

Mandalas, Grids, and Volcanic Eruptions

Notes on the Persistence of Old Geographies in Modern Central Java

By Charles Sullivan

Photo of Gunung Merapi from the website of Richard Seaman at <http://www.richard-seaman.com/Wallpaper/Travel/Indonesia/GunungMerapi.jpg>. Overlaid image of the Borobudur mandala floorplan, which is also shown on page 23 of this publication.

As I awoke on the morning of October 26, 2010, I heard the words “volcano” and “Indonesia” come across the radio. I was instantly awake. Initially, the news reports didn’t name the volcano but mentioned it was in central Java, the area I study. Checking online, I quickly learned that it wasn’t just a volcano that had erupted, it was *the* volcano: *Gunung Merapi*, whose name means Mountain of Fire, the most active volcano on Java, the world’s most thickly settled island, in the center of the chain of islands that makes up modern Indonesia. And this, I was sure, would eventually make the story infinitely more complex.

Besides its geological significance, Merapi is a particularly important and powerful space in the traditional cosmological ordering of the central Javanese universe. This meant there would not be just one but rather many stories on the importance of the eruption. They would represent many combinations of both “scientific” and “religious” and “modern” and “traditional” ways of seeing, understanding, and speaking about this part of the world.

In the initial reports, Merapi was described by its distance from the national capital of Indonesia: that is, 350 miles or so southeast of Jakarta. Also often reported was not only that the volcano had erupted, but also that an earthquake and tsunami had hit that same morning near the island of Sumatra. Both events are located on the “Ring of Fire,” which stretches around the Pacific Ocean, although scientists were quick to point out that the two events in Indonesia did not appear to be connected seismologically. Reports also noted that the explosions produced ash rather than lava and that the upper areas of the mountain had been evacuated. Several people caught on the mountain during the eruption died. Reports of the events followed the standard “formula” for all natural disaster stories about Indonesia in much of the world’s press that appeared after the 2004 tsunami in Aceh.

The details were all accurate, of course. But the picture was stunningly incomplete, missing the interesting but complex story that reflects “traditional” views of the role of volcanoes in the geographies of power in central Java. Merapi lies on the north end of an important meridian of sacral power that runs south from the mountain through the *kraton* (royal court) of Yogyakarta to the Indian Ocean beach at Parangtritis. This stretch of beach, known for its fierce undertow, is home to Kyai Loro Ratu Kidul, the spirit queen of the South Seas, whose power is a critical source of fertility and abundance to the region. On a rare clear day, Merapi dominates the court cities of Yogyakarta and Solo, as well as the pre-Islamic temples of Borobudur and Prambanan. The mountain

is spiritually potent—a site of pilgrimages—where sultans and presidents come to meditate in secret grottos in search of *wahyu*, the light flowing from Allah that is an important source of Javanese spiritual power.¹ According to Javanese legend, not far northwest of Merapi is the place where both Java and the whole world are nailed to the Earth, keeping all things in place and in order. In central Java, Merapi dominates and orients much local geography and many meridians of spiritual power.

Historians of pre-modern Southeast Asia have developed a useful conception of the geography of kingly power related to this that they call the “mandala theory.”² This theory posits an arrangement of political and spiritual authority extending in concentric rings of power emanating from kingly centers. With each successive ring of power, the center’s (and the king’s) influence diminishes, and sites on the “periphery” may pay tribute to several different kingly “centers” at once. Unlike the fixity of modern conceptions of the geography of power based in maps with defined borders of this longitude and that latitude, and of enumerated lists of subjects tied to land and space, the geography of power represented in the mandala view is quite flexible.³ The size, reach, and power of mandalas can expand and contract over time in response to such things as changes in the perceived spiritual power of the king or the appearance of omens of both expansion and decay, such as the bounty or failure of crops, or the calmness or explosion of volcanoes.

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The mandala also accounts for and includes other spiritual powers imbedded in the natural world: in local and regional spirits; in mountains, forests, rivers and seashores, and in thousands of small spaces known mostly on local scales, all of which coexist with kingly power from the center and multiple religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—that have moved into Southeast Asia over the centuries. These powers within the mandala are always in motion and must be attended to vigilantly with the proper rituals and rites, the proper prayers, and the proper offerings. The ability to keep the forces of the mandala

in check is the sign of the presence of a *ratu adil*, or “just king,” whose reign is blessed and proper; if the potentially destructive forces cannot be kept in order, it could be a sign that the king may not, in fact, be the proper sovereign.

Although the explosion of Merapi was occurring in a “modern” time, I was also sure that elements of this mandala system—still very much alive in the conception of the world held by certain Javanese, particularly many connected to the kratons—would also be very much in play, even though they were not evident in the morning’s reports. In order to find out more about what was going on in Java that morning, I opened Facebook, always one of my best and fastest sources for news from Indonesia.

And there it was, an instant message from Mas Bambang Irawan, teacher of development economics at Sebelas Maret University in Solo, a partner and local organizer of the undergraduate summer seminars I have arranged and led for students to study the political geography of central Java and Bali; a superbly trained classical Javanese dancer; and an important member of one of Solo’s royal families. The instant message was about the eruption, but there were no Richter scales, no ash clouds, no government efficiency. Instead, it was about a man, Mbah Maridjan, who had died on the mountain, and it traced a geography based on a different way of understanding the significance of Merapi.

Mbah Maridjan was an *abdi dalem*, a servant to the older of the two royal courts in Yogyakarta, ruled over by Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, who is also the appointed governor of the special region around the city.⁴ Mbah Maridjan was *juru kunci*, “keeper of the keys” in charge of Merapi, which the kraton considers to be a sacred space requiring a special caretaker. His position, inherited from his father, was, officially at least, to build a pathway to Kendah, an important site on the mountain, where the kraton sends offerings of flowers to be thrown into the mountain’s crater. In some ways, this was not “high-level” work.

“I don’t have even an elementary school education,” Mbah Maridjan told my students in an interview in late June 2008, “so I was just a janitor around here, cleaning up after people’s junk and cleaning up the environment on the mountain.” But Mbah Maridjan was more important than that, and his duties were eminently more complex.

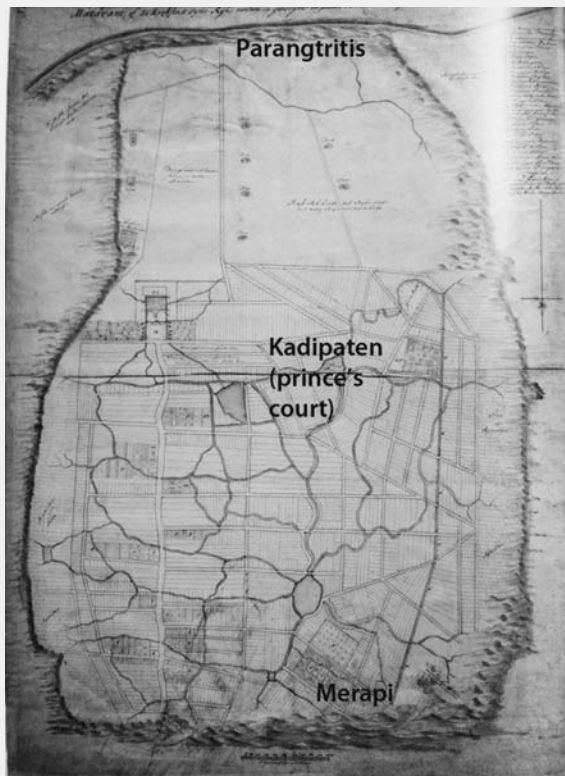
Mbah Maridjan had already become somewhat of a celebrity before earthquakes struck central Java in May 2006, after Merapi had also belched, spewing out lava in a spectacular trail down the south face of the mountain but not fully erupting. In these stories, both the international and Indonesian press called Mbah Maridjan such things as “The Keeper of the Mountain,” “The Volcano Whisperer,” or, in a more nationalist Indonesian bent, “The President of Merapi.”

The stories inevitably painted him as an exotic hold-over from a time gone by, the possessor of mystical powers unknown to and unexplainable by modern science. They were the type of story that often appears when “modern” journalists approach peoples with “traditional” knowledge, in the end painting the subject as both exotic and somewhat delusional, distanced from our modern, rational, and scientific world with its reliable grid of longitude and latitude and its spirit-free analysis of volcanic explosion. In reality, however, these worlds are not quite so far apart; many Javanese who hold “traditional” or “*kejawanan*” (Javanese spirituality) religious views of Islam tied to the mandala world are also quite modern and scientific in their outlook, just as Christians who pray to saints might also be doctors or volcanologists.⁵ But Mbah Maridjan is what my students would call “real old school,” and even most Javanese considered him a man with particularly “old” views.

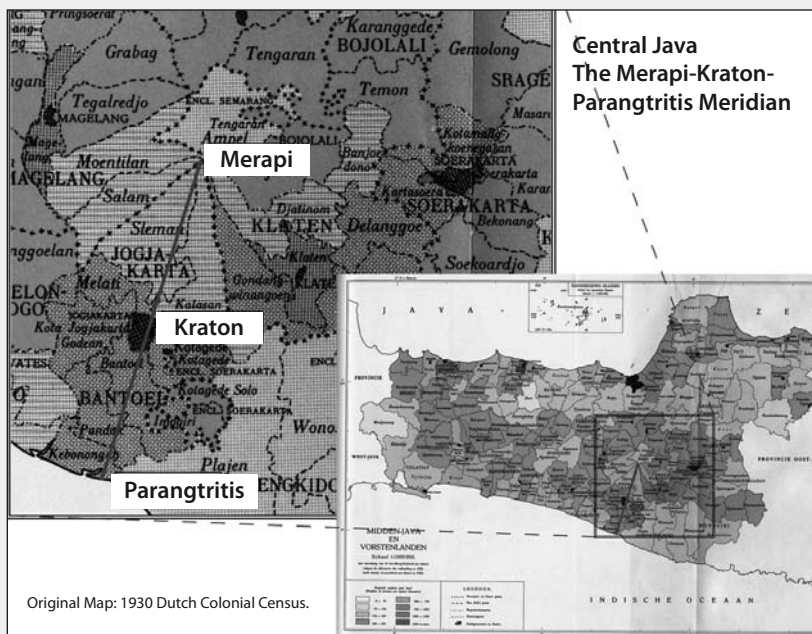
My students’ interview with Mbah Maridjan was fascinating, not so much for what they learned, but for how they experienced it. By the time we got to meet him, their interview skills had become practiced, both in the technical

An 1806 copy of a 1650 map of a “Representation of the Provincial Court of the Soudouhunan [Sultan] Ingalaga, known as Mataram, [Yogyakarta] or the Capital of his Kingdom, closed in by mountains in place of walls.” The map, oriented with the south to the top, clearly shows Merapi and the kraton. The detail shows Merapi itself, which according to the inscription, can be seen from forty miles out at sea.

Below: The author’s photo of the map, reprinted in *Comprehensive Atlas of the Dutch United East India Company*, Voorburg, Altas Maior, 2006.



From the map of Central Java included in the Dutch Colonial Census of 1930, Merapi is not labeled but can be clearly located through the point at which different districts come together at its summit. The mountain needed to be part of all the districts surrounding it. The meridian (author’s addition) can be traced from north to south.



Original Map: 1930 Dutch Colonial Census.

sense and in terms of approaching the interview in an Indonesian way, which is to say, politely, quietly, and somewhat obliquely at times. As a result, many of their interviews went very smoothly, and real connections were made between five young Americans and the Indonesians with whom they spoke.

The interview with Mbah Maridjan didn't go that way. The students' questions and Mbah Maridjan's answers, even though very ably translated in both directions, just didn't match up. The young Americans expected the old man's answers to be "spiritual" and perhaps even a bit "odd," but they didn't realize that they were asking questions in one realm: largely technical, modern, and scientific (even if tinged with a clear attraction to the mystical side of Java); and his answers were coming from a very different realm: one steeped in a world both Islamic and full of spirits (which, to Mbah Maridjan's way of thinking, were one and the same), and where such things could explain the explosion of a volcano as accurately as the scientists also working on the mountain.

The interview started well enough. My students asked what his job was, and he said he was a simple servant of the kraton, a janitor, who prepared a path for offerings to the mountain once a year or so. They asked then why the press had called him the "President of Merapi," and he answered that the kraton tells him that he is a simple and lowly servant, so how could he possibly be a president? When they started to ask about his "abilities," about whether he could "talk to the mountain," he began to give them answers that didn't necessarily make sense to them, saying, "of course not, the mountain is spirits, and I am just a man." When asked about where the spirits were from, he responded they were from the South Seas, guardians of Loro Ratu Kidul (something my students understood the implications of, but which I'm sure none of them actually believed). The further the interview went, they simply were not asking questions he could answer with his view of the world, and he was not giving answers that they could make sense of with theirs.

He did have an interesting take on Merapi itself that they liked. When asked about how he knew the eruptions would happen, he said:

An eruption is like the cough of the volcano. There have been large coughs, but there have been many more small ones that no one has recorded. When the volcano is sick to its stomach, the cough forms, and sometimes erupts. I just know when that will be the case because I've watched the mountain all my life, following my father around. The mountain changes a lot. The lava used to flow to the southwest, but now it flows straight south towards Yogyakarta.

He also said that he hoped Yogyakarta would remain safe and that it was his



A carved Buddha, which normally would be enclosed in a stupa like the ones near it, looks out from the top of Candi Borobudur. Volcanic mountains, visible in the background, ring the temple. (Photo: Charles Sullivan)

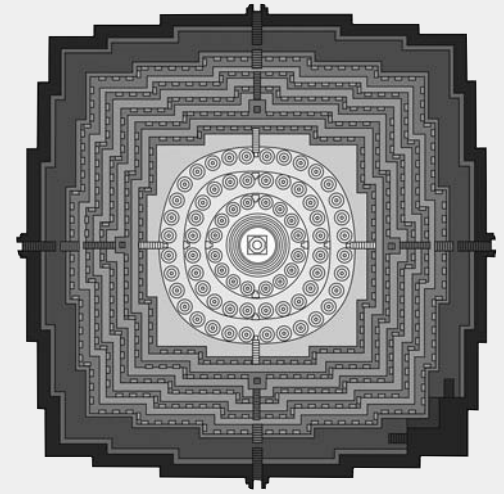


Illustration of the Borobudur floor plan by Gunawan Kartapranata. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prambanan_Shiva_Temple.jpg.

Traditionally, a mandala is a Buddhist map of the cosmos. Mandalas are oriented in the four cardinal directions, with a series of expanding concentric rings emanating from a powerful center. Though often thought of in terms of paintings or artwork, perhaps the world's largest constructed mandala is the stone temple of Borobudur in the shadow of Merapi. The carved friezes on each of the galleries leading to the top of the temple tell stories first from daily life, then higher up from the life of the Buddha, and finally to a level of stupas around

the top rounds of the temple from which carved Buddhas look outward in all the principal ordinal and sub-ordinal directions.

One of the world's newest mandalas of a sort is a map derived from the interconnections of Facebook "friends" around the world. Worked into a single graphic representation, the intensity of light shows the number of connections in any given area, and a recognizable map of the world, in which Java burns brightly, is the result.



Source: http://a6.sphotos.ak.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ak-snc4/163413_479288597199_9445547199_5658562_8388607_n.jpg.

job to help that happen. But for my students, the coughing volcano was a metaphor, while for Mbah Maridjan, it was a literal explanation of the life of the mountain and of its place and his in an older Javanese geography of the world.

As we made our way back down the mountain, Mas Bambang and I were ecstatic; the interview had been a gem, we thought, and the students must have appreciated the specialness of the occasion and the chance to talk with such a "rare" human being, one who saw the world around him in almost completely different terms. But our students, and one in particular, were angry. They felt that Mbah Maridjan had not answered their questions fully and that his responses were designed to hide some sort of truth or knowledge that they had

hoped to understand through this special interview. What Bambang and I saw as miscommunication happening on two levels, the students experienced as active evasion of their “perfectly logical” questions. What they didn’t understand was that Mbah Maridjan was simply trying to answer their (probably to him, often odd) questions within a different frame of logic—an older, and increasingly rare, understanding of things deeply based in local culture and knowledge that acknowledges the presence not just of spirits, but of spirits with names, histories, and well-known personalities, and of mountains that can cough. And my students, and I would assume probably Mbah Maridjan as well, felt misunderstood.

This was, in effect, a miscommunication around two different understandings of the local geography. This was not a new miscommunication; it is simply that one side of the conversation is harder to hear now, as our world is full of the modern technologies of Facebook and television news beaming around the globe instantly.

Mbah Maridjan baru meninggal dunia. Mbah Maridjan has left this earth. He was among those killed in the explosion of Gunung Merapi, as were thirteen others who were on the mountain trying to convince him to come down. Rescue teams found Mbah Maridjan’s body in the kitchen of his house, just down the hill from the highest mosque on the mountain where he frequently led prayers. His body was prostrated in *sujud*, the deepest and most intimate part of the Muslim prayer sequence, where one’s sole purpose is to praise and glorify Allah. But rather than facing Mecca, he was pointed straight south, down the sacred meridian joining Merapi through the kraton and on to the home of Ratu Kidul.

This was instantly all over the Indonesian press; it was something both significant and immediately understood by some (and misunderstood by more). Three photographs of his corpse, still recognizably in *sujud*, splashed across the Internet. Even if Indonesians didn’t know exactly what led Mbah Maridjan to pray rather than flee (or was he just covering himself from the blast?), they recognized an echo of an old way of seeing the world, which some saw as noble and others as superstition. There was also widespread anger that other people had died on the mountain trying to get Mbah Maridjan to come down and away from the danger.

These complicated views led to debates on website commentary pages and in chat rooms about what was truly going on that reflected this split. In these Indonesian discussions, the “technical” worldview was quite present. One of the volcanologists was quoted as saying Mbah Maridjan died because he didn’t know anything about the mountain. Other Indonesians lamented the recurring “superstitions,” which they saw as holding back their national development. In the words of one Internet poster:

*It is the laughable attitude of people like Mbah Maridjan, failed lava goal-keeper, and the ignorant people who follow him that is one of the reasons why Indonesia is destined to remain stuck in the third world forever.*⁶

But another commenter suggested a more flexible view of the world that could be imagined:

*I just wanted to add something regarding the issues of culture and religion that have been expressed here. Mbah Maridjan was Kebatnan, more commonly known as Kejawen—a belief system inspired by ancient Javanese tradition that pre-dates the introduction of Islam. . . . It is a metaphysical search for inner harmony, connection with the universe and with an Almighty God. It exemplifies the Javanese tendency for synthesis. The Javanese system is so flexible that syncretism in all manifestations is attainable, even that which is in conflict. Which explains how so many Javanese manage to see themselves, quite happily, as both Muslim and Kejawen simultaneously.*⁷

Those of us who study geography, the human interaction with and organization of the globe, could profitably be mindful of understanding other, older, and more local ways of seeing the ordering of the world that to some extent are still among us. This may not be an easy task. Many of us are challenged

when trying simultaneously to see the world in multiple ways. We are taught to see the world grid of longitude and latitude as “natural” and to see all geography as having a rational, scientific explanation. Furthermore, we may feel angry when we don’t understand other explanations of events based in cultures we don’t know or understand deeply, when “others” don’t deal with us on our terms or when they don’t answer our questions in ways we can understand. But perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that the Javanese, living for many centuries on the edge of volcanoes in a region of earthquakes and violent waters, would have developed their own geographical explanations of the world in which they live and that these explanations would continue to make sense to at least some of them.

Mbah Maridjan has left this world. Perhaps as he died, he was simply turning to God in a difficult time, but my instinct is that Mbah Maridjan was in deep mediation between both the temporal and spiritual worlds, as he knew them, doing his best to hold back the explosive power of the mountain he felt he knew better than anyone in the world. Perhaps he was trying to keep both Yogyakarta and the kraton safe and to keep the nail holding us all in place pinned to the soil. Perhaps he was simply ready to be “claimed” by the mountain he had tended his whole life. Whatever the case, Mbah Maridjan was certainly living out the end of his life in a way of understanding the world we have increasingly forgotten about and dismissed, but in terms we should work desperately to continue to understand and appreciate. ■

NOTES

1. The word *wahyu* comes directly from the Arabic and Islamic word *wahy*, which means “God’s revelations.” That *wahyu* is conceptualized as a form of light represents the Islamic notion of *Nur Muhammad*, or “the Light of Muhammad,” which is the source from which all things and powers on Earth were created.
2. The mandala theory applies not just to central Java, but to many of the regions now known as South and Southeast Asia. For a full discussion of the mandala theory, its historiography, and a very useful discussion of its implications, see O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), particularly “Post Script II: Again a Cultural Matrix” and “Post Script III: Among the Mandalas.”
3. That is, the map and the census are noted as critical elements of the creation of the nation state put forth by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991).
4. “Sultan” is an expressly Islamic title, and the Yogyakarta and other sultanates in Central Java are Muslim polities that reach back to the kingdom of Mataram that ruled the region dating from the mid-seventeenth century until the Dutch asserted control of the region gradually in the late eighteenth century. The current sultan is appointed the local governor, though there are currently interesting discussions of whether the arrangement of the “special region” he reigns over, in which the governor is not elected as they are in the rest of the country, should continue. The discussion centers on whether Yogyakarta’s “special” nature would be lost if the region were to be subject to the direct vote of the people, in effect losing its connection to old sources of mandala power.
5. Literally “of Java,” *kejawen* is a form of Islam that also accounts for the power of local Javanese spirits and is strongly influenced by the Sufi Islam that first came to the archipelago.
6. Comment by ‘Wong Edan’ on “My Time to Die in This Place Has Come” published on *The Jakarta Globe*, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/home/>, October 28, 2010. Comment posted at 1:48 pm, October 29, 2010.
7. Comment by ‘areyouserious’ on “My Time to Die in This Place Has Come” published on *The Jakarta Globe*, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com>, October 28, 2010. Comment posted at 3:39 pm, October 29, 2010.

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