

---

# *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the  
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

*The Journal of Religion and Theatre* is a peer-reviewed online journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

**ISSN 1544-8762**

All rights reserved. Each author retains the copyright of his or her article. Acquiring an article in this pdf format may be used for research and teaching purposes only. No other type of reproduction by any process or technique may be made without the formal, written consent of the author.

---

## **“Becoming a Puppet”: Javanese Dance as Spiritual Art**

by

Felicia Hughes-Freeland

This article presents material from my anthropological research into Indonesian societies and cultures from 1982 to 1999, and focuses on performance traditions in the Special Region of Yogyakarta in southern central Java.<sup>1</sup> It provides an analysis of case study materials of select Indonesian court dance forms and their complex ties to spirituality and religion. In particular, contrasts drawn by court dancers between court and village performances reveal similarities and differences between religious practices in the two social spheres. Court attitudes toward formal religion are informed by different mystical traditions, including Sufism and Theosophy; villagers, in contrast, operate in an animist context sometimes referred to as “*buda*” (meaning pre-Islamic, but not necessarily Buddhism). I take a phenomenological approach to performance and religion and the relationship between them. These terms are treated as emergent and understood in terms of local categories. This means that I ground my discussion in the terms practitioners used to explain and rationalize their experiences.

The discussion aims to explain what it means to say that a dancer “becomes a puppet” in court dance theatre (*wayang wong*). It first outlines the nature of religious pluralism in the Indonesian state, and offers different explanations of the relationship of Islam to the animist practices which are sometimes referred to as “Javanese religion” (*agama Jawa*). I examine this relationship through a discussion of trance-possession performance in village ritual and through an analysis of first-hand accounts of the experience and practice of court dance. In particular, I discuss a dance philosophy that was written down to rationalize a repertoire which developed during the colonial period (1756-1945). The philosophy is articulated through four principles: concentration (*sěwiji*), energy (*grěgěti*), confidence (*sěngguh*), and determination (*ora mingkuh*). These four concepts are interpreted in different ways, from the specifics of what a dancer should do in performance to how a person should behave in life. This philosophy demonstrates how Javanese people in court circles use spiritually-inflected arguments and categories to explain what westerners might class as psychology and philosophy, not just religion. The blur between the categories of dance and religion occurs because of local differentiation of what might be more generally regarded as “religious” or “spiritual” attitudes from formal religious codes and practices. Court dance represents an aesthetic which is both spiritual and moral, and which is distinct from village possession performance, religion, mysticism, and spiritual techniques. Despite their contrasts, court and village performances both show deviations from what are understood to be the tenets of “pure” or formal Islam.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professor Geoffrey Samuel for inviting me to participate in the “Religion and Performance” seminar series in the School of Religious and Theological Studies, Cardiff University, where an earlier version of this paper was presented on 6 June 2006.

---

---

## Religious Pluralism in the Indonesian State

To contextualize my discussion of performance, I begin with a brief description of the religious background. Indonesia is the world's largest Islamic society, with 90% of its population of around 250,000,000 people identifying themselves as Muslims. Indonesia is not an Islamic state, but is founded on both ethnic and religious pluralism. One of the five guiding principles of the state philosophy, Pancasila ("Five Principles"), requires Indonesian citizens to believe in one God. They can choose to be Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Protestant (*Kristen*) or Catholic (*Katolik*).<sup>2</sup>

These different global religious affiliations are spread unevenly across Indonesia's 17,500 islands. Hinduism and Buddhism were the first religions to spread into the archipelago (c. 400 A.D.). Today they are found mainly in Bali, and also among animist groups who have represented themselves as Hindu or Buddhist to conform to the state's requirement to be monotheistic. During the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, commercial Islamic communities were established in ports in Malaysia, north Sumatra and east Java, followed by European traders and Jesuit missionaries from the fifteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Islam was brought to Indonesia by Sufi merchants, and was superimposed on the existing indigenous, Hindu-Buddhist religious landscape.<sup>4</sup> Although most contemporary Indonesian Muslims are not members of Sufi brotherhoods, Sufism has shaped Indonesian Islam and religious attitudes. By the sixteenth century, political leaders were using Islam to consolidate their power and establish Islamic kingdoms in Java. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, protected by European colonial systems, missionaries from Protestant and evangelical sects also set to work to convert the locals, and continue to do so.

The Republic of Indonesia was internationally recognized in 1949. There followed sporadic struggles between groups who favored the republic becoming an Islamic state and those who supported President Soekarno's Pancasila-based pluralism. After a turbulent period, there was an attempted "coup" on 30 September 1965, which was blamed on Indonesia's strong communist party. This resulted in the establishment by President Suharto of the "New Order" military right-wing government (1966-1998). There was a massive purge of communists and alleged sympathisers, and citizens were required to identify their religion on their identity cards (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk*); not having a religion was tantamount to being a communist, and thus an enemy of the state. For this reason, many people in Indonesia may not be particularly religious, but they will nonetheless identify their religion as Islam. In particular, of the ethnic Javanese originating from central and east Java who

---

<sup>2</sup> It is significant that, in this classification, Hinduism and Buddhism are classed as monotheistic, while Christianity counts as two different religions, leaving no room for Judaism, Jainism, Sikhism or other global religions.

<sup>3</sup> According to the historian Anthony Reid, Islam arrived in Melaka in 1410, and Christianity in 1511. The first Muslim kingdoms in Java were on the north coast: Gresik (1410), Cirebon and Banten (1425), and Demak (1480). The last Hindu-Javanese kingdom of Majapahit fell in 1527. See *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, Vol II: *Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 133-4.

<sup>4</sup> See P.J. Zoetmulder, *Pantheism and Monism in Javanese Suluk Literature: Islamic and Indian Mysticism in an Indonesian Setting* (Ed. and trans. M.C. Ricklefs, K.I.T.L.V. Translation Series 24, Leiden: K.I.T.L.V. Press, 1995).

---

form forty-five percent of Indonesia's population, many of those in the province where I did fieldwork, the Special Region of Yogyakarta, did not pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, or undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. They only engaged with Islamic religious practices for rites of passage: birth, circumcision, marriage/divorce, and death. They described themselves as "statistical Muslims," and were much given to making statements to the effect that "Java did not enter Islam, Islam entered Java," and making anti-Islamic jokes.<sup>5</sup>

Java has been made famous as an example of religious syncretism through Clifford Geertz's *Religion in Java*, the definitive study until Andrew Beattie's *Varieties of Javanese Religion*,<sup>6</sup> although both of these studies are based on research in East Java, away from the "cultural heartland" of Java. Geertz researched in a small town in the mountains between Malang and Surabaya, and Beattie in villages in the eastern salient of Java, populated by the ethnically distinct Osing people. Geertz and Beattie acknowledge that there is a blurring between religious boundaries producing syncretism, but they differ in their analysis of Javanese Islam.

Islam is famously heterogeneous, a fact often forgotten by fundamentalists and governments. Geertz distinguished between ideal types of village animist Islam, urban normative Islam, and court-centered mystical Islam. He has been criticized for ignoring the indigenous basis of Javanese Islam, and for representing occupational categories as religious.<sup>7</sup> This was most controversial in the court category, *priyayi*. During the colonial period (up to 1945), *priyayi* referred to aristocrats and colonial officials; after independence many became civil servants (*pegawai negeri*). Geertz's account of *priyayi* suffers from his research location being so distant from the centers of Javanese culture. Conversely, a more recent study about the sultan's court at Yogyakarta rejects pluralist and syncretic approaches, and argues that Javanese Islam is *normative* Islam. Although it may have been founded in Sufism, there is local recognition of particular instances of polytheism (*syrik*, Ar. *shirk*) that deviate from pure Islam. Beattie draws more on Geertzian syncretism than Woodward, but he also suggests that it is Islam and not Java that is the unifying factor in Javanese religion.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Woodward's characterization of urban Islam in Yogyakarta as normative, my research showed that court-associated *priyayi* in Yogyakarta practice *all* the variants of Islam differentiated by Geertz, and in some cases with a dose of ideas from Theosophy. Furthermore, the court *priyayi* shared a similar pragmatism in their practices and explanations of their religious behavior to that demonstrated by Javanese villagers and commoners whose "*abangan*" religious variant was a syncretism of animism, Hinduism, and Islam syncretism. For example, community feasts (*selamatan*) take place in urban and rural communities. These include pre-Islamic spells and incantations as well as Islamic prayers to Allah. Although court and village attitudes are differentiated along lines of status and aesthetics, and although village religion differs from court Sufism, there are some underlying principles

---

<sup>5</sup> For instance, "I can only spell one word in Arabic: pig."

<sup>6</sup> C. Geertz, *Religion in Java* (New York: Free Press, 1960). A. Beattie, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: an Anthropological Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> H.W. Bachtiar, "The Religion of Java: a Commentary," *Sastra Indonesia* V, 1 (1973): 85-117.

<sup>8</sup> Beattie 290.

---

common to both, and it is important not to essentialize religious differences between court and country.<sup>9</sup>

### **Possession Performance in Village Religion**

These principles emerge in relation to ideas about spirit possession and other similar practices. Java, like many other regions in Southeast Asia, is noted for its trance and possession performances. Masked and unmasked dances invite ancestral or territorial spirits and supernatural forces into human space. Dance experts speak of court dancing in ways which suggested that they were possession dances. Court dance theatre (*wayang wong*) is based on shadow puppet plays. *Wayang wong* is a human version of the well-known shadow play, and models its stories and characters on it. Like the shadow play on which it is modeled, *wayang wong* enacts Javanese philosophical and spiritual worldviews expressed in plays sometimes derived from the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. A dancer is referred to as a puppet (*wayang* or *ringgit*) and portrays what appears to be a highly conventionalized character. A dance expert, Prince Suryobrongto, wrote that “Court dancers, by attending to their role, are in a kind of ‘trance’ [sic]”<sup>10</sup> and later, that the dancer had to “become the puppet” (*menjelma* I.).<sup>11</sup> In conversation during fieldwork, he described the transformation experience during dancing or acting as “possession” (*kěpanjangan*).<sup>12</sup>

Given the frequency of possession performance in the region, it would be reasonable to expect that “becoming a puppet” is a form of possession, but this is not the case.<sup>13</sup> Before examining why Javanese court dance practitioners explained their practices as they did, I first describe village dance practices that involve possession. I then discuss how court practitioners situate what they do in relation to these kinds of village performance. By comparing and contrasting practices and ideas of spirit possession in village and court, I will clarify the relationship between court dance performance and religion.

A popular folk dance in Java is horse dance, known as *jathilan*, *kuda lumping*, *kuda kepeng* or *jaranan*. These highly dramatic forms are associated with animist cults that originate in Javanese villages, where they are performed as part of annual village festivals that take place after the harvest in order to give thanks and to secure fortune and well being for the coming year.<sup>14</sup> Today they are also performed in

---

<sup>9</sup> Writing about *bissu* spirit possession cults in South Sulawesi, Gibson argues that the relationship between global Islam and spirit cults is “essential for an understanding of society and the state in Indonesia” (42). T. Gibson, “Islam and the Spirit Cults in New Order Indonesia: Global Flows versus Local Knowledge,” *Indonesia* 69 (April 2000): 41-70.

<sup>10</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, *Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta* (Yogyakarta: Museum Kraton (dan PDK), 1976) 20.

<sup>11</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, “Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta,” *Kawruh Joged-Mataram* (Ed. Dewan Ahli Yayasan Siswa Among Běksa, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Siswa Among Běksa, 1981) 14.

<sup>12</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, *Conversations*, Yogyakarta, 1 June 1983.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of cases in West Java, see K. Foley, “The Medium and the Message: Sintren, Trance Performance of Cirebon.” *Essays on Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Local Manifestations and Cross-cultural Implications* (Ed. K. Foley. Berkeley: University of California, 1992). On East Java, R. Wessing, “A dance of life: the *Seblang* of Banyuwangi, Indonesia,” *BKI* 155.4 (1999): 644-682. And on Bali, Luh Ketut Suryani and G. Jensen, *Trance and Possession in Bali* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> M. J. Kartomi, “Music and Trance in Central Java,” *Ethnomusicology* 17 (1973): 163-200.

---

village and urban contexts for ceremonial and commercial purposes, including tourist shows.<sup>15</sup>

*Jathilan* consists of two teams of dancers who dance with woven bamboo hobby-horses. They first perform a choreographed fighting dance, which is followed by “free” dancing under the influence of possessing spirits. At this point some or all of the dancers lose control to possessing spirits. They become abnormally strong, and perform unusual feats, such as eating straw and glass. The performance is full of suspense and danger because no one is sure how the altered states will affect the performers’ behavior, and because the possession is believed to be contagious, capable of extending to members of the audience.

The dance both dramatizes and is motivated by the relationship between the spirit master (*pawang*) and the spirits. The *pawang* is normally a male expert who invites the spirits and then attempts to control their dramatic manifestations in the visible world. He is dressed as a menacing “strong man” (*jago*), and may perform as a masked lion of the forest (*barongan*). He is assisted by dancers representing the folk characters who may also have spiritual powers, variously named as Bancak or Penthul (long nose) and Dhoyok or Temben (short nose). The *pawang* facilitates the occurrence of possession, physically encouraging the dancers to work themselves into a trance state. He manages the possession event, making sure that the violence of the possession causes no lasting harm either to the possessed or to the audience, and he ensures that the possession is ended properly. Without such intervention, a performer can fail to return to a normal and complete everyday human state.

The number of *pawang*, masks, and characters in the dance varies according to performance, and not all masks are used each time. Each mask has its own spirit which can possess more than one person if the mask is passed around. Masks are powerful because they bridge the dangerous and ambiguous zone between cultured humanity and natural animality, the visible and invisible worlds.<sup>16</sup> They are gateways to the unknown, and attract ancestral and other spirits; these take possession of the wearer who enters an altered state, referred to as *ndadi* (*kesurupan* I.), and loses control. Islamic disapproval of masks has resulted in some dancers in the 1970’s, ’80’s and ’90’s wearing sunglasses instead of masks in these forms in central Javanese villages, and also curbing the use of possession in *jathilan* and another possession form, *reyog*.<sup>17</sup> Where possession still occurs, putting on sunglasses is a sign the spirit has arrived, and it represents a loss of self-control.

A horse trance performer from a villager in the Sleman district of Yogyakarta explained his own experience of inner states and the role of the *pawang*:

---

<sup>15</sup> In the 1950’s the horse dance was taken up by Javanese migrants to Malaysia, and was analyzed in terms of its contributing to their acculturation: K.O.L. Burridge, “Kuda Kepang in Batu Pahat, Johore,” *Man* 61 (Feb. 1961): 33-36. V. M. Clara van Groenendael has recently documented the transformation of a horse dance troupe from being ‘Javanese religion’ to New Order culture: *Jaranan: the Horse Dance and Trance in East Java* (Verhandelingen Van Het Koninklijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde 252, Leiden: K.I.T.L.V. Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 165.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Zamzam Fauzannafi. *Reog Ponorogo: Menari di antara Dominasi dan Keragaman* [Dancing between Domination and Religiosity] (Yogyakarta: Kepel Press. 2005). See also M. Kartomi, “Performance, Music and Meaning in Réyog Ponorogo,” *Indonesia* (Cornell) 22 (Oct. 1976): 85-130.

---

If I'm in a trance I'm not aware (*sadar*). I don't know what I've eaten, people will tell me after, but I just feel tired...it's not hard to come out of trance, the *pawang* tells the spirit (*roh alus*) to come out...If it's hard, that's because the *pawang* lacks expertise, hasn't done enough meditation. Before a performance, we have to fast for a day and night and sleep in the graveyard...I don't know which spirit enters me. The *pawang* invites our ancestors (*nenek leluhur*) to enter. There are different spirits, different offerings (*sajen*). One dancer is possessed by one spirit. Which spirits come depends on where we're performing. One spirit leader commands many "soldiers," so the *pawang* has to ask the leader of the particular group for permission to invite the spirits. The *pawang* has to know which spirits are helpful, and which ones are destructive and dangerous. He invites the spirits in a manner according to his own beliefs. This is Javanese, Islam's just arrived. In the case of Hindu Buddha, they very much believe in (*percaya*) spirits (*roh*). So it [possession] is not tied to religion, but religion provides the faith to do it: you ask your particular god for help. So Protestant (*Kristen*) *pawang*s ask Jesus for help.<sup>18</sup>

There was an unusual feature at a *jathilan* performance I documented in a highland hamlet in the Bantul district of Yogyakarta Province in August 1999. In this community, annual thanksgiving rituals (*bersih desa*) usually included offerings to the village spirit (*dhanyang*), described by the local keeper of the spirit shrine (*pepundhen*) as a husband and wife who manifest as tigers. The ritual events included a community feast (*slametan*) and a *tayuban*, a dance in which village men take it in turns to dance with three professional women singer-dancers. This activity is called "dancing the village spirit" (*ngimbinke dhanyang*). It is preceded by prayers to the spirit and ritual washing of the dancers, who also perform healing rites using cosmetic face powder. These dancers are not normally possessed by the village spirit (*ketempel danyang*). If possession (*kesurupan*) occurs in this event, it is a sign that the rituals have been performed incorrectly, and the *dhanyang* is dissatisfied: someone will go crazy, or act strange, or faint, or get possessed, either villagers or the host or the keeper of the shrine. After these events, there is often a *jathilan* performance which is expected to include possession.

Several days after the *tayuban* in 1999, a visiting *jathilan* troupe came to the hamlet to perform as part of the celebrations for the Indonesian Independence Day. The troupe leader had asked for his troupe to be blessed by the *dhanyang*. Before the public performance, the keeper of the shrine and spiritual expert, Pak Towikrama, led a procession down to the local spring where rituals for the *dhanyang* usually took place, and performed the blessing. The troupe was given water from the spring, and then performed for the *dhanyang*, without any occurrence of possession. They then returned to the dance arena in the hamlet. After the formal choreographed section, one of the dancers went into trance. At this point my video battery suddenly dropped to empty, and my other still camera jammed. People suggested that these technical breakdowns were caused by a spirit who was annoyed with me because I had failed to make the proper ritual requests to film on that particular day. Other anthropologists

---

<sup>18</sup> Pak N., dancer and taxi driver, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 23 August 1999.

have reported similar technical problems when trying to photograph supernatural presences.<sup>19</sup> I recorded subsequent events in my field notes:

The possessing spirits can put particular dancers in grave danger, and are managed by the strong man...Now four people are helping with one of the four dancers remaining – he’s lying down, his legs shaking convulsively, face horribly contorted, wrinkled brow, carried off by the *pawang*s – “it’s too hard to get the spirit out, so they’ll finish off inside,” says Mas K. Three people are dancing with horses, two without glasses, one with. The glass eater’s “already alright.” ...By 2:40 the tempo’s increased, and the “drumming” dancer’s just been brought off. One is left, holding the horse, without glasses. Five people attend to the last dancer, moving him round the arena, as he hangs on to his horse. Now the dancer seems to have collapsed; his horse is removed from his grasp, and a group of men are carrying him off into a house. He’s rigid, his mouth grotesquely distorted. Mas K tells me that possessing spirits who are not managed properly by the local medium and *pawang*s make trancers die or stay in a state of *linglung* - in a daze. A *pawang* pulls on different parts of the dancer’s body to find the spirit and pull it out, or he blows on the body to control the spirit-dancer. Pak Towikrama has the ultimate power and knowledge, and is the only one who can pull the strongest spirit out of the dancer’s body. This and other healing powers make people entrust the knowledge of the invisible world to him and his followers.<sup>20</sup>

In this community there is a revealing relationship between Pak Towikrama, as spirit medium and keeper of the shrine, and Pak Kaum, the official responsible for religious affairs. Pak Kaum is Pak Towi’s “adopted son” (*anak angkat*). He regards Pak Towi as his teacher (*guru*). There are many “adopted sons” here. If someone falls ill and is helped by someone else, the healer will “adopt” the healed. This is a spiritual relationship, expressed in a kinship idiom. It is structured in the same way as healer recruitment, when illness results in initiation to the cult. When the guru dies, another person replaces him. So the relationship is quite like that of godchild-godparent, in the original spiritual sense.

Pak Kaum also explained the relationship of the cult of the *dhanyang* to Islam in a significant way: offerings are made to the *dhanyang* to secure well being in this life, but “if we’re concerned about our eternal salvation, we turn to Allah.”<sup>21</sup> In the village context, then, normative Islam and spirit cults exist side-by-side, although from the rigorous Islamic point of view the cults constitute polytheism and are therefore heresy.

---

<sup>19</sup> On the implications of this for theorizing spirit possession, see further F. Hughes-Freeland. “Divine cyborgs? Ritual Spirit Presence and the Limits of Media.” Paper presented at the Ritual Dynamics conference, Heidelberg, 29 Sept. 2008, forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> F. Hughes-Freeland, edited field notes, August 1999.

<sup>21</sup> He says this in the film *Tayuban: Dancing the Spirit in Java*. © F. Hughes-Freeland and University of Wales Swansea. Distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1996.

---

## Becoming a Puppet in a Philosophy of Court Dance

As already mentioned, performing in the court *wayang wong* dance theatre has been described as “becoming a puppet.” I now return to the court context in order to expand on the meaning of this phrase and what it reveals about both the aesthetics of court dancing and its relationship to of possession.

The source of this statement, Gusti Suryobrongto (henceforth Suryo), was the recognized expert on Yogyakarta court dance during the 1970’s and ’80’s. His father, Hamengkubuwana VIII, was the last sultan of the colonial period. Gusti Suryo performed in half the court *wayang wong* productions of his father’s reign, and after Indonesian independence he taught in many dance schools and academies. He was famous in the 1930’s for dancing the role of Gathotkaca, son of the Pandawa Bima. In the Sanskrit version of the *Mahabharata* epic, Gathotkaca is a minor character, but in Javanese *wayang wong* and shadow theatre, from which *wayang wong* derives its inspiration, he is a very important character, and many plots center on his adventures. To prepare for the role, Gusti Suryo spent as much time as he could watching shadow plays featuring Gathotkaca and handling the puppet to internalize its character (*watak*): “You have to adjust yourself to the character,” he said. He also studied the three different Gathotkaca puppets used to represent different aspects of the character: talking in court scenes; for flying powers; and for courage and resolution.<sup>22</sup>

After studying the role, the dancer then had to work on the embodiment of the puppet in his or her own dancing body, to achieve a balance between *rasa* and the physical body (*lair*).<sup>23</sup> *Rasa* derives from the Sanskrit, and has a complex role in religious and philosophical systems. In Javanese, it may refer to embodied perception and consciousness.<sup>24</sup> Puppet iconography extends to voices, costumes, and makeup. There are also dance modes which are identified with types of character, including twenty-three dance modes for masculine roles. These are classed on a continuum between *alus* (gentle, refined, reserved, introspective) and *gagah* (strong, muscular, brash, extrovert), with two intermediate types: refined and strong, and robust and rough. There are subvariants for particular gods, monkeys, and demonic kings. There is only one feminine mode (*putri*), with variations expressed physically by the angle of the head: the lowest angle represents gentle and obedient (*luruh*) characters; a more raised chin, represents bold and aggressive ones (*branyak*); there is also in-between (*tumandak* or *tĕmantu*). A female puppet character may also have different forms to display different personality traits in different contexts, such as conversation, flirtation, and fighting (*lincah*).<sup>25</sup> As all female “puppets” were played by young men in the Yogya court before independence, generalizing statements about gender

---

<sup>22</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversations, Yogyakarta, 1 June 1983, and 23 March 1983; see also G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, eight short chapters, *Mengenal Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta* [Getting to Know Classical Yogyakarta Style Dance] (Ed. F. Wibowo, Yogyakarta: Dewan Kesenian Propinsi DIY, 1981) 74.

<sup>23</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 30 March 1983.

<sup>24</sup> See further F. Hughes-Freeland, *Embodied Communities: Dance Traditions and Change in Java* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2008) Chapters 4 and 6.

<sup>25</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, “Wayang-wong gaya Ngayogyakarta,” unpublished mimeograph, collection of Suryobrongto, n.d, 4.

---

attributes need caution.<sup>26</sup>

There is a complex relationship between dance movement and expression in characterization (*wirama* and *wirasa*). Becoming a puppet does not mean caricaturing shadow puppets by imitating their movements. Dancing a puppet is an expression of transformation, not a fixed and stylized characterization as if one were performing as a character defined by a single mask (as in Greek tragedy). Discussants in Yogyakarta during field research in the 1980's stressed the complexity of the "inner" aspect of characterization. As one person remarked, "It takes thirty years to get the characterization; movement is easier."<sup>27</sup> Today's state-trained professional dancers meanwhile can no longer afford the colonial luxury of specializing in one role for several years or more.

"Becoming a puppet" emphasizes what is beyond the visible *lair* aspects of the person. Theatre director and theorist Richard Schechner has proposed "rasaesthetics" based on "snout-to-belly-to-bowel" as an alternative to what he describes as "the 'theatron', the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic."<sup>28</sup> He draws on the *Natyasastra*, the Sanskrit text by Bharata-Muni, used in India in the 1930's to create *bharata natyam* dance, a new middle-class classical version of the temple dancing by low-caste women. Schechner stresses the feeding and tasting aspects of *rasa*, and addressed the literal materiality of "guts" and innards. Javanese court dancers emphasize the other side of *rasa*, the invisible inner energies of the person, referring to embodied sensibility, or the bodily expression of introspection, or consciousness; they explain this with reference to a set of guidelines for dancers called *Joged Mataram*.

### ***Joged Mataram: A Theory of Performance***

*Joged Mataram*, "The Dance of Mataram," is a philosophy which identifies four requirements to perfect the art of dancing. It was written down by Gusti Suryobrongto and published in the 1970's. The formalization of the ideas in *Joged Mataram* was the result of a perceived need for members of the court troupe who were about to go on a European tour in the early 1970's to have something consistent to tell western journalists. Since then it has become the key text for explaining Yogyakarta court dance. Court dance has been modernized in the context of late capitalism, but this text retains a foundation based on nationalist ideals from the earlier modern period. Thus, *Joged Mataram* is also a part of the modernization and globalization of court dance as a classical Indonesian dance form.

Despite the context of its formulation, elements in *Joged Mataram* predate the 1970's and represent an oral tradition about dance practice. Importantly, *Joged Mataram* addresses dance as more than a physical technique. What matters are its "content" and "spirit" (*jiwa*).<sup>29</sup> Four points summarize how the dancer can achieve the

---

<sup>26</sup> F. Hughes-Freeland, "Dance and Gender in a Javanese Palace Tradition," *Male and Female in Developing South East Asia* (Ed. W.J. Karim, Oxford: Berg, 1995); and also Hughes-Freeland 2008, Chapter 5.

<sup>27</sup> Pak Barsono, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 17 December 1982.

<sup>28</sup> "Rasaesthetics," *The Drama Review* 45.3 (2001): 27-50.

<sup>29</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, "Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta," *Kawruh Joged-Mataram* (Ed. Dewan Ahli Yayasan Siswa Among Bèksa, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Siswa Among Bèksa, 1981) 14.

---

correct *rasa* by identifying tensions and contradictions within the inner body person (*batin*), as well as between the inner and outer (*lair*) bodies:

1. *Sĕwiji* (or *sawiji*): “total concentration which does not strain the spirit (*jiwa*).”
2. *Grĕgĕt*: “the dynamic, élan, spirit or fire which kindles in the spirit of a person...which compels a tenacity which permits a channeling of this energy in a proper direction...the dancer strengthens all his or her emotions to avoid unseemly uncivilized (*kasar*) behaviour.”
3. *Sĕngguh*: “self-confidence (sic), believing in oneself without becoming proud or arrogant.”
4. *Ora mingkuh*: “do not be weak in spirit or fainthearted, nor be afraid to face obstacles or take full responsibility.”<sup>30</sup>

*Joged Mataram* makes it impossible to separate physical movement from the expressive or inspirational. Where “western” performance tends to bring the emotions out, in court performance, the *rasa* goes in. Rama Sena, a friend of Gusti Suryo who often participated in our discussions, explained the relationship in a slightly different way from *Joged Mataram* by describing his experiences when he began training in the “gentle” mode (*impur*) when he was nineteen years old – “rather a late start” – with the well-known court dancer, Atmasastra:

When I began, he merely said to me: “Try to stand with your own sense of inner gentleness. Do you understand or not? The most gentle feeling you have.” After three days he said: “Now you can do it. Now walk.” I couldn't dance at all, so whatever I did, I was content. He said: “Oh dear, it's broken. Now it's come back, now it's broken again.” After a week he said: “Now it's holding up.” I didn't know what “broken” or “holding up” meant. But after a year or so, I'd worked it out. It was my gentleness (*kehalusan*) that was “broken” or “holding up.”<sup>31</sup>

When a perceptive teacher recognizes a pupil's potential for *grĕgĕt* and *sĕngguh*, the teacher trains the pupil to concentrate, to ensure that the aspiring dancer will manage these elements, which will subsequently be properly placed (*dipunmapanakĕn*). In performance, the dancer musters concentration, builds up confidence, and allows the energies of the physical and spiritual bodies to become dance. The right balance of concentration, energy, and self-confidence produces the correct *rasa* of feeling able to perform (*sagah*); an impression of beauty (*kalĕrĕsan*); and, in the case of the gentle masculine and feminine dance modes (*impur* and *putri*), the desired quality of movement described as “flowing water.” An imbalance resulting from an excess of dynamism is associated with “acting.” Becoming a tiger in the dance theatre differs from becoming a puppet because it is understood to be achieved by imitating nature, instead of transmuting nature into art as dance

---

<sup>30</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, *Tari Klasik Gaya Yogya* (Yogyakarta: Museum Kraton (dan PDK), 1976) 22.

<sup>31</sup> Rama Sena, speaking in the film, *The Dancer and the Dance*, by F. Hughes-Freeland, © and distributed by The Royal Anthropological Institute: London, 1988.

---

movement (*běksa*). Performers wearing tiger suits and masks leap and roar in imitation of natural tiger movements. The famous tiger-player, Pragalba, a court soldier in the Nyutra regiment from which many dancers were drawn in colonial times had apparently consulted a healer (*dhukun*) about how best to become a tiger. People who had seen him swore that as a result of meditation and other ascetic practices, he had taken on the strength and ferocity of a tiger in his spirit, not just his limbs.<sup>32</sup> When I told Gusti Suryo this story, he maintained that Pragalba was acting, not dancing, and was coming dangerously close to possession. At the time no one mentioned the special relationship between spirits (*dhanyang*) and tigers in villages such as Muntuk. The balance between the four elements is used to distinguish the practice of the performer in dance drama in a manner that is contrasted with acting based on will and imitation. In these terms, dancing is a more complex performance practice than acting, and requires a balance of concentration, energy, confidence, and determination.

In *Joged Mataram*, dancing is ranked above acting because it is inspired and moved by inner feelings and sensibilities (*rasa*), not by the imitation of appearances by an act of conscious will or muscle, in contrast to the inner balance expressed in the facial clarity of *pasěmon* described below. In the court, self-control in dance can redeem, albeit temporarily, the uncontrollable forces of nature and can bring them safely into the world of cultured civilization. *Joged Mataram* denies that dance can be unmediated, natural, and uncivilized (*kasar*). Dancers have to make fine judgments in balancing arrogance in the character with self-confidence (*sěngguh*), because too much self-confidence comes across as arrogance *in the dancer*, not the character. A “bad” character can be redeemed through the skill of dancing, but conversely bad dancing can destroy a good one. Dancing also redeems the most barbaric characters in dance theatre, as dancing belongs to the domain of civilization.

Personal and disinterested determination, the fourth element of *Joged Mataram*, is related to the principle of not imitating something by making an effort of will or putting on an act. By mastering the principles, a dancer could overcome low social status and an unsuitable physical appearance. Although aristocrats and high-ranking officials tended to dance the main roles in *wayang wong*, a good dancer of lower birth and rank could achieve such a role. As dancers acquire social power, the achievement of grace on stage, like social grace more generally, has the power to change a person's life, but such a result must be detached from desire. Self-interest (*pamrih*) damages the *rasa* of the dancer and weakens the aesthetic impact of a performance that should be inspired by the correctly balanced condition of *batin* and *rasa*.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in our very first meeting Suryobrongto had described dancing to me as “a pure duty to serve the dance.”<sup>34</sup>

The fourth element refers to the tenacity, persistence, and stamina that make it possible to overcome fear and weakness: “If you want to become a puppet properly, you have to reduce your human feelings of fear, and wanting to get a good name as a

---

<sup>32</sup> Pak Barsono, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 17 December 1982.

<sup>33</sup> *Pamrih* has a negative meaning, and works in opposition to traditional “Power” (Anderson 1972). Even if this is a *post de facto* account (Hughes-Freeland 2007), Geertz’s question “How is action possible, given compassion?”, *ibid.* 1960, 272, could be rephrased replacing “compassion” with “*pamrih*.”

<sup>34</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 23 March 1983.

---

dancer and so on.”<sup>35</sup>

Whereas human weaknesses are replaced by spirit-inspired strength in *jathilan*, the culmination of “becoming a puppet” occurs when human weaknesses are replaced by the heroic qualities of the character. The heroic idiom in performance transmits the militarism which has been central to the Yogyakarta court’s self-image, and also fitted the ethos of post-revolutionary Indonesia.

The challenge at the heart of dancing is to make the invisible person (*batin*) visible, but without any exertion of the visible body (*lair*). When the balance between energy and inspiration is right, the dancer is no longer trying; the movements are right automatically. Rama Sena emphasized how crucial it is for the physical dynamism of movement to become second nature and for the character of the role to be internalized: “‘Acting Arjuna is to feel it in your innermost being.’ Concentration defines the inner state: as the dancer concentrates (*nyawiji*), the movements move by themselves, and the dancer, in Rama Sena’s words, ‘faces God.’”<sup>36</sup>

Gusti Suryo emphasized facial expression (*pasěmon*) as the sign of the right balance of the elements of *Joged Mataram*:

Yes, the “transformation” is possession (*kěpanjangan*)...that’s “acting,” isn’t it? There are muscles, and there is appearance (*pasěmon*). You can use the muscles to make, for instance, a smile, but *you mustn’t do this!* You have to be *alus*. Just *pasěmon*, in your gaze and feelings. For instance, in *bědhaya* [a group dance for women] you must have clarity of gaze and feeling. It comes from *inside*. Once you’ve grasped that, you’ve understood *Joged Mataram*.<sup>37</sup>

*Joged Mataram* does not describe the movement of emotional force into an artistic form; it teaches how the control of emotional movement defines the nature of the form. It is not muscle that dances, but consciousness. This means that a set of physical practices can become a means to transcend the body when skilled dancers are dancing. They are not making physical gestures; these happen mechanically, and the dancer’s self is beyond the weakness of the body, beyond human failings, heroic and also in contemplation of totalities. The internalization of balance and control to its extinction in the experience of the dancer is a move away from interaction and social relations. To dance is to go beyond the desires of the body.

Dancing from the outset requires a *balance* between the two parts of a person, the *lair* and *batin*, and a more subtle understanding of the complexity of characterization then follows. Dancing does not simply unify the physical and spiritual bodies. It requires a separation of the elements in the spiritual body (*batin*) which then need balancing. This is why Suryobrongto speaks of balance, rather than the fusion (*manukma*) of the physique and the *batin*. Expression is highly controlled, and acting is not simply the outward channeling of energy. To achieve the desirable effect (*alus*) concerns more than the intention of the performer. Dance is also effort,

---

<sup>35</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 1 June 1983.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

---

but its object is to hide the effort, and transform it into beauty. It is not constraint, but restraint and discipline. It is an exercise in self-control.

*Joged Mataram* clearly differs from Schechner's "rasaesthetics," but this Javanese account of *rasa*, which emphasizes moderated self-interest and informs the moral account of court dance, shares characteristics with the *rasa* theory of the eleventh-century Indian philosopher, Abhinavagupta. His *Natyasastra* was more abstract and phenomenological than earlier versions and dealt with the perceptual process as a generalizing process transcending mimesis and its enjoyment and involving the active participation of the observer in the universal potentiality of the experienced object "not limited by any difference of space, time and knowing."<sup>38</sup> And importantly, it is spiritual, but not essentially so: "The artwork...points to Reality and participates in it. In pure spiritual experience there is only the Real."<sup>39</sup> Abhinavagupta's idea of "art as a state of mind," and *rasa* as a "passional cognitive state" appealed to nineteenth century rational consciousness in India and informed the reconstruction of *bharata natyam* dance during the 1930's.<sup>40</sup> *Rasa* is a means to transcend the body, which is itself "an essential prerequisite for transcending the body."<sup>41</sup> This is what occurs in Javanese dance as one becomes a puppet and loses individual self-interest. The microcosmic being of the dancer realizes the macrocosm, the totality of all that there is, and transcends individuated physically bounded identity. This illustrates a paradox in the Javanese material and in Abinavagupta's theory of *rasa*, which returns us to the issue of the snout-belly-guts' materiality of the body raised by Schechner. The body is dual, but *rasa* as embodied perception performed to the highest level results in disembodiment, in a physical sense.

### **Why is There No Possession in the Court?**

Possession performances and spirit cults are viewed with disapproval by some Muslims, but court dancers censored them not because of Islam but because of ideas about status, personal responsibility, and power hierarchies. The four principles of *Joged Mataram* that inform dance help to explain how court experts characterize the aesthetics of court dance as a domain of civilization in contrast to the outside – a domain that becomes a marker of taste and distinction.

*Joged Mataram* represents the transformation of ritually nuanced court performance into Indonesian "high art" which has an aesthetic instrumentality. It deliberately differentiates court performers' *rasa* from that of dances "outside" the court. The aesthetic of court-originated Yogya-style classical dance is distinct from and in contrast to the ritual instrumentality of masked trance and possession performances outside the court.

Each of the four principles of *Joged Mataram* has an implied opposition which reflects this contrastive understanding of court dance with "outside" or undesirable practices:

---

<sup>38</sup> E. Deutsch, "Reflections on Some Aspects of the Theory of *Rasa*," *Sanskrit Drama in Performance* (Eds. R. Baumer and J. Brandon, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1981) 214-215.

<sup>39</sup> Deutsch 224.

<sup>40</sup> A. Meduri, "Bharata Natyam – What are You?," *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (1988): 1-22.

<sup>41</sup> K. Vatsyayan, *Traditional Indian Theatre: Multiple Streams* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1980) 8.

---

1. *Sėjiji*: absorbed concentration but not possession or trance;
2. *Grėgėt*: dynamic energy but not imitation;
3. *Sėngguh*: self-confidence but not arrogance;
4. *Ora mingkuh*: determination but not self-interest.

This in part explains why “becoming a puppet” is contrasted with possession. But who is in control of the performance?

Possession dances, as demonstrated in the case of *jathilan*, above, are mediated by the spirit master (*pawang*) and keeper of the shrine. In the Javanese courts, dancing has been considered as service to the sultan. Some forms are still his prerogative, and cannot be performed outside the court without his permission. The court is conceived of as the orderly center of a potentially disorderly cosmos that has been polarized by the forces of the mountain and the sea. One geological example of this disorder occurred in 2006, when the activity of the volcano to the north of the city, Mount Merapi, increased dangerously and was followed by a major earthquake that started between the city and the sea. The sultan is understood to mediate between the visible and invisible worlds and the forces that animate them. To bring possession dances into the court, with their spirit masters and mediums, would challenge the sultan’s authority. This authority has traditionally been above any particular religion, but the sultan has been identified as divine. To this day his symbolic winged emblem stands for the *garudha* bird, the vehicle of the Hindu divinity Vishnu, and his titles also identify him as Kalifatullah, Caliph of Allah. Despite this last appellation, past sultans did not go on pilgrimage to Mecca other than by mystical means; the current tenth sultan is the first to have done so. Since Indonesian independence, the sultan has also acted as Provincial Governor, and his role is an intriguing mix of routine charismatic authority and secular rational bureaucracy.<sup>42</sup>

Possession dancing also goes against the personal spirit of self-control. The self in Javanese thought is less bounded than the western self because the person is not only his or her physical body, but also the inner, subtle body which is both the seat of possession and the locus of self-control. As explained, the dance philosophy *Joged Mataram*, which is central to court-inspired ethics and aesthetics, emphasizes the balance between control and surrender within the inner self. A dancer cannot be possessed because the techniques that produce this balance would be lost. The emphasis on self-control also means that the dancer’s “concentration” distinguishes the state of the court dancer as “puppet” from that of the horse dancer possessed by an anonymous spirit, or another character in *jathilan* possessed by the spirit of the mask. In the Yogyakarta court, masks are only worn in *wayang wong* by certain demons, monkeys, and *garudha* birds. Masked dances were considered uncouth (*kasar*) by the court, but a number of choreographies derived from these dances were developed into dances in princely residences during the late nineteenth century and were later included in the classical repertoire during the 1930’s. No one referred to the Islamic censure of magical superstitions adhering to masks and masker. Instead masks

---

<sup>42</sup> F. Hughes- Freeland, “Charisma and Celebrity in Indonesian Politics,” *Anthropological Theory*, 7.2 (2007): 177-200.

---

concealed the balance of dynamism and self-confidence revealed through the “inner” spirit shown in the dancer’s eyes in *pasěmon*.<sup>43</sup>

To distinguish the transformation into a heroic “puppet” from the wild cavorting of the entranced horse dancer, Suryobrongto used the term “ecstasy.”<sup>44</sup> It is significant that this word was introduced by the Catholic Church precisely to distinguish legitimate extra-normal states in the sight of God from the demonic possession by spirits.<sup>45</sup> Suryobrongto told me more about the dancer’s state: “Mystical means unconscious. Dancing isn’t mystical, it is still conscious, it is between aware and not aware. What’s the Javanese for that? Oh yes, *sěmėdhi* [meditation, contemplation].”<sup>46</sup> This contemplative state is not emptiness (*kosong-blong*): “The dance is empty but full (*kosong nanging pepak*).”<sup>47</sup> When a dancer “becomes a puppet,” his or her actions become instinctive: the dancer must lose self-consciousness, but not consciousness.<sup>48</sup>

These statements need to be set against strong cultural reservations expressed in Java about losing awareness. Some say that the local tendency to avoid alcohol or hallucinogens is to avoid loss of control. An empty head or an absent mind attracts spirit possessions. People who told me that they had “seen spirits” explained that this happened when they were “not aware”; although they were awake and conscious, they were in a sort of daze “where everything is excluded except for one thing.” This statement relates to a preoccupation in Java with awareness or remembering (*eling*).<sup>49</sup> Remembering also protects you from being carried away physically (*kalap*) by supranatural agencies such as Kangjėng Ratu Kidul (Queen of the South), the mystical spouse of the central Javanese sultans who accounts for numerous mysterious disappearances. In this view, the person is considered to be permeable and susceptible to possession or removal by spirits, particularly in moments of absent-mindedness.<sup>50</sup>

The contrast with spirit possession performance in the villages is further demonstrated by the four principles of *Joged Mataram* being interpreted as a moral

---

<sup>43</sup> Rama Sena, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 22 September 1983.

<sup>44</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, “Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta,” *Kawruh Joged-Mataram* (Ed. Dewan Ahli Yayasan Siswa Among Bėksa, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Siswa Among Bėksa, 1981) 15.

<sup>45</sup> G. Rouget, *Music and Trance: a Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* (Trans. B. Biebuyck, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 8-11.

<sup>46</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 23 March 1983.

<sup>47</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 12 May 1983.

<sup>48</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, eight short chapters, *Mengenal Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta* [Getting to Know Classical Yogyakarta Style Dance] (Ed. F. Wibowo, Yogyakarta: Dewan Kesenian Propinsi DIY, 1981) 93.

<sup>49</sup> *Eling* is sometimes spoken of as “remembering one’s own death,” a kind of “remembering ahead” that is also like the spiritual consciousness-raising involved in the Javanese penchant for regular grave-visiting.

<sup>50</sup> These ideas about loss of control and mysticism also reflect debate within between Sufism and normative Islam. In mystical systems, remembering is to be aware of the possibility of reaching “total awareness,” as in the Sufi practice of *dhikr*. According to M.R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (The Association for Asian Studies Monograph XLV, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), these recitations induce trance, and may be disapproved of by mainstream Islam. However, this is not always the case: see P.B. Zarrilli, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourse and Practices of Power in Kalaripayattu, a South Indian Martial Art* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 151.

---

code, or as principles for guiding everyday life:

1. *Sějwi*: Whatever your aspirations, direct your concentration to your goal.
2. *Grěğēt*: Direct your dynamism and energy to your goal through proper channels.
3. *Sěngguh*: Have complete confidence in your personal ability to achieve your goal.
4. *Ora mingkuh*: Although you will encounter obstacles in your path, do not take even one step back.<sup>51</sup>

By treating the four elements as moral injunctions, *Joged Mataram* also extends to the production of persons as well as dancers, and makes it more than just a Javanese version of theatre anthropology. It draws a less defined boundary between theatre and everyday life than western theatre. It fuses aesthetics and ethics for a way of life.

These factors contribute to the exclusion of possession (and masks) from the sultan's court in Yogyakarta, a place controlled by the gaze of the sultan as Allah's representative and one that demands the highest standards of self-awareness and control from its dancers. Court dance experts invoke the language of altered states but draw a firm line between possession performances that occur in the moment of performance and those that occur outside the court in Java. They also draw lines between dancing and spiritual techniques, such as meditation and the martial arts. These arguments complete the evidence for the delimitation of dance and religion.

### **Dance as Spiritual Art**

"Dance is a *kěbatinan* art, not a *kěbatinan* method for acquiring wisdom," said Suryobrongto.<sup>52</sup> This statement is crucial for understanding the relationship of modern court dance to religion.

A common idea expressed by people I spoke to during fieldwork in Java was that organized religion (*agama*) is "rules for stupid people." Many expressed their religiosity by participating in *kěbatinan* groups (*aliran*).<sup>53</sup> These groups are not administered by the Ministry of Religion but the Ministry of Education and Culture under the category of "beliefs" (*kepercayaan*). *Kěbatinan* groups are inspired by Vedanta, Confucianism, Christianity, Sufism and other philosophies. Normally they have a teacher, a belief system, and a common practice of spiritual techniques (*tirakat*, *tapabrata*). These techniques include meditation ("closing the nine holes"), prayer, physical movement, and feats of endurance such as sleeping on hard rush mats, immersion in chilly, mosquito-ridden rivers from midnight till dawn (*kungkum*),

---

<sup>51</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, *Tari Klasik Gaya Yogya* (Yogyakarta: Museum Kraton (dan PDK), 1976) 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, Conversation, Yogyakarta, 12 May 1983. See also G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, "Tari Klasik Gaya Yogyakarta," *Kawruh Joged-Mataram* (Ed. Dewan Ahli Yayasan Siswa Among Běksa. Yogyakarta: Yayasan Siswa Among Běksa, 1981) 13.

<sup>53</sup> I often heard the view expressed that religion concerns the sphere of *lair*, with rules originating from outside one's own consciousness, whereas spirituality is a personal responsibility. This explains Suryobrongto's baffling statement that "dance affects the self more than religion because 'religion does not affect your behaviour,'" conversation, Yogyakarta, 1983.

---

and fasting.<sup>54</sup> They are claimed to cool desires and self-interest (*pamrih*) which disrupt how one “sits” (*lěnggah*) in the “inner room” of one’s self. These techniques enable the practitioner to “become one with nature” (*menyatu dengan alam*) or to achieve “death in life” (*mati sajroning urip*).<sup>55</sup> In Subud *kěbatinan*, movements like the ones described above constitute a meditative practice (*latihan*). Like court dance philosophy, *kěbatinan* emphasizes the conjunction of *lair* and *batin*, and recognizes the spiritual person as embodied, not as residing in the cogito.

Among the techniques used by *kěbatinan* groups to develop spiritual powers are the martial arts (*pencak silat*). Movements from *pencak silat* have influenced court dance. For instance, Rama Sena, an expert in *silat* as well as dance, compared the rising and falling of dance hands in the “fixing earrings” movement sequence in Yogyakarta court dance to *silat* sequences which protect the face, and the legwork in strong male modes to martial art kicks. *Silat* and dance also share the same quality of concentration, the use of inner resources rather than brute strength, the use of elaborate and contrived movements to build up to the brief but final combat and, most importantly, an emphasis on self-control.

Despite these shared features, *silat* is not so much associated with dance as with *kěbatinan*. It may be taught in a *kěbatinan* group as a technique to develop superhuman feats such as flight, invulnerability, healing and other magical powers.<sup>56</sup> For instance, *ilmu kanoragan* gives strength for fighting; advanced practitioners of *silat* often become notorious for their manipulation of adversaries by mental strength.

*Silat* also develops the practitioner’s ability to see the invisible world (*ghaib*). In the village where I had documented *jathilan*, there had been longstanding problems between the young men and village elders. When I visited the village in 1999, I discovered that many of these youths had joined a group where they studied *pencak silat & kebatinan*, called *Wahyu Sejati Ranggawarsita* (*The True Revelation of Ranggawarsita*, named for the famous nineteenth century court poet). Muntuk had established its own secretariat and had ninety members. My informant, son of Pak Kaum, explained that after he held onto his teacher as instructed, he was able to see a *gendruwo*, which he described as a type of mischievous, destructive ghost (*hantu*) who often lives in trees and urinates on people. Some advanced students may even learn to see the village spirit (*dhanyang*). Other kinds of knowledge (*ilmu*) may also be acquired. For example, my research assistant’s brothers learned different powers from their *silat* teacher. One acquired the ability to become possessed by *ilmu macan* (tiger, panther); another gained “monkey *ilmu*”; two others had the *ilmu* to summon snakes, hold them, be bitten without harm, and also *sense* them. Their sister also had the power over snakes; when I asked her what *kind of* consciousness (*rasa*) or sensation it was, she described it as “*dicium indera*,” or “being kissed by the senses.”

The main difference between dance and *silat* is that dancing does not develop powers of physical invulnerability and control over one’s opponent, nor does it affect others practically: it cannot – and is not intended to – kill or maim, unless a dancer is

---

<sup>54</sup> One of my research assistants told me his father practised *pati gěni*, an extreme kind of fasting in which one is buried in a hole in the ground for up to a week.

<sup>55</sup> S. de Jong, *Salah Satu Sikap Hidup Orang Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Kanisius, 1976) 27.

<sup>56</sup> Koentjaraningrat, *Javanese Culture* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985) 398 ff.

---

out of control and causes an accident. The more instrumentally driven *kĕbatinan* practices were described as the result of “black magic” (*ngelmu klĕnik*), motivated by self-interest, in contrast to true magical power (*sĕkti*), which arises from disinterested spiritual intentions. Dance leads not to *kesĕkten* (magical powers), but to *kĕsempurnaan* (perfection).

These are precisely the kinds of self-interested objectives that differentiate dance from the martial arts and from *kĕbatinan* practices in general and that court dancers are supposed to avoid pursuing. The dancing body is a subtle, spiritual body (*batin*). Learning to dance is a lesson in humility, self-restraint, and the overcoming of desire. As a spiritual art, dance fosters the ability to restrain and discipline the inner forces and energies, to control, not to be controlled. Compared to some *kĕbatinan* and *silat* techniques, dance as a spiritual art was considered easy.

The aesthetic instrumentality of court dance as a spiritual art has not, however, completely eliminated the relationship between performance and spirituality. *Joged Mataram* interpreted its four principles in a spiritual manner, and directed them towards divinity (*ketuhanan*), as follows:

1. *Sĕwiji*: Always remember the Divinity.
2. *Grĕgĕt*: Channel all activity and passion through the path of God.
3. *Sĕngguh*: Feel proud of your destiny as a respected being.
4. *Ora mingkuh*: However many difficulties you encounter in your life, always believe in The Great Judge.<sup>57</sup>

This set of interpretations reflects the requirement of Indonesia’s state philosophy (Pancasila) to believe in one God and is a sign of the court’s participation in the Indonesian state.

## Conclusions

Court dance is based on discriminations between practices defined as being of the court and those of the outside. It also represents the relationship between life and art in such a way as to transfer the values of court performance beyond the context in which it developed. Court dance has now become classical Yogya-style dance, and while it has been detached from the context of colonial court ceremonial from which it derives its values, it has been given a spiritual purpose. It has eliminated some of dance’s instrumental power, bringing it into the domain of virtual power, but it retains resonances that are more than aesthetic, both in the way in which the dancer’s *rasa* is explained, and in the moral and spiritual interpretations of the four principles of *Joged Mataram*. In this philosophy, *rasa* refers to a complex process, which I have glossed as embodied perception, but in the moral-aesthetic context I have discussed here, *rasa* is associated with control and discipline, not sensual indulgence.

Performance and the discourses surrounding it can be a means of understanding how people understand and delimit their religious experiences. By talking to people about the practicalities of performance, I have been able to gain

---

<sup>57</sup> G.B.P.H. Suryobrongto, *Tari Klasik Gaya Yogya* (Yogyakarta: Museum Kraton (dan PDK), 1976) 23.

insights into religion that might not have emerged had I asked questions about religion in terms of rules or beliefs. Performance produces understanding for both subjects and researcher, but is not a set of practices that can be used to illustrate a pre-existing set of descriptors about religion in a particular cultural context.

One important contextual factor in my account is how the Javanese theorization of dancing in the Yogyakarta court contrasts with a set of values associated with the social spheres outside the court. Although “becoming a puppet” sounds as if possession is involved in the performance, I have shown how court experts systematically set court practices in opposition to those of village performances, as represented by the horse dance (*jathilan*). These practices may be summarized as follows:

**Outside (*jaba*)**

Underdetermined gesture: imitation  
popular ritual conventions  
violence, lack of self-control  
possession  
masks

**Inside (*jěro*)**

Overdetermined gesture: *běksa*  
purified conventions  
heroism, self-control  
concentration  
*pasěmon*

The contrast rests on court ideas of control and self-control. *Joged Mataram* is not a timeless “traditional” account of dance, but a statement formulated within the context of an Indonesian religious regime that requires its citizens to believe in one God. Court experts have had to tread carefully to retain pluralism while not implicating themselves in statements that might be construed as polytheistic or animist. Despite the Pancasila requirements that citizens believe in one God and that they record their religion on their identity cards, people were often disparaging about the relevance of organized religion and preferred to find more personal ways of exploring and expressing a belief in God. This sentiment was evident in the elaboration of *Joged Mataram* in conversations I had with Javanese citizens in 1983. Although some of the ideas associated with the dancer’s state appeared to have elements in common with mystical groups that people joined to establish a personal contact with the divine, court experts did not want to equate dance with techniques used to gain supernatural powers. They did this by asserting dance as a spiritual art, not as a spiritual technique that was often used for unspiritual and worldly gains.

In religious terms, the contrast may be summed up by saying that, in the village, animist traditions run parallel to Islam, whereas in the court, animist traditions have become high art. Some of the idioms I have used are reminiscent of self-denial in religious contexts. Indeed, Javanese court interpretations concerning the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge draw on a range of mystical ideas from Sufism (such as the Sufi belief that essence (*dhat*) is unknowable and yet names and attributes are knowable) to Buddhism.<sup>58</sup> The contrast, however, is related less to religious content than to style. The rejection of organized religion as someone else’s rules in court circles is paralleled by multiple practices in the villages; in neither case do they fit a formal model of either religious orthodoxy or Islam in particular.

---

<sup>58</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975) 83. These ideas are explored further in F. Hughes-Freeland 2008.

---

There are two final twists to my account of dance as an expression of spiritual art which exemplified court practices. Toward the end of my research, Suryobrongto said that the principles of *Joged Mataram* could be applied to *all* performance – “Even western ballet!” – adding that all these performance worlds should pursue perfection or purity of life (*urip sěmpurna*). His comment suggests that despite the very specific cultural context from which he was presenting his ideas, he was also interested in *a general* re-ritualization of performance. The second twist also concerns the application of the spirit of *Joged Mataram*. In 1994, alongside the Court Festival there was the Festival of Traditional and Religious Art. The latter featured various village performances (but not with possession) and also, to my surprise, a play by the dance association run by Gusti Suryobrongto’s son, who, together with *his* sons, performed a number of very lively fights with the heroic spirit of *Joged Mataram* fully mustered. It is possible that the spirit of court dance is being squeezed out of the forms with which it has been associated, or perhaps the boundaries between court and folk culture have been radically redrawn. Just as the boundaries between forms will vary according to the cultural politics of the day, so too will the ways in which the relationship between performance, religion, and spirituality is understood and practiced.