

Official Selection
FRAMELINE
FILM FESTIVAL

Official Selection
SAN FRANCISCO
INT'L ASIAN AMERICAN
FILM FESTIVAL

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OUTFEST
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STARZ DENVER
FILM FESTIVAL

AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD
ASIAN AMERICAN
INT'L FILM FESTIVAL

BEST DOCUMENTARY AWARD
SAN DIEGO
ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD
BARCELONA
GAY & LESBIAN FILM FESTIVAL

Tales OF THE Waria

A FILM BY *Kathy Huang*



THE STORY

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population. It is also home to a community of biological men who live openly as women—the *warias*. In the eye-opening documentary TALES OF THE WARIA, four members of this little-known community search for love and intimacy in the face of unusual obstacles. Suharni's seemingly perfect relationship with her boyfriend is tested when she leaves town to find work. Mami Ria struggles to revive her 18-year relationship with a police officer. Former waria Firman leads a quiet life with his wife and children, but still dreams of the past when he had long hair and flirted with men. And Tiara, a glamorous entertainer, performs confidently on stage, but secretly harbors her own heartache. What happens in the complex lives of these four brave individuals? Can they realize their dreams for a future with their male partners?

Shot over several years with warias serving as advisors and film crew members, the film provides unprecedented access to a community that dares to live differently from the norm, despite what consequences may await them. Through their emotional journeys, we gain insight into issues rarely discussed in Western media: Indonesia, Islamic culture, and the daily struggles of transgender communities around the world.

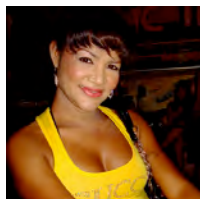
CAST



Tiara is a self-proclaimed diva working in the beauty and entertainment industries. She is proud to be a waria, insisting that God put warias on earth to make the world more beautiful, and takes it upon herself to mentor younger warias. Despite her pride and fierce independence, we soon learn that her past is not without its own heartache.



Mami Ria is a successful salon owner and revered leader of the warias. She cherishes her 18-year relationship with police officer Pak Ansar—a man she shares amicably with his first wife, a biological woman. Recently, however, Pak Ansar's attention has been waning and Mami Ria sets upon winning him back—even if it means taking drastic steps to change herself.



Young, attractive **Suharni** has found true love. Her boyfriend Madi accepts her despite her troubled past as a prostitute and her HIV+ status. As financial concerns mount though, Suharni makes the fateful decision to relocate to the more lucrative island of Bali. Whether her relationship with Madi can survive the temptations of her new home is uncertain.



Pressured by his parents to act like a “man,” **Firman** eventually abandoned his waria lifestyle and married a woman. He now leads a life of happy domesticity with his adoring wife Mimi and their two daughters. The shadow of his past is never far away though. Firman begins to make frequent visits to a waria nightclub, causing great distress at home.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Back in 2005, when I was visiting family in Taiwan, I picked up a newspaper and was astonished to see a photograph of a gorgeous waria who had won a beauty contest in Jakarta. I knew about the “ladyboys” of Thailand, but I had no idea that transgender people could live so openly in Indonesia, a country with a predominately Muslim population. Like many Americans, I had a notion of Islam as being oppressive and particularly unforgiving toward sexual minorities. How could a community like the warias possibly exist?

Unable to shake my curiosity, I decided to take some Indonesian language classes and to travel to Indonesia to experience the lives of the warias firsthand. Under the counsel of Dr. Tom Boellstorff, an anthropologist with 20 years of field experience working with the queer community in Indonesia, I landed in Makassar, a city in eastern Indonesia known for both its strong Muslim faith and traditional openness toward transgender individuals.

After spending several months with the warias in their homes, salons, and nightclubs, I realized I had stumbled upon an extraordinary, multilayered world. To be a waria is to lead a life of extremes, full of tragedy and heroism. I knew that their stories deserved to be shared with a larger audience. I approached several warias with the idea of making a film and they were instantly receptive. Tired of seeing negative, hypersexualized portrayals of themselves in the media, they suggested I focus on the challenges they faced finding love and lasting companionship. Waria elders offered counsel throughout the project. Gaya Celebes, a non-profit organization staffed by warias and gay men, provided translators and film crew members. Together, we set off to find film subjects who could present the waria experience in its full complexity and splendor.

After four long years, our journey is finally over. We hope that we have created a film that will dispel a perception of Islam as monolithically intolerant. There is room in Islam, as there is in any religion, for differences in appearances, lifestyles, and sexual preferences. We have also tried to give audiences a new glimpse into transgender life, one that goes beyond the usual sensational coverage. Our subjects search for love and try to forge meaningful human connections, despite whatever obstacles or heartache may lie in their path. Theirs is a universal story—one that is beautiful and inspiring.

Kathy Huang
Director/Producer



*The director (center) with Associate Producers
Aldy Mardianus & Tiara Bahtiar*

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Geography

Indonesia is a vast archipelago in Southeast Asia spanning four time zones. It boasts a dazzling array of diversity with over 15,000 islands, 300 ethnic groups, and 700 languages and dialects. It is the world's fourth most populous country (after India, China, and the United States). While the government officially recognizes six religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism), it is home to the world's largest population of Muslims.

Although it has gained attention in international media for the natural disasters plaguing its chain of volcanic islands, Indonesia plays a key role in international politics and has the largest economy in Southeast Asia.

Tales of the Waria is set in Makassar, the largest city on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. A port city with a rich tradition of trading and fishing, Makassar has often been called the gateway to East Indonesia. It is also an area known for its strong Muslim faith.



Indonesia. Can you locate the city where the film is set?



Warias

Waria, a term created by combining the Indonesian words for “woman” (*wanita*) and “man” (*pria*), identifies a range of biological men who believe they were born with the souls of women. In Indonesia, a country of almost 240 million people, some activists have estimated that there are 7 million warias. While some warias wear women’s clothes, put on makeup, take hormone pills, and pursue cosmetic surgery, not all do. And in contrast to transgender women in other parts of the world, most warias choose not to have sex reassignment surgeries. Their reluctance stems from both an economic factor (the high cost) and a religious one. As Tiara states in the film, “We believe that we were born as men and must return to God as men.”

Warias can be found everywhere in Indonesia -- in salons, on television, at weddings, on street corners. One of Indonesia’s biggest TV personalities, Dorce Gamalama, began her career as a boy and publicly transitioned into a waria identity as a teenager. Warias participate actively in many aspects of Indonesian life—from voting to public worship. During Muslim prayers, warias in Sulawesi commonly dress as men and gather in the area of the mosque designated for men. Warias who prefer to pray as women, like many in Java, often observe prayer at home where they are less conspicuous and feel more comfortable.

Indonesia’s Queer Community

One can find a range of sexualities and genders in Indonesia. Warias exist alongside lesbians (*lesbis*), gay men, and female-to-male transgendered individuals (*tombois* or *hunters*). The warias, however, are by far the most visible and well known of these communities. While educated and urban Indonesians may not know what the term *lesbi* means, they will undoubtedly be familiar with *waria* or *banci* (a more casual but less respectful term for warias).

Outsiders may find themselves confused by the difference between warias and gay men, especially since members of both communities choose to date men. One important distinction is that warias have, as one film subject puts it, “the soul, instincts, and feelings of a woman.” Gay men in Indonesia may at times act effeminate and put on women’s clothing for fun, but they see themselves as men at their core. Unlike warias who live openly, many gay men in Indonesia date secretly and never tell their families that they are gay. It is not unusual for them to marry women and have children.



In Makassar, warias and gay men often work together in the entertainment and beauty industries and maintain close friendships.

A brief history of warias

Though the term *waria* is a modern construction, a tradition of cross-dressing existed in Indonesia before the arrival of Islam. On the island of Sulawesi, cross-dressing priests known as the *Bissu* served the King of the Bugis. They were seen as both mortal and divine beings, and were held in great esteem.



Though their numbers have dwindled, the Bissu still bestow blessings to this day.

References to modern-day warias began appearing in texts from the early 1800s. Writers made note of “effeminate men” working in coastal trading centers. Known derogatorily as *banci*, they established themselves in petty commodity trading, lowbrow entertainment, and sex work. By the 1960s, their greater social visibility and the protection afforded them under Jakarta’s activist mayor won them the new name of *wadam*—a contraction of “woman” (*wanita*) and the first male prophet (Adam). By the mid-1970s, the Minister of Religion changed *wadam* to *waria* to appease Muslim groups who were upset by the use of the prophet’s name. And in 1978, the national newspaper *Kompas* published the term *waria*, making it official.

Warias today

The warias occupy a unique social sphere where they are both accepted and marginalized. They are often respected for their work in the beauty and entertainment industries, and find themselves in unique positions to support their families with their skills. Warias are also often integrated into their Muslim communities; in Makassar, for example, they pray in mosques, celebrate Ramadan, and are friendly with local imams.

At the same time though, families are rarely thrilled to discover that their son is a waria. Warias are often teased during childhood and drop out of school because of pressures to conform to gender norms. Their lack of education and job opportunities can lead them to drugs and prostitution, and leave them vulnerable to physical violence and sexually transmitted diseases. Recently, extremist groups such as the Islamic Defender’s Front (FPI) have also famously disrupted transgender gatherings and organizations. In 2010 alone, there were three attacks on transgender trainings and LGBT gatherings. In some cases, the police withdrew permits for the events and did not try, or were unable to stop, local Islamic groups from attacking participants.

But the news is not all bad. Arus Pelangi, an Indonesian LGBT organization, describes the recent attacks against warias and other members of Indonesia’s queer community as a backlash to the increased visibility of LGBT communities in the media and their growing activism. In 2006, a distinguished group of human rights experts gathered in Indonesia to put together the Yogyakarta Principles—an affirmation of rights and freedoms for LGBT individuals. And in 2012, waria activist Yulianus Rettoblaut applied to be a member of Indonesia’s National Commission for Human Rights, an organization that monitors and mediates human rights abuses within the country.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY ...

- 1) Judging from the representations in the film, how would you describe a waria? What traits do all the film subjects share? How are their lifestyles and worldviews different?
- 2) Study the list of terms on page 7. Which of these labels apply to the warias? What do you think are some of the advantages and limitations of using these types of labels?
- 3) According to anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, warias differ from gay men in Indonesia because “they identify with a female soul, have a feminine social presentation, and are much more visible in daily life.” Compare transgender & gay communities in Indonesia with those in America. How well do labels translate across cultures?
- 4) Using the glossary below, how would you define the sex, gender, and sexuality of the warias? In the film, Firman describes a formative sexual experience with a male ice vendor where he “found out what it was like to be a waria.” What might his story tell us about the relationship between sexuality and gender identity?
- 5) What common themes exist in the childhoods of our main subjects?
- 6) Describe the relationships our various subjects have with their families. How would you gauge the role of the family in Indonesian society?
- 7) By what means have the warias survived and made a living in society? Why do you think they have chosen these fields?
- 8) How do our different subjects reconcile their Islamic faith with their lifestyles?
- 9) What type of romantic relationships do warias seek? Why do you suppose this is?
- 10) In the film, Mami Ria says, “Love is important for a waria. It completes her life.” Compare the warias’ search for romantic love with your own. What challenges do you share, and in which ways are your experiences different? Why?

Glossary

Sex the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women

Gender the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women

Sexuality or sexual orientation one’s preference in sexual partners

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- 1) What is the history and impact of HIV/AIDS on the waria community?
- 2) What views does Islam hold on homosexuality and transgender individuals? How do they compare to those of other religions?
- 3) Transgender communities exist around the world—for example, the *travestis* in Brazil or *hijras* in India (see definitions below). Choose a transgender community from a different region of the world and compare their lifestyles and worldviews with those of the warias.

DEFINING TERMS...

Trans person Someone who lives partially or fully in a sex or gender not assigned to them at birth.

Transsexual Someone who identifies and lives in the sex opposite of that which they were assigned at birth. Often transsexuals will use feminizing or masculinizing body techniques. Not all transsexuals will seek genital reconstructive surgeries, although many do.

Crossdresser/transvestite Someone who lives part-time in the opposite gender. Generally, they do not identify with the other sex and prefer to keep the sex-identity that they were assigned at birth. The term 'transvestite' has fallen out of fashion in many Anglophone communities where people prefer to use 'crossdresser,' but it is still used in Francophone contexts (travestie).

Travesti A term found in South America to describe people who were assigned to the male sex at birth but who have taken on a feminine gender identity. Unlike transvestites, they live full time as women and often use feminizing techniques. Importantly, they do not consider themselves to be transsexuals.

Hijra A term found in South Asia to describe people who were assigned to the male sex at birth but who have taken on feminine social roles. Often they identify as neither male nor female. They have a role in some religious ceremonies.

FTM/trans man Someone assigned the female sex at birth but who identifies and lives as a man.

MTF/trans woman Someone assigned the male sex at birth but who identifies and lives as a woman.

Transgender A notion mostly common in Anglophone North America, Europe and Oceania. It can be used either as an umbrella term that brings together different trans people or it can operate as a separate identity. Transgender people sometimes live in between sexes and genders, claiming a space that is neither female nor male.

Drag Queen a man who dresses, and usually acts, like a caricature woman, often for the purpose of entertaining.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Additional Readings

- Boellstorff, Tom (2004). Playing back the nation: Waria, Indonesian transvestites. *Cultural Anthropology*, 19(2), 159-195.
- Boellstorff, Tom (2005). *The gay archipelago: Sexuality and nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Blackwood, Evelyn (2010). *Falling into the lesbi world: Desire and difference in Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Davies, Sharyn Graham (2010). *Gender diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and queer selves*. London: Routledge.
- Kulick, Don (1998). *Travesti: Sex, gender, and culture among Brazilian transgendered prostitutes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Valentine, David (2007). *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- van Wichelen, Sonja (2010). *Religion, politics and gender in Indonesia: Disputing the Muslim body*. New York: Routledge.
- Wieringa, Saskia E., Evelyn Blackwood & Abha Bhaiya (2007). *Women's sexualities and masculinities in a globalizing Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Other Films of Interest

- *Be Like Others* (2008): A documentary by Tanaz Eshaghian on young Iranian men choosing to undergo sex change surgery.
- *Children of Srikandi* (2012): A collection of documentary, fiction, and experimental films about queer women in Indonesia, made by queer women in Indonesia.
- *The Last Bissu* (2004): A documentary by Rhoda Grauer on one of the few remaining transvestite priests of South Sulawesi.
- *Madame X* (2011): An Indonesian action film by Lucky Kuswandi starring a waria superhero in Java.
- *Working Girls* (2011): A trilogy of short documentaries, the final of which ("Ulfie Goes Home") examines HIV education and prevention among warias in Aceh.

