

Kristina Schneider (2024): “Unity in Diversity is Not for Us” – Lesbi and Trans Men Navigating Gender, Desire, and Islam in Java, Indonesia. Universitätsverlag Göttingen.

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## **Summary**

In the field of Southeast Asian studies, "Unity in Diversity is not for us" explores the lived experiences of primarily Muslim lesbians and trans men (LT+) in Java, Indonesia, where Islam is the majority religion. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, the book traces how LT+ individuals understand their identities and negotiate their gender and desire in the face of socio-religious rejection. Employing a Grounded Theory Analysis of qualitative interviews, the book further shows how the LT+ protagonists negotiate the incompatibility thesis, which posits the incompatibility of LT+ positionings with heteronormative religious

and cultural values. The research demonstrates that Islam and faith are also an empowering resource regarding the topic; this underlines the plurality of Islam and challenges the widespread notion that Islam is inherently homophobic.

The first main section examines how LT+ understand and perform gender in relation to local discourses and how subject formation takes place. The analysis illustrates the prevalent use of gender labels and the biographical process of identifying with the stigmatized category of *lesbian*, coined as *coming of age as a lesbian*. In addition, this section explores the complex relationship between space and identity articulation. On the one hand, it traces the protagonists' ability to navigate spatial gender norms, resulting in fluid gender performances. On the other hand, it illustrates the interpersonal negotiations that follow the intentional or accidental disclosure of LT+ identities, ranging from external attempts to regulate behavior to acceptance.

The second main section focuses on the alleged tension between Islam, faith, and same-sex desire. The analysis uses Qur'anic narratives and religious principles to specify the religiously and socially constructed incompatibility of Islamic beliefs with LT+ identities. This is complemented by an examination of alternative discourses advocating compatibility and struggling for recognition. Through the lens of lived religion, the micro-level analysis then shows how LT+ actively engage in negotiating faith at the intersection of non-normative gender and desire. In their personal strategies, systematized as modes of negotiation, drawing on both dominant and alternative religious interpretations, they affirm, negate, and reinterpret their contents, carving out space for their subjectivity.

Combining anthropology of religion and queer studies, the book delves into the complex local interrelations of religion, gender and sexuality on the micro level. Through a macro-level analysis of recent social and political developments, it argues that Indonesia is slowly moving from *Unity in Diversity* to *Unity in Morality*.