

Challenging the New Order's Gender Ideology in Benjamin Sueb's *Betty Bencong Slebor*: A Queer Reading

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The representation of sexuality in Soeharto's New Order Indonesian films mainly centred on the female reproductive role, and tended to present the nation as constructed of heterosexual families rather than individual citizens (Boellstorff, 2005). Despite few representations, non-reproductive sexualities film-themes were produced and consumed. Released in 1978, Benjamin Sueb's *Betty Bencong Slebor* became box-office hit in the late of 1970s. This comedy film genre criticized the mainstream perception of *waria*, male to female transgender (MtF), that is marginalized as a second-class citizen. Betty, the house maid *waria* in Bokir's family, starred by famous comedian Benyamin Sueb, portrayed how gender identity is not a fixed identity; it's merely a condition of being straight or being queer. Bokir's wife feels blessed of having Betty in her family to resist Bokir as a womanizer. In this film, *waria*-ness is an alternative strategy to negotiate the patriarchal system. The study finds that *Betty Bencong Slebor* can be seen as a cult film, considering the main protagonist and the film director is Benyamin Sueb, one of the greatest cult icons in Indonesia. As a cult film, *Betty Bencong Slebor* helps the viewer to understand the complexity, ambiguity and the harsh life of a *wadam/waria*, a marginalized group with a distinct identity. Betty's gender fluidity offers a playful negotiation to New Order's essentialist concept of gender binary system. This transgressive element confirms Ernest Mathijs and Mendik's perspective (2007) that a cult film "rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics" (p. 11).

Keywords: *Transgender/Waria, Gender Ideology, Betty Bencong Slebor*

Introduction

This study examines *Betty Bencong Slebor* by Benjamin Sueb, a comedy film produced in 1978 or at the beginning of the New Order period.¹ The film was chosen for the following reasons: first, *Betty Bencong Slebor* is the most popular film about *waria* in the history of Indonesian film in the New Order era (Kristanto, 1995, p. 179, 194). Second, the study builds on the relatively small literature on Indonesian national cinema, most of it dealing with New Order films and their antecedents. The books by Salim Said (1991), Karl Heider (1991), and Krishna Sen (1994) all focus on the text and context of the New Order cinema. In his work, Said (1991) argues that Indonesian movies have failed to portray the realities of the "face of Indonesia," since their narratives are not based on everyday realities, but rather, tend to imitate Western popular films. Heider argues that in the New Order era film became an important medium for the construction of national culture. He notes that the basic pattern of the Indonesian films at the time focused on the supremacy of the group over the individual, and the contest

between order and disorder (1991, p. 136). Films that end happily, with the restoration of order, confirmed the state ideology of an orderly society. In relation to sexuality, Heider argues that up until the 1980s, kissing and palm to palm holding of hands was still considered taboo on Indonesian cinema screens. Sen's study extends Heider's argument. Up until the 1980s, she maintains, Indonesian cinema was viewed as "an ordered space" that should be dedicated to upholding the ideology of order. In the ensuing period, however, Sen argues that the state gradually lost its mechanism of control of the "ordered cinema," due to the advance of audio-visual technology, the changes in the modes of consumption of media, and the domination of film imports in the 1990s (Sen, 1994, p. 157).

Lastly, related to the special issue, I will argue that *Betty Bencong Slebor* can be seen as a cult film in two ways: first, considering the main protagonist and the film director is Benyamin Sueb, one of the greatest cult icons in Indonesia. Second, as a cult film, I will examine that *Betty Bencong Slebor* can be read to understand the complexity, ambiguity, and the harsh life of a *wadam/waria*, a marginalized group with a distinct identity. Betty's gender fluidity offers a playful negotiation to the New Order's essentialist concept of gender binary system. This transgressive element confirms Ernest Mathijs and Mendik's perspective (2007), that cult films "rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics" (p.11). In order to do so, I will also analyze the campy behavior of Betty in a subchapter.

In the post-New Order era, there has so far been little academic writing on Indonesian cinema. In relation to the cinematic representation of issues dealing with gender and sexuality, Marshall Clark's studies (2004, 2008) focus specifically on masculinity, censorship, and symbolic violence in *Kuldesak (Cul-de-Sac, 1998)*, and subsequently in two films by Rudi Soedjarwo, *9 Naga (9 Dragons, 2006)*, and *Mengejar Matahari (Chasing the Sun, 2004)*. Intan Paramaditha (2006) explores a feminist interpretation of Nan T. Achnas's *Pasir Berbisik (Whispering Sand, 2001)*.

A specific study of Wahyu Sihombing's *Istana Kecantikan (The Palace of Beauty, 1988)*, undertaken by Ben Murtagh (2006) is perhaps the only existing journal article that examines the representation of a male same-sex relationship in Indonesian cinema. Murtagh argues that despite the film's unsympathetic ending, in which the *gay* character is imprisoned after accidentally killing his former lover, *Istana Kecantikan* is not as homophobic as other observers have suggested. The film is not "overladen with stereotypes" (2006, p. 226), and although the ending seem to imply that there is an instability associated with being homosexual that can lead to irrational and dangerous behavior, "there is much else in the film that is more sympathetic towards the lead character and his sexuality" (2006, p.

218). The film occupies an important place in Indonesian cinema history, because it is the first response to the increasing visibility of alternative sexuality and transgender identities in Indonesia during the 1980s.

Meanwhile, a study on transgender films in the post-New Order was conducted by the author on the film *Panggil Aku Puspa* (*Call Me Puspa*) by Firman Triyadi produced in 2003. The study concludes that the film *Panggil Aku Puspa* is slightly different from the Hollywood film mentioned above because in *Panggil Aku Puspa* transgenderness is not represented as performativity but as an innate identity. Transgenderness is not only in regard to the physical matter but rather a matter of soul and sense (Maimunah, 2008). The main character of the film, a transgender named Said/Puspa, is presented as a figure of responsible father. Said's psychological and social transformation, which started in his childhood, are also shown in chronological order. As suggested by Boellstorff (2005, p. 57), the majority of transgenders begin to be aware of their gender preference during childhood. Said, at the beginning of the film, admits that he believes he has a female soul trapped in a male body. Another reproductive issue arises when Said is forced to marry Lekha, his cousin. He reveals his obsession for reproductive experience such as being pregnant and giving birth. Tom Boellstorff (2005) argues that the majority of gays tend to consider *gayness* as "the desire for the same sex" (p. 57), while transgender accentuates the desire to be female and have female reproductive experience.

The latest and most comprehensive study of the representation of gender and sexuality in Indonesian film both in the era of the New Order and Reform is Ben Murtagh. His book published in 2013 entitled *Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema: Constructing Gay, Lesbi and Waria Identities on Screen* examines representation of transvestite, transsexual, lesbian, and gay using considerable data and completed with interviews. Unlike other studies on film, this study comes with the method of focus group discussion involving transgender, gay, and lesbian communities in Surabaya in order to find out their responses as they are watching a film about their lives. The result is very interesting. One transgender said "This movie is not for us, it is about us" when she was watching a film about transgender (Murtagh, 2013, p 36).

Queer Film Theory

Unlike the terms "gay" and "lesbian," which clearly designate gender-specific identities, "queer" is relatively gender neutral, a characteristic that contributed to the term's initial acceptance and popularity (Walters, 2005, p. 13). There are many definitions of queer theory, which sometimes contradict each other. Benshoff and Griffin, for instance, define queer as "a theory that

rejects essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality, and sees them instead as fluid and socially constructed positionalities” (2004, p. 1). David Halperin (1995) asserts that queer is “an identity without an essence” (p. 1), stating that “*there is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*” (p. 62, original emphasis). However, since queer does not refer to a particular identity, it is “available to anyone who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices” (p. 62).

Bearing in mind the debates and controversy that surround the term, I will use queer in the following discussion to refer to all forms and representations of non-normative sexuality, including those that are identifiably gay or lesbian. In this sense, I use queer as an umbrella term, and do not enter into the debate between queer theory and lesbian and gay theory, or the debate between queer theory and feminism. From this perspective, queer theory is a useful umbrella framework for all studies of non-normative sexuality and its cultural products. As Elspeth Probyn (2005) explains:

Queer was to be an umbrella term for all those outside of heterosexuality, as well as a way of specifying multiple identities. People inhabit many identities simultaneously, and it was argued that queer would provide an alternative to the “add-on” model of naming identity categories: black, lesbian, working class etc. (p. 288)

The notion of queer refers to the diversity and fluidity of human sexuality, rather than the definition of sexuality and gender according to normative categories and types. In Indonesian academic circles, queer theory and the notion of queer sexuality remain relatively unfamiliar. By showing how the perspective of queer sexuality can provide a new way of looking at representations of same-sex attraction in Indonesian cinema, the writer argues that queer theory, while developed in the context of social activism and academic research in the West, now has a legitimate and productive role as a framework for the study of sexual diversity in non-Western cultural expression.

This study is expected to reveal not only textual analysis of gender performativity but also the construction of gender discourse that developed in the '70s when the film was produced. It rests on the premise that film, as cultural text, is a good source for investigating the way sexuality is constructed and understood in any given social formation.

Betty Bencong Slebor tells the story of Betty (played by Benjamin Sueb), a *waria* servant working for Bokir’s (played by Bokir) family, the owner of a recording company. Betty’s presence in the family is not fully accepted

by Bokir due to her gender identity as a *waria*. Yet, Bokir's wife (played by Amina Cendrakasih) has a different view. She is glad to have a servant like Betty as Bokir often had an affair with his previous servants. On the other hand, Bokir as a businessman has a deep-seated desire for Elvy Sukaesih, a famous *dangdut* (a genre in Indonesian popular music, partly derived from Malay and Arabic musics) singer, and wants to marry her secretly. He asks for his best friend Mansur's help, to arrange the marriage. Mansur conspires with Elvy to trick Bokir. Betty is asked to replace Elvy in the wedding. At the same time, Elvy tells Bokir's wife about the wedding. The tactic of the two women proved to be successful. Bokir is coupled with Betty in the aisle, not with Elvy as he had hoped. The wedding is finally disbanded. Betty and Elvy put an end to Bokir's malicious intent.

The main issues to be addressed in this study are:

- A. How is gender performativity represented in the film *Betty Bencong Slebor*?
- B. How does Betty see her identity (self-identity) in a heteronormative culture?

New Order and Discourse on Homosexuality: Between the State and Islam

Since independence in 1945, homosexuality in Indonesia has never been prohibited by law. Unlike the situation in former British colonies like Malaysia and Singapore that criminalized homosexuality (Laurent, 2005), in Indonesia, the law has remained relatively neutral. However, as Erick Laurent argues, even though there is no legal prohibition against homosexuality, there is a moral prohibition, which means that homosexuality is considered as "a religious (Muslim) and moral problem rather than a legal one" (p 201). This argument is reflected in the shifts that took place in the discourse on gender and sexuality during the long period of Soeharto's New Order (1966-1998), as well as the controversies that have surfaced in more recent times.

As part of its attempts to control the stability and integrity of the social order it had brought into being, the New Order constructed a gender ideology based on a rigid distinction between "productive" men and "reproductive" women. Throughout the period of Soeharto's rule, the regime's ideology of proper manhood and womanhood was promoted through all of kinds of media and other government programs. The importance of "natural" gender roles was highlighted by the idea of the family principle (*prinsip kekeluargaan*) that was based on the heteronormative family: man in his role as head of the household and woman as wife with two children. In this way, individual subjectivity was closely aligned with heterosexual gender normativity (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 75).²

Within this concept, the state placed more value on female sexuality as the primary source of the stability in society, since woman was the key to harmony within the family, the basic unit of the state (Blackburn, 2004, p. 152). Religion played a part in enforcing this aspect of the state's gender ideology, because in the popular understanding of Islam, women were expected to conform to their God-given "destiny" (*kodrat*) to become good mothers and devout wives (Blackburn, 2004, p. 139). In one influential assessment of the state's gender construction, Julia Suryakusuma (1996) defined the New Order ideology as state *ibu*-ism, a construction that highlighted the importance of women as mother (*ibu*). To be married to a man and create "a happy and healthy" nuclear family was seen as the primary duty of all Indonesian women (Murray, 2001, p. 167). Under this formulation of gender ideology, all sexual practice outside heterosexual marriage could be seen as contradictory to the God-given nature of Indonesian citizens. Lesbianism, for example, was considered as a deviant, shameful, and subversive sexual transgression, since it contested the "prevailing ideals of pre-marital abstinence, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage for women" (Bennett, 2005, p. 40).

Waria as Indigenous Embodiment of Transgenderism

Unlike the terms *gay*, *lesbi/lesbian*, and *homoseksual*, which only became well known with the growing discussion of sexual diversity and HIV/AIDS prevention programs in the mid 1980s (Oetomo, 2000, p. 48), Indonesian languages contain words to describe indigenous forms of homosexuality and the transgendered behavior that is a familiar part of the religious rituals of many Indonesian societies. Tom Boellstorff (2005) argues that the subject positions defined by these indigenous embodiments of homosexuality and transgenderism cannot be equated with the Western understandings of "sexual identities." He describes them rather as "ethnolocalized homosexual and transvestite professional" (p.9) subject positions (ETPs). In doing so, he is drawing attention to the distinction between behavior and identity, and stressing the link between transgendered and homosexual behavior and profession in a range of traditional Indonesian societies. Examples of what he defines as ETPs are the *gemblak-warok* partnerships involved in the *reog* drama rituals in Ponorogo, East Java, and the male to female transgendered priests, or *bissu*, that occupy a central place in the religious rites and rituals of South Sulawesi courts and communities (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 9; Graham, 2004, p. 108).

In addition to ETPs, Boellstorff also defines two further categories of Indonesian (and to a large extent Southeast Asian), non-normative sexual and gendered subject positions. The first category is that of the male

transvestite subject position now known in Indonesia as *waria*, which appeared in written discourse in descriptions of a Batavian (Jakartan) dance performance named *Bantji Batavia* in the 1830s, and came into more frequent use in urban centers in the mid nineteenth century (Boellstorff, 2005, p. 57; 2007, p. 85). In contemporary Indonesia, *waria* is a euphemistic term that derives from the abbreviation of *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man).³ Unlike *kathoey* (a Thai term that refers to either a transgender woman or an effeminate gay male) in Thailand, Boellstorff (2005) argues that most *waria* never define themselves as a third gender but as “men with women’s souls” (p. 57). By contrast, Dede Oetomo (1996) asserts that most *waria* do perceive themselves as a third gender since they incorporate both maleness and femaleness. They feel themselves to be “women trapped in men’s bodies” (1996, p. 261, 2000, p. 54). Despite these different perspectives on the applicability of the “third gender” terminology, it is clear that *waria* is not a sexual identity but a gender identity. As Oetomo (2000) observes, “the category of *banci/waria* does not, for the general public, necessarily connote sexual orientation. It is rather a label for non-confirming gender behaviour or for a gender identity” (p. 48). Although transgenders have long been a part of Indonesian culture, tolerance for them does not always mean social acceptance, especially in politics.

Boellstorff’s (2005) last category of Indonesian non-normative sexual and gendered subject positions is that of gay and lesbi subjectivities. Despite the fact that these terms derive from the West, the subject positions they define do not simply mimic the sexual identities invoked by their Western equivalents. Interestingly, however, gay and lesbi Indonesians are not totally distinct from gay and lesbian Westerners. The “sameness” and the “difference” which the Indonesian terms embody reflect a negotiation between local and global cultures. One striking difference between gay and lesbi Indonesians and their Western gay and lesbian counterparts is the Indonesians’ perception that heterosexual marriage is a key step in becoming a whole person. Heterosexual marriage and having children are viewed as “part of a complete *gay* or *lesbi* life” (p. 110). This compromise reflects the influence of “compulsory heterosexuality” in the Indonesian cultural context. In Boellstorff’s view, heterosexual marriage is also a strategy on the part of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians to maintain their place in the national culture, an indication that “*gay and lesbi understand their social worlds in national rather than simply global terms*” (p. 7, original emphasis).

As these examples illustrate, the imposition of Western categories becomes highly problematic without a detailed understanding of the way gender and sexuality are conceived in other cultures and contexts. In the case of queer theory and queer discourse in general, it is important to recognize

that in Indonesia, and Southeast Asia more generally, the queer focus on non-normative sexual identities must be broadened to incorporate the interplay between sexuality and gender which local language terminology defines and which shapes the local interpretations of imported understandings of same-sex desire.

Waria in the History of Indonesian Film

A familiarity with male-female transgendered behavior is also evident in Indonesian film. In fact, the first recognizable queer character in the history of Indonesian film was a male cross-dresser in Nawi Ismail's film *Benyamin Brengsek* (1973). Male to female transgender-related themes subsequently appear in Lilik Sudjio's *Wadam* (1978) and Benyamin Sueb's *Betty Bencong Slebor* (1978). In all these films, the *waria* characters are played by prominent comedians: Benyamin Sueb in *Benyamin Brengsek* and *Betty Bencong Slebor* and Kardjo AC-DC in *Wadam*. In both *Benyamin Brengsek* and *Betty Bencong Slebor* the *waria* main character is a young jobless man who becomes *waria* for economic survival and sexual pleasure (Kristanto, 1995, p. 179, 194). As such, *waria* tends to be framed as a temporary profession rather than sexual/gender identity.

This pattern is also familiar in Western films. John Phillips (2006, p. 5, 52) observes that transgenderism almost always appears in comedy films as a playful way of exploring temporary transformations of gender. The cross-dresser films usually deal with "the story of a male protagonist who is 'compelled' by social and economic forces to disguise himself in order to get a job, or escape repression, or gain political 'freedom'" (p. 52). For example, cross-dressing appears as a device to escape the mob and secure employment in Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*, (1959), to land an acting job in Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* (1982) or a singing job in Blake Edward's *Victor/Victoria* (1982), and to gain access to children following a marital separation in Chris Columbus's *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993). Significantly, the main protagonist cross-dressers are performers: singer in *Victor/Victoria*, actor in *Tootsie*, voice-over artist in *Mrs Doubtfire*, and musicians in *Some Like It Hot*. Cross-dressing in these films thus supports Butler's (1996) view of gender as *performative*, something that must be achieved and re-achieved by an imitated regular exercise and practice. In this sense, *Benyamin Brengsek* (1973) and *Betty Bencong Slebor* (1978) belong to the same genre as the Western cross-dressing film comedy.

Transsexuality and transsexualism (trans-men/female to male and trans-women/male to female) have only rarely been represented in the history of Indonesian film, even when compared to other queer-related themes.⁴ Kristanto's 1995 Indonesian Film Catalogue, for instance, indicates

that Endraatmadja's film *Akulah Vivian: Laki-laki Jadi Perempuan* (1977), based on the true life story of Vivian Rubianti Iskandar, the first "official" Indonesian transsexual, is the only New Order film to depict a transsexual character.⁵ Released amid controversy over sex reassignment surgery, *Akulah Vivian: Laki-laki Jadi Perempuan* focuses on Vivian (played by Vivian Rubianti herself) as a frustrated young man who is under strong pressure to marry. Growing up in a conventional family, Vivian decides to escape her family and is adopted by *tante* (auntie) Lis in a beauty salon. After a long process and great effort, Vivian convinces her father of the significance of the genital operation for her. The film ends with all her family members supportively accompanying her to Singapore (Kristanto, 1995, p. 152). The fact that there is only one film that represents a transsexual character in the New Order era and one film in the post-New Order period indicates that transsexualism has made little impact on Indonesian filmmakers and their audiences.

The representation of *waria* as a cross-dresser which serves as the object of comedy to the audience also appeared in *Catatan Harian Si Boy*, the series in the mid '80s to the mid '90s. In the film, there is a male character named Emon who hilariously plays a very feminine role. Although there is no accurate narrative explanation about the sexual identity of Emon, Boy's closest friend, ideologically, Emon is the representation of a *waria* character who receives a pretty good response from the viewers. In the Reformasi era, the character of a *waria* was presented in some films such as *D'Bijis* by Rako Prijanto (2007), *Lovely Man* (2011) by Teddy Soeriaatmadja, and *Madame X* (2011) by Lucky Kuswandi. The last two films received both national and international awards.

Betty and the Process of Becoming a Waria

Betty Bencong Slebor begins with a narrative showing Betty wearing knee-length blouse that reveals her calves and her high-heeled shoes. She wears a hair bun a la Dharma Wanita⁶ members, which is popular at that time. The combination of modern fashion and the hair bun distinguishes Betty's style from dress worn by *warias* today. Sharyn Davies (2007) argues that a contemporary *waria* in Indonesia cannot escape the influence of transnational global discourse in selecting everyday clothing.⁷ The way Betty dresses (*dendong-waria* language) does not fully adopt Western femininity as Sharyn observed contemporary *warias*, rather it still adopts local femininity (especially the hair bun).

For Betty, the hair bun she wears is part of her "personality." When Nasir, a fellow servant who also works for Bokir's family, mock her hair bun as obsolete, Betty replies bluntly that the hair bun is the personality and

the “spare tire” that is attached to her. “*Biarin ketinggalan zaman, ini khan kepribadian*” (“Let it be outdated, it is personality”). Betty’s hair bun draws Nasir’s attention. It is also the tool to “test his personality.” One day, Nasir tries to mess up Betty’s hair bun using a bamboo pole from the attic. The hair bun is dislodged. In a campy behavior, Betty perceives it as harassing her personality as a woman. This scene shows a smart parody of the narrative of this film, that for *warias* in those days, they imagine the hair bun as part of their femininity. Hair bun makes them a perfect woman. The type of hair bun Betty chooses is a big one as is commonly worn by urban mothers.

Interesting to observe that the hair bun worn by Betty is eventually detached because the lady of the house (Nasir’s wife) suggests Betty to wear simple clothing. Betty then lets loose her short hair without a hair bun. She then leaves the traditional ways and begins to dress in a modern way as suggested by her lady of the house. Betty also leaves the sarong she wore during her early days with the family. A scene shows how Bokir kisses Betty because Betty wore the clothes Nasir’s wife had given her. This hilarious scene shows that basically there is no significant difference between the masculine and feminine body.

Waria: Between Femininity and Masculinity

Femininity and masculinity is a social construction that is attached to a person based on sexual identity. Occupation, role, and behavior affect the construction of masculinity and femininity. The occupation as parking attendant, for example, is constructed as a job fit only for men because it requires high masculinity. The process of subject formation in determining one’s masculinity and femininity is influenced by the dominant ideology where one belongs. During the process, an attraction within an individual whether to obey, reject, or modify occurs. Judith Butler (1990, 1993) uses the term performativity to show that masculinity and femininity are not static concepts but are influenced by the concept of citation or adoption of existing concepts or constructions. In this case, performativity distinguishes an act as “voluntaristic, optional, and willful, or imitative, merely playing a role” (Butler as cited in Eves, 2004, p. 496).

In *Betty Bencong Slebor*, Betty always dresses like a woman: putting lipstick on, wearing hair bun and accessories commonly worn by ideal woman especially in her daily activities as a servant. An interesting scene shows Betty wearing a hair bun, *sarong* and short shirt as she does the laundry. Betty often performs this combination of masculinity and femininity. It indicates that Betty distinguishes herself by not discarding the masculine side and immersing herself in the feminine side. This is not only shown in the choice of clothing but also in her physical strength. An

interesting scene is when her master's car break downs and Betty is asked to push the car. She replies: "*Mana bisa tuan, saya tidak kuat, tuan...saya khan lembut*" ("How can I? I'm not strong... I am gentle"). Betty's sentence indicates that she is a woman who does not have the strength or masculinity of a man as imagined by his master. Interestingly, Betty's masculinity is not completely vanished and it is used by Betty in critical situations. For example, in the scene when Betty buys 1 quintal of rice and carries it using a pedicab (*becak*). The pedicab driver is not strong enough to pedal due to his thin body. Betty spontaneously mocks the pedicab driver's masculinity and when the road ascends, the pedicab stops. Betty is upset and throws the pedicab driver to the field. Betty intelligently shows fluidity between masculinity and femininity. As someone who is biologically male, for Betty, the reason of the pedicab driver to stop pedalling because the load is too heavy is a lame excuse.

This is evidenced in the way Betty throws the pedicab driver to the field and replaces the pedicab driver. Betty mocks the pedicab driver's masculinity. This scene clearly shows that maleness and femaleness are coexistent, not fixed and mutually exclusive. Another scene involving a negotiation of masculinity and femininity is when Betty suddenly needs to pee as she is in a field. Betty spontaneously squats, imitating the way women urinate. Men generally stand when they urinate. Betty seems to have adopted femininity quite well and straddles masculinity and femininity hilariously and playfully.

Camp

In the study of queer theory, camp is the negotiation of masculinity and femininity performed by sexual minority in an effort to defend its adherent and negotiate the repressive dominant ideology. The following subsections specifically discuss campy and performativity as parts of the negotiation of masculinity and femininity often performed by queer people as represented in the film.

Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004, 2006) define camp as "a sensibility, a taste, and an aesthetic, and it shares similarities with literary devices such as parody, irony, and satire. Camp can be both a reception strategy as well as a mode of cultural production" (2006, p. 119). Camp is never a thing or person per se, but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, and gayness.⁸ In other words, camp means parody, irony and satire used by queer people by combining theatrical elements and exaggeration for the purpose of parodying "the hostile environment." As a strategy to survive in a society that marginalizes them, camp emerges in the form of humor that seems to mock the condition it purports. Laughing at the self is one way

to survive and acknowledge marginal reality in everyday life. Specifically, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004, 2006) specify four elements of camp, namely; Irony, Aestheticism, Theatricality, and Humor. In the practice of *waria* life, these four elements may overlap one another.

In *Betty Bencong Slebor*, the representation of camp appears in the selection of language spoken by Betty. The use of low tone and shrill voice, a slightly slurred speech, and the dictions of the *Binan* language distinguish Betty from heterosexual men and women in general.⁹ For example, when Betty replies to Nasir's challenge that it is difficult for *waria* like her to get a job, Betty replies: "*Kalau guwe mau, parkir aja di Taman Lewong, Ngetong, Pasti Banyak Cukong*" ("If I could, I would park at Taman Lewong, waiting for passengers. There are many Chinese businessmen [there]").¹⁰ It means that if Betty could, she would choose to be a sex worker at Taman Lawang, a popular spot for *warias* in Jakarta to work in the sex industry.¹¹ Similarly, when Betty's lady of the house gives her used evening gowns, Betty looks very happy and replies "*Trimse Kamse, Nyonya*" ("Thank you, Mam"). The *Binan* language spoken by Betty is one of *waria* identity that cannot be separated in everyday life. The emergence of *Binan* language in this film shows that the language has long been recognized by *warias*, even in the 1970s when the film was produced.

The *Binan* language (queer language) functions as a code language or secret language in order to survive from the raid performed by officers in the scene when Betty and Nasir are going home from a party one night. Unexpectedly, they encounter a group of *warias* who are practicing self-defense. Suddenly they shout as they hear approaching policemen who are about to raid them. One *waria* screams: ..."*Aduh..ada pemeresonan*" ("Oh no.... inspection") *Pemeresonan* is a *Binan* language to refer to inspection (*pemeriksaan*) or raid (*razia*). The use of this *Binan* language is an example of camp that combines aesthetic and irony elements. It is aesthetic as the changes and additional suffix, such as *lewong* (originally *lawang*, Jakarta's popular spot for *warias*), *ngetong* (originally *ngetem*, work), *cukong* (Chinese Businessmen) aesthetically created terms that were originally only understood among *warias*, but later became slang among urban youth. This *Binan* language can also be interpreted as an irony because the terms the *warias* use often have very different meanings. For example, the word *sakit* (sick) is changed into *sakinah*. They often use the word *sakit* (sick) to describe their "sick" condition which means different from what is "normal." However, the term *sakinah* that they choose as the equivalent of the word *sakit* has a quite opposite meaning, namely; happy or prosperous. The term *sakinah* to replace *sakit* can be a satire for the social reality that they

experience. The existence of *warias* has been widely opposed by conservative religious circles who view *warias* as a group of “sick” people.

Performativity

One key element in queer theory is performativity as proposed by Judith Butler (1993). As in feminist studies that sees gender as a social construction, Butler based her theory on Carole S. Vance’s (1989) argument, which suggests that sexuality, as well as gender, is a social construction that is not static and ahistorical.¹² By developing Butler’s argument about the instability of sexuality as a category, Butler believes that sexuality and sexual identity are parts of the performativity produced and reproduced through a series of repetition and citation (Butler, 1993). In her view, gender is a performance, which means that “There is no identity that exists behind the act that is supposedly ‘expressed’ by gender” (p. 18). Gender, for Butler, is an act which is obtained through repetitive training and is like a script while humans are like actors who make it alive through a series of continuous training by performing the act (Butler, 1993).

The process of continuous training and imitation, as stated by Butler (1993), is part of the process of producing and reproducing identity, and in the case of the *warias*, a process of imitation, a process of performativity to prove that they are “authentic women.” In relation to the difference in sexual identity between homosexuality and heterosexuality, Judith Butler argues about the fluidity of both limits. For Butler, homosexuality and heterosexuality are not fixed categories. A person is merely in a condition of “being straight” or “being queer.” The interplay between being straight and being queer becomes an essential element in transgender studies due to their in-between-ness. Susan Stryker (1988) states that transgenderism and the transgender phenomena “disrupt and denaturalize Western’s concept of ‘normal’ reality” (p. 147).

Interplay between being straight and being queer is often performed by Betty suggesting that the differences between the two are very liquid. For example, when Nasir annoyingly tries to dislodge Betty’s hair bun, Betty spontaneously shouts: “*Eeeh, jahiliah loe, aduh...pulangin dong, ban serep gue diambil*” (“Eeeh, you are so annoying, ouch...give it back, you’ve taken my spare tire”). While previously, Betty admitted to her lady of the house that the hair bun is a personality; this time she considers her hair bun as a “spare tire,” something (identity) that is of secondary importance, literally meaning spare. Betty’s liquid and always contextual view (depending on whom she is speaking to and where she is) is also seen in Elvi Sukaesi’s birthday party where Betty enjoys dancing with Nasir. She does not wear her hair bun anymore. She replaces it with a dress. This scene, referring to

Butler's theory of performativity, indicates that Betty is being straight. In another scene, Betty vulgarly shows the audience that she is a queer, a *waria*, when her master's car breaks down and she needs to find a wet washcloth. Spontaneously, Betty looks for water in the river and uses her bra and falsies fabric as a wet washcloth. This scene is not only hilarious, it also shows that Betty mocks and parodies the tight boundaries between being straight and queer, between male and female identity, at the same time. For Betty, the difference lies only in the way she performs, in her fashion that "imitates" women. This means that gender identity is just how it is performed, not something that is essential and standard. This also happens in the scene when Betty is arrested by a police officer for not being able to show an ID card.¹³ Betty responds relaxedly to questions from the police officer and tells him that her real name is Maun, as written on the ID card, not Betty, as she has been using. Without guilt and clumsiness, Betty admits that she chose the name Betty to make her name look cool and sounds modern. This scene shows the playfulness performed by Betty. Her identities as Maun and Betty (male and female identity) become an issue when she is "being straight" and "being queer"—an interplay and performativity which are exchanged and which complement each other.

Self-Identity and the Sense of the Self



Figure 1. Betty with her Dharma Wanita's bun as part of her local feminine identity

The last question in this study is about how Betty sees herself. The fact that Betty is biologically male and since childhood received learning about masculinity in the family and society makes her experience a sense of incompatibility between her male body and female soul. A model of masculinity that *warias* experience and learn would collide. The

incompatibility to the concept of ideal masculinity in society in general and family in particular will be a serious issue if a *waria* cannot get beyond this stage properly.¹⁴ The majority of *warias* leave their nuclear family and migrate to the city since they feel the incompatibility between the masculinity imposed on them and the femininity they feel. Thus, the sense

of the self is mainly influenced by interactions with senior *warias* in an exchange of experiences about mobility across city or country. The concept of transnational images of femininity and body modification in order to achieve an ideal female body as expected is formed by several factors, namely; mobility, the concept of local culture on women, and interrelated socioeconomic factors (Davies, 2010, p. 142).

In *Betty Bencong Slebor*, for example, on the first day of her arrival at Bokir's home, Betty enters the wrong room. Betty notices too late the writings on Nasir's bedroom door which says "Do not Disturb, *Lain Jenis Dilarang Masuk*" ("Do not Disturb, No Admittance for Others"). Nasir is angry when Betty enters his room while he is taking a bath and wearing only a towel. Nasir asked: "*Jenis loe apa sih? Laki atau perempuan?*" ("What are you? Male or female?") Betty replies: "Mix *dobel*" ("Double Mix"). Betty's reply indicates how she looks at herself. The sense of self that Betty understands is that she is a *waria*, not a woman. The subjectivity as a *waria* is seen in another scene when Betty is arrested by a police officer following a raid on ID cards. Coquettishly and innocently, Betty responds that she is in a position between Maun in her ID card and Betty in reality. While working for Bokir, Betty learns to explore the feminine space, especially from her lady of the house who behaves positively toward her. Betty's masculinity is often tested by Nasir. However, Betty's femininity is actually strengthened through her interaction with her lady of the house and Elvy Sukaesih, another important character in the film.

Betty's view about her subjectivity as a *waria* indicates stages of a process that she went through as she learned from the surrounding environment. Her identity and how she sees herself get clearer when she and Nasir are fired. When they both try to apply to work for Sukaesih Elvy, Nasir asks why Betty chooses to be a *waria*. Spontaneously, Betty replies: "*Tau deh, tadinya sih patah hati, putus asa jadi laki-laki coba-coba kesana kemari nyari kerjaan...nyoba jadi begini eeh urusannya jadi lancar..jadi dames.. wadam...eeh tau-tau keterusan*" ("I don't know, I was desperate, desperate being a man, trying hard to look for a job...and I tried to be like this and everything went well...becoming a *wadam* and I suddenly couldn't stop"). Betty's reply shows the initial process of becoming and being a *waria*. Betty does not consider herself as a female, the target gender. She perceives and recognizes herself as a *wadam*, the third gender.¹⁵ Betty's reply also explains that the economic motive of seeking employment plays a role in her choice as a *waria*, not something that is perceived as a call or something innate.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that at the time this film was made in 1978, the profession as a *waria* (perhaps) was still promising because their population

was relatively small and employment opportunities for them in arts was more promising.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, there are some conclusions to be drawn. First, *Betty Bencong Slebor*, which was made in 1978, clearly shows a cultural product that cannot be separated from gender construction and sexuality that developed at that time. It is interesting to note that for her lady of the house, Betty's *waria*-ness becomes a powerful way to fight the patriarchal hegemony performed by Bokir, a husband who often cheats on his wife by having trysts with his servants. This film also shows how the conspiracy performed by Betty and Mansur once again breaks Bokir's ambition to marry Elvy Sukaesih. Although such narrative is a cliché formula in comedy films to invite the audience to laugh, at the same time it can also be read that the patriarchal hegemony performed by Bokir fails because of Betty. At this point, Betty becomes "a shield" for her lady of the house and Elvy as well.

Second, Betty who works as a servant undergoes the process of selfhood that she learned from her lady of the house, not from the *waria* community (especially senior *warias*), who serves as her mentor and protector as well as a patron of this subculture (Krostchak, 2010). The question is whether Betty's performativity in this film is something that Eves (2004) termed as "voluntaristic, optional and willful or imitative, merely playing roles" (p. 496). In *Betty Bencong Slebor*, imitative role playing as a *waria* seem to be more dominant. Betty's motivation to become a *waria* due to employment reason makes Betty's performativity economically motivated. However, performativity can also be a tool to negotiate heteronormativity. Betty uses *waria*-ness as the agency for economic self-actualization. Thus, *Betty Bencong Slebor* deals sympathetically with the *waria* character that relates to indigenous Indonesian understanding of sexual diversity. By opposing the mainstream perception of masculinity and femininity, the film breaks social taboo and reveals that sexualities and gender identities as Butler (1990) argues, are "a doing" not "a being" (p. 33).

Despite its subversive qualities, the film also raises an ambiguity since Betty's erotic desire is not discussed (Murtagh, 2013). The issue of *a-sexualization* of *waria* subjectivity may be seen as one of their *cultural marginalities* that is not easily defined.¹⁷ *In-betweenness* is often misunderstood. In this respect, this film is precious for its attempt to "help to understand the ambiguity and incompleteness in life" (p. 11) as Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (2007) have argued in defining the notion of cult film.

Betty Bencong Slebor also affirms the role of Benjamin Sueb as the director

and the main protagonist in this comedy who tries to portray the world of a (migrant) transgender who came to Jakarta for economic reasons. Jakarta as a metropolitan city is an alternative space for migrants or outsiders who seek economic survival. David Hanan and Basoeki Koesasi (2011) state that in his comedy films, Benjamin acts more as “an outsider seeking reciprocity in a changing and increasingly aloof modernizing Jakarta society” (p. 74). Betty as a lower-class *waria* is integrated in and becomes an important part in the circle of the world-class *Gedongan* (wealthy classes) Bokir family.

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Notes

[1] The film title *Betty Bencong Slebor* may translate as Betty, the eccentric Bencong (cf. Murtagh's Betty the scatty Bencong, 2013, p. 23).

[2] The concept of 'family'ism is also suggested by Saya Shiraishi in her book *Young Heroes: The Indonesian Family in Politics* (1997). She suggests that there is a family hierarchy that is always visible in every situation, especially the hierarchy between father and child. The father provides happiness and is the decision-maker, the child receives this 'gift' and learns to be mature and not to make his own decision.

[3] *Waria* has many local language equivalents, such as *bandhu* (Madurese), *bentji* (Balinese), *khuntsa* (Arabic), as well as popular slang terms *banci* and *bencong*. Following Murtagh (2013, p. 47), I use the term *waria* since it is more neutral, "unless referring to the usage in particular film".

[4] John Phillips (2006, p. 9) defines transsexual as "persons who are either 'pre-op' or 'post-op'—that is, whether or not they have undergone penectomy, hysterectomy, phallo – or vaginoplasty".

[5] Vivian Rubianti (formerly Iwan Rubianto Iskandar)'s sex-change operation, which was performed in Singapore on 8 January 1973, received extensive press coverage. In November 1973, she won legal recognition of her change of sex (Boellstorff, 2004, p. 188, fn 29). Vivian's success story led to "a general legal, political and religious consensus permitting sex-change operations in Indonesia" (Boellstorff, 2004, p. 188, fn 29).

[6] Dharma Wanita is a women organization whose members are the wives of Indonesian civil servants. In their regular meeting, they wear uniform and the way they dress tends to be similar to the former first lady Tien Soeharto that is wearing kebaya and a bun.

[7] In her paper entitled *Consuming the global: transgender subjectivities and the bodies in Indonesia* (2007), Sharyn Davies argues that through consumption and reformation, contemporary *warias* in Indonesia hold a unique position as they modify their bodies through femininity such as plastic surgery. Interestingly, the femininity model they adopt is not local femininity but western-femininity.

[8] Camp, according to Bruce Rodgers in his book entitled *Gay Talk (1979)*, first emerged in the 16th century as a term used in theatre in the UK. This term was used to refer to theatrical men wearing women clothing and adopting women femininity especially rural women

[9] Binan language is the language formerly used by gay community. The formation of word establishment is derived from the Improved Spelling Rules (Ejaan Yang Disempurnakan - EYD) but undergoes some modifications especially for the two-syllable word in which its second syllable is changed into the suffix *ong*. For example, *Laki* (man) becomes *Lekong*, *Mati* (dead) becomes *Metong* (Boellstroff, 2005).

[10] The constructive portrayal of Betty as a non-stereotypical *waria* is reinforced in her decision to be a domestic helper, instead of a sex worker in Taman Lawang. Besides beauty work, it is widely believed that *waria* works as prostitutes since employment options are limited and the bureaucratic system discriminates against their potential to engage in professional work (Kortschak, 2010)

[11] Most *warias* work as sex worker. Although they have a steady job, *nyebong* or down the road is considered as Rite of Passages of the *warias* for self-actualization, to *dress up* and find sexual partner. Economic motivation is not solely their primary purpose, rather to find the imaginary space, build solidarity and for self-actualization in exploring the world of *waria* (Atmojo, 1987).

[12] Carole S Vance's article entitled "Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality" in 1989 became the foundation of the social constructionism. Vance deconstructed previous ideology which believed that sexuality is a biological reality that is 'natural' and can not be changed. Vance argues that sexuality is 'a product of human action, and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology or innate sex drive'. Sexuality is mediated by historical and cultural factors. The social constructionism also believes that physically identical sexual acts may have different meaning or social significance and subjective meaning depends on how it is defined and understood in different cultures and through the process of historical range (Vance, 1989, p. 13-14).

[13] In the real world of transgenders, the issue of ID card is sensitive because there has not been a recognition for the sexual identity as a transgender. Most of transgenders hold ID card with male name and sexual identity on it. In her biography, Dorce Gamalama (2005) tells the complexity of the process she has to go through legally in order to change the identity on ID card from male into female, from Dedi Yulardi into Dorce Ashadi. Many transgenders in Jogjakarta even do not have ID card because they are migrants from various regions. Without a birth certificate and Certificate of Family, the transgenders end up having no ID card. The absence of ID card makes it difficult for the transgenders to get access to health care and educational aid from the government (Widayanti, 2009).

[14] The issue of incompatibility to the concept of ideal masculinity expected by family becomes the reason for many transgenders to leave and run away from the family (Oetomo, 1996). Within the general context of Indonesian culture that embraces the principle of family, the function of boys as the head of the family, the husband and father is considered important (Boellstroff 2005, Suryakusuma, 1996). Indonesian queer films produced in 2003-2006 show that the main problems faced by transgenders are the issue of the acceptance of family and society and the issue between 'the relationship between sexuality, kinship and social responsibility' (Maimunah, 2008).

[15] The term the third gender was first used by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1994) to refer to men with souls and feelings as women. The term was later used by anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (1987) as he conducted a research in Sambia - Papua New Guinea to refer to local category *Kwolu-aatmwol* (intersex) that he could not find its counterpart in Western epistemology (Herdt, 1987, p. 17, 19). Herdt classification is later used by many other anthropologists to describe the richness of non-Western cultures regarding

variations of gender and sexuality beyond the category of binary opposition of male and female. The term the third gender is attached to *Hijra* community in India whose members is biologically born as men, having a sexual desire to men but dress and behave as women (Davies, 2010).

[16] It is interesting to note that there is a suspicion and difference between the 'original transgender' and 'false transgender' among the transgender community. The term original transgender refers to those who became transgenders due to their call since childhood while the term false transgender refers to those who *nyebong* or sell sex as transgender but they actually are homosexual men who sell sex to other homosexual men. The term false transgender is attached by those who perceive themselves as original transgender to the gays who 'disguises as a transgender' (Widayanti, 2009).

[17] The issue of a-sexualization of *waria* protagonist is also portrayed in Firman Triyadi's *Panggil Aku Puspa* (call me Puspa, 2004). Said, the *waria* character is depicted as a devout and responsible father. *Waria*-ness is not an immoral lifestyle choice, and is not something to be stigmatised. However, the film does not provide rooms for Said to exercise his sexual desire.

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