When the Tutelary Spirit Objected: Conflict and Possession among the Using of East Java, Indonesia

Robert Wessing
The Hague, Netherlands

Abstract

This article discusses a case of possession in East Java that took place in the context of an important customary ritual, the seblang dance. In the course of this ritual, villagers meet their obligations to the spirits of fertility that allowed them to use the land on which their village and fields are located. Considerable stress was caused by a potential dancer who, perhaps for religious reasons, declined to dance although she had been specifically chosen by the spirits. This was an unheard of situation, and was feared to put the welfare of the community at risk. Further stress was caused by perceived interference by government officials whose rejection of an alternate dancer for aesthetic reasons caused the village’s tutelary spirit to become angry, jeopardising the presentation of the ritual and thereby the welfare of the community. After two and a half hours of negotiation, during which narratives reflecting both tradition and the current situation were constructed and reconstructed, the village head resolved the immediate problem by appealing to the spirit’s civic position, though leaving the door open for further problems in the future.

Keywords: East Java; Using; Possession; Seblang; Conflict
Introduction

This paper discusses a case of possession that took place in Olehsari, an Using village in East Java. The occasion was a situation of social stress prior to an important adat (customary) ritual, the seblang dance, in which the interests of the villagers and their allies in the spirit world conflicted with demands perceived to be made by representatives of the national government. During this event, a middle-aged village woman was possessed by the village's tutelary spirit, which through her mouth expressed its displeasure with the situation. In the course of a possession lasting over 2½ hours a compromise was finally worked out, allowing the ritual to proceed. In order to understand these events, it is necessary to first look at the ritual and the villagers' relationship with the spirits, as well as the position of the government vis-à-vis both of them.

The Ritual

The seblang ritual in Olehsari is part of the annual activities during which people fulfil their obligations to both nature and ancestral spirits that are thought to be able to influence the villagers’ lives either positively or negatively (cf. Wessing 2006; Ong 1988: 31). Both kinds of spirits, in the case of the ancestors especially the spirit of the founder of the village, also play a major role in the seblang ritual.

1 I thank Ibu Sri Hidayati of Olehsari, Drs. Kusnadi, M.A. of the Universitas Jember, and Ibu Nahariyah of Jember for their long conversations about some of the things discussed here. Thanks also to Glenn Smith and Hélène Bouvier for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to the anonymous peer reviewers for their insights.

2 The Using (also Osing) are an ethnic group living in the eastern-most part of Java, which used to be part of the kingdom of Balambangan. Though some consider them to be a subgroup of the Javanese, they themselves predominantly claim to be a separate ethnic group whose culture and language differ considerably from those of the Javanese of both East and Central Java (cf. Pranoto 2015: 14-15). For an overview of the history of this area see Kumar (1979), Sudjana (2001) and Sri Margana (2007).

3 Today the ritual is only performed in two villages, Olehsari and Bakungan, both located in the Glagah district of Kabupaten (Regency) Banyuwangi, East Java. For a discussion of these two versions of the ritual see Wolbers (1992, 1993; Wessing 1999). The ritual is now part of what is called bersih desa (the cleansing of the village), though this is a recent change, given that the term is Indonesian rather than either Using or Javanese. It is said that during bersih desa, ideally, discords that have crept into relations between people, and between people and the spirit world are redressed, rather like the request for maaf lahir dan batin (pardon me, body and spirit) made at Idul Fitri at the end of the Muslim fast of Ramadan. I suspect that in the past the name of this ritual was just seblang.
In the course of the ritual in Olehsari a pre-menarcheal girl, possessed by a nature spirit, on seven consecutive days in a ritually demarcated space, performs a dance through which the village's forces of fertility, both human and natural, are replenished (cf. Wessing 1999, 2012-13). The ritual came about as a part of an agreement between the founder of the village and the nature spirits that are the actual owners of the land on which the village stands. In order for the founding of the village to succeed, the spirit owners had to give their permission and be convinced to move elsewhere. In a sense, therefore, the villagers are intruders who, often using trickery, were able to convince the spirits to vacate an area of land they desired to cultivate. In the process they managed to manipulate at least one of them into becoming the new settlement's guardian (*dhanyang*) (see Domenig 2014: chapters 1&2; compare Domenig 1988).

In the Banyuwangi area, one of the conditions in the agreement between the founder

---

4 In Bali the gods are said to only possess “those who are spiritually pure” (Hornbacher 2011: 173). In Olehsari the dancer is presumed to be virginal, and in the case of the village Bakungan where a post-menopausal woman becomes *seblang*, a woman who is no longer fertile and, presumably, sexually inactive. Since the two purities are thought to be linked, abstinence from sex (= physical purity) at least implies spiritual purity.

5 As Domenig (1988) describes it, a trick is played on the spirits. Before claiming the land for human use, a divination takes place in which it is assumed that if the spirits do not give a negative sign, they have given their permission for the occupation of their land. Once the people move in, offerings are made to one of the spirits,
and the spirits was that, in return for access to the village's land, the villagers would each year invite the spirits back to participate in the seblang ritual.6

The present villagers of Olehsari, then, relate to two kinds of spirits: ancestors, among whom the founder has precedence, and nature spirits, specifically the dhanyang named Mas Brata.7 Both of these categories of spirits are perceived to be responsible for different aspects of the welfare of the community; the ancestors deal with the continued adherence to the customs (adat) laid down by them, rewarding their descendants with prosperity and offspring (cf. Triyoga 1991: 46; Wessing 2006), while the dhanyang guards or embodies the fertility of the soil, leading to plentiful harvests and abundant live-stock (cf. Mus 1975). The very existence of the village, therefore, is seen to depend on their cooperation and approval of the people's activities, and the wishes of both these categories of spirits are closely attended to, as their anger is thought to bring disaster to both the offender and the village.

This is all the more true because, while the tutelary spirit is one of the village's guardians, relations between it and the villagers tend to be uneasy, and it is not always regarded as being completely reliable - the founder and his or her descendants must continually make sure that this spirit is not displeased. While living up to their side of the bargain, having been tricked the spirits have no special reason to be overly well disposed toward the villagers. This is evidenced by the people's general wariness in their dealings with them, and their perception of spirits as touchy where their prerogatives are concerned; offerings have to be made just so, on certain dates, and politeness and respect must be maintained at all times if their ire is to be avoided (cf. Wessing 1995: 212, note 11; Saputra 2014a: 650, 658; 2014b: 56). Yet, among the Using relations between people and spirits are perhaps not as sensitive as they may be elsewhere.8 The Using see themselves as being more egalitarian than the Central Javanese, and consider the realms of people and spirits to be on a par, having the same ‘level of reality’, and for this reason able to enter into dialog with each other (Saputra 2014b: 54-59).9

making it a cult object, thereby obliging it to make a counter prestation - e.g. to protect the settlement (cf. Hillebrandt 1921: 796). The spirit, therefore, is a victim of human wiles and its own greed. As Kapferer (1997: 128) points out for Sri Lanka, the gods (and here the spirits) are vain, and love admiration and being the centre of attention.

6 The founder’s leadership position in the spirit's cult would traditionally also have justified this person's leadership of the community. Indeed, serving the spirit owners of the land, and thereby assuring the fertility of the land and the animals is often the exclusive privilege of the founding line. The spirit beliefs, therefore, help maintain the social structure in which the founding line occupies a privileged position. This privileged position is now in decline (Wessing 2013).

7 It has been suggested that Brata could refer to Bathara Kala, who represents time and death and in Java is often depicted as a man-eating demon (cf. Brakel 1997: 256). Zoetmulder (1982, I: 260), however, glosses brata with "mode or manner of life, conduct, custom ... religious vow or practice ... any vow or firm purpose" to which Wojowasito (1970: 210) adds tapa (meditation, fasting), which would be more in character for a village tutelary spirit.

8 “… some [Burmese] spirits are merely horribly dangerous because, as Lords, they are readily offended….” “Yet, they are not, for all that, evil in the sense of consciously malevolent” (Lehman 2006: 130-131).

9 This egalitarian spirit is said to manifest itself in the Using language, which is claimed to largely lack the levels of politeness found in Central Javanese, which reflects the hierarchical nature on Central Javanese society (Saputra 2012: 5; Koentjaraningrat 1989: 15-19; Robson and Wibisono 2002: 8-9). The Using language, it is said, only has two levels, namely the Using spoken in daily life, and basa besiki, the language used when one feels one has to be polite, e.g. when dealing with officials (Saputra 2014a: 649). This may, in the end, not really be all that different from Javanese, which, as Robson and Wibisono (2002: 8) note, also only has one basic level,
Both ancestral and nature spirits have their prerogatives, which include being treated politely by the villagers, having specific offerings made to them and, in the case of the former, being consulted in important family matters. The dhanyang also has certain rights in regard to the seblang ritual. These include setting the date of the event and choosing the dancer, who is nearly always a descendant of the village's founder in the female line (cf. Beaty 2009: 116; Herowati Poesoko 1992: 57-59; Saputra 2014b: 57). Should these prerogatives be ignored, Mas Brata is said to become angry and might cause there to be illness or other troubles. It is in regard to the choice of the dancer that the tensions discussed here developed.

Interference

The problem was twofold. First, the dancer whom Mas Brata named declined to participate owing to (Islamic) family pressures. When Mas Brata, after some grumbling, named a second dancer, the village head, as a local representative of the national government and, more importantly here, of the Ministry of Tourism, rejected her because, he said, the girl was first of all too small and not strong enough to handle the stress of the dance and, furthermore, she would not be attractive to tourists - the implication being that tourists would prefer to see a more curvaceous maiden. The problem with this statement was that to the villagers such a suggestion amounted to interference by outside government forces in what was a village affair.

10 In Olehsari the date is now usually just after the celebration of Idul Fitri, the end of the Muslim fast during the month Ramadan. This was not always the case, however, as such rituals were traditionally celebrated after the harvest. Here as elsewhere in East Java, the spirit world has slowly tended to adjust its calendar to the Muslim one.

11 Informants in Olehsari cited the case of a previous village head, who had been partially paralyzed because he did not treat the seblang properly. Also, previously the dhanyang had requested that a keris (ceremonial dagger) be given to the dancer, as he, Mas Brata, was celebrating a wedding. When this request was ignored, informants said, heavy rains suddenly disrupted the event. At the end of the proceedings, the possessing spirit also declined to leave the dancer who then regained consciousness only after considerable difficulty.

12 The person through whom the dhanyang had been speaking the past few years was Mak Sutrinah (Mak Sut). This woman, a descendant of the founder, who was chosen by the spirit, is not listed among previous dancers (Herowati Poesoko 1992: 59) and is not a professional medium or someone occupying a named role. According to my informants, when the spirit so decides, it can suddenly switch to another person through whom to make its announcements.

13 Tourism and its development in Indonesia are the task of the Ministry of Tourism (Kementrian Parawisata), while cultural matters are seen to by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan). Locally in Banyuwangi these matters are handled by the Dinas Kebudayaan dan Parawisata (Office of Culture and Tourism) (Mr. Aekanu Hariyono, email 15 July 2015). Thus, in Olehsari the village head was administratively responsible to the district head (Camat), the regent (Bupati) and in the case of tourism, to local office of Culture and Tourism (Kebudayaan dan Parawisata). It should be mentioned, that when this conflict came up in discussion in 2010, a man representing the Banyuwangi tourism office denied that his office had ever intervened in the choice of the dancer and it may just be that someone at the village level had overzealously stressed the government’s policy. Such preventative or anticipatory editing of rituals has happened elsewhere as well (Saputra 2013: 22; 2014a: 660, 666). However this may be, the Olehsari villagers were convinced that pressure from the tourism office led to the difficulties.

14 This preoccupation is found elsewhere as well. Foley (1992: 41) reports about a similar dance in West Java that the dancer's "age and sexual allure" may be gaining in importance and that since 1978 she has seen dancers who were "clearly post-pubescent."
On the face of it, this was an aesthetic judgment about the spirit's choice of dancer. However, as will be seen, this critique carried with it a rather large load of other social and political considerations. Ever since the political troubles of 1965, which were especially severe in East Java, government presence and control in the area had been both strict and noticeable. During my first stay there in the 1990s, people's identity cards still indicated whether the individual was 'implicated' in the troubles, and to speak against government policy, especially regarding development, was to court problems - even leading to suggestions that one might have communist leanings. These factors made for an uneasy atmosphere in which it was generally preferred to keep one's head down and one's thoughts to oneself.

The program of national development on which Indonesia embarked after 1965 had as one of its goals the unification of the nation in the face of continued ethnic loyalties, often based on local religious and cosmological ideas (cf. Yampolski 1995: 708). The government's position was that it was time to put aside village ways and adopt modernity (Hefner 1990: 219), though this modernity often comes dressed in Muslim garb.\(^{15}\) In this effort, tourism was considered a valuable tool, which from the middle 1960s onward was increasingly successfully exploited (Adams 1997: 156-7; Hutajulu 1995: 640; Moss 1994: 105). This strategy, however, was problematical in that the ethnic diversity that made the various local groups attractive to tourism was at the same time the basis for the ethnic loyalties the government was trying to limit (cf. Aragon 1991-2: 379); "it is the business of government to nurture harmonious patterns of culture that neither impede development nor destroy essential indigenous values" (Zurbuchen 1990: 134).

The solution was to separate various aspects of local culture from each other, and emphasize those that could be “packaged for sale” to tourists as *adat* (custom) (Acciaioli 1985: 153,158), and de-emphasize ones that stimulated continued ethnic awareness.\(^{16}\) In this effort, local communities became recast along some ideal generic model, and were then allowed to display their (perhaps homogenized) diversity and uniqueness (cf. Pemberton 1994: 238-9). The emphasis now is on display and performance, rather than on the enactment of belief: theatre rather than ritual (cf. Acciaioli 1985: 161; 2011: 3).

One process that is involved here was the loosening of the ties between various celebrations and the local landscape. Locality based cults, celebrating local tutelary spirits and ancestors, have tended to come to be placed within the national calendar with its national and approved religious holidays. As Smith (1992: 94-5) points out, ritualized temporal structures can overcome the "divisiveness and particularity of space" and as local particularities, like

\(^{15}\)Hefner (1990: 188) writes about the Tengger area that “a new and more serious challenge” to the cycle of village celebrations now comes from wealthy villagers who consider the rituals to be too expensive, and advocate cutting back on them or even abolishing them.

\(^{16}\)The same thing had, in fact, been done by the Dutch colonial administration (Acciaioli 1985: 159; Volkman 1990: 92), though perhaps not to the degree with which it has been since 1965. But then, the Dutch were not trying to promote Indonesian national unity.
seblang, are de-emphasized and desacralized, they can be made into tourist attractions, official recognition of local culture requiring that particular rituals be presented as some form of entertainment (Tsing 1993: 245). It is, as a former Banyuwangi official said, just a question of how to package these things, leading in 1991 to the formation of a team to study just this question (Nugroho and Masrur 1991: 7).

One reason that the state was able to secularize adat and to redefine as mere custom things that are ultimately local religious beliefs, is the state's monopoly on the definition of what does or does not constitute a religion, shaping religious truth by setting the parameters within which this truth is defined (cf. Asad 1983: 243). By acknowledging only a limited set of world religions as legitimate, and by then allotting these a limited scope for action, religious differences were prevented from attaining political force (Geertz 1990: 79, 89).

With their secularization, local beliefs were now ready to be placed in new relationships and become tourist objects (objek turis), to be exploited as well as used for nationalistic purposes, liable to be changed, upgraded, adapted, and preserved for consumption by visiting dignitaries and tourists. These latter audiences included not just foreign visitors, but also Indonesian ones who, through their endorsement of these commoditized versions of local culture (Picard 1997: 197), participate in the greater national whole.

Yet, the processing of local ritual, extracted from its cultural context, often reduces its social significance. Tradition, one way to gloss adat, is usually defined neutrally as some set of customs and beliefs a society inherits from its forebears (cf. Handler and Linnekin 1984: 273). Adat, however, is rather more than such a neutral statement implies. As Volkman (1984: 154) writes, the "way of the ancestors", i.e. adat, with its religious aura, referring to ancestral and nature spirits, provides a community’s “symbolic system that encompasses the gods, man, and nature, and that orient[s] man toward action in the world.” This adat in Olehsari includes the 'religious mystical' or 'sacred' seblang ritual in which the people fulfil the contract their ancestors once entered into with the spirits. Leaving aside for now questions about the continual social

---

17 Even though there is a great deal of similarity in the beliefs professed in various villages in Java, it should not be assumed that these are identical. The Javanese, in fact, perceive many differences, and especially urban Javanese are uneasy in strange areas because they do not 'know' the local spirits (cf. Pemberton 1994: 237). The best way to describe the varied beliefs as a whole is as a 'polythetic set' (Needham 1979: 65).

18 Thus allowing a seblang dancer to be present at e.g. the village Alasmalang's keboan ritual, itself already desacralized by an emphasis on tourism (Wessing 2016). Similarly in 2010 I saw the village Kemiren’s tutelary barong ‘perform’ as part of Bakungan’s seblang ritual.

19 This is, again, not something unique to Indonesia. See Carlitz (1997) and Nelson (1997) for instances in which in one case spirit beliefs were attacked by the state and replaced by a state sponsored cult, and in the other the spirit beliefs themselves were standardized and placed in the service of national unity and development.

20 See Acciaioli (1985: 160), Anonymous (n.d.), Handler and Linnekin (1984: 280), and Picard (1997: 191). This often involves changes in length or visual presentation to make the event consumable by outsiders such as television, tourists or other audiences (cf. Yampolski 1995: 710, 714-5; Hutajulu 1995: 641, 645-6).

21 While I disagree with Geertz' (1980) characterization of old Indonesian (specifically Balinese) states as "theatre states", with the commoditization of ritual into tourist performance, the regime seems to indeed be taking on the role of impresario. See also Bruner (1979: 7).

22 It is because of this encompassing reality that the adat is a matter of concern to the Indonesian government. Also, as Aragon (1991-2: 380) writes, altered adat performances may still be perceived as threatening to religious proselytisers and the national government.
(re)construction of such a set of beliefs and customs, or the uniformity of a community's adherence to it (cf. Handler and Linnekin 1984: 276; Wessing 1978b; 2013; Beatty 1999; Howe 2000: 65), the success of a ritual is often believed to depend on its being carried out 'just so', and deviation from the pattern is thought to make the effort infelicitous (cf. Volkman 1990: 105; Howe 2000: 65, 67, 69). Thus, aesthetic and other changes brought about for the sake of tourism may be felt to threaten the efficacy of the event, and generally a too rapid altering or secularization of the adat and the truths embodied in it can be rather disorienting for the people involved, leading to dissatisfaction among the participants (cf. Hutajulu 1995: 648; Yampolski 1995: 715), as well as among the spirits.

This was quite evident in Olehsari where the seblang ritual had in recent years, possibly since 1987, become an official tourist 'object,' which had already led to aesthetic changes, e.g. in the clothes worn by the participants. Being an official tourist object meant that the performance of the ritual had to be guaranteed and scheduled well ahead of time so that it could be listed on the tourist calendar, all of which involved the government bureaucracy in what had up to then been a local affair. 'It used to be,' said one informant, 'that we would have the ritual when the dhanyang decided the time had come, and we would just inform the village leadership of the date. The village's head of agricultural matters (modin banyu; Wessing 2013) would be in charge. Now you need permission from the village head, who has to clear it with the camat (district officer), who in turn has to tell the tourism people. All the arrangements are now made by the village council and everyone has to contribute money'.

There are some people, another informant stated, who feel that the ritual must be held because it will attract tourists, which, they say, is good for the spirits who will then feel that people care for them. On the other hand, there are villagers who wonder why so many people have lately been coming to the ritual and, as Herowati Poesoko (1992: 77-8) writes, many villagers do not really understand what tourism involves and how it will affect them. They do not dare to complain openly and just put up with the government interference but, as the same informant pointed out, they do resent it. 'This is an adat ritual,' he said several times, implying that the government's concerns should be subordinate to those of the village and its adat. An instance was then cited of how an official who had wanted to sell tickets to those attending it was struck down by the dhanyang because 'this is a slametan adat (adat ritual) and not a money making affair.' And so the villagers were caught between their obligations to

---


24 This is not to say that tourism cannot at times be advantageous. Nelson (1997: 703) describes how commercial ventures by a Japanese shrine actually improved conditions. The difference is, however, that Japanese Shintoism is a national cult while Javanese village cults are by definition local affairs, often under pressure from Islam as well. Being local and particularistic, there is no unity among them, making them vulnerable to outside pressures.

25 Wolbers (1992: 114,135 note 24) notes changes between 1985 and 1990 in the clothing of the participants in the ritual, from everyday clothes to new, matching ‘traditional’ ones (cf. Tsing 1993: 245), the tradition here perhaps being a recent construction. In 2010 in Bakungan, the other village where seblang is danced, a variety of extra actors had been added, while the verses (gendhing) to be sung were no longer chosen by the seblang but by a master of ceremonies (protokol), and were sung, loudly amplified, by a single woman rather than by a chorus (compare Wessing 1999; 2012-13).

26 For many the equivalent of half a day's wage.
the *dhanyang*, the spiritual source of the village's well-being, and the wishes of the government, neither of which it is wise to disobey.

The Crisis

It was within this uneasy atmosphere that the crisis concerning the dancer occurred. At first everything proceeded as usual when on the 25th of March Mak Sutrinah (Mak Sut) was possessed by the *dhanyang* who announced that the ritual was to take place on the 29th, and named Wiwin, a slight, single girl aged 21, as the dancer.

Wiwin, however, declined. According to some informants, the girl's parents blamed Wiwin herself, though others claimed that the *dhanyang* had said that her quite religious family would not allow her to participate. 'They have been rewel (troublesome) before. They just do not like the ritual, and Wiwin will feel the effects of her refusal.' Wiwin's refusal was reported to the *dhanyang* through Mak Sut. Mas Brata then named an alternative, a very small girl named Elas, who was still in her second year of primary school. The *dhanyang* was quite displeased, both at Wiwin's refusal, and also because the village head and the rest of the village leadership, who should all have been there, were not in attendance. Such an absence was, of course, a discourtesy to the *dhanyang* whose traditional ritual and feast were at stake. The spirit, quite out of sorts, is supposed to have said, 'Well, alright. If it goes ahead, fine. If not, never mind!'

Although Elas was willing to dance, the village head disapproved of the choice. The girl was not strong enough, he said, and besides the public does not want to see a second grader dance. An informant on the village council said that the girl would not be attractive enough for the tourists - something with which some of the villagers agreed, she said. Others disagreed, saying that the girl's own strength was irrelevant because when dancing she would be using the possessing spirit's power.

On Saturday evening the 27th of March the full village council met to discuss the matter. The consensus of this meeting was that they would propose to Mas Brata that Salwati, a girl who had danced the previous three years, do so again. This was irregular, because the usual term for a dancer is three years and, moreover, it was the *dhanyang*'s prerogative to choose the

---

27 *Mak*; lit. mother; here Mrs.
28 This contradicts the stated requirement that the dancer should be a pre-menarcheal girl. Other such deviations were said to have occurred in the past and, although a pre-menarcheal girl is preferred, single, sexually inactive women seem now to be possible substitutes.
29 Wolbers (1993: 36-7) and Murgiyananto and Munardi's (n.d.: 51) statement that Olehsari girls never refuse to dance as it is believed that one to do so, one would expose oneself and one's family to danger does not seem to be without exception (compare Saputra 2014a:658; 2014b: 60-61). Wiwin's father was said to have been unhappy when Wiwin's sister had danced and, according to an informant, has gone sort of crazy. 'Just come back here in a year,' she added, 'and see if Wiwin has not gone crazy' (cf. Herowati Poesoko 1992: 61).
30 *Ya sudah, diadakan baik, kalau tidak, biar!* This disgust echoes that of a *dhanyang* mentioned by Pemberton (1994: 267) who told the village head "I will not be 'ritual'-ized!" before disappearing forever. (The Javanese *di*"upacara"kaké, might perhaps have been better glossed with ceremonialized, since it is exactly the ritual aspects that are being eroded.) That some people seem to feel the same way is evident from a statement cited by Picard (1997: 204), asking whether Bali must "become a Disneyland, a Hindu Theme Park...."
dancer and not the village council's. It was agreed that this proposal would be communicated to Mas Brata when he was scheduled to arrive the next evening.

Before the scheduled meeting with Mas Brata, the village head went to Salwati's house to ask if she was willing to fill in if necessary. She and her family agreed, 'for the common good,' even though it was irregular. He and another official then went to Wiwin's house but there they were rejected, as others had been. Wiwin now claimed that her fiancée would not allow her to participate.

Throughout these negotiations, the villagers were nervous and upset. There was talk about the ritual not taking place that year, and they were disturbed that no dancer had been chosen and that the dance area had not yet been put in order, while this is usually done several days before the event. As it was, the dance area was prepared on Sunday, the day before the ritual finally took place. The uncertainty made everyone confused (bingung), and Wiwin was blamed by all.31 As one informant said, 'the whole situation is repot; anak tidak ikut bapak, salah' (troublesome; a child that does not obey its father is wrong). Thus, he felt that they should follow the village head's instructions, but also those of the dhanyang, as both stand in a similar relationship to the villagers.

The village head also admitted privately to me that he was quite stressed by these developments. Since the event was on the tourist calendar, he would be held responsible if it did not take place. On the other hand, if something untoward happened due to acting counter to Mas Brata's wishes, he would also be blamed. He hoped that the meeting the following evening would bring a solution. If Mas Brata absolutely rejected Salwati, and Wiwin continued to refuse to dance, the village would be forced to go with Elas. The ritual could not be cancelled because they owed it to the spirits and it was on the tourist calendar; trouble could come from both directions.

Compromise

On Sunday evening, 28 March at 6 PM nine small rice cones (tumpeng) were taken to the dhanyang. A slametan (ritual meal) was then held at the house of Mak Asiah, the woman who prepares many of the attributes used in the seblang ritual. At 7 pm people began to gather at the house of Mak Sut, the woman through whom the dhanyang had been speaking. Elas was present; Salwati and Wiwin were not. The village head was expected, and a junior village official in charge of social and Islamic affairs arrived right after Mak Sut went into trance at 7:35 pm.

31 It should not be assumed that this opposition to Wiwin’s refusal involved an opposition to Islam as well. As was pointed out earlier, the villagers consider themselves to be Muslim and the ritual has been adapted to the Islamic calendar. Furthermore, as Herowati Poesoko (1992: 36) showed, 98.67% of the combined religious leadership of Olehsari and Bakungan, the other village presenting seblang, are in favour of the ritual. Yet, although Islam, in its local Olehsari manifestation, is considered part of the ritual, Muslim purists see this as an improper deviation, which is probably what lay at the base of Wiwin's refusal. Thus, although the villagers are Muslims, they do not necessarily agree with the purist's version of the religion (cf. Beatty 1999). Saputra (2014b: 58) indeed calls them abangan, adherents of an Islam mixed with Javanist (kejawen) practices.
At that point Mak Sut suddenly jumped upright on the bamboo bed on which she had been sitting, landing on her feet with a loud clatter of bamboo; she was possessed by Mas Brata, the dhanyang. Her husband, Pak Saleh, and one of her sons held her and laid her down on the bed, Pak Saleh lighting some incense, which he held near her. Spirits are said to 'feed' on the smoke. Mak Sut lay there, her hands and feet shaking, singing songs that accompany the seblang dance (cf. Wessing 2012-13). In the discussion that followed, Pak Saleh tried to convince Mas Brata, possessing Mak Sut, to accept the village head's choice. In reply the dhanyang complained about the new arrangements, kicking and shaking every time Salwati's name was mentioned, quite obviously rejecting her. While possessed Mak Sut only spoke the dhanyang's words, and offered no interpretation of her own. An interpretation was 'constructed' by the members of the rather large audience that commented on and discussed the spirit's statements, and the situation in general, to the point that Mas Brata several times admonished them to be quieter. The person who most frequently spoke to Mas Brata was Pak Saleh, Mak Sut's husband, who tended her during her possession, and whose statements reflected the consensus constructed by the audience.

Figure 2: Mak Sut (reclining), possessed by Mas Brata. Seated near her head is her husband, Pak Saleh. Mak Asiah sits facing her.

Still lying down, Mak Sut made dancing motions, singing the seblang songs. Her son brought some water in which a red and a white flower floated, and Pak Saleh tried to quiet her down with the incense. Throughout Mak Sut kicked and shook rhythmically. Quite a noisy crowd had gathered at this point and, putting her fingers to her lips, she motioned them to be quieter. Pak Saleh then washed her hands and feet with the water, which calmed her down.

32 Pak; lit. father. Here Mr.
At this point (7:50 pm) everyone awaited the arrival of the village head, as it was clear that nothing would be resolved without him. It was said that Mas Brata left briefly to call the other spirits and have them participate in the decision. Mak Asiah was also called at this point.

At 8 pm Mak Sut began her rhythmic moves again and Pak Saleh brought the incense near. He spoke softly to her to which she shook her head, no! Not Salwati. Pak Saleh then mentioned that the village head was not there yet and asked Mas Brata to go to Wiwin's house to convince her to dance after all. The dhanyang again told the crowd to be quiet and argued with Pak Saleh.

At 8:10 pm Mak Asiah arrived and sat on the bed near Mak Sut's knees, Pak Saleh moving to near her head. The junior official, the only member of the village council present, spoke to Pak Saleh, saying that 'the important point is that Mas Brata agree to Salwati,' to which Pak Saleh replied that he could not force the dhanyang to agree.

Singing, Mas Brata then said, 'if Wiwin does not agree to dance, she could become insane.' Mak Asiah then argued with him to which the spirit replied, lying there dancing and kicking violently, 'the appointed one is the little one [Elas]. It cannot be Salwati, it must be Elas.' Pak Saleh again argued and was abruptly cut off by Mas Brata's loud singing and yelling: "aku kesal, aku menanti" (I am angry, I am waiting).33 A messenger was then sent to ask the village head to please come; Mas Brata continuing his temper tantrum. Pak Saleh commented, 'this is just a hassle. I don't earn any money with this, I'm only trying to help the people.'

At 8:20 pm Mas Brata left, no one being sure if and when he would return. I was told later that he had gone to consult (musyawarah) with his wife and many small spirits, his grandchildren, who were present along with him. Between then and 9:07, when the village head finally arrived, a renewed effort was made to convince Wiwin. Much of the crowd also went home. Pak Saleh tried to calm Mas Brata down, saying that there were guests.34 He attempted to convince him to compromise and to cooperate. 'History is helping each other,' he said. The remaining witnesses discussed the situation, saying that Wiwin was unimportant.

When the village head finally arrived, he acted cool and collected, first greeting myself and Mr. Kusnadi and then, as if he did not know, asked what the problem was. Pak Saleh then restated the matter at length, during which Mak Sut, to whom Mas Brata had returned, moved quietly and rhythmically. The village head then said "this is the people of Olehsari's responsibility, right?", to which those present replied (in Using) "enggih!" (yes!), while Mas Brata sang angrily. The village head then went on, saying that this was a matter between kasar and alus, between people and spirits: spirits are often referred to as wong alus (intangible beings) as opposed to people who are kasar (tangible) (Saputra 2013: 14, 21-22). Actually, the village head was being clever here, as the contrast alus - kasar also refers

33 The shift from Using into Indonesian here may reflect the fact that the spirit's quarrel was with the village head as a representative of the Indonesian government, whose perceived interference was being objected to.
34 Myself and my colleague Drs. Kusnadi (M.A.) of the Universitas Jember in East Java.
to polite and rude behaviour respectively, a subtle comment on Mas Brata's openly recalcitrant and rather un-Javanese behaviour. Shortly after, the rest of the village council arrived. Pak Saleh once again explained the problem with Elas to Mas Brata and said that Wiwin was still unwilling.

The *dhanyang* kicked angrily saying that he would not allow Wiwin to dance now, even if she should want to, which was perceived as a clear threat to Wiwin. With this threat the general concern was redirected from a conflict between the village head and Mas Brata, with the villagers caught in between, to a general disapprobation of Wiwin who 'started it all by refusing to dance.' At this point the problem was resolved and the *dhanyang* agreed to let Salwati dance the next day, even though he was still angry; 'as a kindness to the people,' he said, 'but Salwati may only dance this year. She must be ready tomorrow at 2 pm.' Also, if something should happen to Wiwin, the village head should not feel responsible (*menerima risiko*). He should also deny Wiwin's request to marry in three months' time. Pak Saleh, here acting as a spokesman for the people, then restated the agreement, after which Mas Brata said that the one possessing the dancer would be Siti Sundari, one of his granddaughters.

Mas Brata then left and was replaced by Siti Sundari, who started to tease Mak Sut. The *seblang* song was sung again and the other spirit-children joined in the teasing, making everyone laugh, until Mak Asiah, who had come back, said *wis, wis, mulih wis* (enough, enough, go home already). After a little more teasing and general laughter all the spirits finally left at 10:08 pm and Mak Sut was brought out of trance. The village head gave some final instructions for the next day, displaying his authority, and then said to me in an aside how stressful the whole episode had been to him. The next day the ritual began with only a minor hitch when, still at home, Salwati was suddenly possessed by Siti Sundari who had arrived early.35

---

35 Before this unscheduled possession, Salwati became very quiet and withdrawn, rubbing her eyes. She then burst out in a loud crying and lost consciousness (cf. Freed and Freed 1964: 153-4).
Figure 3: Salwati about to be prematurely possessed by Siti Sundari.

**Discussion**

Western discussions of possession have in the main either considered it to be a psychopathology (Hornbacher 2011: 168), or have analysed it in terms of power relationships and questions of agency. Thus Lewis (1989: 129) argued that women's possession is a form of protest in their unequal relations with men. While this may be so in the cases analysed by Lewis, the matter can be overstated. It is true, however, that, in the Indonesian cases with which I am familiar, it is predominantly women who become possessed - either voluntarily or involuntarily (cf. Steedley 1993: 195; Wessing 1999) - which, Ong (1988: 31) reports, in the Malay world is blamed on their “spiritual frailty, polluting bodies, and erotic nature,” making them especially likely to offend and be subject to retaliation by spirits.

In the case described here, however, Mak Sut was possessed, not because she had given offense, but because the spirit wished to use her as a channel of communication. Further, gender oppression also does not seem to be a factor here. While gender relations in Java generally specify areas of women's and men's competence, and gender is an important factor in social relations, the women involved here (Mak Sut, Mak Asiah, and Salwati, the dancer) are all members of the founding line and have important roles in the seblang ritual. In daily life Mak Sut and Salwati were ordinary members of the community who became possessed in the context of a community ritual (cf. Hornbacher 2011: 172).

---

36 Men, however, can become possessed, either involuntarily especially as a punishment after neglecting to properly deal with either nature spirits or ancestral ones (cf. Wessing 1978a: 103-5), or voluntarily when in such roles as shaman or magician (Wessing 1986; 1996).
Thus, rather than looking, as Lewis (1989) might, for the root of this case of possession in the power relations between the genders, we should look at the wider power relations making up the fabric of Olehsari society. As Ong (1988: 33) writes (though still retaining notions of gender oppression), cases of possession are about violations of moral boundaries, those "governing proper human relations and moral justice." This statement, without reference to gender matters, well describes the situation in which the villagers of Olehsari found themselves; a conflict between the community and the power of the state which, experience had shown, it was unwise to thwart.

There is more to this, however, as the villagers found themselves not only in a difficult position vis-à-vis the government and the spirit world, but also relative to increasing Islamic pressure, which considers spirit possession inappropriate if not idolatrous (syrik). As Hornbacher (2011: 168) notes for Bali, ritual possession is declining in the face of “an underlying struggle over religious concepts and hierarchies”, “marginalizing local concepts of divinity in favour of normalization both of ritual and human identity” implying “a standardized concept of religion”. In this instance, then, the government’s modernizing aims and Islamic interests found common ground vis-à-vis Olehsari’s spirit world, showing how the ritual, though ostensibly only concerned with the maintenance of the village’s fertility and welfare, is embedded in local socio-political realities (cf. Kapferer 1997: 19-21). The argument in Olehsari was not just about the ‘proper’ performance of the ritual and the place of the dhanyang in today’s village society, but also touched upon the relationship of the village with the national government, and the villagers’ position in regard to Islam and its ‘proper’ observation. From an Islamic standpoint, the stance taken by Wiwin’s family was defensible, though culturally they were generally considered wrong. They therefore faced a dilemma as well: culturally one must obey the dictates of one’s ancestors (Saputra 2014b: 61), but does this obedience trump religion, or for that matter government instructions?

It was in fact, the contradiction between the adat and the desires of the government that sparked the crisis, with Wiwin’s family’s religious convictions acting as a catalyst: if either position could have been ignored there would not have been a problem. But, the villagers felt obliged to follow the spirit’s directions, which contradicted those perceived to come from the government through the village head. Although opinion in the village was divided, as can be seen from the informants’ statements cited earlier, in the end they all united in condemning Wiwin who, by following her own (or her family's) Islamic desires, went counter to the wishes of the members of the community, both human and spirit. In this the villagers echoed Mas Brata's ire, and emphasized the moral position of the community versus the immoral one of recalcitrant individuals (cf. Nourse 1996: 437). In that sense the people and the spirits were united, both against Wiwin and, more cautiously, against the interfering demands of ‘the government’ which impinged on Mas Brata's prerogatives and threatened the community's

---

37 As Boddy (cited by Nourse 1996: 426) points out, Lewis' (1989) perspective on possession as a strategy assumes intentionality on the part of women, and underestimates the actuality of the spirits to the people involved.

38 This conflict between adat and religion in East Java dates back to at least the 1930s (cf. Hefner 1990: 139, 197, 203), though its resurgence in the Banyuwangi area seems to be more recent (cf. Beatty 2009).
adat, the basis of their social order.39 In this regard, then, the conflict was a simple case of protest against interference by outside forces (ostensibly about aesthetic matters) in what were perceived to be internal concerns, and by extension an opposition in the periphery against the homogenizing forces emanating from the centre; a small "ritual of rebellion" (Gluckman 1963: 112).

Yet, there is still the matter of the relationship between the community and the spirit(s) on whom the community's welfare is perceived to depend; people not only had to deal with the government, but were also caught in a struggle for dominance with the spirits over who was going to control the way in which the ritual was going to be run (cf. Karp 1990: 83). This conflict was finally settled between the village head (here in his role of bapak [father] of the community) and Mas Brata (a kind of co-father), when the village head stated that this was a matter of alus and kasar, spirits and people, indirectly indicating that Mas Brata's complaining and yelling were kasar (crude) behaviour, unsuited to a alus (spirit) being. Such behaviour, furthermore, in placing the community's relationship with the government in a difficult position, went counter to the dhanyang's role as a protector of order in the community. With this, Mas Brata's protests suddenly caved in; both the spirit and the community focused on Wiwin, and the conflict was resolved - at least for the moment, because having caved in, the spirit has left the door open for further, aesthetic or other, interference in the future.41

Yet, while this tells us what happened, it does not explain Mas Brata's sudden capitulation, the reason for which lies in the moral argument implicit in the village head's comment on alus and kasar. The village head, as bapak (father) of the village and inheritor of the founder's authority and obligations, could have been expected to acknowledge the justness of the dhanyang's position, as the nervous villagers at least implicitly did. Indeed, as Lehman (1996: 3) writes in the context of Burma, the founder's local authority and power rest on his "constant intercession with the spirit owners of the land" without which "the community would suffer and be unviable" (cf. McVey 1993: 6). And it is for this reason, Lehman continues, that "an inherent tension [exists] between the claims of local magnates, putative

39 Note that the conflict was at no time phrased as a conflict with Islam, even though Wiwin’s refusal to dance seems to at least partially have been for religious reasons. To phrase the conflict in those terms, however, would have left the villagers open to accusations of being against religion, a position which it is wise to avoid.

40 While the Indonesian authorities with which the villagers have to deal cannot be characterized as “foreign domination,” they and their concerns do appear as “the suddenly visible representatives of imperialism and the world capitalist system” (Karp 1990: 80), especially in the light of developments on Bali, which is, after all, only a short ferry ride away from Banyuwangi. Yet, as Hellman (2013: 188–9) points out, the voices of the possessed can criticize a corrupt and weak political and religious leadership, contrasting it with the ideal of the community’s founders, in Hellman’s case the King of Pajajaran.

41 The interference and the attendant changes have indeed been constant. In 2003 there was an attempt to stage a seblang performance in conjunction with the celebration of Banyuwangi’s founding day. This attempt failed due to the dhanyang’s recalcitrance (Tabalong 2004: 40). In 2005, however, the Olehsari seblang, though not in trance, featured as part of the kebo-keboan, an agricultural ritual in the village Alasmalang, along with other touristic elements like Kemiren’s barong (protective spirit) and a reog (tiger-dance) performance. All these were at one time locality-bound presentations that have lost their spiritual moorings in the process of touristification. Recently also the ritual has been moved from an open space in the village to a stage (Tabalong 2004: 42), in the process redirecting it to becoming theatre (cf. Wessing 2012–13). The stage has since been scrapped.
successors to the Founders, and the supralocal authorities and rulers" who, of course, have competing claims to the loyalty of the local headman.

In Olehsari, however, the village head did not take the side of the dhanyang. Rather, he presented himself as the local representative of the national government, a moral order, to apply Lehman's (1996: 4-5) depiction, that competes with the one represented by the spirits. As Lehman argues, both the state and the spirits claim "global jurisdiction," including to the territory occupied by the village and the surrounding forests, and, as McVey (1993: 11) writes, from the government's point of view the spirits' claim is basically illegitimate - as all competing claims to universal rulership must be (cf. Tambiah 1977). The people of Olehsari, therefore, found themselves caught between these two competitors. Unlike the Burmese case discussed by Lehman, the Indonesian state does not officially recognize the spirit's claims. Indeed, such beliefs are officially excluded from the domain of religion and are relegated to the category of beliefs (kepercayaan).

Furthermore, although Islam is not the state religion of Indonesia, it is the dominant faith there to the degree that many of the spirits also acknowledge the moral superiority of its teachings. In so far as the existence of spirits is acknowledged in Muslim circles, it is said that they were made by God and thus are under His authority (cf. Muhaimin 1996: 40-41). Islam, as well as the other officially recognized religions, are embedded in the state philosophy, Panca Sila, which is said to be the moral underpinning of the state. In this way, God, of whatever religion, is on the side of the state. In the village head, therefore, Mas Brata faced first a powerful competing claim on the village and its inhabitants, and, second, the moral authority claimed by the state through its philosophy and religion. In this situation Mas Brata could only ngalah (give in), albeit under the slight protest of 'only this year.'

Here the village head’s allusion to alus and kasar was a crucial factory, implying as it did that those who are alus must act accordingly. To have to crudely or angrily assert oneself to accomplish something is a sign of one’s relative lack of potency (Errington 1983: 556; Howe 2000: 76). By calmly taking charge of the situation, and authoritatively simplifying the matter as a question of alus and kasar, the village head put Mas Brata in his place (cf. Kapferer 1997: 109). This left the spirit to make the best of a bad situation and give in, thereby safeguarding his moral authority, the recognition of which, through the annual celebration, is a precondition to his continued social existence (cf. Platenkamp 2014). Mas Brata could, of course, have been recalcitrant, but what would he, or the village in his charge, have gained had he done so? The power of the state, or traditionally the spirit of state

---

42 As Magnis-Suseno (1996: 67) points out, the position of village head used to be much more one of primus inter pares among the other villagers than it presently is. The position is now increasingly one of representing the supralocal government. Even though this aspect was not absent in the past, it has in recent times received greater emphasis.
43 The elements of this state philosophy include nationhood, humanitarianism, democracy, social justice, and a belief in a Supreme Deity, the latter not officially specified.
44 This sort of interaction between the community and the spirit or god occurs in Bali as well, and often brings about new (or changed) rituals and instructions for the community’s future conduct (Hornbacher 2011:178).
45 Javanese: kasekten, cosmic female generative power that pervades the universe and is seen as directly responsible for a person’s position in society (Anderson 1972). This quality is often attributed to powerful or charismatic persons, though in theory available to ordinary persons as well.
(dhemit), is greater than that of a village dhanyang, and thus giving in was perhaps Mas Brata’s most economical move. In doing so he remained the ‘voice of the people’.

**The Voice of God is the Voice of the People**

Finally, there is the question of agency. In this case it is, of course, very difficult to distinguish between the seized and the seizer, since they cannot be physically distinguished. Yet for the participants in Olehsari, unless one would claim that they are all in cahoots, there seemed to be no question; Mak Sut had been possessed by the dhanyang before, when it wanted to pass on instructions regarding the seblang ritual, and the reality of this phenomenon was accepted by all. Early in her trance there was a brief discussion about which spirit had actually come, but this was resolved as soon as Mas Brata's name was mentioned (cf. Steedley 1993: 197). Here, unlike the cases described by Nourse (1996: 436), there was no ambiguity in the messages, and no further interpretation was needed; Mas Brata stated his case rather plainly, especially by Javanese standards.

Yet, in doing so he also gave voice to the concerns of the community, contesting interference by outside forces, and, at least symbolically, raising a rebellion for which the community could not, in the end, be held responsible. It was, after all, not they who had spoken but Mas Brata, the spirit agent (Nourse 1996: 438) responsible for their welfare. This spirit, because it falls outside the government's sphere of effective power, can voice complaints and make statements that might otherwise be interpreted as being against the public interest (cf. Freed and Freed 1964: 156; Adams 1997: 156; Lewis 1989: 23).

In so doing, Mas Brata expressed the villagers' concerns about their adat and the changes overtaking them. This adat has, of course, been changing all along (e.g. the change in the date), but as long as such changes were generated from the inside, they were either hardly noticed or were accepted as an innovation by the spirits. In principle, the adat is an unchanging set of guidelines to proper behaviour, and by attempting to stick with these, especially during ritual, Olehsari was, perhaps futilely, trying to maintain the uniqueness of its tradition (Bateson 1937: 305; cf. Pemberton 1994: 238). After all, it and Bakungan are the only two villages where seblang is still found, a fact that they proudly proclaim. Yet they are also aware of the realities of life in modern Indonesia, and the whole event can be seen as a discourse about what it means to be Using within that context, making the conflict and its resolution into a creation of an experience of change (cf. Douglas 1970: 80-3), using the

---

46 Vox Dei, Vox Populi, with apologies to Alcuin (C.E.735-804) whose letter to Charlemagne (C.E. 800) has over the centuries often been quoted out of context (cf. Roberts 1940: 647).

47 In the case of Salwati's premature possession the next day, it was at first thought that she might be bothered by a devil (setan), until Siti Sundari made her presence known.

48 The fact that one of Wolbers' (1992:88) informants called the seblang presentation a "ritus kesuburan" (fertility rite) is an indication that the true meaning of the ritual, or the direct experience of it, may already be in the process of being lost (cf. Kristensen 1961: 7-8; Firth 1973: 163-4, 200). Yet Wolbers does not identify the speaker, and the people I met over the years fully participated in the ritual and appreciated its reality. One voice does not necessarily constitute doom, though it may be a warning of it, especially given developments in Bakungan (2010) and Alasmalang (2009) where display has clearly won out over belief and ritual.
known phenomena of possession by the usual persons to control both the event and the changes. The conflict, then, made visible and enacted the social stresses in Olehsari (compare Kapferer 1997: 302-3; Howe 2000: 65), highlighting the relationships between the villagers and the spirits, including the egalitarian relationship that made possible this dialog between them. By taking place in the liminal context created by Mak Sut’s possession, it became possible to adjust reality to deal with the emerging forces: even spirits, being part of the Using social universe, must move with the times.

**Bibliography**


Anonymous. n.d. Seblang. One of three slightly varying photocopied typescripts supplied by the village office in Olehsari.


Mus, P. 1975. *India Seen from the East: Indian and Indigenous Cults in Champa.* I.W. Mabbett and D.P. Chandler, (tr. and eds.) Clayton: Monash University, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies. [Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 3.]


