

# JAVANESE EPISTEMOLOGY REVISITED\*

**Bambang Sugiharto** | Department of Philosophy,  
Parahyangan Catholic University,  
Bandung, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

For the Javanese the whole life is a manifestation of the Absolute. Therefore it is not possible to separate the sacred from the profane, neither morality from religiosity, nor epistemology from ethics. Knowledge, as the pursuit of the truth, is not viewed as in empirical tradition in which the mind perceives objects out there through the creation of representations of them by the nervous systems and registered by the brain (Representationalism); neither as in Cartesian intellectualism in which knowledge is founded on indubitable certainties (Foundationalism). It is, instead, a matter of doing and venturing (*Laku*) in which one is to go deeper: from gross physical body, through subtle body, to the sublime soul. The centre of gravity of this pursuit is *rasa* (inner feeling, ultimate secret, the bearer of the divine life, the vehicle of life). *Rasa* is the quintessence of all the three parts of human structure : the head, the chest and the genital (the scrotum).

## Key Words:

• *Ana tan ana* • *Emanation* • *Laku* • *Rasa* • *Virtues* • *Focal awareness* • *Tacit awareness* • *Experience*

This paper is an effort to expose and elicit the complexity, the paradoxical nature –hence also the dilemma- as well as the significance, of Javanese epistemology. And this is intended only as a further discursive elaboration of certain aspects of the more complex Javanese culture and philosophy, without any pretense of finding its ultimate 'essence'. The salient leitmotif of this paper is more hermeneutic-phenomenology, limiting itself to certain particular texts, namely : *Serat Wirid*, *Serat Centhini*, and *Serat Wedhatama*, with other complementary texts whenever necessary. Western philosophical discourse will be referred here and there, by way of comparison, so as to clarify and elicit the specificity of Javanese connotation of meanings and concepts.

### **Javanese Culture**

The Javanese comprise some forty-five percent of the two-hundred-forty-million-strong population of Indonesia. The majority of the Javanese officially adhere to Islam, the mystical and devotional type of Islam in particular. Islam, however, is not the only constitutive element of their religious life. The Javanese religious life is multilayered, consisting of basic animistic thinking, Hindu-Buddhist doctrines and practices, and Islamic tradition. The combination makes a type of hybrid and heterodox spirituality characterized by mysticism, magic, the veneration of souls, spirit cults and the worship of holy places. This kind of spirituality is generically known as *Kejawen* (Javanism).

The tradition of *Kejawen* is extremely rich and draws on a vast literature that spans at least a thousand years, from the oldest, highly sanskritized sources to historical and legendary accounts of the old kingdoms such as the *Pararaton* and *Nagarakertagama*; from the history recorded in the *Babad Tanah Jawi* (The History of Java) through innumerable mystical and religious treatises influenced by Islam such as *Serat Centhini* and *Serat Wirid* of the nineteenth-century, to the works of twentieth century thinkers, such as Ki Hadjar Dewantara and Ki Ageng Soerjomentaram as well as the writings of contemporary novelists.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it is a continuous tradition that is fully alive, manifest in present-day secular and mystical literature and in the interpretation of the widely popular shadow-puppet theatre plays called *Wayang*, a javanized version of *Mababharata* (Indian mythology).

*Kejawen*, however, is not a strict religious category, but rather, refers to an

ethics and a style of life that is inspired by Javanist thinking. So, although most of the Javanese practice Islamic duties seriously, in many cases they discuss life in terms of *wayang* or *kejawan*.

## Worldview

Taken in general, the leitmotif behind so many Javanese literature is, by and large, the view that, human is the microcosm (*jagat cilik*) living in the macrocosm (*jagat gedhê*). Life on earth is seen as a battle between anarchy and order, which is symbolized by the battle between two opposing factions –Kurawa and Pandawa– as it is depicted in the Javanese version of *Mahabharata*. Disorder is represented by the Kurawa which symbolize arrogance and self-glorification; lust, passion, and desire; egotism and vanity. They are the one who do not respect the great order of the cosmos. Order is represented by Pandawa, the five brothers who stand for piety, selflessness, and trust in the righteousness and necessity of divinely ordained order. When they prevail, the cosmos and life on earth will enjoy quiet, harmonious, just and prosperous conditions. In fact, as the story has it, in the great war Bharata Yuddha the Pandawa do overcome the Kurawa.

The potential for anarchy and disorder is apparent in the people's drives and emotions; in their passions and desires. This is rooted in the strong bond between them and the phenomenal world (*alam labir*). But it is the inner aspect of their life and self (*alam batin*) that actually relates them to their origin, to the ultimate meaning and moral cosmic order. By way of various mystical endeavour, people strive to subject their phenomenal outer-being to their inner potential so as to free the inner selves in a quest for reunification with the origin as well as to experience the oneness of being, the unity of creator and created, of master and servant, of the whence and whither of reality.<sup>2</sup>

The universe is embraced by the omnipotent, the Absolute or the Essence (*Dhât*). This Essence is ultimately unnamable. It can be called Lord, God, Allah or whatever, but the Javanese would prefer to call it “*Ana tan ana*” (is, is not). It is not really a 'thing', but instead, the 'origin and destination' of life (*sangkan-paraning dumadi*), or better, 'Life' itself. The Absolute is the primeval existence, the “I” (*Ingsun*), the first that existed when there was only void (*awang-uwung*). It then manifested itself by way of emanation and became immanent in the world, in life and especially in human. It is even said that the Essence of the Absolute is the essence of life and of human. The

Absolute (*Allah*) sees by means of human eyes, hears by means of human ears, feels by means of human feelings.<sup>3</sup> Human is the mystery of the Lord (the Absolute) and the other way round, the Lord is the mystery of human. The Absolute is Life itself (*Urip*). It is Life itself that animates the order of cosmos, earth and human, that constitutes their essence and secret. This order is hierarchical, within the whole cosmos and within human, running from the grossest to the more refined manifestations of existence. The emanation starts from “I” (The Absolute, *Ingsun*), then dwells in its manifestations, and returns back to the “I” as the all-embracing conscious being that comprises in itself all germs of being and the whole universe. In Serat Wirid, the stages of this cosmic emanation are analogous to the stratification of man's structure which consists of three dimensions, namely : the head is the symbol of heavenly equivalent on earth (*bait al ma'mur*), the chest –the centre of the body- is the symbol of the world structure (*bait al muharâm*), and the scrotum –the dwelling place of the Essence- is the symbol of the Essence of being , through which the primeval unity with the Absolute can be restored (*bait al muqaddas*).<sup>4</sup>

### Epistemology

Since the whole life is a manifestation of the Absolute, for the Javanese it is not possible to separate the sacred from the profane, neither morality from religiosity, nor epistemology from ethics. Horizontal relationship is not separated from the vertical, neither the social affair from the personal. The experience of life *is* a religious experience. It is the moral task of all that exists to establish harmony between microcosm and macrocosm, the horizontal and the vertical, but also between the individual and the social, the inner *batin* and the outward *labir*. The inner must guide the outer, somehow that earthly life be always in agreement with the principle of ultimate oneness. The real knowledge is the pursuit of this truth. Thus, in Javanese tradition the true knowledge always bears moral character; epistemology is always ethical in nature. Knowing is gained by way of doing virtues, and vice-versa, as depicted in the famous principle : “*Ngelmu iku kalakone kanthi laku*”.<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that the compartmentalization in the Western philosophy in which Ontology, Epistemology and Ethics are distinctly separated cannot be used to capture Javanese epistemology.

In the Javanese frame of mind, philosophical or scientific knowledge, in

so far as it limits itself only to the phenomenal world, is not the real knowledge, its truth is not the real truth. Even if their truth is claimed to be universal – either in terms of its logical validity, its commensurability or its demonstrability- it is not the universality that counts in Javanese knowledge of “*Sangkan paraning dumadi*” (the origin and destination of life). For the Javanese true knowledge is a matter of personal experience. It is the lone search of a human-being desiring reunification with her/his origin, aspiring to experience the revelation of the mystery of existence, or deliverance from all earthly attachments. Many of the stories of shadow-play mythology have this lonely quest as their subject. The well known story of *Dewa Ruci*, for example, is a story about Bima (one of the Pendawa brothers) who, in search of the 'water of life', eventually met the god Dewaruci in the form of a tiny figure looking exactly like Bima himself. Dewaruci invites Bima to enter his tiny body through his left ear. What Bima finds within the body is nothing but void and a single flame with eight colors, meaning that all forms are within him, that the whole world is within him in an inverted way (*jagad walikan*), that microcosm and macrocosm are identical in every respect.<sup>6</sup>

The mystical journey is most often thought to be performed through four stages, moving from outside to the inside, from the grossest to the subtlest part of the body. The lowest stage is *shari'a*, which is living according to religious laws. The second is *tarékat*, the stage when one realizes the deeper meaning behind the rituals and laws, and lives accordingly. The third stage, *hakékat*, is the more developed awareness and understanding that the only possible way of being is to surrender to and serve 'God', somehow that the whole life and attitude become a permanent prayer. Religiosity now appears more as *laku*, that is, the praxis of the whole life. Rituals and laws as such lost their meaning. The final and the highest stage is *makripat*, when the individual soul has blended with the universal soul, irrespective of what one actually does (work, sleep, defecate, eat, etc). This is the stage when one has become a representative of 'God' on earth, an *insan kamil* (the perfect man).<sup>7</sup>

In the general praxis of Javanese ethical life, hence also in their pursuit of the true knowledge, an important key is formulated in the popular slogan “*Sepi ing pamrih, ramé ing gawé. Mamayu bayuning bawono*” (unselfish and diligent in fulfilling one's duty, to beautify the world). Thus, knowledge is not viewed as in empirical tradition, in which the mind perceives objects out there through the creation of representations of them by the nervous

systems and registered by the brain (Representationalism); neither as in Cartesian intellectualism in which knowledge is founded on indubitable certainties (Foundationalism). From the Javanese viewpoint knowledge is a matter of doing and venturing (*laku*), in which the self, the body, passions and personal ambitions, should be overcome by conscious control so as to give an opportunity for the deeper truth of reality to reveal itself to the consciousness. If these hindrances are successfully surmounted, and one becomes fully attuned to 'God' and to life, it will result in a gradual comprehension of the true knowledge (the *Sangkan Paraning Dumadi*) as well as in a benevolent attitude toward others and to humankind in general, and hence will surely improve worldly conditions. Indeed this attitude is, by and large, the warranty and the proof of the truth of the knowledge.

Thus, in order to accomplish such knowledge one has to go deeper into his/her self, which basically consists of three dimensions: gross physical-body, subtle-body, and the sublime-soul.<sup>8</sup> There are various ways to do this, from the practice of fasting, meditation, immersion in the river water to incantation or recitation of particular prayer formulations. In all these cultivation of soul, in the pattern of social relation, in the pursuit of knowledge, as well as in the efforts to get attuned to the cosmic order, the centre of gravity is *rasa* (feeling).

## **R a s a**

The meaning of *rasa* is actually multilayered, referring to different levels of self and life. In its most common sense, *rasa* means *taste* and *feeling*, such as the taste of rice or the feeling of sickness; it means the physical sense of touch as well.

But *rasa* also means *the sensibility that leads to knowing the right virtues* and behaving in accordance with one's duty and place in society. Particular virtues cherished by the Javanese are: nonattachment (*rila*), grateful acceptance of one's lot (*nrima*), mindfulness (*éling-waspada*), patience (*sabar*), solicitude (*prihatin*), and humility (*andap-asor*). In social relationship it is considered important to respect what others feel (*tepa-sliira*), and above all, not to do what might hurt others. In all this practice *rasa* means a feeling deeper than shame that has to be trained so as to develop into a fine sense. The harmonious social relationship is considered so important that the criteria of good and bad, right or wrong, are mostly determined by how an action is done unto others. The Javanese never have the idea that actions are good

and bad in themselves (deontologically) , neither good and bad simply in terms of God's will. So conscience (*suara batin*) is consciousness of others, of their gaze, comments, and criticism that affect one's position and respect for one's status. A good person is generally described as a person who knows the feeling of shame and who fears the opinion of others.<sup>9</sup>

In a more topographic point of view , the Javanese moral psychology believes that the divine spirit (*ruh*) resides in every human heart (*bati*). Body is a mere equipment of the spirit to live in this world. The heart is divided into two parts : the upper part –above the left nipple, called *sirri*- is the centre of rasa ; the lower part -called *kolbih*- is the centre of morality and decision-making. The cognitive system then works as follows : the head/reason (*fikroh*) receives stimuli from the sensory organs and processes them, then sends them to the feeling (rasa) in the *sirri*, the upper part of the heart. Rasa will differentiate and discern the moral quality of what is apprehended, and then the *kolbih*, the lower part of the heart, will filter them to form the appropriate moral judgement and action. This will be communicated back to the head so that it, in turn, can order the body to act.<sup>10</sup> In this context then, rasa is a part of the heart that discerns the moral quality of what is apprehended. It is in this sense that rasa is the sensibility leading towards virtues mentioned above.

In the mystical practice, however, rasa may be described as *the intuitive inner feeling leading to true insight*, that is, to the awareness of one's being as a part of the cosmic Essence. In this context rasa is often used interchangeably with *rahsa* or *rahasya*, meaning secret, hidden, mysterious. Rasa here is a sort of higher -or deeper- feeling of the presence of the Absolute ('God'), an undefinable fluidity connecting the ultimate depth of one's life with the Divine. Sometimes this rasa is also called *pramana*, *rasadjati*, *rasa pangrasa*, the bearer of the divine life. In the Serat Wirid, however, it is called *suksma* , *nyawa* or *roh ilapi*.<sup>11</sup>

A more specific meaning of rasa can also be found in the Javanese notion of human physiological construction. As mentioned in the Serat Wirid, rasa as *rahsa* is the quintessence of the mind and inclination (in the head), of the thoughts and spirit (in the chest), even of the testicle and virile semen (in the scrotum). In this connection, rasa is *the vehicle of life*, the most fundamental substance for the inception and perpetuation of life.<sup>12</sup>

Getting into the deeper layers of rasa is often depicted like digging a well. First what we see is only the grass, with some inkling that there might be

water underneath. By digging deeper, the earth gradually becomes more muddy. But after all the topsoil has been removed, clear water springs up. And it will continue to emerge unless the earth around it is allowed to crumble in again.<sup>13</sup> The Javanese believes that exploring and cultivating these layers of *rasa* will lead to the enlightenment of self, to the understanding of the origin and destination of the whole universe. The authentic vertical orientation is believed to be the key also to the well-being of horizontal social relationship.

It is quite curious to see what is *rasa* in connection with rationality. If rationality means discursive process of thought -something like *Verstand* in the Kantian sense- then according to Serat Wirid, rationality is the light (*Kandil*) of the Essence (*Dhât, âtma*), not the Essence itself though. Thought can reveal the Essence. Using different metaphor, if the Essence is a jewel, then the realm of thought, brain or rationality is the gold on which the jewel is mounted.<sup>14</sup> Whereas *rasa* is the mystery of the Essence itself and the bearer of the divine life (in this sense *rasa* is also called *pramana, rahsa, rahasya*).

But if rationality means something like 'mind', or perhaps *Vernunft* as in the Kantian sense, in Serat Wirid this kind of rationality would be akin to *Budi*, which lies both in the head (*Sirah, Bait al Ma'mur*) and in the chest (*Dada, Bait al Muhâram*). The understanding of *budi*, concerning the paradoxes of reasons itself in particular, can lead to discursive enlightenment and at the same time move the power of the will. In this context *rasa* is still deeper than *budi*, it is the revelation of the Essence through the ultimate feeling. *Budi* may incite the will to go further and to engage itself in risky spiritual adventure, but it is *rasa* that will ultimately connect us to the Essence in concrete experience. *Rasa* exists in, even is the quintessence of, all the three parts of human structure: the head, the chest and the genital.<sup>15</sup>

### Some Critical Appraisals

Epistemology -being the philosophical foundation of all kinds of knowledge- has served as the ultimate justifying basis of the modern scientific knowledge and worldview. Today, however, the modern epistemology has been severely criticized by postmodernism in terms of its rationalistic, foundationalistic and representationistic characters. Rationality is now found out to be language-bound, determined by power



and particular interests, a product of certain cultural worldview, and deeply rooted in pre-reflective, unconscious experience, in the sense of Husserlian *Lebenswelt*. The claim of the 'ultimately objective' foundation of knowledge kept shifting over history and in the end had been rendered illusory by Heideggerian Hermeneutics as well as by Derridean-Foucaultian Post-structuralism. And along with the deconstruction of the foundation, the modern conviction that, scientific knowledge 'represents' or 'mirrors' the external reality out there, had also been debunked. This is exacerbated by the decisive criticism from within the scientific realm itself (Einstein, Heisenberg, Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, etc) which has eventually rendered the certainty of scientific knowledge highly dubious.<sup>16</sup>

In such a predicament Javanese epistemology -in which reason is subjugated in favor of *rasa*- is worth viewing, that is, how such epistemology is to be understood in terms of modern constellation of knowledge, whether or not it makes sense, and even whether or not it offers a significant alternative for the modern epistemological crisis.

Western Philosophy has been focusing on rationality as its main subject, and consciousness as its *locus philosophicus*. Consciousness has been conceived of always in terms of Subject-Object polarity. Modernity was opened up by the primacy of human subject, which was celebrated by Descartes until Immanuel Kant. But along with the dawn of science, the empiricists early enough balanced it with the primacy of object and shifted the focus to the realm of experience. The notion of experience of this empiricist tradition, however, tended to be limited to sense data, while the operations by which the data were processed were treated almost like the workings of a mechanism. The prevalence of empiricism – which eventually was strengthened by Positivism- in fact did not last forever. The new millennium has witnessed the turn to pure experience, along with the effort to capture the rich and complex dynamism of consciousness. Some philosophers focus more on the subjective dimensions of consciousness and experience. Michael Polanyi, for example, distinguished two dimensions within consciousness : focal awareness and tacit/subsidiary awareness. Focal awareness is the centre of our attention while we are doing something, like when driving a nail the focus of awareness is on the nail. But there is also subsidiary/tacit awareness, that is, the awareness of the hammer while hammering the nail.<sup>17</sup>

A significant shift from the polarity of Subject and Object actually had come about from Husserl when he mentioned the concept of “intentional

consciousness”, still more was his idea of “*Lebenswelt*”, that paved the way toward more serious attention to experience. Reality is that which is experienced in the lived-world (*Lebenswelt*). It is existential experience. In the words of Karl Jaspers, “Existenz” is the never objectified source of my thoughts and actions. It is that whereof I speak in train of thought that involves no cognition. It is what relates to itself and to its transcendence. No definable concept can express the being of Existenz.<sup>18</sup>

However, a definite and radical break from consciousness, came from William James when he said that there is only one primal stuff in the world of which everything is composed, that is, “pure experience”. And knowing is simply a matter of relation in the pure experience. The bearer of knowledge becomes the subject, the other becomes the object known.<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by James, and referring to Plato, Eric Voegelin claims that experience is neither in the subject nor in the world of objects, but rather, In-Between; using Plato's word, it is the *metaxy*. And the term “consciousness” should mean the In-Between reality of the participatory pure experience. The issue in this in-betweenness is not subjective or objective truth, but rather “the truth of existence”, namely one's conscious and responsible engagement in the drama of being.<sup>20</sup> This engagement, in turn, will transform consciousness not in “noetic (intellectual) differentiation” but rather in “pneumatic differentiation”, that is, a transformation from consciousness that conceives of itself as fully immersed in the cosmos to consciousness that is aware of its existence in tension between immanence in the cosmos and the pull of the transcendent pole beyond the cosmos. This will constitute a qualitative change in one's mode of existence, a conversion into a partnership with God. This is a discovery of the pull of transcendence and a commitment to it, the mutual participation of human in divine, and divine in human, reality. Hence, the truth of existence is not a body of propositions about a world-immanent object; but instead, the world-transcendent *summum bonum*, experienced as an orienting force in the soul, about which we can speak only in analogical symbols, mythical symbols in particular.<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely in terms of this kind of Voegelinian mind-frame that Javanese epistemology can be better understood. The truth spoken about in Javanese epistemology is indeed the truth of existence, the tension between the seeking soul of human being and the pull of the infinite transcendental dimension. But Voegelin does not seem to have a specific idea of how to respond to the transcendent. For Voegelin the most direct approach to an

understanding of existence is the study of symbols that have appeared during the course of history out of the experience of people who lived in the openness towards their cosmic ground, and were inthereby “attuned” to the order of being.<sup>22</sup> Javanese epistemology is more definite in its claim on the primacy of “rasa” in responding to the appeal of the transcendent, hence in accomplishing the truth of existence. However, Javanese epistemology is also in line with Voegelin's thought in that the direct expression of, and the access to, spiritual- existential experience is mythical symbols. As mentioned before, Javanese epistemology articulates itself also mostly in mythical narrations and poetical verses.

On the other hand, as far as it concerns the multi-layered concept of *rasa*, it seems that we do not have adequate comparative reference in western philosophical frame-works. In western philosophical tradition *rasa*, either as taste or emotions, tends to be considered a secondary, and even unreliable, mode of knowing, as it is obvious particularly in empiricism. The concept of emotion is recuperated only by Michael Polanyi at the mid of the twentieth century when he claimed that emotion plays selective, heuristic and persuasive roles in the operation of science.<sup>23</sup> *Rasa* as sensibility towards virtues was perhaps alluded by Blaise Pascal in his concept of *Logique du Coeur*, and phenomenologically by Max Scheller in his philosophy of value. But a more elaborate discourse we find in the Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly in his discussion of the concept of *phronesis* in the context of moral knowledge.<sup>24</sup> But *rasa* in the sense of the mysterious ultimate inner connection with the Divine and even as the vehicle of life (in the form of male and female semen) can hardly be found in the tradition of western philosophy. While it may sound promising to elaborate, the problem with the latter meanings of *rasa* is that in such profound level of human existence verbal-conceptual discourse does not play the most important role any longer. It may serve to lead one's consciousness towards more profound levels of understanding, yet the understanding itself, that is, the enlightenment, is achieved not by the discursive mode. It is achieved, instead, through concrete practices and exercises. What is gained is not so much knowledge as *gnosis*.

The above ethico-epistemological framework may be unique and have its own interesting points, yet in terms of praxis it proved to have resulted in various dilemma and paradoxes. This kind of framework sounds in line with Aristotelian eudaimonistic ethics in that the pursuit of realizing one's true self in the Divine union is justified by the utter happiness accompanying

the union. This may also be called prudential ethics in so far as the pursuit of knowledge is viewed as a sign of wisdom. But surely this is not the type of Kantian normative ethics, which is strictly based on the rationality of duties and obligations. In the Javanese ethics, on the one hand it would seem ridiculous to say that striving for true knowledge is obligatory. Not living in accordance with the ethics of *rasa* is neither bad nor evil, it is simply a sign of being uncivilized or foolish.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, although mystical ethics ultimately aims at giving up worldly attachment, such fulfillment presupposes elementary worldly steps, namely, respect for the social order, which in turn entails particular obligations. In fact the Javanese basic ideas of harmony and unity imply orderliness. Respecting order in the Javanese ethics would mean to know and show appropriate manners, to speak the right words, to maintain an orderly existence and to respect the social hierarchy. Life is an ordered and coordinated whole which people must accept and to which they have to adapt themselves. It is precisely in this respect that in the Javanese ethics the accomplishment of moral duty does not simply concern human affair, rather, it concerns the whole universe. Thereby, contrary to the voluntary character of its eudaimonistic and prudential tendencies, the cosmic dimension of the Javanese morality renders the obligation or duty necessary and inevitable, exceeding human volition. Whatever the case, in this respect the disturbance of good order is basically sinful, while action that is directed at re-establishing order is right in itself.

The cardinal virtue of *tepa-sliira* (to measure by oneself / empathy) in fact makes the Javanese unfamiliar with spontaneous self expression of individual. Personal expression –the show of emotion in particular– is impolite, embarrassing, a violation of the privacy of others. Social life should be shielded from individual intrusions by safeguarding polite form, hierarchy and harmony. Thus people may, even should, hide behind formality and politeness. Good manners are evasive manners; one should always say 'yes' because agreement is polite. One should not involve the self, but maintain form and suppress personal needs. Refined manners and indirectness are important; they are signs of self mastery and patience. One has to protect him/her self, while slowly moving to one's goal. One should be alert to the intentions of others while remaining discreet about his/her own.

This kind of ethics are largely formulated in terms of don'ts rather than of do's, for instance, 'Be careful not to hurt the other's feeling', 'Stay away

where you have no business', etc. This kind of ethics in fact results in too much act of self-restraint. Not to involve oneself is good and wise. The irony is that, in the final analysis, this ethics of restraint can easily turn into indifferent self-centred ethics with no real commitment and engagement. And ethics becomes an empty conformity, or worse, hypocrisy. Infractions of social rules is not intrinsically bad, as long as one visibly conforms to the demands of social life. To be corrupt, to cheat, to frequent prostitute, and the like, when far away, are personal matters, as long as it is done discreetly.

The sign of ethically accomplished or enlightened life manifests in fine order, harmony and conformity, where things are accomplished gracefully and elegantly executed. Smoothness, refinement, elegance and grace –like those in Javanese dance and music- are called *alus*. It is culture at its best. So it is *alus* to demonstrate mastery of high Javanese language, to be aware of self and others, to have fine manners and a modest bearing. *Alus* contrasts with *kasar*, which is the absence of good manners, the turmoil of emotions, the straightforwardness of criticism, the rebelliousness of disagreement, the openness of conflict, and the lack of civilized diplomacy.

When this cultural wisdom is translated into politics, however, the tranquility of fine order and harmony can easily take on the serene order of the cemetery. Since rebellious behaviour, straightforward criticism and openness of conflict are disgraceful and gross (*kasar*), to rule the order, violence seems to be warranted. The end justifies the means. To deal with *kasar* people violent means is considered suitable, since this is the only thing they seem to understand. Hence, the rampant violence during the regime of Soeharto, the former Javanese president of Indonesia (mysterious murder of petty criminals, the kidnapping of political adversaries, firing into unarmed demonstrators, etc). Or, if the *alus* means is used, it would appear in the form of ambiguous euphemisms, such as the term 'secured' (*diamankan*) for 'imprisoned'; 'adjustment' (*penyesuaian*) for the rising of prices; 'put into order' (*ditertibkan*) for violent raids and firing into mobs, etc.

Thus, the Javanese epistemology, which amounts to ethics, and even to aesthetics in its primacy of refinement and elegance, in fact today has to face its own paradox and dilemma. Unless it is re-elaborated in terms of critical modern rationality, it will not be able to realize its own dangers and opportunities. Today western modern rationality may be considered bankrupt and trapped in its own verbal-conceptual framework, hence in a *cul-de-sac*. However modern rationality as an ethos of incessant auto-

criticism is perhaps indispensable and has to be faced inevitably by any particular framework in this global radical changes. This is by no means saying that any particular ethnic framework is to be judged in terms of its universal import. But rather, precisely in order to elucidate its own excellence as well as to recognize its own dangers, any particular framework is to be elaborated and examined with critical mind. And how can we avoid the discursive mode in such criticism anyway, since even this article is written in such discursive mode.

---

### End Notes:

\* This paper is based on a research sponsored by United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, through the program of IASACT (Institute for Advanced Study in Asian Cultures and Theologies) in Hongkong, 10 June-19 July, 2007. I am deeply grateful for the wonderful opportunity they provided.

<sup>1</sup> To name some of other famous manuscripts, for example, *Suluk Sukarsa*, *Suluk wijil*, *Suluk Malang-Sumirang*, *Serat Sastra Gendhing* (17<sup>th</sup> century), *Serat Cebolek*, *Serat Cipto Waskitho*, *Suluk Gatholoco*, *serat Wedhatama* (19<sup>th</sup> century), or contemporary novels of the twentieth century such as *Pengakuan Pariyem* (Linus Suryadi AG), *Ronggeng Dukub Paruk* (Mohamad Sobary) or the latest work *Glonggong* (Junaedi Setiyono, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Niels Mulder, *Mysticism in Java* (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1998) pp. 29-30

<sup>3</sup> Such bold statement is stated in *Serat Wirid* (eight statements of the first chapter), but also found in the *Serat Tjenthini* (III, 561-562), and the most radical is in the *Suluk Malang Sumirang* (Song IV, 20 : “There is no God, for you are this God, outwardness and inwardness God is you, all letters replace the letter alef, Allah is you”). See as quoted by Harun Hadiwijono, *Man in the Present Javanese Mysticism* (Amsterdam : Bosch & Keuning N.V. 1967), pp 122-124

<sup>4</sup> This javanese Islamic interpretation in fact corresponds to the Hindu (Çaivism) version which are : *Niskala*, *Sakala-Niskala*, and *sakala*; and also with Mahayana Buddhist version : *Dharmakaya*, *Sambhogakaya*, *Nirmanakaya*. For the details of comparison see *ibid.* pp 21-109

<sup>5</sup> The complete verse is as follows : *Ngelmu iku kalakone kanthi laku/ lekase lawan kas/ tegese kas nyantosani/ satya budya pangekese dur angkara/*. *Serat Wedhatama*, Pocung 33, see Yusro Edy Nugroho, *Serat Wedhatama* (Semarang : Mimbar, 2001) p 42

<sup>6</sup> The story is written in *Serat Cebolek* from the 19<sup>th</sup> century . Cfr. Franz Magnis-Suseno, *Pijar-Pijar Filsafat* (Yogyakarta : Kanisius, 2005) pp 42-43

<sup>7</sup> These four stages originally stemmed from Islamic mysticism of Hamzah Pansuri, but later became ubiquitous in various texts of Javanism . Cfr. Harun Hadiwijono, *op.cit.* pp 94- 115

- <sup>8</sup> These three dimensions is paralell with the three stages of emanation mentioned before.
- <sup>9</sup> Cfr. Niels Mulder , op.cit. pp 65- 67
- <sup>10</sup> Cfr. Konstantinos Retsikas ,”The Power of the Senses : Ethnicity, History and Embodiment in east Java, Indonesia “, in *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol 35, no 102, July 2007, pp197-99
- <sup>11</sup> The discussion on the details of contextual meaning of 'rasa' involving the opinions of Zoetmulder, Kraemer and Hadiwijono can be found in Harun Hadiwijono, op.cit. pp 127-29
- <sup>12</sup> This is written explicitly in the fourth, fifth and sixth statements of the first chapter of the Serat Wirid. See as quoted in Harun Hadiwijono, op.cit. pp 107-9
- <sup>13</sup> See Franz Magnis-Suseno, op.cit pp 53
- <sup>14</sup> Cfr. Harun Hadiwijono. op.cit. 129
- <sup>15</sup> The head, the chest and the genital, each has its own layers. And in the three of them *rasa* is the deepest and most mysterious layer. Ibid. pp 134-36
- <sup>16</sup> I have discussed elsewhere this problem of epistemology in Postmodern context more thoroughly. See Bambang Sugiharto, *The Primacy of Metaphor in Postmodern Philosophy* (Rome : Universita San Tomasso, 1994).
- <sup>17</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge : towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1962) p 55
- <sup>18</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol 1, trans. By E.B.Ashton (Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 1969) pp 50- 72
- <sup>19</sup> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe*, Ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), p.4
- <sup>20</sup> See Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin : Philosopher of History*, (Seattle and London : University of Washington Press, 1981), pp 158-61
- <sup>21</sup> See Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame and London : University of Notre Dame Press, 1978) pp 103-4; also *Order and History*, Vol 3 : *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p 363
- <sup>22</sup> Cfr. Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol I, p.4
- <sup>23</sup> See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp 143 -59
- <sup>24</sup> Cfr. H.G.Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London : Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1975) pp 278 ff, 376 f
- <sup>25</sup> I b i d. pp 54-57

## Bibliography:

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method* (London : Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1975)
- Hadiwijono, Harun, *Man in the present Javanese Mysticism* (Bosch & Keuning N.V., 1967)
- James, William, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and a Pluralistic Universe*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (Gloucester, Mass : Peter Smith, 1967)
- Jaspers, Karl, *Philosophy*, vol I, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 1969)
- Mulder, Niels, *Mysticism in Java* (Amsterdam : the Pepin Press, 1998)

- Nugroho, Yusro Edy, *Serat Wedbatama* (Semarang : Mimbar, 2001)
- Polanyi, Michael, *Personal Knowledge : towards a Postcritical Philosophy* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1962)
- Retsikas, Konstantinos, "The Power of the Senses" in *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol 35, no.102, July 2007
- Sugiharto, Bambang, *The Primacy of Metaphor in Postmodern Philosophy* (Roma : Universita san Tomasso, 1994)
- Suseno, Franz-Magnis, *Pijar-pijar Filsafat* (Yogyakarta : Kanisius, 2005)
- Voegelin, Eric, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame and London : University of Notre Dame Press, 1978)
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Order and History*, vol 3 (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1957)