Nurul Ilmi Idrus

Gender Relations in an Indonesian Society: Bugis Practices of Sexuality and Marriage, [Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 303], Leiden: Brill, 2016, xix + 355 pp. ISBN 9789004311305, price: EUR 78.00 (hardcover).

This book presents the findings of ethnographic research in Kulo village, South Sulawesi (population of 12,653 in 2015, pp. 5–6). Its main objective are '[...] presenting an interpretation of Bugis social and sexual experience by connecting gendered values, marriage and marital violence using a well-established tradition of analysis to provide an understanding of gender relations of contemporary Bugis society through an ethnography of marriage' (p. 40).

Idrus based her investigation on interviews with selected respondents (young and old), focus group discussions, and participant observation, and supports her findings with extensive studies of literature. As the researcher is herself a person of Bugis ethnicity, the study offers an emic perspective with fascinating, in-depth descriptions of how insiders understand their culture—which should be read with all the caveats regarding the biases inherent to any ethnographic study, emic or etic. That said, Idrus might have made a more powerful intervention had she been more careful and self-conscious in presenting her emic views. Instead, her uncritical assertions and conclusions often raise doubts—not of the authenticity of her views and descriptions, but of where they fit in a broader gender analysis.

The author indicates that people's perception and behavior pertaining to gender relations and sexuality are strongly influenced by their religion (Islam) and local beliefs, values and culture. In explaining the rationale behind the expected characteristics and behavior of men and women, respondents in this study refer to examples from the holy Qur'an and the compilation of Prophet Muhammad's utterances (*Hadith*), as well as from a twentieth century Bugis manuscript (*lontaraq*) related to marital life, which frequently mentions the words Allah and Prophet Muhammad. The author, however, suspects that in the *lontaraq* genre '[...] the Islamic terms are used to merely legitimate the content of the manuscript'. (p. 167). The content of *lontaraq* manuscripts is orally passed on to the younger generation by the elders, shaping the minds of the youth regarding the idealized woman/man and wife/husband. The author believes that the development of gender identities and gender relations is also influenced by Indonesia's New Order ideology (with its 1974 Marriage Law) and its focus on the concept of motherhood (*ibu*), regulating marital laws and gender roles within the marriage, and preventing adultery and polygyny among civil servants.

According to this book, masculinity for Bugis people means showing bravery, cleverness, wealth, and leadership. A man's roles are those of protector/defender of his family's reputation, head of the household, breadwinner, religious leader and role model for his family members. Ideal femininity is characterized by beauty, family background, wealth, and piety. In practice, men are valued by their ability to provide for the family (financial responsibility) and women are expected to perform well as sex partner and household manager. For both genders piety is very important.

As the author explains, the Bugis consider marriage very important, following the local custom or norms and religion, with procreation as its primary motive. Remaining unmarried beyond a certain age creates shame for the family. When unmarried men are seen as lacking sexual competence, a commodified value is added to women's marital status; a woman is given the denigrating label 'unsaleable' (*tidak laku*) when she remains single beyond a certain age. To avoid stigma, many families, particularly in rural areas, tend to marry off the daughters at a young age. Families arrange and sometimes force their daughters to marry young to prevent premarital sex and to avoid parental and particularly financial responsibility for child care. Although arranged marriages among young couples are unstable, divorce is avoided as it causes shame. Domestic violence is underreported due to a wife's dependence on her husband's financial support. Child and teenage marriages are observed in many countries around the world, particularly among families with low incomes and education, yet this book does not discuss the phenomenon comparatively.

In male-controlled societies it is common to find unequal gender roles, in which women are expected to show obedience and submission, are relegated to the domestic sphere, and are treated as men's subordinates. The author claims that female subordination and domestication do not apply to the Bugis culture, calling attention to the gendered division of labor that is flexibly practiced by both genders (p. 139). The author suggests that Bugis women are placed in position of honor, with their movements and behaviors being supervised by men to protect them from wrongdoings.

Nonetheless, the author observes a double standard in the studied area. In courtship, women are not expected to initiate contact with men; they must guard their purity (virginity), as extramarital intercourse is tabooed and can result in divorce. Male infidelity is more tolerated. Wives tend to accept polygyny out of fear of losing social status and economic support. A wife's behavior is associated with reward and punishment (heaven or hell), supported with quotations from the *Hadith*, while the Bugis *lontaraq* genre contains no allusions to rewards or punishments in the afterlife following a husband's misconduct. Meanwhile, the Indonesian law lacks in gender equality in domestic violence. The wife tends to be blamed when a husband becomes violent or unfaithful.

The book calls attention to the importance in Bugis society of *siriq*—which can be translated as honor, dignity, or shame. This concept motivates people to achieve the best, yet simultaneously triggers retaliation by male relatives after presumed female misconduct. Women are said to be fragile, like glass or ceramic; when broken, they are without value. It is imperative for women to behave according to the social, cultural, and religious norms. To defend a family's reputation, even murdering a perceived male transgressor can be justified. In case of eloping, both the man and woman are punished.

The tradition of defending a family's honor is not unique of the Bugis culture, of course. One version, known as *carok*, is practiced in Madura and is aimed at men. In India and Pakistan, disapproved relationships between a man and a woman can lead to what is commonly called the 'honor killing' of the perceived sinners (in most cases the woman). Comparing Bugis gender ideologies with other cultures would have enriched the discussion in this book and would have provided a better picture of the gender position in Bugis society in national and global contexts.

To some extent, the findings presented in this study seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, the author claims that Bugis women are given positions of honor and, being perceived as fragile, are well protected. On the other, Bugis women face various kinds of discrimination, including the humiliation of being labeled as 'unsaleable' when they are not married at a young age, male dominance and control, and domestic violence. Idrus fails to address this dualism in gender relations, possibly reflecting a personal bias in this emic study.

Kulo is not an isolated community, nor has its culture stagnated. Contact with the outer world, facilitated by telecommunications and mass media, bring new ideas that influence traditions and people's views, in particular new ideas regarding women's empowerment and their rights. Conflict may arise when traditions are challenged. It would be enlightening to learn how women in contemporary Kulo society handle the challenges of change, yet the book is regrettably silent on this topic.

Issues related to gender and sexuality in the Bugis society of Kulo are described in detail by the author. Unfortunately, findings of ethnographic studies are culture- and time-specific and cannot be generalized to the entire Bugis population. As a result, the uninitiated reader remains ignorant of how representative the book's findings are, even in Bugis society more broadly. Despite its many limitations, this study adds color to the cultural mosaic of the multi-ethnic archipelago of Indonesia.

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