

**The New Order Nationalist Rhetoric:
The Articulation of Javanese Identity in Post-Colonial Indonesia**

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Abstract

The article seeks to find evidence that Indonesians perception of ‘the west’ is still continue to be informed by the past ‘nationalist’ rhetoric of the New Order government. Ever since Indonesia’s second president, Soeharto, the state government has raised awareness of ‘the West’s’ cultural paradigm by using dogmatic virtues of female sexuality and ‘westernization’. The article employs scholarly archives in the form of school textbooks in order to critically trace the tensions between nationalism and what is perceived as ‘western’ culture, as well as its effect on gender and sexuality norms in Indonesia.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, Indonesia, school textbooks

Introduction

The paper will trace the long-term effect of the Indonesian New Order reconstruction of national identity within the representation of gender and sexuality. It will focus on how the New Order nationalist rhetoric of gender politics and Javanese values have been used by the state government to spread its policies.

Under Indonesia's second president, Soeharto, the state government introduced the term *kebarat-baratan* (westernization). *Kebarat-baratan* is viewed as an articulation of corrupting influences from western social norms, such as pre- or extra-marital sex and alcohol consumption. Pre-marital sex, among young people in particular, is often being cited as stemming from western influences of *pergaulan bebas Barat* (free socializing). The term has been preserved and popularized by media presentation in films and on the internet (Webster, 2010, p. 2).

Keeping in mind that *kebarat-baratan* is mostly used to oppose openness on sexuality and pre-marital sex, the nationalist construction of womanhood evidently continues to play a central role in the re-construction of gender and sexuality in post New Order Indonesia, since it was part of the New Order nationalist rhetoric to remind women for their *kodrat* (inherent nature) as a motherly, obedient wife.

That gendered discourses used to be at the center of Indonesian nationalist identity can be seen from the portrayals of female protagonists on television drama (Webster, p. 41). Famous television dramas at the time such as, *Losmen* (Motel) and *Jendela Rumah Kita* (Our House Window), featured female protagonists skilled in taking care of their households. Dating, intimacy, sex, love, marriage and romantic relationships scenes are handled 'safely' and only then presented by Indonesian channels.

State government construction of gender-specific ideology went as far as imposing regulations that internalized the explicit roles of women and men in a form of Marriage Law No. 1/1974 (Kusaeni, 2010). Article 34 states: "The husband is responsible for protecting his wife and providing basic needs for his household". Moreover, Article 34 (2) states: "[...] the wife is responsible for taking good care of the household."

This study argues that state intervention in the household life of its citizen has significant impact on the re-construction of gender, sexuality and feminism as part of 'western products'. The post-New Order era, the short-lived celebration of women's movement that had been established by former President Abdurrahman Wahid, ended in 2005, when President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won his first Presidential term.

The year was marked with the introduction of the Pornography Bill. Since then, Indonesians have witnessed an ongoing struggle between conservative and progressive groups. One of the examples is when *Playboy Indonesia* hit newsstands in 2006. Irrespective of how one feels about this publication, freedom of press issues were at stake, and members of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front repeatedly attacked the magazine's editorial offices and filed a criminal complaint against Arnada, the magazine's editor, who was then sentenced to two years in prison. Islamic Defenders Front claimed that *Playboy Indonesia*, a magazine franchise of the US *Playboy*, is linked to western imperialism and decadence.

But this was only a symptom of what the government wanted to do. In order to evaluate this situation further, this study will underline the importance of understanding local ‘nationalist’ discourses behind the New Order politics for a feminist, Indonesian Studies program that will provide ethnographically informed alternatives to the common explanation of gender politics.

The study argues that the reinforcing of the systems put in place by those once in power is still ongoing today, and that the following questions need to be answered: Are notions of gender and sexuality in Indonesia still influenced by the New Order’s gender politics? And if yes, how?

Methodology

A qualitative method was chosen in order to produce a well-rounded understanding of the present situation on the basis of rich, contextual, and detailed data (Mason, 1996, p. 4). On account of many discursive forms of gendered nationalism of *Ibu Kita Kartini* (Our Mother Kartini), the study employs discourse analytical approaches in the analysis of school textbooks and Kartini’s letters as the study’s primary source.

As the study seeks to demonstrate that normative rendition of national identity on gender and sexuality still exist in terms of colonial discourse, it is this ‘othering’ and media representations that enforce it that will be analyzed. The study employs Judith Butler’s perspective in framing the evolving notions of gender, tradition and nationalism.

Gender and Culture within Cultural Studies Framework

The cultural studies framework highlights culture as a key concept for understanding features of our contemporary historical situation (Dahlgren, 1997, p.53). Cultural studies look further at the media as a powerful tool in meaning-making process and examine the media for their relations with people and with structures of power. They particularly look at how media create meanings and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life (Murdock, 1995, p. 94).

Thereby the media are viewed as a driving force that reinforce or undermine dominant ideologies. Ideology is a key concept which assists us in understanding the manner in which the stereotypes that surround gender are established. According to Thompson (1984), ideologies can be regarded as a ‘system of thought’, ‘system of beliefs’, or ‘symbolic systems’ which pertain to social action or political practice. Ideologies as meaning, having been created through constant representation, are one of the keys to understand what over-arching systems of thought inform us and are maintained by those in power.

Judith Butler offers a relevant perspective on gender and culture when she specifically turns her attention to the production of selves as effects (Butler, 1999, p. 1). As gender is culturally constructed, Butler argues that gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. Gender cannot be separated from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (p. 5). Therefore, gender is a performance of what one assumes to be the characteristics of one’s sex, which is prescribed by one’s political and cultural intersections (p. 10).

The above definitions particularly emphasize the use of meaning-making to enforce and advance the interests of those in power. The presumption that the penetration of media can

shape identities and behavior, led the state government to use the media as a medium to spread its policies.

In the following I will focus on how the nationalist rhetoric influences many Indonesians' dogmatic conception of gender and sexuality. I will initially discuss the nationalist rhetoric of gender politics by the New Order government, followed by its impact on gender construction and sexuality as a model of 'westernization'.

Masculine Militarism

Many theorists of nationalism have noted the tendency of nationalists to liken the nation to a family with its male headed household in which both men and women have 'natural' roles to play (McClintock, 1991). Indonesian nationalism during the New Order is a case in point.

The New Order government famously created and enforced stereotypes of national identity. The regime's security and social political functions have included monitoring social and political developments at national and local levels; providing personnel for important government departments and state enterprises; censoring the media and monitoring dissidents. An imagined tradition of patriarchal family life is the center of gender-specific model of political authority of Indonesia under Soeharto.

Joane Nagel observed how the micro-culture of masculinity in everyday life articulates the demands of nationalism, particularly on the militaristic side (1988, p. 244). The film *G 30S/PKI* highlights Soeharto's regime's preference of masculine militarism. From 1984 to the early 2000s, Indonesian state television TVRI annually aired the film *Pengkhianatan G 30S/PKI* (The 30th September Treason) that presents the suffering of military generals victimized by the Indonesian Communist Party. The film was made to embolden Soeharto's heroism in preventing the 30th September coup (Paramaditha, 2007). Paramaditha convincingly argues that nationalism in Indonesia during the New Order period was therefore defined within the framework of masculine militarism.

Competition over meaning among groups is referred to as the 'politics of representation' (Shapiro, 1988). In the chapter, "Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture: Ethnic Identities and Erasure", Indonesian scholar Ariel Heryanto states that the politics of representation have been central to the rise of modern authoritarianism in Indonesia. Popular culture often conveys political messages, and this is also true the other way around (Heryanto, 2008). Through the re-construction of the 30th September coup, Soeharto established the ideal (heroic) father figure and introduced the culture of Father-ism in Indonesian politics (Shiraishi, 2001, p. 51-78). Soeharto personified himself as a "father" figure who demands his 'children' to obey everything he wishes for (Shiraishi, p. 194). On that account, Indonesian gender ideology emphasizes men as community leaders, decision makers and mediators with the outside world. Furthermore, the state introduced five familial principles of *asas kekeluargaan* (family virtues). *Asas kekeluargaan* underlines the importance of collective values above individual good, and view leadership as the 'natural authority' of the father and of men in general (Kusaeni, 2010).

Chastity and Fecundity Values behind the New Order Nationalist Rhetoric

But nationalism doesn't stop with men. Nationalists often have a special interest in attempting to regulate sexuality and sexual behavior of women (Koonz, 1987). Women's purity as exalted mothers in the fatherland must be impeccable. Since women are thought by traditionalists to

embody family and national honor, since women's shame is family's shame, the nation's shame, and their husband's shame. Portrayals of women in state-produced media products during the Soeharto years were often stereotypical; they were mostly portrayed as sexually shy and passive in the domestic sphere, while catering to their husband and taking care of the children.

Julia Suryakusuma introduced the concept of *ibuism*, a conservative, government-sponsored definition of womanhood, (2004, p. 167) in order to discuss the underlying ideology that is used to legitimize the containment of women. *Keibuan* (motherly) are maternal qualities of the traditional role of women and the concept underlines womanhood as a pillar of the nation. Consequently, the state ideology of *ibuism* is a feudalistic, hierarchical structure, in which the democratic process is non-existent and social status becomes the primary orientation. Yulianto (2010) claims the hegemony of *ibuism* was purposely introduced to retain women in domestic and familial duties and managed to avoid women's involvement in public spheres.

School textbooks are set to influence young girls' idea about traditional feminine values that a true Indonesian woman must uphold: being a devoted wife and a family woman. Moreover, school textbooks are also enshrined with the discourse of *Ibu Pertiwi* (mother nation). According to Shiraishi (2001, p. 131), by referring to the state as *Ibu Pertiwi*, the New Order government symbolizes itself as a legal guardian of a mother nation.

Portrayals of women in state-produced media products and school textbooks are in line with Judith Butler's intersectional gender theory that links 'gender' to 'nation' and ideas of womanhood to the state. Thereby, 'nationalism' is articulated by the state as a form of citizens being required to perform as obedient children to their mother. In other words, to be a good citizen means: be obedient, show solidarity, and do not question the motifs behind 'the parents' instruction (Shiraishi, p. 131).

Javanese Values

The former president Soeharto came to power as the leader of an anti-communist and nationalist army, and he made the military the major force behind the New Order. Sarsito (2006) argues that, by emphasizing his self as a military hero, Soeharto had positioned himself as the father of a big family. He further claims that Soeharto had indeed treated the country and the state as a big Javanese family (Irawanto, 2011, p. 2).

A further stream-lining of national thought was undertaken by the government's insistence on Javanese culture speaking for all of Indonesia. Most of the elites were and are Javanese and the capital Jakarta is also located on the island of Java. With this move, all other Indonesian cultures were taken out of the equation. Evidence of how Javanese culture had enshrined the New Order nationalist ideology could also be seen from the reinforcing heroism of 'Kartini' through state mechanisms. Kartini, a figure who was famous for her criticism of Javanese patriarchal society, had been chosen as a national hero by Indonesia's first President, Soekarno. During the New Order era, her birthday on 21st April became a holiday called *Hari Ibu Kita Kartini* (Kartini's day). The day is often celebrated in schools and state departments by organizing national dress parades and cooking contests.

Kartini was actually a progressive mind who spent her life taking a stand against Javanese feudal and patriarchal society. However, school textbooks turned Kartini's profile into a traditional Javanese figure of *Putri Sejati* (a true lady). Instead of honoring her intelligence and

writing skills, a rarity for a woman during her time, the state government turned Kartini's profile into that of a domestic hero: an obedient (third) wife who dedicated her life teaching young women how to cook and to sew. Young Kartini had dreamed of pursuing her study in the Netherlands, but in the end she decided to obey her father's demand and was married off to an older powerful man (Kartini, 2005).

History textbooks always highlight this part of Kartini's life to tell young schoolgirls to imitate Kartini in 'embracing women's destiny', meaning getting married to form a family. Indonesian feminists often argue that Kartini is a symbol of New Order domestication towards women. I argue that in emphasizing Kartini as *Putri Sejati*, a passive obedient child to her parents in school textbooks and history lessons, the New Order has virtually institutionalized Javanese characteristics of 'submissiveness' and 'feudalism' as a nationalist model. Partly based on this story, Willner (1963) concludes that from childhood, the Javanese are taught to respect and obey authority figures which then lead to the strong hand of paternalistic leaders. The 'father figure' embodies the highest authority.

The natural hierarchical tendency of Javanese society that the New Order adopted cannot be separated from Indonesia since the Dutch colonial era (Cribb, 2011). Javanese is Indonesia's largest ethnic group and hold dominant majority in the government. Therefore it has become hegemonic understanding in today's Indonesia that what frequently refers as *budaya kita* actually means Javanese culture with all its accompanying paternalistic tradition. Contrary to the common perception that the New Order nationalist rhetoric has been informed by gender politics, the emphasis of Kartini's heroism as a true Javanese princess, *Putri Sejati*, points out that it is Javanese values of women chastity and submissiveness that occupy a distinct, symbolic role behind Indonesia's nationalist culture.

Sexuality and the Perception of the West

Women arguably occupy a distinct role in nationalist culture, discourse and collective action, a symbolic role that reflects a masculine definition of femininity and of women's proper place in the nation. Mosse describes how female embodiments of the nation stood for eternal forces and particularly highlighted innocence and chastity (1985, p. 98). Nonetheless, while female fecundity is valued as the mothers of the nation, unruly female sexuality is seen as a threat to discredit the nation.

As previously mentioned, the New Order rhetoric often reminded women of their *kodrat*, a natural destiny stipulating that women should be meek, passive, and obedient to the male members of the family, sexually shy and modest, self-sacrificing and nurturing, and find their main vocation as a wife and mother (Wierenga, 2002). However, similar characteristics are also taught to Javanese women from generation to generation, and therewith highly define traditional Javanese values and characters.

Through the nationalist rhetoric of 'female chastity', gender appropriation continues to influence Indonesians' perspective on gender, sexuality and westernization. The negative view of western social norms and pre-marital sex is exemplified by the concern of *pengaruh pergaulan bebas Barat* (free-socializing influence) amongst parents. In her study, Webster claims that the term *kebarat-baratan* (copying the West) is mainly associated with media presentation as well as forms of popular culture as distributed through films and the internet (Webster, 2010, p. 2).

Tension between ‘the West’ and ‘Indonesian culture’ is clearly addressed by Ida Rahmah (2008) in her study “*Consulting Taiwanese Boys Culture: Watching Meteor Garden with Urban Kampung Women in Indonesia*”. Rahmah looks at the phenomenon of the famous Hong Kong television series *Meteor Garden* amongst women living in small alleys of Surabaya. Rahmah’s study suggests that there exists cultural proximity in how the show presents men and women’s romantic relationships across Asian cultures where no inappropriate kissing scenes took place, especially compared to the ‘western’ version where we often see men and women easily engage in one night stands, *Meteor Garden* is viewed as more appropriate with “our culture” (p.133-148). One of her respondents commented that she liked the show because, “[...] unlike western TV shows where we often see men and women easily engage in one night stands, the show is more appropriate to our values”.

The New Order enforced stereotype of national identity apparently influences how sex is viewed as acceptable only within the frame of marriage. In other words, when you are not married, especially if you are a woman, you should not have sex. Sexuality is further seen as a threat to discredit the nation. This explains why Indonesian feminists and pro-choice activists frequently have to defend themselves from accusations that they are spreading the viruses of western modernity and liberalism (Budiman, p. 77). They are even being accused of promoting pornography, child abuse and prostitution in their opposition to the anti-pornography bill (Amiruddin, 2006). As ‘female chastity’ was located at the center of nationalist ideology, this move suggests that the New Order traditional Javanese family values with masculinity and obedient women at its core, also stood behind the construction of the anti-western paradigm.

Conclusion

In contrast to popular beliefs among some Indonesian scholars, the manipulation and distortion of information concerning anti-western paradigms did not simply originate from the heritage of New Order’s geo-politics. The New Order nationalist rhetoric was particularly influenced by masculinity and feminine values and thus rested on a basis of traditionalist gender ideology. Indonesian culture and nationalist values were thus deeply influenced by notions of what it means to be ‘truly Javanese’.

Indonesian’s tendency to view sexuality from the frame of post-colonialist discourses of Western paradigms has been influenced by how Kartini’s heroism was articulated by the New Order regime as an obedient child and woman. The symbolization of *Putri Sejati* implies more than only a ‘domestication of women’, since the presentation of ‘womanhood’ as well as ‘purity’ become a moral standard that true Indonesian women should uphold.

Given that ‘submissiveness’ is part of a stereotypical Javanese characteristic, in nationalist contexts ‘feminism’ and ‘sexuality’ are viewed as western products that contradict the traditional feminine Javanese character. Since the notions of gender and sexuality in Indonesia have been established by traditional Javanese values, feminism consequently became a contested concept frequently misinterpreted. Misleading gender perceptions in which feminism is seen as a part of western tradition did not fit in with nationalist norms and values, causing its rejection by the New Order government to conform to the universal understanding of feminism and human rights. Moreover, within the state lay ideologies of a secular country with millions of religious people adhering to Islam, moral standard of the religion features as well. Sexuality, in particular, is considered offensive to public decency and Islamic values.

Above findings bring further evidence that the reinforcement of the systems put in place by those once in power is still existence today, and Indonesians are therefore challenged to reconfigure their traditions, beginning with separating the definition of ‘national identity’ from dogmatic virtue ideology.

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