

KANJENG RATU KIDUL, THE ELUSIVE GODDESS OF JAVA

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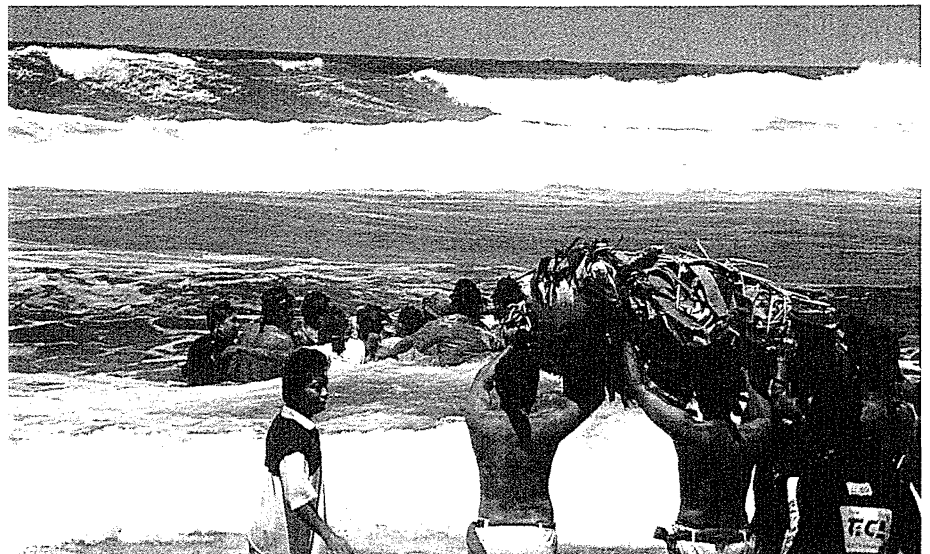
The southern coast of Java offers a dramatic picture: steep cliffs fall into the depths of the Indian Ocean, while huge waves wash beaches of black sand. Violent currents and strong surf have claimed many victims. This is the realm of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, the Goddess of the Ocean and the spiritual consort of the rulers of Central Java.

Ratu Kidul controls not only the sea but also the forces of the land. This beautiful, powerful goddess has a capricious nature which must be reckoned with. She may be a saviour and benefactor of people, but she can also be a destroyer and a killer. The earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis which frequently oppress this part of the world are usually explained by Ratu Kidul's discontent with the *status quo*.

The close association between the sultans of Java and the Goddess of the Ocean dates back to the first ruler of the second Mataram dynasty, Panembahan Senopati (1582-1601), whose descendants – sultans of Surakarta and Yogyakarta until Indonesia's independence – used to be the political leaders of the island and still today are recognised as spiritual leaders in Central Java. According to the 19th century chronicle *Babad Tanah Jawi*, Senopati meditated in a secluded place to gain spiritual power before setting out on a major military campaign. His meditation released powerful energy which caused great turbulence in nature. Disturbed, Ratu Kidul came to the earth and took Senopati away to her palace at the bottom of the Ocean. The ruler spent three days there, learning from her secrets of war, magic and love. Their union – of human and spiritual beings – assured a strong foundation for the Mataram kingdom. Ratu Kidul became the patroness of the Javanese rulers and their subjects, ensuring the well-being and protection of the kingdom.

Still today Javanese sultans are recognised as persons of divine power, whose responsibility is to maintain the order of the cosmos. This concept originates from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition in which the ruler was known as *chakravartin* – the 'wheel turner' – a universal monarch, whose person forms the axis of the universe. The official names of the Javanese sultans clearly express this concept: for instance, 'Paku Buwono', the name used by the sultans of Surakarta, means 'Nail/Spike of the Universe'; while the name of the rulers

LABUHAN: OFFERINGS FOR RATU KIDUL ARE CAST INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN AT PARANGKUSUMO IN 2005. PHOTO MARIA WRONSKA-FRIEND



of Yogyakarta, 'Hamengu Buwono', translates as 'the one who holds the Universe in His Lap'. For Javanese rulers, whose royal power is legitimised by the reference to cosmological concepts, the alliance with the spirits of the supernatural world is vital to maintain control over the land they govern. The powerful, feared and highly respected Goddess of the Sea is their most important ally.

Numerous images of female deities derived from Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions (Tara, Durga, Prajnaparamita, the Nagas) testify that the concept of female energy played an important role in the pre-Muslim culture of Java. Judith Schlehe, a German scholar who conducted a most exhaustive study of Ratu Kidul's significance in Javanese culture, claims however that the concept of the personification of the forces of nature through the Goddess of the Ocean is of indigenous, Javanese origins (Schlehe 1998).

In spite of the great significance of Ratu Kidul, Javanese art features no images of the Goddess, except for some modern devotional paintings. This may result from the Islamic reluctance to represent living beings – be they spirits or humans. Yet the highly revered goddess is strongly represented in Javanese performing arts, rituals and architecture.

In the middle of the 18th century, when the kingdom of Mataram had split into the two houses of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, each of the courts developed separate rituals, validating the legitimacy of their rulers. At the court of Surakarta, the alliance of the



LABUHAN: PRAYERS AT THE BLACK ROCK WHICH MARKS THE PLACE WHERE SENOPATI EMERGED FROM THE UNDERWATER PALACE OF RATU KIDUL. PHOTO MARIA WRONSKA-FRIEND 2005

ruling sultan with Ratu Kidul is reaffirmed through the performance of the sacred Bedoyo Ketawang dance. Each year on the anniversary of the coronation of Paku Buwono, nine young unmarried women of noble birth perform a dance which re-enacts the encounter of Ratu Kidul with Senopati. This very demanding dance is performed in front of the ruling sultan with extremely slow, constrained and highly controlled movements, creating a dreamlike impression. The dancers wear Javanese bridal garments and they have to follow the same preparations as those about to marry. It is believed that Ratu Kidul comes to observe the dance and frequently joins in, appearing as a shimmering figure on the floor.

In 2005 in Surakarta a bitter succession battle took place between the two sons of the late Pakubuwono XII. Followings several months of fierce disagreements, disputes and even violence, two coronations took place. Finally Prince Hangabehi, the eldest son of the late sultan, was recognised as Paku Buwono XIII:



the fact that the Bedoyo Ketawang dance was performed at his coronation meant that he was the rightful successor to the throne.

At the court of Yogyakarta the main act of reaffirming the union with Ratu Kidul is the annual ceremony of Labuhan, conducted at the Parangkusumo beach on the anniversary of Hamengku Buwono's coronation. Among the offerings are hair and nail clippings of the sultan, which are buried near a black rock -- the place where Senopati emerged from the Ratu Kidul's underwater palace. Gifts to Ratu Kidul include a prescribed selection of fabrics (including garments in her favourite light green colour known as *gadung melati*) body lotion, perfume and incense. Attached to bamboo rafts, the offerings are released onto the stormy ocean waters by a group of court retainers. On the same day, similar offering are sent to the peak of the sacred Mt Merapi, to be thrown into the volcano's cone.

The presence of the spirit of Ratu Kidul has been expressed in the design of both *kratons* or residences of the Central-Javanese sultans. For example, the *kraton* of Yogyakarta is positioned at the centre of the axis connecting the two most important places: Mt Merapi in the north and Parangkusumo beach in the south, situated near the abode of Ratu Kidul. The presence of Ratu Kidul has been symbolically acknowledged by lining the courtyards of both *kratons* with black sand, brought from the beach of Parangkusumo.

The most prominent feature of the Surakarta palace complex is the tall octagonal tower Songgobuwono, 'Support of the Universe'. This building is believed to be occasionally visited by Ratu Kidul. Each year on the

anniversary of his coronation, the sultan retires to the highest floor of the tower where, through the meeting with Ratu Kidul, he renews his divine powers.

The rulers of Yogyakarta went much further than those of Surakarta in acknowledging the Goddess in the design of the royal grounds. Sultan Hamengku Buwono I, who broke away from the Mataram kingdom and established the new court of Yogyakarta, required a strong, tangible expression of the legitimacy of his power. His ambitious plans included not only the construction of a large *kraton* at Yogyakarta, but also a replica of Ratu Kidul's underwater palace. This complex, known as Taman Sari, 'Fragrant Garden', was constructed between 1758 and 1769: it is a vast architectural system composed of residential buildings situated on and around an artificial lake, pavilions and bathing pools, a mosque, a system of underground tunnels, a meditation grotto and barge landings. According to some traditions, an underground tunnel was to connect Taman Sari to Ratu Kidul's abode at the bottom of the Indian Ocean.

The most important part of the complex was Sumur Gemuling, 'Coiled Well', a type of sunken chamber with a small platform, surrounded by three levels of vaulted galleries. In the past the bottom of the structure was filled with water. This was probably a meditational retreat, a place where each year the sultan of Yogyakarta would renew his relation with Ratu Kidul.

Difficulties with the maintenance of the place, particularly its complex system of waterways, resulted in its abandonment soon after the death of Hamengku Buwono I in 1792. A devastating earthquake in 1867 turned this ambitious project into ruins, although recent restoration work has brought parts of the complex back to its former glory.

Belief in the supernatural powers of Ratu Kidul continues until today. The year 2006 was a particularly difficult time for the island: in May a powerful earthquake destroyed a large part of Yogyakarta and the nearby area, killing nearly 6,000 people. At the same time Mt Merapi was threatening to erupt, while two months later a large tsunami hit the southern coast of the island, once again killing a number of people.

Many residents of Java claimed that Ratu Kidul was responsible for the disasters. During a heated public debate, it was frequently pointed out that there was negligence in performing certain rituals at the court of Yogyakarta, or that a taboo was broken by

constructing a shopping centre on the sultan's ancestral grounds of Ambarrukmo.

Unlike female expressions of divine powers in other Asian traditions, which have left a tangible legacy of impressive sculptural and painted images, Ratu Kidul is a goddess of elusive presence. One of the court officials compared her presence to the fragrance of incense: 'you do not see her, yet she permeates everything; she is present in the most important moments of the life of Javanese people'.

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