Some Traditional Javanese Values in NSM: From God to Social Interaction

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BIODATA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a number of central traditional Javanese values in social interaction and explicates some of them into cultural scripts using the Natural Semantics Metalanguage (NSM). This explication method, developed by Anna Wierzbicka, relies on the use of basic universally lexicalized concepts termed ‘semantic primes’ to break down complex concepts into simpler ones and is useful to avoid ethnocentricism. With this approach, it is shown how intricate Javanese notions, such as narimo ‘accepting’ and ethok-ethok ‘dissimulation’, may be effectively described using simple vocabulary without lacking in rigour, which would be very helpful for outsiders to understand more about the culture.

Keywords: Javanese values, cultural scripts, social interaction, NSM.

Introduction

This paper examines a number of central traditional Javanese values in social interaction and explicates some of them into cultural scripts using the Natural Semantics Metalanguage (NSM). The Javanese have a life philosophy that heavily emphasizes peace and harmony. For the sake of being tentrem (‘peaceful’) and rukun (‘in harmony with others’), they often conceal and deny themselves, and this has often been understood as something ‘hypocritical’. The values we shall pursue here include narima/trima ‘accepting’, the ‘self-awareness’ value cluster (eling ‘mindful’, waspada ‘alert’ and sadhar ‘aware’, alus ‘refined’), the ‘sensitivity’ value cluster (such as tanggap ‘able to read signs’ and tepa salira⁵ ‘sensitive to others’ feelings and act accordingly’), ngalah ‘to give in’ and ethok-ethok ‘to

⁵ Also spelled as slira, which is an abbreviated version of salira.
dissimulate/pretend\textsuperscript{6}. All these concepts are fundamental to the traditional Javanese worldview which centres around God and the quest to keep a balance with the cosmos. For this reason, I will first discuss this underlying system of beliefs, before attempting to transcribe the values into cultural scripts.

The NSM technique, which was developed by the Polish-Australian scholar, Anna Wierzbicka, would help articulate the cultural norms in a way that is ‘clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike’ (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004: 153). It relies on the use of basic universally lexicalized concepts termed ‘semantic primes’ to break down complex concepts into simpler ones. This technique allows one to explicate cultural concepts without using ethnocentric terms (e.g. the use of English ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ in defining politeness). The NSM method, as Riemer (2006: 3) has pointed out, cannot guarantee the success of its definitions. However, such a pitfall can be avoided with adequate cultural information and proper analysis.

The following is a list of words whose meanings are considered to be semantic primes (Goddard 2002: 14):

- Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY
- Relational substantives: KIND, PART
- Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE
- Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY
- Evaluators: GOOD, BAD
- Descriptors: BIG, SMALL
- Mental/experiential predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
- Speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE
- Actions, events, movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
- Existence and possession: THERE IS/EXIST, HAVE
- Life and death: LIVE, DIE
- Time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
- Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCHING
- Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
- Augmentor, intensifier: VERY, MORE
- Similarity: LIKE (AS, HOW)

In addition to the semantic primes, I will also use more complex expressions, such as ‘make’, ‘give’, and ‘lose’ as ‘semantic molecules’. A semantic molecule is ‘a complex lexical meaning which functions as an intermediate unit in the structure of

\textsuperscript{6}Ethok-ethok may also indicate a state and thus may behave like an adjective.
other, more complex concepts’ (Goddard, 2006: 1). I shall not explicate any particular molecule, as this study is more concerned with the definition of Javanese cultural values.

In developing the cultural scripts, I will also use my own knowledge as a Javanese and a native speaker of the language. I lived as a Javanese monoglot until I learned Indonesian at school when I was seven and have lived among traditional Javanese people most of my life in Salatiga, Central Java. I therefore consider myself a reliable informant for the culture, especially of the Javanese who live in Yogyakarta and Central Java (excluding areas such as Tegal and Banyumas). I will also make substantial use of Geertz’s (1976) work. While his division of traditional Javanese society has been abandoned by many, his explanation on their traditional values, especially as related to social interaction, remains indispensable.

God: The Centre

Basically a religious people, the Javanese have welcomed various different beliefs from other parts of Asia into their life. Hinduism, Buddhism and finally Islam were the major religions that helped shape the basic indigenous values. So central is the belief in God to the traditional Javanese culture that Mulder (1985: 19-20) points out that it becomes the main source of the people’s spiritual values. The Javanese have a holistic view that whatever exists in the world is a part of a larger unit. This unit is in harmonious existence in which all the parts exist and happen following a fixed formula called *ukum pinesthi* (Mulder, 1985: 19), which literally means “law of destiny”.

Further, in this whole unit, there is a centre that covers all the parts called *Hyang Suksma*, which Mulder (2005: 33) has glossed as ‘The All-Soul’. This central spiritual being is seen as the cause of the existence of everything, and is the most secret and basic among others. It is this centre that is often called ‘God’ (1985: 20).

With *ukum pinesthi*, all entities have to move in a particular way that has been designed to maintain harmony. Life is seen as an inevitable thing each human being has to endure with the particular *titah* ‘destiny’ God has designed for the individual. This philosophy is clearly manifested in the expression “*Urip kuwi kudhu dilakoni, sapira abote*”, which roughly means we have to live/endure our life, no matter how

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7My own translation. It is also glossed as ‘law of necessity’ in Mulder (2005: 3), but this translation does not really reflect the meaning of *pinesthi*, which refers to ‘something that determines’.
hard it is. Another expression that echoes this wisdom is ‘Urip kuwi mung sakderma\(^8\) nglakoni’ – life is but a duty, to live what is already given to you. In addition, *ukum pinesthi* also applies to things. There are reasons why a river or a mountain exists at a particular place and not somewhere else people would prefer them to be. Therefore, to make numerous changes to nature is discouraged because it may disrupt the cosmic balance and may invite a disaster. On this basis, *ukum pinesthi* can be transcribed as follows:

**Ukum pinesthi**
(a) God wants people and things to exist/live in a particular way
(b) People and things have to exist/live in this way because of this
(c) Something bad will happen if things and people do not exist/live in this way

Everyone also has the moral responsibility to maintain the harmony and the existence of the whole larger unit, and therefore they have to accept their ‘destiny’. A good Javanese, therefore, must also be able to be *narima/trima* ‘accepting’.\(^9\) He who is *narima/trima* ‘accept[s] his station in life and his fate with an attitude of grateful acceptance’ (Mulder, 2005: 53). Here fate, class, hierarchy, gender and events are seen as inevitable (Geertz, 1976: 241).

The concept’s significance as a “compliance” with God is strongly reflected in the common Javanese saying “*narima ing pandhum*”, which means “accept what God has given to you sincerely/without resisting”. The attitude of *narima/trima* is often associated with adversity, for instance, when someone is mistreated or suffers from a misfortune. In such a situation, one who is *narima/trima* would be reconciled with what has happened to him/her without grumbling (although he/she may have complained before achieving this state of heart). *Narima/trima* “brings peace through the acceptance of the envitable” (Geertz, 1976: 241).

An example of the attitude of *narima/trima* is strongly reflected in the following story of Sujud Sutrisno, a street busker whose profile has been uploaded to the

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\(^8\)The expression *sakderma* consists of *sak*, which means ‘as much/little/big as’, and *derma/darma*, which means ‘duty’, which is derived from the place God has given ‘them in life.

\(^9\)Geertz (1976: 241) glosses *narima/trima* as ‘to acquiesce’. However, a caveat must be made with this translation, as while both concepts mean ‘to comply or accept without protest’, *narima/trima* does not have any connotation of ‘reluctance’ as the English verb may indicate. The Javanese expression also indicates more of a state rather than an action, which seems to strengthen what it refers to: a state of the heart, an attitude and often a disposition.
Indonesian Wikipedia. With his belief in “narimo in pandum”, he accepts whatever is given to him for his ‘gig’ without grumbling:

Sujud sangat dihormati oleh pengamen jalanan dan seniman lainnya. Sujud berkata bahwa kendala utama dalam karier bermusiknya (mengamen) ialah hujan. Setiap kali hujan turun maka itu akan menghambat dirinya dalam "bekerja dari pintu ke pintu" karena bermain kendang sambil memegang payung adalah hal yang sulit. Mantan anggota Teater Alam ini terbilang sebagai seniman yang cukup kondang. Ia pernah tampil sepanggung dengan musisi kelas dunia.

Sebagai orang Jawa sejati, Sujud percaya akan salah satu falsafah Jawa yaitu “nrimo ing pandum” yang berarti menerima suratan takdir dengan kesabaran dan kerendahan hati. Menurut Sujud, takdir atas dirinya berada di tangan Tuhan. Setiap kali mengakhiri permainan musiknya, dia tidak pernah berharap bayaran, namun menerima apa yang orang lain berikan secara ikhlas. (my own emphasis)

(Sujud is highly regarded among other street singers and artists. He said that the main problem in his musical career is rain. Everytime it rains, it makes it difficult for him to "work from door to door", for playing drums while holding an umbrella is difficult. This former member of ‘Teater Alam’ {a local theatrical community} can be considered a relatively famous artist. He has performed on stage with world class musicians.)

Asa true Javanese, Sujud believes in the Javanese philosophy “nrimo ing pandum” which means accepting destiny with patience and humility. According to him, his destiny is in God’s hands. Each time he finishes his musical gig, whenever expects to receive payment, but just sincerely accepts what others give. (my own emphasis)

On the basis of the previous considerations, the expression narima/terima can be explicated into the following cultural transcript. Note that point (i) is to represent the socio-cultural evaluation of the value as something encouraged to be done all the time.

Narima/trima
(a) A person can think something like this:
   (b) God wants me to live in a certain way and not in any other way
   (c) I have to live in this way because of this
   (d) It is bad if I think something like this:
      (e) I don’t want this
      (f) I want something else
   (g) When something bad happens to a person, it is good if a person can think something like this.
   (h) This person will not feel something bad because of this. It is good if someone can think something like this all the time.
   (i) It is good if someone can think like this all the time.
Further, in order to be able to be narima/trima, one also needs to be sabar ‘patient’ and lila/rila “to truly let go” in ‘enduring’ his life. According to Geertz (1976: 241), the concept of sabar ‘patient’ refers to the absence of eagerness, impatience and passion.11 Rila/lila, on the other hand, is based on the view that everything belongs to God and everything that happens in life is His will. One should be lila/rila “to truly let go” when he/she loses something or someone or gives things to people. In this sense, the concept rila/lila is interchangeable with ikhlas, a borrowing from Arabic which means ‘sincere’ or ‘sincerity’. As everything happens according to God’s will, Javanese people also believe that none of them are part of his action or effort, and, hence, ikhlas (and likewise rila/lila) is a detachment from the material world (Geertz, 1976: 241, see also Mulder, 2005: 66). Here, rila/lila also includes one’s attitude towards ‘worldly’ life events and one’s causes. For instance, when I was really concerned because an influential person at my workplace said something not true about me, my mother said “Lila’na wae. Mung masalah kaya ngono... Ora sah dipikir mengko ndak lara ati” (‘Let it go. Just a little problem like that.... No need to worry about it – it will only make you feel hurt’). By saying “a little problem”, she did not mean to underestimate the effects of what the person had said about me, but simply because problems in life are not worth being too stressed about, as they are worldly temporary circumstances. The sense of detachment from the worldly is further confirmed by Hadiwijono (1983: 132) on the significance of rila/lila:

\[Rila\ [...] \textit{adalah kesediaan untuk berkorban dan menyangkal diri. Barangsiapa yang [rila] ia tidak dibelenggu oleh apa pun yang fana, yang berubah. Sebab ia sadar, bahwa segala sesuatu berada di tangan Sukma Kawekas. Ia dapat kehilangan segala sesuatu tanpa prihatin.} [Rila] \textit{ialah tindakan ego yang menjauhkan diri dari segala sesuatu yang fana [...].} \]

(To be rila [...] is to be willing to sacrifice and deny oneself. Whoever is [rila] is not bound to anything worldly, anything temporary (lit. which can change). Because he realizes that everything is in the hands of God. He can lose anything without feeling sad. \textit{Rila} is the action of an ego who distances himself from anything worldly [...]. (my own translation).

\[11\text{For the explication of sabar, please see Goddard’s (2001) explication of the concept of \textit{sabar} in Malay culture, which seems to have the same meaning in Javanese.}\]
On the basis of all the above aspects, I could explicate *rilalila* into the cultural transcript below. Note that point (f) represents its status as a positive value which is encouraged among the traditional Javanese. As we can see later, this point will also be included in other virtues set out in this paper.

*Lila/rila*

(a) A person can think something like this when someone loses someone/something, gives something to people, or something bad happens to this person:
(b) All things belong to God and all things happen because God wants them to happen.
(c) This thing/what just happened to me is also not important after I die.
(d) Because of this, it is good if I do not feel bad at all because I do not have this thing any more/because this just happened to me.
(e) If I feel bad because I do not have this thing any more/this happened to me, it is good if I do not think about it any more so I will not feel bad any more.
(f) It is good if a person thinks like this every time this kind of thing happens/one gives something to people.

Geertz points out that the combined values of *ikhlas* (hence *rilalila*), *sabar* and *narima/trima* are central in order to avoid potential disharmony (1976: 240-1). These three values can lead one to ‘emotional equamity, a certain flatness of affect’ (p. 240). These values work in two ways – inwardly they are an action to control one’s emotions, while outwardly they act as a defence (p. 241). For example, when someone is mistreated by a neighbour, the concept of *narima/trima* and *rilalila* would help the person to calm down, protect him/her from feeling frustrated or sad and from more troubles (e.g. worsened conflict with the neighbour) by pursuing his case further.

**Values related to ‘awareness’**

In order to arrive at the value of *narima/trima*, a sense of ‘awareness’ is crucial. In the first place one needs to *rumangsa* “be aware of/realize” his *titah* ‘destiny’, which includes his or her given place in the community. Those at the lower level of the hierarchy are expected to respect those in a higher position and be subservient to them. The latter, on the other hand, must also realize that their power and position actually belong to God, and therefore they must be humble and strive
not to misuse them. A good person is expected to be able to be aware of himself/herself (bisa rumangsa), and this also reflects humility, rather than to be aware of his abilities (rumangsa bisa), which reflects pride (Suratmin et al., 1991: 24).

Self-awareness is indeed central in Javanese traditional culture, as evidenced by the frequent use of words such as eling ‘mindful’, waspada ‘on one’s guard/alert/vigilant’ and sometimes sadhar ‘conscious/aware’, which is a borrowing from Arabic and often used interchangeably with eling.\(^\text{12}\) Quinn summarizes these three expressions as ‘to keep alert and keep one’s guard up’ (1992: 115). This summary, however, does not clearly reflect the meaning of eling as an awareness of the self. In this case, being eling means that one is mindful of one’s own self, especially in relation to one’s titah ‘destiny’ and God, which entails a large number of moral responsibilities. This significance is clearly reflected in the following excerpt in a blog about people’s lust for power at the blogger’s work place (Alger, 2009):

Deloken kae wayah gentian posisi ndek kantor, wong bareng padha kasak-kusuk golek gantholan, golek jabatan, golek cedhak karo wong neng duwur pamrihe ya kaduman jabatan. Wis cukup tho nek ngono kuwi, iso dijongko bareng nyekel jabatan sing diarep-arep ora nganti seminggu pingin sing luwih duwur.

Wong urip ki mbok eling lan waspada [...].

Look at what’s happening with the position reshuffles at the office. Everyone is going around secretly trying to gain influence, looking for alliances, looking for positions, [and] approaching heavy-hitters to make sure they’ll get a position. That is enough for one to know they’ll want a higher position not even a week after they get what they want now.

Why can’t you people be eling and waspada in living your life [...].

There is a well-known saying about eling which comes from the highly regarded, legendary, poet, Ranggawarsita (1802-1873): Begja-begjane kang lali, isih begja kang eling lan waspada, which literally means, ‘However lucky those who forget may be, those who are eling and waspada are (actually) luckier’. Quinn (1992: 115) has translated it more idiomatically as, ‘However happy those who are lulled into forgetfulness may be, it is always better to be alert and vigilant’. We shall only explicate eling and waspada, as these concepts are more specific to the traditional

\(^{12}\)The expressions eling, waspada and sadhar are also used in their first day to day sense, i.e. ‘remember’, ‘on one’s guard’, and ‘conscious’. 
Javanese rather than Arabic-origin sadhar ‘conscious/aware’. The concept eling, ‘mindful’, may be represented in the following cultural transcript. Point (g) reflects the positive socio-cultural evaluation of eling as a value:

\[
\begin{align*}
eling \\
(a) & \text{A person can think something like this:} \\
(b) & \text{God wants me to live in a certain way} \\
(c) & \text{I have to live in this way because of this} \\
(d) & \text{It is good to live in this way} \\
(e) & \text{If a person can do this all the time, this person will not want something else} \\
(f) & \text{This person will not do something bad because of this} \\
(g) & \text{It is good if a person thinks like this all the time}
\end{align*}
\]

The expression waspada, on the other hand, can be explicated as follows. Note that, unlike eling, it presupposes a continued action with some duration, which is reflected in the phrase ‘all the time for some time’ by point (a).

\[
\begin{align*}
waspada \\
(a) & \text{A person can think like this all the time for some time:} \\
(b) & \text{Things happen.} \\
(c) & \text{Something can happen to me and because of this I can think like this:} \\
(d) & \text{I don’t want to live like God wants me to live.} \\
(e) & \text{I want something else.} \\
(f) & \text{I can do something bad because of this.} \\
(g) & \text{I don’t want this to happen.} \\
(h) & \text{I have to think this all the time so this won’t happen.} \\
(i) & \text{It is good if a person can think like this all the time}
\end{align*}
\]

The Javanese World: Alus and kasar

Javanese people believe that the world consists of the phenomenal kasar and the essential halus/alus (Mulder, 1980: 15-8). To become a moral and enlightened (adiluhung) person, one should move away from the material and phenomenal to one’s essential capacities by training one’s rasa (lit. ‘feeling’), which refers to one’s ‘intuitive inner feelings’. For the traditional Javanese, therefore, rasa knowledge is superior to rational understanding.

From the above phenomenal-essential notion, the concept of alus and kasar is further elaborated into the distinction between ‘refined’ and ‘unrefined’ qualities (see Errington, 1988: 249). Gestures, facial expressions, body postures, intonation and loudness of speech indicate what is happening inside a person. Hence, a good Javanese has to be alus ‘gentle’ in doing things, for instance, never banging the door or not making noises when eating. To be alus, a person also cannot show strong
feelings, such as wailing when a beloved person dies, or showing excitement over getting a rare opportunity. Such traits are seen to only belong to children, peasants and working people. Consequently, one needs to be able to control one’s emotions by being sabar ‘patient’. In this sense, as Geertz (1976: 239-40) rightly points out, alus is a manifestation of ‘flatness of affect’:

The spiritually enlightened man guards his psychological equilibrium well and makes a constant effort to maintain its placid stability. His proximate aim is emotional quiescence, for passion is kasar feeling, fit only for children, animals, peasants, and foreigners. His ultimate aim, which this quiescence makes possible, is gnosis, the direct comprehension of the ultimate rasa. To feel all is to understand all. Paradoxically, it is also to feel nothing [...]. Emotional equanimity, a certain flatness of affect, is, then, the prized psychological state, the mark of a truly alus [refined] character.

We can see an example of how a Javanese may be alus from the following extract of a short story, in which Mudjinah is devastated by her father’s plan to get her married to a man she does not love. One day, however, Abas, comes in disguise to rescue her. She recognizes him and feels happy, but she can quickly conceal her feeling so that no one could see that something is happening. This quality is called being alus ‘refined’.

Sareng dumugi in pandapi manahipun geter sanget, djalaran sumerep Abas wonten ingriku. Nanging sarehning Mudjinah wau lare estri ingkang alus bebudenipun, getering manah kenging dipun sajuti, satemah boten angatawisí. (Suwignjo, 1958; 85) – my own emphasis)
(As soon as they got to the reception hall, her heart trembled from seeing Abas there. However, as Mudjinah was an alus-hearted girl, she was able to conceal the pounding of her heart so that it was not obvious – my own translation)

A trained rasa ‘feeling/intuition’ will also help an alus person to empathize with and understand what others feel and think, although they may not express it. Some expressions that reflect this cultural aspect are pangerten ‘understanding’, tanggap’ able to read signs’ and tepa salira ‘being sensitive to others’ feelings and acting accordingly’. In a culture in which people do not openly express their thoughts and feelings, these social skills are highly valued and are crucial to maintaining harmony. Being tanggap’ able to read signs’ is very useful in communication, as a Javanese is very ‘indirect’. An example of this is offering a neighbour some guavas when he says ‘What nice guavas!’ when seeing you picking guavas from a tree in front of your house. An example of tepa salira, on the other hand, is offering to help your sister
out with house chores when you are staying at her place, as she may have less time
but more work because of your presence. From its etymology, the expression tepa salira comes from tepa ‘measurement’ and salira, ‘body’ – which means that the
‘measurement’ for the sensitivity and actions is your own ‘body’ or self.

On the basis of the previous consideration, I would suggest the general
explication of an alus quality of a person as follows:

Alus (of a person)
(a) It is good if people do not know what a person feels/thinks/wants
(b) Because of this, if a person feels/thinks/wants X, it is good if this person does not
do something like saying X or doing something else so people know this person
feels/thinks/wants X
(c) Other people cannot know that this person feels/thinks/wants X because of this
(d) Because of this, it is good if the person can think like this at the same time\textsuperscript{13}:
   (e) I know if a person feels/thinks/wants something, this person doesn’t have to
       say it; This person can say something else.
   (f) I think I can know what this person thinks/feels/wants if I do something.
   (g) I can think about what I would feel/think/want if I were the person or ask if
       this person wants X.
   (h) I can do something good for this person because of this.
(i) It is good if a person can do something like this all the time.

Ethok-ethok: The Javanese dissimulation trick

Ethok-ethok refers to ‘pretending’, giving the appearance of or acting the part.
This word may function as a noun, adjective (to indicate a state) or verb. For
instance, in a movie or play, people only ethok-ethok because they are just acting
things out. Within the Javanese ‘indirect’ communication system, ethok-ethok has a
more specific meaning, i.e. ‘pretense’ or ‘dissimulation’, and is commonly employed
to hide one’s desires, thoughts or motives for the sake of politeness and to discover
about other people’s communicative motives. For instance, when the neighbor
comments on your guavas, you may ethok-ethok, offering some of them out of
politeness.\textsuperscript{14} If the neighbor happens to want some, he would also ethok-ethok by
saying no. If you do not repeat your offer and insist that he should have the guavas,
the neighbor would normally understand that you are not really serious with your

\textsuperscript{13}The expression ‘at the same time’ is used to refer to ‘also’.
\textsuperscript{14}A short cordial answer such as ‘Yes, they (the guavas) are (big)’ and a quick switch to another topic,
for instance a greeting, would also be very appropriate.
offer and have just made it out of politeness. With this strategy, no one would lose face, for either not offering or feeling rejected. *Ethok-ethok*, as suggested by Geertz (1976: 246-7), is indeed pervasive in traditional Javanese culture:

... *one must call out to any passerby* one knows inviting him to stop in, even though he may be the last person on earth you wish to see. *One must refuse* food (unless the host persists in offering it) even if one is dying of *hunger* ... One should never *refuse* outright people’s requests to do something for them ...

*Ethok-ethok* is very common among the Javanese to maintain unity and save face. If someone feels, thinks, knows, does or has something, but feels this may disrupt harmony, he would normally try to hide it by *ethok-ethok*. For instance, when Ani is with a group of neighbours who are complaining somewhat about not being able to manage to save, one might say ‘*Yen Jeng Ani ngoten gampil mawon yen ajeng nyisihke, nggih?* ‘But it would be easy for Jeng-Ani to set aside (money), wouldn’t it?’: While perhaps this is the case for Ani, she might say instead that she struggles, too. Not responding to the remark would give the impression that it was true, and this might make the neighbors feel that A is more fortunate. Thus, *ethok-ethok* seems to be a good strategy in this situation. Here she has shown her empathy and also solidarity for not positioning herself higher than the rest of the group. One could also *ethok-ethok* non-verbally. For instance, I might *ethok-ethok* not having just accidentally seen someone showing affection to his girlfriend. I could *ethok-ethok* ‘pretend’ I was looking in a different direction. This would help the couple not to feel embarrassed, since, for the traditional Javanese, showing affection to a partner should not be displayed in front of other people. One could also *ethok-ethok* in the following situation:

For example, you are working. Then I come to visit. ... I come and call out at the door. Then you act as though you were not working, not doing anything.’Ethok-éthok you are not working. (Geertz, 1976: 246)

Geertz (1976: 246) suggests that such *ethok-ethok* is to hide ‘one’s own wishes in deference to one’s opposite’. However, it is important to add here that an *alus* Javanese would employ such *ethok-ethok* because he (A) does not want the person who just comes (B) to feel reluctant to visit, thinking that A is busy. This is because his relationship with people, especially his friends, relatives and elders, is
more important than his own interests. When my mother and I visit our relatives in the village (without any appointment), for instance, my uncle would leave whatever he is doing at once to meet us. Although perhaps it is important for him to fix his motorcycle, for instance, he would say he could always do it later, wash his hands and would happily sit and chat with us.

It is important to note that while ethok-ethok is normally used to preserve social harmony, one might also ‘abuse’ it for one’s own interest. For example, someone, say Parman, might ethok-ethok that he did not know that people were gathering at a neighbour’s place to help repair this neighbour’s house, so that he (Parman) could just stay at home relaxing. Another example of the misuse of ethok-ethok can be seen in an illustration by Geertz’ informant:

He said: Suppose I go off south and you see me go. Later my son asks you: ‘Do you know where my father went?’ And you say no, étok-étok you don’t know. I asked him why should I étok-étok, as there seemed to be no reason for lying, and he said, ‘Oh, you just étok-étok. You don’t have to have a reason.’ (Geertz, 1976: 246).

The person in the illustration uses ethok-ethok without any reason and can mislead his son. Such ethok-ethok is considered goroh/ngapusi ‘lying’, which is very much discouraged in the Javanese culture. With this possible misuse of ethok-ethok, it seems neccessary to include its proper function in the transcription of the pragmatic strategy, which is represented by point (f):

ethok-ethok
(a) I think/feel/know/do/haveX
(b) I don’t want people to know this
(c) I can do something so people will not know that I think/feel/know/have/do X
(d) I can say something else than X to do this
(e) It is good to do something like this if:
(f) People do not have to know that I think/feel/know/do/have X and they might feel bad if they know this.

The above transcript is far more representative of the ethok-ethok concept than the one attempted by Wierzbicka (1991: 100), which is based on very limited information:

(a) I don’t want to say what I think/know
(b) I don’t have to say this
(c) I can say something else
Referring to ‘pretense’ and ‘dissimulation’ as explained in my transcription, *ethok-ethok* is often used lightheartedly (G. Quinn, personal communication, 20 May 2013), often to show humility or to maintain a low profile. One good example suggested by Quinn is when one compliments a friend for his cleverness, “Kowe kok pinter banget” (‘How smart you are’) and this friend responds to it by saying “Mung ethok-ethok kok. Jane bodho banget” (‘Just *ethok-ethok*-pretending [to be smart]. [I’m] actually very stupid!’)

Further, traditional Javanese are very well aware of the frequent practice of *ethok-ethok* in their social interaction. Therefore, they often question the truthfulness of what people say to them by asking *tenane/saestunipun* (‘Is it really true?’) or *Kuwi tenan apa ethok-ethok? ’Is it something true or just *ethok-ethok*?’* To convince people that they have been truthful they would also say that what they have said is *tenan/saestu*’true’. For instance, in offering guavas to a neighbour, one could say ‘Mangga njenengan mendhet jambune. Saestu.’ (‘Please, take some of the guavas. I’m serious’).

**Conclusion**

At this stage we can see how the belief in God has become a core source of values among the traditional Javanese people and how they are further developed into their daily norms of conduct. Believing that the central spiritual has designed the people’s cosmos in a particular balance, which sould be maintained to create peace, a harmonious relationship with other people and their surrounding environment is crucial. This quest for harmony is manifested in their manner of social interaction, which put great emphasis on awareness of oneself and his/her place in the society in relation to God, and sensitivity and empathy towards each other. This study, however, is only a preliminary attempt. Further research is necessary to see if any meaning component has been left out in my cultural transcripts and to examine other values not explained here. Apart from this, I believe this paper seems to suffice to explain that what many Javanese do to maintain ‘harmony’ is not meant to be something ‘hypocritical.’ This is not to say that Javanese cannot be *lamis* ‘not sincere’ – anyone can. However, at least it is apparent here that the English term

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15Traditional Javanese people also use this strategy to find out if someone has lied (*goroh/ngapusi*), using the expression as a euphemism. The purpose is to avoid making any offense, which is important to preserve harmony.
'hypocritical’ – if it can be applied to traditional Javanese values – would be something very much discouraged. They are very much aware that ‘harmony’ is not just something lair, ‘physical/superficial’.

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