

# SEX, POWER AND MAGIC: CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING LOVE MAGIC AND PREMARITAL SEX IN LOMBOK

**Linda Rae Bennett**

Key Centre for Women's Health in Society  
The University of Melbourne

## **Working Paper No. 6**

Gender Relations Centre, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian  
National University, Canberra

ISSN: 1447-5952 (pbk); 1835-6133 (online)

© 2000 Linda Rae Bennett

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Permission should be sought from the author: c/o Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Carlton Vic. 3053, Australia. FAX: +61-3-9347 9824; e-mail: <l.bennett@kcwh.unimelb.edu.au>

## **Introduction**

This paper explores themes relating to emerging Indonesian sexualities through a discussion of the customary practice of love magic among young people living in Mataram, Eastern Indonesia. It emphasizes the dynamism of 'tradition', its multiple interpretations and meanings, and its manipulation by different actors. I also explore the ways in which evolving premarital practices embody the potential for individual agency and resistance, while simultaneously mediating social change in a manner that perpetuates enduring cultural ideals of female and male sexuality.

My commentary on love magic derives from an ethnography of maidenhood in Mataram, which focuses on sexuality and reproductive health.<sup>1</sup> Mataram is the capital city of the island of Lombok with a population of around 350,000 people. While Mataram is a minor city by Indonesian standards, it is significant in regional terms as the centre of political and administrative activity in Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB). Mataram's population is of mixed ethnicity and dominated by the indigenous Muslim inhabitants of Lombok, the Sasak. The four primary religions practised in Mataram are

---

<sup>1</sup> This ethnography is based on fieldwork conducted in Mataram between August 1996 and February 1998.

Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism, with Islam being the predominant medium of worship.<sup>2</sup> Due to its geographical location on the periphery and at the meeting point of inner and outer Indonesia, Mataram is also relatively less isolated from the national and global economies than other regional capitals in Eastern Indonesia. Transport and communication networks between Mataram, Bali and Java are well developed, expanding, and increasingly utilized by local residents. Young people in particular are becoming accustomed to telephone and internet communication, and travel on a regular basis between Mataram and other islands. In 1997 approximately 54 percent of NTB's population regularly listened to the radio, and 73 percent were watching television.<sup>3</sup> Based on these figures for NTB, and my observations in Mataram, it is reasonable to estimate that at least three quarters of Mataram's youth watch television and listen to the radio on a regular basis.

Young people from rural Lombok and other regions of Eastern Indonesia are attracted to Mataram for a variety of reasons. Education and training opportunities are greater in Mataram in comparison with more isolated areas of Nusa Tenggara Barat and Nusa Tenggara Timor. Many young people also hope to find employment in the city, despite the fact that youth unemployment remains high. Mataram also lacks an industrial base, and therefore does not offer the possibility of factory based employment.<sup>4</sup> However, many young people are attracted by the allure of Lombok's international tourist industry. The rapid expansion of tourism in Lombok is reflected in the number of foreign tourists recorded as visiting Nusa Tenggara Barat between 1990 and 1997. In this period the annual total of foreign tourists entering the province doubled. However, the figure for 1998 fell substantially, most likely due to negative foreign perceptions of Indonesia's political and economic climate in 1998.<sup>5</sup> For some young people Mataram represents a stepping stone to the more developed cities of Bali and Java. For others the relative social freedom they enjoy in Mataram is preferable to more provincial lifestyles in rural areas of Lombok and NTB. Mataram is in many senses a 'city becoming', it is undergoing social and physical transformation at a significant pace.

Women's sexual socialization in Mataram is mediated through local culture, religion and state discourses that unanimously insist upon the repression of female desire and the imperative of abstaining from sex before marriage. The regulation of premarital sex for women is achieved through cultural and religious insistence on female virginity at marriage. Male and female virginity are conceptualized differently, with unique terms being used for female virgins (*perawan*) and male virgins (*perjaka*) and the social importance of male and female virginity at marriage diverges

---

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 80 percent of Mataram's population identify as Moslem according to calculations from 1990 census data.

<sup>3</sup> These figures are from <http://regional.bps.go.id/~ntb/english/data/social.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See Wolfe (1996) for an exploration of women's experiences and status as factory employees in rural Java. Also see Brogan (1994) for an overview of key health issues for women factory workers in Indonesia.

<sup>5</sup> In 1990, 107 210 000 foreign tourists were registered as arriving in NTB; in 1997, the figure was 214 059 000; and in 1998, 159 263 000 international tourists were registered. These figures are from <http://regional.bps.go.id/~ntb/english/data/recreation.html>.

significantly.<sup>6</sup> Unmarried women known or thought to have lost their virginity often endure severe consequences. If such knowledge becomes public a woman's marriage prospects will be compromised. Marriage is viewed as extremely desirable and an inevitable goal by the majority of young women in Mataram. Full adult status for women and men in Lombok is only acquired upon marriage and the birth of a child, and women who fail to marry or reproduce are greatly pitied

At the same time, young people in Mataram are experiencing growing autonomy and agency in courtship and marriage choices. The choices of many young women accord with wider social trends in Indonesia, occurring in response to changes such as prolonged education, increased participation in the formal economy and paid work, later marriage, shifting patterns of residence, and expanding spatial and social mobility. These transformations are also accompanied by a constant influx of diverse, explicit images of female sexuality that do not correspond with local ideals of female modesty, obedience, dependency and chastity prior to marriage. In order to successfully assert their sexual desire and identities, and to engage in rewarding premarital relationships, young women face considerable conflict in negotiating between prevailing gender specific ideals and sexual double standards, and emerging alternatives.

Here my discussion of love magic entails looking at cultural heritage or 'tradition', however, it is positioned in the present and is concerned with examining how enduring cultural understandings of sexuality are invoked to rationalize behaviour and events that do not confirm with hegemonic cultural ideals. I concentrate on the unique potential of love magic in women's negotiations and resistances of premarital relationships. Thus, my approach is to explore how contemporary practices are evolving through the intersection of indigenous heritage and historically specific reactions to modernization and globalization at a local level.

## **Love Magic: Sorcery, Seduction and Premarital Sex**

In spite of their extensive exposure to formal education and religious instruction, and the state doctrine of *pengembangan* (development), young people in Mataram display continuing faith in a wide range of syncretic beliefs that are typically associated with *adat* (custom or tradition) and superstition by those ideologues seeking to shape 'national culture'.<sup>7</sup> Local youth still place much credence in the practice of sorcery (*seher* (S)), the power of magic, the authority of ancestors in influencing contemporary social life and in the existence of supernatural beings. The Sasak are renowned throughout the Indonesian archipelago – and by ethnographers of Lombok – for the potency and prevalence of their sorcery.<sup>8</sup> Here I consider only one element of such

---

<sup>6</sup> Indonesian and Sasak words appear in italics and Sasak words are identified by (S) when first used.

<sup>7</sup> See Dove's (1988) edited volume on the roles of 'real and imagined culture' in Indonesia for discussion of the various ways in which 'tradition', 'modernity' and development are constructed and interact in the constitution of a Indonesian National Culture.

<sup>8</sup> See Ecklund (1977), Judd (1980), Cederroth (1981), Grace (1997), and Hunter (1996).

beliefs and practices, love magic as it is negotiated in contemporary courtship and premarital relations.<sup>9</sup>

Young people usually describe love magic as *pelet* (S).<sup>10</sup> When a person is thought to be under the influence of love magic, they are referred to using the passive verb form *dipelet* (S). Conversely, the act of inflicting love magic is indicated by the active verb *melet* (S). The word *senggeger* (S) is another more particular term referring specifically to love magic.<sup>11</sup> However, most of my informants who discussed the phenomenon of love magic preferred the term *pelet*, and tended to avoid uttering the word *senggeger* due to the fear that they may be rendered more susceptible to this form of magic through explicit reference to it.

*Pelet* is practised by both lay people and ritual or magic specialists, known as *dukun* or *belian*, and can be employed by members of either sex. The titles of *dukun* and *belian* are held by both women and men who perform a wide variety of roles including midwifery, healing, sorcery, ritual specialization and acting as intermediaries with the spirit world.<sup>12</sup> Love magic is regularly initiated by lay people, however counter magic or the cure of a person inflicted by *pelet* most often requires intervention by a *dukun*. Illness as a result of *pelet* is understood to be resistant to biomedical cures, and therefore necessitates counter magic (Judd 1980:100).<sup>13</sup> Consistent with this, afflictions which persist in defiance of biomedical treatment are often interpreted as a sign that the person has been *dipelet*.

## Sorcery and Secrecy

Knowledge of love magic and the mystical power associated with its practice is passed on by members of the same sex from one generation to the next, a process which entails a high degree of responsibility and secrecy.<sup>14</sup> The imperative of secrecy in guarding magic knowledge relates to the perceived potential for intentional misuse, depleting the potency of the magic, or accidental misdirection of the magic. Mantras recited in the

---

<sup>9</sup> For more general explanations of sorcery and magic in Lombok, and Sasak beliefs in relation to the supernatural see Judd (1980:88–105), Cederroth (1981:117–120), Hunter (1996: Chapter 5).

<sup>10</sup> Magic in general is also referred to by the words *ilmu* and *gunna-gunna*. *Ilmu* is the Indonesian term for magic, as well as the word for science, and is used less frequently than Sasak terms. Occasionally, one also hears the term *ilmu hitam*, meaning black magic. However, the definition of black magic tends to be highly contextual and often varies according to the interests of different parties involved. For detail of the construction of *ilmu hitam* in North Bali see Jennaway (1996:199). *Gunna-gunna* is a term most often used when describing magic practised by Javanese or Balinese, and is thus heard less often in Lombok.

<sup>11</sup> Hunter also notes the use of this term in reference to love potions in rural East Lombok (1996:117).

<sup>12</sup> For detail on the roles of *belian nganak* or *dukun bayi* (traditional midwives) in rural Lombok see Grace (1996:151–155, 1997: Chapter 5). Also see Hunter (1996: Chapter 4) for a detailed explication of the role of *belian* as healers in a rural Sasak community in East Lombok.

<sup>13</sup> Hunter (1996: Chapters 4 and 5) also analyses the pluralistic practices of rural Sasak in employing both ‘sorcery’ and ‘science’ in seeking cures for illness. The case studies she presents suggest that acute illness or death that have not been alleviated by biomedical intervention are eventually understood to be caused by sorcery. In her research in Northern Bali, Jennaway (1996:188) has also observed illness induced by magic to be understood as incurable via biomedical treatment.

<sup>14</sup> Judd (1980:102) notes an aberration from this norm, when magic knowledge can be inherited by children who are not of the same sex as their elders, in instances where there is no appropriate child of the same sex to act as a recipient of the knowledge.

performance of *pelet* are usually divulged to younger men by their elders in written form. These mantras are often a mixture of Arabic, Sasak and Indonesian languages and are strictly not to be repeated aloud unless it is for the express purposes of invoking their magical power. One Sasak teenager who was fortunate enough to study abroad commented that he did not dare leave behind the book in which his mantras were written. He explained further, that although his mantras were unlikely to influence women he encountered beyond Lombok, he feared that his mantras might be discovered, used and thus weakened in his absence.

Just about any substance that can be consumed or come into direct contact with a woman's body is open to suspicion as a potential vector for love magic. In particular, young women are instructed to be highly cautious when receiving gifts from suitors such as facial powder, perfume, lipstick, and chocolates or other sweets, because of their popularity in the transmission of *pelet*. Other objects frequently associated with the practice of love magic include vanity mirrors, photographs (usually of the protagonist) and jewellery. Young women are also advised against opening sealed vessels, such as bottles or boxes received from men or found inadvertently, in order to avoid releasing any magic they may contain.

While youth are open about their knowledge of the symptoms and tools of love magic, and comfortable in relating tales of friends and acquaintances afflicted by *pelet*, they are on the whole extremely reluctant to disclose details of the rituals and mantras involved in inducing *pelet*. The caution and silence surrounding the practice of love magic is compatible with the cultural emphasis on secrecy in courtship and premarital relations, and is customary in the Sasak practice of *kawin-lari* (elopement). Respect for the secrecy surrounding *pelet* is also indicative of the status of this form of magic as cultural capital, which is ultimately preserved by maintaining intellectual property over the body of knowledge required for its practice. Discretion in discussing love magic also stems from the desire to protect oneself from any harm that may ensue as a consequence of disclosing knowledge considered to be both powerful and exclusive.

## **Desire and Danger in the Domain of Love Magic**

The dynamics of sexual desire, jealousy and danger mobilize local understandings of the meanings and motivations for love magic. *Pelet* is unequivocally dangerous and women are thought to be more susceptible to the effects of love magic than men (Ecklund 1977:81; Judd 1980:98). The possible symptoms and consequences experienced by a person who has been *dipelet* are many; however, the primary danger relates to the individual's surrender of self-control. A woman who is under the influence of *pelet* is most likely to manifest such loss of self-control by allowing herself to be seduced, by becoming completely subservient to her protagonist, or by displaying symptoms of madness or acute illness. The affects of *pelet* can be experienced as temporary, prolonged or permanent, and in extreme instances death can be interpreted as a consequence of *pelet*.

During my fieldwork in Lombok there was an isolated incident in my *kampung* (urban hamlet or suburb) in which the prolonged illness and death of a thirteen-year-old

girl was attributed to *pelet*. Despite the girl's immaturity, her extraordinary physical beauty was understood as the principal factor rendering her vulnerable to love magic. The girl's parents had exhausted every available treatment, in both traditional and biomedical realms yet she failed to recover or even experience a remission from her condition. While modern medical practitioners were unable to provide a conclusive diagnosis, a number of *dukun* concurred that she had been *dipelet*. The reason given by the *dukun* for this fatality related to their inability to employ accurate counter magic because they lacked sufficient information regarding the perpetrator of the *pelet*.

Transgressions in socially sanctioned behaviour for young women, which are typically understood as symptomatic of *pelet*, include disobedience, sexual promiscuity, devotion and subservience to a love interest previously unknown or rejected, and running away from home. Episodes of illness and insanity thought to be induced by *pelet* are often characterized by embodied reactions such as fever; paleness; refusal to eat; loss of consciousness; spontaneous fits of screaming, laughter or crying; public nudity; self-mutilation such as scratching or pulling out one's hair; speaking in tongues; muteness or on the other hand repeating the name of the protagonist.<sup>15</sup> The universal symptom experienced by women who have been *dipelet* is their lack of self-awareness and a complete inability to comprehend that they are under the influence of magic. Therefore, women who become the targets of love magic are understood to be unwitting victims, who cannot be held culpable for aberrations in their behaviour experienced during their affliction.

The danger of women falling victim to *pelet* is treated as a very real and serious threat, and is thought to be particularly acute for unmarried women who reside independently of their families. This derives from the inability of a woman's relatives to observe her behaviour and discern irregularities that could be manifestations of *pelet*. Constant surveillance is understood to be an important precaution, as the victims themselves remain oblivious to their condition, and because recovery from *pelet* is largely dependent upon recognizing the affliction and employing counter magic as quickly as possible. A number of my unmarried female friends, who left Mataram temporarily to study or work, underwent ceremonies to protect them from *pelet* during separation from their families. I was present at the homes of several women during these ceremonies, although regrettably I was never invited to directly witness the rituals involved. These ceremonies were performed for women of Moslem, Hindu and Christian backgrounds, and were conducted by their fathers as well as male *dukun*. In addition to these rituals, held prior to their departure, a number of women were also presented with amulets to wear as protection against *pelet* and malevolent spirits. While such rituals and amulets are viewed as important defences against *pelet*, such protection is never considered absolute.

Shortly after I began fieldwork in Mataram I was given a protective amulet by a friend whom I had known for several years. Prior to this I had experienced regular

---

<sup>15</sup> Variations and similarities in the symptoms of magic afflictions in Lombok have been reported by other ethnographers, for examples see Ecklund (1977), Judd (1980) and Hunter (1996). Jennaway has also noted parallels in the symptoms experienced by women thought to be under the influence of magic in North Bali (1996:208).

dizziness and several fainting spells, which I attributed to ongoing difficulties with blood pressure that had been exacerbated by climactic and dietary changes. It was evident that these symptoms had been interpreted as an attempt to *melet* me. When my friend confessed her concerns, she was relieved that I did not dismiss the possibility of being *dipelet*, as I responded by assuring her that I had come to Lombok equipped with my own magic. While my assurance was in fact not entirely legitimate (I merely fancied the notion of myself as a witch), it verified that I was not under the influence of *pelet*, because I was able to discern that it was a plausible explanation for my recent ill health.

Sexual desire is understood as the prime motivation of men for employing *pelet* in the attempt to make women fall in love with them. As romantic love (*cinta*) is constructed as grounded in sexual desire, the ultimate aim in inducing a woman to fall in love is thought to be the subsequent ease of her sexual seduction. Hence, a sexed dichotomy emerges whereby *pelet* represents the potential for men to pursue sexual gratification, and the danger of sexual exploitation and loss of purity for women. This dichotomy embodies dominant cultural constructions of sexuality, which define female sexuality as passive and male sexuality as necessarily aggressive and competitive.

### **Women as Perpetrators of *Pelet***

Reluctance to explicitly recognize female desire as an impetus for women who resort to love magic is evident in popular explanations of their motivations for doing so. Moreover, young women who perpetuate *pelet* are thought to be less competent than their male counterparts in performing this genre of magic, and are consequently perceived as more dependent upon the services of *dukun* or male relatives. Accounts of women inflicted by *pelet* were frequently discussed in informal and structured research contexts, while reports of women employing love magic against men were extremely rare in comparison.

However, the two accounts of women directing *pelet* against men that were relayed to me provide some insight as to how women's motivations for practicing love magic are constructed differently to those of men. In the first instance, a woman sought the assistance of her uncle in order to *melet* her *pacar* (boyfriend), whose commitment to their relationship was unclear. Her *pacar* proposed marriage within days of her uncle invoking the magic, which indicated that he had been successfully *dipelet*. The impetus for initiating the love magic on this occasion was clearly interpreted as the woman's desire to acquire a husband.

A second less auspicious attempt of one of my informants (Kari) to *melet* her *pacar*, occurred after Kari's boyfriend had rejected her upon discovering that she had fallen pregnant.<sup>16</sup> Kari had hoped to proceed with her pregnancy, and was desperate to rekindle the relationship with her *pacar* (in spite of his initial reaction) in the expectation that he would eventually assume responsibility for a child of his conception. In this case, a close girlfriend of Kari's employed the services of a male *dukun* to *melet* the man in question. The *dukun*'s efforts proved ineffective in influencing the attitude of

---

<sup>16</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to replace the names of those people whose experiences of *pelet* are described in this paper.

Kari's *pacar*, who became increasingly antagonistic toward her following her repeated attempts at reconciliation.

Eventually their relationship deteriorated to the point where Kari was coerced into having an abortion by her boyfriend, who deserted her immediately after the procedure. Kari was left alone to deal with the grief of terminating her pregnancy, the loss of a partner, and experiencing feelings of acute emotional and spiritual guilt over a decision that she deeply regretted. It was shortly after her abortion that Kari approached me in a local *warung* (food stall) and invited me to her home, where she shared her grief and the details of her story. She had at this stage known me for only a few hours, although our relationship continued throughout my fieldwork. The initial urgency of Kari's desire to find a confidante whom she felt would not judge her and that she could trust, attuned my awareness to the acute social and emotional isolation experienced by young women whose life histories diverge significantly from the expectations of their sexual culture.

The *dukun* who unsuccessfully attempted to *melet* Kari's *pacar* rationalized his failure by claiming that the target of the *pelet* was not in fact the biological father of Kari's unborn child. In making this claim he vindicated himself and stigmatized Kari, by suggesting that she had multiple lovers and was unfaithful to the man she had wished to *melet*. Despite the condemnation Kari endured as a result of her effort to use love magic against her *pacar*, her motivation for doing so was perceived as appropriate because it involved the desire to secure a father for her child.

Local interpretations of these women's impetus for employing *pelet* against men related directly to their attainment of socially sanctioned roles and relationships. Kari was understood to be in pursuit of a father for her child, while the other woman's motivation was interpreted as her aspiration to acquire a husband. Neither of these women was perceived to have acted in pursuit of her sexual desire, which reflects women's positioning within a libidinal economy that constructs female sexual desire as marginal to men's. Furthermore, the assumption that these women were primarily concerned with securing their own fate through relationships with men is indicative of cultural ideals of feminine dependency, as well as dominant models of female sexuality as located within marriage and for the purposes of procreation.

## **Sorcery and Sexual Jealousy**

Sexual jealousy is often interpreted as a prime incentive for men to *melet* women. Newly wed brides are thought to be particularly susceptible to *pelet* inflicted by jealous suitors seeking revenge after being forsaken for another (Ecklund 1977:64; Dobson and Macintyre 1997). The symptoms of such an affliction usually entail the bride screaming and ranting uncontrollably, and running around in public in various states of undress. These episodes may continue for up to several weeks subsequent to the wedding and typically require the intervention of a *dukun* to cure the afflicted woman.

In instances where a man desires an unmarried woman, who has a current boyfriend, he may use magic against both the woman and his rival. When *pelet* is employed against a male opponent, the symptoms experienced tend to be bouts of acute,

inexplicable illness. The cultural emphasis placed on the competitiveness of male sexuality is compatible with the frequency with which sexual jealousy is described as the motivation for men employing *pelet*. This preoccupation with jealousy also reflects the unpredictability of courtship in Mataram and the insecurities experienced by men in such a competitive social context. A number of young male informants defended their use of love magic by insisting that they would have little chance of securing a *pacar* if they failed to resort to *pelet*, precisely because they were convinced that their opponents would be depending on *pelet* to give themselves an advantage. Therefore, for some young men the use of *pelet* is constructed as a necessary tool, or weapon, determining their vantage point in the arena of courtship.

### **Umi's Affliction—the Public Pursuit of Female Desire**

Umi was raised in a rural Sasak village in central Lombok. She migrated to Mataram after completing secondary school to work as a *pembantu* (domestic servant) in the home of a wealthy Javanese family, where her aunt Bibi was also employed as the housekeeper and cook. Shortly after Umi's arrival in Mataram she began a romance with Udin, who was employed as a night watchman in a neighbouring household. Umi's aunt was content for the relationship to flourish and encouraged the couple to engage in *midang* (traditional courtship conducted in a woman's home) in the early evenings before Udin's shift began.<sup>17</sup> Their courtship proceeded as such for several months, until Umi confided in Bibi that she had *jatuh cinta* (fallen in love) with Udin and intended to marry him. Bibi was delighted at the prospect, as Udin was a suitable marriage candidate for Umi on the basis of their shared religion and his secure employment. She thus suggested that the couple travel together to central Lombok (during daylight) to visit Umi's parents. Upon their return Umi informed Bibi that her father had accepted Udin as a prospective spouse and that she expected Udin to propose marriage or *kawin-lari* in the near future.

Following this development, Umi was accorded greater freedom in her courtship with Udin and was permitted to accompany him beyond the confines of her home for *pacaran modern* (courtship conducted outside of a woman's natal home).<sup>18</sup> One Saturday evening the couple joined a group of friends in attending a popular disco at Senggigi beach. This occasion was Umi's first visit to a tourist location and her initiation into the nightclub scene. As a condition of entry the nightclub they were required to purchase drinks, which clearly acted as an impetus for their consumption of alcohol. After her first drink Umi was approached by a stranger to dance, and obliged despite the disapproving glances of her *pacar*. At the end of the band's set Umi accompanied her new companion to the bar, where he bought her another drink, and they sat to chat. Umi's admirer was a Balinese tour guide (colloquially known as a Kuta Cowboy), who presented her with his business card and suggested that she contact him

---

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed description of *midang* see Bennett (2000).

<sup>18</sup> See Bennett (2000) for a description of the various forms of *pacaran modern* as practised by young people in Mataram.

if she were to visit Kuta Bali.<sup>19</sup> She consumed several more drinks in the company of this man, seemingly unaware of her increasing intoxication, which became obvious only when the band returned and she attempted to leave her stool in order to dance.

Udin had been keenly observing the interaction from a safe distance, but leapt to Umi's side upon spying her instability, and escorted her outside. Umi's new admirer followed the couple into the street, infuriating Udin who was no longer willing to contain his jealousy. While Umi crouched in the gutter attempting to collect her senses, a verbal confrontation broke out between Udin and the Balinese man, which culminated in Udin striking the stranger and knocking him to the ground. Further conflict was averted by the intervention of the nightclub's security staff, who advised Udin and their group of friends to go home. Umi cried throughout the entire journey home, but had no recollection of her tears or the drive back to Mataram.

The following morning Umi awoke with a severe fever, while Udin was displaying bizarre symptoms of swelling in his face and arms. Udin's condition worsened rapidly, forcing him to attend *Rumah Sakit Mataram* (Mataram Public Hospital) where he was administered an antihistamine injection to reduce the swelling and alleviate the difficulty he was experiencing in breathing. Details of the previous evening's events, and the condition of the young couple, had circulated through the neighbourhood provoking instant rumours of foul play involving *pelet*. When Udin's swollen head failed to improve by the following morning, he was convinced that *pelet* was indeed the cause of his affliction. Udin promptly returned to his village of origin in East Lombok to seek the help of a renowned *dukun* in combating the sorcery that had been employed against them. He pleaded with Umi to accompany him and undergo the necessary rituals to protect and restore her to full health, but Umi flatly refused.

Umi stole away from her employer's home on dusk of the same day. She headed for Lembar harbour travelling by foot and hitching lifts with strangers where possible, and caught a late-night ferry to Padang Bai in Bali, and proceeded to track down the Balinese man whom she had met in Senggiggi. The distance between Umi's home in Mataram and Lembar harbour is at least twenty-five kilometres, a considerable journey in local terms. The ferry trip from Lombok to Padang Bai can take anywhere from between four to eight hours and cost around 6,000 rupiah at the time of Umi's expedition. Once in Bali, Umi would have covered an additional sixty kilometres from the harbour at Padang Bai before reaching Kuta. The entire trip to Kuta would have taken Umi somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four hours. In light of prevailing cultural expectations regarding the mobility and social autonomy of unmarried women, it is extraordinary for a single, unaccompanied woman to have undertaken a journey spanning this breadth of geographical space and time.

Wayan (Umi's Kuta Cowboy) received her as if he had been expecting her arrival, the two became lovers overnight, and Umi immediately moved in with him at the compound of his natal family. Wayan's family spoke primarily in Balinese, which Umi could not understand, leaving her somewhat ignorant of and excluded from family

---

<sup>19</sup> See Jennaway (1996:312–329) who coined the term 'Lovina Larikan' and Wolf (1993) for details of the lives and identities of young men who participate in the guide scenes of Lombok and Bali.

relationships and activities. Within a fortnight of her arrival, Umi's lover began to spend an increasing number of nights away from the family compound, which he explained was due to his vocation as a tour guide. However, after six weeks of these frequent absences, Umi grew lonely and suspicious and responded by questioning one of Wayan's friends as to his whereabouts. The friend bluntly replied that Wayan was staying with his wife and two young children in the neighbouring *kampung*. Umi's shock at this discovery supposedly liberated her from the effects of the *pelet* that Wayan had used to make her fall in love with him, and she immediately returned to Mataram, without confronting Wayan or informing him of her intentions.

Upon her return, Umi sadly recounted her version of the experience to Bibi, who had been much aggrieved by her niece's mysterious absence and was deeply relieved that she had returned. By this time Umi was pregnant, and suffering from morning sickness, which Bibi recognized instantly and responded to by escorting Umi back to her village where the predicament could be discussed with her parents. In the village Umi's family also consulted a local *dukun* who advised that an expedient marriage was the most effective way of ensuring her recovery and protection from the *pelet*. Udin no longer wished to continue his relationship with Umi, and rationalized this decision on the basis that he was not entirely convinced that Umi had been cured of her affliction. Umi was thus married to one of her male cousins, the bride price was substantially reduced to precipitate the wedding, and Umi's respectability was effectively restored by her marital status.<sup>20</sup>

## **Local Interpretations**

According to local determinations, this flow of events was caused by the effects of *pelet* inflicted by Wayan in his pursuit of Umi. Wayan was a clearly identifiable protagonist whose multiple motivations were understood as being sexual desire for Umi; sexual jealousy provoked by her existing relationship; and the desire for revenge against Udin following their altercation. The nature and timing of the physical symptoms experienced by Umi and Udin were interpreted as solid evidence of *pelet*. Not only did they become ill subsequent to their initial contact with Wayan, but the resistance of Udin's illness to biomedical treatment and its remedy with the intervention of counter magic, confirmed that *pelet* was the source of their afflictions.

The use of *pelet* in this scenario was further substantiated by the identification of vectors and tools characteristic in the practice of love magic. Consumption of contaminated food or drink is thought to be a common medium for many forms of magic in Lombok. In Umi's case, the drinks she accepted from Udin were thought to contain some sort of substance that rendered her under the influence of *pelet*. The business card given to Umi by Udin was also seen as a tool of *pelet*, which explained Wayan's ability to sway Umi's judgement in his absence. Typically, the potency of love magic in Lombok is thought to be confined to the island because of its inability to cross a body of ocean. However, this obstacle is often overcome by transferring the mystical

---

<sup>20</sup> See Eylert (1997) for a description of bride-price practices among the Sasak.

forces of *pelet* into some kind of token or container that is then carried with the victim, should she be separated by the open sea from the man who has attempted to *melet* her.

Umi's predicament was ultimately deemed to be the consequence of *pelet* due to the extraordinary and apparently otherwise inexplicable nature of her behaviour. The virtually instantaneous transfer of her affection from Udin to Wayan, after only a brief introduction to the stranger, was behaviour considered to be highly irrational outside the context of love magic. Moreover, Umi's desertion of her home and her courageous pilgrimage to Bali demonstrated a degree of independence stretching far beyond her prior experience of mobility or personal autonomy. The factor cementing the verdict of *pelet* in this instance was Umi's lack of self-awareness, which she supposedly displayed in pursuing a sexual relationship with Wayan, and in her refusal to accept that she had been *dipelet* upon Udin's request that they seek the assistance of a *dukun*.

### ***Pelet* and the Regulation of Female Sexuality**

In the preceding discussion, the logic of love magic applied in Umi's situation provides a foundation for exploring the functions of *pelet* in relation to the social regulation of sexual relations. The belief system surrounding love magic is clearly invoked to rationalize behaviour that transgresses sexual norms in a public way. In contrast to the covert sexual transgressions that can be disguised in the contexts of *pacaran backstreet* and *kawi-lari*, premarital sex occurs as a consequence of *pelet* tend to be highly visible.<sup>21</sup> This is not to suggest that the actual sexual contact between lovers is observed, but rather that there is public knowledge of these unsanctioned sexual relationships. The overt nature of these sexual digressions necessitates shared public explanations and responses designed to maintain normative order at both social and symbolic levels. Restoration of order is dependent upon the performance of appropriate counter magic, as demonstrated by the intervention of several *dukun* in the case of Umi and Udin's affliction. Umi's chief social transgression was the open pursuit of a premarital sexual relationship. Consequently, marriage, the institutional home of legitimate female sexuality, was prescribed not only to restore her reputation but also stabilize the social order.

*Pelet* also performs an important role in meditating social change. The shifting social contexts negotiated by Umi are indicative of contemporary transitions in courtship for young people in Mataram, such as declining adult supervision, expanding mobility and the appropriation of public spaces, as well as the growing popularity of alcohol and other recreational drugs. The growing social autonomy of women in courtship and premarital relations also represents greater opportunities for the expression of female desire prior to marriage. Love magic provides a rationale for the increasing visibility of premarital sex for women. This can be understood as a form of cultural resistance to the alternative, less conservative values associated with emerging patterns of sexual relations among youth. The sexual autonomy exercised by women, in openly engaging in premarital sex, is negated by their representation as passive victims

---

<sup>21</sup> See Bennett (2000) for a description of the practice of *pacaran backstreet* involving secret courtship among young women in Mataram.

of *pelet*. This effects a shift in people's perceptions of power, away from women as agents of their own desire, and transfers the responsibility for their sexual behaviour onto men as the sexual aggressors and perpetrators of *pelet*. Prevailing interpretations of the dynamics of love magic effectively perpetuate hegemonic cultural values by reinforcing the definition of premarital sex as deviant, synonymously exalting female purity and virginity prior to marriage. Such interpretations also condone sexual double standards and reaffirm dichotomous constructions of female and male desire. Love magic is thus constructed within public discourse in a manner that mediates social change because it permits a socially plausible explanation for premarital sex, yet explains it in terms that do not destabilize dominant cultural ideals of female and male sexuality.

I would also argue that the open expression of female desire outside of marriage still represents a significant threat to the stability of persisting power relations and the centrality of sex and gender in maintaining social organization and hierarchy. Consequently, the danger that autonomous female sexuality poses in destabilizing the status quo is reversed by positioning women as being 'in danger' of falling victim to love magic. The dialectic of desire and danger invoked is one in which male and not female sexual desire is constructed as dangerous, and women are positioned as inherently vulnerable rather than desirous.

Love magic is also implicated in the social regulation of female sexuality through the ways in which young women's social identities are linked with their perceived susceptibility to *pelet*. In her analysis of love magic in North Bali, Megan Jennaway has noted that according to local understandings, women's vulnerability to love magic is clearly associated with their marital status (1996:213). The same conclusion can be drawn for Mataram, where never married or just married women are considered to be acutely vulnerable to the threat of *pelet*. The relevance of marital status is further confirmed by the popular assertion that an established marriage provides women with a degree of social and sexual security that in turn affords them protection against love magic.

Susceptibility to *pelet* is also linked to the level of social autonomy and spatial mobility of young women. Unmarried women who live or behave independently (myself included) are considered to be at higher risk of becoming victims of *pelet*. The assumption that unmarried women require protection from love magic acts as a justification for the constant surveillance that constrains their sexual autonomy. A woman's physical beauty, and hence her desirability to the opposite sex, is also interpreted as a factor influencing her potential vulnerability to *pelet*. It is common in Mataram for people to rationalize attempts to *melet* particular women on the basis of their exceptional beauty. The cultural emphasis on women's physical beauty, and its significance in evoking sexual desire is a constancy of indigenous sexual mythology of Lombok.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> See Bennett (1996) for details of the Sasak legend of *Bau Nyale* (S) and the sexual mythology expressed in this narrative.

The ideal construction of female victims of *pelet* is suggestive of a model of femininity, which is characterized by sexual availability—signified by marital status, dependency and passivity—signalled by the perceived need for protection, and women’s sexual desirability—determined by physical beauty. Not surprisingly, the archetypal victim of *pelet* is a woman who conforms to cultural ideals in her public demonstrations of sexual desirability, availability and passivity. Women such as Umi, who maintain the performance of socially acceptable models of femininity in their assumption of a victim position, maintain their status as ‘good women’ despite the compromise or possible loss of their sexual purity.

### **Dual Interpretations—*Pelet* as Affliction and Affectation**

Having explored popular explanations of the sexual dynamics embodied in the phenomenon of love magic, I shall proceed to examine the possibility of alternative interpretations that challenge rather than perpetuate prevailing models of female sexuality. The variant perspectives presented here focus on women’s potential to occupy other subject positions, and not just victimhood, in their performance of the afflictions of love magic.

While the public verdict unequivocally positioned Umi as a victim of *pelet*, her possible motivations for pursuing and eventually abandoning her relationship with Wayan do not preclude the possibility that in fact she was acting as an agent of her own desire. It is highly plausible that Umi’s infatuation with Wayan was accentuated by his relative sophistication and ‘street cred’, as well as his access to an alternative world (the global tourist/pleasure economy of Bali) typically romanticized as both affluent and exciting by youth who have experienced a more provincial upbringing in Lombok. Moreover, Umi’s former naivete about social environments beyond the realms of her village and *kampung* in Mataram, may well have intensified the allure of a seemingly more glamorous lifestyle and partner previously unknown to her. The effect of alcohol consumption in suppressing Umi’s inhibitions is another factor that could have conceivably contributed to the intensity of her initial attraction to Wayan. Unwitting intoxication via other recreational drugs, such as ecstasy which is readily available in Lombok’s night club scene, also cannot be ruled out on the basis of confirmed reports of drink spiking in Senggigi. In addition to these circumstances that may have influenced Umi’s attraction to Wayan, an invitation was clearly extended to her to visit him in Bali.

The above speculations can be seen to represent ‘pull factors’ in Umi’s decision to pursue Wayan. Concurrently a number of ‘push factors’ can also be identified. Umi’s obvious distress following the confrontation between her two suitors suggests that Udin’s violent attack on Wayan may have both frightened and traumatized Umi. A transfer of sympathy from the protagonist (Udin) to the victim (Wayan) in this circumstance would be understandable. The immediate reaction of the neighbourhood to the visibility of Udin’s ailment, and the pronouncement of *pelet*, also provided a rationale (or cover) for Umi to engage in deviant behaviour. Furthermore, Udin’s

absence during his return to East Lombok reduced the degree of surveillance to which Umi was subjected, and thus aided in the logistics of her flight.

Umi's choice to cease her relationship with Wayan and return to Mataram can also be understood in light of her dissatisfaction with their relationship and the practical alternatives she faced. Firstly, Umi was experiencing considerable loneliness due to Wayan's frequent absences, her linguistic and ethnic difference from his family, and her isolation from kin and friends in Lombok. Secondly, Umi's discovery of Wayan's unfaithfulness and his marital status would most likely have undermined her trust in him and shattered any prior expectation of marriage. To my knowledge, Wayan did not propose marriage during their affair, and the prospect of a Hindu man taking a second wife is far slimmer than is the case for Sasak Moslem men in Lombok. Finally, Umi's decision to return to Mataram suggests an awareness of the likelihood that her absence would be attributed to the effects of *pelet*, therefore absolving her of responsibility for her actions.

If one chooses to privilege discourses of emotion and female desire as plausible motivations for Umi's behaviour, her sudden departure for Bali need not be deemed as highly irrational or inexplicable. Rather, it can be understood as consonant with the spontaneity and inconsistency of adolescent affection and desire. Similarly, by acknowledging female autonomy, Umi's desertion of Wayan can be interpreted as an independent course of action compatible with her own self interest.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of love magic has highlighted the tenuous position of unmarried women in relation to their sexual identities, explicating the intricacies and contradictions involved in negotiating cultural ideals of femininity constructed upon concurrent notions of sexual desirability, availability, passivity and purity. In a parallel vein, Megan Jennaway (1996) has proposed that women's afflictions of love magic in North Bali can be interpreted as a manifestation of their emotional and/or sexual insecurity. Emotional and sexual insecurity are common among young women in Mataram who seek to assert their sexual autonomy, and for women who experience afflictions (or affectations) of *pelet*. The vulnerability of unmarried women in Lombok to sexual and emotional anxiety can be understood as an internalization of the conflict and uncertainty, deriving from contemporary transitions in premarital sexuality and persistent cultural resistance to those changes.

In surmising the various functions of *pelet* at both societal and individual levels, several principle points deserve reiteration. As a customary practice, the phenomenon and logic of love magic functions to protect public perceptions of the status quo by affirming the deviance of premarital sex and perpetuating dominant cultural constructs of sexuality and gender. For individual women *pelet* represents the potential to subvert cultural norms by providing a socially acceptable explanation for unsanctioned sexual behaviour. Finally, the flexibility of its interpretations and functions enables love magic to assume a critical role in mediating social change by normalizing tensions arising

from historical continuities and discontinuities in the realm of premarital sexuality in a dynamic local culture.

#### Notes

This paper was produced during my residence in the Gender Relations Project between May 1999 and January 2000, as a National Visiting Scholar and later as a Visiting Fellow. It was initially presented as a work in progress in August 1999 in the Anthropology Seminar Series of the Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies. I must acknowledge the valuable input of my colleagues Professor Margaret Jolly and Dr Andrea Whittaker for their careful reading of and constructive comments on this piece of work during my time with the Gender Relations Project.

## References

- Bennett, L. (1996) 'Tradition and Transition: Social Change and Courtship in the Context of *Bau Nyale*', paper presented at 'The Biennial Asian Studies Association of Australia Conference', Melbourne, La Trobe University, 8–11 July.
- Bennett, L. (2000) 'Sexuality and Secrecy: Social Change and Contemporary Courtship Practices in Mataram, Eastern Indonesia', in eds. L. Manderson and P. Liamputtong Rice, *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia: Youth Sexuality and Courtship*, Curzon, London (in press).
- Brogan, K. (1994) 'Women and Children's Health', *Inside Indonesia*, June, 10–12.
- Cederroth, S. (1981) *The Spell of the Ancestors and the Power of Mekkah*, PhD thesis, University of Gothenburg.
- Dove, M. (ed.) (1988) *The Real and Imagined Role of Culture in Development: Case Studies from Indonesia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu.
- Ecklund, J. (1977) *Marriage, Seaworms and Song: Ritualized Responses to Cultural Change in Sasak Life*, PhD thesis, Cornell University.
- Eylert, S. (1997) 'Marriage and Bride-price among the Sasak on Lombok, Indonesia', in U. Bertels, S. Eylert and C. Lutkes. Münster eds., *Mother's-Brother and Cross-cousin: Insights into the Family Life of Foreign Cultures*, University of Münster, pp. 10–16.
- Dobson, B. and K. Macintyre (1997) Personal Communication, Mataram, 10 September.
- Grace, J. (1996) 'Healers and Modern Health Services: Antenatal, Birthing and Postpartum Care in Rural East Lombok, Indonesia', in eds. P. Liamputtong Rice and L. Manderson, *Maternity and Reproductive Health in Asian Societies*, Harwood Academic Press, Sydney, pp. 145–168.
- Grace, J. (1997) *Health, Development and Sasak Women: A Political and Practical Analysis of Medical Interventions in Rural East Lombok, Indonesia*, published PhD thesis, Murdoch University, Perth.

Hunter, C. (1996) *Sasak Identity and the Reconstruction of Health: Medical Pluralism in a Lombok Village*, PhD thesis, University of Newcastle.

Jennaway, M. (1996) *Sweet Breath and Bitter Honey: HIV/AIDS and the Embodiment of Desire among North Balinese Women*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland.

Judd, M. (1980) *The Sociology of Rural Poverty in Lombok, Indonesia*, PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley.

Wolf, Y. (1993) 'The World of the Kuta Cowboy', *Inside Indonesia*, June, 15–17.

Wolfe, D. (1996) 'Javanese Factory Daughters: Gender, the State, and Industrial Capitalism in Indonesia', in ed. L. Sears, *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 140–162.