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The (Un)Holy Transvestite Body: Or, What would Hadewijch of Antwerp Say about the Muslim Waria Boarding School in Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This paper is an inquiry into doing theology as part of the search for justice and equality by people on the margins of power. I shall compare the thoughts and practices of those associated with the *waria* boarding school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with the mystical teaching of Hadewijch of Antwerp. Using the theory of “integrated liminality,” I shall try to demonstrate that Mariani, the founder of the boarding school, and Hadewijch, the beguine group leader in mid-thirteenth century Europe, struggled for justice and equality by resisting the marginality-producing power of their societies. This resonated and continues to resonate with the struggles to end violence on marginalized people in society.

INTRODUCTION

Moving toward maturity, in the opinion of Robert Kegan, the human being is in the meaning-making process (Kegan 1982). With each level of development, one enters into a new liberation which entails vulnerabilities and risks. One, must negotiate culture, for it shapes one’s self. In a Foucauldian word, this negotiation is part of individual “subjectivity,” in which one may perceive, resist, or change oneself to conform to the truth-determining power (Foucault 1990; cf. Butler 1990). A minority group is often placed in such an ambivalent context. Faustino Cruz proposes that a minority group should have “integrated liminality,” the movement from “I am in my culture” to “I have a culture,” in which the minority “challenge, deny, and resist the marginality-producing power of centrality and reflexively renew the converging, self-affirming definitions of liminality” (in Billman & Birch 2011:219). In this way, marginalized people are no longer bound by the culture of embeddedness (race, ethnicity, social class, gender, language), but “interrelate with multiple identities,” and involve themselves in public arenas for “justice and the common good (right action-in-relationship).”

This paper is an inquiry into doing practical theology which applies the theory of integrated liminality in the search for justice and the effort to undo violence on the people who are on the margins of power. For this purpose, I shall describe the thoughts and practices of the *waria* boarding school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and the mystical teaching of Hadewijch of

Antwerp as two ways of building an integrated liminality in each of their contexts. Both Hadewijch's mysticism and the thoughts and practices of the *waria* boarding school support, even confirm, the theory of the possibility of development from "embeddedness in liminality" to "relation with liminality."

THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE WARIA IN LIMINALITY

Who is a *waria*, and how did the phenomenon *waria* emerge in Indonesia? *Waria* is an acronym created from the two words *wanita-pria*, woman-man. Tom Boellstorff defines *waria* simply as "a male femininity" and rejects the notion of a "third gender" (Boellstorff 2004). *Waria* are "male-transvestites," subordinate males who are haunted by their femininity. Scholars do not have much data about the origins of *waria*. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity in Indonesia, however, the *waria* phenomenon was to be found there among adherents of the indigenous religions. By 1960s, *waria* were identified as sex workers or raffish art performers. Yet, no *waria* were brave enough to dress like women back then; they wore men's clothes, but were effeminate in the way they behaved. By 1980s, however, they came out in public in women's dress and were associated with the sex business.

In the religiously pluralistic society of Indonesia today, *waria* are to be found among all religious adherents. Even though they may not be seen as commensurable with gay and lesbian people, however, they are often socially ostracized and mistreated (Safitri 2013). The increase in opposition to these groups has been associated with the rise of the modernist Muslim group in the late 1950s; and it continued to be strong during the New Order era under the presidency of General Suharto. After the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, activities of the three "queer groups" became more visible, although with the strengthening of Islamic laws (*shariah*) in many regions, attacks against their public events have increased (Boellstorff 2004; Blackwood 2007).¹

Indonesian Muslims understand that any marriage bonds outside heterosexual marriage are forbidden in Islam. Gay and lesbian Muslims know that Islamic teaching makes no room for same-sex marriage.² Marriage is not a matter of two individuals joining together in a legal bond, but rather is a contract between families. Marriage is therefore seen as the God-given mandate which sustains "family honor" and "community order" (Blackwood 2007:295).

¹ According to the findings of the ArusPelangi Foundation, in 2013, more than four of five LGBT persons experienced violence (89.3%). About four of five experienced psychological violence (79%), almost one in two physical violence (46.3%), more than one in four economic discrimination (26.3%), almost half sexual assaults (45.1%), and almost two of three cultural violence (63.3%), such as expulsion, marriage arrangement. The oppressors can be from family (76.4%) and friends (26.9%). Almost one of two *waria* experienced violence, and about one of three gays experience assaults from strangers, thugs, and friends. (<http://www.megawatiinstitute.org/megawati-institut/kegiatan/kegiatan/155-diskusi-kekerasan-seksual-pada-kelompok-lgbt.html>, accessed on August 22, 2014).

² It is not my intention to say that other religions, including Christians, are more tolerable to same-sex marriage. The fact is the opposite. Pew Research published a stunning report that in Indonesia, 93 percent of population believe that homosexuality is unacceptable. See "The Global Divide on Homosexuality," (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality/>, accessed on September 1, 2014); also "Indonesia Still Far from a Rainbow Nation," *The Jakarta Globe* (July 10, 2013) (<http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/news/indonesia-still-far-from-a-rainbow-nation/>, accessed September 1, 2014).

Although there are no laws as such against homosexuality, Indonesian politicians often use religion and moral precepts against homosexuality to gain support from the people.

The prohibition of homosexual relationships is based especially on the Qur'an and *Hadith*, a collection of the saying of the Prophet Muhammad. Sura 4:16 in the Qur'an reads: "And as for the two of you who are guilty thereof, punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, let them be. God is forgiving and merciful." (Schild 1990:616). Meanwhile, the *Hadith* rebuke such relationships: "Whenever a male mounts another male, the throne of God trembles." (Ibid. 617). The *Hadith* also distinguish between those whose genitalia are not fully developed so that gender cannot be determined on that basis alone, and those whose gender can be determined to be male because of the urinary organs but who choose to live as female.

In 1997, the state-sponsored Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) issued a binding religious ruling (*fatwa*) that: (a) *waria* is male and there is no third gender; and (b) behavior as a *waria* is to be deemed unclean and forbidden (*haram*). The two largest organizations of Muslims in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), also consider *waria* as deviant from the norms of society. Both groups agree, however, that one can be accepted as fully Muslim after having genital surgery and making a formal declaration about one's gender (Safitri 2011).³

BODY AS A MEANS OF NEGOTIATING MARGINALITY-PRODUCING POWER

It is of considerable interest to note the existence of a boarding school for *waria* in the important city of Yogyakarta which is located in the south-central region of the island of Java. According to the 2012 data, 394,012 people live in Yogyakarta.⁴ The sultanate government and the Javanese mysticism characterize the city, Centuries-old Javanese culture and mysticism are still strong in the lives of most of the people of Yogyakarta, despite the growth of modernist Islam (Muhammadiyah) in recent times. As one of the academic centers of Indonesia, the city attracts many intellectuals from Indonesia and beyond to exchange critical ideas, including those concerned with sexuality and gender. This has been an important factor in bringing about a condition wherein the people of the city tolerate the existence of *waria*. Indeed, *waria* may express their creativity in the public places of Yogyakarta, and coverage of their activities in the mass media is often positive (Safitri 2011, Siagian 2012).⁵

The boarding school, called *Pondok Pesantren Khusus Waria Al-Fattah Senin-Kamis*, was established in 2007 as a follow-up to the social activism of the *waria* in helping so many people of the city after the big earthquake in the same year. After that experience, the *waria* wanted to gather for prayer once a month (or every thirty five days). Seeing how many *waria* wanted to join in this, Mariani (d. 2014) and her friend Shinta Ratri decided to try to have the

³ Aisha Hidayatullah has recently argued that in the Qur'an gender difference is more fluid. She asserts, however, that the Qur'an still assign different gender roles (Hidayatullah 2014). For a comprehensive exposition of the culture and history of Islam's view of homosexuality, see Murray 1997.

⁴ <http://yogyakarta.bps.go.id/index.php?r=site/page&view=sosduk.tabel.3-1-3> (accessed on August 25, 2014).

⁵ According to Safitri's data, some of the *waria* are graduates of prestigious state higher education institutions, such as Gadjah Mada University and the Indonesia Institute of Arts (Safitri 2011:14).

prayer gathering twice a week-- Monday (*Senin*) and Thursday (*Kamis*).⁶ With the help of Hajj Hamrolie, the gathering was then named *Al-Fattah*. (Safitri 2013).⁷ Mariani, the founder of the boarding school, said, “The *pesantren* was established because *waria* are not accepted in *pondok pesantren* . . . [but] *waria* are also human beings who want to practice Islamic teachings . . . I do not perform Islamic rituals to ‘heal’ my soul—to be a man.” (Safitri 2013:98).

The school currently enrolls about thirty people.⁸ Besides the weekly prayer gathering, these cross-dressed people collect money (through what is called an *arisan*) for social welfare and, during the fasting month (Ramadhan), they open the house for neighbors and the poor during each day’s breaking of the fast. Also, as the body of a deceased *waria* is considered unclean (*haram*), because of abandonment by their families, members of the community will prepare the body for burial and will visit the graves of the dead (*ziarah kubur*). Finally, to improve the education provided, the school collaborates with the State University of Jepara and the Nadhlatul Ulama to provide courses on gender studies, Islamic studies, and in the reciting of the Qur’an.

With regard to clothing worn by *waria* during prayer, it is interesting to note that some change their female clothes to male by wearing a *sarong*. Others, however, wear a *mukena*, a dress as would be worn by a Muslim woman during prayer.⁹ These, by wearing such a dress, are trying, I believe, to negotiate their society-constructed gender. For Shinta Rita, the leader of the school, he/ she wants people to regard her as a *muslima*. In an interview conducted in 2010, he/ she asserted that such was the tradition of his neighborhood in Kotagede. He/she was raised in a very religious family, in which every woman should wear a veil (*hijab*). In wearing a veil, he/she hopes that people will accept him/her as part of the Muslim community. The particular prayer clothing, as Safitri contends, is a way to justify one’s “gendered identity” before God (Safitri 2013:103). Male-transvestites, wearing special female clothes for prayer, can be a way to assert liberation from the masculine-constructed culture. In this, they are redefining religiosity and intimate relationship with the divine.

The religious activity of the *waria* in such a school questions the conventional view of masculine-feminine dualism in the teaching of Islam. For Safitri, the existence of this cross-dressing people is a form of resistance to the “hegemonic” discourse of Islam. It negotiates the masculine-constructed society in which religion is believed to be in effect only if the *waria* appears to be dressed and behaving as a virile male (Safitri 2013). It can be said that these male-

⁶ After Mariani passed away in March 2014, the school was relocated from Mariani’s home in Notoyudan to Shinta’s home in Kotagede, Yogyakarta. “Transgender Islamic School Reopened,” *The Jakarta Post* (April 21, 2014) (<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/04/21/transgender-islamic-school-reopened.html>, accessed on September 1, 2014).

⁷ The term “boarding school” (*pondok pesantren*) is actually misleading, for there is no dormitory for the Muslim novices (*santris*). Each Monday and Thursday, students come to pray and learn about Islam. The name of the school, however, makes clear that it is “especially” or “only” for *waria* (*Khusus Waria*). That in itself is a challenge to the common tradition that a “boarding school” (*pesantren*) is for either male or female students (Safitri 2013).

⁸ At its opening, few *waria* joined the school. In November 2013, it grew to twenty five persons, but two of them died. After the relocation in 2014, the students have become thirty five in number.

⁹ Those who pray as male went to traditional boarding school and they are more comfortable to pray with *sarong*. Some contend that if they pray as female, they deceive God since they were born with male bodies (Safitri 2013).

transvestites negotiating their embeddedness and are moving toward relation in liminality. They question the marginality-producing power symbolized by their “unclean” bodies, and they interrelate with their multiple identities as males with female souls. These people have moved from seeking acceptance or incorporation to developing radically responsive strategies which center on common social and economic justice and empowerment. This can be seen as a movement of a marginalized people, in a non-violent way by (un)doing gender, toward intimate unity with the transcendent God and with their fellow human beings.

TRANSGRESSING GOD’S BODY: THE MYSTICISM OF HADEWIJCH

How does Christian tradition reflect on the religious male-transvestite? In connection with this question, I want to touch upon the thought of Hadewijch of Antwerp, a Medieval beguine who lived in the mid-thirteenth century. Since she apparently never left a journal or any autobiographical notes, scholars must examine her writings to try to ascertain her location in the social stratification of her times. The high quality of her poetry indicates that she had a good education and was fluent in Latin and French. This suggests that she was from the upper social strata. She may have chosen to leave behind her aristocratic and educated privileges when she was invited to be the leader of women of the same vocation. To this day, however, no scholar of medieval times has claimed to have found all the details of Hadewijch’s life (Madigan 1998, McGinn 1998, Dreyer 2005).

In the society of that time and place, women were treated as a surplus commodity. Ecclesiastical law allowed a man to beat his wife if she did not obey him. The church even urged men to restrict women’s religious enthusiasm by forbidding them to join a cloistered community or live in solitaries under a rigid rule of piety. Another popular option for women to join a beguinage. The beguines were not cloistered nuns, but a movement of pious Christian women who dedicated their lives to spiritual growth through pray and meditation, confession and penance. Many beguines opened their homes as shelters for widows and for victims of abuse. They gave lessons to both poor and middle-class young people; helped outcasts and provided aid for the sick and elderly; and they trained housewives acquire certain skills and to practice contemplative prayer (Madigan 1998). Here, we have a parallel of a peripheral community. Similar to the *waria* group in Indonesia described above, the beguines can be seen as a peripheral community who were active and engaged for the common good.

Thus, as a Bequine, there was the risk that Hadewijch’s thought would come in conflict with what was deemed sound in the patriarchal society of her time and place. She believed that every woman could come achieve fullness of spiritual growth—“to be God with God, without dictation from any ecclesiastical hierarchy. This did not lead to her breaking away from the Catholic Church. In fact, she and the other beguine sisters attended daily mass. It did lead to the conviction that growth to spiritual maturity could be achieved through personal intimacy with God, often taking place through visions. And it did lead to a minimizing of scholarly scrutiny which was so dominated by male thinkers.

For Amy Hollywood, the mystical thought of Hadewijch was a language of transvestitism “in which the female soul becomes male in order to pursue the Lady Love.” (Hollywood 2006:129). Many of Hadewijch’s teachings were expressed in erotic ways, for instance the vision in which she identified God as Lady Love and the human soul as the “knight errant.” Her

mysticism, however, was not one of metaphor only; rather, it was a passionate, embodied mysticism in which she cross-dressed God as a lady (Jantzen 1995). As she wrote:

Who wills to dare the wilderness of Love
Shall understand Love:
Her coming, her going,
How Love shall receive love with love,
Perfectly.
So Love has kept nothing hidden from them,
But she shows them her wilderness and her highest palace
—Know well, everyone—
Because each has kept on to the end
With suffering
In Love. (Madigan 1998:183)

Her idea of perfection in growth—“to be God with God”—did not teach that one can attain the all of God by escaping from the real world. Rather, through such mysticism, one becomes compassionate and zealous for justice. “But when by fruition,” wrote Hadewijch, “a man is united to Love, he becomes God, mighty and just.” (Hart 1981:84; Jantzen 1995:145). In my view, this mystical experience of turning God into a transvestite deity did not lead to a mere esoteric experience, but to a life of full maturity characterized by the pursuit of justice. With this, Hadewijch subverted authority and opened herself to persecution by ecclesiastical power—the marginality-producing power. The beguine groups were strictly restricted and Hadewijch, along with other female visionaries, were persecuted. As Jantzen writes, the mysticism of Hadewijch was one with a “focus of integration” in which the body plays an important role, because “it is the body, not a disembodied spirit, which performs the mighty works of justice.”

CONCLUSION

Hence, the theological viewpoints—explicit and implicit—from Hadewijch and from those in the *waria* boarding school can be seen as theologizing done by marginalized people. In both sources, questions are raised as to who is deemed worthy to approach the divine. Both are creative in insisting that all human bodies may be in a worshipful relation to God, not only those judged to meet a society’s criteria of masculinity and femininity. Unlike Hadewijch, though, the Muslim *waria* do not experience Allah as the divine Feminine, or make any attempt to experience God as a transvestite being. Nevertheless, the Muslim *waria* carry out the core of Islam as “blessing and peace for all the world” (*rahmatan lil ‘alamin*) by building a safe community for the queers, those judged unclean by their society. Both Hadewijch’s mysticism and the thoughts and practices of the *waria* school resonate with feminists’ voices to reclaim and further develop egalitarian themes within their own traditions (Parsons 2002). In this, both have reassessed the definition of liminality through interrelations with their hybrid identities in order to overcome violence in their own social context. Undergirding this is the conviction that theological formulations are socially constructions which are not set unchangeably in eternity.

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