“Am I human enough in your eyes?”
The Struggle of Waria to Integrate into The Traditional Javanese-Islamic Neighbourhood in Yogyakarta

A Research Paper presented by:

Maria Sattwika Duhita
Indonesia

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:
Social Justice Perspective
SJP

Members of the Examining Committee:
Dr. Naomi van Stapele
Dr. Rosalba Icaza

The Hague, The Netherlands
November 2019
Disclaimer:
This document represents part of the author’s study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

Inquiries:
International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl
twitter: @issnl

Location:
Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands
To my grandmothers, Simbab and Budhe Elly, who have constantly shown the world what it means to struggle tirelessly and to love compassionately.
# Contents

- *List of Figures* vi
- *List of Acronyms* vii
- *Acknowledgements* viii
- *Abstract* ix

## Chapter 1 The Beginning
- “They see us like walking monsters…” 1
- “It is different in Kotagede….” 2
- What do I wish to understand? 4

## Chapter 2 How do I generate knowledge?
- How do I see myself and reflect on this study? 6
- “Translation is always interpretive, critical, and partial” 8
- Why have I chosen to write it this way? 9

## Chapter 3 Understanding Waria
- Historiography of Waria 11

## Chapter 4 How Ponpes Comes into Reality
- “It is a beacon, a safe space for us. It is home.” 16
  - Destabilizing Word ‘Pesantren in the Dominant Narrative 18

## Chapter 5 Narrative of Kotagede
- Kotagede: A Home Within a Home 20
- The Integration of Muhammadiyah in Kotagede neighbourhood 20

## Chapter 6 “I am Waria, I am Moselem. I am human, too”
- Everyday life in Ponpes 23
- “We can’t agree with you, but we respect you as fellow human” 25
- “What makes it work here?” 28
  - ‘She is a local. A *prabumi*: Nativeness in Kotagede 28
  - Stories of *Sarung* and *Hijab* 29
  - “As a minority striving for our rights, we cannot walk alone” 31
  - *Tepa Slira*: ‘try to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, so you understand’ 33

## Chapter 7 “Nevertheless, we are hopeful to be here”
- *References* 35

*References* 37
List of Figures

Figure 2 Ratri and waria sitting on *pendopo* inside *ponpes* 13
Figure 1 Inside Ratri’s *Joglo* house that functions as *ponpes*. At this terrace, *waria* usually gather and study Quran together. After the session is finished, this terrace functions as public room for any social occasion, such as *arisan*, gathering, or party. 17
Figure 3 *Langgar Dhuwur* in Kotagede, one of the remainings from Mataram palace standing still in the neighbourhood. 21
Figure 4 waria and neighbours during bakti sosial. Residents and waria gather in the event and receive basic need support, such as livestock, beverages, and clothes. 26
Figure 5 *waria* and a local partner during discussion. 32
Figure 6 *Waria* and two elderly neighbours. 35
## List of Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANBTI</td>
<td>Aliansi Nasional Bhinneka Tunggal Ika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>The Association of South East Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRCS</td>
<td>Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GWL-INA</td>
<td>Gay, Waria, dan Lesbian Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human immunodeficiency virus infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIS</td>
<td>Institute of International Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITF</td>
<td>International Trans Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKBI</td>
<td>Persatuan Keluarga Berencana Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSFL</td>
<td>Riksförbundet För Sexuellt Likaberättigande</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOGIE</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expres-sion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGM</td>
<td>Universitas Gadjah Mada</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

It has been a long and winding journey to be in this stage. There are tears, laughter, fears, courage, doubt, and faith along the road. I dedicate this list of acknowledgements to those who have been an endless source of inspiration; who have given me hope and freedom to explore and continue my journey.

To StuNed, thank you for this incredible opportunity to study at ISS in The Netherlands. This chance has helped me develop myself and learn more about the world.

To my supervisor, dr. Naomi van Stapele, I would not have been able to write this thesis without your trust and guidance that you have given to me throughout the process. Thank you for giving me the space to explore and learn. Thank you, for being optimistic about my paper, even when I felt low and slow.

To my second reader, dr. Rosalba Icaza, thank you for your encouraging and careful comments. Thank you for spreading good energy through your feedbacks.

To Ratri, Ayu, Rena, Lily, Deta, Nono, Ufi, and Sri. Thank you for your sharing your stories. Thank you for letting me embrace them and make them mine, too. You are the ones that keep me going; the ones that I keep forever in my heart and mind.

To my dearest friends back home in Indonesia and ISS. Thank you for the (virtual) hugs, jokes, musics, laughers, intellectual and ‘not-so-intellectual’ discussions that we have ever had. Thank you for keeping me sane. Special mention to my dearest friend, NA Gustyara, who has always reminded me to believe in myself and have a faith in me. (Thank you for keeping me well-fed, too haha!)

To my family, Bapak, Ibu, and Adek. Thank you for standing with me throughout this process. Thank you, for believing in me, in my dream, and in every choice that I choose in my life. You always have faith to me, and that is what makes me eventually find my way and move forward. I dedicate this paper for you. Terima kasih, aku sayang Bapak, Ibu, Adek.

At last, thank you Lord, for all Your blessings throughout my life.
I am forever thankful.
Abstract

This paper wishes to understand how and why Pondok Pesantren Khusus Waria Al-Fatah (Islamic Boarding School only for Transvestite Al-Fatah, shortly ponpes), is able to operate in Kotagede, a neighbourhood marked by traditional Javanese and conservative Islamic values. Given the fact that the waria community which consists of gender non-conforming individuals have been stigmatised, displaced, and dehumanised in the broader society, Kotagede seems to accept the existence of ponpes and allows it to actively function in the neighbourhood. I explore the interactions between waria and neighbours, as well as the features of Kotagede, the waria identity, and how these relationships intersect. It is central to this paper to understand how waria challenge and negotiate the normative Islamic system in Kotagede, as well as how they mitigate the dehumanisation of the community in ponpes to occur in the neighbourhood.

Relevance to Development Studies

By analysing the identity of waria and their struggle to integrate in Kotagede, Yogyakarta, I wish to provide a new knowledge on the table; to understand non-conforming gender subject that comes from ‘The South’, starting from their perspective and stories as a means of challenging the dominant Western perspective on this matter. I engage with some critical concepts in development studies, such as queerness, neighbourliness, everyday resistance, politics of piety, in order to understand the hegemonic power system in the setting of conservative society and how waria takes agentive actions to problematize and challenge it. I also seek to take part in decolonizing the knowledge of gender and sexuality by writing this paper narratively and reflectively, as it aspires to avoid ‘othering the other’ that have happened in many academia papers.

I posit that the relevance of this paper to development studies should cain to provide place and space for the “other worlds” to exist, or in a simple but yet strong word: pluriverse, “a world where many worlds fit” (Escobar 2015: 20).

Keywords
Waria, Neighbourliness, Queerness, The Self, Otherness, Othering, Dehumanisation, Gender, Non-conformity, Islam, Javanese.
Chapter 1 The Beginning

This chapter marks the beginning of my journey; encompassing my first encounter with the waria community and residents in Kotagede, listening to stories from waria about the discrimination and stigmas they face, a glimpse into the story of Kotagede, and what makes this neighbourhood different from others. These stories are followed by a question that arose during my journey. A question that seeks to understand what makes ponpes able to operate in Kotagede.

Hi, ....

Will you be at ponpes tomorrow, Ma’am? I have arrived in Jogja. Looking forward to meet you.

Hi, Sattwika,

Yes of course you can come to our ponpes. Tomorrow we will also hold social services at Kepara-kan Lor. Please join and come to the ponpes at 1 PM so you can see and observe how we waria, interact with society.

Receiving this short message brought up warm feelings—knowing that you are welcomed in a new community with people you haven’t met or talked to before. I was overwhelmed with excitement, which suddenly turned into cracking nerve when she did not reply when I asked about the exact address. I was nervous that this was a refusal. But then I decided to wander alone, searching for the address based on initial information from a colleague who had written a report about ponpes.

I arrived in Kotagede, Yogyakarta on July 1st, 2019. It had been years since the last time I visited this city. I was still familiar with every road and corner of the city, which made it easy to find the Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah (roughly translated as the Islamic boarding school Al-Fatah, and further addressed as ponpes) though the location, if I may say, was quite secluded. I walked for 300 meters from the well-known upscale Omah Dhuwur restaurant and entered a narrow alley called Gang Soka. The neighbourhood was historic and stoic; remains of traditional joglo houses and traditional mosques stood strong. After walking down the alley for another 250 meters, I found a barbershop and turned left to find Ponpes waria.

The ponpes is located inside a small, narrow alley. People might not know that there is a big traditional Joglo house if they do not walk to the end of the alley. I knocked but no one answered. Inside I could hear someone singing an Indonesian pop song. I knocked again, but still no one answered. Hearing me shouting a bit but too afraid to enter, a kind neighbour helped me knock on one of the Ponpes rooms. It seemed like he had a close relationship with the people in the ponpes. He knew exactly who was singing. He called, “Simbah… Simbah,”

1 Joglo is a type of traditional house of Javanese people. The word Joglo refers to the roof of the house, which indicates the social status of the owners and is associated with Javanese aristocrats.
and suddenly the person he called Simbah stopped singing. Then Simbah came out from the room to meet me.

“Simbah is also santriwaria living in ponpes,” said the neighbour. She is one of the waria who has lived in Pondok Pesantren Al-Fatah for years. She has witnessed how Ponepes developed from just a house belonging to Ratri, the founder of ponpes, into an affirmative space for everyone, especially the waria, to learn and study Islam.

“It has never been an easy life for us as waria,” said Rena. “Ponpes enables us to pray just like the other Muslims.”

Waria, the Indonesian term derived from the word wanita (female) and pria (male) and roughly translated as male transvestite, is regarded as gender identity and expression outside the dominant gender binary ideology (Boellstroff 2004: 162). There has been a great deal of stigmatization imposed on the waria making their lives difficult. When I finally had a chance to meet and sit with the waria living in the ponpes, one of the waria shared her story about how she has faced discrimination and stigma from society. “For waria it is hard for us to find a job or work in formal institutions. Employers won’t let us dress as a woman because they only acknowledge our male bodies not our female souls. So, we have to dress like men.” Unfortunately, the discrimination that she has faced is not the only case to ever happen. The stigmas and judgments they face are layered and occur on a daily basis.

“They see us like walking monsters…”

A monster or an alien; that is how society mocks the waria community. I dedicate this section to the stories that I heard from the waria about the discrimination and stigmas they have been met with in society. Ayu, one of the waria, started telling me a story about the mocking she encountered while busking in a restaurant. She recalled that she wore a flowery dress and put on red lipstick to brighten her lips. “There was a mother and her child sat on a chair, staring at me. After I finished and walked around the restaurant, the mother said to me, ‘Hey do not get closer to us. You’re scaring my child!’ I was offended. We are not monsters. We are not aliens. We are humans,” Ayu said when I asked her about any discrimination and mocking that she has received as a waria.

This mocking and discrimination emerge as the result of the othering of the waria as they are non-conforming with the dominant gender binary ideology, which results in the subordination of the waria. Due to their sexuality and queer identity, the waria receive discrimination from society in many aspects: from everyday life to structural exclusion, including being stigmatized as ‘sinners and deviant.’ In several instances the waria face limited access (Koenig et.al 2010:3) to formal education, social allowances, opportunities to access the market, and formal jobs. Limited access to these services results in the entrapment of the waria in and endless cycle of poverty.

---

2 Simbah is a nickname for elder people.
3 Santri is Javanese term for student who learns Islam.
In her stories, Ayu highlighted how hard it is for her to access formal education due to her gender expression. Stigmatization of the *waria* has been strongly imposed by her classmates and teachers. “I was seen as deviant because I wanted to grow my hair and my nails. I tried to wear the female student uniform to school but my classmates bullied me and the school punished me. My teacher asked me, ‘What do you want? If you want to continue studying here, you should ‘man up’ and wear the male student uniform!’ I chose to keep wearing the female uniform and later I was expelled from school.”

In most of cases the waria are excluded from society and are labelled as deviant due to their gender identity. This process of othering performs as “social, linguistic, and psychological mechanism that distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’, the normal and the deviant” (Barter-Godfrey and Taket 2009: 166; Johnson et al. 2004; Grove and Zwi 2006). Othering follows the mechanism of ‘marking’ and ‘naming’ other, while defining the certain individual or group, resulting in social distance, marginalisation, and exclusion (Barter-Godfrey and Taket 2009: 166; Weis 1995). The process of othering entails key principles: naming, defining, marking, and this whole process results in the production of stigma. Being seen as deviant, the waria are often stigmatized, face verbal abuse, and are bullied by their classmates with demeaning jokes. Given the situation, many waria thus decide to drop out and find informal jobs to earn a livelihood and provide for themselves.

Furthermore, due to their gender expression and performativity that does not ‘fit’ society’s gender binary, most *waria* are excluded and hardly integrate with the broader society. They are often othered by society and even their family members. Many *waria* face violence and harassment, either from strangers, neighbours, and even officers. *Waria* who work as sex worker also receive physical abuse and harassment from their clients. These biases and barriers the waria face result in a web of poverty. Other scholars have also identified links between poverty and sexuality:

“As a result of being marginalized and socially excluded, and as a consequence of the stigma that is culturally imposed, LGBT persons are prevented from participating in society on equal terms, for example by having limited opportunities for earning a livelihood and providing for themselves” (Sida Action Plan 2007-2009: 2)

Given the fact that their identity is deemed as deviant and sinful, there has been a restriction to access public praying room for *waria*. In one discussion a *waria* shared her story about being kicked out of a public mosque while wearing a *mukena* (a Muslim garment worn by women) when she tried to pray. She said, “I was kicked out and not allowed to pray in that mosque. I was mad and asked them why I was not allowed to pray? I am also Muslim, and I want to pray to Allah too, just like you.”

This is a frustrating condition that disproportionately affects the waria community. Another woman shared her story about how she too was kicked from a public mosque nearby. “I swear I won’t dare to pray by myself in a public mosque. I have seen how *waria* are kicked out and I have experienced this myself. We are forced to get out and cannot step inside the mosque ever again.” In a society that is rooted in heteronormative gender ideology, the *waria* do not have a place or the space to perform and express their gender identity. This form of stigmatization dehumanizes *waria*. They are stripped of their rights and restricted from practicing their religion freely.
Due to the bullying and stigma received from society, some waria have decided to conceal their identity. Ayu used to keep her waria identity a secret due to her fear of being rejected and othered. “I keep my identity as waria to myself because I’m afraid and ashamed if people knew that I am a waria.” This speaks to how secrecy is used as a way to avoid being ‘marked’ as the Other. “Secrets are kept to protect self-identity and esteem out of fear of the consequences of revelation.” (Barter-Godfrey and Taket 2009: 168)

“It is different in Kotagede….”

Nevertheless, despite the stigma and discrimination they receive from the broader society, the waria community is still hopeful. As a response to the difficulties they have face in regard to practicing their religion, ponpes emerged and still exists as a safe haven for waria. After being displaced by their previous house in Notoyudan, ponpes opened their doors in at their new house in Kotagede owned by Ratri, a native waria who was born and raised in the neighbourhood.

Kotagede is one of the most traditional and conservative neighbourhood in Yogyakarta. Emerged initially as the capital of the Islamic-Javanese kingdom, Mataram, Kotagede preserves Islamic principles and integrates them with Muhammadiyah, one of the three big Islamic councils in Indonesia. It follows its discourse, including the dominant heteronormative gender discourse. However, despite it roots in heteronormative values, Kotagede still accepts the existence of ponpes and its efforts to provide an ‘inclusive’ environment for ponpes to operate in the neighbourhood.

While being othered and dehumanised in the broader society, the existence of ponpes seems to allow waria to integrate in Kotagede. The local residents see the waria and respect them as fellow human-beings. There are neighbourly acts carried out by the waria and neighbours among each other. For instance, waria and neighbours collectively celebrate Indonesia’s Independence Day in the neighbourhood and neighbours pay a visit when the waria community arranges a gathering at ponpes. These acts of neighbourliness seemingly create an ‘inclusive’ environment for ponpes to operate and integrate into the neighbourhood.

However, there are limits to this kindness in the community. While neighbours and waria seem to have integrated well, there are still spaces and times when the waria cannot interact with neighbours. This restriction revolves around religion discourse conflicting with waria’s gender identity. At a public mosque nearby for example, the waria are not allowed to pray inside the unless they are ‘cured’ and pray as a man by donning a sarong, the male prayer cloth that matches their biologically male body. Moreover, they celebrate big Islamic holidays at separate ceremonies, which was done recently at this year during Eid al-Adha. The waria celebrated and sacrificed goats in ponpes instead of celebrating with the neighbours in the public mosque nearby.

What do I wish to understand?

This research paper wishes to understand how Pondok Pesantren Khusus Waria Al-Fatah (ponpes) is able to operate in Kotagede, a neighbourhood rooted in traditional Javanese and
conservative Islamic values. Given the fact that the waria community has been stigmatized, displaced, dehumanised in the broader society, Kotagede seems to accept the presence of ponpes. Though the community is still being othered in the neighbourhood, warias are seen and respected as fellow human-beings by local residents despite conflicting gender discourses. It is central to this paper to understand how dehumanisation towards the waria community in ponpes is mitigated in Kotagede.

Moreover, considering the neighbourliness (limited) in their interactions, I also seek to comprehend how do the waria and residents navigate their relationships in order to integrate within society. I would also like to examine in what spaces, at what times, and what acts are performed by neighbours and the waria. By learning this we can begin to understand if there are any conditions and/or practices that limit or restrict interactions among the waria and neighbours.

In this paper, I invite you to delve into the waria and neighbours’ stories. Every chapter and subchapter will speak of its own story that comes from the waria community and fellow neighbours. In the introduction of the paper I presented my experiences from when I first arrived to Kotagede, my initial interaction with the waria and a neighbour that took me to ponpes, and how the othering, and the stigmas and dehumanizing behaviour that is imposed on the waria by society. In chapter 2 I elaborate the methodology and methods I made use of in generating the data in this paper, my position and reasons for why I chose to write my paper narratively.

In chapter 3 you will read the stories of the waria, how they define themselves, and what it means to be waria, all of which is entailed in the historiography of waria. In chapter 4 I share the history of ponpes and how it has evolved from year to year, how it dealt with a raid carried out by a Muslim hard-line group, and how it serves as a beacon of safety for connecting with God.

In chapter 5 I present the context of the neighbourhood Kotagede and how it integrates Islamic values into their rules and norms. In chapter 6 I begin with the story of everyday life in ponpes to provide a glimpse of their daily activities, which can be understood as a form of everyday resistance. This chapter will also further explain the sameness-otherness in their interactions, illustrating the politics of living together, the construction of gender, the categorical Self, and categorical Other. Lastly, I will discuss the intersectional aspects that mitigates dehumanisation in this setting.
Chapter 2 How do I generate knowledge?

This chapter is dedicated as a reflection and functions as an organizing principle; as my compass in this research. I contemplate how my positionality speaks and influences the knowledge produced in this paper.

At first, it all felt weird. A stranger like me, wearing a sweater and bucket hat, sitting in the corner of ponpes, waiting for Ratri to come out of her room. I was trying hard to look chill, although I can tell it did not work. My palms were sweating. I was so nervous to meet Ratri for the first time. While I was sitting and waiting, a woman approached me.

“Are you waiting for Ratri?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” I answered. She nodded, and then went back to her room. It was the end of our conversation. At that moment I was too nervous to ask her name. Being in a new setting has always been interesting but at the same time it feels gawky to me. There was an awkwardness between me and warias at first. But it only happened on the first day. Nevertheless, soon after I established myself at the ponpes, I began to take part in the ponpes’ and waria’s life to see what they cook and learn their recipes, to listen to their conversations, to laugh and make jokes, and to help them with their makeup or dresses. They no longer feel they have to wear makeup when I am around. They saw me constantly every day for over two weeks. They ceased to be curious and interested about who I am and what I am doing. They became so used to my presence they even began to ask where I was whenever I was not around. I was no longer seen as an intruder or as a disturbing element in their daily life.

In this setting I become aware of myself as a participating observer; “outsiders who participate in some aspects of life around them and record what they can” (Bernard 2011: 260). This method falls under the qualitative approach in which I make use of in this paper.

This research paper uses qualitative data and is informed by ethnographic principles and epistemologies that depart from the intersubjectivity of knowledge production; looking at people in their cultural setting, understanding their language, symbol, and interactions as well as the shared meanings that circulate and settle in their world. This is important as I aim to understand the dynamics of everyday interactions between the ponpes, the waria, and neighbours living in the area surrounding the ponpes. Using an ethnographic approach, I combine participant observations, which then evolved to be participating observer, and ethnographic interviewing to collect primary data. These two methods are useful and critical to understand the personal experience. This approach also serves as a mechanism for gaining and understanding richer and in-depth explanations of the topic, and also enables me to immerse myself in the setting be studied. Therefore, this research can provide a deep and reflective understanding and exploration of the situation (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1986).

This study weaves together stories coming from eight women: Ratri, the founder of ponpes, Lily, Rena, Ayu, the three waria living in ponpes, Deta, a waria who used to live in ponpes but moved to another city for work, Nono, Sri, and Ufi, three neighbours living around ponpes. My first contact was established with Ratri prior to my arrival in Yogyakarta and I met the rest when I arrived.
I used the participant observation (and observing participant) method, combined with ethnographic interviews and in-depth interviews to incorporate their stories and opinions. Before coming to the site, I established initial contact with Ratri, the founder and religious leader in the pesantren. We agreed to meet in Yogyakarta in July, and I spent a full month observing and taking part in the daily lives and interactions in the pesantren. By using participant observations, I found interactions and non-verbal gestures that strengthened the findings that I acquired during in-depth interviews.

During my involvement and observation on site, I also conducted ethnographic interviews to complete my data gathering. Ethnographic interviews are informal interviews conducted in a natural setting with results largely coming from participant observations (Allen 2018: 2). This type of interview happens between researchers and participants who already have established relationships with the observation and often spontaneously. Ethnographic interviews aim to generate knowledge from the participant in a very natural setting and in their own words. Ethnographic interviews can help understand and make sense of certain practices or rituals by asking the person who is currently engaged to explain the meanings behind actions, customs, symbols, words, practices, etc (Allen 2018: 3).

I choose ethnographic interviews because it is helpful for understanding their experiences, perceptions and emotions. Furthermore, considering my length of stay, I conducted participant observations to establish a relationship, hence I could conduct ethnographic interviews along the way to understand the interactions between the women and the neighbours, and to make sense of certain practices, such as religious practices (salat and Quran recitation), choice of dress, neighbours’ perception of ponpes, and how they see and understand varias themselves.

During my fieldwork and data gathering process, there were many unexpected interviews that happened. One day, I was starving after doing three hours of in-depth interviews with one of the waria in the ponpes. I walked through the alley and found there was one warong open quite late. I ordered one bowl of indomie. The man working there was very quiet and served it quickly. After a long silence he said to me, “It’s late for a tourist to be strolling around Kotagede. Night will fall soon.” As someone who easily engages in conversations with strangers, I replied, “I do not stroll much. I am just staying at the ponpes waria for a few hours. Have you been there?” That conversation was unexpectedly lively and continued. He told me about his perspective about these women and their beliefs, and what the neighbours think about the existence of the ponpes. Through this conversation, I started to understand the neighbour’s views about ponpes. I started to get a glimpse of their perception and whether they oppose or accept the waria presence in their neighbourhood. Through this conversation, I was able to listen to their authentic stories in the real setting.

Nevertheless, my time was limited as I only had a month to spend at the ponpes with the waria and neighbours. I understand it is not entirely effective to rely only on participant observations and ethnographic interviews. Thus, to have a complete and deeper understanding of their stories that I listened to through conversations, I also conducted in-depth interviews with the varias and neighbours. For every interview, Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah requires the researcher or visitors to provide a donation and/or souvenirs to the interviewees, valued at roughly IDR 50,000 (€ 3,5) per person. This form of ‘transactional’ interviewing, however, made me reflect on our (I and the varias) positionality and agency. It made me think how
knowledge is partial and accessible to those who have sufficient funds to pay for an interview. There was one day when I scheduled an interview with one woman who had been living in ponpes for the last four years. We agreed to meet at ponpes at 5PM. I was on my way, hopping on a Gojek when suddenly my phone rang. It was Ayu, one of my waria interlocutors. “Hi, Wika is it okay if you interview Deta instead? Riri unfortunately had to cancel the interview last minute. She has to go. Deta is also a waria and used to live in ponpes for 12 years. So, this is still relevant for you, isn’t it?” she asked. At that moment, I was surprised because this sudden change was unexpected. Nevertheless, I said, “okay, see you in a bit,” and rushed to ponpes. I had no other option. Later after a three-hour long interview, Ayu told me the real reason why Riri bailed on our meeting. “She had a meeting with a client who was paying her IDR 500,000,” she told me while showing me their chat. “IDR 50,000 from the interview means nothing compared to meeting my client who pays me IDR 500,000,” Riri said through chat with Ayu.

Through this experience, I reflected on how I and these women position each other and how our agency plays out in this relationship. In sharing their stories and knowledge the waria have a certain position and agency in regard to whom they want to share their stories and knowledge with.

How do I see myself and reflect on this study?

“Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with the usual assembly of feelings, failings and moods. All of these influences how we feel and understand what is going on. Our consciousness is always the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher.” (Stanley and Wise 1983: 157)

Departing from feminist research methodologies, I am always reminded to be aware of my positionality in every interaction during my observation and in my own writing. When presented the initial design of this research for the first time, I remembered putting down my intersecting identities; Catholic, Javanese and queer, as ethical challenges and biases that might influence the objectivity of my analysis. During my feedback session, my second reader immediately pointed out and asked, “Why would you put these as ethical challenges or biases? Isn’t this what Harding and Haraway mention as situated knowledge? At that moment, I delved into my own positionality. I reflected how my position as a Catholic, queer-bisexual would play out in my analyses. How these identities have become lenses I use to produce knowledge.

Situating knowledge is fundamental to queer research. This is important as the findings and results of this paper closely links to the researcher—me (Haraway 1998). As beautifully written by Donna Haraway (1998) and Sandra Harding (1991), knowledge is produced in its origins. It emerges from certain subjectivity, with its limit and partiality. Knowledge, thus, is partial and specific. This means I will not claim to solely find universality in my knowledge and within my findings and analyses. In this setting, I realise how my positionality as

---

4 Indonesian online motorbike-based ride-hailing.
researcher has certain power relations and gaps with the *waria* and neighbours I talk to. I would never be able to overcome these gaps between me and them. Situating knowledge also demands us to position carefully, reflect, and acknowledge the power relations in the process of knowledge production. As Haraway points out, “How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory power do we wish to cultivate besides vision?”

Reflecting on that, I understand how my positionality would influence the knowledge produced through the results in my research. As a researcher, I am (and should be) aware of my position when I write and express the results in this paper. “Translation is always interpretive, critical, and partial”

I took the above sentence from Donna Harraway (1988: 589), when I reflected on the ongoing conversations between me, the *waria*, and the neighbours. We mostly spoke and had conversations in Javanese. Some people who do not really speak this language might feel alienated as they do not understand what we are talking about. There was one day when foreign volunteers came to have discussion with Ratri. I was there to sit and listen to the discussion, but the volunteers couldn’t understand what the women were saying. “Can you help me translate?” asked Ratri. I nodded and said, “Yes of course, at your service.” Ratri began to speak in Javanese about the forced closure that happened in 2016. She said, “loro ati ngantih mendhem,” and I translated, “my heart hurts until it feels...” I was lost in the middle of my translation. I did not know the correct translation for *mendhem* in English. *Mendhem* in Javanese means drunk if translated literally into English. However, drunk is not the correct translation. *Mendhem* usually expresses a deep, hurt feeling that makes the person unable to process. Thus, I chose the word numb. I am aware that there is a different depth and nuance between ‘*mendhem*’ and ‘numb’, but that is the closest word in my interpretation. Through this conversation, I began to think how my position as Javanese plays out in this case. My situated knowledge lies in how I understand and make sense of the conversation with *waria* that mostly happened in Javanese. There are at least two translation process I had to go through: Javanese to Indonesian, and Indonesian to English. During this process, I recognized that I was in a position of privilege being able to understand the three languages; Javanese, Indonesian, and English. I am fortunate to be able choose which words match the closest meaning. If there are words that can’t be expressed in one language, then I choose another word in English that might have closer meaning to the one in Javanese. Thus, in my translation, I am aware how the knowledge production through translated results are based on my interpretation and partiality. There might be realities that I cannot represent in my translation. Thus, I am aware that my translation takes part on the partiality, specific, situated knowledge produced in this research.

**Why have I chosen to write it this way?**

My research paper is written in a personal, narrative style. It includes stories and excerpts of dialogue between me, the *waria*, and neighbours. This style of writing allows me to reflect deeply on my positionality and the experience of these women. It helps me to avoid othering the people I spoke with, to limit the gaps between myself as researcher and the *waria* and neighbours. To avoid ‘othering the other’ and to instead see them as partners and fellow human beings.
I am aware of the tendencies and risks in my process of the writing, especially the gaps in the social power between me as researcher, the *waría* community and the neighbours living around the *ponpes*.

Writing against Othering serves to be thoughtful of social injustices around us—to understand them in our hearts and minds and to make a commitment to the *waría* community and the neighbourhood. Through this writing, I make use of three modes proposed by Krumer-Nevo and Sidi (2012) that serve to resist Othering: 1) narrative, 2) dialog, 3) reflexivity. Undertaking narrative writing that includes dialogue and reflexivity as the compass of the research means to “display the goals and intentions of human actors; make individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; humanises time; allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions and to alter the directions of our lives” (Richardson 1990: 20). Through these modes, I wish to deliver the contexts of a story and point of views of my interlocutors, hence you, as the reader, receive intrapersonal reality and intersubjective context (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 2012: 301).
Chapter 3 Understanding Waria

“You asked me what it means to be a waria? Here, let me tell you something. Being a waria means being myself. Being what I truly am. I feel great being a waria. Also, it enables me to spread a good vibe around me. I feel that I am freed.” Kusuma, santriwaria in Kotagede

I open this chapter with a statement from Kusuma, one of the outspoken women that advocates for the rights of waria. Her statement opens the deeper, personal discussion about how they define the word waria themselves. This chapter weaves together their stories and defines waria; the definition of their true self.

When I first met Rena, I did not recognise her as a waria. She wore a shirt, short pants, flip-flops and her hair is cut short. She wore no makeup and looked traditionally masculine. After some days in ponpes, I had the chance to speak with Rena personally. I asked her one fundamental question with regards to her identity. “How do you define what it means to be a waria? How do you define yourself?” Rena answered, “Waria is not only about appearance. It is beyond that. Waria means you were born male. You have a biologically male body. You might also appear as a man. However, you never, ever live your body and appearance. You really know that deep down, despite how you look, you are a woman.”

Her answer resonates with what Ayu told me in another interview. She said, “waria is a woman soul born in a male body. I am waria. I have a woman soul; thus, I dress and wear makeup as woman. I do not like to wear men’s trousers or clothes. I am not interested to play with something boyish like cars. That is my inner need and I am happy about that because I am woman inside.”

Since she was 13 years old, Ayu found herself comfortable wearing women’s dresses and began to identify as a woman. At first, she felt reluctant to identify herself as waria. “Because I feel that I am woman, not waria. I feel ashamed if people know that I am waria. I know I am waria, but I feel that I am woman.” In our conversation Ayu separated waria and woman into two different categories, as waria is neither a ‘third gender’ nor ‘transvestite’. It acknowledges her biologically male body, while performing her woman identity.

Apart from the appearance, sexual orientation, and gender performativity, the meaning of waria also touches upon acknowledgement and self-acceptance. Someone is waria when she admits that she is waria. If not, she is just a cross-dresser. Ayu is firm on how she expresses and defines waria as part of self-acceptance as she described:

“Waria is also about self-acceptance. Although you dress up as a woman, if you do not accept or acknowledge yourself as a waria then you are just a cross-dresser. Instead, if you accept and acknowledge yourself as waria although you dress up like a man, then you are a waria.”

5 Quoted from interview, July 4 2019.
Adding to her own statement, Ayu also emphasised how people mistake waria and label them as homosexuals. This, Ayu said, is such a huge mistake. “Waria and homosexuals are different. Because warias is about the soul, not merely sexual orientation.” For Ayu, being waria should not be simplified to just her appearance or mislabelled as a transvestite. Waria rather means how she identifies herself as woman, while still maintaining her biological male body.

In the literature, warias mention jiwa perempuan (woman soul) as the main reason of their attitudes and performativity. Jiwa, or soul, is considered as a constitutive source of waria subjectivity. Jiwa perempuan is significant not only to constitute the subject, but also their attitude and behaviours (Boellstroff 2004; Davies 2010: 122). In one of our conversations, Rena told me, “As a waria, I have jiwa perempuan (a woman soul) inside my body. That is why, although I wear jeans and shirt, people will still know that I am waria because my gestures and behaviours are feminine.”

Historiography of Waria

The notion of waria has been thoroughly discussed by scholars (Boellstroff 2004; Blackwood 1998; Davies 2010). Waria, familiarly known as banci or bencong, is regarded as gender identity and expression ‘outside’ the dominant gender binary ideology. Although it is used to also refer to waria, the word banci is usually spoken derogatively; addressing men who have certain effeminate gestures and seem to not fit the typical-ideal dominant narrative of ‘masculinity.’ Tom Boellstroff (2004) argues that waria is construed as a “third gender,” which is deemed as overly used and poorly defined term. Therefore, it is “male femininity” rather than “third gender” as waria “operates within the orbit of male gendering” (Boellstroff 2004: 161). The existence of waria is not a new phenomenon in Indonesian history, as they are visible in daily life of society, especially in beauty and wellness business, entertainment since early 1800s.

From the beginning, warias do not appear to be limited to any one ethnic group or locality. Therefore, I stress the importance that the understanding of waria should not be located in the same position with “ethnolocalised professional homosexual and transvestite subject position” or ETP (Boellstroff 2001). This term refers to queer selves that perform traditional-spiritual rituals. This confusion arose as Indonesia has a complex gender landscape with various gender identities since pre-colonial period that is regarded as non-normative gender (Davies 2010: 2).

ETPs are constructed throughout Indonesia and have its own local term. Boellstroff (2002) mentioned kedi (appears in Javanese and Balinese), wandu (in Javanese language, but also identified as local term in Sulawesi), kawe-kawe (commonly used in Makassar and Bugis community), and calabai (derived from Buginese community and also common in Kalimantan) as non-conforming gender identities in Indonesia. However, despite its different origins and contextual histories entailed in the construction of these local terms, waria is linked and used as a label to unify these unique local terms. For instance, as one Bugis waria explained in Boellstroff’s paper the s/he is called a calabai by the family” based on their ethnicity. But if they were Makasarrese, s/he would be called kawe-kawe and it is the “same thing as calabai— or bencong, banci” as they are only terms (2002: 162). Couple of the well-known Indonesian ETP communities are bissu in southern Sulawesi and warok in Ponorogo, East Java. In this community, there are established homosexual relationships between the guru and their
understudies known as gemblak. In his analysis, ETPs puts homosexuality or transgenderism in their identity as secondary to the specialised-traditional ritual. They were not ‘born’ or ‘became’ them, but rather they learn to achieve such apprenticeship. Therefore, ETP subject position should not be located and confused with waria.

While ETP existence has been acknowledged for hundreds of years, there is only little historical records of warias in Indonesia. The existence of warias were first traced in the early 1800s and do not appear as limited to certain ethnicity and races. In the earlier times, waria’s identity is associated with lowbrow entertainment, sex work and minor trading (Boellstroff 2004: 162). In the 1830s, waria involved in on-stage entertainment, such as the dances of “Bantji Batavia”—which literally means Batavia transvestite) and Surabaya traditional dance called ludrug (Boellstroff 2004: 163). This association still goes on today, with being linked with beauty and wellness businesses. In relation to waria subject position, this identity can only be occupied by males as “all narratives of waria selfhood are driven by movement away from normative masculinity” (Boellstroff 2004: 163). Warias also believe they have had a soul of woman since birth. The term waria itself is a label dictated by the government during the New Order era, from 1978 (Boellstroff 2004: 162). Initially, this term originally appeared as wadam (wanita adam-female Adam) and was considered a nondescriptive term to refer to waria during the 1960s. Introduced by former activist mayor of Jakarta Ali Sadikin, wadam was linked to a greater social protection and visibility given to the waria at the time. However, the creation of wadam in the mid 1970s produced controversies. Some Muslim groups expressed disagreement and displeasure of the term Wadam as it incorporated the name of the prophet (Adam). Thus, the former Minister of Religion in the New Order era, Alamsyah, coined the term waria to change wadam. This term was agreed upon by former President Soeharto and officially published in the national newspaper Kompas throughout Indonesia (Budiman 1982: 17).

![Figure 1 Ratri and waria sitting on pendopo inside ponpes](image)

However, despite the long and complex history, the discourse and narrative evolved around waria and changed in the late 1950s and 1960s. As a newly independent nation ingraining its value from Islam, warias were discriminated against as they did not conform to the dominant gender binary and therefore became were pushed to the fringes of society. The mass violence
that happened around the birth of Soeharto’s New Order in early 1960s, though it did not appear to be directed to waria, led to the virtual marginalization from the public and marketplace. As the result of this marginalisation, the dominant discourse of waria falls into three categories of economic class: those who own salons, those who work in salons, or those who perform sex work and lowbrow jobs in entertainment.

In understanding the identity of waria, queer theories will be suitable to use as a critical lens. Having queer theory as the framework is done in an effort to understand the dynamic of waria’s gender and sexuality not as a static identity as well as their (body) performativity in the society, and how this identity evolves and reevaluates in Kotagede. Queer theory also offers queering as a potent tool and “as a way of countering hegemonic textual reading and cultural authority, and as a critique of what Warner (1999) calls ‘a regime of a normal’” (Taylor 2013). Queering seeks to challenge, deconstruct, problematise, and critique the hegemonic structure of power that has been deeply ingrained in the system. Furthermore, queer theory is arguing that identities are not fixed; instead, it is not stable deterministic regarding a person’s sex, gender and sexuality. It critically examines how power works in legitimizing institutionalizing—and at the same time stigmatizing—particular forms and expressions of gender and sexuality.

The term queer is used as an umbrella by and for persons who identify as gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, intersex, and also referred as the alternative to LGBTI labels (Gieseking 2008: 737). It had been previously used as a derogatory word for homosexuality, but the term queer was taken back by activists during the 1980s and 1990s and became the “umbrella term” for all non-heteronormative individuals to refer to and claim (Goldman 1996; Jagose 1996). This theory destabilises and “denaturalises gender (masculine/feminine) and biological sex (male/female), questioning the assumed connectivity between sex and gender, or the legitimacy of presumed scientific classification” (Callis 2009: 215). Based on this understanding, I use queer theory as an entry point to understand the notion of waria and the evolving dynamics around the term. I contend that queer theory as a body of work is not restricted to pondering and interpreting gender and sexual subjectivities. Rather, “it is a philosophical commitment to contesting the logics of normativity” (Rooke 2016: 29) as it has been associated with “explorations of difference and the contestation of rigid categories and normalising discourses and practices, speaking instead of the fluidity of spaces and identities in the process of always ‘becoming’” (Browne 2008, Haritaworn 2008 in Taylor 2016: 69).

The concept of queerness is useful in signalling disruption and can be employed as a “helpful analytical tool in the discussion of gender (Davies 2010: 14; Blackwood 2008; Boellstorff 2007a: 20-21). Thus, in this paper, using queerness and queer theory as a framework support the understanding of waria as a non-conforming entity, without putting it under Western labels or L G B T letter soup—which is strongly opposed by waria themselves—as queer is “not a concrete or bounded category” and “resists normalizing and privileging certain identity criteria and enforcing ridged identity categories” (Taylor 2013: 195). Queer becomes a resistant identity; a symbol of endeavours and tireless resistance towards the imbalance system of power.

Thus, in this paper, I seek to employ queerness in order to understand the interactions, relationships, symbols, and shared meanings amongst the waria and neighbours in Kotagede as it seeks to challenge the hegemonic structure and discourse. Given the fact that Kotagede is a neighbourhood that is deeply rooted in Islamic-Javanese values, I wish to make use of queer
theory, along with *queerness* as it concept, to understand how the *waria* in *ponpes* challenge and negotiate the normative Islamic system in the neighbourhood as well as resisting the religious discourse that seemingly discerns their identity as gender non-conforming subject. Furthermore, I find queer theory is useful to see how material inequality, such as class, and waria’s intersectional identities play on the dynamics of waria life in *ponpes* itself and mitigate the dehumanization to ensue in the setting of Kotagede.
Chapter 4 How *Ponpes* Comes into Reality

“Ponpes gives us hope and home. There is no judgment at all here. This is where we can be closer to Allah and learn how to be a better person everyday,” Rena, 2019.

This chapter tells the history of ponpes, from the beginning of its existence and how it continues to provide a safe space for waria to practice their religion today. This chapter provides the context of ponpes’ emergence and how it destabilises the term ‘pondok pesantren’ as it is traditionally occupied with binary gender ideology.

The ponpes in Kotagede was created by Ratri. Her name is well-known in Indonesian media, though I have never met her in person before arriving to Yogyakarta. After chatting with her for two months only through messenger, I finally met Ratri. It was very easy to recognise her. Her picture had been all over in Indonesian media after the forced closure carried out by a Muslim hard-line group in 2016. “I am very popular now,” she said with laughter. Ponpes, that now has been fully under her provision, was initially founded by her late friend Maryani in 2008, after Jogjakarta was struck by 5,9SR earthquake. During the catastrophe, there were approximately 5,700 casualties and thousands injured including waria. As a form of condolence and solidarity, Maryani gathered waria communities to pray and hold charity events. Moreover, with the help from Ratri and respected late Kyai Haji Hamrolie, Maryani managed to provide open space for waria to fulfil their spiritual needs and practice their religion.

“My body was a beacon, a safe space for us. It is home.”

*Ponpes* was initially run in Maryani’s rented house, located in Notoyudan, Yogyakarta. In 2014, Maryani passed away, thus Ratri decided to move Ponpes from Notoyudan to her house in Kotagede. Ponpes managed to gather around 40 waria to pray and practice reciting Quran. They adopted traditional concept of Islamic boarding school and create curriculum with courses to hold from Monday to Thursday. Not only for studying religion, the ponpes also provides social activities on the weekends, for instance dancing courses, makeup classes, or arisan (community gathering) which also involves neighbours and non-waria. This ponpes furthermore functions as a safe haven for hundreds of waria to practice Islam, despite their perceived identities as ‘deviant’ and ‘sinner’ in the eye of patriarchal-heteronormative society. As a male body with feminine traits, warias are regarded as sinner for not conforming to the gender binary and deemed not ‘eligible’ to practice or even study Islam. Therefore, the existence of ponpes has brought a light and home for waria, a place where they are not seen as deviant aliens; rather they are recognised and respected as human-beings and members of the community.

---

6 *Kyai* is a term for Javanese Islamic cleric on Islam.
Although initially formed to provide safe space for waria, Maryani and Ratri also opened this ponpes for non-waria Muslim who wants to join the courses and social activities. In the early days, late Kyai Haji Roemli helped teach the Quran recitation course and preached. “It has always been a place for every-single-one” Ratri said, no matter what your gender identity is. She always opens the ponpes’ door to welcome anyone who wants to join. The existence of ponpes is supported by many parties, including religious leaders and the Yogyakarta Palace through an interfaith discussion under the topic of “Intolerance Movement and Overcoming Efforts.” Furthermore, as stated in 1945 Constitution article 28A and 28I, Indonesian legal system ensures every right to live, right to freedom of mind, right to religion, and be recognized as human in the eye of law, and not to be persecuted on the basis of human rights,” complemented with Article 29 paragraph 1 and 2 in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (DUHAM), strengthen the existence of ponpes and waria in Yogyakarta.

However, despite the good intentions to provide safe space for everyone to pray and fulfil their spiritual needs, Indonesian laws, and human rights declaration that ensure the freedom of ponpes, there has been persecution carried out by a local hardline Muslim group Front Jihad Islam (FJI) in Yogyakarta.

During the persecution, FJI forced the closure of ponpes on the basis of hatred, accusation of Islam deception and blasphemy. “FJI comes from outside of Kotagede. Their bases are in another area. But they intimidated and threatened village officials by telling them that they

---

7 Quoted from interview with Ratri, July 2019.
8 Front Jihad Islam (FJI) is a local Muslim hard-line group founded in 2011. It seeks to uphold and establish Islamic canonic law Sharia in Indonesia, promotes kaffah totality in practicing Islam. To operate in Yogyakarta, FJI locates their bases at 43 Bibis Street, Padokan Lor Tirtomolo, Kasihan, and Bantul (Makin 2017: 13).
will come and raid again if ponpes still continues to operate,” said Ratri while reminiscing the shocking confrontation. FJI regarded waria as a mistake in Islam discourse as it only acknowledges the binary gender ideology. The contestation of the existence of transvestite in Yogyakarta still went on. Three big Islamic councils in Indonesia; the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), Nahdatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah have different takes but still similar points on the existence of waria. MUI points out two arguments based on the Quran: first, waria is however considered male as they have male bodies, and their identity should not be recognised. Second, any kind of behaviour ‘regarded’ as waria behavior is considered haram (illegal) and unlawful. These two points are contained in the fatwa, which is also supported by NU and Muhammadiyah, stating that “LGBT behavior and LGBT supporters were deviant and considered as a desecration of human honor” (Cakrawala 2018). Following this statement, NU pushed the government to take further concrete action in facilitating rehabilitation for waria (NU.or.id, 2016). In line with Nahdatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah also nods in agreement that transvestite or transgender behavior is contrary to kudrat (the nature of human being) and to the core value of Islam as religion. These arguments from three big Indonesian Muslim councils therefore stand as justification for hardline Muslim groups to force the closure and removal of ponpes waria. The persecution of the ponpes stopped its operation for four months until the situation became calmer. This not only resulted in the ponpes’ dormancy, but the raid carried out by FJI raised insecurities among Kotagede residents about the existence of ponpes.

Courses were stopped, social and social activities were cancelled. However, this persecution did not stop Ratri from continuing to open Ponpes and protecting waria communities. Until today, ponpes has been acknowledged as a beacon for waria to find enlightenment upon their practice and study Islam. Ratri’s bravery to protect ponpes and deal with Muslim hardliners resulted in her receiving the 2019 Front Line Defenders Award, making her brave actions and the existence of ponpes become more well-known.

**Destabilizing Word ‘Pesantren in the Dominant Narrative**

In one of my visits, I was curious and asked Ratri why she chose the word pesantren to name her boarding school, as pondok pesantren (ponpes) traditionally emerged as a binary space—only for male students or female students. Pesantren also obliges student to stay in the boarding house, while ponpes waria does not do the same; it allows waria to come and go as much as they like, although there are currently three waria staying at ponpes with Ratri. For Ratri, ponpes is the only term closest to her aim and activities. She said,

> “Back in 2016, when FJI came and protested, they really focused on our name: pondok pesantren khusus waria (ponpes only for waria). They wanted us to change our name into ‘Quran recital class’ or ‘Moslem waria community’ whatever. But I said, it is up to me. I can name this community anything I want. And I choose ‘pondok pesantren’ or ‘ponpes’ as its meaning is the closest name to what we are doing here. We want to study and practice Islam. We have classes, library, praying room, also rooms for waria who want to stay here. It is similar with the so-called-traditional ponpes. Thus, I choose to use the word ponpes to name our community.”

Ponpes is formed from two words: pondok and pesantren. Pesantren is one of the key institutions that plays important role in integrating Islamic values within society and states imposed in the laws and norm in Indonesia. Throughout its history, pesantren has played an
important role in the progression of Indonesian traditional Islam (Dhofier 1999; van Bruinessen 1995) and how kyai (a person assigned as the religious leader) holds the role as ‘cultural broker’ bridging the cultural values—in this case is Javanese—and Islamic values (Geertz 1960). Traditionally, pesantren is called pondok which means bamboo hut. In the past, pesantren usually used bamboos to build the classrooms and dormitories where the students live. While the word pesantren derives from the word santri (students), added with prefix pe and suffix an, thus creates the meaning: ‘the place of the santri’ (Dhofier 1980: 4). However, pesantren logics are based on a biological determinism that only recognizes male or female genders. This concern does not provide space for people who transgress such norms like the waria. Waria is the Indonesian term for transvestite derived from the word wanita (female) and pria (male). Three of the biggest Indonesian Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, MUI (Indonesian Ulama Council), and Muhammadiyah classify waria as ‘deviant’ from the hegemonic, heteronormative sexuality discourse that led to the exclusion and lack attention from the government to provide ‘secured’ space for waria to fulfil their spiritual needs. Therefore, the existence of Pesantren waria Al-Fatah fills the dire gap for the practice and study of Indonesian Muslim as it deconstructs the traditional concept and perception of pesantren that can only be occupied by binary gender conforming students (boys and girls; man and woman).

This conversation makes me reflect on how ponpes destabilises the narrative in the society about “the exclusivity of ‘conventional’ pesantren in terms of identity and gender (that is boy, girl, man, woman)” (Safitri 2011: 96). It is nearly impossible for conventional pesantren to spare any space for non-conforming gender identity to study and reside. Therefore, the existence of ponpes waria can be seen as an attempt to destabilise the term pesantren itself; from an exclusive term for binary gender, to an inclusive term that includes santri waria as non-conforming sexual and gender identity.

This effort of destabilising the term ponpes is in accordance with queering as it challenges the dominant narrative of pesantren by destabilising the meaning of pesantren. Waria, through the existence of ponpes, challenges the hegemonic system of power that transpires within society, especially in the Islamic neighbourhood of Kotagede where they currently reside. Waria challenges the dominant narrative of pesantren that emerges from a binary ideology by using the term to identify their gender non-conforming subjectivity; an entity that is considered deviant and abnormal.
Chapter 5 Narrative of Kotagede

“It is one of the most conservative neighbourhoods in Yogyakarta.” - Ratri.

This chapter describes the context of Kotagede, the neighbourhood where ponpes operates, and how it incorporates Islamic values in the norms upheld in the neighbourhood. Kotagede is deemed as one of the most conservative neighbourhoods in Yogyakarta. Here, I explore the dominant religion ideology in the body of Muhammadiyah, one of the biggest Islamic organisations in Indonesia and how it became integrated in Kotagede.

Kotagede: A Home Within a Home

When I first came to Kotagede, there was a feeling of friendliness and hominess in this area. Everyone smiled as they passed by one another though they were total strangers. Everyone knows everyone living in the neighbourhood. I discovered this certain level of neighbourliness when I once got lost in finding ponpes and someone approached me and asked, “Who are you looking for?”

“I am trying to find Ratri’s house,” I answered.

“Oh, just go to this direction,” he said. After carefully making notes of his instruction on how to find ponpes’ location, I said thank you and asked how he knows about Ratri’s address although he lives a bit further from the area. “Everyone knows everyone here,” he said. “It is a small kampong.”

Kotagede adopted the kampong, a ‘format’ of neighbourhood that brings together a concept of ‘village’ and communities. The sense of community ties neighbours as they live and share their space together in the neighbourhood. As argued by Sullivan, “Kampung community is about neighbourhood and there are strong pressures on kampong people to be good neighbours. Good neighbourship or ‘neighbourliness’ is quite precisely defined in kampong and powerful sanctions function to make community members behave in conformity with the conventions” (1992: p. 71). To achieve communal harmony amongst the neighbourhood, kampong holds strong on the word rukun, which is understood as “a situation in which people live together peacefully and based on compatibly” (Sullivan 1992: 106; Murray 1991).

The Integration of Muhammadiyah in Kotagede neighbourhood

Kotagede is one of the historical neighbourhoods situated in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Deeply rooted in Islamic values, this neighbourhood was initially built as the capital of Islamic Kingdom in Java, Mataram Kingdom. Therefore, since the very beginning of its emergence, Kotagede has had Islam in their ‘blood’ and system.

At the first day of my visit, I got a chance to roam around Gang Soka in Kotagede. There are remains of a palace, traditional mosques and houses. As part of the kingdom, the
architecture of Kotagede is comprised of a Palace, Square, Mosques and Markets that function as public areas where residents usually meet and interact. One of the remnants from this period is a traditional family mosque called Langgar Dhuwur. Langgar Dhuwur is a family prayer house built in the attic of traditional houses in Kotagede. It is constructed with wooden walls and columns. Presently, only two langgar dhuwur remains in Kotagede and both are privately owned. The presence of the well-preserved Langgar Dhuwur in the area marks the strong Islamic values rooted in Kotagede society.

The coexistence of Islamic and Javanese traditions was deemed as crucial elements in shaping the society in socially, culturally, and economically (Mook 1958). The Islamic values that later play an important role in the Kotagede society comes from Muhammadiyah, one of the oldest Islamic organisations formed in 1912. Having Islamic values ingrained in the society, Kotagede preserves and follows Muhammadiyah core values in governing society. There are strong perceptions that Kotagede and Muhammadiyah are inseparable, in which Muhammadiyah became part of the local identity. The integration of Muhammadiyah in Kotagede also contributed to the advancement of the local economy. Many local silver entrepreneurs and traders in Kotagede were members of Muhammadiyah, and this membership elevated the production of silver goods until they reached a significant number, resulting in economic prosperity for the local Kotagede community (Sulistiyanto 2006: 256).

**Figure 3 Langgar Dhuwur in Kotagede, one of the remainings from Mataram palace standing still in the neighbourhood.**

In the early 1970s, Japanese scholar Mitsuo Nakamura studied the emergence and role of Muhammadiyah in Kotagede. In his study, he suggested that Islam and Javanese traditions are accepted as inseparable identity and way of living by the local people. Muhammadiyah was founded by Haji Ahmad Dahlan in early 20th century. It holds to “the mission of amar ma'aruf nabi mungkar (right relationship with fellow human being) and ensures that Islam (and Muhammadiyah) will bring rahmatan lil'alamin (peace in the world)” (Sulistiyanto 2006: 258; Nakamura 1983: 48).

The integration of Muhammadiyah in Kotagede started in 1923, established by Haji Masyhudi, who had the mission to provide the needs of local people through religious and
social institutions (Nakamura 1983: 70). In Kotagede, neighbours know and support each other through cultural and religious activities such as *arisan, pengajian, paguyuban,* and *selametan*. Through these activities, local residents can show their willingness to accept and understand different beliefs and traditions. This neighbourhood upholds Javanese philosophy which upholds the value of tolerance and enables people with diverse beliefs and traditions to reside in Kotagede. As a Javanese society that is famous for being tolerant, Kotagede supports the basic Javanese principle of *tepa slira* which means to walk in someone else’s shoes so as to comprehend their situation and the reasons behind their different beliefs and deeds (Hardjowirogo in Soehadha 2008:22). This principle speaks about empathy and understanding, and it is informed through their traditions and activities. Based on this context, the integration of Muhammadiyah as an Islamic organisation with Javanese core values, allowed for the balancing of each contrasting the norms and principles that govern the denizens.

I identified several aspects that contribute to the life of Kotagede: *kampung* as a format of the neighbourhood, *rukun* as the fundamental value to create harmony in the community, the coexistence of Javanese-Islamic culture and traditions in the history, the integration of Muhammadiyah, and *tepa slira*, a Javanese principle that symbolises empathy. The above-mentioned aspects are important and interconnected in the life of Kotagede, as well as how they play important roles in providing a space for *ponpes* and *waria* to exist in the neighbourhood. Thus, by considering these features, we can further understand what creates Kotagede as a more inclusive neighbourhood for *waria* to navigate and operate *ponpes* in the area.

---

9 *Arisan* is a meeting where people can gather and discuss on local issues in their area. Residents usually use this platform to update each other. *Pengajian* is a Koran recital class. *Paguyuban* is local community set up by residents. *Selametan* is a forum where residents usually celebrate and thank each other for important occasions, such as giving birth, birthday, marriage, or commemoration of late family members.
Chapter 6 “I am Waria, I am Moslem. I am human, too”

“We continue our activities because the right to practice your religion is one of the fundamental human rights. Fundamentalist group cannot stop our need to connect to God.” - Ratri, 2019.

This part is dedicated to the stories I have heard and that were shared with me. Stories about life; how they live their life every day, and what they have witnessed and experienced as warias living in the neighbourhood.

Everyday life in Ponpes

I rarely saw the ponpes quiet or empty. You will see people gathering almost every day; sometimes it is just some waria paying a visit and having chitchats, and on another day the terrace would be full of waria and neighbours celebrating something—might be someone’s birthday or death, or having discussion with (I)NGOs and local partners. Sometimes, Ratri just throws a partylike when she set up syukuran\[^{10}\] to celebrate her award-winning achievement from a human right NGO. The ponpes was full of people; waria, neighbours, journalists and curious neighbours. The quietest day in ponpes was when everyone went to the beach for an outing. On the next day, Ratri already had another discussion with a local partner to discuss about waria and HIV/AIDS and the ponpes was full again.

Only Ratri, Ayu, Rena and Riri live in the ponpe, although Riri sometimes commutes and stays at her home nearby with her mother and brother. Other waria, like Lily and Deta, visit ponpes quite regularly depending on the activities that they have together. Lily, as she focuses on waria rights advocacy, comes to ponpes when there is a discussion happening between ponpes, NGOs, and local partners, while Deta visits ponpes when the community has any art activities and she helps with the dresses and make-ups.

Usually, ponpes gets crowded during the evenings. Warias gather to have dinner together, update each other on their lives, and just chitchat. Sometimes, youngsters in the neighbourhood will come to ponpes in the evenings just to sit and hang around with Ayu, Riri, Rena, and Ratri. That is usually how the weekdays go.

On the weekend, waria will gather in the late afternoon to have regular meetings before starting the Sunday school and recitation session. Usually 15-30 waria come and help the preparation, such as cooking dinner, tidying up the room and terrace, or buying snacks and beverages. Recitation session starts at 4 PM and the Waria gather in the terrace with their sarong or mukena, whichever is more comfortable, and get ready with their Quran in hand. After the session finishes, waria will hear a sermon from Ustaz\[^{11}\] Arief, followed by discussion evolving around Islam and humanity. In the discussion, waria are free to throw questions, especially with regards to Quran passages and how it acknowledges non-conforming gender subjects.

---

\[^{10}\] A celebration for any special occasion, such as birthdays, marriages, or achievement.

\[^{11}\] An honorific title for man and is used in various Islamic languages of the Muslim world. This title refers to any teacher or expert.
Through their everyday life and activities, the existence of ponpes thus supports the idea of ‘everyday’ resistance (Scott 1985) against the hegemonic ‘Islamic’ discourse that does not conform waria identity into the dominant binary society. Everyday resistance brings up the notion of quiet, dispersed resistance; covers a different kind of resistance that is not massive, dramatic, ‘formally’ organised and explicit (Scott 1985). Instead, everyday resistance is seemingly invisible, and it comes in a form of common behaviour of subordinated group.

There are several dimensions within everyday resistance. One crucial element to be taken into account is spatialization of everyday resistance. Space, as conceptualized by Chin and Mittleman (1997), is not original. Claimed as one of the most conservative areas in Yogjakarta, Kotagede serves as a site of resistance (Chin and Mittleman 1997). In this context, sites are “social spaces; where social life is structured in a place-specific way...politically-legally, socio-culturally and socio-economically” (Vinthagen and Johanssen 2014: 9).

Kotagede upholds Islamic values as their main norms in ruling the society. There are public mosques and traditional mushola serve their function as a space to practice religion for Muslim residents. As it is designated as public, the mosque should be accessible to everyone. However, due to their sexuality and gender identity, warias are banned from entering the mosque unless they wear male sarongs. With the dominant binary narrative seeing them as deviant, waria are deprived from accessing the public mosque. Reflecting from Foucault, “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1980: 252). Space is political and ideological which implies that “certain social groups have a higher degree of access to or power over space, while others have more limited access to space.” In the context of public mosque in Kotagede, there is an exercise of power where waria are put in subordinate positions; they cannot access the public space and are unable to practice their religion. Given the fact that their practices are restricted, ponpes emerges and performs as the site where the resistance starts, and it is crucial that resistance is “always situated somewhere and in a particular location” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2014: 9).

Through their activities, waria and ponpes resist the dominant gender binary ideology that has been deeply rooted in the society. Having provided a safe space to study Islam and practice salat, ponpes resists the idea of a gender binary constructed in heteronormative society and deconstructed in a ‘conventional’ ponpes (Safitri 2011). Their everyday resistance comes in the form of regular activities, such as Quran recitation course every Sunday afternoon. Throughout the session, ustad will guide the conversation and go into specific Quran verses that refer to gender and sexuality. In one of the discussions, ustad and waria talked about Islamic poet Abu Nuwas, his conception of paradise, and wildan (boys of paradise). In his preach, ustad mentioned how Abu Nawas was well-known of his verses about same-sex desire. Ratri, looking curious, innocently asked ustad, “if it was ever mentioned in Quran, why is same-sex desire condemned, then?” This discussion facilitated the space for waria and ustad to openly discuss critically and think about the discourse of sexuality and ask why queer identity is deemed ‘abnormal’ in the Islamic discourse. Therefore, this discussion emerges as a form of their everyday resistance while the heteronormative society acts as the superior and imposes  

12 Ritual prayer of Muslims practiced five times per day. 
13 Arabic word means ‘male teacher’.
their values. Warias create their discursive space to openly speak about their sexuality through pengajian.

On a personal level, Ratri performs her everyday resistance through her daily appearance wearing a hijab\(^{14}\). Every single day, Ratri wears her hijab proudly. There is no day that passes where Ratri is seen without her hijab in public. Ratri’s decision to wear her hijab is deemed as the everyday resistance; how body as “a space of power and everyday resistance.” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2014: 9) “I am woman—socially declared,” said Ratri. Within the dominant Islam discourse, the hijab symbolizes a decent, good Muslim woman. Warias in the eye have problematized and challenged the binary power of system in the society. And given the fact how hijab has been a symbol of good Muslim woman, Ratri’s performativity of wearing hijab is a form of everyday resistance as it illustrates how Ratri as non-conforming gender subject wears hijab, as her identity and challenge the meaning.

“We can’t agree with you, but we respect you as fellow human”

I still remember vividly the first day I arrived in Yogyakarta, Ratri invited me to help her with bakti social, a collaborative event at ponpes with Persatuan Keluarga Berencana Indonesia (PKBI; The Indonesian Plan Parenthood Association or IPPA) and The Asia Foundation. During the social event, Ratri and other warias helped each other to distribute packages of food and beverages to local residents. A representative came forward to the stage and delivered a thank you speech in regard to the event being held by the warias.

People sat on their plastic chairs. Some of them looked busy preparing the gifts and packages, while others casually walked from the back to the front of the stage. I was standing in the back when something suddenly caught my eye, the residents sat at the front or on their house’s terrace, while waria sat in a different cluster with their fellow waria. I also encountered a similar situation when Ratri held a celebration for her award from Front Line Defender. Neighbours sitting in groups with other neighbours, while warias sat in another area of ponpes, also in a group. Though they know each other as they are neighbours, they seemed reluctant to sit together.

During the celebration, I chose to sit near an elder neighbour. She recognised me helping Ratri preparing the celebration. She came to me and ask, “Do you know if ponpes has the permit to operate here? Because it is important to mitigate any forced closure being carried out again by the hard-line group if they know that ponpes still operates here.”

During my stay at ponpes, I interacted with some neighbours living nearby. There were three neighbours I had close interactions with: Ufi, Sri, and Nono. Three of them have been living in Kotagede for years and have seen its transformation from a quiet neighbourhood to a vibrant area where curious tourists visit. They have witnessed ponpe’s move to Ratri’s home in 2014, the protest and forced closure carried out by FJI in 2016, and how it regained its agency and became active again.

---

\(^{14}\) A head cover worn in public by some Muslim women. It also functions as religious code in Islam.
Nono lives 300 meters from ponpes. In 2016, when the Moslem hard-line group protested and forced the closure of ponpes, Nono helped take role as kampung security. “I remember at that moment when FJI came and boycotted ponpes; I was there and I took the role of security guard during the raid,” Nono said to me in one late afternoon. “They were told to shut down to avoid another raid because women should be women and men should be men. There is no such thing as ‘in between’ like waria. However, they decided to continue despite our reminders to keep it on the down low. Well, let Ratri be the one who takes any responsibility.”

Nono’s response illustrates how he aims to position himself as a good neighbor by protecting members of his community from an aggressive raid, but at the same time, the waria are still positioned as the Other. In this setting, they might seem to integrate, for instance through gotong-royong response they made during the raid, to gather and protect each other, but the othering still occurred in a sense that Nono sees waria as the community that falls outside of the dominant heteronormative gender category.

Similar impressions were also shown when I asked Ufi, the waroeng owner, whether he knows and interacts with the waria living or visits ponpes and joins in on the pengajian every Sunday. He answered, “I often see them walking around my waroeng. I know some of them, I have their WhatsApp. Sometimes they buy instant noodles here. But that is all. I never come and join their events or Sunday school. We have our own in the mosque nearby.” A similar statement was also made by Sri, a neighbour whose house is right beside ponpes. She has known Ratri since the 1980s. Sri and Ratri have a close relationship as they always help each other when there are ceremonies or parties in their house. However, Sri never joins pengajian with waria. She said, “But we can’t agree with them it is just how they are.”

This ‘sameness-otherness’ situation continues until the celebration of Eid al-Adha in mid-August. I was sitting with Ratri and asked, “Are we going to have a celebration for Eid al-Adha with the neighbours?” and Ratri answered, “We are going to have our own celebration at ponpes.” Usually Eid al-Adha is celebrated by sacrificing a goat, which is called the qurbani.
and is distributed to family, friends, and the poor. This year, *ponpes* sacrificed three goats for Eid al-Adha. Two of them were donations from Queen Ratu Hemas and Nahdlatul Ulama, the traditional Sunni Islam organisations in Indonesia. “After that, we will distribute the meat to neighbours and fellow *waría,*” Ratri added.

However, despite being othered, Sri never sees *waría* as inhumane. Though she does not agree, Sri respects the *waría* and sees them as her fellow human being. “I do not agree but we respect them as humans—as God’s fellow creations.”

This interaction and perception is well-discussed within the concept of neighbourliness, that is understood as the act of friendliness and openness towards people living in the neighbourhood in relation to politics of living together. The idea of politics of living together is to investigate differences and to bring into relief the shifting intersections of dominant imagination of class, ethnicity or ‘race’, and religion or the secular,” (Vollebergh 2016b: 18). Politics of living together aims to understand what happens “*in between* denizens-perception, translations, practices and feelings-when these mutual everyday engagements have become the object of a political project.” (Ibid: 19) In the politics of living together, discourse of self/othering is also scrutinized. Vollebergh, in her book “Strange Neighbour: Politic of Living”, within the context of neighbourhoods in Belgium, highlights the process of identification of self/(cultural) other. Othering has become “a new construction of exclusion” in late 20th century Western Europe (Stolcke 1995:4).

The notion of politics of living together problematises two kind of relationships: “their perception of one another as ‘strangers’ in the context of neighbourhood public space) and their interaction as ‘neighbour’ “(Vollebergh 2016b: 39). This notion brings attentions to a figure of The Neighbour that relates to two fundamental concepts: the Self and the ‘strange’ Other. In the construction of Self/Other, there has been a binary logic that Self, as the ‘us=good=correct’, and the Other as ‘them=bad=wrong’.

In understanding the ‘limited’ neighbourliness, the sameness and otherness, and the Othering in some respects occurring between *waría* and neighbours, I follow the logic from Anick Vollebergh:

“The figure of the Neighbour is characterised by the fact that, as a near Other, s/he creates two opposed movements and structures of feeling simultaneously. The Neighbour’s embodied Otherness constitutes an ethical call for a complete rapprochement dissolving the boundary between Self and Other. On the other hand, his/her near Otherness also forms a constantly irritating presence that haunts the apparent similarity and closeness and therewith the possibility of truly knowing any Other. Thus, the neighbourly relation in its abstract form is structured upon a paradox, its fundamental Otherness being both opening and limiting, evoking both desire and frustration.” (Vollebergh 2016: 137)

In the religious discourse, gender nonconforming subject is imagined as the strange—the Other to the religion. There is strangeness in the dominant gaze towards the Other. By the virtue of the gender Otherness, the *waría*, is perceived as the alienating threat that might erode their belief and Islamic values integrated in society. *Waría* is imagined as the strange gendered ‘Other’ as it does not conform to the dominant gender discourse in their religion.
In this setting, there is Othering process occurring towards waria community in ponpes. In the interview excerpts with Nono, Ufi, and Sri, all three of them perceive waria in ponpes as their Other (gender) neighbours. However, despite the Otherness in the relationships and interactions, ponpes still operates actively in Kotagede. In contrast to the situation in the broader society where waria is dehumanised in many aspects, waria and neighbours see each other respectfully as fellow human being.

“What makes it work here?”

Having heard stories from neighbours and waria about the feeling of sameness and otherness in their interaction, I find there are several aspects at play in the mitigation of othering and the relationships between waria and neighbours, such as nativeness, strong networks with local partners and NGO, class-education, and ‘the invisible’ support from The Yogyakarta Sultanate. The ponpes seems to navigate their relationships with neighbours, strengthen their position in the neighbourhood, and are hence are able to operate in this setting.

‘She is a local. A pribumi’: Nativeness in Kotagede

In the middle of our conversation, I asked Ratri, “There was once an attempt to shut ponpes down. Some residents are aware of this, and so are you. There were also disagreements arose when you decided to continue ponpes and you kept on going anyway. What makes you stay here? What enables ponpes to operate here?” She nodded and simply said, “because I was born and raised here. This is my house. My home.”

Ratri was born and raised in Kotagede. The neighbours know her as a ‘pribumi’, a term to address a local resident. She was born in a middle-upper class society; her late father was a prominent silver-crafting businessman. In this setting, Ratri used to be a little child who discovered the ‘woman’ soul inside her ‘male’ body. Since she was in junior high school, Ratri learned how to do make-up and even wore make-up to school. For Ratri, Kotagede has always been her forever ‘motherland’; a place where she grows and explores herself. Ratri said since the beginning of her story of being a waria, her neighbours know and acknowledge her identity. She said no one has a problem with her putting on makeup, dressing up as woman, and being a waria. “I’ve been putting on makeup since I was in the 7th grade. I wore dress and danced as a woman. In the 9th grade I represented my neighbourhood to compete in a dangdut15 competition, also wearing a woman’s dress. I have been this way since I was a kid and no one saw it as a problem at that time,” she explained.

In regard to her identity as waria, she is accepted in the neighbourhood because the neighbours know she was born and raised there. “I am the only waria in Kotagede, and everyone here knows me. They know who I am. They accept me here, because I was born and raised here.”

The same response and ‘reason of acceptance’ also came from the neighbours living around ponpes. Ufi, the first neighbour I talked to has been living in Kotagede since the 1980s, owning

---

15 Dangdut is Indonesian music genre, mixture of Malayan and Arabic music. This genre is sometimes associated with middle-lower class.
the warong16 50 meters away from ponpes. The presence of Ratri as a local has made warias a familiar presence in Kotagede. Ufi said, he often sees waria walking around the neighbourhood, especially during weekends when ponpes open Sunday school and Quran recitation courses. I first asked him what makes ponpes keep existing in their area even after the forced closure in 2016. He answered, “Because Ratri is a local. She’s is pribumi. She’s been here before she became a waria and that is (ponpes) also her house.”

A similar answer was also given by Nono, Ratri’s childhood friend. He’s known Ratri since she was in junior high school and they have been friends ever since. When FJI came to carry out the forced closure of ponpes, Nono took position as security guard and helped hold back the raging FJI mass. For him, the presence of ponpes does not bother neighbours. They know it exists in their area. However, Nono said, “Ratri lives here. She is a local and her house is here,”

Ratri’s identity as a pribumi, born and raised in Kotagede neighbourhood, therefore, helps preserve the existence of ponpes in Kotagede. Although Ratri as waria is seen as the ‘Other’ in the neighbourhood, her pribumi identity that indicates her nativeness helps mitigate and resist dehumanisation that occurred in the public realm outside Kotagede. While Ratri is seen as the ‘gender other’, her nativeness as Kotagede resident reverse her identity into the ‘Self’, fellow native born and raised in the same area. Nevertheless, not only her life history of being born and raise in Kotagede, Ratri’s nativeness is also extended to her ownership of the house that now she uses for ponpes. Neighbours allow Ratri and other waria to access and operate the ponpes, given the fact that ponpes is her house; it belongs to her.

Through the notion of politics of living together, it unravels how the neighbours see and live together with the waria as the other. In the above interview excerpts from Nono and Ufi, both discuss how they see waria as the gender categorical Other that conflicts with their belief as the Self. However, the Other identity is negotiated through Ratri’s status as native. Her nativeness becomes a crucial element in dissolving the Otherness in her relationship and interactions.

**Stories of Sarong and Hijab17**

On the weekends during my days in Kotagede, I got a chance to join their Sunday school at ponpes. Warias came and gathered on the front porch. The class usually lasted until 6PM and was followed by Maghrib prayer, a moment when they perform salat together. It is an obligation to perform salat. Moslem woman are required to wear mukena and Moslem men are required to wear the sarong. In ponpes, waria have the option to choose whether they are more comfortable to wear mukena or sarong. Before salat started, I asked Nana what she usually wears. “I usually wear a sarong as it feels more comfortable to me. I was born as a male, so when I pray, I should wear something that matches the body I was born in because it is about Allah and religion. I should not take it for granted or not be serious about it,” she said.

---

16 Indonesian word for small food stall.
17 This chapter is developed based on my previous essay, “Sexuality of Indonesian Transvestite: Waria”, submitted for Gender and Sexuality as ‘Lens’ to Engage with Development Policy and Practice course on July 14 2019.
In contrast, Ratri and Ayu choose to wear mukena while doing *salat*. Ratri said, “I feel more comfortable wearing a *mukena* because I am a woman and Islam obligates women to wear a *hijab*. Thus, I wear it and it suits me well.”

Through this conversation, I began to reflect on Saba Mahmood’s politics of piety. This concept was introduced in her study of the women’s piety movement in Egypt. In her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject* (2005), Mahmood sees how the movement has challenged the established power structure and also questions the concept of freedom. Women in Egypt started the movement by entering mosque and doing *da’wa* amongst women. The movement was done also by entering and occupying the mosque that is deemed as a space for men based on the interpretation of the text. It is a form of women’s submission to religious disciplinary standards in order to construct a desirable Muslim piety. In the eye of Westerners, this form of submission is not seen as liberating. However, Mahmood suggests that this submission to the normative system is a form of women’s agency. The agency is not directly concerned with discovering its genuine wants or emotion, but rather with seeking perfection both mentally and emotionally in its subjectivity with respect to the pious selves that the will of God desires. Through this case, the notion of freedom should be considered that “in a context where the distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition of achieving the subjects’ potentiality” (Mahmood 2001: 31). Furthermore, Mahmood, also offers the understanding of agency “not as synonym of resistance to relation of domination, but as capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create.” (2001: 203)

In a few words, politics of piety vis-à-vis agency, as argued by Saba Mahmood, speaks to how the act of submitting to the authority and normative system practiced by subordinate groups is an exercise of their agency. Instead of being seen as merely submissive to the system, this form of piety challenges the normative system by choosing to submit themselves to it. Therefore, the ability to choose, as well as consciously submit themselves to the dominant system, reconstruct, and redefine the pious self, is a performance of agency.

Through the lens of politics of piety, I identify how the construction of piety performed by *waria* illustrate their submission to the authoritative, dominant narrative of pious self; Muslim woman should wear hijab and *mukena*, while Muslim man don the *sarong* during *salat*. *Waria* seemingly submit themselves to the normative system that is deemed binary as it only acknowledges the ‘decent Islamic dress code’ for women and men discerning the gender non-conforming subject. Nevertheless, within *ponpes* as the affirmative space, *waria* are able to choose to don the *sarong* or wear the *mukena* for *salat*—whichever makes them most comfortable. This case illustrates how the construction of pious self as the mode of agency and the attempt to reconstruct their body and mind through “a discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and thus, in many instances, to the male authority) as its coveted goal.” (Mahmood 2005: 2-3) By submitting to the normative religious standard and performing the pious self that conforms the Islamic dominant narrative, *waria* claim agency while resisting the existing social and religious norms that consider them as odd, deviant, and subordinate.

Furthermore, Ratris’ decision to wear the *hijab* points out that piety does not only serve her agentive actions; her piety also mitigates the dehumanisation and othering that might also
occur. In Indonesia, the sarong and mukena are essential elements for Indonesian Muslims, as it does not only express pious Moslem themselves, but also how it represents ‘good Indonesian Moslem identity. For Moslem women, wearing a hijab symbolises the life and respected appearance of a good Moslem. This performance of piety is best illustrated through a conversation excerpt with Ratri as follows, “It is easier for me to talk with people outside ponpes when I wear a hijab. They respect me more.” With respect to the dominant narrative that a good Muslim woman should wear hijab, Ratri chooses to submit herself into this narrative and be a pious Moslem waria. Through her submission, she performs her piety as an endeavour that helps her mitigate the dehumanisation to occur in this setting.

“As a minority striving for our rights, we cannot walk alone”

“You know, what strengthens our position and keeps us existing here? Strong networks,” said Ratri to me on my last day staying in the ponpes. We just finished welcoming a guest from VESTA, a local organisation that focuses on HIV/AIDS issues in Yogyakarta.

The existence of ponpes comes with support of several local, national, and international NGOs. Ratri, with her organising skills, managed to build a strong and wide network that ensures the prolonged existence of ponpes in Kotagede. Currently, the closest organisation that supports ponpes is Persatuan Keluarga Berencana Indonesia (PKBI; The Indonesian Plan Parenthood Association or IPPA) branch Yogyakarta. Having established strong relations and partnerships since the 1980s, Ratri and PKBI18 created collaborative projects and social events to support waria communities in Yogyakarta. This strong bond further bolsters ponpes to come into existence by sharing knowledge, network, capacity building trainings, facilities, and administrative support. Meanwhile PKBI provides local support, while Ratri builds networks with The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan), Arus Pelangi, GWL-INA (Gay, Waria, Lesbian Indonesia), and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika National Alliance (ANBTI). This web of networks has become stronger as ponpes is supported by international NGOs, such as The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL), ASEAN SOGI caucus, and the International Trans Fund (ITF).

For financial matters, ponpes is supported by volunteers. “We also openly accept donations from anyone who wants to provide support, media coverage, support for academic papers, we partner with the Institute of International Studies (IIS), the Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) Gadjah Mada University Yogyakarta (UGM), and the Alliance of Independent Journalists supports us for media coverage,” Ratri continued.

---

18 PKBI was first established on December 23 1957 that focuses on the fulfilment of sexual and reproductive health and right. Currently, PKBI operates in 27 chapters, 214 branches and 96 outlets. (https://pkbi.or.id/information-about-our-organization/)
These networks are built and strengthened by Ratri who initiated ponpes. Compared to other waria, Ratri comes from a different background. There are privileges that Ratri has: acceptance from her family, coming from a upper-middle class family (having silver family business), well-educated with prominent education as she possesses bachelor’s degree from one of the top universities in Indonesia. This background enables her to operate ponpes and build networks with strong local and international NGOs. In addition to this, Ratri has the ability to partner with PKBI to hold social events that engage neighbours, such as bakti sosial, free medical check-ups, and free food packages distributed to residents. This event creates a certain feeling of neighbourliness and is the waria community’s attempt to integrate within the community and undermine the stereotypes that waria are troublesome. Instead they highlight how the waria community brings virtue and benefits to society. Through social events with PKBI, Ratri engages with neighbours also as a form of good neighbourliness as she said, “Neighbours know PKBI and how they work with ponpes very well. PKBI has the closest engagement with neighbours here because they can receive free medical check-up, food stocks, and sometimes PKBI opens a bazaar. That is how they have come to know PKBI and ponpes because they receive benefits from us and PKBI.”

The existence of ponpes is also strengthened by support from Lily, a waria that works to advocate human rights, including waria communities. Lily is a waria from Bone, South Sulawesi. She is educated, has a prominent background, and has served as legislative member in Sulawesi. This strong education and legal background are now being used to ensure ponpes’ existence through the VESTA organisation in Yogyakarta. Her position as a human rights advocate helped Ratri to ensure ponpes keeps functioning. In 2016, when the forced closure
happened, Lily took thre position as the advocate cum lawyer. She opened dialogue with Ratu Hemas, queen consort of the Kingdom of Yogyakarta with regards to the discrimination that waria community was facing.

In this setting, Ratri and Lily possess more privilege than when compared to their fellow waria who were unable to continue their education due to discrimination and rejection by their family and society. Their privileged positions is also recognized and acknowledged by their fellow waria. Ratri and Lily have a certain position within the society, where they can engage and connect with individuals within the mainstream society with greater ease than warias with lower levels of education.

_Tepa Slira: ‘try to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, so you understand’_

One of the fundamental features that plays a vital role in mitigating the dehumanisation that occurs towards waria is the Javanese basic principle of _tepa slira_; a sense of understanding and solidarity.

During one of the conversations with Ufi and Sri, I asked how they reflect on warias as neighbours and how this identity contradicts with their beliefs. In his answer Ufi said, “We are aware of our differences, but that is fine. We are all the same, fellow human beings.” A similar response also came from Sri that said, “we accept them for who they are. It is their fate from God and who are we to judge? We never know how it feels to be like them.”

This conversation between me, Ufi and Sri about understanding and empathy exemplify the residents’ attempt to define and negotiate what it comprises the ideals of living together and what ‘good’ neighbourliness means. Their attempts in negotiating the ideal living situation evolves from of Javanese principle _tepa slira_. This principle is applied to show compassion and achieve harmony in society. As a neighbourhood that is strongly rooted in Javanese milieu, Kotagede applies this principle in their everyday life, and by accepting the existence of ponpes in the middle of their neighbourhood illustrates the best application of _tepa slira_ amongst its residents.

Another case that elucidates the importance of _tepa slira_ is the interfaith dialogue held by the Palace of Yogyakarta. The dialogue involved Ratu Hemas, Ratri, Lily and some waria on behalf of ponpes which occurred in 2016 after the forced closure of ponpes. This dialogue provided a space for the waria community and Yogyakarta Sultanate to exchange ideas and opinions regarding increasing tolerance in Yogyakarta, and how to create an inclusive region for every resident. As a Javanese monarchy in Yogyakarta that symbolises the Javanese culture and performs as the highest authority, the Yogyakarta Sultanate was deemed responsible to uphold the Javanese norms of tolerance and respect.
As she holds the position as the Queen that represents Yogyakarta Sultanate, *Ratu*¹⁹ Hemas also holds the responsibility to ensure tolerance within society. Therefore, Ratu Hemas is an important key to integrating and ensuring the acceptance of *waria* in Yogyakarta. The protection from Ratu Hemas also comes under the form of the organisation *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*²⁰ National Alliance (ANBTI). Through this organisation, Ratu Hemas provided the space and shelter for victims of intolerance, including *ponpes*. “ANBTI is sheltered by Ratu Hemas. Thus, ANBTI and LBH are *ponpes’* closest partners in terms of security,” said Ratri.

---

¹⁹ Indonesian term for queen. Ratu Hemas, translated in English as Queen Hemas, is the wife of Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, the Sultan of historic Yogyakarta Sultanate. Sultan, roughly translated as King, holds political and spiritual position in Yogyakarta.

²⁰ Bhinneka Tunggal Ika is the official national motto of Indonesia. This phrase is derived from Old Javanese, translated as Unity in Diversity.
Chapter 7 “Nevertheless, we are hopeful to be here”

At the end of my stay in *ponpes*, I said bye to Ratri and Ayu and asked for their prayer so I can succeed in delivering their stories in my writing. Ratri smiled, and she said, “Keep us in your heart when you are writing. Please amplify our stories; voices of a lesser entity.”

As a non-conforming gender identity, *warias* have been othered and dehumanised in many settings and situations. In most cases, *warias* have been stripped from their rights and have had their access to needs and services restricted. *Warias* have been seen as the gender categorical Other, being seen through the dominant Self gaze by the state and religion as deviant and as an alien. However, regardless of the dehumanisation and othering occurring towards them in the broader society, they feel accepted and are able to navigate their relationships with their neighbours in Kotagede. The neighbourhood has opened its arms wide for the existence of *ponpes*, despite the conflicting gender discourse between the two groups. The dehumanisation towards *waria* in the broader society rarely ever happens in Kotagede, the place where they belong now.

![Figure 6 Waria and two elderly neighbours.](image)

*Waria’s* intersectional position in society plays a pivotal role in navigating their relationships with neighbours and in mitigating the dehumanisation as well. Ratri and Lily’s education background, for instance, enable both to gain knowledge in networking and organisational skills that benefit *ponpes* to build a strong network supported by local partners, international NGOs, and the Yogyakarta Sultanate. These strong networks, as shown in the previous chapter, ensure the continuation of *ponpes’* existence in the neighbourhood. Moreover, Ratri’s nativeness as a resident of Kotagede, born and raised in the area, helps mitigates the dehumanisation towards *waria* and *ponpes* as she owns the house and takes a leading position. Her nativeness seems to bridge the gap between the neighbours as the Self and *waria* as the gender Other. Also, through the lens of Saba Mahmood’s concept of piety, *waria’s* pious self-performance helps them integrate in Kotagede as well as mitigate the dehumanisation that can
happen in society. Wearing a hijab for instance helps Ratri gain respect from her neighbours, while donning a sarong during prayer helps some waria to be accepted in the public as it seemingly matches their male bodies.

Other than that, the Javanese principle ingrained in the neighbourhood also balances the binary gender discourse propagated in Islam as their dominant belief. The principle of tepa sirat ensures compassion and solidarity in society and seems to have mitigated the dehumanisation towards ponpes and the waria community in this setting. Though otherisation and challenges are still present through actions, time, and space vis-à-vis (dominant) Islamic (religion) discourse, neighbours respect the warias to fulfil their needs in connecting with God. Ratri, Lily, Ayu, Rena, and Deta may differ from Ufi, Sri, and Nono, but they see each other as neighbours. They see each other as humans; as fellow human-beings.

***

I ended my journey after a month of staying in ponpes. I prepared my bag and got ready to hop on the train to take me back to Jakarta.

There are many things I learned on this journey. I remember the last things Ratri said to me before I left, “Despite the discrimination and hardships we face, we are hopeful to be here. We fight every day. We will struggle until we achieve a just society. We will never stop. Never.” This has not left me as it continues to echo in my mind. Our struggle will continue.

We never stop. Will never and will never be.

A luta continua.
References


