Kith and Kin: Theft, Strangeness, and Suspicions Within

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Abstract:
In his pioneering essay, “The Stranger”, Simmel reminds us that strangeness tinges all human relations—even the most intimate or familiar. Some societies reconcile this apparent paradox by projecting strangeness onto outsiders, but this strategy is not universal. In this paper, I demonstrate that strangeness and intimacy are managed differently in Tegalgaring, a village in rural Java. In Tegalgaring village, social interaction in the built environment and understandings of theft render the ‘organically connected’ person strange. In the back of the house, which is the preserve of kith and kin, doors and cupboards are locked. By contrast, open gates, a relaxed trespass etiquette, a veranda which is open to passers-by, and open front doors, welcome the outsider. The demands of maintaining outwardly harmonious relations among family, neighbours, and friends mean that the ‘disappearance’ of an object is usually euphemistically ascribed to ‘outsiders’. In practice, unresolved suspicions are directed towards family, acquaintances, and neighbours. Instead of being projected ‘outside’ the group, strangeness permeates ‘close’ relations and ‘inner’ spaces.

Estrangement and Intimacy
Dichotomies of near-far, close-distant, inside-outside, and intimate-strange structure understandings of reality and social relations in many cultures. In his pioneering essay, “The Stranger”, Simmel (1950:402) demonstrates how a “group” of people who are “organically connected” (1950:404) constructs the person “outside” (1950:402) the group as a stranger. However, it is not just within ‘European’ cultures that these dichotomies operate. Fox (1995), for example, analyses origin myths in Austronesian cultures (cultures which predominate in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific) and finds inside–outside categories to be widespread. As with most myths (Barthes 1973), these origin myths explain how a people was created and also legitimise power.
relations. Significant as these dichotomies are in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966), they can also be subject to inconsistencies or contradictions.

One such contradiction is the “unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation” (Simmel 1950:402). As Simmel (1950:406) notes, strangeness tinges all human relations, even the most intimate or familiar. Conversely, estranged relations possess a degree of commonality—strangers are “inner enemies” (1950:402). A similar paradox can be seen in the Austronesian origin myths. Typically in these myths, an outsider comes to the land, marries the ruler’s daughter, and subsequently usurps the ruler. The categories of inside and outside, which structure these narratives, are unstable from the outset. The outsider—marrying the ruler’s daughter, and, through their progeny, creating the people—becomes the archetypical insider (Fox 1995). These cases present a logical challenge to important categories of familiar-strange and inside-outside. So what strategies do societies turn to in order to manage the paradox of intimate estrangement?

I was confronted by how differently the estrangement of intimacy can be managed after researching ‘sorcerer’ killings in Indonesia. I spent one year (2001-2002) conducting fieldwork based mostly in Tegalgaring village in Banyuwangi District (population 1,500,000) in Java. Killings of ‘sorcerers’ occur intermittently (two or three a year would not be unusual) in rural Banyuwangi, although several times over the past half-century, there have been ‘outbreaks’, during which killings have become more frequent. Most often the killers of ‘sorcerers’ are closely related to the victims. In almost all cases, they are neighbours, family, and/or friends. In an atmosphere of reprisal, if you are a ‘sorcerer’, the people you fear the most are those who are closest to you. However, it is not only with regard to ‘sorcery’ reprisals that an estrangement permeates intimate relations. In this paper, I demonstrate that the way in which local residents understand theft and interact with the built space is indicative of this paradox. My paper contributes to Simmel’s theory as it points to another strategy by which a society manages the strangeness of intimacy—instead of being projected onto the outsider, strangeness is focused on neighbours, family, and friends.
Researching and Living in Tegalgaring

Doing fieldwork, I became quite familiar, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, with estrangement. Informally, I was labelled ‘Dutchman’ (londo) or ‘Tourist’ (turis)—which, as an Australian researcher, I found equally disappointing. Formally, I was ‘foreign’ (asing) or ‘different’ (liyo). Like Simmel’s stranger, I was one in whom people found few unique similarities. Participants focused rather on our common bonds as humans, as reflected in our discussions on general topics ranging from redemption to soccer glory. My rather idealistic conception of these relationships was shattered when I discovered that my host-brother had been taking money from me for some time. I initially thought it was because I was ‘wealthier’ than most in the village. I also ascribed it to my outsider status. In time, I was comforted and surprised to realise that my experience was rather less exceptional than I had imagined. As most ethnographers find, my outsider status also entailed privileged access to the confidences of participants. I realised that these participants also suspected their neighbours, friends, and even members of their own family as being responsible for things that ‘go missing’. The findings in the following pages are based on these confidences and other observations.

Communal Life

Like the majority of inhabitants of rural Banyuwangi, the 5,000 inhabitants of Tegalgaring village are Osing. The Osing people are an Austronesian ethnic group who are ‘native’ to the area. They speak one of ten dialects of the Javanese language (Beatty 1999:22, 24), and the broad patterns of their social and religious life are similar to the Javanese. The ‘organic connection’ that Simmel refers to is, in Tegalgaring village, realised in the bonds of communal life. These consist, primarily, in relations between family, neighbours, and acquaintances.

Kinship in rural Banyuwangi, like the Javanese kinship system (Geertz 1961:2; Jay 1969; Koentjaraningrat 1985:148-154), is bilateral. The notion of ‘family’ or ‘kin’ (famili, dolore) incorporates all the descendants of one’s great-grandparents (such as ‘second cousins’). The most important kinship group is the nuclear family. It consists primarily of a wife who is responsible for domestic chores, a husband who is responsible for providing a livelihood (rejeki), and children. Nuclear families tend to reside in single households. An extended family of grandparents, older unmarried
relatives, and children, often fostered from poorer relatives, may also reside in the
same household.

‘Neighbour’ (tetangga, tonggo) is defined by an unspoken, and not particularly
rigorous, principle of proximity to a household. As in other parts of rural Java (Jay
1969:86), this element of social organisation is locality based, and dependent on
propinquity. The most important neighbour is the next-door neighbour, or the one
over the road. The stringency and character of neighbourly rights and responsibilities
decrease with distance. Generally, in large villages (over a hundred households), at a
distance of more than, say, four households, there are no special neighbourly rights
and responsibilities. But those households which are closer are paramount in the
economy of daily life in Banyuwangi. Neighbouring women together care for
children, shoo chickens from drying crops, go to the river to bathe, wash and hang out
clothing, do important piecework, cook meals, join in the rice harvest, and sweep
outside the house—as in other parts of Java, communal life is ‘female centred’
(Sullivan 1994:90). For their part, neighbouring men often walk to the nearest prayer
house or mosque, chat, raise chickens, play cards, and smoke at night, or join in
harvesting a fruit tree together. And all the above activities will usually be augmented
by family and acquaintances who are not neighbours but happen to be around.
Nevertheless, as in Javanese society (Jay 1969:223) and Balinese society (Warren
1993:16), neighbours are as important as, if not more important than, kin.

‘Acquaintance’ (teman, kanca) refers to people of a more-or-less equal status with
whom one has frequent contact. Generally they are of the same sex. Two married
women who often ride in the small bus (mikrolet) to the market together, two married
men who fight their roosters in a neighbouring village, two bachelors who work for
the same bamboo furniture boss, or neighbours of a similar age might be called
‘acquaintances’. Although Simmel (1950:404) sees “organically connected” people as
having ties of “kinship, locality, and occupation”, in Tegalgarang, a person’s
‘occupation’ is often informal and varied. For example, one of my neighbours was a
harvester, construction labourer, bamboo weaver, or tobacco slicer, depending on the
time of the year. Because of this, connections based on acquaintanceship are more
significant than those based on occupation.

The bonds between neighbours, family, and, friends form the building blocks of
communal life in rural Banyuwangi. There is a sense of parochial attachment to other
people from the same village. However, aside from family, neighbours, and acquaintances, there are no particularly strong rights and responsibilities associated with other villagers. On the surface, the intensely close relationships of kinship, propinquity, and acquaintanceship are characterised by friendliness and intimacy. Beneath this lies an undercurrent of suspicion and strangeness, which is reflected in the interaction with the house space and in conceptions of ‘petty theft’.

**Estrangement, Architecture, and Things that Go ‘Missing’**

In Tegalgarang, the design and use of homes prevent estrangement of ‘outsiders’. The house normally sits in the middle of the property area. Its veranda faces onto the road and its boundaries are demarcated by fences. However, there is no clear social distinction between the inside and outside. All through the day it is customary to leave the gate open, and the trespass etiquette is ‘relaxed’. Furthermore, one should always leave the front door open to indicate that someone is present and visitors are welcome. The visitor, even if from the other side of the village, does not need to be invited to sit on the veranda. As only wealthier people own televisions, after a television has been turned on in the guestroom, which is located at the front of the house, the veranda seats quickly become occupied by neighbours and people passing by. These viewers do not require much encouragement before making their way into the guestroom itself. Spatial relations are both “the condition…and the symbol of human relations” (Simmel 1950:402). And, the further back, physically, one goes in a house, the more inside, socially, one travels. Generally, access to the back reaches of the house is reserved for neighbours, family, and friends, who stream in and out of each other’s houses as they help each other in the numerous daily chores. At the very back, the kitchen is located—this is where neighbouring wives often cook and wash clothes together. The way human relations are worked out in regard to spatial relations of the home in Tegalgarang points to a paradox: the ‘outsider’ is welcomed by open gate, veranda, and open front door, whereas family, friends, and neighbours confront vigilantly locked cupboards and bedroom doors at the back. This phenomenon is closely related to understandings of theft.

In Tegalgarang, notions of ‘ownership’ and ‘property’ do incorporate the idea of exclusive right or use. Nevertheless, this right is frequently transgressed. In fact, it is so common for things to be taken—such as money or valuables from the house, or agricultural produce from the fields—that it is felt to be ‘normal’ (wajar). The word
‘theft’ is rarely used, instead the euphemism missing’ or ‘lost’ (hilang) is employed. One who undertakes this kind of theft is jokingly referred to as ‘one who makes things go missing’ (tukang hilangaken). Otherwise ‘petty theft’ is publicly attributed to a vague ‘other people’ (wong liya)—as though it originates from the outside. As discussed below, there is strong pressure to maintain outwardly harmonious relations and to avoid open accusations of theft. Instead, in a context in which gossiping is prevalent, the identity of the ‘culprit’ is created through rumour among family, neighbours, and friends. The person they suspect when something ‘goes missing’ is one among them.

I noticed, for instance, that the five-year-old grandchild of one of my neighbours was not wearing her gold necklace. Gold is not only ornamental—it is a form of capital that is considered safer than cash at home or in a bank. When I asked a group of neighbours what had happened, they explained that it was ‘missing’. However, when I was alone with the grandfather, he told me in confidence that one of the neighbours had stolen it.

This case of theft among kith and kin was not unique. Another neighbour, an elderly grandmother, stored cash under her bed. She subsequently discovered that the cash had been stolen. The culprit was whispered to be Saini, her great-niece and neighbour. My host-father confided that Saini or Fitri, another neighbour, had also stolen from him.

Not understanding the way things worked, when my money ‘went missing’, I became indignant, instead of being resigned to it. The missing money was openly ascribed to someone from another part of the village. Yet suspicion was really directed much nearer. As I recorded in my fieldnotes, my host-father, Pak Anan was:

> embarrassed that the money could have gone missing, and immediately suspected a lot of people. [Two of my neighbours] and a couple of others had gone to a shaman and had their names cleared by divination for a fee [equivalent to the cost of half a packet of cigarettes]. Pak Anan went to three different shamans from different villages. One knew quite a lot about me. The conclusion Pak Anan drew was that it was my friend. He invited ten pilgrims [who had completed the Haj] to recite [the Q’ran chapter] Surat Lukman 118 times in order that the culprit would be dazed.

Aside from unnecessarily complicating my research, my imprudent response did illuminate the underlying suspicion of kith and kin. The content of gossip and whispers is that the perpetrators of theft are other people within the village, mostly neighbours, and sometimes even people from within the house, that is, kin.
Strangeness permeates these communal relations as the ‘insider’ is consistently suspected when things ‘go missing’. While it is tempting to call such a case of ‘petty theft’ an ‘inside job’, in rural Banyuwangi there is no clear distinction between outside and inside anyway (see Table 1).

Table 1. Insider and Outsider in Tegalgaring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Architecture</th>
<th>‘Soft’ transition from public space to private home space. Front door and gate remain open during the day</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Conception of ‘petty theft’</td>
<td>Openly said to be ‘missing’ or ascribed to ‘outsiders’, but privately attributed to family, acquaintances, and neighbours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precautions against ‘petty theft’</td>
<td>Cupboards and rooms inside the house locked</td>
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<td>Social relations and estrangement</td>
<td>‘Organically connected’ people rendered strange, others rendered familiar</td>
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The people of Tegalgaring studiously avoid strangeness in relations with people from other villages, even other parts of the country. Instead, they quickly establish a bond, whether it be by ancestral origins or otherwise. Custom dictates that passers-by be invited to drop-in (mampir). The strangeness of outsiders is quickly metamorphosed into familiarity; intimacy is projected outside. At the same time, people may suspect that their nephew, aunt, neighbour, or friend is stealing from them; the familiarity of insiders mutates into strangeness.

How do local residents manage this suspicion? Most are concerned to avoid confrontation and to maintain the appearance of intimate relations among those who are nearest. Hence, when I caught my host-brother ‘red-handed’ (tangkap basah) taking my money, I found that my outrage was considered more inappropriate than his actions. ‘Petty theft’ should be openly explained away and dismissed; the object is ‘lost’. Consequently, suspicions are suppressed beneath an ideal of fondness and trust. It should be stressed that these suspicions of ‘petty theft’ among family, neighbours, and acquaintances do not cause great consternation for people in Tegalgaring. The first reason is their pragmatic resignation to the problem. In private, even when participants discussed the alleged culprits with me, it was with a certain resolve; as if the problem exists but nothing can be done about it. Secondly, there is little sense of an ‘inside’ or
inner ‘circle of trust’ having been corrupted in any case. This results from the sense of a continuum between those who are close (that is, family, neighbours, and acquaintances) and those who are distant (unrelated people from neighbouring villages and further away). Finally, there is an expectation for all parties to ‘let bygones be bygones’. For these reasons, the effect of distrust should not be exaggerated. However, there are certain situations in which theft is avenged.

Payback

Unsanctioned payback is infrequently undertaken by ‘sorcerers’ (Herriman 2006a; Herriman 2006b). There are about 10-15 ‘sorcerers’ in Tegalgaring, and they allegedly cause illness and misfortune after disputes with people. One such cause of dispute is when things go ‘missing’. A local ‘sorcerer’ believed that his nephew, Saman, had stolen produce from his grandmother’s garden. Most participants, including Saman’s parents, believed that this had indeed occurred. This is exactly the kind of ‘crime’ that should have been explained away as normal. However, the ‘sorcerer’ refused to accept it and sought redress through sorcery. Saman eventually became sick and died. Partly because he had allegedly sought supernatural redress for Saman’s actions, the ‘sorcerer’ was hunted down and killed by a group that included his own brother-in-law, Saman’s father.

I only have records socially sanctioned payback occurring in other villages, but the phenomenon seems widespread in Java (Colombijn 2002). This seems to occur when the action is deemed to be ‘theft’ (pencurian). The term ‘theft’ is specifically applied only in limited contexts. One of these is the thievery by the most ‘recalcitrant’ local men, who refuse to observe unwritten limits to their pilfering from other local residents, and become known as ‘hoodlums’ (preman, wong wani). Local residents sometimes kill these hoodlums. Another context in which the term is applied is when people who are unknown to local residents are caught ‘stealing’. The ‘thief’ will be lucky to escape alive, if caught by family, neighbours, and friends of the victim, in such a case. A coconut taken by kith or kin is ‘missing’, but if taken by an outsider is ‘stolen’, so it is not the value of the object that calls for such a violent response, but rather the social relation. During such violence by ‘organically connected’ people against a clear outsider, it would appear that inside-outside and intimate-strange dichotomies temporarily obtain a clarity and stability they ordinarily lack.
Conclusion

My research in Tegalgaring shows that categories of inside-outside, close-distant, and intimate-strange are central to understanding social relations. However, an analysis of ‘petty theft’ and interaction with the built space demonstrates that these dichotomies are also characterised by internal contradictions. When an object goes ‘missing’, suspicion is actually directed towards family, neighbours, and friends. Consequently towards the back of the house, cupboards and bedroom doors are locked. Relations between kith and kin are suffused with strangeness. This finding complements the strategy for reconciling the estrangement of intimacy which Simmel identifies; namely projecting strangeness onto the person not ‘organically connected’.

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Footnotes

i Fox’s (1995) observation can also be seen to apply to Banyuwangi. According to a legend about the spread of Islam in Java, a holy man came to Banyuwangi to cure the daughter of a local ruler. In return, the ruler gave his daughter in marriage to the holy man. However, this legend departs from the typical structure—the outsider does not usurp the ruler, and his progeny grows up to be a leader elsewhere. Specifically, the holy man leaves the area, his wife puts their child out to sea in a chest, and the child grows up in another part of Java to become one of the Nine Saints of Javanese Islam (Ricklefs 2001:12-13; Beatty 1999:13; Lekkerkerker 1923:1033-4). This departure from the typical narrative structure might be tied to historical circumstances—the kingdom in Banyuwangi was the only pre-colonial kingdom in Java to resist conversion to Islam. See Ricklefs (2001:12-13) for more detail on the unique characteristics of this legend.

References


