

# Unpacking intersectionalities: On boundaries and culture in Javanese friendships

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article I focus on the philosophical ideals behind Javanese friendships as a central form of local sociality. I critically examine the history of friendship within anthropology and argue that a particular historical development of anthropological epistemologies is partly responsible for marginalising social-philosophical friendship historiographies from the Global South. This is followed by an investigation of some of the intersections between certain forms of relationships that are constituent for Javanese friendships, which rest on specific ideals derived from Javanese cultural history. I argue that the intersections between friendship and other social relationships echo particular socio-cultural boundaries, which define contemporary friendship practices in Java.

I discuss the meaning and practice of intersectionality in friendships by referring to two ethnographic categories that emerged after I had concluded fieldwork in Java: (1) friendships in patronage systems and exchange contexts; and (2) body practices in male-male friendships. Both cases are linked together through the logic of intersectionality with other social relationships. As highly flexible forms of relatedness, friendships oscillate between different moral-social poles provided by their 'neighbouring' relationships, for instance sibling relationships, romantic love, and professional relationships. I conclude by arguing that if we want to understand global friendship cultures on a more comprehensive level, then we need to investigate the local construction and meaning of those intersections that shape the social realities of friendships.

## **Keywords**

Friendship; Indonesia; Anthropology; Intersectionality.

## **No Friendship in the Global South?**

Some years ago I was invited to give a public talk that I had entitled 'Do Javanese have friends?'. The question I raised was intended to include a certain degree of irony because Javanese do, of course, have friends. By choosing this title, I intended to direct some criticism towards my own discipline of social and cultural anthropology. Social and cultural anthropology is considered the science of studying social phenomena in their cultural variety, hence its name. Is it not interesting then, that anthropology has so seldom centred on the topic of friendship? If anthropology has only sparsely covered the subject,

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then we must not be surprised that in most research available on friendship there exists a strong thrust towards cultural bias. This bias takes the form of an almost exclusive focus on Euro-American friendship discourses, which are rooted in rather unquestioned historical perceptions of Ancient Greek and Roman ideals.

I argue that anthropology has contributed to this neglect of critical friendship research and thereby deserted one of its founding goals: to investigate the breadth of different forms of social organisation and social structure in diverse societies. Since the discipline's beginning, social anthropology has almost exclusively focused on family, the cultural construction of biological kinship, and procreation in the context of social relationships. Such research foci reveal a biased Euro-American position within the earlier anthropological investigations.

Ancient historical accounts of friendship, such as that described by Aristotle, postulate that the highest form of friendship can only exist between cultivated men of high moral standing. Aristotle referred to this form of friendship as 'virtue friendship'. Less cultivated people were understood to be incapable of forming relationships of such high moral standing, as I explain further down in this article. In other words, the birth of anthropology as a colonial science has long contributed to the discipline's thematic foci, and, as the case of friendship shows, it has more often than not also contributed to imposing cultural biases on the topics investigated, and thus worked towards creating the social realities it found worthy of studying. Against the ideal of a highly developed Europe with its civilised societies, the uncivilised savage was viewed as lacking more complex forms of kinship relations. For a long time, then, the anthropological equation 'savage = family and kinship' *versus* 'civilised Euro-Americans = kinship plus friendship', remained unchallenged. Such (neo-) colonial epistemological positions were further based on the — more or less — clearly defined roles that kinship positions rest on, which made them easier to grasp with ethnographic methodologies. Friendship, on the other hand, is a relation based on alterity.<sup>1</sup> Friendship relations differ across age groups, social classes, and — as I argue — across cultural boundaries. I will come back to this point later when I present my ethnographic case studies.

It is important to mention that the data I will debate is not intended to present a contrast to Euro-American friendship practices and/or discourses. If one wanted to compare these findings with Euro-American discourses, one would find many similarities, perhaps even cultural universals. It is much more my intention to shed some light on a certain form of social organisation that is not contextualised by Euro-American cultural history, but embedded in local historical traditions and customs that emerged as particular forms of social organisation from Javanese cultural history. This includes forms of ideal behaviour, one of which I will single out below. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the anthropology of social organisation and include friendship in the realm of what has been termed "relatedness" so famously by Carsten (2000: 1-36).

The European history of ideas is – even though often envisioned otherwise – quite particular and limited in reach. Its implicit cultural history of friendship defines this form

of relatedness predominantly as an ideal relationship charged with high moral standards that is voluntary and symmetrical among co-equals. In recent years, however, scholarship has started questioning this perception of friendship, and cultural comparison has especially highlighted alterity and ruptures within friendship relations (Asch, 2005; Brandt, 2013; Heuser, 2018, 2012; Kühner, 2013; Krüger, 2011). More dated accounts tend to highlight how boundaries between the self and the other might slowly disappear in ideal versions of friendship and argue that a close friend takes on the position of an alter ego. This implies that whatever I might do to my friend, I am ultimately doing to myself. I am of the opinion that within the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology it is difficult to discuss friendship without historical contextualisation, and this, I think, must include the predominant epistemological foil of European cultural history. For this article, then, I will refer to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which remains one of the most influential works for understanding Euro-American friendship discourses on a deeper analytical level. The work exemplifies very well how a Western hegemonic discourse on relatedness remains informative for how we think about friendship in general, and certainly how it is depicted in popular discourse.

### **Aristotle and the western perspective**

Aristotle (1998: 140-146; Stern-Gillet, 1995: 148) defines two major friendship types in particular: 'virtue friendship' and 'utility friendship'.<sup>2</sup> The former is an ideal relationship among free and virtuous men. Women and slaves were understood as incapable of such highly evolved forms of spiritual and virtuous relations. By definition, this very form of friendship defines the relationship as one among co-equals, where virtuous men (aristocrats for instance), see themselves mirrored in their friend, and strive to achieve the best for their virtue friends. This Aristotelian definition entails important anthropological information. For one, it explains friendship as a relation among men, implying a same-sex relationship. It is dyadic and exclusive. As Aristotle denies this form of friendship for slaves, I am assuming that he refers to men of similar class and status (social, symbolic or economic) when he mentions 'men of virtue', which pre-supposes the notion of class and status homophily. Homophily is a sociological term that refers to the principle of sameness. The more similar certain social dimensions in a relationship are, the higher the likelihood that it will last. Following this view, at least for a while, this principle seems to be central to the empirical investigation of friendship practices (McPherson, 2001). Sameness also plays a role in the friendship conceptions and practices in societies of the Global South such as Indonesia, even though negotiations of symmetry and asymmetry, sameness and difference play out as mediated by local cultural ideals (Heuser, 2018). This cultural context has also been referred to as a 'cultural matrix' of friendship and provides a fruitful methodological tool to uncover the scope of local moralities (Grätz et al., 2003: 14 referred to it as 'moral matrix').

Utility friendship is the second ideal form of friendship described by Aristotle. He argues that it cannot have a similarly high moral standard to virtue friendship. Utility friendship represents an important form of friendship, but it has less social and symbolic capital than virtue friendship. In utility friendships, friends also come together because of sympathy, but the main factor holding them together is the utilitarian aspect of the relationship. Emotional closeness, intimacy and personal disclosure are much less common between friends of utility than they are between friends of virtue. Aristotle is quite clear when he suggests that friendships characterised by openness and intimacy, or virtue, are of a higher moral standard than ones of utility.

Even though I documented similar discourses in Indonesian friendship practices, Aristotle's argument must be branded as a Euro-American construct that reflects local historical perceptions of social relationships. The bulk of friendship research relies on conceptions, which, at best, apply a conceptual cultural geography that is commonly referred to as the 'West'. Critical historical work on friendship, however, shows that such ideals from European contexts might not even be applicable across the various European epochs (Krüger, 2011). Especially within anthropological discourses, then, such a perspective on friendship must firstly be questioned, and secondly enriched with ethnographic data from different areas of the world. This is related to a general anthropological understanding of human relationships which assumes that all humans build social relationships for a variety of different reasons. Such a view must necessarily include friendships. If we agree on this perspective, then we must also assume that such friendships are based on different historical, philosophical, and cultural conceptions of relationships than those found in the Euro-American context.

The European history of friendship I touch on here remains focused on Aristotelian positions and thereby pre-configures a certain idealised view on sentimental relationships. However, there are other European historical epochs that have influenced how we conceptualise friendship, predominantly Humanism and Enlightenment. Again, our historical memory here must be uncovered as largely selective in that the historical development of friendship discourses referred to here must appear as arbitrary and exclusive. This exclusion of other existing historical discourses on relatedness renders those marginalised epochs *de facto* as times without friendship. Medieval times serve as a good example here. Research on the meaning of friendship in this epoch just started to emerge a few years ago, and has often taken the form of anthropological investigations into close social relationships. Of course, access to sources constitutes a challenge, as available accounts of friendship, especially of non-elite actors, are limited.

The new friendship turn, with its focus on alterity and dynamics, is relatively young in history, quite similar to anthropology (Classen and Sandige, 2011; Haseldine, 2013; Scorpo, 2014). The epistemological similarities in these more recent historical works on friendship in comparison to anthropology are striking, but they rest on quite different disciplinary developments. Whereas history has remained rather Eurocentric in its geographical reach and idealised in the way it has put forward certain notions of social

relationships, anthropology on the other hand has also been Eurocentric, but with respect to how it has imposed a qualitative hierarchy on the people it has studied. Early anthropology was founded on the evolutionary belief that Europe (and, perhaps, the United States) constituted the most modern and developed societies, and this included the way people there went about their social relationships. Other peoples were perceived of as under-developed and backwards. Early descriptive anthropological concepts bear witness to this as they attributed social categories such as 'horde' and 'bushman' to the 'other', as well as the general belief that Europe was related to culture and reason, whereas the colonised territories in the South corresponded to nature and (uncontrollable) emotions (also see Fabian, 1983 for the anthropological construction of 'the other'). The world was neatly divided into the rational and ordered West and the un-orderly, emotionalised rest (Said, 1979).

Friendship as a relationship worthy in its own right remained undocumented, and if we recall Aristotle's definition of virtue friendship, then it is quite easy to understand the general ideological thrust in the humanities and developing social sciences of the time. Europeans (men) were developed enough to build virtue friendships, but the people of the South were classified through kinship terminologies. Following this logic, there was no need for anthropology at the time to go beyond kinship conceptions and look for friendship, or so it seems. The (white) Euro-American person was viewed as at the top of human progress, and the state of industrial and economic development of those countries seemed to support such an exclusive view of the social organisation of the human species. The zeitgeist of anthropology at the end of the nineteenth and during the first quarter of the twentieth century fashioned a general view of the people in the Global South that was defined by all that was lacking in comparison to the Global North, and social relationships were no exception. Friendship in its ideal version, but also as a relationship of everyday importance, was something that was not debated in relation to the societies of the South. Early examples of ethnographic accounts on friendship include articles on the Kwoma from New Guinea (Cohen, 1961) and one on friendship in rural Thailand (Foster, 1976). In both articles, however, friendship comes with a rather proscribed meaning and no ethnographic data on its moral, philosophical or emotional foundations are offered.

The *relatedness turn* in anthropology in the early 2000s started challenging this rather neo-colonial attitude towards the marginalisation of friendship. As Carsten (2000) has put forward, research on social relationships, including kinship and family studies in particular, should focus on the making and re-making of those relationships. A focus on alterity and process was now quickly developing, and was regarded as a promising starting point for a more inclusive analysis of relationships. It is even more remarkable, then, that in her ground-breaking book Carsten excludes friendship. There are, however, more recent ethnographic works that have focused on friendship (for example see Beer, 1998, 2001; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Brandt, 2013; Desai and Killick, 2010; Gareis, 1995; Grätz et al., 2003; Heuser, 2012, 2014; Rawlins, 1989, 2006). These works support the

notion of friendship put forward in historical research and also suggest that friendship is indeed a cultural universal.

During my fieldwork in Java, I realised that this cultural universal of friendship applies to more theoretical conceptions of friendship, whereas social dynamics and the philosophical bases of the relationship are subject to local cultural modulation. In other words, as friendships show different connotations of various social dimensions across cultural boundaries, they are embedded in a discourse of certain cultural universals *and* cultural particularities. Sometimes friendships might be attached to rather dominant discourses of friendship ideals, such as in Euro-American societies. At other times they might have a stronger utilitarian thrust, such as in the Indonesian societies that I studied. What they have in common is a varying degree of moving between the poles of private-public, particular-universal and dogmatic-pragmatic.

### **Beyond the west: friendship and culture**

So far, the large bulk of friendship research has more focused on the idealistic discourse behind the relationship, as I have pointed out. This view suggests a certain Western paradigm that neglected the dynamics I mentioned above and excluded the tensions of the different poles I described in the previous paragraph. However, it is exactly those ruptures and incoherence between friendship ideals and practices that define the socio-cultural particularities of friendships (Brandt and Heuser, 2011, 2016). Questions of cultural particularities were excluded, and so were question of how cultural forms might mix (or not) within cross-cultural friendships. Another, central topic is the complex of sexuality, body practice and related issues of closeness, intimacy, and public space. How does our cultural background shape the ways we position our bodies in relation to our friends in public? Those and other more critical questions regarding everyday friendship practices might have destabilised the aforementioned ideal discourses, but they remain an exception — until today.

Examining Indonesian friendship practices, such as the ones I documented in Java, shows that their meaning and practice is deeply rooted in local cultural understandings of social relationships as derived from Javanese socio-cultural ideals. This means that certain non-Euro-American friendships might show similarities with their relatives in predominantly Western societies, but it also implies that they are negotiated by different social strategies that sometimes bring into question the social matrix that had been established for Western friendships. Alternatively, friendship accounts from the Global South could further help to uncover that certain binary opposition inside Euro-American discourses that were often put forward must appear as rather artificial, and that they do not find analogies in the socio-cultural practices of other societies. Of course one could argue that these are idealised, literary and philosophical versions of friendships that do not exist in social practice, but rather represent an ideal norm that one might aim for. There is nothing wrong with this, and historical analysis of ancient texts is undoubtedly of high value to help us understand how those societies functioned.

My criticism, and where I would situate a de-colonial approach for friendship studies, has two main points. Firstly, those ideals I am referring to need to be understood as exactly that: ideal discourses that inform social practice, which then necessarily differs from the ideal. The power of ideals to inform social practice seems obvious but should be reviewed more critically within the humanities. I would like to see, for example, a stronger focus on the social strategies that societies employ to enforce ideals, or how they construct social practice to be congruent with those ideals. Secondly, we need more in-depth analysis of philosophies from the Global South to gain a broader understanding of the different ideals of friendship that exist, across cultural boundaries and across different historical epochs.

A person-centred approach could help us to uncover inconsistencies and ambivalences in friendship practices. A next step could be a correlation of this information with the information that is provided to us by the more Euro-American-centric historical accounts. Such a methodology would also broaden our understanding of where certain friendship conceptions depart from a Euro-American understanding of the relationship, or we might uncover new friendship types altogether. For anthropology it would be fruitful to investigate how access to certain resources smoothens interrelational bonds and how they might turn into friendships — or how these may break and become something else. Classical historical friendship research may be tempted to identify utility friendship under such circumstances, or maybe no friendship at all, but rather a patronage relationship. I want to argue against such an understanding of friendship relations, and question the more or less implicit qualitative judgement behind such statements. Smart (1999) provides a valuable anthropological example through an analysis of friendship in China, and also shows how sentimental bonds and access to (economic) resources intertwine.

Based on such anthropological accounts (including my own) I must express a certain feeling of discomfort with the implicit moral hierarchy between different friendship types that continues to reverberate in popular and academic discourse. This is why I would like to suggest that friendship universally includes notions of both virtue and utility. A friendship may include material, social, symbolic, or psychological aspects, and usually incorporates some combination of all of these. It is unlikely that one could identify a friendship that exhibits pure virtue or utility. Aristotle's oft-mentioned virtue friendship should be seen as a powerful philosophical ideal discourse that offers a habitual bracket within which social practice happens. This discourse is evaluated according to local cultural custom and philosophical, historical, and literary ideals of social behaviour. People use these ideals as a reference point for their actions to justify and legitimise their behaviour and attitudes. A critical anthropological perspective on friendship must aim not only to uncover marginalised and perhaps undocumented friendship practices, categories, and perceptions, but should also be able to contribute to recent debates on relatedness, family, and new kinship.

In the next section I will refer to data from Java / Indonesia to further my argument that anthropology – and the social sciences and humanities in general – would benefit greatly from undertaking research that interrogates friendship perceptions, philosophies, histories, and social practices in non-Euro-American societies. It sheds light on how sentimental relationships play out in and structure politics and economics (Devere and Smith, 2010), and how they might intersect with patronage and corruption (Asch, 2005, 2011; Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984).

### **Friendship cultures in Java**

When I set out to conduct research on friendship in Java for my PhD I struggled to get 'really' started with fieldwork. I felt as though friendship as a topic of research kept slipping through my hands. Where did I need to go? Where did it happen? Who did I need to talk to? As I reflected later, these questions were central to the very topic I had set out to understand: friendship. Friendship is not like fatherhood or a wedding, which are social positions and institutions with clear social roles and which manifest within a particular social context. On the contrary, friendship is a rather open category with boundaries that are guided by cultural morals and traditions. Then again, it is also responsive to individual dynamics within dyadic interrelations or group dynamics. This openness has also been described as rendering friendship a 'non-institutionalised institution' (Goodwin, 1999; Paine, 1969). The moral matrix of a society provides some sense of moral and social boundaries to the relationship and sets a frame within which people practice the expected or evaluate the unexpected.

Friendships frequently transgress these boundaries. They do so creatively, for example by camouflaging romantic relationships as friendships, or they attach a different friendship label to their friendship to make it seem less intimate. The concepts of 'transgression' and 'boundary' thereby become theoretically central when we think about friendship. Corresponding to the absence of clear institutionalised boundaries, friendship is a relationship that often exists in-between other interpersonal relationships. The main relationship paradigms that influence friendships in my ethnographic data are family, kinship, sexual and romantic relationships, and work relationships. Within such sentimental bonds, different degrees of closeness and intimacy reverberate and generate the boundaries between a particular friendship and other interpersonal bonds. Social knowledge of how to perform those cultural perceptions of friendship is crucial and might differ between nations, societies, larger groups or smaller sub-cultural groups.

Local ideas about morality, body practice, and what constitutes an intimate or sexual act factor into this framing of friendship, and for anthropologists it is obvious that cultural context constitutes a major factor for diversity.

After a few weeks in the field in Yogyakarta, I decided to hang out with people who I had met previously during my language training. I also met new people along the way: friends of friends of friends invited me to meet them, talk to them, to spend time with



them and to get to know them. After all, friendship, as I noted in one of my first field diary entries, is about spending time with people. Later I realised that friendships can be divided into two temporal sections: there is the section of spending time together, of hanging out. In Java this is referred to as *jagongan* (Heuser, 2018: 180-181) and is known as *liming* in Trinidad (Eriksen, 1990). The other section is one of applied friendship in which people actively trade and exchange objects during the course of their everyday interactions. This is when friends question the promises and/or assumptions of help and support inside the friendship and when it is tested. It is also the phase in which the history of friendships is continued and actively reproduced. Such interludes of applied friendship moments deepen affection, trust and intimacy, all of which are practiced after a period of individual reflection in phases of hanging out. Both moments are necessarily interwoven and constitute a circle of friendship practices.

My main research location was the city of Yogyakarta and surrounding villages. The city is the capital of a special administrative region (*Daerah Istimewa*) and is located some 30 kilometres north of the south Javanese coast. Traditionally, the city is regarded as Java's cultural heart (Dahles, 2001, p.53). Friendship perceptions in the region of the city are less influenced by ideal discourses as the ones I mentioned above from Euro-American cultural contexts, but reflect local-spiritual perceptions of interpersonal relations. Here, social interactions are characterised by social hierarchy. The omnipresent manoeuvring through different social status hierarchies is deeply rooted in a social convention that guides people to honour other interaction partners' relational position during interaction.

To understand this cultural marker a bit better I will elaborate on its historical development, which in Yogyakarta also includes notions of spirituality, Islam, and local mysticism. Even today, the city of Yogyakarta's notion of society is characterised by the mystical powers of the ruling Sultan. He is understood to be god's image in the worldly sphere, and the relationship between him and his subjects mirrors the relationship between god and man. The sultan's position has a dual function; he embodies the connection to the spiritual realm as much as he is the governor of the special region of Yogyakarta with worldly, political, and legal powers. His political-spiritual influence and power can be envisioned in the form of concentric circles that reach out from the centre, which is the Sultan's palace (*kraton*), to the physical outskirts of his power, which are comprised of rural areas and neighbourhoods (*kampung*) or settlements (Heuser, 2018, p.72). This perception of power in political thought has also been termed 'centripetality' (Cooper, 2000: 613) and power was traditionally organised through social relationships along a particular asymmetrical division of labour. The local aristocracy (*priyayi*) represented the Sultan's court culture beyond the city walls of Yogyakarta in the outer areas in the region, making the *kraton* also the centre of worldly power.<sup>3</sup> Together this conception of society carried an understanding of societal asymmetry: different parts of

society fulfilled different tasks and labour, all of which were important and needed, none of which could be rebelled against or even questioned.<sup>4</sup>

Included in this particular Indonesian fabric of social relationships is a view that allows relationships such as friendships, acquaintanceships, and patronage relationships to be tested. They are not tested in the sense that there is a conscious decision by people to test a particular relationship, but the relationships I mentioned before are integrated in everyday practices that melt into a continuous cycle of exchanging help and / or objects and thereby function to test the availability and accessibility of help and resources.

Inside Javanese versions of sociality, notions of social hierarchy and asymmetry play an important role, and they also inform discourses revolving around friendships. Asymmetry in Java derives from social hierarchy and is understood to be a rather natural state of human existence.

Here, the Sultan in Yogyakarta becomes important again. As god's human image, he incorporates godly virtues, such as generosity, calmness, and vision. He is the leader of mankind. The relationship with his subjects is necessarily asymmetrical, as is the one between god and man, so asymmetry and social hierarchy are written into the spiritual perception of human existence. Of course, this worldview is reflected in interpersonal relationships such as friendships. This normative order translates into everyday social practice and must not be disturbed, but accepted as a given fact. Disrupting this order by behaving inappropriately would endanger the social harmony that every person is working to maintain. This decided acceptance manifests in what I call a 'behaviour code' (Heuser, 2018: 68) and attached to the concept of *halus*. It defines a particular moral interpersonal attitude that people can achieve by continuous engagement with *kejawan* philosophy and refers to people who are of a wise character. People who are *halus* accept the cosmic order and do not disturb social harmony. They speak in a soft tone, behave in a friendly way, and are helpful towards others. Diametrically opposed to this idea is *kasar*. *Kasar* refers to everything uncultured, loud, rough, and unrefined. It also carries indications of decadence and unfriendly behaviour (Sutton, 1991, p.21).

The mixture of moral-philosophical ideals and personal attitudes play out in social practice and points towards a particular dynamic that characterises all of the friendships in my sample. Here, both aspects of the two Aristotelian ideal types of virtue and utility friendship come to the fore. Of course, you might wonder, isn't that always the case since they are ideal types, and hence are not found in social practice in their pure form? True. In Java, however, these friendship types are not hierarchically related with one placed above the other. Rather, knowledge of proper modes of exchange is an expression of high moral conduct. Local exchange systems, especially in agrarian areas, are witness to this configuration of friendships. A more institutionalised form is *gotong royong*. Inside the system, different modes of reciprocity secure socio-economic as well as emotional security. Similar systems exist in urban and rural areas all across the Indonesian archipelago and rose to popularity under President Sukarno and his successor Suharto. Both Javanese, these Presidents promoted the ideal of voluntary communal work (*kerja*

*bakti*), including notions of help and exchange, as an original (*asli*) Indonesian virtue (Bowen, 1985).

The inherent modes of reciprocity inside these friendships are attached to the 'affective behaviour code' *rukun*, which can be translated as mutuality and reciprocity (Mulder, 2005).<sup>5</sup> As a moral attitude it functions to summon people to obey and agree to a set of shared practices of responsibility and reliability inside more private and intimate friendships, but it also fuels greater institutional networks like *gotong royong* and looser friendships that are more characterised by work and professional domains.

The notion of *rukun* informs social interaction not only in rural areas, urban social fabrics are equally built on it. In the city of Yogyakarta with its approximately 388,000 people, most of the population lives in neighbourhood communities in the back streets. Often narrow little alley ways lead to rows of densely-packed houses. These neighbourhood areas are also referred to as *kampung* and function on the same idea of sociality as their rural siblings. *Kampungs* as neighbourhoods are active social institutions and are governed by certain Javanese traditional ideals. This cultural knowledge about Javanese sociality and etiquette is intrinsic to the practice of *rukun*, and renders it a transpersonal institution that transcends dyadic interactions and obligations for direct neighbourhood help and exchange practices.

### **Asymmetry, business, and friendships**

In Indonesian postcolonial society, helping each other out (*tolong-menolong*), voluntarily offering help (*kerja bakti*), and a continuous exchange of favours and mutuality (*rukun*) including help, became a mind-set and social attitude that were heavily propagated by the political apparatus. Those attitudes fell on thick cultural historical soil and grew roots in the various traditions of hierarchical, and often much needed, asymmetrical modes of socio-economic exchange. In this way it continued, reproduced, and strengthened a history of nepotism, corruption, and patronage systems, within which favourism and personal gift exchange had always played a dominant role in social interaction and communication, especially between the different social classes. Interaction between members of the Javanese aristocracy and ordinary Javanese people or peasants had been characterised by these dynamics for centuries.

Today, similar dynamics exist between the affluent members of the growing Indonesian middle class and their employees, many of who are untrained workers such as gardeners (*tukang kebun*), house maids (*pembantu*), drivers (*sopir*), or handymen (*tukang*). The latter positions are often taken on by men and women who act as seasonal, semi-permanent or permanent workers on building sites, or in other physical work-related jobs. One case described in the empirical vignettes below illustrates this intersection between help, work, business, and sentimental bonds. And this Javanese cultural ideal of social relationships specifically endorses the exchange of help. The economy of trading

favours translates into smaller or larger favours that might be business related or remain private exchanges of help (lending and borrowing a motor bike). If the friendship is closer and people refer to each other as *teman baik* (good friend) or even *teman dekat* (close friend), such exchanges are based on delayed reciprocity. In all of the closer friendships I documented, whether they were group oriented (as is the case described below), or independent dyadic friendships, such an exchange of favours played a central aspect in maintaining the friendship.

Favourism in form of exchange based on personal relationships was also common in the smaller business circles where I conducted research, and these practices continued to shape personal interactions as well as access to job opportunities and resources. In this particular socio-cultural context, friendship encompasses concrete notions of virtue and utility. In fact, the behaviour code *rukun* requires this hybridization in order for harmonious interaction to not be jeopardised. During my second research period I stayed with a family (I will call Dikata in this article) for a few months.<sup>6</sup> Living with them was fascinating, especially for someone who was interested in understanding the exchange modalities in local friendship relations. Why? Asymmetrical friendships in Indonesia as elsewhere incorporate at least two sides, namely the higher and lower status position. Living with family Dikata gave me ample opportunity to witness in detail how people of these two status positions interacted and to understand how reference to friendship constituted a form of mediation that helped to reproduce social hierarchies.

In the following I elaborate on those sides by referring to family Dikata's employees, their relationship among each other (horizontal ties) and theirs to Pak and Ibu Dikata (vertical ties). In the Dikata family's house, the spheres of private, public, and professional intersected. Father (*Pak*) Dikata ran the family's small building business and employed between 4 and 12 people, depending on demand. Of those employees, two were women who worked in family Dikata's house as maids. One of the women was in her late fifties, and she was mainly responsible for the kitchen (*dapur*) and light cleaning tasks. The other woman was younger, she was in her mid-thirties. The latter was employed for cleaning the house, garden, and for doing the washing. Not every day would those *pembantu* (maids) be in the house, rather their work schedules overlapped a few hours, so that often only one would be around. Once a month, they had a full weekend off, which they spent with their family who lived in small villages outside the southern rims of Yogyakarta. During their work days, they lived in the small annex of the main family house. The male employees fluctuated according to jobs generated by the family's small building business. Four male employees, two drivers and two men who worked as handymen on different construction sites, were employed when business went well, but only two men were employed on a continuous basis.

Today, embedded in a monetary market economy that plays into the modulation of the the exchange of favours, the homes of the employees that worked for family Dikata still resembled the status distribution I outlined above: the Sultan's palace inside the city walls as the power centre which radiated to the outskirts, where the less noble and

labourers lived. The rhetoric that Pak and Ibu (mother) Dikata used when they referred to their employees conveys at least two points of information that are central for a critical anthropology of friendship: (1) the language resembled a status hierarchy; while it also (2) employed a friendship rhetoric of benevolence, care, and responsibility. Aristotelian views on friendship would detect a utility friendship at best in this relationship, but embedded in the Javanese context, the flexibility of the friendship category opens possibilities to fashion a relationship that fuses professional interaction with economic ambition and social responsibility.

This friendship rhetoric was, however, employed in a subtle manner, neither the employees nor Ibu and Pak Dikata labelled each other as *teman baik* (good friends) or even *teman dekat* (close friend). The category in use was that of *teman*, friend, which is a very loose concept and refers to people one knows slightly better. However, the male employees referred to each other as *teman baik* (as did the female employees). Pak Dikata was referred to as *Pak*, father. This is common in Indonesia and also refers to patronage structures where the leader of a patronage network is referred to as *bapak* (short: Pak) and his followers as *anak buah* (also see Wolf 1984: 16-20 for the intersection of patronage and friendship). These different social relationships across various boundaries of hierarchical order are framed by a cultural bracket that is common in Indonesia. This cultural bracket is made up of conventions that explicitly or implicitly entertain notions and perceptions of friendship.

The family was also engaged with the near-by Catholic Church and was an active part of its parish. Parts of this parish met as a prayer group of around 10 people every Wednesday, each week at a different family's home. On several occasions I took part in the meetings, all of which followed the same routine: welcoming words from the host followed by singing and praying. During this part of the gathering, women and men would sit on separate sides of the room. Only after the closing prayer, which was followed by a final song, would the group get up and mingle. All members of the group had known each other for years, and as I would find out, all had been or were still involved with each other economically.

The sitting order of the praying group also symbolised the gender relationships inside the friendships of its members: men were friends with men, as were women with women, and sometimes for different occasions some of the women would meet, as would the men. If there were mixed gender meetings then this would be together with partners (*pacar*). Even though I saw women of the praying group interact with their male employees and giving them orders, it was more their husbands gendered sphere of responsibility, whereas they geared most of their supervision towards the female employees.

Pak Dikata, for instance, described the other male members as *teman baik* (good friends), which he explained as being due to the fact that they had known each other for

years, shared common values through the Catholic Church, engaged with the parish, and also because they helped each other out (*tolong-menolong*) frequently. As I found out, 'helping each other' was also used as a synonym for doing business together, and extended to all friends of the parish. Pak's *teman-teman baik* (Indonesian plural) of the parish were more often than not cooperation partners in his building business and either contributed with manpower or expertise, like interior design and furniture. With two of the men of the group Pak Dikata maintained a closer friendship, which he referred to as *pertemanan dekat*, he called these friends *teman dekat* (close friends). With these *teman dekat*, Pak's business transactions were more frequent and reciprocity more delayed than with his other *teman baik*. The closeness of the friendship modulated the particulars of the business agreed upon.

In other words, the parish functioned as a space for sharing local-cultural values and beliefs, but the friendships it fostered also secured access to resources and upward mobility (Tomescu-Dubrow and Słomczyński, 2005). Here, the existing friendships intersected with notions of religious morality and cultural ethics, but also with utility (helping each other out), as advertised by *rukun*. In fact, being a virtuous person implied doing business together because as friends it was a true way of helping each other out.

However, the social sphere of the Catholic parish group builds on the same intersecting characteristics of Javanese social fabric. This social fabric of *tolong-menolong* also translates into offering and accepting help, also in terms of generating business. Both examples from the Dikata family serve well to unpack the idea of utility as continuous interpersonal exchange. It contains the offering and accepting of help that can be read as an investment into networks in order to gain access to resources, but which also includes emotional and socio-psychological dimensions such as disclosure, intimacy and secrecy in certain friendships.

This leads me to suggest that friendships in Java, like the ones between the different members of the parish, oscillate between the (and other) poles of virtue and utility. Of course they can lean more towards one end or the other, but they always include those poles as 'extreme' ends of the spectrum. From an anthropological perspective, then, I think it is important for an appreciation of global friendship practices to acknowledge the intersectional dynamics of these relationships. By targeting their oscillation between intimacy and utilitarian exchange practices we might uncover emic friendship categories that will help us to formulate a more accurate and inclusive picture of global versions of relatedness. The intersectionalities are worth investigating also because this is where culture is located. How, what, and when certain types of relationships intersect with each other is subject to cultural framing as well as the appropriate practices of conventions and etiquette. As my second ethnographic vignette on homosocial friendships demonstrates, there are other intersectionalities in Javanese friendships that play an important role for the development and cultural enactment of the relationship.

## Homosocial friendships

Homosocial friendships in Java also exemplify and thereby help us understand how various social boundaries of different forms of interpersonality are written into local friendship conceptions and practices. I am using the term homosocial here to refer to friendships among people of the same sex (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014), and in the vignette presented below I analyse the cultural ideals of body practice through the case of two young men who described each other as best friends. The Bahasa Indonesia term for close friend is *teman dekat*, and one's closest friend is referred to as *teman akrab*.

I remember meeting with a young Javanese interlocutor at Puro Pakualaman, a palace belonging to a small princely state within the sultanate of Yogyakarta. In close proximity to the palace there is an open space with a big old tree. People come and gather here, drink sweet tea and engage in conversations, relax, or sometimes listen to music. Fadi and I met there several times during my residence in Yogya to hang out and talk about life. On one night we met just outside the area where he was waiting for me next to his motorbike. After I had parked mine and locked it we went off to get some tea and sat down at a small table right under the tree. As we got comfortable, we started talking about our friends and while the conversation evolved, our knees touched and Fadi did not pull back.

I recall that my body contact with Fadi triggered thoughts about physicality in friendships, and later, when I reflected on this situation in my notebook, questions on body practice, embodiment, intimacy, homosociality, and sexuality arose. During the later stages of fieldwork, I met two other Javanese male interlocutors, who, during interviews, pointed out to me that they were best friends (*akrab*). Both were in their late twenties and had met at university and remained friends after their degrees had been completed. We met in different settings and group compositions, alone and the three of us together, to talk about their friendship and also how they related to their other friends. I was particularly interested in understanding the topics of physical and emotional closeness as well as body practice. Tino (27) and Ade (26) both stated that body contact was a normal thing and that it was part of the friendship they had. Participant observation with the two supported this statement. For instance, we would spend evenings on a bamboo mat next to a mobile food stall to drink sweet tea and eat fried nibbles (*gorengan*) such as tempe. Tino would lay on Ade's tummy when it was late, or the other way round, to give but one example. During the day, I also frequently saw them walking arm in arm and pulling each other close.

I am mentioning this case here as I wish to point towards the cultural modulation of body practice in close relationships. When we say 'close relationships' we seldom ask the question of how close they are literally, in a physical fashion. How close can they be, before they might become something else? For male homosocial friendships of the *teman dekat* and *teman akrab* category in Java, these questions are organised and guarded by

cultural codes and etiquette of heterosexual masculinity (Beynon, 2002). It is interesting to see how male homosocial friendships therefore become a main venue for celebrating male heterosexuality and, from a historical perspective, also male heroism. At the very same time, they also hold considerable potential for sabotaging dominant masculinities and their attributes. Nardi (1998) rightfully reminds us that homoeroticity, homosexuality, and homosociality are different categories and must not be conflated into one single conceptual box.

However, the tricky part is that depending on the cultural context the same homosocial behaviour can be interpreted as clearly homoerotic or homosexual. Again, Java presents a good example here and exemplifies how the boundaries between homosociality and homoeroticity are constructed in terms of different social behaviour and body practices. In Java (and Bali), intimate male homosocial friendships include moments of physical closeness as signs of emotional closeness and friendship belonging, as Tino and Ade told me during a night out while we were reflecting on friendships. The former is actually an expression of the latter. Even though homoeroticity may or may not form part of some homosocial friendships, it certainly cannot be readily assumed in homosocial friendships. This makes homosocial friendships a promising venue to unpack in more detail how homosexuality, homosociality, and homoeroticity intertwine among male Javanese *teman dekat* and *akrab*. Engaging with male homosocial friendships is also worthwhile because they challenge assumptions about heteronormative masculinities, or hegemonic masculinities as Connell (1992) frames it, which are responsible for shaping the various cultural taboos inside homosocial friendships in other cultural contexts.

Javanese dynastic chronicles from Hindu-Buddhist times reveal certain sexual activities practiced by the actors of the time. Relating herewith, some of the reliefs at the Buddhist stupa Borobodur near Yogyakarta also depict numerous sexual practices and thereby offer the possibility to reflect on practices of physicality throughout Javanese cultural history. Physical proximity here is also a means to depict emotional closeness inside social relationships, and within male homosocial friendships in particular. Tino and Ade, both heterosexual, celebrated their male homosocial and intimate *teman akrab*-friendship through the public display of physical proximity (also see Nardi, 2007: 49-50). Contrary to most Western conceptions of friendships, it is exactly this public homosocial display of body contact that is constituent of the emotional closeness of their friendship.<sup>7</sup> This very cultural configuration of non-sexual male-male intimacy and body practice unfold inside patriarchal Javanese society.

Beyond Java, the postcolonial Indonesian nation was founded on the ideal of the heterosexual family, often referred to as family principle or *kekeluargaan*. Inside that family of citizens there is no official space for homoeroticity or homosexuality, even though the latter was never made illegal. However, from a patriarchal position, this configuration of citizenship, together with the aforementioned practices of male-male intimacy within Javanese friendships, creates an ideological need to limit homosocial friendships and the practices of male-male intimacy as non-homoerotic. Living in



Indonesian heterosexist society (Boellstorff, 2007: 168) leaves men in a delicate and ambiguous social space. On the one hand it is of utmost importance to distance oneself from possible speculations that one might willingly and lustfully transgress the boundaries between homosociality and homoeroticism. On the other hand, the public display of male-male intimacy is central to intimate friendship wherein disclosure and emotional belonging are important and part of a set of shared values.

## Conclusion

My ethnographic data from Java suggests that asymmetrical friendships in patronage or embedded in business contexts and homosocial friendships are characterised by a continuous oscillation between emotional disclosure, the adaptation of affective behaviour codes such as *rukun*, intimacy and cultural configuration of body practice, but also include more utilitarian oriented aspects that incorporate social asymmetries and economic exchange. The two examples I chose illustrate how friendships are relationships that, once defined and categorised, also show enormous potential to further evolve into hybrid forms of more individualised social relationships that might include various aspects of the two friendship types I introduced above.

If friendships are based on high degrees of flexibility and alterity due to their lack of institutionalisation, then this finding can certainly be verified for Java. Here, friendships exist as highly flexible forms of relatedness which are responsive to the internal needs of the people involved, as well as the external circumstances they face. Friendship in Java can be utilised as a tool to gain access to resources, it can also be a powerful strategy for micro-politicking, such as in the case of patronage networks and in circles where corruption is deemed necessary. Javanese friendship practices incorporate notions of utility and convenience relationships, and they can be work-related or take the form of a sexual relationship. The affective behaviour code *rukun*, as the underlying moral current for any friendship, is sufficiently inclusive to move Javanese friendship realities beyond the binary boundaries that are so often presented as definitive when it comes to friendship research. Classical oppositions such as ideal-material, sexual-non-sexual, symmetrical-asymmetrical do not quite seem to work here. The social practice of friendship in Java is more reminiscent of a liquid relationship that is temporarily, semi-temporarily or permanently interlinked with the logics of other social relationships. Friendships in Java, then, are characterised by alterity *and* consistency; both notions equally form their particular socio-cultural DNA and both notions are embedded in local cultural imaginations of good and moral behaviour.

The prevailing dominance of Western friendship conceptions in scholarship marginalises cultural variations of friendships that are different or based on local moralities that might challenge Euro-American friendship values, which are usually taken for granted. Unanswered questions with respect to Javanese morality and

intersectionalities inside friendships include, but are certainly not limited to, the concrete socio-moral and emotional boundaries between homosociality and homoeroticism and (subversive) practices of homosexuality. Sedgwick suggests to view this continuum as an axis with the two poles of homosociality and homosexuality and end points, on which homosocial friendships oscillate: 'To draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of "desire," of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.' (Sedgwick, 1985: 1-2).

Vertical and horizontal friendships such as the ones around the Dikata family's business show high degrees of flexibility between the poles of symmetry and asymmetry in that the positions of giver and receiver of help and access to resources are continually reversed. These positions seem to circulate in this larger friendship group of the parish where intersections with financial success, private and professional appear as defining momentums.

In this article it was my intention to highlight some of the multiplicity of Javanese friendship practices that unfold due to the relationship's intersectional nature. These intersections play out in ways that are particular to each friendship relation, but they are guided by society's moral values. Rooted in pre-colonial Javanese history, these values continue to guide social interaction and give a cultural reality to friendship relations that are specific to Java.

I am of the opinion that researching friendship is perhaps more necessary now than ever before given the advancement of global interconnections and their effects on social structure and values (for example, the emergence of transnational patchwork families). Potential foci in research to come could include the cultural modulation of friendships and possible emergence of new friendship types we have not yet documented, *as well as* the intersections friendships develop with other forms of social relationships. The latter must necessarily make us think of the boundary as a dividing concept while also contributing considerably to defining the concept of friendship. The case of Java suggests that some of the binary oppositions that emerged as foundational for dominant friendship discourses either do not hold, or they are undesirable altogether in certain local contexts.

It seems indispensable to me to further interrogate the idea of the boundary and, more critically, to better understand how the 'liquidity' of Javanese friendships works and manifests. Bhabha (1994) advanced our thinking about borders and boundaries. He suggests that the transgressive momentum creates hybrid spaces, which have a creative force to them that disrupts, denaturalizes, and potentially dismantles hegemonic cultural formations. I believe that friendships have this power, but we will only learn more about their potential when we undertake more ethnographic investigations to engage with the very cultural components that define friendships, their boundaries, and their possible transgressions.

Such critical and culture-sensitive research would then contribute to an understanding of friendship that is open to procedural dynamics and situational adaptation. Alongside Abu-Lughod (1991) — and with respect to friendship — I would like to see more research of the particular and the specific, that is, analysis that is grounded in thick friendship description and that would allow us to formulate an inclusive perception of friendship. Such an inclusive view of friendships would offer insights into local friendship worlds and broaden our understanding of an important form of relatedness that remains marginalised in anthropological and global sociological scholarship.

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### Endnotes

- 1 This is not to deny that kinship relations undergo socio-cultural change and alterity. However, their roles are more concisely defined as those in friendships.
- 2 He actually mentions three friendship types, but his discussion of 'pleasure friendship' is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 3 See Anderson (1990) for a detailed analysis of the concept of power.
- 4 I am simplifying here for the sake of the argument I am making. However, the general acceptance of this societal order remains intact until today.
- 5 I am using 'affective behaviour code' here to direct attention to the subtle and unspoken dynamics that are part of the tacit knowledge of certain moral Javanese attitudes. Even though it remains unmentioned in social conduct, people sense how and when rukun must be practiced.
- 6 All names of informants have been changed to protect their identities.
- 7 I am not aiming at a cultural comparison here, but am rather pointing towards the cultural construction and historical embeddedness of these boundaries. Male-male intimacy practices inside Western friendships seem to be shifting again to allow for closer proximities of male bodies. For example, among British students the public display of body contact and other behaviour that used to be interpreted as homoerotic and homosexual has been mentioned as a signifier of close friendship (Anderson, 2009).

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