

Mythological Identity and The Reconstruction of Spiritual Values in the Legend of Ratu Roro Kidul

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the mythological identity of Ratu Roro Kidul, a prominent figure in Indonesian folklore, and its implications for local spirituality and culture. Drawing from Mircea Eliade's concept of mythology as a narrative structure that connects humans to the sacred and Joseph Campbell's notion of mythological heroes as symbols of cultural identity, the study employs genealogical myth analysis to examine the origins, variations, and roles of Roro Kidul's myth across Indonesia. The research highlights two main versions of the myth: one linking Roro Kidul to the Majapahit Kingdom as a goddess protecting the Southern Ocean, and the other associating her with the Kingdom of Pajajaran, emphasizing her transformation into a queen of spirits. Both versions reflect the intertwining of spiritual and historical narratives, with Roro Kidul serving as a guardian of nature and a symbol of political legitimacy, especially in relation to the Mataram Sultanate. The study concludes that the myth of Roro Kidul not only represents local beliefs but also functions as a tool for understanding the connection between humans, nature, and the supernatural, while playing a key role in shaping social and political identities in Java. This research paves the way for further studies on the role of myth in the construction of power and cultural identity in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

Mythological identity; Ratu Roro Kidul; genealogy of myth; spirituality and local culture; political legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

According to Eliade (1963), mythology serves as a narrative structure that describes the cosmos, the origins of humankind, and the connection between humans and the spiritual realm. Mythology often functions to explain natural phenomena and convey cultural values and norms through symbolic stories. Eliade argues that myths are part of a society's religious experience, linking them to "sacred time" or the "knowledge of eternity" that transcends ordinary history (Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 1963). Mythological figures, according to Joseph Campbell, symbolize cultural identity, reflecting archetypes within a society's collective psyche. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell (1949) asserts that a mythological figure's identity often appears as a cultural hero, embodying a society's values, struggles, and characteristics. Figures such as Ratu Roro Kidul in Indonesia exemplify mythological identities that not only carry spiritual significance but also play an essential role in reflecting the local culture and beliefs of their communities.

In the Indonesian context, mythological identities like Ratu Roro Kidul reflect the dominant animistic and dynamic beliefs within local communities. According to Geertz (1973), myths in Indonesia are not merely narratives but also behavioral guides that help

communities understand their relationships with nature and supernatural entities. In *Religion of Java* (1960), Geertz explains that mythological figures serve as cultural custodians, symbolizing the connection between humans, nature, and the spiritual.

The above discussion reveals that myths are not merely traditional folklore but represent the values, beliefs, and cultural identities of a society. Myths serve as a medium for understanding human relationships with nature, the divine, and the community. As Eliade and Campbell illustrate, myths hold profound spiritual dimensions, depicting values that are essential to the societies that believe in them and symbolizing the search for life's meaning, connections with ancestors, or beliefs in the sacred forces of the universe.

In the Indonesian setting, the myth of Ratu Roro Kidul is particularly complex and layered with meanings of mythological identity and spirituality. Ratu Roro Kidul is not only regarded as a supernatural entity who rules over the Southern Coast of Java but also as a symbol of sacred natural forces, protecting the power and welfare of the area. This figure, depicted in various versions across Java, Sumatra, and even Kalimantan, is frequently portrayed as a powerful queen closely connected to local rulers or specific kingdoms, especially in Javanese myth. This connection highlights the relationship between this mythological figure and the cultural identity of the communities who hold such beliefs.

Despite Ratu Roro Kidul's high popularity within Indonesian society, there is yet to be an in-depth study examining her mythological identity and reconstructing the spiritual values attributed to her. The diverse versions and interpretations regarding her origins and role reveal that this myth serves not merely as legend but also as a reflection of societal beliefs about natural forces, protection, fertility, and connections with the mystical realm. This myth shapes the spiritual identity of communities and serves as a reflection of cultural values across various Indonesian regions.

Based on this background, this study poses the following research questions: How is Ratu Roro Kidul's mythological identity constructed and developed across the various narrative versions known in Indonesia? What spiritual values are contained within the legend of Ratu Roro Kidul? How do these values contribute to reinforcing the cultural identity of the communities that uphold them? What is the relationship between the Ratu Roro Kidul myth and the belief traditions and spiritual practices within society, particularly in the Javanese cultural context and in the broader scope of intercultural interactions within Indonesia?

This study aims to answer these questions through a genealogical approach to myth, unveiling the origins, variations, and spiritual role of the Ratu Roro Kidul myth within the context of Indonesian society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic discussions on the myth of Ratu Roro Kidul are relatively scarce compared to the widespread popularity of this myth within Indonesian society. Studies conducted by both Dutch and Indonesian scholars, such as Wessing (1997), Resink (1997), Jordaan (1997) and Rokhmansyah (2016) present conflicting perspectives. These studies diverge on the origins, character, status, and cultural role of this mythological figure within the Nusantara, particularly Javanese, culture. Furthermore, they often lack a focus on the mythological and spiritual dimensions of this figure.

Wessing (1997) describes Roro Kidul—also known as the Queen of the Southern Sea or Goddess of the Indian Ocean—as one of the most frequently discussed figures in Javanese spirituality. Roro Kidul is portrayed as a royal princess from a kingdom in the Sunda region. Wessing's study centers on two main aspects: her origin as a princess from Sunda

(West Java) and her relationship with Panembahan Senapati, the founder of the Islamic Mataram state in Central Java during the sixteenth century. Wessing further explores her associations with sexuality and the color green. While Wessing links Roro Kidul's association with Senapati as a source of her widespread fame in Java since the sixteenth century, he asserts that her mythological roots are far older, extending across South, Southeast, and East Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs data collection methods that include literature review and in-depth interviews with cultural figures and community members, particularly those associated with the myth of Ratu Roro Kidul in Javanese society. The literature review encompasses an examination of a variety of academic sources by both local and foreign authors, exploring different historical, sociological, and cultural perspectives on this figure. Interviews are conducted to gather direct insights from cultural practitioners who possess a deep understanding of Ratu Roro Kidul's spiritual and symbolic role. These two techniques aim to capture the range of interpretations and beliefs surrounding this mythological figure within society.

The data analysis methodology in this research uses a qualitative approach, focusing on thematic and genealogical analysis of the myth to discern patterns and themes related to spirituality and cultural identity inherent in the Ratu Roro Kidul myth. The findings are presented descriptively and analytically, constructing a comprehensive narrative on the origins, variations, and societal role of this figure in Indonesian culture. Presenting data in historical and interpretative narrative form allows for a deeper exploration of the symbolic meanings and spiritual functions of this myth in social and cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Genealogical Reconstruction of the Roro Kidul Myth

This study reveals that there are numerous versions circulating in Indonesia regarding the genealogy and origin of Roro Kidul. Resink (1997) posits that Kanjeng Ratu Kidul was a princess from the Majapahit Kingdom in East Java. Jordaan's research (1997) suggests that Nyai Lara Kidul represents an emanation of the Buddhist goddess Vas'ya-Tara, the primary deity of the Kalasan Temple. Indonesian cultural scholar Setiawan (1982) argues that Roro Kidul is, in fact, descended from the celestial maiden Nawang Wulan, wife of Joko Tarub. Meanwhile, Rohkmansyah (2016) presents Roro Kidul as Princess Silu from Kalimantan. Subroto contends that Roro Kidul is associated with Putri Hijau from North Sumatra (Wikipedia, 2019).

In-depth studies by Wessing (1997) and Resink (1997) indicate that two main versions of the Roro Kidul myth persist: one posits that Roro Kidul originates from the Kediri Kingdom in East Java, while the other suggests her origins lie in the Pajajaran Kingdom in West Java.

(1) Version A: "Roro Kidul, Princess of the Majapahit Kingdom"

In this version, the legend portrays Nyai Roro Kidul as Dewi Kilisuci, a royal princess from East Java, with various iterations reflecting local beliefs regarding this mythological figure. One popular version claim that Nyai Roro Kidul is Dewi Kilisuci, daughter of Prabu Airlangga from the Medang Kahuripan, Panjalu, and Janggala kingdoms. Airlangga himself is known as a descendant of the Majapahit kingdom. Known as Roro Kuning due to her beauty, she was the eldest and potential heir of the Janggala kingdom. However, she

renounced her royal position to become an ascetic. To honor Kilisuci's wish, Prabu Airlangga divided the kingdom into Janggala and Kahuripan, ruled by his two other sons. Kilisuci followed her father's path of asceticism and was known to frequent mountain and coastal regions.

Her most renowned meditation site, Selomangleng Cave in Kediri, is believed to be a mystical path connecting Kilisuci's place of retreat to the southern sea, over which Nyai Roro Kidul reigns. The Selomangleng Cave, carved from andesite stone, is adorned with Dwarapala and Naga Raja reliefs in each chamber. Local tradition holds that the chamber on the left leads to Nyai Roro Kidul's kingdom in the southern sea. In an interview, Kediri historian Ki Tuwu explained that Selomangleng Cave contains two large eastward-facing rooms with sacred symbols, reinforcing the legend of this supernatural gateway.

Another version of Dewi Kilisuci's story recounts her refusal of multiple marriage proposals, provoking her father's anger and leading to her exile. Some versions say she contracted leprosy as a curse for rejecting marriage or as a result of her father's rejection. In a more dramatic account, Kilisuci throws herself into the southern waves in despair, where she is received and crowned as the Queen of the Southern Sea, ruling over Java's spiritual entities. From her mystical underwater palace, Nyai Roro Kidul is revered as a protector and an enigmatic force, embodying both beauty and a formidable supernatural authority within Javanese culture.

This portrayal of Nyai Roro Kidul as Dewi Kilisuci underscores values of spiritual resilience and resistance to patriarchal constraints within ancient Javanese society. The figure symbolizes a mythological and spiritual identity, reflecting the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the spiritual realm preserved across Indonesian folklore.

(2) Version B: "Roro Kidul, Princess of the Pajajaran Kingdom"

The second version contends that Roro Kidul was a princess from the Pajajaran Kingdom in West Java, celebrated for her beauty and charm. Out of jealousy, the queen of Pajajaran subjected Roro Kidul to a powerful curse, resulting in a severe skin condition that led to her exile in the forest. Desperate, the beautiful princess cast herself into the sea, becoming a spirit or goddess who resides in and governs the southern sea. In addition to this version, there are variations with differing mythological contexts and backgrounds. Despite its fame, this myth has not yet been studied academically.

Roro Kidul is portrayed as a Sundanese princess, daughter of King Mundingsari of Pajajaran in West Java and Queen Ayu from the Galuh Kingdom. Named Putri Dewi Kadita at birth, she demonstrated an ability to speak, unlike other infants. "I am the beautiful queen who rules over all Javanese spirits, with my palace in the southern sea," she declared. Upon hearing this, her grandfather, the deceased King Sidhula, appeared and proclaimed that Roro Kidul, his granddaughter, would never marry. However, at the end of time, a Muslim king would emerge as her consort and rule over the Land of Java.

As Roro Kidul matured, her unparalleled beauty captivated all, sparking the envy of her malevolent stepmother, who used dark magic to curse her with a scaly, foul-smelling skin condition. Forced to leave the palace with her mother, Roro Kidul sought refuge in the forest. Meditation became her only solace, through which she gained strength and purification, assuming her role as the ruler of the spirit world. Her wanderings eventually brought her to a cliff overlooking the southern sea (Indian Ocean).

During her meditation, she acquired immense power and the ability to perform miracles, even transforming between male and female forms. In one of her meditative states, she heard voices instructing her to enter the turbulent waves, where she would reclaim her beauty and attain the title of Queen of the Spirit World.

Roro Kidul dove into the ocean and emerged as the ruler of spirits, governing both natural and departed souls. She became the Queen of the Southern Sea, revered yet feared as the sovereign of Javanese spirits. While unpredictable and known for her strictness, Roro Kidul is also regarded as a protective figure. The narrative portrays her as a merciful protector of the ocean and its fishermen, despite an annual toll of young lives she purportedly demands to join her underwater palace. Although feared, she is not seen as cruel, with her fierce nature balanced by her benevolent guardianship.

Reflecting her dual nature, Nyai Roro Kidul's appearance changes with the moon. When it wanes, she appears as an elderly, unattractive figure; when it is full, she is a beautiful young woman. Though an eternal virgin, she is reputed to have a strong sensuality, with young men taken as her lovers or servants, fulfilling her insatiable desires.

One youth, Panembahan Senapati, received a supernatural sign that he would become the ruler of Java. He traveled to the southern sea, where he engaged in fervent prayer. His spiritual intensity manifested as a massive storm that uprooted trees and boiled the sea, decimating fish populations. From her underwater palace, Queen Roro Kidul sensed this extraordinary disturbance. Upon surfacing, she encountered Senapati, whom she realized was the cause of the calamity. She implored him to cease his meditation, which he did, calming the storm. Perceiving his intent, Roro Kidul foretold his rule over Java and affirmed that his descendants would inherit the throne.

During this encounter, Roro Kidul and Senapati were drawn to each other and retreated to her palace, where they engaged in a three-day tryst. She imparted statecraft wisdom to him and vowed that her spiritual forces would defend his kingdom, provided future Javanese rulers honored their connection with her.

Upon his return, Senapati met Sunan Kalijaga, an Islamic figure among the Wali Songo, who advised him to rely not solely on supernatural power but on the will of Allah. Despite this, Senapati maintained his mystical bond with Roro Kidul, which aided him in founding the Second Mataram Kingdom, later evolving into the Yogyakarta and Surakarta Sultanates. Convinced that his prayers had been answered, he declared that his lineage would reign over Java and that its people would submit to their authority.

(3) Comparison of Version A and Version B

Based on a comparison between the two versions of the origin story of Roro Kidul, we can conclude that Version B is more aligned with historical accuracy as it provides a more detailed connection between the legend and concrete historical events, especially in relation to the rise of the Islamic Mataram Kingdom.

Version B portrays Roro Kidul as a princess from the Pajajaran Kingdom who eventually rules the South Sea after a series of dramatic events, such as mistreatment by her stepmother and a spiritual journey that leads her to the ocean. This narrative includes a mystical connection with Panembahan Senapati, the founder of the Mataram Kingdom, who gains power and legitimacy to rule through his interactions with Roro Kidul. This process reflects the fusion of local mythology and Javanese political history, linking spiritual forces with the emerging kingdoms on Java, notably Islamic Mataram.

Moreover, the association of Roro Kidul's mythology with a significant kingdom like Mataram, which includes the acknowledgment of Senapati's spiritual authority and that of his descendants, suggests that Version B not only describes the legend but also incorporates concrete historical elements. The emphasis on the relationship between Roro Kidul and Panembahan Senapati, as well as its influence on the establishment of a kingdom that would govern Java, adds political and historical dimensions not found in Version A.

Thus, Version B offers a more structured and comprehensive narrative, reflecting Roro Kidul's role not only as a mythological figure but also as an integral part of the political history of Java, particularly within the context of the rise of Islamic kingdoms on the island.

Reconstruction of Mythological Values

The myth of Roro Kidul, the Queen of the Southern Sea in Javanese culture, embodies not only mystical power and fear but also holds profound cultural values, reflecting views on female roles, power, and humanity's relationship with nature. This article examines how the Roro Kidul myth serves as a social construct that meets society's need to comprehend a larger, more complex world. The reconstruction of these mythological values is not only rooted in traditional beliefs but is also influenced by broader social and cultural developments.

(1) Beyond Human Norms: Roro Kidul as a Transboundary Entity

Roro Kidul, initially known as a Sundanese princess subjected to exile, represents a rejection of prevailing social norms. She was exiled to the forest—a realm beyond human society—often associated with spirits and non-human forces. The causes of her exile vary, from a desire for an ascetic life, rejection of marriage, to a skin disease often perceived in many cultures as a sign of abnormality. This positions Roro Kidul outside human norms, both socially and biologically. However, her exile becomes a gateway for her transformation into a ruler of the spirit world, combining spiritual power with an important social role.

Although her exile may seem like a form of social death, it can be understood as a means to place her in a position that enables healing and transformation. As De Josselin De Jong (1983) notes, individuals who choose a celibate life or suffer certain ailments are often seen as detached from society, yet possessing the potential to strengthen their identity by uniting with a stronger, otherworldly realm. Roro Kidul, rediscovered in the spirit world, ultimately gains new power and is venerated as a figure who governs the ocean and everything within it.

(2) Ambiguous Position: Ruler of Life and Death

Roro Kidul occupies an ambiguous position in Javanese mythology. As the ruler of ocean spirits, she wields unlimited power over life and death, yet simultaneously serves as a protector and provider of prosperity. This position reflects the dual nature inherent in many mythological beings—revered and feared. In her myth, Roro Kidul is believed to demand human lives annually, especially among fishermen who venture into the Indian Ocean. However, while she demands sacrifices, she is not viewed as an evil entity. Rather, she is honored as a protector of the kingdom and its people, underscoring a balance between fearsome power and benevolence toward her followers.

This ambiguity reinforces Roro Kidul's significance as an entity bridging the human world and the spirit realm. Her role as protector and sovereign of wealth, along with her symbolic association with death, reveals the depth of Javanese mythology, which teaches that life and death, pleasure and suffering, coexist inseparably in an unending cycle.

(3) Ambiguous Nature and Appearance: Eternal Maiden and Manifestation of Sexuality

In addition to her ambiguous power and social role, Roro Kidul's appearance reflects the

tension between her two-dimensional existence. She is depicted as an old, unattractive woman when the moon wanes, yet as young and beautiful when the moon waxes, as if she transforms like a serpent shedding its skin. This representation conveys the concept of temporal uncertainty and transition in myth, indicating that Roro Kidul exists beyond human physical and temporal boundaries.

Despite being portrayed as an eternal maiden, Roro Kidul possesses a powerful sexual desire, as revealed in stories where young men are taken as her servants or lovers. This element of sexuality is often a focal point in modern depictions, especially in Indonesian cinema, where Roro Kidul is portrayed as an insatiable sexual figure. This further layers the myth with ambiguity, as she is seen not only as a spiritual figure but also as a sexual symbol manifesting human desires and power in a highly relatable form.

The reconstruction of mythological values in the story of Roro Kidul provides profound insights into how these myths are understood and preserved within a broader social and cultural context. Roro Kidul is not only a symbol of the supernatural forces that govern the ocean but also a representation of socially ambiguous values—from exile and self-transformation to the tension between life and death. By delving deeper into this myth, we can better understand how Javanese society views the relationship between humanity, nature, spirits, and power.

Reconstruction of Spiritual Values

In Javanese tradition and mythology, mythological figures serve not only as folklore but also as tools to legitimize power, link the real world with the spirit world, and maintain spiritual balance in society. One mythological figure with significant influence in Javanese mythology is Nyai Roro Kidul, depicted as the guardian of the southern realm of the Yogyakarta Kraton (palace). Her myth represents not only spiritual beliefs but also explains the relationship between worldly power and the supernatural. This analysis focuses on three main points illustrating mythological values in the belief in Roro Kidul and how these play a role in Javanese political and cultural legitimacy.

Roro Kidul as Guardian of the Southern Realm of the Yogyakarta Kraton

Nyai Roro Kidul is regarded as the protector of the southern realm of the Yogyakarta Kraton, a boundary between the human world and the spirit world. She is depicted as a woman of extraordinary power, often associated with serpent or dragon imagery symbolizing fertility and natural forces. Roro Kidul is vital to maintaining balance between the human world and the spirit world, and her existence is often connected to myths of fertility and the kingdom's prosperity. Linked to serpent symbolism, she represents the fertility of the land, associated with healing and protection for Senapati's kingdom.

Legitimization of Power through Myth and Connection to Roro Kidul

The myth of Roro Kidul's relationship with Panembahan Senapati, founder of the Yogyakarta Kraton, illustrates how Javanese rulers used mythological symbolism to strengthen their political position. Some historians suggest this legend was crafted to legitimize Senapati's authority, especially following the arrival of Islam, which disrupted the concept of Deva Raja (a king as a divine manifestation on earth). Through this story, Senapati gains recognition not only from his people but also from the spirit world, seen as providing protection and fertility. As the story developed, Roro Kidul became an essential symbol in reinforcing political legitimacy in the region.

(3) Influence of the Pajajaran Kingdom in the Roro Kidul Myth and Its Relation to West Java

The influence of Roro Kidul's myth extends beyond Yogyakarta. In mythology, Roro Kidul is also linked to the Pajajaran Kingdom in West Java, associated with strong ancestral spirits and spirituality. The Priangan region, part of West Java, is known as the resting place of ancestral spirits, including female spirits revered in mythology. The connection between Nyai Roro Kidul and this region, often referred to as the place where "spirits disappear," suggests her existence is also closely tied to major kingdoms in Java, such as Pajajaran and Majapahit. This indicates how the mythology serves as a tool for connecting the spiritual and political histories of Java's great kingdoms.

The mythology of Nyai Roro Kidul, with its symbolism and the relationship between spiritual fertility and worldly power, demonstrates the deep connection between spirituality, political legitimacy, and politics in Java. This figure is not only seen as the guardian of the southern Kraton but also as a symbol of fertility and protection, helping to ensure the kingdom's prosperity and longevity. Over time, these myths have evolved, portraying a spiritual force inseparable from the lives of Javanese people, both past and present.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the mythology of Roro Kidul has two main versions prevalent among the Indonesian populace, each offering distinct perspectives on her origins and role in local history and culture. The first version portrays Roro Kidul as a princess from the Majapahit Kingdom who later becomes a goddess reigning over the Southern Sea. This legend emphasizes Roro Kidul's spiritual and mystical role as a protector of nature and ruler of the supernatural realm, with variations that highlight her association with spiritual values and her resistance to patriarchal norms. The second version, which links Roro Kidul to the Pajajaran Kingdom, focuses more on her dramatic life story, including persecution by her stepmother and her transformation into a spirit queen ruling the Southern Sea.

The comparison of these two versions reveals that both serve to connect mythology with Javanese history, particularly with the emergence of the Mataram Islamic Kingdom. The second version, which incorporates more concrete historical elements, depicts a mystical relationship between Roro Kidul and Panembahan Senapati, the founder of the Mataram Kingdom. Through this interaction, Roro Kidul is viewed not only as a protective deity but also as a symbol of political legitimacy, reinforcing the authority of Mataram's rulers with her supernatural power. In this context, the Roro Kidul myth acts as a bridge between spirituality and politics, illustrating how local mythology can shape social and political legitimacy and identity.

This research shows that the mythology of Roro Kidul not only reflects a rich and diverse local belief system but also serves as a tool for understanding the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and supernatural forces in Javanese society. Through a genealogical reconstruction of this myth, we gain a deeper understanding of how Indonesian mythological narratives often blend historical and fantastical elements, creating stories that not only recount a character's origins but also connect them to broader social and political developments. This study paves the way for further research on the role of myth in shaping power structures and cultural identity in Southeast Asia.

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