The Once and Future King:
Utopianism as Political Practice in Indonesia

El pasado y futuro rey:
utopismo como práctica política en Indonesia

Thomas Anton Reuter

Abstract
A centuries-old practice persists on the island of Java, Indonesia, whereby utopian prophecies are used not only to critique the socio-political order of the day but also to outline an ideal form of government for the future. The prophecy text is attributed to a 12th century king, Jayabaya. This historical figure is celebrated as a ‘just king’ (ratu adil) and as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu, who is said to manifest periodically in human form to restore the world to order and prosperity. The prophecy predicts the present ‘time of madness’ (jaman edan) will culminate in a major crisis, followed by a restoration of cosmic harmony within a utopian society. Not unlike the work of Thomas More, and the genre of western utopian literature in general, the political concepts outlined in this Indonesian literary tradition have been a perennial source of inspiration for political change.

Keywords: imagination, Indonesia, Java, prophecy, time, utopian literature.

Resumen
Una práctica centenaria persiste en la isla de Java, Indonesia, en la que profecías utópicas son usadas no solo para criticar el orden sociopolítico actual, sino también para trazar una forma ideal de un futuro gobierno. El texto profético es atribuido a Jayabaya, un rey del siglo xi. Esta figura histórica es reconocida como un rey justo (ratu adil) y como una encarnación del dios hindú Vishnu, quien se manifiesta periódicamente en forma humana para restaurar el orden mundial y la prosperidad. La profecía predice el presente ‘tiempo de locura’ (jaman edan) que culminará en una gran crisis, seguida de la restauración de la armonía cósmica en una sociedad utópica. A diferencia de la obra de Tomás Moro y del género literario occidental en general, los conceptos políticos esbozados en esta tradición literaria Indonesia han sido una fuente perenne de inspiración para el cambio político.

Palabras clave: imaginación, Indonesia, Java, profecía, tiempo, literatura utópica.
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Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of a long-standing socio-political practice on the island of Java, Indonesia, whereby a set of classical utopian prophecies are used to critique the political order of the day. This oral and textual tradition outlines an ideal form of government and thus serves as a source of utopian aspirations.

Authorship of the most popular corpus of prophecies is attributed to a 12th century king, Sri Aji Jayabaya. While this attribution cannot be verified historically, Jayabaya is certainly a historical personage. He is famously credited with reuniting and restoring the realm of Kediri in eastern Java after a period of division and conflict, and with commissioning some of the greatest works of classical Javanese literature (kekawin). The two large remaining royal houses of contemporary Java, Yogyakarta and Surakarta, both trace their descent to King Jayabaya.

In a number of authentic royal inscriptions, dating back to the 12th century, Jayabaya is celebrated as the epitome of a 'just king' (ratu adil) and, indeed, as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu God who is said to manifest in human form (menjelma) periodically at times of severe crisis in order to restore the world to harmony, justice and prosperity (Buchari, 1968). This theme of the return of the just king is central in the later texts of the prophecies.

The Jayabaya prophecies specifically predict a coming crisis of epic proportions, which the text refers to as the ‘time of madness’ (jaman edan). For the majority of Javanese the description of this crisis, as provided in the prophecy texts (for example, that women will wear men’s clothing, and young people will cease to respect their elders), closely resembles actual societal conditions of the present day. This state of chaotic disorder and moral decay is predicted to culminate in a major calamity, followed by a ‘return of the king’ and a restoration of cosmic harmony in the form of a utopian society. At various times, certain individuals have proclaimed themselves as the new ratu adil, and a few of them gained some recognition in connection with 19th century rebellions against Dutch colonialism. While the achievement of Indonesian independence in 1945 brought to an end this particular crisis of colonial domination, the majority of my Javanese interlocutors believe that a deeper crisis of social injustice continues unabated until today, and that the just king has not yet returned.

I shall illustrate that, similar to the work of Thomas More that is being commemorated in this volume and similar also to the wider genre of utopian literature that evolved from it in Europe and beyond, the utopian concept of just
government independently developed within this eastern literary tradition has been a perennial source of inspiration for political critiques and revolutionary changes in Indonesian society.

Prophetic utopianism and utopian fiction differ mainly with regard to the strength of their respective claims to validity. This difference is not so great as to present an obstacle to a fruitful comparison.

A large part of the utopian and dystopian imaginaries of modern western fiction writers, while their authors may not see themselves as prophets or scientific futurologist, are generally most well received by readers if they provide credible or at least internally coherent renditions of possible future societies. Javanese prophecies (jangka or ramalan) lay an additional claim to validity because they have a religious foundation, given that they are said to be the work of a divine incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, namely King Jayabaya. Moreover, as I shall detail below, the capacity of predicting the future is underwritten by Javanese mystical beliefs. Consequently, the utopian prophesies of Java do make firmer assertions about the future than standard utopian literature might, but they are assertions nonetheless. Prophetic predictions about the future cannot be falsified historically because the texts do not normally set a specific time for the occurrence of the future events they predict. Indeed, the intention of these texts is to inspire rather than to convince readers.

Javanese people very much assume that this and every other prophecy needs to be enacted by historical individuals to become a reality and, hence, that the utopian future may be achieved sooner or much later depending on people’s commitment to the ideals that it embodies. Like all future oriented imaginaries, utopian prophecies thus must be pursued by those who would see them realized, while individuals who are opposed to change will strive to ‘chop off’ (mencabut) the causal links that otherwise would hurry the prophecy along.

The difference between utopian and prophetic literature rests largely on their respective rhetoric of legitimacy. In Java, the ability to predict the future is regarded as a standard accomplishment within the field of spiritual practice. A person’s ability to foresee the future is a side effect of their direct meditative exploration of the inner and outer world through rigorous spiritual exercises. These traditional practices, among many other things, aim to purify and cultivate the faculty of foresight (ngramal) that is usually underdeveloped but latently present in all other human beings. Closely linked to this faculty of foresight is the faculty of ‘creative intelligence’ (budi), which places more emphasis on the way utopian thinkers,
prophets and others shape the future through the exercise of imagination. This Javanese concept of *budi* reaches beyond the limits of rational thought and can best be compared with the faculty of ‘active imagination’ as described by Henry Corbin (below).

While western utopian authors may not be systematically trained to develop the spiritual faculty of prophetic foresight, readers often do credit them with a special ability to predict what lies ahead, based on a special depth of understanding of the fundamental socio-psychological forces and historical dynamics that shape human affairs now and into the future. And all utopian fiction is certainly an exercise of creative intelligence insofar as it imagines the necessary conditions for a better future. It is on this basis that a comparison is possible.

The aim of this chapter is to add some much needed cross-cultural diversity to the study of utopianism, as well as using the comparative method to identify some of the reasons for the universal appeal of utopianism.

Despite of the exceptional influence the Jayabaya corpus of prophetic utopian literature has had on Javanese political thought, the only attention this literary tradition has drawn in the west was from 19th century Dutch colonial government officials, who were rightly fearful of the prophecy’s inspirational role in the Indonesian independence struggle.

The influence of this literature has been consistent from the colonial period until now. Most contemporary Indonesians are still familiar with the prophecies today, and many modern writers utilize the text as a resource or simply as an excuse to reflect on the past, present, and future of their country. Consistently, this literature has risen to new peaks of popularity every time there has been a serious crisis in Indonesia, and each time it is interpreted anew to reflect the spirit of the times. In the struggle leading up to Indonesian independence in 1945 and ever since, for example, one widely recognized interpretation of the *ratu adil* (just king) concept for today’s world is that it signifies democracy.

Such consistent practical use of a body of utopian literature for articulating changing popular aspirations for the future is very interesting because it has few parallels in Western societies. Modernism and science, though they both have utopian beginnings, have instilled such a powerfully realist attitude in the western mind that political utopianism is often and all too easily dismissed, nowadays, as a phantasy. While the phenomenon of creative imagination is not entirely ignored by mainstream science, this important human faculty is not afforded the serious epistemological status it deserves as a source of truth. Rather, imagination is more
readily associated with falsehood, with the unreal. As Henry Corbin (1977/1989, p. 1) has aptly put it,

It is a long time [...] since western philosophy [...], drawn along in the wake of the positive sciences, has admitted only two sources of Knowledge (connaitre). There is sense perception, which gives the data we call empirical. And there are the concepts of understanding (entendement), the world of the laws governing these empirical data... Yet the fact remains that between the sense perceptions and the [...] intellect there has remained a void. That which ought to have taken its place between the two, and which in other times and places did occupy this intermediate space, that is to say the Active Imagination, has been left to the poets. The very thing that a rational and reasonable scientific philosophy cannot envisage is that this Active Imagination in man... should have its own noetic or cognitive function, that is to say, that it gives us access to a region and a reality of Being which without that function remains closed and forbidden to us. For such a science it was understood that the Imagination secretes nothing but the imaginary, that is, the unreal, the mythic, the marvelous, the fictive.

Using the case of utopian prophesy in Indonesia as an example, I will argue that modern utopianism needs to challenge the hegemony of this modernist-scientific realism, which offers neither the hope nor the inspiration so desperately needed to address the vital political and environmental challenges of today's world. Utopian imagination posits what the world could be like, and thus can inspire us to employ our will and skills to change our actual social, cultural and political reality, so as to more closely conform to this image of a better world. Truth is not just read off the world but also creatively inscribed upon it by human imagination and action. For now, science is only beginning to recognize the importance of this most characteristically human faculty. While cognitive science has now begun to study the internal neural and psychological processes associated with our capacity to create new images and ideas, it cannot provide a fully satisfactory explanation yet for creativity (Perkins, 1981) or for the sources of human motivation that give purpose and direction to the mind’s creative impulses (Hunt, 1982).

Following a brief social history of the prophetic utopian genre in Java, I will argue that these texts function as a means not simply of predicting but of imagining and actively shaping the future in the present (see Reuter, 2009). This argument will be supported by an account of the religious context of this textual tradition and
its very significant role in Indonesia’s political history and contemporary political practice. The analysis of the religious cosmological foundations that support the Javanese idea of futurology will be supported by a critique of modernist notions of rationality, from the perspective of which prophetic and other forms of utopianism are all too easily dismissed. While there have been a number of studies of millenarianism in Java (Kartodirdjo, 1970; Suwandi, 2000; Florida, 1995), this social science-based literature tends to ignore the epistemological status of the prophetic-utopian imagination, and thus tends to explain away the phenomenon with narrow, functionalist arguments.

**The Historical Background of the Jayabaya Corpus of Utopian Prophecy**

> 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 aged parents,  
> know that the time of madness has begun.  
> (From the *Ramalan Jayabaya*, Oral transmission, author’s translation)

There are two major sets of prophecies in the Javanese literary tradition; those attributed to the 12th century king Jayabaya of Kediri and another attributed to Sabdapalon, the chief royal counsellor to Brawijaya V of Majapahit, a king who lived at the end of the 14th century and is believed to have been a direct descendant of Jayabaya. I will be focusing primarily on the Jayabaya corpus of literature herein, and will begin by examining this corpus historically, both as a narrative and as a political tradition.

Almost every contemporary Indonesian has some familiarity with the major predictions of the Jayabaya corpus. Some people’s knowledge of the texts may be confined to a few of the prophecy’s most pithy statements, such as the one cited above, which are constantly being circulated orally or in the media. Others have read the texts, usually in the form of a recent pamphlet-style edition, of which there are dozens, each with somewhat different content. Very few people are
knowledgeable about or interested in the history of the texts. Nevertheless, I did engage in a detailed study of the history of these texts as part of my research (2001-2006) on this topic, drawing on manuscripts in the royal libraries of Yogyakarta and Surakarta as well as numerous private collections.

The research revealed King Jayabaya’s the authorship of still remaining early manuscripts cannot be proven, and that the link to him may indeed be entirely fictitious and merely a literary device. The actual author of the text may have used the good name of Jayabaya in order to lend credibility to his own predictions. On the other hand, it also cannot be ruled out that this historical figure, credited with being a just king and divine incarnation in a number of 12th century copper plate inscriptions, did indeed produce or commission such a text. The main reason is that the historiographical record for Indonesia, typically, features the same gap that is observable also in the history of the Jayabaya prophesy texts. This gap is between the oldest surviving manuscripts using strips of lontar-palm leaf, which usually date back no further than the early 19th century, and the youngest royal inscriptions on bronze plates or stone, which ceased to be issued after the 13th century. Most of the oldest palm leaf texts we find in contemporary collections are no doubt transcriptions of earlier versions of the same text, the original manuscripts of which have long since been lost. Palm leaf is not a very durable material, and regular transcription onto fresh palm leaves was common practice. It is difficult to be certain of the antiquity of any text beyond the age of the actual manuscript, also because scribes took liberties in adapting the language of the older texts they transcribed, whether on palm leaf or later on paper, which makes linguistic dating difficult. What is beyond any doubt, however, is that the just reign of Jayabaya was real, is still remembered in Java as a golden age, and has provided the main inspiration for this literary tradition.

What is also certain is that the prophecies have been extremely popular, politically influential and contentious for the last 250 years at least, which is as far as I have been able to document them. The earliest remaining manuscripts were produced by and still are kept in the royal libraries of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Few people have read or are able to read these texts, among them the authors of later versions, and hence what we are dealing with today is very much a popular genre based on a corpus of earlier texts. Cheap reprints of the already diverse corpus of early texts, with ever-new interpretations attached, have been made widely available to the public in small, inexpensive booklets ever since the late 19th century. I have collected dozens of such publications, most of which sell out
quickly and are then out of print. Almost everyone today has heard of the essential
tenets of the prophecy and its utopian vision from such late editions.

In the course of my very extensive search for the original literary sources of
this tradition I collected, transcribed and translated more than sixty different
early handwritten versions in Javanese language and sometimes still in Javanese
script, some in prose and some in traditional poetic meters, adding up to about
1.000 pages of material. (Later, published versions of some of the same texts are
available in Indonesian language, but unfortunately these modern translations
are often incomplete or selective and their authors often do not even mention the
source document). The earliest complete written Jayabaya prophecy text I was
able to locate is from the royal library at the Pakualaman palace in Yogyakarta.¹
The scribe notes that he is transcribing this text in the year 1835, and hence it is
evidently a copy of an earlier, 18th century text (date unknown).

In the foreword to the 1835 edition the scribe complains bitterly that his
predecessor has ‘Islamised’ the ancient narrative, warning that such a shamefully
manipulation of sacred knowledge can lead to dangerous personal consequences for
the scribe and will confuse the public with false interpretations. It is not difficult
to see what the concerned scribe is referring to. For example, the text names the
Sultan of ‘Rum’ (Constantinople / Istanbul) as the one who initiated the original
human settlement of Java rather than the Hindu saint Aji Saka, who is commonly
named as the founder of civilization in Javanese folk tradition and in classical
Javanese literature. A scribe in a royal library would have been well aware that
this modification of the text was a conscious act of historical revisionism.

Nevertheless, the 18th century Islamized text by and large still follows the plot
of an earlier, Hindu version, as is evident from what fragments of the original Hindu
version can still be found today in other manuscripts. Most written versions I was
able to collect show some signs of a superimposed Islamic theology and eschatol-
ogy. Of these, the writings of the Surakarta poet and royal scribe Ronggowarsito,
who was the first to massively popularize the genre in the late 19th century, are
perhaps the most well-known today. Meanwhile, the oral versions of the Jayabaya

¹ The text (local catalogue code 0061 / PP / 73; or Girardet 58560) is called Serat Piwulang and
the relevant subsection of this collection is called Jangka Jayabaya. An unnamed palace scribe
created this annotated collection from a variety of earlier manuscripts, upon the request of
King Paku Alam II (1829-1858).
prophecy I have been able to collect are more conservative, and retain most of the earlier Hindu themes.

Reconstructing a hypothetical original version of the text would be a complex philological project, rather than an anthropological one, and most likely to be futile. It would also lead away from the purpose of understanding the prophecies as they are read in Javanese society and used in politics. From this more practical perspective, it could even be argued that 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 mobilization in a slowly Islamizing society. If the texts have changed it is because Javanese society has also changed, and this in itself is a perfect demonstration of how alive and strong this literary tradition continues to be.

‘Jayabaya’ has been compared to Nostradamus in the Western world, but the Jayabaya phenomenon is rather different in that his prophecies are not at all marginal or confined to esoteric circles. They are an immensely popular, widely respected and significant statement about the ideal political order of society, and it is this that makes them so useful as a key for understanding Javanese society.

The prophecies first received attention in the West when one of the texts was found and translated by a Dutch scholar in the mid 19th century (Hollander, 1848). This interest arose from the fact that one of the predictions in the prophecy (which has been fulfilled) is that Java would be freed from the rule of the foreign oppressors from ‘Nusa Prenggi’ (Europe) with the rise of a ‘Just King’ or Ratu Adil who—like Jayabaya—would come to earth as an emissary of Allah (similar to the Imam Mahdi of Middle Eastern Islamic prophecy) or, in the original Hindu version, as a living incarnation of the supreme deity Vishnu. This prophecy inspired a number of serious rebellions against the Dutch colonial regime. The most famous one, perhaps, was under the leadership of Prince Diponegoro, who was widely believed to be the predicted saviour or ratu adil at the time (Carey, 2012). Another common designation for this saviour figure is satrio piningit, the ‘hidden knight or warrior’. Rumours of the appearance of this figure circulate time and again, until this very day, and with special frequency at times when the country is seen to be in a state of crisis.

In order to gauge the influence of this textual tradition, I conducted an extensive search for references made to the Jayabaya’s prophecies in many hundreds of newspapers and magazines published during the 20th century. I found abundant evidence of the ceaseless attempts by Javanese journalists and magazine writers
to relate the texts to the current events and political struggles of their times. Importantly, the research shows that a steep rise in the frequency of such references occurred during every major political crisis of the 20th century.

The first and greatest of these crises was the struggle for national independence. The prophecies were incredibly important during the colonial period, and were frequently mentioned in the political speeches and propaganda material of the independence movement. Indeed, after the Japanese invasion that caused the Dutch colonial government to flee into exile, the movement’s leader, Sukarno, commissioned the publication through the Ministry of Information of a curious book entitled *The Role of the Jayabaya Prophecies in Our Revolution* (Mataram, 1950). When the Dutch made their short comeback attempt after the end of the Second World War and the departure of the Japanese troops, they seized all copies of the book at the printers, and destroyed them. The book was later reprinted and, in his foreword (pp. 17-21), the former resistance leader, Sukarno –now the first President of independent Indonesia– praises the prophecies of Jayabaya for inspiring the liberation struggle. He also stresses, however, that the ‘just king’ (*ratu adil*) of the prophecies is not to be understood as a person (responding perhaps to the fact that he himself was frequently seen as the *ratu adil*) but rather to a republican nation state based on equity, justice and an ethos of service to the people.

This republican reinterpretation of the *ratu adil* concept is one shared by many contemporary Indonesians, and yet the personalistic element characteristic of the idea of ‘just kingship’ was never quite relinquished. As much as it may rely on institutionalization, a modern state too is rightly seen in Java to require a ruler or a ruling class who are able to ‘embody’ the abstract principles of democratic justice within their moral attitude and thus to turn a mere theory into actual justice. Alas, not every president or democratic government lives up to this moral standard. Indeed, the prophecy text list a long succession of future heads of state claiming to serve the people but failing to do so. Every time Indonesia has a new president he is thus identified as one of the future rulers of variable merit already predicted by Jayabaya. For example, interim President J. Habibie (1998-1999) was frequently identified as the ruler whose brief reign the prophecy had predicted to last only ‘as long as the life of the maize plant’ (*sepanjang umur jagung*).

The second major crisis that sparked new interest in the Jayabaya prophecies took place in 1965 when General Suharto replaced the charismatic founding President Sukarno in a bloody military coup. Suharto was seen and saw himself as more closely associated with the prophecies of Sabdapalon than those of Jayabaya...
He was widely believed to be a reincarnation of Sabdapalon, who in turn was an incarnation of the timeless literary figure Semar (or Dewa Ismaya), the ‘wise clown’ and royal advisor to the righteous Pandava princes in the Mahabaratha epic that is a core literary source for the Javanese shadow puppet theatre. Suharto and his inner circle, under the leadership of a Javanese spiritual leader (tokoh kejawen), practiced a veritable cult of Semar in secret.

I was able to obtain first hand information about the immense influence Suharto’s spiritual teacher had on political decision-making in an interview with former Secretary of State and Suharto’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 Mt Srandhil, two sacred sites near the towns of Semarang and Cilacap, located on Java’s northern and southern coast respectively. In the prophecies of Sabdapalon the latter had promised to return and take charge of Java once more, some 500 years after the great Hindu empire of Majapahit had fallen due to the introduction of Islam and a subsequent civil war (around the year 1500AD). He also promised that upon his return he would restore the old religion or agama budi, which is variously interpreted as signifying Hindu-Buddhism, or the religion of Javanese spiritual knowledge (budi), or even modern science. The prophecy is thus rather hostile toward Islam and, indeed, so was General Suharto for the greater part of his reign. Most importantly, he insisted that the Indonesian state be based not on Islam but on the principle of panca sila, ‘the five pillars’, that has its roots in Javanese mysticism. Until today, his successors have left this principle intact despite much renewed pressure from Islamic political movements in recent years and despite the major constitutional reforms that took place after the restoration of democracy in 1998.

The period leading up to the fall of Suharto in 1998 and also the early years of the subsequent reformasi period bore witness to the third and most recent major resurgence in the popularity of the Jayabaya prophecies. Numerous re-publications of the texts appeared around this time and in the subsequent years of instability. Most of these were inexpensive productions that sold large numbers of copies (Soesetro & Arief, 1999; Sindhunata, 1999; Lelono, 2000; Yoedoprawiro, 2000; Hariwijaya, 2003; Purwadi, 2003; Krishna, 2005). I have already mentioned President Habibie, but similar stories were circulated about how his successors President Abdurahman Wahid (alias ‘Gus Dur’) and President Megawati Sukarnoputri ought to be situated within the chronology of the prophetic texts.
The Prophesies of Jayabaya in the Context Of Javanese Mysticism and Politics

The historical review in the preceding section has shown that the Jayabaya corpus is a long established but also a living, contemporary tradition and part of an active political process, embedded in a uniquely Javanese mystical worldview (see also Quinn, 2009). This continuous relevance of Jayabaya’s utopian vision is made possible, first, by a still popular traditional Javanese cosmology that acknowledges the existence of an invisible world of spirit (or of ‘higher dimensions’) and, second, by a process of regular consultation between political figures at all levels of government and expert practitioners of Javanese mystical spirituality.

Prophecy cannot be separated from Java’s ancient and profound mystical tradition. The proponents of Javanese mysticism seek direct access to the truth through rigorous asceticism and other spiritual practices. These practices are said to cultivate a capacity for conscious participation in the flow of ‘intent’ (karsa), an intelligent dynamic force that shapes the whole of history, is inaccessible to language-based reasoning, but accessible to a person who has cultivated a mystical state of unified consciousness. Such consciousness is said to span up to eleven dimensions rather than the usual three dimensions of human language-based awareness. From the perspective of these higher dimensions the future can be apprehended seemingly ‘in advance’ because time, the fourth dimension, forms a circle rather than a straight line.

The descriptions some Javanese mystics have given to me of their spiritual peak experiences are indeed reminiscent of the hyper-sphere concept that modern mathematicians have developed to provide a more tangible understanding of time as the fourth dimension within the geometry of the space-time framework (Rucker, 1984). The future, according to some of the practitioners I have interviewed, is present in the Now, because time ‘curves around’ or forms a ‘dynamic circle’ or ‘spiral.’ This wave-like circularity, they said, becomes evident when time is contemplated from the eternity-based perspective of a cosmos pulsating rhythmically between being and non-being (alam awang uwung, ‘the realm that is empty

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2 The use of terms such as ‘curve’, ‘roundness’ or ‘sphere’ in reference to higher dimensions is ultimately only metaphorical because it is a concept derived from three dimensional experience.
and yet full’). Spiritual practice thus is said to make possible a direct encounter with a deeper reality that is beyond time and yet includes it.

When a practitioner of Javanese mysticism displays a capacity to prophesize the future accurately, this is regarded as one kind of evidence to show that their inner Self (sukma) has awoken, they have merged with the divine intent, and hence, they are able to see the future and past in the present from the higher perspective of eternity. Note that it is not for a mere ‘person’ to achieve such mastery of divine powers. Any such claim would simply be regarded as a case of ego inflation in Java, and attributed to incorrect use or deliberate abuse of spiritual practices. Rather it is the divine cosmic self (tiyang) that achieves mastery over the finite personality (wong) and manifests itself in this way, though perhaps with the conscious consent of the person concerned. Note also that I am departing somewhat from Javanese tradition, according to which it is futile to try and express such experiences in mere words, and which, for that reason, prioritizes practical spiritual instruction instead.

Similar beliefs and practices may be found in some esoteric or New Age circles in the West, but a very profound difference is that in Javanese society mystics enjoy great respect and significant political influence. During my research on religious change in Java, I was surprised to discover that, during their candidature, both President Wahid and Megawati had visited sacred sites associated with the Jayabaya prophecy, such as the Loka Moksa Jayabaya in the village of Pamenang, Kediri. In doing so, they were following a tradition begun by the first president, Sukarno, or perhaps earlier. The Loka Moksa marks the site where the prophet-king Jayabaya is said to have vanished, having achieved moksa or ‘spiritual liberation’ and hence leaving no mortal remains behind.

These and other leading politicians also regularly visit spiritual leaders whose knowledge of the prophecy is believed to be profound, not because they would ever bother to study the actual texts but because they are believed to have direct access to the ‘spiritual (invisible, inner) world’ (alam gaib). In other words, they are able to access the same source from which Jayabaya drew his knowledge of the future in the first place. These contemporary Javanese masters of the spirit world are responsible not only for reinterpreting but also for implementing the prophecy, and thus they are believed to have the power to decide who will become the next president.

Here the prediction of the future becomes inseparable from the making of the future because the personal will and vision of such persons is said to be in alignment with the ‘divine intent’ (karsa) or ‘inner momentum’ of the macrocosm. Whatsoever
such a spiritual master utters is therefore expected to become true, whether it be a curse or a blessing. This is a matter not so much of having personal power but of their being in alignment with the divine, dynamic power of the macrocosm.

Megawati and Gus Dur, for example, were secretly given ‘the divine power to rule’ (wahyu raja) the nation of Indonesia by one of the most influential of these leaders. This happened at a sacred site on a southern beach near the town of Baron, where the last king of the empire of Majapahit (Brawijaya V) is believed to have laid down his crown and achieved moksa. To commemorate this receiving of the divine power to rule, the two presidents later built monuments at this site, showing their gratitude following their subsequent election. The next two presidents, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Joko Widodo, were no strangers to this world either, but I am unable to elaborate on this at present due to the need still to protect informants’ privacy. In any case, further evidence of this link between mystics, prophecies and politics can be found in a number of local Indonesian publications (e.g. Mukhlisin & Damarhuda, 1999).

**The Problem of Time: Modernist Rationalism and the Alternative Logic of Javanese Utopianism**

The political application of prophetic utopianism in Java is interesting as a social practice that has few parallels in contemporary Western societies. I say few rather than none, because there are some notable exceptions. One is the prophecy of Fatima, which has had significant political impact, inspiring the Vatican to undertake covert political action in Poland and beyond that contributed to the fall of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War. Another pertinent example is the dispensationalists interpretation of the biblical prophecy of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ, which can be traced back to the 17th century at least (Watson, 2015) and continues to be of great importance to Christian Zionists in the contemporary USA. The latter have had significant influence on the US government and its policies, especially under Presidents Carter and G.W. Bush. For example, they have lent their support to the Israeli occupation of Palestine because (according to their interpretation) one of the preconditions for the second coming is that Jerusalem be returned to the Jews in its entirety. Dystopian and utopian ideas thus can have practical political implications, in Java and elsewhere around the world. How can we explain this?
Since the Renaissance modern science has provided the dominant model of truth in Western society with regard to the natural world, while an equally dominant and closely related model of human relations has been provided by capitalism and its modernist Protestant ethos, as described in the classic work of Max Weber (1904/1958). Gradually, the materialist rationalism of science and capitalism have provided us with such a powerful description of the world as it is, that any alternative ideas other cultures may entertain about the nature of reality are routinely dismissed as a false proposition; as a mere belief. Among many other things, this conservative attitude fails to consider that the prophetic imagination helps us to change the world and shape the future precisely because it is independent of objective facts. As Castoriadis (1998) has observed, the imaginary is as important as our awareness of the manifestly real when it comes to providing us with the motivation for engaging in action and social change. In other words, what is merely believed today, may become tomorrow’s reality, because both utopian and dystopian prophecies are often self-fulfilling, and fiction becomes fact. This is why utopianism continues to have broad appeal even in the most modernist societies.

What is held to be ‘real’ in contemporary late modern society, following Baudrillard (2005), is not in fact scientific in any case. It is rather an imagined and increasingly simulated reality that has condensed into what Baudrillard calls the ‘hyper-real.’ To the extent that our reality is made to appear to us as a natural state of affairs, rather than being recognized as a human creation based on imaginative human actions in the past, Baudrillard shows that people in many contemporary societies are prevented from re-imagining and recreating reality. We find it particularly difficult to question and challenge the experience of the hyper-real through new, active imaginings because this hyper-reality is so heavily promoted and pressed upon us within a public space dominated by electronic media. As our attention is drawn increasingly into the ‘virtualised reality’ sphere of a media landscape shaped by a small number of private owners, the imagination is not just paralysed but colonised by vested interests. For example, we are still being distracted from paying heed to the deteriorating material conditions of modern life by the widespread denial in the media of growing scientific evidence of an impending environmental disaster. We have become entrapped in the iron cage of a totalizing myth that still wears the mask of descriptive realism but is no longer scientific in the genuine explorative sense, and which discourages us
from creatively imagining alternative, utopian future realities. These conditions make utopian literature arguably more marginalized and at the same time more important for our present times than it has ever been before.

In the Javanese prophetic utopian literature the present, modern condition is not a hyper-reality that can no longer be questioned or examined. The modern condition is instead critiqued as a reversal of the natural order of things and as a state of madness. Indeed, the inability to recognize our human capacity for envisioning and creating a new reality, a utopian future, is noted in the texts as a key indicator that we are indeed now living in the kali yuga, the ‘dark age’ of Hindu cosmology. Now despondency and fatalism are the norm, say the prophecies, and those who ask questions and seek to maintain virtue are scorned or persecuted. Contemporary interpreters of the prophecy texts lament that worldly concerns, and the shallow intellectualism that serves the underlying creed of capital accumulation, have usurped the throne that rightly belongs to the inner Self (sukma sejati), which alone is capable of experiencing truth because it is truth.

From this inner-worldly perspective, the real ratu adil or saviour is none other than the sukma sejati returned to its throne, and when this occurs a golden age of spiritual insight commences for the individual concerned. If this kind of awareness is more widely cultivated, on a societal scale, then it produces a golden age in the exoteric, socio-political sense, emulating the conditions that are said to have prevailed during the reign of King Jayabaya. Unlike the millenarianism of Marxism, this eschatological model does not venture to separate individual spirituality from socio-political advancement because the former is considered a prerequisite for the latter (rather than a superstructure).

The utopian prophecy texts of Java nevertheless also do appeal to the rational side of readers. They begin with a description of reality. Indeed, the content of

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3 An example is mediated imaginary created in on-line interactive cyber worlds, such as ‘Call of Duty,’ a game that has captivated the minds of tens of millions of young adults, teenagers and children. The players are provided with the opportunity to make decisions within a virtual reality scenario, but their imagination is not creative. Rather, the rules of engagements and the imagery are all provided for them, and lead the players into a world wherein brutality is normalised. Not even the international rules of warfare are enforced in this apocalyptic scenario. Unthinking violence towards anyone designated from above as an enemy, including civilians, and self-interested loyalty to one’s own horde of fighters appears to be the only moral principles. The popularity of this game is a mark of how appealing the apocalyptic archetype has become in the collective unconscious of late modern society, or perhaps, what kind of future we are actively being prepared for.
the prophecy texts consists of at least ninety per cent historical description of well
known past events and only ten per cent of future predictions. This is not dissi-
milar from the scientific approach to prediction, which is based on observation of
a sample set of past events with the aim of determining patterns of recurrence in
these events and defining these patterns systematically. In short, scientific predic-
tions rely on the formulation of natural laws or, at least, where that is impossible,
on statistical description of observable historical patterns that are likely to recur
within future trajectories. Similarly, the prophecy texts first strive to establish a
historical pattern.

Observing the fluctuations of the political fate of the island of Java –past,
present and future– the texts describe regular alternations between righteous
and tyrannical governments. They also point to a second, more long-term pattern
or trend whereby the low points in these short cycles increase in depth and the
crises become more frequent. This observed pattern is predicted to continue into
the future, leading to a gradual decline of civilization and culminating in a major
cataclysm. This cataclysm is predicted to occur in the year 2100. The meaning of
this date is uncertain and disputed, however. To begin with, the meaning of this
number is unclear because several different calendars are used in Java. The main
task of the interpreter thus is to pinpoint where exactly the present moment is
being described in the text, which can then serve as a temporal anchor.

Some contemporary interpreters of the prophecy say that a massive natural
disaster will occur very soon, but a lot of this kind of commentary belongs within
the common order of doomsday predictions, which we are all well familiar with
from the millennial Christian fringe in the United States and elsewhere (Hall,
2013). Current scientific research about climate change shows, however, that we
have not quite abandoned the art of prediction in the west and that dystopian and
utopian visions can also be based on science.

The Where and When of Utopia: Concluding Remarks
on Utopianism in Indonesia and Beyond

Regardless of whether or not we are willing to suspend disbelief in order to better
appreciate the Javanese mystical worldview, as described above, there is a more
mundane, phenomenological sense in which the power of utopian prophecy is only
too real. Despite their apparent irrationality, or because of it, visionary imaginaries
may produce positive outcomes in human terms insofar as they dare to posit a future based on values and ideals rather than on observed facts.

It seems that, in this period of late modernity, we often find it difficult to give ourselves permission to imagine and thus produce a new world more commensurate with our highest aspirations and most genuine needs because the world is now located altogether outside of us, objectified and apprehensible only via the mental mirror of a transcendental subject or Ego. In the world of Javanese prophecy, by contrast, the enlightened subject (tiyang) knows the world directly because it is the world; it knows from the position of an immanent subject inseparable from and resonating with that greater subject that is the spirit of the entire universe. This is a formless kind of knowing, without separation and hence without ‘in-form-ation.’

Fundamental human needs, such as creating happiness, beauty or goodness, are not necessarily well served by modernist forms of rationality based on the notion of a transcendental subject, nor by the instrumental rationality of a capitalist modernity that views everyone and everything as mere objects and life’s purpose as a quest to reunite with this objectified world through consumption. Seen from this perspective, our modern worldview contains a great deal of its own irrationality and fetishism.

It may have once seemed reasonable to assume that a firm commitment to scientific realism ought to ensure that our worldview is sound and objective. However, such realism has caused us to lose sight of the deeper truth that—as Clifford Geertz (1973) famously observed—worldviews are ‘models for’ (achieving goals), not just ‘models of’ (reality). For example, if we think that inequality is a natural consequence of market competition then it may seem ‘natural’ and inevitable that the present economic system disadvantages the ‘little people’—whose fate is so often cited in the Jayabaya prophesies as the best barometer to measure the quality of the government at any given time. Such pseudo-realism mythologises reality, and arises from a failure to recognise how we choose to make certain conditions real, how we produce and reproduce them, until they gain the appearance of natural phenomena. Utopia thus reminds us that Corbin’s active imagination is an intrinsic human capability that serves as a necessary antidote to false realism, and perhaps constitutes our only hope for escaping Max Weber’s ‘iron cage.’

The ideal political economy envisaged in Javanese prophecies is rather different. It is essentially based on a spiritual model of righteous government, whereby a government’s success and the virtue of those at the top of the hierarchy, kings and presidents alike, can be measured by the extent to which the wong cilik, the ‘little
people', the man and woman in the street, are able to live in peace and prosperity and freedom from oppression and usury. Jayabaya’s reign is reputed as a period where such benign conditions prevailed, because he was an enlightened, spiritual ruler and hence in tune with the needs of the many and with the cosmos as a whole. The texts describe conditions very similar to those prevailing among the Utopians in More’s work: The common people under Jayabaya’s reign and the reign of all just kings are said to be taxed lightly, their hours of labor are short, they do not suffer from the capricious deeds of powerful individuals but can rely on the good sense and compassion of the king and his officials. The prophecies thus envisage the possibility and describe the characteristics of government in a new golden age, when once again the forces of light will rule supreme on earth, though it may be preceded by a time of great turmoil. No more than a fanciful dream, some may say. But woe be us if we do not dare to dream!

The dominant late modern discourse of instrumental rationality, of course, is not uncontested in the West, nor is modern Java removed from its influence. If I have somewhat dramatized the differences it is only for the sake of illustration. Nevertheless, the degree to which the world of spirit is acknowledged in Java in everyday life, and even in national politics, is quite remarkable. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in the great importance the Indonesian people and national elite alike attribute to the prophecies of Jayabaya.

Whereas in the imagery of Thomas More utopia is a place far removed in space, to Java’s utopian thinkers it is remote in time. Java’s cyclical utopia has occurred before in golden ages past, such as the period of Jayabaya’s reign, and utopia is bound to happen again when the next golden age supersedes our present age of living dystopia, the ‘age of madness’ (jaman edan). Then only can the world be healed and restored.

Some Islamic versions of the prophecy text incorporate the idea of a ‘judgement day’ derived from the Abrahamic tradition, an idea that was foreign to the textual and mythic thought of Hindu-Buddhist-Javanese civilization. The classic Javanese narrative spoke only of a world fallen into decay, destined to be restored one day to renew the cycle. Note that Java is nevertheless familiar with the idea that the world may one distant day reach the end of a greater cycle, the cycle of Shiva the redeemer, when the universe and all existence will return to a state of non-being (ketiadaan). Vishnu, the life giver, by contrast, is the master of the shorter cycles by which the world is damaged and repaired, and the Jayabaya tradition is undoubtedly Vaishnavite.
The title of this chapter, “The Once and Future King”, is of course an allusion to T.H White’s famous rendition of the Arthurian literary tradition (White, 1958), and I should at last explain the meaning of this reference. No matter whether it is Java’s Jayabaya or Britain’s Arthur, the just king, people say, is bound to return at one time in the future. Justice is recognized in both narratives as an eternal cosmic principle, and hence the just king is an archetype, a potential in the mind of every man and woman, ever-present, immanent in the land itself. The ‘just king’ principle is thus said to reside eternally in the sacred space of utopia, that is, in no particular place, while any particular manifestation of just government can only last for a limited time, and often all too briefly, within this quotidian world.

This cluster of ideas is indeed an ancient Indo-European mythological theme that made its way via India to Java. Thomas More is bound to have been familiar with the western, Arthurian interpretation of this theme, which may explain some of the parallels. His departure from such earlier, royalist models of just government has much in common with the 20th century republican reinterpretations of the Jayabaya corpus of literature and its ratu adil ideal in Java, at a time that marks the entry of Indonesia into the fray of modernity.

In the final analysis, there can be no doubt that the utopian impulse is a universal project founded upon our unique and sublime human capacity for creative imagination.

References


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