

Christina Sunardi. *Stunning Males and Powerful Females: Gender and Tradition in East Javanese Dance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 217 pp.

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Confirming the date for submitting my review of Christina Sunardi's *Stunning Males and Powerful Females* could not be more auspicious, given that it coincides with the fiftieth anniversary issue of *Indonesia* (volume 100). Like new leaves on an old tree, Sunardi's project reveals just how much scholarship on Indonesia has transformed in the interim, while gently nudging readers to double back to the diverse roots of that fifty-year-old tree. Illustrative of the diversity, the journal's very first issue incorporated articles on "Prayer and Play in Aceh," notes on a Javanese gamelan recording and an Islamic school in Java, letters from an anthropologist in Kalimantan, a guide to available source materials on Aceh, two translations—a short story by Ajip Rosidi and an early account of the independence movement by the communist leader Semaun—as well as documents relating to the September 30, 1965, Movement.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, Ben Anderson's essay on "Languages of Indonesian Politics"—especially his reference to the importance of the riddling pun to the Javanese Islamic tradition as representing a "'capsulated' intuition"—that I would like to tap into here as I turn to the rich complexities of embodied knowledge explored in Sunardi's long-term ethnographic encounters with gender and tradition in Malang, East Java.<sup>2</sup>

Situating herself provocatively as both scholar and performer of the traditional dance and music of Beskalan and Ngremo, Sunardi makes an important contribution to ethnomusicology, dance ethnology, and queer and gender studies. Her work reveals how performers continue to negotiate and renegotiate the porous boundaries of sex and gender. Moving beyond actual performance, Sunardi investigates the dynamic spiritual and personal ways in which men, women, and *waria* (men who dress and live as women) access the subtle and magnetically charged power of female bodies. As I embark on this timely review, and in the interest of introducing a riddling leaf-related pun, I will interject here that "I have *jaka* leaves (*madon jaka*)."*Jaka* is the sugar palm. *Jaka* leaves are called *ron* in Javanese, but the Balinese verb *makaronan* means "to confirm a date." This has no direct relation to the older Javanese reference to the *ron* of the *jaka* tree, but it does point to an intuitive grasping toward an energized and highly specific plant in a natural locale, where a person might access and embody the feminine sweetness of sugar palm (*jaka*) while honoring a commitment in time (*ron*). In the interest of jumping scale, this playful, linguistically oblique confection, however far-fetched it may seem to readers, will set the stage for my review of Sunardi's sensuously nuanced account of the highly transformative landscape of East Javanese gender ideology as it is negotiated through the confirmed continuities and shifting partnerships of the researcher's body as both dancer and musician. On page 3, Sunardi

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<sup>1</sup> *Indonesia* 1 (April 1966), 205 pp.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Anderson, "The Languages of Indonesian Politics," *Indonesia* 1 (April 1966): 93.

draws on Nancy Cooper's use of the term *centripetality* to specify a form of "attracting power" that she associates with women.<sup>3</sup> Soedjatmoko suggests "a central concept in the Javanese traditional view of life is the direct relationship between the state of a person's inner self and his capacity to control the environment."<sup>4</sup> As I proceed, I would like to bring Cooper's concept of centripetal movement into a tight embrace with Anderson's riddling pun as "'capsulated' intuition," suggesting that Sunardi's text maps a host of these embodied moments where dancers and musicians are able to effectively harness feminine power through their capacity to secure, repeatedly through performance, a sense of place. This is an embodied state, requiring a sensual constitution (*rasa*), to which we will return by way of conclusion.

To her credit, Sunardi accepts sensuousness in scholarship, dispensing with the conceit in which mind and body, self and other, are considered separate.<sup>5</sup> Physical/cognitive/emotional/spiritual knowledge—embodied through a dancer's and/or a musician's behavior—has until recently been largely devalued. When scholars in the past have posited knowing what another foreign culture knows by means of participant observation and analysis, they have often been questioned about their conclusions and evaluations.<sup>6</sup> There is a clear distinction between "participant observers" and "observing participants"... or is there?

As an African American, married to a Javanese, Christina Sunardi is poised as a very particular kind of observing participant/participant observer. Bringing the benefits of being a Westerner "without the cultural, political, and economic baggage of whiteness," and simultaneously "as a brown person assumed to be sensitive and sympathetic to the perspectives of historically unempowered groups," Sunardi situates herself among the dancers and the musicians of Malang as a fully participating fieldworker (xxviii–xxix). "Foreign-but-not-so-foreign," Sunardi ultimately presents herself as a riddle of embodiment. She writes:

Many in the general population believed that I was a *waria*, a male who dressed and lived as a female. At about five feet, eight inches, I was noticeably taller than every Indonesian female I met in Malang (at least, as far as I can recall), and for that matter, most Indonesian males. My relatively broad shoulders and slender, sinewy athletic build reinforced the maleness people perceived in me, as did my studies and performances of Ngremo Putri, a female style dance that was usually performed by males as a cross-gender dance. My association with male dancers who lived as *waria* in their daily lives—waves and smiles to the *waria* who had seen me hanging out backstage at performances or sitting with the gamelan musicians at performances, sometimes playing, sometimes taking photos, sometimes videotaping—was further evidence that I was a *waria*, too. My personal experiences of the fascination for *waria*—who many said were more

<sup>3</sup> See Nancy Cooper, "Singing and Silences: Transformations of Power through Javanese Seduction Scenarios," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 3 (2000): 613.

<sup>4</sup> Soedjatmoko, "Indonesia: Problems and Opportunities," *Australian Outlook* 21 (December 1967): 266.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), xvii.

<sup>6</sup> See: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979]), 169–225.

beautiful, and ravishingly so, than “real women”—has provided critical insight into the cultural need for the power of femaleness as embodied by people who simultaneously pushed at and reinforced dominant boundaries of gender in contemporary Malang ... (xxviii-xxix)

As Sunardi simultaneously pushes at and reinforces dominant boundaries of gender in contemporary Malang, she offers her readers her experience as a performer, just as fruitful a method of gathering data as social science training. What she learns through dance is the riddle of silent embodied knowledge; this is a magnetic and highly mystical knowledge connected to the unique affordances of the Malangan landscape that goes far beyond being informed by texts and written information. It is, in fact, the riddle of this embodied knowledge—its implications, if you will—that assists the author in believing that she knows something without it necessarily being expressed verbally. This method of knowing through dancing—through the body—allows Sunardi to come to know something about East Javanese dance and music. In her dancing and her music-making she situates her own body in the research as a primary document, a magnetically charged “tool,” as it were, toward unpacking the six chapters that serve as the stage, not only for developing her arguments, but for experientially (and experimentally) revealing the particular power that the embodiment and representation of gender through cross-gender performance produces.

Chapter 1 introduces her main goals and her methodology. Chapter 2 confronts and attempts to contextualize a marked cultural ambivalence toward female power, revealing how female dancers and the (mostly) male musicians who accompany them harness this mystical ambivalence through male style dance. Chapter 3 explores the rich historical and cultural ambiguities that have surrounded the expression of female power by males, focusing in particular on the ways male dancers have accessed and embodied this power through female style dance. Chapter 4 elucidates how performers construct boundaries of gender through their senses of the past, further reinforcing performers’ concerns about the preservation of Malangan tradition in the foreseeable future. This two-way thoroughfare in time sets the stage for the salient connections made by her informants between the female style dance *Beskalan Putri*, and female power, leading Sunardi to further explore the ramifications of this mystical feminine power through *Beskalan Putri* in Chapter 5. By way of conclusion, Chapter 6 provides an analysis of performer interaction, synthesizing the main themes that link the book—power, the negotiated terrain of conceptual and physical boundaries of gender, and a discussion of tradition, preservation, and performers’ “senses of history” (94). What becomes evident is that often the most ephemeral interactions between performers contribute dynamically to cultural processes (staged as subtle “‘capsulated’ intuitions”) by and through which tradition and gender are produced. Neither linguistic nor historical analysis has any real purchase on this intuition because it is built into the miraculous quality of the riddle of embodiment. As Anderson asks, “How can it be coincidental?”<sup>7</sup>

Trained to think in terms of conflict rather than complementarity, scholars are often hard-pressed to observe the moments of gendered courtesy when drummers watch

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, “The Languages of Indonesian Politics,” 93.

over dancers, or dancers interact with drummers. These ephemeral interactions are often referred to as “marriages,” however fleeting, in which you take care of each other (Javanese; [*n*]gemong) tenderly as you would a small child. These shifting partnerships, built on trust and often guided by subtle cues, risk losing their mystical gendered force when the dance itself is never really described by Sunardi in a dramatic way that makes the performers’ physicality come alive. This would be my main criticism of Sunardi’s book; namely, that she lacks the power of a choreologist to bring the dances to life through narrative descriptions. Sunardi could take a leaf from the tree of choreologist Claire Holt, whose classic text *Art in Indonesia* continues to display a wonderful capacity for conveying not just the dance movements themselves, but the whole dramatic encapsulated moment in motion, along with an intimate knowledge of the meaning of every gesture.<sup>8</sup> It is Holt’s vivid description of the fourteenth-century East Javanese posthumous statue of King Krtanagara in the shape of *hari-hara ardhanari*, as half male and half female, that served as inspiration for Anderson’s work on power, ultimately so pivotal to Sunardi’s analysis.<sup>9</sup> Taking stock of this important statue again, as experienced through Sunardi’s chapter on “Constructing Gender and Tradition through Senses of History,” would have allowed Stutterheim’s influence, so integral to Holt’s analysis, a chance to re-emerge. Instead of the *ardhanari* type expressing solely the “vitality of the ruler, his oneness, and his center-ness,”<sup>10</sup> Sunardi’s fieldwork would have afforded her the opportunity to tease out the centripetality inherent in Stutterheim’s (and Holt’s) suggestion that the image may represent Krtanagara together with Sri Bajradewi, his wife.<sup>11</sup> The living bodies of Sunardi’s informants as performers arguably would have confirmed these salient continuities with the past, while revealing the shifting partnerships so intrinsic to her text. Holt describes vividly “a greater intimacy” apparent in East Java, where Saivite and Buddhist cults fused, both strongly tinged by Tantric conceptions and practices oriented toward deliverance by magical means.<sup>12</sup> Holt’s descriptions of sculptural remains, temples, and performative practices in the East Javanese landscape would have helped Sunardi argue more compellingly for the presence of the Indic sense of *shakti* as female energy

<sup>8</sup> Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967). Born in Latvia at the turn of the century, Holt emigrated to New York in 1920, where she studied sculpture, modern dance, journalism, and law, and started a career as a dance critic. From there she traveled to Indonesia, where she studied classical dance in Java in the 1930s. While in Java, she worked as an assistant to the Dutch archaeologist and scholar Willem F. Stutterheim, who became both her mentor and lover. Upon her return to America, she worked briefly for Margaret Mead at the Museum of Natural History. She later worked for US government intelligence in the 1940s, and was recruited in the 1950s to teach in what was then the newly emerging Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University, where she stayed until her death in 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson’s essay “The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture” first appeared in Claire Holt, ed., *Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), followed by its republication in Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, *Language and Power*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> See: W. F. Stutterheim, *Het Hinduisme in de Archipel* (Djakarta: D. J. Wolters, 1952), 69; and Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, 80.

<sup>12</sup> Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, 68.

and its importance to male and female potency.<sup>13</sup> Her analysis argues everywhere for the survival in East Javanese dance of the centripetality of Indic ideas concerning female energy as *shakti*. It emerges most evocatively in her conversations with her male *waria* informants, whose sparkling costume elements and femininely attuned gestures continue to cue the drummers of Malang. Such subtle power, described with eloquence and gentle prodding (*ngemong*) by Sunardi, confirms an enduring sense of *rasa*, that elusive continuity of sensuous femininity flowing in and around Malangan precincts, filtering up and down in moments of “‘capsulated’ intuition” to the most intimate sphere of people’s lives.

And now, I conclude my review of this important book with a riddling pun, cuing the copy-editor by plucking new leaves from that old tree:

When the *pesinden* at a *wayang* performance wishes to rest and warn the *dalang* to take over, she weaves the word *ron ing melindjo* [leaves of the *melindjo* tree] into her song. Since these leaves are also known as “*so*” and the Javanese word for rest is *ngaso*, the connection is at once felt, and to the mystification of the uninitiated, the *dalang* takes over the burden of the singing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See: Judith Becker, “Earth, Fire, *Sakti*, and the Javanese Gamelan,” *Ethnomusicology* 32, no. 3 (1988): 388; and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, “Performance and Gender in Javanese Palace Tradition,” in “*Male*” and “*Female*” in *Developing Southeast Asia*, ed. Wazir Jahan Karim (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 198.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, “The Languages of Indonesian Politics,” 94–95.