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1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2007 some friends invited me to attend a “Javanese dance show” that evening. Naturally, I agreed. The show was in a village near Mount Merapi, outside the city of Yogyakarta, where I was spending a semester abroad. Long after sunset, we set out on our motorbikes. A few kilometres outside the city, the fog became so thick that we had to focus on the white road markings just in front of us to avoid crashing.

Turning off the main road, we rode through a series of sleepy villages, finally arriving at a lively, brightly lit centre, where people from the surrounding area had congregated. Maybe 100 people had gathered here. Some were selling tea and fruits. It was relatively cold and silent; a number of people tested the loudspeakers. After buying some tea, we walked to the well-lit centre of the small village.

A small stage, surrounded by a wooden fence, had been erected in front of one of the houses. Pairs of painted horse puppets, made of intricately woven bamboo, were placed on the middle of the stage. Next to the stage was a small gamelan orchestra with metallophones, drums, gongs and other typical instruments. The dancers - male and female - were in a house dressing and putting on their make-up for the performance. They were wearing costumes inspired from classical Javanese theatre with small whips and wooden swords. Heavy make-up covered their faces. When I came in, the first group was ready and they waited inside the house to appear on stage.

When the musicians started to play, the crowd pushed to the front and my friends and I found ourselves huddled against the wooden fence in front of the stage. A man in dark clothing appeared, walked to the middle of the stage, threw

flowers on the stage and closed his eyes. He bowed his head, seemingly in prayer, and stood silent for a moment before leaving. Another darkly clad man appeared on stage, this one with a huge whip. With fierce intensity and concentration, he cracked the whip in different directions and left the stage. Eight young male dancers then came on, smoothly dancing in pairs in a slow style. Their emotionless faces revealing their concentration on the music and the choreography. The music stressed two notes in high frequencies, interrupted by short, fast drum-rolls, where the dancers suddenly moved fast. They started to pick-up the horse puppets and ride them. Although the choreography was complicated, the dancers did not show signs of difficulty. The music got faster and louder, and the dancer’s movements becoming increasingly exaggerated and free, losing the precision of control. They lifted their wooden swords and mock-fought each other. The music built to a chaotic crescendo then stopped, suddenly. The performance lasted about 15 minutes.

A woman began to sing from off-stage without music. The exhausted dancers moved to the centre of the stage, many of them sitting on their horse puppets. Just when I thought the dance might be over, the two men in dark clothes appeared from behind the dancers and threw flowers over them. At this point all the dancers jumped up and tumbled to the ground, some screaming, others crawling all over the place. One dancer, right in front of me, stiffened so much that he resembled a plank leaning against the wooden fence. The man with the whip beat the stiff dancer, until his body relaxed and he fell to the ground. He opened his eyes, but they were all white: he seemed to me like someone on the verge of death.



As I had been expecting a ‘classic’ Javanese dance, I was shocked by this performance. I felt faint and dizzy, and I was relieved to see some of the other dancers slowly wake and become active. They began to move completely freely. To me they seemed to be crazy: some ate straw, others inhaled thick smoke, others crawled and drank water from a bowl, another simply ran off stage. A table of beautifully arranged food was brought in, and within minutes the dancers had completely destroyed it by grabbing the food to give it to the audience or to eat it themselves. Some teenagers in the audience were now dancing; except for the performer directly in front of me, the horse dancers were now all on their feet again. He was still lying on the ground and was being occasionally whipped. The chaos became too much for me; I made my way through the audience and, after going into the house at the back, I fainted.

We left the village in the dead of night. The fog had lifted. My mind was dull, stunned. I had never seen anything like this before. It was as if unknown stages between life and death had been revealed to me. It was on this night, without knowing it yet, that I began my research on *jathilan*.

In this article, I develop my arguments based on data collected not only during my first experience with *jathilan* but also on further experiences during five months of fieldwork that I carried out between 2007–2008 in Yogyakarta on the Indonesian Island of Java. I did my research with the great help of two of my classmates, Saifuddin and Yulisant, with whom I was able to find *jathilan* groups in D.I. Yogyakarta. Together we found and made contact with *jathilan* groups in D.I. Yogyakarta. They helped me conduct and translate extensive interviews with four complete *jathilan* groups. We also interviewed *pawang* (persons with spiritual power) and other people involved in spirit possession rituals. During my research I was able to witness fourteen *jathilan* performances, all of which were documented in videos, photographs, drawings and field notes.

In the following section I introduce *jathilan* as its own horse dance, focusing on the distinctive aspects of the dance groups and their perfor-

mances. The introduction is followed by the explanation of different interpretations of *jathilan*. Drawing on these different ‘readings’ of *jathilan*, I ask how its ‘magic’ is classified. Further, I analyse where this classification may derive from and introduce interpretations made by agents of the government and Muslim reformists, who can be seen as opponents of *jathilan* and its spirit possession rituals. Following that, I present the interpretations by the performers themselves and show their reactions to the aforementioned allegations made against their dance. I then investigate the dancer actors’ motivation for carrying out the performances. In the final section, I summarise the processes analysed in the paper and provide a perspective on the future of the dance.

2. THE *JATHILAN* HORSE DANCE OF YOGYAKARTA

Horse dances are well known on the island of Java. They are mostly performed in East and Central Java and places where Javanese migrants live today.¹ Horse dances are generally referred to as *kuda kèpang*, *jaran kèpang* or *kuda lumping* (literally ‘woven horses’). These terms are used in many parts of Indonesia and in West Java (Foley 1985), where horse dances are not as prevalent as it is in East and Central Java. Other names, such as *jaranan* or *rèyog*, refer to local horse dance styles in East Java (Onny et al. 2011; van Groenendaal 2008; Kartomi 1976). In Central Java, *èblèg* (possession dance) or *jaran èblèg* is the term used to the west of D.I. Yogyakarta² (Marschall 1995), whereas in Yogyakarta city they are typically referred as *jathilan*³ (Browne 2003; Kim 1996).

Jathilan are mainly performed in rural areas. These performances are based on a spirit possession practice known as *kasar*⁴. Since the dances are not performed as an *alus* court dance in the Sultan’s Palace (*keraton*), it is not easy to determine how popular the style is. In the 1980s, the Suharto government carried out a survey to document regional dramatic dance forms in Indonesia. This survey found that, after *wayang* (shadow puppet play), *jaranan* is the most popular and widespread “traditional” dance form in East Java

than 31 hectares and has more than three million residents.

¹ There are two examples of the horse dance from Malaysia (Nasuruddin 1990, Burrige 1961), performed by Javanese migrants; it would be interesting to conduct further research on the spread of the horse dance in Southeast Asia. See Elwin (1942) for an idea of the worldwide spread of the horse dance.

² Its own province since 1950 on the island of Java, ‘Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta’ is the name for ‘special region Yogyakarta’. Including the city area, D.I. Yogyakarta covers more

³ According to Sumandiyo Hadi, ‘*Jathilan* was an initiation ritual. It was seen as a rite of passage into adulthood. If the child has the skill to mimic a horse, he/she can cross over into adulthood. The word “*Jathil*” means mimicking a horse’s movement. That’s why it’s called *Jathilan*’ (Tucker 2011).

⁴ As Geertz (1960) has already shown, arts in Java are classified in fine (*alus*) and vulgar (*kasar*) practices.



(van Groenendael 2008). In his survey in the suburbs of Yogyakarta, Soedarsono (1976) found only a few *jathilan* groups. Things must have changed considerably since then. Two decades later, Kim (1996) reported five *jathilan* groups within 19 villages, a figure that roughly corresponds to my calculations. On average, I found one *jathilan* group for every ten villages in the areas I researched in D.I. Yogyakarta. Most groups said that they do not perform very often (twice a year on average) and all said that they have had difficulties in recruiting young people. I could not find any *jathilan* dance groups in the city centre of Yogyakarta or in the other larger cities.

Since the *jathilan* groups are hired by their hosts, the dance is performed on various occasions that require providing people with entertainment. These include wedding ceremonies, circumcisions, community celebrations like the *bersih desa* (village purification ceremony), Independence Day celebrations or private occasions such as the dedication of a house. The dance performances are held either during the day or at night.

Each performer in a *jathilan* dance (and the other horse dance types) has a specific role to play. The spiritual group leaders or *pawang*, who do not dance themselves, are responsible for the well-being of the spirits, as they are essentially the only people with the *ilmu gaib* (which can be translated as 'magical power') that allows them to see the spirit world (*alam gaib*). Normally, between two and six male or female *pawang* are involved in a *jathilan* performance. The *pawang* make the spirits enter the bodies of the dancers during the dance and, more importantly, they ensure that the spirits leave the dancer's bodies afterwards. Various kinds of spirits are also part of the performance. The most common spirits during *jathilan* are animal spirits (especially horses), but sometimes ancestors or *djinn* (Muslim spirits) are involved as well. Some spirits, like the tutelary spirit of the village (*dhayang desa*), the spirits of the dead or ancestor spirits have been embodied in other horse dances in East Java, but *jathilan* performers deny the presence of such spirits in their performances.



The group *Turonggo Jati Manunggal*; photo used with permission (Source: group's facebook page).

Most horse dance groups have between six to twelve dancers with horse puppets⁵ and one to six dancers with masks.⁶ A few successful groups (such as *Turonggo Jati Manunggal*) have a group of young males and other groups of boys, and men and women up to age 70. An average group have only one group of male dancers in a wide range of age. The accompanying musical group also varies in age, gender and number. There are generally one or two singers (often a male and a female) and five to fifteen people playing instruments. Most *jathilan* music groups in D.I. Yogyakarta combined traditional gamelan instruments with modern instruments such as drum sets or electric guitars. In addition, there is always a group of helpers involved, most of whom are teenagers. They have no costumes and their tasks include helping the *pawang* and supporting the dancers.⁷ The props used by the *jathilan* groups are an interesting topic that deserves more research. It is worth mentioning here, for example, that the stage props can host spirits: the flowers (*kenanga*), the whips and especially the horse puppets, which are put in a 'scary place' (*tempat anker*) on the night before the dance to attract the spirits.

Concerning the process of the performance, I suggest separating a *jathilan* performance into five stages. The first stage starts with the preparation the night before the dance. This stage includes meditation practices for one of the *pawang*, who invites the spirits to the performance. The second stage begins with the commencement of

⁵ When I asked the groups why they use horse puppets, they responded that warriors in ancient times rode on horses and hence so do they. For more information about the 'invention of horses in Southeast Asia', see Bankoff & Swart (2007).

⁶ The groups used different masks representing various characters of Javanese mythology. However, neither the dancers nor the *pawang* could say who these characters are or what they represent.

⁷ I observed that helpers are predetermined (more than others) to become possessed by spirits as well. It is said that touching a possessed person increases the probability of one becoming possessed.



the performance. The horse dancers appear and perform a practised routine.⁸ The third stage can be called a 'caesura'. In comparison to other horse dances in East or Central Java, this seems to be unique in *jathilan*, because only in *jathilan* do the dancers quickly separate into those who are possessed and those who are not. The not-possessed run off stage the moment that the others collapse (as described above). The fourth stage, in which all the dancers are now possessed, is defined by an apparent chaos on stage: there is dancing, the wild consumption of 'spirit food', and the opening up of space for radical feats such as eating glass or straw. The fifth stage, which I had missed in my first *jathilan* performance because I fainted, is the disbanding of spirits that is conducted by the *pawang* on one dancer after another. The entire *jathilan* performance typically lasts about an hour, but can last up to three hours, if, for example, bystanders or *pawang* become possessed or dancers run away.

Now that we have a good idea of what the *jathilan* is as performance, I will discuss the various interpretations of these performances. Given that to date *jathilan* has remained an oral tradition, no attempts by group members or others have been made to inscribe an 'official' meaning of the performance in general. This has resulted in a number of various interpretations of the dance. After a short summary of the literature on horse dances in Indonesia, I will analyse the most influential discourses of dissent, which can typically be traced back to governmental policies and Muslim reformist actors.⁹ Furthermore, I analyse how the participants of *jathilan* respond to the confrontational discourses, which have had a major influence the practice of spirit possession during *jathilan*.

3. THE CONTESTED MAGIC OF JATHILAN AS A MATTER OF INTERPRETATION

What is striking in the literature on horse dances in Southeast Asia is that, while their general forms (actors, properties, occasions, course of action) remain quite similar throughout time and space, the interpretations as to **why** the performers dance, fight, become possessed and carry out

(more or less radical) feats could not be more diverse. Common explanations include social and individual release, contact with the spirit world, and emotional involvement and entertainment. Aside from these common understandings of the dances, the lack of information about the origin of the dances has created an open space for interpretation that has been the focus of much academic debate.



Jathilan dancers having entered the stage of spirit possession; Turi, D.I. Yogyakarta; source: author.

Many researchers agree that the horse dance is an old practice and that it forms a part of the 'ancient' or 'animistic heritage' of Java (Hughes-Freeland 2008; Nasuruddin 1990; Kartomi 1976; Soedarsono 1976; Holt 1967; Burrige 1961). These theories are typically based on three key factors: the range of horse dances in Indonesia (referring to the *sanghyang jaran* in Bali or *sirih puan* in Sumbawa; see Boomgaard 2007), the presence of animal spirits in the dances (loose spirits which do not originate from religions such as Hinduism or Islam) and the references to common legends of kings and princesses (not directly related to Hindu or Muslim stories). Other re-enactments of legends or historical events were associated with the Mataram Kingdom of the fifteenth century (van Groenendael 2008; Snethlage 1939; Inggris 1923), the struggle against the VOC in the seventeenth century (Burrige 1961) and the *wali songo*, the nine Muslim Sufi teachers who are said to have brought Islam to Java (Nasuruddin 1990) in the fifteenth century. The performances I saw in D.I. Yogyakarta made some

⁸ When I asked why all dances included similar dance movements, the groups mentioned classical dance VCDs as well as *jathilan* VCDs, which are available in local markets. Watching other dancers on television performing *jathilan* or other dances provides enough inspiration to plan one's own choreography.

⁹ Even though the separation of the State and Islam forms artificial and maybe simplistic categories, it provides a good tool for me to bring forth the main points of my paper.



vague references to these common legends, however most references in the dances were made to the Panji tales and their main actor, Panji Asmoro Bangun (van Groenendael 2008; Staugaard 1921).

Two negative interpretations of jathilan and a new style of dance

Van Groenendael shows that all folk genres “need to function on two different levels, namely on the original (regional/ethnic) as well as on the new (national) level” (2008, 35). During Suharto’s ‘New Order’ (*orde baru*) regime, great efforts were made to support ‘national arts’, Indonesian ‘culture’ (*budaya*) and ‘tradition’ (*tradisi*) as part of the Suhartian process of ‘modern’ nation-building. Many art forms like the *wayang* (van Groenendael 1985) or *bedhaya* (Hughes-Freeland 1997; Brakel-Papenhuijzen 1992) were modified to fit the national level. These *alus* arts were hence performed not only on the local level but throughout the country as public events or in political institutions such as the Sultan’s Court (*keraton*) in Yogyakarta. Since there are no *alus* arts that include spirit possession, *jathilan* in its ‘magical form’ was never performed on formal occasions and was mostly marginalised (Hughes-Freeland 2008). Nevertheless, the style of *jathilan* in which dancers were not allowed to enter deep trance was promoted as a ‘cultural’ event. This does not, however, mean that the dances with spirit possession had not yet reached village populations (Hughes-Freeland 2008; van Groenendael 1985). Even possessed dancers were anxious to please the regime to the extent that the actors promoted Suharto’s party ‘Golkar’ in their performances by wearing the party’s representative yellow T-Shirts (Tucker 2011). When claiming to promote ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’, *jathilan* groups could even perform ‘spirited’ dances, but not without suspicion. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, spirit possession in *jathilan* performances became much more popular. The dance remains famous for the radical practices of the performers during the spirit possession stage.

Today, actors within the political and religious elite are still making concerted attempts to hinder or eliminate all dances that include spirit possession. This implies that, if *jathilan* is to ‘function on the national level’ as an *alus* practice, certain elements of the dance must be eliminated. As I

will demonstrate, spirit possession and the radical practices performed during this possession are not considered ‘modern’ by reformists¹⁰. These interpretations of *jathilan* as a ‘pre-modern tradition’ made many of my informants (including the *jathilan* group members themselves) say that while *jathilan* ‘still’ exists, it will soon disappear.

Van Groenendael (2008) documented the ongoing efforts of a *jaranan* group to fit into a ‘modernised’ horse dance genre called *jaranan ké pang*, as required by the state under Suharto. These attempts have included emphasizing the aspects of entertainment and aesthetics and excluded the fourth stage in which dancers become possessed. Drawing on Pemberton’s findings (1994), Browne (2003) gave an account of ‘domesticated’ or ‘tamed’ *jathilan* performances without spirit possession or other ‘spiritual’ behaviour. In fact, all horse dance styles have a ‘tamed’ format as well, which are mostly performed by the same groups. In addition to van Groenendael’s differentiation, Browne differentiated between ‘domesticated’ or ‘tamed’ performances and ‘hard’ performances (2003). Onny et al. (2011) however distinguish between ‘*obyongan*’ and ‘festival’ performances. In the following, I prefer Onny et al.’s suggestion because it was a distinction also used by some of my interviewees.

To provide an example of the influence of the Suharto era’s state policy on current *jathilan* practices, I will now share my experience with the ‘festival’ form of *jathilan*, where no spirit possession is allowed.



Jathilan festival group in front of the keraton; Yogyakarta; source: author.

¹⁰ Different from other parts of the world, in the Indonesian context, the ‘orthodox’ Muslim tendencies (in Indonesia best

exemplified by the Muhammadiyah) are better named as ‘reformist’ since they are relatively new in the history of Indonesia.



Today there are national competitions for these ‘festival’ horse dance genres. In 2008 I witnessed such a *jathilan festival* in front of the court of the sultan (*keraton*) in Yogyakarta. Due to the popularity of the location and the excellent timing (both days fell on a weekend), the festival attracted hundreds of visitors and tourists. The costumes and choreographies were highly elaborate, and each performance took less than 15 minutes. Interestingly, the horses were much smaller than in the *obyongan* performances. A few women’s groups participated in this well-organised festival, something I had only seen twice in the *obyongan* form. Nearly every group was largely unfamiliar with the ‘festival’ form. Indeed, many groups normally performed *jathilan* by inviting the spirits, but here spirit possession was forbidden, a circumstance that proved difficult for the dancers, particularly because the music is the same as that played in the *obyongan* form. Especially the male dancer groups struggled with these strict regulations, sometimes unintentionally falling into trance and therefore being expelled from the competition, as one bystander told me. The female groups did not become possessed, mainly because most of them were practising nothing other than the ‘festival’ form. I was told afterwards that the dances were restricted by the national organisers so that there would be no provocative movements.¹¹

By setting up regulations for the dance demonstrations in the example above, the national organisers have tried to modify the dance into a ‘modern’ form. Although the earliest records of the horse dance (Sneathlge 1939; Pigeaud 1938; Staugaard 1921) already mention forms without trance, since the 1980s serious efforts have been made to promote new horse dance genres without trance. Today, These efforts are in part of the government’s attempt to construct a modern nation state, and fit in with Muslim reformist critiques. As an example of the latter, ‘erotic movements’ (which I never saw) were explicitly forbidden during the performance. The claim that the dance promoted (homo) sexuality can be seen as part of this religiously-based critique, which I present now.

Building on van Groenendael’s analysis, I argue that the horse dance must also function on a

global level. All the people I talked to were Muslims and, like most people in Yogyakarta, they locate the ‘ideal Islam’ in the Middle East. Their religious interpretation of the dance implies that *jathilan* is an indication that Indonesian Islam is still too closely connected with local traditions and ‘improper’ practices. They state that horse dances like *jathilan* are “full of tradition and customs inherited from old generation [sic] such as erotic dance, liquor party, and homosexual relationship” (Onny et al. 2011, 1) and that it is a “form of free, spontaneous and rules free entertainment for common people” (ibid.). The dances “often cause controversy to emerge among people because of their contradiction toward present customs of ethics and politeness.” (ibid.). This is an oft reproduced accusation - which I heard repeatedly when I informed people of my research - of *jathilan* and other similar dances in Java.

As mentioned by Onny et al. (2011), the claim that the horse dance is not masculine, or even a sign of homosexuality, has affected *réyog* in East Java. As most men are now ashamed to perform the dance today, male dancers have been replaced by female dancers. This is not only because the dance has a bad reputation for its apparent non-hetero-normative behaviour¹², but also for alcohol abuse (of the audience and the dancers) and/or its allegedly erotic aspects. Those involved in the dances were reluctant to talk about this aspect with me, and I presume that the 2010 anti-pornography law will not make such enquiries any easier. Teachers (*kyai*) at a famous *pesantren* (Muslim confessional school) “have actively pressured local government to bring *reog* [*réyog*] culture more into line with their own particular version of religious orthodoxy” (Wilson 1999, 9). *Jathilan* performances are nonetheless still dominated by male dancer groups. Different to other regions in Java, *jathilan* from Yogyakarta did not modify their performances due to these kinds of accusations. However, the interpretation held by reformist Muslims that *jathilan* promotes ‘improper’ or impolite behaviour and that it breaks the rules of morality made it difficult for me to convince my fellow university students to accompany me to observe *jathilan* performances.

11 Similar regulations were documented at the *reyog* festival (Onny et al. 2011), or *jaranan ké pang* (Groenendael 2008).

12 The discourse on homosexuality related to the horse dances relates to the *gemblakan*, a system that functions within a master-student relationship (*perguruan*). The dancers, who were described as young and handsome (Kartomi 1976), were called *gemblak* or *jathilan* (Groenendael 2008)

and lived with their master, the *warok*, in one house. Due to their lack of sexual intercourse with women, they were presumed to be homosexuals (Groenendael 2008; Kartomi 1976). The hosting of *gemblak* by *warok* has been outlawed since 1983. For more recent information on *gemblakan*, see Wilson 1999.



Jathilan group members felt offended by my questions about their 'belief' and 'religion'; I was perceived as a stranger passing by only for an interview. They tried to position themselves as 'proper Muslims' and emphasised their involvement as hardworking preservers of 'original Javanese culture and arts' (*budaya/seni asli jawa*) and 'nothing more'. In my interviews, all the *pawang* as well as the *jathilan* dancers agreed that *jathilan* has nothing to do with religion (*agama*), custom (*adat*) or belief (*percayaan*). This was exemplified when a *pawang* told me: "You don't have to believe in spirits – everyone knows that they exist" (my emphasis). They would only nominate *jathilan* as culture (*budaya*) and tradition (*tradisi*). As I have shown above, this is the same interpretation as during the Suharto regime. As Pemberton (1994) has shown, this reference to 'tradition' was one of the features of 'domesticated' performances in the New Order regime, and still today this classification lacks potential controversy, disorder or conflict.¹³ The group members stressed these 'culture' and 'tradition' references so empathetically that in reverse one can easily imagine the conflicts between the three levels of the global, national and local meanings of *jathilan*.

The claims made by high-rank political agents or well-educated Muslim actors have had a serious impact on the members and audiences of *jathilan* dance groups. Before I present the interpretations made by the dance's performers and audience, I wish to show the ongoing struggle to retain *jathilan* as a magical practice in one example from my field notes.

"One rainy night a *jathilan* performance involving two male groups was held near the Merapi. The second group was already in the last stage, and almost all the dancers had already been helped to leave the stage of possession. Only one dancer remained: his spirit was proving reluctant to leave. Two or three times, the two *pawang* tried to 'push' the spirit out of the body by moving their hands along the dancer's body and then making a gesture of throwing something away. The dancer seemed to recover after each attempt, but his possession soon relapsed. He appeared nervous and showed increasing resistance to the *pawang*. The atmosphere in the audience began to change: discomfort and disquiet was evident on the spectators' faces. It was already quite late (around 11 pm), and this dance was supposed to be the last one. After the two *pawang* had failed to remove the spirit, a calm and older *pawang* came on stage. He managed to

approach the angry spirit. He used another technique to convince the spirit to leave that involved whispering spells (*mantra*) in the dancer's ear. Again, the dancer seemed to recover. His body, now totally exhausted, was brought to the dressing room with the help of other dancers. Yet just as the relieved spectators were about to leave, the dancer suddenly became possessed again. He collapsed, then stood up quickly and ran to the orchestra, which was still playing a popular song. The audience resumed its uncomfortable air, which was reinforced when the dancer then shouted: "Where is your responsibility?" and requested a Muslim song. Although the orchestra promptly obeyed his request, the dancer still seemed nervous and restless. The *pawang* approached him carefully and brought him into the dressing room. The music subsided and the spectators left. In the dressing room the *pawang* tried to remove the reluctant spirit again and again and finally appeared to be successful when most people were already returned home."

This example nicely illustrates the contested status of *jathilan*: while the possessed dancer was apparently unwilling to leave the stage, the *pawang* were unable to make the spirit leave. People in the audience stated that this might have been a *djinn* (Muslim spirit), which was more powerful than the *pawang*. For those I talked to, it demonstrated the power of Islam in comparison to *jathilan* as a 'cultural event.' Like many urbanites I talked with, they saw a contradiction between Islam and *jathilan*. This shows that the criticisms of the dance's antagonists, such as the 'modern state' or Muslim reformists, are highly influential among the group's members. It also proves the importance of the narratives and the audience's engagement in interpreting *jathilan*, which I will now present.

Interpretations by the jathilan groups and the pawang

During interviews I often had the feeling that every *pawang* and dancer had a different focus in interpreting *jathilan*. An analysis of all the interviews revealed three prominent interpretations of *jathilan*, namely: 1) to entertain the audience, 2) to please the spirits, and 3) the emotional involvement of the audience and the performers of *jathilan*.

My first idea of any 'function' of *jathilan* was that the dance was a re-enactment of an old leg-

¹³ For a discussion of this aspect, see Lysloff (2001/2002).



end. I believed that I recognised a number of similar features between the different *jathilan* groups in their dance steps and gestures. When watching the (second) stage of the choreographed dances, I became convinced that all of these movements would certainly have detailed explanations of their functions and therefore retelling a shared literal source. However, it appears that these details did not matter to the performers themselves. Few knew much about the history of the dance, save for a few names such as Panji Asmoro Bangun, who is the main actor in many legends in Java. As it was in the New Order era, it was much more important for every dancer or *pawang* to highlight how their practice was a secular form of entertainment.

This aspect is not only a 'strategy' to cope with the accusations from government and religious figures described above; it is also the economic basis for the existence of their group. Since groups are mainly hired by hosts and/or sponsors to entertain the guests for various celebrations, their future depends on the success of their show. If their audiences are amused and entertained, the groups are more likely to be hired in the future, and thus be able to afford better props to improve their appearance and so forth. As such, the groups are often very flexible in fulfilling the wishes of their hosts: van Groenendael describes an occasion in which a possessed dancer blesses a penis after a circumcision (2008, 102–4) and a lesson for young people to perform a *slametan* ritual (2008, 93–7), conducted by dancers who were possessed (and therefore inheriting a high form of authority). It is not only important to satisfy the host with the performance but also - and even more importantly - the onlookers who like to see wild possession dances and express a certain demand for unexpected behaviour which marks the 'thrill' during the spirit possession stage. I saw people walk away in disappointment if too many dancers ran off stage, because they had not achieved the goal of 'emptying themselves' and becoming possessed (which was quite common during female dance performances). To entice the audience, the dancer may not only perform feats but also play games with each other or the spectators, like cat and mouse play and fetch the stick. The *pawang* also have their ways of impressing the audience. Since they have the 'magic power' (*ilmu gaib*) to communicate with the invisible world of spirits (*alam gaib*), some of them

express their secret communication with slow sweeping hand gestures. These theatrical aspects are part of the entertainment interpretation made by the dancers and *pawang*. Younger group members especially repeatedly stressed these features of the dance.

The 'spiritual' interpretation of the dance was much more difficult for me to understand. Some performers of *jathilan* stressed the secular meaning of spirit possession, as a practice of 'entertainment' and 'preserving tradition'. While some aspects of the dance provoked religious associations for me, those employing this interpretation said that the dance had no 'religious' meanings. Before I discuss that in depth, I will present three short examples of this 'spiritual interpretation' of *jathilan*.

Some *pawang*, for instance, told me that they are very careful to remember the invitations sent to all spirits the day before the *jathilan* performance. If they forgot to invite any spirit to the dance, it was possible that members of the audience could become involuntarily possessed. Another example of a 'spiritual' interpretation of the dance is the offerings (*sesajen*) made to the spirits. In fact, most possessed dancers eat right until the end of the performance. Besides rice, coconuts, bananas and 'spirit food', they also like to eat fragrant oil, incense, straw, glass and flowers. Even a live chicken may be killed by a dancer biting into its neck. As van Groenendael (2008, 78) mentions, this often marks the fulfilment of a *kaul*¹⁴ made by someone, in many cases by the host of the performance. The third aspect of the 'spiritual interpretation' of the dance is the fear of the anger the spirits might have, should the fulfilment of their wishes be ignored or delayed too long. The *pawang's* helper and the musicians in particular were instructed to respond to all wishes immediately, even if the dancers ask to eat glass or if the required songs change every few minutes, because all possessed dancers have their own favourite song. If the reaction to the demand comes too late, the dancers sometimes attack members of the orchestra or helpers, usually by grabbing them. A *pawang* told me that if some spirits were not satisfied, incidents such as involuntary spirit possession can occur days after the dance.

When I asked why these preparations and practices are not connected to religion or belief, all my interviewees agreed that 'religion' (*agama*) and 'belief' (*kepercayaan*) are only associated

14 A *kaul* is 'a vow to perform some special act (to offer a sacrifice or hold a party, for instance) upon fulfilment of some ur-

gent wish' (Groenendael 2008: 78). Hosting a *jathilan* performance can be an offering to satisfy a rather large *kaul*, for example, healing a close relative of a serious illness.



with Islam. The categorisation is not surprising, as the notion of *agama* as ‘institutionalised religion’ is predominant. For example, each Indonesian has to choose one from the six official, recognised *agama* for their passports. Nevertheless, I was surprised that ‘belief’ is reserved for *agama*, Islam, as well. The explanation for this again relates back to the Suharto era, where folk performances had to be ‘modern’, that is, universal and separate from local beliefs. Interestingly, these group members argue that spirit possession dance is essentially the same as the spirit-free festival form of the dance. In essence, they argue both forms are not spiritual at all because “you don’t have to *belief* in spirits, everyone knows that they exist”.

Nowadays, this is the most contested of the interpretations. This contestation has in turn led to a gradation of the spirits involved. The *pawang* told me that they most often invite animal spirits or place spirits (*demit*) to *jathilan* performances, which both belong to the lowest classes of spirits (Daszenies 1987). However, a new development seemed to be on the rise during my stay: some *pawang* told me, that recently, more Muslim spirits (*djinn*) were requesting to be invited for a *jathilan* performance, which may be a respond to the audience’s desire. While this may constitute a reaction to the Muslim allegations against the spirit possession of the dance, further research is necessary to investigate this development.

Having shown the allegations, reactions and contesting interpretations of *jathilan*, I wish to present the factors that keep the dance alive. Why do boys, men and (both young and old) women perform *jathilan* in its ‘spiritual’ *obyongan* form? Most explicitly, which aspects of emotional involvement and inclusion illustrate the motivation of the *jathilan* group members and their commitment to spirit possession? In the following section, ‘emotional involvement’ will be analysed as an individual state of consciousness, while ‘inclusion’ forms an evocation of communal affiliation.

Communal affiliation can be seen in the fact that almost all members of a *jathilan* group that I encountered belonged to the same village or its close surroundings. Van Groenendael writes that the groups “considered themselves to form one big family” (2008, 47), which is true of most of the groups I met. Some dancers stressed the trust they feel for their *pawang*, which is necessary to ‘empty their mind’ (*pikiran kosong*), a necessary pre-condition of becoming possessed. Especially in situations where one’s bond with one’s own family is weak or broken, belonging to a *jathilan* group can be a resource of communal activity.

In Tegalrejo, Imogiri, southeastern D.I. Yogyakarta, I talked with Pak Cemplus, who was the director of a *jathilan* group called *Turonggo Seto* (white horse), which included twelve dancers and thirteen musicians. Imogiri was the epicentre of the earthquake in 2006, and almost all the huts in the village had been destroyed, leaving many people dead. He told me that it took some time to revive the dancing after the earthquake, but they had since begun performing *jathilan* every Monday in the village centre. This frequency is far greater than for any of the other groups I interviewed from other regions, who dance only irregularly. It shows that *jathilan* can create a sense of belonging and togetherness within the community.

Another important feature of the dance for most performers and followers of *jathilan* was an emphasis on the dance as form of release and free expression. Possession dance is seen by many performers as fostering a general feeling of release from shame, shyness and social norms (Tucker 2011; van Groenendael 2008; Browne 2003; Burrige 1961). The individuals I talked to (group members and spectators) understand *jathilan* as way to reduce both individual and communal stress and tension.

“Everyday Javanese behaviour is expected to be calm, smooth, modest, and moderate. Outright conflict is avoided and expressions of passion are frowned upon. This may put a lot of psychological pressure on individual members of the society, who must work hard internally to control themselves and manage their external presentation. Behavior during *jathilan* is the polar opposite of what is expected of daily comportment and self-expression. Possessed performers may engage in, and audience members in turn may witness or even spontaneously join, extremes of behaviour that would be outright forbidden in everyday life” (Tucker 2011, 18).

After seeing and following fourteen performances, I agree with Tucker that the release the audience and group members feel is due to three main ‘performative’ aspects to *jathilan*: music, dance and involuntary possession.

The music is especially effective in altering one’s state of consciousness, as it features very high and very low frequencies, a monotone drum beat, and rapid, sudden changes between extremes of high and occasional low tempo. This had an effect not only on the dancers but also on myself (see Introduction), on my Indonesian friends and, it appeared, on the audience in general. Sometimes, when we were overcome by dizziness and queasy feelings, we had to get away



from the speakers to return to normal. Another performative aspect, which forms the audience's interpretations of *jathilan*, is the opportunity to take part in the dancing. In some night-time performances, young people from the audience also danced. While they did dance, they did not do so on stage, nor did they become possessed. If anyone became possessed, a *pawang* is needed to remove the spirit. In fact, they typically only danced to the popular songs that were often performed while the possessed performers were dancing. However, it is not only the music that is stirring; it is also the atmosphere in general. Seeing different people break moral rules and norms is both abhorrent and fascinating. Therefore, in this way I argue that the *jathilan* audience becomes emotionally involved too. The most striking part of the performative elements provided by *jathilan* is when people from the crowd become so tangled up during the dance that they themselves become involuntarily possessed. Involuntary spirit possession is, for most spectators, a hint that there are 'real spirits' involved. I do not analyse ontological questions here, but for bystanders this question is a permanent and entertaining feature of the dance, too. Many people in the audience like to determine who is really being 'possessed' (*kesurupan*) and who might be pretending (*pura-pura*).

When I told *pawang* about how I fainted during my first *jathilan* performance, they all told me that I had 'emptied myself', and was ready to become a vessel for a spirit who wanted to enter my body. If I had achieved this off-stage, they said, I could be a natural horse dancer on stage. They told me that I might have a gift for learning *ilmu*, and they asked me to practice dancing with them. Until today, I have refused this offer.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates that magic and modernity are not as distinctive or separate as one might think. As I have shown above, the horse dance groups were pressured into dropping the elements of spirit possession practice from their performances during the Suharto, or *Orde baru* policy, era (1967–1998). Suharto's nation-building policy stressed arts and 'culture' as part of national identity, untying them from localized beliefs and practices. An emphasis on the aesthetic and theatrical elements of the dances made them both more comprehensible and palatable for foreign tourists and for Indonesians from other

parts of the country. In this way, *jathilan* performances became labeled 'cultural' events.

Post-1998 the practice of spirit possession became popular again, and many new *jathilan* groups were founded in D.I. Yogyakarta. Some of them now perform both forms of the dance, with and without spirit possession. The two forms are so fundamentally different that I identify them as distinctive styles in the third section. The re-emergence of spirit possession practices has attracted renewed and increasingly powerful criticism. A common discourse among religious reformists is that Indonesian Islam is too closely connected with indecent practices, identifying *jathilan* as such a practice. The reformists argue that *jathilan* is 'improper', both in terms of sexual and moral behavior. Furthermore, they argue, the dances are not proper Muslim practice and, as with governmental criticisms, are too localised. This discourse appeared to be the popular opinion about *jathilan* in Yogyakarta city, where horse dances with spirit possession are typically dismissed as pre-modern and outdated. As I have shown in this paper, the performance groups in the countryside struggled with these discourses. My interviewees seemed to find them especially problematic, given that I was both a stranger and a foreigner. They argued that *jathilan*, even with spirit possession practices, is a part of 'culture' rather than 'belief' or 'spiritual practice', just as during the *Orde Baru* era. By doing so, a striking transformation process is revealed: if spirits, super-powers and extreme practices in spirit possession are part of 'culture', then 'culture' turns out to be what most would call 'magical' and 'magic' simply becomes 'cultural'. I call this a 'modern' explanation, because it is an attempt to side-step religious and political allegations and the discussion about what belongs to 'modernity': for nobody can deny that 'culture' itself should be preserved. But, if modernity becomes magical, what is the benefit in still calling it 'modernity'? This paper is another illustration of the difficulties in defining religion and belief. Furthermore, it demonstrates that spirituality rather than religion is an integral part of the public life, and with all of its inherent implications is far from being pushed away from it. I therefore question the benefit of using 'modernity' as a category at all, and rather regard the present time in Indonesia and Southeast Asia as something entirely new.

On a practical level, the performance groups will change and many are likely to disappear due to a lack of interest from young people. Nevertheless, I have the impression that some 'major players' will remain, such as the group *Turonggo*



Jati Manunggal, who have become very popular in D.I. Yogyakarta. They have modernised their performances, using new media to promote themselves, as well as being very flexible and entertaining in their shows, shifting focus away from performing radical feats during spirit possession to entertaining games, where possession plays a minor role.¹⁵ During the time of my field research in 2007–2008, I saw several performances that adopted this shift to a kind of ‘new’ spirit possession dance. Such shows featured a number of games, in which spirit possession is no longer a key element of the dance, yet allowing the groups to benefit from the open space of action it offers. The dancers perform their ‘show’, and it is not clear whether they are really possessed or not. In this space, they are free to act in unusual ways, something which is highly entertaining for the audience. Another important element of the debate over *jathilan* is already part of a ‘magical discourse’ of Indonesia, that is, the audience and the *pawang* feel the increasing presence of Muslim spirits. But in calling forth these spirits, the *pawang* may be putting them in a dangerous position in which the powerful *djinn* mentioned in the Qur’an are too strong for them to control.

The process of ‘inscription’, in which people’s actions become inscribed and therefore regulated (Howe 2000) would be in this case a development of the standardized ‘festival’ form of *jathilan*.

As I have shown this process has already started and it will nevertheless continue. Hughes-Freeland has already noted that students are learning the horse dance at an official dance academy.¹⁶ Yet given that this regulation is negotiated on several levels, religious and national, local and individual, it is far from disappearing. Just as it has over the centuries, the dance will continue to change, evolve and remain dynamic.

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¹⁵ Groenendael has already given an account of a group called ‘Samboyo Putro’, which was very flexible and offered more entertaining games with the audience than extreme practices.

¹⁶ In Hughes Freeland’s online paper, ‘Performance in Indonesia: Traditions of Court and Country’ at <http://www.swan.ac.uk/sssid/indonesianperformance/newtraditions.htm>



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