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## *Jathilan*: Trance and Possession in Java

Robert Lemelson, dir. 27 min. Elemental Productions. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 2011.

Christian S. Hammons

University of Southern California

With the release of *Jathilan: Trance and Possession in Java*, Robert Lemelson and Elemental Productions add another superb film to their rapidly growing catalog of documentary films about cultural politics and psychology in Java and Bali, Indonesia. The catalog currently consists of 11 films, but more are surely on the way. *Jathilan* explores the cultural, political, and psychological significance of a Javanese possession ceremony by the same name, which refers to the movements of the horses the participants are said to ride as they enter trance (see Figure 6). Possessed by spirits, the participants are able to perform extraordinary feats—eating burning incense, broken glass, and live chickens and submitting to scalding irons and the weight of a moving motorcycle. The film offers numerous analytical perspectives on the ceremony, showing how its significance has changed as the political context in which it is performed has changed yet also showing the cultural continuity it provides for the participants, who remark more than once that the purpose of the ceremony is “to preserve our culture and heritage.”

The film follows the process of a *jathilan* ceremony in Yogyakarta, Java, incorporating the commentary of participants, observers, and an Indonesian anthropologist as

the ceremony unfolds. A loudspeaker announces that “the authentic *jathilan*” is about to begin. Observers gather along the perimeter of the dusty courtyard where the ceremony will take place. Participants, traditionally men, dress as warriors and apply makeup to their faces (see Figure 7). The stage and props—the horses that the dancers will ride, the masks they will wear, the offerings that will be made—are blessed with incense by a priest, who asks for the protection of various spirits, including those of the dead. The anthropologist explains that, in the past the ceremony initiated young boys into manhood. Then the warriors begin to dance in unison, riding their horses in fluid movements that quickly become “harsh and expressive,” in sharp contrast, one observer explains, to the “refined and organized” dances of the court (*kraton*). “I see that as a form of resistance from the people,” he says, “a resistance against the artistic forms of the Royal Court.” The story recreates a battle in the forest between human-devouring spirits and the soldiers of two princes, Bancak and Doyok. Historically, it is connected to the collapse of an early Mataram kingdom.

Following the bloody coup that brought Suharto to power in 1965–66, throughout Indonesia, but especially in Java, traditional performances that once maintained a space for resistance were made “safe” and put on display, demonstrating the sterile “unity in diversity” of the New Order (see Pemberton 1994). In the case of the *jathilan* ceremony,



FIGURE 6. The dancers ride horses as they go into trance. (Photo courtesy of Elemental Productions)



FIGURE 7. The dancers are made up as warriors. (Photo courtesy of Elemental Productions)

the film explains, performers were forced to wear yellow, the color of Suharto's political party, and were forbidden from entering trance. In the post-Suharto era, rather than returning to "tradition," the jathilan ceremony has diversified in form. Women and other groups that were previously excluded (such as patients from a local mental hospital) may now participate. Young boys ride the trance-inducing horses not into manhood but in order to reduce juvenile delinquency.

Suharto understood the danger of possession ceremonies: they are marked by an excess that threatens to undermine the order that contains them. Catherine Russell has argued that the filming of possession ceremonies must confront the same problem: "The actual experience of possession remains outside the limits of visual knowledge and constitutes a subtle form of ethnographic resistance: films of possession cannot, in the end, represent the 'other reality' of the other's subjectivity" (1999:194). *Jathilan* does indeed struggle with this issue, especially in the second half of the film, when it turns to questions of experience and credulity. It briefly explores the "monotone" gamelan music and other techniques that participants believe are essential to entering trance. It asserts that observers are generally not sure what to make of the performance. It cites several of the participants, who claim that they do not remember the performance and do not understand its "magic" or "power." The film shows these same participants eating burning incense, broken glass, and a live chicken and submitting to the irons and the motorcycle without being injured. They say they are able to do this because "they believe." Other participants admit to pretending and to never truly entering

trance. The anthropologist, wanting to be a participant-observer, confesses that he began to enter trance but quit dancing because he did not want to "crack coconuts" with his teeth. The audience, the film suggests, now sees the ceremony as entertainment or "trickery" or maybe "real trance." The participants thank the audience for coming, gamelan is replaced by pop music, and all involved—participants, observers, experts, and now viewers—are left wondering how the jathilan ceremony should be remembered, how it relates to the rest of their lives, and whether it is anything more than a peculiar pastime.

If for no other reason, *Jathilan* is remarkable for showing so many facets of a complicated possession ceremony in only 27 minutes. The film barely touches on the cultural politics of possession ceremonies in Indonesia, and from an ethnographic perspective, the participants' lives only exist on the ceremonial stage, but if either of these issues had been addressed, the film would have been twice as long. As it stands, the film is ideally suited for classroom use and will easily provoke discussion. It should also be viewed in the context of Lemelson's other films, which together constitute a substantial body of work, consistent in its approach, themes, production values, and commitment to the people of Indonesia.

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## *Bunong Guu Oh: Bunong's Birth Practices between Tradition and Change*

Tommi Mendel, dir., with Brigitte Nikles, anthropologist. 50 min. Tigertoda Productions. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 2010.

**Barbara Johnson**  
*Independent Filmmaker*

*Bunong Guu Oh: Bunong's Birth Practices between Tradition and Change* was filmed in 2008–09 by Swiss filmmaker Tommi Mendel, based on a social anthropological case study by Brigitte Nikles. The film opens with a lone tree in bright sun as we hear a Bunong legend about the time before there was midwifery, when the population did not grow. The tree comes into clear focus as we hear how the great love of one ancestor for his wife led human beings to discover the secrets credited with populating the world.

The text explains that the Bunong are an indigenous people who make up more than half of the population of Mondulhiri Province in the northeastern highlands of Cambodia. They live at the intersection of their animist traditions and changes in industrial and settlement patterns that have accelerated in the last decade.

The sun-drenched landscape turns to a dark interior where the storyteller, a central figure in the film, speaks confidently about the origin of midwifery while a man sitting just behind her is engrossed in lighting and smoking a large hand-rolled cigarette. Sound and images introduce human, natural, and supernatural elements of the Bunong world in