

A study of the Islamisation of South Sulawesi through an analysis of the grave of the second Muslim ruler of Luwuq

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## **He Who Lies at Malangke**

This essay is a study of a now-demolished grave in Malangke, reputed to be that of the second Muslim ruler of the South Sulawesi kingdom of Luwuq, Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin (reigned c.1611-36).<sup>1</sup> The structure of the grave is addressed in a “Short Contribution” in which J.M Van Lijf, the former Dutch *controller* of Masamba (1939-42), describes the excavation of the grave and offers an explanation as to why it was carried out (Van Lijf 1953).

The grave’s location lends its name to the posthumous title of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin: *Matinroé ri Malanngké*, (Bugis) “He who lies at Malangke”. The grave is surrounded by other Islamic graves, none of which seem to have been built so intricately, as they are only noticeable from large cylindrical stones placed to mark their position. The burial ground stands on dry land amidst large marshes. Nevertheless, the foundations of the grave are below the water table, thus Van Lijf (1953) suggests that the groundwater level has risen over the ensuing centuries. In the late 1930s the grave was the site of a yearly pilgrimage. As the dead are considered to remain a part of the family, they are venerated as the messengers between Allah and the living. They therefore have knowledge, which they can impart on the living, and for this reason respect to the dead is paramount to good living conditions. For if the ancestors are neglected, their living relatives will bear the consequences such as bad harvests and bad health (Wessing 1978: 97-103).

As the *controller* of Masamba, Lijf (1953) was in charge of the grave and thought it worthy of excavation. It was only upon digging around the base of the building that some surface carvings on the south wall were discovered, eventually leading to a small entrance which allowed them to enter the what he describes as a “stupa-grave”.

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<sup>1</sup> The grave was destroyed during the *gerombolan* rebellion led by Kahar Muzakkar (1950-65). Not a trace remains: even the foundations stones have vanished (Personal communication, Ian Caldwell).

Having been immersed under water for so long, the grave was filled with muddy water, which on the evidence of the sagging outer walls obviously had an effect on its foundations. The structure was built using slabs of sandstone all held together using a tongue-and-groove method. The lack of the use of mortar suggests the construction was also liable to the entry of air and moisture, causing it to erode. Two flat bronze plates were fixed into the soft yellow sandstone entrance of the grave, acting as two doors. The presence of these small forged plates suggests that the doors were bolted together, although upon excavation, Lijf (1953) remarks these doors were in fact hanging loose off the frame and pressed into the earth. Large pieces of the doors were missing as tradition dictates that people would visit the grave annually as a sort of pilgrimage to the dead, breaking off bits of it to use as amulets. This tradition also led to the foot of the building being filled with earth, which made the excavation process more difficult. The pieces that were left of the door were found in the entrance of the grave and were returned to their initial place.

Van Lijf describes the passageway as being narrow and low, so much so that one had to stoop forward to enter the vault, a rectangular area with a barrel-vaulted dome. The vault's dimensions were not large, its length measuring 2.1m, its width 1.8m, and its height 1.8m. As Islamic tradition would dictate, the corpse was buried in the earth, lying on its right side, facing west. Black granite posts with pointed tops had been pressed into the earth to mark the head and foot of the corpse.

Van Lijf offers only a basic description of the architecture of the grave, and says little about the remarkable carvings with which it is decorated. Nor does he go into detail about the very evident tripartite structure of the grave. He does however, record the tradition that the grave was built by Torajans from Pantilang, a district at the foot of Latimojong range, which lie to the east of Palopo. He proposes the decorative motifs of the relief work, much of which runs in a central band around the grave, to be of Hindu origins, while acknowledging that a Torajan origin offers no explanation either of the style of the building or of its relief work.

The fact that such an intricate grave belonged to the second Muslim ruler of Malangke suggests that the architectural design may have been

replicated from his predecessor. However, the first Muslim ruler, as confirmed by Van Lijf, is buried in Pattimang in “a grave of no architectural significance”. In Islamic theory, there is an emphasis on modesty and Muslims are discouraged to spend money on material things as it is believed that this would not only distract from the worship of Allah, but also could be put to better use to help others (Quran 9:34). Although this is not always strictly observed, it might explain why the first Muslim ruler of Luwu, Matinroé ri Wareq was buried in a much simpler grave (Caldwell 1988).

The stylistic differences between the first and second Muslim grave suggest a change in society’s perception of Islam, reflecting perhaps a greater acceptance of the new religion, as well as its greater integration into Luwuqese culture. The grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin became a model for many later royal graves (for example the graves of later Bugis rulers of Luwuq in Palopo, Luwu (M. Irfan Mahmud 2003) and those of the Makassar kingdom of Gowa (Bulbeck 1992). The unique construction of the grave of Matinroé ri Malangké clearly formed a model for these later Islamic graves. My aim is to investigate this process by determining the origins of the architecture of the grave and the decorative motifs that can be found on it.

### **The Architecture**

As Ibbitson Jessop (1990:105) states: “No art reveals as much about a civilization as architecture”. So I will begin by examining the architecture of the grave and its significance in Indonesian tradition. The structure of the grave is clearly divided into three sections (photo 1), or levels, as is frequently seen in pre-nineteenth century mosques right across the archipelago (photo 2). This tripartite construction serves no practical purpose but is symbolic of pre-Islamic Austronesian cosmological beliefs. The lowest level represents the underworld, the middle layer represents the human world, and the uppermost layer signifies the heavens.



photo 1: The tripartite grave.



Photo 2: Masjid Agung in Demak

The concept of tripartite architecture is also reproduced in the construction of housing. According to Waterson (1997: 93), “most indigenous belief systems of the Indonesian archipelago share the concept of a three-tiered cosmos, whether reflected implicitly or explicitly”. Whether in the Barabadur or at Masjid Agung in Java (Ibbitson Jessup 1990:190), cosmological and

religious beliefs are compounded together to shape these societies and the environment in which they live.

The layered structure of the grave is evocative of Buddhist temples such as the Borobudur, which Clair Holt (1967:47) describes by drawing attention to the numerous Buddhas found on the building, and how the amount of detailing on the Buddhas increases gradually with the higher niches. This structure is on par with Islamic theology which believes in these three basic spiritual levels, as well as a further seven divisions within the layer that is heaven (Quran 41:12, 2:29).

The conventional view of Islamic architecture is often epitomised by domes, calligraphy and geometry. Regional influences, although not entirely dismissed, are often overlooked when discussing Islamic architecture. However, as studied by Frishman (2007), its construction is by and large shaped by these local traditions, while domes, calligraphy and geometry are merely stereotypical of the Middle East. This could lead to a discussion as to what exactly defines Islamic architecture, but for the purpose of this essay, I will be using the definition proposed by Blair (1995), which encompasses all works of architecture created within an Islamic context. This means that a Christian church in a Muslim country would be as much of an example of Islamic architecture as a Mosque in a non-Muslim country. Consequently, Islamic architecture becomes more far reaching and open to interpretation. Therefore, in studying this grave, I shall be looking beyond Islam at non-Muslim, or pre-Islamic, Indonesian culture.

Throughout the course of Indonesian history, the spread of Islam came about through two methods. The first being the conversion of indigenous Indonesians and the second being the arrival of foreign Asian Muslims (Chinese, Arabs etc) who married locals and consequently converted them (Ricklefs 2001, Chapter One). It is important to note that Islam was introduced to Indonesia largely in a peaceful manner through trade and intercultural exchange rather than by force. This helps explain the ease with which it was integrated, although in South Sulawesi, conversion of Bugis kingdoms other

than Luwuq was by the sword. Furthermore, a significant factor that facilitated the acceptance of this foreign religion was the fact that it had been brought to Indonesia through Asian trade routes, throughout which it had become infused with local mysticism thus making its philosophies easier to relate to. In conclusion, Islam's susceptibility to outside influences has rendered its architecture an amalgamation of styles and cultures, the former grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin being an excellent example of this.

### **The Motifs**

Having looked at the structure of the grave, I will now be examining the carved motifs that adorn the exterior (photo 4). The carvings on the stone are made up of two distinct patterns. The larger pattern is a repeated motif that goes around the entrance of the vault, framing it as one would a picture. The design itself looks like a succession of clouds, all emanating from the rim, with an additional floating floral pattern. The second motif stands alone, and resembles a chilli pepper (photo 5). The origins of these designs are unknown and it is possible that these lie with models far afield in Indonesia. I will try to determine what these influences are by looking at stylistic similarities in the motifs of other parts of Indonesia that had contemporary trading relations. The most obvious of these are the north coast Islamic port states of Java, the natural trading coast for the southwest peninsula of Sulawesi (Caldwell and Bougis 2004:457, 475).

One possible source of these designs, as suggested by Lijf (1959) is the neighbouring Torajan culture. The Torajan language has no written form and so wood-carving is used to express what other cultures would do with writing. Unlike other languages in the archipelago, the Torajan language has no written form. Expression is achieved through wood-carving in which every pattern has a different meaning symbolising different moral concepts (Nooy-Palm 1988). Therefore, the patterns are numerous in quantities but fairly simple in design. To suggest that these designs are simplistic would be to deny that they carry so much responsibility in expressing this culture's sentiment. In comparison to the carvings of the grave of the Sultan of Malangke, however, these indigenous

designs appear more basic, with as much focus on colour as on the intricacy of the motif (photo 3). Furthermore, the Toran people have never converted to Islam thus reaffirming the lack of contact between these two communities and therefore the implausibility of the grave being based on Torajan design.



photo 3: examples of Torajan wood carvings.

The spread of Islam in Java in the sixteenth century is popularly associated with the *wali songo* (Javanese), the “nine apostles” of Islam, and it is likely from Java that Islam came to Sulawesi. By 1611, Islam was the dominant religion amongst the Bugis people (Cribb 2000:44; Pelras 1996:134-135), yet was adapted to suit some pagan principles. It was believed that this would encourage a larger number of people to convert to Islam, and that they would eventually be induced to practice orthodox Islam Gibson (2007:39). One can assume that this was true of things other than daily life, such as art and architecture.

Islamic architecture during that period can be assumed to have preserved much of an earlier Indonesian structural and decorative repertoire. The most parsimonious explanation is that the grave reflects local architectural traditions adapted to a new purpose. This seems reasonable when considering the common tripartite pattern of Indonesian house construction. However there are reasons that lead me to believe that the inspiration of the decorative motives lay slightly further afield, in Java.



photo 4: The entrance.



photo 5: The “chilli” and the swirls.

## **Majapahit influence**

The fall of the Majapahit kingdom (c.1478) is traditionally attributed to the *wali songo* Sunan Giri. A episode of the conflict is described by Fox (1997:201):

When Brajiwaya's troops first attack Giri, they are driven by back by Sunan Giri's pen which turns into a kris, kyai Kalam Munyen. When the first Sunan Giri dies and is replaced by his grandson, Parapen, the forces of Majapahit are victorious and burn Giri to ashes. Yet when these forces attempt to disturb the grave of Sunan Giri, Brawijaya's entire army is attacked by swarms of bees that them back to Majapahit.

The supernatural powers that lend themselves to the *wali songo* aid them in converting the non-Muslim people and the swarm of bees leads to the conversion of the entire Majapahit kingdom to Islam.

This amalgamation of cultures and ideologies led to the inclusion of forms of Majapahit art under the umbrella of Islamic art. Sunan Giri's grave is one such example where an Islamic grave is displayed with extensive Majapahit-style carvings. It is the carvings on the door panels to the entrance to the grave to which I would like to draw your attention (photo 6). Though they are not identical to the carvings on the grave in Malangke, they bear some strong similarities, notably the manner in which they are carved. The door panels depict two dragons and several phoenixes amidst heavy vegetal and floral patterns. This tendril ornamentation as described by Van der Hoop (1949: 243) is shallow, similar to the pattern on the grave in Malangke that can be seen to the left of the "cloud" motif (photo 4 and 5). The wood carving throughout the grave's complex in Gresik depicts a similar floral relief, which I can best describe by likening to the moment a thick fluid begins to bubble.

Majapahit art and architecture is by and large figurative and depicts scenes with humans and animals set against a vegetal background, which has

allowed the comparison and connection with the motifs on the grave in Sulawesi.



Photo 6: Entrance to the grave of Sunan Giri

### **Cirebon influence**

It seems clear that the decorative motifs on the grave are inspired by Javanese models, the most obvious being those of the grave of Sunan Giri at Gresik on the northeast coast. In the early seventeenth century, Giri was the major beacon for Islam as far as Ternate and Tidore (personal communication,

James Fox), and it seems reasonable to assume that it exerted similar influences to Sulawesi. However, one should also consider the important grave of Sunan Gunung Jati in Cirebon. Worthy of attention is the wooden door situated in between the ninth and tenth levels of this grave. The intricate floral design is essentially made up of foliage and lotus flowers as well as little pavilions which appear on each of the shutters and the arabesque that climbs sparsely upwards. These all evoke the stone carvings at the Mosque of Mantingan which dates back to the Sultanate of Demak (Tarling 1992:331). Further comparison of this woodwork with other works in Islamised areas such as the grave of Sunan Bonang and Sendang Duwur (Tjandrasmita 1975:96) shows distinct similarities. However, more conclusively, these carvings are suggestive of many Hindu-Javanese decorative motifs found at Candi Panataran and Candi Tigawangi (Tjandrasmita 1975:96).

### **The cloud motif**

My first impressions upon seeing pictures of the grave at Malangke were to associate the design framing the entrance with clouds. For this reason, I have referred this design as the cloud motif. I will now try to determine what exactly these “clouds” are (if indeed not clouds) and what the design may represent.

In Indonesian art, the depiction of clouds is most commonly associated with Chinese origins. In terms of symbolism, the cloud motif fits with the nature of the structure in question as it may represent the gateway to the heavens. In terms of design, it is similar to the rock motif but can be distinguished from it by the shape of its spirals, which are more lozenge-shaped. Furthermore, the cloud motif’s position in pictures and reliefs can also help differentiate it from depictions of rocks, due to the fact that in depictions of clouds one will almost certainly find representations of plants (Van Der Hoop 1949:295). Due to the evident presence of designs of flora and vegetation on the grave, one can be inclined to think the “clouds” are indeed clouds; however, their shape is rounder than lozenge-shaped and the pattern with which they are laid out is not characteristic of the cloud motif. However, due to the

associated vegetal patterns, I am inclined to disregard the possibility that the pattern on the grave represent rock motifs.

A distinguishing feature of the “cloud” pattern is the recurring frequency with which it is represented. It is not geometric or symmetrical, both quintessential features of Islamic art, nor is it random. The swirls all curl towards the same direction, evocative of Hindu-Javanese design. However, a photograph of a Balinese temple (Gillow and Daws 1994:97) depicts “tuff figures of guardian spirits and naga dragons adorned with offerings of buleng (chequered cloth) and flowers” (photo 7). More importantly, in the background, the cornice of the building has a recurring motif that is very similar to the one found on the grave. The difference lies in the fact that rather than having an elaborate border with a vegetal theme, the clouds are framed alone, with no additional floral motifs within the frame, but surrounded by them outside. The clouds are not linked to each other directly but all originate from one “stem” which doubles as the outline of the cornice.

photo 7: Cloud cornice

Van der Hoop (1949:298-303) offers another possibility for interpreting the cloud motif, when he writes that “The flame is the symbol of magical power”. The expansion of Islam in Indonesia was facilitated by the fact that its leaders were attributed with almost mystical qualities which substantiated their sovereignty (Pelras 1996:134-135). The presence of a motif of fire might therefore be justified on a leader’s grave. The diagrams that Van der Hoop (1949:298-303) presents display fire in various art forms taken from various sources across Indonesia. One feature that appears in many of these diagrams is similar to one that is observed on the grave: a recurring pattern of equidistant swirls all facing the same direction. This kind of structured pattern is seldom seen in the depiction of vegetation where the reference to nature leads to carvings of vegetation being made more organic and less rigid. In spite of this, as fire is also a natural element, there are some depictions of it where it appears neither violent (where the carvings are long and sharp to emphasis danger) nor threatening. In these instances, the fire takes on an organic form and can be likened to uncontrollable flames that billow in the air, rather similar to the motifs that surround the swirls on the grave<sup>2</sup>.

One characteristic of the flame motif is that it resembles “the shape of a reversed point of interrogation” (Van der Hoop 1949:300) which is contradictory to my previous supposition that the swirls all originate from one stem. With this in mind, the direction of the pattern changes completely and in lieu of the flames bursting out of the grave’s entrance, they are bursting towards it. In this case, the patterns that I originally believed to be surrounding the swirls on the grave are actually the foundations for the swirls.

### **The “chilli pepper”**

Although I have referred to the second motif on the grave as a “chilli pepper” due to its resemblance to the fruit, the importation of chilli peppers into

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<sup>2</sup> The “chilli” also makes an appearance in the fire motifs but generally as a series rather than a single flame. The flame emerges from a base comprised of two swirls and curves at an angle similar to the “chilli”.

Indonesia did not occur until the early sixteenth Century (Robinson 2007) when it began to be used in cooking. While technically possible (the grave dating from as much as a century after its introduction) I suspect that the design is not of a chilli pepper, but I will continue to refer to it as such.

In keeping with the general theme of vegetation that seems to have encapsulated the motif on the frame of the entrance, I attempted to ascertain the origins of the “chilli” from the same Javanese sources but this proved futile. The motif was a more elusive design to trace due to the scarcity of its appearance in Indonesian architecture. It is unusual to find a design of a single leaf, not attached to a tendril of vegetation as is the case with our “chilli”.

In Javanese batik, the extensive use of vegetation (Kerlogue 2004) lends itself to close study – as the saying goes, the devil lies in the details. Among the numerous patterns of batik, the “semen” pattern stands out with regards to the grave in Malangke for it consists of “young shoots of foliage” (Kerlogue 2004:76). In Hindu-Javanese philosophy, the *semen* pattern used in batik is considered upper class and was only worn by aristocracy (Kerlogue 2004:76). Although there are similarities with the grave, the subordinate position of the foliage in contrast to the animals in the semen design would deem it unlikely to be used as a main motif on a grave of a Sultan (photo 8).



Photo 8: *semen* batik pattern

### **To conclude**

The destruction of the grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin (as part of a systematic campaign to ‘purify’ Islam in South Sulawesi) represents a tragic loss to both the region’s history and the history of early Indonesian Islam. The grave’s architecture was quintessentially Indonesian, with a tripartite construction manifest throughout the archipelago and showing no “typical” (i.e. Middle Eastern) Muslim traits. The cosmological meanings of the different

layers (while they may have derived from pre-Islamic cosmological beliefs) were in keeping with Islamic beliefs concerning the structure of the universe. The fact that there were evidently key similarities in Islamic thought and pre-Islamic cosmological beliefs may help explain why Islam was accepted and adopted so widely and willingly throughout the archipelago. Within a diverse background, local traditions have been maintained or incorporated into new ones. This amalgamation of cultures has seeped into the art and architecture of the region, apparent in the grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin. Influences from the east Javanese kingdom of Majapahit, and the Islamic port states of Giri (Gresik) and Cirebon, and attempted interpretations of the motifs examined result in a variety of possibilities rather than definite answers as to the symbolism of these designs. However, whether they depict fire, vegetation or clouds, the swirls on the grave symbolise the open-mindedness of the people of Sulawesi in accepting the new and integrating it into the old; thus begging the question as to whether Indonesians were Islamised, or whether Islam was made Indonesian.

Albeit impossible to delineate the specific origins of the motifs I have been discussing, they are most likely based on wood carved decoration. Both the north coast of East Java and the Toraja highlands of South Sulawesi are renowned for their skills in wood carving. However, Torajan designs and motifs are very different from those on the grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin. The Torajan style of carving is geometric, simple and bold, while the designs on the grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin represent much more closely those found on surviving sixteenth century wood carving still extant at the graves of Sunan Giri in Gresik and Sunan Guning Jati in Cirebon. Furthermore, East Java is as a natural trading coast for the southwest peninsula of Sulawesi, with evidence of regular trade between the two regions dating back to at least AS 1300 (Caldwell and Bougas 2004:457). It seems reasonable to conclude that the most likely model of the carvings (but not the architecture) of the grave of Sultan Abdullah Muhiddin reflects the absorption of Javanese styles of wood carving into local design. Given Giri's prominence as a beacon of Islam in the region in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, I conclude that the most likely model for the carvings on Sultan Abdullah's grave are those found on the grave of Sunan Giri.

4146 words.

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