

ENTRY FOR THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HOMOSEXUALITY

(New York: Garland Press, 1990, pp.597-599.

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INDONESIA. This island nation shares with its Southeast Asian neighbors a heritage of acceptance of homosexual behavior in its traditional cultures. Though little is known about the same-sex practices of many of the tribes of the East Indies, there is information from early explorers about several cultures. Among both the Dayak (Iban) of Kalimantan, and the Bugis (Makasar) of Sulawesi, there was a socially-recognized "half-man/half-woman" androgynous role for males similar to the berdache tradition among American Indians. Such individuals were often sacred religious leaders of great spiritual power, wore a mixture of men's and women's clothes, combined masculine and feminine aspects in their character, and had sex with men. Among the Bugis, such "bisu" individuals traditionally resided at the courts of local rulers, where they took care of the sacred royal ornaments.

In contrast, the eastern part of Indonesia is Irian Jaya, which is a totally different culture area from the rest of the nation. Irian is the western part of the island of Papua New Guinea, where the tribes share the Melanesian way of life. Melanesian cultures emphasize super-masculinity for males, who are grouped together in warriorhoods. In these societies,

feminized males are looked down upon, and boys are pressured to adopt the masculine warrior lifestyle. One means of gaining masculinity, in the lifestyle of many of these Melanesian cultures, is for a boy to absorb masculine characteristics through sex with a man. Accordingly, every boy is expected to go through a stage of growth, in which he either orally ingests or anally receives semen. It is believed that he cannot mature into manhood without gaining this sperm through homosexual acts, even though after he matures he will marry heterosexually. Homosexual relations, often done in a ritual context, provide a major means for transmission of masculine values from one generation of males to another.

The major culture of Indonesia is Java, and only in the Ponorogo area of eastern Java is homosexuality institutionalized in man-boy relationships. Here, however, boys are valued for their feminine characteristics, and men will take a boy as a "gemblakan." Traditionally, gemblakans were kept by a "warok," a spiritually and physically powerful masculine adult man. Waroks would gain social status by the lavish wealth they could display on their beautiful gemblakan. A man would arrange with the boy's parents to keep him for one or two years, and would present the parents with gifts and financial support during the time in which he kept the boy. Some gemblakans were as young as seven years old, but most were in their teens, and some were loved so much by their man that they stayed together until the boy was in his twenties.

In recent decades, however, it has become too expensive for

most men to support a gemblakan, so in the traditional villages of Ponorogo where the practice still continues, several men will combine their resources to share a boy. The group of men is usually either in a reyog dance troupe, where the boy performs in androgynous dress and heavy makeup, or in a group of unmarried young men. The boy spends a few days in the house of each group member, before being shared with another member. Married men will sleep with the boy rather than with their wife while the gemblakan is visiting, but the wife usually does not mind because of the social prestige that the gemblakan brings. Often, after the boy matures, he continues to regard the man's family as extended kin, and he will sometimes even marry the daughter of the man he had formerly slept with.

Indonesia is mostly Islamic in religion, and the attitudes of Islam toward homosexuality are ambivalent. Among fundamentalist "santri" followers of Islam, sex of any kind outside of heterosexual marriage is discouraged, but it is an open secret that adolescents in Muslim boarding schools are often involved in homosexual relationships. Usually, Islam has adapted itself to local customs, and in areas like Ponorogo where homosexual behavior was common, the religion did not oppose this practice. However, in recent decades as Islam has reacted against the European stereotype that all Muslim men are pederasts, and as a more fundamentalist wave has swept through the Middle East, Islam in Indonesia has taken a more negative view of homosexuality. Fundamentalist Muslims today do not seem as intent on inducing guilt over homosexuality as fundamentalist

Christians are, but they come close.

Nevertheless, among those Indonesians who are not so strict on religion, popular acceptance of homosexuality continues. One popular form of entertainment in eastern Java is "ludruk," a form of theater in which female roles are traditionally played by transvestite males. The actors in these traveling troupes are often homosexual, and serve as sexual partners for married men who come and visit them after the ludruk performances.

With traditions like this, it is not surprising that transvestite homosexuality is well known in modern Indonesia. The term for such individuals is "banci," which is similar in meaning to the gay vernacular term "drag queen." Bancis are often employed in beauty salons or other fashion-related businesses, but many of them make their living by prostitution.

Gay men in Indonesia are a separate social group, quite distinct from bancis, even though some gay males will sometimes dress in drag and will joke among themselves that they are banci. Though gay men are active in every field of labor, they are most noted as models, dancers, tourist guides, hair stylists, and fashion designers.

An open gay scene exists in all Indonesian cities, but many remain secretive. There is very little social contact between gay men and lesbians, who are usually quite secretive about their sexuality. The main fear of those in the closet is that their family will find out, which is an indication of low self-acceptance. Nevertheless, there is not much pressure on gays outside of the family. Employment discrimination against gays is

not often a problem, and homophobic violence against gays is quite rare. Police are not known for their anti-gay activities, and government policy in general is not discriminatory. Some top ministers of the government are commonly known to be gay, yet this does not lead to calls for their dismissal.

As a result of this lack of discrimination, few gays see a reason to become politicized, and they tend to integrate more into general society rather than establishing their own separate subcultural institutions. For example, since same-sex couples are free to dance together in discotheques, and gays can associate comfortably with each other in these dance places alongside heterosexuals, there are not many strictly gay bars. The one great social inhibitor for gays is that their family will confront them about their sexuality, and many of them seem resolved to become heterosexually married in their later years, But other than that, gay people in Indonesia seem to have a rather accepted place in society generally. It is ironic that the position of gays in the democratic nations is often more repressed than it is in an authoritarian regime like Indonesia. Indonesian values such as social harmony, non-violence, responding to the voice of the people, and unity in diversity, seem to protect gays more effectively than traditions of majority rule and individual rights. Still, as Indonesians are becoming more westernized, some "progressive" elements are bringing western homophobic attitudes into society. If that occurs, gays in Indonesia will likely respond with political activism, as has happened in America and Europe.

See MELANESIA[?]

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