

**READING THE FUTURE IN INDONESIA: JAVANESE TEXTS OF  
PROPHECY AS A POPULAR GENRE**

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***Introduction***<sup>1</sup>

*When carriages drive without horses,  
ships fly through the sky,  
and a necklace of iron surrounds the island of Java  
When women wear men's clothing,  
and children neglect their aging parents,  
know that the time of madness has begun.*  
From the *Ramalan Jayabaya*, Oral transmission, my translation.

This paper discusses the rather unusual literary genre of prophecy texts in Java. Following a brief social history of this genre, I will argue that these texts function as a means not simply of predicting but of imagining and actively shaping the future. I combine this analysis with a critique of modern rationality, from the perspective of which prophecy texts would otherwise be all too easily dismissed - as a presumptuous exercise in imaginative mythologising. I will argue, instead, that these and similar texts of prophecy too base some of their rhetorical power on a rational analysis of historical facts and on careful observation of patterns of change across time, as does modern science, and that science in turn has its own mythology. The difference is that the

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prophetic genre rests on the assumption that human beings, or at least some particularly gifted human beings, can draw on intuitive insight to find answers where rationality tends to fail us.

### *A Social History of the Jayabaya Corpus of Prophecy Texts*

There are two major sets of prophecies in the Javanese literary tradition, those attributed to the 12<sup>th</sup> century king Jayabaya and those attributed to Sabdapalon, a royal counsellor to King Brawijaya V in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. In this paper I will be discussing mainly the Jayabaya corpus of texts. First of all, I would like to examine this corpus of literature historically, both as a narrative and as a political tradition.

Almost every contemporary Indonesian has some familiarity with the major texts of Javanese prophecy, and we are thus dealing with a popular genre, even though their knowledge may be confined to some of the prophecy's most pithy statements, such as the one cited above, which are passed on orally. The texts may have had a more esoteric character at some time in the past, but they have been popular and politically influential and contentious for at least 300 years.

In my very lengthy search for original literary sources of this tradition, I have collected close to 100 different versions. The earliest written version I was able to locate is from the royal library collection in Solo and was transcribed in 1835. This version has a foreword, however, which clearly indicates that this is but a transcription on another, earlier document. In the opinion of the 1835 scribe - this earlier document was itself already a corrupted copy of a still earlier text, complaining that its author has Islamised the narrative. For example, the narrative names the Sultan of Rum (Constantinople) as the one who initiated the original human settlement of Java rather than the Hindu saint Aji Saka, though this Islamised narrative still follows the general plot of the earlier, Hindu version quite closely in many respects. Fragments of the original Hindu version still exist, but most of the other written versions show similar signs of a superimposed Islamic theology, cosmology and eschatology. Many oral versions of the Jayabaya prophecy also retain the earlier Hindu themes, however, and I do believe it would be possible to reconstruct the original version. This would be a complex philological project, rather than an anthropological one, however, and would lead us away from the reality of the prophecies as they are read in Javanese society and used in politics. In this more practical context, the fusion of Islamic and Hindu ideas in the prophecy texts did

them no harm but made them all the more inclusive and effective as a means of political mobilisation.

Java's great prophet Jayabaya has been compared to Nostradamus in the Western world, but Jayabaya is different in that his prophecies are not marginal and esoteric but immensely popular and politically significant. Indeed, what little attention the text received in the West came from Dutch scholars of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hollander 1848). This is because one of the predictions in the prophecy is that Java would be freed from the oppressors from 'Nusa Prenggi', or Europe, with the coming of a "Just King" or *Ratu Adil* who – like Jayabaya - is an emissary of Allah, or in the Hindu version, an incarnation of the deity Vishnu. This prophecy inspired a number of rebellions against the Dutch colonial regime including the most famous one, under the leadership of Diponegoro, who was widely believed to be the predicted *ratu adil*.

In my extensive search of references to the Jayabaya's prophecies in newspapers and magazines in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I have found that an unusually high frequency of such references occurred during every major political crisis. The first of these crises was the struggle for independence. The prophecies were incredibly important, and were frequently mentioned in political speeches and propaganda material. Indeed, after the initial departure of the Dutch, Soekarno commissioned the publication of a book entitled "The Role of the Jayabaya Prophecies in Our Revolution". When the Dutch made their short comeback after WW2, they seized the book at the printers, but it was later republished. In his foreword to the book, Soekarno identifies himself with the prophesied liberator, Ratu Amisan, but simultaneously stresses that democracy is ultimately the "just king" of the prophecies, an interpretation shared by many contemporary Indonesians. Indeed, every time Indonesia has a new president he is identified as one of the future rulers predicted by Jayabaya. Thus, for example, Habibie is sometimes identified as the one whose rule was predicted to last only "as long as a life cycle of the maize plant", or approximately 9 months.

The second major crisis that sparked interest in the prophecies was in 1965. Soeharto, however, was more closely associated with the prophecies of Sabdapalon, and was widely believed to be his reincarnation, who was himself regarded as an incarnation of the timeless literary figure Semar (Dewa Ismaya), who is a royal advisor in the to the righteous Pandava princes in Javanese puppet theatre. Soeharto and his inner circle, under the leadership of a *Kejawen* (Javanese mysticism) spiritual leader, practiced a veritable cult of Semar. I gained first hand information on the immense influence of

Soeharto's spiritual guide on political decision-making in an interview with former Secretary of State and Soeharto's right hand man, Murdiono. I also had the chance to visit some of the sacred sites associated with this cult, especially at Mt Tidar and Cilacap.

Finally, the fall of Suharto and the early years of *reformasi* witnessed another resurgence in the popularity of the prophecies. There are numerous re-publications of the text from this time, most of which are very inexpensive productions and have sold large numbers of copies. I have already mentioned Habibie, but similar stories were told about his successors Abdurahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri. I was also able to determine that during their candidature both of them visited sacred sites associated with the prophecy, such as the Lokamoksa Jayabaya, the site where the prophet king is said to have vanished (having achieved *moksa* or liberation), leaving no mortal body behind. The two politicians also visited spiritual leaders whose knowledge of the prophecy is profound, though they do not study the texts. Rather, their knowledge is thought to be based on having access to the world of spirit, to the same source from which Jayabaya also drew his knowledge. Indeed, these contemporary Javanese masters of the spirit world are charged not only with interpreting but also with implementing the prophecy, and are believed to have the power to determine by spiritual means who becomes the next president. Megawati and Gus Dur, for example, were anointed by one of the most influential of these leaders at a sacred site on a beach in Gunung Kidul, and they built monuments at this site to show their gratitude after their subsequent election.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is no stranger to this world, but I am not prepared to elaborate while he is still in office. Herein we see prophecy manifested as a living, contemporary tradition and an active political process based on a still powerful belief in the spirit world within the broader epistemological context of Javanese mysticism.

### ***On the Science of Prophecy and the Mythology of Science***

The political use of prophecies in Java is interesting as a social practice which has few parallels in contemporary Western societies. I say few rather than none, because there are exceptions, such as the prophecies of Fatima, which had an enormous political

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<sup>2</sup> The spiritual leader in question has expressed his wish not to be named, due to concerns that he may suffer persecution or risk the enmity of competitors, particularly among Muslim spiritual leaders.

impact and arguably inspired initiatives which eventually contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. The ardent belief in the Biblical prophesy of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ among members of the Christian Right in the United States, who have significant links to the current US government, is another pertinent example.

In general, however, modern science has provided Western civilisation with such a powerful description of the world, as it (supposedly) really is, that any other idea anyone may have about the nature of reality is immediately ridiculed and dismissed as a false and irrational belief. The prophetic imagination does indeed posit a set of beliefs of what the world will or should be, motivates us to act according to these images, and often changes the world in the process. As Castoriadis (1998) has observed, the imaginary can thus be more important than the real as a source of change. Conversely, what we in the West hold to be the 'real', following Baudrillard's (2005) theory of the hyper-real, may in fact be no more than an imagined, simulated reality while actual reality eludes us completely, or may not exist at all. Science is, in this sense, just another product of the political imagination, and by hiding this embarrassing fact behind a smoke screen of materialist realism, its imagery operates all the more pervasively within our Western collective unconscious. In other words, because science leaves so little to the imagination, because we think we "know" so much, because the world is so disenchanted, so Baudrillard argues, we are no longer at liberty to invent symbolic cosmologies to suit our objectives - in terms of what we want done, what sort of world we want to create. We are entrapped in the iron cage of a supposedly merely descriptive rationality.

This is not to suggest that the prophecies of Java are not rational or descriptive at all. Indeed, the content of the texts – from the perspective of their 19<sup>th</sup> century authors - consists roughly of 90% historical description and 10% future prediction. This is not dissimilar from the scientific method, whereby predictions of future events are deemed possible and rational by basing themselves on observation of a sample of past events, and determining a pattern of recurrences, in short, a natural law or, at least, a historical pattern. Likewise, the prophecies establish a historical pattern, a political cycle alternating between righteous and tyrannical governments, and a second pattern whereby the low points in these fluctuations increase in depth, leading to a final and global cataclysm which will occur in the year 2100. Before the reader breathes a sigh of relief, let me hasten to add that the meaning of this date is uncertain and disputed, due to the different calendars in use in Java. Most of the leading contemporary interpreters of

the prophesy say that the final crunch – in the form of a massive natural disaster - will come, or at least begin, in 2012, the same year foretold in the Mayan prophesies, of which they know nothing.

A scientist would scoff at this and say that the future cannot be predicted with any certainty, or at least not for very far in advance. Current debates about climate change show, however, that we have not abandoned the art of prediction and that we cannot afford to do so. But predicting the future of humanity is a bit like trying to make a profit in playing roulette. A roulette wheel is subject to physical laws, and there is also some regularity in the way in which any person will throw the ball into the spinning wheel. Gamblers thus fancy they can predict what numbers will come up, but generally, they are defeated by the complexity of the event, the limits of memory and computing power, and most importantly because the time span over which a number series can be observed is too short to observe regular recurrences which often operate on very long cycles within a complex system. Nevertheless, casinos acknowledge that some people have uncanny winning streaks, to the extent that they regularly evict such people.

So what do we make of the Javanese prophesies in the light of this? Is it possible? On the basis of the capacity of the rational mind, clearly not. But then, recent scientific research in neuropsychology has shown that human beings have an unconscious intelligence which may far surpass their faculty of reason, and can deal with complexity more effectively. In one experiment, subjects who were distracted from thinking about a complex problem came up with more accurate solutions than others who were encouraged to analyse the information provided (Association for Psychological Science 2008). From a *kejawen* perspective, this intelligence is deemed to be ‘of the spirit’, and a person who is able to delve deeply into the realm of spirit (*alam gaib*) is believed to be privy to a knowledge that may seem supernatural to others.

Regardless of whether we may accept this kind of evidence, there is another sense in which the power of prophesy is real. In our rational, scientific worldview there seems to be little room left for presumably “irrational” or spiritual worldviews such as the one the Jayabaya prophesies rely on. But despite their irrationality, or because of it, prophesies may produce positive outcomes in human terms insofar as they dare to posit a future which is based on values and ideals rather than observed facts. It seems that we in the West can no longer imagine and thus produce a world in our own image, to our own human liking and commensurate with our real needs, because the world is now altogether outside us, and only apprehensible - through our senses and scientific devices

– in the mental mirror of a transcendental subject or Ego. In the world of Javanese prophesy, by contrast, the subject knows the world because it is the world, it knows from the position of an immanent subject whose spirit is in communion with, or some say identical with, the spirit of the universe.

Aims such as achieving happiness, or creating beauty, goodness, are not necessarily well served by rationality, and certainly not by instrumental rationality. In any case, as I mentioned earlier, our modern worldview also contains a fair amount of irrationality, though it is not obvious to us because we claim to be basing everything on fact. To us it seems that an inclination to rationality is enough to ensure our worldviews are sound. Thus we lose sight of the truth that – following Clifford Geertz (1973) - worldviews are ‘models for’, not just ‘models of’. For example, we fail to see that our ideology of equality produces enormous economic disparities, and serves only those few who benefit from competition. We think that this inequality at the level of outcomes is simply a natural consequence of the way the market operates, as if the way it can be described to operate at present were the only way it could operate.

The ideal political economy envisaged in the Jayabaya prophecies is rather different, and essentially based on a model of spiritual hierarchy, under the leadership of a divine ruler. Yet at a level of outcomes, the aim of this hierarchy is frequently stated to benefit the *wong cilik*, ‘the little people’, to create conditions whereunder the common people can live in peace and prosperity. Jayabaya’s reign is reputed as a period where such conditions prevailed, because he was an enlightened, spiritual ruler. While Islamic versions of the prophecies envisage a final cataclysm and judgement day, the Hindu-Javanese versions are more cyclical and thus envisage a time thereafter, the dawn of a new golden age when once again the forces of light will rule supreme. No more than a beautiful but fanciful dream, some may say. But woe us if we do not dare to dream.

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