

"DARI MATA TURUN KE GEMBLAK," [""LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT FOR GEMBLAKS"] *TEMPO MAGAZINE* (Jakarta, Indonesia, 10 October 1987, pp.30-32.

Homosexuality among the *waroks*, among *indang* dance groups, and probably among students at *pesantren* Islamic boarding schools, has a long history in Indonesia. Research about the world of *gemblak*, which is now a non-monogamous one, is most developed.

This is not a circumcision ceremony. A 12-year-old boy wears a stylish batik sarong, a watch on his left wrist and expensive sandals. His face is clean. He talks and walks a bit like a girl. He always has some cigarettes in his pocket, to give out as gifts. Sometimes he also wears sun-glasses. One or several muscular men guard him.

That is the sight that can only be seen in Ponorogo, East Java. That boy is a *gemblak* - a name that has no connection at all with circumcision ceremony, though it has something to do with sexuality. And the boy's guards are the *waroks*.

The existence of *gemblak* and *warok* began because of this belief: do not touch women if you want to be magically powerful. So, to satisfy their sexual needs while gaining their magical power, the *waroks* from Ponorogo look for boys to be their lovers. Since then, the tradition of *gemblak*-keeping began to exist. This homosexual tradition has been known in this area for a very very long time, long before the Americans were terrorized by AIDS or the Pope's resentment toward homosexuals.

Only in Ponorogo is the *gemblakan* or homosexuality not cursed. It has even become a status symbol. This sexual relationship between persons of the same sex has become one with the *warok* and *reog* tradition. A *warok* is a hero. He is a sort of gangland boss who "owns" a certain area in a city. Formerly, *waroks* used to be leaders of the *reog* groups also. The more *gemblakan* he has, the more prestigious and looked up to he is.

These kinds of stories are half-believed or half-doubted. It is Dr. Ismed Yusuf from Diponegoro University, Semarang, who revealed what is actually going on after doing his research there. This tradition which was formerly open still exists now, though it is not open and has less followers now. The reason for Ismed, 38 years old, not to report his research which was done five years ago is that he did not dare to publish it in a rush.

Because of one of his students, this child psychiatrist could get information from persons who usually would not talk openly about such an issue. In Bancar Village, 17 km on the south-east of Ponorogo, he found two groups of still active *gemblakans*. That is why he did his research there. Fifty respondents were chosen at random. They consisted of fifteen boys who were active in their "*sinoman*" groups, five *gemblaks*, two ex-*gemblaks*, five housewives, three characters, an elementary school teacher and others. For six days this father of three spent Rp. 500.000 and got the inputs about social norms that support the peaceful

existence of homosexuality in Ponorogo.

"Warok and gemblak are not only respected," said Ismed who is a "haji" (meaning a moslem who has been to Mecca, the holy land) now. "But, indirectly, this tradition also has social importance, namely: avoiding marriage among teenagers and promoting what we call the foster parents program. Different from normal dating, a warok has certain duties to perform for his same-sex lover. This arrangement is an unwritten agreement and it has the same strength as the unwritten law of custom. For instance, a warok has to send his gemblakan to school. He must be able to afford to provide his lover with fancy clothes and good food. To make a long story short, gemblak-keeping costs a lot of money. Nowadays in Ponorogo, when being a warok is not a profession that can make a person rich, it seems to be more difficult to keep a gemblak. So, today the heroes form a group to keep one or two gemblaks together.

Gemblaks do not usually come from Ponorogo. They might come from Blitar, Trenggalek or other regions around Ponorogo. And they usually come from poor families.

There are also matchmakers looking for potential gemblakans. If one of the matchmakers has found a boy - usually a beautiful boy of nine to sixteen years old, feminine, and does not have money to go to school - he will visit the parents of this potential gemblak. The matchmaker will say that the boy will be sponsored by a group of *sinoman* (young men). He will be sent to school and will be taken care of.

The father and the mother usually understand that their son is being asked to become a gemblak. If they agree, the next step is the negotiation concerning the length of the contract period and the payment. The parents must agree about how many years their son is going to be in the position, what they will get as payment, and so on. According to Ismed, the parents usually do not ask a lot. They feel fortunate that there are others who will take care of one of their many children.

If both parties agree, then the leader of the *sinoman* will visit the gemblak. Up to now, it is seldom that the choice of the matchmaker is refused by the group. Perhaps the leader just wants to be practical. He does not want to wait anymore.

Then here comes the day of the "marriage". Different from the heterosexual marriage - when the groom fetches the bride - the gemblak is the one who will go to the ceremony which has been prepared before. There is going to be no priest or legal marriage license of course. Besides the members of the group, the "lurah" (meaning head of the village) and other important figures in the village are coming also. It seems that the lurah is considered so important that if he cannot come to the party, the warok should go to his office to introduce him to his gemblak.

The parents of the gemblak attend this ceremony, and express their hopes, such as hoping that their son will get a good

education, have good times and other formalities, while giving their son to the sinoman. What is essential in this ceremony is that the leader of the group will ask the members if the name of their new lover should be changed.

Then the honeymoon begins. Certainly the leader has the right to have the first turn of being with the boy. He has this privilege along with the duty to train the gemblak so that the members do not have to do that. Patiently the leader - who is very experienced undoubtedly - will teach everything that the gemblak should do. What accessories he has to prepare. Usually he has to have hair cream and cigarettes to give as gifts with him all the time.

If he has finished his training from the leader, then he has to do some service for each member of the group. The leader arranges the turn of each member. They just wait for the gemblak to be sent to their homes. As a rule, the gemblak is sent after six o'clock in the evening. The gemblak will bring some cigarettes for the member he visits. Also, if the gemblak goes out with the warok, his pockets are filled with cigarettes to be given to every acquaintance of the warok that they come across. The more cigarettes that are given out, the more prestigious the warok is.

The warok's fondness of his gemblakan is not a laughing matter. There are some waroks who even forbid their gemblaks to do any physical labor so that their hands will stay soft and smooth, and the boys are treated like princesses. Of course, in other times, it is the warok who is waited on by the gemblak.

Gemblak-keeping means spending a lot of money. And although nowadays the gemblakan is kept by a group, there is always a warok who goes bankrupt. Ismed witnessed a warok who had to sell his bicycle after dating a gemblak for several days.

What Ismed did not see is a fight among waroks because of gemblak. It does not happen any more. Soepeno, a 56-year-old warok, told *TEMPO* that in the old days, a gemblak could be the cause of conflict. He remembered when he was a teenager, a gemblak who was borrowed from another warok accidentally died. His warok was distraught. It meant disaster and consequently a big fight broke out. The victims of this fight were many.

In "Serat Centhini", a work of literature by three writers from the Sultan's palace in the era of Paku Buwono IV, in the middle of eighteenth century, there is a part that describes the fight among waroks because of two gemblaks. Cebolang, the main character, with his student Nurwitri - both are males - who came from Sokayasa (around Mataram kingdom), were travelling. When they got to Ponorogo, lots of warok fell in love with them. A fight broke out among them to win these wanderers' hearts. There were many casualties. At night these two wanderers danced for them and dressed up as women.

The next night several waroks came to have sex with Cebolang and Nurwitri. Perhaps because of the uptightness of the situation, Cebolang and his student agreed to go to bed with them

on condition that the waroks' wives and daughters had sex with them afterwards. The waroks did not mind that. There was taking and giving, a flexibility that tended to make things easy.

Serat Centhini also tells the adventure of Cebolang with Ki Adipati Wirasaba. Adipati who is apparently a bisexual were crazy about Cebolang and Nurwitri while he already had a lover, Jahe Manis (meaning Sweet Ginger) and several other women as his harem. Ridiculously, Jahe Manis also fell in love with Cebolang.

In the summary of the book by Sumahatmaka (published by PN Balai Pustaka), it is said, "Ki Dipati jinambu dadya gerah...." Apparently homosexual practice has had its own idioms since, at least, the eighteenth century. They are "jinambu" (meaning passive) and "anjambu" (meaning active).

According to Dick Hartoko, chief editor of Basis literary magazine, a Dutch man by the name of Van Goenls wrote that Amangkurat I showed the symptoms of being a homosexual also. The journal that was written in 1647 says that the King of Mataram was always surrounded by handsome young men when he attended the "sodoran" ceremony which was an exercise for the soldiers to fight on horse-back with lances as weapons. In that Dutchman's diary, the handsome men were referred to as "blau", meaning lovers.

It seems that the tradition of gemblaks and homosexuals in Java has a long history. And not only did the waroks start the gemblak tradition, but also the unique traditional marriage in Ponorogo. After the wedding ceremony, the bride had to go back and stay at her family house. So, to keep the groom company, the bride's family provided the groom with a gemblak. Only after several nights - usually five nights - the bride and the groom could get together.

As a proof that gemblak is commonly accepted in Ponorogo, Ismed found an organization activist in the local neighborhood association who was an ex-gemblak; moreover, he found also a lurah who was a former gemblak. They are married now to women. That lurah, for example, is the leader of a local "ketoprak" (folk play) group and a father of six. The women do not mind if their husbands were gemblaks or waroks.

According to Ismed Yusuf, the psychiatrist, homosexuality in Ponorogo is more oriented toward society. The culture wants it to happen and of course there must be some answer for that. "Probably," said Ismed, "there is a factor of cooperation (concerning custody of a boy). And perhaps it is a way to satisfy the sexual needs before marriage."

But homosexuality because of the culture has its own burden and limit. There is a duty to be done; there is a limit of the period of the contract. This is very different from homosexuality in general. Both the gemblak and the warok want to prove themselves as men who can father children.

This is similar to the "anak jawi" tradition in Padang Pariaman

regency in West Sumatra. In the dance group called "indang", formerly the dancers were boys. They were really spoiled by their manager whom they called "sipatuang sirah". And because they had to be effeminate in the dancing, those boys were dressed up like girls. Alas ! They were treated as girls also in daily life. And because they slept together in one big room, eventually homosexuality existed between the manager and the boys or among the boys.

Today, this has not been happening any more, because the dancers are girls. But God knows if the same thing will happen again among those girls.

PESANTRENS ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

Besides warok and indang, romance among members of the same sex happens in the pesantrens (islamic boarding schools) as well. There, it is called "mairilan". TEMPO reporter in East Java tried to interview several "kiai" (teachers) and "santri" (students) in a pesantren in Madura, which has both male and female students whose dormitory is, of course, separated. According to the principals of the pesantrens, sexual relationships among students used to happen, but now such things do not exist any more.

But a kiai in this pesantren which was founded in the end of the nineteenth century said, "Lust occurs at certain times, and since the students are always together with their same-sex friends, well ... , you know." But this kiai who graduated from IAIN Malang and who has been teaching in this pesantren since 1973 did not want to explain what he meant with his "you know".

From the students we could not get a convincing story. They, who are in their teens, said that mairilan still exists. They even said that some of them saw it with their own eyes. The others said that there is no such thing like that here nowadays.

But definitely, the santris said that "liwath" (meaning homosexuality) is more sinful than adultery, according to the kiai. But does this guarantee that there is no intimacy at all among them? There is interesting information from a santri, "Intimate, yes. But we do not go so far as liwath. We only rub the sensitive parts of our bodies, which we call 'atampeyan'." He, 18 years old, admitted having seen two friends of his doing it.

From these three examples of traditional homosexuality, only the gemblak tradition is supported by, in Dr. Ismed words, the culture of the society. The others, indang and pesantren, can be called "accidental". Even now, though the waroks are married and have children and grandchildren, they still want to remember their times of keeping gemblakan. Is there a possibility that from this "accidental" period, there is going to be a continuation in the warok's future? The fact is that homosexuality exists in every era.

In a house at Kauman village, Sumoroto, Ponorogo, a warok opened the world of gemblakan to us. Kasni, 64 years old, the warok, is now the leader of a reog group called "Pujonggo Anom", the winner of the all East-Java reog festival last August. In his living room measured three times three meters, and accompanied by Suparno, 24 years old, one of his last lovers, Kasni said that not being open is not the characteristic nature of a warok.

Then, here is his confession:

I remember vividly that right after being circumcised, I began to have sex with gemblaks. I was 15 years old and I was learning "ilmu kanuragan". That time, it was shameful for youngsters not to learn martial arts.

Well, anyone who learns ilmu kanuragan must not touch women if he wants to be successful. I hated women at that time. On the contrary, if I see "cah bagus" (meaning beautiful boys), wow, I feel so happy.

I kept gemblakan for myself. I used to change gemblakan often. I was great in bed. I had more than twenty gemblakans. If I sleep with two or three gemblakans, wow, I feel like I am in heaven.

Was it sinful? Well, I did not have sex with virgin girls or the others' wife. And, anyway, was it not the heritage of our ancestors?

After I had known everything about ilmu kanuragan, I got married. I am a man and I have to prove myself that I am a man who can father children. I have five children and the eldest is now 27 years old.

I still have sex with gemblak now and then. But not as often as when I was young. But if I see a handsome young man, I cannot help longing to do it.

It is impossible to wipe out the gemblakan tradition. Gemblakan will always exist as long as reog exists. The only difference is that it was open in the old days while today it is not. If we are open, we are going to be accused of doing ridiculous things that we have never done. Nowadays the government is campaigning against our gemblakan tradition.

People must have asked us first why the waroks keep gemblakans. Do not accuse us of being bad without knowing anything why we do it. Gemblakan is a tradition. In reog performances, gemblakans play the role of "jaranan". Today, the jaranan is played by girls. It is all right perhaps, but it is against the tradition. If it is so, that means that reog has lost its spirit.

(Now it is Suparno's turn to tell his story. This gemblakan now has a wife called Sri Wahyuni who is three years younger than he is. They have a four-year-old son now. When they got married,

Sri had already known what her husband is. She is not jealous if her husband dates a warok as long as he does not have an affair with a woman.)

I want to be a gemblakan because I like it. Waiting on a warok and going to places with him make me feel proud of myself. Besides, my parents have been getting extra income because of that. Every three years they get a cow from the warok who is keeping me.

Apart from playing reog, I have also a beauty salon called "Noni". When I played reog in Kediri, a solicitor fell in love with me. We dated for quite a while and he sent me to a beauty salon to study. But I dated him just for a short time because I got tired of him.

I got married to Sri in 1980 because I was afraid that I might become a "banci" [transgender]. Eventually I had a child. I seldom play the role of gemblakan these days. How do you have sex with gemblakans? Aihh..... you know.