

Indonesian Intersections of Bisexuality and Transgender

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Sharyn Graham

School of Social Sciences

Auckland University of Technology

Auckland, New Zealand

sharyn.graham@aut.ac.nz

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apqbangkok2005@anu.edu.au

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Abstract

This article analyses the intersections of bisexuality and transgender in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. While there are no equivalent indigenous terms, there are cognate identities and experiences that make such an examination valid and fruitful. The article is divided into three main sections. After a brief introduction, I introduce two gendered identities which fall outside normative models: *calabai*' (transgendered males) and *calalai*' (transgendered females). In the second section I recount specific examples of bisexuality and transgender intersection. A critical analysis of these intersections reveals much about representations and understandings of desire, sexuality, and gender. The theoretical contributions which arise from this analysis are proposed in the third section where I argue that the conceptual categories imposed by rigid Western terminology are rendered problematic when considering the intersection between bisexuality and transgender in South Sulawesi. As such, in South Sulawesi experiences of bisexuality and transgender must be explored from a perspective which allows appreciation of their coalescence.

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Introduction

Jero', Dodid and I sat staggered on the bamboo stairs leading to Jero''s house. The *muadzin* was calling people to evening prayer. The sun was slowly setting, silhouetted behind the large white dome that crowns Sengkang's largest mosque. Jero' and Dodid are men in their early thirties. Dodid has recently married. Jero', however, is leaving the decision, and planning, of his wedding up to his parents. His parents are yet to find him a suitable spouse. The three of us talked about a number of things. Soon our conversation turned to ideas of gender, sexuality and identity:

Jero' – I was once warned about *calabai'* (transgendered males). I was told, 'Don't trust *calabai'*.'

Sharyn – Why not?

Jero' – Well, you know *calabai'* play an important role in weddings, right. They organise the food, organise the wedding costumes, they dress the bride and groom, and do their make-up. *Calabai'* are put in positions of trust, you know. Often they are alone with the bride in the room getting her ready for the wedding. The *calabai'* is putting on her make-up and dressing her. Well, I have been told that sometimes *calabai'* rape (*memperkos*) the bride.

Sharyn – That doesn't really happen, does it?

Dodid – It seldom happens, Jero'.

Jero' – Sure, it doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Tell Serli (Sharyn) about your wedding day, and the *calabai'* who was feeling you up!

Dodid – Well, there was a *calabai'* who was employed to organise (*mengurus*) my wedding and s/he was in my room dressing me, but s/he kept needlessly feeling my body and squeezing my arms and touching me everywhere. I was very uncomfortable.

Jero' – Yep, while diving, drink water! (*Iye', sambil menyelam minum air*, meaning, take advantage of every opportunity).

Sharyn – I can understand why that would happen, but why would a *calabai'*, who is attracted to men, want to rape a bride?

Dodid – Because *calabai'* have two sides to them, mostly they're attracted to men, but sometimes to women. If their passion rises (*timbul nafsu*) then they can be attracted to women.

Jero' and Dodid's comments started me thinking about the intersections between bisexuality and transgender. Jero' alluded to *calabai'* drinking water while diving. By this he implied that *calabai'* take advantage of every sexual opportunity that comes their way. While *calabai'* are transgendered males, from Jero''s perspective, *calabai'* are also bisexual. Dodid reinforced this assumption when he asserted that *calabai'* have two sides and, as such, can be sexually attracted to men and to women.

In this article I want to deconstruct and explore further the intersections between bisexuality and transgender on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi – I contextualise the paper more fully elsewhere (Graham, 2004). For simplicity, I take bisexual to mean sexually oriented toward both sexes. I take transgender to mean exhibiting appearances and behavioural characteristics not generally associated with one's sex. These definitions are certainly problematic and I will return to them in later sections. I use the terms *hir* and *s/he* rather than gender specific pronouns to encourage readers to think beyond binaries of women and men. All names are pseudonyms.

Calabai' and calalai'

Yulia is one of the most respected wedding organisers in Sengkang. Hir skills as a make-up artist and dress-maker are also highly sought after. In recognition of hir expertise, s/he is often referred to as Indo' Boting (Bugis for Wedding Mother). Yulia is economically savvy and has saved enough money to buy hir own simple, yet comfortable, house. Built in typical Bugis style, it is on stilts and is divided into three sections. The second section is where Yulia does hir dress-making.

Yulia is male-bodied and yet s/he does not conform to the expectation of being a man. Yulia does not identify as a man, and people do not consider hir a man. Neither does Yulia aspire to be a woman. S/he was born male, and in order to be a woman, s/he would have to have been born female according to Bugis understandings of gender. Yulia identifies, and is identified as, a *calabai'*. Yulia is feminine in hir behaviours and dress, although s/he does not embody the image of an ideal Bugis woman. Rather, Yulia's style of dress is influenced by Western images of fashion and s/he frequently

wears short skirts and low-cut tops. Yulia is also assertive in both hir job and hir sexual relations with men, which are not perceived as feminine qualities. Yulia neither reflects the image of a Bugis man nor a Bugis woman. Rather, Yulia is *calabai*'.

Ance' is thirty-four-years-old. S/he has known for a long time that what society expected of hir as a female (to be feminine and marry heterosexually) did not fit with hir sense of self. Ance' never liked playing with girls, putting on dresses, serving guests tea and biscuits, or any of the things a girl is expected to do in order to learn to be a woman. Indeed, Ance' hated helping hir mother and older sisters so much that s/he always found an excuse to assist hir father, or to go off playing with hir brothers. While hir behaviour was tolerated when s/he was young, as Ance' grew up the pressures on hir to be more feminine and to marry became stronger. Ance' wanted to have children, it was just the strict model of womanhood available to hir which s/he detested.

Ance' identifies, and is identified as, a *calabai*', a female-bodied individual who is more like a man than a woman. This does not mean that Ance' desires to be/come a man, though. S/he does not. It is just that Ance' prefers men's clothes, men's work, and men's freedom. As such, s/he is not considered a woman. But Ance' is female-bodied, so s/he can never be a man, s/he is *calalai*'.

Using the narratives of Yulia, Ance' and others, I now want to examine the intersections between bisexuality and transgender. What is revealed is that bisexual and transgender experiences merge in South Sulawesi so that it is problematic to apply discrete Western-derived labels and theories. As such, there is the potential for

development of a more inclusive theoretical framework which appreciates Bugis intersections of bisexual and transgender experiences.

Bisexual and transgender intersections

I opened this article with an exchange between Dodid, Jero', and myself. One of the themes of that passage was the perceived vacillating desire of *calabai'* for men and women. Jero' revealed that, in his opinion, *calabai'* take advantage of all situations: *calabai'* drink water while diving. Dodid noted that *calabai'* have two sides, and if their passion rises, they can be attracted to women as well as to men. Indeed, for many people in South Sulawesi, being transgendered implies bisexual desire, as the following narrative suggests:

Serli, you shouldn't go with Yulia (a *calabai'*). You shouldn't go with Yulia and all hir friends to (the city of) Bone. You shouldn't go because Yulia's man side might emerge and s/he might try to seduce you. You never know when their (*calabai'*) man side might emerge (Haji Bacco').

Haji Bacco', an elderly *calabai'*, believes that even though Yulia is *calabai'*, or precisely because s/he is *calabai'*, Yulia's man side might emerge and s/he might try to seduce me. Yulia strongly refutes this assumption. Yulia is adamant that s/he is not attracted to women, and indeed, if s/he were, s/he would not consider himself a true *calabai'* – for Yulia, true *calabai'* are not attracted to women; if *calabai'* are attracted

to women, then they are fake *calabai*'. Nevertheless, sexual wavering is a common assumption made about *calabai*', as the following passage further reveals:

So Yulia is a *simpanan* (literally, 'on the side', a 'storage', in this case, mistress) ... she's looked after (*dipelihara*). Yeah, some guys have a wife and also a *calabai*' *simpanan* ... they get bored with their wife, she always looks the same, maybe getting older and not so attractive, and she works around the house. Also, all they ever talk about is problems they're having. So men go and find *calabai*' because they have a different body, they're very beautiful and wear beautiful clothes, and they're more exciting. And most important, *bencong* (*calabai*') can't get pregnant! I too like hanging out with *bencong* sometimes. You can gossip and stuff and also be really frank (*terus terang*) and talk about topics that you can't with girlfriends. But watch out (*hati-hati*)! Don't be alone in a room with them because you never know if their man side is going to emerge (*muncul*)! (Nabilah, a civil servant in her late twenties).

Nabilah states that men find *calabai*' attractive because they are not women. Nabilah also reiterates the common theme that a *calabai*'s man side might emerge. This passage reveals that men can be married and still form relationships with *calabai*', revealing an intersection between bisexual men and transgendered males. *Calabai*' are also believed to be attracted to men and women. We see this again in the following quote:

Calabai' are like adaptors. They're AC/DC. They 'plug in' to both women and men (Andi Jafri, a young man).

Such perceptions underscore a significant intersection between transgender and bisexuality. Sexual desire is considered to be particularly strong among transgendered individuals because sexual desire contributes substantially to an individual's identity; for an individual to identify as transgender, their sexual motivation has to be particularly high, or else they would feasibly just conform to societal norms. Many people extend this assumption to unproblematically link transgender to bisexuality. While there is some truth in this assumption, many *calabai*', like Yulia, vehemently refute this. Why then is this link so persistently presumed?

Calabai' have fewer restrictions applied to them than do either men or women, and they are not expected to (be able to) control their sexual passions. Moreover, *calabai*' are in a sense expected to be outlandish in their sexual desires because this in part signifies their identity. Men are required to be in control of their passions and desires (Peletz, 1996); women are assumed to have a low sex-drive. *Calabai*' differentiate themselves from men because *calabai*' are considered to have no ability to control their desires, and *calabai*' differentiate themselves from women because *calabai*' have such a high sex-drive. We find, then, the first intersection between transgender and bisexuality is the perception that transgendered individuals are bisexual.

A second link between transgender and bisexuality stems from the cultural context in which identities are formed. There are very strict ideas of what is expected of males and females in South Sulawesi. While there is tolerance and general acceptance of

calabai' and *calalai'* identities, there is still pressure on individuals to marry heterosexually and have children. For this reason, and also because of personal desire, some transgendered individuals develop heterosexual relationships while maintaining homosexual relationships, as the following narrative reveals:

There's a *calabai'* with a kid you know. Yes, there is. In the daytime s/he's *calabai'* ... works, dresses, acts as a *calabai'* ... but then at night s/he goes home to hir wife and kids and acts and dresses like a man and plays the role of husband and father. We call hir *amfibi* (amphibian) because s/he can live in the sea and on land ... s/he can live in a woman's world and a man's world. S/he can live in two environments (*alam*) (Pak Hidya, middle-aged man).

Pak Hidya relates the case of a *calabai'* who maintains a heterosexual relationship and performs the role of husband and father. While this individual may be doing this simply to conform to societal expectations, it is an example of an intersection between bisexuality and transgender. In the following passage, Dilah notes that, although s/he is a *calalai'*, s/he wants to have children:

Yeah, I'd like to have children, I just don't want to get married. Ugh! I could adopt a baby so I wouldn't have to sleep with a man. But if I did have to marry, you know if my parents force me, which they've tried to do before, but I always tell them their selection isn't suitable (*cocok*), then I'd just stay with him until I was pregnant and then I'd find a *lines* (a feminine woman who is attracted to *calalai'*) because

you know, a *hunter* (*calalai*) can't change hir feelings, hir makeup. You can't change your fate (*kodrat*), hey. Once a *hunter*, always a *hunter*, you know? (Dilah).

In this passage, Dilah shudders at the thought of getting married. S/he expresses a wish to have children, though, and s/he is under pressure to do this within the institution of heterosexual marriage. While there is no desire on Dilah's part to be involved in a sexual relationship with a man, marriage is the only legitimate way to have children. Understandings of bisexuality which fail to take into account the extent to which society moulds sexuality, or at least prescribes legitimate avenues, are limited in their applicability to South Sulawesi.

Another *calalai*', Ance', is also constrained in hir development of relationships. Like Dilah, Ance' wanted to have children, but s/he did not want to perform the role of wife. Ance' explains hir situation:

We got married because two males, or two females, can't have children. At the start, [my spouse] Wawal did all the cooking and cleaning because s/he's *calabai*' and s/he knew all about that kind of stuff. I'm *calalai*' and I hate doing all that housework stuff, that's why I'm *calalai*', because I want to live like a man. At first it was good. But then Wawal got lazy. In the end s/he expected me to be the husband and the wife! (Ance').

In Ance''s account, we hear of a unique solution. While Ance' wanted to be like a man, and s/he sexually desired women, s/he could neither conceive, nor legitimately raise, children in a homosexual relationship. So s/he married a *calabai*' (a transgender male). In this way, Ance could get pregnant but continue to live like a man. Identifying as transgender does not necessarily preclude marriage and children (cf. Boellstorff, 2000). Ance''s gender identity meant that s/he was forced, in a sense, to be bisexual. We see again how the gender structure in South Sulawesi operates to shape sexuality. The second key intersection between transgender and bisexuality, then, stems from the way cultural norms prescribe appropriate avenues for gender and sexuality experiences.

A third intersection between bisexuality and transgender arises due to the impact of gender on sexuality. In Bugis society gender and sexuality are tightly interwoven. Who one erotically desires, and the roles one plays in sexual acts, are contributors to gender identity. As such, there is an influential relationship between transgender and bisexuality. We see this in the following account:

You know, the most important factor [in me becoming a *calalai*'] was influence from a *lines*. You see, I was chosen and seduced by a *lines* over a long time, and this is what made me become ill (*sakit*; homosexual desire is often described in such terms). Before, I wasn't ill, I used to just act like a man (*dulu saya tidak sakit, cuma gaya seperti lelaki*). Then there was a *lines* who always approached me and wanted to be partners (*pacaran*). At first, when we became friends, I didn't think about sex. The *lines* kept paying me lots of attention but I

was still scared because I still had feelings like a woman [i.e. was still sexually attracted to men]. I was still 16 then. But I was from a broken home and I really enjoyed all the attention I was getting. So finally I too became ill (*saya ikut sakit*) and became a *hunter (calalai')* (Eri, a *calalai'* in hir mid-twenties).

Eri's eventual attraction to, and relationship with, a *lines* may be seen as a continuation of hir masculine behaviour, which was 'like a man'. However, s/he still had feelings like a woman and so it was not necessarily a natural progression. Without the attention from a *lines*, Eri may not have developed a *calalai'* identity (i.e. s/he may have remained only sexually attracted to men). We see here how sexuality is in some respects an extension of gender identity.

This interplay between transgender and bisexuality is evident in other accounts as well. For Dilah, a thirty-year-old *calalai'*, it was attraction to a woman which initiated hir formation of a masculine *calalai'* identity (cf. Newton, 1984). Moreover, the woman with whom Dilah developed a relationship with was married to a man:

I met a girl who was married to a violent man who beat her all the time and never satisfied her [sexually] in bed. We became friends and I guess we started testing. At first she was scared and didn't know if it was appropriate (*cocok*), but finally we let go and 'became one body' (*bersetubuh*, a term for making love). We were both satisfied (*puas*) and we became partners (*pacaran*) because we were suitable (*cocok*) (Dilah).

This narrative adds an interesting dimension to the intersection between transgender and bisexuality. While Dilah is transgendered, hir partner is bisexual. There are, therefore, attractions between these two categories.

The passages examined in this section illustrate intersections between transgender and bisexuality. These intersections problematise the application of terms such as bisexual and transgender. Transgender and bisexual identity in South Sulawesi cannot be fully understood using Western-derived categories. Rather, the intersection of transgender and bisexuality underscores a significant way in which identity in South Sulawesi differs from Western settings: transgender and bisexual experiences may merge to form a single identity. In order to appreciate Bugis gender/sexuality categories, we need to reconfigure rigid Western approaches which dichotomise (trans)gender and (bi)sexuality. I move now to the conclusion where I highlight areas for potential theoretical development.

Conclusion: Potential theoretical development

This article has sought to develop a nuanced understanding of the intersections between transgender and bisexuality in South Sulawesi. In the first section I introduced two additional gendered identities, *calabai'* and *calalai'*. Through the narratives of Yulia, Ance' and others, the ways in which some individuals form gendered identities that do not conform to normative models were revealed. *Calabai'* and *calalai'* identities are impacted through the intersection of transgender and bisexuality. Three main intersections were thus analysed in section two. These

intersections included: transgender implying bisexuality; cultural discourses encouraging transgendered individuals to be bisexual; and gender identity initiating bisexual desire. I now want to highlight potential theoretical implications of these intersections for future gender/sexuality work.

In thinking of gender and sexuality in South Sulawesi it is problematic to apply Western-derived terms such as bisexual and transgender. There is certainly heuristic value in using these terms and as such I have used them in this article. However, they do not translate well. In Western discourse, bisexuality assumes active sexual desire for both men and women. In South Sulawesi, however, bisexuality is often moulded, even prescribed, by cultural norms. In Western discourse, transgender often assumes that an individual crosses from one normative gender to the 'other'. In South Sulawesi, however, *calabai*' conform neither to the model of womanhood nor of manhood. Rather, *calabai*' assert a distinct gendered identity. Trying to categorise individuals in South Sulawesi as bisexual or transgender overlooks these fundamental differences in meaning and it does not allow for appreciation of the particular environment in which identities are formed. Moreover, using discrete terms such as bisexual and transgender ignore ways in which these categories impact upon each other.

Applying Western labels to non-Western identities also poses a problem in that the meaning of concepts such as sexuality and gender differ. It is possible in the West to have an identity based on sexuality (e.g. to be lesbian, gay, bisexual). It is also possible to have an identity based on gender (e.g. transgender). Because gender in South Sulawesi is constituted in part by sexuality, a division between a gendered

identity and a sexual identity is not conceptually possible. Bisexuality is not distinguished as a sexuality, and transgender as a gender. The distinctions between Western identity labels thus become blurred because no clear break exists between gender and sexuality. As Jackson notes for Thailand, it is difficult, indeed ultimately impossible, 'to consistently sustain a difference between the notion of desire for a particular type of sexed body (whether male or female), and hence of sexual identity, and the idea of a preference for enacting a particular gender performance (whether masculine or feminine), and hence of gender identity' (Jackson, 2000: 416). Western terms and theories are therefore labelled in a cultural matrix which is not applicable to South Sulawesi.

In order to appreciate gendered identities in South Sulawesi we need to develop theories which are more attuned to a variety of understandings of gender and sexuality, and which are sensitive to the constitutive intersections between sexuality and gender in identity formation. Such theories will problematise clear conceptual categories and break down the rigidity of Western labels (e.g. bisexual, transgender). Collective understandings of the dynamic relationship between gender and sexuality will be enriched if we can take into account the different configurations of these concepts in South Sulawesi and develop theories accordingly.

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