

[Java's Hinduism Revivial](#)

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Golden Age prophesized by Hindu king--when "iron wagons drive without horses and ships sail through the sky"--catalyzes religious movements

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Islam came late to Indonesia, and its dominance was never complete. Hinduism survived in full form quite well in Bali and a few other areas. In some regions where Islam had only a moderate impact, a considerable proportion of the population are only nominal Muslims. For several reasons, including the country's complex political dynamics, there has been, in recent decades, an increasing trend of these nominal Muslims to return to Hinduism. In the following report, Dr. Thomas Reuter, researcher at the University of Melbourne's School of Anthropology and president of the Australian Anthropological Society (thomasr@unimelb.edu.au), shares his evaluation of the historical and religious dynamics of this shift in religious allegiance.

Java is a center of islam within the Indonesian archipelago, which, in turn, is home to the world's most populous Muslim nation. Eighty-eight percent of Indonesia's 235 million people are Muslims, and just two percent are Hindus. But the many ancient monuments scattered across its landscape remind one of a very different Java, one where Hindu kingdoms flourished for more than a millennium. At the peak of its power in the 15th century, the influence of Majapahit, the last and largest among Hindu Javanese empires, reached far across the Indonesian archipelago.

Islamic influence first advanced along trade networks, gaining a foothold along the northern coast of Java with the rise of early sultanates. Hinduism lost its status as

the dominant state religion in Java at the beginning of the 16th century, as these new Islamic polities expanded and the Hindu empire Majapahit collapsed.

While the majority of the population did become Muslims along with their rulers, for many Javanese this was a change in name only. And even though an ever-more popular and educated acceptance of Islam was gained in the colonial and post-colonial era, through the work of independent and government Islamic organizations, the victory of Islam has remained incomplete. Most recently, a back-to-Hinduism movement which first emerged in Java in the 1960s, has gathered new momentum in the turmoil of Indonesia's economic and political crisis. Some of its members are prophesying that a natural cataclysm or final battle is at hand, in which Islam will be swept from the island and Hindu civilization restored to its past glory. The movement in Java is part of a wider national phenomenon of reconversion to Hinduism. In part, this is a reflection of the rapid Islamization of Indonesian society in recent decades, and especially after the fall of Suharto in 1998, which has made it difficult for many Javanese to carry on their Hindu traditions and retain a nominal Muslim identity. As a result, the Hindu community of Java is now the largest in Indonesia.

Officially identifying their religion as Hinduism was not a possibility for Indonesians until 1962, when it became the fifth state-recognized religion. This recognition was initially sought by Balinese religious organizations and granted for the sake of Bali, where the majority were Hindu. The largest of these organizations, Parisada Hindu Dharma Bali, changed its name to Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia in 1964, reflecting subsequent efforts to define Hinduism as a national, rather than solely Balinese, affair.

During the violent anti-communist purge of 1965-66, many practitioners of Hindu Javanese traditions felt compelled to declare themselves Muslims for their own safety. But their initial assessment of having to abandon their earlier traditions in order to survive in an imminent Islamic state proved incorrect. Recent political developments and Islamic education and mosque-building aimed at their community are motivating many to make decision towards Hinduism.

Repeated experiences of harassment have left adherents of Hindu-Javanese traditions with deep-seated resentments. Many of my informants portrayed their return to Hinduism, the "religion of their mighty Majapahit ancestors, " as a new expression of national pride. Political trends aside, however, I should note that the

choice between Islam and Hinduism is often a highly personal matter. Many Hindu informants reported that other members of their own families are nominal or even pious Muslims.

A common feature among Java's Hindu communities is that they tend to rally around newly built temples (pura), which are often located near archaeological sites, or ancient temples (candi) which had remained intact from the Hindu period and are now being partially reclaimed for Hindu worship. For example, one of the new Hindu temples is Pura Mandaragiri Sumeru Agung in eastern Java. When the temple was completed in July 1992 with Balinese aid, only a few local families confessed to Hinduism. By 1999 the local Hindu community had grown to more than 5,000 households. Another important site is Pura Loka Moksa Jayabaya near Kediri, where the Hindu king and prophet Jayabaya is said to have achieved spiritual liberation (moksa). A movement in the earliest stages of development was observed around the newly completed Pura Pucak Raung. Here the Indian saint Maharishi Markandeya is said to have gathered followers for an expedition to bring Hinduism from Java to Bali in the fifth century. Still, the perhaps one million Hindus in Java are just under one percent of the island's population.

It is evident that Hindu temples tend to bring economic prosperity to local populations. Take, for example, Pura Sumeru. Apart from employment in the building and repair of the temple itself, a steady stream of visitors has led to the growth of a sizeable service industry. During festivals, thousands of Balinese pilgrims arrive each day, and much of their generous cash donations flow into the local economy. Offerings, meals and accommodation are provided in an ever-lengthening row of shops and hotels along the main road leading to the temple. Pondering the secret to the economic success of their Balinese neighbors, many locals have concluded that Hindu culture may be more conducive to the development of a lucrative international tourism industry than is Islam. In view of the social difficulties of being a Hindu amongst a vast majority of Muslims in Java, however, I do not think that such economic considerations offer an explanation for the new popularity of Hindu religion.

Followers and opponents alike explain the sudden rise of a Hindu revival movement in Java by referring, among others, to the prophecies (ramalan) of Jayabaya. Various editions of the Ramalan Jayabaya have become national bestsellers, and the predictions made therein are often discussed in daily newspapers. Indeed, the prophecies are an important idiom for a public debate on the ideal shape of a new Indonesia.

The historical personage Sri Mapanji Jayabaya, who reigned over the kingdom of Kediri in the 12th century, is known for his efforts to reunify Java after a split had occurred with the death of his predecessor, Airlangga, for his just and prosperous rule, and for his dedication to the welfare of the common people. Regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, Jayabaya is the archetypal image of the "just king" (ratu adil) who is reborn at the cataclysmic end of each dark age (jaman edan, "age of madness") to restore social justice and natural harmony in the world. Many believe that the time for a new ratu adil is now, or as the Jayabaya prophecies put it, the time "when iron wagons drive without horses and ships sail through the sky." These apocalyptic and utopian prophecies evoke the notion of a revolving cosmic cycle, of a future that is in effect a return to a golden past.

Muslim and Hindu interpreters agree that this is the time of reckoning, of major political reform, if not a revolution. Many also agree that a truly democratic system of government may only be established by a national leader of the highest moral caliber, thus blending traditional notions of charismatic leadership with modern notions of democracy. My work in Java, if anything, has reminded me that human civilization does not flourish in the absence of shared values that actively promote a more humane and enlightened society. In a religiously or ethnically diverse society--and that description applies to most societies nowadays--one of the most important of these values is undoubtedly tolerance.