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## **Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Mystical World of Java**

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# Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Mystical World of Java

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## Abstract

At present, a great deal of scholarly research on Indonesia focuses on processes of Islamisation and the notion of an Islamic modernity. This paper will discuss a phenomenon that seems to point in a different direction, namely the contemporary reconfiguration of *dukun*/spiritual experts called *paranormal* or *supranatural*. These can be seen as an assemblage of tradition and modernity, locality and translocality, religion and mysticism, spirituality and business, global esotericism and popular psychology. Most of them belong to the urban middle-class, are highly professional, and make extensive use of modern mass media to advertise their supernatural skills. Yet how do they position themselves in Indonesian and global cultural contexts? Which representational strategies are prevalent in which situation? How does their cosmopolitan identification reconcile claims of “Eastern spirituality”? And embedded in all this: what role does the positionality of a Western ethnographer play in the transcultural research encounter?

## Key words

Indonesia, anthropology, cosmopolitanism, Occidentalism, popular religion, spirits, media

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## Introduction

Stressing ‘the modern’ in connection with Javanese magical-mystical and *paranormal* phenomena means to point towards the fact that the spirits are dynamic, subject to change, and ready to adapt to new circumstances brought about by globalisation, as is the rest of Javanese society and culture.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the spirits now appear in (international) mass media. There are also cases in which spirits of (deceased) foreigners are believed to have taken possession of Indonesians, thereby not only transgressing the borders of bodies and subjects, but also superseding the established cultural differences. Indeed, it has come to my attention, that some (modern, globally oriented) spirits accept, and even demand, cheese as a contemporary substitute to more traditional offerings (*sesajen*) of flowers, incense and rice.<sup>2</sup> These ethnographic vignettes demonstrate that in many ways the spirits, gods and goddesses of Java (and beyond) have undergone a cosmopolitan transformation. Yet, spirits are not the main focus of this article. Rather, it is the socio-cultural interaction – humans who intertwine discourses on invisible forces with modern life-styles and orientations – that constitutes the research focus. Whereas the empirical part of this paper features one particular local setting – the modern mystical world of Java – my theoretical intention is to contribute to the recurring debates on Orientalism, Occidentalism and cosmopolitanism, as well as to participate in discussions concerning the popularisation of contemporary religious practice and experience.

This endeavour is not unusual for an anthropologist. However, most social science scholarship, including literature related to a global religious resurgence, currently chooses to focus on world religions and the rise of fundamentalism.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, not only in Indonesia but also in other parts of the world, there has been a steady increase in the study of occult and paranormal phenomena.<sup>4</sup> This paper stresses these phenomena’s entanglement with modernity and cosmopolitanism.<sup>5</sup> As such, the following research places special emphasis on contemporary, modern constructions of popular traditions in the context of unorthodox forms of public religiosity.

Based on a case study of present-day spiritual experts and magical specialists named *paranormal* or *supranatural*, this paper asks: How do *paranormal* practitioners position themselves in modern Indonesian cultural contexts, and how is their self-positioning constituted *vis-à-vis* the wider,

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1 Bubandt (2012) explores the changing kinds of spirits and changing conceptions of self in a global world.

2 These are examples from different Javanese contexts: the first one refers to one of many explanations for the 2006 earthquake in Bantul, saying that the spirits of the South Sea envied the spirits of Mount Merapi, as they would get international media attention when the volcano erupts. Therefore they made the earth tremble in order to raise attention as well. The second example cites a guardian of a cave who learned in meditation that there is a spiritual female figure whose background and power extends beyond Java. For that reason she would ask for “Western” offerings such as cheese. The last example points towards ghost stories such as the ones from Lawang Sewu in Semarang. In this colonial building a Dutch lady is said to have been tortured by the Japanese, and it is believed that her soul still appears at times to select Indonesian visitors.

3 Apart from that, there is profound criticism towards the concept of religion itself as being derived from Christianity. As Asad put it “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition itself is the historical product of discursive processes.” (Asad 1993, 29; cf. also Alatas 2006, 16). In this paper all variants of non-institutionalised, mystical and magical (“folk”, popular and everyday) beliefs are included in the use of the term religion.

4 For Africa see e.g. Geschiere 1997; Obi Oguejiofor and Wendl 2012, for Europe see e.g. Knoblauch 2009.

5 The present paper is an extended version of a presentation at the ISEAC Cosmopolitan conference 2012: “On Cosmopolitanism and Southeast Asia: imaginings, mediation and movement”, Australian National University, Canberra, 16 - 18 February 2012.

global world and the West? I will investigate diverse representations of spiritual, transcendent convictions and vernacular cosmopolitanism. The analysis will refer to translocal imaginings of the Orient and Occident.

This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork undertaken in 2011, as well as experience gained as a result of 25 years of recurring visits to Java. Thus, a related question presents itself: What role does my positionality as a Western ethnographer play in the transcultural research encounter?

I will begin with a brief exposition as to the definition and identity of *paranormal*. Then, I will provide self-reflexive remarks concerning the methodology, followed by recent associated quantitative data regarding advertisements. It is by means of such advertisements, published in mystical tabloids, that *paranormal* seek to attract and address their clients and audience. By doing so, they inadvertently display certain aspects of their cultural self-positioning. Subsequently, it is my intention to theorise the *paranormal* interlocutors' self-representation as witnessed in ethnographic encounters, as well as to discuss cosmopolitanism, and finally, to draw a conclusion pointing towards what I consider to be the critical aspects and potentials of the dynamic role and social significance of modern *paranormal*.

## Description of paranormal practitioners

There exists a long tradition of belief in invisible forces in Java. This history has already been well-documented from the point of view of intertwined political powers and interests (Anderson 1990, Bertrand 2002) as well as from the perspective of ordinary people (Schlehe 1998). Nevertheless, *paranormal* practitioners cannot be categorised as relics of a pre-modern past (although critics of dubious popular religiosity often voice such accusations). *Paranormal* can be seen as an assemblage of categories like tradition and modernity, folk belief and popularised religiosity, locality and translocality, spirituality and business, and global esotericism and popular psychology. The practitioners skilfully mediate these alleged opposites. Most importantly, their convictions and practices exist both side-by-side with world religions or in opposition to them. I have met *paranormal* from all the religious backgrounds officially recognised by the Indonesian state: Islam, Protestantism (including Pentecostalism and other charismatic Churches), Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Some present themselves as pious adherents of their religion, others focus much more on what they designate as their local culture. *Paranormal* form part of a current reconfiguration of traditional *dukun*. In classical ethnographic literature, they are considered to be magical-mystical healers and experts (Geertz 1960, 67; Koentjaraningrat 1985).<sup>6</sup> There is also a connection between *paranormal* and *guru kebatinan*, the leaders of Javanese mystical groups and organizations who also claim to possess special abilities and supernatural powers. Another variant, typical for the minority of ethnic Chinese Indonesians, are the so called *suhu* (cf Schlehe 2014). In any case, it should be mentioned that the current practitioners employ a great variety of self-designations referring to different traditions and identifications: apart from *paranormal* and *supra-* or *supernatural* they describe themselves as *spiritualis*, *ahli metafisika*, *juru sembuh* (healer), *ahli hipnotis*, etc.<sup>7</sup> and they run several types of spiritual centers (*padepokan*) and alternative clinics. For the sake of readability, *paranormal* will be used here as an umbrella term.

There is no elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus connected to *paranormal* practitioners.

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<sup>6</sup> Although the practitioners themselves usually identify with one peculiar designation in order to mark a distance to the others, the categories *dukun* and *paranormal* etc. overlap.

<sup>7</sup> The appropriations of Western terms in Indonesian designations are, as was explained to me, meant to mark a distance to evil forces in sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. Though, I would say that good and evil are not clear-cut opposites in this context.

The related beliefs and practices are informal and non-standardised. What I find remarkable is that contemporary *paranormal* have become modernised, while retaining their claim to supernatural knowledge and power (*ilmu/kekuatan gaib*) by means of traditional methods.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the discourse of *paranormal* is grounded on rather vague notions of ‘tradition’ and related practices. These include transferring energy, praying, meditation, herbs, providing amulets (*jimat*), inserting tiny objects under the skin or acting as spirit mediums etc. In contrast to *dukun*, most of them belong to the urban middle-class, are educated, professional, highly mobile members of national organisations (like the ‘Indonesian Communication Forum for Paranormal and Alternative Healers’),<sup>9</sup> and they make use of modern mass media (magazines and tabloids, television, internet, mobile phone) to advertise their supernatural skills. Many are registered and possess official work permits, they have office hours, sometimes in international hotels and often in different cities, and some of them stage exhibitions and performances in shopping malls. Thus, aspects of local traditions are articulated and enacted in translocal spaces. Corresponding to the global trend of consumerism and commercial entertainment, media and spirituality have become inseparable (Meyer and Moors 2006). Subsequently, Indonesian *paranormal* offer miraculous interventions and solutions for the everyday problems of their clients. These clients are people from all ethnic groups, education levels, faiths, or claims to modernity. Despite this, it should be noted that most of them belong to the affluent urban strata of society. The *paranormal* promise to strengthen clients in business and financial affairs, careers,<sup>10</sup> charisma and aura, but also provide solutions in matters of love and sex, or guarantee to protect against the evil influence of sorcerers. *Paranormal* also offer physical and mental healing treatments, although these do not enjoy the same demand as the aforementioned practices.

Many *paranormal* practitioners display an ambivalent attitude towards the economy, materiality and money. While most practitioners earn enough to sustain themselves – and some even become rich – the desire to earn money is seen as a negative trait. The most frequent criticism voiced by my interlocutors concerning colleagues was not the accusation of “black magic” (an accusation that was formerly widespread and once again attracted much public attention in 2013<sup>11</sup>), but rather their disapproval of solely acting for profit-oriented practices. The *paranormals*’ success depends on the staging of magical powers and traditionality. Thus, the spiritual economy of the modern *paranormal* relies on both entrepreneurship and cultural values (Schlehe 2012).

Furthermore, *paranormal* do not merely associate themselves with their respective culture, economy and religion. They are also closely connected to the political power structures in Indonesia (cf. Bertrand 2002). For example, President Suharto (1968-1998) strongly supported and funded the *paranormals*’ main national organisation. At present, adhering to the fluctuating power relations of the democratic system, many *paranormal* support candidates in local and national elections in order to develop mutually beneficial relationships with those in power. Nonetheless, their position in society remains ambivalent. As a result of the increasing influence of orthodox

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8 For instance, the famous *paranormal* Ki Joko Bodo declares on his homepage that he possesses thousands of spirits from Papua, Java, Dayak (Kalimantan), Makassar (Sulawesi) which are already ten thousands of years old (“*memiliki ribuan Jin asal Papua, Jawa, Dayak, Makassar yang umurnya sudah puluhan ribuan tahun*” (Indoforum 2007).

9 The Forum Komunikasi Paranormal dan Penyembuh Alternatif Indonesia (FKPPAI) has ca. 40,000 members. It is based on an organisation initiated by President Suharto’s wife, Bu Tien, and was founded in the national culture park Taman Mini in 1991.

10 Especially political careers and local elections (Pilkada) are an important field for *paranormal* these days (cf. Trihartono 2012). This may have to do with the fact that after decentralization there is much money involved in local elections.

11 In the Indonesian public the issue of “black magic” became a highly contested topic in 2013 due to an attempt of Indonesia’s parliament to outlaw black magic (*ilmu santet*). In a proposed revision of the criminal code it would become illegal to “declare the possession of mysterious powers” (Bland 2013).

Islamic parties, in 2005 the MUI (Indonesian council of Muslim scholars) issued a *fatwa* against the *paranormal*. The *fatwa* formed part of an ongoing campaign to disrepute and destabilize the societal standing of *paranormal* practitioners.

## Methodological reflections

Through my engagement in several research projects over the past decades, I have come to know many spiritual specialists (*dukun* and *paranormal*) personally. In addition, I have also attended several national meetings of *paranormal* from all over Indonesia (Schlehe 2011). But it was only in 2011 that I focused especially on this type of people for two months. During this period, I visited about 30 *paranormal* practitioners in Yogyakarta, Solo and Jakarta with the intention to learn more about the way in which they position themselves in society. Their religious orientations varied and often included *Kejawen* (the Javanese spiritual worldview and practice) or were a mixture of styles. There were men and women, poor and rich, and people from various ethnic backgrounds. The youngest was 30, the oldest over 70 years old. Apart from personal encounters, I also attended the set of a local television station to witness the shoot of several live television broadcasts. This experience motivated me to evaluate advertisements in order to calculate and compare how *paranormal* represent their identities publicly and commercially. In doing so, I applied a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.<sup>12</sup>

What does anthropological field research mean in this context, and in which way does the research in itself constitute a form of cultural performance? To start with, I conducted conversations and interviews, which turned out to be an appropriate and suitable research method as *paranormal* are accustomed to answering questions posed by their guests and patients. They are accustomed to narrating and contextualizing their practices to dignify and justify their position. As such, I found them to be very eloquent. They clearly enjoyed discussing and explaining their worldviews, experiences, methods and extraordinary abilities. In fact, most of them expected me to take part in certain activities such as rituals and treatment sessions with their clients. So it was an easy step to progress from interviews to participant observation. I found it highly insightful to be present during these healing ceremonies. It gave me the opportunity to feel and share the emotional intensity that was being created and exchanged between the *paranormal*, the client and associated participants (e.g., as in the example below, the *paranormal's* assistants and the clients' relatives or spouses). When embodiment and experiences through the body were demanded, the limits of this mutual understanding were truly put to the test: I was not only given special drinks and things to eat and swallow, but was also at times treated physically. This included for example a form of massage incorporating strong blows to my back in an attempt to transfer the *paranormal's* energy to my body.

Having hinted at this, I am not at all claiming that I became immersed completely. Nor did I lose my inner cognitive and critical distance. Nevertheless, it enabled me to develop empathy not only intellectually, but also emotionally and sensually. This form of transgressive methodology strikes me as crucial in the process of obtaining insight and understanding the reason and methods by which *paranormals'* treatments work. Nevertheless, it is not easy (or perhaps impossible) to do justice to the faithfuls' spiritual, emotional and embodied experiences in ethnographic writing, as the nature of such research must always strive for a transformation of experiences into analyses. Yet, the main goal of my study was not to understand fully the faithfuls' experiences, but to reveal the representational strategies of the *paranormal*. In this vein, the experiences served to augment my understanding of the transmission of non-verbal messages.

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12 Ethnography always combines different methodological strategies. The core component is usually qualitative. In the present study I complement this with a quantitative component (cf. Morse and Niehaus 2009).

It should also be stressed that only the benevolent side of *paranormals'* activities was presented to me. The flip side – malevolent magic and supernatural harmful attacks – did not feature in any of our conversations or during my participation.

From a methodological and self-reflective point of view, a comparison between the empirical fieldwork and the evaluation of the *paranormals'* advertisements in tabloids and on the Internet turned out to be interesting. Reading and looking at these commercial texts and visual representations provoked differing personal impressions and feelings. At times I found the advertisements ridiculous. The way in which some *paranormal* present themselves and attempt to attract and seduce their customers (for instance when it is promised that debts will disappear if the debtor pays a certain amount of money to a *paranormal* or when it is offered that your aura will be opened, enabling you to be successful in everything if you send your name, birthday and a photo – for 230.000 Rp within Indonesia and for 750.000 from abroad) struck me as deeply problematic.

This is an example of the difference between studying texts or images and interacting with people. In the latter case, the researcher can develop empathy and an embodied understanding. But, especially in the context of the current digital age and the existence of manifold forms of mediatisation, this distinction proves to be insufficient. Nowadays, many *paranormal* offer their services virtually – and it seems to work too, without any physical encounter or atmospheric impact. This reveals that beyond embodiment we also need to understand the cultural context through which such mediatised representations become successful. Furthermore, one should keep in mind that anthropological fieldwork remains a cosmopolitan endeavour of transcultural conversation stimulated by the wish to develop a critical understanding of differences and similarities across cultures. Cosmopolitanism, according to Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, is a willingness to engage with the Other, and to immerse oneself in differing cultures and meanings (Hannerz 1990). In my opinion, such an approach should be combined with an acute awareness of the constructedness of the categories of Self and Other, as well as sensitivity to social contexts and power differentials. Thus, cosmopolitanism both acknowledges diversity and overcomes differences. In this it corresponds to the concept of “transdifferences” as going beyond binary constructions of opposition (Lösch 2005). It also engages the interactive and reciprocal concept of translation as suggested by Martin Fuchs (2009). To understand ethnographic fieldwork as cosmopolitan in such a way is to showcase its outstanding possibilities.

Clearly, the ethnographic encounter, the mutual performance and the positionalities shape the data and understanding even more when the non-Western interlocutors' attitudes and evaluations of the West and the world transpire to become research interests in their own right. Often the researcher is considered, to a certain degree, to be a representative of Western culture. Therefore, it makes sense to include alternate forms of expression in the study. This resulted in my investigation concerning the self-representation of the *paranormal* in advertisements. In spite of this, it should be kept in mind that advertisements in commercial mass media are not simply a neutral manifestation of the *paranormals'* orientation. They are directed towards an imagined audience of possible clients. Through the perspective of such advertisements, it is possible to observe how *paranormal* present themselves *vis-à-vis* an anonymous Indonesian public. Yet before continuing with a discussion of advertisements, I would like to describe a healing ceremony.

## Healing and representation

One day, after a long narrative interview with a famous *paranormal* practitioner in Yogyakarta, I was invited to take part in a ceremony for a woman from Jakarta. The client had been suffering from cancer for more than two years and had undergone several operations in medical hospitals. Despite this, a new tumour had formed in her stomach. She had arrived at the *paranormal's* centre, accompanied by her husband, her sister and two other relatives. They had already spent several

days there preparing themselves for the ceremony. The *paranormal* and two assistants were at hand to conduct the following procedure. We were all sitting in a circle surrounding a half-dead goat. The *paranormal* and his assistants were chanting, everybody became very calm and concentrated, and I could feel the intense atmosphere. Then *the paranormal* started moving his right hand with beautiful, dance-like gestures from the client's belly – without actually touching it – towards the goat. This was repeated several times accompanied by chants and mantras. Finally he finished, the goat was slaughtered, its belly opened and the *paranormal* searched its intestines. It was a piece of meat that he eventually identified as something which did not originally belong to the goat – by his gestures the client's tumor had been transferred into the animal and could now be removed from there. The abstract thread of the cancer had materialized, and everybody – including me – could sense the patient's relief. The group took the piece of meat to a nearby river and tossed it into the water.

When we walked back from the river on a small path through the rice fields I happened to walk next to the *paranormal*. Thus, the others could not hear him saying to me “*itu sugesti saja* - this was just suggestion”.

Obviously his representational strategy was quite flexible: While he had stressed his mystic, supernatural abilities during the ceremony in which he had combined the non-verbal messages of his gestures with traditional chants and mantras, he switched to a more psychological idiom when addressed by the Western anthropologist afterwards. Effectively, he translated his activities into what he imagined to be occidental rationality, thereby proving his modern, cosmopolitan knowledge. This shows how the self-positioning of the *paranormal* practitioner depends on the perceived audience.

## Advertisements in magazines

Before I elaborate further on what my interlocutors explained and displayed to me, I would like to demonstrate how *paranormal* stylize and present themselves to the public and to their prospective clients in commercial advertisements. How do they position themselves culturally, which verbal and visual identity markers do they employ as “branding” in the highly competitive marketplace of spiritual offers?

Most advertisements can be found in mystical magazines. They offer support in financial matters and career prospects, promise strength and an attractive aura, help in matters of love and sex, announce healing abilities and exorcism (cf Schlehe 2012). Typical statements would be, for instance:

“*Anda terlilit hutang, butuh modal, butuh dana serta ingin lebih makmur*” - you are burdened by debt, need capital, financial support and want to be more wealthy – quickly contact [so-and-so]..

Or there is promotion for a “pusat benda bertuah”, a center for things that bring luck (like *keris*, certain stones, oils etc.), or a female *paranormal* would be announced as “*yang terkenal sebagai kampiun pencipta benda bertuah untuk kecantikan abadi, ketampanan, pengasih, keharmonisan rumah tangga, dsb.*” - somebody who is famous as a champion in creating devices for eternal beauty, good looking (men), love, harmony in the family, etc.

Often a portrait photograph of the practitioner is displayed as well as very detailed descriptions of his or her methods and the effects of treatment.

Having conducted a quantitative analysis of *paranormal* practitioners' advertisements, I do not claim that the evaluation is objective. On the contrary, it should be emphasised that the evaluation criteria cannot be precise at all. They are subjective, polyvalent, overlapping and can only indicate vague tendencies. Taken as such, and being aware of their limitations as research data, I find the advertisements to be remarkable cultural artifacts, especially when seen in joint perspective with the research encounters.



The evaluation is based on seven Indonesian mystical magazines (weekly and monthly tabloids)<sup>13</sup> published in 2011. 215 ads were evaluated, 40 for women, 168 for men and 7 unspecified ones. On average we found 2.4 references to the categories per advertisement.

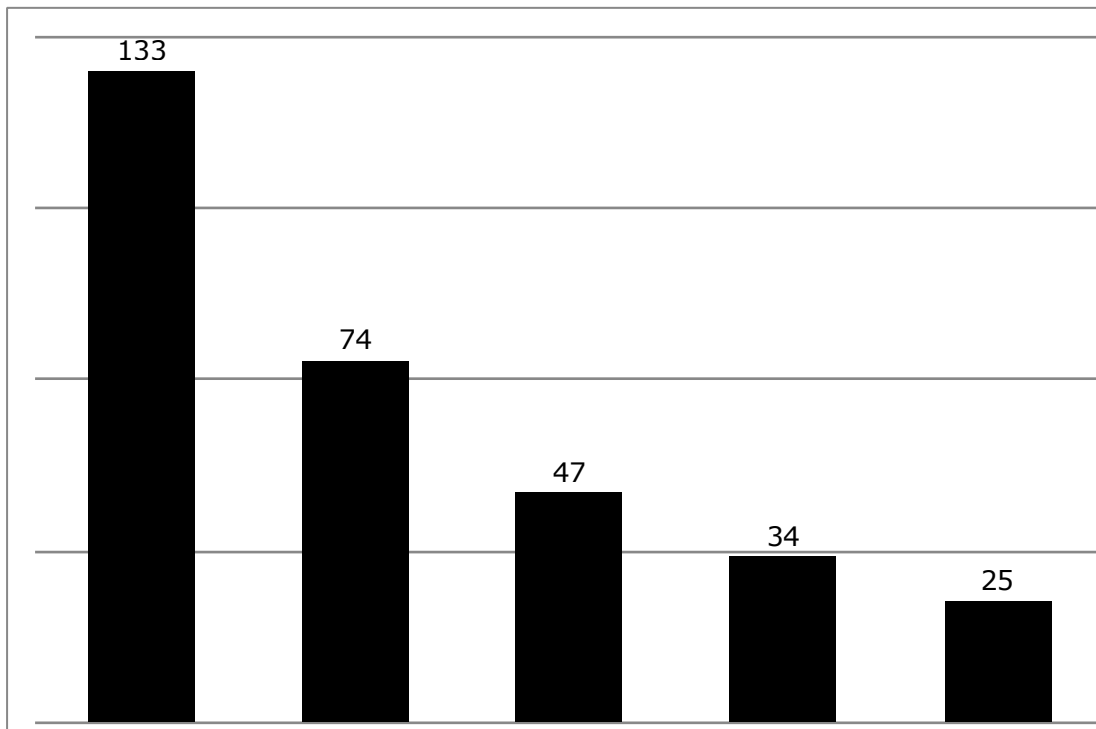


Diagram 1: cultural tendencies of *paranormals'* advertisements in Indonesian mystical magazines (Schlehe)

Before I contextualise and interpret these findings, let me first highlight the respective indicators. The diagram reveals that in commercial advertisements, *paranormal* refer first of all to *local* markers of identity such as, for example, dress (in the case of Javanese: *kain*, *kebaya*), concepts (*lahir-batin*), and forms of address (*Gus*, *Ki*, *Mbah*, *Nyi*). The second highest scoring topic turned out to be *Islamic* identification, which was indicated by dress, for example the wearing of a headscarf, Arabic words, citations from the Koran and forms of address including *Ustadz*, *Thabib*, *Kyai*, *Kyai haji*, *Sultan*, *Syekh*.<sup>14</sup> This was followed by an unspecific “*oriental*” (or orientalising) display of identity. As such, I suggest a categorisation according to references to the Arab world and, to a lesser degree, India and China (indicated by the use of ornaments, accessories like carpets etc.). A *Western* or *global* orientation could also be identified by dress (for instance ties for men), reference to rationality („*rasional*“) and appropriations of English terms like “*Parapsikolog*”, “*Hypnoterapist*” or the display of a PhD. Finally, *unspecific religiosity* appeared to be marked by an absence of any display of the *paranormal's* own religious affiliation and a stress on universal ideals embracing all religions and people from diverse backgrounds.

Apparently, the branding and staging in the context of advertisement in most cases point towards local attributes and identification. The second most common of which featured a display of Islamic identity. The goal, one assumes, is to foster a sense of legitimacy and feelings of belonging in the target group of possible clients. Islamic branding may also be a self-protective

<sup>13</sup> The evaluated magazines are: Posmo, Mystic, Misteri, Liberty, Victory, Meteor Jogja, Merapi.

<sup>14</sup> It should be emphasised that there is no clear separation of ‘local’ and ‘Islamic’ cultural heritage in Java. These are highly contested issues. As such, this is an example of the above mentioned overlap of the categories in the chart.

strategy due to a general surge of Islamisation. The previously mentioned *fatwa*, as well as a more common suspicion of “superstition”, are but recent examples of this ongoing development. The widespread use of titles refers to traditional hierarchies. The inferred meaning of such honours implies that the *paranormal* desire to be considered as highly respected people within the Javanese<sup>15</sup> and/or the Islamic social system. Less widespread are references to an imagined Eastern or oriental world or to an unspecific West or global world. In the latter case, the attracting factor may be seen in association with modern science and technologies. These symbolic referents give the *paranormal* an additional edge, as they display knowledge and competence in both traditional and modern realms, as well as the ability to connect transcendence and rationality. They serve to link the *paranormal* with the wider world, thus adding to his prestige and the validity of the service being offered.

What is of interest in the context of this paper are the creative practices through which *paranormal* mediate, and articulate the Self and the world. Unsurprisingly, their self-representations in advertisements differ from what they express in ethnographic encounters.

## Paranormal cosmopolitanism

In personal communication *paranormal* practitioners emphasize a universalistic understanding of humanity. All interlocutors stressed that there is no difference between religions, races, ethnic groups, class and gender. In this way, they strive to transcend cultural borders and boundaries. Some of them rely on global Islam, but the majority stress local belonging, as well as what Ricklefs (2007) has referred to as a “mystic synthesis”. At the same time, all those interviewed referred to aspects that I would designate as global esoteric discourses. These are embedded in global ideas about spirituality and alternative worldviews. One catholic *paranormal* said: ‘the world is searching for values at present. People all over the world are taught materialism... [there is a] technical or mechanical humanity or robot humans.’ (Interview Romo S., Yogyakarta, March 2011).<sup>16</sup> Yet there remains a commonly held conviction that people everywhere in the world have *ilmu* (knowledge) and spiritual specialists (like *paranormal*) are to be found worldwide, just ‘the way’ (*cara*) and the media of application and treatment differs. They stress sameness, not difference.

Hence, we could presume that genuine cosmopolitanism and universalism are indeed to be found amongst *paranormal* practitioners – or are at least voiced in conversations with a Western anthropologist. The longer our conversations continued, nearly all of them expressed a self-confident sense of Indonesian cultural uniqueness and laid claim to a vague Eastern superiority in regard to spiritual matters. One typical statement was that all *ilmu* (knowledge/science) comes from God. Accordingly, the purported difference between East and West was that Indonesians, or people from the East, prioritise ethics (Pak D., Yogyakarta, February 2011).<sup>17</sup> Finally, many *paranormal* reiterate the conventional orientalist<sup>18</sup> dichotomy through which Europe is associated

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15 Not seldom Javanese *paranormal* adopt kraton titles to indicate an alliance with the traditional aristocracy and a legitimisation by the Sultan’s palace. This may even be combined with reference to Semar, the clown and deity of the shadow play, as in the case of a well-known *Ru* *paranormal* in Yogya who uses the designation “Ki Puger Ismoyo”.

16 “*Dunia sedang mencari nilai. masyarakat dunia itu diajarkan tentang materialisme... manusia teknik atau mekanik atau manusia robot*”

17 “*Orang Indonesia atau pokoknya bagian Timur, etika itu didulukan*”

18 In 1978 Edward Said coined the notion of “Orientalism” for a world view that asserts the superiority of the West over the East. James G. Carrier (1992) then introduced the term Occidentalism for essentialist images of the West by non-Western people. The terms self-orientalisation and self-occidentalisation point towards constructions of a simultaneous essentialist image of the Self.

with notions of *ratio* or rationality<sup>19</sup>, as opposed to a general Indonesian or Eastern spiritual ethic, such as the Javanese notion of *rasa*, a mystical, intuitive, emotional and embodied form of knowledge and understanding (cf. Stange, 1984) which also includes taste, touch and feeling (Retsikas 2008, 124). As the leader of the above mentioned national organisation ('Indonesian Communication Forum for *Paranormal* and Alternative Healers') explained: 'When *rasa* is developed it leads to religiosity and arts. When *ratio* is developed it leads to scientific knowledge and technology.' According to such opinions, while the West remains technologically superior to the East, it is inferior in terms of spirituality.<sup>20</sup> In this context, a lady who wished to be designated as a 'meditation and motivation trainer' (English in original) formulated, in a remarkable mixture of languages, the following: '*Orang Barat itu sangat logic dan mindset mereka, mindnya, lebih berkembang daripada soulnya dan hati.*' (Western people are very logical and their mindset – their mind – is more developed than their souls and hearts) (Interview in Solo, February 2011).

Especially in the wake of recent changes in the era of *Reformasi*, and as a result of the ongoing processes of decentralisation and regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*), some *paranormal* fear that Indonesians will adhere to an increasingly Western lifestyle. For instance, Romo S. said: 'After *otda* (*otonomi daerah*) there is much more competition, and a general loss of moral values. People become very technical, mechanical and capitalist...like Europeans.'

These worries appear to correspond with what other authors have deemed a crisis of identity as a result of the corrosion of nationalist identity in the wake of Suharto's downfall (Rudnyckij 2010, 209; Siegel 2006). But in contrast to other cases, and although some *paranormal* present themselves as pious Muslims, most of them do not strive for the creation of a new explicitly Muslim identity. Instead, they propose a revitalisation of traditional ethics in a more modernised form. For example, Ki Joko Bodo, probably the most famous *paranormal* at present (due to his frequent media appearances some people call him a celebrity), states: 'the task of *paranormal* in the global world and first of all in Indonesia is to pacify and to prevent conflicts between religions' (Interview Jakarta, March 2011).<sup>21</sup>

'...in the global world and first of all in Indonesia...' is a formulation typical for the self-positioning of modern *paranormal*, as the notion of unspecific globalism, including ideas of universal humankind, are highly estimated concepts. Nonetheless, Indonesia is the ultimate frame of reference. Indonesians – not only *paranormal*, but the majority of all citizens – believe in their spiritual and moral superiority over the rest of the world. There is much historic precedent for this line of thought. Especially in the early 20th century, Javanese *priyayi* (modern educated members of the social elite) who had access to modern education were confident that their 'Eastern' culture was spiritually superior to that of the materialist West (Ricklefs, 2007, 228).

Is this self-orientalisation? It most likely is. Nevertheless, it does not only reflect Western orientalist stereotypes, but certain Asian voices as well. The Indian poet, social reformer and advocate of a 'spiritual Asia',<sup>22</sup> Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), for example, paved the way for a rhetoric of the 'soulless', mechanical West: a civilisation defined by its technical achievements, but lacking a spiritual dimension; the antithesis of an organic culture found within Asia, romantically envisioned as a benign and better place (Bonnett 2006, 271; 2010, 208). These images 'moved back and forth between the West and the East' in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chakrabarty 2012, 143).<sup>23</sup> Regardless of their origin, they are strong and widespread, and they reveal a deep

19 "Di Eropa kehidupannya serba rasional"

20 "Yang bersifat teknologi itu kalah sama barat"

21 "Kehadiran *paranormal* di dunia global terutama di Indonesia ini sebenarnya untuk mendamaikan."

22 Tagore's vision was based on the conception of a spiritual post-national Asian modernity.

23 According to Peter van der Veer Tagore perpetuated a notion of spirituality that was "a modern concept born out of the interaction between India and the West" (van der Veer 2009, 1110; cf. also Chakrabarty 2012, 146).

cultural self-confidence and pride that has often been overlooked in scholarly literature. Self-orientalisation here does not simply entail a reproduction of the orientalist stereotypes of Eastern passivity and inferiority. It also implies the production of positive images aligning the East with an inherent spiritual superiority. This goes hand in hand with occidentalist assumptions of a rational, yet spiritually and morally floundering West (see also Schlehe 2013).

Thus, the crucial point is that the *paranormals'* cosmopolitan identification is negotiated by means of their claim to, and celebration of, "Eastern spirituality". They oscillate between cosmopolitanism and its counter-attitudes. They engage not only in universalism, but also in a stereotypical uniformity ("the spiritual East"), which is 'opposed to the pluralizing discourses of cosmopolitanism' (Robinson 2007, 2).<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that popularised Javanese mysticism is intertwined with modernity and cosmopolitanism, and that it forms part of a peculiar Javanese understanding thereof: On the one hand, a modernity that incorporates magical-mystical dimensions, and on the other a form of cosmopolitanism characterised by hierarchical divisions expressed in orientalist and occidentalist ideas.

Cosmopolitanism should be understood in a concrete context, which is not only local but also shaped by the appropriation and co-production of the global. My study and analysis offers a perspective which strives to open up the debate so as to initiate future discussions, while providing the foundation for further reflection: What are generalisable patterns, global commonalities and local peculiarities of popularised religion (respectively folk beliefs and their modern variants)? How are they connected to constructions and positionings of the Self and the Other ("East" and "West" and the connected world)?

Beyond the general global tensions between particularism and universalism, this paper takes the form of a case study to identify the ongoing ambivalence between universalised cosmopolitan ideas and their consecutive rupture in orientalist and occidentalist imaginaries. Therefore, what Appiah (2006) designates as the connection between patriotism and cosmopolitanism should be explored in a critical manner. Patriotism is akin to nationalism and essentialism. Not all 'local, parochial, rooted, and culturally specific loyalties' (Werbner 2008, 14) are innocent and benevolent. Nor does any form of 'translocal, transnational, [...] enlightened, universalist and modernist' (ibid.) – which is according to the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism connected with the local – function as a true indicator of plurality and cosmopolitanism. At least not if we understand cosmopolitanism in the above-mentioned sense of engagement with the Other, transdifference and interactive translation. On the contrary, examples abound of exclusivist transnational trends and conceptualisations of otherness that are 'overdetermined by figures of difference' (Moore 2011, 9).

Therefore, I propose a critical analysis of modern *paranormals'* ambiguous approaches to cosmopolitanism. Their self-positioning *vis-à-vis* modernity and the West, which can be considered mere "vernacular cosmopolitanism", is at times no more than a local variant of globally entangled ideas and stereotypes of Orient and Occident (cf. Schlehe 2013). Furthermore, there exist plenty of valid reasons to cast a critical perspective on both the economic, market-oriented and political dimensions of their activities.

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<sup>24</sup> It is not easy to distinguish the terms cosmopolitanism, universalism and pluralism. Hollinger stresses the cosmopolitan will to engage human diversity: "For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists it is a problem." (Hollinger 2002, 231). And further: "cosmopolitanism is more liberal in style" than pluralism which is more conservative as it is oriented towards the pre-existing group (ibid.).

As a result of considering the *paranormals*' advertisements as discourses laden with diverse cultural references, and in comparison with the self-representation witnessed in encounters with a foreign anthropologist, it becomes clear that in the former context the local and the Islamic is more strongly emphasised, whereas in the latter case much more stress is placed on a cosmopolitan self-representation. Of course, the nature of the data acquired through the analysis of advertisements differs considerably from insights derived from fieldwork. For this reason, they are not directly comparable in a strictly systematic sense. This becomes increasingly problematic when we consider the above-mentioned embodied experiences and the transmission of non-verbal messages as "data". Nevertheless, the appraisal brings to the fore that the self-positioning of *paranormal* has not only to do with world views and philosophies, but also with situations, spaces of communication, interaction and imaginations of audiences and, last but not least, business interests and strategies deriving from political insecurity in respect to the surge of Indonesian Islamisation. In the public expression of mass media advertisements, *paranormal* prefer to define themselves as locally respected authorities and pious Muslims. Yet during the course of our conversations, and in their everyday practice, the practitioners drew upon an ethics of openness and transgression. As I spent long periods of time in their waiting rooms, I was able to observe that they attract clients from differing ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds. The remedies on offer promise to counter (spiritual) insecurity, financial, health or love-related problems. It became clear that the customers trusted the *paranormals*' capacities to successfully request the spirits' or other powerful agents' help, no matter which religion the individual client was affiliated with.

Therefore, I would like to end with some remarks on what I consider to be the positive aspects and potentials of such practices. Although we have seen that a cosmopolitan counter-narrative can include orientalist and occidentalist stereotypes, there still remains the remarkable aspect of opposition to fundamentalist stances. *Paranormal* practitioners exemplify a unique kind of opposition to secular modernity. At the same time, they relativise and undermine the "naturalness" of ethnic absolutisms and rigid boundaries between religions and what are categorised as local beliefs. Furthermore, in the intersection between the mystical and the popular we find a blurring of the boundaries between the religious and the non-religious (cf. Knoblauch 2009, 12). *Paranormal* create alternative spaces. These offer the possibility for a re-imagining of alternate self-other relations (Moore 2011). Thereby, they contribute to a pluralisation of religious orientations. Ulrich Beck sees in the devotion to 'A God of One's Own' (2010) in Euro-American culture, a potential to counterbalance fundamentalism and fanaticism and thus to lessen the religious potential for violence (cf. also Beck 2006). It is possible that *paranormal* practitioners in all their varieties offer comparable potentials. It remains to be seen if there is a chance for future pluralisation of religious orientations and a revival or creation of tolerant traditions in Indonesia and beyond. At the very least, the *paranormal* practitioners deserve recognition as a unique and intriguing part of the ethnically diverse and historically rich tapestry of Indonesian culture, religiosity and cosmopolitan practices.

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