

## Searching for Women in Trance: Attitudes of and towards the Female Performers of Jathilan Dance

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Published online: 30 July 2021

Cite this article (APA): Rapoport, E. (2021). Searching for women in trance: Attitudes of and towards the female performers of Jathilan dance. *Jurai Sembah*, 2(2), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.37134/juraisembah.vol2.2.1.2021>

### Abstract

*Jathilan* is one of the names of the traditional dance that has pre-Islamic animistic origins but still enjoys remarkable popularity in Javanese communities in Indonesia and abroad (including Malaysia and Singapore where it is better known as *kuda kepang*). The state of trance is considered to be the main attraction of the performance; dancers are believed to become possessed by the spirits which give them powers to demonstrate various feats of physical invulnerability. It can be generally perceived as a masculine practice, since the dancers ‘riding’ flat woven horse effigies represent soldiers or noble warriors of the past (*satria*), however lately more and more young women were joining the existing performing groups or even starting their own. The objectives of this paper are to reflect on the experience of these female performers, their backgrounds, beliefs and motivations; to consider the differentiation in understanding of male and female roles (in terms of spiritual strength and potency) in the tradition of Javanese spirit and magic beliefs (*kejawen*); to see, how the perception of these female performers by their audiences and their self-identification are formed in the conjuncture of local mysticism and understanding of gender norms prevalent in the society; to assess what kinds of mystical and mundane threats female performers should be more aware of in comparison to their male counterparts, and whether they truly break the barriers of gendered expectations or rather adjust their performing practice according to them.

*Keywords:* gender equality, jathilan, Javanese culture, kuda kepang, performing arts, spirit possession, women

### Introduction

*Kuda kepang* literally means ‘plaited horse’ as the horse effigies made of woven bamboo are the hallmark props of the performance. By this name the dance is better known in Malaysia and Singapore where it is still practiced in the communities of Javanese immigrants and their descendants, and represents a creative manifestation of their identity. However, in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (*Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta*—DIY) and neighboring regencies such as Klaten and Magelang in which I have been focusing most of my ethnographic fieldwork, the dance is better known by the name of *jathilan*. So, I will be referring to it this way when discussing my own findings and use ‘[Javanese] horse dances’ when speaking of the phenomenon in a broader sense.

While there could be certain (at times—significant) regional variations in costumes, music accompaniment, choreography and even explanations of the meaning and origin of the dance, central in all the versions is the state of trance achieved during the performance. These displays of the altered states of consciousness ranging from somnambulant movements to wild uncontrolled behavior—screams, shrieks, sudden collapses and seemingly impossible summersaults—combined with the feats of physical invulnerability (like eating glass or razor blades, playing with fire, enduring getting whipped, etc.) constitute the main attraction of the performance.

Dancers are free of pain or fear, or shame, for it is believed there are spirits acting through their bodies during the performance. So, from the etic perspective, the main feature of the horse dances can be defined as *possession trance* (Bourguignon, 1973, p. 12) as it involves explicit signs of the altered states of

consciousness (abnormal behavior, changed or uncontrolled bodily movements) and beliefs that the occurrence of trance is caused by the non-human agents entering humans' bodies. From the emic perspective, however, there is no terminological distinction between 'possession' and 'trance' and what occurs during the horse dance, depending on the geographic area or practitioner speaking can be called *kesurupan*, *mabuk* or *ndadi*. Since I am not aiming to discuss any instances of trance without possession or possession without trance, the words 'trance' and 'possession' would be further used interchangeably to signify one and the same phenomenon of possession trance.

In this paper, I am going to depart from a brief glance at the notions regarding possession, gender and power that can be found cross-culturally, followed by a look into the descriptions of the horse dances in general and female participation in them in particular, that can be found in the existing scholarly publications and, finally, focus in more detail on the situation with the female participation in *jathilan* that I have discovered through my own ethnographic fieldwork (based on participant observation and in-depth interviews) in the Special Region of Yogyakarta and delve into a few personal accounts of the local dancers and trance masters.

### Possession: Power or Weakness?

Among many possession and trance cults in various parts of the world, be that Africa, Central and South America or South Asia, the capacity or likelihood to enter this state might be considered as predominantly, if not exclusively female characteristic (e.g., Keller, 2002, p. 4; Schmidt, 2010, p. 98). Moreover, such possession can be employed (or further interpreted) as a tool to make up for a less advantageous position in a society, "play a significant part in the sex-war in traditional societies and cultures where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims" (Lewis, 2003, p. 26); thus, deeming possession as both prerogative and power of the weak. On the other hand, in many other belief systems there could be found notions about possession as a challenging and dangerous endeavor, so only those who are spiritually and otherwise strong can handle it (Guelden, 2017, p. 90). In the most extreme cases, possession might be considered not safe for both men and women, with such practices reserved exclusively for the individuals existing outside the normal gender dichotomy such as post-menopausal women (Andaya, 2018, p. 3) or transvestite priests (Becker, 2004, p. 102).

The notions regarding possession in Javanese culture, to certain extent, can be placed between these two extremes. It is generally perceived that people are more likely to be overcome by the spirit entities in a state of emotional distress (Geertz, 1960, p. 97) and thus experience involuntarily possession, which can also be caused by an overall lack of spiritual discipline (Ferzacca, 2002, p. 96; Geertz, 1960, p. 98). Even among *jathilan* practitioners there is an opinion that those who faster and deeper go into trance are the ones currently preoccupied with some daily-life troubles (Rapoport, 2018, p. 12). So, it is more typical for (at least, temporarily) emotionally or spiritually weakened individuals, though without any direct correlation with their biological sex or gender. At the same time, while there are specifically feminine genres of trance performances (e.g., *sintren*, *angguk*, *dolalak*), the horse dances themselves have some militaristic connotations, and can be interpreted as a display of a manly bravado of the warriors preparing for battle. Furthermore, *ilmu kebal*—the knowledge of invulnerability also has more to do with the masculine practices and invariably male characters though with a varying social standing and respectability, from *kyai*—Muslim community leaders and teachers to *warok* and *jago*—magically potent outlaws.

Most of the pre-Independence accounts (e.g., Inggris, 1923; Koentjaraningrat, 1990<sup>1</sup>) and archival photographs of the horse dances attest to no signs of female participation, but even back then it was not something completely unheard of. As early as in the 1930s, Pigeaud was already mentioning the existence of female performers (1938, p. 231). Descriptions of the more recent state of affairs can be found in a number of articles (Browne, 2003; Christensen, 2013; Foley, 1985; Hardwick, 2014; Hughes-Freeland, 2008a; Irianto, 2016; Kartomi, 1973; Marschall, 1995) and a few book chapters or subsections (e.g., Geertz, 1960, pp. 296-299; Kim, 2007, pp. 143-175; Keeler, 1987, pp. 99-102) and a number of Indonesian-language MA and PhD dissertations (e.g., Kuswarsantyo, 2013) which themselves rarely engage with the scholarship produced in other languages.

Remarkably, most of these sources do not provide any examples of female participation in the dance but also no reflection on why that might be so or whether and how could there be any exceptions. Occasionally, *jathilan* even gets mentioned as an example of an all-male dance, precisely to serve as an antithesis to some all-female traditional genres (Hughes-Freeland, 2008b, p. 160). More about women in the horse dances can be learned from the only two lengthy studies of the tradition. These are a monograph

by Victoria M. Clara van Groenendaal *Jaranan: The horse dance and trance in east Java* (2008) and MA thesis by David E. Mauricio *Jaranan of east Java: An ancient tradition in modern times* (2002), *jaranan* being another name of the dance most frequently used in that province.

Somehow Mauricio's interlocutors provided him with the strictest outlook on the matter of female participation:

Women are specifically prohibited from participation in the trance portion of a performance ... Due to the Javanese belief that there is a perceived danger to unborn and newborn children, women are not allowed to purposely enter any Jaranan trance. (p. 37-38)

Interestingly, no other source conveys the same view. Moreover, van Groenendaal who has performed her research in the same region as Mauricio and even a decade earlier<sup>2</sup> was able to observe female performers:

Although there were also female horse dancers, they could not become *gambuh* [trance master], according to my informants. The reason for this, they stated, was that women lack the necessary inner strength (*kakuwatan batin*) to grasp the requisite esoteric knowledge. (p. 29)

A practical reason why a woman is allegedly unable to acquire *ngelmu* [mystical knowledge] is that, in view of her many social obligations (domestic duties and child-rearing), she is not in a position to undergo the rigorous trials that are a precondition for the acquisition of such knowledge. (p. 38)

It is worth noting at this point, that trance during the horse dance and the subsequent release from it are achieved only with the assistance of this trance master figure—a person of esoteric learning but also some supernatural gift who is solely responsible for the contact with the unseen world during the performance. In Yogyakarta area, such person is most commonly referred to as a *pawang*.

At last, apart from the matters of danger or no-time-to-spare from domestic obligations, there could be also a view that women "may be deemed more refined and more self-controlled than men" (Hughes-Freeland, 2008b, p. 142). Which not as much presumes them not fit for the horse dance, as the horse dance not being a good fit for them. Still, my own field research has shown that in Yogyakarta and neighboring regencies of Klaten and Magelang there are female dancers, female *pawangs* (even though they are quite rare) and it is not uncommon for women in the audience to become possessed while watching a performance.

### **Jathilan: Girls Can Do That Too!**

Horse trance dances have been traditionally held during communal celebrations, most often of marriage and circumcision, and these still are the main occasions for the performances that take place in Javanese villages nowadays. But also, jathilan can be seen performed in a variety of cultural and touristic venues during city-wide or smaller locality festivals. Performances of the latter kind are usually shorter and include only one or two parts performed by a single group; at times, these might feature genuine trance but also could be reduced to mere choreographic displays void of explicit ritual elements. Such non-trance performances are often described as *festival jathilan* (Christensen, 2014, p. 99).

Standard structure of a village performance in and around DIY involves several parts (usually three or four) of dancing and trancing (resulting in subsequent exorcism) performed by the different dancers 'riding' horse effigies, at times accompanied by various masked characters, some of which are not expected to go into trance. Normally, there are several trance masters overseeing every part and performing exorcism in the end. One of the parts frequently features female dancers that can at times be taken care of by their own female *pawang*. Female dancers might be a part of a larger group or represent a small collective of their own which would be hired by an all-male group if female dancers are requested by the host.

Among 26 performances I have documented in Yogyakarta region in June-August 2017 and July-October 2018, 19 did feature female dancers, 17 of those did showcase female trance, while in two other cases female participants were performing as masked characters who are not expected to be possessed. Out of seven performances with no female participants only one was a typical long village performance of four parts. Apart from the female dancers, in four cases there were also female *pawangs* involved (twice they were working in pairs, two other times one female trance master performed alongside her male colleagues). Furthermore, as it is not uncommon for the spectators or musicians to become possessed during the performance (Christensen, 2014, p. 108, Kartomi, 1973, p. 172, Kim, 2007, p. 156, Mauricio, 2002, p. 35),

I have also observed three instances of young women from the audience going into trance. In one case, it resulted in the entranced woman joining the dance and receiving exorcism from a male *pawang* in the end.

In addition to this data, my analysis of the posters used to advertise performances online (mainly via *JPA Lover's* facebook group, precisely dedicated to the performances taking place in DIY with the occasional mentions of the events in Klaten and Magelang) reveals that in 170 out of 257 such announcements (66%) female participation was explicitly mentioned, while in many of the remaining 87 cases information about the number of parts and the kinds of participants involved (male, female or masked dancers) simply might not have been specified. Thus, even though female dancers never perform more than in one part, they are more frequently than not featured in the poster announcements.



Figure 1: Jathilan poster featuring female performers: Babak Putri—female part. (Source: *JPA Lover's* facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/121991931245322/>)

Nevertheless, active female involvement does not mean a complete absence of controversy. There is a sensitive issue of propriety of physical contact between male *pawangs* and female dancers (that would be discussed later). And even though none of my Javanese interlocutors spoke of any ‘supernatural’ threats that possession might pose, some still perceive wild entranced behavior as not entirely compatible with a feminine image, while connecting the role of *jathilan* dancer with the demonstration of strength, physical and spiritual alike, that women are not expected to possess or at least emphasize. From the hosts’ and spectators’ point of view, female dancers are primarily valued for their attractive looks. And, be that due to the appearances or social obligations, but, while there are middle-aged men performing *jathilan*, seeing more mature women in it would be extremely rare. Female dancers themselves, contrary to the aforementioned positions, indicate that their main drive and main pride lies in their ability to prove that they can do the same things as men. And both male and female performers share the same commitment to preserving their culture – the most commonly expressed motivation for joining a performing group (though its recurrence and almost identical formulation leaves some reasons to suspect the effects of the state cultural policies on how performers reflect on or at least publically explain their practice).



Figure 2: Three male *pawangs* of Kudho Puspito group simultaneously perform exorcism on a female dancer. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2018)

As for the female trance states, those actually mostly look different, less intense than the male ones. Typical trance during the male performance starts with the dancers falling on the ground, they may begin rolling over, shaking and yelling in more or less violent way. At some point, *pawangs* and their assistants usually help them to stand up again so the dance can continue but in a far more chaotic manner. Shrieking, rolling, even somersaulting may reappear at any moment, and the very procedure of exorcism is likely to be quite intense. Typical female trance is not exactly the same. Occasionally, dancers fall, but they can as well merely sit down or kneel. They rarely perform feats (like eating glass or getting whipped, although exceptions are possible) and continue dancing in a changed yet still rather reserved manner, which can be described as *somnambulant trance* (a term used by Foley, 1985, p. 39) in regard to another kind of Javanese/Sundanese female trance performance).

Among 17 female trances that I have observed in my fieldwork, only four can be described as entirely uneventful, with only somnambulant dancing, no one falling on the ground, and entirely peaceful exorcism of every single performer; three other cases, on the contrary, can be characterized as remarkably extreme, with a lot of uncontrolled behavior and occasional feats, including female performer getting whipped—which, from the emic perspective, can be understood as an indication of trance being genuine.

### **Girls Who Deserve Praise**

In October 2018, I've conducted an interview with the members of Putri Adhara, a small all-female group that is frequently invited to join other (all-male) groups' performances. The name translates as 'the girls who receive praise'. 'Like divas,'—suggests one of them, but all the group members appear to act rather modest, if not shy, while answering the questions. Putri Adhara is a collective of six dancers in their early 20s or younger (one is still attending high school), only two of them have some formal dance education but all are united by their interest in *jathilan* as an art form and do not demonstrate much (if any) knowledge of spiritual matters.

Putri Adhara are the ones who say they take pride in doing what men do. But in their daily behavior they do not seem to go against any social expectations: they act, look and talk like rather modest Javanese young women. One of the dancers is wearing hijab when we meet for the interview, although she easily abandons it while performing. This corresponds to the overall laid-back attitude of the Javanese Muslim women towards covering their hair—many do it on some occasions, but under other circumstances do not mind showing their hair in public. Typical *jathilan* costumes are rather prudent by the Western standards; pants normally cover the knees and under the tight corsages women wear shirts that conceal their shoulders

and chests, but still there is more left uncovered than the strict norms of Islamic propriety would approve of. Nevertheless, during all the trance and non-trance performances (the latter lying beyond the scope of 26 performances I previously referred to here) that I have ever observed, no female dancer was covering her hair.



Figure 3: Entranced member of what was yet to become Putri Adhara dance group. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2017)

I do not try to talk to Putri Adhara about Islam and veiling, considering that might be a sensitive matter, but, surprisingly, they are quite reserved even when it comes to talking about spirits (most of the Javanese prove eager to get involved in such kind of a conversation (Rapoport, 2020, pp. 95-96). They claim, they do not have any stories of the encounters with the unseen world to share and, when first asked about the trance, they insist that it is nothing but acting. But I have observed Putri Adhara in action three times; in July 2017 (before they even came up with the name and the very idea of officially forming a freelance group) and twice in 2018. The first of these three performances actually provided me with an example of a rather intense female trance. My field notes from 2017 include the following descriptions:

After *pawang* throws flower petals in the air, all the dancers, but one, fall. One, who was the first to fall, starts rolling on the ground, though still in a seemingly more careful manner than men do ... For the handlers, it takes quite some effort to wake one of the dancers. She looks like she is crying and suffering (as if not even from pain but from grief). She is given a burning incense stick which she keeps holding in her mouth while slightly chewing ... (field notes, 2017)

When the time comes for the exorcism, the dancers start falling, rolling on the ground, covering their ears and screaming. Exorcism for almost every dancer lasts long and even though there are female helpers, male *pawang* performing it does not hesitate to hold the dancers in the ways he sees fit. (field notes, 2017)

When confronted with the images from this performance, Putri Adhara members admit that maybe it was part acting, part real. One of the dancers explains that she was still able to hear and feel everything, but the falling was caused by her body suddenly becoming stiff, so she could not move at all. Later on, performers also acknowledge, that they might experience a 'hangover' after performing, which could even prevent them from carrying on with their daily activities (like attending school) so they may skip one or two days, but never more than that.



Figure 4: Male *pawang* of Kudho Manunggal Kalidadap group performs exorcism on one of the Putri Adhara dancers without avoiding physical contact. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2017)

Despite their attempts to downplay the aspects of trance, Putri Adhara have no doubts in the importance of the *pawang*'s role. But when I ask how do they manage to work with different *pawangs*, provided that every trance master employs somewhat unique exorcism techniques, they suddenly mention that their only concern is about the possibility of an unfamiliar *pawang* to act inappropriately, taking advantage or harassing them (which also confirms, once again, that, while in trance, the dancers are not in control or even not aware of themselves and their surroundings). Even though, they admit, no harassment had actually happened to any of the Putri Adhara members and other male performers they worked with showed them nothing but support and respect. Same comes to their neighbors and families, who do not object to young women's engagement in *jathilan* overall but might frown upon them coming home late if they have to practice or perform in the evening.

Thus, the young generation of performers in Yogyakarta area does not appear to be seriously concerned with the mystical matters, has no notions of danger that spirits or the very state of possession might pose, and prefer to underestimate actual trance aspects. If they see any possible threats in their practice, those are only mundane ones.

### Tackling a Touchy Subject: Female *Pawangs* and Physical Contact

Remarkably, many male *pawangs* share the same concerns about propriety of touching female performers during exorcism. Thus, Kudho Praneso, one of the most renowned groups in the area that has been active for almost three decades (since 1992) has no female dancers in their ranks. In response to the question why, the group members readily explain, with some awkward laughs, that for a male *pawang* and his helpers it could be a tricky task to take care of women and perform exorcism on them since it is unclear how to hold them, to restrain their movements—if necessary, and not to do it in any inappropriate way (Rapoport, 2018, p. 11).

Female helpers and female *pawangs* are exactly meant to resolve this issue. Another all-female group, called Lembayung Senja (Purple Twilight) is led by a female *pawang* Bu Sri. Bu Sri is in her early forties, she smokes and has no children (both not very typical for a woman in Java), even though she is married and her husband is also involved in *jathilan* activities. Her experience with the horse dances began in East Java where she was originally in charge of makeup. But her proclivity to become a *pawang* somehow revealed itself and people around encouraged her to assume this role, so, by the time we first talked in 2018, she has been acting as a *pawang* for about five years.

During the Lembayung Senja performance that I have observed in July 2018, Bu Sri was working in pair with another female *pawang*, but there was also a male trance master who took part in all of the exorcism procedures. During our two conversations, first right after the performance and about a month later when we specifically met for an interview, Bu Sri communicated to me contradicting details; first she claimed that, besides the presence of a male *pawang*, she is also capable of expelling the spirits all by herself. But during the interview she admitted, that male *pawang* is necessary, however he cannot touch female performers (observations prove that an exception can be made for touching hands), so female *pawangs* are necessary for holding possessed women and calming them down.

Bu Sri openly admits that female dancers are in the high demand because they are beautiful and this is a relatively new kind of attraction in *jathilan*. Apart from trance performances, Lembayung Senja frequently participates in various festivals from which trancing part is excluded so the groups only compete in displays of their choreography and costumes. Bu Sri still acknowledges, that even for such occasions *pawang* is necessary, although the function is completely the opposite—to protect the dancers from spirits and make sure that nobody gets possessed. Nevertheless, Bu Sri does not pretend to have an extensive knowledge of spiritual matters; to her understanding, for keeping the dancers safe it is sufficient for the *pawang* to pray according to their religion (in case of Bu Sri it is Islam, but even though she does not know any examples, she considers it to be no less possible for a Christian person to fulfil the same duties). Bu Sri believes, that in the present deep knowledge of (or even any affiliation with) *kejawen* (traditional Javanese pre-Islamic beliefs) is not necessary, and while about two decades ago the horse dances used to be mostly about *kejawen*, now it is changing because *kejawen* rituals are just too complicated<sup>3</sup>.



Figure 4: Dancer of Lembayung Senja group performing in Sleman regency, not far from the city of Yogyakarta. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2018)

But Bu Sri's views do not testify for all the *pawangs* in the area. Another female trance master, known as Bundha Shelly, mentions that even though she also prays to Allah during the performance, she does address local Javanese spirit entities as well and on certain days performs *kejawen* rituals (including worship of *Ratu Kidul*—the Queen of the Southern Sea, revered by the Javanese of different professions, from fishermen to female singers, but also known for her mystical connections with the sultans of Yogyakarta). Other *jathilan* practitioners who know Bundha Shelly hold her in high esteem exactly as a rare example of a person who “lives her daily life as a ritual”, following traditional fasting methods and dietary restrictions.

Bundha Shelly's story overall provides quite an example of some inspirational narrative about a person who managed to make the best of their not so favorable circumstances. She is a laundry employee working 8-hour shifts on weekdays, she is a widow in her 50s who had to raise five children all by herself

at the expense of getting an education, but, besides that, she is a famous *pawang*, participating in more performances than probably any of the male trance masters do, she is well-known and well-respected by many *jathilan* practitioners in the area, she is an authority figure approached for advice or help in conflict-resolution between the members of the large overlapping online and offline community of *jathilan* enthusiasts.

Bundha Shelly looks much younger in her scenic appearance; she wears heavy makeup but often dresses in the same manner as male *pawangs*<sup>4</sup>. However, she emphasizes that such outfit is only ‘for work’ and she is far from assuming a masculine role but, on the contrary, relies on her maternal instinct (‘bunda’ itself stands for ‘mother’ in Indonesian). She has started performing as a *pawang* in 2012, initially she just enjoyed watching *jathilan*, but she always felt an urge to help the entranced dancers. Bundha Shelly believes her powers are inherited and some of her female ancestors were *orang pintar* (literally—a wise person, another term for a spiritually potent ritual and magic specialist). Still, she admits that she did not feel confident about performing *pawang*’s duties at the start but other *jathilan* practitioners encouraged her to do what she does—precisely because she is different from all the other *pawangs*.



Figure 5: Bundha Shelly in a traditional male headwear performs *pawang*’s duties during the male dance in Desa Wisata Krebet, Bantul. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2018)

Bundha Shelly is also a unique example of a free-lance *pawang* (normally a trance master belongs to particular group) and she values this status since it allows her to participate in as many performances as possible. She definitely gets a lot of invitations and does not mind traveling to the next regency which might mean up to a two-hour-long motorbike ride. So, in her case, joining *jathilan* might serve not only the purpose of expressing oneself and creating a personal narrative different from their objective unsatisfactory economic and social position, but also as a real source of additional income.

The latter is normally not the case with *jathilan*. To host a village performance, during the time of my fieldwork, did cost about six or seven million Indonesian rupiahs (under 500 USD). Whereas, an average show might involve about 30 dancers, if not more—with three or four parts, which normally include six or eight (at times 10) dancers with the horses, but also various masked characters that can dance their own part or accompany the ‘horse riders’, not to mention gamelan ensemble, several singers (commonly, at least two), several *pawangs* and numerous helpers, but also expenses on the transportation, plus costumes and sound equipment that are usually rented. Even though singers and sometimes musicians are paid for separately, considering the substantial number of people involved, individual shares are not that significant, so the income mostly serves the group’s ability to carry on, rather than anything else.



Figure 6: Bundha Shelly soothing entranced male dancer with her manicured hand. (Photo: Eva Rapoport, 2018)

Bundha Shelly is able to receive that many invitations precisely because she does not limit herself to working with only female dancers. During three different performances where I have seen her, she was involved in all kinds of activities, including soothing of the entranced male performers and even bringing them back from their trance all by herself. What also separates Bundha Shelly and Bu Sri, are their views regarding trance. According to Bundha Shelly, if a *pawang* gets possessed themselves, it is a sign of weakness and she claims to have never experienced that, while Bu Sri with a certain enthusiasm retells a story of how she suddenly became possessed by a snake spirit which made her crawl on the ground and required involvement of another *pawang* to be expelled.

As it seemed natural for Bu Sri that a snake spirit would make her crawl, it is a common notion that behavior of the entranced dancers depends on the kind of spirit possessing them. Still, there seems to be no consensus regarding the question of female possession; whether these are all the same spirits that possess women and men or if those are actually different. According to Bu Sri, spirits are all the same, however, from the point of view of some members of another *jathilan* group—Kudho Nalendro, spirits in male and female possessions are actually different. But most of the dancers themselves usually appear quite unaware when it comes to the esoteric matters and even *pawangs*, at best, sound rather vague if not uncertain while answering the questions regarding the typology of the spirits involved in their performances. Thus, despite the great popularity of *jathilan* as a performing art (or actually because of it) the *ngelmu* (mystical knowledge) side of the practice seems to be somewhat in decline. Yet again, the absence of complicated rituals, as well as relative simplicity of the choreography might be exactly the reasons of the great popularity enjoyed by the horse dances nowadays.

## Conclusion

Despite some sources presenting evidence against female involvement in trance or exorcism, in the Special Region of Yogyakarta women do experience trance, perform it during *jathilan*, and are even capable of performing the trance master's duties. More than that, female dancers have become essential for the majority of performances. Women are resolutely entering what used to be a predominantly male domain but not exactly on equal terms; they are treated differently by the audiences (considered as a special attraction), by the *pawangs* (some prefer not to handle female performers) and have their own concerns (pertaining sexual harassment), not shared by the male performers.

Even within the performance there is no complete equality of the roles, commonly female trances are less intense (however there could be some striking exceptions). Female *pawangs* are still rare and even the most renowned of them in the area emphasizes her motherly role in the performance and the entire

community of practitioners. There still remains an issue of propriety; in regard to physical contact between female dancers and male *pawangs*, while some locals doubt whether it is at all appropriate or compatible with the feminine image to be involved in *jathilan*. And while female dancers insist, that one of their main drives is to prove that they can do the same things as men, female performers seem to be in a good demand not for what equates them to men but for what sets them apart—their pleasant looks and relative novelty of their participation.

At the same time, female practitioners, dancers and *pawangs* alike, express the same (as men) motivations for practicing *jathilan*, which they formulate as preserving their culture. And they can expect the same kinds of returns, such as the benefit of belonging to both a particular small family-like community which is their dance group and a broader artistic community of traditional performers, and also empowerment in creating their own personal narratives, independent of any objectively unfavorable social and economic circumstances (thus, thanks to *jathilan* and its connection to spirits and magic, a person working a menial job can at the same time be renowned for her or his mystical powers and commitment to the tradition).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While Koentjaraningrat's *Javanese Culture* was first published in 1989, when discussing traditional beliefs and performances, *jathilan* included, the author often refers to the observations and reminiscences from his childhood and youth.

<sup>2</sup> Although van Groenendaal's fieldwork preceded Mauricio's, English translation of her monograph was published some years after Mauricio has completed his thesis, which is probably why he makes no references to van Groenendaal and her research.

<sup>3</sup> In line with that, according to the *pawang*, group leader and kuda kepang advocate from Singapore, Iswandiarjo bin Wismodiarjo, acquiring power for merely becoming a dancer in the old days might have required meditating in a cave for days, if not weeks. Which, obviously, now would be problematic for a person who needs to keep their day-job.

<sup>4</sup> Bu Sri also performs in a male costume and on one of the videos from the past performances that she keeps and likes to show, she appears with moustache and sideburns painted on her face.

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