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**INDONESIA'S OWN 'PYRAMID':
THE IMAGINED PAST AND NATIONALISM OF GUNUNG PADANG**

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ABSTRACT

A narrative commonly found within the discourse of nationalist archaeology is the polemic of ideology at the expense of empiricism. There are many examples of the manipulation of archaeological data in the service of the state's nationalist or imperialist ideology, and such efforts produce narratives in which archaeology is treated as inherently apolitical. This paper explores the interactions between and within multiple stakeholders –the state, archaeologists, and the media – and their roles in the construction of national myths, and their consequences for local populations. It highlights recent controversies surrounding the re-interpretation of the megalithic site of Gunung Padang in Western Java, Indonesia. The case of Gunung Padang offers an opportunity to observe how national myths are both constructed and contested in recent times. This paper argues that the intersections between archaeology and popular media contributed to a skewed understanding of the past and generated specific categories of acceptable national myths which, in turn, directed nationalistic research.

KEYWORDS: archaeology, narratives, nationalism, myths, Gunung Padang

INTRODUCTION¹

Nationalism is a political project which adopts as its core principle that a political unit must be organized around a shared identity (Anderson 1983; Hobswam and Kertzner1992; Breuilly 1985). When adopted as the primary principle around which states are organized, nationalism is often used as an ideology which validates the deployment of state power. State nationalism are

¹ The draft version of this article was presented at the "Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference", organized by Association of Asian Studies, 21 – 24 March 2019 in Denver-Colorado, and never been published before.

typically expressed in ethno-linguistic terms and operates by creating a sense of membership around these terms while deploying policies to the benefit of a particular group. While nationalism is a particularly modern phenomenon, it relies on the past for a narrative of authenticity; nationalism is often conceived as inherited – that the organization of the people within these national terms has long roots in the past and the right to power is based upon tradition (Thomas 2004). As a result, academic disciplines that are involved in the production of the past such as archaeology are strongly linked to nationalist politics (Diaz-Andreu 2007). In recent years, archaeologists have begun to examine how the practice of archaeology is entrenched within nationalist politics (Kohl et al. 2007; Kohl and Fawcett 1995). Scholars are often critical of nationalistic practices in archaeology, citing how nationalist ideologies compromise the objectivity of archaeological research by determining and limiting the kinds of research questions being asked (Kohl and Tsetsckhladze 1995; Trigger 1995). However, national ideologies are rarely static, the way in which nationalist archaeology operates within the context of shifting and contested nationalisms is currently understudied.

By examining the archaeological research that took place at the site of Gunung Padang in West Java between 2011-2014, the authors investigate how multiple and competing interpretations of nationalisms are contended through scientific, archaeological discourse. Indonesia provides an interesting case to observe how nationalism and archaeology relate to each other. As a post-colonial state without a historical correlate, the modern Indonesian identity was constructed to be multi-national while being homogenous at the same time. The assertion of homogeneity through a single national identity is especially problematic given Indonesia's culturally and linguistically diverse population, who often feel neglected by the central government's development policies (Anderson 1999). The construction of a modern Indonesian identity through the notion of a pan-Indonesian past is thus incompatible with the modern Indonesian project. Still, numerous political figures throughout the history of Indonesia have used the past to argue for a single, national identity. As a result, archaeological practice in Indonesia is often steered by varying degrees of nationalist politics, which has led to mismanagements of heritage sites and real detrimental impact to local tourist economy.

This study employs the literature research method in exploring and collecting various data about the Gunung Padang Site, from discoveries to the controversies that surrounding the site in 2011 - 2014. The main data sources are not only from the scientific publications, but also publications that has been published by various mass media. This is because this paper will also examine how the media construct people's understanding of Gunung Padang Site, and how the myths play an important role in shaping people's mindset.

SHIFTING NATIONALISM AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN INDONESIA

As an emergent post-colonial state, the Indonesian national identity was largely a construct of a collective anti-colonial stance borne in the early 20th century. Construed in modern terms, the Indonesian identity was rationalized as a common nation-building project towards a shared economic independence from the West by Soekarno, Indonesia's first president. Despite the new national identity being marketed as a vision for the future, the Soekarno regime still relied on claims of the pre-colonial past to legitimize the newly formed government. Pre-colonial empires such as Sriwijaya and Majapahit, known only from fragmentary evidence at this point, were aggrandized and often cited as great pre-cursors to the Indonesian nation (Manguin 2000; Reid 1979; 2011). Reconstruction projects of the Hindu *candis* at Prambanan in the 1950s were aimed at elevating Classic period monuments as national symbols, which, along with Borobudur stood for a great Indonesian past and a great potential for Indonesia's future. However, the use of culturally specific, religious monuments as national symbols was problematic. To what end can Hindu-Buddhist monuments be salient national symbols to Muslims? How can Javanese temples be meaningful to the Acehnese and Papuans? The contradiction apparent in the deployment of pre-colonial monuments as national symbols is analogous to the fragile nature of the emergent Indonesian identity which straddled pluralism and nationalism only precariously.

For the past to be meaningful, it had to be decontextualized. Prince Diponegoro, a 19th century anti-colonial rebel whose political motivation was strictly local, was reimagined as an early leader of the Indonesian independence movement (Anderson 1999: 1). The Hindu-Buddhist *candis* were stripped of their religious meaning and were reinvented as national monuments through a series of speeches which argued for the temples to be seen as material and, more importantly, spiritual heritage (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 2011: 410). These *candis* were used as a marker for an Indonesian "golden-age", a time in which the Indonesian civilizations were building monumental architectures. The deployment of Prambanan and Borobudur as national symbols complemented Soekarno's urban construction projects. Named *proyek mercusuar* (the lighthouse project), this project was aimed at modernizing Jakarta through a series of communication and urban infrastructure construction in the 1960s (Barker 2005). Among the buildings commissioned for *proyek mercusuar* was a new, state of the art, multi-sports stadium, and the *Monumen Nasional* (national monument), a 400-ft tower topped with a gilded bronze flame symbolizing Indonesia's struggle for independence. The use of buildings as national symbols characterized Soekarno's political strategy, which was aimed to "dispel the aura of alienness from the institution of modern government" (Geertz 1973: 317). These construction projects were wrapped around the ideology of *pembangunan* (development), in which the construction of urban infrastructure was construed as a metaphor for the construction of the Indonesian national character.

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Among the “spiritual heritage” that was appropriated from the past is the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity), which became the national motto of the Indonesian state. The phrase was lifted off the *Kakawin Sutasoma*, a 14th century poem written during the Majapahit era in Old Javanese. Similar sentiment is also found in *Pancasila*, the five philosophical tenets that form the basis of Indonesian governance, which Soekarno claimed to have “dug from the ground” (Kroef 1968: 246). These philosophies mandate that Indonesia is inherently pluralist in character, turning a polemic into an inherent quality of the nation and are often deployed to combat dissent stemming from ethnic and religious differences (Djuli and Jereski 2002). Similarly, the *nusantara* concept, which was found in the 14th century Majapahit texts of *Kitab Pararaton* and *Negarakertagama*, was used by nationalist writer Mohamad Yamin to justify the modern Indonesian border (Wood 2005, 2011). The concept, which described Majapahit’s tributary relationships with non-Javanese polities was appropriated to mean that the current territory of Indonesia was once part of the Majapahit state, effectively implying that the modern border is inherited from the past. All these concepts have been used to homogenize modern Indonesia.

Such nationalist agendas and ideologies permeate into the archaeological practice in Indonesia, where archaeology is expected to contribute to the development of national character by looking for manifestations of the modern national identity in the past (Simanjuntak 2011; Utomo 2018; Wartha 2016). Research focus is mainly placed on monumental architecture and epigraphy, where the next national symbols and ideology can likely be found. Sites such as Trowulan and Sendang Duwur, which exhibit both pre-Islamic and Islamic architectural features, are elevated as exemplars of modern Indonesia’s religious tolerance (Gomperts et al. 2010; Tjandrasasmita). Indonesian pre-history, which has been erroneously construed as politically sterile (Glover 2003: 24), is also fertile ground for the search of a national identity as evidenced by the interpretation that the Austronesians are ancestral to all of Indonesia’s modern ethnic groups (Simanjuntak 2011). While the focus on Classical period architectural research stemmed from the old Dutch orientalist tradition, monumental architecture likely contributed to the nationalist narrative of *pembangunan* in the Soekarno administration, an identity that only intensified during Soeharto’s New Order regime.

The history of archaeological research in Indonesia has shown that archaeological practice in the region has been especially sensitive to nationalist politics. The anti-communist stance which defined the early phases of the Soeharto regime led to the censorship of the Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon, which described the role of Chinese Hanafi Muslims in the spread of Islam in Java, and Slamet Muljana’s *Runtuhnya Kerajaan Hindu-Jawa* which incorporated the Semarang and Cirebon annals in its reconstruction of Indonesia’s Islamic history (Muljana 1968; Wain 2017). The decentralization of the central government following the dissolution of Soeharto’s New Order regime in 1998 encouraged increased ethnic regionalism. Ethnic identities, which had been suppressed in the Soeharto administration, began to manifest politically as regional governments’

autonomy grew (Brown 2002). Archaeologically, this has led to more culture-historical research in areas outside of Java. More recently, incumbent president Joko Widodo proposed a new definition of an Indonesian nationalism, one that is based on Indonesia's maritime policy. As a result, more and more archaeologists are currently undergoing research on Indonesia's maritime past. National ideologies in Indonesia are multiple and dynamic. However, their reliance on the past for authenticity means that the past must be constantly reproduced and negotiated in order to become salient in the present. We argue that the most recent research at Gunung Padang is an example of multiple competing national ideologies being contested archaeologically, and analyzing this process is important to understanding how the national past is produced in Indonesia.

RESEARCH AT GUNUNG PADANG AND ITS CONTROVERSIES

Gunung Padang is the largest megalithic site in Southeast Asia. Located in Desa Karyamukti, Cianjur, West Java, Gunung Padang is a man-made construction consisting of naturally occurring columnar joints arranged into several rectangular, fenced courtyards on a hill sitting at 885 meters above sea level (Sukendar 2001: 5; Yondri 2017). These courtyards are arranged on terraces and are marked by entryways made from two andesite pillars placed upright, which are larger and taller than other pillars used to fence the courtyards. The site is known from an 1891 report in *Oudheden van Java* by Dutch geologist R.D.M. Verbeek, who described the site as a series of upright columns arranged on four stacked terraces. In 1914, Dutch archaeologist N.J. Krom argued in *Rapporten van de heidkundigen Dienst in Nederlandsche-Indie* that the pillars at Gunung Padang were similar to Shaivite lingas found in other Hindu temples in the archipelago and that the site was likely a burial site (Sukendar 2001; Akbar 2013; Yondri 2015).

Gunung Padang remained unstudied further until 1979, when the site was rediscovered by locals. Teams from the Directorate for Heritage Protection and Management (DP3SP) and the National Center of Archaeology (Arkenas) conducted independent research at the site in the following years (Yondri 2012). The DP3SP researchers focused on intensive mapping of the site while teams from Arkenas, led by Indonesian archaeologist R.P. Soejono focused on documenting the architectural features and conducting pit testing. Subsequent studies of Gunung Padang were oriented towards understanding the site's context and function. In 1981, researchers discovered a fifth terrace (Bintarti 1981) and petrographic studies of the columnar joints conducted by the Archaeological Center of West Java in the 1990s revealed that the stone pillars were likely local and was quarried from a volcanic quarry north of Gunung Padang (Djubiantono 1996/1997; Yondri and Djubiantono 2003). Further excavations were conducted in 2002 to test Krom's theory regarding the function of the site as a burial site, which yielded no evidence to support the claim. Instead, researchers argued that Gunung Padang is an early form of a *punden berundak*, an

architectural style which resembles a step pyramid which was characteristic some pre-classical sites found in West Java (Bintarti 1981; Yondri 2017).

While Gunung Padang was designated heritage status in 1998 by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the site only received national attention in 2011. A team assembled by Andi Arief, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Special Staff for Disaster and Social Relief, was assigned to conduct excavations at the site. The Integrated and Independent Research Team (TTRM), which consisted of geologists from the Indonesian Institute of Science (LIPI), archaeologists from Universitas Indonesia, as well as various other personnel including military officers, made the controversial claim that Gunung Padang was, in fact, a massive pyramid that could be as old as 28,000 years (Natawidjaja et al. 2018; Bronto and Langi 2016). The team conducted geophysical surveys using ground penetrating radar, multi-channel resistivity, seismic tomography, as well as archeological excavations at the site (Natawidjaja et. al 2014, 2018) and discovered, among other things, a possible chamber containing metric tons of precious metal under Gunung Padang, evidence for metal working, a hydro-electric dam, a giant kujang (Sundanese short sword), and a patinated coin thought to be a religious amulet (Aziz 2014). TTRM's chief geologist, Danny Hilman, and lead archaeologist, Ali Akbar, made multiple claims that Gunung Padang's pyramid is much older than the pyramids at Giza and that the site is at least 10 times larger than Borobudur (Akbar 2012/2013).

TTRM's research at Gunung Padang was strongly opposed by archaeologists from multiple sectors, including the academia and some state institutions. The criticisms were leveled mainly on methodological grounds, citing TTRM's approach as lacking in standard archaeological methods. This includes: 1) TTRM's lack of documentation when removing columnar joints from its archaeological context (Yondri), 2) lack of attention paid to stratigraphy, 3) site destruction, and 4) TTRM's obscene budget compared to a lack of funding at other state institutions (Dipa 2014). TTRM's attempt to recruit 500 volunteers to participate in a mass excavation in 2013, called, conspicuously, Operation to Honor the Red and White (red and white being the color of Indonesia's flag) at Gunung Padang, was heavily protested by various members of the archaeological community (Prasdi 2013). Facing criticisms, TTRM attempted to integrate members of the archaeological community into their research, going as far as tempering their claims about Gunung Padang (Natawidjaja et al. 2014). However, research stalled in 2014, coinciding with the start of Joko Widodo's presidency and the end of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's term.

DISCUSSION

The recent controversies surrounding the archaeological research at Gunung Padang suggest that the past is still very much a salient arena for Indonesian identity politics. The

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nationalist ideology of *pembangunan* is implicit in TTRM's attempt to establish Gunung Padang as a site of an ancient civilization. While TTRM's conspicuous nationalization of Gunung Padang is reminiscent to Soekarno era strategies of bolstering national identities using symbols, the Yudhoyono administration's motivation for mobilizing the ideology of *pembangunan* likely differed from Soekarno's motivation. We argue that *pembangunan* is likely deployed in its metaphorical definition of the construction of national character to establish a new sense of national unity that was still reeling from the effects of post-New Order fractionalization. To this end, nationalistic activities were regularly scheduled at Gunung Padang; visits by high-ranking government officials, including president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, were common occurrences as well as flag raising ceremonies involving uniformed members of the military and the police. These events were highly publicized, and the intensive media presence only assisted in disseminating nationalistic images of patriots saluting the Indonesian flag at the site towards public consumption. TTRM's bombastic claims that Gunung Padang is older than the pyramids at Giza and larger than Borobudur were designed to invite media coverage, which found success at both the national and international level.

Why invoke pyramids from 4th dynasty Egypt and a Central Javanese Buddhist temple to make sense of a pre-classic megalithic structure in West Java? The deployment of these two specific comparisons reveal much about the logic of nationalist politics taking place at Gunung Padang. Archaeology operates by creating relational categories with which objects are analyzed. These relational categories operate on different scales, from object typology on the basis of shared chemical composition to comparison of states across different world-regions. These categories are created through rigorous research which builds on prior observation about the archaeological past. TTRM's relational categories, however, were constructed through the consumption of popular and nationalist myths about the past. Representations of Egyptian archaeology in the popular media conflate Egypt's history into an "amorphous, imaginary past" that epitomizes the colonial fetish for ancient civilizations which are instantly recognizable through their pyramids (Hall 2004). Similarly, Borobudur as a monument invokes the same image of an "ancient civilization" imagined to be "Indonesian", first by orientalists, and later by nationalists operating in post-colonial context. In arguing for Gunung Padang as evidence for the oldest civilization in the world, TTRM reached for a comparative device that is assumed to be universally accepted and has both international and national currency. The construction of Gunung Padang as a national myth thus relies on the authenticity of other myths.

TTRM's effort to nationalize Gunung Padang through claims of science distinguishes it from past nationalizing efforts. The Soekarno-era nationalizing projects does not rely on claims to truth, as he himself confessed that he "never quite assimilated the theory that children must be instructed factually. My idea was to stir them passionately." (Sukarno and Adams 1966 in Reid 2011). For example, the face of Gadjah Mada, a Majapahit era vizier and originator of the

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nusantara concept, was lifted off an unidentified terracotta figure found in Trowulan, the site of Majapahit's capital. This image was reproduced on the cover of Yamin's book which reinvented Gadjah Mada as a national hero who aimed to unify the archipelago in the 14th century (Yamin 1960). In contrast, TTRM invested much time and many resources to establish the scientific authenticity of their claims, a process that mirrors nationalist movements elsewhere. As Julian Thomas (2004) observed, the rise of nationalism in Europe is linked to the transformation of antiquarianism into archaeology. Rigorous, scientific archaeology operates under the principle that the past is objectively knowable. Within this logic, national pasts known through archaeology were also objectively knowable. Thus, the nation-state, seeking a source of past identity to essentialize, must rely on a notion of objectivity to make an absolute claim that their past is authentic.

Despite the explicit nationalist bend to TTRM's research at Gunung Padang, opposition to the project was mainly expressed on methodological grounds (although see Tanudirjo 2012 for an ethical case against TTRM and Sulistyanto 2014 for a hyper-relativistic reconciliation of TTRM's research). However, it is incorrect to characterize this opposition as purely driven by empirical critiques. The concept of *punden berundak* or the step pyramid, which was used by researchers from the Archaeological Center of West Java from the 1980s-2000s to describe Gunung Padang, was argued by the most vocal critics of TTRM's research to be the more archaeologically correct interpretation of the site. However, this concept itself is not free of nationalist politics, as it was born out of a "local genius" agenda which aimed to elevate regional ethnic identity. Thus, we propose that it is more appropriate to view opposition to TTRM's interpretation as contesting different national agendas; where TTRM's argument for the existence of a pyramid at Gunung Padang is rooted in the search for a common, if not homogenizing, national identity, the *punden berundak* concept is rooted in regionalist arguments which aimed to elevate specific ethnic identities, in this case the Sundanese, over a national one (for regionalist nationalism in China see Falkenhausen 1995). The practice of archaeology in Indonesia has historically been inseparable from nationalist ideologies (Tanudirjo 1995, Soekmono 1990), a relationship which has continued into the present. Research directives written by the Ministry of Research and the National Center for Archaeology explicitly states that research should support agendas set by the central government (Kementrian Riset, Teknologi, dan Pendidikan Tinggi 2018; Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional 2015). Scientific archaeology, however, represents an arena where this agenda can be contested. By framing the critiques to TTRM's nationalist project at Gunung Padang on the grounds of flawed methodology, critics of TTRM are able to contest other national ideologies on what appears to be politically-neutral grounds, while at once discrediting the authenticity of their claims.

OUTCOMES AND CONSEQUENCES

The legacy of TTRM's research at Gunung Padang is difficult to evaluate. Most of the discourse regarding the site's interpretation occurred via the medium of television, newspapers, and social media, which bypass the traditional scientific check-and-balances system of peer-review. As a result, TTRM's research at Gunung Padang is, at best, inconclusive. Here we offer some general observations. The sudden national interest of Gunung Padang redirected the kinds of research questions being asked at the site. Prior to 2011, researchers mainly focused on site description and sourcing the columnar joints that were used in the construction of the site. Excavation was limited to several units and was mainly aimed at understanding how the columnar joints were arranged underneath the visible top layer. TTRM's research, however, was focused on seeking evidence for a pyramid structure underneath the site. As such, TTRM was much more focused on vertical excavations and employed a more destructive excavation method. The lack of rigorous methodology meant that any data gathered by TTRM is unlikely to be useful for future studies, and the portion of the site TTRM excavated no longer has archaeological meaning. At the same time, however, TTRM's focus on establishing a calendar date introduced C-14 dating, which was a novel approach at the site. Their C-14 dating produced wildly ranging dates of between 3000 years BP to 28,000 years BP (Natawidjaja et al. 2018). Following the publication of TTRM's dates, dating the site has become more of a focus for researchers, with other archaeologists submitting their own C-14 dates which challenged TTRM's own results.

Site destruction as a result of tourism is also a very serious concern at Gunung Padang. The intensive media coverage of Gunung Padang between 2011-2014 brought a lot of tourism to the site, up from 2.940 people monthly in 2011 to around 4.874 people per month in 2013 and reached its peak in 2016 with 8.842 people per month (Yondri 2017 : 276 –287). While locals have benefited economically from the tourism boom in the short-term, tourism infrastructure, both from the perspective of heritage management and local economic potential, was severely lacking at the site. This led to a haphazard development, such as stalls and toilets being erected in the core area of the site and metal railings being staked on the ground that digs into the columnar joints for the purpose of the hike to the site. Vandalism is also a common issue, due to lack of rules governing the visitors' behaviors and security around the site.

Research at Gunung Padang has stalled since 2014, coinciding with the conclusion of Yudhoyono's second term in office. Unlike Yudhoyono, the incoming president, Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, defined his vision for Indonesia as a global leader in the maritime sector. In a speech to the East Asia Summit in 2014, Jokowi outlined the pillars of his policies to include revival of Indonesia's archipelagic identity (Carruthers 2016). Citing Indonesia's past as a great thalassocratic and seafaring nation, Jokowi imagined a new definition for an Indonesian national identity based around the concept of *kebaharian* (maritimeness). Following Jokowi's election,

both state and academic archaeologist shifted their attention to maritime archaeology, to be in line with the new national narrative of the past. TTRM's research programme at Gunung Padang, based around a different nationalist ideology of *pembangunan*, is currently no longer salient to the national imagination of the past. The dissipating interest to the national narrative being constructed at Gunung Padang meant that research at the site will likely be discontinued. In July 2017, a seminar was held under the title "Gunung Padang Site Towards World Heritage" held at the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia. In this seminar, Ali Akbar, the lead archaeologist for TTRM, argued for Gunung Padang to be submitted to UNESCO as a world heritage site. By registering Gunung Padang as a world heritage site, members of the TTRM hopes that research at the site will be continued. As it stands, Gunung Padang still invites a lot of archaeological questions. Much of its context is still unknown and is likely important to our understanding of megalithic cultures in Island Southeast Asia.

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