

Birgitt Röttger-Rössler

## **The Eyes of the Others: Shame and Social Conformity in Contemporary Indonesia**

"How can you trust somebody who does not know how to blush?"  
(Alexander von Humboldt)

Recently, an Indonesian student told me how he had had a really difficult time when he returned home for the first time after spending 5 years in Germany. It was only when he got back to Indonesia that he realized how much his years in Germany had changed him. "I have forgotten," he explained, "to continuously feel shame (*malu*) and see myself only through the eyes of the others."

This short sentence contains three important components that I wish to address in the following: First, he points out how a central role seems to be assigned to shame in the Indonesian context. Second, he implies that seeing oneself in public through the "eyes of the others" plays an important role in shame processes. And, third, the young Indonesian's information that he had lost his shame competence in Germany points to the flexibility of emotions as socially learned and thus changeable qualities. These are the topics I shall be addressing in the following.

### **I. Shame in Indonesia: Facets of a Cultural Model**

The emotional dimension of shame plays a dominant role in the context of Indonesian societies (*malu* is the corresponding term in the national language *Bahasa Indonesia*). An enormous range of behaviors in everyday interactions are classified as shame-evoking. This range extends from the slightest infringements of etiquette—such as having dirty shoes—to major violations of social norms such as offences against the gender segregation rules. The decisive point is always that there is a public sphere for the specific misbehavior, that it takes place in front of the "eyes of the others." In brief, shame (which I shall define later) is a strongly emphasized and very visible emotion in Indonesia.

I shall start off by sketching the main aspects of the Indonesian model of shame by referring to my own research data gathered among the Makassar in South Sulawesi (a highly stratified Islamic society). Nonetheless, the basic principles are also to be found in other Indonesian societies, as numerous social anthropological studies have confirmed.<sup>1</sup> This allows me to generalize and talk about a pan-Indonesian pattern or "model of shame."

The analysis of my material shows that there are essentially three factors that trigger feelings of shame (Makassarese: *siri'*) in an individual (ego):

1. Ego infringes social rules and norms and knows or believes that others are aware of this.
2. Another person misbehaves, and this impacts on ego either (a) directly through the misbehavior, that is, ego is injured either symbolically or materially; or (b) indirectly because ego is a member of the particular context to which the transgressor belongs.
3. A more high-ranking person is present ("status shame").

An anthropological vignette will provide a closer look at the first two aspects:

The stream feeding the farmer Musa's paddy fields has dried up. Therefore, he diverts water from the still plentiful irrigation system serving the fields of his neighbor Bora. However, he is caught out. In the village, Musa is now described as a person without shame (*tena siri'na*). He holes up in his house and avoids the public sphere for weeks. His family also avoids every unnecessary walk through the village. Later, he tells me he half died for shame [*siri'*]. Bora also classifies his feelings as *siri'*. He reacts with anger [*larro*], making harsh demands for compensation from Musa, demands that the village community considers to be fully justified.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, H. Geertz «The Vocabulary of Emotion. A Study of Javanese Socialization Processes», *Psychiatry* 22 (1959), 225–37; C. Geertz «Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali», in C. Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973, 1–46; W. Keeler «Shame and Stage Fright in Java», *Ethos* 11.3 (1983), 152–65; K.G. Heider *Landscapes of Emotion: Mapping three Cultures of Emotion in Indonesia*, New York, 1991; C. Goddard «The “Social Emotions” of Malay (Bahasa Melayu)», *Ethos* 24.3 (1996), 426–64; E.F. Collins & E. Bahar «To Know Shame. Malu and Its Uses in Malay Society», *Crossroads. An Interdisciplinary Journal of South East Asian Studies* 14.1 (2000), 35–6; D.M.T. Fessler «Shame in Two Cultures: Implications for Evolutionary Approaches», *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 4.2 (2004), 207–62; D.M.T. Fessler *A small field with a lot of hornets: An exploration of shame, motivation, and social control*, San Diego 1995