

***Lontar Yusup* - the adoption of a popular Islamic poem in Indonesia - reminiscences from the trip to Banyuwangi in East Java**

Karolina Agnieszka Dobosz

Reviewer: Aekanu Hariyono

“Mr. Bernard, I presume?” – asked secretive men at the door of a cigarette smoke filled room. We came in and sat with confusion. Our host, Aekanu Hariyono – head of promotion and information service in Banyuwangi – explained to us who was Mr. Bernard. In the same village since 1979, Bernard Arps¹ has conducted a total of four years of fieldwork in Indonesia, principally in Surakarta and Yogyakarta in central Java, Cilacap on the south coast, and here in Banyuwangi. My travelling companion looked like Mr. Arps, they say. This was the beginning of my adventure with the community of the Kemiren Countryside, Glagah District in Banyuwangi Sub-Province. That night I was observing the ritual called *Macaan*² – traditional singing of the Yusuf story.

That Tuesday evening we came to the village called Kemiren driven on motorbikes by Mister Hariyono and his student. We were invited to a cottage made entirely of wood and without nails or

¹ Bernard Arps is a professor of Indonesian and Javanese Language and Culture at Leiden University.

² It is called *Macaan* in Osingnese, *Mamacah* in Madurese, *Macapatan* in Mataramanese (Kulonon).

cement. We crossed the front veranda to the room with threshing floor where about twelve men had been prepared to start the ritual. It was around 8 or 8.30 p.m. It was obvious that the ceremony was strictly for men, but the food preparation falls upon the women of the family. I entered the kitchen and found few women bustled around the dishes. They were cheerful and very hearty. In a specific moment of the reading session each guest received a cup of coffee and a banana-leaf dish. There was something mystical in this gathering. Instead of being a woman I was admitted to participate in this intriguing observance. Swayed by this fragrant memoir I will try to elucidate some aspects of the cultural history of *Macaan* in Kemiren.

People of Kemiren

The people who live in Kemiren are the Osing. They are one of the three minority ethnic groups still surviving in Eastern Java. The others, recognized by Banyuwangi regency, are Javanese and Madurese. The Osing are mostly adherents of *abangan (agami jawi)*³ Islam, although there are some who follow Hinduism and Christianity. *Abangan* people adopted an animist worldview in dealing with the divine world. They believe in ancestor spirits and ghosts and respect them as much as the existence of God himself. They also disregard formal rituals, such as praying 5 times a day, attending mosque, and going on pilgrimage to Mecca.

Tracing Osing cultural history shows the typical quality of the Javanese mystical tradition - its syncretism. In the course of its history it absorbed all the religious traditions that reached Java and gave it its own interpretation. So the term *abangan* popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to the rural Javanese Muslims whose beliefs are blended with animist and Hindu-Buddhist tradition. They follow the local system of beliefs, called *adat*. It stems from an ancient belief, the *kejawen*. This reminds us that the original religion

³ Geertz, Clifford. *The Religion of Java*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960, p.11

of Java was animistic. The prevailing belief was in different powers, nature-spirits and souls of the deceased hidden in the unseen world, still seen in Javanese folklore. Then, in the 5th century Hinduism was introduced in Java. One thousand years later it was followed by Islam, which was adapted to suit the existing Hindu and animistic elements. As I inquired later after the story I heard in Kemiren cottage, it played a significant role in the official conversion of the community to Islam.

The adoption of the Lontar Yusup in Banyuwangi

The *Lontar Yusup*⁴ or *Sěrat*⁵ *Yusuf* read during *Macaan* is a narrative poem containing the life-story of the Islamic prophet Yusuf, known as Yusup in Javanese. It is sung without instrumental accompaniment from a paper manuscript in Perso-Arabic script. It teaches about reality, humanity and the consequences of closeness to God⁶. But in seventeenth century version of the poem God is named with pre-Islamic Javanese names rather than Allah.

This narrative, originally a Middle Eastern poem about Yusuf, is one of the most popular Javanese works of literature - West, Central and East Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok was and still is within the scope of Yusuf's story influence. This shows that not only Indian literatures have influenced Javanese, but also Persian and Arabic tales, often via Malay⁷ adaptations or translations, and have been thoroughly domesticated here.

Sěrat Yusuf, based on the Quranic story of Joseph in Egypt, in the Javanese version becomes a poetic and a bit lengthy tale of beauty and piety⁸. Some scholars discerns that, with regard to his

⁴ The story of Yusup in Javanese is found in a variety of versions, written most likely on *lontar* palm leaves – so it is called The *Lontar Yusuf*.

⁵ Javanese word *sěrat* means the book or the story.

⁶ On the base of interview with one of Kemiren people carried out by Aekanu Hariyono: *Reciting the story of Yoseph*.

⁷ Arps, Bernard, *Looking in Odd Mirrors: the Java Sea*, Leiden, 1992, p.120

⁸ Ricklefs, Merle C., *Islamising Java : The Long Shadow of Sultan Agung*, p.475
[online:] http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/arch_0044-

emphasized physical attractiveness, the character of Yusup parallels non-Islamic Javanese heroes such as Prince Panji and Prince Arjuna – both featured prominently in literature and theatre. Probably this resemblance has been important for his popularity in this region. Certain is the role of this mythical and legendary text in the Islamization of Java. The motif of Yusup's beauty is not a Javanese modification but referred to Quranic depiction. In fact, he is known as the epitome of male beauty throughout the Muslim world. The *Lontar Yusup*, where the Yusup's handsomeness is repeatedly emphasized, is often considered as a medium to ask for physical beauty.⁹

Some characterize the Yusup poem as a romance, but closer reading of the Javanese text shows it was written with instructional, even prerogative intentions. It is founded on the divine origins of the Yusup tale. There are frequent references to parallels between events in the narration and history of Islam. The main story is also a point of reference to fairly basic, ethical and doctrinal message. For example, this poem stresses the ability of God to destroy idols, the practice of Yusup to convert people to Islam before he helps them, Yusup's closeness to God and its exemplariness. And the most important in that matter, the listeners are frequently urged to heed the message of these asides. This provokes the idea that the story was intentionally rendered into Javanese to spread and reinforce knowledge of Islam.

Ritual singing sessions – *Mocoan Lontar Yusup*

Geertz's thesis of Javanese religious syncretism assumes that Javanese people choose to follow an "indigenous" belief inherited

8613_1998_num_56_1_3503?luceneQuery=%2B%28authorId%3Apersee_156946+authorId%3A%22auteur+arch_328%22%29&words=persee_156946&words=auteur arch_328, access: 15.09.10

⁹ Behrend, Tim, *Textual Gateways: The Javanese Manuscript Tradition*. [In:] Ann Kumar and John H. McGlynn, eds., *Illuminations: the writing traditions of Indonesia*, New York and Tokyo, p.175

from their ancestors rather than fully convert to an “alien” one imported from a distant place. So they use this, meant as instructional, poem in a number of ritual acts, like *Macaan* in Kemiren.

These ritual reading sessions are considered as a way of asking for Yusup’s *supa’at*, which is a meditation with God. For this reason they take place in the framework of vigils called *melekan*. *Melekan* are held for occasions like various rites the passage, annual village cleansing or different types of purification. When I was visiting Kemiren *Macaan* fell on a circumcision of two local boys.

Let’s get back to this evening when I was observing the *Macaan*. During the ritual the *Lontar Yusup* was read as usual from beginning to end in a whole night. The Banyuwangi version contains about 35,000 syllables and its reading takes seven hours, including two short intervals. As I mentioned before, it started around 8 p.m. That night I couldn’t have understand a single word from what I have heard. So I use accounts made by Bernard Arps to retrace a sequence of events of that night.

The participants or members of the reading association recite or sing in turns from the manuscript, which is passed around the circle of reciters on a pillow. They start with the singing of the first two stanzas on a special melody, what they concluded with an Arabic prayer. After that the text is sung without a break up to the point where the king Jiyan of Kudus agree to become a convert to Islam¹⁰. It is described in a stanza called *suba-suba* what means ‘welcome’ or ‘reception’. That was followed by an interval in which coffee and banana cakes are served, what happened around 10.30 to 11 p.m. After a while the reading was continued for about an hour, when it reached another specific stanza. Here the bridal bed of Jaleha and the king of Mesir (Egypt) was described. At midnight someone from the gathering prepared *banyu arum*, a purifying ‘fragrant water’. It is made of flower petals which are put in water from a carafe that had been placed among a set of offerings. So it smelled fragrant. I think there must be some link between names *banyuarum* and *Banyuwangi*, because the meaning is the same - *banyu* means ‘water’

¹⁰ This happened before Yusup arrive in Mesir (Egypt) with a merchant who buys him from his brother.

and the word for 'fragrant' are both *arum* and *wangi*. Then four stanzas were sung, but since the first word of the third stanza the following part of reading session is called *arum-arum* – 'fragrances'. The bowl of water with flower petals was passed around and all drank some of it. The canto were finished when the water was taken out of the room. After a second interval the reading was resumed. Around 3.30 a.m. it came to an end. It always must be finished before daybreak. The story is concluded with at point where Yusup becomes king of Mesir. At the end, the first two stanzas of the poem were sung again and finished off with an Arabic prayer and *selametan* – a communal feast, symbolizing the social unity of those participating in it.

Sometimes the reading is accompanied by the practice of *ngugem* – literally "to put one's trust in someone or something". It is a kind of bibliomancy in which answers for questions or problems solutions are found in the text. The person who wants a question answered places at random some money in the manuscript. The manuscript is opened and the passage on which the money is found is interpreted in reference to the problem.

Javanese poetic construction

I asked about the language of the recitation. Mr Aekanu told me it is called the *Kawi Language*. It stems from the Sanskrit word *kavi* which means 'poet'. It is a literary and prose language on the islands of Java, Bali, and Lombok. It originates from an 'Old Javanese' written in Java between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. *Kawi* is the ancestor language of Modern Javanese. An etymology attached to *Kawi* is *Kawitan* – the beginning and the *tembung kawitan* means primordial words. Recitation of Yusuf poem sounds like a set of songs. It is cast in the so-called *tembang cilik* verse forms, where *tembang* are both poems and songs. Mr Aekanu listed eleven types of *tembangs*, which have different characterizations as follows:

<i>Tembang:</i>	Characterization:
<i>Dhandang gula</i>	charming, captivation and flexible
<i>Sinom</i>	friendly, sociable, crisp, from <i>si enom</i> 'the young one'
<i>Pangkur</i>	angry, annoyed, filled with graveness
<i>Asmarandana</i>	captivated, amorous, grave but caused by lovesickness
<i>Durma</i>	fierce, surging, suitable for expression of anger
<i>Kinanthi</i>	pleased, affectionate, loving
<i>Mijil</i>	sweet, grave but filled with relief
<i>Pucung</i>	frivolous, coaxing by making joke, without tension
<i>Mas Kumambang</i>	deploring, very sad
<i>Gambuh</i>	warm hearted, humorous, funny
<i>Megatruh</i>	sorrowful and despairing, sad, regretful

Conclusion

As people travel all around the world they follow the thought scent. The cultural patterns may be traced by them only if they study not only the text but also contexts. One night's observation gave me an access to tangled web of cultural circumstances connected with the adoption in Java of a story stemming from the Middle East. For me, inquiring into the history of the adoption of the Yusup poem in Banyuwangi unveiled at least a part of Javanese culture jigsaw puzzle.

Bibliography:

- Arps B., *Looking in Odd Mirrors: the Java Sea*, Leiden, 1992
- Behrend T., *Textual Gateways: The Javanese Manuscript Tradition*.
[In:] Kumar A. and McGlynn J. H., eds., *Illuminations: the writing traditions of Indonesia*, New York and Tokyo
- Geertz C., *The Religion of Java*, Chicago, 1976
- Ricklefs M. C., *Islamising Java : The Long Shadow of Sultan Agung*,
[online:]
http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/arch_0044-8613_1998_num_56_1_3503?luceneQuery=%2B%28authorId%3Apersee_156946+authorId%3A%22auteur+arch_328%22%29&words=persee_156946&words=auteur+arch_328, access: 15.09.10