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BANCANGAN KAMPUNG, SAMBIT SECTOR, PONOROGO, EAST JAVA

INTERVIEW WITH THE LEADER OF THE SAMBIT REOG DANCE GROUP

Pak M (this is his real name, change it for publication) is a tall thin gentle man in his 40s, who is the instructor and choreographer of Sambit's Reog dance group. He also plays in the orchestra of the group. Before him, his father was head of the Reog group, and tho the position is not hereditary he assumed this position after his father died.

Also present was the head of Bancangan village (population 1,604). He is a muscular man maybe 50 years old, who performs as the acrobatic redfaced prime minister. Later we were joined by another married man who is in the Reog group, and a twelve year old boy who is the group's jatilan and gemblakan.

There are a total of 60 males in the group. There are 10 men in the orchestra, 2 masked dancers (the clono or king, and the pujangganom or prime minister, who has a red face), and 2 jatilan hobby horse dancers (young boys age 12 and 13) It is taboo for females to perform in traditional reog, so the boys are dressed in female attire. Some other reog groups, who are less traditional, are today beginning to use girls as well as boys as jatilan, but this group only uses boys.

They said they could come to Yogyakarta to give a performance, and would charge Rp. 200.000 (ca. US \$120) but much of that would be for transportation expenses. The Indonesian government will often pay for sponsoring performances in Ponorogo, but does not pay much for local affairs. It does it mainly to win the sympathy of the people to support Golkar political party. Two decades ago the government tried to discourage reog, but within the last decade there has been a major change of policy, as the government now encourages local cultural traditions. Reog groups today are flourishing, and there is a reog symbol at the entrance of practically every kampong.

They told me that Reog originated as the band of followers of a warok. Tho warok is completely gone today, reog continues actively. I asked why waroks disappeared, and they said it was because they all died of old age. My attempts to get further answer for some of the social reasons why there might not be a new generation of waroks arising, were not successful.

JATILAN DANCER

They told me readily that the waroks would fall in love with the beauty of the gemblakan boys, and they seemed anxious to display the beauty of their gemblakan so they dressed him in his finery of the jatilan costume. I took slides as they lovingly and carefully dressed him. He did not seem reluctant to be dressed like this, or even shy about me taking photographs of him as he

was being dressed. They told me that a boy will only keep this role as jatilan until he is circumcised, then he retires from the reyog group and has no more association with them. He does not usually take another role in reyog after that, and has no special relationship with the group in future years but is returned to his parents.

They explained the details of his costume, all of which is either female clothing, or clothing that could be worn by both men and women. There is no specifically masculine clothing in the costume. The boy is very good looking, but not especially feminine. He just seemed a typical cute boy, yet it became obvious as time passed that he was gentle-natured and well-behaved. I would not call him masculine at all, and when he put on the girl's wig, he did indeed look quite beautifully feminine. He did not seem awkward or embarrassed at all.

The jatilan costume consists of an "opra" hat and long earrings, which are women's style, but the necklace and bracelets could be worn by both sexes. The star shoulder pads signify the military aspect of the costume, taking its inspiration from the Dutch colonial officers' uniforms. The sash (simpang) is a woman's style, but the belt and cloth around the lower body (sampur), and the hanging cloth below the belt (bebet) could be worn by either male or female. The pants could also be worn by either sex, but the designs on the jatilan costume mark it as a woman's style. The jatilan is supposed to represent a woman character when he performs in reog.

WAROKS AND GEMBLAKANS

In traditional times there were five waroks in this village. All of them were married to women, and had children. If a warok has sex with his wife, it does not decrease his magical powers, but having sex with his gemblakan will help him increase his positive power. Every warok had at least one gemblakan at any one time, tho the most prominent warok had as many as four gemblakans at once.

They told me a long story about how the waroks got into a fight over one warok's daughter who refused to marry the son of another warok. The warok who had the daughter then used a boy to dress as his daughter, and tricked the other warok into thinking he was giving his daughter for marriage. Only later did the warok's son discover that it was really a boy, but only after he had fallen in love with the gemblakan.

GEMBLAKANS TODAY

There are still boys who fill gemblakan roles today, even tho there are no longer waroks. The biggest change is that gemblakans will be sent to school like other children, and they are no longer the cause of fighting, as they formerly were

between competing waroks. A gemblakan is supported by a group of males rather than a single warok. Today, there are two types of groups of males who will support a gemblakan:

- (1) a reyog dance group of mature married men,
- (2) a sinoman group of unmarried young men in their teens and early 20s.

This jatilan gemblakan I met is from the same village, and Pak M found him by visiting the school and picking out the best looking boy and then asking permission of the boy's parents. This is commonly done, and if the parents say no, then their wishes are respected. If the parents agree, then a gift is offered to them in payment for the boy. Usually the gift is a cow, for each two years of time.

Most of the gemblakans come from the area south of Ponorogo, near Trenggalek. When I asked why this area was the place, they said it is because the boys there are the most beautiful. But it is also noteworthy that that area is mountainous, and not fertile soil, so the people there are not prosperous. The fact that a group seeking a gemblakan will pay the parents a white oxen cow, will provide a significant economic benefit to the family. The value of a cow is over \$300 US dollars, which is a very large sum for rural Javanese. When I asked if they would accept a comparable amount of money instead of a cow, they said the parents would prefer a cow. Money changes value all the time, but a cow remains productive and increases in value. A family's prestige in their village is enhanced if they have a cow, they can ride in an oxcart instead of having to walk everywhere, and the children love to play with it and ride it. More importantly, they can plow more fields with a cow, and thus improve their economic position. Being able to get a cow as a draft animal is thus a major incentive for parents to lend out their son for two years. If the group likes the boy, and wishes to keep him longer, then the family can profit even more, as they can get another cow for each two year period. This has to operate as a powerful incentive for the boy to do a good job in his role as a gemblakan.

The men told me that they will use a middleman, whose specialty is locating gemblakans in Trengglak, for a commission. They said parents are happy to see their son chosen for this role. This is an attitude not quite in agreement with Jerome Weiss' statements in his 1974 paper on gemblakan, so it bears further investigation. I hope to go to Trenggalek on a future research trip, and ask the parents directly.

SINOMAN

The other type of group who will sponsor a gemblakan, besides a reyog dance group, is a sinoman. Like reyog, the sinoman group originally had close association with a warok. The sinoman members were young men who admired the magical power of a warok, and hung around him hoping to learn from him and absorb some of his power. The warok was the head of the sinoman. Today, this organization is a group of unmarried young men, and their social

role is to serve drinks at festivals and feasts. A boy is allowed to join a sinoman one year after he is circumcized (circumcision is a major ritual for boys approaching adolescence, and usually occurs at age 14-16, depending on when the parents can afford to pay for the ceremony). He remains in the sinoman until he gets married, usually around age 25. Each year the sinoman adds younger boys, to replace the older ones who get married.

There are four sinomans in Bancangan village, with about 20 boys in each sinoman. Every young man in the village belongs to a sinoman. They are a formalized friendship group, and they meet regularly in the house of the parents of the head boy of the sinoman.

Each sinoman has a gemblakan, which the boys' parents give them money to pay for. The gemblakan moves around each day, to stay with a different sinoman member in his parents' house with him and to sleep with him at night. The sinoman is obligated to treat the boy nicely, dressing him well and feeding him all he wants, to make sure that he goes to school regularly and does his studies, and that he attends prayers regularly at the mosque. In return, the sinoman members can "hold him in his arms, and get pleasure from him."

After circumcision, the gemblakan will graduate from that role, about age 18, and will return to his parents' home. He will then himself join a sinoman as a member. He will then have access to his own group's gemblakan.

They told me that a gemblakan is like "a centerpiece, to show off their pride in their group. Having a gemblakan makes the group sweeter." When I asked what they meant by "sweeter" they said he provides a unifying focus for the group. "If there is a beautiful boy whom all of them like, everybody will have a common interest in him."

By having access to a gemblakan, bachelors are not sexually aggressive toward girls, and the peace of the village is assured. If there is a sexual imposition toward a young woman, this could make for many conflicts within the village, so gemblakan-keeping serves to keep the society running smoothly.

LOANING OUT A GEMBLAKAN

A sinoman may loan out a gemblakan for 2 or 3 days. A gemblakan may be loaned to another sinoman, to a married man, or to outsiders who are visiting the village as guests. Doing so shows their generosity, and the fine quality of their gemblakan will provoke admiration. The lending out of a gemblakan also provides important alliance-building networks. Plus, the borrower is expected to give a gift (usually cigarettes) to the gemblakan, who will keep them as his gifts for his parents and his friends.

There is no special ceremony which the borrower has to do before

requesting a gemblakan, or before sleeping with him. All he has to do is to ask. No return obligations are required on his part, for the members of the loaning group. It is just a gift, "for his pleasure."

Though formally a gemblakan cannot refuse the request of his group leader that he be loaned out, in practice he has a choice. If the gemblakan does not wish to go with that particular person or group, he will secretly tell the head of his sinoman, who will offer an excuse as to why the loan cannot be carried out.

Between the sinomans for young bachelors, reyog groups for married men, or loans, every man has access to different gemblakans periodically. The fact that gemblakans change every few years also promotes variability.

Formerly, it was a warok who kept a gemblakan, but today it is only a sinoman or reyog group. I asked if an individual might want to have a gemblakan all to himself, and they answered: "If you kept a gemblakan by yourself, it would indicate that you are selfish, and you want to keep yourself separate from your friends. It would violate 'gotong-royong.'" This term is a reference to the spirit of working together in cooperation, of sharing in everything, that is an important basis of Javanese culture. Whether they are building a house, holding a festival, or preparing a funeral, they do it as part of a larger group. Just as each person always shares what they have, to help their friends, they also share their gemblakan. My questions about their own individual interests were met with disapproving comments, indicating the differences between Javanese cooperation and American individualism.

They told me that a sinoman or a reyog group without a gemblakan will not be as close. They are more concerned with the bonds of closeness, than with jealousies of individuals. Javanese are not jealous of the sexual involvements of the other members of their group, because they think socially -- as members of the group -- rather than individually.

Likewise, if a married man sleeps with a gemblakan, his wife is not jealous as she would be if he slept with another woman. In response to my repeated questions of disbelief, they replied "Why should she be jealous, it is not another woman? How could she be jealous of a boy?" They will typically all three sleep in the same bed. If the wife does not want to be part of this arrangement, she can move to another bed. The position of the three in the bed can vary, depending on the inclinations of the people. But there would, they emphasized, never be any sexual involvement between the gemblakan and the wife.

SINOMAN AS FICTIVE KINSHIP

The advantage of having a gemblakan, they explained to me, is that he provides a common focus around which the male group can unify. Certainly there are social mechanisms for women to have

close friendships, but these seem to operate more informally and more within the boundaries of the kinship system. With males, in contrast, there seems to be a necessity for more formal structures which are structured outside the kinship system of blood and marriage relatives. This is the case with both reog groups and sinomans. Even after a young man marries, and leaves the sinoman, he continues to have extremely close ties with the other men who were sinoman members with him. They remain close throughout life, and their closeness provides a unifying focus for the village. They told me "Your sinoman members are like your brothers, and having more brothers means you can always have someone to depend on." Gemblakan-keeping provides important symbols of prestige, as well as cementing social relationships.

Thus, the sinoman provides a male friendship network that goes beyond the kinship boundaries of the family. Just as marriage provides a heterosexual means for widening one's network of support and social obligation beyond one's blood relatives, the gemblakan tradition promotes a homosexual means for doing likewise. The Javanese of Ponorogo see gemblakans as a necessary ingredient for the unity of the fictive kinship brotherhood of the sinoman. Homosexual behavior, then, is not a threat to the family, but -- like its heterosexual counterpart in marriage -- is a means to strengthen it. Same-sex "friendship" and other-sex "marriage," are not institutions in opposition to each other, but both are part of the glue that holds the society together.

In modern Western culture, we have seen a steady breaking away of the social bonds which tie people together into close emotional relationships. First it was the breakdown of the extended family system, into nuclear families. Then it was the lessening of the size and importance of the nuclear family. And along with that breakdown has occurred the lessening of close emotional ties among same-sex friendships. Homophobia is the water which has been poured over the fires of passionate friendships. In short, there is simply no way to have any kind of really close same-sex friendships, as long as people fear that someone will think they might be homosexually involved. And once close emotional bonds are destroyed within each sex, that puts more pressure on the single close emotional bond permitted by society, the marriage between the husband and wife. With so much depending on this one bond, the pressures can break even that apart, resulting in a high divorce rate and the emotional alienation that is the plague of modern industrial society.

In order to save friendship, society must make an active effort to eradicate homophobia, and to restore that social balance between family and friendship that is so necessary for our emotional survival.

