

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Custom: *Tali Paranti*

On a Thursday evening in mid-July 1972, close to the time of the *maghrib* or sunset prayers, my grandmother ordered me to go and pick seven different kinds of flower buds from the gardens in people's backyards in our village. She also told me to go to the small shop on the edge of the village to buy a fine cigar, or *surutu*. When I returned with the flower buds and the cigar she led me to a room located in the farthest back part of our house where our paddy was stored between seasons. She asked me to put the buds in a bowl filled with the spring water that spouted from a bamboo pipe, or *pancuran*, in the back yard. She then burned incense, *menyan*. For a minute, we remained silent as the smoke and the aroma of the incense wafted out through narrow spaces in the bamboo walls and roof. Meanwhile the call to prayer, the *adzan*, had sounded. The boys of my village, in their checked sarongs and black caps (*pecis*) made their way to a small mosque for the *shalat* prayers. The whole village was enveloped in serenity as we prayed, the women at home and the men and boys at the mosque.

Times moved on. Grandma, who in her daily activities was a small *batik* cloth trader, or *tukang batik*, in the Tasikmalaya market, was faced with financial difficulties. Her partner had asked her to give him a certificate of land title to be deposited in the bank as surety for a loan. Then, instead of acquiring additional capital to develop the business, she experienced the most horrible episode of her life. She was summoned to court by the bank. It turned out that her partner had been unable to return the money he had borrowed and that Grandma, as the guarantor, had to pay it back herself.

All the members of my family were in a panic because the land comprised 90% of their assets. Grandma came to me and asked me to accompany her in her ancient car, a 1948 Morris. We travelled to various sacred sites and visited some prominent clerics, or *kiai*, of West Java. The purpose was clear: to find a way, *neangan tarekah*. *Tarekah*<sup>1</sup> is a Sundanese word which is close to the term *turuq* or the 'way of the orders' in Sufism. Grandma's *tarekah* was simply to find a way to solve her problem, not to perform any mystical practices. Visiting holy sites, spending a night in vigil in a sacred tomb and in the boarding house nearby were the main items in our itinerary.

We returned home to the village with lists of mystical chants written in Arabic, which were considered to be amulets. We were in a slightly more optimistic mood. Having travelled through the interior of the southern part of West Java, which in the 1970s had not yet been touched by paved hot-mix roads, or even a single concrete path, Grandma returned with her spirit refreshed. Several

months later, the court found that Grandma's partner had falsified the lease documents from the bank. After a year of struggling in court, Grandma won the case and got her titles to the family land back.

Ten years after the court case, as a young man, I went to the University of Indonesia in Jakarta to study Indonesian literature. During holidays, I frequently spent my days in the village where Grandma had retired from being a *tukang batik*. Most of her life was now dedicated to reading the Qur'an in study sessions (*pengajian*) in the village. I often asked her about the seven kinds of flower buds, the bowl of water and the cigar in the rice store. Her answers never satisfied me. She replied that she "just followed the *tali paranti*." In Sundanese, *tali* means a rope made from bamboo or the bark of a tree, *paranti* means a device, a tool, or custom. Thus, *tali paranti* is the string or rope taken from culture which is used to tie everything that is scattered: it is custom. I myself had an upbringing in the same culture as my grandmother, the customs of the traditional Sundanese Islam of Tasikmalaya.

Grandma also used to perform an old ritual to purify the rice harvested in a season. Some Sundanese still retain ritual practices related to the myth of Dewi Sri, the female deity who introduced the cultivation of rice to the people of Sunda (Wessing 1974: 207). From the point of view of the anthropology of Islam, as demonstrated by Geertz (1960/1976), Grandma's narratives could be seen as examples of the syncretic incorporation of Islam into the local environment. With respect to Sundanese society, Newland (2001) and Muhaimin (Muhaimin 1995:4-7) have taken the discussion further on the consequences of Geertz's concepts (1976). Exploring the three famous cultural categories proposed by Geertz of *priyayi*, *santri*, and *abangan* (Geertz 1976: 121, 227), Newland (2001) sees local Islam in West Java, particularly in the area around Garut, about 70 km from Pamijahan, as mainly syncretic.

However, the term 'syncretism' is in fact not as clear as crystal, at least not for Muhaimin, who studied Islamic practices in Cirebon, about 200 km to the North of Pamijahan (1995). Muhaimin (1995: 109) tries to comprehend the issue from a different angle, that of the concept of *ibadah*, or serving God. Instead of identifying a particular ritual action in Islam as syncretic or as part of *abangan* or *santri* practice, he uses two terms of exegesis: *ibadah* or not *ibadah*. A local custom can be transformed semiotically into a religiously acceptable act of Islamic *ibadah*. Thus various local practices may be identified as heretical and syncretic, but from the devotee's point of view this may not necessarily be the case. Often the devotee's *intention* may be overlooked. In Islam, particularly in the Syafe'i school of jurisprudence, intention (*niat*) should initiate a ritual, and the intention should even be pronounced clearly in the heart and on the lips. There is no *ibadah* without intention.

In the case of my story, some parts of Granmda's *tali paranti* were capable of being transformed into *ibadah* when she intended them to serve God. The demarcation of sacred and profane is fine because a particular act may be recognised as *ibadah* in certain circumstances but in others as non-*ibadah*. The contrast between *tali paranti* and 'religion', as stated in my grandmother's narratives then still leaves room for debate. Such narratives are easily found among the Sundanese, and even throughout the islands of Java. This phenomenon reflects the intersection between *tali paranti* and religion, and between these two poles there are people who create and produce narratives in order to comprehend the scattered 'signs' (Parmentier 1994 and 1997) around them.

Throughout this volume, I will discuss the nature and function of narratives at the sacred sites of Pamijahan or Safarwadi near Tasikmalaya in West Java. The *wali* in the title of my study, Shaykh Abdul Muhyi (1640-1715), was a holy man who still today mediates the wishes of the people of Pamijahan, as well as those of the pilgrims who come to the site from other areas. A negotiation occurs there between an ideal and reality, and this perpetuates the existence of Pamijahan as an important sacred site. To a large extent, this significance is found in the narratives relating to the site. By narrative, I mean a mode of communication in which people make an attempt to comprehend their various experiences within a framework of represented time. Narratives, predominantly the narratives of the *wali*, tow the past into the present.

This volume is a study of traditional narratives which are recited and received both by villagers and pilgrims in regard to the local pilgrimage (*ziarah*) tradition in Pamijahan, particularly at Shaykh Abdul Muhyi's sacred site. The narratives will be examined as part of the popular beliefs of Priangan Timur or the eastern part of West Java. Locating them in the wider context of Sundanese oral and written traditions, my investigation will illuminate the nature and function of such traditions in the particular case of Pamijahan.

The research will elucidate the role of the *kuncen*, the custodians of sacred sites, as guides and spiritual brokers who maintain the narratives. It will also be important to investigate the villagers' as well as visitors' view of the *kuncen* in regard to local pilgrimage. The study will also enhance comparative studies concerned with networks of holy men or saints (*wali*) on the island of Java (Pemberton 1994; Fox 1991: 20). I want to argue that people respond to, and participate in, saint veneration on pragmatic grounds. However, these grounds are subject to interpretation and contestation in time and space. In redefining their narratives, various individuals, such as custodians, Sufis, and even to some extent government functionaries, are considered to be authoritative persons by virtue of their capacity to conduct and manipulate narratives. As this argument develops, it will be important to understand the modes of signification in the village.

## B. Going to Pamijahan

I was brought up about 70 km from Pamijahan, the site of my fieldwork. The traditions of this village are not totally unfamiliar to me. After the sunset *maghrib* prayers, the leader (*imam*) of the congregation in the small mosque where I lived in Kampung Benda, Tasikmalaya, often recited a ritual *hadiyah*. This is a chant presented as a gift to the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, to a *wali*, or to relatives who have passed away. The name of Shaykh Abdul Muhyi was one of the names recited in this ritual *hadiyah*. My family and neighbours occasionally went on pilgrimages to Pamijahan. I myself went to Pamijahan for the first time when I was an undergraduate student. Subsequently I went there several more times, accompanying colleagues and relatives as they undertook pilgrimages.



**Figure 1. Pamijahan, West Java**

I came to Pamijahan for research in August 1996, initially spending almost seven months in the village. For the first three months, I stayed in a house belonging to the younger brother of a site custodian, a *kuncen*. However, in December 1996, I received a personal grant to do library research on Shaykh Abdul Muhyi's manuscripts in Leiden, the Netherlands, for a month, and I left the village. In March 1997 I returned to Pamijahan for another three months. At this time, a young Pamijahan scholar, Kang Undang, a graduate of State Institute of Islamic Studies in Bandung (IAIN Sunan Gunung Jati) and an immediate descendant of Abdul Muhyi, offered me shelter.

The first three months of my fieldwork in Pamijahan were spent getting oriented, undertaking a census, making maps and conducting interviews, both open and structured, with pilgrims. I called my field strategy *makan bubur panas*, or "sipping hot rice porridge". I started eating, as it were, from the edge, beginning with peripheral and marginal issues and proceeding gradually to the crucial, sacred and 'hot' topics in the village. I conducted my first interviews in

Panyalahan, a fringe hamlet in the village complex of Pamijahan, and only later moved on to interviews in Pamijahan proper. In the view of villagers, Panyalahan is a less sacred site than Pamijahan. However, as I will discuss later, Panyalahan often challenges the authority of Pamijahan.

At this stage in my work, I had the opportunity to interview the old *kuncen* of Panyalahan as well as his predecessor. Both have now passed away. I also had access for the first time to Panyalahan's sacred manuscripts. My reason for pursuing the *makan bubur panas* strategy was that I had to obtain a smooth entry to the village by first learning its various modes of signification without intruding into village affairs. For this reason I conducted only open interviews, allowing informants to talk as long as they wanted. I did not interrupt what they had to say unless there were technical reasons to do so.

For the next three months after I had gathered initial data from Panyalahan in the outer areas of Pamijahan, I focused on Pamijahan itself. For several reasons gathering data in Pamijahan was not easy. Some of prominent custodians, the *kuncen* or key bearers, had encountered bad experiences with students and university researchers who had come to the village a year before. They felt scrutinised, spied on, and disturbed by the bombardment of questions regarding the legitimacy of *ziarah* and the relationship of *ziarah* to Islamic doctrines. It is widely known that reformist Islamic organizations such as the Muhammadiyah and Persatuan Islam (Persis) do not agree with local *ziarah* practices in rural areas. Neither the *kuncen* nor the villagers wanted to be subjected to this endless delicate debate. Their reluctance to be drawn into such debates is not because they lack the knowledge to engage in them, but because, according to them, it would be a waste of time and disruptive to their lives. More than that, they later confessed to me that some researchers had removed certain written materials from the village. One *kuncen* asked me to go to Tasikmalaya to find a manuscript 'borrowed' four months before by a lecturer from the university in Tasikmalaya. Slowly I learned what to do and what not to do in the village.

So it was helpful not to ask difficult structured questions in the first stages of my fieldwork but rather to present myself as a student who wanted to know the teachings of the ancestors by allowing the villagers to perform as 'teachers'. I did not make critical field notes in front of them but rather allowed the local people to teach and tell. However, I was learning about iconic, indexical, and symbolical signs through their stories, performances, rituals, and other socially recognised acts. Rather than provoking them with structured questions, I simply joined in their daily schedule.

Informants often invited me to go to chat and smoke with them in a small shelter in the neighbourhood called Batu Ngijing near the Pamijahan river. The villagers of Pamijahan are forbidden to smoke in the inner sacred territory of the village (see Chapter 5) so they move to a less sacred area to gather and relax after a day

in the paddy fields or working as guides for pilgrims. This unassuming spot is important in village affairs. It has become an informal place of assembly where people discuss issues in their village. Thanks to my frequent presence in this place, I found myself often invited to the homes of key persons in local Sufi orders and in the guild of site custodians (*pakuncenan*).

The final stage of my fieldwork was quite different from the previous ones. I had to check the validity of some crucial categories. For me, this was the most challenging phase because now I had to provoke the villagers with a host of structured questions. It was at this stage that I asked for permission to attend Sufi rituals and received permission to see inside the tomb of Shaykh Abdul Muhyi. It was also at this stage that issues of precedence and contestation in village society became evident. This was the most difficult phase of my work because I had to understand this contestation without disturbing villagers' daily activities. I also had to study a Sufi manual, a process that could only occur under the guidance of a Sufi master. In March 1997, I returned to Canberra but again in January 2000 went back to Pamijahan, updating my data and gathering new information from the village itself and from government offices in Tasikmalaya.

Essentially my research was an exercise in the implementation of, and testing of, a semiotic approach to the understanding of culture within the scholarly tradition initiated by the American philosopher C.S. Peirce (1839-1914). This meant pursuing the Peircean notion that signs have three key dimensions: representamen, referent and interpretant. I set out to collect data on the properties of representamens in Pamijahan. I then strove to comprehend their references based on the assumptions of the villagers. Finally, I tried to reach an understanding of the relationship between representamens and their reference within the complex discourse and interpretation of the interpretants there. This is the framework which informs the structure of the volume.

## **C. Signs**

Following the penetration of cultural studies and the humanities by the legacy of Saussure, Peirce has now been 're-invented' by a diverse group of scholars but not exclusively associated with the university of Chicago (cf. Sebeok 1997). Semiotics has become widely known as the 'science of signs' or, if not a science, it is a method of unveiling signification in the production of signs (Eco 1979: 32, 1999: 12). Saussure and Peirce, the two founders of semiotics, were interested in the nature of signs in our lives, but they developed different theoretical frameworks. Saussure is better known as a structuralist while Peirce is, according to his followers, a proponent of pragmatics (Parmentier 1987, 1994 and 1997).

Saussurean structuralist semiotics focuses on the binary relation within signs between a 'signifier' and a 'signified', though there is no compulsory relation

between the form of the signifier and its signified reference. The meaning of signs is derived from 'differences' or contrasts within a wider, total, synchronic, or timeless system. The Saussurean view has provided researchers in various areas with an explicit theoretical framework and the results, in many instances, have been marvellous. In the study of culture, Lévi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss 1968-1977) is the most prominent descendant of Saussurean semiotics. The utility of binary logic is seen most clearly in his famous essay on "The Story of *Asdiwal*". Lévi-Strauss developed linguistics-based Saussurean semiotics into structuralist anthropology by drawing on aspects of Russian formalism in his analysis of the story. The result is a schema or model. Unlike Saussure, who was deeply concerned with linguistic models, Lévi-Strauss goes further by proposing a model of social behaviour or social structure. A structure in Lévi-Strauss's view is similar to Saussure's concept of 'deep structure' in language which provides a 'schema' or a cognitive framework for the ordering of meaning. In other words, Lévi-Strauss and Saussure are more interested in studying the structure of phenomena on a synchronic level (*langue*) than phenomena in use (*parole*). Pragmatic semiotics (the study of phenomena in use) is derived from the theory of signs introduced by Peirce. He stresses the importance of semiosis in which signs can grow as human culture grows. Unlike Saussure who freezes the sign in synchronic analysis, Peirce locates signs within process and points explicitly to the importance of the 'interpretant'. This view is very important in understanding the complexity of culture, particularly in the post-modern and post-colonial period where Saussurean and Lévi-Strausseau views of cognitive patterns are challenged by the rapidity of social and cultural transformations. For Peirce, the sign is accordingly fluid rather than frozen.

To comprehend Peirce's semiotics we have to know his main doctrine of the sign. According to Peirce, "A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity..." (Noth 1990: 42) Accordingly, there are three conditions that permit a phenomenon to qualify as a sign. First, it should be come to our perception. Second, it should refer to a referent, and third, it should be interpretable or generate interpretation. Furthermore, signs should be anchored in a context and in time. The Saussurean paradigm omits agency or the subject in the process of semiosis, but Peirce opens the way to research on the interpretations made by people. (Rochberg-Halton 1986: 45-70)

Later theoretical investigation reveals that a process of signification not only deals with the conventionalised relation between signifier and signified but also other kinds of relations which provide the framework for other unintentional signs, both linguistic and non-linguistic (Eco 1979: 190-216). In other words, a process of communication cannot always be assumed to have just a 'sender' and 'receiver'. The signification can be actively engaged without the existence of a sender. In this regard, Clifford Geertz (1973) asserts

...what Lévi-Strauss has made for himself is an infernal culture machine. It annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular mind of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all (1973:355).

In his *Religion of Java* (1960/1976) Clifford Geertz answers the shortcomings of Saussurean structuralism by utilising local knowledge. Unlike Lévi-Strauss and Saussure, he focuses on *parole* rather than *langue*. The variants of Javanese religion are a fabulous example of his phenomenological framework. If we follow structuralist semiotics, the main project in Pamijahan would focus on linear and contrastive analyses of signs, finding the regularity underlying the system of signs functioning in the area. It would be like studying a building by making inventories, classifications and generalisations in order to get a view of the structure behind the building. This project would not be interested in the 'cultivation' of signs where the building might later be used by other tenants, or be sold, or even be neglected. Yet, in reality there is much opportunity for the owner of the signs and for the receiver of the signs to negotiate or to make transactions regarding the building, or structure. This does not mean that our knowledge of the formal regulation of the building is unnoteworthy. It is just a choice we make.

There is no room in this volume to detail further the intersections and disjunctions between the views of Saussure and Peirce. I am not concerned with the debate about the nature of signs but rather will refer to their work in general terms for the important insights it gives into the signification process in the society of Pamijahan. The utility of Peircean semiotics in studying culture, to some extent, has been drawn upon by Turner (1967) and Geertz (1976) even though these masters of 'cultural performative' and 'interpretative' analysis do not mention explicitly the connection between their analytical frameworks and Peirce's work (Parmentier 1997: 13-14). Both Turner and Geertz apply an analytical framework that to some extent displays triadic concepts similar to those of Peirce (Colapietro 1996, Mertz 1985). Accordingly both Turner and Geertz can also be located in the domain of pragmatism where the problem of 'subject' or 'agency' is central. Geertz's fascinating 'thick description' is seen as a preliminary semiotic project in anthropology. As argued by Parmentier (Parmentier 1997), Geertz' interpretative study is lacking in the area of epistemology.

His work does not advance the technical grasp of semiotic anthropology. His work does not advance the technical grasp of the types and classification of sign relations; his ethnographic demonstrations fail to explore the structure of semiotic codes as presupposed systems of interpretants. ...his focus on textually mediated self-understanding neglects the powerful ways that symbols can be manipulated to constrain,



confuse, and control the understanding of those not in a privileged position in a society. The Geertzian program of a 'natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of vehicles of meaning (1983:118) is only the prologue to a full-fledged semiotic anthropology (Parmentier 1997, 13-14).

To follow Parmentier's argument, Geertz's interpretive legacy does not provide the student of culture with a strong analytical tool. In my view, Geertz (especially 1993 and 1973) is able to fill a gap in the Saussurean tradition by accessing local knowledge, making it a cultural category that can be compared and tested by other scholars or researchers. However, Geertz's lack of explicit analytical unities (Geertz 1973) makes his interpretative program difficult to imagine for the student of semiotics or anthropology. His famous categorisation of the variants of Javanese religion is a good example of how problematic this issue can be. Recent studies argue that what has been drawn by Geertz in the *Religion of Java*, the *santri*, *priyayi*, and *abangan* categories, are not strict iconic or indexical signs referring to certain domains in Javanese culture but rather 'fluid' and 'cultivated' signs (Bachtar 1992). In my perspective, this gap can be filled by pragmatic semiotics where signs flow through the times.

If customs, or *tali paranti* are seen as signs, they can be examined in terms of three semiotic levels. The first is as signs as people understand them. The second is the position of the signs in relation to other signs in the same cultural framework. The third is the way signs are used in everyday life. Turner's 'ritual forest' (Turner 1967), for instance, to some extent reflects the triadic dimension of the Peircean sign: icon, index, and symbol (see also Rochberg-Halton 1986; Parmentier 1997).

## D. Narratives

The study of narrative has passed beyond the borders of the discipline of literature (Prickett 2002:2). An economist recognising the importance of narrative states "Economists cannot predict much, and certainly cannot predict profitability. If they were so smart they would be rich" (McCloskey 1990:10). McCloskey claims that economists work partly as storytellers whose studies would be better if their explanations could be shown in accepted narrative form. The same argument has been used by Jackson in the field of legal practice. (Jackson 1990: 27) Jackson found that judicial mechanisms are undoubtedly influenced by strategies employed in narrative. The jury is not concerned with the relevant facts only but also with "the manner of telling the evidence". He gives the example of middle class witnesses who tend to be called rather than people of a marginal class because jurors, who also come mainly from the middle class, can easily 'translate' such witnesses' stories. The same narrative mode is found in historical writing. White (1986) asserts that historians describe events

according to stock narratives which live in society or in the minds of readers. In other words, narrative can be found in every domain of culture so that, according to Miller "Nothing seems more natural and universal to human beings than the telling of stories". (Miller 1990: 66) It is arguable then that narrative has penetrated different disciplines in spite of the fact that 'narrative' as an epistemological unit has been overtly neglected by disciplines other than cultural studies and the humanities (Kreiwirth 2000: 293-294).

However, the disciplines of rhetoric, literary studies, sociolinguistics and anthropology have produced a vast array of literature studying homo-*fabula*. In this volume I shall not describe the historical study of narrative but rather discuss the utility of narrative frameworks, particularly those influenced by semiotics. These theoretical departures are relevant in clarifying the nature of narrative in traditional societies where characteristically narrators and audiences interact intensively.

Structuralism has led literary studies into the spirit of scientific inquiry, where critics seek to find a model of a particular genre based on various works studied in the light of structures. They try, for instance, to find universal plots. Northrop Frye's book, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1969) is based on such assumptions. His followers such as Scholes (1974) modify the framework by focusing on how narrative changes over time. They found that changes only occur on the level of social topics, while the stock of characters and actions remains fundamentally stable. They set up a hypothetical, deductive method based on their assumptions about the nature of narrative, which they have applied and tested on particular literary narratives. Collective awareness is a crucial point of departure for the structuralist: societies are recognised as have an underlying mechanism to organise and classify experience. Following Lévi-Strauss, myth, with its paradigmatic deep structures, is the primary source of meaning (Harari 1979: 19-21).

Somewhat later, post structuralism tried to modify the work of its predecessors; post-structuralists are structuralists aware of their previous mistakes. They argue that literary meaning not only depends on the material content of texts but also on the meaning created by the readers (Culler 1975b:192). On such assumptions, narrative theorists have expanded their frameworks to incorporate reader response. Such an approach resembles communication theory which, in some respects, has provided a foundation for theorising the role of the reader. The audience can grasp meaning only in the complete utterance. Messages are delivered through a particular context of references and codes. Communication also rests on contact between the sender and receiver. Reader response approaches develop a perspective of narrative by "producing its own 'reader' and 'listener'. In creating meaning, readers use their own conventions to understand a narrative or a text (Culler, 1975b: 192). In the last few decades, there has been an emergence

of Jakobsonian and Peircean frameworks for studying 'narrative in culture' in the Austronesian region as found in the work of Fox and Parmentier.

James Fox, in his study of Rotinese narratives (Fox 1986), provides a good example of how structuralism must be anchored in context. In Roti, structure is often negotiated and used differently according to a context of 'precedence'. A metaphor of itinerary in Rotinese narratives, which has created a 'trajectory and sedimented path' in society, is subject to multivocality in daily practices (Fox 1997:6).

I apply the semiotic-anthropological perspective of Fox and Parmentier to Pamijahan for several reasons. The nature and function of narrative in Pamijahan are very different from narrative as it is conceived by modern Indonesian literary scholars, where fictionality, stylistics, aesthetics, canon and genre have been important foci.

Indonesian and Malay critics of literature are to some extent indebted to Winstedt who, unlike Dutch scholars, at an early stage attempted to theorise the concept of literature (*sastra*) in the Malay world in his *History of Classical Malay Literature* (Winstedt 1969). On the first page, Winstedt states clearly what *sastra* is and how it is related to history.

Literature strictly came into being with the art of writing, but long before letters were shaped, there existed the material of literature, words spoken in verse to waken emotion by the beauty of sound and words spoken in prose to appeal to reason by the beauty of sense... (Winstedt 1969, 1)

So *sastra* should 'appeal to reason by the beauty of sense'. The simple syllogism that 'what is not beautiful is not *sastra*' applies. Winstedt's definition is useful for the discussion of the verse forms of the *pantun* and *syair*, or Malay romances, because these genres are regulated by the 'canon of beauty'. However, undergraduate students in Indonesia may be somewhat confused when they glance through *A History of Classical Malay Literature*. Within his concept of 'beauty', Winstedt includes a range of various written and oral genres to which 'canon', 'fictionality' (in Rene Wellek's terms, 1976/8), authorship, and other Western literary concepts cannot easily be applied. In what terms can we define the concept of beauty in, say, the Malay romance *Hikayat Sama'un* on one hand, and the 'theological catechisms' written by Nur al-Din al-Raniri in 17<sup>th</sup> century Aceh on the other?

Furthermore, another difficulty met by the student lies in historically based definitions like *sastra modern* and *sastra lama*, or 'modern literature' vs 'classical literature'. The mere concept of *sastra tradisional*, or 'traditional literature' is fraught with difficulty. For example, there is an implicit suggestion in Winstedt's book that any written material not published in Latin script by some 'publishing house' or other, or not printed on a 'Gutenberg machine' should be classified as

'classical literature'. Winstedt is probably right, if he is taking his definition from the dictionary of Malay compiled by Wilkinson. Wilkinson (1959:1025) states that the term *sastera* is originally from Sanskrit *shastra*, meaning the Hindu sacred books, or in the Malay Archipelago, books of divination and astrological tables.

The word *sastra*, or literary work, in the contemporary Indonesian context is equally ambiguous. Critics divide *sastra* into two main categories based on period, patronage, content, and canon. These are *sastra lama* (old literature) and *sastra modern* (modern literature). *Sastra lama* is associated with literary works written in pre-modern Indonesia. Zuber Usman (1963: 9) defines *kesusastraan lama* as "literary works produced before Abdullah bin Abdulkadir Munsyi". The reason is simply that Abdullah had departed from tradition and his literary expression, in content and style, was close to that of daily life. He states:

...pokok jang ditjeritakannya sudah agak berlainan dengan jang ditjeritakan oleh pengarang-pengarang sebelumnya. ... Tentang tjeritranya bukan lagi mentjeritrakan dewa-dewa, raksasa-raksasa atau dongeng jang muluk-muluk dengan puterinya jang tjantik djelita serta dengan istananja jang indah permai... Abdullah mentjeritakan kehidupannya sendiri.... (Usman 1963: 9-11)

...the story told is different from those of previous authors (in 'old literature')... The story is no longer about the gods, giants, or fabulous fairy tales with beautiful princesses and magnificent castles... Abdullah tells about his own world...

Thus, the *Hikayat Sri Rama*, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Babad Tanah Jawi*, *Babad Pajajaran*, *Sejarah Melayu* can all be found under the one heading of *sastra lama*. On the other hand, students reading Teeuw's *Modern Indonesian Literature* (1979) are led to believe that Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Bumi Manusia* and Achdiat K. Mihadja's *Atheis* are examples of *sastra Indonesia modern*, Indonesian modern literature, because they were written after the creation of the modern Indonesian state. Clearly the boundaries between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' literature represent more ideologically loaded categories than definitions according to internal literary properties. Furthermore, there is a tendency for critics and literary students to pay more attention to the aesthetics and canonicity of the texts. Thus in modern Indonesian literature, as in Western literature, there are *belles lettres* and pulp works (also called *sastra pop* or *sastra picisan*) and in the category of traditional literature there is chronicle, fable, myth and legend. A work of literature may be seen solely as an artistic work without any reference to the real world, or it may be perceived as having reference in the real world. There are many debates in the weekly columns of newspapers addressing these issues, for example whether a particular work is good enough to be classified as *karya sastra* or not.

Such notions about modern Indonesian literature seem to be alien when applied to so-called *sastra lama*. I once acted as an examiner in an honours level examination, or *ujian sarjana*, in literary studies in the Faculty of Letters of the University of Indonesia. I put a simple question to the student candidate: what is literature? One of the main variables in literary studies - a variable important to my discussion here - is 'fiction' or fictionality (in Indonesian *rekaan*). Literature is fiction! Because I had been trained in 'old' Indonesian literature and philology, I brought to the examination three kinds of manuscript: the *Hikayat Sri Rama* (a Malay romance), the *Sejarah Melayu* (a chronicle) and *Hill al-Zill* (a mystical work on the 'Shadow of God' in the world). I asked whether these manuscripts were literature. The answers were interesting enough to be outlined here. The *Hikayat Sri Rama*, said the candidate, is a work of literature (*karya sastra*), the *Sejarah Melayu* is a work of historical literature (*sastra sejarah*), and *Hill al-Zill* is a work of literature (*karya sastra*) but not fiction. My student was rather hesitant to describe the last one because she had previously defined *karya sastra* as fiction. *Hill al-Zill*, according to her reading of the manuscript was not fiction. Thus, she tactically redefined her answer. The student demonstrated her reliance on Wellek's book (Wellek 1955-1992) which had become the most famous text book in the Faculty in the late 1980s. It is devoted to the notion of fictionality in literary works.

What is *sastra* is not so easy to describe, not only for undergraduate students but also for literary critics and scholars. 'Fictional narrative' is made up, invented, a product of the imagination. For Lamarque however, 'fictional' narrative and 'factual' narrative resemble each other in terms of their "formal features - time, structure, voice, perspective; and in semantic features - truth, correspondence with the facts, or reference" (Lamarque, 1990; cf. Culler, 1975a). Ambiguous assumptions about traditional literature, *sastra tradisional*, and classical literature, *sastra lama*, need further explanation. Ambiguities are not only reflected in the definitions of the genres but also in the methodologies and frameworks applied to research on such materials. No doubt philologists have been among the principal agents providing us with information about these genres. Starting with the need for teaching materials for colonial administrators and missionaries, they collected and carefully studied written materials from the archipelago. In time, philological studies have made important contributions to defining what should be recognised as *sastra* and what not.

Sometimes problematic transmission occurs. Scribes may use various 'horizontal' or contemporaneous sources as materials to write their own 'hybrid' versions of a text. In Indonesia, the Dutch translated, transcribed, and transliterated texts from the local bibliotheca. The locals often retranslated or copied the Dutch version back into their tradition. Accordingly, Robson proposes that the main task of philology is 'making a text accessible' (Robson 1988) by trying to identify some putative 'original' lost in the past. However, the originality as often

imagined by the 'stemma students' cannot be applied properly (e.g. Brakel 1977: 105:113). Works of traditional literature are created in 'open tradition' where originality and authorship are not crucial issues. In the eyes of the traditional communal society, the text should be useful, not just beautiful in Winstedt's terms.

Robson (1988) observes that the urge to demonstrate the usefulness of classical literature by Indonesian scholars is rather an emotive endeavour due to the notion of 'cultural heritage' (*warisan kebudayaan*). He states,

In an Indonesian context this is especially emotive because it calls to mind those from whom one receives a 'warisan' (inheritance) - one's elders and ancestors, and it is well known that these are deserving of high respect, so that it becomes no less than a moral duty to care for what they have left behind for us, their living descendants... Indonesian scholars on the other hand like to point to the moral lessons to be found in classical literary works (Robson 1988, 6)

Robson's proposal has brought a new perspective to the study of Indonesian classical literature within a philological approach. However, 'reader expectation' is also problematic, particularly in the light of recent developments in post-colonial theory, where the task is to see post-colonial discourses from the point of view of colonized subjects. There is a legitimate post-colonial question that can be applied in the field of manuscript study in Indonesia: the necessity to re-read a discourse that is related to the colonized people but created in post-colonial times (Becker, 1989).

It is important to provide access to the wider world, but it is even more important to understand why a certain community might have no proper access to their own heritage. In this case, the Indonesian philologist, Sri Wulan Rujati Mulyadi (1994:79) highlights the disappearance of manuscripts, their very extinction, or *kemusnahan naskah*. Mulyadi clarifies two kind of extinction: unintentional and intentional. Climate, natural disasters, and unskilled conservation practices cause the loss of manuscripts or deterioration in their quality (Mulyadi 1994: 79-86). But there is also a lot of evidence that manuscripts have also been burned during or seized for political reasons and borne off to overseas collections wars (Alfian 1987: 130-136). The Balinese and Achenese experienced a huge loss of manuscripts in their holy wars with the Dutch invaders. In the 19th century, when orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries travelled through the interior of Java, they too started collecting manuscripts. Indeed, these are legitimate questions regarding the manuscript acquisition. Even more than this, colonial policy in culture and education influenced what people should read and write in the archipelago. The dynamic intersection with colonial powers, war, national government policies, and pseudo collectors has created a number of 'lacunae' in the local bibliotheca.

We cannot stop the times. However, there is in all of this a critically important lesson for me as a responsible student of culture and philology, that is, to look at manuscripts which record various local narratives in the context of the communities that produced them (Becker 1995). In other words, the work of a diligent philologist should extend to the people, the scribes, and the communities that sustain these materials. Before I decided on Pamijahan as my field site, I had trekked through various old villages around Tasikmalaya and Garut in the southeastern quarter of West Java. I was confronted with a situation in which the main written narratives of villages had been removed from their local contexts by various agencies, whether deliberately or not. The people of Kampung Naga near Tasikmalaya, for example, told me that their connection to their past had been broken when what they called “the colonial apparatus” borrowed their manuscripts in the 1920s, and then when the army of the Darul Islam Movement burned their village in about 1959. The same situation also occurred in Pamijahan. Only a few manuscripts of good quality are now available for reading in the village. There is also the irony that when Indonesian Government tried to preserve traditional manuscripts by giving funding to the researchers, some researchers abused this by borrowing sacred manuscripts from villagers and ‘forgetting’ to return them. In other cases, the researchers copied manuscripts, giving the copies to the villagers while retaining the originals.

In Pamijahan and its neighbouring areas, there are a number of written and oral narratives about the past. These narratives are not only used in reading performances, or as manuals, or as cultural reference works but are also perceived as sacred ‘signs of’ and ‘signs in’ the past. It is very evident that the meaning of narratives is constructed through diverse decoding modes. Thus for my purposes, I will use the term ‘narrative’ instead of *sastra* for the narrative materials I encountered in Pamijahan.

## E. Research Questions

Providing local narratives to ‘the world’ within philological projects is an important task that deserves attention. However, in the case of Pamijahan, it is also legitimate to go beyond the role of text provider. We can ask the question how do the villagers or the owners of the texts, or the scribes, relate to the references suggested by particular narratives? What role does a particular narrative have in local history? Who told, and who still tells, the stories? How does the group identity of the narrators affect this history? Which are the most important groups appreciating or listening to the stories? We can also posit other questions in temporal perspective. For example, how did the narratives develop? How have certain stories followed different paths of evolution? What impact do different narratives have on villagers’ daily activities? What do certain narratives have to tell us about historical awareness? Which stories are crucial

for villagers and which not? In addition, we might list still other legitimate questions on narratives, depending on our interest.

The 'Gutenberg' culture of print, colonialism, and the globalisation of information have penetrated to the level of local culture. Unlike the people of cosmopolitan societies who can easily and conveniently go to fine book stores or libraries or to the internet, the Pamijahanese have to understand their practice, ritual, identity and the past from the only available narrative sources in the village. They have to negotiate with the changing times and the external world, including a capitalistic mass media and often devious and predatory politicians. They have to comprehend all the scattered signs around them. More than that, they have to negotiate diverse signs, religious texts, *tali paranti*, the management of sacred sites, *ziarah* and *tarekat*. Their narratives are one of the media they possess to understand what is happening in and around their village. This volume builds on the various accounts of traditional narratives, popular practices and custom, or *tali paranti*, to address the following specific questions:

1. What narratives are the most important to the people of Pamijahan?<sup>2</sup>
2. What kinds of references are designated by the people's narratives?
3. How and why do the people of Pamijahan, as interpretants, make particular interpretations of these narratives?

My argument in relation to the first question is that the peoples' narratives are vastly more complex than is assumed in studies based on literary or philological approaches. In Pamijahan I observed that manuscripts are perceived not only as written materials but also as artefacts and as evidence in various cultural debates. All the important manuscripts preserved in the village are concerned with the founding of the village, Sufism, and pilgrimage, or they are collections of written amulets. Access to these manuscripts is generally only possible through ritual and initiation. Because this access is limited, there is room for manipulating the significance of the artefacts to bolster social precedence within the village. The manuscripts supply people with a cultural category related to the concept of space and place. To be a cultural representamen is to be approved by the *tali paranti* or 'grounding' of village culture. So my first question relates to the first dimension of Peircean semiotics where the properties of signs are questioned.

My argument concerning the second question – the semantic dimension or references of signs in the village – is that most narratives (or signs) in the village appear in three modes: as icon, index, and symbol. For most villagers a manuscript can exist as an iconic sign when it refers to the words of ancestors. In this guise, it is a 'sign in the past'. Such iconic references are found in the narratives of ancestors, 'the path', space, places, Sufism and pilgrimage (*ziarah*). The arrangement of spatial concepts and social structure carries reference to the ancestors' itinerary or the metaphors of kinship and the imagined space of the *pongpok* (sides). In this respect, iconic signs, whether present in narratives or in



material artefacts of the culture, are oriented to the past without, to borrow Parmentier's words, "the actual spatio-temporal existence of the represented object" (Parmentier 1994). It is necessary to add that all narratives concerned with the village founders are also present in 'contiguity mode' or as indexical signs. The narratives in indexical modes function as a discourse or experience in the present of the Pamijahanese. They are narratives pertaining to the past but they tell about the references of the past from the point of view of present narrators. The written and oral material collected and broadcast by the guild of custodians are framed in this mode.

Finally, my research in Pamijahan suggests that the signs *of* the past and the signs *in* the past are not necessarily coherent and frozen. In fact, it reveals fluid signs where the *tali paranti*, ritual action and sacred text are continuously negotiated. The regimentation of meanings is often undertaken by the custodians at the sacred sites, but at the same time different groups in society contest this process by focusing on different source narratives. Precedence becomes a crucial topic in the village. More than that, the practice of pilgrimage in Pamijahan invites outsiders such as pilgrims, government functionaries and religious organizations to become involved in village affairs. There is no doubt that tradition and sacred narratives are thereby opened to pragmatic perception.

## F. Volume Structure

This volume is divided into three main parts. The first part, Chapters 2 and 3, provides an overview of signs in the village of Pamijahan. Chapter 2 describes Pamijahan as a cultural domain and a modern political entity within the Republic of Indonesia. Chapter 3 describes in philological style the most important signs appearing in traditional written narratives. The discussion focusses on the manuscripts found in the village of Pamijahan and in neighbouring areas that are perceived by villagers as important references.

The second part of the volume, Chapter 4 to 7, examines the references of the signs, whether these appear in written or oral narrative form, in artefacts or in social performance. Chapter 4 describes the references of narratives based on their internal and external properties. The chapter argues that the formal synchronic and pragmatic regulation of the narrative of the ancestors is expressed schematically and iconically in the social structure of the village. Chapter 5 discusses a further implication of the references of narratives described in Chapter 4. In essence, this chapter argues that iconic signs are related to the itinerary of journeys undertaken by Shaykh Abdul Muhyi, the founding ancestor of the village. These signs become the references of the narratives of space. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the nature and meaning of Sundanese Sufi narratives in the villagers' context. I argue that these narratives of Sufism not only connect the village to the wider world of the orders (*tarekat*) and of Sufi teachings but also have profound symbolic significance for those who hold the manuscripts in their

possession. In sum, the second part of the volume examines the semantic dimension of narratives in the village. I argue that the references of the narratives are heavily contextualized by various modes and actions. The meaning of signs is not fixed and can appear in various modes of semiosis.

The third part of the volume examines the interpretants or the process of negotiation between people and the sacred signs in narratives by focusing on the phenomena of a Sufi order (*tarekat*) in Pamijahan and of pilgrimage (*ziarah*). Both *tarekat* and *ziarah* provide a dense web of signs and agencies. The main argument of these chapters is that the relationships between custom or *tali paranti*, religion and the people are complex. The concept of *ibadah*, the issue of precedence, popular practices, and external influences are all intermingled and shape the villagers' daily activities. Through these narratives, people try to comprehend this scattering of signs.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I will use the term *tarekat* instead of Sufism.

<sup>2</sup> In Sundanese literary genres we find a number of terms that are associated with narrative, most notably *riwayat*, *carita*, *sajarah*, *babad*, *sasakala*, *dongeng* and *carios*.