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## MODERNITY AND SPIRIT POSSESSION IN JAVA

HORSE DANCE AS A THREATENED SPACE OF  
INTERPRETATION

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## MODERNITY AND SPIRIT POSSESSION IN JAVA

### HORSE DANCE AS A THREATENED SPACE OF INTERPRETATION

#### INTRODUCTION

In October 2007 I was invited by friends to attend a 'Javanese dance show' in a village near Mount Merapi and the city of Yogyakarta, where I was spending a semester abroad. We set out on our motorbikes long after sunset. A few kilometres outside the city, the fog became so thick that we could see little more than the white road markings just in front of us. We had to focus on them to remain on the road. After a while, we turned off the main road and drove through sleepy villages until we finally arrived at an illuminated village where people from the surrounding villages had met up, some selling tea and fruits. The male and female dancers had gathered in a house in which they prepared to dress and put on their make-up for the performance. They were wearing classical Javanese costumes and carrying small whips and wooden swords. In front of the house a small stage had been erected which was surrounded by a wooden fence. Pairs of painted horse puppets made of woven bamboo were placed on the middle of the stage. Next to the stage was a small orchestra with gamelan instruments such as metallophones, drums and gongs.

Once the musicians started to play, the spectators gathered around the stage until myself and my friends found ourselves huddled against the wooden fence. A man dressed in dark clothes came in and threw flowers on to the stage. He closed his eyes for a little while, seemingly in prayer, and then left. Another man, similarly dressed, came with a huge whip. Quite concentrated, he lashed a few times with great cracks in different directions and left the stage as

well. Eight young male dancers then appeared on stage, dancing in pairs in a smooth style, their motionless faces revealing their concentration on the music and the choreography. The music stressed two notes in high frequencies, interrupted by short and fast episodes of drum-rolls. After some time, the dancers were all holding a horse puppet in their hands. Although the choreography appeared rather difficult, the dancers did not seem to show it. Their movements changed; they became more and more excessive and less exact. They lifted their wooden swords and seemed to fight with their dance partners. The music's tempo increased and the dancers became more excited, now all with eyes closed. About fifteen minutes after the dancing started, the music suddenly stopped and a woman began to sing alone, the dancers apparently calming down. At this point 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 back dancers and suddenly 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 came and beat the stiff dancer until his body relaxed and fell to the ground. He opened his eyes, but they were all white: he seemed to me like someone on the verge of death. Since I was expecting a 'classic' Javanese dance, I was shocked by this performance. I felt faint, but was relieved to see some dancers awake and active



after a while. They now moved completely freely. To me they seemed to be crazy: while some ate straw, others were inhaling thick smoke, while yet others were crawling and drinking water from a bowl. One dancer even ran off the stage. A table with a copious amount of food was brought in and within a very short amount of time the beautiful arrangement had been completely destroyed. Even some teenagers in the audience were now dancing; except for the dancer directly in front of me, the horse dancers were now all on their feet again. He was still lying on the ground and was still being whipped at times. All this confusion 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 at the dead of night when the fog had lifted. My mind still was dull; 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.

## THE JATHILAN HORSE DANCE OF YOGYAKARTA

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 between 2007-2008 in Yogyakarta on the Indonesian Island of Java.

In the following chapter I give an introduction to jathilan as its own horse dance genre, which is followed by some different interpretations of jathilan in the third chapter. Such interpretations variously claim that the dance is a practice that threatens moral issues, a 'backward' practice against modern nation-building ideas, a communal and individual practice of release, a practice making contact with the spirit world, and not least a modern form of entertainment. Drawing on these different 'readings' of jathilan, I discuss the dance (especially its spirit possession) as an open but contested space of interpretation for various actors. The ongoing struggle around the dominant interpretation of the dance is applicable not only to jathilan, but to all horse dances and other traditions with spirit possession that are common in rural areas. In the final chapter I provide a perspective on the future of jathilan.

Horse dances (sometimes called 'hobby horse dances') are well known on the island of Java. They occur mostly in provinces such as East Java and Central Java and places where Javanese migrants live today.<sup>1</sup> General names for horse dances are *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 *réyog* refer to local horse dance genres in East Java (Onny, Listia & Deddy 2011; van Groenendael 2008; Kartomi 1976). In Central Java, *èblèg* (possession dance) or *jaran èblèg* is the term used to the west of D.I. Yogyakarta<sup>2</sup> (Marschall 1995), whereas in Yogyakarta city everyone refers to the horse dance as *jathilan* (Browne 2003; Kim 1996).

Given that jathilan occurs largely in rural areas and is, due to the practice of spirit possession, not performed as a court dance in the Sultan's Palace (*keraton*), it is not easy to determine how popular the genre is. In the 1980s, the Suharto government launched a survey to document regional dramatic genres in Indonesia. This survey proved that, after *wayang* (shadow puppet play), *jaranan* is the most popular and widespread art genre in East Java (van Groenendael 2008). While Soedarsono (1976) conducted a survey in the suburbs of Yogyakarta, in which he indicates there were only a few jathilan groups, things must have changed considerably since then. Two decades later, Kim (1996) reports five jathilan groups within 19 villages, a figure that 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 of them said that they do not perform very often (two times a year on average) and all said that they have had difficulties in recruiting young people. There are no jathilan dance groups in the city centre of Yogyakarta or in other larger cities.

I carried out my research with the great help of two of my classmates, Saifuddin and Yulisant,

<sup>1</sup> There are two examples of the horse dance from Malaysia (Nasuruiddin 1990, Burridge 1961), performed by Javanese migrants; it would be interesting to conduct further research on the spread of the horse dance in Southeast Asia. For an idea of the worldwide spread of the horse dance, see Elwin (1942).

<sup>2</sup> 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 than 31 hectares and has more than three million residents.



with whom I was able to find jathilan groups in D.I. Yogyakarta. They helped me to conduct and translate extensive interviews with four complete jathilan groups. Other persons like pawang or other people involved in spirit possession rituals were also interviewed. During my research I was able to witness fourteen jathilan performances, all of which were documented on video and with photographs, drawings and field notes.

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 like the dedication of a house. The dance performances are held either during the day or at night. On average the jathilan dance takes about one hour, but due to the expected actions (bystanders or

more importantly, they ensure that the spirits leave the bodies (of the dancers) afterwards. Another subgroup consist of various kinds of spirits: the most common spirits during jathilan are animal spirits (especially horses), but sometimes ancestors or djinn (Muslim spirits) are involved as well. This depends on the ilmu and the decision of the pawang. Before the dance, the pawang told me that they would invite the spirits and enter into a contract with them: for their service to come and entertain the people, the spirits promise to leave the body when they are asked to move out. In the case of a reluctant spirit, the possessed dancer needs a powerful pawang to force the spirit to leave. Some spirits, like the tutelary spirit of the village (*dhayang desa*), have been embodied in horse dances in East Java, which still have importance for only few people in meeting such a powerful spirit (Groenendael 2008). Such tendencies of interpretation are now offended and even rejected, as I will show below.



1. The group *Turonggo Jati Manunggal*; from their facebook page.

pawang becoming possessed, dancers running away, etc.), it can sometimes have a duration of up to three hours.

The actors of the horse dance groups like jathilan can be separated into certain subgroups. The pawang are responsible for the well-being of the spirits, since they are practically the only people with ilmu (individual spiritual 'knowledge' or 'gift') that allows them to see the spirit world (*alam gaib*). On average two to 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,

Most horse dance groups have between six to twelve dancers with horse puppets and one to six dancers with masks.<sup>3</sup> Not all dancers achieve the goal of entering into a trance: some have the gift 'to empty their thoughts' (*pikiran kosong*)<sup>4</sup> almost immediately, while others might never have experienced such a state of consciousness. Very few successful groups (like the group *Turonggo Jati Manunggal*) have a group of young males and other groups of male children, old men and women of all ages. On average, there is only one group of male dancers of different ages. 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.<sup>5</sup> The musicians

<sup>3</sup> The groups used different masks representing various characters of Javanese mythology. Neither the dancers nor the pawang could say who these characters are or what they represent.

<sup>4</sup> Another term for an 'empty mind' is *ngalamun*, which refers to 'vacancy' or 'emptiness'; see Browne (2003).

<sup>5</sup> For more about the 'invention of horses in Southeast Asia', see Bankoff & Swart (2007).



also vary in age; they consist of one to two singers (often male and 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. Their music is also very mixed: most groups switch to popular music after a gamelan set. In addition, there is always a group of helpers involved, most of whom are very young. They have no costumes and their tasks include helping the pawang and supporting the dancers. I observed that helpers are predetermined (more than others) to become possessed by spirits as well.<sup>6</sup> The material equipment of jathilan groups forms an interesting topic that certainly deserves more research. It is worth mentioning here that different things on the dancing stage can host spirits: the flowers (kenanga), the whips and especially the horse puppets, which are placed in a 'scary place' (tempat anker) one night before the dance so as to attract the spirits.

I suggest separating a jathilan performance into five stages. The first stage starts with the preparation one night before the dance, which also includes meditation practices for the pawang who invites the spirits to the performance. The second stage begins with the start of the performance. The horse dancers appear and dance to a practiced choreography. 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. The third stage can be called a 'cesura'. In comparison to other horse dances in East or Central Java, this seems to be unique in jathilan because the dancers quickly separate into those who are possessed and those who are not. The latter group of dancers runs off stage the moment that all the others collapse (as described above). The fourth stage is on the one hand shaped by smooth dancing and the consumption of 'spirit food' by the possessed dancers. On the other hand it opens a space for unexpected things to happen, radical feats and diverse interpretations, which can be done by different groups of actors who are directly or indirectly involved in jathilan. The

interpretations that mainly correspond to this stage are discussed in the next chapter. The fifth stage, which I missed in my first jathilan performance due to my fainting incident, is the disbanding of spirits that is done by the pawang to one dancer after another.

These three latter stages were missing in another form of jathilan, namely the 'jathilan festival'. This genre is relatively new in its present form, and I argue that its 'invention' is due to the recent narratives of modernity in Indonesia. I will now present this development of jathilan in the Javanese context under the influences of politics and religion, nation-building and contested interpretations of spirit possession.

### **JATHILAN AND OTHER HORSE DANCES IN PROCESSES OF MODERNIZATION**

What is striking in the literature on the horse dance in Southeast Asia is that, while its general form (actors, properties, occasions, course of action) remain quite similar throughout time and space, the interpretations as to why dancers dance, fight, become possessed and do (more or less radical) feats could not be more diverse. Prominent explanations such as social and individual release, contact with the spirit world, emotional involvement and entertainment will be discussed below. Beside these understandings of the dance, the question of its origin forms a very open space for interpretation, rather asked from academics than the groups themselves. Taking into account a.) the range of horse dances in Indonesia (referring to the sanghyang jaran in Bali or sirih puan in Sumbawa; see Boomgaard 2007), b.) the animal spirits (loose spirits which do not originate from religions such as Hinduism or Islam) and c.) the common legends of kings and princesses (not directly related to Hindu or Muslim stories), 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; Nasuruiddin 1990; Kartomi 1976; Soedarsono 1976; Holt 1967; Burrige 1961). Other re-enactments of legends or historical events were associated with the Mataram Kingdom of the fifteenth century (van Groenendaal 2008; Sneathlaga 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

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<sup>6</sup> It is said that touching a possessed person increases the probability of one becoming possessed as well.



(Nasuruddin 1990) in the fifteen century. My collected accounts in D.I. Yogyakarta offer some vague but similar references, but references are mainly made to the Panji tales and its main actor, Panji Asmoro Bangun (van Groenendael 2008; Staugaard 1921).



2. *Jathilan dancers enter stage of spirit possession; Turi, D.I. Yogyakarta; source: author.*

These diverse interpretations are only applicable as long as jathilan is an oral tradition. The oral history keeps the interpretation of the dance dynamic and adaptable. As I will show below, these traditions may have changed already. There are attempts to ‘inscribe’ the dance as an entertainment show free from spirit possession. Two offending interpretations, which reject this ‘open space’ of interpretation provided in jathilan, are popular in present Indonesia. These offending sides highly influenced the practice of spirit possession during jathilan.

#### *Two offending interpretations of Jathilan and a new genre*

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). When Suharto and his ‘New Order’ (orde baru) regime came to an end in 1998, great efforts were made to support ‘national arts’ 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 correspond to the national level, i.e. to identify with the state and its agencies. They were hence carried out 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 dances on the national level or in the keraton that include spirit possession, folk performances like jathilan were never performed on formal occasions and are mostly marginalized (Hughes-Freeland 2008). However, this does not mean that the dances and their political contents have not yet reached village populations (Hughes-Freeland 2008; van Groenendael 1985). There are also serious attempts to regulate all dances that include spirit possession. This implies that, if jathilan is to ‘function on the national level’, certain elements of the dance must be eliminated, i.e. those that are carried out by the groups that are not considered ‘modern’ by reformists, as well as spirit possession and radical practices during the spirit possession. These interpretations of jathilan as a ‘pre-modern tradition’ make many of my informants (including the jathilan group members themselves) say that jathilan ‘still’ exists, but will soon disappear.

Building on Groenendael’s analysis, I argue that the horse dance must now function on a global level too, since all the people I talked to were Muslims and, like most people in Yogyakarta, they locate the ‘ideal Islam’ in the Middle East. This 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’ (2011:1) and that it is a ‘form of free, spontaneous and rules free entertainment for common people’ (ibid.) and ‘often cause controversy to emerge among people because of their contradiction toward present customs of ethics and politeness.’ (ibid.). This is an often reproduced accusation of jathilan and other similar dances in Java, which I heard repeatedly when I told people of my research on jathilan. When I talked to citizens of Yogyakarta and asked for their opinion on jathilan, they emphasized its rural character and ‘primitive’ practices; most people laughed and suggested that I research more elaborated dances such as the court dances and/or wayang wong (Soedarsono 1990), which do not induce ‘backward’ behaviour such as spirit possession.

As Onny et al. (2011) have mentioned (already cited above), the accusations of dancers not being male while dancing horse dances have already affected réyog in East Java: the male



dancers have been replaced by female dancers because men are ashamed to dance the horse dance today. This is not only because the dance has a bad reputation for alcohol abuse and/or its allegedly erotic aspects, but also because of the discourse of homosexual behavior that is present when talking about horse dances in general. 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.<sup>7</sup> Teachers (kyai) at a famous pesantren (Muslim confessional school) 'have actively pressured local government to bring reog culture more into line with their own particular version of religious orthodoxy' (Wilson 1999:9). In D.I. Yogyakarta, the discourses on homosexuality and jathilan do not overlap very much. Jathilan performances are nonetheless still dominated by male dancer groups. Also, the interpretation held by reformist Muslims that jathilan promotes 'improper' or impolite behaviour or that it breaks the rules of morality made it difficult for me to convince my fellow university students to accompany me to jathilan performances.

As I argue in this chapter, jathilan is not only an 'open space' but also a 'contested space' of interpretation. In my opinion, the jathilan groups felt offended by my questions as a stranger just passing by for an interview. They tried to position themselves as 'proper Muslims' and emphasized their involvement as hardworking preservers of 'original Javanese culture and arts' (budaya/seni asli jawa) and 'nothing more'. In my interviews, the pawang as well as the jathilan dance groups all agreed that jathilan has nothing to do with religion (agama), custom (adat) or belief (percayaan),<sup>8</sup> but rather with culture (budaya) and tradition (tradisi).<sup>9</sup> They stressed

these latter nominations of jathilan so empathetically that in reverse one can easily imagine the ongoing conflicts between the three levels of the global, national and local meanings of the dance. In their narratives, young people especially pointed out the important entertainment factor of their 'show' (pertunjukkan) and often excluded the spirits involved. On the other hand, old people highlighted the pleasure of the spirit in dancing (and consuming) in a human body.

Although the earliest records of the horse dance (Snethlage 1939; Pigeaud 1938; Staugaard 1921) already mention forms without trance, strong efforts have been made since the 1980s to promote new horse dance genres without trance. These conform to the governmental constitution of a modern nation and correspond to Javanese Muslim reformists who avoid 'improper' practices that appear to be closely connected with spirit possession. These new genres are often presented in competitions and festivals.

Groenendael (2008) documented the ongoing efforts of a Jaranan group to fit into a 'modernized' horse dance genre called jaranan képaṅ as required by the state under Suharto. These include more aspects of entertainment and aesthetics and exclude the dancers becoming possessed by spirits. Referring to Pemberton (1994), Browne (2003) gives an account of 'domesticated' or 'tamed' performances without spirit possession or other offending behaviour by jathilan groups. In fact, all horse dance genres such as jathilan, reyog and jaranan have a 'tamed' format as well, mostly performed by the same groups. In addition to Groenendael's differentiation, Browne differentiated between 'domesticated' or 'tamed' and 'hard' performances (2003),

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> This was rejected by a pawang telling me: 'You don't have to believe in spirits – everyone knows that they exist'.

<sup>9</sup> For Pemberton (1994) this reference to 'tradition' is one of the features of 'domesticated' performances in the New Order regime, which lacks potential controversy, disorder or conflict. For a discussion of this aspect, see Lysloff (2001/2002).



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



while Onny et al. (2011) distinguish between ‘obyongan’ and ‘festival’ genres. In the following, I prefer Onny et al.’s suggestion because it was used by some of my own interviewees too.

There are national competitions for these ‘festival’ horse dance genres, and I was fortunate to be able to witness such a jathilan festival in 2008 in front of the court of the sultan (keraton) in Yogyakarta. Due to the popularity of the place and the excellent timing (both days fell on a weekend), the festival attracted many 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-organized festival, something I had only seen twice in the obyongan form. Almost 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, because the music is the same as that played in the obyongan form. Especially the male dancer groups struggled with these strong regulations, sometimes accidentally falling into trance and therefore being expelled from the competition, as one bystander told me. The women’s groups did not become possessed, mainly because most of them were practising nothing other than the ‘festival’ form. As I heard afterwards, the dance movements were restricted by the national organizers so that there would be no provocative movements.<sup>10</sup>

By setting up regulations for the dance demonstrations, the national organizers try to modify the dance into a ‘proper’ form. As I show in this example, the state promotes a ‘modernized’ genre of jathilan by taking criticism from reformist Muslims into account. Not only the spirit possession but also the ‘erotic movements’ (which I never saw) are explicitly forbidden. These two restrictive institutions have had a deep impact on the members and audiences of jathilan dance groups. To illustrate this impact, I give an example of the only disturbance I saw during a jathilan performance.

‘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

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 slow 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 this time appeared to be successful.’

This example nicely illustrates the contested space 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. This interpretation does not necessarily question the practice of jathilan, since Muslim spirits are rarely involved in the dance. Yet for those I talked to, it demonstrated the power of Islam in comparison to jathilan as a ‘cultural event’. Like many urban citizens I talked with, they saw a contradiction between Islam and jathilan. This proves not only the audience’s engagement in interpreting jathilan (see below); it also shows that the criticisms of the dance’s antagonists,

<sup>10</sup> Similar regulations were documented in reyog festival (Onny et al. 2011), or jaranan képang (Groenendaal 2008).





such as the 'modern state' or Muslim reformists, are highly influential with the group's members and its audience.

One reason why spirit possession in jathilan has survived these recent developments is the various interpretations it offers. The groups who performed in the festival told me they came to 'win', to 'see Yogyakarta', and because they were 'proud to be invited'. The spectators were interested in the rapidly alternating dances and the dazzling costumes, but their interest was not maintained for very long, and there was a rapid turnover of people in the audience. This format is therefore interpreted differently by the bystanders and the groups and differs from the obyongan form. I argue that the 'jathilan festival' lacks performative elements, an aspect that will be described below. Prior to that, I present the interpretation of the jathilan groups and spectators.

#### *Interpretations of 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 and its meaning, namely: 1) to entertain the audience, 2) to please the spirits, and 3) to practise a communal art form.

I often asked whether the dance represented the re-enactment of an old legend because I recognized many similar features of the different jathilan groups in their dance steps and gestures. By watching the second stage of the choreographed dances, I was sure that all these movements would certainly have detailed explanations of their functions, but it appears that these details did not matter for the actors of horse dance groups. They did not know about the history of the dance save for a few names like Panji Asmoro Bangun, who is the main actor in many legends in Java. It was much more important for every dancer or pawang to highlight how secular their entertainment practice is. This aspect is not only a 'strategy' to cope with the accusations described above; it is the economic basis for the existence of their group. Since the groups are mainly hired by hosts and/or sponsors to entertain the guests on the different occasions mentioned above, their future depends on the success of their show. If their audiences are amused, the groups might be hired in the future and thus be able to afford

more material to improve their appearance and so forth. As such, the groups can be very flexible in fulfilling the wishes of their hosts: Groenendael describes an occasion on which a possessed dancer blesses a penis after a circumcision (2008: 102-104) and a lesson for young people to perform a slametan ritual (2008: 93-97), conducted by dancers who were possessed. Other occasions like the kaul are described below. 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. If too many dancers run off stage because they have not achieved the goal of 'emptying themselves' and becoming possessed (which was quite common during female dance performances), I saw people walk away in disappointment. 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 other practices. The pawang also have their ways to impress the audience. Since they have the gift of communicating with the invisible world of spirits (*alam gaib*), some of them express their secret communication with sweeping hand gestures. All these aspects are part of the entertainment interpretation made by the dancers and pawang. The younger group members especially repeatedly stressed this feature of the dance.

Although not prominently articulated, I recognized a second interpretation, which seemed to be more important for the older members than for their younger counterparts. If asked directly, they all agreed that spirit possession has no direct impact on the well-being of the community, but some nevertheless mentioned the importance and pleasure of the spirit to dance and consume in a human body. As already mentioned above, in other regions, the horse dance genre provided occasions to meet the guardian spirit of the village (*dhayang desa*) or other spirits of high rank. Nowadays this interpretation is the most contested one, which also leads to a degradation 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). Although the people I interviewed minimize the significance of the spirit invitation to the dance and into the bodies of the dancers, on other occasions they mentioned how important the feature of spirit



worship is. First, some pawang told me that they are very careful to remember the invitations sent to all spirits the day before the jathilan performance. One pawang had to remove a spirit after it possessed a spectator because he forgot to invite it.<sup>11</sup> Another example of a 'spirited' interpretation of the dance is the offerings (sesajen) made to the spirits. In fact, most possessed dancers consume constantly until the end of the performance. Besides rice, coconuts, bananas and 'spirit food', they like to eat fragrant oil, incense, straw, glass and flowers. Sometimes even a live chicken becomes involved, which is killed by a dancer biting into it. As Groenendael (2008:78) mentions, this often marks the fulfilment of a kaul<sup>12</sup> made by someone, in many cases by the host of the performance. The third aspect of the 'spirit' ual interpretation of the dance is the feared anger the spirits might have should the fulfilment of their wishes be ignored or delayed too long. The helpers of the pawang and the musicians in particular were instructed to respond to all wishes immediately, even if the dancers ask for glass to eat 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 clenching them. They are then hard to separate from their victims. A pawang told me that if some spirits were not satisfied incidents like involuntary spirit possession can occur days after the dance. These attacks were used in the interviews to point to the ambivalence and power of the spirits and are therefore a hint that jathilan is not only an occasional pleasure for spirits, but may be necessary in the views of some actors to satisfy the spirit world. Although some (mostly young) people rejected this statement, they all agreed that a village is safer if, for example, jathilan is performed at bersih desa celebrations.

The communal aspect of the horse dance performances is the third dominant interpretation the group members identified in the interviews. Almost all members of a jathilan group belong to the same village or its close

surroundings. 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' in order to become possessed. Especially in areas where one's bond with one's own family is disturbed, belonging to a jathilan group can be a resource of communal activity.

In Tegalrejo, Imogiri, southeastern Yogyakarta, I talked to Pak Cemplus, who was the director of a jathilan group called Turonggo Seto (white horse) that 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 have since begun performing jathilan every Monday in the village centre. This frequency is far more than for any of the other groups I interviewed from other regions, who dance only irregularly. Since possession dance is seen by many actors of the horse dance as fostering a general feeling of release from shame, shyness and social norms (van Groenendael 2008; Browne 2003; Burrige 1961), the individuals I talked to (group members and spectators) understand jathilan as way to reduce stress as well. As I demonstrated above, it is also used as a way to cope with trauma, but more research is necessary to analyse this aspect.

#### *Interpretations and emotional involvement by the audience*

After analysing the interpretations of jathilan by national institutions and reformist Muslim groups and adding different interpretations made by the dance groups themselves, I will now present the interpretation of the audience and demonstrate the last aspect of jathilan's open space of interpretation discussed in this chapter. In general, the interpretation of the bystanders during spirit possession rituals is very important because the possessed person has normally no memory of what happened. This aspect, already mentioned by Rouget (1985), is striking in the negotiation of jathilan too. That is why some of the understandings of the different dance groups overlap with the audience's interpretations. These negotiations over meaning that occur between the audience and the dance groups are constant, not only during the performances, but also in general, throughout the jathilan.

<sup>11</sup> This spirit was easy to handle: it just asked for oil (minyak fanbuk) to drink.

<sup>12</sup> A kaul is 'a vow to perform some special act (to offer a sacrifice or hold a party, for instance) upon fulfillment of some urgent 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.



In Yogyakarta city and its suburbs, the audiences at jathilan dances are significantly mixed, perfectly matching Indonesia's demography, with many children and young people, a fewer adults and far fewer seniors. They constitute the social (and economic) foundation of the groups. The most important factor for the host and sponsor of every dance is that the audience is large and highly entertained. If a jathilan group attracts people for a few hours, it might be hired more often. People rarely travelled far (except for myself and my friends) to watch a jathilan performance; indeed, the onlookers mostly came from the surrounding areas of the stage. Sometimes an itinerant group<sup>13</sup> would appear spontaneously. But even when jathilan groups know that they will be performing at a certain place and time, they do not often advertise it,<sup>14</sup> since they are mainly hired as side acts to bigger events such as the *bersih desa* or Independence Day celebrations. What is interesting for the composition of the audience is not only who comes, but also who stays away from it. While I cannot estimate how effective the accusations of unsuitability mentioned earlier are, I can state that most of my university peers have never seen jathilan live. They had been told that such performances involved 'improper' practices and considered it to be totally backward and rural, just as average German students do not find 'German folk dance' appealing. The only people from Yogyakarta city I met at the jathilan performances were art students who were teaching the groups dance moves or doing fieldwork on jathilan on their own. After seeing and following fourteen performances, I argue that there are also 'performative' aspects to jathilan. This is the main appeal for the audience in 'joining jathilan' (*ikut jathilan*). The music is especially effective in altering one's state of consciousness, as it quickly switches between very fast and few slow parts, in very high and very low frequencies, and has a monotone drum beat. This had an effect not only on myself (see Introduction), but also

on my Indonesian friends. Sometimes, when dizziness and queasy feelings became too strong, we had to get away from the speakers to return to normal. Other performative aspects, which inform the interpretations of jathilan of the audience, include dancing. In some night-time performances, young people from the audience like to dance. They dance without being on the stage or becoming possessed, moving to the popular songs at the end of the performances. But 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 loathsome and fascinating. Therefore, I argue that the jathilan audience becomes emotionally involved too. The most striking part of the performative elements provided by jathilan is when people become so tangled up during the dance that they themselves become involuntarily possessed. It can be very surprising and funny if the person standing next to you suddenly crawls on the ground and eats straw. The 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 last point is a permanent and entertaining feature of the dance. Many people in the audience like to determine who is really being 'possessed' (*kesurupan*) and who might be pretending (*pura-pura*).

To complete the different interpretations of all the actors involved in jathilan performances, I should mention my own perspective, especially as I collapsed during my first contact with the dance:

*'I was sitting in the house when I slowly started to see clearly again. The music remained as fast and as loud as before, and next to me, a possessed spectator was being treated. [...] I still felt weak: it was very late now – we had this long and exhausting drive through the fog, and all the time during the dance I felt like dancing and could not move, penned up in the crowd. I also had only one tea hours ago and felt exhausted...' (own field notes, 1 November 2007)*

My interpretation differs very much from what the pawang told me when they heard that I had fainted. They were sure that I had 'emptied myself' and almost let a spirit enter my body. If I achieved this off the stage, they said, I would be a nice horse dancer on stage. They assured me that I might have a gift for learning ilmu, and they asked me to practice dancing with them. Until now I have refused this offer.

<sup>13</sup> Such itinerant groups have become rare. In an early account, Pigeaud (1938) writes that itinerant groups were quite popular. They were famous for their extreme practices to attract an audience. I once saw two young men performing a jathilan dance on the street. One carried a tape deck and the other wore a horse puppet and a Javanese dance costume. They said they would, at the request of their sponsors, perform a short dance without spirit possession.

<sup>14</sup> Some groups, as the above mentioned Turonggo Jati Manunggal jathilan group, have their own facebook page where forthcoming dances are announced.



## CONCLUSION

I have argued that jathilan is an open but contested space of different interpretations and 'readings', providing a link between issues of modernity, religious reformism and local practices and beliefs. Concerning the 'modern' variations of the horse dance I have discussed, I think the new 'festival' genre of jathilan (and similar dances) provides interesting features for many people, though further elaboration is necessary to analyse the reception of the horse dance without spirit possession. However, I doubt that the groups will refrain from inviting the spirits in the future, nor does the majority of the audience want to lose 'spirited' jathilan performances. As shown above, there are numerous reasons why people participate as spectators of jathilan obyongan. Most importantly, the actors in jathilan groups and spectators stressed the moment of entertainment that is formed by aspects of surprise, fright and music.

Although many people from Yogyakarta told me that jathilan and its spirit possession will 'disappear soon', it is hard to determine whether that will really be the case. I am convinced that jathilan groups will persist over the next few decades since they are flexible and still leave an open space of interpretation for all the actors in the dance. In the future I can imagine that there will be stronger references to Muslim spirits (djinn) and a shift of practice from radical exercises during spirit possession to entertaining games, where possession plays a minor role.<sup>15</sup> I have seen performances that have adopted this shift to a kind of 'modern' spirit possession dance; in this case spirit possession is no longer a key element of the dance, but the groups benefit from the open space of action it offers. The dancers were performing their 'show', and it was not clear whether they were really possessed or not; in this space they could act in unusual ways, which was highly entertaining for the audience.

The process of 'inscription', in which people's actions become inscribed and therefore regulated (Howe 2000), will go on. Hughes-Freeland has already noted students learning the horse dance at an official dance academy.<sup>16</sup> Yet

given that this regulation is negotiated on several levels, religious and national, local and individual, it is far from disappearing. Just as in past centuries, the dance will continue to change and remain dynamic.

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> In Hughes Freeland's online paper, 'Performance in Indonesia: Traditions of Court and Country' at

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<http://www.swan.ac.uk/sssid/indonesianperformance/newtraditions.htm>.



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