From Cosmogony to Exorcism in a Javanese Genesis. The Spilt Seed, Stephen C. Headley

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A cosmology is at basis a description of a perception of order, and one basic idea of the cosmology of the Javanese is that as long as this order is maintained, all will be well, on both the levels of society and the individual. Yet, the Javanese realize that things can and do go awry and that everyone thus may need to have things put right. The ritual used to attempt this is a ruwatan (exorcism), which in its common form involves the presentation of the myth Murwa Kala, the Birth of Kala. This myth in its many and varied incarnations is the subject of this book. Stephen Headley considers some forty versions of it, the earliest dating back to ca. 1670 CE. These include full-fledged wayang presentations, as well as magical formulae used by shamans in their cures. Some show clear influence of Islam, while in others this is less obvious, or perhaps even lacking.

After an introductory chapter describing the myths and the methods of their presentation, the book is divided into two parts. The first (chapters 2-4) looks at the interconnection between the myth and the ritual related to it. In Chapter 2, a ruwatan from 1983 is translated in full and illustrated with drawings of the main characters involved as these appear in the wayang presentation. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a comparison of this presentation with three other interpretations. Chapter 4 takes the matter further afield and considers exorcisms in which the myth is used, but without wayang accompaniment. The second part (chapters 5-7) considers the relationship between cosmic order and purification, exploring such things as cosmogony, the notion of impurity, and Javanese cosmology, as well as the relation of the Murwa Kala myth to other Javanese mythologies.

A number of themes arise throughout the study, and rather than dealing with each chapter individually, I will address these here. The first theme is origins. As Headley points out, the Birth of Kala myth is about the creation of the world. It seems, however, that something quickly went rather wrong when the god Guru spilt his seed inappropriately, a disorderly act through which ferocious Kala came into being. The Kala myth, then, first of all involves the realm of the gods, the upper and under worlds. The actions of the gods, however, soon come to involve the Earth, as Guru tells his misbegotten son, Kala, that various categories of people will henceforth be his proper food. Although at first sight this appears to be a selective list, on closer examination it includes everyone, and all may thus be in need of purification (pp. 158, 166). On Earth, then, the action moves first to an ideal village, and then to a real place, the location of the exorcism, and the persons for whom it is being staged. Their problems are commonly cast as a banishing of “evil” (pp. 6, 85), which is, however, a subjective notion as Kala is not just evil. Rather, he has two faces, as do his father (p. 108) and mother (Uma/Durga; p. 92). Even the seed itself shares this feature (p. 153). Rather than evil, it is thus perhaps more appropriate to see this as a setting right of the disorder within which people’s lives may go wrong. The way to do this is to start over and return to the origins (p. 113), where lay the purity and order that the Javanese feel are essential to wellbeing (p. 156).

The way back to the beginning is through words, the second theme. Words are a powerful
force in Java. When a child is born, it immediately hears the confession of faith and an admonition to obey its elders, and at death the person’s spirit receives words of advice for the journey to the afterlife. The cosmos was spoken into existence (p. 149) in Javanese as well as in Islamic thought (pp. 115, 123, 151), although it is not clear to me to what extent these can be separated here. The human body is said to have been created by reciting the Javanese alphabet forward, and not surprisingly, therefore, returning to a person’s or the world’s origin involves the backward recitation of this alphabet (pp. 90, 157).

The secret of the origin of the world, and especially of Kala, lies in a set of mantras that describe these events. Guru wrote these mantras upon Kala’s body when he assigned him the human race as his prey, and it is only by reciting these mantras that Kala can be defeated. It is interesting, Headley notes, that even though they are the opening portion of the myth, these mantras are only recited at the end of the wayang presentation. The question that arises here, then, is one of priority, namely, can the mantras be effective without the wayang presentation? The answer to this question is yes, because, as is clear from Headley description of them, the presentations set the scene for the actual purification, which lies in the mantras. Uttering them first would negate the reason for the purification, which lies in the mantras. Uttering presentations set the scene for the actual purification. Through the telling of the tale, the subject of the ritual is “returned” to the center of presentation. Through the telling of the tale, the subject of the ritual is “returned” to the center of creation, now located on the wayang stage. This is where past and present, here and there, meet (p. 141). I wonder here, parenthetically, about using the words “performance” and “play” in connection with wayang, as is done throughout the book. I prefer the word “presentation,” since the exercise involves a “making present” of all involved, gods, Kala, the victims, in order for things to be set right.

That the mantras are also effective without the wayang is clear from other contexts in which they are used. They are used at royal offerings, recited by village healers, sung at royal births, and also as lullabies (pp. vi, vii, 126, 143), though lullaby here should not, of course, be understood in the Western sense. While the child may fall asleep to them, their purpose is to create an envelop of sound within which the baby will be safe (p. 143). The sound, therefore, creates the protection, which is also why all those who attend and thus hear the wayang presentation may benefit from it (p. 95).

Given the importance of the mantras, one might expect them to be the same everywhere, which is not the case. Both the geographical dispersion of the myth – Headley speculates on connections with Austronesian mythology (p. 20) – and its age have led to variations in both the Kala story and the crucial mantras, leading to idiosyncratic variants (p. 102). What, Headley asks (p. 129), “establishes the limits for a canon of performance?” While there are structural similarities in parts of the presentation, other parts vary, and when used by those less skilled, the whole event may be reduced to some bare essentials (p. 130) while still remaining a ritual purification (p. 129). In the end, this may just be a question of rasa: If it feels and seems right, it can be believed in.

What this comes down to, then, is the skill and believability of the ritual specialist, the one who speaks the words that effect the return to the origin. This is the third theme. In uttering the mantras, the presenter of the wayang, the dhalang (or the healer, dhukun) speaks with the voice of a god, describing what is going to happen (pp. 134, 154) and in so doing, one expects, makes it happen, since classificatorily, the dhalang is equivalent to, though not identical with, the god Guru. He is called “Speaking the World” (pp. 74, 83, 98), because he can present the origin myth and recite the mantras, which is Guru’s role. In so doing, he has power over the event of (re)creation. Guru and the dhalang are both healers (p. 101) and, in a sense, both Kala and his victims need to be healed. It was, after all, Guru who started the problem with his disorderly sexual behavior. Since Kala cannot read the mantras written on his body, he cannot heal himself, and in any case, only Guru may read them (p. 95). This gives Guru and the dhalang power over both Kala and the victims (pp. 57, 79, 95): To know someone’s or something’s origin gives one power over that person or entity (pp. 21, 133).

However, while participating in the purification, the gods are also watching themselves (pp. 68-69), being their own “essential audience,” as A.L.
Becker once put it, and thus the gods and the people, including the dhalang, the victim(s), and the audience, all participate in the ritual. Indeed, as Headley points out (p. 148), the dhalang cannot do without an audience, and the audience “requires a putative witness to the events which the myth describes.” Headley notes here that even a non-responding “other” (e.g., the gods?) constitutes an audience, but I wonder whether such a non-responding other is needed, since the dhalang is Guru, who is therefore present and participates, along with everyone, in this (re)creation. All those present witness the social reality of the purification, giving it the validity and healing power that it needs.

In the final chapter, Headley attempts to bring the three themes together in a Javanese cosmology, tying them to wider mythologies and other elements of belief. Referring to the Javanese 4/5-classification system, he shows how there are parallels between the widespread belief in four birth siblings (dulur papat) and other categorially equivalent entities. He concludes that these birth siblings may be supportive friends as well as destructive enemies (p. 194), although, as Headley himself notes, this is not supported by the mythology (p. 204) or, in my own experience, by Javanese or Sundanese informants. As friends they are called kandha, which means “to tell or advice,” which is indeed proper behavior for protecting siblings. While the dulur papat may act up when they feel ignored, making a baby a bit colicky, they are never said to be destructive forces in the sense of Kala. It is of course true that Kala’s own birth siblings aid him in seeking out his prey (p. 199), but in this they only help Kala, as is proper, and they are not the victim’s own birth siblings, which are, indeed, unique (pp. 193-194). In fact, the only link between Kala’s birth siblings and every one else’s is their categorial co-incidence (pp. 203, 204), which makes them equivalent in some ways, but in no way identical.

The links with other mythologies, such as the Sri/Sedana rice myths and the tales and practices around the Queen of the Southern Ocean, while not incorrect, would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of these mythologies, although this might have taken the discussion too far afield and is perhaps best left for a separate publication. Also, the author’s reflections on the similarities and differences between the cosmologies of villagers and kings leave me with a number of questions. The two, indeed, share a cosmology, as Headley points out (p. 193), and I find it going a little too far to state that the palace was order while in the village only limited local custom prevailed (p. 197). The order of the kingdom, indeed, extended over a larger territory than local custom did, but one should not forget that some kingdoms started as local villages. Village custom, furthermore, is the basis for its local order, dependent on the approval or approbation of the founder’s spirit and the nature spirit with whom whom this founder made a pact. It seems, furthermore, a little extreme to say that Central Javanese peasants had no ancestors to venerate (p. 204), since in practice the inhabitants of rural hamlets were descended from the founder and, thus, their veneration was of both ancestral and nature spirits at the same time.

The coming of Islam has had some impact on all these beliefs, though more so in recent decades than before. It may have led, as Headley points out, to the emergence of a pan-Javanese identity as the Javanese began to see themselves as Muslims rather than inhabitants of scattered hamlets, each with its own spiritual panoply. Yet, quite often the person who brought Islam became identified as the founder, while the protective spirit became a jinn, and thus there was a great continuity with previous practices (p. 207). All this, however, has changed and is still changing very slowly because, as Headley notes, the “Javanese never lost their nostalgia for a more intimate cosmos.” In short, this book gives the reader much food for thought, not only about Javanese mythology, the wayang, and cosmology, but also about what it is to be a Javanese person within a cosmos so construed.


Par Laurence Husson

L’ouvrage en lui-même est imposant (621 pages) et, de ce fait, contraste d’emblée avec la multitude de courts essais parus sur l’histoire brûlante et déroulante – tant pour les observateurs étrangers que pour

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