

HOMOSEXUALITY AND TRANSVESTISM AMONG THE DAYAK OF KALIMANTAN

by

Dr. Walter Williams

Professor, University of Southern California

In many traditional societies around the world, the most important social division of labor was that of the masculine and the feminine. Males were expected to follow masculine pursuits of warfare and hunting, while females were concerned with duties that were compatible with the rearing of small children. Women tended to focus more on the home, not because they were incapable of other activities, but because the safety of the children required it. Women in many small-scale societies were quite active, being the main suppliers of food, in their gathering of wild plants or their farming of domestic plants. But they were of necessity the closest parent to the infant child, for the simple reason that it was females, and not males, who produced milk for the child's nourishment.

Men, on the other hand, did activities that were more dangerous, since they did not have to stay close to the children. Also, the loss of a man was not as damaging to future population growth, as the loss of a woman in her childbearing years. This explains why men usually did the dangerous activities like warfare, hunting or domesticating large animals.

A major characteristic of homo sapiens as a species is that there is much more individual variation than is true for most

animals. This variation is a great advantage, which allowed early humans to adapt better to diverse environments. It is not surprising that, as in other aspects, there is individual variation in the inclination of males and females to these various masculine and feminine labor roles. Not all people who happened to be born with a male body adapted well to these rigorous masculine activities. Some males in virtually every society do not fit the stereotype of the typical masculine man.

Scientists disagree as to why this variation occurs, but most scholars now working in the field of gender studies conclude that it is probably a combination of inherited genetic factors, hormonal conditions during the mother's pregnancy, and possibly environmental factors during a child's first few years of life. Psychiatric theories of past decades, that attributed gender nonconformity to a single cause, such as a dominant mother, have now been disproved and discredited. There is evidence to suggest that certain females are born with an inclination to be more masculine, and certain males to be more feminine.

A minority of human societies see such gender variation as a threat, and try to enforce strict gender roles for all members of the same sex. But many cultures, probably a majority of the traditional small-scale societies of the world, tend to accept this variation as a natural part of being human. Many cultures provide a recognized social role for individuals who do not fit the standard masculine or feminine roles. The masculine female may become a warrior. The feminine male who is not inclined to the dangerous role of a warrior, on the other hand, may adopt the ways of a woman.

This tendency is a part of many societies, but the most widely known example is the "berdache" role among American Indians. The "berdache" was a recognized and highly respected

position for feminine males in many Indian tribes. Some Indonesian cultures traditionally respected a role that is very similar.

In contrast, the patriarchal Middle Eastern religions of Islam and Christianity condemned such variation as sinful because they viewed men as superior to women. A non-masculine male was seen as "lowering himself" to the inferior position of a woman. But before the spread of these religions into Indonesia, some local religions appreciated women, worshipped feminine goddesses, and viewed feminine males as sacred. This was particularly true of societies where women were highly respected. The feminine male was seen as "androgynous," an individual who combines both the masculine and the feminine into one unity.

In animist religions, everything that exists has a spirit, and these spirits must be respected. A person who combines both masculine and feminine spirits is seen as doubly blessed by the spirit world, and therefore more likely to be a religiously gifted person. This explains why many religions clothe their leaders in garments that look feminine, or at least different from the usual masculine clothing. The male priest who dresses femininely, who behaves as a transvestite, symbolizes the unity of both divisions of society. He portrays the fusion within himself of opposites, and the unity of immortality.

This idea of animist religions can be illustrated by looking at the traditional ideas of the Dayaks of Kalimantan. Dayak religion revolves around the interaction of two deities, the male god "Mahatala" of the sky, represented by the hornbill bird, and the female goddess "Djata" of the earth, represented by the snake. Creation involves the coming together of these two opposites, just as the male and female are joined in the sexual act of procreation.

There are two kinds of priests in Dayak religion: the female

"balian" and the male "basir." These priests are spiritual mediums, healers for those who are sick, officials at funerals and at the new year ceremonies. To gain spiritual power, the female balian take on some masculine characteristics and the male basir try to act femininely in every way. For the basir, this includes both transvestism, dressing like women, and homosexuality, taking the female position in sex with men. Since their status depends on the thoroughness with which they absorb the feminine, a male priest who acted heterosexually would be looked down upon. They have much higher status if they act homosexually.¹

Nineteenth century anthropologist G. A. Wilken wrote in Manual for the Comparative Ethnology of the Netherlands Indies that male basir "dress and behave entirely like women, and surrender themselves to unnatural lusts (pederasty), a sin that is common among the Dajak. There are even basir who are married to a man, wholly in accordance with the rules." Among the Land Dayak in Sarawak, such persons were called "burig," and among the Sea Dayak, "manang." For the Sea Dayak, he wrote, "The male manang dress like women and are treated as such; they therefore do not take part in warfare." He concluded that among all the Dayak groups, such androgynous individuals "are held in high respect. Their services are preferred to those of the balian, and they are paid more" for their medical and religious skills.²

The respect that underlies the manang's reputation has a religious basis. An explorer among the Dayaks in the 1880s wrote, "If you ask the reason of this strange custom, the only answer forthcoming is that the spirits or deities who first taught Dayaks the knowledge of the powers of manangism, gave them an injunction to assume the woman's garb." Many of the Dayak spirits were considered to be female, and so a feminine-like manang would more likely be able to connect with the spiritual

powers of this goddess-based religion. According to another early European reporter, who wrote in 1911, Dayaks believed that a male would assume the manang role only "because he has had a supernatural command conveyed to him in dreams on three separate occasions. To disregard such a command would mean death. He prepares a feast, and sacrifices a pig or two to avert evil consequences to the tribe, and then assumes female costume. Thenceforth he is treated like a woman, and occupies himself in female pursuits."3.

Why the two professions of medicine and spirituality were combined in the manang shaman is explained by Hugh Low, an English explorer who lived among the Sea Dayak in Sarawak from 1844 to 1847. He wrote that, "The manang is a person of great consequence in the village, all diseases being brought to him for cure; to perform this, if the disease be internal, he calls together all the friends of the sick person, and by making, with the assistance of others playing on gongs and tom-toms, a deafening noise, sufficient to kill a person in ordinary health. He pretends to converse with the spirit which troubles the afflicted person." Since the Dayak, like followers of other animist religions, believed that disease was caused by a bad spirit, it required a spiritually powerful person to convince this spirit to leave the body of the sick person. The manang, therefore, is an extremely important person, second only to the village chief in social status.4.

The manang, wrote Mr. Low, "is generally old, and rich from the many presents and payments made to him by those who require his services." Concerning the personal life of the manang, he stated, "I never saw any one who had a wife or children of his own, though ... they are permitted to adopt the children of other people, and this they frequently do." Thus, by encouraging manang to adopt children, there was no need for orphanages, since

the childless homosexual could become an adoptive parent. The clothing of the manang "precisely resembles that of a woman.... Not satisfied with the assumption of the dress of the woman, the manang, the more to resemble them, takes unto himself a husband, who is generally a widower having a family, and who, in expectation of inheriting the manang's property, is glad to comply with his caprices. He is treated in every respect as a woman, and does not go to war with the men." Far from condemning this practice, the Dayaks merely accepted it as an ancient custom of their way of life. They accepted the fact that some males were not inclined toward the masculine rigors, but instead of trying to make them conform they allowed them to develop more androgynous skills as religious and medical leaders. Likewise, homosexuality was not seen as a threat, but was a means by which Dayak society took care of orphans and motherless children.⁵

In fact, homosexual behavior could raise the status of the manang. H. Ling Roth, writing for the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain in 1892, pointed out that "if he can induce any young man to visit him at night and sleep with him his joy is extreme; he sends him away at daybreak with a handsome present and then, openly before the women, boasts of his conquest, as he is pleased to call it. As his services are in great request and he is well paid for his trouble, he soon grows rich.... As episodes of this kind tend to show how successfully he has imitated the character of a woman he is highly gratified, and rises, accordingly, in the estimation of the tribe as a perfect specimen."⁶

Such practices are part of the cultural tradition of Indonesia, but they have declined tremendously under the impact of Islamic and Christian missionaries. As early as the 1880s, the British observer Perham noted that manangism had also existed among the Malays but was in decline in the coastal regions because

"Mahometans consider the practice of it altogether inconsistent with the true religion of Islam."7. Christian missionaries, bringing with them their stories of homosexuality as the "sin of Sodom," were even more condemnatory. As a result, androgynous males in modern Indonesia and Malaysia have little awareness of the connections between their inclinations and the ancient heritage of Southeast Asian cultures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

For this continuing series, anthropologist Dr. Walter Williams refers readers to his book, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston, MA, America: Beacon Press, 1986). Dr. Williams is a professor in the Program for the Study of Women and Men in Society, at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles CA, America.

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5. Low, Sarawak, pp. 175-76.

6. H. Ling Roth, ed., "The Natives of Borneo," Anthropological
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7. Perham, "Manangism," p. 102.