hair, though some of them don't. Most have breasts, either from a stuffed bra, self-prescribed hormone therapy (birth control pills), or more recently by silicone injection (Boellstorff 2007, 1969). One waria I spoke with joked that her breasts were her "gift from Thailand." Almost all waria speak and move in a manner one would associate with femininity. Though in the past waria were often associated with sex-work, today they are commonly associated with salons, where many waria work. In Yogyakarta Waria are visible in daily life- in markets, in salons, on the street, in neighborhoods. Waria have sex with *normal*

men, not *gay* men and never other *waria*. “Their desire is generally understood as “the desire of femininity for masculinity- that is, as heterosexual desire” (Boellstorff 2007, 1191).

There is no exact English equivalent for the Indonesian word *waria*. “Waria” is a combination of the words “wanita”- woman, and “pria”-man. One might be tempted to label *waria* as transgender, however, as Tom Boellstorff points out, “transgender” is often used to suggest transcending gender, and this doesn’t quite fit the *waria* subject position. For the same reason, Boellstorff also argues against earlier claims that *waria* are part of a third gender. “Transexual” *waria* are not; the word usually implies genital change surgery, which is very uncommon and certainly not what it means to be *waria*.

Boellstorff settles on “male transvestite,” arguing that this is the closest equivalent, while acknowledging that it too falls short. He argues that it best represents the way most *waria* “see themselves as originating from the category ‘man’ and as remaining men in some fashion” (Boellstorff 2007, 1060). Evelyn Blackwood uses the term “gender transgressor” to refer to *waria* and others who do not follow the normative gender role associated with their sex (Blackwood 2005, 852). This term allows her to refer to both current-day *waria* and *tombois* as well as the ritual transvestites of the past, without implying that these individuals fall into the exact same category (I will also employ this term for the same reason). Few scholars have focused their work exclusively on *waria*, but these are currently the main scholarly arguments and understandings of the *waria* subject position.

### **Religion and Gender Transgressors**

Historically, religion has had a tremendous impact on the cultural context in which Indonesian gender transgressors are understood. *Waria* and other Indonesian gender

transgressors are a fascinating example of how “individuals create, produce, and articulate their gendered identities or subjectivities in relation and resistance to gendered discourses and cultural repertoires” (Blackwood 2005, 852). The role and understanding of waria today is radically different from that of pre-Islamic gender transgressors. The mythologies of premodern Indonesian religions produced a world in which gender ambiguity or gender-switching was acceptable, and even a necessary and significant component of religious rituals. In contrast, the mythologies introduced by Dutch colonialism and Islam created a new worldview in which gender ambiguity was stigmatized and stripped of its religious role. In the early post-colonial era, globalization and modernist Islamic trends continued to change gender discourse and the Indonesian view of gender transgression.

Today, religion, Islam for 88% of Indonesians, is seen as an integral part of Indonesian citizenship (Mujani 2009, 576). This is evident from the constitution, from state policies, and from modern political dialogues. Many Indonesians will tell you that to be Indonesian is to be religious. Interestingly, because of this phenomenon, the religiosity of many waria in Yogyakarta gives them legitimacy as citizens. For religious waria in Yogyakarta, Islam is a source of understanding about their gender, not only for them but also for non-waria. While the strict gender binary of Indonesia is largely a product of early Islamic thought, Islam does act as a link between waria and other Muslims the community.

However, gender discourses in Indonesia are always changing. Though there is some continuity between the early Postcolonial era and present day, it seems that in the Post-Suharto era new gender discourses are developing.



Modern Indonesia, very recently freed from the Suharto's New Order regime, is home to constantly competing, developing, and diverging religious, political, and cultural trends. Modernist Muhammadiyah and Traditionalist NU, the two main Islamic organizations in Indonesia, butt heads on a political level (Mujani 2009, 576). These two organizations have millions of members and wield plenty of political power, but at the same time, politics are becoming less and less occupied by religious groups. While half of women in Yogyakarta wear the *jilbab* and long sleeves in keeping with recent pious trends, the other half wear short shorts and casual t-shirts. While tremendous efforts are made to preserve Indonesian religion and culture, globalization is changing Indonesian culture every day. These trends are all going in different directions, but they all coexist in modern Indonesia, shaping the way people understand gender and gender transgressors.

Before I discuss contemporary religious discourse and what that means for waria today, I will provide a broad overview of the role of gender transgressors in Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial eras. I will then draw from discussions of recent religious and political dialogues, more recent historical and ethnographic accounts of waria, and my own brief observations and interaction with waria in Yogyakarta.

## TERMS

*Bu*: Indonesian term, short for “Ibu,” meaning “mother.” The word is used as a title preceding the names of older women, similar to “Ms.” or “Mrs.”

*Gay*: Indonesian word borrowed from English. In keeping with Boellstorff’s writing, the word is italicized because its meaning in Indonesian culture differs slightly from the word “gay” in Western culture.

*Gender Transgressor*: Umbrella term employed by Evelyn Blackwood in her discussions of non-normative gendered individuals in island Southeast Asia. The term allows her to refer to ritual transvestites of pre-Islamic times as well as more modern forms of transvestism, without implying that these individuals fall into the exact same category. Blackwood notes that “although a ‘transgression’ is usually thought of and used to mean a violation or breaking of a law, command, or moral code, it also contains a more neutral meaning: to go or pass beyond” (Blackwood 852).

*Lesbi*: Indonesian word borrowed from English “lesbian”. In keeping with Boellstorff’s writing, the word is italicized because its meaning in Indonesian culture differs slightly from the word “lesbian” in Western culture.

*Masjid*: Mosque

*Normal*: Indonesian term referring to individuals with normative gender and sexuality. Interestingly, men who have sexual or romantic relations with *waria* fall into this category, as well as women who are involved with *tombois*.

*Pak*: Indonesian term, short for “Bapak,” meaning “father.” The word is used as a title preceding the names of older men, similar to “Mister.”

*Pesantren*: Term for Indonesian Muslim Boarding school. There are different kinds of *pesantrens*, some focusing on religious study more than others. Some families send their

children to *pesantrens* for religious purposes, while others do so for the better quality of education.

Suharto: President of Indonesia from 1968 to 1998; founder of the oppressive and corrupt but economically successful “New Order” regime.

*Tomboi*: In Indonesia refers to female bodied individuals who dress and behave in a masculine manner. Similarly to *waria*, *Tombois* have romantic and sexual relations with *normal* women, and their desire is understood as heterosexual. *Tombois* and *waria* share many commonalities, but have a different history and are understood slightly differently in Indonesian culture. *Tombois* are much less visible in daily life than are *waria*.

*Warung*: Indonesian term for a stall where one can typically buy food and drinks. *Warungs* are often a place for Indonesians to meet and socialize.

Yogyakarta: City on the southern coast of Java. The city is known for its cultural diversity and acceptance, as well as its many universities.

## PRE-ISLAMIC COSMOLOGIES AND NOTIONS OF GENDER

As Boellstorff, Blackwood, and Peletz all point out, scholarly work on Southeast Asian gender transgressors is surprisingly lacking. Much of the research done thus far on gender in Southeast Asia has been on focused on the lives and experience of women, and early records of gender transgressors are mostly limited to the accounts of western traders and missionaries. However despite these limitations current scholars agree that gender transgressive individuals were not only accepted in the early Modern period, but also important and necessary ritual practitioners for the survival of the community (Blackwood 2005, 852).

In early modern Southeast Asia, the two genders were associated with complementary symbols and powers. Female gods often represented the underworld, the earth, the moon, and the rice crop (Peletz 2006, 312). In ritual contexts, women in the community were associated with birth, death, and healing (Peletz 2006, 312). Male gods were typically represented by the upper world, the iron which plowed the rice fields, the sky, and the sun (Peletz 2006, 312). “Double deities, sacred cosmic dualities, and gender-switching mythological figures were typical” of the region (Blackwood 2005, 858). Peletz also points out that during this period male and female relations were relatively egalitarian, and that women had a fair amount of independence and social control (Peletz 2006, 312). Gender roles were more fluid, and sexuality

and eroticism were more tolerated (Peletz 2006, 312). And, because of these complementary powers of gender, gender transgressors took on important religious significance.

Take the Bugis of Sulawesi, for example. In early Bugis cosmology, the original deities were androgynous (Blackwood 2005, 857). Their creation story has two parts: first these gods first gave to other androgynous beings with various sacred powers (Blackwood 2005, 857). In the second creation, they gave birth to lesser gods, these being the ancestors of the early Bugis dynasties (Blackwood 857). This second set of deities is less powerful, because they were not androgynous: gender was split.

The Bugis kingdoms all had a special class of priests called *bissu*. These ritual practitioners protected the community by using their powers to safeguard royal regalia and strengthening the royal family's "white blood," as well as assisting in military conflicts (Peletz 2006, 312; Blackwood 2005, 854). *Bissu* were highly respected, and often given royal status (Peletz 2006, 312).

Where did the *bissu*'s power come from? It came from their ability to cross from one gender to the other. *Bissu* were feminine males or masculine females who often lived as the opposite gender and married members of the same sex (Peletz 2006, 312). In ritual, *bissu* were able to embody the complementary powers of both genders, and recreate the gender ambiguity of the original Bugis deities (Blackwood 2005, 857). The Bugis even believed that *bissu* might be beings of the first part of creation, before gender was split for humans and other lesser beings (Blackwood 2005, 857).

Though *bissu* are the best documented, gender transgressive ritual practitioners were not unique to the Bugis people. Similar practices can be found across Southeast Asia during this

time period. Among the Ngaju Dayak of Kalimantan are documented male *basir* and female *balian* who were “entered by supernatural beings” during ritual, usually of the opposite gender (Blackwood 2005, 854). They are considered by modern scholars to be gender ambiguous; western observers mistakenly identified them as hermaphroditic (Blackwood 2005, 854). It is unclear whether these individuals lived as the opposite gender outside of a ritual context, but Blackwood holds that they possessed a “distinct status that transgressed masculinity and femininity” (Blackwood 2005, 855). In Ngaju Dayak cosmology, the total godhead is bisexual, and a combination of both sexes. The entire godhead is split into two deities, the watersnake goddess of the underworld and the hornbill god of the upper world (Blackwood 2005, 858). Similarly to the Bugis *bissu*, For the Ngaju Dayak the *basir* and *balian* represented the sacred unity of these two beings, and this was a source of power (Blackwood 2005, 858).

The Iban communities, of Sarawak also employed gender transgressive shamans, called *manang bali*. *Manang bali* learned of their calling through revelatory dreams (Blackwood 2005, 855). After notifying their family and village headmen, these new shamans undergo a ritual with older *manang bali*. They receive a new female name, and dress in women’s clothes, and is presented to the community by the family headman’s wife (Blackwood 2005, 851). *Manang bali* were often “known to take a husband, and young men were said to sometimes seek out a manang bali for sex at night;” this reveals that gender transgression was part of their lives both in and outside of a ritual context (Blackwood 2005, 815)

Gender transgressive ritual practitioners are also documented among the Tetum of East Timor, the Kodi of Sumba, and elsewhere. Gender transgression and religious power can be found in Javanese mythology, where “one of the signs of ‘Power’ was the ability to concentrate

apparently antagonistic opposites by containing both masculine and feminine in... one entity” (Blackwood 2005, 857). The Javanese *wayang* tradition contains mythological characters with the ability to change gender. For example in one story Srikandi, a wife of Arjuna, is sexually attracted to a woman called Dewi Dumiti, and changes into a man called Kandihawa in order to pursue her (Blackwood 2005, 857).

None of this is to say that there were not gender boundaries in early modern Southeast Asia. “Sacred mythologies powerfully shaped everyday gendered meanings, creating and substantiating a masculine and feminine binary,” however this binary “...needed to be reunited symbolically from time to time to maintain the cosmos” (Blackwood 2005, 858). Because humans represented the splitting of the godhead into two lesser aspects, people understood gender as “something originating in a separation and needing to be recombined periodically” (Blackwood 2005, 858). Gender transgressive ritual practitioners such as *bissu*, *basir*, and *manang bali*, were able to embody this recombination, and because of this were needed and respected by the community.

Bu Rita, one of the very educated waria I met in Yogyakarta, was familiar with this history of ritual gender transgressors. She referenced *bissu* in her interview, their role as “leaders of religious ceremony,” their ability to purify sacred instruments like the *kris*, and their magical immunity to weapons (Rita 2012). Bu Rita emphasized that waria were not a phenomenon which recently emerged in the modern era, but have existed for a long time (Bu Rita is a leader in the Yogyakarta waria community; she is an activist and founder of a non-governmental organization which seeks to educate and empower waria).

However, coming from a completely different religious and historical context, Bu Rita understands her gender very differently from the ritual practitioners of pre-Islamic times. Whereas in premodern times, gender transgression was a source of power for people like Bu Rita, since then their gender identity has been delegitimized and stigmatized (though this may be changing). In Indonesia, this change began to develop as Islam took root and Dutch colonialism established itself.

### CHANGING DISCOURSES: ISLAM AND DUTCH COLONIALISM

People in island Southeast Asia began to convert or incorporate Islam into their faith and practices beginning in the early thirteenth century (Blackwood 2005, 860). These effects were very different from place to place; often the traders on the coasts, who were exposed to Islam by foreign traders, would convert long before those who lived in central rural areas (Blackwood 2005, 860). Islam was not a centralized, organized religion at this time, and was often introduced through Sufi practices (Blackwood 2005, 860).

In the beginning, these Muslim ideas and practices were easily incorporated into indigenous belief systems. Old practices, such as those of gender transgressive ritual specialists, often remained important for the preservation of the community. It wasn't until reformist Modernist Islam of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the new cosmology began to take hold and visibly change notions of gender (Peletz 2006, 315). These new religious discourses, coupled with the Christian-influenced gender binary of European colonists, created a world where the two genders were separated by an unbridgeable gap, and gender transgressors became stigmatized and delegitimized violators of the natural order.



## **Islam**

Over time, Islamic mythology began to replace older beliefs. In contrast to the creation stories of early Southeast Asian communities, Islam (and Dutch Christianity), offered a new cosmology in which one almighty God created man, and then woman as his spouse (Blackwood 2005, 862). Although the Qur'an is not clear about God and gender, people did not see the almighty God as embodying both genders, as they did indigenous gods of the past. Whereas before, male and female were associated with complementary sets of symbols and powers, and the female was often associated with reproductive and regenerative power, men were now associated with generative powers. Women were symbolically associated with the soil for man's seed; their material bodies had reproductive abilities but women did not possess a generative capacity (Blackwood 2005, 862). A new, more hierarchical gender binary was developing. Increasingly, men were seen as possessing strength and reason, "while women were considered more vulnerable to human weakness and passion" (Blackwood 2005, 862).

Blackwood explains this change as a shift from what she calls "sacred gender" to "innate gender" (Blackwood 2005, 862). Before, each gender was understood as a source of power, a power which could be employed in a religious context. This binary of "sacred gender" was replaced by a binary of "innate gender" in which gender was "fixed, unchangeable, and [a] god-given attribute of humans" (Blackwood 2005, 862).

This shift occurred gradually and sporadically throughout the Indonesian archipelago. However as Modernist Islam became more influential, attempts were often made to discourage belief in magic and supernatural power. By the 19th century, folk belief was discouraged strongly throughout Southeast Asia (Blackwood 2005, 860). The new fixed binary, with a new

set of roles and symbolism, becomes visible in historic records. Islamic institutions tended to train only male clerics; girls could go to the *pesantren*, but only attend beginner classes (Blackwood 2005, 861). In many areas, laws began to restrict women's right to divorce, and tended to make women more legally dependent on men (Blackwood 2005, 861). In royal courts of Indonesia, usually the centers of Islamic belief, seclusion of courtly women became increasingly common (Blackwood 2005, 861). In Aceh, a kingdom previously ruled by four queens in the 1600s, a *fatwa* forbidding women to rule was put in place by the end of the century (Blackwood 2005, 861).

Again, these changes did not take place uniformly, nor did they effect everyone equally. In Aceh for instance, women of the lower classes enjoyed much more freedom than did the restricted women of the courts (Blackwood 2005, 861). However, as time went on, gender boundaries became more and more fixed. Islamic discourses naturalized gender by emphasizing gender differences, denying magical powers associated with gender, and denying the ability of humans for gender ambiguity. During this time, records of gender ambiguous individuals disappear, replaced by records of individuals who completely switch to the opposite gender (Blackwood 2005, 861).

Most of the historians of this time period naturally focus most on the changing role of women in this time period, not male gender transgressors. However, this documentation still provides important context for the world in which gender transgressors now found themselves. Gender transgressors, whose role had been so spiritually significant in the previous era, now “challenged Islamic belief about nature and the purpose of the sexes” (Blackwood 2005, 862).

This, in combination with Dutch colonial rule, would practically erase the role of gender transgressors in Southeast Asia by the 19th century.

## **Colonialism**

In the history of island Southeast Asia, European traders and colonizers consistently made conscious efforts to impose their own gender roles upon the colonized, and held native men and women up to their own masculine and feminine ideals. Europeans, missionaries and traders alike, had very little toleration for gender transgressors in and out of a ritual context, and were shocked by what they found in Southeast Asia. Alarmed Portuguese explorers record observations of homosexuality in Burma; Spaniards in the Philippines cut men's hair to suit proper Spanish masculinity. As Peletz puts it:

“[A]rchitects of institutional and cultural rationalization and the sociocultural forces that spawn them are notoriously unfriendly to all phenomena deemed to be ambiguous or liminal with respect to gender, sexuality, or most anything else unless they have folkloric, touristic, or other clear market value” (Peletz 2006, 316).

In Indonesia, the dominant European trading and eventual colonial power was of course the Dutch, who first arrived in the sixteenth century, but became more consolidated by the nineteenth century (Blackwood 2005, 864). Christian Holland was home to a similar gender binary to that developing alongside Modernist Islam. Dutch mythology introduced a new kind of domesticity for women. Dutch patriarchy emphasized the role of women as housewives and childbearers, and “idealized the virile man” (Blackwood 2005, 864). Gender and sexuality was seen as a natural and necessary consequence of sex (Blackwood 2005, 864). In Holland, men suspected of homosexuality were prosecuted and sentenced to death in the early eighteenth

century (Blackwood 2005, 864). The point of course is not to sensationalize the strictly enforced gender binary of the Dutch, but to provide context for the gender roles the Dutch would seek to impose upon their colonies.

In their Indonesian colonies, the Dutch enacted policies specifically to reform practices and understandings of gender. To improve the lives of the colonized, Dutch women educated Indonesian girls, “introducing them to properly gendered roles as ‘modern’ housewives and mothers” (Blackwood 2005, 864). The Dutch codified Indonesian *adat*, creating a legal system which would institutionalize Indonesian gender roles (Blackwood 2005, 864). Gender transgression was not tolerated; especially women “who lived as men were treated severely” (Blackwood 2005, 864).

### ***Bissu* and the New Binary**

These two forces combined to create a new understanding of gender and gender transgression. Again, the story of the *bissu* offers a telling example. The Bugis people had adopted Islam by the early 17th century (Peletz 2006, 316). Long before then, Islam and older practices had intermixed, and Bugis kingdoms had continued to employ *bissu*. However starting at this time, Bugis leaders were seeking to expand their authority, and often did so by implementing “strategies of cultural cleansing aimed at eradicating gambling, slavery, the consumption of opium and palm wine, ceremonials of a pre-Islamic nature, and all other evidence of ‘pagan times’” (Peletz 2006, 316). Eventually, this included attempts to eradicate the role of the *bissu*, first female *bissu* and then male *bissu* (Blackwood 2005, 863) Increasingly, their existence was perceived as incompatible with Islam. Not only did they attempt to violate the gender gap introduced by Islamic cosmology, but also they were descended from gods in

Buginese mythology. This “status of divinity” was considered a heresy and a major incompatibility with Islam (Peletz 2006, 316).

Despite this, in some areas male *bissu* continued to practice, incorporating Islam by invoking *Allah* with their old rituals. However, in the 19th century attempts to eradicate the *bissu* were completed by Dutch colonial rule. Dutch rule replaced the sovereign kingdoms of the Bugis. Since the *bissu*'s role was to protect the community by strengthening the royal family, the Dutch eliminated the role of the *bissu* when they eliminated the royal family (Peletz 2006, 316).

As a result, gender transgressors in Sulawesi were stripped of a legitimate role in a religious context, and became stigmatized and unacceptable. Gender ambiguity or transgression became inconceivable in the new worldview of Islamic and Dutch notions of gender. Until very recently, *waria* were unable to safely identify or express themselves in Sulawesi.

This drastic change from “sacred gender” to “innate gender,” came as a result of Islamic discourses as well as the similar gender constructions consciously imposed by the Dutch. Obviously this change did not occur exclusively as a result of religious discourse. Peletz attributes this shift to changes in commerce, state building, territorial consolidation, more centralized and bureaucratic political systems, and the centralism of Sunni Islam, Theravada Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and Catholicism in various parts of Southeast Asia (Peletz 2006, 315). However it is clear that in many parts of modern-day Indonesia, Islam and Christian-influenced Dutch culture played an enormous role in the development of this new binary. With time, these changes were not novel, but normative, and became the new understanding of gender throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Interestingly, records of gender ambiguous individuals in Indonesia stop by the nineteenth century (Blackwood 2005, 865). Instead, records of women

who “pass” as men and vice versa appear, with a new stigma attached to their behavior (Blackwood 2005, 865). Gender transgressors have almost entirely lost their positive associations with ritual practice; instead, gender transgressors were seen as “false approximations of a gender not theirs” (Blackwood 2005, 865).

### POST-COLONIAL GENDER TRANSGRESSORS

In the decades following independence, gender transgression continued to be stigmatized and generally kept out of sight. However, records of male gender transgressors can be found. In the 1960s waria were generally associated with markets, sex work, and low-brow entertainment (Boellstorff 2007, 1114). Before the eighties, waria rarely expressed themselves in daily life (Boellstorff 2007, 1113). Some older waria recall isolation during this time period, staying in the house during the daytime; others remember trying to appear *normal* during the day and going out only at night, appearing as women (Boellstorff 2007, 1113).

Coinciding with the beginning of Suharto’s New Order regime, in the mid sixties to early eighties (depending on the area) waria began wearing women’s clothing all the time, as opposed to “certain contexts like performances or nighttime sex work” (Boellstorff 2007, 1124). Around the same time, waria became increasingly associated with salon work (Boellstorff 2007, 1124).

Very little has been written recently on waria. Waria are vaguely known to some westerners because of their vulnerability during the AIDS epidemic (Pisani 2008). Though his work is mostly concentrated on *gay* men in Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff’s ethnographic research provides the most recent view of waria in the archipelago.

In Boellstorff’s experience, waria usually identified as such by their early teens. These children are not intersexed, nor is their sexuality the identifying factor (Boellstorff 2007, 1139).

Consistently, “narratives of waria selfhood are driven by a movement away from normative masculinity. As children, most warias engaged in play atypical for boys,” instead taking part in typically feminine activities (Boellstorff 2007, 1139). Eventually it would become clear to the child’s family that their son had the soul of a woman. Family’s reactions vary widely, ranging from acceptance to denial to disownment. As I learned in Yogya, waria who are accepted by their families usually end up extremely successful, while those who are disowned usually end up homeless and selling sex (Sri, Rita, Yuli 2012).

### **New Order Gender Discourses**

New Order political discourses generally perpetuated and strengthened the gender roles which developed in the previous era, especially emphasizing the role of the Indonesian woman. Marriage is incredibly important during this time period. In order to be an active citizen, women must be an effective wife and mother (Blackwood 2005, 869). Various political policies, many pertaining to public health, promoted the ideal of Indonesian nuclear families with the mother responsible for the children and their well-being (Blackwood 2005, 869). Boellstorff makes reference to the state’s *azas keluargaan*, or family principle, which emphasizes what he calls “State Momism.” “Implicit is the heteronormative ideology linking these ideally gendered men and women into the citizen-family” (Boellstorff 2007, 2144). Islamic discourse, too, places tremendous emphasis on heterosexual marriage. In Muslim communities, social and kinship structure is based on marriage and reproduction (Boellstorff 2007, 1873). Marriage is seen as making one a “more pious Muslim” (Boellstorff 2007, 1873).

With the combined forces of political and religious pressures, heterosexual marriage is the expectation of almost all Indonesians. From his work with *gay* Indonesians, Boellstorff is

able to speak to this. No Islamic texts are explicit about homosexuality or even anal sex, and Indonesian Islamic scholars tend to act as if sex between males simply doesn't happen (Boellstorff 2007, 1893). Boellstorff holds that "national belonging and heteronormativity are mutually defining and supporting, such that those who fall outside official sexual norms are failed citizens" (Boellstorff 2007, 1874). Almost all *gay* men and *lesbi* women eventually marry heterosexually in Indonesia. The binary of "innate gender" is just as strong as it was in the nineteenth century, with a visible emphasis on marriage.

### **Sexuality of Waria**

This binary manifests itself interestingly in the way that the sexuality of waria is understood. Interestingly, waria are much more accepted into Indonesian society than *gay* men have thus far. The reason is that their sexuality is understood as being heterosexual.

Waria have romantic and sexual relations with men who identify as *normal*. While relationships with *normal* men are often hard to maintain, most waria hope to live with a boyfriend or husband who accepts them as waria, and is open with them in public (Boellstorff 2007, 1321). While these relations are "understood abstractly as a form of homosexuality, it is clearly distinguishable from sex 'between two men'" (Boellstorff 2007, 1195). This speaks to the fact that the gendered soul and visual presentation of the body are the main identifiers of gender for Indonesians. Many waria engage in sex work, and those who do engage in receptive oral and anal sex, as well as penetrative anal sex (Boellstorff 2007, 1321). It is important to note that being waria is not synonymous with exclusively receptive sexual practices; *normal* men expect waria to have a penis, and it is very uncommon for waria to get sex change operations even for



those who can afford it (Boellstorff 2007, 1321). This is one fact that Boellstorff uses to support the idea that waria are a male *femininity*, not an attempt to be *female* (Boellstorff 2007, 1300).

However despite the possibility that waria may attempt to be feminine and not fully female, the strict adherence of most waria to feminine looks, and the understanding of their sexuality as heterosexual shows that even waria are subject to the strict confines of the Indonesian gender binary. Blackwood found similar evidence among in her ethnographic work on *tombois*. In many ways similar to waria, *tombois* “make sense of their masculinity by situating it in another gender” (Blackwood 2005, 871). Because of the emphasis on gender difference and the separation of roles in Islamic discourse, Blackwood argues, gender ambiguity is not allowed; feminine men or masculine women are inconceivable. “In a world of two separate genders, one must be one or the other: other possibilities are not readily imaginable” (Blackwood 2005, 871). This mentality can still be seen today.

#### PRESENT DAY: WARIA OF YOGYAKARTA

As stated earlier, waria today are visible and often active members of the Yogyakarta community. The waria I met were consistently concerned dedicated to the improvement and empowerment of other waria. Corresponding with Boellstorff’s experience, the waria I talked to about religion did not see their gender as being incompatible with Islam; instead they had interpreted Islamic thought from the perspective of being waria.

#### **Bu Yuli**

Bu Yuli is well-respected in the waria community in Yogyakarta. About fifty years old, with short curly hair and penciled on eyebrows, in America I would have mistaken her for a slightly masculine-looking lesbian.

Bu Yuli smiled and welcomed me into the house. She apologized for the rain and insisted I have some coffee. We talked for a few minutes, just small talk, and then she apologized again and explained she had to shower.

There were three other waria, housemates of Bu Yuli, who sat with me while I waited for her. They were disappointed; a volleyball game had been cancelled because of the rain. One had long hair and wore a nightgown; another had a short bob and wore a tight tshirt and shorts. They all looked to be in their early thirties, and all feminine and attractive. They all had higher-pitched voices, though it didn't sound forced or unnatural. The three of them sat the way women would sit and moved the way women would move. They were curious about America, and eager to try and scandalize a young American student who wanted to talk to waria about their gender. "We are *banci*," one of them said, using the vulgar derogatory term for waria. Another explained to me in detail the story of how she got her breast implants. I couldn't understand everything they were saying, but they were good-natured and easy to banter with.

"Are the waria in America tall?" asked the outspoken, longhaired waria in the nightgown. I had no idea how to respond. Avoiding the actual question, I replied that most people in America were taller than the average Indonesian. They asked me more questions about the waria in America, if there were many of them, where they lived, about the recent new marriage laws in some states, and what the word for waria in English was (Bu Yuli shouted "traaaanSEXUAL" from the bathroom). All these questions threw me for a loop. There really *aren't* waria in America. Certainly there are transgender people, but that isn't quite the same. Why *aren't* there waria in America? Is it because it's easier to be ambiguously gendered there?

When Bu Yuli finished showering she walked past us in her towel. She *did* look womanly; I wondered if it was because of her figure and movements, or if I was just overanalyzing. As she changed in the corner of the room, the same outspoken waria pointed at Bu Yuli, and laughed as she said, “See? That’s a woman!”

After Bu Yuli was dressed she started speaking to me quickly in Indonesian, and I did my patent smile-and-nod routine. She assumed a level of fluency that I had not yet achieved. She was pointing at her motorbike, and I finally realized that she wanted me to join her somewhere. I put on her spare helmet and climbed on the back.

Less than ten minutes away we stopped at a *warung* where a few waria sat eating and drinking. Behind area where a woman was selling food and drinks, about fifteen or twenty waria were gathered in a circle.

I sat between Bu Yuli and a man, maybe a doctor, who seemed to be giving a presentation about safe sex and sexually transmitted infections. I couldn’t understand everything that was said, but I could tell that the presentation was very informal, and dirty jokes abounded.

The waria in the circle ranged from late teens to middle age. There was one that looked my age and had braces. Most of them dressed casually, but a few looked like they were dressed to “go out.” Many of them smoked. One waria held her cigarette and exhaled exactly like Audrey Hepburn does in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” The group knew each other well; the younger waria leaned on each other like sisters or best friends would.

The man said something about condoms, and the whole group erupted with laughter. Everyone had been giggling the whole time, but now the doctor, too, had to pause until he

finished laughing. It didn't seem like condoms or sex were an awkward or uncomfortable subject for this group to talk about; merely hilarious.

Bu Yuli, as an older role model for many of the other waria, regained her composure, but I could tell she thought the joke was pretty funny. She smiled at me as the meeting ended. Everyone clapped, and one of the waria collected dues from the group.

After socializing for a few minutes, I walked with Bu Yuli to a small building near the *warung*. She told me that this was where she worked. It was a simple building with bare walls. I was pretty sure it was a shelter. There was a homeless-looking man sitting by the entrance staring into space, and a couple kids running around. Further inside, a sick-looking waria lying in a bed shouted violently and kicked her feet. Bu Yuli talked with another waria about her in a hushed voice, and I sat down so she could do her work.

When she got a moment, Bu Yuli sat across from me and explained that many waria worked at the shelter. I couldn't tell if just waria stayed at the shelter; it seemed like the *normal* man by the entrance and the two kids were staying there too. Bu Yuli told me simply that the shelter was "for friends." She also explained how many poorer waria lived on the street and became sex workers. I recalled reading in Boellstorff's book about the tendency of *gay* and waria people to do good works in the community.

Bu Yuli leaned to one side, casually farted, and began talking to the other waria again. They were going to check on some other people, so I went back to the front office of the shelter where a few other waria from the meeting had gathered.

I sat on the couch and introduced myself to some approachable-looking waria. I ended up talking with two waria at length. One waria was from Papua and had a dyed blonde bob. The

other I would have thought to be a flamboyantly gay man in America; I admired her white leather shoes. They asked me if there were homeless people in America. They asked about Obama. They asked about the “ladyboys” in America, and about gay people being able to get married: I had to clarify that in those states both waria *and* gay couples were allowed to marry. The blonde waria asked if I had a boyfriend in Yogya, and asked if I liked Jack Daniels or going to discos. She was very enthusiastic about karaoke, and about Jack Daniels.

All the waria I met that day were incredibly friendly, and very easy to talk to. In general, they were just as curious about me as I was about them. All of them consistently asked about waria in America, and assumed that they existed there.

I could also tell that I’d caught a glimpse of a very strong waria community. This was a group of friends who probably knew each other well, lived nearby one another, and met regularly. They joked together, smoked together, and supported one another. Older waria, like Bu Yuli, were role models and important leaders of the community.

### **Bu Sri**

Bu Sri’s age and more formal demeanor set her apart from the younger waria I had met with Bu Yuli. She met my translator and I at a restaurant in her neighborhood, and showed us to her house. She wore a *jilbab*, the Muslim head covering common in Yogyakarta, though not so common among waria. She was in her fifties, had a long modest dress on, and wore foundation and liquid eyeliner.

She showed us into the sitting room, and showed us pictures of her adopted daughter’s wedding. She set a glass ashtray on the table and lit a cigarette.

When I asked Bu Sri what it meant to be “waria” she jumped right to the religious answer. “Waria is given from God,” she said emphatically, “It is *given*.” I again recalled Boellstorff, in his explanation of how most waria believed their gender was their god-given fate.

Like Bu Yuli, Bu Sri is also an important member of the Yogyakarta waria community. She spoke passionately about waria who were thrown out by their families to live on the street. A devout Muslim, she and her friend Bu Ani founded a *pesantren* for waria. The project began when the two waria wished to organize a prayer group and volunteers to help those affected by the earthquake in 2004. The group then turned into a weekly meeting where various waria, most of them older, would discuss Qur’an and hadith together. They would often bring in lecturers from universities to offer different interpretations and perspectives. They use the word *pesantren* for their meeting place, but it isn’t a boarding school; it’s more of a safe place and a space for waria to worship and discuss their faith together. Discussing Islam and interpreting it as waria is a source of confidence for Bu Sri and the other waria I talked to. They have no qualms about their identity, because they believe it was given to them by God. I asked Bu Sri if most other waria thought that their gender is “given,” and she said most did. As I expected from Boellstoff’s work, these waria consistently saw their gender as their fate, rather than their choice.

#### METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

My intent when I planned to do my ISP in Yogyakarta was to conduct my research specifically on the *pesantren* which I spoke about with Bu Sri in her interview. Unfortunately, the *pesantren* wasn’t holding any meetings the month that I happened to be there. In addition the other cofounder of the *pesantren*, Bu Ani, was hospitalized shortly after I met her.

Instead I was forced to look at waria more generally, though I still wanted to focus on religion. I decided to look at the ways that religious and political discourse had shaped the lives of Indonesian gender-transgressors in the past, and then attempt to analyze today's religious discourses and Islam's current effect on the lives of waria in Yogyakarta.

Because I had been forced away from my original subject, I found myself with a much broader topic which was much more difficult to reach conclusions about with this kind of project. In order to draw substantial conclusions about religious discourse and the lives of Indonesian waria, I'd need a Masters degree, fluency in Indonesian, and probably years of interaction with waria. Lacking those qualities, I'll offer as much insight as I can.

Boellstorff, Blackwood, and Peletz all offer a perspective on the religious discourses of the pre-Modern through post-colonial eras. But what about Indonesia post-Suharto? Surely the end of the New Order Regime must be having an effect on gender discourses. Based on albeit limited experiences with waria in Yogyakarta, and similarly limited understandings of Indonesian Islam and politics, I hope to draw some small conclusions.

#### ISLAM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Boellstorff holds that heteronormativity is seen as a must for Indonesian national identity, and religious-political dialogues seem to support that claim. This norm acts as a barrier between waria and the national community. But what else makes up Indonesian national identity?

When Indonesia declared independence in 1945, one of the concepts written into the constitution was one called *pancasila* (Mujani 2009, 577). *Pancasila*, an important and well-known concept in present day Indonesia, is a set of five principles, meant to unify the people of

Indonesia (Mujani 2009, 577). The very first of these principles is belief in one almighty God (Mujani 2009, 577).

While this first principle is considered debatable and open to interpretation by some Indonesians, the presence and placement of this first principle speaks to the importance and interconnectedness of religion and national identity. Most Indonesians will not believe you, or simply will not understand you if you say that you don't know your religion, or you don't have a religion. To be a citizen in Indonesia you must identify by one of the five religions recognized by the Indonesian government (Boellstorff 2007, 126). This religion is printed on your identification card and other documents, and requested when you go to the hospital. Faith and national identity are very much intertwined.

How is this relevant to waria? All of the waria who I spoke to in Yogyakarta were Muslims, some of them quite devout Muslims at that. Might this faith, which is deeply tied to Indonesian national identity, offer waria a source of acceptance to others in Indonesian society?

On a local level, it seems that this might have some truth. When I asked Bu Sri about Muslim perceptions of waria, she replied that she was well respected in her neighborhood despite the fact that it was quite religiously conservative. Bu Sri is a respectable and religious waria, and her neighbors know that when they meet her and when they see her participating in Muslim activities and wearing the *jilbab*. Bu Rita, also very thoughtful as a Muslim, shows her devoutness in her daily life: despite her successfulness she leads a very humble lifestyle. This is visible from the modest place she lives, her work, and the way she interacts with other people. Bu Sri and Bu Rita both told me that many waria went to the *masjid*, where these waria are obviously seen by other Muslims. At the very least, Islam is something that Bu Sri, Bu Rita, and



others have in common with her Muslim neighbors, and something that offers a connection to the rest of Indonesian society. People who get to know them on anything deeper than a surface level will find that they are good people, and good Muslims by common standards.

These impressions are mostly based on more socially and financially successful waria who I interacted with. Whether all waria go to the mosque and pray five times a day, I can't say. Likely not. However Islam *is* a common bond between waria and other Muslims in Yogyakarta. It seems that many waria have had to think their faith through more than some normatively gendered Muslims, because their gender is seen as being at odds with Islam. As a result, Islam is a source of inspiration for waria like Bu Sri and Bu Rita to lead meaningful lives and do good works for the community.

While I was in Yogyakarta I got a haircut at a salon run by a waria. I arrived in the evening. While I was there Bu Tina, the waria working at the salon, at one point excused herself, shut the door, and pulled out a prayer rug. I and one other customer, a woman, saw Bu Tina go through the same prayer routine that all Muslims know.

#### DIVERGENT ISLAMIC TRENDS AND ATTITUDES

This is obviously not the only role religion plays in the lives of modern-day waria. Today's religious discourse continues to emphasize heteronormativity and perpetuate the gender binary of colonial and early Muslim Indonesia.

However, things have become more complicated since the fall of Suharto.

Under the New Order regime, many religious and political groups were oppressed and silenced to preserve Suharto's political power. Since Suharto left office, these various religious and political groups, many of them "radical" Islamic organizations, have been relatively free to

run for office and recruit new members (Fealy 2004, 104). After 9/11, there was much alarmed speculation by Western scholars as to how this emergence would play out, and fear that “radical” Islam would spread throughout Indonesia (Fealy 2004, 104).

Other recent scholars have pointed out drastic trends of secularization in politics. A study based on political polls by Saiful Mujani and William Liddle in 2009 concluded that secular political parties have dominated and will probably continue to dominate Indonesian politics.

So some have pointed to increasing Islam-ization after the fall of Suharto, and others expect secularization to continue. Divergent trends can also be seen in Islam itself. Two main Muslim organizations exist in Indonesia. Muhamadiyah is a Modernist organization with the goal of aligning Indonesian Islam more with the Islam of the Middle East, ignoring all folk influence and focusing on Qur’an and *sunnah* (Mujani 2009, 577). Nahdlatul Ulama, or NU, is a traditionalist group formed in response to Muhamadiyah in 1926 (Mujani 2009, 577). There are also several smaller minority groups.

These divergent trends have obviously had mixed effects on attitudes toward gender transgressors thus far. On one hand, globalized media and the presence of tourists has exposed Indonesians to cultures in which gender transgression is more acceptable. While *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are less open about their identity, *waria* are visible in Indonesian daily life. In 2004 for the first time an Indonesian movie, “Arisan!”, featured a gay couple (Boellstorff 2007, 2303).

On the other hand, there have been more instances of intermittent opposition and violent attacks on *waria* and other gender transgressors in recent years since the fall of Suharto. In 1999 *gay* and *waria* activists attempted to hold a press conference, hoping to move forward toward acceptance in the post-Suharto era (Boellstorff 2007, 2303). However, it didn’t take place

because of several threats by Muslim organizations to burn down the venue for the event. In 2000 a gathering in Kaliurang of *gay* and *waria* organizations for the observance of National Health Day was interrupted by an attack by the *Gerakan Pemuda Ka'bah- Ka'bah* Youth Movement (Boellstorff 2007, 2303). Gatherings like these had taken place in the previous decade without any of these consequences (Boellstorff 2007, 2303). In 2001 a book launch by Dede Oetemo, a *gay* activist, was prevented by the police under “the pretext it would disturb public security” (Boellstorff 2007, 2303). In Aceh, Bali, and Java there have been incidents in which *waria* have been physically attacked on the street and their hair has been cut (Boellstorff 2007, 2303).

What do these attacks mean? Boellstorff believes that these incidents point to the fact that in the post-Suharto era “masculinity is nationalized in a new way” (Boellstorff 2007, 2282). In earlier postcolonial times, male-male sexuality had been disapproved of or ignored, but never prompted violence (Boellstorff 2007, 2252). It’s possible that in the uncertain political times following Suharto, “attempts by nonnormative men to access civil society can appear to threaten the nation itself” (Boellstorff 2007, 2282). If this is true, then these attacks, though usually perpetrated by Muslim youth groups, are not primarily religious in nature, largely a result of national political notions of masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

Though on a personal level some *waria* in Yogyakarta are often very visible and accepted, on a larger scale within Indonesian society they are still quite restricted by the strict colonial, Islamic, family-based gender binary. Because of this binary today’s *waria* respond to their femininity by completely assuming the role and appearance of the opposite sex. They are

relatively accepted in comparison to *gay* Indonesians because of their understood heterosexuality, however many waria are still unable to express themselves, and a good number are disowned by their families.

On a small scale Islam can offer connections between waria and *normal* members of the community. However on the whole, I would venture to say that the role of religious discourse is decreasing. Indonesian politics is dominated by the secular, and global culture is doubtless beginning to shape gender discourse. Recent attacks on gender transgressors by small minority Muslim groups appear to be inspired by a nationalized masculinity rather than religion alone.

Religious discourse has had a tremendous effect on Indonesian conceptions of gender throughout history. Pre-Islamic beliefs originally gave gender transgressors power and respect, while Islam had the opposite effect. While the near future is quite uncertain, it's likely that religion may not be the driving force in Indonesian gender discourses to come.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

I found that my work was made very much more difficult by the broadness of my topic after I couldn't focus on the *pesantren*. I thought that there would be regular activities to attend and people to meet there, and this simply wasn't the case during the time that I visited. While attempting to focus on religion did help, I would recommend focusing on a more specific aspect of waria life.

While I was in Yogyakarta I speculated on how else this research could have been improved. In the future, I would try to use an actual waria as an advisor, or if possible even live

with waria. I found that Yogyakarta was an excellent place to learn about waria; the community there is very strong and everyone I talked with spoke very openly and unreservedly.

For anyone else who continues this study, I would strongly recommend Bu Yuli or especially Bu Rita as an advisor or interviewee. Both are incredibly educated and well-connected in the waria community.

Overall, I'm happy with what I learned about waria, but I wish that I had been better connected with the community before departing for Yogyakarta. My first week and a half was largely spent attempting to network and schedule meetings with people. However, the work was very interesting and rewarding, and I enjoyed every interaction I had with waria in Yogya. I certainly hope that future SIT students will continue this study. Semangat!

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