

EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 15

'Mantra Gerak' / Movement Mantra

Agus Bima Prayitna

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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15. ‘MANTRA GERAK’ / MOVEMENT MANTRA

Agus Bima Prayitna (Indonesia)¹

I. Personal Background

I was born in Kalang Lor Village in the Wanagiri Region of Central Java, where my father was a primary school teacher and a *dalang* (shadow-puppet master) in the Wayang Purwa style. My mother took care of all the family necessities of which one is the noble task of educating the children.

From the age of two, I was often ill. When I reached adolescence, my father trained me in *laku* (ascetic practices) such as: *kungkum* (submersion in the river), fasting, solitude in sacred places, in caves and on the road without sleeping throughout the night. *Laku* practices for youth, in general, are actually training for adulthood and a way that an adolescent can be close to and learn from nature.

In the 1970s, all adolescent boys in Java still studied mantra from *dukun* (spiritual teachers) and I did too. I learned about the types and functions of Javanese mantra, which are chanted, murmured or recited internally and have the potential to generate energy or strength.

My knowledge was deepened during my research for my undergraduate thesis on ‘The Structure and Social-Culture of Javanese Aji-Aji Mantra’. I perceived that Javanese Aji-Aji mantra is a form of oral poetry and learned that, basically, there are three types:

- **Magical** – mantra used to fulfill or obtain something that is wished for with full power and force. In Javanese culture, this is the first level and the first step in a person’s journey in the process of life. Usually people at this level are

¹ This chapter was translated from the Indonesian by Diane Butler.

still young at heart or not yet mature or old in the sense of *ngelmu* (knowledge). In contrast, a person considered old in Java is someone who already has deep and broad knowledge of, as well as experience of applying, the *ngelmu* they possess.

- **Mystic magical** – mantra practiced by a person after mastering magical mantra and used to fulfill the necessities of life. However, the results depend on the process of nature or of life. Power and force exists, but is not a must. In Javanese culture, this is the second level when a person is stepping into *ngelmu* but is still considering or fulfilling the necessities of life, which is termed *kahaman kadonyan*. At the level of mystic magical mantra, a person is permitted or proven to have control over what they wish for, yet the results are given over to the practitioner’s process of life.
- **Mystic religious** – mantra that is used for harmony of life both in relation to other humans and nature. In Javanese culture, this is the third level when a person is already *mungkur kadonyan* (past worldly things). So, although a person still conducts their life in an ordinary manner, they have already let go of any desires and all is surrendered to the process of life or surrounding nature.

II. Chronology Leading to ‘Mantra Gerak’

After graduating in 1986, I performed Javanese mantra in the form of a poetry reading in 1987 at the Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah (Central Java Cultural Park) in Solo. Also in 1987, my friend Arja brought me to Padepokan Lemah Putih to introduce me to Mas Prapto. He offered me a program to practice how the mantra that I knew could be transformed or embodied in movement (like the movement I saw that day when he and many Europeans were practicing), even though at that time I had no understanding of what movement was.

For the next six months, I did not respond to Mas Prapto’s offer. I was not interested at all as it seemed so very different and distant from my background. In mid-1987, Mas Prapto contacted me again to talk about how the mantra that I knew could be embodied in movement. In his words, “*How about Mas Agus first just try movement practice?*” Starting with no movement resources, I began to practice among the European friends, and also a few Indonesian friends

who had already studied dance at the ASKI music academy (now Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Surakarta). My background was in Javanese literature and I had written quite a bit about Javanese *tembang macapat* and *geguritan* (poetry), *cekak* (short stories), drama and critique essays. But I truly had difficulties knowing the language of the body. For sure it would have been different if I had had a background in dance or at least had ever exercised my body.

Starting from knowing nothing, through movement practice with sincere intensity and also spurred on by practicing among European friends, two years later I just knew in an aware way what mantra was and what movement was. From these two different worlds, gradually I was able to embody mantra – the mantra of the universe in Javanese culture – in the form of movement.

I studied Amerta Movement with Mas Prapto regularly and intensively from 1987 to 1997. In this context, my mantra was not in an oral form; rather, it was in the form of body movement. Since 2001, even though I do not take part in workshops any more, I have remained in the weave in the sense of *srawung* (sharing), in friendship and in Java it has even become like kinship.

Since 1997, I have engaged in art practice and art performance of 'Mantra Gerak' with an artistic identity of Teatr Mantra Gerak.

III. 'Mantra Gerak' (Movement Mantra)

1. Mantra

Mantra, in Javanese culture, is pure neutral, natural sound that has the potential to generate energy or strength. By sound, I mean an energy wave or vibration that exists in every human body. This energy wave or vibration is still in a pure and natural form which, as it manifests, can be sensed by one's eardrum. Pure neutral, natural sound includes crying, anger, laughing, as well as serene and satisfied sounds and many other types of manifestations. All of these are *rasa* (feelings) that become a desire. There are several categories of desire such as hunger, thirst, sexual and religious-spiritual desire.

2. Gerak (movement)

Gerak (movement), in my experience and opinion, is the process of change that occurs in all parts of the body that are alive, active and creative in a natural way in every human being. In other words, movement is a process of change in a human body that is living a natural human life. As I see it, a human's existence even just at the

minimum level begins with the meeting of sperm and egg until it grows into a human being, which is shaped and influenced by:

- our natural geographic environment
- our culture (including customs and religion, and the social, political, economic, legal, technological, and scientific aspects of life).

3. Embodiment and unification of mantra with movement

'Mantra Gerak' is a unification of two universes or two different subjects, namely the *jagad mantra* (universe of mantra) and the *jagad gerak* (universe of movement). Both clearly exist in every human being, but both are different in nature and form. Though different, both can coalesce into an actual unity in a human being's actions throughout their life. Mantra is not only manifested in an oral form; it is also embodied in movement until our every movement has the potential and quality of energy or strength. The next process is to find how every movement can be meaningful or useful for life. Though mantra is commonly used to obtain inner power, my approach after studying Amerta Movement has been more towards cultivating a condition of relaxation and full participation in the living atmosphere of an environment. This is because, when we return to the origins of 'Mantra Gerak', we find that our sounds and movement come from a pure, neutral, natural potential.

4. The practice process of 'Mantra Gerak'

I practice 'Mantra Gerak' regularly alone and occasionally share the practice with college students, artists, spiritual practitioners, children, and village communities in Indonesia. I have also offered workshops a few times abroad in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. The process I share is just to help each person to discover the form, manner, and techniques they can use for their own creative innovation.

Preparing oneself

Self-purification means letting go of everything that closes us off from pure, neutral, natural sound and the changes that are within each of us. Purifying here is not copying a stereotypical form associated with some religions. Why do we need to purify ourselves? Because, in the course of our lives, we are colored or shaped by the surrounding natural and cultural environment in its broadest sense.

Through self-purification a person can more easily practice and ultimately receive what they wish for. Purification in 'Mantra Gerak' does not mean getting rid of, quelling, reducing, stunting or stopping anything in the body. Rather, it is an attitude and actions that stem from the body, which allow us to reach clarity. From this clear atmosphere and condition we can easily see, feel and make pure, neutral, natural sound and physical changes. An analogy for the beginning level is calming, clearing, and cleansing impurities from cloudy water in a neutral glass. At the next level, we transform and apply clarity in our actions or activities.

Practicing for or in nature

As 'Mantra Gerak' prioritizes natural elements, we respect nature, learn from and reflect on it, rather than exploring and investigating nature to exploit it, because human beings are part of the universe and have the same character as nature. These days, virtual global networks have increased communication in the fields of technology, science, politics, and religion. On the one hand, this can help the process of human life. On the other hand, it can cause competition and also reduce the natural role of human beings. 'Mantra Gerak' can help revitalize a person's natural life process in an aware way.

'Mantra Gerak' for, or in, nature can include practicing with:

- Water at a river, spring or water source
- Stones in a river or on a mountaintop or ridge
- Soil, rice field sediment or beach sand
- Wind at the seashore or on a mountain and natural fire on a mountain
- Plants, trees, rice fields, and forests.

I mainly practice 'Mantra Gerak' in nature as it is easier to reflect on the natural elements in my body in order to know, process, and apply them in thought, feeling, and physically. For instance, *kungkum* submersion in a spring or the source of a river while facing the sun's position in the morning, at noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, and in the middle of the night nurtures a sense of fluidity, flowing, and clear spreading. Wind by the sea and natural fire on a mountain connects us with the spirit of life. Practicing on a mountaintop helps us control anger, transform it, and apply the energy in a different way.

A rice field can be a medium to study fertility by various practices such as enriching the soil, choosing and planting seeds, caring for the plants, and harvesting crops. So, fertility is not merely sexual; rather it is the chain of life, which requires mutuality. In 'Mantra Gerak', it emerges from creativity in such a way that it will bring forth innovation in a person with full commitment, playfulness, and productivity. One can share love for the harmony of life.

Practicing for or in society

This practice is very important, especially in Javanese culture. Practicing in society builds on the previous levels in terms of one's ability to be within a community's social environment where individuals may differ in their backgrounds. Each person will be recognized for his or her inner and outer communication skills. In Javanese culture this practice is the final level and termed *tapa ngrame*; meaning that although a person lives an ordinary life, they are always in a condition of being on retreat. This practice can include:

- Practicing in a village
- Practicing in crowded places such as a market or a street
- Practicing for or in a heritage site or a *candi* (temple)
- Practicing together and alone in these places.

5. The function of 'Mantra Gerak'

Based on the understanding that the growth of a human life is affected and shaped by both human and natural systems, in order to become aware of one's existence one can, for instance, use 'Mantra Gerak' as a means for:

- Opening, reading, discovering, analyzing, fertilizing, growing or liberating one's individual being
- Being courageous in bringing forth one's individual being
- Being independent in one's individual being
- *Srawung* (associating) with one's individual being.

The practice can also have beneficial physical, relational, protective, and compassionate affects. For example, since beginning to practice 'Mantra Gerak', I have rarely had flu, exhaustion or a headache. I no longer suffer *buyuten* (trembling fingers) or low self-esteem. It is easier to communicate and dialogue, the feeling of restlessness is less, and it is easier for me to adapt to situations than it was before.

'Mantra Gerak' embodies more than spoken or written language; it is a universal language that all living creatures possess, including human beings. So, in the context of relations both between humans and with other creatures in this world, 'Mantra Gerak' is a bridging language that is not limited to any social, cultural, political or geographical background. In this manner of communication a harmony emerges that respects and maintains the rights and dignity of all beings.

The practice of 'Mantra Gerak' also produces a condition of interpersonal protection so that people do not interfere with, harm, or conquer each other. In this way, individuals feel safe together without creating unnecessary boundaries or closing themselves off.

In 'Mantra Gerak', the source and priority is to explore pure, neutral, natural sound and changes in all parts of the body with sincerity and awareness. This produces a vibration of loving kindness, which manifests in the body as a conscientious heart. In the Javanese understanding, everyone has a conscience that can and will become more clear, luminous and glistening if it is regularly trained through *laku* practices like contemplation, meditation or reciting mantra that have a clear, calm and settled quality. One result is that a person can be more sensitive toward what has happened, is happening, and will happen to them and around them. A conscientious heart surely has a positive value in life or is useful for goodness, which is called *daya hayu* (energy of peace).

6. The embodiment of 'Mantra Gerak' in art

'Mantra Gerak' has as its source Javanese culture, which is heterogeneous, open, and accommodating. I view 'Mantra Gerak' as one of the new embryo elements of culture that still requires a lengthy process to grow and crystallize into a cultural form. Like a tree seed, it needs to be planted in a nursery and it needs fertilizer and care if it is to grow.

Ritual Art

'Mantra Gerak' as ritual art manifests as an offering that has a spiritual nature, as an expression of homage and as a feeling of

gratitude for life whether in the past, now or for the future. For instance, at Candi Jago in Malang reading the bas-relief depicting the Arjunawiwaha tale inspired ritual art based on the ascetic ideal. While after the eruption of Mount Merapi in 2010, I created ritual art for nature with the community in East Merapi Village.



Sembah Ibu Bumi / Offering to Mother Earth by Teatr Mantra Gerak for Banjar Kurungan (hamlet of hand-crafted chicken cages). Photo: Suksma Jati Cahyaningrat

Performing Arts

As a performing art, my art aesthetic in ‘Mantra Gerak’ is always connected to my feeling of religiosity towards the audience, the setting, and nature. I have performed in communities and heritage sites in Indonesia and Sharing Time events abroad and even

collaborated with a jazz organ player. Art practice with children in my village feels very playful and they easily make friends and access creativity. My intention is that any performance will produce a vibration of life together, harmony, and be an ongoing inspiration.

IV. 'Mantra Gerak' and 'Rajah'

A *rajah*, in Javanese culture, is a written or painted mantra. Its functions and characteristics are similar to oral mantra. A *rajah* uses special materials according to its essence and potential such as natural colorants, scents, the cardinal directions, a circular earth shape, triangular mountain shape, and square ocean shape. Sometimes a master artisan will keep the materials or technique for making a *rajah* secret. This is so that the *rajah* is not easily copied, or misused, or used by people who have not fulfilled the required *laku* practices.

Although a *rajah* can be a work of art that stands alone, it can also be combined with 'Mantra Gerak' especially in the form of ritual and performing arts.

V. A 'Mantra Gerak' Perspective on Life Now and in the Future

1. A perspective on Javanese culture as the mother of 'Mantra Gerak'

The role of 'Mantra Gerak' in communication and dialogue or in a *paguyuban* (a social association with a common interest or values), which in Javanese culture stems from communal social patterns, is the main source for placing 'Mantra Gerak' in everyday life. Life in a *paguyuban* society is based on *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and tolerance, and almost all decisions are based on togetherness. Any act or attitude of a community member that does not reflect togetherness would be an error. From this perspective, the existence of one's ego or personality is lessened. This lessening of the ego or personal universe is what 'Mantra Gerak' brings forth or encourages.

2. A 'Mantra Gerak' perspective on dialogue and global communication

As globalization and technological modernization is a part of life nowadays, it cannot be rejected or denied. For example, one phenomenon of technology that everyone must have and use is a communication tool. With all the sophistication of

telecommunications equipment, we are able to cross all boundaries. This is a gift of modernity in that it generally weaves humans together. Yet it can be a weak point if interpersonal connections become dependent on a device. It can also be dangerous if one person's values are eroded or oppressed by the dominance of another person's values. One example is what has happened to some young Javanese people who have plunged in and followed the currents of other cultures and have become distant from their own culture. One reason for this is easy access to modern communication tools and the influences of other cultures. 'Mantra Gerak' is one way that the quality and potential of one's personal essence can be cared for even in the current of globalization.

VI. Religiosity of 'Mantra Gerak'

Returning to the essence of 'Mantra Gerak', which is the pure sound and movement that every person experiences – by practicing and through a deepening process, one will encounter a sense of the divine. Here, I do not mean in a conventional religious context. A person who cultivates and practices pure natural sound and movement will go beyond the limitations of their thoughts, feelings, and physical ability. They will emit a vibration.

Inner sound that is soft, pure and natural will bring one to a tangible, transcendent, inner atmosphere. Javanese culture as the mother of 'Mantra Gerak' has a mystic, transcendent atmosphere, which practitioners can connect to by themselves when 'Mantra Gerak' comes truly from the inner soul. It is an atmosphere of harmony with nature, the ancestors, one's relatives, friends, and so on. Attainment of a mystic, religious atmosphere is a concrete experience of the sweeping away of one's being. Yet, it does not eliminate one's being as it manifests in pure and natural sound and movement.

~ ~ ~

Agus Bima Prayitna was born in 1959 in Kalang Lor Village, Wanagiri, Central Java, Indonesia. Since the age of 17, he has studied mantra with several Javanese masters. In 1986, he completed his thesis 'Mantra Aji-Aji Jawa' and earned a Bachelor's degree from the Department of Languages and Javanese Literature at Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta. From 1987 to 1997, Agus studied Amerta Movement with Prapto. In 1997, he named his work 'Mantra Gerak' and began to create performances with an artistic identity of Teatr Mantra Gerak.

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