

RUMAH MENAPO

The Refuge of the Deer during the Floods of the Batanghari River

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Borju, the poet of disasters, has been making masks for several years. Since his grandparents told him how their ancestors were lepers treated as outcasts by the neighbouring villages. They were driven into the depths of a forest full of haunted ruins, a cursed place abandoned for centuries. On the last night of the month of Ramadan, the unfortunate lepers still dared to join in the *takbiran*¹ procession wearing masks and long rags that hid their sores. On their backs they carried a rattan basket in which compassionate souls would dispose food.

These haunted ruins were in fact the remains of the largest Buddhist monastic university in Southeast Asia between the 7th and 13th centuries. This “confluence of knowledge” flourished at the crossroads of the Buddhist Sea Route which took over from the continental Silk Route in the 7th century. Scholars and religious masters from China and India came here to study by sailing through the Malacca Strait and up the Batanghari, the largest river in Sumatra. *Batang* means “river” in Indonesian, and *Hari* is Vishnu’s 656th name. It is by navigating this stream that Indian religions entered the archipelago from the very first centuries of our era, up to the primary forests on the slopes of the Kerinci Volcano. A route that could also be called “the Gold Route”, because merchants from all over Asia rushed there to seek this precious metal. Hence the name Suvarnadvipa, which in Sanskrit means ‘the Island of Gold’, referred to what is now Sumatra island (this island’s Mahayana and Tantric teachings radiating until Tibet). Around the 13th century, this great university sank into oblivion.

Today, on its very site stands the village of Muara Jambi whose inhabitants are all Muslims. Their homes are made of wood and built on stilts along the Batanghari River. Their orchards planted with cacao, *duku* and durian trees that extend over more than 3000 hectares, in the middle of ruined temples. Several young villagers occasionally work on excavations alongside archaeologists. They know how to talk to each stone, each mound of red earth, each tree in the forest, their parents still with small huts where they watch, at night, the fall of the durian fruits. For these young people, the ancient knowledge is still alive among the ruins. They feel deeply and naturally infused and inspired by it so they collect and read many history books. They are both guardians of the site and explorers of its past. Legends, local wisdom and the “inner eye” are their excavation tools.

Thus, to celebrate the memory of his leprous ancestors, Borju the poet began to make tormented masks out of dry pumpkins, which the children carry each year on the last night of the fasting month, in a joyful procession through the village.

¹
Takbiran: prayers and celebrations on the last night of the Muslim fasting month.



Celebration the memory of leprous ancestors by making tormented masks out of dry pumpkins. Documentation by Padmasana Foundation

From his Indian grandfather, Borju² inherited a slender body whose ascetic thinness and Rastafarian hair give him an aura worthy of his commitments. During the week, in a local madrasa, he teaches Pancasila, the five pillars of the Indonesian Constitution, emphasizing social justice, community mutual aid (*gotong royong*), and cultural diversity. On days when the smoke from forest fires is so thick that schools are forced to close, he organizes poetic protests against corruption outside the governor's palace in Jambi City. On Saturday nights, he sings at weddings with his Malayu pop music band. And on Sundays, he takes the children to his open-for-all school along the Batanghari, to plant a green barrier against the coal dust, which falls on the village in a heavy and suffocating rain, when the trucks, on the other shore, unload the coal on the stockpiles in the open air. Borju is also the father of a little girl. As a clairvoyant Muslim he named her: Prajnaparamita, the Mother of Wisdom in Mahayana Buddhism.

In September 2019, the entire province of Jambi was invaded by smoke from huge forest fires, as was the case in other regions of Sumatra and Kalimantan. A new Indonesian word was born out of this environmental crime: *karhutla*, an acronym formed on the term *kebakaran hutan dan lahan*, forest and field fires. Challenging the disaster, Borju revived an ancient ritual: *Larung Sungai*. Under an orange sky blurred by a screen of suffocating smoke, the villagers of Muara Jambi embarked on two long motorized canoes to throw offerings into the river. All wore pumpkin lepers' masks modified into fire masks. And the poet declaimed:

*"The waters of the Batanghari can no longer soothe the thirst
 Its currents that once ferried glorious tales
 Today bring news of disaster to the Golden Island
 The Earth is burning burning
 Disconsolate farmers in parched rice fields
 Sit motionless, no tress left for shelter
 Clear-cut, they all fell into the pockets of clowns
 Wearing the costumes of the select few
 All that remains are rotten branches clutching at the sky
 All that is left is to die, waiting for the slanders of the earth"*

²
 Mukhtar Hadir is
 Borju's real name

When I first arrived in Muara Jambi in November 2010 on an official invitation, the villagers were still regarded as outcasts by the provincial authorities, as if the stigma of their leprous ancestors clung to them. The governor himself dissuaded his guests from going for a walk alone in the village. He would give them an escort of several army people to protect them against “this population of robbers and outlaws”. The inhabitants of Muara Jambi were accused of stealing fruits from trees in their own orchard that the authorities claimed as part of the archaeological site, or of demonstrating against the coal companies. They were also looked down upon by the Archaeology Department, who employed them as cheap labour for excavation and suspected they stole valuable artefacts in the process. But when the villagers handed their findings to the archaeologists, they were never given feedback about the historical or religious meaning of those ancient objects. As if they had no right to know, as if knowledge belonged to academics alone, not to “uneducated village people”.

In November 2010, the Jambi Provincial Government had organized a seminar about Muara Jambi as a tentative candidate for UNESCO World Heritage. I had been invited to talk about the journey of the Indian Buddhist master Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana to Suvarnavdipa in 1012, as recorded in a Tibetan manuscript said to be written by Atisha himself. This highly learned monk left the prestigious Buddhist center of Nalanda, in India, to cross the ocean and meet his most cherished guru from countless previous lifetimes: Serlingpa, the Man of the Golden Island. After 13 years in Sumatra, Atisha went back to India, and was later invited by the king of Tibet to undertake the so called “second spreading of Buddhism” in the Himalayas, carrying with him the precious teachings of his master from the Golden Island.

During the two days seminar, several scholars exposed how excavations undertaken since the 1970s by the Indonesian government had already exhumed eight of the eighty-four “temples”, several statues and much Chinese pottery and ceramics from the 9th Century; but very few epigraphs, so that archaeologists still did not dare to speak openly of “a university”. Yet they admitted that these complexes were not temples but study centers, with two to six podiums each, once sheltered from sun and rain by a tiled roof supported by wooden pillars. The student monks would have sat cross-legged around the podium on a brick pavement.



Candi Kotomahligai, Muara Jambi

One of the most brilliant speeches of the seminar was delivered by Prof. Dr. Mundardjito, a senior archeologist from Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta. He stressed that the construction of Muara Jambi, which lasted over several centuries, must have required a multidisciplinary knowledge to adapt to the complex geography of the site: rain forest, swamps, and a river with monsoon floods. Therefore, to reveal what Dr. Mundardjito described as the “identity card of Indonesia”, a multidisciplinary approach should in turn be required today, where archeologists, historians, epigraphists, environmentalists, architects, spiritual masters and also village communities should be encouraged to live on site with their local wisdom.

Borju and his friends from the village were not invited to the seminar as speakers, but only as part of the audience. They were active listeners, and the speech of Dr Mundardjito struck them. It suddenly freed them from the stigma as outcasts, outlaws, and ignorant farmers with which local authorities and academia had stamped upon them. It clearly granted them the duty and the legitimacy to continue their commitment to explore, preserve, and develop the intangible wealth of “their home” - the Murara Jambi site. From that moment on, they organized themselves in a more structured way by creating the Padmasana Foundation (*Padmasana* refers to the lotus-shaped base upon which some Buddha statues stand) to professionalize their work and share it more widely. And that’s how I entered their village, without a military escort, never to leave.

In 2012, the archaeological site of Muara Jambi was inscribed by the Indonesian government as *cagar budaya* (cultural heritage), having previously been tentatively listed as candidate, in 2009, for UNESCO World Heritage. Today, nonetheless, Muara Jambi and its village community, face numerous threats from human and environmental impact. To name just a few:

- The Batanghari, once a river that carried gold and enlightened minds, has become a black poisoned river. Along its upstream tributaries, clandestine gold miners amalgamate gold dust using mercury and dump the residue into the river
- The giant pumps which dredge the sand just in front of the village, destabilize the banks, increase the turbidity of the water, and raise heavy metals to the surface while crushing the ancient treasures still hidden in its bed
- On the opposite shore of Muara Jambi, where three more temple complexes are located, former sawmills are being used to stockpile coal in the open air, in the wake of unrestrained exploitation of the forests. When the coal is loaded onto giant barges, black clouds form over the Batanghari, dropping oily, toxic rain on the village, penetrating eyes and lungs.
- Large plots of this National Heritage Site have been devoured by young oil palm plantations. They fill the swamps of Muara Jambi where pandan leaves traditionally grow. The women of the village use pandan to weave the ritual mats that accompany every stage of life
- Mass local tourism now enjoys the sacred site as a recreation centre. And a growing influx of Buddhist pilgrims, mostly Chinese

se, from Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, China and Indonesia, come to pray at the foot of the temples, but ignore the Muslim populations who live on the site. They arrive with their own tour guides, so the villagers do not benefit economically from their visit.



(Muara Jambi Temple Complex)

The members of Padmasana Foundation are all inhabitants of Muara Jambi village. The youngest learn in imitation from their elders. Its activities cater for the 3000 inhabitants of the village, but also passing visitors. Among its many activities to date are gatherings that teach/discuss/organize/screen:

Citizen archaeology / Re-public³ archaeology:

- In the bed of the Batanghari River over 6,000 ancient Chinese coins dating back as far as the first century BC and their classification according to their respective dynasties have been gathered
- Preserved minute tin scrolls found in Batanghari River, engraved with mantras in Old Malay, Javanese and Sanskrit (Informally conducted with Arlo Griffiths, former Director of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFO) in Jakarta, to transliterate and make these scrolls "talk" again; with the support of French archaeologist, Pierre-Yves Manguin, one of the most eminent experts in the history of Buddhism in Indonesia)

Environment:

- Nursery of medicinal plants and endangered species
- Manufacture of bags from recycled plastics, sold on the site
- Documentary films on the degradation of the site by mining companies and plantations to alert the public.

³
'Re-public' is a new word created by the villagers playing with two concepts: To open archaeology to the general public, the villagers, not just the experts. So it has become a real "re-public", a kind of democratic archaeology

Culture :

- Revival of dance, music, mask, and local craft (batiks, mats) practices
- Collecting seloka (a traditional form of four verse poetry about local wisdom and customary law), which includes knowledge told by the elders, such as local legends, medicinal plants etc.
 - A “Muara Jambi-Indonesian” dictionary (in progress)
- Documentary films on endangered arts such as Zikir Bardah (large Sufi drums played by the elders)
- Artist residency with 9 Singaporean students from Lasalle College of the Arts, on-site workshop in the village and joint exhibition in Singapore (“Crossing the Straits” 2016-2018, organized by McNally School of Fine Arts); including a publication by Lasalle College on this cooperative work, titled “To leave home is already half the journey”.



(Documentation of students from Lasalle College of the Arts)

- Publication of a book: “Dreams from The Golden Island” (Babad Alas, 2018) in four languages (Indonesian, Chinese, English, French) designed and illustrated by young artists from Muara Jambi. This book is a bridge between the Buddhist past and the Muslim present, bringing together sutras in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, surahs from the Quran, and local wisdom poems.

This publication is also the “identity card” of the villagers of Muara Jambi, granting them recognition by the Indonesian authorities and UNESCO, as the guardians of the site and the explorers of its history, to no longer be considered “intruders” threatened with expropriation.



Documentation of the exhibition

To challenge the aforementioned multidimensional conflicts which enfold this huge archaeological site, Padmasana Foundation is now building a physical centre of knowledge and exchange, of yesterday and for tomorrow, from Sumatra and beyond, building on their prior projects. This will be a miniature replica of what was the first ancient "green university", at the crossroads between India and China, which included on its campus the rain forest as an orchard, a library, a living pharmacy and a haven of meditation. This "house of local wisdom and world peace" aims to support the village economy, educating the heart, combating historical amnesia, transmitting the culture of peace and respect for nature. It is named: Rumah Menapo. Rumah is the house. Menapo is how the villagers refer to the mysterious temple complexes that are surrounded by walls and canals, many of which are in ruin as earth mounds in between their orchards and cocoa plantations'. Archaeologists have not yet been able to unravel the mystery of these "temples", so they have adopted the local term menapo. Napo, in the language of Muara Jambi, refers to 'the deer', and me is 'the location'. During the annual floods of the Batanghari river that submerges the village under more than a meter of water, the menapo is the high location where wild animals from the forest take refuge (like on Noah's ark).

On the foundations of Rumah Menapo, the leper mask procession unfolds today as a healing dance performed by the young women of the village: Topeng Labu, the Pumpkin Masks.

Author's Bio

Writer, translator and public servant; born in France. From the age of 19, she began traveling the world as a journalist, writing several literary books, including the life story of Marceline Loridan Ivens, a Jewish woman who had been exiled in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp during the second world war, and various film scenarios, including "A Tale of the Wind", with Dutch documentary director Joris Ivens (Indonesian Calling). In 1989 she settled in Yogyakarta. She recompiled Serat Centhini, a great Javanese literary work, into a 21st century version entitled "Kekasih yang Tersembunyi". After the earthquake on 27 May 2006, she built the Giri Gino Guno studio in Bebekan, Bantul (DIY). During the eruption of Mount Merapi on October 26, 2010, she collaborated with the Al Qodir Islamic Boarding School to accompany the residents of Kinahrejo until they got back on their feet.

From the experiences of these two natural disasters, the story of "Babad Ngalor-Ngidul" was born with illustrations by artist Heri Dono— a continuation of the book *Lahirnya Kembali Beringin Putih* (1999). Her latest work titled "Mimpi-Mimpi dari Pulau Emas", was produced together with the people of Muara Jambi Village, in Sumatra, who used local wisdom, fairy tales, and the third eye as a means of excavating this extraordinary Buddhist ancient site. There, with them, she built a house of wisdom and peace: Rumah Menapo.

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