

Ratu Kidul Rendered:

Claiming and Counterclaiming Spiritual Space in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, the Spirit Queen of the South Sea, commands no modest veneration in the Javanese Sultanate of Yogyakarta. Associated primarily with the royal *keratons* of both Yogyakarta and Surakarta, her presence as wielder of royal power has shifted since the Javanocentric ideals of Suharto's *Orde Baru* era. I contend that in the contested religious fractures of Yogyakarta in 2018, Kanjeng Ratu Kidul's presence in daily life has instead migrated onto two seemingly antithetical planes: the public sphere of memes, YouTube ghost-hunters, and Indonesia social media; and second, the private sphere of *kebatinan* (interior, spiritual) mysticism. In response to rising normative Islamic piety in the last decade, it seems she has vacated the historical claims of spiritual and temporal power that she once wielded. In exchange, she has gained access in spaces that Islamist pieties do not or cannot contest: patriotism, online youth culture, and private spiritual experience. As Karen Strassler demonstrates, Ratu Kidul has successfully transferred from the unseen spiritual world of the *keraton* into the realm of visual images post-Suharto.¹ This thesis explores not so much the question of whether Yogyakartaans engage with her cult, but how these relationships are justified and reimagined in an arena of normative pieties. Whether by eroticizing, abstracting, or maternalizing her image, Yogyakartaans continue to actively negotiate their ties to *kejawen* mysticism and the Spirit Queen. But more than that, marginalized Yogyakartaans, including queer Javanese people and working-class women working along Parangkusumo, are also actively redefining their relationship with her, eschewing the image of Ratu Kidul as seductive boon-granter in favor of Ratu Kidul as mother, grandmother, and compassionate guardian. Far from

¹ Karen Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere: Photographic Appearances of a Spirit Queen," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56 (1): 2014, 99-100.

clinging to a staid “traditionalist” orthodoxy in relating to the Sea Queen, Yogyakartaans are independently delineating these intimacies.

I. Research Methods

My project preoccupies itself with ethnographic field work in Yogyakarta and its surrounding towns, from 2018-2019. It incorporates textual, visual, and oral sources, the lattermost of which amounted to some twenty-four interviews conducted in English, Indonesian, with limited Javanese and Indonesian *pergaulan*, or colloquial speech.

My textual and visual sources came from a variety of locations in both Yogyakarta and Surakarta. I was fortunate enough to have friends, informants, and Drs. Judith Schlehe and Mark Woodward’s recommendations as I sifted through roadside bookstalls full of mystical tabloids, paintings of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul in tourist shops along Malioboro, and the internet. Indeed, the domains of Indonesian Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, scanned from 2018-2021, shed more light on Ratu Kidul’s continued emergence as a national, rather than just as an expressly Javanese figure. I was also able to find books published by Javanese intellectuals and religious figures whose attempts to bridge a perceived gap between *kejawen* and Islam, or *Islam Jawa* (Javanese Islam).

The interviews were conducted from October 2018 to August 2019. Interviews with one person or community of *kebatinan* practitioners typically led to Whatsapp contacts among other communities. Many interviews were conducted with Javanese individuals who practiced a variety of spiritual disciplines that often included encounters with God, other spirits, or Ratu Kidul in tangible visions. This included self-identified *penghayat kepercayaan*—believers in groups related to the *kebatinan* sects mentioned in Geertz’s *Religion of Java*; artists with close

connections to the *keraton*, who engaged frequently in offerings to the Spirit Queen; queer Indonesians in Yogyakarta; and one self-identified Kaballah practitioner. Distinct but related to this list were several individuals, some from non-Javanese backgrounds, who identified as *indigo*, that is, capable of seeing spirits tangibly in everyday life, not least of all the Spirit Queen. Others held the term *kejawen* more loosely, eschewing the religions printed on their KTP (state-issued identity cards) in favor of a more expansive spirituality and sexuality. Their relationships with the Sea Queen, too, warranted special attention. I was also able to engage with Muslim and Protestant Christian individuals who engaged the spiritual world with more caution—seeing in Ratu Kidul and *djinn* like her a threat to the pious.

These interviews crisscrossed the city of Yogyakarta, but also included interviews in Wates, Bantul, and of course, Parangkusumo Beach. Indeed, two interviews with women who worked on this beach understood to be a gateway to Ratu Kidul's kingdom on the waves, proved extremely insightful, and demonstrated at least some perspectives of rural, working-class mystics. I met most individuals in their homes, in restaurants, and, particularly with younger informants, in local bars. I owe special thanks to Wisma Bahasa, my language learning center, and Drs. Mark Woodward and Judith Schlehe, for their insights and advice. Likewise to Dr. Bambang Hudayana, my sponsor at UGM, and finally Drs. Deirdre de la Cruz and Nancy Florida, for their mentorship that culminates in this thesis.

II. Literature Survey

Although several serious studies of Ratu Kidul as a subject had already been conducted through the 1980s and early 2000s, before that she had certainly appeared in passing in other, broader discussions of Java and Javanese-ness. Particularly, Ratu Kidul is coded as emblematic of *kejawen*—Javanese mysticism. This, in turn, has linked her cult and veneration to larger

concerns of the relative vitality of communities Geertz perceives as *abangan*—traditionalist Javanese Muslims, opposed to the more normative *santri* communities who coexist in the same towns and cities.² None of this, and certainly none of the revisions and rebuttals of those dichotomies, are particularly new. Nancy Florida, John Pemberton, and Mark Woodward in turn have pushed back at the orientalist assumptions inherent in the division. Elsewhere, they contend that it is far more accurate to categorize traditionalist Javanese Islam as a historically-rooted tradition of Islam, and not, say, a stack of pre-Islamic traditions in a trench coat.³

This association of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul with *kejawen* and royal power has been the primary point of departure for most of the earlier studies on her cult—and continues to be the main way she is discussed academically among Indonesian scholars. Indeed, Ratu Kidul’s mystical marriage with the founder of Mataram, Senapati, is what most frequently appears in introductory books and websites. None of this is surprising, since Ratu Kidul does not appear in traditional art visually, as Strassler observes.⁴ Regardless of historical oral sources now unavailable to us, what has survived are her appearances in keraton literature, both in Yogyakarta and Surakarta.

Indeed, the earlier studies devoted specifically to Ratu Kidul explore her literary presence. Robert Wessing’s speculations about the origin of Nyai Roro Kidul (another of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul’s titles), link her to Hindu cults and myth, alongside snake goddesses throughout Southeast Asia.⁵ Els Bogaert’s 1990 study *Van Sunans, Sultans, en Sultanes*,

² Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 6-7, 127-129; Niels Mulder, *Mysticism and Everyday Life in Contemporary Java*, 1-11.

³ Mark Woodward, *Islam in Jawa: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*, trans. Hairus Salim (Yogyakarta: HS. LKiS, 1989), 5-9.

⁴ Strassler, “Seeing the Unseen,” 99-100.

examines the literary record of Ratu Kidul in *Babad Tanah Jawi* and *Babad Nitik Sultan Agung*.⁶ Florida, whose work primarily focuses on the *keraton* of Surakarta, translates and explores the meaning of her relationship with Panembahan Senapati articulated in the libretto of *Bedhaya Ketawang*, a rare coronation dance still performed in Surakarta.⁷

Ratu Kidul also appears in passing in older research, in one case even detailing her sites of devotion scattered throughout Java. L. Adam's study records place-names and the folklore surrounding sacred spaces associated with Ratu Kidul, alongside the composition of the *sesajen* offerings floated out to sea in her honor by the Yogyakarta Sultanate each year.⁸ These notes from Adam's history regarding the *sesajen* were transcribed from accounts as early as 1926. Merle Ricklefs mentions the queen's literary presence in *keraton*-commissioned *serat*, alongside her connections to palace intrigue and the construction of the Taman Sari complex in Yogyakarta.⁹ Again however, even these sources are primarily tied to her veneration as part of a larger complex of royal cult.

More recently, Dr. Argo Twikromo's work, *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, expresses a similar interest in theorizing her connections to royal cult and what he called Javanese philosophy" during our informal conversation. I found Twikromo's work particularly helpful as an introduction to discourse on Ratu Kidul in Java, in particular among academics. I will,

⁵ Robert Wessing, "A Princess from Sunda: Some Aspects of Nyai Roro Kidul," *Asian Folklore Studies* (56, 1997), 320-337.

⁶ Els Bogaerts, *Vans Sunans, Sultans, en Sultanes: Ratu Kidul in de Panitik Sultan Agungan*, (Leiden), 1990.

⁷ Nancy K. Florida, "The Badhaya Katawang: A Translation of the Song of Kangjeng Ratu Kidul." *Indonesia*, no. 53 (1992): 21-32.

⁸L. Adam, "Some Historical and Legendary Place Names in Java," from *Kraton: Selected Essays on Javanese Courts*, ed. Stuart Robson, trans. Rosemary Robson-McKillop (Leiden: KITLV Press 2003), 76-77.

⁹ M.C. Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi: 1749-1792, A History of the Division of Java*, (Oxford: University Press, 1974), 199-200.

however, discuss his work in depth later in the thesis, and keep my mention of his work here brief.

In a break from literary studies centered on the royal keratons, Judith Schlehe's 2003 publication, *Die Meereskônigin des Südens, Ratu Kidul*, balances both the literary and ritual aspects of Kanjeng Ratu's cult.¹⁰ She spends significant time on popular expressions of mysticism associated with the *makhluk halus* (spiritual beings) of Javanese belief. Schlehe also examines Ratu Kidul from the lens of gender, evaluating the significance of spiritual and temporal power incarnated in a woman's body in historical Java. From surveying traditional literature, legends, personal accounts, and ritual, Schlehe concludes that Kanjeng Ratu Kidul arises as a multifaceted symbol, her role shifting with the identity of each devotee. She notes the ways Ratu Kidul's mythos functions as a strong political defense for the primacy of the *keraton* and the political status quo, and as an explanation for political or financial success. Meanwhile, the ritual practices of Muslims, Chinese Indonesians, Catholics, and practitioners of *aliran kepercayaan* (now referred to as *penghayat kepercayaan*) towards the Sea Queen conform to the perspectives of the individual, and the beliefs they hold already about Javanese tradition. Ratu Kidul cannot explain Javanese society as such; rather, she takes on the color and meaning of those who offer her their devotion.

Schlehe is not a Javanologist, and summarizes rather than translates Javanese literature. Ultimately, she builds on the formidable literary and historical study of Ratu Kidul veneration from before the turn of the 21st century. But unlike many previous studies, her ethnography devotes significant time to the cultural and spiritual aspect of Ratu Kidul, and its embodiment in

¹⁰ Judith Schlehe, *Die Meereskônigin des Südens, Ratu Kidul: Geisterpolitik im javanischen Alltag*, (Berlin: Reimer, 1998), 25, 244-256.

contemporary Javanese culture. As both Doris Jedamski and my own German translator assert, Schlehe emphasizes the aspects of gender, environment, and politics in explaining the prevalence and tenacity of this pre-Islamic sea goddess.¹¹ In her opening chapter, Schlehe explores both the role of women and the role of *kejawen* (traditional Javanese mysticism) in daily life, and links this to the politics of the late *Orde Baru* and the years immediately after Suharto's fall. Drawing on observations by Geertz and Stange about *kejawen*, Schlehe largely sees Javanese mysticism as a sort of counterweight to rising Islamicization in the late 1980s of which Kanjeng Ratu Kidul is a central figure.¹² Chapter three of her work evaluates other female deities in Southeast Asian and surmises that the Sea Queen must be an indigenous pre-Islamic figure;¹³ the next chapter evaluates the controversy her veneration triggers among Muslims in Java. Acknowledging historical literary documents and *babad* as launching points for well-known sources of Javanese spirituality, Schlehe turns her attention to popular responses to the Spirit Queen, including Chinese Indonesian ritual, the monthly events at Parangkusumo Beach, and two riveting accounts in Chapter 10 from Javanese coastal residents who claim to have had direct visions of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul herself.

Schlehe's work is a fusion of the studies that came before, drawing partly on the literary tradition and partly on larger conversations about Javanese religion and ritual. Part of her interest in popular cult seems to have arisen from her research seasons in the late years of *Orde Baru*, when both anti-Suharto normative Islam and a proliferation of Javanese mystical practice were waxing in Java. Schlehe noted, in a conversation in March 2019, that especially in the first years

¹¹ Review of *Die Meereskönigin des Südens, Ratu Kidul: Geisterpolitik im javanischen Alltag*, by Doris Jedamski, *Archipel*, 62, (2001): 234-235.

¹² Schlehe, *Die Meereskönigin des Südens*, 23.

¹³ Schlehe, *Die Meereskönigin des Südens*, 72-91.

post-*Orde Baru*, Indonesian adepts who claimed to secure political posts for clients through mystical powers made profits in the tens of thousands of U.S. dollars. Their practice, she recalls, were attested by the profusion of open advertisements and *kejawen* practice in cities like Yogyakarta. This openly-practiced mysticism had gone underground by 2019, but she contends that Javanese spirituality has always simply changed forms in response to new religious trends, surviving in whatever ways it needs to. In Schlehe's 2003 monograph, then, we observe this fusing of two branches of Javanese study around the cult of Ratu Kidul—both her appearances in the royal literary records, and the meaning of Javanese mysticism in Yogyakarta in the 1980s.

Perhaps reflecting the digital and visual realities of Indonesia throughout the last decade, Karen Strassler's 2012 work, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," spends much less time with the literary appearances of the Spirit Queen and much more with popular media and devotion. She primarily examines Ratu Kidul as a contemporary visual symbol, exploring the Sea Queen's hold on public imagination as expressed in visual images, be they films, paintings, or *foto asli* ("original" or "genuine" printed images of Ratu Kidul said to be imbued with special power).¹⁴ Strassler surmises that Ratu Kidul, who previously had no visible iconography, entered the media-based politics of post-independence Indonesia specifically through new visual imagery. Twentieth-century media and visual arts meant that power had to be translated into the tangible, a jump that Ratu Kidul seems to have made very successfully amid the arena of quintessentially Javanese symbols.¹⁵ This projection of power as image, Strassler contends, has been hitched to Indonesian nationalism, and remains a universally recognized and therefore divisive image in Javanese consciousness.¹⁶ Ratu Kidul can represent a certain lost

¹⁴ Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," 98–130.

¹⁵ Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," 108–113.

¹⁶ Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," 127–130.

Javanese, to the infuriation of Muslim and Christian religious conservatives, and to the satisfaction of Javanese more supportive of mystic traditions. Strassler also makes special note of Gus Dur's comments on the anger of Ratu Kidul that purportedly caused the 2006 earthquake in Yogyakarta. His speech reminds us that the evocative power of Ratu Kidul's aura in Indonesian culture reverberates in politics, and the competing visions of the good Javanese society held by Javanese people.¹⁷

Strassler's focus on the anthropology and the visuality of Ratu Kidul tackles this complex subject from new angles. Strassler spends significant time examining online media, both visual and textual, to explore the viability of Ratu Kidul in the 21st-century imagination. Hers is a deeply digital project, and in some ways explores a very different Ratu Kidul from the distant figure who appears in *Babad Tanah Jawi*. This shift of focus, too, might reflect new undercurrents in Ratu Kidul's waters. Strassler is not only interested in visions of a perceived Javanese past populated with mysticism and *lelembut* (spiritual beings), but in a Javanese present and future. As Gus Dur himself drew on figures historically revered by the Javanese like Ratu Kidul, he made claims on both the past and the now, much as did (and do!) the two Mataram Keratons. This transition of Ratu Kidul from text to image, from colonialism to post-colonialism, from page to webpage, is precisely what Strassler attempts to analyze *in medias res*.

Bianca Smith and Mark Woodward's collaborative study of 2016, I have kept last, in part for its brevity and its recent publication.¹⁸ Both scholars note the regrettable lack of collaboration between feminist scholars who exclusively discussed Javanese womanhood in the context of

¹⁷ Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere," 129.

¹⁸ Bianca Smith, Mark Woodward, "Magico spiritual power, female sexuality and ritual sex in Muslim Java: Unveiling the kesekten of magical women," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* Volume 27, Issue 3: 2016, 317-322.

Islamic Syariah law, and the overwhelmingly male scholarship that discusses *kesakten* and Javanese spirituality while discounting the role and historical power attributed to women. This study, much like Schlehe's work, explores the Hindu-Javanese influences that inflect Javanese understandings of sex, sexuality, gender, and magic, such as the distinctly Hindu figure Ken Dedes.¹⁹ Ratu Kidul, however, Smith and Woodward identify as a Muslim-Javanese figure, while acknowledging her many similarities to Hindu deities and their roles in Javanese cosmology. The study also notes—indeed stresses—the amalgamation that is the Javanese understanding of supernatural power and its access, that is, *kesakten*. *Kesakten* ritual and belief draws heavily on both South Asian Tantric and Muslim Sufi thought and practice, and often Indonesians do not distinguish between the two, using both the older Hindu and Islamic-derived words to describe things.²⁰ This study too reflects a trend of recent scholarship not only on Ratu Kidul but on other facets of Javanese belief. Not content to simply study the origins or historical significance of these figures, this collaboration makes full use of both the literary, historical, and anthropological study of the present day to tackle its subject.

The bulk of the research for this project occurred before I gained a moderate grasp of classical Javanese, and leans less on literary analysis of *keraton* texts than on interviews accomplished in the field. I do not wish to suggest that *keraton* texts are irrelevant to any future study of Ratu Kidul, or to overstate the supposed divisions between *keraton* walls and the larger Javanese public. Florida would be the first to emphasize that those divides were porous at best.²¹ This study will not juxtapose the “demotic” devotion of non-royal Javanese with “elite”

¹⁹ Smith and Woodward, “*Magico-spiritual Power*,” 3. The page numbers of this online version differ from the print journal.

²⁰ Smith and Woodward, “*Magico-spiritual Power*,” 6-11.

²¹ Nancy Florida, “Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam,” In *Cultures of Scholarship*, ed. S. C. Humphreys, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190-195.

Javanese, though we will investigate the intersections of generation, social class, sexuality, and gender. Like Schlehe and Strassler’s projects, my work is both literary study and ethnography. I pay special attention to the ways Ratu Kidul and her devotees take up digital and printed space, asserting presence through text, spoken word, image, and video. Coupled with the personal accounts of mystics’ relationship with Ratu Kidul, I seek to explore how Ratu Kidul has somehow entered a pan-Indonesian public imagination while simultaneously withdrawing from it. This study is an attempt to locate her—both digitally and physically, particularly in a context where her traditional sites of veneration are heavily contested. I am also interested in oral and personal departures from what is deemed “common knowledge” about the Sea Queen—and who is making those counterclaims within *kejawen* traditions.

III. Appearances of Ratu Kidul Beyond the Keraton

A) Indonesian Social Media

Any new discussion of Ratu Kidul’s “public appearances,” if we will use that term, should strive to do more than to merely juxtapose popular devotion against royal *keraton* cult. A good number of her most widely attended public rituals on the southern coastline of Parangkusumo, for instance, operate under the aegis of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta keratons. Likewise, the many *abdi dalem* (palace servants), court dancers, and distant members of the royal families of Yogyakarta and Surakarta operate both within and without *keraton* walls. Nevertheless, I do want to survey the spaces outside of palace complexes heavily associated with her cult, including popular, expressly Indonesian (rather than just Javanese) online spaces as well. In both physical and virtual space, I hope to demonstrate not just the community of

Indonesians in communication with her cult but also the ways her cult is contested or redefined in these spaces by normative pieties.

I open this discussion of these virtual spaces, by outlining the politics of the Indonesian *medsos*, or *sosmed*, that is, Indonesia and Indonesian-diasporic social media. Even the controversy about the grammar of the order of the acronym expresses the ways this space is contested. Should it be *sosial media*, a nearly direct translation from English, or *media sosial*, putting the adjective after the noun, which would be grammatically correct in Indonesian?²² Exactly to what global or western meme spaces do the memes on Indonesian Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube allude to? How much has arisen from the Indonesian cybersphere itself?

Javanese-language Twitter, while larger than many other ethnicity-region-specific quadrants of Indonesian *medsos*, is nevertheless only one sector among many. Remarkably, Ratu Kidul—or her Sundanese equivalent, Kadita—occupy a lot of airtime in way of memes and jokes. She is often the punchline of humor where, say, a Western tourist is lured to wear green on Ratu Kidul’s favorite beach (I was repeatedly told to not wear green to the sea, lest she decide to snatch me away in the riptide, to serve in her palace). But this is distinctly Indonesian, rather than Javanese, Twitter, and Instagram. Memes like these appear in English or Indonesian, but are not specifically devoted to the intricacies of Javanese or Sundanese ritual or belief. She appears as a national, rather than ethnic-specific figure, and this transition stands out as unique among the much more regionally-relevant sources elsewhere in this thesis.

She also appears extensively in ‘*misteri*,’ a specific genre of Indonesian YouTube and *sosmed* connotating far more than the meaning of “*mystery*” in English. It is not a genre of

²² Mas Teddy, “Sosial Media atau Media Sosial?”, *Kompasiana*, Dec 8, 2017, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.kompasiana.com/masteddy/5a29e36e5ffe1f47db2078e2/sosial-media-atau-media-sosial>

whodunits, but rather one that straddles the gap between cryptozoology and ghostbusting. In these YouTube videos, women in camp outfits lead the viewer into a perilous world of haunted hotels, secret liaisons with the Spirit Queen, and local legends of the South Sea, with music not unlike similar paranormal-hunting videos of the US in the early 2000s. There is a morbid fascination with the seductive mythos of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul as spirit bride of the sultans and sunans of Java. Indeed, her reputed physical allure is highlighted and depicted for a presumably male, heterosexual audience.

Of course, there are signs even here that this YouTube space is contested—evidence that this fascination with the arcane or supernatural has to be tempered with religious caution. Adjacent and sometimes interwoven into this genre are discussions of the religious relevance of Ratu Kidul to Javanese Muslims. In others, there are outright attempts to curate her image, in one case going to far as to paint her in a white jilbab to demonstrate her conversion to normative Islam. We will discuss this particular image in depth in the next section.

This genre of *misteri* appears in print as well, in the mystical tabloids found in roadside bookstalls near the *alun-alun* of Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Magazines from the early 2000s to the present discuss a plethora of spirits, hauntings, unidentified creatures, and lost treasures scattered throughout Indonesia. Kanjeng Ratu Kidul and her serpentine child Nyai Blorong feature heavily in these pages, or even in local advertisements by *dukuns* (ritual experts) who claim to sell her artefacts that will ensure prosperity for their businesses. Here too, normative piety is used as a sort of fig leaf, an attempt to justify the salacious details being described, though exactly for whom this justification appears we will consider soon as well.

B) Parangkusumo Beach

In terms of physical spaces, it would be remiss to not discuss Parangkusumo Beach, one of the fabled gates to Ratu Kidul's watery domain. On *Jumat* and *Selasa Kliwon* (the Friday and Tuesday of each month that intersects with the day *kliwon* of the Javanese five-day week), the night beach roars to life with a night market, sex work, ritual offerings floated (or retrieved) from the sea--and gamelan and wayang on *Jumat Kliwon* specifically. A number of young Indonesians (of generations that would be familiar with youth *medsos*) have attended the events, but the largely middle-aged, male clientele seem heavily involved in the social events of the night.

In 2019, the rituals I attended were well-visited, and certainly widely known by Javanese in Yogyakarta. Many working-class Gojek (motorcycle-taxi) drivers of the city claimed to have attended at least one such night event, usually with friends. The event continues to be bolstered by the aegis of the Yogyakarta *keraton* as well. *Abdi dalem*, or servants of the palace, still receive prayers and offerings before the gated compound of the Cepuri Stone, where the founder of the Mataram Dynasty is believed to have encountered Ratu Kidul after ceaseless meditation. My guide, Cempaka, himself from a family with deep roots in *kejawen*, laid *kemenyan* incense in braziers, and whispered his prayers in an *abdi dalem*'s ear. The *abdi dalem* we approached in January 2019, had noted that the numbers of visitors had not meaningfully changed, and perhaps even increased over the years, since he had first begun his position in the 1980s. He notes that people still approach him with highly personal prayers and petitions, though it is not clear to whom these prayers are addressed. Another elderly Javanese person we encountered, a farmer from Grogol, on the contrary believes attendance has decreased in the last decade. He attributes this to the rising suspicion of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, two powerful mass Islamic organizations in Java. Local shopkeepers and non-local workers who experienced the rituals

seemed to disagree about the numbers of attendees—real statistics aside, no consensus seems to exist among locals.

Right on the beach, hundreds of individuals over the night offered *sesaji* (offerings) purchased from the stalls of flowers in the market further inland, or meditating with incense sticks planted in the sand before them. A number of the beachgoers seemed to be searching the sand for flowers that the sea had sent back, an act that some of Cempaka's friends treated with derision. "They are greedy and only want money," one friend explained to me. "They want Ratu Kidul's blessing to get rich." When asked about their errands by the sea, the torchlit beachgoers uniformly declined to respond.

Parallel to the ascetic and the ritual ran what seemed like an entirely different event. A night market selling antique *keris* blades, massages, traditional cures, and clothing attracted attention, though it seemed the event itself lacked any explicit connection to the Spirit Queen. Further inland, a traditional Javanese (*joglo*) gazebo next to the mosque was staging a *wayang* performance, with a *gamelan* orchestra behind the screen. Throughout the night, sex work was prevalent as well, pitched towards heterosexual men. Sex workers lined the pathways leading up to the beach, but did not seem to be seeking business on the beach itself.

It may be difficult then, to collect quantitative data on the Jumat Kliwon and Selasa Kliwon events. But as far as the four separate events I visited from January to August 2019, it seemed clear that these events were attended in the hundreds or up to thousands, both by visitors and local residents. Regardless of whether numbers had increased or decreased, it remains clear that the events are still *rame*, the Javanese word for an event being populous, loud, and merry all at once. The ascetic elements of these events exist in tension with the *duniawi*, or "worldly" elements that coexist in these spaces. One mystic, who runs a restaurant on the main road, noted

that tourists often came to bother or photograph women who came to meditate silently on the beach.

Indeed, Parangkusumo, even (especially!) during non-ritual nights, is a site of meditation for a number of self-identified mystics or ritual practitioners. This includes dancers from ISI (Arts Institute of Indonesia), or choreographers from the Yogyakarta *keraton*, who frequent the sea to seek permission for certain dances conducted in Ratu Kidul's honor. This also includes *penghayat kepercayaan*, members of mystical sects that incorporate theosophy, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic elements, alongside *kejawen*. We pay specific attention to these communities, and their spaces, not because many or even a majority of mystics claim to have relationships with Ratu Kidul, but because in these spaces too we see a deep awareness of dialogue with normative piety. I have never encountered a *penghayat kepercayaan* who denied the validity of the "original" six religions one must choose from on their government-issued KTP cards. Nevertheless, the now decades-old move to legalize *penghayat kepercayaan* as its own religious choice that some of my informants campaigned for suggests one more space where normative piety is both contested and circumvented. Ratu Kidul's presence (or notable absence) in these communities and their physical centers seemed to be a clear marker of where a person's lines in the sand are drawn. As we have seen on the beach, this is not always figurative sand.

Finally, a number of *indigo*/spiritual youth and contemporary artists also occupy these spaces, seeking connection with what they perceive is a more natural, historical Javanese mysticism (as opposed to normative Muslim or Christian pieties). I have done my best to investigate the use of this term, "indigo," though it seems to originate from New Age movements of the 1970s in the United States—associated with specialists and parents of young children who claimed to see the auras of individuals with unique abilities.²³ While little of the notion of auras

remains present in the Javanese iteration of *indigo*, the term encompasses people who see the supernatural regularly, with a sort of sixth sense—and is frequently associated with children and adolescents. The fact that this term is used at all in Java—and so widely recognized by working class and aristocratic Indonesians alike—however, suggests that the borders between Western New Age iterations and what we think of as unadulterated *kejawen* are porous. Just as theosophy influences the *penghayat kepercayaan* movements, as least some aspects of the New Age movements of the 1970s in the West have petered into Java as well.

Ultimately, this spirit world is diffuse, and exists in conjunction with communities that cater to Yogyakarta's bourgeoisie and aristocracy: Indonesian capitalists, western tourists, Indonesian-as-second-language tutors, vegetarian cafes, and middle-class queer Indonesians who have found livelihood in Yogyakarta's thriving arts scene. My status as an (Southeast Asian, queer) American researcher offered access to some of these spaces not frequently discussed, and I draw attention to these subcultures to highlight yet another tactic of contesting and circumventing staid religious mores: in this case, by proximity to Western and aristocratic Javanese patronage. Nevertheless, these communities also ultimately rejected the most traditional, male, and heterosexual patterns of engaging with Ratu Kidul, and seemed to explore new means of connecting to her as a maternal guardian of Java, rather than as a sexual icon.

This is not to suggest, however, that interactions with Ratu Kidul are cynical cash grabs, or else a kind of Hindu-Buddhist cult fig-leaving as Islamic. On the contrary, the vast majority of Muslims I interviewed who did engage with her or her devotion expressed an interest in

²³ John Leland, "Are They Here to Save the World?", *The New York Times*, published Jan 12, 2006, accessed April 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/12/fashion/thursdaystyles/are-they-here-to-save-the-world.html>

harmonizing the tension between Javanese culture and Islam, both in themselves and in their communities. The sheer volume of ink spilled by Javanese intellectuals on Ratu Kidul and *Islam Jawa* should be enough to convince us that this effort is no idle apologetic, if an apologetic at all. If anything, these books, sect writings, tracts, and interviews point to a discursive Javanese world. Much like the ways the supernatural is claimed and counterclaimed by different members of Karo Batak society documented by Mary Steedly,²⁴ I look at these stories as signs of a discussion, rather than a capitulation to one interpretation of piety or another. How Ratu Kidul is *rendered*, to use both a literary and digital-arts term—is inextricably tied to this discursive tradition.

IV. Ratu Kidul Rendered Seductive

I have chosen the adjective here with some precision—though I must intervene to describe precisely what is meant when we describe Kanjeng Ratu Kidul as rendered “seductive” by the efforts of mass media, social media, and cult. Strassler’s work comes again to mind, cataloguing the ways Ratu Kidul is sexualized in media, not least of all the *horror* films of the early 2000s and films from decades before.²⁵ Likewise, the prevalence of sex work surrounding her sites of ritual devotion, and the ways her physical image is sexualized in popular games like *Mobile Legends*, are largely self-evident, and do not need more attention than has been lavished on them.

I choose to discuss Ratu Kidul rendered seductive because it entails not just what is revealed in so-called “revealing” dress, but what is withheld. By covering up, or withholding an image, one makes statements too about the body. Ratu Kidul’s presence in media, far from being

²⁴ Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press), 1993, 132-138.

²⁵ Strassler, “Seeing the Unseen,” 114-116.

some safe refuge for soft-core pornography, is repeatedly negotiated, contested, and delineated by the needs of the growing desires of pan-Indonesian consumers. Indeed, Strassler’s analysis that the visual image of Ratu Kidul helped her enter the arena of post-Suharto symbols seems relevant in 2018’s Yogyakarta. But I wish to complicate this narrative by discussing the ways this image of a powerful, green-clad seductress is enhanced or downplayed to appear in the capitalist arena of symbols and internet objects.

It must also be stressed that any sexualization of Ratu Kidul is not somehow a modern interpolation into the older tradition. The passages of Babad Tanah Jawi that depict Ratu Kidul’s seduction of the young (then-prince) Senopati portray both her profound power but also her emotional vulnerability and sensual beauty.

<p>Sénapati cengeng aningali, Ing warna dyah sinom, Amicaréng wau ing driyané, “Tuhu ayuné punjul sabumi, Ing watara mami Sang Retna ing arum. Kaya nora pasaja sayekti, Léléwané kang wong, Miwah yén angandika manisé, Tansah karya sumelanging ati, Asung brongta kingkin, Raga- krana kaduk.²⁶</p>	<p>Dazed was Senapati to see her beauty, And he said to himself, “Truly her beauty is most excellent in the world, In my reckoning, This jewel of the fragrant ones, of women. In truth, all of this seems affected— her actions. When she speaks –her oversweetness! It always makes my heart flutter, Gives me lovesickness. Her charm is too much—so enchanting.”</p>
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²⁶ *Babad Tanah Jawi*, 18 vols. (Batavia: Balai Pustaka, 1939-41), Jilid 5.

But while literary appearances of Ratu Kidul include these moments of tender sexuality, translating this mythos into visual image has afforded modern Indonesian audiences a proximity that may not have existed before. A question of access is salient too—the majority of non-aristocratic Javanese do not have access



to the performances of the *Bedhaya Semang* or *Ketawang* in either Yogyakarta or Surakarta. The impassioned librettos depicting Ratu Kidul and Panembahan Senapati's legendary love are not in wide circulation. Removed from the context of court literature depicting private mystic encounters, Ratu Kidul is now, effectively just one Indonesian symbol among many other national symbols.

A) Ratu Kidul as Meme

For instance, Kadita, a playable character in *Mobile Legends* appears clad in green with a trident, dueling other heroes in the game's arenas. The game itself is phone-friendly multiplayer platform hugely popular in Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia, much in the way the game *League of Legends* conquered both Asia Pacific and Western audiences in the earlier half of the 2010s. Her iconography here makes many nods to both the Javanese and Sundanese mythoi and also to Hellenistic myth. Wielding a weapon typically associated with the Greek sea god Poseidon, while bearing the sensual green outfit associated with her in Java, Kadita storms across the map “pushing waves and roaming to ambush enemies and help her allies.”²⁷

Kadita/Ratu Kidul, then, has been digitized and wielded by players to compete with characters from a variety of franchises and regional mythologies. This is not a figurative but an actual digital arena, where an “Indonesian” goddess can be played by patriotic Indonesians to defeat other players from around the world. Kadita in *Mobile Legends*, then, becomes an image of Indonesia projected out to a global community of gamers, a proxy for the kinds of tensions frequently found in gaming.

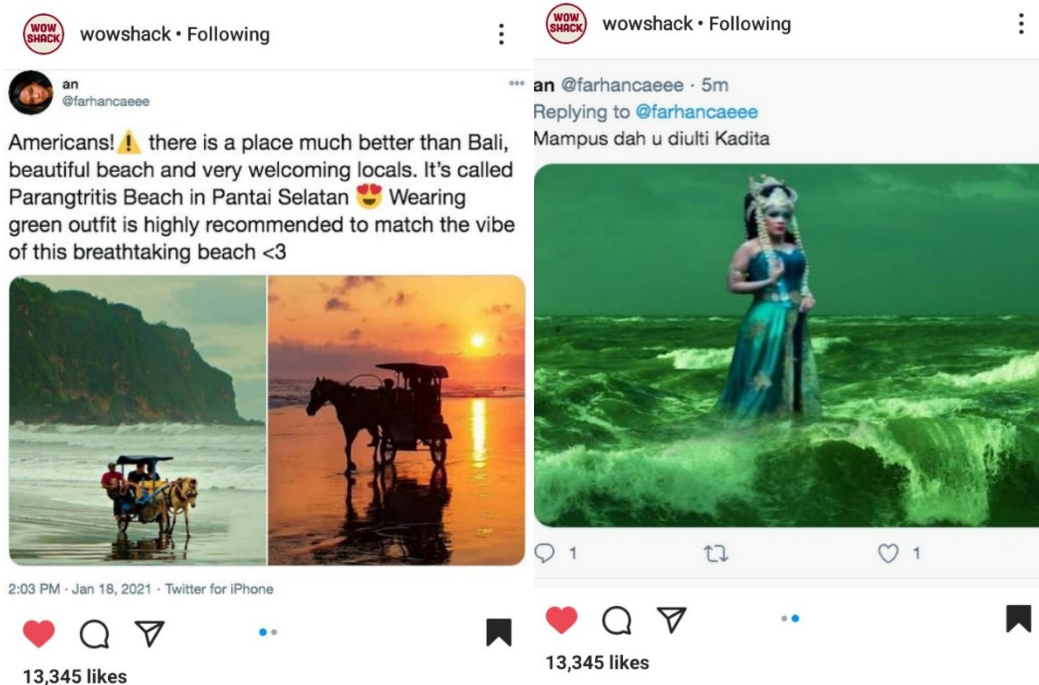
These associations do not go unnoticed—the Indonesian memesphere seems to have intuitively accepted her into a compendium of pan-Indonesian symbols, particularly in moments of national outrage at westerners. As I write this in 2021, with the COVID-19 pandemic still raging, Indonesian memes have exploded in a small bonanza of nationalistic images and memes in response to the extradition of Kristen Gray. Kristen Gray, a Black, queer, American woman, was ejected from Bali on the grounds that she had been exploiting a loophole to work long-distance in Bali where the cost of living was low.²⁸ Gray herself claimed that her expulsion was a result of racism and homophobia exhibited by the Balinese authorities. But for many Indonesians, the attitude expressed here was especially egregious because she was selling tutorials to other westerners eager to slip through COVID restrictions and take advantage of the infrastructure in Bali. The response was immediate and damning. One meme in particular circulated by Twitter account @farhancaeeee dared tourists to visit Parangtritis Beach decked out in green, instead of going to Bali to exploit it, presumably in hopes that said tourists would be kidnapped by Ratu Kidul for wearing her favorite color. A Twitter subtweet replied with an

²⁷ “Kadita Guide,” *Mobile Legends*, 2020, accessed March 23, 2021, <http://mlbb.mobacompanion.com/kadita/>

²⁸ “American Kristen Gray to be deported from Bali amid Twitter row,” *BBC*, 20 Jan 2021, accessed 23 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55728398>.

image of Ratu Kidul in a turquoise skirt, riding over the waves, with the colloquial caption “Mampus dah u diulti Kadita” (“You’re already dead, *ult-ed* by Kadita”).

I draw attention to the verb used here—*ulti*—a derivative from the English *ultimate*, or “ult.” In gaming lingo, to use one’s “ult” is to activate a character’s ultimate power or special



ability to defeat an opponent. The tongue-in-cheek response—and the use of the name Kadita, rather than Ratu Kidul—demonstrates that the degree to which digital nationalism in gaming has seamlessly entered the language of nationalistic memes.²⁹ In a moment of Indonesian outrage, these symbols and vocabulary are used to reflect the ways Ratu Kidul’s image in *Mobile Legends*. At least in part, her digital incarnation here has become a national and not merely ethnic symbol. An affront to Bali is an affront to Indonesia, and by extension, the Sea Queen as well. A product among other products, Ratu Kidul has been effectively digested as a multi-faceted image—part seductive, part nationalistic, an iconic visual koine for Indonesians well beyond Java.

²⁹ @Wowshack, *Instagram*, posted 18 Jan 2021, accessed 23 March 2021.

In less politically charged memes, Ratu Kidul appears elsewhere in other parodies and moments of humor as well. In the wake of the viral American 2019 meme “Storm Area 51,” an Indonesian named Alfi Syahr created a Facebook event set for September 22, 2019, entitled “Come, Let’s All Assault Parangtritis Beach Wearing Green Shirts in the Thousands.” “Storm Area 51” was an American-created Facebook event that satirically suggested assaulting a government base of alien-conspiracy-theory fame. A running tagline of the event is that “they [the government] can’t stop all of us.”

In Indonesia, however, “because Area 51 is too far away,”³⁰ Syahr’s event description exhorted locals to storm a beach associated with Ratu Kidul in green clothes—clothes believed to make Ratu Kidul kidnap the wearer from shore. Fear not, the description assured its ironic attendees; “she can’t drown *all* of us.” QoryGore, a popular Indonesian YouTube artist, has since posted a commentary on the event, explaining its context to others while making some jokes of his own, to an audience of 383,000 views as of July 26, 2019.³¹

According to FaktualNews, an online news/magazine portal, Syahr explains to a mostly amused Indonesian audience that this is just a meme. The event itself he describes as parody, an idea sparked when he tried to think of an area in Indonesia filled with the same air of mystery and conspiracy as the USA’s Area 51. For Syahr, Parangtritis Beach, with its deep ties to disappearances, *horor* films, and Ratu Kidul veneration was a natural choice.³² As of late July

³⁰ Alfi Shayr, 2019. “Ayo serbu sapu ParangTritis pakai baju hijau..” Facebook, accessed August 1, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/events/473130740116717/?active_tab=discussion,

³¹ Qory Gore, “AKSI SERBU NYI RORO KIDUL Di Pantai Selatan PARANGTRITIS,” posted July 24, 2019, YouTube video, 14:59 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtBpM0fllvw&feature=share>

³² Faktual News, “Ternyata Cuma Parodi, Ajakan Serbu Parangtritis Berbaju Hijau,” FaktualNews.co, July 23, 2019, <https://faktualnews.co/2019/07/23/ternyata-cuma-parodi-ajakan-serbu-parangtritis-berbaju-hijau/152491/>

2019, the event has since gathered more than 8,400 attendees, with an additional 15,000 claiming to be “interested” in attending on Facebook. Evidently, some 23,400 Indonesian and Indonesian-fluent internet users got the joke, not counting those simply aware of the meme. The punk irreverence of an event of this level of satire suggests that Ratu Kidul as icon remains extremely recognizable. But beyond that, it becomes abundantly clear that Ratu Kidul is being compared and contrasted with other national images. If America has aliens in Area 51, Indonesia has Ratu Kidul in the South Sea. Stripped down and enhanced for export, her image and the seductive powers associated with her exhibit a quite different pathos from the focus of Senapati’s infatuation in *Babad Tanah Jawi*.

B) Ratu Kidul in *Misteri* Magazines and YouTube

Ratu Kidul has also been rendered visually seductive in print. The mystical tabloids I found in small bookstores near the *alun-alun* of Yogyakarta and Surakarta yielded another realm where her imagery was both revealed and concealed, reflecting the tensions of depicting so controversial a figure in image. The tabloids, or *majalah misteri*, feature a number of stories about Ratu Kidul or mystics who have encountered her cult. In these dozen-odd magazines (from samples published from 2001 to 2018), a steady flow of articles about her appears. Some articles interview those who claim to have seen the Sea Queen, or who received her jeweled treasures—only to lose them mysteriously before they could be shown to the interviewers. Others recount adventures pertaining to the mysteries of the South Sea. Advertisements for Jakartan mystic practitioners and *kyais* with magical powers feature as well, some selling artifacts associated with Ratu Kidul or Nyai Blorong. When I interviewed the book vendors in front of the *keratons* of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, I was unable to gauge the demand for these

magazines—a fair number of old editions remained in the stacks they had, and the vendors explained they get buyers off and on, of a variety of ages.

Often these sensational stories tiptoe right to the edge of the mystical, sexual, and scandalous, before quickly backing away from the cliff ledge with pious admonitions to never tamper with spirits or practice *kejawen*. The irony is palpable; anyone who has picked up a copy of a *majalah misteri* presumably has *some* interest in the profane, mystic, or cryptozoological. But a thin patina of cautionary moralizing seems to sufficiently justify the sensationalism. This seemed a consistent pattern in over a decade of issues I scanned from the magazine, *Misteri*.

One such story, written in the first-person, recounts of a man who receives a walking stick in which Nyai Blorong, the malicious half-snake daughter of Ratu Kidul, resides. Nyai Blorong, rather than simply being an evil spirit, is declared a *setan* (devil) by the author. Said author proceeds to thank God for being preserved from the snake-woman's sexual temptations. On a spiritual journey with an emissary of God, the author sees the history of Nyai Blorong, and through a complex genealogy he learns how her birth in Southern Java explains the resistance of the south (that is, Yogyakarta) to normative Islam. The author then intones, "Hopefully, there is a contemporary spiritual expert who can bring the holy teaching of *Tauhid* and free them from darkness."³³

Alongside the magazines, a motley variety of Indonesian YouTube videos plays with similar themes, in which either a religious speaker or a self-avowed *paranormal* explores sites associated with Ratu Kidul, be it Pelabuhan Ratu in West Java, or Parangkusumo Beach. Some

³³ W.E. Goenawan, "Menyingkap Sosok Nyai Blorong: Bersama Kanjeng Pangeran Djoko Panjihamidjojo Ba" from *Misteri* May 2014, 118.

videos recount personal accounts along the southern coast of Yogyakarta, filled with misted-over shots of the sea, while others still try to exegete the existence of Ratu Kidul in Islamic theology.

One archetypal production on YouTube features a thumbnail of two juxtaposed images of Ratu Kidul: the first in her archetypal Javanese regalia, the second in a flowing white *jilbab* headscarf, piously covered up to her wrists and ankles. The title elucidates this combination of images: “*Subhanallah!* [God is Perfect!] This Is the Verse in the Quran about Nyi Roro Kidul..[.]” In this production by Anomali News, the narrator adopts the prosody often reserved in Indonesian for august speeches or news reports, as if to lend some formality and grandeur to the subject matter. Visually, the video employs images of Ratu Kidul, digital special effects, and what appear to be pirated clips from Hollywood movies, explaining passages in the Quran where Ratu Kidul is explained.³⁴ Overlaying the images and narration, suspenseful western-style music is added (similar to what one imagines in, say, a blockbuster’s car chase or a fantasy movie’s battle scene), though its purpose in the six-minute video with over ten million views as of May 2019 is puzzling. Besides *Anomali News*’ riveting thriller, other videos have the same air of tabloid-ish sensationalism, the effect of which does not at all appear to be ironic. Videos like these seem to generate interest akin to American productions about Bigfoot, paranormal activity, or cryptozoology, and perhaps are inspired by the genre.

What can be made of this kind of sensationalism blended with piety? It must be noted this portrayal of Ratu Kidul and her mythos is only partly a recent trend. While Schlehe and others might have theorized Ratu Kidul to be a pre-Islamic goddess, her appearances in the *babad* and *serat* of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta *keratons* often seamlessly include her in Javanese Islamic

³⁴ Anomali News, “SUBHANALLAH !!! Inilah Ayat Al Qur'an Tentang Nyi Roro Kidul..,” posted December 2017, YouTube video, 6:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNJ_bCHEcP8

cosmology. In one manuscript Ricklefs read and summarized, she appears rather as an emissary of God, a convert to Islam, and ultimately a faithful spouse of the Mataram kings, particularly Sultan Agung.³⁵ What is not strange or new is the appearance of Ratu Kidul in Javanese Islam; she has long appeared in the Islamic traditions here, enjoining Javanese to follow the faith. What is new is that her cult is being treated with suspicion now by more conservative Muslims and Christians. She and her daughter are not servants of God but suspect rebel spirits—*setan*, in opposition to human health and divine order. She has been taken from the sacred and re-assigned to the profane.

In these tabloids, the aesthetic of Ratu Kidul's mythical legacy is ultimately commercialized. The airs of *kejawen*, mythology, fascination with magical relics—all these are embraced. But just as the story veers into the sensational, the author invokes normative Muslim piety to warn the good reader, and so justify his reasons for writing the story. The outer aesthetic and visual/written symbols of *kejawen* and Ratu Kidul veneration are tolerated, at times even embraced for any number of motivations. But this is permissible only so long one accepts a larger, normatively pious worldview, and proves it in the text or video at hand.

I hesitate to summarize these videos and tabloids—and their many anonymous writers. I think it is fair to treat normative pious Muslim takes on the identity of Ratu Kidul seriously—that is, not expecting the video to contain any nudge-and-wink irony at the end. At the same time, in some of these magazines, it seems the calls to normative piety are very much tacked on to a larger genre that seems to sincerely engage in *kejawen* mysticism unsanctioned by, say, Muhammadiyah Muslims. Perhaps these caveats allow for plausible deniability—a way to

³⁵ Ricklefs, M.C., *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi*, 199-200.

remain morbidly fascinated with the spirit world without claiming to tamper with *setan* or demons.

I suggest, however, that these videos and texts can also be read as a genre very much in discourse with itself and with the normative pieties of 2010s Indonesia. In aesthetics, in melodrama, in diction, these examples do not differ vastly. They employ similar tropes of evoking the otherworldly and the *creepy*, a word that also invokes the *fay* or *eerie* in colloquial Indonesian. Nevertheless, where the writers fall in this spectrum seems to reflect personal degrees of comfort with discussing Ratu Kidul, *kejawen*, and normative Islam. Far from simply rejecting Ratu Kidul as heretical or enshrining her as some pre-Islamic past “corrupted” by Islamic interpretation, the authors and the readership of this genre navigate these spaces with great precision and diversity of thought. Her image online is profoundly contested. Even the thumbnails on YouTube suggest polemics: shall she wear green or shall she wear white?

V. Ratu Kidul Rendered Abstract

Parallel to this push towards rendering Kanjeng Ratu Kidul seductive is a push in what might seem to be the opposite direction. Rather than emphasizing her sexual powers or her visual appeal, there is a push in a number of circles to remove her altogether from the realm of the worldly—*yang duniawi*. These circles of educated men—traditionally rooted either in more traditionalist *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), in parties like the “moderate” Nahdlatul Ulama, and in formal academia—frame discussions of Ratu Kidul’s legitimacy in terms of theology, philosophy, and history.

A) Reconciling Javanese Culture and with Christianity and Islam

I want to interrogate the underpinnings of this particular realm of literature, written by a community I found incredibly willing to humor a young researcher with his questions about Ratu Kidul. I wish to take the scholastic work here seriously. Some sources, such as Dr Twikromo's work, proved insightful both as secondary sources on Ratu Kidul's veneration and as primary sources on how Ratu Kidul is discussed in the context of *kejawen*. Much as Ratu Kidul's digital avatar in the *Mobile Legends* is iconified in moments of national solidarity, Ratu Kidul as an abstract symbol of Javanese "wisdom" or philosophy reflects the discursive way *kejawen* is being negotiated in certain pious circles in Yogyakarta.

I begin this discussion not with Islam but with Christianity: in particular, a Protestant *Kristen* convert who rejected his old life steeped in *kejawen* mysticism. Pak Abraham Nur Alam called himself a convert to *Kristen Jawa*, that is, Protestant Javanese Christianity. When asking our mutual friend Anna what made *Kristen Jawa* distinct from mere Christianity practiced by Javanese people, she noted that the cultural elements of *gamelan* instruments, Javanese traditional garb, and even some non-religious harvest rituals were celebrated in the church setting.

However, both she and Pak Abraham fiercely differentiated this from *kejawen* and the "dangerous" spiritual elements of Javanese mysticism. Pak Abraham explained to me, that there are only two spiritual realms: "that of God and all the angels, and that of Satan." (Notably, this adage was also expressed almost verbatim by Javanese members of a local Eastern Orthodox church I attended in Yogyakarta). *Kejawen*, Pak Nur Alam explained, was a particularly high-ranking form of demonic activity: "If Islam is commanded by a corporal of Satan, then *kejawen* is commanded by a general, and so outranks it." This in turn is evocative of a specific language

of evangelical-esque “spiritual warfare” between angels, humans, and demons—popularized in America, at least, by evangelical books like Frank Peretti’s, *Piercing the Darkness*.³⁶

Ratu Kidul, by extension, then, is a demonic figure—not dismissed as fictitious, but disavowed as an enemy of God. The rest of the conversation veered into long discussions about theology, but I do draw attention to the way Javanese-ness is defined and negotiated by this particularly staunch community of Protestants. Their stance towards Javanese culture is somewhat more polemical than that of many Catholics I encountered. For the congregants of this *Kristen Jawa* church in central Yogyakarta, the veneration of Ratu Kidul, and even *kejawen* at large, can and should be split from their own identity of Javanese culture. The fashion, music, and accoutrements of Javanese physical aesthetics are embraced, but spiritual practices, and *especially* the spirits themselves, are rejected in favor of normative Protestant piety.

I found another meditatively-drawn line. This time between acceptable and unacceptable Javanese Islam, in the words of the influential Nahdlatul Ulama member, Pak Imam Aziz. He remains a prominent speaker noted for his leading role in advocating for tolerance alongside faithful Islamic practice in his party. He embraces normative Islamic tenets, while also agreeing that *penghayat* practitioners should be able to register themselves as an official religion, and is by and large content to tacitly tolerate, controversial communities like the Kotagede *pesantren* run by trans women. I will be the first to confess, this was a humbling encounter; our conversation encompassed the acceptability of *sesajen* for Muslims, urban and rural development, our opinions (and his misgivings) about Geertz’s *Religion in Java*, and the epistemology of faith. I was, at the time, only recently competent in Indonesian, and just beginning my interview season. I owe Pak Imam Aziz a great deal for his willingness to

³⁶ Frank Peretti, *Piercing the Darkness*, (Westchester: Crossway Books), 1989, 440-442.

introduce me to the discourse on the subject of Java articulated among Javanese Muslims themselves.

In Pak Imam Aziz's words, *kejawen* and Islam are epistemologically parallel—"epistomologinya paralel." Conceptions of the *alam ghaib* (the spiritual world), the power of the sea, and the importance of nature in Islam are all paralleled in *kejawen*, which made it easier for the first Javanese Muslims to embrace the faith. *Kejawen* and its beliefs about the spirits of the Javanese worldview were not things to be wiped out so much as to be *disetujui*—reconciled—to the faith, a theme that Pak Imam Aziz stresses is the general consensus of NU individuals. While *slametan* and *sesajen* traditions may once have been hosted to ward off angry spirits, Pak Imam Aziz asserts that simply switching the purposes of these rituals is enough. Instead of giving offerings to spirits, offering *sesajen* can become a form of almsgiving, particularly if the food is offered to forest animals or humans. The aesthetic, physically embodied ritual, and all else are welcomed; only its theological underpinnings have changed. Nevertheless, the ritual and the aesthetic became gateways of profound truths for the Javanese Muslims—they are not attached retroactively as in the belief system of the Protestant Pak Abraham Nur Alam.

Ratu Kidul is yet another tangible marker of the place of *kejawen* in his religious framework. Pak Imam Aziz reminded me that Islam also affirms a guardian of the sea: the enigmatic prophet Al-Khidir (remarkably, also associated with the color green). And while he declined to say whether Ratu Kidul actually exists, he did note Javanese people do believe she does, as a rule. Understanding Ratu Kidul might offer a sort of tangible parallel for Javanese individuals to connect to the piety inspired by figures like Al-Khidir. Again, the visible, physical practices and images of *kejawen* are not condemned. So long its internal underpinnings are

“orthodox,” the Javanese aesthetic—Ratu Kidul as *analogy*—should be preserved, in Pak Imam Aziz’s estimation. Here, Ratu Kidul is not so much desacralized but *re-sacralized*, interpreted along the lines of a form of normative piety while including what Pak Imam Aziz deems is Javanese culture.

In both cases, both Protestant Christianity and NU-style Islam, then, a negotiation occurs—particularly for Javanese who practice mainstream faiths while hashing out exactly what parts of *kejawen* mysticism will be kept or rejected. Pak Imam Aziz’s notes the breadth of opinion within the pale of the faith. I was unable to contact Salafi or Muhammadiyah speakers or thinkers for discussions on Ratu Kidul, but clearly the Protestant and NU individuals I spoke with, Javanese ritual and tradition had to be *disetujui*—made to agree, literally—with their faith, albeit either by parallelisms in Pak Imam Aziz’s case, or outright subordination, as in Pak Abraham’s worldview.

What does this process look like? What communities engage with this discourse? I want to stress that the philosophical, theological conversations here are not the preserve of westernized Javanese elites, but extant in diverse communities of co-believers of all genders, who engaged with great emotion, nuance, and animation. I was instantly reminded of my own Malaysian Chinese background, and the ways family members would attempt to negotiate Chinese ritual and tradition with the Christian evangelicalism they had embraced in the late 1990s.

Much like the informants of John Bowen’s discursive Islamic world, my own interviewees engaged with this ongoing dialogue within their faiths. This should not be surprising; I draw our attention instead to the ways these conversations were framed, the rationalizations of faith that occur, and in some cases, the secularization of Javanese mysticism itself by discussing *kejawen* as a “philosophy” or an “abstract symbol.” Within this framework, it

seems a genuinely wide spectrum of practices and relationships to *kejawen* and Kanjeng Ratu Kidul had found traction among the contemporary pious. I also draw attention to what is not said—what Pak Imam Aziz would *not* assert about Ratu Kidul to a researcher. While the apophatics—the defining of something by negation—of one’s relationship to Ratu Kidul will feature far more frequently in our final discussion, it is worth observing this occurring here as well.

B) The Queen in Nonfiction

In my first forays into the libraries of Universitas Gadjah Mada, I found a smattering of slim volumes that discussed Ratu Kidul, invariably in the context of something else: Ki Tirtohamidjaja’s *Mitos Ratu Kidul: Dalam Perspektif Budaya* (The Mythos of Ratu Kidul in Cultural Perspective); Argo Twikromo’s far more academic *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, housed in UGM’s philosophy library; and finally, Muhammad Sholikhin’s *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul Dalam Perspektif Islam Jawa*, (Kanjeng Ratu Kidul from the Perspective of Javanese Islam).³⁷ Written in the early 2000s, even if based on research from earlier decades, these books seek to locate and place Ratu Kidul within a Javanese cultural framework. But as even their titles suggest, a great deal of this accessible literature has already framed the conversation in terms of theological or cultural lenses. We are not, then, discussing whether Ratu Kidul is real, but rather, what she *symbolizes*. Already, this discussion has been shifted out of the realm of the existentially controversial, and into a cultural space that cannot be easily contested. I found Schlehe’s discussion of a Javanese ritual in Kotagede rebranded as a cultural display particularly helpful.³⁸ By acknowledging the real spiritual differences between the Islamic *kejawen* of

³⁷ Ki Tirtohamidjaja, *Mitos Ratu Kidul*; Twikromo, *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*; Sholikhin, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul dalam Perspektif Islam Jawa*.

decades past, but nevertheless baptizing an event as “cultural,” organizers of the event could not be easily contested on the grounds of Modernist Islamic piety. “Properly” framing these conversations, then, becomes essential for anyone discussing a figure as controversial as Ratu Kidul.

Ki Tirtohamidjaja is an enigma—his name scarcely appears on the internet. However, the back of the book suggests this is the work of someone long interested in things Javanese. His work bears no citations, and draws on no traceable interviews, field research, or previous scholarship. It does, however, reflect a way that Indonesian mystics themselves are negotiating a path between the competing traditions of normative Islam and *Islam Jawa*, as they see it. Tirtohamidjaja speaks extensively on the complexity of Ratu Kidul, a symbol of worldly temporal power, feminine grace, the sea, and Javanese tradition (which he insists on calling “Mataram” culture, named after the last fully independent Javanese dynasty).³⁹ Likewise, he affirms in his opening pages that he is not attempting to eradicate belief in Ratu Kidul, a task he asserts is impossible. However, he does seek to bridge the gap between rational thought and the worldview of his ancestors, who saw the cosmos through *mata batin*, or noetic eyes. Even the cover emphasizes this—there is no bold painting of Ratu Kidul riding a golden chariot on the front. Instead, the reader sees a sunset over a quiet beach overlaid with text.

Several choices of diction stand out here. Tirtohamidjaja actively avoids calling Ratu Kidul an aspect of Javanese spirituality—the mythos of Ratu Kidul is simply discussed in the broad context of “culture.” Referring to spiritual practices mostly associated with *kejawen*, he refers to the Mataram Empire as its source. Despite being a religious scholar, a *kyai*,

³⁸ Judith Schlehe, “Contesting Javanese Traditions,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45:131, 2016, 3-23. Accessed: 31/7/2019.

³⁹ Ki Tirtohamidjaja, *Mitos Ratu Kidul*, 1-2.

Tirtohamidjaja also attempts no religious exegesis. But he appeals to his presumably Javanese audience on the grounds that Ratu Kidul is a symbol of the *batin*, spiritual, internal world of their ancestors. Indeed, it is this *batin* that permits space for the author to articulate his assertions about Javanese spirituality. In this source, we receive little understanding of what the author's personal beliefs are. Nevertheless, by citing the past cultural norms of Mataram Java, Ratu Kidul has been moved temporally, and so is no longer a threat to the present religious controversies in Java today.

Dr. Twikromo's monograph, also published in 2007, is a culmination of field research conducted in roughly the same period Schlehe conducted hers. A professor at Atma Jaya, a local Catholic university, Twikromo writes scholastically, while remaining accessible to a lay audience curious about the mythos of the Sea Queen. In his slim but pithy monograph, he first argues that temporal and spiritual power are inseparable in Javanese cosmology. Ratu Kidul, as a symbol of the sea, of womanhood, and spiritual power, thus acts as one who makes manifest political power in Java.⁴⁰ All this is conveyed with academic and conversational ease, while he simultaneously criticizes the "ravaging" advance of secular "modern ideology" in Indonesian responses to mythology.⁴¹ Twikromo also responds to dismissals of Ratu Kidul's mythos on purely rational grounds. Citing Mircea Eliade, he argues not for the existence of a mythical South Sea Queen, which perhaps some of his readers might expect, but rather discusses her function and significance in Javanese culture.⁴²

Twikromo refers to the legends and mysticism associated with Ratu Kidul as heirlooms of a distinctly Javanese worldview, and spends little time discussing intersections with Islamic

⁴⁰ Twikromo, *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, (Yogyakarta: Nidia Pustaka, 2006), 144.

⁴¹ Twikromo, *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 1.

⁴² Twikromo, *Mitologi Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 13.

mysticism or practice. During our interview, Twikromo, a Catholic Javanese professor at a Catholic university, explained both that he was not himself a mystic, and that he was particularly interested in what he called Javanese *philosophy*—beliefs about the balance in nature, the keys of political legitimacy, and the cosmology of Javanese geography. His authorial choice to discuss Ratu Kidul from a philosophical framework (not a religious one) and as a pre-monotheistic inheritance from a distant Javanese past reflects his vision of that past. This perceived Javanese past is rational and reasonable, embodied in language that secularism (and perhaps hardline religious modernism) might spurn. Catholic scholarship in Indonesia, Woodward observed in our conversation in March 2019, has often emphasized the indigeneity of regional traditions, often to supersede competing claims on religious legitimacy in various societies. In a region where many Catholics feel pressured by religious tensions with elements of the Muslim majority, works like Twikromo's certainly lay claim to Javanese identity. Twikromo here affirms a Javanese-ness that is ultimately non-religious, one that might be incorporated into modernity and its universalizing religions without being the heritage of any one current religion as such.

I only make note of this scholastic choice in order to observe one way a non-Muslim Javanese scholar has reimagined Ratu Kidul's legacy in ways that both pious Catholics and perhaps even more normatively pious Muslims might accept. This work, however, remains rooted in perspectives on the Javanese past, peppered with accounts of Javanese devotees and mystic practitioners from the mid-80s. It remains a primarily philosophical book—indeed, the only copy at Gadjah Mada University resides in the philosophy department's library. But its genre, argument, and diction move her into the realm of a symbolic, rather than metaphysical entity.

Finally Muhammad Sholikhin's far longer work suggests one mystic's meticulous research into Ratu Kidul's legends and her cult as it is practiced in Java. Based in Salatiga, a city north of Yogyakarta, Sholikhin's background seems to be in the *pesantren* and other religious communities dotting Central Java. In some ways it maintains some of the fascination with the mystic found in the *misteri* magazines where Ratu Kidul is rendered seductive. At the same time, Sholikhin's defense of the reasonability of Ratu Kidul is inherently polemical, if diplomatic, if only because it engages in openly religious language. Just as Pak Imam Aziz has reconciled his faith and his practice, Sholikhin attempts just that in text. But because Sholikhin engages in a religious dialogue with other Muslims, we also see moments where he disengages with parts of Ratu Kidul's cult deemed too worldly. Neither wholly rejecting or embracing all aspects of her modern veneration, he too negotiates between faith and tradition.

Sholikhin builds a closely-argued case study, defending the use of ritual incense and *slametan* celebrations with exegesis of a number of hadith.⁴³ Emphasizing that such expressions of piety have historical and religious precedent, even in the Middle East, he concludes, "What is clear is that the primary purpose [of these *slametan* rituals] is to be a spiritual expression, a place to pray and draw close to God."⁴⁴ Such practices cannot be understood purely with the five senses or the scientific method, he continues. And since a whole network of meanings, religious justifications exist behind these other Javanese practices, the veneration of the spirit world and *Ratu Kidul* must be seen through the same theological lens. Sholikhin's argument seems to articulate what many NU-leaning Muslims feel about *kejawen* at large, using the mythos of *Ratu Kidul* as metonymy for a much larger network of beliefs he embraces.

⁴³ Sholikhin, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 21-42.

⁴⁴ Sholikhin, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 42.

The rest of his book, remarkably, outlines legends, beliefs, and locations where individuals go to communicate with Ratu Kidul. The descriptions are meticulous, suggesting some of these sights are places he has visited himself or heard through first-hand witnesses. At one point Sholikhin even describes his own encounters with Ratu Kidul, coming forward as a Muslim mystic himself:

Certainly, this is quite strange. The author himself experienced this strangeness [encountering Ratu Kidul in meditation, as did the Sultan Hamengkubuwana IX]. When I had to soon send a draft of this book, I experienced several difficulties finishing it. Then I practiced *khalwat* and meditation to overcome this. When I slept, I dreamt of meeting Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, who brought up several things that were connected to the completion and resolution of this book. Maybe for others, this is strange. However, these strange things are just normal affairs for spiritual people, including *most of Javanese society* [emphasis added].⁴⁵

This assertion of belief and practice seems particularly bold—not many of my informants were willing to say as much in person, much less in a published book. But this book certainly makes a push to justify Ratu Kidul in the theological and cultural framework of Javanese Islam—going so far to suggest that spiritual encounters like this one are commonplace for Javanese people and “spiritual” people. Sholikhin asserts that spirituality is an integral aspect of Javanese identity, and by extension, forces a normative pious rebuttal to contend against a “core” Javanese principle.

This spirituality, however, is juxtaposed with elements of her veneration deemed too worldly. Describing Parangkusumo Beach to the reader, he notes both the environmental depletion of the famous sand dunes, and the thriving sex work prevalent on Selasa and Jumat Kliwon with no small distaste. Indeed, he describes both in the same page:

⁴⁵ Sholikhin, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 182.

“[The sex workers] take advantage of a societal belief that having sex on Parangkusumo Beach will bring blessings for life... Truly it’s inconceivable, the future of Parangtritis Beach [an adjacent beach]. If the dunes begin to disappear and the sex market continues to be bustle, Parangtritis can only weep. If so, one of [the beach’s] primary allies, Mount Merapi, will ‘cough’ more often, that is, erupt, as a sign of God’s punishment—and as a sign from ‘Sang Ratu Kidul’ that she won’t put up with this.”⁴⁶

Far from setting Ratu Kidul in opposition to God, they are placed in alignment here.

Explosions from the mountain are a sign that both Allah and His creation, Ratu Kidul, will not brook this kind of insult—along fault lines of morality the author takes for granted. By rendering her ultimately as a spiritual, abstract figure who appears in dreams, and speaks through augurs and signs, the author makes clear he traverses a highly contested space—in this case, the physical realm of Parangkusumo, its visitors, and sex workers. Moralizing and essentially curating Ratu Kidul’s cult, Sholikhin is making editorial decisions about what can and cannot be deemed ‘true’ belief or veneration. But by moving her into the world of the spiritual and the moralistic, he manages to carve out a space for his own beliefs, much in the way the aforementioned writers also bargain for space. Rendered cultural, or abstract, they avoid challenging a normatively pious consensus outright.

VI. Ratu Kidul Rendered *Batin*: Apophatic Intimacies

The distinction between the *lahir*—the material, and the *batin*—the spiritual and internal, is frequently discussed in the context of Javanese belief and ritual. Geertz defined this dichotomy as between the *batin* “the inner realm of human experience,” and the *lahir* “the outer realm of human behavior.”⁴⁷ These two Arabic terms are also widely used in Sufi discourse throughout the larger Islamic world, and not simply a preserve of Indonesian Muslims. These definitions, are

⁴⁶ Sholikhin, *Kanjeng Ratu Kidul*, 211.

⁴⁷ Geertz, *Religion of Java*, 232.

not, of course, watertight—Javanese mystics and others who spoke to intimate experience with *kejawen* and figures like Ratu Kidul operated in both spaces. But in the response to the contestation of normative piety we have already observed, it seems that outward expressions of devotion have retreated into the realm of *batin*.

Accounts suggest a tangible change since the Gus Dur presidency to the present in the visibility of Yogyakarta's *kejawen* practitioners. Robert Hefner points out the ways “non-standard” forms of Islam have been forced underground in recent years.⁴⁸ He notes further that so far, so-called *abangan* Islam has not converted into an acceptable, public-facing form of Islam. While I have chosen to sidestep this larger discussion of whether the so-called *abangan* have really disappeared, I think there is a consensus that indeed, *kejawen* and by extension, relationships to Ratu Kidul, are significantly less public-facing today, excepting the rituals maintained by the two *keraton*. Moreover, this has occurred in response to a rising normative piety that, like the YouTube thumbnail discussed before, would prefer spirits like Ratu Kidul to wear a headscarf.

Nevertheless, by no means is this particular brand of piety's reach complete, or unchallenged. As discussed, Parangkusumo is heavily frequented by those seeking boons of the Spirit Queen. Ratu Kidul continues to receive the patronage of the *keratons* of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, even while the Pakualaman of Yogyakarta, hosted a discussion in 2018 on whether Ratu Kidul really existed in the context of Islamic exegesis.⁴⁹ These public and printed spaces are

⁴⁸ Robert Hefner, “Where Have All the Abangan Gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia,” in *The Politics and Religion of Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, ed. Michael Picard and Remy Madinier (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 71-73.

⁴⁹ “Kanjeng Ratu Kidul Fakta atau Mitos? Ini Dia Hasil Diskusinya di Pakualaman,” *Tribun Jogja*, January 21, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019,

still discursive spaces. The individuals from *kebatinan* sects, *indigo* paranormal seers, queer Yogyakartaans, and female mystics who lived near Parangkusumo, however, have largely elected to maintain personal, rather than public connections to the Spirit Queen. Other individuals who had once been steeped in *kejawen* practice and had seen Ratu Kidul frequently in visions, had since moved on to less controversial spiritual practices. Nevertheless, the evidence from the interviews I collected from 2018-2019 suggest that intersections of class, gender, and sexuality have indeed informed new relationships to Kanjeng Ratu Kidul that neither follow the traditional narrative affirmed by the keratons nor the normatively pious injunctions against *kejawen*. Others choose to engage with one of these sources of power—say, working for the keraton—while also maintaining personal ties with Ratu Kidul that elude those boundaries. These intimacies exist often physically within spaces like the southern coast of Java, but also define themselves by what these intimacies are not: not worldly, not normatively Islamic, not Hindu, etc. Frequently in these conversations, I met many women and queer men who claimed Ratu Kidul as a kind of personal, maternal figure, full of compassion and care, rather than a seductive granter of wealth and boons.

Indeed, it is this search for wealth and sexual perks that are most widely condemned by both normatively pious Javanese and by *kejawen*-receptive mystics, like my guide Cempaka. At the beach, he and his friend, Nova, were dismissive of the men who trawled the beaches on Jumat Kliwon looking for *kanthil* (magnolia) flowers. When pressed, these night-time searchers ignored any inquiries as to what they were seeking on the beach, though Cempaka and Nova read this immediately as a cynical attempt to be granted wealth and power. Sholikhin's book likewise criticizes the worldliness of the sex industry thriving on Parangkusumo, as discussed. And normatively pious individuals like Ahava, whom I met, were quick to mention politically minded

<http://jogja.tribunnews.com/2018/01/21/kanjeng-ratu-kidul-fakta-atau-mitos-ini-dia-hasil-diskusinya-di-pakualaman?page=2>

peers in the 2010s who through secret prayers sought to gain political office by pleading with Ratu Kidul. If anything, *kejawen* expressed in the public sphere seems to be associated with the *lahir*—the worldly. And so, both by leaving public *kejawen* for normative Islam or by retreating into private practice and meditation, both seemingly opposing communities have distanced themselves from the general understanding of what a relationship with Ratu Kidul includes. Both choices offer a retreat into the *batin*, uncorrupted by lust or avarice. At the same time, this necessitates a division of body and spirit, a break between the public and private.

Ahava's account of her interactions in some ways rather mirrored the experience of Protestant convert Pak Abraham Nur Alam, rejecting *kejawen* and her experiences with Ratu Kidul in favor of a Sufistic but ultimately more normative piety. A young, college-educated single woman, Ahava has experienced Ratu Kidul in visions before. Practicing a combination of Sufi and Kaballah (!) mysticism, Ahava notes that in previous years she received advice from Ratu Kidul, which ultimately proved fruitless. At first some of her advice made sense, but subsequently the messages from the Spirit Queen helped Ahava less. "*Nah, itu bahaya,*" (This is the danger), she said, referring to the pacts and spiritual bonds her ancestors may have made with *djinn* in centuries past, including Ratu Kidul. She ultimately used an English term, "creepy," to describe her encounters. She was reminded of other university-age youths in *Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam* (the modernist "Muslim Student Union") who, as mentioned, chose to contact Ratu Kidul through meditation for political offices. She even spoke of a book her friend owned that offered its readers secret prayers to meet and receive boons from Ratu Kidul.

Since then, she explains she has drawn close to Allah and His prophets, even in her blend of normative piety and Sufi mysticism. This is not to say Ahava is opposed to Javanese cultural events, like the *Nyadran Agung* ritual she invited me to in Wates, mid-2019, to inaugurate the

controversial new airport to be built there. While Ahava actively participates in non-*kejawen*, non-spiritualized elements of Javanese culture, she has ultimately left what she deems *kejawen* behind. For her, at least, to forsake *kejawen* is to distance oneself from the “creepy” and the *lahir*, and to draw close to God through a different kind of *batin* spirituality.

A) Queer Javanese Intimacies and a Maternal Ratu Kidul

Meanwhile, my guide Cempaka’s personal journey in a culturally Javanese family that has experienced the religious shifts in 21st-century Indonesia. He too refers to the Sea Queen as *Kanjeng Ibu*, and regularly invited me to offer flowers and incense at Parangkusumo. Cempaka noted with some disappointment how his father, once a very *kejawen*-steeped Muslim, became more normatively pious through the efforts of Cempaka’s mother and the community around them. Cempaka himself found a great deal of solace in *kejawen* after a life-threatening accident, and has been steadily returning to what he identifies as the language, rituals, and beliefs of his ancestors. Like many of his friends, he has not had a direct experience with Ratu Kidul in visions, but emphasizes her maternal aspect, and the deep compassion she has for all of Java. He also emphasizes her presence as a spiritual being, and not a physical one.

In Cempaka’s case, a great deal of this search for *kejawen* is tied to a certain nostalgia for the past, although he tries his best to avoid romanticizing that past. For him, this return to an ancestral Javanese heritage incorporates both the aesthetic and the unseen, the physical and the spiritual. The ritual nights on Parangkusumo, which he attends almost monthly, often involve him procuring *sesajen* offerings from a Javanese Hindu *pemangku* (priest), which he then offers at the Cepuri Stone, or out to sea. Some of these offerings, however, he offers to *Sang Hyang Acintya*, the Balinese term for the unknowable one god. Others he offers to Ratu Kidul.

Another facet of this is historical and politically intentional. Cempaka, an out gay man and *kejawen*-positive Javanese individual, has experienced conflict within his own family as he has drawn closer to tradition. When asked, he expressed a deep sense of disappointment (*kecewa*) with the rising trend of normative Islamic piety in Yogyakarta. When asked whether Yogyakarta was a comparatively more liberal city than elsewhere, Cempaka laughed aloud. In his view, no part of Java has escaped this trend. Observing Javanese religious rituals in Catholic, Hindu, and quintessentially *kejawen* spaces like Parangkusumo Beach are decidedly political acts for him as they are spiritual, an attempt to ensure the physical spaces are maintained so the *batin* may flourish.

Cempaka's idea of a restored Javanese traditionalism, then, is holistic: both the physical expressions of *kejawen* and its spiritual truths and figures (like Ratu Kidul) are important. But the sort of *lahiriah* Cempaka rejects is the worldly aspect of Parangkusumo rituals: the sex work, for instance, or the men who hunt for leftover flowers on the beach to procure blessings or wealth. But regardless of the state of Parangkusumo in a decade or later, it seems clear his internal convictions motivate his forays into contested physical spaces.

Another of Cempaka's friends, a gay Balinese man named Made, was closely connected to the expat community and artists who support the *keraton*'s daily needs in Yogya. He bore some deep connections Javanese mysticism, in addition to his own Balinese Hinduism. With close ties to the *keraton*'s consumption of hand-drawn batik, and the artist community of the city, Made discussed *kejawen* comfortably, and had a great deal to say about Ratu Kidul. Noting that she is venerated in Bali as well, he emphasized that the Sea Queen was not to be called Ratu Kidul; she does not like to be addressed as a queen. Rather, one should address her as *Kanjeng Ibu*, that is, Lady Mother. He proceeded to explain how the chariots, the gold finery, the

crown—all these were human-made illustrations of her that should be rejected. “*Tanpa mahkota*,” he repeated: she appears “without a crown.” For Made, Ratu Kidul is a maternal guardian of the South Sea, and not ultimately a figure to be reviled or feared. In direct contrast to the elements of Javanese society that embrace the aesthetics of *kejawen* while rejecting its spiritual aspect, Made strips away the physical and visual elements of her cult, in favor of a truly invisible spiritual mother. Indeed, even her royal identity—and any legitimacy her cult derives from the *keraton*—are downplayed.

This does not seem to be exclusively a phenomenon among queer Indonesians, but a larger consensus shared in arts communities like Institut Seni Indonesia (Indonesian Arts Institute), and the *keraton*. Dancers for the famous gender-non-conforming performer Mas Didik Nini Thowok recounted to me once how *Bedhoyo Hagoromo*, a sacred dance based on a famous ancestor of the Mataram kings, was performed. As it was being staged, one dancer recalled that a friend of hers who was choreographing it, noticed that where there were ten dancers on stage, when only nine had been chosen. The tenth dancer’s gender was uncertain, but the character’s dress was the same as the others—that of men essentially crossdressing as women.

This story is particularly evocative to any Javanese listener, in part because most royal dances in honor of Ratu Kidul (such as the *Bedhaya Ketawang* in Surakarta and the *Bedhaya Semang* in Yogya) also attest to an additional, unseen dancer—Ratu Kidul herself—who occasionally reveals herself to discerning audiences.

Another story from the same dancers was of a time they sought *izin*—permission from Ratu Kidul to perform a children’s dance in her honor, during a night trip to Parangkusumo. One colleague was particularly skeptical of Ratu Kidul’s existence. The dancer I interviewed recounted how, while her skeptical friend was standing on the water, she saw them physically

disappear in a particularly high wave. Later, the friend resurfaced from the waves, traumatized, saying that as they entered that wave, they felt the shore seem increasingly farther away. A dark stillness surrounded them. At the last moment, this friend was able to turn around and leave, and reenter the physical world.

The dancer who knew this skeptic had also seen Kanjeng Ratu Kidul on the waves, who had said nothing but had simply hovered above the water. The dancer has no other explanation of what she saw, and simply concedes that the Spirit Queen exists. Amid these intersections of gender-nonconformity, dance, and ritual, Ratu Kidul's presence is keenly felt by artists in these spaces.

Without speaking for all of the several dozen queer Indonesians I conversed with in spaces throughout Yogyakarta, I draw attention to the ways Ratu Kidul—or Kanjeng Ibu—appears a maternal figure to many queer individuals, rather than a sexual one. For both Made and Cempaka, any connection to Ratu Kidul as seductress or granter of political office are not particularly salient.

This shift towards a more maternal Kanjeng Ratu Kidul is reflected in stories from the Surakarta keraton from as far back as the reign of Pakubuwono X (r. 1893-1939), who ascended the customary tower in his keraton at the beginning of his reign in hopes of spending a night with the spirit consort of the Javanese *sunans*. Instead, as Pemberton recounts it, the Sunan tripped on the stairs and was rescued by the Spirit Queen, who clucked over him as a child.

“What is all this child business?” the Sunan demanded. But he was met only with a loud sign from the sky, heralding a new relationship—the old consortship had passed. Ratu Kidul's role as mother and not consort had begun.⁵⁰

This particular change seems to have been readily grasped by these two gay men, who, besides their personal convictions about *kebatinan* and *kejawen*, have little vested interest in the traditional ways of petitioning Ratu Kidul. Embodied in their devotion as a patient and compassionate guardian and mother, her realm extends to some extent past the bounds of the patriarchy, including even gay Indonesians who feel besieged by government policy and religiously-instigated homophobia.

B) Working-class Mystics: Female Mystics on Parangkusumo Beach

During my field work for three days at Parangkusumo Beach, I managed to interview two working-class Indonesian women who had come to live or work in the vicinity of the beach, whose idiosyncratic experiences with Ratu Kidul flouted what is most often associated with her cult—masculine pursuits, *kejawen* as a primarily male practice, or else an intellectual curiosity explored by Javanese literati. Instead, both women I met spoke at length of going to Ratu Kidul in moments of pain or grinding poverty, and reconciling with their circumstances through these intimacies with a maternal sea goddess.

I met one of the local sellers of ritual *sesaji* flowers, who asked to be addressed as Bu Kembang (Ms. Flower). She works with some dozen other women on *Jumat Kliwon* and on other nights. During our interview, we discussed her perceptions of Ratu Kidul, and the instructions she received from a local entranced *jurukunci*, or ritual custodian of the South Sea in the *keraton*'s employ. Once, while asking for Ratu Kidul's advice about her hard station in life, Bu Kembang was enjoined, "*yang rutin yang jujur, jual bunga*" (sell flowers consistently and honestly). Since then, Bu Kembang has obeyed this command, even as an old woman. I ventured

⁵⁰ John Pemberton, *On the Subject of Java*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1994, 123.

to ask her if she felt afraid: Bu Kembang's entire outfit, including her *jilbab*, was bright green, colors that most Javanese do not wear on the beach for fear of being drowned by Ratu Kidul. She quickly dismissed the thought. "*Saya anak Ibu* (I am Mother [Ratu Kidul]'s Child)," she said simply. While sometimes wary of the visitors who come to Parangkusumo on their various pursuits, Bu Kembang emphasized the purity and personal connections she has with the Sea Queen, referring to her as a mother—up to the point of flouting taboos as well-known as not wearing green to the sea.

Bu Kembang is confident enough in the personal, *batin*, relationship she enjoys with the queen; something other visitors with other intentions may not enjoy. "Ratu Kidul does not care about your religion," she went on, noting the cross I wore about my neck that evening. "Ratu Kidul is a *Ratu Adil*." It is worth noting that *Ratu Adil* is a particularly evocative term in Javanese. Meaning, "just ruler," the term embodies the monarchic ideal of the good ruler in the eyes of the people. To ascribe this to Ratu Kidul is to not only assert her temporal or even spiritual power, but also her moral power as Java's spirit queen.

On the main road that leads to Parangkusumo, I encountered a local restaurant owner, here referred to as Bu Warung (Ms. Foodstand), who had moved from the Bandung area years before. Bu Warung emphasized she was a practicing devotee of Ratu Kidul and expressed deep personal gratitude to the queen mother for her newfound prosperity. When asked about the monthly *Jumat Kliwon* rituals and the visitors from out of town, she cautioned me against trusting the many visitors who spread lies about Ratu Kidul in order to get money. Bu Warung herself, of multi-ethnic descent, had once never believed in the djinn of *kejawen* mysticism, until a near death incident in which she claimed to see a massive, crowned snake before dropping into

a coma. “I am Muslim,” she explained, “but I combine it [*gabungkan*] with *kejawen*.... While I am Muslim, I still believe in reincarnation.”

Later in life, and deeply financially disenfranchised, she wandered on foot throughout Java until she arrived at Parangkusumo, where she settled. This beach is of particular importance, for she sees it as the center, or navel, of the *keratons* of all the world’s seas. Other doors exist throughout Java, but its center is just beyond the roof of her *warung*. While here she reasoned she should stay here more permanently: “...I’ve been tasked to this—to aiding people on spiritual matters...I don’t use the term *paranormal*...but to help anyone in difficult times...in both *lahir* and *batin* ailments... [and so I] tied myself to the Southern Coast.” In a time of financial hardship, she asked both Allah and Kanjeng Ibu for guidance and provisions on the beach, in order to live out her mission to help those in need. She claimed to have received divine providence to start up a small restaurant, from which she continues what she sees as her life’s task. When anyone comes to her, she does not instruct them in mysticism but encourages them to practice *ragasukma* (“taking on the spirit-body,” a meditative practice) according to their own techniques, and according to their own religious practices and the deities they beseech. Notably as well, Bu Warung disavows the *paranormal* community we’ve just discussed, echoing the opinions of other mystics I encountered who accused *paranormals* of being obsessed with materials—“sticks and stones and sacred objects.” Regardless of whether *paranormals* in truth do harbor such obsessions or not, Bu Warung here is aligning herself with an immaterial spirituality, one that does not impose itself on other devotees, regardless of the ill-intentions of visitors to the South Sea.

Both women, coming from poverty and marginality, have embraced a kind of mysticism and connection to Ratu Kidul that is deeply *batin*, spiritual, rather than attached even to the

“taboos” or rituals associated with her. They directly attribute their station in life to Ratu Kidul’s instructions or blessings and see in their positions divine purpose. Living far from the Yogyakarta *keraton*, the spirituality both women express emphasizes that anyone can interact with Ratu Kidul, regardless of religion or ethnicity. While both had opinions about the ways new visitors had changed the meaning of events like *Jumat Kliwon*, they expressed an emphasis on one’s intentions; the Queen Mother sees the heart and rewards it justly, as, in Bu Kembang’s words, a *Ratu Adil*. In Bu Warung’s case the ties between her personal connections to the queen and to *kejawen* are explicit. A *batin*, ecumenical connection to Ratu Kidul is available to all, though notably these connections are not tied to the *lahir*, or to a politicized struggle for *kejawen*. It remains ultimately an internal, personal connection. What is particularly revealing is that both women spoke often of a community of female mystics who frequented the beach—sometimes harried by tourists, but it seems evident from these interviews that the ways women are engaging with the sea and its Queen differ from the male-dominated activities on *Jumat Kliwon*.

C) Penghayat Kepercayaan: Mystical Communities in Yogyakarta and Wates

A final community I engaged with were the many spiritual sects, the *penghayat kepercayaan* perhaps better known as the *aliran kepercayaan*. Like the women I encountered at Parangkusumo and the queer *kejawen*-oriented youth I interviewed, many *penghayat kepercayaan* also spoke to intimacies with Ratu Kidul, even if what occurred in those interactions were often too private. Self-consciously rendered from a combination of theosophic, Javanese, and Islamic thought, these organizations occupy a unique, diverse space in Yogyakarta even in 2019. I encountered these communities through word of mouth, particularly from informants who knew I was interested in interviewing *kejawen*-approximate communities in Yogyakarta. Communities like *Sapta Dharma*, *Hardo Pusoro*, and *Sumarah* were immediately

recommended. There seems to be a general consensus that *penghayat kepercayaan* practice some form of *kejawen*, through meditation and asceticism, and that if anyone has secret connections with the Spirit Queen, it would be them.

I was disabused of this image very quickly by several, but not all of these organizations. The *penghayat* are essentially a plethora of religious communities that broke off from so-called *abangan* Islam and *kejawen* practices, from the 1900s to the 1950s.⁵¹ Over the early decades of independence, they gained steady traction amidst the deep polarization of political parties and communities of the age. Under *Orde Baru*, much of this traction was eroded. Now, as in their heyday, many of the extant *penghayat* groups in Yogyakarta today cite their roots in *kejawen*, in the divine revelations (*wahyu*) of their founders, in theosophy, or in normative Islamic mysticism. Whichever angle a community takes, it seems each group emphasizes its legitimacy by embracing and rejecting some of these over the others. More historically prominent organizations, like the Sumarah group, also tout their history of anti-colonial resistance, and the tacit support from Sukarno and later even Suharto in his first decade of government. Sukarno himself, I was told by current leaders, had allegedly enjoined the founder of Sumarah to forge it into a “strong and safe” organization. High-ranking leaders of *Orde Baru*, like Suharto’s trusted general Zahid Hussein, were members of Sumarah, another key Yogyakarta member explained to me. The aegis of *Orde Baru*, he claimed, protected the organization.

While these accounts may seem puzzling given the eventual crackdown on *penghayat* organizations in the late Suharto era, it is worth remembering that the *penghayat* (then called

⁵¹ M.C. Ricklefs, "The Totalitarian Experiment (I): Kebatnan, Christian and Government Competition and the End of Aliran Politics, 1966–80s." In *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, C. 1930 to Present*, (SINGAPORE: NUS Press, 2012), 132-134.

kebatinan sects) were deeply embedded in politics, or else suspected of harboring deviant political loyalties. Likewise, the *Orde Baru* regime—and Suharto himself—were heavily invested in acts of pilgrimage, visiting palaces and sites of spiritual significance, offering renovations to ensure control of that power. Pemberton notes how Suharto visited Parangtritis in person, among other places, while employing staff to act as “go-betweens” between the regime and the spirit world.⁵² In the decades of the New Order, then, these were by no means political vacuums, but hotly contested for by the leaders of Java, and by extension, Indonesia.

In a bid to gain traction and legitimacy, communities like Sapta Dharma and Sumarah legitimized themselves in their loyalty to *Orde Baru*, distinguishing themselves as philosophical paths of spirituality and emphatically *not* the new religions that normative Muslims accused them to be. For the organizations that survived the mass bans of the *Orde Baru* against suspect *kebatinan* groups, however, political power and mystical practice were contentious subjects.⁵³ Meanwhile, in post *Orde Baru*, claiming any particular proximity to *kejawen* or non-normative Islam became suspect. Of the five *kebatinan/penghayat* communities I visited, not one of them suggested that they or any other group were a religion, but simply a “system of belief.” Or rather, while some members might register themselves as *penghayat* on their national identity cards, the vast majority I met claim to be faithful practitioners of their own faiths, simply using the techniques of their organization in prayers and meditation.

For a number of historically influential *penghayat*, a long precedent stands of intentionally distancing themselves from *kejawen* proper, and figures associated with it, not least of all *Ratu Kidul*. The Sumarah community, seems to embody this particular trend well. Founded

⁵² John Pemberton, *On the Subject of Java*, 299-305.

⁵³M.C. Ricklefs, “The Totalitarian Experiment (I): Kebatinan, Christian and Government Competition and the End of Aliran Politics, 1966–80s,” 132-134.

in 1935 by a mystic who claimed to receive divine revelation, Sumarah boasted a swell of numbers in the independence era, that since has dwindled to some 2500 members in 2019, according to my sources. And while their *joglo*-style meeting house and the prayers they engage in take on a distinct Javanese flair, my guide Pak Yus Wijoyo emphasized that they do not pray to the mythical figures of Javanese spirituality. Semar and Ratu Kidul and the rest of the Javanese spirit characters are not denied or denounced in the quietist beliefs of Sumarah. However, engaging the spirit world is not the purpose of the organization, but rather it is to align humans to enlightenment under *Tuhan yang Maha Esa* (the one omnipotent God). Employing the safe, monotheistic rhetoric of the *Pancasila*, prayers in Javanese, and traditional *joglo* architecture, Sumarah now positions itself as a thing separate from *kejawen*, and certainly not *musyrik*, or polytheistic. Anyone from any faith can join. In a similar fashion, Pak Daryono, a resident of Wates and a leader another *penghayat* group, dismissed Ratu Kidul as a figure none of his members interacted with.

Indeed, Pak Yus' unwillingness to discuss the spirit world without disavowing it, seems to reflect the ways that organized groups engage with both normative Islamic piety and *kejawen* practice. Lacking the political patronage of yesteryear, the reluctance to affirm communication with Ratu Kidul—a symbol of political and mystic power in Java—seems shrewd and strategic. Appealing to her power for a political PR-gain, in the bold manner of older figures like Gus Dur, seems no longer a viable option in 2019's political climate.

This was, however, not uniform. In the *Hardo Pusoro* community, I found a number of individuals from Yogyakarta and Surakarta who either claimed to experience visions or else meditated at Parangkusumo. I had the privilege of discussing theology with a many such individuals. *Hardo Pusoro*, whose Javanese name means “Controlling the Dangerous Passions,”

however, draws its roots from many strands of philosophical and mystical thought. Its leaders actively acknowledge theosophy, *kejawen*, Western scientific knowledge, and the divine revelation bestowed on their founder as bases of legitimacy. This multiplicity of roots and influences is reflected in the many, personal perspectives on Ratu Kidul and embodied *kejawen*.

Official *Hardo Pusoro* beliefs about the supernatural world, *Ratu Kidul*, and connections with *kejawen* are fairly standardized, it seems. When asked, Pak Iwan and Mbah Miran, a senior member and the current spiritual leader respectively, explained that *Hardo Pusoro* is no religion but a form of *ilmu*, or knowledge. Unlike religion, it is objectively prove-able, Iwan asserted. A *Hardo Pusoro* adept can enter the unseen world and return to explain what they have seen, particularly into the realm of *siluman* (the invisibles), mortal spiritual beings and former humans, of which *Ratu Kidul* is a powerful member. *Hardo Pusoro*, however, is also a method, a practice that can grant the member access to understand and see this *ilmu* experientially. Much of this is rooted in *kejawen*-reminiscent principles, according to these leading figures. Unlike Sumarah members, they seemed much more willing to both discuss and assert their ties to *kejawen*, or else to emphasize the spiritual powers of the Javanese people as a foundation for their own practice. Perhaps this predisposition to spirituality in Java is genetic, Pak Iwan suggested. Conversely, he suggests that rational white Europeans might not grasp such matters because such tendencies are not in their DNA.

Within this framework, however, individual *Hardo Pusoro* members seem to emphasize different aspects of this varied amalgam. For some members, like Pak Wasis, the scientific aspect is reassuring. Since *Hardo Pusoro* is not a religion, and simply *ilmu*, its self-identified theosophist, “scientific” model of understanding the spiritual is welcomed by those who actively practice their government-registered religion. For others, the group’s ties to elements of *kejawen*

are cited as reasons for joining; Hendro, a middle-aged member joined in part to recultivate his Javanese identity and mystic practice, which he felt he missed while growing up in a Catholic convert family. Almost as soon as he said this, however, an ethnic Chinese Indonesian at the table emphasized that everyone here had their own personal reasons for joining Hardo Pusoro.

But even in this one community, interactions with Ratu Kidul and the South Sea are diverse. Pak Iwan's opinion was that Ratu Kidul was a human who had been reincarnated to the spirit realm of the *siluman*, and will remain there for another five hundred years. Ratu Kidul "*merasa gusti, tapi bukan gusti*," according to him: Ratu Kidul feels she is a lord, but is not truly a lord. Instead, though she is very powerful, her ego prevents her from union and enlightenment. He has not, however, interacted with her himself. When I asked another member, Bu Noer, if she knew others who had experiences with Ratu Kidul, she replied, "It cannot just be anyone, we must be careful [in choosing whom to ask]." When asked how to discern the honest mystics from the dishonest, she explained that this difference lay in the *rasa*, "the smallest and deepest part of the heart."

Meanwhile, Wibowo, a member from the Surakarta chapter of Hardo Pusoro, has had direct visions and interactions with the Spirit Queen, but declined to share the details of those experiences. He does note, however, that many of his friends in Surakarta have had similar experiences. He is more open to discussing the general sanctity of the South Sea. While mediating once with some others, he saw a circle of light open up in the cloudy sky above them. "For those who don't know, it would seem this is magic," Wibowo noted. But in truth, he felt this was a natural result caused by *gelombang* (waves) of energy sprung from their meditation.

When asked what constituted *kejawen* proper, however, he explained that the practices of Hardo Pusoro are not a modern kind of *kejawen*, but simply a different way of approaching

the same essence that *kejawen* practices. The *ilmu* of Hardo Pusoro has existed since time immemorial in *kejawen*, after all. Instead of being something new, this older knowledge has been adapted to the present; its form changes, and so Hardo Pusoro is understood as the form of *ilmu* as it appears now in Java. The west, not having the genetic tendencies of Javanese, has turned to reason and logic. This is one way of obtaining *ilmu*, but again, these are simply externally different systems, all pursuits of an elusive, single *batin* truth. Hardo Pusoro, and its practices—its *cara*—facilitate the process of understanding such matters. But the *inti* (seed, essential matter) unifies all these constructions of east and west in my sources' view.

But for Bu Noer, Ratu Kidul and the South Sea are deeply maternal sources of mystical *energy*, a term that carries significance to her beyond mere electrical watts. Ratu Kidul is a *nenek*, a benign grandmother, and her domain of the south is a center of great spiritual importance. A week before the presidential elections in 2019, Bu Noer went down to the sea with friends to pray for peaceful elections. Shortly after, she sent me photos she had taken on the beach. Noting a green flare that had landed on her chest in the photo as a sign from the cosmos, she expressed how she felt directly blessed by the experience. She adds that as a descendant of the founder of the Mataram Dynasty (believed to have first wed the Sea Queen), she feels a personal ancestral call to visit Parangkusumo Beach. Visiting the southern coast makes her feel at peace; it is a source of divine blessing (*rahayu*).

Is Bu Noer's mysticism grounded then in the practice of *kejawen* itself? Are the ritual and the ancestral essential to interacting with the Spirit Queen? Is even the practice of Hardo Pusoro the ideal means of ascertaining truth? For Bu Noer, it would seem these are the wrong questions. Instead, she embraces an ecumenism that affirms movements like Hardo Pusoro, typical *kejawen* practice, and other spiritualities of Indonesia. While rising religious conservatism saddens her,

she asserts that the *penghayat* themselves are not concerned with politics, or the seeming decline of their movements. As long as the roots are in the ground, the same values will spring up again in a different form. Culture, religious practice, and its *lahir* might change, but an internal *inti* was never threatened. Ratu Kidul, then appears as a grandmother—a maternal and non-sexualized figure, whose southern abode is a source of great cosmic energy in Noer’s worldview, an aspect or window into much larger cosmic truths.

Situating this discourse in this discussion of whether “abangan” practice is fading feels awkward. Avoiding explicitly religious terms and describing spiritual experience as “energy waves” or “knowledge” certainly makes these practices less prone to provoke controversy. But I draw attention to the ways this particular community has, in some sense, secularized *kejawen* practice and relationships to the South Sea. By retreating entirely from religious debate and establishing itself as a philosophy and lifestyle, ties to *kejawen* are justified with almost scientific diction.

Kanjeng Ratu Kidul in these examples appears as many things, a concerned mother, a protector of the most vulnerable, and as spiritual guide. But she is not a liberator, an equalizer of social class, or a restorer of lost fortunes for communities like the *penghayat kepercayaan*. Likewise Ratu Kidul does not, in the end, promise any prosperity to Bu Kembang, selling flowers to the men who search for divine favors by the sea. Nor does she appear as a rallying call for either Cempaka or Made to overturn homophobia—certainly not explicitly. Ratu Kidul appears more often as a consoler of the weary, in these cases speaking intimately in the lives of these individuals. Nevertheless, in Bu Kembang’s opinion, especially, Ratu Kidul is the ruler that was promised. *Ratu Adil* is typically gendered as male, even if the word *ratu*—monarch—can apply to any gender. But by subverting this linguistic ambiguity, Bu Kembang places her trust in

the Queen's maternal instinct—so much so that wearing green on Ratu Kidul's beach is a sign of her faith and belief.

VII. Analysis and Conclusion

Having sieved through such a breadth of interviews and accounts of the Spirit Queen, I hesitate to draw conclusions that essentialize the idiosyncratic nature of mystical experience. One *penghayat* might affirm connections to Ratu Kidul—another might disavow her. Others have encountered her directly in visions, but openly reject her cult as *musyrik*, or polytheistic. I do, however, point to patterns in the ways Yogyakarta residents experience Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, and how those experiences reflect intersections of class, generation, and gender. Likewise, the language used to discuss Ratu Kidul reflects tactics of marginalized individuals to justify their beliefs and communities. Intimacies with Ratu Kidul, which are hard to document, can nevertheless be communicated to others in idioms that elude the boundaries defined by normative Islamic or Christian piety. Ultimately, I contend that Ratu Kidul veneration—and by extension, *kejawen*—is not “dying.” Nor is it simply changing form and taking on new “camouflage” to disguise itself before probing normative pieties. I think the idioms themselves, be they of seeing *kejawen* as cryptozoology, as philosophy, as spiritual consolation—change the nature of interactions with Ratu Kidul themselves. By extension, these idioms also change the role Ratu Kidul plays in Javanese politics, society, and intimacy today. Instead I draw attention to this shift to a more maternal Ratu Kidul, which I see as reflective of new needs and hungers among Javanese practitioners historically underrepresented in the written sources of the *Keraton*: that is, working-class women and queer Indonesians. Unsatisfied with Ratu Kidul as a purely seductive, royal figure, individuals are not just hiding “*abangan*” belief from normative eyes, but actively negotiating new relationships with Ratu Kidul herself. In short, this discursive tradition

within Islam and Christianity in Java is not just discourse between humans but also between humans and the Spirit Queen. These intimacies too, must be reckoned with.

Without doubt, Ratu Kidul as a seductive, visual, *creepy*, figure is certainly alive and well. Blended of Western-style ghostbuster documentaries and the haunting image of Ratu Kidul as serial queen and consort of the sultans of Yogyakarta and the sunans of Surakarta, this rendering harbors more traditional aspects associated with her cult. The tabloids harp on legends commonly told about the Spirit Queen, and indeed capitalize on the shock value of depicting things “occult”-related. At the same time, even these spaces change the relationship with Ratu Kidul by imaging her, or rendering her, in film or in print.

Derivative of these images of Ratu Kidul as beautiful, furious, and fey is a thriving Indonesian youth meme culture that has employed her imagery for games, anti-colonialist humor, and pan-Indonesian solidarities. Seen as a kind of an Indonesian equivalent to alien conspiracy theories in America, Kanjeng Ratu Kidul is juxtaposed with other national symbols as a figure associated with Indonesia. In moments of anger at American or western tourists, memes reference her as a sort of vengeful righter of wrongs, someone who will protect Indonesia from neocolonial advances.

Away from the world of Indonesian online youth culture, Javanese literati and religious thinkers spend more time reconciling Ratu Kidul with normative piety—be it Christian or Muslim. Framing older beliefs about her within conversations on “Javanese philosophy,” “the glory of Mataram,” and “ancestral” belief, discourses like these relegate her to a sufficiently distant past that few normatively pious Javanese would summarily dismiss. Rendering her abstract, some writers argue for her cult as a morally acceptable thing, while criticizing environmental degradation on Parangkusumo, or condemning the sex work that thrives on *Jumat*

and *Selasa Kliwon*. Moralizing statements like these from Sholikhin coexist with open confessions that the author dreams of Ratu Kidul and leans on her for spiritual guidance—all while practicing a variety of normative Islam. Ratu Kidul as a philosophical figure, as a private tutelary spirit, and as a symbol of the *keraton* does not challenge social order. If anything, Sholikhin's book in particular seems to affirm the political, religious, and moral order of the day, rather than suggesting radical new relationships to the Spirit Queen.

The same, however, cannot be said of the intimacies negotiated by working-class female mystics, marginalized *penghayat kepercayaan*, artists, and queer Indonesians who are actively redefining traditions and connections to Ratu Kidul. Rejecting the hypersexualized image of Ratu Kidul, and also rejected the more scholastic or theological speculations of university-educated Javanese men, queer Indonesians and women frequently speak of maternal relationships with her instead. She appears as a mother or grandmother. Not to be trifled with, certainly, but this desexualized queen seems aloof to the practices of men who seek flowers on Parangkusumo to obtain wealth or sexual prowess. For individuals who are not seeking political office or beautiful women, Ratu Kidul offers intimacies not frequently discussed in traditional *keraton* literature.

Ratu Kidul, however, does not challenge the capitalist, neo-colonial, heterosexist order of society. I did not encounter individuals who saw her as a symbol of resurgent Marxist indignation. Indeed, in the case of Bu Kembang who sold flowers by Parangkusumo, Ratu Kidul's advice (spoken through a male *jurukunci*, or ritual steward) was to continue her difficult labor with consistency and to accept her place. Nevertheless, Bu Kembang wearing green to the sea because she is a “child” of Ratu Kidul is an unexpected relationship. It is a relationship

through which working-class Javanese women feel daring enough to negotiate new intimacies with a *Ratu Adil*—a just ruler.

I contend that the interviews here depict a three-way discourse, not just between traditionalist and modernist Muslims and Christians but also between those communities and Ratu Kidul herself. For some individuals like Ahava, this discourse has been abruptly cut off; Ahava felt these interactions with spirits like Ratu Kidul were “creepy,” and so to be avoided. Nevertheless, her return to normative piety and mysticism was instigated first by meeting and speaking with the Spirit Queen in meditation. For others, the language used to defend spiritual connections to *kejawen* are oriented towards more human audiences. In yet others already discussed, marginalized individuals have found new ways of connecting to Kanjeng Ratu Kidul as mother, grandmother, and *Ratu Adil*. These assertions are bold—neither traditionalist in the strictest sense nor normatively Islamic or Christian. These idiosyncratic intimacies are often apophatic: she is *not* a temptress, *not* musyrik or demonic, does *not* care about your religion. In many cases devotees hesitated to recount stories deemed too personal. In others, there was a sense that an outsider should not hear these experiences. These apophatics do not strike me as reflective of a purely Western-style “spiritual, not religious” trend—even if we acknowledge the importation of New Age phrases like “*indigo*” spirituality into common parlance in Java. Perhaps for some Indonesians with ties to academia and western expats, some of the same diction is employed, but I struggle to see how Bu Kembang or Bu Warung have “borrowed” from Western New Age to redefine Ratu Kidul.

I conclude with these examples to contest any narrative of Javanese piety that depicts it *only* as a struggle between traditionalism and normative faith. Such a framework excessively centers the piety of heterosexual men and speaks of *kejawen* as a static practice that can be only

either preserved or eroded by political forces. No one, I should think, contends that *kejawen* in public spaces goes uncontended. But by reducing the conversation to what of a previously dominant tradition has survived to the present, we overlook both the ways these traditions continue to change and the intimacies with Ratu Kidul that are forged by women and queer people. By rejecting, embracing, or bargaining with her cult, new ties are being made.

Bu Noer analogized Javanese spirituality to roots bursting up from the ground in many places—welling up and never completely dying out. But even as traditionalist pieties seem to be on the retreat, a discussion about how individuals are shaping *kejawen* and its powerful spiritual figures should warrant new conversations. Perhaps we must entertain the possibility that Ratu Kidul is revealing herself to communities in ways not previously documented by *keraton* writers, Western researchers, or Indonesian academics.

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