

# The Interplay of Religion and Culture at Cetho Temple and the connection with Javanese Heritage

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## Abstract

This study investigates the integration of Hindu symbols in contemporary Javanese rituals at Cetho Temple, offering insights into the dynamic interplay between religion and culture in Java. The temple, a significant historical and religious site, continues to serve as a focal point for rituals that blend Hindu and local Javanese practices. Through field observations and interviews with local priests and devotees, the research highlights the use of Hindu deities, symbolic structures, and offerings in daily and ceremonial rituals. These practices are essential for maintaining cultural heritage and reinforcing communal and individual identities. Despite facing challenges from modernization, social changes, and the influence of other religious practices, these rituals provide spiritual and social benefits, fostering a sense of unity and shared heritage within the local community. The temple's architectural features and religious artifacts underscore the enduring influence of Hinduism within the syncretic spiritual landscape of Java. The study emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of Javanese spirituality, showcasing how ancient traditions are preserved and adapted in the modern context. Future research could further explore the impact of external influences and investigate additional sites to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Javanese religious and cultural syncretism. This research contributes to broader discussions on cultural heritage preservation and the evolution of spiritual practices in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** Cetho Temple, Javanese rituals, Hindu symbols, Syncretism, Cultural heritage

## 1. Introduction

The intricate relationship between religion and culture has long fascinated scholars across disciplines, revealing how deeply intertwined these two aspects of human society are. In the context of Javanese heritage, this interplay takes on a unique and profound character, offering a rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and practices that have evolved over centuries. This paper explores the dynamic interaction between religion and culture within Javanese society, examining how these elements have shaped, and been shaped by, the island's historical, social, and political landscapes.

Java, the most populous island in Indonesia, has been a melting pot of diverse religious influences, including animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, each leaving an indelible mark on the local culture. The Javanese have adeptly synthesized these influences, creating a distinctive cultural heritage that reflects a harmonious blend of spiritual and worldly elements. This synthesis is evident in various aspects of Javanese life, from art and architecture to rituals and everyday practices.

Central to this study is understanding how religious beliefs and cultural practices influence and reinforce each other in the Javanese context. This paper aims to illuminate how religious and cultural elements coalesce, adapt, and sustain

themselves within Javanese society by delving into historical records, literature, and contemporary observations. In maintaining and transmitting Javanese heritage, special attention will be given to critical religious and cultural symbols, such as temples, ceremonies, and traditional performances.

Furthermore, this paper will explore the impact of external forces, such as colonialism and globalization, on the religious and cultural landscape of Java. These forces have not only challenged traditional practices but have also spurred new forms of religious and cultural expression, reflecting the inspiring resilience and adaptability of Javanese heritage.

By examining the interplay of religion and culture in Java, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural identities are formed and sustained in a globalized world. It underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage while acknowledging the dynamic nature of cultural evolution. Through this exploration, the paper aims to offer insights into the complex and ever-changing relationship between religion and culture, using Javanese heritage as a compelling case study.

## **2.1 Historical Context of Cetho Temple**

Hinduism, brought to Indonesia through trade and cultural exchanges with India, profoundly influenced Javanese culture and religious practices. The Majapahit Empire, a significant political and cultural force in Java, adopted Hinduism as its state religion. Cetho Temple, built during this period, embodies many Hindu architectural and symbolic features. The temple complex is designed in terraces ascending towards the peak, symbolizing Mount Meru, the sacred mountain in Hindu cosmology. The reliefs and statues found within the temple complex depict various Hindu deities, such as Shiva, and mythological scenes from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These elements underscore the temple's role as a center for Hindu worship and its connection to the broader Hindu cultural heritage of Java.

Despite the strong Hindu influence, Cetho Temple also reflects a significant degree of syncretism, blending different religious and cultural traditions. Java, with its rich tapestry of local animistic and ancestral worship practices, provided a fertile ground for such syncretism. The local Javanese beliefs, which emphasized harmony with nature, ancestral reverence, and the presence of spiritual forces in the natural world, intertwined with Hinduism to create a distinct spiritual environment at Cetho Temple. This syncretism is evident in the temple's unique carvings and rituals, incorporating elements of local folklore and ancestral worship. For example, the use of symbolic motifs such as fertility symbols and representations of local spirits highlights the blending of Hindu cosmology with indigenous Javanese spiritual concepts.

Additionally, the temple's orientation and alignment with natural features of the landscape reflect the Javanese emphasis on harmony with the natural environment. Cetho Temple not only served as a religious site but also as a cultural hub for the local community. It played a vital role in the preservation and transmission of Javanese cultural identity, particularly in the face of the growing influence of Islam and later colonial powers. The temple's rituals, ceremonies, and artistic expressions provided continuity of cultural practices that connected the local population to their historical and spiritual roots.

The historical context of Cetho Temple is a testament to the dynamic interplay between Hindu religious influences and local Javanese beliefs. This syncretism created a unique cultural and spiritual landscape that continues to be revered and celebrated in contemporary Javanese society. Understanding this historical context enhances our appreciation of Cetho Temple not just as an

architectural marvel, but as a living embodiment of the rich and complex heritage of Java.

## 2.2 Data Analysis Method

The integration of Hindu symbols in contemporary Javanese rituals at Cetho Temple illustrates the enduring influence of Hinduism within the syncretic spiritual landscape of Java. This section explores how Hindu symbols are interwoven into modern-day rituals at Cetho Temple, highlighting the continuity and adaptation of ancient traditions.

1. Deity Worship:
  - Statues and Iconography: The presence of statues of Hindu deities such as Shiva and symbols like the lingam (a representation of Shiva) are central to the rituals conducted at Cetho Temple. These icons are revered as religious symbols and serve as focal points for prayer and offerings during rituals.
  - Offerings (Sesajen): Offerings placed before these deities often include traditional Javanese elements like rice, flowers, and incense, symbolizing a blend of Hindu and local traditions. Making offerings (sesajen) is a common practice in both Hindu and indigenous Javanese rituals, signifying respect and devotion to the divine.
2. Sacred Architecture:
  - Terraced Design: The temple's terraced layout is reminiscent of Mount Meru, a sacred mountain in Hindu cosmology. This design influences contemporary ritual practices, where devotees ascend the terraces as a symbolic journey towards the divine.
  - Yoni and Lingam: The presence of the yoni (a symbol of the goddess Shakti) and the lingam at the temple is integrated into fertility rituals and prayers for prosperity. These symbols are central to Hindu worship and are honored in rituals that seek blessings for fertility and abundance.
3. Ritual Practices:
  - Temple Festivals (Odalan): Annual temple festivals, known as odalan, incorporate Hindu rituals such as the chanting of mantras, the performance of traditional dances, and the offering of holy water (tirta). These festivals draw large numbers of devotees who participate in these ancient rites, preserving their Hindu origins while blending with local cultural expressions.
  - Ruwatan Ceremonies: Ruwatan, a traditional Javanese ritual aimed at cleansing individuals from misfortune, often incorporates Hindu symbols and chants. At Cetho Temple, these ceremonies might include the recitation of Hindu prayers and the use of holy water blessed by Hindu priests, demonstrating the syncretic nature of Javanese spirituality.
4. Astrological and Spiritual Significance:
  - Calendar and Timing: Many contemporary rituals at Cetho Temple are timed according to the Hindu-Javanese calendar, based on astrological calculations rooted in Hindu cosmology. Essential dates for rituals and festivals are chosen based on auspicious times identified in this calendar, reflecting the ongoing influence of Hindu astrological practices.
  - Pilgrimage Practices: Pilgrims visiting Cetho Temple often follow traditional Hindu pilgrimage practices, such as fasting and

performing circumambulations around sacred structures. These practices are seen as a means of gaining spiritual merit and purification.

The integration of Hindu symbols in contemporary Javanese rituals at Cetho Temple underscores the enduring legacy of Hinduism in Javanese culture. Through the preservation and adaptation of these symbols and practices, Cetho Temple serves as a living testament to the syncretic nature of Javanese spirituality. This blending of ancient Hindu traditions with local customs continues to enrich Java's cultural and religious landscape, ensuring that these age-old symbols remain relevant and revered in modern times.

### **3. General Description of The Research Location**

Besides serving as a ritual center, Cetho Temple also functions as a spiritual center. This is due to its location on Mount Lawu, which is believed to be a spiritual center with three peaks. One of the literary works from the period contemporaneous with Cetho Temple (late 15th century) is the Kakawin Kunjarakarna, which, among other things, tells the story of a person striving for "final liberation." To achieve this liberation, all impurities must be cleansed through noble knowledge (jnana wisesa), which leads a person to realize that they are an incarnation of a god, or even that they are the god themselves. Three paths cannot be distinguished in the pursuit of "noble knowledge," as none is superior to the others:

1. The path of Buddhist devotees who respect the five Jinas (Wairocana, Aksobhya, Ratnasambhawa, Amitabha, and Amogasiddhi);
2. The path of Shiva worshipers who respect the five Shivas (Shiva et al.);
3. The path of the Rishis who respect the five Kusikas.

In the Majapahit constitutional system, the three religious sects were managed by different entities: the Kasogatan ring mantra for the Buddhist sect, the Kasiwan ring mantra for the Shiva sect, and the Her Haji mantri ring for the ascetic or Rsi sect. Notably, the term her haji refers to a group of ascetics or Rsi, a term that suggests a religious identity where water plays a key role in ritual activities. In this context, water is sacred in relation to cleansing, purification, and fertility (her haji = holy water or tirta).

Cetho Temple was not constructed to honor a deified king or to legitimize a dynasty's power. Rather, it was built by a community of ascetics (her haji) for ritual traditions aimed at obtaining tirta-amrta. The statues and reliefs at the temple depict sacred stories such as Amrtamanthana, Garudeya, Cuddha-mala, and Dewa Ruci (Tirta Prwitasari). At the end of the series of Cuddha-mala narrative relief stones, an inscription is engraved in Kawi script. According to philological analysis by Darmosoetopo, the word rakayaman derives from ra+kayaman, where the honorific "ra-" implies meanings like heaven, sky, or mountain peak. The word dukanungkul comes from duk+anungkul, where anungkul means prostration, and pawitra means holy bath (ibid: 83-84).

The word pawitra also appears in the Negarakrtagama text (Riana, 2009: 286, 368) in reference to Mount Penanggungan as a holy mountain. Mount Penanggungan contains a sacred bath, namely the Sendang (petirtaan) Jolotundho. According to Darmosoetopo, the term "tirta sunya book" does not necessarily refer to a physical bath (as no trace of a bath has been found at Cetho Temple). Rather, it refers to the reliefs of the Cuddha-mala story, which should not be regarded merely as an ansich book.

This Ruwatan tradition aims to eliminate sadness and bad luck. The story carved on the reliefs of Cetho Temple with the Sudamala theme is also found at Kidal Temple and Suku Temple. The Sudamala story tells of the transformation of the goddess Uma into a giant and her palace into a forest, or a graveyard, as a result of a curse from Lord Shiva due to her infidelity. In her giant form, the goddess Uma becomes known as the goddess Durga.

Figure 1 shows the Limasan Houses of the Cetho Hamlet Community.



Figure 1. The Limasan Houses of the Cetho Hamlet Community, adapted from Doc. Marsono, August (2015)

The relationship between *Atman*, *Brahman*, and the world is the core view of the cosmos in Hinduism, a concept that remains alive today and is explained in various ways. In the world of *wayang*, the universe or cosmos is portrayed as consisting of : 1) Jagad Alit, the human universe, which includes knights, giants, and ordinary humans; 2) Jagad Ageng, or the unfolding universe, symbolized by mountains or *kayon*; 3) Jagad Pepadhang (*padhang* = light), representing heaven (*hyang* = holy), where the gods (*dewa* = light) reside.

This cosmic view, divided into these three dimensions of the universe, is also described in Old Javanese literary works.

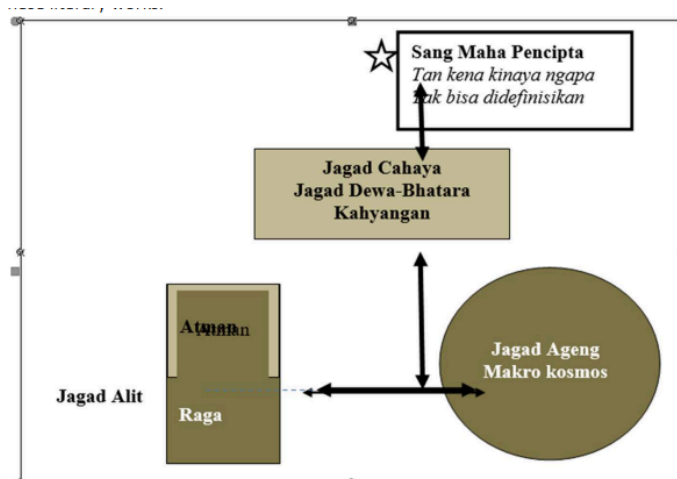


Figure 2. Scheme of the dimensions of the cosmos in Javanese wayang

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The research on the integration of Hindu symbols in contemporary Javanese rituals at Cetho Temple reveals a rich fusion of religious and cultural traditions. Observations of daily offerings, temple festivals, and spiritual cleansing ceremonies illustrate the active role of Hindu deities and symbolic structures within the temple complex. Interviews with local priests and devotees highlight the importance of these rituals in preserving cultural heritage, showcasing the harmonious blend of ancient Hindu and local Javanese practices.

The temple's architectural features and religious artifacts, such as statues of Hindu deities and yoni-lingam representations, are central to these rituals, maintaining a strong connection to Java's Hindu past. These practices not only reinforce cultural identity but also offer spiritual and social benefits, fostering community unity and bringing blessings to various aspects of life. However, contemporary rituals face challenges from modernization, changing social dynamics, and the influence of other religions. Adapting these practices to ensure their modern relevance is essential for their sustainability, with educational initiatives playing a key role in transmitting their significance to future generations. The integration of Hindu symbols at Cetho Temple illustrates the dynamic relationship between religion and culture in Java, preserving ancient traditions while allowing for adaptive spiritual practices.

#### 5. Conclusion

The integration of Hindu symbols in contemporary Javanese rituals at Cetho Temple underscores the dynamic interaction between religion and culture in Java. This synthesis helps preserve ancient traditions and encourages the development of adaptive spiritual practices that remain relevant in today's society. Observations and interviews reveal that rituals involving Hindu deities, symbolic structures, and offerings are vital for maintaining cultural heritage and reinforcing both communal and individual identities. Despite challenges from modernization and social change, these practices provide spiritual and social benefits, fostering a sense of unity and shared heritage within the local community. Educational initiatives are crucial to ensure the sustainability of these rituals and pass on their cultural significance to future generations. This study emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of Javanese spirituality, offering insights into the vital role cultural heritage plays in shaping identities.

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