

### **The root and the flower**

How and where does evil emerge? Under what conditions is it recognized? When is it named? When denied? Questions about evil revolve around origins: false starts, botched creations, damaged childhoods, mutations and, archetypally for some of us, original sin. *Man's first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world*: so Milton had it. But the birth of evil is not just a Puritan hang-up. Everywhere, the How and the Where questions quickly revert to a nagging Why, as if only a first cause - or a final cause - could resolve the mystery. So the scrutiny of conscience or crime leads inevitably back to some prior condition which will make sense of the whole. The root of all evil.

That urge to understand is the driver. For as Weber insisted, the problem of evil is ultimately a problem of meaning. You can't deal with it until you understand its origin and *raison d'être*. It's also a problem of attribution. Is evil 'in the nature of things', part of the System, as Manicheans, conspiracy theorists, and Christian apologists propose? Without evil, no good, no choice, no freedom, no redemption, no material world. Hence Augustine's doctrine of *felix culpa*, the Fortunate Fall. Or is evil a stain to be expunged forever from human nature and society, as assorted Utopians would have it? Do we have only ourselves to blame? Made bad, can we be re-made good?

Philosophers, bishops, and political thinkers tend to come at these big questions from first principles. What was in God's mind when he created the serpent? Could he have done better? Could he have created a being who always

freely chose the good? Or, in a secular frame, how can a diversity of competing interests be accommodated in a just social system, the evils of oppression avoided, and a better kind of citizen created?

To the anthropologist, first principles are always question-begging in that they lack the context that would give precise meaning to the terms. Without knowing what counts locally as evil, without knowing what makes up a person or a good life, we can't bring into focus the bigger picture. We begin, necessarily, with the local. Yet even in the smallest, remotest communities, in the midst of individual suffering it's the big questions that loom, generalities answering to particulars. That confrontation of scales – microcosm and macrocosm – is part of what makes the problem of evil so compelling. The fascination is in the working out of Last Things in the small print of everyday life.

In this chapter, I want to look at how the problem of evil, locally conceived, is reconfigured under the pressure of conversion and the incorporation of small-scale societies into the modern state. On this broader stage, how does evil change shape and meaning? How is the primordial updated? Where now is the serpent?

### **Java and Nias: locating evil**

To explore these questions, I consider two Indonesian societies: one tribal, mostly non-literate, the other a settled agrarian civilization. To put a name to them: Nias, a heavily forested island, nominally Christian, in the Indian Ocean; and Java, a chain of volcanoes, cities, and crowded plains, mainly Muslim with a deep heritage of Hinduism, syncretic mysticism, and a pantheon Allah shares with the ancestors, sprites and monsters. In neither setting is there a simple translation of the English word 'evil', or even of 'bad'. The Niha for bad is *lö sökhi*,

'not good'.<sup>1</sup> There's no separate term for evil. In the Niha Bible, when God says, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner,' he uses the same formula as when he tells Adam, 'of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and *Not Good* thou shall not eat'.

In Javanese, *apik* means good, nice, attractive, while its antonym *elek* means bad, nasty, evil, and ugly, the moral and aesthetic overlapping. Again, no specific evil word. But let's not forget that *our* word has a number of meanings, ranging from a generally deplored condition, as in 'the evil of poverty', to what theologians call 'natural evil' – earthquakes and epidemics - to the moral evil exemplified in certain crimes held to be against the order of things and which place miscreants beyond the pale of normal humanity. In many, perhaps most, societies, there are distinctions more or less of this kind, with different sorts of diagnosis and remedy - legal, ritual and therapeutic - even if they aren't named or get lumped together, as in our word evil. The greater variation is found in the *locating* of evil, whether in persons, moral careers, systems gone awry, the spirit world or some grander cosmic scheme. Is evil *out there* or *in here*? One of my themes will be that what makes evil a problem is its ambiguous locality, its slipperiness and unboundedness, above all, its sticky attachment to the self. Unlike the merely bad, wrong, or dangerous, evil is often represented and experienced as chaotic, gratuitous, off the scale, irreducible to human schemes. Hence Yahweh's taunt to Job: *Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook?* Indeed, one reason evil fascinates is because it is incalculable, escaping the neat formulation of moral codes and mechanical explanations. 'Lack of a word for it' might be said to illustrate the elusiveness of evil rather than, as some prefer, pointing to its cultural relativity.

## **The headhunter, a necessary evil**

In both Nias and Java, nonetheless, evil has an epitome, a figure that stands for death as much as evil. In Java, it's the spirit ogre Bathara Kala, the misbegotten son of Bathara Guru (Shiva) and Durga. In Nias, where I shall begin, the new religion provided a readymade villain in Satan, but the Evil One - or the Not Good One - never really caught on. The Bible translator had assigned a mischievous spirit named Afökha to the role of fallen angel, but in two years filled with mischief, not to say evil, I rarely heard the Prince of Darkness namechecked. No, in Nias, the repository of fear and horror, the thing you most dreaded, was the headhunter, *emali*. (In Niasan, to 'scream in terror', *fa'emali*, means 'to shout *headhunter*'.) In whatever era - from pre-colonial to the present - the headhunter was an everpresent danger, real or imaginary. But - and this is where the problem begins - raiding and headhunting were authorized by the ancestors. If you wanted to win glory as a warrior, reinforce a house, or give a dead chief a proper send-off you needed a skull (Fries 1908). Killing was hideous, to be sure, but good things came from bad. Headhunting was a necessary evil. What excused it in the old morality was the fact that, in the generalised exchange of predation, harm to others was matched by risk to yourself; for the raiders, though instruments of terror, were themselves potential victims, as were their families. This is the crucial point, psychologically, ethically, and - as we shall see - historically. The menacing outsider was a version of yourself; so to take a head, you had first to *become other*, shedding your humanity. Before setting out, raiders would lap blood from a pig's trough, then gird themselves with crocodile-hide and tusked helmets. Once in character, they were free from scruple. They were cruel, as a tiger is cruel, but blameless - neither malevolent nor morally at

fault. Which is why ritual indemnity, a licence to kill, applied whether the victim was an armed opponent or an innocent child alone in the fields. The mode of action (not to overtheorize it as 'ethical stance') wasn't defined by the pendulum swing of feuding, with honour robbed and recovered: honour had little to do with it. Between killing and revenge (*sulö*, 'repayment') was a blind spot, a conceptual gap through which men ran like beasts: so, at least, they remembered it many years later (Beatty 2015).

The blind spot contained a paradox. Headhunters were the supreme outsiders, the bogeymen; but that faceless terror was also yourself. So what did you see in the mirror? Decent citizen and family man or cold-blooded killer? We can point to the tricks of evasion: ritual separation, symbolic metamorphosis, the uniform of death. But the puzzle remains, as it does with any official denial of inhumanity, whether fog-of-war euphemism or bureaucratic fudge. It's less the images of the demonic that perplex than those of the demon off duty: the camp commandant enjoying Beethoven after work, the torturer playing with his children, the tyrant at prayer. How can someone be both human and inhuman? Psychologically, by projection and categorical inversion of the opposing self; sociologically, by whatever cultural and social apparatus makes this possible. In the run-up to the Spanish Civil War, warming up for later horrors, Franco used the brutal Foreign Legion to put down an insurrection in Asturias, arguing that the left-wing workers - fellow Spaniards - were barbarians like the Moroccans he had spent years terrorising (Preston 2000: 16). Acts of cleansing savagery were noble and necessary. During the Civil War, the priests blessed his cannons.

We demonize others, but it's ourselves we have to live with; and for that there are always ways and means. Moral duplicity - distinct from mere hypocrisy

- often rests on a duplex morality; hence the conventional markers of ethnic slurs, separation walls, inter-caste rules, stigma. The Nias case, as we shall see, required a splitting of the self, not just a change of uniform or shuffling of roles. It complicates the perennial conundrum of human iniquity, reminding us that - however easy ideology makes it - *psychologically*, denial is difficult because humans are singular, if morally double. I cannot pretend to solve this 'enigma of enigmas', to use a phrase of Ricoeur (1967) in his book on evil. What I *can* do is offer some insight into what it takes to recognize in the other your demonic double; to say, as Prospero says of Caliban at the end of *The Tempest*, 'this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'. I can do this because, exactly a century ago, something of the kind happened, quite suddenly, in Nias when a Protestant conversion movement known as the Great Repentance swept the island. It started in a village close to the dingy port of Gunung Sitoli, where the Rhinish missionaries had toiled for half a century without success. By 1915 they had won only a few hundred converts, poor families whose faith was bartered for pennies and medicines sent by parishes back home in the Rhineland. The German missionaries, and especially the Dutch administrators, were quite cynical about these converts, seeing them as spiritual benefit scroungers. But they were soon to get a shock.<sup>2</sup>

Dutch conquest of the East Indies' Outer Islands had come three hundred years after first landfall in Java. Under the Cultivation System, Java had become the most profitable colony in the world. But Nias was too remote and too poor to be of interest to the colonial capital. At the time of conquest in 1906, the only thriving export was slaves, traded with north Sumatra. Gold was needed for bridewealth and feasts of merit, and the quickest way to get it was by selling

captives. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, lust for gold caused a spike in raiding that led to the depopulation of large tracts of the south and to the militarisation of bordering areas. Villages were fortified with palisades and booby-trapped trenches; sentries guarded the approaches. Fear of the headhunters was compounded by fear of slavers. But the enemy was also within. As late as the 1980s, old men still recounted stories of betrayal carried out by their younger selves, half-boasting, half-lamenting that they 'ate' their relatives for gold.

The slave trade fed the system of competitive exchange and the prestige economy, though in spirit it was the exact opposite, flouting the rule of good measure, the precise calibration of debts and merit, and the balancing of the books over a lifetime that would allow a feastgiver to die peacefully and pass to the ancestral Valhalla (Beatty 1992). In the moral calculus, taking what did not belong to you was the cardinal sin. To gain something for nothing, to steal, even to profit, was to offend the ancestors and risk the afterlife. Gold, the prize, came to embody a contradiction between the rule of equity in internal exchange and the rapacity of the external market. The most desirable commodity was tarnished. Luckily, there were detox rituals to transfer guilt to a scapegoat, a slave who was beheaded, clad in the owner's filthy gold.

The ambivalence that gold excited can be read in a myth, still told, of a sow that ate humans and excreted gold. In the nineteenth century, the whole island became something of a golden sow, devouring humans and churning out wealth. In the twentieth century the pig passed to the Dutch, which explains both *their* riches and the poverty of Nias. It's an apt metaphor for exploitation, a scatological symbol of avidity and disgust, perhaps self-disgust, but also a

peculiarly Niasan example of wishful thinking. For the golden sow is a forbidden fantasy of something for nothing, wealth without origin.

Such was the moral framework on the eve of conquest.

### **The discovery of evil**

Conversion unfolded a series of paradoxes: a heavenly something for an earthly nothing, a deal with the divine 'costing not less than everything', a Fortunate Fall waiting to happen. It was the world turned upside down, a new way of thinking for the New People, as converts were called. Yet tradition had paved the way in the nexus of exchange and in concepts of wickedness, redemption and salvation. Long before the Bible came, changing everything and nothing, Niha already knew damnation and resurrection (*femaoso*, the ritual 'raising' of a dead chief). Two generations after the Repentance, watching the chief of Orahua review his feasting history from his deathbed, it was hard to see where the old ended and the new began. 'Away with your damned hallelujahs!' he yelled at the priest, while his followers rose to air their grievances, clearing his path for transition. But where was he headed?

Cosmological ambiguity was there from the outset. The missionaries had seized on cultural parallels to leaven scriptural translations with local concepts, sometimes reinforcing, mostly inverting the old values. Honouring thy father and mother, a basic tenet of life in Nias, turned out to have its origin in the Bible: it was headlined as a commandment. Yet, perplexingly, the wooden ancestor figures that filled Niha houses were damned as idols. Rules against short-measuring and adultery - standard Niha themes - turned out, like a host of other dos and don'ts, to have a more specific source than Ancestors Anonymous. In the



missionaries' hands, everything was foreseen and scripted, yet bathed in a different light. This could be reassuring but mostly it was unsettling, like discovering someone you thought you knew was really someone else - an analogy that could apply to the whole conversion process. The force of prohibition and the doublethink of translation effected an othering, or doubling, of the self. In becoming a new person, you discovered you were – or harboured within yourself – someone else, and that someone else was evil.

Translation pre-empted the present by rewriting the past. The German missionaries' simple task had been to find local equivalents, a Niha word for *heilig* or *Himmel*. But for the target audience - the translated - the effect was more complicated: a known word with a solid reliable meaning suddenly shifts ground or acquires a double meaning, only one of which is authorised. *So'aya*, 'one who uses spells' (a sorcerer), becomes 'the Lord'. *Horö*, 'war', 'enmity', 'crime', becomes 'sin'. Sometimes the old sense persists awkwardly alongside the new. Your affines, traditionally called 'Those who own us' (*Sokhö ya'ita*), now have to share this epithet with God. Elderly men and women who scrutinise entrails and set bones are upgraded to Hebrew prophets (*sama'ele'ö*). The word for taboo, *moni*, does for 'holy'. The Holy Bible, in turn, is called the Tabooed Scripture. But the old use of *moni* is forbidden, if not forgotten. Taboos are tabooed. By repetition of the new meanings the world known to ritual and accessible through ritual is hollowed out; commerce with the dead becomes impossible. But that unnameable, invisible realm, the source of blessing and curse, is still there, replenishing or withering crops, exerting an influence for good or ill, but no longer manipulable or knowable. The whole relation to knowledge is inverted. In the Garden of Eden, evil was a *product* of knowledge,

the fruit of that forbidden tree. Ignorance was bliss. For Niha, the discovery of evil required them, perversely, to unlearn what they had known, the world of the ancestors, sacrifice and raiding. Almost everything in the past was forbidden. It had become literally unspeakable.

This was translation as linguistic estrangement, obliging people to *unknow*, or know in a different way, what they had known before. In the Niha Bible, native concepts, personages, even local history found a role, at once familiar and strange. In the retrofitted cosmos, the spiritual lustre craved by chiefs became the radiance of God. The struggles between heathens and Hebrews prophesied the conversions and defections of contemporary Nias. Egyptian plagues recurred in the epidemics that ravaged the island after the First World War. What should have been a bad fit – a desert creed for a forest people – turned out to be startlingly apt.

Yet the Bible was not yet the handbook for Niha converts it would become. It was not until the Dutch garrison had established control that the freighted words struck home; the message, as it were *rediscovered* as a version of their own past and present predicament. An overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* probably accounts for the converts' scriptural zeal. Naturally, the missionaries saw in it God's hand. Yet without the colonial cataclysm, the prophetic threats and promises would not have made sense. Biblical tales of sin, dispossession, and restoration now had a new experiential truth. The Book of Job was, and remains, a favourite, a primer on cosmic injustice. But at the time of the mass conversions the most popular story was 'Samson and Delilah', a tale of national defeat and sacrificial redemption. Apart from the strikingly relevant symbolism of magical hair (which recalled chiefly lustre), for Niha the story had a peculiar resonance, a sting. In

repudiating their own tradition, Niha converts had brought the temple crashing down on their heads. Triumph over the enemy was a kind of defeat.

### **The spectacle of evil**

So how did the Great Repentance begin? The trigger was a retreat held to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the mission. Missionary Rudersdorf, deploring the lack of conscience among his flock, demanded from them an extended period of reflection on their sinfulness, threatening 'expulsion from the Last Supper, should they not repent and change their lives' (Hummel & Telaumbanua 2007: 157). Excommunication meant exclusion from the religious community and refusal of the sacraments: a terrible penalty for converts who had broken with their pagan kin. It suggested the humiliating refusal of one's portion at feasts and implied social ostracism, the severest sanction short of execution. The threat worked. Converts flocked to Rudersdorf's classes. They read (or listened) and pondered their sins. Native evangelists carried the message to other districts.

Here's how one missionary remembers the events (Kriele 1927: 95-6).

The course taken by the revival was more or less the same everywhere. People were seized by terrors of conscience, suddenly feeling themselves inescapably confronted with the divine holiness. The sense of sin and guilt overwhelmed them with elemental force, and it seemed as though a sentence of annihilation were being passed on their whole life. As one of the missionaries wrote at the time, "The fear of God is passing over our island." They cried to God for forgiveness, but could not feel that this was enough. An irresistible force drove them to the missionaries. Crowds streamed to the mission house in a way our workers had never experienced. For weeks and months they were able to do little else but hear confessions all day ....Terrible revelations were made; matters which had taken place twenty or thirty years before were brought to light. Unsparingly, they stripped the masks from their faces, caring for nothing but to be free of the load which oppressed them. Many trembled all over and stood as if crushed before the missionary, who only needed now to direct them to the consolation of the Gospel, to the Cross of Christ.

'Annihilation' seems the right word. For conversion brought a rejection of all that it meant to be Niha, a word that encompassed both human and Niasan.

Venerable practices like sacrifice, ancestor worship, headhunting, and plunder - all that made for a good life - were abandoned along with the household gods, who were torn from their fixtures and burned on bonfires that lit up the hills.

Morally, this was year zero.

Orahua, in the centre of the island, experienced these events a full decade later, and then again, in successive decades, like a relapsing illness. Repentance was not self-limiting. The trouble was that you couldn't erase the past: the past was yourself. The headhunters had gone, but now the threat was within, its evulsion a collective horror. Whereas in the north the movement was driven by confession, a talking cure, in Orahua, penitence was mute. Converts created a theatre of cruelty, a spectacle of evil in which the *self* - not the other - was demonized. Before astonished congregations, reprobates re-enacted their 'crimes' in trance, establishing their innocence by acting out their guilt. But this wordless mime was not quite confession, not quite deliverance.

What protected them from revenge was the innocent automatism of the dumbshow, the sense that the compulsion came from outside. As spiritual contagion spread through the audience, witnesses felt compelled to join in, leaping onstage to rape, rob or kill, even seizing the original victim in pantomime violence. Here, truly, was a return of the repressed. Acting on buried impulses and memories, penitents claimed to know little of what had passed. And victims could only forgive them, embracing them in their tears. Yet because the catharsis was inarticulate, incomplete, the embers of memory weren't extinguished, and every few years symptoms would again break out. These revivals were always

wordless: each new phase named for its primary symptom. After the first Repentance came the Shivering, a few years later the Jumping, and then, most memorably, the Laughing, when whole congregations rocked with laughter as if at some endless cosmic joke. As Freud (2003) first noted in a famous essay, the uncanny is marked by compulsion and repetition. The techniques of salvation – laughing, jumping, shivering – were in each case repetitive and compulsive. A symptom that still occurs in revivals today - the beat goes on - is a rhythmic speaking in tongues. Niha called it the ‘new language’. What did it mean? A veteran of the last Repentance in the 1960s said to me, ‘We didn’t understand. It was like your language, it meant nothing. Only God understands.’ But *who* speaks or acts in these sessions? The ancestors, the Holy Spirit, the crowd, your former self? Does agency lie outside or in? Can you ventriloquise yourself? Is the new language, void of meaning, a figure for the silence of God?

In the Repentance, the duality that Freud sees as belonging to the uncanny, the sense of ourselves as obscurely double – Jekyll and Hyde – is dramatised. The incorporated, dormant past is once again externalised, brought to light. But the penitent is neither one thing or the other, neither old Adam or new person. And that blurring of boundaries, of times and tenses, of agency and identity, is what creates the uncanny effect: the queasy automatism and sense of horror that stands out as the dominant emotion, both in eye-witness reports and in recollection.

The acting out, the making visible, is critical. In his book on the uncanny, Royle (2003: 108) notes ‘a special emphasis on the visual, on what comes to light, on what is revealed to the eye. The uncanny is what comes out of the darkness... “To make the invisible visible is uncanny” (de Man).’ Niha today

speak of the past as a time of gloom and darkness, God as Light.<sup>3</sup> They understood Samson's blindness. But if the re-enactments were startlingly visual - a spectacle of the self as other - what was actually *seen*, what kind of insight achieved? Royle (2003: 2) insinuates a troubling thought: 'At some level the feeling of the uncanny may be bound up with the most extreme nostalgia or "homesickness".'

Nostalgia for the forbidden, a misremembrance of things past. Was this what thwarted the Repentance and explained its recurring symptoms? (One thinks of Freud's dictum: 'Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences'.) Or was it that the suppression of the ancestors, and of one's own ancestrally hallowed acts, merely 'displaced them to the realm of psychology,' as Terry Castles writes of Enlightenment rationalism. 'By relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalising the mind itself' (Castles, cited in Davis 2007: 7).

Unlike revivalist cults elsewhere, inspiration did not lead to rebellion. Blindness did not lead to insight. The muteness of the confession and its ritual containment meant that the movement gained no political traction. Instead, the pentecostal fire was self-consuming. The millenium fizzled out. The head of the mission who had proclaimed the greatest awakening in Asia later declared that fundamentally nothing had changed (Müller-Krüger 1968: 281).

And yet of course it had. For conversion, which came through the discovery of evil and a new conception of the self, was the pathway into a differently shaped cosmos. From being the centre of the world, tribal Nias would diminish to a speck on someone else's horizon. And for the Niha themselves, a silent role as extras near the end of the cosmic drama. (When is the End coming? people

would ask me.) Henceforth, it was the unconverted who replaced raiders as the archetypal 'outsider', *niha baero*, a word that came to mean 'pagan', 'unbeliever'. But believers too remained tainted, their salvation uncertain. In the new dispensation, Old Nias was incorporated as original sin, the indelible evil that barred full admission to Christendom. As one man lamented to me, 'we here at the edge of the world are God's stepchildren. Unlike you, we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven'.

### **Java: containing evil**

The case is rather different in Java, where a blend of religious traditions - Muslim, Hindu, and native Javanese - has spawned a rich philosophical discourse on morality (Beatty 1999, 2009). And yet, as we shall see, recent events show a certain resemblance with Nias. Evil and misfortune are personified in Kala, son of the goddess Durga. His story is told in a shadow play, *The Birth of Kala*, which provides both an account of the origin of evil and a manual of how to deal with it - diagnosis and cure. As Stephen Headley (2000) has shown, at the climax of the play, the puppeteer, who briefly incarnates Vishnu (*Wisnu*, in Javanese), recites an ancient cosmogonic text that releases Kala's victims from his power and expels him from the village where the play is being performed. The monster can't be killed, but his fangs can be drawn. The Kala story is unique in several respects. Unlike other plays in the tradition, it merges Hindu mythology with a native creation myth; it is performed in daylight, when Kala stalks his prey; and it has a ritual purpose: it's an exorcism. The theory is simple: because evil has an origin, it can be rooted out.

In Banyuwangi on the eastern tip of Java, where I carry out fieldwork, this is

the only shadow play traditionally performed and it has a special local significance. Remote from palace and barracks, the eastern cape was a political outlier, a place of exiles and malcontents. (An independent kingdom was destroyed by the Dutch in 1768.) The containment of power, whether for good or evil, was and still is a problem. Here the classical models of Javanese statecraft elaborated by Geertz (1968) and Anderson (1990) don't apply. Instead of the exemplary centre, with the ruler as axis of the world, power is dispersed among sacred locations: caves, groves, and ruins haunted by rebels and sages. Their shrines are controlled by caretakers and mystics able to tap the networks and scan the relics for contemporary meanings. Anderson's classical model has a radiant centre but no perimeter: power fades with distance, like the signal from a telephone mast. In Banyuwangi, the problem of accumulation and containment takes a different form. Without centre or periphery, power is kept from leaking away or running wild not by centripetal ritual but by constructing a temporary boundary (Beatty 2012b). This is what villagers do in domestic and community rituals, marking out an enclosure, whether of woven leaves, Koranic prayers, or by pacing out a boundary. This is the firewall tested by Kala.





Like other figures of the shadow play, Kala (depicted above) is both *out there* and *in here*, demon and disposition – a conscious ambiguity that separates reflexive Java from regressive Nias. In Javanese philosophy, the puppets are a gallery of human types. To watch them is to recognise oneself and one's neighbours. But Kala is anomalous, disruptive of any scheme. He came into being when his father, Guru (Shiva), riding on an ox behind his consort Uma/Durga, becomes aroused but fails to connect with her. The god's semen falls into the ocean, boiling up to create a monster who unleashes evil and death upon the world. Ricoeur's notion of 'pre-ethical' evil as defilement, a 'symbolic stain', seems apposite (Ricoeur 1967: 26); but so too is Douglas's (1966) structural conception of pollution. Guru's effusion is, supremely, 'matter out of place', the primal sin for which all humans must pay. As a sage admonishes the lecherous god, 'this all started because you chose the wrong time and place to begin ...' (Headley 2000: 39). As Headley explains in his presentation of a Central Javanese

performance, Kala's victims are soiled, hexed (*sukerta*, from *suker*, 'dirt'). Kala himself helpfully adds: 'For those who hear it, that word means those who bear the mark have an impaired and tainted destiny' (Headley 2000: 45). The exorcism is a purification. Such is the case in Banyuwangi, too, though at the extremity of Java, beyond the reach of any palace, there's a special emphasis in performance on the spilled seed as *power without a container*, danger distilled.

The young Kala develops an unhealthy appetite for human flesh when some blood accidentally gets into his soup. 'Mm, what was that in the soup today, Ma?' he asks Durga. To limit his cravings she offers him a restricted menu of children born in certain birth combinations: twins, an only child, boy-girl-boy, and others born out of place or away from home. All these are tainted and designated for death; the goal of the exorcism to remove impurity and danger. In the following picture, the clothes of participating children are draped over the screen.



At the end of the show they gather behind the screen and pull a pandanus string, the other end held by the puppeteer, unraveling an empty leaf basket (a container without content: inversion of the problem to be solved), releasing them from Kala's power. The performance, known as *ruwatan*, refers to this act of freeing: an exorcism.<sup>4</sup>

Hosted by worried parents, the event combines deadly serious themes with ghost-train comedy. Kala himself is a gurgling buffoon, the cause of superstitious thrills rather than genuine terror. But the moment of exorcism is a solemn pause in the levity. The burning of incense, the descent of Wisnu, and the incantation of mantras by the puppeteer are tense with significance. At any rate, as the parent of twins - a dish fit for a demon - you're eager to stage the event because you'd rather not take the risk.

### **Evil unleashed: a 'witch craze'**

Here, then, in contrast to Nias, is a moral framework that requires no double standard, no self-denial. Evil is conceptualised, acknowledged, put on stage and managed. It's all good clean fun.... Yet Java, too, has had its periodic convulsions and strife, famously, its Year of Living Dangerously. When Java runs *amuk* (a Javanese word), Kala escapes the bounds of the play. Indeed, we are forewarned of the possibility; for, like Brechtian drama, the plot violates the distinction between audience and characters. The host's family even figure among the puppets, while the puppeteer, in his screen avatar, chases the burping ogre on his quest for victims through the village. (In Bomo, a poor village further south, when funds are lacking for a full performance the local magician, dressed as the monster, *recites* the Kala myth, then chases twins, triplets and other edible

combinations round the village, Benny Hill style.) Once Kala is loose, like the genie, he's very hard to put back in the bottle.

Which is what happened as my second period of fieldwork in Java ended in 1997, just before the fall of the dictator Suharto. A 'witch craze' broke out that led – over the next year - to the lynching of over 100 people across the district.<sup>5</sup> When the first case occurred in a village near where I was living, I heard the news from a carpenter who had been working there. Over the remains of a neighbourhood prayer-meal he related the events with grim satisfaction – how the victim had been dragged out and cut down, how a mob had burned down the house – and he pronounced the death a 'cleansing'. But his audience disputed whether the victim could really be a sorcerer and whether black magic (*sihir*) was a fiction, as the headman protested, or an undeniable fact. Such was the view of the carpenter, who as neighbourhood imam carried influence. In his words, which seemed to express a dogma, 'it may not be disbelieved'.

In the next weeks, reports of other attacks followed, always in a haze of rumour and contradiction. Victims were reputed sorcerers or preachers, madmen or vagrants; killers were neighbours or outsiders, security agents or masked ninjas. It was disturbing but not extraordinary; no one imagined what would follow: the deaths, the curfews, the investigations. No one expects the Spanish Inquisition. And yet, paving the way, a blasphemy trial in a nearby town caused riots, stoking official panic and public anxiety about the unrest spreading. Anonymous phone calls reached outlying villages, leaflets were dropped in mosques. Briefly, the road to Banyuwangi was sealed.

Before the witch hunt was in full swing in 1998, and the whole district frantic, I had got out. There being no on-the-spot accounts by trained observers,

most views of what happened – my own included – depended on hearsay and rumour-fed press reports. By the time proper research was begun, stories had been told to reporters, policemen, independent commissions, and to villagers by and about themselves so many times that the actuality – whether said, done, or imagined - was scarcely recoverable. You might say the same of the Great Repentance, but among miserable sinners there was nothing to hide: that was the point.

Explanations of the witch craze have been wildly diverse, with conspiracy theories to the fore: that instigators were Suharto's men spreading chaos, or jihadis bent on liquidating the infidel, or *anti*-Muslim provocateurs blackening orthodox parties as a threat to pluralism.<sup>6</sup> A surplus of theory contrasted with a dearth of first-hand information. In a pattern that Nils Bubandt (2001), writing of other conflicts, calls an 'epidemic logic', external factors – local radio and media speculation, security warnings (social media had hardly begun) – kindled local fears and reprisals, producing the dreaded outcomes.

Only two accounts derive from anthropological research and both reject conspiracy. The Cornell anthropologist James Siegel, who conducted interviews in 2000, divines an existential crisis. The collapse of the Suharto regime left people bewildered. Totalitarian surveillance had *created* its subjects, but the mirror in which people saw themselves defined, and recognised themselves as citizens, suddenly clouded. In the rural hinterland, on the edge of the state, agency became obscure, so obscure that villagers suspected even themselves of being witches: repositories of malignity in the Africanist sense (Siegel 2006: 124; Evans-Pritchard 1937). Paraphrasing, one might say that the occult powers of the state – the right over life and death - passed to those who had ceased to

belong to it. Witchcraft supplanted statecraft. The victims of mob violence were scapegoats - evil externalised and eradicated - and the witchcraze a scattershot pre-emptive strike. As in the anti-communist pogroms of the 1960s, killing became a way of establishing one's innocence. But mutilation and dismembering, literal overkill, only served to emphasise the futility of the quest and the virulence of contagion.

Siegel's thesis might conceivably fit the capital, Jakarta, with its Orwellian ministries and legions of spies, or the intricate hierarchy of the traditional sultanates. But there were no 'witch' killings in Jakarta or Jogja. The violence erupted where the ruler's gaze never determined identity or everyday experience. Siegel's theory ignores the history and geography that made the area what it is: the proximity to Hindu Bali, the 250-year lag in colonization and the imposition of Islam, the distinct regional culture which not for nothing is called *Osing*, the vernacular word for No, a one-fingered salute to the political centre.

Against Siegel's post-structuralist analysis a young Australian scholar, Nicholas Herriman (2014), offers older-style evidence. In 2001 he carried out 12 months' fieldwork south of Banyuwangi, sampling affected villages in every subdistrict, doing interviews (150 of them), and checking press reports against police records. The facts, thus constituted, showed that in nearly every case alleged sorcerers and their victims were known to one another. Suspicions followed the familiar trail of grudges and misfortunes. The pattern was normal for sorcery-related killings in Java. No need for ninjas, the deep state, or Derridean spectres. What was abnormal was the scale, which Herriman attributes to the loosening of the state. People seized the opportunity to take revenge and exact community justice on alleged deviants just as they had always

done when disorder permitted. They joined in because of peer pressure or because they could get away with it. This is what they told Herriman, and this is what the facts, assembled from name lists, interviews and court judgments amply confirmed. Herriman's forensic presentation and his trenchant dismissal of half-baked theories are compelling ('I could find no evidence for this' chimes like a mantra through the text). Yet any reconstruction, however firmly grounded, will leave ethnographic lacunae. There is a distance between act, report and interview that cannot be factored out, and layers of linguistic complexity – Indonesian (the language of officialdom), Madurese, and Javanese in at least two regional variants – that cannot show through. The difficulty of constructing a sufficient narrative, of recovering motivation, situated thought and emotion in formal interviews with strangers - all without personal knowledge of lives or circumstances - obscures what lies *behind* the facts, which are not, in any case, neutral evidence but constructions by interested parties *after the fact*. An ethnographic hinterland, a history of relations, cannot be denied for lack of present evidence. In Banyuwangi, people get ill, bear grudges, and don't ordinarily take revenge – least of all, on behalf of others. Rules of avoidance and norms of harmony mean that personal quarrels rarely ramify, even within a family. Why, then, did something long tolerated become suddenly intolerable, bad enough for murder? Why *these* particular individuals, these aggressors, these victims? Why would hundreds join in a killing? Why the extreme savagery? And why did some villages – such as Bayu, my own home-from-home – escape the violence? What checks and balances protected Bayu but failed in Kenjo or Kabat? We are back with the origin questions.

## **The presence of the past**

It's possible to reconcile the two approaches. Herriman nails the proximate causes – strange illnesses, grudging suspicions; Siegel explains the paranoia. But equally, each theory undermines the other. As in any conflicted history, the reconstituted facts must, in part, be *post hoc* rationalisations, shaped for diverse audiences, including the tellers themselves. Give the cops what they want, and don't let them think we're gullible rustics. As Siegel (2006: 146) puts it, 'citing disputes thus normalizes the uncanny,' whereas the uncanny is what needs to be explained. Siegel's political model is misplaced (by several hundred miles) and his recipe for evil confuses sorcery with witchcraft and witchcraft with spirit possession. Yet eventually his finger lands, I'm pretty sure, on the right spot, the sore point, if not the root of evil (2006: 161-2). It has to do with the relation between present and past; and to anyone familiar with Indonesia it will seem all too obvious, though the case could only be made through intimate narrative engagement, not factual accounting or abstract speculation. Faulkner's weighty comment on the defeated American South comes to mind: 'The past is never dead', he opined, 'it's not even past'. The historic defeats of the Confederate South, Republican Spain, Indonesian communism, and pagan Nias all have in common a stifled, unspeakable history, a broken timeline bisected Before and After. In Nias, the reference point was the Great Repentance; in Java, the coup of 1965. The anti-communist massacres of that year, with up to a million dead, were a pivotal moment, shaping national and village politics ever since.

Banyuwangi, a communist stronghold, suffered 25,000 dead (Cribb 1991: 10). The killings may have been led by the army and Muslim organisations, but in the back-country every village had its homegrown, black-clad death squad and



its quota of victims. Complicity – often born of fear – was widely shared. Yet the fear that ruled the countryside back then was less of the communists (who mostly *weren't*) than of the people afraid of the communists: the vigilantes. The modus operandi of night-time raids, road blocks, and mutilations was the template for the later witch craze in which, once more, it was fear of the men in black that prevailed. Hence the panicky talk of ninjas and outside forces (Retsikas 2006). But terror is a double-edged sword. The horror that the vigilantes inflicted came back to haunt them. The retired killers, some of whom I knew well in the 1990s, have tended to die badly – at least, that's how others like to see it - and their deaths are usually explained by the law of karma. Tapan of Bayu was found dead in a ditch, covered in ants; Rapi'i fell mute and died, unmourned, during my last stay. The more reflective, which is not to say guilty, expect a cosmic reckoning. For there's no escaping *cakra manggilingan*, the wheel of fortune. In the old Javanese saying, what goes around comes around. Yet, as I often observed in late night conversations, any talk of blame arouses a vague anxiety, for who in this affair was innocent? Natural justice - a tidy end, if also a sticky end - turns out to be one more evasion.

### **A political exorcism**

So where is Kala in this story? In popular cosmology, ghouls and sorcerers belong to Kala's army; and in the classical dualist symbolism they are among the 'figures of the left' (*pengiwa*): the *sinister*, one might say, whereas the Islamic line, descending from Adam, comprises the figures of the right (Beatty 1999: 107-8; Pigeaud 1967-70, I: 151). In a perversion of the traditional order, which allows some legitimacy to the left-hand Indic line, the *political* left became

demonized, and factional killings equated with witch-cleansings. It was to the 'sinister' line that communists were assigned in 1965. Propaganda made of their mass destruction a preordained exorcism, a purification ushering in the restoration of order under Suharto; the New Order, as it was called. The recent witch hunt lacked this catch-all deviant category, but the political context was no less crucial even if the victims were less determinate. In the months after Suharto fell, Kala-exorcisms took place in cities across Java (Headley 2004: 453-473).

It might seem, then, that when circumstances require, Javanese can conveniently project their demons outward, making of Kala and his tribe an external enemy where philosophy once made him a human symbol. But the ravenous terror that gripped Banyuwangi during the witch craze suggests the projection is not entirely successful. Like the Great Repentance in Nias, the legacy of past massacres, revived in contemporary lynchings is, unavoidably, a return of the repressed: the victims who keep coming back to be killed. Siegel calls it 'the repetition of an historical event, one never assimilated and therefore repeated' (Siegel 2006: 162). In monsterring the Other - whether communists, magicians or misfits - Javanese evade their demons, whitewashing their terrible past. Unlike Kala, these demons cannot be exorcised because they mostly have no face or name; their referent is a 'thing of darkness none acknowledge' as their own.

All this is relatively new in Indonesian history: evil has burst its bounds and run riot. Yet the framing of evil - or rather the way it has of slipping through the frame - is not new; for evil has always been a threshold phenomenon - of interleaving realms, categorical borders and fugue states. The sperm that finds

no womb; the monster that hunts in the shadowless noon; the headhunters, half-men, half-animal: all are dangerous because of their vague dislocation, their haunting semi-presence. Like the spirit world that governs it, evil is on the fringes of the everyday, elusive but palpable, most potent when sensed rather than seen or grasped. Its evocation in spectacle is paradoxical, displacing; and what can be more deranging than the trauma of conversion or the black ops of the shadowy state? For these new kinds of evil, neither prayer nor mantra will suffice.

## **Conclusion**

Let me end with some comments that bring together three interrelated aspects of evil: its structural dimensions, its affective quality, and its essential mystery. In my Indonesian examples, evil consists in harm inflicted by and upon others who are *more or less* than human: ninja, headhunter, monster, communist, sorcerer: an other who is always, potentially, oneself. Hence the ritual format, the offputting fancy dress, the mutilations. In his book *Religion and Monsters*, the Bible scholar Timothy Beal writes that ‘monsters are in the world but not of the world. They are paradoxical personifications of *otherness within sameness*... threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things. They represent the outside that has gotten inside’ (Beal 2001: 4, original emphasis). My Indonesian cases express Beal’s formulation, which also gives us an angle on their contrasting figurations, a perspective on evil that is neither theological nor rooted in Christian or Islamic cosmologies. Javanese exorcism plays on the outside/inside motif from the beginning: the spilt seed, the puppeteer channelling Vishnu, the domestication and ejection of Kala from the

village. Ritual patrols the borders and expels what has 'gotten inside'. But this tidy arrangement breaks down with the unravelling of the New Order. Evil in the contrasting Nias case is constructed on a separation of human and monster/headhunter achieved through doubling and denial.<sup>7</sup> But conversion leads to an interiorisation of the distinction, a move from inside-out to outside-in. The monsterring of the self.

Whatever its primeval origin and its protean forms, evil is conjured *between people* - humans acting inhumanly; not between people and God, as is the case with sin. Yet it's the otherworldliness, the garish supernatural light, that discovers or creates evil and that distinguishes it from ordinary wrongdoing. That discovery, in turn, is an *emotional* response, not a cool assessment or moral reckoning. Evil is in the heart of the beholder: a reaction of fear, loathing, or horror. It's the disclosure that, in turn, produces the uncanny effect, the jolting sense of dislocation, *déjà vu*, or supernatural doubling. As Royle (2003: 2) puts it:

The uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter...an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light. But it is not 'out there', in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality.

The Abrahamic traditions which refract evil through sin, humanizing it, mostly miss the outlandish, hair-raising, monstrous character of evil conveyed by the Indonesian examples (though Job's Leviathan fits the bill). In the Western tradition, this incalculable effect finds expression not in orthodoxy but in imaginative works that escape or defy doctrine: *Moby-Dick*, *The turn of the screw*, *Macbeth*: figurations of evil that hover mystifyingly in paradox, plumbing depths, inverting perceptions (*Fair is foul, foul is fair*), confounding black and white,

inner/outer distinctions. The transgressing of boundaries that produces the uncanny means that evil defies reckoning, a just apportioning of blame. However sensational, however banal, evil remains an unfathomable mystery.<sup>8</sup> Yet it has definable contexts and its recognition obeys a distinct psycho-biological mechanism, raising hairs, making the flesh creep. Crucial to both my cases, a generational gap - a mute incubation period - prepares the way for a terrifying eruption of the past. And this return, in the Gothic conception, is uncanny. The German word - Freud's word - is *unheimlich*, 'unhomely', an etymology that could fruitfully be explored in an ethnographic context where *pernah*, Javanese for 'feeling at home', 'comfortably placed', is both a salient emotion and a primary social objective (Beatty 2019). Beal (2001) writes: 'Monsters are personifications of the *unheimlich*. They stand for what endangers one's sense of at-homeness, that is, one's sense of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health and meaning. They make one feel *not at home at home*. They are figures of chaos and disintegration *within* order and orientation' (original emphases). In both Java and Nias, evil is a phenomenon of dislocation, being out of place, no longer at home in the world. Kala may be dismissed for a while, the headhunter banished, but efforts to root out evil must end in failure, for evil no longer has a root, if it ever had.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 1990. 'The idea of power in Javanese culture', in: *Language and power*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Anon. 1916. Eine religiöse Erweckung in Nias. *Berichte der Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft*: 250-51.

- Anon. 1917. Die Erweckungsbewegung auf Nias. *Berichte der Rheinischen Missions-Gesellschaft*: 7-10, 40-44, 173-4.
- Beal, Timothy K. 2001. *Religion and its Monsters*. London: Routledge.
- Beatty, Andrew. 1992. *Society and Exchange in Nias*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- ... 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ... 2009. *A Shadow Falls: In the Heart of Java*. London: Faber & Faber.
- ... 2012a. The Tell-tale Heart: Conversion and Emotion in Nias. 32- 77: 295-320.
- ... 2012b. Kala Defanged: Managing Power in Java away from the Centre. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 168: 173-194.
- ... 2015. *After the Ancestors: an Anthropologist's Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ... 2019. *Emotional Worlds: Beyond the Anthropology of Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bubandt, Nils. 2001. 'Malukan apocalypse: Themes in the dynamics of violence in eastern Indonesia', in: Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhöfer (eds), *Violence in Indonesia*. Hamburg: Abera.
- Cribb, Robert (ed.) 1991. *The Indonesian killings of 1965-1966: Studies from Java and Bali*. Monash University: Clayton, Victoria.
- Davis, Colin. 2007. *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dijk, Kees van. 2001. *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Fries, E. 1908. Das 'Koppensnellen' auf Nias. *Allgemeine Missions-Zeitschrift* 35: 73-88.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Groenendael, C. M. V van. 1992 'Is there an Eastern Wayang Tradition? Some Dramatis Personae of the Murwakala Myth of the "Eastern" Tradition', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 148: 309-15.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1960. *The Religion of Java*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ... 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Headley, Stephen. 2000. *From Cosmogony to Exorcism in a Javanese Genesis: The Spilt Seed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ... 2004 *Durga's mosque: Cosmology, Conversion and Community in Central Javanese Islam*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Herriman, Nicholas. 2014. *Witch-hunt and Conspiracy. The 'Ninja Case' in East Java*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing.
- Hummel, Uwe and Tuhoni Telaumbanua. 2007. *Cross and Adu: a socio-historical study on the encounter between Christianity and the indigenous culture on Nias and the Batu Islands, Indonesia (1865-1965)*. Proefschrift. Universiteit Utrecht.
- Koentjaraningrat. 1985. *Javanese Culture*. Singapore/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kriele, Ed. 1927. The Nias revival. *International Review of Missions* 26 (61): 91-102.
- Mangunwijaya, Y.B. 2004. *Durga/Umayi*. Trans. Ward Keeler. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Müller, T. 1931. *Die 'grosse Reue' auf Nias. Geschichte und Gestalt einer Erweckung auf dem Missionsfelde*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann.
- Müller-Krüger, Th. 1968. *Der Protestantismus in Indonesien*. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk.
- Parkin, David. 1985. Introduction. *The Anthropology of Evil*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pigeaud, Th. 1967-70. *Literature of Java*. 3 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Preston, Paul. 2000. *Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War*. London: Fontana Press.

Retsikas, Konstantinos. 2006. The Semiotics of Violence: Ninja, Sorcerers, and State-Terror in Post-Soeharto Indonesia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 162: 56-94.

Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1967. *The symbolism of evil*. Trans. Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press.

Siegel, James T. 2006. *Naming the Witch*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The people of Nias are called Niha (= human, Niasan).

<sup>2</sup> Information on the Great Repentance (*fangesa dödö sebua*) is mostly buried in missionary archives and journals. Among examples consulted: Anon. 1916, 1917; Müller 1931. Hummel & Telaumbanua (2007) is a theological PhD dissertation. Information on Orahua and Central Nias, where the Repentance happened much later, is based on fieldwork from 1986-1988 and 2011. Beatty 2012a, an article on conversion and emotion, offers a fuller account.

<sup>3</sup> Beatty (2015: 97-8) contains a comic sermon on this theme.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1992 and 1997 I watched and recorded segments of half a dozen Kala shows, in villages around Banyuwangi. The stories (*lakon*) differ in certain respects from the classical versions (Groenendael 1992). I have also drawn on Headley's presentation of a performance in Central Java (2000) and his erudite study of cosmology (2004).

<sup>5</sup> I use the popular terms 'witch hunt' and 'witch craze' loosely; but, strictly, 'there are no practitioners who perform destructive magic as a result of inherited ability. In other words, Javanese society knows of sorcerers but not of witches' (Koentjaraningrat 1985: 419; Geertz 1960: 107). Siegel (2006) disagrees.

<sup>6</sup> For several months, regional press reports and unofficial notices were collated in daily online blogs. For a sample of academic discussion, see Retsikas 2006, van Dijk 2001. My own small speculation (Beatty 1999: 259) was disproved by Herriman's work, which supersedes all previous studies.

<sup>7</sup> As Parkin (1985: 12) puts it, 'the term "evil" when applied to monsters denotes a field of human impossibilities'.

<sup>8</sup> 'Ah the mysteries of virtue! The mysteries of evil!' concludes the narrator of *Durga/Umayi*, Manguwijaya's novelistic transposition of the Kala myth to modern Indonesia (Manguwijaya 2004: 168).