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JAVANESE BUDDHISM. AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF MULTIPLE REVIVALS

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Figure 1. Buddhist statues and stupas in "Villa Metta" meditation centre, Blitar, East Java [photo by author]

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to explore the emergence of a form of Buddhist social-religious world in contemporary Java which I call Javanese Buddhism. This form of Buddhism is an aggregate of multiple historical and synchronic processes. While Buddhism has been introduced in Java and Indonesia at large in the early 20th century, many institutional and vernacular narratives have framed it as a revival of the “classical religion” of Java. Recent developments which include the post-New Order political configurations and the increased influence of global Theravāda Buddhism have brought new sensitivities and new practices to the fore in local Buddhist affairs. Oftentimes, these new religious patterns intersect efforts at revitalising local social and economic realities. I call the outcome of these developments a “revival in the revival” for the renewed sense of relevance with which Buddhism is invested in the formation of local identities in some of the contexts described in the Temanggung highlands, in Central Java, but also in urban realities.

At the same time, the objective of the dissertation is broader than returning the ethnographic case of understudied religious practices. It seeks to capture the wider complexity involved in the articulation of Javanese Buddhism, a complexity that shows how a given religious world is constituted by practices and processes that might not be sacred in themselves but that cannot be separated from what subjects and communities organise as religion. These include forms of leisure economy, distinct aesthetic choices, imaginaries about prosperity, personal success and attractiveness. In order to trace this subject in the thesis, I make use of ethnographic data which I have collected during several fieldwork stints carried out between 2015 and 2019 in several locations in Java and, to a lesser extent, through online ethnography conducted between 2018 and 2020.

In this introduction I will define the subject of the study, contextualising and discussing the specific usage of “Javanese Buddhism”. I will outline then more in detail the aims of the dissertation and introduce the content of the individual chapters. Lastly, I shall elicit the research context and methodology.

1. Javanese Buddhism: defining the working notion

The thesis hinges on the category of Javanese Buddhism as its defining argument. The term is an etic construct and it is created and used in a specific sense. Javanese Buddhism may refer in its immediate sense to either an ethnic connotation or a geographical collocation. The former would describe the Buddhism of the Javanese, the majoritarian ethnic identity in Java and Indonesia. Derived from the features attributed to the Javanese as an ethnic group, the trope of Javanese Buddhism could also be read in a stricter religious meaning, that is as a syncretism of Buddhism and the ensemble of religious practices that refer to the traditional Javanese religious world. The latter sense could point instead to a simple geographical fact: Buddhism as practised on the island of Java, irrespective of ethnic preoccupations.

The use I make of the term is at the same time broader and more specific than these two understandings. While the category is inclusive and it emphasises the centrality of the Javanese religious tradition as well as the set of ethnocultural stances that go under the umbrella of “Javaneseness”, it is not meant to identify a religious phenomenon in strictly ethnic terms. The premises for this position are two. The first is the fact that the distinct Javanese ethnocultural history is only one of the many components that participate in the complex of Javanese Buddhism described in the thesis. The second premise is the recognition of the multiple identities that converge into the phenomenon discussed, including the acknowledgement of the porosity underlying from the start a large ethnic identity such as “the Javanese”.

The other major ethnic identity that coalesces in the processes that thematise Javanese Buddhism includes Chinese-Indonesians. Indonesians of Chinese descent bear a distinct collective history that associates them with the wider reality of diasporic Chinese communities in maritime Asia. In Indonesia, such descent has also been a politically charged territory, with tragic consequences as the community was explicitly targeted in the events of the 1965-66 anti-communist purges and again in the 1998 riots. Nevertheless, before and after these events, Chinese-Indonesians have lived in continuity with “Javanese” cultural features. Many Chinese-Indonesian households have spoken Javanese as their everyday language for generations. Mixed families have existed and exist throughout recent Javanese history. Oftentimes, Javanese names have been adopted (although forcefully so during the Suharto regime) by Chinese-Indonesian citizens. Hybrid religious realities that include both Javanese and Chinese-Indonesians have been the norm in local forms of Christianity, Islam as well as in localised religious traditions. Although this thesis does not insist on ethnic vocabularies, it shows indirectly how Buddhism too constitutes a space of continuity between Javanese and Chinese-Indonesian histories.

The dissertation recognises therefore ethnic categories as highly blurred and in a constant process of remodulation. In a sense, the reading of Javanese Buddhism in apparently more straightforward geographical terms is closer to the meaning that I try to convey. However, the geographical connotation too should not be understood as an autonomous unit or abstracted from outside realities. On the contrary, Buddhism on the island of Java communicates to various degrees with Buddhism and non-Buddhism outside of its territory. While Java constitutes undoubtedly an institutional centre for national Buddhist affairs in Indonesia and its Hindu-Buddhist heritage sites radiate with force in the imagination of the entire archipelago, many practices that take place in Java are animated and sustained by Buddhists from outside of the island. Several Buddhist monks that reside in Java originate oftentimes from outside the island and travel routinely to these areas for religious purposes. Many substantial communities of Buddhists can be found in a few other regions such as North Sumatra, Riau, Palembang, Lombok as well as in a number of scattered urban areas that count historically important Buddhist groups, such as Pontianak and Singkawang (on Kalimantan) and Makassar (on Sulawesi).

Therefore, rather than a phenomenon that pertains strictly to an ethnic group or to an island, Javanese Buddhism is best understood as an aggregate and a hub. It is an aggregate in the sense that it draws together elements and practices from diverse originations. Such diversity is not only framed by the identity backgrounds that are drawn in, but also by the social-cultural spheres that Buddhists bring in the religious world and that converge in their practices. Procedures of landscaping, aesthetic choices, cultural festivals, heritage policies, visions of leisure economy and a distinct prosperity ethos are some of these spheres. Taken together, these practices of both religious and non-religious origination give shape to a temporary cultural form (an “aggregate”). As a consequence, religion at large is understood as a field (Kupari 2020; Verter 2003; Bourdieu 1971), as a permeable area of human action, production and thought (Lambek 2014) and not as a secluded sphere of phenomena and of investigation, discontinuous from the rest.

Javanese Buddhism is also a hub because the components and practices that make up its complexity do not crystallise into an essentialised cultural formation. They do not culminate in a clear-cut fashion and do not flow in a univocal direction. They merge into a cultural-religious form that is constantly evolving and incorporating new threads, while simultaneously diffusing to different social-cultural segments and geographical locations. This process is best captured conceptually with the images of the assemblage, the strata and the rhizome (Buchanan 2020; Thayer-Bacon 2017; Smith 2010). Such ideas are borrowed from the work of Deleuze and

Guattari (1986) and constitute fundamental keywords for how I picture analytically Javanese Buddhism throughout the thesis, ideas which shall be explored in detail in chapter I.

2. Aims and structure of the thesis

The following chapters suggest looking at Buddhism in Java and Indonesia as a product of multiple originations and in constant resonance with a number of heterogeneous cultural, religious and economic stances. This approach departs significantly from the established ways in which the history of Indonesian Buddhism has been narrated. Buddhism in Indonesia has been understood often as a trajectory marked by historical ruptures, gaps and impenetrable boundaries presumed along ethnic lines or institutional orientations. This has led to discussing Buddhism in the archipelago through a number of mutually excluding definitions, such as the “new religious movement” paradigm, the “Chinese religion” or the linear “revival” of pre-/non-Islamic Java. In this dissertation, I show how these definitions and ethnic-circumscribed histories converge and depend upon each other in multiple forms.

On the side of mobilising the thought of Deleuze and Guattari as the overarching framework in which I operate, I do so in conversation with the work of anthropologists of religion like David Morgan (Morgan 2012, 2010; Elison 2018) and Donovan Schaefer (2015). They both shed important light on the confluence of multiple forces upon religious phenomena, but they are especially useful in apprehending the complex relationship of material and phenomenological processes with discursive formations. Such perspectives are crucial for understanding how heterogeneous strands of narrative, language, materiality and perception are weaved into a cultural assemblage. I understand Javanese Buddhism through this perspective not only when dealing with history as such but also in the contemporary configurations that unfold in the ethnographic scenes.

This analytical framework seeks to organise the more specific research questions that orient the ethnographic data: how are discourses of religious “return” reconciled with thorough innovative processes in Indonesian Buddhism? How are return or revival discourses experienced as “really real”? What kind of dynamics does Theravāda Buddhism as a modern world tradition enter in concrete social-cultural contexts? How do Buddhists in Java situate themselves as a diverse minority in a “competitive” religious landscape?

The first chapter will elaborate further on the broader issues at stake. It situates the ethnography in the larger context of contemporary Indonesian history and the developments of that religious tradition that refers to Buddhism as a “world religion” (Masuzawa 2005). It pauses

especially on the formation of Theravāda Buddhist infrastructures as a transnational expression of religious affiliation and an influential vehicle for Buddhist practice. The chapter also pinpoints some of the analytical keys that run through the dissertation, with reference to the notion of “lived religion”, the interplay of materiality and discourse and the *deleuzian* ideas of assemblage, rhizome and strata. Chapter two, instead, reconstructs the specific history of Buddhism in Java, inviting a broader view that brings together the multiple strands that constituted it over the centuries and especially in the late- and post-colonial history of Indonesia.

Chapters three to six are strictly fieldwork-based. They account for the organisation of emerging forms of Buddhist practice, animated by lay associations and individual initiatives. Chapters three, four and five are geographically located in Central Java and display unique confluences of Javanese ritual tradition with modern Theravāda Buddhist discourses and practices. Some of these hybridised practices are experienced as a “revival” of what many perceive to be the classical religion of the Javanese. They seem to materialise therefore Javanese Buddhism in a literal and ethnic sense. However, the chapters also indicate that this process is not limited to the act of braiding in religious experiences, aspirations and ritual forms, but apparently unrelated spheres, such as social mobility, economic reforms, inter-religious frictions, identitarian discourses and mediatic landscapes are all factors that intersect and influence the formation of contemporary Buddhism in Java.

Chapter six is based instead in major urban settings, that is the metropolitan areas of Surabaya and Jakarta. While the attention is slightly shifted away from the developments of the Javanese hinterland, the chapter proceeds on some of the motifs that guided the contemporary establishment of Buddhism also in rural Java. One of these themes is the role of formal and informal organisations and institutions both lay and monastic. Another theme is the powerful role of neo-liberal and entrepreneurial discourses and practices in contemporary religion which underpin many of the activities of new and traditional youth groups. Although this aspect makes up a theme of continuity through the chapters, it will be particularly illuminated in the sixth.

3. Research background and methodology

The research is the result of a varied set of data and temporal spans. The backbone of the dissertation builds entirely on ethnographic fieldwork, enriched and expanded with extensive bibliographic research and online ethnography. I carried out fieldwork in Central and East Java (see Figure 1), predominantly in rural regions (Temanggung, Blitar), but also in urban contexts such as Surabaya, Semarang, Yogyakarta and Jakarta. The choice for the locations involved was

largely justified on the basis of the research themes, but it also followed the trail of personal networks which built up over the stays in Indonesia. While most of the data collected and elaborated for the dissertation derives from the doctoral fieldwork proper (from June 2019 through March 2020), I also make use of data gathered over previous stays.

My first lengthy stay in Java ranged from December 2014 to April 2015. My primary objective and occupation were not ethnographic – in fact, I was not yet enrolled in an anthropology graduate program and I only had a rudimentary acquaintance with a couple of classics of the discipline. I resided in Semarang and Surabaya, where I followed two NGO programs in the fields of primary education and organic farming. The collection of data was on that occasion far from systematic, as I participated in events and visited Buddhist temple activities out of private interest rather than a methodological blueprint.

My second stint in Java was instead significantly longer and relatively organised. I lived in Solo/Surakarta between August 2017 through June 2018 and I had acquired meanwhile a more solid background in anthropology and ethnographic research. In fact, that very stay formed the ethnographic basis for the research connected to my M.A. thesis and it was centred around Javanese gamelan music as a knowledge system and its evolutions through its entrance into formal educational curricula. While the subject of that study was thematically different, it offered an important foundation in Javanese cultural history as well as the contemporary Indonesian developments in issues of politics and religion. The chain of personal contacts on that occasion, moreover, led me to locations such as the hamlets of the Temanggung highlands and oriented to some extent the pathways for the research to come.

The experience of the previous two stays turned out immensely useful not only for designing the doctoral project ahead of fieldwork. When the global pandemic from Covid-19 spread the world over in 2020, halting my on-site fieldwork activities, I was obliged to rearrange the overall direction of my project. While following a number of debates and activities online and carrying on interaction remotely with my research participants were fundamental (and increasingly ordinary) practices past February 2020, I could count on a set of scattered data to work or rework on. Sometimes, looking in retrospective to fieldnotes, conversations and pictures from previous visits cast new light or helped assemble entirely new lines of research.

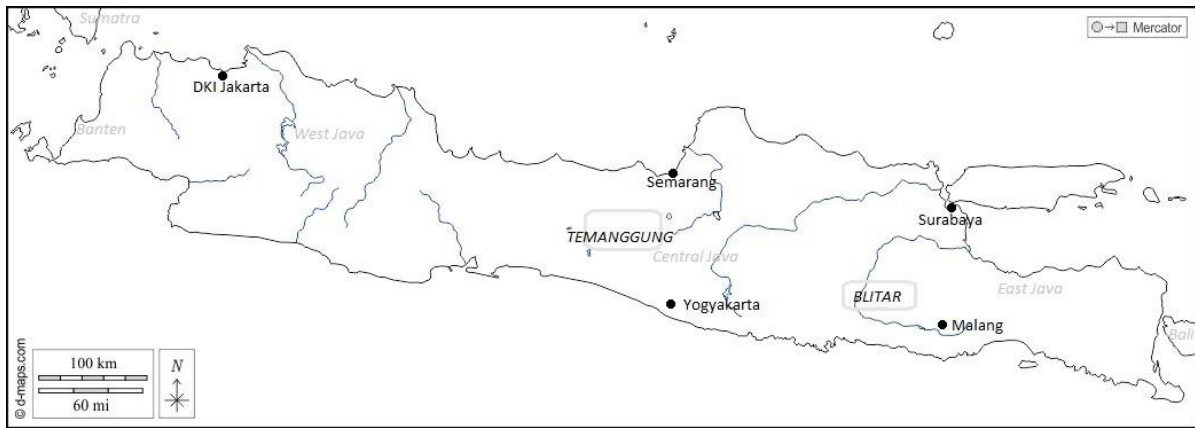


Figure 2. Java, research sites.

My entry to the specific locations that make up the field sites of the dissertation was a gradual process that is difficult to pinpoint with an exact date. My acquaintance with practising Indonesian Buddhists began already during my first stay in 2015 and it was facilitated by the fact that I attended temple worship opened to the public and events that did not require a specific kind of “gatekeepers”. As my first encounters with the Indonesian Buddhist context occurred in major cities, the fact of my foreignness raised occasional interest among the communities in question, but it was never a significant barrier in our interaction. My physical complexion, instead, was perceived at times with an unexpected twist. Rather than being lumped together in the category of “white tourist”, still a subject of curiosity among elderly Indonesians but also many in the younger generations, a degree of surprise was raised by the fact that “a Muslim was worshipping at the local vihara”, assuming I was of Arab or Turkic descent.

In a more remote region like Temanggung, my foreign origin was bound, in theory, to raise more than an eyebrow. However, as it turned out, a village like Surjosari was in a process of transformation with more frequent intercourses with outsiders. Against my expectations, my 2017 visit was not the first time a foreigner had sojourned in the village. Moreover, my initial stay in the house of Subagyo, the most “mobile” of the village residents, smoothed the first impact of diffidence or scepticism that my presence in a relatively secluded setting might have stirred.

The ethnographic material consists of semi-structured and unstructured interviews, carried out in Indonesian, except one which was carried out in English for the specific initiative of the interlocutor. Interviews were conducted face-to-face. Online communication, in the form of chats on messaging apps, was continued during and after my stay in the fieldwork sites although no new interaction was entirely initiated online. All the participants expressed informed consent and the research purpose of my stay and of the interviews was always made explicit. On the side

of formal interactions, a major source for the ethnography that follows was constituted by field notes which did not only elicit conversations and spoken exchanges but transcribed observations, participant-observations and individual impressions. Online articles, social media posts and official statistics have been used extensively to integrate the material that I collected first-hand. Except for some of the field notes, most data have been collected, processed and contrasted directly on laptop. The main software used were nVivo, Zotero, IrfanView and Office.

The settings of the ethnographic scenes that make up the chapters correspond to the real names and locations. However, the smallest geographical units (villages and hamlets) have been anonymised, taking into account the minoritarian character of Indonesian Buddhists and the mutability of inter-religious relations in Java. The same logic applies to people's names. While the identity of prominent figures or public personalities such as monks is mostly kept in the original, the data of other participants have been anonymised as well.

Chapter I

TRAJECTORIES: LINES OF RESEARCH IN THE STUDY OF BUDDHISM IN INDONESIA

In this chapter, I will explore the three trajectories on which the thesis is articulated. With the first trajectory, I situate the thesis in the context of the literature on the contemporary social-cultural history of Indonesia. It traces the formation of the country's current religious landscape and describes how political events intersected the onset of specific majority/minorities dynamics. The second trajectory reconstructs the emergence of Theravāda Buddhism as a transnational religious formation and discusses its modernist direction. The third trajectory situates the thesis in the wider theory in the anthropology of religion. I will discuss here the evolution of new materialism as a theoretical standpoint, the approach known as “lived religion” and then the interplay between discourse and materiality, a theme which unfolds in many forms through the thesis. In order to do so, I unpack the concept of religion proposed by Donovan Schaefer and the framework advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, with particular reference to their notions of strata, rhizome and assemblage. The aim is to show how the subject of Javanese Buddhism is conceived as an “assemblage”, that is a contingent religious formation bearing multiple historical and material dynamics, and not in fixed ethnoreligious terms or as an independent religious orientation.

1. Majority and minority religions in Indonesia

Indonesia is estimated to be the world's largest Muslim-majority country, with sizeable minority pockets peppered throughout the archipelago. Although the Indonesian nation-state is constituted on a secular platform, its policy and national ideology are strongly oriented by religion. This aspect is enshrined in the constitution of the country and is periodically reiterated by public debates that involve the education system, the administration of the public space or moral issues of various sorts. In recent years, the controversy surrounding the eligibility of non-Muslim political candidates in Muslim majority districts and the range of applicability of the country's blasphemy law have been two examples of nationwide polemics crossing politics and religion. On a national level, such public debates are often stirred by the positions and activism of lay and clerical Islamic groups while locally they may be conveyed also by an array of associations and

scholars that refer to other religions in those provinces where these are demographically substantial.

The number of surveys and censuses carried out in the country about religious matters, from individual affiliation to the thorough mappings of worship venues, is also telling of the attention given to the field of religion in the country and the degree of scrutiny that various hubs of institutional power dedicate to it. About 207 million Indonesian citizens (87.18%) reported themselves as Muslim in the most recent nationwide census. The latest governmental data (BPS 2010) available on which all the official statistics are based is the 2010 census published by the national board for statistics (BPS – *Badan Pusat Statistik*). A new census of this kind is currently under way at the time of writing¹. In 2018 the Ministry of Religion released a separate census (Kementerian Agama 2018), in which the number of Muslims was reported to be 231 million (86.7%), with a slight difference in the proportion equally distributed among all the other official faiths. Moreover, regional governments carry out routinely their own censuses on a range of issues, including religious affiliation. Minor discrepancies are therefore common anytime national data is contrasted against regional information.

Apart from Islam, religious affiliation in Indonesia is characterised by five additional state-recognised religions. Two of these are the main branches of Christianity – Protestantism and Catholicism – which historically refer to separate ministerial boards and are always distinct on all levels of civic life. Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism (the latter included in the state bureaucracy only starting from 2006) complete the set. More recently, the category *kepercayaan* (“belief”) has been introduced as a possible option for religious affiliation². The category is meant to be inclusive of the vast number of local forms of religiosity that cannot be encompassed in the six main state-fostered religions. The recognition of *kepercayaan* in 2017 has been the result of several years of debates and efforts from minority groups, although its viability in educational and legal matters au pair the other main religions is seen as problematic, above all for the lack of established institutional bodies and doctrinal consensus (Butt 2020).

Unlike in neighbouring Malaysia, where religious affiliation is often defined along ethnic identity, in Indonesia religion and ethnicity proceed mostly as two distinct social realms. This is especially true in Java. The ethnic identity that makes up the majority on the island and in Indonesia at large, the Javanese, subscribe largely to Islam, but there are also significant communities of Javanese Christians, Javanese Hindus and Javanese Buddhists. Because of the

¹ *The Jakarta Post* (02/2020): <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/14/indonesias-2020-census-to-recruit-390000-volunteers-keen-to-follow-s-korea-footsteps.html>

² *Jakarta Globe* (11/2017): <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesias-constitutional-court-says-yes-indigenous-faiths/>

multi-religiosity of those who identify with the broad Javanese tradition, it is rarely a matter of surprise that participation in rituals and customary practices that stem from Javanese traditional practices involve individuals and communities of diverse formal religious backgrounds. The disassociation of ethnicity and religion is also visible in the case of religious conversion. While the transition from Islam to any of the other religious affiliations may be frowned upon on theological grounds, the ethnic background and belonging are never questioned, for Islam, Christianity or Buddhism would not automatically make one more (or less) Javanese.

Despite these facts, certain discourses may occasionally try to mobilise some idea of “true Javanese-ness” in relation to one or the other formal religion according to circumstances or political gains. The attention to Javanese ethnocultural qualities (attire, speech, food, aesthetics, rituals) and the degree to which these features intersect a formal religious affiliation, often Islam, is an ongoing debate that has emerged particularly after the de-centralisation program fostered since 1999 by the *Reformasi* governments, a project which has re-ignited local ethnic identities in several regions of Indonesia. Nonetheless, the question of how Javanese identity may be weaved into official religious affiliation is not an entirely new preoccupation, since historical narratives that traced a genealogy between Javanese identity and religions such as Islam or modern Hinduism have circulated on and off through the twentieth century (Kurniawati 2012; Ricklefs 2007; Hefner 1989). The case of Surjosari, which we will explore from chapter III, inflects in quite explicit terms Javanese ethnic identity with the practices and vocabulary of contemporary *and* historical Buddhism, contributing with an additional thread in the way Javanese identity is articulated.

A set of similar dynamics between ethnicity and religion characterises Chinese-Indonesian communities. Because of distinct historical events, which we will reconstruct in chapter II, many Chinese-Indonesians have been affiliated in modern Indonesia with Buddhism. To this day, the majority of the country’s Buddhists is still associated with Chinese-Indonesian descent – although the categories themselves, both of “Chinese-Indonesians” and “descent”, are blurry and occasionally subject of controversy (Hoon 2006). As we will see, the conflation of Chinese identity with Buddhism is a relatively modern historical product, that links Chinese-Indonesians with the wider developments of the Chinese diaspora in Asia. Furthermore, communities that relate to some understanding of Chinese culture or ancestry may subscribe to an array of religions other than Buddhism. Confucianism and Daoism are traditionally major forms of religious expression among Chinese-Indonesians and have been historically practised in conjunction with Buddhism. Such syncretism has shaped a local movement called Tridharma, a movement which, despite its popularity, has never gained the status of formal religion.

Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, in recent decades Christianity has also been gaining momentum among communities of Chinese descent. Finally, individuals and groups subscribing to Islam also exist among Chinese-Indonesians, instantiating social-cultural realities, identities and religious milieus that blur even more the boundaries between ethnic categories. The worship on Gunung Kawi in East Java, in which Chinese and Javanese, Muslim and non-Muslim, pay homage to two Muslim heroes believed to bestow good luck on the pilgrims is perhaps the clearest example of the porosity of ethnic categories and religious belonging.

These observations introduce the complex dynamics between minority and majority categories in Java. Both from an ethnic and a religious perspective, minority/majority discourses circulate with force in Java and elsewhere in Indonesia and the categories they contain (Javanese, Chinese, Muslim, non-Muslim) serve as important devices of identity construction for many individuals and communities. Oftentimes, they are also mobilised by political actors on different institutional levels and for different power games. However, the haziness of ethnic boundaries and the differentiation that is maintained between ethnic belonging and official religiosity create multiple scenarios in which “majority” and “minority” are relativised constructions and give ways to various intersections between religion and ethnocultural claims.

1.1. Indonesian presidencies and the “question of God”

The six-fold (or seven-fold, if we include *kepercayaan*) system of religious affiliation in Indonesia is the result of a series of events that have entangled religion, politics and nationalist narrative for several decades and that eventually made religious affiliation obligatory in the late 1960s. We shall pause here on this specific evolution. The years immediately before and after the formation of the Indonesian nation-state, which is the period between the 1940s and the 1960s, are the crucial site in which the knotty relationship between nationalism, religion and state bureaucracy was set forth. This relationship shaped a tradition of mutual influence that continues to this day.

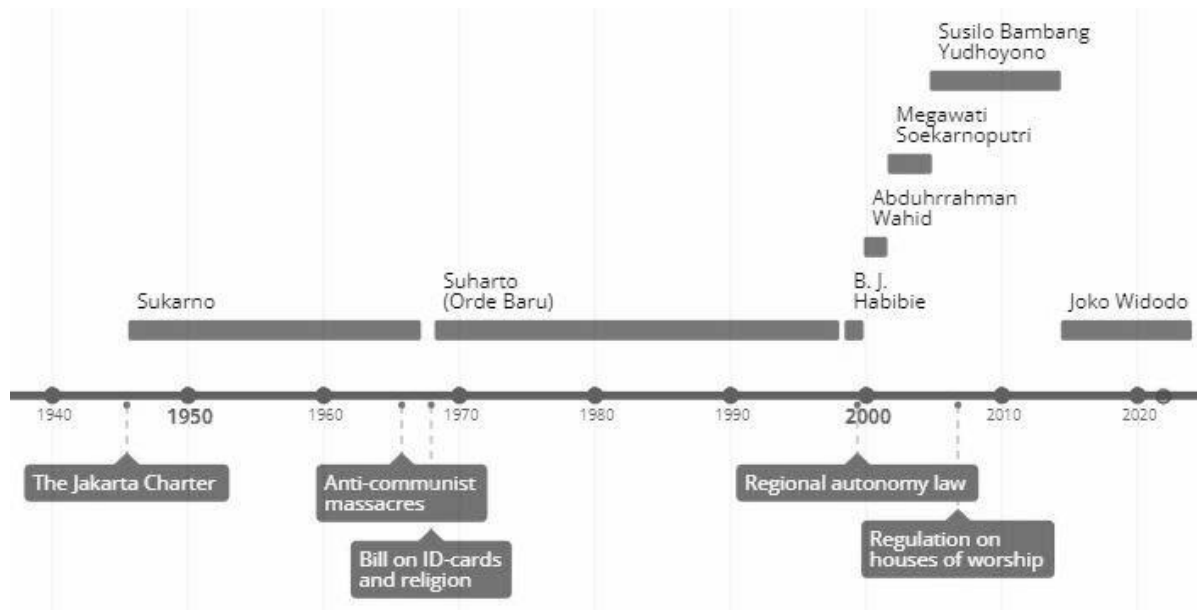


Figure 3. Post-colonial governments (above) and relevant political events (below).

The question of whether the Indonesian state should have been a secular country or a republic with formal Islamic leanings was a central issue in the intellectual quarters that debated the nature of the post-colonial country-to-be. In fact, while most of the intellectuals and the activists that made up the early nationalist groups came from predominantly secular and Dutch-educated backgrounds, Islamist groups played a vital role in fights relating to the anti-colonial movement of the early 1900s. Expecting some form of recognition for the participation in the nationalist project, upon the meetings of the constituency Islamist groups pressed for the constitutional recognition of Islam as the sole state religion, with *shari'a* obligations for all the Muslim residents (Fogg 2019; Ricklefs 2012).

The acknowledgement of Islam as a state religion was supposed to be expressed with a clause in the state's ideological chart *Pancasila* in its 1945 draft (known as the Jakarta Charter). However, the final draft eluded any explicit reference to Islam but mandated "belief in God almighty" (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*) as the first principle of Indonesian national identity. While such notion of deity did not necessarily correspond to the monotheistic definition of a personified God – *ketuhanan* is a general referent for divinity as opposite to *tuhan* which stands for "God" closer to the Semitic understanding – the principle has been traditionally understood in the sense of the Abrahamic religions. The conflation of *ketuhanan* with the idea of a personified, monotheistic God was manifested rather clearly when the constitution was progressively expanded to include Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism to the set of state-supported faiths.

In order to be considered “religions” (*agama*), they needed to prove their respective equivalent of a one supreme God, a prophet and a holy book, as mandated by Abrahamic theologies.

This specific understanding of what national religion should be was influenced not only by the local Islamist movements but also by the orientation and personal biographies of the charismatic personalities that guided the establishment of the Indonesian nation-state, which are worth recollecting. The background and trajectories of Indonesia’s first president and vice-president, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta, and of the president and ideologue of the *Orde Baru* regime, Suharto, contributed to shaping the specific view of religion supported or tolerated by the state. Soekarno, Hatta and Suharto were all nominally Muslim. However, their private backgrounds were rather more complex than that.

Soekarno and Hatta were educated and trained in the Dutch school system, while Suharto attended the Dutch military academy. They were exposed to European-style education and knowledge patterns, including ideas of governance, culture and religion (Pemberton 1987). From the strictly religious perspective, Soekarno and Hatta were also members of the Theosophical Society and participated in the gatherings linked to the lodge, which merged ecumenic and pan-global views of religion, but with a leaning for Hinduism and Buddhism (we shall return to this point chapter II). Moreover, Soekarno was born to a Balinese woman who brought a distinct religious blend to his native family environment.

Suharto was educated instead in the modernist Muhammadiyah Islamic educational system before entering the secular setting of the military academy. Despite having received a more orthodox variety of Islamic education, he was also a firm believer and practitioner of vernacular forms of local Javanese religiosity throughout his life. Suharto was known for being an apprentice at a Central Javanese shaman (*dukun*) and allegedly meditated regularly in a cave in the Dieng plateau. He also changed his name frequently as a way of warding off the evil spirits he perceived were constantly persecuting him, and used Javanese notions, numerology and symbolism throughout his entire political career (Elson 2001).

The backgrounds of Soekarno and Hatta first and of Suharto later are important for grasping the specific vision of national religion that emanated through their charismatic personae, via the governments they presided and via the political centrality they attributed to the *Pancasila* state ideology. Such vision was undoubtedly influenced by the main paradigm derived from the major Abrahamic faiths but also by the distinct European understanding of “religion” as a distinct domain from culture and customs. The complex rapport between the perimeters of *agama* (religion) and of *adat* (customs) and the movable frontiers between them according to social and political intentions and circumstances stems from this historical conjunction. At the same time,

the proximity of Indonesia's presidents to diverse religious environments, from syncretic forms of Javanese Islam to the acquaintance with Hindu-Buddhist circles, allowed the settling of a more inclusive sensitivity that avoided the crystallisation of *shari'a* Islam as the sole expression of the country's official stance on religion.

The intertwinement of religion and politics was produced to a large extent by the more or less direct input given by the country's highest political characters. However, the relationship cannot be grasped fully without taking into account the violent events of 1965-66, events that not only engendered the embeddedness of religion and citizenship as we know it today, but that had a huge impact on the subsequent history of Indonesia at large.

1.2. Religion in the wake of the 1965-1966 killings

During Soekarno's presidency, Indonesia occupied an important seat in the non-aligned movement of the early Cold War. At the same time, it experienced a progressive authoritarian turn following a series of internal turbulences and failed coups. Soekarno initiated a period he called "guided democracy" (*Demokrasi terpimpin*), characterised by the support of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, or PKI). In October 1965, another coup attempt provided the anti-communist and CIA-supported sections of the military under Suharto with an occasion to overturn the regime of Soekarno, who was increasingly close to the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party (Bevins 2020). Suharto and his generals singled out the PKI as the sole responsible for the coup attempt. They began a demonising campaign against the Communist party which turned soon into systematic repression. The bloodshed was exacerbated once Suharto took over the presidency, taking advantage of the disarray into which the Soekarno government had descended, due among other things to Soekarno's aggravated physical conditions.

The anti-communist repression between 1965 and 1966 is one of the gloomiest and still unelaborated events of the post-colonial history of the country³ and it had significant repercussions on all levels of social life. Communist sympathies and symbolic connections involved a wide set of social groups across class and ethnic identities as well as areas of cultural life. Urban workers in cities like Surabaya and Semarang and vast sections of the rural peasant communities, especially in Java, Sumatra and Bali, were all parts of the society in which communism had found wide support. But communist alliance could also be identified on the

³ The 1965-66 brutal repression was documented visually by the director Joshua Oppenheimer in two acclaimed films, *The Act Of Killing* (2012) and *The Look Of Silence* (2014).

lines of ethnicity and cultural-religious identity. In some cases, moreover, communist affiliation offered a pretext for escalating inter-ethnic friction.

The Chinese-Indonesian community was targeted as particularly close to communist ideas, as it was perceived as the outpost of Maoist China. After the most brutal phase of the 1965-66 killings and mobs, several policies were put in place to assimilate Chinese-Indonesians by eradicating elements of “Chineseness” (Suryadinata 2008). Chinese cultural festivals were prohibited, as were the use of Chinese scripts and idioms in public space. This had enormous consequences for the Indonesian religious demographics, as Confucianism was outlawed and many citizens of Chinese descent took up Buddhism as their official affiliation (at least nominally) since Buddhism was perceived at that conjunction to be a more “native” faith. In addition, most Chinese-Indonesians were encouraged to give up their names and convert into “native” ones or derivatives from Sanskrit, Arabic or Western languages.

Chinese-Indonesians weren't the only sufferer of ethnic scapegoating in the anti-communist carnage and religion was also a point of contestation in contexts that involve different minorities. In Sumatra, Javanese minorities were slaughtered in anti-PKI campaigns, while in Lombok it was the Balinese community to be targeted (Vickers 2005: 157; Coppel & Cribb 2009). Leftist intellectuals, feminist movements (Wieringa 2002: 139-190), clubs revolving around spiritual sects (Stange 1986) were some of the additional environments in which communist sympathies were identified and persecuted more or less systematically. Oftentimes, suspicion of communist ideas rather than their outward expression was sufficient for channelling the atrocious repression of the military. The vagueness of the range of what could define a “communist suspect” allowed for some groups to take up the military's anti-communist stance for pursuing parallel agendas. The assassinations linked to religious identity, especially among strands of Islam perceived as “deviant” and perpetrated by members of schools defining themselves as orthodox, can be seen through these lenses (Ricklefs 1993: 288). Indirectly, the killings had an effect on the overall religious landscape of the country, especially as religion was increasingly mobilised as a facet of civic life.

1.3. ID-religion and its discontents

The impact of the anti-communist purges on religion was massive and it was not limited to power dynamics between institutional Islam and its unorthodox or unorganised periphery. Every expression or suspicion of atheism was used as a justification for official repression as it was perceived as an orientation synonymous with Marxism. The first principle of *Pancasila* on the

foundational belief in God was often summoned in this frame. The Suharto government further bureaucratised the notion of *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* in order to “fight atheism”, with the implementation of mandatory religious affiliation for all Indonesian citizens, to be stated in ID documents and all types of administrative paperwork.

The anti-atheist scare coupled with compulsory religious affiliation sparked something of a “rush hour of the gods” (McFarland 1967) throughout the country, in which the religions recognised as official could proselytise with ease, legitimised by the civic duty to shape an anti-communist nation. These state-sanctioned religions corresponded largely with the major “world religions”, that is organised religious traditions that are ideally uprooted from specific local contexts, are based on a scriptural corpus and guarantee a degree of supervision on moral and theological issues (see Masuzawa 2005). Many communities in Indonesia who practised local religions of various kinds but who were vaguely familiar with Islamic notions opted for Islam as their official affiliation. Other communities who explicitly opposed Islam, which was seen as connected to the perpetrators of the 1965 mass killings, deliberately affiliated with Christianity. This process was especially visible in Java, where Christianity had only a very marginal following up to that point.

Hinduism and Buddhism were adopted by the communities whose chiefs or leaders were exposed to the circulation of dharmic teachings via spiritual sects or Theosophy circles, but also by those who perceived the Indic religions to be more consonant with the local religious expressions. In places like Java and Bali moreover, the narrative of Hindu-Buddhism as the “classical religion” of Indonesia played a big part in channelling affiliation to the modern form of the dharmic religions. The area of Surjosari which we’ll explore in the following chapters experienced what was presented as a “revival” of Buddhism within this frame.

In any case, the requirements of official religious affiliation initiated a period in which the propagation of world religions linked to institutional churches and organisations as well as informal networks, was met by the bottom-up need for citizenship. The affiliation to one of the recognised religions was in many cases a matter of bureaucratic formalities, with negligible consequences on the actual religious practice of given individuals and communities. Individuals who only subscribed to Islam for the sake of paperwork, for instance, are colloquially known to this day as *Islam KTP*, “ID card Muslims”.

However, over the decades the top-down religionising efforts did issue an overall shift in religious practice towards a more or less orthodox understanding of the given religions. This occurred through a conjunction of factors, which include the rise of mandatory religious education in all national and private schools, but also the massive building of houses of worship which

brought the state-sponsored religions, in a very physical sense, down to every neighbourhood and corner of the public space. The few local religious realities that resisted the penetration of more dogmatic forms of religion were at the very least compelled to negotiate space with them (Ricklefs 2012; Vignato 2000), either through syncretic stances or their re-configurations as self-contained religions. The debate over the bureaucratisation of *kepercayaan* can be seen as the culmination of this process.

1.4. Authority, spiritual power and ID-religion.

In Java, the main living form of traditional religious-political authority alternative to both the nation-state and the institutions of the world religions was represented by the royal courts. While previously numerous, only two royal dynasties are still perpetuated today, in the Central Javanese towns of Yogyakarta and Solo. Albeit void of real political power, they still exercise substantial influence in conveying a standard of “Javanese culture”. Both aristocracies adopted Islamic titles from the 18th century and incorporated formal Islamic vocabulary and references. However, over the centuries the courts had retained a significant body of symbols, rituals and conceptions that originated in local Javanese religions. Among other things, the courts inherited fragments of the idea of sacred kingship from the historical Javanese empires, which hinged on the royal family and oriented in important ways the nearby communities (see Geertz 1960).

The dynasties of Yogyakarta and Solo preserved much of their sacredness well into the 2000s, as showcased by the mass participation in the public rituals and ceremonies organised by their retinue. Nonetheless, the outward expression of these alternative forms of religious authority has faced increasingly vocal opposition and disdain by formal Islamic organisations. Muslim groups and clerics routinely discourage participation in the most “religious” aspects of the royal rituals, such as the worship of the royal paraphernalia paraded in procession (such as daggers and precious stones) and of the royal water buffaloes. As a consequence, in recent years the court mass ceremonies and processions have been performed in a more low-key fashion, marginalising ritual sections that used to be more central in the past, such as the mass rubbing into the royal buffaloes’ bathwater and dung. The practices carried out by the Javanese courts have been systematically framed as superstition or as religiously controversial by the country’s two mass Islamic organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah (Woodward 2011) and many Javanese Muslims have come to disregard them as such. In order to avoid the persistent accusation of unorthodoxy,

in 2017 one member of the Solonese royal family travelled to Denpasar in Bali to convert publicly to Hinduism and amend her ID card accordingly⁴.

The crystallisation of inter-religious boundaries that emerged with the formalisation of religious affiliation also affected the ecumenic spiritual-religious creed that characterised the early nationalist environments and condensed in the figure of Soekarno. Soekarno's spiritual legacy and the influence his persona exerted in the realm of religion became a cult in its own right and radiated through his physical remains but also his living kinship. This cult manifested in the spiritual pilgrimage that developed over the years to his burial site in Blitar, East Java (see Figure 3), and the aura of sacredness with which the Soekarno lineage is invested (de Jonge 2008). The influence of Soekarno's power resonates, via his genealogical posterity, also in the realm of contemporary political offices, not only through the short presidency (2001-2004) of his daughter Megawati Soekarnoputri, but also and especially in the traffic of imaginaries, symbols and references relating to the Soekarno that most of the prominent political actors are obliged to negotiate in order to secure electoral and spiritual legitimacy⁵.

However, the enchantment that characterised the cult of Soekarno and the religious reality he and his family represented began to be disputed in the late-Suharto era and especially with the surge of religion-based identity politics after the fall of the *Orde Baru* system and the implementation of a massive de-centralisation program. Once an unthinkable debate, the ideological structure of *Pancasila* began to be questioned more vocally, as was the cult of Soekarno as the spiritual guide of the nation (Bourchier 2019). Megawati Soekarnoputri herself began to be depicted more frequently in a *selendang* (loose Islamic headscarf) in the electoral campaigns for the latest regional and national rallies. When her daughter Puan Maharani run for office in 2019 in the Central Java electoral ward she was photographed on ballyhoos in the same attire. Soekarno's third daughter, Sukmawati, raised scandal in 2018 when she published a poem that longed for the return to the old-time religious life of Indonesia, attracting accusations of blasphemy by major Islamic groups. In 2021 she eventually converted to official Hinduism⁶.

⁴ *Nusa Bali* (07/2017): <https://www.nusabali.com/berita/15675/putri-keraton-surakarta-beralih-jadi-pemeluk-hindu>

⁵ See Roosa on *New Mandala* (2014): <https://www.newmandala.org/sukarnos-two-bodies/>

⁶ *Coconuts* (10/2021): <https://coconuts.co/bali/news/daughter-of-indonesias-first-president-sukarno-embraces-hinduism-in-bali/>



Figure 4. Portraits of Megawati and Buddhist Prajnaparamita in Soekarno's house and mausoleum.

The account elaborated so far in the chapter shows how majority and minority religions were constituted demographically in Indonesia in the context of the political events from the 1960s onwards, as well as the gradual marginalisation of non-sectarian or syncretic orientations. It also indicates how the dynamics through which a governmental policy intended for ideological surveillance like the implementation of mandatory religious affiliation re-shuffled and had long-term repercussions on the actual religious practice of most citizens.

As a state-sponsored majoritarian religion, the influence of Islam in the civic and religious life of the country is not only measured against the increase of religious observance and collective self-awareness by Indonesian Muslims, but it spills over to other formal religious domains too. The country's Christian communities have borrowed elements of vocabulary and moral conceptions from Indonesian Islam (Aritongan and Steenbrick 2008). The same can be said of Indonesian Buddhists who, like adherents to Christianity in the country, make use of the Arabic-derived *umat* to define themselves as a community instead of the more neutral Indonesian nouns *masyarakat* or *komunitas*. In a few instances during my fieldwork, the Islamic exclamation *Alhamdulillah* ("thank God") was rephrased by Buddhists in colloquial circumstances, including by a monk,

into *Alhamdulillah*. One of the villages I stayed at during my research decided to make use of the first daily prayer call (*subuh*) from the nearby mosque as the call for the village's Buddhists to gather at the closest temple for a morning worship session. Such fragments give an idea of the hegemonic role played by Islam in the religious landscape of Indonesia, but they also underscore a degree of religious porosity that is maintained beyond the hardened borders introduced with the bureaucratisation of religious affiliation in the country.

Indonesian Islam has experienced a trend towards a specific orthodoxy following the 1965 coup and, as we have seen, it exercises substantial influence on many aspects of social and religious life, including lives under different formal religious affiliations. However, orthodoxy trends internal to a given religion and power dynamics in respect to different affiliations are phenomena that concern not only Islam but also the other five religions that Indonesia regards as its official faiths.

The remainder of the thesis will focus on these aspects as they unfold within Buddhism. While in Java and in other parts of Indonesia forms of Buddhist devotion have been incorporated and localised in various ways over the 20th century, the surge of Theravāda Buddhism as a cosmopolitan tradition has introduced additional patterns of religious practice and authority.

2. The dawn of Theravāda Buddhism as a transnational religion

Although Buddhism originated in northern India in the 6th century BCE with the life and teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni, the present-day schools and institutions that drive Buddhism as a “world religion” are the result of historical developments that took place over the last few centuries, mostly outside of India. In scholarly and popular literature alike, contemporary Buddhism is often divided into three macro-orientations, also called “vehicles” in devotional writings. These are the Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and Theravāda schools. Substantial differences exist among the three vehicles in terms of canonical literature, teleology and encouraged ritual practices. These differences reflect the distinct social and historical settings in which they crystallised as religious institutions, out of the ocean of sects and lineages that characterised the early history of Buddhism.

The three schools correspond traditionally to three distinct geographical regions, although today these relocations have become increasingly blurry. The Mahāyāna vehicle encompasses the developments of Buddhism as produced in China, Korea and Japan, albeit historically other regions of Central and Southern Asia participated in this orientation. Vajrayāna Buddhism is closely associated with the Himalayan region of today's Tibet, Nepal and Ladakh (India). After

the Tibetan diaspora of the 1950s and 1960, Vajrayāna Buddhism has been widely popularised also in the United States and Europe. Instead, the history of Theravāda Buddhism has unfolded largely between Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia and it is marked by the use of Pāli as its liturgical language and the recognition of the three-fold *vinaya* canon (Tīpitaka) as its only textual tradition of reference. The major discrepancy among the traditions has been described as a difference in open/closed approaches towards the canon (Veidlinger 2010). While the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna vehicles maintain the possibility of a constantly expanding canon, Theravāda Buddhism considers as its pillars only what was uttered by the historical Buddha Sakyamuni and that was validated in the monastic councils that followed immediately after.

Theravāda Buddhism stands for, literally, “the teachings of the elders”⁷ and much of its self-representation rests on the narrative of being the uninterrupted continuation of the original teachings of the monastic circles closest to the historical Buddha. Therefore, from a Theravāda perspective, the two other major vehicles are perceived as derivative, less authentic and in some cases misleading. Despite this narrative, Theravāda as a tradition is a relatively modern phenomenon (Crosby 2014; Gombrich 2010). The origins of the contemporary Theravāda school can be loosely traced to the conservative movement of the Mahāvihāra monastic order in 12th and 13th century Ceylon. The order gained official patronage beginning with the Parakramabāhu I reign, eclipsing a number of different monastic lineages who also claimed to be preserving the teachings of the elders (Warder 2000; Hirakawa 1993).

Strong with institutional support, the Ceylonese Mahāvihāra school began to wield influence outside of Ceylon as well, as the kingdom became renowned as a centre of Buddhist expertise. The Bagan dynasties in Burma (1100-1300 ca.), in a series of attempts at regulating the monastic life of the kingdom, invited Ceylonese monks to lecture the local communities of monks who soon enough made Burma itself a renown centre of proto-Theravāda, Mahāvihāra Buddhist learning (Aung-Thwin 1985). A similar pattern was replicated in Thailand. Siamese monks travelled to Ceylon in order to study at Mahāvihāra monasteries and transmit the lineage to Thailand. The process accelerated once this form of Buddhism received royal patronage under King Ram Khamhaeng of the Sukhothai Dynasty (Kusalasaya 2013), initiating a long tradition of inter-dependence between the Siamese monarchy and Theravāda Buddhism which lasts to this day. Through official patronage, Burma and Thailand became additional vectors of Theravāda Buddhism in their own right.

⁷ From the Pāli *thera* (elders) and *vāda* (speech, doctrine).

The form of Buddhism transmitted to mainland Southeast Asia from the Mahāvihāra school of Ceylon was not yet the kind of Theravāda Buddhism as is known today. It was by and large a monastic religion, although Buddhist monks performed a number of important social functions, such as being in charge of lay education and officiating rites of passage, that transcended the specificities of the Theravāda school. In many cases in both Burma and Thailand, monks were also engaged in folk ritual practices and functioned as the medium for communicating with classes of spirits or other local supernatural beings. A significant turn in the history of this Buddhist tradition and the coin of the “Theravāda” designation occurred in the late 1800s, due to a combination of factors, which included the social and intellectual influence of colonial Britain.

The main advocate for a thorough reform of Buddhism was a British-educated Ceylonese monk, Anagarika Dharmapala. He initiated a period of intense literary production in the form of essays and commentaries, many of them written in English. His writings were in unison with the literature produced by European orientalist. He put the Buddhist canon in dialogue with European rationalist perspectives and demonstrated the relevance and the affinity of Buddhist doctrines in respect to Western sciences, especially psychology. Dharmapala’s mission was to marginalise all those aspects of Buddhist practice perceived as irrational and superstitious and focussed instead on the cultivation of a Buddhist religiosity more consonant with modern scientific discourses and with the textual knowledge as the greatest form of authority.

Importantly, Dharmapala envisioned an interiorised canon-based devotion that permeated the lives of the general population instead of being confined to the monastic domain. Although later in his life Dharmapala took conflictual stances towards colonialism and Britain, his work was endorsed by a number of Euro-American writers and he was invited to deliver lectures in some of the most important gatherings of the Theosophical Society. His vision of Theravāda Buddhism as a lived and democratic religion while at the same time anchored on the authority of a textual and “authentic” canon exerted influence throughout the Buddhist world that referred to the Mahāvihāra lineages.

Dharmapala’s vision reverberated in the developments in Thailand and Burma. A scholar himself, King Mongkut of Thailand introduced a more rigorous application of the Tipitaka canon in the Thai monastic community and initiated a new lineage (*Dhammayuttika*) specifically focussed on the exact adherence to the conduct mandated in the canon. The following monarchs in the dynasty invested considerable energies and finances in bureaucratising the *sangha*, including the access to the institution via written examinations, but also in popularising Pāli education at large

and introducing the “Buddhist era” dating system (Ishii 1986). Soon after, similar policies as well as the establishment of a *Dhammayuttika* order appeared in Laos and Cambodia (Harris 2001).

In the same stream of reformist movements, in Burma the Theravāda monk Ledi Sayadaw travelled through the country inviting the population to abandon the “folk” practice of animal sacrifices. He also authored several publications on the Pāli language intended for monastic and lay followers alike. However, his most far-reaching contribution was the teaching of scripture-based meditation practices such as *satipatthana*⁸ to the lay population. The lecturing of meditation techniques to lay Buddhists was later taken up and amplified by his followers, locally renowned monks such as U Ba Khin, who spread the practice outside of Burma (Braun 2016).

Lay meditation derived from the *satipatthana* texts (such as the *vipassana* technique) grew during the late 1900s into something of a global movement through a string of English-language publications and the appearance of popular meditation masters. The activity of meditators like Satya Narayan Goenka, a Bengali-Burmese master and businessman who coined the ten-days “meditation retreat” format, was particularly crucial. His standardised *vipassana* model was adopted progressively as a Buddhist lay practice throughout the Theravāda world as well as in secular domains in East Asia, Europe and the Americas (Stuart 2020). In Indonesia, both *vipassana* and meditation retreats have been incorporated as standards of Buddhist practice.

These major developments towards Theravāda Buddhism as we know it today was seen by many observers as the emergence of “Buddhist modernism” (MacMahan 2008, 2004), for the rationalised and democratised rendering of religious practice. Other authors have gone as far as defining the vehicle as a form of “Protestant Buddhism” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988), for the resemblances that it bears with comparable developments in Christianity in early modern Europe (see Weber 1958), although the use of the term has been contested for imposing Western-specific categories (Holt 1991; see Abeysekara 2019 for a recent debate on the concept). Whether or not it is appropriate to talk about “protestantisation” in respect to Theravāda Buddhism, it is clear that some of the tenets traditionally maintained by the school resonate with the features of reformed Christianity and modernity at large. The orientation to textual knowledge as the main form of religious guidance, the efforts invested in instilling forms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, extended not only to a circle of ascetics but to the wider lay society, the universalist and cosmopolitan leanings are all aspects that evoke parallels between Theravāda Buddhism and Christian Protestantism.

⁸ *Satipatthana* (“the establishment of mindfulness”) referred originally to both the name of a section of the Tipitaka canon concerning meditation as well as the meditation technique itself.

Resting on the authority of monastic lineages and strong with political endorsements, such as from the modern governments of Thailand and Myanmar, Theravāda Buddhist institutions make these modernist features tangible through a set of specific practices, which can be lumped together into three sets. The first one is the fostering of scriptural knowledge, expressed through the promotion of the Pāli canonical language for prayers and religious terminology, but also through major translation projects – via publications as well as mobile apps – of selected parts of the Tipitaka into vernacular languages. The second set has to do with the “democratisation” of scriptural knowledge and practices traditionally confined to the monastery. This is expressed not only in the popularisation of whole *suttas* and systematic philosophical notions from the Tipitaka scriptures to lay Buddhists, but also in the spread of text-derived meditation practices, such as the *vipassana* system, and ideas of ethical conduct.

Thirdly, Theravāda Buddhism supports a cosmopolitan and trans-national idea of religious community. As such, it rests on a complex relationship with local religious traditions (Brac de la Perrière 2009). Simultaneously, much energy and financial resources are invested in exchanges, international universities and projects which are often seen as intertwined with the political agendas of the respective nation-state of the lineages, especially with reference to Thailand (Kitiarsa 2010), Myanmar (Jordt 2007) and Sri Lanka (Learman 2005).



Figure 5. Indonesian monk and author Ven. Uttamo receiving ordination in Bangkok in 1987.

Despite the self-representation of Theravāda Buddhism as the religion of the elders and the strand of the tradition closest to the deeds of the historical Buddha, the “vehicle” condenses a number of features that frame it as a thoroughly modern project. In Indonesia and particularly in Java, the Theravādin idea of authenticity blends with local formulations of Buddhist “going back to the past”, in spite of the fact that both Theravāda Buddhism and Buddhism at large are relatively recent introductions. The apparent discrepancy between self-narrative and practices reflects what is commonly perceived to be a divide between discourse and materiality in the academic study of religion (Ioannides 2016; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Keane 2008), an aspect that is not confined to religion but concerns many other cultural practices too (Nakassis 2013; Silverstein and Urban 1996).

While many scholars prefer to adopt one or the other lens for discussing religious phenomena (see Reinhardt 2016 and Lambek 2014 for a critique), the perspective I convey in this thesis acknowledges the dialogic nature of the two domains. Material practices and discursive patterns are co-dependant and participate in fundamental ways to the formation of religious assemblages. In order to unknot these dense analytical categories, I turn now to the wider anthropological literature.

3. The study of “lived religion”: from materialism to assemblage

Since the 1990s the study of religion in the social sciences has been greatly influenced by the surge of the paradigm commonly defined as the “material turn” or “new materialism”. The latter definition has been forged to emphasise the distinction of the paradigm from the classical approach of historical materialism, which built on Marxist theories and which enjoyed a degree of popularity in anthropology in the 1960s through the 1980s (Harris 1966, 1979; Margolis 1973; Wolf 1982). New materialism emerged as a viable trajectory in anthropological analysis in conjunction with a number of new important strands in the discipline, such as the renewed attention to the body as a repository and a producer of culture (hence “embodiment” – Csordas 1990; Lock 1993; see also Mascia-Lees 2011) and especially the rise of Actor-Network Theory as devised in the social sciences by Bruno Latour (1996, 2005).

Inspired by the *deleuzian* idea of assemblage, Actor-Network Theory underscores how objects and social phenomena invariably exist in webs of physical and imaginative relationships and participate as much as human actors in producing a socio-cultural world. In a famous example of how such networks are instantiated, Latour (1999) contrasted the two slogans used in the public debate over gun control, “weapons kill people” versus “guns don’t kill people, people kill

people”. Where the former projects the responsibility of the act in the very mechanistic capacity of the weapon, the latter delegates the act of killing to the sole intentionality of the human subject. Latour upturned this logic and proposed that it was instead the assemblage of people *and* guns that kill people, including into this network not only the physicality of weapons (the trigger, the bullet etc.) but also the human finger, the contingent psychological condition, the role of violent films, the bullet’s speed, and so on.

In this frame, objects and events come to occupy a much more salient and active role in the social world, which exceeds the traditional relegation of things by anthropologists as inert recipients of human-generated symbolic relationships or indexes of disciplines of power (Hazard 2013). Studies in the orbit of new materialism are informed in major ways by the reading proposed by Latour and focus habitually on how “(...) apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people and are acted upon by people” (Woodward 2007: 3).

The attention towards the material dimension of social life has also been propelled in recent years in anthropology by the revitalisation of phenomenology as a paradigm for the humanities (Mattingly 2019; Desjarlais and Throop 2011), as well as by the sustained discussion over the so-called “ontological turn” (Bessire and Bond 2014; Venkatesan 2010) and the study of sensorial engagement with the world (Le Breton 2017; Pink 2010). These theoretical orientations have contributed to positioning materiality at the heart of anthropological inquiry, as social-cultural worlds are understood to result from the perceptual interaction of all the elements at play in an environment. The phenomenological assemblages emerging among humans and between them and the world of things have been enriched by categories such as that of “affordance” (Ingold 2018, following Gibson 1982), that is the potentiality that emerges at the point of contact between a perceiving subject and another object or person. Following this line of thought, other authors have dislocated the primacy of human agency and diluted it in oceans of “thingworlds” (Lucas and Robb 2021) or have side-lined human agency completely, emphasising the role of radically indifferent and autonomous “ecologies” (Cohen and Duckert 2017).

I find the evolution of the discussion on material culture particularly useful for grasping the full reach of the processes that may be involved in a cultural assemblage. Objects, events, people and symbols combine to form contingent cultural hubs that may (or may not) impact further combinations, according to specific historical contexts or the predisposition of perceiving subjects. From this standpoint, we can understand a religious phenomenon in a non-deterministic way while appreciating the broader set of objects, sensations, associations and individual and collective biographies that contribute to its formation.

3.1. From “material religion” to “lived religion”

The impact of new materialism on the study of religion has been substantial. In the trail of the ontological reflection, Philippe Descola (2014) has redefined religion as a whole as “ontologies of incarnates”, that is the “public instauration of an invisible quality through a speech act or an image” (2014: 37), emphasising the extent to which “religion embodies, religion incarnates, religion renders present in visible and tangible manifestations the various alteration of being” (ibid.). Such definition departs significantly from both the classical notion of religion as a “web of symbols” elaborated by Clifford Geertz (1973) as well as the purely cognitive dimension analysed by authors such as Pascal Boyer (2002).

The attention to a broadly understood materiality, the body and perception in the study of religion is important because it offers a path that overcomes the excessive focus on textualism, dogma and, for anthropologists, the category of “belief” as the privileged site in which religion can be found and studied (Orsi 2011; Keane 2008). Such focus on scripture and matters of belief has been reframed as the enduring legacy of Christianity-influenced scholarship and Cartesian mind/body dualism (Lambek 2014; Vásquez 2011).

Researchers working on religion in this post-Cartesian analytical frame have named their subject in slightly different ways, depending on the methodological angle adopted. “Material religion” is the denomination employed by authors who associate their work the closest with the interaction of religion with material culture, understood primarily as things, objects and buildings (Plate 2014). While proceeding from a common theoretical background, the use of “everyday religion” pays attention instead to the diffused nature of religious experience, as opposed to the traditional focus on institutions, literacy or formal rituality (Ammerman 2007), and resonates with the emergence of ordinary language philosophy in the wider anthropological literature (see Das 2020, 2007; Lambek 2010).

Finally, “lived religion” has gained popularity in recent years as a definition that encompasses the same premises as its “everyday” sibling and analyses how “religious practices are framed by religious practitioners” (Schedneck 2019: 33), understanding religion in an indissoluble continuity with the other spheres of human activity. Therefore, the lived religion approach acknowledges the usefulness of the notion of “religious field”, in which “field” identifies semi-autonomous spheres of relations where individuals act and are positioned. The idea was first introduced by Bourdieu (Burdieu 1971; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), although it was expanded later on in order to show the permeability of the different social “fields” and the ways they impact each other (Verter 2003).

Scholars writing in this trail bring onto one platform the institutional and the vernacular, rejecting thus the concept of “popular religion” as a lesser or tentative form of “true” religion, which is supposed to lay instead in formal ritual and more or less explicit belief systems (Orsi 2010; McGuire 2008). They treat therefore as equally relevant orientations the religious experiences of what Alfred Schütz (1946) defined as the perspectives of “the expert, the well-informed citizen and the man on the street”. A tenet of the lived religion approach is frequently the attention to experience, which is always traced in the material body (McGuire 2016) and the research focus includes the categories of perception (a domain most directly influenced by phenomenology, see Knibbe and Kupari 2020) as well as the various ways in which things enter these experiential and sensorial fields (Morgan 2010). The materiality of objects considered to be relevant for a given religious reality is therefore broadly understood and it extends beyond the conventional role that religious studies have attributed to the material world, confined to symbolism and/or fetishism (Sansi 2018; Pool 1990).

3.1.1. Towards an anthropology of “lived Buddhism”

While the “lived religion” approach was first formulated within the anthropological scholarship on Christianity (as in Morgan 2012; Orsi 2005; Hall 1997), in recent years anthropologists working on Buddhism have contributed with a number of significant researches within this orientation. Julia Cassaniti (2015) has shown how communities of lay Thai Buddhists incorporate and struggle to make tangible Buddhist ideas such as non-attachment and impermanence, with particular attention to the participants’ everyday work on emotion. Other authors, working predominantly in the Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna traditions of Buddhism (Sasson 2021; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019; Brox 2019; Allison 2019; Sehnalova 2019; Chiodo 2017), have explored the entanglement of Buddhist religiosity with object materiality, including plastic waste, and the global economic systems, expanding the reach of what is included in the definition of materiality.

Perhaps the most productive area of scholarship in the anthropology of Buddhism has been the application of material culture paradigms to Buddhist economy at large, which encompasses the traditional practices of *dana* and merit-making (Walsh 2007; Childs 2005), but also the encounter with late-capitalist business techniques in China and Tibet (Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2016) and the consequences of the surge of “spiritual tourism” in Thailand (Schedneck 2017). All these authors have contributed to shifting the classical focus of Buddhist scholarship on formal Buddhist concepts, textuality and relationship with state power. They also inspired many of the lines of inquiry which I follow in this thesis.

The entanglement of Buddhism with practices of tourism and other forms of leisure economy more or less defined in religious terms is a fertile field for research. Concentrating on this entanglement not only allows for the study of how Buddhist ideas are engaged and adapted, but it offers a starting point for following the multiple social-cultural activities that merge into tourist infrastructures. Such practices lead one to explore issues as diverse as mobility patterns, ethnic discourses, notions of aesthetics and heritage, economic techniques and strategies for visibility and attractivity. Although tourism is only occasionally the point of departure in the analyses of the thesis, many of the practices described in the chapters can be traced to the emergence of a local tourist economy and the expectations that it carries.

3.1.2. Lived Theravāda Buddhism: more themes to explore

Less explored paths which I pursue in this thesis and are worth investigating in the frame of “lived Buddhism” regard the relationship between Theravāda Buddhism and corporate forms of economy and imaginaries. Aspects of this relationship can be seen in the activities that lay Buddhist organisations choose to carry out in order to gain attractivity, particularly among young Buddhists. This is explored in detail in chapter VI, but there are echoes of such practices also in the activities of a youth group like Pemuda Buddhis in chapters III and IV. Such activities can take the form of team-building initiatives and “ice-breaking” tasks oriented at enhancing group cohesion and are expressed in a specific vocabulary of prosperity, self-development and individual success. The enterprise (the “corporation”) is intended to be the perpetuation of the Buddhist *umat* against the competition posed by other religions, locally and nationwide.

However, it is often the case that the mobilisation of imaginaries rather than concrete neoliberal technologies constitutes means potent and efficacious enough for advancing such an idea of the successful religious community. I understand imagination as a faculty rather than a delusional form of cognition, following the reading that Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) make of Kant’s idea of the imaginary, that is “the ability to bring to mind that which is not entirely present to the senses” (Sneath et al. 2009: 11-12). The imaginary is pervasive, has implications for the tangible world and travels in not always foreseeable directions (Strauss 2006). Many of the practices enacted in my research contexts mobilise entrepreneurial and/or spectacular imaginaries in more or less conscious forms without necessarily entailing comparably grand projects. The imaginary of the religious or cultural “big event” circulates and is especially potent in this frame. Initiatives like Java Connections, *Nyadran Perdamaian* and the organisation of Weisaks in Jakarta make use of specific linguistic choices (including the choice of English idioms), bodily postures,

aesthetic configurations and allusions that appeal to the immediate sensorial perception as much as to the imaginary. Taking into account this level of cultural circulation can offer important insights into the assemblages that Buddhist references engender in concrete situations.

Another aspect of lived Buddhism which hasn't been tackled extensively is the localisation of Theravāda Buddhism with context-specific ethnoreligious stances. The blending of concepts and practices that can be ascribed to the Theravāda tradition with local forms of religiosity and identity affirmations is not a new theme. Theravāda Buddhism has intersected local religious practices and cosmologies throughout its historical evolution in Myanmar and Thailand. It has been mobilised as well discursively to articulate nationalist agendas, especially among Burmese and Sri Lankan extremist factions. However, not much has been said on the adoption of Theravāda Buddhist rituals, vocabulary and institutional lines for the expression of ethnic identities alternative to nationalist frameworks. The mobilisation of Theravāda Buddhism within the social uprisings of the *dalit* of India (Verma 2010) is perhaps the closest instance of a process of identity formation in the making that encompasses the Theravāda religious infrastructure.

The case of Surjosari that I present in chapters III to V does not involve dynamics of political militancy or emancipation. On the contrary, it unfolds in a community (the Javanese) which constitutes in ethnic terms the demographic majority countrywide, and it advances the features that are perceived to be “authentic” of that majority. However, the self-representation of the community as virtuous upholders of ethnic authenticity and the re-valorisation of those ethnocultural features through Buddhist practices offers a new prospect on how Theravāda Buddhism is lived in the context of emerging local identities.

3.2. Locating religion between discourse and new materialism

Although many writings in the lived religion approach define their subject of study explicitly set apart from linguistic and discursive perspectives, influenced, as we have seen, by the embodiment and new materialism paradigms, Knibbe and Kupari (2020) also indicate that materiality and discourse as bodies of theory and methodology don't need to be understood as incompatible with each other. On the contrary, integrating the two perspectives might shed new light on the issues so far explored by those scholars who work in the lived religion scheme. The study of discourse in the social sciences has a robust history that stems from the seminal work of Michel Foucault and it had an enormous influence on the development of theory in post-colonial studies and all the declinations of cultural critique (see Gandhi 2020 for a summary of these developments). The important legacy of the work of Foucault on discourse in the anthropology of religion is due

mainly to the writings of Talal Asad on Islam (2009 [1986]; 2003), although with major implications for the wider discipline.

3.2.1. Talal Asad's discursive tradition

In his famous critique of Clifford Geertz, Asad pointed out how the symbolic approach in the study of religion was insufficient for accounting for a number of issues intrinsic to religion, above all the question of power. Asad attempted to de-essentialise Islam from the centrality attributed to scriptures, seen by scholars as the “essence” against which the religious behaviour of Muslims should be judged and contrasted. On the contrary, he proposed that the sheer diversity among the religious manifestations that refer to Islam should not be understood as deviant or corrupted “lesser traditions” in respect to an objective “greater tradition”⁹ represented by the written text and their exegesis. Instead, *the whole* of Islam could be better apprehended as a discursive tradition.

With the use of discursive tradition Asad intended to merge two notions. The first was the Foucauldian idea of “discursive formation”, that is a set of historically produced and power-infused systems of thought and speech. The second is the reading of Alasdair MacIntyre’s concept of tradition, understood not in the popular sense of integrated customs and lore, but as an unfinished project, an ongoing and always emerging “conversation”. In this way, Asad could overcome the two extremes in the academic study of religion of erudite essentialism and radical localisms, removing the value-judgement intrinsic in conceptions of objectified orthodoxy. At the same time, the idea of discursive tradition acknowledged the importance of the common pool of narratives and systems of thought and speech within a given religious stream which various communities and groups receive, produce and make claims to.

The insight provided by Asad’s work has inspired a bulk of scholarship which has proceeded mostly in parallel to the emergence of material religion (Johnston 2020; Hjelm 2014). In their work on lived religion, Knibbe and Kupari (2020) have proposed to look precisely at the legacy of the discursive tradition as a fundamental integration to the ongoing discussion on materiality. An example of such blending would be the recent research that has appeared in the study of secularism, particularly the work of Scheer et al. (2019), on how discursive practices around secularism intersect with the material body and emotions of contemporary European societies. In a similar direction, Schrijvers and Wiering (2018) explore the interaction of sexual

⁹ “Great tradition” and “little tradition” refer to the classical division proposed by Robert Redfield in 1956, see Lukens-Bull (1999) for a critical discussion.

practices and experiences with religious/secular discourses around sex to converge into a conception of what constitutes “good sex”.

I situate the vision of religiosity that I try to convey through the thesis in this strand of thought, at the point of interaction between the set of categories and discourses that are historically produced and mobilised by actors across the social and political spectrum and the lived experience of the human subjects who engage with them, individually and collectively. There are many ways in which this “point of interaction” might be conceptualised. The affects dimension explored by Schaefer is an important point of departure.

3.2.2. Power beyond knowledge: Schaefer’s “religious affects”

In a critique of the purely linguistic strands of discourse analysis but also of the marginality with which power figures in material approaches, Donovan Schaefer coined the notion of “religious affects” (Schaefer 2015; 2012; on the same concept, see also Kasmani 2020 and Stodulka 2018). In his work, Schaefer thematises power outside of language, or at least outside the trail of thought which conceives of power as accumulated in exclusively linguistic regimes (what he calls “the linguistic fallacy”), regimes that are seen as crystallising in individuals to produce subjectivity. The assumption, in this framework, is that religious bodies move because “a particular textual regime has directed them to do so” (Schaefer 2015: 13). Instead, Schaefer locates the interplay between power and religion in affects, which are characterised as propulsive elements of experience, thought and sensation that occur before language and even before consciousness.

Affects are inherently embodied and resonate with dynamics of compulsion, addiction and emotional intransigence, that is the *persistence* of embodied, non-codified emotional forms across individual and collective evolution. Therefore, power can “choreograph” bodies on registers that exceed the linguistic and are conveyed through modes of perception. For Schaefer, the efficacy of Reagan’s speeches as well as the emergence of islamophobia via specific bodily and spatial organisations are both examples of the ways power spirals around affect modes and not by hinging on conceptual grids. Following Pellegrini (2011), Schaefer recalls how the ability of religious traditions to win over converts or to re-ignite spiritual effervescence is less about examining or re-pondering conceptual hermeneutics but in the tackling of affective congruences. The religious body is invested, that is, in a structure of feeling that can draw together individual experiences, thoughts and sensations that may be very diverse or even contradictory.

Language and discourse are not entirely dismissed in the analyses of the authors who work in the frame of affects but are recast in specific relationships. While the circulation of discourse

is understood as necessarily resting to varying degrees on material and embodied circumstances, linguistic forms might be studied not only as the major expression of discourse and knowledge systems but also in their material and acoustic qualities as they participate in sensorial complexes. The readings of authors like Schaefer help us to reconfigure power, including religious power, as diffusing through embodied states. Some of the facets in the emergence of contemporary Buddhism in the ethnographic contexts we are going to explore point in this direction too. They also helps us in re-introducing issues of discourse as an expression of power dynamics into the discussion on materiality and the senses that I traced in the previous paragraphs. Once we have acknowledged the compresence of the two levels, we still need to elaborate on how precisely discursive strands are entangled in material and bodily formations.

A possible entry point into this issue is offered by the writings of Deleuze and Guattari. I turn to the work of the two authors for two reasons. One is their reflection on the concept of “strata”, which is illuminating for the analytical knot we just described. Another reason is the employment of the productive notions of assemblage and rhizome, two images that Deleuze and Guattari introduce and expand in *A Thousand Plateau* (1986) in order to understand cultural complexity at large. Ultimately, the string of thought contained in the images of Deleuze and Guattari allows me to integrate the diverse ethnographic material involved in this thesis and it constitutes a crucial framework for how the different processes which I describe are envisioned to fit together into the trope of “Javanese Buddhism”.

3.3. Rhizomes and strata. Working with *A Thousand Plateau*

The work of Deleuze and Guattari has been widely adopted in many fields of the social sciences and it has experienced a new wave of popularity in recent years, including in anthropology (see for example Handelman and Shapiro 2020 and Appadurai 1990 for an early application). Several lines of research are defined routinely using one or more insights from what the two philosophers thought as a “theoretical toolbox”. In religious studies, the most influential work inspired explicitly by *A Thousand Plateau* has been Tweed’s theory of religion, as the author made use of the notions from Deleuze and Guattari in order to get to a definition of religion as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering” (Tweed 2006: 54). However, the work of the French philosophers has been brought into conversation in the anthropology of religion only marginally. Exceptions have been Sykes’ (2015) ethnography on Tamil ritual music in Singapore and Bialecki’s (2012) work on “virtual Christianity”.

One of the key concepts that Deleuze and Guattari investigate is the idea of assemblage. Elaborating on the Freudian notion of *Komplex*, that is the relatively stable structure of interpersonal relations in which an individual makes place for him/herself, Deleuze and Guattari argue that within a body (material, social or philosophical) the component parts are never stable nor fixed and they constantly connect with other components, within and without the given body. The authors stress the fluid and relatively indeterminate nature of social formations and draw attention to the processual aspect of these formations, a feature that is best appreciated for many scholars in the French original of the concept, *agencement*: to fit, arrange, piece together (Buchanan 2020; Phillips 2006).

In the process of an assemblage, culture diffuses horizontally, filtering through the available spaces and fissures, mixing, diluting or displacing the pre-existing structures. The authors explain the working of this process with the botanical image of the rhizome. Unlike roots and arborescent organisms, rhizomes spread horizontally, non-hierarchically and connect at any point with any other rhizome. A rhizome can be broken, but it necessarily starts to grow again via one of its threads or by forming new lines (the principle of “asignifying rupture”, Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 8-11). The persistent feature of rhizome recalls Schaefer’s idea of intransigence, which we have seen just before. Although inherently unstable and in flux, features of culture or one’s emotional predisposition retain a degree of perseverance.

The concrete way, the ordering principle, in which connections and selections are established to form temporary and contingent aggregates is described by Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1986) through the notion of territorialisation. Assemblages “territorialise”, lump together, components into temporary formations that are inherently subject to processes of deterritorialisation and simultaneous reterritorialisations into new aggregates, born from new connections. It is also in the context of territorialisation that the authors elaborate on a crucial point, which is further explored in *A Thousand Plateau* (1986: 45-85), that is the taxonomy of the components involved in cultural arrangements. To explain this point, they make use of the geological image of strata. The image is useful because, like social-cultural phenomena, geological strata can give an impression of fixity and concreteness while, at a closer look, they reveal a constant magmatic reconfiguration of the elements that compose them. For this reason, they favour the usage of the processual notion of stratification, rather than the potentially misleading picture of immobility that strata evoke.

There are three types of strata, geological, biological (“material”) and semiological (“alloplastic”). Although distinct, these types of strata impact on each other and are in a relationship of dependency with one another, like the soldier and a phalanx: although the phalanx

may appear to be a sum of separate components (soldiers, spears, shields, etc.), these are mutually implicated, as a soldier to be in a phalanx will necessarily need a spear. Similarly, the group of components does not automatically yield a phalanx, because the phalanx is an event, a performance. Deleuze and Guattari use this image to explain how the different types of strata are simultaneously different but mutually dependent and subsist in a process, which is stratification.

The typology of strata as material and discursive/alloplastic types serves to understand a recurring theme in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, which is the co-dependence in every manifestation of content and expression. Assemblages are constituted by material multiplicities and discursive multiplicities. The two multiplicities come together necessarily through an event that brings the two formations into a state of resonance, that is of interaction and exchange. Antonioli and Heuzé (2012) emphasise how the music metaphor in Deleuze and Guattari is chosen in contrast to the notion of both harmony and dissonance. The resonance that exists between material multiplicities and discursive multiplicities does not imply a specific outcome but can manifest in various forms, including apparent discrepancies or contradictions. Whatever being the form, resonance occurs always on the expressive side and it is a feature of all assemblages.

3.3.1. Javanese Buddhism as an assemblage

I recalled part of the themes that Deleuze and Guattari elaborated in their thought, and especially in *A Thousand Plateaus*, for two main reasons. The first one is the analysis given on the compresence and co-dependence of material and discursive strata in cultural assemblages while the second one is the very conceptualisation of assemblages. The observations that Deleuze and Guattari make of material and discursive formations as always-already co-emerging, mutually dependent and resonating offer us a path to think differently about materiality and discourse. Rather than being conceived and researched as two alternative fields in which social-cultural phenomena occur, the discussion on strata shows how both levels can be understood jointly. This aspect is enriched further with the recognition that not only the material level but also the discursive dimension is an ensemble of multiple threads that vary in kind and degree, threads that do not refer to a unitarian whole and do not lead to a single specified direction.

I explore the co-emergence of these two levels throughout the following chapters. In the various research settings, Buddhism is always a set of material relationships that are established more or less consciously among objects, people, environments and sensorial realms. It shows through places of worship (from *viharas* to convention centres), aesthetic practices, the direct

involvement of environmental and agricultural procedures, the importance of immediate sensorial experiences. Simultaneously it also emerges as a discursive field on very different levels. These threads range from broad historical narratives (such as the weight attributed to Buddhism as a “classical religion”) to various identitarian stances involving Javanese and/or Chinese ethnic streams. Discursive multiplicities also encompass the modalities in which Buddhism circulated and circulates in state bureaucracy, including its definition as a “religion”, and in respect to other existing traditions (Christianity, Islam, Javanist movements, Confucianism) and they filter in how official affiliation is engaged and/or blurred in concrete cases, but also in the symbolic associations that are constituted on individual and/or collective scales, from minute acts of devotion to large events.

The religious rituals and the secular initiatives big and small described through the chapters, the practices around Buddhist sculptures from Temanggung to Yogyakarta, all show how the two levels co-emerge and resonate with each other. But they also indicate the impossibility of laying out the present form of Buddhism in a neat, continuous and unitarian genealogy. This is the second point in which the framework of Deleuze and Guattari comes useful, especially in the overarching notion of assemblage.

I consider Javanese Buddhism as an “assemblage”, in the most basic sense, because it is a confluence of multiple practices, stories, identities, local and transnational traditions. This is true both for the current phenomena I bring under the umbrella of Javanese Buddhism, but also for the dynamics that throughout history have produced Buddhism(s) in the region, as we will see in chapter II. In the sense more tightly related to the *deleuzian* idea, Javanese Buddhism is an assemblage because it does not culminate in an essentialised identity or a clear-cut religious blueprint. It is an etic category that tries to capture a specific phenomenon that territorialises elements of multiple origins into a fluid form that simultaneously connects and branches out to other social-cultural segments or to entirely other formations – be it other segments of Buddhism in Indonesia, global Theravāda Buddhism or different social-economic realities in Java and beyond.

Therefore, I frame Javanese Buddhism as a “rhizomatic” phenomenon rather than an arborescent cultural formation. As such, it incorporates various stances, including claims of ethnic authenticity (or “rootedness”), and morphs continuously through shifting configurations. The shift is both internal and external, as it stands in continuity with processes as diverse as the implementation of leisure economies, dynamics emanating from other religious traditions and political circumstances and imaginaries pertaining to notions of success, development and attractivity. The images of strata, rhizome and assemblage are crucial in this sense for navigating

the broad complex which I call Javanese Buddhism and can serve as helpful cornerstones for apprehending social-religious phenomena at large.

Living Buddhism in multi-religious Indonesia

In this chapter, I outlined the trajectories of the thesis. I situated the thesis in respect to the wider history of contemporary Indonesia, especially how Buddhism is constituted as a modern minority religion. I did so by eliciting the dynamics of religious affiliation in Java and countrywide, an aspect which is closely related to the political events of 20th century Indonesia, from the early post-colonial presidencies to the tragic consequences of the anti-communist campaigns and the sectarian trends that emerged thereafter. Secondly, I briefly recalled the history of Theravāda Buddhism and how it became a transnational Buddhist orientation. While the presence of Theravāda Buddhism in Indonesia is relatively recent, it has surged as a prominent institutional vehicle in the country and it has set the tone for many aspects of Buddhist practice in Java, the seat of its headquarters, and from here to the rest of Buddhist Indonesia.

With the third trajectory, I expanded the discussion to the analytical points that link the thesis with the wider anthropological literature. I positioned the thesis in the stream of literature referring to the lived religion approach and reconstructed the genesis of this approach from the paradigm of new materialism. I outlined as well how new materialist and discursive approaches came to occupy largely distinct corpora in the anthropology of religion. In the last section, I explored some of the notions from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. These concepts are useful for understanding the interplay of discourse and materiality in a different key. Finally, the idea of assemblage and the related images of strata and rhizome are evoked as the conceptual compass for the overall design of the thesis. Javanese Buddhism is presented accordingly not as a reified religious phenomenon but as a dynamic and contingent hub which, despite having no definable centre or direction, constitutes a relevant social-religious aggregate in which various practices and themes converge and propagate.

Chapter II

PERPETUUM MOBILE: BUDDHISM IN INDONESIA

A vihara in Central Java

Vihara Avalokitesvara-Watugong is one of the largest and most impressive architectural objects in the Javanese Buddhist landscape. Its architecture sums up in an interesting way the changes that characterised the modern history of Buddhism in Java and Indonesia. Located in the outskirts of Semarang, the provincial capital of Central Java, the construction of the temple in the 1950s coincided with the formation of an Indonesian Buddhist *sangha* under the aegis of venerable Ashin Jinarakkhita and was regarded by many as a major symbolic act in the re-establishment of Buddhism in the archipelago. A large board at its gate reminds one that this sacred ground constituted the first official vihara¹⁰ in Indonesia “since the times of Majapahit”, the last of the Sanskritised dynasties of Java.

The apparently unproblematic historical move – that is, linking contemporary Buddhist practice with the religious world of Majapahit – is one of the techniques that attempts in quite explicit ways at grounding this vihara and, by extension, Indonesian Buddhism at large, with the history of pre-Islamic Java. As we will see in chapters III and V, this historical narrative figures, sometimes in the background sometimes to the fore, in many contexts that articulate contemporary Buddhism as a form of “revival”. However, the complex is also linked with the very materiality of the soil on which it stands, which provides an additional layer of deep history: Watugong identifies in Javanese a massive rock (*watu, batu*) resembling a ritual gong which was believed to be spiritually charged. This powerful device in volcanic stone is said to be found once in what is now the yard of the vihara and came to designate to this day the entire neighbourhood with its name. The finding of the gong-shaped stone is recollected on the same welcoming board. Past the gate, the visitor is met precisely by the giant gong-shaped rock, circumscribed by a perimeter of black-painted bricks.

Following the developments of Buddhism in post-colonial Indonesia, from the 1960s Vihara Avalokitesvara-Watugong, then known solely as Buddhagaya, became the stronghold of the influential Buddhayāna movement of Ashin Jinarakkhita. As we have seen in the previous

¹⁰ *Vihara* identifies in Indonesian an exclusively Buddhist house of worship, distinct from Chinese-syncretic temples (*klenteng*) and unaffiliated worship venues (*cehya*). The term (*vihāra*) is derived from Sanskrit, via Pāli, in which it was originally used in reference to monasteries and residencies for monks (Chakrabarti 1995).

chapter, Buddhayāna intended to promote a non-sectarian version of Buddhism as a distinct “national Buddhism” for Indonesia. Non-sectarianism was, in this understanding, a fusion of elements from the three contemporary major Buddhist traditions (Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna) and many of the aesthetic features of the vihara bear witness precisely of this big aspiration. A tall pillar sustains the *chakra* and lion symbols of the Buddhist king Ashoka, venerated in most Theravāda environments, particularly in Myanmar. Statues of Kwan Im, the popular gender-fluid representation of Avalokitesvara in Chinese-influenced Buddhism, adorn a separate altar as well as the *dhammasala* hall, next to the main Gautama Buddha statue. A massive stone tablet emerges from a fountain to the right reciting in bas-relief portions of the Tibetan Bardo Thödöl. Facilities for offerings like money-burning and the lion guardians dotting the outdoor spaces are both according to Chinese standards of craftsmanship.

Over the decades, the vihara became increasingly known among Buddhists as Avalokitesvara, a Mahāyāna worship often overlapping with the cult of Kwan Im. The unofficial re-denomination was symptomatic of the growing dominance of Chinese-Indonesians within Buddhist matters following the ban, under the New Order, on Confucianism and all Chinese cultural venues and aesthetic features, including writing in *hanzi* script. Although most Chinese-Indonesians under that conjunction opted for Buddhism as their stated religion and many began to populate Buddhist viharas, others kept to their older houses of worship and nominally changed the status of Chinese worship houses (*kelenteng*) into formally Buddhist ones (*vihara*). For a while, the practice of converting the denominations of worship venues blurred the distinction between the two terms and initiated a process of “Buddhification” of Chinese houses of worship and Sinicisation of Buddhist ones. This process is perhaps best summarised with the project of building a majestic 45 meters tall pagoda on the right edge of the vihara grounds, decorated with several Kwan Im miniatures and Chinese-style canopies.

However, by the time the imposing Kwan Im pagoda was inaugurated in 2005, with a dedication tablet of the provincial governor of Central Java, Buddhism in Indonesia had come to be identified by a shifting configuration of discourses and organisations. Ashin Jinarakkhita passed away in 2002, in 2006 Confucianism was reinstated as a legal religious affiliation and, most importantly, Sangha Theravāda Indonesia had surged as the dominant school in Buddhist affairs in the country. The standardising efforts of the Theravāda school became evident on all levels of religious practice, from Buddhist school curricula to religious terminology, temple worship and meditation. After a thorough makeover, which involved the entire remaking of the *dhammasala*, the placing of Borobudur-style stone stupas as decorative items and the project of building a 36-meters tall statue of a standing Sakyamuni (advertised at the moment of my stay by a large

donation board), Vihara Avalokitesvara-Watugong eventually came under the complete domain of Sangha Theravāda Indonesia in 2006.



Figure 6. The watugong rock



Figure 7. The southern section of the vihara complex with the Kwan Im pagoda

The affiliation and architectural history of the Watugong vihara in Semarang is exemplary of the fortunes that Buddhism underwent in Indonesia over the last century and it condenses many of the themes that unfold within the following chapters. As the brief account suggests, this history is not merely a question of power dynamics between competing schools and denominations. Several other issues are drawn in that relate to identity politics, local religiosity and, above all, the circulations of objects and narratives in the lives of Buddhists in Indonesia. Following the threads of the history of Buddhism in Indonesia is not only important for contextualising the ethnographic field, but it is conducive to better appreciate the way historical fragments reverberate in the religious life of some of the present-day Buddhists and how those fragments are taken up consciously to articulate specific narratives and identity formations. In fact, while much of what might be deemed “Buddhist” in today’s Indonesia is the result of very recent events and dynamics, the continuous recurrence of ideas of “return”, “revival” or “revitalisation” inevitably instantiates selective links to history.

Drawing attention to history is not a linear or unambiguous endeavour. The assemblage that is contemporary Buddhism in Indonesia might be figured as a layering of events, people and artefacts that have been braiding into each other in complex ways and for a vast period of time. Although Java was not always the geographical kernel of the historical dynamics of Buddhism in the archipelago, the island has been the durable epicentre of many developments that shaped the religious and political themes that define Buddhism in Indonesia. These themes range from the dominant aesthetic strands associated with “native” Buddhism to the island being the seat of most Buddhist organisational headquarters. The renewed attention to cultural and ethnic symbols among the Javanese, the majoritarian ethnic identity in the country, also makes Java a crucial site for observing the intersection of Buddhism with historical-cultural narratives and current religious practices. In the following sections in the chapter, I will follow the various historical threads that coalesce in the complex formation that is Buddhism in Java.

1. Sriwijaya and the Sanskritic cosmopolis (~300-1370)

No trace is known to this day of the exact first appearance in the Indonesian archipelago of notions and practices somewhat relating to Buddhism. The early manifestations of Buddhism in the area, largely ascertained through secondary sources, portrayed from the start a deep continuity with the larger history of the region. Splitting the history of Nusantara (the pre-colonial connotation for the Indonesian archipelago) from the wider Asian religious and political

chronicles might be deemed a construct in itself, since the polities and religious traditions that animated the archipelago have never been self-contained nor isomorphic to what we may think of as Indonesia through the lens of today's nation-state. The cultural history of Nusantara has been porous and dependent to the flux of ideas and events emanating from the west, predominantly India and coastal Southeast Asia, and north-east, that is China-influenced polities and cultural-economic routes.

Much recent scholarship (Acri et al. 2019, see also Sen 2006) has recovered the usage of the notion of Maritime Southeast Asia to speak of this wider cultural and historical junction, in order to emphasise the often understated role of sea routes in cultural fluctuations. The notion also avoids modern nationalist vocabulary and it elaborates on an early formulation of Coedès (1968) who addressed the interconnected specificity of insular Southeast Asia but reduced it to "island farther India". Buddhism was no exception in the intense cultural flow that characterised this region, both in its earliest record available to us and for many centuries after. The kind of Buddhism travelling in the maritime region of the sub-continent that comprised Nusantara participated in the wider Sanskritic cosmopolis (Acri 2018; Pollock 2006) that stretched from India to China primarily by sea routes and played a fundamental role in the textual transmission and the philosophical elaboration of the Buddhist tradition in the centuries immediately after the passing of King Ashoka.

The role of Nusantara in this religious and cultural intercourse became especially prominent as Buddhism entrenched in the early political institutions that wielded power on what were also the major maritime economic hubs, the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Sunda. The kingdom of Sriwijaya is often cited as the first of such Buddhist-endorsing polities in Nusantara. A thalassocratic state (Kulke 2016) based on the island of Sumatra, Sriwijaya radiated its dominion to Java, the Malay peninsula and coastal Borneo. The kingdom formed a political model typical of the early Southeast Asian states, a model traditionally defined as "mandala" (Wolters 1999) or "galactic" (Tambiah 1977), in which a complex patron/client system allowed through the centuries the relative autonomy of the principalities and kingdoms subjugated. In strictly religious terms, most of the kingdoms in the region subscribed to a fluid Hindu-Buddhist religion, complemented by localised practices and beliefs. Hinduism and Buddhism were not therefore mutually exclusive orientations, although distinct dynasties could express an endorsement for one over the other. The religiosity of kingdoms like Sriwijaya and for many centuries after is to be understood in this frame.

The actual religious life of Sriwijaya is difficult to ascertain. Early Chinese accounts on the region attribute by 300 CE a marginal role to Buddhism in the daily life of its inhabitants

(Shaffer 2015) suggesting perhaps the prevalence of the typical regional syncretism of Hindu-Buddhism and local traditional practices, an idea confirmed by the recent discovery of Sriwijaya-era Shaivist¹¹ temples on the banks of the Musi river. Buddhism had become nonetheless a relevant institutional presence in the capital area between 600 and 1000 CE. Palembang, the capital of Sriwijaya, is addressed multiple times on the accounts and travelogues of Chinese and Indian Buddhist monks as a vibrant centre of Buddhist learning. Several Chinese monks would spend long periods at the monasteries of Palembang, acquiring and translating texts from Sanskrit, often on journeys that had India as their final port but increasingly holding Sriwijaya as a reputable centre of Buddhist knowledge production on its own right.

The language of the very texts involved – Sanskrit – in this intense exchange between Sriwijayan, Indian and Chinese traders, monks and proselytisers is telling of the kind of Buddhism circulating in these predominantly monastic and aristocratic environments. It reflects especially the literary and theological developments of the Nalanda school in northern India, the hotbed of the developments of the Sanskritic Buddhist tradition from which the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions would later crystallise. The prominent monastic circle of Palembang would be also the birthplace of one of the major scholars of Sanskrit Buddhism, Dharmakīrti, who navigated and lectured throughout the Southern Buddhist world, from Sriwijaya to Ceylon and up to Nalanda (Sinclair 2019).

The fame of Sriwijaya as an erudite centre of Buddhist knowledge transmission began to fade after 1000 CE due to a concurrence of factors. On the one hand, more kingdoms had surged to the status of regional power both on the maritime side and on the mainland of the continent. On the other hand, the Buddhist links to India began to weaken. Two of the most important events that occurred in India and that echoed in the religion of maritime Southeast Asia were the rise in popularity of the tradition of Shankaracharya, by many read as a “revival” of Hinduism and positioned in open philosophical friction with Buddhism (Ingalls 1954). But especially traumatic was the destruction of the prestigious Nalanda university, which affected severely the previous patterns of monastic exchanges and the history of Buddhism at large. As the research on the Musi Shaivist temples suggests (Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan 2017), moreover, varieties of Hindu practices were likely repopularised between 900 and 1200 CE on Sumatra and the Malacca Strait, while in the Sundanese kingdom of Padjadjaran Hinduism surged to the status of official religion. The shift in regional maritime power in the centuries to follow, to the Javanese empires and to the wealthy sultanates that mushroomed progressively all along the Indian

¹¹ A form of Hindu devotion, focused on the worship of Shiva. It is still one of the major expressions in today's Hinduism.

maritime routes eventually provincialised the centrality of Sriwijaya in favour of new networks and allegiances of trade and, increasingly, of religion.

2. Historical Buddhism in Java

Although Buddhism seemed to enjoy a privileged status in Sriwijaya and contributed substantially to the flow of Buddhist ideas and manuscripts between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea, remarkably little is left to us in terms of material and literary cultures, with notable exceptions such as the Biaro Bahal, the Muara Jambi complex and a few examples of ritual epigraphy (Griffiths 2018; 2011). The opposite seems to be the case with Java. The island was a relatively marginal region in the affairs of much of Sriwijayan history, except from a short stint in the ninth century in which the capital appeared to have been relocated to the island's central plains (Munoz 2006). Nonetheless, in the period between the seventh and tenth century, Java produced two of the most important cultural artefacts related to Buddhism that are of immediate relevance for how Buddhism is represented and localised in contemporary Indonesia. The first is the iconic Borobudur andesite stupa, which dons nowadays the coat of arms of Central Java and virtually all the tourist brochures on the region. The second is the rather obscure manuscript *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*, which enjoyed a brief but crucial moment of popularity in the second half of the 1900s. The two artefacts may be the legacy of two separate dynasties and photograph two distinct moments in the religious developments of the region, reflecting up to this day the high degree of uncertainty that surrounds this historical period in the island.

The Śailendra princely dynasty is widely regarded as related to the earliest Javanese political formation one can properly speak of. However, the nature of its dynastic structure and the extent of its autonomy from Sriwijaya have been debated for several decades (Zakharov 2012; Jordaan 2006; Coedes 1934). By the time of the construction of Borobudur, between 770 and 825 CE, the Śailendra seemed to have moved their capital already a few times, from the coastal region of contemporary Semarang progressively towards the inland (van der Meulen 1979). The construction of Borobudur is associated with the enthroning of king Sanjaya, a monarch who began his own dynasty which would later morph into the Medang-Mataram kingdom¹², a state in more open conflict with Sriwijaya, also on the grounds of religious patronage.

The religious configuration of the Śailendra monarchies was similar to that of Sumatran Sriwijaya. Buddhism and different strands of Hinduism coexisted within the aristocracies with

¹² In Indonesian referred to as *Mataram kuno*, to distinguish it from the later Islamic sultanate of the same name from which the Kartasura aristocracy (contemporary Solonese) claimed descent.

different historical periods coinciding with different orientations and preferences of the ruling classes. Like in Sumatra, a monastic network existed on the island by the seventh century, as notable Indian, Ceylonese and Chinese monks are reported to have resided in Central Java (Acri 2016). The early years after king Sanjaya, the years in which the Borobudur construction took place, could be considered by and large a “Buddhist” era, with the ruling of Dharanindra and especially Samaratungga, whose throne corresponded to the brief moving of Sriwijaya’s capital to Java. The Sanskritic maritime Buddhism of Palembang and the “Mahāyāna” or “Vajrayāna” Buddhism with which Borobudur is widely identified might actually refer therefore to the same pool of Buddhist scholasticism and exchanges in continuum with Sumatran Sriwijaya, especially so since the Javanese and the Sumatran territories converged for a while to form one political domain.

2.1. Borobudur and its iconography

Several volumes have been dedicated to the interpretation of the Central Javanese Buddhist complex since its “discovery” in the 1800s by European academics and colonial officials. It is important nonetheless to remember a few facts concerning the monument that are crucial for framing the kind of Buddhism circulating on the island at that time and for the multiple references that are made in its respect in contemporary Buddhist discourse (we will explore this in chapters IV and V). Borobudur is configured as a giant *stupa*, in Buddhist architecture a sacred object designed to stand for the historical Buddha Sakyamuni and, frequently, used to host the ashes of notable ordained monks or relics perceived to be charged with some kind of power. It is sculpted entirely in andesite stone, a variety of volcanic rock ubiquitous in Java particularly on sites located a couple of kilometres away from active calderas. In fact, the monument is built between two pairs of volcanoes, Merapi-Merbabu and Sindoro-Sumbing, three of which are active. Soekmono (1976: 16) estimates about 55.000 cubic metres of andesite used from the surrounding valley for building the complex. The specific type of stone gives Borobudur a distinct uniform dark-grey tone, although originally many of the reliefs might have been painted and gilded (Woodward 1981). The features of the monument are exemplary of a religiously composite landscape.

The galleries showcasing the reliefs and ascending concentrically to the upper plateau give the stupa the outline of a *mandala*, a feature which was not missed by earlier scholars (Wayman 1981) and which allowed many to identify from the start Borobudur as an example of Vajrayāna symbolism. However, the sculptural aesthetics and the narrative unfolding through the reliefs suggest a more complex bricolage of styles and stories, typical early (Sanskritic) Buddhism, but

they also draw from local non-Buddhist religious elements. The law of karma represented on the first and lower galleries (level of “worldly desire”, or *kamadhatu*) is largely depicted using local Javanese mythologies and scenes such as groups of gamelan music players. The “Javanese” elements are mixed with other repertoires such as the canonical stories about the previous lives of “virtuous characters” (*Avadana*) and the Buddha himself (*Jataka*). Both genres reflect the influence of the different orientations active at that time in India and that spread from there east and west in diverse branches and schools (Salomon 2018). Past a section that recounts the birth of the Buddha Sakyamuni (*lalitavistara*), the higher galleries unroll instead a story which has been identified with the *Gandavyuha* sutra (Miksic 1999; Woodward 1981). The sutra was a Sanskrit scripture originally composed in India around 300 CE and the manuscript was one of the most popular texts navigating the maritime Buddhist route and flourished later in China and Japan as a section of the larger *Avatamsaka* scripture. The “emptiness” one can witness at the top plateau of the Borobudur structure is the culmination of the *Gandavyuha* sutra and reflects the emptiness that Buddhism devises in teleological terms.

All along the galleries, the monument is dotted with several anthropomorphic Buddha statues carved in the same stone. Woodward (1979) estimated 504 Buddha sculptures in the original design of the monument (of which 461 are now present, many of them restored or reproduced from scratch from the artisans of the area). The aesthetic features of the statues and their *mudras* relate the sculptures to different Buddhas and bodhisattvas and various artistic traditions, from Indian Gupta (~300-550) conventions to Tantric and Mahāyāna cosmologies and symbols. Outside of the main mandala-shaped stupa, finally, Borobudur is conceptually completed by two additional buildings, the Mendut and Pawon structures. Both connoted nowadays as *candi*, Hindu-Buddhist “heritage sites”, the two buildings are symmetrically erected on a straight line from each other and, unlike Borobudur, might have been envisioned as temples or possibly royal burial sites.



Figure 8. Statues of the main Borobudur complex.

The lack of material evidence from the centuries immediately after the construction of Borobudur and other devotional architecture in Central Java suggests a decrease in the importance of Buddhism in the religious orientation of the Javanese courts. The Sanjaya dynasty seemed to have been inclined towards Shaivism from the start. Their descendants established the Mataram kingdom which by the tenth and eleventh century grew to become Java's main political power under the reign of Dharmawangsa as well as the last major kingdom to be based in Central Java. The daughter of Samaratungga would later marry into this dynasty, reconciling the split between Śailendra-proper and the dynasty claiming genealogy to king Sanjaya, but marking also a shift in terms of religious endorsement. Prambanan, a Shaivist religious complex just east from Borobudur and constructed only a few decades after, is regarded as an index of the overall religious climate within the ascending Mataram aristocracy.

2.2. Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan

The tenth and eleventh centuries inaugurate a period of intense cultural production in Java. While this period was marked by much evidence of Hindu devotional practices, the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* Buddhist text is attributed to this time span. Several centuries after, the scripture became pivotal for conveying an idea of Buddhist unified godhood, crucial for recognising Buddhism as a modern state-religion. The thriving cultural production of the period was likely due to the artistic inclinations of individual ruler-patrons such as Dharmawangsa. In religious-cultural terms, his era is mostly remembered for the translation into Old Javanese of the Hindu epic Mahabharata. At the same time, Dharmawangsa's grandfather, Mpu Sindok, was the sponsor of Buddhist esotericism, or a stream of Buddhist teachings that were transmitted within a tight group of initiated monks which characterised a significant portion of the travelling Mahāyāna monastic networks, a religious world that not infrequently intersected with Shaivist practices (Orzech et al. 2011). The most important surviving Buddhist scripture at this junction in Java is the esoteric poem *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*¹³.

The existence of three different blocks of manuscripts all relating to the same scripture suggests that the text might have constitutes something of an esoteric canon in maritime Asia, copied several times. Recent authors seem to agree that the content of this scripture is an elaboration of the thought of Sanskrit Buddhist scholar Dignāga, while, perhaps due to the heavier influence of Shaivism, the Mpu Sindok version is considered by some not to be the oldest of the three in circulation (Kandahjaya 2016: 69). The chronological quandary however is not the point for the summoning of this Sanskrit-Javanese hybrid text. Rather, it is important to retain a sense of the overall Buddhist ideas and practices sweeping the island and the region through, among others, this manuscript, which many centuries later would be regarded as the quintessence of indigenous Buddhism¹⁴.

Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan might be qualified as a mixture of philosophical reflections and practical instructions for the attainment of *buddhabood* and is divided into two sections. The first one, also called by the text itself *Mantranaya*, is a series of Sanskrit strophes with commentaries in Old Javanese introducing the cosmology in which the initiated practitioner participates. This is

¹³ The word *hyang* is an ancient concept diffused locally in Sunda, Java and Bali and identifies an invisible spiritual quality, although in combinations with *sang* it is used as a devotional honorific. The concept is not unique to Buddhist or Hindu usage and can be found in many varieties of local religions as well as in Javanese Islam.

¹⁴ The Mahāyāna literature of Java has been largely lost, although substantial references exist in translations into Chinese and Tibetan (Acri 2016). The relatively recent discovery of the Surocolo bronzes allowed scholars to postulate the existence of a much larger Sanskrit-Javanese textual pool, particularly of the esoteric kind, connected to Buddhist notions transmitted from there to East Asian monasteries (Sharma 2011).

done in the typical Mahāyāna/Yogācāra fashion of recollecting all the names of the Buddhas past, present and future who secured *buddhabood*. The second part, *Adwaya-Sadhana*, contains instead a gradual set of practices that the initiated needs to follow in order to become a *tathagata*, a “self-created one”. The four-fold path culminates with the knowledge of the *Paramaguhya*, the supreme secret. It includes the acquaintance with the knowledge of *adwaya*, which corresponds to the *advaita* philosophy of non-duality. The argumentative tone of the text is seen as one piece of evidence of the influence of the epistemological turn in Sanskrit Buddhism initiated around the sixth century in India by Dignaga, who started a tradition of exposition and deductive logic which influenced also the Vedanta Shankaracharya school (Sharma 2008). But the manuscript acknowledges explicitly the receiving of its secret doctrine from the Dignaga stream, mentioned as *Ḍan Ācaryya Sri Dignāgapāda*. The specific teachings of the Sanskrit master and his disciples have been identified with *Yogāvatāra* and *Bhāvanākrama* (Nakamura 1980) and concern, the former a unique categorisation of the ten perfections (*pāramitā*), the latter an explanation of practices for attaining ultimate wisdom. The original compiler of the *Bhāvanākrama*, moreover, drew from a pre-existing source on the quality and necessity of *bodhicitta*, a source that has likely inspired the *Dhammapada* (Theravāda) notion of *mettā* (Kandahjaya 2016: 77).

Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan is a hybrid text in many respects. While on the one hand its content justifies the “esoteric” label that the majority of scholars has attributed it, on the other hand, the same content reveals clearly a set of dynamics that places it in the context of the pan-Asian circulation of monks, texts and ideas. The initiated monks (or those suitable for initiation) did not enjoy some form of separate track along the maritime routes but moved side-by-side traders, laymen and other types of religious specialists. More often than not, identities and functions overlapped in the same individual. This pattern of mobility would be maintained for many centuries and characterised profoundly the religious dynamics of the region, from Shaivism to Islam and Christianity. Although an esoteric text, therefore, the manuscript can be understood as a manifestation of the very organisation of the economic and social life of the region.

2.3. Buddhism under Majapahit (~1300-1500)

After the reign of Dharmawangsa, the centre of political and economic power in Java shifted eastwards and the islands of Bali and Lombok were encompassed for the first time in major ways in Javanese polities. The history of Buddhism re-emerged accordingly in the eastern portion of the island. The rulers that succeeded to the throne of Dharmawangsa were in increasingly hostile relationships with Sriwijaya and managed to stand up against the powerful neighbour only with

the reign of Airlangga (1000-1049). How much these conflicts reflected cultural-religious differences of sort is difficult to assess. However, most historians however agree on defining the religious configuration of the East Javanese kingdoms of the second millennium as Hindu-Buddhist, where the noun compound actually signifies a hierarchy between a supposedly dominant Shaivism/Vaishnavism and a marginal Buddhism, a pattern that remained stable down to the Majapahit period (~1300-1500). Pigeaud (1960: 172) goes to the extent of concluding that the popular expression *jaman Buda* in reference to pre-17th Century Java is a confirmation of the perceived foreignness of Buddhism to the everyday Javanese in respect to the ubiquity of Shaivism. Nonetheless, the almost uninterrupted stream of material evidence running from the 9th to the 15th century suggests that the religious world in which the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* and the Surocolo bronzes were produced did not differ dramatically from the reality of later kingdoms such as Majapahit.

The constellation of monarchies that ruled East Java in the aftermath of King Airlangga showed a variety of religious inclinations relatively similar to their predecessors on the island at large. While the kingdom of Kediri (1045-1222) under the government of Joyoboyo, a ruler known to this day for his oracle skills, is largely characterised as a flourishing Vaishnavite dynasty, the reign of Singhasari (1222-1292) showed notable sympathies in regard to Buddhism. The infamous ruler Ken Arok had his wife Ken Dedes portrayed into a statue, sculpted in stone, as an incarnation of Prajnaparamita, the Sanskrit-Mahāyāna female anthropomorphic embodiment of the *bodhisattva* wisdom. Moreover, literature of the local *kawi* canon indicates that she was the daughter of a Buddhist monk (Bullough 1995; Coedès 1968). Kartanegara, the last and most powerful of the Singhasari rulers and head of the lineage that initiated Majapahit, was a devout Buddhist and presented a stone statue of Avalokitesvara as a royal present during his embassy to the Melayu kingdom of the Melacca Strait. His daughter Rajapatni and queen consort of the first Majapahit monarchy was initiated into esoteric Buddhism and retired in her adulthood as a *bhikkhuni*, a Buddhist nun. Her funeral followed a rather pompous Buddhist ceremony and was recorded on several *kakawin* accounts in the period of the reign of Hayam Wuruk (Drake and Budiman 2012).

Buddhism constituted therefore an important foundational feature underlying the expansion of the celebrated Majapahit empire. Rather than appearing in a subjugated form of relationship in respect to Vishnu-Shiva devotions, the “Hindu-Buddhist” trope seemed to correspond to a division of labour sort of social organisation, as Pigeaud himself (1960: 180) seems to suggest elsewhere. Within the royal domain, Buddhism and Hinduism occupied distinct roles and did not function as alternative cosmological models to choose from. Official

priesthoods in charge of ritual performance existed in both Hindu/Shāivist (*dewaguri*) and Buddhist (*bhikkhu*) religious fields, although they served different purposes. Buddhist specialists were summoned particularly on the occasion of funerary rites and were considered the repository of tantric knowledge to which members of the aristocracy and court functionaries would occasionally recur. Buddhist and Hindu specialists were also assigned to specific territorial administrations, the Buddhist ones known as *mandala*, the Shāivist as *resbi*. Buddhist districts tended to occupy the outer regions of the territories under the direct control of the court. These units were regarded as communities of worshippers of “lesser gods” (Pigeaud 1960: 486). Instead, Hindu expertise was involved in the bureaucratic business of the court and presided over legal affairs, as well as fulfilling ritual functions in relations to the (Hindu) divinities with which the rulers were perceived as being in close relation, sometimes borrowing their names to elevate their titles and joining in the godly pantheon.

The Majapahit period ultimately was a time of vibrant religiosity and state cults in respect to Shāivist and Vaiṣṇavite devotional patterns. However, Buddhism never disappeared from sight, nor was it reduced to a lesser or unpopular devotional option. Hinduism and Buddhism maintained an equally respected status as two commensurable orientations of a religious continuum. It is crucial to keep in mind, however, that the “Hindu-Buddhist” religious world sketched thus far, in which the history of Java crosses paths with global Buddhism, is predominantly the religious world of the court, the aristocracies and the state. From Sriwijaya to Majapahit, as in much of both maritime and mainland Southeast Asia, the official religion of the monarchies hardly ever reflected the religious practices of the commoners, from the tribute-paying agricultural communities to remote hill and mountain societies.

Although Hindu-Buddhist cults and concepts seeped from the courts to the everyday religiosity of the masses, by and large, the religious life was characterised by the less articulate and local sets of practices and beliefs which constituted the main religious corpus through the centuries. It doesn't come as a surprise, then, that as soon as the official patronage of Hinduism and Buddhism shifted in favour of Islam after Majapahit the production of cultural artifacts related to the “dharmic” religions ceased almost abruptly. This would be the case in Java but also in the maritime region as a whole (McPherson 1984, see also Lombard 1990), exposed as it was to the cultural innovations coming along the India-China sea trade especially with the renewed commerce bustle initiated with the Islamic harbour-states.

3. Javanese religion

The account of Pigeaud of pre-Islamic Java is also notable for the fact of being one of the extremely few examples in which a brief overview is given of the everyday religious life at the time of Majapahit outside of the courts. The summary is remarkably consistent with the descriptions of rural Javanese religiosity formulated about the Javanese society in the early twentieth century (Wessing 2006; Chambert-Loir 2002; Mulder 1978; Geertz 1960). While it is not possible to isolate any stage of “pure” Javanese religiosity, completely distilled from either Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, there are a few themes that make it possible to talk about a “Javanese” religion. The wider religious reality of Java has been characterised by the belief and the ritual practice concerning a female mother goddess, Ibu Pertiwi, sometimes overlapping with the cult of Sri Dewi, whose worship is associated with agricultural fertility, especially rice growing. Most important of all however was (and, to a limited extent, still is) the sheer number of rituals performed in reference to a locality-bound nonhuman presence. At times, worships linked to spirits residing in specific sites have been shared with aristocratic devotionality, such as the cults linked to the Southern Sea, residence of the mythological queen Roro Kidul, practiced to this day in the Yogyakarta sultanate, or the lingering spirits of deceased “powerful individuals” connected to *candis* or caves. In the majority of cases, though, these were village-specific forms of ritual communication with invisible residents.

The range of these kinds of inhuman presence is particularly vast and varies across the island. Wessing (2006) has gone as far as characterising the whole of rural Javanese religiosity as a “community of spirits” to emphasise the importance of this cosmological level. These forms of inhuman presence might range from spirits inhabiting specific corners of one’s place of dwelling to crossroads in the village’s topography up to forest and mountain spirits, perceived as the ontologically most different from humans and therefore the most potentially dangerous.

Occasionally, the belief and the communication with these classes of spirits is intersected with ancestors-oriented forms of rituality. Community and family ancestors were never deified (a process that could occur instead for the royal dead), but ritual offerings and other acts of ritual communication were, and continue to be, a ubiquitous expression of everyday religiosity. Ritual practices connected to the ancestors also constitute one of the most enduring and widespread forms of Javanese religion and have been incorporated progressively into local Islam and more recently into other official religious expressions.

Another important element of Javanese religiosity is constituted by ritual specialists who are, in a sense, multifunctional for the ritual and physical wellbeing of the village. These are the

janggan and the *dukun*. The figure of the *dukun* still exists in contemporary Java, predominantly in the role of traditional healers, although they are never revered as god-like individuals, they receive offerings and donations and are widely regarded as the closest among the humans to the spirits' domain and the other invisible powers. Finally, one last crucial religious dimension of Javanese religion was expressed in practices and customs which today are understood as occupying the domain of the arts or tradition. The personality of the *dbalang* (puppeteer) who runs *wayang* theatre performances has been often associated with the spreading and adaptation of religious and moral teaching to the wider population. To this day, they are often regarded as spiritually advanced individuals (Susilo 2000). Moreover, the earliest proselytising of Islam in Java is also popularly attributed to mystics-cum-*dbalangs* (Geertz 1960). Other Javanese performative arts that survive to this day are considered to be rooted in Javanese religious practices (Mauricio 2002) or as activating religious dispositions (Benamou 2010).

This summary of Javanese religion is sufficient for giving an idea of the underlying religiosity that likely characterised much of the wider Javanese population through the mutability of royal patronages and formal political power, down to the recent past. Elements of Javanese religion transmigrated into the “world religions” that crystallised later in the island. More recently they were consciously accommodated into a number of esoteric sects that mushroomed at the turn of the 1900s in the archipelago (collectively known as “*kebatinan* groups”) or integrated into the wide *kejawan* syncretic spectrum.

4. Chinese diasporas between global and local religiosity

Much of the classical academic literature on the religion of Java and maritime Asia at large is assembled with in mind India as the principal source from which religious influences of all sorts emanated, from Shaivism to Buddhism and Islam. In recent decades, the position of the archipelago has been revisited to deliver a more dynamic understanding of the relationship to India, emphasising the in-betweenness of Nusantara with the fundamental sea routes to China. The religious history of the maritime Chinese communities has often been studied in isolation from the main developments of the region, either from the point of view of Buddhism or Islam. However, Chinese traders, laymen, priests and monks did not merely sojourn in the archipelago in order to acquire esoteric Sanskrit scriptures but contributed themselves to moulding the religious reality of the area.

Chinese monks formed a conspicuous presence in the monasteries of the Sriwijaya and Śailendra dynasties. Chinese was also the first official Muslim ambassador at the court of

Majapahit, as early as 1407. Muhammad Zheng He (Cheng Ho, or 郑和), Ming dynasty's legendary navigator and statesman, contributed in substantial ways during his lengthy stay at the Javanese court to the development of Islam in coastal Java (Sen 2009). His figure has surged to legendary status and is celebrated today throughout maritime Asia as a significant character for fostering the settlement of both Chinese ancestors religion and Islam from the western Indian Ocean to the Philippines (Dreyer 2006).



Figure 9. Klenteng Tiao Kak Sie in Cirebon, Central Java (now vihara Dewi Welas Asih), built in 1658.

The deeds of figures like Zheng He cannot be overstated but are nonetheless notable exceptions. Perhaps most important has been the role that the extended circulation of ordinary Chinese has played in complexifying the Javanese religious landscape. The decades after the fall of Majapahit (1520) initiated a period of intense migration from China to maritime Asia (Guillot et al. 1998) which increased dramatically under colonial rule to become a “diaspora” (Tan 2014; Chin 2000; see also Chun 2017). The process of mobility continued centuries later, when British-occupied port cities in China in the aftermath of the opium war favoured the migration of impoverished sections of the peasant Hakka and Guangxi populations to work in the mines and plantations of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

The migrants who made the sea route over these various waves of mobility brought along a large number of cults and religious sensitivities which reflected their region or district of provenance and differed substantially from the textual religion of the travelling Buddhist monks. The religious world of the non-Muslim Chinese maritime communities, that is the majority of them, has been described in various ways. Cangianto (2014) recovered the expression “*Hua* religion” (華教) to bring together the distinctly Southeast Asian fluid form of Chinese public religiosity, which encompasses elements of *Baishen Jiao* cults, Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and varying features of local worships transmigrated from mainland China. Specific devotions, moreover, appeared in the process of migration and are exclusive to maritime Chinese, such as the worship of the sea goddess Mazu (媽祖) which spread from Taiwan to Western Borneo and Java (Sidharta 2014). In other cases, syncretic cults were formed between Chinese deities, Islam and Javanese conceptions, such as the Gunung Kawi shrine of Da Er Laoshi / Mbah Djuggo in East Java, which draws to this day Chinese and Javanese followers (Koji 2012).

The Chinese communal religion in Java (as in coastal Borneo) was spatially centred around the institution of *kongsi*, small associations or clubs revolving around communities of the same geographical origin or the same clan name (Susilo 2015). *Kongsi* functioned as both houses of worship and social clubs and were fundamental in supporting newcomers in all aspects of social life, from religion to unionism and the needs of business and finance. The *kongsi* system took on progressively the function of mainly religious sites, known in Java as *klenteng* (Widodo 2004; Lombard & Salmon 1980). The first *kongsi-klenteng* is recorded in Batavia (Jakarta) as early as 1650 and its structure stands to this day as Jin De Yuan¹⁵ (Salmon 2003). These worship houses constituted naturally also the sites in which a kind of Buddhist religious life began to reform, albeit predominantly in Chinese idioms, after the dispersion of Buddhist scholarship in Java with the fall of Majapahit and the widespread diffusion of Islam.

With the settlement of large Chinese communities in colonial Malaya as well as in Java, there also emerged the need to recover the circulation of religious functionaries from mainland China in order to officiate funerary rites and wedding ceremonies. These included many Buddhist monks, whose role however remained for a long time functional to the task of ritual specialists. Several of these Buddhist functionaries arrived from peasant communities and were rarely instructed, or even interested, in scriptural canonical knowledge (Chia 2020: 23). In the nineteenth century, a fresh input was injected into this new transnational network with the surge of the

¹⁵ The *klenteng* has been renamed recently with the Buddhist title Vihara Dhamma Bhakti, it is located in Jl. Kemenangan III, in Jakarta.

Human Life movement in Chinese Buddhism. A few words on the cultural context of mainland China are in order here.

Drained by two opium wars (1839-1860), the Boxer rebellion (1899) and the Sino-Japanese war (1894-5), the Qing dynasty in the late 1800s was also pressed on a religious level by the events of the Taiping revolution and the cult of Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全) (1851-1864), as well as the coming of Christianity on the European-controlled coasts. Buddhist intellectuals on the mainland, in concert with a number of lay scholars and reformers, contributed to breathing new life into the weary Qing society by revitalising traditions like Buddhism, perceived to be more in line with indigenous history and which did not posit alternative sources of power. The Nanputuo monastery in Fujian became the base for the development of a wave of Buddhist modernism which was meant at once to renovate the structure of Buddhist learning and proselytising and to strengthen the social fabric of the Chinese state. Venerable Taixu was the most vigorous advocate of the Buddhist movement he named Human Life (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教) in contrast to the popular perception of Buddhism as a “religion of death”, for the presence of Buddhist monks and functionaries was publicly seen in connection to funerary rites and ghostly entities (Pittman 2001).



Figure 10. A section of a klenteng dedicated to bets and fortune telling in Jakarta.

The Human Life movement inaugurated a period of important investments in scholarly learning on the side of monks, but also social activism and temple and monastery building. Interestingly, many financial resources for this project came from donations from the diasporic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, who got rich from businesses around medicinal products, such as the notorious Tiger Balm oil (Chia 2020: 37). Echoes of the Human Life movement propagated quickly among the maritime Chinese communities. Several temples were constructed at this time throughout the region, as well as the first proper monastery, the Kek Lok Si complex, on the island of Penang (Malaysia).

Java was incorporated from early on in this renewed network of travelling monks. *Klentengs* worked as the centres around which clusters of Buddhist learning were formed. While no monastery was yet built on the island by the turn of the 1900s, monastic residencies became routinary and a few ordinations within the Java-born Chinese community (*tionghoa peranakan*¹⁶) took place in the monastic lineages of mainland China. The first proselytising activity of this kind in colonial Java is attributed to Ven. Pen Ching, who resided in Semarang for a few years, before returning to China for a short stint and heading back to the Dutch East Indies to continue his missionary activities, this time in Bandung, then in Cirebon and finally in Batavia, where he inaugurated the first monastery in 1951, the Kong Hoa Sie temple. The activities of masters like Pen Ching, like Chuk Mor in Malaya, were crucial in establishing a new institutional Buddhist substratum in the region and contributed, in a sense, to entangle in popular parlance Buddhism with “Chineseness”. Although the monks involved in this new stimulus of Buddhist scholarship were engaged in lecturing and exposing the *dharma* to the local Chinese-speaking communities, it is important to keep in mind that the overwhelming part of the religiosity of the population of Chinese descent was characterised by the *kongsi-klenteng* paradigm, centred around the cult of ancestors and local deities. A major shift occurred only in the second half of the 1900s, due to a set of political events we’ll discuss just below, that split the history of Chinese-Indonesian communities, particularly the Javanese, from that of their parallels in the neighbouring post-colonial states.

¹⁶ In contrast to *tionghoa totok*, China-born residents and with Chinese idioms as their native languages (Heidhues 2017; see also Tan 2008)

5. Colonial communities of “the great awakening”

Coherently with the strands of historical facts I just summarised, it would be inaccurate to state that contemporary Buddhism in Indonesia is the product of the religious innovation promoted by late-colonial intellectual quarters alone. However, a big portion of what makes contemporary Buddhism, including conceptions and specific practices, stems to a great extent from the activities of the seemingly tiny and elitist circle that was the Indonesian Theosophy. The Theosophical project was a movement initiated between Russian and American authors aimed at a global “great reawakening” and found its scriptural milestones in the publication of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* by Helena Blavatsky, originally published in 1877 and 1888 respectively. While the movement fused religious elements from various sources, ranging from Kemetism to Zoroastrianism and esoteric notions of Kabbalah, a great emphasis was put on the Hindu philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta and the teachings of Buddhist monks from colonial Burma and Ceylon. The centrality of Hindu and Buddhist concepts¹⁷ was perhaps best photographed by the acclaimed speech that the Indian-born scholar Swami Vivekananda delivered at the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, the most famous initiative supported by the Theosophical project (Beckerlegge 2004; McRae 1991).

Buddhism was strongly sponsored by the movement throughout its history, to the point that Christmas Humphreys, the British judge and founder of the London Buddhist Society, stated that Buddhism and Theosophy were “conceptually identical” (Humphreys 1984, cf. Shin’ichi and Klautau 2012). Theosophists fostered the presence at the Parliament of Religions of two monks, the representatives of what the movement perceived to be the two main currents of the religion, Japanese Soyen Shaku and Ceylonese Anagarika Dharmapala (Moritz 2016; Tweed 2005). Educated in British Christian schools, Dharmapala was also one of the most prolific English-language writers in the modern Theravāda movement and a crucial character in the nationalist developments in Sri Lanka (McMahan 2009). Blavatsky and Olcott, the unofficial leaders of Theosophy, converted themselves to Buddhism, under the aegis of Dharmapala, linking the destinies of Buddhism and the lodge in major ways. One of the main publications of the group outside of the writings of Blavatsky would be *Esoteric Buddhism* by Alfred Sinnett.

Orientalism played a big role in the way the movement conceptualised itself and branched out worldwide, especially in the colonies. The effort and finances invested by Euro-American

¹⁷ Including the idea that Buddhism and some strands of Hinduism might have been “aryan” religions, therefore inherently superior to traditions such as Islam (Masuzawa 2005). This racialised idea was not unfamiliar among some Javanese *prijayi* and followers of the syncretic movement Budi Utomo (de Tollaere 2004: 41).

theosophists in spreading the lodges to colonial Asia was part of the ideology that saw Asian populations as “naturally” more inclined to the reception of inward and ecumenic philosophies. At the same time, we can encompass it into the wider orientalist academic project of that time which aimed at fostering a rationalised renaissance of the “oriental religions” out of the state of “polytheism” and superstition in which Asian societies were perceived to be decayed (Lopez 2018, 1995; App 2012; see also Said 1979).

The Indonesian Theosophy lodge was founded in 1884 in Pekalongan, on the north coast of Java and, after a slow start, became quickly the second-largest Asian network, after its Indian counterpart. By 1903 the Indonesian Theosophy had already expanded to five lodges, all of them in Central-East Java (including Semarang, Solo, Yogyakarta and Surabaya) (de Tollenaere 1996). Bandung, Bogor and Batavia, in West Java, were added soon after. The first main publication, *Pewarta Theosophie*, had hundreds of subscribers outside of the Theosophical membership and issued from the start articles and essays in Dutch, Javanese and Melayu. Publications through language-specific journals began after 1912 in sub-magazines like *Chabar* (in Melayu), *Koemandang Theosophie* and *Rasa* (in Javanese). A journal called *Sterlicht*, devoted solely to the teachings of Jiddhu Krishnamurti, the world-renown Indian scholar widely sponsored by the Theosophists, was also active in the 1920s (de Tollenaere 2004: 36). In 1930 the Society reached possibly its peak of followers, exceeding 2.000 formal members, although its influence must be measured by also taking into account the indirect effects through its members’ dissemination via education and political activism.

Although popularised originally within the elite of the substantial community of Dutch residents, the ideas of the Theosophical movement did not circulate in an intellectual vacuum. For several decades Dutch philologists and archaeologists had been engaged in discussing and recovering (in some cases pillaging) artefacts and cultural features of native Indonesians. Interest was sparked on several aspects of native culture and religiosity, elaborating on a postulated “classical” Java progressively corrupted by the coming of Islam. Many publications appeared in Dutch and in English on subjects as diverse as *candi*-centred religious cults and local music genres, such as Balinese and Javanese gamelan music. Gamelan music especially fascinated and repelled Dutch officials (Kunst 1937), who nonetheless managed to showcase it at the Paris Expo of 1889 as an instance of “oriental culture”, allegedly inspiring Debussy in person (Tamagawa 2020). But Dutch academics were also preoccupied with the recovery and the translation of less known manuscripts and aspects of oral traditions. Simultaneously to the beginning of the restoration

process of Borobudur¹⁸, the Dutch scholar Jacob Kats published a translation and a commentary of the forgotten *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* (Kats 1910), which he based on retrieved blocks of palm leaves that Dutch residents managed to save on the island of Lombok, from the war waged by the colonial government against the Mataram dynasty.

As we see, Indonesian Theosophy entered an intellectual scene which was already dense with academic debates and speculations. Its relevance, however, lays in the fact that the membership and the participation in its initiatives were not restricted to the residents of European descent, but was open to sections of the local population, especially in the later decades. This had a fundamental impact on the several religious and lay associations and youth groups that formed from within its membership and that guided the ideology of early post-colonial Indonesia. The majority among the “native” participation came from the Javanese aristocracies (*priyayi*) and upper classes that collaborated with the Dutch colonial infrastructure and had access to formal European-style education. Subsequently, the local Theosophy was also open to the affiliation of local residents from the so-called “foreign orientals” category, which included predominantly Chinese-Indonesians and a smaller number of Tamil Indonesians. Among the Indonesians of Chinese descent figured also religious characters, including Buddhist monks.

The overall Buddhist leanings of the Theosophical Society were expressed locally in the period between the 1920s and the 1940s, which saw the establishment of multiple sub-organisations. Some of these Theosophy-inspired groups led up to nationalist and independentist movements, such as the Young Theosophists and especially the *Sumpah Pemuda* (“Youth Pledge”). The “fathers” of the Indonesian Republic, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta, as well as key educational figures like Ki Hadjar Dewantara, were renowned members of these movements. Other groups, with sometimes overlapping memberships, continued the rather apolitical and religious agenda of the pan-global Theosophy. The Java Buddhist Association (originally called “Association for the Propagation of Buddhism in Java”) was established in 1929, as a branch of the international Burmese Buddhist Mission based in Thaton, British Burma (Ishii 1984). The organisation, an almost exclusively Dutch affair, was short-lived and was replaced three years later by the much larger Batavian Buddhist Association which revived the embryonal magazine, *Namo Buddhaya*.

While resting on international connections leaning towards the expanding Theravāda school, influenced through regional exchanges not only with Burma but also with Ceylon, the organisation was particularly open to the Indonesian Chinese community (Yulianti 2020: 80),

¹⁸ The religious site was “discovered” by Sir Thomas Raffles during the brief British occupation of the island (see Tiffin 2009).

whose religiosity, as we have seen, related instead to the developments of Buddhism in mainland China. In 1934 the association worked jointly with the Theosophical Society in welcoming the visit of the famed Ceylonese monk Narada Maha Thera, a disciple of Anagarika Dharmapala. This moment was saluted by many as the first visit of a Buddhist monk in contemporary Indonesia, a somewhat incorrect statement given that Chinese monks had been touring and residing for decades on coastal towns in the archipelago, but perhaps telling of the different endorsements and representations placed on different Buddhist vehicles.

Despite joining a common pool of initiatives and sharing a vision of Buddhist missionaryism, the Chinese-speaking monastic network and the Theosophy-sponsored Theravāda one maintained two different channels of circulation, although on the ground the identities of practitioners, especially in the *peranakan* community weren't necessarily so clear-cut. An evident split in affiliation occurred in 1934, when the *Sam Kaum Hwee* association was established around Javanese *kjentengs*. A combination of members who had navigated the Theosophy circles, Chinese Buddhist monks and Chinese-Indonesians of both *peranakan* and *totok* background, *Sam Kaum Hwee* tried to institutionalise a specific Chinese-speaking religious platform, philosophically grouping Buddhism with Taoism and Confucianism¹⁹, while remaining broad enough to be inclusive of the large number of cults and devotions that existed in specific communities.

Sam Kaum Hwee was a success among the Chinese-Indonesians of the archipelago, it survives to this day with the de-sinicised name of Tridharma and sits in Indonesia's Buddhist council WALUBI (Suryadinata 1989: 107). While undoubtedly popular, the ethnic aspect of *Sam Kaum Hwee* made the continuation of its activities problematic in the anti-Chinese climate of post-colonial Indonesia, jeopardising the existence of Buddhism at large, since Chinese-Indonesians outnumbered any other ethnic identity within Buddhist affairs. The wide-ranging activities of the famed monk Ashin Jinarakkhita served to address precisely the risk of ethnicising Buddhism in a Chinese sense and had a huge impact on the fortunes of the religion in the post-colonial period of the archipelago.

6. Ashin Jinarakkhita and the vision of an Indonesian Buddhism

Ashin Jinarakkhita was a *peranakan* Chinese-Indonesian, born in 1923 in West Java as Tee Boan An (Juangari 1995). Inclined to philosophy and religious scholasticism, he participated in the

¹⁹ Confucianism had experienced a parallel revival in China and spread from there to the maritime communities along similar patterns as Buddhism. The tradition however remained largely a philosophical orientation (Coppel 1981). More recently, internal debates have been resumed on Confucianism as a separate religion (Sutrisno 2017).

Indonesian Theosophy from a very young age, before the Society suspended its activities during the years of Japanese occupation. He continued to follow the activities of the lodge in the Netherlands, where he moved to study Chemistry and was allegedly impressed by the teachings of Krishnamurti that he attended in Groeningen. Both before and after his metropolitan sojourn he was in touch with the network of Mahāyāna Buddhist monks that circulated between China and Southeast Asia (Chia 2018). Back in Indonesia, he decided to take on monastic ordination and dedicate his life to the spread of the *dharmā* in his country of birth.

Jinarakkhita intended to take on the robes in the Chinese-Mahāyāna tradition, although the political events unfolding in mainland China made it impossible for him to undertake the journey, particularly so for religious motivations (Chia 2018). He travelled instead to Burma where he was ordained in the Theravāda vehicle and was given the name with which he became known. He returned to Java as the first ordained monk in the contemporary history of Indonesia and was celebrated by some as a sign of the general renaissance of the dharmic religions in the country “since the times of Majapahit” (Brown 1987). The historical connection established between his ordination and the religious reality of “classical” Java perceived at the peak of its military glory occurred in a buzzing atmosphere of culturalist and nationalistic talk. It also shared a substantial set of discourses, including the importance attributed to the cultural-religious world of pre-Islamic Java, with the parallel developments within the emerging Indonesian Hinduism (Ramstedt 2004). The most symbolic move in this direction was the personal dedication that Jinarakkhita put in revitalising the recently restored Borobudur complex (Bloembergen & Eickhoff 2015), not only as an archaeological object but also as a site for religious pilgrimage and worship for contemporary Indonesian Buddhists.

In 1953 he managed to organise the first Waisak in Indonesia, the celebration commemorating the birth, Enlightenment and passing of the Buddha Sakyamuni observed in most Theravāda-majority societies. The event took place precisely at Borobudur, drawing over 3.000 followers, in a parade that had a significant impact on local mainstream media (Juangari 1995). In the same period, Jinarakkhita worked for giving his idea of “Indonesian Buddhism” an organisational structure. He founded a lay group called *Persaudaraan Upasaka-Upasika Indonesia* (PUUI, Union of the lay Buddhists of Indonesia²⁰) and acquired from donation a large plot of land near Semarang, where in 1955 he built the Watugong vihara. The inauguration of Vihara Watugong in May 1956 was a spectacle in itself and was included in the bigger frame of events intended to celebrate Buddha Jayanti, the 2500th anniversary of the passing of Buddha

²⁰ *Upasaka* and *upasika* are terms derived from Pāli and used almost exclusively in Theravada environments.

Sakyamuni. The day after, Jinarakkhita presided a mass event between Mendut and Borobudur, followed by over 7.000 Indonesian Buddhists and a group of fourteen “special guests”, notable Buddhist monks, invited by Jinarakkhita from Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and Japan. On that occasion, new monastic ordinations were made among a dozen Indonesians.

As demonstrated by the symbols and language mobilised, such as the Jayanti celebration and the terminology employed, Theravāda inclinations were already evident in the early years of the movement. Jinarakkhita anticipated in fact the danger of overrepresentation of Chinese cultural elements in Indonesian Buddhism, especially after the foundation of *Sam Kamm Hwee*, in the tense nationalist narratives of early independent Indonesia. From the point of view of theological tenets, his entire project might be seen as an attempt in mediating his specific *peranakan* heritage with an ecumenic vision he received from his Theosophy background and that was expressed largely in the language of Theravāda Buddhism. This was reflected in the unique attire he kept throughout his life – donning Theravāda robes but with the unshaved beard of a Chinese master. The non-affiliation stance of Jinarakkhita allegedly confused the Dalai Lama himself during his visit to Indonesia in 1976. At his question “To what sect of Buddhism do you belong?” the monk answered: “I am just a servant of the Buddha” (in Chia 2020: 134).

More than simply bricolaging elements from the various Buddhist vehicles and strong with some degree of grassroots support, Jinarakkhita intended to make his non-sectarian line of thought into a distinct “Buddhist vehicle for Indonesia”. He called his project Buddhayāna, which would formally replace PUUI from the 1970s. He delivered lectures and teachings to the Buddhist *umat* and circulated a number of devotional pamphlets, in *klentengs* but also in a new type of Buddhist houses of worship, viharas, that began to spring up throughout Java. These booklets did not only contain doctrinal notions but also liturgical sections and practical guidelines for the wider community, notably in Indonesian or at least with a translation into Indonesian. Moreover, between the 1960s and the 1970s, Jinarakkhita engaged in an intense missionary activity to the farthest corner of the Indonesian archipelago, to the extent that he was colloquially dubbed for a time “the flying monk”.

The point of his touring was not only set in a proselytist key, but it served also the agenda to avoid the main obstacle to a truly national Buddhism, that is the danger of overly ethnicising the religion, by which he meant not only Sino-centrism, but also Java-centrism. While Jinarakkhita was successful in bringing Buddhism to parts of the archipelago that had up to that point neither an existing Chinese-Indonesian community nor a history of Theosophy lodges (such as the Lampung countryside on Sumatra, the Central Sulawesi highlands, or the sub-archipelago of the western Moluccas), the core of the Buddhayāna movement remained in Java.

The political salience of Java increased further in the highly centralised bureaucratic and political system imposed by the New Order, a crucial period in which the charismatic activity of Jinarakkhita turned once again fundamental for the fortunes of Buddhism in the country. Religious discourses became salient in the aftermath of the 1965 massacres, more than they already were in the early days of the Republic (recall chapter I). As the idea of equating communism with atheism was disseminated on all levels of institutional and civic life, the antidote to communism was found in binding nationalism to “more religion”. One of the most controversial policies of the regime was the implementation of official religiosity, which obliged each citizen holding an ID card to declare affiliation to one of the state-mandated religions. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the policy was meant to eradicate atheism and marginalise forms of syncretic religiosity that escaped the main world religions. The national standards of mandatory religious affiliation were set by Abrahamic faiths and the only two options available for official statement at first were indeed only Islam and Christianity. Since the beginning, this configuration created problems and confusion for the hundreds of forms of local religions which could not be neatly enclosed into either standard Islamic or Christian affiliation or that did not relate in any way to the Abrahamic creeds. Demographically this paved the way for the formal hegemony of Islam and, to a lesser extent, Christianity in much of the archipelago.

The contestations towards the requirements of affiliation of this policy (though rarely against the policy as such) began from virtually day one and were brought forward especially by the Hindu section of the population. Hinduism as a form of popular religious identity was a relatively new concept in Indonesia and became essentialised through the joint forces of Balinese activism and the ethnoreligious revivalist movements emanating from India (Picard & Madinier 2014; Picard 2011; Ramstedt 2004; Vignato 2000). A few local religious traditions found in this movement, driven by Balinese leaders, a vehicle of expression and inclusion into a national narrative (Roth 2005; Vignato 2004, 2000; Reuter 2001; Schiller 1996), although for the main part it meant an adaptation to the Balinese rendering of Hinduism.

Like Hinduism, which officially became *agama Hindu*, if the Indonesian Buddhist community wanted to be acknowledged as an official religion, stateable in ID documents, it needed to prove that it was a “religion” (*agama*) in the first place. Since Abrahamic faiths constituted the standard against which a definition of religion should be measured, it meant that candidates to the status of *agama*, out of the indefinite realm of mere “customs” (*adat*), needed to present three main traits: a monotheistic notion of divinity, a prophet and a holy scripture. This requirement was problematic for the vast majority of the “native” religions, but also for Hinduism and Buddhism, which lacked an unambiguous category of a unified God-almighty. Ashin

Jinarakkhita, by far the most authoritative and renowned Buddhist figure in Indonesia at that time, worked personally in the direction of “nationalising” Buddhism.

Jinarakkhita solved internal debates in the *umat* about doctrinal notions such as the divinity of the Buddha Sakyamuni and the necessity of a theistic category to begin with (Brown 1987: 111). Eventually, Jinarakkhita’s rendering of a Buddhist creed that acknowledged the existence of *Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*, a supreme divinity, became dominant and he was able to produce a version of *agama Buddha* that fit the superimposed paradigm of the national government. He stated that the Tipitaka scriptures, the canon recognised as the ultimate authority by Theravāda Buddhism, was Buddhism’s holy book, while the historical Buddha Sakyamuni was its prophet.

As for *Yang Maha Esa*, Jinarakkhita elaborated on the publications around the discovery of the *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan* text and he claimed that the notion of buddhahood, *sang hyang Adibuddha*, as elaborated in that manuscript was in fact a reference to a supreme all-encompassing divinity. At the same and one time, hence, Jinarakkhita could compromise with the official requirements of a state-defined “religion” while showing the relevance of Buddhism to Indonesian history and therefore to the national project. Therefore, Buddhism had no difficulty in entering the pantheon of the state-sponsored religions, especially so as Suharto himself endorsed the discursive circulation of Buddhism and Hinduism as Indonesia’s “classical religions”.

Ashin Jinarakkhita’s Buddhayāna has been an influential and long-lived experiment in the country. As of 2015, Jack Chia (2020: 152) states that the Buddhayāna council counted among its affiliates over 500 temples all over the country, a slight majority located in the countryside, a proportion that perhaps suggests its success among non-Chinese Indonesians²¹. As we have seen, Jinarakkhita’s accommodation to the nationalistic ethos allowed a relatively easy collaboration for officialising Buddhism within the *Pancasila* ideology. Suharto received Jinarakkhita a few times and he presided over the Weisak celebrations organised by Buddhayāna at Borobudur. In 1969 he held a speech at Weisak in which he exhorted the Indonesian Buddhist *umat* in practicing the Noble Eightfold Path and contribute in this way to the progress and wellbeing of the nation (Chia 2020: 143). Jinarakkhita managed moreover to convert a few high-rank generals in Suharto’s military.

²¹ Following an old Dutch colonial practice, Chinese-Indonesians have been banned from arable land possession well into the post-colonial state. To this day, the majority of Chinese-Indonesians, particularly in Java, resides in towns and cities.

Ashin Jinarakkhita played a huge role in guiding the fate of contemporary Buddhism through the turbulent decades before and after Indonesia's independence. The juxtaposition of global Buddhism, China-driven maritime religious networks and nationalistic historiography was the product of his own activism and made possible by his distinct biography which merged Theosophy, cosmopolitanism, *peranakan* background and a multifaceted scriptural knowledge. His eagerness to make Buddhism "Indonesian" was a project he carried on to his last days. Jinarakkhita passed away in 2002, followed by a grand ceremony in Jakarta attended by Buddhist institutional figures from all over Asia. A shrine dedicated to him is in Vihara Ekayāna Arama, in North Jakarta, while his ashes are buried in South Sumatra, after his own will and consistently with his view of decentralised Buddhism. The area is home to one of the communities that converted under his proselytist activities and is closer to the earlier traces of Buddhism in the archipelago: Muara Jambi and the vestiges of Sriwijaya.

7. Sangha Theravāda Indonesia

By the late 1970s Buddhayāna was no longer the only player in the Buddhist landscape of Indonesia. Ashin Jinarakkhita emphasised the concept of *Sang Hyang Adibuddha* as a "one and only God" which he implemented in temple worship by adding a phrase to the *namaskara* salutation. This alienated some of the monks that he himself had ordained, who were closer to a "purer" understanding of the dharma in a Theravādin sense. Simultaneous with the final approval of Buddhism as a state-protected religion (a decision which was finalised only in 1975 with *Peraturan Pementinah Republik Indonesia n.21*) five monks had quit Buddhayāna, followed by a few more in 1976, year in which Sangha Theravāda Indonesia (STI) was officially established and an STI temple, Vihara Tanah Putih (Figure 11), built in central Semarang. Soon after, Chinese-Indonesian bhikkhu Dharmasagara received Mahāyāna ordination in Hong Kong and, upon his return, quit Buddhayāna as well to form the much smaller Sangha Mahāyāna Indonesia.

The institutional relationships between the popular Buddhayāna, the newly formed but rapidly growing STI and the Mahāyāna breakaway group were tense and sat for a few years uncomfortably under umbrella organisations such as WALUBI, formed in 1982. WALUBI (*Pervalian Umat Buddha Indonesia* – guardianship of the Indonesian Buddhist *umat*) was largely sponsored by the board of Religious Affairs with the intention to keep track of an organisational scene that would become rather baroque with each year. After being initially presided by the military general Soemantri, WALUBI was then guided by Theravāda-inclined presidents. In 1995 Buddhayāna was expelled by the federation. The businesswoman and philanthropist Siti Hartati

Murdoyo would later take over the presidency of WALUBI (Suryadinata 2014: 33) and monopolise the relationships with governmental bodies, including the organisation of national Weisak celebrations. Although late Suharto seemed to have intervened personally in order to reconcile the positions within the Buddhist associations, his participation in WALUBI-organised councils and the 1996 Weisak at Borobudur was read by many as taking sides in favour of the governmentally structured WALUBI (Chia 2020: 151).



Figure 11. *Vihara Tanah Putih in Semarang, the first Theravāda-specific temple in Indonesia.*

The WALUBI federation might be seen as the outpost from which Theravāda Buddhism exercised influence within the national Buddhist affairs between the 1970s and the 1990s. The closeness of WALUBI to military and governmental personalities was functional also for the implementation of policies that aimed at shunning Chinese cultural features within the country. Under the presidency of Soemantri, WALUBI set on mapping out all the houses of worship in the country that fell within the continuum of “proper” Buddhist temples and *klentengs*. A dedicated conference was organised in 1984, titled “The Problem of *Klentengs*”, where a typology was made between “full viharas”, Chinese worship houses that contained predominantly

Buddhist elements and that could be considered “viharas” and *klentengs* with little or no reference to Buddhism. The latter should be converted and become viharas. The resolution had clearly a twofold outcome: if on the one hand, it continued on the line of the governmental policy of de-sinicising Chinese-Indonesians, on the other it allowed Theravāda Buddhism to seep into an already ingrained religious infrastructure that touched the everyday religiosity of thousands of Indonesians.

Under this new force, several *klentengs* changed their traditional Hokkien names into Pāli Buddhist referents, a process which had already begun in the early years of the New Order before this explicit resolution. A few of them were also completely renovated according to the simpler and rationalised architecture of modern Theravāda temples, from the kind of statues represented indoor to the decorative features in and around the major hall. The project was however slow and never really completed, as noted by Suryadinata (2014: 32), especially since the fall of Suharto signified also a relaxation of the New Order’s anti-Chinese stance. However, this “theravadisation” process in temple naming was still going on as late as 2017, when I received the information that a *klenteng* I had visited in Medan, North Sumatra, was to be demolished that year and replaced with a “full” vihara.

During the period of its most intense influence within WALUBI, Sangha Theravāda Indonesia managed to gain prominence indirectly through other initiatives. In 1980 Buddhism managed to obtain its own directorate within the Department of Religious Affairs, a position which was shared up to that point with Hinduism. In 1993 Buddhist education in school curricula (for Buddhist students only) and higher education were regulated and standardised. The influence of the Theravāda current was again important here. The educational material retained features of the historical-nationalist narrative grounded in Sriwijaya and Majapahit originally proposed by Jinarakkhita, an aspect which was largely inherited by STI, and references to the Mahāyāna Buddha Amitabha cult still appeared in the official textbooks of the 2013 and 2015 editions. The doctrinal content however followed exclusively the Theravāda canon, with a focus on Theravāda terminology, a specific set of holidays typical of Theravāda societies (Kathina, Maha Puja) and texts such as the Dhammapada with readings in Pāli²².

In the 2000s, STI became a hegemonic force within Indonesian Buddhism, especially after the passing of Ashin Jinarakkhita. The acquisition in 2006 of the Watugong vihara in Semarang, with which we opened this chapter, was possibly the most symbolic event of this overall re-orientation. However, it must be underscored that the flourishing of associations legitimised by

²² Textbooks for elementary school (*Sekolah Dasar – SD*), class I and III (Pendidikan Agama Buddha dan Budi Pekerti 2015, 2013).

the proximity to governmental bodies and federations was only one side of this process. The expansion of Theravada through the organisation of conventions, large events and temple building could not be possible solely through institutional endorsements but it rested in important ways on a dynamic network of monks and lay groups that extended to mainland Southeast Asia. A wide grassroots support via substantial private donations and organisational networking with religious institutions overseas were (and are) crucial aspects in the ideological and material penetration of Theravada Buddhism in the practice, conceptual frameworks and aesthetics of Indonesian Buddhism. STI found an important source of support among wealthy Indonesians, including bourgeoisie Chinese-Indonesians, but also in the missionary ambitions of Buddhist schools from mainland Southeast Asian (Kitiarsa 2010). The Thai Dhammayutta monastic branch was particularly engaged, through a series of mutual exchanges with the Indonesian community of monks, called *Dhamma Tours*, in attracting the educated Chinese-Indonesian section of the Buddhist *umat*²³.

The history leading up to the formation of contemporary Indonesian Buddhism, as we have seen, does not follow a neat genealogical progression. It is not received intact from a postulated “classical Java” down to the present, neither can it be considered a wholly new religious movement, with a clearly defined and describable trajectory. It might be figured instead as the fortuitous assemblage (a “bulb”, in the botanical language of Deleuze and Guattari) of historical strands of multiple origins and with no defined end. The Qing dynasty, Javanese village rituals, Western esotericism, volcanic stone, seafaring technology, colonialism, mediaeval Indian philosophers, New Order military generals, remnants of palm leaves inscriptions, Muslim traders. The making of contemporary Buddhism in Indonesia is the result of the coming together of these developments which mobilised people, objects and discourses over several centuries. Through the various epochs, Java occupied a central position for the way these stories interacted. Fragments of these interactions reverberate in the practices, the narratives and imaginaries of contemporary Buddhists and they surface at different junctions and with different purposes.

²³ Personal conversation with Jesada Buaban (มหาวิทยาลัยวลัยลักษณ์ Walailak University / Gajah Mada University), whose doctoral research, unpublished, investigates the monastic exchanges between the Thai Dhammayutta and Buddhāyana in the 1900s.

Chapter III

SURJOSARI, 2017.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A “REVIVAL IN THE REVIVAL”

“Revived” Buddhism in rural Java

In this chapter, I introduce the ethnographic field of the Buddhist-majority village of Surjosari. Located in the highland regency of Temanggung, the village is a site that condenses many of the issues at stake in the process which I frame as a “revival in the revival”. Surjosari is one of the rural sites in Java in which Buddhism was adopted as a formal religious affiliation beginning from the 1950s, a religious dynamic which residents and observers experienced retrospectively as a “revival”. In recent years, the villagers have started a set of upgrades intended to revamp in equal measure the economic, social and religious fabric of the area. The birth of youth associationism centred around the cause of Buddhism has been a crucial vector in guiding these revitalisation efforts in both religious and non-religious matters. Taken together, this revitalisation complex constitutes a new “revival”, in which many threads converge.

Next to the immediate religious and economic affairs of the Temanggung area, such as the increasingly standardised forms of Theravāda Buddhist practices or the specific landscaping efforts, this form of revival also resonates with larger ethnic and religious discourses around Javanese identity as such and “Javaneseness” in relation to formal religions, including Buddhism. At the same time, it is also embedded in broad long-term trajectories that encompass processes of internal, multi-directional mobility and nationwide policies around religion and agro-politics.

In this chapter, I describe the many ways in which the renewed attention given to Buddhist religious practice is inextricable from larger social and economic processes. It shows how the combination of these factors gives rise to a specific form of “Javanese Buddhism”, understood in historical-ethnic terms, which is partly the indirect coalescence of these rhizomatic factors, partly the intentional and organised effort of distinct social actors. The chapter shows how religious experience is produced at the intersection of discursive and material practices, which also indicates how religion as a field can hardly ever be abstracted from other spheres of human concern. This also had methodological implications in my approach to the ethnography. In collecting and organising the data, I made use of various kinds of information, from the analysis

of digital media and the narratives elaborated by some of my interlocutors, to the ethnographic participation in both the ritual and the routine activities of the activists and the villagers. The chapter focuses on developments that I observed around the period of my stay in the village in 2017. It aims at providing a description of the processes underway around that time in the area from which further developments emerged and branched out in the period between 2018 and 2020, aspects that will be explored in chapter IV.

I introduce the chapter with a recent local debate surrounding the question of Javanese heritage and identity vis-à-vis Buddhism. The episode indexes the controversies and the ongoing questions surrounding the religion on a larger scale in Java and Indonesia. Afterwards, I narrow down the focus to the Temanggung regency and Surjosari. Although the rest of the chapter will be dedicated to the villagers and the issues of the Surjosari area, I situate the dynamics of the village in broad continuity with comparable developments in nearby locations, such as the villages of Cemoro and Purwodeso (section 4). I do so by following the activities of the *Pemuda Buddhis* youth group. In the latter part (section 6) I concentrate on the formulation of a “Javanese” variety of Buddhism in Surjosari and surroundings from the point of view of ritual practice.

1. Java, heritage and Buddhism. An unsettled territory.

Sometime in mid-2015, in the popular magazine *Buddhazine* the director Sutar Soemitro published an unusually vehement article on the weakness of “national pride” among Buddhists in Indonesia²⁴. The article moved from an anecdote circulating a few months before concerning the inauguration of an Indonesian Buddhist *vihara* in central New York²⁵. However, according to Soemitro what could have been an occasion for the showcase of national culture, turned out to be a disappointment. All the statues in the temple were fashioned according to “Thai” aesthetics and, so maintained Soemitro, there was little Indonesian-ness aside from a dedication in Indonesian written on a plate at the entrance of the venue.

This aesthetic level was far from incidental, continued Soemitro, as it reflected the everyday visual and practical circumstances in which Indonesian Buddhism unfolded in the vast majority of *viharas* in the country. Statues and other artistic features were routinely inspired by Buddhist representations as found in Thailand, Myanmar, China and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka.

²⁴ *Buddhazine* (07/2015) “Umat Buddha Indonesia Tak Bangga dengan ke-Indonesiannya?”

²⁵ Vihara Parivara Dhamma Acala – Indonesian Buddhist Temple, 86, 56th Avenue – Queens, New York.

Not just visual features, but for Soemitro entire schools were “imported” from abroad, from the mainstream Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna vehicles to the less institutionalised Maitreya, Plum Village and Nichiren, originally formed in Taiwan, France and Japan respectively. This was reproachable, in Soemitro’s eyes, because unlike most non-Asian countries, Indonesia could count on a native form of Buddhism both in aesthetic and religious practice. The evidence laid on archaeology and historical record. The stone Buddhas of the grand Borobudur complex were an index of what an “Indonesian” Buddhist aesthetic should look like.

Not only the local (in fact, Javanese) representation of the historical Gautama Buddha, but the stone effigies in heritage objects like Borobudur were also telling of the physiognomy of a typical Indonesian inhabitant of that time: composed, broad-chested, well-proportioned, not fat nor emaciated. His features and bearing are those of a *silat* warrior as if straight from a 90s blockbuster film production. Similarly, history and archaeology in the form of recuperated manuscripts, stone excavations and traces from surviving non-Islamic ritual practices, revealed the wider artistic, literary and ethical framework in which this vision of a native Indonesian Buddhism could “flourish again” without recurring to perceived foreign sources.

Not long after the publication of this column, Soemitro passed away prematurely, but his characteristic vision was far from unique. That is, the vision that the cultural and religious world of pre-Islamic and pre-colonial Indonesia (“Nusantara”) carried precise ethnic qualities that were supposed to be innately relevant for the present-day Javanese. If this ethnohistorical narrative could be addressed to a Javanese collective identity at large (see for example Dahles 2001), modern day Buddhists in Java were supposed to take on such narrative with particular pride and earnestness. Furthermore, the appearance of contemporary Buddhism in the country was framed through the idea of religious “revival” (Brown 1987), which authorised the vision of an additional layer of continuity between the religion of Nusantara and the contemporary Buddhist *umat*.

Outside of the strictly Buddhist field, the question of how to qualify the vast archaeological and historical evidence of Nusantara had been an open issue in the broader discourse in Indonesia. For a number of institutions and citizens alike, the unresolved tension has continued to be whether to look at “Nusantara” through the detached lens of heritage or whether it constituted a cultural framework to be seriously taken up and lived out in everyday cultural practices. Such question was perceived as relevant for the Javanese and Indonesians of all religious orientations and in recent years it has been re-invigorated through the surge of ethno-culturalist categories and of Islam as a hegemonic public force.

The intensification of discourses around ethnic identity has been sparked particularly after the fall of Suharto in 1998, when a set of policies was introduced progressively in order to decentralise the institutional infrastructure of the country. The process has led to the rise of an unprecedented degree of self-awareness about local identities. Oftentimes, culturalist stances were also mobilised countrywide in unresolved issues of land dispute or political power struggles between local and national institutions, especially among marginalised communities (Kusumaryati 2020; Hauser-Schäublin 2013; Tyson 2012). Although often articulated on moral and theological grounds, contemporary lay and religious Islamic organisations have also brought attention to ethnocultural features, specifically on where to draw the boundaries between *agama* (religion) and *adat* (customs, tradition), with reference to what is permissible or not in Islamic-religious terms (see for instance a debate over music in Lombok, Harnish 2011).

The recent repositioning of Islam in the public arena has aroused new twists also to the ongoing debates concerning Javanese heritage and Buddhism. In a popular publication, the Islamic scholar Fahmi Basya (2012) brought the Borobudur complex into a Muslim framework. He went as far as to claim that the Borobudur monuments were, in fact, the legacy of an Islamic form of esoteric knowledge going back to a supposed link between the Palestinian king Solomon and Java. Fahmi's controversial argument was given space in university conferences and local tabloids and it was later aired and debated in national media. However, his thesis was also telling of the present configuration of local Islam as well as the shifting genealogies attributed to the local religious expressions. Basya's book postulated and retraced the Islamic-ness of his arguments (which boiled down to a set of numerological recurrences and architectural proportions of the Borobudur monuments) not upon the usual cult of the mystics who are believed to have introduced Islam to Java (the *wali songo*) but on a straight and undiluted link to the birthplace of Islam itself, in the Middle East.

Deliberate and contentious as it might appear, episodes such as Fahmi's book and the backlash that it triggered among academic and popular voices alike are symptomatic of just how much Javanese ethnocultural discourses and the role of Nusantara's heritage traces are fraught with contrasting meanings, references and degrees of relevance in the lives and actions of the flesh-and-bones Indonesians of today. This fraught territory becomes especially salient for those Indonesians that mobilise the "Hindu-Buddhist" historical narrative, to use a classic Geertzian figure (1973), as a *model of* and a *model for* individual orientation and social action, as indexed by voices such as Soemitro's.

The debates articulated over identity, history and the relationship between state religions and local traditions reverberate in concrete developments in the country's religious communities. The intersection of these debates with contextual social-religious dynamics produce very peculiar ways in which ethnohistorical issues are engaged on the ground and reformulated in different ways according to circumstances and purposes. In order to elicit the workings of such dynamics in reference to contemporary Buddhism, I turn the focus to the Temanggung highlands in Central Java. The regency counts several villages with substantial Buddhist populations and is one of the regions with the highest number of both practitioners and Buddhist houses of worship outside of the island's metropolitan areas.

The relevance of Temanggung also rests in the fact that Buddhist affiliation intersects here a quintessentially rural environment, a setting with which ideas of Javanese authenticity are often associated (Strassler 2010). The ethnographic data emphasises how the villagers themselves incorporate and mobilise such ideas. However, it also shows how the area is embedded in fact in broader mobility patterns, economic systems and imaginaries. These aspects are not only contextualising features but essential traits in the establishment and the evolution of the religious life of the area and they organise in important ways the very religious complex in which a distinct form of Javanese Buddhism unfolds.

2. Temanggung, between marginality and centrality

A landlocked regency nested on the volcanic highlands of western Central Java, Temanggung is one of the rearward areas in the industrial and, increasingly, post-industrial economic landscape of Java (BPS 2010). The almost entire economy of the regency revolves around agriculture, as many among the residents carry on subsistence types of farming. Agriculture is the main form through which the economy of Temanggung is also tied to the wider Javanese and Indonesian commercial network. The region is the breadbasket of the island for basic crops, such as ginger, and especially for one of the most lucrative national industries, that is tobacco farming. The area is particularly important for the affluent *kretek* cigarette industry, a large domestic market slice dominated by the local business giant Sampoerna. The company was acquired in 2005 by US-based Philip Morris International, which also runs the Sampoerna Museum in Surabaya²⁶. However, the strategical location of Temanggung for the tobacco industry is met with

²⁶ Sampoerna website: <https://www.sampoerna.com/sampoerna/id/about-us/pmi>

disproportionately unfavourable working conditions, as frictions between unions and corporation, low selling rates and widespread informal market practices dominate the labour practice of the region. Such conditions have frequently issued mass protests that have often resonated on national media, especially in the period between 2012 and 2014 (Sobary 2016; Herdiyani 2013).

The embeddedness of Temanggung into the domestic and international tobacco business shows a peculiar tension between dynamics of marginality and centrality. This ambiguity is also reflected in the demographics of the regency. Temanggung is the second least densely populated region in Java, an island notoriously discussed as burdened with the problems of “overpopulation” (Lipscombe 1972). The issue has been tackled historically with a resettlement program called *Program Transmigrasi*, initiated in late-colonial times and perpetuated in different phases through the 20th century. The program relocated entire families and communities from crowded provinces in Java, Bali and Madura to allotted lands within those islands and, more often, in outer regions defined as underpopulated on Sumatra, Kalimantan, Papua and the Moluccas (Hugo 2015, 2006; Otten 1986). While internal migration was not a new phenomenon in Indonesia (see Salazar 2016) the program reshuffled the demographic profile (including the religious profile) of whole provinces in unprecedented ways. In some of the host territories, inter-ethnic tension and episodes of brutal violence issued as a consequence of the program (Barter and Côté 2015). Oftentimes, religion was mobilised as a triggering factor for the simmering tensions and inequalities that emerged among the newly diversified populations (Sidel 2018)

Temanggung was exposed to the resettlement policies in both directions. It was at different times a region from which communities were sent away to other provinces but also a region that, at other stages of the program, resettled outside families from within Java (Yuli Setyaningtyas 2008; Hardjono 1988). As a result, the regency experienced transmigration both ways. A highly diverse religious makeup emerged in Temanggung for both this migratory process and for the parallel developments in religious affiliation that occurred nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the present configuration, Temanggung is a Muslim-majoritarian regency, like other regions in Java, although it is home to several religious minorities who dot the entire countryside: Catholics, different Protestant denominations, Buddhists and smaller communities of Hindus and self-identified “Javanists”. While the presence of non-Muslim communities in the rural areas of Java is not unique to Temanggung (the Salatiga-Ambarawa-Magelang triangle comprise, for example, a sizeable proportion of Catholic Javanese), the regency’s minorities are highly

diversified and scattered. According to some of my interlocutors, the dispersal of non-Muslims into micro-enclaves in Muslim-majority villages is what contributed historically to the incorporation of some of the minoritarian communities into Islam, via episodes of “economic” conversions.

Despite its apparent peripheral status, the sociological makeup of Temanggung is therefore considerably dynamic also from a religious point of view. In some cases, events pertaining to religion that occurred in Temanggung had a national and even international ramification. In 2009 and 2018, Temanggung’s administrative seat, the homonymous small-town in the south of the regency, has been twice the objective of two acts of terrorism attributed to Islamic religious radicalism. In the first case, members of the Jemaah Islamiyah group were caught in the process of planning the murdering of the then-president Susilo Bambang. The group was a radical organisation formed in the late 1990s and notorious for the deadly Bali bombings of 2002 (Osman 2010). More recently, the anti-terrorist governmental body Densus 88 raided a house at the town’s fringes in which three men affiliated with the supra-national Islamic State were about to bomb the local police headquarters²⁷. The men were arrested and were subsequently found linked to the suicide attacks at the Surabaya churches in the same year.

Between 2010 and 2011, another episode of social friction linked to the regency’s religious diversity made the country’s headlines. It involved the Protestant pastor Antonius Bawengan²⁸, a Manado-born cleric who had already aroused controversy in the province for alleged proselytising activities. Violence escalated when he was reported to the authorities with the accusation of blasphemy for the diffusion of booklets that claimed, among other things, the resemblance of Kaaba’s black stone to female genitalia and of the three pillars of Mina to male organs. When in August 2011 the blasphemy sentence for the pastor was set to five years (the legal maximum), riots and mobs fired up in Temanggung, organised by radical Muslim protesters who had asked instead for the death penalty. Three churches were burned in the regency as a consequence and a police van was set on fire.

As these examples suggest, Temanggung is far from the stereotypes associated with “remote areas” (Vesantkumar 2017; Ardener 2012). Although it may be regarded in many respects as a region condensing dynamics of marginalisation, at least within the Javanese context, it

²⁷ *Tempo* (in Indonesian): <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1056310/densus-88-tangkap-tiga-terduga-teroris-di-temanggung/full&view=ok>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch (in Indonesian): <https://www.hrw.org/id/report/2013/02/28/256410>. Parts of the episode were also reported on international media, see NYT: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/world/asia/09indonesia.html>

remains economically, socially and religiously imbricated in multiple ways to the affairs of Java and Indonesia at large. Zooming in to the context of Surjosari, the Temanggung sub-region in which a big part of this work is based, I'm going to explore a similar process in which marginalisation and remoteness are crisscrossed with a national and global circulation of practices and imaginaries that interest the core of the community's religious world.

3. Surjosari, 2017

When in 2017 I visited Surjosari for the first time, the village seemed to belong to a completely different era from the habitual rumbling and movement of things and people characteristic of contemporary Java. Its location on the rugged highlands of the Temanggung province, which comprises three medium-sized volcanoes, makes it for a wearying ride to begin with. Whether approached from the regency capital in the west or from the eastern slope, passed the windy road that from the Semarang-Solo highway slips through the resorts and the entertainment venues of Bandungan, one is left to navigate a large uphill region, dotted with villages and small towns, amidst ever wider fields and plantations. On the upper end of the range, the road becomes little more than an unpaved track between fields and woods.

At the time of my visit, Surjosari was home to a village community of about 160 residents, 141 of which were Buddhists, while the rest comprised Muslim households. The village is the only one in the district with such an overwhelming Buddhist majority, although most of the hamlets in the wider area count substantial communities of Buddhists, in varying demographic configurations with Muslim and, to a smaller extent, Christian households. Surjosari impressed me from the distance as a village as ordinary and unassuming as any other encountered around the area. Only a minority of the houses were built in bricks and cement, while most donned the old-fashioned combination of bamboo, wood and tinsplate. The population of cattle, dogs and poultry, combined with the absence of cars (although motorbikes did make the rounds occasionally) and especially the quietness in which the place seemed to be drifting at all hours, all contributed to give one the impression of time suspension amid an idyllic scene of the Javanese countryside. The village was delimited to the east and the north-west by the forest and to the west by a steep slope. Two human-made objects reproduced symbolically the same border: a large

*pendhapa*²⁹ set up in a pitch to the south-east and a tiny family-run shop (the only one in the area) in the west.

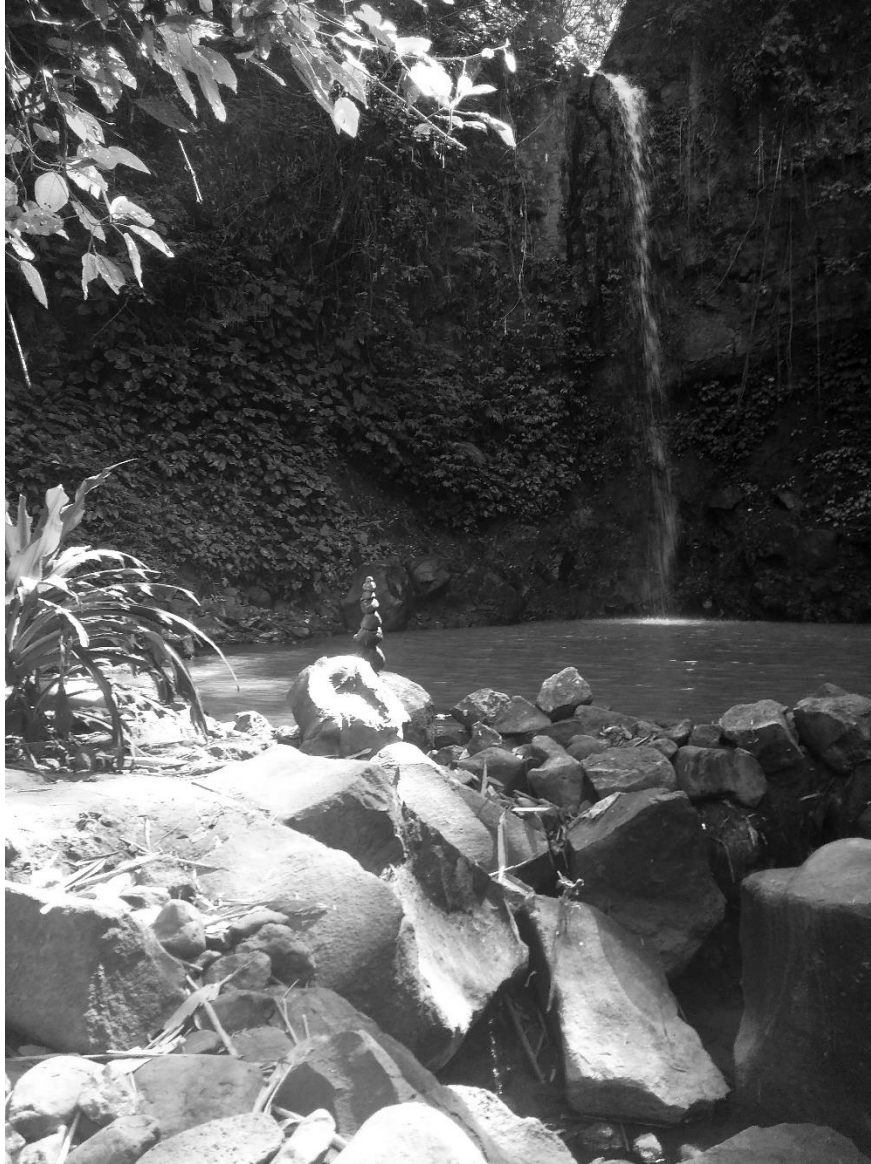


Figure 12. Waterfall on the slope of Surjosari.

The eastern forest seemed to effectively function as de facto boundary of the village, while to the uphill north the village seemed to morph more gradually into the woods, through a few intermittent hectares of cultivated soil – fruits and vegetables. The rice fields, instead, opened

²⁹ Javanese wood- or shingle-roofed gazebo.

wide a couple of kilometres to the south, in which direction all the farmers would disappear in the morning. What appeared to be a well-trodden path winds through the plots of land and up into the northern forest, until it runs along a stream of water. Further deep, eventually, the stream and the path led to a waterfall (*curug*), overseen by a giant oak with a hollow trunk, after which the real no man's land finally seems to begin (Figure 12).

However, the pond formed by the *curug* was far from being just a waterfall. This water source was nothing less than what a few local legends and some archaeological work suggested as being a sacred pond from which at the time of Nusantara Buddhist monks and Javanese spiritual practitioners would collect holy water for ritual abduction and official ceremonies. The story seemed to conflate the speculations surrounding other *curugs* and humanly routed water sources in the Temanggung area. The most notable and plausible of which appears to be the Umbul Jumprit to the west in the province, a site recently linked to the Liyangan excavation (Degroot 2017) where a Buddhist monastery was believed to be erected during the early Mataram dynastic period, although its religious significance is still disputed (Abbas 2014).

Whether or not Surjosari's *curug* bears historical traces of sacredness, by the time I left the fieldwork site, it came to constitute a significant ritual and religious site. In any event, up to 2017 there was little suggestion of any visible regard or relevance attributed by the villagers to Surjosari's *curug*. The place was fairly hard to access, save for the rough path between the rock and the fields, and no mark nor any sign of particular care singled it out from the surrounding areas. But the village lacked obviously religious marks as a whole. The only place of worship in the village was a public house functioning as a Buddhist *vihara* while the entire surrounding area was remarkably void of mosques, a striking characteristic in contemporary Java not only for their absence in the built environment but also in the area's soundscape.

3.1. Subagyo, a Buddhist activist

The description of Surjosari given above was in all likelihood not very dissimilar from what Subagyo saw upon moving here two years before. Subagyo was a man in his early thirties, originally from the Jepara countryside on the north coast of Java. He moved to the village upon marrying Metta, a girl from the Temanggung regency. They moved to Surjosari together with her father, who was born and raised in the village. The choice to move to a place relatively secluded

as Surjosari was a thoroughly meditated one and was not dictated only by the family background of Metta.

Subagyo was not a farmer himself and had lived for most of his young adult life in places that had little to share with Surjosari's aloof tranquillity. He graduated from high school in a private Protestant institution of Jepara's region under the umbrella of a Christian foundation (*Yayasan Pendidikan Kristen*). Right after, Subagyo moved on to Jakarta where he studied an undergraduate program at STAB Nalanda. STAB stands for *Sekolah Tinggi Agama Buddha* – Institute of Higher Education for the Buddhist Religion – and it is one of the major institutes in the field of Buddhist Studies in Java. Inaugurated in 1979, in connection to the official establishment of Sangha Theravāda Indonesia, the institute's main objective was to form graduates who could fill up posts as Buddhist teachers in the country's education system, which mandates religious education up to undergraduate level. Before the formation of STAB, teaching posts in Buddhism were assigned to instructors without formal education or, not infrequently, were simply left vacant. While the undergraduate program of STABs is double railed – “dharma studies” and religious education, the entire graduate curriculum is devoted to Buddhism for school and university instructors.

Subagyo met his future wife Metta, who was also enrolled at a Buddhist college, the Salatiga “Sailendra” branch of STAB, at an event in Temanggung organised by the Jakarta-based Nalanda in collaboration with smaller Buddhist organisations from Yogyakarta and Temanggung-city. After a stint in Yogyakarta, they eventually relocated to Surjosari in 2014, in a house belonging to Metta's father. Not long afterwards Metta gave birth to a daughter, Aykia. Subagyo was very mindful of his daughter's upbringing. He was teaching Aykia traditional Javanese children's games and portrayed her multiple times every day in pictures in set in the fields or by the village's vihara, pictures which he later posted on his social media.

Subagyo and Metta's personal backgrounds were not the typical trajectory of a Surjosari resident who, for the most part, had been farmers for generations and had left the village on extremely few occasions. The slightly different status of the couple was also marked by their house, which was the only one in the village renovated and fortified entirely in bricks, although the Javanese plan (a veranda in the front, a “wet kitchen” in the back and a stable for cattle) was kept. In the same year that I stayed in Surjosari for the first time, a black car would complement the property of the household, another “first” in the village.



Figure 13. Surjosari's village pavilion (pendhapa), and a newly introduced Buddha statue.

3.2. Temanggung's *djoyo wulu*. Reconstructing a Buddhist genealogy

The day I met them, Metta spent most of the time in the kitchen with her father and a neighbour chatting and cleaning vegetables and popped out frequently to the veranda only to serve snacks and poke a joke. I had interacted with Subagyo beforehand through social media, after I read some of his posts on the Buddhazine online magazine. Therefore, we did not dwell in introductory talk and the conversation drifted quickly towards the history of Surjosari and Subagyo's own religious engagement. Long-haired and chain-smoking pretty much from dawn to dusk, Subagyo was fond of calling himself an "activist" for the number of activities he carried out. While he had been a Buddhist from birth, most of his textual knowledge was acquired over the span of the last few years. He showed me around in his room and quickly flicked through the textbooks he studied from during his education at STAB Nalanda. A separate shelf accumulated religious texts and popular books on Buddhism from various provenance, some of which were in English, a language he admitted he could not read. Some more books were on subjects relating to "Javanese culture" at large and commentaries on Javanese court literature. He seemed very

content with his expanding library, although he also confessed that he usually felt “too sleepy to read”.

Subagyo framed the religious configuration of the village in an apparently contradictory manner, a pattern that would recur persistently in many of the conversations I happened to have with residents and outsiders alike. Surjosari’s Buddhism was talked about by most of my interlocutors at the same time or alternatively as a “revival”, an instance of pristine and interrupted continuity of Java’s classical religion or the conversion to a thoroughly new religion. As I would later come to understand, much of what might be called contemporary Indonesian Buddhism is in fact a combination of the three things in quite literal and peculiar ways.

The genealogy of the revival narrative is traced by Subagyo, and later by other well-informed residents³⁰, to the hagiography of eight men who were talked about as *tokoh kunci* (“key personalities”), an expression in Indonesian which was used in reference to any person who was perceived to have had a crucial role in the modern history of Buddhism in Temanggung. However, these very eight personalities were known collectively as *djoyo wulu*, “eight glorious ones”, in Javanese. Subagyo admitted he had very limited knowledge of these eight personalities, besides knowing the name of Mbah Manggis, Surjosari’s “first Buddhist”, a man that his father-in-law had known in person. On a recent trip to Yogyakarta, Subagyo had the chance to learn more details about the origin story of Buddhism in the wider region from university lecturers and *romo/ramani*³¹ of Vihara Karangdjati. He began to be especially interested in one of the *djoyo wulu*, Romo Among. For Subagyo, the man was the missing link between the larger regional revival of Buddhism in late-colonial Indonesia and the more humble and localised deeds of Mbah Manggis, the man who introduced Surjosari’s farmers to Buddhism.

Subagyo began out of his own interest an intense research activity which he accomplished thanks to his network of personal contacts. Just a few weeks before my arrival, he had managed to trace the contact of the only living kinship tie of Romo Among: his eldest daughter, Retno. When he related to me the encounter he had with the now-elderly woman, he grew increasingly engaged in the conversation. The woman revealed that the relationship between Romo Among and Mbah Manggis was first of all a professional one, as they both occupied between the 1960s

³⁰ See Lambek 1993 for an elaboration on the three-tired individual perspectives towards religious bodies of knowledge: the expert, the well-informed citizen and the man on the street, an image he recovered from Schutz 1964.

³¹ Javanese referent for highly learned and respected men (*romo*) and women (*ramani*). Among Javanese Buddhists they are used for lay Buddhist instructors. “Mbah” is instead a more generic address form for respected elderlies.

and 1970s institutional posts in the ranks of the police corps, although on different territorial scales.

Romo Among's approach to Buddhism was rather scholarly in nature. He diligently wrote down texts of discourses and lectures he happened to hear, discourses he thought were not yet fixed as bodies of textual knowledge. Retno seemed to have been particularly moved by her father's detailed account of the four noble truths, the basic tenets of all Buddhism. She also reported how Romo Among appeared to have been crucial in the debate on the thorny "question of God" in Indonesian Buddhism. The issue was one of the three basic requirements for the acceptance of Buddhism as one of the "state religions" and raised vehement debates in local Buddhist and Hindu circles, as those religious traditions did not have a ready equivalent to the Abrahamic idea of godhood.

As we recalled in the previous chapter, the issue for Buddhism was resolved on an institutional level by Ashin Jinarakkhita and his reading of *Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan*. Subagyo admitted he was quite baffled to learn that allegedly many practitioners and sympathisers at the time of Romo Among dared to question God's existence. For him the issue was particularly puzzling, since these personalities were also at the same time convinced nationalists, and nationalism and (mono)theism were indissoluble to the eye of any Indonesian born in the era of the *Orde Baru*. As he ascertained from Retno, however, Romo Among managed to clear from his Yogyakarta circle any doubt on the issue of God in Buddhism by simply asking them to be silent and meditate. After an entire evening spent quiet and motionless, reportedly they all acknowledged that, yes, there was a God in Buddhism.

Like Romo Among, Mbah Manggis' religiosity before the official adoption of Buddhism could be loosely defined as *kejawen*, the widespread syncretist movement which blended traditional Javanese religiosity with Sufi Islamic notions and vocabulary. Like other personalities associated with the revival on a smaller scale, Mbah Manggis' role in the eastern Temanggung countryside is often talked about as *tokoh kunci*, a key personality. He learned the basics of the Buddhist teachings through communal evening gatherings and private visits with his colleague in the higher rank Romo Among. Just like the bureaucratised orders in the public administration in the New Order cosmology, *tokoh kunci* were perceived to ferry the flow of religious knowledge and affiliation from larger provincial and regional contexts down to the smallest territorial units.

A parallel dynamic to the religious transmission between Romo Among and Mbah Manggis occurred between Romo Among and Sutrisno, one of the key personalities that was also

regarded as one of the *djoyo wulu*. Sutrisno was a former Catholic in a neighbouring sub-district of Temanggung, Kalidalem (8 kilometres west from Surjosari). He not only converted to Buddhism personally like others among the *tokoh kunci* but set up a formal event on the 1st of June 1968 in which the sub-district officially declared the “resurrection” (*kebangkitan*) of Buddhism in the area. The event is commemorated yearly in Kalidalem to this day. The choice of the date was hardly incidental, as it is the national holiday for the commemoration of the national ideology (*Hari Lahir Pancasila*). Every year since then the district celebrates at once the Pancasila ideology and Sutrisno’s figure as a key personality for local Buddhism.

3.3. Pemuda Buddhis: the formation of a Buddhist youth militancy

Subagyo intended to reevaluate the personality of Mbah Manggis for Surjosari and surroundings to a similar degree as Sutrisno’s near-cult that developed in his sub-district of Kalidalem. Prior to this, he intended to turn first the village’s youths into Buddhist activists, for he felt that the state of Buddhism in Surjosari and especially in the scattered communities of the surrounding highlands was “in danger”. The reason why Subagyo was especially focussed on young residents, who ranged from adolescents to men in their early thirties, was that Indonesian Buddhism at large and rural Buddhism in particular were affected by a slow demographic decline. According to him, this trend was caused by the expansion of Christian and Islamic educational institutions on the one hand, and inter-religious marriage on the other, in which case it was frequently the Buddhist counterpart to change his or her affiliation³².

For Subagyo, the contemporary pattern of internal mobility, marked to an important extent by processes of urbanisation, intensified this process in major ways, as chances to partner with a spouse from the same minority religion, let alone from the same sub-district of origin, were often slim. Subagyo pieced together this narrative to me (although he referred to a “Buddhist decline” also in his journalistic pieces) with an autobiographical tone. He had been himself an example of an urbanised village youngster and he had edged the danger of abandoning the “way of the forefathers”, by being educated in Christianity and being through his adolescence indifferent towards religious matters. Whenever possible, he had made now a personal vow to

³² Inter-religious marriages in Indonesia, although not uncommon, are often performed with the idea that the household should state one common religious affiliation. It follows that one side of the couple changes his or her stated religion to conform to the one of the partner. Whether the practice is mandated by law or it constitutes only a customary practice is still a heated debate (Aini, Utomo and McDonald 2019).

prevent similar possibilities to occur in the lives of other young Buddhists from the Javanese countryside.

Shortly after he moved to Surjosari on a permanent basis, Subagyo began organising evening gatherings at his veranda, meetings that were still consistently being carried on weekly throughout my stay in Temanggung. On the side of these weekly congregations, which gathered young residents from a radius of ten to fifteen kilometres, Subagyo more informally hosted individuals and small groups of people almost daily. For all practical purposes, Subagyo's domicile had in fact become an organisational headquarter, a social club and an editorial office. As such, the line between official meetings, casual catch-ups and private matters was very thin. While almost every week there were events, plans and logistics to be discussed, a good deal of the time spent together was invested in conviviality – rumours and gossip loosely concerning the *umat*, but also the discussion of business ideas, coffee sipping and even singing, especially when meetings rolled deeper into the night.

Subagyo's gatherings were thus socialisation events to an important degree. But the idea and activities of Pemuda Buddhis remained anchored in more concerted projects that had Buddhism and village life as their axes. Subagyo was successful in creating in a relatively short time a set of regular and less regular initiatives that engaged the village youth through various activities. These activities had the threefold objective to create a network of young Buddhists on a district and regional level, the materialisation of an appealing and more vibrant religious life and, ultimately, a resilient, village-based, form of social fabric.

Apart from Subagyo, one of the most active members of Pemuda Buddhis was Sura. Sura was a couple of years younger than Subagyo and was born and raised in Tare, a hamlet a few kilometres north of Surjosari from a family of tobacco farmers. He was educated consistently as a Buddhist throughout his life, although he experienced an intensification of his religious commitment once he moved out of the countryside to study Economics at an undergraduate course in Semarang. In the last year of his studies, he took the decision to move back to the village and returned to Semarang only to defend his B.A. thesis or for short-term jobs. Sura got in touch with Subagyo via social media first, and after he moved back to the countryside, he began to be involved in the activities of Pemuda Buddhis, of which he quickly became one of the senior and most militant members.

His decision to return to the village was animated by the joint motivations of establishing a business in the countryside linked to coffee farming and participating in religious activism. In

2018, after my first visit to Temanggung, he became a *samanera*, a temporary monk. He also admitted he occasionally toured the highlands of Temanggung in order to identify possible sites of heritage linked to Buddhism that were still overlooked by the local administrations and communities. After he joined Pemuda Buddhis, the “heritage hunt” became a group activity that involved a few among the activists. They successfully managed to bring a few fragments of artifacts to the attention of regional heritage committees, although the activity as such was extremely difficult to carry out for several complications involved, from surveying the opinions of archaeologists to the paperwork to file to the regional boards.

In May 2016 Pemuda Buddhis was formally launched with an event participated by over 200 young Buddhists from the hamlets of Temanggung and the nearby regencies of Kendal and Semarang. The event was overseen by Ven. Atthapiyo, a charismatic Theravāda monk from the island of Flores³³. Atthapiyo gave an introductory speech by Surjosari’s vihara in which he recollected his path to monkhood in his early twenties. Born in Catholic-majority Flores, which granted him the title of “first monk from Flores”, and from a religiously committed family he only began to learn about Buddhism at the age of twenty-two. In his speech, he recounted the struggle of being a young Buddhist in an area without a pre-existing community, particularly among his peers, and of how the presence of a supporting association would have facilitated his personal and religious life. He realised then the meaning of the Buddha’s maxim on the *dharmā* being like a jewel and not a random brick: for, like a jewel, it was indeed a rare thing to find among the living. The speech of Atthapiyo was clearly a motivational input to the formation of the youth group and concluded his talk wishing that the spirit of Pemuda Buddhis “could warm up the chilly highlands of Temanggung”.

The remainder of the event was an oath for the cause of Pemuda Buddhis and the commitment to the revitalisation of Buddhism. After the recitation of the Pāli chant *Devatā Aradhana* (the “summoning of the divine beings”³⁴) some of the participants came to the front of the vihara in turns and recited a personal commitment they had written on paper. The vows were then individually closed in envelopes and placed in a basket. The commitments would be sent three months later to the address of the respective vihara that the “activist” had written on the envelope. For Subagyo, this was meant to engage symbolically the youngsters with their own

³³ Ven. Atthapiyo passed away in 2018, at the age of thirty-seven.

³⁴ A Pāli-Indonesian version of the chant is available here: <https://paritabuddhist.com/aradhana-devata-mengundang-para-dewa/>

communities and further motivate them to the cause. He showed me one of such letters, belonging to seventeen-year-old Nirmala:

“I, Nirmala, in front of the altar of Buddha Sakyamuni, commit myself to keep hold of the jewel that I have received. And I promise to continue the struggle of those who have preceded me in the advancement of Buddhism”³⁵

At the time of our conversations, Nirmala was still active in the activities of Pemuda Buddhis, stated Subagyo, and she intended to enrol in a program for Buddhist Studies, although she had so far postponed the application. The evening culminated with the launch of white lanterns into the sky.

Pemuda Buddhis’ founding story and the activism that it inaugurated condenses a few important points. The first one is the choice of language and the imaginary evoked. The Indonesian noun *pemuda* is historically charged with semantic connotations that set it apart from the generic twin referent for “youth”, the disengaged *remaja*. Lee (2016) reconstructs how the *pemuda* noun, coined from the Melayu *muda* (“unripe”), was formed in late-colonial times in order to better translate the Euro-american notion of “youth”. Its usage remained nonetheless scant and confined mostly to the field of bureaucracy and military ranks. It was only with the diffusion of consumer culture that a new term, *remaja*, was popularised. *Remaja* fitted the purpose of identifying “youth” as an age group and an emerging market category in the expanding commodity-driven economy of the New Order (Naafs and White 2012).

In this semantic split, *pemuda* was progressively left to its political and military connotations in which it first appeared. This was especially true from the 1920s and well into the post-colonial era, as the militant realm was saturated with *pemuda* organisations (see Foulcher 2000 for *Sumpah Pemuda*; Ryter 1998 for *Pemuda Pancasila*; Peters 2013 for *Pemuda Rakyat*). The employment of *pemuda* in the sphere of associationism therefore cannot be abstracted from this charged history. Its specific semiotic life is summoned inevitably also when the usage extends beyond the overtly political to respond to questions of religious belonging, as in the case of Pemuda Buddhis in Surjosari, but with parallels also within the Indonesian Muslim world (Lee 2011; Rosyad 2007).

At the same time, the experience created with the formation of the Buddhist youth group is born from the concrete confluence of evolving social, economic and religious circumstances.

³⁵ In the original: “*Saya, Nirmala, di hadapan altar Buddha berkomitmen untuk tetap memegang teguh permata yang telah saya miliki. Dan berjanji untuk meneruskan perjuangan para pendahulu agama Buddha*”.

In this sense, it bypasses the classic views of youth categories being either counter-systemic configurations (Sykes 1999) or subcultural strands (Hall and Jefferson 2006). *Pemuda Buddhis* shows not only how the criteria of *pemuda* belonging are inexplicit and constituted from the outside (see Rollason 2017 for a similar point) but also how the stance of the youth group conveys a diffused communal feeling, that is the preoccupation over the state of Buddhism. In the next section, I follow some of the activities of the organisation which link the young Buddhists of Temanggung to old and new revitalisation practices and narratives.

4. Anatomy of two “safaris” and two Buddhisms

With its 98 officially registered viharas (BPS 2020), Temanggung is the regency in Central Java with the highest number of Buddhist houses of worship. The number is considerably high if we take into account that the next non-metropolitan regions with the highest number of Buddhist affiliates, Jepara and Pati, count only 49 and 37 viharas respectively. The care for official demographics and censuses was one of the key preoccupations of *Pemuda Buddhis* from the start. According to the activists, the discrepancy in the proportion of Buddhist places of worship among these three regions was simply due to their very effort as militants in the Temanggung highlands to report Buddhist religious venues to the provincial bureaus.

For the group, mapping Buddhism properly and submitting accurate census data were the preliminary requirements if the *umat* wanted to obtain some degree of visibility in respect to the wider polity and especially in respect to itself. In fact, they perceived one of the major problems to be the poor awareness and coordination that countryside Buddhists often experienced. The creation of a thorough outline of the presence of viharas in the province was one of the missions for which *Pemuda Buddhis* was initially formed and the excursions undertaken for the purpose, in the style of weekly tours among a set of identified viharas, went under the name of “Safari Vihara”.

The reasons for sketching an accurate database were not merely representational, but the group aimed at assessing the state of the constructions – some of the temples were in a state of semi-decay or had fallen into disuse. More importantly still, the participants to the safaris had the chance to interact with a local Buddhist community, learn the history behind a given vihara and, equally crucial, get in contact with one another on a religiously driven platform. This triple-tiered scale of engagement – environmental, communitarian and interpersonal – was for Subagyo the

antidote to the decades-long deterioration of Javanese Buddhist sociality. Two such safaris that I attended had directed us to two quite distinct villages and distinct stories. However, despite the difference in their narratives of ethnogenesis and their outward ritual, both villages pointed to a similar convergence upon the cultural and religious patterns insinuated by Sangha Theravāda Indonesia.

4.1. Purwodeso

Candiroto is a loose group of fourteen villages on the northern slope of Mount Sindoro, relatively close to the Liyangan excavation site on the western edge of the Temanggung province. One of these villages, Purwodeso, is the site of the first Sunday safari I took part in. Subagyo informed me that this area is known among coffee enthusiasts like him as the best coffee plantation in Temanggung. I found at that point that the coffee seeds branded “Temanggung” which I purchased earlier in Yogyakarta and which we discussed a few nights before with some of the activists came precisely from this spot. Narrowly elongated on a hill rich in water streams, Purwodeso’s lush landscape was indeed constituted by several plots of coffee plantations that stretched in every direction one looked.

On that day, we were followed by about thirty-five activists and other young sympathisers. The origins of the development of Buddhism in Purwodeso followed a storyline similar to Surjosari. Wisnu Mulyono, *romo* and *jaga vihara* (“gatekeeper”) of the main temple in the village, explained that Buddhism was first initiated in Purwodeso by two men he called Sumariyo and Mbah Darmin. Wisnu explained how Buddhism had “spilled over” to Purwodeso from the neighbouring district of Parakan, where the dharma was introduced by one of the eight *djoyo wolu*. Wisnu pinpointed the first official manifestation of Buddhism in the village to the year 1963, through the activities of a resident woman, ibu Siti, an educated personality who was originally from Parakan but who had important connections with village heads throughout the area. Wisnu didn’t seem to know any more details on the characters he mentioned, but he indicated with conviction that some form of scriptural knowledge was central to Buddhism in the area from the start:

The Buddhist *umat* here got to know the reading of *paritta*, *gatha* and sutras from ibu Siti from Parakan district. In 1963 there were only eight Buddhist households and at that time religious worship was carried out simply in the private houses of the *umat*.

By 1965 then Buddhism seemed to have gained popularity and thirty-five households were already participating in services. However, those were also years of political circumspection, that would culminate in the mass killings of anyone suspected to sympathise with the left, acts that have been particularly gruesome and under-reported in the Javanese countryside. In the same year, the then village head and one of the *tokoh kunci* in local Buddhism, Sumariyo, was summoned to the Temanggung regency police headquarters in order to be heard. There was a rumour, Wisnu said, that Buddhism was the religion of the communist party, for the links with both intellectual circles and the Indonesian Chinese community. As the head of the local community at that time, Sumariyo was heard to “clarify” the issue. After a lengthy informal auditory, Sumariyo managed to convince the officials that Buddhism had nothing to do with communism and that the practices of the village were based on true “religion and spirituality” (*agama dan kebatinan*).

In 1971 the residents themselves built the first *cetya* (informal house of worship) in the village made of bamboo and pandanus leaves, named Cetya Ramsi Loka, a construction that served the community for about a decade. It was the same ibu Siti who introduced a small Buddha statue to the structure. In the same year, they received the first visit of a fully ordained Buddhist monk, Ven. Jinakumar, in an atmosphere filled with expectations and enthusiasm. The monk was one of the founding figures of Maha Sangha Indonesia, the first council of Buddhist monks in the country, established within Jinarakkhita’s Buddhayāna project. The monk however, as I gather from Wisnu’s account, must have already held Theravādin preferences at that point, as he conferred to a couple of residents the status of *upasaka* (male) and *upasika* (female)³⁶ and expressed the wish for the construction of a proper *vihara* in the village.

Exactly ten years later, Purwodeso inaugurated a stone-and-concrete temple, Vihara Virya Dhamma Loka, a name given by Ven. Jinakumar himself. The opening of the *vihara* set up a promising basis for Buddhism in the village, as it initiated a period of frequent visits of “yellow-robed monks”, who could often guide the religious practice of the residents. The most assiduous of the visitors, Ven. Khemasarano, was also one of the five monks who officially took part to the ceremony in which the popular Vihara Tanah Putih in Semarang was brought under the Theravāda denomination in 1979.

³⁶ Pāli terms widely used in Theravada Buddhism for “lay devotees” who hold a set of precepts and guide religious service in the absence of a monk. While this role exists also in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna varieties of Buddhism, albeit under different names, it has been particularly institutionalised in Theravada environments (Davids & Stede 1921; Nattier 2003).

However, in the same period, the area suffered the consequences of one of the most intense phases of *program transmigrasi*, the controversial relocation plan from over-crowded islands to more remote regions³⁷. Several residents of Purwodeso, especially young individuals and newlywed couples, were resettled at that time to Kalimantan. In a region far from being overcrowded (Temanggung is to this day the least densely populated province of Java, after Rembang), the effects of a residential contraction of the kind promoted by *transmigrasi* were perceived as dramatic, especially since rural Java at large began to experience the simultaneous process of depopulation due to urbanisation trends.

In the early 2000s the Buddhist population of Purwodeso had shrunk to only eighteen households. Once more, just like in Surjosari, it was a one-man initiative that would breathe new life into the religious community. Wisnu's own activity as a Buddhist community organiser began after he attended the national Weisak celebration at Borobudur for the first time. On that occasion he got in contact for the first time with a vast and diverse range of Indonesian Buddhists. Through some of those contacts that he managed to keep via SMS, in 2007 he successfully brought a congregation of Buddhists from different sub-districts to Purwodeso for the celebration of Weisak, profiting from the custom for which, beginning from the 1990s, parallel Weisak mass events were being organised on the side of the main Borobudur mega-gathering.

The event brought a new kind of self-awareness to the village, said Wisnu, and it sparked a new “spirit” or enthusiasm (*semangat*) in attending and organising communitarian worship. The village had simultaneously grown in visibility with the upscaling of the coffee industry in the country. A roastery, a café, as well as a whole segment of informal economy seemed to have mushroomed more or less in the same breath with the steadier flow of yellow-robed monks.

As I would learn from a later conversation with Sura, one of the senior Pemuda Buddhist militants, in 2018 Purwodeso organised the first *asadha*³⁸ ever held in the regency, with a sizeable crowd joining in not only from Temanggung, but also from nearby provinces like Wonosobo, Magelang and Semarang. The younger residents were involved in a performance of classical

³⁷ In the 1980s *Program transmigrasi* offered one last round of massive incentives, thanks to generous funds from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Goldman 2006).

³⁸ A Theravada celebration commemorating the first sermon of the Gautama Buddha, the “setting in motion of the wheel of dhamma”. Observations of *asadha puja* have started in Indonesia beginning from the 1980s, with events typically held around Vihara Mendut, in the proximity of Borobudur. In recent years, celebrations on a regional and provincial scale have also become common.

Javanese dance and the singing of *Badra Santi*³⁹, which was taught during a Pemuda Buddhis safari in the Jumo sub-district, overseen by a gamelan teacher from Semarang.

Wisnu invited all the activists to the vihara for the weekly service. The members, who had been partly listening to Winsu's story, partly dispersed chatting in the front yard, all joined in the temple together with a dozen residents who had meanwhile populated the hall. The service would take place with the usual sequence of chanting, meditation and lecture. As the main *romo* in the area, Wisnu himself would guide the meditation and initiate the lecture, on that occasion sprinkled with delighted references to the young activists and the importance of improving one's knowledge of Buddhist doctrines in order to safeguard its survival.

4.2. Cemoro

Two weeks later, the Pemuda Buddhis activists held another safari westward, to a possibly even more arduous setting. Gunung Prau is a mountain which divides the Dieng Plateau to the west from the Temanggung province in the east. The village of Cemoro developed steep uphill on the north-eastern side of the mountain and it was marked by an unusual coolness in the air all day through. The village was articulated into streets that were little more than tiny alleys, too narrow and jagged even for motorbikes. Unlike Purwodeso, Cemoro was reliant predominantly on the "traditional" yield of the province: tobacco farming. In spite of the centrality of the tobacco fields, the village took its name after a variety of magnolia trees (*cemara*), which is reflected in the main strain of vegetation in the village that dominates the non-cultivated landscape.

Near the tiny village vihara, waiting for us, stood an elderly *romo* and a monk. The monk was a man with glasses possibly in his sixties who introduced himself as a Mahathera, a higher rank in the Theravāda ordination. Ven. Guddhasi, his monastic name, was accompanied by two other yellow-robed men, who were addressed as novices or temporary monks (*samanera*). Just like in the previous safari, we arrived before the Sunday service, which typically took place in the late morning. Romo Hudi was a withdrawn man in a woollen cap. His wife was arranging the altar in the vihara while his only son was not present, as he left the village for Yogyakarta five years ago.

³⁹ A Javanese epic (*kakawin*) from Lasem, on the north coast of Java. The manuscript is considered to impart several references to Buddhist notions and is composed in a distinct meter (*kidung*). Its alleged author is enshrined with an altar and a gravestone in the Rembang regency. In 2020 *Badra Santi* inspired the creation of a Buddhist youth collective under the umbrella of the Pakarjawi cultural foundation. Some information on their initiatives and articles is available here: <http://badrasanti.or.id/>

He had been in touch with Subagyo beforehand and entertained immediately some small talk in Javanese with him and Sura, while many of the activists arranged themselves by a brick barrier which created a sort of balustrade along the ravine below. In a casual conversation with them on this occasion, I heard for the first time the expression *potensi wisata* (“touristic potential”) in reference to the surrounding landscape. The comment would recur frequently on later occasions.

The worship session in Cemoro was carried out in the usual sequence, with the notable fact that, like in Surjosari, part of the chanting and the lecture that followed were performed entirely in Javanese. The prevalence of Javanese beyond the casual conversation was indicative of the peculiarity of the historical background and the present configuration of Cemoro. As recounted by Romo Hudi, the genealogy of Buddhism in the village was of a significantly different genre from the historical-factual narrative of Subagyo in reference to Surjosari. When asked straightforwardly about the adoption of Buddhism in the village, Romo Hudi rolled out a mythological narration that accounted for the origin of the village itself (*alkisah desa Cemoro*). However, the narrative however did not contain any historiographical claim nor any reference to Buddhism as such:

It is said that, in times past, in this north-eastern side of the mountain there used to live a married couple of spiritually advanced persons (*orang sakti*), they were Kyai Tjokro Tanu Wijoto and his wife. They were experienced and renown meditators and, being a couple, they attracted followers both male and female. It so happened that once they were both caught and imprisoned by an inimical force. They were taken to the middle of the woods. Upon release, they received a revelation (*wahyu*) that they should start a life in the area where they were imprisoned. Therefore, they began cutting the woods and built the first hamlet of what is now Cemoro.

The story of Kyai Tjokro Tanu Wijoto (who was donned with the *kyai* honorific of a contemporary Javanese Islamic scholar) was set in an unspecified time past. The fact that this account was given in response to any question about the origin of Buddhism in the village was a good example of the way the religion was apprehended in Cemoro and the wider religious reality in which it settled. Buddhism in Cemoro was in fact a very recent phenomenon, even in comparison to the *djoyo wolu* proselytism of late-colonial Java narrated by Subagyo. Buddhism was first introduced to the village as late as 1997, as Romo Hudi would later tell us, after he and three other Cemoro residents attended a Weisak event in the Parakan sub-district. Before that, the religious life of the village was explicitly defined as *kejawen*, following the Pangestu path⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Pangestu is one of the better defined *kejawen* orientations, revealed in 1932 to a man called Sunarto Mertowarjoyo and later written down as a body of text by Pangestu, from whom it takes its name (Choy 1999: 117).

“Attending the Weisak we realised how much attuned (*adem dan cocok*) those teachings were with our own understanding”, continued Romo Hudi. Right after that they got in touch with a *romo* from Parakan who guided them on the course to the formal adoption of Buddhism. Given the village’s background and the novelty that formal Buddhism represented, the origin story of Cemoro’s present religious identity is not surprising in its effortless merging of Javanese/*kejawen* mythic language with contemporary Buddhist affiliation. In this way, the traditional (Javanist/*kejawen*) religiosity of the area was given authority and continuity through the platform of official Buddhism while the latter was given historical depth.



Figure 14. Romo Hudi offering incense before a dark-painted Buddha.

The apparent discrepancy between the recollection of Buddhism’s origins through the narrative of the village ancestors vis-à-vis the factual account given earlier on the village’s conversion to Buddhism over a Weisak was never perceived as contradictory. Ven. Guddhasi elaborated further on the religiosity of Cemoro and provided a rhetorical bridge between the two accounts through the category of “culture” (*budaya*). Later in the conversation, he would elicit the connection through the idea of *karma*. At the beginning of his speech, he summarised the connection between the two accounts with a dense comment:

[...] *Agama Buddha Nusantara yang sudah menyatu dengan kebudayaan Indonesia.*

“[Cemoro Buddhism amounts to] the Buddhism of Nusantara which has already become one with the culture of Indonesia”.

In this apparently self-evident statement, Ven. Guddhasi concentrated in fact many of the elements at play in the historical self-representation of contemporary Buddhism in Indonesia and particularly in Temanggung. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the sheer number of native practices and beliefs not conforming to any of the given world religions shifted to the modern notion of “culture” (*budaya*) or “custom” (*adat*). Such move represented a way to elude the state-mandated restriction on religious affiliation and the internal orthodoxy trends within given official religions. However, in this wider frame Buddhism appeared in an ambivalent position. It was simultaneously an assemblage of contemporary religious features (an *agama*) and it was projected retrospectively in the same form as the religious world of Nusantara. All things relating to Buddhism were kept distinct from the “culture” slot, which was associated with Indonesia as a modern nation-state. The origin narrative of Cemoro represented an instance in which the two dimensions were supposed to be in a process of mutual attunement (*menyatu*). Nonetheless, what exactly constituted “culture” in the story of Cemoro (the *kejawen* background, the overall genre of the Kyiai Wijoto story, the use of Javanese) was not made explicit.

Ven. Guddhasi slowly took on the lead of the conversation, while Romo Hudi limited his interventions to side remarks and comments on the exact location of households and villages that were mentioned during the chat. Ven. Guddhasi was himself a native of the highlands of Temanggung. He had first entered the monastic life in the mid-1980s, in the Dhammadipa Arama of Batu, East Java. In 1986 he moved to Bangkok. There, after a short period of spiritual guidance under Ven. Vidhurdhammabhorn, he received full ordination in Wat Bovoranives. He was now officially based in Jakarta, where he occupied administrative posts within the ranks of Sangha Theravāda Indonesia, especially in the period between 2003 and 2011. In the last few years, he spent more and more time in the Temanggung region, officiating at worships in viharas or simply spending a period of meditation in one of the dedicated huts for monks that had begun to appear in the area.

A few meters away from the vihara, Ven. Guddhasi guided me and another dozen between activists and residents, past a line of houses, to a corner shaded by a giant tree he called *cemoro susu* (“milky *cemoro*”), where the “milk” referred to the female variety of the tree. We stopped by a huge rock at the roots of the tree, which were visible on the surface. Ven. Guddhasi explained

that that very tree had sacred qualities and that, when a tree became that large, it usually surged to the status of icon (*ikonik*) for the village community. Its power was not exclusive to the villagers, though, as anyone who undertook a journey of spiritual wander or, literally, “spiritual tourism” (*wisata rohani*) at its feet could benefit from its blessings. “That’s a scientific fact” he added to one of the activists with whom he had interacted, “don’t think of it as a mystical cliché”. He lit a bunch of incense sticks while reciting a short chant in Pāli. Everyone fell silent, interrupted only by the sounding of an *adzan* in the valley. Ven. Guddhasi placed the sticks on a protruding section of the rock, next to a small vessel, which he refilled with drinking water.

After a few moments of silence as he kneeled down in front of the rock he invited us to follow him further to a small, elevated cabin across from the *cemoro* tree. The concrete hut had, from the outside, the unassuming look of a *mushola*, an Islamic prayer booth, including an elaborate pattern carved in gold above the entrance door in the guise of Arabic calligraphy, although upon closer look it turned out to be a mere decorative pattern. The tiny room, painted entirely green, contained three prayer rugs, a moneybox and a vessel for water offerings. The single and bulkiest piece of furniture in the room, pitch-dark even at midday, was a black opening in the western wall that had the odd appearance of a mantel. It was in this direction that the Ven. Guddhasi guided us as we entered.

He illuminated with the torch of his mobile phone in the direction of the black opening in the wall and we saw that the opening was in fact a cramped passage that ended at the roots of a large tree attached to the back of the hut. A hollow section at the tree base was signposted with a couple of small jars containing flowers which must have been in place for several weeks by that time. As Ven. Guddhasi stretched his hand deeper in the opening, the torch of his phone illuminated the interior of the hollow tree and disclosed a bigger jar filled with water. I also noticed that the hollow section was actually the stem of the tree roots, cleared from the soil. In a corner between the tree trunk and the outer part of the wall grew another tree trunk, much younger and slender. Even when inquired on the details and the significance of the place we just visited, Ven. Guddhasi didn’t seem to be willing to go into much explanation. He suggested though that the hollow tree provided us with an excellent spot for deep meditation, although its position was such that only very experienced meditators could “sustain its power”. Monks were especially encouraged to approach such places, but lay *orang sakti* could also meditate here, as they allegedly did in the past, without unwanted consequences.

We all moved outside back to the broad daylight. Most of the Pemuda Buddhis activists scattered in small groups around the village and mingled with those who had remained outside

the entire time. There was only me and Subagyo next to Romo Hudi, who regained his talkativeness after he had been silent pretty much the whole time that we spent between the *cemoro* tree and the green cabin. “It is the bond of karma”, he resumed, “Cause and effect. If there are no seeds it is impossible to grow trees. So, we are Buddhists who grew from the seeds planted by our *nenek moyang* (“ancestors”)”.

The practices and narratives involved in Cemoro merged Buddhism and Javanism in a more or less conscious way. The village’s modern religiosity constituted a re-attunement with the ancestors’ spiritual covenant, in which respect the villagers were bound through the workings of karma. Moreover, elements of Javanese religion were combined in the village with Buddhist settings or diluted in Buddhist vocabulary. These dynamics were not confined to narrative but they were also grounded in the rituals of the village. Among other things, *Anjangsana weton*, the celebration performed at a given household upon a person’s birthday according to the Javanese calendar, were officiated in recent years in the form of a thanksgiving for being born as a human and not as a lower being. Sunday *Kliwon*, another celebration based on calendrical combinations of Javanese and Gregorian cycles, were now performed in viharas.

We took our leave from Romo Hudi and waved goodbye from afar to Ven. Guddhasi and the two *samanera*, who returned to the vihara in the same silent contemplation in which they followed us the entire time. Some of the activists too began to head back to their village of origin, as the ride to the eastern region of the province could easily take one over an hour. We lingered for another half an hour with a small group of young residents, with whom Subagyo commented on the elements that could be upheld as the *potensi wisata* of the location: a nearby waterfall, the natural landscape of the mountainside and especially the *wisata spiritual* provided by the *cemoro* tree. They were all entries that Subagyo seemed to arrange into his mental map of the village attractiveness. One of the Pemuda Buddhis members added that the coffee plantations on the way up to Cemoro, extending not far from a second waterfall, could also provide a scenic candidate for leisure activities. We headed back to Surjosari before the punctual afternoon downpour of the rainy season.

The militants of Pemuda Buddhis appeared impressed by the visit on that day and would comment extensively around it later in the evening. Subagyo in particular seemed very enthusiastic and confessed he was “definitely” going to write an article about Cemoro at some point. The village would be soon fully integrated into the wider vision of Javanese Buddhism of actors such as, among others, Pemuda Buddhis. Mutual visits upon major celebrations intensified. Two years later, as I learn from Subagyo through messaging, Cemoro was chosen for the yearly regional

Weisak festival. According to Subagyo, the event would bring to the slope of the village over 2.500 participants. A procession with a golden Buddha statue, a small group of monks and congregations of men and women donning traditional Javanese court attires and Indonesian national flags, paraded along the mountainside, as it was widely shared on social media. The ceremony was attended by the regional governor and echoed on various regional print and online media⁴¹.

The successful assimilation of Cemoro into the project of a “Javanised” Buddhism was perhaps the most condensed and prosaic example of the kind of revitalisation envisioned by the most self-aware sections of the young activists. The boundaries between the religious and a more generic sense of social belonging became ever more blurred in the object of this process of renewal. In any event, the direction taken by Cemoro and Purwodeso villagers in concert with the activities of a youth association like Pemuda Buddhis, by 2019 became a pattern undertaken by many other villages and hamlets with substantial Buddhist populations, as I will expand in the following paragraphs.

5. Coffee and mushroom. The taste and economy of a revival

Early in 2017, the activists of Pemuda Buddhis had pledged to dedicate more energy over that year to the economic empowerment of their religious community. Sensing that the wellbeing and survival of Temanggung Buddhism passed through its impression of vitality as a religion as much as through the economic relevance and strength of its community, they had begun to collect ideas about the possible content and paths of that “empowerment” (*pemberdayaan*). As I heard several times during their gatherings, many of the issues that affected the Buddhist communities of Temanggung could be traced to the fact that the countryside lifestyle and occupational perspectives, which meant predominantly farming, had become an undesirable option for most youngsters over the past few decades. This seemed to imply that by reverting the set of symbolic and economic associations attributed to rural life, the negative demographic trends could be equally counteracted.

⁴¹*Media Centre Temanggung* (06/2019) (in Indonesian):

<https://mediacenter.temanggungkab.go.id/berita/detail/ritual-pengawinan-air-di-peringatan-tri-suci-waisak-desa-cemoro>;

Tribun News (06/2019) (in Indonesian): <https://jateng.tribunnews.com/2019/06/20/ribuan-umat-buddha-hadiri-perayaan-tri-suci-waisak-di-cemoro-temanggung>

The narration formulated on such meetings portrayed the economic and religious tendencies of Buddhist villages as being constantly weaved into one another. Discussions on these lines spanned all levels of formality, from veranda talk to regional conferences, all invariably juxtaposed economic action with the development and “improvement” of religiosity. This seemed to be in part confirmed by the evidence provided by numbers. According to much statistical data, in fact, it so happened that the lower-income and less infrastructurally developed sub-districts in Temanggung were also those inhabited by the Buddhist communities.

The productivity of a given area was measured against the official yield of its main crop for the wider market, tobacco, and the organisation of the farmer into unions and cooperatives. Central Java was in 2018 the only region in Indonesia to experience double-digit growth in tobacco production, making it the second province overall for production in tons (Pertanian 2020), and Temanggung was by far the province with the highest indicators (BPS 2019). Such figures were not neutral as they were partly the conquest of a large chain of protests that the Temanggung tobacco farmers demonstrated between 2011 and 2012. Such protests were staged against, on the one hand, the low rate negotiated by the great industries of the country’s cigarette market and, on the other, against a bill known as PP.109, which in 2012 tried to curb tobacco consumption and put in place new regulations on its cultivation (Sobary, 2016). The bill was eventually passed with several amendments to the point that some observers have dubbed it a “paper tiger” (Astuti and Freeman, 2017).

Despite the mediatic noise around the regulation of tobacco production in Temanggung, a province in which tobacco is crucial not only for its contribution to the national market but also for its embeddedness in the agricultural ritual life of some of the farmers (Margana 2014), areas such as Surjosari appeared often at the margins of such developments. According to one of the most proactive Pemuda Buddhis organisers, Sura, a recent graduate in Economics, this was largely due to the unorganised aspect of the tobacco chain in the area. Farmers tended to sell their products on the informal market, autonomously and often at a rate even lower than the price set by unions in other districts. These practices tended to perpetuate patterns of relative poverty in areas such as Surjosari’s, compared to other sections of the regency.

Rather than focussing on a traditional economic activity such as tobacco, an activity which, according to the Temanggung union, occupies in part or entirely the crops of nearly 90% of the farmers, Pemuda Buddhis activists shifted the attention for their vision of economic empowerment to other agricultural domains: mushrooms and, especially, coffee. The coffee business in all its declinations – from farming techniques to the establishment of cafés – was a

buzz topic in many conversations among the younger residents. The association between coffee and the Temanggung highlands was also established through plenary discussions and more formal settings, such as conferences and meetings with Buddhist institutions.

The starting point in which an actual plan of economic activism was formulated by the young activists was the unlikely setting of a meditation retreat. Over 2017 New Year's Eve, Pemuda Buddhis organised from an idea of Subagyo a meditation retreat intended mostly for young people. The retreat was led by Ven. Jatarika, an East Javanese monk who received ordination in the same lineage as Ven. Guddhasi (although he never resided in Thailand). Apart from being an occasion for the practice of *atthasilani*, the eight moral precepts, the retreat was intended to bring together on a more or less formal platform a number of activists from the province in order to discuss and sketch in the spare time a blueprint of what “economic empowerment” could mean for Temanggung Buddhists.

Over of one the gatherings at Subagyo's house a few months later, Sura recounted how on that occasion, together with Ven. Jatarika, they had evaluated positively the youth initiatives that began since 2016, initiatives such as Vihara Safari and the cemetery pilgrimages, but also how over the current year a major focus on economy was considered paramount for the *umat*. Although on the occasion of the retreat and the subsequent meetings they did not come up with immediate concrete plans, those occasions were useful for brainstorming a few ideas.

A few ideas for locating areas of economic potentiality (*potensi pemberdayaan*) in Temanggung were derived from a workshop attended by Sura in central Jakarta. The workshop was organised by Institut Nagarjuna, an inter-denominational Buddhist NGO devoted to the support of a liberal and progressive understanding of the *dhamma*, called “dhamma kontekstual”⁴². The institute collaborated also with local NGOs for the promotion of the *dhamma* and for improving the living conditions of the *umat*. For Sura, coffee and earwood mushroom cultivation were the particularly strategic areas that could be harnessed in Temanggung and that would generate the most benefit for the residents in the mid-long term. Coffee was an especially profitable domain that could also let Temanggung Buddhists participate in the generalised flare of enthusiasm and “coolness” that seemed to shroud coffee production and consumption in Indonesia at that time.

⁴² Nagarjuna was a Sanskrit Buddhist poet traditionally associated with the early developments of the Mahāyāna school. More info on the organisation (in Indonesian) on: <https://institutnagarjuna.id/>.

Like in other regions in Indonesia, coffee farming was introduced in Temanggung during the Dutch administration in both its present varieties, arabica and robusta. However, due to its versatility in soil and elevation, it is the robusta cultivation that has been historically favoured in all of the country's provinces. Over the decades, what used to be a system of production originally thought almost exclusively for the export market has developed into something of a local "coffee culture", to the extent that the relatively steady and remunerative exporting industry has been accompanied, in recent years, by a sudden boom in the import market too (BPS 2019).

Although Central Java did not count the most extensive plantations in terms of hectares dedicated to the bean (regions in Sumatra producing Gayo and Mandheling⁴³ arabica top any other province countrywide), Central Java has been nonetheless one of the very few provinces in which coffee production has been extended consistently size-wise (Petani 2020). Like for tobacco farming, the regency of Temanggung far outnumbered any other district in terms of hectares and productivity (BPS 2019). This was an effect in part of the wide support of the rural development program of the province initiated in the 1990s, which maintained that the intercropping of coffee and tobacco could counteract the risk of land erosion to which much of the region is exposed (Febriharjati 2015).

While these general trends explained part of the positive prospects of coffee production in Temanggung, however, the farming of coffee seeds in Temanggung began to be considered a particularly lucrative affair in very recent times. Between 2014 and 2016 the DJKI (General Directorate for Intellectual Property) issued a new act that brought under its protection two new varieties of coffee, the Sindoro-Sumbing Java Arabica and Temanggung Robusta. The first variety referred to the localities stretched on the Temanggung-Wonosobo slopes while the second applied to Temanggung at large. Provided that cultivation and harvest met a specified set of requirements, farmers in the given areas could obtain a certificate of Geographical Indication, with its relative benefits on the upscaling market.

Two months after the resolutions that Pemuda Buddhis activists formulated over the meditation retreat it was on coffee that much of the efforts of the group began to be concentrated. Through a chain of personal contacts, the activist group eventually reached out to a Buddhayāna organisation from Surabaya, who accepted to make a generous donation for the implementation of the agricultural program of Pemuda Buddhis. They decided to meet formally in February that year at a training centre near Semarang, the regional capital of Central Java. The administrator

⁴³ GAeki: <https://gaeki.or.id/areal-dan-produksi/>.

from the Buddhayāna group made it clear enough that the system of certificates of geographical indication needed to be harnessed in specific ways. In fact, one of the bases of the organisation's financial support was not only the acquisition of land but also the education of the local actors in marketing strategies.

According to Sura's accounts, coffee was a subject of conversation for in connection to the affairs of the regional Buddhist community even before the exploratory meetings with Buddhayāna and Institut Nagarjuna. Coffee farming was already associated with the *potensi pemberdayaan* of the area, when a report on the situation of coffee farmers in Temanggung was presented at a cultural festival in Borobudur. While the region could boast some of the best varieties of coffee worldwide (literally: "eight out the first ten best varieties", although I wasn't given any contextualisation or data of reference for it), the quantity and quality of the final product placed on the market was highly uneven across the sub-districts.

On that occasion, in Buddhist-inhabited areas the quality of the product was deemed still "very low". This was caused by a number of factors involving all the stages along the production chain, from the maintenance to the harvest methods and the post-harvesting treatment. The farming system was overall defined as "still traditional", meaning that the fertilisation and the pruning phases were done with methods and timings much below the general standards. Harvesting was an especially weak point in that, in order to meet immediate economic necessities, many farmers would sell the seed, to either the final buyer or to middlemen, when it was still on the tree. This meant little control and care given to the timings of the harvest, with the seed oftentimes collected unripe. For Sura, the result was a final product of low quality that had a market value much below its potential.

After taking into consideration all these factors and opinions, Pemuda Buddhis activists, in accordance with the Buddhayāna group, contracted a coffee plantation to be treated "professionally". The expertise needed for making the entire system more competitive would be guaranteed by inviting coffee farming specialists. "I don't think we would get any far if we only gave abstract lectures to the farmers", said Sura, by far the most engaged activist on the matter, "Instead, we decided to pay some experts to move in here for a while and 'spin the wheel' (*menggerakkan roda*), so that the farmers could learn from a concrete example. I feel this is the most effective way".

The Buddhist, "professional", coffee plantation was acquired at a rate of 10 million Rupiah, and about 700 trees were farmed by the end of 2017. The project was expanded with the

opening of a coffee *warung* (food stall) serving both as café and roastery, in a village downhill from the Surjosari slope. The business was expected to turn remunerative once robusta GI certificates would be acquired but that could also serve, meanwhile, as a “hip” gathering venue. The coffee *warung* became reality in the middle of the 2020 Covid pandemic, promoting itself as “the café in the middle of the forest”.



Figure 15. Surjosari café. The venue has been registered in September 2021 as a bar and “art space”.

Next to the relatively laborious coffee business, *Pemuda Buddhis* also included in the program negotiated with Buddhayāna the expansion of mushroom farming, in the varieties of earwood-auricularia and oyster. Both crops require a less demanding set up than the coffee plantation, and consist of working on wood logs, that could be assembled in a relatively small space. For this reason, the activists opted for developing the project in the yard of a vihara. Located just a couple of kilometres south from Surjosari, Vihara Paramita was visited by the group in a previous safari, a temple which had not functioned as a house of worship for several years. In fact, parts of the structure were in an advanced state of decay, from the moulded corners of the outer walls to the cracked tiles of the entrance. The development of the mushroom farm around the vihara would inject a stimulus to rekindle the religious sociality of the village, as the temple, with the help of some maintenance work, would be partially embedded in the farming enterprise and partially restored as a functioning house of worship.

Unlike the coffee business, mushroom cultivation required less onerous expertise and relatively easy maintenance. Moreover, the final product could be easily put up for sale at the closest market as well as stocked for larger industries without the need to comply with tight requirements. The idea for the mushroom enterprise was originally put forward in February 2017, upon a meeting that Sura managed to organise with a monk, who succeeded at running a similar project (oyster mushroom) in the backyard of Boyolali STAB college, one of the three Buddhist higher educational institutions in Central Java. The yard was able to reach a daily rate of 20 kilograms of mushrooms harvest after only a few months of farming.

Vihara Paramita became the pilot program of the mushroom enterprise. 5.000 logs were being farmed by 2018 by three young activists residing in the surrounding settlements of the temple. “The proceeds of the work are meant to be divided among the families that ‘refer to’ the vihara, with a small additional dividend to the activists doing the work... it is also a way to improve their economic power”, adds Sura, “But if it works out properly in Vihara Paramita, ideally I would like it to be implemented farther also in temples already prepared (*siap*) for such project”.

6. Pemuda Buddhis between everyday ritual and liturgy

The activities carried out by the Pemuda Buddhis group balanced constantly on a tension between pragmatic and economic preoccupations on the one hand and the concern with religiosity on the other. Although “religion” has appeared so far almost exclusively on the level of discourse, that is, in the efforts at assembling a coherent narrative of decline and resurgence, the activities of the Buddhist youth group extended with equal focus on domains that pertain more directly to the religious in its most ordinary sense. All the regular temple services in Surjosari and the other villages of the area were invariably conducted by members of the youth group. In many cases, entire temple services were revitalised by single or organised activists over the last decade. This had brought back into the public physical space the kind of ritual experience that was progressively discontinued in some village viharas and retrieved into the private domain.

The activities that were directly performed by Pemuda Buddhis activists, in place of ordained monks and *romo/ramani*, included the logistic organisation of Sundays’ and the mid-week services. Within the formal liturgies, some of the activists like Sura took on the ritual guidance of *paritta* recitations as well as the instructions on group meditation. It is important to recall that

these organised public rituals (generically referred to as *puja bakti*) were all elements associated with the “modern” wave of Buddhism in the region. Although a few of the elderly residents had some degree of familiarity with some of these meditation practices and single ritual phrases, for the majority it was a matter of establishing a set of new linguistic and bodily regimes.

6.1. A question of (ritual) language

In all village rituals, the use of Pāli linguistic formulas was held extremely important in all devotional activities, public as well as private. In this respect, the structure of every formal worship I witnessed in the villages did not differ from their urban counterparts. The main ritual device was a ubiquitous booklet called *Paritta suci*. These were small volumes of about 90 pages, in Pāli and Indonesian language, employed in all the village temples as well as in the country’s major cities. Virtually all such booklets I have seen in the villages of Temanggung were introduced upon the recent re-prints in the early 2000s by Sangha Theravāda Indonesia. The Jakarta-Semarang press of STI sought to bring together into a unified and standardised edition a collection of Pāli texts that had appeared previously in locally printed pamphlets. Such older, black-and-white, booklets were still occasionally piled up in corners and backrooms of urban viharas but were almost non-existent away farther from the major urban settings (I happened to find only two copies of such older editions in Temanggung, in a dismissed library arranged in a former *cetvya*, some 15 kilometres from Surjosari).

As the content suggests (*paritta* and *gatha* are Pāli texts from the Tipitaka canon), the *Paritta suci* collection was a Theravādin enterprise from the start. However, its structure and internal organisation reveal a certain intention to create a pan-Indonesian Buddhist rituality that resonated with Buddhayāna’s attention to “ethnic” Buddhism. The introduction to the booklet enlists a series of traditional rituals and indicates what scriptural snippets from the book are most appropriate to be recited on the given occasion. Although it is never mentioned explicitly, these occurrences were for the larger part extracted from the ocean of local practices specific to Indonesia and then given by the compiler a short Pāli scriptural reference as ritual guidance. By way of example, the handling of water meant to be used for the preparation of traditional medicine for a sick person needed to be accompanied by the following sequence of Pāli scriptural recitations:

Air untuk orang sakit (“[for the blessing of] water for medicinal use”)

- Vandanā
- Tisaraṇa
- Buddhānussati
- Dhammānussati
- Sanghānussati
- Saccakiriya Gāthā
- Ratana Sutta (Bait 4, 5, 6, 7, 14)
- Bojjhanga Paritta
- Sakkatva Tiratanaṃ
- Sumangala Gāthā II

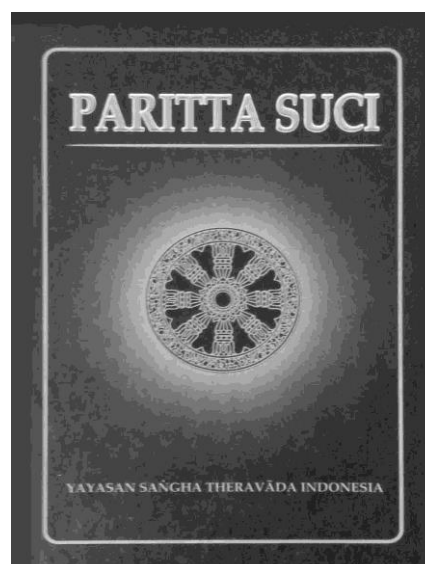
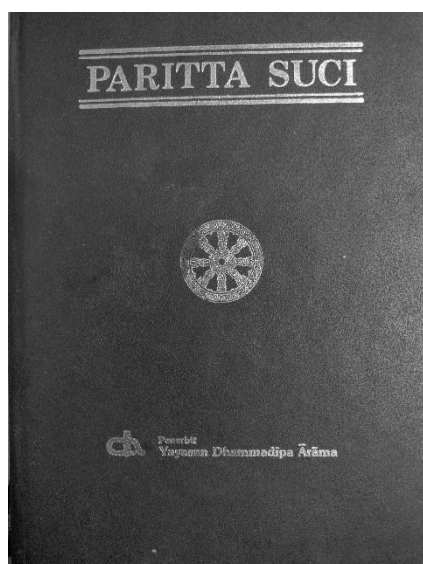


Figure 16. *Paritta suci* booklets, Yayasan Dhammadīpa Ārāma, 1997 edition (left), STI, 2006 edition (right).

The compiled liturgical indications were meant for a selection of ritual occurrences that did not overlap as a whole with any distinct ethnicity but referred only to a nonspecific “Indonesian” tradition. When rituals mentioned in the collection happened to be in the repertoire of given communities, *Paritta suci* served to standardise the verbal expressions performed during the liturgy and, indirectly, authorised from a Buddhist perspective the given tradition. However, in other circumstances, *Paritta* selections began to be adopted ad hoc together with the establishment or the revival of new ritual traditions (as we will see in the next chapter). In any event, the booklets

contributed indirectly to the creation of a ritual scriptural corpus that assumed something of a prescriptive quality for contemporary Buddhists.

Paritta suci booklets were donated to Surjosari and the nearby villages in batches over subsequent visits by monks and organisations. In Sura's village of origin, Tare, they were introduced by the activist himself, upon returning to the village after finishing his coursework in Semarang. Within a relatively short time, the scripture had become extremely popular in the villages as in city viharas and constituted unquestionably a "standard" in every formal temple service. Many practitioners could recite even mid-length *parittas* in Pāli entirely by heart, some possessed a copy at home and used it for private worship too, although the content was meant primarily for public offices. Later on, when I asked some of the participants the more straightforward question about indicating a "Buddhist" object they cherished particularly in their home environment, the *Paritta suci* surpassed in a few cases even their private Buddha statuette. Stacks of the booklet were a fundamental physical feature in all sorts of communal rituals, including those outside of the temple environment. The volumes were simply collected and transported to the venue in which the service was due.

However, next to the *Paritta suci* a couple of viharas in the region also featured a second heap of booklets for public worship. They were entirely in Javanese and were translations, as Sura explained, of auspicious *metta* wishes and protections, prepared by *Pemuda Buddhis* volunteers in the beginning of their activities. Unlike the Pāli *paritta*, however, they were seldom recited and never at major temple celebrations. I witnessed Javanese recitations in Surjosari only at early morning worships, sessions normally attended by only less than a dozen residents.

The acquisition and the routinisation of Pāli linguistic practices were only one of the ritual innovations that *Pemuda Buddhis* contributed to popularising. Like elsewhere in Buddhist Indonesia in recent decades, Theravāda forms of meditation have become routine forms of Buddhist rituality also in the Central Javanese countryside. While the young activists were by no means the pioneers of these practices in Temanggung, it was nevertheless thanks to their revitalisation efforts that became an indispensable feature of what "being Buddhists" meant for the Central Javanese villagers.

Meditation of different sorts had constituted a form of religious practice for the Javanese at large for centuries. Great amounts of popular and academic literature have been dedicated to the topic of Javanese religion and it is beyond the scope of the thesis to rehearse it. It's enough to notice, however, that the surge of standardised Buddhist meditation techniques – *vipassana* and

metta – did not displace pre-existing meditative regimes entirely, just like other Javanese religious forms were not eradicated by the spread of official Buddhism. Theravāda-Buddhist and Javanese techniques were far from being forms of religiosity secluded from one another, as the ethnographic scene in Cemoro village suggested. However, in the internal economy of formal Buddhist rituals they came to occupy distinct spaces. What is more, different forms of ritual authority coincided with the two strands. While the guidance of formal meditation sessions at viharas were, in the absence of monks or experienced *romos*, the domain of young residents, all the religious activities ascribable to the Javanese tradition were hardly ever led or even discussed by individuals in their twenties or thirties.

Outside of the formal structure of temple ritual, however, the boundaries between Buddhism and Javanism were extremely porous and did not pertain to specific age groups. To the contrary, in some instances it was precisely the contribution of Pemuda Buddhis to revive or to foreground some Javanese aspects of the village's cultural and religious life. The pursuit of an organised "tradition" of communal ancestors' worship is one such examples, as we'll see in the last section of this chapter and later through the organisation of mass *nyadrans*. In such cases, the youth group acted both as the vehicle for the reaffirmation of Javanese rituals or the establishment of new rituals based on Javanese ritual elements but also for the revalorisation of these through Buddhist lenses.

6.2. The *djoyo wulu* pilgrimage. Ritualising a rural Buddhist history.

I have already anticipated earlier in this chapter how Subagyo and the other Pemuda Buddhis activists were preoccupied with tracing a clear genealogy of the appearance of Buddhism in contemporary Temanggung. This genealogy was pinpointed in the hagiographies of eight historical individuals, the *djoyo wulu* characters, whose activities were braided further with the deeds of other district-level men and women who were regarded as the pioneers of Buddhism in their respective areas. In some cases, like for Sutrisno, such particular key personalities were objectified as near-cult figures, with a yearly recollection and devotional acts oriented towards their household. The concern around the *djoyo wulu* was not only restricted to the process of piecing together a narrative aimed at achieving plain historical accuracy. Hagiographical storytelling was constantly accompanied by an active labour intended to ground those personalities in a very

spatial and material sense, not only for the sake of documentary evidence but for their revaluation as present religious pilgrimage sites.

Acts of devotion towards ancestors that bear no direct connection to one's family such as communal ancestors, village founders or "area" ancestors or protectors used to be a relatively common practice throughout rural Java⁴⁴. However, such practices were embedded in the larger scheme of Javanist village religiosity, often performed within the "village cleansing" ritual cycle (*bersih desa*) and directed towards a personality considered as the very founding figure of a given village. In many instances, chronologically distant village founders were fused with mythological characters or even nature spirits (Wessing 2006; Chambert-Loir 2002). The activities initiated in and around Surjosari, instead, differed precisely because the continuum was postulated between a departed *djoyo wulu* and a specific community of living residents delimited by a common official religious affiliation, which was Buddhism.

Since he moved to Surjosari, Subagyo had been interested in recuperating the biographies of the characters that the farmers of Temanggung deemed connected to the contemporary adoption of Buddhism in some of the villages. One of the earliest "safari" experiments within the *Pemuda Buddhis* vision was a cemetery tour that located the burial grounds of those men and women. For most of the activists, that was the first time they had the chance to pay homage (*menghormati*) to them, at least in a public and organised form. Unknowingly perhaps, they had in such a way inaugurated what would become, in a short time from then, a distinct pilgrimage itinerary.

On the occasion of the regional Weisak of 2017, one week before the main celebration *Pemuda Buddhis* managed to mobilise the local *umat* into an event attended by over 200 residents. A ceremony was organised in Kalidalem, the village where Sutrisno had lived, whose story had clearly inspired Subagyo. We recalled before how Kalidalem was considered by the Buddhist residents of the region to be the first core of "village Buddhists" and the first vihara in Temanggung.

The event at the vihara was hosted by two elderly residents who were the only surviving members of the *umat* from the early community of Sutrisno. One of them, Pak Utomo, recounted

⁴⁴ The worship of ancestors has been traditionally understated in the scholarship that followed the classic work of Clifford Geertz (1960), who did not devote much attention to death rituals beyond the *slametan* gatherings. Beginning from Koentjaraningrat (1984), several different accounts have recast light on the importance and the diversity of Javanese death ceremonies but also on the enduring relationship between the departed and the living (de Grave, 2018).

with striking details how he alone had built the very wooden door of the temple, but also how many villagers from the whole Temanggung regency had contributed to the construction of the vihara. The original wooden walls of the temple (now entirely remade in bricks), for instance, were made of boards transported on foot from the neighbouring village of Tame, five kilometres north. “*Oleh sebab itulah vihara ini dijadikan vihara induk*” (“it’s for that reason that this vihara has become the main temple”), that is, the temple came to be considered as “the mother/main vihara” (*induk*) in the district because it was both the first in the region but also the one to which symbolically residents from different villages, other than Kalidalem, had contributed.

Proceeding on a plan sketched by Subagyo and Sura, the informal gathering at the Kalidalem vihara was followed by a more solemn procession in the direction of the nearby cemetery, to the grave of Sutrisno. After lighting a set of candles and incense, the Pāli *Saccakiriya gatha* was chanted, guided by one of the two elderlies from the vihara, followed by a short line in Javanese. The liturgical part of the commemoration lasted less than ten minutes, after which the participants began to converse and split into groups. The majority went a while later after Subagyo, who invited the *umat* to pay respect to the graves of two *djoyo wulu*, Mbah Manggis and Mbah Noro, which were located in another public cemetery three kilometres north, in the direction of Surjosari.

As the foundational narrative of Kalidalem seemed to point, a sense of a communal destiny centred around the shared dimension of contemporary Buddhism was also consolidated by expanding commemoration rituals to the “key characters” from all the surrounding villages. On the way, Pak Utomo elaborates to Subagyo and a small group of activists around him how Mbah Manggis and Mbah Noro still provided him with inspiration (*inspirasi*) about keeping up the spirit of dhamma. He recalls how, from the two men, the Kalidalem early circle did not receive any money nor any *dhamma* guidance, but only “enthusiasm and a devotional booklet in Javanese”, with which they toured on foot the villages of the area.

The procession continued eastwards more or less compact to the grave of Mbah Samsul, where the congregation is joined at the vihara by his living son-in-law. The stop at the vihara lasts only a few minutes and it is followed by a formal commemoration by the cemetery. Proceeding north to the Ngalang hamlets, we stopped by another cemetery where the same ritual was performed by the tombstone of a certain Mbah Cipto Martoyo. The pause was here considerably shorter and did not involve additional courtesies. The village did not have a regularly functioning vihara, although it did have a physical temple and was in relatively good shape. As I would learn

from Subagyo, the majority of the early Buddhist *umat* had meanwhile converted to Islam or to the Baptist Church.

A few hundred meters to the west we passed by a giant andesite-stone stupa, donned with a yellow ribbon and a golden umbrella, a *tempat wisata religi* (“place for spiritual tourism”), one of the participants explained to me. Some halt for a genuflection, but we all stopped soon after at the next village. Standing by a tiny temple, which was painted entirely in bright yellow with an octagonal window, a monk was clearly waiting for the group to visit the location (I learned later the rich background of the *bhikkhu*, a practitioner in Thailand of the Thai Forest tradition and a visiting monk in Australia a couple of years back). The recollection centred here around the *djoyo nulu* character of Mbah Budi, who was remembered by the monk himself as “the person to shave his head upon becoming ordained”. After the regular recitation, this time performed by the monk, the group proceeded further, in the direction of the northernmost village. The monk led the procession this time, as the last village of the tour is also the location of a small monastic residency.

Mbah Gito’s grave was the most elaborate of the set we visited. Placed under a small gazebo, the tomb had been adorned with a stone statuette of Buddha Sakyamuni, right over the plaque. Unlike the previous personalities we encountered, moreover, Mbah Gito’s was the only one who underwent cremation, although the burial ground was delimited in the fashion of a regular interred coffin. With the exception of Hindu-influenced Bali, home of the notorious *ngaben* ceremonies⁴⁵, cremation is a virtually unknown practice in Java. While extremely common in many of the Buddhist- and Hindu-majority countries in Asia, burials have been the norm, instead, in most parts of the archipelago, including Java, regardless of formal religious allegiance. The only crematories on the island seemed to cater to a segment of the Chinese-Indonesian population, a practice that has a centuries-long history (Salmon 2016). For this reason, the presence of a cremation urn in this corner of the Javanese countryside struck me as somewhat unusual.

Pak Utomo described the grave to those closer to the tomb, explaining that the ground was originally intended for the burial of Mbah Gito’s wife. When the man passed away in 2012, following his dispositions, his body was cremated and laid to rest in a hole in a corner of his wife’s

⁴⁵ Following the alignment of Indonesian Hinduism along more standardised lines (Vignato 2000; Ramstedt 2004; Picard 2011) *ngaben* ceremonies have recently appeared also in other Hindu pockets in the country, see *The Jakarta Post* (07/2012): <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2018/07/21/malangs-cremation-ceremony-welcomes-members-of-different-faiths.html>.

burial ground. The stone statue was added on the same occasion. Pak Utomo remembered Mbah Gito's cremation, however, also as an event of wider ethical significance: "Thanks to the ashes of Mbah Gito, the Buddhist *umat* of the area was able to have direct experience of what the ashes of mankind are like. Everyone was invited on that occasion to hold in his or her hands a heap of ashes and then insert it personally into the hole". The inhumation of Mbah Gito was in such a way not only an atypical funeral ceremony for the technique employed but it constituted at the same time a vivid act of collective meditation. The remains of the deceased offered a very tangible and material medium to reflect upon (or, rather, "to experience") the impermanence of the human form. Pak Utomo invited the participants to stick their hands into the ground and touch the urn of Mbah Gito, to symbolically recollect the inhumation of the *djoyo wulu*.

The congregation dissolved after the last set of rituals – chanting, spreading jasmine flower petals, lighting incense and candles. Many made the way back to their respective villages on foot, some were given lifts by the few who had followed the whole event by motorbike. About a dozen of the *Pemuda Buddhis* lingered at Subagyo's place. They commented extensively on the event, engaged especially in tracing kinship and acquaintances among those who participated in the *ziarah* ("pilgrimage"), but they also enjoyed themselves on a guitar well into the night on a seemingly endless flow of coffee.

A revival in the revival

The genesis and the activities of *Pemuda Buddhis* allowed us to gain an overview of the concrete bases on which a Buddhist "revival in the revival" took shape on the Temanggung highlands. The first revival consisted in the way Buddhism was approached by the villagers as a formal religion in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a revival in the sense that the affiliation to contemporary Buddhism was perceived as a return to "Nusantara" after a long hiatus characterised by major cultural transformations, from colonialism to the surge of Islam, therefore in a discursive continuum with parallel developments at that time underway in Indonesian Hinduism. The new revivalist stances depart from the same rhetorical premises, that is a feeling of decadence and a deterioration of the social and religious fabric of the area and of those very revivalist movements of few decades before. The state of decay of some of the worship venues and the episodes of conversions out of Buddhism were taken as evidence for this trend. At the same time, both the decline narrative and the aspects that propel the new revival can be read through developments that embed

Temanggung to broad dynamics, such as old and new internal mobility patterns, driven by government-sponsored relocations, urbanisation trends and return migratory phenomena fuelled by new economic prospects (coffee business, the implementation of a culture- or ecology-based tourist economy).

In any event, these practices show how religious and non-religious preoccupations are constantly weaved into each other. The interrelation of the religious field with other spheres such as economy, demography and national politics is not only shown through the conditions that drive the religious revivalist efforts that we saw via the activities of Pemuda Buddhis, but it can also be observed in what local Buddhists draw into strictly religious practices. The development of the *djoyo wulu* cult shows precisely how the biographies of lay villagers could be encompassed into religious rituals on the basis of their activities as promoters of Buddhism on an administrative level.

The practices through which the Buddhist revival unfolds in the villages of the Temanggung highlands also illustrate two important aspects. The first one is how the religious revival is articulated through a complex of complementary material and discursive practices. The elaboration of origination narratives in Cemoro mixed with the incorporation of ritual environmental components from Javanese rituality indicates this fact. However, other elements recall this complex, such as the meditation performed in the presence of the ashes of Mbah Gito or the relevance attributed to writings, ranging from the scriptures introduced by Ibu Siti in Purwodeso to the omnipresence of *Paritta suci* booklets in viharas and homes alike. *Paritta suci* in particular condenses an authority as a material object and as a device for a specific linguistic content that in itself is a product of the historical trajectory of Indonesian Buddhism.

This point links us to the second aspect that transpires in Temanggung's village Buddhism, that is the role of Theravāda Buddhism throughout these developments. Although Theravāda institutions do not emerge as the active advocate of the "revival in the revival" in Temanggung, most of the factors and the religious features that are mobilised can be traced to the dominant role to which Theravāda Buddhism has surged within the affairs of Indonesian Buddhism. This is expressed in the specific Buddhist background of the main Pemuda Buddhis activists, such as Subagyo and Sura, but also in the frequent residencies of Theravāda monks, in a region in which monastic presence used to be extremely rare. The Buddhist devotional practices performed at viharas also showed a consistent turn towards Theravādin styles of worship, manifested in the widespread use of mindfulness meditation and Pāli vocabulary. In some cases, such as in Purwodeso, it was a Theravādin initiative (*asadba*) that included the hamlet into the

emerging network of local Buddhist villages and brought the village a renewed sense of social-religious vitality.

The “revival in the revival” of Temanggung is one of the manifestations of Javanese Buddhism. In the contexts described, Javanese Buddhism takes on specific nuances in an ethnohistorical sense. Buddhism becomes “Javanese” for the sites, ethnic identities and local ritual traditions involved, while a Javanese community becomes (“again”) Buddhist. This level will be highlighted further in chapter IV.

Chapter IV

SURJOSARI, 2019.

BUDDHIFICATION AND JAVANISATION

Revitalising Buddhism through culture (and vice-versa).

This chapter continues on the same ethnographic trail as chapter III. Most of the observations in the previous chapter referred to the developments in the Temanggung villages that culminated in a form of “revival in the revival” of local Buddhist religiosity in combination with wider process of social and economic revitalisation. The practices underway were recorded in 2017 or made reference to events that occurred right before my stay on that year. In this chapter, I continue to follow some of the subjects already encountered (Subagyo, the activism of the Pemuda Buddhis youth group) as recorded over my fieldwork in 2019. However, the thematical focus is narrowed down to the specific ritual forms in which the Buddhist religious life of the villagers is merged with the Javanese tradition in more or less explicit fashions.

The chapter shows how Buddhist religious life is expressed in a variety of modalities. One of these modalities lays in the reformulation of traditional (Javanese) rites of passage in a Buddhist key. This modality gives rise to a process in which Javanism becomes “Buddhified” and Buddhism becomes “Javanised”. In other words, it shapes an additional manifestation of Javanese Buddhism, inflected this time in more Javanese-religious terms. Another modality is provided by the organisation of large communal events. Such events may not be devised as overtly religious occasions. In fact, they are often presented as cultural festivals or ecumenic initiatives organised around a Javanese custom intended to promote a feeling of conviviality and inter-religious tolerance. However, the Buddhist religious quality is never absent from such events.

Inserted in the wider vision of organisations like Pemuda Buddhis, these practices refer to a different level of religious performance. This dimension acknowledges that religion circulates, through practices, discourse and imaginaries, on formats that are not traditionally associated with religious rituality and sacred spaces. Lay mass-gatherings, cultural gigs, TV programs are all sites in which religion is produced, diffused and incorporated. Some of the practices I describe in this chapter can be seen in this light. While they may not necessarily revolve around established acts

of Buddhist devotion (although they occasionally do), they work to amplify the association between given villages, Buddhism and classical Java. The program of the Java Connections festival aims quite explicitly in this direction, as we'll see in this chapter.

In rural communities like Surjosari, events of this kind also trigger a sense of effervescence and communal destiny that, directly or indirectly, refer back to Buddhism as the common denominator, for the identity of the organisers and the centrality of the village on such occasions. Practices like cultural festivals and organised mass-gatherings reflect a dimension of religious life which is increasingly common across the religious world and which some observers have framed through the category of “eventisation” (Bramadat et al. 2021; Dowson 2020). Events are understood not only in the traditional sense as established religious performances (such as processions or temple celebrations) but include happenings, concerts, assemblies, parties, festivals that filter religious content while not being a formal religious occasion. As Dowson (2020) pointed out, eventisation is an important aspect of modern religious life as events of this sort multiply, also as a consequence of the influence of popular culture in social life at large (see also Koskowski 2019; Quinn 2009 and Getz 2008). In this respect, events blur even more the line between the sacred and the secular, including what spaces count as religious and non-religious.

The chapter relates the interplay between Buddhism and the Javanese ritual tradition in Surjosari through the prism of events. Some of these events are religious rituals in the traditional sense, like the rites of passage of *gombak* and *tingkeban*. The former is a ritual of “hairlock cut” performed to young children, while the latter is a seventh-month pregnancy rite. In both cases, these are rites of passage that have been revitalised or reintroduced ad hoc by the villagers in the frame of the wider “revival in the revival” to which Pemuda Buddhis contributed. On the surface, as we will see later in the chapter, the organisation in Surjosari of the Java Connection event stood at the opposite end: a one-off initiative that did not claim any historical depth or religious-ritual significance. A cultural event with music performances and lectures, the occasion was filled with references to Buddhism, heritage and highlighted the “Javaneseness” of the village’s religious life.

The *nyadran* ritual is situated instead between these two varieties of events. A Javanese communal ritual of ancestors recollection, *nyadran* has been revitalised and “eventised” in Surjosari in a specific direction and from 2019 it began to incorporate the features of a cultural festival. Although these sets of events present distinct genealogies and involve distinct social spectra, they condense multiple issues, discourses, imaginaries and practices, connecting economy, aesthetics, identity, social media, Theravāda Buddhism, Javanese rituals and historical narrative.

1. Surjosari, 2019

When I visited the Temanggung area again during my fieldwork in 2019, Surjosari appeared very different on many levels. The outer limits of the village were now clearly announced by a wooden gate reporting an auspicious greeting in Javanese. The same gate would be reinforced during my stay and the plate replaced with a larger plaque signalling the entrance into a “waterfall tourist destination” (*destinasi wisata curug*). The entire area had been cleared up and thickly decorated with plants and flowers, both on the street level and in private home yards. The pavilion in the village square was now neat and apparently used on a regular basis – according to a schedule fixed on a wooden board. Not only had the area turned overall densely green, but almost every house had now a Buddha shrine in full display. While the altars were arranged in a variety of materials (wood, bamboo, cement, stone, brick and plastic) and colours, they all invariably featured a statuette of a sitting Sakyamuni Buddha. The statue came exclusively in four forms: clay, gypsum, white stone or volcanic (grey to black) stone.

The path uphill was similarly cleared and generally easier to walk. Boards indicating the distance to the waterfall were installed at intervals along the trail, accompanied, upon sharp turns, by bamboo handrails. The route was now visibly designed as a path with a defined destination, which was the waterfall. Passed the hollow tree, the pool of the waterfall was overseen by a large wood-and-bamboo platform, upon which a small gazebo was installed. Other signs of quick change in the area manifested in non-visual form. My local mobile provider was now in full signal (only two years back I was only able to make calls, let alone browse the internet, in the square downhill) and an *adzan*⁴⁶ could be distinctly heard from the valley at Islamic prayer times, in place of the near-absolute acoustic stillness that used to dominate.

Among private dwellings, signs of renovation were especially tangible particularly around Subagyo’s household. Like the neighbouring homes, the place of Subagyo and Metta was lush with greenery, including an elaborate outdoor shrine which featured a small pond with flowers and a light-grey statuette. The most striking feature, however, was a large neon blue placard displayed over the main window with the logo of Buddhazine, the magazine formerly directed by Soemitro (recall chapter III) and in which Subagyo was now an active and prolific writer. The same shade of blue, freshly painted, was to be seen on the right-side of the large indoor space

⁴⁶ The five daily prayer calls in most Sunni Islamic schools.

that opened up at the entrance of the house. What used to be an unorganised ensemble of electronics and books resembled now a proper-looking home office. Subagyo himself chose to wear more often home attires that recalled “traditional” Javanese clothing: he hung around in a *sarong* at all times and donned a *blangkon* piece of batik fabric on his forehead on a number of occasions⁴⁷.

The webzine, which constituted a popular independent media published by and for the Buddhist *umat* countrywide, had become a vital platform for Pemuda Buddhis to make themselves known outside of their most immediate regional reach. Some of the readers, as the comments to the columns frequently showed, were even surprised to find there existed members of the national Buddhist community outside of the major cities. Like other media, up to Subagyo’s involvement the webzine also had aired predominantly articles, comments, editorials and topics that focussed on the religious life of urban Buddhists. Besides concentrating on events and issues that didn’t seem of immediate interest to the rural *umat* (from book launches in Jakarta or Medan, to the psychological well-being in corporate workplaces), Buddhazine reproduced a well-seated impression that Indonesian Buddhism was, after all, a domain of the affluent and of urban Chinese-Indonesians. Following Soemitro’s column, which we saw in the previous chapter, the discussion initiated on issues of history and identity had expanded the scope of the webzine and several articles on rural communities and by writers reporting from the countryside had begun to appear in the period between 2015 and 2019.

For Subagyo, the opportunity afforded by the webzine was not only a window for the mediatic representation of the Temanggung Buddhist community, but it constituted an actual possibility to capitalise on this exposure in terms of visibility and economy. The “capital” involved could have different declinations. As the religious life of Temanggung villagers became increasingly eventised, the kind of experience enacted could also be constructed in terms of an intangible form of benefit that came with it, a dimension often expressed through the category of *suasana* (“atmosphere, sensation”), operating on varying degrees of immediacy. Nonetheless, reverberated and amplified, this particular value would also herald in the long run a very worldly kind of payoff in the form of the ubiquitous circulation of *potensi wisata* (“tourist potential”). While the early manifestations of this discursive and material motion towards the recuperation of traditional practices and the mobilisation of *potensi wisata* were all present in their embryonal form

⁴⁷ A *sarong* is a large piece of fabric clothed around the waist, historically worn by both men and women and still common in many regions of South and Southeast Asia. *Blangkon* is a specific way of knotting an elaborate squared cloth around the forehead, formerly worn throughout Java, Bali and Lombok.

during my previous visit in 2017, by the end of my fieldwork in 2019-2020 their strands and developments could be seen everywhere.

2. *Nyadran*. Recollecting the ancestors

Rituals revolving around ancestors have been present in Java for generations and have criss-crossed formal religious affiliations since first documented. Collectively known with the umbrella term of *nyadran*⁴⁸, these ritual traditions are actually only loosely related with one another. Substantial differences are there not only in terms of their outward scope or their historical genealogy, but also in their calendrical and cosmological connections, as well as the choice of the location deemed appropriate for their performance (see Brenner 1991 for an example of a *nyadran* ceremony within the aristocracy in Solo; Nugroho 2015 for a historical development of a *nyadran* ritual in the Nganjuk countryside).

Broadly speaking, *nyadran* might be used to refer to a short individual prayer in Javanese uttered over a relative's grave, after a Qur'anic recitation, as well as to a large communal meal performed in the memory of a more generic class of "deceased" or "ancestors". A *nyadran* would be considered such also in the reverse configuration: collective rituals rich in offerings dedicated to a specific departed, just like single individuals prayers or meditations invoking more abstracted ancestors. A private home, cemeteries, uninhabited slopes or "the southern sea" were all possible environmental scenes to be found across the *nyadran* spectrum in Java. In this sense, *nyadran* seems often to identify all forms of cemeterial rituals that do not fall directly into the eschatological repertoire of scriptural Islam or Christianity.

In Temanggung alone *nyadran* rituals comprise a set of very different ceremonies, occurring at different time intervals and more or less attached, in ritual or calendar, to a formal religion (predominantly Islam). The organisation of a collective *nyadran* ceremony needs to intersect the two main calendrical cycles (Gregorian and Javanese), to which typically the Islamic one is added, taking into account the progressive shift of the yearly fasting month, but also the astronomical determination of the start and conclusion of the rainy season. The diversity in calculations among the villages makes it possible to participate in multiple communal *nyadrans*, an

⁴⁸ *Nyadran* is linguistically also rendered as *sadran*. Possibly descended from the Sanskrit *śraddha*, see Pigeaud 1963: 424 and Zoetmulder 1974. Headley 2004 and Koenjaraningrat 2007 have provided additional contextualisations of the term.

option that is occasionally entertained by the farmers of Surjosari as kinship and other kinds of intra-regional connections are established. In 2017 I counted five *nyadran* organised on the slope around Surjosari between March and early May.



Figure 17. Residents of Surjosari loading willow baskets for the cemetery *nyadran*.

2.1. Ancestor rituals in Surjosari

The major collective *nyadran* specific to Surjosari takes place normally at a cemetery located outside of the village's outer limit and is jointly attended by the residents of the surrounding villages. The occasion is commonly set up in order to commemorate the area's ancestors (*leluhur*), although the reasons behind the residents' participation could be as well very different, from paying homage to the real or mythological founders specific to the Surjosari area to the recollection of concrete departed in one's genealogical ties. The first time I attended such

ceremonies about seventy residents participated and the whole ritual displayed the structure of a typical *slametan*⁴⁹. Each resident or household joined the event with two or more baskets of various types of cooked and raw food, all invariably complemented by a large white *tumpeng* (cone of cooked rice). The attendees sat on the ground in two mirroring lines and the courses were distributed in between.

The food constituted the material offering to the dead and was frugally consumed and then rapidly passed on for a quick taste to the neighbouring participant. Between these two moments, there was a pause of silent introspection in which the ancestors were “recollected” inwardly and individually, an act that brought some of the participants to tears. Before the first serving and then again after the recollection, short prayers and recitations were performed on a microphone. Although the atmosphere of the event was not overly liturgical – the backdrop of convivial chitchat hardly ever ceased – the stages of the ceremony and the moment of meditation were approached with earnestness by most participants.

The particular religious configuration of the slope, characterised not only by three official affiliations (Islam, Buddhism and Protestant Christianity), but also by an important degree of internal diversification, issued on that occasion an interfaith twist to the most overt religious section of the ceremony: the prayer. Reciting a sequence of two or more prayers relating to different religions within the same *slametan* is not a practice unheard of in multi-religious settings in Java (Beatty 1999: 25-50). However, in Surjosari the custom of aligning a qur’anic recitation with a Buddhist verse in Pāli was a very novel introduction, as Subagyo informed me, and one that came from an open discussion.

By virtue of his age, one of the most authoritative elders of the village, Metta’s father recalled how in his youth and well into his early adulthood collective Islamic or Buddhist prayers during *nyadran* ceremonies were not featured at all. A “respected elder” would simply invite the congregation, in Javanese, to pay homage to their ancestors. After that, everyone would withdraw in meditation for a few minutes, before resuming the circulation of the food offerings and breaking the *tumpeng* apart. It was over the last thirty-something years that, according to him, prayers “of various *agama*” began to be introduced. It all started, as he recounted, with the head of the neighbouring village, a devout Muslim albeit still evidently obsequious towards the Javanist religiosity, who began to recite a qur’anic verse in Arabic right after the speech in Javanese.

⁴⁹ Geertz (1960) and Beatty (1999) have given extensive accounts of Javanese ritual feasts (*slametan*) and their symbolic significance within both Javanese religiosity and sociality.

The brief Islamic recitation became over the years an integral part of Surjosari's *nyadran* and, for the most part, no issues were raised by the Buddhist and Christian members of the community, who made up at that time over a half of the residents of the wider area. Instead, it was not uncommon (and it is still not, as I could witness over the 2017 and 2019 *nyadrans*) that some of the non-Muslim villagers joined into the Arabic recitation. The linguistic and religious-specific issues began to unravel more explicitly as some of the participants took on whispering Buddhist *gathas* individually or in small groups during the prayer in Arabic or the meditation section. The confusion was particularly exacerbated as microphones and speakers began to be carried along to the cemetery in the last few years.

In 2014, finally, as Metta's father became the elder "in office" for the Javanese invitational speech, the issue was brought to the fore. After a discussion with village heads and other elders of the area, they eventually concluded that the prayer sessions should follow an established sequence, in order to give the due weight to both *agamas*. Interestingly, the Christian denominations never entered the debate. The Arabic recitation, then, was placed at the beginning of the event, after the Javanese speech, while the Pāli one was delivered on the same microphone, after the inward recollection and right before the "opening" of the *tumpeng*.

The more or less explicit consideration over the position of the official religions within a Javanist ceremony, as I anticipated, is not unique to the collective *nyadran* recollections. In fact, apart from the location and the class of nonhuman participation invoked in the ritual, the outward structure of Surjosari's *nyadran* did not differ particularly from a *slametan* performed at other occurrences and rites of passage. Nonetheless, the careful thought given to a clear-cut religious sequence in the stages of the ceremony is telling of the degree of self-awareness to which the religious affiliation of the farmers had surged over the span of just a few years. At the same time the very possibility of a communal *nyadran*, given a climate or increased religious essentialisation and in a district in which Islamic radicalism has often made the headlines constituted a space in which the same inter-religious difference could be overcome (or in which it could be "agreed to disagree", as in Beatty 1999: 25), sometimes allowing the participant to respond, literally, to different religious inputs simultaneously.

2.2. *Nyadran*. From a waning ritual to cultural salience

The 2017 *nyadran* was deemed by both Subagyo and Sura a notable “success”. While I failed at first to understand the exceptionality of the event in respect to the previous years, it became clear later upon my next visit in 2019 that the success of Surjosari’s *nyadran* was measured, at least by members of Pemuda Buddhis, against the quantity and quality of participants. In the last few years, the participation to communal *nyadrans* in Surjosari’s area had witnessed a drastic decline. For Subagyo, the waning of the tradition was due to the generalised “abandoning of Javanese culture”. The ceremony of 2017 was the first in a long time in which the attendance experienced an increase since he or Metta could remember. Such growth was not entirely spontaneous, however, as Subagyo had tried – and succeeded – to involve more actively the young residents of the area. Moreover, a couple of the participants (including myself) were acquaintances who hailed for the first time from outer regions upon his personal invitation to join “a unique Javanese ritual”.

According to Subagyo, the presence of visitors from Jakarta or altogether from abroad expanded the importance of the event as an instance of a cultural object “to be preserved” (*melestarian* would be a frequent verb used in such utterances). This would start, in the mid-run, a virtuous circle for which the residents themselves would grow more aware and motivated to take part in such ceremonies, once the event was invested with the additional prestige of the “culture” frame, of which the degree of tourist attractiveness, *potensi wisata*, seemed an indissoluble aspect. In other words, Surjosari’s *nyadran* had the potential to be encompassed into a vision that held the village and the surrounding hamlets as a living example of an idealised and authentic Javanese culture.

In the light of much retrospective scholarship and “culturetalk”, including the introduction of culture subject into formal education curricula, the pinnacle of Javanese authenticity was tacitly or explicitly located in the socio-religious culture of the grand Majapahit empire, and its sole distinct and living lineage was to be found in Buddhism, exemplified, above and beyond, by the architectural evidence of Borobudur. This association was done by many among residents and outsiders and it was sometimes implied also in the conversations with Subagyo. As we have seen in chapter II, Borobudur belonged in fact to a much earlier polity, the Śailendra. While more knowledgeable residents such as Subagyo were aware of the distinction and of the temporal gap of several centuries that intercurrent between Borobudur/Śailendra and the East Java based Majapahit, the two dynasties and the corresponding religious orientations

(Śailendra were sponsors of Buddhism whereas the Majapahit world was religiously Hindu-syncretist) were often conflated into a single narrative of a generalised Buddhist classical Java.

When we discussed further the *nyadran* ceremonies in the area after the 2017 event, Subagyo explained to me how the tradition is intrinsically relatable to Buddhism and how Buddhists would gain merits by the sole act of participating in it. According to Subagyo, there were especially two aspects that made the recollection of the dead a very Buddhist activity. On the one hand, according to him, the Buddha himself is found to pay respect on multiple occasions to the bones of complete strangers. On the other hand, citing the Sigalovada Sutta⁵⁰, the Buddha mentioned the importance of paying respect “to those who are worthy of respect”. Subagyo interpreted then the Javanese *nyadran* as an ideal concentration of the cemeterial practices and the “respect to the worthy” extracted directly from the deeds and words of the Buddha. The point of such acts, though, is not to merely reproduce scriptural fragments, but it is to ultimately bring about an effect, however generic that might seem. By “paying respect” to worthy ancestors, the deceased can inspire (*menginspirasi*) the living to reproduce their virtues in the tangible world. Secondly, through the act of pausing on their worth, one could exercise introspection as a virtue valuable in itself, with the purpose of enhancing contemplation as a desirable feature and skill in everyday life.

By pointing at historical narrative and elements of textual doctrine, Javanese *nyadrans* and Buddhism were made thus tightly interrelated in the vision of Subagyo. Although not always in plain sight, the positioning of Buddhism as the given religious quality of classical Java was a fundamental motive throughout this series of practices that aimed at making Javanism more “Buddhist” as well as making Buddhism take on Javanese traits. The merging of Buddhism with the idea of a crystalline Javanese culture “just as in Majapahit” is what constituted, at the core, the notion of “living heritage” that seemed to herald visibility and attractiveness for Surjosari. This blend was never only a discursive device, but it corresponded to practices that resonated closely with it and that embodied it on the ground.

⁵⁰ The 31st discourse in the *sutta* “basket” of the Theravada Pāli canon.

2.3. *Nyadran* as an “event”

Surjosari’s *nyadran* became an “event”, fully identified as a form of cultural festival, starting from 2019, when it began to be widely advertised and promoted by the Pemuda Buddhis activists and some of the residents themselves via Facebook, Instagram and invitation cards. Several side-gigs were scheduled in what was extended into a four-days long event that came for a fee of 100.000 Rupiah (about 6€ at that time) for those who opted for a “live in” format. The actual *nyadran* ceremony was then sandwiched between a series of speeches, workshops, tours and small concerts. In its ritual sense, *nyadran* was not envisioned as a strictly Buddhist affair. It retained the classical non-denominational form, as it remained open to the nearby Muslim and Christian communities who were traditionally tied to the area’s cemeterial commemoration. In fact, the festival was officially described on ads as an example of interfaith “peace and tolerance”, rather than an overt Buddhist or Javanist occurrence.

To outsiders, the event was also presented as an occasion to experience local culture (*budaya lokal*), which in turn could instill into the participant the “values of peace”. The festival itself was given the official name of *Nyadran perdamaian* (the “*nyadran* of peace”). The relevance of the festival as an instance of peace promotion was also reiterated by some of the gigs involved. Two local academics (a historian and an archaeologist) gave mini-lectures on Borobudur, a French writer and Tantric practitioner spoke of her encounter with the pristine beauty of the Javanese court, while a local NGO specialist delivered a speech on the importance of harmony and unity in the name of the Indonesian Republic.

The day of this eventised edition of the *nyadran* ceremony was especially crowded with visitors joining specifically for the ritual, in addition to the fifty people that were accommodated in the villages through the festival. The structure of the cemetery ritual had retained the form of the *nyadran* that I attended two years before, although the overall atmosphere was considerably jollier, with balloons and music aired in the background by both residents and visitors. The breaking of the *tumpeng* rice cones (Figure 19) became the starting point of the most festive section of the event, as the participants socialised, jested and took generous amounts of selfies.

OPEN REGISTRATION

4 HARI LIVE IN 27-30 Maret 2019

Perbatas 40 orang

NYADRAN
★ Perdamaian ★

belajar nilai perdamaian dari budaya lokal

Temanggung
Jawa Tengah

Kunjungan rumah ibadah dan diskusi

Training Peace and Tolerance

Mengikuti Nyadran

Kunjungan ke Candi

Tinggal di rumah warga

Pentas Kesenian Lokal

Persyaratan

- Siswa atau Mahasiswa/i dari berbagai latar belakang Agama, Suku, dan Ras
- Tertarik dengan isu perdamaian dan toleransi
- Membuat video 1 menit atau karya tulis tentang budaya lokal, perdamaian dan toleransi
- Mengisi formulir <https://goo.gl/forms/UMznkvZR1cUVY6HK2>
- Deadline 20 Maret 2019

Narahubung: 085222196561 (Ana)
email. nyadranperdamaian@gmail.com

Rp. 100 K - Kaca, Pertunjukan seni lokal, Sertifikat, Makan dan snack Doorprize, Teman baru

Musik Perdamaian Helmi ft. Rizka

Diselenggarakan oleh AMAN Indonesia
The Way We Live Better Together
Didukung oleh

Peace In Diversity
KOSMOS PAROKI ST PETRUS DAN PAULUS TEMANGGUNG

Salim Lee (Pakar sejarah dan peneliti teks Borobudur)

Elizabeth D. Inandjak (Penulis dan Penyair)

Hanifah Haris (AMAN Indonesia)

Goenawan (Arkeolog)

Astin Mei (MAFINDO Wonosari)

Figure 18. Invitation leaflet for the Nyadran Perdamaian.

However, the *nyadran* was not only animated by the conspicuous presence of visitors who joined from outside out of curiosity but was attended earnestly by a number of participants who had familial connections with the Surjosari area but had no previous experience with participating to the ritual. Agus was one of them. A man in his fifties, he had come all the way from Yogyakarta to take part in the ceremony. Although he was aware that the practice was still carried out in the area, he had only decided to participate this year for the first time after he had heard about it through a social media page. A Muslim, Agus was born in the closest village to Surjosari and had moved to the Yogyakarta region in his late teenage, before taking up a job in the state bureaucracy. Although he had only rarely come back to his birthplace over the years and his parents had already passed away, he never lost the awareness, so he said, of “where his roots were set”. The point of the event, he informed me, was to pay homage to one’s family and to the ancestors of the village, because he acknowledged the existence of a strong continuous relationship that subsists in physical distance and that carries on even after death. “Many believe that with bodily death that relationship is cut forever, but ‘we’ recognise that the lymph (*getah*) between us and our ancestors keeps flowing after death”.



Figure 19. The nyadran feast by the cemetery.

The remaining activities of the festival were catered mostly for the visitors who had joined the event upon subscribing to an online form and who were lodged in the houses of local residents. Although the program as a whole was thought by Pemuda Buddhis predominantly for students and young people at large, the profile of the guests was quite varied. Over the first evening, everyone was involved in ice-breaking activities in which all the participants had the chance to introduce themselves and get acquainted with one another. The motivations for making the journey to Surjosari were as diverse as the participants themselves. While some were university undergraduate students who wished to collect research data about “Javanese customs”, others had reached out to the organisers of the event through a chain of personal contacts from a set of Buddhist organisations ranging from *vihara*-based networks to Buddhist educational institutions – many were STAB students of various provenance. The underlying motive in the latter case seemed to be a more generic desire to witness an authentic Buddhist way of life in a community that displayed the qualities of a pure and timeless Buddhist religiosity wedded with local culture,

or a “living Borobudur” (*Borobudur yang hidup*), as I heard circulating through the days of the festival.

Even if the festival was framed as a celebration of interfaith conviviality, the centrality of Buddhism as an expression of true Javanese culture could be hardly missed. The epicentre of the festival was the newly revamped Surjosari, with its array of outward “Buddhist” signs. Moreover, the village’s residents were also the keenest, during the more formal activities of the event, to don attires commonly perceived as traditionally Javanese: the chignon, white blouse and a tight long *batik* gown for women, striped flannel vests with a *blangkon* or *batik* shirts and *peci*⁵¹ for men. Furthermore, coherently with the explicit interfaith dimension of the event, some of the moments scheduled in the program involved a tour of the area’s places of worship and religious heritage sites. Because the majority of the outside visitors were themselves of Buddhist background the visits to the *viharas* and especially the evening worship sessions at the temple were characterised by mass participation. Mats and cushions were even placed outside the temples to accommodate the large number of attendees. In addition to the aesthetic marks of Buddhist presence, therefore, the large crowds that gathered around everyday Buddhist devotions contributed to creating also the visual impression of a Buddhist character to the whole *Nyadran Perdamaian* festival.

Nyadran Perdamaian turned out successful for the Pemuda Buddhis organisers. The students who participated were invited by Subagyo to submit a short text on their experience to him and, in addition, he exhorted them to share social media visual contributions about the event. Subagyo himself would then compile numerous posts on the festival. Although formulated with reference to the interfaith dimension of the event, these contributions foregrounded constantly the persistent interplay between Buddhism and a figuration of pristine Javanese culture which constituted the special character of Surjosari. In any case, the *nyadran* festival of 2019 managed to mobilise an unprecedented number of both locals and visitors and could be considered in many respects a showcase for the religious and aesthetic life of the Surjosari area, indirectly working towards that *potensi wisata* envisioned by many of the activists.

The festival triggered a sense of optimism among the residents so that Subagyo and the activists did not hesitate to propose the organisation of two more events involving the Surjosari community within the same year. But the occasional staging of festivals and large events was not the only way through which a sense of cultural revitalisation was performed and diffused. A

⁵¹ Rigid, oval-shaped headwear, usually black or in dark hues. *Peci* is today commonly associated with traditionalist Islam, although its exact origins are disputed. The elderly residents of Surjosari regarded the *peci* to be a “Javanese” form of attire irrespective of any formal religion.

number of other local features and rituals was carefully brushed up and represented as a dignified expression of “local culture”, within a Buddhist framework. Such elements were distilled and disseminated in large events as well as in private undertakings, in formal ritual as in everyday forms of religious and social practice. The residents’ attunement to these practices and the Buddhist language into which they were expressed would also enrich the programs of more complex festivals and the general mediatic appeal of the Surjosari area, a process that would slow down only with the 2020 pandemic.

3. Revival and Buddhification of two Javanese rites of passage

Like for the *nyadran* cemeterial recollection, the local activists were crucial intermediaries in the process of recuperating and rebranding waning local practices. The informal gatherings and meetings that commonly took place following evening Buddhist worship sessions were an important site for the transmission and discussion of these forms of knowledge, but also the gatherings that began to happen spontaneously at Subagyo’s veranda, which came to represent in many respects a community point of reference. An additional moment of sociality was the worship gathering performed at private indoor shrines, gatherings that some of the residents hosted in their homes in rotation. These post-worship meetings especially tended to be highly gendered, as they were attended predominantly by male residents, the very few female ones being some of the young people involved in the Pemuda Buddhis initiative. The reason for this gender imbalance, I was informed, was that private houses could not host all the residents of the village and therefore only the heads of the households, that is men, were expected to participate. However, as formal moments of worship at private altars did have enough room to include female residents, who during worship typically made up a third of the congregated, the spatial explanation never seemed fully satisfying to me.

The marginality of female residents in discussions and decision-making upon such gatherings might be explained by the overall tradition in Java to attribute public utterances and speeches to male members of the household or the community (Smith-Hefner 2009). However, another probable deterrent to women’s direct involvement was the ambience that emanated in such informal community gatherings. Post-worship conviviality was commonly populated by incredible amounts of coffee cups and heaps of dried tobacco and driven by a tone of conversations in mostly witty low forms of Javanese speech and carried on sometimes into very

late-night hours. These features of post-worship sociality contrasted with the kind of gendered morality which seemed to characterise the village in patterns not very dissimilar from the Javanese non-Buddhist contexts I was familiar with, in which women's public presence is constructed with specific expectations of decorum and composure.

The evening gatherings in Surjosari played a fundamental role in the process of recuperation of traditional Javanese practices, through the informal discussions of the residents but especially as the activists prompted on such occasions the inter-generational transmission of cultural elements and memories (or their contextualisation) relating to the "times of old". Such occasions were even more important for the re-evaluation or a better understanding of ritual practices that, unlike *nyadran*, were hardly ever to be seen in the region because fallen out of use or carried out by only a handful of residents in remote regions of the district. The ritual first cut of a child's hair (*gombak*) and the complex set of ceremonies accompanying the mid-stage of a woman's pregnancy (*tingkeban*) were two such examples that were invested with special consideration by Surjosari's residents over the period of my stay.

3.1. Denny's *gombak*

The cutting of a child's hair is a rite of passage historically familiar to many communities in the Malay-Indonesian world, although the form and content of the ritual might vary greatly and the prevalence in the contemporary societies is extremely patchy. In his early study of the "ideal" Javanese small town of Mojokuto, Geertz (1960) discussed the existence of a hair-cutting rite of passage among the sheer number of communal *slametan* performed in the area and ascribed it to a Hindu substratum. Thirty years later, Hefner (1990: 146) would describe a similar rite, albeit much more austere in form compared to the version of Geertz, among the Tengger of East Java under the name of *tugel kuncung* or *tugel gombak*. Traces of comparable rituals (*akika kenduri*) are also to be found in peninsular Malaysia (Frisk 2009), where however, in the very few instances in which they survived, they have been ostensibly recast outside of the realm of religion.

The process of marginalisation of hair-cutting rites of passage in Malaysia coinciding with the expanding hegemony of state-sponsored religions, notably Islam, might have had a loose parallel in Java. Along with its presence in the Tengger communities (who have adopted official Hinduism in the late 1900s), the *gombak* ritual is today only attested in the Wonosobo regency in western Central Java, where it is practiced as a form of Javanist rite by a small pool of residents nominally

subscribing to different state religions, that is Islam, Christianity and Buddhism (Febriyanto and Riawanti 2019; Abdel 2013; Widyatwati 2012). The practice, also known as *rumatan gimbal*, has been recently acknowledged by a board of the Ministry of culture as an instance of “cultural heritage” of Central Java⁵². The variety of *gombak* of Wonosobo is characterised by the fact that only certain children, both male and female, are entitled to undergo the rite, those that develop a specific dreadlock in their early years – a sign that is interpreted as being the auspicious intercession of a supernatural entity, however differently conceived.

3.1.1. *The revitalisation of gombak in Surjosari*

The relative proximity of Wonosobo to the Temanggung area may account for the circulation of knowledge among some of the Surjosari farmers about the continuing practice of *gombak* in the neighbouring regency. Over one of the evening post-worship gatherings, Wahyu, a man in his late thirties, announced that he was going to have a *gombak* performed for his six years old son, Denny. The occasion allowed the residents the opportunity to discuss the practice. While many had heard of the ritual before, only some of the elderlies had in fact witnessed first-hand one in the village or in its surroundings. Much of that evening therefore went on in a dense conversation in which those present shared their own personal memories or fragments of generic knowledge about some of the stages of the ritual. Wahyu also observed that a *gombak* was performed three years before in the neighbouring village of Tlakan for a four-years old child. The village was a Muslim-majority one and had performed *gombak* in 2016 for the first time allegedly after several years in which it was not carried out.

Later on that evening, Arjo, one of the senior residents present at the gathering, further elaborated to me the background of *gombak* rituals in the area, as he wanted to make sure I understood the salient parts of the discussion, which rolled along in mixed Indonesian and low Javanese. He remarked that *gombak* used to be a relatively common practice throughout the regency when he was young (he had just turned seventy). The rite, he commented in retrospect, used to be quintessentially “Javanese”, as the day for the main ritual was calculated according to a child’s *weton*, his or her birthdate according to the Javanese calendar. The ceremony however, according to Arjo’s recollection, featured also a moment of communal prayer in which the Islamic

⁵² Ruwatan Rambut Gimbal of Wonosobo on the ministerial page (in Indonesian): <https://warisanbudaya.kemdikbud.go.id/?newdetail&detailTetap=359>.

tablil was chanted. The looping recitation of the verse is a common centrepiece of many Islamic rites of passage in Java and Indonesia at large, on occasions such as a child's circumcision (*sunatan*), funerary rites and the recollection of a Muslim saint. Due to its association with practices regarded as non-orthodox, the appropriateness and style of its performance in such contexts is often debated by local scholars, with the large association Nahdlatul Ulama being traditionally on the permissive side (Ismail 2003). When the Surjosari farmers "became Buddhists" in the mid-60s they seemed to have figured out a way to retain the practice of *gombak* by adding instead of the *tablil* a Buddhist chanting. The shift managed to not alienate anyone in the village as, in Arjo's account, the residents were all compact in embracing Buddhism at that time. Either way, like other practices of the kind, *gombak* rituals began to slowly decline in the area, a fact that was to be attributed for the man to a generalised "abandoning" of the Javanese cultural values – including perhaps (although he never mentioned it) the rise of a less compact religious profile among the farmers in the greater district.

Several interpretative grids have been circulating about the *gombak*, reflecting both regional variation and diachronic permutations. One of the better-established notions regarding the ritual is the idea that children undergoing a *gombak* rite were not simply appointed out of a deliberate decision on the side of their parents, as it seemed to be the case for Wahyu and Denny. It was instead specific types of hairlocks, particularly those displaying a characteristic curl with a reddish shade, that would indicate, naturally as it were, that *that* child around the age of three needed to undergo a certain ritual. Children with such hairlocks were therefore "chosen" not by the living but from a web of supernatural circumstances. The entities involved in this web are manifold: in the Wonosobo area the agency seemed to rest in the myth of Nyai Roro Kidul, the Javanese queen of the southern sea, with whom the child with a hairlock is supposed to bear a relationship of genealogical descent. Alternatively, it is related to the figure of Kiai Kolodete, a character that merges Islamic saintly cult with community ancestor worship (Salehudin et al. 2018). In all cases, the hairlock was an index of the child's continuing relationship with the nonhuman world, fraught with danger and in need to be severed ritually, in order to guarantee his or her complete socialisation in the human realm.

The connection with some degree of ancestry, familial or mythological, seemed to form a common substratum among the more or less explicit understandings annexed to the *gombak* rite of passage and which circulated in some fashion also among Surjosari villagers. These include the offerings given in the name of the forefathers before the rite and the more generic statements that claimed that the ritual was a re-establishment of the bond with "the way of the ancestors".

Most commonly however the residents with whom I interacted tended to frame the ritual as a wish to *lepas balangan* (“remove the obstacles”) from the upcoming social life of the child or simply a way to deliver an auspicious “blessing”.

3.1.2. *The gombak ritual for Denny*

The *gombak* ceremony organised for Denny was in any case accompanied by great curiosity and participation on the side of the residents. Several meetings were arranged the weeks before to discuss and rehearse the details of the ritual. Because such preparatory gatherings tried to involve at least one member for each household – those that were not out in the field – the ceremony could be said to have mobilised to some extent the entire village. The involvement of a substantial portion of the villagers was not only a matter of making the ceremony relevant and widely partaken, but the various stages that it implied needed the physical contribution of a significant number of people.

The preparation for the ritual began approximately three weeks before the actual ceremony, with the collection of wood and bamboo from the forest, in order to build a series of makeshift pieces of furniture that would be used specifically during the ceremony. This was usually done by the relatives of the family and it involved predominantly men in the spirit of *gotong royong*, in the words of the residents, that is a work of mutual help cooperation for the common good, a recurring notion in Javanese neighbourhood life. Once the “kitchen” was prepared from scratch – a work that took almost two weeks – the *gotong royong* of the preparation process passed on to the female counterpart of the extended family. This had to do almost exclusively with food. A whole day was dedicated entirely to the cleaning and sieving of rice grains (*napeni beras*), an act that was in fact very ordinary for the villagers but that was nevertheless invested with special significance by the family and elders like Arjo, who cared to always retain the name of this stage in Javanese.

The completion of the rice cleaning marked the transition into the more ceremonial phase of the rite. From that night on, the house of Wahyu was frequently visited by the villagers at all hours of the day. The idea was that during this stage also the fellow residents who did not have the chance to take part in the preparatory *gotong royong* could be recognised as contributing symbolically to the set of material requirements for the smooth performance of *gombak*. Within a couple of days, hence, the house of Wahyu became furnished with wood, copper and plastic

vessels, cooking accessories and utensils, all items that were supposed to be used later during the ceremony. Besides becoming filled with accessories in a very spatial sense, Wahyu's house was visibly the centre of village life over that week. Not only were villagers visiting in order to have a chat or helping around the house, but the twice-a-week home worship session was also stationed at his household. Throughout the day, incense was constantly lit at the wooden Buddhist shrine of his garden.

The two days before the event seemed the most hectic around the house, which was now predominantly populated by the village's female residents. It was the stage in which all the energies were supposed to be concentrated around the preparation of food, a process that "must" last at least two days, as Arjo informs me. Arjo seemed to have become my unofficial informant over that week, as we met frequently on the street or while I assisted or try to participate to some of the preparatory business. Subagyo followed all the stages of the ritual too, constantly accompanied by his top-shelf camera. Although he was aware of the Javanese terminology and symbolisms for some of the ritual components, he had never seen them before organised in the view of a *gombak* rite.

The night before the event assumed a more formal and ceremonial tone. The residents were invited in the early evening to perform independently a series of rituals familiar to anyone close to Javanese religious practices, that consisted mainly of giving offerings in the form of food and incense at given locations – water springs, crossroads, house corners, gravestones or any place deemed sacred. While it is difficult to estimate how many among the villagers performed an offering that evening in their private homes, most of those who performed one outdoor (I witnessed about a dozen) were directed to their respective Buddhist shrines. Lanang, a guy in his thirties, was the only person to make the way up to Surjosari's waterfall to perform his offering – flower petals in a bamboo tray. He completed it with an ablution which he executed by immersing himself waist-length in the rocky pond of the fall. Interestingly, this kind of offering, which involved a more direct expression of one's religiosity, was referred to as entirely "optional" by the villagers who discussed the event over the various gatherings.

Everyone was expected to partake instead to a variety of *slametan* (called *babah dalan*, the "opening of the road") which was launched later that evening as an auspicious request that everything would run smoothly on the next day. The *slametan* was attended by a large number of people, some came from nearby hamlets too, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, and featured a few minutes of Pāli chanting before the opening of the ritual rice cone (*tumpang*). After that, a few

residents lingered at Wahyu's house for another couple of hours, distributing tasks for the following day from the most official to the most menial.

Strictly speaking, performing *gombak* was a relatively brief and straightforward affair. However, the ensemble of events and ceremonial stages that were put together extended the ritual to several hours of prayers, socialisation, food and cultural performances. The ceremonial setting in which the ritual was performed was also particularly ornamented. As asked in the several meetings over the previous days, the villagers gathered at about nine in the morning in the western end of the main street of Surjosari, where a large plastic pavilion was set up earlier in the day (we were in the middle of the rainy season). The stand was lined internally with two pieces of polyester fabric, one white, one yellow, forming a combination of colours that were associated by the villagers with belonging to the Buddhist *umat*. Increasingly more women too had begun donning attires that included solely white and yellow on formal occasions, or that recolled that chromatic combination through white tops and yellow-patterned batik gowns. On that occasion, however, the family of Wahyu and Danny was the only one to dress in a somewhat more formal fashion for that day (Wahyu wore a white shirt, his wife a *batik* blouse, while Danny a casual t-shirt). On the ground, several brown mats were combined to form a vast, slightly elevated sitting platform capable to host a couple of dozen participants, outside of it, regular plastic chairs were arranged for the remaining guests.

Across from the pavilion's opening, an altar with a golden Buddha statuette was set up, among several jars filled with flowers. The shrine was the focal point towards which all the activities of the event were oriented. The arrangement of Danny's family and of the other participants during the ritual didn't seem to be of much importance. In fact, only those sitting on mats complied with the usual right-to-left gender division. The more or less close vicinity to the performance on the side of the family was also not a relevant issue. According to Arjo, the child could be held still by either the mother or the father, but Danny was "big enough to stand on its own". Crucial, though, was that the cutting would be performed by one of the elders of the village. Being the elder in charge of many religious functions, Metta's father Sumartono was chosen for the ritual cut and for officiating the ceremony in general.

The cutting of Danny's hairlock was done quickly but the procedure was inserted in a tight succession of pre-established gestures and recitation. After the congregation had chanted the *namaskara* salutation in unison, Sumartono proceeded to recite a *paritta* and a *gatha* texts from the Pāli canon. The two short texts recited, *Abhaya* and *Sumangala*, scriptures associated with "blessing" and "protection" respectively, were chosen for being the chants predicated in the

Theravāda tradition for occasions such as the shaving of a monk's or a *samanera*'s head upon ordination. The cut was effectuated on the side of the altar and the hairlock was placed then in a small clay vessel. After the event, the family would bring it home and dispose of it in the manner of a food offering. Following the cut and after sprinkling some water on the child, Sumartono guided another shorter session of Pāli chanting and consequently gave a speech at the microphone reasserting the importance of the event for the Surjosari community and the salience of keeping up “the culture of the ancestors” united with Buddhism.

3.1.3. A Javanese “horsesdance” for Denny’s gombak

As the main part of the ceremony came to a close, all in all in less than an hour, the family of Danny initiated the *slametan* and the food was then distributed by three women to the other participants farther in the pavilion as well as to those standing outside of it. The audience was at this point at its peak in terms of participation, as several residents arrived from neighbouring villages to join in the feast and in the general moment of conviviality. After the feast was over, the whole ritual was supposed to be sealed with two *jathilan* performances at the village’s main pavilion.

Jathilan, also called *reak* or “horse dance”, depending on the province, is a historically prominent performative art of Java centred around some of the staple elements of Javanese folklore (specific styles of make-up, costumes and parts of *gamelan* orchestral sets, although none is a mandatory feature for obtaining a *jathilan*). But the core of the dance is its escalation in the mood resulting into an individual or collective trance, episodes that are oftentimes codified as acts of possession which are voluntary and individualised, as well as related to some level of communication with the spirits of the ancestors (van Goenendael 2008; Monteanni 2020). With the surge of the idea of a distinguished Javanese classical music, however, genres such as *jathilan* have been pushed to the margins or smoothed over as instances of a coarser musical culture, like unorthodox forms of *gamelan* (Pemberton 1987; Sutton 1991; Rizzo 2020). When staged as cultural folklore, instead, possessions and other “ambiguous” or obscene traits were removed or glossed as harmless comedy. Formerly attached to ceremonies and rites of passage of different kinds, *jathilan*, which is typically practiced in loose semi-stable ensembles, was in contemporary Java something of an underground cult performed in dedicated festivals and kept enjoying some degree of popularity in a few pockets in the countryside.

Jathilans never completely faded from the landscape of Surjosari. In 2017 I had already the occasion to witness one, in the same village pavilion, concluded with a chaotic trance episode in which one of the main dancers had to be removed from stage and immersed, head down, into a bucket of cold water. On the occasion of Denny's *gombak*, however, the dance was brought in as a self-conscious cultural performance mandated by the deliberate reconstruction of a "Javanese" ritual. The first of the two *jathilan*, performed by a Temanggung group, was in fact quite different from what I had seen previously and responded to the more mainstream requirements of what a folk-dance performance should be: colourful, entertaining adapted to European music scales, with no actual possession. The second *jathilan* was staged on the next day in the late afternoon and constituted the de facto closing of the *gombak* rite.

Although equally crossover in style (with a full-blown drumming section), the second group of which Sura had been an occasional collaborator at the *saron*⁵³ remained more observant of some of the traditional features of a *jathilan*. These included the music scales used by the ensemble and the moves of the "horse dancers", but also the considerable length of the whole performance – over an hour to which nonetheless the residents remained attentive participants. The explicit hybridity of the spectacle, the inclusion of *kraton*-style dancers and the lack of possessions, however, were a reminder that this show too was expected to be approached and appreciated as a fragment of an essentialised and modern understanding of what constitutes "Javanese culture".

"The glue of fraternity" (*getah persaudaraan*) was a comment that Subagyo threw casually into a conversation about the ceremony that had just passed. That was undoubtedly one equally important aspect of the motivation behind the organisation and the substantial participation in rituals such as *gombak*. It described the sense of group unity that underlined the engagement of the community in such events. On this level, Surjosari's communal involvement into ritual acts of this kind resonated with the Durkheimian idea of "effervescence" as a facet of social religiosity (Durkheim 1965: 236), an aspect which functioned as both a "glue" and a stimulant for collective participation (see also Fonseca et al. 2019).

The "glue" at the centre of Subagyo's comment identified also a bodily and spatial experience of the collective, an experience which had become allegedly rare in the communitarian life of the Surjosari area, especially around religious matters. It described the revitalisation of rituals as the antidote to an "unglued" community issued from decades of religious fragmentation, migration

⁵³ Metallophone instrument in a *gamelan* ensemble.

and economic marginalisation. It was in a similarly self-aware spirit that other rituals were revalorised or entirely introduced to the village over the same period.

3.2. The seventh month of Siti

A second rite of passage that was performed around the same time as Denny's *gombak* was a mid-pregnancy ritual surrounding one of the young women of the village. Javanese rituals around a woman's pregnancy were described at length in Geertz's symbolic account of the *slametan* cycles (Geertz 1960: 38-45). A *tingkeban* is an elaborate set of rites and gestures performed around the seventh month of a woman's pregnancy and is held particularly important in case of a first-born child. The point of the ritual is to ensure a smooth childbirth as well as to mark the transition into the status of motherhood for the woman involved in the ritual. Several additional layers of meaning, including numerology, cosmology and links to Islamic notions and practices, are also given and are greatly diversified across regions (Iswah 2012; Sastro Utomo 2005). Mid-pregnancy rites like *tingkeban* are also not exclusive to Java, as they figure in some other traditional ritual practices across Indonesia. On a macro-regional level, they find a parallel in the *valaiikaapu* seventh month rituals in southern India (Petitet and Vellore 2007) and the *suukhwan maemaan* practices in northeast Thailand (Poulsen 2007).

Like for other Javanist practices, circumspection and attempts at purging the ritual and the symbolisms involved from clearly non-Islamic aspects have featured strongly since the end of the 1900s (Newland 2001). However, Surjosari's residents did not seem particularly interested in reflecting on the symbolic intricacies of the occurrence, and the *tingkeban* itself was a relatively low-key ceremony, albeit some of its features were recognisably consistent with the many other *tingkeban* accounts recorded from throughout Java. Moreover, the ritual must have been considered important enough still in the 1970s and 1980s as the compilers from Sangha Theravāda Indonesia decided to include it in the collection of rites of passage in the *Paritta suci* for which a guided Pāli recitation was recommended.

Unlike *gombak*, childbearing rituals have never disappeared from the Temanggung highlands, including Surjosari. As elder and village chief, Budiono explained to me how seventh month rituals were common occurrences in the village already at the time in which he became the village head, in 1991. However, in saying this he pointed to the larger practice of giving offerings to natural spots, such as water sources and specific corners of the household, rather than organised

tingkeban-specific communal ceremonies. The purpose of the practices was for him the activation of an inner feeling of gratitude towards the flow of life and to reiterate the usual respect given to the entities that are perceived to be inhabiting the sites of the offerings. The statements of Budiono, his understanding that the kernel of the ceremony was a generalised and individualised homage towards life-as-such, suggested that while the *tingkeban* had withstood decades of quick socio-cultural change, its condensed, simple and individualised form emphasised also how its outward expression and the symbolic connections had shifted over time.

3.2.1. *Siti's choice to hold a tingkeban*

The woman at the centre of *tingkeban*, Siti, was looking forward to having her mid-pregnancy ritual performed. I was informed about her *tingkeban* by Subagyo the week before, when he was chatting with Siti's husband, Bayu, about the proper arrangement of the various parts of the ritual. I met her two days before the ceremony, while sitting in front of her house with her mother, Yesi, who was meanwhile housesitting back and forth the front yard. Siti was born and raised in Surjosari, although for a couple of years she had commuted to a small town to the south of the district in order to attend high school. There she got acquainted with many of the people whom she now considered her good friends, most of them Muslim. She had taken part to a *tingkeban* ritual two years back, right before she got married with Bayu. On that occasion, her best friend from school was in a late stage of pregnancy and decided to protect her labour and delivery by having her family arranging for a childbearing ceremony. She was particularly impressed by the feeling of communion and intimacy that emanated over the ritual, especially between the spouses and between the couple and the mother of her.

Siti remembered how the ceremony on that occasion was quite simple in form. The couple was blessed by the friend's mother and then toured the village in procession, followed by another young woman from the village who carried a tray with offerings. After following these stages, they prepared for an Islamic blessing and then for a communal feast with neighbours, relatives and friends. The friend delivered a boy less than two months after at the town's clinic. Since then, Siti yearned a *tingkeban* performed for herself. However, the intimacy and the feeling of connection aroused by the ritual weren't the only motivations around her decision. Siti's family biography weaved into her views on *tingkeban* in important ways.

Siti's mother, Yesi, hadn't had the chance run a *tingkeban* ceremony for herself and her life as a wife and a mother had been rife with hardships. Such life difficulties were perceived in retrospective to be the result of the lack of a mid-pregnancy rite. Yesi's family had decided that a childbearing ritual was not that necessary when she was expecting her first child, who was Siti's elder brother. In fact, some of the family members even advised her against it, because the child was not the couple's firstborn, since Yesi's husband had another child from a previous, short-lived marriage. Besides, holding a *tingkeban* ceremony was a significant expense at that time, especially if all the "traditional" stages were meant to be performed, and would have represented an unbearable cost to the family's finances. While Yesi eventually gave birth without major difficulties despite missing her *tingkeban*, her life became full of complications. Not long after, Yesi and her husband gave birth to a second child, another male, who died within one year from birth. Two year later, right after Siti was born Yesi divorced and had to raise alone her two children as well as her husband's son, who remained to live with her, with only the neighbours to help her around in childcare duties.

The background story of Siti highlighted the obvious gendered dimension of *tingkeban*. The ritual revolves of course around the body and future status of the woman holding the ceremony, but her mother also occupies a central role throughout its progression. Moreover, in the case of Siti, the ritual was associated with a sense of ethical necessity in respect to her mother's story. However, another female figure is important in all *tingkebans*, a character who goes by the name of *dukun bayi*. The word *dukun* is historically attributed in Java and Bali – although the word was later incorporated into standard Indonesian too – to a practitioner of traditional medicine who commonly treated both physical and spiritual ailments. While his or her role has been downsized with the rise of biomedicine, the figure continues to enjoy a degree of respect and popularity⁵⁴. Nevertheless, the *dukun bayi*, a role reserved exclusively to women, is not a generic professional *dukun* and often holds the status purely for the performance of *tingkeban* and for acting as midwife in the process of giving birth. The ritual is meant to also establish an important bond between the future mother and the *dukun bayi* who will assist with her labour and delivery, bringing an additional level of auspiciousness to the process. However, as Siti's friend *tingkeban* suggested, with the surge of hospitalisations the *dukun bayi* rarely acts as the actual midwife and her role is often confined to that of a ritual specialist for the performance of the ceremony alone.

⁵⁴ In 2021 *dukun* from several provinces gathered for the first time to form a "union". The event was reported by different media countrywide (in Indonesian): <https://www.ayojakarta.com/read/2021/02/04/30642/resmi-dibentuk-persatuan-dukun-indonesia-siap-memasyarakatkan-santet>.

Not having memories of *tingkeban* rituals in the recent family history and having only distractedly witnessed one or two in their lives, Siti and Bayu had asked for advice to the village elders and to individuals like Subagyo who could help direct the ceremony “in the appropriate ways” while clearly marking it as a religious occasion. Just like what had occurred not long before for *gombak*, the ritual was widely discussed over the more or less casual gatherings that the residents entertained in the afternoons and evenings. Differently from the cutting of Denny’s hairlock, many villagers seemed to have a say on one aspect or another of *tingkeban*. However, the details evoked for the rite did not differ substantially among each other in and most conversations concerned the appropriate quantities of rice and other items needed for the communal feast. It was also agreed without much debate that Sumartono would be responsible for officiating a Buddhist section within the ritual.

As Subagyo suggested to me, the only other *tingkeban* he had witnessed in Surjosari did not have a proper Buddhist segment, but only a *namaskara* salutation within a larger prayer session entirely in Javanese drawing in God Almighty. In conversations with the residents, Subagyo stated on more than one occasion the importance of encompassing the ritual into a Buddhist setting, as Surjosari was after all “a Buddhist village”. His position seemed to be widely shared among the neighbours. They often repeated the axiom, among each other and to me, that Javanism and Buddhism in Surjosari “travelled together”. The line between description and prescription was often blurry in statements of this kind.

3.2.2. *The stages of Siti’s tingkeban ceremony*

The ceremony was organised on a drizzly Wednesday. On the previous day, the neighbours of Siti and Bayu gathered at the couple’s house to prepare food (mostly a task for women) and to weave the leaves needed for enclosing the *ketupat* (steamed or fermented rice cubes). The men were instead responsible for the lighting of small fires in specific corners of the street where the pregnant woman and her husband would parade for the ceremony. Together, after dusk, they chanted and briefly meditated at the couple’s home altar (a section that the only three non-Buddhists present did not followed). Before the actual ritual, offerings were given by the relatives and neighbours of the couple, in a form not very different from what was prescribed for *gombak*. Water sources and *dapur* (kitchens) were held especially important as the sites for offerings for the ritual, as both water and the kitchen were taken as symbols of “life giving” power. In *tingkebans*

“as they used to be done”, I grasped from Arjo on that day, seven different water sources had to be singled out in the village for the giving of offerings and for collecting the water needed for the ritual blessings. Despite the wide availability of water springs with the recent installation of several public fountains following the general refurbishing of the village’s communal space, said Arjo amused, that custom was an unnecessary bother nowadays. One major water source was nonetheless crucial for the officiation of the rite, and for Surjosari the choice fell inevitably on the village rocky waterfall.

The next day, the day of the main section of the ritual, a small procession took place uphill from the house of Siti towards the waterfall, a procession which involved both families of origin of the couple, the closest relatives and the *dukun bayi*. Siti was wrapped only in a long yellow patterned *batik*, leaving the shoulders bare and hair down, while Bayu wore only a *sarong* to the waist, of a similar hue to Siti’s fabric. However, right when the group was ready to leave, it began to rain more heavily, and the procession that eventually made it to the waterfall was significantly reduced. Besides the couple, it included a congregation of women, including Siti’s sister who carried a large tray with food and flower offerings, both grandmothers-to-be, Bayu’s brother, the *dukun bayi* ahead of everyone and a bunch of curious children at the fringes of the group. Except for the couple and the *dukun bayi* – an old lady in pink *kebaya* and brown *batik* – everyone was in a casual, informal, attire. There seemed to be no particular requirement nor restriction on who could follow the procession, but the majority of the congregated, perhaps because of the rain, had decided to wait downhill for the completion of the main part of the ritual.

The ritual bathing took place by the pool of the waterfall and consisted in the *dukun bayi* sprinkling water on the couple with a broom made of twigs. The water was not sprinkled directly from the pool but it was poured first into a coconut vessel that was stuffed the day before with flower petals and coins. After the recitation of a prayer in Javanese and the laying of the food tray (which featured several sliced eggs, *kerupuk* chips, fried tofu and noodles) the procession headed back towards the settlement.

The procession for the bathing of the couple lasted overall less than forty minutes. After that, a feast took place with the food that the residents brought from their kitchens in a sequence similar to the *slametan* performed by the cemetery – a prayer, the opening of the banquet, the quick sharing of one’s food and the re-packing of the leftovers for private consumption back home. Following this, the participants engaged in the “Buddhist” section of the ritual. Siti (now back to a more ordinary attire) and the other women of the family sat in the front, facing the altar, and began singing Buddhist-themes songs in Indonesian at a keyboard on pre-recorded tunes –

a practice I witnessed several times at communal house worships. After that, Sumartono came to the fore and the liturgy switched linguistically into Pāli while the relatively large group of participants fell silent. A pile of *Paritta suci* was brought in the house from the vihara and Sumartono recited a section of the scripture that was meant to be read out for the occasion. The prayer session offered itself as a prime example of the effort that Sangha Theravāda Indonesia had put in matching the local ritual repertoire with the cosmopolitan scripturalism of the Pāli canon and with forms of knowledge circulating in scholarly Buddhism at large.

The ceremony was closed in the evening with a final *slametan*. The meal was originally supposed to be had at the house of the woman's parents. In this case, however, as Yesi and Siti resided under the same roof, the same household served all ritual purposes. On the side of the family members (Siti, Bayu, Yesi and Siti's sister) the rest of the attendees were the male "family heads" of the village, in a configuration similar to the informal evening gatherings. The food offered in the *slametan* had a few specific characteristics that were not typical of more generic collective feasts. Geertz (1960) was one of the first to enumerate the various symbolic aspects of each ceremonial food item present during the meal.

The *slametan* served for Siti's *tingkeban* seemed to include only a couple of different variations from the arrangements that a regular feast tended to prescribe. These were a row of seven white rice cones placed in the centre – each for every month of pregnancy, according to the villagers, although for Geertz this was also a reference to the seven layers of heaven in Islam (1960: 39). In the middle there was a larger white cone with a turmeric yellow base and, importantly, a spicy *rujak* salad, the taste of which to the mother's palate indexes the gender of the foetus in the womb: if very spicy she shall have a girl, if sweet or bland a boy. A large Buddhist altar was kept lit in the room with candles and an electric lamp throughout the evening. Together with a TV screen, it was by far the brightest corner in the room, otherwise illuminated by only a feeble white neon. The ceremony however did not feature any particular reference to Buddhism and, after the ritual banqueting, the guests whiled away the evening with casual discussions or following the videoclips aired on a music channel.

I met Siti again the day after the rite for a quick conversation. She was feeling very tired but was also very content and peaceful (*nyaman*) after the event of the previous day. When I asked her what the taste of the *rujak* was like, she answered, jokingly, "It was sour! (*asem*)". She said she had decided to follow a recommendation she had received after consulting with a monk through Facebook, that is to take up meditation at least fifteen minutes every morning and after dusk, until the day of delivery. Meditation had never been easy for her, keeping up with the habit was

therefore bound to be a challenge, but she declared to be highly motivated to keep in track with it, especially as she enjoyed the *mettā* section at the end of each meditation. She gave birth to a boy one and a half months later.

3.2.3. *The Buddhist Paritta selection for Siti's ceremony*

Like for the *gombak* ceremony of a couple of months before, the ritual for Siti's *tingkeban* was also connected with a few moments of specific Buddhist devotion. One of the main expressions of Buddhism on such instances was the recitation of Pāli scriptural sections, extracted from the *Paritta suci* booklet. For the occasion of a child's hairlock cut, the selection of texts was derived from the recitations predicated for the shaving of a monk's head. The choice for the prayers and chants to be performed for a *tingkeban* was less straightforward but it is interesting to reflect on their composition, because it is indicative of the system by which Buddhist scriptures entered the ritual life of Indonesian Buddhists.

The habit of reciting Pāli texts on occasions having to do with childbearing was unknown to other communities in Southeast Asia who make use of Theravāda-Pāli prayers as a ritual corpus. As Poulsen (2007) stated, even in a community with a very similar tradition in northern Thailand and in a society highly influenced by Theravāda Buddhism, the ritual was remarkably void of any Buddhist reference. In other contexts, where Buddhified traditions around childbearing were figured, these were focussed exclusively around the moment of delivery⁵⁵. The *Paritta* compilers' task of assembling of a Theravāda Buddhist scriptural base specific for mid-pregnancy rituals is therefore telling of the associations that were drawn into the *tingkeban* cosmology, but also of the historical contexts in which these sets of prayers were put together from various sources.

The sequence of texts selected for the seventh-month pregnancy ritual came from a dedicated section of *Paritta suci*, called *Tujuh bulan kandungan* ("the seventh month of pregnancy"), in Indonesian in the original, as the practice could be known elsewhere in the country by names other than *tingkeban*. The selection included a series of stanzas for refuge-taking which were also performed for various other rituals – these were *Buddhānussati*, *Dhammānussati* and *Saṅghānussati* texts, plus the *Saccakiriya gāthā*. The first three were linked to the practice of taking refuge in the

⁵⁵ As in Myanmar, Paul Fuller, Ven. Nandachara, personal communication.

“triple gem” of Buddhism, the Buddha, the teachings (*dhamma*) and the community (*sangha*), while the latter reformulated the same triple gem and declared its truthfulness. The selection was closed with the recitation of the *Abhaya paritta*. This chant is far less known in the Theravāda world. It consists of six stanzas and in the ritual indications of the *Paritta suci* it has multiple functions. It is commonly used for the protection against danger, obstacles and upsetting circumstances, but also as a bedtime prayer.

The *Abhaya paritta* scripture referred to the spiritual cleansing of physical spaces as well as people against the working of malevolent forces. The link between the activity of malevolent forces and the state of a foetus around the seventh month of pregnancy could be traced, in Buddhist terms, to the operations of karma. One of the rare scriptural links between the workings of karma and mid-pregnancy lays outside of the main Theravāda corpus and can be found in the *Gārbhāvākraṅti* sutra, an early Mahāyāna scripture. The early monastic interest, in Indonesia, with Buddhist primordially (especially under the interdenominational influence of the Buddhayāna movement) might account for the appreciation of concepts and bodies of text that originate not only in the established Theravādin canon but also in the corpus of Indian or “early” Buddhism.

The *Gārbhāvākraṅti* sutra, is one of the very few instances in which a Buddhist phenomenology of a woman’s pregnancy is given⁵⁶. The seventh month of pregnancy is the time in which the foetus starts perceiving suffering, a cornerstone of Buddhist creed. For different early scriptures, the moment in which suffering begins coincides with the foetus beginning to bear a soul (*jīva*) (Kritzer 2008: 75). Most importantly, in connection to the beginning of suffering, the seventh month is associated with the start of karmic production, as the two dimensions (suffering and karma) are in Buddhism interrelated, at least on a theological level.

The use of *Abhaya paritta* as a device for spiritual cleansing and a protective tool that tries to ward off bad karmic consequences can explain its chanting in reference to the seventh-month stage of a pregnancy and the reasons for its mobilisation by the *Paritta suci* compilers in reference to *tingkeban*. In any case, the recitation of a given scriptural selection prepared by the early Indonesian Theravāda *sangha* is significant for two main points. It is an example of how various strands of scholarly knowledge are pieced together with a sense of internal epistemic coherence. At the same time, it shows how such textual assemblage enters the stream of an actual ritual tradition and the practical undertakings of everyday Buddhists.

⁵⁶ See Langenberg (2017; 2013), Lin (2017) and Kritzer (2014; 2008) for the *sutra* and other recent scholarship on childbearing in Buddhist scripturalism.

Organised within a couple of months from each other, the *gombak* and *tingkeban* ceremonies in Surjosari were just two manifestations of the ways in which Buddhist modernism and a complex set of local ritual traditions combine and influence each other in the process. The two rites of passage also show the specific trajectories of what counts as “tradition” and how it came to be considered important in the first place. On the one hand, the interpersonal networks of the residents was the main vehicle for the diffusion of ideas about traditional practices. As the accounts of Siti and Wahyu showed, such networks extended beyond the village and included mobility patterns and knots of ritual knowledge that referred to distinct dynamics – such as the pursue of higher education or the religious-ritual developments of different districts.

On the other hand, the organisational efforts of Subagyo and the association he animated, Pemuda Buddhis, played also a fundamental role. The active and selective work of recuperating performative and aesthetic elements deemed culturally authentic was always in the forefront of their project and filtered in all the public forms of ritual life in the village. Therefore, the process underlying these practices, whereby Buddhism and the Javanese religious tradition are blended in more or less conscious ways, is the result of inputs and motivations flowing from different sides and condenses threads of larger historical significance.

4. Java Connections. Javanese Buddhism as a cultural festival

On the side of rituals that claimed a form of revival of the Javanese religious tradition or Buddhist religious occurrences coloured with a touch of Javanese aesthetics, other events were organised from scratch as intentionally and thoroughly “secular”. Such events reproduced a discursive and material blend in the association that triangulated Buddhism, Surjosari and the various takes on Javanese tradition. For the format and the network of people involved, this class of events is the most straightforward contribution of the activities of Pemuda Buddhis. Within the last dry season before the 2020 pandemic outbreak, Pemuda Buddhis managed to organise two such larger-scale events, “Java Connections” (in English in the original) and a second one named simply Festival Surjosari in early December. This kind of events built on the positive experience of 2019’s *nyadran* and attempted to replicate and amplify its atmosphere, while appealing to a large inter-regional audience. I will pause on the Java Conention festival in order to give a sense of the elements mobilised by such events and the importance for the representations conveyed in and about Surjosari.

4.1. The preparation of a “Javanese Buddhist” event

The organisation of the Java Connections cultural festival was by far the most resource-consuming event that Pemuda Buddhis had managed to put together. If the *nyadran* run a couple of months earlier required more than a few organisational efforts, the festival had also financial costs that could not be borne by an individual household nor compensated by a group of ticket-paying participants. Differently from Festival Surjosari, which was to follow soon after and that reproduced the live-in formula of *Nyadran Perdamaian*, the Java Connection event was meant to be entirely for free and condensed into one evening. Subagyo’s house was once again the centre of several gatherings in which some of the activists brainstormed over organisational aspects. The editorial activities of Subagyo for Buddhazine had intensified in the course of the previous months. The magazine seemed particularly keen on pitches documenting “ethnic” Indonesian Buddhist settings and the average thematic coverage of the platform had shifted as a consequence, departing from its main urban focus and “lifestyle” sort of contributions. The bond between Subagyo and Buddhazine had grown in such a way that, now not only was Subagyo’s house a branch office of the magazine, but editors of the Jakarta-based platform (who were a miscellaneous group of Buddhist college graduates, industrial philanthropists, young activists and academics) became frequent visitors to the Temanggung’s Buddhist communities, either in concerted excursions or simply as private guests.

Over one such meetings at Subagyo’s place, Leo, an editor from Jakarta, suggested that Subagyo could apply to the pool of funds which the magazine had collected through donations. It was enough to submit a short form stating the expected costs of the event. The application went through quickly and Subagyo received the equivalent of approximately 500€ for the festival’s organisation.

Unlike the organisation of events connected to rituals of Javanist or Buddhist mould, Java Connections was the exclusive result of ideas and personal networks emanating from the Pemuda Buddhis youth. As an individual involved, albeit as an amateur, in artistic collectives, Sura was the most proactive in reaching out to acquaintances who could provide suitable names to be hosted for the festival. By early July a schedule was finalised, re-inviting some of the guests who joined the *nyadran* program, like the archaeologist and Javanese palaeographer Goenawan, but investing especially in entertainment and performative arts. Among the invited groups there were

Astakosala Volk, a large folk-rock band from Solo singing entirely in Old Javanese, two bands from Jakarta – one of which proposed a blend of pop with a crossover of Javanese-Sundanese traditional instruments – and a young songwriter from Bali.



Figure 20. Subagyo's living room and Buddhazine office in 2019, the day before "Java Connections"

The scope of the festival, or at least the outer picture that Subagyo and the other activists attempted to project, is perhaps best summarised by the short description that they submitted for the fund request⁵⁷:

"Java connections" constitutes a theme which has been developed together with Buddhazine. It is a theme which is meant to discuss the manner in which the Javanese man (*manusia Jawa*) who lives in the contemporary world can carry on without letting go of the roots of culture (*akar budaya*) while still being able to adapt to the age of modernity. The event is going to be filled with a section of live music and sessions of informal discussions, so that each participant will be able to get infused with the wisdom pearl which is being/becoming (*menjadi*) Javanese.

⁵⁷ I was forwarded the PDF file of the fund request by Subagyo.

Although filled with evocative images, the description is quite telling of the desire to engage a certain vision of Javanese-ness which is detached from the onset of modernity. The community of Surjosari at large is positioned with a certain ambiguity in respect to this tension. On the one hand, the “traditional” profile of the village (agricultural, remote, “Javanese” in respect to speech and etiquette) is what propelled and motivated the initial efforts of the Pemuda Buddhis main activists at shaping a distinct Javanese Buddhism in the area. On the other hand, events such as Java Connections predicated (“infused”) back to the villagers more precise ideas of tradition and historical narratives filtered through the category of culture.



Figure 21. “Java Connections” digital flyer.

The idea of traditional Javanese culture promoted with the Java Connection event was also conveyed through the poster of the festival that was circulated mostly through social media (Figure 21). The main element was a mixed formation bearing the contours of a guitar player in a sitting crosslegged position (*sila*), but it was filled with the features of a mountain, lush at the base and culminating in a bare rocky head at the top. A blue-hued god in ancient Javanese attire controlled the reins of a horse (Krishna? A *jathilan* play?) as the clouds dispersed over the figure.

The flyer condensed visually the notion of classical Java which, in many conversations, was located in its purest form in the Majapahit era. For this reason, it was a notion that remained porous in respect to Hindu forms of representation (we may recall that Majapahit was in fact predominantly influenced by Shaivism and Vaishnavism, see chapter II). This was manifested in the visual features of the leaflet, but also in the inclusion in the program of a Hindu Balinese musician.

4.2. Borobudur and Majapahit: interpretations of Surjosari's Buddhism

The involvement of Surjosari's residents was this time kept to a minimum although everyone I talked to in the village seemed very keen on celebrating some notion of Javanese culture. Subagyo's house was by far the busiest quarter of the village that weekend. The morning of the event, Metta and two other women kept themselves occupied in the kitchen the entire time, preparing food for the musicians and the other guests who killed time or napped around the house before and after the event. By midday over thirty people had already reached Subagyo's house and were hanging out with each other. A large group of young people hailed from a Jakartan Buddhist association and were all in blue attire. Isabelle, a French poetess and retired academic in her sixties who resided in Yogyakarta and whom I encountered already at the *Nyadran perdamaian* ceremony, was also included in the sequence of speeches of the event and was spending the morning in the kitchen chatting with the other women.

Before lunchtime, I talked briefly with Isabelle and Subagyo. Perhaps because of the common background motives that guided us to Surjosari on that very day, the topic of the conversation drifted quickly towards Surjosari and Buddhism. Isabelle was an enthusiast of Javanese court literature and a Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioner (she spent several hours a day during her stay in Surjosari meditating in her room). When she found through her network about the Buddhist *umat* in the Tamanggung highlands she admitted she was positively surprised to find communities in central Java who "still" practiced Buddhism and perpetuated the tradition of Borobudur. The Java Connection event was the third occasion in which she made the trip up to Surjosari. She enquired Subagyo on the state of other similar communities elsewhere in Java. He answered that Surjosari area was one of the very few to have a Buddhist majority. Outside of Java, Subagyo added, another rural community with Buddhism as a majority affiliation existed also in

Lombok. However, he said that, unlike in Temanggung, they were not “oriented towards Majapahit”.

Several other groups of people, especially youngsters, would gather in the following hours from various districts, although predominantly from Central and West Java’s main cities. That afternoon, I interacted extensively with the Solonese Astakosala musicians who were among the performers in the Java Connection event, especially with their singer Dodo. I expected that the our main point of commonality would be our shared knowledge of the Solo artistic milieu, as I had previously spent a period in that city learning some basics of *karawitan* (the gamelan music variety taught and performed in the area). Instead, it was my area of origin that interested him and relaxed the interaction into a friendly talk. As I zoomed in repeatedly on my phone device to locate my family’s place of origin, Dodo grew increasingly amused. When I finally tapped on Matino (my birthplace), he showed the map around the room, to the other band members, and they concluded delighted that I was, too, a villager (*wong deso*) like them, a half-ironic address form they would use towards me for the rest of their time in Surjosari.

This brief episode was interesting not only for being a small-scale instance of finding myself positioned in a specific way within a local web of representation, but rather for the fact that *wong deso* seemed to be a repository for a number of positive and desirable qualities. Curiously, the qualities of “being from the village” were characteristics and associations that my Astakosala interlocutors themselves weren’t born with – they all grew up in urban contexts. Nevertheless, they tried to embody the imaginaries associated with being *wong deso* in their conduct: from the attire they donned on- and off-stage to the types of cigarettes they smoked to the figures of speech used in conversation and in formal artistic performance.

Dodo gave me his own version of the religious history of Surjosari. According to him, “before” (*dulu*) all the inhabitants of the Temanggung slopes practised a form of Buddhojawi Wisnu, a syncretic movement born and popularised in East Java in the 1930s. Subsequently, with the New Order, as each citizen was required to subscribe to only one formal religion, they ended up opting for Buddhism. The Buddhojawi Wisnu experiment was the first and most explicit aspiration to bring back to life the religiosity of Majapahit. The conflation of that short-lived movement with the religious life of the Surjosari farmers, which is also occasionally glossed as a revival of Majapahit’s grandeur, seemed to Dodo a coherent and self-evident interpretation.

Just turned thirty, Dodo was born in a “mixed household”, in that his family was half Catholic, half Buddhist and even included (he admitted this in a whisper) a Muslim grandfather. However,

he acknowledged the fluidity of actual religious practice and, at the end of the day, he preferred to identify as a *kejawan*, the syncretist movement of Javanese mysticism, Islam and dharmic concepts. The Astakosala project, he said, was his own way to practice Javanese religiosity, in a language, Old Javanese, that he found himself constantly in the process of learning and perfecting.

4.3. Java Connections. A cultural festival in rural Temanggung.

The stage for the Java Connection event was set up in the open field at the western edge of the village, oriented towards the path downhill to Surjosari's *pendhapa* and the vihara, so that the spectators had the mountain slope as a constant background throughout the performance. The stage itself was a large but relatively low draped platform, with several massive speakers at the sides and a console table with control panels to the side, on the ground level. At sunset, a mountain-shaped row of bamboo poles holding a series of torches was lit behind the stage, while the speakers were topped with conic willow-braided baskets, commonly associated with traditional methods of rice cooking. By the starting time of the event, after dusk, about two hundred people were already gathered. Some were sitting on the ground, on a large mat right at the base of the stage – a position largely occupied, as I found out later, by invited guests such as the district's governor and several village heads – others simply standing behind and, as time elapsed, virtually stepping on every available gap in the pitch and the fields.

The only overtly religious element of the event's visual setting, notably a quintessentially Javanese one, was a tray with three glasses of tea and a bunch of incense sticks placed in a corner of the stage, in the manner of a modern *wayang* performance. The entire event however might be read as an attempt at essentialising a certain scholarly vision of what authentic Javanese religiosity is, which branches out to global Buddhism as much as to fragments of modern Hinduism. That is, as close as possible to what a reconstruction of Majapahit's Hindu-Buddhist era (*zaman Budha*) might be. The first performer, a young songwriter from Bali, presented himself almost self-evidently as a Hindu and addressed the local residents in the audience with a "We are the same", equating thus the two religious realities.

4.3.1. *Lubdhaka and the Borobudur panels*

Astakosala Volk followed right after with a longer performance. While the first song was their own creation, the second one was directly inspired by a *kakawin*, or a poem in Old Javanese. The song narrated the story of Lubdhaka, the protagonist of the Siwaratrikalpa text written by Majapahit-era author Mpu Tanakung. The poem was constructed as a lesson on ethics and developed the deeds of “immoral” Lubdhaka, a hunter indifferent towards, or perhaps unaware of, the dharma. Partly due to the bad karma accumulated, he struggled to find prey. Upon the night of the rite of Shiva, an occurrence associated with Shiva’s performing of the “cosmic dance” and celebrated as Maha Shivaratri in many Hindu communities, including Bali, Lubdhaka climbed onto a tree by a water pool. He began tearing off all of the leaves and he continued to do so until dawn. As it turned out, by doing this Lubdhaka had unintentionally performed a ritual known as “Shiva rite”, which was especially powerful as that very night was the recurrence of Maha Shivaratri. However, neither the *kakawin*, nor its references over the evening of the festival went into further details about their version of the Maha Shivaratri rite. Unwittingly anyway, Lubdhaka had shifted his destiny. Summoned Shiva took compassion on him and arranged for his servants (the *ganas*) to take Lubdhaka “to Shiva’s abode”, sparing him the otherwise unavoidable subjugation to Yama’s hell⁵⁸.

The Lubdhaka-themed song allowed for a smooth transit into a lecture-like part of the evening. The academic and archaeologist Goenawan began his speech by elaborating further on the Siwaratrikalpa text and breaking down to the public the “teachings” of the story. While the overarching message of the narrative seemed evident – paying homage to Shiva as a value in itself, without the necessity of any prior knowledge – the text offered on another level some degree of ethical indeterminacy. “We cannot know ultimately whether what we are doing right now is a good thing or a bad thing”, said Goenawan. The archaeologist brought back the *kakawin* to its quality as a story and exalted the practice of bedtime storytelling, particularly of those stories relating to “our Javanese ancestors”. However, he reproached the fact that such practices were on the wane in contemporary Java. According to him, that was a pity principally because Javanese culture possessed a wealth of such narrations which were also a way to connect with the forefathers.

⁵⁸ The original story stages a series of confrontations between Shiva and his *ganas* and between these and Yama. For thorough explorations of the Siwaratrikalpa *kakawin* see Haendel 2012 and Echols et al. 1972.

Although statements of this kind issued from the discussion over stories of the Old Javanese *kakawin*, as such relatable to the fluid pantheon of the Majapahit era, the speech drifted back to a more specific exaltation of narratives and textual evidence bearing more directly a Buddhist flavour. Goenawan recommended the audience to make use especially of the Jataka tales as bedtime stories. Jatakas are a corpus of vernacular stories originated in the larger oral history of South and Western Asia as well as sharing a substantial pool of motifs with the Sanskritic “Panchatantra” (Edgerton 1924). Nonetheless, the tales have been historically also standardised in Theravāda Buddhism as a specific section of the Pāli canon and are commonly associated with Buddhist moral lessons or fables about the Buddha’s previous lives (see Appleton 2016, but also Warder 2000 for a wider historical contextualisation).

Goenawan pointed by way of example to one story that has been traditionally encompassed in the Jataka corpus and which trails have a tangible equivalent in the Javanese material heritage. He was referring to the story of “the tortoise and the birds” (*Seekor kura-kura dan para burung*), a fable in which a tortoise is transported to the Himalayas by two flying geese. The birds carried the reptile by a wooden stick which the tortoise kept hold with its mouth, making it impossible for the tortoise, a notorious chatterer in the tale, to utter a single word. The story invariably ended with the tortoise not being able to keep quiet for the entirety of the journey and thus plummeting into the void to its own death. The details of the fatal accident and its aftermath are given various renditions.

Goenawan narrated the story according to a bas relief that could be seen and touched in an outer stone next to the staircase of the Candi Mendut, one of the UNESCO andesite stone temples of the Borobudur complex. The Mendut relief associated with the Jataka story had the tortoise instigated by a group of people below. After replying to their provocation, it eventually fell among them, smashed open and eventually eaten by the humans. The “moral teaching” of the story was less straightforward than the Lubdhaka *kakawin*, although for Goenawan it pointed to the same truth. That is, the necessity of adhering to what was widely considered to be “the good” and was recognised as true by the ancestors. Departing from it would inexorably lead one astray.

4.3.2. *The Serat Gatholoco as Javanese (Buddhist) heritage*

By the time Goenawan approached the end of his speech (which he performed simply cross-legged on the stage), at about nine in the evening, the audience grew in numbers and engagement, responding with laughters or absolute silence to the inputs received from the stage. After the performance of another music band and of a comic duo, who mimicked the gestures and the dramatic code of a typical *wayang* satirical section, another lengthy speech was held by Isabelle. The writer delivered a talk that blended her life story with Javanese literary culture. Although she had been living in Java for over thirty years and had built a family with a man from the Yogyakarta area, her perspective as an “outsider” was foregrounded in several moments and gave a distinct tone to her talk about Javaneseness.

However, the entire speech of about twenty minutes was directly concerned with religion. Isabelle recollected a scene in her early days as a journalist in Indonesia, in which she met Mohammad Rasjidi, one of the first ministers of Religious Affairs in the country. Although he was a pious Muslim, with a degree obtained in Egypt, Isabelle recalled him handing over to her a copy of the *Serat Gatholoco*, a Middle Javanese text associated with esoteric teachings and linked, centuries later, to a whole mystical movement of the same name (Anderson 1981). A copy of the *Gatholoco* and a couple of interpretative booklets featured also prominently in Subagyo’s library. Isabelle went on narrating to the audience a summary of the text, amusing those present with the remark that Java was, indeed, “a strange yet unique country”. A brief recollection of the story is useful in order to understand the way in which its exegesis fits into the project of delivering a very specific version of Javaneseness and how historical narratives relate to the contemporary religiosity of the area.

Isabelle depicted Gatholoco as a young character of noble descent who was inclined towards mysticism and higher knowledge. He was ordered by his father to further his studies in order to gain access to the “science of the ultimate” (*ilmu sejati*) and he was sent to debate with three Islamic scholars, all bearing Arabic names (Abdul Jabar, Abdul Manab and Abdul Gharib). Gatholoco won the argument over the true meaning of what it meant to be a man of knowledge as well as over the spiritually clean/unclean (halal/haram) dichotomy. Therefore, he presented the three scholars with a riddle revolving around the *wayang* theatre and asked them which of the four elements was created first: the *wayang* as such, the puppeteer (*dbalang*), the lamp of the *wayang* stage or the background colour against which the *wayang* performance is staged. The scholars were unable to solve the riddle and pulled back.

Gatholoco went on wandering and reached a mountain top where he encountered an ascetic known by the name Dewi Perjiwati. Before actually debating with the hermit, he had to face a riddle given by the Dewi Perjiwati's pupils who lived nearby in the area. He solved it and was allowed to speak directly to the ascetic. Dewi Perjiwati asked Gatholoco about the central theme in the narration, that is the origin of things. Gatholoco needed to give an appropriate definition of the *syahadat* declaration of faith, as well as of the meaning of man and woman and "husband and wife", in the sense of participants in a sexual intercourse. If Gatholoco answered correctly, Dewi Perjiwati would take him as a husband, albeit reluctantly so as it seemed from the nasty comments given by the pupils. As soon as Gatholoco solved the riddle he was immediately thrown to the bottom of the cave where Dewi Perjiwati lived, and a fight issued between the two. The conflict, which was intellectual as much as it was an erotic one, ended when Dewi Perwijati gave birth to a child, who turned out to be conceived from the encounter with Gatholoco. The two eventually decided to instruct the son about the pillars of Islam.

The *Serat Gatholoco* is often perceived as controversial for the ambiguous status of Islam given within its narrative and Isabelle expressed surprise at the fact that she received the text from the then minister of Religious Affairs. While on the one hand Islam was in the story explicitly ruled out as a lesser knowledge (the three Koranic scholars being defeated by a young spokesperson of the Javanese aristocracy) on the other hand the ultimate teaching that is delivered after the conflictual encounter on the mountain top revolved around the pillars of Islam and the *syahadat*. Nonetheless, these were transmitted by an ascetic with a Javanese Hindu title (*demi*).

The significance of the story was declined in different ways in different contexts. For Isabelle, it emphasised the importance of the quest for knowledge, a theme in which she identified a parallel with the Buddha's own wandering among scholars and ascetics before reaching enlightenment. When we recollected the festival the day after with some of the residents, however, Rahayu, who already knew the outline of the story, highlighted the danger associated with the quest. For him, the core teaching was that, down the line, one would always be better off sticking to the eternal truth as transmitted by the ancestors, pointing at the same time to the stories of the Mendut's tortoise and Lubdhaka.

Isabelle continued her speech stressing the Buddhist elements that emanated, according to her, not only throughout Javanese literature but also in aspects of religion and society that were not outwardly "Buddhist". She found many traces of the terminology used by traditionalist Islamic schools, such as the Nahdatul Ulama, to be indicators of a Buddhist origin, such as the vocabulary for fasting and scholarly hierarchy. All the Javanese and Indonesian lexicon stemming

from *bud-*, moreover, was attributed to the Buddhist notion of *bodhi* so that the traditional Javanese and Sundanese name of Budiman meant something akin to the notion of *bodhisattva*. Therefore, Isabelle concluded that “Buddhism was very rooted in Java” and praised the Surjosari community, its lifestyle and religious orientation, for showcasing the qualities of a Borobudur that “from stone had turned into a living society”.



Figure 22. An afternoon rehearsal of *Astakosala*.

The closing of her speech focussed instead on her personal biography, how she grew increasingly intertwined with the religious world of Java and how it eventually became her home. She recounted how, before finally adhering to Tantric Buddhism, she was exposed to Javanism. She was introduced to all the spiritual places around the Merapi volcano by its gatekeeper, a man known by the honorific Mbah Maridjan. She meditated under the mountain’s sacred banyan tree under the supervision of the spiritual leader. Afterwards, she became interested in the later court literature of Solo, especially the *Serat Centhini* epic, a hefty body of texts narrating another spiritual journey at the times of Majapahit, which she rendered and compressed in a short volume recently published. The most notable character, for her, was not one of the three main protagonists, all

noble heirs like Gatholoco, but the wife of Amongraga, Ni Ken Tambangraras, who did not “pursue God”, but instead served and helped the husband and his affiliates to regain their alignment to the universal truth.

4.3.3. *A post-event ghost story*

The atmosphere was increasingly festive and the event dragged far into the night between comic segments and another long performance of the Astakosala Volk group. A large group of people, mostly youngsters, lingered by a large bonfire after the event was formally off. As it commonly happened in such nightly social circumstances, the topic of conversation drifted towards the storytelling of episodes involving the manifestation of ghostly entities (*cerita hantu-hantu*). Stories of this kind can be either accounts of personal experiences or reports of spooky affairs concerning others. Some of them had taken a life of their own and were recounted further as an established repertoire of the genre. Since I was about to leave Surjosari for a while two days later, I tended to spend more time with Subagyo. Several small groups of people chatted the night away over such stories and I listened to the accounts narrated in the group in which me and Subagyo found ourselves. The group was made up of some of the people that had hanged out around Subagyo’s house over those days – some of the artists invited and a couple of other young people from the Yogyakarta region.

Most of the stories followed a typical script which involved the apparition of ghosts and less identified entities in given locations, such as home windows, toilets and street corners. The majority of these manifestations does not entail a visual mediation but one or more auricular indications – clicks, taps, whispers, gusts of wind. The story Subagyo shared that evening however struck me for two facts. On the one hand it accompanied auditory signs with more diffused bodily sensations as well as a generic category of feeling (*rasa*), on the other hand it drew in extremely personal life events, such as the disappearance of his father. He recollected the day in which he, still a young kid, learned that his father had ventured in the afternoon into the forest near the place where they lived at that time, on the north coast of Java, only to never reappear again. The event left a mark on his life and elements of that tragic incident recurred frequently in many forms, from frightened dreams to troubled meditative states and spooky sensations creeping over him anytime he happened to be in forests. One of the most vivid scenes still came from an experience he had in the woods when he was younger, before leaving Jepara:

[...] Although it was still early in the afternoon, it was cloudy, and I soon felt as if all of a sudden night had fallen. I felt a very quiet hissing just behind me... the sound was not chasing after me, but it felt as if it emanated from my very spine. Right after I felt like a force was pulling my t-shirt first to the right and then to the left. I can't say why, but I understood that "it" wanted to drag me to its abode in the forest. I began to breath heavily and the breath felt like a wind that weighted and turned my stomach around. At the same time... I was still walking the entire time... the pressure in my spine felt unbearable and I perceived like a stone in my lower back. My thoughts were extremely bewildered.

The life event narrated by Subagyo referred to a specific occurrence he experienced in his adolescence, but encounters of the kind had recurred a few more times over the years. However, on the next occasions he felt relatively more equipped in handling the situation and the feeling never repeated with the same kind of intensity. He was sure that the entity with which his body interacted was not one from the generic classes of *bantu* to which most people referred to in such experiences. He cared to clarify too that it was definitely not a case of possession. It was instead most surely an encounter with the spirit of the dead, although he could not tell whether that was specifically the wandering spirit relating to this father. For the same reason, Subagyo said he was still extremely afraid of "the dead" and he visited cemeteries only in the company of other people. In other situations, however, he couldn't control his engagement with the inhuman presence and his reaction to it. This was the case, for instance, with meditation practice.

The narration of Subagyo in the context of *cerita bantu-bantu* wrapped up an evening in which the circulation of spiritual entities occupied a centre stage. Moreover, the genre of the stories echoed the references to supernatural occurrences that were conveyed throughout the evening. The transition between the dimension of the Javanese classical literature and the dimension of individual "ghostly stories" seemed particularly smooth and made the world of characters like Gatholoco and Lubdhaka appear somewhat near and relatable.

The account of the Java Connection evening shows how events can articulate specific visions of religious belonging also when they are modelled around the discursive platform of culture. The various moments of the festival filtered a distinctive version of Javanese tradition, manifested through some of the features that are perceived to be defining: the *wayang* repertoire, the classical literature, the styles of Javanese speech. Although presented as traits of culture, such features can hardly ever be severed from the realm of the religious. The religious level was intrinsic

in some of the stories narrated, but it was also made explicit through the various speeches and the many attempts at grounding the literary and archaeological references to Buddhism as the living religion of the area.

Events like Java Connections are not only important for their performative content, as speeches or artistic gigs, but also because they establish a specific sense of the collective. The quality of collective effervescence is a well-acknowledged dimension of religious rituals (Knottnerus 2014) and one of the classic interpretative strands in the anthropology of religion that followed the trails of Durkheim (see Throop and Laughlin 2002). However, the importance of taking into account a broader category of “events” lays in the fact that events highlight the role of different strands of social-cultural life in co-producing a religious world. They emphasise therefore the blurriness of the boundaries between the orbits of the religious and the non-religious.

An eventful revival

In this chapter we followed the multiple ways in which the processes of Javanisation and Buddhification connect in Surjosari. We followed this dynamic taking events and eventisation as the main ethnographic theme. Such events were either confined to Surjosari or included the surrounding hamlets, while having nonetheless the village as the main site or the organising unit for the event. The rites of passage of *gombak* and *tingkeban*, revitalised within different family settings and purposes, show how the conjunction is instantiated between contemporary Buddhism and the Javanese tradition on a formal ritual dimension. The eventisation of *nyadran* cemeterial rituals portrays a similar convergence, although on a different scale. The practice of communal ancestors recollection is reformulated as a part of a wider cultural event (*Nyadran perdamaian*) that, while keeping intact its religious significance, is revalorised as an instance of inter-religious conviviality and peacebuilding. At the same time, the activities and the representations circulating in the wider event inserted *nyadran* in a Buddhist frame and devised Surjosari as a site of Javanese authenticity. While departing from a thoroughly secular perspective, the Java Connections event celebrated Surjosari as a living example of the cultural and religious world of classical Java and posited a continuous lineage between the historical Buddhism of a heritage site like Borobudur and the living religion of the village.

These ethnographic scenes indicate also the great underlying diversity of discourse, understandings and embodied practices of what constitutes “Javanese religion” and what constitutes “Buddhism”. As suggested by the comments of the village elders and, on the other hand, Subagyo and Dodo, several strands of memories, experiences and patterns of knowledge diffusion are conflated into the category of Javanese-ness. Likewise, Buddhism does not enter the scene as a monolithic and neutral phenomenon, but it emerges as a stratifying body of linguistic traditions, bodily postures and aesthetic practices (we’ll see more on this point in the next chapter). Such diverse set of perspectives accommodates the scriptural worlds and the specific institutional histories of Theravāda Buddhism and of the Indonesian Buddhayāna movement, but also the range of less articulated modalities in which Buddhism has intersected local religious practices in the Javanese countryside. The multiple ways in which Buddhism is represented and talked about adds additional ramifications into different historical and political spheres. While perspectives such as Dodo’s give a distinct historical depth to the modern history of Buddhism in Java, inputs from Subagyo and Isabelle, instead, appeal to a more essentialised vision of Buddhism as a world religious tradition.

The practices that converge in the *gombak* and *tingkeban* rituals and in the *Nyadran Perdamaian* and Java Connections events make Javanese Buddhism a particularly tangible form of religious experience. Therefore, in this specific arrangement, Javanese Buddhism seems to emerge “really” as both a religious referent attached to an ethnic identity and a religious-ritual blend.

Chapter V

LITHIC HISTORIES. ALTARS AS VISUAL CULTURE IN CENTRAL JAVA

Aesthetic encounters

In this chapter, I shall focus on one of the main characteristics of the “revival in the revival” among Surjosari’s Buddhists: the establishment of front shrines and the popularisation of indoor altars. In the following pages, I will explore how these forms of material and visual practice weave together several issues. Some of these issues build upon a few aspects that I introduced in the previous chapters, such as the continuity posited with the religious world of classical Java and the intent of harnessing the *potensi wisata* (“tourist potential”) of Surjosari and the Temanggung highlands at large. However, the chapter investigates how both the historical trajectory traced between contemporary Buddhism and classical Java and the potential of tourist attractivity are condensed into the practice of Buddha altars. The attention is shifted therefore to altars and statues and the relationships they instantiate through their material and symbolic circulation.

I will start by introducing the context of Buddhist sculptures in contemporary Java with a scene from the Yogyakarta outskirts. This serves to contextualise the practice from a wider angle. Despite being a novel introduction in the Surjosari countryside, Buddhist iconographies in the form of sculptures are not a neutral form of representation in the public sphere in Java as they are charged with historical and religious significance beyond the confines of the Buddhist *umat*. Their more recent diffusion in the Surjosari area cannot be abstracted from this wider set of associations established also in non-Buddhist Javanese quarters. This is especially relevant since, until quite recently, the everyday religious and social-cultural reality of nominally Buddhist and non-Buddhist rural communities did not differ substantially.

The episode of the Buddha statue in the Bantul outskirts of Yogyakarta sums up two important elements that underlie the visual presence of Buddhist stone iconography at large. On the one hand, we find the reference to notions of heritage, especially to the Borobudur complex in the Magelang regency (located between Temanggung and Yogyakarta), a monument which is artistically remarkable precisely for its dark-stoned aesthetics. On the other hand, the episode relates to the religious history of contemporary Java and Indonesia, that is how the social presence

of statues experienced alternate fortunes with the changing religious landscape on the island through the 20th century.

The remaining sections of the chapter will return to the highlands of Surjosari and will follow the themes that emerged with the establishment of the altars and the statues. One of these themes is the introduction of new forms of sacred spaces. On the surface of it, they appear to constitute two distinct devotional sites. However, the chapter follows the inclusion of the shrines in dynamics of private/public expressions of religiosity, revealing their more complex nuances as sacred objects. A different but related theme is the adoption of shrines as elements of the village's landscape. In this modality, they become valued features of the village's scenery that combine with the other environmental changes in order to produce an attractive setting that could also herald tourist potential.

Both themes, the devotional dimension and the level of environmental pleasantness, can be brought together under the notion of aesthetics as a tool for analysis. I find the category of aesthetics useful for its double understanding. On the one hand, the motivations around the introduction of Buddhist statues in Surjosari mobilised the notion of aesthetics in its everyday semantics, that is as visually/sensorially pleasant features (Reckwitz et al. 2015). On the other hand, the inclusion of the statues and the shrines into specific private and collective relationships shows a level of aesthetic practice that concern the very act of perceiving (Meyer and van de Port 2018). Aesthetics are framed as a form of sensual mediation that contributes to defining a sense of the "really real" in the embodied life of religious practitioners. Objects, particularly sacred objects, are especially powerful participants in aesthetic practices, as they enter the material culture of a community and organise its visual field (Morgan 2012). In the case of Surjosari, their visual presence triggers specific embodied states, which help the figuration of Javanese Buddhism as a particularly real religious compass.

In the practices around shrines in Surjosari, these two dimensions of aesthetics are hard to separate. They show from another perspective how religious dynamics are weaved into processes that may not be strictly pertaining to religion, such as the preoccupations over environmental pleasantness or the wish for the implementation of a tourist economy. Ultimately, the introduction of statues and altars in Surjosari emphasise the inter-relatedness of material and discursive formations at large underlying the Buddhist religiosity of the villagers.

1. Buddhist statues in Java: stories and history

At the beginning of the previous chapter, I briefly sketched a set of changes that have occurred in Surjosari between my two stays in the village area, in 2017 and 2019. Many of these changes involved a concerted refurbishing of the public space and included infrastructural upgrades such as the installation of several public fountains, the clearing of the village's streets, the renovation of public venues such as the *pendhapa* and the village's main vihara and the overall adherence to principles that might be deemed "environmentally friendly". The refurbishing efforts originated from a mixture of resources. They were the result of a series of regional investments, to which villagers applied for major structural enhancements, but they included also a large number of private initiatives which were particularly noticeable in the verdant embellishment of the street-sides made up of individual gardening of plants and flowers. Therefore, the overall public space was noticeably different from the rougher and dusty appearance of two years before.

There was however more to this leafy turn in the village's aesthetics. The botanical work of the villagers was encompassed in a larger project that envisaged the implementation of notions of permaculture in the wider village area. Many ideas related to sustainability and permaculture had become common currency in the conversations of the residents. The village found itself imbricated in a regional network of permaculturalists and were periodically involved in exchanges and workshops. In late 2019, a regional workshop on permaculture was organised in Surjosari by a Semarang-based organisation. While the sustainability aspect seemed to be a major priority in the comments of the residents, occasionally linked to more general ideas of health and well-being (*sehat*), they commonly praised also the purely aesthetic side of the changes brought about in the village.

The rationalised, lush scenery that Surjosari displayed was in fact not only articulated through floral and horticultural introductions or modifications but was accompanied by the appearance, in 2018, of Buddhist garden shrines and altars. The statues and the manufactural details of the altarpieces were conceived explicitly as complementary to the aesthetic refurbishing of the village as the two aspects were almost always integrated. The ambivalent position of Surjosari's garden shrines as deliberate objects of aesthetics and at the same time inevitable signals of the villagers' religiosity entailed important interconnections and ramifications that are worth investigating.

1.1. Buddha sculptures in Muslim-majority Java

Buddhist statues in Java bear a distinct symbolism that relates them to discursive formations such as national and ethnic historicities as well as scholarly imaginaries. However, they also figure as material devices that carry a value for their thingness, that is for their very presence as objects and units of the landscape. Deliberate as it may appear, the practice of setting up garden shrines in Surjosari did not come out of a vacuum neither in its symbolic dimension nor in its physical circulation. In the first place, Buddhist iconographies in Java (and in Indonesia at large) relate oftentimes to the Borobudur complex in Central Java, a ninth century heritage site which is held as fundamental in the Javanese visual repertoire and for many constitutes its artistic zenith (recall chapter II). Whether by way of imitation, distancing or simple reference, Borobudur constitutes a dominant form of Buddhist representation in the country that is also mobilised for purposes other than the strictly religious one, as in tourist promotional material or national symbols.

At the same time, the monument does not exhaust the entirety of the visual forms that participate in contemporary Buddhist sculptural history. An assemblage of styles and visual threads have poured in for centuries on the island from influences as diverse as Bali, China and mainland Southeast Asia. With few exceptions, however, these latter iconographic styles are mostly confined to Buddhist temples and specific venues such as *klentengs*, cultural clubs or meditation centres. Conversely, stone statues and architectural styles that relate to the Borobudur monument populate various sections of the public space, either in the form of archaeological remnants of the more or less distant past or in the form of recent reproductions, for devotional or ornamental purposes.

The everyday proximity of Buddhist statues or Buddhist architectural conventions to the lives of ordinary Javanese neighbourhood across the island suggests a different angle of analysis as sculptures, in these contexts, are not necessarily charged with contemporary religious significance. This is especially obvious in Javanese neighbourhoods and spaces marked by some degree of Islamic socio-religious life – that is, the majority of them. In some of these contexts, heritage sculptural presence may evoke feelings of discomfort, as when the Borobudur complex itself became synonymous with land dispossession and legal litigations among the surrounding farming communities (Adhuri and Aji 2016). In other cases, however, their very presence participates in the aesthetic interactions that inform the broader visual life of many Javanese regardless of their formal religious affiliation. The fortunes of a stone Buddhist statue in Bantul, in the outer Yogyakarta region, is an example of these interactions outside of a Buddhist context.

The chapter proceeds ethnographically from an account of sculptural social history in non-Buddhist Central Java, in the outer Yogyakarta region. The outer regencies around Yogyakarta, especially to the north, are known as the “ring” in which most of the iconic Buddha statues in volcanic rock are manufactured today and sold throughout the country. The statues reproduce the stone Buddha sculptures of Borobudur, and some of the artisans of the area commonly help on restoration projects around the heritage monument. After that, we’ll trace the genesis of Surjosari’s shrines and the stories in which they become embedded.

1.2. “The sculpture that took the bullet instead of us”

I visited the neighbourhood in Bantul in 2019 during a stopover from the city of Yogyakarta. The encounter with a Buddhist statue in the neighbourhood where I stayed was completely fortuitous and I managed to figure out the history of the Buddha sculpture only after a lengthy inquire among the residents and the hawkers of the area. The outer regencies around Yogyakarta, especially to the north, are known as the “ring” in which most of the iconic Buddha statues in volcanic rock are manufactured today and sold throughout the country. The statues reproduce the stone Buddha sculptures of Borobudur, and some of the artisans of the area commonly help on restoration projects around the heritage monument. However, in the Bantul regency the practice of sculpture-making was on the wane, as the northern regencies, closer to Magelang and Borobudur, became more profitable sites for the economy of Buddha statues also for the increased traffic in domestic and foreign tourists.

The statue was an old volcanic-stone sculpture, hidden in the neighbourhood and cemented on a low bulwark made of the same rock. The wall circumscribed a yard that provided the entrance to two different households, one of which had its eastern side constructed just a few centimetres next to the statue. The area was particularly dense with religious references and worship sites. Just a few streets to the east there was a small yard with a few layers of bricks building up a towering structure that resembled a ruined *candi* (a pre-Islamic place of worship). The rocky compound was designated as a “Hindu” site and was still visited by the few Hindu Javanese of the area. Just to the south, instead, there was a large Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) while two mosques featured equally distant east and west, one in traditional Javanese architectural fashion, the other one displaying decisively modern designs.

When I visited the neighbourhood, the statue appeared as if decapitated and it had presumably been in this state for quite some time (Figure 23). This could be intuited from the layer of moss that covered the uneven upper end, the section where used to be the base of an anthropomorphic neck, just as it covered in patches the overall profile of the sculpture. Cross-legged, hands joined together in the lap and on a platform that resembled the classical artistic convention of the lotus flower, the main body of the statue did not stand out, aesthetically, as dramatically different from similar representations of Buddhist torsos in Java. Buddhas with the same *dhyani* mudra, sometimes identified as Amitabha (or *Amituofo* in the Chinese idioms spoken in Southeast Asia), make up the majority of the anthropomorphic sculptures in the Borobudur complex (Soediman 1973: 106). However, the base of the statue did not correspond to any of the styles employed in the sculptural representations of the Buddhas that presently compose the Borobudur stupa. They bore resemblance, instead, to much later artistic conventions that overlapped with East Javanese depictions. The statue, that is, seemed to have been manufactured with a modern reading in mind of the syncretic Majapahit religious world rather than a faithful reproduction of the style of Borobudur or other Buddhist aesthetics present in the region in the early 1900s.

My encounter with the statue was initially unanticipated since I only incidentally noticed it when I briefly overnights in the area and there seemed to be no one at that time dwelling in the two houses that encompassed it. After I spoke one evening with Rio, a middle-aged resident of the borough, I found out that the statue was classified as a “heritage object” by the regional office and that the Buddha recounted a considerably wider background about itself and the neighbourhood.

Rio declared himself a Muslim quite early in our conversation, although he made sure several times that I understood he was extremely against “the radical Muslims”, of which according to him there were many nowadays living in the area. Although he couldn’t tell for sure when the statue was erected, he seemed to remember that he was once told that must have been sometime in the 1920s. He was however much more confident with retelling the story circulating among the dwellers of those two houses:

When I was a kid, let’s say in the 1970s... but it was like that pretty much until the 1990s, the two houses were occupied by two families. The statue looked exactly the way it looks today. Both husbands (“family heads”) died almost simultaneously and left two widows to look after their respective children.

The two ladies had very different personalities and even physical features. One was tall, sturdy, sometimes a bit rude in her expression (*kasar*), while the other was small, not very talkative, with a darker complexion, although she was always very kind to me and all the kids in the area. The two women lived more or less peacefully, but once they had an argument over one small thing and they stopped talking to each other for a long time. You know, neighbours... however, the children were always allowed to play in their houses and orchards regardless of that argument... at that time there used to be many trees around, mangoes and guavas. Finally, after three years of being “silent” (*diam-diam*) the women made up and became “good neighbours” again. Like their husbands, the women also died almost at the same time. One of the houses has been empty ever since, the other one is still occupied by one of the children, who has made many changes in the yard.

The main occupants, therefore, did not seem particularly concerned with the presence of the statue, according to Rio, but they weren't entirely indifferent either. They were both Muslim, but they never tried to remove it or alter it in any way. Instead, they occasionally left an offering of rice at its base on given days. While there might have been little analytical knowledge about the symbolism or the religious relevance of the figure, the man recollected a series of stories relating to the image and that accounted for the sculpture being in the state in which it is now. The statue was, allegedly, the centre of an important event that occurred in the 1940s and the entire neighbourhood was, in a very physical sense, “saved” by its presence.

[...] The head and part of the upper arm... you can see here [he touches the top of the sculpture] ... were destroyed by a Dutch squad. I was told that was 1948, the year of the second military aggression. It was full of patrolling soldiers in this area. One of the ways in which the Dutch kept the situation under control here was by simply firing their rifles around. Bullets ended up everywhere. The statue, which is made of volcanic rock (*batu gunung*, lit. “mountain stone”), was in fact beheaded by the Dutch bullets. Not only the statue of course. People were mutilated as well. I used to know a man in the neighbourhood, Pak Alif, who was only twenty-something at the time of the aggression. I remember him having his nose completely deformed... it was punctured by a flying bullet at that time. The Dutch were very insidious in this area because they were told that many [anti-colonial] youth activists resided around here. Some of those young activists were responsible for the dismantling of a bridge over the Opak river. That bridge was important because it made it possible for the Dutch troops to march from Yogyakarta to the south coast. So, they were particularly enraged at that. I think the statue is a reminder of that heroic event for the residents, but I feel it was also something of a “protector” for those who were fighting. Personally, I think the statue... sacrificed itself for us, like it

volunteered to save our life. I always think that if the bullets had not hit the statue they could have landed on an Indonesian fighter and kill him.



Figure 23: The Bantul Buddha

Rio regretted not asking more questions when he was younger to the survivors of those years, who could perhaps share something on the exact origins of the image. As far as he remembered, there hadn't been anyone paying homage or worshipping it for decades and there was never such a thing as a real cult around it. He said he was very familiar with the statue since he was a small kid, as he used to play around it all the time, although at that time he considered it nothing more than "regular stone". Regardless of the religious meanings, he still held it in high regard because it constituted a shred of evidence that the local youth was once brave enough to fight the Dutch

soldiers for the sake of Indonesian independence. He stressed the potency with which the stone of the statue was charged recollecting how he was once told that, after the event in 1948, the head of the Buddha was eventually thrown by the residents to the slope just south of the neighbourhood not in order to dispose of it, but because it was intended to protect in this way the entire area. He tried to look for it several times after he had learned about it but was never successful in retrieving it.

Regarding the religious aspect of the statue, Rio confessed that he had studied it over the years and had found online information about the Buddha and about the specific *mudra* depicted. He confirmed it must “definitely” be an Amitabha, not unlike those of Borobudur. However, the lack of Buddhist and Hindu communities in its proximity contributed for him to the neglect both physical and “spiritual” of the statue.

The statue is even less visible nowadays... In the past, when I was a kid, it was in plain sight from the street level. Later, they began building more densely in the neighbourhood and a grocery stand is usually placed in front of the yard... that is now you can easily pass by without noticing it. The descendants of the ladies who inhabited the houses back then have also little interest in it. Nonetheless, one of them... the one who runs the grocery business, actually has set up the stand right in correspondence to the statue because he said the statue hosts a *djin*... a grandparents *djin*. But it's a good spirit, because it protects him and the people around.

Because he felt that the statue was not seriously taken care of, a couple of years ago Rio notified the regional Heritage Conservation centre, who once a year came to check the state of the image. They had also advised the residents not to damage or sell the statue. Unfortunately, Rio concluded, one of the reasons why it was so difficult to gather information about the structure was the anti-communist coup. Many neighbourhood heads, normally the individuals who hold most of the “collective memory” around a given borough, were executed or made to disappear during the 1960s. Some of their families had fled the region while the few who remained refrained from recollecting anything relatable to the past⁵⁹. This was especially true for the religious past, since one of the long-term consequences of the coup was the intense islamisation of the area. This issued, on the one hand, the thick presence of Islamic worship and educational sites and on

⁵⁹ Joshua Oppenheimer has captured the distinct kind of trauma coated in silence that characterised post-1965 Indonesia in two acclaimed films, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014).

the other the reluctance of commenting on “less than proper” religious orientations, from a modernist Islamic perspective.

The story of Rio and of the decapitated Buddha statue in the Bantul neighbourhood is dense with themes that are worth pausing over and that in one form or another recur through this chapter. The statue’s stylistic bricolage – and its very placement, one may add – is telling of the specific religious consciousness circulating during the last decades of colonial Indonesia and afterwards. Moreover, the set of historical events and narrations with which the Buddha became subsequently caught up (the Dutch Second Aggression, the statue’s re-enchantment through Javanese-Islamic notions *djinn*, heritage policies of contemporary Indonesia) is an example of how different phenomena flow into each other – in a rhizomatic fashion, following Deleuze and Guattari (1986) – to produce relevant cultural practices such as statues and their social history. On another level, the engagement of the neighbourhood’s residents and of Rio himself in rapport to the image revealed the extent to which the sculpture has never been solely an inert element of adornment or a passive repository of symbolic relations. It co-participated instead in essential ways to the formation of meaningful human-inhuman relationships.

I will carry over this compresence between narration and materiality through the lens of Buddhist sculptural practices (though not exclusively) back to Surjosari. Although characterised by an overwhelming Buddhist majority, the historical background of the village was not thoroughly different from the outer Yogyakarta regencies. That is, it was marked by a fluid religious history that, while familiar with Buddhist iconographies, inflected those representations in a porous and shifting system of cosmologies and material practices. In the highland village, the recent custom of establishing wayside shrines and indoor and outdoor statues offers an opportunity to trace the way in which some versions of social history become distilled into aesthetic components in formal Buddhist terms. Such aesthetic features co-write, through sensual practices, the narratives that the villagers end up inhabiting.

2. Aesthetic practices in the Surjosari area

As we have seen when following the constructions of events and rituals in Surjosari, the preoccupation with religious revitalisation in rural Buddhist Java is always accompanied by the mobilisation of themes that are not directly connected with religion as such. In a general sense, the genesis of these projects was the expression of anxieties over a collective feeling of identity,

manifested also through the creation of Pemuda Buddhis. The convergence of these processes stirred a singular and selective reworking of Javanese ritual and artistic traits. In addition, this was paralleled by a sharp reorientation of the local Buddhist landscape towards a more standardised form that resonated predominantly with national and global Theravāda Buddhism. While the intersection of identitarian and religious matters occupied a central place in the changing landscape of villages like Surjosari, the issues at stake comprised economic concerns such as the material well-being of the farmers and the potentiality for the development of a leisure economy. Therefore, the kind of revitalisation that emerged is a confluence of multiple strands that are both religious and non-religious.

Pausing on Surjosari's shrines and the various connections they reveal shows this process clearly. At the same time, the attention is slightly shifted from a chief focus on narrative and acts of recuperating traditions (or "traditioning", Babadzan 2000; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2010), which we explored in the previous chapter, to pay attention instead to the relationship that comes into being between the residents and the material artifacts. This focus is relevant for understanding the full spectrum of the shared religious world of the villagers, which is not exhausted by the elements of discourse alone but comes out as embodied experiences too. The complex web of discourses coupled with the set of material assemblages which involve, among other things, sculptural devotionality, is what ultimately makes up a great slice of what we might call Surjosari Buddhism. In fact, while the origin of the statuary practices in the village may be considered a simple matter of spatial ornamentation, the shrines came to quickly constitute an integral part of the way the villagers represented themselves as a community.

2.1. The "atmospheric village"

The wayside altars in Surjosari were set up on the occasion of a regional competition, organised in February 2019 by the government of the Temanggung regency. The initiative was meant to allocate a small funding for the implementation of leisure infrastructure in the area. The competition involved a board of nominees appointed by the governor himself which was expected to tour among a selection of ten villages to assess the overall aesthetic impression of the given village and act as a panel of judges in small tournaments that took place among competing groups of villagers. The criteria revolved around an idea of beauty and pleasantness that was

expressed through a conception of “nice atmosphere” (*suasana indah*). The tournaments were ludic competitions that ranged from ability contests to culinary bake-offs.

Therefore, the shrines were set up by the few villagers who already owned a Buddha statue as a simple decorative feature in the context of the “nice atmosphere” encouraged by the competition. Within a few weeks from the application, however, approximately half of the households had a shrine in full display in their front yard. The shrines were manufactured by the villagers themselves, while the Buddhas were mostly purchased or acquired from an artisan in a nearby village. In any case, the statues were immediately regarded as important for the manner in which the villagers intended to present themselves to their district neighbours in the frame of the tournament. Rather than stressing a particular religious meaning, they were incorporated into a narrative of authentic and sustainable lifestyle. This intent was especially clear in the self-promotional video that Surjosari submitted for the competition (Figure 13).



Figure 24. *Worshipping by a black-painted stupa.*

The visual material uploaded by some of the competing villages other than Surjosari focused on the villagers’ comments on the peaceful nature of neighbourhood relations and tended to transmit a sense of calm and ordinary human-centred activities, such as cooking, going to the mosque or the sight of children attending elementary school. In sharp contrast to these images, Surjosari promotional clip evoked quite a different feeling. The video portrayed extended cuts of environmental landscapes, in which “wild” natural settings were juxtaposed to the lush and visibly

nursed home gardens. Its soundscape was assembled for the large part using elements that recalled a perceived old-fashioned way of life associated with rural Java: the sound of woodworking, the itinerant ice-cream cart chased by a group of laughing children or simply the sounds from the wind and insects emanating from the forest. The bucolic setting struck me for its discrepancy with the highly sophisticated shooting equipment with which Subagyo and a few of the villagers had prepared those very sounds for the clip.

Human presence in the film appeared only in the second half. The clip showcased people involved in three main businesses, that is the production of coffee beans with state-of-the-art roasting machinery, the composed devotional gestures of two residents in neat batik clothes towards the garden shrines and, the only real dialogue in the clip, a short conversation with Sumartono as a “village elder” narrating the importance of the hollow tree on the path to the waterfall for meditation but also a brief recollection of the history of Surjosari. Several close-ups on Buddha statues were interspersed throughout the film, which ended on an aerial view of working farmers. Although Surjosari did not win the competition (it came out second in the ranking), the event was commented on positively by the residents and the social media response was particularly warm as many users lauded the beauty and the feeling of a “real Java” that the village radiated.

2.2. Buddhist shrines and the articulation of a visual culture

The front shrines remained in place in all the households that set them up for the event. Moreover, over the following months, also those who did not initially build one started to adorn their yard with a shrine in one of the few artistic styles that began to constitute the standards. On the surface of it, this trend was hard to account for, if not through the lens of the overall environmental beautification of the village. Many comments suggested also this stream of motivations. For Adiarjo, a middle-aged man particularly active in village community affairs, the idea of setting up wayside altars was definitely a positive innovation and he saw it in continuity with the “long-term program” (*program jangka panjang*) that the village was trying to implement in order to be classified as a leisure destination (*dusun wisata*). The program⁶⁰ included also the implementation of environment-friendliness principles, for example the phasing out of plastic

⁶⁰ Many official and unofficial initiatives in Indonesia go under the generic “long-term” (*jangka panjang*) or “short-term” (*jangka pendek*) schemes. I wasn’t able to get from Adiarjo whether he referred to one of the official programs sponsored by the province or an informal concerted effort at improving the village living conditions.

use and also the assessment of the health conditions of the inhabitants (*program keluarga sehat*), with the steps needed for developing workshops for the general community and regular medical checks.

Landscaping efforts were already visible and appreciated by different kinds of people. After living for a few years in Jakarta, where she also graduated, 27 years old Wulan had just relocated back to the village, against her initial plans. She had done so solely based on the pleasantness of the environment and the “nice atmosphere” (*suasana indah*) in contrast to the hectic and anonymous life she said she was carrying out in the capital. She had followed through social media over the past two years the improvements that the village had undergone and, thanks to a job that she was able to perform remotely, eventually took the decision to move back to her birthplace. Marsudi, instead, a 25 years old resident, was particularly pleased with his shrine because of the visual effect that the statue created at night, especially on full moon evenings. He defined the scene as “highly instagrammable”.

Motivations such as these manage to give an idea of the extent to which outdoor statues and shrines figured as overt ornamental features that aided a feeling of visual and sensorial enjoyment. However, by lingering a bit longer over the villagers’ relationship with the shrines as well as the altars’ taxonomy we may discern how the statuary practices were also enveloped into the larger religious life that was being unpacked in Surjosari. Individual prayers, brief meditations but also the orientation of communal rituals towards the statues were all practices that emerged around the garden shrines soon after their appearance. This explicitly devotional rapport is not in contradiction with the statements above that confined the altars to merely decorative arrangements. They form together complementary scenes that shed light on the totality of the religious life in the village, where the sensory and imaginary fields are as relevant as the overt gestures of religiosity. The notion of aesthetic culture is useful in order to appreciate this relatedness.

Aesthetics is a polysemic category that I find important to retain, for the present purpose, in at least two of its major understandings. In the first place, the placing of altars as decorative and ornamental objects, both on the occasion of the regional contest and as regular neighbourhood adornments, was justified upon the self-evident qualities of beauty and decorum (*indah* or *keindahan*) that they were perceived to provide to the surroundings. In this “everyday” sense of the term (Burns Coleman 2018; Reckwitz et al. 2015), placed next to other features of the human-made and of the wider environment, from flower beds to the mountain landscape, the shrines figured as objects of sensorial gratification. However, in the second place, the care

and contemplation dedicated to them suggested that their relationship with the social domain extended clearly beyond the needs of self-advertisement of the village. As the ritual settings explored in the previous chapter showed – the offerings in preparation of the *gombak* ceremony and the orientation of the mid-pregnancy rites – altars succeeded as centrepieces of devotional practice too.

This last form of assimilation connects to another construction of aesthetics as a corporeal “science of perception and sensation” (Meyer & van de Port 2018: 20) that is ever-present in religious life (Meyer 2009). This perspective recovers thus a second understanding of aesthetics, in the Aristotelian notion as a primarily perceptual practice. Such notion transcends the exclusively expressive realm in which the concept is commonly applied in popular parlance, as Meyer and van de Port point out, and draws attention to the process by which the sensual mediation provided by aesthetic practices functions in establishing “a sense of really real”. Acknowledging the widely shared insight that much of what is important in life amounts to little more than a social construction (Taussig 1993), aesthetic practices are a privileged site in which the formation of a sense of the real emerges out of mere “faking it”, especially when matters of authenticity and traditioning around heritage object are scrutinised.

The relationship that Javanese Buddhists establish with objects, practices and narratives of deep time can be approached in these terms. Garden shrines and their quick incorporation into the religious repertoire of the villagers might be conveyed as an expression of aesthetic persuasion, therefore always already constructed but not, for this reason, less earnest. This point is elucidated by extending the analysis to the way in which altars came to co-inhabit the ordinary religiosity of the villagers.

2.3. Indoor and outdoor. The creation of new enchanted spaces

I anticipated in the previous section how garden shrines had been incorporated rather quickly into the devotional gestures and ritual life of the villagers. While this is perhaps not particularly bizarre given the iconographic continuity between the sculptures and the wide network of Buddha images circulating through the Buddhist world, I was at first surprised by the readiness with which the shrines were sacralised with a specific set of gestures. These ritual acts appeared progressively less deliberate once I started seeing them on a continuum with the parallel but less visible custom of arranging *indoor* altars, which Surjosari residents had been cultivating for the previous few years.

In a strictly religious sense, the most visible kind of innovation that emerged therefore was the creation of private Buddhist sacred spaces in the public eye, on an emerging indoor/outdoor ritual divide. Although it might be inferred that the wayside shrines only extended into public view a kind of private devotion developed indoor, for the residents of Surjosari the two settings had two distinct but complementary roles. Rather than a structural dichotomy, the indoor/outdoor distinction signalled a nuanced difference in devotionality and relationship with the shrines.

2.3.1. Indoor shrines as individual and communal devotion

The indoor home altars were never entirely private domains, in the sense of secluded spaces for individual or family-centred worship. We may recall the centrality of the shrines in the ritual scenes sketched in chapters III and IV. In those instances, the ritual sequence performed in the frame of Javanist rites of passage involved systematically one or more moments of communal prayer or chanting focussed on the home shrine, typically in the house of the family that hosted the event. In addition to these sporadic occurrences, an important part of the everyday religious life of the village revolved around regular communal worship at home. On a bi-weekly basis, one of the residents would host an evening ritual session in his or her household. The stages of the service did not differ substantially from regular collective worship at the local vihara, which is centred around Pāli invocations, meditation and chanting sections from the *Paritta Suci*. The atmosphere however tended to be less formal, as the session was usually opened by karaoke-style singing of Buddhist-themed songs (in Indonesian) and closed with extended moments of socialisation, with coffee and snacks.



Figure 25. Group worship at an indoor shrine.

The very existence of this type of regular informal worship sessions was the subject of a few conversations I had. According to Sumartono, these forms home worships were the legacy of the past, at a time when the village did not have yet its own vihara. Religious worship was simply performed in private homes and, since moments of sociality tended to be very few nowadays, the tradition was kept alive also after a vihara was eventually constructed and religious service had appeared in a more standardised form and in a dedicated setting. Many among the elders confirmed this version, although Hardi, a forty-five-year-old resident, added that the tradition of communal home worship was to be traced back to Javanist spirituality. Group readings, discussions and meditation used to be (and still are, though on a smaller scale) a common activity carried out in several strands of Javanism. As it was implied a few times over the conversations, this routine continued to be carried out also in Surjosari for many years well into the formal Buddhist turn of the village.

The important element to retain from these observations is the fact that devotional practices directed at indoor shrines were never fully private affairs but were regularly performed as communal forms of worship. Brief moments of group prayers were occasionally directed

towards the altars even on more casual get-togethers. The emerging indoor/outdoor demarcation, therefore, did not issue a neat private/public opposition for the reason that there was not an entirely private type of religious spaces to begin with. The different settings in which the altars were placed, nevertheless, did entail a few distinct features of religious practice. Indoor altars were the focus towards which individual meditations were oriented. Lisah, a woman in her late thirties, reported how the practice of sitting alone in meditation in front of her altar produced a feeling of “intense communion” with herself. Oftentimes she found herself concentrating on the whiteness of her statue and allowed the perceived purity of that dye to pervade her with those same qualities. It was for Lisah a much-cherished moment which she looked forward to every day. Like many other villagers, she would also read out loud sections of the *Paritta suci*, sometimes together with her husband but mostly on her own. Reading the scripture before the altar created a particular atmosphere that made her feel at ease with herself.

Every evening...around 8 PM, when my husband sits in the other room watching TV or is out chatting with other people (*ngomong-ngomong*), I light one of these yellow candles next to the Buddha. Immediately I start to feel different...like the statue looked at me and made my liver feel lighter and relaxed. Then I start reciting from the [*Paritta suci*] booklet. I like especially the sections about *metta*-giving...so that's often what I read. I feel like a consonance (*sesuai*) between the statue that looks at me and the part I recite.

Paritta recitations and meditation (exercises of mindfulness, *vipassana* or *metta*) were the most common practices that set the indoor shrines apart from the front ones. For the kind of devotional activities that circulated around them, indoor altars involved a quintessentially Buddhist form of relationship. Moreover, the comment of Lisah specified the degree to which Theravāda devotional features seeped into intimate religious practices, although they formed by no means the entirety of the possible ties that the villagers entertained with their altars. If the relationship with indoor shrines could be ascribed to Buddhist religiosity in a more or less strict sense, since many of the practices performed were taken from the repertoire of vihara communal worship, outdoor altars were charged with more ambivalent associations and joined in different kinds of stories.



Figure 26. An andesite-stone statuette, in a black-dyed clay perforated stupa.

2.3.2. The introduction of Buddhist front shrines in Surjosari

Naradi was one of the first to set up a shrine in front of his house before the custom was taken up by most of Surjosari's villagers. He associated the two altars with quite distinct rituals. He had built over time a strict worship schedule he performed by his wayside altar, at 6 AM and then at 7 PM. The ritual consisted mainly of a brief recitation in Pāli and then in Javanese, accompanied by the lighting of three incense sticks. However, he described his indoor devotion as more “complete”, as it included meditation and lengthier chanting from the *Paritta*. The two altars corresponded for him to two equally important forms of worship that weren't entirely overlapping, but it was the function of the incense, an element recurring in every talk about wayside shrines, that marked the outer ritual as substantially different from the indoor one. Many

residents took up the habit of incense burning before the shrines' statues for the simple and general feeling of peacefulness and sensorial pleasantness associated with the fragrance's emissions into the surroundings. For Naradi and a few other villagers of his age (late thirties to early forties), however, the burning of incense by the statues had also the function to communicate with the invisible entities that inhabited the area:

[...] It is also a matter of giving offerings. I believe there are other creatures that live around us. I mean... if you ask me, I wouldn't be able to exactly describe them, but I can sense that they exist, that is also what my father perceived. In a sense, it is also a way to connect and carry on with my ancestors' tradition. So... I give them this paramita offering (*dana paramita*). At least it makes me feel peaceful and reconciled (*adem*) and at the same time I reconnect with an ongoing tradition.

Residents like Naradi made use of the shrines in an admittedly crossover fashion. Beyond its exteriority as a fully Buddhist sculptural practice, the altar provided for him an occasion to reconnect with a set of beliefs and practices he was transmitted by his ancestors, both in the sense of actual kinship genealogy and as a more generic class of the village community "of the olden days". This was for him largely an inward and solitary practice, especially since nobody in his neighbourhood performed rituals of this kind in their yard. At the same time, Naradi commented on his ritual with the aid of standard Buddhist vocabulary, framing the act of offering to the invisible lifeforms of the area as an instance of *dana paramita*. While the two words exist independently in Indonesian (via Sanskrit loans) in a slightly different meaning, when used in combination they re-entered the language with a specific Theravādin connotation, that is the act of giving as a virtue in itself, which forms the first of ten prerequisites on the progression to bodhisattvahood⁶¹.

The occasion of the regional competition in 2018 brought about something of a snowball effect on the establishment of wayside shrines and a process of mutual imitation was triggered. Although the altars were undoubtedly perceived in their Buddhist-religious significance, a sense that the statues permeated the village with an aura of deep time was a firm conviction among many. If for people like Naradi this involved some notion of ancestry, for others this was rather

⁶¹ An enlightened individual who vows to help others on the same path. The other nine prerequisites are *silā* (morality), *nekkhamma* (renouncing material possessions), *pañña* (transcendental wisdom), *virīya* (exertion), *khanti* (endurance), *sacca pāramitā* (truth), *adḍhiṭṭhana* (determination), *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *upekkhā* (equanimity) (Dhammapala 1996).

a relationship with history as such. Hardi spoke about his and his neighbours' shrines in these terms:

[...] since there are shrines in front of the houses around here, it's almost like our village has returned to the days of old (*zaman dulu*) ... I mean the Hindu-Budha times... Majapahit. I decided to set up one [altar] myself in order to reinforce this feeling... to revive again the traditions of the times of old.

Two aspects were underpinned in comments like Hardi's. One was the centrality of the communitarian effort, for both its generative capacity and the specific efficacy to instil a feeling of historical depth, notably an idea of Majapahit religious culture. The second was the fact that the Buddha statues were essential in producing this vision, affording in this way a function that went well beyond the purpose of the statues as Buddhist worship devices in the modernist sense.

Statues were taken to provide a sense of "compact" community, in the self-aware words of Hardi. Compactness (*kekompakan*) was an informed motivation behind the decision to keep the shrines after the competition or to build one in its aftermaths. This winding idea of compactness was not merely conceptual (the wish to create a visually conformed and monolithic community) but it was a hunch, a "gut feeling" grounded in the devotional and embodied practices that were being established around the shrines. Like Hardi, also Lisah had established her front shrine not to her exclusive benefit but with the intention that also other villagers, upon passing by, could linger around her shrine and pay a quick gesture of devotion:

[...] the altar of course is not only for me. I like when the neighbours or other villagers stop by and bow down or do a sign of worship (*berpuja*). I have the feeling we're a Buddhist village... it motivates me and others to do the same. I actually do the same with the shrines of the others.

The sense of community, which the use of "compactness" evidently tried to capture, was pinned in the visual practice of seeing and, importantly, *being seen* around the performance of devotion through a common set of gestures, utterances and objects. The comment of Lisah resonates with what David Morgan, in his revisitation of Durkheim's totemism, defines as a communal gaze (Morgan 2012: 70), that is a historically developed routine of organising a visual field, in which a community sees itself through the physical act of worship, with all the elements this may involve,

including devotional items and the wider ecology. In a routine of seeing, the culture's two bodies (the physical-material and the social, in Morgan's words) are temporarily joined (2012: 3-28). The centrality of the notion of "visual field" and its organisation is particularly relevant in emerging religious domains like Surjosari. The embodied aspect of the devotional gestures really comes together when concomitant with a series of other elements in the field, like the statue and the immediate surrounding. Were the gestures (bows, prayers, offering, incense burning) to be performed in isolation from these elements, the perceived outcome would be of a different sort – perhaps still experienced as religiously cogent but not in the direction of "community" in the specific way envisioned by Hardi, Naradi, Lisah or Subagyo. The important role that non-human elements played in this frame surfaces with additional clarity when the characteristics of the statues were scrutinised.

2.4. Golden, white, black: a taxonomy of Buddha statues

Subagyo was one of the very last villagers to set up a front shrine, somewhat surprisingly given his status, in many respects, as the outpost of Surjosari's recent cultural life. He had pondered extensively over the decision of creating a wayside shrine. Subagyo was a relatively latecomer also in respect to indoor altars, as he acquired a statue as late as during the period of my first stay in Surjosari in 2017, when indoor statues had already been present in the houses of other villagers for some time. Before he got a statue that year, the only Buddhist non-textual devotional material in his house was a colourful poster of a Sakyamuni instructing a handful of disciples. He admitted that, although he was happy for the development of the "new" tradition and was actively mobilised to acquire some of the statues of the residents, he hesitated to install one himself because, since his house was regularly visited by friends and acquaintances of different faiths, he was afraid that having an altar in full display would make someone feel uneasy. After he eventually got a small stone statue in 2017, he placed it on a shelf above a flatiron, in a discreet corner of the house. He slowly began to decorate the shelf by adding a few flowers. When Subagyo acknowledged that the position of the statue did not provoke any particular reaction in his friends, he finally decided to build a proper altar and, a while later, a wayside shrine.

The sensitivity in regard to his visitors' religiosity was one of the motives behind Subagyo's hesitation. The second was the indecision concerning just what kind of statue to get and through what means was appropriate to obtain one. As I mentioned above, the statues

donning Surjosari's altars both indoor and outdoor came in a limited palette of iconographic styles. This variety was produced by the crossing of colours – black, golden, white or left undyed – and materials, mostly varieties of volcanic stone, gypsum and clay. Once again, Subagyo's preoccupation wasn't solely explained as a matter of ornamental aesthetics, but it implied the potential meanings and effects that a given style would manifest for the worshipper and his or her house. Subagyo understood that statues were not just neutral pieces of furniture and his hesitation was also due to the fact that he weighed all the options and their potentials. He resolved to obtain a clay one, glazed in white dye:

[...] I think this one is more suitable for an indoor environment. It transmits radiance and calm... I can focus on it. One in volcanic stone (*batu gunung*) ... like... is probably too strong (*kuat*). However, I do want to get one like that eventually.

The outward differences in the statues were for Subagyo no trivial matter. A statue dyed in white was perceived as more approachable, on an intimate level, as well as more suitable for meditation. This aspect resonated with Lisah's description of her indoor shrine and accounts for the general prevalence of these kinds of statues in indoor environments, also outside of Surjosari. Dark-stone statues – in gabbro-andesite or painted dark-grey so as to resemble it – were perceived as more powerful and potentially dangerous. The reluctance of Subagyo to obtain one in this format was possibly relatable also to this level, his discomfort with objects and situations that recall his nightmarish experiences with the wild and the transcendental (as in his account in chapter IV). When he made up his mind to set up a wayside shrine, therefore, he opted for another white-dye statue.

Nevertheless, black or dark-hued statues, in andesite stone real or mock, were desirable items and were especially sought after for outdoor placement. Both Hardi's and Naradi's were in this style, a detail that appealed to some notion of historical depth (Majapahit or the "time of the ancestors") all the more effective, also for the fact that the hue of the statues approximated more or less precisely the colour and texture of Borobudur. In more or less explicit ways, the placement of dark-stone statues produced the double effect of materialising the kind of specific historicity with which Borobudur was often collapsed and of shaping a religious community with a tone of authority and Buddhist authenticity, for Borobudur was also, squarely, a Buddhist symbol. This class of statues also exhibited the facial and bodily contours of the kind advocated by Soemitro

in his piece (recall chapter III) and which he connected with the physical qualities indicative of the Indonesian national character – proportionate, strong, broad-faced and with a gentle expression (Figure 26, 27).



Figure 27. An andesite-stone altar.

2.5. Golden statues as “signposts” of Theravādin networks

Whether it was for their intrinsic potency or for the narrative of communal history they were perceived to essentialise, dark-hued statues, mostly in real andesite, were also a popular choice for the main Buddha effigy in viharas throughout Java, including in the nearby village of Cemoro (see Figure 14). However, the temple in Surjosari displayed what I noticed to be the other major aesthetic strand in the sculptural practices of the village. It was a golden-painted statue, moulded

in copper (although the smaller ones of this kind could be either in copper or gypsum) and adorned on the side with two Borobudur-style stone stupas, which was the second most common sculptural artifact after Sakyamuni representations. This kind of statues was also associated with different physiognomic features in the depiction of the Buddha Sakyamuni, a style that recalled Thai artistic motifs – like slender bodily features, a higher *usnisa*⁶² and robes in sharp relief – and which was prominent in many temples around the country, notably Theravāda ones but not exclusively. In private shrines, a variation on these golden-style Buddhas was represented by statues with a smaller *usnisa* and broader facial features (Figure 28). It was in some respects a “hybrid” set between Thai artistic conventions and East Asian ones (Rowland 1963).

As we see, the statues circulating in the village showcased a taxonomy of styles that were telling of larger dynamics, both spiritual and interpersonal. For example, the two sculptural strands (golden and dark-stoned) corresponded to two forms of exchange and social networking. Almost all the golden-painted statues were donated in batches by a Jakarta-based Theravāda lay institution, Yayasan Dhammapala, an organisation which was centred, as is often the case, around a vihara of the same name. The donation was in this instance a one-way ethical gesture, with the residents not expected to reciprocate. The golden statues, which made up approximately a third of the statues placed in wayside shrines and in some few cases positioned on indoor altars, were brought to the villagers by the Dhammapala group on those occasions in which common religious initiatives were organised between Surjosari’s Buddhists and other regional and national Buddhist communities.

⁶² The “knot” on the top of the Buddha’s head, one of thirty-two signs of Buddhahood and a feature with a considerable history of artistic interpretations (Falk 2012; Lachman 2005).

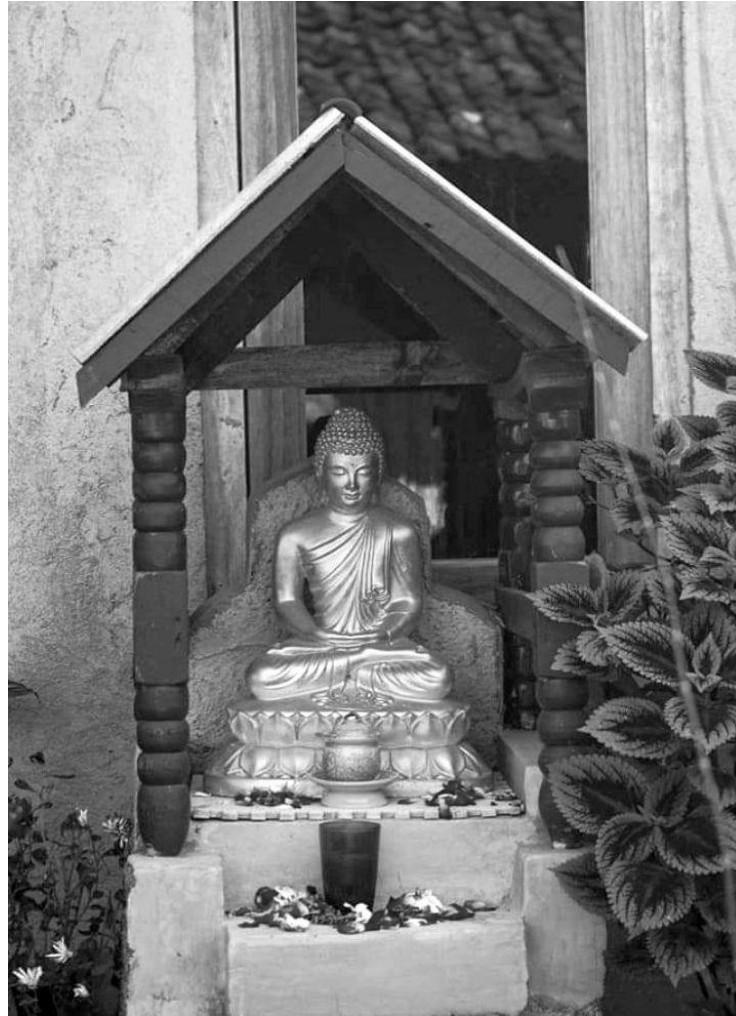


Figure 28. *A golden-dyed Buddha.*

For the donating association, the statues were conceived as a form of *dana* ethical exercise, a practice of giving that entailed a distinct form of reciprocation. In Buddhist theological terms, in fact, the reciprocity of these forms of donations does not lay in the binding obligation of the receiving side, but in a supernatural form of return, such as the accumulation of “merits” in reference to one’s karma (Ohnuma 2005). The effect that these forms of donations produced in the landscape of the village was nonetheless a further visual and material mark of the Theravādin culture which braided with increased intensity in the religious life of Surjosari. Simultaneously, the donated statues signified practically and symbolically the embeddedness of the village in the set of exchanges and ritual activity of Indonesian Theravāda Buddhism. The casual comments of the residents about the formal affiliation of the village’s Buddhism as being “Theravada Thailand” assumed therefore a fairly material evidence in the contours of the statues.

When compared to this set of statues, the stone sculptures implied instead a set of relations of a different sort. Only three residents had purchased them (at a price ranging from 100.000 to 150.000 IDR, between 6 and 8,50 Euros), all of them in the andesite variety and from producers of the Yogyakarta ring of “statue makers”. The rest of the residents had acquired instead them from a local artisan workshop about three kilometres downhill from the Surjosari slope. In this case, the statues were not fully subject to exchange as commodities, neither were the object of ritual giving in the form of donations. Instead, they entered ethical dynamics that run directly and personally between the villagers and the artisan.

2.6. Mulyono: stone statues as ethical exercises

As I mentioned on few occasions before, most of the real or mock stone statues in the village came from a specific sculptor who lived in a nearby hamlet from Surjosari. I met the artisan, Mulyono, on the morning in which Subagyo had finally decided to get a statue for his wayside altar. He contemplated the several sculptures in the laboratory, some finished some unfinished, scattered around the workshop, which was a vast and bright storage space serving also as living room for guests. The artworks that filled the space were of various kinds and sizes, ranging from 20cm tall statuettes to bulky larger-than-life sculptures. The overwhelming majority of the works were representations of full-bodied or head-only Sakyamuni, while a smaller number of artifacts consisted of other figures like anthropomorphic protectors in the guise of baby monks, but also one giant golden Ganesh. While Subagyo browsed among them before he joined us for coffee, I had a long conversation with Mulyono.

2.6.1. Mulyono and his “return” to Majapahit

A cheerful forty-year-old man known around as *abli patung* (statue craftsman or sculptor), Mulyono lived in the large household surrounded by the rocks of the slope and wild vegetation, together with his wife and his mother-in-law. He was the father of two daughters, both of whom had left the village. The younger of them was a student in one of the branches of STAB at Boyolali, a town west of Solo, while his eldest daughter worked in Semarang. Mulyono was very grateful that both his daughters had grown up to be “practitioners in the dharma” and was especially pleased that the younger one had chosen the theological curriculum at STAB, with in

mind the intention of eventually becoming a Buddhist nun. A portrait hung in the room, capturing the two girls at a still very young age, in traditional Javanese attire.

Mulyono himself had been an earnest Buddhist practitioner for several years, he confessed as the conversation drifted towards the religiosity of the villagers of the region. He was very happy that the villagers had taken up Buddhism “again” with conviction. Mulyono seemed particularly engaged in relating contemporary Buddhist practice with the history of Java and he saw his statues as contributing actively to this sense of revival. He framed contemporary Buddhism explicitly as the revitalisation of Majapahit and “Hindu Mataram”: “Buddhist was shunned by Islamisation for centuries... but now it’s back”, he repeated. His argument was always grounded in what for him was the evidence of stone both as carrier of religious history and as creative-artistic index:

[...] If you look around here, it’s full of remnants of Majapahit and Mataram... stones, parts of *candi* (temple ruins), lingam, statues, parts of big *senjata* (ritual sculptural objects connected to chakra cosmology). It’s enough to dig a little bit and something comes to the surface. I heard that now there are some young people who are taking care of that... it’s great that is happening, I think. Unfortunately, it’s difficult to take care of heritage objects, not only for many years people did not care, but they have also been depleted for so many years by looters and collectors... what I want to do is to “build on” (*membangun*) this tradition. I see my statues “as one” with our history.

As we can see, Mulyono described a historical trajectory from Majapahit and Mataram (interestingly, the two historical kingdoms were discussed almost interchangeably despite their different geographical and chronological domains, a pattern which we have seen also in chapter IV) and the current cultural life of Java and Temanggung. Unlike the narratives provided by many other Buddhists I happened to speak with, Mulyono grounded this kind of connection with the stone materiality of rocky remnants and the “everyday” objects of heritage that dotted the Javanese countryside, to which, he perceived, his stone artifacts were adding upon in a relationship of continuity.



Figure 29. Mulyono and Subagyo

Mulyono's reference to the engagement of young people in the recovering of the material evidence of pre-Islamic Java regarded the effort spent by some of the Pemuda Buddhis activists like Sura, who organised excursions through the regency with the intent of uncovering buried "heritage objects", in line with what few years back had been successfully accomplished with the Candi Lyangan in Wonosobo (as we saw in chapter III). However, such efforts were difficult to coordinate as they required the consultation and oftentimes the physical presence of local archaeologists, who would be supposed to join in from outside of the regency.

2.6.2. The aesthetic and exchange conventions of Mulyono's statues

The artifacts that Mulyono produced came in a few distinct styles and materials, like gypsum, clay and volcanic stones like gabbro and varieties of andesite, left bare or painted black, grey, white and (rarely) golden. The majority and allegedly the most in-demand as well as demanding were those made of stone. He said this while he showed me a giant Buddha head carved entirely in one

block of andesite. According to him that type of stone (*batu gunung*) was the finest and most appreciated, however he wasn't always able to work with it, because it required a considerable effort from his side and a certain engagement to find the ideal raw material for it around that altitude on the slope.

Most of the statues were completely hand-carved, although one typology of the small-sized Sakyamunis came in a near-identical output, as they were realised in clay, in a sturdy silicon mould. Mulyono stressed repeatedly that his work was thoroughly self-taught (*otodidak*), as he was not born into a family of artisans. For his artworks he took inspiration from examples taken from sculptures and decorative elements of Javanese temples and *candis*. Frequently his models came from inspiring statuary samples found on the internet. He showed to me his phone while he recounted how he realised his giant golden Ganesh solely by following the contours and the bodily features he found on an online picture of the deity.

Mulyono joked that, for the reason that he was an *otodidak* and not an artist by lineage or formal education, his Buddhas were far from flawless. However, his creations were charged with a different sort of quality that set them apart from most other stone statues that were produced, transacted or circulating in Java. They were imbued, in his terms, with the power of *bodhicitta*⁶³, and were interconnected with his personal religious practice. Such quality was not to be taken for granted and was indeed quite rare in a landscape of craftsmanship dominated by Muslim sculptors, such as those of the Yogyakarta “ring”, whose work was largely an economic activity like any other.

For Mulyono, carving and moulding the statues was a spiritual and ethical exercise. He did not produce them for sheer economic benefit (he currently received financial support from his eldest daughter) nor for the intentional merit-making purpose of *dana*. Mulyono rarely began a sculpture out of deliberate intentionality or exertion of will, but he endeavoured with a new sculptural item mostly upon solicited request, from an individual practitioner, a vihara or an association. The creative process, which could be as short as two days or as long as a couple of months, was accompanied all along and especially right before its commencement by a series of spiritual practices.

⁶³ A Buddhist notion referring to the desire to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all.

[...] whenever I receive an order and I decide to accept it, I have to meditate intensively. Meditating in the evening and at around midnight is especially beneficial [for the purpose]. I do this for all the statues, from the tiniest to the largest. My work then is done in full presence and performed constantly with the intention to spread loving-kindness... with *bodhicitta*... If we talk of *bodhicitta*, one must say that some statues are more demanding than others. When I have to start a statue from stone like this one [points to the giant stone Buddha-head] or that one [points to a stone-mould sitting Sakyamuni] in addition to meditation I have to fast for one whole day, before I can reach the right state to begin the job... I certainly wouldn't dare otherwise.

The creative process was for Mulyono intrinsically connected to his practice as a Buddhist. A typical work needed to be initiated by the specific request of a commissioner, who provided therefore the affordance for the spiritual and creative activity to begin. While all the statues were invested with the focussed intentionality of *bodhicitta*, some statues, notably the ones worked in stone, demanded a spiritual disposition of a different category. The material in which the sculptures would be carved constituted the spiritual margin that required ultimately a distinct religious approach. This disposition in respect to the material may have its origin in the more challenging labour that stone-carving entailed compared to raw materials such as clay. According to accounts like Mulyono's, however, this needed to be traced to the perceived intrinsic "powerfulness" of stone, recalling the hesitance of Subagyo in respect to purchasing a statue in dark stone, real or mock.

Once a statue (or a series of them, depending on the order) was completed, Mulyono did not expect a corresponding fee from the commissioner but the order was delivered entirely for free or, if anything, it was corresponded for an open donation of money – although he never accepted donations exceeding 100.000 IDR (6 Euros). This habit emphasised the religious and ethical dimension of the enterprise and avoided that his activity would turn into a merely lucrative job. Over the years, Mulyono had acquired some degree of expertise in the making of different styles of statues and had adapted his craft to suit different possible requests. Mostly he was given free rein over the representational features to be realised, although in some cases he received precise instructions on a desired set of elements the sculpture needed to display.



Figure 30. Buddhas in stone and in clay.



Figure 31: Subagyo's outdoor shrine

Overall Mulyono acknowledged that he had acquired quite a reputation in the domain of devotional craftsmanship and his creations were to be found in several temples in Central Java (in viharas in Semarang, Jepara, Mutilan and Boyolali) and as far as Bali. During my visit to his workshop, he pointed at two golden statues that had just been finished and ready to be delivered to the neighbouring island. Golden statues, he said, were especially on-demand in Bali. Furthermore, orders of this kind came increasingly from Theravāda temples, for which Mulyono forged statues in what he deemed the appropriate “Theravādin” feature, that is the cross-legged Sakyamuni with the robe in relief on one shoulder. He sculpted Buddhas of this type also in the stone variety, although he stated that the “original” Sakyamuni should be carved without the monastic robe and that was the type he was generally most inspired to forge.

On his phone, he showed me several other sculptural features he liked to represent, ranging from specific mudras of the Buddha to chakra symbolisms, connecting them to bas-reliefs from Borobudur and other established “heritage objects”. As our conversation came to a close, he offered to give me one of the smaller statues which were not crafted for any specific commissioner. Taken aback by the offer I refused, excusing myself on the ground of the impracticability of having to transport a stone statue across the continent, a decision I regretted later. Meanwhile, Subagyo too collected his Sakyamuni statue meant for his outdoor shrine. He

collected the statues without corresponding any sum of money. From his chat with Mulyono I gathered that he had informed the artisan about his wish to obtain a sculpture beforehand, but he had not expressed specific requirements as of the artistic features of the statue. He opted once again for a bright-dyed statue, perhaps not yet daring the intimate presence of a dark-hued and historically “deep” stone Buddha.

Buddha statues: an index of aesthetic rhizomes

In this chapter, we have seen the social dynamics around and about shrines in Surjosari. The introduction of Buddhist statues and shrines in the village enter a wider history of Buddhist representation in Java and reveal a complex set of relationships that I brought together as forms of “aesthetic practices”. The idea of aesthetic practice underscores the mobilisation of the statues for purposes that might be deemed ornamental or heralding potentials of tourist attractiveness. This aspect filtered from the context in which the villagers in Surjosari set up the first wayside shrines, upon the 2018 competition. However, the stories and the relationships that surround the Buddha statues reveal an additional level of aesthetic practice, as they become incorporated in gestures, sensations and imaginations that spill over into the domain of the religious. The sacralisation of the statues is particularly evident in the instances in which rituals and forms of devotion are oriented towards the shrines. Perspectives such as Lisa’s signal how the altars enter the embodied religious life also from a private, internalised point of view.

The statue’s features, materials and chromatic conventions are active participants in producing a form of religious ecology or inducing a spiritual disposition. In the case of Subagyo and Mulyono, the Buddhas’ colours and materials were not interchangeable characteristics, but were co-agents in shaping religious lifeforms. As such, they were taken up and approached seriously. The participation of the statues in the wider religious world echoed Latour’s (2007) figuration of human/material assemblages. In this sense, they are never only passive receivers of symbolic meanings bestowed by human actors but are powerful in their material presence. The hesitancy of Subagyo in respect to the acquisition of a statue and the differentiated approach of Mulyono towards the different kinds of sculptures show this level clearly. In both cases, the materiality of certain statues has specific implications. The potency of stone, particularly andesite,

appears such that even its resemblance by way of colouring and dying may be efficacious enough for the activation of powerful religious states.

Therefore, the energy of the lithic exceeded the solely functional role of statues as the repository of human-generated meanings, a level of experience that is nevertheless important and reiterated (Cooney 2020; Wang 2019; Doyle White 2016; Lopez 2013). Instead, the lithic itself, as Cohen (2015) devised with the expression “lithic enmeshment”, discloses in the process a degree of activity that is never entirely exhausted by the range of meanings that human actors confer upon it. Seen in this light, the claim to continuity between classical Java and contemporary religiosity that Naradi and Hardi put forward, might be less deliberate than it initially appears.

Taking into account the potency of stone statues as material actors acknowledges also episodes such as Rio’s story about the neighbourhood Buddha statue in Bantul. Although the significance of the sculpture was very fluidly articulated and did not figure in any way as an object of Buddhist devotion, the Buddha statue managed to retain nonetheless a vivid powerfulness. The statue “acted” as defender against the Dutch invasion and, over the decades, entered the local social world as protector or a spiritually charged device that is not entirely fathomable.

Ultimately, the chapter showed how Javanese Buddhism is configured on material relationships as much as it is conveyed by discursive practices. It also suggests how religious processes can never be severed by dynamics and preoccupations that take place in different spheres of the social-cultural world. As such, Javanese Buddhism at large comes out as an assemblage of multiple themes and does not crystallise as a linear expression of a single set of phenomena.

Chapter VI

OTHER REVIVALS. ENTREPRENEURIAL DHARMA IN URBAN JAVA.

Enterprise culture and Theravāda Buddhism in urban revivals

In this chapter I shift the attention to the role of youth organisations in conveying specific forms of religious practice and imaginaries. The activity of some of the youth groups I discuss ties in major ways Theravāda Buddhism with entrepreneurial vocabulary and ideas of individual success. Previously, we have seen how the activity of a youth organisation like Pemuda Buddhis was pivotal in shaping the social and religious life of the Buddhist villages in Temanggung. They acted as the vector for the circulation of both standardised forms of Theravāda Buddhist rituality and ideas relating to economic empowerment (such as the notions and practices around *potensi wisata*). However, from a wider perspective the dynamics that led to the activities of Pemuda Buddhis were not isolated. Youth organisations form an important aspect of sociality in Buddhism as in other religious domains in the country. Moreover, in recent years lay associations and activism at large have mushroomed within Buddhism in Indonesia. This is especially visible in the country's major cities. The fortune of this pattern of sociality, particularly the willingness to initiate formal lay organisations may also be seen as the product of a sweeping entrepreneurial ethos.

The focus of the chapter is therefore expanded to some of these city-based organisations. The aim is to show the embeddedness of (Theravāda) Buddhist forms of sociality with strands of entrepreneurial culture and prosperity narratives. As I recalled in chapter I, a connection between Theravāda Buddhism and entrepreneurialism was already postulated in the wake of Max Weber's *Protestan Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Based predominantly on theological considerations and historical developments in Sri Lanka, authors like Obeyesekere (1988) have gone as far as characterising the Theravāda orientation as a form of "Protestant Buddhism".

Entrepreneurial culture is defined along the cornerstones of the self-reliant individual, competition and meritocracy (Pfeilstetter 2022; see also Douglas 1992 for an earlier discussion on "enterprise culture" as a form of individualised value). While entrepreneurialism is sometimes cited as a hegemonic ethical-economic system, linked to the flows of global neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), it is reflected and embodied in micro-economic actors and

agencies which have consequences for the ordinary life of individuals and communities (Huang 2020; Freeman 2014). The initiatives and the engagement around coffee production of young residents like Sura in Temanggung (chapter III) was an example of such micro-economic entrepreneurial culture and its coupling with religious preoccupations. The implementation of *potensi wisata* through Buddhist and Javanese aesthetics (chapter IV and V) was another example, manifested moreover through practices that Comaroff and Comaroff dubbed as “ethno-preneurial” (2009).

Elements of the convergence between entrepreneurialism and Buddhism emerge also in this chapter, in the activities of the Jakarta-based organisation Buddhist Reborn. However, Pfeilstetter (2022; 2016) also indicates how the discursive dimension of entrepreneurial culture is a site of inquiry as crucial as the economic practices that are heralded. Notions and values that relate to entrepreneurialism and corporate culture are filtered through linguistic practices and bodily disposition that are not approached as conceptual building blocks but operate also and especially on a sensorial level, through what Schaefer (2015) called “affective modalities”. The vocabulary and the activities conveyed by the Theravāda Buddhist organisations we encounter in this chapter can be understood in this frame.

In the practices carried out by the youth organisations, entrepreneurialism is often joined by ideas of prosperity, intrinsically associated with Theravāda Buddhist organisational dynamics. Prosperity is a broad category that relates to wealth, good fortune and the attainment of happiness (Retsikas and Marsden 2018). In the anthropology of religion, prosperity has a sustained history in the study of African Charismatic churches (Lauterbach 2020; Comaroff and Comaroff 2004), although it is also an emerging field within the study of other religious spheres (Fomina 2020), including contemporary Buddhism (Borup 2018). Notions of prosperity are particularly central in contemporary religion as they often blur the boundaries between affluence understood in economic terms and wealth in a spiritual sense. In this chapter, prosperity emerges as one of the manifestations of the convergence between entrepreneurial culture and Buddhism and it is frequently expressed through the idea of “success” (*sukses*). This can be seen especially in the accounts of Buddhist Reborn, but it is also implicit in the references mobilised by PATRIA members.

A frequent platform for the circulation of entrepreneurial culture circulates is provided by events. As we have seen in chapter IV, eventisation is a prominent facet in the public expression of contemporary religiosity. This aspect is reiterated clearly in this chapter, particularly through the organisation of a “lay” Buddhist Waisak. However, the chapter also suggests how big

events are not only powerful in as much as they mobilise great amounts of resources and people (Müller 2015). Eventisation works also through the web of imaginaries that are evoked which are not necessarily commensurate to the given size of the event. In this sense, an event like a Waisak in Central Jakarta can have an amplified resonance by conjuring wider imaginaries, through distinct aesthetic choices and communication formats ranging from motivational speeches to stand-up comedy and pop-music concerts.

The chapter proceeds from the theme of youth activism, highlighting the role of Theravāda Buddhist vocabulary and forms of practice, but also the importance of internal, multi-directional mobility patterns for shaping the instauration of these forms of sociality. The main focus is shifted to the socialisation practices advanced by the youth organisations in Surabaya and Jakarta and how group-making techniques are forged through entrepreneurial vocabulary and imaginaries. The same focus animates the second part of the chapter, which discusses the establishment of Buddhist Reborn in Jakarta. The organisation moves from similar premises to the birth of Pemuda Buddhis, that is the willingness to counteract the perception of affiliational decline among Buddhists. However, the kind of activism of the Jakartan association has distinct traits and operates on a different scale, which includes the ability to organise a large Waisak event in the capital.

1. Theravāda organisations in Indonesia

Sangha Theravāda Indonesia (STI) was formally launched in 1976 with an official ceremony held in Vihara Tanah Putih in Semarang. The function was attended by a dozen Indonesian monks trained mainly in Myanmar, but also in Sri Lanka and Thailand. STI branched out quickly into associations that catered to specific social groups, such as women, workers or local communities linked to a specific vihara. Such sub-organisations, as well as the main monastic body of STI, established strong links to sister organisations in Theravāda-majority countries, especially Thailand. The emerging associationism in Indonesian Theravāda Buddhism might be also seen in fact in the orbit of the thriving internationalisation of the Thai *sangha*, trends that are in turn intertwined with the cosmopolitan ambitions of the Thai nation-state (Kitiarsa 2010; 2009).

The intercourse between the Thai Buddhist institutions and the emerging Indonesian *sangha* did not start out of a vacuum in 1976, however, but it was already fostered in the previous decade within the ecumenic picture of the Indonesian Buddhayāna movement. In 1966, in an

effort to invigorate the local monastic community, Ashin Jinarakkhita met in Bangkok the nineteenth supreme patriarch of the Thai *sangha*, Charern Suvaddhano and asked him to send a number of monks to help in the propagation of the dharma in Indonesia. When the Thai Ministry of Religious Affairs created in 1969 the TIDGA program (Institute of Dhammaduta Going Abroad) the project could be inaugurated within a legal and consistent framework. The missionary program was established within the state-sponsored Dhammayuttika order of the Thai *sangha*, an order that had a rich history of influence in the modern dynamics of Buddhism in Thailand's neighbouring countries, especially in Cambodia and Burma (Buswell and Lopez 2014; Harris 2001). The headquarters of Dhammayuttika have been historically located at the Wat Bowornives in Bangkok, where several Indonesian monks ordained, before it relocated to Wat Phrasri Mahathat Bangkok in 2016.

Beginning from the 1970s, TIDGA provided a precious platform for the Thai monastic network to disseminate worldwide. In a bulletin published in 2014, TIDGA claimed the successful establishment of monastic communities in several countries across Asia, Europe and the Americas, with a number of official temples affiliated with the Dhammayuttika lineage (Bauban 2021a and 2021b). While the number of Dhammayuttika temples were fewer than five in most countries where the order had a base, Indonesia stood out in the document with as many as 22 affiliated temples. Moreover, unlike the other locations in the list whose temples tended to cater to Thai nationals residing in the given country, the Indonesian counterpart was the only site, outside of Thailand, in which the TIDGA-ordained monastic community constituted the main form of religious authority for the local Buddhist population. This fact also implied that some type of patronage needed to come from local supporters and sponsors and not Thai expatriates (see Bauban 2021b).

2. PATRIA: the surge and the limits of a Theravāda youth project.

While the Buddhayāna movement that drove the early diffusion of Buddhism in Indonesia was an orientation loosely organised around the charismatic figure of Ashin Jinarakkhita, STI emerged very soon as a hard-wired web of micro-organisations that benefited from a favourable institutional constellation internally and internationally (recall chapter II). In spite of this fragmentation, the Indonesian Theravāda project seemed to retain the sense of a unitarian picture. Upon the ceremony for the anniversary of STI held in Malang in 2001, Ven. Dhammasubho expressed this unity with the picture of the family tree: “The Theravāda Youth (PATRIA) is the

child, Wandani (*Wanita Theravada Indonesia* – Indonesian Theravāda women association) is the mother, Magabudhi (*Majelis Agama Buddha Theravada Indonesia* – Board of Indonesian Theravāda Buddhists) is the father, while Indonesian *bhikkhus* (monks) are the uncles and mentors”⁶⁴.

The official youth branch of STI was inaugurated in 1995. Its legal name, *Pemuda Theravada Indonesia*, was fused into the acronym PATRIA, a name which reminisced nationalist sentiments linked directly to the founders of the Republic, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta. A Latin-derived archaicism, *patria* was a referent for national belonging in the vocabulary of de-colonising Indonesia and it was frequently used by Soekarno in public speeches as a surrogate for the Melayu *kebangsaan*. Moreover, Soekarno’s birthplace, the town of Blitar, is to this day known as *kota patria*. The launching event was organised by a cluster of young Buddhists who later constituted the Jakarta sub-branch of the association. The ceremony took place in the yard of the Theravādin vihara Mendut in Magelang, the closest worship facility to the Borobudur heritage complex. Since the 1980s, vihara Mendut also hosted one of the few monasteries in Java. In any case, the choice of its location for the inauguration of PATRIA signalled a complex relationship between Indonesian Theravāda Buddhism and the practices of heritagisation and the connection to “traditional” Javanese aesthetics.

2.1. Activism through entrepreneurialism. PATRIA’s group activities

From the start, PATRIA displayed a unique combination of corporate imaginaries, nationalist credo and charity activities. The aptitude for social activism was clear from its manifesto publicised in pamphlets and, later, on its official website. Apart from “increasing morality and belief in the *buddhadharma*”, PATRIA’s objective was:

[...] to play an active role in improving the quality of Buddhist HR (*sumber daya manusia*). To that goal, [PATRIA] aims at pursuing programs of

1. Training in leadership and organisation. These activities include PATRIA training (basic/intermediate/advanced); workshops and seminars on personality development; communication; entrepreneurship.
2. Social, cultural and sports programs. Such activities come under the umbrella network of “PATRIA Peduli” and involve activities of natural disaster assistance, anti-drug campaigns, social service and sports/art competitions.

⁶⁴ (in Indonesian) <http://www.dhammadakka.org/?channel=info&mode=detailartikel&id=837>

3. Fostering of self-sufficiency (*kemandirian*) and fundraising, especially in view of assuring the long-term continuity of the organisation's activities. Such projects include the organisation of seminars for the wider public, the commercialisation of Buddhist audio-visual material, the planning of guided tours and the setting up of market days.
4. Public information and publication, especially through the PATRIA magazine, website and social media outlets.⁶⁵

Therefore, the first point in PATRIA's statute sanctioned its determination to the training of a Buddhist leadership and enhancing organisational-communicational skills. The training was actualised in workshops and seminars that followed a progressive structure. Importantly, the activities that fell under this point were not confined to the education of religious leaders exclusively. The expertise acquired was meant to form Buddhist citizenry equipped with soft skills and know-how applicable also to the wider job market. The other major project in PATRIA's program was the pursuit of community-oriented events (*bakti sosial*) and was perhaps the most frequent and visible activity of the association. Initiatives of *bakti sosial*, often including donations of food, money and medical services, were performed on a regular basis (in some cases even weekly) in major urban areas like Jakarta and Surabaya and addressed poverty-stricken neighbourhoods and families, including non-Buddhist families. These initiatives increased dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic emergency⁶⁶.

2.1.1. *What makes Buddhist "youth"*

In the rich landscape of youth organisations in Indonesia, PATRIA was also one of the few that I was aware of in which the constituents of the category of "youth" were explicitly defined. The age group qualifying for PATRIA participation were individuals "of Theravāda orientation" between the age of sixteen and forty. However, in the everyday practices around the access to the organisation, one's educational background was oftentimes a defining factor. PATRIA members were on average university students and being in the age group corresponding to the span of higher education became a tacit or explicit expectation in order to be considered in the *pemuda* pool.

⁶⁵ PATRIA website (in Indonesian): <http://www.patria.or.id/about>

⁶⁶ *Tribun News*, initiative of *bakti sosial* in Makassar, Sulawesi (in Indonesian): <https://makassar.tribunnews.com/2020/06/09/patria-berbagi-bantu-warga-terdampak-covid-19>

This fact emerged clearly in 2015 on the occasion of the establishment of a new PATRIA section in Batu, East Java. One of the potential problems faced by the organisation's emissaries who hailed from sister groups from Surabaya and Malang was that the area lacked a substantial pool of youth qualifiable for membership. The organisers did not imply an absolute demographic shortage but the fact that most young people in town were "*remaja* from school, with barely a university student". The specific dynamics of inclusion (or exclusion) from PATRIA groups along formal educational lines in this context reflected the involvement of young people within temple activities at large. Youth classified as *remaja*, high school kids but also who had "not yet" enrol into a university degree, were given a dedicated section of the regular Sunday service, with classes and lectures given by *samanera* (temporary monks) or a lay Buddhist on topics ranging from social media usage to school performance. Individuals classifiable as *pemuda*, instead, while they might be of the same age as their *remaja* peers, participated in main temple worship and would sometimes even lead the service, in the absence of a monk.

2.1.2. *Joining a PATRIA branch*

When PATRIA deems an individual or, more commonly, a small group as suitable to the organisational requisites, the local branch of the organisation offers an introduction to new members typically in periodical events simply called Basic Training (in English). These events were carried out with the underlying idea to create a membership pool which, apart from participating in the communal activities of the local branch and the initiatives on a national level, was also capable of performing administrative and organisational tasks independently around the local vihara of the member's area of residence. One Basic Training I attended in November 2017 in Surabaya displayed what were the regular sessions included in such events. A Basic Training was commonly opened by a choral *namaskara* recitation in Pāli, followed by the singing of the organisation's official hymn, a anthem in the style of an Indonesian patriotic march⁶⁷.

The training featured micro workshops focussing on a range of topics that incorporated entrepreneurial language and reiterated various declinations of the idea of "success". The workshops on that occasion were: "Why is Buddhism different", "Achieve success with positive thinking", "Fundamental factors in a successful leadership", "Organisational ethics", "The

⁶⁷ The hymn can be listened to on the video channel of one of PATRIA's branches: <https://youtu.be/q3CVqqSXL0c>

concept of serving” and “Tips for managing an organisation”. Micro-lectures and workshops of this type were not unique to training programs, as they imbued many other activities of the organisation. However, in the context of a Basic Training these lectures were jointly performed with a set of recurring activities, such as “Man Big Leader” and “Patriot Dhamma”, which were meant to provide group-making strategies and that were devised in the same language of corporate icebreakers.

The latter of the two fixed activities, Patriot Dharma, invited the participants to apply one of the main tenets of modern Buddhist meditation, awareness, to chart and evaluate all sorts of interactions they had in that moment with the immediate surroundings. The evaluation needed to be carried out by following a grid of given couplings (in English in the original): dominance/challenge, revenue/counteraction and compliance/constraints. The outcome of activities of this kind had a mixed response among the participants, some of whom delivered only a fuzzy understanding of the task and of the arcane English vocabulary employed. However, the workshop managed to give an idea of the ways in which PATRIA events were intersected and shrouded with unordinary language resonating with corporate discourses also when carrying out relatively ordinary duties, like group-making activities.

2.2. The making of a “successful” self through Buddhist groups

Despite the occasional joint activities with different associations based in more remote regencies and the deliberate organisation of workcamps and events in rural settings, PATRIA remained a predominantly urban affair. Throughout Java, its regular religious initiatives like the weekly organisation of public mindfulness meditation sessions were customarily set up in cities such as Surabaya, Semarang, Malang and the greater Jakarta area. However, the prevalence of urban activism was not a coordinated choice but, rather, the outcome of the dynamics through which young individuals get to become members. The process leading to affiliation and the kind of practices (religious and non-religious) that were disseminated through the activities of PATRIA worked synergetically in shaping a distinct kind of Buddhist selfhood oriented. While the reliance on the incoming university student population connected necessarily the organisation to urban and suburban contexts, that is where most university campuses are located, the orientation of the youth members is affected, in turn, by the specific kind of cosmopolitan Theravāda practices that

radiated through the association. Two passing comments from senior members will illuminate this process.



Figure 32. A PATRIA “Basic Training”.

Looking back at his early engagement with Buddhist activism, Dhoni, 39 years old and one of the most prominent senior organisers in the East Javanese PATRIA, recalled how moving to Surabaya from his hometown near Probolinggo represented something of a paradigm shift in his religious experience.

Before coming here [to Surabaya] I used to be, you know, a *kelenteng* Buddhist. I used to go to the temple just like my father always did and performed the rituals to the deities. I became a “real Buddhist” (*Buddha sejati*) as I moved to enrol in a university course. In Ubaya⁶⁸ I networked with the Buddhist student association, that’s how I came to know about the correct way to practice Buddhism. Later, I entered PATRIA and I started attending their *Amedha*⁶⁹ program (meditation classes), which I continue

⁶⁸ One of Surabaya’s private universities.

⁶⁹ From Pāli *ā-medha*, literally “without intelligence” or “without sacrifice”, that is without the hindrance of conscious thought (Pāli Text Society’s Dictionary).

until today [we talk as we come out right from one of the *Amedha* sessions]. Since then, I know that if I want to get serious about my practice, that is the way.

[...]

We do *Amedha* since the beginning of PATRIA with Ko Yudha, a veteran of the *umat* in Surabaya. In the early days it was extremely popular, people had to sit in meditation outside of the temple [laughs]. But it was, you know, just sitting meditation, for as long as one... even up to two hours. Scanning of the body and awareness of breath, either to the nostrils or to the stomach. It was unlike what we just practised [in today's session], no walking meditation. Since Ko Yudha is no longer head of PATRIA I took on the responsibility to continue *Amedha* every week, but today the young are less perseverating... too many distractions perhaps! While, as you know, progresses in meditation can only be made with perseverance. One has to remain goal-oriented.

Amedha was a weekly meditation practice organised by PATRIA, largely following the mindfulness principles as popularised in most contemporary Theravāda institutions (as we reconstructed in chapter I). However, in the recollections of Dhoni, the earlier practice seemed to follow more closely the *vipassana* formula of body scanning and breath awareness, in accordance with the teachings of S. Goenka, its main proselytiser outside of the place of origin of the movement, late-colonial Burma. Instead, the meditation that Dhoni just led introduced elements such as walking/sitting alternation and sections of loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*). Both elements departed from the classic teachings of Goenka and had entered Theravāda lay meditation circuits in more recent years, from the recuperation of ideas from earlier movements in Myanmar but also from non-Theravāda traditions (Ly 2012; Fronsdal 1998). Importantly, Dhoni related a shift in his perception of and engagement with Buddhism upon his moving into a metropolitan university environment, a social context in which he apprehended the “correct way” of being a Buddhist, which was understood to be Theravādin.

Although departing from a different lifepath, the story of another senior member, Ariyanto, is noteworthy for the fact that it draws similar implications. Born in the highlands of Temanggung, Ariyanto worked today as a physiotherapist and served as the head of the Yogyakarta branch of PATRIA. He got involved in the Theravāda youth organisation as he moved to the Yogyakarta metropolitan area to the south in order to pursue his university studies.

When I entered a degree course at Gajah Mada University (UGM) there weren't yet many young people from my area applying for university or moving to the city for studies. Even fewer were the villagers (*wong deso*) who would start a career such as that of a physiotherapist. There wasn't also much Buddhist practice going on... we had only a Jinarakkhita's [Buddhayāna] temple in the village. I became a PATRIA

member when I enrolled in UGM and now I am both the head of the organisation and... I hope I don't sound too arrogant [laughs] also quite a successful doctor. I am the proof that even a villager can progress. I think it also has to do with karma. If we believe in karma, it means that the future can be changed... we create it starting from now. If we believe in karma, what you want to see tomorrow, you have to start acting in the here and now. If you want to look at your past it's enough to see how you are now, but if you want to see the future take a look at what you're working on right now. If you're not doing anything, nothing will be of your future (*tidak akan jadi apa-apa*). But if you work hard in this moment, your future will be bright and clear.



Figure 33. An Amedha meditation at PATRIA in Surabaya.

Just like Dhoni, also Ariyanto's engagement with Buddhism was shaped in important ways by his moving to a university environment, as he networked with fellow Buddhists and became involved in the activities of PATRIA. This formed not only a new interpersonal network for him but had also an impact on his life as a practising Buddhist, by moving from a less organised and inter-denominational domain such as Buddhayāna's into one defined by Theravādin approaches to knowledge, meditation and associations. Framed as a narrative of success, in the sense of achieving both religious and occupational progress, Ariyanto's short self-account merged with his definition of the workings of karma. In this way he seemed to bring onto a moral level both his activism and his leap from a low-income social background into the educated urban bourgeoisie. Karma, then, appeared to be a notion closely related to individualised self-reliance and industriousness.

Theravāda Buddhist organisations like PATRIA intersected the bulk of vocabulary, images and practices of entrepreneurialism on multiple occasions. For the most part, this was conveyed indirectly via linguistic practices and incorporated also via the concurrent dynamics of urbanisation and, in some cases, economic improvement. In other instances, the synergy between Theravāda Buddhism, corporate-entrepreneurial discourses and young people's mobility was elicited by the very programs of PATRIA.

2.3. *Saddha Perdana*: ritualising young Buddhists' mobility

As we have just seen, the emphasis on entrepreneurial language and the incorporation of notions of progress, understood in individual religio-economic terms, is diffused in some of the core activities of PATRIA. Conscious of the high dependence on the university population for the organisation's membership and the importance of non-religious programs, PATRIA affiliates had begun to actively recruit members directly on university campuses. Reaching out to fellow students of the same religious affiliation is typically a relatively straightforward task. Religious education is a study subject in most degree courses in Indonesia in public as in private institutions and most universities grant support for students' associations organised around religion. Often too, for those who are new to the urban environment of the campus, joining a faith-based community represents the first form of sociality encountered away from one's hometown.

The Surabaya branch of PATRIA had tried to put up preliminary meetings and introductory events for the students interested in joining the organisation directly on the city's

campuses over the 2009-2012 period. However, for the difficulty of obtaining adequate space, PATRIA began to move introductory and welcoming programs to viharas, after advertising such events on campus via flyers or shared via group chats on social networks.

The recruiting activity among university students goes under the Pāli-Indonesian name of *Saddha Perdana* (SAPER), the “first act of faith”, and usually consists of a yearly gathering in September where long-time activists and young newcomers socialise. Each year, the meeting has a different theme which brings together religious principles and convivial activities. Over the previous years, the themes bore titles such as “Beauty and the Beast”, “And What Should I do?” and “How Lucky I Am to Be a Buddhist”. In such events, the major focus was the socialisation of the students into a community whose common ground and identitarian trope is the affiliation to the Buddhist *umat*, although the specific Buddhist background of the incoming students may not always be Theravādin at the start (as we have seen with Dhoni).

In the Surabaya branch, the SAPER event I attended was organised in a large conference hall attached to a vihara and gathered a number of students who came from various towns and villages in Java as well as further localities in Lombok and even Kalimantan. The more advanced PATRIA activists introduced the new students to the Theravāda viharas present in Surabaya. After that, the event skimmed explicitly religious themes and, for nearly two hours, shifted entirely to icebreaking games and communal activities, coordinated by a senior member who acted throughout the event as host, entertainer and master of ceremony. In one of the activities scheduled, the participants were requested by the host to form circles of five fellow members and perform a number of given games aimed at getting to know each other’s particulars. After each round, they would reshuffle the groups in order to repeat the same tasks but in a different configuration.

A more official introduction to PATRIA was given by the organisation head towards the end of the program, with a speech that recollected briefly the organisational history of PATRIA and its links to its sister Theravāda associations. The closing session of the event was a moment dense with metaphors that resonated with the lifepaths and imaginaries of the young participants. It consisted of a theatrical performance organised by four of the PATRIA members, staged on a makeshift platform within the same reception hall of the vihara. Following below, a sketch of the plotline that I jotted down during the performance:

The performance dramatised the story of Aheng and Ahong, two male friends living in a Javanese village, caricatured by the improvised actors with a mixture of Javanese and Chinese speech inflection. One day, Ahong decided to finally accomplish his dream to find a good-paying job in a city and he succeeded to do so in a relatively short time. However, once settled in his new office, Ahong met Amei on the workplace and immediately had an infatuation for her. While his life seemed to be proceeding like in a film, he didn't forget his friend in the village. He made up his mind and invited Aheng to the city, although he had a few doubts about how his friend would feel like in such a different kind of environment. Aheng eventually came to the city. Ahong managed to introduce him to his same workplace and talked his witty boss, Apeng, into employing him. Aheng, met Amei too. They fell in love with each other at first sight and during a short absence of Ahong from the city they entered a relationship which appeared to be leading quickly to wedding planning. When he returned and after learning the news, Ahong was immediately carried away by jealousy and fury. He tried to seek revenge (once again in the sphere of the workplace) and attempted to ruin his friend's career by convincing his boss of Aheng's job shortcomings and persuading him into terminating his contract. This marked the beginning of Aheng's fall as his visits to the liquor store became more frequent and he began to hang out with prostitutes, until eventually Amei broke up with him. The parting with Amei is the wake-up call for Aheng and the chance for him to ask her for forgiveness. In the end, the couple got back together and lived on in tranquillity in the village.

The story of Aheng and Ahong, as a few closing remarks by the organisers underscored, was played around the moral idea of cause and effect that is brought about by the workings of karma, exemplified in the play within the course of the single lifetimes of the protagonists. Ahong was affected by his ambitions to climb the social ladder and leave behind his friend and the social-moral world of the village. Although his revenge towards Aheng seems to produce the desired effect (Aheng's firing and decay into dubious lifestyles), in the long run Ahong's rage does not seem to pay off. Instead, Aheng endured the bad rewards for engaging in a romance with Ahong's girlfriend regardless of his friend's feelings. However, the story suggests a happy ending for Aheng, as he asks for forgiveness and he moves with Amei to the world of the village.

While the conservative moral dimension that the drama entailed was fairly explicit, the role that the urban/rural imaginary divide played in the plotline was less emphasised but hardly missed by the participants. Since most of them had moved to Surabaya from a provincial background – and many did so just a few months or weeks before – the process of identification with the dramatised transition from the idealised innocence of village life to the moral

degeneration of urbanity was rather straightforward. As one of the students admitted at the end of the event: “This could have been me... what is more, my Chinese name is Ahong!”.

By carefully braiding the biographical experience of the members in the audience with the wider moral lesson of one of the fundamental Buddhist teachings (karma, consequentialism) PATRIA grounded the ordinary life trajectories of the students into a religious dimension. Conscious of the sociological background of its membership base, moreover, the organisation functioned as a platform on which different shades of ethnicity, particularly Javanese and Chinese, were constantly balanced out. Finally, throughout its set of activities, PATRIA contributed to the perception which associated Theravāda Buddhism with civilisation and urban religiosity. As Dhoni’s and Ariyanto’s comments highlighted, the association was never only a projection formulated by Theravādin institutions, but corresponded in many cases to the actual life trajectories of local Buddhists. Economic and educational mobility, in such instances, merged with religious becoming, a process accompanied along the way by agents such as PATRIA.

3. Inspirational Buddhism

Crucial as they might be in forging a specific reality of urban-centred Buddhism in Java, however, the efforts of PATRIA seemed to be constantly confronted with two issues. On the one hand, there were the dynamics of PATRIA’s membership, on the other hand, the long-lasting question of the perceived shrinking of the Buddhist demography on a national scale, a kind of anxiety which resonated closely with the frequent concerns that were voiced among Pemuda Buddhis in Temanggung. By relying extensively on the student population rather than regular city residents, the membership of the organisation was disproportionately dependant on a large pool of late-teenage members who were often not in the position to guarantee active participation after completion of the university degree. This fact left only a sparse number of members representing the senior end of the organisation’s age group with the task of engaging their age peers. Secondly, despite its socialising and community-oriented activities, PATRIA did not seem to have provided the much-cherished antidote to the perceived stagnation in Buddhist affiliation nationwide. Yet another youth organisation took shape with the intention of counteracting this very concern.

3.1. A Theravāda youth organisation in Kelapa Gading

Buddhist Reborn was founded in 2007 by a then only nineteen-year-old Aryo Purnomo in Kelapa Gading, a vast area of Jakarta characterised predominantly by Indonesian-Chinese businesses and activities. This was reflected also in the visible features of the area's religious life, with a strong presence of Christian, Buddhist and Confucian places of worship. The organisation was originally formed as a spin-off from a PATRIA sub-branch centred around the Theravādin Jakartan vihara Buddha Sasana. In fact, the temple hosted one of the oldest sections of PATRIA in the country. In 2005 the vihara established a dedicated building for the activities of the youth organisation next to the main *dhammasala* (the major worship hall in a temple complex). However, after the initial enthusiasm, participation in the organisation's activities had become scant, as it had, according to Purnomo, in Buddhist-oriented youth associations throughout the capital. Considering this generalised feeling of decline, the young Purnomo, together with two other peers, put forward the idea of revamping the building and its activities by forming a distinct organisation. The new association was devised as an independent group from the institutional and bureaucratised structure of PATRIA and, at least in its initial intentions, limited to the local socio-religious reality of Kelapa Gading.

However, due to the explosion of social media culture in the country the events of Buddhist Reborn began to reach out quickly to individuals and communities outside of the neighbourhoods of Kelapa Gading. Unlike the nationalist and ethnically ecumenical ethos of PATRIA, Buddhist Reborn seemed to cater for a specifically Indonesian-Chinese population base. Information and engagement with the group's activities travelled from a geographically and ethnically marked community hub into similarly ethnically-defined groups, articulated via virtual platforms – Facebook communities and, later, WhatsApp groups hinged on Buddhism and specific social media groups centred around individual viharas of either Theravāda or Tridharma orientation, but also non-religious groups, such as high school and university clubs. The group also gained popularity through more traditional media, particularly flyers and posters distributed in viharas and *kelentengs*. The ethnic configuration of Buddhist Reborn has had important consequences for the fashion in which the organisation branched out of its Jakarta pool and reached specific circles outside of Java and even outside of Indonesia.

3.2. Waisak celebration as a “big event”

Buddhist Reborn inherited the entrepreneurial attitude of many of the PATRIA-organised activities but invested an even greater effort on informal socialisation. Communal initiatives ranged from informal hangouts to futsal⁷⁰ and badminton tournaments and were explicitly meant to bear a casual feel. Nevertheless, the Buddhist background of the association was reiterated through the frequent communal *vipassana* meditation sessions, in the Jakartan vihara and through a podcast program initiated in 2018. References to Buddhist notions applied to everyday situations or lifestyle topics were also established through the titles that were given to such gatherings (“Buddhism on Youth's Shoulders”, “Accept Me, Myself and I”, “Let's Be Mindful In Tasting Chocolate”, “The 5 Powers of Champion Millennial”, all in English in the original). In most cases, however, such headings only identified an opening speech or a short lecture. The firmest mark of Buddhism on such occurrences was the ubiquitous greeting in Pāli (*namo buddhaya*) that had become common currency among most Buddhist communities in the country, while socialisation activities constituted the main body and objective of the event.

The activities and online presence of Buddhist Reborn proved so successful that beginning in 2015 the group organised its own yearly Waisak, in the form of a big event open to the wider public. As we recalled in the previous chapters, Waisak had been celebrated in Indonesia since the onset of contemporary Buddhism in the grand setting of Borobudur, under the supervision of Ashin Jinarakkhita and of the central government. While remaining an impressively large celebration, attracting thousands of Buddhists from all over the country as well as from overseas, the national Waisak events had become increasingly decentralised. This development stemmed from the occasional discords that emerged among the several associations under WALUBI⁷¹, the highest board for Buddhist affairs in the country and the main organiser of the Borobudur Waisaks. These quarrels had resulted in a few instances in the desertion of the event by major bodies such as Sangha Theravāda Indonesia and Buddhayāna.

Among the parallel celebrations that began to be arranged elsewhere from Borobudur, many communities organised local Waisak festivals on the township or regency level, as we have seen in the context of Temanggung. By the time the activism of Buddhist Reborn began to diffuse among certain sections of the local Buddhist population, that is to say, the compartmentalisation

⁷⁰ Five-a-side football, popular throughout Southeast Asia.

⁷¹ WALUBI stands for *Pernwakilan Umat Buddha Indonesia*, The body of representatives for the Indonesian Buddhist community. It was formally constituted in 1998, replacing a former federation, *Majelis Pandita Buddha Dhamma Indonesia*.

of Waisak celebrations was the norm rather than the exception and did not stir much controversy. On the contrary, Buddhist Reborn's Waisak was well-received and supported by many groups and organisations, including PATRIA, who advertised the event on their platforms.

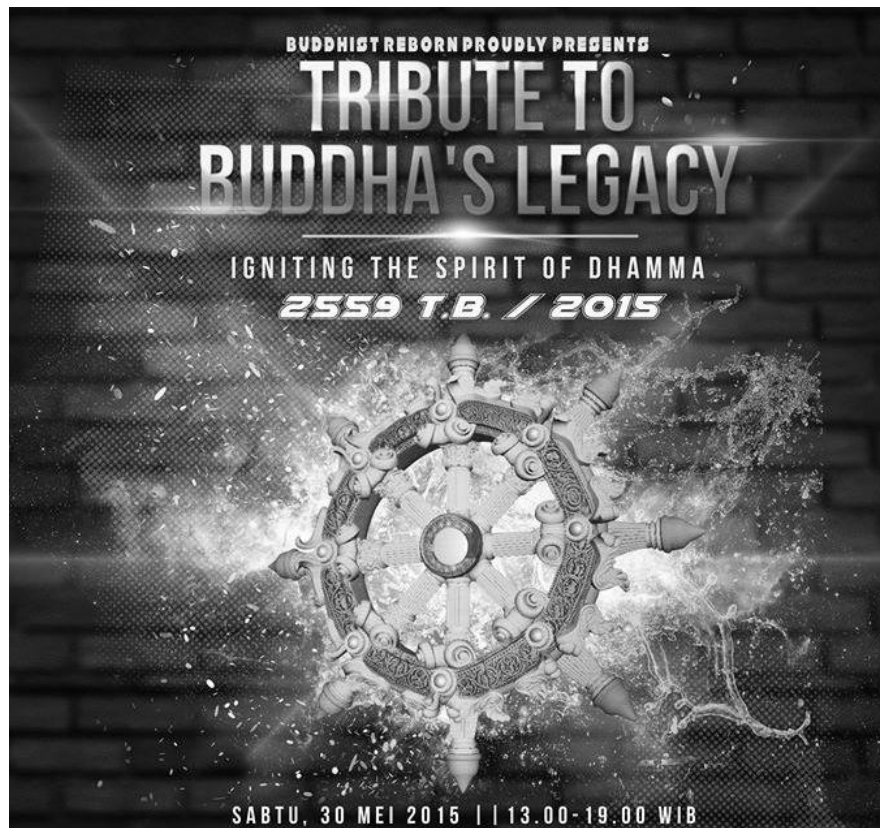


Figure 34. Advertising flyer of the Waisak event.

3.2.1. Waisak as a “big event”

The Waisak event's magnitude, organisational efforts and format were remarkable, the more so as it was arranged by an association with only seven years of activity. The event was arranged at a large convention hall in Central Jakarta and reframed the 2015 Waisak with the English title “Tribute to Buddha's Legacy – Igniting the Spirit of Dharma”, since then each year's celebration was given an overarching theme in the same tone. The event consisted of a seven-hour long ceremony accessible upon an entrance fee. The sessions that alternated through the program were highly diversified and the overall atmosphere was meant to give one the impression of taking part in a large music festival, be it for the constant flux of people or for the high-quality sound system and visual effects involved through the schedule.

The ceremony was launched in the intentionally darkened hall by a roaring voice offstage, which exhorted the participants to the motto of the event “Wake up! Speak up!” that was also encouraged to be employed as the official social media hashtag for the event. The formal opening speech was delivered by the then leader of Buddhist Reborn, Nella Kuswanti, who addressed the audience with a presentation of the aims of the event. The goal was “to inspire” (*menginspirasi*) those present to perform community-building acts among the different segments of the Buddhist *umat*, but also to inspire other organisations to follow their example, that is, to set up events of the kind fostered by Buddhist Reborn or to join them in future activities and celebrations. The head of vihara Buddha Sasana commented on the podium in a similar tone, hoping that the event would *menginspirasi* the youth to take pride in their religious belonging, holding a brief but condensed talk peppered with adjectives such as “inspirational”, “exceptional” and “unprecedented”.

Much of the event was dominated by the layout of a TV talk show, that is the alternation of conversation-like interviews on stage and entertainment segments. After the two opening speeches, the sessions were guided by the event’s main host, Jack Sepuluh, an early activist of Buddhist Reborn, but also an MC and a stand-up comedian. On that occasion, his first appearance on stage was a gag intersecting gestures, phrases, visual effects and musics from Agent 007 and Matrix Reloaded. The sketch witted around the presentation of the main activists of the organisation as “agents”, reproducing the virtual conventions of the famed Warner Bros film. Afterwards, he introduced the set of invited guests, a number of personalities which he presented as “key-note speakers” and who were intended to convey models of “inspiration”.

The first stage conversation on stage took place with Aryo Purnomo, who reasserted the need for events of this kind as essential vehicles in order to build pride and confidence in the community. The quality of “confidence” in one’s religious affiliation especially was for him the pre-requisite and entrance door to a desire for a deeper understanding of the *buddhadhamma*. The following “key-note speakers” were two guests from outside any formal religious institution. The first of them was Wong Yin Onn, a Malaysian-Chinese lecturer in medicine at the Malaysian branch of Monash University as well as a “renown Buddhist practitioner”. The second speaker was instead a twenty-year-old Yasa Paramita Singgih, a local billionaire from Bekasi, West Java, and a social media influencer.



Figure 35. A speech at Buddhist Reborn's Waisak event.

The biographies of Mr. Onn and of Singgih were remarkably similar despite the generation gap, as they recounted the story of the self-made man of success. The life trajectories that they narrated were those of two men who began their journey from a low-income family background up to a state of affluence in their respective fields – medicine and menswear respectively. In both accounts, the firmness of their belief in *buddhadhamma* and the adherence to its principles of ethical conduct were said to have helped enormously with their achievements and their success. Buddhist ideas such as *pattidana* (merits sharing) and *sila* (virtue) were thinly interspersed over their speech as practices that assisted them throughout their path to prosperity. They were also notions used in some of the other sessions of the program, in reference to the overall objective of Buddhist Reborn.

On the side of interviews, the remaining segments of the event included mostly music performances, in a variety of styles and media that ranged from charismatic gospels and karaoke tunes to performances of solo violins and of an indie-pop band. Another highlight anticipated in the event's introduction was the appearance of Andrie Wongso, arguably one of Indonesia's most famous personalities in the field of motivational business, with plenty of publications, events and YouTube videos mostly revolving around the importance of “positive thinking”.



Figure 36. A performance during Waisak.

3.2.2. Rebranding Buddhism

The Waisak event of Buddhist Reborn proved hugely successful, as about 2.000 participants gathered from different metropolitan areas of Java and beyond, from Tangerang to Surabaya and Palembang. Two years later I discussed the event and the origins of the organisation with Aryo Purnomo, who did not hide a sense of fulfilment. Born in Jakarta from a family that he called “vihara Buddhists” (cfr. Dhoni who talked about his background as being “*klenteng* Buddhist”), he grew up attending Catholic and Protestant schools for the lack of specifically Buddhist educational institutions in the area. Attending private Christian schools is not uncommon among middle-class Indonesians, particularly Chinese-Indonesians. The educational infrastructure provided by Christian foundations and networks of international institutes is often perceived as the most prestigious and cosmopolitan in the country, as opposed to state education and the institutes in the orbit of Islamic foundations and charity trusts (although this is a rapidly changing picture, see Njoto-Feillard 2017).

In spite of the principle that enrolment to Christian schools is formally open to Indonesians from all religious backgrounds and although conversion is not expected, Purnama noticed that it is in fact in those formative years that “the seeds are sown” for the eventual detachment of young Buddhists from their religious context of origin. The perspective of Purnama was only a more articulated version of a narrative of decline which resonated with many accounts I was given throughout my stays, from Temanggung to Surabaya.

Since in-school socialisation and romantic flirting commonly intensify with the coming of age of the pupils, Purnomo continued, intimate interactions with peers from a Christian background tend to become the norm rather than the exception. Finally, friendships and liaisons tend to spill over into young people’s daily routines outside of school. Such routines might include ordinary activities like a family meal but also the participation in devotional activities or events broadly linked to religious associations. Purnomo himself participated in events organised by Pentecostal organisations, which in Kelapa Gading alone run about twelve houses of worship (BPS 2018). On such occasions, Purnomo said, he experienced a sense of vitality and communion that one could rarely witness in the nearby viharas or at comparable non-liturgical events organised by Buddhist foundations. The Pentecostal events were, for Purnomo, catalysts for a sense of awe and “inspiration”, bolstered especially by the very large amounts of people they managed to mobilise and bring together but also by a less defined sense of “coolness” (*keren keren*) which radiated through the assemblies.

According to Purnomo, the attractiveness of Pentecostal worship, in its ecclesiastical and lay associationism and the inter-denominational socialisation platforms offered factors that ultimately drew adherents out of the Buddhist community. The “drawing” of affiliates however was rarely the product of deliberate acts of individual conversions but occurred most frequently upon marriage, since for pragmatic considerations such as schooling and state bureaucracy most Indonesians tend or wish to form mono-religious family units, the status of interfaith marriage being to this day an open debate (see Aini et al. 2019).

Buddhists who became Christian converts were not framed by Purnomo as completely renouncing their religion of origin, a disavowal which was not expected in many cases, especially when multi-religious dimensions were established within one’s family of origin. He avoided throughout his narrative the usage of terms such as *konversi* or the Islamic-derived *murtad*. In his view, those who changed religion didn't necessarily fail as Buddhists, that is, but had merely “changed orientation” (*berganti haluan*). They were naturally drawn by a more dynamic, compelling

and effervescent form of socio-religiosity. The necessities imposed by entering into marriage were the catalyst that facilitated a process of religious trespassing.

For Purnomo, the correspondence between the growth of fellow Buddhists who were drawn into the Christian religious orbit and the overall depopulation of practising Buddhists in the economically productive age group was an aspect too evident to be missed. When he was still a high school student, he began to be a “dhamma activist”, as he exhorted his classmates to join vihara activities. “I was a dhamma proselytiser in a Christian school”, he admitted amused. That experience was revealing for him and constituted the wellspring of his commitment to the dhamma cause that led right after to the formation of Buddhist Reborn. “How would it look like today if they had a strong and motivated community supporting them? What needed to be done was basically a ‘rebranding’ sort of job, and that is basically what I did with Buddhist Reborn”.

In the meantime, Purnomo had become father to a son and deepened his knowledge in Theravāda meditation by attending a few meditation retreats in Bali with his wife in the cosmopolitan Burmese tradition of S. Goenka. Over the years, his mission with Buddhist Reborn and his focus on youth had also turned into a carefully studied project. As he explained to the wider *umat* in his frequent workshops in various Indonesian cities, vihara religious participation was measured against a four-fold division of human lifespan. The first range comprised individuals up to the age of nineteen, a time mostly characterised by learning, dependence and large availability of free time. The second range spanned from age twenty to thirty-nine and included those who found themselves putting into practice what they had learned in the previous stage, although with considerably less free time at one’s disposal and burdened by family chores. Interestingly, both “zones” were equally defined as *pemuda*, albeit deserving distinct considerations. While the first group was still widely represented in temple activities of both liturgical and non-liturgical kind, the second group was characterised by a dramatic drop in worship attendance and/or an altogether “change in orientation”.

Therefore, Buddhist Reborn set out to adjust its programs according to this taxonomy of life stages, each age group requiring different sorts of communal activities in order to build and, more importantly, sustain the attractiveness of a Buddhist-defined form of sociality. Such activities were identified with small and mid-size motivational speeches, sports and music competitions, workshops for coffee production and sales strategies, but especially the organisation of mass events. The organisation of Waisak celebrations were also understood in this light: as opportunities to mobilise large sections of the Buddhist *umat* for a big event that merged a selective set of religious references with the need for a feeling of the spectacular and

the effervescent. Waisak mass celebrations were successfully replicated over the following years in different venues of Central and Northern Jakarta and they were halted only by the spread of the 2020 pandemic.

Entrepreneurial dharma

In this chapter I explored a different expression of Javanese Buddhism, by following the activities of two distinct Theravāda youth groups, a PATRIA branch in Surabaya and Buddhist Reborn in Jakarta. Although the dynamics of the two organisations are shaped by the specific urban contexts in which they operate (recall the intertwinement between university campuses and PATRIA membership), they stand in continuity with processes that unfold in the wider Buddhist landscape in Java and Indonesia. The affiliation to youth Buddhist organisations is reliant on young people that often carry on links with a background of origin that is defined by a varying assemblage of religious horizons. Another theme of continuity is the narrative of decline characterising the Buddhist *umat* and the subsequent revitalisation that the given youth group intends to fulfill. Such project connects the organisational patterns of Pemuda Buddhis in the Temanggung highlands and Buddhist Reborn in the capital district.

In both the lifepaths that bring individual members to the joining of youth organisations and the religious practices and vocabulary that animate the revival(s), Theravāda Buddhism features as a prominent force in these refashioning projects. Like in other contexts in contemporary South and Southeast Asia (see Schober and Collins 2018 for Sri Lanka; Ladwig 2016 for Laos; Levine and Gellner 2007 for Nepal) Theravāda Buddhism becomes almost synonymous with modernity and individual progress. The autobiographies of Dhoni and Ariyanto testify to this movement in which Theravāda Buddhism proceeds weaved in with their respective trajectories of mobility, urbanisation and prosperity. The interpretation of their experience through Buddhist notions, particularly the moralisation of individual entrepreneurialism through the law of karma, but also the inclusion of motivational talks and business personalities in religious and non-religious events alike (as in the speeches performed in the Jakartan Waisak), indicate the degree to which Theravāda Buddhism is embedded in such prosperity and entrepreneurial narratives.

The organisation of Waisak 2015 in Central Jakarta also elucidates a more specific device embedded in these processes, the vehicle provided by “events”. The amount of organisational effort, finances and people mobilised for an event such as Waisak approximates the set of features that a big- or mega-event tends to have as a social-economic category (Salazar et al. 2017; Müller 2015). The celebration was far from an event of the scale commonly studied under the mega-event rubric (sports tournaments, conferences, Expos etc.). However, the gestures, the degree of spectacularisation enacted and the relevance of events like Waisak commensurate to a given societal pool signal how much the circulation of imaginaries and big-event correlations is as powerful and efficacious a device as the course of an actual mega-event.

The capacity to bring about states like awe, effervescence, “inspiration” or “coolness” is also echoed in settings where the actual magnitude of events was considerably modest, like in the cultural festivals of Surjosari. This fact points to the efficacy of mass events as vocabulary and technology rather than quantity and scale and participates to the set of dynamics that Dowson (2020; elaborating on Pfadenhauer 2010) has lumped together as the “eventisation” of contemporary religion. As we have seen previously, eventisation is framed as an increasingly defining feature of a religious landscape in which multiple religious traditions share and compete for space and visibility. Events also show the intrinsic porosity of the religious domain with spheres and preoccupations that transcend it. The stories of Purnomo and, in the previous chapters, Subagyo integrate and resonate also with these tendencies.

The “secular” event of Waisak in Jakarta, but also the language and the formats of PATRIA introductory activities, suggest a peculiar stratification of discursive and material practices. As we have seen, the events big and small put up by the organisations are framed and conveyed through a set of linguistic practices that recall closely entrepreneurial and corporate culture. Such vocabulary, together with the values and notions drawn in implicit or elicited form (self-reliance, leadership, “success”), is incorporated via the kind of bodily activities, spatial configuration and, in the case of members like Ariyanto, through the trajectory of one’s very biography. Events like Buddhist Reborn’s Waisak show how values of enterprise, affluence and spectacle are also made into a sensorial experience, through the mobilisation of entertainment formulae that involve participants from a corporeal perspective. One’s approach, understanding and commitment in respect to religious life is filtered also within these varieties of experiences and social domains.

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, I explored the emergence of Buddhism in contemporary Indonesia from a rhizomatic perspective. The approach is intended to overcome the compartmentalised and alternative histories through which Indonesian Buddhism has often been described – a continuous tradition; an unambiguous revival; the “religion of the Chinese”; a thoroughly new religious movement. Instead, the thesis has shown how Buddhism in Indonesia is constituted in a non-linear fashion by the sum of these histories and a number of additional stances, such as the rise of forms of leisure economy and the advent of entre-/ethno-preneurialism. All these themes spread, overlap, experience ruptures and germinations into novel strands and converge to form temporary aggregates.

Throughout the thesis I used the notion of Javanese Buddhism, and the consequent focus on Java as an ethnographic site, precisely as an instance of a cultural-religious aggregate. As such, it does not exhaust the entire spectrum of the possible manifestations of Buddhism in Indonesia. However, it signals the formation of a distinct confluence of themes and practices that is pinpointed in Java (albeit in a diffused mode) while it reverberates symbolically and materially also outside the island. In this sense, I framed Javanese Buddhism also as a “hub”, that is, in order to underscore the range of articulations that the Javanese Buddhist aggregate radiates and disperses elsewhere. Such articulations, through “mapping and charting” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Guattari 2013) may inform future lines of research which can look into how further aggregates are formed, on these premises, also outside of Java. Within this rhizomatic orbit, the thesis has followed a number of themes, which I shall briefly recall in the following sections.

Youth organisations, revivals and activism

Through the chapters of the thesis, youth organisations have provided a common platform for the expression of a renewed religious sociality and initiatives that intended to sustain a form of Buddhist collective identity. Youth organisations made use of the culturally and politically charged youth category of *pemuda*. Some of these organisations carried on nationalist or ethnic overtones, such as Pemuda Buddhis as a context-specific project on the Temanggung highlands or PATRIA on a nationwide scale. Their members expressly called themselves “activists” or “militants”. Elsewhere, these political connotations were considerably downsized, as in Jakartan Buddhist Reborn, although the overarching aspirations were of a similarly wide scope. That is, the revival

or the revitalisation of a Buddhist kind of community, traced back to either a village or region-specific *umat* or extended discursively to the national Buddhist demographics.

In the programs and the activities of the youth groups, revitalisation might signify different things and is materialised in a variety of ways. In the villages of Temanggung, revival implies the resuscitation or thorough (re)invention of traditional Javanese rituals or cosmologies, often filtered through contemporary Buddhist vocabulary. We have followed in this frame the organisation of the *gombak* and *tingkeban* rites in Surjosari (chapter IV), as well as the revalorisation of *nyadran* cemeterial feasts and the historical-narrative work in Cemoro and Purwodeso (chapter III). In other instances, revitalisation does not imply the reformulation of distinct ritual practices but rather reevoking effervescence in a religious community perceived to be waning or demographically shrinking. Although this level was best exemplified in the activities of Buddhist Reborn, it underlies most of the ethnographic scenes we have explored.

The eventisation of religious life

A major device for the expression of revivalist stances has been the language and the set of material and sensorial practices supplied by events. Events are a crucial site in which contemporary religiosity is performed and they provide oftentimes a liminal space in which the sacred and the secular collapse into each other. They also show how the religious sphere is always already porous to domains and preoccupations that exceed it. Through the thesis, events surfaced in multiple forms and ranged on a continuum between rituals with an overt religious character to thoroughly secular occurrences that were nonetheless shaped around religion or established repeated references to religion. In the settings we have seen, locally organised Waisaks and a festival like Java Connections (chapter IV) sit at the farthest ends of this continuum.

Events have the capacity to mobilise a wide set of peoples and motivations. Regardless of their scale, events' attractivity is also commensurate to the imaginaries involved. Events in rural Java like *Nyadran Perdamaian* and Java Connections evoked culturally and historically deep imaginaries that attracted a diverse pool of participants, while 2015 Waisak in Jakarta linked to mass-mediatic entertainment repertoires and entrepreneurial discourses that reached out to a large audience. Events' relevance and attractivity is also augmented by the surge of social media and communication culture, which join forces in adding complexities in the transmission of religious sociality. In any case, events constitute a crucial site for the experience of contemporary public religiosity and constitute another fertile trail for future research in religion in Indonesia as elsewhere.

Theravāda Buddhism

The thesis has focussed predominantly on the Javanese/Indonesian manifestation of global Theravāda Buddhism. In recent decades, the “vehicle” has become a dominant affiliation for temples and Buddhist practitioners in Indonesia. Theravāda Buddhism came to overlap with and sometimes substitute the pre-existing Buddhayāna denominational infrastructure, which articulated the early “return” of Buddhism in the country in the 1950s. The focus on Theravāda associations and religious expressions was also the outcome of the fact that all the contemporary revivalist stances we followed were framed within the formal religious orbit of Theravāda Buddhism.

Established in the late 1970s and flourished afterwards also through a set of transnational connections, Theravāda Buddhism formed in many cases the actual “Buddhist” backdrop that most practitioners referred to in their practices or ritual utterances. Theravādin elements became hegemonic in many facets of Buddhist religious life, from meditation styles to greetings, celebrations and vocabulary, marked by the surge of Pāli as the default liturgical language and of Pāli scriptures as the main textual corpus. Theravāda Buddhism provided throughout a distinctly cosmopolitan flair (sometimes regretfully so, as in Soemitro’s article, chapter III) yet conveying a historically deep religious genealogy that refers to the deeds of the historical Buddha himself.

The narrative of descentance from the “elders” of Buddhism intrinsic in Theravādin self-representation stands in a complex relationship with the contemporary recuperation of Java or “the religion of Majapahit” as the cornerstone for Buddhist expression in many contexts across the island (we have seen this extensively in Temanggung). However, Theravādin institutions and practices may also stand for religious orientations and values associated with individual progress from both a spiritual and material-economic perspectives (chapter IV).

Materiality, discourse and aesthetics

The set of practices and dynamics described through the thesis show an indissoluble interaction between discursive practices and the material dimension. While much of the revivalist perspective, particularly in the Temanggung villages, was articulated in narrative forms and assembled via discursive means, it was constantly reflected in material, bodily and environmental practices. Sometimes the materiality of objects and of the landscape seemed to act upon practitioners rather than the other way around. This facet of religious experience was especially evident in chapter V and in the relationships between the residents and the Buddha sculptures. The chapter also illustrates the double reading of the notion of aesthetic practice. The wayside shrines in Surjosari were originally set up for their ornamental qualities that could herald a specific atmosphere and

attractivity. Simultaneously they were also approached as material objects that actively induced specific spiritual states in ways that were not always foreseeable on the basis of their provenance or their Buddhist iconographic features. They showed the working of aesthetics as a perceptive and sensorial dimension that contributes to distilling a sense of “the really real”.

Although the case of the shrines and the sculptures in Temanggung and Bantul illuminate this process distinctly, the importance of aesthetic practices might be extended to many other contexts as well. The perceptual level analysed through aesthetics resonates in fact with one of the elemental features of religious experience underlined by Donovan Schaefer, that is “affects” (2015; 2012). The sensorial engagement with a given object or environment enmeshes with the embodied codified and non-codified emotional forms in an individual or collective to produce meaningful (though not necessarily coherent) dispositions. Such dispositions shape in important ways what individuals experience as the really real. The participation to events, in the form of mass-gatherings, public rituals or workshops, which we have seen through the thesis, can also be considered salient for this very dimension.

Other points of departure

The approach I tried to convey through this thesis, that is a “rhizomatic” perspective on Buddhism in Indonesia returns a panoramic view of the diverse components that coalesce in a complex religious field. Inevitably, some paths remain under-explored and constitute fecund trajectories for further research. From an ethnographic angle, it might be worth pausing on the perspectives from outside the Buddhist *umat*. As we have seen, Buddhists in Indonesia are not enclaves abstracted from the wider social field. They are situated on multiple continuities with other religious domains, either for sharing the public space on a township or regency level or through dynamics of inter-religious cohabitation or conversion. As religion as such has experienced a resurgence in public awareness and political surveillance in recent years, looking into the interstices of religious affiliation and the localised configurations of inter-religiosity can shed new light on the everyday reflections of those macro-processes. The discussion over *nyadran* public rituals which we have seen in chapter IV is an example of how such “inter-religious” lines of investigation may look like in Java and Indonesia at large.

Another point of departure is represented by the interrelations in place between the local Buddhist *umat* and organisations, systems of patronage and webs of support abroad. While work is currently being carried out in the field of contemporary monastic connections between the Indonesian and the Thai *sangha* (Bauban 2021) other strands of research can include the lay junctions between Indonesian Buddhists and interconnected links overseas, in locations such as

China or mainland Southeast Asia. Moreover, although in my analysis on the “multiple revivals” in Javanese Buddhism much attention has been dedicated to Theravāda organisations, in inquiring further into transnational connections, it might be useful to also take into account other networks that operate in the country’s Buddhist landscape, such as Mahāyāna or Nichiren groups. Such lines of research can contribute further to the emerging field of Buddhist economics as well as ethnographically expanding on the possibilities that eschew the nation-state as the given unit of historical processes.

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