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Homo Narrans in East Java Regional Myths and Local Concerns

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between regional mythologies and local spirit concerns. It explores the extent to which teenagers in three communities are familiar with myths about the Goddess of the Southern Ocean, Nyai Roro Kidul, and her supposed daughter, Nyi Blorong. It shows how as one moves further away from the Queen's immediate domain, knowledge of this allegedly universal mythological figure rapidly diminishes and is merged with local spirit figures of more immediate concern. Although the mythological figures may be less immediately relevant locally, people still retain practical knowledge about them, such as the taboos associated with the queen and how to create amulets and other safeguards against her or her daughter's anger. The article finally also examines how in the non-local space of motion pictures, different mythologies may come to be merged, unchallenged by the truth constraints that being anchored in a locality usually places upon such tales. This loosening from local ties allows the movement of these spirit entities into media and cyberspace in which the direction of their further development is anything but certain since it is determined by non-local mythmakers.

Keywords: Nyai Roro Kidul—Nyi Blorong—local knowledge—mythmakers—Java

IN THIS article¹ I explore the interrelation between regional mythologies and local concerns about spirit phenomena, with a special focus on the myths surrounding the Goddess or Queen of the Southern Ocean, Nyai Roro Kidul,² which are often thought to be widely known in Java. The data was gathered in the following communities in East Java: Puger, a fishing village on the south coast; Ambulu village, located a few kilometers inland from the coast; Cantikan, an urban *kampung* in the city of Jember, about thirty-three kilometers from the coast, and; Perumahan Panji Laras Indah, a “suburban” housing complex in the village Arjasa, a few kilometers outside Jember. Since I wanted to study the perceptions of teenage youths about the myths, I attempted to interview them without adults present as much as possible. This inevitably skewed my sample of informants toward boys of junior- and senior secondary school age, as girls of that age were quite difficult to approach alone, that is, without the influencing presence of adults. Nevertheless, the data gained from boys and girls was quite similar. Interference from self-proclaimed adult “experts” also occurred when interviewing the boys, but in their case it was more easily overcome.³

FISHER (1987, xi) and more recently NILES (1999, 3, 8) have proposed reconceptualizing humankind as *Homo narrans*, or man the tale-teller, because part of what defines communities and their reality are the stories the participants tell of themselves: it is participation in local narratives and the icons that validate them that makes one an insider and a member of the community (WESSING 2001). BRUNER (2002, 27) notes that these tales constitute a particular way of knowing about the world. Both he and FISHER see stories as constitutive of our conception of the world (compare TURNER 1981, 145, 163) and ourselves (BRUNER 2002, 64), a performative act, in the sense of AUSTIN (1975), that realizes the realities “imagined” in the tales.⁴

This should not be taken to mean that all stories or, perhaps, the realities they weave, are automatically accepted as truth. Many stories told to children are known by adults to be fantasies and are usually clearly marked as such. Yet, especially when skillfully told, these too are able to conjure a reality into which even adults may be temporarily drawn.⁵ Also, not all participants may know

the stories equally well or be equally skillful in telling them (compare SUTARTO 2004, 179). Nor do they always agree on the way a story must be told or about its truth (FISHER 1987, 58),⁶ though for the sake of social relations people will usually publicly ignore or at least not emphasize their differences (BEATTY 1996).

BRUNER (2002, 94) posits that the “possible worlds” created by narrations are based on the world people know. Yet, this knowledge depends on the interaction between individuals’ perceptions, creating a consensus model. Truth, then, is what people agree on and the truth of a myth or legend “should not be confused with fact” (NILES 1999, 133). Rather, these are stories “which people may infuse with their truth” (O’FLAHERTY 1988, 35). The past may provide the pattern on which the present should be modeled (BATESON 1970, 135), but such modeling must also be assessed or even reconstructed over the generations as changes occur in the context in which things are true (WESSING 1995, 210; BRUNER 2002, 58). Thus, the continued “truth” of a story is the result of a social process in which it is assessed by an audience that judges it against other truths (WESSING 1978; compare BRUNER 2002, 91). As was discussed elsewhere (WESSING 2001), the context of this judgment, and thus the reality defined by it, is usually very local, even though the elements that make up the stories seem not to differ very much from location to location. For instance, most communities in Java have tales of a founder and a tutelary spirit with whom he made a pact, as well as stories of local ghosts and spirits and the rules for dealing with them. Yet, while these stories and spirit entities are similar, the local particulars and the rules governing them are not identical.⁷

To summarize, the teller⁸ of the tale weaves a vision of a reality, and communities define themselves through the stories they accept as reflecting reality. Reality is what people say it is for as long as the participants continue to accept the tale as it is told—something that can be enhanced if the teller’s style of presentation pleases the audience (NILES 1999, 174–76).

MYTHS

Nyai Roro Kidul is a well-known figure, both in the anthropological literature (compare JORDAAN 1984; KRUIJT 1906, 498–500; SCHLEHE 1998; WESSING 1997a, 1997b; WOODWARD 1989) and in Java, especially since a number of movies were made about her and her “daughter,” Nyi Blorong. In the popular press the impression is sometimes given that the story of the Queen is known by all the Javanese (*Surya* 1991, 5) and that this legend “lives among the people, having been handed down through the generations and is close to the heart of the Javanese people” (YONGKI 2003, ix).⁹ But, as I will discuss later, for all this familiarity with her name, detailed knowledge about her was rather scarce among those I interviewed.

There are actually two traditions of tales about her that are sometimes mixed up in the literature (see, for example, WESSING 1997a). The first of these, which is part of a Southeast Asian tradition of liaisons between founders of states and *naga* princesses, tells of her meeting with Panembahan Senopati and the founding of the Central Javanese state of Mataram (OLTHOF 1987, 78–82; WESSING 1997b).¹⁰ This story, which is usually included in collections of folk tales (compare KNAPPERT 1977, 65–72; TERADA 1994, 143), is claimed by some informants to have been invented by Sultan Agung of Mataram (r. 1613–1645) in order to legitimize the founding of this state. In it, the Queen, who is sometimes called Dewi Kadita, is described as a beautiful princess of, variously, Pajajaran, Galuh, or Kediri. Because she either refused to marry or contracted a foul-smelling skin disease, she was banished from the palace. After wandering for a time she came to the south coast of Java and entered the ocean. There she became the ruler of the spirits of Java (DE GRAAF and STIBBE 1918; JORDAAN 1984; PIGEAUD 1960–1961, vol. iv, 211). Her palace at the bottom of the ocean is a sumptuous place of great beauty that is said to look just like the *kraton* (palace) of Yogyakarta (*Intisari* 1991, 130). In most depictions of her, her body is shown only from the waist up. Although SCHLEHE (1998, 144) denies this, GREVE (2002, 16) reports that according to his informants, she always has a fish-like tail when she is in the water (compare HAR n.d., 36; HARNAENI HAMDAN Hs. n.d., 16), so as to be able to move quickly and easily.¹¹ When out riding she uses a golden carriage with a *naga* (dragon or snake) motif, drawn by a black and a white horse. Related mythology (JORDAAN 1984, 108–109) continues the *naga* motif, as did



FIGURE 1: Nyai Roro Kidul or Baruna Segara statue at the Bali Beach Hotel. Photo: Frans Erkelens.

Jordaan's informants who said that the Queen was referred to as a *naga* or mystical snake.

THE QUEEN ON THE COAST

A quite different tradition about her is as a source of wealth for fishermen on the south coast of Java and by extension with others who make their living there, such as harvesters of swallows' nests on the cliffs overlooking the Indian Ocean (*Tempo* 1982, 75–76). Indonesian popular children's literature reflects this relationship with fishermen (Harnaeni H. Hs. 1985a, 1985b, n.d.; RULLY n.d.), and Knappert tells of the involvement of harvesters of swallows' nests with her (KNAPPERT 1977, 72–74; compare KRUIJT 1906, 499–500).¹² None of the East Javanese teenagers I interviewed was familiar with the story of the Queen's relationship with the courts of Java and, as HEADLEY (2004, 138) points out, her "cult hardly extends beyond the palaces and a number of villages on the southern coast." This is somewhat overstated, as the fishermen's cult at least extends all along the southern coast of Java. The court tradition that Headley refers to is indeed rather restricted and is mostly relevant to people involved in court affairs. Yet, near the court there is a general awareness as was evident during the installation of the current Sultan of Yogyakarta. *Contra* HEADLEY (2004, 522), among the common people viewing this installation, her role of protector of the realm seems to be quite alive (compare *Tempo* 1989a, 72; *Kompas* 1989, 1, 5). Villages, even coastal ones, whose inhabitants are associated with the courts are also more likely to be familiar with tales of the Queen's origin and other particularities. Parang Tritis, for instance, lies on the coast but was intimately involved with the founding of Mataram by Panembahan Senopati. The court connection is well-enough known there as I found in 1991 (compare BRAKEL 1997).¹³

One major difference between the palace and village traditions is that the coastal tales only existed as oral narratives about a belief in the existence of the Queen and what one had to do to assuage her, while the court's tales are written texts, even if they were recited aloud, that legitimized the founding of the state of Mataram. Furthermore, in line with SWEENEY's observations (1980, 27), the two categories of tales tend to be mutually exclusive: the fishermen's tales do not mention the courts and the court mythology ignores the Queen's relationship with the common people. Court and coast have different concerns, which is reflected in the tales that are told, even about the same goddess.

In coastal communities like Puger and Ambulu the Queen is part of a pantheon of spirit figures that play various roles in the community. When one asks who she is, one is told that she is the *penguasa laut*, the ruler of the ocean, who controls the bounty of the ocean and by extension the welfare of the community. According to the fishermen, for access to this bounty she demands sacrifices of

human lives,¹⁴ and until she has received them, catches of fish will be small. To assuage her demand for lives, an annual offering (*slametan pancer*) is made in the form of a small boat filled with items representing the community (WESSING 1997a). She is dressed in green, her favorite color, and is said to become jealous when people wear this color on the beach. In her anger she is then likely to drown the offender.



FIGURE 2: Nyi Blorong. (From KREEMER 1879: facing page 1).

NYI BLORONG

Until her film debut, Nyi or Nyai¹⁵ Blorong was much less well known than Nyai Roro Kidul. KREEMER (1879, 9, note 4) calls her a money goddess who prefers to dwell in still waters or swamps. Others say she lives in a palace in the Indian Ocean (MEIJBOOM-ITALIAANDER 1924). She is said to be a *jinn* (genie) in the form of a beautiful, radiant woman who can change into a snake (SCHLEHE 1998, 240) or has the tail of a snake or a fish, with jewels as scales (KREEMER 1879, 6; SCHLEHE 1998, 144; KRUIJT 1906, 500). If appealed to, she is said to provide one with riches in exchange for which the supplicant must have sexual relations with her every *malam Jumat Kliwon*,¹⁶ for example, every thirty-five days. After having been satisfied, her scales turn into gold and jewels (ANONYMOUS 2003b). This continues for some seven years after which the beneficiary must surrender to Nyi Blorong and physically becomes part of her house (VAN HIEN 1912, 145).¹⁷ Es DANAR PAGERAN (2001, 35) reports on an exceptional link between Nyi Blorong and the Javanese *dhanyang desa*, a village's tutelary spirit that also often appears in the form of a snake (WESSING, forthcoming) (see below). This *dhanyang*, Nyi Tawun, could incarnate as either a beautiful woman or a snake¹⁸ and is said to

have brought people wealth, after which they started calling her Nyi Blorong. This link is exceptional because the *dhanyang* usually acts as the moral guardian of the community, while obtaining wealth from Nyi Blorong is considered immoral and those who pursue this road are said to lust after wealth (ES DANAR PANGERAN 2001, 35; SCHLEHE 1998, 240).

THE QUEEN AND NYI BLORONG

Although in the movies about her Nyi Blorong is said to be the daughter of Nyai Roro Kidul, this connection may well be a relatively recent development. Indeed, SCHLEHE (1998, 144) takes both Roy Jordaan and myself to task for accepting this relationship, stating that none of the older Dutch sources that she consulted speaks of a connection between the Queen and Nyi Blorong. She cites the *Babad Prambanan* (SCHLEHE 1991, 206; 1998, 143) as saying that Nyi Blorong is the daughter of the spirit-king Raja Angin-Angin whom she equates with the Queen's mythological predecessor, Mbok Roro Kidul. This, she continues, connects Nyi Blorong's origin with a figure even older than the Queen. If, she concludes (SCHLEHE 1998, 145), there is really an earlier connection, it is between Nyai/Kyai Blorong and Ratu/Raja Angin-Angin¹⁹ and not between Nyi Blorong and the Queen.

This argument misses the point, which is not to dismiss a possibly recently created connection but rather to explore why and how such a connection could have been made and become accepted by the public. How then did the idea come about that the Queen and Nyi Blorong are mother and daughter? One could speculate that if the Queen took over Mbok Roro Kidul's position, as Schlehe states, then Mbok Roro Kidul's role as mother could have simply moved with it. It is more likely, however, that this connection is indeed a creation of the moviemakers, as SCHLEHE maintains (1991, 206), and that this was done on the basis of the similarities between them. The two figures indeed have much in common: both live in underwater palaces, they are sources of wealth, and have scaly snake or fish-like lower bodies. Also, the cruel punishment handed out by Nyi Blorong to her petitioners is sometimes also attributed to Nyai Roro Kidul (WORMSER 1920, 18–25). Given these similarities the connection was easily made: as HOBBSAWM and RANGER (1983) have shown, "ancient traditions" are readily created.

While the actual cult of Nyai Roro Kidul may be relatively restricted, knowledge of her existence is widespread and rumors about her sudden appearance in some place are common. The Queen is also regularly mentioned in popular media like the Surabaya magazine *Liberty*, and even in the more prestigious news magazine *Tempo* (1988, 1989b). Films and television programs have also helped to create a general awareness, including, perhaps as part of the advertising

hype surrounding them, an awareness of the sexuality, mysticism, and danger associated with the Queen (*Editor* 1989, 61; *Tempo* 1989c, 38; 2003, 70).²⁰ However, the recording of folklore can “have a feedback effect on the tradition itself” (NILES 1999, 107). Furthermore, as SWEENEY (1980, 7) points out, publishing myths (in printed form in Sweeney’s discussion but we could include films here as well) raises their status and gives them an aura of being the “correct” version. It might be fruitful to see the various tales told within either tradition as similar to the branch or even twig stories of the *wayang* repertoire (SEARS 1996, 189). Especially in the non-court tradition, the things that are told about the Queen have some relationship with the coastal tales, although the exact connection is sometimes difficult to discern and becomes ever more unclear and mixed up as one moves further inland.²¹



FIGURE 3: Advertisement for the movie *Ajian Ratu Laut Kidul*.

LOCAL CONCERNS

Thus, in Ambulu and Puger on the coast, informants kept the Queen and Nyi Blorong clearly separated. The Queen, as was mentioned earlier, was the ruler of the ocean while Nyi Blorong was said to be the queen of the snakes. In the fishing village of Puger, the Queen’s role as controller of the catch was emphasized, as was her interrelationship with a host of local spirits (WESSING 1997a). In Ambulu, where deep-sea fishing is not important,²² informants rather quickly steered the conversation away from the Queen to a more local concern, Watu Ulo. Only one informant mentioned that her parents had been taken by the Queen while catching shrimps in the area, but then also changed the conversation to local spirits. Watu Ulo is a long, rocky breakwater on the beach there, and

is said to be the remains of a vicious man-eating *naga* (snake) that was defeated by a local hero and whose spirit now guards the island Nusa Barong, just off the coast (compare GABRIEL F. X. 1991, 8). The structure is said to mark the boundary between the domains of various local spirits.

We see then that even in these coastal communities the importance of the Queen varies with the role she is perceived to play in peoples' daily lives. While she was quite important in Puger, where many inhabitants regularly enter her domain to catch fish, in Ambulu this was less so since fishing there is of lesser importance. Nevertheless, in Ambulu she was also seen as a separate from Nyi Blorong, who was not characterized as her daughter in either place. This was quite different from the beliefs in Jember and Arjasa, where neither figure is immediately relevant in people's daily lives.²³ Uniformly my informants were not aware of the court mythology and could only give the sketchiest information about either the Queen or Nyi Blorong. All believed the Queen to exist, although one sixteen-year-old Arjasa boy from a strict Muhammadiyah Muslim²⁴ household admitted to some doubts. He certainly did not believe in Nyi Blorong: "That is just too hard to imagine," he said, "there is no proof at all." He also called Nyi Blorong the queen of the snakes, but this could be because he has close friends in Ambulu. All other Arjasa informants maintained that the Queen and Nyi Blorong are mother and daughter²⁵ but were unable to provide further details.

Responses from Jember informants were more mixed. A fifteen-year-old boy stated that Nyai Roro Kidul and Nyi Roro Kidul (who are the same figure) were married and had Nyi Blorong as their child. Others called Nyi Blorong the Queen's *patih* (vizier) or *dayang* (servant) but did not refer to the mother-daughter relationship, and both a teenage boy and an adult man claimed that Nyi Blorong was the Queen of the Southern Ocean. No informant knew of anyone who was rumored to have approached Nyi Blorong for wealth, though they were generally aware that fishermen asked the Queen for good catches. "If they do," they said, "it will rain fish (*hujan ikan*), but the next day someone pays." The only other thing they knew is that one should not wear green when going to the beach.²⁶ "There are rules there," one boy said, "and these have to be followed," which is exactly where the danger lies. The beach is strange territory where the spirits do not know the boys and the boys do not know the spirits, making it easy to make mistakes (compare PEMBERTON 1994, 237). Away from there, however, the Queen is an outside spirit with a well-known name. As a boy from Arjasa pointed out, the Queen is mostly important to the people on the coast, the fishermen and "here in the housing complex [Perumahan Panji Laras Indah] she just isn't of primary importance."

Sometimes, however, this can suddenly change. In August 2001, around Independence Day, little plastic bags filled with variously colored liquids were strung up in front of houses and shops. I was told in Jember that these were a



FIGURE 4: Penangkal against Nyi Blorong's anger. Photo: Robert Wessing.

charm (*penangkal*) to ward off Nyi Blorong's fury. It seems that Nyi Blorong had lost her scarf (*selendang*) and was angrily looking for it. These charms were to prevent her from entering people's houses: their purpose was to *tolak bala* (ward off misfortune). This rumor spread throughout East Java and at least as far west as Semarang (SUPRIANTO 2001, 10; *Suara Merdeka* 2001). In some places it was the Queen who had lost the scarf and fifteen persons were rumored to have lost their lives under mysterious circumstances because of her anger: she kept taking victims until the *selendang* was found. Others believed that one of the Queen's children was about to be circumcised.²⁷ "The point is," they said, "that every time the ruler of the southern coast has a celebration it impacts" [on the people] (SUPRIANTO 2001, 10). In response people made various offerings to the Queen and carried amulets to protect themselves (ANONYMOUS 2003a).²⁸ Religious leaders denounced all this as superstition and advised people to turn to the teachings of their faith instead, but during the two weeks of my stay the little plastic bags could be seen everywhere. Thus, when the Queen and Nyi Blorong became matters of immediate concern people knew how to respond in appropriate, practical ways. Otherwise, however, as was observed earlier, discussions about them tended to become mixed up with matters of local spirit presences, which seem to act as a context of reference for information about them. This may in fact be the only way that people can use the information.

In rural Java these local concerns tend to revolve around a cult focused on the community's founder and the tutelary spirit with whom he has made a pact, and together with whom his spirit continues to protect the welfare of the community.

In addition there may be a selection of more or less benign house, yard, and other spirits that, together with the founder, the tutelary spirit, and God, form the spiritual landscape of the community (compare WESSING 2001; forthcoming).

In Cantikan and Perumahan Panji Laras Indah, however, this was not the case. *Kampung* Cantikan developed as part of the city of Jember, while the suburban Perumahan Panji Laras Indah was originally built as housing for the Jember police and later sold to the general public. Neither, therefore, has a founder and only Cantikan has a possible tutelary spirit. Concerns in Cantikan were mainly focused on the nearby river Bedadung and its guardian spirit to whom some of the people in the *kampung* make offerings. It was said that meditating on the river's bank might yield one a vest (*rompi antakusuma*) that makes one invulnerable to sorcery.²⁹ One has to pass certain tests, however, and failing them could cause one to lose one's mind. Furthermore, there is a rock in the river, the Batu Mayit (corpse stone), near which an underwater tunnel is thought to connect directly with the Segoro Kidul, the Indian Ocean. Children are said to sometimes disappear into this tunnel.

The Perumahan Panji Laras Indah has neither a founder nor a tutelary spirit. The location of the housing complex is said to have once been that of the kingdom Panji Laras, and people had seen or heard a horse-drawn carriage rumble down the road at night. Part of the complex was once a coconut grove in a forested area in which some graves were located, said to be associated with this kingdom. This accounted for the many spirits there: every house has its own *penunggu* (guardian), among others, a spirit-woman living in a fruit tree at one house, a weretiger at another, and elsewhere the spirit of a bearded old man. The attitude toward these spirits is one of mutual avoidance and they are not given offerings. Only one householder had called in the help of a specialist (*dhukun*) who had moved his house-spirit to the house of a neighbor. The two households have not been on good terms since. When making alterations to one's house one must give a *slametan* (ritual meal) and one should be careful when moving large rocks that may lie in one's yard.³⁰

What is interesting about this story is that there is no historical record of there having been a kingdom called Panji Laras,³¹ yet the inhabitants of the Perumahan are convinced that they live in its sphere of influence, just like the inhabitants of rural villages live in the sphere of influence created by the interaction between the founder and the tutelary spirit. The absence of the latter pair, especially the tutelary spirit (*dhanyang*), necessitates the presence of individual guardians in each of the houses.³² This also reflects the fact that, unlike the case in rural communities formerly, the households are all unrelated newcomers and thus not naturally under the protection of a founder-spirit pair.³³ Most people in the community attest to the truth of the story, and neighbors inform

newcomers about it and about the guardian of their particular house. These spirits, as FISH (n.d.) observes for West Java, are an intrinsic part of peoples' reality, a part of the natural world in which they live that also includes magic, mystical events and, ultimately, formal religious beliefs. Thus, while the fundamental element protecting rural communities, the founder-spirit pair, is absent in the suburban housing complex, whose residents are furthermore primarily oriented on urban Jember and its university and government offices, we see that, contra to HEADLEY's (2004, 516) observation, the authority of such village traditions has not significantly declined in the context of an urban lifestyle. Rather, the traditions are adapted to local circumstances.

Finally, these beliefs also do not disappear as young people become involved in such late twentieth century activities as chat groups and the Internet. Indeed, the entries posted in, for example, WEBGAUL (2002) reflect a lively discussion about the identity and reality of, among others, the Queen and Nyi Blorong—a discussion, admittedly behind pseudonyms, that was far more open and spontaneous than many of the conversations I had with the teenagers.³⁴ Yet, here too the level of knowledge displayed is one of generalities. Even so, an engagement with modern technology therefore does not automatically lead to a Weberian “disenchantment” (WEBER 1947, 139–47). While it disconnects the discussion from immediate local concerns, the invasion of cyber space by ghosts has given these a whole new realm to haunt.³⁵ These stories influence how people relate to each other on the Net, which in turn feeds back into day-to-day social relations, especially among the young (compare BARENDREGT 2005b). This differs from local discussions of television programs and movies, as was done by FISH's (n.d.) young informants. There, the telling of stories about local spirits tended to merge with the recitation of programs seen on television, and vice versa, because these children also said that listening to ghost stories on the radio could cause real spirits to appear. Stories, therefore, form the context for other stories and thus create a reality: it produces a state of affairs (FISH n.d.).

CONCLUSION

We see then that knowledge about mythological figures and spirits is most specific in “centers” where they have the greatest relevance. Away from these places this knowledge quickly diminishes into generalizations and a vague feeling that one must beware of these entities. Everywhere, however, such figures, vividly or vaguely, engage with local concerns, with the local concerns becoming more dominant as one moves away from the centers. The lack of specific information about the Queen and Nyi Blorong in Jember and Arjasa is therefore not surprising since what my informants learned from the media was usually not most relevant locally. When it became so in August 2001, people gained information

about preventative measures rather than about the nature of the Queen or Nyi Blorong. This was practical information similar to the prohibition on wearing green when entering the Queen's domain and other rules for interacting with her. An exception here seems to be the data gathered by FISH (n.d.) in West Java, but this may have something to do with the relative ages of our informants, for example, my teenage informants did not generalize as readily as their younger ones did. Furthermore, the interaction between the regional tales (the Queen and Nyi Blorong) and local concerns is not a uniform process. Rather, as was noted earlier, their reinterpretation is subject to group dynamics. A local spokesperson, a teller of the tale, may set the tone, with others more or less in agreement (compare NOURSE 1999). Thus, we see these figures portrayed in all kinds of lights, from benefactors to evil beings, the latter especially in the film *Kutukan Nyi Roro Kidul* in which the Queen is portrayed as evil in opposition to a devout Muslim teacher. The meaning of these figures and people's understanding of them are a matter of continual construction and reconstruction: even if Nyi Blorong was not originally part of the Nyai Roro Kidul myth, she is so now and is accepted as such by many people.³⁶ Just as people watching *wayang* presentations do not thereby learn the text of the *Mahabarata* or the *Ramayana*, the films do not teach them the original or "authentic" stories of the Queen or Nyi Blorong. Rather, these presentations reflect the concerns of the filmmakers and others involved with the process, which shows in the way that the story is presented. As such, the movies and television programs may be seen as generating a new space in which new versions of the myths, removed from their localized limitations, can both travel and gain a measure of truth. These then, in turn, start to interact with local truths and concerns.³⁷

Myths and tales in general then, are judged in terms of the local context. As SCHLEHE (1998, 245) points out, the interpretation of these beliefs is flexible and different groups or even individuals can give different interpretations to them. This is, indeed, the beauty of symbols and metaphors: they can be interpreted in many different ways and it is a matter of community judgment whether an interpretation is generally acceptable (WESSING 1978, 172). A community, however, is made up of individuals who each evaluate the narrative based on their own experience and knowledge of previous tales (compare FISHER 1987, 75). We saw this happen in Panji Laras where individuals' experiences and expectations "created" a sphere of influence based on the association of the housing estate's name with a fictional kingdom. The audience, therefore, is a crucial participating factor in this process (NILES 1999, 53, 65; compare HOBART 2002, 371) that orders people's experience and creates a mutual social reality (WESSING 1978, 13; FISHER 1987, 93). This is, of course, a continuous, open-ended process (TURNER 1981, 140) and makes possible new individual interpretations and understandings

to in turn be judged by the audience. We conclude then, with apologies to Walt Kelly's character Pogo, that "we have met the mythmaker, and he is us."³⁸

NOTES

1. A version of this article was presented at the 14th Java Workshop of the ESSJN in Salatiga and Yogyakarta, 12–15 January 2005. Part of the research on which it is based was made possible by a grant from the Maatschappij voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek in de Tropen (Treub-Maatschappij). I would like to thank Matthew I. Cohen and Jerry Sullivan as well as the participants in the Java Workshop for their comments, as well as my many friends who responded to my email query about a label for "man the tale-teller," and especially Douglas G. Wilson of the American Dialect Society, who put me on the trail of *Homo narrans*.

2. Also Ratu Kidul, though some claim that the two are not the same (WESSING 1997b, 337, note 3; RASSERS 1959, 265).

3. NILES (1999, 105) notes that collecting folklore data can be "like pulling teeth," yet there are also those who trumpet their alleged expertise. The reason for choosing teenagers as my informants is that they are the primary audience for movies made about the Queen and Nyi Blorong. HEIDER (1991, 20–21) suggests that these audiences tend to be male youths between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, though ANONYMOUS (1988, 1) also mentions rickshaw drivers, domestic servants, and villagers. While this may be the case, my teenage informants had previously seen all the movies I had on VCD, except for the most recent one, which drew the largest audience when it was shown at one of their homes.

4. "Imagined" is used here in the sense of ANDERSON (1991). By stories both Fisher and Niles mean all kinds of narration, including songs, personal accounts, myth, and history to name but a few (compare TURNER 1981, 153). Illustrative here is the Javanese concept of *babad*, which simultaneously means the creation of a cultured place and the story or history told about it. See also the German *Geschichte* or the French *histoire*, which can mean both story and history.

5. Compare ROGERS SIREGAR (1979) and BARENDREGT (2005a, ch. 15). NILES (1999, 120) speaks of the "'ritualized" language of myths, heroic poems, and so on, in which a special register of voice is used. Tone and emphasis are markers in daily speech as well, differentiating insiders (natives) and outsiders.

6. Sometimes people cannot agree that a particular story is the right or proper one, in which case schisms and discontent can occur (WESSING 2002).

7. This can make visiting unfamiliar places a risky undertaking (compare PEMBERTON 1994, 237).

8. Even today, tales are still primarily transmitted orally. In the traditional Malay world illiteracy was the norm, both at the court and among the common people, surrounding the performer with an aura of mystique that was only added to if the tale was read aloud from a text (SWEENEY 1974, 48–49, 57; 1980, 13), since the ability to read was something akin to magic (JOSSELIN DE JONG 1964, 236–37). Even there, though, reading (*baca*) meant to recite aloud (SWEENEY 1980, 150). In spite of schooling and the spread of literacy, orality has remained an important aspect of people's enjoyment of stories as the ability to read does not automatically motivate people to do so, and reading for pleasure remains uncommon in the Malay world (SWEENEY 1980, 5, 25). In addition they are often performed on cassettes as radio plays, on television, and on VCDs and DVDs—the popularity of which

has caused some Indonesian observers worry about the imminent demise of folklore (AW 1991, 2), which, as SUTARTO (2004, 9) observes, can be forestalled by paying attention to traditional culture, which indeed seems to be the case in the radio plays and many television programs (see below) (compare PUTERA MANUABA 2000). Finally, it should be noted that books are relatively expensive in Indonesia. In January 2005 books costing between around 25,000 and 80,000 rupiah were no exception, with hardbound books selling for Rp. 100,000 and up. The exchange rate at the time was Rp. 11.700 per Euro, but of course this says little about the purchasing power of the public.

9. *Legenda atau cerita tentang adanya Ratu Laut Selatan...berkembang di dalam masyarakat, telah diturunkan secara turun temurun, dan sangat melekat di hati masyarakat Jawa* (YONGKI 2003, ix).

10. See also RICKLEFS 1974 about her relationship with Javanese rulers generally. The immortal Queen is supposed to have had a three-night sexual liaison with Senopati, a relationship that is these days referred to as a marriage. (See HARNAENI HAMDAN Hs. [n.d., 18] for a quite deviant, more strictly Islamic version of this story.) The successive rulers of the courts of Java must continue this relationship if their realms are to prosper (WESSING 2003; YONGKI 2003, 145), although HEADLEY (2004, 522) feels that this relationship has eroded in competition with Islam. This motif is also found in Japan, where it may have been introduced from Java (KUMAR 2004, 12). Despite these liaisons, the Queen, as JORDAAN (1984, 106) writes, remains an ever-rejuvenating virgin. However, as ALLEGRO (1973, 96) observes about other such phenomena, “It will be appreciated that this sacred virginity, attributed somewhat incongruously to goddesses who spend most of their mythical lives leaping in and out of bed with gods and mortals, is not primarily or even essentially to do with having intact hymens. Their ‘virginity’ lay in the power of their wombs to produce offspring whose excellence derived from menstrual blood perpetually at its most powerful.” In the case of the Queen, it is not so much offspring as the welfare of the state that is important (WESSING 1997b).

11. SCHLEHE (1998, 78) is skeptical about connections between the Queen and snake cults. However, an informant in Parang Kusumah told the Dutch painter Frans Erkelens, who regularly paints the Queen, that she could appear as a snake wearing a crown (Erkelens, personal communication, June 2004; see also SCHLEHE 1998, 144, note 225). And, *contra* SCHLEHE (1998, 147), on the cover of a modern children’s book, Nyai Roro Kidul (Cerita Asli Indonesia 25), she is clearly depicted as a mermaid (GREVE 2002, 16), while the cover of HARNAENI H. Hs. (1985b) also hints at a scaly lower body. Also, at the Bali Beach Hotel stands a statue of the Queen, clearly showing her lower body to be shaped like that of a fish—though this could be her Balinese equivalent, Baruna Segara (see figure 1). Compare an alternative Javanese name for the Queen, Nyai Gede Segoro Kidul (KRUIJT 1906, 498).

12. Interestingly, none of the nine films I have seen that deal with the Queen and/or Nyi Blorong are about relations with the courts of Java. Of the ones dealing with the Queen herself, *Anugerah Nyi Roro Kidul*, *Kutukan Nyai Roro Kidul*, and *Ajian Ratu Laut Kidul* are set on the seashore, while the setting of *Bangunnya Nyi Roro Kidul* and *Pembalasan Ratu Laut Selatan* is primarily urban. Of films in which Nyi Blorong is the main character, *Kisah Cinta Nyi Blorong*, *Nyi Blorong*, *Putri Nyi Roro Kidul*, and *Petualangan Cinta Nyi Blorong* take place in a city, while *Perkawinan Nyi Blorong*, in which the Queen figures as Nyi Blorong’s mother is set in “mythic space,” that is, no recognizable earthly setting. Similarly, the events in HAR (n.d.), an Indonesian children’s book, take place in “mythic space” and are about the origin of Nyai Roro Kidul. The same is true of YONGKI’s (2003) pseudo-historical novel

written for older readers. Only one, rather deviant, children's book (HARNAENI HAMDAN Hs., n.d.) concerns her relationship with the origins of the courts of Java.

13. On the other hand, villagers living near but uninvolved with a site sacred to the court may be rather unconcerned with it (compare HEADLEY 2004, 525).

14. Due to the dangerous waves on the Indian Ocean, fishermen regularly drown (compare WESSING 1997a, 104).

15. Also *kyai* (old man) Blorong, though *nyai* is more common (VAN HIEN 1912, 145; KRUIJT 1906, 500).

16. A combination of days from the Javanese seven- and five-day calendars.

17. Nyi Blorong is rather similar to the Sundanese *ipri* (compare WESSING 1988, 54; ROSIDI 1977, 95–105).

18. This is a common transformation (compare HIDDING 1929, 47).

19. Note that both are of uncertain gender, as is Nyai Roro Kidul in the older literature (KRUIJT 1906, 498; SCHLEHE 1998, 106; HEADLEY 2004, 329, note 65).

20. Note the words in the movie advertisement (figure 3): *terberani* (most daring), *sensasional* (sensational), *erotisme* (eroticism), and *permainan asmara* (love play).

21. There is a seemingly endless variety of these “branch” stories as can be seen by typing Nyai Roro Kidul into a search engine. See, for example, <http://groups.msn.com/RATUKIDULZuidzeeGodin/javagodin.msnw> (last accessed 23 June 2006).

22. Economically Ambulu primarily depends on tourism to nearby Watu Ulo, as well as some farming and forestry.

23. According to one Arjasa informant, even though there were noticeable differences between people from Jember and those from Arjasa (*orangnya lain*), this did not show in their responses to my questions.

24. Although not specifically discussed here, Islam and the currents of debate within it are, of course, part of the local context in which these spirit beliefs occur and to which they must adapt.

25. This was also true of three university students (two young women and a young man) in Surabaya.

26. Some years ago when a movie about the Queen was playing in Jember, people were even warned not to wear green when going to see it.

27. She is believed to have five children, three girls and two boys. SUBIYANTO Hr. (n.d., 50) mentions their names and Nyi Blorong is not among them.

28. A few years earlier GUK (1996) wrote that the Queen was rumored to need a number of small children as *tumbal* (propitiatory gifts) for the forthcoming wedding of her daughter. In response children started wearing necklaces of an uneven number of pieces of yellow bamboo. Tr4G posted on WEBGAUL (2002) that when s/he was small, “every few years...a necklace of yellow bamboo had to be worn to prevent the child from being bothered by the Queen. Around midnight there would be the sound of a horse-drawn carriage, just like in the Nyai Roro Kidul movies. She wore a crown and would go around the village. That is what they said. No one would dare leave the house if they thought she was coming. But those tales are gone now.” On beliefs about such abductions in Cirebon see COHEN 1998.

29. Compare the *Anta kusuma* (or *Anantakusuma*) cloak that allows *widadari* (and perhaps others as well) to fly (HIDDING 1929, 52; ECHOLS and SHADILY 1989, 43). HOYKAAS (1956, 312–13) links this cloak with the serpent Anantaboga, the origin of rice. The connection between the serpent, the river, the *rompi*, and the guardian indicates that this guardian could well be the community's *dhanyang* (compare HIDDING 1929, 52–53).

30. In 2005, during renovations to one of the houses, care was taken not to offend its guardian spirit: a cosmologically appropriate date was selected, a *slametan* (ritual meal)

was given, and a small gold ornament was embedded into the ridgepole of the addition to the house.

31. The only place that the name comes up is in a story from Banten in West Java called Panji Kelaras (URUSAN ADAT-ISTIADAT 1963, 167–74). A prince who was banished because of his addiction to cock fighting impregnates a girl in the forest and then returns to the palace to occupy the throne. A son is born in the forest and grows up with a magical rooster who names him Panji Kelaras: “*Blek-blek kukeluruk, saya ayam si Panji Kelaras. Ibunya digubuk buruk, ayahnya di istana bermalas-malas*” (Blek-blek, cock-a-doodle-doo, I am the rooster of Panji Kelaras. His mother lives in a dilapidated shack, his father lazes in the palace.) Later the boy learns that the ruler likes cockfighting and heads for the palace. After some complications they figure out their relationship and all ends well. My thanks to Dr. Akhmad Khusyairi of the Universitas Jember who pointed this story out to me. In the village Lebak Jabung (Kab. Mojokerto) lies a *petilasan* (trace) of the *Jago* (rooster) Panji Laras: <http://putramaja.tripod.com/Mojokerto/mokerAA.htm> (last accessed 23 June 2006).

32. Where *dhanyang* guard a community, other nature spirits are kept at a distance, just as the guardian tiger of a shrine or village is said to banish all other tigers from its vicinity (WESSING 1995, 198).

33. Although it is less so now than in the past, the inhabitants of rural hamlets tend to be descendants of their founder and could perhaps be seen as a “house,” in the sense of LÉVI-STRAUSS (1988, ch. 13), that is collectively guarded by the spirit of the founder and the tutelary spirit.

34. In the presence of a Western academic, adults are often especially reluctant to admit that they believe in or even know about these phenomena (compare WESSING 1995, 213, note 22). Fish’s primary school informants, however, showed no such reluctance (FISH n.d.).

35. Interestingly, BARENDREGT’S (2005b) data on the haunting of the Net does not mention ancestors, founders, or nature spirits, but only includes the spirits of people who have died premature or violent deaths, for example, the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth (*kuntianak*). This accords with my own data from Arjasa about a haunted mobile phone that kept on ringing people, even though its young owner had died in a motorcycle accident. It is believed in Southeast Asia that the spirits of those who have died violent deaths are unsatisfied and continue to haunt this world (compare SELL 1955, 16).

36. Interestingly, this does not seem to have gone any further and I have not seen any new mythic developments in the relationship.

37. This is indeed happening in, for example, the work of the Dutch painters Frans Erkelens and Roy J. Döhne. Their involvement with the Queen is rooted partially in their perception of the Javanese experience and in part reflects their personal Dutch circumstances: <http://www.franserkelens.nl/indonesia.html>; http://groups.msn.com/DeJavaanseGODINDERZUIDZEE/_homepage.msnw?pgmarket=nl-nl (both pages last accessed 23 June 2006).

38. Concerning Pogo and Walt Kelly, see <http://www.rru.com/pogo.html> (last accessed 23 June 2006).

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