

ELEMENTAL PRODUCTIONS

# Jathilan

TRANCE AND POSSESSION  
IN JAVA

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## FILM GUIDE

ELEMENTAL PRODUCTIONS presents  
JATHILAN: TRANCE AND POSSESSION IN JAVA  
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### JATHILAN



Practiced in Java for centuries, *jathilan* is a folk dance that uses the power of music and dance to channel powerful and sometimes frightening forces. Led by a spiritual guide and a whip-bearing ringleader, a group of dancers ride woven horses in rhythmic unison until they are entered by spirits. Once possessed, they engage in a range of self-mortification behaviors until safely emerging from their altered state, left with no memory of the event and no lingering ill effects.

Despite its inherent drama, this extraordinary practice is more than mere spectacle: dancers, spiritual leaders, anthropologists, and enthusiasts all have their own interpretations of *jathilan*'s significance to participants, onlookers, and local Javanese communities. Whether *jathilan* is seen as an empirical proof of spiritual presence, a strategy of community building, or a resistant expression of folk identity, both the broader contexts of Indonesian historical, political and social change and the personal and subjective experiences of those who keep it alive illuminate the deeper significance of this dynamic performance art.

This film focuses on three performances held by three different *jathilan* groups, all of which are based on the outskirts of Yogyakarta, a city in Central Java. These are *Kudho Mudho Satriyo*, which means "Horses of the Young Knights," *Kudo Budoyo*, which means "The Culture of the Horse," and *Krido Kencono*, which translates to "Golden Pillar."



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### JATHILAN PERFORMANCE



As evident in the film, *jathilan* is performed out of doors, often in village squares or a temporarily constructed tent or sheltered arena. It may be part of a larger celebration or held all on its own. In the hours leading up to the show, excitement is drummed up by public announcements hawked through a travelling loudspeaker, and crowds slowly start to gather.

Beyond an eager audience, *jathilan* requires the participation of a number of key figures, each of which plays a role in the unfolding of the performance: the *dalang*, the dancers, the

musicians, the *barongan*, and the clown(s).

Arguably the most important figure is the *dalang*, alternately known as the *pawang* or *penimbul*, who acts as both spiritual leader and as a hands-on director of events as they unfold. The *dalang* is seen as having the spiritual power to induce trance in others as well as the ability to communicate with ancestors and other spiritual beings such as Queen Roro Kidul, the Goddess of the South Seas, who plays a meaningful role in Central Javanese mystical and spiritual life.

The performance begins when, dressed in black as a menacing “strong man,” the *dalang* makes his offering. He blows on a bowl full of smoldering charcoal and incense, repeating quiet invocations and prayers to Ki Asmara Bumi, Sri Cemoro Bumi, and Ni Asmara Bumi. These are names for father and mother earth, deities from which the *dalang* will ask for permission to perform and request protection so that the village and performers will remain free from harm and guarded from evil. He prays over the woven horses to be ridden during the performance and invites the ancestors to come and take possession of them. Some believe that this is the moment when the spirits enter; the riders of the particular horses possessed during this ritual will later themselves become possessed. The *pawang* also asks the spirits to keep the performers and villagers safe during the performance and afterwards.



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***"I ask for forgiveness from Sri Cemoro Bumi or other local spirit beings in local cemeteries, the spirit of the dead." — Barno, Jathilan leader***

The dancers and musicians then begin, working in concert to invoke trance. It is believed that the dancers will more quickly proceed to a possession state with the help of musical accompaniment. Traditionally *jathilan* uses a two toned gamelan to create a simple or hypnotizingly monotonous sound, a small orchestra comprised of a *kendhang* (a two-headed drum), a gong, other metallophones, and a *selompret*, which is an oboe-like reed instrument. Non-traditional instruments, such as a drum set or an electric guitar, sometimes complement these instruments. The music played alternates between monotonous rhythmic and melodic repetition and dramatic syncopation.



Of all the instruments the *kendhang* drum is thought to play the most significant role because it follows the gate of the horse. With their legs following the rhythm of the drum, the dancers "ride" their hobbyhorses crafted from woven bamboo. Male dancers often are shirtless, wearing cropped pants and brightly colored fabric wrapped around their upper legs. The purples, reds, greens, chartreuse, and sometimes batik patterns are accentuated with gold piping and golden bracelets around their wrists and upper arms,

beaded necklaces, bandannas or traditional hats with brightly colored fringe. Their facial features are accentuated with a heavy layer of makeup and even their whips are beaded and decorated. The horses themselves may be painted with stripes or spots and wide expressive eyes, adorned with brightly colored saddles or sashes and sewed on gold fringe to indicate their mane.



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The dancers parade in circles, marching their horses and dancing with traditional but unrefined stomps, whirls, posturing balances, and arm movements. The dancers may continue in this manner for as long as an hour or as briefly as fifteen minutes—however long it takes before one or more begins to be possessed by spirits. This possession may result from a sort of hypnosis by the *dalang*, so it seems that the dancer is drawn into possession, or a dancer may suddenly fall into trance all on their own. At least one dancer must be possessed in order for a successful performance, but quite often multiple dancers will go into trance to receive the possessing divinities. Occasionally audience members or onlookers may also become entranced and enter the arena to dance.

During possession it is believed that the performers are taken over by spirits and therefore lose consciousness or volition as their bodies are “danced” by these other beings. A dancer may know possession is imminent because his body feels cold, starts to shake, or he gets “pins and needles” or vertigo. Onlookers can see the dancers’ bodies seem to convulse, shiver or rigidly cramp up, writhe, or fall face down into the dirt, all signs that the spirits are now possessing their fellow villagers.

***“When I hear the music, I start to feel something. My head feels dizzy, I break into a cold sweat and my hands shake. Just listening to the music I already feel a trance-state, dizziness and feel something like a sharp pin in my head. ”***  
**— Hari, Jathilan Dancer**

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During a performance, dancers may be possessed by animal spirits, place spirits, ancestor spirits or even evil spirits known as *setan* or *roh jahat*. Once possessed, the dancers' behavior will be determined by the kind of spirit that has possessed them. Those entered by a horse spirit might eat raw rice plants as a horse might, and other kinds of spirits, such as tiger spirits, clown spirits, dog, snake spirits, and others all have their particular proclivities such as eating raw chickens or requesting particular songs to be played by the gamelan. They might demand spirit food, eating the standard offerings of incense, flowers and perfume or request other objects that are typically given to ancestor spirits, such as money, cigarettes, sacramental daggers known as *kerises*, and etc. They may interact with one another or audience members, fighting, teasing, or speaking in tongues.

Many believe the proof that the performers' bodies have truly been evacuated and entered by the spirits is that many performers become impervious to pain and may perform feats of invulnerability. They may climb trees, eat thorny or poisonous leaves or glass, swallow razors by the fistful, submit themselves to the lash of a whip, or stab themselves. In the film one participant even allows himself to be run over by a motorcycle while lying on a bed of thorns and another has his bare back pressed by a smoking hot iron.

The horsemen, some entranced, then enter into battle with another character in *jathilan's* performance, the *barongan*. *Barongan* is derived from *singo barong*, a mythical guardian tiger said to have accompanied Dipanegara during his battle against the Dutch in 1640. It is a large puppet believed to be quite powerful in either protecting the villagers from sickness, hardship, and death but if it is displeased it can cause misfortune. Accordingly, a village's *barong* receives offerings on holy days. Brought to life during performances, it is manipulated by two men crouching inside, one moving the back legs and the other becoming animating the tiger's front paws and masked face, lunging towards dancers and audience members and snapping the movable lower jaw.





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Amidst the sometimes fearsome or gruesome activities of *jathilan*, two final figures provide some comic relief—the clowns. The long-nosed Bancak and the short-nosed Doyok are said to be two princes in the ancient Kediri kingdom, yet a similar clown pair often appears to provide comic relief in *wayang* puppet shows and other folk performances, suggesting that they are just another iteration of a popular performance structure. According to legend of the brothers' presence in

*jathilan*, Bancak and Doyok were traveling through the forest when they ran into two man-eating spirits, known as *jin*. The *jin* wanted to eat the two brothers, but were defeated in a struggle and so attacked their foot soldiers instead. In the layers of narrative and legend woven into *jathilan*'s performance, the horsemen represent these foot soldiers, and their falling into trance represents their battle against the man-eating *jin*.

After the crowd has been shocked and thrilled, the performance is brought to an end. One by one, the *dalang*, sometimes accompanied by other ringleaders or helpers, will pray over the possessed dancers, placing calming hands upon their bodies in order to bring them safely back to everyday reality and to ensure that wounds or injuries their bodies have been subjected to during the performance, when they were protected by the spirits that possessed them, are rendered harmless as the spirits exit and their original personhood is restored. For some dancers the exit from the possession state is easy and gentle, while others must be restrained as the spirits seemingly wrestle out of their bodies, or have the spirit knocked out of them by a vigorous blow from the *pawang*. One by one the performers will be led offstage, looking slightly dazed, in order to rest, replenish, and reorient themselves. Once returned to their senses, most dancers report no memory of the event.





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### JATHILAN AND TRANCE PERFORMANCE IN JAVA

Some scholars believe that *jathilan* is the oldest extant form of dance on Java. Variations of *jathilan*, all incorporating signature elements of the form, are found throughout Java and broader Indonesia. These are variously known as *kuda lumping* in East Java, *kuda kepang* in Central Java, *ebeg* in Banyumas Central Java, *reyog* in Ponorogo and Central Java, *jaran dhor*, and *jathilan pitik walik* in other parts of Java and *sang hyang jaran* in Bali.



Trance or possession performance exists in many forms all over the world and is fairly common in broader Southeast Asia as well as throughout Indonesia. There are a number of trance performances found in different parts of the country with elements that overlap with those of *jathilan*. For example in the Barong and Rangda dance performed in Bali, male dancers and audience members may go into trance and stab themselves with *kerises*, or traditional carved daggers.

In Bonerate, South Sulawesi, older women become possessed and gorge themselves with eggs, walk over hot coals, let their hair and dress become disheveled and dance, often for hours at a time.

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On the island of Java alone, *jathilan* exists among a rich diversity folk performances that incorporate trance and possession. For example, *tjowongan* is performed by women in Central Java to invite rain in times of drought; a group crafts a doll representing the goddess of rice, and dance swinging the doll back and forth until they and the doll both become possessed. In *sintren*, found in Cirebon West Java, guided by a *pawang* a young girl is bound, placed inside a covered cage, and then emerges unbound, in full costume, and dances with the slow and graceful movements of the goddess by whom she has been possessed. If Javanese folk trance performances by women seem to be underscored by themes of fertility, abundance, and grace, men's performances are more physically dramatic and inspire fear and wonder. These performances include *silat*, or entranced martial arts fighting performed to music; *prajuritan*, a trance drama based on myths associated with the battles between Majapahit and Balambangan kingdoms in the 15<sup>th</sup> century wherein people dress up as soldiers and swordfight; and *dabus* in Bandung, West Java where male dancers go into trance and engage in radical self-mortification such as driving awls into their stomachs, eating glass and razor blades, and slashing their legs with knives. According to one eyewitness account, a certain memorable performance of *dabus* involved performers cutting open their stomachs and cooking eggs on a fire built on top of one performer's head; one man even cut off his tongue and danced around with it still convulsing in his hand. As in *jathilan* the *seh*, who is the *dabus* equivalent of the *dalang*, prayed over these various wounds, which all were promptly healed (including the tongue, which reattached itself).

The impressive presence of trance and possession performance throughout the island of Java suggests its importance in Javanese ritual and communal life. In fact, it has been said that at almost every feast or ritual in Java, barring birth and death celebrations, traditionally there would have been such a performance. *Jathilan*, like many of these performances, may be held at times of celebration, transition, or healing, and as such has been common at weddings, circumcisions, birthdays, and other festive events.



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### JATHILAN IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE

*Jathilan* can be considered a “folk trance art form,” an expression of Javanese animism that pre-exists the Hindu, Christian, and Islamic beliefs that have taken root on the island over the course of many centuries. Some conjecture that the current form of *jathilan* performance originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Sutowijoyo became the first ruler of the Mataram kingdom. Sutowijoyo rejected Islam even though it had already begun to take hold on Java, and it may be that *jathilan* blends the ancient indigenous animist practices he supported with a re-enactment of the historical splitting of his kingdom and preparations for war against his enemies.

Up until the present time, many participants believe that during performance they are communicating with animal spirits, demigods, ancestors, and spirits of the dead. Thus the dance has been described as both magical and akin to religious worship. *Jathilan* was historically performed by local troupes and handed down for generations amongst family members not just for aesthetic value but also to serve a function for their communities, to protect the village and connect with ancestor spirits. Some scholars believe it served as an initiation ritual or rite of passage, where if a young boy displayed skill in mimicking a horse's movement, then he was ready to become an adult. As such it has played, and may still play, an important sacral role, which is further indicated by its presence at the rituals described above.

One important ritual incorporating *jathilan* is the *bersih desa* ritual, or the annual spiritual cleansing of the village. This cleansing allows villagers to communicate and appease those invisible greater forces at work in their lives in order to promote fertility and harmony within their local environment. In this context the performance of *jathilan* becomes an indication of the good relations between the people and the spirits and a signal of the fortune of the coming year; it is believed that the performers' quick entrance and exit from possession states indicate blessings and good fortune, while the longer it takes performers to enter or emerge from these states, the more difficult or unfortunate the coming year will be. This is because entrance into trance can be interpreted as evidence that the spirits have received the people's prayers and they are responding in kind—if nobody is possessed it means their prayers have not yet been received, and additional prayers and offerings must be prepared. According the folklore of certain *jathilan* troupes, the one year no dancers went into trance was 1965, the year the country was plunged into chaos due to the alleged communist coup and violent retaliation where hundreds of thousands of people were murdered.

Contemporary *jathilan* performance is still imbued with a residue of the sacred and mystical meaning associated with experiences of communal trance, although in many cases the context and interpretation of its performance has changed. These changes are due to

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social and political shifts, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century by political strategies of shaping and promoting Indonesian identity under Suharto's "New Order" regime and by a concurrent and related trend towards increased professionalization within the performing arts.



After the upheavals of 1965, artists and art forms of all kinds became targets for persecution because of the alleged relationship between art groups and the communist party, and much public performance temporarily ceased. President Suharto took power in the late 1960's and held it for approximately three decades, until the late 1990's. Under his rule, the country witnessed sweeping changes heralded by projects geared towards national development and increasing international contacts in trade, business, and tourism. These changes ultimately affected

performing arts traditions as well, include folk performances such as *jathilan*.

Under Suharto's New Order, dance and performance was repackaged not just for local but also for national and international consumption, and not just for original sacral purposes but to bolster and illustrate the "Unity in Diversity" of Indonesia, which was a founding tenet of the nation and a key point of national pride. As such, local folk performances were repackaged for state ceremonies, educational displays, commercial shows, tourist performances, and as corporate entertainment. However, in order for folk performances to be appropriate to this new context it had to be modified. In *jathilan*'s case, this led to changes in the form: superficially, dancers had to wear yellow costumes because that was the color of Golkar, Suharto's political party. More significantly the performance was sterilized and sanitized; dancers were forbidden to enter a possession state, eat unusual objects, or engage in dangerous or shocking behaviors, removing a clearly central aspect of the performance. This has led some to classify contemporary *jathilan* as little more than "wholly domesticated spectacle" that can be considered nothing more than "strictly entertainment."



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***“During Suharto’s New Order it was like this: the arts were exploited for political ends. The artists were assisted, under the condition, for instance, that performers weren’t allowed to wear red or green clothing. They had to wear yellow because that was the color of Suharto’s party. Then Jathilan groups were forced to perform for tourists. They sterilized Jathilan. They forbid the eating of dangerous objects, and trance was abolished. This is an example of the government dominating and intervening in every aspect of people’s lives. Finally, when Suharto fell from power, Reformasi began, and Jathilan changed again. In today’s era, freedom has led to different forms of Jathilan.” — Bondon Nusantara, Jathilan Enthusiast***

Changes or decisions about what seemed appropriate may also reflect religious and class differences within the country, where upper-class Indonesians or those Muslims or Christians who have distanced themselves from animist roots of local religion, “power spirituality,” or syncretic spiritual practice opposed possession and masks and found the dance uncouth, primitive, frightening, and sinful.

Meanwhile the increasing demand for polished and accomplished performances that could represent Indonesia on the national stage meant an increase in demand for proficient Indonesian dancers and performers. Up until the Suharto era, *jathilan* was the province of laborers, people whose primary means of making a living lay elsewhere and who had no aspirations towards being “professional dancers” or living off of their performances. Indeed, most performers were casually organized in troupes that received little to no reimbursement for dancing, rather participating in *jathilan* for the enjoyment and for the satisfaction of continuing a valued local tradition.

But it happened that simultaneously, also due to educational initiatives and development under Suharto, the university education system for performing artists was blossoming, supporting an increased “professionalization” in the field where dancers began more often to be graduates of university than amateurs. Undergraduates at performing arts colleges, such as the prestigious Indonesian Institute for the Arts, now receive training in folk dances from different regions including *jathilan*, with some even participating in annual *jathilan* festivals and competitions.

Many local performers bridled against the New Order’s cultural policies and the restrictions and dictates that had constricted *jathilan*’s expressive form. Therefore in the late nineties, after Suharto fell from power, *jathilan* performers joined the cultural renaissance in the arts and public media that reveled in the new freedoms of expression. Local troupes reclaimed the form, experimenting and innovating, which re-injected the performance with a grassroots dynamic and a new vitality.

Some results of this creative renaissance led to diversification and hybridization such as

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using additional musical instruments, like drum sets, as a part of the musical accompaniment. Changing gender roles in broader society also emerge in *jathilan* performance, as all-women groups have now begun to participate in spirit possession, manifesting the wild side of the supernatural world that used to be reserved for men. Children's groups are also active.

However, despite this revitalization some fear that *jathilan* remains threatened by social and historical changes ushered in over the past decades. Local studies reveal a decline in participation; one sub district in Klaten used to have thirteen *jathilan* troupes and now it only has two; another used to have nine and now it only has one. Some local sub districts have instituted public performances held at regular intervals as a way to preserve the art form, which is still valued by many.

***"The purpose is to preserve our culture, to enjoy the beauty of the dance and music. The function of Jathilan is to preserve our culture and heritage." — Jathilan Enthusiast***



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### JATHILAN, JAVANESE PERFORMING ARTS, AND JAVANESE THEORIES OF THE EMBODIED SELF

As established above, *jathilan* exists within a wide variety of possession performances present on the island of Java. In such performances, the performers are thought to become “empty vessels” or “puppets” where their own personalities and desires are evacuated and their bodies are entered and manipulated by spirit beings—in the previously mentioned *sinten* by a goddess, in *dabus* by spiritual cohorts of the Prophet, and in *jathilan* and its variants by horse and other spirits. In fact, *jathilan* exhibits just one extreme variation on this common theme present in many other expressive forms, and perhaps ultimately signals a particularly Javanese or Indonesian conceptualization of the self.

One of the most popular forms of Javanese entertainment has traditionally been puppet theater, including *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppetry utilizing two-dimensional leather puppets, and *wayang golek*, using three-dimensional rod-puppets. In these performances, the *dalang*, or puppeteer, is the one who manipulates and plays the roles of all the puppets, changing his voice and movements accordingly. While clearly *jathilan* uses human beings and *wayang* inanimate objects, it can be argued that both instruments are conceptualized similarly: both actual puppet and possessed dancer act as an “empty vessel” whose body is filled and animated by the energy and volition of another being. In trance this other is the spirit summoned by the *dalang*; in puppetry it is a familiar character brought to life by the *dalang* himself.

In both these situations, the *dalang* is a revered mediator of sorts, a channel either for the will of the spirits or for the essence of a familiar character. The dancers, as much as the puppets, are merely “danced.” Like the *pawang*, the *dalang* in puppet theater performances will also use offering and prayer to ensure a successful performance, which in part depends on his spiritual potency. This division of labor and disparity in power is indicated outside of the realm of performance—while dancers are not accorded any special social status it is not uncommon for *dalangs* or *pawangs* to be accorded high status, sometimes even serving priestly functions in their communities.

The role of *dalang*, and the extension of puppet analogies, can be found in other popular Javanese performances where trance or possession do not occur, such as the folk theater forms of *ketoprak*, and *ludruk*, where human comedic improvisers are guided in the developing plot by a *dalang*, who often appears onstage and acts like an interactive on-the-spot director. This puppet-master model even translates into other aspects of life, including interpretations of political events; as power shifts people may wonder, who is the *dalang*? In other words who is the secret orchestrator behind power plays, the one “pulling the strings” behind the scene?

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Of course, when *jathilan* dancers become puppets of the spirits, they do wild, coarse, and shocking things. Therefore aspects of *jathilan*, and other Javanese folk trance performances, may be positioned in clear contrast to other forms of theater, but in particular in direct opposition to court dance. Considered broadly, the difference can be summed up in the pervasive Javanese idiom of *halus* versus *kasar*, qualifiers that can be applied to people and behavior, objects and materials, art, and more. *Halus* indicates all that is refined, graceful, smooth, polite, restrained, and of high quality, while *kasar* indicates that which is frank, rough or hard, aggressive, uneducated, and unprocessed. From visible aspects of dance and performance, if we attend to what the bodies in performance are doing or how they are behaving, *jathilan* can clearly be considered *kasar* while court performances, such as *srimpi*, *bedhoyo*, and *wayang wong*, are *halus*. Movements in *jathilan* and other folk trance performances are spontaneous and improvised, what Indonesian performance scholar Felicia Hughes-Freeland calls “undetermined gesture,” while movements in court dance are choreographed down the most subtle movements of chin and pinkie fingers, exhibiting what Hughes-Freeland calls “overdetermined gesture.”

***“Artistically, the movements of Jathilan are really harsh and expressive. This was in contrast to the movements of the court dances, which are refined and organized. I see that as a form of resistance from the people. A resistance against the forms of the Royal Court. Because they couldn’t do the same things as the aristocrats, they have their own artistic expression that is now called Jathilan.” — Bondon Nusantara, Jathilan Enthusiast***



Therefore, at first glance, *jathilan* might appear to be a folk performance that positions popular selfhood and comportment as the complete opposite of royal and courtly comportment. In some ways the two do convey very different expectations for behavior. Possession would be forbidden in court dance for a number of reasons. First of all, the sultan holds not just a political but also a spiritual position in Central Javanese life. As such, within the court, the Sultan is the sole mediator between visible and invisible

realms; to invite a *pawang* or other such mediating figures into that space would be seen as an inappropriate challenge to the Sultan’s authority. Furthermore, the exuberant and unpredictable nature of possession goes against the spirit of seamless self-control and subtle refinement that is sought and prized amongst court dancers.



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**Table 1. Jathilan in Opposition to Court Dance**

<i>Jathilan</i>	Court Dance
<i>Kasar</i>	<i>Halus</i>
Undetermined gesture	Overdetermined gesture
Popular ritual	Rarified ritual and convention
Violence and loss of self-control	Subtlety and Restraint
Possession	Concentration
High degree of audience participation	Quiet and contemplative appreciation
Dancers drawn from local communities	Dancers trained in court since a young age

Yet despite these differences there remains a similar principle to both court dance and folk trance performances that express particularly Javanese theories of spirituality and the self. While court dancers are not striving to be entered by spirit beings during their performances, they are consciously engaged in emptying and submitting the self to a higher power, whether that higher power is the heroic qualities or core of the character they are embodying in performance or a divine essence manifest in human form. Therefore masters of court dance believe that it is quite valid to say that a classical dancer is also “becoming a puppet” and, by attending to their role, are “in a kind of trance.” If in *jathilan* the culmination of becoming a puppet occurs when spiritual beings enter the performers’ bodies to perform their wild feats, in court dancing, the culmination of becoming a puppet is reached when human weaknesses are fully replaced by the strength and goodness of the characters or archetypes they are portraying. The idea is that once physical movement and inner concentration or intent is in balance, the court dancer no longer exerts him or herself, no longer has to try: the movements are right automatically, they “move by themselves” as the dancer becomes one with divinity. This is a transformation that could be read as akin to possession, although one not quite so literal as *jathilan*.

Historically, the preference of the embodied idiom of becoming a puppet or an empty vessel in performance that can be found across Java and Bali has led some anthropologists to come to conclusions about the nature of the culturally inflected self; famously, in her work on trance Jane Belo believed the performance conventions were part of a broader cultural “puppet complex.” She identified both court and folk dance as “different manifestations of a

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larger cultural preference situating the individual actor as the vessel for reanimating traditional artistic symbols” which many anthropologists believed reflected an under emphasis on individuality or self-expression. This view, along with local emic explanations of how and why one becomes a puppet for the spirit, has been contested by some contemporary performance scholars, who interpret the work of Javanese performers as highly active and enactive and argue that they are not “being danced” but are actually responsible for dancing the spirit into being.

Kevin O. Browne’s work lends further nuance to analyses of *kasar jathilan* performances and their illumination of Javanese conceptions of personhood incorporating ideas of awareness, emptiness, but also ambiguity. Browne also uses the concept of “hard” performances to indicate those that have not been sanitized for state or corporate purposes, still including some of the more dangerous, shocking, or transgressive elements of the form. In some ways harmonizing with the “puppet” argument put forth above, Browne sees horse trance performance as embodying foundational Javanese concerns with awareness, or *eling*, and emptiness, or *ngalamun*. He too notes both the “emptiness” of the performers and the division of labor where the *pawang* remains the exemplar of awareness and control, maintaining his own composure, guiding the behavior of the dancers, and able to restore them to their own awareness.

In everyday life for Javanese, awareness and emptiness are powerful guides for behavior, motivation, and inner orientation. Awareness, or a “remembrance” of who you are and your place in the world, an awareness of your spiritual self and a capacity to tame and modulate your emotions accordingly, speak carefully, and not offend others is a cultivated goal contrasted with emptiness which is associated with daydreaming, dissociation, excessive emotionality, fuzzy thinking, and lack of consideration for others. In everyday life, emptiness is seen as dangerous, perhaps a precursor to mental illness or unwanted spiritual possession with the understanding that to be emptied out is to fall away from Javanese-ness, to make oneself vulnerable. Yet the paradox in the case of *jathilan* is that it is precisely this emptiness that opens up direct channels of communication with the divine and bestows blessing upon the community (as one might argue, it does in court dance), and ensures individuals safe passage through the performance. This embodied tension between restorative and threatening emptiness, a powerful awareness and control faced with a potentially even more powerful chaos, imbues the performance with a compelling sense of ambiguity and anticipation.

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#### SUBJECTIVE, ETHNOGRAPHIC, AND NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POSSESSION PERFORMANCE

To Euro-American audiences, who for the most part uphold expectations for a coherent and autonomous self and for whom the idea of positive dissociation, trance, or possession is mostly unfamiliar, the question may arise as to why Javanese performers in particular, and other groups in general, might volunteer to undergo spirit possession or why possession has come to play a significant role in multiple performance and spiritual cultures. Up until recently, this question has driven research on possession performance, and anthropologists and ethnographers have identified a number of functions possession may serve in its local community which are relevant in *jathilan*'s case as well.

One of these is the demonstrable effect of teamwork enacted to communicate with deities to preserve safety and harmony. As all humans do, people in Central Java face uncertainty and the threats of privation, catastrophe, and suffering, and hope to acquire a modicum of control over their fates by appeasing and supplicating powerful spirits. Javanese society has also been noted for its emphasis on interdependence and collectivity, and the value it places on collective work for the good of all. It is believed that a wide variety of communal activities can attract the beneficence of the gods, inviting good luck and preventing disaster, but *jathilan* might be particularly preferred as a form of collective spiritual labor and experience because the “proof” of its success is dramatically visible to participants through spirit possession.

The communal aspect of *jathilan* should not be understated. The group must dance in unison in order for possession to occur. Dancers explain that they must be in intimate proximity to one another and in rhythmic sync, saying, “We have to be close to one another so the spirit can enter us.”

***“The process of becoming possessed is called “circling.” Circling to be close to each other so that the spirits can enter us. If the circle breaks, there’s no way it will happen.” – Karman, Jathilan leader***





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The generational aspect to *jathilan*, where it is passed down from family member to family member, serves to further cement present performers to the community of those who have gone before.

In *jathilan* this successful display of teamwork is rewarded by communication with the spirit world. The moment of possession provides a sense of spiritual satisfaction and security, in that it is the proof that the teamwork was successful, that the gods approve and remain open to ongoing communication. It seems that even in *jathilan*'s increasingly secular context, as spiritual aspects of the performance may be less important than they used to be, the protective aspect of teamwork and community in and of itself remains. In the film, one team leader explains that it is healthy for adolescent boys to participate in *jathilan* because it "builds brotherhood" and "reduces juvenile delinquency."



Somewhat ironically, it is perhaps precisely because of the aforementioned cultural emphasis on the harmonious collective in Central Java that people may need some sort of cathartic release, the second frequently cited reason for trance and possession rituals. Everyday Javanese behavior is expected to be calm, smooth, modest, and moderate. Outright conflict is avoided and expressions of passion are frowned upon. This may put a lot of psychological pressure on individual members of the society, who must work hard internally to control themselves and manage their external presentation.

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Behavior during *jathilan* is the polar opposite of what is expected of daily comportment and self-expression. Possessed performers may engage in, and audience members in turn may witness or even spontaneously join, extremes of behavior that would be outright forbidden in everyday life. This provides a break from the normal self-monitoring and self-control. Furthermore, attributing such behavior or emotions to spiritual beings that are distinguished from the familiar individuals they are animating allows emotions like aggression or forbidden desire to be expressed without those individuals having to be held accountable for them. A similar but subtler interpretation, again following Kevin O. Browne, suggests that rather than a simplistic catharsis, *jathilan* performance brings dancers and audience into a collaborative and direct participation with moments of uncertainty and possibility, that elude cultural and political organization. This allows them to enjoy the anticipatory tension that arises at the thresholds between conformity and spontaneity, vulnerability and invulnerability, awareness and loss of self, which is a reflection of their everyday struggle to balance social restraint and individual expression within the norms of Central Javanese culture. The apprehension or possibility that something out of the ordinary could happen in regulated exchange is both exciting and anxiety producing, and hence quite compelling; the fragile balance between awareness and emptiness perhaps embodies the deepest psychological and interpersonal concerns of the audience members.

Finally, it cannot be denied that such novel behavior, that is terrifying, sensory, absorbing, and exciting, is also quite simply deeply entertaining. The “spirits” provide a real spectacle for onlookers, endowing familiar faces with seemingly super-human powers. Seeing these spirits in action may bring an almost voyeuristic pleasure as viewers can peer into the supernatural world of gods, demons, wild animals, and the dead.

Understanding the reasons why possession performance may be important to particular communities, however, does little to explain how it actually works. Ethnographic accounts of subjective experiences of spirit possession in Indonesia remain rare, and when these experiences are reported they may puzzle those who have only experienced *jathilan* from the outside. According to the performers interviewed in the film, participating in *jathilan* is a pleasurable experience. They describe themselves as feeling “light, carefree,” or reporting, “You feel good when you perform and wake refreshed.”

***“It feels like someone sings Javanese lullabies to you. It feels like a child being cuddled.” – Jathilan Dancer***

The subjective experience the dancers report seem to be in direct contrast to what their bodies are undergoing. Common knowledge and our own empirical experience tells us that getting our backs smoothed out by a glowing hot iron, eating light bulbs, or getting run over by a motorcycle should be physically painful, perhaps even frightening. Yet the participants do indeed appear to remain unharmed, both during and after the performance. From an

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emic perspective this ability to withstand violence to the body without feeling pain is evidence of the authenticity of the possession, and hence, the spirits themselves—the performers believe they remain unharmed because they believe it was not “really them” who underwent such tortures, but otherworldly beings.

***“I don’t feel anything. I’m not the one eating glass, I’m just the medium. It doesn’t hurt.” — Jajuli, Jathilan Dancer***



***“I don’t know what kind of spirit possessed me. I don’t understand the magic or the power of the dance. People say I eat things but at the time I’m not aware of it. Only after I become conscious do I taste it’s bitterness. When I eat something it feels good. But if I’m not possessed by a spirit, I certainly wouldn’t want to eat incense or things like that!” — Budi, Jathilan Dancer***

But what practices or processes enable this seemingly supernatural invulnerability?

Neurologically and physiologically, possession is an altered state of consciousness and a form of dissociation. An altered state of consciousness (ASC) is defined as a subjective difference in mental functioning usually accompanied by observable psychological, physiological, and behavioral differences. It allows for a state wherein one field or faculty of perception might be highly enhanced while other perceptive faculties are dramatically reduced, even at times eliminating all sensation from a particular field. Dissociation is a set of experience and behaviors where perception, memory, and a sense of identity are functionally altered.



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***“After I become possessed, I don’t remember anything. If my friends, wife, or child watches me, I wouldn’t recognize them.” — Budi, Jathilan Dancer***

To a certain extent, dissociation is a fairly common and often pleasurable experience, which can refer to fluctuations in ordinary consciousness that most often go unnoticed as such because they are not culturally given much significance as dissociation per se. Experiences of absorption or focused concentration during imagination or daydreams, study, sex, exercise, art-making, prayer, or time in nature, where there is a suspension of self-consciousness, critical thought, or the awareness of certain aspects of the external environment or the passage of time, are all experiences of minor dissociation. Trance or possession can be considered an extreme variant of a similar neurophysiologic experience.

The existence of trance and possession states around the world and the similarity of its subjective experience and outward expression bespeak a common underlying physiological mechanism. Certain aspects of trance and possession seem to be similar cross-culturally. For example, repetitive circular dancing is a widespread strategy of inducing trance or possession witnessed in disparate communities, from the Samburg of Kenya where it is known as “tromping” to the “grabbing” in American Indian ceremonies. Similar physical changes also accompany trance and possession states no matter where they occur: shaking or trembling, changes in speech and facial expression, muscular rigidity, pupil dilation and glazed eyes, postural changes, and spatial disorientation. Finally, people from different trance and possession traditions report similar subjective experiences of the possession state, and describe feeling lightness or floating, emotional responses, kinesthetic sensations, rejuvenation, and short-term amnesia of the actual possession event. These similarities suggest a common underlying neurophysiologic mechanism to this phenomenon.

Some neurological changes, observable using fMRI and other brain-imaging technology, include suppressed arousal and an inhibition of emotion-processing mechanisms in the brain during a dissociative event. During such an event, fMRI’s show less activation in regions of the brain associated with emotion sensitivity and more activity in regions associated with emotional regulation. Inhibitory activity in the pre-frontal cortex disrupts what is known as the ‘emotional tagging’ of perceptual and cognitive material by the amygdala and related structures. This disruption leads to decreased or suppressed autonomic arousal—in essence damping the “fight or flight” response—and act as a mechanism of pain control. These neurophysiologic changes may lead to feeling like one’s behavior is not self-directed or under one’s own volition. Under such conditions, a dissociating person could reasonably attribute his or her experiences and behavior to an outside entity, such as a deity or spirit, especially within a culturally provided interpretive framework encouraging him to do so.

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It is important to note that dissociation, here associated with trance or possession, can occur in different contexts. The context of *jathilan* focused on here falls into a category of possession dissociation termed “central” possession. “Central possession” is a temporary, voluntary, reversible, and sometimes pleasurable possession occurring during rituals or other ceremonial occasions. It is bound up in healing, religious, or aesthetic systems of meaning, usually attributed to the power or presence of revered spirit beings, and received positively by observers and believers. Central possession, despite its apparent transgressive qualities, is culturally patterned and remains supported by social norms and even follows norms of possession itself, which encompasses complex behavioral patterns learned by watching others or during previous possession experiences.

Although it is not formally taught, central possession is indeed learned. Through watching others become possessed performers become familiar with the many sensory triggers for possession; the auditory stimulation of the music, the visual triggers of hobbyhorses and costume, the kinesthetic triggers of dancing and stamping, and the olfactory stimulation of incense. These may be termed “culturally-specific somatopsychological factors” which are associated with or encourage possession. By watching others perform and hearing others speak about *jathilan*, performers are also socialized into the appropriate behavior once in trance as they come to internalize the beliefs about and expectations for possession performance. In the “role enactment hypothesis” a person who believes he is possessed by a particular spirit will then adopt the personality or characteristics of that spirit, and may be able to perform actions that would be otherwise impossible.

“Central” possession, which is culturally meaningful and socially sanctioned, is a quite different experience from what has been called “peripheral” or “maladaptive” dissociations. These are primarily involuntary, usually occur out of ritual or culturally or socially meaningful contexts, and may lead to depersonalization and a disconnected or “unreal” feeling, interfere with cognitive and perceptual processes, or cause personal or interpersonal distress. Such maladaptive possession is often associated with trauma response, in that it may act as a defense mechanism to block awareness of a horrible event which is either physically inescapable, overwhelming, or difficult to cope with. Javanese culture has its own folk models of such “peripheral possession,” which can be referred to as *kesambet*, the Javanese word for “possessed by an evil spirit” and sometimes, *ngamuk*, a folk term which can be applied to a variety of upsetting, aggressive, or disruptive behaviors which can be associated with a loss of functional consciousness or self-directed action and in certain cases with possession by a malevolent being.

Yet the differences between central and peripheral possession may not be so clear-cut. Some people achieve states of disassociation, trance, or possession more easily than others, and some may not be able to do so at all.

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***“I never experienced real trance myself. Because when I performed Jathilan and pretended to be in trance, the audience saw it as a real trance. Actually I was pretending, I just made it up. Not everyone can experience trance.” — Kasidy, Jathilan leader***

This may in part be due to an inborn propensity, but If dissociation has been previously or often accessed as a coping mechanism, for example during times of childhood stress or life trauma, then it may then become a type of “skill.” Some research points to the fact that ritual possession is in fact most frequently found in poor or marginalized groups, a category within which many *jathilan* performers debatably fall.

Possession states are perhaps best understood as the result of interactive processes wherein performers’ understandings of their positioning in social contexts influence their neurobiological states and vice versa, processes wherein body, mind, and sensory environment mutually inform one another. Dissociation encompasses both actual and spontaneous alterations in brain states that reflect basic neurobiological phenomena, and role performances shaped by socially- and culturally-informed beliefs, expectations, and templates or scripts. These scripts both functionally trigger neurological mechanisms and provide a way for people undergoing the subjective experience of possession to make sense of stimuli and responses, provide a key to interpreting what is happening as well as a culturally appropriate attribution to who, how, and why, it is happening the way it is.

In short, social meanings and contexts certainly affect psychological and neuropsychological processes, but a socially meaningful dissociative experience would be impossible without the neurobiological mechanism of dissociation.



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### POSSESSION PERFORMANCE IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

*Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. 1951. Dir. and Prod. Maya Deren.

*Les Maitres Fous*. 1955. Dir. and Prod. Jean Rouch.



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