



Left: Ganti Sirap ceremony at Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi.

# What animals teach us about Islam

## Animal reliefs in the mosque of Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi

Tan Zi Hao

Conventional wisdom holds that Islamic art prohibits figurative representation and has a proclivity for abstract stylisation. This view is at best a misguided oversimplification and requires much nuancing. In the mosque of Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi, there are four central columns [*saka guru*] whose wood panelled bases display animal reliefs. The animals represented include snakes, tigers, bantengs, and fish, each of which conveys specific moral wisdom intrinsic to the teachings of Islam.

Tucked to the west of the holy tomb of Mbah Buyut Trusmi, bordering a graveyard, stands the mosque of Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi. For decades, the mosque has been a spiritual lodestone of Trusmi, a small yet hectic town in Plered, Cirebon Regency. Along with the holy tomb and the graveyard, the mosque belongs to the broader sacred complex Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi, named after the eponymous founder of Trusmi.<sup>1</sup> The sacred complex was once a *pesantren* [Islamic boarding school] that had welcomed students and scholars of varying Sufi orders. The site also consists of caretaker's halls [*bale*], an exclusive building believed to be the oldest structure in the compound [*witana*], an ablution pond [*pekulahan*], a pilgrim's lodge [*jinem*], and many more.

During events such as the annual Memayu and the quadrennial Ganti Sirap ceremonies, devoted Muslims travel from afar to assist in replacing the roof covering of the various edifices within the sacred complex. Roof replacement is symbolic of spiritual renewal and rejuvenation. It stresses the importance of introspection and self-improvement so as to strengthen one's faith. Days before the festivities, the complex is often already abuzz with activities both logistical and spiritual: responsibilities have to be delegated, roofing materials and food ingredients have to be gathered, while devotional practices such as *tahlilan* and *brai* carry on deep into the night.<sup>2</sup> Altogether the activities stimulate greater anticipation if not direct participation among the Muslim communities in Cirebon. In both

ceremonies, the division of labour is starkly gendered. Whereas men are responsible for the reconstruction of roofs, women are mostly busy with food preparation. Nonetheless, the sense of communal conviviality is shared across all. It is largely believed that spiritual capital can be accrued from involvement in these ceremonies, where individuals voluntarily offer their time and labour in exchange for divine blessing or *berkah*.<sup>3</sup>

### The *saka guru*

The animal reliefs are located in the innermost prayer room of the mosque. To reach this space, one has to pass through a common praying area where the *bedug* (a large drum beaten to signal the call to prayer) is hanging.<sup>4</sup> In the rectangular common praying area, there exist columns similar to the *saka guru*, but the bases are profusely decorated with floral instead of animal motifs. Contrariwise, the main prayer room is enclosed by walls of equal width, with a *mihrab* [niche] and *minbar* (raised steps from where to preach) facing Mecca on the northwest side of the room. It is in this exclusive space that sixteen animal reliefs are found mounted on all four sides of the four *saka guru*. Leaving out the repeated motifs, one notices five different variations. All animal reliefs are situated below eye level, serving a mnemonic function for Muslims who pray seated.

That the animal reliefs are placed at the inner sanctum of the mosque is suggestive

not only of their symbolic significance, but infers a decision made by one with sufficient authority. Moreover, only the *saka guru*, which are principal structures in Javanese architecture, have bases with animal motifs. The provenance of these reliefs remains uncertain. Cirebonese woodcarver Djoko Nurkafi recalled that he had seen sketches of the reliefs from his teacher, the late Ki Kamad, but he was unsure if the sketches were his original or a reproduction of earlier sketches. Considering the involvement of Ki Kamad's father in a team of woodcarvers responsible for providing decorative carvings for Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi in the early twentieth century, Djoko Nurkafi's estimation is barely surprising. Under the leadership of Ch.O. van der Plas, then Resident of Cirebon (1932-1936),<sup>5</sup> a restoration project at Cirebon's Sang Cipta Rasa Royal Mosque had spurred the influx of equipment and techniques from Jepara, a coastal area notable for elaborate woodcarving.<sup>6</sup> In all likelihood, the animal reliefs are relatively recent artefacts forged in the crucible of colonialism. The following discussion presents the animals in a sequence assuming that one moves from the doorway to the *qibla* wall that points towards Mecca.

Right: Animal reliefs mounted on the *saka guru* bases in the mosque of Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi. On the first two *saka guru* are a snake and a tiger in two variations; on the other two *saka guru* are a pair of bantengs and nine fish encircling Allah. The images from left to right depict: the snake, the sitting tiger, the tiger lying on the ground, the bantengs, and the fish.

### As still as a snake and tiger

On the column bases facing the doorway, a snake sticks out its forked tongue while resting upon a rocky foundation with its body coiled up. The stringent stillness of a snake, according to the chief caretaker Kyai Tony, is to be emulated by fellow devotees. Social abstinence is the snake's greatest virtue, for any disturbance would drive it into hiding, into further isolation. Comparing the snake to a devotee, he contended that a Muslim does not wish to be disturbed during prayer. The late Kyai Achmad, the previous chief of the sacred complex, offered a similar analogy. In praise of the snake, he expounded that one should "behave like a snake", to "eat once and stop eating for an extended period", implying that Muslims should abstain from worldly indulgence.<sup>7</sup> Abutting the snake reliefs are the tiger reliefs, which come with two renditions: one tiger is depicted sitting, while another lies prone on the ground. Pertaining to the tigers, Kyai Tony was of the opinion that they convey a lesson of spiritual concentration not unlike that of the snake. Kyai Achmad considered them a reminder for Muslims to "always sit, instead of sleeping", which was interpreted as a disposition for "contemplation" [*tafakur*].<sup>8</sup> Read in the context of a mosque, the distinct tiger poses are reminiscent of the prescribed prayer movements [*rakaat*].





Symbolic affiliation between the snake, the tiger, and spiritual discipline is not uncommon in the broader Islamic world. The subduing of animality by Muslim saints is a recurrent trope in Sufism. The figure of a Sufi sheikh is commonly visualised riding a tamed tiger or lion with a snake as his whip, for it is precisely his unfaltering belief in God that renders him fearless among the beasts, at once enabling his extraordinary mastery over nature and the animal kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Tigers and lions resting underneath the shade of trees is another persistent Sufi imagery in Cirebon and abroad. Seated beasts are direct evidence of the spiritual prowess of holy saints, who are capable of coercing abominable beasts into unusual compliance. From the abstinence of the snake to the tiger's aptitude for sitting, perceived composure of the animals is valorised and taken as a lesson for spiritual discipline.

### Banteng, the people

Inching closer towards the *qibla* wall, the other two column bases present reliefs of bantengs (species of cattle found in Southeast Asia). Unlike the previous carvings, the banteng relief has a symmetrical composition that points skyward. Standing on a peaking foundation, the pair of bantengs face towards a tree, which has a curious outgrowth reaching the clouds, emblematic of the empyrean domain. Commonplace in Javanese animal symbolism, the banteng reflects the staunch character of the people. This popular association is relatively modern but not entirely unthinkable given banteng's endearing domesticity and its longstanding service to humans. The traditional *rampok macan* ceremony, which involved a battle between a tiger and a banteng (or a water buffalo), may have contributed to this signification. During colonial times when the ceremony was staged, the tiger was associated with the deceitful character of colonial invaders, while the banteng emerged as a symbol of the plebeians who would eventually triumph against all odds.<sup>10</sup> In the main Cirebonese royal court *Kraton Kasepuhan*, a single door leaf at the gateway leading to the princes' quarter depicts a confrontation between an elephant and a banteng. This particular motif is likely to be a cryptic chronogram [*candrasengkala*] denoting a historic year, but the confrontation has been interpreted by locals as a balance of power between the ruler and ruled: if the elephant symbolises power and royalty, the banteng symbolises the unflinching spirit of the people. That this relief contains the only animal that exhibits sexual dimorphism—the male is depicted with horns while the female without—is positive testimony to the banteng's symbolic manifestation of the people.

### Purity of fish

The relief depicts a total of nine fish encircling the word 'Allah' in Arabic. Kyai Tony

clarified that the seawater fish is immune to its salty environment. When consumed, its flesh has a "savourless" [*tawar*] quality, which is likened to a pure interiority sheltered from extraneous elements. Not by coincidence, his anecdotal account echoes a Qur'anic verse that regards the edibility of seawater fish as a bounty of God: "The two bodies of water are not alike—one is palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, the other salty and bitter—yet from each you eat fresh fish" (Surah 35: 12). Indeed, fresh fish are "not easily swayed", averred the late Kyai Achmad, since they "remain unsalted".<sup>11</sup> The animal is herein, to recall Claude-Lévi-Strauss's remark, both "good for eating" and "good for thinking",<sup>12</sup> since the savourless taste of the seawater fish mirrors the purity of the human soul. An individual with spiritual integrity is akin to a seawater fish, whose essence is impervious to outside contamination, detached from the cares of the material world.

Beyond what is intrinsic to all nine fish, the number nine itself denotes yet another spiritual significance. In Javanese Islamic mysticism, the number refers to the nine conduits of lowly passion [*nafsu*]. The human body is said to possess a total of nine orifices [*babahan hawa sanga*], which include the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, penis, and anus.<sup>13</sup> All nine orifices provide access to worldly desires and hence have to be regulated or sealed.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the depiction of the nine fish oriented towards Allah takes on a metaphysical tinge. Apart from a demonstration of unquestioning loyalty to God, the fish signals a foreclosure of all sensory functions, a willful submission of the soul to God, not least insinuating the death of the corporeal body.<sup>15</sup> Death, understood only as a termination of the present life, launches one into the Hereafter. As an aquatic animal roaming freely in the water, the fish is particularly pertinent for imagining a life beyond the present life.

### Towards mystical union

From the snake to the fish, we are trailing a path from the netherworld to the empyrean domain. More can be gleaned from looking across the animal reliefs, which follow an order of reading that is by no means coincidental. With the stillness of a snake, one enters into prayer. With the disciplined concentration of a seated tiger, one retires into contemplation. Unique to both the snake and tiger reliefs are the undulating rocky terrain, otherwise known as *wadasan*. Beyond serving as the ground upon which the snake and the tiger rest and genuflect, the *wadasan* reflects the earth, the here and now.<sup>16</sup> Life in the present world thus corresponds to the predatory beasts, who have bowed down before God to renounce all worldly passions.

Next come the two bantengs, awaiting a takeoff. Being herbivorous, they stand in stark contrast to the preceding beasts.

Their steadfast and slow-moving character testifies to their resolute containment of worldly passions. At the apex of the ground, the bantengs rally towards the tree that extends towards the clouds, otherwise known as *mega mendung*. The shift from *wadasan* to *mega mendung* blatantly demonstrates a movement from the here to the Hereafter, signifying a path towards spiritual enlightenment.

This journey culminates in the final relief where the *wadasan* foundation is entirely absent, leaving only the clouds. The nine fish wander in mid-air, for at this stage, the being is no longer burdened by the material world but stays afloat in the realm of eternity. The nine fish, symbolic of the nine orifices of the body, are completely sealed off from all worldly passions. Visualised with propinquity to Allah, the fish serves as a marker of mystical union with God.

Animal imagery, far from being a prohibited element in Islamic art, presents an array of creative configuration with which to render abstract concepts in Islam intelligible and memorable. Largely due to the animal's proximity to 'nature', the use of animal symbolism in religion often illustrates "how human nature should be and how it might be restored".<sup>17</sup> The animal reliefs in the mosque of *Kramat Mbah Buyut Trusmi* are noteworthy objects of Islamic art, not only because of the intricate woodwork but for the ideas and interpretations they engender. Beyond what plain words could explain, animal attributes offer incisive demonstrations in the elaboration of complex spiritual concerns. They perform an idea with the least amount of effort. More crucially, animal imagery is a proxy for human thought. What is selectively deemed as natural or innate to the animal kingdom is not only used to prescribe moral wisdom, but to impart to Muslims the guiding principles for attaining spiritual union with God.

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### Notes

- 1 It remains debatable as to whom the appellation 'Mbah Buyut Trusmi' refers. Muhaimin, A.G. 2006. *The Islamic Traditions of Cirebon: Ibadat and Adat Among Javanese Muslims*. ANU Press, pp.185-86.
- 2 *Brai* is a derivative of the word *brahi* or *berahi*. The word can be understood as excitement which usually bears sexual connotation, but in this context, it relates to the excitement evoked from the performance of devotion to God. To grasp the layered complexity of *brai* and how its perception was further compounded by colonial objectification, see Cohen, M.I. 2011. 'Brai in Performance: Religious Ecstasy and Art in Java', in Harnish D.D. & Rasmussen A.K. (eds) *Divine Inspirations: Music and Islam in Indonesia*. Oxford University Press, pp.132-60.
- 3 For a detailed description of *berkah*, see Geertz, C. 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Yale University Press, p.44; Siddique, S. 1977. 'Relics of the Past? A Sociological Study of the Sultanates of Cirebon, West Java', PhD thesis, University of Bielefeld, p.182.
- 4 This space was built at a later date to accommodate the increasing population in Trusmi. Kwanda, T. 2012. 'The Tradition of Architectural Conservation and the Intangible Authenticity: The Case of Ki Buyut Trusmi Complex in Cirebon, Indonesia', PhD thesis, National University of Singapore, pp.138-43; <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/37828>.
- 5 Van der Plas was highly regarded in Indonesia for "taking an uncommon and knowledgeable interest in Islam and non-Western cultures". His approach was strongly influenced by the orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), who, in 1921, secured him "an appointment as consul for the Netherlands in Jeddah", thus paving the way for his subsequent career, from being the Assistant Resident of Blitar (1931-1932) to the Resident of Cirebon (1932-1936) and the Governor of East Java (1936-1941). His leadership in the mid-1930s in Cirebon coincided with the 'ethical period', where Cirebonese Sultans were allowed to maintain their influence and preserve their custom. Frederick, W.H. 1995. 'The Man Who Knew Too Much: Ch.O. van der Plas and the Future of Indonesia, 1927-1950', in Antlöv, H. & Tønnesson, S. (eds) *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism 1930-1957*. Curzon Press, p.36.
- 6 I am indebted to Djoko Nurkafi and Matthew Isaac Cohen for their comments.
- 7 Kwanda, p.366.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.365.
- 9 Schimmel, A. 1975. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. The University of North Carolina Press, p.428; Bruinessen, M. 1991. 'Haji Bektash, Sultan Sahak, Shah Mina Sahib, and Various Avatars of a Running Wall', *Turcica* 21-23:55-69.
- 10 Wessing, R. 1992. 'A Tiger in the Heart: The Javanese Rampok Macan', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 148(2):296; Ricklefs, M.C. 1974. *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi, 1749-1792: A History of the Division of Java*. Oxford University Press: 276; Holt, C. 1967. *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*. Cornell University Press, pp.22-23.
- 11 see note 7
- 12 Lévi-Strauss, C. (Trans. R. Needham) 1963. *Totemism*. Beacon Press, p.89.
- 13 The nine gateways of Lawang Sanga at *Kraton Kasepuhan* share a similar meaning. The nine orifices as a trope is widespread and reverberates through many other esoteric practices such as tantrism. In Hindu-Buddhist teachings, the nine orifices are called *navadvāra*. Becker, J. 1993. *Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam, and Aesthetics in Central Java*. Program for Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State University, pp.144, n.6.
- 14 Hadiwijono, H. 1967. *Man in the Present Javanese Mysticism*. Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, pp.146-47.
- 15 A little-documented Javanese funerary tradition requires that all nine orifices of a corpse be shut off with cotton prior to burial. Woodward, M. 1989. *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*. University of Arizona Press, p.198.
- 16 The rough contour of the *wadasan* mirrors the different grades of worldly passion [*nafsu*]. Bambang Irianto & Dyah Komala Laksmiwati. 2012. *Baluarti Keraton Kacirebonan*. Deepublish, p.18.
- 17 Randall, C. 2014. *The Wisdom of Animals: Creatureliness in Early Modern French Spirituality*. University of Notre Dame Press, p.4.

