ROBERT WESSING

Porous boundaries
Addressing calamities in East Java, Indonesia

Introduction

In recent writings people’s social reality and the communities they form together have been described as constituted by the intersection of individual stories that reflect these people’s perceptions of the reality about them (Wessing 2006c; Fisher 1987; Niles 1999). Fischer and Niles characterize people as tellers of tales, Homo narrans, whose mutual stories are the basis upon which they perceive themselves and each other as belonging to a community: participation in these tales defines insiders and outsiders, both relative to the community as a whole and to sub-groups within it.

These stories, however, are not only about the way the community came to be and is presently structured. They are also about things that can or have gone wrong, and what alternatives the participants have when things go awry. These narrations reflect people’s ability to make sense of the inexplicable (Bruner 2002:28), or, in Geertz’s (1973:108) terms, their recognition that misfortune is inescapable ‘while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole.’ Stories, Bruner continues, domesticate the surprising and allow for an explanation of the otherwise unexplainable (Bruner 2002:90). Through these explanations misfortune becomes part of ordinary reality, understandable and, it is hoped, manageable.

The process employed to do this is relatively simple. As described elsewhere (Wessing 1978:163-6), people create cognitive domains that include

---

1 Bruner 2002; Wessing 2001, 2007. This includes not only the content of the stories, but also the way in which they are presented and the way the audience reacts to them, something the essayist S.J. Perelman characterized as the idiom of interaction: ‘habits of speech and jest and reaction’ (Crowther 1988:271, 273), to which one might also add things like body language.
references relevant to the current problem and exclude elements deemed irrelevant. The included elements are then structured according to their perceived importance to the situation, a structure that is reflected in the tale that is told. On occasion, however, there may be more than one set of references to select from. In this case the narrator can ignore the additional information, considering it irrelevant, include it as secondary to the main story, or, especially in the case of religious phenomena, include it as a possible parallel phenomenon to be considered ‘just to be sure.’ In this process the scope of the event is obviously important. Narrations of local events will include local references, and those of wider relevance will reflect this by the inclusion of factors from further abroad, including greater attention to alternative explanations. Stories, then, are ‘keyed’ to the scope of the event that they narrate.

In this article I look at how misfortune is perceived and dealt with in East Java, Indonesia. Obviously misfortune is not a uniform phenomenon and it may be seen to strike at different levels of society, from the individual and the household to the nation. Responses to it will be seen to vary with these levels, becoming more general as the event in question becomes more encompassing and less individually specific. Thus, in East Java specific dangers such as illness, sorcery and possession are dealt with through the agency of a local curer (dhukun) while general dangers, like epidemics, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, may be addressed by cleansings (ruwatan) and by reference to both mythological figures and God.

Also reflected in these responses is a concern with the two dominant cosmological models that are prevalent in East Java, namely ‘pre-Islamic tradition’ (adat) and Islam. Both, as will be seen, are exhortations through which
people attempt to guard their health and the general order of things, blaming calamities on individual or collective misbehaviour (Douglas 1970:13). This differentiation between the two models, however, is a heuristic one and should not be seen in terms of Geertzian categories, distinguishing Santri and Abangan modes of behaviour. Nor is the difference a Redfieldian one between great and little traditions, as both are prominent at all levels of society, and practices that some consider non-Islamic are accepted as part of religious behaviour by others, even if these practices are not prescribed in either the Koran or the Hadith (traditions) (Ido 2008:32; compare Beatty 1999). Over the centuries Islam and ‘animistic’ beliefs have become integrated, and are expressed to varying degrees in different social situations. Islam must not, therefore, be seen as a thin veneer over an underlying animism, as was proposed by some early models of religion in Southeast Asia, although there is much discussion whether some practices ought properly to be allowed and what can be considered to constitute Islam (Wahid 2006; Wessing 2007). Given the at least public dominance of Islam at the present time, it stands to reason that publicly a general version of Islam is given great visibility. This says nothing, however, about privately held beliefs.\(^5\)

This last statement, however, gives rise to another problem, namely what is meant here by belief. As Lehman (1972:375-6) summarizes it (though he considers the question to be vacuous), what do we mean ‘when we say someone truly believes (has internalized) something, and how can we use evidence of action to decide the matter’. In response, Lehman proposes that people ‘actively, even if unselfconsciously, construct a conceptual representation of the world and of … [them]selves’. In other words, people construct explanatory narrations and act according to them.

This does not, of course, mean that all the members of a group or community will agree with the explanation (or model) or that it will be fully subscribed to at all times even by the individual constructing it.\(^6\) Even neighbours, while attending each other’s celebrations, may have quite divergent ideas of what is going on.\(^7\) Proper outward display, Beatty (1999) notes, does not guarantee

\(^5\) Pressure to conform to stricter Islamic standards may often come from outside the community, for example from recent immigrants or the regional Islamic council (MUI). Because it places the discussion in the public domain – removing it from private practice to public observance – such pressure is difficult to resist, as non-compliance leaves one (or one’s group) open to accusations of heresy or heterodoxy (kesasar, sesat) (Wessing 2002; Beatty 1999; Vid 2008).

\(^6\) Beatty 1999; Goody 1996. In this the people of East Java are neither alone nor unique, as comparable doubts were recorded as long ago as the fourteenth century in the Pyrenees area of southern France (Le roy Ladurie 1985:412-24).

\(^7\) Similarly, the quite ethnically mixed assembly of folk in a housing complex near Jember (East Java), whose Islamic convictions vary from nominal, to Nahdatul Ulama, to Muhammadiah, to wearing the full burkah, will attend each other’s rituals, wearing the appropriate clothing and saying the appropriate prayers when they do so.
inner conviction, and symbols can be privately interpreted. Especially more pious Muslims have long doubted the efficacy of numerology and *mantra* (De Bie 1901:29; Poensen 1909:262). Some people, though quietly these days, doubt the teachings of more purist Islam as well. Yet, whether any given individual gives credence to these things or not, spirits and magical practices are part of Javanese life and individual Javanese must *ipso facto* have a position on them (Lehman 2006:127; Wessing 2006b:160). In any case, when one sees a person burning incense at a grave, making offerings to a spirit or fervently praying, I would propose that this person thinks or hopes that this action will have some kind of result, assuming the person not to be totally irrational. Belief, being an individual matter (Smith 1963:181), is difficult to pin down, and symbols that speak volumes to one person may be meaningless to another. Religious reality, Brede Kristensen (1962:83) writes, is infinite and inexpressible.

The differentiation here between Islam and pre-Islamic tradition, then, is a heuristic one though also one that is subject to serious debate in Indonesia today. Of the two cosmological models, Islamic principles tend to gain greater visibility beyond the level of the individual and the household, at the levels of the community and the wider nation. Islam is indeed an increasingly dominant public narrative, though not inevitably the most favoured one (Beatty 1999:182). Although it varies with degrees of piety, at the level of the individual and the household non-Islamic explanations and treatments are quite often invoked. Stricter Muslims say that *musibah* (calamities) are trials, put in one’s path by God (*coban teka Tuhan*). Thus, privately, as the valuation of Islam increases, the narratives focusing on alternate models decrease in importance. Also, the more public an event is, or the wider its scope, the greater the emphasis on official religion, no matter what the privately held positions of the participants may be. Furthermore, while even tradition-focused narratives tend to contain some Islamic references, the more purist Islamic ones tend to eschew references to traditional ideas about spirits and the like.8 This divergence has been ongoing since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,9 though previous practices ‘have stubbornly survived’ (Headley 2000:192). A third cosmology, modern science as represented by modern medicine, is frequently a last resort, spiritual solutions of some sort often being preferred.

---

8 Koentjaraningrat (1989:350-1) distinguishes between sacred and non-sacred *slametan* (communal meals), considering non-sacred those held for house moving and for journeys, but also for curing, and a host of other family-oriented occasions, because they do not have God in mind. When prayers are included they ‘may assume a sacred character’, he writes. This seems to me a rather restricted notion of sacred, as it does not reflect beliefs in ancestors or spirits. It may be that Koentjaraningrat had in mind the official government definition of sacred, which includes five religions (Islam, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism), and specifically excludes alternate beliefs.

9 Ricklefs (2008:34) dates the divergence more conservatively to the nineteenth century.
Porosity

In East Java and indeed in Southeast Asia generally, human bodies are seen as containers (wadhah) of their spirit (soul; semanget).\(^{10}\) In order for these wadhah to function properly, that is harmoniously and free from illness and calamities, their ritual purity has to be maintained. The problem is that these containers are thought to be porous,\(^ {11}\) allowing spirits and other influences to move in and out, and leaving the person involved open to a loss of personal spirit or to possession, the invasion of the body by an alien spirit. Especially under stressful conditions, often involving ambiguity concerning social boundaries (Ong 1988; Douglas 1970), the human spirit is thought to be able to wander away, sometimes to other bodies, human or animal, something that causes great concern, especially where it involves children, whose wadhah are thought to be less firm than those of adults (compare Kroes 2002:60). To prevent this from happening, various amulets (sikep or jimat) may be employed to strengthen the boundaries of the individual’s wadhah, some consisting of herbs and secret ingredients, others containing ‘Islamic’ magic like citations from the Koran. More purist Muslims reject such amulets and seek to strengthen their wadhah by reciting verses from the Koran, especially the Ayat Kursi, the 255th verse of the second book.

 Principally the same porosity is found in units like households and hamlets, whose boundaries, though marked, do not prevent spirits from other domains from entering and at times causing trouble (Wessing 2006a:45, 58, 87). Care must thus be taken here as well to guard these units both from intrusion and from loss. Along the boundaries of individual homes, papaya trees (Carica papaya) and daun kelor (Moringa oleifera)\(^ {12}\) may be planted to protect the home against sorcery attacks, while yellow bamboo wards off bothersome spirits and red hanjuang plants (Cordyline fruticosas; Osing: andong) guard against misfortune in general.\(^ {13}\) This latter plant is also often found in grave-


\(^ {12}\) http://primbon.com/kayu_bertuah2.htm (last accessed 8 July 2008). This plant also guards against possession.

\(^ {13}\) Knowledge of the magical effects of this plant has been fading. In the past it was thought to guard against calamities and was associated with shrines and sacred places throughout Java and the wider Indo-Pacific area (Barrau 1965:338-9), as well as with offerings to the rice goddess (Kern 1924:580). Pleyte (1905:48) writes that in West Java its leaves offer shade to the spirits of the deceased. Even in 1927, however, many considered it just a decorative plant (Heyne 1927:442). In East Java its name is no longer always known. The Madurese call this plant kaju orep (wood or tree of life; Heyne (1927:442) calls it Kadjo Oerip). Stevens and Schmidgall-Tellings (2004:576) classify the red variety as Cordyline terminalis.
yards and *pundhèn*, the place where a community’s tutelary spirit resides.\(^ {14} \) These are boundaries or interfaces where people commonly encounter spirits. Other protective mechanisms for the home will be discussed later. These include burying amulets in the yard or near the doorstep of the house, and other magical measures.\(^ {15} \) Kampung also have their defences, mainly ritual ones, including veneration of the community’s founder and its tutelary spirit, mass prayer meetings at critical times, and communal control measures against anti-social behaviour such as adultery and premarital sex,\(^ {16} \) which are thought to lead to ritual impurity and thus a loss of spiritual power.\(^ {17} \)

This is not to say that porosity is always necessarily negative. As Schefold (1989, 2001) has shown, positive influences flow into communities and individuals from elsewhere, something that is only possible if the boundaries of these units can somehow be breached. Furthermore, as shown by Wessing (2006d), change and cosmic mobility are only possible when forces can cross the boundaries between demarcated domains. Such positive (inward) flows, however, take place under carefully controlled circumstances, mediated by ritually powerful persons like shamans (Wessing 1999a) or rulers who serve ‘as channels of spiritual blessings from the invisible spiritual world’ (DeBernardi 2006:136). What must be guarded against is uncontrolled traffic in and out of the *wadhah*, as this can cause disorder. For order to be maintained, various defences (*pager*) are put up aiming to counter such uncontrolled flows and keep the *wadhah* pure and clear, in other words orderly.

The individual and the household

The basic social unit is the household and the individuals that compose it. The two are inseparable and a person who is not part of such a unit is both vulnerable and incomplete. Through participation in household rituals a person par-

---

\(^{14}\) Eringa 1984:282; Wessing 2003b:438. Rural communities are usually referred to as villages, though this can be a source of confusion as the administrative village (*désa*) is quite often not a person’s point of primary reference. Rather, this is the kampung, a subsection of the *désa* where one’s immediate relatives are likely to live and whose inhabitants are one’s neighbours and members of one’s immediate social networks (Wessing 2001:34-5; 2003b:428-30). The units under discussion here, therefore, are kampung, both rural and semi-urban.

\(^{15}\) For mainland Southeast Asian parallels see Tannenbaum (1987).

\(^{16}\) Kleinman (1988:23) notes that according to Chinese medical theory, excessive loss of semen can lead to a fatal illness due to a loss of vital energy, leading to weakness and thus vulnerability.

\(^{17}\) Compare Wessing 2002; Korn 1932:80, 180. Concerning this spiritual power in Java generally, see Anderson (1972). When during the fight for Independence in the 1940s the outer wall of Yogyakarta’s keraton (palace) was breached, this meant to many Javanese that the cosmic power contained within the palace and the person of the sultan were now uncontrolled and flowing out into society, creating a dangerous condition (Stange 1975:171).
takes of and helps generate the religious or cosmic power concentrated in this unit (compare Hellman 2006:94). This power is essential for the well-being of the participants, and its diminution is dangerous to individual members and to the household as a whole. This is the reason the household is ritually guarded with the papaya, *hanjuang* and other plants mentioned earlier, as well as for the emphasis on ritual purity.

However, the composition of the household is not restricted to the living persons residing in the house. In and around the house spirits are thought to dwell, such as the house’s tutelary spirit (*penunggu*) and the spirits of deceased ancestors like the *begejl*, each of whom has prerogatives and desires. A deceased husband may be given a *sandringan* (offering) of food and drink on *malem Jum’at Kliwon*, a combination of days in the Javanese seven- and five-day weeks. Other ancestral spirits may demand reverence and incense, while the *penunggu* may also have tastes of its own. All these spirits watch over the welfare of the house and its inhabitants, and monitor their behaviour. While generally benign, they can become angered when people misbehave or when their prerogatives are ignored (Wessing 2006a).

Sometimes even ancestral spirits can be ornery. Especially children up to seven years old, whose *wadhah* is thought to still be especially ‘open’, wear an amulet (*sikep*) around the neck or the waist to protect them from spirits that could make them sickly. Children are thought to be vulnerable to being startled, perhaps by the spirit of a deceased ancestor or even of a parent that wants to take the child away. This can cause the child to suffer from *ayan* (dizziness, fits, apoplexy and the like) or *setip* (probably from Dutch *stuip*; convulsions, fits) (Tim Penyusun Kamus 1990:59; Echols and Shadily 1989:527; compare Winzeler 1995:78).

Persons older than seven years may wear a *sikep* (a magical amulet) to protect them from others’ evil intentions. A *sikep* usually contains a piece of paper with writing in an Arabic-style script, although a 24-year-old primary school teacher told me that it is not really Arabic. It is worn in one’s headband or one’s pocket, wrapped in a green or white cloth. The *sikep* may also be placed above the door to one’s house, where it is wrapped in black cloth. In this case the amulet protects the whole household. Other measures included burying a *rajah* (magical amulet) in the form of some rust, a bottle filled with incense, or a *keris* (ritual dagger) in the front yard of the house. At night this *rajah* may manifest as a magical tiger, protecting the members of the household against

---

18 A simple *sandringan* can consist of a plate of rice topped with a salted egg, coffee, and a glass of water containing *kembang telon* (ritual flowers).

19 In principle, then, the *sikep* protects the porous *wadhah* from both undesired in-flows and out-flows.

burglars and people with evil intentions (Wessing 1995:212, note 14). In order to maintain the efficacy of the sikep or rajah one must burn incense and make an offering to its spirit every Thursday evening (malem Jum’at). Neglecting this duty might anger the spirit, which could have undesirable consequences of its own; once initiated, the relationship with the spirit must be maintained.

A sikep also serves to keep one from being possessed by spirits. Spirits are thought to be ubiquitous. When going to a new place or walking on an unfamiliar road, one must ask permission from the local spirits. Coming home from a journey, even a short one, the spirit that guards the house must be greeted. Neglecting this duty might anger the spirit, which could have undesirable consequences of its own; once initiated, the relationship with the spirit must be maintained. A sikep also serves to keep one from being possessed by spirits. Spirits are thought to be ubiquitous. When going to a new place or walking on an unfamiliar road, one must ask permission from the local spirits. Coming home from a journey, even a short one, the spirit that guards the house must be greeted. Neglecting this duty might anger the spirit, which could have undesirable consequences of its own; once initiated, the relationship with the spirit must be maintained.

Both the idea of kothong and the ease with which the person is possessed point to the porosity of the wadhah discussed earlier. It is the porosity that allows the wadhah to empty out and the invading spirit to move in, necessitating the use of a boundary-strengthening sikep or other measures to strengthen one’s defences, including fasting, silat (martial arts), and meditation (compare Winzeler 1995:83, 86; Geertz 1977:151).

While more strict Muslims also feel the need for protection, they claim to acquire this by reciting the Koran (ngaji, wirid), and dzikir (chanting the confession of faith), salat (prayer), or larger prayer meetings (istighotsah). Recourse to the spirit world is regarded as sirik (idolatry). An Osing university student stated that Muslims protect themselves through ngaji and salat while wong Jawa (Javanese) use sikep, differentiating clearly between being

---

21 Similarly, when entering a forest, one must ask its tiger guardian’s permission (Wessing 1995:196-7).
24 These prayer meetings are not always effective, however, as pupils at one school became possessed at the conclusion of one such meeting (May 2007:33).
Javanese and being a Muslim. However, even those who do turn to the spirit world do not fully neglect Islam. The Arabic-style script found in the sikep is, of course, a reference to religion, which in this way is seen as being part of or supporting the magic. Similarly, as Anoegrajekti (2006:117) points out, people will utilize mantra (spells) for protection yet see these simultaneously as a way to seek a blessing (ngalap berkah) from God.

We see then an apparent divergence between those to whom the narrative of Islam brings enough certainty by itself and those who use a wider range of protective measures including references to Islam. There is, furthermore, a divergence between the above narrations of possession and the modern scientific ones used by the leadership of the factories or schools where possessions have occurred, their medical consultants wondering whether possession could be an indication of mental weakness.25

Illness

One illness that readily illustrates the idea of the porosity of the body is anginen (Ind., masuk angin), the indications of which are general aches, feeling bloated, as well as the symptoms associated with a cold.26 This illness, which is also found in mainland Southeast Asia and India (Hanks 1963:21; Kleinman 1988:12), is said to result from an imbalance between the body’s four constituent elements, wind, fire (or heat), water, and earth, that link a person to the cosmic totality.27 This imbalance can be prevented by proper diet and harmonious social relations (Dreezens-Fuhrke 1995:24; Kleinman 1988:12). Of the four, wind and heat are the ones most likely to cause problems,28 wind being the most problematic, as an excess of it is thought to cause the above symptoms while a shortage may lead to muteness and mental problems (Dreezens-Fuhrke 1995:23). The cure is to drive out the excess air by massage and in serious cases by a kerokan, a deep massage using oil and a coin. This can generally be done by a family member, or a low-level specialist, a dhukun pijet (masseur).

25 Ery et al. 2006:17, 2006b:1, 7; Rie et al. 2006:3; Ong 1988.
26 Geertz 1977:151; Dreezens-Fuhrke 1995:23. Informants could not give me a specific Osing term for this illness, though they were familiar with the Indonesian masuk angin, which Kawuryan (2006:134) considers to be a Javanese term as well. Robson and Wibisono do not mention masuk angin, listing instead anginen (2002:44). The Osing use angin to refer to sorcery, which is, of course, also an indicator of skewed relationships.
27 Compare Kleinman 1988:11. These elements are linked with a person’s four spirit siblings in a 4/5-classification system, in which the fifth element is the person him or herself. Through these siblings the person is part of the cosmic totality (Rato 1991:45-6, note 6; Pigeaud 1983). On spirit siblings see Wessing (2006a:67-70).
28 Geertz 1977:151. Dreezens-Fuhrke (1995:24) observes that the four-element theory is not generally known in Java, though people do act in accordance with its principles.
Preventing *anginen* is thus a matter of maintaining a balance between the bodily elements and in one's social and spiritual relations, thus maintaining harmony in the cosmos. Indeed, the primary distinction made by the Javanese is between *slamet* (peace and harmony, or balance) and *bingung* (confusion, instability and soullessness), a lack of balance (Dreezens-Fuhrke 1995:30). Illness, especially when prolonged, is often seen as resulting from a personal fault, the patient or a family member having offended either a spirit or a person – for example being out of balance with one's social or spiritual surroundings. The question ‘what have I done wrong’ or ‘who have I or this household wronged’ therefore soon arises.

To find out what is wrong, the patient can, of course, go to a doctor, but quite often people prefer to go to a *dhukun* (cure) (DeBernardi 2006:101; Hanks 1963:25). The reason for this choice, several informants explained, is that the doctor usually does not explain his or her diagnosis, or does so in terms that the patient does not understand. The doctor’s narrative tends to be in terms of a disease, a narrative that is based on assumptions and explanations that may be far removed from the patient’s immediate experience (Kleinman 1988:5). Often the doctor just gives one a prescription, some pills or a shot without much further explanation. Furthermore, people are afraid to hear what ails them in the doctor’s terms: words like cancer only bring additional stress because how is one to pay the cost of such an illness? One would have to go to the hospital, which is expensive. Unlike the doctor, the *dhukun* has no set fee and, at least ideally, one pays what one can afford.

Then there is the unfamiliar method of treatment. The whole medical procedure is foreign and it feels better to be treated at home. Even those who have money often prefer to be treated at home because they feel freer and less impeded (*lebih bibas*) there, more comfortable in familiar surroundings. Another weakness of the doctor’s diagnosis is that he cannot explain why one is sick or where the disease came from, why this particular patient is affected, and how the illness will affect the person’s life (Kleinman 1988:20, 43-4).

The *dhukun*, on the other hand, often has a closer personal knowledge of the patient than the doctor can have, and his narrative can therefore include aspects of the patient’s personal history. This makes his diagnosis and treatment both more understandable and more comfortable. Thus, a *dhukun*...
can tell that one has been *disapa wong alus* (affected by a spirit) and one then immediately knows that ‘yes, earlier I passed the place where that spirit resides’ or ‘oh yes, the child played there’ (Tambiah 1970:316-7). If one goes to the doctor with *perut kembeng* (bloated stomach) he will diagnose a liver ailment (a disease), while the *dhukun* will blame sorcery, especially if the condition persists. The *dhukun*’s explanation, therefore, is an immediate one in locally understandable terms because ‘yes, that place is indeed *angker* (eerie)’ or ‘yes, I may have offended someone’. In cases not blamed on sorcery the *dhukun* then prescribes some water or tea that has had a prayer or magical formula (*mantra*) said over it and only if the patient does not get well for some considerable time will he prescribe further measures (Geertz 1977:149).

The doctor and the *dhukun*, therefore, both narrate and give meaning to the patient’s complaint, though in quite different terms. The *dhukun*’s narration of the illness is in everyday language: this is what happened, this is why you are ill, here is what to do, while the doctor uses terms that are not immediately relevant or understandable to the patient. Even when the *dhukun* uses ‘Islamic’ (Arabic) words, these are not foreign in the same way that the doctor’s language is because Arabic is part of daily religious life – the latter in spite of the fact that few people actually understand the language. In short, a medical narration is a non-local one while spirits and even sorcery can be placed in a local context (Kleinman 1988). It is this local narration, an informant pointed out, that allows the patient to have faith (*yakin*) that he will be cured. It is often only when things become really serious that people finally go to the doctor, but then it is often too late.

*Sorcery*

Sometimes if an illness is intractable to the efforts of *dhukun* or doctors, it is thought to have a more malign cause, namely sorcery (*santhèt*, also *kiriman*).

---

32 This seems to be a change from Poensen’s observation that people in Kediri found reformed Islam ‘too burdensome, too bookish, and that in a foreign language’ (cited in Ricklefs 2008:35).

33 Smith (1963:181) discusses the difference between faith and belief. While a person may doubt specific aspects or claims of a belief system, he or she may yet have faith in the system as a whole. Belief, he writes, is not identical with faith but rather is an expression of it.

34 Even though the difference is not absolute, I find it advantageous to maintain the differentiation between witchcraft and sorcery proposed by Evans-Prichard (1972:21, 387), in which witchcraft is seen as an innate psychic power to do harm, and sorcery consists of learned mechanical ways, such as spells and potions, that are deliberately applied in an attempt to affect a person’s well-being. The distinction is a heuristic one between unconsciously and consciously done harm. Of course, it does not matter immediately to the victim whether sorcery or witchcraft is involved. He only knows that some supernatural force caused his suffering. In Java, this sort of thing is said to be learned rather than innate, and thus would fall under sorcery in the above differentiation.
angin\textsuperscript{35}) by a jealous or angry neighbour (compare Manan, Sumaatmadja and Wardhana 2001:68, 72; Hanks 1963:78-9). Like elsewhere in Indonesia (Barth 1990:641), belief in sorcery is deeply ingrained in East Java, adherence to Islam notwithstanding (\textit{Jawa Pos} 10-1-2008). To protect oneself against sorcery, one can either ask a \textit{dhukun} for a pager (lit. fence, here protection) or put one’s trust in God, reciting portions of the Koran, especially the Ayat Kursi, which is said to be able to stop any evil (Wessing 1996:275-8). Sorcery is generally thought to originate from a close neighbour, someone one may have had a run-in with.\textsuperscript{36} Of the 62 \textit{santhêt}-related reports that I read in the newspapers \textit{Jawa Pos} and \textit{Surya} during intermittent visits between 1990 and 2008, 43 (69\%) clearly concerned relations with neighbours while another 11 (18\%) probably had the same cause.\textsuperscript{37} These accusations between neighbours most often involved mysterious illnesses and dreams in which the sufferer saw the alleged sorcerer, which was taken as an indication that the illness was due to sorcery (\textit{Surya} 18-12-2007; \textit{Jawa Pos} 6-1-2008). Even in cases where the alleged sorcerer claimed to have had no known problems with his neighbours, friction can be both subtle and long standing, beyond immediate memory: as Geertz (1983:157) points out, long-time neighbours are ‘characters in one another’s biographies’.

Occasionally the person accused of sorcery is a local religious leader (\textit{kiyai}), though this is rare.\textsuperscript{38} In such cases the alleged sorcerer often cures suspicious illnesses, leading people to suspect that he had caused them to begin with. When rumours then get started that this person can also command magical familiars that can cause disease and death, fear can easily turn to anger (Kristanto 2002-3:54). To counter accusations of sorcery is, of course, quite dif-

\textsuperscript{35} Sorcery is thought to be sent on the wind.

\textsuperscript{36} Alwie and Winardo 2000:64-5. This is similar to Evans-Pritchard’s findings among Africa’s Azande (1962:281). It appears to contradict my 1996 article, where suspicions of sorcery existed between university colleagues rather than between neighbours. These colleagues, however, were part of the academic ‘community’ and, most often being members of the same college, were in close, nearly daily contact. See also Geertz 1977:154; Kleinman 1988:19.

\textsuperscript{37} 11 (18\%) concerned relations with in-laws, 3 (5\%) had to do with local politics, and in one case a sorcerer tried to cast a spell on George W. Bush during his visit to Indonesia in November 2006. Given the notorious inaccuracy of these news reports, these statistics should not be taken as reflecting real local events: they only reflect the number of times an event was attributed to a specific cause. Yet when discussing them, informants tended to take these news reports at face value.

\textsuperscript{38} A large number of the people executed in the Banyuwangi area of East Java in 1998 were religious leaders who had been accused of sorcery. These murders, however, seem to have been instigated by outsiders rather than by their neighbours, and are said to have been politically motivated (Alwie and Winardo 2000:65; Manan, Sumaatmadja and Wardhana 2001:4, 52-5; Sims 2001; Sloot 1998; compare Kusnadi 2001:7). Traditionally, furthermore, suspected sorcerers in the Banyuwangi area were exiled rather than murdered (Manan, Sumaatmadja and Wardhana 2001:30).
ficult, as a plain denial is not likely to carry much weight with the community. In East Java a solution has been found in the *sumpah pocong*, a death oath, in which the accused sorcerer is wrapped in a shroud while the Koran is held above his body. In this condition he solemnly swears that the accusation is false and that, should he be lying, God will eternally damn him.\(^\text{39}\)

In summary, we see that narrations about calamities in the personal and household sphere, like illness or accusations of sorcery, tend to be restricted to the subject’s personal experience with spirits and neighbours.\(^\text{40}\) In this process reference is made to local icons such as known spirits, familiars, *dhukun*, or neighbours, with only occasional reference to God and Islam – though the latter depends on the piety of the person or the household (Geertz 1977:149). In the case of sorcery accusations, however, a problem arises because such accusations cannot be resolved within the narrative in which they originate, but must have reference to the parallel one of Islamic belief, involving the accused and the community in a broader set of assumptions.

The community

If, for the individual and the household, boundaries were personal and even hidden from neighbours, those delineating a community are much more specific and clear, though no less porous. Interestingly, with the move to this wider, more public level, the nature of the narration of calamities changes as well. Reference is now made to the community’s founder (*pembabat*) and its tutelary spirit (*dhanyang*) while Islam plays a much more obvious role, though its scope still depends on the piety of the community as a whole.

Within both the Islamic and the pre-Islamic views, communities in Indonesia and specifically Java can be seen as religious or moral entities (Van den Berg 1901:16; Korn 1932:79-86; Wessing 2002:162-3). These *kampung* are in a sense the centre of the inhabitants’ world, where the spirits of the ancestors and the tutelary spirit responsible for the welfare of the community are part of the local landscape (Wessing 2001), and where rituals must be carried out to avoid the ire of the ancestors and God. Such rituals may range from strictly Islamic prayer meetings to activities that have little if anything to do with Islam, such as the burying of a cow’s head at a sacred grave, or a mixture

\(^{39}\) Compare the Sumatran *batu penyumpah* (oath stones) on which persons accused of incest, adultery and the theft of land or cattle took an oath of innocence before the community and the spirits of the ancestors (Barendregt 2002:290).

\(^{40}\) When a sorcery accusation goes beyond this interpersonal sphere, other factors are probably at play and the accusation is most likely spurious – keeping to an emic point of view that holds sorcery to be a real possibility.
of Islamic and other elements. At specified times, such as the occasion of bersi dèsa (cleansing of the village), the community’s boundaries are maintained by a kirab, a circumambulation of the village (or kampung) during which the Islamic call to prayer may be called out but which may also involve the parading of sacred items like ritual daggers or agricultural produce or other items that reflect the social unit. A visit to the tutelary spirit’s shrine (pundhèn) is also made, as this place marks the boundary, the interface between the community and the dangerous world of the spirits.

Agricultural and fertility rituals are performed in which once again the merging and blending of various cosmologies is evident (Wessing 1999a). Thus, as Van Akkeren (1970:14) describes, incantations at these rituals involve the invocation of God (in Arabic), followed by an appeal in Javanese to the earth, Adam and Eve, the rice spirit, the community’s founder, the ancestors, and the tutelary spirit. Through these rituals the people hope that they will be protected from negative influences and calamities, while thanking God for the blessings they received during the past year. At the same time they thank and commemorate the community’s tutelary spirit (dhanÿang) and visit the graves of the community’s founder and other legendary figures. The spirit of the rice crop is a central part of these celebrations, as failing to honour this goddess would make her angry, which could lead to empty rice kernels or diseased rice plants as well as sick children (Van Akkeren 1970:14; Effendy and Anoegrajekti 2004:9, 23).

In order to maintain their welfare, inhabitants must maintain ritual purity within their boundaries. This means that the community as a whole is morally responsible for individual failures like sexual misbehaviour and the presence of sorcerers (Hellman 2006:52, 94). Ancestral strictures must be obeyed if epidemics or a decline in prosperity are to be avoided (Anoegrajekti 2006:42, note 44). People caught in premarital or extramarital sexual activity may be paraded (sometimes nude) around the community, and be forced to marry (Java Pos 1-2-2008; Rid 2008:30). If they refuse, they may be evicted from the community, depending on how strictly religious rules are followed. Sorcerers too are chased away and their houses may be burned down or destroyed (Ido 2008:32; Java Pos 27-3-2008). The reason for such drastic actions is that the impurity resulting from such persons’ actions can infect others in the community, which could lead to calamities (musibah) such as fires, crop failures, infectious disease (pageblug) or other calamities. These things come about

43 In the literature often called Dewi Sri but among the Oising also known as a widodari and as Sri Tanjung.
when people sin, an Osing housewife said. As an example she pointed to the Porong/Sidoarjo area near Surabaya, which was inundated by a mud volcano (Marshall 2008b). ‘There were many naughty people there’, she said, ‘and much prostitution. Now their community has been wiped out.’

Pageblug

Where individual illness was attributed to punishment for personal shortcomings or a neighbour’s ire, the explanation for epidemics is placed in a different, more general narrative. Pageblug (epidemic) is a disease profile that can lead to the death of more than half a community’s population. Past epidemics include smallpox and cholera and leprosy, which were attributed to the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, Nyai Roro Kidul (Koesnoen 1916:320, 330; Van Ossenbruggen 1916:7, 10, 28, 144, 306). Persons dying during an epidemic were said to have died kesasar (lost), after which a bekasak spirit, who may be dressed as a haji, a person who has undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca, leads them to the Goddess’s realm.44 These days, of course, smallpox is no longer a danger and, while cholera and leprosy are still found, they are much less prevalent than they were before. The symptoms of pageblug now include very high fevers that lead to unconsciousness, convulsions and death. The perceived cause, however, is often still the same: Nyai Roro Kidul needs to recruit servants to serve in her palace (Wessing 2006c). Where epidemics are not attributed to the Goddess, they may be said to be due to the ire of ancestors. 45 To assuage them, people visit their graves, where they hold prayer meetings, especially during Rama- dan after the annual Islamic fast, often coinciding with the bersi dësa ritual.

Natural disasters46

While volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and the like are usually not kampung specific and thus will be discussed in more detail in the next section, fears

---

44 Van Ossenbruggen 1916:8, 18. Leprosy and smallpox are probably classified here as skin conditions, something the Goddess is said to have suffered from (Wessing 1997b:319). Someone who is lost is exposed to unknown and thus unpredictable spirits, which may lead him into danger (compare Pemberton 1994:237).

45 Dreezens-Fuhrke (1995:56) notes that God is rarely blamed for disease. Nyai Roro Kidul is not equally prominent in all areas of Java, and even in East Java her importance varies (Wessing 2006c, 2007).

46 Some of the disasters discussed here occurred well away from East Java. This did not, however, diminish their relevance and immediacy to the people there. While I was in Europe when the Anak Krakatoa became active in 2007, several friends sent me text messages asking whether they should save newspaper reports of the event for me.
about them can be local. Especially after the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami that struck Aceh and other parts of Southeast Asia, rumours of impending tsunamis were rife, both in coastal communities and some that were nowhere near the coast.\footnote{Djunaidi 2005:6; Ery 2005:1, 11; Wed and Ais 2005:20. Similarly, after the disastrous eruption of Mount Krakatoa in 1883, ‘the least sound or the smallest earthquake at first got everyone’s attention, and was immediately reported, while before the eruption these phenomena were hardly noticed’ (Van Sandick 1890:166).} Tens of thousands of people joined in prayers at the Grajagan beach in East Java during a period of high waves, asking to be spared from a tsunami (Abi 2006:33). According to an informant in Sumber Jeruk (Rogojampi), someone had dreamt that a tsunami would hit Grajagan but that the disaster could be averted if Nyai Roro Kidul were given a selanetan (ritual meal) that included certain specified foods. This dream was confirmed by a small child who claimed to have seen the Goddess’s carriage, and by people’s perception that the ocean was pulling back, as it had done in Aceh. Even in a village quite far from Grajagan people wondered whether they lived far enough from the ocean and whether there would be danger to them. All along the south coast of Java, people were fearful, thinking even common large storms might be tsunami (Ant 2005:3). Such fears are not totally unfounded, as occasionally a single community may indeed be struck by a smaller tidal wave. This happened to a coastal community\footnote{Informants say that it was the village Sanggar, though this is not conformed by reports on this tsunami. See http://www.ess.washington.edu/tsunami/specialized/events/eastjava/damagetables.html (last accessed 21 July 2008). The village Grajagan mentioned earlier did experience this tsunami, which accounts for the people’s fear of another one.} in East Java on 3 June 1994 during a shadow puppet (wayang) presentation, celebrating a boy’s circumcision. The people blamed the disaster on the fact that the wrong wayang story had been presented. To prevent these things from happening, the villagers variously make offerings to the Goddess of the Indian Ocean, Nyai Roro Kidul, or perform a bersi desa or barikan ritual to cleanse the community of discord and disharmony.\footnote{Ery 2005:1, 11; Wed and Ais 2005:20; Jawa Pos 15-1-2007. Such fears can also be suddenly triggered by a number of unexplained or unexpected deaths. In 2001 a rumour made the rounds that either the Queen or her daughter, Nyi Blorong, was furious about the loss of a scarf and was going around everywhere in people’s houses looking for it. The way to protect one’s home was to string up little plastic bags containing a coloured fluid, which people all around East Java promptly did (Wessing 2006c:53-4).}

Thus, while an actual tsunami generally affects an area much larger than a single community, fear of one can be kampung specific, leading people to address it in local terms. Although the goddess Nyai Roro Kidul is usually part of a larger narrative, she here participates in a local, coastal one. The stories about her in these coastal communities are also rather different from the ones told about her in the Javanese keraton (palaces): to these fishermen she is a source of calamities as well as prosperity in the form of abundant catches
(Wessing 1997a), while in the keraton tales she legitimizes the ruler’s power, which places her in the next higher level of discussion in this article. In inland communities she is much less directly relevant, and discussions about her there tend to merge with ones about the local spirit pantheon.\footnote{Wessing 2006c, 2007. Ricklefs (2008:34) seems to suggest a more general familiarity with the Goddess, which I did not find.}

Similarly, volcanic eruptions, especially major ones, are also part of the next level of narrative. Usually only kampung near or on the slopes of the volcano that are immediately threatened by lava flows or mudslides actively engage in protective measures involving appeals to Nyai Roro Kidul (in Central Java), the spirit of the mountain, or to God – all entities beyond the confines of the kampung (Laksono 1988:192-3; Ziz 2005:8). Further away from the mountain, however, people may also be affected by fear. Thus, when in 1963 Mount Agung in Bali erupted, the sky above the O sing village Kebaman in East Java was black with dust and people thought that the end of the world (kiyamat) had come. They slaughtered livestock and held a selametan, praying to God for their salvation.

The reaction of the people of Porong near Surabaya to the mud volcano that engulfed their villages shows a similar combination of elements. Two photographs in the newspaper Jawa Pos of 5 November 2006 show a group of men (the paper calls them mystics), wearing white trousers, black jackets and white Muslim-like caps, sacrificing a goat\footnote{Goats and water-buffaloes are part of a set of sacrifices that in the past included human beings (Wessing and Jordaan 1997:118-20). Depending on the circumstances a greater or lesser item from this set may suffice as sacrifice. Human sacrifice has, of course, long been abandoned. Marshall (2008a:76-7, 81) shows a similar sacrifice at Mount Bromo.} and a chicken to the mudflow. Similarly, Marshall (2008b:102) shows a photograph of a ‘Muslim preacher’ praying to God for an end to the mudflow yet sitting between two red flags so that he ‘can better hear the earth’.

To summarize, at the kampung level the narration of calamities involves the maintenance of the community’s boundaries, just as the individual’s boundary had to be maintained at the lower level. Rather than individual relations with spirits and ancestors, however, the story at this level involves the founder and the community’s tutelary spirit (who may be addressed by the kinship term kakik (grandfather) (Wessing 2006a:37) and, where she is a local figure, the Goddess Nyai Roro Kidul. It also invokes the spirit of rice, which is implicitly the spirit of local fertility\footnote{While the literature gives the impression of a unitary tale about this spirit, the story of Dewi Sri, these stories can actually vary between local communities (see Heringa 1997).} since this fertility is expressed through the abundance of the rice crop. Also invoked, alone or interwoven with all these other concerns, is God, who at this more public level has much greater visibility than at the individual level. An interesting marker
is a change in code in these invocations – from an appeal to local entities in the local language and sometimes terms of kinship to an appeal in non-local Arabic to address God – a change that indicates the difference in the context from which the narratives are drawn.

The ‘nation’

Above the level of the local community, the narration becomes much more generalized and includes the region (East Java) as well as Indonesia generally. Indeed, calamities seem never far from the news in Indonesia. Located on the Pacific Ring of Fire, the nation is subject to 17% of the world’s largest earthquakes and its volcanoes are among the most active in the world.\(^53\)

Well known to many are the eruption of Mount Krakatoa in 1883 and the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004. These, however, are only the most headline-grabbing events, as Java is geologically very active due to its location at the subduction zone of the Indo-Australian Plate and the Eurasian Plate. Mount Merapi in Central Java has been quite active since 1995, while in November 2007 both Mount Kelud (East Java) and the Anak Krakatoa (West Java) were active,\(^54\) the latter erupting (beledhos) as many as 400 times each day (Sukanda 2007; Ais and Yul 2007:1, 11). Also well known is the above-mentioned sudden appearance of a mud volcano at Porong in East Java, which has since inundated whole villages. Less well reported are myriad events like the sudden heating up to steaming of the water in a well in Bangsalsari in the kabupaten (regency) Jember (East Java) (Ishom 2007) and the sudden appearance of a spring in a rice field in East Java’s Bondowoso (Aro 2008). Furthermore, major storms often occur along the south coast of Java, especially between the months of January and March, causing floods and landslides. These events, while not directly affecting the lives of most people in East Java, are reported in the newspapers and on television and thus are part of daily life. The reports are discussed, and in conversation are often connected with other seemingly uncontrollable events closer to home.

Acts of God

When news of the 2004 tsunami started filtering through and the scope of the disaster slowly became apparent, I emailed a Javanese friend whose immedi-


\(^{54}\) Anak Krakatoa is the volcano that was formed after Krakatoa’s 1883 explosion.
ate reaction was that Nyai Roro Kidul must have been very angry about the ongoing conflict between the Indonesian government and the Acehnese separatist movement. My friend was not alone in this response. An informant later told me that the Sultan of Yogyakarta had allegedly ordered an offering to be prepared, fearing that the Goddess would send further calamities. Earthquakes are blamed on her as well. The ones that struck Central Java in May 2006 and again in 2007 were attributed to her jealousy over the fact that an erupting Mount Merapi had received everyone’s attention and was given the lion’s share of offerings. Others attributed Merapi’s eruption to the marriage between the mountain’s guardian, Kiyai Sapu Jagad (Venerable Broom of the Universe), and the Goddess of the Southern Ocean (Headley 2004:503). Volcanic eruptions indeed receive much and long-lasting attention, perhaps because of their greater visibility prior to the event.

Eruptions are sometimes seen as indications of the guardian’s displeasure with people’s attention to their religious obligations (Lapian 1987:212-1; Dvorak 2007:9; Sholikhin 2008:244) and some are said to indicate a cosmic imbalance and to presage dynastic changes (Saputra 2007:64; Lapian 1987:211, 215; Pamungkas 2007:34-5). For instance, when Mount Kelud in East Java erupted in 1990, rumours started circulating about changes in the national leadership and the possible return of Soekarno, Indonesia’s founding father (Hudijono 1990; Winchester 2003:237). The guardians of Mount Merapi and Mount Lawu are also thought to guard the well-being of the palace of Yogyakarta and by extension the well-being of its subjects (Woodward 1989:199). When an eruption occurs, it is said that only those who have not kept to the ancestral customs (adat) and have committed many sins will suffer calamities – indeed, it may have been their behaviour that brought on the eruption (Marshall 2008a:89). Others see an eruption as a blessing. In shadow-puppet presentations, the mountain is, after all, a symbol of life, and while eruptions cause much destruction they are also a source of soil fertility. A source of death, therefore, is also a source of prosperity, and an eruption is said to lead to a

---

55 This is, of course, hearsay and could well be apocryphal, especially given the sultan’s claim not to believe in such things and his public adherence to Islam. The invocation of Nyai Roro Kidul is part of a pattern, however, and elsewhere sea goddesses were also invoked: in India the goddess Gangamma Talli was said to be responsible (http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1346769.cms; last accessed 16 July 2008) while among the Chinese of Thailand Mazu, a Taoist goddess of the sea, was invoked to pacify the restless spirits of those who died during the disaster (http://goasia.about.com/od/thailand/a/mazuphuket.htm; last accessed 16 July 2008). Similarly a typhoon in China in 1633 AD was blamed on a mischievous dragon (Liu 2007:133).

56 The name of this guardian varies. He is also known as Embah Merapi (grandfather Merapi) and Sunan Merapi (Sultan Merapi), reflecting a kinship relationship and an Islamic one respectively. Mount Krakatao’s guardian is named Orang Alijeh (Winchester 2003:164), the meaning of which is unclear. The idea that gods live on volcanoes seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. See Dvorak 2007 and Winchester 2003:102-3, 303.
period during which life is stable, calm and good (Triyoga 1991:66-7).

Alternatively, eruptions can be punishment for human sins. In the wake of the Krakatoa disaster people blamed themselves for not following religious prescriptions, for immoral conduct, and for not opposing the rule of a hea-
then (kafir) colonial government (Lapian 1987:219-20). As a result, religion-
driven anti-colonial violence suddenly increased, to decline six months later
as fear and shock subsided.57 Events that defy human understanding need
to be placed within a familiar context in order that people can maintain their
sanity,58 and are thus blamed on human failure resulting in a dissatisfied god-
dess, in cosmic disharmony, or in God's ire, depending on the narrative being
used (Van Sandick 1890:168).

The Yogyakarta palace’s representative on Mount Merapi is Mbah Marijan,
the *juru kunci* (lit. keeper of the keys; guardian) who serves as an intermedi-
ary between the mountain and the palace. He makes the annual offerings
(*labuhan*) that are supposed to protect the palace, the ruler and the people
(Schlehe 1996:400) and he and his people circumambulate (*kirab*) their local
community counter-clockwise59 to assuage the mountain’s anger, reciting the
Surat Yasin from the Koran as they do so (*Surya* 18-5-2006). To be efficacious
the *labuhan* ritual must be performed in his particular *kampung*, which medi-
ates between the realm of Yogyakarta and Merapi, the centre of the universe
(Schlehe 1996:404; Marshall 2008a:96). Failure to perform the rituals could
well spell the end of the world.

Told by volcanologists and the military to leave his *kampung* because an
eruption was immanent, Mbah Marijan replied that whether the mountain
erupts or not is determined by the Almighty. If He has not said so, it will not
happen (*Surya* 23-4-2006). People say that the volcano warns them before it is
going to erupt: various noises, flashes of lightning60 and a rise in the air tem-
perature are signs that are trusted more than warnings and explanations from
experts (Laksono 1988:194; Schlehe 1996:405; compare Dvorak 2007:8). The

---

57 Van Sandick 1890:169; Winchester 2003:321, 345. Similarly, in the European Middle Ages, ca-
alamities were seen as divine punishment for human sins (Tuchman 1982:305). By the time of the
Enlightenment this position came to be questioned (Voltaire 1947:32-7) though it did not disap-
pear. Even in the nineteenth century church membership in some areas of the United States rose
significantly after a number of major earthquakes (Hough 2004:302; see also Lapian 1987:223).
58 When people are unable to do so after a disaster, stress and mental illness seem to result (see
59 The newspaper report did not mention the direction of the circumambulation, but on the
news program of the RCTI television station of 19 May 2006 it could clearly be seen to be counter-
clockwise.
60 Lightning is sometimes considered a *naga* (mythical serpent) in the sky (Wessing 2006d:212).
Some Native Americans in California also associate serpents with earthquakes and tsunamis, and
similarly claim that moans and terrible sounds emanate from caverns in a mountain prior to an
earthquake (Hough 2004:302, 304).
present Sultan of Yogyakarta does not share the villagers’ views, but Mbah Marijan does not regard him as a real sultan, calling him a governor instead, because he does not show the proper respect for Mount Merapi.\footnote{Marshall 2008a:93-6. Like Mbah Marijan, the Kanekes of Banten in West Java also maintain the world through their rituals at Arca Domas (Wessing and Barendregt 2005), regardless of who the current worldly powers are and what the state of their legitimacy is.}

Mbah Marijan, then, represents the realm as well as ordinary citizens. The latter do not offer to the mountain and are, in fact, reluctant to even approach its upper reaches.\footnote{This attitude may be changing. Tsing (2005:148) reports seeing people selling meatball soup at the summit of Mount Lawu, one of the guardians of Yogyakarta. Others offered prayers there.} Mountains are the homes of gods and spirits and are less relevant to local communities than they are to the palace and the ruler (Wessing 2006a:28-9), and dealing with powers of this magnitude is left to those qualified to do so. For ordinary people it is even taboo to speak of an eruption (Schlehe 1996:397). Making offerings in order to prevent calamities is therefore the task of the ruler. It is said that Mount Raung in East Java demanded diamonds to stop erupting, though it is not clear if these were ever delivered. After the 2004 tsunami, Indonesia’s current president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, was advised to sacrifice 1,000 goats (Marshall 2008a:89). He did not do so, and when other calamities followed people wondered whether he should be leading the country (De Jonge 2008:118) or whether perhaps his choice of vice-president was the proper one since the man’s name, Jusuf Kalla, when pronounced by a Javanese, sounds much like that of Batara Kala, the demon that devours human beings.\footnote{Kala is time, which devours all. He is also the focus of the Murwa Kala ruwatan (exorcism) ritual. See Headley (2000).}

Some suggested that the nation should be diruwat (exorcized) to avoid further disasters, something that was indeed done in Surakarta in 1949 to calm unrest there (Headley 2004:468). Another common solution, at the keraton level, similar to the one used in the kampung, is a circumambulation (kirab) during which heirlooms, including a white water-buffalo, are led in procession around the city (Jawa Pos 10-2-2005, 11-1-2008; Surya 11-2-2005). A kirab is, in fact, a boundary-creating mechanism, often used in the past by South and Southeast Asian rulers upon ascending the throne to solidify their realm (Paranavitana 1970). It can be repeated from time to time to maintain the boundary’s strength (Wessing 2003a:234-5). Today the kirab is not just part of the traditional Javanese idiom, however, and is also used in the Islamic context (Jawa Pos 11-2-2005, 11-1-2008). ‘It is done to give thanks to God’ but also ‘so that the people will be protected from natural disasters’.\footnote{Jawa Pos 11-1-2008. Some say, however, that natural disasters are a trial sent by God and that they should be a lesson to people (Jawa Pos 1-1-2008). Others do not draw as fine a line and see in them the hand of the ancestors and local spirits in addition to God.} In 2008 a group
of santri (students at an Islamic boarding school) in the city of Jember in East Java conducted a kirab on 1 Muhamram, the Islamic New Year, which contained no references to traditional Javanese beliefs (Jawa Pos 11-1-2008).

If the kirab maintains boundaries, labuhan offerings maintain good relations with the spirit world on the state level, at least that of the traditional Central Javanese sultanates. On these occasions, clothing and personal aspects of the sultan, like his nail clippings, are offered to Nyai Roro Kidul, the Goddess of the Southern Ocean. In return she is thought to continue to protect the realm of the Sultanate of Mataram, now represented by Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Wessing 1997b:322). In principle, this labuhan offering differs only in degree from the offerings made to the spirit protecting the house and a kampung’s tutelary spirit: Nyai Roro Kidul’s scope is larger than that of the other two, but the function she performs is essentially the same.

On the level of the Indonesian state, no such offerings are made, at least not officially, as this would be against the teachings of Islam. This is not to say that there has been no relationship between Indonesia’s rulers and the Goddess: both President Soekarno and President Soeharto are said to have maintained a connection with her (McNeely and Wachtel 1988:116; Pemberton 1994:305-6). Whether more recent presidents have also done so is not clear and, in a time of Islamic resurgence in Indonesia, would not be done publicly in any case. Istighotsah (prayer meetings) these days substitute for mystical references at most levels of the public sphere, addressing non-local issues from disasters to school-leaving examinations (Jawa Pos 7-1-2008; Surya 4-4-2007).

In the case of major calamities beyond the local community level, then, the narrative increasingly refers to powerful non-local figures like the guardian of the volcano, the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, and God. At the level of the individual and the household the narrations are about individual transgressions vis-à-vis God, ancestors, local guardians, or other individuals, leading these to inflict punishment in the form of illness or sorcery. At the higher levels of the community and ‘nation’, however, actions of entities beyond the local sphere are built into the tale. Guilt, as Lapian (1987:212) points out, becomes collective rather than individual, as it is the collectivity that tolerates the transgressions of individuals in its midst. It is also social collectivities that must satisfy the demands of the powers that guard the welfare of the community, be these a spirit queen or God. At the level of the Indonesian state, only God is publicly invoked.

At no level did we find much (if any) reference to modern science, an alternate cosmology. Doctors were often consulted only when everything else had failed. For things like volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and earthquakes, the pronouncements of scientists were disregarded in favour of the interpretations of local seers and mystics. One reason is that, like the medical doctors,
the scientists’ narration does not satisfy local needs, which are based on non-scientific questions, namely why the volcano erupted and what is to be done to limit the consequences (Dvorak 2007:8). Indeed, while scientists are busily measuring, their efforts are sometimes re-enchanted. Thus Dvorak (2007:8) writes of an old woman in West Java who placed an amulet on the volcanologists’ equipment to ensure that these instruments would not interfere with the eruptions, since the volcano had its own agenda that was not to be interfered with.

**To whom it may concern**

As one moves from the local to the ‘nation’, then, the tales and the tellers become increasingly general and non-specific, moving from individual local spirits to general mythologies. Thus, sorcery (*santhèt*) is a local tale while, for instance, Nyai Roro Kidul, of whom people locally may know very little (Wessing 2006c, 2007), is a regional or national one. This same gradation runs through the dangers themselves, which run from specific ones for which local solutions must be found and general dangers that are addressed through *istighotsah* (prayer meetings), *ruwatan* (exorcism) and boundary-strengthening (porosity-decreasing) circumambulations. In all cases, however, people rationalize calamities and restore cognitive order by conceptualizing them in the appropriate mythological reality: the unimaginable literally becomes mythological, as is illustrated by the Krakatoa eruption’s inclusion in Ranggawarsita’s *Pustaka Raja Purwa*.65

The categorization used here is, obviously, not an exact one and some entities are addressed at more than one level. Thus the spirit of Mount Merapi was seen to have three names, variously indicating a personal relationship with him (*embah*; grandfather), a more general Javanese term of respect (*kiyai*), and *Sunan*, an Islamic title. At all levels also, God can be part of the explanation, increasingly so as the event under discussion becomes more general and public. Things like *istighotsah* (prayer meetings) are Islamic equivalents to traditional solutions, addressing non-local issues like calamities or end-of-year examinations.66 Individuals proclaim *bismillah* (in the name of God) as they leave the house or when they enter public transportation, both being moves from private into increasingly public spheres. Local *dhukun*, on the

---

65 Winchester 2003:125-6. See also Hammond (1996:202) in which major ecological problems become incorporated in mythology, which may be an ancient human mechanism for storing important information (see Shermer 2005).

66 But people also go to *dhukun* to obtain aid in passing their examinations (Wessing 1996:276-7).
other hand, address private issues like illness and bad luck.

An increasingly Islamizing Indonesia, then, demands a more Islamic commentary in the more general public context. Yet, as Woodward (1989) has shown, while Islam is a national and even global religion, its expression in Java is often a local one and, as we have seen, the Islamic narration often runs parallel with the non-Islamic one. The sacrificers at Porong wore Islamic symbols while addressing earth spirits, and *kirab in kampung* are said to at once thank God for a bountiful harvest and satisfy the demands of the community’s tutelary spirit. In rituals asking for rain, offerings are made to this tutelary spirit, who is said to function as an intermediary to God. Household spirits are venerated at *magrib* (dusk), the time of the evening prayer, with the aim of asking their blessing as well as that of the Prophet Muhammad (Wessing 2006a:50, 63). The mixture is, indeed, most visible at the local community and household, and individual levels where, as Sutarto (2008:26) points out, the traditions of pilgrimages to graves and reverence to local spiritual leaders are part of the local culture and are accepted as part of Islam. Individually a person may have gone on the hajj to Mecca, and yet actively practise Javanese spiritual exercises, even with the aim of becoming closer to God: there is thought to be little difference between the teachings of Islam and those of other beliefs.67

This concurs with the findings of Rato (1992:69) in Madura, where the spirit of a grave was perceived to merge with the local tutelary spirit and eventually with God. As was also shown in Wessing (2006a), the community’s founder merges with the tutelary spirit, and ancestors merge with the founder, while all eventually merge with God, who is the centre of everything.

This proposition was confirmed by an Osing housewife in her 40s, who pointed out that ‘spirits, *dewa* (gods), and *Tuhan* (God) are actually all the same, they are only different words. Actually, the ancestors (*leluhur*) are a kind of gods as well’.68 However, she continued, this does not mean that God and the ancestors are identical. ‘It is just that in remembering one’s parents one also almost automatically remembers God. God is the source (*asal*) and one’s ancestors, one’s own *asal*, return to God.’ The unity expressed by my and others’ informants, then, is a categorial one. Ancestors, various spirits, and God are united in a single category, because all are seen to come from God, at

67 Pamungkas 2007:7. All these are seen as sources of spiritual power (*kasekten*) (Anderson 1972). Similarly, the Shan of mainland Southeast Asia attempt to access spiritual power through amulets, tattoos, the Buddha, and other sources (Tannenbaum 1987:760).

68 Beatty 1999:167. Poensen (1864:232, note 60) also noted this phenomenon. See also Riboet Darmosoetopo (1983-84:117).
least within the cosmology that is dominant today.\footnote{Syeh Siti Jenar’s statement that in religious ecstasy man can become one with God can be understood in the same way (compare Sholikhin 2008).}

Yet being members of a single category does not make them identical. Rather, the category is polythetic, all members having something in common with some other members while not necessarily having anything in common with all the members (Needham 1979:65). It is the category that is appealed to, the members of which telescope into each other, and rather than being mutual substitutions, the appeal is ‘to whom it may concern’,\footnote{This felicitous characterization was suggested to me by Gerald Sullivan. I would also like to thank him for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.} the appropriate choice being determined by the nature of the emergency and the social context: highly powered ones at times of great need and lesser ones at less pressing times. As Aryanti (2007:122) writes, people ‘give thanks to Sacred Powers’ and ‘ask for guidance from their ancestors’, in which God and the ancestors are combined in the category of sacred powers. Thus, when reports state that a ritual expresses thanks to the Almighty (usually God) for a good harvest this is indeed what is meant, even though the Almighty subsumes other, local and more immediately visible foci for thanksgiving.

Conclusion

The reality created by these narrations of calamities, then, is not a unitary one. Rather, the stories reflect socio-political levels as well as both individual and community orientations vis-à-vis Islam. The latter often depends on the dominant voice in the community: where this person or these persons are tolerant of a heterodox Islam, the orientation to non-Islamic beliefs will tend to be stronger than it is in places where more orthodox views predominate – and even the latter are not always in agreement about details of their belief, saying that this or that person or movement is on the wrong path (kesasar).\footnote{Wahid 2006:5, 19. Religious movements’ reliance on the absolute truth of their sacred texts, in combination with the authority of the movement’s leaders leads to circular arguments in which the movement’s followers end up talking just among themselves; adherents of other persuasions are wrong by definition. This ‘purity’ of belief, especially at the level of national religious organization, often results in there being little understanding of the concerns faced by local branches, making it difficult for the latter to address local matters (see also Mulkhan 2002:77).}

In addition there is the ‘modern’ voice of science, although as Tsing (2005:122) has shown, this voice is not a unitary one either. In any case, participation in the ‘tale’ of modernity does not preclude simultaneous participation in other models of reality. A family of schoolteachers in Jember that owns
a late-model automobile, two motorcycles, and subscribes to cable television nevertheless engaged a *dhukun* when their grandchild was seriously ill. Similarly, Tsing (2005:136) reports that during a crisis situation, cosmopolitan university students, who had earlier scoffed at the efforts of *dhukun*, began to lean toward acceptance of these traditional practices as the crisis deepened.

Nor is there unanimity about the spirits and their role in daily life, even where non-Islamic beliefs are tolerated. Some scorn them, echoing Pemberton’s (1994:237) informant that (evil) spirits are nothing but the flapping of one’s neighbours’ tongues, while others quietly bring them offerings and hope for their protection. Even pious Muslims may retain a belief in *jim* (genies), which are said to have been created by God out of fire. Whichever position a person holds, he or she is implicitly engaged in a continual discussion about Islam, spirits and ‘science’ with both neighbours and persons in the wider environment: their various narrations define a range of realities that are not totally mutually exclusive, and range from traditional Javanese conceptions, to varying degrees of mixture with Islam, to purist Islamic ones.

We see then that, like the communities constituted by the tales told by the East Javanese *Homo narrans* (Fischer 1987:xi; Niles 1999:3, 8), understanding of the calamities that strike the participants in these communities is also constructed in such a way as to reflect both their scope and the possible cosmologies in terms of which they are to be understood. This leads to numerous stories, the predominance or perceived ‘truth’ of which depends on the status of the teller and the social context in which it is told. In the view of the aforementioned informant, because of the categorial unity of the entities invoked, the stories are all essentially true. The one chosen is a matter of preference and context.

**Acknowledgement**

I want to thank Prof. Dr. Akhmad Hsusayori of the Universitas Jember (Pasca Sarjana) for facilitating my stay in East Java.

72 Most of Geertz’s informants believed in *dhukun* generally, though opinion about specific *dhukun* might be divided. The *dhukun* themselves believed in their own skills (Geertz 1977:148).

**References**

Porous boundaries

Abi and Ila
Ais
Ais and Yul
Akkeren, Philip van
Alwie, Taufik and Paulus Winarto
Anderson, Benedict R. O’G.
Anoegrajekti, Novi
Ant
Aro
Aryanti, Dani
Bakels, Jet
2000  Het verbond met de tijger; Visies op mensenetende dieren in Kerinci, Sumatra. Leiden: Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Universiteit Leiden. [CNWS Publications 93.]
Barendregt, Bart
Barrau, Jacques
Barth, Frederik
Beatty, Andrew
Berg, L.W.C. van den
Bie, H.C.H. de
Brede Kristensen, W.

Bruner, Jerome

Crowther, Prudence (ed.)

DeBernardi, Jean
2006 The way that lives in the heart; Chinese popular religion and spirit mediums in Penang, Malaysia. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Djunaidi, Rusli

Douglas, Mary

Dreezens-Fuhrke, Joyce

Dvorak, John

Echols, John M. and Hassan Shadily

Effendy, Bisri and Novi Anoegrajati

Eringa, F.S.

Ery
2005 ‘Rame-rame buat barikan tolak tsunami’, Surya 19(86), 8 February.

Ery et al.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E.


Fisher, Walter R.
1987 Human communication as narrative; Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Geertz, Clifford


Hanks, Jane Richardson 1963 *Maternity and its rituals in Bang Chan*. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University. [Southeast Asia Program 51.]


Heyne, K. 1927 *De nuttige planten van Nederlandsch Indië*. Buitenzorg: Departement van Landbouw, Nijverheid en Handel in Nederlandsch-Indië.


Hudijono, Anwar 1990 ‘Akan lahir pemimpin dari Jawa Timur?’ *Surya* 4(97) 11.

Ido 2008 ‘Dituduh nyantet, dihajar tetangga’, *Jawa Pos (Radar Jember)*, 12 May.

Ishom, Barid 2007 ‘Air mendadak panas dan keluarkan asap tebal’, *Jawa Pos (Radar Jember)*, 4 December.

Ito 2005 ‘Tunjukkan tanda-tanda ganguan jiwa’, *Bernas Jogja* 59(60), 16 January.

Jonge, Huub de 2008 ‘Patriotism and religion; Pilgrimages to Soekarno’s grave’, in: Peter Jan Margry (ed.), *Shrines and pilgrimages in the modern world; New itineraries into the sacred*, pp. 95-120. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.


Robert Wessing

Kern, R.A.

Kleinman, Arthur

Koentjaraningrat

Koesnoen, Mas

Korn, V.E.

Kristanto, Nurdien H.

Kroes, Gerco
2002 *Same hair different hearts; Semai identity in a Malay context; An analysis of ideas and practices concerning health and illness.* Leiden: Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS).

Kusnadi

Laderman, Carol
1991 *Taming the wind of desire; Psychology, medicine and aesthetics in Malay shamanistic performance.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Laksono, P.M.

Lapian, A.B.

Lehman, F.K.


Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel
1985 *Montaillou; Een ketters dorp in de Pyreneëën* 1294-1324. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Liu, Kam-biu
Porous boundaries

McNeely, Jeffrey A. and Paul S. Wachtel
1988 *Soul of the tiger; Searching for nature’s answers in exotic Southeast Asia*. New York: Doubleday.

Manan, Abdul, Imam Sumaatmadja and Veven Sp Wardhana

Marshall, Andrew

May

Mulkhan, Abdul Munir

Needham, Rodney
1979 *Symbolic classification*. Santa Monica: Goodyear Publishing Company. [Goodyear Perspectives in Anthropology.]

Niles, John D.

Ong, Aihwa

Ossenbruggen, F.D.E. van

Pamungkas, Ki Ageng

Paranavitana, S.

Pemberton, John

Pigeaud, Th. G. Th.

Pleyte, C.M.

Poensen, C.

Rato, Dominikus
1991 *Prahu Madura; Ritual pembuatan dan simbolisme hiasannya; Studi kasus di Puger dan Besuki*. Jember: Bidang Kajian Madura, Universitas Jember. [Seri Kertas Kerja 14.]

Downloaded from Brill.com 10/15/2023 12:39:08PM
via Open Access. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC 3.0)
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0
1992 *Buju’ dan asta; Persepsi masyarakat Madura Sumenep terhadap kuburan kemat*. Jember: Bidang Kajian Madura, Universitas Jember. [Seri Kertas Kerja 18.]


Rid 2008 ‘Kumpul kebo, guru SD digerebek’, *Jawa Pos (Radar Jember)*, 13 February.

Rie 2006 ‘Kami tidak takut lagi’, *Surya* 20(130), 24 March.

Rie et al. 2006 ‘Permainan intelijen parapsikologi?’, *Surya* 20(129), 23 March.


Sandick, R.A. van 1890 *In het rijk van Vulcaan; De uitbarsting van Krakatau en hare gevolgen*. Zutphen: Thieme.


Sloot, Rob 1998 ‘Moorden op Java politiek geïnspireerd’, *De Telegraaf*, 3 November.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 1963 *The meaning and end of religion; A new approach to the religious traditions of mankind*. New York: Macmillan.


Sukanda, Ukon Furkon
Sutarto, Ayu
Tambiah, S.J.
Tannenbaum, Nicola
Tim Penyusun Kamus
Triyoga, Lucas Sasongko
Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt
Tuchman, Barbara W.
Vid
Voltaire
Wahid, Abdurrahman
Wed and Ais
Wessing, Robert
1997a ‘Nyai Roro Kidul in Puger; Local applications of a myth’, Archipel 53:97-120.
2001 ‘Telling the landscape; Place and meaning in Sunda (West Java)’, Mous- sons 4:33-61.
2002 ‘Shifting boundaries; Cosmological discourse in Java’, in: Coen Holtzappel, Martin Sanders and Milan Titus (eds), Riding a tiger; Dilemmas of integration and decentralization in Indonesia, pp. 162-80. Amsterdam: Rozenberg.
2003a ‘The Kraton-city and the realm; Sources and movement of power in Java’, in: Peter Nas, Gerard Persoon and Rivke Jaffe (eds), Framing Indonesian realities; Essays in symbolic anthropology in honour of Reimar Schefold, pp. 199-250. Leiden: KITLV Press. [Verhandelingen 209.]


2006a ‘A community of spirits; People, ancestors, and nature spirits in Java’, Crossroads 18-1:111-111.


2006c ‘Homo narrans in East Java; Regional myths and local concerns’, Asian Folklore Studies 65-1:45-68.


Wessing, Robert and Bart Barendregt 2005 ‘Tending the spirit’s shrine; Kanekes and pajajaran in West Java’, Mous-sons 8:3-26.


Winchester, Simon 2003 Krakatoa; The day the world exploded, 27 August 1883. London: Viking.

