

**Female Masculinities and Sexual Practices in Southern Africa and Indonesia;  
female-bodied banci and lesbian men.**

Prof. Dr Saskia E. Wieringa

University of Amsterdam

Director International Information Center and Archives of the Women's Movement

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**Introduction**

The development of sexuality studies and particularly of studies of same-sex sexuality within anthropology has not been continuous. After an early interest in the topic (Karsch-Haack 1911; Bleys 1995) interest in sexuality was at a low tide after the second World War (Vance 1991; Wieringa 2005a). A strong constructivist stream made anthropologists focus their studies on the cultural determinants of human behaviour, including sexuality. I have been engaged with studies of women's same sex sexuality in a crosscultural context for over 25 years (Wieringa 1987, 2002, Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, Wieringa, Blackwood and Bhaiya forthcoming) and will consider here two case studies I have recently been involved in. The first is a longitudinal study of a lower class b/f community in Jakarta, Indonesia (Wieringa 1987 and 2005b). The other case is part of a study in six Southern and Eastern African countries carried out in 2003 (Morgan and Wieringa 2005). In both cases one of the partners exhibited a particular cultured pattern of female masculinity. Coming out of a scientific history in which sexuality in woman-woman relationships was ignored I initially focused on the documentation of their sexual practices. Relatedly I became interested in the dynamics between culture, gender and sexuality.

In the west there is a tradition of speaking about GID (Gender Identity Disorder) in discussing female masculinity (see definition DSM). However the female-bodied persons I work with do not consider themselves to be afflicted with a 'disorder'. Africa has a tradition of woman marriages which were socially accepted, several ethnic groups

in Indonesia recognize(d) various forms of transgender behaviour (Blackwood 2000, Boelstorf 2000; Graham 2005). Colonial and postcolonial societies have eroded the tolerance with which these gender categories were accepted (Wieringa 2005b). Present-day female-bodied 'men' may not be aware of these traditions of tolerance; they are increasingly stigmatized by society and at times pathologized by members of the medical profession. Their 'disorders' if any do not seem to deviate substantially from those of other members in society who are faced with heavy social pressures. I therefore rather speak of 'non-normative sexualities' which is of course a broader category than just female masculinities. Studying female masculinity in a context of non-normativity leads one to discuss the cultural determinants of 'normalcy', in this case masculinity. But it is not only cultural variation that is interesting. Cross cultural continuity also leads to questions about bodily (in) stability and the relationship between culture, body and other determinants of the self, such as the soul, however conceptualized. Couching this discussion in terms of 'disorders' however, is not very helpful.

### **Female-bodied transgenders in Indonesia, banci**

This section discusses the dynamics of a group of lower and lower middle class female-bodied persons engaged in same sex relations in Jakarta, Indonesia. Socially, emotionally and erotically they ascribe to a butch-femme pattern<sup>1</sup> modeled on the traditional Indonesian heterosexual gender regime. At the same time they are still linked to an older tradition of transgender behaviours, both of female-bodied and of male-bodied persons, called banci. This was a relatively tolerated form of existence. Male-bodied banci, now often called waria (from wanita – pria, the Indonesian terms for women and man respectively) are still very visible, particularly in East Java.<sup>2</sup> The older female-bodied

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<sup>1</sup> The words 'butch' and 'femme' were not used by most of the respondents in this research, though they were aware of them. Younger butch women would sometimes use the term 'butchie' for themselves and their male-identified friends. The male-identified participants in this research would usually refer to themselves as 'laki laki', men, while their feminine partners all said they were just 'women' and 'wives' of their partners. I discuss this terminology elsewhere in greater detail. For the sake of convenience I refer to this group as a 'butch-femme' community although it has to be understood that the way they perform their butchness and femmeness is specifically Indonesian. When I refer to the butches I use s/he and hir to denote their subjectivity as possessing a male soul in a female body.

<sup>2</sup> In Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, they can get an identity card with that gender identity assigned (Atmojo 1987; Oetomo 2001, Priaga 2003, Koeswinarno 2004).

persons I worked with still know this term as it relates to persons like them, but will not commonly use it for themselves now.

These are not the only discourses the members of the Jakarta b/f community are confronted with. The breakdown of the strong centralist 'New Order' state of President Suharto, has led to a wave of decentralization and new forms of disciplining and identity formation, in many cases based on religious affiliation. Global discourses on gay and lesbian rights are gaining some currency among middle class persons with same sex preferences. Groups of younger, better educated middle class lesbians are emerging who are making wide use of internet and other forms of information technology. They have more international contacts and are aware of lesbian communities in other parts of the world. Also, they espouse a feminist ideology of androgyny and sexual equality which is alien to the b/f community discussed here (though in practice b/f patterns are rather common in this group of middle class women as well).

In my research I explored the persistence of the legacy of Indonesian traditions of romantic love and the post-colonial gender construct, the so-called 'kodrat' (nature) of both men and women, but which is most commonly associated with women (as if men have no nature). Both in their adherence to traditional forms of gender constructs and erotic practices and in their moments of change the b/f group I worked with demonstrate the texture of the imbricating layers of culture and nature, though they themselves employ a naturalized discourse (see also Butler 1993).

Jakarta's lower class butch/femme community is comprised of several hundred women, as far as I am aware, living all over the city. There may be many others outside of this group, but this network I was able to trace. I had first come into contact with a core group of them when I did fieldwork on the history of the Indonesian women's movement in the early 1980s. Soon after that period of fieldwork I was blacklisted, and I could only return to Indonesia after the fall of dictator Suharto, in 1998. During my first return visit I couldn't find them any more. They had moved out of the city centre where I had first met

them and had gone even more underground than in 1983, when a few of them had made a valiant but short lived attempt to set up the first lesbian organization in Indonesia, called Perlesin (Persatuan Lesbian Indonesia, Indonesian Lesbian Association) (Wieringa 1987, 1999).

The women's movement was one of the motors behind the democratization movement which brought Suharto down, and in Yogyakarta, in December 1998 the Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia (Indonesian Women's Coalition, KPI) was set up. This was the first women's mass movement, after the Suharto regime had banned the Communist-oriented mass women's organization Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women's Movement) in the wake of the mass murders which followed an army putsch in 1965 (Wieringa 2002). At this first congress, the work plan of the KPI was drawn up. Fifteen sectors were established; sexual minorities was sector 15. Two years later sector 15 had come into operation, and some members of the b/f community had joined. When I returned to Indonesia in 2001 I was invited to a party they organized for me. There they asked me formally to write down their history, as they wanted to take part in the new democracy that Indonesia was struggling to establish. "We have also suffered under the military dictatorship", they told me, "and this must be known. How else can we become full citizens? You have written down the history of Gerwani, so they are rehabilitated now, we also want to regain our pride. We have known you for almost 20 years now, we trust you, so we ask you to write down the truth about our lives".

I accepted their request (though with postmodern hesitations about the 'truth' I would be able to dig up). It came at a sensitive moment for them. Although their lives were no longer under direct attack from the military, new challenges had presented themselves, not only a rising fundamentalist tide but also from within the feminist movement to which they had hesitantly but courageously allied themselves. Some members of the KPI leadership felt that b/f behaviour was old-fashioned, patriarchal and oppressive, particularly to the femmes. They let it be known that if members of this community wanted to join the women's movement they had to conform to the new feminist ideology

of gender equality. I had already confronted this attitude of those members of the feminist leadership of the KPI, arguing that a b/f lifestyle is one of the manifestations of women's same-sex life and that it is not up to other lesbians or feminists to simply denounce it (see also Wieringa 1999). If there is violence between the partners this should be addressed, but, I argued, b/f erotics is a powerful sexual style and perfectly legitimate when this is what both partners want. The coordinator of sector 15, herself a self-identified lesbian woman, agreed with this view. We organized a seminar at the office of the KPI with the members of the b/f community to discuss b/f dynamics and the research objectives. The participants agreed to share their life stories with me in the interest of a collective process of consciousness raising and coming out. It took two more years before I could start the research.

With the help of the dynamic coordinator of sector 15 a total of 20 female-bodied persons were asked to participate in the research, 10 femmes, and 10 butches, all between 40 – 60 years old, all of them lower or lower middle class. I selected this age range, as I wanted to trace their histories through the New Order period, from the first lesbian organization ever set up, Perlesin. Most of them were couples, as one of the goals of the research was to investigate the dynamics between the partners. The methodology consisted of these twenty oral history interviews, which were all transcribed, five focus group discussions on specific themes which emerged out of the interviews, participant observation of various events in their lives, such as parties, dinners and informal meetings as well as seminars on specific topics, with outside participation. I also interviewed some middle class key informants who had been active in setting up lesbian organizations in the 1990s.

Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants; some of the interviews with particularly the butches were conducted on the veranda of the KPI office. The femmes would not come there easily on their own, as it was a 'public' space. One or two members of the KPI always accompanied me. This was particularly useful when the femmes were interviewed, as the butches tended to be suspicious. I was classified by

them as a butch and therefore a possible predator of their wives. This perception was magnified as I insisted on a private interview with each of my narrators. The members of the KPI who accompanied me would chat with the butch partner so the interview could be conducted without disturbance.

Several participants were members of the KPI, particularly the butches. Their femme partners would join if there were particular activities. But not all butches were comfortable with the fact that the KPI is a feminist, and a woman's organization. Diny's partner for instance, considers himself to be a man or at least someone whose female body is less important than his male soul, and therefore feels that it is not proper for him to join a women's organization. All butches said they had male souls, but Diny's partner is the only one who decided that as a man in a female body s/he could not join a women's organization.

My f/b respondents conform to the dominant gender regime in society, with its ethos of romantic love, in which possessiveness and jealousy are valued elements but which also entails women's oppression and male superiority. An example of such romantic, sexual possessiveness is a popular song, sung by a female singer, with the following refrain:

'When I will have become your wife don't ever give up wanting to possess me.'

They claim a sexual citizenship, in which there is space for the gender transgression of the butches, while their partners claim 'sexual normalcy' as 'wives' of their butch husbands. The detraditionalization and egalitarianism that dominate the discourses within a western gay/lesbian movement (see also Weeks 1999) seem to hold little attraction for the b/f community in Jakarta. Rather they opt for extending the boundaries of the niche they occupy. They are proud and out, though not as lesbians. The couples I interviewed live together, and their neighbours and families accept, sometimes after a lot of resistance, the particular arrangement they have forged. The butches are proud to be called 'Om' (uncle) by their neighbours, while their femme partners take care to share all the normal

activities expected of married women, such as participating in the women's neighbourhood associations (arisan).<sup>3</sup>

Although the butches are the most obvious gender transgressors, with their masculine haircuts, clothing and body language, the same sex erotic energy and impulse of the femmes, the ostensibly more 'normal', supposedly 'passive' partners was often the motor that fuelled the relationship.

Members of the Jakarta b/f community then are negotiating their identities and subjectivities within a tight web of multiple and contradictory discourses, respecting some boundaries, rupturing others. They bargain for acceptance in their communities by adhering to established patterns of heteronormativity. But in doing so they subvert these norms at the same time (see also Butler 1993). Socially they are subversive because they disrupt the sex-gender order as the butch partners destabilize the established boundaries between bodies and gender behaviour while their femme partners publicly uphold them. Sexually they are subversive because femme pleasure is the motor of the relationship rather than the satisfaction of the male partner. This rupture of the established order however is not always recognized by their major political allies, the feminist lesbians. They point to the ways the b/f partners perform particular established patterns of heteronormative behaviour and point to instances of violence and excessive jealousy on the part of the butches.

### **Passionate aesthetics and b/f dynamics**

Indigenous ideas of romantic passion were fiercely embraced by the b/f couples who narrated me their life stories. Their passion followed the 'ethic, aesthetic and etiquette' (Paz 1996) of heteronormative romance, though with their own adaptations of this model. This culture of love is very much inspired by the Javanese Hinduized court culture. The

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<sup>3</sup> The Betawi term some of the Jakartan butches were called 'engkong', lit grandfather, term of respect for men.

most popular masculine models are the virile, ascetic Arjuna, his robust warrior-brother Bhima and the romantic, invincible Raden Pandji. The first two are characters of the immensely popular Mahabharata, the exploits of Prince Pandji are a genre in itself.

This story illustrates several elements which are echoed in the many popular present day dangdut songs.<sup>4</sup> The irrational attraction of the two lovers, mysterious and involuntary, the bonding of souls which cannot be broken, even in death, the prowess, loyalty and steadfastness of the lover who must win many battles to find his beloved. Sexual attraction turned into love is a bond forged by the Gods (the popular Islamized expression is ‘anugerah Allah’, a gift of Allah).

Likewise the b/f couples I interviewed did not conform to the heteronormative pattern of masculine sexual aggression and feminine dependence, unless in an eroticized, consensual way. Often the femme’s erotic energy was the motor of the relationship. This was recognized by the butches, who were quick to announce that they were the men in the relationship, but immediately agreed that usually they were seduced by their wives and that it was their honour to satisfy the desires of their partners.

Butch gender transgression is a common theme in the stories the butches told me. All butches cited having experienced gender nonconformity at a very young age. As they phrased it during the research, their subjectivity was built on the realisation that they had a masculine soul. Later they realized their sexual attraction to women. For most femmes on the other hand sexual attraction to a butch was their first experience of gender nonconformity. As they felt that they were primarily attracted to the masculinity of their partners they continued to identify themselves as ‘women’. Sexual satisfaction was given as an important reason to stay with their partners

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<sup>4</sup> Dangdut is the onomatopoeic (dang-dut dang dang) name of a style of music that is particularly popular among lower and lower middle class youth. It is a blend of rock music, with Hindi, Malay, Arab and Western elements.

The butches display various forms of chivalrous behaviour, opening car doors, carrying parcels, making themselves useful to the household in the ways Indonesian men would (which is rather limited, as cooking and cleaning are not considered to fall within their domain). So the butches try to live up to those ideals but as their gender transgressive ways are not always accepted by employers, they find it hard to acquire the financial means to do so. This is compounded by the fact that many butches have left school at an early age, refusing to wear any longer school uniforms with skirts. Many b/f couples therefore have money troubles which affects their relation deeply. During my research I witnessed the break up of the relationship of Yusup with his attractive younger lover Retno. When I first met them they were very much in love. Retno was sitting on Yusup's lap, spoonfeeding her lover his favourite food. However, Yusup, who had been a minor trader, lost his business in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings. Since then their relationship deteriorated. Yusup became insecure, realized s/he no longer commanded the respect s/h earlier enjoyed and became intensely jealous of Retno, who worked as a singer in a karaoke bar. Although Yusup tried valiantly to become more of a houseman, his frustration took over and when s/he became violent, exploding in a jealous fit of rage, Retno ended the relationship.

Let us listen to their voices. In one of the focus group discussions we talked about b/f sexual practices.<sup>5</sup> The group consisted of two traditional f/b couples (Retno and Yusup and Diny and Audi), one self-identified lesbian couple (Julia and Ayu) and the interviewer. I asked them whether it was true that butches didn't want to be sexually touched by their wives, as many of them had told me. The two butches, Yusup and Audi, immediately reacted in the affirmative:

Yusup: Indeed, I don't want that at all. I am happy to be embraced, and kissed, but don't want to be touched.

Audi: If I am touched, the issue is.. well, there is no difference then. Then I am like a woman. But I am actually a man... I put myself in the position of a man. .. I satisfy her. If

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<sup>5</sup> Held in the house of Diny and Audi, Jakarta on 8 February 2004. All names are pseudonyms.

she does the same to me, well then we are the same! If she acts the same as I do, touching all over, then my passion immediately leaves me and then I am repulsed by her...

The femmes concur. Retno, Yusup's partner, explains:

'If I tease hir, I may touch hir. ..Yes, ...But she cannot relax if I touch hir and s/he becomes very tense... So in the end I don't want to touch hir, for then s/he will feel repulsion. Rather than that we end up not having sex at all, I'd better not touch hir to start with.. leave it, the important thing is that I get my orgasm, That's what I want, isn't it?... So I want to be happy and get my orgasm, I'd rather not touch hir, for s/he cannot relax then, and doesn't feel passion any more..

Audi: I always ask my partner whether she enjoys what I am doing? If she says she does, then I continue, but if she wants to touch my breasts and my vagina when we are having sex, I immediately have to stop. All my arousal has gone, it just happens like that in my soul. I feel that then there is no difference with her as a woman. So what can I do then? For I am her man...

Yusup: All I want is to be embraced, and stick my body to hers, then I am already satisfied...

Audi, yes, only when she just teases me I don't mind...

I: who takes the initiative for sex?

Audi: Sometimes it is me, but usually it is she...

Yusup: I mostly asked for it in the beginning, but gradually she started asking me all the time, for she is addicted to sex with me.

Ayu: (a self-identified lesbian). Maybe because the butch never gets an orgasm...?

Audi: No, that's not true, for I also have my feelings when she gets her orgasm...both of us have feelings then... My body also contracts...

Yusup : what I like is not when she touches me, but when our bodies and vaginas are stuck together...my partner also likes it very much when I stick my fingers in her vagina.

Audi: yes, .. that's nice, when we both rub against each other, that is very nice.

I: So, Diny, you have been married to a man before. Who is the better lover?

Diny: Audi, for sure! S/he always gets me an orgasm. A man, well, he just doesn't get anything done. They are always egoistic and I never got an orgasm. But with Audi I always have an orgasm.

Retno: The same with me. With a man I never got an orgasm, but with Yusup always.

Diny: yes what I like most is her tongue, .. but actually it is the feeling. The issue is you cannot force anything. If the feelings ... If we have any problems, I cannot feel anything. But when there are no problems, it is very nice.

Retno: yes, when we love each other and are happy...

Diny. It is all the same, a man or Audi,... but a man doesn't smell nice, and he doesn't behave nicely either. They can just ignore you. But a butch will never do that...they understand me. When I was with my husband I was always afraid, when my husband came home, I was afraid. For a man has to eat and he must be served, and I always felt very constrained by that. With butches it is not like that.

Retno, Yes, with a man you have to use a preservative, if not you can get pregnant. You don't get an orgasm, but you get pregnant instead. With a butch – you don't get pregnant and you constantly get orgasms.

...And men snack all the time (have relationships on the side).. so no orgasms, but pregnancies and you can get diseases from them.

Julia: I saw on tv the other day that only 15% of the women ever get an orgasm because of penetrative sex...Men are also weak, they need to boost their sexual energy, by drinking traditional medicine or even using Viagra. Whereas a butch, they can give endless sexual pleasure without Viagra.

The interesting thing is that both butches, in the earlier in depth interviews I had with them, stress that they felt they were born as tomboys and butches, but that in the above fragments it is their souls, rather than their bodies that tell them what to like in sex. As Audi said, it is not hir body that determines whether s/he is sexually aroused, 'it just

happens like that in my soul.’ Audi and the other butches described themselves as people with female bodies but masculine souls. The soul then is the dominant factor in gender assignment. They all dress in a masculine way and are usually referred to as men by neighbours, in shops. They all knew women who had bound their breasts with stagen, the tight cloth Javanese women wear around their stomachs to ties their kain, but my narrators didn’t go all that way. When making love they would undress, unless their friends with bound breasts, for these would never show their female bodies to their partners. They had all had their fights with their families but were happy with the acceptance of their wives. They were proud of their sexual prowess and the confirmation of that which their partners assured them. The only major social problem they internalized was religion. Particularly the Muslims among them felt that they couldn’t pray in the mosque. At home they would wear the female clothing assigned for praying (mukenah), the only time they would don women’s clothing. Most of them refused to do so however in the public space of the mosque and didn’t attend the services in the mosques as other men would. Some of them felt pained because of that.

It is the intricate interplay between soul (however defined) and body that is at stake in the other case I will briefly introduce here as well.

### **Namibian lesbian men**

‘Lesbian men’ is not the term the female-bodied persons discussed here refer to themselves. They call themselves ‘men’. In the course of the research process the researcher, Elisabeth Khaxas, of the same Damara community in Namibia, decided they are ‘lesbian men’ as they have relationships with women. That term is now commonly used.

This section is mainly based on recent fieldwork in Southern Africa; the interviewees were nine young self-identified lesbians of six countries, who each collected 3- 5 life stories in 2003. They were trained by Dr Morgan and me and we helped them analyse their interviews, which they presented at the IV IASSCS congress in Johannesburg 2003.

After that (Morgan and Wieringa 2005). Many forms of women's same sex relations were uncovered, such as mummy-baby relationships in schools, and Zulu traditional healers (sangoma's) engaged in same sex relations. The sangoma's were closest to the traditional female husbands in women marriages know from literature. If in most post-world war II literatures women marriages are described as sexless between the partners, the openness with which the sangoma's in this research spoke about their same sex relationships is striking ( Nkabinde and Morgan 2005; Wieringa 2005a) As in the case of the Indonesian b/f community, social stigma in Africa towards same sex relations is rising, with presidents like Mugabe and Nujoma strongly denouncing it. Almost all narrators discuss the social stigma they are confronted with.

*One negative thing is men in the community are watching our kind of people, because you don't want relationships with men and are together with a woman. They think I must rape that woman, or if men have Aids rape me and give me the disease as well, or think men did not stay in a good way with lesbian women so I have to do this to get them, ... they think women pretend to be men because other men did not treat them well - so I will get her so she will stop that thing. The benefit is that I think that one is protected from diseases (Khaxas and Wieringa2005: 136).*

Almost all the lesbian-identified women in South Africa had experiences with male aggression, whether incest or rape. Only one of them reported having gone to a therapist who was sensitive to the issue. All the others dealt with their traumas on their own.

In extreme cases women are driven to suicide. One of our Namibian informants, Helen, left her native town because her mother feared she might be driven to commit suicide because to the social stigma attached to her way of living. She knew a young woman who actually committed suicide.

*My mother cried and said "Our town is so small and people talk too much, so stay away from here and live in (a larger town)." She said that there were so many people in (a*

*larger town) and she did not want me to die; if I stayed on in our town I would die, I would commit suicide, so she said (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 131-2).*

If women ended up in hospitals with disorders, the medics rather confused them:

*...when I was operated the first time there was a girl from (another town), she came to the hospital three times one after another. She suffered from headache, and while she had headache the parents of the girl would say “this man.... this man....,” ... and she could not take it any longer and wrote a letter, one to the pastor and the other one to the police and one for the parents that she cannot change the fact that she loves women, that it is better if she takes her own life so she can die and no longer be in the way of the parents. When she was there the doctors asked her whether they would tell her parents about the fact that there is something male in her, because when she came to the hospital she told the doctors about those things. Her headache was only when she was at home because she was not at peace... so she had a disease of not being at peace. The parents were brought from (another town) with their travel paid by the state and the doctors told them whatever they told them. They were adult enough to understand but in the train on their way back they said “it’s because of this man that we went to Windhoek and that because of this man...,” everyone in that compartment was told. When they got to Luderitz the girl wrote the letters I mentioned before and hanged herself... (silence). The letter was read at her funeral and the parents while they could not change anything regret what they have done (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 132).*

In this case doctors tried to intervene, but it is very unclear what they had actually been doing. At any rate their intervention was ineffective, or maybe even counter productive. This may be due to a lack of empathy or knowledge about the extent of the homophobia in the community.

Even though historically many African cultures, such as the Damara, have known various forms of women’s same sex relations and Damara culture is still tolerant towards transgender women and same sex relations, it is at present very difficult for individual

Damara women to be open about their relations with other women. Silence and secrecy are prevalent. The postcolonial experience denies this possibility to women who would like to live such a life.

Like wise the Christian church condemns women's same sex relations even in Damara culture, with its echoes of a past in which women's bond friendships were institutionalised (Wieringa 2005a). One of our respondents didn't accept the homophobia she was confronted with, and fought back. Being an active church member, she was very hurt by the hostility she experienced from a church leader.

*God who has made this creation must provide help. Last year or the year before, the pastor said when you have been created as a man you have been created as a man, when you have been created as woman then you have been created as a woman. Okay when I was sitting in the church, I did not say anything. But I have visited him personally and I told him, "Pastor, you have children...you are not like that and it's good but in your family there might be somebody like that and this issue will also become your responsibility... And if somebody else says about your family that that person is like that then you also don't feel good. ... something that is not possible before God, God would not have allowed that... and what happened that Sodom and Gomorrah have been destroyed? Was it not about that, that men and men and women and women have relationships with each other? On that day God became angry and Sodom and Gomorrah ....so then it was like that from the beginning and then it was the creation of God, then it's God's creation. So I said that he should know that these things are sensitive, that anger comes because people speak badly about you. I told him that in his congregation there are people like that and I am also of that kind, but I don't want to publicise myself before the people (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 140-1).*

This was an effective intervention. Other Damara respondents also related their confrontations with church leaders, and they met with similar success. This example shows that when WSW themselves are strong enough to confront the homophobia of their surroundings they may be able to create a more tolerant surrounding. However, they

receive no help in this effort from social workers or community leaders and have to find the strength themselves, or in a lesbian support group.

### **Female masculinity**

As in Indonesia the partners are usually living in gendered arrangements, in which one partner is the 'man' and the other the 'normal woman'. The manliness the female bodied husbands demonstrate, goes far. Not only do they have to show financial responsibility, in some cases social fatherhood is expected of them, or more.

Below is the account of one b/f couple in Namibia. When their relationship starts, the femme partner, Lerato, was already pregnant. The butch partner, Neties, accepts this child readily and assumes the male role in the family:

*She played a role like if she was the one who impregnated me and she was like the father of this unborn baby and she was responsible .She was always there for me during the pregnancy. And if I needed something like say for example I needed to go to the clinic, she would give me money to go to the clinic. So she was actually playing the father role in the whole pregnancy (Isaacks and Morgan 2005: 102).*

Five years later Lerato couldn't accept her same sex orientation and the fact that she was not living out her childhood fantasies of heterosexual marriage:

Female masculinity is a recurrent theme in both research projects. In Jakarta the butches would say that they might have a female body, but that their souls were masculine. They displayed differing degrees of masculinity. Some are 'passing' women and are recognized as males by their partners and their surrounding. Others show more ambiguity. For the 'passing' women seeking health services is particularly traumatic, as there is the danger that they are unmasked as women (see also Mak 1997). In Damara culture female masculinity is not only related to social practices, such as financial responsibility, a division of labour and masculine ways in general. The male-identified respondents strongly feel that it is something inside them, that they are born with it.

*I was born like that...It's not something that I am learning now. It's something that is in my blood and so I have to suffer (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 165).*

Another respondent:

*This thing is inside you coming from somewhere (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 165).*

But what it is that is inside, or in the blood, is not at all clear to these respondents. There is a suggestion that it may have to do with either hormones, or maybe with having both male and female genitals, hermaphroditism. The first respondent quoted above is aware that there are persons who are hermaphrodites, or born intersexed and who are later operated on. Their knowledge about the medico-biological aspects is vague at best:

*... some people are created with two genitals. So the doctor said that the girl while she was a female.... when she became five years old she changed and became a man...The creation itself is like that. Some of us have been made disabled, have only one thing, but have been made like that, while other people have already been made with two things (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 165).*

Another respondent's experiences with doctors were not very enlightening either. She once stayed in hospital for three months on what originally seemed to be an infection of the ovaries.

*I became ill with my ovaries and then my stomach swelled up, and when I got there for examination they said it was possibly a pregnancy, but I knew that all these years I had never slept with men, how could I become pregnant? I told the doctors that I was not pregnant, that I didn't have a man and that it was impossible. They asked "How come that you don't have a man?" I don't know how old my daughter was by then. I told them to operate on me because I was in so much pain... All the women who were with me in the hospital were discharged and I was alone all by myself. I was now healthy - why was I still in the hospital? Then they would say "We are looking for something, we are*

looking for something ...” and I would say “What is it that you are looking for and which you don’t find?” ...I stayed there for three months, they were examining me and examining me but they discharged me without telling me anything. I went back to the hospital when I had a continued headache, and when they got my file they were examining the old mysterious disease (for which she had stayed an extra three months in hospital as described above). I asked a German doctor “What is going on with me, my head is sore but you don’t care about that and you are only interested in the operation that has already been done - what is the problem? ...they showed me films, they did not say what they were looking for. They showed me films of men who are sleeping with other men, and they could not understand that I did not have any interest in those things... of men with men and women with women... While I did not know what was going on in my life they showed those things to me, when they were supposed to tell me what was precisely going on in my life. When I asked about that... They told me that my hormones were not good and the head is sore continuously and so on so on, and that this would only be corrected when I am operated on. And I said “What precisely would I be operated on?” They asked me why I don’t have relationship with men and I said I did not come to the hospital to find men - I came because I have pain – “If there is any reason why I should have relationship with men then you should tell me.” At that time I was with Alwina and every time they met her they would ask “Is this your sister?” and later I told them “She’s my woman” and then they said “This is what we found in you, something is not right with you, it’s impossible why a young person like you doesn’t have relationships with men and why you have only one child.” I said it wasn’t my problem and that it also was not their problem and that they should only help me with my headache and the pain in the stomach. They said they could operate on me because the headache was continuing... When I was to be operated I was supposed to leave Namibia, and go and stay in a country in which the people don’t know me, me, who is known by the people of Namibia, to be operated, and where do I go. I said leave it and let me die if necessary. ...the doctors said that male hormones are strongly in my body and when I asked why it is like that they said that in some people, male hormones are strong in a woman and an examination shows whether it can be changed or not, and I said “Let this be, I am okay, I have relationships with women and I don’t have a problem.”

*Q: They would operate you and then you would become a man?*

*H: Yes, you must believe me, when my head pains like that and when I have sex than I feel truly better (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 165/6).*

Another informant struggled with his aggression and asked a doctor about that, as s/he was not quite sure whether there were maybe also physical causes? Again the doctor spoke in riddles:

*I would go to the doctor and then they would say, "Why do you become so angry?" When I saw myself in two ways (as both man and woman), I was thinking is this a good thing? What is going on? I have breasts, the genitals is like that (female). I also looked at how my children were. Then I saw a bit of difference (between them and me). I went to Katutura hospital in 1995.... 1996. There was a doctor for gay people... a woman doctor from South Africa... The doctor showed me books and told me that such things do exist but "your country has been oppressed by the white people from the beginning and so many things that in other countries are known are not yet known here. The first thing that showed me that I am like that is when I got the second child a white woman doctor caught her. It's people who are learned. On the day that we had to be discharged she came to me and said, "Madam I want to share something with you.". Then she asked, "How is it with you? Do you have one man or boyfriend? How do you get children?" She said she saw my genitals and that is the reason why she is asking these questions. "Do you need any help? Do you know about it?" I said I suspect something but not fully. She told me a few things that she could see on my genitals. She saw how my genitals were built. Then she thought this person must be of this kind. There is a little difference....*

*Q : That it looks like there was a penis...*

*C: Yes like that. She also saw that on the breasts. When I was visiting the clinic she always looked at me and ...you can see that through the back. If you are a lesbian, then they have to look very well at you, if somebody who is learned looks at you... I feel that the things that are happening are not just by themselves, so God who has made this creation must provide help so I don't beat out somebody's child's eyes (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 167).*

However 'learned' the doctors were, they were not really able to provide our narrators with the answers to the questions they posed. They remained with many ambiguities, about themselves and their bodies. One of our respondents would have liked to emerge out of this gender liminality and put an end to all the ambiguity that hir body shows by a sex change operation.

*I would have liked to change the way I am created. These breasts, anything that shows on me the female look, I would have changed that...When I was young, long ago, I read in the Huisgenoot about Erica, who became Eric, about her. I was so interested, while I was still at primary school, in the seventies, I desired that so much ....if there was money then I would have undergone a gender change or genital change (Khaxas and Wieringa 168).*

According to another respondent there are three types of people who are lesbians.

*when I was growing up, we were children of older people and they saw that (being gay) through religion as a very big sin. But I do not see that as a sin, truly, it's a feeling that God has created in you, it's not that suddenly you get up and do something like you want it. You get people who are born with it, you get people who are mimicking other people (following the example of others). You get people who are doing this because they had love disappointments. I don't know any love disappointments from the side of men as I am sitting now (Khaxas and Wieringa 168).*

The belief that homosexuality is in the blood is reinforced by the fact that in many cases in Damara culture there are more than one sibling in a family that are homosexual. All three Damara male-identified narrators in our research agree 'this thing' is something they are born with, and they associate it with hormones, with maybe a hint of a penis. It is not surprising then, that with so much masculinity involved, there is also talk of pregnancy. However all pregnancies produced by them have ended in miscarriages. Although one of our respondents was not quite sure of hir paternity, s/he accepted the full consequences of hir girlfriend's miscarriage and paid the hospital bill:

*While (my girlfriend and I) were together she said that something is moving inside her and I said, What could it be? What could be moving?" She said that she has not been menstruating for two weeks. She said, "You also know how you jumped and how much seed you are shooting." I said, "Don't talk about that." When I said that she got disappointed and got angry and left. That is because she was only with me and something like that happened to her and I didn't know about that... She said that she went to the doctor and was told that she was six weeks' pregnant and a few days and she came to me and apologised for leaving the other day and said that she told me that something is moving inside her and that I had said "don't talk about that thing" while she only stays with me and only does that with... I asked her whether she is saying that she is pregnant with my children and she said naturally. I said, "What are you saying?" I said, "Don't say things that God will punish us about." I calmed down and became afraid. I said that if there is a child and because I have never seen you with a man, I cannot say that it is not mine... Sometimes.... sometimes you feel how you shoot and it can happen, if you receive, it can happen. So I said that we have to wait and see. She cried a lot saying she did not have sex with other people, only with me. I was then still young. She left for her family house one weekend... she was angry because I was not supporting her with this thing and did not have interest in it. I don't know whether she went and drank something (that aborted the baby) or whether it was because of anger that she has lost that baby... (her brother told me) that she is ill and in the hospital, but the people at home would tell me more. I got a fright and went there. The woman told me that she had lost the baby and that it was about three weeks. I felt so guilty...I got leave and went to the place where she was to visit. I did not know what to say and she was on a drip...she lost lots of blood. When she saw me she cried and I also cried but I don't know ...even when she was speaking about that I did not heed that. I only thought that they went out sleep with other people and then say it's yours. But truly, she only stayed with me so I talked with her and paid the hospital fee.*

*Q: Did somebody give birth to your child?*

*R: (laughing) I made mistakes and maybe the children that could have been there did not come, because it looked impossible to me. One said to me when we have sex see what*

*happens in each style, that in a certain position it's possible that one can become pregnant but you just get mad, so much in your own pleasure that you don't know what is happening (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 168-9).*

Another informant too was positive that certain styles of lovemaking, like 'koekstamp' can end in a pregnancy:

*You lie next to each other like scissors, your leg into the other woman and her leg into yours...it's like in a scissors position. Then things also go very well. It's a very dangerous moment because all the things (laughing) are together nicely. If a woman who did not have a man or had men many years ago has been with me, and during that time she made a mistake and was with a man, she would become pregnant....*

*Things like that also happen, you know, one, two, three, four boys have been born that look like me. And I only get boy children (from other women) (laughter) ....*

*Q: If women are with you and they get involved with men then they become pregnant?*

*R: Yes, one told me, and it was only the two of us together (no man in the picture). Women do have respect for me and when there are diseases around and somebody wants to cheat on me, then she should stay away from me. That the woman knows perfectly and so when a woman is together with me, she will not go and have dealings with other people (relationships with men), let me say with men. I have been together with a woman for about two months, then she said she (got pregnant), seriously, she got pregnant... she told me that for two months she had not washed (her menstrual blood) and that she only knew me. So I said we have to see. I could see in her body the changes that were taking place. The marks that are there when a woman gets pregnant. The marks on the face when her nose becomes a bit bigger. The way she changes.... her torso becomes broader. She carried the baby for four months. One day I was talking to a girl that I know from the school. I was watering the garden when my girlfriend came and saw me with her and became jealous and went and drank and lost her baby (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 170).*

This respondent too carried took the financial consequences for the fruit of his masculinity like a man:

*(my girlfriend then) twice had miscarriages when we were together. When I said that we have to separate, then she said that I must pay her back for the blood that she lost. She did not look like this. It's because of that thing (miscarriage) that she has lost weight. Because she lost a lot of blood twice. First while she was at work and secondly in Walvis Bay because of the cold. She does not get involved with other people (men). She only stays with me. And so that (situation) also happened. It happens in the life... If you are given and the two of you... your blood comes together and God gives it to you, if that moment comes and I throw away my seed, then if it reaches there and because hormones, male hormones are also there, then something like that must happen (pregnancy). She miscarried at four months (Khaxas and Wieringa 2005: 170-1).*

## **Conclusion**

The female-bodied men of these two case studies see their gender identity as springing directly from their souls or bodies, at any rate as an innate condition. Troubled by social stigma and (religious) prejudice they carve out an existence in which sexual prowess takes an important place. Among the Damara this sexual activity is seen to as possibly resulting in pregnancies (however none claim that children were actually born). Marginalized by society and pathologized by the medical profession they claim a normalcy in which they are supported by their wives. Both Jakarta's butches and Namibian 'lesbian men' claim what they see as their rightful place in society and demand that their governments respect their human rights. However heteronormativity is increasingly imposed by both religious rightwing and conservative political postcolonial groups. Knowledge of a past in which certain women-women relations were more respected, whether in the form of women marriages or as couples with a transgender female, may support their claims for rights. They don't see themselves as suffering from any kind of 'disorder', rather they realize that their society's push towards heteronormativity disinherits them.

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