

# Green, The Forbidden Color Of Parangtritis Beach

By Farah "Fairy" Mahdzan  
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Once, when I was still in America studying, I received a postcard from Indonesia with a most peculiar tale to tell. The postcard's picture looked to me like a barren desert in Egypt but it was in fact a snapshot of an Indonesian beach with two men in the far distance herding along two cows across the horizon. The description printed at the bottom of postcard read: "*Parangtritis, Central Java - beautiful black sand dunes stand guard over an angry sea.*"



I flipped the postcard over and this is what my friend Fibi wrote to me, in her unique and neat handwriting, about this beach that was unknown to me back then:

(Translated from Bahasa Indonesia a.k.a. Indonesian)

*Fai, thank you for sending me the postcard from Purdue [Indiana]. This time I am sending you a postcard with a picture of Parangtritis Beach. Perhaps you've been there? I was there once, when I was younger. The beach is not that impressive and wah, the waves of Parangtritis are gigantic, though I think Bali is a much better place to visit.*

*Parangtritis also carries a famous legend. It is said that whoever visits the beach wearing the color green, be it a green shirt, green hat or even green shoes[!], the unfortunate person will be "swallowed" by the sea. Believe it or not, people who have worn green to Parangtritis have been reported missing and this mishap occurs often. I'd advise you to leave your green wardrobe at home before you plan to venture out to that part of Indonesia!*

*Regards, Fibi*

Fibi never really told me why people "disappear" if they're caught wearing green at Parangtritis. A few years later when I had graduated and earned some money of my own to travel, inevitably my curiosity got

the best of me. Before I knew it, I was already in Jogjakarta, in a car in with several other friends, rumbling casually down the small narrow highway that was to take me to Parangtritis sometime that one afternoon after New Year's Day.

### Arriving at Parangtritis Beach

The trip to Parangtritis from the city of Jogja took a good 30-40 minutes. We drove out into the countryside and the scenery along the way reminded me of Perlis, a state located in northern Peninsular Malaysia where my father's *kampung* (hometown/village) of Jejawi is located. My eyes feasted on a diet of green mountains, tropical trees, modest Indonesian homes, mosques and *sawah padi* (paddy fields) as we made our way to Parangtritis.

As soon as we arrived, I noticed that the sands in Parangtritis were black, unlike the light brown color sand that I normally associate beaches with. Black sands are a specialty of Javanese beaches due to the presence of volcanoes that make up much of the region's terrain.

There were not many people on the beach due to the weary weather; strong winds were blowing and the sky looked dull and bleak. There were however a handful of people taking advantage of the coolness of the day. I spotted a few horse carts known as *andhongs*, traveling from one end of the beach to the other, the horses galloping noiselessly but majestically over the black sand, carrying tourists who were clearly optimistic on trying to have a good time on the beach.

But alas, my postcard-sending friend Fibi was right, the beaches of Parangtritis were a disappointment. Littered all over the beach were trash of many sorts, from discarded plastic bags, straws, drink cans, paper, rotting rinds of local fruits, even the occasional lumps of horse dung that fall out from the *andhongs*. Trash as far as the eye could see!

It was truly an eyesore, and for once I was reluctant to take pictures of this one particular Indonesian tourist spot. I did however pose for one with my friends, just as a reminder that I had been to Parangtritis. Even at that I meticulously chose an area where the sandy beach had the least amount of trash so as to not spoil my picture which might cause me to flinch in sorrow if I were to look back at the snapshot some fine day. (L-R: Rere, Ipoenk, myself, Mbak Ika)



## ***Nyai Roro Kidul* Likes the Color Green...!**

I suddenly remembered the no-green-attire-on-Parangtritis warning and asked my friends what the deal was with this whole myth. Apparently this warning has been engrained in Javanese culture for centuries.

According to legend, a mythical queen named **Nyai Roro Kidul** or **Ratu Laut Selatan** (Queen of the South Seas) rules the seas of Java. Once a woman who was ousted from her land due to an atrocious skin disease bewitched by a jealous woman adversary, lonely and miserable *Nyai Roro Kidul* received a premonition in her dreams that advised her to dive into the Java Sea. Upon following the mysterious advice and plunging into the fierce salty waters, not only did her skin shed all the boils and sores that once infected her beautiful body; *Nyai Roro Kidul* also became immortal and a magical permanent resident of the ocean ever since. The lady-turned-goddess apparently also inherited a castle in the depths of the sea filled with many faithful servants.

Coincidentally, this Queen of the South Seas is also the mysterious queen that all the Sultans of Jogja worship and become husbands of. By "marrying" the queen, these sultans are guaranteed ruling power over the land.

*Nyai Roro Kidul* is said to have a fondness for the color green, especially when worn by men. Therefore if you are seen wearing green on the beach, *Nyai Roro Kidul* will lure you into the sea by engulfing you in crashing waves as you are taken to become her slave for



eternity. If the goddess queen somehow does not wish to keep you (read: reject quality!), you will be dumped on another part of the beach, an area different from where you were last seen. My friend Ipoenk shuddered as he shared a recent case of how a local man was found this way, very much shaken. The guys in our group laughed uneasily all of a sudden at the mere revelation of the story. I suppose the fact that the queen had a preference for young men had something to do with it, *hehe*.

Believers of this ancient Javanese legend try to appease the goddess *Nyai Roro Kidul* by making ritual sacrifices during certain times of the year by throwing various items such as finger nail clippings and offerings into the sea. They believe that the Queen's anger must be contained to ensure that the seas do not "get angry" thus making fishing difficult, a main source of income for many fishermen who live by the coastline.

There are of course various versions of this story, but this version is the one that I remember the most. Apparently there is also a hotel room somewhere in West Java in the south that is purposely left empty by the hotel management as a sign of respect to the queen's deity: the famous room number is 308 at Samudra Beach Hotel, Pelabuhan Ratu. No guests are allowed to occupy the room at any time. There are paintings of the alleged queen in that room and guests of the hotel have claimed to hear sounds of the waves come from the room but upon inspection, no one is in it.

### **Small Fish Swim to Survive**

After concluding the stories of the mythical *Nyai Roro Kidul*, we walked up and down along the beach, exploring what we could of the place. Slicing across one area of the beach and running towards the ocean was a small stream that seemed to have caught the attention of by-passers as I saw them squatting to look intently at something in the water. I realized what it was that these people were looking at: small schools of baby fish slighter bigger than the size of tadpoles were squirming their way around in the shallow water, fearlessly dodging floating rubbish, a few occasionally meeting their doom as they get trapped in man's garbage. I can just sense that the fish were very much hoping the flow of water would drift them quickly towards the sea where they could grow and be free.

Everyone seemed fascinated by the small, swimming creatures as I heard squeals of delight from young children; I suppose seeing anything alive in this part

of the beach seemed like a miracle. I saw no other animals on the beach except the sea gulls that were flying in the sky and the forlorn groups of fish in that small stream; other than that there was not even a crab in sight.

It had started to drizzle and we quickly huddled under *Mbak* (Big Sister) Ika's umbrella, laughing loudly when the unrelenting winds suddenly blew our umbrella inside out, rendering the weather shield useless. As we frantically tried to fix the umbrella back into its original shape, the ocean waves crashed with ferocity like no other sea force imaginable, spitting at the beach shores so viciously; a clear reminder to potential swimmers that this bad sea was merciless and will kill. I stared in awe and disbelief at the few people who were bravely (or foolishly?) facing the potentially dangerous sea by dipping themselves in it near the edge of the beach.

Out yonder beyond the angry, surging sea, someone joked that one could swim out to Australia from Parangtritis since it was facing in the right direction, if one was mad enough. It's of course impossible to swim out that far, if one were desperate, I suppose you could take a boat illegally to Australia. If, one was desperate enough to pull such a stupid and fatal stunt! And believe me, there have been a few cases. People perish of course in the attempt; the seas are much too fierce to travel in simple boats.

The hopeful, illegal immigrants who have died this way reminded me of the small baby fish I saw in the stream running into the sea; all are like hopeful small

beings who try and challenge the big forces of nature to get to greener pastures.

## Sad Tourists

Dusk was settling in and it was time for us to leave Parangtritis. As we made back to our car, I noticed a group of what looked like Japanese tourists trudging their way back to their tour bus, their cameras and camcorders hanging on straps by their sides, tucked away with lenses caps on. I doubt the cameras were ever used. The tourists had the most remorseful look on their faces as they quietly chatted among themselves, as though someone had died. I could not help but guess what they were feeling inside; like myself, the East Asian visitors were not very happy with the conditions of what could have been a most beautiful black-sanded beach.

Albeit the harsh realities of Parangtritis' deteriorating ecosystem and cleanliness, I appreciated the local knowledge and mystical belief of *Nyai Roro Kidul* that was parted to me by my Jogja friends. You can bet I paid respect to local customs and adhered the warning: I had brought not one single clothing item with me to Jogja that was **green** in color!  
([fairy@mahdzan.com](mailto:fairy@mahdzan.com))

### Credits:

Illustration: Fairy

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