

The Compass of Life

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The Compass of Life

*Sundanese Lifecycle Rituals and the Status of
Muslim Women in Indonesia*

Linda Lentz



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Contents

Series Editors' Preface	
Culture, Identity, and Gendered Practices: The Importance of Ritual <i>Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart</i>	xi
Acknowledgments	xvii
Acronyms and Abbreviations	xix
Introduction	xxi
Chapter One · Introduction	3
Organization of Research	9
Chapter Two · Conceptual Framework: Feminist Theory and the Life-Story Approach	11
Feminist Theory	12
Gender	12
Status and Power in Southeast Asia	16
Status in Southeast Asia	16
Operationalizing the Concept of Status	18
Power in Southeast Asia	18
Operationalizing the Concept of Power	20
Life-Story Research: Rationale and Methodology	22
Rationale for Using Life-Stories	24
Methodology	25
In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews	26
Selection of Respondents	27
Organization of the Interviews	28
Conclusion	29
Chapter Three · Setting the Context: Historical Background, Socio-Cultural Influences and Local History	31
Historical Background on the Sundanese	32
Modernism: Ideology of the State	35
Islamicism: Islam in West Java and Aspects of the Ideology of Islam	36

Traditionalism: Sundanese <i>Adat</i>	41
Modernism, Islamicism, and Traditionalism	46
Local History and Community Background	49
Local History	49
<i>Posyandu</i> and <i>Kader</i> Program Background	54
Local <i>Posyandu</i> and <i>Kader</i> History in Cimanggu	55
Chapter Four · Wedding Rites: Continuity and Change in Women's Roles	59
Description of Ceremonies	62
Melamar (Engagement) Ceremony	63
Siraman (Foot Washing and Bathing) Ceremony	64
Ngeuyeuk Seureuh (Sex Education) Ceremony	68
Seserahan (Gift Giving) Ceremony	73
Akad Nikah (Religious) Ceremony	74
Sabada Nikah (Traditional) Ceremony	75
Sawer (Advice Song) Ritual	75
Nincak Endog (Stepping on the Egg) Ritual	76
Meuleum Harupat (Stick Lighting) Ritual	77
Huap Lingkung (Exchanging Food) Ritual	78
Reception	78
Buka Pintu (Door Opening) Ritual	79
Ngunduh Mantu (Welcoming the Bride) Ritual	79
Analysis of the Ceremonies	80
Values Concerning Roles and Responsibilities of Husband and Wife	80
Constructing Gender Relations for the Bride and Groom	85
Transforming the Bride and Helping Her Transition to a New Status	93
Rituals Reflect Influences from the Wider Social Context	98
Ritual Change and Modernism	99
Ritual Change and Islamicism	103
Conclusion	111
Chapter Five · Birth Rites: Women and the Role of (Re)production	113
The Ceremonies	117
Four-Month Ceremony	118
Explanation of Four-Month Ceremony	119
Seven-Month Ceremony	122
Explanation of Seven-Month Ceremony	124
Pregnancy	130

Traditional Midwives (Paraji) and Modern Midwives (Bidan)	132
Labour and Delivery	138
Explanation of Labour and Delivery	140
Afterbirth Ceremony	142
Explanation of Afterbirth Ceremony	144
Umbilical Cord Ceremony	146
Explanation of Umbilical Cord Ceremony	146
40-Day Ceremony (Marhaba)	149
Explanation of Marhaba Ceremony	152
Baby Weighing Ceremony (if born in the month of Sapar)	154
Explanation of the Baby Weighing Ceremony	157
Conclusion	160
Chapter Six · The Life-Stories	163
Description of Case Study Respondents	164
Presentation and Discussion of the Life-Story Material	171
Childhood	171
Chores	171
Discipline	180
Education	185
Adolescence	190
Dating	192
Meeting Husbands and Engagement	197
Work	200
Married Life (Adulthood)	205
Residence Pattern	206
Decision-Making	210
Divorce and Remarriage	215
Inheritance	220
Aging	221
Future Hopes	223
Conclusion	225
Chapter Seven · Conclusion	231
Glossary	243
Indonesian Terms	243
Sundanese Terms	244

Bibliography	247
Primary Sources	247
Statistics	247
Interviews	247
Newspapers	248
Secondary Sources	249
Index	265

Series Editors' Preface

Culture, Identity, and Gendered Practices: The Importance of Ritual

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

In keeping with its place in our Series on Ritual Studies, Linda Lentz's remarkable study of Sundanese women's roles in society highlights the capacities and knowledge that women are able to demonstrate within the framework of customary life-cycle rituals. These rituals define the spheres in which women are prominent organizers of community events. They define these spheres in terms of the concept of *adat*, customary law, running parallel with and in some ways opposed to aspects of official Islamic ideology.

Adat is a pan-Indonesian concept through which local communities can conserve their senses of cultural identity in dialogue with state-based rules, often rules that depend on notions of Islamic law. At the same time, the spheres of *adat* and Islam become fused together in crucial ways that mediate the contradictions that can emerge between them when *adat* is portrayed as traditional and Islam is presented as a modernizing movement. The mediation takes place through the seamless incorporation of practices into the processual framework of overall rituals centered on reproduction and life-cycle needs. Life-cycle rituals provide a naturalized context for the operation of *adat*, for a number of reasons. First, they track the temporality of human life, and second they become the vehicles of important social values that are acknowledged at the wider social levels. Thus, women who play organizing roles in these rituals come to act as supporters of customary identity, and they are recognized as the keepers of that identity.

Lentz situates her study deftly in the midst of several contextual issues. At one level, she is concerned with ways in which Sundanese culture differs from that of the more dominant ethnic category, the Javanese, with less stress on hierarchical social rank, and a kinship system based more on bilateral principles and less on patrilineal norms that would foreground male-based privileges. These bilateral principles show throughout the life-cycle rituals. They

go along with an ethos of mutual respect between husbands and wives, even though the husband is supposed to be the leader and the wife is seen as the household caretaker. Marriage also establishes an unmarried girl as an adult woman, able to bear children and take her place in the community. This transition is marked by rituals. Marriage alone, as a legal act, would not be able to convey such meanings.

Lentz situates her whole exposition in the context of debates about the social roles and statuses of women and men in South East Asian societies. By participating prominently in life-cycle rituals that draw on community co-operation, individual women, she argues, can acquire a kind of potency and can accumulate that potency in ways that give them more status than others. Like other writers, Lentz is concerned here to break down the supposed dichotomy between the political and the domestic domains of action. Women's 'domestic' roles also constitute a political domain, framed by life-cycle rituals in which women may be said to exercise informal powers. (In fact, their powers here seem also to be formal, because rituals entail a considerable formality of action.)

Lentz constructs a wonderfully detailed, intimate, but highly structured account of these rituals. Following both her participant observation and her collecting of life stories from the women who lived around her in her neighborhood, she distinguishes between life histories and life stories here. She refers to the idea that life history as a term implies the introduction into the narrative of materials from outside the narrative itself in order to give more information and putative objectivity to the account. In practice, however, the predominant focus since the term life-history was first used has been on the narratives of persons themselves, and these narratives are not systematic chronological accounts but are narrative commentaries on life. Lentz's own purpose, which she admirably achieves, is similar to that of many other writers who have obtained life stories as a means of gaining insight into the dialectics of social life, or the interplay between individual experience and agency on one hand and customary social patterns on the other. Indeed, one can often go further, as she herself does in her account, by showing how individual actions can change or modify particular ritual practices. In the Sundanese context another site of dialectics is between *adat* and Islam and how women manage subtly to weave these two together and accommodate their potential contradictions. It is interesting to read in Lentz's account the extremely violent political history of conflicts that lies at the back of the ordered peacefulness of the rituals that she portrays.

Women's prominence in local rituals was in some ways facilitated by the policies of the Indonesian New Order that began with President Soeharto. The state supported women as Ibu, "mothers," enjoining them to embrace modernity and education for their children, realized in programs for family welfare.

With Islam there is a more complex history, since political activists call for a more rigorous adoption of *shar'iah* law, while moderates recognize a range of Islamic practices, and many people still follow *adat* customs, even though these are sometimes characterized by Islamic activists as 'backward.'

Lentz's study, then, speaks to a broad range of ethnographic, comparative, and theoretical themes while grounding these in her well-rounded holistic ethnography. We have ourselves contributed to life-story narratives from fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, as in the stories of Ongka and Ru (Strathern and Stewart 1999, 2000) adding a telling discussion with Ongka's daughter Yara on her frustration about not being able to succeed to his leadership because of her gender. We have also edited a collection of essays that show peaceful dimensions of Islamic practices (often Sufi-based) and prominent roles of women in cultivating the shrines of Saints in parts of Islamic Africa (Stewart and Strathern eds. 2005). In a similar vein we have published volumes in one or other of our Series that we co-edit by scholars showing complex interactions between custom, modernity, and Islam (see Önder 2007, a study of rural life in a Black Sea part of Turkey, with our Series Editors Preface, in which we point to the ubiquity in Islam of the theme of the contradiction between Islam seen as 'modern' and traditions seen as 'backward' and we indicate how Önder explores the deeper local context in which gendered differences are prominent). Another study that explores how in Yogyakarta, in Java, people continuously try to communicate with one another in both traditional and modern terms was an early publication in our Medical Anthropology Series (Ferzacca 2001, with our Editors' Preface). A third volume appeared in the Series we edited for Ashgate and was also based on work in Yogyakarta, showing a vast, complex mix of themes in which modernity, Islam, and tradition jostled and accommodated each other in a complex urban environment (Daniels 2009, with our Preface).

We are delighted to be publishing this nuanced and detailed ethnography of women and ritual, which adds significantly to all of the above themes in a vital way.

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Note

* Professor Strathern and Professor Stewart Co-Edit and run the internationally recognized, interdisciplinary *Journal of Ritual Studies*, founded in 1987, which deals exclusively with ritual in all of its aspects. At: (<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/journal.htm>); (<https://www.facebook.com/ritualstudies>) Journal of Ritual Studies Facebook Page; and Stewart and Strathern are Co-Founders of the Comparative Ritual Studies Group (<https://sites.la.utexas.edu/ritual-studies-group/images/>).

They Co-Direct the Archival Cromie Burn Research Unit which is the Center for a major long-term effort to archive [At: (<http://www.stewartstrathern.pitt.edu/>) materials from many of the field areas in which they are involved, with particular reference to unique historical records of Papua New Guinea, and in remote parts of Taiwan. The archive already contains a complete version of

a 1999 book on the Female Spirit Cult in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, which is otherwise out of print and unobtainable, as well as important sets of early photographs and documents. Also, a unique dictionary project is open-access on the web site: (http://www.stewartstrathern.pitt.edu/papua_new_guinea/melpa_dictionary.html)

Stewart and Strathern are a wife and husband research team in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and presented the 2015 *Mary L. Thomas Lecture* (West Virginia University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology). They were the 2012 DeCarle Distinguished Lecturers at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand where they are also Visiting Fellows. They are also Research Associates in the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and have been Visiting Research Fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan during parts of every year from 2002–2015. Jointly they have had visiting appointments and / or lectured in many countries, including e.g., Germany, Taiwan, Mainland China, Japan, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, PNG, Norway, The Netherlands, Fiji, and the USA. And they have worked for many years with a number of museums around the world (e.g., Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Switzerland, the USA, and the U.K.)

Their long-term, diverse creative research work has been published in over 50 books and over 275 articles on their research throughout parts of the Pacific, Asia, and Europe (focused on Scotland and Ireland, also on the European Union). Their most recent co-authored books include *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Self and Group: Kinship in Action* (Prentice Hall, 2011). Their recent co-edited books include *Ritual* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008), *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009) and *The Research Companion to Anthropology* (Ashgate Publishing, 2015). They have broad interests which embrace and engage with local and global issues, utilizing their cross-cultural linguistic skills, a grounded comparative and interdisciplinary approach, and an actively engaged scholarly stance.

They have worked and continue to work and publish in the arena of Health, Healing, and Medicine. They are also actively engaged in research and writing on Ritual Theory and the topics of Political Peace-making and the rituals associated with that and the new arena that they have developed on the analysis

of Global Disasters and the ritual practices that arise out of these contexts. They are building a cluster of people in various geographical areas to work together on this. Their webpages are:

(<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/sandspublicat.htm>)

(<http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/>) and (<http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>)

They are the co-founders of the Pitt in the Pacific Study Abroad educational program:

<http://www.abroad.pitt.edu/pacific>

Their current research and writing is in the arena of Humans and the Environment; and contemporary theoretical framings of intellectual debates in Anthropology. They are completing their book *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Stewart and Strathern, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming) on these topics.

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I wish to thank my husband, Jeff, for his steadfast support and encouragement. Your love and commitment to helping me fulfill my dreams has made all the difference. I am thrilled to be on this life journey with you. I also want to thank my children, Jalen and Masen, for their patience and understanding when I was distracted and busy. You both fill my life with indescribable joy. I am proud to be your Mom.

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Most of all, I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to all my Sundanese friends who graciously allowed me to interview them, participate in important events in their lives, ask endless questions, and share their stories with strangers. I am very grateful as this research would have been impossible without their enthusiastic help and hospitality.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BKB:	Bina Keluarga Balita (Guidance for a Family with Small Children)
BKKBN:	Badan Kordinasi Keluarga Berencana Nasional (National Family-planning Coordinating Board)
DI:	Dar'ul Islam (Movement for an Islamic State)
MC:	Master of Ceremonies
PKI:	Partai Komunis Indonesia (Indonesian Communist Party)
PNI:	Partai Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian Nationalist Party)
PKK:	Pendidikan Kesejahteraan Keluarga (Family Welfare Education Program)
Posyandu:	Pos Pelayanan Terpadu (Integrated Health Services Post)
Puskesmas:	Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat (Community Health Center)
RT:	Rukun Tetangga (administrative subunit within a neighbourhood)
RW:	Rukun Warga (neighbourhood that is administered as a unit)

Introduction

There is a long-standing perception that women in Southeast Asia, who are mostly Muslim, have relatively high social status. This book takes a close look at Sundanese women in West Java, Indonesia, to see if this perception has merit, and if so, how this plays out in Sundanese women's lives. This study examines the lives of individual Sundanese women and the cultural framework in which their lives are lived. Utilizing data collected from participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, their status as women is investigated as well as how gender relations are constructed within the context and constraints of the local community and wider social influences such as Modernism and Islamicism. The entry point for examining their lives through this gendered lens is the lifecycle rituals. These ritual productions help women move from one life stage into the next. At these important junctures it is possible to see the competing hegemonic discourses on the role and position of women and how individual women and their families respond to various influences in the decisions they make regarding the rituals. These decisions in the ritual context reveal how women negotiate their role and position in Sundanese society more generally. In the life-story analysis, this study investigates how gender discourses have been communicated to individual women at different stages of their lives and how there is variation in individual perceptions of gender relations within a single community. This study shows that Sundanese women play an important role in maintaining and (re)creating rituals and practices, which enables them to nurture and (re)produce the traditional social order in which they have relatively high status. From this foundation women have the power to negotiate the disparate gender discourses that influence their lives.

