

Living in a Time of Madness: Last Days of Java's Last Prophetic Poet

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Shortly before his death in December 1873, the renowned Javanese court poet R. Ng. Ronggowarsita composed a short work of social criticism and Islamic ethics that is among the most celebrated of Javanese literary texts. *Serat Kalatidha* (The Time of Darkness) reflects upon the avenues that remain open to the ethical subject in what Ronggowarsita calls the “time of madness,” the time of darkness and error that marked his dismal present in high colonial Java. Most celebrated as a prophecy, the poem is, in part, a critical reworking of an early nineteenth-century prophetic reflection on the Javanese past. My talk explores the troubled context in which the author wrote this twelve-stanza (108-line) poem and how its text forms both a critical commentary on the state of the poet’s current-day society and a pensive reflection on the ethical imperatives of Islam. In the course of this exploration, I reveal how Ronggowarsita’s poem forms a prophecy, not as a foretelling of an already determined future, but rather as a work that moves along prophetic time to provoke in his readers a productive intimacy with both pasts and futures.

Professor **Nancy Florida** is a historian of colonial and postcolonial Indonesia whose work concerns Javanese and Indonesian history, historiography, and literary studies; Islam in Indonesia; and mass violence and trauma. She is a professor of Javanese and Indonesian Studies at the University of Michigan, where she served as Director of the University’s Islamic Studies Program 2010-2012. Her most recent book, *Javanese Literature in Surakarta Manuscripts*, Vol. 3 (2012), is the third of three volumes detailing the contents of some 700,000 pages of Javanese manuscripts stored in three royal archives in Surakarta, Indonesia. Other representative publications include *Writing the Past, Inscribing the Future: History as Prophecy in Colonial Java* (1995), “Sex Wars: Writing Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century Java,” in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (1996), “Writing Traditions in Colonial Java: The Question of Islam,” in *Cultures of Scholarship* (1997), “A Proliferation of Pigs: Specters of Monstrosity in Reformation Indonesia” (*Public Culture* 2008), and “Syattāriyya Sufi Scents in the Literary World of the Surakarta Palace in Nineteenth-Century Java,” in *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia* (2018), and “Living in a Time of Madness: Last Days of Java’s Last Prophetic Prophet,” forthcoming in *History and Theory*. Her current research concerns metaphysical poetry of an early nineteenth-century Sufi sage from the Javanese palace of Surakarta.

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12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue