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### **Aesthetics, Mysticism, and the Performing Arts in Postcolonial Indonesia**

HSTAS/SISSE 469, MW 1:30-3:20pm, Smith 306

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### **SYLLABUS**

This course has a twofold purpose: 1) to show Javanese aesthetics and mysticism as intricately connected interpretive systems with unique world-views and 2) to introduce students to the history and practice of Javanese systems of inner belief [mysticism or kebatinan] through a study of Javanese performing arts. Contemplative practices are part of most religious and spiritual traditions: this course explores their academic impact on the development of thought in the humanities and social sciences. The study of contemplative practices is a method to develop concentration, to deepen understanding, and to cultivate mindfulness. By studying Javanese contemplative practices as a unique interpretive system, we will see that philosophy, psychology, religion and aesthetics are as intertwined in Indonesian thought-worlds as they are in Euroamerican ones.

### **Background**

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world and has the largest Islamic population of any country in the world. There are more Muslims in Indonesia than in all of the Middle East. Yet Indonesian Islam is a mosaic that weaves together threads of local spiritual practices, village rituals, performing arts, and influences from India and the Middle East that have been percolating throughout the archipelago for over 800 years. On the island of Java, where over half of Indonesia's 200 million people live, oral tradition attributes the spread of Islam to nine sufisaints [practitioners of Islamic mystical traditions] who are believed to have brought Islam to Java. Scholars have long suggested that sufi practices combined with older Hindu-Buddhist beliefs to produce an eclectic religious tradition that was outside of the mainstream of orthodox Islam. But continued research on Islamic traditions has shown that the idea of "normative" Islamic practice may be outdated. Islamic beliefs and practices have combined with local traditions to produce unique religious systems in every part of the Islamic world.

Much of Java's early history was recorded in European languages by Dutch scholars who were part of the colonial apparatuses of the 19th and 20th centuries. The Dutch antipathy to Islam as a threat to colonial rule often makes it difficult to weed out fact from fiction in early Dutch descriptions of Javanese Islam. But certainly in the early 19th century

Islamic and Javanist practices were still intertwined; they would remain so over the next hundred years. Also in the early 19th century ideas of purifying Islam of the cultural accretions that obscured the true message of the Prophet began to reach Java from India and the Middle East. This would get stronger over the next century and result in the Islamic Reform movement of the early 20th century, as mystical Islam was displaced by more orthodox and scripturalist forms. But in the complex negotiations among Javanese who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Javanese who served the Dutch colonial regime, Javanese musicians and performers whose art drew upon rich traditions of Java's Indic past, and Javanese villagers who needed potent rituals to support the growth of crops, Islamic and local practices continued to blend, using beliefs in sacred amulets containing passages from the Qur'an, sacred trees where village spirits lived, and sacred graves of Islamic saints, believed to be efficacious for healing and fertility, to counter demands for adherence to the daily requirements of the syari'at [A. shari'ah], the outward expression of the faith.

The background of the spiritual groups [aliran kebatinan] that were born in Java in the 1930s and the 1940s is to be found in this brief history of Islam, as well as in the theosophical appreciation of earlier Indic religions that flourished in the first decades of the 20th century, and the Javanese opposition to the Dutch that would lead to the Indonesian revolution after World War II. Attempts to cast Javanese religion in a Hindu-Buddhist mold and to discount associations with Islam lasted into the 1980s. To understand the background of contemporary meditative practice in Java, one must study the older religious traditions that had a strong impact on the formation of Javanese identities. In this class we will follow the history and practice of one of the mystical groups born in the years just prior to the Indonesian revolution. It is called Sumarah [surrender] and ties together sufi, theosophical, and village mystical practices from Java.

Another route to understanding Javanese contemplative practices is to explore the ways in which mystical experience in Java is connected to the performing arts. In the early 1930s, as the spiritual groups were forming, Mangkunagara VII, ruler of the minor court in Solo, had already delivered his famous lecture that linked the ancient Javanese shadow theatre tradition to mystical practices. The study of Javanese shadow theatre, gamelan, dance, poetry, or batik eventually leads the student into the practice of Javanese meditation. Contemplative practices in Java are believed to enhance one's aesthetic powers. The best way to understand Javanese culture and its representations is to study the ways in which Indic, sufi, theosophical and revolutionary themes blended to produce styles of aesthetic and spiritual practice that are uniquely Javanese.

### **Course Methodology**

This course juxtaposes historical and experiential ways of understanding Javanese contemplative practice. How much can we learn from studying historical texts about Javanese meditation? How does an experiential introduction to Javanese contemplative practices enhance the understanding gained from historical analysis? Through a combination of reading, discussion, and an introduction to the practice of "relaxed" meditation, we will gain an appreciation for the ways in which meditation and its study can enrich our understanding of Javanese culture and history and, perhaps, have the potential to cultivate patience, compassion, and awareness in daily life.

### **Course Requirements and Readings** [books also on reserve at OUGL]

Maria Dermout, *The Ten Thousand Things* [photocopy of the novel at RAM'S]

Clifford Geertz, *Religion of Java*

Ben Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*

Laurie Sears, *Shadows of Empire*

Judith Becker, *Gamelan Stories* [for graduate students, optional for others]

Reading Packet available at RAM'S Copy Center on the Ave

Students are expected to participate actively in class discussion.

Reading assignments should be prepared for each class meeting, i.e. assignments for each week is for discussion in the following week of classes. Two short essays (3-4 double-spaced typed pages)--will be due in class in weeks 4 and 7--offering reflections on reading assignments, personal diaries, and class discussion. In week three, students will be expected to begin planning their final projects through individual meetings with the instructor. The final topic for the project will be approved by the instructor during weeks 6-7. Final projects will be presented in the last two weeks of class and written versions will be due on the last day of class on the 30th of May.

**Goals** To maximize participation, this course is being run with limited enrollment in an intensive seminar- type format. Students should prepare the readings conscientiously, take notes on it, ask questions of it, and think deeply about it, all in advance of class. Students should also be willing to participate in class exercises and to practice them when appropriate outside of class as well.

## **Grading**

The course grade will be calculated as follows:

Class participation 25%

Short essays 40% (20% each)

Final project 35%

Short essays should include the student's own personal reflections on the readings and class discussions. This can be presented in either more academic or more creative styles of writing. Students may choose to focus on a particular group of reading assignments but, in general, the essays should indicate a familiarity with all of the past few weeks' assigned readings.

Completed final projects will be due no later than the beginning of class on Wednesday the 30th of May. Projects will be graded on the basis of creativity, theoretical sophistication, and expression, in equal measure. The instructor will be happy to provide bibliographic and other advice. Students will be expected to meet with the instructor during weeks five and six of the quarter to approve topics and resolve any questions that may have arisen. Final projects may be planned and executed in collaboration with one or more other students. They may take the form of videos, dramatic productions, artworks or installations, short stories or essays. They may also take the form of a 10 page research proposal for a future project. The main point is that the projects comment upon the class readings and discussions in specific disciplinary ways.

It is vital that every student keep in a safe place a back-up copy of his/her short essays should the instructor's copy be lost, either on its way to the instructor or after being received by her. Receipt of a paper from a student constitutes an acknowledgment by the student that he or she has complied with this requirement, and has retained in a safe place an exact and complete copy of the paper for possible future use.

## **Course schedule**

### **Week One** Representations of Occident and Orient

In his noted book *Orientalism* [1978], Edward Said has discussed the ways in which the Orient has been represented in colonial and postcolonial scholarship, fiction, and other media. The East and Islam is presented as passive, sexualized, mysterious, corrupt, childish and decadent. In this first week of class, we will read a novel that presents the stereotypes of European, elite Asian, and non-elite Asian in clear focus. We will use this first week to uncover the ways in which we have been taught to accept stereotypical views of Java and Islam.

26 March Introductory Remarks: oral tradition in Java and Bali  
28 March Java, mysticism, and orientalism

Readings: Maria Dermout's *The Ten Thousand Things* [available as xerox copy at RAM's copy Center on the Ave and on reserve at OUGL]; Said selection from *Orientalism* [available in reading packet]

### **Week Two** Anthropology and Java I

This course will look at representations of Java in history, ethnography, and literature. In fiction we learn from the singular and the unverifiable whereas in history we try to quantify data and situate the archive. History is about acknowledging limits while literature is about stating claims. One way to describe the study of literature is to see it as a training ground for ethical reflection. Ethnography is about "being there" and "writing here" as Geertz has eloquently told us. But "culture," ethnography's subject, has been deconstructed in recent work in anthropology, history, and literary criticism. How can we put these various methodologies together in new and fruitful ways?

2 April Anthropology and Its Object

Film: Margaret Mead and Samoa

4 April Representing Java in ethnography and literature

Readings: Geertz, *Religion of Java*, pp. 1-7 and 121-224

### **Week Three** Anthropology and Java II

Geertz saw Javanese Islam as a thin glaze resting over older and more deeply rooted animist and Hindu-Buddhist traditions. But newer scholarship suggests that Javanese Islam may be more resilient than Geertz thought and still getting stronger. Geertz presented Javanese religion as a tripartite structure with animist, Islamic, and elite Hindu-Javanese parts to it. By reading his book against the grain, we can perhaps see how Javanese religion may appear quite different to its practitioners.

9 April Javanese Religious Histories

11 April The Javanese slametan in theory and practice

Readings: essay by Paul Stange [in reading packet or on reserve]; Geertz pp. 11-118

### **Week Four** A season for art; a season for agriculture

Javanese and Balinese beliefs about psychology and mysticism are intricately connected to their beliefs about the natural world. Rice--its planting, breeding, cooking, and eating--are all connected to various life-cycle rituals and celebrations. Java and Bali are home to some of the richest riceland in the world and rice plays an important role in story, song, and dance. This week we will look at the connections

among art, agriculture, and belief.

16 April Guest Lecture by Dr. Wolfgang Linser: Rice breeding, the rice goddess, and Javanese rice rituals

18 April Rice, Computers, and Ritual in Bali

Film: The Goddess and the Computer

Readings: selections from Stephen Lansing's *Priests and Programmers* [reading packet]; selections

from Vicki Baum's *Tale of Bali*

### **Week Five** Javanese Ramayana and Mahabharata Stories

This week we will explore the oral traditions of the Javanese and Balinese shadow theatres: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. We will look at the transmission of the stories from India to Java and Bali and some of the transformations the stories undergo as they move across the Indian Ocean. We will also look at the shadow puppets of Java and Bali through film and in-class presentation of a variety of puppets from Java.

23 April Oral traditions, performance traditions, written traditions

Film: *Master of the Shadows* [on a Balinese shadow puppeteer]

25 April Presentation of Javanese Shadow Puppets and the stories

Readings: Ben Anderson's *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese*; Claire Holt "The Wayang

World" [reading packet]

### **Week Six** Javanese Shadow Theatre, Islam, and Mysticism

Despite the fact that over 90% of Java's population is Islamic, shadow theatre based on Hindu Mahabharata stories continues to thrive in Java. This week we will look at the ways in which shadow theatre and Islam have co-existed in Java for centuries intertwining with beliefs in the spirit worlds of Java.

30 April Islam and Shadow Theatre

2 May Sacred Sites, Spirit Worlds, and Shadow Theatre

Readings: Paul Stange "Mystical Symbolism in Javanese Wayang Mythology";

Sears *Shadows of Empire* preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1

### **Week Seven** Dutch Colonialism, American Theosophy, and Javanese "Tradition"

After the Java War of 1825-1830, the Dutch began to take an interest in Javanese culture. Language institutes were set up where Dutch scholars, Bible translators, and administrators could study the Javanese language. The Dutch scholars began to realize that Java had an ancient oral and written culture connected to that of ancient India. Eager to

lead the Javanese away from Islam, and doubtful of whether the Javanese could be converted to Christianity, Dutch scholars and administrators promoted the study of Java's Indic culture. The heart of this culture was the shadow theatre.

7 May Dutch and Javanese Ideas of History

Film: Max Havelaar [selections]

9 May Theosophy and Javanese Culture

Readings: Shadows of Empire chapters 2-4; Mangkunagara VII "On the Wayang Kulit [Purwa] and its Symbolic and Mystical Elements" [reading packet]

**Week Eight** Shadow Theatre, Revolution, and Postcolonial Performance Styles

The Indonesian state became a reality at the end of 1949 after almost ten years of war and revolution. In the 1950s and 1960s, shadow theatre served as a vehicle for the various political ideas of the parliamentary and "Guided Democracy" periods of Indonesia's first president Soekarno. Soekarno presented many of his political ideas through the rhetoric of the shadow theatre; he even claimed to be a puppetmaster himself. This week we will look at the change from the Old to the New Order in Indonesia and the ways those changes were reflected in the world of the shadow theatre.

14 May Soekarno, Geertz, and Shadow Theatre

Film: Riding the Tiger, Part III

16 May Postcolonial Performance Styles

Readings: Geertz pp. 227-308; Shadows of Empire chapters 5-6

**Week Nine** Javanese Mysticism Reconsidered

This week we will evaluate the ways in which Javanese mysticism and performing arts have been presented in literature, scholarship, and film. We will consider the various ways in which readings, class discussions, and meditative practices have contributed to our understanding of Java's art and culture. We will also begin to see the various presentations of group projects that students have been working on throughout the quarter.

21 May Geertz, Stange, and Howe on Javanese mysticism

23 May Group projects

Readings: Geertz pp. 309-352, selections from David Howe and Paul Stange [reading packet]

**Week Ten** Aesthetics, Mysticism, and Performing Arts in Class

28 May MEMORIAL DAY HOLIDAY

30 May Group Projects and Concluding Thoughts

