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## Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia

**ABSTRACT** Thousands of Indonesian men now identify as both “gay” and “Muslim.” How do these men understand the relationship between religion and sexuality? How do these understandings reflect the fact that they live in the nation that is home to more Muslims than any other? In this article, I address questions such as these through an ethnographic study of gay Muslims. I argue that dominant social norms render being gay and being Muslim “ungrammatical” with each other in the public sphere that is crucial to Muslim life in Indonesia. Through examining doctrine, interpretation, and community, I explore how gay Muslim subjectivity takes form in this incommensurability between religion and desire. [Keywords: incommensurability, Indonesia, Islam, nation, homosexuality]

### OF ANTHROPOLOGY, ISLAM, AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

Work in the anthropology of religion has long concerned itself with the relationship between orthodoxy and practice as well as the problem of making intelligible widely divergent religious beliefs (Tambiah 1990). Such problems of “cultural translation” (Asad 1986) within and across religious traditions have been important to anthropology from its beginnings (Frazer 1915; Tylor 1958) and through many key moments of consolidation and innovation—for instance, in the work of Clifford Geertz, to whom I return at the end of this article. As anthropologists adjust to a world powerfully redefined—like it or not—in terms of a “War on Terror,” we confront a range of official and popular ideologies that portray religion, particularly Islam, as the source of unbridgeable difference. How can fundamentally conflicting understandings of religion and ultimate order regarding issues from jihad to same-sex marriage be understood and lived side by side in a diverse world?

Elizabeth Povinelli has diagnosed the problem posed by such fundamental conflicts of worldview as one of “incommensurability” (Povinelli 2001). Noting an increasing ethnographic emphasis on incommensurability, from the contradiction of “other modernities” in China (Rofel 1999) to the paradox of spirit possession in a globalizing Thailand (Morris 2000), Povinelli draws on philosophers of language to link incommensurability to the question of translation and its failures. In this article, I explore a case where cultural translation appears to meet its incommensurable limit: *gay* Muslims in Indonesia. (I keep *gay* in italics throughout be-

cause *gay* is a concept that partially translates the English concept “gay,” without being reducible to it.)

In examining *gay* Muslims’ sense of inhabiting incommensurability, I do not imply that other religions are more tolerant than Islam, as the enthusiasm for banning same-sex marriage amongst certain Christian groups in the United States clearly indicates. My interest lies rather in responses to circumstances in which public norms render *gay* and Muslim “ungrammatical” with each other. From the voices amplified from mosques five times a day to fasting during the month of Ramadan to living openly as a husband and wife, Islam in Indonesia (as in many other parts of the world) is not just a matter of personal belief and prayer; it constitutes a public sphere that includes the nation itself. Heterosexually identified Indonesian men find a long-standing, voluminous, and public Islamic discourse addressed to their transgressions and concerns. Sex between men, in contrast, is unintelligible: *Gay* Indonesians find above all the silence of incommensurability.<sup>1</sup> On the relatively rare occasions when Islamic figures speak of male homosexuality, it is typically in terms of absolute rejection: “Homosexuality is clearly a social illness, a morally evil trend that must be eliminated, not a human right to be protected as [Western] gays now claim.”<sup>2</sup> Male homosexuality does not bifurcate into the meritorious and sinful: It is incomprehensible as a form of sexual selfhood, and this incommensurability is a fundamental difference between how *gay* Muslim Indonesians and heterosexually identified Muslim Indonesian men experience their sexualities.<sup>3</sup> This incommensurability is further strengthened by the fact that

although both homosexuality and heterosexuality in contemporary Indonesia operate on global and national spatial scales, no local tradition or *adat* sanctions contemporary *gay* subjectivities, which are distinct from ritual transvestite practices (Boellstorff 2005: Chapter 2). Yet *gay* Muslims exist: So how do these Indonesians resolve the apparently incommensurate statuses of being *gay* and being Muslim?<sup>4</sup>

The special challenge of incommensurability in regard to male homosexuality (rather than those proscribed forms of male heterosexuality, like adultery, glossed as *zina*) becomes evident in relation to this public character of Islam in Indonesia, as in other Muslim majority countries. In his book *Sexuality in Islam*, the influential Tunisian scholar Abdelwahab Bouhdiba notes that:

Anything that violates the order of the world is a grave "disorder," a source of evil and anarchy. That is why *zina* (adultery) arouses such strong, unanimous condemnation. However, in a sense, *zina* still remains within the framework of order. It is a disorder in order: it does not strictly speaking violate the fundamental order of the world; it violates only its modalities. It is, in its own way, a form of harmony between the sexes. It is a false *nikah* (marriage), it is not an anti-*nikah*. It recognizes the harmonious complementarity of the sexes and its error lies in wishing to realize it outside the limits laid down by God. [Bouhdiba 1998:30–31]

Bouhdiba emphasizes that "Islam remains violently hostile to all other ways of realizing sexual desire, which are regarded as unnatural purely and simply because they run counter to the antithetical harmony of the sexes . . . in Islam, male homosexuality stands for all the perversions and constitutes in a sense the depravity of depravities" (Bouhdiba 1998:31). Not all Muslims agree with Bouhdiba, but it is important to acknowledge the dominance of such views in Indonesia and elsewhere. For Bouhdiba, forms of proscribed heterosexuality, as forms of "false marriage," remain comprehensible within an Islamic framework; to use a linguistic metaphor, they are false utterances like "the earth is square." Male homosexuality, however, is not just false but ungrammatical, like "earth happy twelve the": For Bouhdiba and most Indonesians, sex between men is incommensurable with Islam.

This fundamental difference is starkly evident in the scholarship on Indonesian Islam, which correctly emphasizes Islam's public character (Gade 2004; Hefner 2000). For instance, in one of the most comprehensive studies of Indonesian Islamic thought in recent years, John Bowen notes that his "primary objects of study are socially embedded forms of public reasoning" (Bowen 2003:5). Yet although he emphasizes that "the constant element in the narrative concerns gender, the equality of rights and relationships among men and women" (Bowen 2003:5), the topic of homosexuality is entirely absent from his study. Similarly, M. B. Hooker's study of Islamic judgments makes only a single brief reference to a 1998 judgment forbidding male and female homosexuality (Hooker 2003:185). Robert Hefner's important *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization*

*in Indonesia* (2000) also ignores homosexuality. That these three (and many other) recent and comprehensive studies of Indonesian Islam make so little mention of homosexuality accurately reflects how, to date, homosexuality has been incommensurable with Islam as a public discourse in Indonesia.

If, as Bowen and many others have noted, Islam in Indonesia is not a unified dogma but a set of debates, what is significant is that with rare exceptions, homosexuality is not even debated in Indonesian Islam. (Compare this with the predominant place of homosexuality as the Christian Right's "perfect enemy" [Gallagher and Bull 2001].) It is not that there are not *gay* Muslims; as discussed below, most Indonesian *gay* men follow Islam. Nor is it that being *gay* is never public. Although for the most part the "*gay* world" exists as a kind of distributed network—a largely invisible archipelago—amidst the "normal world" of Indonesian national culture, there are cases in which male homosexuality appears in the mass media or other public venues. However, there has been virtually no context in which Islam and male homosexuality have come together in the public realm. Indonesians find ubiquitous public display of proper heterosexuality and frequent debate over improper heterosexuality, but there are no *gay* Muslim publics. Herein lies the incommensurability of being *gay* and being Muslim.

#### SPATIAL SCALES AND NATIONAL BELONGING

The incommensurability between Islam and male homosexuality in Indonesia is shaped by local and national spatial scales. Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation on earth, is home to more Muslims than any other country. Islam has spread through the archipelago since at least the 13th century, primarily through the trade networks that linked many coastal communities to each other and, via the Straits of Malacca, to the great commercial system linking the Far East with South Asia, Africa, the Arab world, and Europe (de Graaf 1970). The Dutch were the dominant colonial power in the region for the 350 years preceding World War II; during this time, colonial officials like Snouck Hurgronje called for working against Islam as a potential political movement and strengthening understandings of it as a set of localized religious beliefs (Steenbrink 1993). This meant, above all, identifying Islam with discrete local customs (*adat*). To this day, "ethnolocality" is consistently framed as a starting point, the origin—however contested and reconfigured—of authenticity that is subsequently placed into dialogue with national and global spatial scales (Boellstorff 2002). This grounding in ethnolocality often leads to a shared frame of reference for modern-day Indonesian and modern-day Indonesianist alike: "I start from the level of the village disputes and work upwards" (Bowen 2003:6, see chapter 3).

*Gay* Muslims face a particular challenge because being *gay* is incommensurable with ethnolocality, this "level of the village" that is so important to notions of Islamic "selfhood" and "community" in the contemporary archipelago.

It is self-evident to *gay* Indonesians (and other Indonesians) that the concept *gay* is not learned from one's elders or from traditional beliefs, and to date there have not been individuals terming themselves *gay Jawa* or *gay Bugis* or organizing communities based on such identifications: Being *gay* is a foundationally national concept linked to globalizing notions of homosexual subjectivity. *Gay* Muslims cannot retreat to "the level of the village" and must find other spatial scales in which to inhabit the incommensurable space of being *gay* and Muslim.

Islam is one of several official religions in Indonesia (the others are Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Hinduism: all globally recognized religions rather than localized or "animist" traditions). Despite this concession to national unity, because nearly ninety percent of Indonesians are Muslim, an Islamic ethos predominates in national popular culture and many regions of the archipelago: Every president has been Muslim and it is widely understood that it could not be otherwise. The vast majority of my *gay* interlocutors have been Muslim. From the existence of a department of religion to the requirement that all Indonesians have an approved religion on their identity cards and marry within their faith, the state links publicly recognized religion to national belonging (Bowen 2003:178–185, 246–252).<sup>5</sup> In postcolonial Indonesia, every citizen is to have a religion just as they are to have a gender: It is an essential attribute of being modern. Having a sexuality is also modern: Worldwide, sexuality typically plays an important role in notions of proper citizenship (Bunzl 2004; Mosse 1985). Leslie Dwyer notes in her study of Indonesian family planning that "sexuality and gender may be reified as essential, non-negotiable attributes of national identity" (Dwyer 2000:27). Although family planning discourse focuses on women's sexuality, it shapes notions of "proper masculinity" as well, so that "'to make sense as a man in Indonesia' one must get married and function effectively as a dutiful husband and provider. . . . the importance of adequately performing one's familial duties and obligations is now linked to notions of progressiveness and good citizenship" (Howard 1996:13,172). Religion, nation, and gender–sexuality, thus, represent three points in a triangle that posits the heteronormative nuclear family household as the foundational unit of nation, piety, and proper citizen selfhood.

Because *gay* Muslims almost never find themselves in environments where they can be openly *gay* and Muslim at once, in what ways do they find not the resolution of incommensurability, but its habitation? I have never encountered a *gay* Muslim who had not thought carefully about the relationship between his faith and his homosexual desires, and *gay* Muslims often discuss questions of religion amongst themselves, although such conversations do not typically take place in official sites like mosques. Most *gay* Indonesians understand Islam to emphasize heterosexual marriage (and having children in that marriage) as the only acceptable basis for a pious life. Yet although *gay* Muslims find the domain of religion conflated with what they term the

*dunia normal* (normal world), as they move through what they term the *dunia gay* (*gay* world) these Indonesians do not leave their faith behind. Inhabiting apparently incommensurate spaces of religion and *gay* subjectivity becomes largely a matter of individual exegesis—albeit exegesis often shared with *gay* friends. It is for this reason that I focus on individual narratives in this article; such narratives accurately portray how most *gay* Indonesians link homosexuality and Islam.

If the question of religion is not surprising to *gay* Muslims, neither is it surprising to Western audiences: Some of the most common questions I am asked are "how do *gay* Indonesians deal with being Muslim?" and "does Islam in Indonesia accept homosexuality?" These are not just the questions of a layperson. From the earliest sustained Western scholarship on Islam in the archipelago by colonial officials like Snouck Hurgronje to mid-20th century writing (e.g., Siegel 1969) to more recent work (e.g., Beatty 1999; Bowen 1993, 2003; Hefner 1985, 2000; Siapno 2002), there has been great interest in how Islam shapes social relations, law, and governance—even if, as noted earlier, homosexuality is virtually absent in this scholarship.

Another common question I am asked is "how are there Indonesians calling themselves *gay* at all?" Indeed, it is only in the last 30 years that some Indonesians have started calling themselves *gay*, and only in particular, limited circumstances—a significant difference from the much longer history of gay identification in much of the West, including the United States (Chauncey 1994). Many Indonesians still do not know of the term *gay*, or if they do, they sometimes think it is an English version of the better-known terms *banci* and *béncong* (male transvestites, for whom the more respectful term is *waria*). Among those Indonesians who do know of their *gay* fellow citizens, many portray them as selfish and exclusive. In reality, most *gay* Indonesians are working class and learn of the concept *gay* through mass media or friends, rather than from travel outside Indonesia or meeting *gay* Westerners. Given this situation, it is not surprising that anthropological work on Islam in Indonesia has paid virtually no attention to homosexuality. However, this article offers more than an improved understanding of *gay* lives, worthy as such a goal may be. My hope is that the example of *gay* Muslims can contribute to anthropological conversations concerning cultural responses to incommensurability, a topic of increasing importance as globalization becomes experienced less as an impending process and more as a de facto state of affairs.

## DOCTRINE

Most *gay* Muslims understand Islamic orthodoxy to be incommensurate with sex between men, but no orthodoxy provides a complete roadmap for faith; each represents "a structure of ideas and practices that penetrates but does not encompass the lives of its practitioners" (Barth 1993:177). Although some *gay* Muslims recall hearing from religious authorities that homosexuality was sinful, the overarching

concern with sexuality that they encounter is the proper channeling of heterosexuality into marriage. Islam is often referred to as a “sex-positive religion” in the sense that sexuality is regarded as a gift from God and the right of every person: “In the quranic view of the world, physical love impinges directly on the social order” (Bouhdiba 1998:9–10). In Islamic thought in Indonesia as elsewhere, the central concept organizing sexuality is that of marriage, which has historically been seen as a contract between families, not just two individuals.<sup>6</sup> The sins against marriage in Islamic doctrine are typically adultery, premarital sex, and prostitution, not male homosexuality, because sex between men is assumed not to lead to children. If male homosexuality is mentioned, it usually takes the form of incidental references rather than sustained commentaries, as reflected in the scholarly literature on Islam in Indonesia.

This emphasis on heterosexual marriage and the de-emphasis of male homosexuality is shared by the Indonesian nation-state, whose “family principle” (*azas kekeluargaan*), promulgated through a range of policies including a pervasive family planning regime, stresses that the nation is made up of heterosexual nuclear families, not individual citizens (Suryakusuma 1996). National belonging and heterosexuality are mutually defining and supporting, and those who fall outside official sexual norms are failed citizens. Marriage in Muslim communities throughout Indonesia is usually seen as the very foundation of sociality, determining boundaries of kinship and ethnicity, assuring social reproduction (because children are presumed to be the result of heterosexual couples), and literalizing one’s relationship to the divine (Idrus 2004). Marriage is typically a key element of Muslim orthopraxy. It is not simply an expression of sexual desire or a sign of being pious, but a practice that makes one a more pious Muslim (see Mahmood 2001). Given the dual emphasis of Islam and the nation on heterosexual marriage, it is not surprising that so many *gay* Indonesians marry (Boellstorff 1999). It is not inaccurate to speak of a “religious–familial complex” in which kinship and faith are part of a single cultural domain. In his study of mostly Muslim *gay* men in Jakarta, Richard Howard found that they “recognized that they carried within themselves a divinely inspired nature (*kodrat*) as men, which could only be fulfilled through marriage and the continuance of the life cycle” (Howard 1996:3).

As heterosexual marriage tends to be the positive concept organizing sexuality, so adultery (*zina*) tends to be the negative one. In the Qur’an and most Islamic writings, *zina* is defined primarily in terms of illicit sex between a man and woman. Anal sex between men (*liwath*) is viewed as a sin in the Qur’an but in a rather oblique manner: Lot (*Luth*) is mentioned, but the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are not, and in contrast to the detailed attention given to adultery, male homosexuality is not one of the abominations for which specific punishments are listed (Murray and Roscoe 1997:307).

Many scholars see in the Islam of the Mediterranean and Arab worlds a generalized “will not to know” in which

sex between men, although officially frowned on, is tolerated so long as its practitioners do not make their acts or desires publicly visible. Such interpretations seem generally valid in the Indonesian case. If asked directly, most Indonesian Muslims will say that Islam disapproves of sex between men, and even liberal writers conclude it has been strongly forbidden in Islam (e.g., Fadhilah 2004). In recent years, there have been scattered incidents of “political homophobia” in which Muslim groups attack *gay* men attempting to claim public space (Boellstorff 2004a).

In practice, however, male homosexuality has not represented a major concern in Indonesian Islamic thought: The typical perceived opposite of normative heterosexual marriage is the failure to marry or heterosexual sex outside the marriage bond. In Indonesia it is sometimes unclear as to whether sex between men counts as adultery (*zina*). For instance, the popular Indonesian Islamic sex manual *Bimbingan Seks Islami (Islamic Sexual Guidance)* states that “some experts in Islamic jurisprudence are of the opinion that male homosexuality is the same as *zina*, with the result that its penalty is the same as for *zina*” (Asrori and Zamroni 1997:192). However, the chapter on adultery (*pezinaan*) flatly states that “*Zina* is sexual relations between a man and a woman outside of marriage” (Asrori and Zamroni 1997:197). The authors posit that *zina* is damaging because it makes the lineage of children born from the *zina* uncertain and poses the threat of adverse affects to the fetus from sexually transmitted diseases (Asrori and Zamroni 1997:203), neither of which is relevant to sex between men. Significantly, the authors claim that *zina* is on the rise in Indonesia and attribute this to the influence of Western media, globalization, urbanization, and modernity (Asrori and Zamroni 1997:198–200). They do not mention male homosexuality as increasing or link it to globalization. It is simply included in the litany of things that can lead people away from marriage and its sinfulness lies in this characteristic. Because *gay* Muslims find little information on sex between men beyond silence or denunciation, it is primarily through interpretation that they inhabit these incommensurate spaces of religion and desire.

## INTERPRETATION

### *Seeing Being Gay as Sinful*

*Gay* Muslims find themselves in a doctrinal environment that speaks little of sex between men, but it is also an environment in which notions of “interpretation” (*ijtihad*) are debated and enacted on a variety of levels, from judicial decisions to personal notions of “virtue” and “sin” (Bowen 2003). Acts of interpretation are also held to be central to being a modern citizen: One votes, one consumes, and in contemporary Indonesia one now typically chooses one’s heterosexual marriage partner through love rather than “arrangement,” which is increasingly deemed backward and undemocratic (Boellstorff 2004c). It is through acts of interpretation, not reference to established conventions in Islamic thought, that the majority of my *gay* interlocutors

have arrived at the conclusion that being *gay* is either not sinful or a comparatively minor sin, so long as they marry women and have children.

Before turning to the apparently predominant view among *gay* men that sex between men is not necessarily sinful, I wish to examine the interpretive practices of those *gay* Muslims who do feel that they are sinning; even in these cases, there exist struggles with incommensurability. At one extreme are those who see their sexuality as a serious sin. One *gay* Muslim in Bali, citing the story of Lot, felt that “being *gay* is a big sin in Islam, one of the sins that cannot be forgiven” (conversation with author, February 12, 1998). A young Muslim man in Surabaya underscored that “you know, being *gay* is a sin—a big sin” (conversation with author, September 23, 1997). Reflecting the relative de-emphasis of male homosexuality in Indonesian Islamic thought, many of these *gay* Muslims who feel they are sinning cannot recall where sex between men is prohibited in the Qur’an, or they combine narratives, as in one *gay* man’s rendition of the story of Lot (*Nabi Luth*):

The people of Lot in Sodom were *gay*, lesbian, and transvestite. One day an angel came to Sodom disguised as a very handsome man. The people of Sodom wanted to have sex with the angel. Lot tried to offer his daughters instead, but the people of Sodom were not interested. So God told Lot to build a big boat and fill it with all the animals of the earth, because he was going to flood the earth. And he flooded the earth, and the people of Sodom were drowned. [conversation with author, September 3, 2000]

My *gay* Muslim interlocutors who felt they were sinning cited the story of Lot and Sodom more than any other as they struggled to interpret their homosexual desires. Another frequently cited story concerned King David as a prophet who fell in love with a man (some say he married the man as well) and was then cursed by God. In Surabaya, one *gay* man combined the stories of Lot and David:

Once there was a city called Sodom. There, men had sex with other men and women had sex with women. Now the prophet David was instructed by God to bring them back, so they would become normal again. So at that time, God sent two angels to Sodom in the guise of two very handsome men. They went to the room of prophet David in Sodom. And once they were there, everyone started saying “there are these two very handsome men in the house of David.” So they all rushed to the house of David and wanted to force themselves in. The angels went out, and they helped David escape from Sodom. But because they didn’t want to change back, that city of Sodom was cursed by God. And all of the *gay* people there were turned into ash and the city was destroyed. [conversation with author, October 20, 1997]

Syncretic narratives like these reflect how many *gay* Muslims perceive prohibitions against sex between men in a rather diffuse manner. A few *gay* Muslims who thought being *gay* was sinful saw their desires for men as having a divine origin, the injunction being to control desires at odds with God’s plan for the world. One such Javanese *gay*

Muslim believed *gay* people were created as “a test from God, to see if we can overcome it and still marry and have children” (conversation with author, December 11, 1997). A Sumatran *gay* Muslim believed that “in Islam all people are created with feelings of love towards women and towards men. How large those feelings of love are is dependent on the person” (conversation with author, February 5, 1998). Many *gay* Muslims who saw being *gay* as sinful subscribed to environmental etiologies, as in the case of the following man, living in Bali but originally from rural East Java.<sup>7</sup> He felt he became *gay* after being seduced by a boy five years older than him:

I remember being happy about the way it felt. I think that’s when I started having feelings for men; I don’t think it was something that started from birth, and for that reason I don’t agree with your Muslim friends who say that *gay* people were created that way by God. Back then I didn’t know the word *gay*, but I had heard the word *homoseks*, and I knew that it was a big sin under Islam. I still feel that way; I feel that it is a big sin. But I also feel that I have to enjoy my life. I can’t help it that I like being with men and don’t like being with women. What can I do about it? So I just go on sinning. [conversation with author, March 3, 1998]

Many of these *gay* Muslims located sinfulness in practices, as in the following example:

The sin is from the *gay* activities. In my opinion, all religions are against being *gay*. But whether it’s a sin or not depends on what you do. For instance, if you have lots of sex partners, that’s a sin, not the *gayness* itself. . . . For instance, say you become *gay*. There are people who become *gay* only here [points to his heart]. They don’t actually have sex. They’re just happy when they see people of the same sex. And I think that’s not a sin. . . . Especially in Islam, marriage must come first. It’s not supposed to be sex first. But the times demand that style. . . . And there are other people who are worse than me, who commit rape or murder. [conversation with author, May 2, 1998]

Muhammad, from a rural part of South Sulawesi, shared this view of sin as arising from acts. Married to a woman, Muhammad nonetheless frequented places in the city of Makassar where *gay* men congregated. He reconciled marriage and what he saw as innate homosexual desires through behavior management:

Well, yes, it is a sin. But I don’t do it too much. I have tried to stop; I’m always praying to God and fasting, asking that I won’t be like this anymore. But the feelings are still there in my heart, and eventually they just can’t be held in anymore; after one to three months they get too strong [points to his chest]. So I have to let it out. [conversation with author, April 14, 1998]

This view that the sinfulness of being *gay* lies in actions rather than status is why some *gay* Muslims avoided certain sexual practices, particularly penile–anal sex. One *gay* man from Makassar, Iwan, noted that “Even up to today, one thing I won’t do is penetrate someone or be penetrated anally by them. Because I think that’s even more of a sin. There are some people who say you’re not an official *gay* (*gay*

*resmi*) if you don't do that, but I don't care" (conversation with author, September 8, 2000). In this understanding, sexual acts, being the responsibility of the self, have greater import than homosexual desire, created by God. Hadi, a *gay* man from Surabaya, was from a devout family; both of his parents had already gone on the pilgrimage to Mecca, and he felt they would disown him should they ever learn he was *gay*. Hadi, like Iwan, worked to "reduce [his] sin as a *gay* person" (*mengurangi dosa saya sebagai gay* [conversation with author, November 12, 1997]). Unlike Iwan, however, he did this not through avoiding certain sexual practices, but by being a *gay* person who is "successful in his career" (*berhasil dengan karir* [conversation with author, November 12, 1997]). For Iwan and many other *gay* men, success in society could affect the domain of religion, mitigating the sinfulness of male homosexuality.

### Seeing Being Gay as Not Sinful

The range of narratives presented above illustrates how many *gay* Muslims interpret their homosexual desires as being sinful. However, what I found most striking during fieldwork was that such views were not predominant among my *gay* Muslim interlocutors. Instead, most either did not see being *gay* as sinful or understood it to be a minor sin easily forgiven by God. Incommensurability was inhabited and understood as part of God's plan. It was meant to be that one was *gay*, yet also meant to be that being *gay* and being Muslim can never be made commensurate. The starting point for these *gay* Muslims was a belief in God's omnipotence and omniscience. Given that God is all knowing, all wise, and all merciful, many *gay* Muslims concluded they were created *gay* by God and, thus, that they were not sinning.

In these views, all forms of desire (*nafsu*) are planted in each individual by God and represent irresistible forces that cannot be denied, a common view among Indonesian Muslims (Brenner 1998:149–157; Siegel 1969). This was brought home to me on November 23, 1997, when I visited Ketut and Suhadi, a *gay* couple who shared a home with an elderly woman and a little male dog, Tika. Ketut, who was Balinese Hindu, had bought the dog several months earlier and lavished it with affection. His partner Suhadi, a Javanese Muslim, had grown to love the dog as well despite the fact that Indonesian Muslims rarely keep dogs as pets because they are seen as polluting (*najis*). Tika was several months old and just coming into sexual maturity, playfully mounting the legs of anyone who stopped to pet him. Shaking his head, Ketut said, "Well, it's about time we get him castrated." Suhadi looked at Ketut with a mixture of revulsion and alarm. "It would be so sad that he wouldn't have *nafsu*. If we do that, would he still want to guard the house?" In this view, *nafsu* is a vibrant, essential aspect of being that can be temporarily controlled but not forever denied. For *gay* Muslims who do not see their subjectivities as sinful, homosexual desire, planted in one's soul at birth by God, represents a fate (*nasib*) that must be accepted, because "Nasib is the ultimate explanation for events in this life: that it

was written as the will of God, that so should be" (Barth 1993:184). In the following excerpts, four *gay* Muslims, two Javanese and two Buginese, engage in this line of reasoning:

In fact, it's a sin, right? But what can we do about it? God created me as *gay*. . . He created me to desire men, not women. God already knows all this, right? So we could also say that it's not a sin. Unless we do it wrong. . . if we have sex with an authentic man [*laki-laki asli*], that's a sin [for both of us]. That man should think, "Gosh, I'm an authentic man; why am I having sex with another man?" That's a sin. But if we are made by God as homo. . . if we have sex with each other—*gay* with *gay*—why is that a sin? He was the one who made us this way! . . . It's fate [*nasib*], right? [conversation with author, August 24, 1997]

I know that I was created the same as *hetero*. It's only that I desire men. I know that God knows my feelings, knows that I like men. So I think it's something that's ordinary and natural [*lumrah dan wajar*]. . . I now realize that God has created everything, including *gay* people, so in fact it's not a sin. I didn't choose to be *gay*. Did you choose to be *gay*? Of course not. [conversation with author, October 30, 1997]

After I read many books, I came to the belief that God has a different plan for me to have made me a *gay* person. And there is a kind of poetry that is good for me, that is good for you and for all *gay* people. "God has given me the ability to accept the things that I cannot change about myself, and has given me the ability to change the things that can be changed." Because *gayness* [*kegayan*] is inside of me. If it was just a thing like this [pointing to a chair], maybe I would have already thrown it away by now. But it's everywhere inside of my body. Inside of my nerves, inside of my blood. [conversation with author, May 5, 1998]

Why do I think it's not a sin? Because it is God who creates us as *gay*. . . if for instance we have a *gay* soul [*jiwa gay*], and we try to be like a *hetero* man, it's transgressing God's will for us [*justru keluar dari kodratnya kita*]. [conversation with author, August 19, 2000]

Sometimes a sense of being *gay* as not sinful can even emerge from interactions with religious figures. Ardi, a *gay* man from near Medan in north Sumatra, was known for his skills in magic [*ilmu*], which he had learned at a syncretically minded Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*):

My religious teacher would speak in an indirect way. For instance, he knew that I was *gay*. I never told him directly, but he knew. And he never said anything about [it] to me directly, he never said that being *gay* was a sin or anything like that. But he did advise me not to take semen into my mouth or up my butt, because if I did it would weaken my *ilmu*. [conversation with author, February 1, 1998]

That the incommensurability of being *gay* and Muslim is inhabited rather than superseded is indicated not only by Ardi's religious teacher's indirectness, but by the fact that Ardi planned on marrying a woman and living a "normal" life alongside, not in place of, his *gay* life. Indeed, the greatest concern of most of my *gay* Muslim interlocutors was typically not the sinfulness of homosexuality, but their desire to marry heterosexually. This desire was powerfully shaped

by religious and familial pressures but was not just an external imposition; for many it was another form of authentic desire. In the following narrative from Surya, a *gay* Muslim man living in East Java, both Islam and *gay* selfhood repeatedly surface around the issue of marriage. As Surya entered his early twenties, his parents and also his *gay* lover, Hendy, told him that it was his duty to marry and have descendants. Surya also wished to marry: “I felt that wanted to be normal” (*rasa ingin normal*):

So eventually I married a woman who was a villager and a religious fanatic [*fanatik agama*]. But I couldn't get an erection with her. I tried fantasizing about Hendy while having sex with her, but in order to put my penis into her I had to open my eyes, right? And as soon as I'd do that I'd go flat. So I tried and tried for a whole year. . . . Eventually I told her about Hendy. She said it was against Islam, a sin [*dosa*], and I had to stop, but I told her I couldn't. She didn't understand that it's not a physical matter, it's a matter of the soul [*jijaw*]. . . . She cried, “If you're like this, why did you marry me?” She was right because usually one marries for choice [*pada umumnya orang kawin pilihan*]. . . . Once I got her pregnant I was so proud! I felt like I'd fulfilled my duty as a man. Now that I'm married, no matter what I have to take care of her and the child because according to Islam that's my responsibility. And fulfilling the sexual function is one of these responsibilities. . . . When she found out I was still seeing Hendy, she said I had two choices: get a divorce or stop seeing him. I told her that under Islam she couldn't initiate a divorce and I didn't want a divorce but I was still going to see Hendy. And he and I are still together to this day. [conversation with author, October 12, 1997]

Note how for Surya choice is a defining feature of marriage, *gay* love, and faith—albeit one in which male privilege under his understanding of Islam makes his choice more consequential than his wife's attempt to force a different kind of choice. The shift from marriage based on arrangement to marriage based on choice and love is a key marker of being modern and properly national in Indonesia (Siegel 1997). Choice is how one consumes in a shopping mall, how one votes in a democracy, and how one implements “family planning,” so important to state-sponsored ideologies of sexuality (Dwyer 2000). The importance of choice and love in the context of God's omnipotence even appears in many of the narratives from the minority of my *gay* Muslim interlocutors who claimed they would never marry, as in the following example:

If a man chooses a man and lives together with him, and that is what makes happiness, does that not count as a partner? God created day and night. Sun and moon. God also created man and woman. So why cannot a man with a man be understood as partners? I think that what's clear is that if they love each other, I think that's okay. [conversation with author, August 29, 2000]

Those *gay* Muslims who say they will never marry usually come to that conclusion through acts of interpretation as careful as those of *gay* Muslims who do marry. Islamic law places all human actions within five categories: (1) obligatory acts like daily prayer and fasting (Arabic and Indone-

sian *wajib*); (2) commendable but not required acts like performing extra prayers (Arabic *mandub*, Indonesian *sunatrasul*); (3) acts toward which Islam is indifferent, like eating foods that are not forbidden (Arabic *mubah*); (4) reprehensible but not forbidden acts like divorce (Arabic *makruh*); and (5) forbidden acts like adultery and theft (Arabic and Indonesian *haram*).<sup>8</sup> Islamic jurists tend to regard marriage as required or *wajib*, but some claim that there are justifiable reasons why some people need not marry: “Marriage in Islam is a sacred contract which every Muslim must enter into, unless there are special reasons why he should not” (Ali 1990:445–446; see also Hallaq 1997:175). These “special reasons” can include not only financial and physical ability but also mental and spiritual ability. Some of my *gay* Muslim interlocutors reasoned both that marriage is *sunatrasul* (commendable, but not required) and that their homosexual desires make them physically and spiritually unfit for marriage:

In my opinion I've been this way ever since I was born; I was created this way. So I'm meant to be this way and I have to walk this path. None of us ask to be born this way, right? So it's definitely something that's meant to be. In my view, marriage is a duty [*kewajiban*] for Muslims only if they are capable [*mampu*]. And by *mampu* I don't just mean financially but spiritually, mentally, and physically as well. So by those criteria I'm not meant to get married and so it's not a sin that I don't marry. [conversation with author, December 1, 1997]

What all these *gay* Muslims share is a sense that interpretation is necessary in the face of incommensurability between religion and desire. In the void created by the relative lack of Islamic discourse concerning male homosexuality, they feel they must use interpretation to forge answers, however imperfect and uncertain, to the question of how they should live. Even if engaging in these acts of interpretation in isolation from other *gay* men, all of my *gay* interlocutors understood *gay* as a national category of selfhood, linked to notions of *gay* selfhood found across the world. I recall a conversation in 2000 with Ali, a *gay* man living in Makassar, which occurred a couple of weeks after Anwar Ibrahim, deputy prime minister of Malaysia, had been accused of sodomy and sentenced to nine years in prison. I asked Ali if he or his friends were concerned that a similar event could happen in Indonesia. “There's been no influence here,” Ali replied. “Malaysia is an officially Muslim country [*negara Islam*]. Indonesia is not a Muslim country, but a country founded on Pancasila [the Five Principles of the nation, including ‘Belief in One God,’ but not specifying Islam]” (conversation with author, August 16, 2000). For Ali, the fact that Islam was not Indonesia's official religion opened the door to inhabit the apparently incommensurate domains of religion and homosexuality that made the prosecution of the latter comprehensible in the Malaysian context. Yet even in a nation founded on Pancasila, most Indonesian Muslims understand Islam as a religion of calls to prayer, mosques, and collective rituals like the communal feast (*slametan*)—a religion that

participates in a moral public sphere it construes in heterosexual terms. *Gay* Muslims also confront incommensurability with regard to community.

### COMMUNITY

My discussion thus far has intentionally presented the intersection of *gay* subjectivity with Islam in privatized terms. This is an accurate impression of the fundamental divide between religion and homosexuality that these Indonesians experience, because in Indonesia there is currently no way to be publicly *gay* and seen as a pious Muslim; it remains “ungrammatical.” It is clearly not the case that *gay* Muslims do not think about the relationship between Islam and their sexualities; it is precisely that thinking about this relationship is, to a great degree, the only way they can experience the relationship at all. *Gay* Muslims do not necessarily feel excluded from their religion—I have never heard *gay* Muslims say they no longer felt they were Muslims because of their sexuality—but they imagine a life course of incommensurability in which they are *gay* in the *gay* world, marry heterosexually in the normal world, and find religious community in that normal world alone. Even many of those *gay* Muslims who do not feel that being *gay* is sinful, and who additionally do not plan on marrying heterosexually, expect to find religious community solely in the normal world. I know of no cases to date in which *gay* Muslims pray collectively and openly in a mosque or other formal venue.

It is not simply social disapproval that leads to a lack of *gay* Muslim community: A handful of *gay* Christian groups have existed in urban centers. Examining a meeting of one such group in a northern district of Surabaya in 1997 will help highlight the situation of *gay* Muslims. I disembarked from a pedicab one night before a storefront closed with a heavy metal gate. In front of the gate were 15 people, a mix of *gay* men, transvestites, and a few *lesbi* women. After waiting almost half an hour for the person with the keys to show up, we entered the building, a beauty college. We walked through a large room filled with desks: On each, a mannequin head awaited a student’s careful powder brush. At the far end of the room was a circular iron staircase; climbing it, we came to a room the same size as the one below, also filled with desks and heads. One wall was completely mirrored and the others sported posters detailing the latest makeup designs, happy customers with facial masks, and giant eyes displaying various eye shadow combinations. Everyone got to work clearing the tables from the room and setting out chairs in five long rows, facing a podium with a placard bearing the salon’s address and the words “Prayer Alliance.” Three transvestites, one *gay* man, and one *lesbi* woman—the leaders of the group—moved to the front of the room holding hands and praying audibly with bowed heads. Meanwhile, more *gay* men and transvestites entered; soon there were 30 people in the room gossiping, laughing, or praying with heads bowed and eyes closed.

The prayer circle ended and the leaders took their seats at the front of the room. A transvestite came up from the

back of the room to operate an overhead projector; another moved to the podium to begin the service by singing to lyrics shown on the projector. Usually, a man accompanied the group with a guitar, but he was absent because he was marrying a woman the following day. Nevertheless, everyone sang with gusto, clapping their hands. The transvestite leading the singing shouted, “We have no music but still have the spirit to sing and praise God.” The singing ended after 20 minutes and the transvestite asked if there was anyone who wanted to come forward and give testimony. One man told how he had feared he would be late because he worked in the factory on the outskirts of town, but that God had provided transport in the form of an unexpected ride. The testimony was followed by a sermon, focusing on the importance of following in God’s footsteps. The meeting ended with songs, a closing prayer, and invitations to the next meeting in two weeks’ time.

This Christian prayer group—significantly, it did not call itself a “church”—was sponsored by a local church but was not allowed to meet on its premises. In a nonpublic context, the group rendered Christianity and *gay* subjectivity commensurate, even though many participants wished to be “cured” and homosexuality was rarely openly discussed. Since the early 2000s, a few Muslim intellectuals have taken tolerant stances with regard to *gay* Muslims, calling for Indonesian Islam to publicly recognize homosexuality and even same-sex marriage (Al Qurthuby et al. 2004). Yet to my knowledge and the knowledge of my interlocutors, no Islamic analogues to the “Prayer Alliance” have existed in Indonesia to date, despite the common existence of informal Muslim study and prayer groups. One explanation for this state of affairs would be that Islam is more disapproving than Christianity of homosexuality. However, given the range of views in both religions this seems an overly hasty conclusion; at issue is, rather, how for Indonesian Muslims, unlike Indonesian Christians, proper religious practice should be public, not limited to the upper floor of a beauty college. This reflects both Islamic understandings of community (*umma*) and Islam’s dominant position in contemporary Indonesia.

### A GAY SLAMETAN

The ethnographic materials presented in this article suggest that whether *gay* Muslims uphold heteronormativity (e.g., by seeing their homosexual desires as sinful, marrying heterosexually, or stating that they plan to marry) or destabilize it on some level (e.g., by seeing their homosexual desires as God given or saying that they will not marry heterosexually), to date no point of commensurability between the “languages” of Islam and *gay* subjectivity has been reached. Yet *gay* lives exist and are lived every day; what exists is a habitation, not a resolution, of incommensurability. This habitation of incommensurability recalls not translation but a process I have elsewhere described as “dubbing culture” (Boellstorff 2003). In dubbing, a topic of recent interest to the Indonesian state, the

moving lips of persons speaking one language on a film or television show are set alongside a soundtrack in a different language. The incommensurability of the two languages is not translated in the usual sense; there is no resolution from one language into the other. Instead, the two languages are placed together like rails on a train track that unify only at some ever-receding horizon. It is impossible, say, for a Japanese-language film dubbed into English to have actors whose moving lips exactly match the soundtrack—but this “failure” is presupposed by viewers. Similarly, the simultaneous habitation of the categories *gay* and Muslim is self-consciously incomplete.

Such processes might hold important lessons for an anthropology of incommensurability, helping to explain “the emergence of radical worlds in the shadow of the liberal diaspora” (Povinelli 2001:320). There may be things—concepts, poems, sublime ideas—that are untranslatable, but nothing is undubbable: “Dubbing” is a useful metaphor for inhabiting incommensurability. The narratives discussed above demonstrate how *gay* Muslims do not typically feel that being *gay* will ever be “utterable” in terms of religion and nation. Yet *gay* Muslims exist, inhabiting spaces of incommensurability between *gay*, Muslim, and Indonesian. The religious beliefs and practices of *gay* Muslims are “complementary, overlapping accounts” (Brodwin 2003:86) of faith, habitations of incommensurability involving movement between individual and community.

In *The Religion of Java*, Clifford Geertz identified the communal feast or slametan as central to Javanese experiences of Islam. Geertz notes that a slametan resolves incommensurability by acting as a “kind of social universal joint, fitting the various aspects of social life and individual experience together” (Geertz 1960:11):

A slametan can be given in response to almost any occurrence one wishes to celebrate, ameliorate, or sanctify. . . . There is always the special food . . . the Islamic chant, and the extra-formal high-Javanese speech of the host. . . . Most slametans are held in the evening. . . . Upon arrival each guest takes a place on the floor mats. . . . When the host has completed the [formal introductory speech], he asks someone present to give the Arabic chant-prayer. . . . The preliminaries completed . . . the serving of the food begins. [Geertz 1960:11–13]

Arno’s birthday slametan was held on November 28, 1997, in the little town where he lived about 20 miles outside Surabaya—coincidentally, Geertz’s field site for *The Religion of Java*. Arno’s friends came in from all over Surabaya (and his boyfriend all the way from Bali) to meet not at Arno’s home, but the rented home of another *gay* man, tucked away on a small street on the far side of town. Its small front room had a low ceiling, lit by a single long fluorescent light bulb and decorated with a quotation from the Qur’an (the *ayat kursi*) alongside photos of the president and vice president. Here, Arno could hold his paradoxical gathering—a private slametan—safe from the eyes of family and neighbors, away from the public yet under the indifferent gaze of religion and nation.

Twenty-four men sat in a circle inside the crowded room, backs pressed to walls. Some of Arno’s *gay* friends had been cooking all afternoon. From the kitchen, they emerged to place food in the center of the circle: rice, fried chicken, fried mashed potatoes, peanut sauce, and shrimp crackers. The room fell silent as one of Arno’s friends began to speak, clearly but informally, in Indonesian rather than Javanese: “Well, we are here to celebrate Arno’s birthday. He won’t tell us exactly how old he is, but in any case we’re here on his behalf.” The assembled laughed gently. “So let’s take a few moments to pray, each following our own beliefs and praying in our own way. Let’s pray for the good fortune and health of Arno. Begin now.” A few moments passed in silence with heads bowed. “Okay, that’s enough. Now everyone please eat a lot!” Arno moved to the center of the circle and, taking a large pastry server in hand, cut off the tip of the rice mountain (*nasi gunung*), putting it on a plate with other food items. Everyone sat quietly: Arno was free to give this first serving to a person of his choice. Turning around on his knees, he approached his boyfriend and gave him the plate as they kissed each other on the cheeks. Approving murmurs reverberated around the circle. Plates were passed around and everyone moved in to eat.

Most slametans involve neighbors, but Arno’s slametan grouped together men meeting on the basis of *gay* subjectivity. In place of Javanese narrative coupled with an Arabic chant, obligatory even in the Hindu slametans held by Tengger Javanese (Hefner 1985), these *gay* participants spoke Indonesian and prayed silently, “each in their own way.” Inhabiting—not resolving—incommensurability, Arno’s slametan brought together *gay* men at the margins of the public. It made no appeal for social inclusion and did not invoke the potential of a *gay* Muslim public. Yet it drew from mainstream religious practice and also national discourses of individuality, national language, and religious egalitarianism. On another night, Arno would hold other events to celebrate his birthday with family members, coworkers, and neighbors. On this evening, a *gay* world of faith came into being in a little room around a mound of rice.

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## NOTES

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1. Because of limitations of space, it is also not possible to discuss *lesbi* Muslims; “homosexuality” in this article refers to male homosexuality. From my own fieldwork and some published sources (e.g., Prawirakusumah and Ramadhan 1988:122, 250, 427), it is clear that

many *lesbi* women are Muslim and struggle with questions of faith and belonging. This is a crucial area for research and I hope to discuss *lesbi* Muslims in a future publication. See Boellstorff 2005 and references therein for discussions of *lesbi* Indonesians.

2. *Republika* (2005). The phrase "gays demanding rights" apparently refers to Westerners.

3. "Bisexuality" is rarely discussed in Indonesia as a category of sexuality, even though in a behavioral sense it is quite prevalent. See Boellstorff 1999, 2005.

4. This article draws from two years of fieldwork conducted in Indonesia during 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997–98, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2004, primarily in Surabaya (East Java), Makassar (South Sulawesi), and Bali. There are also, of course, *gay* Indonesians who follow religions other than Islam, but because of limitations of space, I do not address them in this article, except for some references to *gay* Christians (Christianity is the next-largest religion in Indonesia after Islam). Additionally, I do not discuss the religious beliefs and practices of male transvestites (*warias*) in this article (see Boellstorff 2004b).

5. It lies outside the scope of this article to discuss events like the "Jakarta Charter," an attempt to constitutionally require Muslims to follow Islamic law.

6. See, for instance, M. Ali 1990:444–449; Esposito 1998:94; Idrus 2004; Waines 1995:94.

7. Howard (1996) claims that all of the *gay* men in his Jakarta sample, regardless of religion, saw becoming *gay* as the result of social relationships.

8. This five-fold division is termed *al-ahkam al-khamsah*. See Bowen 2003:14, Hallaq 1997:174–180; Waines 1995:76.

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