

Does the Queen of the South Sea Like Cigars?

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Introduction

During the first (and up to now, last) performance in October 2002 of the carefully and laboriously reconstructed sacred *Bedhaya Semang* in the Yogyakarta Palace – an aspiration to rival or at least to balance that of the *Bedhaya Ketawang* in the competing sister-city's Surakarta Palace – the Sultan Hamengku Buwana X, in full Javanese ceremonial dress sat on the upper level of the royal hall, and gave audience to the public for his coronation anniversary. As official videographer of the reconstruction, my attention was on the dance. I was shocked to hear reports that while my eyes were on the dancers rather than the Sultan, at some point he had lit up a cigar during the performance. This is in great contrast to the Surakarta king's meditative posture as he spiritually revisits his conjugal relationship with the mythical and often wrathful Ratu Kidhul, Queen of the South Sea.

In this paper, I entertain, investigate, and ponder what makes a dance sacred and mystical in Central Javanese traditional culture. How does *bedhaya*, a superlatively ritualised dance form, compare with other markers, indicators, objects and forms such as *keris* (daggers), *gamelan* (percussion orchestra), gong, cannon, and albino water buffalo? What is the relationship of *bedhaya* to religiosity, and to spiritual and mystical concepts and practice? What is the meaning of a cigar in a society full of '*upacara*' (ceremony), '*selamatan*' (ritual meals), *jaman* (cleaning of ritual objects), fasting, meditation, and the propensity for even modern Javanese to *kramatkan* – to consign something with mystical power, evidently consciously creating situations of danger as if to justify fear and respect for unseen higher authority – and to *menyambung-nyambung* – to connect disparate events in an attempt to show the hidden influence behind ordinary and extraordinary incidents? Many of my Javanese friends love creatively connecting their external and internal views of the world. One looks for ways to 'square up' the unexplainable. It seems to come down to matching up one's own sense of propriety, spirituality, and power. In this extremely elastic situation, one may have to 'look sideways' in order to

glimpse the meaning behind. Direct questions do not seem to yield clear answers.

Did it happen?

My initial reaction was that smoking a cigar was sacrilegious amidst the elaborate offerings and rituals laboriously and carefully prepared (for fear of bad luck and reprisal from the Queen of the South Sea), by specially designated experts. It was an affront to the supposedly highly spiritual nature of the event of finally performing the reconstructed dance in the 'proper' situation with all pomp and circumstance, and in the presence of highly respected guests. I confirmed with some of those present, including dance teachers and dancers who helped in the reconstruction (but who did not dance the final performance). No one was exactly sure if they had seen the cigar, but they had certainly heard that (many) others had seen it. Even though, one of them thought certainly that the Sultan smoked a cigar during the initial trial performance of the four and half hour version, which was eventually edited down (twice) to one and half hours.

What kinds of things are sacred in Java?

Before determining if a sacrilege had been committed, we should know what is considered sacred in Java. As Endicott (1991, p. 1) has found in his superb analysis of Malay magic, which has similarities to Javanese beliefs, explicating this 'extremely complex' topic '(borders) on chaos'. He found it 'is impossible to construct, from the material in the literature alone, a clear and complete description of the process by which one becomes a magician' (ibid, p. 14). Although he was talking about magicians, the situation matches well with Javanese beliefs in the supernatural. What's more, there is probably even less literature available about the Javanese case. Therefore, I must triangulate many of the definitions needed to focus upon the issue of smoking a cigar during a sacred ritual dance.

It is clearly, if not logically, evident that the general public considers the *bedhaya* genre to be sacred. The following statement appeared in a recent report in The Jakarta Post (2002, p. 17) about the *Lawung*, another sacred dance: 'Di lingkungan keraton selain tari Bedaya (sic), ada sebuah tarian lagi yang masih dianggap sakral yaitu Beksa Lawung.' (Within the palace circle, besides the *Bedaya* dance, there is another dance, which is also considered sacred, namely the *Beksa Lawung*.)

It is helpful to know what else is considered sacred and magical in Java. In Javanese traditional culture, even in these modern times, many things, accoutrements and objects are considered spiritually charged. Probably the most well known are the *keris*, *tombak* (lance), and other weapons passed on as heirlooms both in the royal and commoner families. Some of these are known to be the site of powerful spirits, and even the most ordinary looking weapon might be revered as a holy object. The respect for weapons extends to the cannon at the palace. Even though of Dutch origin, they are given Javanese names with the high honorific of *Kyai* or in some cases, the feminine *Nyai* – titles usually reserved for people of rank.

Turning to more conventional objects, the gamelan orchestras with their numerous bronze instruments and ornately carved cases are impressive signs of economic and political power. The gongs, especially the largest in the ensemble, have preceded the Dutch cannon mentioned above with names prefixed by *Kyai* and occasionally *Nyai*. In the Solo palace, during special days, the orchestras are ritually cleaned with offerings and incense, and are physically bathed with water. For the common person, not able to afford a gamelan orchestra, gemstones and rings holding secret power are proudly worn. Somewhat less conventional are the albino buffaloes led by *Kyai Slamet* (again the use of honorific names) which are paraded on the eve of *Sura*, the Javanese New Year. Their excrement is carefully picked up as a good luck charm.

Not only objects, but also places can be powerfully charged. The bedroom at the (now closed) Ambarukmo Palace Hotel where the current Sultan's great-grandfather resided and finally passed away instills many a chill in visitors. Graves of legendary men are crowded with those seeking help, blessing, and spiritual power on the nights of Tuesday and Friday eve. The kind of meditation one encounters there is also the primary activity at Parangtritis Beach where every year victims are claimed by the rough and treacherous undertow – ostensibly a sign of the Queen of the South Sea's displeasure. Power places do not have to be impressive visually. A number of spiritually charged objects reside in a rather unassuming corner of the Siti Inggil, the high ground in front of the Solo palace.

This intense regard for things spiritual and magic is clearly apparent in the milieu of the performing arts culture and that of the *bedhaya*. The drum used in Solo's *Bedhaya Ketawang* is brought out – accompanied with incense – by designated servants. When it is in place, the drummer (who in this case is the leader of the palace musicians) *sembahs* (a formal salute with both palms together in front of one's face with fingers pointing up to heaven or forward to the King) and rubs the drumhead with water from a small container of rose petals. The *kemanak*, a pair of bronze banana-shaped idiophones played throughout the dance is kept in a special box and *sembah*-ed to.

During the rehearsal of Jogja's *Bedhaya Semang*, the notation books used by the singers and musicians, even though they were photocopies, were kept in two special locked boxes, and carefully handed out and taken back for each rehearsal. This special handling reinforces the heightened consciousness of combined fear, awe, and uncertainty towards music, which is not only not allowed to be performed outside of the palace, but only at approved times. The dancers (who are supposed to be (1) virgins, and (2) not menstruating) exude a special aura as the *bedhaya* performance for the coronation anniversary nears. On the day of the anniversary, jasmine flowers woven into a special garland are placed on the drum, and worn on the left ear of the drummer(s).

To acknowledge where and when ritual and magic is used or appealed to, again we turn to Endicott's (1991, p. 22) Malay study, which shows a close

concurrency with the Javanese case. Magic is used to increase crop yields and therefore, material wealth. Divining the best site for a new house or building, clearing out bad spirits, or appeasing those who remain are common reasons for calling the local shaman. They are also called upon to ward off demons during pregnancy, birth, circumcision, marriage and death. In Java, the singing of classical poetry in the *macapat* forms used to be common during the early 20th century; the well-known *Dhandhanggula* is still at least vaguely remembered by the current generation. I have friends in modern Jakarta, college graduates with modern careers, who go to shamans when they feel physically or spiritually ill.

As might be expected, magic is used to gain advantage over opponents; a well-known practice is to have an (invisible) gold needle inserted somewhere on one's body (called a *tusuk*). One of my old teachers lingered for years in bed, unable to pass away peacefully, because – it was said – her *tusuk* could not be taken out because the shaman had passed away, and the current ones were not strong enough to find it for removal. Lastly, magic is used for the more usual reasons: entertainments such as shadow play, forecasting, and charms for love and spells to harm others.

It is noted that in Java, things and acts can be *sakral* while places are *kramat*. The importance of sacrality generates fine degrees of discernment which quickly expand into a complex of differentiations and nuances. Some people maintain that sacred things have to do with God while things with equal spiritual power but not related to God should be considered *wingit* (dangerous). *Bedhaya*, the power of *keris*, and other objects might be considered *wingit* because they have power but they are not related to God. This is a matter of debate!

Time and space are also factors. A church or mosque is sacred only when it is used for prayer, but not when someone is cleaning it. In a recent ritual commemorating Ben Suharto and Mas Yudhoyono (two respected and mystically-oriented dancers who passed away rather young, in their fifties), there was a special setting of many white and red rose petals. (These same kinds of petals are brought to graves regularly when visiting ancestors). For those sitting close by, there might be a strong aura of sacrality, but for those further away, the aura might not reach them, and the flowers would seem to be only perhaps a thing of beauty or mere interest. The definition of sacred things seems to be very much up to the individual.

In a recent 'tempest in a teapot' over Pope Benedict's seeming fascination with extravagant clothing and return to feudalistic ways, the official explanation that he did not wear expensive and trendy shoes made by luxury Prada but that the red shoes were special in symbolizing the blood of martyrs, touched on the topic of his using antique objects and clothing. The use of 'age-old liturgical accessories was aimed at reinforcing a *sense of mystery and the sacred*' (*The Star*, 2008).

In contemporary Indonesia, *antik* means not only old things, but unusual new things (you can go to shops to custom-order new *antiks*), especially those

which suggest age. For example, in Java the *Muryoraras*, a midnight music meditation done by Saptono's group (who single-handedly revived this practice which goes back to Prince Kusumayudha's early 20th century) uses a shiny new small table on which is placed a candle and incense. In the relatively low economy of many of the participants, this otherwise unremarkable object of a highly polished round side-table is uncommon enough to enhance the specialness and spirituality of the situation; old rituals using new things. In any case, it is noted by several local experts including a respected *dukun* (shaman) that while it is clear that there are sacred things, places, or events, articulating what makes them so is not easy and certainly does not follow any rational (*rasio*) explanation.

Saptono agrees that it is not easy to define what is sacred and exactly what is proper conduct, but it is clear to him that in matters of sacrality, there is always something, which indicates a presence of other worldly power. During the many times he has performed *Muryoraras* and other sacred ritual classical pieces, although he himself cannot see the spirits which others say have visited, he believes the witness of others. This is corroborated in Danielou's (2003, p. 17) selected articles in Indian studies which states that sacred music (in the form of what he terms non-articulated sound¹) is the key 'to the means of communication with the supernatural', and that dance is 'a highly important tool in direct contacts between mankind and supernatural powers.' And indeed, in both Jogja's *Bedhaya Semang* and Solo's *Bedhaya Ketawang*, people have seen or sensed the presence of spirits, even Ratu Kidhul, The Queen herself.

What are the rules? Is there sacrilege?

When something sacred is involved, there are usually a lot of rules. In the *Bedhaya Semang* rehearsals, everyone, including myself as the videographer (a technical adjunct, not a performer) was required to wear the full traditional Javanese dress. Men of rank (not me) had to wear their keris, which is an indication of formality. Whenever we stepped onto or off the floor of the main rehearsal space, even though it was a lesser pavilion used for general public events such as tourist performances, we had to *sembah*. This could be quite a few times when setting up microphones and tripods. These protocols are more or less normal within the palace, and are a show of respect and politeness. There would be no bad luck, only bad manners if not done. Maybe.

At the onset of the project, there was a *selamatan*, a grand and detailed set of offerings with several days of prayers by important spiritual leaders including specifically Islamic ones. Hundreds of food stuffs including the head of a water buffalo were set before the main Bangsal Kencana pavilion. The next day, several busloads of people including all of the dancers and musicians paid homage at the graves of the royal ancestors at Kota Gedé and the royal burial grounds Imogiri. The offerings were thrown into the sea at Parang Kusumo beach, known to be an immediate entryway to the Queen of the South Sea. Finally, there was a similar homage up the slopes of Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes.

The *selamatan* is one of the central rituals in traditional Javanese culture inside and outside the palace. It is done to ask for safety of the participants and as such is done for birth, death, marriage, and the start of a new venture or business. It is done before *wayang kulit* (shadow plays) especially if the stories are the dangerous ones of the great battle to end battles, the *Bratayudha*. It is done for some *bedhaya* performances. It could be done as a sort of consecration. A gamelan, especially one being sent overseas to foreign universities might be initiated by a *selamatan*, followed by a playing of the instruments. Due to eagerness to show respect, fear of faulty execution, or simply over-enthusiasm, there might be some exaggeration.

One of the senior teachers² had reconstructed another less potent *bedhaya*. She was unsure if that particular one was sacred (although judging from her body language, she would like to believe that they all are; at least the ones from the palace repertoire, if not the more recently composed ones), so just in case, she did an offering. Someone mused whether the offering was really necessary, implying an accusation that she was blowing up the situation, (as some Javanese jokingly say about themselves and their fellow people's tendency to make sacred – *me-sakral-kan* – something, anything, or everything), perhaps to give it more importance. But she said she did it because she wasn't sure; this was like taking out insurance. It doesn't hurt to err on the side of safety.

In the Jogja palace, there is a regular dance practice on Sunday mornings. The women who come to dance are in traditional dress of *kebaya* (traditional blouse) and *batik kain* (a wax-resist dyed wrap-around skirt). Their hair is pulled back in the traditional *sanggul*. While they do not have to be in uniform, it is clear that there is a formality observed. By contrast, in the Solo palace, at their regular Sunday dance rehearsal, the dancers are much more casually dressed in t-shirts (also acceptable in Jogja but not at palace rehearsals) and *kain* (which do not have to be batik, but could be more colorful fare from other parts of Indonesia or those made for tourists). The hair is not done up. So, the aspect of formality related to sacredness is not uniformly defined within the palace cultures.³

Although the definition of right and wrong differs, all agree that when things are not properly done, bad things can happen. But even if offerings are properly done, there may be undesirable consequences. When one of the musicians fainted during *Bedhaya Semang*, it was suggested that this was not due to lack of good health, food, or sleep, but due to a supernatural force. Another example concerns the famous musical composition *Gadhung Mlathi* in Solo, which is rarely performed because it is *sakral*. Playing it requires elaborate offerings, not quite as grand as for *Bedhaya Semang*, but possibly on a level with 'normal' *bedhaya*. The great music master Pak Martopangrawit suffered a stroke not long after a performance of it in the mid-seventies.

Once, a teacher friend of mine had merely shown some students the special introduction (*buka*) for *Gadhung Mlathi* because there was more than one way to do it. Immediately afterwards, when he tried to stand up, he had lost feeling

in both legs and could not get up. Even after being helped up by friends, it took some lengthy massaging before his legs were functioning again.

For such relatively small matters, there is plenty to be fearful of. What about larger issues such as the recording of sacred dance? A professional television producer had obtained permission to video the entire *Bedhaya Ketawang*, which up to that point (around 1994) had been strictly prohibited, except occasional short news clips. The tapes from all four (perhaps five) cameras were unplayable. Even after sending them to Japan for investigation, they yielded nothing until one day after the tapes had been disappointedly returned to Java. Suddenly, the images appeared. A short time afterwards, the producer died unexpectedly. Those close to the project agreed, knowingly, that his demise must have somehow related to the Queen of the South Sea.

Who decides all this anyway?

A surprising number of people I interviewed said that the individual defines sacredness. One of the senior dancers involved in the reconstruction felt that the *Semang*, was either not sacred or not as sacred as it had been made out to be considering its assumed (or desired) pedigree as one of the compositions from early days of the dynasty, by the 17th century grandson of the founder of the dynasty, the omnipotent Sultan Agung. She had danced other *bedhaya* which she felt were more heavily spiritual. On the other hand, another of the senior dancers with even more experience said that she goes immediately into the spirit of *Semang* and that four and half hours was not burdensome. This might be a sort of trance-state.

Sacred things are designated (preferably long ago) by individuals, (those who are strong or have authority, like priests or kings), or by groups of people - a community. For instance, small open spaces in tree trunks in Thailand and India can start off as makeshift shrines. Someone comes along and puts some flowers and burns some incense. Soon, others do the same. Eventually, so many come that a temple might be built there. There is a special shrine to Ratu Kidhul at the luxury Nusa Dua resort in Bali. When they built the place, twenty-five Balinese priests were invited to consecrate the site. They did not feel strong enough to do it, feeling that there was a very powerful spirit there. They invited an equal number of Jogjanese *orang pintur* (shamans) to join them. It was recognised that the strong spirit which had to be appeased/pleased was Ratu Kidhul.

But I wonder whether just because someone says something is sacred, does that make it so? Is there not something intrinsic in the thing which can be felt by those who have the ability to know: by the shamans, *dukuns*, and *orang pintur*. After all, rules can be changed for the convenience of the boss, the King, or the ruling class. Any object can be a personal talisman. A photograph of one's grandmother can be sacred, but only to the person who reveres it. In church, the wafer used in communion may look like and taste like any other small cookie or biscuit but because it has been consecrated, it becomes sacred. This raises the question of whether the person consecrating the wafer (or other objects) has some special permission given to him/her by an

authorised granting agency, or actually possesses some supernatural power. Is the power institutional or personal?

Did it happen? Does it matter?

So did the Sultan insult the Queen by smoking a cigar during the ritual dance depicting or commemorating the sexual union between her and the subsequent heir of the dynasty – himself! One of the senior dance teachers did not see the Sultan smoking a cigar but she thinks (strongly) that he would not do such a thing because the *Semang* is *sakral*. By implication, she is saying that smoking a cigar is not proper. However, if he is king, then may he not do as he pleases? Does he not have the authority to change the rule for his convenience? Even though the Queen is a terrifying spiritual being, and even though there is danger associated with her, since the King is a principal player in the scenario, and apparently sexually and spiritually strong enough to be her partner, does he not make (at least some of) the rules? What is the point in reviving, let alone reliving this mythical union if for more than sixty, eighty, even a hundred (no one is quite sure) years the dance had been set aside undanced. If it is such an important ritual why was it allowed to stop? Were there good reasons to stop it? In Solo, even the myth has changed for the convenience of the King or the King's family! It is said that Paku Buwana-X, the last Solonese king with any vestige of power and certainly economic wealth came upon the Queen one day in his youth when he was alone. She endearingly called him 'my child'. The ritual dance can be enacted as homage to The Mother, and in subsequent generations to *Eyang* or Grandmother. Thus, it was no problem when the daughters of lately deceased Paku Buwana-XII danced the *Bedhaya Ketawang*. Since the dancers represent the Queen, or are symbolically the Queen herself in multiple manifestations, there can be no question of incest if the King is now a grandson! It is no longer necessarily a sexual union between the Queen and the King.

To bring matters back to the cigar. It turns out that among the many elaborate and exacting offerings, there may have been at least one, maybe more than one cigar. There may very likely have been a platter of *sirih* (a concoction of betel leaf, betel nut and other condiments) and tobacco – a traditional way of consuming tobacco still practiced by older generation (usually village) ladies. It was wondered at the time of the *Semang* offering whether these were for the enjoyment of Ratu Kidhul. I can surmise that since the *bedhaya* symbolises (and on the astral plane, maybe not just symbolizing) the sexual union of the Sultan and Ratu Kidhul, these consumables would and could also be for the human Sultan.

Notes

¹ By non-articulated sound, given the context of the article, I believe Danielou is referring to sounds which are not on the surface "musical" – that is they are not melodic, and may even be considered dissonant.

² The teacher shall remain anonymous. Her voice went quieter when she shared this insight, so from this, I presume she would prefer not to be publicly acknowledged.

³ Another difference is that in Solo, incense is always burned continually during rehearsals of *Bedhaya Ketawang*, but in Jogja, this was not the case for *Bedhaya Semang*. This is not to suggest lack of attention in Jogja. There, the incense is burned before the rehearsal.

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Biographical statement

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