Reconstruction of an indigenous community's belief in dragon

Research on prehistoric Batu Naga Site in Kuningan, West Java

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological remains can be used as data to reconstruct the culture of the past. At the top of Mount Tilu, Kuningan, stands a *menhir* (standing stone) decorated with reliefs. The indigenous community which once cared for this site has long vanished. This paper is the result of a research applying archaeological method and semiotic interpretation to reconstruct the life of this long-dead indigenous community. The reliefs on the *menhir* tell of the beliefs of this ancient which venerated the dragon. They considered this creature as the beginning of life on the earth. This dragon is different from its counterparts known in other parts of the world.

KEYWORDS

Archaeological site; Megalithic community; dragon (*naga*); semiotic; mythology.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

On 2 February 2013, the author made a field trip to the top of Mount Tilu in Dusun Banjaran Desa Jabranti Kuningan Regency West Java, situated precisely on the border with Central Java. The trip was intended to confirm a report from the local community about *batu tulis* (engraved artefacts made of stone) found on top of Mount Tilu. *Batu tulis* is the common term used by laypersons to describe rocks which are carved with specific inscriptions or depictions; however, closer examination is needed to determine whether the carving or inscription is something which has occurred naturally or was made by human hands. The author's observations have confirmed that there are reliefs carved on the *menhir* (standing stone) on top of Mount Tilu. Most of the reliefs were covered with moss and lichen; therefore, the surface of the rock needed to be cleaned before observations could be made. Interestingly, there is also a cluster of large boulders which is characteristic of those found with Megalithic artefacts.

Megalithic artefacts are man-made artefacts carved from a big chunk of rocks. R.P. Soejono has written that people in ancient times built Megalithic structures because they believed in a connection between the world of the living and the dead. As the dead also oversaw the welfare of the living, the living maintained a religious system to pay their respect to the dead. These observances included building large structures using big chunks of stone (Soejono 1984: 2005).

Megalithic cultures began to develop in prehistoric times and some have continued to the present. Akbar (2010) has described the prehistoric religious system as animism, a religious system which believes that a spirit or soul continues to live and have an impact on people's lives on earth. To maintain a good relationship with the spirits and to ensure the continuity and prosperity of their society, the living must venerate the spirits or souls. These spirits or souls were thought to reside in nature; hence "natural spirit worship" was born. The spirits or souls could also reside in animals and plants. This belief gave rise to "animal and plant spirit worship". The spirits and souls could also reside in a specific talisman or object; consequently "fetish spirit worship" was born. The spirits could also reside in the bodies of the dead, long-departed ancestors, and they can return to this world. This gave rise to "ancestor spirit worship" (Akbar 2010: 92-98).

The Megalithic relics on top of Mount Tilu consist of several large-sized rocks, some stand upright (*menhir*); the rest are arranged to form a multi-

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level structure or *punden berundak* (a terraced gravesite which is considered holy or revered). One of *menhir* is three-sided with reliefs on each side. On the first side is a relief of a large serpent, also commonly referred to as a *naga* or dragon, birds, and geometric patterns. The second is decorated with is a figure of a human carrying a weapon who is holding onto the tail of the *naga*, and the background is filled with floral, geometric, and abstract motifs. On the third side, two human figures are seated and three human figures holding weapons are walking. This side is also embellished with floral, geometric, and abstract motifs. Because of these prominences of the reliefs of a *naga* on it, this relic is called the Batu Naga (Dragon Stone) Site (Akbar 2014: 121-122), see Illustration 1.

Illustration 1. The sketch of the relief was drawn by a researcher in Balai Arkeologi Yogyakarta (Widianto 1984: 54).

After carrying out a review and making initial observations, the author commenced an early literature review which yielded the information that the Balai Arkeologi Yogyakarta (Yogyakarta Archaeological Institution) conducted research at this site in 1984. At the time of the research, the site was located right on the border of West Java and Central Java, so it was considered part of Central Java. The figures of the two seated people were not described in detail, nor were the depictions analysed. The relief of the dragon attracted far greater attention because it was associated with prominent ornamental motifs used during Hindu period, like those on temples. The reliefs on the *menhir* were estimated to have been carved around the fifteenth century CE (Widianto 1984: 43).

In archaeological investigations, we often see reliefs carved or inscribed on a relatively hard medium, like stone, terracotta, or metal. Generally speaking, a relief is imbued with a message which needs to be conveyed to its audience. The tale or story inscribed is an essential part of the inspiration or beliefs held by its creators; therefore, a study of such a relief opens a window into the thoughts or beliefs observed by a certain community at a particular time. Even though they are rare, there are some reliefs which have survived from prehistoric times, the period prior to the recorded history, before the invention of a writing system. A relief can be interpreted as an attempt by its creators to perpetuate their aspirations by transferring the ideas in their heads into a medium or into an oral narrative, traditionally passed down from one person to another, into permanent images the creators hoped would last for many generations.

Agus Aris Munandar has argued that reliefs can be classified into three categories, namely: story reliefs, ornamental reliefs which embody a religious concept, and reliefs which are purely decorative. Story reliefs carved on a religious structure also assume a religious role, because they could be used as teaching materials to instil religious and moral education in an audience. Munandar has also said that a religious tale would not be carved or inscribed in its entirety; its depiction would be confined to only certain scenes (Munandar 2011: 195-197). From the perspective of the art, Primadi Tabrani has stated that an artist would use the language of forms as an intermediary between himself and his audiences. The language of forms encompasses photography or pictures, comic illustrations and reliefs among other forms of illustrations (Tabrani 2002: 56-58).

Some of the *menhir* at Megalithic relics in Indonesia were carved and incised. Quite a number of forms and stories on these reliefs cannot be identified since usually the scenes were not part of a specific tale. However, this is not true of the reliefs at the Batu Naga Site. It is also possible to learn more about the stories depicted on the reliefs because the figures and motifs on a single side of rock are interconnected with those on the other two sides. It is no leap of faith to assume that the reliefs on the three sides of the rock are connected with one to another, because they were carved on the same rock. Pertinently, the spacing of these reliefs on a Megalithic site which is closely

associated with something holy obviously has a deeper meaning rather than being mere decorations. These deeper meanings can be interpreted after subjecting it to a form identification and story reconstruction. The next step is to trace the context or reason for the spacing or placement of the reliefs on the *menhir* and the erection of the *menhir* in the broader context, namely on Mount Tilu. The next important move is to try to pinpoint the dating or chronology of these reliefs. On the basis of the descriptions, the foremost issue is to try to identify what kind of belief is sculpted on the *menhir* as it must have mirrored the character of the community.

In archaeology, these issues are related to the three dimensions of the science, namely: form, space, and time. Albert C. Spaulding has asserted that the dimension of form can be discerned by identifying the physical form of an artefact, the dimension of space can be deduced from its spacing or placement or geographical position and the dimension of time which can be detected from the relative and absolute dating of an artefact (Spaulding 1979: 23-39). One of the stated objectives of archaeology according to Lewis R. Binford is reconstructing cultural history (Binford 1972: 80-89). Uncovering the story as told by the reliefs and determining both their context and the chronology of the Batu Naga Site will obviously be of the greatest help in the reconstruction of the community religion in the past. Half a century ago, James Deetz also stated that the aim of archaeology is to reconstruct the life of an ancient society on the basis of the physical remains of the past (Deetz 1967: 5). Therefore, archaeological research is expected to reconstruct the culture of the society at that period.

2. METHODOLOGY

As the objects studied were in the form of reliefs or pictures on the rock, the author used an archaeological method which includes semiotic interpretation. As Deetz says this archaeological method consists of the observing, describing, and explaining (Deetz 1967: 8). When explaining data, specifically those data that have been adjusted and applied in a great deal of archaeological research, it is necessary to utilize semiotic enquiry to interpret the data.

Observation or data collection was achieved by conducting surveys and carrying out field excavations, and then backing this up with literature studies. The author conducted field surveys in March and November of 2013, followed by excavation work in November 2014, January 2015, and November 2015. During the surveys, a detailed observation was specifically made of the form and dimensions of the artefacts, followed by preparing a thorough documentation in the form of drawings and photographs. Observations were conducted on various occasions because each new observation can reveal fresh discoveries or details not recorded in previous observations. Surveys were also conducted at sites with reliefs similar to those found at the Batu Naga Site. Literature studies have been pursued since March 2013. The materials investigated were literature on Megalithic relics, written documentation in the form of inscriptions and old manuscripts, statues and reliefs from different

periods plus a review of the concept of religion.

The Batu Naga Site is located on top of Mount Tilu at an elevation of 1,348 metres above sea level. The site on top of the mountain is surrounded by unpopulated dense forest. The nearest village is Dusun Banjaran, which can be reached by foot within four hours. At the time the author began his research in 2013, there was only one person from the village who had been to the top of Mount Tilu, because the area was managed by the Perhutani (State Forest Management) and was classified as a conservation forest. The people from the village only went to the forest to collect firewood and were ignorant of the existence of the *menhir*.

Describing or data processing was carried out by performing a specific and contextual analysis (Clarke 1978: 32). Specific analysis is applied to the form of the relief as well as its spacing on the rock's surface. This analysis is done to identify each part of a particular relief. A contextual analysis is primarily carried out to determine the association between the rock surfaces on a single piece of rock, between the *menhir* and other pieces of large rock strewn over the Batu Naga Site, and their relationship with the overall surroundings. Contextual analysis has also been used to determine the relative chronology of the Batu Naga Site.

In November 2014 and November 2015, the author conducted excavations to determine whether the reliefs found on the rock's surface extended deeper to part of the rock buried underground. During the excavation, some small, fragile pieces of plain pottery were found. The excavation to a depth of 20 cm revealed that the relief of the *naga*'s body continued down to the parts that were buried. This fact alone shows that the relief was not carved after the rock was planted on the ground. The excavation also revealed that the soil sample from the Batu Naga Site contains carbon and is associated with the *menhir*. This finding was then examined in more depth in the laboratory of the Badan Tenaga Nuklir Nasional (National Nuclear Energy Agency of Indonesia) using radiocarbon dating. Sharer and Ashmore state that radiocarbon dating is one of the absolute methods to determine the age of any archaeological relics (Sharer and Ashmore 2003: 311).

Data interpretation was done by semiotic enquiry. During this stage, the form and spacing of the reliefs were perceived as symbols. Semiotics is the science of signs and symbols. It considers signs and symbols to be everything which has meaning for humans (Hoed 2014: 5). According to Masinambow, the pioneer of cultural semiotics was Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who developed his system within a philosophical framework (Masinambow 2002: iii-iv). Agus Aris Munandar has reiterated Peirce's view on trichotomy or a categorization into three (Munandar 2017: 21-22). According to Pierce as applied by Munandar (see Illustration 2), there is a relationship between a "sign" and its "referent" which results in three kinds of "association".² The

² The broken line between "sign" and "referent" is intended to indicate that there is not necessarily any observable or direct relationship between the sign and the referent (Daniel Chandler 2017, "Sign" in Semiotic for beginners, retrieved from the online version <http://>

first association is natural in character, namely: it is an extension and it will produce indexes. The second association is formal in character, namely: it is about similarity in form and it will produce icons. The third association is arbitrary in character, or rather has no association at all, and it will produce symbols (Munandar 2017: 21-22).

Illustration 2. Peirce’s trichotomy diagram (Munandar 2017: 21).

Munandar argues that because of the vast expanse of its logical process, Pierce’s semiotic concept can be very beneficial in addressing archaeological problems arising from the meaning attached by people in the past to certain objects they made. Objects like buildings, statues, reliefs, or paintings can be perceived as signs (Munandar 2017: 21). The process of logical reasoning within Pierce’s trichotomy can be developed into a process called semiosis and can be developed even farther into unlimited semiosis (referent *n*), see Illustration 3 (Munandar 2017: 22-23).

Illustration 3. Semiosis process (Munandar 2017: 23).

Describing or data interpretation can also be performed by comparing the reliefs found at the Batu Naga Site to other reliefs found in various sites in Indonesia. These might be sites from the prehistoric period or from the era of the recorded history of the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, or colonial periods.

visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html, accessed on 3-10-2017).

Ali Akbar cautions that, when interpreting prehistoric artefacts without the benefit writing, it must be understood that the life of prehistoric society was surrounded by an environment that was deeply immersed in the world of spirits-magic-religion. People in prehistoric society believed in and nurtured a relationship with the Almighty from the creation process, life on earth until life after death (Akbar 2014: 1-3). In Indonesia, the prehistoric period ended in approximately the fourth century CE and the period after that is the era of the recorded history, marked by the use of the Pallava script from India (Soemadio 1984). Moreover, there are also works of comparison referring to literature written by experts in the field which can be used as written references. Hence these methods can expect to help uncover the story and the meaning of the reliefs and ultimately reveal the religious concepts of the contemporary people.

3. ANALYSIS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARTEFACTS FROM THE BATU NAGA SITE

Among the remains on top of Mount Tilu is a three-sided standing stone with reliefs carved on each of its sides. The stands 160 cm tall but its width seen from top to bottom varies. In general, the three sides of the rock are of a different width, at the narrowest it is 50 cm and the biggest circumference is 180 cm. The shape of the surface tends to be flat; however, there is some convex and concave pitting. The variation in the width and differences on the uneven surface clearly indicate that this rock as a natural rock.

A. FIRST SIDE

On the first side, the side of the rock surface facing northeast is an engraved motif of a large-size serpent which covers the whole surface. The image of the serpent is carved with its mouth opening on the left. Its upper lip is depicted longer than its lower lip, and therefore it resembles an elephant's trunk. The mouth is open, and the upper and lower teeth are clearly depicted in the form of triangular carvings, creating a relief of sharp teeth. The size of the teeth is relatively even with the exception one on the upper jaw and one on the lower jaw which are bigger than the rest, creating an impression of fangs. On its head is something which resembles a lock of hair tied in three sections. The creature's eye is carved in an elliptical shape, whereas its ear is carved in a circular shape and is smaller than its eye. The serpent's body is curved to the left. On the left side, there are horizontal lines that represent the belly of the beast. On the right side are triangular lines which resemble the traditional *tumpal* (triangle) decoration. The triangular motifs formed the serpent's scales along its back. This carving only shows the head and half of the serpent's body; the rest of the body and its tail are not shown.

The surface or area under the serpent's mouth is filled with geometric patterns of parallelograms (lozenge-shaped). There are two interconnecting lozenge-shaped patterns, one on the right and the other on the left. Similar geometric patterns are also depicted below the parallelogram. Below this again is an engraving of a flower-like design without a stem and each motif is shaped like an ellipse. There are also decorative motifs consisting of other

geometric shapes and runners (of plants). These motifs fill the area outside the head and body of the serpent. Then, there are also other geometric shapes and root patterns. These motifs fill the space outside the head and body of the serpent (see Illustration 4).

Illustration 4. First side (left, photograph by the author, 2013; right, illustrated by Bintang Megakusuma, 2013).

B. SECOND SIDE

On this side, there is a relief of a serpent depicted full length, from its head to its tail. A man holds the serpent's tail. The serpent's body is surrounded by various motifs, geometrical, abstract and birds.

The serpent on this side is depicted like that on the first side; however, as said, on this side it is fully drawn including the lower part of the body and the tail. On the lower part, there is an engraving of closely spaced lines with the spacing getting tighter near the tail. The tail is slimmer than the body. The serpent's head is located on the right side, the belly is in the lower midsection and the tail is in upper left side; therefore, overall the serpent resembles the letter U. The tip of the tail is branched into three points.

The man holding the serpent's tail is drawn in the left area of the rock. He

is depicted as bald and he is facing the left. The man's eyes, ears and mouth are drawn unadorned, devoid of any decoration or jewellery of any kind. He is not wearing an upper garment; he is wearing some kind of waist belt tied at the back. He has a lower garment that extends to his knees; however, despite the covering his private (genital) part is obviously erect and is clearly directed at the serpent. He is barefoot and his two feet are facing left. The man is holding the serpent's tail with his left hand, while his right hand clutches a sharp weapon which looks like a machete (see Illustration 5). The back of the machete is straight, but its sharp edge is not entirely straight. The mid-section of the sharp edge is slightly curved inward; hence, the width of the blade is slightly slimmer in the middle.

Above the serpent's head are two birds drawn facing the left. In front of the serpent's mouth there is a decorative motif of three-pronged runners. Below the mouth there is another depiction of a bird, in front of it or to the right of the bird there are two geometric patterns which resemble a five-pointed star. There is also a crawling creature with many feet in the curvature of the serpent's body.

Illustration 5. Second side (left, photograph by the author, 2013; right, illustrated by Bintang Megakusuma, 2013).

C. THIRD SIDE

On this side, proceeding from top to bottom and from left to right is as follows (see Illustration 6). At the top, in the middle, there is a five-sided motif. This motif resembles a flower with five petals. Each petal is lozenge-shaped. Inside each of these lozenge-shaped motifs is a smaller lozenge-shaped object. Seen from left to right, two of the lozenge-shaped objects are located on the left, to be precise in the north-westerly and south-westerly directions. The third lozenge shape is in the middle top section or in the north. The fourth and fifth lozenge-shapes are located on the right, to be precise in the east-north-easterly and east-south-easterly directions.

Below the five-sided motif, to be precise in the middle, there is a large triangle, which is supported by a beam on the left and right sides. Below the beam, there is a container decorated with woven patterns. To the right and left side of the container are seated human figures. The large triangle is an isosceles triangle. Two of the triangle's sides are of the same length, while the horizontal side on the bottom is longer than the other two sides. Inside the triangle, there are two connecting parallel lines, which form two triangle sides that are smaller in dimension than the outer triangle. On the top or at the apex of the triangle there is a two-part finial which tilts towards the right and the left. Above the finial is the empty space in which we find the five-sided object we have described previously. The empty space gives the impression that the five-sided object is floating in space, and therefore it appears more like a five-sided star as opposed to a five-sided flower.

Below the large triangle motif, there are four vertical lines. These four lines form two pillars or two columns supporting the large triangle. The two pillars or columns are of the same height and width. Beneath the two pillars, we see a container of some sort with a base. The container resembles a cauldron or something which looks like a reservoir, and it is semi-circular in shape and decorated with a geometric shaped object. There are three geometric objects with six petals on the upper part of the container. Beneath the three geometric objects with six petals are three lozenge-shaped objects. Then, there is a horizontal line that separates the upper part of the container from its base. The base of the container is decorated with a triangular motif that resembles meander motifs. On the right and left sides of the container are seated human figures facing the container.

The hair of the first human figure on the left side is styled with a topknot which ends in three locks. This figure is carved in profile; in other words, the eyes of this figure are not directed at the observers. The eyes are round and big, so is the nose, of which the tip is rounded. He is grinning; hence, his sharp teeth look like fangs. His body, which appears to be medium size or maybe a normal size, appears to be unclothed, except that there appears to be a belt of some sort around his waist. The figure is sitting with his feet stretched forward, and he is not sitting cross-legged. The toes of his bare feet are facing towards the right. He is sitting with his right leg folded; thus, his knee is higher than and not at his side. His right hand is holding the right

knee, while his left hand is holding some kind of a weapon which hangs over his left shoulder. The handle of this weapon is clearly apparent, but the other end is not clearly delineated; therefore it is difficult to determine whether this weapon is a blade, machete, a club or something else. His unclothed body is unadorned with any accessories at all on his arms, body, or feet.

The second figure is positioned on the right side, and he is wearing some sort of headgear or his hair is styled in a way that resembles a *mohawk*. This figure is also drawn in a lateral position; therefore, he is not facing the observers. His eye is round and bigger than the eye of the figure on the left. The nose is also big with rounded tip. His tongue is sticking out of his mouth, but his teeth are not seen because his mouth is not open wide. His body appears to be unclothed, but he is wearing some kind of waist belt tied at the back. His back, head and the base of his neck and his back are drawn with a straight line; hence, the impression is this figure is rather fat. His chest also protrudes forward, adding to the impression of a fat person. The figure is depicted in a sitting position with both feet folded in front. This is not a cross-legged position because the knees are higher raised in front of his chest and are not at his side. The left hand is holding the left knee. His unclothed body, including his arms, body or feet, is also unadorned and devoid of any accessories.

Below these two figures who sit on either side of the container, we see another three human figures carved in the middle and right side of the rock surface. They are drawn facing the left, not facing the observers. In this position, they appear to be marching, heading towards the left side. They seem to be wearing some kind of unadorned clothes. These clothes end at the waistline, and below that they seem to be wearing a lower garment that resembles a skirt that reaches down to their knees. The shape of their heads differs from one to another. The head in the middle vividly resembles an animal head. Even though the shape of the other two heads cannot be clearly determined, the nose of the left head is pointed like a dog which would be uncommon for human nose. The figure at the extreme left has a human body, human legs and human hands and a canine-like head. All the three figures are carrying weapons on their hands. The figure on the right is holding something that looks like a spear or javelin, which is carried over his left shoulder. The figures in the middle and on the left are holding sharp weapons which look like machetes or short blades which they brandish in their right hands. The machetes appear to be similar in design to the one carried by the human figure on the surface of the second side.

To the left of and below the three human figures we see several animal or faunal motifs. These motifs are engraved on the lowest part of the rock surface. Unlike the motifs on top and middle of the rock, the condition of the rock's surface on which the motifs are engraved is not good because it is covered with moss and lichen. Attempts have been made to clean it up; nevertheless, the condition of the carving is rather blurred; therefore, it is quite difficult to make out the carved motifs. On the left side, there is depiction of birds and

frogs. Still on the left side of the surface or in front of the three marching figures, there is a snake. Below the snake there is one large animal which is difficult to identify; hence, a question-mark still hangs over it. The four-legged animal might be some kind of large lizard or maybe even a type of tiger.

Illustration 6. Third side (left, photograph by the author, 2013; right, illustrated by Bintang Megakusuma, 2013).

4. STORY ON THE RELIEF AND RELIGIOUS CONCEPT

On the first side of the rock, the dominant figure is the large serpent, the focal point of the depiction. Its prominence is clearly indicated by the size of the serpent, which is much larger than the other figures on the carving. The serpent figure has also been also carved in detail with great precision, and its shape is better-defined than that of the other figures. The other figures are also placed around the serpent's figure, also placing more emphasis on the serpent figure and assigning the other figures the role of decoration or as fillers for the empty space.

The engraving of serpent figure from the top to the ground which only shows half body figure can be seen as a sign (relief of *naga*, see Illustration 7).

In semiotics, a sign will have a meaning. The serpent relief depicted turning to the left is an icon referring to a snake that moves dynamically and thrusts itself from the earth or bursts out of the ground. The concept of a large-sized serpent emerging from the earth indicates that the serpent is an icon for the ruler of the underworld.

When we observe the relief meticulously, obviously the half-bodied serpent is a creature which does not exist in the real world; therefore, it must refer to a mythological being. Overall, it can be said that the figure depicted is a serpent in view of its long, sinuous body, with scales and no limbs. Unlike a real serpent, this figure has additional features, like an ear lobe, three topknots, and its upper lip resembles the curled trunk of an elephant. In semiotics, this sort of relief is associated with a symbol indicating a dragon. Conceptually, a dragon is a mythological animal; hence, the people at that time believed in myths about dragons.

Basuki Teguh Yuwono writes that a dragon is usually a mythological beast which exists in nearly every part of the world, whose manifestations differ according to the region. Although it might seem different, a dragon is depicted in a form which closely resembles a large serpent or a reptile with scales. It is believed to possess supernatural powers which can influence the life of mankind (Yuwono 2011: 31). The term *naga* (dragon) itself comes from Sanskrit, and one of its meanings is serpent (Zoetmulder and Robson 1997: 686-687).

Illustration 7. The semiosis process of the first side relief of a *naga* from the head to the body.

On the second side of the rock, both the human figure and the *naga* are the central representations. Both are represented as much larger than the other reliefs. The other figures are not represented in any detail, actually a bit sloppily. This makes them difficult to identify and they appear to have been used as fillers for the empty space. Obviously these figures were not considered as important as the figure of the *naga* or the human which are quite

distinctly the central figure because they are placed in the centre of the rock surface. Both the human figure and the *naga* must be viewed as belonging to the same story, because they are placed on the same rock surface and because the hand of the human figure is holding the dragon's tail.

At first glance, as the right hand of the human figure holds a weapon it might seem to be describing a battle with the *naga*. The human figure is drawn facing the *naga* with its male genitalia erect. A male with an erect genital is symbol of sexual passion. If the relief were a depiction of a battle scene, logically the male would have protected his genitalia from injury and specifically take care no injury befalls his sexual organ. A relief depicting a weapon is an index that refers to the character or concept of masculinity. In semiotics, a relief of a sexual organ symbolizes that a physical interaction or sexual intercourse with another being is about to occur. Anatomically the position of the *naga*'s body, which faces the sexual organ of the male figure, is in the approximate area of the genitalia.

The *naga* on this relief is depicted surrounded by birds, two birds above and one below the mouth. Furthermore, there is a depiction of two objects which resemble flower petals. In semiotics, a relief of birds and flowers symbolizes peace and tranquillity. The birds are depicted as undisturbed, even though they are close to a dragon's mouth. Therefore, it can be inferred that the birds and the flower have a close relationship with the *naga*, intimating that the figure of *naga* is not an evil or fearsome figure. The flower relief is also a symbol closely associated with the concept of the feminine. The flower image which is carved close to the dragon symbolizes the close association between the *naga* and the flower or in other words the *naga* has feminine traits.

In the next semiosis process (see Illustration 8), the deduction has to be that the *naga* is the ruler of the underworld or the earth (stage 1) which is symbolized by feminine traits. The *naga* as a female symbol can be interpreted as an indication that females are the source of life (stage 2); hence a *naga* is also an icon of the Mother Goddess.

Illustration 8. The semiosis process of the relief on the second side showing the *naga* from head to tail.

The motifs or figures engraved on the second side are inseparable because they form a unified story. As explained, in semiotics the relief tells a story about physical intercourse between the weapon-carrying male figure and the dragon, which is positioned as a female. The meaning of this story is the unification of two elements which possess extraordinary powers because the *naga* is a symbol of power of the underworld, and only a male who is also possessed of an extraordinary ability would be able to mate with a *naga*. The male figure with the erect sexual organ is a symbol for an ancestor or God or a "super human being" (see Illustration 9).

Illustration 9. The semiosis process of the relief on the second side of the male figure with an erect sexual organ.

In the next part of the process (see Illustration 10), observing the relief of the two birds above the dragon's head, it becomes obvious that the birds are not intended merely as filler for some empty space or have been put there for decorative purposes. The bird couple is depicted in a reasonably large size and placed in an elevated position near the top of the rock. Through a process of semiosis, the two birds become the icon of a couple consisting of a male and a female (stage 1). The bird couple is not sitting on the ground but are placed on the apex of the rock, and hence they could be a symbol for the Upper World, a region which is higher than the world in which the humans live (stage 2). The Upper World is a symbol of the Heavens in which the gods or our ancestors reside (stage 3). The two birds might be a symbol of the dragon and of the exceptional male who now resides in the Heavens.

On the third side of the rock (see Illustration 6), the roles of almost all the figures appear to be equally important. This deduction is based on the fact that their size is more or less the same. However, the workmanship of the reliefs at the top and in the middle is more detailed and therefore it would seem reasonable to assume that they are opposed to the reliefs at the bottom. In semiotics, the placement of an object can also be interpreted as having a

specific meaning. The top part symbolizes an important concept, whereas the lower section symbolizes a less important concept.

Illustration 10. The semiosis process of the relief on the second side about the bird couple.

When we set about making a closer observation, the motif of the five-sided star appears as if floating above the house with the triangular roof. In semiotics, a star is a symbol which illuminates all the lives in the world. Inherent in a star is the concept of the Almighty, who resides in the Heavens and characterized by oneness and hence is referred to as the One and Only. The combination of lines below the star forms a house with an isosceles triangle as the roof, supported by two beams. In semiotics, a house symbolizes the need for a dwelling or a place of residence and a happy and harmonious family life. A house is a symbol of a happy and harmonious earthly life. Below the house is a container which might be a bowl for storing food. In semiotics, a container is a place for storing everything, especially food to meet daily needs and to store surpluses. A container expresses the concept of worldly fortune and prosperity.

The appearance of the human figures next to the container is distinct. The human figure on the left seems to be grinning, exposing sharp teeth which resemble fangs. In semiotics, fangs are the index which refers to malevolence. The human figure on the right is smiling. Smiling lips are the index that refers to goodness.

The animal reliefs on the lower section of the rock are, in semiotics, icons which refer to animals which might range from birds, snakes, frogs, lizards to tigers. The concept behind these animals is a depiction of the environment which symbolizes the surroundings in which humans live. The figures of three humans march to the left and all of them are carrying a weapon. Two of the figures are holding sharp weapons which resemble machetes. A machete is an icon of a land-clearing tool. When we combine the human figures with weapons, the animal figures stand symbol for the human world (see Illustration 11).

A thorough examination of the figures reveals that they have human bodies but animal heads. Although there is only one head which resembles animal, another head on the left is considered animal head. In semiotics, they are a symbol of a human with an animal-like instinct. The concept of people with animal heads refers to humans who still retain animal-like characteristics or have not yet acquired the noble values of humanity. If they continue their march to the left, their way of thinking will be entirely transformed into animal-like thinking. In their daily lives, humans with animal heads are confronted with choices. The larger human figure on the right side of the container, because of his position, can be perceived as, symbolizing he is on the side of goodness; therefore, this figure is introducing the concept of positive, reasoned thought to the groups of smaller humans with animal heads. The human figure on the left side can be perceived a symbol referring to evil; hence, this figure is trying to influence the human figures with animal heads with negative, unreasoned thought.

Illustration 11. The semiosis process of the relief on the third side about the human figure with a machete.

Overall, the reliefs on the third side of the rock surface contain a meaningful story, especially if we follow the narration from the bottom upwards. Humans who live in their environment in the real world, namely with the animals, are confronted with choices in their lives. Basically, humans carry animal traits within them and yet humans also long for harmonious and happy lives and also desire to be closer to the Almighty. If they yield to their animal instincts and follow the example of the human figure on the left, these animal traits will completely engulf them. If, on the other hand, they choose to follow the lead of the human figure on the right, which leads to goodness, they will attain happiness and prosperity in the world. Humans who lead their lives in this fashion will benefit from the Almighty's guidance and be close to Him.

Overall, the reliefs engraved on all three sides of the rock at the Batu Naga Site narrate a story which contains not only a meaning, but also help to reconstruct the religious concepts followed by the people at the time it

was carved. These religious concepts can be interpreted as follows. Humans at that time believed that their origin could be traced back to the time when the Mother Goddess had had physical intercourse with the male possessing exceptional powers. Both ascended to the Heavens and had become deities. Humans also believed that, besides them, there were supernatural powers which were much more powerful than they were and governed their lives in this world. Therefore, if they are to attain happiness in the physical world and in the world to come, humans must follow the guidance of the deities.

5. CHRONOLOGY

Assigning a time to the making of the reliefs comes down to the same thing as dating or establishing the chronology of the Batu Naga Site relief. Deetz has stated that chronology can be divided into absolute and relative chronology (Deetz 1967). Among other methods, relative chronology can be determined by comparing the particular technology or techniques used to make a specific relief, the elements or sections found on the relief and the context in which the relief at the Batu Naga Site was found.

Humans in Indonesia have been carving rocks and stones and producing reliefs since the prehistoric period. In Indonesia the early prehistoric period, especially in Java, developed roughly a million years ago and continued into approximately the fourth century CE. Towards the end of the prehistoric period, during the Neolithic, a number of Megalithic cultures developed and they have left many relics in the form of statues and reliefs carved on rocks. This tradition continued in the following periods into which Indonesian history is divided: the Hindu-Buddhist period from the fourth century CE to the thirteenth century CE; the following Islamic period, from the thirteenth century CE to sixteenth century CE, there were also numbers of stone reliefs, but it was also marked by a lack of relics in the form of statues. From the colonial period to the period of Indonesia's independence, various statues and reliefs on rocks have also been found. Each period has produced reliefs with their own unique characteristics; hence, they can be used as indicators in dating or establishing the relative age of remains.

Research to determine the chronological age or period of artefacts from Megalithic cultures is in progress. Soejono made the point that Megalithic artefacts can date from different periods. They range from those of the prehistoric period to those from the era of recorded history, and some are even from this present period. Some Megalithic remains have decayed into ruins or are no more than scattered remnants left behind by a society which has disappeared or undergone huge changes. Some of them are still in use (Soejono 1982: 73).

Robert von Heine Geldern, as quoted in Soejono (1984: 206) stated that Megalithic traditions can be grouped into two major traditions:

- a. Old Megalithic from around 2500 to 1500 BCE, characterized by artefacts

like *dolmens* (stone tables); stone ladders, pyramidal structures with ladders, *pelinggih*, stonewalls, and stone-paved roads.

- b. Young Megalithic from approximately the first millennium BCE, whose remains consist of stone coffins, *dolmen semu*, sarcophagi, and stone vessels.

Besides using relative dating, some researchers have used carbon dating to get a more precise dating. The dating of some Megalithic sites in some big islands in Indonesia has been established. For instance, carbon dating analysis of the Megalithic site in the form stone burial jars in Tatelu, Minahasa, shows 2070 ± 140 BP.³ The Megalithic site in Bondowoso, East Java, shows 840 ± 200 BP. The Megalithic site in Jember, East Java, shows 580 ± 100 BP (Prasetyo 2006: 289, 291). When calibrated, the Megalithic site in Minahasa reveals a range from the third to second century BCE, and the Megalithic site in Bondowoso reveals a range from the twelfth to thirteen CE. The Megalithic site in Jember is younger since it reveals a range from the fourteenth to fifteenth CE. Meanwhile, the Megalithic site in the form of a terraced gravesite and *menhir* at the Gunung Padang Site, West Java, in several samples could be from between 5200 to the fifth century BCE (Akbar 2013: 259).

The author's observations at several Megalithic sites have confirmed that humans in the prehistoric period had mastered carving techniques which allowed them to produce low reliefs. The techniques to produce high relief or to produce a three-dimensional relief had already been mastered by prehistoric people in Indonesia. These techniques were used to create human-like motifs, floral, faunal, buildings, geometric shapes and abstract patterns. Human-like motifs, whether a full representation of a human figure or only part of the human body, like a human face, full front or in profile, have been found. Among the floral motifs are leaves, coconut palms and so on. Fauna motifs depict such animals as large snakes, tigers, birds, and lizards. The technique for carving an entire block of a rock to produce a statue had also been mastered by prehistoric people in Indonesia.

During the late prehistoric period, apart from making tools and constructing buildings from stone, humans made metal goods like bracelets, axes, spear-heads, and some sort of swords, as well as *nekara* (bronze kettledrums). *Nekara* are generally heavily ornamented on both the top and the body. Bintarti has noted that one of the ornaments on *nekara* is the *tumpal* (triangle) decoration (Bintarti 2008: 145).

Various archaeological sites, like the Pasemah Site in South Sumatra, the Pangguyangan Site in West Java, several sites in Wonosari Central Java, Megalithic sites in Bali and Sulawesi illustrate the skills, techniques, and motifs produced during the prehistoric period. Statues and reliefs on rocks from the

³ Sharer and Ashmore refer BP to radiocarbon dates only, BP or Before Present means before 1950 (Sharer and Ashmore 2003: 336). According to Deetz, the radiocarbon result which determines the obtained date, should be given latitude; for instance, 2300 plus or minus 200 years old (2300 ± 200). To determine such date, for instance 2300 years, we should consider the average amount of radioactivity detected in the sample and the latitude means degree of variation found in the average observation (Deetz 1967: 37).

prehistoric period are usually found as part of a building complex or a group of Megalithic structures.

A study of simple statues in Indonesia, from Sumatra, Java, Bali, and other regions, conducted by Purusa Mahaviranata reveals that these all show similar characteristics, for instance, eyes wide open, crossed arms, visible genitalia or the genital part prominently shown. The simple statues found on Nias, according to Mahaviranata, illustrate a leader figure or the personification of an ancestral character believed to possess supernatural powers. Simple statues found in Bali are also believed to be from the Megalithic culture (Mahaviranata 2008: 102-105). In archaeological science in Indonesia, the term simple statue refers to a *menhir* (Sukendar 1993).

On the basis of research by Kristantina Indriastuti (2005) into the prehistoric relics in the Megalithic sites of Pasemah, the ancient community could create statues, paintings and engraving on rocks. Some of the artefacts include statues of seated humans, a statue of a person holding a child and a tiger attacking a small child. The paintings depict a person riding a water-buffalo, concentric circles and roots. Rock engravings include a depiction of a human face, a person riding an elephant and lines shaped like a fish (Indriastuti 2005: 11-14). Sukendar has argued that there were some fundamental changes from the *menhir*, which are static representations of objects, to a style of carving which illustrated humans performing various actions (Sukendar 1993: 8).

A depiction of a *naga* is frequently found on archaeological relics from the Hindu- Buddhist period in Java. In many of the temples built from the eighth to tenth century surveyed by the author, including the temples of Prambanan, Sewu, Borobudur and the temples on Dieng, are motifs depicting a large serpent or *naga*. For instance, this motif is found on statues of Dwarapala and a temple relief which tells the story of a dragon and a turtle moving Mount Mandara. *Naga* motifs are also found in *lingga* and *yoni*. One of the most beautiful statues is of God Vishnu riding Garuda, which tells a story Garuda's quest to seek the holy water, *amerta*, and conquer its enemy, the *naga*.

This statue from 1019 CE is now part of the collection of the Trowulan Museum in East Java. The author also had the opportunity to observe several *naga* motif artefacts from the era of Majapahit (circa 1293 to approximately fifteenth century CE), now also found in the Trowulan Museum. Many of the temples, which were constructed near the end of the Hindu-Buddhist, also contain *naga* motifs, for example, the temple of Sukuh. The author has also observed several low relief *naga* motifs, in which the *naga* is positioned sideways, not facing the observers.

The *naga* motifs from the Hindu-Buddhist era, observed by the author, were depicted in a number of different ways. Despite the different depictions, usually the *naga* is depicted with its mouth wide open displaying clearly visible sharp teeth or fangs, wearing a chain or necklace around its neck or directly below its head, wearing a crown on its head and an ear decoration in the form of earrings or *sumping*. The techniques used to create a *naga* relief during the Hindu-Buddhist era were low- and high relief as well as full surface carving to produce a statue.

When we turned our attention to the broader area of Southeast Asia some early relevant information has also been gathered; however, it has to be analyzed in more depth to see any connections or developments. One is a legend known among the people in Cambodia. Legend says that Kambu Svayambhuva met a huge, many-headed *naga*. Before fighting, they talked to each other, and it turned out that they were both devotees of Siva. The Naga King then gave his daughter to Kambu in marriage. Using his magical powers, the Naga King built a new capital for his son-in-law. Kambu then ruled the kingdom which was later called Kambuja. The legend, composed by Promsak Jermsawatdi, has also been quoted by other researchers like Coedes and Munandar (Jermsawatdi 1979: 124; Coedes 2010: 104; Munandar 2014: 237). Preliminary literary studies have been conducted on books related to the buildings and art of Cambodia and India, including those by Stutley (1985), Munsterberg (1970), and Permentier (1960). However, so far, no drawing or photo of an artefact which shows the forms of a human figure and *naga* relating to the legend has been found.

The descriptions above demonstrate that rock-carving skills have been mastered by humans since the prehistoric period. Remains in the form of *punden berundak* (a terraced gravesite which is considered holy or revered) are generally classified as prehistoric remains. No complete and detailed survey of the Batu Naga Site has been carried because it is located in a densely forested area, heavily overgrown with undergrowth and trees. However, generally speaking the site takes the form of three terraced gravesites. The top is a flat area which is around 100 meters long. There are a number of parts of this site: (1) an upright stone with a relief; (2) scattered big stones whose patterns have not yet been deciphered; (3) a mound of soil around 3 metres high; (4) a 13 metre-square structure with the stone stairs on the northern side, (5) a 3.5 metre-square structure with a stone floor whose outer side is 1.1 metre high and the inner side 0.7 metre (see Appendix, Batu Naga Site layout).

Unquestionably, the depictions of the *naga* at the Batu Naga Site are different in style to those of the *naga* during the Hindu era. The result of the dating test on four samples from the Batu Naga Site conducted by the National Nuclear Energy Agency of Indonesia shows that the oldest remains date from 2000 BCE and the most recent from the fifth century BCE. This dating indicates that the Batu Naga Site was used during the prehistoric period and hence dates from the period before Hinduism entered Indonesia.

In brief, the indigenous community at that location during the prehistoric period can be reconstructed as follows. The community had lived permanently at the site which is shown by the depiction of relief of the pillars and roof of the house. The people were knowledgeable about their environment and could identify certain types of animals. The people could also produce art, in the form of sculptures relevant to their beliefs. The people could build constructions located at the top of the mountain using arrangements of big stones. The complicated construction also indicates the presence of a society which used a division of labour in their construction work: for instance, finding

the materials, transporting them to the construction site and for the building work itself. The society also knew about working metal, for instance, to make machetes which were probably used in agriculture and hunting animals. It is generally assumed that the people in a location like this were united by the same belief which, in this case, considered dragon the central figure. Apart from this, there was a teacher figure who instructed them in the philosophy of life and inculcated virtues, wisdom and harmony.

6. CLOSING

The disclosure of the meaning of the reliefs found at the Batu Naga Site has provided additional knowledge enabling a reconstruction of the culture of the prehistoric community which once lived there. Reliefs from the past found on rocks can divulge an event which occurred or tell about a particular faith of ancient people. The reliefs at the Batu Naga Megalithic site in the district of Kuningan, West Java, contain a religious story dating from the prehistoric times. These teachings or traditions are depicted in the stories carved on the sides of the artefact in the expectation that they would be seen and understood by the people then and by people of the following generations.

The reliefs at Batu Naga are carved on three sides of a standing stone. Each side can be construed as a single plane or surface containing one scene of the story. The story is narrated by tracing the carved reliefs clockwise. Briefly, the story is told as follows. In the beginning or the first side, the *naga* or the dragon which symbolizes the underworld appeared on earth. The second side shows the *naga* had sexual intercourse with a male figure that possessed special powers which enabled him to mate with the *naga*. From this relationship, the ancestor of humans on earth came into being. The last side teaches people how to conduct their lives on earth by abiding by the command to perform good deeds to achieve prosperity and happiness with the blessing of the Almighty. The reliefs depicted at Batu Naga do not have a written narrative associated with them which might serve as a reference point, since people from that period have not left any writings; therefore, further discussion about the findings of this study is still open.

The prehistoric period in Java was followed by the historical period. The people who arrived and introduced literacy were the Indians, the Arabs, the Chinese and the Europeans. These people also introduced a different system of belief to that of prehistoric period. Their coming brought a change in the beliefs of the indigenous community. The figure of the dragon, once so central, began to be eclipsed or was even abandoned. The central spiritual figure in prehistoric belief was a dragon, but he/she was replaced by another figure from the new religion, like Siwa in Hinduism. The concept of the importance of a dragon or a big snake was not fully left behind, but its depiction was adapted to resemble that the dragon known to the Indians, the Chinese and the Europeans.

Meanwhile, the role of the figures representing good and evil in the Prehistoric period seems to have survived for a certain period, despite the

arrival of a number of various cultural elements from outside Java. Gradually concepts of good and evil were also affected by ideas from cultures from outside Java. Names and forms changed but many aspects seem to have been universal. The drawing of a good figure with a smile and a bad figure with a smirk and fangs was already known in the prehistoric period at Batu Naga Site and this has been continued right up to the present day.

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1. Upright stone with relief.

2. Scattered big stones.

3. High mount of soil.

4. Square structure with stone stairs.

5. Square structure with stone floor.