

Sundanese Lifecycle Rituals and the Status of Women in

Indonesia

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Abstract

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. 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.