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# Beyond the exemplary centre: knowledge, power, and sovereign bodies in Java

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The article explores the formative effects of forms of esoteric knowledge associated with Sundanese and Javanese martial arts in Indonesia. Those in possession of such knowledge are held to be efficacious and able to act in an intercessory capacity, mediating relations with the denizens of the unseen world, the *alam ghaib*, to afford protection to themselves and others. It is knowledge that implies a link to and ability to mediate relations with a higher form of authority. More recently, these forms of knowledge and its transmission have been transformed in modern, nationalist martial arts schools in which relationships based upon devotion to the martial arts teacher are reorientated towards the state as the progenitor of knowledge and material gain. Tracing these transformations, I argue that the portrayal of power as some form of 'potency' in academic accounts has obscured a model in which power is perceived to be relational, hierarchical, and instantiated through performance – a model sensitive to the role that violence plays as both a coercive and compelling force, and which accurately reflects the intrinsic instability of political authority consolidated through personal relations. In this respect, similarities in conceptions of power that circulate in Indonesia and more widely in Southeast Asia are not merely cultural, but rather reflect pragmatic concerns with the material relations of power.

Fredrik Barth, in a comparison of traditions of knowledge in Southeast Asia and Melanesia, argues that transactions in knowledge are profoundly formative processes that shape the respective cultures of these regions in very specific ways.[1] In Southeast Asia, he posits, merit is to be gained from the dissemination of knowledge by the figure of the guru, a spiritual preceptor whose task it is to provide exegesis on matters of enlightenment. In contrast, in Melanesia the initiator manipulates knowledge in a regimen of secrecy, and, 'like a conjurer, tries to *withhold* truths from his audience even while he initiates them as novices' (Barth 1990: 641-2, emphasis in original). These distinctive modes of transacting knowledge, Barth argues, are generative of very different effects. In Southeast Asia the downward conversion of knowledge for lower forms of benefit is conducive to 'intensive reciprocal relations with disciples'. In Melanesia, however, knowledge, transacted solely with the dead ancestors through ritual exchange, leads only to a 'weak, ephemeral and temporary bond' with novices (Barth 1990: 640-50). Thus, Barth concludes, while the 'pervasive aspects of culture in

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Southeast Asia are shaped by the activities of thinkers in the Guru mould, Melanesian cultures have been profoundly shaped by their absence, and the consequent hegemony of initiators' (1990: 652).

Barth's conception of knowledge as an open, expansive, and verbalized resource defining the pivotal role of the guru in Southeast Asia has long puzzled me. His thoughts on the generative effects of knowledge transactions are insightful. Yet the linch-pin of his argument, the distinction between the role of the guru in reproducing knowledge and that of the initiator in hedging it, is at odds with traditions of knowledge and its transmission with which I am familiar in Indonesia, specifically in Sunda and Java. In these traditions the transactional role of the guru has formative force precisely because of the guarded exchange of knowledge through initiation, apprenticeship, and right of descent. While Barth acknowledges the existence of 'distinctive currents of secrecy and bodies of esoteric knowledge' throughout Southeast Asia (1990: 652), as I shall show, he fails to appreciate the wider significance of these traditions and, importantly, what they seem to suggest about forms of political process and conceptions of power. As will hopefully become clear, he is not alone in this omission.

Much of the scholarship on Indonesia has recognized the importance of personal relations to forms of political process (e.g, Errington 1989; C. Geertz 1980; Keeler 1987; Wolters 1982). However, absent from the literature is a consideration of the significance of interpersonal relations to conceptions of 'potency' that often inform or legitimize authority. The consubstantiality of conceptions of spiritual and political power in Java posited some years ago by Benedict Anderson (1972*a*) has, quite rightly, been criticized as a particular hegemonic articulation of the properties of 'power' (see Koentjaraningrat 1980). Yet the conception of an idealized notion of substantive spiritual power concentrated in a person, place, or thing, rather than being derived from interpersonal relationships between social actors, has remained the default position for many scholars writing about aspects of power in both Indonesia and Southeast Asia.[2] The approach I take here is to examine power relations from the purview of intersubjectivity.

In what follows I explore changing configurations of esoteric knowledge, or *ilmu batin*[3] (literally 'inner knowledge'), and the ways in which they are enacted and embodied in the practice of the martial art of Pencak Silat. The figure of the teacher, or guru, is fundamental to the dissemination of *ilmu batin*, the acquisition of which commonly involves apprenticeship to a guru. Such knowledge is of, or related to, the 'invisible realm', the *alam ghaib*, the sphere of the supernatural or divine, and is not given freely. However, its possession may be demonstrated publicly in displays of the supernatural abilities it is said to endow, including, amongst others, invulnerability. In these displays the guru and his students demonstrate their imperviousness to injury by virtue of the guru's capacity to call upon and manipulate the non-manifest forces (Connor 1995: 125) of the *alam ghaib*. Such displays serve to render the strength (*kekuatan*) of the invisible world apparent and establish the efficacy of the guru and his ability to mediate relations with the *alam ghaib*. The guru is able to act in this capacity owing to the knowledge that he possesses, commonly the names of the ancestors who might be called upon for assistance. The performance of invulnerability is a means through which authority might be instantiated, and in this respect the political efficacy of the invisible realm is articulate in the bodies of those rendered invulnerable by divine providence (cf. Bubandt 2009).

A consequence of focusing upon the relational aspects of *ilmu* practices is that it brings into sharper focus recent transformations in systems of knowledge transmission in which greater individualism and more substantive conceptions of power hold sway

(see de Grave 2000). Under President Soeharto's New Order regime Pencak Silat was cultivated as a vehicle for the promotion of national identity and the ideals of New Order citizenship. The organization responsible for the national administration of the art, the Indonesian Pencak Silat Federation (IPSI), was sponsored by Soeharto and led by ex-heads of military intelligence and, more recently, the Indonesian army Special Forces, or Kopassus.[4] Since the beginning of the 1970s IPSI has overseen the transformation of Pencak Silat into an international competitor sport. Under the auspices of the organization, spiritual practices, such as those through which one may become invulnerable, are discouraged, relegated to a traditional past held to be incommensurable with a modern sport. Within IPSI the practice of Pencak Silat, formerly associated with person, place, and ethnicity, is thus de-territorialized and reconstituted as an object of national culture (L. Wilson 2006).

The last few decades in Indonesia have been witness to the advent of large-scale, formally organized Pencak Silat schools such as PPS Betako Merpati Putih, in which exponents publicly demonstrate their prowess by shattering concrete slabs and stacks of iron pump handles with their hands and feet. The ability to perform such feats is attributed to the development of 'inner power' or *tenaga dalam*, which is cultivated through the practice of breath control.[5] Closely aligned with IPSI, clearly discernible in modernist schools such as Merpati Putih, is a bounded individualism that was a prominent component of discourses of New Order citizenship (Headley 2004: 518; see also Aragon & Leach 2008). The development of one's own potential in the achievement of feats of inner power resonates with the developmental ideals of the New Order state. Yet, while these modernist schools distance themselves from conceptions of esoteric knowledge prevalent in more 'traditional' styles of Pencak Silat, with the cultivation of *tenaga dalam* a continuity with invulnerability practices can be discerned regarding the indexical relationship of the body to power. I elucidate these continuities, and argue that presuppositions that inform the practice of invulnerability are suggestive of a model in which power is not thought of simply as something that inheres to a person or place, but is recognized as personable, divisible, and in need of affirmation if it is to endure. This is a more accurate model of power more generally than academic commentators have allowed for (Ryter 2009: 3-4) and, I contend, reflects the volatility of authority consolidated through personal relations and the ability to afford protection through invulnerability. This, I conclude, has implications for understanding forms of physical violence. Knowledge of invulnerability is not exclusive, and the body assumes political significance because of its potential for transformation, as the means through which authority can be enacted and contested.

## The practice of invulnerability

Traditionally, the practice of Pencak Silat and *ilmu batin* go hand in hand, and renowned Pencak Silat teachers are held to be in possession of both high-level physical skills and spiritual knowledge (Djoemali 1958: 36, in Maryono 1998: 242). Of the various kinds of *ilmu* practices, that most commonly associated with the art is knowledge of invulnerability, or *ilmu kebal.* The practice of invulnerability is widespread throughout Southeast Asia (see L. Wilson, Facal, de Grave & Green 2010). Tomo Pires, in his sixteenth-century account of the kingdom of Malacca in Malaysia, mentions the *cabaées*, noblemen given to believe they could not die by the sword (Pires 1967 [1515]). In West Java the performance of invulnerability is also commonplace. *Dabus*, a practice associated with the Sufi order Qadiriyyah,[6] is a means of rendering visible the power of

God in this world. In public performances of *dabus*, participants hammer sharp spikes into each other's bodies, climb ladders of blades affixed to poles, or dance energetically on piles of broken glass, all seemingly without apparent harm befalling the performer (Vredenbregt 1973: 316-18; cf. Winstedt 1938: 191). *Dabus* is a demonstration both of the faith of the performer in God, and of the omnipotence and beneficence of God in ensuring the performers' safety. However, there is some disagreement amongst Pencak Silat teachers on the matter of *dabus* and *ilmu kebal*. Some teachers clearly see *dabus* as *haram* (forbidden under Islamic law), while others suggest that similar mechanisms may be at work in rendering exponents impervious to injury.[7] Despite this difference in opinion, the spiritual practices associated with Qadiriyyah figure prominently in the practice of Pencak Silat throughout West Java.

Those held to be skilled in Pencak Silat and in possession of knowledge such as invulnerability are often referred to as *jago*, or 'champion' (literally, a fighting cock; Wessing 1978: 83-5; 1987: 170). The *jago*, almost exclusively male, is an ambiguous figure. Part hero, part bandit, *jago* were utilized in both colonial and pre-colonial orders as an instrument of control at a local level. Often *jago* were well-known figures in the criminal community, outlaws given to robbery and extortion. Protectionism was one of the reasons these figures were both feared and tolerated as they undertook to safeguard their neighbourhoods from incursion from others of similar criminal intent (Schulte Nordholt 1991). In the nineteenth century, revolt against the Dutch colonial administration in Java was often led by *jago* held to be invulnerable by their followers (Kartodirdjo 1984: 18-19; Onghokham 1984: 328-36; van Till 1996), and *jago* well versed in *ilmu kebal* played a prominent role in the struggle for independence from the Dutch (Cribb 1991: 29-31). A leading light in the Pencak Silat community in Jakarta describes the *jago* as 'a martial arts teacher that possesses ... a religious foundation, external and inner knowledge, self-belief and firm belief in God' (Saputra & Sjafi'ie 2002: 10). While a somewhat idealized definition, the quote does illustrate the ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the *jago* in popular consciousness. The recently deceased Islamic cleric Haji Ahmad Fadloli El-Muhir is an example of a contemporary *jago* in Jakarta.

Until his death in 2009, Fadloli led the 'Betawi Brotherhood Forum' (Forum Betawi Rempug, FBR), a group formed to represent and protect the interests of the inhabitants of central Jakarta, known as the Betawi. Fadloli had a strong religious education, and members of the organization, which is based at the Islamic school he founded in Cakung East Jakarta, swear to uphold sharia law. According to Fadloli, FBR is a social organization with a regional character and as such might be compared to other national-level Islamic organizations in Indonesia. The difference between FBR and these organizations, he claimed, was that their aim is to foster an understanding of religion.[8] FBR, however, works to preserve Betawi identity, promote prosperity and social justice, and uphold the law for the Betawi community. In keeping with these aims, the organization promotes three main principles of Betawi culture, 'prayer, school and Silat' (*Sholat*, *Sekolah*, *Silat*). If a new member does not practise Pencak Silat, after entering the organization it is obligatory that he will learn. FBR even professes to have its own style of Silat, a Betawi system called *Ji'it*, practised originally by Fadloli's family. Emphasis is placed on community security, and FBR maintains guard-posts throughout the territory that it controls for the 'protection' of the indigenous community. Linked to Lieut. Gen Sutiyoso, the mayor of Jakarta from 1997 to 2007, FBR has been implicated in the attack on members of NGOs that have been critical of Sutiyoso's policies (see Brown & Wilson 2007).

While Fadloli was respected by members of the organization for his role as a religious leader, it was his reputation for invulnerability that greatly enhanced his authority. During a dispute with rival Madurese thugs in 2002 he is said to have been impervious to machete cuts to his body, and his status as being *kebal* soon spread (I.D. Wilson 2008: 196). In an atmosphere of fear in which the threat of violence is ever present, being known to be invulnerable has an obvious political advantage. One might, however, begin to build a reputation for invulnerability without going to the extremes of confronting machete-wielding gang members.

One evening, while sitting in Cianjur in West Java in the house of Uwa Udun, a well-known and respected Pencak Silat guru, the conversation turned to the matter of *ilmu kebal*. As those present began to detail instances of invulnerability that they had witnessed, Bapak Adang, a senior student of Uwa Udun, produced from his pocket a bottle of what he claimed to be sulphuric acid. Those in the crowded room seemed unsurprised at this, or even at Adang's questioning of who among them would care to test their invulnerability. No response to his solicitation immediately forthcoming, Adang announced that his student would demonstrate that he was *kebal* by 'washing' himself with the acid solution (*mandi air keras*). The student, a young man in his late teens, sat in the corner of the room, and began quietly to recite the opening passage from the Qur'an. Bapak Adang requested a glass of water, which was passed to him. He prayed over the water and then passed it to his student to drink. Others had by this time signalled their willingness to participate, and also drank from the glass, which Adang stressed was vital if one were to avoid serious injury. He opened the bottle and began to apply the solution quite liberally to the forearms of his student and others wishing to take part in the demonstration. No one seemed to come to any obvious harm, although some professed later that the acid stung a little.

Noticing my obvious interest in events, Adang invited me to his house the following evening to talk on the subject. We sat and smoked, exchanging pleasantries for a while, until Adang asked if I would like again to see how it was possible to withstand the acid. He produced the bottle that had featured in the previous evening's performance, and poured the contents into a bowl. His student then produced a coin that he offered to me for inspection, following which he dropped it into the liquid. The metal began to react vigorously and the coin soon dissolved in the bowl.[9] As he had done the evening previously, Adang proceeded to pray over a glass of water, which he then ordered both his student and myself to drink. After we had done so, he asked me if I wanted to test to see if I was now *kebal*, and before I had any chance to express my reservations on the matter, he had thumbed the top of the bottle and began to apply the solution to my arm. His student then immersed his hands in the liquid in which the coin had dissolved, continuing to scoop the solution from the bowl to wash his face with it. While the acid did indeed sting, neither Adang's student nor I suffered any injury from contact with it.

In answer to my questions about the performance, Adang studiously avoided any claim to understand how protection from injury was enacted, stating only that it was not his doing but by the will of God (*keinginan Allah*) that we came to no harm. This deferral of agency is a common motif in explanation of phenomena such as invulnerability. Adang would not reveal the details of the prayer that he used to invoke the will of God; such knowledge was to be guarded and only passed on to those apprenticed to him. For the student, participation in the performance of invulnerability was proof (*bukti*) of his devotion (*bakti*) to his guru and his faith in his knowledge. Such tests of a student's obedience to their teacher's commands are commonplace in the study of

Pencak Silat, and amongst his students it was those who proved their loyalty and trust in him to whom Adang would eventually pass on the knowledge that he possessed.

## Powerful relations in West Java

The search for knowledge was an imperative stressed to me by all the gurus with whom I studied in West Java and Jakarta. Indeed, the itinerant quest for knowledge is a way of life idealized in the Javanese chronicle the *Serat Centini* (Anderson 1972*b*: 8-9), an early nineteenth-century text explicating Javanese mystical knowledge through the narrative of the religious quest of Seh Amongraga (Rickleffs 2001: 163). In a similar vein, my fieldwork was often perceived by my teachers as a commendable search for knowledge made all the more meritorious by the distance I had travelled and the personal sacrifices I had made to learn from them. As Bapak Rifa'i, a teacher with whom I apprenticed in Jakarta, often repeated to me, our task in this world is to seek knowledge. When introducing me, Rifa'i would often refer to me as his *santri*, a term used in reference to a religious student, and made little distinction between Pencak Silat and spiritual knowledge.

Rifa'i was my first teacher in the art of Cimande, perhaps one of the most well-known styles of Pencak Silat in Indonesia, named after the area in which it is said to have originated in the highlands to the south of Jakarta. The style is widely acknowledged to be the source of other styles of Silat in West Java (Maryono 1998: 43-4) and by IPSI as one of the main points of reference for the standardized system it employs (Nalapraya 1992: 6). Yet the practice of Cimande remains an informal affair largely centred on the village of Cimande, and overseen by the elders (*sesepuh*) of the community. A settlement with a population of around 5,000 people, Cimande is divided into three 'hamlets' or *kampung*. The original settlement, *kampung* Tari Kolot, is held to be the birthplace of Cimande, and it is here that previous generations of significant practitioners are laid to rest.

I first began to study with Bapak Rifa'i in Jakarta, living and training at his house in the south of the city. After some weeks of learning with Rifa'i, he informed me that if I were to continue in the art I would have to be initiated (*kecer*) by an elder from Cimande, Bapak Haji Yusuf, who was the most senior member of his lineage. Initiation may only be conducted by an elder of the village, the small ceremony consisting of an oath (*talek*) in which one pledges allegiance to one's teacher and to follow certain behavioural proscriptions[10] and during which the supplicant is blessed by the initiator[11] (L. Wilson 2006: 149-52). Like the other elders in Cimande, Haji Yusuf can trace his descent from the founder of the original settlement, Embah Buyut,[12] and the figure recognized as the founder of the style of Cimande, Eyang Kahir. Thus he is able to act as a link in the unbroken chain of 'spiritual mediation' (*wasila*; van Bruinessen 1994: 125, see also Woodward 1985: 1010) that stretches from him, via the ancestors (*karuhun*), to Sunan Gunung Jati, one of the nine apostles of Islam in Java, to the Prophet Muhammad, and ultimately to God. For this reason he and the other elders are able to 'search for blessings' (*ngalap berkah*) on behalf of others, not to bestow blessings themselves directly. Yet while kin relations are important in defining the boundaries of the community,[13] it is the spiritual knowledge that the elders are said to possess that is the source of their authority (*wibawa*).

Bapak Rifa'i and the other teachers with whom I trained in Cimande constantly reiterated the importance of the spiritual teachings of the sufi order Qadiriyyah, to which they and the majority of the elders in the village adhere. In this respect Cimande is more than a system of self-defence; it is a means through which one might draw closer to God. Training in Cimande tempers both *batin*, the inner or internal aspects of

being, and *lahir*, the physical self manifest in external reality.[14] Aspects of *ilmu batin* that I was encouraged to practise included meditative techniques (*zikr*), remembrance of God through the constant recitation of one of His ninety-nine names. Through the practice of *zikr* one aims to become constantly aware of the presence of God in one's heart. This is one way of beginning to purge or make pure the more refined elements of being. However, the physical and spiritual aspects of training in Cimande are not separate processes of development. Rather, one cultivates (*ngolah*) feeling or sensitivity (*rasa*) of both the immediate comprehension of the inner self and the intersubjective awareness of one's own and other bodies in martial training. It is through the practice of *ilmu batin* and the disciplining of the body, through cultivating these different aspects of 'sensitivity', that the possibility of supernatural abilities (*kesaktian*) can be realized.[15] Yet this should not be a goal in its own right, and any abilities that may manifest are considered epiphenomenal to the quest for union with God (*tauhid*).

Physical training in Cimande includes a harsh and painful conditioning process in which players repeatedly clash arms with one another in a sequence of co-ordinated movements. Strategically, Cimande exponents look to intercept an incoming attack by striking the opponent's limbs, and their highly conditioned arms are capable of delivering fierce, disabling blows. Immediately after training sessions, oil (*balur Cimande*) is massaged into the bruises and contusions of the players in order to alleviate injury to tissue, but most importantly, it is said, to strengthen (*menguatkan*) one's bones. The elders manufacture the oil during *mulud*, the auspicious month of the Prophet's birthday. While the ingredients of the oil are a closely kept secret, it is common consensus that they are not the most important aspect of the manufacturing process. Far greater significance is attributed to the recitation of the *amalan tawasul*, a prayer in which the Prophet and prominent ancestors are called upon to help facilitate the passage of the petition to God.[16] The *amalan tawasul* is also recited prior to the practice of Cimande to entreat for the safety of those training (Heryana 1995: 31-2), and during the blessing imparted as part of the initiation ceremony. Knowledge of the invocation remains guarded and is passed down from generation to generation. Its recitation is a communicative act, and knowing the names of the ancestors is an important part of the 'interpersonal technology' (Harrison 1998: 1) through which relations with the *alam ghaib* are maintained. The limbs of Cimande practitioners are thus forged into formidable weapons, becoming impervious to injury through harsh conditioning and, importantly, the capacity of the elders to mediate relations with the non-manifest world.

The notion of authority being linked to spiritual 'potency' (Errington 1983), of the concentration of 'cosmic energy' in a person or place, is a common theme in writing on Sunda (Antlöv 1995: 100-1; Wessing 1978: 23-4; 1987: 170) and Java (Anderson 1972*a*; Keeler 1987: 38-40). Yet the elders in Cimande do not act singly to have effect in the world, and to think of them simply as being 'potent', or as channels of spiritual energy, obscures these relations. Hildred Geertz makes a similar point, in relation to Bali but relevant here, that relationships with higher spiritual authority imply 'not just potency in an abstract of physical sense, but rather a competence in a personalistic sense', a transaction between social agents that are *sakti*, between efficacious beings, both visible and non-visible (H. Geertz 1995: 10-11; 2004: 43; Wiener 1995). Thus, displays of invulnerability such as that performed by Bapak Adang and his student can be considered to be a compelling presentation of the guru's efficacy, of his knowledge of and capacity to enter into and maintain relations with the *alam ghaib*. In Cimande, both elders and ancestors similarly act in an intercessory capacity. The agency of the ancestors

continues beyond their deaths, is enacted through people and things, and can be seen to be located in a field of spatio-temporal relations in which agency is not confined to the body (Gell 1998: 96-154). It is not so much that 'power' is in any way homogeneous and concentrated in the elders; rather, the elders are the locus of relational identities articulated in the genealogy. Thus, they might be seen to be, in Alfred Gell's sense, 'multiple': that is, 'the precipitate of a multitude of genealogical relationships, each of which is instantiated in his/her person', and in which 'conversely an aggregate of persons, such as a lineage or tribe, is one person in consequence of being one genealogy: the original ancestor is now instantiated, not as one body but as the many bodies into which the one body has transformed itself' (Gell 1998: 140). The elision of these interpersonal relationships becomes more immediately apparent when considering recent transformations in knowledge practices such as *ilmu batin* in modernistic martial arts schools in which concretized notions of power and a more highly developed individualism hold sway. It is these that I consider next.

## From the mystical to the molecular

Under President Soeharto's New Order, Pencak Silat was widely promoted as a means of cultivating the Unitarian ideals of the regime. Sponsored by leading members of the political and military elite, under the auspices of the Indonesian Pencak Silat Federation (ISPI) the art was aligned with nationalist imaginaries of a common cultural heritage and linear historical development (L. Wilson 2009). In 1973, in accordance with the New Order programme of the militarization of sporting, cultural, and youth organizations (see Ryter 2001), Lieut. Gen. Tjokropranolo, former head of the joint services intelligence staff in Jakarta and personal assistant to President Soeharto, was appointed head of IPSI. Eddie Nalapraya, head of the Jakarta Regional Military Command, and also former adjutant to Soeharto, succeeded Tjokropranolo in 1981. Under their leadership, Pencak Silat has been fundamentally transformed from a regional practice associated with ethnicity and spiritual development to, in the words of Eddie Nalapraya, realize its potential as a 'nation- and character-building tool' (1999: 4).

New Order ideology was firmly anchored in conceptions of Javanese culture (Mulder 1998), and a commonly expressed ideal in the rhetoric employed by Soeharto was the necessity for the state to attend to both the external, physical (*lahir*) and inner, spiritual (*batin*) well-being of its citizenry. While economic development might provide for material well-being, it was through the cultivation of the cultural inheritance of the nation that its spiritual needs might be addressed (Pemberton 1994: 154). Pencak Silat is held to be part of this heritage. At his address at the opening of the national headquarters of IPSI in Jakarta in 1997, Soeharto stressed that Pencak Silat, 'laden with noble values', should be preserved 'to become the pride of continuing generations' and 'an active component in the development of nation and state' (IPSI n.d.: 14).

Within IPSI the practice of Pencak Silat is sub-divided into four aspects – mental/spiritual, self-defence (*bela diri*), sport (*olah raga*), and 'artistic' (*kesenian*) – each of which has its own administrative section within the organization. Matters relating to *ilmu batin* are eschewed. While falling within the remit of the 'mental/spiritual', the emphasis has been on sporting competition, with which esoteric aspects of the art are held to be incommensurable. Loyalty to any agency other than the state is thus reorientated to suit an institutional agenda and the particular brand of spiritual hegemony propagated through the rhetoric of the New Order. Through the regulation of Pencak Silat and the cultivation of athletes as exemplary New Order citizens in IPSI, the

potentially transformative capacity of the Pencak Silat guru is 'civilized' (Elias 2000 [1939]: 362-79), brought into line with the New Order narratives of national unity, progress, and development. An organization that is favoured by IPSI and that embodies these values is the Pencak Silat school Merpati Putih.

Founded by Saring Hadi Poernomo, in Yogyakarta, Central Java, in 1963, Merpati Putih claims to have over 100,000 members at seventy-six branches throughout Indonesia, with representation in the USA, Japan, and the Netherlands. The organization has a formal constitution and governing board, and every three years stages a conference and general meeting for all branch members. The school traces its origin to a system of self-defence and spiritual development taught in the Royal Palace of Amangkurat II, the Sultan of Mataram in the seventeenth century, and the cultural heritage of Javanese mysticism and cosmology, or *kejawèn*. Practices such as *kanuragan*, ritual initiation, through which *aji*, supernatural powers invoked through the recital of mantra, are imparted to the initiate, are part of the cultural repertoire of *kejawèn*. Yet whilst rooted in *kejawèn*, the emphasis in Merpati Putih is upon modernization and serving national interests. The organization has striven to rid itself of the mysticism associated with these practices, attempting to validate them scientifically (de Grave 2001: 229). Members of the school wear a red and white uniform in imitation of the Indonesian flag, and even the five rows of stitching on the collar have significance, representing the five principles of *pancasila*, the Indonesian state doctrine or national philosophy.

Exponents of the school are well known for their ability to develop inner power, or *tenaga dalam*. Typically, training sessions open with the instructor leading the group in an oath stating belief in one God, pledging subservience (*mengabdi*) and devotion (*berbakti*) to the nation and the state of the Republic of Indonesia, and fidelity and obedience to the school (de Grave 2001: 242). The instructor then leads the class through a series of dynamic breathing exercises. The focus of training is upon the cultivation of inner power, which is achieved through a series of co-ordinated breathing exercises performed in conjunction with specific bodily postures. Practitioners perform these exercises in unison, and claim that through their constant and disciplined practice inner power may be channelled to any part of their body. Exponents demonstrate their ability to manifest inner power through smashing stacks of iron pump handles or concrete blocks with their hands, feet, and heads. These performances are a means of testing one's ability and of progression in the school's grading system, and are the main feature in spectacular public demonstrations. At the school's complex in Jakarta, the head of the organization, Bapak Poerwoto Hado Poernomo, or Mas Poeng as he is known less formally, explained to me that it is not *ilmu*, but *ilmiah*, or science, through which Merpati Putih players are able to develop inner power. All living things require energy to exist, and respiration (*pernafasan*) releases energy in a chemical reaction in the cells in our bodies through oxidation. Through dynamic breathing techniques, inhalation is controlled, the breath being held before exhaling, thus causing a decline in oxygen levels immediately available to the body and enabling it to go anaerobic. Anaerobic respiration is responsible for an increased rate of production of the molecule adenosine triphosphate, or ATP. ATP is the molecule responsible for the storage and transfer of energy within the body. It is this chemical reaction that is claimed to be the source of inner power.

In contrast to invulnerability practices in which one trusts to the will of God and to one's guru to prevent oneself from coming to harm, in Merpati Putih one activates one's own inner potential through dedicated practice and self-development. Mastery of inner power is demonstrated through the ability to shatter objects, not to withstand

assaults on one's person. In contrast to the figure of the guru, the instructor (*pelatih*) in Merpati Putih is viewed no longer as a spiritual preceptor or repository of recondite knowledge, but as a facilitator of self-development for all who participate in group instruction and the sequence of breathing exercises taught as part of the school's curriculum. The guru's authority is thus depersonalized and subordinated to the school's organizational hierarchy. The development of inner power, permeated with the values of the New Order, the self-proclaimed developmental order (Heryanto 1988), both articulates and affirms the rational, technocratic superiority of science over supernaturalism. While homage is paid to the founders of the school and its lineage is traced back to the royal court in Mataram, in a manner characteristic of New Order historiography, care is taken to distinguish the past from the present and the modern school of Merpati Putih. Conceptions of the New Order citizen, loyal to the nation and state, take precedence over genealogical relations that bear upon personhood and place. Intersubjective relationships and intermediary practices are thus reconfigured through an over-determination of paradigmatic relations centred upon the bounded individual.

Benedict Anderson's account of power in Java as a substantive entity, an 'intangible, mysterious, and divine energy which animates the universe' (1972*a*: 7), while much criticized, remains a standard reference point for many scholars' characterizations of forms of power in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Anderson contends that contrary to European conceptions of power as abstract, an aspect of relationships, power in Java is held to be concrete, finite, and embodied. Individuals held to be 'potent' thus become the centre of political authority, which is held to be a manifestation of their potency (Keeler 1987: 39). While Anderson (1990) himself later took issue with his theory, the uncritical use of his model has resulted in the common occlusion in academic accounts of the relational aspects of concepts of power in circulation in Indonesia, and indeed in Southeast Asia. However, the importance of maintaining relations with a higher form of authority, of demonstrating one's efficacy and rendering visible the strength of the non-manifest world in practices such as invulnerability, suggests a notion of power in which hierarchical authority is recognized as relative, mutual, and constituted through display. Further, the obvious attention given to the incorporation of forms of knowledge such as *ilmu batin* and those held to possess it within the New Order national project points to the need to displace alternate loci of authority. I next explore some commonly held assumptions about forms of political process in Indonesia and Southeast Asia from the perspective of a relational rather than substantive model of power.

## Beyond the exemplary centre

An enduring image of the state in the work of scholars writing on Indonesia and Southeast Asia has been that of the centred polity, the 'mandala', in which graduated sovereignty, emanating from a central authority, is extended through the recognition of men of outstanding prowess as being of higher spiritual status (Wolters 1982: 9). Politically the social order is a reflection of the cosmological order, substantive spiritual power focused in the centre of the state and waning towards its peripheries. In an oft-cited line, Clifford Geertz, writing with regard to the 'theatre state' in nineteenth-century Bali but with the intention of contributing more generally to political theory, makes the observation that '[p]ower served pomp, not pomp power' (1980: 13). In this conception the work of ceremony and ritual is not just to reflect the social hierarchy. Rather, ritual is itself a form of power and not just a means of dissimulating coercive power (Cannadine 1987: 19). Geertz's model of sovereign power in the theatre state has

been critiqued for neglecting the 'realpolitik' of maintaining dominion over one's followers. In order to rule, to be become an 'exemplary centre', extravagant ritual required the mobilization of significant numbers of people. Geertz fails to account for why they were compelled to fall in line in an environment where followers could vote with their feet if, as Henke Schulte Nordholt argues, 'the burden imposed upon them was too heavy or if the protection given was insufficient' (1981: 475; see also Tambiah 1985: 316-38). Yet what is important in his model is the emphasis placed upon the visibility of power.

Ward Keeler contends that the idealized image of the exemplary centre at village level in Java mimics the sovereignty of the ruler. However, he argues, authority is not necessarily confined to one individual or 'centre'. Rather, it is diffuse, and in this way the degree of dependency on any one individual is limited. Allegiances are mutable and easily switched to another local leader attempting to establish themselves as a 'centre' (Keeler 1985: 138; see also Bremen 1980). While power is unitary in nature, different communicants might wield it effectively to diverse ends, and different centres of power might be recognized simultaneously, which undermines 'the potency of any one centre, and so undercuts the doctrine of the exemplary centre' (Keeler 1985: 139). Power, 'an attractive and compelling, rather that coercive, force', is modified to suit the needs of the situation on the ground. It is the difference between the ideal and reality; it concerns 'political might – what we would call power, conceived of as a coercive capacity – that stands apart from any Javanese ideas about ideal behaviour and definitions of power' (1985: 139). It is this ambivalence, Keeler argues, that grants the space for political negotiation. The dispersal of authority, he posits, is an aspect of idealized conceptions of power that fits with Javanese concerns to maintain what he refers to as 'personal sovereignty', the demonstration of one's status 'by remaining impervious to ... political influence' (1987: 107). A 'dissimulation of a superior's control mitigates the impression of a loss of personal control or autonomy. The dissimulated self also gains a particular authority: a diffuse but idealized and highly respected position as agent both operating within and surpassing the world' (1987: 268). A similar logic can be seen to operate in the practice of invulnerability. Joshua Barker argues that the '*kebal* body' (1999: 109), resistant to the surveillant technologies of the state, is in a sense territorial, describing an 'interiority' impervious to outside interference (1999: 110-11). Yet this conception of circumscribed boundaries articulate in the invulnerable body, of the body as a marker of territoriality, is only half the picture. One does not become invulnerable owing to 'spiritual potency' concentrated in the individual, but though entering into and mediating relations with other social agents, both manifest and non-manifest. This, I want to suggest, is recognition of the importance of relations of exteriority to the instantiation and maintenance of authority: of the necessity of entering into and maintaining relations with persons, both visible and invisible, to the task of consolidating power (cf. Strathern 1995: 22).

In the standardized regimen of breathing exercises through which *tenaga dalam* is cultivated in Merpati Putih, New Order imperatives are clearly discernible. Yet, while the New Order cultural project served to define and maintain a distinction between tradition and more modern practices in relation to the state as an agent of change, it did so through the exercise of extant technologies of power. Formally organized Pencak Silat schools such as Merpati Putih serve not to efface relationships based upon devotion to one's teacher, but to reorientate them towards the state as the progenitor of knowledge and material gain. Individuality is formalized in a way that denies

connectivity except with the anteriority of a nationalist past. In Merpati Putih the '*kebal* body', the product of alignments in assemblages that transcend the authority of the state, is not so much pacified or colonized as exiled to a traditionalist past. The ability to direct and externalize inner power in order to shatter objects, to exhibit mastery over one's environment, is a display of efficacy that is depersonalized, that is constitutive of uniform bodies and common potential. It is, then, not surprising that the Indonesian Special Forces, Kopassus, have long trained in Merpati Putih. *Ilmu kebal*, on the other hand, is potentially subversive, a direct challenge to authority. Critically, it is knowledge that lays bare the stark truth that the state's claim to monopolizing force within its domain is, at best, precarious.

In an account of processes of state formation in Southeast Asia, Tony Day argues that it is the failure of 'administrative power' to displace physical violence that defines the history of state violence in Southeast Asia and differentiates it in this respect from the West. Historically, in the region, violence has exhibited a particular aesthetic quality in which its enactment is both the source and guarantor of the magical beauty of the state (Day 2002: 229). The 'key concepts' of the 'man of prowess' and the 'theatre state' evidence the importance of the capacity for violence and its spectacular display to the instantiation of authority. Violence is thus better understood as a cultural repertoire, rather than in terms of its legitimacy. Models of sovereignty informed by territoriality and defined by the legitimate use of force do not really map onto the complexities of localized and multiple kinds of authority in contemporary Southeast Asia (Day 2002: 230-6). The dominion of the state is far from pervasive, and this is exemplified in forms of local knowledge such as *ilmu kebal*, knowledge that is not the ideological preserve of a certain class, an instrument of class domination. While '[i]t is directly concerned with relations of power ... its function is to assist the knowledgeable to exercise power, make it protective, or elude it. Such powerful knowledge also attracts adherents who form communities of the "protected". *It is a state-forming kind of knowledge*' (Day 2002: 160, my emphasis). Drawing on Taussig, Day posits that sacred knowledge and rites of state figure prominently in the creation of the state as a magical object of worship (2002: 283-4). In this respect, conceptions of the sacred are not defined solely by the guarded exchange of knowledge through initiation. Rather, 'the power of the sacred ... derives from the fantasies of the people prohibited concerning the (supposed) nature of that sacred knowledge' (Taussig 1992: 130). Even those marginalized by the state thus help 'imagine and sustain its power' (Day 2002: 284; cf. Errington 1989: 110).

However, Day's account suffers somewhat from an implicit evolutionism, locating forms of sovereign authority historically antecedent to modes of administrative governance. Moreover, it is questionable to what extent the modalities of power that he elaborates are particular to Southeast Asia. As I have argued, *ilmu kebal* is capable of transforming bodies in ways that are resistant to authority. It is expressive both of relations of power that are emergent and reversible,[17] and of the intimate relationship between violence and protection (Kelly & Shah 2006). It is a practice informed by a construal of power widely applicable to the realities of localized authority in the contemporary world, of sovereign practices rooted in the capacity for violence (Hansen & Stepputat 2005). It is a logic of power that shaped the forms that terror and intimidation took under the New Order state (Siegel 1998: 113-15), and which continues to inform the sovereign practices of groups like Forum Betawi Rempug. In this respect, the effects of knowledge practices such as *ilmu kebal* are both a countervailing force to sovereignty and a constitutive element of it.

## Conclusion

To return to my point of departure for this article, my puzzlement with Barth's characterization of the 'guru culture' in Southeast Asia, I have argued that the transmission of forms of knowledge like *ilmu kebal* has formative effect because it is both transformative and relational. It is knowledge that implies a link to and ability to mediate relations with a higher form of authority. The portrayal of power simply as some form of potency has obscured a model of power sensitive to its intrinsic instability. The conspicuous display of invulnerability is a performance expressive of the 'political ontology of the lived-in world' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009: 53; see also Hughes-Freeland 2007: 193), of the volatility of authority consolidated through personal relations, and the need to demonstrate efficacy if authority is to endure. Power is thus perceived to be relational, hierarchical, and instantiated through performance. Similarities in presuppositions about power that circulate in Indonesia and more widely in Southeast Asia are, then, not merely cultural constructs, but reflective of more pragmatic concerns with power relations. This is a model that suggests a far more intuitive understanding of the role that violence plays as both a coercive and compelling force than is often found in political theory, and which may warrant reconsideration of conceptions of power in the anthropology of Southeast Asia (cf. Chua 2009). The question, then, is less one of what is distinctly Southeast Asian about forms of knowledge and its relationship to authority. Rather, a more productive line of inquiry is to be found in what the particular configurations of sovereign authority and models of power in Southeast Asia might tell us about power and authority elsewhere in the world.

### NOTES

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[1] I am indebted to Leo Howe for bringing Barth's work to my attention in conversations from which sprang the initial impetus for this article.

[2] Recent authors who place emphasis upon the substantive aspects of power in Indonesia include Antlöv (1995: 104-5), Beatty (1999: 77), Brenner (1998: 62), Foley (1990: 64), Howe (2000: 76), and Siegel (2006: 173-74), and in Southeast Asia Janowski (2007: 14).

[3] *Ilmu batin* is a generic term used in reference to the complex of knowledge practices that are the focus of this article. Other terms used in reference to mystical or esoteric knowledge include *ilmu ghaib* (knowledge of the invisible realm), *ilmu klenik* ('occult' knowledge), and *ilmu dalam* (inner knowledge). While *ilmu* may be glossed as 'knowledge', and indeed gained through the study of texts, it may also be acquired through ascetic practice, revelation, the learning of mantra, passages from the Qur'an, or transmitted via spiritual agency (cf. Wessing 1978; Woodward 1985). The term generally implies knowledge of a mystical nature.

[4] The current head of IPSI since 2003 is General Prabowo Subianto, head of Kopassus from 1995 to 1998. Once married to Soeharto's daughter Titiek, Prabowo is a prominent figure in the post-New Order political landscape with unfulfilled presidential aspirations.

[5] While its use is not confined to modernist schools, the term *tenaga*, 'energy' or 'power', is used in opposition to the more esoteric notion of *ilmu* and the manifestation of supernatural abilities, or *kesaktian*, that it might engender.

[6] Founded by Shaikh 'Abd al-Qadr Jilani in the twelfth century in what is present-day Iraq, in Indonesia the order developed mainly in Java (Lombard 1996). *Ilmu* Abdul Qadir Jilani was taught in both Banten and Cirebon in West Java from at least the seventeenth century (van Bruinessen 1995: 209-10).

[7] The *dabus* practitioners that I have questioned on the matter tell me that it is their use of *wirid* that prevents them from coming to harm, a technique in which the constant repetition to oneself (*dalam hati*) of the statement of faith, the *shahada*, focuses their attention to the exclusion of all else. Perhaps mindful of Islamic prescriptions on the matter of spirit possession, they were careful to note that the state they entered into was not a trance state, that they remained conscious (*sadar*) throughout the performance. However, Foley (1985) notes that the *dabus* performers she interviewed in West Java, all of who had trained in Pencak Silat, spoke of altered states of consciousness when starting to perform, that they felt 'calm, free and peaceful'. Some explained that they were 'entered by the "friends of the prophets", and that this is what makes them strong enough to receive blows. *All agreed that it is the power of Allah that protects them*' (1985: 32, my emphasis).

[8] Interview with Fadloli, Cakung, Jakarta, 14 November 2003.

[9] The low-domination rupiah coin, which has high aluminium content, may serve to neutralize the acid solution, an explanation suggested by Elena Khlinovskaya Rockhill.

[10] The way that the pledge is enumerated varies, but generally it entails the following proscriptions: to show piety and obedience towards God and Muhammad; not to oppose one's parents and elders, one's guru, or the 'ruler' (*ratu* – in a contemporary setting this is somewhat ambiguous, and is often interpreted as 'leaders of society'); not to indulge in extra-marital relations, lie, or be proud or arrogant; to avoid that which might cause loss to oneself such as alcohol, gambling, or drugs; not to be envious; and not to depart from sharia.

[11] After taking the oath, the student takes a *sirih* leaf, dips it into a glass of water blessed by the guru, and drops water three times into his or her right eye. The water is then applied three times to the right arm and hand, the forearm and shin, and the same procedure is followed for the left side. The water is dripped into the eye to sharpen one's vision and to 'cleanse' one's sight in order to look upon the world in a just manner. The repetition of the ritual cleansing during the *kecer* is held to be cognate with the ablutionary prescriptions of the Islamic faith, hence the procedure being repeated three times.

[12] The founder of a settlement is referred to as *buyut*, which is also a kinship term used in reference to both 'great grandfather' and 'great grandchild': that is, both progenitor and descendant three generations removed from ego.

[13] Authority within a lineage from a particular guru is figured through primogenitary succession. If the eldest child within a family does not practise the art, then the next eldest sibling who does is considered the most senior practitioner within the lineage, regardless of gender. However, patrilineal descent supersedes matrilineal descent in matters relating to the practice of Cimande, reflecting a gender hierarchy in the political sphere. Furthermore, while women might in principle become elders, there are none in Cimande, and no women who teach the art publicly in the village (cf. Smith-Hefner 1988: 539, 551-2).

[14] The notions of *lahir* and *batin* are not oppositional, and are best thought of as differences in degree, not kind, gradations of being from the mundane through to the sublime.

[15] *Kesaktian* is formed from the root *sakti*, and is often glossed as 'power' in the sense of 'potency', of supernatural power concentrated in an individual or place. The notion of *sakti* is highly gendered, and is often used in reference to male sexual potency. An implicit phallocentrism frames the use of the term and the spiritual strength of males (Brenner 1998: 147-9; Hatley 1990: 180-2; however, see also Wessing 1997 for an account of the female as the locus of power in mythological accounts of *sakti*).

[16] Wessing is of the mind that the role of the ancestors as mediators between God and humans is a more recent Islamic transformation of relations with the ancestors, who are no longer seen as granters of requests (1978: 95). Hildred Geertz's (1995) analysis of interpersonal relations with the non-manifest world in Hindu Bali would, however, seem to confound simple theories of religious (re)orientation. Moreover, Wessing's account of power in Sunda (1978: 23-4), and indeed of the efficacy of prayer during *mulud* (1978: 89), is framed by Anderson's conception of power as concrete, homogeneous, and constant, which leads him to neglect the mediatory role of the guru in his analysis.

[17] Importantly, invulnerability can always be overcome. Like Achilles' heel, and Baldur's issues with mistletoe, nobody is completely impervious to harm. This was a fact that was often stressed to me whenever conversations about the issue of *ilmu kebal* arose. Whether through striking to the eyes, drowning, preventing contact with the earth, or through being overwhelmed by more powerful knowledge, the invulnerable body can always be rendered vulnerable. Nobody is unassailable, and here the limitations of power become evident.

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## Au-delà du centre exemplaire : savoir, pouvoir et instances souveraines à Java

*Résumé*

L'article explore les effets formateurs de formes de savoir ésotérique associées aux arts martiaux de la Sonde et de Java, en Indonésie. Les détenteurs de ce savoir ont la réputation d'être efficaces et capables d'agir en tant qu'intercesseurs, intermédiaires des relations avec les habitants du monde invisible, les *alam ghaib*, afin d'obtenir la protection de ceux-ci pour eux-mêmes et pour les autres. C'est le savoir qui implique un lien avec une forme d'autorité supérieure et la capacité de servir d'intermédiaire avec celle-ci. Ces formes de savoir et leur transmission se sont transformées plus récemment en écoles d'arts martiaux modernes et nationalistes, dans lesquelles les relations basées sur la dévotion au maître d'arts martiaux sont réorientées vers l'État, source de savoir et de gains matériels. En retraçant ces transformations, l'auteur avance que la représentation savante du pouvoir comme une forme de « puissance virile » a occulté un modèle dans lequel le pouvoir est perçu comme relationnel, hiérarchique et réalisé dans la performance : un modèle sensible au rôle que joue la violence comme force à la fois coercitive et persuasive, et qui reflète fidèlement l'instabilité inhérente à l'autorité politique consolidée par les relations personnelles. À cet égard, les similitudes entre les conceptions du pouvoir qui ont cours en Indonésie et, plus largement, en Asie du Sud-est ne sont pas seulement culturelles mais reflètent des préoccupations pragmatiques sur les médiations matérielles du pouvoir.

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