

Linda Rae Bennett and Sharyn Graham Davies, eds. *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. 328 pp.

Annemarie Samuels

In June 2014 I watched *waria* dancers perform traditional feminine Acehese dances on stage in Banda Aceh. It was a splendid performance in which the dancers' techniques, dress, and cosmetics betrayed a high degree of professionalism and many hours of training. It was also a courageous performance. Although the audience consisted mainly of sympathetic students, activists, and NGO workers, a raid by the radical Islamist FPI (Front Pembela Islam, Islamic Defenders Front) and the police was a serious risk. Surveillance of sexuality in general and denunciation of LGBTI in particular has increased in Aceh in the past years, especially in the capital where the government openly joins forces with FPI and related groups. Yet the performance for a crowd of activists took place in a hopeful atmosphere where people embraced diversity, and which may be equally characteristic of the past decade's blooming NGO scene and democratization process.

While Aceh cannot be considered representative of the rest of the archipelago, the range of developments taking place in the province resonates with the assessment of the edited volume *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations*. As the editors, Linda Bennett and Sharyn Davies, note in their introduction to the volume, in terms of sexual politics, the post-Suharto era is characterized by "the constant vacillation between diverse voices—some progressive, some conservative and many in between" (10). A decade and a half after the fall of Suharto, the editors asked a highly experienced and multidisciplinary group of researchers to take stock of the dynamics of sex and sexualities in Indonesia. The result is a collection of fifteen insightful and often surprising chapters that address a broad range of topics using data from a wide variety of sources and places. The book is divided into four sections: sexual politics, sexual health, sexual diversity, and sexual representations. An encompassing introduction by the editors and a sparkling afterword in the form of a dialogue with two important gay activists/academics, Dédé Oetomo and Tom Boellstorff, provide general reflections on the volume's central issues and point at new directions for research.

The volume's strength lies not only in its timeliness and the high quality of the individual chapters, but also in the broad scope of the compilation that makes several significant contributions to the study of sex and sexualities in Indonesia. It does so in three major ways. First of all, this collection of studies and perspectives offers an assessment of current developments in the field of sex and sexualities. By analyzing discourses, public sentiments, health concerns, and limits and possibilities of diversity, among other topics, the chapters together provide a rich view on (mostly)

Annemarie Samuels is an assistant professor at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, and a Marie Curie visiting scholar at the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University.

recent historical developments and the present state of affairs, forming an important addition to earlier scholarly work in this field.¹ A major topic of interest in this respect is the rise of Islamic conservatism and the increasing public presence of radical Islamic groups that influence sexual politics. Tracing relations between Islam and gender politics in Indonesia since the period of the New Order regime, Kathryn Robinson (chapter two) points out that both the New Order ideology and the Islamist discourses that have gained ground in the *Reformasi* era have promoted a patriarchal, heteronormative gender order. Despite Islamic political parties not being successful during elections, radical Islamic groups have pushed conservative agendas by mobilizing public opinion, such as the mass support for the adoption of 2008's anti-pornography bill, the highly mediatized demonstrations against Lady Gaga's 2012 visit, and the growing public agitation and protests against LGBTI Indonesians.²

Interestingly, as Robinson notes, it is exactly the democratic space opened up by *Reformasi* that has enabled radical Islamist discourses to thrive. Yet, this same space has also enabled progressive women's activists to be heard, most successfully in 2006's adoption of the new law against domestic violence and marital rape. Meanwhile, the internet has offered a wealth of new possibilities of meeting, organizing, and identifying outside of heteronormative frameworks. This dynamic is highlighted by contributors Stephen McNally, Jeffrey Grierson, and Irwan Martua Hidayana (chapter ten). The authors discuss stories of gay Indonesian men who find in the online world possibilities of expression that are lacking in what they consider the "normal" world. In the next chapter, Evelyn Blackwood traces a variety of sexual subject positions associated with the label *lesbi* over the past decades, reminding us of both the influence of international discourses on sexual subjectivities and the refracted and highly varied meanings that they may espouse locally. Considering progress made in the field of diversity, it is noteworthy that Oetomo, a prominent gay rights activist, made it to the final round of candidates for human rights commissioner. In the afterword, he discusses the selection process he went through and points out that while the mainstream government may be conservative, Indonesia does, indeed, have independent institutions that are progressive when it comes to women's and LGBTI rights.

A second major accomplishment of the volume is the depth and variety of original data presented. Many chapters draw on ethnographic materials that provide keen insight into everyday experiences of sex and sexualities—experiences that rarely match the public discourses. This attention to the relation between public discourses and actual experiences is important, since sex and sexuality are often at once objects of public discussion and surrounded by secrecy and taboos. Thus, for example, drawing on interviews with husbands, wives, and children in polygamous marriages, Nina Nurmila and Linda Bennett show how the private beliefs and experiences of the

¹ See, for example, Evelyn Blackwood, *Falling into the Lesbi World: Desire and Difference in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010); Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Julia Suryakusuma, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Basingstoke, Hampshire UK: Institute of Social Studies/Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

² For an insightful analysis of public debates about the anti-pornography bill, see Laura Bellows, "The Aroused Public in Search of the Pornographic in Indonesia," *Ethnos* 76, 2 (2011): 207–32.

spouses differ greatly from both Indonesian marriage law and most Islamic schools of thought (chapter three). Despite official regulations, wives and co-wives are rarely in equal economic positions and first wives may be pressured to publicly give their consent to their husband's second marriage even if they privately disagree. Interestingly, the intimate details that the respondents in this study reveal about their sexual lives also show that women have considerable agency in initiating or avoiding sexual relationships with their husbands.

The discrepancy between public discourse and individual experiences also permeates the stories of people living with HIV/AIDS. Two chapters, by Irwan Martua Hidayana and Brigitte Tenni (chapter four) and Leslie Butt (chapter five), give insight into AIDS patients' efforts to obtain care in the face of stigmatization. Hidayana and Tenni give examples of HIV-positive couples negotiating their risks of transmission and difficult reproductive choices in the often-limiting health-care systems in West Java. Butt's analysis of HIV-positive women in Papua shows how they internalize the politics of race and the stigma's of HIV. She argues that, instead of primarily focusing on individual behavior, health care encounters have to be understood within the larger political context. A third example of the central role that empirical research plays in nuancing dominant discourses is Harriot Beazley's study of adolescent sex workers in West Java and Central Java (chapter nine). Although the girls in her study come from poor families, they are not forced or trapped into sex work, but rather take it up to help their families and achieve a lifestyle based on material comforts. They choose their own customers, party with their friends, and have boyfriends with whom they enjoy romance and sexual pleasure, all as part of their sexual identities. Providing a counterweight to discourses that portray child sex workers as victims who are always in need of rescue and protection, Beazley shows that these girls "take pride in their work and create positive self-identities within their daily lives" (196).

The third key contribution of the volume is that it discusses a number of as yet largely unexplored topics, opening up interesting new areas of research. These topics include, among others, infertility and sexually transmitted infections (chapter seven), the negotiation of ageing and sexuality in transnational contexts (chapter twelve), and sex workers' consumption of various drugs and cosmetics that impact their health, performance, and appearance (chapter six). Thomas Barker's essay on the content of popular pornographic videos forms a welcome addition to existing analyses of the public debates that they cause (chapter thirteen). Perhaps most significantly novel is the chapter on intersex persons and intersex rights, contributed by Saskia Wieringa (chapter eight). Next to covering such new ground, however, the volume also speaks to the ways in which specters of Indonesia's history keep influencing the *Reformasi* sphere. Importantly, the mass murders of 1965–66 and the politicization of Gerwani women return in two novels discussed by Pamela Allen (chapter fifteen). These novels, *Lasmi* and *Ayu Manda*, not only "challenge conventional constructions of female sexuality in Indonesia" (304), they also engage with this dark chapter in Indonesian history, revealing the intertwining of sex and politics.

Clearly, the study of sex and sexualities is not only a relevant effort in and of itself but may also provide a window onto other general developments in present-day Indonesia, for example, those related to the economy, health care, media, race, and religion. This volume shows, for instance, how economic concerns intersect with sex

work, polygamous marriages, and health-care choices. It also points at the entanglement of the politics of sexuality and race. This is apparent from Butt's stories of HIV-positive Papuan women as well as from Helen Pausacker's analysis of public debates on women taking part in national beauty contests. Pausacker points out how these debates focus on the beauty queens' religious values (especially sexual chastity) and on their race and ethnicity, questioning whether their appearance is "'pure' Indonesian" (287) and criticizing participants who are considered either too light- or too dark-skinned.

Finally, the various ways in which Indonesians negotiate sexual morality form a red thread running through the volume. Ethical considerations are, for example, a central concern for fertility doctors and patients in Bennett's study. Doctors, she shows, often refrain from asking questions about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), afraid that such morally sensitive issues reveal infidelity and cause marital trouble and "then," one doctor says, "there will be no baby" (153). Bennett pointedly concludes that for these doctors, "STIs pose a moral threat to the creation of a family, rather than a tangible biological threat to the creation of a child" (154). "Shame" is in many ways a central aspect of sexual moralities in the archipelago, and in the opening chapter Davies contributes a stimulating extension of the concept by looking at "kinships of shame." What makes shame so important to social life in Indonesia, Davies demonstrates, is that instead of only reflecting on the person who acted "wrongly," it is this person's entire family, school, or organization that is shamed. This is especially apparent in restrictions on and the surveillance of premarital sexual relations and same-sex romantic relationships. People who are caught deviating from the norms may expect little public support, and instead see their marriage prospects or job opportunities vanish—a burden that may extend to their social networks. Davies concludes that surveillance not only causes compliance (and furtiveness) but, in a more positive vein, also sparks imaginative responses among some people who manage to create and express more diverse sexualities.

Sadly, surveillance of non-normative sexualities at times takes on violent forms. In early 2016, the country was in the grip of what prominent media called the "LGBT crisis," during which state and nonstate actors identified LGBTI as a danger to the nation, sparking threats against LGBTI persons and limiting their already restricted safe spaces. In Aceh, some of the people who had been present at the 2014 dance performance had to go into hiding. Such deeply worrisome events reveal what Boellstorff has called "state straightism": national heteronormativity and gender normativity endorsed by the state.³ As in earlier times, sex and sexualities have become objects of political moralism dominated by conservative voices, the result being to disenfranchise those who seek an inclusive, diverse, and tolerant nation. In light of such developments, academic efforts to examine and analyze the wide range of discourses and practices of sex and sexualities in Indonesia become all the more pressing. *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia* offers a significant contribution to this cause.

³ Tom Boellstorff, "Against State Straightism: Five Principles for Including LGBT Indonesians," E-International Relations, March 21, 2016, <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/21/against-state-straightism-five-principles-for-including-lgbt-indonesians>, accessed March 8, 2017.