

The Remaking of Tradition: Sex, Lies & Politics

Traces of cultural practices, tradition, custom and informal laws are still ubiquitous in the modern Indonesian society. The dangers of some traditional practices, such as forced marriage, virginity tests, female genital mutilation or circumcision, and others, are even practiced in cities claimed to be more modern. In November 2014, Indonesia was taken aback by the Police Department requiring virginity tests for female police recruits. Globally, female circumcision is still pervasive in many parts of the world. This and other similar cultural practices constitute a significant number of death causes in girls of Africa, and Central and South Asia. Almost all religions in the world are not yet free from the traces of practices that endanger the lives of children, women and sexual minorities. To combat these harmful customs, UN Human Rights Committee has stated that, given the morals grow out of many social, philosophical and religious traditions, the freedom from cultural values, traditions and customs protecting morals must be based on principles that protect universality of human rights and are not derived from a single tradition (ICCPR, November 13, 2012).

To the contrary of the UN conclusions, religious and cultural rights are generally expressed as collective and communal, and then, at some point, these rights become unfriendly and uncaring to women and other vulnerable groups. Primacy of individual rights is suspected as something smelling “western” and not compatible with the conditions in Indonesia. At the same time, Indonesia adopts a system of laws and democracy upholding human rights and the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women). The resulting tension between individual rights and communal rights does not only impact

the gender dimension, but also extends to the dimension of race/ethnicity, and social, economic and political stratification. Within the framework of religion, women are demanded and obliged to be loyal to the belief and cultural system that might be harmful to them, and may even violate their human and legal rights. But, fidelity of women in this discursive field has been evaluated from different perspectives. In his study, Bronwyn Winter (“Religion, Culture and Women’s Rights: Some General Political and Theoretical Considerations” in the *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 29, Issue 4, July-August 2006, pp. 381-393), captures exactly how human rights of women get distorted and suffer severe violation through religious practices and rituals. More specifically, he talks about early marriage, female genital mutilation, the imposition of certain clothing for women (eg. the veil for women in Aceh), the murder of women for family honor (honor killing), and other dangerous cultural practices.

In 2012, we witnessed one of the most dangerous Islamic interpretations, forbidding girls to attend school, exemplified in the shooting of Malala. Tafsir, legal regulations, and practices of religion and belief systems often violate human rights of girls. The Forum of Confidence, Trust & Promotion of the Rights of Women and UNHC-HR (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) assert that the world must fight the practices of discrimination and intolerance in the name of religion and cults on the rise over the last decade. Included are the traditions and cultural systems that clearly violate human rights of women. Traditions, beliefs and values have changed throughout the ages and can no longer be interpreted as a single and universal practice, because all stand in their respective context. Application of human rights

in such practices is challenged because of these arguments of singularity and universality. In reality, practices are contextual and culturally-bound. This then leads to an effort to broaden the space for gendered interpretation of the human rights of women that may bring progress, such as the wider inclusion of women in education. Public movements like *Musawah*, equality, led by Muslims, have been successfully integrating Islamic teachings, universal human rights, and the values of equality and justice. The approach is very simple – claiming religion not to be an obstacle to women’s equality and freedom of human rights. In other words, what we witness today around the world and Indonesia is the presence of discursive efforts seeking to perpetuate traditions, contested by forces to remake these traditions in the spirit of universal human rights.

This third issue of IFJ presents a broad array of the work of several feminist thinkers interested in the impact of cultural traditions of Indonesia on the lives of women. Using a large variety of sources, the first several articles cover the wider social context of such cultural traditions, while the second part zooms in on the operation of government and its electoral systems. We show that challenges to remaking of traditions revolve around sex, lies and politics. Following official statements, biographies and films, Saskia Wieringa confronts political silence investigating manipulation of traditional concepts of gender and sexuality in the 1965 Indonesian genocide during incorporation of Suharto’s militarist regime. Immersing himself in a tale of a Hadrami migrant on a way from Yemen to Southeast Asia, Ismail Fajrie Alatas illustrates an example of a literary expression looking to curb femininity and masculinity reconfigurations sprouting from migration. Tracy Wright Webster, interviewing Yogyakarta women, investigates how competing consumerist culture and traditional Islamic values lead to “shameful” situations handled in the form of early marriages. Gadis Arivia and Abby Gina

criticize implementation of Arabic temporary marriages as a sex tourism mechanism in Cisarua and Jakarta undermining Indonesian traditions that facilitate gender fairness. Nurseli Debora Manurung discusses reciprocity effects between liturgical texts and the Toba Batak customary wedding on the social configuration of a woman as a good for sale between men. Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi identifies “structures of opportunities” for political engagement of women in the Indonesian electoral system. Sapariah Saturi points out oppression of women in conflicts between indigenous groups and the government in deforestation processes on Indonesian islands rich in biodiversity. Rocky Gerung criticizes the absence of “feminist ethics” in the campaign and insufficient “sharpness of discourse” in media coverage of the 2014 presidential elections hampering promise of change during this mandate. Finally, Dewi Candraningrum, in her conversation with prominent feminist leaders in Indonesia, exposes religious influences in limited representation of women behind parties competing in the 2014 elections. Harmful cultural practices clearly creep into literature, alienation of migrants, construction of histories, tourism, culture wars, social taboos, livelihoods, commodities, political opportunities, environmental sustainability, media, and electoral processes.

While there is much concern in Indonesia, there is also a reason for great hope – in the form of prominent male and female political leaders, balanced high quality scientific research, and brave creative expression. It is our intention for the International Feminist Journal to continue being such a positive force that helps remake patriarchal traditions. We hope that this illuminating collection of scientific articles will enrich your research, teaching and other projects related to gender, and finally, that it will inspire you to drive the forces of fairness and equality, both in Indonesia and the international community.

Dewi Candraningrum & Lea Šimek