Dédé Oetomo
Talks on Reyog Ponorogo

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Oetomo is one of the leading gay-rights activists in Indonesia and an academic at Airlangga University, East Java. This is an edited version of an interview I recorded with him on film in December 1992 for a documentary project on Reyog Ponorogo. The intention was to record a seamless response to a series of questions on Reyog Ponorogo which were given to Dédé beforehand.

DÉDÉ OETOMO

1. Let me start by making it clear what my position is with regard to the warok-gemblakan tradition in Ponorogo. I first became interested in the warok-gemblakan tradition when a few of my friends and I started a gay movement in Indonesia. It is interesting to note that actually it was our western friends, academics, who reminded us of the warok-gemblakan tradition in Ponorogo, and of course other traditions as well. So, my position is as an outsider, as an academic in a way, and also as a gay-rights activist. As such, I have learned to be rather careful when talking about homosexuality or about a homosexual community in Ponorogo - as the warok-gemblakan community can be described.

2. I think what they do sexually, we have to call homosexual acts. This is widely known all over Java. Anybody who is in touch with the traditional way of life in Ponorogo, knows that there are these older men called warok who, instead of having sex with their wives, have sex with younger boys - eight to fourteen, fifteen - and they do that as part of looking for prowess. Whether we can call them a homosexual community is questionable. They don't call themselves homosexuals; they don't identify themselves as homosexuals, such as one finds in the West or in modern Indonesia. They would call themselves warok-gemblakan. It is a tradition of prowess, and of performing arts. This is where Reyog Ponorogo comes in. As you are probably aware, the older performers in the Reyog Ponorogo dance are usually the waroks and traditionally the younger boys, the hobby horse dancers - nowadays some of them are women - are the gemblakan. But it is not so easy to say if it is a homosexual community or not.
3. Seen from the outside, from what I have read, from what I have seen in pictures, they live like a homosexual community anywhere. They are lovers, they exchange boys, even sometimes between waroks. If there is a visiting warok, he gets to sleep with the host warok's boys. And depending on how wealthy the warok is - if he is very wealthy, he can have more than one gemblakan. Around the warok-gemblakan relationship there are people called ondolan, - this is probably especially true nowadays. These are people who are past the age of gemblakan but are still in a relationship with the warok. There are also the so called warokan. These are not real warok. These are older men who still sleep with younger men but they are not really warok in terms of the social prowess. Warokan tend to share gemblakan. A few men would share a gemblakan. The community itself is called sinoman. Which brings in the interesting question of whether this is a specifically Ponorogo phenomenon or whether it is something that is common all over Java, because the word sinoman is still known now as a group of young men who do things - there are organisations of younger men in villages now known as sinoman. One wonders, if in the past there were also warok-gemblakan traditions elsewhere, probably not so institutionalised as in Ponorogo but with the same practices. We know that some Ponorogo waroks do recruit younger boys from other areas, outside of Ponorogo. People tend to isolate the warok-gemblakan practice to Ponorogo but actually if you go to Kediri, Madiun and the surrounding area you will hear similar terms being used. Even in urban centers like Surabaya, you hear the word gemblakan now and then, especially among the working classes. So one suspects that the tradition is probably not specific to the Ponorogo area but its most prominent manifestation is in Ponorogo and in connection with the Reyog tradition.

4. As to how this warok-gemblakan tradition came into being, well, Ponorogo has always been known in history as an area that resists the power of the state - Mataram, the Dutch - there has always been a tradition of rebellion. I think this is because Ponorogo has always been a marginal area in Java. There are other marginal areas in Java, Banten is one, Banyuwangi is another. These are areas that have never actually given in to the central state power. They are always in resistance. This has to do with the economy of the area and it has to do with how people go about arranging their economy.

5. Also, in the Ponorogo area and all over East and Central Java we have this tradition of jagu, men of prowess, people who are kind of ambiguous: they could be a Robin Hood type, robbing the rich to help the poor, or they might just be men looking for power. This tradition of jagu is actually found all over East and Central Java, and if you look into the history, for example, some of the Javanese kings were portrayed, in the court texts, as jagu. This might be how the warok-gemblakan tradition started.

6. Warok are the local strongmen, who tend to be ambiguous in their role vis-a-vis power. Sometimes they resist power, sometimes they can be used by power. In the sixties, waroks were close to the communist party and that is why a lot of waroks were killed in '65, '66. That is why the warok tradition has an ambiguous status now. The state wants to co-opt the Reyog Ponorogo tradition - it is something to show to the outside world - but at the same time they know that the power of these local strongmen can be detrimental to state power.

7. There is also an economic aspect to the tradition. A warok doesn't take gemblakan just like that. He has to compensate the parents of the younger boys with a cow, with cattle, or with the use of land. In some cases that have been recorded in literature, the warok has to pay for the wedding of the gemblakan. So the warok-gemblakan tradition is a whole institution, with rules. From interviews of people in Ponorogo, we learn that parents, for example, are quite proud if their boys are taken in as gemblakan. For poor families this is a way of moving
up socially and economically. There is one piece of writing published in 1941 that talked about female warok and female gemblakan - this is the only piece that I know that talks about this. So it could be younger girls as well.

8. I think what is happening with the warok-gemblakan tradition these days, and what has been happening to traditional institutions throughout Indonesia, say, since the turn of this century, is that these traditions are now facing encroachment by modern western, pan Indonesian conceptions of morality and all that goes with them. What for a long time was considered acceptable, in fact institutionalised, in Ponorogo is now facing a kind of morality that only accepts, for example, sexuality within marriage, only with one spouse, with children - but two only. This makes it difficult for people in Ponorogo. On the one hand, they want to be proud of their tradition - they want to show Reyog, but at the same time within the Reyog tradition and behind the Reyog tradition there is something that is a bit shameful for them. This is true of other traditions, all over Indonesia actually. If we read the writings of people earlier this century, we find the same kind of overtones, where Dutch educated Indonesian intellectuals are rather ashamed of the past which they consider to be decadent and not in accordance with modern times.

9. In Indonesian society you will find different traditions of alternative sexualities including homosexuality - warok-gemblakan is one. It is interesting to note there is a double standard in place. Amongst ourselves, we know that there are people who have sex with each other, in mosques for example, in West Sumatra or in the warok gemblakan tradition for that matter. This is something that most Indonesians are not proud of and they are rather disturbed when anthropologists or Indonesianists, bring this up.

10. There are also the modern homosexual communities of the urban centres. With these communities, most Indonesians will say 'Oh, they are decadent, they are mentally disturbed, ... it's a sin.' But the behavioural reaction would be one of a lot of tolerance - as long as it is not in their own family. Once it is other people's families, a performer, even the village dancer, they don't care. As long as it is not in their own family. Even when it is within the family, once they find out.... the reaction gets less and less strong over time.

11. It is probably useful to bring in here the fact that the cross dressing waria, the banci are socially more acceptable. I think this is because most Indonesians think that they are asexual, and not a threat to the patriarchy of Indonesian society, whereas homosexual men and lesbian women are seen more as a threat in that sense. But the reaction is different from the West. There is no queer bashing at all in Indonesia.

12. We in the gay movement have used the Ponorogo example to justify the fact that there is a need for an Indonesian gay movement. There is a need for modern day Indonesian homosexuals to learn from the past and at the same time to live in the present. Of course we have had resistance from other quarters, from people who disagree with us, but the point is that the warok-gemblakan tradition was there and is still there in part, although it is changing. Our point of view is quite simple.... The accusation from people who are against the gay movement in Indonesia and who say that this is something that we have imported from the West is actually not true. We have had traditions in the past like the warok-gemblakan relationship, the warokan, the ondolan.

13. Historically, these are quite complex relationships but obviously in the urban setting we can’t simply go back to these traditions, or construct our sexuality upon them. This is something which is being explored right now in different Asian countries. India is doing it. The
Philippines is doing it, Thailand in a way is doing it also. We are all looking at the past where the homosexual lifestyle, the homosexual way of life was incorporated into the culture. Our task now is a kind of rediscovery, or retaking what was ours before the encroachment of modern morality.

14. Another issue that is important now for these traditional modes of sexual expression is the question of AIDS. We in Surabaya would like very soon to start working in the Ponorogo area because we know from our outreach workers that there are cases of other sexually transmitted diseases among the warok-gemblakan population. This means that if we don't take preventive action soon the whole culture might be wiped out, which is already happening in Africa for example. This is our trajectory for the future.

15. Within the gay movement, we are hoping that these people can still lead their way of life without interference from the outside world - if they want to do that. This actually came up in a gay caucus in New Delhi, at the last AIDS conference of the Asia Pacific where people in the Philippines, in India, including some Aborigines from Australia also, were talking about how these alternative sexualities should be given their rights.

16. We have to remember that in all this discourse, the waroks are central to Ponorogo culture. What modern day writers and journalists sometimes try to portray is that the warok-gemblakan institution is marginal to Ponorogo. I would disagree strongly with that. What I see is that Ponorogo is warok, Ponorogo is Reyog and Ponorogo without warok is unthinkable. This is important if we look into other Indonesian cultures, or even cultures in South and South East Asia in general. What we see is that people of alternative sexualities, be they men who have sex with men, be they men or women who cross dress, or eunuchs, are actually preservers of culture. We have traditions in south Sulawesi, for example of the bissu, where the regalia of the court, and all court rituals have to be presided over by a bissu, who is a man, or a woman, who cross dresses, and who also only has sex with the same gender. These are people who are not a part of the so-called modern world, in the sense that their discourse is different - but we feel that we should at least have a dialogue with them, approach them, see what they want, ... if they want to preserve their way of life we should empower them and I think that is the bottom line.

17. What is interesting is an idea that has been thrown around by a colleague of mine in the Philippines who said that in the olden days, people of alternative sexualities tended to be the healers of their society - like the bissu, like the medium priests in Dyak cultures, in Borneo. And in a way, it is interesting as we discover our past to portray ourselves - the modern day lesbians and gay men, and people of alternative sexuality - as people who are helping society cope with AIDS. This is definitely true in the West, it is true in Malaysia, it is true here in Indonesia, and in the Philippines and apparently also in India. Perhaps this is the beginning of the discovery of the Asian past as well as the realisation that we can live comfortably with people with alternative sexualities.