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From King to People: Jayabaya's Prophecy and Its Evolution in Javanese Political Culture

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Abstract: *This study investigates the evolving role of Jayabaya's Prophecy in Javanese political culture, tracing its reinterpretation from the royal courts of Kediri to contemporary digital activism. Employing historical methods (heuristics, verification, interpretation, historiography) combined with narrative, semiotic, and discourse analysis, the research examines primary and secondary sources ranging from prophetic manuscripts to murals, protest songs, and digital media. Findings demonstrate that the prophecy has shifted from a tool of elite legitimation to a medium of popular resistance, particularly since the Reformasi era. Concepts such as zaman edan ("age of madness") and Ratu Adil ("Just Ruler") exemplify the fluidity of meaning, functioning alternately as mechanisms of state hegemony and as counter-narratives of dissent. In the contemporary context, the prophecy also acquires apocalyptic and emancipatory interpretations, reflecting public anxieties over corruption, inequality, and ecological crisis. The study highlights the enduring political significance of myth as a dynamic cultural resource, situating Javanese prophetic traditions within broader debates on myth, power, and collective imagination.*

Keywords: *Jayabaya's Prophecy; Political Myth; Cultural Resistance, Javanese Studies*

Introduction

The history of Javanese culture is inextricably linked to myths, symbols, and prophecies that have a profound influence on its social and political framework. These elements serve both as components of the traditional belief system and as a cosmological mechanism for constructing a reality that surpasses historical logic and modernity, rooted in a symbolic heritage transmitted through generations (Ihsana & Urfan, 2024). Within this framework, predictions, or jangjawokan in Javanese tradition, occupy a pivotal role as alternative narratives that embody collective aspirations, anxieties, and uncertainties regarding the future and evolving circumstances. These prophecies play a crucial role in critical circumstances, including colonisation, political crises, and power transitions, functioning as both spiritual guides and instruments for analysing the historical trajectory of Javanese society (Setianto, 2010).

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The Jayabaya Prophecy, attributed to Prabu Jayabaya, the illustrious king of the Kediri Kingdom in the 12th century, is among the most renowned prophecies in Javanese cultural heritage. It occupies a significant position not solely due to the historical figure who originated it, but also because of its symbolic significance regarding pivotal events that transpired long after its inception. The prophecy, conveyed through multiple oral and written accounts, predicts the arrival of a fair-skinned populace from the north, a tumultuous era termed the "age of madness," and the rise of an exemplary leader named Ratu Adil, who will signify the world's restoration (Fatkhan, 2019). The significance of this prophecy resides in its adaptability, as its interpretation evolves with the changing context of the times. In the colonial period, it served as a historical rationale for the presence of foreign powers. In contrast, during the New Order and Reform eras, it emerged as a symbol of the populace's anxiety and hope amidst social and political instability. The lasting significance of the Jayabaya Prophecy underscores that it is not merely a cultural artefact but an active narrative that conveys the collective hopes and concerns of Javanese society. The significance of this prophecy resides in its adaptability, as its interpretation evolves with the changing context of the times. In the colonial period, it served as a historical rationale for the presence of foreign powers. In contrast, during the New Order and Reform eras, it emerged as a symbol of the populace's anxiety and hope amidst social and political instability. The lasting significance of the Jayabaya Prophecy underscores that it is not merely a cultural artefact, but an active narrative that conveys the collective hopes and concerns of Javanese society (Hardi, 2023).

Since the era of the kingdom, Jayabaya's prophecies have served as an ideological instrument to reinforce the legitimacy of authority. In the conventional Javanese political framework, the king served as both an administrative leader and a spiritual entity, regarded as the embodiment or representative of supernatural forces (Wulan & Setiawan, 2024). Interpretations of these prophecies frequently associate the king with cosmic concepts, including world equilibrium and divine fate, thereby rendering the exercised power as both political and sacred. In this context, Jayabaya symbolises an idealised glory and order, and consequently, the prophecy linked to him serves as a mechanism to reinforce the prevailing power structure (Efi Nurwindayani, 2021).

Nevertheless, from the onset of the 20th century until the 1998

Reformation, the interpretation of Jayabaya's prophecy experienced a significant transformation. The prophecy, once dominated by the ruling elite, transformed into a grassroots discourse, openly interpreted by the populace. This phenomenon transpired concurrently with the erosion of traditional authority, the emergence of political consciousness, and the proliferation of alternative media within society. The desacralization of prophecy coincided with a legitimacy crisis in the oppressive political system. In this context, Jayabaya transcended his role as a mere symbol of royal authority and emerged as a visionary figure who "embodied the voice of the people," serving as a symbolic representation in the narrative of resistance against injustice (Bagus Setiawan Agus Trilaksana, 2021).

Pict 1. The painting entitled "Greeting to Fertile Lands and Marhaen the Farmer" by Budi Ubrux.

Source: https://www.kompas.id/artikel/belajar-dari-wong-cilik-mendamba-ratu-adil

This novel interpretation reinterprets Jayabaya's Prophecy as a tool for social critique, particularly in contexts where formal political expression is constrained. The narratives of the "era of madness" and the "Ratu Adil" serve to express collective anxiety, convey aspirations for justice, and signify the yearning for systemic change. Jayabaya's Prophecy has transformed into a medium for the contestation of meanings between rulers and the ruled, manifesting through interpretations in pamphlets, speeches, songs, and street graffiti. (Widodo et al., 2022).

Pict 2. The painting entitled "All of My Hopes" by Budi Ubrux

Source: https://www.kompas.id/artikel/belajar-dari-wong-cilik-mendamba-ratu-adil

In the current socio-political landscape, Jayabaya's Prophecy has undergone a significant recontextualization, permeating modern public arenas, including demonstrations, murals, protest songs, and social media. Symbols such as "the age of madness" and "the Just Queen" have reemerged as

manifestations of apprehension regarding corrupt and inequitable socio-political circumstances, while simultaneously encapsulating optimism for the advent of an exemplary leader capable of instigating transformation. The transition from a top-down interpretation governed by power structures to a bottom-up interpretation generated by the populace marks a significant shift in the societal articulation of cultural heritage. Jayabaya's prophecies now serve as tools of cultural and political resistance, articulating crises, injustices, and collective aspirations, and illustrating that cultural heritage is not static; its significance is perpetually contested within the realm of social conflict (Setyawan et al., 2022).

Prior research indicates that Jayabaya's prophecy serves a purpose that transcends mere mythological narrative, functioning as a mechanism for political legitimacy and a manifestation of social resistance. (Stajić, 2020) contends that this prophecy serves as an ideological tool in contemporary political practice, particularly during periods of crisis. Fawaid et al., (2022) demonstrated that in Babad Tanah Jawi, Jayabaya's prophecy served to legitimise the authority of the Javanese dynasty by presenting it as a historical inevitability. Sasmita et al., (2018) emphasise that Jayabaya has been redefined as a symbol of resistance to colonialism and serves as an inspiration for the development of national identity.) These three studies affirm that interpretations of Jayabaya's prophecy are dynamic, contextual, and actively influence the political culture in Java.

This research is significant, as Jayabaya's prophecy represents not only a Javanese cultural heritage but also substantially influences narratives of power and political resistance across different eras. While several studies have addressed its role in elite legitimacy and colonial resistance, few have explored the transition in interpretation from the elite to the populace, particularly in modern manifestations such as street art and digital media. This research presents originality by emphasising this transition via a cultural history perspective and an examination of prevalent political discourse. Consequently, the study presents the subsequent research inquiries: 1) In what ways has the understanding of the Jayabaya Prophecy transformed from the period of kingdoms to the modern era? 2) What significance does this prophecy hold in influencing cultural and political dialogue within Javanese society?

Method

This study employs historical methods to trace the evolution of Jayabaya's Prophecy within the cultural and political context of Java, spanning from the royal period to the modern era. This scientific method seeks to critically reconstruct historical events and meanings through the systematic analysis of primary and secondary sources (Herlina, 2020). This study employed the historical method, executed in four primary stages (Irwanto & Sair, 2014): Initially, heuristics were performed by aggregating diverse sources, including Jayabaya's prophetic texts (both printed and oral), historical documents (colonial archives, media reports, political speech transcripts), cultural artifacts (murals, protest songs, digital content), and literary and popular cultural works that embody interpretations of the prophecy. Secondly, source verification or criticism is conducted to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of the data through external criticism (validity of sources) and internal criticism (consistency of content). Third, interpretation is employed to comprehend how the meanings of Jayabaya's prophecy have transitioned from a mechanism of royal legitimacy to a symbol of popular resistance. Fourth, historiography is the process of constructing a historical narrative that systematically elucidates the evolution of meaning within the larger context of socio-political change.

Various qualitative analysis techniques were employed integratively to analyse the collected data. Narrative analysis was employed to delineate the story structure and plot patterns within the Ramalan Jayabaya narrative, focusing on the revival of characters and symbols such as "zaman edan" and "Ratu Adil" across diverse historical contexts. Secondly, semiotic analysis was employed to elucidate the symbolic significance of texts and visual and cultural expressions featuring representations of Jayabaya, including street murals, protest slogans, and digital memes, which illustrate the visual aspect of popular politics. Third, cultural discourse analysis is employed to investigate the collective construction and interpretation of prophecy by society about power dynamics and socio-political contexts. This research employs analytical techniques to document the enduring significance of Jayabaya's Prophecy and to elucidate how this cultural heritage serves as a site of contestation and expression of the populace's aspirations for social and political transformation across different eras.

Discussion

Jayabaya is both a monarch and a manifestation of divine authority

In the political history of Java, Prabu Jayabaya holds a distinctive and complex role as an exemplary monarch, renowned for his leadership of the Kingdom of Kediri in the 12th century, as well as for his significant symbolic presence in the prophetic tradition that persists and develops within the collective memory of the Javanese populace. Jayabaya transcends historical confines and enters the domain of mythology, establishing himself not only as a temporal leader but also as a spiritual entity believed to possess a unique connection with the cosmos and divine intent (Arifin, 2024). In Javanese culture, he evolved from a historical figure into an archetypal entity, a sagacious monarch who merged temporal authority with supernatural abilities (Putri & Yuniseffendri, 2025).

In Javanese culture, he evolved from a historical figure into an archetypal entity, a sagacious monarch who merged temporal authority with supernatural abilities (Mahdina Nurrohmah & Wahyu Setyawan, 2023). This quality is perceived not merely as personal charisma, but as an embodiment of the cosmic mandate that connects a king to the temporal cycles (kalabendu, kalasuba, and kalasakti) (Wahyudi, 2015). Prophetic texts, such as the Jangka Jayabaya, disseminated through both print and oral media, bolster Jayabaya's stature in this context. These prophecies encompass forecasts regarding the incursion of foreign nations, the era of chaos (zaman edan), and the emergence of Ratu Adil, all of which bear significant political ramifications for Javanese society, particularly during periods of crisis or power upheaval (Rohman, 2022). The divination transcended mere spiritual or folkloric text, serving as a legitimising mechanism for authority within the royal framework and contemporary political practice. In this context, divination serves as a symbolic conduit, linking the ruler to a cosmic mandate and offering a moral and cultural basis for power claims that transcend traditional political realms.

Jayabaya's legacy endures not only through narrative but is also reinterpreted across diverse historical and cultural media. Within the colonial framework, Jayabaya's prophecy was invoked in both religious and popular resistance movements that sought to interpret colonialism as an element of a preordained prophecy. Dutch colonial archives documented apprehensions regarding the dissemination of prophetic texts considered to incite militaristic zeal

and political defiance (Saehudin, 2022). In contemporary times, interpretations of Jayabaya have resurfaced in political discourse, folk protest music, street art, and digital media, including memes and narrative videos on social platforms. Depictions of Jayabaya in popular literature and historical films have contributed to his status as a symbol of resistance, hope, and a vision for a more equitable order (Muhlisiun, 2024).

Jayabaya transcends his historical role, symbolising continuity among the past, present, and future. He illustrates the interconnection of history, mythology, and politics within the overarching narrative of Javanese civilisation. This figure serves as a cultural nexus where collective memory, the legitimisation of power, and political imagination converge. In this framework, power is legitimised not solely by administrative efficiency or military strength, but also by spiritual narratives embedded in local cultural frameworks. Consequently, it is unsurprising that throughout various epochs, both traditional and contemporary, Jayabaya remains a symbol of authority that provides stability amid societal disorientation.

Elitist Interpretation: Divination as the Sovereignty of Time and Fate

In Indonesia's contemporary political history, particularly during the New Order period, there has been a notable transformation in the interpretation of cultural symbols, such as the Jayabaya Prophecy, which originally resided within the spiritual and cultural traditions of Javanese society. This prophecy, which foretells challenging times (zaman edan) and a saviour figure referred to as Ratu Adil, was progressively integrated into the formal political domain by the ruling elite. This process illustrates the dynamics of cultural interpretation and demonstrates how myths can be utilised for ideological ends, influencing, regulating, and reinforcing power narratives (Nasution, 2022).

Jayabaya's prophecy serves as a collective articulation of Javanese society's interpretation of historical ambiguity, social turmoil, and the aspiration for equitable governance. In the context of the New Order, the interpretation of this prophecy experienced a significant reconstruction. The symbol of "zaman edan" is no longer perceived as an immediate state of turmoil requiring confrontation, but is recounted as a historical issue that has been addressed due to the establishment of the New Order regime. Simultaneously, the concept

of "Ratu Adil" was diminished to a mere symbol, losing its subversive nature and becoming conflated with the portrayal of a hegemonically constructed leader, one perceived as having achieved stability and order (Fawaid et al., 2022).

The government incorporates these mythical elements into the national development narrative through various media, including state speeches, history textbooks, and documentary films. Development is now perceived not merely as an economic or social initiative, but as a sacred endeavor to reestablish the nation's cosmic order. Within this framework, dissent or opposition to the government is viewed not as an integral part of the democratic process but as an action that disrupts harmony and jeopardizes collective safety. This phenomenon suggests that myths are not merely altered but also recontextualized within an authoritarian political framework that prioritizes stability above all other considerations (Rudolf, 2022).

The New Order regime meticulously regulated the public's interpretation of the prophecy. The dissemination of meaning was executed methodically via educational institutions, state-controlled media, and official governmental discourse. Any manifestation of symbolic resistance or alternative interpretation originating from the grassroots was deemed subversive, if not perilous (Sianipar, 2021). Interpretations of Jayabaya's Prophecy that characterize "zaman edan" as a depiction of corrupt power or assert that "Ratu Adil" has yet to arrive due to persistent inequality are deemed violations of the prevailing narrative.

It is evident that the myth, initially open and dialogical, has been appropriated and utilized as a legitimizing instrument by the political elite. Cultural expressions capable of critique, such as wayang, tembang, or folklore, are increasingly subjected to censorship or manipulation to align with state ideology (Imperial, 2020). This framework posits that the elitist interpretation of Jayabaya's Prophecy has diminished the myth's emancipatory aspect to a conservative "narrative of delay," which undermines the prospect of radical transformation.

The regime constructed a narrative asserting that the present authority represents a continuation of "historical destiny." This narrative portrays national leadership, particularly that of President Soeharto, as the embodiment of a historical figure destined to lead the nation to greatness. The employment of spiritual symbolism in contemporary political contexts demonstrates that the New Order regime depended not solely on

coercive power but also on symbolic power to sustain its hegemony. By enveloping authority in historical mystique, any endeavor to contest the status quo may be characterized as rebellion against the very essence of history (Tyson & Nawawi, 2022).

This discourse on power engenders a societal paradox: while individuals are compelled to perceive that change has occurred, the persistent socio-economic disparities intensify the yearning for transformation. However, the appropriation of the "Ratu Adil" symbol has led to a loss of political direction and a decline in the hope for change. Rather than serving as an instrument for social mobilization, Jayabaya's prophecy was restricted to the rhetoric of the status quo, which constrained the populace's vision of a more just and equitable future. Consequently, the interpretation of Jayabaya's Prophecy within the framework of the New Order transcended mere cultural or spiritual considerations, constituting a significant political exercise of authority. Myths that initially served a dual purpose as both comfort and catalysts for collective consciousness transformed into ideological tools that legitimized the status quo. Prophecy has ceased to be a domain for expressing hope and has become a bastion of power that opposes transformation. The evidence suggests that in authoritarian societies, even ancient texts and ancestral myths are subject to manipulation for the ruler's political interests.

Litigants: Prognostication in a Prominent Political Movement

Following the 1998 Reformation, Indonesia's political and cultural landscape experienced substantial transformations, particularly in the interpretation of cultural symbols formerly regulated by the state, including the Jayabaya Prophecy. During the New Order era, prophecy was reduced to a tool for legitimizing authority, encapsulated in an official narrative that emphasized stability and pseudo-harmony; however, following the Reformation, there was a form of "reclamation" of meaning by the populace. In an environment of transparent democracy and increasing civic consciousness, individuals no longer accept the interpretations bestowed by the elite as given. They commenced reinterpreting the symbols as components of a more dynamic and progressive social critique (Chuzaifah, 2022).

The symbols of "zaman edan" and "Ratu Adil" are now perceived not as fatalistic narratives that pacify aspirations for the future, but as metaphors reflecting the current socio-political circumstances, which are marked by widespread inequality. The term "crazy era" is reintroduced to characterize

systemic corruption, economic turmoil, pervasive state violence, and the abandonment of democratic principles. Simultaneously, the concept of "Ratu Adil" has evolved into a collective emblem of the populace's aspiration for leadership that is transparent, equitable, and supportive of the marginalized. This interpretation is no longer exclusive to the elite; it has emerged from the grassroots, originating from the lived experiences of individuals that directly confront various forms of structural injustice (Sasmita et al., 2018).

In this context, Jayabaya's prophecy has been rejuvenated not as a hallowed and immutable spiritual text but as a dynamic and subversive narrative. Individuals, particularly young people, began utilizing this prophecy in various forms of popular culture. Street media, including murals, graffiti, and protest posters, employed the quote from Jayabaya as a means of political communication. On campuses, in community spaces, and across social media, symbols of the prophecy manifest as memes, brief videos, protest songs, and satirical illustrations that critique the government or political-economic elites deemed to have neglected their reform obligations (A et al., 2022). This signifies that cultural heritage is conveyed and reinterpreted through a continuous dialogue between past and present contexts.

This "bottom-up" interpretation is important because it is shaped by the public's daily experiences rather than by the state or official institutions (Mora, 2022). The public's interpretation of Jayabaya's Prophecy is shaped by their engagement with severe socio-political conditions, including displacement, unemployment, educational disparities, and discrimination. These conditions contribute to a novel vision of the future, one that is independent of the state's narrative and grounded in solidarity and collective resistance. Prophecy serves as a language of dissent, possessing mobilizing potency and offering a moral foundation for the populace's struggle.

The reinterpretation of cultural symbols, such as the Jayabaya Prophecy, exemplifies a decolonization of meaning within the tradition of resistance. It signifies a repudiation of the prevailing narrative that has sustained power, substituting it with a more grounded and emancipatory alternative. Individuals utilize the symbol to deconstruct antiquated, restrictive myths and establish new ones that serve as instruments of social transformation. This aligns with the perspective of critical cultural theorists, who view myths as dynamic entities rather than static ones and as rhetorical instruments that can be repurposed to combat

oppression. The Jayabaya Prophecy has transformed into a dynamic sphere of meaning contestation. Elite narratives no longer dominate it but transform into a convergence of history, mythology, and contemporary conflicts. This highlights that culture is not merely a static inheritance from the past but an active political domain that continually engages with power, identity, and social reality (Wicaksono & Muna, 2022).

The evolution of the interpretation of Jayabaya's prophecy in the post-Reformation period illustrates a broader trend: the resurgence of public enthusiasm for reclaiming formerly restricted domains of meaning creation. Cultural symbols serve as a valid and potent instrument of resistance, particularly when democratic institutions do not meet their commitments. The populace no longer anticipates the miraculous emergence of the "Ratu Adil," but instead initiates the practice of justice through social movements, horizontal solidarity, and critical public discourse. Consequently, Jayabaya's prophecy during the Reformation era transcends a mere passive narrative regarding the future, evolving into a dynamic discursive framework that is perpetually advocated for and contested in terms of its significance. It transforms into a narrative of emancipation, not due to its promise of utopia, but because it offers a lexicon to express the anguish and aspirations of individuals confronting an inequitable system. This demonstrates that cultural symbols within society are inherently political and can consistently be appropriated as instruments of resistance.

Alternative Interpretation and Regional Post-Apocalypticism

Modern interpretations of the Jayabaya Prophecy reveal that this mythological text transcends cultural heritage and traditional political legitimacy, evolving into a dynamic discursive space. This prophecy mirrors contemporary societal anxieties regarding multifaceted political, economic, ecological, and moral crises, while also facilitating the creation of alternative narratives that exceed the official state framework. Consequently, Jayabaya serves not merely as a "prophecy of destruction" in a descriptive sense but can also be interpreted analytically as a cultural instrument for redefining the dynamics among the populace, the state, and the future (Rohman, 2022).

Jayabaya's interpretation can be viewed as a form of symbolic resistance against prevailing narratives that prioritize stability and progress. When the community's crisis experience conflicts with official state

narratives, this prophecy is reinterpreted as a tool for cultural and political dissent. Such interpretation corresponds with the counter-narrative theoretical framework (Scott, 2023), wherein marginalized groups employ conventional symbols to assert their agency while repudiating the state's exclusive authority over historical and future interpretations. In this context, Jayabaya's prophecy functions as a means of expressing aspirations, grievances, and hopes overlooked in state discourse.

This phenomenon of reinterpretation illustrates the dialectic between tradition and modernity. The younger generation is not merely reiterating classical interpretations but amalgamating them with modern genres such as cyberpunk, ecofiction, and digital activism. The process of intertextuality generates hybrid narrative forms that illustrate the contextualization of local heritage within global realities (Saktimulya et al., 2021).

Thus, Jayabaya's Prophecy transcends its status as a static text, serving instead as an alternative framework for interpreting destruction not as a conclusion, but as a stage of social regeneration that facilitates the emergence of a new order (Ngesthi et al., 2022).

Consequently, the findings of this study validate that the Jayabaya Prophecy has evolved into a dynamic discursive instrument. It serves to legitimize power while simultaneously symbolizing resistance to social injustice and facilitating the expression of collective identity. This transformation illustrates that local mythology can serve as a battleground for the contestation of meaning, imbued with political, ideological, and cultural dimensions, and can offer alternative visions of a more equitable and dignified future.

Conclusion

This research has shown that Jayabaya's prophecy is not a static cultural relic but a dynamic discursive framework whose meaning is continuously reconstituted in response to shifting socio-political contexts. From its use in legitimating royal and New Order authority to its appropriation as a grassroots instrument of critique during Reformasi, the prophecy embodies the contested relationship between power, culture, and identity in Java. The symbols of zaman edan and Ratu Adil illustrate how myth can oscillate between conservatism and subversion, serving both as a justification for political order and as a lexicon for resistance.

In contemporary discourse, the prophecy is increasingly reinterpreted through digital media, protest art, and popular culture, where it functions as both a critique of systemic inequality and a post-apocalyptic vision of renewal. This

underscores the continuing political utility of myth in societies where formal institutions often fail to address structural crises. This research suggests next research can expand beyond Java to examine parallel prophetic traditions across Indonesia and Southeast Asia, enabling comparative analysis of how myths operate as transhistorical resources of power and resistance. Integrating digital ethnography and visual studies will further illuminate how younger generations reimagine cultural heritage as a vehicle for social critique and collective imagination in an era of global uncertainty.

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