

Showcasing Muslim life in diaspora: Indonesian female vloggers in South Korea

A report on the presentation given by Dr. Suh Jiwon at the Seventh 7th CSEAS Online Seminar on Indonesia, held on March 10, 2022. Commentary was provided by Nishi Yoshimi from CSEAS.

Dr. Suh Jiwon is an associate professor at Seoul National University, South Korea. Her PhD, from Ohio State University, is about the politics of transitional justice in post-Suharto Indonesia. Her research interests include transitional justice, the politics of memory, refugees, human rights diplomacy, and decolonization, with a focus in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. Her articles include “Plural Justice: Indonesian Norm Entrepreneurs and Models of Justice” in *South East Asia Research* 27:2. She translated *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* into Korean and in 2018, she wrote a book on Benedict Anderson.

Abstract

As vlogging becomes popular, more and more Indonesian vloggers are showcasing their lives abroad online. What do the vloggers choose to communicate from their lives in the diaspora, and how do they narrate their gendered social roles? What is the nature of the relationship they forge with the audience? This research focuses on the ways how two married female Indonesian vloggers – Gina Selvina of the “Kimbab Family” account and Zhiiee Leely – tell their stories as migrant women in South Korea in response to their mostly Indonesian viewers. Although clips covering typically Korean topics in Indonesian media, such as K-pop stars and street foods, are predictably popular, both vloggers and viewers also show a deep concern for maintaining Islamic lifestyle and traditions of tanah air as a minority group in the host society. When it comes to the matter of mothering, the viewers tend to support and affirm the vloggers’ practices, rather than functioning as police of morality. In sum, vlogging can work as a dialogue between women in diaspora and an audience generally supportive of women’s experiences and take them as inspirational tales.

Commentary: New Media, New Representations

Our commentator is Dr. Nishi Yoshimi from CSEAS. She specializes in Southeast Asian Area Studies. Her research interests include disaster management and social integration through

information sharing and storytelling of disasters in Southeast Asia as well as Indonesian Cinema Studies.

The case presented by Dr. Suh Jiwon shows us that something new is going on, which opens a new page, or creates a new variation, to the popular narrative about Indonesian women in Indonesia. To date, typical representations of Indonesian women in public have been shaped through textbooks and popular culture, such as novels and films, images of women in newspaper reports, and so on. Several specific patterns of women's stories have been told repeatedly, and depending on the situation, the stories have been modified in response to historical conditions or local contexts. We see several basic stories about Indonesian women, like Kartini, a real national hero who was eager to study abroad but got married according to her father's will and died at age 25, or Nyai Ontorosoro, a fictional character who became known to the public after appearing in a nationally famous novel by Pramudhya. There are also stories of overseas migrant domestic workers, who are called national heroes for sending foreign currency back home. Their stories sometimes appear as success stories, for example of how they build a house in their homeland for their parents with their earnings. But miserable tragic stories also appear daily in the newspapers.

The cases presented today by Dr. Suh Jiwon inform us that vlogs by women can be one of the most influential media in creating representations of women. My observation is that over the last twenty years or so, the traditional Indonesian female representation has been challenged and new variations have emerged through film and fiction. I provide three examples for this. The first is Trinity (Ade Perucha Hutagaol), Indonesia's leading travel blogger. She has traveled alone to 88 countries around the world and published 15 books, including *The Naked Trinity* series. Two of her books have been made into films. The second is Hanum Salsabiela Rais. She is a former TV reporter and daughter of Amien Rais, the former President of Muhammadiyah, the second-largest Muslim organization in Indonesia. She accompanied her husband on his studies in Europe. A novel based on her experience was published in 2011 and made into a film in 2013. The title is *99 Cahaya di Langit di Eropa*, or *99 lights in the European Sky*. Interaction with

Westerners and the ingenuity of maintaining a Muslim lifestyle in a country where Muslims are the minority are depicted in the film, as well as friendship and solidarity among Muslim women living in Europe and the process of becoming a veil wearer. Hanam has established herself as an independent Muslim woman. The third example is Rania Samudra. She is the protagonist of *Jilbab Traveler: Love Sparks in Korea*, a novel written and adopted as a film in 2016. The story is about a woman who blogs about her travels abroad and falls in love with a Korean. Compared to these stories, Mama Gina in *Kimbab Family* is very new. I think she is seen as a perfect and friendly person to Indonesian audiences. According to newspaper reports, she uses her YouTuber income to support her parents in Indonesia and she also built a house there.

I have three questions. First, why do you think these women living in South Korea use Bahasa Indonesia when they vlog? Second, why do you place them in the context of Muslim life in the diaspora? What are your strategic intentions, if any? Third, who is the audience? You said that most of them are Indonesian, but I am particularly interested in generation and region, if these are identifiable. I asked this question because it is interesting to me that Mama Gina has assumed a Sundanese identity in her vlog. This question relates to what the vloggers think that their audiences like. Do you have any thoughts on assumed audience and the actual audience?

Speaker responses:

Using Bahasa Indonesia to Vlog and Audience Interaction

Why do women living in South Korea use Bahasa Indonesia when they vlog? I think that the alternative to Bahasa Indonesia would be Korean or Sunda language. Although the most popular uploads or clips are about the Sunda culture, which is a niche culture in the world of new media such as YouTube, ultimately using Bahasa Indonesia is the easiest way to become successful as a vlogger. This is because there are so many Korean vloggers making vlogs in Bahasa Indonesia. Why? Because when you see from the global perspective, English is of course the number one language on YouTube or wherever, but the market is very competitive. Chinese is another big language, but China does not allow you to watch YouTube clips in China. Therefore, from the perspective of global multilingual YouTubers, the best, fastest way of

becoming successful as a YouTuber is to make clips in Bahasa Indonesia, or Hindi. But Bahasa Indonesia is easier for them.

There are so many Koreans who make vlogs; some have lived in Indonesia for a long time, like Korea Reomit (Jang Hansol), who graduated from Indonesian elementary, junior high, and high schools. But other Youtubers just learned some basic Indonesian and started to make videos. For Indonesians, it is better to make clips in Bahasa Indonesia rather than Javanese or Sudanese to receive more comments and more views and become more successful as a vlogger or YouTuber. Why not Korean? Korean language is among the big languages, but it is not as big as Bahasa Indonesia. Only approximately 50 million people use it. It is very difficult for Korean vloggers or YouTubers to get 2 million subscribers. Also, many of the migrant workers in Korea are not very fluent in Korean. As these are migrant workers channels, the audience are Indonesians who want to go to Korea or other countries; this is another reason that the language of the videos is Bahasa Indonesia. We can see many requests on Leely's channel for her to make Korean language lesson videos, but she did not respond to the suggestions.

When it comes to the Korean YouTubers who make clips about their Muslim life in Indonesian, I think it is a bit strategic and also commercial. As for the Indonesian female YouTubers who live in Korea, the content is based partially on their own strategies and partly on responding to the demands and the comments. The comment sections are full of questions on how to practice halal, how to do sholat, whether Koreans hate hijab, and so on. As the vloggers try to become more successful, they answer these questions. Therefore, the content is a result of the interaction between the vloggers and the audiences rather than a strategy of the vloggers.

Audience Attributes and Audience Identification

I think most of the people who comment on the migrant workers channels are would-be migrants who dream about going to Korea as a student or as a migrant worker. These are young people. But there are also migrant workers themselves who make comments, like "I am a migrant worker living in this city/ this country, nice to meet you." Therefore, there are likely

middle-aged migrant workers as well as some young people who dream about, but may not really plan, going to Korea, and those who consider going to other countries as migrant workers. Viewers are from all over Indonesia, but those who reveal their identity are mostly from Central Java. There are also Malaysian commentators and others who just watch the videos from other cities or countries and give comments.

I think Korean people do not watch these vlogs. For example, although the Kimbab Family vlog sometimes tries to make their videos bilingual with subtitles and explanations in Korean, when you look at the comment section, 99 percent of the comments are in Indonesian. There are almost no Korean comments on these videos, except for those from those Korean vloggers who specialize in Bahasa Indonesia clips. On the vlogs of Leely and other migrant workers also, we find no comments in Korean, so I assume that no Koreans are watching these videos. This also reflects the relationship between Koreans and Indonesians these days—more and more Indonesians are interested in Korea, but very few Koreans are interested in Indonesia.

My intention at first was to analyze the videos of Korean vloggers as well, but I decided to focus on the Indonesian women vloggers, because I found that the Korean vloggers are more strategic and more commercial in their approach, making the characteristics of the videos are a bit different. Although right now I focus on two Indonesian women vloggers, at a later stage I may do some research on the native Koreans who are making Bahasa Indonesian clips. I think the audiences of these two types of vlogs may overlap, because clearly there are many Indonesian K-pop fans and many young women who are interested in overseas life. However, the Kimbab Family and Zhiee Leely channels have more specific audiences. For example, the commentators on Leely's channel are migrant workers or those who are specifically interested in becoming migrant workers. As the commentator identities are hidden, those researching vlogs and similar media need to be careful in assuming or presuming that the audiences are from certain social groups, though.

In terms of the motivations of viewers, many are interested in Korean culture and in life overseas in general, specifically in Korea. But this also has its limits. For example, when a few women commented on the Kimbab Family channel that they wanted to “marry a Korean guy like Gina did,” they received zero or just one “likes.”

With Leely’s channel, we see that the viewers are people who want to become migrant workers. Right now, I cannot specifically identify whether the vlog audiences are mostly female, but I assume this is the case. Some male migrant workers identify themselves on Leely’s channel by writing a message like, “Hello, I work in Ansan.” I think these people want to get a message from other viewers. The women vloggers are very popular, so I just assume that many girls and women are interested in Korea and going to Korea and they are watching the videos on these vlogs. More careful investigation of the comments and finding other methods to reasonably determine the identity and gender of the audiences of the vlogs is necessary to better understand the phenomenon.