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Kala defanged

Managing power in Java away from the centre

Introduction: Topographies of power

In the anthropology of power there is a complex interaction between events on the ground, models of those events constructed by actors (explanations and charters, models of and models for), and the perspectives of outsiders trying to make sense of it all. Edmund Leach (1954) was among the first to explore this nexus of idea and action in *Political systems of Highland Burma*, since when discussion – at least in Southeast Asian circles – has oscillated, Kachin-style, between the serene idealism of Clifford Geertz (1980) in *Negara* and pragmatically minded, transactional approaches of the kind exemplified by Fredrik Barth (1993) in *Balinese worlds*.

Java has a place in this story. The turmoil of its history – its feuds and famines, conquests and colonizations – contrasts with its cultural emphasis on permanence, its refined rage for order. As Schrieke (1957) long ago showed, the continuity of Javanese history consists precisely in an *emphasis* on continuity, each ruler assuming not simply the temporary reins of power, but its lasting symbols. However different their practical circumstances, however irregular their claims to authority, successive leaders saw and projected themselves as perpetuators of the old order (Moertono 1981:38, 52-3). Order depended on a conception of power as centralized, embodied in a ruler who was either semi-divine or linked to the gods. The ruler was a figure of both temporal and sacred authority, the pattern of behaviour for regional lords and the ultimate point of reference for the peasantry (Anderson 1990; Behrend 1989; Moertono 1981). Power, in this conception, was not relational or abstract, but substantial, radiant, and magical. It operated through hierarchy.

Whether we accept as the prime reality the *image* of continuity or the disorder it attempts to recover says much about our particular theoretical bent and style. The colonial-era scholars, Schrieke, De Graaf and Pigeaud, all emphasized continuities between the pre-Islamic and Islamic kingdoms, which con-

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sisted mainly in the forms and symbols of authority, the instruments of royal power. In a similar vein, the Javanese author Soemarsaid Moertono (1981:6) writes that over a period of 'four hundred years [from its founding circa 1585, through its successor principalities, down to the present] no basic changes seem to have taken place in the structural organization of the Mataram state, nor in the ideological bases of state-life'. The idea is repeated by Benedict Anderson (1990:69) in his influential essay on the Javanese idea of power: 'Yet this overt Islamization of the rulers does not seem to have caused major alterations in their way of life or outlook. The penetration of Islam scarcely changed the composition and the recruitment of the Javanese political elite or affected the basic intellectual framework of traditional Javanese thought'. Whether they are speaking of politics, 'way of life', 'world view' or mysticism, one thing that scholars agree upon is the extraordinary stability of what Moertono calls Java's 'conservative traditionalism'.¹

In the modern period, conservative traditionalism, in fettered form, typified the cultural politics of the Soeharto era (Pemberton 1994). Unlike earlier periods, known to us only from ruins and records, about this era we have a good deal more evidence: a better sense of the interweaving of refined words with violent actions and of the sometimes contradictory relations between 'exemplary centre and administrative periphery' (Antlöv 1995). Yet the analysis of power, fixated as it is on hegemonic structures, has continued to distract from other possibilities, other topographies of power.

Indeed, a top-down view of a top-down process necessarily misses a good deal, filtering out contrary evidence and fine detail. Rather like those functionalist-era ethnographies of African societies where change was subsumed within a solid and enduring system underwritten by *pax Britannica*, theories of power in Java, if not quite a product of the 32-year Soeharto regime, came to reflect its rock-like permanence (or perhaps leech-like tenacity) and to emphasize structure, continuity, even timelessness, over material contingencies and internal variations. The key to understanding Javanese thinking lay in the symbolism of the Indianized states and their Islamized epigones, kingdoms that came and went, changing little in essentials over a millennium. The great realms of Central and East Java stood for Java as a whole, and Java (or its Balinese cousin) for Indonesia and beyond (Geertz 1968, 1980). And if

¹ Two characteristic formulations: '[...] a world view and an ethos which is elitist, esoteric, and aesthetic, and which remains, even after the adaptations and reformulations forced upon it by four hundred years of Islamization, three hundred of colonial domination, and twenty of independence, a powerful theme in the contemporary Indonesian consciousness' (Geertz 1968:36); 'a heterodox, radical union-mysticism, which the Javanese have held in tenacious, monotonous stability through long ages without essential change till the present day' (Hadiwijono 1967:6). On the contrast between the ideological continuity and practical messiness of Javanese and Balinese history, see Ricklefs 1998.

idealized 'theatre states' – constructed, like castles in the air, over 'exemplary centres' – were best witnessed in Java and Bali (or at least pre-colonial Bali), they could be descried even in such unlikely places as modern, staunchly Muslim South Sulawesi (Errington 1989). Of course the model could only be maintained, like the polities they described, by ignoring a great deal of local reality – and, in the shape of Islam, quite a lot of non-local reality; or by holding to a view of politics as largely symbolic. Geertz (1980:131) had claimed of the Balinese *negara* that the king was 'a sign in a system of signs'. Hardly changing the terms, Errington (1989:285) concludes: 'One can reasonably regard the polity as a vast apparatus whose purpose was regulating signs, and the ruler as the ultimate source, ceiling, and regulator of signs'.

The rhetorical force of the depiction made the arguments compelling.² Indeed, Anderson's centrist Java and Geertz's theatre state (surely one of the most dazzling anthropological productions) exerted such a spell that in Errington's book one sometimes doubts whether the subject is Sulawesi or Java. In pulling in the ethnographic periphery, the charismatic thinkers had enacted their theories.

Centres and outliers

If discussions of power in Indonesia have been too Java-centric, power talk *about* Java has been equally overcentralized. With the source of legitimacy located firmly in the centre – traditionally Jogja and Solo; in modern times Jakarta – outlying regions are stigmatized as powerful only in a negative way. At opposite ends of the island, Banten to the west and Banyuwangi in the east are notorious as 'warehouses of black magic'. The reputation is self-fulfilling. It was Banyuwangi – in a horrible social experiment more risky to stage near the centres of command – that saw an outbreak of witch killings at the end of the Soeharto era when over one hundred people were lynched in the space of a few months. The victims were village healers, Koran teachers, vagrants, and unfriendly neighbours – people alike in their insignificance and marginality. That much was clear. But who was to blame? The killers, according to contradictory reports, were local mobs or masked ninjas trucked in from outside. The instigators, according to rumour and inference, were Soeharto loyalists sowing the chaos that would justify a return to power, or Muslim extremists waging jihad against the infidel, or anti-Muslim extremists wanting to paint the orthodox parties as a threat to the secular compromise. Amid the talk of provocateurs and black propaganda, a surplus of theory contrasted with a dearth of reliable first-hand information. In a pattern that Bubandt (2001),

² For criticism, see Caldwell 1991; Howe 2005:32-7; Ricklefs 1992; Schulte Nordholt 1996.

writing of the Maluku wars, calls an 'epidemic logic', external factors – media reports, government directives and security warnings – fed local fears, shaping the violence in unintended ways, as the spreading violence in turn confirmed the speculation. What Bubandt (2001:245) calls 'political instigation theory' – the dark side of centrist theories of power – 'became the dominant discourse or narrative on the violence, both locally and nationally'. As is usually the case in Indonesian politics, no one knew for certain who was behind anything. Some have argued that there was no mastermind, no conspiracy. Others divined an existential crisis, a return of the repressed after decades of uneasy cultural truce (Siegel 2001). Herriman (2006, n.y.) shows in convincing detail that the witch hunt was motivated by local, relatively constant factors, its timing and virulence being a matter of opportunity as the state's grip weakened. These views are not incompatible.

Most social scientists agree that a crisis of legitimacy accompanied a practical loss of control. Indeed, the classical Javanese model predicts that the collapse of centralized state power – in image or fact – is felt first in the regions where control is weakest (Anderson 1990:34-5). From this perspective, events in East Java were symptomatic of a bigger problem. And as the Banyuwangi lynchings faded, other conflicts depending on quite different local motivations – religious, ethnic, economic – broke out in regions far from Java. Undeniably, normal service between centre and periphery had been disrupted. The analogy that springs to mind is that of a power cut in which stray cable ends flicker and burst into flame. But were other conceptions of power – autochthonous, non-hierarchical – and different frames of action also in play? Did regime change expose alternative, deeper-lying models that had been suppressed by the heavy hand of New Order governance?

Behind the efforts to assign causes and apportion blame lie older unresolved doubts over the extent to which outliers, within and beyond Java, ever subscribed to the centrist model. Caldwell (1991) effectively disposes of one example, showing that none of the criteria – Indianization, borderless realms, an indifference to territorial control, 'the idea of social and cosmic unity', in short, the exemplary centre – ever applied in South Sulawesi. But what of those 'other Javas away from the kraton', where people speak, act, eat, create, even carry things, differently (Hatley 1984)? These regional differences betoken not merely cultural variations on themes, but structural differences: breaches in the island pattern that once again became visible as Jakarta's sun dimmed.

Discussion of the causes of violence shortly before Soeharto's fall and in the aftermath has polarized around two positions which differ fundamentally on the *practical* relation between centre and periphery. One camp argues that the violence was directed from the centre; the other that it flared because the

centre could not hold.³ Aditjondro (2001), for example, provides evidence of elite support for paramilitary fighters in Maluku, whereas Van Klinken (2006:134) stresses the 'fundamentally local' character of the violence in the outer islands, rejecting 'Jakarta-centric' explanations that regional conflicts were engineered to legitimize military intervention.

For obvious reasons, social scientists, and in particular anthropologists, have been keener than political scientists on local explanations. They are less concerned with policy; they talk to different kinds of people. But as recent scholarship has reminded us, the muddying of centre-periphery relations is far from new. Among elements that complicate the centrist model one can point to the legacy of state repression from colonial times (Schulte Nordholt 2002), official connivance at gangsterism (Schulte Nordholt 2002; Frederick 2002), and local traditions of rough justice that challenge the state's monopoly on violence (Colombijn 2002; Herriman 2006; Siegel 2001). An emerging picture of the government as criminal – not merely venal and violent but illegitimate – undermines the very idea of cultural hegemony that has been scholarly orthodoxy since Anderson.

Order and consensus

Now, it is not very often that one can put one's finger on the beginning of anything as nebulous as a witch craze, but I was lucky or unlucky enough to be living a couple of miles from the first killing at the end of 1996. Not knowing that hundreds more deaths would follow, I took no more notice of it than anyone else. The pattern seemed familiar: a reputed sorcerer, a bad neighbour lynched by villagers, a botched enquiry, a failure to convict that amounted to a semi-official condoning of the act. It had happened before. When a neighbour broke the story of the killing, I was sitting with the headman of Bayu and other villagers around the remains of a *slametan*, a prayer-meal. Our informant had been working as a carpenter in the hill village of Kenjo where he had relatives and got the story himself the morning after it happened. He was convinced of the victim's evildoing and thought he had got what he deserved. He used the term *rizik*, 'cleansing', recalling the anti-communist purges of the 1960s and the 'mysterious killings' of 1983 when gangsters and local troublemakers were executed by death squads. As the imam of our neighbourhood prayer-house, his words carried a certain weight. 'These things may not be denied, may not be disbelieved', he said. But the others present disagreed.

³ Arguments about whether state agents or shadowy forces loyal to the old regime were the key factors seem to me beside the point in this respect. The regime always operated backstage to enforce the harmony that conductor and orchestra magically achieved onstage. What is at issue is whether local strife was engineered or home-grown.

The headman said there was no such thing as sorcery. The reason why so many people died in Kenjo had nothing to do with sorcery. It was because it was backward, resistant to modern ways. If people didn't foul the stream they drank from they wouldn't get sick. Another man said that if anyone deserved retribution it was the lynch mob: through the law of karma they would surely get their desserts. He himself had been a member of an Algojo death squad in 1965 and had since repented. And then they turned to me, in one of those agonizing fieldwork moments, and asked what I thought. I had heard a lot about the people who had died in Bayu in 1965, identified as sorcerers or communists – what they called *pengiwo*, figures of the left, the sinister, the dark side; I knew their widows and their children, and I said, No, the man was not a sorcerer and his killers were murderers. The headman was pleased. The imam-carpenter shook his head. The point could not be argued: this was Java. But he later banned his children from playing with mine.

Now I do not want to suggest that the witch killings were a result of religious factionalism or ideological divisions of the kind that were rife in the 1960s. Herriman's exhaustive forensic investigation has conclusively shown that not to be the case. People were victimized because of sorcery fears and personal grudges not obviously connected with cultural or class schisms; a weakened state allowed their violent expression.⁴ What I want to show with my anecdote is how local arrangements in ideologically plural villages like Bayu depend on consensus rather than a top-down cultural hegemony for the maintenance of order. A 'Things fall apart/The centre cannot hold' argument would miss this crucial point. In Banyuwangi there never was a centre. Instead, what permits daily life to go on in a village of orthodox Muslims, pantheist mystics, peasant animists and the religiously indifferent is a truce that allows people of different orientation to combine in ritual and in ordinary living arrangements. Far from the centres of political authority, what sustains the social order, what gives legitimacy to a plurality of views and practices, is a social contract realized in a hundred daily usages and sanctified in the *slametan* (Beatty 1999:23-50). The clash of opinions over the first witch killings, voiced in – of all places – a neighbourhood *slametan*, opened up a crack, forcing people to confront what divided them. When one man says 'This may not be disbelieved' and another says 'I don't believe in sorcery, the lynch mob were murderers', this makes it difficult to carry on. My own little difficulty was that

⁴ Herriman n.y., 2006. Local, even routine, motivations do not exclude the possibility that the witch craze embodied paranoid fears and unarticulated anxiety over the dead of 1965, as Siegel (2001) suggests in a fascinating essay. Siegel (2001:31, 57) is incorrect, however, in seeing witchcraft in Banyuwangi as something inherent or 'inherited' (like Evans-Pritchard's Azande), as opposed to learned or passed on. Nor is witchcraft/sorcery (synonyms in Siegel's presentation (2001:37, 46, 56)) regarded as a form of spirit possession. Neither the witch nor the victim is possessed in any sense that Javanese would recognize.

my children were deprived of their best friend for a month. But the headman, shortly after the encounter, faced a concerted challenge to his authority from Muslim militants in a coup that had been building for a year or more (Beatty 2009). The important point is that he held on; the militants were faced down; and unlike many other villages in the surrounding countryside, Bayu suffered no witch hunt. The old consensual arrangements stood it in good stead.

Tanah sabrang wetan: Power beyond the eastern frontier

The failed village coup, like the witch killings, throws a lurid light on the ways in which power is managed away from the centre, in places where potency and politics are separate matters. In the Banyuwangi area the distinction goes back a long way. As a realm loosely affiliated to Majapahit, later a rebellious vassal of Mataram, at times a Balinese ally, Blambangan in Java's Eastern Cape was ambiguously placed: neither a province nor independent, Javanese but self-avowedly different (Lekkerkerker 1923). It remained a Hindu-Buddhist realm for 250 years after Majapahit fell, retaining to this day a dialect with many words from Old Javanese and Balinese and a distinctive – probably post-conquest – ethnic badge: Osing, or Jawa Osing. Islam became the official religion of its puppet rulers, at Dutch insistence, only after the VOC had practically wiped out the population in the 1760s (Lekkerkerker 1923:1048-54). But villages around Banyuwangi remained *buda* into the mid-nineteenth century, 350 years after the rest of Java (Lekkerkerker 1923:1030). Resistance to Muslim rule is recorded in folk memory (Pigeaud 1932:249). When, in the seventeenth century, the local strongman sent his court magician and guru to Mataram, there was a trial of strength. The Mataram adviser asked for the guru's *kris*, then dissolved it in water and swallowed it. Not to be outdone, the guru spoke a *buda* mantra and called for his *kris* to return, which it did, bursting through the Mataram adviser's stomach and flying back to its owner's sheath. Every year, that 'same' *kris* undergoes a rigorous cleansing at the sage's shrine in Cungking in a ritual which is part of a priestly cult unapologetically free of Islamic elements. The cult's heirlooms include a zodiac beaker, probably Majapahit-era, of the kind still used in the Tengger highlands to the west (*Zodiak-bekers* 1921:861-2). Other relics of the same semi-legendary figure are scattered among half a dozen villages. In annual cleansing rituals they are handled reverently by ordinary Muslims and questioned for prophecy.

What is interesting is that broader Hindu-Javanese connections are forgotten, so the saint's cult presents no explicit challenge to Muslim orthodoxy or the official dominance of Islam. The same applies to the ingredients of local syncretic culture: the making of holy water, the mumbled mantras, the colour symbolism of the *slametan* that matches the iconography of fourteenth-cen-

ture Java.⁵ Sometimes identified as Wangsakarya, the guru of Tawang Alun (reign 1676-1691), most people know the sage simply as Great-grandfather Cungking. Indeed, the *buda* champion has been reinvented as a purely local hero. In local conception, the zodiac figures on the beaker refer to the lords of illness that preside over 12 sacred spots around the area. The cult's most secret and powerful knowledge is a litany of the 12 lords to be recited as you revolve the beaker on your left hand during the annual cleansing. The content of the cult's teaching, such as it is, consists of standard Javanist axioms about self-control, self-knowledge, and the interconnectedness of microcosm and macrocosm – no *bismillahs*, then, but nothing to frighten the horses. The prophetic power of the relics is pretty bland too: a matter of celebrants interpreting the letters on a copper inscription. Since the letters are worn out by centuries of fingering, the meaning changes, rewritten every year like a palimpsest. But to the cult's adherents, instruction and prophecy matter less than the fact of participation in an openly non-Islamic cult that is still a legitimate part of the local syncretism. For the saint is also the guardian spirit of the village, and the headman cannot govern without his approval, vested in the cult's elders. Weekly sessions at the shrine in Cungking are mostly attended by Javanists, people whose attachment to formal Islam is secondary. But the bigger events attract large numbers of orthodox traditionalist Muslims.

Here, then, is a localized source of power, remote from formal authority though underpinning its lowest elected functionary, distinct from the dominant religion yet complementing it in practice. In two other villages close to Banyuwangi, major non-Islamic rituals remain central to village life. In the *seblang* trance dance of Bakungan, an old woman incarnates local spirits and dances for two hours, enacting the first clearing of the forest and planting of rice. The dance is incorporated in the *slametan desa*, the annual village feast. I witnessed this performance on three occasions in the 1990s and was told by the organizers that the headman's relation to the *seblang* was like that of the Sultan of Jogja with Ratu Kidul, spirit queen of the Southern Ocean. The headman of the time, a Christian, was unhappy with his ritual consort. 'I'm already married,' he protested. But when he tried to stop the event one year he fell ill and was obliged to relent. For the *dukun* who summons the spirits, Islam is, as he put it, 'a colonization of the soul', a foreign import that he rejects as a Javanese. The *seblang*, for him, is part of Java's *buda* heritage. But most other villagers see no conflict between the *seblang* and their affiliation to Islam. Similarly, in the village of Olehsari, another *seblang* dance, this time

⁵ Pigeaud 1962, IV:57-8. Nor does the iconography contain any political referent: it is self-contained. The litany accompanying the neighbourhood *slametan* refers to the self as microcosm, not to the ruler or polity (Beatty 1999). This lack of a wider political context contrasts with the parallel that Headley found between state and village rituals and with the shared cosmology of king and peasantry in Central Java (Headley 2000:193-6).

performed by a young girl, is the main event of the ritual calendar (Wessing 1999). In an effort to bring it within the fold of Islam, it was moved from after the harvest to Idul Fitri, but its non-Islamic character is otherwise unchanged. As its organizers proudly proclaim, 'No bismillahs here'. In 1996 the young, ambitious headman – always in uniform, not terribly bright – saw it as a branch of village security (*keamanan*) rather than a challenge to orthodoxy. But despite the efforts of cultural bureaucrats to turn it into a tourist attraction or a mere cultural performance, it escapes political domestication.

Alternative models of power

So what kind of power is being channelled here? In *Varieties of Javanese religion* (Beatty 1999), I referred to Turner's concept (1969) of the 'powers of the weak', the appropriation of spiritual powers by disadvantaged groups to offset their political weakness. A similar notion was developed by Lewis (1971) in his studies of women's possession cults in East Africa. In such cases the strength of the marginalized, the efficacy of their magic – in political terms, the bite of the underdog – depends upon a shared recognition of chthonic or immanent powers. Turner traced this recognition to the liminal phase of ritual in which status differences are set aside in favour of a common humanity felt to be in the protection of the unmarked group: the maternal relatives in a patrilineal system, the people without status or formal position. What about Java? Away from the palace and the barracks, with their monopoly on might and magic, such practices can still flourish. Indeed, the traditionalist Islam followed in rural Banyuwangi is no threat to them. What would exclude the traffic with spirits – and deny the powers of the weak – is, rather, a rationalized, modernist monotheism that would banish them from its worldview.

The distinction between sacred power and political authority can be seen at its starkest in the Barong show of Bayu, an all-night drama that climaxes at dawn in a spirit possession by a were-tiger (*macan*). The *barong* is the village mascot, pet dragon of Bayu's guardian spirit; the drama in which he features is a central institution of village life; yet most of the 26 players – the musicians, clowns, princes and ape-monsters – are from families stigmatized by association with the outlawed communist party. The man who is possessed by the tiger spirit and who bears its mask witnessed as a boy the murder of his father by anti-communist vigilantes acting at the behest of regional military commanders. The disjunction between spirit power and body politic could hardly be sharper. Seeing the *macan* run riot through the terrified crowd it is hard not to wonder: what is going on inside the head of the man inside the head? And whose power is it anyway?

You might think its tainted past would put the Barong beyond the pale of

respectability. But the tiger-spirit is also the village guardian: the spirit-possession is part of the annual cleansing. Here then, we have a paradox: the welfare of the village maintained by political pariahs, people with an unspeakable past.

It would be a mistake simply to see the Barong as an example of 'resistance'. Its sanctity, its stubborn refusal to be improved by tourist promoters or manipulated by local politicians, is certainly a kind of defiance. But its place within the ensemble of village activities, like that of the trance dances and the Cungkung cult, is neither oppositional nor partisan. Nor do people see it that way. What all these performances fiercely resist is their suppression, but that is a different matter.

We can come to an understanding of what is going on by recognizing that the form and the location of power differ from the classical model in which sacred power and authority coincide (or are made to coincide through the ritual validation of force). Indeed, several conceptions of power are present in the same setting. To be sure, it is possible to find traces of the classical model in local politics, for example, in the practice of staying up on the night of a village election to see who will be anointed, as indicated by the *daru*, the ball of divine radiance that falls like a star on the roof of the favoured candidate – a practice that recalls in miniature the alighting of *wahyu*, or divine grace, on the king's successor (Moertono 1981:56). Practically, this custom puts the power of prophecy and therefore of patronage in the hands of the skywatchers: the headman has to win their approval. In the run-up to an election, villages around Banyuwangi hold divination sessions at which readings are taken from the *lontar Yusup*, a seventeenth-century Javanese narrative of the Life of Joseph.⁶ At the end of the all-night recitation, the book is smoked in incense and, one by one, the names of the candidates are put to the test. The diviner lets the book fall open and reads the lines on facing pages between his thumbs. The dozen or so elders who have sat up and recited then debate the meaning. Since the words are taken out of context (you may not refer to the lines above or below) and the two lines are unrelated to each other, the meaning is necessarily obscure, and therefore has to be sifted. It is particular words or phrases rather than whole sentences that matter.

In the village of Bayu, one such divination yielded the following combination of words when the candidate Sutris was put to the test:

Pangeran tumurun bagindha, Dawud ingkang ngebaktia ring ingsun iku maleh sun kasmaran⁷

⁶ For a comprehensive treatment of the *Lontar Yusup*, see Arps 1992.

⁷ The words do not scan as a single sentence since they combine unconnected lines from facing pages. I am grateful to Ben Arps for his advice on the transcriptions and translations. (The interpretations, in places unorthodox, are those of my informants.) The divination procedure described in Arps' book (1992:175) had changed in the few years that separated our periods of research.

The phrase *pangeran tumurun bagindha* indicated princely descent, seemingly authorizing the appointment. The name Dawud, in the anthropocentric symbolism of the *lontar*, means voice, *suwara*, which also means 'vote'. *Kasmaran* (enamoured) 'meant' *seneng*, pleased, glad. The elders agreed that a highborn ancestral headman called Kepundung was speaking through the *lontar* and giving candidate Sutris the nod.

In contrast, the divination for his rival, the son of a former headman, indicated the end of a chiefly line, as shown by the words 'death' and 'scattered'. The results of these ancestrally guided readings are noted down and preserved in beautiful calligraphy, sometimes framed, and preserved as powerful testimonies. When I asked, 'What if Sutris, in the event, hadn't been elected?', they said: 'He must, because the reading is a revelation of what must happen'. And they pointed to the line that says, *Sadurunge winarah, wus wikan*: 'Before being told, he/they already know.'

It is important to note that the divination can only be done after a full reading at which the beginning is reread, completing a narrative circle, just as the book goes round from reader to reader. And the interpretation is decided by consensus, not by an authoritative expert. The legitimation of the headman is therefore collective, anticipating the proof of the falling star. The readers stay up all night in what is called a *malem tirakat*, a night of mystical austerity, as it were accumulating and embodying the power to give voice to the prophecy.

What the collective deliberations do not fully express, any more than the complex litany of the neighbourhood *slametan*, is the esoteric meaning or level of insertion of the symbols, what Javanese call their location, *lungguh*. This is because readers differ in their orthodoxy and knowledge: some of them being pious Muslims who do the daily prayers and believe in the literal prophecy of Muhammad, others being pantheists or even atheists who see the Koran and the Prophet as no more or less than human symbols.

For the mystics, the *lontar* is an instrument of self-reflection, not a window onto the otherworld, the world of spirits, which is purely symbolic. Nor is it a factual narration of Egyptian history. As they constantly told me, 'there is no need to go outside'. *Lontar*, in their obsessive wordplay is *lantaran*, a 'mediator' in the reading of the self.

All of these performances – the trance dance, the tiger possession, the *lontar* reading – are sacred rituals before they are entertainments. As such, they cannot be tampered with. They provide access to, and showcase, power. The ritual context provides the insulating 'container' (*wadah*); collective participation authorizes the ritual's form. The notion of container and contained is, of course, a standard one in Javanese thinking; but, as we shall see, it has a particular resonance in an area remote from centralized political rule, for here sacred potency lacks the protective envelope of legitimate authority; containment and concentration must take on different forms.

Power and place: An alternative model

After the Dutch conquest of Blambangan in the late 1760s, there was no functioning court subordinate to the foreign ruler such as those of Yogya or Solo, no palace or aristocratic class to maintain the semblance of sovereignty or the pattern of behaviour.⁸ The situation was quite unlike that described by Headley (2000:196) for Central Java in which ruler and villager inhabited a 'jointly envisioned cosmos' and the peasant acknowledged his place within a hierarchy (see also Keeler 1985). Power, as locally conceived, lacked a social focus, a living epitome. Without the centripetal pull of the royal rituals, without the taxes and temple networks that provided both hierarchical frame and practical means elsewhere in Java, there was nothing – no court-country polarity – to hold things together (Hall 1999:215-29; De Casparis and Mabbett 1999:304-17). Since there was no exemplary centre, power was – and is – dispersed among sacred locations (*angker*) – mountain tops and craters, ruins and caves – and among semi-historical figures (*wong sakti*) and their shrines mythically connected to the old order. Access is controlled by *dukun*, caretakers and mystics able to tap the circuits and manipulate the relics for contemporary meanings.

In the centralizing classical model, power is at once focused and radiant, attractive and expansive – in the imagery of its exponents, a lens, lamp, or torch (Anderson 1990; Moertono 1981). Away from the centre, the topography of power is differently structured. Here we find a less explicit model composed of scattered, self-contained powerpoints. These sacred emanations may be connected up in local legend or linked through the wanderings of saints and sages: such is the case with the Twelve Lords of the Cuningking cult. Or they subsist as isolates, effusions that cannot be brought within an overarching narrative unless it be that of the pantheist mystics, for whom power is as singular as it is pervasive (Beatty 2009:151-64, 188-99).

For this alternative model of power, metaphors of torches or lamps will not do. One thinks instead of the fashionable image of the rhizome: haphazard connection without hierarchy or centre; or the secret tunnels, reported by George Quinn (2004), that link powerpoints across Java. I have not heard of these tunnels in Banyuwangi, but the notion of subterranean networks, subtly undermining surface hierarchies, is an apt one for the inchoate model I am outlining. Against the top-down, hierarchical vision of a cosmic mountain or

⁸ A remnant lives on in Banyuwangi, jealously preserving its titles but without power or privilege (De Stoppelaar 1927:20). To the extent that they are known in the hinterland villages, their standing depends on reputed connections with semi-legendary figures of the pre-colonial past. At the time of my fieldwork in the 1990s, a retired plantation supervisor – an aristocratic scion – kept the family graveyard.

omphalos, with the king at its centre, picture a hidden Java shaped to local impulses, honeycombed from within.

Blambangan, whose volcanic landscape is riddled with powerpoints, was a place of exile, its plantations worked by colonial convicts, its forests and mountains the haunt of dynastic rebels and malcontents fleeing Mataram and Bali. Among the aristocratic spirits of Alas Purwo (Primeval Forest) on the Eastern Cape is Joyokusumo, the founder of Sangkan Paran, a mystical sect with a large following in the region. As he entered the forest for the first time, Joyokusumo is said to have peeled off his human mask to reveal a tiger within: a trope that joins the liminal status of the were-tiger to the unruly energy of the exile. To members of the sect, the mystical tiger-spirit recalls an earlier legend – the charter myth of Blambangan’s golden age. Before he challenged Mataram and struck out for independence, Tawang Alun first withdrew to the forest where he saw a vision of the white tiger (*macan putih*) that would carry him to the place where he would found his new capital, Macan Putih.

Like the forest sprites and demons of the Barong drama, noble spirits are sources of power unrecognized in official discourses. With their seats (*lungguh*) in wild places – groves, crags, ruins – they harbour an untamed potency that can be converted into hegemony only through rebellion, usurpation or the millennial coming of the Just King, the *ratu adil*. One of the epithets of the Sangkan Paran founder, to be found in a litany in the member’s handbook, is Erucakra, a messianic title he shares with that epitome of displaced potency, Prince Dipanagara. His shrine in a village to the west of Banyuwangi contains a repository of relics, including ‘Dipanagara’s gown’.

The boundary of power

In the classical Javanese model of statecraft, the ruler claimed to be the axis of the world – not just a hotline to the gods but the point of intersection between the microcosm of the realm and the godly macrocosm (Moertono 1981). After Blambangan was decapitated and laid waste by the VOC, the concentric model could not apply. Sacred power lurked in the forests, among diehard rebels and priests loyal to the old order (Lekkerkerker 1923; Pigeaud 1932). But they too were rooted out or sent into exile. Modern Banyuwangi is the legacy of this history.

Without centre or periphery, the problem of accumulation and containment of sacred power takes a different form. Anderson’s model has a radiant centre but no perimeter: power simply fades with distance, like the signal from a telephone mast. Ironically, all that remains of the last kingdom in Blambangan is part of its wall: a perimeter without a centre. Post-conquest another model is emphasized. Power is kept from slipping away not by cen-

tripetal ritual but by inscribing a temporary boundary. In all of the examples I have given, before local spirits are channelled, the participants first construct a boundary, either by ritually walking round a territory, constructing a fence or enclosure, or verbally marking off a perimeter, as in the litany of the 12 lords on the zodiac beaker or the circuit of *lontar* readings (the readers, in turn, are enclosed within a fence of woven leaves). As with everything else, the relation of content to container is itself subject to diverse cultural elaboration. The container, *wadhah*, is – for Javanists – the material (*wadhag*) form holding the more precious ethereal content. If the wrapper is Islamic, as in the prayers framing a *slametan*, the higher truth is contained in the kernel, which is always in the vernacular, not Arabic. The more orthodox, on the other hand, tend to relativize the content or interpret its symbols in Islamic terms. The *lontar* recitation seems on the face of it a plainly Islamic occasion. But the concealed meanings, unavailable to the orthodox (or unacknowledged), are anthropocentric and universal. In the same way, for the mystics the true source of knowledge is not the Koran, which is time-bound and historical, but the living human body – the ‘wet book’ – endlessly reproduced through the generations. In this East Javanese, literally eccentric, perspective, the fixed orientation of, and to, the palace no longer applies. Microcosm and macrocosm join not in the single person of the ruler, but in any individual able to read the symbols or scan the book of the self. The fixed cosmic order, so crucial to classical statecraft, gives way to a relativist anthropocentric universe, a kind of ‘wherever I hang my hat’ philosophy.

More at home in Java’s Eastern Cape, the metaphysical free agent is nonetheless a latent threat in regions closer to the centres of traditional authority. Indeed, for Keeler (1992:10), the pursuit of potency through self-isolation is linked to notions of autonomy. Once obtained, however, potency must be acknowledged to remain effective: the challenger needs a following, the *dhalang* an audience (Keeler 1992:19; Moertono 1981:79). Moreover, the possibility of withholding one’s attention or transferring allegiance ‘undermines the potency of any one center, and so undercuts the potency of the exemplary center’ (Keeler 1985:139). The instability of power, its dependence on attraction not coercion, grants an efficacy to the formally powerless; top-down ideology is vulnerable to popular withdrawal.⁹

‘In the traditional setting,’ writes Paul Stange (1999:240), ‘mystical consciousness and social power were cosmologically bound together.’ In the Banyuwangi-based Sangkan Paran sect, whose ideas are interwoven with local religious practices, notions of microcosm and macrocosm, expressed in a

⁹ A reviewer comments: ‘[in Central Java] people are always on the lookout for signs as to the waning of a current center and so the seeds of disorder are always present. Kethoprak stories are full of this sort of thing.’

politically correct formula linking the 'order of the state' (*tata negara*) with the orders of household and person, are balanced by a countervailing emphasis on self-containment and the individual realization of spiritual potency (in the sect's jargon, *kuwasa*). Stange identifies a separation of the magical from the mystical, a 'shift of emphasis from powers to consciousness' in post-colonial Javanese mysticism. In Sangkan Paran's case, this shift is not just a reckoning with modernity or an acknowledgement of political realities; it restates a vernacular rejection of the centrist model, affirming the universal in the local.

For the mystics, then, power is personalized. For the rest, it emerges in performance – theatrically and violently, but guaranteed by a tradition that is itself dependent on a living consensus, a joining of unlike-minded souls in the social compact. This is not Durkheimian organic solidarity, but a kind of horses-for-courses ecumenism that accommodates difference by specialization and an agreement not to contest meanings in public. For lack of a centre, cohesion is achieved by other means. And in the intricate symbolism of the *slametan* it all comes together.

One might argue that the frozen politics of the Soeharto era, like the *pax Neerlandica*, favoured and fostered this ritual and social compromise. But the compromise preceded the dictatorship and outlasted it; it was maintained in spite of state-sponsored violence and political repression.

Placing power

Javanese visitors to rural Banyuwangi, like colonial observers before them (De Stoppelaar 1927:21, 115), are struck by its egalitarian ethos and – in the Osing-majority villages – the almost complete lack of speech levels or formal indicators of status. To these unusual features we can add other characteristics unwitnessed by earlier observers: its fluid social patterns, its flirting with competition and chaos in traditional contests, its internal diversity and the complex cultural compromises that prevent conflict (Beatty 2005). The temptation is to explain these regional peculiarities as either adventitious historical residues or the effects of some unchanging cultural essence. But they possess both a long history and the sanction of tradition. And seen in the light of the problematic of this article – power away from the centre – they take on a certain logic. Banyuwangi is what it is because of where it is. Its place within the bigger picture, its dislocation, is crucial. Can the same be said, perhaps, of other outliers?

I have said that the work of interpretation is very much concerned with locating meanings: in texts, in the body, in puns and allusions. This is common to all Javanese interpretation. But Banyuwangi is especially concerned with place: being in and out of place, changing places, and so on (Beatty 2002). With no fixed fount of power, space becomes highly relativized and

unstable; even the cardinal directions are given anthropocentric – hence shifting – origin (Beatty 1999:162-3). What matters for order, and thus for the containment of power, is the orderly management of movement. A change of place within the structure implies a potentially dangerous release of power, but provided this can be contained within a ritual form, it can be beneficent, life-giving. At the seven-month pregnancy ritual, for example, husband and wife change places, the woman squirting porridge into the husband's cupped hands. He provides the womb-container, she the seed.

Weddings climax, amid the thunder of drums, in a curious little ritual in which bride and groom scramble for seeds tipped out of a bag and then pull either end of a leaf packet (*kupat*). The two actions mime the spreading of seed – a ritual ejaculation – and release from a vow symbolized by the unravelling of the empty packet. Content without container is replaced by a container without content. The life-giving rhythm of spilling and release is enacted within the safety of a ritual wrapper.

The same highly charged unravelling occurs in the Barong show when the were-tiger breaks free of his bonds prior to possessing the man-in-the-mask. And ritual unravelling completes the exorcistic shadow play which tells the story of the Birth of Kala. In his erudite studies of cosmology, Stephen Headley (2000, 2005) has reconstructed the evolution of the Kala myth and its changing place in what he calls the Central Javanese 'landscape of faith'.¹⁰ In Headley's analysis, a holism rooted in the old kingdoms and personified in the monarch has given way to a rival worldview whose centre is Mecca and whose constituency is the amorphous *umat*. Islam's 'transposable landscape of belief' is inhabited by an uprooted peasantry now prey to individualism and nostalgic for the lost whole (Headley 2005:517). But in Banyuwangi, as we have seen, Islam made its accommodations in a very different way and in a quite different setting. In places such as Bayu, among villagers of mixed orientation, the concept of the *umat* can only be divisive. Until recently, with the Islamic revival, it was rarely used. In two years' fieldwork I only heard the word used by visiting preachers. In Bayu, the ties between co-religionists complement rather than challenge the horizontal bonds of kinship and neighbourhood; and at the very edge of Java there was no centralized hierarchy to replace or bring down. Kala stalks an altogether different landscape. Indeed, differences in the topography of power help to account for the special appeal of his story.

As in the wedding rite, in the Birth of Kala we again find a miming of spilling and freeing. The god Guru (Siwa) chases his consort, fails to catch her (or – seated behind her on an ox – cannot connect) and spills his sperm into the ocean, thus unleashing evil and death upon the world. Guru's semen causes a boiling of the ocean from which a monster, Kala, the source of misfortune,

¹⁰ Alternative East Javanese wayang versions are outlined in Clara van Groenendael 1992.

is born. Mary Douglas (1966) famously defined pollution as matter out of place. Guru's spilled seed is, supremely, matter out of place, the original sin for which all humans must pay. As the god Narada explains to Guru, 'this all started because you chose the wrong time and place' (Headley 2000:39). But the offending material is not simply out of place but lacking a receptacle, a *wadhah*. The performance of the play is the solution to this problem.

For reasons which should now be clear, the very idea of spilt seed – displaced power – makes the play highly appropriate for Banyuwangi; indeed the Birth of Kala is said, by tradition, to be the only wayang regularly performed in the area. The dangerous power unleashed by the randy god, is domesticated, made safe by the puppeteer. Kala's fangs are extracted and his powers over the *lare wayang* – the children whose birth combinations are inauspicious, people out of place – are dissolved by the recitation of sacred mantras. The sponsors of the show, or their children who have been hexed by Kala, gather beneath the puppet screen and pull the ends of an empty leaf packet, freeing themselves from Kala's influence.

But power, its containment and orderly release, depend, as I have said, on consensus. You may disagree, but once you do so in public you breach the protective fence, the container, and power runs riot. So it did in 1998 with the fall of Soeharto. In the year before that Year of Living Dangerously, I recorded another of those oddly humorous little rituals that mark the milestones in Java. Two boys about to undergo circumcision were *dikalani*, that is rid of Kala's baneful influence, by having their hairline shaved and a cock's blood tipped over their heads. It was a splicing together of opposites: a head-circumcision, a *buda* exorcism joined to an Islamic rite of passage. The master of ceremonies was the *modin*, the mosque official. He wore a trilby hat to show he was off-duty and a smile to show that it was all harmless fun, no stain on his official orthodoxy. But the boys' father, a reformist zealot and critic of the *modin*, had objected to the performance. Under pressure he let it happen. It was this man – an ally of the imam-carpenter – who later led the village coup against the secularist headman and enthusiastically backed the witch killings. For him and the growing number who are like him, Islam has ceased to be a mere container of Javanism. Indeed the metaphor no longer applies. A purified Islam needs no Javanist purifications.

Yet amid the Islamic revival, the shows go on: the *seblang*, the tiger possessions, the spirit cults, the *lontar*. In a context of overheated cultural politics, Kala's defanging – the ritual containment of power – comes to assume a broader significance. Demonic visitations, eruptions of local powers, are no longer mere community revitalizations. They are partisan reminders that the heterodox majority (in some places, minority) will not be sidelined.

Conclusion

‘Though, from the centre it never seems so, most of Java is far from the *kra-ton*’, writes Ron Hatley (1984:15). The ethnography of Java is a recent affair – systematic fieldwork by anthropologists goes back only a generation – and the scope of variation has not been adequately charted. But distance can be social as well as geographical; the view from the bottom is not the same as the view from the top. Historians of Java routinely comment that elite culture should not be taken as a guide to local practice. But the working assumption is that, lacking evidence to the contrary, what goes in the court – with obvious modifications – goes in the village. It would be fairer to accept that dynastic histories and the literature of the courts cannot provide a reliable basis from which to generalize about popular belief and practice in the past, even where the literature (for example, the *Centhini*) takes popular culture as its subject (Ricklefs 2006:196). Even in the 1990s, I found that Banyuwangi’s intelligentsia – the local experts on arts, history and custom – knew little of the sociology of the village or the complexity and variety of belief and practice. When I described syncretic rituals I had witnessed they listened with polite incredulity; when I told them of *slametan* in the village of Bomo attended by both Hindus and Muslims, they declared this to be impossible. Anthropologists will be familiar with this reaction. The intricate compromises of village life in Java, the myriad usages that find no official expression, cannot be captured in a visit or an interview: they can be known only through patient long-term familiarity and participant observation. If ‘expertise’ falters before the living reality, in dealing with the historical record the gap between official knowledge and local practice must be far wider. In truth, we simply do not know what the mass of Javanese thought or did in earlier periods or to what extent they conformed to the Great Tradition of the courts. And the further from the political centre the stronger must be this conclusion. As the example of Banyuwangi shows, it would be a safer bet to assume that village ideas and practices – answering, as they do, to quite different structures and needs – are not and probably never have been like those of the centre. Where they appear similar, through incorporation into larger ritual frames or through adaptations of elite styles, other practices persist in their shadow, contradicting, parodying, complementing, or merely differing from the dominant mode. Suzanne Brenner has commented that writers on Javanese concepts of power have tended to confirm ‘ideologies of the centre’, by which she means the formally superior, male perspective. Instead, she argues, ‘attention to peripheral discourses may reveal fundamental views of women’s and men’s natures that bypass or re-configure the idioms of potency and prestige’ (Brenner 1995:42). My concern in this essay has not been gender, but my strategy has been somewhat similar. There is more to Java than the lamp reveals.

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