

Chapter 12. The devotional shrine of Nagara Padang, West Java, in comparative and analytical perspective

The UNPAR (Parahyangan Catholic University) Department of Philosophy's study days 2010¹

The devotional shrine of Nagara Padang, village of Rawabogo, Ciwidey, West Bandung, Indonesia, plays a central role in the research of Dr Stephanus Djunatan, a lecturer of philosophy at the Parahyangan Catholic University (UNPAR), Bandung, who defended his PhD thesis before the Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in February 2011, under my supervision. I returned to the shrine in May 2010, three years after my first visit, and this time in the context of a massive student research training project supervised by UNPAR lecturers. Leaning heavily on Djunatan's work, my argument briefly describes the main features of the shrine and of a large collective pilgrimage there starting from the village of Rawabogo. In a more original vein, the argument highlights the syncretistic signature of the shrine's cult (apparently a mixture of Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and animistic elements, going back to the first half of the second millennium CE). Parallels are drawn not only with the Borobudur devotional shrine of Central Java, but also with North Africa (where I have studied, since 1967, shrine cults in the context of popular Islam; cf. above, chapters 1 and 2) and with sub-Saharan Africa (where in at least three places, as widely apart as Malawi, Cameroon

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and Uganda, somewhat similar, symbolically and culturally charged rock formations may be found, especially associated with the idea of the emergence of the first people from the earth or their descent from heaven). The possibility of an extreme antiquity for the Nagara Padang site as a cult centre is further suggested by its reminiscences of Upper Palaeolithic initiatory rituals of spiritual (re-)birth, with the novice having to press his or her body through a narrow rock crevice. The presence of at least one menhir and of numerous cupmarks on the top of the site suggests continuity with the widespread Indonesian megalithic complex, which has contested affinities throughout South East and East Asia, and the rest of the Old World – and Bronze Age dating. These discussions are supported by numerous illustrations. Against the background of a selection of the scholarly literature the anthropological theory of shrine cults (also called ‘regional cults’) is presented in a nutshell – with emphasis on Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas*. This finally allows me to comment, at the organisers’ explicit request, on the considerable merits of the student research training project.

12.1. Introduction: The students’ research training project at Rawabogo village, and the adjacent devotional shrine of Nagara Padang

As part of their programme on aspects of Indonesian society, culture and spirituality, around 1st May, 2010, some 40 students of the Department of Philosophy, Universitas Parahyangan (Catholic University) Bandung, accompanied by nearly a dozen members of staff, spend a number of days at the village of Rawabogo, some 25 km South West of the city of Bandung. I visited the site intensively in 2007, at the beginning of the local field-work of my then PhD candidate Stephanus Djunatan, M.A., one of the members of staff involved. Three years later I came back to Bandung in order to supervise the finalisation of the PhD thesis (Djunatan 2011). Since my trip coincided with the study days, I took the opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with the village and its shrine, and of seeing the students and staff in action. The following reflection has been written at the staff’s explicit request.



a



b*



Fig. 12.1 a,b, c. The surroundings of Rawabogo village.

While equipped with all such common yet breath-taking features as the surrounding mountainous landscape and terraced wet paddy fields, and the less common feature of a recently planted pine forest, the truly distinguishing feature² of Rawabogo is that it is the site of an extensive devotional shrine up in the mountains (c. 1600 m above sea level). The shrine's name is Nagara Padang – explained by the guardians, by scholars and by others in various ingenious and mystical

² There are indications that the mountain shrine of Nagara Padang is not unique in Sunda culture but answers to a more general regional type, in which even transregional, possibly transcontinental megalithic themes resonate. However, such an argument would require much further library research before it can be made conclusively. Meanwhile, my suggestion is prompted by the following titles: Pleyte 1905b (*cf.* 1905c); de Quant 1899; Roxas-Lim 1983; van Tricht 1932. Given the very limited scope and purpose of this chapter's argument, I will dodge the obligation of situating it against the background of the very rich literature on the religion of Java and of Indonesia in general, but *cf.* Geertz 1969 / 1960; Beatty 2003 / 1999, and references cited there.

ways, but probably with the original meaning, in the Sunda language of West Java,³ of 'Realm (*Nagara*) of Splendour (*Padang*)', or 'Realm of Rice-eating' (as if it is some mythical Land of Cocaygne, of unending abundance). The shrine's six guardians live down in the valley. The two principal ones (father and son) are informal community leaders in Rawabogo, where their personal dwellings also accommodate pilgrims who come to the shrine. The shrine itself belongs to an area gazetted as a National Park, and its official entrance gate can only be passed during office hours. Although pilgrims have been known to be taken up in their ordinary clothing, the ideal outfit for the pilgrim is a uniform, consisting of a loosely fitting black costume and a variegated grey headscarf (for the men), or a white top, dark *sarong* wrapper or trousers, and a variegated brown headscarf (for the women). Apparently the existence of the shrine has given rise to an entire industry dedicated to the renting and (after each individual use) cleaning of such uniforms. The overall signature of the shrine's cult is Islamic, and formal (if sometimes garbled) Islamic prayers and songs mark the beginning, the various successive stages, and the end, of the pilgrimage; appropriately also, the only building to be found at the shrine, just inside the entrance gate, is a small mosque.

12.2. Nagara Padang as a layered palimpsest of religious forms deriving from the well-known succession of world religions in the Indonesian archipelago, but also with the suggestion of older religious forms, notably megalithic ones

Meanwhile, as in many forms of Indonesian popular religion, the devotional idiom proffered at Nagara Padang is internally layered, and implicit Hindu, Buddhist, and local Sunda (apparently also including megalithic)⁴ elements may be identified in addition to the Islamic ones. In fact, the format and purpose of the shrine is perhaps best characterised by saying that it is a natural, *i.e.* non-man-made, counterpart of Borobudur. The latter devotional shrine in Central Java,

³ Hardjadibrata 2003; Rigg 2009 / 1862.

⁴ In 2010, a small *menhir* (slender elongated rock which human hands have placed in an upright position) could be found at the top plateau of the shrine, in front of the place where the offerings had been laid out in anticipation of the *slamatan* communal meal. As a large number of available photographs by Messrs Henri Ismael and F.X. Bambang Kristiatmo Subowo, and myself, indicate, in support of my personal recollection, this rock was there in 2007. An extensive literature deals with the megalithic aspects of Indonesian, and especially West Javanese, cultures, which are thus *potentially* implicated in what some comparative ethnologists, and archaeologists, have considered to be a near-global, seaborne network of megalithic cultural forms encompassing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, parts of the Eastern Pacific, the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, *etc.* The continuity between these megalithic forms throughout the Old World was a widely accepted idea among specialists in the first half of the 20th century. More recent trends frown on all such transcontinental continuities and on the implied 'diffusionist' explanations of such continuity, and deny that one, near-globally distributed, 'megalithic culture' exists at all. My personal conviction is that the older views, although currently counter-paradigmatic, are more correct.

with its dazzlingly lavish decoration in the form of Buddhist sculpture, is not in the first place a depiction of the Buddha's life and earlier incarnations but especially a protracted pious lesson, in sculpture, portraying a Buddhist pilgrim's progress through the phases of life and knowledge, towards ultimate illumination – and, as we shall see, the same pious representation of the challenges of individual life dominates such local meanings as guardians, pilgrims, and locals currently project onto the site of Nagara Padang. Distantly comparable is procession through the Stations of the Cross, as depicted on the interior walls of most Roman Catholic Churches, both in commemoration of the Passion of Christ, and as devotional inspiration for the individual worshipper.



Fig. 12.2. Duly uniformed students and staff listen to Islamic songs before setting out on the pilgrimage.

At Nagara Padang, there are virtually no images shaped by human hands. Instead, salient aspects of the natural rocky landscape – a narrow passage, a set of cliffs, a steep ascent, a jutting rock *etc.*, – have been named and thus made the objects of human pious projections; subsequently they have been joined, primarily by generations of guardians, into a coherent mental map of the spiritual realm of Nagara Padang.⁵

⁵ Such naming is not unique to Nagara Padang. On several occasions I have visited underground limestone caves of Belgium, the largest of which (*e.g.* at Han and Remouchamps) have been opened to the public under the tutelage of local guardians – mere civil servants without any spiritual connotations. While these guardians conduct the visitors through the darkness, from room to room, they call out the names they have given to the natural formations of stalactite and stalagmite (the result of thousands of years of dripping and evaporation of drops of water in which a small quantity of limestone is dissolved, leaving a microscopic sediment): 'Look, ladies and gentlemen, here we see a ham hanging from the ceiling, and there is the image of the Madonna', *etc.*

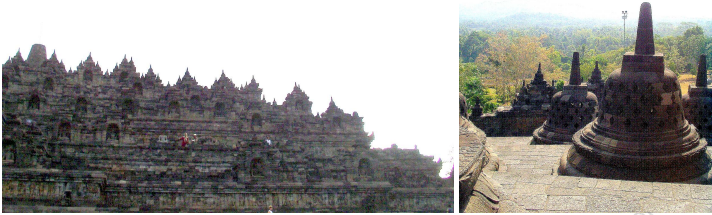


Fig. 12.3a-b. The Borobudur devotional shrine in Central Java.



Fig. 12.4a-b. The menhir at the top of Nagara Padang.



Fig. 12.5.** Another apparent menhir (but with almost industrial geometry!) allegedly bearing the thumb imprint of the Mystical King; as part of the pilgrimage rite, a pilgrim's thumb is pressed onto the same spot so as to convey the Mystical King's blessings.



Another way in which the rock face plays a role at Nagara Padang: as part of the pilgrimage rite, the rock is ground so as to produce a blessing-conveying powder to be applied to the pilgrim's face and body. If this type of practice is found elsewhere in the Old World (something on which I have no information), it might leave sufficient archaeological traces to make comparative study possible. Note the hands of the junior guardian and an assistant, holding an offering of red incense sticks.

Fig. 12.6. Rock powder in the pilgrimage rite.



12.7.a (please turn over)



At the very highest point of the pilgrimage path, overlooking the surrounding mountain tops and all the way to the Indian Ocean some 50 km to the South, the pilgrim is to balance himself or herself against a jutting rock, high above the surroundings, without much physical support, forced to overcome inevitable fear by total spiritual surrender. In the process, the back of the head is placed in a large cupmark that was once made in the vertical rock. It is as if the pilgrim's head is placed in a pre-existing mould in the rock face, *cf.* the thumb imprint in the menhir, Fig. 12.5. Clearly, the pilgrim's body is used to re-model his or her existence according to an elaborate spiritual model handed down by the guardian.

Fig. 12.7.a-b-c.** The mystical vision.



a

b



c



d



e**



f



g



h

i

It is my impression (but this may be partly due to selective attention on my part – more than an archaeologist I have been a specialist in ritual) that these cupmarks are particularly conspicuous at those stages in the pilgrimage path that are singled out for ritual attention: prayer, burning of incense (or of cigarettes as a smoke offering), deposition of flowers, application of perfume; if this impression could be substantiated, it would indicate a continuity in ritual attention across one or more millennia. I am offering only a selection of the site's cupmarks. Possibly some of these cupmarks have a strictly natural origin in erosion of the rock face, but others would appear to be strikingly artificial *i.e.* man-made. Comparative research throughout the Old World has revealed that cupmarks have been a very widespread phenomenon in space and time ever since the Middle Palaeolithic, but that they are particularly associated with Bronze Age megalithic expressions.⁶ While the patterns formed by cupmarks have given rise to wildly divergent interpretations (and while there is no reason to suggest that all the numerous instances of cupmark arrangements follow a similar logic or semantics) archaeologists tend to interpret cup marks, much like other prehistoric granulation patterns, as expressions of natural or supernatural potency.⁷ Note the Hindu / Buddhist signature of the offerings in Fig. 8d, and of the hand gestures in Fig. 8e. Also note the modern literate graffiti in Fig. 12.8 f, and the extensive red paint in Fig. 12.8h (human application of red ochre, likewise a very widespread phenomenon since the Middle Palaeolithic, is

⁶ Cf.: Anonymous [Jennings, Hargrove], 1891; Bednarik 1993; Burgess 1990; Dukinfield Astley 1911; Kumar 1996; Morris 1989; Morris & Milburn 1977; Noy 1979; Tacon *et al.* 1997; van Binsbergen with Lacroix 2000 and forthcoming; Younker 1985. This distribution across the millennia is another indication – along with indications in the fields of musical instruments, symbolic thought, symbolic markings, and perhaps mythology – for much greater continuity between the cultures of Anatomically Modern Humans and those of their predecessors in the old World, the Neanderthaloids, than is suggested by the now somewhat discarded expression Human Revolution (used for Anatomically Modern Humans' achievements in the Upper Palaeolithic; cf. d'Errico *et al.* 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2003; Bednarik 1999).

⁷ Cf. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988; Dowson 1989 (incidentally suggestive of geomantic symbolism); Anati 1981; Garlake 1990; also cf. my *The Reality of Religion* (in press). Over the past two decades, I have made a worldwide comparative study of one particular instance of granulation: leopard-skin symbolism, in which context many of the general themes of granulation emerge; cf. van Binsbergen 2004a, in press (e), and below, p. 554 f.

similarly interpreted in terms of potency). In Fig. 8c the unmistakable cupmarks are no longer conspicuous at the present image resolution, and therefore I highlighted them by white circles in the picture. Finally note that the sequence of rocks at the general public space that forms the centre of the devotional site (Fig. 8e), resembles a megalithic structure notably a corridor grave.

Fig. 12.8.a-i. Cupmarks abound at the devotional shrine of Nagara Padang.

Megaliths have a near-global distribution (Fig. 12.9), which can be appreciated even if we keep our distance from the debate, now waged for nearly two centuries, as to whether or not the many different regional megalithic practices belong to one global complex or whether the similarities between the many local manifestations are merely superficial and reveal no underlying generic unity.



(source: van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 378, Fig. 28.14, with extensive references).

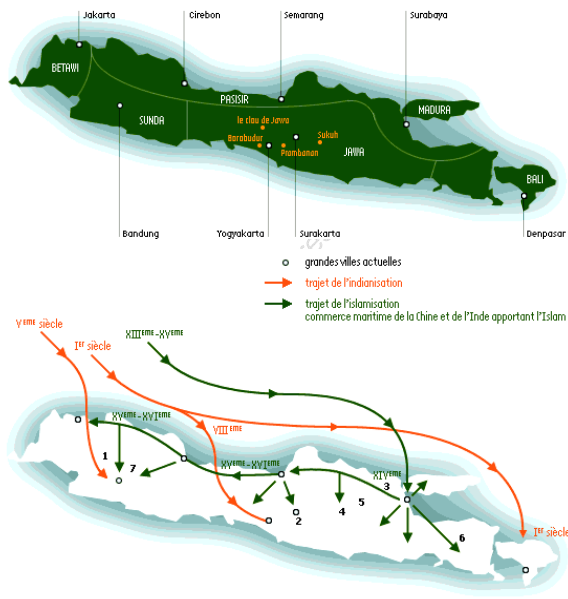
Fig. 12.9. Global distribution of megalithic structures and practices.

The arrival of Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist influence in the isle of Java has been studied in detail in an extensive literature. West Java was relatively late to undergo Indianisation (from the 5th century CE on) and Islamisation (from the 15th century on). Buddhism on Java developed in close association with continental South East Asia in the second half of the 1st millennium CE. These dates match fairly well those proposed by Djunatan in his study of the site (Djunatan 2011). Further continuities may be found, at Nagara Padang, with religious complexes that are much older and have a much larger geographical distribution:

- the Indonesian megalithic complex (cupmarks, dolmen), and its Old World associations
- the cult of the earth as reflected in shrine cults with their tree and spring associations,
- an initiatory complex expressed through ritual rebirth from a narrow rock crevice.⁸

⁸ Another possibly prehistoric element at Nagara Padang is the spiral, which in Djunatan's analysis underlies the entire worldview conveyed by the spiritual instructions at the site, although locally there are no conspicuous representations of spirals on the rock face. Spirals have been prominent in rock art ever since the Upper Palaeolithic. The handicap in the interpretation of Palaeolithic signs is obviously that there is

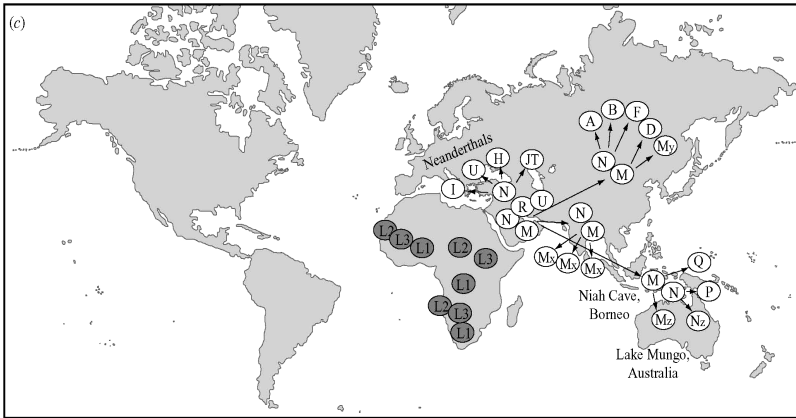
While these proposed three older complexes are so old that documentary sources on their interpretation are totally absent, yet we are not completely at a loss as to their place in cultural (pre-)history. Molecular biology has established the origin of Anatomically Modern Humans in Africa, c. 200 ka BP, and the Out-of-Africa from c. 60 ka BP – with early ramifications into South East Asia, attested at the Niah Cave in North Western Borneo. Of course, connections with the rest of the Old World were facilitated by the fact that, until the rise of the global ocean level by 200 metres at the onset of the Holocene (10 ka BP), insular South East Asia did not exist as such but was an integral part of the South East Asian subcontinent. On top of this Upper Palaeolithic continuity, the last few millennia BCE major migrations brought people and cultures from South China and South Asia into the Indonesian archipelago.



small circles: present-day large towns; red / grey arrows: trajectory of Indianisation; green / black arrows: trajet of Islamisation, with seaborne trade from China and India bringing Islam; I, V, XIII etc.: centuries CE); source: Basset n.d., with thanks

Fig. 12.10. Indianisation and Islamisation of Java

no accompanying text from that period to explain them, yet specialist are increasingly inclined to believe that such interpretation is not beyond our present-day reach. The spiral is often understood as an evocation of a temporal process, in which change and constancy are combined – as in the physical and spiritual growth of a human person. This is also how the spiral features in the context of Nagara Padang, according to Djunatan.



The spread of the mitochondrial DNA haplo group M, Middle to Early Upper Palaeolithic (Forster 2004); The haplo groups M and N were the first of Anatomically Modern Humans to venture 'Out of Africa' – all other haplo groups (except the original inside-Africa L groups) descending from them. By the end of the period highlighted in this figure, Anatomically Modern Humans had not yet spread (across Beringia, and with the haplo groups here shown for North-eastern Asia) into the New World.

Fig. 12.11. Long-range continuities between the population of West Java and the rest of the Old World.

At Nagara Padang,⁹ megalithic, i.e. (presumably) Bronze Age elements (menhir, cup-marks), and presumably Palaeolithic elements (the cult of tree and spring, and the initiatory crevices) feature explicitly, and prominently (through prayers, offerings and other rites) as institutionalised stations in the pilgrimage path as directed and ritually articulated by the shrine guardian who on the surface represents a syncretistic, Sundanese form of Islam, notably popular Sufism. This strongly suggests that what we have in Nagara Padang, is a case of one of the best known principles in comparative religion: *the continuity of cult places across several millennia and more*. The rocky area of Nagara Padang, slightly reworked by human action (as in the structures around the entrance, see Fig. 12.28 below, and perhaps in the proposed megalithic corridor grave, see Fig. 12.8e), but especially subjected to signification and symbolisation by the complex pious narrative projected onto the stations along the pilgrimage path, is probably best regarded as a religious palimpsest,

- whose oldest local form harks back to the Upper Palaeolithic (and reflecting other primal cult places of Anatomically Modern Humans in the first phases of their expansion out of Africa) – the initiatory crevices, the cult of tree and spring
- on which were much later superimposed megalithic / Bronze Age forms (cup-

⁹ Not unlike the situation I found at various sites in Sri Lanka, cf. van Binsbergen 2010c.

marks, menhir(s), perhaps a corridor grave) in continuity with continental South and East Asia

- after which the site (and its various Palaeolithic and Bronze Age stations and practices) was appropriated by Hinduism / Buddhism in the first millennium of the Common Era, and reinterpreted in terms commensurate with those, closely related, world religion, whilst loosely incorporating the earlier forms
- finally to be appropriated, from about half a millennium ago as far as West Java is concerned, by Islam – relegating all the older layers and their manifestations, to a heterogeneous complex of ‘Sundanese syncretism’ with not only Hindu-Buddhist but also ‘animistic’ (*i.e.* local Palaeolithic and Bronze Age) elements.

In at least three places, as widely apart as Malawi (the Kapirinthiwa hill near Lilongwe), Cameroon (the sanctuary of Fovu among the Baham, Western Grassfields),¹⁰ and Uganda, somewhat similar, symbolically and cultically charged rock formations may be found, especially associated with the idea of the emergence of the first people from the earth or their descent from heaven. The cults of tree and spring are found all over the globe and may be considered of very great antiquity. In my work on comparative mythology (2006a, 2006b, 2010a, 2010g, 2012d) I have developed an ‘Aggregative Diachronic Model’ of global mythology, which defines a few dozen basic ‘Narrative Complexes’, and traces their emergence and distribution in space and time. On this basis I argued that it is possible to suggest the mythological contents of ‘Pandora’s Box’, *i.e.* the cultural package that was developed inside Africa ever since the emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans, and that was subsequently transmitted, transformed, and served as basis for further innovations, all over the world, from c. 60,000 years ago onward. Among these primal mythological ‘narrative complexes’ feature ‘From the Tree’ (the entire world, and all of humankind, derive from a primal tree), ‘the Primal Waters’ (the entire world, and all of humankind, derive from the primal waters, of which every sea, river, stream and lake may be considered an epiphany), and ‘From the earth (all of humankind derive from primal beings that emerged from the earth).

Having tested out and improved this model over the past decade, I have found it inferior to Witzel’s 2012, yet sufficiently reliable to serve for the systematic interpretation and provisional dating of prehistoric data. It is on this basis that I consider the manifestations of an Earth, Tree and Spring cult at Nagara Padang to go back to Middle Palaeolithic if not older origins although (given Anatomically Modern Humans unimpeded inroads into what is now Indonesia prior to its inundation at the onset of the Holocene) its emergence is not necessarily to be located in this particular corner of the Old World.

The superposition and geographical distribution of the various layers of this palimpsest is set out in Fig. 12.12.

¹⁰ Illustration at: van Binsbergen 2006c.

Despite the particular nature of Nagara Padang as an almost totally natural, mountainous devotional shrine, this layered sequence is far from unique to Nagara Padang – I have already indicated various parallels from within Sundanese West Java, but in fact the sequence is so common to the whole of Indonesia that we can find a parallel description of it, in rather similar words, in an authoritative description of Balinese cultural history (Goris & Dronkers n.d.).

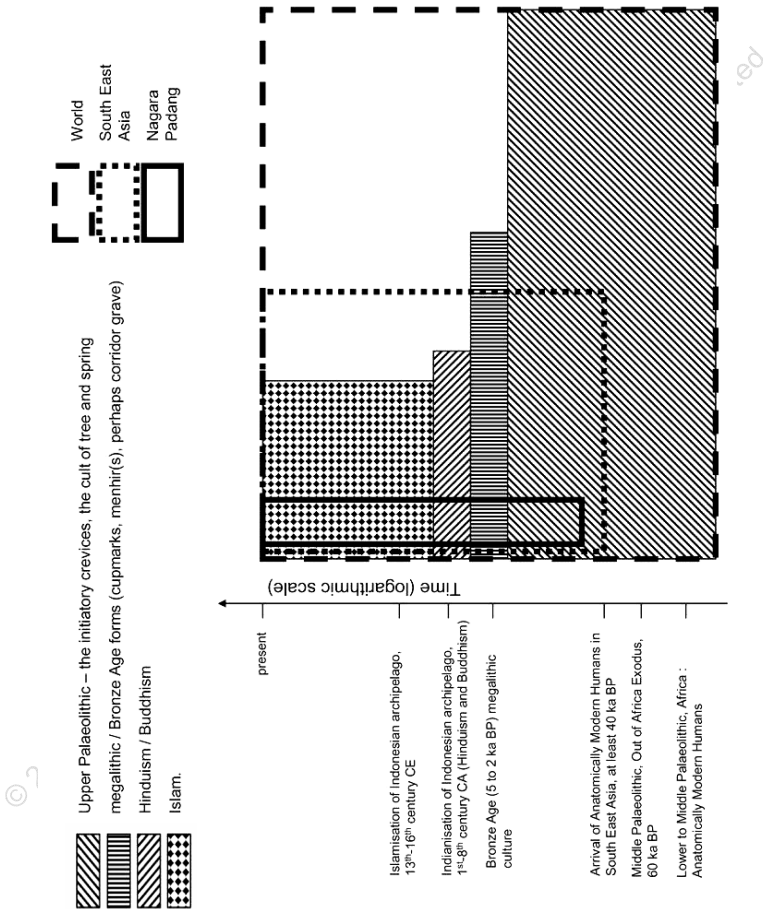


Fig. 12.12. Schematic representation of the layered composition of the religious system obtaining at Nagara Padang, and its proposed periodisation.

12.3. 'The pilgrim's progress'¹¹



Fig. 12.13 a-b*. Students trying on the shrine cult's uniforms.



Fig. 12.14.* Pilgrims (students, staff and villagers) setting out for the shrine, led by the junior guardian (front right).

¹¹ Cf. Bunyan 1909 / 1678.



Fig. 12.15 a-b.* Rebirth through a narrow rock crevice, a pilgrimage station that suggests that the ritual site of Nagara Padang originally goes back to Palaeolithic times.



Fig. 12.16 a-b. Villagers carry offerings and musical instruments up the mountain; note the central egg on the carrier in photograph (a, arrow), reminiscent of the globally wide-spread cosmogonic theme of the world egg.

As said before, the actors' (notably, the guardians') conscious conceptualisation projected onto the landscape in the context of the devotional shrine of Nagara Padang, is that of stages in the individual pilgrims' spiritual progress. Here, four overall stages may be distinguished (list based on: Djunatan 2011):

- a. an Initial Phase, in which a sacred spring and the entrance gate convey a time-honoured and almost universal symbolism of birth and rebirth;
- b. the Phase of Childhood, bringing out such aspects of human growth in infancy and adolescence as are articulated by:
 - i. *Batu Palawangan Ibu*, 'The Rock of the Vaginal Passage';
 - ii. *Batu Paibuan*, 'The Rock of the Motherhood';
 - iii. *Batu Panyipuhan*, 'The Rock of the Formal Education'; and
 - iv. *Batu Poponcoran* 'The Passage of Initiation to Adulthood';
- c. the Phase of Adulthood, bringing out such aspects of human growth in mature secular life as are articulated by:
 - v. *Batu Kaca Saadeg* 'The Rocks of Self-awareness';
 - vi. *Batu Gedong Peteng* 'The Rocks of the Dark Cave';
 - vii. *Batu Karaton* 'The Rocks of the Palace' (at this point the imagery of the palace and the royal administration becomes particularly prominent); and
 - viii. *Batu Kuta rungu* 'The Rocks of the Ear', which is already geared to an ulterior concern of wisdom beyond the exigencies of society, and leads on to
- d. the Phase of the Sage, bringing out the culmination of human growth in wisdom as articulated by:
 - ix. *Batu Masjid Agung* 'The Rock of the Mosque of Majesty';
 - x. *Batu Bumi Agung* 'The Rock of Glorious Earth';
 - xi. *Batu Korsi Gading* 'The Rock of the Ivory Throne';
 - xii. *Pakuwon Eyang Prabu Silihwangi* 'The Rock of Eyang Prabu Silihwangi' (the legendary king – 12th century AD – who allegedly became a hermit and thus founded the shrine); the shrine seems considered to consist of his and his retinue's bodies turned to stone (du Perron 1959: VII, 341 f.).
 - xiii. *Batu Lawang Tujuh* 'The Rock of the Seven Doors';
 - xiv. *Batu Padaringan* 'The Rock of the Rice Barn' (cf. the above explanation of the name of Nagara Padang), also known – by a more explicitly Islamic interpretation¹² – as 'the Array of the Twenty-Five Prophets'; and
 - xv. *Puncak Manik* 'The Rock of the Summit of the Light'.

The shrine guardian instructs the pilgrims on their pilgrimage, so that it may become a road to wisdom. Such instruction begins in the valley, but is especially dished out from station to station, in the course of the pious peregrination through the shrine area – where each named station is marked by the guardian's specific attention, through small offerings (incense, cigarette smoke, flowers), prayer, and instruction.

¹² The Prophet Muhammad is reputed (*Hadith* 21257, in response to a question posed by Abu Dharr) to have said that there have been 124,000 prophets; only 25 of these, however, have been mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and thus 'the Twenty-Five Prophets' has become an established Islamic concept.



Fig. 12.17 a-b. The junior shrine guardian engaged in pious instruction, and in ritual marking a specific station of the pilgrimage: the entrance to the sacred precinct.

For the individual pilgrim, the summit of the pilgrimage experience may well be when, at the station marked d.xv in the above list (*Puncak Manik* ‘The Rock of the Summit of the Light’), he or she is taken to the highest top and there has to balance himself dangerously and in total submission (and trust *vis-à-vis* the guardian) on a jutting ledge, as the highest point between Heaven and Earth.

However, having completed the pilgrimage with only a handful of people in 2007, in our ordinary clothes, the 2010 experience made me aware of aspects that had so far escaped me. The more recent pilgrimage in the course of the Departmental study days was massive, involving not only dozens of students and their lecturers, all in pilgrim’s uniform, but also a few dozen villagers (similarly attired) from Rawabogo: elders, musicians / singers carrying their musical instrument, and others who carried the elaborately prepared food, fruits and flowers for the *slamatan* (sacrificial meal) that we were to have at the extended plateau near the top. It is here, collectively at the top, rather than individually in the culmination at the *Rock of the Summit of the Light*, that our pilgrimage reached its actual culmination, adding one extra, social, phase to the near-ecstatic individual experience.



Fig. 12.18. Silent prayer before the *slamatan*.

12.4. A comparative and theoretical perspective on shrine cults



Fig. 12.19. The shrine of Sidi Mhammad Sr, N.W. Tunisia, 2002 (*cf.* chapters 1 and 2, above).

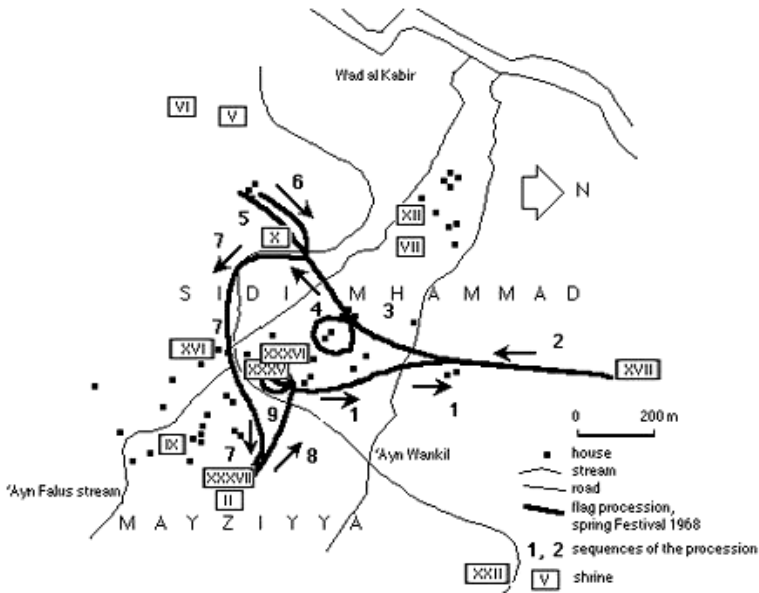


Fig. 12.20. The path of Spring pilgrimage at the shrines of Sidi Mhammad, N.W. Tunisia, 1968.

My earliest field research as a student of popular religion was (1968) on shrine cults in the context of popular Islam in the highlands of North-western Tunisia.¹³ In this context I familiarised myself with the scholarly literature on the comparative study of shrine cults and pilgrimage, making some contributions to that field myself.

Incidentally, also in the shrine cult in the highlands of North-western Tunisia, under the cloak of popular Islam, there is a marked continuity with megalithic cults,¹⁴ which has been duly recognised in the literature on North African saintly cults, and has attracted the attention of archaeologists such as Camps (1961, 1974, 1980, 1982, 1987), a leading author in this field for N.W. Africa. In the valley mapped in Fig. 12.20 alone, over a dozen of shrines may be found in an area scarcely exceeding 2 km². Of these, most have the appearance of rather small megalithic structures – dolmens, such as abound throughout North Africa.

¹³ Cf. *Historic Berber culture: Wim van Binsbergen's (2006d) webpage on ħumiriyya (N.W. Tunisia, North Africa), late 18th – mid-20th century* (<http://www.quest/journal.net-shikanda/Berber/index.htm>), which offers hyperlinked texts of the many scholarly, and some literary, texts I wrote on this topic.

¹⁴ Similarly, continuity between megalithic cults and the present-day Buddhist cult was witnessed in several instances during field-work in Sri Lanka, 2011; cf. van Binsbergen 2010c.



left: Sidi Bu-Qasbaya al-Kabir / Sr (1968); right: *mzara* 'Ain Raml (2002)

Fig. 12.21. a-b. Originally megalithic shrines in the valley of Sidi Mḥammad, 'Ain Drahām, Tunisia.

The invisible saints associated with these structures are considered to be 'our ancestors' (*jadūdna*) by the local population, and they and their megalithic mini-dwellings play an overwhelming role in the religious life of the villagers. Most shrines are situated at major trees that share in the cultic attention, and many shrines are adjacent to sacred springs or to the streams originating in such springs. A cultic attention that goes back, at least in part, to the North African Bronze Age or even Neolithic, thus is incorporated in the popular local forms of a world religion, Islam, that emerged only in the middle of the 1st millenia CE, millennia after the end of the Bronze Age. Again we have a case here of the local continuity of shrine cults across millennia.

Against this reconstructed pre- and protohistorical background, the details of the pilgrimage at Nagara Padang bring out many of the common traits that such specialists as Victor Turner, Richard Werbner, Michael Sallnow, and John Eade¹⁵ have discerned in pilgrimage worldwide:

- the concept of a Centre-Out-There, which invites the pilgrim to leave his everyday state behind and enter the sacred state of the pilgrim – in order to set out on a physical journey along a well-defined path in the real landscape (and by so doing, restructuring – remapping – the landscape into sacred space), as well as on a spiritual, inner journey of transformation and illumination;
- in the process, all social and even biological distinctions and differences between pilgrims become temporarily irrelevant (hence the uniforms) and are wiped out (so that a merging can take place between widely different

¹⁵ Seminal literature on shrines and pilgrimages includes: , 1982 1969; Turner & Turner 1978; Eade & Sallnow 1999; Eickelman 1976; Werbner 1977 (with a chapter contributed by me); Sallnow 1981, 1987; Dubisch 1995; Alcock & Osborn 1994; Farnell 1907; Tyson 1997; Lymer 2004; Ranger 1987; Nthoi 2006; van Binsbergen 1985b, 1976a, the latter two included in this book as chapters 1 and 2.

status categories such as those of students and lecturers; between widely different spheres of life such as those of the poorly educated *desa* dwellers and those of the (largely elite) students from the big city; and even, within the limits of locally defined decency, the socially imposed rigid separation of the genders is temporarily relaxed);

- instead of such differences, the pilgrims establish among themselves a sense of *communitas*: Victor Turner's term for greatly enhanced sociability to the point of the dissolution and merging of individual existences.



Fig. 12.22 a-b*. Offerings (highly reminiscent of Hinduism / Buddhism) at the top plateau, just before the *slamatan*.



Fig. 12.23.* The final greeting ceremony; note the menhir at the centre (arrow).

The sacrificial meal is – at Nagara Padang as well as in very many ritual settings including pilgrimage settings (until recently also in N.W. Tunisia)– the near-universal expression of sociability, where eating together (‘commensality’) is a central occasion to bring out fundamental equality (everyone sits together with everyone else, and the portions – dished out in sets of four – are meticulously prepared so as to be equal); moreover, the act of eating reminds the pilgrims of such equality and identity as is implied in the fact that they all possess a human body with by and large the same functions, needs and limitations. Of all human activities, articulate language is the one that is most based on the sustained articulation of complex difference (the differences between phonemes, and those between other parts of speech); therefore, the *silent* prayer before the group sets out for the pilgrimage, and the *silent* prayer before the final sacrificial meal, are also eminent manifestations of *communitas*.



Fig. 12.24. The fenced sacred spring at the entrance to the sacred precinct of Nagara Padang.



Throughout the Old World, shrine cults centring on man-made shrines (even if only slightly remodelled after the original natural layout, as in Nagara Padang) tend to be closely associated with the cult of such striking natural features of the landscape as (large) trees and springs. Textile offerings to sacred trees, usually in the form of narrow strips / rags torn from human clothing, are ubiquitous in South Asia (I observed them repeatedly during my 2011 field-work in Sri Lanka), South East Asia, Central Asia, North Africa, and in fact throughout the Old World. Also at Nagara Padang, the pilgrimage path features a sacred spring

Fig. 12.25. Shreds / rags torn from human clothes tied to a branch near the top of the Nagara Padang devotional shrine.

An eminent manifestation of *communitas* is also the music which the village's musical specialists perform before, during and after the *slamatan*: admittedly, not all pilgrims participate in the music (as they might have done if it were communal singing), and the exquisite traditional Sunda music performed on this occasion (a specimen of which I posted at YouTube: <https://youtu.be/iNwtqNyjbZs>) is certainly not what most student pilgrims would daily play on their MP3 players, yet the music, with its reticent charm and many repetitions, casts a lubricating at-

mosphere of non-verbality over what remains (or what, during and after the meal, re-emerges) of the pilgrims' diversity. This is the case, even though in this case most students chose to emphatically deny the musicians their attention, and went on chatting and joking as if (in the best South Asian tradition) they were a privileged aristocratic audience disdainfully entertained by low-class musical entertainers.



Fig. 12.26. The musicians taking a break during the 2010 pilgrimage at Nagara Padang.

During the 2010 pilgrimage at Nagara Padang, the final celebration of *communitas* occurred when, after the meal and the music, all pilgrims were lined up in a circle, which subsequently, via a hairpin bend, doubled into itself and rolled itself off into a spiral,¹⁶ in such a way that each pilgrim would come directly face to face with each other pilgrim, pronouncing greetings and blessings, shaking both hands, and bringing both hands back to one's shoulders in a comprehensive gesture of incorporation and affirmation. After that culmination of *communitas*, the group of pilgrims breaks up and everyone stumbles down, individually, and without any further pious admonitions, not along the wide and gradual path where the upward part of the pilgrimage had been made, but (as if to drive home the spiritual transformation that the pilgrimage is to have brought about) along the different, and unexpectedly narrow and steep, path down the mountain slopes back to the entrance gate, and so further back to the lodge, where the pilgrim's uniform is rapidly shed, and where – in this case – preparation for the festive final evening of the study days is resumed in full swing.

¹⁶ Cf. my above remarks on spirals, at Nagara Padang and world-wide. Also cf. the path in Fig. 12.20?



Fig. 12.27. The junior shrine guardian in his living room.

This is not the place to dwell on, and seek explanation for, the many parallels between the pilgrimage rites in the mountains of North-western Tunisia, and those at Nagara Padang¹⁷ – separated by more than 10,000 kms, and enacted in greatly different language contexts (the Austronesian linguistic macrophylum of Bahasa Indonesia and Sunda, against the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum of Arabic / Semitic, and Berber). These parallels range from the broad overall structure of the pilgrimage as described above for Nagara Padang (but which would also literally apply in the North African case!), to such details as the tying of shreds of textile from human clothing to trees at the shrine, the veneration of a sacred spring and sacred rocks, the collective meal, and certain diffuse megalithic connotations attaching to the shrine. My personal explanation for such uncanny parallels all across the Old World (and many more could be listed, from outside the realm of shrine cults), is in terms of the Extended Pelagian Hypothesis, to be set out in detail in my various monographs now in the press (also *cf.* p. 289 *f.*, above; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011). However, despite these underlying communalities, the overall conscious ('emic') conceptualisation of the shrine by

¹⁷ Again, my 2011 Sri Lankan field-work brings out that there, again, the formal parallels (despite the difference in world religion, Buddhism versus Islam) with North African shrine cults including the continuity with megalithic cults is very striking – somewhat half-way between North Africa and Nagara Padang.

the local actors is rather different: in Nagara Padang we see a heterogeneous combination of nature, megalithic, initiatory, Great Mother / Earth, kingship, agricultural and Qur'anic references whose sole unifying factor is the inclusion in the guardian's pious discourse and in the unified pilgrimage trajectory; in North Africa there is a similar heterogeneity of references, but these have been more effectively brought under the unifying common denominator of popular Islamic saint veneration, which in the eyes of the local actors is all-explanatory, and (until the international rise of Islamism c. 1980 CE) unproblematically continuous with formal Islam.



a



b





a*, c: Enigmatic large prismatic block at one of the final stations of the pilgrimage; b-d. Other manifestations of deliberate human working upon the shrine area: a stone slab with a text, regular stairs, and a reliquary-like or tomb-like concrete structure, also with a text, all marking the entrance to the shrine area proper. For the reader's orientation I have marked the same stoneblock by a white outline on two images. Note the blue butterfly basking in (b)

Fig. 12.28.a-d. Man-made elements at Nagara Padang.

At Nagara Padang, it is not so much saint veneration that bestows sanctity upon the shrine. Admittedly, there is mention of the legendary king / monk, and an implicit notion of Indonesia's legendary Seven *Walis* (Saints) having appropriated and purified the shrine area for Islam, but (contrary to the saintly tombs in North African popular Islam, and elsewhere) there is no explicit physical sign here of such Islamisation, apart from the mosque at the entrance gate, and the claim that, at one point of the pilgrimage trajectory, a particular indentation on a rock slab represents the Muslim *kopiah* cap. In addition to the prism-shaped saintly graves, other similarly shaped objects tend to play an important role in the saint veneration in the popular Islam of Western Asia and North Africa: sacred chests or boxes (*zenduq*) containing sacred flags, incense and candles. In this respect it is remarkable that one of the few apparently man-made objects at the Nagara Padang shrine is a large (c. 2,5 m.) prismatic block, about which however I could not gather the guardian's explanation.

12.5. Conclusion: *Communitas* during the students' research training at Rawabogo

The UNPAR staff and students may have been largely unaware of this systematic, comparative background to their pilgrimage experience. Moreover, many students,

especially during the later stages of the pilgrimage, were somewhat distracted and were allowed to retreat into enhanced attention for each other and for their mobile telephones and cameras. Yet this near-universal structure of pilgrimage may not have failed to leave its mental and emotional imprint on all participants. Their temporary *communitas* with the villagers during the pilgrimage, was tested and renewed during the following evening, when students and villagers alternately performed before several hundreds of people. Then roars of appreciative laughter from the predominantly *desa* audience in response to the students' sketches brought out the fact that the mutual accommodation between these two life worlds was not merely an illusion – not just an ephemeral artefact of the pilgrimage situation, nor left behind on the top of the mountain.



Fig. 12.29: (a). Students performing before the villagers, and (b) their audience.

As a total stranger to nearly all participants in this pilgrimage, I was greatly privileged to be allowed into the *communitas* that the pilgrimage brought about, to partake of the food and the blessing, to enjoy the music, and to see how many students were fascinated and moved at least at certain points in the process. I cannot judge to what extent the experience touched the hearts of the UNPAR participants. I hardly had the opportunity to specifically interview the students, yet spend the entire pilgrimage day and night in their midst. After the pilgrimage I spoke at length with the members of staff and there – during our meals and at the pilgrims' hostel – encountered the lingering sense of *communitas* that had characterised our journey up the mountain, but (perhaps not by accident) we spoke of other topics than the pilgrimage and the popular religion that sets its scene. And even at the top, during the sacrificial meal, *communitas* was not total – as is clear from the fact that, whereas the standard number of pilgrims eating together should be four in the Nagara Padang context, one group could only muster three members, and when these had nearly finished eating, one of the other pilgrims approached them and in one sentence re-imposed difference and destroyed *communitas*: 'Look who are seated here together', he said, '*orang dajak, orang cina, orang belanda*' – 'a Dajak, a Chinese, and a Dutchman...'



'A Dajak, a Chinese, and a Dutchman' – left: I myself – in other words, by attributing these ethnic labels of exclusion during the ritual, the pilgrims are emphatically conscious of less than total communitas.

Fig. 12.30.* *Orang dajak, orang cina, orang belanda...*



Fig. 12.31.* No study days without a formal certificate.

I have seen the students greet the local elders and villagers with considerable respect (although some remained standing, condescendingly stooping towards

the seated elder), and their stage jokes obviously registered with the audience during the concluding festive evening. Yet I have seen little evidence of an actual *encounter* between students and villagers, in the sense of acting together on a common task, engaging in conversation, or attentively listening to each other's music. No doubt, as much as possible was brought about of a meeting between what are in many respects the extreme opposites of Indonesian culture in Java today. The students were brought, albeit only for a very limited period, in close proximity with the life of the *desa* and with its popular spirituality, in a format where it was very clear that their lecturers (their academic role models) took these rural and traditional forms very seriously and accorded them great respect but without identifying with them.



Fig. 12.32.* Learning in and from the *desa*.

To counterbalance the urban culture of digital gadgets, fashion and consumerism to which modern life in Bandung inevitably exposes the students, this must have been a very valuable experience to the students, for which the Department of Philosophy and UNPAR as a whole deserve great praise. The respectful approach to local popular religion in undergraduate teaching, based – as in this case – on the staff's detailed participatory research and prolonged, trustful relations with the local community, is one of the ways in which we can partake of traditional wisdom. Through such wisdom we may be able to re-source our lives and our communities, and to reconstruct them after the devastating crisis of meaning

brought about by modernity.¹⁸



Fig. 12.33.* Greeting the senior shrine guardian in front of his house.

¹⁸ A week after our return from Nagara Padang I was privileged to address the staff of the Philosophy Department, UNPAR, on: 'The crisis of meaning under conditions of globalisation, urbanisation and commodification, and the reconsideration of traditional wisdom approaches as a possible way out' – largely reiterating my more general argument on wisdom: van Binsbergen 2009b, 2015, but greatly inspired by our experiences at Nagara Padang.

