

The Other Science: An Immolation For the Honorable Nyi Roro Kidul

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Image by: Ni Putu Dinanty | Source: Kompas.com

“There's a natural mystic blowing through the air, can't keep them down. If you listen carefully now you will hear such a natural mystic blowing through the air”. - Bob Marley

The lyrics quoted above may represent what I want to share while developing a thesis project - artistic research and production that experimentally explores the discourse that is locally anchored in the context of Yogyakarta regarding the existence of so-called Nyi Roro Kidul who is paradoxically occupying the liminal space somehow. Or at least, those lyrics could also give me an understanding that mystical things in this universe where we live may not be a social construction carried over during colonialism and continues to nowadays, but it may be an event that just happened naturally and we just can't explain it yet. From here, I will try to tell stories and provide a narrative of 'the other science' through a specific dish called *nasi tumpeng*, and how it is also related to certain rituals in the southern coastal areas of Java. For me, it is important to depart from this point before I go further and elaborate more what the project is about.

I will start with the dish called nasi tumpeng. Historically, nasi tumpeng is a symbol of offering to the universe, its cone shape symbolized as a volcano, in Buddhism Varjrayana is defined as the golden mountain which is the center of the world, if I remember correctly. The conical shape of this dish is closely related to the natural conditions in Indonesia where it is filled with volcanoes. Even so, from the past until now the presence of nasi tumpeng has the same meaning, namely the embodiment of gratitude to the universe that has given life. Etymologically in Javanese society, the word '*tumpeng*' is an acronym for the term '*yen metu kudu mumpeng*', which means when you do something you have to be serious. To me, perhaps what it means is that when humans are born on this planet we should live a life that respects nature and doesn't act destructively, also when doing something should be excited, confident, and not easily discouraged. In serving, the cone-shaped rice is laid out on a winnowing tray with a banana leaf. Usually, nasi tumpeng is served surrounded by seven types of side dishes, which number 7 in Javanese is called '*pitu*', it means pitulungan (favor).



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In several places on the southern coast of Java, some people still do rituals that use this nasi tumpeng as a dish, one of them is *Larung Sesaji*, which in some cases attaches great importance to the involvement of ecological aspects in the process. The ecological attitude to the ritual appears as an intention to provide awareness from and for the people who live there. Larung sesaji is one of the many processions of offerings for the sea in the southern region of Java which is routinely held every year during the month of Suro, on Tuesday *Kliwon* or Friday *Kliwon*, and was originally initiated by fishermen in 1817. Within the range of history of the kingdom in Java, this ritual was carried out during the reign of Adipati Cakrawardaya III, carried out routinely in the context of

expressing gratitude to the universe and the ruler of the southern sea, Nyi Roro Kidul. For the people who live there, this liminal figure exists in an imaginary world and reality, a woman highly respected for her power in the seas south of Java. Therefore, the effort of offering is a kind of pray so that life in the sea is always blessed and the ecosystem chain always lives in harmony.

One of the areas on the southern coast of Java that is very closely related to this belief is Yogyakarta. Founded in 1756, Yogyakarta is an area where it is vulnerable to natural disasters and also has rich biodiversity. To this day, the people who live there still doing certain rituals in order to negotiate with nature who is in charge of disasters. In the economic-political context in Indonesia, Yogyakarta is a royal territory in a republican system, and in many cases the royal laws still applied there, for example land matters. In terms of urban planning, this area has an imaginary line that connecting Mt. Merapi, Keraton (king's palace), and the legendary southern sea. Besides that imaginary line, Yogyakarta also has a philosophical axis, namely; Tugu, Keraton, dan Panggung Krapyak, and these are connected in real terms in the form of roads. The philosophical axis symbolizes the balance between humans horizontally and humans and nature vertically.

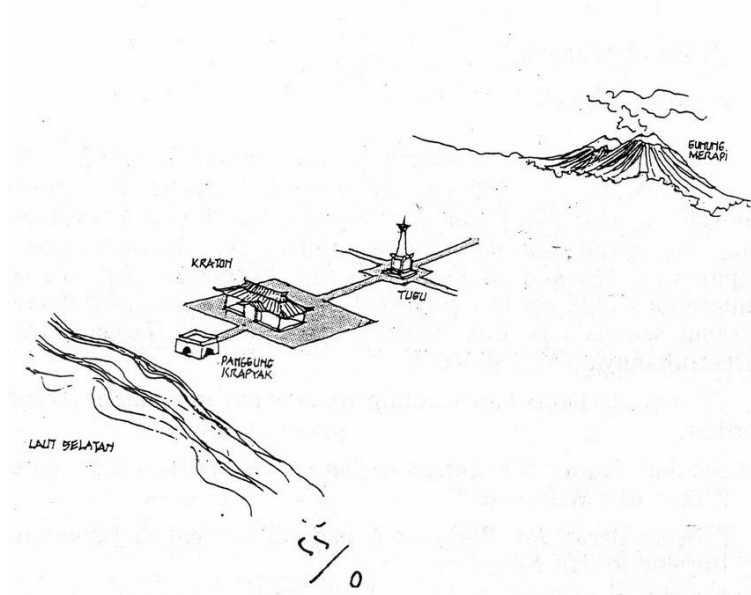


Image source: Personal document

In the Indonesia history that is not written much by historians is how the royal contributed a lot financially to the development of Indonesia at the beginning of

independence, maybe also because of the closeness of the Queen to the co-founders of Indonesia. Just for information, people in Yogyakarta call the king as *Ratu*, which in English means the Queen. As an island, Java has 44 volcanoes and Yogyakarta is right between Mt. Merapi (the most active volcano on the island) and the Indian Ocean. The geographical aspect was then used as a narrative to legitimize the royal, because this entity is argued to be a balancing force between forces at sea and in volcanoes. Ratu is also believed to have an alliance with supernatural beings who live on Mt. Merapi and the Indian Ocean, to ensure the city is safe from hazards such as natural disasters. However, soil fertility in Yogyakarta, however, is not only the result of volcanic material produced by Mt. Merapi during its eruption, but also from an adequate hydrological system. This means a river system that carries fertile soil from the top of the mountain to the plains below. There are four main hydrographic basins in the Central Java region, namely Progo, Serayu, Serang and Solo (Degroot, 2010). The Progo basin is considered the main river in Central Java, flowing from Mt. Sindoro directly into the Indian Ocean, receiving tributaries from Mt. Merbabu and Mt. Merapi. River systems carry extraordinarily rich volcanic ash to the plains around them that can be hundreds of kilometers away from the origin and this contributes to soil fertility in the area.



Image source: nyirorokidul.com

In local history, Nyi Roro Kidul is known to have alliances with the Central Java royal court and the Mataram palace, we can generally trace it back to Senapati, the founder of the Mataram kingdom. The first meeting between Senapati and Nyi Roro Kidul was recorded in the Babad Tanah Jawa (Olthof, 1941). Undoubtedly, the main element in this description is Nyi Roro Kidul's appearance as the 'king ruler'. It was her who told

Senapati that his prayers were heard and that he and his descendants would become rulers of Java. It was through her that Senapati was taught the principles of state administration. In addition, she promised her support and told him how to call for help whenever needed. It was history that brought people to nowadays to make nasi tumpeng to be given to the sea on the southern coast of Java, as an immolation for Nyi Roro Kidul. There are several arguments in favor of Nyi Roro Kidul's primordial status regarding the fact that its relationship with fertility, although limited, can still be proven. Her worship as a harvest goddess among the Javanese is clear evidence of Nyi Roro Kidul's earlier connection with agricultural fertility. This relationship can also be deduced from a Central Java legend, where Tisnawati (the goddess of dry rice) introduces herself as the younger sister of Nyi Roro Kidul (Cock Wheatley, 1931).

For me, if the hypothesis about the partial displacement by Nyi Roro Kidul is correct, the future development of this natural mystic becomes more intelligible. Presumably, because of the weakening of her connection with fertility, the bond with the vast majority of the agricultural people became increasingly meaningless and loose; in the process her identity finally dissolved into a mysterious demonic power, which was connected with the Southern Ocean. At the same time this development provided the conditions for her integration into the abstract schemes of Javanese cosmic dualism, in which Nyi Roro Kidul is associated with the sea, chaos, unlimited space beyond, and the supernatural; and is put in opposition to the earth and mountains, the established order, the microcosmos, and earthly creatures. It is only in her relation to the ruler, as a mediator between these different worlds, that Nyi Roro Kidul discloses something of her former position.

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