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**Working draft:**

**Living in a Time of Madness: Last Days of Java's Last Prophetic Prophet**

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Saturday night, 11 October 1873, marked the spectacular and conclusive end of the first Netherlands East Indies Agricultural Congress and Exhibition that was staged in the royal Central Javanese city of Surakarta. The Congress had opened the previous Tuesday on the main square (*alun-alun*) that lies in front of the palace of the Pakubuwanan (that is, “Axis of the World”) kings of Surakarta. Hailed as the first scientific meeting on agricultural production in the Indies, the Congress was designed to bring together native and European elite for a weeklong conference on modern agricultural practices that could increase crop yields and profits in the colony. In addition to its primary elite audience, the organizers also hoped to attract the interest and attendance of a secondary audience of ordinary native farmers. For although the common folk could not participate in the Congress itself, it was hoped that they would be attracted to the exhibition of modern agricultural implements and handicrafts that was to be open to the public, for a price, as well as to the numerous free events to be staged as part of the extravaganza. It promised to be an outstanding event: in the month leading up to the Congress, the local vernacular newspaper featured a series of long articles on the Congress, detailing a program that featured concerts, Western theatrical performances

(*komedie*), traditional masked dance and *wayang* shadow plays, horseraces, festive dinners, fieldtrips to a local sugar factory, and several fireworks displays.<sup>1</sup>

Since a *congress* was a radically new form of event in central Java, the vernacular press needed to define the novel term to its native readers in the first of this series of articles. A *konggrès*, we read, is “a gathering or meeting of *raja-raja* (normally, kings) along with *pujongga* (normally, “classical” prophetic court poets), and the like, to discuss matters of (normally metaphysical) significance (*ginem rasa*).”<sup>2</sup> This curious definition of the new, modern term only works through what may have been a confusing reconfiguration or transformation of the conventional meanings of a set of particularly charged Javanese words: *kings* are exchanged for colonial officials and planters; *prophetic literati*, for scholars and scientists; and *metaphysical truths*, for empirical knowledge and know-how. I say “may” have been confusing, because concurrent with the run-up to the Congress, the same newspaper was also hosting a heated debate among a set a pseudonymous reader-contributors on the value, or lack thereof, of traditional epistemologies in comparison to modern western knowledge. The debate reached its climax in a caustic exchange on the validity of the *pujongga*-ship of the very-soon-to-be-departed R.Ng. Ronggawarsita (1802-1873), famously known after his death as “the Last (or Seal) of the Pujongga” (*pujongga panutup*). But before returning both to that debate and to the spectacular end of the Congress in the conclusion of this paper, I would like first to briefly introduce the poet, his poetry, and his time – especially his end time.

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<sup>1</sup>*Bramartani* (18 September-9 October 1873).

<sup>2</sup>*Bramartani* (18 September 1873).

## The Poet

R.Ng. Ronggowarsita (1802–1873) is conventionally recognized both as the greatest and as the last of the prophetic court poets (*pujangga*) of Java. In postcolonial Indonesia, he is remembered primarily for his prophetic insight, notably for his imputed foresight of Indonesian national independence and for the foreknowledge he had of his own death, as well as for his biting social criticism.<sup>3</sup> Western and western-trained scholars have variously acknowledged him for apprehending the frightening end of the dark night of “tradition” just before the dawn of modernity,<sup>4</sup> appreciated him as a significant transitional figure,<sup>5</sup> observed him as a victim of progress,<sup>6</sup> and maligned him as an empty fraud.<sup>7</sup> Little or no attention, however, has been afforded to how some of his most influential writings work to overcome the rupture of modernity through strategic reinscriptions of past-times in ways that have, over the past 145 years, repeatedly elicited recognitions of their effective contemporaneity.<sup>8</sup> This essay looks briefly at the deployment of this strategy in just one of his late works, against the background of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sukarno, “Ranggawarsita adalah Pujangga Rakjat (Pidato 11 Nopember 1953)” in Kamadjaja (Karkono Partokusumo), *Zaman Edan: Suatu Studi tentang Buku Kala Tidha dari R.Ng. Ranggawarsita* (Jogya: U.P. Indonesia, 1964), pp. 16-21; Kamadjaja, *Zaman Edan*; D. N. Aidit, *Tentang Sastra dan Seni* (Djakarta: Jajasan “Pembauran,” 1964), p. 94; Maria Hartiningsih and Ahmad Aris, “Menatap Jaman Edan” (Observing the Time of Madness), *Kompas* (June 1, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, “A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light: Transposition in Early Indonesian Nationalist Thought,” in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 241–43.

<sup>5</sup> G. A. J. Hazeu, *Oud en Nieuw uit de Javaansche Letterkunde* (Leiden: Brill, 1921); J. Anthony Day, “Meanings of Change in the Poetry of Nineteenth-Century Java,” (unpublished PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Kenji Tsuchiya, “Javanology and the Age of Ranggawarsita: An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Javanese Culture,” in *Reading Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> R.M.Ng. Poerbatjaraka, *Kapustakan Djawi* (Jakarta: Djambatan, 1952), pp. 158–66.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most recently in Haris Rusly’s “Kita Sedang Hidup di Zaman Edan” (We are currently living in the Time of Madness), *Nusantara News.Co* (February 18, 2018), an article that cites Ronggowarsita in order to critically observe the political climates of contemporary Indonesia and of Kim Jong-un’s North Korea.

hotly contested discourses and projects of modernity that marked the final months of his life.

Ronggawarsita, who died on December 24 or 25, 1873, was born on March 15, 1802, into a renowned lineage of court *pujangga*. The king's *pujangga* was not only the preeminent literatus of his generation; he also served as spiritual guide for the king and kingdom. Imbued with both natural and supranatural knowledges and wisdom, he was the learned one known to be graced with the divine light of prophecy (*wahyu*).<sup>9</sup>

Ronggawarsita was the last to hold this exalted position. Preceding him in the office were his grandfather and his great grandfather. His great grandfather, the accomplished R.Ng. Yasadipura I (1729-1803), is often hailed as the progenitor of the renaissance of Javanese literature thought to have commenced in the second half of the eighteenth century and to have ended with the death of Ronggawarsita.<sup>10</sup> Yasadipura I's son, R.T. Sastranagara (aka Yasadipura II, 1756–1844) was, perhaps, even more accomplished than his father had been, authoring a truly remarkable range of literary masterpieces. Sastranagara's son did not succeed him in the office of *pujangga*. That son, also named Ronggawarsita, was indeed our Ronggawarsita's little-known father; his was an unhappy fate. Though reputedly a brilliant scholar (indeed acknowledged by his colonial nemesis as the most brilliant of his age),<sup>11</sup> the elder Ronggawarsita was to vanish into exile in 1828 at the

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<sup>9</sup> A *wahyu* (from the Arabic *wahy*) is a divine and manifest light which, when it falls upon the favored person, supernaturally invests that person with the power of, say, kingship or *pujangga*-ship. For notes (possibly composed by Ronggawarsita himself) on *wahyu*, see *Serat Wawaton Tatakrama Kadhaton* (Composed Surakarta, [mid-19<sup>th</sup> century]; inscribed Surakarta [late 19<sup>th</sup> century]). MS. Museum Radya Pustaka [RP] 76, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> I argue that this idea of a “renaissance” was a colonial project that worked, possibly unself-consciously, to marginalize the Islamic aspects of Javanese literature in my “Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam,” in *Cultures of Scholarship*, ed. S. C. Humphreys (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> In his report to the Kommissaris Generaal on the elder Ronggawarsita's arrest and torture at the Residency House, the then colonial Resident, Baron Nahuys van Burgst boasts that his captive is “the

height of the Dipanagara War (1825-1830), a bloody conflict that claimed the lives of 15,000 colonial soldiers and over 200,000 Javanese rebels and civilians.<sup>12</sup> Recognized as the last (and unsuccessful) stand of traditional Javanese authority against Dutch colonialism, this war marked a watershed in Javanese history: that is, the conclusive end of Javanese political authority and the beginning of high colonialism in Java. It also marked the beginning of serious colonial scholarship on (what was becoming known as) the traditional Javanese world along with a halting and limited start of the penetration into that world of (what was becoming known as) Western modernity. It was between and across these worlds that Ronggawarsita the Last of the Pujongga lived. And, I would argue, he lived this in-betweenness in a manner that consciously rejected either embracing Western modernity or being fixed in a dead Javanese tradition.

The poet, prophet, spinner of tales, master of time reckoning, and historian Ronggawarsita was educated in the manner that was conventional for literati of his time and his station: learning at the feet of his elders was followed by more formal instruction in an Islamic boarding school (*pesantrèn*), after which he enjoyed several years of studious peregrinations across the Javanese landscape, before finally, entering into a literary apprenticeship in the scriptorium of the Surakarta palace. He was twenty-five years old at the time of his first official appointment at court; this was during the Dipanagara War, shortly before the 1828 arrest and exile of his father, an unhappy event that two years later was followed by the arrest and exile of his king. Elevating the exiled king's tractable uncle to the throne, the Dutch had effectively engulfed the court. It was

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most intelligent Javanese alive" (Nahuys to the Kommissaris Generaal, Sourakarta den 19 April 1828, missive no. 41 geheim LaM, Ministerie van Kolonien no. 4133 in the Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Yasadipuran lineage of *pujongga*, see my "Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam," *op. cit.*

about this time that Ronggowarsita composed his first poetic work, perhaps not surprisingly a biting satire of the sadly circumscribed social world in which the Javanese subject of that time might move.<sup>13</sup> Over the next almost forty-five years of his career, Ronggowarsita produced an extraordinary array of works, ranging from massive prose histories of Java (from the year 0 to his near present) that were thousands of pages long, through Sufi songs, moralistic poetry, legendary romances, and treatises on Islamic metaphysics, Sufi practices, and time reckoning to his well-known prophetic works.<sup>14</sup> He also served as (sometimes maligned) native informant to a series of Dutch philologists as they were mapping out Javanese literary traditions and as an editor of the first vernacular newspaper in the Indies.<sup>15</sup>

The changes experienced by Ronggowarsita over his lifetime were staggering. As a young man, he witnessed the end of effective Javanese royal power and, closer to home with his father's exile, the dangers of resisting that end; the advent of high colonialism (with its notorious system of forced deliveries); and the emergence of "Java" as a subject for scholarly study. In his middle age, he observed the opening in Surakarta of the Indies first Western teacher's training school for native subjects, participated in the

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<sup>13</sup> R.Ng. Ronggowarsita, *Serat Jayèngbaya (composed Surakarta, ca. 1830) in* [Klempakan] *[inscribed Surakarta, 1920]*. MS. Sasana Pustaka Karaton Surakarta SP 135; SMP [Surakarta Manuscript Project] KS 415.5, pt. 5. For more on this poem, see my *Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 40-48.

<sup>14</sup> For a list of works attributed to Ronggowarsita, see Anjar Any, *Raden Ngabehi Ronggowarsito: Apa Yang Terjadi* (Semarang: Aneka, 1980), pp. 114-16.

<sup>15</sup> Surakarta's local *Bramartani* was the first vernacular newspaper published in the Netherlands East Indies. Its first run survived only one year (1855-1856); it was revived under the name *Djoeroemartani*, 1865-1871, and again as *Bramartani* 1871-1931). The *pujangga* Ronggowarsita served as one of its native editors until being accused of a press offense (dates unknown: probably toward the end of his life, ca. 1869-1872) (Komite Ronggowarsita, *Babad Cariyos Lelampahanipun Suwargi R. Ng. Ronggowarsita*, Vol. II (Surakarta: Marsch, 1931), pp. 104-113. On the genesis of the newspaper, see Ahmat B. Adam, *The Vernacular Press and the Emergence of Modern Indonesian Consciousness, (1855-1913)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995), pp. 16-19.

establishment of the first vernacular newspaper in the archipelago (and, it is said, suffered colonial discipline for some of his writings therein), watched the richest agricultural lands of central Java fall into the hands of Dutch lessees as the Javanese elite (himself included) became their abject debtors and the common folk their near serfs, and served as a sometimes reluctant, and apparently underpaid, teacher to and ghostwriter for the series of more or less competent Dutch philologists who passed through his court city. At the end of his life, he witnessed the transformative effects of Western technological progress on the colony: the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 and the proliferation of steamships radically accelerated global flows of people, products and ideas; the coming of the telegraph in 1870 compressed space and time; scientific agricultural practices were beginning to transform the agrarian landscape of Java; new, hitherto unthought-of professional opportunities were opening (or not) for the Javanese elite; and the completion in May 1873 of the first interior railroad – from the coast through the principalities – forever changed the domestic and economic lifeways of the native population. Ronggawarsita was an observer and a participant in all these changes. At the same time, he continued to perform his sometimes supranatural services at the royal palace: prophetic, poetic, and historiographic.

During the same time period, reform Islam was beginning to sweep the Muslim world and an Islamic revitalization was affecting the practices and understandings of Islam across Java. These new forms of Islam, which were to become dominant among Javanese Muslim scholars by the turn of the twentieth century, effectively marginalized the articulations of Islamic traditions by earlier Muslim scholars in Java. It is no doubt for this reason that the contributions of Ronggawarsita, and those of his illustrious

forbears, to Islamic thought in Java, are little recognized today. Indeed, that Ronggawarsita *was* a scholar of Islam remained buried knowledge until its unearthing in the late 1980s by the Javanese scholar Simuh.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say here, that this family of Javanese literati were major contributors to a corpus of Javanese Sufi literature composed in and around the Surakartan palace from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. There is ample evidence to suggest that all these literati were at least followers, and sometimes *murshid*, of the Shattariyah Sufi *tariqa*. Shattariyah networks had been active forces in the Javanese elite's last stand against Dutch colonial forces in the Dipanagara War, the war in which our Ronggawarsita had lost his father in 1828 and the war whose end marked the beginning of the (modern) reification of Javanese "tradition."<sup>17</sup>

In the final months of his life, Ronggawarsita would have witnessed a marked intensification of the forces of colonial modernity in his lifeworld, the Agricultural Congress being only one example. Aside from the epistemological debates of which he was sometimes the maligned target, perhaps most disturbing to him would have been the most obvious demonstration of the technological progress in his midst: that is, Surakarta's part in the mobilization for the military invasion of the Sultanate of Aceh in the fall of 1873.<sup>18</sup> For 1873 marked the beginning of the bloody forty-year colonial war to subdue the then sovereign state of Aceh and to secure the island of Sumatra as a Dutch

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<sup>16</sup> Simuh, *Mistik Islam Kejawen Raden Ngabehi Ranggawarsita: Suatu Studi terhadap Serat Wirid Hidayat Jati* (Jakarta: University of Indonesia Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup>For more on the intellectual and political participation of these Javanese literati in these Sufi networks see my "Shattāriyya Sufi Scents in the Literary World of the Surakarta Palace in Nineteenth-Century Java," in R. Michael Feener & Anne M. Blackburn, Eds. *Buddhist and Islamic Networks in Southern Asia: Comparative Perspectives* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming 2018). See also my "Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam."

<sup>18</sup> It is of note that the Surakartan *pujongga* family's Shattariyah pedigree (*silsilah*) is traced through the Acehnese Sufi saint, Sèh Abdul Rauf (Florida, "Shattāriyya Sufi Scents").



possession. A substantial number of the initial invasion force of nearly 9000 soldiers and 3500 forced laborers comprised Javanese natives who were mustered in the principalities, and then efficiently transported, along with their modern weapons, on the brand-new railroad to Java's north coast where steamships were waiting to transport them to Sumatra. The three foci of the vernacular press in Surakarta over the last five months of 1873 were: (1) the mobilization for the invasion of Aceh, including significant coverage of the colonial government's efforts to recruit, or impress, native subjects into the coming invasion force and to overcome the reluctance of the already-enlisted native soldiers to fight; (2) a discourse among reader-contributors on what were coming to be seen as the incommensurate epistemologies of (Western) modernity and (Javanese) tradition, often framed in terms of *science* versus *superstition* – a discourse that included careful attention to the progressive modern position adopted by Meiji Japan in its encounter with Western knowledge; and (3) the events surrounding the first Netherlands East Indies Agricultural Congress.

### **The Poem: Ignorance and Darkness in a Time of Madness**

During this period Ronggawarsita composed a number of poetic works, among these his most famous poem, the prophetic, socially- and self-critical *Serat Kala Tidha* (A Time of Blindness/Darkness/Ignorance),<sup>19</sup> three Sufi songs that formed (in part)

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Errington has produced an intelligent and sensitive study of Ronggawarsita's *Kala Tidha* ("To Know Oneself the Troubled Times: Ronggawarsita's *Serat Kala Tidha*," in *Writing on the Tongue*, ed., A. L. Becker [Ann Arbor, MI: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1989], pp. 95–138). His study forms an extraordinarily detailed meditation upon the linguistic and literary work both of Ronggawarsita's text and of Errington's English translation of it. Although my translation choices often diverge from Errington's, reading his text along with mine could prove useful.

Although there is no internal dating in the text of the *Kala Tidha*, most scholars have dated the poem to the very end of Ronggawarsita's life. One of the earliest extant manuscripts of the poem (MS. Kraton Yogyakarta W.316) concurs, dating the poem 28 Sawal 1802 (18 December 1873),

reflections on death,<sup>20</sup> and a prophecy that anticipated both the coming liberation of his people in 1945 and, in uncanny detail, his own imminent death.<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will limit my comments to Ronggowarsita's celebrated *Kala Tidha*, a work, like most works of "traditional" Javanese literature was composed to be sung aloud in a verse form known as *macapat*. Often taken as a prophecy, the work forms both a critical commentary on the state of the poet's current-day society and a pensive reflection on the ethical imperatives of Islam. In the poem's closing, line Ronggowarsita announces his imminent death in words that also form his acrostic signature:

<p><b><i>Serat Kalatidha (Sekar Sinom)</i></b>  <b>R.Ng. Ronggowarsita<sup>22</sup></b></p> <p>1. Mangkya darajating praja</p>	<p><b><i>The Time of Darkness: (Sinom verse)</i></b>  <b>R.Ng. Ronggowarsita<sup>23</sup></b></p> <p>1. Now the glory of the realm</p>
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exactly one week before Ronggowarsita's death (Lindsay, Soetanto, and Feinstein, *Katalog Induk Naskah-naskah Nusantara, Jilid 2: Kraton Yogyakarta* [Jakarta: Yayasan Obor, 1994], p. 201).

<sup>20</sup>Ronggowarsita, *Wirit Sopanalaya*, ed. Padmasusastra (Kediri: Tan Koen Swi, 1921).

<sup>21</sup> The poem prophecies that the return of well-being for the Javanese will come in the Javanese year 1877 (1945-46 CE), dated by chronogram: *wiku memuji ngèsthi sawiji* (the priest prays for the achievement of unity). Indonesia declared its independence from the Dutch in August 1945 at the close of World War II. Ronggowarsita proclaims that he will die in eight days, at noon on Wednesday Pon, 5 Dulkangidah Jimakir 1802 (24 December 1873). The chronogram is *nembah muksa pujanggaji* (The pujangga takes leave to vanish/die). See Ronggowarsita, *Sabdajati*, in *Lima Karya Pujangga Ronggowarsita*, ed. Kamajaya (Jakarta: Bale Pustaka, 1980), pp. 54-59. The newspaper (*Bramartani*, January 1, 1874), however, reports that Ronggowarsita died at 1:00 PM on Thursday, December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Also of note is the persistent focus on the nature and circumstances of the poet's death that has characterized a number of Ronggowarsita biographies over the past 138 years. See, for example, R.Ng. Soeradipura, *Serat Wédhapurnama* (circa 1880), Leiden University Library MS BCB 157, Anjar Any, *Raden Ngabehi Ronggowarsito: Apa yang Terjadi* (Semarang: Aneka, 1980); *Zaman Edan*, ed. Ahmad Norma (Yogyakarta: Bentang, 1998); Purwadi and Mahmudi, *Hidup, Cinta dan Kematian Ronggowarsita* (Yogyakarta: Pion Harapan, 2004). The most recent of these biographies opens eerily with the biographer's midnight meeting with Ronggowarsita's ghost on the main square in front of the Surakartan palace (J. Syahban Yasasusastra, *Ronggowarsita Menjawab Takdir: Sebuah Biografi Spiritual* (Yogyakarta: Beranda, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> R.Ng. Ronggowarsita, *Serat Kalatidha*, in *Lima Karya Pujangga Ronggowarsita*, ed., Kamajaya (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1980), pp. 29-44. I have added the diacritics.

<sup>23</sup> The poem proper comprises twelve stanzas; some renditions of it, however, are prefaced by an additional stanza: Wahyaning arda rubéda/Ki Pujangga améngeti/Mesu cipta mati raga/Mudhar warananing gaib/Sasmita sakalir/Ruweding sarwa pakéwuh/ Wiwaling kang warana/ Dadi badaling Hyang Widdhi/ Amedharaken paribawaning bawana (*ibid.*, p. 29). A translation of the prefatory stanza: Disclosing the plague of desire/The poet gives a warning/Focusing his mind, silencing his body/To open the veil of mystery/All the secret signs/The knots that do trouble/Parting the veil/He becomes the deputy of Almighty God/Revealing this world of woe.

<p>Kawuryan wus sunya ruri Rurah pangrèhing ukara Karana tanpa palupi Atilar silastuti Sarjana sujana kèlu Kalulun kala tidha Tidhem tandhaning dumadi Ardayèngrat déning karoban rubéda</p> <p>2. Raturé ratu utama Patihé linuwih Pra nayaka tyas raharja Panekaré becik-becik Parandéné tan dadi Paliyasing Kalabendu Malah sangkin andadra Rubéda kang ngreribedi Béda-béda ardané wong sanagara</p> <p>3. Katatangi tangisira Sira sang paramèngkawi Kawileting tyas duhkita Katamaning rèh wirangi Déning upaya sandi Sumaruna anarawung Pangimur manuara Mèt pamrih mèlik pakolih Temah suha ing karsa tanpa wewéka</p> <p>4. Dhasar karoban pawarta Babaratan ujar lamis Pinudya dadya pangarsa Wekasan malah kawuri Yèn pinikir sayekti Pédah apa anèng ngayun Andhedher kaluputan Siniraman banyu lali Lamun tuwuh dadi kekembang ing béka</p>	<p>Is manifest an empty void. The rule of rules in ruin Because there are no models<sup>24</sup> left. Respectful ways forsaken, The learned, the good are carried away Swept up in the time of darkness. Silent, the signs of Creation A craven world swallowed by sorrow.<sup>25</sup></p> <p>2. The king, a peerless king His vizier, pure excellence Flawless, the hearts of the ministers all The servants fine each one Yet none can serve To stay the Time of Wrath. Rather ever greater grow The troubles that do plague Myriad, the cravings of the people of this land.</p> <p>3. Aroused are the tears Of him the master poet, Wrapped in heavy heart Afflicted with disgrace. For secret schemes Swirl about encircling [him] Heartening with honeyed words To seize advantage and get success, Destroyed in the end is him that's caught unawares</p> <p>4. For inundated with news Rumors borne on lying lips Lauded as set for leadership But in the end to be left behind. If one reflects on it in truth, What merit then is prominence? Sowing seeds of error That bathed in the waters of forgetfulness Blossom as flowers of regret.</p>
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<sup>24</sup> The word translated as “models” is *palupi*, designating both a model or example to be followed and a piece of writing.

<sup>25</sup> Variant reading of lines 5–8: Ponang paramèngkawi/ Kawileting tyas malatkung Kongas kasudranira (*ibid.*, p. 30). A translation of these alternative lines: The master poet/In the embrace of a grieving heart/Is revealed a worthless wretch.

<p>5. Ujar Panitisastra          Awawarah asung péling          Ing jaman kenèng musibat          Wong ambek jatmika kontit          Mangkono yèn nitèni          Pédah apa amituhu          Pawarta lalawora          Mundhak angraranta ati          Angurbaya ngiketa caritèng kuna</p>	<p>5. The words of the <i>Panitisastra</i><sup>26</sup>          Teach with the warning that          In an age that is accursed          ‘Tis the virtuous man who fails.          And so if one reflects on it,          What merit then in taking faith          In foolish senseless news?          Lest it break the heart,          Better to compose the tales of old</p>
<p>6. Keni kinarya darsana          Panglimbang ala lan becik          Sayekti akèh kéwala          Lalakon kang dadi tamsil          Masalahing ngaurip          Wahananira tinemu          Temahan anarima          Mupus papasthèn ing takdir          Puluh-puluh anglakoni kaélokkan</p>	<p>6. That may be wrought into models          With which to weigh the good, the bad.          Truly there are many          Lives lived, deeds done<sup>27</sup> to exemplify          The question<sup>28</sup> of life          Its meaning found;          Then one is reconciled          Accepting what destiny has ordained;          Else to pursue the strange, the          preternatural.</p>
<p>7. Amenangi jaman édan          Éwuh aya ing pambudi          Mèlu édan nora tahan          Yèn tan milu anglakoni          Boya kaduman mélik          Kaliren wekasanipun          Dilalah karsa Allah          Begja-begjané kang lali          Luwih begja kang éling lawan waspada</p>	<p>7. To live in a time of madness          Is to know trouble in one’s mind.          To join the madness, unbearable          Yet he who does not join          Will not receive his share,          And so goes hungry in the end.          And yet it is the Will of God          However fortunate are they who forget,          More fortunate still are they who          remember, who are aware.</p>
<p>8. Samono iku babasan          Padu-paduné kapéngin          Nggih mekoten Paman Dhoplang          Bener ingkang angarani          Nanging sajroning bathin          Sajatiné nyamut-nyamut          Wis tuwa arep apa</p>	<p>8. Or so the saying goes:          As a matter of fact [we] want it too.          Isn’t that right, Uncle Dhoplang?<sup>29</sup>          True it is who’d say as much,          And yet within [my] deepest depths          In truth [I] am so far from that.          Grown old now, what is there to do</p>

<sup>26</sup> The *Panitisastra* is a classical text on ethical practice that was composed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by Ronggawarsita’s renowned great-grandfather, R.Ng. Yasadipura I (1729-1803).

<sup>27</sup> Translated here as “lives lived, deeds done” is the word *lalakon*.

<sup>28</sup> The word *masalah*, translated here as “question” also means “problem(s).”

<sup>29</sup> Uncle (*Paman*) Dhoplang is a character in a children’s ditty. To whatever question he is posed, he answers (in village *krama*), “yea, that’s right” (*nggih mekoten*). The question here, invites the stock answer.

<p>Muhung mahasing ngasepi Supayantuk parimarmaning Hyang Suksma</p>	<p>Save enter into solitude So that [I] may receive the mercy of Eternal God.</p>
<p>9. Béda lan kang wus santosa Kinarilan ing Hyang Widdhi Satiba malanganéya Tan susah ngupaya kasil Saking mangunah prapti Pangéran paring pitulung Marga samaning titah Rupa sabarang pakolih Parandéné masih taberi ikhtiyar</p>	<p>9. Different from those endowed with strength By the grace of Almighty God Whenever met with hindrances No need for them to seek success It falls to them a fruit of faith To them the Lord provides succor Through their fellow creatures comes All means of livelihood And still they strive with diligence</p>
<p>10. Sakadaré linakonon Mung tumindak mara ati Angger tan dadi prakara Karana wirayat muni Ikhtiyar iku yekti Pamilihé rèh rahayu Sinambi budidaya Kanthi awas lawan éling Kang kaèsthi antuka parmaning Suksma</p>	<p>10. With utmost effort their actions Done only to delight So as not to be a bother. For according to the ancient tales To choose to act is truly The choice felicitous Together with endeavor With heed and mindfulness<sup>30</sup> Seeking only God's gracious mercy.<sup>31</sup></p>
<p>11. Ya Allah ya Rasulullah Kang sipat murah lan asih Mugi-mugi aparinga Pitulung ingkang nartani Ing alam awal akhir Dumunung ing gesang ulun Mangkya sampun awredha Ing wekasan kadipundi Mila mugi wontena pitulung Tuwan</p>	<p>11. Oh God! Oh Blessed Prophet! Who art Merciful and Loving Might Thou grant Your succor which does suffuse This world, beginning unto end To dwell within my life. For now I have grown old At the final end, how will it be? I pray the Lord to help me.</p>
<p>12. Sageda sabar santosa Mati sajroning ngaurip Kalising rèh aru-ara Murka angkara sumingkir</p>	<p>12. May I be patient and strong Dying within life<sup>32</sup> Untouched by tumult and trouble</p>

<sup>30</sup> The word *éling*, translated here as “mindfulness,” also, and at the same time, connotes “memory” and “remembrance.”

<sup>31</sup> In this stanza, and the final line of the preceding stanza, the poet inculcates the Islamic virtue of *ikhtiar* (individual effort or striving). Though all is determined by God, one is bound to put forth every effort in this life. And, as voiced in the final line of the stanza: whatever one does, he or she does it for the sake of God alone.

<sup>32</sup> “Dying within life” is a form of the well-known Sufi injunction to “die before you die,” which invokes the extermination of the self that is effected by the soul's absorption into the Divine.

Tarlèn meleng malatsih Sanityasèng tyas mamasuh Badharing sapudhendha Antuk mayar sawatawis Borong angga suwarga mèsì martaya	Quit of selfish desire With nothing left but love That ever then my heart does cleanse Quelling [His] righteous wrath, And somewhat lightened thus Surrendering self, dying fill the deathless void. <sup>33</sup>
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The best known of all Javanese literary works, this poem has been invoked as prophetic social truth by a startling array of Indonesian figures over the last 145 years.<sup>34</sup> Many Javanese can recite the poem by heart, or at least the ubiquitous seventh stanza that opens with “To live in a time of madness.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is unsurprising that countless Indonesians have repeatedly recognized in their successive nowtimes the “time of madness” inscribed by Ronggawarsita in 1873. More pertinent still is the prophetic and ethical force that this recognition has upon these Indonesian subjects -- the almost visceral sense of contemporaneity the poet and poem still have for them today.

In these twelve short stanzas Ronggawarsita mourns the *recognized* end of a form of life that we might call “traditional Java,” mocks his own vain ambitions, affirms the utility for the present of remembering the past, inscribes the absurdity of life in a time out of joint, calls into question his own abilities, emphatically affirms the ethical message of Islam in the world, and in a final cryptic signature announces his own death.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that, though recognizing an end, the poem is not, as some have argued,

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<sup>33</sup> The final line anticipates the poet's imminent death and absorption into the Divine while at the same time providing his acrostic signature, or *sandiasma* (secreted name), which is seated in the second syllable of each of the words: *borong* (surrender) *angga* (body/self) *suwarga* (die/deceased; heaven) *mèsì* (fill) *martaya* (deathless void).

<sup>34</sup> Among these, the first two presidents of Indonesia Sukarno and Soeharto; D. N. Aidit (non-Javanese head of the Indonesian Communist Party, extrajudicially executed in 1965); modern Indonesia's most acclaimed author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and; one of modern Indonesia's most acclaimed poets, W. S. Rendra.

<sup>35</sup> A Google search of the first line of stanza 7, “Amenangi jaman edan” (to live in a time of madness) on March 31, 2018, yielded 20,400 hits.

<sup>36</sup> See note 33 above.

just a desperate lament of the defeat of traditional Javanese power; it is, I think, rather a more complicated reflection upon and reactivation of indigenous and other potencies. Owing to its own movement along a particular form of prophetic time, it is a poem that effectively haunts and hence cannot be forgotten: it neither celebrates the vanishing past nor repudiates a productive intimacy with that same past. Neither does it ignore discontinuity, the difference of emergent futures.

### **Prophetic Repetitions**

Ronggawarsita's 1873 poem repeatedly reminds its reader to remember, and it does so through a cunning repetition of an early nineteenth-century prophetic text that had been composed, possibly by his illustrious grandfather at a time when traditional Java had not yet been fixed as tradition. The older prophecy that Ronggawarsita borrows without attribution is found in the *Book of Centhini*, a multi-volume poetic work that was compiled by a team of Surakartan court poets in 1815 and that is widely reputed as "the first Javanese encyclopedia."<sup>37</sup> Within the text of the *Centhini*, this prophecy (to be repeated twice in different forms both in the "original" and by Ronggawarsita) is attributed to prophetic authors from the past. The first author (or imagined author) is Ki Pujangkara, a seventeenth-century sage who foresaw the imminent end of his perfect present in the old royal capital of Mataram under the mighty king Sultan Agung (The

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<sup>37</sup> The *Serat Centhini* (or *Cabolang-Centhini*) was commissioned by the crown prince of Surakarta who was later to reign as Pakubuwana V (1820-23) on 26 Mukharam Jé AJ 1742 (7 January 1815). The massive 722-canto poem was compiled by a team of Surakartan court poets comprised of K. Ng. Ronggasautrasna, R.T. Sastranagara (our Ronggawarsita's grandfather) and Ki Ng. Sastradipura.. For more on the authorship of the text, see *Serat Centhini*, 12 vols., ed. Kamajaya (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Centhini, 1985-91) I: iv. See also my notes on the text in my *Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts Vol. III: Manuscripts of the Radya Pustaka Museum and the Hardjonagaran Library* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University SEAP, 2012), pp. 222-23.

Great Sultan) (r. 1613–1645). The end that he sees is an end that his contemporaries were incapable of recognizing. A student of the sage Pujangkara shares this prophecy with a troop of wandering seekers of Islamic truths who have happened onto him at the site of Mataram's still-future successor kingdom of Kartasura.<sup>38</sup>

<i>Serat Centhini, Pupuh 248 (Sekar Sinom)</i> <sup>39</sup>	<i>The Book of Centhini, Canto 248 (Sinom Verse)</i>
<p>21. Rèh mangkya dlajating praja Kawuryan respati wingit Sarèh ruruh ing ukara Krana mèt palupi sidik Tan tilar silastuti Sujana sarjana sarju Mumidya mrih widada Tentrening sagung dumadi Ascaryèng tyas karoban déning utama</p>	<p>21. Now the signs within the realm Are manifest full wondrous. Peaceful following the rules Left by models true. Never forsaking respectful ways, The learned, the good are in accord, They strive for virtue. The serenity of all Creation Hearts of joy flooded by virtue.</p>
<p>22. Sang Prabu Wali Kalipah Patih nayaka luwih Pra pangageng tyas raharja Panekar mratah prayogi Punika kang dumadi Paliyasé rèh rahayu Mila mangkin andadra Raharjaning kang nagari Temah suka sukur sanggyaning kawula</p>	<p>22. The king, a Caliph and a Saint His vizier and ministers excellent Flawless, the hearts of the courtiers all The servants all respected This then is the cause That keeps [?] the way of bliss. So ever greater grows The happiness of the realm, And so all its subjects do rejoice.</p>
<p>23. Katatangi ring sampurna Para kang paramakawi Kawileting tyas ascarya Katamaning tyas majernih Dènnya ngupaya sandi</p>	<p>23. Awakened to perfection Are all the master poets, Enveloped by hearts of joy, Affected by purity of heart As they strive for secrets</p>

<sup>38</sup>The Mataram period lasted from the late sixteenth-century until 1677. Its successor realm of Kartasura, at which site our imaginary early seventeenth-century pilgrims had stumbled, lasted from 1677-1742. The realm of Kartasura was succeeded by that of Surakarta (1745-present), the court Ronggawarsita served. In 1755 a rebellion divided the realm into two kingdoms (Surakarta and Yogyakarta), both of which survive, in more or less greatly attenuated form, in the present Republic of Indonesia.

<sup>39</sup>*Serat Centhini*, ed. Kamajaya (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Centhini, 1986), Vol. III, pp. 306-307. (Canto 248: 21-25). I have added the diacritics.



<p>Sumaruna anarawung          Angimur manuara          Mèt pamrih amrih pakolih          Dadya suka ing karsa manadukara</p>	<p>That swirl about encircling,          Heartening with honeyed words:          Seize advantage to seek success,          And so happy is the will that is prepared:</p>
<p>24. Kasok karoban ing warta          Babaratan ujar yekti          Binudi dadi pangarsa          Puwara kathah nemahi          Ginulut anetepi          Kotaman dadya pangayun          Andhedher kaleresan          Siniraman banyu aring          Bilih tuwuh dadya kekembang ing nugraha</p>	<p>24. For inundated with news          Rumors borne on truthful lips          Lauded as set for leadership,          In the end it often comes to pass.          Nurtured they succeed,          The virtuous become prominent          Sowing seeds of righteousness          That bathed in healing waters          Blossom as flowers of grace.</p>
<p>25. Wicara ran Nitisastra          Awawarah asung péling          Inggih ing jaman dupara          Kuwat dènnya mangun jurit          Taletuh praja tintrim          Tentrem sakèhing tumuwuh          Kadiparan sageda dursana          Nagari Mantawis          Saking nalar lestantun salaminira</p>	<p>25. The words called <i>Nitisastra</i>          Teach with the warning that          In times of uncertainty          Be strong when you make war.          Worthless, the realm struck silent by fear.          At peace are all the living things.          And yet it can be made an example:          The Kingdom of Mataram          One might then think it could never          end. . .</p>

But, as the *Centhini* goes on to say, that end is but two generations away, noting the Quranic truth that the only thing that never perishes is the Essence of the Almighty.<sup>40</sup> In his unattributed citation of this passage, Ronggawarsita underlines that ephemerality of worldly realms. Repeating, with a difference, this prophecy from the past, our poet *inverts* the language of the “original,” thereby translating the perfection of Sultan Agung’s early seventeenth-century Mataram into the disaster of his late nineteenth-century Surakarta, another kingdom perfectly positioned for an end. And this is an end that our poet fully recognizes. Turning the older prophecy upside down in the first five verses of the “Time of Darkness,” Ronggawarsita transforms laudatory verses that had

<sup>40</sup> *Serat Centhini* III, p. 308 (Canto 248: 26).

described the majesty and virtuous working of the realm under the saintly (*wali kalipah*) marshal rule of Sultan Agung into a story of doom that reflects his own time out of joint.

But the full prophetic force of Ronggawarsita's iteration of the prophetic past is only realized in his reinscription of another prophecy, one that traces Javanese history backwards and forwards from the year 0 to Judgment Day and does so within an explicitly Islamic framework.<sup>41</sup> In the *Book of Centhini*, this prophecy is disclosed to the same wandering troop of seekers of Islamic truths. The pilgrims having arrived at a sacred mosque that is located close to the site of the future kingdom of Surakarta, this time it is a young scholar of Islam who relates the prophecy to them. This prophecy, as told by the young scholar and as inscribed in the *Centhini*, was composed, it is said, by the legendary ninth-century Javanese king Jayabaya – but as it was revealed to him by a wandering Islamic saint from Rum (Turkey). The outlines of this prophecy, known as the Jayabaya Prophecy (*Jangka Jayabaya*) remain well known in today's Java, having been widely disseminated in a prose version that is said to have been compiled by none other than Ronggawarsita himself. The *Centhini* poetic version follows here:

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<sup>41</sup> Judgement Day is slated to take place in the Javanese year of 2100 (2162 CE).

<i>Serat Centhini, Pupuh 257 (Sekar Pucung)<sup>42</sup></i>	<i>The Book of Centhini, Canto 257 (Pucung Verse)</i>
<p>34. Dalajating praja kawuryan wus suwung Lebur pangrèh tata Karana tanpa palupi Pan wus tilar silastuti titi tata praja</p>	<p>34. Now the glory of the realm is manifest an empty void. Ruined is the rule of rules Because there are no models left. Forsaken are respectful ways and the order of the realm.</p>
<p>35. Pra sujana sarjana sarju satemah kélu Klulun Kalatidha Tidhem tandhaning dumadi Hardayèngrat déning karoban rubéda</p>	<p>35. The learned, the good are carried away Swept up in the time of darkness. Silent, the signs of Creation A craven world swallowed by sorrow.</p>
<p>36. Sitipati, narèprabu utamèstu Papatih nindhita Pra nayaka tyas basuki Panekaré becik-becik cakrak-cakrak</p>	<p>36. The king, a king of peerless virtue His vizier, true excellence Flawless, the hearts of the ministers all The servants fine and handsome</p>
<p>37. Nging tan dadya paliyasing Kalabendu Mandar sangkin ndadra Rubéda angrurubedi Béda-béda haradaning wong sanagara</p>	<p>37. Yet none can serve to stay the Time of Wrath. Rather ever greater grow The troubles that do plague Myriad, the cravings of the people of this land.</p>
<p>38. Katatangi tangising mardawa-lagu Kwilet tyas dhukita Katataman ring rèh wirangi Déning angupaya sandi sumaruna</p>	<p>38. Aroused are the tears of the poets, Wrapped in heavy hearts Afflicted with disgrace. For they strive for secrets that swirl about</p>
<p>39. Anarawung, mangimur sanubarèku Méncéng pangupaya Ing pamrih mélik pakolih Temah suha ing karsa tanpa wiwéka</p>	<p>39. Encircling, heartening the soul. Their efforts, lead astray By desire to gain success. Lost in the end are those caught unawares.</p>
<p>40. Ing Panitisastra wawarah sung pémut Ing jaman musibat Wong ambeg jatmika kontit Kang mangkono yèn nitèni lalampahan</p>	<p>40. The <i>Panitisastra</i> teaches with the warning that In an age that is accursed ‘Tis the virtuous man who fails. “Tis so if one reflects upon the way,</p>

<sup>42</sup>*Serat Centhini*, ed. Kamajaya (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Centhini, 1988), Vol. IV: 3-4. (Canto 257: 34-44). I have added the diacritics.

<p>41. Nawung kridha, kang menangi jaman gemplung Iya jaman édan Éwuh aya ing pambudi</p>	<p>41. Of subtle truth: he who lives in crazy times Yea, in a time of madness Will be troubled in his mind.</p>
<p>42. Yèn tan mélu, anglakoni wus tartamtu Boya kadumanan Mélik kalling donya iki Satemahé kalirèn wekasanira</p>	<p>42. If he does not join, then it's certain that He'll not receive his share Of worldly things and position, And so go hungry in the end.</p>
<p>43. Wus dilalah, karsané kang Among- tuwuh Kang lali kabegjan Ananging sayektinèki Luwih begja kang éling lawan waspada</p>	<p>43. And yet it is the Will of Him Who Nurtures all Creation: They who forget find fortune, But in truth More fortunate still are they who remember, who are aware.</p>
<p>44. Wektu iku, wus parek wekasanipun Jaman Kaladuka. . .</p>	<p>44. At that time, near will be the end Of the Era of Sorrow. . .</p>

Even the most cursory comparison of these verses with the first seven stanzas of Ronggawarsita's *Kala Tidha* demonstrates that our poet has reinscribed, *almost* verbatim, this prophecy for the Javanese future that, according to the *Centhini*, had been revealed to a "classical" ninth-century Javanese king by a wandering Turkish saint. The prophecy explicitly concerns the disastrous time of darkness – and of madness – that Ronggawarsita's poem addresses. For it is with this second repetition that our poet recognizes in this past lament on future moral decline in Java his own troubling present. The "time of madness" foretold by a Turkish *maulana* is the poet's Java of 1873. Ronggawarsita effects this recognition in his poem's first seven verses through a

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translation across poetic forms and along prophetic time.<sup>43</sup> But that is not all. In the *Centhini* Jayabaya prophecy, the culmination of the “Time of Blindness” that Ronggawarsita recognized as his present signals the coming of its end and an opening to a messianic golden age, the rule of justice under a saintly Sufi king.<sup>44</sup> Ronggawarsita, however, anticipates neither a Sufi king nor the millennial end of time. Rather Ronggawarsita's poem is a strategic translation of the earlier prophecy into a new prophetic context.

Of the twelve-stanza poem, it is only the first seven stanzas that have been plucked from the earlier prophecy to be rewritten in another prophetic register. The eighth stanza opens with the poet's droll observations on the citation: framing it as a just a “saying,” he notes that while we, the common folk (that is, the poet and “Uncle Dhoplang”), may recognize and repeat the old prophecies, they may have become for us mere platitudes. This is because we (again, the poet and Uncle Dhoplang) are indeed driven by the desires for gain, position and, even, progress, that the recognition of the “time of madness” would have us forswear.

8. Or so the saying goes.  
As a matter of fact [we] want it too.  
Isn't that right, Uncle Dhoplang?

Ronggawarsita continues with a self-critical, and self-aware, reflection on his own position as an old man, a man, who embodying *an* end, is able to do nothing but retreat into solitude, there to seek God's mercy.

True it is who'd say as much,  
And yet within [my] deepest depths

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<sup>43</sup> The earlier prophecy, composed in Pucung meter, is translated into Sinom. Ronggawarsita grafts this translated/transformed citation together with his inverted citation of the other prophetic passage to compose the first seven stanzas of his own prophetic “Time of Blindness.”

<sup>44</sup> *Serat Centhini* IV: 4-5 (Canto 258: 1-7).

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In truth [I] am so far from that.  
Grown old now, what is there to do  
Save enter into solitude  
So that [I] may receive the mercy of Eternal God.

Ronggawarsita then contrasts his own fading position as a living anachronism looking toward death with that of the strong, that is, those who are poised to move beyond the horizons of (any given) present "time of madness" toward other emergent futures. And with this he moves resolutely into the prophetic register of Islam.

9. Different from those endowed with strength:  
By the grace of Almighty God  
Whenever met with hindrances,  
No need for them to seek success  
It falls to them a fruit of faith.  
To them the Lord provides succor  
Through their fellow creatures comes  
All means of livelihood.  
And still they strive (*ikhtiyar*) with diligence.

10. With utmost effort their actions  
Done only to delight  
So as not to be a bother.  
For according to the ancient tales,  
To choose to act (*ikhtiyar*) is truly  
The choice felicitous  
Together with endeavor  
With heed and mindfulness/remembrance  
Seeking only God's gracious mercy.

The ninth and tenth stanzas are marked by an intensification of the poem's Muslim register, with a focus on the interplay of the dual ethical imperatives of Islam: to accept absolutely the determination of divine decree while at the same time fully exerting one's individual effort in the responsible exercise of human choice. This exertion of

effort is to be performed with heed and with a mindfulness born of remembrance (*éling*). Only thus are accomplished the aspirations whose fruition has already been ordained by God. And all these exertions are performed for the sake of God – and for the sake of becoming a fitting receptacle for His loving mercy.

In addition to the Muslim injunction always to remember God, the remembrance that Ronggawarsita speaks of also enjoins a responsibility to remember the human past (the “lives lived and deeds done” spoken of in the poem’s sixth stanza), an historical responsibility to the particular dead, of whom he was soon to become among the more prominent.

5. ....  
Better to compose the tales of old

6. That may be wrought into models  
With which to weigh the good, the bad.  
Truly there are many  
Lives lived, deeds done to exemplify  
The question of life  
Its meaning found.

Those “lives lived and deeds done” in the past, properly remembered, serve as models for the future.

In the last two stanzas of “The Time of Darkness,” the poet turns in anticipation to own death. Calling out for God’s help, he is moving on, first to death in life, and then to his final bodily end in the fullness of the deathless void.

11. Oh God! Oh Blessed Prophet!  
Who art Merciful and Loving  
Might Thou grant  
Your succor which does suffuse  
This world, beginning unto end  
To dwell within my life.

For now I have grown old  
At the final end, how will it be?  
I pray the Lord to help me.

12. May I be patient and strong  
Dying within life  
Untouched by tumult and trouble  
Quit of selfish desire  
With nothing left but love  
That ever then my heart does cleanse  
Quelling [His] righteous wrath,  
And somewhat lightened thus  
Surrendering self, dying fill the deathless void.

Surely realizing that he will have been the last of the prophetic poets, Ronggawarsita comes to his end with the realization that his death heralds the vanishing of the form of life (shall we say, “traditional Java”) that he embodies. But also and at the same time, through his prophetic recognition of this end in the rather different end that had been prophesied by his forbears for his present Javanese lifeworld, he effectively activates a relay across times in order, thereby, more effectively to touch both those who preceded him and those who will come after him. Ronggawarsita composes and thus suggests a form of active memory that will neither ignore discontinuity (say, for example, the rupture of modernity), nor allow forgetting a past, or rather pasts, that he neither celebrates nor repudiates. Rather he provokes a productive intimacy with both pasts and futures, an intimacy realized in the relay across times, along prophetic time, that his writing has set off. The ethical force of his poetry, and especially that of “The Time of Blindness,” thus continues to work its effects across multiple times of madness.



## A Conclusion, but not *the* Conclusion

In the months preceding his death, Ronggawarsita no doubt followed the debate on the value or lack thereof, the force or the failure of his *pujongga*-ship, of his prophetic gifts. The debate turned on the question of whether Ronggawarsita was the embodiment of a dead tradition whose passing should be celebrated as it was being overcome by modernity – or the (last) receptacle of a prophetic light (*wahyu*) that could still serve to illuminate the Javanese future. In this pseudonymous debate, the foremost champion of Western modernity's ascent was one “Pothèt Umarmaya” (“the trickster dwarf”).<sup>45</sup> And yet while challenging the form of life, of knowledge, the *tradition* that he thought Ronggawarsita embodied, this cheeky champion of Western epistemology also recognized that within what he saw as the long sleep of tradition, Ronggawarsita alone had been awake. On September 4, 1873, the local newspaper ran Umarmaya's latest response to his most faithful sparring partners:

Don't think that I'm trying to dismiss the usefulness (*guna*) of R.Ng. Ronggawarsita, but I can definitely say that in this day and age, he is no *pujongga*. Why, if you compare him to the students in the teachers' school who actually understand mathematics, Javanese, Malay, and some Dutch, measurement, mapping, (*anggambar ngèlmi bumi*), natural science, astronomy, and so forth, subjects that are *useful* to the realm, who are not just fancifully winging it (*awur-awuran*); then [Ronggawarsita] appears to be *SHAKING* in his *pujongga*-ship. – *AND YET* it remains fitting to honor and to revere him, for at the time when everyone else was asleep, [Ronggawarsita] stood alone in wakefulness. Unfortunately, he was not yet able to pull himself up tall (*jumeneng*) and stride forth to expand the horizons (*jajahan*) of his mind, for there was no compass to guide his heart. HOW TRULY GREAT is the value of such a man. Is it not fitting to honor him...? One hundred years from now, when European knowledge has risen ever higher over the island of Java,

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<sup>45</sup> *Pothèt* means “dwarf.” Umarmaya is the name of the trickster sidekick of the Prophet Mohammad's heroic uncle, Amir Hamza, protagonist of the romantic Ménak tales.

people like Carik Langenharja, like També Jumiril, like Kodheng,<sup>46</sup> even more so like me, will be worth no more than *OPIUM BALLS* (*buntel tiké*)-- even now I feel that we have been knocked out and kicked to the wayside by the Japanese who have been associating with Europeans for less the two hundred years, whereas we Javanese have had almost five hundred years [sic]... Eh, so it is for men lost in the stupor of deep sleep (*Bramartani*, September 4, 1873; emphasis in italics and in capital letters are Pothèt Umarmaya's).

While the heated and sometimes bitter exchanges that took place over those months could not have but wounded Ronggawarsita, as duly noted by one on his supporters in the *Bramartani* of 25 September 1873, they would not have surprised him, or, I think, caused him undue dismay. For I am suggesting that Ronggawarsita himself recognized the limitations of his own abilities, the endtime of the lifeworld that he had known and the inevitable ascendancy of modernity. But the form of his recognition of that end allowed room for the uncanny return, in modernity, of the ghost of "traditional" difference.

I began this essay noting the emphatic conclusion of the first modern congress on agricultural production in the Indies on Saturday night 11 October 1873. The end was spectacular: it was about eleven o'clock on that Saturday night, and the participants, Dutch and royal Javanese, along with their numerous wives (they had been allowed to bring along as many as, but no more than, three wives each) were reveling at the banquet

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<sup>46</sup>Carik Langenharja, També Jumiril, and Kodheng were Pothèt Umarmaya's regular sparring partners in the columns of *Bramartani* in the last months of 1873. Like "real" Javanese proper names, the pen-names chosen by these men, or possibly women, carry meaning: "Carik Langenharja" means "Scribe of Langenharja." Langenharja was the campy pleasure retreat that built in 1871 by Pakubuwana IX, ruler of the Karaton Surakarta (1861-1893). In the 1880s one of the most prominent real-life scribes of Langenharja was the female courtier, Nyai Tumenggung Adisara; notably she called herself the "Lady Pujongga of the Karaton Surakarta, some ten years *after* the death of our poet, the "Seal of the Pujongga" (see Ny.T. Adisara, [*Serat Wulang Putra*]. MS. SP 444 Ha; KS 368.3). The meaning of "També Jumiril remains unclear to me; També means "coming," but I fail to recognize the significance of "jumiril"). "Kodheng" means "confused."

tables inside the pavilion that housed the Exhibition, while outside the natives were enjoying a fireworks display. When a second (!) errant rocket landed on its roof, the pavilion quickly ignited in flames. At the cry of “Fire!” the ladies ran for the exits while the rattled gents made an abbreviated and chaotic attempt to save the valuable items on display in the Exhibition. Their feeble efforts were in vain: within a matter of minutes the pavilion and all its contents had been reduced (or returned) to ash (*pulang awu*) (*Bramartani*, 16 October 1873).

The retrospective report on the Congress and Exhibition noted that even before the disaster, the event had proven to be a failure. Aside from the invited participants, it seems that very few people had bothered to show up at all. The report speculated on the reasons: it was too hot, people were reluctant to take leave of their ricefields, and, most notably, rumors concerning the true purpose of the Congress had struck terror among the natives. As it turns out, this event, the first ever public congress to advance modern agricultural practices in the Indies, coincided with the first mobilization of native troops in central Java for deployment to the bloody colonial war that was about to be waged in Aceh. Word had spread that the Exhibition had been designed as a trap, into which hapless natives were being lured in order to press them into military service. And, indeed, when on opening night, a student<sup>47</sup> from the provincial capital Semarang had been caught trying to sneak into the Congress without paying the admission fee, he was chased down, roughed up, had his head shaved, and, it is said, shipped off to Aceh (*Bramartani*, 9 and 16 October 1873).

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<sup>47</sup> It is certainly worth noting that it was a *student*, indicating a student from a modern school, and not a simple peasant who suffered this unhappy fate.

One can only wonder whether or not R.Ng. Ronggawarsita was present on the palace square the night of the fire, either outside with the other natives watching the fireworks show or inside the Exhibition pavilion with the participant-revelers – after all, the lead-up article to the event had explained that a *konggres* is a “meeting of kings and *pujongga* and the like to discuss weighty matters.” (*Bramartani*, 18 September 1873). I would like to imagine that our poet was there watching from the outside as this celebration of modern technology went up in flames – reduced to ash just two months before his own death. He would, I think, have watched with a wry smile. Ronggawarsita was not at all unaware of the advent of modernity. As an editor of the first vernacular newspaper in the Indies, he had himself been a participant in that emergent modernity. And yet he also stood in critical relation to it, challenging a jealous form of global modernity that demands absolute repudiation of all other forms of being in the world. He was a man who would not be *conformed* to either emergent world: the traditional or the modern. Ronggawarsita was a “classical” non-conformist – not a hopeless relic of the past. He fully recognized the inevitable end of the lifeways that belonged to that past – just as he saw clearly his own impending death. Ronggawarsita neither celebrated nor repudiated what was emerging as the “traditional” past; rather he lived in productive intimacy with it. By having recognized and reinscribed his present as the future that his forbears had prophesied, he had revitalized the past and at the same time activated a relay across discontinuous times that would repeatedly motivate future regenerations of his ethical message. His writing performed a kind of active memory that neither ignored the discontinuity of modernity nor was overcome by it. As the Prophet Muhammad was the

Seal of the Prophets, Ronggawarsita was the Seal of the Pujongga – he was the embodiment of an end that opened the horizons of an unknown future.

Ronggawarsita's death came on the 25<sup>th</sup> (or the 24<sup>th</sup>) of December 1873, just over two months after the incineration of the modern Agricultural Exhibition and just weeks after the first telegraph reports of colonial casualties (both Javanese and Dutch) from the invasion force in Aceh had reached Surakarta. His obituary was the lead story in *Bramartani*'s edition of January 1, 1874:

Surakarta. On Thursday, the 25<sup>th</sup> at about 1:00 PM, Rahadèn Ngabéhi Ronggawarsita, royal retainer of the Kadipatèn at the rank of Kliwon who also served as the king's *pujongga*, passed away returning home to God's loving grace (*rahmatollah*). This has left all those who have been affected by his teachings in a speechless daze. The wake and funeral surpassed that of most men. May the deceased be blessed with the love of Almighty God in heaven.

Now the city of Surakarta Finest-in-the-World is watching expectantly for those of the new generation (*trubusan* = "sprouts) who may succeed the deceased who has left behind him the sweet fragrance of fame in the fields of poetry and Javanese narrative (*carita*). But rather than merely filling his vacancy, may these youths outshine him in bringing peace, prosperity, virtue, and nobility.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> One week later, underlining Ronggawarsita's failings in the worldly sphere, the following (unprecedented) notice was published in *Bramartani*:

Kadipatèn Anom Surakarta. Notice is hereby given to all the gentlemen or common men within the city of Surakarta and its surrounding villages, by governmental order dated 1 January 1874, no. 3.

With the death of Radèn Ngabéhi Ronggawarsita, retainer at the rank of Kliwon in the Kadipatèn, [notice is given] to whomsoever claims to be his creditor, or to have bought up the crops of his fields in advance, or to have leased his apanage lands etc., and who holds legal papers to that effect complete with seal.

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By order of the government, all these have 100 days from the date of this order to make their claims as creditors of this Radèn Ngabéhi Ronggawarsita. After 100 days, the claims of whomsoever should come forward will be denied, even if said claimant holds legal papers signed by R.Ng. Ronggawarsita (*Bramartani*, 8 January 1874).