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# **Dreams, legends, spirituality and miracles: understanding tattoo narratives among contemporary urban men in Java Island, Indonesia**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between dreams and tattooing in the context of the spiritual beliefs in Indonesia. Based on interviews and ethnographic study in the Island of Java, we highlight the importance of dreams, their perceived meanings and significance for male individuals, who have tattooed their bodies with dreamed imagery. Interviews revealed narratives which arise from the tattoos themselves and we relate them to myth, belief and legends familiar to the Javanese; these draw upon religious faith and also more atavistic mystical beliefs. An important source is the Javanese legend of Nyai Roro Kidul, a narrative often seen to legitimise political, royal and magical power. Dream expressions also draw upon popular visual culture as part of a dynamic and ongoing evolution of an embodied discourse of belief. Our case studies reveal that tattooing can be part of the broader mediation of belief in the supernatural where older beliefs can intervene in new domains and contexts for expression.

Keywords: tattoo; dream; miracle; belief; legend; myth; legitimisation; mediation

In previous research on tattoos in Indonesia's underground music community (Handoko 2019), we noticed that a punk music fan wore a tattoo of St. Mary because she had dreamed of meeting her. What's more, the dream led to her turning from Islam to Catholicism, as she believed that the dream was a sign. Impressed by this case, we looked more widely for other contemporary examples which connected tattoos to dreams and magical beliefs. This article details results from this effort to study the creation and significance of tattoos in contemporary urban communities in Java island based on dream-based beliefs and practices. Our study seeks to provide insights on how dreams motivate Javanese people to get tattoos and how the dream narratives are enmeshed with regional folklore, mythology, superstition and other narrative sources. We also examine the influences tattoo artists draw upon when interpreting and visualising the dreams into tattoo objects.

## **Research context: tattooing and Indonesia**

Tattooing has been practiced in Indonesia at least since prehistoric times ca. 1500–500 BC (Rosa 1994). Yet research and publications on tattoos in Indonesia are very limited in number because tattoo culture is still considered taboo and often contradicts the social and religious values held by Indonesian people whose majority are Muslim. Olong (2006) and Handoko (2007) have observed that their negative perception continues to be reinforced by religious teachings that consider tattoos to be haram, or forbidden (Bauto 2014; Dahlan 2014). Elsewhere I have described cases where tattooed people were rejected by prospective in-laws, refused employment and labelled as transgressors and criminals (Handoko 2019). In the Yogyakarta region, urban tattoos appeared around the 1950s, and mainly worn by street criminals and former prison inmates (Handoko 2007).

Marianto and Barry (2002) noted that, in Jakarta during the 1960s and 1970s, tattooed people were often former inmates. This identification with criminality was further stigmatised by the murders of 'criminals' by President Soeharto's New Order state actors which took place in

the early 1980s whose victims appear to have been targeted because of their tattoos (Marianto and Barry 2002). In 1983–1984, these were known as unexplained shootings or *Petrus* (an abbreviation for *Penembakan Misterius*). The majority of the victims were tattooed and were singled out by military gunmen dressed in civilian clothes (Marianto and Barry 2002; Olong 2006; Siegel 1998). Even though other peoples of the world associated tattooing with criminality, this was a particularly extreme response.

After the fall of the New Order in 1998, freedom and more liberal expression through tattoos spread first amongst young people in the Punk, Rock, and Black Metal music communities. Students also started to adopt tattoos (Olong 2006). Tattoos and tattooing activities at those times had various functions and associations, namely: as fun diversions, following new trends amongst young people, rebellion, or artistic expression. However, tattoos still create negative feelings within a broader conservative Javanese society (Handoko 2007; Olong 2006). Recent research shows that tattoos in Indonesia are growing increasingly popular in certain communities such as in entertainment industries and the working class. The underground music scene is perhaps the most intensive inspiration, including for musicians and fans of Punk, Hardcore, and Metal music genres. For this community, tattoos function variably as self-expression, a medium of community and social interaction, and representations of aesthetic values and local ideology. As this article details, however, they can also serve as spiritual expressions. Despite having local uniqueness in terms of symbolism and practice, such as the use of Javanese script, Balinese iconography (e.g. *Barong* and *Rangda*) as well as local motifs derived from Dayak and Mentawai culture, tattooing practice in the underground music world have been influenced by global culture, such as depictions of Marilyn Monroe, the Rolling Stones logo, and Christian saints (Handoko 2019).

Recent research conducted by Hegarty (2017) focused on *Kustom Tato* among upper middle-class people in Indonesia. This research showed that tattoos were increasingly popular as a lifestyle symbol and for personal identity. *Kustom Tato* is created specifically for each individual or in accordance with the client requests. Popular symbols such as Indonesian local motifs were used with some modern artistic modifications (Hegarty 2017). Overall, tattoos have many functions and manifestations in Indonesia today, most usually as aesthetic and lifestyle expression (Olong 2006). In some instances, tattoos articulate spiritual and mystical concerns (Handoko 2007, 2019; Manru 2017). Like their traditional forebears, some young local people in Java Island tattoo their bodies in hopes of gaining magical power. They carry out ritual activities, such as burning incense and praying in sacred places before tattooing their bodies with certain symbols. This kind of tattoo sometimes is called *Rajah* by some people to distinguish them from a common tattoo (created without the ritual). *Rajah* describes a tattoo that aims to function as a mantra or amulet, which is used to protect from physical harm, to avoid demonic interference, or to magically attract the opposite sex. A Javanese prison inmate in Yogyakarta had an example of the latter (Handoko 2007). A Javanese man about 48 years old, he worked as a debt-collector and had been jailed for injuring and killing people. He was also known as a playboy who could captivate the hearts of women in the city of Yogyakarta and surrounding areas. He divulged the ‘secret’ of his allure: green coloured, snake scales tattooed on his penis. Because of his belief in the tattoo’s magical power, the owner explained that he had gained four wives. To acquire the tattoo, he had to fast and pray in a Javanese traditional manner, called *kejawen*, and follow a ritual process led by his Javanese spiritual teacher/shaman (Handoko 2007). This example also illustrates a wider point that perceptions of tattooing practices and tattoos have undergone important changes during the last two decades in Indonesia. Tattooing has moved from being a relatively abstruse topic associated with deviancy and non-mainstream groups to a

dimension of popular culture; the practice has also seen the re-emergence of traditional and mystical beliefs with new manifestations.

The esoteric world of spirits and mysticism has been an essential element of Indonesian culture and identity right across the archipelago. The strong belief in spirits and mysticism can be represented by the figure of dukun or shaman (Mahony 2002). For Mentawaiian groups, the dukun shaman is chosen through a dream and has a star symbol tattoo on his body. This dukun in Mentawaiian people is called sikerei (Munaf et al. 1999), who is a person who controls spells. Etymologically, sikerei comes from the word kerey which means 'mantra'. He is seen to have mastered spells which makes him able to connect creatures in the sita makokoinung (supernatural realm) with a human who lives in the realm of makokoinung (the world). This is a more traditional precursor to the modern Javanese tattoo practices investigated in this article. Dreams are also influential in the creation of traditional architecture (Sitanggang 1991; Wibowo 2001). Overall, this article aims to add to previous scholarship by examining the relationship between dreams and tattooing in the context of the spiritual beliefs in urban Indonesian contexts. We highlight how dreams help form the basis for the creation of tattoos in contemporary communities in urban areas in Java island, particularly those participants of Java's underground music scene. Based on interviews and ethnographic study in the Island of Java, we describe a series of cases where dreams motivated Javanese people to get tattoos and how their narratives are tied in with Javanese folklore, mythology, superstition and other narrative sources. By highlighting religious and atavistic mystical concerns, we argue that contemporary Javanese tattooing is part of the broader mediation of belief in the supernatural which reinforces old beliefs while raising new domains and contexts for expression.

## **Method**

Our study is based on a combination of participant-observation, field research, and intense communication through social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. For this study, we specified the subjects of the study using purposive and snowball sampling approaches. Participants were selected on the basis that they directly have experiences on the tattoo productions whose main ideas of creation or motivation to make tattoos are based on dreams. To find respondents, some tattooists in the Surabaya and Sidoarjo area were contacted and they helped to spread information to other tattooists and tattoo lovers in the community. Many of the subjects were sought out based on suggestions, and not everyone who had a tattoo based on the dream could be interviewed (for different reasons, such as opting out or in lack of or out-of-date contact information). Tattoo artists, however, were able to provide some detailed information about persons and their tattoos. Five male respondents were available to be interviewed. They were from the Javanese cities of Jakarta, Salatiga and Sidoarjo. Three of them are tattooists and some others are their clients, aged 25–40 years old. The interviews took place from December 2017 to May 2019.

To analyse the functions and the meanings of tattoos, a deeper contextual study would be necessary (Lodder 2010) as tattoos and dream interpretations are intersubjective textual forms. People are not always ready or willing to discuss their tattoos when asked (Demello 2000). But on the other hand, tattoos researchers try to find the meaning of each of these tattoos (Lodder 2010). Thus researchers are sometimes fixated on just one side issue, that tattoos must have certain meanings because they are attached to the body. If the role of the body is eliminated, is the tattoo still meaningful? The value of subjectivity is critical because tattoos are the result of one's life experience. On the other hand, the tattooist has a role in the production of meanings in tattooing practices and understanding tattoos should be studied

through channels of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. This is what Lodder (2010) describes as a tattooing discourse. As a result, the questions that arose in the interviews did not only centre on the meanings of the tattoos but also the motivations for someone to have such imagery on their bodies. This line of questioning opened-up opportunities to understand tattoos from various perspectives, knowledge, and contexts.

### **Understanding dreams in Indonesian cultural perspectives**

Dreams form one of the key bases for tattoo creation today. Among the people in Javanese cities (e.g. Jakarta, Surabaya) and other regions, the imagery of dreams included angels, Jesus, St. Mary, a Javanese mystical Queen of the South Sea (in addition to other images from popular culture). Accounts gathered in interviews with tattooed individuals also highlight the dream's importance in having the tattoo as well as the resulting specific imagery. According to Wibowo (2008), dreams in the Indonesian context are part of the supernatural world and are believed to carry messages and collective beliefs. That is why some Javanese people are significantly concerned about their dreams. Valuing and interpreting dreams is not a new phenomenon in a global historical sense, but its ongoing importance in modern urban society and the way it manifests through tattoos can be distinctive and meaningful in a local Javanese context.

Literature about dreams and their meanings in the Indonesian cultural context are rarely found in Indonesia because 'the nature of traditional wisdom' is usually passed down by word of mouth, generation after generation. However, this knowledge still has much currency and is closely embedded in Indonesian folk culture. According to Koentjaraningrat (2002), the basic words of *budaya* (culture) comes from the Sanskrit language 'buddhayah', which is the plural form of *buddhi* which means 'mind' or 'reason'. So Koentjaraningrat defines culture as 'mind power' in the form of creativity, intention and taste. In other words, culture is a whole system of ideas, actions and human work that is obtained through a lifelong learning process. Another Indonesian scholar, Liliweri (2002) defines *budaya/kebudayaan* as a view of life from a group of people in the form of behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they receive unconsciously all of which are inherited through the communication process from one generation to the next. In Javanese culture, dreams are a significant element of its *budaya*.

Dreams are believed to be the medium carrying information about the future of humans. Wibowo (2008) states that Indonesian people, especially Javanese, already have a collective awareness of dream interpretation dating back several hundreds of years. He studied dreams based on a colonial era ethnographic manuscript written by H. Maksoem of Tegal, Central Java in the 1930s named *Ta'biraning Impen*. The manuscripts reveal four types of symbols contained in the context of dream interpretation in Javanese culture, ranging from binaristic religious imports to animistic symbols reflecting the syncretic range of Javanese spiritual vocabulary. The typology consists of: (1) religious symbols including angels, prophets/apostles, God, heaven and hell; (2) symbols relating to nature, namely the sky, sun, moon, stars, rain, lightning, rainbow, clouds, fire, well, river, sea, hot water, wind, mud, soil, forest, sand/dust, mountain, earthquake, large and small trees, drinks and milk, livestock, wild animals, reptiles and venomous animals, birds, fish; (3) symbols relating to human life such as marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, death, men and women and parts of the human body; and (4) symbols of human work such as ships, bricks, houses and corners of houses, bridges, clothing, women's makeup and money, weapons, containers and equipment, various objects.

Ta'biraning Impen has some similarity to Jung's theory of dreams (1959) whereby dreams express not just personal interior life, but also collective or universal reference. Jung proposed that dreams frequently contain archetypes, universal symbols that trigger all human thought. Jung said that 'It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us' (Jung 1969). To some extent, Jung was rediscovering the dream whereas there is a historical continuity in the way that Javanese people still believe that dreams are a clue to determining the future and a means of making a decision.

One recent example of the strength and perceived veracity of dreams is the recent 2019 presidential election. Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), a wellknown Islamic religious teacher from Riau Province, had broadcast openly through digital live media about his experience of being visited by an unnamed cleric. According to UAS, the cleric who has 'inner pure eyes' gave a clue about who should be chosen as president in the election. The cleric claimed to have dreamed five times about who the winner would be. The five time repetition supposedly meant that the message was from God rather than Satan.<sup>1</sup> In the final vote another candidate was elected.<sup>2</sup> Dreams can therefore intertwine legitimately with religious, social and even political issues in Indonesia.

Indonesia is a country with the largest Islamic population in the world and in his study of Islamic psychology, Nuruddin (2016) on dreams said that in Islam there are legitimations through the Quranic Naz that the dreams are a hint from God and an intermediary for revelations for other prophets and messengers. A smaller proportion of Christians exist in Java and likewise, dreams have been highlighted in the context of Christian teachings (Ardila 2014). Ardila, who studies dreams based on Book of Events 37: 1–11 and its relation to the life of Christian believers, reveals that: (1) dreams are a means of revelation, wherein through them, God gives instructions and leads his people to the His ways; (2) God communicates to humans not only to people in the Old Testament but to the times even now God still uses dreams as a means to communicate to humans to remember and convey God's purpose to human; (3) God speaks to humans in dreams, so humans better know that God is sovereign in providing information about the future; (4) through vision, God gives warnings to humans, issuing a warning to certain people whose lives are not pleasing to God so that the person repents; (5) God can deliver the intention to humans which can be personal and universal; (6) dreams can be used by God to express visions for certain people by giving a vision of his future.

In the construction of local architecture of the Karo Batak (Sitanggang 1991) and Simalungun (Wibowo 2001), shamans and their dreams continue to be important for determining whether the lands are fit for the construction. Among the Kiai or local Islamic clerics, it is believed the dream which comes after praying also can be used as a sign. The logo for the largest Islamic Sunni movement in Indonesia, Nahdatul Ulama (NU) was designed by Kiai Ridlwan Abdullah in 1927<sup>3</sup> and was based on a dream following istikharah prayer. This is the forerunner and basis of the current NU logo. On the one hand, this dream can be seen as a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4506822/bertemu-prabowo-ustaz-somadlegau-ungkap-bisikan-hasil-5-kali-mimpi-ulama>.

<sup>2</sup> The official final result announced on 22 May 2019 by the General Elections Commission (KPU).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/7644/kisah-pencipta-lambang-nu-muktamar-nu-ke-2-surabaya-1927>.

source of visual inspiration arising from the unconscious processes of someone struggling with a visual design task, but the application to a Sunni religious movement and the link with prayer provides additional meaning to this narrative in a Javanese context.

In several famous murder cases in Indonesia, solutions were reportedly provided by dreams. In the case of Angeline's disappearance in Denpasar Bali in 2015, the police had difficulty tracking her whereabouts. The head teacher at the girl's school, Ruta, together with the other teachers held a ritual event, led by a local Balinese shaman, including sprinkling holy water in a Pura (temple) and Angeline's room. In the girl's bedroom, Ruta allegedly heard a magical whisper that Angeline would be found. She was already with Ratu Niang Datu, a mystical creature, in the house. In a dream later that evening, Ruta once again was told by the spirit that Angeline was still in her adoptive mother's house. Based on that information, the next day, the police visited the house and saw a mound in the yard; inside it was Angeline's body.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps what is most important about this case and many others like it is the way that they are reported in various forms of media, which, we argue, help to reinforce existing beliefs regarding the cultural status and applicability of dreams. By the same token, they can potentially trade on peoples' cultural and religious belief systems in manipulative or controlling ways. The tsunami that destroyed a whole city of Palu, Sulawesi Island, on 28 September 2018 has been linked to a story about a vision that came through a dream to a local artist Abee Zam-Zami Djalaludin, which foresaw the devastation. In his digital painting published through Facebook on 4 June 2014, he illustrated three boys and white horses running away from the rising waves. Behind the three boys, the enormity of the tsunami crashes again Palu's iconic bridge and its cars. This dream came true four years later, in 2018. Tsunamis are not unusual in Indonesia and dreams arising from anxieties about these are to be expected, but the widespread cultural belief regarding the significance and meaningfulness of dreams means that there is a receptive audience to any reports which reinforce such beliefs. If there is reception to dream visualisations occurs in news and social media, they are also important in the emerging popular realm of tattooing in Java (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tsunami destroys Palu City. Illustration by Abee Zam-Zami Djalaludin, on Facebook, 4 June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/2257155/bisikan-gaib-dan-ratu-niangdatu-di-muka-rumah-angeline>.

## **Tattoos and the realm of dreams in Java**

In Indonesia, our research found that tattooing practice is conducted commonly across a range of contexts, from door to door, on streets, parks, and luxurious studios in malls, apartments, and boarding houses. We gathered descriptions about how tattoos are used for individual self-expression for group and community identity and commitments; tattoos were worn by professionals, students, housewives, underground musicians and fans, and convicts, especially in Java Island.

One of our main respondents, a person for whom meaningful dreams were translated into tattoos, is Beta. He explained that he was of Bugis descent born on the island of Java. Currently, he works as an engineer. One night, a few years ago, he had a dream experience when he was in charge of installing an internet transmitter in Pajanangger village, Kangean archipelago, Sumenep Regency. The prelude to his dream was other visions. Several times, he experienced strange events at night, as he saw a flame, as a lantern flew against the wind direction. The object flew low above the ground, slowly. So he assumed that the object was not a shooting star. During the incidents, he slept on the beach. According to him, he was not allowed to sleep in a bed in a house, under his roof with his family because according to his family customs, an unmarried man was not allowed to sleep under the same roof with other people. During these incidents on Kangean Island, he was sleeping in a hut with part of the sides of the building-wide open. After seeing the flying lantern several times, he began to dream:

I was bitten by a poisonous snake, then became comatose and placed by my family in a coral cave on the edge of the sea which is believed to be the residence of beings who are harder than diamonds. After three days I realized that I was naked and my body was getting taller. Oddly, without me measuring, I knew that my height was three meters. My skin became pure white, all my scars disappeared, except for the snake bite marks under the ankles of the inside of my left leg. My body was filled with tattoos of short writings, quotes from philosophers throughout the history of the earth. One of the quotes I remember most is ‘come here, leave the dead, how will you live, while you are surrounded by corpses, between them and breathe in death’. Then I gasped when the reflection of light from the sea dazzled my eyes, However, I did not turn my face away or cover it with my hands but I reflexively moved my wings to protect my face, I walked out of the cave without asking who I was; I flew and went down in the middle of the settlement then walked and looked around, everyone recognized me.

But I don't know who they are. People were gathering without talking. From a distance appeared a naked woman descending from the sun very gracefully and slowly. She did not have wings. She wore a long white cloth overlaid around it. It was as though she was talking but her lips only smiled and did not talk. My ears heard nothing but something inside me understood it and felt it as beauty. She told me that I would live to be as old as nature, to be a witness of nature.

After the internet transmitter project was completed, he decided to tattoo a picture of a man flying among the trees. This tattoo is in silhouette style. Interestingly, the figure, which he



said was like himself, in his tattoo, does not have wings (as related in his dream). The visualisation of the tattoo was adopted from one of the scenes of the movie ‘Waking Life’. In the film, the main character floats into the sky when trying to reach the car door handle, said Beta (20 December 2017).

He also admitted that, after the dreaming, he seemed to have turned into a new human being. He began to contact his colleagues who had hurt his feelings and held meetings with them. His dream brought about a form of inner healing for him. When I asked him about the meaning of the tattoo, Beta asked me to watch the movie. This film was made by an American director, Richard Linklater. The animation is distinctive because it was first recorded in live action and then specially processed by the computer animator team, a process known as rotoscoping. The film tells about the dreams of one man and his attempt to find and differentiate between ‘waking life’ and the dream-world. The main character in this film is someone who personifies the journey of human thought in building his existence. In this movie, the man meets people who philosophically interpret life and the journey of human life, with all of its problems. Beta, in turn, interpreted this film as representing feelings about his own life and his dreams. He acknowledged that before his dream, he had problems especially betrayal. But after dreaming, he felt he had to restore himself and forgive all the things he considered bad, for his own good. The visualisation of the movie he adopted represents his dream, quotes of the philosophers in his dreams and the events after the dream (20 December 2017) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Beta's Tattoo (left) and screenshot of 'Waking Life' (right).

Perhaps most interesting in this narrative is the relationship between international ‘Hollywood’ storytelling, the subconscious constructions of a dream narrative, the constructions of meaning around the interpretation of the dream, the resultant life actions including forgiveness and the embodiment of the dream imagery as a tattoo. The episodic nature of the dream and some of its themes seem to be influenced by Linklater’s narrative but adapted to become a more Javanese mythology. The tattoo thus expresses an interesting hybridity where localised belief in the meaningfulness of dreams and the dream itself is fed by the cinematic narrative.

Our second example features a man who dreamed of seeing Rahwana, a *raksasa* (giant) figure in the Mahabharata story. The man works as the assistant of a fisheries minister, and he met Suthalontong, a tattooist in Salatiga, Central Java, around 2016. Known for studying folklore, Suthalontong was surprised that the figure who appeared in the dream was Rahwana. He came to the interpretation that the dream contained a special message, that every human being had two sides of character: good and evil. The Rahwana character occurs in both Java and Bali mythologies, but to illustrate this image of Rahwana, Suthalontong preferred a Balinese-style figure (Figure 3).

Another name for Rahwana is Dasamuka (or 'ten faces'), wherein nine faces symbolise evil, and one face symbolises goodness. An important moral of his mythic stories is that humans still possess a good side even though their lives are full of anger and bad deeds. As long as they find the true meaning of love, then a person can choose to be good or control their evil side. In the tattoo, Suthalontong focused Rahwana's face on the good side only, even though the raksasa character was still visible, namely sharp canines and wide eyes. Suthalontong said that (in Balinese terms) *dasa* means ten. If the gods become angry, their other faces would appear. In this Rahwana tattoo, it shows the kind side of him. It is interesting that this case also showcases the role of the tattooist as an interpreter of dreams as well as the arbiter of the imagery used. As with our first example, a more complex narrative underlies the image. In both cases, the imagery and its associated narratives have been inspired by a dream which is visually interpreted by the tattoo artist. In this case, the sources and influences for the narrative are much more close to home, tied to Hindu-Javanese and Balinese mythology. The choice of imagery also draws from a more locally orthodox stock of symbols and symbolism.

Our third case concerns the dream experience of another tattooist, Alex. He is originally from Ambon, Maluku, and was educated to the high school level. His ability to make tattoos is very well-known in Jakarta, especially his oriental style images. Alex rarely uses sample images when making tattoos; he largely uses his imagination. This is significant as it results in a different approach to visual language and the visual interpretation of the dreams of his subjects.

Alex's journey into tattooing is worth describing in more detail as it provides many elements which are common to the development of other current tattoo artists in Indonesia. Alex's ability to imagine the shape or object was self-trained since he was in elementary school. A key moment was when he went to a place called Kampong *Kuda Mati*. According to Alex, when making tattoos, some young men were drunk. There were a number of amateur tattooists who received payment for their tattoos by exchanging them with bottles of liquor, not money. When Alex was busy watching how to make tattoos, a local young man called him and pressured him to tattoo on his partner's body. These young men knew that Alex was a local painter. They wanted Alex to prove his art skill but in the form of a tattoo. People fascinated in the results because Alex's tattooing was like professional work that they often saw in magazines. Alex soon learned to make a hand-made tattoo machine which used a dynamo tape recorder combined with an acupuncture needle. Alex required money rather than a bottle of liquor for his services. After he graduated from high school, he migrated to Bekasi, a city near Jakarta. From there, he was also able to fly to Korea, because at that time (ca. 1996), tattooists who could do dragon tattoo objects well were very rare. A Korean businessman asked him to make a tattoo and took him to South Korea to study tattoos more seriously. Since then, Alex has become increasingly famous and has opened a tattoo studio in an apartment in Jakarta.

Eleven years ago, a man asked Alex if he could make a tattoo on his back in the form of Nyai Roro Kidul, Queen of the South Seas, a famous figure from Javanese mythology. The person claimed to be a psychic and had a dream about having a full back tattoo of the figure. The psychic had visited many tattoos artists, but they refused because they were worried that Nyai Roro Kidul would come and curse them. According to Alex, the artists who refused to tattoo the image were all Javanese. Alex was originally from Ambon, Maluku (Moluccas), so a Nyai Roro Kidul image would not frighten him. Alex perceived this as an expression of art, not a magical object.

It is worth discussing why tattoo artists from Java are so afraid of the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul. In Indonesia, the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul was re-popularized by Indonesia's renowned portrait painter, Basoeki Abdullah, who made at least six paintings of her. However, his paintings are tied to tragic events.<sup>5</sup> Basoeki allegedly had encountered Nyai Roro Kidul periodically in Parangtritis, Pelabuhan Ratu and along the south coast of Java, but he never envisaged her face clearly. He painted her based on the legend's statement that Nyai Roro Kidul was a very beautiful woman. His model for his first painting of Nyai Roro Kidul, a woman by the name 'Mrs. Harahap'. Unfortunately, shortly after being painted, she died from cancer. He returned to paint Nyai Roro Kidul and used other women as models but they all died after the paintings were finished. After these instances, he only painted this subject from imagination.

Because of what happened to Basoeki's models, tattoo artists refused to make Nyai Roro Kidul tattoos because of it was seen to be cursed. Research also found that convicts in the city of Yogyakarta were reluctant to have tattoos of local spirits (e.g. Nyai Roro Kidul, kuntilanak, genderuwo, pocong) because they believed the creatures were real and would haunt their lives once they were on their bodies (Handoko 2007). Therefore, if they wanted to make tattoos of demons, then the ones chosen were those that came from the West and Japan (Handoko 2007). These examples not only highlight the level of belief in the supernatural in Java. They also show how 'outsider' imagery is seen as unthreatening because it is from a foreign framework of beliefs. The corollary of this was Alex's readiness to tattoo Nyai Roro Kidul because he was not part of the Javanese framework of beliefs.

Based on various sources, including the oldest written by Wessing (1997a) conducted a literature study about Nyai Roro Kidul and revealed that she was originally a daughter of Pajajaran's king, in West Java. There are many versions of who her father is, but the point is that she was a princess who was ejected from the palace. Some say it was because of a skin disease she suffered, and so she had to isolate herself. The skin disease was caused by the act of bewitching the king's concubine. There is also a story that it was because she refused to marry someone of the King's choice, making the king angry and thus driving her away. After wandering in the forest, she arrived at the edge of the cliff overlooking the south coast of Java island and plunged into the ocean waves. She was then stranded in the mystical kingdom of the southern sea.

Legend narrated that Nyai Roro Kidul made a deal with Kanjeng Senapati, the ancestor of the subsequent Sultans of Yogyakarta: they could rule if she were to be married to him and his successors. According to Hamengku Buwono IX (the Javanese king of the Sultanate of Yogyakarta), in his interview with Tempo magazine in 1988 (Wessing 1997b), Nyai Roro Kidul had a different appearance based on the phases of the moon: she appeared young and beautiful when it waxes, and old and ugly when it wanes. The association formed later that she was often associated with prosperity and protection, but on the other occasions, demons and death. Thus she is still venerated and feared at the same time (in Wessing 1997b). Wessing (1997a) also comments on the use of Nyai Roro Kidul myth in Javanese politics for legitimation of authority. Others relates its use to local habits in which spirits and mysticism are part of Javanese human life and identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Isnaeni, Hendry F. <https://historia.id/kultur/articles/lukisan-koleksi-istanamemakan-korban-PdW57>.

The psychic's tattoo was finished in five sessions and a painter helped him to sketch the image of Nyai Roro Kidul. Interestingly, three months later, he went back to Alex to make a dragon tattoo which was positioned on the top of Nyai Roro Kidul tattoo. The inspiration allegedly came directly from Nyai Roro Kidul through the psychic's dreams. Clearly, he was also concerned about the outcomes of having the tattoo: before the image of Nyai Roro Kidul was tattooed, he performed prayer at Pelabuhan Ratu beach. In addition he made an offering of a buffalo head which was washed away into the ocean, as a sign of respect and a request for the blessing of Nyai Roro Kidul. Through these rituals, it is possible that the psychic expected to gain supernatural powers from Nyai Roro Kidul.

The paranormal practitioner (dukun) is likely to have followed the old tradition of the Labuh Saji ceremony in Pelabuhan Ratu Sukabumi, West Java. Labuh Saji is a hereditary tradition of Pelabuhan Ratu's fishermen community which pays homage to Nyai Roro Kidul; Labuh (meaning anchoring/dropping) offerings are made to the sea with the hope of an abundance of fish catches every year and maintaining good relations with Nyai Roro Kidul (Rahayu 2016).<sup>6</sup> It can be seen that the practitioner tried to copy the ritual by giving a buffalo's head as an offering to Nyai Roro Kidul. This was also to strengthen his identity as a loyal follower of Nyai Roro Kidul, the queen of the spirits in the land of Java. The tattoos and the offering are a means of gaining the legitimacy as a supernatural practitioner (dukun), a person who is close and involved in the mystical world under the reign of Nyai Roro Kidul. Regarding the dragon tattoo placed three months after the Nyai Roro Kidul, it is surely to complete his dream, for there is a story that relates Nyai Roro Kidul riding a dragon (Naga) with a golden carriage (Wessing 1997b). In his explanation to Alex, the dukun called the dragon the husband of Nyai Roro Kidul. In the traditional motifs, such as in batik fabric of the Sultanates of Solo and Yogyakarta and the surrounding area, naga symbolises water or sea (Istari 2012; Saddhono et al. 2014). Thus within local visual culture, there is a close relation between naga, the sea and Nyai Roro Kidul.

Unfortunately, we do not have a visual record of the dukun's Nyai Roro Kidul and Naga tattoo. But we can comment on the 'spiritual/mystical' phenomena in Alex's tattoo works by comparing his other artworks and other client's experiences. There was a young man of Chinese descent who went to Alex because he dreamed that Alex was tattooing him. When meeting Alex this young man did not have an idea about the tattoo he would draw on his body. When he looked at the wall of the tattoo studio room, his eyes stared at a Buddha figure (depicted looking at the twigs of a pumpkin tree bearing its fruits). Some branches come out of the wounded arms. The young man was interested in the image and asked Alex to make the tattoo of it on his right arm. The image was very suitable given Buddha's positive meaning and spirituality. Although he is a Christian, he liked the image of Buddha which, in Alex's painting, is an image of goodness and God. The good arm and the wounded one are symbols of life, in which sometimes people live well but the other times also experience suffering. Alex chose twigs and the pumpkin as symbols of growth in faith. Alex explained that whatever happens, whether good or bad in this life, people will still get the abundant

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<sup>6</sup> Ritual offering of buffalo heads is still practiced today in some areas of Indonesia, both in inland and seashore locales. For example in the Surakarta Palace, Mahesa Lawung ceremony became part of the royal tradition for hundreds of years. A ritual to request safety and protection, Mahesa Lawung is carried out by burying a buffalo head in the Krendowahono Forest (Setiawan 2015). A similar tradition can also be found outside the Keraton (Palace of Sultan). For example in the sugar factories across Java Island, such as in PG Madukismo (Yogyakarta), there is a ritual to offer buffalo head pieces every year before the milling process of sugar cane begins. This ritual is believed to be for the safety and welfare of employees (Pramono 2009; see also Fauzi 2016). In Sulawesi, the maccua tappareng ceremony also offer a buffalo head to the middle of Tempe Lake, Wajo, and is intended for the king of the lake, Punna Wae (Mustamin 2016). There are many similar ceremonies across the Indonesian archipelago, but they have seen little systematic study. In Laboya, Sumba Island, men have tattoos of buffalo heads (kaduna kamadila). Interestingly, buffalo is a representation of the god associated with prestige among men, which was obtained through fighting and murder (Saul, in Handoko 2007).

blessing from God. There is an interesting syncretism in the choice of a Buddha image by a Christian client, but this is not unusual in the context of Javanese hybridity nor, as we have seen, in the practice of tattooing in Java, more broadly (Figure 4).

Alex seems inadvertently to make tattoos which articulate faith, mystical and spiritual themes. Further claims are being made about the power of these tattoos. Anthonyus, a lung cancer sufferer is of Chinese descent and a Christian from Central Java who moved to Jakarta. He initially wanted tattoos so that he could disguise holes in his body (that resulted from the medical procedures of removing fluids from the body). When he met Alex, his health was very poor. Anthonyus told Alex that, according to the doctor, he would only live two months. Alex envisioned making a tattoo of a falcon which in his eyes represented a strong faith in God along with Anthonyus becoming strong like a Falcon. Two weeks later, Anthonyus went back to Alex and told him that the fluids from the lung had stopped by itself. Later, Alex added another curative image, an image of Jesus pulling up a hand holding a lung full of cancer. The tattoos of a falcon and Jesus seemed fit for Anthonyus as he was a Christian. Alex explained that after the Jesus tattoo was finished, ‘miracles’ began to appear. Anthonyus’s oncologist was surprised because cancer stopped developing and seemed to die. Even more, Anthonyus is alive, five years later. There is no demonstrable medical explanation for Anthonyus’s recovery, but he has changed his lifestyle and he has become actively religious. Anthonyus remembered that Alex prayed for his curing after the tattooing process was finished, so there was a certain ritualising of the tattoo process itself. Anthonyus attributes his recovery to this ‘miracle’ and Alex has since tattooed the oncologist with an image of the Last Supper. Alex explained that this is intended to symbolise service and sacrifice. Since then, many people whom Alex knows, including those from poorer backgrounds, are able to get service from the doctor for free.

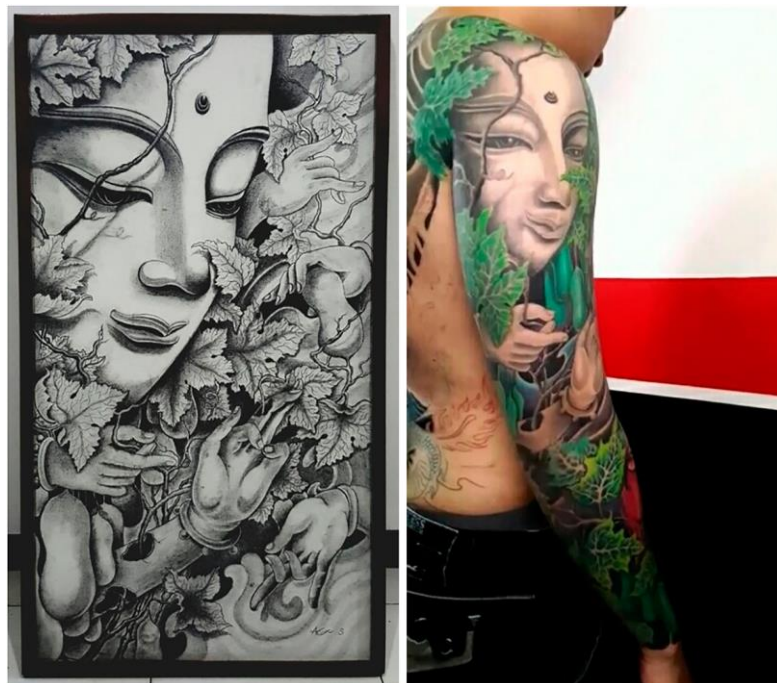


Figure 4. Buddha painting on studio wall (left) and tattoo (right), both artworks by Alex, Jakarta.

### Conclusions

Our study has shown that dreams can play a significant role in the conceptualisation and ideation of tattoos in our sample of Javanese men. Tattoos become an embodiment of the meaningfulness of

dreams and visions. We have emphasised the rich narratives which the tattoos draw upon from pivotal Indonesian legends, such as Nyai Roro Kidul and Rahwana, but also the use of Western popular visual culture. We also have identified narratives which arise from the tattoos themselves and draw upon religious faith and also atavistic mystical beliefs.

The tattoos and their accompanying narratives, in turn, become agents and validators of magic, myth, miracle and the supernatural as part of a larger process of mediation. The mediated narrative perpetuates and reinforces belief in the power of the supernatural. This can act alongside political or religious motivations, which can be seen to make use of these beliefs to legitimate various forms of power. But this would not be as meaningful and powerful without already strong cultural foundations which intertwine Java's cultural, religious and spiritual belief systems. As Wessing (1997b) observes, such systems are part of Javanese identity. Our sample shows that the beliefs extend demonstrably into the practice of tattooing. Despite continuing conservatism regarding tattooing, it is clearly a growing trend amongst younger Indonesian men and women, which mirrors more global trends towards this form of body art.

We have also described cases where belief in the power and significance of dreams, linked to religious and spiritual belief and practices, play a distinctive role in the choice of imagery by individuals. This manifests in certain forms of visual expression on one level. The personal narratives and beliefs demonstrate an evolution in how they relate to traditional beliefs through new forms of urban body art. To be sure, the tattoo artists themselves play a key part in the interpretive visualisation choices which are made.

Our study has therefore provided reflection on the continuing strength of superstition and belief in the supernatural in Java, but mediated through forms of modernism and global hybridity. In the case of Beta, the dream arose out of a very local cultural context, but the actual tattoo imagery used was drawn from global, cinematic image-making. The dream represented and prompted a profound pivotal moment in his life, but the imagery itself was derivative. It shows how individuals occupy parallel worlds, constructing meaning and visualising it from both global and local symbols in a hybridised fashion, while the narrative sources are more home-grown. In the second case, the choice of imagery draws from a more locally orthodox stock of symbols and symbolism. But like the other examples, the role of the tattoo artist is crucial in the final visualisation and conceptualisation of the tattoo which originated from the subject's dream. A complexity of interpretation underlies a seemingly simple image. The third case study is illustrative on several levels, firstly because it deals with a legend and a spirit Nyai Roro Kidul. Commonly an image of political legitimacy, it legitimised the magical power of a dukun, in part because of the taboos and historical discourse on the use of spirit's image.

The role of the tattooist is clearly complex when seen across all the case studies. This involved: the choice of style and interpretation of orthodox imagery; different capacities to create images and participate in the narrative; and holding different roles which intervene in the tattoo meanings. Of particular interest has been the specificity regarding 'outsider' imagery which is seen as unthreatening because it is from a foreign framework of beliefs.

It is evident that tattooing is finding a modern place in the traditional belief systems of Java as they become adapted to modern life. Superstition, myth, belief and religion remain a part of Javanese identity. Cultural media often broadcast how dreams in society are still counted as signifiers or the signs from the alam gaib, the mystical world. Hence the dreams are seen

as credible and meaningful drivers and deliverers of tattoo ideas. For some people, dreams carry an irrefutable message. That is why in a modern context, some of them are visualised in the form of tattoos so that the dreams and the messages can be remembered. From another perspective, tattoos act as reminders of our potential as human beings. Dreams become a kind of mystical journey and self-expression and identity of a spiritual human. Regional legends, such as that of Nyai Roro Kidul, provide material and validation. The role of the tattoo artists as interpreters of the dreams and translators of the narrative to imagery is a vital part of the process. Particular tattoos are not only meaningful, but can also be powerful and even seen as magical or miraculous in their own right.

There is much more to study about this theme in the case study area, and there is great potential for comparative work with other cultural contexts and belief systems. The use of dreams as a conceptual and visual source of body-art could be quite universal, even if the underlying meaning or power of the images are understood or experienced quite differently.

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