

Muara Jambi – from Sloka To Seloko

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Abstract - The language of Muara Jambi village has already established itself in the international world of archeology with a word grown on its own land: menapo. This is how the villagers refer to the mysterious temple complexes surrounded by walls and canals, many of which are still piles of ruins and earth mounds in the middle of their orchards and cocoa plantations. Archaeologists have not yet been able to unravel the mystery of these “temples”, so they’ve adopted the local term menapo. napo in the language of Muara Jambi is ‘the deer’, and me is ‘the location’. During the annual floods of the Batanghari river that is submerging 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.

Keywords – Muara Jambi, Sloka, Seloko

DISCUSSION

In the year 671, the Chinese pilgrim I-Tsing sailed on a Persian vessel from the port of Canton to India, to study Buddhism. It was the memory of Xuanzang, the renowned monk and translator who had died some years before, that gave I-Tsing the courage to venture on this dangerous journey. But unlike his compatriot, I-Tsing did not proceed along the continental Silk Road. Demand for Chinese silk had declined after Byzantium successfully developed silkworm production in the year 551. In addition, the road was often blocked by the incessant wars in Central Asia among the Arabs, Tang Dynasty Chinese, Tibetans and Eastern Turks. Chinese merchants and pilgrims now had to travel by sea, sailing due south to the Malay archipelago before heading north to India, along the island of Sumatra through the Malacca Straits. I-Tsing was to emerge as the first Buddhist chronicler of the new sea route:

After twenty days at sea, the ship reached Bhoga, where I landed and stayed six months, gradually learning Sanskrit grammar. The king gave me some support and sent me to the country of Malayu, which is now called Srībhoga. (A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago, A.D. 671-695)

I-Tsing next proceeded to India and spent eighteen years at Nalanda, the largest Mahayana Buddhist monastic university of its time, in the present state of Bihar. On his return journey, he stayed again for several years in the island kingdom of *Srībhoga*, which he also calls *San-fo-ts'i* or *Malayu*. I-Tsing writes that in this fortified place, a thousand monks study all the same subjects as in Nalanda: logic, grammar, philology, medicine and the arts, as well as metaphysics and philosophy. He copies hundreds of Sanskrit manuscripts, before finally returning to China in 694.

Nowadays in the country of *Srībhoga*, there is a village: Muara Jambi. Its inhabitants are all Muslim. They live in wooden houses built on stilts along the banks of the Batanghari, the longest river in Sumatra. Their orchards cover 2000 hectares in the heart of an immense archaeological site dotted with 84 compounds of ruined temples. Those 84 red brick temples, of which only eight are being restored, might have been “faculties” interconnected by a huge network of canals. When one walks along the paths of the undergrowth covered with debris of Chinese ceramics from the 9th century, one begins to dream of the first “green” university at the crossroads between India and China that has included on its campus the rain forest as an orchard, a library, a living pharmacy and a haven of meditation. This archaeological site has been inscribed by the Indonesian government as *cagar budaya* (cultural heritage) and on the tentative list of candidates for UNESCO World Heritage.

Known as the largest archaeological site of Indonesia, the history and function of the ruins of the Muara Jambi complex remains for the most part a mystery. Various archaeological seminars have been organised in recent years in the city of Jambi to discuss the history of Muara Jambi. At a seminar in November 2010 about Muara Jambi as a tentative candidate for UNESCO World Heritage, Prof. Dr. Mundardjito, a senior archeologist from Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, 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, river with monsoon floods. Therefore today, to unfold what Dr. Mundardjito regards as “the Identity card of Indonesia”, a multidisciplinary approach is required: archeologists, historians, epigraphists, environmentalists, architects, artists, spiritual masters and also village communities living on site and experiencing it through their local wisdom.

Dr. Mundardjito's vision is very much shared by Muara Jambi's villagers. Many of them work on excavations alongside the archaeologists. In 2002, digging among the ruins of Gedong I temple, one of them smelled some jasmine. They eagerly continued to dig, guided only by the scent. And they came upon a *Dvarapala*. *Dvarapalas* are the gate keepers of Buddhist and Hindu temples. Armed with a shield and a mace, they traditionally display a wrathful aspect in order to repel evil. But the one they discovered at Gedong I temple was all smiles, with a jasmine flower hanging from his ear. That *Dvarapala* has become the mascot of their village. Like him, the villagers are the guardians of Muara Jambi, but also its explorers. Their ears and the eye of their heart are the tools they use for excavating. They know how to make each stone talk, and each anthill, and every tree in the forest - at night, from their small huts, they listen for the durians to drop.

This is how they know every tale of the adventurers who have come all the way here to *study*, to trade, or to plunder: *The Travelogue of the Arab Merchant Sulayman*, the *Book of Roads and Kingdoms* by the Persian Ibn Khurdadhbih from the 9th century, the *Meadows of Gold* by the Arab geographer Al-Masudi, from the 10th century, *The Book of Marvels of the World* by Marco Polo, British lieutenant S.C Crooke's report in 1820, and last but not least *The Journey to the Master* by the Indian sage Atisha Dipamkara Srijnana who came to Muara Jambi in the year 2012 to study with his "Indonesian" master, Dharmakirti/Serlingpa, and brought those Buddhist teachings finally to Tibet.

For the villagers, the ancient knowledge which put Muara Jambi at the crossroads of the sea routes between the Middle East, India and China is still alive among the ruins. They feel deeply and naturally infused and inspired by it. In 2011, a community collective of young residents of Muara Jambi has founded the Padmasana Foundation (denoting the lotus-shaped base upon which some Buddha statues stand). Its members are driven by a passion for the heritage site, discovering its rich history and cultural impact, and finding sustainable ways to conserve it in relation with the surrounding environment and the community. They also actively promote public awareness of the site through the use of modern communication technology and have developed an expertise in video works for which they received number of awards (2015 winner of Diageo-British Council-Social Enterprise Challenge for Arts, Creative and Tourism Organisations, winner of the Video Pesona Indonesia competition by the Department of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia, 2013 winner of video competition of the Indonesian Kaya Rasa from the Department of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia.)

Padmasana is very active in building a bridge between the cultural, linguistic and literary global treasures of the past and the local ones of today. In the Batanghari river, they find many of those treasures, like the minute tin scrolls engraved with mantras in Old Malay:

- (1) // ya7 sir(i)ḥ siriḥ pajiniḥ sila
- (2) rtas· barkayin· pati tanan di-
- (3) ri maka gantas· tanam ma-
- (4) ri jaṇan diḡantas· tanan di-
- (5) ri maka gantas· si galagaḥ si bu-
- (6) rkat· si k(u)dusi nirmula mu(ji) mu
- (7) sāha ? di ? ca rakṣa rakṣa ||

'Betel, betel ... please sever gently, wearing pati cloth, plant yourself, then pluck, plant yourself, don't be plucked, plant yourself, then pluck the sugarcane grass, the sugar-palm, the bud, the rootless ... Protect, protect!'

(Translated by Arlo Griffiths, former director of the French School of Far East (EFOE) Jakarta)

These are healing mantras which invoke plants that the villagers grow and consume every day, like the betel leaf that they use to treat ninety-nine diseases. There are three kinds of leaves: green, red and black. The latter can repel black magic. It grows only in the wild, in the darkest corners of the forest.

Dharmakirti/Serlingpa himself mastered the knowledge of these forest plants, and its incantations and rituals:

*Guard the earth and heal the people.
Stop epidemics and destroy the yaksha spirits.*

*Treat the grass the way the trees are treated,
Work hard at the power of the sword and the miraculous vase,
The feats of walking fast, flying in space and seeing below the ground
These are the eight ordinary accomplishments you will definitely achieve*

Aryacalasaddhananama by Serlingpa

(Translated from Tibetan into English by Lobsang Shastri- Library of Tibetan Works and Archives - Dharamsala 1999 - The original Sanskrit manuscript is lost)

Serlingpa wrote also *slokas* - 4 verses Buddhist teachings in Sanskrit -, to tame the barbarian borderlands of existence:

*Adverse conditions are your spiritual teacher;
Demons and possessor spirits, the Buddha's emanations,
Sickness is a broom for negative karma and defilements;
Sufferings are displays of the expanse of ultimate reality –*

(*Leveling Out All Conceptions* - attributed to Serlingpa -translated from Tibetan into English by Thupten Jinpa - *Mind Training* (Wisdom Publications 2013).

The villagers today do recite *slokas* - but in Malay - to temper their passions and bond their hearts. They call these short poems *selokos*

*Kami susun jari nan sepuluh
Kami tundukkan kepala nan satu
Kami atur sembah nan sebuah*

*Lapun-lapun ke muaro
Kerap-kerap ke angso duo
Mohon ampun kepada yang tuo
Mohon maaf kepada yang muda*

*Let's join our fingers that make ten
Let's bow our heads that make one
Let's bow down with no malice*

*Nets cast in the estuary
The call of two gregarious geese
Ask the elders for forgiveness
And forgive the young*

*Dibilang banyak tikar di rumah
Terbang pagi burung berkicau
Mati anak gempar serums
Hilang adat negeri kacau*

*Many mats in the house, they say,
Aflight in the morning, the bird sings endlessly.
A child dies, the household mourns
Customary law faints, the whole country collapses into chaos*

The members of the *adat*council are masters of *seloko*. In one of the poems, they trace in rhyme and rhythm the map of their customary lands:

*Dari Muara Selat menyebrang ke Tanggo Papan
Dari Tanggo Papan terus ke Buluran Bumban
Terus ke Pinang Rajo Mangkuang*

*Berlayar menyebrang Olak Tai Besi
Dari sini langsung ke Sungai Seno langsung ke Keliling
Langsung ke Hilir sampai ke Duren Sakat langsung ke Selat.*

*From the estuary of the Straits one crosses to the wooden steps
From the wooden steps straight to the aquatic plant canals
Straight towards the Royal Pinang trees
Sailing across the Tai Besi whirlpool
From there directly to the Seno river one goes around the swamps
Directly downstream as far as the durian trees, back to the Straits*

Today, the young activists of Padmasana are creating a new form of poetry, performed to promote public awareness of the environmental disasters in Muara Jambi:

PETAKA DI BUMI MELAYU

*Bening batang hari tak mampu lagi obati dahaga
Arusnya yang dahulu membawa kisah kejayaan
Sekarang berubah membawah kisah petaka di pulau emas
Prajnaparamita malu mematung
Berlari... di tengah keserakahan manusia
Menangis... mengadu...
Ia terdiam tidak mampu bergerak
Bumi terlampau panas
Raut murung wajah petani di petak sawa yang mengering
Duduk mematung tak ada pohon untuk berteduh
Semuanya tumbang jatuh tersungkur dalam kantong-kantong badut
Berbusana elit
Kini tinggal ranting lapuk mencakar langit
Tinggal mati... menanti saat bumi memaki*

(Oleh Mukhtar Hadi, alias Borju)

DISASTER ON THE LAND OF MELAYU

*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 Prajnaparamita is petrified with shame
She would like to escape human rapacity
Crying ... moaning
Reduced to silence, she remains petrified
The Earth is burning burning
Disconsolate farmers in parched rice fields
Sit motionless, no trees 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 earth to castigate us.*

(By Mukhtar Hadi, alias Borju)

Padmasana is also working on an “Muara Jambi-Indonesia” dictionary. The Muara Jambi language is spoken by some 3000 people. The dictionary in progress comprises some two hundred words sounding so pleasant that one has the feeling to hear onomatopoeias whereas they express complex situations and feelings and subtle actions. Here are some of the most charming ones:

Aga'aga': an injunction addressed to a person who is behaving unreasonably, in order to make him reconsider his behaviour

Bagoyor: a leisurely pace, almost slow motion, ultimately leading to its goal

Balencom: a heavy object falling into the water (river / sea) in a vertical position.

Dodok: the condition of land damaged by an animal (wild boar)

Gtun: feeling astonished, or a greeting addressed to someone

Keteguran: a person possessed by a spirit to the point of falling ill

Lasak: movements of a person who cannot rest quietly, especially in their sleep

Muto kadorok: Sleeping one's fill and even more

Ngempor: the state of a teenager in love

“All the canals that in the past allowed the students and professors to move from one edge of the university to this other edge, are called today by archaeologists *kanal*,” explains Abdul Have, alias Ahok, member of Padmasana. “But *kanal* is a Dutch word, and it's not the Dutch who built these canals. They are more than a thousand years. We in the village call them *buluran*. And for newly dug canals, we have another local word, *sakean*.”

The language of Muara Jambi village has already established itself in the international world of archeology with a word grown on its own land: *menapo*. This is how the villagers refer to the mysterious temple complexes surrounded by walls and canals, many of which are still piles of ruins and earth mounds in the middle of their orchards and cocoa plantations. Archaeologists have not yet been able to unravel the mystery of these “temples”, so they've adopted the local term *menapo. napo* in the language of Muara Jambi is ‘the deer’, and *me* is ‘the location’. During the annual floods of the Batanghari river that is submerging 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.

To continue their research on the history of the site and make it a place of training, meetings and exchanges of knowledge of yesterday and today, with visitors from cities and villages, local and international, young and old, Padmasana foundation plans to build a “Forest of Wisdom” on a plot of 800 square meters. To this miniature replica of what was the ancient “green university” will be added two bungalows to accommodate researchers, academics and passionate visitors worldwide. This forest of wisdom will be built according to local architectural traditions. And it will be named: “Pondok Menapo”.