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# Faith comes from the sea

## Maritime symbolism in the origin stories of three Muslim pilgrimage sites in Java

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The island of Java lies at the centre of a vast archipelago known locally as Nusantara, a world of islands.[1] It is also in the political and cultural heart of Indonesia, by far the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation. In Indonesia the territory of Islamic faith is criss-crossed by sea. The sea begets stories that are widely known – and very much *enjoyed* – across Java. They include the origin stories of several busy pilgrimage sites on the north coast of the island. This paper sketches the legendary origins of three of these sites, and explores the role of the sea and water in establishing their authority as nodes of Islamic piety.

Epigraphic evidence suggests that 500 years after Muhammad's *hijrah* Islam had made a tentative appearance in Java.[2] Small communities of Muslims took root in trading enclaves along the north coast, and traces have been found of Muslims living in the Hindu-Buddhist interior. For reasons that are far from clear, in the 1520s this glacial, centuries-long growth tipped into a sudden mass conversion to Islam across the island.

In folk tradition the conversion of Java is attributed mainly to a cohort of semi-legendary saints known as the Nine Wali (*Wali Sångå*) most of whom lived in the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century. They include Sunan Kalijågå, Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang, whose stories are the subject of this paper. Their three tombs have been sacred places and popular pilgrimage destinations for at least 400 years.

[1] Literally, *nusa* means "island" and *antara* means "between" or "beyond". The name reflects a view of the world that places Java at the centre surrounded by "islands beyond". Today *nusantara* and its variant *nuswantara* are taken to denote the Indonesian archipelago.

[2] A gravestone found at Leran near Surabaya commemorates a certain Fatima binti Maimun and is dated in kufic script 496 AH (1102 CE). But there is doubt about the origins of the stone and the lady. Both may have come from India or the Middle East.

Today they host many hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of devotional visits every year.[3] The origin stories of the tombs are well known to pilgrims and to the Muslim public in general. They are disseminated by word of mouth, in television dramas, and in small guide books and popular histories sold in bookshops, markets and at the sites themselves.

Each of the three tombs is housed in a small, sloping-roofed, slightly raised wooden burial chamber that in turn lies within a larger, square building under a low, pyramid shaped *tajug* roof made of dark wooden *sirap* shingles. Each of the mausoleums is surrounded by a burial ground filled with grave markers, and each lies immediately to the west of an adjacent mosque. In Java, the direction of the *qibla* is to the west,[4] so when the mosque congregation bows towards the Ka'bah in *salat* prayer they are also praying in the direction of their revered local saints.

Sunan Kalijågå's tomb lies in the village of Kadilangu which is part of the town of Demak some 25 kilometres east of Semarang in Central Java [GPS coordinates: 6°53'47.39"S 110°38'52.00"E]. Sunan Bonang's tomb is just 200 metres from the sea in the centre of Tuban, a small town about half way between Semarang and Surabaya in East Java [GPS coordinates: 6°53'40.86"S 112° 3'47.72"E]. Sunan Giri's tomb is on a hillside overlooking the harbour town of Gresik, about 15 kilometres northwest of Surabaya, East Java [GPS coordinates: 7°10'8.23"S 112°37'51.60"E].

## Sunan Kalijågå visits the oceanic "other world" of Islam

By popular consensus the most revered, and the most explicitly Javanese (as opposed to Arab or Middle-Eastern) of the Nine Walis is Sunan Kalijågå. Reputedly he was born in the mid 1400s into the local Muslim aristocracy of Tuban, a trading town on the north coast of (then predominantly Hindu-Buddhist) East Java. As a young man he left the privileges of his home and turned to a life of crime but was inspired by another legendary saint, Sunan Bonang, to renew his commitment to Islamic piety.

[3] Really accurate figures on visitor numbers are difficult to come by. When I visited the tomb of Sunan Bonang in July 1997 custodial staff showed me records that indicated pilgrim numbers had been increasing at a rate of 10-20 percent a year, culminating in a total of 526,268 in 1997. When I visited the tomb in November 2003 staff assured me that visitor numbers had topped one million in 2002, see Quinn 2008:64-66. There is no reason to suppose that visitor numbers have not continued to climb in the years since.
[4] More accurately *north*-west, although until recent times there has been some variation in the exactitude of *qibla* orientation in Java and across Indonesia.

Bearing the name Sheikh Malaya he moved west to Cirebon, another north coast trading settlement. There he resolved to meet the prophet Khiḍr (in Indonesia often called Khaidir, Kidir or Kilir), the spiritual guide and "green one" of Islamic hagiography. Khiḍr appears in the Qur'an in Surah 18 (Al-Kahf) ayah 65-82 in which the prophet Musa meets with "one of Our servants", traditionally understood to be the prophet Khiḍr. Musa pleads with Khiḍr to be accepted as a follower and taught "something of the higher truth that you have been taught" (Qur'an 18:66). The meeting appears to have taken place at or near "the junction of two seas" (Qur'an 18: 60).

The incident is echoed in an anonymous Javanese text *Wejangane Kangjeng Nabi Kilir Marang Syech Malaya* (The teachings of His Grace the Prophet Kilir to Sheikh Malaya) possibly written in the late 19th century. It describes a seashore meeting between the prophet Khiḍr (called Kilir) and Sunan Kalijågå (called Sheikh Malaya) in which Sunan Kalijågå adopts a role analogous to that of Musa in the Qur'anic story.

> [Sheikh Malaya] set out from Cirebon and walked quickly without any dangers to be seen. In the depths of his heart he was focussed on one thing only: the reward of truth. He headed north and after a time came to the coast where he stared in wonder at the sparkling sea. There were no boats to be seen (it happened to be at night) and he was in doubt about what to do, for he had intended to put to sea and drift wherever the ocean currents might carry him. He was taken aback by the depth of the sea but was too ashamed [of his fear] to turn away. So, with nothing to lose, he decided instead to meditate on the shore to curb the surge of his worldly desires. He was thinking of one thing only – the purpose that he was focussed on – the grace of Hyang Widdhi.[5]
>
> At that instant the prophet Kilir appeared before him like a tiny child suffusing the air with sweet perfume. When the prophet materialised he was like a bolt of lightning but Sheikh Malaya didn't even blink and remained deep in meditation. His Grace the prophet spoke: "Wake from your meditation, don't shut me out. In truth, I am the one you are looking for, the prophet Kilir." (Wirjapanitra: 44)

In the Qur'an Musa accompanies Khiḍr on a journey during which Khiḍr performs several enigmatic acts that – it turns out – reveal his prophetic powers and moral

[5] Although *Wejangane Kangjeng Nabi Kilir Marang Syech Malaya* was written in relatively recent times by a Muslim author, it refers to Allah by the Old Javanese term for the highest deity in the Hindu pantheon, Hyang Widdhi (Supreme Lord).

integrity. In the Javanese text the Prophet Kilir invites Sheikh Malaya to come with him to "a place of silence" where he will show him "the mystery of Allah". It is a promise that echoes the promise of higher truth mentioned in the parallel passage in the Qur'an.

> The prophet Kilir sprang into the air and Sheikh Malaya flew up with him, apparently clinging to his thigh. It wasn't long before the pair came to a vast, broad place like a flat field. All around them was the boundless ocean. (Wirjapanitra: 44)

The prophet Kilir instructs Sheikh Malaya – alias Sunan Kalijaga – in some of the mysteries of sufism, including the symbolic meaning of colours. But what predominates in the narrative is the impact of the sea as a force that symbolically erases the old order and gives birth to the new. It strips Sheikh Malaya of the old certainties that had ruled his life.

> Sheikh Malaya was commanded to open his eyes, and when he did he beheld an expanse without horizon. He concentrated hard to take it in but he couldn't see where north or south were, nor west or east, nor could he see the sun or moon. He had arrived in a world that was the very opposite of the world he had known. (Wirjapanitra: 44)

And when eventually Kilir returns Sheikh Malaya to dry land, the Javanese saint has become a new man.

> Thus it was that Sheikh Malaya was instructed to return to the world in which he had previously lived. The expanse of this world appeared before him. Again he could see the four cardinal directions, and he was able to distinguish above from below. Again he could see the sun with its halo of light, he could see the ocean and the mountains clear and steady. On the shoreline he was struck with wonder. He looked around him as if in a dream.[6]
>
> Nevertheless he took it all in and understood it in an instant, for now he was armed with the knowledge of where he had come from and where he had to go. He was like the bud of a flower that had reached the moment of blooming, exhaling the sweet fragrance (of Islam) into the air.

[6] This passage almost exactly replicates a passage in the *Serat Dewa Ruci*, a text written some time in the late 18th century and attributed to Surakarta court poet Yasadipura I (1729-1803), see Arps 2007:5.

> He headed home, but he didn't return to Cirebon. Instead he went to his home at Kalijaga. That is why Kalijaga became famous, because it was here that Sheikh Malaya passed on the power of his Islamic *ilmu*. He become a great leader of the faithful and many clever men came to study under him. (Wirjapanitra: 49)

## Sunan Giri, the young man from the sea

Like Sunan Kalijågå, Sunan Giri is represented in popular story as a kind of antipodean Musa. With many variants,[7] the story goes that some time around the middle of the 15th century, Sunan Giri's father, Maulana Ishak, went to Blambangan at the far eastern end of Java opposite Bali, to convert the Hindu population to Islam.[8] During an epidemic the daughter of the king of Blambangan fell ill. The king announced a competition: whoever could cure his daughter would be given her hand in marriage. Maulana Ishak succeeded in doing so, the Hindu princess and the Muslim teacher were married, and the princess converted to Islam. The local king, however, remained a resolute Hindu. Playing a role echoing that of the Pharoah (*Fir'aun*) in the Qur'anic tale of Musa (opening verses of Surah 28 Al-Qasas), the king grew fearful of Maulana Ishak's growing authority and the growing stature of Islam in his territories. He ordered the murder of his son-in-law, but Maulana Ishak managed to make a narrow escape leaving behind his wife who was pregnant.

The princess gave birth to a boy. Fearing that her father would murder the infant, she secretly took him to the seashore, placed him in a casket and set him afloat on the waters of the Bali Strait. (In some versions of the story she was commanded to do this by her father after pleading with him to spare the life of her baby.) The sea currents bore the casket north into the Java Sea where it was picked up by a trading vessel belonging to a rich Muslim business-woman, Nyai Ageng Pinatih from the trading town of Gresik. She recognised the saintly attributes of the child and adopted him, raising him to become a renowned teacher of Islam and ultimately the ruler of Giri, one of Java's earliest Islamic polities. She gave him the name Jåkå Samudrå, literally "the young man from the sea".

[7] Some of the variations in popular stories about Sunan Giri are mentioned in Agus Sunyoto 2012 ch.5.
[8] The story that follows is digested from several sources, principally Umar Hasyim 1979: 21-29.

The infant Sunan Giri is adopted by the rich business woman Nyai Ageng Pinantih after emerging from the sea. (Illustration from a popular storybook.)

"Jåkå Samudrå" took charge of his adoptive mother's business operations. He undertook a hazardous trading voyage across the Java Sea to the island of Kalimantan (Borneo). There he disposed of his cargo without requiring his customers (many of them unbelievers) to pay for it. His crew protested, but Jåkå Samudrå told them to regard the loss of the cargo as *zakat* alms paid to the poor in the service of Islam. They replied that he needed a return cargo, so he commanded them to fill his ships with ballast of sand and stones. The ships arrived back in Gresik, and the valueless cargo was reported to Nyi Ageng Pinatih. She became angry, but when she went to see the ships for herself she found them full of valuable cargo that had magically filled the holds during the return voyage across the Java Sea. She realised that her adoptive son had a profound understanding of Islam, and her own was shallow. Giving alms to the poor and devoting wealth to proselytising (*da'wah*) would bring her greater profits, both material and spiritual. (Syam: 1-17)

Today the tomb of Sunan Giri is one of Java's busiest pilgrimage sites. It sits atop a hill in the town of Gresik, about 15 kilometres north west of the centre of Surabaya. The site overlooks the sea. Below it, just metres from the waters of the harbour lies the tomb of Nyi Gede Pinatih. The origin stories told at both sites (and in the case of Sunan Giri, told in innumerable small books) give high prominence to Sunan Giri's miraculous origins in the sea.

## Sunan Bonang on the shoreline between Hinduism and Islam

The sea that caused goods to materialise in the holds of Jåkå Samudrå's ships similarly proved its power to nurture Islam in a famous story told of Sunan Bonang. As in the

stories of Sunan Kalijaga and Sunan Giri, this story too plays out on the frontier between the boundless ocean of Islam's truth and the land-bound, finite abode of human frailty. In this case the sea wreaks its destructive but regenerative power on the scholarly traditions of unbelief.

> A very learned brahmin priest named Sakyakirti scoffed when news of Sunan Bonang's reputation reached him in distant India. Packing up a library of books he set sail for Java determined to debate the upstart Muslim holy man and convert him to the Hindu faith. As his ship approached Tuban the sea rose and a vast storm overtook it, tearing it apart and sending it to the bottom of the Java Sea.
>
> Sakyakirti survived and was cast ashore on the beach at Tuban. As he lifted his gaze and looked around he saw a man in a white robe standing before him. Sakyakirti called out to him.
>
> "Friend, I am a Hindu priest. I have come from India to pit my knowledge against that of Sunan Bonang. But I think my journey has been wasted. I have lost all my books... they went to the bottom of the ocean together with my ship."
>
> The white-robed figure raised his staff, plunged it into the sand then lifted it up again. Fresh water jetted from the hole he had made. Carried on the gush of water the brahmin's library of thick books also spurted from the sand. They rolled over in the air and settled undamaged, dry and in neat piles in front of the dumbfounded visitor.
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> "Sir," said the priest, his voice trembling, "I see that you are the saint I have been looking for. I plead for your forgiveness and I gratefully embrace the faith of Islam." (Digested from Arman Arroisi 1993:1-2 and Hadi Asmara 1998: 35)

Sunan Bonang makes books from a wrecked ship spout from the sand on the waterfront at Tuban. (Illustration from a popular story book.)

Today, the spring created by Sunan Bonang is known as the Srumbung Well (*Sumur Srumbung).* It lies at the tidal line on the shore near the centre of Tuban, little more than 200 metres from the ancient tomb of Sunan Bonang. At one time it was accessible only at low tide but now a small gazebo-shaped building has been erected around it shutting out the sea, so pilgrims can access the spring at any hour. The water from the spring is fresh and, according to some pilgrims, comes via an underground channel direct from the *Zamzam* well in Mecca.[9] It "tastes different" and can be taken away in bottles to be mixed a drop at a time with bath water and cooking water, and used as an all-purpose medicine.

## The sea has will

In the extract from *Wejangane Kangjeng Nabi Kilir Marang Syech Malaya* cited earlier, Sheikh Malaya (Sunan Kalijågå) goes to the seashore at Cirebon intending "to put to sea and drift wherever the ocean currents might carry him." The sea not only represents the disorienting boundlessless and unpredictable power of the divine, it also embodies divine will. Complete surrender to God's will carries the believer to a destination – a good destination – determined by God. The same idea is expressed in the story of the infant Jåkå Samudrå (Sunan Giri) for whom the currents of the Java Sea were a gentle path to Islamic service and piety.

[9] Personal communication during a visit to the site in 2009.

According to one well-known story,[10] Sunan Bonang died on the island of Bawean in the Java Sea (possibly around 1525), but his body was spirited away for burial in his home town of Tuban. When the body reached Tuban there was a further dispute over burial rights between the saint's followers from Surabaya and those from Madura. In a bizarre touch the disputing parties flipped a coin and burial rights fell to the Madurese. But when they loaded Sunan Bonang's coffin onto a ship for transport to Madura, the sea rejected the ship and it mysteriously refused to move. Clearly it was the will of the sea that he be buried in Tuban.[11]

The sea, or the waters of a river, can even be an arbiter – a kind of litmus test – of faith. Islam is the faith that cannot be extinguished. It burns in water, in fact water can be fuel for faith. According to the court chronicle *Babad Tanah Jawi* and folk anecdotes, whenever Sunan Kalijaga meditated at night he carried a taper to illuminate the darkness. It glowed with the light of faith.

> If he felt sleep coming on him he would dive into the river holding the glowing taper. If the flame was doused as it hit the water it signified that the Almighty had not yet heard his prayers. After a year of nightly meditation by immersion he was astonished to find that the glowing taper he held was never extinguished, even when it went repeatedly below the surface of the water. (Sastrodihardjo: 16)

## The motif of floating

When Sheikh Malaya was invited by the prophet Kilir to accompany him to "a place of silence" he found himself floating in a boundless, formless void, like an ocean. To float is to be free from the constraints of normal posture and orientation, even gravity. It is a metaphor for the boundlessness, formlessness and power of Allah. The impulse to go to sea – to brave the dangers of the unkown and unknowable – is a metaphor for the believer's longing for Allah that compels the believer to put aside all doubts and fears and to plunge into, or float on, the vast ocean of divine substance.

[10] Told to me by Muhammad Lazim, a custodian of Sunan Bonang's tomb in Tuban, during a visit in 2005, see also Hadi Asmara 1998: 35.

[11] In telling of body-snatching adventures, coin flipping, and recalcitrant ships that refuse to sail, Javanese story tellers let loose the playfulness – sometimes the slapstick humour – that often quietly deflates the excesses of pomposity in the religious traditions they are passing on. A similar story to that of Sunan Bonang's disputed burial is told regarding the origin of the tomb of Sayyid Yusuf on Poteran Island, off the coast of eastern Madura, see Quinn 2009: 254-255.

In Java this conventional *sufi* metaphor – the mystic swallowed up in the sea of non-being – is transformed into a practice known as "meditative drifting" (*tåpå ngèli*). For pilgrims at the tomb of Sunan Kalijågå, *tåpå ngèli* is part of the saint's legacy. Tomb custodians recount that every night after the Isa' prayer the saint would go to the riverbank and meditate. To ward off the beguiling but dangerous forgetfulness of sleep he would slip into the river and meditate for hours immersed to his neck in the cool current and drift away in meditation. (*Babad Tanah Jawi* jilid 2/18)

The idea of *tåpå ngèli* is alive today (although understood more in the telling than in the doing) and it is understood in spiritual-mystical terms.

> By undertaking *tåpå ngèli* you launch yourself into the river of divine substance, that is, you submit yourself to the will of God Almighty. The current is God's current. It is like the current of a river that flows along, twisting and bending in step with the rhythms of nature. The current speaks – as it were – the language of nature's wisdom. If you allow yourself to drift in it, ultimately you will reach the river's mouth at which point you will enter the divine sea of contentment and good fortune. ("Kejawen: Ajaran luhur…").[12]

Some interpret the current of *tåpå ngèli* as the unstoppable tide of modern life. The waters in which one floats are the waters of human society. To live well in the modern world the trick is to avoid rigidity and fanaticism and learn how to "drift without floating away" (*ngèli ning ora kèli*). "This is not easy to pull off," says one contemporary observer.

> "*Ngèli*" means not resisting the waves that drag us along, but rather going with the flow or riding the swell. With a flexible outlook we won't drown or get carried away or, worst of all, founder on the shoals of life. So when the moment is right we should be able to extract ourselves from the current safely and without stress. (Sri Teddy Rusdi)

The author invokes two strategies that allow you to drift along without letting the current get the better of you. The first comes from nineteenth century poet-philosopher Radèn Ngabei Ranggåwarsitå (1802 – 1873). In his poem *Sêrat Kålåtidhå* (A Time of Darkness) the poet warns that the only way to avoid being seized by the madness of

[12] A measure of the interest in this issue, on the date I accessed this article it claimed to have received more than five million hits and this post had attracted more than 1,500 comments.

modern times (read: carried off by the current) is to cultivate independence of mind. In the terminology of nineteenth century proto-psychology he calls independence of mind "acute awareness" (*éling*) and "acute vigilance" (*waspådå*).[13] The other strategy comes from philosopher Ki Ageng Suryomentaram (1892 – 1962). Nothing, he said, happens randomly or without cause. All events are governed by the laws of nature. There is an inevitability about the things that happen to us. For that reason it is futile to pursue one ambition and ignore all else, or fight to the death to resist something to the exclusion of all else. We cannot govern our lives to that extent. If we try, we lose perspective and allow the current of obsessiveness to carry us away (Sri Teddy Rusdi).

## Connecting with the pre-Islamic past

In innumerable folk stories and traditional devotional practices of pre-Islamic origin the sea expresses the divine essence and will. Conventionally this force – whether benign or malevolent – appears in metaphorical guise. The willfulness of the southern ocean, for example, is represented in the capricious, seductive, autochthonous sea deity Ratu Kidul, the Queen of the South (also called Nyai Råråh Kidul). For centuries the rulers of Central Java, Muslims all, have represented themselves as allies of Ratu Kidul, an alliance sealed in symbolic marriage. From time to time, Ratu Kidul has intervened in, even directed, the affairs of the Javanese state.[14]

Sheikh Malaya's meeting with the prophet Khiḍr on the beach at Cirebon is modelled on – and in some passages is drawn almost verbatim from – a text called the *Serat Dewaruci* probably written by the Surakarta court poet Yasadipura I some time in the second half of the eighteenth century.

This work in turn is based on a pre-Islamic text originally written in Old Javanese in which Bima, a hero of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*, sets out in search of the water of life. The search takes him into the depths of the ocean where he meets Dewa Ruci, a tiny replica of himself. Dewa Ruci invites Bima – who has a massive body – to squeeze inside him through his ear. The sceptical Bima manages to do this, and inside his mini-

[13] This advice is no esoteric oddity because, in various fragments, the *Sêrat Kålåtidhå* is probably the most widely known poem in Javanese society today.
[14] Even today, the rulers of the now politically toothless Javanese polities of Jogjakarta and Surakarta conduct an annual ceremony called Labuhan (literally "casting into the sea") during which symbolically powerful royal artifacts are cast into the sea to placate and venerate Ratu Kidul.

self he finds a vast ocean. It is the ocean of God's infinity that lies within the diminutive confines of every human individual.

Bima (left), a pre-Islamic Musa and Dewa Ruci (right), a pre-Islamic Khiḍr, shown in the depths of a stylised ocean. (Illustration from a popular story book.)

In *Wejangane Kangjeng Nabi Kilir Marang Syech Malaya,* the prophet Khiḍr is represented as "like a tiny child" (*apindha rare bajang*), that is, like Dewa Ruci. In a host of ways Sheikh Malaya's journey into the mystical ocean recalls the Dewa Ruci story. So Sheikh Malaya not only adopts the persona of the prophet Musa who meets with Khiḍr, but also that of the Javanese hero Bimå (also called Wrekudara) who meets with the dwarf-like divinity Dewa Ruci. The valencies of the story invite the reader (or, as often as not, the listener) to look to Java's Hindu-Buddhist heritage as well as to the heritage of Islam.

Many, probably most, of the pilgrims who visit Sunan Kalijågå's tomb in Demak will know the story of Musa and the prophet Khiḍr. Many will also have at least a vague idea of the Dewa Ruci story, which has been turned into a shadow play sustained in popularity by Bima's spectacular fights with sea monsters. The tomb's origin story with its Janus-like character is given a reassuring, powerful materiality by being anchored in a particular place – the tomb of Sunan Kalijågå. Like the story, the tomb is on a "shoreline",[15] a place of transition, a bi-valent place that juxtaposes the materiality and compromises of everyday living against the boundless, perfect power of the divine.

[15] Or it once was. Demak's harbour silted up centuries ago and the coastline is now some 10 kilometres from the tomb that once stood near the shore. But Sunan Kalijaga's tomb still stands beside the Tuntang River, a site that recalls Sunan Kalijaga's riverside meditative practices. The river is something of a watery boundary between two rival orientations in Javanese Islam: on the one hand indigenous traditionalism embodied in the saint's tomb with all its stories and practices, and on the other hand the modernist, Middle-Eastern oriented outlook that is stronger at the nearby (but cross-river) Grand Mosque of Demak.

## The liminal, conciliatory embrace of the sea

On the 26th of December, 2004, a tsunami devastated the coastal regions of Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra. Much of the provincial capital, Banda Aceh, was destroyed. An estimated 180,000 people were killed or disappeared across the province and about half a million were left homeless. At the time Aceh was racked by a secessionist rebellion that, from the late 1970s, had proved impossible to resolve by negotiation. The tsunami focussed world attention on Aceh and its apparently intractable conflict. This in turn gave impetus to negotiations that within months produced a settlement, the so-called Helsinki Agreement of August 2005 (Heiling, Kingsbury). Behind the successful resolution of the conflict lay a conviction – largely unspoken around the negotiating table but palpable nevertheless – that Allah had spoken through the sea. A number of *ulama*, mosque *imam* and media commentators across Indonesia also expressed the conviction that Allah had spoken through the tsunami, and that indeed Allah always speaks in two ways; through the verses of the Qur'an, called *ayat qauliyah*, as well as through natural phenomena that are also seen as divine "verses" called *ayat kauniyah*.

The case of Aceh is extreme but it illustrates that in everyday practice as well as in *tauhid* theology and speculative *sufi* esotericism the imagery of the sea can be powerful. In the context of Javanese history, and the 16th century transition from Hinduism-Buddhism to Islam, this imagery seems to play a liminal and conciliatory role that resonates in stories like those of Sunan Giri and Sunan Bonang recounted above in which the sea is both destructive, regenerative and reconciliatory. As Ethel Sara Wolper observes, the Khiḍr of Muslim myth and folklore is widely seen as a symbol of cultural contact and conversion (Wolper 2013:147). Khiḍr has been seen as a sailor figure, symbolically aligned with the sea but appearing on the shoreline frontier between the two very different worlds of sea and land. He is, then, a figure identified with orderly transition from one order to another. A recent book represents Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid (in office 1999 – 2001) as a mercurial Khiḍr, bearing Indonesia through the transition from the dictatorial rule of President Soeharto (in office 1967 – 1998) into Indonesia's current era of liberal democracy. The cover of the book shows a cartoon image of the president dressed like the prophet Khiḍr in Middle-eastern dress, seated on a beach with the sea in the background (Mas'ud Adnan).

The liminal character of the sea squares with the liminal character of pilgrimage. On the mutable shoreline of this imagery Java's Hindu-Buddhist past encounters its Islamic

present, folk philosophy (*tåpå ngèli*) meets *sufi* esotericism, and local devotions meet the wider world of Islam. The boundary-free embrace of the sea seems to provide a conciliatory frame for these encounters to take place.

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