

The Many Shades of Shame in Indonesian Gender and Sexual Politics

Many scholars working on emotion cultures in Indonesian societies have asserted the integral role of *malu* (shame or shame-like emotions) in people's everyday interactions (Geertz 1973; Keeler 1983; Stodulka 2009; Beatty 2005; Boellstorff and Lindquist 2004; Fessler 2004). One of the most prominent studies on this topic is conducted by Birgitt Röttger-Rössler (2013) who draws on the "Indonesian-model of shame" based on findings in her ethnographic fieldwork among the Makassar, in South Sulawesi Indonesia.

Through this model, Röttger-Rössler maps out that an individual shame reaction is triggered when (1) the self infringes certain social norms and they believe that others are aware of this, (2) other person misbehaved and this triggered either direct or indirect damage to the self, mainly due to shared contexts between the self and the other, and (3) the self encounters another who has higher status. In other words, this model of shame is "organized consistently in social-relational or dyadic terms: The shameful behaviour of one person always impacts on other persons as well; it also always diminishes and threatens the social integrity of others." (Röttger-Rössler 2013: 408).

Departing from Thomas Scheff's (1990) definition of shame as a social emotion arising from viewing oneself in the point of view of another, Röttger-Rössler debunks Scheff's account which locates shame as a negative assessment of the self, by arguing that the display of shame in many Indonesian societies is fundamentally viewed as a virtue. Those who "know shame" and consistently demonstrate it in everyday interactions are well respected and those who violate these norms and values can lose all claims to social recognition and support (see Fessler 2004). The productiveness of *malu* as a relational experience is also highlighted by Collins and Bahar (2000). Not only does shame regulate interactions between people from different social ranks and age, but it is also highly connected to notions of gender and sexuality:

as with the English concept of shame, *malu* is closely associated with sexuality. The Indonesian word for genitals (*kemaluan*) echoes the English expression 'private parts.' Furthermore, sexually provocative behaviour by self or others should elicit *malu* [...]. Gender-inappropriate behaviour causes both men and women to feel *malu*. A boy would feel *malu* if he behaved like a girl, for example by displaying tears in public (ibid., 42, italics in original).

The interconnections between shame, sexuality and gendered relations are further elaborated in a long list of Röttger-Rössler's scholarly works, among others in her comparative study on gender nonconforming persons in South Sulawesi and Southern Philippines (2009) and in her ethnographic elaboration on experiences of conjugal love and intimacy in Makasaris culture (2008). All of these key contributions have opened up multiple pathways of understanding within my own PhD research project on the affective lives of Muslim sexual and gender minorities in

Indonesia, in which Röttger-Rössler herself, whom I always addressed as *Bu* Birgitt (*Bu* or *Ibu* is an Indonesian honorific address to women) has been one of the supervisors. Röttger-Rössler's conceptualisations on shame have shed light on how it is not only shaping different facets of social life of the research participants but also being navigated by them¹.

In this article, I explore in three case studies how Röttger-Rössler's conceptualisations scaffolded my analysis on politics of gender and sexuality in Indonesia. The first one pertains to the role of co-shaming in an increasingly hostile Indonesian public discourse from 2016 to 2018, the second is on how shame emerges in the process of affective meaning-making in an online interaction between non-heterosexual subjectivities, and the third one is how shame which is tied to locally and religiously scripted gender roles is being played out in interpersonal relationships among a group of gay men in the northwesternmost region of Indonesia, Aceh. It is worth noting here that due to limited space, I shall provide the two former case studies as snippets whereas the full accounts of each case have been published elsewhere (see Thajib 2021, 2014). In the last section I shall present an ethnographic vignette to take a closer look at how the affective domain of shame is queered in everyday practices in Indonesia.

Co-shaming in anti-LGBT discourse

Co-shaming, according to Röttger-Rössler (2013: 408) is a phenomenon in Indonesia which has become a powerful means of social control, it refers to "a circumstance when a rule violation has become public, those persons who are associated with the transgressor also feel shame." Individuals may feel shame with and for those considered misbehaving not only due to familial ties or direct personal bonds but also due to shared association to a certain context, such as belonging to the same region, religious group and so on. This emotional response generally leads the persons enacting the shameful acts being admonished and ostracised.

In my own study context, shame saliently patterned the accelerating frequency and intensity of public controversies against sexual and gender minorities or the so-called "anti-LGBT" campaigns in Indonesia from 2016 to 2018 (Thajib 2021). In this period, not only members of sexual gender minorities are facing an array of condemnation in mass and social media, they were also intimidated in private domains and persecuted in public spaces. Within the anti-LGBT discourse, shame as a cultural model is embraced by a range of actors —state and non-state, political and religious— to describe and address people who do not conform to heterosexual and gender binary assumptions. The depiction of non-normative behaviours as a contagious disease, and the identification of people who are associated with them as paedophiles, destroyer of the nation's future, or moral terrorist (Boellstorff 2014) point to the many dimensions that shame mediates relationship between self and others.

The first dimension pertains to the role of shame as means of sanctioning and ostracising people who do not fit with normative sexual and gender assumptions, by shaming people who

1 Birgitt Röttger-Rössler's intellectual contributions, her conceptualisation of shame and beyond, have been very valuable not only in enabling me to develop critical insights on the Muslim queer affective world-making in Indonesia. They have also spurred the development of anthropology of emotion in Indonesia as a field onto an exciting direction. A path that I and others who may also have the privileges of engaging with her personally and/ or intellectually will for sure continue to take on.

self-identified as lesbian, gay and transgender persons. The second dimension corresponds to how the articulations of shame by the dominant forces of society are compounded by aggression and hostility. Tom Boellstorff (2004) describes how the assaults to the events held by local gay men and transwomen in Yogyakarta and Solo in early 2000s can be understood as a reaction of *malu* of normative men when they feel a particular kind of masculinised nationality is under threat. While Boellstorff is concerned with the nationalised form of masculinity as the source of this aggressive shame, his argument can be extended to the way shame circulates not only among those do not fit to sexual and gender norms, but also implicates others with whom they associate or with whom they are associated with in a specific context (Röttger-Rössler 2013). In this case, shame is not only felt by some of the Indonesian political figures, religious leaders and other moral entrepreneurs with regards to the presence of LGBT but also due to the fact that they share a common context (of religion, nationality and locality) with the marginalised others.

This point brings me to the third dimension, namely, the deployment of shame as political means to break with moral laxity of the past such as represented by the ambiguous attitudes (often inaptly rendered as ‘tolerance’) towards sexual and gender minorities in the previous eras (Platt, Davies and Bennett 2018). Tapping into the heightening sense of piety in Indonesian public spheres after the political reform of *Reformasi* in 1998, various agents of moral control urges that it is not enough to merely treat sexual and gender minorities with half-hearted acceptance, ignorance, nor silent indignation. They raise demand for a collective form of moral disciplining, including through the use of violence. This kind of narrative also builds on shaming out parts of society who seemingly remain indifferent or morally unaffected by the increasing visibility of queer representation in various media outlets. According to Helena Flam, shaming out involves “asserting oneself and one’s own moral standards. It implies a feeling of superiority towards the other who claims more than deserved status and/or power” (Flam 2005: 30). On that note, the treatment of LGBT as “shameful other” is not only about reproducing stigma and discrimination, but also a bid to generate wider social participation toward the moral rectitude of the nation from the perspective of higher moral authority.

Globalisation of shame

Whereas in the previous section, the model of shame has been instrumentalised as a rhetoric for marginalising people of non-heteronormative genders and sexualities, here I focus on how those being subjected to this violent discourse navigate the model of shame for social justice agenda. For this purpose, I draw on my analysis on emotional narratives that circulate online following the dispersal of ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) regional conference in Surabaya, East Java, by police under local Islamist groups’ pressure in 2010 (Thajib 2014). The materials highlighted here are collected from the news section of *fridae.asia*, a Singapore-based online platform for Asian gay and lesbian community, specifically from the comment section under one news entry entitled “Islamic protestors force evacuation of ILGA conference participants in Surabaya” (published on 26 March 2010)².

2 <http://www.fridae.asia/newsfeatures/2010/03/26/9786.islamic-protestors-force-evacuation-of-ilga-conference-participants-in-surabaya>. Accessed on March 2nd, 2012.

For example, in the online commentary lines, a user which goes by the name of “Anteos” expressed that they are ashamed of and angered by Indonesian religious officials’ who had committed intolerant behaviours towards queer communities. Anteos also stated that the violent incident with ILGA have made them felt ashamed for being an Indonesian, and to some extent a Muslim, because this would make them ‘guilty by association’. As I have discussed in the full version of the paper, Anteos’s expression is one of few other similar narratives that are conditioned by their position of inhabiting the double status of being injured by the violent religious-national discourse while being associated with the violators due to their religious and national affinity.

In the study of lesbian and gay identity formation in the West, the feelings of shame have been largely coupled with pride in a psycho-political spectrum shaping and shaped by the desire to ‘come out’ (Britt and Heise 2000). In this perspective, for queer subjects, shame is perceived as a sense of failure before an idealised other and “experienced as an affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence” (Ahmed 2004: 107). The global formation of queer shame is locally reconfigured by these actors in the acts of circumventing the heteronormative and homophobic challenges of local websites (as well as everyday physical avenues).

The pairing of anger and shame within these online commentaries echoes the model of co-shaming (Röttger-Rössler 2013) which I have explained in the previous section. But rather than associating their shame to shared localities, religion etc, the commenters seek to address international audiences, especially queer ones. They do so by expressing emotives that can presumably connect them to the global (English-speaking) others who are assumed to share a similar experience of being shamed for their nonnormative desires. By not only addressing but also bearing witness to the ongoing violence towards sexual and gender minorities, the commenters aligned their *malu* to a globalised climate of shame against discriminatory practices and rights abuses towards LGBT people. Shame became an affective means of harnessing a “fellow-feeling” (Ahmed 2004) that can potentially generate solidarity with and from an imagined, global queer community. In these narratives, they no longer saw themselves as victims of violence in need of sympathy but rather as agents who bore witness to the precarious fate of sexual and gender minorities in Indonesia, which is actually, ultimately, their own.

Queering shame in Aceh

In the last part of this article, I focus on an ethnographic vignette on how shame shapes interpersonal relationship among a group of gay men in Aceh. All identifying information on the research protagonists has been removed from this article, and a pseudonym is assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The protagonists are Tino, and his friend Rafi. I spent most of my six months of fieldwork in a coastal town I called Rancong hanging out with both men. The following event took place in the holy month of Ramadhan in 2014.

It was around 6 p.m., the call for *buka puasa* (fast-breaking) was just announced through the speakers of the mosque towers when we arrived in a noodle-eating place in the centre of Rancong. We ordered two bowls of sugary drinks such as customarily practiced during the fasting month as they provide quick energy boost after a whole day of fasting. We were also waiting for Rafi who said that he would join us after attending the fast-breaking event at his new workplace, one of the private national bank branches in Rancong. While stirring his bowl of cold drinks

Tino admitted that he was not in the mood of seeing Rafi that evening. He just had a heated argument with Rafi the day before we met.

The quarrel between Tino and Rafi took place when they decided to kill time while waiting for fast-breaking by riding on a motorbike together. Tino was driving the motorbike while Rafi was sitting on the back. As they passed through the famous hang-out spot among the youth of Rancong located nearby the beach, Rafi saw two men passing next to them on a motorbike. Rafi seemed to be attracted to these men and instructed Tino to speed up their motorbike so that he could flirt with them. At first, Tino followed the instruction, but then Rafi started to wave his hands to these men in a cajoling way. This gesture made Tino upset and he decided to turn his motorbike the other way while scolding Rafi. "That will be the last time I will be in that situation like yesterday again with him, it is really, really embarrassing (*sangat-sangat memalukan*)," he continued complaining.

I had seen Rafi make similar gestures in other occasions when we roamed through the town on motorbikes. Tino was also present in these occasions, but usually, we would just laugh about it. So, I asked Tino why he was particularly upset as I thought he was used to seeing Rafi flaunting around whenever he saw someone who was attractive. Tino said:

no, but yesterday he was really vulgar (*vulgar sekali*), he approached people who are good-looking in his eyes or those he found of interest. So, he is really following what his heart tells him to do (*mengikuti banget kata hati*) that this person can be seduced - And the way he greeted them. And I was really embarrassed (*sangat malu*) because a lot of people here know me, I didn't want them to know. I told him that this is the last time he can do that... It was really uncomfortable (*risih*). I don't care if people say I am a hypocrite (*munafik*) or anything, it is just so uncomfortable. You saw it yourself, didn't you? When I was still studying in communication, I was often captured by a video camera for campus assignment, and when I saw myself in the video, my own side which is so effeminate (*menthel*), it is a big No! (*itu nggak banget*) I even condemned myself. Why was I so effeminate? Don't be too coquettish (*ceriwis*). After that I changed a lot, so now everyone said I am more charismatic on stage. I never exaggerate (*berlebihan*), except when I am joking (Audio-recorded conversation with Tino, 31 June 2014).

Tino's articulation of feeling embarrassed (*malu*) and discomfort (*risih*) was first and foremost tied to Rafi's sexual engagement (by means of cajoling) with other males in public space. He viewed that being in the proximity of Rafi, would jeopardise his masculine composure and could incriminate him with further stigmatisation. This is something that he had been trying to avoid, i.e. by restraining to appear effeminate (*menthel*), coquettish (*ceriwis*), exaggerated (*berlebihan*) while adjusting his daily conducts according to the culturally-authorised version of masculinity, i.e. being charismatic and showing restraint in one's social conduct.

Here, I want to further examine Tino's shameful response within the triangular relationship between masculinity, emotion, and interpersonal dynamics. A more liberal-leaning analysis might place Tino's emotions (shame, discomfort, self-condemnation) as a part of his personal failings, or even branding it as a form of "internalised homophobia". Internalised homophobia as a pathological term is introduced to describe a negative feeling towards one's own homosexuality (and to some extent one's own gender nonconforming behaviour). But following ongoing criticism to this psycho-pathologizing model of this practice (Love 2007; Herek 2004; Wickberg 2000), I also see the limitation in applying such contradictory feelings towards one's own

non-heteronormative sexuality and gender as a manifestation of “internalised homophobia.” Especially if we are to consider that this ambiguous keyword is often used reductively, as it is founded upon a positivistic bias towards certain attitudes (as confident, tolerant, self-accepting etc.) as a model for ‘natural’ personhood, over the pathological others.

Meanwhile, Tino’s articulation of shame, discomfort and self-loathing have a lot more to tell us than a simple manifestation of a psychopathological attitude. It points to the deeper notion of what does it mean to “live with injury without fixing it” (Love 2007). Furthermore, the ways internalised homophobia is employed in this particular discourse tends to annex socio-structural problems (gendered hierarchy, patriarchy, heterosexism, sexual prejudice) to personal psychology. In contrast, the stories that Tino told me; about the troubled feelings towards his social world and himself for not being able to fit in with dominant model of masculinity also emerge as a web of connections filled with gaps and ambiguities much more complex than the term internalised homophobia is able to purport.

This gap is particularly conspicuous if we are to take seriously the material, cultural and structural aspects in which Tino’s story is located. The first aspect stands out in his anticipation of being exposed to people who may have known him due to his public persona as a radio announcer in the relatively closed environment of Rancong. In the context of the local culture, in Aceh, the intertwinement of social status and shame is deepened through the local term of “*marwah*.” A word that Tino has also casually remarked on for a couple of times in situations where he was exposed to potentially shameful situation: “*Jangan sampai hilang marwahku*” (I don’t want to lose my *marwah*). *Marwah* is loosely translated from the Malay language *maruah*, which simultaneously connotes dignity, reputation, and masculinity. This term has been historically reproduced during the thirty years of violent sectarian conflict in the region which ended in 2006 (Fatah 2004).

In this case, the source of Tino’s fear of stigma as a non-masculine male intersects with the fear of losing face, which in his situation also could mean losing the source of livelihood as an entertainer. The second aspect points to the discourse of gender in the local context of Aceh. As highlighted by gender studies scholars (Jauhola 2012; Blackwood 2010), Islamic discourse plays a central role in Aceh and in the general Indonesian society, through the overlapping of sexed bodies and gender social attributes: Together they are the true manifestation of ‘*kodrat*’ (God’s will). As Blackwood explains: “Indonesians express a concordant relationship between bodies and behaviors. When people speak of *kodrat perempuan* or *kodrat laki-laki*, they are referring to nature or character (*kodrat*) of women and men (...) This relationship means that in the dominant Indonesian sex/gender system, one’s gender attributes are seen as naturally and indivisibly part of one’s sex” (2010: 40, italics in original).

So far Tino’s acuteness of shame has been populated by his own and what he perceived as Rafi’s failures in keeping up with *kodrat* as a mixture of locally and religiously scripted gender roles. This feeling has further attenuated the ways in which Tino practically embodied his desires for intimacy with other men. Unlike Rafi, Tino said that his ways of approaching other men are much more casual and personal. He mainly got to know them first through online dating platforms where they could remotely share personal information. Once he sensed that there are mutual interests between him and a potential lover, he would propose an actual meeting over coffee. He told me that during the first dates, to impress his dates, he would try his best to appear manly (*kebawa laki*). I asked him “how do you then make them feel attracted to you?” to which he answered:

by caring (*perhatian*), I provide care for him. If someone is in a relationship with me no women can beat the way I care for men. I also tell the guy I like exactly that after we are close of course. And if I have a strong feeling towards him, I will tell him, although it would risk him leaving me, I don't care. As long as I have set my feelings free (*memerdekakan rasa*) toward you, my inner self is not repressed (*tertekan batin*). I was being upfront but not vulgar of course. (Audio-recorded conversation with Tino, 31 June 2014).

For Tino, the everyday performance of same-sex desire would involve making an “excessive effort” to navigate the normative constructions that are built around caring as gender-specific feelings (women are more caring than men) in order to garner feelings of intimacy from the subject of his affection. Tino's attribution on the gendered roles of in performing care can also be extended to the gendered dimension of same-sex practice. To him still, his expressions of attraction unlike Rafi's, are still within the limit of cultural appropriateness.

The popular imagination on male homosexuality in my daily interactions with the Muslim queer community in Indonesia and the physical act of sex among men – which sometimes includes anal intercourse – is also tied to gendered hierarchy. In this sense, taking the sexual position of a ‘top’ (the insertive partner in anal sex) and a ‘bottom’ (the receptive partner) are hyper-identified as markers of a gender gap in a gay male intimacy. As Vietnamese-American queer scholar, Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014: 6–7) reveals:

in a patriarchal society, to bottom is akin to being penetrated and dominated like a woman (...) The top position is seen as being ‘active,’ ‘dominant’ and ‘masculine,’ while the bottom role consigns one to the less privileged side of the binary: ‘passive,’ ‘submissive,’ and ‘feminine’ (p. 6–7).

Rumours and jokes about who is top and bottom frequently circulate in the daily interactions between myself and Tino, Rafi and their circle of friends in Rancong. Being called a “bottom” often used as means for ridiculing each other, while when someone claims one is a top, they were also received a joking reply of disbelief. This demonstrates that it is in the intersections of multiple grids of dichotomy, between masculinity and femininity, activity and femininity, and strength and weakness, self and other, that normative modality of shame is simultaneously being reproduced and displaced among the research protagonists. Here once again, the shameful and shaming reactions of Tino and his friends reverberate the first two factors described through the pan-Indonesian model of shame outlined by Röttger-Rössler. However, while we can see how displays of shame are interlocking and in tension with dominant moral codes engendered by religious doctrines, sociocultural norms, and political discourse, such affective practices are also highly skewed by the everyday vernaculars of queer intimacy and embodiments.

The different stories drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork have conveyed how shame, in its many shades, remains a productive force in Muslim queer world-making. Through this complex set of feelings, people with alternative sexualities and gender expressions in Indonesia navigate the volatile debates about their identities and belongings, respecting some boundaries while transgressing others.

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