RITUALS OF CHAOS

The movement work of Suprapto Suryodarmo Alice Pitty Copyright 2005 Alice Pitty

"There, on that turbulent brink we will see nonlinearity and feedback throbbing in the form of an utterly wild and eerily beautiful beast called the strange attractor" (Briggs and Peat 1990:31)

The movement of life

Suprapto Suryodarmo is an idiosyncratic figure in the field of Indonesian contemporary performing arts. Difficult to define, even by his long-term colleagues, he seems to play the role of a maverick, or a shape shifter, mercilessly breaking with the formality of tradition and yet deeply connected with the cultural heritage of his land and people. Usually known by his shorter name, Prapto, he is a movement teacher from Central Java. Indeed movement is his main aesthetic vehicle as a performer, rather than dance. However, the word "movement" can also mean a political movement, a cultural movement, or simply the movement of life itself. His work as a teacher, performer, and innovator, is to explore how physical body movement is shaped, or "in-formed", by these deeper underlying forces of motion.

Since movement, by nature, is never fixed, working with Prapto can feel like diving into a sea of uncertainty, and struggling to keep one's bearings amongst currents that are constantly changing. The ground rules are never certain because the ground itself is always moving. Movement is synonymous with change, and change always contains an element of chaos. By allowing the "movement of life" to penetrate and channel itself through him, Prapto actually seems to embody the forces of chaos, a quality that is unusual and distinguishes him as a shape shifter. However I do not mean that his life is disorganised or that his artistic work is chaotic. It is more that Prapto, just by being himself, acts as a stimulator or catalyst for the power of chaos to take effect. He uses his own body movement as a diagnostic tool, a barometer, to sense what is evolving or trying to emerge in a person's life, or in the interaction between people of different cultures, or in the unconscious interplay between performers. As one student described his work, "studying with Prapto is exploring the life beneath the life". (Miriam May, pers. comm)

Rites of passage at the edge of chaos

A rite of passage, in human experience, could be likened to a period of evolutionary transformation where a relatively stable structure or system starts to change and evolve. This change process might be precipitated by a need to survive, or an urge towards novelty and

experimentation, or a co-creating web of circumstances. (Capra 1997:221) A simple example might be moving house. During the rite of passage, the original structure will start to dissolve, destabilise, and re-emerge at a new level of complexity. The furniture has to be packed up, put in a van, and be re-created in a new situation. Whatever the precipitating circumstances, the actual experience of that chaotic and disintegrative period can be overwhelming, confusing, exciting, and even terrifying as one is flooded with new information. Indeed the feeling of being flooded can be so alarming as to actually inhibit access to the vital creative resources that are needed to move through times of immense change.

When this happens, some form of container is needed which provides safety and an appropriate degree of stability during the vulnerable time of loss of identity. (Patricia Shaw, pers. comm.). Rituals act as this container. When a child starts to lose its form and identity, transforming into an adult body with powerful feelings of sexuality emerging, then a ritual is needed to guide the child into its new body and identity. The rite of passage involves a cleansing, a purification, of the former expression of being in preparation for transforming into a new body and sense of self. In my understanding, a rite of passage is not exactly the same as a ritual. The rite of passage is the change process itself, irrespective of whether that change is spontaneous or planned. Ritual is more like the conscious awareness of that rite of passage. It is the vehicle that expresses celebration, uncertainty, grief, awe and wonder.

Prapto, as an agent of chaos, tends to stimulate rites of passage to occur. However he does not intentionally create rituals or manufacture them as an artistic event, except when there is a clear decision to create a performance. He simply practises movement as a way of entering a conscious dialogue with the broader "movement of life". If there is a friction to that flow of life, such as a point of stagnation within a system or a person, he will stimulate movement to happen. This force of motion initiates the rite of passage, bringing more "procreativity" into areas which were losing touch with the dynamism of life. Rather than creating a ritual form, Prapto simply remains open and attentive to the essence of ritual itself, the conscious awareness of the rite of passage as it evolves from moment to moment.

That awareness may well be expressed through dancing, sculpture, praying, or singing, but there is no preconceived structure. Because if the ritual form were fixed it may also potentially become part of the stagnation, thereby losing the vital quality of awareness and "free movement". So working with Prapto is particularly challenging because not only does he stimulate rites of passage, but the supporting vessel of ritual is also open ended. His expression of ritual is not a pre-determined sequence of events, but more like a continuous improvisation in response to the subtle flows of the "movement of life". In this way, he can

engage directly with the evolving dynamic relationship between the visible world of familiar structures and the underlying forces of change and evolution.

The ritual space is one in which we can respond to the experience of change, at puberty, marriage, location, or changes in the delicate balance between the human community and the world of nature or spirits. As global development becomes ever more rapid and widespread, new and unexpected rites of passage are happening due to changes in climate, technology, and cultural relations. The ritual space is more vital than ever and yet many traditional forms of ritual face disintegration and dissolution into one big global soup. Traditional rituals may lose meaning if their contextual framework itself is in upheaval. This does not only impact upon the 'disaffected youth' in modern society, but indeed wherever the force of change is being felt across the planet. The more effort that is put into maintaining traditional structures of ritual, the more those rituals seem to be threatened by the tides of change as if they are an endangered species.

Rituals embody and express fertility and potency, the basic "procreativity "of life. If rituals are to continue to be genuinely in touch with the potency of life, to give meaning to the experience of global change however it manifests locally, they may need to stay at an edge of creative instability where the actual structure of the ritual can be fluid enough to reflect, and also instigate, changes in the local environment. I see Prapto's work as a metaphor, and perhaps a model, for a continual evolvement of ritual which is rooted enough so as not to lose the basic essence of ancestral lineage, and yet fluid enough to express current change and uncertainty. I am calling this work "rituals of chaos".

The shaman moving in the "space between the wind"

Javanese people usually see Prapto as a shaman (*dukun*), someone whose primary role is to heal the sick. Without doubt Prapto's lineage is that of the shaman, but he is not a traditional healer. Prapto does not work with the forces of nature as such, in the traditional sense of power that is associated with shamans. Rather he explores the crevasses of consciousness that emerge between cultures, between people, between philosophical concepts and between historical and current events. The shaman's role is to remain vigilant, awake, conscious, when entering a world that is beyond normal levels of awareness. For Prapto, that world is not so much that of Carlos Castaneda but rather the subtle atmospheres of different countries, of different histories, of different relationships to nature, and implicit cultural values. His sense of ritual is how to design the space, the container, needed to consciously allow those different energies to engage with each other.

He is particularly skilled at sensing how the visible world of form (for instance a ritual) could

be more fully charged with the potent energy, which imbues that form with life and creativity. For example, I might read a leaflet which is advertising the work of a friend of mine. The leaflet is well presented and very impressive, but I know that my friend has some important qualities which have not really shone through in the presentation style. The unique qualities of my friend's spirit do not jump out and enliven the text. It is as if there is a dissonance between what I see (in the leaflet) and what I feel (about the person). This subtle gap is like an empty space between the form of a work and its spirit, that which breathes life into the form. In Prapto's language, it is the "space between the wind", a discrepancy between what is seen and what is felt. The "space between the wind" can hold the key to a creative power which could emerge when there is more integrity between the internal and external landscape of the person.

How does Prapto reveal the pockets of life experience that are hidden in the "space between the wind"? Firstly he observes a person's basic movement patterns, their walking, standing, crawling, and sitting. Through the movement patterns he can sense the undercurrents of a person's life as a flavour, or a scent trail, which he follows to find an entry point into the space between the wind. Sniffing the air, with a feral quality, he tracks the winding scent trail down into those undercurrents. He then surfs along the currents as if he were a bird gliding upon the "bone of the wind". His ears act as antennae, and his fingers as the feather tips of a bird's wings subtly adjusting to changes in velocity and direction. When he finds the right entry point, like a condor swooping down into a steep and narrow ravine, he dives between the cracks and crevasses of the tectonic plates that are shifting deep within the person's inner landscape. His body twists and contorts to follow these "fault lines" as if he were creeping along the infinite edge of a fractal, moulding his body to reveal its myriad of shapes, colours and patterns.

The boundary of the fractal is the "terrain that lies between the finite solid world of the black inside the [Mandelbrot] set and the unstable limitlessness of the white and grey areas." (Briggs and Peat 1990:97). It is at this place, where the finite meets the infinite, that the shaman enters the shadowlands of the underworld. Prapto then dialogues with the trees, temples, mountains, deities, and invites them to support the person by breathing life into the "space between the wind". From the spirit world he also receives clues such as sounds, objects, specific movement practices, or poetic metaphors, that he offers back to the person in order to help them become more aware of how these deeper forces of motion are continually shaping their day to day life.

He uses a similar process to understand the movement of cultures. In this case, he penetrates the veins of a culture's inner landscape, the "space between the wind" of a collective history.

Again he looks at the visible structure of a culture and how the unconscious substrata may need to shift and change in order to create a new level of development in the collective consciousness of its people. In Indonesia this dissonance may emerge as a cultural fault line such as colonialism, or a political volcano of student protests. The dissonance can have the effect of trapping the potential creativity or co-evolution of the inner spirit of Indonesian people (what is felt) and the outer form of their arts, education, industry and leadership (what is seen). I shall offer a concrete example of the "space between the wind" through looking at education of the performing arts in Indonesia.

The cultural fault lines between performance and ritual

Preserving traditional art forms is paramount in a country which is steeped in such a wealth of artistic heritage. In the 1960's national arts colleges were set up because of a concern about losing this wealth to the sweeping tides of modernity and cultural imports that lapped ever stronger at the shores of the Indonesian islands. Their aim was to preserve and maintain an educational lineage of traditional arts as well as fostering the development of Indonesian contemporary work. The colleges are always a hive of activity with rehearsals on staircases, performance art in the rice paddies, top performers as lecturers and detailed anthropological research. From my personal experience, I would say that the colleges have been very successful in achieving their aims. However the educational process is generally based on an academic university setting, which seems to be the very antithesis of an artistic source which probably comes from ritual, and was probably taught through spiritual apprenticeship.

Furthermore these ritual art forms are usually presented as a western style performance which again is not necessarily their original context. I do not think the problem is the western influence as such, or even the modality of performance, but more how the western models of education and performance can integrate with the original context. If those influences are not conscious, with their potential effects being fully considered before being given their entry visas into the country, then the traditional rituals can start to lose coherence between form and spirit. It is as if the "form" of western performance and education is taken on board without the powerful ancestral "spirit" of those forms being consciously acknowledged.

Perhaps there is a tendency to see everything western as modern and therefore not able to affect the more historical layers of Indonesian art and culture. Therefore it is possible to teach traditional forms without fear that western educational methods will penetrate the spiritual dimensions of those forms. I do not believe this is so. What is loosely called "western" is at least as old as Socrates himself. The western spirits will enter at a much deeper level of consciousness and may create a dissonance in performance and education at a subtle level in the colleges. The dissonance tends to give the feeling of clothes that don't quite fit. There is

an inexpressible and yet tangible gap between what is seen and what is felt.

These symptoms of cultural dissonance can equally be found in western arts colleges which take on board non-western art forms without consciously integrating the deep ancestral influence behind those traditions. The cultural imports can create a fault line in the ritual space. Within the unconscious cultural interplay, or the spirit world, empty spaces can emerge which may weaken the structural integrity of the rituals. I shall give two examples of what can happen when these "fault lines" take effect, when the spirits played games in the "space between the wind".

Each year the National Arts College of West Sumatra presents an anniversary performance in remembrance of a famous Minang choreographer called Huriah Adam. Several days after the performance I awoke to the sound of screaming next door. I asked my family what was happening. "Spirits have possessed some of the students," they replied. Curious, I went next door to see this spectacle for myself. Sure enough, many of the students were crowded into the living room of our neighbour, who luckily happened to be the friendly neighbourhood dukun. About six people were convulsing and speaking in tongues while the dukun was encouraging them to breathe deeply into their abdomens. The dukun talked with the spirits, asking them what they wanted and why they were possessing the students. The spirits inhabited different pockets of the theatre. They told the dukun that they were angry about being disturbed without acknowledgement. Staff and students had filled the usually empty theatre with preparations and activities for the annual performance without taking time to acknowledge the "ritual space". With their spiritual noses being put out of joint, the ancestors decided to make their presence felt. About twenty-five students were possessed during those few days. A ritual ceremony, based on invoking the power of the Koran, was used to readdress the situation. (Pitty 1997:10)

Secondly, a young European choreographer visiting Indonesia decided to create a large scale ritual performance in the fields between the arts centre and the arts college of Solo, Central Java. Many people were involved, both European and Javanese dancers and musicians. Buddhist priests were invited to pray during the performance. Bamboo pipes were filled with kerosene and the fields were flooded with dancers, drummers, and fire. I was sitting quietly with a friend in a small *warung* (cafe) away from the performance area. Suddenly the choreographer ran past us up to the changing rooms wailing, "It's all going wrong." Chaos was descending. We went up to help her fix her dress and then she rushed back towards the fields calling some dancers to follow her.

A couple of days later I met this woman, who now had terrible burns over her forehead and

one ear. She told me that several hours after the ritual had ended, she and two friends were sitting next to a very small fire. Suddenly this fire raged up and the flames engulfed her face. Quickly one of her friends dived over her and pulled her away, minimising the impact of the burns. The next day local dukuns came to give her a helping hand. They explained that many spirits lived on that land, and they were disturbed by her performance to the extent that they actually wanted to kill her. Thankfully they did not succeed due to the timely intervention of her friend, but again they made their presence felt.

There are certain parallels in the two events. In both cases there was a confusion between performance and ritual. In West Sumatra the event was a form of ritual, a remembrance for a creative ancestor, but the way they approached the event was in the style of a secular performance evening. The second example was more intentionally designed as a ritual, with all the right trappings of fire, drums, chanting and trance dancing. However, when the European choreographer ran past us saying "It's all going wrong", her voice was that of a performer going off stage. Offstage doesnít exist in the ritual space. Also, both events took place in the more uninhabited territory of the arts centres. The theatre in West Sumatra is surrounded by fields and new buildings that were not fully occupied at the time of the performance. The land in both areas is used for grazing animals and some crop growing. In my experience both areas have a similar feel, that of a no mans land where nature has a space amongst the arts centre buildings. I am pushing a metaphor to make a point, but I feel that this no mans land represents the territory between performance and ritual in the artistic development of the art centres. In the confusion between performance and ritual, there was a window for the spirits to speak. "You want to know about ritual? Well here you are...Deal with this chaos, then do a ritual!"

Balancing tradition and new influences in the ritual arena

Indonesia in particular understands the meaning of how the chaotic world of demons and malevolent spirits can enter when the structural integrity of the ritual starts to develop kinks and gaps. This is one of the reasons why the guardians of tradition request such clear adherence to the precision of the ritual form. Tradition tends to provide people with safety and specificity, a vital part of a rite of passage. The container needs to be strong enough so the wealth of ancestral knowledge can still be present in the new body, but also flexible enough to allow the transformation to occur. The walls of the womb are elastic muscle.

However the danger in rigidly adhering to form is that one might not be able to access the creativity which allows the ritual to accurately reflect changes in the evolving relationship between human life and the world of nature and spirits. In this case ritual does not happen at the creative edge of instability but may replace the role of order, and we start to use rituals to

create the illusion of certainty in our lives. We may feel safety in our ritual forms, something to hold onto, some semblance of order. Ritual becomes routine rather than rite of passage between certainty and uncertainty. Rituals may become a way to avoid facing the chaos, the deep terror of aloneness in the eye of the storm.

We may mistake a feeling of connectedness as belonging to the rituals of our clan, culture, or ego structure, rather than belonging to life itself. This is what Prapto might call "ritual for covering". Such rituals can easily become sterile, losing their potency in an effort to maintain safety in the form. We try to create order in the stable and visible world, whilst chaos lies lurking beneath as the invisible shadow. Fear of chaos, instability, and change is met by repressive order, with Indonesia being a recent example of how the overwhelming power of chaos broke through the governmental order. A devastating social earthquake happened as the deep tectonic plates in Indonesia's recent history started to shift and fold.

The ritual space is carved from the potency of Adam's first cry upon leaving the womb, the Garden of Eden. His cry imbues that space with a tangible resonance as he faces the grief of separation. A rite of passage will always involve grief, mourning the loss of the old ways, the security and familiarity of the containing womb. Holding onto traditional rituals as routines can be a way of avoiding the inevitable grief of change, but may also cause the death of tradition if the ritual becomes sterile and irrelevant. If the ritual loses its potency, then it loses its meaning and validity in the present world. When the form does not accurately reflect the spirit of the present times, the ritual will start to feel old-fashioned. This feeling of sterility, especially when it is combined with the repressive order that masks chaos, fear, and grief, can provoke people to dismiss the old ways, throw off the shackles of tradition and order, and seek out innovation and modernity in the desire to find meaning in present experience.

And yet if we discard tradition, if we do not honour our ancestors, we run the risk that they will continue to haunt us as was apparent in the two case studies. Traditions do need to be fully honoured as the ancestors of our evolutionary process. When the past influences are fully integrated with present developments, then the spirits that live in the forgotten fields will feel included in the changes that are taking place at the arts centres. Without their energy the new performances will feel hollow and empty, taking on the shell of another cultural influence without the powerful spirit of the ancestral lineage being present.

Traditional form is not the same as ancestral lineage though deceptively similar. The lineage does indeed emerge from within the form, but only when the form is totally and fully embodied within the performer. Because then the real spirit of the work, literally the ancestral spirits, start to emerge and imbue the work with life, fertility, potency, and

meaning. The performers themselves have to be the medium, the interface, between the visible form and the intangible spirit of the work. This is the fundamental training of an artist whether Indonesian or not. Without this complete embodiment there are empty spaces, space in the wind, and the spirits may well fill those empty spaces with chaos. Western influences may well come into that training process, and vice versa.

However the new influences also need to enter fully the ritual space, not just as a free floating costume, the exotic glamour of east or west, but the influences or spirits need to be initiated and included into a new interplay of ancestral spirits that includes the western ones. The word influence, like influenza, comes from the wind, and the wind is spirit, the original breath of life. Influence is a form of spirit. (Highwater 1981:136; Capra 1997:257) The western, or non-western, influences need to be treated as seriously in the ritual space as any other ancestral spirit, because the interplay of spirits will create new dances, new rituals, not losing any of the past ancestors but simply emerging at a new level of complexity.

Creating an interactive field between ancestral spirits of different cultures

Prapto honours the ancestral spirits of his own culture by having an intimate relationship with the landscape, nature, mythology and spiritual practices of Java. However he remains open as to how that those spirits or influences may express themselves. His movement practice appears to be improvisation but it is also not improvisation, because each movement is reflecting the invisible flows and pulls of everything that is moving around him. In this way he allows the ancestors of his land to speak to him in the ritual space through his body movement. Furthermore he allows himself to be moved by, influenced by, other spirits or influences so that a Greek, Filipino, or Japanese quality of movement, and consciousness, may also come and go through his body and mind, not as a costume of steps and techniques but as an inner impulse to move.

By remaining culturally fluid, but without sacrificing the integrity of his own roots, he is able to explore how rituals can open to other influences, but without losing their own ancestral power. The key is to be conscious and vigilant of the subtle interplay among those influences, recognising the change in atmosphere when a new spirit enters the ritual space, and exploring the language, the mind, the thought processes that can creatively describe that influence to someone of another cultural background. This is the only essential difference between Prapto and more traditional Indonesian shamans or artists. He accesses a creative understanding of the interplay between spirits or influences from different cultural sources.

Through engaging with different ancestral spirits, Prapto tries to understand what is the angle or perspective, the language and codes, through which one person or one culture sees the

whole field of interaction. There is no doubt that the essential source of his work is Javanese culture. However he is unusual in being able to step outside his own culture and see it in perspective through other cultural lens. In doing so he helps people of other cultures not so much to understand Java or Indonesia, but to see themselves and their own culture through the mirror of Indonesia. Perhaps Javanese people tend to see him as a traditional Javanese dukun because they are using their own terms of cultural reference through which to see him. They see him from that angle and no other. Prapto is fundamentally a shape shifter because he is able to move among different frames of reference and reveal the distortions and pulls between the different mirrors.

Rituals of chaos

Nowadays there is a very different relationship emerging between natural forces and human magic. In this century we have unlocked the invisible world, the world of genetic engineering and sub-atomic phenomena. We have opened the shaman's door and we are holding the key of life. (Larssen 1998: 233) The wild animal of chaos has been unleashed into our atmosphere, our oceans, our DNA structure, and our global economy. Tribal people may call them spirits, scientists may call them strange attractors, they are perhaps the same phenomenon with different cultural interpretations. Devastating hurricanes and floods, chemical weapons and pollution, are the demonic spirits that have emerged along the space between the wind to wreak havoc in the visible world, because distortions have appeared in the delicate balance between the forces of nature and human behaviour.

Many of these new distortions do not pay heed to national boundaries or local shamanic lore. Therefore, the shaman's job of engaging with the forces of chaos takes on a whole new dimension in a contemporary setting. Being a channel, a visionary, for the appropriate rituals needed to create passageways of awareness and action demands a level of creativity that may well have to go beyond traditional forms. The shaman's magic may no longer be an effective tool for invisible influences and forces that lie well beyond the local community's usual parameters. (Abrahm 1996:135)

Rituals act as a vehicle to express uncertainty and the need for safety at times of immense change. Rituals are also designed to clearly reveal the consequences of our actions, as the shaman does when addressing the effects of individual or collective behaviour. Many rituals are culturally specific, with a language and code of behaviour that is implicitly understood. For instance rituals take place in situations as diverse as the rainforest of Kalimantan and the boardrooms of the Chase Manhattan Bank. However these groups of people are increasingly having to cross paths in order to address the effects of global phenomena that does not recognise the boundaries of profession, culture, or status. Discrepancies of perspective,

language, and values mean that we struggle to understand the needs and expectations of another group of people that may be as close as the next street, or as far away as the other side of the world.

So what are the rituals that can reveal the needs of one group in a language and structure that makes sense to a totally different group? What are the rituals that support people in dealing with the consequences of their community's particular actions, and reveal how those actions can collectively compound or resolve the power of the terrifying monsters we have created? How to design the space, the container, needed to consciously allow those different energies to engage with each other? This is the work of the contemporary shaman. These are the rituals of chaos.

Appendix

A short biography of Suprapto Suryodarmo

Born in 1945, Suprapto Suryodarmo was introduced to Javanese mysticism as a child through visiting the temples and *dukuns* in Central Java with his parents. In the late 1960s he studied at ASKI in Solo, a national college for performing and fine arts, and also at Gaja Mada University in Yogyakarta where he took a degree in philosophy. Later he worked as an administrator at ASKI, finally becoming vice-principal before leaving to develop his own school. During this period he studied *Vipassana* and *Sumarah* meditation, a Javanese meditation practice. He started to explore free movement under the guidance of his *Sumarah* teacher, usually practising alone at the temples, beaches, and mountains of Central Java. Although his style is clearly influenced by Javanese court dance, he never formally trained as a classical dancer. His movement is essentially spontaneous, influenced more by his own attunement with inner forces than with observers' expectations of watching dance.

In 1975 he created wayang buda, a pivotal performance which marked out his distinctive style. Presented at Mendut temple for Waisaka, the annual Buddhist celebration, he took the theme of a traditional wayang kulit performance, but the normally static white screen was moving and Prapto himself moved in front of the screen rather than the traditional shadow puppets. (Stange 1992: 16) In the early 1980s, Prapto started to work with professional artists from Europe. Already exploring the interface of psychology, medicine, movement therapy, and ritual theatre, there seemed to be a natural convergence between their interests and Praptoís own artistic journey. From these early encounters and initial workshops in Java, Prapto started a school called Padepokan Lemah Putih on the outskirts of Solo. Nowadays he works internationally as a movement teacher and performing artist, teaching at the Naropa Institute in Colorado, the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam, and at retreat

centres in the Philippines, Europe and Indonesia.

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