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Nyai Roro Kidul: Water, Gender, and the Politics of Sacred Sovereignty in Javanese Cosmology

Nurhidayu Rosli¹, Al-Amril Othman¹, Mohd Firdaus Abdullah¹, Yusry Sulaiman² & Haslinda Hasan²

¹Centre for Research in History, Politics & International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

²School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia,
06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia.

*Corresponding Author: nurhidayurosli@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract: This article examines *Ratu Laut Selatan*, Nyai Roro Kidul, as a Javanese cosmological text that binds water, gender, and sovereignty within an interconnected regime of meaning. It argues that water functions not merely as an ecological medium but as a cosmological infrastructure of power legitimising rule through the sacred union between the king and the sea queen. By situating the Southern Ocean as a sacred and feminine domain, the study reveals how the feminisation of water creates a dialectic in which the female body of water is both alluring and threatening, sustaining patriarchal authority while expressing feminine agency that resists control. Integrating hydro-cosmology and hydrofeminism, the analysis interprets rituals, taboos, colour symbolism, and natural phenomena as political signs. The Merapi, Keraton, and Ocean axis is read as a dynamic framework of sovereignty balancing human, natural, and spiritual realms. Within this configuration, water emerges as a gendered space of power, generating obedience, fear, and devotion through ceremonial and oral traditions that delineate what is permitted and forbidden. At the local level, the study demonstrates how Javanese water cosmology shapes ideas of sovereignty through nature and feminine symbolism. At the global level, it enriches hydropolitics by introducing a paradigm of the sea as a locus of power and feminine sacrality, rarely explored in social science and humanities. Reading Nyai Roro Kidul as a hydropolitical text, this article calls for expanding water politics theory to include cultural and cosmological dimensions in understanding how water organises ecology, economy, and the imagination of sovereignty.

Keywords: Nyai Roro Kidul; water; gender; sacred sovereignty; javanese cosmology

Introduction

In the vast cultural imagination of the Javanese world, few figures embody the convergence of nature, power and spirituality as profoundly as *Ratu Laut Selatan* or Nyai Roro Kidul, the Queen of the Southern Ocean. Revered and feared, she reigns over the waters of the Indian Ocean that border Java's southern coast, her myth resonating through oral traditions, royal rituals and popular consciousness for centuries. Within Javanese cosmology, Nyai Roro Kidul is not merely a sea deity or spirit but a symbolic embodiment of the relationship between sovereignty, the feminine and the sacred. Her story has travelled through time, from pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist worldviews to Islamic Javanese syncretism, evolving into a cultural grammar through which ideas of power, legitimacy and ecological order are continuously negotiated (Wessing, 1997). The myth of Nyai Roro Kidul centres upon her eternal bond with the kings of Java, particularly those of the Mataram lineage. The ruler's mystical marriage to the sea queen functions as both spiritual covenant and political

charter, anchoring the ruler's temporal power within a sacred cosmological order. Through this union, the monarch becomes the intermediary between the human and the supernatural, the earthly and the aquatic. In this way, the Southern Ocean, known locally as Segara Kidul, assumes a political meaning that transcends its geography. It becomes the metaphysical counterpart to Mount Merapi, with the Keraton (royal palace) situated between these two poles. Together, Merapi, Keraton and Samudera form the cosmological axis of Javanese kingship, a spatial and spiritual configuration that binds mountain, court and sea into a single continuum of divine order (Wessing, 1997).

Despite its persistence within Javanese thought and practice, the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul has been largely interpreted through the lenses of folklore, anthropology and mysticism. While these approaches provide valuable ethnographic and cultural insights, they often overlook the deeper hydropolitical and gendered dimensions of her myth. Water, in these accounts, tends to appear as background rather than as an active agent of meaning and power (Abdullah, 2025). Similarly, Nyai Roro Kidul is often framed as a symbol of feminine danger or seduction, a trope that obscures the complex interplay between the sacred and the political that her figure represents (Kam, 2021). This study departs from such conventional readings by foregrounding water as a cosmological infrastructure of power and by situating Nyai Roro Kidul within a broader theoretical conversation on hydro-cosmology and hydrofeminism (Rigg, 1992; Shefer, Bozalek & Romano, 2023). The primary aim of this research is to reconceptualise Nyai Roro Kidul as a hydropolitical text that reveals the intersection of cosmology, gender and power in Javanese thought (Musila, 2024). It seeks to demonstrate how the myth of the sea queen operates as a living framework through which ideas of sovereignty are naturalised and reproduced. More specifically, the study addresses three interrelated questions. First, how does the Javanese cosmology of water shape the symbolic logic of kingship and legitimacy? Second, in what ways does the feminisation of water embody both subjugation and resistance within the structure of sacred sovereignty? Third, how can this localised cosmology of water be read as part of a broader intellectual dialogue on the relationship between nature, gender and power?.



Figure 1. Sketch map of Palabuhanratu Bay (Wynkoops Bergen Baaÿ) and the adjoining Tjianjoerse lands, drawn by the Dutch surveyor P. Jansen in 1789.

Source: P. Jansen (1789).

By engaging with these questions, the article aims to situate Javanese cosmology within a comparative and theoretical framework that transcends local ethnography. It positions the myth of Nyai Roro Kidul as a critical lens for understanding how Southeast Asian societies articulate the moral and spiritual foundations of governance through the language of nature and the feminine. In doing so, it underscores that water, far from being a passive backdrop, is an epistemic and political force that structures the imagination of sovereignty. The Queen of the Southern Ocean thus emerges not only as a mythic figure but also as a mirror reflecting the deeper metaphysics of power in the Javanese world and beyond.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Nyai Roro Kidul spans multiple disciplinary terrains, ranging from anthropology and folklore to religious studies and cultural history. Yet despite this breadth, her figure remains largely confined to descriptive ethnography and mythological interpretation. Early colonial and postcolonial ethnographers, including Theodore (2013) and Moertono (2009), depicted Nyai Roro Kidul as part of the Javanese court's cosmological structure, interpreting the royal-spiritual relationship as a symbolic device for legitimising kingship. These works situated the myth within the broader framework of Javanese political theology, where divine sanction and moral order were integral to the stability of the realm. However, their analyses were embedded in structural-functionalist paradigms that reduced the myth's potency to ritual performance rather than epistemological significance. Subsequent anthropological contributions, most notably by Geertz (1980) and Anderson (1972), further expanded the understanding of Javanese kingship and symbolic power. Geertz's notion of the "theatre state" in Bali and Anderson's reflections on the "idea of power" in Javanese political culture both acknowledge the performative and sacred nature of authority. Yet, neither fully addresses the oceanic dimension of sovereignty or the role of water as an ontological category in political imagination. In their frameworks, the sacred is abstracted, detached from material environments such as the sea that, within Javanese cosmology, are essential to sustaining spiritual legitimacy.

Parallel to this, scholarship in environmental humanities and political ecology has produced rich discussions on water as a site of governance, materiality, and symbolism. Linton & Budds (2014) advance the concept of the hydrosocial cycle, arguing that water should be understood not as a neutral or purely natural resource but as a socio-political construct co-produced through human and non-human relations. In Southeast Asia, studies by Bakker (2012) and Sneddon & Fox (2006) illuminate how river-basin development and irrigation infrastructures are deeply entwined with state formation and power. While these perspectives have transformed the analytical vocabulary of water studies, they remain largely confined to terrestrial hydrologies such as rivers, canals, and catchments. The maritime and spiritual dimensions of water, particularly those embodied in the mythic cosmology of the Southern Ocean, continue to be marginal within global hydropolitical and environmental-humanities discourses. Equally significant is the growing field of hydrofeminism, which conceptualises water as a feminist metaphor for relationality, embodiment, and resistance. Scholars such as Astrida Neimanis (2012) have theorised the material politics of water through the lens of gender, arguing that water's fluidity disrupts binary hierarchies and invites alternative ontologies of being. While Cielemecka & Åsberg (2019) extend this line of inquiry to waterscapes and toxic embodiment, the hydrofeminist scholarship to date has seldom been brought into conversation with Southeast Asian cosmologies or indigenous epistemologies of water. Integrating the mythic figure of Nyai Roro Kidul within this theoretical field allows for an exploration of how the feminine and the aquatic co-produce political meanings that transcend Western feminist paradigms.

While the above scholarship has advanced the study of Javanese mythology, political cosmology, and environmental thought, three critical gaps persist. First, the hydrological foundations of Javanese sovereignty have not been sufficiently theorised. The ocean, though central to Javanese cosmology, remains an under-analysed site of power and ritual. Second, the intersection of gender and water in the production of sacred authority has not been systematically explored beyond symbolic or folkloric interpretations. Third, there is a lack of dialogue between Javanese indigenous epistemologies and global hydropolitical theory, resulting in a persistent Eurocentrism that sidelines Southeast Asian conceptions of nature and governance. This study responds to these gaps by positioning Nyai Roro Kidul as a hydropolitical and hydrofeminist text, situating

her within a broader cosmology where water is both material and metaphysical. It proposes that the myth of the Southern Ocean embodies a distinct form of political ecology rooted in the interplay between sovereignty, gender, and the sacred. By foregrounding water as a cosmological infrastructure of power, this research contributes to the global turn in water studies that seeks to decolonise hydropolitics and to recover non-Western narratives of ecological and political thought. Ultimately, it argues that understanding Javanese cosmology through the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul not only reconfigures local interpretations of kingship and spirituality but also expands the conceptual boundaries of what water means within the humanities and social sciences.



Figure 2. Image of Nyi Roro Kidul
Source: Irma. (2025, Januari 21).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive design grounded in cultural hermeneutics and critical discourse analysis. The figure of Nyai Roro Kidul is examined not as folklore but as a living text of power in which cosmology, gender, and sovereignty intersect within Javanese heritage politics. This approach is justified by the study's aim to interpret cosmological narratives as dynamic political frameworks rather than static myths. Hermeneutic interpretation uncovers meanings embedded in rituals, oral traditions, and visual symbols, while discourse analysis situates these within postcolonial debates on sovereignty, gender, and environmental imagination. Data were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The inclusion criteria focused on documents that addressed water, femininity, and sovereignty, while sources centred on tourism without cosmological significance were excluded. The analysis followed an iterative hermeneutic cycle involving close reading, contextual comparison, and thematic abstraction. Recurrent motifs such as sea, body, obedience, sacrality, and legitimacy were synthesised into interpretive themes showing how water functions as both a natural and symbolic infrastructure of power. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and reflexive awareness of positionality within postcolonial epistemologies. Through this methodological design, the study demonstrates that the myth of Nyai Roro Kidul operates as a hydropolitical and hermeneutic system shaping gender, sovereignty, and ecological morality in the Javanese world.

The Findings and Discussion

1. Water and the Sacred Landscape of Javanese Cosmology

In Javanese cosmology, water is not an inert substance but the very medium through which life, power and sacred order are sustained. The Javanese world, often described as a web of correspondences between the human, the natural and the divine, locates water at the centre of its metaphysical architecture. Within this worldview, the sea, river, and rain are not separated by physical taxonomy but connected through a continuum of divine energy that flows between realms. To understand the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul is therefore to understand how water itself becomes the organising principle of sovereignty and the embodiment of the sacred (Roy E, 1984: Pamungkas et al., 2021). The sacred geography of Java is structured by a tripartite axis linking Mount Merapi, the Keraton, and the Southern Ocean. This axis represents the vertical relationship between heaven, earth and sea, and simultaneously the moral relationship between ruler, subject and the unseen world. Merapi symbolises fire and ascent, a masculine principle associated with divine authority. The Keraton, positioned at the centre, represents balance, governance and moral order. The Southern Ocean, governed by Ratu Laut Selatan, embodies the feminine principle of receptivity, depth and transformation. Together, they form a sacred cartography in which water operates as both the boundary and the bridge between worlds. Sovereignty in this cosmology is not a legal abstraction but a performative balance maintained through ritual offerings that ensure the circulation of cosmic energy between these domains (Troll et al., 2015).

This cosmological arrangement is not simply metaphoric. It is inscribed into the physical and political landscape of Java. The royal palaces of Yogyakarta and Surakarta are both aligned along the north–south axis, connecting Merapi in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south. This spatial orientation materialises the relationship between the king and the sea queen. It is through this axis that the ruler situates himself as the mediator of cosmic forces, the one who maintains equilibrium between the fiery mountain and the watery abyss. The flow of power, much like the flow of water, depends on movement and circulation rather than possession. The authority of the king is legitimate only insofar as he sustains this cosmological circulation through ritual and moral discipline (Karsono & Wahid, 2008). The ritual of Labuhan, held annually by the Keraton, enacts this circulation of power. Offerings of garments, flowers and perfumes are cast into the Southern Ocean as symbols of devotion to Nyai Roro Kidul. These materials, chosen for their fluid and fragrant qualities, signify the sensual and ephemeral nature of the sea queen's domain. The act of casting offerings into the water symbolises the surrender of earthly possessions to the sacred flow that underpins kingship. Through ritualised immersion, the boundaries between human and divine are temporarily dissolved, reaffirming the sovereign's covenant with the sea. The sea, in turn, legitimises the continuity of rule by absorbing these offerings into its endless movement (Friend, 2006).

At a deeper level, water in Javanese cosmology carries a dual ontology. It is both generative and destructive, nurturing and consuming. This duality reflects the Javanese conception of balance, or *keseimbangan*, in which harmony emerges from the tension of opposites. Nyai Roro Kidul embodies this paradoxical nature of water. She nurtures the realm with fertility and abundance, yet she can also reclaim life through storms, drownings and the unseen forces of the deep. This ambivalence is not a moral flaw but a cosmological necessity, reminding both ruler and subject that power must be tempered by respect for the forces that cannot be mastered. Water also functions as a moral metaphor in Javanese philosophy. The ideal ruler is often compared to water, which is humble yet powerful, fluid yet enduring. It flows downward to nourish the lowliest of beings but can also carve through stone. This symbolism mirrors the ethical expectation that the sovereign should embody humility and service rather than domination. The political value of water thus lies in its capacity to represent both authority and compassion, a model of governance that merges ecological awareness with spiritual responsibility (Anderson, 1972: Geertz, 1980: Wessing, 1997).

Interpreting this sacred landscape through the lens of hydro-cosmology reveals that water in Javanese thought operates as a political theology. It is the invisible infrastructure that connects cosmology to sovereignty, ecology to morality. The relationship between the ruler and Ratu Laut Selatan is not an isolated myth but part of a broader epistemic system that understands power as circulation rather than control. The sea queen represents the fluid dimension of sovereignty, one that resists fixation and constantly demands renewal.

through ritual and reverence. In this sense, Javanese cosmology offers a counterpoint to Western notions of territorial power. While modern political systems define sovereignty through boundaries, the Javanese model defines it through balance and movement. The legitimacy of rule is measured by the ability to harmonise with the natural and spiritual flows of the world. By positioning water at the centre of authority, Javanese cosmology articulates a distinctive form of sacred hydropolitics, in which the act of governing becomes an act of maintaining the rhythm of the cosmos. The sea, far from being a passive backdrop, emerges as the living archive of sovereignty, embodying both the fragility and the endurance of power itself (Anderson, 1972: Roy, 1984: Wessing, 1997).

2. The Sea Queen and the Ritualisation of Power

The relationship between sovereignty and ritual in Javanese culture is deeply entwined with the figure of Ratu Laut Selatan, the Queen of the Southern Ocean. Within the political theology of Javanese kingship, authority is not derived solely from administrative control or lineage but is ritually enacted and continuously reaffirmed through sacred performance. The sea queen functions as the metaphysical counterpart of royal power, her domain embodying the unseen dimension of legitimacy that sustains the visible order of the court. Through ritual, the abstract principles of rule are translated into embodied acts of devotion that bind the human to the divine and the natural to the political (Anderson, 1972: Wessing, 1997: Troll et al., 2015). The most important expression of this connection is the Labuhan ceremony, a royal offering to Nyai Roro Kidul performed at coastal sites such as Parangkusumo and Pelabuhan Ratu. The ceremony serves as a ritual dialogue between the palace and the sea, between the sovereign and the sacred feminine. Offerings of garments, incense, rice, and flowers are prepared with meticulous care and sent to the ocean to symbolise the monarch's acknowledgment of his dependence on cosmic forces. The sea is not approached as a passive recipient but as an autonomous partner whose favour ensures the well-being of the kingdom. The act of throwing offerings into the waves represents both surrender and reciprocity, a recognition that power must circulate rather than accumulate (Jalil, 2015: Nuzulanisa, & Fariha, 2022).

The ritual process itself embodies the logic of circulation that underpins Javanese cosmology. Priests and palace officials perform prayers and recitations that link the offering to ancestral spirits and deities associated with the sea. The ritual hierarchy mirrors the political structure of the court: every act, from the preparation of the offerings to their immersion, reflects the ordered flow of authority from the ruler to his subjects and finally to the realm of the divine. Through ritual choreography, power becomes visible as a series of gestures, voices, and movements that bridge the physical and the spiritual. Sovereignty, in this sense, is not a static possession but a performance that must be renewed through proper ritual conduct (Wessing, 1997: Widyatwatia et al., 2020). Historical records suggest that the Labuhan ceremony emerged as a synthesis of pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and Islamic elements, adapting to shifting theological landscapes while retaining its cosmological core. During the Mataram period, the sea queen was understood as the spiritual consort of the king, her domain representing the depth and mystery of divine power. In Islamicised versions of the ritual, Nyai Roro Kidul was reinterpreted as a guardian spirit rather than a goddess, yet her symbolic role as the guarantor of royal legitimacy persisted. This adaptability highlights the fluidity of Javanese religiosity, where syncretism is not seen as contradiction but as continuity. Anthropologically, the ritualisation of power through the sea queen reveals a form of governance rooted in sacral reciprocity. The ruler does not command the elements but negotiates with them through ritual diplomacy. This interaction constitutes a form of cosmological contract, in which legitimacy depends on the ruler's ability to maintain equilibrium between human ambition and divine order. The Labuhan ceremony thus functions as a moral economy of power: it distributes merit, sanctity, and protection across the kingdom while reminding the monarch of his spiritual obligations. The offerings themselves, chosen for their perishability, underscore the impermanence of power and the necessity of continual renewal (Roy, 1984: Wessing, 1997: Beatty, 1999: Friend, 2006).

In Javanese court cosmology, ritual functions as a medium through which gendered symbolism and political theology converge. The king embodies the masculine principle of order and restraint, while Nyai Roro Kidul represents the feminine principle of fluidity and transformation. Their union, reenacted through offerings and the Labuhan ceremony, symbolises the harmony of opposites essential to cosmic balance (Roy,

1984: Wessing, 1997). The erotic dimension often portrayed in chronicles and oral traditions should be read not literally but metaphorically, as the fusion of authority and fertility that sustains both moral virtue and agricultural prosperity. The ruler's spiritual discipline and the land's fertility are believed to depend upon his faithful maintenance of this sacred relationship. Nyai Roro Kidul, in turn, mediates between desire and restraint, her volatile temperament reminding the monarch of the moral dangers of excess and arrogance. In political terms, the ritualisation of power through the sea queen constitutes a form of performative sovereignty (Sudarsih, 2020). The Labuhan transforms metaphysical concepts of order into tangible social experience, communicating the ruler's commitment to cosmic balance and moral integrity. Through spectacle and participation, it reaffirms the unity of the kingdom under divine oversight. Yet beyond its ceremonial grandeur, the ritual also operates as a subtle discourse of power, where the spectators themselves become participants in reaffirming a moral cosmos in which royal authority is naturalised as part of the universal order.

From a theoretical perspective, the ritualisation of power through water exemplifies how hydro-cosmology materialises in practice. Water here is the medium through which political order is enacted, its fluid movement mirroring the flow of legitimacy. The ceremony reaffirms that sovereignty in Javanese thought is contingent, not absolute; it must be sustained through relational ethics rather than coercive force. In the symbolic exchange between the palace and the sea, power becomes an act of devotion rather than domination, reflecting a theology of governance where nature and authority are bound in mutual obligation. The sea queen thus stands at the threshold between myth and governance, between spirituality and statecraft. Her ritual presence transforms the abstract notion of sovereignty into a lived experience of interconnectedness. By studying this ritualisation of power, one uncovers a distinctive mode of political imagination in which water, gender, and the sacred are inseparable dimensions of rule. The sea is not a metaphor but a medium of sovereignty, a living participant in the moral and spiritual economy of the Javanese world (Rigg, 1992: Friend, 2006: Abdullah, 2025).

3. Femininity, Fluidity and the Politics of the Body

The figure of Nyai Roro Kidul occupies a central position in the symbolic construction of gender and power within Javanese imagination. Her body, simultaneously sacred and sensual, becomes the site through which the dynamics of authority, desire and cosmic balance are articulated. In contrast to Western dualisms that separate body and spirit, Javanese cosmology integrates them as interdependent manifestations of vitality. The female body, especially that of the sea queen, materialises the energy of *rasa*, an affective essence that connects emotional, physical and spiritual realms. Through this embodiment, femininity is neither peripheral nor decorative; it is constitutive of the moral and political order that water sustains. The sea queen's corporeality is closely linked to the element of water. Both are characterised by mutability, depth and receptivity. Water's capacity to flow, transform and envelop becomes a metaphor for feminine agency that is relational rather than oppositional. Yet this same fluidity provokes anxiety within patriarchal structures of power, for it resists containment and definition. Myths that portray Nyai Roro Kidul as seductive and dangerous reflect this ambivalence. She can grant prosperity to those who honour her, but she may also consume those who transgress her domain. Such narratives operate as moral allegories about discipline, restraint and respect for the natural order. The sea queen's power lies not in domination but in her ability to dissolve boundaries and remind rulers of their dependence on forces beyond human control (Roy, 1984: Wessing, 1997: Kam, 2021).

From the perspective of hydrofeminism, Nyai Roro Kidul embodies a politics of the body that is fluid, porous and intersubjective. Her body is not enclosed but constantly exchanging energies with her environment. This relational ontology challenges the hierarchical metaphors of political authority that privilege solidity and fixity. The femininity of water, like the sea itself, carries the potential to transform political imagination. It suggests that sovereignty, when viewed through the feminine aquatic principle, is less about command and more about circulation, nurturing and renewal. The sea queen thus symbolises an alternative ethics of governance grounded in care, reciprocity and humility (Neimanis, 2012: Shefer, Bozalek, & Romano, 2023). The erotic dimension of Nyai Roro Kidul's myth deepens this politics of embodiment. Her legendary union with the king represents the meeting of two elemental forces rather than the subordination of one to the other. The relationship is generative, producing fertility for the land and spiritual legitimacy for the ruler. In this

context, sexuality functions as a cosmological language that links bodily desire with the health of the kingdom. The moral equilibrium of the realm depends on the proper regulation of passion, both personal and political. Excessive desire leads to chaos, while disciplined affection maintains harmony. The body of the sea queen, therefore, is a pedagogical figure that instructs rulers and subjects alike in the ethics of balance.

Cultural expressions such as wayang performances and court dances visualise this intertwining of body and water. Choreographies that depict waves, spirals and flowing gestures evoke the movements of the sea and the grace of the feminine form. These performances are not merely aesthetic but epistemological, translating cosmological ideas into bodily rhythm. Through dance, the human body becomes an extension of the oceanic body, participating in its cyclical motion of giving and receiving. The body, like water, is revealed as a vessel of sacred agency rather than a passive object of control (Hughes-Freeland, 2008; Keeler, 2017; Neimanis, 2012).

Historically, the moral authority of Javanese rulers has depended on their ability to embody the virtues associated with water and femininity. Compassion, patience and adaptability are celebrated as royal qualities, contrasting with the rigid masculinity often valorised in Western political thought. The sea queen's enduring influence within the court tradition demonstrates that femininity in Javanese cosmology is not excluded from power but integrated as its vital counterpart. Her myth teaches that governance requires empathy and responsiveness to the rhythms of nature, not the imposition of will upon it. In contemporary interpretation, the politics of the body represented by Nyai Roro Kidul also challenges modern assumptions about gendered vulnerability. Rather than portraying the feminine as subordinate, Javanese cosmology recognises its capacity to mediate between the visible and the invisible. The sea queen's body is both threshold and conduit, marking the permeability of categories that Western epistemologies tend to fix. Reading her through hydrofeminism recovers a vision of the body as relational intelligence, capable of reconfiguring political subjectivity and ecological awareness simultaneously. Ultimately, the sea queen's fluid embodiment redefines the parameters of sovereignty. Her myth reminds us that power cannot be maintained through rigidity but must move, flow and transform. In the Javanese imagination, the feminine and the aquatic converge to form a sacred continuum that sustains both life and legitimacy. The politics of the body, when read through water, becomes an ethics of interdependence that situates femininity not at the margins of authority but at its very core ((Roy, 1984; Wessing, 1997; Neimanis, 2012)

4. Reading Nyai Roro Kidul as a Hydropolitical Text

To read Nyai Roro Kidul as a hydropolitical text is to approach her myth not merely as folklore but as a living archive of how power, environment, and spirituality are imagined and negotiated in Javanese culture. The sea queen serves as a hermeneutic key for understanding how water functions as a medium of governance, where ecological rhythm and political authority are intertwined. In this reading, myth operates as an indigenous philosophy of rule that articulates a relational logic of sovereignty. Water, through its fluidity and depth, provides the grammar through which authority is both legitimised and constrained. While modern hydropolitics often focuses on the control, distribution, and conflict surrounding water resources, the Javanese cosmological system situates hydropolitics within a symbolic and ethical framework. It is less concerned with possession than with maintaining harmony between human, divine, and environmental forces. The sea queen embodies this moral ecology, reminding rulers that sovereignty demands reciprocity rather than domination (Wessing, 1997; Kristianto, Singgih & Haryono, 2024). Her myth thus encodes an ecological principle within political theology: to govern justly is to maintain the circulation of energy and respect the rhythms of nature. In this sense, the sea is not external to politics but its living foundation, a realm where the relational ethics of water become a guide for moral and environmental balance (Andayani & Jupriono, 2019).

The textual corpus surrounding Nyai Roro Kidul, including Babad Tanah Jawi, Serat Centhini, and local ritual chronicles, consistently portrays the sea as an arena of negotiation rather than domination. In these texts, water acts as a discursive field where ideas of order, sacrifice and cosmic exchange are rehearsed. The ruler's offering to the sea is not an act of tribute to an inferior deity but a declaration of interdependence. It acknowledges that authority derives its legitimacy from the equilibrium of natural and spiritual flows. Reading these texts through hydropolitical analysis reveals how the language of devotion conceals a complex model

of environmental governance that predates modern statecraft. This interpretive stance challenges Eurocentric notions of political modernity that separate myth from rationality. In Javanese cosmology, myth and governance are not opposed; they are mutually constitutive. The myth of the sea queen, with its emphasis on ritual reciprocity and ecological balance, provides a framework of environmental ethics that contrasts sharply with the extractive rationalities of colonial and postcolonial states. It insists that power is relational and that the health of the kingdom depends on the moral integrity of its engagement with nature. In this sense, Nyai Roro Kidul functions as both a theological symbol and a political critique, offering an indigenous vocabulary for what might now be termed sustainable sovereignty (Roy, 1984; Ras, 1987; Widodo & Purwantoro, 2019).

Hydropolitical reading also illuminates how gender operates within this system of power. The sea queen personifies an alternative mode of authority that is embodied, affective and regenerative. Her fluid sovereignty contrasts with the rigidity of patriarchal structures, suggesting a model of leadership grounded in care, adaptability and empathy. The sea's volatility mirrors the contingency of power itself: both are subject to tides that must be read and respected rather than controlled. The hydropolitical imagination of Java thus links the governance of people with the governance of water, implying that disorder in one inevitably leads to disruption in the other. From a methodological perspective, treating myth as hydropolitical text bridges the divide between symbolic analysis and material ecology. Rituals, spatial orientations and oral narratives are not dismissed as superstition but recognised as modes of political reasoning embedded in local epistemologies. The sea queen's domain becomes a site where governance is performed through offerings, taboos and aesthetic expressions that sustain collective memory. By reading these practices as hydropolitical discourse, one perceives how cosmology functions as a living constitution, regulating not only belief but also social conduct and environmental care (Wessing, 1997; Damayanti et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this interpretation situates Javanese cosmology within global discussions on the politics of water. While modern hydropolitics often concerns treaties and transboundary management, the Javanese framework reveals a deeper philosophical insight: that sovereignty is inseparable from the circulation of the natural world. The sea queen's mythology translates this insight into a ritual language, one that teaches governance as a form of ecological stewardship. It proposes a vision of political ecology grounded not in human supremacy but in sacred interdependence. Ultimately, to read Nyai Roro Kidul hydropolitically is to recover the ocean as a site of indigenous theorising about power and morality. The sea's currents, like the movements of authority, are cyclical and unstable. Through her myth, the Javanese recognise that sovereignty must remain fluid to endure. Water, in its endless motion, becomes the metaphor and mechanism of a political order sustained by reverence, reciprocity and renewal. The sea queen therefore stands as both guardian and critic of kingship, ensuring that the rhythm of governance never strays from the rhythm of the earth itself (Andayani & Jupriono, 2019; Kristianto, Singgih & Haryono, 2024).

5. Decolonising Water and Power: Javanese Cosmology in Global Perspective

The study of water and power has long been dominated by Eurocentric frameworks that equate governance with mastery over nature. Colonial and modern hydropolitics, from the engineering of canals to the mapping of river basins, have defined water as a resource to be regulated, owned and exploited. Within this epistemic order, indigenous understandings of water as a living force have been marginalised or dismissed as superstition. The Javanese cosmology centred on Nyai Roro Kidul offers a critical counterpoint to this tradition. It presents a vision of water not as a commodity but as a sacred relational entity that sustains political, moral and ecological balance. To situate this cosmology within global discourse is to engage in a process of epistemic decolonisation, where the sea becomes a site for rethinking the foundations of sovereignty and ethics (Wilson, & Inkster, 2018; Viaene, 2021; Kristianto, Singgih & Haryono, 2024).

Decolonising water studies requires an acknowledgement that colonialism did not only appropriate land and labour but also redefined the metaphysical meaning of nature. In Java, Dutch colonial administration reconfigured coastal and irrigation systems according to utilitarian logic, severing the spiritual link between water, people and cosmology. The rituals dedicated to the Southern Ocean were recast as remnants of primitive belief, while the sea itself was reduced to a site of extraction and commerce. The persistence of Nyai Roro Kidul within popular memory and royal ritual thus signifies more than cultural continuity. It embodies

resistance to the epistemic violence that sought to erase the sacred dimensions of water and replace them with a technocratic regime of control. By reading Javanese cosmology as a system of knowledge, this study aligns with the broader intellectual movement to decolonise the humanities. The cosmological principles embodied in the sea queen's myth articulate an alternative theory of governance based on reciprocity, humility and ecological attunement. They challenge the modern separation between politics and spirituality, human and non-human, reason and emotion. Such dualisms, foundational to Western modernity, are dissolved within the Javanese worldview where water operates as both matter and meaning. The sea is simultaneously physical and metaphysical, its movement reflecting the moral rhythm of the cosmos (Neimanis, 2012; Wessing, 1997).

Placing this cosmology in dialogue with global debates on hydropolitics reveals its philosophical sophistication. It provides a model of relational sovereignty that is not centred on domination but on the maintenance of equilibrium. The sea queen's domain functions as a moral mirror for rulers and communities, demanding that power be exercised with awareness of its ecological consequences. This perspective resonates with contemporary calls for environmental justice and planetary ethics, yet it originates from local epistemologies that have historically been excluded from academic canons. Reclaiming these narratives is therefore an act of intellectual restoration as much as cultural preservation. The decolonial potential of Javanese cosmology also lies in its redefinition of the relationship between gender and authority. The feminisation of water in the figure of Nyai Roro Kidul does not imply subordination but reconfigures power as care and renewal. Her fluid sovereignty stands as a critique of rigid hierarchies that dominate both colonial governance and patriarchal structures. Through her, the ocean becomes a space of both memory and possibility, a reservoir of alternative futures in which power is reimagined as relational and restorative (Wilson, & Inkster, 2018; Damayanti et al., 2020).

Engaging with Javanese cosmology on its own epistemological terms allows for a rethinking of global theory from the South. It invites scholars to view myth not as an object of study but as a mode of theorising, capable of producing insights about governance, environment and moral order. To decolonise water and power is to recognise that the sacred can function as a category of political knowledge. The sea queen's enduring presence in ritual and imagination demonstrates that non-Western traditions have long theorised the ethics of sustainability and balance. In reframing Nyai Roro Kidul as a participant in global intellectual history, this study contributes to the reconstruction of hydropolitics as a plural and inclusive field. It suggests that the future of water studies must draw from the wisdom of cosmologies that refuse the binary between nature and culture. Decolonising water, in this sense, is not a return to the past but a reorientation towards coexistence, where the ocean is no longer a frontier of exploitation but a foundation for a shared and sacred humanity (Trumbull, 2013; Kristianto, Singgih & Haryono, 2024).

Conclusion

The study of Nyai Roro Kidul reveals that Javanese cosmology redefines the relationship between nature, gender, and power. Within this worldview, water functions as the central medium through which sovereignty is imagined and sustained. The sea is not external to politics but an active participant in the moral and spiritual economy of governance. Reading Nyai Roro Kidul as a hydropolitical text demonstrates that myth can operate as a theory of power grounded in balance, reciprocity, and reverence for the non-human world. The sea queen embodies a sacred and ecological sovereignty, where her union with the ruler signifies negotiation rather than domination between human ambition and divine order. Rituals such as the Labuhan ceremony express a living cosmology that binds political practice to ecological awareness, portraying water as both symbol and agent in sustaining legitimacy. The study also shows that gender is integral to Javanese hydropolitics. Nyai Roro Kidul's femininity, fluid like water, challenges the rigidity of patriarchal authority. Her dual capacity to nurture and destroy reveals that power in Javanese thought is inseparable from care and humility. This understanding reframes sovereignty as stewardship, where leadership entails attunement to natural rhythms and human vulnerability. Placed in a global frame, the cosmology of the sea queen contests Eurocentric paradigms that equate governance with domination and water with resource extraction. It offers instead a model of relational sovereignty grounded in harmony with the environment. Decolonising water knowledge requires recognising such cosmologies as theoretical systems in their own right. By situating Nyai Roro Kidul within hydropolitical

thought, this study affirms that the sea is not a boundary but the origin of political imagination. The enduring presence of the sea queen invites a rethinking of sovereignty as ethical, fluid, and sacredly interconnected with the living world.

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