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Ritualized homosexuality

The practice commonly referred to as 'ritualized homosexuality' consists of non-reciprocal genital contacts between a younger and an older male, usually in the form of fellatio (or, more rarely, sodomy), practised in the context of initiation rituals. Certain kinship relationships between the two participants are often favoured for these relations. The practice is prescriptive, in that every male must partake in it, first as a receptive participant and later as an active agent. Most men go on to marry and engage in heterosexual activity after a period of ritualized homosexual practice, although, in some societies, homosexual practices continue alongside heterosexual marriage. Ritualized homosexuality had a limited geographical distribution: it was found in

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societies that occupy the southwest border of the Papua New Guinea Highlands and the southeastern coast of Irian Jaya, as well as isolated areas of insular Melanesia (such as Malakula in Vanuatu). The practice appears to have been abandoned in most areas today, a process in which progressive mission influence in the Melanesian hinterlands since the 1920s, and subsequent colonial control, has played a significant role.

The rituals associated with such homosexual practices were complex, elaborated and protracted, with strong religious connotations. Many involved the ritualized hazing of initiates. For example, the initiates were often terrorized with mysterious flutes played in the bush, and threatened against revealing any imparted secrets to women. They might be forced to induce nose-bleeding and vomiting by inserting grasses and bamboo slivers in their noses and throats. Homosexual practices thus occur in a context of terror and pain for the initiates. It is noteworthy that societies which practise ritualized homosexuality are embedded in a larger cultural area in which male initiations and hazing rituals, but not necessarily ritualized homosexuality, are found. Why certain societies include or even centralize same-sex practices in rituals of manhood while neighbouring societies do not remains a mystery.

Underlying ritualized homosexuality is the belief that male adolescents must ingest the semen of older men in order to grow into full-fledged adult men. Semen is comparable to mother's milk, but while mother's milk is seen as sufficient to ensure the normal growth of women and pre-adolescent boys, it is inadequate for the production of men, a process which requires the ingestion of semen. Semen ingestion is found in societies in which men believe in the polluting and debilitating power of women, which must be counteracted through such purifying practices as induced nose-bleeding, which they continue to engage in even after initiation in many of the societies concerned.

Anthropologists who have studied ritualized homosexuality disagree about the relative importance of erotic aspects for the participants. Certain aspects of the ritual suggest that, for the younger participant at least, it is devoid of erotic meaning: for example, the climate of fear and intimidation in which the practice takes place, and the fact that some adolescents, who initially refuse to fellate their seniors, have to be forced to do so. Yet pleasure can play an important role in the ritual, as is attested by the fact that, in some societies, adults continued to engage in playful homosexual contacts beyond the ritual stage, and the evident pleasure that many ini-

tiates take in talking about semen ingestion. Thus the practice may have had multiple meanings—some overtly erotic and some concerned with growth and fertility—which coexist, or differ between individuals, across the various societies which formerly engaged in the practice.—NB

Further reading

- Herd, G (ed.), 1993. *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*, 2nd ed., University of California Press.
- Knauff, B, 1994. *South Coast New Guinea Cultures: history, comparison, dialectic*, Cambridge University Press.