

## Secret Relationships and Clandestine Encounters: an Ethnography of Youth Romance and Marriage among Javanese Male Sex Workers in South Bali (Indonesia)

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**Abstract.** This article is intended as an ethnographic and theoretical reflection on the significance of courtship practices and marriage among lower classes Indonesian youth. It also discusses gender roles and social transformation. It is based on fieldwork research carried out in Bali and East Java between 2008 and 2010 among a gang of male sex workers. The article discusses the importance of secret relationships and clandestine encounters, *pacaran backstreet*, between Javanese male sex-workers who cater the homosexual sex market and migrant female workers in Bali, and the role of marriage as a cognitive resource in the transition to adulthood in the context of sex work. It sheds light on alternative forms of masculine identity and on articulations of juvenile malaise, gang affiliation, corporeal practices, male bonds of solidarity, reciprocity and respect, and their impact on the construction of interpersonal emotional relations. It draws conclusions about the role of customary practices and values in the lives of young men (and women) in a specific sector of contemporary Indonesian society.

**Key words:** courtship, marriage, masculine identity, sex work, Bali

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### 1. Introduction

*Pacaran backstreet* is the Indonesian term used to describe liaisons or relationships between young men and women that are conducted in secrecy (Bennett, 2005). Recent scholarship on premarital relationships among educated youth in Indonesia has underscored the significance of *pacaran backstreet* for middle-class women and its impact on the transformation of gender roles: *pacaran backstreet* provides women increased freedom to choose their partners and allows great independence in controlling the dynamics of courtship, emotional fulfillment, physical affection and sexual exploration away from public scrutiny and social reprimand (Bennett, 2005). It is also responsible for a diffused prolongation of the period between puberty and marriage among women (Smith-Hefner, 2005). While these studies have provided in-depth ethnographic accounts of relevant trends in contemporary Indonesian society, they have scarcely focused on the experiences of young men and lower classes young people. This article aims to rectify this ethnographic omission, and to make a contribution to the study of young men, masculine identities, contemporary courtship practices and marriage in Indonesia. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork research carried out in South Bali and in the cities of Surabaya and Malang (East Java) for a period of over twenty months between 2008 and 2010<sup>1</sup>.

### 2. Indonesian youth and articulations of juvenile malaise

The young Indonesian men that I introduce in this article are Javanese migrants aged 16-26 who work in the sex industry for foreign homosexual men in South Bali. They are affiliated to one of the largest street gangs that populate the tourist area of Seminyak and compete for the control of the sex market.

These young men come from the lower classes of Indonesian society, have spent the first part of their lives under the stable but rigid authoritarian regime of the New Order (1965-1998), and the second part of their lives in periods of economic crisis, in the free-for-all of democratic elections, de-militarised civil life and unfettered consumption choices bolstered by a plenitude of advertising and mass media (Nilan, 2008: 69). They have witnessed the existential uncertainty of their parents and have experienced the monetary crisis that gripped much of Indonesia beginning July 1997; more

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recently they have faced the hardship and the scarce employment opportunities of salaried work. The progressive deagrarianisation and the concomitant process of urbanization of Indonesian cities have prompted these young men to move to towns in search of employment; others, my informants for instance, have invested in long-term internal migration projects to Bali, sought affiliation to existent groups of migrant workers and found legal or illicit occupations in the tourist industry.

Recent studies that have focused on the construction of masculine identities among contemporary Indonesian youth have shown that the social integration to youth subcultures is functional to the acquisition of cultural capital, the accumulation of emotional and material resources, and the creation of bonds of trust, solidarity and protection in situations of personal uncertainty, great competitiveness and distress (Elmhirst, 2007; Kristiansen, 2003; Nilan, 2009). These studies have also demonstrated that youth subcultures originate new youthful masculinities and have presented the image of the young unmarried man (*kaum pemuda, kaum remaja, cowok*), whose behavior is depicted as *kasar* (coarse, flamboyant, playful, outrageous), critical of the patriarchal system and whose spirit is ruled by passion, in sharp contrast with the *bapak* (the father) of the New Order period, whose God-given wisdom, self-control and mastery of emotions positioned him at the head of the family, the business, the town and the nation-state (Nilan, 2009: 332-333, see also Peletz, 1995).

While the category of youth subcultures may seem quite narrow or suggests cohesiveness among its members, it places emphasis on the social articulations of juvenile malaise that animate young Indonesians and offers fruitful insights to further investigate the nuanced experiences of Javanese male sex-workers. These young men leave their home village (*kampung*) in search for more remunerative work opportunities, separate from the world of customary practices, assume a fictitious identity and embrace the dangers and contradictions of sex work. Such detachment, however, is never linear, nor definitive, as they maintain. Their adhesion to exploitative sexual practices and to the violent code of street warfare between gangs in Bali is – in their words – only temporary and nevertheless directed to attain financial security and to fulfill an adult masculine identity, in accordance with the values of Javanese society and Islamic tradition. In this sense, the transition to masculine adulthood is complete when young men are able to draw together the considerable financial and cultural resources required to marry a woman within their community, provide well for their own family and care for their parents (Elmhirst, 2007: 230).

### 3. Gangsters and warriors: peer initiation to a street gang of male sex workers

I have explored elsewhere in great detail the antagonist struggle between male sex workers and between street gangs in Bali (Alcano, 2010, 2011). My informants belong to the Villa Jambu gang, named after the cul-de-sac across the street in the center of Legian, near Kuta, South Bali. These young men self-identify as heterosexual but engage in compensated sex with foreign homosexual tourists or permanent residents. At Villa Jambu, these young migrants learn to tailor their bodies to meet the requests of their clients and to exhibit the codified gestures and postures of a fictitious homosexual identity. Through apprenticeship with older gang members, they learn to deceive their customers and establish durable relationships with wealthy men in the attempt to be financially supported over a long period of time.

The Indonesian term *geng* (gang) employed by my informants refers to a self-assembled association of peers who come from the same village or from the same city neighborhood, and who are held together by the same professional activities, mutual interests and pursue the same objective to control the sex market. The term gang has a particular meaning in gang research (Nilan, 2011: 4) and defines “organizations of the socially excluded” (Hagedorn, 2005: 156, also quoted in Nilan, 2011: 4), actively involved in illegal activities (Klein 2005) and characterized by the use of violence (Nilan, 2011: 4). Sex work in Indonesia takes place in regulated state-sanctioned brothels (*lokalisasi*); however, the criminal law prohibits sex work in illegal brothels, discos, karaoke bars, massage parlors and street locations, and the facilitation of illegal sexual activity, the trade in women and underage males and earning profit from the prostitution of women. Most of the young men of Villa Jambu arrive in Bali and enter sex work when they are still underage, although they systematically lie about their age to their clients. Moreover, they are involved in petty crime and small and medium scale illegal activities, such as theft and drug peddling.

The initiation to this gang of Javanese sex workers includes a violent fight (*tawuran*) which serves as a rite of passage for the initiate. Older gang members attack the prospective member, beating, kicking, punching, burning him with cigarettes, and also inflicting sexual violence and verbal abuse. The fight is a form of ritual rebirth: the initiate is symbolically tortured and murdered and turned by his peers into a new gang member, a *brother* or *gangster* (or *gengsi* in Bahasa Indonesia), as my informants suggest, and socialized into a formally defined and approved set of norms and values about the self, their body and the sex market. The underlying idea of the ritual fight is that the ability of the body to bear the pain is a prerequisite for it to be transformed into bodily capital; sex work requires high tolerance to pain and this

can be learned artificially.

During the fight the gang member is cheered on by other members, while the initiate – known as the *fighter*, or the *warrior* (with both terms borrowed from the English language) – is the object of gambling, with bets being made on how long he will endure the pain.

Pam Nilan (2011) established an interesting connection between ritual initiations among young school boys in Solo, Central Java, and the deeds of mythological Javanese heroes performed in Indonesian puppet theater (*wayang kulit*). Her argumentation broadens our understanding of peer initiation among Javanese sex workers and shows a salient trait of Javanese culture, historically involved with processes of transformation and growth. The author reprises Andrew Weintraub's (2004) study of Javanese hero Gatotkaca and its transformation from a boy child to a warrior of supernatural strength and bravery. The young Gatotkaca had the powerless body of a boy child still attached by the umbilical cord, which had to be cut (Nilan, 2011: 4). The weaker body had to be destroyed and then through supernatural forces and indigenous riches (in this case minerals) brought back to life as the hero Gatotkaca (Weintraub, 2004: 110, also quoted in Nilan, 2011: 4).

#### 4. Inclusions, aspirations and sacrifices

At Villa Jambu, a successful ritual fight and the acquisition of the *gengsi* status mark the detachment from a former self and full inclusion into the gang, its networks of solidarity, protection and support in the search for customers. They also guarantee street credibility and respect at the level of the local informal economy and gang-regulated politics. Furthermore, they provide new gang members with a peculiar worldview, a model to think about their masculine selves and their entrepreneurial skills. Gang members overcome a diffused sense of marginalization, uncertainty about the future and the absence of a recognized social status.

The young inhabitants of Villa Jambu share a secret communicative code, much similar to the idiom of past gangsters of the capital city of Jakarta and known as *bahasa prokem*, historically used to conceal illegal and criminal activities and based on neologisms, loanwords, foreign words, resignifications and syllabic inversions, deletions, insertions (Chambert-Loir, 1984). Nancy Smith-Hefner (2007) demonstrated the resonance of *bahasa prokem* with *bahasa gaul*, literally the “language of sociability”, a type of slang quite common among middle-class Indonesian youth. According to her analysis, *gaul* ideology expresses aspirations for social and economic mobility, an orientation towards the values of informality and commensurability and an attitude of self-confident cosmopolitanism; it speaks to solidarity, social flexibility and self-assurance rather than status differentials: someone who is *gaul* is good at adapting socially (Smith-Hefner, 2007). Her discussion facilitates the comprehension of the dynamics and interactions that regulate life at Villa Jambu for at least three reasons. First, the use of a specific jargon delimits the boundaries of the gang, and distinguishes the insiders from the outsiders by including the former into a determined horizon of meaning about lifestyles and work ethics. Second, a linguistic form that emphasizes solidarity and reciprocity reveals the importance of affiliation, loyalty and respect in the work environment. Third, explicit reference to social mobility is indicative of aspirations that encompass the contingency of material needs and have to do with the quest for a better social location.

The *gengsi* status implies privileges but also imposes duties, norms of conduct and personal deprivations. The performance of the new masculine role is time-consuming and all-embracing. Each person puts his craft before everything else. His physical, mental and emotional energies are channeled towards one purpose only, to entice clients and maximize profit. These young men invent what they believe is a new plausible biography, the story of the young homosexual who moved to Bali from conservative Java in search for love, work opportunities and to express sexual orientation. However, they are well aware that foreign men have acquired a certain familiarity with the local rhetorics and the mechanisms of sex tourism and have become progressively suspicious of recurring accounts of inequities and social exclusion that come with the recognition of a homosexual identity in Java. As a result, they have initiated a work ethic centered on self-privation that forbids any contact with young women in public places.

The sex workers of Villa Jambu speak of sacrifice (*kurban*) and making a sacrifice (*bekurban*). In his brilliant study of corporeal practices among African-American boxers in Chicago, Loïc Wacquant (1995) argued that the very idea of sacrifice is intimately linked to the attempt to maximize bodily performances during professional training and fighting in the ring. Among professional boxers, and among Javanese sex workers, the body is raw, malleable material and a form of capital: its use must be finely regulated to avoid the wearing effect of time and to compromise professional success. In this sense, “sacrifice is at once a means and a goal, vital duty and prideful mission, practical exigency and ethological obsession” (Wacquant, 1998: 48). 24 year-old Dian, who currently lives and works at Villa Jambu, maintains that “not being able to hang out with girls in public will make the white tourists (*bule*) think we are gay, serious, really interested in them, so we'll be able to make more money, ask for whatever we want”. Wacquant, consistent with some of the classical

anthropological theories of sacrifice, underscored how collective privations create a sentiment of belonging and co-appartenance among members of any professional activity that has to do with the self-exploitation of the body: “[Sacrifice] binds into one great chivalrous brotherhood all those who submit themselves to it (...). And it bestows upon all those who adhere to its forbearing dictates the specific honor of the craft” (Wacquant, 1998: 48).

### 5. Secret relationships, clandestine encounters, public weddings

Relationships with the female world are complicated. As noted in other parts of the archipelago by Pam Nilan (2011), young men seem to make a clear-cut distinction between “girls” and “a girlfriend”. My informants distinguish between hanging out with girls (*cewek*) and being in a serious relationship with a girlfriend (*pacar*, or *girlfriend*, or *racap*, according to a widespread word inversion), and many underscore that “a real man must always have a girlfriend by his side” (Jay, 26 years old), or even that “a man with no girlfriend is not a real man” (Vickri, 28 years old). Girls are usually associated with the world of juvenile temptations, casual relationships, and with the excesses of gang lifestyle, while a girlfriend is perceived as the epitome of adult life, a further attempt to discipline the body and to achieve a full masculine identity. Such double standard has little to do with the mere need to express sexual desire; rather, it is oriented towards a redefinition of the self through proper heterosexual marital life.

Among Javanese male sex-workers in South Bali, *pacaran backstreet* – secret relationships - are widely regarded as a preoccupation and invested with a variety of purposes and meanings. We have examined how these young men self-identify as heterosexual but engage in forms of compensated sex with foreign homosexual men and how their professional activity places constraints on their ability to conduct courtship and flirtation with women in public spaces. All relationships with young women, they maintain, must go undetected from the eye of current or potentially new customers and must be pursued in secrecy.

The term *titik temu* means “meeting point” and the expression is used by these young men to identify the site of clandestine encounters. The *titik temu* par excellence is the unauthorized parking area of the now demolished Sari Club, one of the three sites destroyed by the terrorist attacks of 2002, in the densely populated residential and commercial area of Kuta. Javanese sex workers gather in the early evening hours to sell illegal substances to foreign and local tourists, while simultaneously wait for their girlfriends to share a moment of fleeting intimacy, hold hands, exchange kisses and affection and talk about their future life as a married couple. Colloquially they use the English terms *prince* and *princess* to refer to each-other: “I am waiting for my prince”; “Do not bother the prince and the princess while they are talking” are among the frequent expressions that they use while meeting in secret.

To arrange *pacaran backstreet* causes stress (*strés*), my informants maintain. Young male sex workers risk their professional reputation, their credibility and their profits if found in the company of women by their male partners. Nevertheless, these encounters are crucial because they allow to get better acquainted with potential spouses and experience courtship and premarital relationships.

Indeed, *pacaran backstreet* should ideally culminate into marriage. Curiously enough, the term *titik temu* is also used to indicate “marriage”, “the meeting point of two different minds”. These young men establish an important symbolic connection between their juvenile private and romantic encounters in Bali with their girlfriends and the public wedding ceremonies of adult life in Java. Significantly, on their wedding day men and women will no longer be considered as “princes” and “princesses” but will be treated and honored by their local community as “Kings” and “Queens”. At a further level of analysis, then, *pacaran backstreet* is a stressful event because of the broad expectations placed on sex work by these young men, their attempt to maximize material capital and enter adulthood through marriage.

Other forms of clandestine encounters include: online conversations and video-chatting, especially late at night, when sex workers are busy chatting with their foreign clients overseas; love letters, hand written and left on the motorbike saddle, often washed away by tropical storms; love songs, requested through the circuit of local radio stations. Sometimes these young men take the risk of being seen in public and attend the work place of their girlfriends: they might share a meal together, exchange kisses and cuddle. Some lie to their customers and pretend to be in Java visiting their families in order to spend more time with their girlfriends.

### 6. Marriage as a cognitive resource

Ethnographic evidence seems to suggest the relevance of *pacaran backstreet* in the transition to an adult life-phase. It also points to the significance of marriage in the lives of these young men, who have experienced the violence and the hardship of sex work and - towards the end of their short career, around the age of 26 - begin to reflect upon the contradictions of their time at Villa Jambu and weigh the costs and the possible consequences of their entrepreneurial

activity<sup>2</sup>. The young men of Villa Jambu arrive in Bali with hopes of hefty monetary gains and better lifestyles. Oftentimes, however, they are reluctant to satisfy the sexual requests of their clients, have to live with the social stigma attached to male sex work, strive for the control of a saturated market, and many end up spending more than they earn to purchase drugs. In most cases, these mechanisms sharpen, rather than attenuate, a general sense of insecurity and disorientation, and foster a sentiment of self-detachment from sex work. Among those who have accumulated a sum of money sufficient to buy small land property, build a house and arrange a wedding ceremony in Java, many choose to rush their departure from Bali.

In a context of extreme brutality and exploitation, the idea of marriage and the goal to marry represent an important cognitive resource: they ease self-understanding within a specific work environment. Silvia Vignato (2007), aptly talked about cognitive resources in terms of “joints that facilitate life” and allow social actors to think and act upon social change, ponder the incongruities and potentials of life choices, orient actions.

Clearly, intentions and practices are informed by specific gender roles, social expectations about masculine identity that are embodied throughout a person's upbringing, through family, school education and religious participation. However, to interpret the behavior of these young men in terms of adjustment/resistance to pervasive institutions and cultural models is to reduce the analysis of human interaction to a structure/agency binary opposition. The life experiences of these young Javanese sex workers show a more nuanced relationship with customary values, built around a process of self-understanding and self-awareness. Through the traumatic affiliation to criminal networks and through the enactment of homosexual practices, these men become wary of the meaning of tradition in the personal economy of their own lives, and eventually embrace it at its fullest. As Donny, 29 years old, puts it: “At 29 I now know where I come from, and I know where I am going”.

Through the idea of marriage, the older inhabitants of Villa Jambu question the discrepancies of sex work and make sense of their lives, beyond the apparent excitement and the collective euphoria of life in the gang. Speaking of his past clandestine encounters with his girlfriend in Bali, Hendra 29 years old, currently married and living in Surabaya, recounts that “meeting in secrecy allowed me to spend time with my girlfriend, but most importantly reminded me that I was a man, and not just a whore”. Hendra used the verb “to forget” (*melupakan*) when talking about sex work. Others emphasize the need to meet, court, and marry “quickly” (*cepat*, or *capcus* in slang terminology).

## 7. Other networks, deprivations and ideas of marriage: the relational, emotional and work environment of young female migrants

Among the female Javanese migrant workers that entertain *pacaran backstreet* with the young men of Villa Jambu in South Bali there is a similar propensity to stable relationships and marriage; however, among young women the relation between work and marital life presents a number of significant differences. In their words, work in Bali is not something to quickly forget to move on to matrimony, but an opportunity to be seized over a longer period of time. Work offers the chance to a career and to self-fulfillment: as such, it is not quite compatible with the return to Java and with married life. Otherwise said, work does not lead to marriage, at least not immediately. Although young women intend to marry, several delay their departure from Bali and some do not marry at all.

The migration path and the professional integration into the tourist sector of these young women is also regulated by preexisting gender-based support networks. These young female migrants arrive in Bali and seek salaried employment in hotels, restaurants, massage parlors, fascinated by the stories of relatives, friends and acquaintances, tales of unlimited work opportunities. Their arrival coincides with their exit from the traditional *kampung* house of their parents (*rumah*), their stay in a boarding house (*kos*) and the routine of a new work schedule.

These are important changes in the lives of these young women. Boarding houses are scarcely supervised: three or four girls share the same room to save money on rent, there is no curfew and guests are free to walk in and out at any time. Boarding houses are often managed by Balinese women (*ibu kos*, landlords) that exercise no effective control over their tenants. For all the above reasons, there is a general perception among Balinese people and among families in Java that these young women (and daughters) live in a promiscuous environment (*pergulan bebas*). Several informants, for instance Ali, who is 23 years old, felt “under scrutiny” but did not worry because, “no matter what we do or don't do, we

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<sup>2</sup> I have described in a previous contribution (Alcano 2010) the state of social marginality, drug addiction and alcohol abuse, social and inter-generational dependence and physical and social immobility that characterizes the life experience of a numerous group of former sex workers that decide to continue to live in Bali after the conclusion of their working activity at Villa Jambu.

are Javanese and Javanese girls are always sluts (*pelacur*). Her words reproduce a historical identification of female migrant workers with prostitutes in Bali but are indicative of a state of social reprimand.

These young women find work as waitresses, receptionists, cleaning ladies at hotels, resorts or private villas; some are apprentice beauticians and masseuses; some others work in the public relations business or as entertainers in night clubs. Their work shifts are long and grueling (10-12 hours) with two half-hour breaks for lunch and dinner and one day off work a week; their average salary averages about one million rupiahs (about 800 euros) a month. Their employers, for the most part expatriates and permanent resides, believe they are lazy, slack, unprofessional, and evaluate their performance on a regular basis. Some think of them as disposable: girls usually get fired if they arrive late for work more than once a week, are caught talking to each other during work hours, or become pregnant. Some others think of them as sexually available and frequently ask for sexual favors in exchange for a bigger share of tips at the end of the day, a higher salary at the end of the month, the promise to be awarded a promotion later in the course of their careers. These women tackle the issue with evident embarrassment but show no hesitation in stating that "the fact that your boss asks you to spend a little bit of time with him after work doesn't make him a bad boss (*killer*), because a bad boss is one that doesn't pay you if you work overtime or doesn't give you a promotion" (Ali).

In a context of social stigma and psychological pressure, harassment and sexual molestation, the young women I have talked to maintain that they are willing to give up their good name (*nama baik*) and their good reputation to keep their job position and possibly advance in their career. This is an interesting aspect of female work ethics, if one considers that promotions are rare and apprentices earn little or no money, or are often replaced to avoid full-time, full-salary hiring; furthermore, plenty of stories of young women fired for no apparent reason circulate in Bali and in boarding houses. Dina, for instance, 21 years old, works as a waitress at a burger restaurant to become financially independent (*mandiri*) and raise a family, as she recounts: "I love my job because it gives me independence; maybe one day I'll become manager in another restaurant and I'll make more money, have a few kids and be able to afford them a good life, because you know, a man's salary is never enough nowadays".

Just like their male companions, young women adopt a pragmatic aptitude towards marriage, with the intention to invest their earnings and start family. The idea of marriage, however, is not a powerful cognitive resource as it is for young men; it does not allow a person to think of oneself within the work environment and through social change. On the contrary, marriage seems to impede self-fulfillment. Many girls have described *pacaran backstreet* as a "waste of time" (*membuang waktu*) and maintain that are too young to marry. Some think of their clandestine encounters as a nuisance (and also mention stress): oftentimes they have to adjust their work schedule to meet with their boyfriends, or ask their employers for a leave of absence. Moreover, they also worry about being seen with men in public, afraid they might be judged as too libertine (*bebas*).

These women, however, do not abstain from having a relationship with a boyfriend: they like the attentions and gifts they receive, and are afraid they will not find a partner whenever they decide to return to their village and get married. Ani, 24 years old, asserts that "[our] boyfriends make good money and give us good expensive presents: mobile phones, designer bags, nice clothes. And also, if one day I decide to get married, who's gonna marry me? A man can come to Bali, sell his butt, go back to his village and still be treated like a hero, because he's rich; I can work all my life but if everyone thinks I'm a slut in Bali I will always be a slut. And who's gonna marry a slut, uh, you tell me?"

## 8. Conclusive remarks

*Pacaran backstreet* speaks of contemporary ideas of courtship and marriage among Indonesian youth. Its relevance is not limited to middle-class educated female students, but extends to other (lower) levels of society and provides information about widespread relational practices among young men and young women in a wide range of contexts.

In the tourist area of South Bali, Javanese men experience and forge alternative forms of masculine identity. While academic literature has examined such articulations of juvenile malaise from the point of view of youth subcultures and practices, and has insisted on their cohesive and subversive aspect, ethnography among male Javanese sex workers suggest a less linear approach to the study of youth formations and a more nuanced interpretation.

In the case of Javanese male sex-workers in Bali, customary values and traditional institutions continue to play a pivotal role in the lives of young men (and women). Social transformations spark new needs and aspirations, yet family and marriage still provide a powerful cognitive resource to make sense of life, its changes and contradictions. At the parking lot of the former Sari Club different ideas of interpersonal relationships and marriage meet, which are revealing of persisting models (and changing attitudes) towards adult life in contemporary Indonesian society.

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