

HOSTING THE WILD BUFFALOES: THE *KEBOAN* RITUAL OF THE USING OF EAST JAVA, INDONESIA



Photo by Robert Wessing

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Robert Wessing

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Robert Wessing

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the keboan ritual that is celebrated in two Using (Banyuwangi area) rice-growing villages in Java, Indonesia. During this ritual, male descendants of the community's founder become possessed by spirits and behave like water buffaloes. This possession, a liminal state, allows the men to function as channels for the transfer of fertility into the community. While now keyed to the Javanese and Islamic calendars and cast as the annual cleansing of the village ceremonies known throughout Java, in the past the ritual was a thanksgiving for the recent rice harvest, during which the ancestors and nature spirits, the true owners of the soil, were asked to bless and support the coming rice-growing season. In the light of continued Islamization of the area the ritual is now cast as an expression of gratitude to the Almighty for sparing the people from poor harvest and famine. Beside religious constraints the ritual has recently also been subject to pressures from forces of modernization, steering it toward touristification and commercialization, including the importation of outside, locally irrelevant cultural performances. These developments are not universally accepted as they have affected the event's ritual dimension, changing it into a form of folk-theatre.

INTRODUCTION¹

This article discusses the *keboan* ritual that is celebrated in two Using² rice-growing villages, Aliyan in the district (*kecamatan*) Rogojampi, and Alasmalang in the district Singojuro,³ both part of the regency (*kabupaten*) Banyuwangi in East Java. Other than a few, sometimes erroneous,⁴ references in the literature, and some superficial mentions in the popular press and on the Internet, little has been written about this ritual.⁵

1 I thank Pak Aekanu Hariyono of Banyuwangi, Pak Yailadi and Pak Asir of Aliyan, Pak Kasim of Alasmalang, as well as Ibu Sri Hidayati of Olehsari, Ibu Surti of Bakungan, Pak Hasnan Singodimayan of Banyuwangi and many others who patiently answered my questions. Special thanks are due to Ibu Nahariyah and Pak Slamet Hariyono for their assistance during the fieldwork, and to Mr. Jan Willem Hartman of The Hague for his drawings of the route taken in Alasmalang, and for drawing the route on the map of Aliyan. All photos are by the author unless otherwise specified.

2 The Using (also Osing) consider themselves to be a separate ethnic group, although some others see them as a sub-group of the Javanese. However this may be, the Using language and culture differ considerably from those of the Javanese of both Central and East Java (see Pranoto 2015:14–15). Their villages are primarily concentrated in the regency Banyuwangi in East Java. For descriptions of their history and culture see among others De Stoppelaar (1927), Beatty (1999), Sri Margana (2007), and Wessing (2012–2013).

3 In the past it was also found in the villages Bubak and Gladek near Aliyan. De Stoppelaar (1927:31) also mentions the villages Kinjo and Bajalangu, and implies that celebrations like these used to be widespread in the Banyuwangi area. Actually, in Alasmalang the ritual is called *kebo-keboan*, while in Aliyan it is called *keboan*. For simplicity I use only the latter name here.

4 Saputra (2007:101), for instance, calls it a masked dance, which rather stretches the imagination.

5 See, e.g., <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/01/16/thank-you-loyal-buffalo-thank-you.html>. See also

My purpose here is primarily ethnographic, and as such I seek to describe and contextualize the facts that I observed during the rituals. As Nader (2011: 211–12) points out, this is at basis a theoretical endeavour:⁶ ‘ethnography is a theory of description’. Yet the choice of the facts that are highlighted depends on the story that the ethnographer wants to present, and the narrative he or she wants to develop. Therefore, one of the issues that must be addressed is where to draw boundaries, either geographic, ethnographic, or topical. Social phenomena have meaning and must be understood in the social context in which they occur, but determining the nature and scope of that context is part of what the ethnographer does. This is a significant problem in the present case, because the *keboan* ritual, which involves a relationship between men and spirit-buffaloes, could be compared to human–buffalo relationships⁷ in many parts of the world (Molenaar 1985:249, note 39; Lincoln 1981:75). In Southeast and East Asia, relations between people and buffaloes take a variety of forms: as funerary and other life cycle offerings (Kreemer 1956:194), as offerings to ancestral spirits (Simoons and Simoons 1968; Holm 2003:2), in mythologies as indicators or predictors of significant social changes (De Josselin de Jong 1965; Löffler 1968), as expiatory sacrifices (Van Baal 1976:173), and at the state level as sacrifices that strengthen the realm and its boundaries, or animate state building projects (Headley 1979; 2004:282–329; Wessing and Jordaan 1997).⁸

The *keboan* ritual could be compared or contrasted with all of these, depending on the issues one wishes to address. That I do not do so here is due to a unique aspect of the *keboan* ritual, namely, it is the only one I know of in which living men are possessed by buffalo spirits, to serve as channels through which natural forces of fertility are thought to flow into the community. In most of the cases referred to above, the buffaloes are killed, while in the *keboan* ritual it is men who, albeit temporarily, offer up their social identity⁹ (= symbolic death) in order to accommodate (host) the spirit-buffaloes, and thus serve their community. As will be seen, the local community is indeed the focus of the mythology associated with the ritual, featuring the village’s founders, its tutelary spirit, and the received history associated with the location. This is the context to which I limit the present description.

the photographs at <http://www.jemberphotography.com/index.php?pg=ViewTopik&id=2058&start=0> (both last accessed 26 September 2014). This neglect may be part of the general lack of interest in the area (see Sri Margana 2007:20), which has only relatively recently come to western anthropological attention, especially since the publication of Beatty’s (1999) study.

6 Theories are our narrations, ‘descriptions of processes of knowing adopted by scientists’ (Bateson 1958:281; cf. Nader 2011:216).

7 Not to speak of human relationships with other animal species, such as tigers or bears (cf. Wessing 1986; Hallowell 1926).

8 In any case, the *keboan* rituals differ considerably from buffalo-related ones at the Central Javanese court (Headley 1979; 2004:282–329), and from those conducted by the Tenggerese during their *Labuhan Maésa* or *Kasada* ritual (Hefner 1989:46–64), which seem to involve the sacrifice of a buffalo. The Central Javanese court rituals and those of Tengger indeed seem more alike to each other than either is to the *keboan* ritual. See <http://www.demotix.com/news/tenggers-mayu-desa-ritual#media-190546> and <http://www.demotix.com/news/2964210/unan-unan-mayu-bumi-warsa-1935-c#media-2963950> (Both last accessed 26 September 2014). Hefner (1989:46) mentions the sacrifice of ‘food, crops, money, and small livestock’ but no buffalo.

9 The men lose their social identities as they literally, though only temporarily, become one with the buffalo spirits in a symbolic sacrifice, as when the sacrificial victim and the god unite (Hubert and Mauss 1991:11; Smith and Doniger 1989:189, 190).

The theoretical points of departure that underlie my thinking in this paper are 1) that people's perception of reality is bound up with the narratives they create about themselves (Bruner 1991; Niles 1999); 2) that rituals are performative in the sense of Austin (1975); and 3) that by being performative, rituals, when properly carried out, are thought to bring about or maintain the realities specified in the narratives. For this last to occur all the required actors and factors must be brought into proper play (Kristensen 1961:10), even if, as Baumann points out (1992:98; cf. Beatty 1999:ch. 2), not all community members need to necessarily agree that the present way is the right way to perform the ritual, or that the ritual is indeed valid at all—something the more strict Muslim members of the communities studied here might indeed dispute (see below). The point is that the opinion leaders most listened to—that is, the ones with the strongest narrative, and their (larger?) audience—verify the correctness of the ritual's performance, confirming its legitimacy and effectiveness for the participants, if not necessarily for everyone else (cf. Rodemeier 2014).

In the *keboan* ritual, men, specifically descendants of the community's founder, become possessed by spirits and behave like water buffaloes (*kebo*). This possession places the men in a liminal state, allowing them to become points of transfer of fertility into the community. While now part of the annual cleansing of the village (*bersih desa*) ceremonies known throughout Java, in the past the ritual was known as *sedhekah bumi* (also *selamatan desa*), in which thanks was given for the recent rice harvest, and the ancestors as well as the spirit powers of nature were asked to bless and support the coming rice-growing season. These rituals are now usually held during Sura (also Muharram), the first month of both the Javanese and the Islamic¹⁰ lunar year: in Alasmalang on 10th day of Sura and in Aliyan on the last Sunday of that month.¹¹

The rituals may have been part of a complex that included the *seblang* dances of Oleshari and Bakungan near the city of Banyuwangi (Wolbers 1992:126–27; Wessing 1999a, 2012–13), in the course of which people feast the nature spirits and perform ritual acts.¹² The latter may vary from village to village, but usually include simulations of agricultural activities, and/or imitations of an animal (De Stoppelaar 1926:416). Other than yearly mentions of them in the newspaper Jawa Pos, the only recent fuller treatment of the ritual is a booklet by Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009) published by the Banyuwangi Office of Culture and Tourism (Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata). These authors speak of it as a *bersih desa* celebration, and a symbolic expression of the people's gratitude to the Almighty for sparing them from famine and agricultural pests (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:33). The prevention of calamities (*musibah*) is indeed a major focus of the ritual and, as will be discussed below, calamities in the form of poor harvests and agricultural pests are said to have been the reason that the ritual was first performed.

¹⁰ The inhabitants of both villages identify themselves as Muslims, although, like elsewhere in Java, there are differences of opinion about what practices are allowed by the tenets of the faith. Public adherence to a 'purer' form of Islam has made headway since I first came to the area in 1990, with a resulting decline of open reference to more traditional approaches, including those involving possession (See Beatty 1999, 2009; Hornbacher 2011:172, 185; Rodemeier 2014; Wessing 2013).

¹¹ Only in Watu Kebo, a third village where this ritual is celebrated, not discussed here, does it take place ca. 10 days after Idul Fitri, the holiday that celebrates the end of the Muslim fast of Ramadhan.

¹² Elements of the ritual to be described here, e.g., the hitching to a plough and the sowing of seed, also occur in the Bakungan version of the *seblang* ritual (Wessing 1999a), symbolically linking these rituals and highlighting the agricultural nature of both the *seblang* and the *keboan* events.

SEDHEKAH BUMI

The month Sura during which these rituals are usually celebrated, is a period of temporal transition, and as such is considered *keramat* (supernaturally charged), perhaps doubly so because of its association with both Javanese and Islamic ideas (Sholikhin 2010:8). During this time people make offerings to the spirits and bring ritual meals (*selametan*) to *keramat* places (Sholikhin 2009:217). Some believe, Sholikhin writes, that these offerings will appease the spirits of deceased ancestors that have not yet reached perfection, and are thought to be about during this month (Sholikhin 2009:217; Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:116).¹³ Even though the whole month is sacred, Javanese villagers tend to especially celebrate the 10th day of Sura with a ritual meal (Sholikhin 2009:238), which in the case of Alasmalang coincides with the *keboan* ritual.¹⁴

To summarize, through this ritual the villagers hope to protect themselves against calamities like bad harvests and agricultural pests while simultaneously seeking spiritual permission to start the next agricultural cycle. By doing this, they hope to assure an abundant harvest and general welfare. At the same time they remember and thank the Almighty for His protection and the success of the previous harvest (Aekanu 2008:7).

The powers of nature that cause things to go wrong now and then are seen as an expression of mysterious supernatural powers in the universe. Nature, the people claim, is an expression of these powers that ultimately control what happens; one can only try to live in harmony with them (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:9). While this juxtaposition of spirits and the Almighty could at first seem to be contradictory, it presents no great difficulty to most Using. To understand this we must first look at the villagers' relationship with the spirit world.

FOUNDERS AND SPIRIT OWNERS

In traditional Javanese 'belief',¹⁵ nature spirits are the true owners of the soil onto which people intruded to build their settlements (Wessing 2006a). These are the entities that Mus (1975:10) calls the Lords of the Soil (cf. Geertz 1960:26, note), without whose cooperation the successful founding of a new community would be impossible. In order to secure the cooperation of this spirit-owner, auguries must first be undertaken, while conditions demanded by the spirit must be met (cf. Domenig 1988). These demands often include an annual feast and, for example, in Aliyan, being consulted about various village affairs,

13 Ancestral spirits still seeking perfection, that are not allowed to sit on God's side, are said to be thankful to be remembered by the living (Sholikhin 2009:217). In West Java, on Maulud, the day of the Prophet's birth and death (also a powerful time of transition), were-tigers roam all over West Java to gather at Pakuan, the capital of the old kingdom of Pajajaran (Soemaatmadja 1960:99).

14 As was mentioned above, in Watu Kebo the ritual takes place some days after Idul Fitri. Elsewhere, in the village Olehsari, the related *seblang* ritual was also moved from the first day of Sura, bringing it into conformity with the Islamic calendar. Local informants could not explain the reason for the change, saying only that this was done at the request of the village's tutelary spirit (Murgiyanto and Munardi n.d.:17). These changes may be the result of reclassifying these and several other rituals as *bersih desa*, the cleansing of the village. This releases these events from their previous ties to the locally specific spirit world, and allows them to be shifted, both temporally and cognitively (cf. Pemberton 1994:242-43).

15 I am speaking in a very generalized ethnographic present, ignoring for the present changes in perception brought about both by an evermore dominant Islam and by modern education (see Wessing 2013). I also do not here address the question of what the idea of 'belief' entails (see Wessing 2010:51-52).

including the start of the agricultural season (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:13). Once this is accomplished, and the spirit-owner becomes a tutelary spirit (*dhanyang*), the fertility of the soil and the abundance of the harvests are hopefully guaranteed, leading the community to prosper. Should the founder or his successors (on whom the responsibility of the observance of the commitments made to the spirit devolves) neglect their obligations, the *dhanyang* is likely to be angered, and might send illness and calamities in the form of agricultural pests to punish the community and remind it of its duties.

The primary focus, then, is on the relationship between the founder (*cikal bakal, pembabad*) and the nature spirit (*dhanyang*), the entity that was changed from a wild spirit into a guarantor of the community's welfare. In many areas of Java, this relationship of opposition and cooperation is expressed in the relative locations of the *dhanyang* and the founder's grave, a line between them bifurcating the community (Wessing 2003:443–45). Often, however, we find that the distinction between the two has faded, leading them to become one. This is perhaps partly due to the fact that the spirit of the founder of the community, who is often at least theoretically ancestral to the majority of its members, is also thought to watch over the welfare of his or her descendants. Thus when asked, villagers may point to the grave of the founder as the location of the *dhanyang* (cf. De Stoppelaar 1926:416; Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:32, 36; compare Mus 1975).¹⁶

To return to the juxtaposition of spirits and God, the villagers seem to be of two minds about the source of calamities. While on the one hand they fear that bad harvests and crop diseases will follow if the rituals are neglected, they also blame natural causes and punishments sent by God.¹⁷ There is indeed opposition to this ritual from some village clergy in both villages, though this should not be exaggerated; in Aliyan it is sometimes said that the ritual originated with a sign from the Almighty (*Yang Maha Kuasa*). As one Using informant¹⁸ put it, 'ancestors, spirits, *dewa* (gods) and Tuhan (God) are only different words for the same thing' (Wessing 2010:72–73), making the distinction between them a categorial one. All these entities are said to have the same origin, i.e. God. This does not make them identical, my informant continued, but one can appeal to the various entities as appropriate. Thus, rather than the village guardian spirit having 'become marginalized in deference to God' (Pemberton 1994:241; cf. Hornbacher 2011:170, 185), appeals are made to the most relevant aspects of their common characteristics. In any case, thanking and appealing to God is also a means of seeking protection from calamities, as ingratitude may provoke God's ire. With these ideas as a background, we can now look at the villager's account of the origin of their rituals.

¹⁶ This process is ongoing. Generally, where a personal relationship with the *dhanyang* is maintained, as in the *seblang* villages of Olehsari and Bakungan, the spirit's name is remembered (Wessing 1999a). Elsewhere various differing explanations are given. In Aliyan, one of the *keboan* villages, the distinction is becoming less well understood, though the difference between the founder's grave and the tutelary spirit's location is still clear.

¹⁷ Though the Using were long resistant to Islam, especially when it was propagated by the Dutch VOC in their attempt to counter Balinese interests in the area (Sri Margana 2007:6), Islam has steadily been gaining ground among them (Beatty 2009). Where as recently as 1991, I was told that with the coming of Islam, Java had lost its *yoni* (Hindu female powers of fertility), village celebrations involving ancestral and nature spirits are now sometimes preceded by a circumambulation (*ider bumi*) in which the Muslim call to prayer has a prominent place. Concerned Muslim leaders worry about the *syirk* (idolatrous) implications of being possessed by a spirit, and are sometimes opposed to the ritual's performance. Up to the present, however, its proponents have prevailed.

¹⁸ To avoid controversy, my informants' identities are kept confidential.

THE MYTHS¹⁹

It is not possible to state with any certainty how old the ritual is. Even though some claim that it is ‘centuries old’ (Aekanu 2008:7), others only state that it goes back to colonial times.²⁰ In both Alasmalang and Aliyan the myth about its origin is keyed to the founding of the village, which probably occurred sometime in the late 18th or early 19th centuries (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:91), as Java’s East Hook recovered from the wars and conflicts that had devastated the area and depopulated it between the mid-17th and late 18th centuries (Kumar 1979:192; Sri Margana 2007:244).²¹ This says nothing, however, about its prior existence, about which we have no information. While the related Using *seblang* ritual seems to point toward a connection with the court at Majapahit (Wessing 2012–13:181), this is very vague, and may equally refer to Balambangan’s own Indic court (cf. Sri Margana 2007:19–23).

The founders of Alasmalang and Aliyan, then, may have moved into a ruined and abandoned territory that was thought to be occupied by the ghosts of those who had lived there before, and who thus, in a residual way, had a prior claim to the land and the relationship with its spirit-owner. Appropriately, the name Alasmalang means forest or field full of obstacles and danger.²²

Whether the persons mentioned in the myths were the actual founders of these communities is difficult to say. Their graves lie appropriately opposite each village’s tutelary spirit’s location, but they may have been symbolic figures that became the focus of the rituals during the time of crisis, as is suggested by their names. The founder of Krajan, the focal hamlet (*dhukuh*) of the village Alasmalang, is Embah²³ (grandfather) Karti, whose name Karti derives from *kerta* (safety, prosperity; Hasan Ali 2004:222).²⁴ Thus, his name can be read as ‘the person who brought welfare.’

Similarly in Aliyan the originator of the ritual is said to be Ki²⁵ Wangsa Kenanga, in which both Wangsa and Kenanga refer to the *kenanga* flower (*Canangium odoratum*;

19 I shall not undertake here a detailed comparison of the myths underlying the rituals in Alasmalang and Aliyan, as this would take us too far afield. Such a comparison should include not only the myths related here, but also the one told in Watu Kebo, as well as perhaps those of the *seblang* villages of Bakungan and Olehsari.

20 A man in Aekanu’s VCD (2007) claims the ritual started in the time of the *kompenni* (the Dutch East Indies Company, V. O. C.).

21 The effect of these conflicts were also expressed in the ‘species poor’ nature of the forests in East Java, representing a regrowth on the fields that had been abandoned during this time of unrest (Whitmore 1984:263–4).

22 From *alas* (forest, also fields outside the village: see Hasan Ali 2004:4; Robson and Wibisono 2002:32) and *malang* (an obstacle). Also *malangati* (dangerous, bringing difficulty, causing fear: see Hasan Ali 2004:268).

23 Also Ki (elder) or *buyut* (great-grandparent)

24 In Javanese *karti* is a variant of *karta* (welfare, well-being). See also *kerta* (prosperity, welfare) (Robson and Wibisono 2002:337, 365).

25 Also *embah*, *buyut* or *eyang* (grandparent) (Leny and Ranco 2008:32). These three titles refer to the ancestral position of this man vis-à-vis the villagers. In Javanese, *buyuten* has the additional meaning of a ‘place where a priest lives and works’, a sacred ancestral place of worship, ancestral and sacred, e.g. cemeteries (Robson and Wibisono 2002:125). In Sundanese, *buyut* can also be glossed with ‘prohibited’ or ‘taboo’. Sundanese further has *kabuyutan* which can be glossed with ‘something tabooed, a sacred place like the grave of a saint or sacred person’ (Hardjadibrata 2003:138).

Hasan Ali 2004:212, 486), a flower commonly used in graveside offerings (Robson and Wibisono 2002:355). Ki Wangsa Kenanga's sons, who play a pivotal role in the ritual, are named Raden Pekik, (Highness Handsome, Dashing Prince) and Raden Rangga, a lower court official (Robson and Wibisono 2002:615). These names probably indicate an elder brother-younger brother relationship in which the elder is said to be handsome and superior, and the younger occupies a junior or inferior position. Alasmalang's *dhukuh Krajan* and its fields were surrounded by dense forest as well as four named low hills (*gumuk*) that were overgrown with trees.²⁶ These hills were *angker* (eerie, sacred; see Wessing 2006a:22, note 18), full of large boulders, and were inhabited by spirits, causing people to be afraid to go there. The hills lay (roughly) in the direction of the four points of the compass. To the west (actually southwest) there is the *Watu Gajah* (Elephant Rock), where the village's tutelary spirit resides at the *petaanun*. To the north (northwest) there is the *Watu Karang*, from *karang* (place, settled area, home; Robson and Wibisono 2002:336). To the east lies the *Watu Lasa* in which *lasa* (*kelasa*) refers to a woven mat to sit on (Hasan Ali 2004:192), appropriate to the hamlet's founder whose grave lies nearby. Finally there is the *Watu Naga* or *Watu Tumpeng* to the south (= southwest), the *naga* being closely associated with *widodari* (nymphs), including the rice goddess, Dewi Sri (Wessing 2006b:218–19).

According to local informants, Embah Karti made an agreement with the spirit-owners of the land. In exchange for the use of the land, the village would hold a yearly *keboan* ritual. Yet others say that the ritual was started in response to a famine (*paceklik*) after the crops were destroyed (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:93). There had been a long drought, then a very serious epidemic (*pageblug*) struck the hamlet: a person who fell ill in the morning would be dead by night. Livestock was affected as well, including the water buffaloes that used to soak in the wallows (*kubangan*)²⁷ near the village after working in the fields. If all this were not bad enough, there also were robbers that stole the crops.

Seeing that something needed to be done, Embah Karti meditated and received a spiritual message. He gathered his people at the center of the hamlet and taught them the *keboan* ritual. First, they had to pray (*do'a*), and then eat a communal meal (*selamatan*) that had to include various crops and twelve cones of cooked rice (*tumpeng*). The latter were to be placed at the center of the hamlet, the focus of the (local) world. Other activities included irrigating the rice field, ploughing, and whatever was involved in growing rice. Then there was to be a circumambulation (*ider bumi*) of Krajan, the founding hamlet, which included making offerings at the hills that mark its four corners. The villagers followed these instructions and the epidemic ended. They have performed the ritual ever since.²⁸

26 Such low hills are a common feature of the landscape in Java's East Hook. They moderate the winds blowing in from the Indian Ocean, and function among others as repositories of surface water (Jawa Pos 2010:43). Although they were often thought to be the home of spirit guardians (*penunggu*), they have in recent years become commercial objects, the sand of which is dug away and sold.

27 A wallow is 'a muddy or dusty place in which an animal, as the buffalo, wallows...' (McKechnie 1971:2057).

28 This last statement must be taken with a grain of salt. After the troubles of 1965, the New Order government forbade the full ritual, fearing that it might have political implications. Only the communal meal was permitted, and the village elders circumambulated the hamlet by themselves. Eventually this led to unrest, and one of the villagers was possessed by a nature spirit. This man/spirit insisted that the ritual be revived in order to prevent the outbreak of disease. Children are said to also have received visions

The story told in Aliyan is quite similar. The founder of the focal *dhukuh* of this village, also named Krajan, was Ki Wangsa Kenanga, who entered into an agreement with the spirit-owner of the land there. People could not tell me the name of this spirit, but pointed to the *petaunan*²⁹ at the western end of the hamlet as the place where people approached the spirit(s). As part of the agreement Ki Wangsa Kenanga promised this spirit that the people would annually feast him. If they neglect this, it is feared that the spirit will strike the village with bad harvests and pests: in Aekanu's VCD of the 2007 performance of the ritual it is said that large 'rice' rats live near Ki Wangsa Kenanga's grave.

Ki Wangsa Kenanga had two sons, Raden Pekik and Raden Rangga. These sons were well matched, and Ki Wangsa found it difficult to decide which of them should succeed him as village leader. He told them both to study religion (Islam), after which he received an inspiration (*wisik*) to transfer his son's powers into two roosters that were then set upon each other (*tajèn*). When neither rooster won, Ki Wangsa decided to separate his sons: Raden Pekik remained in Krajan while his brother moved to the *dhukuh* Sukodono (see Fig. 1). There has been tension between these two hamlets ever since, and they celebrate the *keboan* ritual separately.³⁰

As in Alasmalang, the ritual in Aliyan originated as a result of a failed harvest due to agricultural pests and drought, causing widespread suffering. One evening, Ki Wangsa Kenanga met with his sons to try to solve these problems. When they did not succeed, the sons went to meditate: Raden Pekik in the south, and Raden Rangga in the west, where the *dhukuh* Sukodono is now located. They meditated for days, until one night the villagers heard a strange noise that sounded like the footsteps of a large creature. After this continued for several days someone dared to look, seeing a mud-covered human-like creature with the head of a water buffalo. The people then followed the creature to where Raden Pekik and Raden Rangga were meditating.³¹ There the creature(s) disappeared, and all they found was Raden Pekik (and elsewhere Raden Rangga) meditating. The next day the seedlings in one rice field seemed to have been trampled by a water buffalo. After this the fertility of the land returned: crops were abundant, and the pests had gone. The people of Aliyan have celebrated the *keboan* ritual even since, initially led by the two brothers in their respective *dhukuh*.

in their dreams. In 1990, the ritual was finally reinstated (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:96–97). Compare the cleaning of the Cekandik temple in Bali, when poor harvests and a man falling ill were attributed to neglect of this temple (Bateson 1937:399).

29 Note that this is not the spirit's *pundhèn* (place of veneration; Hasan Ali 2004:360), which is located somewhat southwest of the founder's grave. A line between the grave and the *pundhèn* would not, therefore, bisect Krajan, while a line between the grave and the *petaunan* does, the *petaunan* furthermore being much more conveniently located for meetings with the spirit.

30 These celebrations are held on the same day and are nearly identical. They only intersect at the village hall (*balai desa*) where the officials are honored. Even there, the tension especially between the young men of these two *dhukuh* is visible. It was once tried to merge the two celebrations, but the entranced *kebo* became angry and the experiment was stopped. The leaders of the two *dhukuh* concluded that the tutelary spirits of the two hamlets did not want the celebrations to be combined. Such tensions between brothers seem to occur more generally in the Malay world (cf. McKinley 1983).

31 The story is unclear here, but since the two sons were meditating in different places, there must have been two of these creatures.

Fig. 1. Map of Aliyan with route



Ki Wangsa Kenanga's grave, south of Krajan, is guarded by spirit-buffaloes that are said to become visible just before the ritual. It is claimed that Ki Wangsa Kenanga owns these spirit-animals as well as all the animals in the village.³² Raden Pekik's grave is located on one of the *gumuk* (hills) south of Krajan, slightly southwest of Ki Wangsa's grave. The other *gumuk* is the home of the village's tutelary spirit, and is guarded by a snake, as large as a coconut tree, that lights up at night. This snake is said to be an incarnation of the tutelary spirit.

In both Aliyan and Alasmalang, then, the community's founder entered into an agreement with the tutelary spirit-owner of the community's land. Upon the founder's death, responsibility for fulfilling this contract devolved upon the founder's descendants, in Aliyan Raden Pekik and Raden Rangga: the leading actors in the ritual are all said to be descended from the founder, even if only vaguely.³³ In Aliyan these included primarily the *pawang* (shaman, mediator with the spirits) and the possessed *keboan*, while in Alasmalang it was the *pawang*, the girl portraying the rice goddess, and the *keboan* who were said to be descendants of Embah Karti (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:99).

It will have been noted that the focal *dhukuh* of both Alasmalang and Aliyan is called Krajan.³⁴ Krajan or Kerajan is the traditional name for the focal hamlet of an Using

32 Graves of spiritually potent persons are often guarded by were-animals (cf. Wessing 1986; Rato 1992). In Aekanu's VCD (2007), it is claimed that the water buffaloes in the village today are descended from those that had belonged to Ki Wangsa Kenanga.

33 One man in Aliyan pointed out that 'we are all descended from the founder, even if we cannot clearly trace the line of descent. When in 2010 an Aliyan man, who usually became possessed during the ritual, wanted to stop being a *keboan* because he was old, he was brought to Ki Wangsa Kenanga's grave to *pamit*, to take his leave and ask his ancestor's permission to stop.

34 Using: *kerajan*, the place in a village or hamlet where the office and home of the village head are

village. Usually the oldest, founding hamlet, it is the central place where the first village leader, e.g. the founder, would have resided (cf. Robson and Wibisono 2002:396; Hasan Ali 2004:216). This is the hamlet that is demarcated by gates during the ritual and will be circumambulated by the *keboan* (see below, pp. 24–26). Where it has a clear center, as in Alasmalang, this becomes the focus of the ritual. In Aliyan, where such a clear center is absent, the hamlet as a whole is the focus, with various activities located along the route of the procession.

THE RITUAL

In what follows, I primarily describe the ritual as it takes place in Aliyan, the proceedings in Alasmalang having been considerably affected by being placed on the official calendar of tourist-events. Such official attention can lead to substantial changes in the ritual, which are often not necessarily considered either proper or desirable by all local participants (cf. Wessing 1998; Wijayanti 2007:153, 158–59; but see Parkin 1992). In 2009, for instance, the procession (*ider bumi*) was delayed for several hours because the *Bupati* (regent) had not arrived on time, which, combined with the change of the day of the *selamatan*, caused the *pawang*, Pak Rahmat, to worry that the spirits would be angry (*ngamuk*). As a sign of danger, a man was possessed by a spirit that complained about the delay. ‘People these days,’ Pak Rahmat said, ‘often don’t want to listen to the *pawang*’s advice.’ Alasmalang’s circumambulation has furthermore been ‘enhanced’ by folkloristic troupes from other villages, leading to a lack of authenticity as well as considerable congestion. As one lady remarked, ‘this is no longer a *selamatan desa* [e.g., a ritual], it is a *pesta rakyat* [a folk-party]’. Aliyan also has received some official attention but has thus far managed to hold out against major changes. In 2010, the *Bupati* attended for the first time, but unlike in Alasmalang the ritual had started before her arrival, and she only caused a minor delay.

Greater official attention also leads these events to be placed in a wider context. What started as a local, even closed ritual now participates in regional and even national symbolisms expressed in the *Bupati*’s speech (cf. Tabalong 2004:44; Wessing 1997a:115). Yet, while the ritual in Alasmalang has been seriously affected by these outside influences, the basic ritual elements underlying it are still visible, as are the concerns that the ritual addresses.

De Stoppelaar (1927:31–2) is the only early writer to give some description of the ritual, and his is a rather elementary one. He writes that the village magician (*dhukun desa*) offered incense and food to the tutelary spirit with a request for general welfare. He then brought a number of men into trance by burning incense near them (i.e., having them inhale the smoke). These men then behaved as if they were bulls, lowering their heads and butting each other; they were possessed by spirits. When completely entranced they were hitched to ploughs, and ploughed a rice field near the *dhanyang*’s *pundhèn*, the place where the *dhanyang* may be contacted or venerated. There, finally, rice seedlings were planted and the men were brought out of trance. When the seedlings were large enough to be transplanted, every owner of a rice field in the village was allowed a share to plant on his own field. This was thought to promote a good harvest for all.

located (Hasan Ali 2004:216). Van Vollenhoven calls Krajan ‘a principal village ... with subsidiary hamlets (*dhukuh, pedhukuhan, cantèlan*)’, a rather vague description that leaves the concept of village undefined (Holleman 1981:149).

In Aliyan, the ritual used to take three days but has now been shortened to two, as certain elements, like a cockfight, have been eliminated (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:41–42). On the first day an *ojung* took place (see below, p. 23), followed by a cockfight. On the second day there was a communal meal (*selamatan*) at the ancestral graves in both Krajan and Sukodono, followed by a shadow puppet presentation (*wayang*) of the story Turunné Dewi Sri (The Descent of the Rice Goddess). Due to the expense of hiring a *wayang* troupe, this has been replaced with a video recording of the Dewi Sri story. Finally, on the third day, there was a circumambulation (*ider bumi*) of Krajan, which ended with the symbolic ploughing, harrowing and sowing of rice seed. These days the *selamatan* at the graves takes place on the first day while everything else happens on the second. Preparations, however, begin much earlier and, as a sign of the ritual's approach, men in Aliyan begin to spontaneously go into trance (*ndadi*), starting as early as the beginning of Sura.

Fig. 2. *Gapura*



About a week before the celebration of the ritual, people begin to clean the village, reflecting the instructions given in the myth about the origin of rice and the rice-goddess (cf. Rassers 1959:11; Purwadi 2004:137). Bamboo gates (*gapura*; see Fig. 2) are erected on the road leading into and out of the *dhukuh* Krajan. In Alasmalang, where the center of the *dhukuh* is defined by the crossing of a north-south and an east-west road, and which lacks a road around the hamlet, there are eight gates; four fixing the outer boundary of the hamlet and four closer to the center. In Aliyan these gates similarly indicate the outer limits of the *dhukuh*, but also stood at significant points of transition, for example, at the approach to the grave of Ki Wangsa Kenanga and at boundaries with other hamlets. These gates are hung with young leaves of the coconut tree (*janur kuning*), and various root crops (*pala kependhem*), hanging fruit (*pala gumantung*), and fruits of creeping plants (*pala kesimpar*),³⁵ and, on the outer side of the gate, king bananas (*gedhang raja*). In

35 These include *kelapa gading* (a variety of coconut), *rambutan* (*Nephelium lappaceum*), *salak* (*Zalacca*

addition, *puring* leaves are attached to the uprights and a red and white national flag tops the structure.

Just within the main *gapura* leading into Aliyan in 2010 stood a *pénjor*, an upright bamboo pole from the thin, bent-down upper end of which hung a structure made of woven *janur kuning* leaves. According to one lady, this indicated that ritual work (*gawe*) was going on.³⁶ One name given to this construction is *kuwung* (rainbow), a symbolic association with Nawang Wulan, the nymph (*widodari*) who introduced rice to Java—i.e., a form of the rice-goddess. *Janur kuning* leaves seem to be associated primarily with the female, as opposed to the male *gedhang raja*. On the gates the *janur kuning* marks inner, female ritual areas, forming a unity of male and female in combination with the male *gedhang raja* on the outside. The gates in both Alasmalang and Aliyan, therefore, define the ritual area that indeed used to be forbidden to outsiders. Several informants in Aliyan told me that if outsiders were present, the entranced *keboan* would chase them away. The idea is to keep the inner, ritual area pure from outside influences, and it is into this ritual area that the ‘wild’ *keboan* (see below, p. 33) appear, helping Dewi Sri to focus fertility into the community.³⁷

Aside from the gates, there are several other required items, some of which accompany the possessed *keboan* on their circumambulation. These include a *wayang* (shadow puppet) stage, some whips, a model plough (*singkal*; see Fig. 3), a model harrow (*garu*; see Fig. 4), a mountain made up of various crops, and a carriage for the rice-goddess. The *wayang* stage and the whips will be discussed later. The plough and harrow, which will be used to symbolically prepare some land to be planted, are again decorated with *janur kuning* (young coconut tree leaves) and, especially, *puring* leaves (*Codiaeum moluccanum*; Hasan Ali 2004:362),³⁸ which were also attached to the gates. Among the Using, these plants grow especially in graveyards, much like the *kemboja* tree (*Plumiera acuminata*) is planted in Javanese graveyards (cf. Robson and Wibisono 2002:664; Hasan Ali 2004:399).³⁹ The presence of *puring* is said to link the event with the ancestors. In fact, explained an informant, the *puring* leaves used in the procession must be gathered from the graveyard, from the ancestors (see Fig. 5).⁴⁰

edulis), bananas, watermelons, aubergines (*Solanum melongena*), jackfruit (*nangka*; *Artocarpus integer*), and the like.

36 Compare the *kaca-kaca* in West Java (Wessing 1978a:23). *Pénjor* are usually found in combination with *janur* leaves, *puring* leaves, *gedhang raja* (king bananas) and a coconut—all of which also feature in the *keboan* ritual.

37 Compare Tooker (1996:334–37) for very similar practices among the Akha, a number of hill tribes living in Thailand, Burma, Laos, and the Yunnan Province in China, in which the building and placement of gates involve a circumambulation of the village, ‘aggregating’ parts of the village within the boundaries created by the gates and the procession. Both the closure to outsiders and the gates, in combination with the circumambulation transform the hamlet into a sacred space in the sense of Smith (1987).

38 The group of plants known as *puring* has many varieties: Kadir (2008) lists 260 of them. Most of these varieties, however, are given folk names rather than botanical ones, making the leaves used locally difficult to identify (cf. Chandra and Sitanggang 2007:6).

39 Drawing on his own experience in the Banyumas area of Central Java, the novelist Tohari (2011:66) mentions *puring* growing alongside *kemboja* in the graveyard of his fictional village. However, my research assistant, Ibu Nahariyah, points out that in East Java, only the Using use *puring* ritually. Given the preponderance of these *puring* and *kemboja* plants, one could speak of these graveyards as Javanese ‘groves’ of the dead, parallel to the grove reserved for a village’s tutelary spirit, which in any case often lies directly opposite the grave of the founder (Wessing 1999b; 2003).

40 In East Java these days, *puring* has become a fashionable plant that is grown in house yards and along

Fig. 3. *Singkal* in Alasmalang. (Note the absence of *puring* leaves)



Fig. 4. *Garu* in Aliyan (Credit: Slamet Hariyono)



hedges. This was also starting to be done in Aliyan. However, the plant continues to play an important role in events like weddings, where ancestors also play a significant part. Hardjadibrata (2003:650) writes that in West Java, *puring* leaves are used medicinally, reinforcing the link with the ancestors.

Fig. 5. *Puring* plants in an Using graveyardFig. 7. *Tandur* in Alasmalang

Especially important is a cone-shaped structure made from fruits and vegetables,⁴¹ assembled on a small carrying platform (*tandhu*). These crops and fruits, as well as those on the gates are similar to the ones requested by prince Sedana when he and Dewi Sri founded a new settlement (Rassers 1959:12). They are symbolic of the fertility inherent in the hamlet and its lands (cf. Wolbers 1992:98). Indeed, Sholikhin (2010:265) calls such a cone of crops a *gunungan*,⁴² a cosmic mountain and replica of Mt. Meru which, as Mabbett (1983:66) writes, represents ‘a vital force, full of vegetal energy’ and is ‘interchangeably identical with the tree of life...’. In Alasmalang, this inherent fertility is made even clearer by the many crops that are ‘planted’ along the center of the hamlet’s roads on the evening prior to the circum-

41 These include *kacang panjang* (*Vigna sinensis*), aubergines, maize (*Zea maize*), peppers (*Capsium*), rambutan, pineapple (*Ananas comosus*), tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*), apples, *labu* (*Cucurbitaceae*) and possibly *salak*, and sometimes carrots.

42 It was not called a *gunungan* in the two villages, but Jawa Pos (2012:11) and Wijayanti (2007:148) use this term for identical structures elsewhere in East and Central Java.

ambulation (Fig. 7). At first glance the vegetable Meru seems to be absent in Alasmalang, but this is because there it is incorporated in the carriage of Dewi Sri, the Goddess of rice and embodiment of fertility.⁴³

Fig. 8a and 8b. *Tandhu* in Alasmalang (left: back view; right: front view)



In Alasmalang, Dewi Sri's carriage is a kind of sedan chair (*tandhu*) on wheels (Figs. 8a and 8b). In it, pushed by a number of men, she rode the length of the procession, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting. In Aliyan, the *tandhu* (Fig. 9) has been replaced by a pedicab (*becak*). In both places the carriage is decorated with basically the same crops that were found on the gates and on the vegetable Meru. In fact, Alasmalang's *tandhu* resembles a mountain with the various crops incorporated in it.⁴⁴ In Aliyan, where the vegetable *gunungan* precedes Dewi Sri's carriage, these decorations are simpler (Fig. 10).⁴⁵ No *puring* leaves were attached to either carriage, as this was the conveyance of the goddess of fertility who does not represent the ancestors.

Ki Wangsa Kenanga, the putative founder of Aliyan, is said to be the owner of all the animals. One of the articles that must be present at the start of the procession is a woven bamboo tray (*nyiru*) containing small figures of animals made from rice-flour dough, including water buffaloes as well as snakes, rats, chickens, crocodiles, and many other animals. The possessed men then angrily roll over these figures, chasing away or killing the agricultural pests. If this were not done, informants said, the rice fields would be

43 Such *gunungan* symbols of fertility are also part of the *garebeg* rituals celebrated at the *kraton* (palace) of Yogyakarta, of which especially the *garebeg maulud*, the celebration of the Prophet's birth and the most popular one, has associations with fertility, the maintenance of which is one of the ruler's responsibilities. Items associated with this celebration, such as whips and rice harvesting knives (*ani-ani*) as well as parts of the *gunungan* itself, are thought to be imbued with special curative and protective powers. The *garebeg maulud* was traditionally also the time that the Javanese paid their taxes, which could well be seen to reflect the welfare of the realm, and thus the functioning of the ruler (Miyazaki 1988:119–22, 124–25; Rouffaer 1931:22, note 2).

44 These include in the back *terong* (aubergine), *labu* (squash), *kacang panjang* (cowpea), *rambutan* (fruit of the *Nephelium* tree), water melon, *jambu air* (*Eugenia aquea*), *ubi* (cassava), and *cabe* (red peppers), and in the front *pari* (paddy) stalks, pineapples, maize, sprouting coconuts, *labu*, and more *cabe*.

45 Including *janur kuning*, paddy, and *kacang panjang*.

attacked by them. It is curious, therefore, that the figures included several benign animals, like chickens.⁴⁶ It was suggested that these were included to ward off diseases that attack them.

Fig. 9. *Tandhu* in Aliyan



Fig. 10. *Gunungan* in Aliyan (Credit: Slamet Hariyono)



Finally, wallows (*kumbangan lumpur*) are dug along the route of the circumambulation, one at each leg around Krajan plus a large one at the village hall (*balai desa*). In some of them a couple of rice seedlings are planted. During the procession the possessed buffalo-men jump into these wallows whenever they spot them, bathing in the mud like water buffaloes (Fig. 11). The handlers that restrain them usually end up being as muddy as the *keboan*. In Alasmalang the water guardian (*jaga tirta*)⁴⁷ formerly flooded Krajan's streets with water, but since these were paved this has become

46 The annual offering to the Goddess of the Southern Ocean in Puger (East Java) includes rice-flour dough figures of caterpillars, snakes, scorpions, *emprit* or *pipit* birds (birds that attacks the rice crop in the field), and other pests. See also Rassers (1959:18) and Headley (2003).

47 Also *mudin banyu*. *Jaga tirta* means guardian of the water, the official in charge of irrigation. De Stoppelaar (1927:12) writes that *mudin* is perhaps an Islamic term replacing the various *dhukun* (mediator with the spirits) that used to assist the village head (*kuwu*) among the Using. The term *mudin* indicates a religious functionary, though their tasks often have nothing to do with religion. The *mudin banyu* is perhaps equivalent to the Sundanese *wali puhun*, who replaced a functionary called *pu'un* (see Wessing 2013:113–15).

difficult to do. The *keboan* there now jump into a flooded gutter along one of the roads, and are hosed down at the central intersection.

Fig. 11. *Guyang*



Fig. 11. Pak Asir, *pawang* in Aliyan



Nyekar

The proceedings in Aliyan begin the day before the procession with a visit of the *pawang* (mediator to the spirits), Pak Asir (Fig. 11), and the other water-guardian (*jaga tirta*) to the grave of Ki Wangsa Kenanga south of Krajan, and to the two hills (*gumuk*) that lie slightly southwest of this grave. This visit is called *nyekar* (placing flowers on a grave), and is intended to let Ki Wangsa Kenanga and his son Raden Pekik know that the ritual will take place the next day. The timing of this visit does not seem to be crucial: in Aliyan it was scheduled to take place at 3 PM, but because it threatened to rain that afternoon it was brought forward to 10 AM. In Alasmalang too, there was uncertainty about when it would occur; having been scheduled for Saturday evening around the time of the evening prayer, it actually took place early Sunday morning.⁴⁸

48 <http://uun-halimah.blogspot.com/2009/05/upacara-kebo-keboan-pada-masyarakat.html>. (Last accessed 26 September 2014).

In Aliyan, the *pawang* and his entourage bring an offering of yellow uncooked rice (*beras kuning*),⁴⁹ ritual flowers (*kembang telon*), betel quid (*ragi kinangan*),⁵⁰ a cone of yellow (cooked) rice (*tumpeng*), and an assortment of the crops of vine, tree, and roots similar to those that were mentioned earlier (cf. Aekanu 2008:8; Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:53). He then invited (*ngundang*) Ki Wangsa Kenanga's spirit to the next day's event. This is at the same time an invitation to attend, and a notification that the event is taking place, and thus that the descendants are fulfilling their customary obligations. The *tumpeng* is eaten communally, after which people can compete in grabbing the offerings (*rebutan*), because, having been in contact with Ki Wangsa Kenanga's grave, these are thought to have magical properties.⁵¹ The same thing is done at the two *gumuk*, the grave of Raden Pekik and the *petaanun*, the home of the tutelary spirit, and at two places where irrigation water enters the community's rice fields.⁵² In Alasmalang, much the same thing happens, with offerings brought to the four stones (*watu*) that define the hamlet's periphery.

Selamatan Desa

In Aliyan the ritual opens at about 5:30 AM on Sunday with a general ritual meal (*selamatan*). Every household has prepared a cone of rice (*tumpeng*), a green vegetable, a dish called *pecel pitik*,⁵³ and water or tea to drink. Mats or banana leaves are spread along the street in front of the houses, and the food is laid out on these. Family members, guests, and passersby then partake of the food, together with all the other households in the *dhukuh*. *Selamatan* food may also be sent to relatives in other, nearby villages as is commonly done in Java. The point is that all—leaders, villagers, relatives, and others—share the food empowered by having been part of the *selamatan* (Pemberton 1994:243–45) (see Fig. 12).

One important aspect is the number of *tumpeng* that are to be eaten by the leadership together with the tutelary spirit. In Alasmalang, I was told that there had to be six and 12 of these: six for the four directions plus the *axis mundi*, and 12 for the months of the year. In Aliyan, on the other hand, nine *tumpeng* sufficed. In addition each household had its own *tumpeng*. Important is that this food, including the *tumpeng*, should be consumed together by the villagers and the leaders.

In Alasmalang in 2009, however, it was decided to have the *selamatan desa* on the evening before the procession because, since the event was now on the tourist calendar, too many outsiders crowded the streets, trampling the food. On the day itself, then, only the village leaders and their invited guests, including the Bupati, would partake of the official 12 plus six *tumpeng* at the crossroads, the focal center of the hamlet. This was not

49 Rice colored yellow with turmeric.

50 The ingredients for a betel quid (*sirih*), which is an appropriate offering for the rice goddess (Wessing 1978a:119; 1999a:652, note 20; Purwadi 2004:137).

51 Pemberton (1994:244–46) writes that *rebutan* tend to be confined to places empowered by the village's *dhanyang*. Occasionally the *rebutan* occurs before the end of the ritual. In Bakungan, in 2010, the *seblang* dancer was supposed to bathe at the village's spring, but youths pushed her aside and started to fill their bottles with the 'sacralized' water before she had a chance to make it sacred by doing so.

52 Actually, the places where what was until then just water becomes irrigation water. Such places are thought to be guarded by spirits and offerings are made there (cf. Wessing 1978a:116–17).

53 Steamed and roasted free-range chicken (*ayam kampung*) mixed with grated coconut and spices (Hasan Ali 2004:317).

to everyone's liking, but the crowding of the streets did not leave much choice. People also complained that the officials only took the meat, and left the rice to be thrown away.

Prior to the official *selamatan*, Alasmalang's *keboan* were being made up in the west, near the *petaunan*: their faces and bodies were blackened, wooden cattle bells were hung around their necks, and wooden horns and black raffia wigs were attached to their heads. None were in trance, and they and the audience had a good time, laughing and playing around. Elsewhere the rice goddess and her female attendants were being made up as well.

At the same time some men and women gathered near Dewi Sri's carriage, dressed in 'traditional' farmers' clothes. Some women carried baskets of yellow rice while another woman's basket was filled with unhusked rice (Using: *pari*), and yet another had maize, bananas and a roasted chicken, to be used later in an offering.

In Aliyan, the *selamatan desa* was scheduled to begin at 5:30 AM on the day of the procession. In both hamlets, the *selamatan* is opened with a prayer by a religious leader or a village elder, for example, the *jaga tirta*, the *pawang* who leads the procession (Aekanu 2008:8; Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:120).

Fig. 12. *Selamatan desa*



Ider Bumi

As the Aliyan *selamatan* was ending, the first of the possessed *keboan* made his appearance at the starting point, near the house of the *pawang*, Pak Asir. The possessing spirits were said to have come from outside the hamlet. Also near the starting point, lying on the ground was the tray with animal figurines, while in the road the model plough and harrow stood waiting. The first one to arrive was the lead *keboan*, who carried an incense

Fig. 13. Lead *keboan* in Aliyan

burner (*pedupan*) between his teeth and would later scatter yellow rice along the route as an offering to the spirits that possessed the *keboan* (Fig 13). As he arrived, he ran up to a musical ensemble (*tabuhan*)⁵⁴ that waited there, urging them to play louder. When they did not play loud enough, he charged into them. He then ran to the wallow (*kubangan*) there and jumped into it to bathe (*guyang*), as did the other *keboan* who appeared, one by one. The *pawang*, Pak Asir, said a prayer (*do'a*) to God and scattered yellow rice (*beras kuning*) there. He also applied yellow rice to the faces of the *keboan* as these arrived.

Unlike in Alasmalang, where only one of the 14 *keboan* became possessed during the procession,⁵⁵ the ones in Aliyan commonly become possessed as early as the evening before, but especially after dawn on the day of the *ider bumi*.⁵⁶ As Aekanu (2008:7) writes, 'at 2 AM something magical seems to pervade the air. After *subuh*, the time of the morning prayer, the screams of Man Irin, the lead *keboan*, can be heard: a spirit has possessed him since the evening before. With his eyes wide open and his fists tightly clenched, he breathes in the smoke of the incense,' which is what spirits feed on. Others

54 This ensemble and another, called *hadrah*, accompanied the procession, the *tabuhan* near the front and the *hadrah* at the rear. The *tabuhan* is a metallophone ensemble, in East Java probably modeled on a Balinese example, this ensemble's other Indonesian location being in rather distant Sumatra (Kartomi 1998:623 and Harnish 1998:735). *Hadrah*, which is mentioned only for Malaysia (Matusky and Chopyak 1998:409), is an Islamic drum and gong ensemble.

55 Someone said that four *keboan* were possessed. The majority of them in Alasmalang were conscious, striking poses for cameras, and participating in conversations. They ran into clumps of very enthusiastic spectators, targeting especially the prettier girls who then ran away screaming with laughter.

56 Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009:61) write that some people become possessed and act as delegates from the ancestors (are possessed by ancestral spirits?), who come specifically to see the preparations. These people, however, regain consciousness and do not become *keboan*.

too may become possessed during the night or even some days before the event (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:44–47).

In the past, the cockfight with steel-bound spurs (*taji*; Pleyte 1901:237) took place at this point. Though Aekanu (2008:8) writes that this was symbolic of men's readiness to provide for their families until death, it is more likely that the cockfight had its origin in the blood sacrifice that in the past preceded the founding of a community, a founding that is reiterated by the *keboan* ritual's thanksgiving for the harvest (Pleyte 1901:233) and the request for rain at the start of the new agricultural cycle. Such blood sacrifices of chickens, rams, or even buffalo still occur (Wessing and Jordaan 1997).⁵⁷ These days the cockfight is symbolic: the roosters are set upon each other but are then immediately separated. After the cockfight (or perhaps now instead of it) some men took some long dried strands of banana plant and whipped each other with them. This is called *ujungan* or *gitikan* (see Fig. 14) (Hasan Ali 2004:75, 145).⁵⁸ *Ujungan* used to be done with rattan canes and the purpose was to draw blood, the first one to bleed being the loser (De Jonge 1990:428). The rattan canes are reminiscent of the whips used to combat the pests that attack Dewi Sri in the myth as related by Rassers (1959:19): Puring strikes with a bamboo, making *Səngkan* and *Turunan* appear.⁵⁹ 'Out of their male organs [these] ... produce long pieces of rattan, which they use as whips in their fight against the bull and the buffalo. No sooner have these animals received a lash of the whip than they fall powerless; a rope is put through their noses and they are tied to a large tree.' The whipping, then, could at one time have been a reference to the Dewi Sri mythology, linking the ancestors and the taming of the buffaloes that are the focus of the *keboan* ritual.

57 They are part of a set of sacrifices that used to include humans (Wessing and Jordaan 1997:119–20). It is interesting to note that the animals that are used in animal fights in the context of a ritual are sacrificial animals *par excellence*. These include, in descending order, the bull or buffalo, the ram, and the rooster. Bullfights and cockfights in Indonesia have been analyzed respectively by Geertz (1972) and De Jonge (1990). Bullfights were part of agricultural rituals including the promotion of fertility (Bishop 1925:630, 633; Wessing 2006b:229, note 42) and its link with human sacrifice is clear from a ritual described by Bishop (1925:632). Like cockfights prior to Geertz's article, ram-fights seem not to have received anthropological attention. Mentions of it tend to be primarily touristic (R. 1923; V. 1926 and various pages on the Internet). This lack of attention may be due to the fact that these ritual fights were lumped together with other animal fights under discussions of gambling, which is part of the rituals though not the main reason for them (cf. Maandschrift 1833:637; Kiehl 1877:357; Geertz 1972:11–15). As is clear from the writings of De Jonge (1990:444) and Geertz (1972:5), in both the cockfight and the bullfight the underlying battle is not so much between the animals as between the men they represent. Such animal fights, McNeely and Wachtel (1988:148–49) note, 'substituted' for human sacrifices that aimed to ward off bad harvests and epidemics (but see Wessing and Jordaan 1997), the ram-fights having originated several generations ago in West Java as part of a 'renegade religious ritual'. This ignores the fact that they also occurred in Aceh (Alkema and Bezemer 1927:424; Jawa Pos 2013:13). An interesting parallel between the ram-fight and the bullfight is that both beasts are accompanied by two men, called *seler*, whose sexuality is at stake here (Wessing 2006b:229, note 42; see R. 1923:814 and photograph). Whether this risk is also present in the ram-fight is unclear. For a clear photograph of a ram-fight and the *seler* see Douwes Dekker (1950:299).

58 Also written *ojung*. See also *ujungan*, a 'mock duel with rattan canes' (Robson and Wibisono 2002:776; Coolsma 1879:125). Elsewhere in Java this is called *tiban* (Jawa Pos 2009:8). These lengths of banana tree fibers replace the whips or rattan canes that used to be used. These would perhaps have drawn the blood that used to flow during the cockfight.

59 As was seen earlier, *puring* is a reference to the ancestors. Van Albada and Pigeaud (2007:923) gloss *səngkan* with stranger or someone from elsewhere, also someone who has gained in rank or status. *Turunan* is glossed with descendant (2007:1031).

Fig. 14. *Ujungan*

While De Stoppelaar (1926:416) was unsure whether this ‘game’ of *ujungan* had a spiritual background, in Javanese, Madurese, and Using communities in East Java, it is now a rain-making ritual. ‘The blood that flows and the pain suffered are considered a sacrifice [to ensure] that the rains will soon arrive’ (Jawa Pos 2006:25). This association with rain is emphasized by the *tabuhan* ensemble, whose rhythm at that point is that of falling rain (Aekanu 2008:8). This ensures that the rains will come, emphasizing the coming planting season. The whip may be a reflection of Dewi Sri’s whip (*pecut naga raja*) with which she urges on the animals pulling her carriage. ‘Each time the *pecut naga raja* is struck, bits of luck fall to earth from the heavens’ (Murgiyanto and Munardi n.d.:45). In Alasmalang, there was neither a cockfight nor an *ujungan*.

In Aliyan, the procession was now ready to start and the participants began to assemble. It was said that the *keboan* go into trance after the *pawang* burns some incense, but this cannot be true for all of them, as some, including the lead *keboan* had been in trance since the night before. Out in front, deep in trance was the lead *keboan* carrying his incense burner between his teeth and a bowl of yellow rice in one hand. Behind him came some other *keboan*, also in trance with their eyes wide open and their fists clenched, some chewing on grass or leaves. Some *keboan* wore wooden horns and/or a black raffia wig. These approximately 20 *keboan* were followed by the *tabuhan* ensemble behind which came the decorated plough (*singkal*) and harrow (*garu*), each pulled by two *keboan*. Then followed the *gunungan* of crops, carried by some men, and this was in turn followed by the rice goddess, Dewi Sri, in her carriage right in front of which danced an older *gandrung* dancer (Fig. 15).⁶⁰ Behind her came a troupe of young boys, made up like junior *keboan*

60 It was difficult to determine whether this *gandrung* dancer, who is there to greet the visiting spirits

Fig. 15. Dewi Sri and *gandrung* dancer

who danced and performed along the route.⁶¹ The *hadrah* ensemble closed the procession, which, as it moved along, was cheered on by the villagers that formed the audience that by its approval validated the performance of the ritual. The *pawang*, while present throughout, did not have a fixed place in the procession. With the sounding of the *tabuhan*, the procession begins to move, the *keboan* dancing to the rhythm of the music. Being in trance, the *keboan* are quite strong and unpredictable, and each is handled by two strong young men whose task is to keep the possessed men moving along and calm. These young men belong to the *keboan*'s household, as does a woman who also accompanies each one, washing his face with cooling water. As they dance and also each time they emerge from a wallow along the route, the *keboan* greet the people watching and invite them to join in the dance by raising their hands, cheering loudly, or blowing whistles, creating an immense din. Water is continually thrown up in the air and onto the participants and audience, ostensibly to cool down the *keboan*, but often also just for fun.⁶²

that possess the *keboan* was a man or a woman. Usually, it was said, it is an old woman though she is supposed to represent Marson, the last male *gandrung* dancer who in 1895 was replaced by Semi, the first female one. In some ways the *gandrung* in Aliyan resembled the *seblang* dancer of Bakungan (Wessing 1999a).

61 In 2008, this was a troupe of boys and girls in dancing costume.

62 I asked two informants whether this had anything to do with rain, which is said to follow the successful performance of a ritual. After all, while the time of the harvest should be dry, the planting season that follows needs water. Although my informants denied this, the parallels with the Thai *Bun Bang Fai* festival are interesting: water is thrown to promote rain and fertility while boys roll around in muddy fields (cf. Klausner (1974:17), Lefferts (2004:132), and Rajadhon (1960:37). Headley (2003: figs. 6.1, 6.9, and 6.10) shows depictions of ritual nudity in a rice field as part of its purification, with a clear emphasis on the pudenda. Elsewhere I have linked such sexual references with promoting fertility (Wessing 1997b:342, n. 38, 2009:372–73).

Alasmalang's start was similar. Prayers (*Do'a*) were said and yellow rice was scattered as an offering to the spirits (*meras*) as the *keboan*, each controlled by two handlers, arranged themselves before Dewi Sri's carriage. At this point these *keboan* were not yet possessed, but this can occur any time along the route. Like in Aliyan, the possessing spirits are said to come from outside Alasmalang, from the nearby Watu Tumpeng, but also from as far away as Jember or Sanggar. They have various appearances and it cannot be predicted which spirit will come on any particular year.

Dewi Sri's carriage, which waited near the *petaunan* in the western part of the *dhukuh*, was surrounded by a number of girls made up to be the goddess' attendants (*dayang*). At this western border also stood a platform on which the *wayang* story Batara Kala⁶³ was to be presented, the screen on which the puppets' shadows are projected facing the *petaunan* and the spirit world.

The *keboan* were all made up much alike, with black raffia wigs, bells, and black body paint. Behind them came the three women and the man dressed as farmers, carrying a whip, baskets with yellow rice, and one with offerings to be made at the four compass points that define the hamlet. As the procession started, the *wayang* presentation began and the *jaga tirta* slightly flooded this leg of the road with water, which in the past would have been flooded. One *keboan* jumped into an overflowing gutter and others had fun splashing around. As the procession, lead by the *buldrah* (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:122),⁶⁴ neared the intersection it was halted because the Bupati, who had finally arrived, was about to partake of the official *selamatan*. This done, the Bupati immediately departed and the procession could continue.

ROUTE

As it would be too confusing to discuss both the route and the events taking place along it at the same time, I shall first describe the route taken in each hamlet and then pay attention to the activities carried out along them. As seems to be common throughout Indonesia (Wessing 1988:178–81; Anwarmufied 1981:93), in both places the procession is said to go counterclockwise around the *dhukuh*, giving access to the chthonic powers of the earth.⁶⁵ However, given the individual layouts of the hamlets, there are some technical differences. In Aliyan, as can be seen on the map (Fig. 1), the *dhukuh* Krajan is the central

63 There is some confusion here. Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009:123) write that the play Sri Muleh (the return of Sri) begins as the procession sets off. Yet they claim that this story is about Batara Kala and the danger he presents; in other words, the typical exorcism (*ruwatan*) story. Sri Muleh, on the other hand, is presented in the evening following the procession (<http://uun-halimah.blogspot.com/2009/05/upacara-kebo-keboan-pada-masyarakat.html>; last accessed 26 September 2014). *Wayang* presentations can be seen to make present or actualize ancestral conditions, conducive to bringing about desired results. I am indebted here to a long-ago conversation with Dr. John Emigh, then of Brown University. See also Headley (2000), in which the recitation of a cosmogony serves as an exorcism, and Headley (2003), where the recitation of the myth as part of a rice field purification ritual similarly evokes primordial (i.e., pure) conditions.

64 Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009:103) gloss *buldrah* with 'a leader who is an expert farmer'. The word occurs in neither Hasan Ali's (2004) nor Robson and Wibisono's (2002) dictionary.

65 Randal Baier (personal communication) notes that in West Java 'three women' [danced] 'counterclockwise around an elaborate display of offerings of uncooked rice and cakes' after which there were 'invocations to the rice goddess'. See also Pemberton (1994:261), where the movement is clockwise and De Josselin de Jong (1965:286–87) where it is again counterclockwise.

hamlet of the village, lying right below the hamlet Bolot.⁶⁶ The procession, having started near the house of the *pawang*, Pak Asir, began by moving west along Krajan's northern road, in the direction of Timurjo, following this road as it bent south toward Aliyan's main road. There, the procession turned west toward the village hall (*balai desa*) at Kedawung. The activities there having been finished, the procession returned along the main road until it reached the intersection at Cempoko Sari, a curving road leading south and east toward the grave of Ki Wangsa Kenanga, which lies at the end of this road near the border with the village Parijatah Wetan. There, homage was paid to the founder, after which the procession returned to Krajan, this time going straight 'north' crossing the intersection with the main east–west road and proceeding a little way past Krajan. Pak Asir then turned the procession around and had it head west again along the road it had started on, once again following the curve south to the main road. This time, however, the procession turned east toward the main intersection at Krajan, site of the simulated agricultural activities. After this, the procession headed north once more and stopped at the house of the late Haji Latip.

Alasmalang's route was more complicated because, unlike in Aliyan, there was no road around the hamlet (see Figs. 16 and 17). Here, the procession started in the west at the *petaunan*, heading toward the intersection where it turned left (north), passing the gate that defined the center and going on to the outer gate that bounds Krajan at the Watu Karangan. They did not go beyond this gate to the *watu*, making the gate take the place of the boundary hill. The procession then turned around, heading south along the same road back toward the center. There it turned left once more, heading east to the outer gate at the Watu Lasa and the grave of the founder. Having finished there, the procession headed back to the center, turned left and went south toward the outer gate at the Watu Naga or Watu Tumpeng and then onto the center where the simulated agricultural activities took place. After these, Dewi Sri and the procession headed north, beyond the outer gate, to the rice field where the *keboan* and the people cavorted. Then the goddess, her entourage, and some of the public went back to Karjan, leaving the *keboan* and youth to play in the mud.

Fig. 16. Actual route, Alasmalang

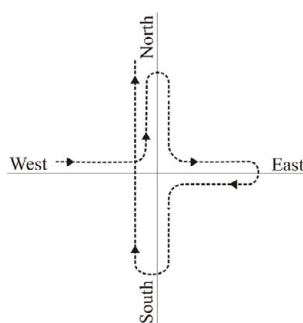
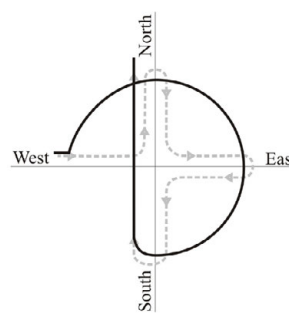


Fig. 17. Simplified route, Alasmalang



It will have been noticed that, while I earlier wrote that the route follows a counterclockwise direction, the one in Alasmalang went clockwise. As described by Alasmalang's *pawang*, Pak Rahwat, the route should have gone from the west, via the center to the south, back

⁶⁶ Both Bolot and Krajan now have extensions to the east, but these are barely involved. The focus is on the hamlet Krajan in the center of the map.

to the center and to the east, back to the center for some symbolic activities and then to the north. However, when the procession was underway I heard someone at its head ask which way they should turn at the center, to which the answer was ‘lor’ (north). The procession then turned left, after which, of course, every turn at the center was to the left, turning the route into a clockwise one. I am unaware if this was just an error, or whether it might have had to do with the location of the rice fields where the *keboan* finally bathed.⁶⁷

Spirals

There is, furthermore, something interesting about the route taken in both Aliyan and Alasmalang. While circumambulation literally means ‘to walk around’ (McKechnie 1971:328), i.e., to draw a closed circle around, this is not what is done in either Aliyan or Alasmalang.⁶⁸ If one simplifies the back and forth route in Alasmalang to a simple line from the west to the north, south, center and north, the resulting figure is a spiral rather than a circle. Similarly, if in Aliyan one were to cut the detour to the *balai desa* and the founder’s grave, neither of which existed in Ki Wangsa Kenanga’s time,⁶⁹ one is left with a double encircling of Krajan: west, south, east, north, west, south, east, north: a counterclockwise double spiral. This once more emphasizes the chthonic agricultural focus of the ritual, and especially the concern with rice.

Events along the Route

The concern with the forthcoming rice-growing season can be seen in the activities of both the *keboan* and the public. In Aliyan, the first stop was the village hall (*balai desa*). There a large incense burner wafted its smoke, feeding the visiting spirits, and a large wallow awaited the *keboan* to bathe in before paying homage (see Fig. 18) to the dignitaries—including, since 2010, the Bupati. There was a brief wait for the Bupati to arrive, during which the *keboan* ate rice and *pecel* that had been laid out for them on banana leaves at the foot of the audience hall (*pendopo*). Having eaten, Man Irin, the lead *keboan*, crawled onto the *pendopo* and paid homage to the assembled guests. The Bupati then made a speech and broke an earthenware water vessel (*kendi*) as a sign that the event could now officially start.

From the *balai desa* the procession headed to Ki Wangsa Kenanga’s grave (see Fig. 19), the *keboan* jumping into wallows, as well as trying to enter the occasional rice field. Arriving at the grave, the *keboan* paid homage to the founder, their ancestor and initiator of the ritual. They embraced his grave until moved away by their handlers.

⁶⁷ Pak Rahwat, having recently had a stroke, did not actually lead the procession, which may have led to the confusion. This lack of clarity also showed up in reports on the ritual, one of which has the procession start in the west, head east to the Watu Lasa, then west to the Watu Karang, south to the Watu Gajah and finally north to the Watu Naga (<http://uun-halimah.blogspot.com/2009/05/upacara-kebo-keboan-pada-masyarakat.html>; last accessed 26 September 2014). Such apparent ‘errors’ do not necessarily invalidate the ritual. As Parkin (1992:20) notes, ‘participants can, in moments of ritual enthusiasm and emotion, spatially reshape the passage of the ritual.... Those in charge may insist on its proper performance but can also ‘tacitly accept the spatial shift and even claim it as the “real way”—allowing new agency by default’.

⁶⁸ Nor, in retrospect, in Bakungan (Wessing 1999a:654–56).

⁶⁹ The stop at the *balai desa* was only instituted in 2008, when attention from officials outside Aliyan increased (Mr. Aekanu Hariyono, personal communication).

Fig. 18. Paying homage. (Credit: Selamat Hariyono)



Fig. 19. At Ki Wangsa Kenanga's grave



Heading back toward Krajan an incident occurred that illustrates the degree to which the *keboan* are identified with actual water buffalo. As the saliva from a water buffalo is thought to have curative powers (e.g., Kreemer 1956:160, 165), the lead *keboan* was asked to cure a woman with a *lumpuh* (paralyzed, crippled) leg. Nuzzling her leg the buffalo-spirit/*keboan* applied *beras kuning* to it while the smoke from his incense burner wafted about.⁷⁰ The lead *keboan* is especially thought to have these powers. In Soebairi's 2008 VCD, a member of the public yells *ilang penyakité*, let the illness be gone.

70 Saliva from powerful persons is said to have such powers as well (Wessing 1986:22ff).

Fig. 20. *Nyabarakeken winih*

Arriving finally for the last time at the intersection of the main east-west road and the one leading past Krajan and Bolot, the *keboan* ploughed and harrowed, and kernels of *pari* (paddy) were scattered on the road as if on a seedbed (*nyabarakeken winih, tandur*) (see Fig. 20). In Aekanu's 2007 and Soebairi's 2008 VCD recordings of these events, the district officer (*camat*) appears to be adding to this seed paddy. The *keboan* then rolled around in the scattered seed, after which people were allowed to grab as much of it as they could get hold of, often pushing each other away (*rebut*).⁷¹ This sometimes annoyed the *keboan* who then tried to butt the people. The 'planting' accomplished, the procession headed north again to the house of the late Haji Latip, who during his lifetime had been the *pawang* leading the procession. Here Pak Asir brought the *keboan* out of trance. In Aekanu's (2007) VCD Pak Irin, the lead *keboan*, greets (*pamit*) the *pawang* before being brought out of trance by being hit on the forehead as Pak Asir reads a *mantra*. In response, the *keboan* collapses, exhausted. Sometimes the spirit possessing the *keboan* is not ready to depart and must be cajoled, but in the end all leave. Having recovered, the *keboan* go home.

In Alasmalang, the first stops were successively the outer gate near the Watu Karang (north), the one near Watu Lasa and the founder's grave (east), and the gate at Watu Naga (south). As they were about to turn south, the *keboan* were sprayed with a hose, a substitute for the wallows they would previously have bathed in. At all three gates, the *bulrah* made an offering (*peras*) of Lady Finger bananas (*gedhang emas, Musa*

71 Compare the *rebutan* that are part of the Garebek rituals of the Central Javanese courts (cf. Miyazaki 1988:119–29). *Rebutan* are struggles to obtain ritually powerful objects (Robson and Wibisono 2002:620), which in this case is the rice seed that has gained ritual powers of fertility from its participation in the *keboan* ritual, and especially its physical contact with the possessed *kebo*. See also Pemberton (1994:*passim*).

acuminata), turmeric rice (*beras kuning*), betel quid (*ragi kinangan*) and *kelapa lawé* (25 coconuts),⁷² while the woman carrying the basket with paddy stood nearby and a group of girls sang songs praising Dewi Sri and the joys of a good harvest (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:113). Having made these offerings, the procession headed back to the intersection, the *keboan* going on into the center and Dewi Sri and her entourage stopping just short of it. The *keboan* then arrayed themselves, sitting on the east and west sides of the road. Dewi Sri got out of her carriage and, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting and the woman carrying the basket with paddy, passed in front of them, blessing them. This done, a man in farmers' clothes 'hoed' the side of the road, after which two *keboan* each were hitched to a model plough and a model harrow, and simulated preparing (*ngurit*) some meters of land (actually the pavement) to the north of the intersection. The intersection was then wetted down and some men, who had taken the contents of the lady's paddy basket, proceeded to scatter the stalks of paddy on the wetted pavement, creating a symbolic seedbed that was then trodden upon by the *keboan*, recalling the myth about the origin of the ritual. Having finished, the procession, with Dewi Sri back in her carriage, headed north, toward some flooded rice fields beyond the Watu Karang gate. There, as Dewi Sri and her entourage watched from the road, the *keboan* plunged into the mud, ploughing and harrowing, and chasing youngsters who dared to get too close to them.⁷³

This ploughing and harrowing frolic went on for a while, after which the rice goddess decided to head back to *Krajan*. Here too the *keboan* were brought out of trance by being hit on the forehead. After recovering there a while they headed for home.

HOSTING THE WILD BUFFALOES

Throughout Southeast Asia, the appearance of the buffalo is a sign of transition. As discussed elsewhere (Wessing 2006b:213–18), in mythologies throughout Indonesia, the emergence of a (water) buffalo from an underworld cave or a body of water is a sign of the imminent coming into being of a new state or other territorial unit and, indirectly, the rice upon which the welfare of these units depends. They or their substitutes⁷⁴ are also closely involved in human transitions, their sacrifice often making them into the vehicle on which the person's spirit either enters or leaves this life (Wessing 2006b:221–25). They are, as Holm (2003:208) writes, 'the only fitting substitute for the human body', the self being the most proper sacrifice (Hubert and Mauss 1981:11, 21, 29). Their appropriateness as a sacrificial substitute for human beings means that they are perceived to share certain attributes with them, and it is sometimes said that people have *sipat kebo* (buffalo-like attributes),⁷⁵ just as they may share attributes with other animals, like the tiger (Wessing

72 Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009:105–109) list *saba* or *kepok* bananas (see Kloppenburg-Versteegh 1978:102), white rice, yellow (turmeric) rice, a burial cloth and a partially husked coconut covered with a white cloth, kitchen spices, yellow porridge (*jenang kuning*), betel quid (*ragi kinangan*), and a rice cone (*tumpang*).

73 See Covarrubias (1942:74–75) for a similar 'entertainment' in Bali, where it takes the form of bull races in flooded fields, reminiscent of the Madurese *kerapan sapi* (cf. Sutjitro 1992). Both these events are linked to the agricultural cycle, the Madurese one to the harvest and the Balinese one to the advent of planting.

74 See note 57 above.

75 This buffalo aspect was recognized throughout South and Southeast Asia and beyond. In the *Rg Veda* (X. 90.6–16), for instance, the world is created out of the body of the primordial man *Puruṣa* (the prototype of sacrifices; Stutley and Stutley 1984:239), whose name is a composite of the words for 'man'

1986:111–16).⁷⁶ Indeed, the buffalo is sometimes said to represent the Javanese generally, for instance, in its ceremonial fight against a tiger (*rampok macan*) during which it usually defeats the tiger—the latter said to represent the colonial Dutch (Wessing 1992:289–91, 296).

As Siswanto and Prasetyo (2009:45) note, the *keboan* are ‘*kerbau jadi-jadian*’ (were-water buffaloes), in which the person, under the control of an alien spirit, becomes (*ndadi*) ‘like a buffalo’. The *ndadi* (becoming) experienced by the *keboan*, therefore, in which their normally visible insider-humanity makes place for the wildness of spirits that is manifested in the outsider-buffalo, can be seen as a temporary sacrifice of their human identity to allow the spirits to fulfill their task of bringing rain and fertility into the community.⁷⁷

Elements of this ritual reflect parts of the mythology of the rice goddess,⁷⁸ in which the buffalo or cow also plays a significant role (Rassers 1959:11–19). These include the crops used as offerings, the cleansing of the village, and especially the presence of the ‘wild’ *keboan*, ready to *ngamuk* (run amuck) when displeased (Siswanto and Prasetyo 2009:43). In the myth, Manikmaya, the wild bull and buffalo are among the attackers of the rice crop (= Dewi Sri). They are subdued, but not killed—unlike other attackers such as the rat, pig and monkey. Rather, ‘... a rope is put through their noses and they are tied to a large tree’ (Rassers 1959:19).⁷⁹ Similarly, in the tale as told by Purwadi (2004:183), Dewi Sri rides in a cart drawn by the mythological ox Lembu Gumarang.⁸⁰

The *keboan*’s wildness (*ora tutut*, ‘ungovernable’) may be seen as representing or embodying the wildness of the possessing spirits and the realm beyond the hamlet in which they are thought to reside. At the same time, this wildness is also the source of the fertility on which the community depends. The *keboan* then, are the wild outside that is socialized and brought into the community to aid with the agriculture.⁸¹ As such they are

and ‘bull’ (Lincoln 1981:75), reflecting the identity of bull and man (Molenaar 1985:249, note 39). Compare various groups in Indonesia who consider the sacrificer to be identical with the sacrificial buffalo (Kreemer 1956:232, 246).

76 McVey (1993:10) speaks of the ‘disorderly, animal aspect of humanity’ as an attribute of people living ‘close to nature,’ [...] ‘distant geographically and socially from the centre....’ However, this ignores the fact that the ruler must have within himself some aspects of that unruly nature (Wessing 1990:251).

77 Informants in East Java told me that, similar to what happens in Bali (Hornbacher 2011:175–76), a possessed person’s spirit is thought to have left the body it is associated with prior to this person being possessed. This gives an extra dimension of meaning to the precondition of ‘selflessness’ mentioned by Hornbacher (2011:180). When the possessing spirit has left its host’s body, either voluntarily or after being expelled, the person’s own spirit is called to return.

78 While at basis one set of related myths, local variants of it may differ even between neighboring villages, reflecting local reference points and concerns, but together linking the communities concerned (cf. Heringa 1997; 2003).

79 In the past the sacrificial animal was tied to a post, in India known as a *yūpa* (Headley 2004:285; see also Stutley and Stutley 1984:351–52). This is or was until recently still done elsewhere in Indonesia (cf. Forth 1998; Kreemer 1956).

80 While *lembu* is usually glossed with cow, it can also be a wild water buffalo (Wessing 2006b:215). During the ritual in Alasmalang in 2004, Dewi Sri’s carriage was pulled by two *keboan* with their bodies painted white instead of black (Riy 2004:17).

81 It is interesting to note that, like elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia (Simoons and Simoons 1968:48–9, 72, 84, 120, 268–9), until quite recently (i.e., 2007) Using farmers in the village Siliragung (district of Bangorejo, regency of Banyuwangi) would set their water buffaloes loose to graze in the teak

Fig. 21. Water Buffaloes in a Wallow (Aceh)



like the outside spirits, the original owners of the land. The wild *keboan* and the people dance around the hamlet in a barely controlled chaos, accompanied by Dewi Sri and overseen by the *pawang*, creating a counterclockwise spiral path to the underworld that funnels the powers of fertility into the community. This full participation by all concerned validates the ritual and effects the transfer by bringing together the appropriate symbols: ancestors, water, the *keboan*, the rice goddess, and the spirits. The ritual is seen here, then, as an action that accomplishes a goal through its performance, in which the proper conjunction of the appropriate symbols specifies the desired result (cf. Wessing 1978b:176; Kristensen 1961:10). In that sense, the narration of past events and current desires that takes place in the course of this ritual may be seen as performative in the sense of Austin (1975), just like prayers (also ritual actions) are in the final analysis constitutive of Javanese houses and communities Errington 1996:183–84; Wessing 2008:533).⁸²

forest when they were not needed to work on the land. This was also done in Aceh when I taught there in 1980–82. There, semi-wild water buffaloes were kept in large tracts where they were free to roam during the off-season (see Fig. 21). Individual owners know their water buffaloes, while newborn calves follow their mothers (See also Koloniaal Instituut, p. 413, entry number 1370). In Siliragung this practice has now been discontinued, my informant said, due to the prevalence of rustling. It is still done elsewhere in East Java, however (Zen 2009:13; Dwi Setiyawan 2009:13). Informants said this was a ‘centuries old’ custom that was already practiced in colonial times. Wild buffaloes (*Bos Banteng* or *Bos Sondaicus*) also still roam the nearby forested area (Jawa Pos 2011:27; compare Singodimayan 2011:59).

82 Pemberton (1994:251) characterizes Sri stories these days as ‘an active means to prosperity,’ rather than, as in the past, ‘a sign of productive harvests.’ I wonder though whether they were not ‘an active means’ all along, at least in the way that these things are acted out.

SUMMARY

The rituals in both Aliyan and Alasmalang, until recently, were acted out narrations of a mythological event from the time of the founders and the origin of the communities. In those myths, these hamlets found themselves facing hostile forces from beyond their boundaries in the form of drought, infertility, and pests. In both the Alasmalang and the Aliyan foundation myths, relief came in the form of a ritual circumambulation that strengthened community boundaries. This involves two things simultaneously, namely (1) the definition of the hamlet as a place through (2) the fixing of its boundaries. Both were initially accomplished through an agreement with the spirit-owner of the community's soil, the tutelary spirit. By fixing its *pundhèn*, a boundary point was determined between the space of the community and the realm of the spirits, in the process ritually transforming unordered space into a place, i.e. the *dhukuh* (cf. Smith 1987:28, 75). This newly defined place in turn contains the sacred space of the community (Van den Berg 1901:16; Korn 1932:79–86; Wessing 2006a:56), which is today annually highlighted by the procession. The nocturnal movement of the first *keboan* in Aliyan (Raden Pekik and Raden Rangga) can be seen as reinforcing those boundaries in the face of a calamity, an action that continues today through the ritual.

In both cases the route is a spiral, 'danced' around and into Krajan, the founding *dhukuh* in the two villages. This is the location where the agreement with the tutelary spirit was first made, and where the spirits of the ancestors and the tutelary spirit are part of the landscape; the route touches the founder's grave, the spirit's *pundhèn*, and the *gumuk*, iconic places that demonstrate the veracity of the founding mythology (Wessing 2001b). This route bounds the sacred space of the community,⁸³ which is revitalized by the celebration and is linked to the domain of the spirits by a spiral path along which dance the buffalo-spirits, whose wildness is antithetical to the community, but necessary to it as well. The wild spirits, therefore, can only participate through the agency of the men who temporarily 'sacrifice' themselves⁸⁴ by losing their own spirit, thus becoming the buffalo-spirits' gateway into the community (Wessing 2012–13:205). This sacrifice allows them to participate in the celebration and bring their powers of fertility into the community. Fertility having been attained and the boundary strengthened, the *dhukuh* is once more an appropriate place to commemorate the ancestors and their spirit allies, and involve them in the people's concerns and celebrations.

CONCLUSION

It will have been noticed that although the *keboan* rituals of Alasmalang and Aliyan, have similar mythological backgrounds, the foci of attention of the two events are diverging. While in Aliyan the focus was still on the channeling of fertility and honoring the ancestors' directives, in Alasmalang the narrative had at least partially shifted, or was in the process of shifting, to the government's development policies. In other words, a shift is taking place from local specificity (Pemberton 1994:237) to a national generality, in which

83 Accounting for Aliyan's former closure during the ritual.

84 As opposed to the sacrifice of buffaloes to serve as vehicles at ritual occasions (cf. Holm 2003; Kreemer 1956:222–54; Simoons and Simoons 1968; Wessing 2006b). Here it is the human *keboan* that serve as vehicles for the spirits. Compare Forth (1998:25–29) for similar inversions among the Nage of Central Flores.

the demands of local custom and belief are losing their precedence (compare Rodemeier 2014:150, 152–53).

While the official emphasis is on the development of tourism, both Alasmalang and Aliyan are relatively small communities that lack the drawing power for tourists of, for instance, Tanah Toraja or Bali, and the facilities to accommodate great numbers of them. The number and impact of what one anonymous reader called ‘pesky tourists’ has been limited to non-local residents from neighboring villages,⁸⁵ who I would not call tourists in the usual sense. This does not mean, however, that the government’s intrusion has had no impact on these rituals. Especially in Alasmalang, the scope of the proceedings has been broadened⁸⁶ with the imported participation of cultural troupes from throughout the Banyuwangi area, creating what one informant lamentingly called a *pesta rakyat* (folk party), and another characterized as a carnival, thus at least partially achieving what Acciaioli describes as the government’s policy of privileging display and performance over belief and enactment, as ethnic groups participate in ‘a cultural substrate for all the people of the archipelago, a putatively ancient pan-Indonesian tradition’ (Acciaioli 1985:161–62; 2001:3).

Especially in Alasmalang this has led to a lesser emphasis on what had been the focal aspect of the ritual, namely the possession of men-in-trance by buffalo spirits. Indeed, during my last visit to Alasmalang only one of the *keboan* actually went into trance, and that rather late in the proceedings. The other ones only pretended to be in trance, and during breaks in the ritual chatted and joked with the onlookers.⁸⁷

While some might judge the Alasmalang event to no longer be a valid or real *keboan* ritual, it would perhaps be more fruitful to see the proceedings in Alasmalang and Aliyan as different kinds of events that, while they share a common name (cf. Baumann 1992), are based on diverging narratives. Each is valid in its own way, but addresses different goals: the maintenance of sacred sources of fertility in Aliyan, and in Alasmalang the implementation of the government’s secular development policies.

The validity of an event, after all, is a function of the requirements set by the context and circumstances in which it takes place. In the present case this is perhaps symbolized by the intrusive presence of the Bupati, whose tardy arrival delayed the proceedings in Alasmalang, and seemingly added a loop to the route in Aliyan—in both cases demonstrating the power of the new ‘king’ (*raja*). These intrusions have opened the proceedings to outside participation, and by detaching them from local belief and spirit concerns have, especially in Alasmalang, tended to change it into a form of tourist-oriented folk-theatre, leading to a partial loss of its traditional focus. In Alasmalang, therefore, the ritual is in transition. Furthermore, while some participants are still concerned with the community’s relationship with the ancestors and the spirits, as was evidenced by the man who became possessed when the Bupati’s late arrival delayed the procession, others now focus more on the government’s wishes. Although the ritual as performed in Aliyan

85 In the course of the three times that I attended a *keboan* ritual in these communities, I noticed, not counting myself, two non-Indonesians: an Australian tourist and a Japanese researcher. The tourist disappeared after approximately half an hour. Other obvious ‘outsiders’ included a researcher from the Universitas Jember, and Mr. Hasnan Singodimayan, an *adat* elder from Banyuwangi, along with a few of his friends.

86 Not without the cooperation of some local people who saw in it an opportunity to make some money.

87 Indarti (2015:140) indeed wonders if touristifying events such as this will not be counterproductive. Turning culture into a tourist spectacle, she writes, may lead to a loss of its *ruh* (spirit, here authenticity).

certainly is not static and unchanging, the orientation there was still primarily on the community, while in Alasmalang the focus of attention was shifting elsewhere (cf. Wessing 2001a), reflecting new concerns and, perhaps, a new view of the world.

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