

Strategic Communities: The Notion of *Keluarga* in Indonesia and among Females of Same-Sex
Attraction in Yogyakarta.

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This paper provides a glimpse of the salient themes to emerge from my fieldwork on female same-sex relations and identities in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, conducted over 12 months during 2003-2004¹. The participants were females who identified as being of the *priyayi* (Javanese middle to upper) class, Muslim, university educated, and financially independent. All self-identify as *butchi*² and assume masculine gender. They are therefore not to be seen as representative of all females of same-sex attraction in Yogyakarta. As such, however, these participants are intended to provide a case study of the dominant themes and practices which emerge from research on female same-sex and transgender practices in Indonesia. The central themes are the negotiation of gender discourses, lesbian (*lesbi*) *butchi* / *femme*³ identities and *keluarga* (family), a sense of community.

In this paper, I argue that females of same-sex attraction in Yogyakarta in identifying as *lesbi* are in many ways excluded from the traditional or *priyayi* family (*keluarga*) structure and form new *keluarga* affiliations. These *keluarga* provide the local nuclei to a wider national and global *komunitas* (community) of lesbians. In this sense this paper highlights the levels at which the

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² Females of same-sex attraction who assume a masculine gender identity.

³ Assume a feminine gender identity.

notion of *keluarga* in Indonesia is strategically employed to create a sense of community, often one that can only be imagined. Further, it explores the processes and discourses through which female sexualities and gender identities are shaped and articulated.

Keluarga Indonesia / the Indonesian Family (Community).

The notion of *keluarga* in Indonesia embraces several spheres of belonging: extending from the immediate, nuclear family, to incorporate elaborate kinship ties and the wider society. As Anderson (1991: 120) points out, the notion of the Indonesian community is a remnant of Dutch colonization: it is at that time that the boundaries were marked for what was to become the independent Republic and ‘a territorially specific imagined reality’ (ibid: 122). Anderson explains that the introduction of centralized education enhanced the construction of one united nation through the perception of a community comprised of multiple ethnicities with a ‘coherent universe of experience’ (1991: 121).

Notions of the Indonesian nation as *keluarga* have since been strategically employed by successive governments, in particular that of Suharto, in pursuing nationalist agendas. The slogan *Keluarga Sejahtera* (the Prosperous Family) was employed as an umbrella term to incorporate a range of social development programmes implemented during the New Order period. ‘The centerpiece’ of these development initiatives was the National Family Planning Board (*BKKBN*) (Newland 2001: 1). Since 1994, the 29th of June⁴ is annually celebrated as the National Day of the Family (*Hari Keluarga Nasional-HARGANAS*), with events hosted each year in a different village or regency across the nation. The Presidential speech opening the event invariably draws heavily on family values, emphasizing the role of the family in the development of morally upright citizens, thus framed as prerequisite to a prosperous nation. Without fail, reference is made to the *BKKBN* and the need for ongoing support for its activities by the populace. In 2004, Megawati explicitly promoted the *BKKBN* as the governmental ‘programme most fundamental to the future prospects of regional autonomy’⁵. In the same year, the Minister for Women’s Affairs, Mien Sugandhi stated that:

I can understand that lesbians have individual rights, but I cannot accept them as Indonesian women. My belief is that lesbianism is not in accordance with

⁴The 29th June was chosen to commemorate the day in 1970 that the Family Planning (*Keluarga Berencana*) body was made national.

⁵ Taken from Megawati’s *HARGANAS* speech.

Pancasila, because lesbians have forgotten their fundamental duties as mothers, giving birth, and raising children⁶ (Gayatri, 1996: 86).

Recent speeches, including that of President Yudoyono, marking this day of national celebration, provide example of (Tempo Interaktif, Jakarta, 3 July 2005) government level reinforcement of the institutionalized control of female bodies, fertility, reproduction and sexuality through their emphasis on marriage, family and the *BKKBN*.

Dominant Narratives of the Feminine

In this context, gender is intrinsic to notions of *keluarga*. Evelyn Blackwood argues that dominant gender narratives outline the ways in which gender is framed as a cultural category (2005) and also that ‘gender...is one of the primary crucibles within which sexuality is produced (ibid: 5). Aged 19-31, the research participants indicated that their gendered and sexual identities were shaped in ongoing negotiation of the New Order gender discourse (1966-1998), and more recently the period of liberalization and globalization. Saskia Wieringa describes the Suharto era as one of “patriarchal, authoritarian, national ideology” (2003: 2) in which New Order military authority was exercised through the politics of control of women’s sexuality (ibid).

The New Order period is characterized as one in which nationalist and gender discourse were controlled and manipulated through the re-imagining of traditional ideologies, such as the Islamic *kodrat wanita* (women’s ideological code of conduct) which underpinned women’s place, role and status at all levels of society regardless of faith. The *kodrat* was inscribed in government policy, as is exemplified in the *Panca Darma Wanita* (the five responsibilities of women) and actively pursued through the Darma Wanita (Civil Servants’ Wives Organization). Sunindyo (1996) outlines these responsibilities as a wife’s role to; support a husband’s career and duties, provide offspring, raise children, be a good housekeeper, and act as community guardian (125). As Blackwood (1995) suggests, “postcolonial states actively create (or reconstruct) and promote formulations of gender compatible with the perceived needs of development” and subsequently “definitions of womanhood are consciously forged through state ideologies” (125). The development agenda pursued by Suharto, for the Indonesian nation, therefore positioned women as wives and educators whose primary task was maintaining family allegiance.

⁶ *Suara Karya*, June 6, 1994.

Keluarga asli / Gendering female bodies in the family

It is significant then, that the family is the primary institution through which gender ideals are embraced, negotiated, (re)worked or (re)interpreted. All participants expressed a consciousness of the inequalities and contradictions of the dichotomous gender system first witnessed at home, in particular regarding domestic duties, control of money and decision-making. For example, one participant's family hired a *pembantu* (maid), who assumed all household duties, liberating her and her mother, a teacher, from prescribed domesticity. During Ramadan (Muslim holy month) when the *pembantu* returned to her village, however, it was necessary for them to take on these roles. The young girl rebelled against the restrictive nature of what she viewed as 'old/*priyayi*' tradition. She compared herself to her brothers and expressed thinking 'it would be good to be a boy, not tiring from work' (Yana). And indeed, during the remaining 11 months of the year it was she, not her brothers, who assisted her father in home maintenance. Another felt her father exercised undue control in not allowing her mother to work outside the home. She complained, 'he can forbid but he doesn't want to be forbidden' (Kian). One participant left home several times, first at the age of 9, due to her father's physically violent reprisals against what he perceived her non-feminine behaviours. All perceived their fathers' control of money and decision-making as a reflection of male power and access in both the private and public domains. The conflict and contradiction in the home were, to some extent, compensated by friendships and peer interactions in high school and university. These provided validation and support to the participants' gender identities and developing sexualities that the family did not. As Ortner (1997: 18) states, "whatever the hegemonic order of gender relations may be...[t]here are always sites, and sometimes large sites, of alternative practices and perspectives available, and these may become the basis of transformation".

For females in Yogyakarta, and despite their increasing numbers in higher education and in the workforce, there is still a strong sense that marriage bridges the divide between adolescence and adulthood: through marriage, and subsequent childbirth, a female becomes a woman. This supports Simone de Beauvoir's argument that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1966 [1949]: 5). Not all females, however, want to become woman. Irrespective of their current same-sex relationships and their masculine gender identity, following graduation from university, traditional *priyayi* expectations of marriage and motherhood were imposed upon the three oldest participants by their families. Consequently, one participant was requested to undergo a *ruatan* (a Javanese ritual baptism) in which her true sex and gender would be aligned, her parents hoping it would be heteronormatively: this did not occur. As Beatty (2003) reports, the perception is that

the outcome reflected the way things are meant to be in the cosmic order of things. Another participant entered into a sham relationship with a gay male friend, a collaborative strategy that represents a form of resistance (Gayatri 1995). Exposed by a family acquaintance, the charade was short-lived. After 4 years of relationship and close ties with her partner's family, another participant was asked by her partner's father to grant permission to allow her partner to marry a man. While this request does indicate a level of acknowledgement of their same-sex relationship, it also indicates and reinforces the notion that both the relationship and her masculinity were not seen as culturally and socially valid. As Blackwood suggests, '[s]ociety insists on the priority of the body in determining gender' (1999: 193). Female masculinity is merely performative: she could stand in for a male but not stand in his way. In this case, lesbian invisibility is maintained through the practice of sham marriages and the breakdown of relationships on proposal of marriage.

As Murray argues, practices such as sham marriages reflect that middle to upper class lesbians have much to lose in terms of social position and the power invested in that position, particularly in relation to their position in the family (Murray 1999: 147). Among the participants it was a common perception that identification as *lesbi* and expression of same-sex desire may result in 'being thrown out by their parents' through jeopardizing the 'good name' of the family. They also risk losing financial support and may be forced to fund their own education. As one participant reiterates, 'young women may not be in a position to resist the view that lesbianism is a sickness...abnormal and not permitted' (Kian). Collusion in invisibility also can be seen as a protective strategy. It is through access to education, lesbian networks and global media and discourses that *priyayi* lesbians find support for and reification of their gendered choices and lesbian identity.

***Keluarga lesbi* / the lesbian family**

Traditional gendered expectations of wifedom and motherhood within the family (a microcosm of the wider society), are seen as oppressive among *butchi*. These expectations deny their sense of gender and sexual identity. Consequently, many of the participants moved away from their families to eliminate the possibility of bumping into relatives or having them drop in unannounced. This move has both required and allowed them to forge new and supportive relationships: *keluarga* within the wider *keluarga / komunitas lesbi*.

This transition is prompted by the need to be *terbuka* (open) with oneself: to acknowledge one's same-sex desire. In her work on West Sumatra, Blackwood suggests that *tombois* "having already established a masculine gender identity, ...also laid claim to a sexual desire for women, a move that accords with the hegemonic cultural ideology, in which sexuality is thought to flow on from one's sex / gender" (1999: 190). Only once they admitted their sexual desires to themselves, did they feel they could open up to others, others who shared female same-sex desire. Through becoming selectively *terbuka* with others, friendships and *keluarga* emerge.

According to Murray, *keluarga* is a 'strategic community' (1999:40), it is comprised of a small and intimate group of females. The core group I interviewed all attended the same university. *Butchi* can be seen to be the heads of these families, in that they are more likely to maintain a stable sexual identity. For this reason they are seen as 'true lesbians' (Murray 1999; Gayatri 1994). It is *butchi* who are founding and long term members of the *keluarga* I met at the JP café on the outskirts of Gajah Mada University. *Butchi* also forge links with other lesbian communities in Java, throughout the archipelago and beyond. *Femmes*, generally of stereotypically feminine self-representation, tend to have less involvement in the group. Further, they are more inclined to bisexuality and it is in relationship with *butchis* that *femmes* become visible. Most *butchi* acknowledge the likelihood their *pacar* (girlfriend / lover) will choose heterosexual marriage and motherhood, in doing so they say it is *terserah dia* (up to her). The extent to which this is a matter of choice is questionable, a point acknowledged also by the participants.

Within this *keluarga* strict gender roles are played out. These are predominantly *butchi / femme*, *sentul / kantil* (Jav.-butch /femme), and *cowok / cewek* (Indo.-guy / girl). I did meet one couple who both identified as *andro*⁷ (androgynous). The terms *lesbi*, lesbian, *les* and *lines* were used for same-sex identities. Although the gender and sexual identities of *butchi* may seem fixed, as Hall explains, identity is a process that is historically constructed, fragmented, multiple, fluid, contingent and 'never completed' (ibid: 2). As such, identities are in a constant state of flux. In assuming a masculine gendered lesbian identity each individual performs a subjective expression of that perceived identity.

'The look' (Yana) is an important identifier. *Butchi* are identified by their adherence to strict codes of dress and behaviour (Wieringa 1999). These include short hair - sometimes slicked back with gel, collared button-up shirts or even muscle t-shirts and trousers bought in menswear stores,

⁷ Derived from the English androgynous and assuming masculine and feminine gender traits.

large faced watches and bold rings. They characteristically walk with a swagger and smoke in public places. In her research in Jakarta in the 1980's, Wieringa noticed that within lesbian communities strict "surveillance and socialization" (1999: 224) within the *keluarga* may have contributed to the apparently fixed nature of *butchi* identities.

While *butchi* identities may appear fixed all participants held individual perspectives on butchness. Overwhelmingly, butchness was related to dominance, responsibility and protectiveness. It is in their personal relationships with femmes that the hybridity of lesbian and *butchi* identities is articulated. For instance, the two opposing and distinct opinions on femmeness among *butchis* reflect these. Firstly, that the ideal *cewek* be '*lemah, lembut and sopan*' (soft, supple and polite), terms used to describe stereotypical femininity in Indonesia. Incorporated in this stereotypical view of femininity was the preference that *femmes* be dependent and passive. Secondly, although gender complementarity and femininity are desired in a partner, among the two eldest *butchis*, the key factor in the relationship was equality in power relations between partners, with equality reflected in distribution of domestic tasks, decision-making and sex play.

Interestingly, these *butchis* were active members in the Indonesian Women's Coalition for Justice and Democracy (KPI), a national body with regional divisions. Their involvement is political: they support the notion of lesbian rights as *hak asasi manusia* (basic human rights). In pursuing lesbian rights they have repeatedly attempted to activate the KPI's 15th sector for transgender, lesbian and bisexual females, to no avail.

Affiliation with this sector of the KPI is unsupported by many of the associated *butchi* and *femme* members of this *keluarga*. The reasons are twofold yet intertwined. Firstly, affiliation with sector 15 potentially makes visible the sexual / lesbian identities of its members. Secondly, active involvement in sector 15 is political: the agenda of freedom of sexual preference among females derives its impetus from human rights, homosexual rights, and feminist discourses. Engaging with these discourses requires time, effort, consciousness of and resistance to the marginalization of alternative female sexualities and the belief that sector 15 can assist in addressing the processes and effects of this marginalization on a wider community level. Many in the *keluarga* simply do not have the resources or the political inclination to be involved: perhaps a remnant of what Wieringa (2003) argues to be the strategic depoliticization of women during the New Order period. Many are comfortable in their current social networks and do not feel the need to struggle for legitimacy or visibility.

In terms of my argument, the agenda of sector 15 represents an attempt to broaden the notion of *keluarga* beyond the nucleic *keluarga lesbi* to incorporate the wider lesbian community, a move that requires a degree of openness. Many lesbians in Yogyakarta, however, approach the notion of *terbuku* (openness) with much trepidation: they are strategically open. Clearly, the rhetoric of the Indonesian nation as *keluarga*, premised on strong family values, heterosexuality and gender polarity, positions *lesbi*, and particularly *butchi*, as being at odds with state endorsed discourses of womanhood and femininity. *Keluarga*, however, is a community value available to all Indonesians. For *lesbi*, it is within their lesbian *keluarga* that they can express their openness. The formation of such exclusive *keluarga* in many ways reflects the secrecy and limitations of traditional families, while their hybridizations and engagements with national and international homosexual discourses and practices reflect the broader social meaning of *keluarga* in Indonesia. Access to globalizing discourses may bring about rearticulations of *lesbi butchi / femme* identities, yet the extent to which this occurs is both personal and contingent.

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