The islanders themselves, after years of Japanese occupation, were only too glad to have the Americans there, even after the bombing and shelling destroyed nearly every living thing on the atolls. The Americans, however, weren’t quite so gracious when the British attempted to re-establish themselves. Newly arrived, the British resident commissioner ran up the Union Jack only to have American marines shoot it full of holes. Some villages petitioned the US to transfer the islands to American rule, and indeed the US and Britain engaged in lengthy sovereignty disputes over some of the islands. Having occupied them, the US felt it had established rights to them. The US, of course, did establish a trusteeship over the Micronesian islands it seized from Japan, but as in Vietnam and elsewhere, decided in this case to allow its allies to retain the colonial possessions it had wrested from Japan by force of arms.

In what is in some ways the most striking incongruity, we learn that the Gilbertese actually contributed relatively huge amounts of money—many thousands of pounds—to alleviate postwar hunger in Britain, despite the fact that Britain had done nothing to protect them from foreign invasion. This small and deceptively simple book contains many such gems and is well worth the attention of anyone interested in how the modern Pacific became modern.

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Documentary Film Reviews

TALES OF THE WARIA. Written, produced and directed by Kathy Huang; a co-production of the Independent Television Service (ITVS) with assistance from the Center for Asian American Media; editor, Carla Gutierrez. Harriman, NY: distributed by Transit Media Communications, 2011. 1 DVD (56 min.) In Indonesian with English subtitles. Colleges/Universities, US$295.00; High Schools/Public Libraries, US$100.00; Home use, US$25.00. Url: www.thewaria.com


In the past few years, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) communities in Indonesia have been facing greater challenges due to the increase of intolerance expressed in the public sphere. In 2010, the
ultra-conservative Muslim group FPI (Islamic Defenders Front) forced the closure of LGBT-related events, including a workshop on transgender issues in Depok, the ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) conference in Surabaya, and the Q! Film Festival in Jakarta. Following these raids, LGBT advocacies in the forms of art and activism continued with extra caution as there was no protection guaranteed by the police. While in the previous years the Q! Film Festival was celebrated publicly by urban film goers, in 2011 and 2012 I attended the festival opening (if one could even call it a festival at all) in a clandestine mode. It felt like going to your neighbour’s private party, with the schedule for screenings updated on a daily basis via email. But in those two years I also watched more LGBT-themed films, many of which were made by gay and lesbian filmmakers: Madame X (2010), Lovely Man (2011), Sanubari Jakarta (Jakarta Deep Down, 2012), Parts of the Heart (2012), and Children of Srikandi (2012).

The fall of the New Order authoritarian regime under Suharto in 1998 was followed by a more pressing and visible interrogation on the discourses of gender and sexuality. In 2003, the film Arisan (The Gathering), directed by female filmmaker Nia Dinata, portrays the first uncensored gay kissing on cinema. Whereas in the New Order period homosexual characters were victimized, pathologized, and “cured,” the gay relationship in Arisan is described as a natural part of everyday life, and the process of coming out is intertwined with the characters’ realization to “be true to themselves” in a hypocritical society. However, post-1998 political reform has also paved the way to other forms of visibility. Along with the implementation of sharia law in some regions, militant groups, in the name of religion, have been conducting protests against female performers deemed as morally loose or sexually “deviant” individuals. The debates around sexuality and morality were intensified when the government passed the Pornography Law in 2008, which, according to both secular and Muslim activists, would legitimize the criminalization of women’s bodies. Despite some revision, the Pornography Law still retains heteronormative-biased articles, including the one that defines homosexuality as a form of deviance.

It is within this disheartening political climate that two films, Tales of the Waria (2011, dir. Kathy Huang) and Children of Srikandi (2012, dir. the Srikandi Collective), are particularly important. Tales of the Waria documents the lives of four transgender women in Makassar. During the process, Asian-American director Kathy Huang consulted with the local transgender community (one of the characters in the film, Tiara, also serves as associate producer of the film). Children of Srikandi started with a workshop, led by German filmmakers Angelika Levi and Laura Coppens, that brought together eight queer women filmmakers in Indonesia. As stated on its website, Children of Srikandi is “the first film by queer women about queer women from Indonesia.” In addition to the crucial issues addressed in both films, the transnational collaborative processes should be underlined as they would
potentially lead to more affiliations and exchanges on gender and sexuality issues in a wider cinematic and social landscape.

The two films differ in their artistic approaches but both emphasize the agency of queer subjects in positioning themselves within their immediate environment. *Tales of the Waria* responds to how *waria*—a combination of two Indonesian words, *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man)—has been historically situated within the national imagination. The waria subjects have long populated Indonesian cinematic screens as comic figures; they are both loveable and laughable. As suggested by anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, *warías* are highly visible in Indonesian culture in comparison to gay men and *lesbi* (lesbians), yet this does not necessarily mean full acceptance. In Indonesian heteronormative society, many *warías* remain second-class citizens with limited professional options.

What the viewer learns from the documentary *Tales of the Waria* is not merely the “truth” about *warías* but how the *waria* subjects/characters participate as performers of truths. Tiara, Mami Ria, Suharni and Firman, the four characters in the film, occupy a typical *waria* space as performers, hairdressers and make-up artists, yet in that limited space each of them negotiates with the spatial confinement by performing their “true” desires. HIV-infected Suharni is both a breadwinner and homemaker, and there is no part in the film in which she portrays herself as a victim. Tiara recalls her past as a boy who did not fit in and, proudly, shows her mother photographs of herself in women’s dresses and full make up. The mother, who remains ambivalent about her son’s identity as a *waria*, praises her beauty and calls her “a real woman.”

The film is captivating precisely because it does not try to erase ambivalences through the portrayal of idealized *waría* warriors. The desire for everlasting love is a theme that binds these characters, and in their journey they might end up in unexpected places. Mami Ria, a salon owner, considers plastic surgery to keep her relationship with a married police officer. To fulfill his parents’ expectations, Firman discards his *waria* identity to live as a married man with two children. It is easy to dismiss these characters as conformists, but they have revealed themselves, to the camera, as transgender subjects who face and deal with their own ambivalences. In the end, realizing that he could not repress his desire to return to his *waria* community, Firman acknowledges his fractured self. Mami Ria makes a bold move to end her affair with the police officer, though of course such decision does not come without regret.

The individual stories of eight queer women filmmakers in *Children of Srikandi*, transcending the borders between documentary, fiction and experimental film, are woven by a *wayang* (shadow puppet) narrative featuring an androgynous mythological female warrior Srikandi from the Mahabharata. The story of Srikandi desiring another woman, juxtaposed by the real-life story of the transgender puppet master Soleh who describes
himself as a “man with woman’s soul,” is in itself very promising and calls for further elaboration. The myth of Srikandi was in fact used by the leftist women’s organization Gerwani, which was banned by the Suharto regime, defamed, and later accused of promoting lesbianism. However, since each filmmaker only has 10 minutes to present her individual story, depth and complexities can be a challenge.

Lesbians face different—and one could argue greater—challenges in Indonesia. Compared to the *waría* and gay male communities, the lesbian communities tend to be more discreet. As the narrator in Stea Lim’s segment in the film explains, a woman in Indonesia is expected to be “a good daughter, wife, and mother,” and a lesbian could only fulfill one-third of these expectations. With double discrimination as both women and lesbians, “coming out” could be a very painful process. The film’s tagline, “breaking the code of silence,” is not an overstatement since silence was (and is still) pervasive. Hence, despite the limited space for exploration, the filmmakers have courageously presented their views on various issues, ranging from the memory of growing up as queer, the tension with their families and religion, and confining labels given in the society (as well as within their own lesbian circles). The value of *Children of Srikandi* lies in its process, of “coming out” as a collective, and within it filmmakers help one another as actors and collaborators.

Both *Tales of the Waria* and *Children of Srikandi* engage with the question that might be posed by many foreign audiences: How do queer subjects live in a country with the largest Muslim population in the world? In her article on the making of *Tales of the Waria* published in the *Huffington Post* (2012), Kathy Huang wrote that she went to Makassar with questions about religion and proposed this topic to the *warías*. One of the *warías* replied, “What for?” For many Indonesians who are Muslim by birth, religion could be both present and absent, playing a significant role only as a marker of a family gathering ritual, every Idul Fitri holiday. The fact that religion and transgender identities could conflate in unthinkable ways, shown by Suharni praying at the mosque as a man, is probably not surprising for many Makassar *warías*. For them, the ways in which they negotiate their *waría* lifestyle and Islam were less urgent than what Huang describes as their “more immediate concern”: the search for an everlasting love. The emphasis on love strategically gives a different view of Islam, which, again, might surprise foreign audiences more than Indonesians, and calls attention to how the transgender subjects want themselves to be seen. Perhaps, if one would pose a critique, the search for love, as in many other films with the same theme, might create a distance between the film and the inseparable, larger social reality: the cases of violence against transgender individuals in many parts of Indonesia.

Violence against LGBT people in the name of religion has been worsening, and this is what *Children of Srikandi* wants to address. In the segment *Jlamprong*, Eggie Dian, director and character in the film, narrates
her experience living on the streets of Yogyakarta where she became the
target of violence by the police and ultra-conservative religious groups. Eggie Dian is a survivor and her story must be heard, but the juxtaposition
between the narrative and the images prevents us from grasping the complex
issues involving politics, the state apparatus, and the religious groups in
Indonesia. As she recalls how she “was abused physically and sexually by
the police, and by a religious male group from the neighborhood,” the film
displays images of the FPI’s protest against the ILGA conference (with an
FPI member writing “teroris moral”/“moral terrorist” on the gate) and
the Q! Film Festival incident. The film uses footage from a documentary
on the FPI’s raid against the festival, in which a man with a turban speaks
into a microphone, “Screening gay and lesbian films and free sex is against
religion!” While the violent acts against the ILGA and the Q! Film Festival
are real and should be addressed, they are not automatically the same as
those suffered by street children like Eggie. The images might reduce the
“religious male group from the neighborhood” to the FPI, whereas in small
towns there are many more groups, with less visibility, which operate with
the same mechanism as the FPI.

The two films, however, have done their parts in creating spaces for
queer subjects to tell their stories, and this is a highly significant political
agenda. What future films on Indonesian LGBT could elaborate on further
is the question of the role of the government, which has been very slow in
responding to discrimination against sexual minorities and violence in the
name of religion. In LGBT-themed films I watched in the past two years, the
state is largely absent. In the post-authoritarian context, such absence might
reflect the difficulty in reformulating the relationship between the citizens
and the state. While Indonesians have engaged with the issues of identity
politics to redefine the nation after Suharto, new ideas of nationhood are
permeated by skepticism and distrust over the competence of the state to
mediate tensions among citizens.

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