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# VARIETIES OF JAVANESE VIOLENCE

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**Andrew Beatty. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. I-xv +272 pages, with index.**

Andrew Beatty entitles his book *Varieties of Javanese Religion*, the very title making reference to perhaps the most well-known book in English on Java, Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java*.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Beatty's field work was done not far from where Geertz did his. The reason to repeat a study of Javanese religion is not to see what has happened in the half century (it is a little less than that) since Geertz's study. Rather, Beatty feels that a central problem of Javanism has been left inadequately explained. Javanese syncretism needs more attention.

To pose the problem as a matter of "syncretism" rather than "tolerance" is of course important and right. To tolerate is to "endure," to "bear with"; it is a type of suffering. It begins with differences, and it implies no necessary point to which these differences refer. Syncretism, by contrast, is a type of integration, though, Beatty says, it is not necessarily a fusion of elements. Following Charles Stewart,<sup>2</sup> he understands it as "a systematic interrelation of elements from diverse traditions, an ordered response to pluralism and cultural difference." (3) Syncretism begs for some understanding of what, exactly, orders the response to the culturally diverse. Perhaps there is no more timely question in the study of Java, particularly East Java, remembering 1965-66 when youths from Nahdatul Ulama killed "communists" and the recent killings of "witches" (*tukang santet*) in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Beatty cites Charles Stewart, "Relocating Syncretism in Social Science Discourse," in Göran Aijmer, *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols* (Göteborg, Sweden: IASSA, 1995), pp. 15-37.

The various Muslims, Hindus, followers of "Javanism," and members of the sects Beatty studied embody the effects of the historical forces that have passed through Java. But their relation to their past is not clear:

. . . If the historical background is important, its precise relevance to the present is not always easy to establish. Javanese syncretism may have its roots in the past, but it is not simply an effect of the past, still less a concrete thing which persists through cultural inertia. Its significance lies in a combination of immediate factors (the position of Islam, the nature of the village community, norms of association, etc.) and the present arrangements would quickly unravel were these to change. (3)

If history is insufficient, we have to look to the present, to the everyday (happily for the ethnographer). And, eventually, to religion. Beatty necessarily begins his study with the *slamatan*. Geertz said that the *slamatan* was "at the center of the whole Javanese religious system." Beatty does not dispute this, but he points out that it is odd. For while "participants see [the *slamatan*] as integral to their lives as social beings and to their sense of themselves as Javanese" (25), and though it "is a communal affair" [yet and contrary to Geertz] it defines no distinct community." (25) This is because though it is largely verbal and though there is "lengthy exegesis" as part of the ceremony, and though it purports "to embody a shared perspective on mankind, God, and the world, it represents nobody's views in particular." (25)

Here is a ritual, then, that says nothing about what people believe. This is possible because while everything is explained, each can hold (silently) his own beliefs:

. . . each symbol has a range of meanings which variously contradict, complement, or nest inside each other. The variant readings which comprise this symbolic ambiguity are not the quibbles of specialists over the finer points of tradition; they reflect fundamental differences of a kind we are not accustomed (not *prepared*) to expect in ritual. A few of the participants believe that a transcendent and unknowable God created man and sent down the Koran to Muhammad as his sole guide, and that man's preordained actions lead inexorably to heaven or hell. A few others disbelieve in any kind of afterlife, and question the idea of a personal God, the absolute truth of the Koran, and the divine mission of Muhammad. The remainder—perhaps a small majority, though proportions vary—believe in the continued existence of ancestors and perhaps in some form of *karma*, but not in a Muslim afterlife. But they all pronounce the same words. (34)

The "multivocal symbol is . . . revealed as an example and vehicle of syncretism." (27) So long as people in the ceremony say the same words, or at least attest to these words, there is "syncretism." The ritual contains one set of symbols but an expanse of meanings. Of course, any participant understands that many people present hold beliefs conflicting with his own. "Syncretism," the possibility of holding diverse traditions together, returns to the power of ritual since within the *slamatan* there is a tacit recognition of these differences and that nonetheless there is a certain unity.

Beatty believes that Geertz, who placed his discussion of the *slamatan* in the section describing peasant beliefs, "blurs the issue," the issue being whether the *slamatan* "is really at the centre of the whole Javanese religious system." (28). Beatty

wants to give credit to Mark Woodward for saying that the whole is merely the peasant version of court-centered Islamic mystical practice.<sup>3</sup> But, in fact, Beatty rejects Woodward's view. Woodward would have Islam be the "unifying factor." On the face of it, if the participants hold such various and such apparently unIslamic beliefs it would seem to be obvious that Islam scarcely unifies. Woodward, however, contends, following the Islamicist Hodgson, that these beliefs are simply no longer apparent as Muslim but that, if one knew earlier Muslim practices, one would recognize them. In fact, Woodward is himself a bit of a syncretist, espousing not only that notion but the belief found in the Javanese courts that peasant religious practices are merely degraded versions of authentic court versions. Woodward's notion of derivation comes up against the questions of social identity. If one were to say that the similarities of Jewish and Muslim prayer indicate that the later are derived from the earlier, one would still not dare to claim that Muslims are really Jews. The question of whether Javanese are "really" Muslims as opposed to the majority being, in some sense, Muslim was, of course, never at stake for anyone besides Woodward. Nor, contrary to Woodward, did Geertz ever deny the multiple foreign sources of the *slamatan*, particularly Hindu but also Javanese. What is original about Javanism rests in its ability to syncretize, including even elements possibly derived from the courts. The problem remains of how to locate this synthesizing capacity. To look for it is to ask what holds the Javanese together (insofar as they are held together). Can syncretism be located in one cultural tradition that includes all others, and if so, can we name it? It is in the nature of cultural syncretism that after its operations it is hard to know what is left of the original.

Beatty gives examples of Javanese religious practices as he proceeds through the book. However interesting in themselves, these, in my view, do not advance the fundamental question he has raised. He gives, however, a fascinating account of the *slamatan* by problematizing it as he does:

Indeed, as religious orientations, we find all three of Geertz's variants, and combinations thereof, present in the same event. It is as if the pious trader, the animist farmer, and the mystic were seated at the same meal and obliged to talk about the very thing that divides them. What could they possibly have in common? And what keeps their passionately held differences from erupting in discord? (30)

What indeed. It comes back in this account to the *slamatan* itself. It is not exact to say that participants in the *slamatan* are "obliged to talk about the very thing that divides them." Rather, as Beatty makes precise, they speak of the "multivocal symbols" but not of all their meanings. Beatty cites a line of the speaker at the rite: "There is five-coloured porridge: red, yellow, white, black, and green, dedicated to their four wise siblings of many colours, the fifth being oneself." (31) The meanings of the colors are left to individual interpretation outside the rite. To follow Beatty again:

What is not said is at least as significant as what is said. And what is said, though it varies little among speakers, varies greatly in meaning. The formulaic

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Woodward, ed., *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Developments in Indonesian Political Thought* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1996).

explication of the *slamatan* address, in its generalities, ambiguities, and wordplay, encompasses diversity and seems, superficially, to deny it . . . (51)

There is an agreement, one might say, not to bring up differences. But, Beatty goes on, "there is still a sense that something important has been said and shared. If this is ritual as consensus, it is a peculiar form of consensus which under the surface preserves contradictions and divisions." (51) Differences are, he adds, buried "in common ground," which is "common only in form, not sense." The result is that "instead of consensus . . . we find compromise and provisional synthesis" [provisional because it lasts only as long as the ritual]: a temporary truce among people of radically different orientation." (25) The ritual consists of the insistence, not to say belief, that local people have ritual form in common. But, as Beatty points out, knowledge of difference persists; a "truce" implies the continued differences of the parties who have agreed to it. If what sets people apart is put aside during the ritual, it seems not to be ever out of mind. Individual interpretation of common symbols is well known to Javanese, who, in my experience, outside the ritual, comment on the ignorance of others. Beatty's use of the word "truce" seems to me apt.

It seems to me that Beatty does not sufficiently credit the local nature of the *slamatan*. *Slamatan* are found throughout Java, but they are local in the first place because the spirits that are referred to in the rite are local. They are sometimes Muslim spirits, just as they are sometimes "Javanese." Even without the form of ghosts, the spirits of the past haunt Java by residing in the persons who participate in the *slamatan*, giving them their indisputable identities as Muslims or whatever else. One might think of the *slamatan* from this point of view as a ritual which localizes the major currents that have swept through Java. Through the *slamatan*, these historical effects, taking the shape of participants, human and otherwise, are given a place. The assertion of these differences is a significant part of the rite which in effect says that all of these forces have a place. If the forms are "multivocal" but still common, it is because these forms have been variously inhabited and continue to be. The *slamatan* is local, then, in the sense that it localizes; and it localizes a great diversity of cultural influences which remain distinct.

When Beatty says that the *slamatan* "defines no distinct community," I am not sure that I agree. It seems to me that there is a local community and that the *slamatan* is its ritual expression. But doubtlessly there is no consensus on the meaning of the ritual. Ritual is often thought of as a fundamental form of self-consciousness. From the time of Durkheim at least, it has been seen as the highest form of self-consciousness a people are capable of. Durkheim explained totemism, for instance, as the effect of the "effervescence" Australian peoples felt when, assembling after periods of dispersal, they sensed their commonality.<sup>4</sup> The first objects that came their way became their self-reflection: they "were" then lizards or whatever animal or thing they first came across in their excited state. The study of ritual since then has focused on the varieties of interpretation of ritual objects possible within a community. These interpretations one might call their beliefs. One can, however, distinguish between beliefs and self-

<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1915).

consciousness. The *slamatan* is a ritual in which understanding of meanings and awareness of commonality are prised apart.

This is possible in part because the participants are not thought to be believers but witnesses. "The guests are present not as a passive audience but as witnesses (*seksi*) validating the reiterated intentions of the host and as participants in the prayer. Their sincere assent is required and each phrase of symbolic explication is followed by a collective 'Yes.'" (34) The assent in the first place is the assent of the witness, the person who sees, who attests to the fact in front of him and who, by so doing, furnishes the condition for a performative utterance. The *slamatan* might, for instance, be given to mark the birth of a child. The witnesses attest to the intention of the host as it is uttered explicitly by the spokesman. In so doing they show that there is, indeed, an address. The participants are not the addressees. They valorize the intentions of the rite (that the child be safe) but not in the first place by identifying directly with its giver. They are there, rather, to show that a statement has been made and to confirm that there are, somewhere, supernatural figures who are addressed. Doubtless they differ about which these are. The function of these witnesses is to show that the ritual form is indeed appropriate, and that such an intention is rightly expressed through it. There is a form of communication, and it works.

Witnesses register what is in front of them rather than first of all sharing directly in the intention of the giver. What they attest to is not only the meaning of the *slamatan*. Rather they show that it is possible for someone to make the sort of communication to the spirit world, however defined, that is made in the ritual. They attest that it is believable even if they may not find it acceptable for themselves. What is said is not, for instance, "madness" or gibberish. They show that the speech of the host, given by his spokesman, is indeed a part of community life and is, therefore, "reasonable," which is to say "credible." Even if they disagree.

Surely the ritual manufacture of credibility of divergent beliefs is a source of syncretism and a source of community. However, it merely pushes the question of the source of syncretism back further. How is ritual made? I would stress the localizing tendency. The *slamatan* lacks hierarchy, the principal divisions being age and sex rather than social position. It is, indeed, a tacit expression of the sentiment that there is something that stands outside of hierarchy. The point, it seems to me, is not that there are "other Javas" away from the palaces, as indeed there are. It is rather that the local community finds a way to assert its localness despite factors that would and sometime do link it to royal centers. It is precisely in light of what lies outside the boundaries of the community that the *slamatan* takes its shape.

The *slamatan* denies hierarchy since all of its participants are equally witnesses, none with a position which might lend him access to a superior source of credibility, at least for the moment. This applies to Islam, and it applies to the courts. The *slamatan*, in manufacturing credibility, asserts its own power to do so against that of the courts and any particular religion. It recognizes differences to say that they can be held together by the force of a (Javanese) confrontation, one which invokes the spirits of everyone and the presence of neighbors who believe in some of these spirits. The confrontation is not, however, that of Muslims versus Hindus versus Hindu-Javanese etcetera. It is everyone facing the speaker, and the speaker facing everyone and every thing present or half present.

That the address is not precisely and not exclusively to the human beings there at the moment of speech is important since, of course, it leaves them as witnesses or third parties. By their capacity to attest to communicability, they form the community. Outside them there is, arguably, no credibility. Or there are other sources of credibility that apply to others.

George Kahin told me of his experience in Jakarta during the revolution. It was dangerous to drive, though there was not much traffic. The danger was from peasants, recently arrived from the countryside, who would wait for cars and then rush into the road, allowing the vehicles to brush against them. They hoped that the cars would knock off the spirits that clung to their backs when they came from the countryside. These peasants assumed a difference of worlds. Haunted by spirits of the village, they could not belong to the city. They needed to leave behind one system of credibility to join another. They found in city traffic possibly a superior form of truth, but surely at least a power greater than the powers they had heretofore acknowledged, a power which recognized their belongingness to a different realm and, at the same time, their potential for joining a new system of communications. The separation of self-consciousness from belief in the *slamatan*, which assumes that a variety of beliefs does not preclude the making of a community, prepared these peasants for city life with its quite different assumptions about what is believable.

It is a question of communications and of their credibility, which means, following Derrida and others, the necessity of assuring an address, a necessity which makes self-consciousness not a matter of "us" and the first objects that seem to reflect us, but a triangular structure in which the witness is vital element.

There are other sources of Javanese syncretism. The most well-known study is surely Ben Anderson's discussion of Javanese tolerance and Javanese myth. Perhaps the association of ritual with myth is a thing of the scholarly past, but just as I wish that Beatty had developed his notion that *slamatan* participants are witnesses, I also wish Beatty had taken up the other claims to explain syncretism. Do the people he knows no longer make references to *wayang* figures? He might also have taken up John Pemberton's study, which shows how the symbolic power of the Sunan was greatly enhanced by the denial of Javanese defeat through a victory celebration that was necessarily purely symbolic. The power of the court to make cohere what otherwise is distinct and separate is related to this power of denial. Since the "truce" Beatty describes is so close to denial, one would like to know about its place in Javanese symbolic life. Is there something general to be said? Finally, I wonder why in considering a ritual which is more than most based on speech he did not consider the qualities of the Javanese speech. My own explanation of Javanese speech concludes with a discussion of the formation of the community out of the capacity of low Javanese to demand to be translated into high Javanese, thus to find its proper addressee and to form the community in the same gesture while, at the same time, taking in the foreign. The Javanese language itself puts together what otherwise would remain discrete and alien elements, locating them in a Javanese framework. This

syncretism is related to the possibility of "toleration" as I show in discussing the Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

Reservations aside, one is grateful to Andrew Beatty for raising again the question of Javanese syncretism and for pointing out the qualities of the *slamatan* at a moment when political events make his study so timely. Banyuwangi was, indeed, the site of witch killings in 1998. Nationally, Islam progressed in the later Suharto years. Locally, this meant that "Muslim gains achieved over many years were now being consolidated." (241) Though national Islamic leaders were "liberal, ecumenical, and progressive" (241) (one could make certain exceptions), the results locally were the riots in Situbondo, near Banyuwangi, where churches and courts were attacked in an aggression supported by various local Muslim leaders. Beatty clearly is eager to have his analysis bear on these events, and surely it does, though he devotes little space to them. He refuses to think that the syncretic process he sketched is now irrelevant. He would instead argue that the New Order urge to confrontation and the Javanese habit of syncretism interact in complex and unresolved ways. Though locally Muslims were emboldened to claim more for themselves as they gained the support of the New Order in its later years, it is also true that Javanese

. . . have internalized the compromise between . . . different orientations, giving place—if not equally—to practical Islam, Javanist philosophy, and the ordinary rituals of village life. To be forced to choose between these theoretical rivals, or to repress one in favour of another, would not be easy. (242)

He illustrates how difficult such choice is through the story of a wedding in which a bride, a strict Muslim coming to her new home from another village, married a local man who was indifferent to Islam; a situation, Beatty points out, that is usual enough. In Beatty's story, the bride is torn between Islamic and Javanist orientations as she becomes possessed by the spirit of her grandfather, a *kijaji* who was killed as a sorcerer and reappeared to her, as he had done earlier to others, as a weretiger. This vision was interpreted as the effect of neglecting spirits in favor of Islam. The situation raises questions about division of loyalties, and recalls other interesting complications, such as those symbolized by wearing and not wearing the veil. It is of course suggestive both of how religion in its various forms compels identity and how strong the wish is for a truce.

One wishes, in the light of later events, to know more how phantasms arise. The explanation of the riots in Situbondo are various. The local military official warned about a repetition of the events of 1965–66 while government spokesmen discussed "'the heating up' which precedes an election rather than as the stirrings of deeper religious currents." (242) These clichés of the New Order, however, might be taken seriously to the extent, at least, that "deeper religious currents" are not alternatives to "heating up." The "heating up" of sentiments occurs obviously because during an election people must declare their choice, a choice for someone being also a choice against someone else. This, naturally, is what puts pressure on the "truce" of the

<sup>5</sup> The references for this paragraph are Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Mythology and the Tolerance of the Javanese* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1965); John Pemberton, *On the Subject of "Java"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); James Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

*slamatan* which depends on acknowledging differences only to have them not count. Beatty's analysis of the *slamatan* as the mechanism of syncretism is not at all out of place. It is rather that the *slamatan* is, again, a local phenomenon. But the rioters of Situbondo claimed not to be "Javanese" or residents of a particular place, but rather to be Muslims. The *slamatan* failed precisely to show that in a particular locality, everyone belongs. The inability of government authorities to control events was matched by the inadequacy of national Muslim leaders. It is an indication of how the truncation of political processes in the New Order left a gap, to use the term Jakartan's favor, between the local and the national. New methods of syncretism outside the locality did not develop. National identity did not suffice. Mere fear of the repetition of 1965-66 was not enough to hold back violence.

It is clear from reading the statements of Muslims involved in these events that they felt neglected by the representatives of the national government. If they took out their anger on Christians, who were sometimes Chinese, and even on fantasized Jews, it is because they demanded recognition for themselves.<sup>6</sup> The strange, fascinating form of self-recognition available in the *slamatan* was clearly insufficient. The recognition of differences led to violence because, in the national sphere, they could find no reflection of themselves. Which is to say, as a result of the "gap" dividing the actors from the national sphere, there was no possibility of either syncretism or tolerance.

The *slamatan*, by putting differences aside in favor of a common identity, also insists that violence is not part of identity. One only has to think of Javanese life as it would be without the *slamatan*. Then, people of different cultural traditions would face each other and, quite possibly, have to decide who is dominant and who must give in. The usual understanding is that those who are more forceful are the masters. Their form of identity comprehends force; the dominated must abjure it. Out of the recognition of differences comes a political understanding. The *slamatan*, by separating belief and self-consciousness, by saying that all recognize the same symbols and, in a sense, are recognized by them, avoids this confrontation which perhaps necessarily incorporates violence as an element of identity. Rural Javanese self-consciousness, the reflection of self gained in ritual, comes with *rukun*, or harmony and peace. It is the blessing of the spirits, in the idiom of many. It is the effect, in any case, of placing violence outside identity.

Violence is not eliminated, of course. How it occurs is a disputed question. In East Java in 1965 massacres followed the conflict between landless peasants and landowners, between landless Javanist communists and Muslim proprietors. Geoffrey Robinson, in his study of Bali, points out that the idea of beautiful Bali prevented the study of the fissures in Balinese society along which the terrible violence of 1965 occurred. He attributes the violence not entirely to conflict internal to Bali, but to the engagement of the army and governmental authorities who incited the killings. The implication, however, is that without the conflict already inherent in Balinese society, there would have been no killings. Robinson attacks the idea, which he attributes to Clifford Geertz, that violence is spontaneous and comes, in effect, out of nowhere.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The statements of participants are reported in various issues of *Media Dakwah* for 1993 and are discussed in my "Kiblat and The Mediatic Jew" to appear in a volume edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Paradise* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

In Aceh in 1965 all Communists were murdered after the army encouraged high school students to kill them. There, however, one cannot speak of social fissures. There were only about two thousand communists in Aceh out of a population of well over a million, and they were, locally, not threatening. The fear of communists was instigated from above without drawing on local questions. Yet students could be instigated to murder.<sup>8</sup> It makes the question of how it could happen all the more pressing. In my opinion, only when one sees the anti-dialectical forms of identity that prevail in Indonesia can one see how violence is put aside in the form of the suppressed recognition of differences. The limitation of the mechanisms of suppression, such as the *slamatan*, plus the failure to generate new forms of social recognition, have to be taken into account in explaining Indonesian massacres since 1965, both those generated from above and those which arise “spontaneously” from below.

The inadequacies of all the syncretic mechanisms of Java, including the ones I listed above, are more than ever obvious today. Finally, it comes back to the peasants who brushed the village spirits clinging to them off against George Kahin’s jeep. They did so to become participants in the revolution, nationalists. Today, their equivalents who want to leave their villages behind find no means to replace their old identities or to keep them in check. And they find little new to which to bond themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> The events of 1965-66 in Aceh are briefly described in “Possessed,” the Afterword to the new edition of James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, forthcoming in 2000) and in the “Epilogue” to my *Shadow and Sound: the Historical Thought of a Sumatran People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).