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Comparative Masculinities: Why Islamic  
Indonesian Men are Great Mates and  
Australian Men are Girls

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**Comparative Masculinities:  
Why Islamic Indonesian Men are Great Mates  
and Australian Men are Girls**

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**Asia Reconstructed: From Critiques of Development to Postcolonial Studies  
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## Why Indonesian Men are Great Mates and Australian Men are Girls

Now that the deleterious effects of post-modernism are well and truly receding, it is almost possible to speak again about sameness. Already the work in the global masculinities series of volumes for Zed Books edited by Michael Kimmel has disclosed some uncomfortable uniformities concerning what men do. In particular, Pringle and Pease (2001, 245, 251) have found that 'there are striking commonalities across the world in terms of patriarchal power relations', especially that 'the 'patriarchal dividend' seems to apply, one way or another, in all the social formations surveyed' in their collection. At the same time, they are convinced of 'the need for a systematic and contextualised but culturally-sensitive investigation of interconnected but also quite idiosyncratic experiences and practices of men within distinct but interrelated gender regimes across the various regions of the world' (Pease and Pringle 2001, 10).

While in Asian studies 'masculinity' is 'an important lacuna' in gender research (Louie and Edwards 1994, 135) and in the anthropology of Southeast Asia too, masculinity and its constructions 'have been taken for granted' (Peletz 1995, 79, 102), Kimmel (2000) has noted that anthropologists studying gender relations elsewhere have discovered high levels of variability in the meanings of masculinity. Such studies give rise the notion that 'masculinity' itself is a culturally-bound concept that may have little relevance outside the Western intellectual tradition which constructs masculinity out of the experience of five percent of the world's population of men in one region of the planet at one historical moment. Hibbins (2003a, 2003b, 2005) found, for instance, that Chinese male migrants to Australia emphasised quite different expressions of masculinity compared with Western men. Certainly from our interviews with Islamic Indonesian men in Australia (Howson, Donaldson and Nilan 2005), it is clear that 'masculinity' is a term that translates awkwardly, unlike 'manliness' and even 'virility'.

McGane and Patience (1995, 15) have commented that ideas about Australian masculinity have their own peculiar history which needs to be recognised at the same time as it can be used to compare ideas about men in other cultures (See also Pease 2001). Thus while Australian and other Western men tend to identify power with 'economic control and coercive force', with 'activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals' (Errington 1990, 5), men elsewhere think differently.

The 'prevalent view' in many parts of Southeast Asia, for instance, is that to 'exert force, to make explicit commands, or to engage in direct activity – in other words to exert 'power' in the Western sense' – reveals instead an *absence* of effective power (Errington 1990, 5). It is commonly believed in Java that, through the sustained practice of self-control, individuals are able to develop a concentration of inner, mystical power, a divine energy or mystic inner strength which enables them to control themselves, others and the environment *without* using the 'crude' physical, political and material force

celebrated in Western notions of hegemonic masculinity (Brenner 1995, 28). Power is 'concrete', more like a substance or an energy. It is divorced from force, and is its own reward, although a sign of it in abundance is wealth and a large number of followers (Errington 1990, 41, 43). To exercise 'western power', then, is to exhibit weakness. Hegemonic masculinity in its Western conception, undermines itself when men practice it outside of its apposite context. In this regard, Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) rethinking of hegemonic masculinity is useful. Local patterns of hegemonic masculinity are located within regional ones which sit within a global gender order, and thus a masculinity hegemonic at one level may be quite marginal at another.

At the regional level, then, many Indonesians consider reason (*akal*) and passion (*nafsu*) to be forever in struggle, as a result of The Fall of Adam and *Hawah* (Eve). The success of the former over the latter results in good behaviour, and the reverse brings bad behaviour (Peletz 1995, 91). Restraint and control of the inner self are therefore necessary and virtuous, their absence indicates an absence of virtue and gives rise to stigma (Peletz 1995, 89). *Akal* (reason, intelligence, rationality, judgement) distinguishes humans from the animal world. 'In many (and perhaps all) Muslim communities one finds an entrenched, highly elaborated belief that 'passion' (*nafsu*) is more pronounced among women than men' than 'reason' (*akal*) (Peletz 1995, 88).

Both men and women operate within the 'reason/passion' framework. Women, children, indigenous people and Westerners are seen as lacking in restraint when it comes to eating, drinking, extravagant consumption, gambling and sex, are thus relatively uncultured, closer to nature and may even be sub-human (Peletz 1995, 90; Brenner 1995, 34).

It is the 'hegemonic view' of Indonesian men that Australian men have less reason and 'greater animality' than they themselves do. In the eyes of our informants, particularly Budi, Ray, Wali and Widodo, Australian men are "crazy about sports", something which is "absolutely alien for Indonesians". They are "bigger", "have strong muscles" and "a more pronounced sense of physical attributes". They "like to have a good body" which they "show off" (Interviews, 12/05/05, 13/05/05 & 11/04/06).

They "love drinking", display unacceptable sexual behaviour, and are more likely to be unfaithful. They even like to "grunt", "scream" and "yell". They seem "like a gorilla", display "brute power", are "aggressive" and "like to show it rough". In this vulgar way, Australian men resemble those Indonesian men who come from "a very low economy class . . . like a coolie" (Interviews, 12/05/05, 13/05/05 & 11/04/06).

Unlike Indonesian men who are generally "more [self] controlled", Australian men, like Indonesian women, are more animalistic, emotional, irrational and sexual (Interview, 12/05/05; Peletz 1995, 94; 97; Brenner 1995, 31). 'Real' men have 'long', 'broad', 'high', 'deep' reason while women, and marginal men like Australians and "coolies", have the opposite (Peletz 1995, 93; Brenner 1995, 31; Ong 1990, 388-9). Thus it is that while high-status men and those regarded by Javanese themselves as powerful 'may be graceful and slight of

build [and] sometimes strike Westerners as effeminate' (Errington 1990, 6), it is, without doubt, Australian men who are truly girlish.

Indonesian women, according to Widodo, a Javanese journalist and Doctoral student, are not attracted to these marginal and effeminate men, but prefer men who are "smart, articulate, who have a way, an aura" (Interview, 11/04/06). This inner power so clearly absent in Australian men, is accompanied by a cool, refined demeanour. Consequently, in the eyes of Western men, Indonesian men's relations with each other appear to be stiff and formal (Brenner 1995, 27, 30). But in their own eyes, Indonesian men, as Ray, who comes from the old royal family of South Sulawesi explains, are "more familiar with each other. We are very close to each other and you know, not like in Australia. They are more distant from each other [not] like us in Indonesia, we are like family, you know" (Interview, 12/05/05). They are, in short, like the best of mates, unlike Australian men who were seen by our informants, in Ray's words, as "more distant from each other" (Interview, 12/05/05).

This lack of mateship is exhibited in Australian men's attitudes and behaviour towards other men. Budi, a Ph.D. student at the University of Newcastle, tells of his experience of their uncaring attitudes:

I spent a lot of time with a group of Australians for my Masters degree, so I have a lot of experience with them. And the most important thing is sometimes they are very selfish . . . They just don't care, they just do what they like. They don't care about the rest of the group . . . There is a distance between East and West in Australia because when I formed a group with the Chinese we were still closer together (Interview, 12/05/05).

Unlike migrant Chinese men who act 'humbly, politely, respectfully, and like a team player, as opposed to acting like a competitive individual' (Cheng 1998, 191), the Australians exhibit 'aggressive competitiveness'. Not surprisingly, the masculine behaviours of Australians are seen as 'antisocial, selfish and morally wrong' (Cheng 1998, 193). Similarly, Vietnamese migrants to Sydney regard the moral values of Australian men as 'poor' for their own sense of self as being part of an organic whole is undermined by a monadic individualism more in tune with the requirements of contemporary capitalism and its emphasis on competition and individual advantage (Carruthers 1998, 48, 49, 50).

To our Indonesian informants, this was clearly manifest in the relationship of Australian men to their families. As Budi explains,

They are not really good sons in our perspective because they even don't contact their parents for a month . . . They live separately from their parents and its not normal for us . . . They don't see each other, they don't go to the family . . . they don't depend on the parents . . . They don't say 'father' or 'mother' for their parents, they just mention maybe John or whatever. So it's quite strange in my ears (Interview, 12/05/05)

In contrast is Yuki's description of Indonesian men's relationship with their families:

Our men . . . although they may get distant from the family for working and for studying, they just want to go home. More frequently than Australians, I think . . . My own culture is Sundanese, so parents just like want to be with their children. That's why if we go away from our parents and not say hello and not meet them soon we feel like – guilt (Interview, 10/05/05)

And Ray says,

We never let our parents go out to live by themselves. We love them, I mean we have to take care of them. This is totally different (Interview, 12/05/05)

And if men remain strongly tied to their parents, as fathers themselves, their task is, as Widodo explains, to bring their sons up "surrounded by their friends and family . . . to always be part of this community and society", and to remind their boys "from the very, very, very small that you are part of something bigger". This is in sharp contrast to Australian fathers who "keep telling the children as soon as they start to look after themselves, like at some point we have to move out, we have to be independent and being independent is something being promoted here since the very early beginning" (Interview, 11/04/06).

Not only is the family the cornerstone of the Islamic community, and the institution principally and seriously entrusted with the inculcation of values, even ahead of the mosque, but it is the most important location of leisure time which renews and strengthens what Budi calls "the values of the family".

In my city, when they have a leisure time, they just prefer to go to the family's houses, like to the uncle, to the grandparents or to the other relatives, have a chitchat over there visiting.

We are a very strong community . . . Australian families, they are very fragile. Lucky that I am very strong. I have a relationship with my mosque – we have a big community in Newcastle (Interview, 12/05/05)

In conclusion, the differences that these men see in the way Australian men treat their families is one of the reasons that Budi insists that masculine values in the two societies are "totally different". But, as noted at the beginning of this paper, it is a difference rooted in the ubiquity of the 'patriarchal dividend'. Australian men see Indonesian men as 'lesser' because they are polite, modest, self-effacing and 'effeminate', that is, they are like women. Indonesian men think that Australian men's inferiority to them stems from their lack control of their base passions. They too are 'like women'. Their differences in relation to each other are measured through their relationship to women – in the patriarchal dividend – and thus in the commonality of patriarchal power relations which masculinity expresses.

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