Case Study 57

‘Two-spirit’ people and the ritual ceremony solang

In this case, we focus on an ICH element which can only be performed by individuals inhabiting a gender role somewhere between or encompassing both the masculine and the feminine. Called upon to perform a ritual ceremony - solang - which grants the blessing of the spirits for the safety of travellers before an important voyage, for good harvests, protection from natural disasters, or healing of the sick, the ‘two-spirit’ people, or farcons of Nahili society are uniquely able to practice this ICH due to their intermediate condition of being neither male nor female, neither woman nor man, but a mixture of the two.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Solang ritual begins with a chant as the sun is setting, and is accompanied by a cylindrical drum, cymbals, and metal rhythm sticks. For the blessing to be a success, the ritual is often performed in a cave or other secluded place. The farcon takes their place in front of a large assortment of ritual offerings for the spirits, including different kinds of foods such as rice, eggs, a hen or a rooster, and fruits. They chant in an increasingly erratic and distressed fashion, as their body begins to shake and they enter a trance. In some cases, the spirit which possesses the farcon refuses to give the blessing if the offerings are insufficient. During the solang ritual, in order to honour the spirits that possess them, and hence give their blessing, the ‘two-spirit’ people may also take a small dagger and try to force it to their throat, heart, or other body part. Eyes decorated thickly with kohl and lips slathered in pink, the two-spirit people curl their hands through flames and call to the spirits in a language only the gods can understand. Accompanying the two-spirit person, a group of dancers stamp their feet wildly. If a powerful spirit has possessed them, and if the blessing is successful, the dagger will not penetrate during the trance and they will not bleed. This is also taken as evidence that they are legitimate conduits to the spiritual realm.

Farcons are not only fully accepted in Nahili society, but are particularly honoured and revered, seen as having special sensory qualities due to their transcendent gender: they see, hear, taste, smell and feel things others can’t. This duality, the embodiment of both masculine and feminine elements, is believed to imbue them with the power to connect, or act as an intermediary, between the natural and spiritual worlds. Most farcons are inducted in their 20s, becoming part shaman, part priest. Their training is long and complex. They must learn the sacred language used by the farcons, if they have not already learned it through a dream. They also have to memorize numerous mantras as well as ritual dances, prayers, chants, instruments and their uses, and other sacred knowledge. They are one of five genders in Nahili society; a community that believes that all genders must co-exist harmoniously. These ‘two-spirit’ people are accordingly allowed to socialize and mingle with both women and men.

1. . Case loosely based on Davis, Sharyn Graham (2010) *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves*, ASAA Women in Asia Series, Routledge and Davis, Sharyn Graham (2007) Challenging Gender Norms: Five Genders among Bugis in Indonesia, Thompson Wadsworth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)