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The Magic Begins to Fade

Ponorogo, Indonesia

By ZAMIRA LOEBIS Ponorogo

Homosexuality is a delicate topic in conservative, Islamic Indonesia. But until recently that wasn't the case in Ponorogo, a small town east of Yogyakarta. One of the more prestigious occupations in the area has traditionally been that of warok, a man believed to have mystical powers who stages ritual dances in order to bring good fortune to the community. His dancers were once attractive boys aged 10 to 16. The warok himself maintained his mystical powers by sleeping with the boys, who had their own title: gemblak.

But the warok of Ponorogo are becoming a thing of the past. As modern times bring a new openness to gays in Indonesia's big cities, they have almost shut down one of the country's longest-running homosexual traditions. Warok still live and work in Ponorogo, but they're not encouraged to live with gemblak anymore. Girls have replaced boys in the ritual dances, which themselves have evolved from meaningful rites into gaudy exhibitions for visiting tourists. Nowadays the warok is any man who has enough money to keep a dance troupe. "First they brought in the bright lamps," mourns Kasni Gunopati, 71, one of the oldest warok in town. "Then the radio, and now the television. Nowadays boys are ashamed to be known as a warok's gemblak."

It used to be a very grand honor. In the purest form of the tradition, a troupe of 60 artists walk in procession to a town or a meeting to bring luck. The most important figure is a dancer sporting an elaborate tiger mask, weighing up to 60 kg and secured between his clenched teeth. But it was the gemblak, a dozen or so, who always led the procession. The tradition springs from the story of Prince Jaka Bagus, a ruler from the Ponorogo region who maintained his steeliness by abstaining from food and intercourse with women. Instead, he had a harem of gemblak.

In the era of former President Suharto, such offbeat local customs became embarrassing to the bureaucracy, and the people of East Java are known for their religiosity. That double pressure has done in the old ways. Girls lead the procession now and many gemblak have packed up and joined the gay community in Jakarta. A few remain, though they now call themselves "foster sons." Gunopati, who had eight such partners, thinks something has been lost. "A gemblak was a lover and a symbol of honor," he recalls. "The more handsome he was, the prouder I was of him, and the more prowess I got from him." Not only Gunopati but a tradition that has lasted for centuries may not have much strength left.

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"Gay Indonesia" by Richard Ammon October 2002  
The Old Ways

Some of the links that accompany this story, on the left under Literature, connect with lengthy discussions about the ancient rituals involving the warok and gemblak male relationship mentioned above. I encourage further reading to fully understand the whole tradition and nature of this master/apprentice arrangement.

Those of us from the modern western gay tradition who understand homosexuality as an inborn trait that endows us with a bi-polar sensibility (male-female) will find this tradition quite intriguing.

The East Javanese town of Ponorogo has an historical reputation for the magical powers and sexual potency of its inhabitants. Two figures central to the legend and rituals of this culture are the warok and gemblak. Due to their alleged martial and magical abilities, the warok were often advisers and strong men for the local ruler, and hence free from the obligations of ordinary villagers.

The warok was rarely part of the official government, and thus played a somewhat ambiguous role, residing in the margins of social and political life.

On the one hand his standing amongst villagers made his support crucial for any aspiring ruler and he often acted as an agent for higher authorities.

At the same time, however, his unofficial status also made him a potentially dangerous adversary and troublemaker. The warok was a power broker, an intermediary between higher and lower powers, in the concrete and cosmological sense. His authority was intensely personal, depending on mastery of invulnerability, martial arts, magic, and religious knowledge, as well as the fear and admiration with which villagers regarded him.

In order to pass on his knowledge and skill, a warok sought out certain younger men, a gemblak, whom he considered as possessing the traits necessary for this alternative and important role in the tribe. Ancient legend tells the story of the son of the king of Ponorogo leaving home to learn all about martial arts under the guidance of a holy man. Subsequently, the two men would become intimate trusted friends. This type of filial and, presumably, sexual exile within a religious and martial arts context, is a common and a recurring element in Javanese and Balinese narratives.

## New Interpretations

Today that tradition is carried on by dance troupes who compete and perform during the annual Reyog Ponorogo festival. The leader of the dance troupe and the person who usually carries the Singa-Barong mask is the warok, renowned for his strength.

One of the most intriguing elements of the Reyog dance are the warok's companions, the handsome androgynous gemblak soldiers, riding their hobby-horses to the rhythm of the accompanying music. If warok bring to Reyog connotations of excessive masculinity, gemblak, in contrast, bring to their military role connotations of grace and femininity.

Unfortunately, in modern popular discourse, armed with labels and assumptions, gemblak are now being seen as 'transvestites' and warok as 'homosexual,' which they politely deny. Instead, they claim their relationship to be a part of a long-standing tradition, which has little if anything to do with transvestitism or homosexuality.

Whether they can be called a homosexual community is questionable. They don't call themselves homosexuals; they don't identify themselves as homosexuals, such as one finds in the West or in modern urban Indonesia. They would call themselves warok-gemblakan in a tradition of prowess and of performing arts. This is where Reyog Ponorogo festival comes in--it disclaims modern 'gay' identifications.

Dede Oetomo, an activist and leader of the modern gay community in Java, has claimed, "seen from the outside, from what I have read, from what I have seen in pictures, they live like a homosexual community anywhere. The combination of old, powerful men and poor, but handsome young men and boys seemed like a questionable combination of power."

With these 'modern structuralism' concepts and categories, an ancient legend has been confounded by a modern paradigm; there's no elegant way of depicting the whole truth of the relationship between warok and gemblak. Natives profess the relationship is not homosexual, conventional, dualistic or transvestite.

To resolve this dilemma, one could question the truthfulness of the Reyog informants (who reject modern labels), or we can resist naming in order to revere the beauty and mystery of a legend steeped in the magic of human androgyny, power and wisdom.

“Dede Oetomo Talks on Reyog Ponorogo” by Josko Petkovic  
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Oetomo is one of the leading gay-rights activists in Indonesia and an academic at Airlangga University, East Java. This is an edited version of an interview I recorded with him on film in December 1992 for a documentary project on *Reyog Ponorogo*. The intention was to record a seamless response to a series of questions on Reyog Ponorogo which were given to Dede beforehand.

## DEDE OETOMO

1. Let me start by making it clear what my position is with regard to the *warok-gemblakan* tradition in Ponorogo. I first became interested in the warok-gemblakan tradition when a few of my friends and I started a gay movement in Indonesia. It is interesting to note that actually it was our western friend [Professor Walter Williams] , academics, who reminded us of the warok-gemblakan tradition in Ponorogo, and of course other traditions as well. So, my position is as an outsider, as an academic in a way, and also as a gay-rights activist. As such, I have learned to be rather careful when talking about homosexuality or about a homosexual community in Ponorogo - as the warok-gemblakan community can be described.

2. I think what they do sexually, we have to call homosexual acts. This is widely known all over Java. Anybody who is in touch with the traditional way of life in Ponorogo, knows that there are these older men called *warok* who, instead of having sex with their wives, have sex with younger boys - eight to fourteen, fifteen - and they do that as part of looking for prowess. Whether we can call them a homosexual community is questionable. They don't call themselves homosexuals; they don't identify themselves as homosexuals, such as one finds in the West or in modern Indonesia. They would call themselves warok-gemblakan. It is a tradition of prowess, and of performing arts. This is where Reyog Ponorogo comes in. As you are probably aware, the older performers in the Reyog Ponorogo dance are usually the waroks and traditionally the younger boys, the hobby horse dancers - nowadays some of them are

women - are the *gemblakan*. But it is not so easy to say if it is a homosexual community or not.

3. Seen from the outside, from what I have read, from what I have seen in pictures, they live like a homosexual community anywhere. They are lovers, they exchange boys, even sometimes between waroks. If there is a visiting warok, he gets to sleep with the host warok's boys. And depending on how wealthy the warok is - if he is very wealthy, he can have more than one *gemblakan*. Around the warok-*gemblakan* relationship there are people called *ondolan*, - this is probably especially true nowadays. These are people who are past the age of *gemblakan* but are still in a relationship with the warok. There are also the so called *warokan*. These are not real warok. These are older men who still sleep with younger men but they are not really warok in terms of the social prowess. Warokan tend to share *gemblakan*. A few men would share a *gemblakan*. The community itself is called *sinoman*. Which brings in the interesting question of whether this is a specifically Ponorogo phenomenon or whether it is something that is common all over Java, because the word *sinoman* is still known now as a group of young men who do things - there are organisations of younger men in villages now known as *sinoman*. One wonders, if in the past there were also warok-*gemblakan* traditions elsewhere, probably not so institutionalised as in Ponorogo but with the same practices. We know that some Ponorogo waroks do recruit younger boys from other areas, outside of Ponorogo. People tend to isolate the warok-*gemblakan* practice to Ponorogo but actually if you go to Kediri, Madiun and the surrounding area you will hear similar terms being used. Even in urban centers like Surabaya, you hear the word *gemblakan* now and then, especially among the working classes. So one suspects that the tradition is probably not specific to the Ponorogo area but

its most prominent manifestation is in Ponorogo and in connection with the Reyog tradition.

4. As to how this warok-gemblakan tradition came into being, well, Ponorogo has always been known in history as an area that resists the power of the state - Mataram, the Dutch - there has always been a tradition of rebellion. I think this is because Ponorogo has always been a marginal area in Java. There are other marginal areas in Java, Banten is one, Banyuwangi is another. These are areas that have never actually given in to the central state power. They are always in resistance. This has to do with the economy of the area and it has to do with how people go about arranging their economy.

5. Also, in the Ponorogo area and all over East and Central Java we have this tradition of *jagu*, men of prowess, people who are kind of ambiguous: they could be a Robin Hood type, robbing the rich to help the poor, or they might just be men looking for power. This tradition of jagu is actually found all over East and Central Java, and if you look into the history, for example, some of the Javanese kings were portrayed, in the court texts, as jagu. This might be how the warok-gemblakan tradition started.

6. Warok are the local strongmen, who tend to be ambiguous in their role vis-a-vis power. Sometimes they resist power, sometimes they can be used by power. In the sixties, waroks were close to the communist party and that is why a lot of waroks were killed in '65, '66. That is why the warok tradition has an ambiguous status now. The state wants to co-opt the Reyog Ponorogo tradition - it is something to show to the outside world - but at the same time they know that the power of these local strongmen can be detrimental to state power.

7. There is also an economic aspect to the tradition. A warok doesn't take gemblakan just like that . He has to compensate the parents of the younger boys with a cow, with cattle, or with the use of land. In some cases that have been recorded in literature, the warok has to pay for the wedding of the gemblakan. So the warok-gemblakan tradition is a whole institution, with rules. From interviews of people in Ponorogo, we learn that parents, for example, are quite proud if their boys are taken in as gemblakan. For poor families this is a way of moving up socially and economically. There is one piece of writing published in 1941 that talked about female warok and female gemblakan - this is the only piece that I know that talks about this. So it could be younger girls as well.

8. I think what is happening with the warok-gemblakan tradition these days, and what has been happening to traditional institutions throughout Indonesia, say, since the turn of this century, is that these traditions are now facing encroachment by modern western, pan Indonesian conceptions of morality and all that goes with them. What for a long time was considered acceptable, in fact institutionalised, in Ponorogo is now facing a kind of morality that only accepts, for example, sexuality within marriage, only with one spouse, with children - but two only. This makes it difficult for people in Ponorogo. On the one hand, they want to be proud of their tradition - they want to show Reyog, but at the same time within the Reyog tradition and behind the Reyog tradition there is something that is a bit shameful for them. This is true of other traditions, all over Indonesia actually. If we read the writings of people earlier this century, we find the same kind of overtones, where Dutch educated Indonesian intellectuals are rather ashamed



of the past which they consider to be decadent and not in accordance with modern times.

9. In Indonesian society you will find different traditions of alternative sexualities including homosexuality - warok-gemblakan is one. It is interesting to note there is a double standard in place. Amongst ourselves, we know that there are people who have sex with each other, in mosques for example, in West Sumatra or in the warok gemblakan tradition for that matter. This is something that most Indonesians are not proud of and they are rather disturbed when anthropologists or Indonesianists, bring this up.

10. There are also the modern homosexual communities of the urban centres. With these communities, most Indonesians will say 'Oh, they are decadent, they are mentally disturbed, ... it's a sin.' But the behavioural reaction would be one of a lot of tolerance - as long as it is not in their own family. Once it is other people's families, a performer, even the village dancer, they don't care. As long as it is not in their own family. Even when it is within the family, once they find out.... the reaction gets less and less strong over time.

11. It is probably useful to bring in here the fact that the cross dressing *waria*, the *banci* are socially more acceptable. I think this is because most Indonesians think that they are asexual, and not a threat to the patriarchy of Indonesian society, whereas homosexual men and lesbian women are seen more as a threat in that sense. But the reaction is different from the West. There is no queer bashing at all in Indonesia.

12. We in the gay movement have used the Ponorogo example to justify the fact that there is a need for an

Indonesian gay movement. There is a need for modern day Indonesian homosexuals to learn from the past and at the same time to live in the present. Of course we have had resistance from other quarters, from people who disagree with us, but the point is that the warok-gemblakan tradition was there and is still there in part, although it is changing. Our point of view is quite simple.... The accusation from people who are against the gay movement in Indonesia and who say that this is something that we have imported from the West is actually not true. We have had traditions in the past like the warok-gemblakan relationship, the warokan, the ondolan.

13. Historically, these are quite complex relationships but obviously in the urban setting we can't simply go back to these traditions, or construct our sexuality upon them. This is something which is being explored right now in different Asian countries. India is doing it. The Philippines is doing it, Thailand in a way is doing it also. We are all looking at the past where the homosexual lifestyle, the homosexual way of life was incorporated into the culture. Our task now is a kind of rediscovery, or retaking what was ours before the encroachment of modern morality.

14. Another issue that is important now for these traditional modes of sexual expression is the question of AIDS. We in Surabaya would like very soon to start working in the Ponorogo area because we know from our outreach workers that there are cases of other sexually transmitted diseases among the warok-gemblakan population. This means that if we don't take preventive action soon the whole culture might be wiped out, which is already happening in Africa for example. This is our trajectory for the future.

15. Within the gay movement, we are hoping that these people can still lead their way of life without interference from the outside world - if they want to do that. This actually came up in a gay caucus in New Delhi, at the last AIDS conference of the Asia Pacific where people in the Philippines, in India, including some Aborigines from Australia also, were talking about how these alternative sexualities should be given their rights.

16. We have to remember that in all this discourse, the waroks are central to Ponorogo culture. What modern day writers and journalists sometimes try to portray is that the warok-gemblakan institution is marginal to Ponorogo. I would disagree strongly with that. What I see is that Ponorogo is warok, Ponorogo is Reyog and Ponorogo without warok is unthinkable. This is important if we look into other Indonesian cultures, or even cultures in South and South East Asia in general. What we see is that people of alternative sexualities, be they men who have sex with men, be they men or women who cross dress, or eunuchs, are actually preservers of culture. We have traditions in south Sulawesi, for example of the *bissu*, where the regalia of the court, and all court rituals have to be presided over by a *bissu*, who is a man, or a woman, who cross dresses, and who also only has sex with the same gender. These are people who are not a part of the so-called modern world, in the sense that their discourse is different - but we feel that we should at least have a dialogue with them, approach them, see what they want, ... if they want to preserve their way of life we should empower them and I think that is the bottom line.

17. What is interesting is an idea that has been thrown around by a colleague of mine in the Philippines who said that in the olden days, people of alternative sexualities

tended to be the healers of their society - like the bissu, like the medium priests in Dyak cultures, in Borneo. And in a way, it is interesting as we discover our past to portray ourselves - the modern day lesbians and gay men, and people of alternative sexuality - as people who are helping society cope with AIDS. This is definitely true in the West, it is true in Malaysia, it is true here in Indonesia, and in the Philippines and apparently also in India. Perhaps this is the beginning of the discovery of the Asian past as well as the realisation that we can live comfortably with people with alternative sexualities.