MAKASSAR by Walter Williams 1987

Among the Makassar or Bugis of southern Sulawesi, their most strongly held traditional beliefs are the veneration of sacred ornaments, which are said to be full of powerful magic. These beliefs are a holdover from the animist religion before the spread of Islam into Sulawesi, and also reflect the spiritual power of the local ruling family. Periodically, such as the beginning of the plowing season, when the land is broken anew for the next crop, the sacred ornaments are displayed.

Increasing Islamic influence has greatly changed the picture in the twentieth century, but previously, those who protected these ornaments and performed the ancient rituals with them were the "bisu" priests. During the rituals, such priests dressed androgynously, in a combination of masculine and feminine clothing. They wore the woman's style of sarong and jacket, but the kris and headpiece of the man. In their daily life they acted homosexually.

Nineteenth century documents record the fact that these bisu priests had high social prestige, and usually resided in the courts of the ruling family. Their primary duty was to take care of the sacred ornaments and to serve as sexual partners for the men of the court. A male who was going to become a bisu was usually recognized in early childhood, because of his dislike for

the ways of men and his attraction to feminine things. He would then be dressed as a girl, and would become part of the women's group socially. If he later tried to have sex with a female, he would be expelled from the woman's group. He was instead encouraged to have sex with men.

While the bisu tradition has declined, another homosexual role continues to be recognized in Makassar society. This is the "kawe" role, which is homosexual but does not have a sacred connotation. Nevertheless, there does continue to be an appreciation for androgyny in Makassar society, as represented by the "masri" dance. This dance, which first became popular in Sulawesi in the 1920s, involves boy dancers between the ages of 8 and 12. To the music of a violin and a drum, they dance a simple rhythmic beat while chanting "kelong" verses used by young people who are courting. These boy dancers are dressed somewhat like a seductive woman, with a long white shawl as a viel. The main emphasis of the dance is the arousal of sexual excitement among the men who watch this dance. The men, most of whom are married, show their approval by slipping large amounts of money into the neck of the boy's shirt. As with the bisu, it seems to the androgynous mixture of masculine and feminine that accounts for the intense popularity of this dance.

Such a style reflects past traditions. Rather than trying to deny the femininity of such males, or to suppress their homosexual feelings, cultures like the Makassar and the Dayak are examples of Indonesian traditions of respect and appreciation for those who are different. They allowed people who might otherwise become self-hating and disruptive elements in society, to fit

into a useful role instead. They saw androgyny as a benefit for society, as a symbol of the unity of humanity, a link to the higher sacred levels of existence, and an important aspect of our wonderful human diversity. As we appreciate the wisdom of the Pancasila philosophy of "unity in diversity," perhaps it would be advisable for modern Indonesians to appreciate anew the wisdom of these traditions from the past, as they help us to accept the diversity of men and women in society today.

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), and to J. M. van der Kroef, "Transvestism and the Religious Hermaphrodite in Indonesia," University of Manila Journal of East Asiatic Studies 3 (April 1954): 257-265. 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.