

A New Archipelago Concept for the *Era Reformasi*?¹

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Abstrak

Sejak awal berdirinya, Indonesia telah dibentuk berdasarkan gagasan bahwa 'kebudayaan nasional' dan 'identitas nasional' harus lebih diutamakan daripada identitas kesukubangsaan. Pemerintah Orde Baru berusaha menciptakan 'kesatuan dalam keragaman' ini tidak hanya melalui Pancasila, tetapi juga melalui 'konsep kepulauan' (wawasan nusantara) dan 'azas kekeluargaan'. Dengan berakhirnya Orde Baru, adakah cara untuk mengubah konsep-konsep ini, sehingga warga Indonesia dapat berpikir tentang diri mereka sebagai anggota suatu masyarakat nasional yang bersifat *transethnic* dan *transreligious*?

Dalam tulisan ini, penulisnya berargumentasi bahwa jawaban untuk pertanyaan ini adalah 'ya'. Dengan mengilustrasikan kenyataan identitas *gay* dan *lesbian* berdasarkan penelitian di Makassar, Surabaya dan Bali, penulisnya menunjukkan bahwa berbeda dari identitas seksual yang bersifat 'lokal' seperti *bissu* atau *warok-gemblak*, kaum *gay* dan *lesbi* Indonesia berpikir tentang diri mereka sebagai anggota dari suatu masyarakat yang tersebar luas ke seluruh negeri 'gaya nusantara', termasuk laki-laki dan wanita dari berbagai latar belakang etnis dan agama. Contoh-contoh etnografis dari kehidupan sehari-hari kaum laki-laki *gay* dan wanita *lesbian* memperlihatkan bahwa walaupun perilaku para individu ini seringkali dikatakan bertentangan dengan kebudayaan Indonesia, dalam kenyataannya, perspektif dan perilaku mereka merupakan contoh dari 'kebudayaan Indonesia'. Mereka memiliki perspektif 'wawasan nusantara' sesuai dengan konsep pemerintah dan menggunakannya dengan cara-cara yang sebenarnya tidak diharapkan oleh pemerintah. Konsep nasionalisme Indonesia telah ditransformasikan dengan cara-cara yang tidak direncanakan sejak masa Orde Baru, dan akan terus berlanjut pada era reformasi. Dalam tulisan ini diketengahkan juga cara kaum *gay* dan *lesbi* memodifikasi 'prinsip kekeluargaan' ciptaan Orde Baru yang memungkinkan mereka diterima sebagai anggota masyarakat nasional yang baru.

As a sociocultural anthropologist I study culture, which to an anthropologist means not only dances, rituals, and art, but systems of

thinking and interacting in everyday life. As a result, anthropologists do not just study isolated groups; they can also study people in urban areas, people who are rich, people who are migrants, and so on.

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One of the topics I study is gay and lesbian identity in Indonesia. I have conducted this research since 1992 in Makassar, Bali, and Surabaya, and also for short periods in Samarinda, Balikpapan, Kediri, Yogyakarta, Bandung, Solo, and Jakarta. My research focuses on Indonesians who identify themselves as *gay* or *lesbi*—that is, homosexual people, who are sexually attracted to the same sex, but have what we might call ‘normal’ gender identities. In other words, the people I study do not identify themselves with transgender terms like *waria*, *banci*, *kedi*, or *bissu*; instead, they use the ostensibly foreign terms *lesbi* and *gay*.

It appears that Indonesians started identifying as *lesbi* or *gay* in the 1970s, but these terms did not start appearing on a nationwide scale until the 1980s. Mass media have been extremely important to these identities since their beginnings. One of the most important early events was the ‘wedding’ of two *lesbi* women, Jossie and Bonnie, in Jakarta in 1981. The ceremony was covered by *Liberty* and *Tempo*. Since that time, almost all *lesbi* women and *gay* men in Indonesia come to realize they could call themselves *lesbi* or *gay* after reading about these terms in mass media; for instance, through a gossip column in a magazine, a rumor about a movie star in a newspaper. The terms *gay* and *lesbi* are part of no ‘tradition’ or *adat* in Indonesia; they are concepts regarding sexuality, considered the most intimate and ‘local’ part of human life, but the concepts are always learned from a distance.

Despite the fact that the terms *gay* and *lesbi* have appeared in Indonesian mass media for many years now, many Indonesians still do not know what *gay* and *lesbi* mean. Often, Indonesians consider them English equivalents of *waria*, or terms used only for talking about foreigners. Those Indonesians who do know what *gay* and *lesbi* mean often think of these

people as ‘deviants’, people who go outside the norms of society.

In my research I have spent many days with *lesbi* and *gay* people. I have met their lovers, their parents, and their friends. I have spent time with them in parks, apartments, and shopping malls. I have visited small villages where *gay* men or *lesbi* women live. What I want to emphasize in this essay is my discovery that in one sense, these Indonesians are **not** deviants. Their culture—their way of thinking—actually makes explicit many central assumptions in contemporary Indonesian society that otherwise might go unnoticed. As a result, *gay* and *lesbi* identities can be useful as analytical tools **beyond** the case of homosexuality. In particular, they are a striking example of truly **national** identities, integrated across ethnicity and religion, that were formed contingently through New Order ideology. This does not mean that *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians are ‘bad’ products of the New Order; it means that like all Indonesians living under the New Order (and all people living under modern nation-states everywhere), dominant ideologies affect self-identity, but often in unexpected ways. The particular manner in which *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians have transformed New Order ideology in unexpected ways is particularly interesting because it is surprisingly compatible with a new ‘era of reform’ or *era reformasi* where civil society is rejuvenated and tolerance is more valued. To illustrate this point, let me tell you a story that begins in a field in Makassar.

It is four o’clock in the afternoon and it looks like it might rain; there are dark clouds to the east, but no one seems to mind. The field is full of hundreds of people, mostly young men, playing volleyball and basketball. In the center of the field is a group of 20 *gay* men who come here almost every afternoon to play volleyball. Six *gay* men play on each team; others sit and talk along the sidelines. These *gay* men are not hidden, they are laughing and talking

loudly, but no one else on the field seems to mind. A couple of **normal** men come over from the basketball court to watch us play, laughing if someone screams in an effeminate manner. One *gay* man sees them watching us and comments: '...wherever we go, we're visible.'

Soon it starts to rain and the game ends; several *gay* men get on a *pete-pete* and come to my house, where we start watching the television show 'Word Quiz'. I sit down with them and after a few minutes I ask them if they like the show. When they reply that it's one of their favorites, I remark that there is a show like 'Word Quiz' that is popular in the United States as well. My friends nod and say: '...that's true. It's like that with so many of the shows. It's like there are no new ideas here—we just use ideas from the West.'

The show ends and we sit down to eat; after a few minutes, another *gay* man enters the house, returning from a public health conference focusing on religious and cultural perspectives. He says he is worried that the following day, when the conference discussion is supposed to turn to the topic of *gay* men, the other conference participants will be intolerant and say that *gay* men are not real Indonesians. As he sits down to eat, he says something quite profound: 'Culture is something that is created by humans and then believed. There are people in Indonesia who have created *gay* here in Indonesia and believe in what they have created. Thus, *gayness* is part of Indonesian culture.'

In this story we see *gay* Indonesians reflecting on the fact that they, like most Indonesians, are expert at taking ideas from elsewhere and transforming them for the Indonesian context. My friend's statement that *gayness* is part of Indonesian culture is insightful for several reasons, not least that he referred to '**Indonesian** culture', not 'Bugis culture' or 'Makassar culture'. One of the most interesting dimensions of *gay* and *lesbi* identities is that they are **transethnic**. Clearly, there are *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians from every ethnic group: Javanese, Bugis, Balinese, Makassarese, Minangkabau, Torajan, and so on. However, while *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are certainly

aware of their various backgrounds, in terms of their sexuality they identify themselves not as *gay* or *lesbi* Javanese, or *gay* or *lesbi* Bugis, but as *gay* and *lesbi* **Indonesians**. There are no ethnic *gay* or *lesbi* identities or networks; even the slang that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians use is based on Indonesian, not a 'local language' like Javanese, and varies to a remarkably small degree across the archipelago. This does not mean that *gay* and *lesbi* identities are the same everywhere in Indonesia; at issue is that *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians see these differences as subsumed within a **national** identity.

The fact that a transethnic and translocal identity like this could have developed in Indonesia in the last twenty years raises a number of important theoretical and methodological issues. The only other clearly transethnic identities in Indonesia are religious and nationalist, but in each of these cases there are powerful institutions sustaining them. One important question is how *gay* and *lesbi* identities, which have never yet enjoyed this kind of institutional support, are nonetheless transethnic. One factor is that *gay* and *lesbi* identity is clearly new, not originating from tradition, parents or local communities. The national character of *lesbi* and *gay* identity is thus linked to modernity and to mass media.

However, the fact that *gay* and *lesbi* are clearly not 'traditional' does not explain how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians themselves understand these identities. It is not the case that *gay* and *lesbi*, or any other identity, is ever just 'imported' into Indonesia. It is always transformed in the process, changed to fit new circumstances. In the case of *gay* and *lesbi* identities, one important aspect of this transformation is that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians use metaphors of an 'archipelago' when they think about their identities. Sometimes this is explicit. For instance, the national network of *gay* and *lesbi*

groups is called *GAYa Nusantara*. *Gaya* means 'style', but when the first three letters are capitalized it seems to contain *gay* within it. *Nusantara* means 'archipelago' but it can also mean 'Indonesia'. In Indonesian, nouns come before adjectives, while in English they come after adjectives; since *GAYa* is both English and Indonesian in this phrase, *GAYa Nusantara* can have four meanings: 'archipelago style', 'Indonesia style', 'gay Indonesia', and 'gay archipelago'.

Such naming practices, however, would have little meaning if not reflected **implicitly** in the daily lives of *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians. While these Indonesians recognize and comment on differences between *lesbi* and *gay* identity in different parts of Indonesia, most are firm in their conviction that this diversity is enclosed within unity—that *gay* and *lesbi* are fundamentally **Indonesian** identities, not the property of any one area or ethnic group. There is a two-fold metaphor at work. On one level, the idea is that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are part of a national archipelago of diversity within sameness. This archipelago metaphor is then projected recursively so that on another level *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians as a whole are one single 'island' in a **global** archipelago of *gay* and lesbian communities, one that includes other 'islands' like Holland, Thailand, and the United States.

It is clear that *lesbi* women and *gay* men got the idea that unity in diversity could be represented as an archipelago from the Indonesian state. The archipelago concept (*wawasan nusantara*) dates from the early period of nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century but gained new force in December 1957 in the context of an international dispute over maritime boundaries. At the First International Conference of the Law of the Sea in Geneva, the Indonesian state argued that its

borders were not limited to a certain distance from the coast of each island, as was the international norm, but should include all of the waters 'within' the archipelago. Indonesia's request was granted, and the Second International Conference in 1960 recognized the notion of an 'archipelagic state' and with it the archipelago concept. In 1973 a government resolution decreed that the archipelago concept 'gives life to national development in all its aspects—political, educational, and socio-cultural' (Kusumaatmadja 1982:25). The archipelago concept continues to be used in the *era reformasi*, as we saw in a speech given by Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri at the PDI-P Congress in Makassar in July 2000, where she emphasized that Indonesia is an archipelagic state, not a continental one.

This transformation of the archipelago concept by *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians is an example of hegemony, a concept often associated with the work of the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci and developed by 'Birmingham school' theorists like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, as well as many Indonesian intellectuals (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1986, 1988, 1991; Williams 1977). Gramsci recognized that powerful groups rarely hold power solely through state force; they also use culture and mass media within the realm of civil society to build a 'common sense' where citizens see themselves as invested in the state's perpetuation. This dominant way of thinking, established primarily through consent in the realm of civil society and only in the last instance through violence, is one crucial dimension of Gramsci's formulation of hegemony.

An important aspect of Gramsci's theory of hegemony is that this dominant way of thinking must constantly be renewed in civil society. It must always adapt itself, and for this reason it is always at risk of being transformed

by grassroots groups in unexpected ways. This is exactly what we see in the case of *gay* and *lesbi* identities. These Indonesians have taken a core element of state ideology, the archipelago concept, and transformed it to understand their sexualities and the way these sexualities are linked nationally and transnationally. Most of the time this process is not conscious; these Indonesians rarely say explicitly that they are transforming a state concept. But this is what they are doing, at the same time that they are transforming the concepts *gay* and *lesbian* from outside Indonesia. It is not hard to imagine that if *gay* and *lesbi* identity had arisen in the Old Order, in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement and a strongly antagonistic stance toward the West, its character would not have been what it is now. It would also be different if it had arisen only now in the *era reformasi*.

It is with this concept of hegemony in mind that I can make the following statement: *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are the New Order's greatest success story—albeit a success the New Order state never intended! What I mean by this is that these identities are the greatest example in Indonesia of a truly **national** identity—translocal, transethnic, and transreligious. They have successfully incorporated the state's archipelago concept, but in a way the state never imagined. *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians thereby illustrate that we can take concepts from sources that we may not agree with, or may even completely reject (such as the New Order state) and still transform them into something useful and legitimate. (Early nationalists made the same point when they noted that the greatest gift of the Dutch to Indonesia was the idea of 'Indonesia' itself.)

The archipelago concept is not the only state concept I would like to mention today as an example of hegemony. A second is the 'fam-

ily principle' (*azas kekeluargaan*). This principle regards the nation as made up of families, of very particular families—not 'traditional' extended families, but **modern** families with a husband, wife, two children, a home with smooth white tile floors, a television set, car, and other paraphernalia of the new middle class. In this idea of the family, every family member is supposed to follow the father. The metaphor is that every citizen is a child and the state is a father, and therefore the citizen doesn't know what is best and should just follow the wise state. One concrete illustration of how these two principles come together—the archipelago concept and the family principle—can be seen in the '*nusantara* galleries' found in Indonesian museums. In these rooms, which focus on how the 'local culture' a particular museum exhibits is actually part of a national culture, one of the most common kinds of displays 'shows sets of male and female dolls dressed in wedding garments of each province' (Taylor 1994:80). In these displays, heterosexuality defines the national archipelago.

It is obvious that many Indonesians (including many *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians) do not believe this state propaganda. However, one's relationship to a dominant ideology is not a simple matter of belief or disbelief; the theory of hegemony predicts that even when people fight the state, they may do so by transforming the state's own way of thinking. We have seen how the archipelago concept was unexpectedly transformed by *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians. A series of drawings made by a *gay* man in Jakarta in 1997 illustrate how *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians might transform the family principle in their thinking.

In the first picture we see 'a poor **hetero** family that does not follow Family Planning'. Utensils and toys are strewn about a dirt floor; a mother, weighed down by an infant, screams over a gas stove, while the father is incapaci-

tated in bed by the fighting of the other four children. One child is urinating on the floor; curtains hang precariously from unhinged shutters. 'The parents have 'create[d] not heaven but a 'hell' on earth. How far can this husband and wife guarantee that their children will become successful people later on?' By contrast, the second and third figures show 'a *lesbi* couple who are professionals' and 'can live together comfortably' and 'a young *gay* couple who, besides being happy, also can enjoy life optimally'.

By claiming that a *gay* or *lesbi* couple can create a 'modern' household even better than a *hetero* couple, this writer is critiquing the family principle. But at the same time the writer still uses the state's own way of thinking. For this author what counts as a successful family that enjoys life optimally? It is not any 'traditional' extended family gathered around a cooking-pot. Instead the writer presents a pair of two *lesbi* women, and later a pair of two *gay* men, in both cases with beautifully coiffed hair, clean clothes, smooth white tile floors, television sets, automobiles, two servants, gardens being watered, and the calm aura of leisure. In other words, what counts as success is the same modern middle-class, professional household the New Order state claimed was the ultimate goal of 'development'. This writer tries to break away from the state's ideology by claiming that *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians can make families, but still keeps many of the state's assumptions in his definition of what counts as a 'successful' family.

This example shows how when social groups fight a hegemony, they almost always use some of that hegemony's own ways of thinking. We have to be careful, because this could have a negative effect—groups think that they are resisting the state but actually support it. However, it can also have a positive effect. This is demonstrated by my earlier example of the archipelago concept, where *gay* and *lesbi* people have created something new

from old ways of thinking—bonds of tolerance, understanding, and closeness across ethnicity and religion through a shared sense of being Indonesian. *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians show that the archipelago concept can be transformed, that it may be possible to create a new archipelago based upon greater tolerance and social justice.

It is insufficient to say that *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians could never become accepted in Indonesian society simply because in 'local culture' there is no idea of *lesbi* and *gay*. The ideas of 'local' and 'global' are not real aspects of the world, but ways of thinking about the world that can change over time. Indeed, 'local culture' is a concept the New Order took over from the colonial era (Burns 1999; Pemberton 1994; Tsing 1993). Very few groups in Indonesia are really 'isolated'. Throughout Indonesian history, most groups have been taking ideas from the 'outside' and transforming them. *Lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians demonstrate it is possible to think of Indonesia as one big 'locality'. How might that change the way we think about some of the current conflicts in Indonesia?

This raises a set of interesting questions concerning the place of *lesbi* women and *gay* men in a rapidly changing Indonesia.

The key to effective civil society is tolerating diversity, even when we do not completely agree with some of that diversity. If we are only willing to accept as part of society people that we agree with one hundred percent, then sadly I do not believe unity in diversity is possible. Can the Indonesian people create not only a new archipelago concept, but also a new family principle? One that recognizes that there are many kinds of families, and that not everyone has to marry to be an adult? One that accepts *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians? These men and women say that they did not choose to be

this way. Many are very religious and believe that God intended them to be this way. They try to live lives that are positive and good, and they try to contribute to society. Must they be rejected? If they are accepted, might that not be a sign that we can tolerate other kinds of differences as well?

I conclude by returning to several key elements of my argument. To understand the lifeworlds of *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians, it is vital to develop a theoretical and methodological approach recognizing that aspects of life which are ostensibly intimate and personal—like sexuality, identity, or the family—may not necessarily be ontologically founded in locality. Second, to understand such translocal dimensions of culture, anthropologists must sometimes conduct research in more than one

place. Third, the concept of hegemony has utility in underscoring how groups that resist dominant ideologies may unintentionally use parts of that dominant way of thinking—but that a group reconfigures dominant ideologies does not necessarily mean the group in question suffers from ‘false consciousness’. Finally, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are not ‘deviants’; their lives illustrate some fundamental characteristics of Indonesian culture. Additionally, they illustrate how it is possible to forge new ways of being that are still authentically Indonesian. These Indonesians show us that it is possible to create a new archipelago concept for the *era reformasi*, and I look forward to watching how my Indonesian friends work to create these new possibilities for tolerance, civil society, and social justice.

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