Plays of Hierarchy and Spontaneity in Everyday Social Gatherings of the Javanese

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The Javanese interaction is often extremely formalized. The way they speak and behave is regulated by their collective ideal of refinedness which is based on a set of oppositional ideas, i.e., highly valued refinedness (alus) versus degrading coarseness (kasar). This value system is not just a matter of personal aesthetics of action but also implies a Javanese ideal of social hierarchy, for those who are more refined exert socio-cultural and even political authority over those less refined. Then, we have to ask to what extent the everyday acts of the Javanese are constrained by this notion of hierarchy; and where we can find rooms for free plays and spontaneity. The material for these questions are taken from two forms of customarized social gatherings in a Central Javanese village. One is the communal feast, or jagong, which is occasioned by a wide variety of family rituals, where people try their best to achieve the ideal of refined action. The feast produces to us a scene of collective subjugation of the people to the whole order of cultural hierarchy. The other form of the social gatherings, called jagongan, contarasts to this rigid subjugation. It is an informal and casual gathering taking place almost every evening in front of village houses. People in the jagongan enjoy refined action as a form of playful performace, even as a parody. Creativeness, variation, surprise, and above all a sense of pleasure is appreciated in it. Though the hierarchical notion permeates deep into everyday interactions of the Javanese, anti-hierarchical elements operate like parasites from within the hierarchy itself.