

Intergenerational Homosexual Relationships in Ponorogo, East Java

By Walter L. Williams

Reyog is an all-male Indonesian folk dance centered in the East Java area around the city of Ponorogo. Reyog is a major cultural institution in Ponorogo, and it is what this region is most known for. As so often happens during ethnographic fieldwork, when I went to Ponorogo for the first time I had no idea the directions that my subsequent research would take. Over the next several months I attended reyog performances in Ponorogo city and in small villages surrounding the city. I interviewed many dancers and other people involved with reyog dance troupes. Reyog, which is almost totally opposite in style from the slow and elegant court dances at the Sultans' Palaces in Yogyakarta and Surakarta, is sort of a cross between a ballet and a circus. Performances are quite elaborate productions, with spectacular movement and mesmerizing music.

After watching many performances I concluded that the main message of reyog is to stress the need for male unity. Males are presented in the dance as both masculine and feminine, powerful and beautiful. Male power is represented by a macho adult dancer who hold a fierce-looking tiger mask, while male beauty is represented by boy dancers between the ages of eight to eighteen. The boys' form of dance, which is the main focus of attention for much of the performance, is extremely graceful and feminine.

Men are said to melt in their emotions due to the beauty of the boys. The dancers perform ritualized battles between two factions, but at the end of the performance they all unite and live happily ever after. The message of the dance is that, in order to benefit society, males need to unite by accepting all their qualities. Both masculine power and feminine beauty are good. Both should be appreciated.

In interviewing elderly men who had been reyog dancers in their youth, I learned that many of them had homosexual relationships with one or more men in their dance group. I did this research in 1987 and 1988, and gave slide presentations at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association and at a conference held at Harvard University, but this is the first time I have published anything on this topic. Though a Ph.D. dissertation in anthropology was written on the subject by Jerome Weis at Yale University in the 1970s, as far as I know Dr. Weis never published on this subject. I decided to write this essay as an example of the kind of information that is out there in the world if researchers will investigate.

In Ponorogo, a boy who is involved in one of these institutionalized homosexual relationships is called a “gemblak” or “gemblakan.” Every one of the former gemblaks I interviewed went on to marry a woman when he reached maturity, and not one of them felt exploited or harmed by the experience. A number of them told me that they felt especially honored to be chosen as a gemblak, and they enjoyed the sexual activities. Some of the boy dancers acted as gemblaks for the adult musicians and performers in their reyog group. Though the adult men in the troupe were usually married to women, it was socially acceptable for them to have sex with a gemblak if they wished. Some of the men became quite close to the gemblak of their reyog troupe, and when the boy reached the appropriate age for marriage (around age thirty) sometimes he would marry the daughter of a man who had formerly been his lover.

Instead of being sexually involved with the members of the dance troupe, some gemblaks choose to be in a long-term pederastic relationship with a single individual man. This man is usually a “warok”, a masculine adult man who is the spiritual guide and director for a reyog troupe. Traditionalist Ponorogans believe that a hyper-masculine warok, who remains unmarried throughout his life, develops great spiritual power partly because he does not have sex with

women. The great paradox of Ponorogo culture is that there is much social pressure on people to marry by the time they are age thirty, and yet the unmarried warok is valorized as the most prominent culture hero. Every village has a statue of a warok and/or a reyog character at the entry to the village. Traditionally a warok has one or more gemblaks who live with him as sex partners. I visited the homes of waroks who typically had on prominent display a formal photograph of himself with an Indonesian government official. In these photographs, standing beside the warok was a boy who was his gemblak at the time. Although waroks and gemblaks are supposed to stop having sex when the boy reaches maturity, they usually remain emotionally close for the rest of their lives. I saw some cases where the former gemblak married the niece of his warok lover.

This socially-acceptable pederasty extends to another group besides reyog dance troupes. Each village in Ponorogo has a “sinoman,” which is a formalized group for unmarried adolescent boys and young men. A boy will typically be admitted into the sinoman when he reaches puberty, and will remain as a member until he gets married to a woman when he is in his late twenties or early thirties. The group, usually consisting of about five to twelve members, has many important responsibilities. The sinoman polices the village at night to prevent crime, keeps the irrigation system in good working order to make sure that each farmer receives the right allotment of water, and takes whatever actions are necessary to keep the village running smoothly. Many adult village mayors learned their leadership skills when they were the leader of a sinoman in their twenties.

Ponorogan traditional village society loads down adolescent boys and young men with so many responsibilities and things that need to be done, that they literally have little time to get into mischief. Young men receive a lot of respect because villagers realize everyone depends

heavily on the sinoman. Each sinoman has a lot of authority, including choosing its own leader. The mayor of the village is a mentor for the sinoman leader, but they also work as a team. This is the means by which Ponorogo villages avoid juvenile delinquency, by channeling the energy of young men into productive activities that benefit the village, rather than having gangs that engage in anti-social or criminal activities.

The sinoman also provides for the sexual needs of the unmarried young men. Sex between males and females outside of marriage is highly disapproved. In the rural villages of Ponorogo where I did my research, the typical experience for a male is not to have sex with a female until he gets married to a woman when he reaches his late twenties. Before that, he has sex only with a gemblak.

When I did my research I found that the gemblak tradition was not moribund, but an integral part of the way young men grow up. Each sinoman has a boy, usually between eight and fourteen years old. After he reaches puberty the boy will no longer be a gemblak, and he will become a sinoman member himself. However, I interviewed one gemblak who was eighteen years old. His sinoman loved him so much, and he loved being a gemblak so much, that he continued in this role longer than other gemblaks. When I interviewed him, he told me that he enjoyed the sex with the sinoman members very much, and he had no interest in getting married to a woman. He was very feminine in demeanor, and I suspect that he later became a lifelong homosexual.

Every gemblak and former gemblak I interviewed told me that he enjoyed being a gemblak. I kept searching to see if I could find some who were negatively affected by this experience, asking if they felt sexually exploited by being the sex toy of a group of older males, but I could not find even one person who felt they were harmed by being a gemblak. I did hear

of a few instances, where a sinoman or reyog group arranged with the parents of a young boy for him to become their gemblak, and the boy cried after being taken away from his home. He was not crying about sex, but because he missed his parents. In that instance, if the boy did not adjust to life with his group he could return home.

No boy is forced to be a gemblak if he does not want to continue in the role. However, if he returns home, then his parents are expected to return the gifts that the group had given them when the arrangement was made. Typically, the group gives the parents an ox, and helps them plant and harvest their rice crop. Having a son chosen as a gemblak is a significant economic benefit, and so parents are happy if a warok, reyog group, or a sinoman pick their son.

The gemblak himself is treated very kindly, and given a level of respect not shown toward other boys. I interviewed former gemblaks who told me that they felt like visiting royalty as they rotated from one group member's house to another. In some sinomans, the gemblak goes from the house of one member to another each day, which is quite easy since Ponorogo villages are compact and houses are close together. But in some villages the gemblak remains at one house for several days before he rotates to the next sinoman member's house. The gemblak's personal belongings are carried to the house of a sinoman member, and the young man and his parents welcome him with a nice meal. At night he sleeps with the sinoman member and they have sex. I wondered how the boy could have enough energy to have sex every night.

After I gained their trust the elderly former gemblaks told me what they did sexually. The older male puts cream or saliva on the inner thighs of the gemblak, inserts his penis between the gemblak's thighs, and thrusts until ejaculation. Gemblaks told me that they cross their legs at the ankle to be able to squeeze tightly for a better feel. Sometimes, gemblaks told me, the older male masturbates them or performs oral sex on them if the gemblak wants to have an orgasm.

When I asked about anal intercourse, Ponorogans invariably said they thought that was unclean and disgusting. Thus, they were engaging only in safe sex. Transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is virtually impossible via this technique of intercrural sex. Given that sex between the thighs has been a commonly accepted form of pederastic relationships, from ancient Greece to modern Ponorogo, in my lectures during the height of the AIDS epidemic I suggested that this form of traditional wisdom should be used as a blueprint for both heterosexual and homosexual people who wanted to avoid unwanted pregnancies and HIV.

After a gemblak wakes up and eats breakfast, the sinoman member carries his books and holds an umbrella to shade him as he goes to school. On weekends he usually spends the day visiting his own parents, or relaxing with the sinoman as a whole. Sometimes, I was told, the sinoman holds a party in a house where the parents are gone. In this case, the gemblak might have sex with each of the sinoman members, whoever wants to participate, one after another. In the evening his belongings are taken to the house of another group member in the village, and he has dinner before having sex with that person that night. This rotation process goes on until he has slept with every member of the group, and then he moves to the house of the first person to start the rotation cycle again.

I was amazed when I heard these personal stories, because I had never heard of anything like this. I asked: “didn’t you feel sexually exploited, going from house to house to be a sexual object?” Not one gemblak or former gemblak I interviewed felt exploited in the least. On the contrary, they enjoyed the attention. One former gemblak told me that he felt like the sinoman’s little pampered pet. His problem, he said, was after he left the gemblak role and no longer had people waiting on him hand and foot, he had to learn to do everything for himself. Gemblaks are also treated with high respect not only by each sinoman member, but also by the sinoman

members' parents. Parents might give their son money so he can buy a nice gift for the gemblak, or the son might do extra work to get a larger allowance.

I slept in village houses, which are typically only one big room. At night the mother and father roll out a mat and sleep together on it, while the children sleep together on their own mat. However, the son and the gemblak sleep together on a fine mattress, which is carried from house to house with the gemblak. Sex is done extremely quietly, but with everyone sleeping together in the same room it is impossible not to overhear as the parents have sex or the son and the gemblak have sex. Parents obviously realize that their son is having sex with the gemblak, and that is perfectly acceptable. Several parents explained to me that they were glad their son was staying at home with the gemblak instead of looking for sex by going out to bars in the city, or having sex with a prostitute.

Each sinoman lavishes gifts on their gemblak, typically fancy clothing, a wristwatch, and fine shoes. At festivals and other public events each sinoman competes with other sinomans to display the most lavish outfits for their gemblak. The group members dress their gemblak lovingly, and hold an umbrella to shade him everywhere he walks. Sometimes a gemblak is even carried on a portable chair by four sinoman members. The sinoman earns praise and prestige by how elaborately and respectfully they treat their gemblak.

The whole system, from these inter-village public events to the welcome given by the parents of the young man, plus the gifts and labor given to the gemblak's parents, is designed to give high status to a gemblak. Both at reyog dance performances and at other public events, I saw finely dressed gemblaks show a kind of stately confident (even royal) demeanor that I never observed among non-gemblak boys of their age.

The way Ponorogans organize the gemblak system, everyone benefits. The parents of the gemblak receive significant financial advantages. The gemblek receives royal treatment, gifts, and high prestige. The sinoman members have an acceptable sexual outlet and a way to exercise their competitive drive in non-violent ways. With the sinoman members having to do wage labor to purchase nice things for their gemblak, on top of all their other responsibilities, there is literally no time for the young men to get into mischief.

The village avoids problems from adolescent males, and the village also benefits because sex is contained and regulated for social benefit. The only socially approved partner for adolescent boys and unmarried young men is a gemblak. For a married man, he can have sex with his wife, but if he wants to have extramarital sex it is easy enough for him to join a reyog troupe and have sex with a gemblak. When I was there I did not observe or even hear of one case of unwed pregnancy or prostitution in the villages.

Though these practices were still going on in the villages when I was doing research there in 1987 and 1988, the traditions were under assault. In the city of Ponorogo, western influences were having an impact. Western-educated Ponorogans I talked to considered the pederastic gemblak institution something of an embarrassment, and a relic from what they called their “uncivilized” past. Under the influence of American machismo, especially as conveyed in violent American movies, younger people have started looking down on the graceful feminine dance styles in reyog. They considered it unseemly for boys to develop such grace and beauty.

Westernized people considered gemblaks as something that only occurred among uneducated redneck farmers. No sophisticated person, they told me, would have sex with a gemblak. To discourage the practice, many reyog groups in the city have subsequently started using young girls as dancers instead of boys. Boys were not supposed to be beautiful, some said,

only girls should develop their sense of personal beauty. At least that is what they learned from the Christian missionaries, American armed forces personnel, businessmen, and tourists who were coming to the city of Ponorogo.

What I have discovered, in numerous instances of fieldwork with Native Americans, Asians, and Polynesians, is that Western (especially American) fundamentalist Christians, Catholics and Mormons, are sending missionaries out to convert all the peoples of the world. This is happening more intensively today than at any time in the past. Missionaries aim not only to wipe out indigenous religions, but also to suppress “sinful” practices in general. Socially-accepted homosexuality is at the top of their list of sins to eradicate.

One can only guess how many such practices have already been lost to history. If anthropologists do not act soon, to gather this cultural knowledge before it disappears, even more such traditions will be gone without a trace. In addition, the United States government under the George W. Bush administration has put extensive diplomatic pressure on the governments of Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, to start prosecuting intergenerational relationships with boys below age eighteen, even if those relationships are willing. Indigenous traditions that have existed probably for thousands of years are being wiped out because of United States government influence. I offer this example of my own research to suggest that Southeast Asia is an area of the world that bears further investigation.

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