

REYOG file

HOMOSEXUALITY AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING VILLAGE UNITY IN PONOROGO, JAVA

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In 1987-88 I was awarded a Fulbright research grant to investigate gender variance in Java, while being associated with Gadjah Mada University. This built upon my previous research on gender variance among North American Indians, as reported in my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH*. In the last chapter of that book, I introduced several examples of institutionalized "berdache" roles in various cultures around the world. One of these nations where a tradition of acceptance and social veneration of gender variance and homosexuality has existed is Indonesia.

While much more data needs to be gathered about the many cultures of Indonesia, we do have some data about respected "half-man/half-woman" androgynous berdache roles among the Dakak (Iban) of Kalimantan and Borneo, and the Bugis (Makasar) of Sulawesi. As with the American Indians, berdaches were traditionally considered sacred leaders of great spiritual power, wore a mixture of men's and women's clothing, combined masculine and feminine aspects in their character, and engaged in homosexual behavior. Among the Bugis, such "bisu" individuals traditionally resided in the courts of local sultans, where they took care of the sacred royal ornaments. I strongly encourage gay and lesbian ethnographers to conduct fieldwork on either of these two groups. While the Bugis and Dayak, like most other peoples of the world, have been significantly influenced by the homophobic attitudes of Western culture, elements of respect for the berdache still exist today.

Right now, we Americans do not realize the extent to which Fundamentalist Christian groups are exporting homophobia in their many missionary endeavors in the non-Western world. So, if we are going to gather research on societies that have accepting attitudes toward homosexuality, the need is great to begin this fieldwork quickly before it is too late. As I argue in a review essay, about homosexuality in Thailand, that is published in *THE JOURNAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY* (1990), anthropologists can provide an important function for Western gay rights movements by investigating the means by which non-homophobic societies incorporate homosexuality into their social life. By learning from other cultures how same-sex eroticism is respected as an acceptable part of human behavior, we can thereby help to develop those social conditions in our own society.

In contrast to the androgynous berdache traditions, in eastern

Indonesia exists a very different homosexual tradition among males, one that emphasizes masculinity. This cult of masculinity, as revealed by the important fieldwork of Professor Gilbert Herdt and others, is indicative of the Melanesian cultures of Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea. As Herdt points out, this form of institutionalized homosexuality is organized along intergenerational lines, involving same-sex relationships between men and boys.

The ethnographic literature that exists on male homosexuality in non-Western cultures suggests that a culture may have one of these traditions, but not both. Accordingly, I was surprised to find that the area of Ponorogo, in eastern Java, incorporates both the androgynous and intergenerational traditions.

Java is the most populous island of Indonesia, which is the fifth largest nation in the world. Javanese people are still in the process of emerging from their colonial past, as subjects of the Dutch East Indies. I interviewed elderly Javanese, gaining a sense of their perspective on their past, by doing life histories. This research, especially in its gender aspects, is reported in my new book JAVANESE LIVES: WOMEN AND MEN IN MODERN INDONESIAN SOCIETY (Rutgers University Press, 1991).

Besides this book, I am also working on another book on homosexuality in Indonesia. A part of this project is on the Ponorogo area of east Java.

[BEGIN SLIDES HERE, *** denotes new slide]

*** Like other areas of Java, Ponorogo is an agricultural society that is mainly dependent on rice farming. Terraced rice paddies dominate the landscape, but many other crops are also grown. The volcanic soil is so fertile, that branches which are chopped off plants and stuck in the ground, will sprout leaves and become living fences.

*** The most immediate awareness that a visitor has when reaching the Ponorogo cultural area, is seeing these ornate statues at the entrance to every village. These statues commemorate REYOG, a dance form that is the main source of cultural identity for Ponorogo villagers. In Java, folk dances tend to be either men's dances or women's dances; there is very little sex-mixture in dance. REYOG is a male dance group, and each Reyog group is headed and overseen by a "warok." This man standing here is a former warok, now retired. He was one of my main informants while I was in Ponorogo, and I stayed at his house. A warok is a powerful man, but while his power may be expressed in terms of his physical strength, that is not the emphasis. He is known

for his bravery, but it is his spiritual strength and magical powers, which are the real hallmark of a warok. He is the epitome of the Ponorogo version of the "macho man." He is the sponsor and protector of a Reyog group. Every reyog group has a warok as their leader.

*** Besides the warok, the other members of the dance group are the musicians, who play flutes, *** gamelan gongs, drums, and a bamboo instrument that is shaken (called an "anklung"). *** Together, the reyog music forms an eerie, other-worldly sound that is quite exciting musical background for the reyog dance performance. ***

*** In the dance, the main performer is the "Tiger King," represented by a dancer who makes his dramatic entrance from behind the drummers. The Tiger King wears a heavy tiger-head mask *** which is mounted by a peacock. The tiger represents the strength of men, and the peacock

represents male beauty. The entire emphasis of Reyog is a celebration of male attributes.

*** Another character is the masked red figure, representing the Prime Minister of the King, along with his cavalry protectors, who are always played by boys (ages 10-20). ***

Briefly, the long and complex story of Reyog involves the Prime Minister journeying through a forest, on an important assignment from his King. In the middle of the forest, the group is attacked by the Tiger, who is king of the forest.

*** First the boy cavalymen fight the Tiger, but they cannot defeat him. Next the Prime Minister himself attempts to subdue the Tiger, but that battle also ends in a draw. Neither side can win, so in respect for the bravery and strength of each other, both the Tiger King and the Prime Minister negotiate a settlement. When the Prime Minister explains the purpose of his journey, the Tiger King agrees to join him as an ally. At the end of the dance, they all go off together as friends.

*** The important theme of the Reyog dance is male competition, which among intelligent and strong men will be settled so that friendship wins out in the end. It is a message for men to subdue their differences toward beneficial alliances which will be a benefit to all. The message of the dance is the importance of masculine unity. This unity theme is a major aspect of Ponorogo culture. It is what keeps Ponorogo villages unified.

*** The warok is the main culture figure in Ponorogo society, with statues commemorating his status. Part of his magical power is derived from him not having sex with a woman, since female energy is considered incompatible with warok masculine power. Therefore, he puts his energy into his relationship with an adolescent boy.

*** This warok is standing before his reyog group's tiger mask, which has an honored place in the living room of his house. Above the mask are two photographs: one showing an Indonesian government official presenting him a plaque for his leadership in the community, and the other with his "gemblak." The gemblak role is done by a boy who is chosen by the warok to be his boy-lover.

*** The boy who takes a gemblak role is almost always also one of the cavalymen dancers in the reyog dance. Such a boy is chosen for his good looks, usually around age ten to twelve. A warok or his representative will go to the boy's parents and offer to provide some sort of payment for the boy to become his companion. Usually this involves payment of an ox to the parents. Such a present represents a major economic advantage for the parents, since an ox can be used for plowing (so that the parents do not have to hoe so much in the fields), and for transporting crops to markets farther away.

*** Waroks are not the only males in Ponorogo to have gemblaks. In each village there also exists a group of unmarried young men, called a "SINOMAN." Each sinoman is a closely-knit group of males, ranging in age from their mid-teens to their late-twenties, who would be roughly comparable to a "gang" among American young men in urban ghettos. Here are some young men who are members of a sinoman in a village where I did my research, along with some female relatives of the group's leader in front of his house. Yet, unlike American gangs, in Ponorogo the sinoman functions in a more socially-useful way.

*** First, they are often reyog groups-in-training, and their leader

may later become a warok if he is successful in developing his power and magical abilities. Here is the sinoman leader, sitting in his home. Second, they provide much of the labor to help other villagers besides their own family. They are interested in doing this labor because they wish to get payment, so that they can also afford to pay the parents of a boy, so that he can become the gemblak for their sinoman. Sitting beside the sinoman leader is the gemblak of their group. He was originally contracted to be the gemblak for this sinoman when he was twelve years old, and he is here nearly twenty. Usually a gemblak only serves in this function for a couple of years, and after that he goes back to live with his parents until he marries a woman. But this gemblak liked his group so much that he decided to stay with them, and they liked him so much that they made presents to his family every year since he was originally contracted. The members of the sinoman raised money to buy an ox for his parents, and every year do labor in the fields of his parents. They now have life pretty easy, with all these strong young men helping them work on their farm.

The advantages of the sinoman to have a gemblak are three. First, a gemblak provides them with a sexual outlet. In Ponorogo, there is severe condemnation of heterosexual behavior outside of marriage. An unmarried young woman who gets pregnant would be ostracized from her family and the village, and the man who had sex with her would be severely punished. I never heard of a female prostitute in a Ponorogo village, and I doubt that they exist. Since males do not get married until usually their late twenties, they therefore have no female sexual outlets during the height of their sexual years. Given this restriction, it is not surprising that the young men will value their gemblak as sexual partner.

*** Everyone in the village of course knows that a boy who is a gemblak is serving as sexual partner for his sinoman. Here is a retired warok looking at the gemblak of his nephew's sinoman, while the mother and aunt gather around their well. A member of the sinoman is drawing water from the well. I slept in the house of this family, and it was quite acceptable that this young man slept with his gemblak. Different sinomans arrange the sexual sharing of their gemblak in various ways. In some, the gemblak will reside with a young man in his family's house for a week or several days, while in other groups the gemblak will move every night to a different member of the sinoman. In each case, the family of the young man will prepare a comfortable bed for their son to share with the gemblak. Since everyone sleeps in the same room, or with only a cloth curtain separating them, it is impossible not to realize that the males are engaging in sex (even though Javanese are particularly quiet while engaging in sex).

In interviewing gemblaks and adult men who were gemblaks in their youth, I asked them "Didn't you mind moving from one house to another?" They uniformly answered that they did not, that their personal goods were always carried for them, and that when they arrived at a house the family treated them like visiting royalty. My other main question was more personal: "Weren't you sexually exhausted by sharing sex with all these men? Didn't you feel sexually exploited?" Again, the answer was no. I did not understand this, until I myself had several sexual encounters with gemblaks. As a guest in their homes, it was considered polite to offer the gemblak to

sleep with me on occasion. It would have been considered an insult for me to refuse, so I went along with the practice. It took me no time at all to adjust to this local custom.

Since I let the gemblak lead the way, and instruct me what to do, I soon realized why they did not feel sexually exploited. Male-to-male sex for Ponorogo villagers, I discovered by my participant-observation, involved the gemblak lying down, wetting his hand with spit or hand lotion, and lubricating the penis of his partner, then guiding the erect penis in between his thighs. In Indonesian, this is called "jepit paha" (between the legs), and it is the usual form of male eroticism. The top-man thrusts until orgasm, and that is it. If the gemblak wants to have orgasm, the man might sometimes perform oral sex on him, but it is not reciprocated by the gemblak. These two sexual forms are kept distinct. What is interesting here is that the inter-crural form of sex is completely safe sex, and is the typical means of male sexual interaction. [in this and many other societies]

The second function of the gemblak role is that it provides the basis for male bonding. Sometimes the sinoman members will have a party, at a member's house when his parents are away. Often during this party, the sinoman members will each engage in sex with the gemblak, one after another. It is not usually considered proper for members to have sex with each other, but they told me that they feel a sense of bonding to one another by sharing their gemblak. As important as their sexual sharing, they also bond together because of their economic activities. It is expensive to support a gemblak, since they must labor for his parents and also must labor to provide their gemblak with fancy clothes and status symbols like jewelry, a wristwatch, an umbrella, and fine shoes. The time of the young men is thus spent in productive labor, since the prestige of their sinoman depends on how finely they can outfit their gemblak. He becomes their status symbol. By treating him so considerately, they and their families are thus bound in an extra-kinship network of pride in a group. Often, parents will have to help out their son to pay his share to support the gemblak. The gemblak thus becomes the focus of the sinoman, and he is their symbol of the unity of their group. The members feel like brothers to each other, and they retain this close feeling even after they get married and start having their own children.

*** Later, married men often join a reyog group, and replicate the sense of group closeness with other men that they earlier had within their sinoman. Since the warok who heads a reyog group will have a gemblak, he may often share his gemblak with other members of the reyog group who wish to have sex with him. While it is expected that men above their late-twenties in age should become heterosexually married, except for the warok, the social arrangements in Ponorogo thus make it possible for virtually any man to have a socially-acceptable outlet for his homosexual desires. By channeling these desires into the institutionalized man-boy relationship with a gemblak, both prostitution and illegitimate births are avoided.

*** The third function of the gemblak role is the high social status that it provides for the boy. If he is in a sinoman, he becomes like visiting royalty to the families of the members he visits. He provides a significant economic contribution to his parents, and so parents are pleased if their son is chosen to be a gemblak. I have

spoken to many elderly Ponorogo villagers, who delighted in telling me how proud they are of the fact that their son (now usually married and a father) was a gemblak. If a boy takes a gemblak role for a warok, he can become a famous dance star at an early age in a reyog dance troupe. He is idolized by the crowd, and the dance performance of the young cavalry dancers occupies much of the performance.

*** Thus far I have focused on the intergenerational aspects of the gemblak role, but also notable is the androgyny of the boy dancers. Boys who are chosen for the gemblak role are those who seem more gentle, androgynous personality types. His androgyny provides a perfect complement to the super-masculine warok man who is his lover.

*** While the gemblak's dance role is as a cavalryman, and he wears a man's helmet, he also often wears a wig in a woman's hairstyle. Then he wears men's epulats, over a woman's blouse *** with men's pants. There is a conscious mixing of the masculine and the feminine in the clothing of the gemblak for his performance, denoting his androgynous social-sexual role.

*** The gemblak rides a horse constructed of pleated bamboo and painted. *** When he is astride his horse, in full costume, he is treated with great kindness and respect by the members of the reyog group. *** He is their star, and exudes a sense of supreme self-pride and confidence seldom seen in young boys, and not evident among other boys in Ponorogo who are not gemblaks. *** He is, in more ways than one, regal in bearing and demeanor, a little queen if I ever saw one.***

*** In the reyog performance, much of the dancing by the gemblaks involve very feminine body movements, which the boys are instructed in by their teachers (usually former gemblaks).

*** They daintily hold sashes, which they flip at the Tiger King and to the audience. *** The whole emphasis is their regal attitude and their androgyny. *** [several slides of dance]

*** This last slide shows how even very young boys are encouraged to take up the gemblak dance role, to practice in their childhood so that when they get older they can possibly take up the gemblak role. This shows the importance of socialization in allowing individuals to adjust to a sexual role that societies like our own might look upon with horror and dismay. In Ponorogo, because it has been an accepted social role from their earliest memory, boys and their parents do not look askance at this practice but look forward to it as a possibility for their future.

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CONCLUSION

Many Western anthropologists have had difficulty in understanding homosexuality, because they do not understand how it is socially "useful" for anything beyond physical pleasure. We can see from the Ponorogo example, that homosexual desires can in fact be channeled into functions that are quite beneficial for some societies. Most important is that no one feel exploited. In Ponorogo, everybody wins: The parents get major financial assistance from the warok or the sinoman, the males who get a gemblak get sexual satisfaction and social prestige, the gemblak himself gets exalted treatment and high social status, and the village as a whole gets several things. The village gets a major form of entertainment and cultural identity due

to the fame of their Reyog Ponorogo dance troupes, and a sense of shared purpose that unites the young men and the adult men together into groups that go beyond kinship connections.

Anthropologist should be the first ones to emphasize the inaccuracy of the notion that the only purpose of sex is reproduction. If we just think about it there are many other purposes of sex, including the promotion of close intimate bonding among non-related individuals, for the release of personal stress, for entertainment and pleasure, and other things. Same-sex eroticism can easily fit into these functions, if only a society does not take a condemnatory attitude toward it.

Anthropologists have emphasized how marriage functions to provide a larger network of individuals to whom one can turn in times of need. What they have ignored is that there are often other forms of social unity besides heterosexual marriage and childbearing for accomplishing these goals. And sometimes, it is homosexual forms of bonding that can tie people together in a shared sense of village unity. As the example of Ponorogo demonstrates, homosexuality can be a means of helping society. What this implies, is that if we want to promote a greater acceptance of homosexuality (not just tolerance, but genuine acceptance) in our own society, we need to come up with ways by which homosexual relationships can provide benefit to society. To do that, the best places we can look are to other cultures, which have worked out myriad ways by which same-sex eroticism can be accommodated without people feeling it is a threat to children, to the family, to religion, and to society in general. Lesbian and gay ethnographers are just beginning to uncover the social mechanisms by which cultures of the Native Americans, Siberians, Japanese, Thai, Polynesian, and other world areas have accomplished this task. The tragedy is that Western homophobia is beginning to be felt in places like Ponorogo, where people in the more Westernized urban areas are already beginning to consider the homoerotic aspects of their culture as a shameful practice. Even if this respected tradition might die out, at least anthropologists can try to record what is possible of these traditions.

One of the things in which I am most proud, is the influence that my book *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH* has had, in aiding contemporary lesbian and gay American Indian people in rediscovering their sense of connectedness to their own past culture. Going beyond tedious academic debates about the etiology of homosexuality, we academics have a responsibility to use our training to present something of value to the peoples which we study. I can think of no more valuable gift for future generations of gay people, than to gather this information before it is too late.