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Migration of Indonesian Gays to Paris, France**

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**The Vulnerability of the Minority:
Migration of Indonesian Gays to Paris, France**

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Abstract:

Indonesia is a rapidly growing modern society in Asia. However, the representation of sexual and gender nonconformity has long been seen as "strange" in Indonesian society. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) people can be considered members of a minority group. According to Fraser (1997: 18), gays and lesbians suffer from "heterosexism", the authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality. This comes with homophobia, the cultural devaluation of homosexuality. LGBT sexuality is thus disparaged, and LGBT individuals are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence. The idea that homosexuality is a disease is widely spread in Indonesia, and as a consequence it is common for LGBT people to be called "the sick" (*orang sakit*). If someone is known to be LGBT, taunts and gossip will follow, as well as harassment and loss of employment. This paper examines the migration of Indonesian gays abroad, particularly to Paris, France. Data for the following discussion were collected through a study of Indonesian gays in Paris when I was conducting my PhD research at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) from 2010 to 2015. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-five Indonesian gays, aged between 24 and 42, in Paris to explore their reasons for migrating to Paris as well as to determine why they chose the city as their destination.

Keywords: *Indonesia, Homosexuality, Gay, Migration, Paris*

Introduction

Indonesia is an inherently pluralist nation, with cultural diversity being an inseparable element of its makeup. According to Statistics Indonesia (*Badan Pusat Statistik/BPS*), Indonesia has at least 1,340 different tribes/ethnic groups (Kurniawan, 2018). With a population of 260 million, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous nation (Fleming, 2016). It is also the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, with 87.2% of its population being Muslim; a demographic study conducted by the Pew Research Centre's Religion and Public Life Project in 2012 concluded that 13% of the world's Muslims live in Indonesia. President Sukarno, Indonesia's founding father,

maintained that religious minorities must have a stake in Indonesia's future, proposing 'Pancasila' as the country's foundational pluralist philosophy. It consists of five points (Rogers, 2018):

1. Belief in the one and only God
2. Just and civilized humanity
3. The unity of Indonesia
4. Democracy led by the wisdom of deliberations among representatives
5. Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia

Indonesia, therefore, is a country of "one for all and all for one", a concept manifested in its official national motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" (unity in diversity) (Rogers, 2018). The choice of this motto makes it clear that Indonesia's founding fathers possessed an awareness of, and also emphasized, its cultural and religious diversity (Rogers, 2018). Such recognition, however, has not been enjoyed by LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) individuals. Why? Why have they been unable to live in Indonesia, with many deciding to migrate abroad?

According to Takács, Mocsonaki, and Tóth (2008) from the Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Science, the LGBT can be seen as a minority group, i. e. a social group characterized by relative powerlessness in their interest-representing abilities. They cite a statement by Fraser (1997) that gays and lesbians suffer from heterosexism, the authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality. Along with this comes homophobia, the cultural devaluation of homosexuality. Their sexuality thus disparaged, LGBT individuals are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence, while being denied legal rights and equal protection – all of which are fundamentally denials of recognition. They also suffer serious economic injustices; they can be summarily dismissed from paid work and are denied family-based social-welfare benefits. However, far from being rooted directly in the economic structure, these derive instead from an unjust cultural-valuational structure. Even though Indonesia has a secularist constitution and homosexuality is legal, a recent poll shows that 93 percent of Indonesians feel homosexual couples should not be accepted (Demetrianova, 2014). The authoritarian New Order regime of Soeharto had more resources to impose its agenda to a greater degree than the Old Regime of Sukarno (Boellstorff, 2005). Since the New Order regime fell in 1998, Indonesia has been a society under enormous political stress and change. Its fledgling democratic governments have faced increasingly Islamicized pressures in terms of governance and law. In the post-September 11, 2001 climate, the rise of militant Islamic groups and certain extreme forms of atavistic behavior across Indonesia has led to endemic and pervasive violence targeted at both ethnic minorities and explicit homosexuals, who are often perceived as deviant or corrupted by Western values. Groups that have explicitly targeted the LGBT community have included the Indonesian Council of Ulemas, Indonesia's top Muslim clerical

body; the Islamic Defender Front, an extremist group known for its violent tactics; and the Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (Offord, 2011).

The presence of homosexuality in Indonesian society is considered as deviating from social norms, a situation that has been influenced by the country's 'creeping' Islamization widespread impact on the perception of what is considered normal and appropriate moral behavior. At the beginning of the 1980s, homosexuality became closely connected to the spread of HIV/AIDS in the minds of many Indonesians. As a consequence, in Indonesia people call gay people *orang sakit* ('the sick'), and they are targeted for social exclusion, violence, and other forms of physical, psychological and emotional persecution (Offord, 2011). Arus Pelangi founder King Oey notes: "Discrimination occurs everywhere. If someone is known to be homosexual, taunts and gossip will follow, as well as harassment and loss of employment". This exacerbates the widespread stigma that homosexuality is a disease (Adihartono, 2015).

Such discrimination leads to the creation of stereotypes. Fiske (1988), as well as Hogg and Vaughan (2010), examines the main characteristics of stereotypes highlighted by social-psychology studies in the century since the concept was introduced and used. They identify five main characteristics: a) stereotypes are simplified images of members of a group, b) stereotypes are adaptive cognitive shortcuts that enable quick impressions about people, c) stereotypes are stable because of their function of cognitive adaptation, d) stereotypes are acquired and crystallize in childhood; e) stereotypes become more acute and more hostile when social tensions and conflicts appear between the groups and when they are extremely difficult to change. This is what has happened to Indonesia's LGBT community until now.

However, studies have also shown that Indonesia is home to a number of 'sacred' or 'traditional' forms of homosexuality, the most well-known being the *bissu* of South Sulawesi and the *warok* of the Ponorogo region of East Java (Murtagh, 2013). Davies (2010) describes the *bissu* as androgynous shamans who symbolically embody male and female elements. The Bugis of South Sulawesi—i. e., the society in which the *bissu* are found—acknowledge four possible genders, as well as a fifth 'para-gender' identity. In addition to male-men (*oroane*), and female-women (*makunrai*), there are *calalai*, biological females who take on many of the roles and functions expected of men; *calabai*, biological males who in many respects adhere to the expectations of women, and *bissu* (Davies, 2002). Meanwhile, a *warok* is a leader of the *Reyog* dance. In this tradition, the *warok* conducts homoerotic relations with a younger man, known as a *gemblak*, as heterosexual intercourse with women is understood as polluting (Wilson, 1999). The *gemblak* is normally chosen for his poise and physical appearance, and is typically characterized as androgynous and light in facial complexion; the latter is sometimes enhanced with facial powder (Wilson, 1999).

During performances, the *gemblak* is sometimes known to dress in feminine attire, such as the *kebaya* blouse, a wrap-around skirt (*jarik batik*), and a scarf (*sampur* or *selendang*) (Kartomi, 1976).

In some elements of daily life, homosexuality has been informally welcomed, meaning that LGBT individuals would be accepted so long as they did not cause trouble in society (Johan, 2011). However, the facts show that discrimination against the LGBT community is also still very common and often cannot be solved. Therefore, to avoid social discrimination, many of Indonesia's gays have played a form of 'hide and seek'. They tend to see themselves as open (*terbuka*) in certain spaces – for example, in cruising spaces and in the homes of friends – and closeted (*tertutup*) in others, such as the workplace or the family home (Boellstroff, 2005).

Word Choice: Choosing the Word "Gay" Instead of "Homosexual"

Before I enter my main discussion, I would like to explain why I have used the word "gay" instead of "homosexual". As Whitaker (2011) said, some people believe that the word "homosexual" has negative overtones. Indeed, most members of the Indonesian LGBT community prefer the words "gay" and "lesbian".

The word "homosexual" is associated with pathology. As French philosopher Michel Foucault explained, homosexuality appeared as one form of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy to a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1980). Meanwhile the word "gay" is commonly used as a declaration of identity to represent selfhood, as in the sentence "I am gay", "It's who I am", and "It's what I label myself". Thus, this word has become a kind of pride that exists in the self of every gay man, whether gay masculine or gay feminine. When James M. Donovan¹ from Tulane University conducted his research 'Homosexual, Gay, and Lesbian: Defining the Words and Sampling the Populations', he found from one of his respondents the point of distinction between the word 'homosexual' and 'gay'. Homosexual defines a behavior; gay, on the other hand, defines an individual's acceptance of behavior, or mindset. Gay describes a way of life. Homosexuality may have nothing to do with gay; for example, many non-gay men (and women) do things considered homosexual, i. e., participate in sexual acts with persons of the same sex (Donovan 1992).

This paper is based on research I conducted while earning my PhD in sociology at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Marseille, France. During my field research in Paris, I interviewed 25 Indonesian gays (masculine and feminine). Interviews lasted for one to three

¹ When he works on that research, he is still a PhD candidate.

hours, depending on respondents' availability and mood. The most difficult element of my research was becoming familiar with them; for this, I asked a gate keeper to introduce me to my respondents. The gate keeper is also gay and has lived in Paris for more than 10 years. According to this gatekeeper, there is no statistical data on the number of Indonesian gays in Paris, but he estimates a figure of several hundred. For the dissemination of this research to the public, I am upholding my promise my respondents to not publish their names or employment; they have allowed me only to write their initial and age.

Migration is not a "Choice" but (like) a "Must"

Discussing the meaning of globalization, which is almost never precisely defined, McGrew (1998) argues that globalization is a process that generates connections not only across nation-states and national territorial boundaries, but between global regions, continents, and civilizations. This invites a definition of globalization as a 'historical process which engenders a significant shift in the spatial reach of networks and system of social relations to transcontinental or interregional patterns of human organization, activity and the exercise of power'. On the other hand, Baylis and Smith (1999) identify the character of globalization from the internationalizing of production, the new international division of labor, new migratory movements from south to north, and the internationalizing of the state. Here, Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan (2011) refer to globalization not only in economic terms, but also in relation to social and political transformations and the emergence of global currents of thought. Those two definitions indicate that globalization has opened connections in all domains, extending connections into every sphere. Migration, which now generally refers to moving across a national border, often with the purpose of settling for a period of time, is one effect of the globalization process.

For LGBT individuals, migration is (like) a must rather than a choice. The "push" and "pull" factors identified in early migration studies are no longer the main reasons for migration. Generally, voluntary migrants have been thought to move because the economic conditions and living standards in their countries or regions of origin are not as desirable as in another country or region. In other words, voluntary migrants have been held to move to find work and better job opportunities (Hanco & Vicino, 2014). However, the reasons that people actually move from their countries of origin to other countries are varied and complex.

This holds true for Indonesian gays in Paris, who argue that living in Indonesia is not a "rational" choice because they are limited by the thoughts of a society that cannot accept homosexuality and even portrays it as against nature. Sexual identity and feelings can thus be strong motivators for migration. LGBT individuals can migrate in search of places that offer more freedom

for them to express their sexual identities. They may migrate because they fear being persecuted because of their sexuality (Hancox & Vicino, 2014).

Discussing this phenomenon, there are three reasons why Indonesian gays have migrated to Paris: it may be for study, because of family conditions (such as divorce), or by chance (holiday, trying to find a better life). Below are some short narratives from my respondents about why they migrated to Paris.

(H, 36)

"I don't know. I am here inadvertently. One day I saw information that the French government had opened scholarships for Indonesian students. At the same time, I thought that I had to apply for it. I had nothing to lose. After one month, I received a call that I had to go to the embassy to have an interview. Then they informed me that I passed the interview. I went to Paris without any idea. I just think that I have to study hard and get the diploma. That's all. After I got the diploma, I continue my study to Master degree and then you can see, I am here in Paris. "

(W, 29)

"I don't know. It all happened inadvertently. After I got my master's degree here in Paris, my professor asked me to continue to get a PhD. And I think it's a chance. I am comfortable in Paris. "

(I, 30)

"I got a scholarship and I went to Paris. That's it. "

From those three narratives, we can see that H, W, and I did not have any specific goal for staying in Paris. However, they shared a common trait: they met their boyfriends inadvertently. H met his boyfriend while eating at a fast food restaurant. At that time, the restaurant was full and H was sitting alone. Suddenly, JM (now his boyfriend) asked him for a seat; H allowed him to sit. They exchanged phone numbers and began having intensive *rendez-vous*.

Meanwhile, W met his boyfriend while they were working on their assignments at the library. W told me that he was suddenly approached by a young man who asked to borrow the book that W was reading. At the time, W felt disturbed, and he continued reading the book. After the library closed, W tried to run to catch the night bus. G (now his boyfriend) followed him furtively, but W noticed him from a distance. When W got off from the bus, he stopped for a few minutes and G approached him. W asked him what he wanted. Finally, G said that he just wanted to know him very well. They exchanged phone numbers and held several *rendez-vous*.

An interesting experience was had by I, who fell in love with a colleague on first sight. One day, I and M (now his boyfriend) were working on a project together. They fell in love because of the intense meetings necessitated by this project. M loves I for his intelligence. At that time, I lacked

confidence because of body issues, feeling himself overweight, but M said that his love was not for I's body. For him, one's intellect is more attractive than one's body. Another short narrative comes from A, age 34.

"I have lived in Paris since 2008. You know, I came to Paris just for holiday, but in the end I fell in love with V (his boyfriend)".

As in the two cases above, A came to Paris inadvertently. At the time, he was only visiting Paris as a backpacker. As he lacked the money to stay in a hotel, he decided to stay in a youth hostel. Unexpectedly, he met the man who became his boyfriend, V, there.

H, W, and I shared a family background. Their parents were divorced and they needed parental affection. They told that, if their parents had not been divorced, they would have chosen to return to Indonesia and voice their sexual preference. For them, it would be better to tell the truth in advance rather than lie. However, their condition changed, and they chose to stay in France because of their parents' divorce.

Relationships with Family in Indonesia

Family is the central structure (of Sundanese and Javanese) society (Surtees, 2018). Family members give each other attention, care, and various other obligations; neglecting one's obligation to one's family is a serious social infraction (Geertz, 1967). However, this is hardly the case for Indonesian gays in Paris. Although not all respondents have experienced unfavorable situations, some have deliberately severed their relationships with their family Indonesia (or had their relationships with their family severed) because they gay. Why has this happened?

According to Strommen (1989), parents commonly exhibit two reactions when learning that their son is gay. First, most parents are unfamiliar with homosexuality, and thus have negative perceptions. Second, parents feel that they have failed to educate their children. Such reactions indicate that parents believe that having gay or lesbian children is embarrassing (Rothman & Weinstein, 1996). Rothman and Weinstein (1986) write that, when a family member comes out, there are a multitude of responses. Take, for example, the announcement of a person's betrothal. A heterosexual person's announcement is often received with joy and many gifts; LGBT individuals, meanwhile, are often met with negative responses, which can range from mild disapproval to complete non-acceptance and disassociation. These negative responses, though usually expected, cause considerable stress and pain for the LGBT individuals seeking parental approval.

Rejection is stronger in families with strong religious convictions. Blumen and Raymond (1988) argue that such families support the views of their religion, even when judging family members. Some LGBT individuals who come from families with strong religious convictions will normally not come out to their families, as they know that coming out would only boomerang on them.

What then are actually the greatest pressures of being gay in Indonesia? According to Dede Oetomo (2004), there are two major pressures. The first is the marriage; gay men are afraid that they will be forced by their families to marry a woman. Second is insecurity resulting from anxiety about potentially being revealed as gay by society. As a consequence, many must go to gay bars to create an identity; as noted by Holt and Griffin (2003), gay bars and clubs are often the only public places in which they can openly express their sexuality. Such bars and dance clubs are perceived as places of acceptance and utilized as an escape from the dominant heteronormative culture (Holt & Griffin, 2003). Gay bars do not develop by accident; they are founded after careful and systematic planning (Achilles, 1998). It can thus be said that the existence of gay bars and clubs may indicate "privacy" in the realm of subjects' personal sexual identity and the performance of that identity (Matejskova, 2011)

Another consequence is moving to one of Indonesia's major cities or abroad. This is logically understandable, as noted by Oetomo (2004), the real threat for gay individuals in Indonesia comes from family, friends, and the society. Of these, family is most prominent, as their rejection greatly influences the behavior and psychological state of gay individuals (Oetomo, 2004).

For this research, I am focusing only on the nuclear family, which is defined as a married man and woman (typically with two children). According to Rapoport and Rapoport (1982), there is a myth that the nuclear family is disappearing. This has not, however, happened in Indonesia, where the nuclear family remains a powerful normative ideal (Saggers & Sims, 2005).

Family, as an institution, has been criticized by Tanti Noor Said (2014). She writes that family should be a safe place in which all children are loved, but—for Indonesian gays—it is quite a frightening institution. Said cites the Dutch sociologist, Professor Peter Geschiere, as saying that family is the most repressive institution in promoting cultural values. As such, it may not be the safest place for the children. Some Indonesian gays are beaten and verbally abused simply because they are gay. That Indonesian families predominantly view gay people negatively cannot be doubted, a situation that can be attributed to the *gender belief system*.

The gender belief system imposed by the Soeharto regime included a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females, and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity (Kite & Deaux, 1987). This belief system included stereotypes about men and women, attitudes

towards appropriate roles for men and women, and perceptions of individuals presumed to violate traditional gender roles, including LGBT individuals (Whitley, Bernard & Ægisdóttir, 2000). It is clear, thus, that this system holds that heterosexuals dislike LGBT individuals because they are perceived stereotypically as having cross-gender traits, roles, and physical characteristics (Whitley, Bernard & Ægisdóttir, 2000).

Some of my respondents confessed that their main reason for going to Paris was their problems with their families. Being derided as sick led them to flee their homes to find a safe place.

V. Family Integrity and Non-Integrity

Family may provide social support for their children. Many of the respondents that I interviewed in Paris had already told their parents that they are gay, and some had already announced that they had partners, even though they were not legally married.

According to Wan et al. (1996), there are four categories of social support: emotional, informational, companionship, and tangible. Emotional support is associated with sharing life experiences. It involves esteem, affection, trust, concern and listening, and functions to enhance an individual's self-esteem. Informational support, meanwhile, concerns the provision of knowledge that might help an individual increase his or her efficiency in responding or generating solutions to a problem (Cross, 2000). Companionship is the next form of support, and includes spending time with others in leisure and recreational activities, thereby distracting individuals from their problems; according to Wellman and Wortley (1989), companionship support is usually provided by close friends or colleague. The last is tangible support, which refers to the provision of financial aid, material resources, and needed services.

Below, I will give three of my respondents' narratives. The first of two narratives are more positive, because the respondents' families did not entirely reject their children being gay.

(H, 40)

"Yes, indeed. My parents always think of my life. In an Indonesian family, a child is always treated like gold. It's very different in European society. When we are married, our parents will hope that we will stay with them. We can't forget that there is a very strong connection between them. I mean, parents and their children.... Since I am here, I still have a contact with them. Come on ... technology has brought us Facebook, Instagram, Path, Twitter, Skype, and Yahoo Messenger. Just click on them, and I know what my parents are doing, and they know what I am doing in Paris."

H is gay and a Muslim, and his family knows his sexual orientation. He has lived in Paris for eight years with his partner. He said that his parents strongly support him, and underscored that his

parents—despite being embarrassed that their son is gay—still have a longing bond with him that cannot be severed. H does not want to abandon them, and thus he maintains contact via the internet. As he explained, he regularly chats with them using such programs as Skype and Yahoo Messenger, or updates his status on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to show his parents that he is fine in Paris.

(Y, 38)

"... they never send me euros, but I send them my euros. We connect with each other over the internet, particularly with Skype. But normally, I chat with my sister ... and later my parents will appear on screen, just to say "Hello". I am very happy to have family like them ... *Alhamdulillah* (Praise God). That's why I have tried to find halal employment so I can send them some euros. Is it a sin if I want to make them happy?"

According to my interview, Y, a Muslim, retains strong emotional bonds with his family even though he lives in Paris. For him, distance is not a problem, and he enjoys chatting via Skype. In this case, Y has given tangible support to his family in Indonesia. His sister has tried to send him money, as the older brother Y feels himself responsible to support his family. He found employment in Paris, even though his job is not an office job. So long as he does not lose his human dignity, any form of employment is acceptable. He hopes that his family is happy and proud of having a child like him, even though he is gay.

From the two narratives above, it can be said that close family relationships can be a great source of strength in times of crisis, because children require signs that their families still love them, no matter what.

The last narrative, however, is a sad one. The informant's parents severed ties with him because they were ashamed of having a child like him, and felt that they had failed as parents. This interview was a little dramatic, because the informant always cried when remembering his parents. He missed them very much and had regularly tried to contact them, but always failed.

(I, 40)

"... (Crying in front of me) ... My parents didn't want to have a gay child, so they stopped our relationship. But I am still in touch with my two sisters. I love them ... love [them] very much ... I send them some euros and ask them about the condition of my parents. ... they don't want to speak with me ... One day, one of my sisters wanted to send me some money, but I said "No". I am her brother, so I have to be responsible. There are four of us ... One of them acts like my parents. She is a fanatic Muslim... I want to contact her, but it's impossible ... (Crying) ... I miss them ..."

Besides telling his story, I had told me that his parents died seven years previously, but his parents still did not know that he was gay. A few days after his parents' death (mother and father), he

confessed to his three younger sisters, but one of them (the youngest) could not accept him being gay. I remain in contact with two of his sisters, but not with the youngest. I come from a strongly religious family background. While his mother was only a typical Indonesian housewife, his father worked for an Islamic institution. They had made pilgrimages to Mecca many times, and sent their children to Islamic schools. All three of I's sisters wear the hijab (veil). Meanwhile, although I studied at an Islamic school, he is quite liberal. He told me that being gay is not anyone's fault; anyone can be born as gay, he said.

Conclusion

Closing this paper, it can be said that migration seems inevitable for LGBT individuals. Under current circumstances, the migration of Indonesian gays cannot be prevented. Being open about their sexuality makes them particularly vulnerable to discrimination at the hands of society, religious leaders, and even the state. As long as these push factors do not change, migration will become the "natural way" for them to avoid mistreatment. Because the Indonesian state is unwilling or unable to protect the basic human rights of its citizens, I consider the migration of Indonesian gays a state failure. In my opinion, the state should stem the migration of gays by ensuring their safety and by providing them with the opportunity to contribute to their own society. After we all—gay, lesbian or heterosexual—are human beings, and therefore have the undeniable right to express ourselves.

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