

# Women in Indonesia Between Ethnicity and Religiosity<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *Tulisan ini bertujuan mengungkap kondisi perempuan Indonesia dalam kelompok etnis dan agama melalui metaanalisis atas pelbagai penelitian yang dituangkan dalam bentuk tesis dan disertasi. Penelitinya sebagian besar perempuan, baik warga negara Indonesia maupun warga negara asing. Kelompok etnis yang diteliti cukup banyak dan terdapat di pelbagai pulau. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa telah terjadi perubahan status dan peran perempuan dalam budaya dan agama yang berbeda ke arah yang menguntungkan perempuan dan laki-laki. Perubahan itu tampak khususnya dalam hubungan perempuan dengan agama, dengan perkawinan, dan dengan sektor usaha. Meskipun demikian, ketimpangan gender belum sepenuhnya hilang karena nilai-nilai budaya ataupun keagamaan yang hidup dalam pelbagai masyarakat itu tidak seluruhnya mendorong perubahan.*

**KATA KUNCI** *Kondisi perempuan, ketimpangan gender, etnis, patriarkhi, nilai-nilai, perkawinan.*

Women's development in Indonesia is influenced at least by ethnicity and religiosity. Therefore, it would be possible that the dynamic of values in cultures and religions changed women's condition in Indonesia. In this paper, I would like to explain women's condition particularly in different ethnic groups and religions, in marriage and in business. For the sake of comprehensible discussion, I think that some actual information about Indonesia might be necessary.

## BRIEF OVERVIEW ON INDONESIA

Indonesia is a wide archipelago country. The 17,508 islands stretch across the equator between Asia and Australia, and between Indian and Pacific oceans. The country includes a total land area of 9.8 million sq. km, covering 7.9 million sq. km of ocean (including the exclusive economic zone). Five largest land masses cover the 1.9 million sq. km: Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan (a part of Borneo), Sulawesi, and Irian Jaya (a part of New Guinea). The climate is tropical with only two seasons: dry from March to August and

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<sup>1</sup> Makalah ini disunting dari *country paper* yang dikirimkan ke *Seminar on Women in Asia: Issues and Concerns* Stella Marris College, Chennai, December 11

rainy from September to February. As a state, Indonesia counts more than 200 million citizens with bigger number of woman (57%) than man (43%).

This republic has known many changes since 1998. Three presidents came to power in four years and we do not know whether the fifth president of Indonesia – a woman – will stay until 2004, the time we shall elect the people representatives. The total numbers of province has changed also from 27 to 26 in 1999 and to 29 in 2002. It seems that more provinces will be recognized in the near future due to the new system of governance called decentralisation.

Indonesian people are polyglot, they speak both Indonesian (bahasa Indonesia) and regional languages. There are about 400 regional languages and more than 2,000 dialects. The regional languages are the mother tongue of most Indonesians. By ethnicity the Indonesian nation consists of no less than 300 ethnic groups, but by mother tongue they can be grouped in eight largest:

1. Javanese : 52,1% (Central and East Java)
2. Sundanese : 19,3% (West Java)
3. Minang : 3,5% (West Sumatra)
4. Maduranese : 2,9% (Madura Island)
5. Banjar : 2,4% (Kalimantan)
6. Batak : 2,3% (North Sumatra)
7. Buginese : 1,8% (South Sulawesi)
8. Balinese : 1,7% (Bali)

Although Indonesia is not a religious state, each citizen is encouraged to embrace a religion according to their own beliefs and values. Officially, there are five recognized religions and some systems of belief such as Kejawen, Pangestu (both embraced by many Javanese), Kaharingan (Dayak Ngaju in Central Kalimantan). But people should embrace a recognized religion beside their belief. This creates a situation in which the members of Dayak Ngaju ethnic mention a specific religion in their identification card but never practice it since for the Kaharingan is their religion. The situation of the Javanese people is better because the Kejawen or Pangestu are just a life philosophy or a way of life that can be combined with any religion.

The total numbers of followers for each religion are:

1. Islam : 168.596,016 (87%)
2. Protestant : 11,670,522 (6,5%)
3. Catholic : 9,915,468 (3.6%)
4. Hindu : 1,985,264 (1.5%)
5. Buddhism : data not available.

(data of 1996)

Sometimes I am amazed by the fact that people living in the archipelago called themselves Indonesian despite the multiplicity of ethnic groups and religions. They can not pretend that they have one "Indonesian Culture"



(with capital C) because in reality there are so many cultures in Indonesia. The only cultural element that bound them together is the national language, the bahasa Indonesia<sup>2</sup>. I believe that centuries of contacts and relationships among those island people have created some kind of mutual understanding and solidarity. The relatively same historical backgrounds also help the building of this nation.

In the following part I will limit the exposé in eight ethnic groups: Batak, Minang in Sumatra; Baduy, Sundanese in Java, Balinese in Bali; Buginese, Toraja in South Sulawesi; and Sentani in Irian Jaya. Some of those are small ethnic groups and are not mentioned in the above list. Another limitation is the systems of belief: Islam, Protestan, Hindu and Kaharingan. If other religions are not discussed, it is because no thesis yet which reports a research in those areas.

It should be noted also that this exposé is based on the data compiled in twenty master theses of women's studies and one research report. As I mentioned above, Indonesia is a multicultural society. Therefore, Indonesian women's studies discuss about women issues in the context of different cultures<sup>3</sup>.

#### WOMEN'S ROLE IN RELIGIOUS CULTURE

There are two situations in which women are related to the systems of beliefs<sup>4</sup>. The first is the situation of equality (Vitrie 1998, Permana 2002) and the second is inequality (Pakan 1998, Siregar 1999, Kadir 2001).

According to Vitrie (1998), a Dayak Ngaju who embraces Islam with conviction, the Dayak Ngaju people embrace Kaharingan and believe in a unique god which has two "faces": Mahatara or male aspects and Jata or female aspects. The world and the universe have been created and taken care by the two: Mahatara takes care of the upper universe whereas Jata the lower universe. In the daily life, this concept is translated in collaborative partnership between woman and man: the woman's role is complete when there is men's support, and the existence of man has a meaning due to the existence of woman. Since Dayak Ngaju is a moving farmer society, the domestic and the field job are taken care by both woman and man. When a woman is married, she and her husband choose their place to live, either with the wife's family or the husband's.

Long time ago, Kaharingan priests were women, but now women play their role only in the ceremonies, ie. Tiwah, a fourty days ceremony for conveying soul to heaven. The actual priests are men<sup>5</sup>, but only women

<sup>2</sup> The fact that Indonesian people eat rice as basic food could be a cultural factor for the integration.

<sup>3</sup> The Women's studies graduate programs in the Universitas Indonesia, established in 1990, has more than eighty master thesis.

<sup>4</sup> For the practical reason I use

*systems of belief*

which includes both religions and systems of beliefs which are not recognized as religions.

can accompany the soul in their journey to the heaven. Equal partnership can be seen through the preparation, the events, and the closing of this ceremony.

The same concept of unique god exists in Baduy ethnic (Permana 2002), but the centre of worship is Ambu, a spiritual entity that any person has but exists also in the real world as the function of procreation. Therefore Ambu is closer to woman than man traits. Ambu takes care of both universe: the microcosmos which is represented as home and the macrocosmos or the universe. In this system of belief, there are three worlds: The upper world is the end of human life journey, the eternity. When human reaches the upper world, she or he is taken care by Ambu Luhur. The middle world is our real world, the perishable which is taken care by Ambu Tengah. And the lower world is a place where dirty souls are purified during fourty days by Ambu Handap.

But we cannot say that Baduy society is matriarchal because man is the leader in the family, the group, the village, and the tribe. Man also presides the ceremonies. The equality can be seen in the complementary functions between men and women. It is a monogamous society. When a man wants to marry a woman, he should work first during one week in the woman's padi fields. When he has shown his good qualities, the woman agrees to marry him and, like in the Dayak Ngaju society, both decide where to live. When a tribal chief lost his wife, he should give the authority to other man for he has lost his balance, he is no more a whole, a totality.

Everything that concerns the padi is women's affairs since Ambu is represented by Nyi Pohaci (= Dewi Sri) who takes care of padi and the field. The most important for this ethnic group is the padi ceremonies: from the seedling to the harvest. Every ceremony is taken care only by women.

It is important also to note that this is a close society – Dayak Ngaju is open – divided into two communities: internal Baduy and external Baduy. Nobody can enter the internal Baduy. They refuse formal education, electricity, radio, television ... modern world. They never use nails, they build houses from woods and ropes. Only the external Baduy can communicate with the outside world. It is the external Baduy who travels and trades. They bring basic needs (salt especially) for the internal Baduy. Therefore Permana (2002) got all data from the external Baduy.

Beside those systems of beliefs which continue its existence in some ethnic groups, there are communities of officially recognized religions. First, the Moslem community where women are subordinated. The case of religious text books for high school (Bustaman 2001) shows clearly that the whole religious education is gender biased. The content follows closely the ancient thought of Fiqih (Islamic law), there is no adaptation of Islam in the

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<sup>5</sup> It seems that women's role in the religion has been shifted and less than before. According to men priests, women refused to become priest because they embraced a religion and getting married. Since there is no written record about the changes, it is difficult to draw a conclusion, but the fact is women priest should stay virgin whereas men priest can have a family.



Indonesian context, ie. there is no role model for women<sup>6</sup>. It should be noted that the text books are written under the control of the Ministry of religious affairs, the writer is always a man. Bustaman (2001) discussed in particular the rules of marriage (wedding, divorce, remarriage, polygyny) in which women can not take any decision; the inheritance where women has right for a small part; and the impossibility for women to be a leader of all kind of religious activities and also to be a president. The fact that Indonesia has at the moment a woman president creates a controversy among the believers.

But the case of an Qoranic girls school (*pesantren putri*) studied by Faiqoh (1998) shows a change of attitude. The leadership of a Nyai Nafsiah, whose husband is the head of Islamic boys school, in her *pesantren* has changed the society's consideration vis-à-vis girls and women. Parents are now convinced that education is a must for girls as for boys. She reinterpreted the text book (*Kitab Kuning*) while teaching because it is difficult for her to make another. She socialised different gendered roles by asking boys students to do domestic job and the girls student the public job. She creates women student organisation inside the *pesantren* so that the girls can learn organisation and leadership (she believes that being a leader is a choice for both girls and boys, it is a human rights). She also teaches the girls to think critically in order to built an awareness about being a woman as human being not as a subordinate to other human being.

Those two cases show that Moslem private schools are more progressive than the public ones because they can use text books which meet their needs. Therefore, the Moslem women's development is in the hand of the Nyai. I believe that Moslem community in Indonesia is changing in two directions: a big part goes back to ancient arabic (Islamic) culture. For example, more and more Moslem women covered themselves from head to feet. Women and men's place are clearly separated. No more shake hands between different sexes. The other part continue to embrace contextual Islam, the tolerant Islam, the smiling Moslems. If the two parts respect each other and respect other communities too, there will be no problem. Only Moslem women should be aware of their rights and conditions.

The second case is of women ministers in two ethnic groups: Toraja (South Sulawesi) and Batak Toba (North Sumatra) which embrace Protestantism. Toraja ethnic had a traditional culture which positioned women very high (Pakan 1998). In their system of belief (*Aluh To Dalo*), woman priests is an intermediaire between human and the supranatural. It was a bilateral matrilineal society where woman's roles were important, women were a decision maker. But going to war was a man task whereas weaving was for women. Meanwhile this ethnic group has experienced acculturation: firstly through contacts with Buginese, a patriarchal and

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<sup>6</sup> Indonesian people has experienced the life with an important women's role: many queens governed Indonesian monarchies, even Aceh (North Sumatra, applies Islamic law since last year) has several women sultans; during the independence war women collaborate with men on the front line.

hierarchical society. Secondly, through contacts with Dutch Calvinist culture which was very discriminatif against women. During the colonial time, woman's role was very limited, ie. only men may learn theology. But there were changes long after Indonesia became a republic. Through the Toraja autonomous church, which went back to old tradition, women learned theology (1971) and became priests (1986). In 1997, there were 40 women priests out of 338. But they still suffer discriminative treatment in their carrier and welfare.

Siregar (1999) found a different situation in the Batak Toba society. It is patrilineal and patriarchal. Women are considered as worker and companion, they have no rights to talk and to decide. For example, in marriage they are sold to men and have to enter their husband's clan. Women has no right for inheritance.

They embraced Protestantism in 1861 through German missionaries which enforced patriarchy. They immediately had their own church (*Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, HKBP*). In 1966 the believers were aware that women and men had not yet equal position. In 1986, women ministers have been accepted but the role were very limited and stereotypical. For example, they had no right to give blessing in Sunday service and in the wedding. The fact that women are considered as companion in this culture enables them to be a leader even if they are highly educated. It will take much time for Batak Toba people to change their vision about women despite the reformed church.

#### WOMEN IN MARRIAGE

As mentioned above, the Batak Toba women become husband's property after the marriage. But as a single woman, she is her father's property. Anyway, women exist to serve men in this community. According to Batak Toba tradition, a family should have a son, otherwise the father can not go to heaven. But in fact, a son is needed to receive inheritance and to assure the clan sustainability. Therefore, a husband can divorce his wife just because she does not give him a son<sup>7</sup>. But the women can not return to her parents because she is no more a member of his father's clan. It means that she lost every thing and has to live by her own means (Irianto 2000, Marbun 2002).

Irianto (2000) found in her research about Batak Toba women in Jakarta that they have strategies to get their part of inheritance. Since the Batak Toba common law does not give a chance to women to get inheritance—and her belongings during marriage, the women use the national law. They make it a case for the court. Some of them win the case, some manage a compromise with the other parts (ex-husband or son). Here we can see a change of behavior and culture. Even if they loose the case, they show a rebellion against the patriarchy.

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<sup>7</sup> I believe that the majority of Indonesian men do not know that the child's sexe depends on them, not on the women.



Let us now look at the Moslem community: the Sundanese, the Buginese and the Madurese. In general Moslem women believe that a wife should follow her husband's order, she has to make him happy, to serve him. They think that women's sexuality, women's reproductive health, and women's welfare are not important.

In Sundanese community, girls are taught to be a wife and a mother. Huriani (2001) found out that married women who join the *Majlis Taklim* (Qoranic activities group) in West Java do not understand the meaning of sexuality and they never talk about it. For them a marriage is an economic guarantee, an institution to get peaceful life and a friend. Therefore they are obedient to their husband, they think that to satisfy is an obligation, to refuse husband's desire is a sin but to take initiative is improper, the satisfaction is only for a man. Many of them have experienced an arranged marriage.

In Buginese there are two worlds: the aristocrats and the ordinary people (Niswati 2001, Hading 2002). But both respect the *Siri'* culture which means that every community member should have dignity and value their rank. A scandalous conduct could destroy a clan's dignity. Therefore boys are educated to be a leader and a family guardian, especially female members. Girls on the other hand are brought up to be a family's pride, her place is in the house, going out is a risk to lose her dignity, she should be guarded by the male member (Hading 2002). Both embrace Islam but follow the misinterpretation of Islamic rules (Niswati 2001) so that the patriarchal culture has been enforced.

In the aristocratic community, there is a tradition of marrying children when they were born (*Mappasitaro*). The community members keep this tradition alive for three reasons: economic: to keep wealth within family, to get equal match economically and by status, and to improve aristocratic status, especially for women. Very often those children grow up without knowing that they are bound in a marriage arranged by their parents. Common law prevails over national law. Problems come when they fall in love with another person or do not like their match. For men, it is not a big problem because, as Moslem, they can have more than one wife. But for women it becomes a burden. Niswati (2001) found at least four types of family's problem: first, battered wives who accept the violence just to protect family dignity and to prevent themselves from making sin (ie. refuse father's will, refuse husband's desire); second, divorce which put women in misery because they destroy family's name and they do not get anything from their ex-husband; third, unofficial marriage which makes women lose all their rights in the family because they are considered as nonexistent; and fourth, suicide when the women can not bear much longer to live with a man they do not love and/or to be victims of violence.

In the case of ordinary people—Buginese Wajo—the situation is slightly different but not better (Hading 2002). The *Siri'* values are maintained through child rearing. Girls are prepared to be confined in the house so that no scandal could happen. Very young they are taught to recite the

Qoran together with their brothers, but at the age of nine they are educated separately. It means that the boys are still free to go outside the house but this is not the case for the girls who are taught to manage family health, to do household tasks, to be a companion. It means also that girls have no access to higher education. Hading concludes that anyhow the situation is not profitable for women: those who are obedient get an honorable consideration, but are imprisoned and sacrifice themselves. Those who resist are free and independent, but are considered as embarrassing and lost their "traditional" rights.

The Madurese have a strong character due to hard life in the dry island. They embrace Islam and its culture. In this community, girls are married very young and do not stay very long as a wife. Men divorce easily their wife or have several wives (Bouvier 1994). Many Madurese have left their homeland a long time ago and live in East Java (Setyawati 2002). They become a whole community beside the Javanese, but their culture does not change much. They stay Madurese wherever they are.

In Islam a marriage is legitimated and blessed by Allah when it is done by a Moslem leader (*penghulu*) and in front of a witness. But to be official, the Islamic office makes sure that a contract is signed. Many people do not care about the official marriage because it is more important to get Allah blessing. Therefore, *Sirri* marriage is still common in the Madurese community<sup>8</sup>. In general women choose this system to avoid parents decision, or men to avoid obligations when they take another woman as wife. This is unfortunate for women, because they do not have a bargaining position over their husband. Men may pretend to be a husband without fulfilling any obligation. Women can not insist for their rights because there is no contract. Men can leave their wives as they like and women should accept the reality. Setyawati (2002) found out that many single parents are the result of *sirri* marriage. In this case, women should bear alone all the burden: children welfare especially. When a husband is dead, his wife(s) can not use her rights for inheritance since there is no record of their marriage.

It seems to me that equality is still a dream for many women because in many ethnic groups the official religion strengthened the patriarchal culture. Only when women become more independent and conscious about their existence as a whole human being, they might change the system (Bouvier 1994, Hading 2002).

## WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Money seems to be an effective means to obtain independancy. At least this is what Sendratari (1995), Tilawati (2001) and Marbun (2002) found out in different ethnic groups. Their research on women entrepreneurs

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<sup>8</sup> In fact it is common, under different names, in any Moslem community in Indonesia. Lately, this system has facilitated prostitution and trafficking in women.



shows that rural society is the origin of those women. Poverty, marginalisation, and women's hope to have a better life have motivated them to become traders.

In Bali (Sendratari 1995) women traders are known since 1920 when they brought goods to the harbour. Moreover, Balinese culture does not create a barrier for women's roles, ie. women workers in the road bulding. But women in agricultural society are considered as secondary human resource despite their important roles as bread winner. This situation is profitable for women to do business in vegetable trading. They are the link between village and town (market). The effects of economic power are good on women: first, they can give order to men, including their husband who work for them; second, they are decision makers in children welfare and the children respect them; third, they manage to free themselves from domestic tasks by paying a worker and by creating a job division for members of the family; fourth, they are able to do business with other traders in the market and create work opportunity in their surrounding; and fifth, they always be an important element in Hindu-Bali tradition, especially in the every day worship. Sendratari concludes that those women entrepreneurs manage to combine motherhood and entrepreneurship to assure the sustainability of business and family.

In Palembang (Tilawati 2001), there was no business tradition because the colonial government made them stay farmer by a treaty signed in 1852. Poverty and patriarchy have motivated farmers to move to town (Palembang) and become traders of basic needs in the market. Beside patriarchy, the matrilineal system which allows only eldest daughter to manage family wealth pushed women to be the bread winner and obtain independency. But the same as Balinese women traders, they have to adapt business with their role as wife and mother. For example, when they have small childre, they do trading at home or have a stall nearby. They also must pay a substitut for reproductive tasks. As for the religious activities, those Moslem women still pay a lot of time for it. Tilawati distinguished two kind of traders, small and big ones. For the small traders, business is a survival strategy. Therefore, they can not be as autonomous as the big traders: decision making, children rearing, wealth possession. In their community, on the contrary, small traders are tolerated for not joining the social activities. It is interesting also to note that the concept of kinship has changed in this community. Family for those women traders is not limited by parental linkage, but extended to friends in business. In fact, this kind of trade is considered as informal business which need a lot of trust between traders and between traders and buyers.

In Batak Toba Society living in Jakarta, business begins as a survival means to avoid poverty in the village or to change role with unfortunate husband. The situation is relatively the same as in the two ethnic groups mentioned before, but Batak Toba women dare more to take a risk by trading gold and diamonds. Their existence has been facilitated by the system of pawn: people need money quickly and the pawn system can not provide

it. So, they prefer to loose their jewels instead of using it as a mortgage. Ironically, this business of big money is still considered as informal. There is no formal protection against the risk, the authority exploits the traders instead of applying taxes. As Irianto (2000) has shown also, the situation in Jakarta facilitates Batak Toba women to change their culture. Marbun (2002) found out that economic power has made Batak Toba women to be an agent of change: no more obligation for a family to have a son which means that girls and boys have the same value, no more arranged marriage since independent women have power to refuse it, no more marginalisation in the community since women have rights to decide in religious and other social activities.

## CONCLUSION

Women in Indonesia experienced a real change in their communities. There are progress and regress as well. In many cases they have to fight for their rights since their condition became worse within changes of values. In others they gained their autonomy and therefore got a real power in their relations with men. In some communities they got back some roles in social life but not the same as before. In Indonesia ethnicity and religiosity developed in their own way but they influenced each other.

It might be interesting to note that the current national development plan will facilitate the women liberation ("emansipasi" is the Indonesian term). Since 2000 gender mainstreaming has been made official in the development policy and programs and in the same year there was a change in political system from centralisation to decentralisation. Some provinces were enthousiantic in maintaining the tradition, thus ethnicities became a big issue. Meanwhile the new policy had its impact in religious culture. The question is what are the possibilities for Indonesian women—not long ago the Province of West Sumatra made a law to protect women by defending them to go outside the house at night without their *muhrim* (father, brother). It created a controversy and the law has been changed.



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