

**Joget amerta:
A Kind of Religious Practice from Javanese Buddhism**

USMAN

Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies, Gadjah Mada University,

Yogyakarta;

Email: asyqi_wahidi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Joget Amerta is a religious practice which has been created by Suprpto Suryadharmo. The main objective of discussing Joget Amerta is to describe how Javanese responds to practice Buddhism in the specific culture. The response produces specific practice which is difference from other cultures, both characteristically and practically. The uniqueness of Joget Amerta can only be found in Javanese culture because it is originally born from culture of Java, and it results from the flexibility of Javanese people in accepting various incoming religions from outside world. I argue Joget Amerta shows the highly capability of Javanese people to produce particular religious practice which is totally different from the original practice coming from the original countries, as it is well known that Buddhism was brought by Siddhartha Gautama from India. In order to enrich scholars' debate on the issue of practicing world religion based on local culture; I raise two research questions in this paper. The first, what are the basic movements of Joget Amerta? The second, why Joget Amerta is considered as one of religious practice of Javanese Buddhism? In accordance to the case of Joget Amerta, I assume what happens after the contestation between Buddhism and Javanism is syncretism. It means that religious doctrine from Buddhism has been successfully transformed into specific practice with unique characteristic.

Key Words: Joget Amerta, World religions, local culture.

Introduction

Background

Joget Amerta or Amerta movement is free bodily movement which has been created by Suprpto Suryadharmo. He is Javanese art performer and the founder of Padepokan Lemah Putih located in Plesungan village, Northern part of Solo. The idea of creating *Joget Amerta* came from his spiritual query which is closely related to his spiritual backgrounds. He created *Joget Amerta* after he had joined *Vipassana*, *Sumarah* and Free Movement. In Buddhist practice, *vipassana* is intended to retrain the individual's relationship to the senses (hearing, seeing, touching, etc.) in order to produce a stance toward the world in which self-identity is understood to be substance-less (Ingrid Jordit, 2006: 198). *Sumarah* is one of the many mystical movements in Indonesia that bases its teachings in indigenous Javanese spiritual wisdom, in particular a philosophy of *rasa*. (Sarah Weiss, 2003: 25). The Javanese word "*Sumarah*" simply means "the state of total surrender," and it is a name not only for the organization, but also for the practice which provides its focus. (Paul Stange, 1984 : 116; See also Djoko Dwiyanto, 2011: 173-174).

In brief, it can be said that the basic movement of *Joget Amerta* is free movement or unorganized dancing steps. The meaning of free movement here actually is not free like *sakkarepe dewe* (following whatever one wants). Free movement here means not using specific patterns in expressing. One is not bound by movement vocabulary, but is more toward *net*, *greget*, *osik*, *wisik* (intensifying, dynamic feeling, intuition to move, spiritual inspiration) that tries to *tawuh mapan* (blossom in settling in its place and time) through the presence of one's movement. (Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 3). Movement, which he calls free movement, beginning from small children until elders who have ordinary skills or high expertise,

feels more suitable for everyone who has an intention to develop his presence in the world of movement.

Generally speaking, the term “joget” can be applied for children who are playing with a feeling of enjoyment. Then he mentions that we can find a kind of Joget Amerta in Yogyakarta, Joget Mataraman for example. In this context, the term “joget” can be used for many communities. Specifically in the case of Joget Amerta, the term “joget” should be able to develop *obah, polah, olah* and *solah* (changing or growing, motion, processing, and actions or manner of conduct). (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014; See also Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 3). Then, the term “Amerta” itself has a meaning of “life or essence of life.” Thus, Joget Amerta is a kind of religious practice that arises from Javanese Buddhism teachings.

Research Question

In order to enrich scholars’ debate on the issue of practicing world religion based on local culture; I raise three research questions in this paper. The first, what are the basic movements of *Joget Amerta*? The second, why *Joget Amerta* is considered as one of religious practice of Javanese Buddhism?

Material and Method

This paper was written with a qualitative approach that produces descriptive data. For participation observation and in-depth interviews, I lived in Padepokan Lemah Putih, Solo five days divided into two field trips. The first field trip was conducted for two days, from March 9, 2014 until March 10, 2014, and the second field trip was conducted for three days, from May 16, 2014 until May 18, 2014. Data presented on this paper are collected through *in-depth* interviews, collecting material

or written documents that are available in the center of Padepokan Lemah Putih, and also in libraries generally.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze data from the field, I use Schreiter's views; he mentioned there are three kinds of contestations between world religions and local cultures. The first is contestation between popular and official religion, the second contestation is between popular and elite religion, and the third contestation is between "esoteric" and "exoteric." (Robert J. Schreiter, 1985: 124-125).

To show three contestations or contrast among World religions and local cultures more clearly, I quoted Schreiter's views respectively. The first is contestation between popular¹ and official religion. Robert J. Schreiter (1985: 125) showed this contestation as below:

"If we take official religion to be those prescribed beliefs and norms of an institution promulgated and monitored by a group of religious specialists, then popular religion becomes those patterns of behavior and belief that somehow escape the control of the institutional specialists, existing alongside (and sometimes despite) the efforts at control of these specialists. In this view, popular religion is seen as deviation from a norm. The task of official religion, then, is to bring popular religion into line with the established norm. The norm is understood to be a set of beliefs that then define a kind of practice. Popular religion in this sense is construed as having alternate beliefs or no clearly defined beliefs at all."

The second contestation is between popular and elite religion. I quote Schreiter's views to understand this contestation. He explained that:

¹ The term "popular religion" derives from the use of the adjective "popular" as it is found in its variants in the Romance languages. Literally it means "of people" and can be used to mean of all people in general, or of one class of the people (usually the poor, majority class) in particular. It is not ordinarily used in the English sense of "popular" meaning "in fashion." When used in Latin American contexts, it generally refers to the poor, majority class. When used in North American contexts (as in "popular culture"), it refers to the majority, middle class. (Robert J. Schreiter, 1985: 124).

“Elite can be understood either as cultural or a social category. When it is understood as a cultural category, it contrasts the more literate, verbal, and conceptually sophisticated approach of one group with the more illiterate, non-verbal, and often enthusiastic form of another (“lower”) group. Most often it is also a social and economic category. The elite group will be identified with power and the control of resources, and the popular group will often be known simply as “the masses” of unlettered and disfranchised people.” (Robert J. Schreiter, *ibid.*).

The third contestation is between “esoteric” and “exoteric.” According to

Robert J. Schreiter:

“The distinction refers to the quality and quantity of lore transmitted to the population. Certain doctrines and practices will be preserved for an initiated few, while a more general version will be transmitted to the majority. In the discussions of popular religion, this sense of “elite” is used in terms of theological sophistication of some believers over against the more rudimentary level of understanding of the great majority of adherents to a particular religious system” (Robert J. Schreiter, *ibid.*).

Results and Discussion

The Basic Movements of Joget Amerta

Free movement is the main characteristics of Joget Amerta which means that there is no specific movement in doing Joget Amerta. In Joget Amerta, we can see nine postures which are originally based on free movements which are taken from daily life activities. The nine postures are:

- a. lying with its changes
- b. stretching/yawning

Stretching/ yawning can be likened to a starter key that connects the sleeping world and waking up world. It is like a car that has stopped; its engine is off then started with a key. Here the stretching concept is as one way to awaken the sleeping and hidden potentials in our bodies and in our subconscious.

- c. sitting with its changes
- d. kneeling with its changes
- e. crawling, crawling on the earth, crawling in the air
- f. standing with its changes

- g. walking with all of its various changes
- h. jumping with its changes
- i. lifting (*madal pang* = like we are released from gravity). (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014; Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 3-4).

Joget Amerta as Religious Practice

Looking from some aspects of Joget Amerta, I argue that it is a kind of religious practice in Javanese Buddhism. Although the inventor of Joget Amerta asserts that it is not meditation, but in doing so there are such kinds of meditation. So, I stated that Joget Amerta is a religious practice of Javanese Buddhism. There are three basic argumentations to support my statement. First, the religious background of the creator of Joget Amerta is a Javanese Buddhist. He developed Joget Amerta after joining *Vipassana*. *Vipassana* is a Buddhist practice that functions to develop genuine mindfulness to be able to know what is arriving and departing in our body, thoughts, heart, desires, or seeds that enter. One just places oneself as a witness, an attitude which endeavors as far as possible so that self-subjectivity becomes more objective. (Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 4). Second, the creator of Joget Amerta had involved in *Sumarah*, a Javanese meditation tradition, for eight years. Although he had been involved in *Sumarah* for several years, he refused to become *Pamong* (an important position in *Sumarah* organization). He did not mention the reason why he refused *Pamong* position in *Sumarah*, but in fact, *Sumarah* influenced him very much in his life. There is a famous concept in *Sumarah* liked by him; the concept is that *obah olah kersaning Allah, urip moksa kersane hyang sukma* (changing or growing processing by God's will, life for attaining liberation by the grace of the divine soul). Then, he met Sudarno Ong, a mixed between Javanese and Chinese,

whom thought him to release anxiety with simple method. The method is *kendho lan sumeleh* (relaxing and settling). Before joining *Sumarah*, he told me that he was frightened. In every single night, he cannot sleep. Consequently, he cannot feel relax and calm. Then, *Sumarah* rescued him from this condition. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

The third argumentation is related to the function of Joget Amerta. Because it is a kind of religious practice, it has similar function such as religious practice derived from World religions. Joget Amerta can be functioned as a way to *pamudaran* (release from desire) because the most important value in Joget Amerta is *pasrah* (surrender). This concept is similar with some concept in other world religions such as Islam, Christianity, and others. Actually this concept is an effective way to make balance between profane life and spiritual life. After feeling *pamudaran*, people will understand some Javanese spiritual concepts such as *urip mampir ngombe* (life is temporal only for drinking), *sepi ing pamrih rame ing gawe* (no much hope but work more), and so forth. On the other hand, in Theravada Buddhism teaching whoever wants to release or gets *moksa*, he or she should leave his house, walk alone, and bring only two clothes. But in Joget Amerta, to release from desire people do not have to escape from this world and follow Theravada Buddhism teaching, because we are not monk. It is better to live like usual as ordinary people, but keep in mind that Joget Amerta teaches people to shape our awareness which is in a limitation. Because of our limitation, we have to surrender (*pasrah*). (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

According to Suprpto, surrendering (*pasrah*) is a development from relaxing. It can be relaxing the body, relaxing thoughts, relaxing *rasa* (feeling),

relaxing desires, and relaxing seeds. Actually in *Sumarah*, these relaxation practices function so that we can have more sensitivity. By relaxing, our nerves can be more sensitive and are able to be more in accord with the atmosphere. Inner and outer occurs harmoniously. (Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 4). This leads to support my argumentation that Joget Amerta is religious practice because it is not only free movement but also containing religious values which is *pasrah* (surrender). Although the concept of *pasrah* (surrender) is very essential in Joget Amerta, the creator remains us not to be trapped in negative meaning of surrender which is apathetic. Surrender (*pasrah*) means that we have to be aware to the limitation. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

Another function of Joget Amerta is to open an inner space. It relates to the Javanese concept “*lima pancer dengan sedulur papate*” (the four directions and the fifth throughout that is God, with one’s four accompanying inner companions or elements). By this, it is hoped that circulation of life energy, nature, and human will happen because of the grace of God. (Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 5).

The most essential function of Joget Amerta is to teach us how we can be involved witness or how we can be a witness itself. This function relates to the concept of creation. In Suprpto’s view, the creation is never ending. He uses the term “evolution” to describe the never ending process of creation. Actually he did not want to follow Darwin’s theory of evolution or other sciences, but in his explanation, his evolution concept has similarity with Darwin’s theory. He tries to differentiate the evolution of flora, fauna, and human. His concept of evolution relates to the concept of “being” or “existence.” In his view, all beings is *hana* (*existence*). (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

There are two kinds of *hana*: complete *hana* and incomplete *hana*. The human is complete *hana* because human consists of five elements: body, mind, heart, intention, and seed. The flora cannot be categorized as complete *hana*, because it does not have five elements completely. The most perfect of being, in his opinion, is *angel*, but human being does not need to become angel. All beings can only evolve in their own ways of evolution. It means that fauna cannot evolve in the human's way of evolution. On the contrary, human being cannot evolve in the angel's way of evolution. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

Along with this concept he criticizes Javanese mystical concept about *manunggaling kawulo gusti* (the unification between God and human) or the concept of *nyawiji* (to be of one mind). In Prapto's view, how far does human being evolve, he never be the God or angel. Human is human. From this point of view, he tries to limit the possibility of unification between human and God. Instead of thinking the unification between human and God, it is better to change the way of our thinking. He stated that we have to begin thinking with "human perspective" not God perspective. What does it means? (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

Actually he emphasizes the way of thinking starting from the reality that is seen and touched. On the contrary, we have to avoid thinking "something" or "being" that is unseen and untouchable, "God" for instance. In his view, the World of Symbol cannot describe what is "God." How far the debate about "God", it is only human conception or perception about "God" and human conception cannot describe the real Reality of "God" comprehensively. It does not mean that he does not believe the existence of "God", but wordily debates about "God" is waste time. His way of

thinking, in my opinion, is mostly influenced by Buddha's thinking who did not want to speculate about "God." According to him, "God" is not personal and without any attributes. In brief, he said that we can feel or taste the existence of "God", but "God" cannot be described by any human word. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

His concept about "God" is also influenced by Javanese mysticism. As it is commonly known that "God" in Javanese mysticism is *tan keno kinoyo opo* (cannot be described by what) and *tan keno kinoyo ngopo* (cannot be described by why). Thus, the peak of human being evolution is only human. Then the question is how to understand human being? To answer this question Suprpto offers to begin with the concept of Nature World. In Nature World, we are insisted to see the reality (including human being) as it is (Indonesian Language: *apa adanya*). I think this is what he means about "human perspective." In "human perspective", the central is human. To think about human being, it is better to start with thinking five elements of human being as it is mentioned above. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

Another interesting point to note here is that Suprpto tries to criticize another Javanese mysticism or other mystical thought, for example, *mati sajeroné ngurip* (feeling death in the life). This is not the right concept, according to him. He asserts that human being should be active and creative. If he or she thinks that he was dead although he is still alive in this world. It means he is suicide. (Interviews in Padepokan Lemah Putih, 16 May, 2014).

From above explanations, it can be said that basically in the purpose of Joget Amerta is for shaping our awareness which is in a limitation. But basically, we can

change that limitation. This concept itself stems from the concept of *omah* (home), which is a concept of the micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos. In his interpretation, in general there are life concepts stemming from the concept of *nyawiji* (to be of one mind) or *lingga-yoni* (phallus-womb), or a circulation concept, or a conflict concept, or a thesis-antithesis concept that is seeking for synthesis (but usually forgets its synthesis). (Suprpto Suryadharmo, 2009: 6).

III. Conclusion

It can be concluded that adjustment, assimilation, accommodation, acculturation, hybridation, and syncretism are perhaps some terms showing the meeting between world religion and local culture. As it is stated by Robert J. Schreiter, there are three kinds of contestation between world religions and local culture. The first is contestation between popular and official religion, the second contestation is between popular and elite religion, and the third contestation is between “esoteric” and “exoteric.” In accordance to the cases discussed above what happens after those contestations is syncretism. It means that religious doctrine from Buddhism has been successfully transformed into specific practices with unique characteristic and method in practicing those religious doctrines. The practice of Joget Amerta cannot be found in other countries, except Indonesia, Central Java to be specific.

I argue Joget Amerta is religious practice based on Javanese and Buddhism teachings which are supported by three argumentations. Firstly, the religious background of the creator of Joget Amerta is a Javanese Buddhist. Secondly, the creator of Joget Amerta had involved in *Sumarah*, a Javanese meditation tradition, for eight years. Thirdly, it has similar functions like the function of world religions.

The ultimate function of Joget Amerta is as a way to *pamudaran* (release from desire), a means to open an inner space, a ritual to teach us how we can be involved witness or how we can be a witness itself.

Finally, the implication of the paper is to encourage the scholars, researchers, and academics to conduct more intensive researches or studies on world religions in practice in Indonesian context, in order to describe, to explain, to explore the way of local people in practicing religious doctrines which come from other countries. The studies or researches are very significant to understand the unique characteristics of religious practices based on specific culture.

References

Books

- Dwiyanto, Djoko, 2011. *Bangkitnya Penghayat Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan YME: Hasil Studi di Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta*. Yogyakarta: Ampera Utama Penerbit.
- Jordit, Ingrid, 2006. "Defining a True Buddhist: Meditation and Knowledge Formation in Burma," in *Ethnology*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (Summer, 2006), pp. 193-207.
- Schreier, Robert J., 1985. *Constructing Local Theologies*. London: Richard Clay Ltd.
- Stange, Paul, 1984. "The Logic of Rasa in Java," in *Indonesia*, No. 38 (Oct. 1984), pp. 113-134.
- Suryadharmo, Suprpto, 2009. "Meditasi dalam Tari: "Tari dalam Meditasi?," a paper presented on Seminar Nasional "Seni Tari dalam Kehidupan Manusia," Surakarta: Institute Seni Indonesia (ISI).
- Weiss, Sarah, 2003. "Kothong Nanging Kebak, Empty Yet Full: Some Thoughts on Embodiment and Aesthetics in Javanese Performance," in *Asian Music*, Vol. 34, No. 2, an Indonesia Issue (Spring – Summer, 2003), pp. 21-49.

Material Interviews

Interview material recorded and translated by Usman, May 16, Solo 2014.