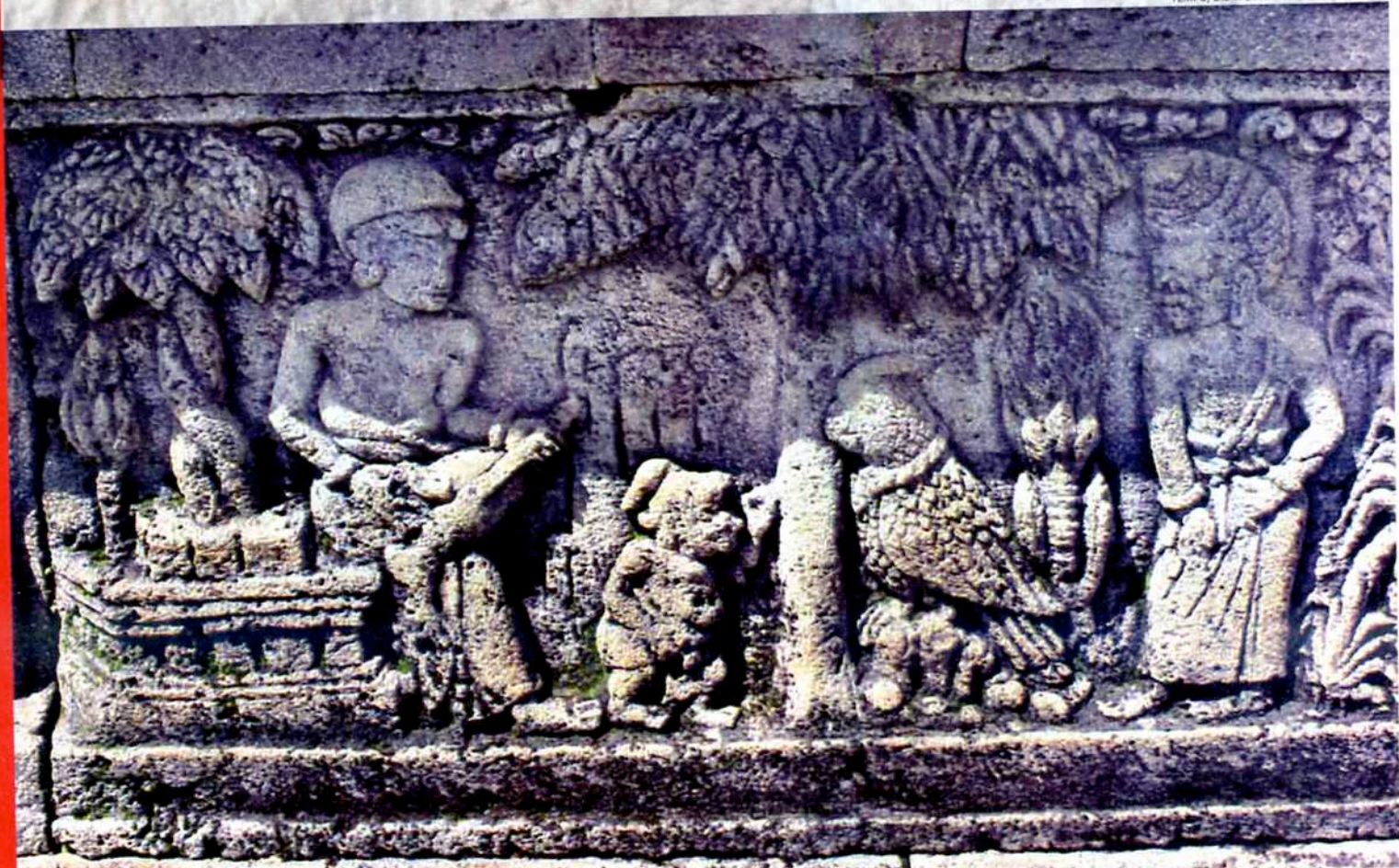


# Interlude

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## Tantra: A New Interpretation of *Panji*

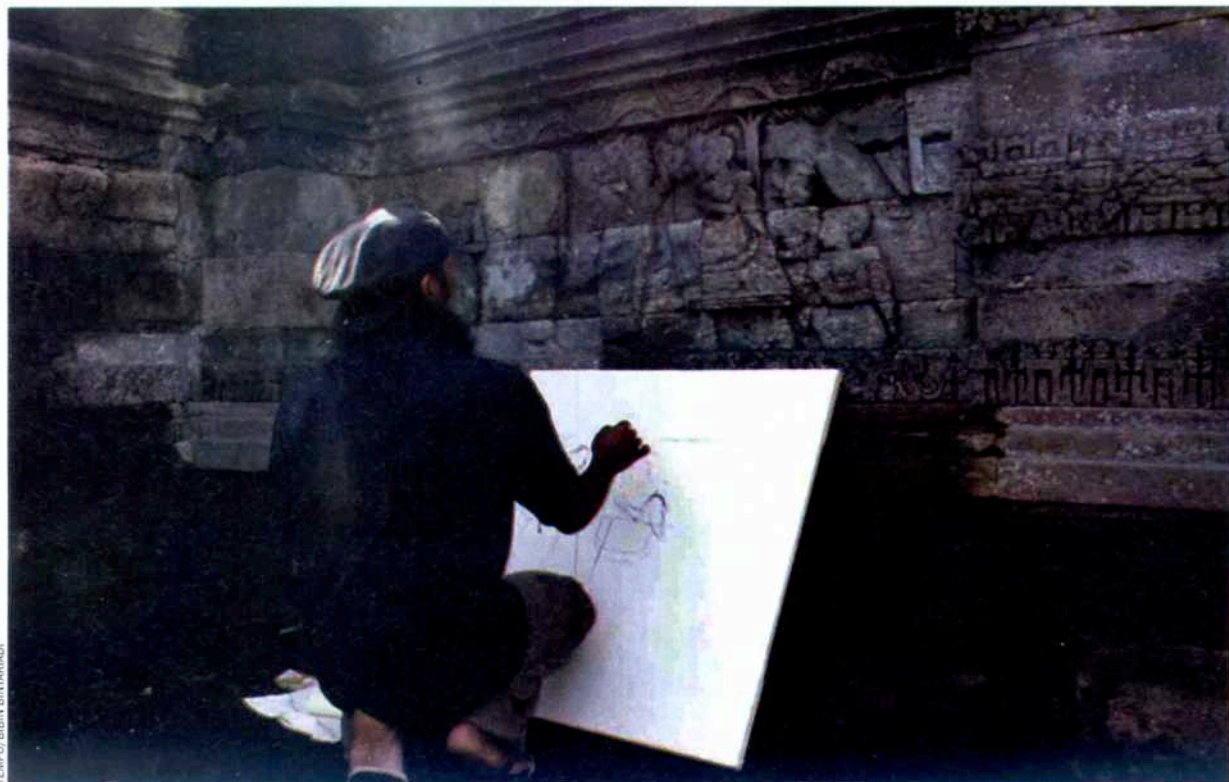
*Panji* (translates as “flag or standard”) is a popular East Javanese love story from the 14th century. It tells the story of Prince Panji Inu Kertapati who goes in search of his beloved, Princess Candra Kirana, who he has lost. To this day, the story of *Panji* is still very much alive in the art of the masked dances of East Java.

German archeologist named Lydia Kieven became interested in studying the reliefs of *Panji* on the ancient temples of East Java. For years she climbed up and down the East Javanese mountains in order to be able to carry out her study in this iconography. Her dissertation on *Panji* which she finished last

year in Australia has produced voices both against as well as in favor of her thesis.

According to Kieven, the story of *Panji* is merely a symbol of the Tantric religion which was developing in East Java at the time. Tantrism is a religious belief which stresses that in order to reach God, a person must practice a certain manner of physical love ritual. Kieven was present at the *Panji* Arts Festival held in the front compound of the Penataran Temple in Blitar, East Java, in mid-June. The following is *Tempo*'s report on this new interpretation of *Panji* which also includes a report on the condition of the temple sites of East Java where *Panji* reliefs are located.





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Participant of the Panji Arts Festival at the yard of Penataran Temple, Blitar.

Relief on the story of Panji at Penataran Temple and the story of Gagak Aking (top right).

Relief on the story of Kunjarakarna at Jago Temple, Tumpang village, Tumpang subdistrict, Malang (below right).

**U**NDER the bright rays of the midday sun, the figure of a man sculpted into the relief could be seen clearly. It is a heroic figure. He is wearing a cap in the form of a headdress rather like a *blangkon* or Javanese cloth headdress, but without the little part jutting out at the back; he is bare-chested and wears a pleated sarong hanging from his waist to a little over his knees. The figure is seated in a horseless carriage with one of his legs crossed over the other. He is accompanied by five other men. Four of them are in front of him and one more is seated with his knees drawn together, below the feet of the main figure.

The relief of the figure in a cap sculpted on the Gambyok Temple next to a holy grave in Gambyok village which is in the district of Grogol near the town of Kediri in East Java, is thought by Indonesian archeologists to be the figure of Raden Panji in the *Panji* story. Such a figure cannot be found on the reliefs of temples in Central Java. He is only to be seen in the temples of East Java. On the reliefs of the temples of East Java he is always accompanied by courtiers, standing both in front of him and behind him.

The *Panji* story is known to be a story that was very popular during the Maja-

pahit era (AD 1300-1500). From Majapahit the story spread throughout Southeast Asia in various different versions. The story tells how Raden Panji from the Kingdom of Jenggala and Princess Candra Kirana from the Kingdom of Kediri wished to be married. However, they were separated and had to search for a long time to find each other before they could finally meet and wed.

The public has until now always thought of the *Panji* story as a love story about the bitterness and hardships of "the journey of the reuniting" of two lovers. However, 54-year-old German archeologist Lydia Kieven who was present at the Panji Arts Festival in the compound in front of the Penataran Temple in Blitar, East Java on a Sunday in mid-June, has a different interpretation of the tale.

For years she has been climbing up and down the mountains of East Java studying various temple sites containing the *Panji* tale. She is of the opinion that the *Panji* story truly has a symbolic meaning which is far deeper than that of a simple love story. In her view the story of *Panji* reflects a certain religious stance. Her opinion is reflected in her doctoral thesis entitled *The Meaning and Function of the Figure with a cap in Reliefs of East Javanese Temples of the Majapahit Period*, which was pre-

sented at Sydney University, last year.

What makes her thesis controversial is that she sees the *Panji* story as being in reality a symbol of the Tantric religious sect which appeared in East Java at the time. Beside the Gambyok Temple site she studied six other temple sites, namely the Penataran Temple, Surowono Temple, Mirigambar Temple, Yudhe Temple, Kendalisodo Temple and the Selokelir Temple. "Penataran is the largest temple and also the one with the most *Panji* story reliefs," Kieven told *Tempo*.

The Penataran Temple complex has a length of 180 meters and a width of 60 meters, with a compound running from west to east. The *pendapa* (a Javanese style open building with no walls but instead four pillars or beams holding it up) in the compound of the first terrace is decorated with reliefs narrating the *Panji* story. In the relief is the figure of a man with a cap and a woman with long hair. According to Kieven, they both frequently appear in romantic love scenes but often also in situations where they are merely sitting and longing for each other.

In reliefs on several other temples such as the Kendalisodo Temple, Kieven has found many scenes of Panji making love to his beloved Candrakirana in an intimate and erotic fashion.





Kieven interprets the erotic, sexual scenes as pointing to Tantric teachings which during the Majapahit period were practiced in both Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. Tantra was one of the main ways for a person to achieve union with the gods during his or her lifetime. One of the ways of Tantra to achieve such union was through sexual intercourse.

Kieven's interpretation of the existence of Tantric teachings in the reliefs is based on the fact that in so many of the reliefs Panji is shown together with a hermit. Lydia interprets the hermit as being Panji's spiritual teacher. "The Penataran Temple has many reliefs showing Panji with his hermit," she says.

Other than that, according to Kieven, in the reliefs there are many scenes showing Panji and his beloved crossing water. In Hindu and Buddhist mythology crossing water symbolizes rising from one level of knowledge to a higher one. "Crossing water can be the symbol of a spiritual journey to a higher level of consciousness," she explains.

Kieven analyses why so many pictures of Panji were sculpted in the reliefs of East Javanese temples. According to her it was to make it easier for pilgrims in ancient times to perform the core Tantric rituals. The reliefs were intended to prepare the pilgrims to be

able to perform the rituals in the most sacred parts of the temple.

In the Penataran Temple for example the *Panji* story sculpted on the reliefs of the terrace with the *pendapa*, is the entrance or starting point for the pilgrims to perform rituals in the main sacred temple compound. The main reliefs of the Penataran Temple are sculpted with the stories of the *Ramayana* and of Krishna—which in Indian literature are stories about the gods. So symbolically, the *Panji* stories which contain Tantric teachings are the intermediary for union with the gods.

Kieven's new interpretation which claims that there is a Tantric element in the *Panji* stories has created a lot of controversy. Kieven knows that there are many in Indonesia who oppose her views and feel that they are simply imagined on her part. It is said that she has exaggerated symbols and connections. Others however, agree with her and believe that the *Panji* reliefs are not just entertainment in the form of stories but possess a deeper and higher meaning and symbolism.



THE *Panji* stories continue to be studied by researchers. This is because there are many who think that Panji was simply a fictive figure originating in leg-

ends. That image cannot be separated from the cultural packaging of the *Panji* stories which are more of a historical legend rather than historical facts that have become a part of legends.

Before Lydia Kieven's research of Panji from a religious perspective, there have been experts who have researched Panji from other perspectives. The late Professor Poerbatjaraka for example studied Panji from a philological (the perspective of manuscripts and written texts) and literary perspective. He studied the tales of *Panji* by looking at the characters and the plot of the story reflected in his book *Tjeritera Panji dalam Perbandingan (A Comparison of the Panji Stories)* which was published by Gunung Agung in 1968.

Poerbatjaraka criticized the popular views about the origins of *Panji* which claimed that it originated during the Majapahit period. According to him the tale of *Panji* originated in the Kingdom of Kediri. He claimed that Raden Panji in fact represented Sri Kameswara, the King of Kediri who had a wife named Candra Kirana.

After Poerbatjaraka, for a time there was not much more scientific discourse on the subject. Then around 1978 the archeologist Setyawati Sulaeman announced the results of her research. According to the lady who is Indonesia's





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Jago Temple in Tumpang village, Malang.

first woman archeologist, the story of *Panji* which is sculpted on the reliefs of the temples in East Java, is evidence of the resurgence of the Kingdom of Kediri after the decline of Majapahit.

Agus Aris Munandar, an archeologist from the University of Indonesia, has studied the *Panji* stories from a historic perspective. In his literary piece entitled *Citra Panji pada Masa Mahapahit (The Image of Panji during the Majapahit Period)* which was published in 1968, Agus writes that the *Panji* stories clearly contain a religious element. According to Agus, it is simply not possible that a relief with no religious significance at all to it would have been sculpted on a religious building such as a temple. "If the *Panji* stories were only an ordinary love story," he says, "it is impossible that they would have been sculpted on to a sacred place such as a temple."

Other than wearing a cap, being accompanied by his retinue of followers and dealing with women, according to Agus, Panji was also good at war, at playing the gamelan, at making love as well as being very courteous. So in the reliefs is depicted a figure who behaves very chivalrously towards his beloved. "If Lydia Kieven interprets the reliefs as being Tantric, she may have a point," he says. As seen through the perspective of Tantra, Panji and his beloved are performing an ethical ritual."

The way of Tantra, according to Agus is not only through sexual communion. There are two divisions of Tantra namely, left Tantra and right Tantra. Left

Tantra is the path of the sickening and the horrible (*wamamarga*), that is accomplished by doing the forbidden, for example by *matsya* (eating so much of the *gembung* or gibbous fish—the Latin name is *Rastrelliger Sp.*—until one is sick) and *madut* (becoming drugged by smoking opium). Right Tantra is the path of goodness (*baktimarga*) which is reached for example, by meditating. Nevertheless, the aim of both Tantras is the same: union with the gods while a person is still alive.

Even if Kieven interprets Panji—who is described as being very courteous to his loved one—as a Tantric ritual, it would be according to right Tantra. "But we need to remember that not one *Panji* story states concretely that it concerns religious rituals," Agus reminds us. "This is the weak spot in Kieven's thesis."

Agus says that he has tried to find references to Tantric rituals in the *Panji* stories in manuscripts, but has never succeeded in finding any. Several of the stories do refer to Panji performing rituals or ceremonies where he sacrifices a buffalo, and there is gamelan playing and dances. "But there is no mention of Tantric rituals," he says.

Kieven has taken the *Panji* story on the reliefs and compared it to the *Panji* story in manuscripts. According to Agus, Kieven should have first read the manuscripts containing the *Panji* stories, noted what was said and only then studied the reliefs. Because logically, the *Panji* story would have first been created and then only sculpted on the reliefs of temple walls.

It is a pity says Agus, that Kieven concentrated on the reliefs. According to Agus during nearly the same period he was also doing a study of *Panji* stories and he in fact came to a different conclusion. He sees the tale of *Panji* as a fragment of history of the Majapahit era.

According to Agus the story of *Panji* is actually an allegory of the failed attempt of the King of Majapahit to wed the daughter of a Sundanese princess. It is an allegory for the story of Hayam Wuruk's failed attempt to marry Dyah Pitaloka, as told in the *Pararaton Book*, the *Kidung Sunda* and the *Parahyangan Tales*.

In the *Pararaton Book*, the *Kidung Sunda* and the *Parahyangan Tales* for example there appears a fragment of that event: "...the Princess of Sunda killed herself at *Bubat* after a bloody battle as a result of the political ambitions of the Vizer of Majapahit. Hayam Wuruk was deeply saddened by this and experienced great grief because the Princess of Sunda was his first love..."

This fragment of history has similarities to the narrative in the tale of *Panji*: "...the murder of Panji's beloved (Martalangu/Angreni) who was his first love and his personal choice. Panji felt his sadness deeply and often even fainted and was left lost and confused..."

According to Agus there are still many other events in the history of Majapahit which bear similarities to the narrative in the tale of *Panji*. For example the building of a hamlet in Wilwatika (Majapahit) by Raden Wijaya and his friends as compared with the building of a rest house by Raden Panji and his friends.

Based on those similarities, Agus is of the opinion that the temples and sacred places in East Java which are decorated with reliefs of the tales of *Panji* are actually intended to commemorate Hayam Wuruk. "The temples were built as holy places to honor Hayam Wuruk." According to him the society of that day believed that Hayam Wuruk was a good intermediary to the gods; to pray at the temples dedicated to Hayam Wuruk was a way to reach the gods.

However, Agus does not go as far as Kieven who interprets the *Panji* reliefs on the East Javanese temples as a guide to following the rituals of Tantra. "I am not as daring a Lydia Kieven who holds that the *Panji* reliefs were a doorway to the rituals of Tantrism," he says.

Nurdin Kalim, Ismi Wahid, Bibin Bintariadi (Blitar),  
Hari Tri Wasono (Kediri)





**"In the temples of East Java I felt that I had found something sacred. I did not have this feeling at Borobodur and Prambanan because they had become too much of a tourist object."**

—LYDIA KIEVEN

## A Mathematician Who Loves Java

**P**ERSPIRATION rolled off the face of the Caucasian lady. The white shirt over her T shirt was drenched in perspiration but she seemed totally unaware of the blinding heat of the sun at the Penataran Temple in East Java, on Sunday two weeks ago. She was also unaffected by the loud voices of more than 300 students and professional artists who were all trying to draw the reliefs on the temple. She continued to circle the temple, engrossed in taking photographs and making notes in her book.

The woman, Lydia C. Kieven, seems not to be satisfied with the doctorate that she obtained at the end of last year. Kieven is still collecting material that she might need at some point. "There may be more research to do later," she said in relatively fluent Indonesian.

The 54-year-old lady who was born in Germany, has long been interested in the cultural wealth of *Nusantara* (the Indonesian Archipelago). Her love for Indonesia began 25 years ago when she first came on a visit to Bali. Her friends told her a lot about Javanese culture. A year later she visited Borobodur and Prambanan. The mathematician from

the University of Cologne immediately became interested in learning Indonesian. She fulfilled her desire to do so in 1990 by taking a master's degree in Indonesian language and literature at the University of Cologne.

Kieven's family find her intense interest in Javanese culture a little strange but she does not care. She even purchased a gamelan together with her friends. The name of their gamelan group is Laras Kulon (a play on the German word for Cologne which is Koln and sounds very much like Kulon). While studying she also worked as a tour guide for Germans going to Indonesia. After accompanying the tourists, Kieven would stay several weeks in Indonesia to learn more about Indonesian culture. "I love Java," she says.

During her short semester she found time to study archeology as well as Javanese and ancient Javanese languages at Gajah Mada University in Jogjakarta. Kieven even took private lessons with Ki Patmospusito. Her aim was to study the story of the *Arjunawiwaha*, which was the subject of her thesis. She chose the temples of East Java as the object of her research because not many peo-

ple have studied them. "In the temples of East Java I felt that I had found something sacred. I did not have this feeling at Borobodur and Prambanan because they had become too much of a tourist object," says the former *Deutsche Welle* journalist for Indonesia.

Her thesis which bore the title *The Asceticism of Arjuna* brought her a master's degree in 1995. In accordance with the teachings of Ki Patmo a year later Kieven studied the tale of Panji at the Kendalisodo Temple but she then had to stop gathering material for her research because she contracted cancer. Upon her return to Germany she followed a doctoral program at the University of Cologne.

Later too much work caused Kieven to have to stop her Panji research. In 2002 as a consequence of the Bali bombing, the amount of German tourists going to Indonesia decreased greatly leaving Kieven without work. On the advice of Professor Adrian Vickers, who is also a Panji researcher in Bali, Kieven sought a scholarship from Southeast University in Australia. In 2006 she moved to Australia and there she continued her research on Panji.

Agus Bimo Prayitno, who graduated in Javanese literature at the March 11 University and who accompanied Kieven during her research to various temples during her journeys, says that Kieven's energy and enthusiasm in studying Javanese culture is enormous. She is also tireless in her pursuit of Javanese temples visiting them over and over again. Kieven even rented a motorcycle to travel around East Java. "She is like Srikandi (a heroic woman figure in Hindu mythology). Once she makes up her mind to do something, she has to do it," says Bimo who has known Kieven since 1993.

Suprpto Suryodarmo who is the Head of the Padepokan Seni Lemah Putih in Surakarta and who assisted Kieven in her research, says Kieven whose knowledge of *karma inggil* (high Javanese) is quite good, did not just make Indonesia the object of her dissertation. Kieven also has an enormous love for Indonesian culture. During the Panji Festival in Malang three years ago, Kieven was very active in helping Prapto without demanding a single rupiah in payment. Kieven even paid for her own travel expenses as well as her own room and board. "Her love for Indonesia can at times be greater than that of an Indonesian," he says.

Pramono, Bibin Bintariadi (Blitar)