For most of the history of most societies across the world, the socialization of women has been inextricably linked with institutionalized systems of religion. This socialization has been carried out partly via the highly cerebral vehicles of theological and didactic treatises, but more effectively, I think, through narratives presenting images of the ideal woman. In Christendom, these ranged through stories of Mary, Mother of God, and the saints, represented also in innumerable paintings and statues, to remembrances of the lives of good and pious women of the local parish. Java, however, is far more complex than those societies in which a single religion has been historically dominant. Here three major religions—the Javanese, the Indic (mainly Hinduism, but also some Buddhism) and the Islamic—appeared one after the other, none wholly dominating the others, and with the subsequent formation of many different syntheses. Each of these religions did, however, put forward quite different images of womanhood, and it is with these that I shall be concerned here. My sources are Javanese narrative texts (chronicles and other genres) from the early modern period, principally the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These are complemented by historical (e.g., archival) and anthropological material providing information on the way in which these stories about women were institutionalized in religious rituals.

The Tripartite Nature of Java’s Religious Tradition

The purely Javanese base of this tradition has been relegated by imperfectly informed Westerners to the status of the unspecified “animism” of “the pagan tribes of Malaysia,” but actually constitutes a cosmology, pantheon, and source of socialization as coherent as that of ancient Greece. The major goddesses belonging to this pantheon and the rituals associated with them are described below. On top of this base was erected a superstructure deriving from often greatly modified Indic and Islamic religious ideas. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, we
find in the writings of Yasadipura 11² a conceptual separation of the Indic and Islamic religious traditions of Java. He postulates a dualism, the left-hand side representing the devotion which is offered up to the gods of Indra's heaven, Indra and Batara Guru, and the right-hand side the understanding of the Law of Islam and of mystic reality (Javanese hakekat), and the acceptance of the examples of the Prophets (nabi) and of the wali (saints or apostles). This allocation of the Islamic heritage to the right and the Indic one to the left goes back to the mid-eighteenth century at least,³ and probably earlier.

**The Living Goddesses of Java**

There are two principal Javanese goddesses, venerated long before and long after the arrival of Hinduism and Islam. The first is Nawang Wulan ("Moon-flying One"). The legend associated with this goddess is related in the early pages of a famous Javanese chronicle, the *Babad Tanah Jawi*,⁴ written under the Mataram dynasty. Established in the early seventeenth century, Mataram became the most powerful modern Javanese kingdom. The story goes that Ki Jaka⁵ (called Ki Ageng⁶ Tarub II later in the text), steals the heavenly robe of the moon goddess (*widadari*) Nawang Wulan when she descends to bath in a lake with other *widadari*. This enables him to force her to marry him, and they have a child. It transpires that Nawang Wulan has the secret of producing endless rice, since the supply in the granary does not diminish no matter how much she cooks. One day, her husband breaks her prohibition against looking into the cooking pot and sees that there is only one grain inside, which she can transform into a potful. This destroys her magic and she has to deplete the rice store like any ordinary mortal. She wishes to leave, but cannot do so until she discovers her robe under the last of the rice in the granary. This robe, called Anta Kusuma, enables her to fly back to heaven, but before doing so she promises to return to suckle her baby daughter, Nawang Sih. When Nawang Sih grows up she marries her foster brother Ki Ageng Tarub III, and their grandchild Ki Ageng Sela becomes the grandfather of Ki Pamanahan, father of the first ruler of Mataram, Senapati (who reigned from about 1584 to 1601).

An Islamized legitimation of the centrality of the magic robe Anta Kusuma is given in a later story in the *Babad*, which deals with the construction of the mosque of Demak, on Java's north coast. It is recounted that a bundle with a cover of goat or sheep leather and containing the prophet's prayer-mat and shawl fell on Sunan Kali-Jaga, one of the nine apostles of Javanese Islam. He made the cover into a garment called Anta Kusuma or Ki Gundil which was to be worn by all the
kings of Java for accession and war. Sunan Kali-Jaga gave this magic robe to Senapati, who went into battle wearing it. The continuing significance of the Anta Kusuma jacket for nineteenth-century Javanese rulers is also well attested. Sultan Hamengkubuwana II of Yogyakarta (1877–1921), for instance, wore the Kyai Anta Kusuma jacket for Garebegs, the major rituals of the court calendar. This sacred heirloom, which had belonged to the first Sultan of Yogyakarta, was made of triangular pieces of cloth of a wide variety of patterns and colors sewn together. The quilted design—not only the actual patchwork, but the related quilt-like pattern—is considered by the Javanese to have the power to ward off sickness and evil. Even in modern times it is said that the Sunan of Surakarta “still worships his heavenly mother Dewi Nawang Wulan, who is also considered to be a personification of Dewi Sri. Every eight years he conducts a ceremony where he personally cooks rice for his subjects.” As part of the Garebeg ritual, the Sunan cooks rice from a dangdang (rice cooker) said to belong to Nawang Wulan.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century C. M. Pleyte recounted a story collected from the Tenggerese people of the mountains of east Java which is very similar to that in the Babad Tanah Jawi. However, it includes more details about events after the moon goddess finds her wings at the bottom of the granary. In this version she leaves her husband, returning to heaven with the instruction that her daughter should be left in the sawah (paddy field) and a bundle of rice-straw set alight as a sign that she should return and feed the child. Pleyte argues that this is obviously an agricultural myth, with Nawang Wulan, the agricultural goddess, bearing a daughter, who symbolizes rice. This daughter must be taken to the field (signifying the sowing of the grain), where her mother gives her to drink (the flooding of the rice-fields by the rain), after being alerted by the flame of the rice straw (the burning of the fields).

The links between Nawang Wulan and fertility rites apparently run very deep in Javanese culture, for she is invoked in the ceremony for the Javanese bride held on the eve of the wedding. During the night before the wedding, which is known as the lenggahan midadareni (the second word is a verbal form of widadari), the bride is expected to remain awake all night in order to establish contact with the widadari or moon princess. According to the Javanese scholar Koentjaraningrat the groom has to do the same.

This ancient and indigenous Javanese myth has been retained and incorporated into the Islamic religious calendar. A striking example is the celebration of Mulud (commemorating Muhammad’s birth and death, one of the highlights of
the Muslim year) in Cirebon. Writing in the early 1930s, J.W. van Dapperen noted that on this occasion the old people wore a special costume, the Ananta Kusuma [a variant spelling] jacket; like the royal jackets mentioned above, these were also made of patchwork, in this case dull red and white squares. Members of the Cirebon royal families and staff of the regional cultural office told the present author that this jacket, which was associated with Sunan Kali Jaga (as noted in the Babad story), not only protected its wearer against rain, drowning, and heat, but endowed those who wore it with the ability to fly. One of the dishes used to prepare the sacral rice, the cooking and distribution of which is central to the celebration, is believed to have been used by Nawang Wulan to provide rice for a thousand people—just as the Sunan of Surakarta cooks rice from a rice-cooker said to have belonged to her. Some of the rice is husked only at the ceremony, which Van Dapperen traces back to an old custom relating to Dewi Sri, the rice goddess, whom local informants identified with Nawang Wulan. Once the rice has been cooked, everyone in the crowd rushes forward to get some, because it is considered to have magic powers.

Another aspect of the goddess commemorated in the Cirebon Mulud celebrations is her manifestation as a bango bird (a kind of stork). The Mulud gamelan plays a special tune called Bango butak ("The Bald Bango") or Rara butak ("The Bald Maiden"), which probably refers to a folk story in which the hero’s wife possessed another magical power—the ability to produce cloth from nothing. Behind closed doors she changed into a bango bird that plucked its own feathers to make cloth, thus becoming bald. Because of this magic power the bango bird is considered sacred. A number of textile motifs bearing the same name, such as the well-known bango tulak, share this sacred status and are used on ritual occasions.

As noted above, the Javanese rice goddess, Sri, is identified with Nawang Wulan in Surakarta and Cirebon court rituals. Under this name she is celebrated in a number of rituals, particularly the slamatan metik, or harvest festival. In his classic study of a Javanese village, the anthropologist Robert Jay noted that this was the largest of all the communal rituals, or slamatan. Every hearthhold that harvested a plot of rice held its own slamatan metik at the beginning of the harvesting season, to which all husbands in the immediate vicinity were invited (unmarried men were not included). This slamatan celebrates the marriage of Dewi Sri and her consort Jaka Sudana and as part of its ritual identifies every wife with Dewi Sri and every husband with Jaka Sudana. The ritual re-enactment of this
union is thought to bring blessings and fertility to a marriage. The participants take home most of the food served to them, which represents the *sri kawin*, the bride-price paid by the bridegroom to the bride. The term itself reflects the marriage (*kawin*) of the rice goddess Sri with Jaka Sudana, as well as the royal union with the widadari Nawang Wulan. The *sri kawin* of the slamatan is spiritually symbolic of the food which a husband gives his wife for her support. In this way each wife receives *sri kawin* from the hand of her husband, and husband and wife contribute *sri kawin* through neighboring husbands to their wives. According to Jay’s account, the villagers treated the occasion with a certain lighthearted mockery which veiled a deep seriousness. The ritual seemed to say something positive and profoundly satisfying about the marriage bond.¹³

The second of the two major indigenous Javanese goddesses is Nyai Rara Kidul. This goddess first appears in the Babad Tanah Jawi in the account of the career of Raden Susuruh, son of the king of Pajajaran and founder of Majapahit, considered the greatest of the Hindu-Javanese kingdoms. Travelling across Java as a young man, he meets a female ascete (*ajar*) called Cemara Tunggal (“Single Pine”), who tells him to look for a *maja* tree with bitter (*pait*) fruit, and establish himself there as ruler of all Java. She reveals to him that she is actually a princess of Pajajaran, and thus related to him. Because of her beauty, all the rulers of Java had sought to marry her, but she had refused them, and left the kingdom in the face of her father’s wrath. Reverting for a moment to her former shape as a beautiful princess, she tells Raden Susuruh that she can take on many forms, male or female, young or old, and will not die until the Day of Judgment. She promises to meet him again when he rules all of Java, and to then move to the south coast. Her troops will be the spirits of Java and she will serve Raden Susuruh and his descendants, the rulers of Mataram. In one version of the story, she promises to marry each of the rulers of Java. Under the name Nyai (Rara) Kidul (“The [Virgin] Lady of the South”) she again appears in the story of Senapati, founder of the Mataram dynasty. His supernatural power is so formidable that it causes a great disturbance in the seas, killing all the fish. Rising from her underwater palace to find him standing on the shore, the goddess surrenders to him all that is in the ocean and puts her hordes of spirits at his service. In return, he restores the fish to life and is then taken to her palace where they enter into a sexual union. During his three days there, she instructs him on the mystic science of kingship. So the author of the chronicle, in celebrating the Mataram dynasty, considers it essential to link its
founder, Senapati, with both of the two most powerful Javanese goddesses, Nawang Wulan and Nyai Rara Kidul.

The third appearance of the goddess in the chronicle occurs at the end of the life story of Sultan Agung (reigned 1613–46), the greatest of the kings of Mataram. When he goes to the southern ocean to meet her, she informs him that he has only two years to live and tells him to leave his earthly kingdom and join her. He refuses, saying that all her spirits are still not equal to mankind and the creation. At this, she asks him to use his powers as a great king who is recognized by Mecca in order to turn her back into a human being. To her great sorrow, Agung refuses to exercise the curse that has made her Goddess of the Southern Ocean. Eventually she is consoled, and thereafter instructs him to throw a holy kris into the ocean at the time of his death. She undertakes to care for it, and to pass it on to his successor.¹⁴

In the Centini (an encyclopedic text of which the fullest version is an 1814 recension from the central Javanese court of Surakarta), Nyai Rara Kidul makes an appearance in connection with an ancient shrine (sanggar-pamujan), in which there are two containers. In one there is a kain (long unsewn skirt) made of lurik (woven cloth with check or striped pattern) with a pattern of multi-colored stripes, and another kain of gold leaf, as well as a headcloth edged with lace and gold leaf. In the other is a kampuh (special kain worn at court or weddings) of the gadung malati pattern with gold leaf. All these are said to belong to Nyai Rara Kidul. The caretaker of the shrine, Ki Carita, recounts how he takes these clothes home every year to check the number and to air them, before bringing them back to the shrine. When he takes them away and returns them he is followed by tigers, but at a distance. These are guardian tigers that take the form of men in the day. The durian trees to right and left of the shrine are said to have been planted by Panembahan Senapati—another reference to the relationship of the goddess with the founder of the Mataram dynasty and its successors.¹⁵

The importance of this goddess for Javanese rulers and more widely in Javanese society can be seen in the following historical events:

♦ The founder of the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, Sultan Mangkubumi (reigned 1749–92) built a large water-garden complex known as Taman Sari, which can still be visited in Yogyakarta. One of its most remarkable buildings is the Sumur Gumuling, accessible only via an underground passage, which was probably designed for establishing a ritual union with Nyai Rara Kidul.¹⁶

♦ Records from the end of the eighteenth century show that the Dutch East India Company establishment in Yogyakarta regularly financed an offering to be made
to Nyai Rara Kidul, “to avoid misunderstandings in their relationship with the court.”

- In his autobiography the Yogyakarta prince Dipa Nagara, leader of the Java War (1825–30) against Dutch colonial rule, writes of how “Ratu Kidul” (“Queen of the South,” an alternative name for the goddess) appeared to him as he was performing asceticism in a mountain cave. Realizing that he was as one dead to the world, she promised to return in the future when the time would be ripe. The young Dipa Nagara heard what she said, though he made no sign. In the morning he went down to Parang Taritis, where he bathed in the sea, and slept at Parang Kusuma. He was again sunk in meditation when he heard a voice (that of the goddess) instructing him to change his name and preparing him for the fact that in three years time there would be great disturbances in Yogyakarta, in which he would play the chief role. She gave him an arrow, Sarotama (a legendary weapon belonging to the Mahabharata hero Arjuna), and warned him that he must refuse the Dutch offer to make him heir apparent, for God had determined that this would be a sin. Instead, he must provide support for his father who, though he would not rule long, would be the ancestor of rulers.

- A Dutch official, writing of the 1920s and 1930s, describes the wood Si Rawung, about ten kilometers from Petarukan in the Pekalongan area of Java’s north coast. Part of the wood was converted to villages, and part allocated to a certain Mr. Mackenzie. In this latter plot was a well-kept graveyard. When it was decided to fell the trees on this land, the native population refused to carry out the work; it was therefore necessary to use Christians and people from Cirebon instead. In the middle of nearby coconut gardens stood an old teak tree called Jati Songsong, which was said to be the paseban (audience-place) of Nyai Rara Kidul, a place where many people came to spend the night (nyepi: a common Javanese practice undertaken at sites thought to possess spiritual power that can be acquired by such nocturnal vigils).

On Tuesday-Wage and Friday-Kliwon (combinations of days of the seven-day and fifty-day weeks that occur every thirty-five days) and on the great festivals, people arrived in their hundreds from all over central Java, seeking riches and making offerings of flowers (actually at the mosque school, a typical example of Javanese accommodative syncretism). It was said that sometimes in the evening between 6:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. one could hear tambourines and gamelan instruments going out to sea in a great bustle; this was thought to be Nyai Rara Kidul returning home after a visit to the mountains, accompanied by her host of followers. It was believed that those who saw her wearing a kain in the pattern of parang rusak (“broken knives,” one of the Javanese batik patterns reserved for royalty) and a green jacket, and shaded by a red parasol, were near their hour of death.
In all regions of Java, then, Nyai Rara Kidul has been venerated, a veneration that continues to the present in more contemporary manifestations. Most tourists remain unaware that in luxury resort hotels a room may be reserved for her so that she will not become angry with the guests and take them into her watery domain beneath the treacherous waters of the south coast.

Minor Incarnations

JENG RATU MAS TRANGGANA WULAN

In the Centini, the travelers Gatak and Gatuk meet a special virgin (rara/wanodya kinaot) called Tranggana Wulan ("stars and moon"), who tells them that she was formerly the daughter of Brawijaya of Majapahit. At the time of the fall of the kingdom and the changeover to the religion of the Prophet, she went to the Bagor forest to follow the will of God (Hyang Widdhi), who ordered her to become the queen of all the spirits. She named the pond where she held audience Sugih Waras ("Rich in Curative Power"). Every Friday-Manis she comes there to grant the wishes of those who have remained steadfast in their desire to come into her presence (the Javanese word used for presence is jeneng, which is not used of ordinary mortals but of rulers). The noise of cannon-fire which the travelers had previously heard was the signal that this was the day for her to appear. It was necessary for people who wanted to come into her presence to carry out asceticism for one day. On this occasion she asked the travelers what they wanted, and one of the party said that he was looking for his relatives, a man and a woman. Tranggana Wulan said he should not worry, for although it was not yet the time, he would indeed meet them later in Tunjung Bang. She went on to explain divinatory lore relating to various birds, for which they thanked her. She replied, "All that I have said is already your own possession; I am only the one who draws it out." She then remarked that it was already late and she must ask their leave to return to heaven (kahyangan).21

The above passage has a marked similarity in structure and motifs to the Babad stories of Nawang Wulan (and both divinities have Wulan, "moon" in their names) and of Ajar Cemara-Tunggal, the princess of Pajajaran mentioned earlier who refused to marry and fled to take up the life of a hermit. She too is described as ruling over the spirits.22

THE ANGGARA KASIH WOMAN

Another episode in the Centini tells the following story: a very poor man, Kyai Harda Sangsara, goes to the Roban forest in Pekalongan in search of a sarat sugih
(a spell or special magic to become rich). Here he meets an old man with the appearance of a wiku (seer). The latter says that he will introduce his daughters, and allow Kyai Harda Sangsara to choose one as a wife. However, he should not choose any of the beautiful daughters but a hideously deformed, scarcely human one. Kyai Harda Sangsara follows these instructions, and this deformed woman proves she possesses supernatural qualities by turning into a beauty. But unlike the frog-into-prince story and other similar tales, this does not end in the couple living together happily ever after. This woman does not enter into domesticity. Instead, she promises to come to the house of Kyai Harda Sangsara only on Fridays and every Anggara Kasih (Tuesday-Kliwon, a sacred day on which the court dance bedaya ketawang, said to celebrate Nyai Rara Kidul, is performed). Before her visits he has to set up a rice cooker (bumbung) made of blue-black (wulung) bamboo at each of the four corners of the house. She then fills these with gold and silver money so that he becomes very rich.23 Once again we find the reference to the bountiful rice-cooker.

To sum up, Java has two major goddesses, the moon maiden (Nawang Wulan) associated with rice and cloth, and the sea goddess (Nyai Rara Kidul) associated with power over spirits and death-dealing power. Motifs from the narratives associated with these major goddesses also recur in stories about minor ones.

**Elaboration: a Whole Pantheon of Goddesses**

A particularly elaborate pantheon consisting entirely of goddesses was recorded by a Dutch observer in early nineteenth-century Gresik, on the north coast.24 This is especially remarkable as Gresik is in the very heartland of Javanese Islam; according to well-remembered tradition, it is here that the conversion of the island began. This female pantheon, however, is exclusively Javanese and Hindu. Hinduism brought to Java its own goddesses, who are prominent in the statuary of the Hindu-Javanese period,25 though they never achieved the entrenched social presence of the Javanese ones. In this pantheon the goddesses are divided into five groups, as follows:


- Those given to Arjuna as a reward for his fighting Dewa Ditia Kawaca. They are said to have been forty in number but only seven names are known, i.e., Supraba, Tilutama, Dersa Nala, Prab Sini, Sri, Tunjung Biru, Gagar Mayang, and Rati (the consort of the god of love, Kama).
Widadaris who descended to earth. These include Dewi Sri, reborn first as Citra Wati, then as Sinta and Sembadra, plus eleven other goddesses with Sanskrit names.

Widadaris living in Sapta Patula. These are Dewi Prawi, who married Batara Kesna, Dewi Naga Gini, who married Sena, Dewi Srenggeni Wati, who married Nakula, and Dewi Naga Wati, who married Sadewa.

Widadaris living on the bottom of the waters: Dewi Gangga Wati, who married Prabu Dasa Muka, Dewi Ganggi Hara, who married Gatut Kaca, Dewi Wantnu Hara, who married Arjuna, and Dewi Wiratna.

Note that in the first section a Nawang Kain—the second word means cloth generally, or a particular garment—appears as well as the better known mother and daughter Nawang Wulan and Nawang Sih.

Sacral Queens

Javanese rulers were traditionally thought to have divine qualities, and from the time of Airlangga, the first king for whom some biographical details are preserved, it seems that this was also true of their queens. According to Javanese accounts, Airlangga had two queens who conferred blessing and bounty on the kingdom. A particularly striking story concerns the queen of Ken Angrok, Ken Dedes: a statue still extant, one of the finest of the Hindu-Javanese period, is traditionally said to be her portrait. The Javanese chronicle relating to this period, the Pararaton, relates that she had a glowing vulva; when her future husband asked a holy man what this meant, he was told that it was the sign of an imperial woman. Whoever married her, whatever his personal failings, would become sovereign of the world (chakravartin). This is only one representation, albeit a particularly graphic one, of the belief in the power of certain spiritually powerful women to confer political hegemony, and in the case of the statue, combines indigenous concepts of female magic with an Indianized iconography.

To sum up, according to indigenous Javanese religion, kings, who themselves had a divine or semi-divine status, were dependent upon women—both the goddesses of their sacral marriages, and the queens of their secular marriages—whose benevolent power was considered an essential element in the ruler’s legitimacy and in the prosperity of the kingdom.

Exemplary Wives

Both Hinduism and Islam brought to Java fairly draconian conceptions of the manner in which wives could demonstrate their virtue, ranging from suttee to
various types of ordeal. Proving oneself a virtuous wife according to Indic and Islamic norms was no mean feat and could have literally fatal consequences. Hindu texts imported a negative image of women, describing them as by nature unfaithful. Killing a woman was considered a minor sin compared to the major sin of killing one’s teacher. The ultimate display of fidelity was for a Hindu wife to kill herself if her husband died, and the religious basis of and merit acquired by this process is graphically described in Old Javanese texts. In one, a king who foresees that he will be killed on the battlefield, asks his wife to remain loyal to her promise to follow him in death. When somewhat later he reminds her of this request, she replies, “Why should I not be true to you? For I decline, furthermore, to become a captive, because I would be ashamed of being laughed at. Heaven would be to die with you.” After his death, she makes an obeisance to his corpse, saying, “Oh, you who were supreme in the fragrant bed-chamber, and were so expert in the secrets of love-making as to fill the heart to overflowing, you have asked me to go with you in death. Please, elder brother [usual form of address for a husband] wait for me; do not hurry on ahead.” She then loosens her hair and unsheathes her dagger, stabbing herself through the chest. Her blood rushes forth, while she takes a ritual bath in the blood that wells up in her mouth. The queen then performs an act of worship to her husband. A moment later she performs the yoga of oblivion, which is followed by her death. When she falls she bends forward over the face of her husband. Such acts of sutee were probably confined to the royal courts, and early European visitors report seeing the immolation of royal women.

Islam, like Hinduism, explicitly rated women as inferior to men. An eighteenth-century Javanese Islamic text says that a woman may not be paid honor by a man, not even by her own son. Islamic law also rates female testimony below that of males. Furthermore, Islam maintained stringent standards by which female virtue was judged. The Cabolang (the prologue of the Centini) has many stories of Islamic origin which hinge on accusations of misconduct against women, and the heavy penalty this entails. These include the story of Maryam, daughter of Abdullah of Mecca, whose brother Abu Bakar had accused her wrongly of adultery, but who escaped the death penalty. Then there is the story of Aklimah, who was married to an ugly man who mistreated her. She was praised by Fatimah, the Prophet’s daughter, for her devotion to her husband. When her husband came home he almost killed her, thinking she had committed adultery because he had seen Fatimah’s footprints. He spied on her jealously. Gabriel came to take her to heaven, but she insisted that her husband must come too. When he was taken to
hell by Ngjirail (the angel of death), Aklimah took him from there to heaven. In another story, two women are put on trial, which involves all the soldiers slashing them with their swords. Miraculously, they survive and it is concluded that they must be innocent. Reference is also made to the story of Joseph and Zuleikha (the wife of Potiphar), which is said to demonstrate the untrustworthiness of women. Another story concerns a man who was granted three wishes and wasted them because of a quarrel with his wife, for which she deserves blame. The cumulative effect of such stories must have been to reinforce the negative Hindu ideas regarding women introduced earlier.

It is tempting to regard these passages as barbarous relics of a dim and distant past, perhaps reflecting fantasy more than reality. However, the demands made by Christianity on women to prove themselves virtuous wives or suffer hideous punishments are clearly and prosaically reported in Dutch colonial records. In his account of the role of religion in seventeenth-century Batavia, Leonard Blussé notes that his decision to entitle one section “The Taming of the Shrew, or the Socializing Function of the Church,” was not mere facetiousness, but “based on historical reality.” What this “taming and socializing” of “shrews” actually involved, it immediately becomes clear, is the execution by drowning in barrels, strangling, and other such punishments for women accused of “godless demeanor, fornication, thieving, devilish practices and empoisonments.” According to Blussé, such evidence leads to the supposition that the church “reformed” Batavia’s women, imposing “a certain morality on their behavior” and providing them with a “veneer of metropolitan norms.” The women involved were mainly from outside Java, and constituted a minority group. The savagery with which they were treated partly reflects an ethnic hysteria that was part of the psychology of the colonizing Dutch even in the twentieth century. Stories of native black arts (guna-guna) abound, based on the not unreasonable suspicion that the compliance of the colonized, even of the master’s concubine, was an enforced pretence behind which darker feelings lurked.

The Consort-as-Heroine: Tambang Raras in the Centini

Tambang Raras is a virtuous wife, submissive to her husband. However, she is also not only literate but also highly learned; this latter point is significant because it seems to represent something new brought by Islam. The possibility that a woman can gain prestige through religious knowledge presents an alternative female role that runs counter to the ostensible misogyny of the texts cited above. Ultimately,
Indeed, Tambang Raras proves to have a touch of the old goddess about her, sharing supernatural powers with her husband.

When Tambang Raras is introduced at the end of Canto 352 the author begins with a brief description of her clothes. She is dressed in a kain of white floral work, a breast-cloth of gadung pattern (which, as we have seen above, is associated with Nyai Rara Kidul), a jacket of yellow floral cotton material, and is also wearing two diamond rings. The author then comments on her extraordinary radiance (cahya: an attribute of divine and royal personages), and on the beauty of her eyes. However she does not look at men, because she is in love with mystic knowledge (ngelmu). Many aristocrats and learned men of religion (ulama) come to visit her, but she is not inclined towards them. When she looks at men, it is as if they are wild men or lunatics (baring), and she feels as if male guests are unclean (najis). She has no desire, except for ngelmu. She has perfectly memorized the Qur'an and proves more expert than her younger brothers in mastering the great texts of Qur'anic exegesis, such as the Tefsir Bahwi-Baelawi and the Jalalen. She also demonstrates her superiority to the kaum pangulu (Muslim scholar-officials) in her understanding of the hadith (traditions relating to the deeds and sayings of the Prophet). Her younger brothers bow to her deeper knowledge of such points of Islamic law as ijemak (consensus by those having authority) and kiyas (argument by analogy) but she has doubts and does not feel satisfied with what she knows. She prays to God for a teacher, a desire that is filled by Among Raga, the man who becomes her husband.

The religious development of Tambang Raras, which is emphasized as soon as she appears in the text, is also the central focus of her relationship with her husband. After the wedding (much to the consternation of family members), the consummation of the marriage is considerably delayed by an extensive program of religious instruction. This ranges over many subjects (at a rough estimate, more than fifty) representing the Javanese interpretations of Islamic teachings for which the Centini is famous. Though space does not permit discussion of these fifty-odd theological subjects, it should at least be pointed out that they are generally treated at a high level of sophistication. Comparing them with similar passages elsewhere in the text where the two characters involved are both male, we can say that no concession in the direction of simplification has been made because Tambang Raras is a woman.

The philosophical tradition underlying these sessions of instruction is a particular type of Javanese-Islamic mysticism, stressing the pursuit of unity with
God (Javanese tokid, from Arabic tawhid). The interpretation of the concept of unity is the locus of perhaps the biggest philosophical battlefield of current Muslim theology, which we shall not enter into here. It is sufficient to note that Muslim mystics generally based their religious life on the combination of tawhid (Unity) and the shar‘ia (revealed Law). It is this pairing of tawhid with Islamic law that is essential for the orthodox Muslim mystic, and the abandonment or perceived abandonment of adherence to the Law has led some Muslim mystics to be condemned as heretics; in some well-known cases those accused have even been put to death. Zoetmulder has provided a translation of an entire session in which Among Raga instructs Tambang Raras about the pursuit of tawhid.\textsuperscript{41} Other passages deal with aids to the achievement of unity, e.g., through meditation or the use of particular prayers or collects (wirid, from Arabic wîrd, plural awrad).

In this list of subjects from the Islamic curriculum on which Among Raga instructs Tambang Raras, the lengthy discussion of the wuku system represents a striking “odd one out.” The divinatory wuku calendar is uniquely Javanese, though it has been partly Hinduized.\textsuperscript{42} It is still in use in Java today, as represented in the Javanese almanacs, those inexpensive and unpretentious paperback volumes that provide a fairly comprehensive guide to the practice of agama Jawi (Javanese religion) and Javanese socialization. The wuku calendar is a thirty-week cycle that has a wholly abstract character, repeating itself without reference to the seasons or the stars. Each wuku is presided over by a combination of the following signs: a god and a tree (invariably), a bird, one foot or two feet, often in water, a house, and a pennant (um-bul-umbul: a flag indicating rank, e.g., military). In combination, these features establish the characteristics of a particular week and thereby predict the character and fortune of those born in it. For instance, if both feet are in the water it means that there will be much rain in this wuku, and if the pennant is held above the head it means that a person born in this wuku will rise to great heights, while the position of the house is important for indicating how much money the person will have and whether or not they will be open-handed and generous. Elsewhere in the text, it is said that the wuku system is the best way of judging a woman’s character; for instance, it is superior to the Islamic “science” of physiognomy.

The main narrative of the Centini concerns Among Raga’s desire to avenge the defeat of his father, ruler of the theocracy of Giri, by Sultan Agung of Mataram. However, the chief Islamic official of Mataram (the pengulu) accuses him of ignoring Islamic law and has him thrown into the sea. The Sultan, on the other hand, says that Among Raga’s real sin was not offending against Islamic law
but attempting to become perfect in this life, something that is permitted only to rulers. Among Raga nonetheless rises from the dead in a spiritual form possessed of magical powers, and Tambang Raras also acquires such a form. They are both _oliya_ (the word _oliya_ is derived from the Arabic plural of the word _wali_). Throughout the Muslim world there has been a widespread cult of the _wali_ ("saints") as miracle-workers with supernatural powers, and there is a hierarchy of _wali_ headed by the _Qutb_ (Pole or Axis).\(^{43}\) Though this belief can be said to be contrary to the teachings of the Prophet, the _wali_ and their miracles were included in most Muslim catechisms.\(^{44}\) In Java, however, the most current use of the term has been to refer to the famous nine apostles who were responsible for the island’s conversion to Islam. So it is clear that in whichever sense the word is used here, very large claims are being made for Among Raga and Tambang Raras.

The pair materialize and dematerialize throughout the remainder of the _Centini_ text. At one point Among Raga actually creates an island on the south coast, where he lives with Tambang Raras in great wealth, bestowing gifts on whomsoever requests them and displaying the superiority of his magic powers over more orthodox Muslims who try to throw him into the sea again. The magic couple visit other places, such as a famous cave, Langse, used by Dipa Nagara for his ascetic practices. Finally they meet with the Sultan of Mataram, Nyakarakusuma, and ask him how they can become allied with the royal line. The Sultan advises them against returning to the world, and on his advice they turn themselves into red rattan worms, which the Sultan takes home and cooks. He eats the male worm, and one of the princes eats the female worm. This story represents another attempt by the Mataram dynasty to incorporate into itself (in this case, literally) the spiritual powers of those who have these in abundance. And Among Raga, who is not only spiritually powerful but of royal birth, together with his consort Tambang Raras, seem to represent a survival of the magically potent royal couples of the pre-Islamic era.

**Ascetics**

Female ascetics practicing a pre-Islamic form of religion are described in Javanese texts, and also credited with religious status and power. This tradition of solitary women with spiritual status did not die with the conversion to Islam, as we can see from the depiction of a number of such women in the _Centini_. A notable example is Rara Suci, who is described as a _wiku_ and _oliya wanita_\(^{45}\) or female _wali_—once again, a bold claim.
The reason she left her family to lead a life of asceticism is that she read an Islamic treatise dealing with the four nepsu, Amarah, Supiyah, Luamah and Mutmainah. The word nepsu is from Arabic nafs (soul) and the words Amarah, Supiyah, Luamah and Mutmainah probably refer to successive stages through which the soul goes to achieve purification and ultimately annihilation. Thus the first, Amarah, is a Javanese rendition of Arabic an-nafs al-ammara, the unregenerate soul. The fourth, Mutmainah (Arabic mutma’inna) is the tranquil soul. He is called Prabu Dyatmika Suksma Mulya and his country is called Lali-Muslimin. Rara Suci tells the travelers in the Centini an allegorical story in which the four nepsu are portrayed as kings or rajas. Amarah, Supiyah, and Luamah decide to attack Mutmainah’s country which is completely annihilated by their demons (buta). Only Raja Mutmainah is left. He prays and receives an answer telling him to go out and fight; if he follows these instructions, events will turn out well and he will remain a king. He goes out to battle clad in Ultimate Knowledge (Utameng-ngelmi), wearing the headcloth of Observance of the Law (Sarak-sarengai), the girdle of Inner-quiet-of-Praise (Enenging puji), carrying a kris in the style Sempana-sidik, and so on, riding on a horse called Mindfulness (Elingeling) whose bit is Faith-in-Unity (Iman-tokid), whose strap is the Pillars of Islam, and whose girth is Constantly-Firm-in-Faith (tetep Pikukuwing iman).

After Rara Suci has finished telling this story, the female member of the party, Rancangkapti, asks for her blessing so that she can follow her example and not marry. But the holy virgin informs Rancangkapti that this is not granted to her, and that later on she will enter into an excellent marriage: after all, it is decreed by God (Hyang Widdhi) that those women who marry and are ruled by men outnumber those who do not marry seven to one.

Very much in contrast to such independent and powerful women are four women described elsewhere in the Centini. They are linked with a religiously learned man, Seh Wakidiyat, although the nature of their relationship is not clear, since the word used to describe them, endang, can mean wife, daughter, or female servant. What is apparent is that they are entirely at the Sheikh’s disposition. Although they look like fairies from heaven (peri parayangan), they are constantly being told to prepare food, make things look nice, and so on. Furthermore, the Sheikh is able to offer them in marriage to anyone whom he considers worthy of the favor, which he does while explaining the Islamic provisions for divorce to the favored man, Cabolang.
Islam and Royal Women

Some royal women who appear in European as well as Javanese stories seem to have dedicated their lives to religious studies. The Islamizing of the court of Pakubuwana II was associated with his elderly grandmother, Ratu Pakubuwana, who had long been devoted to Islamic learning. Her name is associated with a number of surviving texts representing Javanese interpretations of Islam with a Sufi orientation. She attempted to mould her young grandson into being a model Sufi king, but this attempt was ultimately not very successful.

There is at least one case (although perhaps not constituting as much the one in seven ratio referred to above) where a princess refused marriage to pursue the religious life. Nancy Florida recounts the story of a princess of Surakarta called Sekar Kedaton ("Flower of the Palace"), who though hotly pursued by her cousin, the reigning monarch Pakubuwana IX, for nearly twenty years, remained obdurately single and devoted to a life of learning. At least two of her compositions are extant: both are didactic works and one draws on an early commentary on the Qur’an.

By contrast, in some cases it seems that a shared religious life was a strong emotional and even erotic bond between royal couples. The chronicle account of the reign of Pakubuwana II (1726–49) relates how the ruler’s love for his queen was rekindled when he came upon her reading a theological text, probably an Islamic mystical work. This led to the conception of the future Pakubuwana III.

Again, the autobiography of the famous Javanese prince Dipa Nagara, who led the anti-Dutch Java War from 1825–30, also describes the relationship between the author and his wife in terms of a common religiosity. Unlike the Among Ragatambang Raras passages, it is characterized by a rather touching reciprocity between husband and wife. In one passage, for example, Dipa Nagara relates how he had been on the point of taking his life until his wife counseled him to be patient and trust that God would recompense his good works—advice she made bold to give to him as he had earlier taught it to her. Dipa Nagara replied:

“Oh my ruby, my mistress,
who art like a finely chiseled diamond
and sent down from heaven
out of the bounty of the Lord!
Jewel among the women
of all the land of Java!
I cannot describe my feelings.
Truly, you know right, and your servant [i.e., Dipa Nagara himself] is greatly in error.” He goes on to say that the most favored of all men in the world are those who are greatly tried, for this is proof of God’s love. It should be noted that Dipa Nagara’s own initial religious education was undertaken by another woman, his great-grandmother.

In conclusion, I would like (in the Javanese tradition) to propose a duality of my own: one between indigenous Javanese religious myths, which are based on an “ideology of respect” with regard to the divine blessing conferred by women, which should not be nullified by transgressing their wishes; and that of imported religious ideologies, whose narratives encode “ideologies of suspicion” towards women, inferior beings laboring under the necessity of disproving accusations against their virtue, intelligence, and probity. The first is most strikingly exemplified in the narratives of the goddesses and the efforts made by Javanese royalty to claim alliances with them, as well as in the rituals enacted to this day by ordinary Javanese rice-farmers. The second most strikingly manifests itself in the introduction of the ordeal for women, in which they must undergo violence to demonstrate obedience and virtue.