routledge
international
encyclopedia of
queer culture

edited by
david a. gerstner
and lifestyle certainly exists, a model that assumes a unilateral movement from a Western centre to a ‘developing’ periphery is clearly inadequate. Equally problematic is a model that fixes local, indigenous identities in some kind of unchanging ‘traditional’ past which is under constant threat of erosion. Rather, globalization means that everything is in flux, including the identity categories of both the West and the rest.

Bibliography


Further reading


MARK MCLELLAND

INDONESIA, SEXUAL CULTURES

While still poorly understood by most Westerners, Indonesia is geopolitically significant. Stretching a distance greater than that from California to New York, Indonesia is the world’s largest archipelago, with over 3,000 inhabited islands and over 600 spoken languages. With over 200 million citizens it is the fourth most populous nation (after China, India and the United States). Since nearly 90 per cent of Indonesians are Muslim, it is also home to more Muslims than any other country.

Indonesia’s glbtq sexual cultures can be placed into three general categories:

Ritual transgenderisms and homosexualities

Transgenderisms and homosexualities linked to ritual or performance have existed in many (but not all) parts of the archipelago as far back as written and oral texts permit us to speculate. These are typically only for men, for only part of the life span, and do not release the persons who take them up from heterosexual marriage. Perhaps the best-known case involves ritual specialists known as bissu. Bissu were usually men who guarded sacred objects in the Bugis royal courts and who would for certain purposes dress in a manner combining male and female clothing. Like many ritual transgender practices, it does not appear that the bissu profession was identified with a sexual culture and sexual restraint was often seen as a way for bissus to increase their mystical powers. Some ritual transgenderisms and homosexualities, including bissu, persist now; others have been discontinued because of the influences of colonialism and religions such as Islam and Christianity, and are known only through historical texts.

Warias

Warias (better known to the Indonesian public as banci or bencong, terms most warias consider derogatory) are persons seen to be born as men who, usually in childhood, come to believe that they have the souls of women, or souls that are both male and female. They dress in a feminine style, usually all day long, although rarely do they try to pass as women. While the historical record is still incomplete, it appears that warias first appeared in the Indonesian archipelago during the nineteenth century. From the beginning warias were associated not with ritual but with the developing
market culture of colonial-era cities; they appear to have made their living as performers in popular theatre, in small-scale trading and through sewing and sex work. In contemporary Indonesia warias are visible in daily life to a degree that surprises tourists and other visitors. They are particularly associated with salons and other situations where body transformation is called for, such as bridal makeup. They appear on TV advertisements and shows, and perform for public events, including political rallies. Despite this social recognition, warias also face discrimination; sometimes from their families of origin, sometimes from passers-by on the street. Warias rarely marry women or have sex with each other; their ideal sexual and romantic partner is a 'normal' man. Often it is expected that this man will eventually leave their waria partner for a wife, but it is also common for a man to continue a relationship with a waria after marriage, with or without his wife’s knowledge.

In contemporary Indonesia warias live not just in urban areas but in rural environments also, although the best-known waria organizations and events take place in cities. Warias are found across the Indonesian nation and are not seen as being exclusive to any particular ethnic group. As the reference to political rallies above indicates, they are increasingly present in the public sphere.

**‘Gay’, ‘lesbi’, and ‘tomboi’ Indonesians**

From the available data it appears that some Indonesians began to use the terms gay and lesbi during the 1970s, with an acknowledged national social network taking form in the 1980s. Unlike ritual transgenderisms and sexualities or the ‘waria’ identity, Indonesians do not usually learn about ‘gay’ identity from their community. Most ‘gay’ men say they first learned they could be ‘gay’ from fragmentary coverage in the mass media. Once seeing themselves as ‘gay’, these men are often able to meet other ‘gay’ men in parks and shopping centres or by ‘playing eyes’ with a man who they hope might be ‘gay’.

On the surface of things, ‘gay’ men might appear similar to gay men in the West, particularly since the Indonesian term ‘gay’ is clearly derived from the English ‘gay’. However ‘gay’ men have transformed the concept gay in unexpected ways. Since most ‘gay’ men (like most Indonesians) do not travel outside Indonesia or speak English, their links to Western homosexualities are fractured. Almost none, for instance, know the significance of things such as Stonewall or the rainbow flag. Significantly, most ‘gay’ men marry women and assume that Western gay men do the same. This state of affairs reflects not only ‘gay’ men’s incomplete knowledge of Western homosexualities, but the importance of heterosexual marriage in contemporary Indonesian society. This is not just the product of ‘traditional’ sexual cultures but is shaped by the Indonesian nation-state’s emphasis upon marriage and the nuclear family as core elements of national society.

Since the term ‘gay’ is still not well understood by Indonesian society (many think it is English for waria), ‘gay’ men rarely face overt discrimination. This is particularly the case because few ‘gay’ men reveal themselves as gay to family, co-workers or friends who are not gay themselves. Since Indonesia was a Dutch colony and its penal code is based upon Napoleonic law, which was relatively uninterested in homosexuality, legal action against ‘gay’ men is rare. However, some openly ‘gay’ men have experienced discrimination, as in the case of Dédé Oetomo. In a number of cities ‘gay’ men have created organizations and even published small magazines.

The term ‘lesbi’ appears to have existed as long as ‘gay’ (‘lesbian’ is also found but is less common, probably because -an is a suffix in the Indonesian language). Like ‘gay’ men, most ‘lesi’ women learn about
the concept lesbi through mass media and then meet other ‘lesbi’ women. However, since it is more difficult for women to move about unaccompanied than men, ‘lesbi’ women face particular barriers in forming a community; they must largely do so in more policed environments such as at home or school. Nonetheless, ‘lesbi’ women have formed communities and even organizations in a number of Indonesian cities. Like ‘gay’ men, many ‘lesbi’ women marry heterosexually, for reasons that often include both personal desire (for children, for social acceptance, for God’s favour) and social pressure.

One of the most important differences between ‘gay’ and ‘lesbi’ Indonesians is that while the waria identity has existed for some time, there has been no similarly recognized identity for female-to-male transgendered or transvestite persons. Such persons in Indonesia go by a variety of names, the best known of which is tomboi (sometimes spelled ‘tomboy’ or ‘thomboy’). The fact that the ‘lesi’ and tomboi identities have come into being at around the same time (rather than decades apart as in the case of ‘gay’ and waria) has important consequences. For instance, while ‘gay’ men rarely have sex with waria, ‘lesi’ and tomboi persons are often ideal sexual partners. Additionally, while waria is understood as a uniquely Indonesian identity, the tomboi identity seems to reflect the existence of tomboy identities across Southeast Asia.

**Further reading**


**INGE, WILLIAM**

*In the work of American playwright William Inge, searing dramas of life in small-town America reveal a keen critique of social and sexual repressiveness. A drama college graduate, Inge held a variety of teaching and journalist positions before being inspired to try scriptwriting through a chance meeting and subsequent friendship with Tennessee Williams. An auspicious debut with *Farther Off from Heaven* (1947) was followed by a series of highly successful plays throughout the 1950s, including *Come Back Little Sheba, Bus Stop, The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Picnic*. Hailed by critics as a major new talent for his exposés of stifling provincialism in the American heartland, Inge’s career faltered badly in the 1960s when he experienced a string of flops. Strictly closeted, Inge struggled with his homosexuality and in later life became increasingly prone to bouts of severe depression and alcoholism, eventually committing suicide at age 60.*

**BRETT FARMER**

**INMAN, JOHN**

*b. 1935*

**comic actor, mime**

John Inman is best known for his camp performance as Mr. Humphries, the flamboyant sales associate he portrayed for ten seasons on the British TV series *Are You