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Review Essay



Gender, Sexuality, and Society in Indonesia

A Review Essay of Three Recent Publications

Michiel Baas

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

arimba@nus.edu.sg

Christina Sunardi, *Stunning Males and Powerful Females: Gender tradition in East Javanese Dance*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015, xxxiv + 217 pp. ISBN 9780252038952, price: USD 95.00 (cloth); 9780252080593, USD 30.00 (paperback); 9780252096914, USD 27.00 (ebook).

Matteo Carlo Alcano, *Masculine Identities and Male Sex Work between East Java and Bali. An Ethnography of Youth, Bodies, and Violence*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, x + 197 pp. ISBN 9781137541411, price: EUR 90.09 (hardback).

Saskia E. Wieringa with Abba Bhaiya and Nursyahbani Katjasungkana, *Heteronormativity, Passionate Aesthetics and Symbolic Subversion in Asia*, Brighton (UK): Sussex Academic Press, 2015, xii + 275 pp. ISBN 9781845195502, price: GBP 65.00 / USD 74.95 (hardcover); 978845197698, GBP 25.00 / USD 34.95 (paperback).

On the tenth of February 2018, Reuters reported on various proposals to revamp Indonesia's penal code, among which making the public act of gay sex punishable by up to eighteen months prison and up to nine years if there is evidence of abuse or a video of the act has been published. Furthermore, unmarried heterosexual couples found living together could face up to six months in prison, and two years if having engaged in sex outside marriage. About

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two months later, *The Australian* featured a concerned report on the detainment of four people on suspicion of having engaged in homosexual intercourse in Aceh ('Four face lashing in Indonesia's Aceh province over gay sex', 3 April 2018). Accordingly, the four suspects were rounded up by vigilantes, and could face up to hundred lashes in public. At the time of writing this article, it remained unclear whether the men had actually received said lashings, yet in other cases this has taken place publicly ('Gay men, adulterers publicly flogged in Aceh, Indonesia', CNN, 15 July 2018). While up till now Aceh is the only province in Indonesia that has imposed Sharia law and thus criminalized gay-sex, the article again mentions the proposed plans in Parliament which would have Indonesia adopt anti-gay regulations across its islands. It is clear that the crackdown against LGBT-Indonesians has already given rise to HIV infections. As CNN, referring to a Human Rights Watch document, reports: attacks, raids, and open hostility has derailed health efforts to prevent HIV. Access to condoms, counseling, and prevention-education are disappearing ('Indonesia's crackdown on LGBT people fuels HIV crisis, report says', 24 July 2018).

While the three recent publications I will discuss below do not directly touch upon HIV-related issues, or speak of the recent crackdown, they are each important examples of studies that show the diversity, plurality, and malleability of sexual identities in Indonesia. As such, they are able to contribute positively to the argument that more recent developments actually do not reflect local mores and interpretations of gendered and sexual identities. In fact, they show quite the opposite: like elsewhere in Asia, homophobia, heteronormativity, and disappearance of deviancy and non-normative sexualities need to be understood as very recent phenomena that mark a departure from previous norms and practices.

Christina Sunardi's *Stunning Males and Powerful Females: Gender tradition in East Javanese Dance* is an important ethnography about the interplay of gender, power, and traditions within the geographical context of Malang in East Java, Indonesia. Its principle focus is on cross-gender dance performance in which both male and female dancers/musicians participate. Primarily drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2007, the focus of the book is on the way male and female performers access and embody femaleness through East Javanese presentational dance and its music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It does so by examining the perseverance of what the author refers to as 'female power' faced with various cultural pressures that aim to contain, control, and suppress this particular form of dance. The main argument is clearly formulated: "Through the continuous transformations performers have made

to tradition, they have been negotiating culturally constructed boundaries of gender and sex—sometimes reinforcing these boundaries, sometimes transgressing them, sometimes doing both simultaneously.” (p. 1)

For her study, Sunardi draws on theoretical and methodological approaches from ethnomusicology (which she considers her home discipline) as well as anthropology, gender studies, dance studies, studies focusing on Southeast Asia and those of other disciplines. The result is a book which combines interpretative ethnography, textual analysis, and performance analysis (p. 2). It is her endeavor to contribute to new ways of thinking about ‘spiritual power’ and the way this manifests itself in Java. Power, as such, is an important element in her analytical framework, ranging from the spiritual (e.g. magical energy, potency, spiritual potency) to associated speech, behavior, and dispositions, as well as its gendered implications (pp. 2–3). In particular, Sunardi highlights spiritual knowledge (*ilmu*) which is sometimes also talked about as a kind of substantive magical power. “In the context of performance, *ilmu* is knowledge that enables artists—including musicians, dancers, and puppeteers—to rapture, mesmerize, and in some cases, heal” (pp. 4–5). Furthermore, “[u]sing *ilmu*, male and female performers gain the power of presence to affect audiences emotionally—making them feel happy, enthralled, in love—physically—giving them shivers, widening their eyes, freezing their expressions—and sometimes spiritually—healing their hearts and minds” (p. 5). Having no form and being invisible, “[t]ransmission often involves the movement of *ilmu* from one person’s body to another’s so that the recipient comes to have, hold, own, or incorporate it into his or her own body” (p. 5). *Ilmu* can thus be embodied, though its transfer may be understood as a conceptual process or could be interpreted as osmosis (pp. 5–6).

One of the strengths of this ethnography is the way it treats performance and the boundaries of gender and sex as integrally related. The author argues that “performance contributes to continuous cultural processes by and through which boundaries of gender and sex are negotiated, and that boundaries of gender and sex affect the ways in which femaleness and maleness are performed” (pp. 7–8). Informed by ideologies that shape assumptions about how gendered individuals should look, sound, and behave, the author asserts that boundaries of gender and sex are conceptual, and that they are experienced through bodies, objects (e.g. clothing, the physical space of the performance), and daily life (p. 8). It will come as no surprise that she draws on Judith Butler here in her approach of sex and gender as unstable constructs that are thus continuously constituted by and through what people do (or should do) with their bodies (p. 8). Sunardi then shows that “in negotiating conceptual and physical boundaries of gender and sex through dance metaphorically—and also

physically—performers in Malang both reinforced and destabilized dominant ideologies of maleness and femaleness” (pp. 8–9).

After a very clearly structured and argued first chapter which is simply titled ‘Aims and Approaches’, Sunardi then presents her material in an equally precise manner. Chapter 2 focuses on what it takes to maintain ‘female power’ while performing a ‘male style dance’. It explores some of the ways that female dancers and the mainly male musicians accompanying them, maintain and make cultural space for the expression of women’s magnetic female power through their performance of male style dances. Sunardi argues that “by performing male style dance, female dancers and (mostly) male musicians negotiated boundaries of gender and sex visually and sonically, maintaining and making cultural space for women’s expression of female power despite pressures from state and society to control and subdue it” (p. 33). Chapter 3 forms a logical continuation here with its focus on male dancers performing female style dance and in doing so pushing at dominant conceptual and physical boundaries of gender and sex, as they embody and represent male femininity both on and off stage. In doing so the male dancers “have been contributing to the ongoing cultural production of tradition and maintaining cultural space for males to access and make visible the magnetic power of femaleness” (p. 63).

In chapter 4, Sunardi turns to the question of performer-constructed senses of gender as they establish what comprises tradition through their senses of history. The author argues that “the ways performers connected femaleness, the female style dance *Beskalan Putri*, the past, spiritual power, and Malang [...] indicates ways of thinking that in effect maintain cultural space for the magnetic power of femaleness and connected female power to Malang identity” (p. 94). The subsequent chapter focuses on representations of female power through this same dance and zooms in more specifically on the dancers’ sense of Malangan tradition. Here concerns over presentations and the impacts of the social, political, and cultural climate are of primary concern (p. 127). The final chapter uses analysis of performer interaction to round off the author’s exploration into gender, power, and tradition. In doing so she brings together the themes and topics discussed in previous chapters in order to “demonstrate some of the ways that micro-moments of interaction on and offstage are critical moments of complex cultural and ideological work” (p. 158).

What makes this book so relevant is the way it shows how gender norms and performances are far from stable ‘facts of life’ but often negotiable, changeable, and dependent on the individual itself, a source of strength or stress. Although the book is principally focused on understanding the various dance and music forms, a sense of dread and pressure does feature in the background as performances face pressure from politically, socially, and culturally uncertain times.

There is a lot going on in this book and in its attempt to provide a very precise and coherent argument, it sometimes seems to play it a little too safe. Occasionally, the book feels shackled by its ambition to be a strong, theoretically well-argued, academic publication. Considering the focus is on dance and music here with performers playing with and negotiating various gender roles, I found a certain frivolity and joy lacking. The author herself is a trained dancer and hopefully she will be able to bring out this experience and the actual joy of dancing more in subsequent publications.

In the intriguing ethnography *Masculine Identities and Male Sex Work between East Java and Bali: An Ethnography of Youth, Bodies, and Violence*, Matteo Carlo Alcano examines the construction of masculine identities in the context of migrant men from Surabaya in East Java who seek membership in street gangs of male sex workers in South Bali. The ethnography is firmly situated in the study of youth transitions, the construction of masculine identities, as well as questions related to work and unemployment, gang violence, and migration. It investigates “the ambiguity of social relations and consider[s] the predatory aspects of collective social practices” (p. 10).

Focusing first on the meaning men attached to masculine identities, the book zooms in on the life and work in a low-income neighborhood in Surabaya and how its men articulate specific ideas of uncertainty and precariousness (pp. 15–6). In so doing, it attempts to explain the reasons for migrating, with a special focus on work these men will do in South Bali. Within the context of the *kampung*, “successful masculine identities relate closely to the ability to provide for the family, and to fulfill the quite onerous [...] community expectations” (p. 31). It is here that the author already provides us with a glimpse on how these men are able to negotiate their own (sexual) identities in relation to what will be required of them in their future profession.

Alcano’s interpretation of what belonging to a gang means differs somewhat from public perceptions. He argues that to become part of a gang is not only a diversion and way out of boredom but also “a fun, playful engagement” and even “an activity that leads to personal development and as such requires actual work and personal investment” (p. 53). He notes that these gangs are “self-assembled associations of peers who are held together by mutual interests and pursue their specific objective to control the sex market, including the conduct of working and often illegal activities” (p. 97). Within the gang, being able to provide for oneself and one’s family equals a successful masculinity (p. 98).

A long-term relationship with a foreign man seems to be a particular goal to achieve for a variety of reasons: stability, income, and the prospect of a ‘better’ future. “There even have been cases of young men returning home accom-

panied by their partners, who were interested in expending money in land property and wanted to take a firsthand look at their potential investment” (p. 85). But Alcano also notes how stories of marginality and discrimination are also employed to trick potential clientele into supporting them (p. 86). As such, there is always an inherent tension between a male sex worker and his partner or boyfriend, something which reflects inequality and a slippery relationship with the ‘truth’. This is further highlighted by the fact that many if not most male sex workers do not perceive themselves as homosexuals but self-identity as straight (p. 102). To them, homosexuality is something ‘fabricated’ (constructed as well as created), and not necessarily related to sexual desire or orientation. It should be thought of as a category that references “a set of distinctive public practices that a person learns through initiation by peers and that are, ultimately, linked to sex work” (p. 102). Homosexuality is therefore a performance rather than an internal sense of self (p. 103).

Violence (physical and symbolic) is a key element in the analysis here. Alcano speaks of a violent transformation of the body into an object of desire and as a rite de passage into a new way of being in the world. Sex work is understood to require a high tolerance of pain (punches, kicks, bites, cigarette burns, being forced to use sex toys), something which can be learned (p. 104). Furthermore, Alcano notes how gang members invest considerably in “crafting their body in order to mimic what they perceive and describe as a “real” (*asli*) homosexual man” (p. 112). Again performance is key here. “In public, these young men mimic a series of codified postures and gestures that they believe are appropriate for a gay man” (p. 112). They even risk their professional reputation and credibility if found in the company of women (p. 121).

In the final chapter, Alcano turns to what happens to these men once they are no longer involved in sex work. It is a particularly strong chapter that also points out the pitfalls of the world they have inhabited as part of a street gang. Some venture abroad, try to live a cosmopolitan gay lifestyle, with the trappings of youth and the fading of beauty, while others remain in South Bali, at the mercy and charity of their (former) peers for money, alcohol, drugs, and even clothes (p. 151). All in all, this satisfying ethnography contributes to a steadily growing though still limited body of work on (Asian) male sex work and related issues of structural inequality, unemployment, and limited opportunities for supporting one’s family. It always shows the malleability of sexual identities and the way young men negotiate sexual expectations and fulfillment.

The third volume to be discussed here, Saskia Wieringa’s *Heteronormativity, Passionate Aesthetics and Symbolic Subversion in Asia*, complements the previous two with its focus on gender, normativities, and sexuality. The book is the

outcome of a collaborative research, training, and advocacy project involving three NGOs and one research and advocacy network. Unlike the other two books, however, which were solely oriented to case studies situated in Indonesia, this one draws comparison with India and as such widens our scope for understanding gender and sexuality within a broader Asian perspective.

The broader concern of the book is to understand the way women in Indonesia and India live, negotiate, and self-regulate non-normative lives. In doing so, it asks a poignant question: *do all humans have the same rights to enjoy their lives?* One of its key points the book addresses is “the formidable power of heteronormativity and its embodied subversion by those expelled from its core or who choose to stay in its margins” (p. 4). Heteronormativity here is referred to as “the dominant pattern of partnership in a specific context and the model upon which as so-called ‘stable’ family life, and by extension, social life is built” (p. 4). What Wieringa and co-authors aim to do is to bring to the fore “the deviancy of those who transgress the boundaries of the ‘normal’ in various ways” (p. 5).

As it states in the opening pages, this book needs to be located within the framework of feminist postmodern anthropological studies with a focus on intra-Asian comparisons of gender and sexual relations. The colonial past functions as the historical backdrop for this (pp. 5–6). Before Wieringa addresses the three main concepts that structure the book—heteronormativity, passionate aesthetics, and symbolic subversion—she first addresses the topic of sexual politics. Building on earlier work she defines this as “the regulation of bodily, emotional, mental, symbolic, and aesthetic sensations; in this process the pleasures, as well as fears and obligations are constructed in which the private and the public merge to create imbricating networks of power relations” (p. 24). Focusing on the mechanisms by which women are excluded from or transgress the hegemonic model of sexuality within the context of the patriarchal, heterosexual, and nuclear family in India and Indonesia, the book addresses a considerable concern in terms of women’s rights and health (p. 25).

Wieringa defines heteronormativity as the “erotic, heterosexual, and affective practices, the norms governing those practices, the institutions that uphold them, and the effects produced by those norms on heterosexuals and those living non-normative sex lives” (p. 27). It is important to state here that heteronormativity cannot be reduced simply to heterosexuality, although the interplay of gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality is central to it (p. 28). Wieringa stresses that while heterosexuality is generally not a conscious choice, it is the field of power that enforces it that is oppressive, not heterosexuality itself (p. 28). Wieringa treats passionate aesthetics in combination with symbolic violence. The way she utilizes the concept of aesthetics is in terms of estab-

lishing definitions of sensory impressions and a set of principles that underlie distinctions in morality. Wieringa feels it is important to underline “the subjective nature of making value judgments of particular forms of sexuality [...] Any aesthetic distinction is based on subjective views yet acquires hegemonic power in a given context” (p. 33). Symbolic subversion becomes about resistance to the effects of heteronormativity. “Symbolic subversion extends from self-defeating strategies to various forms of adaptation” (p. 35).

Subsequent chapters touch upon sexuality and religion (chapter 3); the role and normative influence of the ‘Asian family’ (chapter 4); notions of the ‘normal,’ traditional gender norms, and marriage (chapter 5); deviancy, expulsion, and repulsion (chapter 6); sex life satisfaction (chapter 7); various (sexual) identities and subjectivities (chapter 8); the question of symbolic subversion (chapter 9); strategies for the future (chapter 10); and ‘the sliding scales of heteronormativity and symbolic subversion’ (chapter 11).

The book is well-balanced and the two countries clearly offer immense scope for comparisons. Perhaps because Wieringa’s Asian expertise lies primarily with Indonesia, these chapters feel more robust, building on a much longer engagement with the topic. Here it could have benefited from a stronger engagement with the many studies that have addressed LGBTQI-issues in India in recent years. Yet there is no doubt that women’s movements and those focusing on sexual health and liberties will benefit from this publication in both countries. It provides strong case material that will foster much discussion and incentivize future research.

In conclusion, these are obviously three very different publications. From discussing cross-dressing within the context of traditional dance in Java, we moved to male sex work in Bali and finally on to questions of gender and sexuality politics affecting women living non-normative lives in Indonesia and India. Yet the overarching concern that features in all three studies is that of normativities, changing gender roles, heightened sexual politics, and issues of oppression and violence. The studies paint a picture of a shifting landscape of changing sexual and gender relations that are impacted by globalizing forces of religion (most notably Islam) but increased awareness and possibilities of self-expression. It is clear that not just in Indonesia but across Asia questions of gender and sexualities are increasingly at the forefront of societal and cultural concerns. Countries such as Nepal, Taiwan and Vietnam have made steps to make civil partnerships and marriage between same-sex couples possible in the future while India recently decriminalized homosexuality, reading down its much maligned colonial-era article 377, which basically criminalized homosexuality up till that point.

Although primarily focused on Indonesia, above-mentioned studies fit in with a growing body of work that discuss the interplay of gender and sexuality with topics of religion, social and cultural norms, and also globalization. With reference to India, well-known scholar of Sanskrit Wendy Doniger has recently discussed the topic of dissent in the ancient Indian sciences of sex and politics (2018). A co-authored publication by Devdutt Pattanaik, a well-known author of topics related to Hinduism, and Jerry Johnson has addressed the way Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Hinduism treat queer identities and sexualities (2017). The formation of vernacular non-normative/queer identities in regional India has been investigated by Katyal (2016) and Khanna (2016). Androgyny and cross-dressing is addressed by Mukherjee and Chatterjee (2016). And finally, the way Indians address their non-normative sexualities online is investigated by Dasgupta (2017). If we cast a wider net, we also see recent publications that investigate such questions within the context of Thailand (Furhmann 2016), Singapore (Chua 2014), and multiple publications with a China or pan-Asia focus (see Baas 2015 for a review of recent publications in the field of Asia, China and Hong Kong and Japan). Recent studies in the latter category include Lim (2014) and Liu (2015).

What stands out in all these studies is the urgency to engage with LGBTQI-related topics and how the fields of history, cultural studies, and the social sciences can complement each other in order to form a more coherent picture of local identity-formations and expressions, and the way societal pressures, politics, and globalization impact these identity formations and expressions. Such studies also highlight the urgency to take seriously the implications of heteronormativities and how these are often made part of (local) politics with an eye-out to 'other' and isolate groups that do not fit within a dominant ideology of family, state, and religious values. If anything, the studies discussed here point at the work still to be done, especially considering ongoing developments across Asia.

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