

Now You See It, Now You Don't:

Homosexual Culture in Indonesia

Research >
Indonesia

It's around seven o'clock on a monsoon evening. We're in the mountain resort town of Prigen, 60 kilometres south of the port city of Surabaya, at a two-storey, multi-purpose assembly hall owned by a foundation that seems to be connected to the Navy. We've been invited to a birthday party thrown by Kiem Thing (a.k.a. Eddy Tjondronegoro) and Hamid, well-known wedding consultants and owners of beauty parlours in the town of Sidoarjo near Surabaya. A flashily decorated stage has been set up in the front of the first-floor hall. The backdrop is printed with the two birthday boys' names as well as the words 'Yuliet Salon', Kiem Thing's establishment. Above it are the ubiquitous Garuda Pancasila coat-of-arms and official portraits of the President and Vice-President.

By Dédé Oetomo

Crews from two television stations, the public TVRI and the private SCTV, are on hand to cover the event, much to the guests' and hosts' delight. A few of the more special guests are asked to offer sound bites. The ethnic Chinese Kiem Thing looks sveltely divine in a matronly pearly-coloured evening gown, a brunette Taiwanese-made wig flowing to just below his shoulders and a tiara. The ethnic Banjar Hamid wears a sort of *kurta* pyjama outfit he designed himself, with the sleeves of the jacket made of decorated chiffon, showing off his strong arms. They stand smiling at the door, welcoming their friends and business acquaintances.

Many of the guests are those who are known in Indonesia as *waria*, a neologism for transgender people coined from the words *wanita*, or woman, and *pria*, or man. The term *waria* refers to biological males who do not conform to social stereotypes of masculinity and who imitate women in their clothing styles or mannerisms while retaining a masculine identity. Other guests are gay men in drag. It is an art in itself to recognize who's who. Old-timer gay guests know the difference: the drag queens boast a tongue-in-cheek attitude – they try to look fabulous at the same time as they mock their own appearance with a touch of self-deprecation. The guest list also includes whole families from among the hosts' neighbours and business relations. Some have come all the way from Banjarmasin in South Kalimantan Province, where Hamid regularly goes to prepare weddings. Several rent-boys from Bandung, West Java, stud the roster of performers.

By 19:45 most of the guests have been seated in rows of folding chairs

and are beginning to grow a tad restless. The emcee, a gay man who is the chair of the Sidoarjo branch of the National Committee for Indonesian Youth (KNPI) and popular transgender entertainer, welcomes the guests. Two *waria* then open the festivities with an East Javanese *remo* welcome dance. Short speeches are given by Kiem Thing and Hamid; soon after, a Muslim prayer in Javanese-accented Arabic is said by their close friend Papa Nador, a former procurer of rent-boys now doing odd jobs. The guests are then invited to partake of a sumptuous buffet dinner in the adjoining room, consisting of exquisite Chinese and Javanese cuisine. The event culminates in a programme of traditional and modern dances and lip-synch singing. There is a sprinkling of Western and Chinese tunes, but most of the music consists of songs of the *dangdut* genre, a popular pastiche of Hindi film music, Malay ditties, and rock.

By 23:00 many of the guests have left, but those who stay until the end enjoy another party with people of their own kind.

Throughout Indonesia there are people like Kiem Thing and Hamid and their friends. Most people, except for the very ignorant, know of *waria* in their communities and more often than not accept them as they are, perhaps because they occupy a known social niche.

Indeed, different locally variable constructions of a third gender identity abound in traditional Indonesian cultures. Some transgender people even have very important positions in their societies, acting as medium priests, shamans, or ritual custodians of royal sacred objects. In contemporary Indonesia, many people go to their modern-day counterparts' salons

to have haircuts or beauty treatments. Local young men hang out there to play table tennis, have their hair bleached, get a tattoo or have a part of their body pierced, learn about sex or drugs, or just find a space away from home where instead of their own nagging mother they have a surrogate mother who lets them do just about whatever they like. Large numbers of working-class men in fact have sexual or emotional relationships with *waria* at one time or another in their lives. Some explain it away by saying that it is not adulterous to have sex with a *waria*; others believe it will prevent or cure them from sexually transmitted diseases. Men and women go to certain *waria* to have their fortunes told based on poker cards, lines on their palms, or moles on their faces. If necessary, these *waria* can implant artificial moles to improve one's luck. Female prostitutes and office workers often have liquid silicone injected by *waria* in order to obtain a more pointed nose, higher cheek bones, a luscious pair of lips, or a prominent chin. Some *waria* can even do these injections at the client's place of work. This practice, which started a few years ago among salon-based *waria* and gay men who wanted to improve their body image, has now spread to other populations, including some men who would like to increase the size of their genitalia.

Those who are in the know are also familiar with another category of people who identify themselves using the modern terms 'gay', 'homo', or other locally coined words. The more androgynous of these men, especially those in the same professions as *waria*, are often mistaken for *waria* by the more ignorant members of the public. While *waria* are almost always identifiable by their appearance and actions, gays are

not, and their numbers are certainly much larger than those of *waria*. Several private television stations – including the same SCTV that sends its crew to Kiem Thing and Hamid's birthday bash – went on a spree of cleaning up *waria* and androgynous gays from their shows in 1997, but in the wave of liberalization that followed the resignation of President Soeharto in May 1998, many of them were asked to return. Now it is almost *de rigueur* for young male presenters on television to have campy mannerisms (which is not difficult because most of them are queens anyway). Most viewers are clueless as to these men's sexual orientation; they just think they're cute. Some young female presenters even effect such attitudes. The presence of gay men and *waria* in show biz has meant that in addition to their camp behaviour, their special argot has spread to young people who want to project an image of being cool and trendy. *Bahasa binan* (queer language) – which originally developed as a way for street-based gays and *waria* to communicate without being understood by their customer or the authorities – has now become known as *bahasa gaul* (funky language) and has spread out from the big cities across the country. Most speakers of *bahasa gaul* are not aware that their lingo began as the argot of a sexual minority.

All this does not mean, however, that Indonesia is paradise for *waria* and gays. Most *waria* can tell stories of violence at the hands of fathers or older brothers. They survive being beaten, having their heads shaved, or being disowned and turned away from home. Many are forced to grow up with bullying in the schoolyard and neighbourhood. On the other hand, Indonesian communities tend to tolerate and even accept those who are tough enough to survive and prove themselves useful (as long as they are not their own kin, it seems). There is no culturally driven queer-bashing like there is in the West, although street-based *waria* must face extortions at the hands of happy-go-lucky thugs, officials of the municipal public order department, or policemen. In some localities, bribery and rape are almost a monthly fare. A disconcerting recent development is the addition of overzealous religious gangs to the list of perpetrators of anti-gay violence. At the same time, in most large Indonesian towns *waria* have their own organizations, supported by the municipal people's welfare department or one of the more secular political parties. They organize social activities such as hair-dressing lessons, music and dance programmes, and in some cases even Qur'an reading sessions or Christian prayer meetings.

Some gays, especially of working-class background, socialize with *waria*, but others shun them for being 'sissy' and 'indiscrete'. While *waria* can survive in their liminality, their 'in-

betweenness', gays can hide in their invisibility. So how do gays find 'people of the same heart'? Some go to known *waria* beats, where they meet other gays or men who like to have sex with *waria* and gays. Others hear about gay-specific venues such as parks, street corners, discotheques that are gay one evening a week, or restaurants and cafés that are queer in the afternoon right after working hours, and meet their future friends there. Since the 1980s the mass media have helped by presenting coverage of transgenderism and homosexualities, and many people find their communities in this way. This media coverage, along with increasingly open talk about HIV/AIDS and a wave of new democratization and human rights discourses, has been fostering vibrant – albeit discreet – gay communities across Indonesia. Some gays are now even organizing openly, although their discourse tends to be assimilationist. Many gays go to the big cities, but others can find a liveable existence in small towns as well. And while many people know about the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras or the bars and saunas of Bangkok, most can be said to live an 'indigenous' Indonesian existence.

For many gays, invisibility can indeed be oppressive. Societal obsessions with religion, marriage, and procreation can feel quite suffocating. There are faint attempts to resist these dominant ideologies by some radical left-wing intellectuals, and some gays have been able to make peace with their families and are able to live happily and openly with their partners. However, for others invisibility is the only option. The gay beats, once-a-week discos, three-hour-evening cafés, and even the gay organizations can be seen as ghettos. They are necessary to remain sane, but they are not enough.

Indonesian society is now beginning to democratize itself. For many it is a very slow and frustrating process, and most *waria* and gays still do not feel that they belong in the social mainstream (although, for that matter, neither do workers, peasants, and the urban poor). The Constitution of 1945 was amended in August 2000, and the following article was added: 'Everyone has the right to be free from discriminatory treatment of any kind, and to receive protection from such discriminatory treatment' (Art. 28-i, Par. 2).

This particular amendment went unnoticed by Indonesia's *waria* and gays (and, one must quickly add, by most Indonesians). Perhaps one day, a stronger group of activists will make use of this paragraph to demand equal rights, but for the time being Indonesia's *waria* and gays merely continue to make the best use of the liminality and invisibility that continues to afford them some degree of ability to survive. <

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