

REYOG PONOROGO, EAST JAVA

I arrived in Ponorogo city today, with my translator Kedah, and my friend Ardiyanto, along with six of his employees which he brought along. He is a batik factory owner in Yogyakarta, and both he and Kedah did translations for me into bahasa Javanese.

REOG DANCE

We arrived in time to see a performance of the REOG dance, for which Ponorogo is famous. This performance was held in the city square, to commemorate Indonesian independence day. The Indonesian government now has a policy of sponsoring these cultural celebrations, as a way of winning the sympathy of the masses of people. At this dance, there were thousands of people who had come from the entire district, most of them boys and young men. On the road to Ponorogo, we saw many of them walking all the way. The atmosphere was similar to an American state fair, with vendors selling food and souvenirs, rides and attractions, and seats up front for visiting dignitaries. Some teenage boys came up to me, and one of them spoke a bit of English. Ardiyanto arranged for them to guide us to see the performance. Somehow they got us through the crowd and an official asked me (in English) how he could help us. I thought he was going to tell us we could not come in there, but instead he escorted me to the front row of chairs for visiting dignitaries. Since I was the only non-Indonesian in the crowd, I was quite an attraction to them. As we walked around the grounds, I would suddenly find myself surrounded by a crowd of boys and young men, who crowded close together to stare at me. I felt much like a zoo exhibit, but when I smiled they would almost always smile back. Some would delight in saying a few English expressions they had learned. Everyone laughed when I understood, especially if I replied in Bahasa Indonesia.

For the Reog performance, I sat next to the principal of the city high school, and he explained the dance to me. The performance was quite a spectacle. There was an orchestra of about 20 men, all dressed in black. They played gongs, gamelan, drums, and bamboo instruments. The dancers were also about twenty, or more, with bearded men, masked dancers, men in tiger suits, and a tightrope performer in mask, who swung around on ropes at the top of tall bamboo poles. While he did his highwire act high above our heads, the dance went on below. Later he came down and joined the stage. The most character character on stage was the king of the tigers, a man wearing a heavy tiger mask that he held on with his teeth, and topped by a peacock feather headdress over two meters tall. He swirled around on stage, while the grand procession occurred at the end.

JATILAN DANCERS

The two characters that I was most interested in were the jatilan bamboo horse dancers. These are young boys dressed fancily in female or androgynous clothing, and riding small white bamboo horses as cavalry to protect the king. They moved about the stage in feminine movements, and I am sure they are the boys that are traditionally portrayed by gemblakans.

When I asked some young men about gemblakan, they usually giggled

a bit, and told me right away that the gemblakan was a homosexual lover to a warok. The two teenagers who served as our guides (they were high school students age 15 and 17) said they consider this practice a thing from the past, and somewhat pornographic. They told me the SAMBIT district south of Ponorogo city is the place where homosexuality is still most common. They said something about there also being female prostitutes there, but I could not get a clear understanding on this.

They said they were afraid to go there, because they had been told in school about the dangers of syphilis and AIDS (which is amazing since there have only been two known cases of AIDS in Indonesia). They had no idea what "safe sex" is, but seemed appreciative when I told them. They even asked me about the dangers of masturbation. They said the Koran teaches masturbation is not good. They are devout Moslems, one of them even stopped the conversation to do his Islamic prayers at the appropriate time. Though they said they had not ever had sex with anyone (male or female), they did seem quite interested. But they are afraid of disease and of violating their religion. Government and Islamic propaganda are evidently effective.

These boys followed us to our losmen room, and wanted to stay and talk. Though they did not want to have sex, because of these fears, they nevertheless seemed fascinated in watching me as I undressed to change clothes. By 3:30 am, I was getting so sleepy that I could not have done anything anyway, so I told them I had to go to sleep and they should go home.

The next morning I was awakened by a knock on the door, and it was the two of them returned. Again they seemed fascinated at looking at me without my clothes on, but I was not interested in pursuing anything so I went back to sleep. Later, after we all woke up, they went with us in the minibus as we drove to Sambit.