

# **The GLOCAL 2019**

**The Global Council on Anthropological Linguistics 2019,  
in Asia**

**Siem Reap, Cambodia  
23 - 26 January 2019**

**Editor: Asmah Haji Omar**

ISSN: 2707-8647

ISBN: 978-0-6485356-0-7

# Becoming Spiritual: Documenting Osing Rituals and Ritualistic Languages in Banyuwangi, Indonesia

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## Abstract

Banyuwangi is a highly unique and dynamic locality. Situated in between several ‘giants’ traditionally known as centres of culture and tourism, that is, Bali to the east, larger Java to the west, Borneo to the north, and Alas Purwo forest to the south, Banyuwangi is a hub for culture and metaphysical attention, but has, over the past few decades, become a focus of political discourse, in Indonesia. Its cultural and spiritual practices are renowned throughout both Indonesia and Southeast Asia, yet Banyuwangi seems quite content to conceal many of its cosmological practices, its spirituality and connected cultural and language dynamics. Here, a binary constructed by the national government between institutionalized religions (Hinduism, Islam and at times Christianity) and the liminalized Animism, Kejawen, Ruwatan and the occult, supposedly leading to ‘witch hunts,’ have increased the cultural significance of Banyuwangi. Yet, the construction of this binary has intensified the Osing community’s affiliation to religious spiritualistic heritage, ultimately encouraging the Osing community to stylize its religious and cultural symbolisms as an extensive set of sequenced annual rituals. The Osing community has spawned a culture of spirituality and religion, which in Geertz’s terms, is highly syncretic, thus reflexively complexifying the symbolisms of the community, and which continue to propagate their religion and heritage, be internally. These practices materialize through a complex sequence of (approximately) twelve annual festivals, comprising performance and language in the form of dance, food, mantra, prayer, and song. The study employs a theory of frames (see work by Bateson, Goffman) to locate language and visual symbolisms, and to determine how these symbolisms function in context.

This study and presentation draw on a several year ethnography of Banyuwangi, to provide an insight into the cultural and linguistic symbolisms of the Osing people in Banyuwangi. The study first documents these sequenced rituals, to develop a map of the symbolic underpinnings of these annually sequenced highly performative rituals. Employing a symbolic interpretive framework, and including discourse analysis of both language and performance, the study ultimately presents that the Osing community continuously, that is, annually, reinvigorates its complex clustering of religious and cultural symbols, which are layered and are in flux with overlapping narratives, such as heritage, the national political and the transnational.

*Keywords:* Osing, Banyuwangi, Java, Religious and Cultural Symbolism, Linguistic Anthropology

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## Introduction

From between 2001 to 2018, I conducted ethnographical work on Central and East Java,

Indonesia, in search of linguistic and cultural dynamics in the region. The linguistic characteristics of both Javanese and other languages in Java evidenced the need for investigation, some of which have presented themselves as hidden languages, that is, in this day and age of pervasive media and technology, and intensified mobility and contact, there still exist communities in ‘urban’ localities who are secluded from languages communities and societies within which they live.

One such community is the Osing, in Banyuwangi. In my work on Banyuwangi, I was surprised to encounter Osing families who, despite living at the centre of Javanese and Indonesian communities whose communication is in Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia, these families are patently unaware of these two languages, and resort to Osingnese as the only language with which they are skilled. This becomes more surprising as Osing communities have a weak educational support base, despite that the Indonesian government has begun to invest resource into revitalizing the Osing community and its language. Despite the seclusion of the Osingnese people in Banyuwangi, and the limited economic resources in the community, the Osing cultural, linguistic and religious heritages have evolved and have sustained themselves.

This study considers these phenomena within the Osing community in Banyuwangi, and presents a frame analysis so as to locate symbolic contexts, that is, to frame the symbolisms and their linguistic, visually performative and other contexts as a community patently adhering to a mixed syncretic (Geertz) religion. It is hoped that these findings will benefit communities who have sought liminal spaces within which to sustain heritage, and thus those who have sought to increasingly make sense of their position in a local, national and transnational set of arenas.

### **A Short History of the Osing Ethnicity**

The Osing ethnic group, a community rooted in the Negeri Belambangan heritage and native to Banyuwangi, East Java, Indonesia, generally occupies several districts throughout Banyuwangi; Giri, Glagah, Kabat, Rogojampi, Songgon, Singojuruh, Cluring and Genteng. The local government has allocated and developed Kemiren, a village in the Glagah district, as a space for Osing communities to preserve their cultural values.

### **The Osing Language**

The Osing language is a Malayo-Polynesian language, within the larger Austronesian family. The language generally has roots common to other neighboring languages such as (old) Javanese and Madurese, and has managed to retain its ‘unpolluted’ elements, whereas Javanese has developed and has emerged into new forms, thus having transformed into a language very devoid of the structure of the Osing language. As such, the status of Osing as an independent language is contested, and is, at times, labeled as a dialect of Javanese, rather than a language in its own right. Unlike its Javanese and Madurese analogues, the Osing language does not separate class through language form, register, stance or socio / dialect. The Javanese language has generally three levels, Kromo, Madiya, and Ngoko, all three of which are placed and appropriated to effect class separation, but in complex ways. The Osing language provides complex structures of deference within each individual case of discourse, where respect is exhibited through certain language structures and cultural forms, but which presents itself universally with all speakers.

## Osing Religious Tradition

Osing religious practices were originally rooted in Hinduism, following the spread of Hinduism throughout 'larger' India. Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist empire Majapahit, one of the last major Hindu empires of what is now Southeast Asia, extended throughout Asia, and centred itself in Java, reaching its peak in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Islamic inroads into the region in and around Java converted many of the Osing people, yet, the new religious influence and cultural ritual practices combined Hinduism, Islam, and local pre-Hindu beliefs and mores. This generative development of the Osing culture was then also significantly influenced by foreignism during the colonial period, that is, with occupation and control of the Blambangan Peninsula region by the Dutch East India Company. However, Islam has still remained dominant throughout the ethnic communities of Osing, with Hinduism, Christianity and Animism surviving as minor religious or spiritual adhesions. Animism pervades much of Osing religious practice, as it does much of Southeast Asian religious convention, yet the religions maintain societal proximity in the face of cultural mixing.

Sitting in between mainland Indonesia, that is, Java, and the island of Bali, the Osing communities are somewhat in tension between the Islamic policies of Indonesia, and the strong Hinduism of Bali, and as such, the cultural-religious tensions are obvious in Osing communities in Banyuwangi, thus expanding the repertoire of festivals to include certain 'Balinese' Hindu festivals.

## Ethnographic Work

The talk and paper were developed for The GLOCAL Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology 2020, in Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia. The intentions of the paper include to expose the symbolisms of the Osing rituals, which all occur in sequence throughout each solar year. These rituals, which amount over ten per year, guide the Osing communities in Banyuwangi, and beyond, through the lifeworld practices of the Osing community, and with which these communities negotiate their natural, social, religious and political surroundings. Each of these ceremonies is accompanied by visual performance (dance, clothing and so forth), culinary practices and artifacts, speech rituals, and other culturally appropriated interactions within and across the communities. During these ceremonies, the Osing communities interact with animals and a nature in general, thus satisfying the animistic elements of Osing. The symbolic intentions of these rituals are complex, mediated by both the continuation of heritage of the Osing communities and the current intentions of Osing ethnic groups to accommodate national and transnational stringencies.

Below I present and describe the Osing annual sequence of rituals, and provide an introductory description of the symbolisms of each of these rituals. Present limitations do not allow for a discussion of the large set of typologies of symbolisms found during ethnographic work. Rather, the paper summarizes these and presents a small fraction and generalization of the findings.

This ethnography in Osing communities and their rituals took place in various localities in Banyuwangi, sometimes in an organized fashion, and someone sporadically, over the period from 2001 to 2016. A more intensified ethnography was accomplished during 2017 and 2018. A strong focus during the ethnography was placed on Kemiren village, in the Glagah sub-

district of Banyuwangi, though the Osing communities are dispersed throughout Banyuwangi, and predominantly to the North. Linguistic data was obtained several hundred informants who were all Osing speakers, most but not all of whom were of Osing heritage, though some were not fully fluent in the language. The data was collected by listening/recording extensive discussions and comprehension of the Osing lifeworlds, by observing and documenting rituals, and by participating in these rituals, over the two decades, and hence through ethnographic work. The communities welcome interest and engagement in local ritual by outsiders, irrespective of outsider religious affiliation or heritage. One factor central to this invitation emerges as the efforts by the Osing community to reinforce government awareness that local religious practices are not black, that is, black magic and satanic, but rather, that the Osing adhere to the strict requirements by the government to (explicitly) abolish all occultist and black practices. Of these 'black' practices is the Jaran Goyang (dancing horse) love spell, which is used to ensnare a target lover, as a combination of speech, fasting, dance, and other practices (picking flowers in graveyards and so forth). Neighboring countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines have their versions of the Jaran Goyang. In Indonesia, the origins of the ritual are complex, combining Javanese and other traditions. The poetics themselves of the spell are highly intricate, which complex parallelisms and reduplication, and exhibit have a number of variations.

This ethnography required an extended tenure in the community, including activity and hence integrating into the community. I participated in many of the rituals while observing others. During the extended ethnography, specific focus was placed on the specific application and 'take up' of rituals across generations, that is, grandparents, parents, grandchildren, as well as the teaching of these rituals from generation to generation. The transfer of symbolism through teaching was also an area of focus, as was the appropriation of these symbolisms across age groups, and subsequently across levels of kinship who have differing competences in technology, different lifeworld experiences, different education, and whose cultural affiliation various owing to modern requirements to become mobile, to receive education in established higher institutions and to travel to larger cities for work and commercial gain.

## **The Osing Rituals**

A simple typology of symbolisms within Osing rituals is below, the analysis of which builds on a Geertzian theoretical framework of Symbolic Anthropology, drawing on data taken from language rituals, as well as from visuals and performance rituals.

The extensive and intricate network of rituals generally guides Osing communities through their traditionally animist cum Islamic and Hindu beliefs. The main art form is their popular version of Gandrung traditional dance., Patrol, Seblang, Angklung, Barong dance, Kuntulan, Kendang Kempul, Janger, Jaranan, Jaran Kincak, Angklung Caruk and Jedor. A plurality of inquisitions emerged over the years, but central to which were the likes of how the ritual designs combine voice and body movements, how Osing societies organize community around these rituals and their 'light' and deep symbolic structures.

### ***The Ten Rituals***

1. Seblang

The Seblang tradition guides people to avoid pageblug (all danger). The residents celebrate the ritual at every beginning of the Shawwal month. Seblang is a dance ritual that places the dancer into a trance akin to a possessed state. The dancers must be young girls, appointed by dead ancestors through the mediation of spirits, who inform the locals. While dancing, the girl uses a crown of strands of banana leaves and flowers, called *omprok*. The appointed girl will dance with eyes closed on a circular stage to traditional music of Banyuwangi. The dance begins 2:00 pm and finishes prior to sunset, on each of seven consecutive days. There are two types of Seblang dance.

1a. Seblang Olehsari – This is a sacral village ceremony aiming to ward off misfortune. The seblang is performed for 7 days, by a the young female virgin, in the Olehsari village. The dancer must be selected by ancestors through the mediation of spirits who inform the pawing the religious leader, in a dream. At times, however, the dancer is part of a lineage of seblang dancers, and is hence genealogically predetermined. Within the ceremony, audiences also visit the graves of their ancestors, so as to request permission to perform intended daily activities. The Seblang Olehsari contains 28 songs.

1b. Seblang Bakungan – The Seblang Bakungan purports to do the same as the Seblang Olehsari, but with some differences. The performance is shorter than the Seblang Olehsari, and lasts only one night. Unlike the Seblang Olehsari, the dancer for the Seblang Bakungan is an old woman, who dances to 12 different songs during the performance.

#### 2. Petik Laut

A tradition that is celebrated by the resident fishermen to express gratitude and to ask for blessings from deities. The ritual uses a small canoe filled with ‘*Sesembahan*,’ that is, items offered to the deity during worship.

#### 3. Ider Bumi

This is similar to the Seblang, as a ritual through the practicing of which, performers aim to avoid all dangers. The ritual is celebrated on the 2PndP day of Shawwal.

#### 4. Puter Kayun

This is a tradition to commemorate ways in which walking paths are built by residents of a village, celebrated on the 10PthP of Shawwal.

#### 5. Satu Suro (Suroan)

This is performed on the first day of the Javanese calendar year in the month of Suro. The ritual elicits expressions of gratitude by villagers toward deities, and who ask for blessings from the deities.

#### 6. Rebo Wekasan

This is performed on the final Wednesday of every lunar month.

#### 7. Ruwatan

This ritual is intended to cleanse or release performers from curse or misfortune. A Ruwatan ceremony involves a sacred Wayang Kulit (shadow puppet) play that is performed as an exorcism to cleanse Sukerta (people) who have fallen victim to personal disaster and curse and who are considered magically vulnerable to the evil god Bathara Kala. This is also conducted and performed at weddings.

#### 8. Sapar

Through this ritual, performers express gratitude to deities and ask for blessing from these deities. The residents of villages cook porridge and offer this food to all throughout their village and to poor and misfortune people.

#### 9. Kebo-keboan

During this ritual, a man dresses to stylistically resemble, sometimes symbolically, buffalo. The dress includes a horn and black wrapping around the body. The dress, dance and ritual in full all aim to symbolize that the buffalo is a powerful beast, an intention which becomes the foundation of a society's farming livelihood.

#### 10. Perang bangkat

In the tradition of the Osing wedding, several combinations are possible for matrimony, as below. The ritualistic coupling of people for matrimony is names as such so as to ensure that families find responsible men who are able to love, care and fulfill the needs of their spouse in the afterlife.

- The eldest son of one family must be matched with the youngest female child of another family
- The youngest son of one family must be matched with the youngest daughter of another family
- The eldest son of one family must be matched with the eldest daughter of another family.

### Discussion

Most of the symbolisms within the above ten rituals are grounded in notions of a strong binary opposition construct, in that these symbolisms are positioned vis-à-vis their 'opposites' so as to maximize the binary differential, during each ritual. For example, colors are frequently presented in binary form, as are the relational constructs and 'stance' (see work by Asif Agha) between performer and audience emphasized, where audiences are also positioned to participate in the performance (see work by Alessandro Duranti). The sequences of food offerings are frequently in binary fashion, as offerings, prayers, and other elements are performed in binaries. This initial positioning of ritual elements in binaries, subsequently increasing the poetics and parallelism of the rituals, begins to expose the deeper levels of symbolism evident in the traditional architecture of these ritual events. However, modern representations and performances of these rituals have begun to dilute the traditional symbolic differentials.

The deeper interpretations and levels of symbolism require an understanding of how these symbolisms affect relations between individuals, classes of society and the larger community. The effects of the symbolisms, frequently latent, are not easily realized nor seen without knowledge of the wider Osing community. These deeper levels are also not easily recognizable without awareness of a plurality of other intersecting factors and tensions, such as government mandate vi-a-vis transnational patterns. The interrelation of these dynamics is remarkable in that local communities seek to redesign yet reappropriate rituals for situated context predicated, while considering these multiple factors, not least of which are larger regional and transnational intersections. This reflexivity becomes central to the performance of these Osing rituals in the current era, as it has been throughout the history of the Osing community. As a result, the Osing community has sustained their heritage practices until the present time, in one way or another. Also, through this reflexivity, and through a general (at times) aim to funnel the symbolisms into their particular meanings, the various classes of symbols frequently redirect to the 'common \ ' meanings, in that the symbolisms and their rituals have been designed to move toward and to construct a common social and spiritual nodality. For example, fear represents one symbolic consequence of dance, where prayer seeks to alleviate the fear, thus constructing a binary. The

animal dances instill in audiences a fear which prayer alleviates, and where both scaffold one another. The performance becomes representational of larger society, where, through effective prayer practices and devoutness, fear is reduced to a perception only, and evil becomes nothing more than an imaginary construct in the presence of the deity. The binary thus creates meaning through the construction of boundaries between each side.

Within their annual inculcation, several classes are central to the Osing community, where other classes and clusters of these symbols are foreign, but emerge through relations between the fundamental structures of the Osing communities and their relation to outside occurrences such as emergent government mandate, the interactivity between Islam and Hinduism and Animism, and new textual modes and technologies. Following work by Rosaldo, we ask how emotional reaction to these symbolisms and their use predicates the application of these symbolisms, in situated context, thus also leading to the embodiment of these symbols, and exposing their deep structures. These deep structures provide, a reinterpretation of Clifford Geertz's perspective of Islam in Java as unique, that is, an indigenized or domesticated version of Islam syncretically reflecting local as well as foreign influences. This is Geertz's 'syncretic' notion of Islam in Java, yet here, the generative exposition of deeper symbolisms brings about a more complex character in these symbols, and the factors that mediate these symbols.

Interestingly the Indonesian government seems to be positioning, and capitalizing on, Islam as a frame of reference, an effort which has pervaded Osing (and other) communities in complex ways. For example, the Islamic intentions of the Indonesian state can position supposed 'black magic' practices throughout Banyuwangi as anti-Islamic so as to frame Islam as righteous. In this way, black magic becomes a tool with which to stabilize an institutionalized Islam, as a truer religion vis-à-vis its 'evil' opposite. That is, the use of black magic and the existence of these communities all aid in the reaffirmation of Islam as a doer of good. Through these deeper symbolisms, Osing communities make sense of their lifeworlds as pious citizens, thus reintegrating into their Osing societies as communities constituting a balanced integration of Animistic, Hinduistic, and Islamic elements. Javanese religion has maintained its structure as a syncretic Islam with the abangan 'variant' emphasizing animistic elements, the santri, Islamic element, and the priyayi, Hindu elements. Initially and increasingly coming together in these rituals in an etic fashion, they become contextualized through emic perspectives by practitioners.

Another binary emerges, the notion of which is reinforced by Hefner, who characterizes Indonesian Islam in terms of two emergent and rival traditions regarding the political role of Islam. 'Civil Islam' as 'pluralist' affirms democracy, voluntarism, and a balance of countervailing powers in a state and society, where as a regimist Islam strives for an Islamic state without checks and balances. This binary also extrapolates as a continuum and culminates to Javanese mysticism and animism.