

Talismanic Seeing: The Induction of Power in Indonesian Zoomorphic Art

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1 The Talisman of the Earthly Angel

The Earthly Angel (*Malaikat Lindhu*) is a remarkable Sufi talisman, linked in particular with the Shaṭṭāriyya Order, in the form of an Arabic calligram that appears to be unique to the region of Cirebon, a former sultanate and city in West Java. Nowadays the accepted interpretation of the calligram is that it depicts the Hindu elephant-headed Gaṇeśa.¹ Gaṇeśa was introduced around the eighth century to Southeast Asia direct from India, where he originated, and his worship continued until the ascendancy of Islam in the 16th century. From that time onwards Gaṇeśa became widely known as Batara Gaṇa (Lord Gaṇa) in Javanese tradition, and the shadow puppet theatre subsequently re-imaged the god as a courtly character dressed in a floral chintz jacket and turban.² Nevertheless, scholar of the West Javanese puppet theatre Moh Isa Pramana Koesoemadinata has noted that the Shaṭṭāriyya Order's account of the Earthly Angel differs greatly from the narratives associated with Gaṇeśa in Indian Hinduism. Shaṭṭāriyya tradition describes him as a being who 'originally crawled from the earth and was able to achieve heavenly spirituality'.³

The Earthly Angel calligram depicts Gaṇa viewed frontally and displaying four arms, with two hands holding customary Śaivite ritual implements. This depiction maintains elements of Gaṇeśa's original Indic-Javanese iconography but contrasts with the puppet theatre's depiction of Gaṇa in profile and

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- 1 Amir Gozali, 2011, 'Kaligrafi Arab dalam Seni Lukis Kaca Cirebon', *Brikolase* 3(2): 91, typically described a glass painting of the Earthly Angel by R. Sugroto as a 'Ganesha *srabad* taken from the religious mythology of Hinduism'.
 - 2 To avoid confusion in this chapter between the Indian and Javanese identities of the god, which displayed distinctly local characteristics, discussion of Gaṇeśa in the Javanese context uses the term Gaṇa.
 - 3 Moh Isa Pramana Koesoemadinata, personal communication. The Angel's name *Lindhu* means 'earthquake' in Javanese and, by implication, 'movement from the earth', as in the Shaṭṭāriyya account of his origins.

with two arms.⁴ The calligram combines imagery derived from the Hindu religion with Arabic text, thereby testifying to the intriguing history of interaction between Islam and earlier aesthetic traditions in Java. In its apotropaic role, the Earthly Angel underscores perceptions of talismanic power amongst Sufi-orientated communities.

The Earthly Angel calligram is definitively depicted on a *tolak bala* (disaster-repelling) panel, assumed to date from the mid- to late 19th century, from Cirebon in the collection of Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) (Fig. 8.1). The panel's dimensions and the consummate carving with gilding suggest that it was made for display in a palace context.⁵

The complex iconography includes several motifs that date earlier than the ascendancy of Islam in Java. Nevertheless, these references to the visual semiotics of a distant past are presented in a medium that only became fashionable in historically recent times. The panel's gold leaf and red cinnabar pigment testifies to the influence of the 19th-century tastes of immigrant Chinese communities, some of whom converted to Islam, on the art of north-coast Java.⁶ The use of gold resonates with perceptions in the wider Islamic world, where the precious metal was attributed with talismanic power due to its rarity, value, and symbolic connotations.⁷

Until today, Shattāriyya interpretations of the spiritual significance of the Earthly Angel calligram have largely been considered restricted knowledge.⁸ Nevertheless, Indonesian academics, artists, and the general public alike regard the reading of meaning in symbols, such as those appearing on the ACM panel, as an important mechanism for appreciating the country's aesthetic heritage. There are complex reasons for this perception, but its roots can be traced to the consolidation of Javanese cultural identity around the royal courts during the Dutch colonial period in the 19th and early 20th century. It was this

4 Kanjeng Madi Kertonegoro, 2009, *The Javanese and Balinese Wayang Figures of Gods and Goddesses* (Ubud: Daya Putih Foundation), 81, illustrates the puppet in courtly form.

5 A remarkably similar *tolak bala* panel, featuring the coat-of-arms of the Kacirebonan Sultanate, hangs on the main wall in the principal reception pavilion of the Kacirebonan Palace and faces the *kraton* entrance.

6 The popularity of this style of gilding derived from decorative trends in the middle to late Qing dynasty (1644–1912).

7 Christiane Gruber, 2016, 'From Prayer to Protection: Amulets and Talismans in the Islamic World', in Francesca Leoni *et al.* (eds.), *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum), 35.

8 See Tommy Christomy, 2008, *Signs of the Wali: Narratives at the Sacred Sites in Pamijahan, West Java* (Canberra: ANU E-Press), 126, for a further discussion of secrecy surrounding contemporary Sufi teachings in West Java.



FIGURE 8.1 Talismanic panel (*tolak bala*) depicting the Earthly Angel calligram, 1850–1900, Cirebon, West Java, wood with gold leaf and pigment, 71.9 × 45.5 cm; Asian Civilisations Museum (2000.5571)
PHOTOGRAPH: ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

court environment that subsequently engendered values of ‘educated refinement as a primary aesthetic’.⁹ Among cultural practitioners today, the ability to interpret the nuanced symbolic languages of the Javanese arts is understood as being testimony to an individual’s insightful connoisseurship and usually draws upon their religious or moral qualities.

Such a style of interpretation of Javanese art is Bambang Irianto’s *Makna Simbolik Batik Keraton Cirebon* (Symbolic Purposes of Cirebon Palace Batik), first composed in 2011, which references diverse media.¹⁰ *Makna Simbolik* thus provides a relevant portal for appreciating the ACM calligram while avoiding too great an emphasis on symbolic readings that may sometimes appear contrived.¹¹ The connection between some elements of the *tolak bala* panel and Cirebon batik motifs is apposite, as the likely place of its creation was the village of Trusmi, famous for refined batik patterns and now part of Cirebon city.¹² Both the production of wood *tolak bala* and batik were customarily male occupations in Trusmi, and it is very possible that the unknown carver of the ACM panel was also accomplished in the graphic art of wax-resist dyed textiles.

The Earthly Angel on the ACM panel holds in his two upper hands a Middle Eastern sabre and an implement that local informants describe as a mirror or bludgeon, although it may represent a *jogan* fan, considered one of the attributes of royalty in Southeast Asian sultanate courts.¹³ Both accoutrements display Islam’s Declaration of Faith. The two lower hands hold a Śaivite scalpel and skull-cup. The Earthly Angel stands on a mountain peak that Irianto describes as a multivalent allusion both to the Seven Levels of Being (*Martabat*

9 Sarah Weiss, 2006, *Listening to an Earlier Java: Aesthetics, Gender and the Music of the Wayang in Central Java* (Leiden: KITLV Press), 12.

10 The writer thanks Benny Gratha, Textile Museum of Jakarta, for kindly providing access to the museum’s photocopy of the 2011 manuscript, which was subsequently published as H.R. Bambang Irianto and Sally Giovanni, 2015, *Makna Simbolik Batik Keraton Cirebon* (Yogyakarta: Deepublish).

11 It is pertinent to remember, while appreciating Irianto’s study, that Justine Boow observed that Central Javanese batik makers do not refer to *arti* (meaning) but *sifat*, an Arabic loan word in Indonesian for ‘characteristic’, ‘nature’, or ‘quality’ in their reading of motifs. See Justine Boow, 1988, *Symbol and Status in Javanese Batik* (Perth: Asian Studies Centre, University of Western Australia), 91.

12 Hasan Muarif Ambary, 1998, *Menemukan Peradaban: Arkeologi dan Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional), 173. Calligram wood panels were also once carved in Yogyakarta, Surakarta, and Palembang, but the creation of *tolak bala* in this form is almost extinct today.

13 My appreciation to Tan Zi Hao for conveying the interpretations of the mirror by Made Casta and bludgeon (*gada*) by Erik North, via the late P.H. Yusuf Dendrata, personal communication.

Tujuh) of Shattāriyya doctrine and to human desires.¹⁴ The peak's boulder, on which the figure stands, may be understood to represent the highest state of peace, attained through piety and obedience to God (*mutmainah*).¹⁵

The panel shows fragrant pandanus palms (*pandanus amaryllifolius*) growing on ancillary mountain peaks, flanking the Earthly Angel and forming the Cirebon motif known as 'stone and pandanus' (*sela pandan*).¹⁶ The pandanus appears on a Gaṇa *tolak bala* panel from the early 18th century, discussed further below, as well as on undated gravestones at the mausoleum of the revered Muslim saint of West Java Sunan Gunung Jati. 'Stone and pandanus' creates a visual metaphor for power through combining notions of invincibility (rocks) with the sweet scent of good deeds that testify to firm faith (fragrant pandanus). The mountains on the ACM panel are formed with the popular Cirebon art motif known as *wadasan* or 'like broken coral rocks' (*wadas*). *Wadasan* is none other than a vertical version of the other well-known Cirebon art motif, *megamendung*, meaning 'overcast sky' or clouds.

On the ACM panel there is a small gateway at the foot of the central mountain, crowned with a stylised one-eyed *kala* monster face. The cyclops-like visage is an apotropaic device that similarly appears as a vegetal simulacrum on Hindu-Buddhist era temples and on the 16th-century mausoleums of Javanese Muslim saints (*wali*). Caves, reminiscent of the dwelling places of religious hermits, are depicted on the slopes of the mountains. They also feature as a recurring element in landscape depictions in terracotta sculpture from the late Hindu-Buddhist era and subsequently in north-coast *pasisir* art in the following centuries, such as on the wood façade of the mausoleum of the Sufi saint Sunan Drajat at Lamongan. The use of actual caves, often man-made, as locations for spiritual practices dates back to the earlier Hindu-Buddhist period and is demonstrated in the numerous surviving examples found around Java, as well as in neighbouring Bali. On Drajat's mausoleum, the cave motif appears as a mountain with wings, apparently alluding to the celestial *garuda* bird. On the ACM *tolak bala* the wings have transformed into the shape of the actual cave entrances.

14 Irianto, 2011, 142, interprets a batik cloth depicting a small pavilion on top of a similar *wadasan* mountain as symbolising *insān kāmil* or the 'perfect man'. A close synergy exists between the mountains depicted on the cloth and on the carved panel. Christomy, 2008, extensively discusses *Martabat Tujuh* in the West Javanese context.

15 Irianto, 2011, 142, lists the other *nafsu* as (1) greed which is the lowest level in the development of a human (*amarah*), (2) learning to listen to the voice of his conscience and so seeking to resist his carnal desires (*lawamah*), and (3) reaching the purity of perfect harmony (*sufiah*).

16 Achmad Opan Safari, personal communication.



FIGURE 8.2 Head cloth (*iket kepala*), with feline creatures as vegetal simulacra and calligraphy, 1875–1925, Cirebon, West Java, cotton, indigo, hand-drawn batik, 86.0 × 84.0 cm; Jakarta Textile Museum, Jakarta (025.1)
PHOTOGRAPH: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The heads of *garuda* birds, in the form of cloud simulacra, flank either side of the Earthly Angel figure. In the centre of the upper part of the panel, the ‘overcast sky’ motif, combining horizontal and vertical configurations, suggests the complementary union of *lahir batin*. Here a striking visual focus is an irregular circular cavity physically recessed into the panel, bringing to mind a mosque’s *miḥrāb*. The same circular device features at the centre of a man’s head cloth from the late 19th–early 20th century (Fig. 8.2), from Cirebon, encircled by the Declaration of Faith and vegetal simulacra representing feline creatures. Present-day Cirebon observers call this creature the *macan Ali*—literally

meaning ‘tiger of ‘Alī’, but commonly translated into English as the ‘Lion of ‘Alī’, in accordance with the nomenclature used in the wider Muslim world.¹⁷

The batik’s centre circle suggests the *modang* motif, a plain geometric field seen at the centre of Javanese *dodot* and *kemben* wrap garments and said to represent a mirror or pool of water (*blumbangan*).¹⁸ The Indonesian textile scholar Judi Achjadi interprets the head cloth’s circle as ‘a reference to the cosmos, and the concentration of protective power in that spot’.¹⁹ The cavity appearing on the ACM panel is likewise intended to avert disaster, complementing and enhancing the *tolak bala* power of the Earthly Angel calligram.

2 Seeing and Meaning in the Earthly Angel Calligram

While the term *tolak bala* today in Indonesia commonly refers to Islamic supplicatory prayers requesting divine protection, or to activities such as ritual feasts (*selametan*), the use of the term for the ACM panel highlights that its purpose is to supernaturally avert calamities and diseases through the power of a pictorial device combining image and text. For this intention, such talismanic images were customarily hung in entry spaces, often the forecourt pavilion, in old Javanese houses.²⁰ They also feature in the medium of glass paintings, which have become popular in Cirebon over the last 100 years. Javanese students of mystical practices, known as *kebatinan*, and shaman-healers (*dukun*) particularly favour hanging such paintings in their homes.²¹ Nevertheless, as Matthew Cohen observes in his essay on the foundations of painting traditions in modern Java, paintings on glass in domestic settings were not necessarily always perceived to have magical power.²²

17 Farouk Yahya, 2020, ‘Calligrams of the Lion of ‘Alī in Southeast Asia’, in Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Farouk Yahya, *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice* (Leiden and Boston: Brill), 473.

18 Robert Wessing, 1986, ‘Wearing the Cosmos: Symbolism in Batik Design’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2(3): 64–66.

19 Judi Achjadi, 1998, *The Jakarta Textile Museum* (Jakarta: Jakarta Textile Museum), 76. The decoration of batik head cloths often conveyed talismanic meaning due to the Javanese belief in the sacredness of the head.

20 Gozali, 2011, 82, states that Earthly Angel paintings were generally hung in pairs.

21 Matthew Isaac Cohen, 2005, ‘Traditional and Popular Painting in Modern Java’, *Archipel* 69(32): 34.

22 Cohen, 2005, 34. Nevertheless, Anissa Rahadiningtyas, personal communication, has perceptively observed that the transparency of glass, with its ability to reflect and refract light, makes the medium an apposite symbol for the mystical realm.

The Earthly Angel is one among a diverse group of subjects depicted in Cirebon calligrams that use Arabic or Javanese *pegon* script, in various different media. Often the text is reconfigured and stylised to such an extent that only the calligrapher can decipher it.²³ Alternatively, it may be interpreted in the broadest terms as alluding to Quranic phrases, such as the *basmala* and the Declaration of Faith. The Arabic calligraphy is often written without the diacritic marks, as their absence is believed to enhance the potency of the text.²⁴ The most popular calligram, both in Java and elsewhere in the Islamic world, is the leonine creature known in Indonesia as the *macan Ali*. The Malaysian scholar Farouk Yahya has comprehensively examined the Middle Eastern origins of this calligram and its various iterations in Southeast Asia.²⁵ There are also Javanese calligrams featuring characters from the Indian-Indonesian *Mahabharata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* epics. Such calligrams reflect Java's Hindu-Buddhist past and are unique in the Islamic world. The subjects particularly favoured in glass painting include Batara Guru (Śiva) and Semar, the clown wizard. Their iconographies specifically reference the shadow puppet theatre, with the features drawn in profile and displaying the accoutrements associated with each character.

The contrasting appearance of the Earthly Angel with those images referencing puppet characters suggests that it has a singular lineage in the history of Cirebon calligrams. Contemporary Indonesian commentators often seek to eschew any association of the calligrams with religious belief by explaining them merely as wall decorations, the popularity of which is due to their uniquely Cirebon art style (*khas Cirebon*).²⁶ Indonesia's largest conservative Muslim organisation, Muhammadiyah, generally forbids the use of talismanic devices, including *tolak bala*.²⁷ At a time now when many ultra-conservative

23 The contemporary glass painter Safari has a repertoire of 50 *srabad* motifs, including six versions of the Earthly Angel. *Pegon* script is the Javanese language written with Arabic characters.

24 For use of talismanic charms (*jampi*) lacking diacritics on the inside of Cirebon masks, see Laurie Margot Ross, 2016, *The Encoded Cirebon Mask: Materiality, Flow and Meaning along Java's Islamic Northwest Coast* (Leiden: Brill), 210. This type of text is referred to as *arab gundul* ('bald' Arabic) and is considered an older and more potent script.

25 Yahya, 2020, 454–526.

26 Paramita Abdurachman (ed.), 1982, *Cerbon* (Jakarta: Yayasan Mitra Budaya Indonesia & Penerbit Sinar Harapan), 109, describing Cirebon's glass painting calligrams, appears impelled to justify their existence by noting that mystical 'scraps of paper bearing sentences in Arabic letters are often seen above the doors of houses ... in almost every other city in Indonesia'.

27 The other major Indonesian Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, accepts the use of talismans.

and literalist Muslims in Indonesia regard Sufi practices with suspicion, there is a common assumption among these groups that mysticism is ‘a refuge for pre-Islamic beliefs’.²⁸

The Earthly Angel is known as a *srabad*, a term familiar today only among the older generation of court elites and adepts of mysticism. Tan Zi Hao, in his extensive research into Cirebon zoomorphic imagery, documents the multiple local explanations for the word’s origin.²⁹ The interpretations (*kereta basa*) reflect a Javanese predilection for word play, puns, and acronyms, where meanings may conceal as much as they reveal. Among the ciphers, Tan cites an explanation that *srabad* is the ‘compound between the Arabic *sirr* (secrecy) and Javanese *babad* (chronicle, tale)’, implying ‘the secret relationship between the self and God’.³⁰

Another explanation, popular since the 1970s, describes the word *srabad* as an acronym for *mingser abad*, meaning ‘moving away from the era’.³¹ It references the time of transition from the Hindu-Buddhist to the Islamic period during the 16th century. The West Javanese artist Kuswa Budiono identifies the definition of *srabad* as specifically referring to the subject of hybrid animals, the appearances of which are inspired by the famous 16th-century chariots, the *singhabarwang* in the Kasepuhan Palace and the *paksinagaliman* in the Kanoman Palace, Cirebon.³² Both royal vehicles take the form of chimera-like monsters variously merging the features of an elephant, *garuda* bird, *naga* serpent, *barong* lion, and elephant. The notion of hybridity—whether in the transition between religious epochs or in creatures with supernaturally composite appearances—likewise occurs in the merging of image and text in the Earthly Angel calligram.

3 Induction of Power in the Calligram

Talismans can exist in many different forms in Islam.³³ Whether the object’s intention is to be seen, or alternatively kissed, rubbed, or even produced as

28 Ross, 2016, 3.

29 Tan Zi Hao, 2019, ‘History, Memory and Islam through the Animal: The Zoomorphic Imagery in Cirebon’. Unpublished PhD thesis, National University of Singapore, 160–163.

30 Tan, 2019, 161.

31 Safari, personal communication.

32 Kuswa Budiono, 2002, ‘Makna Lukisan Kaca Cirebon’, *Wacana Seni Rupa: Jurnal Seni Rupa & Desain* 2(5): 8.

33 The English word ‘talisman’ is derived from the mediaeval Arabic *tilsam*, the meaning of which also included ‘amulet’ and ‘incantation’. See www.etymonline.com/word/talisman.

philtres to be consumed, visibility is always an important aspect of a talisman's efficacy, which is not the case for miniature amulets or for the whispered charm.³⁴ However, it is perceived that the talisman's power is inducted into the calligram through the concealment of its essence, that is, the meaning of the religious text. Annemarie Schimmel, scholar of Sufism, observed that the intention of sacred scripture, from early times, has been 'concealed under the cover of metaphors lest the power of the real be broken'.³⁵ Acknowledgement of the sacred power is reflected in the process of the production of Cirebon calligrams. Just as when a calligrapher copies the holy Quran, when creating the *tolak bala* image the artist may perform ritual fasts, prayers, and recitations of the names of Allah.³⁶

The occult significance of letters from the Arabic alphabet in the Javanese and Malay world is testified to in the *Daqā'iq al-ḥurūf* (Hidden Implications of Letters/Sounds), composed by the Acehese scholar and Shaṭṭāriyya adept from the 17th century 'Abd al-Ra'ūf. It is a commentary on two lines of verse by the great Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240):

We were lofty letters/sounds unuttered
held latent in the highest peaks of the hills.³⁷

Daqā'iq al-ḥurūf presents an orthodox interpretation of Ibn 'Arabī's text, yet al-Ra'ūf was certainly also familiar with the writings of the Indian Shaikh Muhammad Ghawth Gwalior (d. 1563).³⁸ Among them is *Jawāhir-i Khamsa*

34 Gruber observes that the terms 'amulet' and 'talisman' are often used interchangeably, but that amulets are typically small objects: see Gruber, 2016, 33. Ross notes the Cirebon practice of whispering spells to ensure their efficacy. This represents another form of 'concealment': see Ross, 2016, 160.

35 Annemarie Schimmel, 1994, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 116. The prophylactic power of the Quran's text as an object is demonstrated by the use of miniature copies worn or carried as amulets.

36 The contemporary glass painter Safari says that he fasts for three days after receiving a commission to make a calligram. The creation of particular calligrams requires specific spiritual practices, such as reciting repetitive prayers seeking permission from God and reciting His divine names 10,000 times when painting a calligram of the word Allāh: personal communication.

37 A.H. Johns, 2009, 'Reflections on the Mysticism of Shams al-Din al-Samatra'i (1550?–1630)', in Jan van der Putten and Mary Kilcline Cody (eds.), *Lost Times and Untold Tales from the Malay World* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press), 159.

38 Azyumardi Azra, 2004, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulamā in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: Allen & Unwin and University of Hawai'i Press), 83.

(Five Gems), which Gwalior composed in 1549. This work contains elements similar to the yogic practices taught by Hindu gurus with whom Gwalior had close contact. It also includes a discussion of the esoteric power of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and the spirits who preside over them. These concepts parallel Hindu teachings regarding sacred letters, known as seed-syllables (*bijaksara*), found in India and also early Java.³⁹ Gwalior adopted such techniques of Hindu yoga in formulating parts of the Shaṭṭāriyya *zikr* practice. Among the eminent students of ‘Abd Ra’ūf, after his return to Aceh in 1661, was ‘Abdul Muḥyī, who later would become the leading figure in the subsequent transmission of Shaṭṭāriyya teachings to West Java. Muḥyī may have had a close connection to the Cirebon court, as later oral traditions record his marriage to a Cirebon princess.⁴⁰

Belief in the occult was an important factor in the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. In the specific context of Javanese thought, power was seen as an intangible energy that pervades the cosmos so that there is ‘no sharp division between organic and inorganic matter, for everything is sustained by the same invisible power.’⁴¹ The concept of the fundamental unity that exists between a talismanic object and its power is expressed through the paradigm of *lahir batin*, that is, the unity of the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner.’⁴² This invokes *tawḥīd* as the core of both exoteric and esoteric knowledge in Islam. The great Indonesian religious teacher of the 18th century ‘Abd al-Ṣamad al-Palimbānī describes the ‘knowledge of hidden things (*bāṭin*)’ as the ‘*taṣawwuf* of knowledge.’⁴³ In

39 Oman Fathurahman, 2008, *Tarekat Syattariyah di Minangkabau: Teks dan Konteks* (Jakarta: Prenada Media Group, École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM), UIN Jakarta, KITLV), 30.

40 Ismail Fajrie Alatas, 2019, ‘A Hadrami Sufi Tradition in the Indonesian Archipelago: The Itineraries of Ibn Yahya (1794–1849) and the Tariqa ‘Alwiyya’, in R. Michael Feener and Anne Blackburn (eds.), *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia: Comparative Perspectives* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press), 131.

41 Benedict Anderson, 1972, ‘The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture’, in Claire Holt (ed.), *Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Jakarta & Kuala Lumpur: Equinox Publishing), 7. Anderson is here referring to Central Javanese culture, and his writings generally tend to sideline the significance of Islam, but his observation is relevant to the Cirebon world view.

42 Ngurah Nala, 2009, *Aksara Bali dalam Usada* (Surabaya: Penerbit Paramita), 167. Speaking of Balinese Hinduism, Nala describes talismanic letters gaining their power through the unseen realm (*niskala*) manifesting in the visible object (*sekala*).

43 Hiroko Kushimoto, 2012, ‘Preliminary Mapping of the *Tasawwuf* texts in the Malay World: *Hidaya al-Salikan* and Some Related Texts’, in Kawashima Midori (ed.), *Comparative Study of Southeast Asian Kitabs (2): Papers on Tasawwuf and Fatwa Texts Presented at the Sophia University Workshop on May 20, 2012* (Tokyo: Institute of Asian Cultures, Sophia University), 5. Abd al-Samad lists this as the third of three types of knowledge obligatory

the realm of Javanese arts, *Babad Cirebon* (Cirebon Chronicle), dated around 1820, identifies the shadow puppet performance, *barongan*, mask, and *ronggeng* dances as metaphors for the four stages of mystical practice, where each of these stages ‘begins with concealment and concludes with revelation’.⁴⁴ T.E. Behrend, scholar of Javanese literature, interprets the act of decoding the Arabic texts hidden within the calligram’s figural image as ‘a metaphor for the mystic quest of finding Allah amid the display and splendour of creation’.⁴⁵

The reconfiguration of a visual image into the stylised shape of calligraphy, often barely legible, elicits the Sufi idea that the merging of the manifest with the hidden conveys special significance. Behrend’s observation alludes to the ‘process of mystical unveiling (*kashf*) that was particularly upheld in Shattāriyya circles’.⁴⁶ Annemarie Schimmel might have been speaking of the experience of the observer looking at Javanese *tolak bala* when she wrote: ‘when the Word is indeed of Divine Origin, humankind can never completely discover all the possible meanings which it contains’.⁴⁷

4 The Earthly Angel and Shattāriyya Teachings

The Middle Eastern origins of Shattāriyya are obscure, but the order was likely introduced by ‘Abd Allāh Shaṭṭārī (d. 1485) to India, where it rose to prominence in the 17th century and spread to Southeast Asia at this time.⁴⁸ The teachings of Shattāriyya are closely based on those of Ibn ‘Arabī, with its attention to

for all Muslims. The first is knowledge of *tawhīd* (*‘ilm uṣūl al-ddīn*) and the second is knowledge of the law (*‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*, or *syarak*).

44 Ross, 2016, 10–11; D.A. Rinkes, 1996, *Nine Saints of Java* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute), 129–133.

45 Timothy E. Behrend, 1996, ‘Textual Gateways: The Javanese Manuscript Tradition’, in Ann Kumar and John H. McGlynn (eds.), *Illuminations: The Writing Traditions of Indonesia* (Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation), 128. The concept of *lahir* (Arabic: *zahir*) *batin* pervades art forms throughout the Islamic world of Southeast Asia. Boow discusses its significance in Central Javanese batik: see Boow, 1988. Ross likewise discusses its significance in Cirebon mask traditions: see Ross, 2016. Virginia Hooker advises in a personal communication that Malay *pantun* poems are structured such that the first couplet is the ‘skin’ (*kulit*) and the second couplet is the ‘content’ (*isi*).

46 Gülru Necipoğlu, 2015, ‘The Scrutinising Gaze in the Aesthetics of Islamic Visual Cultures: Sight, Insight and Desire’, *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World* 32(1): 43.

47 Schimmel observes that ‘a revelation that is fully understood would not be a true revelation of the unfathomable Divine being’: see Schimmel, 1994, 119.

48 Carl W. Ernst, 2005, ‘Situating Sufism and Yoga’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Third series* 15(1): 30.

the doctrine of *lahir batin*.⁴⁹ Wherever Shaṭṭāriyya, with the mystical doctrine of the Seven Levels of Being, spread throughout the Muslim world, it became ‘domesticated’ alongside existing intellectual and spiritual traditions.⁵⁰ The order’s success lay in its ability to engage local court cultures. In Surakarta and Yogyakarta, Central Java, this included both aristocratic men and women practitioners during the 18th and early 19th centuries, while all four palaces in Cirebon became centres of *taṣawwuf* learning.⁵¹ Indeed, today the practice of mysticism continues to be so pervasive in that city and surrounding region that local adepts sometimes just speak of ‘Cirebon wisdom’ (*ilmu kacirebonan*).⁵²

As previously observed, Shaṭṭāriyya, amongst all the Sufi orders, expressed the most interest in the Indian Hindu yogic tradition. It incorporated elements of the tradition into its practices through oral teachings and commentaries such as *Bahral Hayat* (The Pool of Nectar), compiled by Gwalior.⁵³ *Risāla-i Shaṭṭāriyya* (The Shaṭṭāriyya Treatise), composed by Bahā’ al-Dīn Shṭṭārī (d. 1515), includes a chapter specifically addressing the ‘methods of the yogis’.⁵⁴ Shaṭṭāriyya might have found a sympathetic reception in Javanese courts because of the Javanese people’s own rich heritage of pre-Islamic Indic mysticism. The Indian text *Sāradā Tilaka Tantra* (*Tilak* of Saraswati Tantra), attributed to the 9th-century sage Lakṣmana Desikendra, describes Gaṇeśa manifesting as a seed-syllable letter and seated on a lotus throne in the form of the Sanskrit alphabet.⁵⁵ In the Old Javanese text *Gaṇapati Tattwa* (Truth of Gaṇapati), Śiva expounds a similar esoteric doctrine to his son Gaṇa. Śiva, contrasting his teaching with the practices of ordinary people who worship the

49 Christomy, 2008, 147.

50 For an example of Shaṭṭāriyya’s engagement with the Moghul rulers of India, who granted recognition to Shaṭṭāriyya as one of the official Sufi orders of the empire, see Tommy Christomy, 2001, ‘Shattariyyah Tradition in West Java: The Case of Pamijahan’, in *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 8(2): 64–65.

51 For a discussion of Shaṭṭāriyya practice at the Kasultanan Yogyakarta and Kasunanan Surakarta, see M.C. Ricklefs, 2018, *Soul Catcher: Java’s Fiery Prince Mangkunagara 1* (1726–95) (Singapore: ASAA Southeast Asia Publications Series), 20–21, 297–298. The four Cirebon palaces (*kraton*) are Kasepuhan (1447), Kanoman (1677), Kaprabonan (1696), and Kacirebonan (1807).

52 Christomy, 2008, 93. For the *silsilah* of the Shaṭṭāriyya teachers associated with Cirebon’s courts and Islamic schools (*pesantren*), see Mahrus El-Mawa, n.d., ‘Melting Pot’ Islam Nusantara Melalui Tarekat: Studi Kasus Silsilah Tarekat Syattariyyah di Cirebon. Available at: www.academia.edu/3129633/Melting_Pot_Islam_Nusantara_melalui_Tarekat_Studi_Kasus_Silsilah_Tarekat_Syattariyyah_di_Cirebon.

53 Ernst, 2005, 29. Gwalior translated the rendition in Persian from an Arabic translation of the lost Sanskrit work *Amritakunda*.

54 Ernst, 2005, 30.

55 Arthur Avalon (ed.), 1982, *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra* (New Delhi: Motilal Banasidass), 33.

deity 'in a piece of stone', provides complex instructions on how to envisage deities as letters within the body.⁵⁶ *Serat Manik Maya* (Tales of Manik Maya), compiled in the 16th century with elements drawn from earlier pre-Islamic sources, links the individual letters of the Javanese alphabet to specific Hindu deities, such as Śiva and Viṣṇu.⁵⁷

Laurie Margot Ross proposes that the significant presence of Shaṭṭāriyya in Cirebon during the 19th century, despite the decline of the order in the heartland of Islam, may have been a result of its 'Indic orientation, which was deeply resonant in Java'.⁵⁸ Despite the orthodox Islamic religious teachings contained in some early Indonesian texts, and the writings of scholars like 'Abd al-Ṣamad Palimbānī, the idea that Islam's and Java's Hindu heritage were contradictory was 'unlikely to have occurred with much urgency to the Javanese court elite' of that period.⁵⁹ Significantly, Theodore Pigeaud, in his commentary on Mpu Prapañca's *Deśawarṇana* (Descriptions of the Regions) (1365), notes the convention in Islamic Java of referring to the religion of the past simply as *agama buda*. Although provisionally translatable as 'Buddhist religion', George Quinn calls this a 'catch-all' term encompassing Śaivite Hinduism as well as a kaleidoscope of indigenous ancestral beliefs.⁶⁰ Pigeaud suggests that this reflects the

56 Sudarshana Devi Singhal, 1958, *Ganapati-Tattwa: An Old Javanese Philosophic Text* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture), 3–4. Contemporary Balinese observers state that the Indonesian word *rerajahan*, meaning talismanic diagrams with letters, derives from the sacred letters drawn on the physical body of the king (*raja*). My thanks are expressed to I. Ketut Bawa and I. Made Maduarta for this information, kindly conveyed through Jean Howe, personal communication.

57 Stuart Robson, 2011, 'Javanese Script as Cultural Artefact: Historical Background', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 45(1 & 2): 13. See also Stephen C. Headley, 2004, *Durga's Mosque: Cosmology, Conversion and Community in Central Java* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) for a discussion of the *Serat*. He notes that the phrase *manik maya* may be translated as 'made of jewels', but it is also an appellation for Batara Guru, among many other meanings.

58 Laurie Margot Ross, 2016, *The Encoded Cirebon Mask: Materiality, Flow and Meaning along Java's Islamic Northwest Coast* (Leiden: Brill), 134. See also Nancy K. Florida, 2019 'Shaṭṭāriyya Sufi Scents: The Literary World of the Surakarta Palace in Nineteenth-Century Java', in Feener and Blackburn (eds.), 2019. Florida documents the vibrancy of Shaṭṭāriyya-inspired mystical poetry in Central Java court circles, although she does not imply that its popularity was directly connected to Java's past Indic heritage.

59 M.C. Ricklefs, 1974, *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749–1792: A History of the Division of Java* (London: Oxford University Press), 82; see also M.C. Ricklefs, 2006, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk: East Bridge) for a discussion of orthodoxy and syncretism in early Javanese Islam.

60 George Quinn, 2019, *Bandit Saints of Java* (Burrough on the Hill, Leicestershire: Monsoon Books), 82.

degree to which deities, such as Gaṇa, continued to be remembered in popular consciousness as ‘belonging to the Java of all times’.⁶¹ By contrast, Islam quickly expunged almost all evidence of the highly ritualistic practices of the Javanese variant of Vajrayana Buddhism.

The Shaṭṭāriyya name Earthly Angel suggests the imprint of Gaṇa’s earlier role in Hindu yoga practices, where the elephant-headed god corresponds with the earth element.⁶² Indian tantric texts assign Gaṇeśa to the lowest chakra of the body’s six centres of psychic energy and equate him with the kundalini energy, the awakening of which leads to spiritual perfection.⁶³ The Shaṭṭāriyya narrative of the Earthly Angel arising from earth to achieve ‘heavenly spirituality’ remarkably resembles this mystical process. The Earthly Angel’s subsequent identification as a tutelary spirit (*danyang*) reflects a wider historical pattern in Java, whereby Hindu deities transformed into ancestral beings of semi-divine status. The popular belief in an extraordinary complex spirit world, incorporating earlier deities like Dewi Sri (Lakshmi), remained commonplace in Java until the 20th century. This is reflected in some of the prayers of Shaṭṭāriyya groups in West Java today, which are a mixture of Islamic prayers and incantations from the ‘teaching of the ancestors (*kabuyutan*)’.⁶⁴

5 Batara Gaṇa in the Pre-Islamic Era

The Earthly Angel’s transition from an Indic elephant-headed god into a Sufi calligram may be contextualised through the changing Javanese identity of Gaṇa over the span of 1000 years prior to the ascendancy of Islam. Museum collections and art history publications conventionally reference Indian iconographic

61 T.G.Th. Pigeaud, 1962, *Java in the 14th Century: A Study in Cultural History: IV Commentaries and Recapitulation* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 255. Pigeaud links this expunging to the complexities of Majapahit *sraddha* mortuary rites, with their strong Buddhist elements, which conflicted with Islamic burial prescriptions.

62 S.K. Ramachandra Rao, 1992, *Gaṇeśa—Kosha: Being an Encyclopaedia of Gaṇeśa, Also Containing Original Sanskrit Texts Relating to Gaṇeśa* (Bangalore: Kalpatharu Research Academy), 92. Rao notes that mediaeval Indian Tantric texts prescribed that Gaṇeśa icons were to be made in clay, after which they were to be ritually disposed of. The use of this impermanent medium is a reminder that Gaṇa was depicted in a variety of materials, of which only stone sculpture survives today in Java.

63 Rao, 1992, 90–91. Javanese stone reliefs and textual references document the existence of yoga practices in the Hindu-Buddhist period. Indian Tantric texts equate the Gaṇeśa’s coiled trunk with the coiled kundalini. The coil symbol also occurs in inscriptions connected to the elephant-headed god in Java.

64 Christomy, 2008, 113.

tradition when describing the Javanese images as Gaṇeśa, ‘god of knowledge and remover of obstacles’.⁶⁵ The Indonesian art historian Professor Edi Sedyawati, however, has documented the numerous other names by which the deity was known in the pre-Islamic era when both Hindus and Buddhists revered Gaṇa.⁶⁶ The other names suggest the varying roles, extending beyond a single generic identity, which reflect the complex development of religious practices in Java.⁶⁷ They include Gaṇapati, Gajendrawadana, and Durmaka, or ‘disfigured face’, in reference to his elephantine features.⁶⁸

There is both sculptural and literary evidence that Gaṇa was among the most popularly worshipped gods in Java and that his multiple identities as protector/tutelary guardian/tantric deity may have established the prototypes for his subsequent transformation into an Islamic talismanic image.⁶⁹ The majority of surviving stone images of Gaṇa occur in Central and East Java, although the god was likewise revered in West Java.⁷⁰ Solitary statues have been found situated in locations perceived to be sacred or significant at sites as geographically distant as Panaitan Island on the extreme southwest tip of West Java and on the slopes of Java’s highest mountain, Semeru, in the island’s east (Fig. 8.3).

Their presence at these sites documents the deity’s special role as protector under names such as Winayaka, ‘seeing far and near in the day and in the night’.⁷¹ The talismanic powers attributed to Gaṇa are hinted at in the presence

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- 65 Retno Sulistianingsih Sitowati and John N. Miksic, 2006, *Icons of Art: National Museum of Jakarta* (Jakarta: Bab Publishing Indonesia), 119, description of 8th century Gaṇa image from Candi Banon, Central Java.
- 66 The mediaeval Buddhist poem *Porusādānśānta* (The Man-Eater Subdued), where the exorcised demon Gajawaktra manifests as a demonic form of Gaṇa, documents the cult of the god in Javanese Buddhist circles.
- 67 P.J. Zoetmulder, 1974, *Kalangwan: A Survey of Old Javanese Literature* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), 297. Zoetmulder documents the local Javanese deviations from Indian stories associated with Gaṇeśa. He notes that despite the deity’s popularity, there is no evidence of the existence of the Gaṇapatyas, one of the five orthodox sects of Indian Hinduism, on Java.
- 68 Edi Sedyawati, 1994, *Ganesa Statuary of the Kediri and Singhasari Periods: A Study of Art History* (Leiden: KITLV Press), 139, n. 53, observes that *Smaradahana* lists nine different names for the elephant-headed god, none of them being Gaṇeśa. While the diverse nomenclature may also reflect the metrical demands of *kakawin* poetry, they undoubtedly also testify to the many nuanced local ways in which the deity was perceived.
- 69 Zoetmulder, 1974, 297. Sedyawati cites Nicolaas J. Krom (1924) stating that Gaṇa statues outnumber surviving images of Durga and Agastya by a ratio of 22:5:2: see Sedyawati, 1994, 5.
- 70 The oldest surviving inscriptions, documenting the presence of Hinduism in Java, are the Tarumanagara inscriptions, including the Telapak Gajah stone, which features the carved footprints of Indra’s elephant, in Bogor, West Java.
- 71 Natasha Reichle, 2007, *Violence and Serenity: Late Buddhist Sculpture from Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press), 182. See also Ann R. Kinney with Marijke J. Klokke



FIGURE 8.3 Standing Gaṇa, 1200–1300, Karangates, Malang, East Java, stone, 269.0 cm high
PHOTOGRAPH: DIRK BAKKER

of a miniature standing elephant-headed god at the base of the blade of the famous Knaud keris, dated 1342.⁷² Even today on the neighbouring Hindu island of Bali, Gaṇa talismans continue to be utilised as protection against all kinds of threats and perils.⁷³

Sedyawati proposes that two distinct identities for Gaṇa appear to begin evolving during the Kediri-Singasari periods (11th–13th century) in Java.⁷⁴ These identities prefigure the subsequent personification of the Earthly Angel as a *tolak bala* that has the power to repel evil. Epic poems produced for royal circles emphasise the god's wrathful aspects and his ability to vanquish enemies.⁷⁵ Mpu Dharmaja's *Smaradahana* (Burning of Smara, God of Love), composed in the early 12th century as a eulogy to the Kediri monarch Kameshwara, depicts Gaṇanjaya, or Victorious Gaṇa, as a divine warrior displaying a frightening appearance, as if he is 'about to destroy the world'.⁷⁶ Pauline Scheurleer, scholar of Javanese art, theorises that the development of this aspect of Gaṇa's identity may have been a result of the 'myth of a local fierce deity adapted to Javanese court tradition', although the wrathful emanation of Gaṇa was likewise worshipped in India.⁷⁷ This suggests the possibility of a historical precedent for the Earthly Angel's role as a tutelary spirit in Cirebon's Shaṭṭāriyya cosmology.

and Lydia Kieven, 2003, *Worshipping Siva and Buddha: The Temple Art of East Java* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 151; Sitowati and Miksic, 2006, 119; and Sedyawati, 1994, 105.

72 See 'Kling van een kris bekend stand als de kris van Knaud—*Keris buda*'. Available at: <https://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/default.aspx?lang>.

73 Nala emphatically declares that 'Hindu people on Bali have chosen the goddess Sarasvati as the symbol of knowledge, not Gaṇeśa or Gaṇapati': see Nala, 2009, 169.

74 Sedyawati, 1994, 162.

75 One interpretation is that this is part of a general Javanese trend towards the 'demonisation' of supernatural beings—a reference to Tantric Buddhist and Hindu deities appearing in their wrathful (*krodha*) aspect. See Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, 2000, 'Skulls, Fangs and Serpents: A New Development in East Javanese Iconography', in Wobke Lobo and Stefanie Reimann (eds.), *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, Berlin, 31 August–4 September 1998* (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull), 190.

76 For a translation of *Smaradahana*, cantos 28–37, describing the magical power of Gananjaya (Victorious Gaṇa) as a divine warrior, see Sedyawati, 1994, 137–159.

77 Scheurleer, 2000, 194. See also Rao, 1992, 50. Tantric images, such as the monumental 14th-century West Sumatran statue of the ruler Adityavarman holding a skull cup, wearing a textile decorated in a skull pattern, and standing on a lotus throne in the form of skulls, may have resonated with local archipelago populations, where ritual head-hunting was practised until recent historical times.

There is a sequel to the Indian *Mahabharata* epic from the Javanese late Hindu-Buddhist period called the *Korawasrama* (Struggle of the Kauravas), which relates the ongoing conflict between the Pandawa and Korawa brothers. It describes Gaṇa as the 'prime ancestor, before which many people make curses and take oaths, so that all their wishes may be granted'.⁷⁸ Scheurleer identifies the presence of skull iconography on a number of East Javanese Gaṇa statues as being derived 'from the important role of the skull in ancestor worship throughout the archipelago'.⁷⁹ These characteristics are significant given the subsequent importance of both oath taking and ancestor reverence in Javanese Islamic courts, such as at Cirebon.

The latest known visual depiction of Gaṇa in a Hindu context is a stone relief at the 15th-century temple of Sukuḥ, Central Java, contemporaneous with the establishment of Islam on Java (Fig. 8.4).⁸⁰ The Portuguese traveller Tomé Pires, writing in the first decades of the 16th century, estimated that there were around 50,000 ascetics (*tapas*), similar to those depicted at Sukuḥ Temple, on the island. Significantly, Pires describes the close interaction between the Muslims and ascetics on the north coast of Java: 'And these men are also worshipped by the Moors, and they believe in them greatly; they give them alms; they rejoice when such men come to their houses'.⁸¹ The respect of the coastal Muslim communities for the Śaivite practitioners likely arose from long familiarity. Muslim graves, the earliest dated 1368–69, are found in the environs of the Majapahit capital at Trowulan, East Java, and indicate the presence of Muslims at the Hindu-Buddhist court.⁸² The devotees of the two faiths almost certainly recognised similarities between Sufi and yogi doctrines, as the latter are recorded in texts such as *Gaṇapati Tattwa* which address 'searching for unification with the deity'.⁸³

78 Reichle, 2007, 184. The prose composition has been tentatively dated to the post-Majapahit period: see Zoetmulder, 1974, 129. See also Sedyawati, 1994, 162; Kinney et al., 2003, 152. A statue, from Surabaya in East Java, dated 14th–15th century and now in the National Museum of Indonesia (Inv. No.199), depicts standing Gaṇa flanked by two jars with a flowering lotus. The presence of the jars and lotus on Majapahit mortuary figures is usually associated with deceased royalty enshrined as deities.

79 Quoted in Reichle, 2007, 184.

80 Jan Fontein, 1990, *The Sculpture of Indonesia* (Washington: National Gallery of Art), 175, cites dates found on inscriptions at the site which cover a time-span of 1416–59.

81 Quoted in Ricklefs, 2006, 11. Pires's description of the ascetics evokes the mendicant practices of Buddhist monks with their 'begging bowls' seen in Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia today.

82 M.C. Ricklefs, 2001, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200* (California: Stanford University Press), 5.

83 M.C. Ricklefs, 1993, *War, Culture and Economy in Java 1677–1726* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), 11. In addition, see Lydia Kieven, 2013, *Following the Cap-Figure in Majapahit Temple Reliefs: A New Look at the Religious Functions of East Javanese Temples, Fourteenth to*



FIGURE 8.4 Gaṇa and the forging of the sacred keris, 1400–1500, Suku Temple, Karanganyar, Central Java

PHOTOGRAPH: RIO HELMI

The remote location of Suku Temple, high on the slopes of Mt Lawu, its esoteric imagery, sometimes overtly sexual, and terrace design, reminiscent of prehistoric *punden* sanctuaries, have all led to scholarly interpretation that the site exemplifies the re-emergence of indigenous belief systems predating Hindu-Buddhism.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, as Jo Grimmond suggests in her 2012 study of the temple, a close reading of the temple's images removes the site's significance from the megalithic realm and locates it in the mainstream of Javanese Hindu art.⁸⁵ The important Gaṇa relief at Suku temple, albeit puzzling in its precise interpretation, represents an expression of the most up-to-date trends

Fifteenth Centuries (Leiden: KITLV), 85, referencing Zoetmulder (1965). See also Bernard Arps, 2016, *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind: The Javanese Shadow-play 'Dewi Ruci' Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto: A Study in Philology* (Singapore: NUS Press), 465, n. 138. In his commentary on the mystical shadow play *Dewi Ruci*, where the hero Bima seeks the 'whence and whither of being', Arps notes that the Quran speaks of the idea 'that God creates and recalls His creatures'.

84 Typical of this viewpoint is Nigel Bullough, 1995, *Historic East Java: Remains in Stone* (Singapore: ADLine Communications), 97. Bullough writes that 'these structures reflect ancient religious concepts predating the arrival of Hinduism ... which saw a resurfacing of indigenous Javanese beliefs and customs'.

85 Jo Grimmond, 2012, 'Mountains, Forests and Water: A New Approach to the Study of the Javanese Temple Complex of Suku', in Alexandra Haendel (ed.), *Old Myths and New Approaches: Interpreting Ancient Religious Sites in Southeast Asia* (Melbourne: Monash University), 138.

in Śivaite Tantric practices, as understood by followers, rather than a return to an ancient ritual past.⁸⁶

The temple's Gaṇa stands naked on one leg before a metal-smith's workshop where a dagger is being ritually forged. The god holds a dog, which has led several scholars to conclude that the site was sacred to the Javanese Kalang people, originally an outcaste semi-nomadic class, who claimed descent from a dog.⁸⁷ Kalang identity resembles the non-conformist vagrant *vrātya* practitioners of Indian Vedic tradition, whose patron deity was Gaṇeśa.⁸⁸

The long association of Gaṇa with the power of oaths resonates with other narrative reliefs at the site, such as the *Sudamala* (The Exorcism of Durga) story, the theme of which is deliverance from a curse.⁸⁹ The expression of the god's role as protector is alluded to in other Sukuh reliefs of ithyphallic demonic figures displaying the same unusual hopping pose as Gaṇa.⁹⁰ The figures evoke the prophylactic Tantric guardians performing ecstatic dances at the Bahal Temple complex at Padang Lawas, North Sumatra, dated in the 11th–13th century.

The explicit sexual symbolism of some of the images at Sukuh may not have appeared at that time so 'entirely unacceptable to Islam'.⁹¹ *Serat Centhini* (The Tale of Centhini) describes the picaresque adventures of several religious students, who are identified as practitioners of Shaṭṭāriyya, around the 1630s. They encounter heterodox 'religious students of ecstasy' (*santri birai*) who recite *dhikr* before abandoning themselves to all manner of sexual licentiousness.⁹² The term *birai*, meaning in Javanese 'to be in love' or 'to be mad about', is likely related to the name of the Hindu-Buddhist Tantric wrathful deity Bhairava, and the mystical trope 'becoming a Bhairava', as a description of untrammelled

86 Stanley J. O'Connor, 1985, 'Metallurgy and Immortality at Candi Sukuh, Central Java', *Indonesia* 39: 60.

87 Made Wijaya, 2014, *Majapahit Style* (Denpasar: Yayasan Beringin Berapi), 126–129. A contemporary *kejawan* interpretation is that the dog symbolises loyalty and ancestry (*keturunan*), with the relief intended to be read simultaneously as the chronogram 'Elephant in priest's turban-biting-dog' (*Gajah-wiku-anahut-buntu*): Agung Harjuno, personal communication.

88 Rao, 1992, 10–11.

89 Fontein, 1990, 175; see also Kinney *et al.*, 2003, 275.

90 See Herwig Zahorka, 2003, 'The *Palang* Design on Ceremonial Indonesian Textiles and its Cultural-Historic Backgrounds Represented with Archaeological Monuments and the Purpose to use those Penis Inserts Today', in National Museum Indonesia, *The International Conference on the Diversity of Nusantara Ikat Weaving: Cisarua, West Java, September 15th–17th 2003* (Jakarta: Proyek Pengembangan Museum Nasional), 38, plates A & B.

91 Jacques Dumarçay, 1991, *The Temples of Java* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 87.

92 M.C. Ricklefs, 2007, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions* (Singapore: NUS Press), 36–37. Among the locations where the *santri birai* secretly gathered in the 19th century was Mantingan, whose famous mosque is discussed here.

antinomian states, occurs in Sufi texts into the 19th century.⁹³ Stanley O'Connor, in his definitive essay on Suku Temple, reports traces of Tantric rites that could still be found in the Surakarta Palace, situated not far from Mt Lawu, in the early 20th century.⁹⁴ He cites an account of an ithyphallic court dance, known as the 'drunken elephant', which apparently included hopping steps just as seen on the Suku relief.

The last major surviving Hindu-Buddhist religious text from Java, *Tantu Panggġlaran* (Founding of the World), written at some time between 1500–1635, the period after the ascendancy of Islam, includes extensive references to Gaṇa.⁹⁵ The text relates how the deity was appointed the guardian of the eastern portal of the cosmic mountain Mahameru. Although Sedyawati notes that Gaṇa is not a major character in the Javanese shadow puppet theatre, the renowned Cirebon glass painter Rastika (1942–2014) evokes this ancient guardian connection in his depiction of an Earthly Angel calligram on a Cirebon *gunungan* symbolising the cosmic mountain (Fig. 8.5).⁹⁶ The Earthly Angel's presence on the *gunungan*, a puppet displayed at the commencement of performances and regarded as possessing talismanic significance, echoes the placement of *tolak bala* panels at building entrances. Its position is centred in vertical alignment with the cosmic tree that forms the puppet's mountain shape. This references the *axis mundi* implied in the Earthly Angel's other name, Pillar of the Universe (*Sangga Buana*), about which it is said that it exists as a 'spectral manifestation' and directional guardian dormant beneath the Kasepuhan Palace's ceremonially important north *alun-alun* square.⁹⁷

Tantu Panggġlaran offers a further intriguing hint of a historical connection between the worship of Gaṇa in pre-Islamic times and the imagery of the Earthly Angel. The text mentions a location called Medang Gaṇa (*medang of*

93 Andrea Acri, 2019, 'Becoming a Bhairava in 19th-Century Java', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 47(139), 288, 3.2.

94 O'Connor, 1985, 62. A hint of Vajrayana Buddhist symbolism, particularly in images of embracing 'mother-father' (*yab yum*) deities, is suggested in a contemporary East Javanese account of Adam, representing the Void (*sepi*), and Hawa, representing desire (*hawa napsu*), documented by Andrew Beatty, 1999, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 169. In addition, Kate O'Brien, 2008, *Sutasoma: The Ancient Tale of a Buddha-Prince* (Bangkok: Orchid Press) cogently presents literary evidence for the practice of Tantric sexual yoga in medieval Java.

95 Stephen C. Headley, 2000, 'Javanese Cosmogonies and Muslim Cosmographies: An Encompassing Knowledge?', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 28(82):284, suggests 'Founding of the World' as an appropriate English title for *Tantu Panggġlaran*, while acknowledging the complexities of translating the Javanese title with its Sanskrit etymology.

96 Sedyawati, 1994, 173, n. 39.

97 Tan, 2019, 118.

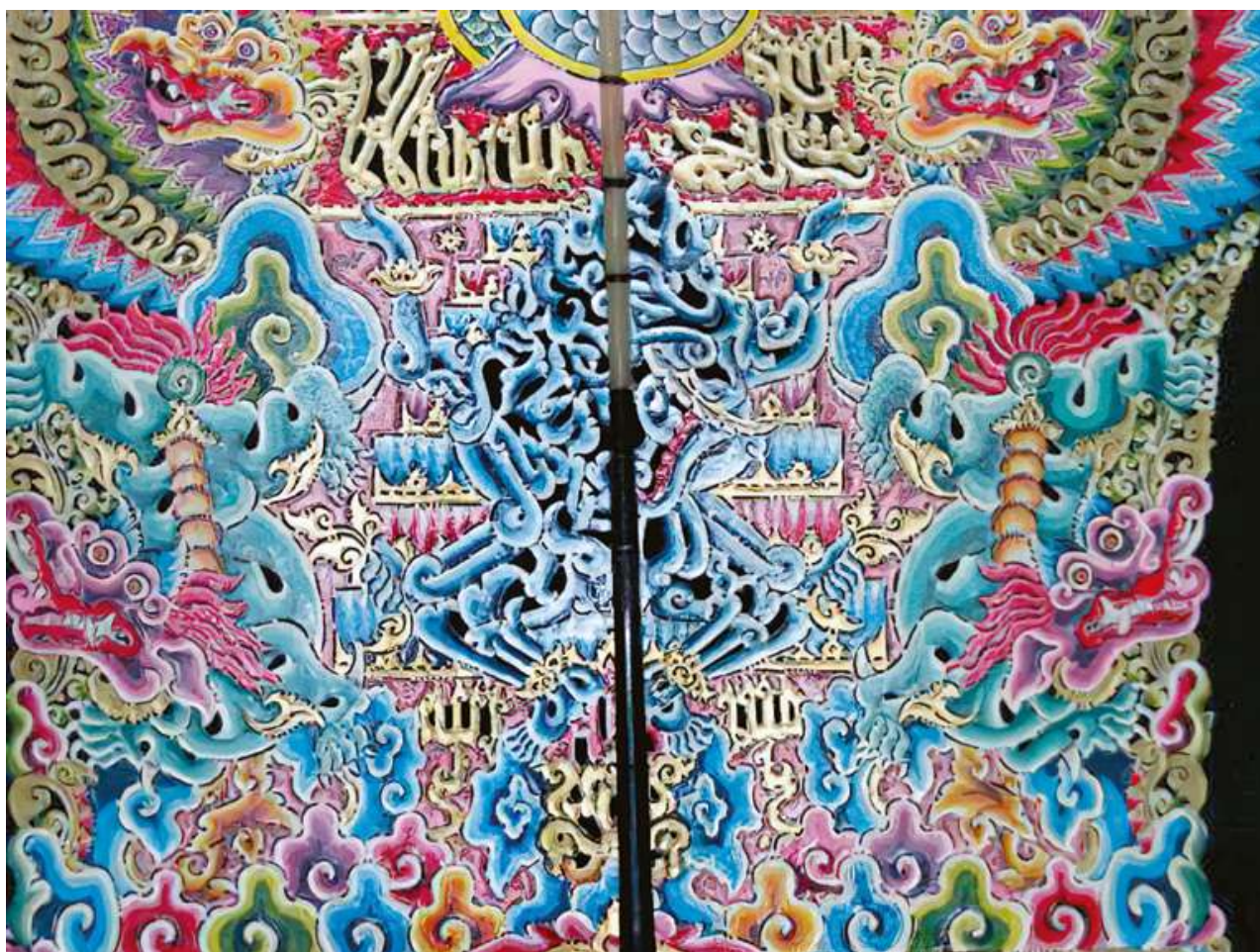


FIGURE 8.5 Gunungan depicting Earthly Angel calligram, wayang kulit shadow puppet [detail], Rastika (1942–2014), c.2005, Cirebon, leather parchment, pigments and gold paint
 PHOTOGRAPH: MOH ISA PRAMANA KOESOEMADINATA

Gaṇa) among the ‘countries’ established on Java by the gods.⁹⁸ Medang Gaṇa was a semi-legendary Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in West Java, the name of which, in the 17th century, became transformed into Sumedang, an important centre of Shaṭṭāriyya practice not far from Cirebon.⁹⁹ Contemporary local Sufi tradition identifies the Earthly Angel, in the form of Gaṇa, as the ‘guardian of the land of Cirebon’ (*danyang bumi Cirebon*), suggesting a forgotten connection with the region’s ancient kingdom bearing his name.¹⁰⁰

98 Sedyawati, 1994, 174. The etymology of the toponym *medang* is uncertain, but it is likely related to the Indonesian *medan* meaning ‘field’.

99 Available at: westjavakingdom.blogspot/2011/07/kerajaan-medang-jati, accessed 2 April 2018. The kingdom was also known as Medang Jati.

100 Safari, personal communication.

6 Talismanic Images: From the Hindu-Buddhist into the Islamic Era

The use of Arabic script to form the Earthly Angel calligram is prefigured by an earlier visual practice in Java, before the advent of Islam, where creatures attributed with special talismanic powers are depicted not as calligrams but in zoomorphic forms known as simulacra. These devices first appear in stone relief sculptures at 8th–9th century Buddhist and Hindu temples in Central Java. They include vegetal lions carved on terrace cornerstones at the Borobudur stupa (Fig. 8.6) and *garuda* antefixes at *candi* (temple) sites such as at Suntan, Cangkringan.¹⁰¹

Even after the development of a new range of decorative motifs in temple art in the East Javanese period (11th–15th century), *kala* monster faces continued as vegetal simulacra located above entrances similar to earlier Central Javanese monuments.¹⁰² The placement of the imagery in the magically liminal locations of doorways and cornerstones attests to the lasting belief that simulacra possess prophylactic power.¹⁰³

Support for this proposition is found in literature of the Hindu-Buddhist period, where zoomorphic imagery in the form of metaphors and similes became an essential element of poetic expression.¹⁰⁴ The relationship of the literary devices to architectural simulacra is underscored by the perception that the creation of poetry was analogous to erecting a temple. Hence

101 The antefix is in the collection of Prambanan Archaeological Museum, Klaten (Inv. No: BG388). For a discussion of the stylistic development of antefix vegetal ornament, see Marijke J. Klokke, 2000, 'Ornamental Motifs: The Stylistic Method Applied to Ancient Javanese Temple Art', in Wobke Lobo and Stefanie Reimann (eds.), *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1998: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, Berlin, 31 August–4 September 1998* (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull), 91–96. However, Figure 8.7 diagrams, drawings based on actual stone reliefs, do not appear to recognise that the antefixes were intended to be read as simulacra.

102 Klokke, 2000, 88–89, 96. The longevity of *kala* simulacra in Java is testified to in an early 20th-century Yogyakarta batik cloth depicting the monster face in vegetal form, illustrated in James Bennett, 2011, *Beneath the Winds: Masterpieces of Southeast Asian Art from the Art Gallery of South Australia* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia), 104–105.

103 The unambiguously ithyphallic rampant lions on the terrace corners at the slightly older Ngawen Temple, not far from Borobudur stupa, support the interpretation of lions as prophylactic, as do the guardian lion statues currently installed at the east entrance of the stupa.

104 Zoetmulder, 1974, 214, proposes that the devices reveal a basic element of Old Javanese thinking, 'the unity of the cosmos and the interrelatedness of everything in it'. This foreshadows the teaching of *tawhīd* introduced with Islam.



FIGURE 8.6 Architectural antefix depicting a feline creature as a vegetal simulacrum, 780–820, Borobudur Stupa, Magelang, Central Java
PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES BENNETT

the words of the text contained talismanic power.¹⁰⁵ The opening lines of the *Sumanasāntaka* (Death by the Sumanasa Flower) declare:

The deity who is the supreme god of the poet's writing board is the essence of written characters ...

He is given illusory form through unceasing meditation in order that he descends into this temple of books (*candi pusaka*).¹⁰⁶

Stuart Robson, scholar of Javanese literature, proposes that the Old Javanese term *palambang*, often applied to literary compositions, is directly related

105 See S. Supomo, 2006, 'The Sanskritization of *Jawa* and the Javanization of the *Bharata*', in Peter Bellwood, James J. Fox and Darrell Tryon (eds.), *The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Canberra: ANU Press), 309, n. 10.

106 Peter Worsley, S. Supomo, Thomas M. Hunter and Margaret Fletcher, 2013, *Mpu Monaguna's 'Sumanasāntaka': An Old Javanese Epic Poem, Its Indian Source and Balinese Illustrations* (Leiden: Brill Press), 25.

to the Modern Javanese *pralambang*, meaning ‘secret or deep, allusion’.¹⁰⁷ A closely related concept is *pasemon*, which refers to an ‘allusion’ or ‘metaphor’. The Javanese root word *semu* means ‘to seem like’ or ‘to be coloured by’.¹⁰⁸ *Pasemon* is commonly associated with literature, but it is also a key aesthetic device in Javanese visual arts. There is a long tradition in Indonesian texts, spanning the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic periods, where concealment is seen as a metaphor for, or source of, spiritual power.¹⁰⁹ A famous poem, attributed to the 16th-century Sufi saint Pangeran Panggung, narrates one definitive episode of disguise in the *Serat Panji* (Tale of Panji), which is set in Hindu-Buddhist Java but became widely popular throughout the Islamic period.¹¹⁰ On this occasion the hero, appearing in the masquerade of a puppeteer, is a metaphor for the presence of God manifest in the world but unrecognised. The same romance cycle presents Prince Panji in a variety of other disguises that contribute to enhancing his spiritual charisma.¹¹¹ The complex multivalent nature of reality, where the same image can simultaneously convey diverse meanings, is likewise the essence of both simulacrum and calligram in the visual arts.

The references in mediaeval Javanese poetry to elephant simulacra are especially tantalising considering the subsequent frequency of the motif in Cirebon art and the development of the Earthly Angel calligram. Mpu Tantular’s 14th-century allegorical poem *Porusādānśānta* (The Man-Eater Subdued), also known as *Sutasoma* after the name of the hero, describes a seashore scene where an elephant-shaped boulder is ‘being washed over by waves ... furiously spouting up sea water as if trumpeting, its truck raised upwards to the sky’.¹¹² Elsewhere, *Pārthāyana* (The Journeying of Partha) recounts how the protagonist finds an ‘elephant rock’ from which ‘poets in aesthetic rapture cast themselves in the waves’.¹¹³ The presence of the simulacra in those locations implies

107 Stuart Robson, 1995, *Deśawarṇana (Nāgarakṛtāgama) by Mpu Prapañca* (Leiden: KITLV Press), 11. Robson proposes that mediaeval Javanese literary texts, and this may also be applied to contemporaneous visual arts, created ‘a bridge between the observable world and an inner truth’. This concept resonates with the Islamic notion of *lahir batin*. See also Helen Creese, 1998, *Pārthāyana; The Journeying of Pārtha an Eighteenth-Century Balinese Kakawin* (Leiden: KITLV Press), 30.

108 Laurie J. Sears, 1996, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 7, citing Wilfridus J.S. Poerwadarminta (1937) for this definition.

109 Creese, 1998, 37.

110 A.H. Johns, 1965, *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet* (Canberra: Centre of Oriental Studies, The Australian National University), 17.

111 Creese, 1998, 37.

112 O’Brien, 2008, 96, canto 85.11.

113 Zoetmulder, 1974, 369.

that the power of the zoomorphic imagery is also associated with fraught or dangerous transitional zones in the landscape, not unlike their visual placement in contemporaneous temple architectural schema. The seashore, for example, may be viewed simultaneously as land and sea, and as a place of pleasure and danger, of arrivals and departures.¹¹⁴

The earliest surviving elephant simulacrum in an Islamic context is at the Mantingan Mosque in Jepara, Central Java, built in the mid-16th century.¹¹⁵ The mosque's verandah features a unique set of 68 carved stone medallions, including a vegetal simulacrum of an elephant. Although the setting of these stone medallions has been much altered by several restorations, the sophisticated carving of the medallions suggests that the choice of subjects was not arbitrary, nor was the carving intended to be merely decorative.¹¹⁶ The elephant (Fig. 8.7) appears alongside a panel depicting the simulacrum of a monkey with a crab (Fig. 8.9) as well as a variety of talismanic 'endless knot' configurations and auspicious floral designs. Today, Javanese wood carvers refer to zoomorphic simulacra and calligrams as *ukiran memet* or 'hidden (difficult) carvings'.¹¹⁷ This is a reference to the way that the subject is disguised with floral/vegetal ornament or script, and it is closely related to the term *candra sangkala memet*, meaning 'hidden' chronograms depicted as visual images and also associated with talismanic powers.¹¹⁸ A *sangkala* chronogram above Mantingan's mihrab commemorates the date of the mosque's founding in 1559 with an enigmatic Hindu reference.¹¹⁹

114 Worsley *et al.*, 2013, 638, discuss the debate by characters in *Sumanasāntaka* (Canto 35–36) regarding the relative merits of the seashore (*pasir*) compared to mountains (*wukir*). The beauty and delights of the seashore are praised as providing an appropriate location for erotic adventures; nevertheless, the heroine feels unsafe there.

115 Hasan Muarif Ambary, 2003, 'Arkeologi dan Kajian Islam Indonesia', *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 1(2): 117, proposes that zoomorphic devices in the visual arts became especially associated with the development of the Sufi tradition of forest recluses in north-coast Java in the 16th century, but provides no further evidence for this conclusion.

116 Several radical restorations of the mosque, commencing in 1927, destroyed much of the original red-brick structure. The notion that the combination of zoomorphic simulacra, 'endless knot', and auspicious floral motifs represents an established convention, conveying talismanic significance, is supported by the same set of imagery on a Lampung *lawon kori* pair of doors dated 17th century, in the collection of Art Gallery of South Australia (Bennett, 2011, 27).

117 B.A. Soepratno, 2004, *Ornamen Ukir Kayu Tradisional Jawa: Ketrampilan Menggambar dan Mengukir Kayu* (2) (Semarang: Effhar), 26.

118 Chronograms that record dates concealed in the form of visual or textual riddles are associated with talismanic powers in many parts of the Islamic world.

119 The ambiguous chronogram is 'appearance-Brahman-colour-essence' (*rupa-brahmana-warna-sari*) for 1559: see Hasna Anindyta, 2017, 'Pengaruh kebudayaan Cina terhadap



FIGURE 8.7 Elephant as a vegetal simulacrum, 1559, Mantingan Mosque, Jepara, Central Java; Tropenmuseum (TM-60054170)
PHOTOGRAPH: TROPENMUSEUM

Restoration of the mosque in 1978–81 revealed hidden reliefs at the back of the stone medallions, depicting figurative scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic, with selected faces disfigured (Fig. 8.10). It seems likely that the reliefs originate from an earlier Hindu temple that was built on the same site, as a *makara* sea-monster architectural fragment is also found in the adjoining graveyard. The incorporation of the reliefs into the mosque structure may be evidence of the notional absorption or subversion of power associated with the pre-Islamic order rather than of merely the use of recycled building materials that were fortuitously available.¹²⁰ When the Islamic era simulacra and *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs

arsitektur Masjid Mantingan', in *Seminar Heritage IPLBI* (Bandung: Institut Teknologi Bandung), 208.

120 Richard M. Eaton, 2001, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 94–132, analyses patterns of temple desecration by both Muslim and Hindu rulers in India, proposing that they were intended to subvert conquered centres of power, rather than being ideologically driven by religious doctrines forbidding figurative images.



FIGURE 8.8 Arjuna sees the elephant-shaped stone in the lake, from *Pārthāyana* narrative relief, 1275–1350, Candi Jago, Malang, East Java
PHOTOGRAPH: RIO HELMI

are read together as a single totality they become an expression of *sirr*, where truth may be found concealed behind outer appearances.

The only surviving sculptural depiction of an elephant simulacrum from the pre-Islamic period is a relief at the Buddhist temple of Candi Jago, Malang, built in the 13th or early 14th century (Fig. 8.8). It depicts an episode from *Pārthāyana* where the hero Arjuna gazes across a body of water in which there is ‘one rock completely covered by roots, [which] looked like an elephant with a trunk’, and beyond to the pavilion of Kama, the god of love.¹²¹ Significantly, the Mantingan panel likewise depicts the elephant standing in water, surrounded by lotus lilies, suggesting that the carver may have been referencing *Pārthāyana*, which was certainly still remembered in the 16th century.

This presents the possibility that the panel depicting the monkey and crab simulacrum may also intentionally convey a textual allusion. The most obvious claimant is the *Rāmāyaṇa* episode where Hanuman, the monkey king, while building the land bridge to Lanka to rescue Princess Sita, encounters a hostile crab that he catches with his tail. This story is found in the Malay *Hikayat Seri Rama* (History of Prince Rama), which has been known in Java since the eighth century, as is evident in the famous *Rāmāyaṇa* reliefs at the Prambanan Śaivite temple complex.¹²² The choice of the subject from the famous Malay text for

121 Creese, 1998, 267, canto 34, stanza 9. The appearance of the same trope in this much later Balinese version of the story testifies to the enduring nature of the imagery.

122 Roy Jordan, 2011, ‘The Causeway Episode of the Prambanan *Rāmāyaṇa* Reexamined’, in Andrea Acri, Helen Creese and Arlo Griffiths (eds.), *From Lañkā Eastwards: The Rāmāyaṇa in the Literature and Visual Arts of Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press), 167.



FIGURE 8.9 Monkey and crab as vegetal simulacra, 1559, Mantingan Mosque, Jepara, Central Java; Tropenmuseum (TM-60054169)
PHOTOGRAPH: TROPENMUSEUM

the mosque's decoration may also have had a political subtext. The female ruler of Jepara, Ratu Kalinyamat (d. 1579), commissioned the Mantingan mosque and lies buried in the adjacent mausoleum. During Kalinyamat's lifetime, the kingdom formed an alliance with Malay forces to stage several unsuccessful naval expeditions against Melaka, in an attempt to liberate the former Malay Islamic sultanate from Portuguese occupation.

Both the *Pārthāyana* and *Rāmāyaṇa* epics continued to be considered mystically powerful following the rise of Islam in the 16th century. *Pārthāyana* leads into the *Arjuna Wiwāha* story, where Arjuna performs ascetic penances and acquires a powerful weapon as a boon from Śiva with which to destroy the demon Niwātakawaca, which is wreaking havoc on the world. Today this story is still considered to be among the most mystically potent of the wayang stories. *Rāmāyaṇa* tells the story of how the avatar Rama, with the aid of Hanuman, defeats the ogre king Rahwana, who is likewise wreaking havoc on the world.

Beyond these similarities, perhaps there is a further underlying conceit that connects the Mantingan panels, and this involves the theme of water. Arjuna has to pass the lake—represented by the elephant/lotus simulacrum—to reach the pavilion of the god of love. Hanuman has to cross the sea—implied by the crab simulacrum—to rescue Rama's beloved from Rahwana. The relief on the reverse side of the elephant panel also depicts the subject of crossing

water.¹²³ Three figures look out over water, including Rama, in likelihood surveying the straits of Lanka across to the farther shore, which is Rahwana's kingdom. A dwarf *panakawan* servant, his grotesque features un-defaced like the other figures, fishes with one arm irreverently raised high, exposing his armpit, in disregard of the protocols of behaviour in the presence of social superiors. They stand beneath two closely intertwined trees, the foliage of which forms a one-eyed *kala* monster simulacrum. The trees perhaps serve as a metaphor for the inseparable loyalties of the two sibling heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The inclusion of the *panakawan* dwarf, a character often regarded as possessing occult powers, and the supranatural trees implies that this is no ordinary scene but represents a potent spiritual moment. The use of crossing/entering water as a symbol for mystical initiation or empowerment has long been current in Java. It occurs most notably in the *Dewi Ruci* story, where Bima enters the ocean to discover the 'whence and whither of being' of Sufi doctrine.

Early Javanese Islamic devotional poetry, such as *Suluk Wujil* (Song of the Dwarf Wujil), dated 1607, repeatedly describes mystical experiences in terms of analogies found in pre-Islamic literature and performance practices.¹²⁴ The two visible simulacra and the hidden relief medallions installed in the threshold space of the mosque's verandah may allude to the idea of the spiritual journey/struggle involving the conquest of the lower *nafs*, represented by the demon Niwātakawaca and by Rahwana. Only through achieving this victory can the devotee arrive at spiritual gnosis, which is symbolised at Mantingan by the worshipper passing through the verandah and entering within the sacred space of the mosque itself.

A notable example of a man-made 'elephant rock' is found at Cirebon's royal garden retreat of Sunyaragi, where there is a composite stone simulacrum sculpture of an elephant, which formerly stood in water (Fig. 8.11). The elephant is a carriage in which the sultan, perceived as the penultimate Sufi sage, reportedly sat to meditate.¹²⁵

Sunyaragi, meaning Place of Stillness, is said to have been constructed in 1741 and to be the gravesite of an unknown Chinese Muslim saint (*wali*).¹²⁶ The

123 The figurative relief aligns horizontally to the vertical elephant simulacra on the front of the stone panel. The combination of vertical and horizontal axis is regarded as symbolic of the intersection of *lahir batin* in Java today.

124 For example, see Matthew Cohen, 2012, 'Suluk Wujil and Javanese Performance Theory', *Performing Islam* 1(1): 13–34.

125 Another simulacrum rock sculpture at Sunyaragi features the hero Bima wrestling a *naga* serpent, referencing an episode in the *Dewi Ruci* story where Bima travels into the ocean.

126 Denys Lombard, 2010, *Gardens in Java* (Jakarta: École Française d'Extrême-Orient), 11, 20. Current site guides do not mention the saint's grave, although a ruined ground structure, clearly suggesting a Chinese tomb but simply signposted as 'Chinese monument' (*monumen Cina*), is located in a prominent position in the gardens.



FIGURE 8.10 Three figures, including Rama, standing by water, from *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative relief, reverse side of elephant simulacrum panel, presumably 1400–1500, Mantingan Mosque, Jepara, Central Java

PHOTOGRAPH: MUSEUM NASIONAL INDONESIA—ARKADIUS



FIGURE 8.11 Elephant, with raised trunk, as stone simulacrum, c.1741, Sunyaragi, Cirebon, West Java, stone, coral and stucco
PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES BENNETT

complex is a fantastic artificial landscape replicating the Javanese conceptualisation of the world as ‘mountain and sea’. There are miniature-shaped mountains and caves, built from natural coral limestone rocks, which were originally located in an artificial lake called Segara or the Sea.¹²⁷ The jagged rocks used to create Sunyaragi, including the elephant simulacrum, evoke the Cirebon *wadasan* motif, such as that seen on the ACM panel depicting the Earthly Angel.

The association of *wadasan* with spiritually charged or magical landscapes is further suggested by the presence of the motif in the form of miniature mountains through which the winged *barong* lion appears to travel on the Singhabarwang carriage. Lion and elephant simulacra also appear as *wadasan* carved on undated gravestones at the Mausoleum of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon (Fig. 8.12).

127 Timothy E. Behrend, 1984, ‘Kraton, Taman, Mesjid: A Brief Survey and Bibliographic Review of Islamic Antiquities in Java’, *Indonesian Circle, School of Oriental and African Studies Newsletter* 35: 39. The lake, like the other water features, is now dry due to neglect and environmental degradation.



FIGURE 8.12 Gravestone with elephant heads as wadasan simulacra, undated, possibly 1900–1950, Mausoleum of Sunan Gunung Jati, Cirebon, West Java

PHOTOGRAPH: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Tommy Christomy, historian of Shaṭṭāriyya practice, notes the multivalent reference to coral rocks (*karang*), in the West Javanese mystical term ‘knowledge of *karang*’ (*ilmu karang*).¹²⁸ The metaphor implies the adept’s invulnerability, attained through the harnessing of supernatural powers. The depiction of elephant simulacra in these various settings, including a mosque, royal retreat, and mausoleum, over the time span of several centuries, implies that the zoomorphic image conveyed significant meanings related to spiritual potency and power. It provides the historical context for the appearance of elephant-headed Gaṇa as a calligram in Cirebon art.

7 Earthly Angel Calligram from an Early Islamic Simulacrum

The oldest known surviving image of Gaṇa as a *tolak bala* talisman is probably a carved wooden panel attributed to the fourth Cirebon sultan, Panembahan Girilaya (1601–77). It is now preserved in the Kasepuhan Palace, but has been tentatively dated as being from the early 18th century (Fig. 8.13).¹²⁹

The panel depicts a vegetal simulacrum of Gaṇa, wearing a priest’s turban and holding a long bull-hook, riding an elephant. Both figures are drawn in profile view, reminiscent of a shadow puppet. The attribution to Girilaya may contain an element of truth, especially as the wood’s patina and traces of white priming pigment imply considerable antiquity.¹³⁰ The direct involvement of Cirebon’s court circle in the arts is well documented and the commissioning of talisman images was once the activity of the palace or of individuals with royal connections.

The panel suggests that the old associations of Gaṇa with protection in battle continued into the Islamic period. Gaṇa’s bull-hook is as much a lance as goad, and the elephant still evoked connotations of warfare in the early 18th

128 Christomy, 2008, 57–58. The word *karang* also refers to the name of a district in Tasikmalaya, which was regarded as a centre of spiritual power in pre-Islamic times and as the location of Pamijahan, where the Shattariyyah saint Abdul Muhyi chose to live and die.

129 Panembahan Girilaya is the posthumous name of Panembahan Adiningkusuma, who was executed by his father-in-law Susuhunan Amangkurat I and subsequently buried at Giriloyo village near the Mataram royal mausoleum at Imogiri, Central Java.

130 Tan, 2019, 143, n. 183, records that the 19th-century Javanese painter Raden Saleh dated the panel to 1528, while others claim that the year 1720 is written in Arabic in the Gaṇa figure: see Sm. Subroto and Parsuki, 1983/1984, *Album Seni Budaya Jawa Barat* (Jakarta: Proyek Media Kebudayaan), 66.



FIGURE 8.13 Talismanic panel (*tolak bala*) depicting Gaṇa riding elephant as vegetal simulacrum, attributed to Panembahan Girilaya (1601–1677), 1650–1700, Cirebon, West Java, wood with traces of pigment; Kasepuhan Palace Museum, Cirebon

PHOTOGRAPH: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

century despite the increasing use of firearms.¹³¹ Another contemporaneous image of Gaṇa appears as a chronogram for 1720 on a stone pillar at the mausoleum of the aristocrat Tumenggung Puspongoro, adjoining the grave of the Sufi saint Sunan Gresik (d. 1419) in Gresik, East Java (Fig. 8.14).¹³²

Both Girilaya and Puspongoro lived in times of turbulent conflict. Prince Girilaya was actively involved in the disastrous Pacirebonan War (1650) between the Cirebon and Banten sultanates, while Puspongoro was the leader of forces in the Surabaya War, which ravaged East Java during 1717–19.¹³³ The associations of Gaṇa with victory in battle may have continued in circles where the Sufi angelic being could be perceived as a metaphor for the devotee's inner struggle to conquer the lower self in order to achieve the highest gnosis.

Several aspects of the Girilaya panel document the initial stage in the development of the *tolak bala* and the aesthetics of Cirebon art as it is known today. The panel shows Gaṇa riding his elephant beneath clouds formed by the *megamendung* motif that also appears on the ACM panel.¹³⁴ Palace oral histories and batik makers attribute the invention of *megamendung* to Walangsungsang, also known as Pangeran (Prince) Cakrabuana (r. 1447–79).¹³⁵ It is said that the prince was inspired to create the motif after seeing the reflections of clouds in the water with which he was about to perform ritual ablutions before Islamic prayer.¹³⁶ In the panel's sky are cloud simulacra of flying birds, which appear again as more naturalistic depictions in a later *tolak bala* panel of the Earthly Angel riding the Lion of 'Alī (Fig. 8.15). The carver has

131 The importance of elephants in the Javanese courts is documented in the names Palimaan (Place of the Elephants) in Cirebon and Kali Gajah Wong (Man and Elephant River) in Yogyakarta, which local tradition remembers as the location where the sultan's elephants bathed.

132 Hasan Muarif Ambary, 1986, 'Epigraphical Data from 17th–19th Century Muslim Graves in East Java', in C.D. Grijns and S.O. Robson (eds.), *Cultural Contact and Textual Interpretation: Papers from the Fourth European Colloquium on Malay and Indonesian Studies, Held in Leiden in 1983* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications), 26, reads the image of Gaṇa, resembling the style of a shadow puppet, as holding an arrow over the sea and forming a chronogram for 1720, the year before Puspongoro died.

133 Ricklefs, 1993, 169.

134 Bruce Carpenter, 2009, *Javanese Antique Furniture and Folk Art* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet), 36, observes that the *megamendung* is 'inevitably described as Chinese in origin, even though similar motifs are seen in purely Hindu-Buddhist art'.

135 Irianto, 2011, 145. According to one account, Walangsungsang was the founder of the batik village of Trusmi, now part of Cirebon and also called Mbah Kuwu, as the founder of Cirebon's dance mask tradition: refer Ross, 2016.

136 The simple delineation of *megamendung* on the panel suggests that we are viewing an early version of the motif. Today there are two varieties of cloud motif, *mega mendung* (heavy overcast skies foreshadowing rain) and *mega sumirat* (cloudy skies in hot weather): see Achmad Opan Safari, 2010, 'Iluminasi dalam Naskah Cirebon', *Suhuf: Jurnal Pengkajian Al-Qur'an dan Budaya* 3(2): 314.



FIGURE 8.14 Chronogram (*sangkala*) in the form of Gaṇa crossing the sea, 1720, Makam Pusponegoro, Gresik, East Java
PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES BENNETT



FIGURE 8.15 Talismanic panel (*tolak bala*) depicting the Earthly Angel riding the Lion of 'Ali (*Macan Ali*) as calligrams, 1827–1837, Cirebon, wood with gold leaf and pigment; Kasepuhan Palace Museum

PHOTOGRAPH: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

portrayed the birds with wings that are calligrams for the 99 Names of Allāh. This panel is one of an identical pair that include a dating of 1827–37 on the reverse side, with an enigmatic inscription referring to the seven birds.¹³⁷

A contemporary Cirebon interpretation reads the birds as representing the heron that flies between continents and symbolises individuals (*ahli saliq*) who have chosen separation from the world in order to embark on the mystical journey in quest of God.¹³⁸ The birds also allude to a Cirebon proverb, ‘The flying heron reaches the place of the water spinach (*kangkung*)’.¹³⁹ The *kangkung* here represents the devotee who has emptied his/her mind of worldly distractions to become in essence like the plant’s hollow stem.

It is uncertain exactly when the talismanic image of Gaṇa as a simulacrum transformed into the calligram of the Earthly Angel, although it had already occurred by the 19th century, when Cirebon commenced to develop a ‘full-blown tradition of true figural calligraphy’.¹⁴⁰ A Cirebon manuscript copy of *Serat Panji Jayalengkara* (Story of Panji Jayalengkara) features various calligrams, including both the Earthly Angel, identifiable by the rooster’s claw feet, and a four-legged elephant (Fig. 8.16).

The composite physical features, which a contemporary Cirebon adherent of Sufi practice ambiguously interprets as expressing the mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) of the artist, is also found on the ACM panel and serves to emphasise the image’s apotropaic power through hybrid appearances.¹⁴¹ Similar claw- or talon-like feet appear on several icons of Gaṇeśa documented by Ramachandra Rao in his comprehensive study of the god’s worship in India.¹⁴² The meaning of the Javanese letters comprising the *Serat Panji Jayalengkara* calligrams is deliberately illegible, but the Earthly Angel drawing creates the *memet* chronogram

137 K.C. Crucq, 1932, ‘Houtsnijwerk met inscripties in de kraton Kasepoehan te Cheribon’, *Djawa* 12, 9. My appreciation is expressed to Farouk Yahya for providing me with an English translation of Crucq’s paper, personal communication. According to Crucq, the reverse inscription reads: *manoek pipitoe njata goena/pamoertine apa doedoe ning manoesja*, translated as: ‘the seven birds represent what is forbidden for men’. However, this translation is questioned by a Javanese colleague and requires further research.

138 My appreciation is expressed to Achmad Opan Safari for his extensive commentary on this symbolism: personal communication. For a discussion of *ahli saliq*, refer anonymous, n.d. *Salik dan Suluk—Kebenaran Hakiki*. Available at: <https://alhakiki.tripod.com/hakiki025.html>.

139 *Kuntu manglayang anggakdi panggalihing kangkong*: Safari, personal communication.

140 Behrend, 1996, 199.

141 Safari, personal communication.

142 Rao, 1992, 264–266. Rao identifies the claws as tiger legs, while acknowledging that their significance is unknown.



FIGURE 8.16 Earthly Angel and birds as calligrams, double-folio from *Serat Panji Jayalengkara* manuscript. 1851, presumably Cirebon, West Java, ink and pigment on paper; Museum Sonobudoyo
PHOTOGRAPH: MUSEUM SONOBUDOYO

for the date of its composition in 1851 and reads: 'There is no elephant as big as a hill'.¹⁴³ The Angel's one-legged pose is reminiscent of the hopping Gana, likewise depicted facing a miniature mountain, on the relief at the 15th-century Sukuh temple.¹⁴⁴

143 Timothy E. Behrend, 1989, *Katalog Naskah-Naskah Museum Sonobudoyo Yogyakarta* (Yogyakarta: Museum Sonobudoyo), 320, provides this interpretation of the chronogram (*Oranana-gajah-saprawata-anak*). Behrend, 1996, 199, also illustrates two exquisite bird calligrams from the same manuscript which are incorrectly assigned to the *Serat Selarasa* (1835).

144 My appreciation is expressed to Professor Virginia Hooker for pointing out this similarity: personal communication. For contemporary Javanese *kejawen* spiritual practitioners, the mountain on the Sukuh relief is complemented by a wave beneath Gaṇa's left foot. Together, these two images symbolise the Javanese concept of cosmic unity or 'sea and mountain' (*sagara wukir*): Agung Harjuno, personal communication.

The chronogram also includes a diminutive heron, standing directly below the Earthly Angel; and on several other pages there are individual waterbird calligrams holding vegetal forms in their beaks. Their presence suggests the manuscript illuminator's intentional reference to the Shaṭṭāriyya proverb of the heron and water spinach, which, as discussed earlier, symbolises the search for spiritual truth. The subject, like the Earthly Angel calligram, does not apparently illustrate any episode in the *Serat Panji Jayalengkara*, which is a romance. Rather, the calligrams seek to imbue the manuscript, both as a narrative text and as an object, with talismanic power. The extent to which Shaṭṭāriyya teachings spread outside court circles into the wider community, both Javanese and non-Javanese, at this time is documented in a handwritten colophon in the manuscript recording its sale by a Chinese person named Oey Tek Nyi Jioe Te Kian on 27 June 1881.

The exceptionally esoteric significance of the Earthly Angel precluded its use as a batik garment motif, but by the end of the 19th century Cirebon and other north-coast Java batik centres were manufacturing quantities of batik cloths featuring a variety of bird calligrams.¹⁴⁵ Typically, these were head cloths and ceremonial drapes, both forms of textile that served talismanic purposes of protection (Fig. 8.17).¹⁴⁶

The batik bird calligrams sometimes appear remarkably similar to Ottoman *tughra*, although it is uncertain how familiar the makers were with the monograms, and the production of the cloths may simply reflect a broadening perception of the importance of Arabic script in talismans. Flying birds as devolved zoomorphic images, derived from the *megamendung* cloud motif, feature in the borders of another finely batiked 19th-century Cirebon head cloth (Fig. 8.18). Four earth-bound *kala* monster faces appear as simulacra utilising the *wadasan* stone motif. They complement the symbolism of the airborne creatures and face towards the head cloth's empty *modang* centre, which embodies Achjadi's afore-mentioned 'concentration of protective power'.

On this head cloth the bird simulacra, with accompanying vegetal motifs, are depicted in highly attenuated forms, yet they appear to evoke the heron

145 Ross, 2016, 211, notes evidence of this in the use of Arabic script in *jampi* charms inscribed on the back of Cirebon dance masks, which appears to have increased around the beginning of the 20th century.

146 For an extensive discussion of talismanic batiks, see Fiona Kerlogue, 2001, 'Islamic Talismans: The Calligraphy Batiks', in Itie Van Hout (ed.), *Batik: Drawn in Wax* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute), 124–135.



FIGURE 8.17 Man's head cloth (*iket kepala*), with birds as calligrams, 1900–1940, north coast Java, cotton, indigo, hand-stamped batik, 90.0 × 91.0 cm; Gift of Michael Abbott AO QC, Art Gallery of South Australia (20124A19)
PHOTOGRAPH: ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

and water spinach of the Shaṭṭāriyya proverb. Tan draws attention to repeated references in *suluk* devotional poetry to images of *lebur* and *luluh*, meaning ‘to dissolve or to melt away’.¹⁴⁷ He interprets such simulacra from Cirebon as representations of the dissolution of the boundaries between self and the divine essence, rather than as extreme figurative stylisations.

¹⁴⁷ Tan, 2019, 132.



FIGURE 8.18 Man's head cloth (*iket kepala*), with bird and kala simulacra, 1880–1925, Cirebon, West Java, cotton, natural dyes, hand-drawn batik; Tropenmuseum (RV-Liefkas-608)
PHOTOGRAPH: TROPENMUSEUM

8 Conclusion

The history of zoomorphic simulacra in Java, dating back over 1200 years, suggests that there has been a long-held belief in the talismanic power of visual ambiguity, which dates from the Hindu-Buddhist era. The evidence for this is seen in early temple reliefs and is further supported by mediaeval Javanese poetry, where literary metaphors evoking visual simulacra appear in texts that were themselves regarded as mystically talismanic. The cultural currency

attributed to the potency of concealment continued to be important following the rise of Islamic court cultures in the 16th century and is demonstrated in imagery found across a diverse range of media, both visual and textual. The Islamic association of the imagery with talismanic power may be understood in the context of the mystical paradigm of *lahir batin*, which is very important in Javanese sensibility and in Sufism. This history explains the longevity of belief in the prophylactic role of the deity Gaṇa, which arose during the Hindu-Buddhist era and continued after the arrival of Islam in Java. Rather than being a response to Islamic religious restrictions against figurative depiction, the transformation of the elephant-headed god into the Earthly Angel calligram sought to enhance his prophylactic potency by portraying him in Arabic script revered for its sacred nature.

Today, largely due to the influence of literalist and normative interpretations of Islam, the talismanic implications of Cirebon calligrams and related zoomorphic images are increasingly being displaced by a secular emphasis on their role as expressions of aesthetic identity in the arts of West Java. In Indonesia the calligrams and images are recognised nationally as examples of a distinctive regional art style that has developed out of an extraordinarily rich aesthetic heritage, and they are seen as one reflection of the diversity of the country's many ethnic traditions.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, for contemporary Shattāriyya students of Sufism, the Earthly Angel reminds 'the viewer of the essence of mystical teachings contained in Islamic texts and as a symbol of their identity as followers of *taṣawwuf*'.¹⁴⁹ Here the visual power of Gaṇa resides in the continuing visibility of his image as this unique Cirebon *tolak bala* calligram which appears in a range of contexts, including the magnificent examples of carved wooden panels still found in several royal palaces in Cirebon and Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum.

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148 I. Gede Arya Sucitra, 2015, 'Transformasi Sinkretisma Indonesia dan Karya Seni Islam', *Journal of Urban Society's Arts* 2(2): 97.

149 Safari, 2010, 317. As Cohen, 2005, 34, notes, such images in Java have become 'an artful way to project one's identity'.

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