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Washing your hair in Java

George Quinn

On the evening of 7 May 1997 I joined more than 10,000 people crammed into a pilgrimage complex known as the Vanishing Place of King Joyoboyo (*Pamuksan Sri Aji Joyoboyo*) in the village of Menang about eight kilometres from Kediri in East Java. It was the eve of the first of Suro (also called the first of Muharram) which is New Year's Day in both the Islamic and Javanese calendars. On this date people flock to holy places across the island of Java to usher in the New Year with various rituals that connect the past with the future.

As night fell a thick queue of pilgrims jostled towards Joyoboyo's shrine.[1] On the steps of the shrine they sank to their haunches and approached the central sanctum in an awkward 'squat walk'. Licks of bright orange flame jumped from several incense burners as pilgrims paid homage to 'Grandfather' (*Eyang*) Joyoboyo and prayed for his blessing in the coming year.

Towards midnight the crowd around me thinned. People were drifting off somewhere. I joined a small group and went about 500 metres through the surrounding rice fields to a spectacular bathing place called Tirto Kamandanu. It consists of two concrete bathing pools, one for men and one for women, inside a walled compound. Towering above the baths is a giant stone image of the Hindu god Wisnu, and backing this an equally massive image of the elephant-headed god Ganesha. Entry to the complex was through a large, Balinese-style, split gate.

In the late night gloom scores of men were waist-deep in the water of the men's pool, or squatting at the rim of the pool, washing their hair. Some were using soap or commercial shampoos, others were simply dipping their hands into the water and vigorously wetting their hair. Women were doing the same in the pool next door (although I didn't personally witness this). When I asked what was going on, one young man – blinking through the lather streaming down his face – replied that he had come to Joyoboyo's vanishing place to renew his commitment to patience (*sabar*) in the face of life's trials, and to renew his trust in Allah (*tawakal*). Stoic patience and a fatalistic trust in destiny ruled by Allah are traditional virtues still much admired in Javanese society today. By ritually bathing and washing his hair on New Year's eve the young man hoped to wash away the stains of the past year in order to be clean and ready for the challenges of the new year.

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[1] The historical King Joyoboyo (more correctly but less usually spelt Jayabhaya) was a Hindu-Buddhist ruler of Kediri in the middle years of the twelfth century. Today he is popularly regarded as the ancestor of Java's kings and is accorded a veneer of Islamic identity. The pilgrims at his shrine would almost all have called themselves Muslims.

There is a special term in Javanese for washing the hair, *kramas.* In the form *karamas* the word appears in Old Javanese texts where it has the meaning 'something with which to wash the hair' (Zoetmulder 1982, I:801). The Old Javanese verbal derivative *akaramas* means 'to wash one's hair, and it is this word, minus its weakly stressed prefix *a-*, that has survived into modern Javanese and has been borrowed into modern Indonesian'.[2]

Traditionally hair was thoroughly cleaned with *banyu landha,* called lye in English. In fact *banyu landha* is still widely used to wash the hair in rural society today. *Banyu landha* is made by burning dry stalks of rice (*merang*), preferably in a clean clay vessel. The charred stalks and the ashes are doused in hot water and left to soak overnight. The liquid is then strained and is ready to use as a kind of shampoo. *Banyu landha* is rich in saponin, a compound that has foaming characteristics and is highly alkaline. When used to wash the hair it dissolves the acidic oils in the hair and scalp and removes the scaly surface of hairs, leaving the scalp clean and the hair rather stiff and dry. Traditionally, after washing with *banyu landha,* the condition of hair was restored by massaging it with an extract of coconut oil called *cem-ceman.* This restored lankness, shine and oily acidity to the hair.

Traditionally, ritual washing with a special *kramas* component has been part of the major moments of transition in the human life span – marriage, giving birth, and death. According to Koentjaraningrat (1985:361) a Javanese girl goes through a ritual *kramas* ceremony after her first menstruation. In the lead-up to marriage *kramas* also has an important part to play. On the day before the formal marriage ceremony (*panggih, temu panganten*) the bride takes

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[2] It is possible that *kramas* is related to the Malay-Indonesian *-remas* (to knead / squeeze / crumple something) and the Javanese *rames* (mixed together, of food on a plate). Both terms are suggestive of the massaging and the congestion of suds and hair that accompanies *kramas.*

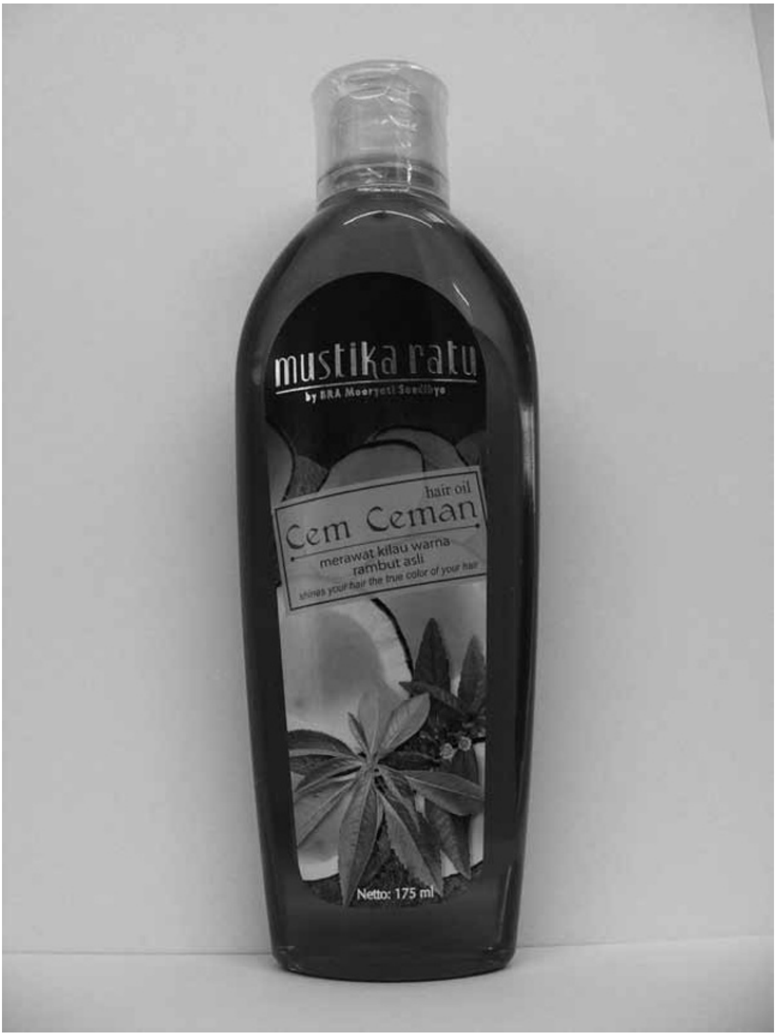
mustika ratu
by BRA Mooryati Soedibyo
hair oil
Cem Ceman
merawat kilau warna
rambut asli
shines your hair the true color of your hair
Netto: 175 ml

Figure 1. Cem-ceman

part in a bathing ritual called *siraman.* The bride and groom (in separate places) are doused with perfumed water. In more elaborate *siraman* ceremonies a make-up expert (*juru paes*) or an older relative carefully washes the bride's hair using *banyu landha* or a modern detergent-based shampoo.

In the seventh month of pregnancy a woman undergoes the *mitoni* or *tingkeban* ritual involving, among other things, ritual bathing or *siraman* with water collected from seven wells and perfumed with flower petals (Koentjaraningrat 1985:352-3). Thereafter, again according to Koentjaraningrat, between the *mitoni* ceremony and the birth the prospective mother has to observe many taboos and is required to wash her hair once a week using *banyu landha.* On the 40th day after a woman has given birth she undergoes a ritual purification assisted by a healer (*dhukun, wong pinter*) or midwife (*dhukun bayi*). The components of the ceremony are similar to those of the Islamic *ghusl* – the ritual cleansing of the whole body – with *kramas* using *banyu landha* traditionally an important component of the ceremony. Similarly, after death the body of the deceased is thoroughly washed. Traditionally this process also includes careful washing of the hair using *banyu landha* (Geertz 1960:69; Tanojo 1963:14).

Ritual washing of the hair is also part of preparations for the Islamic Fast (*pasa, siyam*). Traditionally, at least in Central Java, there were three stages of preparation for the Fast: *nyadran* (visiting the graves of ancestors, praying for their repose and tidying up the graves), *padusan* (ritual washing) and *megengan* (usually a *slametan* meal with prayers on the night before the commencement of the Fast). *Padusan* is conducted on the day before the commencement of the Fast and may involve the ritual cleaning of key household implements like mats, kitchen utensils, implements for hulling and pounding rice and so on. *Padusan* was, and for some people still is, conducted at ritual bathing places like Umbul Cokrotulung near Klaten, Umbul Pengging between Kartasura and Boyolali, Umbul Kayangan in Wonogiri district and Umbul Berjo in Karanganyar (Tok Suwarto 2005). *Padusan* invariably demands special washing of the hair. This is 'a physical and spiritual preparation to clear, clean and sanctify the mind so that when the Fast begins you are not distracted by base appetites' (Tok Suwarto 2005).

And as we have seen, ritual washing, including *kramas,* remains a significant component in preparations for the New Year. Pre-New Year bathing and *kramas* may be conducted in private at home, but very commonly it is a public affair in conjunction with visits to holy grave sites or, in a few places, with New Year's Eve immersion (*kungkum*) rituals at the confluence of rivers or in springs, as happens at the Tugu Suharto site in the western suburbs of Semarang.

The ritual washing of hair seems to derive its power from a convergence of four main elements. First, from ancient times hair – especially women's hair – has had a fetishized character. It is a body-part – even a bought-and-sold artifact – with special symbolic significance that seems to be both psycho-sexual in character and related to the regulation of Javanese society with its Islamic religious order.

Anthony Reid (1988:79-80) observes that in pre-modern Southeast Asia 'hair was a crucial symbol and emanation of the self' and 'enormous care was given to the care of the hair, to ensure that it was always black, lustrous, abundant, and sweet-smelling'. For both men and women the refusal to cut the hair, and conversely the shaving of the head, have been seen as acts that can confer power on an individual, or at the very least define a person's social status. In a Javanese story, the husband of Ratu Kalinyamat – the queen of sixteenth-century Jepara – was murdered on the instructions of Arya Penangsang of Jipang. In her quest for justice Ratu Kalinyamat meditated naked and vowed never to cut her hair until her husband's death had been avenged. As her hair grew, so too her sexual allure and the moral authority of her cause grew, attracting the attention of Sultan Adiwijaya who successfully engineered the murder of Arya Penangsang.

There is a popular tradition that Prince Diponegoro commanded his followers to cut off their hair to distinguish themselves from fellow Javanese who were Dutch collaborators and whose hair was normally long in the fashion of the day (Reid 1988:82; Yudhistira 2007). Nyi Ageng Serang, the elderly aristocrat who became an ally of Prince Diponegoro, is reputed to have shaved her head bald while fighting the Dutch. For a woman this was a shocking act of self-mutilation. She abandoned her femininity and became in effect a 'man' – that is, a ruthless guerilla fighter bereft of the weakness, softness and beauty that was traditionally seen as a characteristic of femininity embodied in a full head of hair.[3]

Second, the ritual washing of hair takes place at key moments of transition from one state to another – the transition from everyday living to the liminally holy fasting month of Ramadhan, from an old year to a new one, from childhood to sexually mature adulthood, from childlessness to motherhood, from unmarried to married life, and the ultimate change of state… from life to death. In the incident I observed at the Vanishing Place of King Joyoboyo, the ritual washing of hair took place around midnight - at the exact moment when the old year morphed into the new.

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[3] There are many examples of hair as fetish in more recent Javanese history. During the *Revolusi* (1945-1949) many nationalist fighters refused to cut their hair (Yudhistira 2007). Of special interest is the 'long hair' (*rambut gondrong*) controversy of the 1970s, which I see as an instance of resistance by the older generation to the adoption of long hair by young men who 'didn't deserve it'.

Third, in ritual contexts – including in ritual contexts today – hair is washed in *banyu landha* made from rice stalks. It seems to me possible that there is symbolic significance in the use of rice stalks. Rice stalks are used not only because they are a source of alkaline foaming saponins, but because rice has immense symbolic importance in Javanese society embodied in the myth of Sri and Sadono.[4] Indeed the very appearance of rice may be symbolically appropriate to the *kramas* ritual – it grows in paddy fields like hair growing on the head and flourishes when it is bathed in water.

Finally, the power of the *kramas* ritual must come in part from its presence in popular story. To give one example, in an almost universally known episode drawn from Java's classical cycle of shadow plays – the *wayang purwa* – Drupadi, the wife of Wrekudara (also called Bima) is insulted and humiliated by Dursasana. Drupadi vows that she will wash her hair in the blood of Dursasana. Dursasana suffers a terrible death at the hands of Wrekudara during the Bharatayudha battle. Wrekudara sucks up Dursasana's blood and deposits it in his battle helmet and it is there that Drupadi washes her hair in her tormentor's blood.

It is a commonplace of anthropology that in many societies, perhaps universally, hair is a powerful symbol of sexuality as well as a component in the symbolic regulation of the social-religious order. In religious contexts water (and its transformation, blood) is widely seen as a purifying agent that can revivify a degraded life.[5] In Javanese society hair is decidedly multi-signifying. On the one hand it is a crown (*mahkota*) growing from the sacrosanct precinct of the head. It is a symbol of human beauty, perseverance and power. On the other hand it symbolizes bestial character and problematic sexuality. It is a remnant of animality that reminds us of the depths of defilement and depravity that we are capable of descending to. In the iconography of the classical shadow theatre that underpins so much of the modern iconography of Java, the depraved, rapacious ogres are hairy, and especially have long unkempt hair on their heads (in addition to other markers of bestiality like fangs, bulging eyes, loud voices, big loping jerky strides and florid faces).

Just as Drupadi washed away the stain of her defilement through a ritual act of *kramas*, so also the present *kramas* is a ritual of purification that has religious and sexual meaning. It both extirpates the accumulated mistakes and wounds of the past, and also prepares the subject of the ritual for a new start in a new estate. Hair emerges from beneath the skin, from the interior of the body, and it is constantly growing. It therefore lies at a kind of transition point between interior and exterior – at the boundary that distinguishes individuals from their environment. Perhaps this is why hair is also symbolically associated with boundaries and transition, with the marking of boundaries and with preparation to cross them.

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[4] Sri (more fully, Dewi Sri) is the indigenous rice goddess of Java who lives in countless myths and folktales. Together with her consort Sadono (who, in some versions, is her brother), Sri is the focal point of rituals intended to secure good rice harvests and general agricultural fertility.

[5] For key studies see, for example, Leach 1958; Douglas 1966; Hallpike 1969; Hershman 1974; Hiltebeitel and Miller 1998. None of the above, however, deal directly with Indonesian societies.

A RITUAL IN DECLINE?

From ancient times bathing places (usually called *padusan* or *patirtan*) have been important centres of community life and religious ritual in Java. Probably the best-known surviving pre-Islamic bathing places are the Belahan and Jalatunda sites in East Java. Bathing pools were important in royal residences too, witness, among others, the Taman Sari pool in the Jogjakarta palace and the Tasikardi royal bathing pool in the centre of the ancient reservoir south of Old Banten. Early mosques were often surrounded by moats where worshippers would undertake their pre-prayer ritual ablutions (a survival of such a moat can be seen at the Grand Mosque in Old Banten), and bathing pools were to be found in many places of religious retreat, such as those that still survive at Jumprit near Parakan, Central Java, and Umbul Pengging between Kartasura and Boyolali, Central Java.

At the beginning of this chapter I described my experience of ritual *kramas* at Tirto Kamandanu bathing place adjacent to the Vanishing Place of King Joyoboyo. Let me now cite a somewhat different experience of *kramas*, reported in the Javanese-language magazine *Panjebar Semangat* in 1997.

> Purification rituals at bathing places are commonly held towards the end of the month of Ruwah. Unfortunately today these rituals seem to be losing their meaning. If you look at them in their outward guise you might think they are more popular than ever. But the fact is that purification rituals are turning into tourist attractions with people flocking to them in unprecedented numbers. Quite often the event is enlivened with music from a *dangdut* orchestra.
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> When you think about it, it is not the purpose of purification rituals to give men and women the chance to splash around in a pool groping and pinching one another. The real purpose of the ritual is to give everyone a chance to purify themselves in the lead up to the fasting month of Ramadhan.

> [...] So we shouldn't be surprised if Surti, a sincere and perhaps naive young woman, felt quite uncomfortable with what she found at Kahyangan, Dlepih near Tirtomoyo. She had set out from home with the intention of preparing for the Fast by purifying herself under the waterfall in the pool at Kahyangan, the same pool where Panembahan Senopati had once immersed himself in meditation. But after less than 10 minutes in the water she had clambered out. 'I had to get out of there', she said. 'People were just horsing around, splashing water over each other and making ribald jokes.'
>
> Raden Ngabei Suraksobudoyo, the custodian at Kahyangan, was likewise far from happy with the situation. 'But what can I do?' he said. 'They're just children, really. As long as they don't do anything genuinely debauched, I'm not going to stop them. The guardian spirit here is quite capable of distinguishing between pilgrims who come with serious intent, and casual visitors who only want to have a bit of fun.' (*Upacara padusan 1997*)

Many pilgrims, like Surti, find at best a degraded sanctity at hitherto holy sacred places - degraded to the point where they feel they can no longer wash their hair in public there in a ritually significant way. *Kramas* with commercial shampoos has largely contracted to the domestic sphere rather than in public places, though in the domestic sphere increasing prosperity has brought it to countless millions of Indonesians. Yet even in the privacy of the home *kramas* retains social-religious functions. Rather than purity it is cleanliness, as urged on citizens by the state, that is emphasized. But even cleanliness seems to be secondary to the expression of individual choice and the creation of a certain self-image that conforms to the interests of the state and the business community. Through the purchase of commercial shampoos consumers exercise their individuality in a way that establishes a personal connection with the manufacturer and with a brand name. Personal sensuality and the pursuit of luxury are dominating values driving the use of shampoo. Advertisements portray shampooed hair as shiny, bouncy and easy to manage – attributes that the modern state and its business allies expect of citizens and consumers. Shampooing the hair is also a tactile, very sensual act that makes hair sexually attractive – but (and this is important) *safely* sexually attractive. The act of shampooing the hair and displaying the results of shampooing the hair exude a sensuousness and sexuality that is not threatening to conservative community values, the state, or to the conduct of business.

Kramas also remains important to the public expression of religious piety. Muslim women are urged with increasing insistence to wear a headscarf as a sign of their Islamic identity and piety. The headscarf (normally called a *jilbab*, sometimes *krudung* or *tudung*) covers the hair completely and drapes over the shoulders. But the wearing of the *jilbab* with its close-fitting skullcap can cause problems. Women may develop dandruff or suffer hair loss, the scalp may become itchy and the hair may exude an unpleasant smell. Islamic books and magazines recommend frequent *kramas* to deal with these problems. One popular book, *Jilbab dan rambut sehat* (The headscarf and healthy hair) for example, tells readers that frequent washing of the hair with shampoo (at least once every three days, and every day if necessary) is 'absolutely essential, in fact an obligation (*kewajiban*), for women who wear the Islamic headscarf' (Ismiaulia and Solihah 1991:27). *Kramas* for Muslim women is not only a solution to a hair-health problem. It also helps them become more 'Islamic' by making possible the comfortable wearing of the *jilbab*. It is even argued that wearing the *jilbab* helps Muslim women protect their hair from dirt, thereby implementing Islamic injunctions on cleanliness (Ismiaulia and Solihah 1991:42).

Thus for Muslim women *kramas* is portrayed as component of public piety essential to the regulation of dress in a properly Islamic way. It is also of psycho-sexual importance, keeping beauteous but hidden the hair that is a symbol of female sexuality that should be seen only by a woman's *muhrim* (spouse and close family).

Even in the commercialized present with its ever encroaching pressure to adopt an Islamic persona in public, shampooing the hair can still connect an individual to the past and be a marker of Javanese identity.

Funeral customs are notoriously resistant to change and anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that in Javanese society ritual *kramas* of the deceased is still very much alive. In Java's local pilgrimage practices – a sub-culture that is burgeoning in a quite extraordinary way – ritual hair washing is still widely practiced as my experience at the Vanishing Place of King Joyoboyo suggests. The equally extraordinary burgeoning of the middle class wedding culture demands that many features of traditional weddings be 're-cycled' (albeit mostly in de-sacralized guise) and one of these is the *siraman* with its *kramas* component.

A number of manufacturers of shampoos market brands that use natural *merang* extract. These include the widely popular Sariayu and Mustika Ratu brands. Consumers who choose these *merang* shampoos probably do so because they see the word *merang* on the label as a marker (however degraded) of the authority of Javanese tradition and of Javanese identity. In a society in which foreign consumer items are highly valued, and Indonesian tradition can often be problematic or marginal, choosing *shampoo merang* may be one of the few ways left to them to say 'I choose Java' while at the same time being *moderen*.

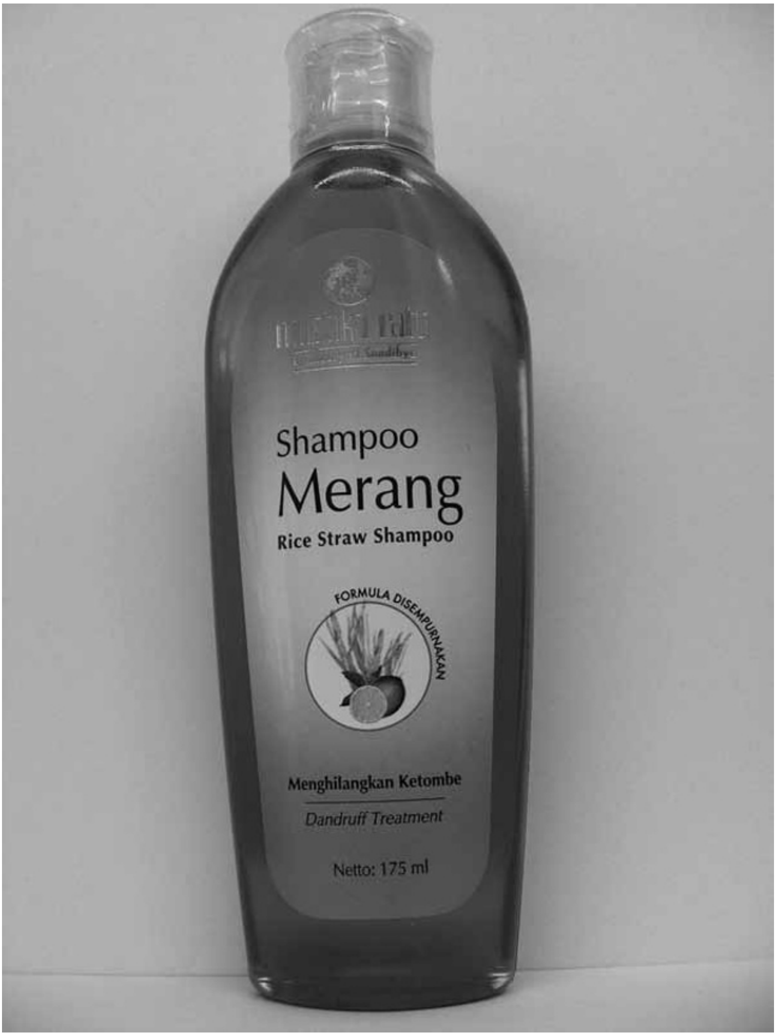
Shampoo
Merang
Rice Straw Shampoo
FORMULA DISEMPURNAKAN
Menghilangkan Ketombe
Dandruff Treatment
Netto: 175 ml

Figure 2. Shampoo merang

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