

Material Culture and Marginality: The Loss of Mataram Characteristics in Ancient Gravestones at Tanggeran Village, Central Java (19th–20th Centuries)

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Abstract

Islamic Mataram was a preeminent kingdom in Java since the 16th century. However, by the 19th century, the colonial policies of Daendels and the aftermath of the Java War triggered profound political instability. Dutch intervention through *Instituut voor de Javaansche taal* reframed Javanese culture into an elitist construct, systematically decoupling Islamic influence from Javanese tradition. This created a cultural segregation that stripped marginal communities of their access to the symbolic meanings of Javanese Islam heritage. This study utilizes (Shils & Shils, 1979) theoretical framework of “The Center and The Periphery.” Theoretically, the potency of symbolic values diminishes as the geographical distance from the center of power increases. Employing the seven-stage methodology by (Ashmore & Sharer, 2010) comprising formulation, implementation, data collection, data processing, analysis, interpretation, and publication. The research focuses on gravestones in Tanggeran Village, Central Java, which is geopolitically as a marginal region, and compared to the central palace standard. Field findings reveal that 19th-century gravestones in Tanggeran Village still retained distinct Mataram characteristics. However, by the 20th century, this style faded, transitioning into significantly simpler forms. This phenomenon demonstrates a deterioration of cultural values within material culture, influenced by geographical distance, the weakening of the Palace’s political control, and historical silencing by colonialism. Consequently, the local community has lost its collective memory regarding its cultural origins.

Keywords: Mataram Islam, Java, ancient tombstone

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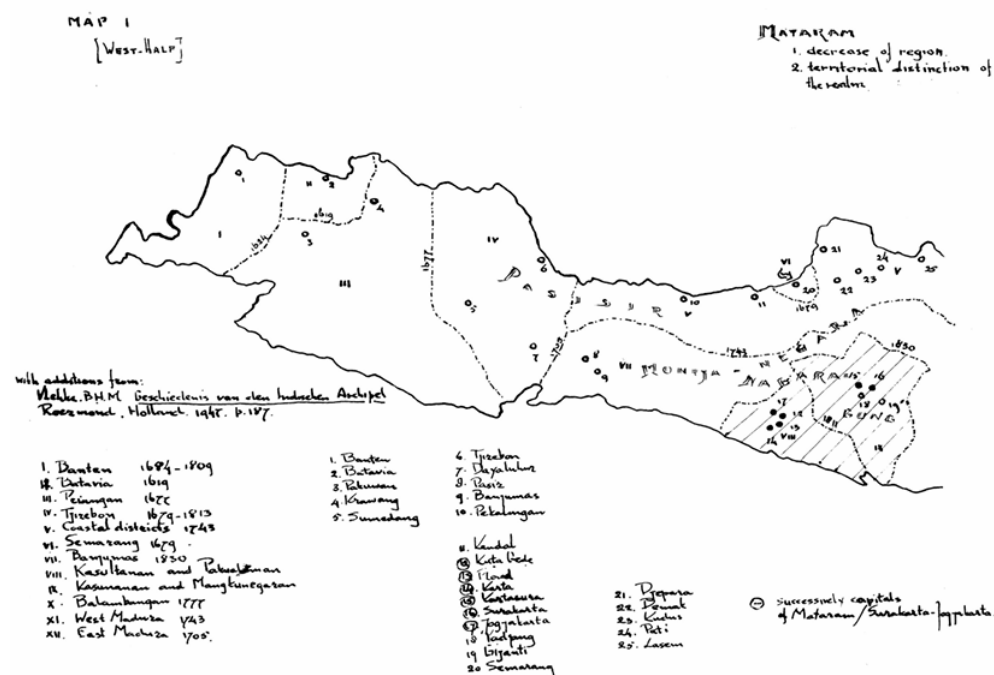
Introduction

The arrival of Islam in the Java region was marked by the development of Islamic-style kingdoms that began to emerge on the coast of Java. Starting with the emergence of the Demak Kingdom led by Raden Patah, a son of Brawijaya. In the 16th century, to be precise, 1578, near Kali Opak and Kali Praga, the Mataram Kingdom was founded by Ki Ageng Pemanahan, where this area was actually still under Pajang's authority. The Giyanti war of 1775 resulted in the Giyanti Agreement which resulted in Mataram being split into the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Sultanate and the Surakarta (Solo) Kasunanan (Poesponegoro, 2008b).

The division of territory during the Mataram era was divided into several parts, namely *nagaragung* which was the core or central region of the Mataram kingdom, *mancanegara*, the region outside the core but still under central control. The *mancanegara* region was located around *nagaragung*. The coastal region was a small area that also bordered the sea (Handinoto, 2010). Some sources state that there was a *mancanegara* region as well as a coastal region. Another source states (Poesponegoro, 2008a), there was an area that was more core than *nagaragung*, namely *kutanegara* or *kutagara*, which was the area where the palace was located with more specific boundaries.

Figure 1

Sketch of the Distribution of the Central Java Region



Source: Bernard H.M. Vlekke (1947) in (Moertono, 1968)

In a sketch by Bernard H.M. Vlekke (1947), the Brebes region is depicted as a single unit with *Tjirebun*. This region was categorized as coastal from at least 1799 to 1833, along with Tegal and Losari, extending to the south coast. Meanwhile, the outermost region is depicted in Banyumas (Carey, 2014) and the core region, *Nagaragung*, is located in Yogyakarta and Surakarta.

Entering the 19th century, Napoleon sent his envoy to Batavia, Marshal Herman Willem Daendels to serve as Governor-General. The aim was to make Java a military base to face

England in the Indian Ocean. Daendels' arrival was the beginning of disaster for the Javanese people. Starting with the project to build the trans-Java postal road, using gunpowder to blow up mountains and open access through the Priangan Mountains, Puncak Pas, to Bandung. It didn't stop there, Daendels tried to centralize power in Batavia for all administrative matters of the Dutch East Indies, this made fundamental changes in the political structure and access in Java. Including relations with Javanese kings. The palace, especially Hadiningrat Ngayogyakarta, often felt humiliated by the policies issued by Daendels (Carey, 2014).

In archaeology, gravestones are viewed as material culture, not merely the product of human culture or thought. Therefore, gravestones are not merely tangible objects but rather something that holds meaning in various aspects of society. Studies related to gravestones in archaeology generally first identify their morphology. Gravestones are divided into four parts: the base, body, shoulders, and top (Sukendar, 1999).

Tanggeran Village is in the southern part of Brebes, precisely Tonjong District, Brebes Regency, Central Java. South Brebes or also called *Brebes Kidulan*, refers to the current Brebes Regency in the south with Bumiayu District as the center of community activities, especially in running the economy for the surrounding districts, including Tonjong District. The Brebes, Tegal and Losari regions used to be one unit, in 1678, Amangkurat II appointed the first Regent of Brebes and made the region stand autonomously (Iskandar, 2006). This also indicates that since its founding, Brebes Regency has been part of Mataram's authority.

Problems and Methodology

In the Tanggeran Village public cemetery, ancient gravestones are scattered, thought to date back to the 19th century. These are concentrated on the northeastern side, the highest point in the area. As a region once under Mataram rule, some of the ancient gravestones in Tanggeran Village share common characteristics that indicate Mataram characteristics. However, over time, Mataram-style gravestones have fallen out of use, both in their form and decoration. Local residents no longer know the origins or owners of the graves bearing Mataram symbols. This has led to a fading of cultural identity within the community, reflected in the ancient gravestones, particularly in Tanggeran Village. This research seeks to formulate and address the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of Mataram gravestones in Tanggeran Village, Brebes, Central Java?
2. To what extent have the characteristics of Mataram gravestones in Tanggeran Village as archaeological objects faded?

The method used in compiling this research is based on systematic archaeological research methods. This research method consists of seven stages: formulation, implementation, data collection, data processing, analysis, interpretation, and publication (Ashmore & Sharer, 2010).

Formulation is the initial stage in this research. Research formulation is the stage of problem definition, feasibility study and background investigation. This stage is important to do because it is the initial stage which determines the objectives and main problems in the research. The next stage is implementation. At this stage, planning is carried out and all necessary arrangements are completed in the field. There are at least three main components that need to be considered at this stage, licensing, funding and logistics. There are two types of data collected at the data collection stage. First, primary data is the main data in research, which in this case is ancient tombstones as data objects for archaeological research. Secondary data in

this research are historical notes, literature studies, old maps, and previous research that can support primary data. The two main activities in carrying out data processing are processing archaeological data objects, which in this case are ancient tombstones and processing in making notes, writing or descriptions. The processing of archaeological data objects in this research is in the form of pictorial recording, namely recording that captures visuals. Photographs were taken using a camera of ancient tombstones in this research.

The analysis stage in archeology at least includes a classification based on certain variables that are needed. In this research, the classification carried out was the grouping of ancient tombstones based on their shape, decoration and existing symbols. This analysis can also be applied to cultural material as a whole, namely positional meaning is the meaning obtained through observing the relationship between one symbol and other symbols as a whole. In this analysis it must also be interpreted in relation to the context of the symbol towards its owner. In this case, Edward Shils' theory of Center and Periphery is assisted, which divides society into center and periphery. The central community here is defined as the center that holds and has control over cultural values. So you will see differences in patterns between central and peripheral communities as owners and producers of cultural materials. Interpretation is the result of analysis, which includes a collection of data collected and processed. Interpretation requires an understanding of the context and various model tests, including historical, cultural, and social aspects. Research publication is carried out as a form of researcher accountability for their research results.

Theory

Edward Shils (1975) “The Center and The Periphery”

A theory regarding social patterns in society, namely center and periphery (Shils & Shils, 1979). This theory states that symbolic value diminishes with increasing geographical distance from the center of power. In a societal structure, the central zone exerts influence on the broader community, within the ecological region in which they reside. The central zone here is not limited to a specific geographic area or scope, but rather serves as the center of the realm of values and beliefs. This center then regulates all forms of symbols, values, and beliefs within society. The center here is also sacred. Essentially, every society has its own official beliefs, and it is the center that regulates these, even when the community interprets or understands these beliefs in its own way.

There is a set of central values, namely the order that governs the way a society lives. These values govern many aspects of life, such as economic, social, political, kinship, and even cultural values. The center of power has an organization that holds authority over these values. This central organization holds authority and is elite in nature. Within the elite, they make decisions, consult with each other, discuss, and take the initiative in carrying out their duties. However, within the central system, there is a hierarchy that means some will have more power than others. However, their decisions must be based on the public interest in their actions, values, and the system as a whole.

One strategy in relations and politics is to have territory. To provide legitimacy, land or territory often becomes a profitable symbol. Apart from the resources contained therein, territory is a symbol of conquest of power. Territory is considered as something special which is also related to social status. This then makes a society have certain boundaries not only as regional boundaries, but also social boundaries. Those who live close to the central territorial area will

be considered to have more privilege than those who are far from the center. One example is sentiment towards public facilities and their communication access with the center. With easier access to the center, people who live close to the center will receive many benefits. However, they also have to be more obedient to the values issued by the center. Values in society: economic, political, social and cultural, will be more strictly applied.

For those who live far from the center of power, they will have the freedom to use less of the values of that center in some aspects. The distribution of values will be uneven, and those who live far from the center will experience vulnerability. Sometimes this arises from the central organization itself if it is too centrist. However, even as far as a democratic society is concerned, there will always be a small part of those who do not implement central values for various reasons. In the end, this is like a pattern, no matter how comprehensive the distribution of values, there will be those who apply and those who do not apply these values.

Ancient Tombstones in the Central Area of Mataram

The ancient gravestones in the central area of Mataram, Yogyakarta today, have their own characteristics. That one the tombstone issued during the Mataram period, Sultan Agung (1613–1645), is also called the Nisan Hanyakrakusuman (Yaser, 2023). The gravestones from this period have influences from Demak-Pasai. The general characteristic of this type is that it is flat with a taper at the bottom, the *mustaka* is *meru* or triangular in shape, some have decorative *tumpals* and tendrils or leaves. The Hanyakrakusuman tombstone has three evolutions in its decorative form. Firstly, the tombstone is tall and large, there is no *tumpal* decoration on the body of the tombstone, and there are no decorative cloud flower edges. Second, the tombstone is still tall and large, there are *tumpal* decorations on the body of the tombstone, and there are decorative cloud flower edges. Third, the size of the tombstone is smaller than the previous two stages, has a *tumpal* decoration on the body, and is decorated with cloud flower edges.

Ancient gravestones in the central Mataram region continued to evolve, particularly in their varied forms and decorative motifs. During the Hamengkubuwono I era (1755–1899), a typical gravestone typology centered in Yogyakarta, but this type also spread throughout Surakarta, the northern coast of Java, and parts of Central Java. Furthermore, this typology also includes subtypes such as Gunungkidulan gravestones, Pantura gravestones, Selobaran gravestones, and so on (Yaser, 2025). Most forms within this type retain their flat shape, with the exception of the *gada* shape. Despite the visual diversity and the addition of decorative motifs, key characteristics that distinguish this type from the central Mataram region, in addition to its location, remain. This type is a continuation of the previous type, Hanyakrakusuman. In the Hanyakrakusuman type, the common decorative motif is the triangle or *tumpal*, the *mustaka* on this type still represents the *meru*, and some gravestones still feature cloud-blossom decorations on the edges. The common forms of the Hamengkubuwanan type are found throughout Yogyakarta, Central Java, and the surrounding areas.

Both the Hanyakrakusuman and Hamengkubuwanan types are products of ancient tombstone culture produced in the central region of the Mataram kingdom. Both types are continuous with each other, both in terms of time and in the development of their forms and decorative motifs. Despite their variations in form, the general morphology, along with their underlying meaning and philosophy, remains intact.

Results and Discussion

Tanggeran Village Public Cemetery, borders residents' plantations to the north, the Pedes River to the south, and rice fields to the east and west. This cemetery is still actively used by residents today. The discovery of ancient tombstones in this cemetery is quite massive with several variations in shape. There are finds of ancient tombstones in the Tanggeran Village Public Cemetery. Some of them have unique shapes and are slightly different when compared to the ancient tombstones found in the central areas of Mataram, Yogyakarta and Surakarta. At least 194 ancient tombstones were found consisting of various variations in shape and decoration.

It is known that in the morphological division of ancient tombstones, there are head, shoulders, body and feet (Sukendar, 1999). In the findings of ancient tombstones in Tanggeran Village, this morphological division appears to be as follows.

Figure 2

Morphological Classification of Ancient Gravestones



The head is the topmost part of the gravestone. This section features a variety of shapes, ranging from tapered, flat, and curved. Most ancient gravestones discovered have shoulders that connect directly to the head. The body typically features geometric lines or other decorative elements, and the foot is usually found joined directly to the body.

One of the easiest ways to classify cultural materials is by distinguishing their basic shapes. Ancient gravestones found in Tanggeran Village are classified based on differences in basic shape. The five basic shapes of ancient gravestones in Tanggeran Village are rounded, crowned, square, thin crown, and nodule. The rounded shape is based on the rounded head of the gravestone. This shape is known to be present in 69 of the gravestones found in the Tanggeran Village Public Cemetery. Furthermore, there is a square shape, with a flat head that merges with the body, giving the appearance of a square or rectangle. The square type was found in 15. The crown shape on ancient gravestones is easily recognized by the triangular or divided head shape into three as if forming a crown. This type of crown is 43. Another type that resembles a crown is the thin crown. This type is similar to a crown, only there are differences in the dimensions of length, width and thickness which are smaller. The thin crown type is 25. The last type is the nodule, in the form of an ancient gravestone with an irregular shape, usually made of andesite stone. This type is 42. It is known that the total number of ancient gravestones found in the Tanggeran Village Public Cemetery is 194.

Common decorative motifs found on ancient gravestones include geometric lines on the body, triangular shapes, anthropomorphic motifs, and other motifs such as lotus buds. Straight horizontal lines on the body of the gravestone are common at this site, usually consisting of two or three lines, interspersed with other motifs or simply plain. The use of horizontal lines

on the body of the gravestone has been apparent since the emergence of the Demak type (Ambary, 1984).

Anthropomorphic the concept of assigning human characteristics to non-human objects, such as inanimate objects, nature, plants, or animals (Guthrie, 2015). The concept of anthropomorphism is rooted in human awareness of spirituality. In a time when humans were still pre-religious, they tended to view something greater as part of themselves. Anthropomorphism is closely related to animism. Animism is defined as a belief that all things possess a spirit. Piaget proposed ideas related to animism, stating that animism emerged from simple societies. Although this society has advanced in thought, action, and technology, these animistic elements are difficult to completely eliminate. Animism is also a product of perception. States that animism is a perceptual strategy based on three levels. Perception is interpretation, which in turn produces meaning, which is then recognized at a broader level. Anthropomorphic phenomena arise from the search for meaning. When humans began to observe the world and see what appeared to be alive, this led to the attribution of human attributes to non-humans, a phenomenon known as anthropomorphism.

Figure 3

Anthropomorphic Gravestone



Variations of triangular shapes and ornamentation are also found on ancient gravestones. This shape is common on the body of the gravestone, while triangular elements are also found on the headstone, which resembles a crown. Triangular ornamentation is common in Javanese society, representing the *tumpal*, is a triangular ornament applied to various media such as buildings, textiles, and, in this case, ancient gravestones. *Tumpal* also represents *Mahameru* Mount, a sacred landscape in Hindu-Buddhist teachings. The summit of *Mahameru* is the abode of the Gods, and its slopes represent the lowest level of heaven (Poesponegoro, 2008a). The concept of the universe with *Mahameru* as its center seems to have persisted into later periods. In Islamic architecture, ancient Javanese mosques feature *tumpal* roofs, a representation of the *meru* concept (Pijper, 1947).

Another variety is the lotus flower bud. Lotus or also known as *padma* is a plant that is viewed with philosophy in classical teachings in Indonesia. There is a religious conception that the lotus is a plant that grows in water, like the Gods in classical teachings who do not touch the earth. Furthermore, the lotus is a sacred flower that served as Vishnu's seat when he first created the universe (Munandar, 2019).

Inscriptions on gravestones generally revolve around the identity of the deceased, such as name, date of birth and date of death, and for some beliefs and cultures the names of family members are also included. Apart from that, there are also poems, poems and quotations from the holy book. So far, ancient tombstones in Tanggeran Village have been found with inscriptions containing year numbers, most likely these are the year numbers of the time of death. This year's number inscription findings often found rounded type tombstones, with the date listed around the 20th century. Meanwhile for other types it was quite rare to find identification and the inscriptions only had decorative variations.

In the 19th century, the political condition of the palace was unstable, until the Java War culminated. The war was sparked by Prince Diponegoro's anger at the actions of the Dutch and the duke who conspired over a road project that put stakes on the prince's land. This really tarnished his dignity. The Java War lasted from 1825 to 1830. It ended with the prince being arrested and exiled to several places, before finally being placed in Makassar until the end of his life (Carey, 2014). After the Java War, the political order in Java was largely controlled by the Dutch which involved many aspects, including socio-cultural. The Dutch established an institution whose special task was to study the language which was inseparable from Javanese culture, based in Surakarta. This institution is *Institute for Javaansche Taal* and later became *Javanologi* which is a center for Javanese studies in Leiden with large funds and adequate methods (Shiraishi, 1990). This has the effect that anyone who wants to study Javanese culture, including the Javanese themselves, must at least read Dutch language works or come to the Netherlands. The substance he studied came from Surakarta, which gave kasunanan legitimacy for Javanese culture. In practice, Dutch *Javanologi* not only manipulated ancient Javanese traditions, but also separated Islam as something opposed. As a result, many ordinary Javanese Muslim people cannot read their own cultural traditions and symbols (Yaser, 2023).

Judging from the ancient tombstones in the central area of power, the ancient tombstones in Tanggeran Village are quite simple. Some of the philosophies of shape and variety found on ancient tombstones in the central area are also found on ancient tombstones in Tanggeran Village. Although not as rich as what is found on tombstones in the central area. The philosophy of shape and variety found on tombstones in the central region include *tumpal*, *wulan tumanggal*, *purnama sidi*, *kembang awan*, *kemada* or *kembang patran*, *wajik* or *kembang patran*, *lung-lungan*, *kembang paku tanduk rusa*, *kembang manggis* or *kembang tunjung*, *padma*, *bawang sebungkul*, *kembang waru*, *kembang cengkih*, *kembang pepe*, *kembang melati*, *ulat*, and *Muhammad Salira* (Yaser, 2023).

Conclusion

The characteristics of the ancient tombstones in Tanggeran Village have their own characteristics which are different from the ancient tombstones in the central area of Mataram. The ancient gravestones found have a simpler shape, with decoration dominated by geometric patterns. Apart from that, pre-Islamic traces are also found even in the form of animist culture. Meanwhile, traces of the characteristics of ancient Mataram tombstones in Tanggeran Village are reflected in the *tumpal* pattern which is a representation of Mahameru Mount. Even though this is included in the pre-Islamic tradition, the use of this variety was still carried out until the Hamengkubuwanan type (1755–1899).

The ancient gravestones in Tanggeran Village experienced some fading when they entered the 20th century, with indications of simplifying the basic shape towards a rounded type, as well as the use of simple decoration. In this type, it is clear that there are year numbers that indicate

the 20th century. If you look at the situation at that time, there are several geo-political factors behind it. Political conditions since entering the 19th century were unstable, especially due to Dutch interference in the palace order. This influences socio-cultural policies and how people view their own culture. Apart from that, there is a geographical factor in the form of Tanggeran Village being in a marginal area which is quite far from the center of the Palace, so that the cultural control in Tanggeran Village is not as strong as that in the center.

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