

Traces of Buddhism in Sumatra: an archaeological perspective

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I. Introduction

Sumatra, one of the larger islands in Indonesia, has many archaeological evidences. Since its prehistoric times, Sumatra seems to have played important role in making up the culture of Indonesia.¹ In the historic period which is marked by the influence of Indian culture in the 6th century AD, many archaeological artifacts have been discovered. As far as its religion background is concerned the archaeological artifacts showing both Hindu and Buddhist religion in the area.

The oldest inscription in Sumatra dated back to 682 AD comes from Kedukan Bukit near Palembang (South Sumatra). The inscription mentioned that *Dapunta Hyang mangalap siddhayatra* in the Saka year 604. Krom (1931) is of the opinion that Kedukan Bukit inscription commemorates the winning of Sriwijaya in attacking Malayu in 682 AD or, in other word, to commemorate the forming of Sriwijaya. However, according to J. G. de Casparis (1956) who read the inscription there is no word “Malayu” in it.² The other inscriptions are Telaga Batu and Kota Kapur. Telaga Batu inscription (near Palembang) has no date but F.M. Schnitger (1931) assumed to be derived from the 9th or the 10th century A.D. Casparis who published the inscription (Casparis, 1956) placed it in the second half of the 7th century.

Kota Kapur inscription (found in Bangka) dated to 686 AD. It mentioned that Sriwijaya has attacked *bhumi jawa* in the Saka year 608. Coedes (1968:83) interpreted *bhumi jawa* as Taruma kingdom in West Jawa.³ There are still many other inscriptions such as Karang Brahi (7th century), Palas Pasemah (end of 7th century), Bukit Seguntang (Casparis, 1956), and Talang Tuwo inscription. Some of these mentioned the existence of Sriwijaya. The aim of this paper is not to describe the kingdom of Sriwijaya however, but to trace the Buddhism that has developed in Sumatra. Based upon the written records as illustrated before, Buddhism has developed at least since the sixth or the seventh century. The Bukit Seguntang inscription especially, seemed to have Buddhist background. J. G. de Casparis (1956:10-11) read the word “*siksaprajna*” as *siksa* and *prajna* in Mahayana Buddhism. In Talang Tuwo inscription (684 A.D.) it is mentioned: *ratnatraya* or *tri ratna, pranidhana, wajrasarira*. These words are having Buddhist features (Coedes, 1930). Coedes is of the opinion that

¹ Many prehistoric remains have been uncovered in Sumatra such as stone axes, megalithic statues, etc.

² For further discussion see Coedes, “Les inscriptions malaises de Sriwijaya”, *BEFEO XXX*, 1933:29-80. It was reported that the inscription was found at the village Kedukan Bukit (Seguntang) in 1920 and first published by van Ronkel, “A Preliminary Note concerning Two Old Inscriptions in Palembang”, *Acta Orientalia*, 2: 12-21.

³ It was stated in the inscription: “... *nipahat diwelana yam wala Sriwijaya kaliwat manapik yam bhumi jawa tida bhakti ka Sriwijaya*”. *Bhumi Jawa* has been interpreted variously. H. Kern (1913) interpreted as Jawa or Sumatra, Krom (1919:430) thought it is the island of Bangka.

Talang Tuwo inscription is the oldest evidence on the existence of Mahayana Buddhism in Indonesia or in mainland South East Asia as well. In Java the oldest evidence of Mahayana Buddhism dated back to 778 A.D. (Kalasan inscription) while in Kamboja the evidence on it comes from 791 A.D. (Prasat Ta Kam inscription). Moreover he notes that the word *wajrasarira* (“having diamond body”) as stated in line 12 are showing Tantric character.

Other archaeological evidences as will be described below support the existence of Buddhism from 7th to 13th century.

II. Buddhist Monuments in Sunatra

Religious buildings as old as the seventh century have so far been found in Sumatra called as “*biaro*” (“temple” derived from Sanskrit “*vihara*”). At Muara Takus (near Kampar River, Central Sumatra) a temple complex has been found: Candi Bungsu, Candi Palangka, Candi Mahligai, and Candi Tua. Its architectural form basically is a stupa. Candi Mahligai (Mahligai stupa) for instance, principally seems to have been a cylindrical *stambha* or massive pillar surmounted by a small stupa. The monument is made of brick, embellished in parts with sandstone. The *stupa* has apparently been enlarged like various other monuments. Estimates of the date of Muara Takus vary between 11th - 12th century or 12th - 14th century (Bernet Kempers, 1959:69).⁴ Schnitger gives date to the 11th century; Moens gives date to the 7th century. The porcelain sherds found nearby date to the Ming period.

Candi Bungsu has been connected with a Chinese report that in 1003 AD the king, named as Se-li-chu-la-wu-ni-fu-ma-tiau-hwa of San-fo-ts'i sent envoys to China. They informed the Emperor about a new temple and asked for a name. The Emperor gave the name Cheng-tien-wa-shou (Groeneveldt, 1960:65). Westenenk identified Cheng-tien-wa-shou as Candi Bungsu. The king name thought to be Sri Cudamaniwarmadewa of Sriwijaya who reign in 11th century. By that time Sriwijaya is the centre of Buddhist school. Coedes notes that during the reign of Sri Cudamaniwarman, Dharmakrti (one of the highest monk in Suwarnadwipa) wrote a book on Buddhist religion named *Abhisamayalandara* (Coedes, 1968:141).

It was reported that an inscription in Kawi and Prenagari script have been uncovered in the ruins. The inscription consists of Buddhist syllables: *om*, *ah*, *um*, and *mam*. The scripts are carved together with *vajra* on sandstone. Other inscription is read as “*om ah bilstantakrhumphad swaha*”. (Kusen et al., 1995). Its meaning is not clear yet, but it seems to be Buddhist *mantra*. Based on the inscription and *vajra* it seemed to be justified to assume that religious background of the temple complex should be Vajrayana Buddhism.

In the Talang Tuwo inscription of A.D. 684, it was mentioned that Dapunta Hyang Jayanasa founded a park named Srikshetra: “*swasti sri sakawarsatita 606 dim dwitiya suklapaksa wulan caitra sana tatkalana parlak sriksetra ini niparwuat parwanda punta hiyam sri jayansa*” – “Prosperity! The Saka year 606, the second day half-full moon of the month

⁴ The earlier date of Muara Takus may be the seventh century and according to Chinese records in 672 AD I-tsing on his journey from Kanton to India has stopped for six months in Shih-li-fo-shih (Sriwijaya) to learn Sanskrit grammar. Shih-li-fo-shih is located at equator.

caitra; it is the time when the garden (named) Sriksetra was built under the leader of His Majesty Sri Jayanasa". From the terms used in the inscription, Satyawati Suleiman (1980:3) concluded that the religion followed in Sriwijaya was Mahayana Buddhism of the tantric kind. She noted that tantrism in Sriwijaya came from Bengal, whence Buddhist missionaries came to Indonesia on their way to China, and where pilgrims came from South-East Asia and China.

At Padang Lawas, North Sumatra, other archaeological monuments have also been discovered and showing the existence of Buddhism in Sumatra. The sanctuaries lie scattered on the banks of the Pannai and Barumon. The most important are Biaro Bahal I, II, and III; and Si Pamutung which form part of the numerous sanctuaries of Pannai (Satyawati Suleiman, 1980:18). As was the case in Muara Takus, the ruins have suffered from natural destruction. All the monuments of Biaro Bahal are Buddhist temples. It is important to note that, judged from the figures carved on the wall, Padang Lawas had many dancing figures (Bahal I) representing some tantric rites. Dancing warrior in relief of Bahal I hold a club on his right hand and his left hand resting against body with raised index finger. He has large round ear ornaments. In Pule, another Buddhist temple in Padang Lawas, some of the figures have human bodies and animals' heads. It could have been animal masks as in Tibet when tantric dances are performed (Satyawati Suleiman, 1980:10).

It is worth noting that a tantric character of the temple fits entirely with one of the inscription in Padang Lawas which expressing the terrific laughing in Tantric ritual: "*hahahaha hum huhuhehai hohauhaha om ah hum*". Beside, in the central chamber of Bahal II a statue has been found of Heruka, one of the most terrific gods of later Buddhism who was especially worshipped by sorcerers (Bernet Kempers, 1959:77).

Inscriptions have been found in Sumatra: inscription from 1269 Saka which is carved on the back of Amoghapasa, from Bukit Gombak (1278 Saka), Surowaso (1279 Saka), and Kubur Raja (1300 Saka). All of these three inscriptions showing tantric character of King Adityawarman. The first inscription mentioned the statue Amoghapasa-Gaganaganja that was placed in the religious building for Jina. In Surowaso inscription it was clearly showed that the King (Adityawarman) was ordained as a Bhairawa. J.L.Moens (1924:558-579) has discussed at length this inscription. Moens translated the word *hasano* = "laughing", it means laughing in Bhairawa ceremonial. Moens compared to other sources on this problem. In the Mahabharata (Bhismaparwa, canto 796) it was mentioned that Durga: "*Reverence to the younger sister of the chief of cowherds, delighting in Mahisa's blood, loud laughing, who dwelest continually near to sepulchrals*". (Moens, 1924:578). Also in Nepal, one of the eight *bhairawa-smasanas* is called "Attattahasa smasana" - a cemetery in which laughing is heard.⁵ A cemetery should play the part loud of a sacred ground. In Tantrism such regions are par excellence the places where the highest ritual initiations in the esoteric doctrine are carried out. The cemetery is the place where the connexion with the terrestrial is abolished (Pott, 1966:77).

⁵ The eight smasanas in Nepal are: *Candogra-smasana, Gahvara-smasana, Jvalamkula-smasana, Kalanka-smasana, Ghorandhaka-smasana, Laksmivarna-smasana, Kilakila-smasana, and Attattahasa-smasa*. Each smasana is inhabited by Bhairavas, and demonic aspects of Devi (Pott, 1966:82).

III. Buddhist Statues

Traces of Buddhism in Sumatra are evidenced by sculptures found in Lampung, Palembang, Jambi, West Sumatra, North Sumatra, and Padang Lawas. In Palembang a Buddha statue was found on the Bukit Seguntang Hill. It is made of granite which is not found locally. It led to the conclusion that the statue could be from Bangka where this statue has been made on the neighbouring island this kind of stone is available. The date supposed to be 3th or 5th century AD for the style is similar with that of Amarawati school of art. Satyawati Suleiman (1980:14) is of the opinion that this statue could have been made at a later date about the 9th century. Other Buddhist statue found in Palembang is stone statue of Maitreya and Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or Padmapani from Kerinci. This Avalokiteswara is made of bronze. Both his hands are broken.

Besides bronzes a few stone images were also found in this area. A stone image of Avalokiteswara (now in Museum Pusat, Jakarta) is an example. Originally this statue had four arms, but only one on the left holding a book remains. Amitabha is in the coiffure. He has a long *sarung*, and a tiger skin is draped around his hips. The other hands had probably a vase, rosary (Satyawati Suleiman, 1980:38, pl. 11).

In Solok Sipin (Jambi) a Buddha stone image has also been found. Other Bodhisattwa stone statue was found in Punggungraharjo, Lampung. The Bodhisattwa is seated in *vajrasana* on a lotus cushion. The hands are in a gesture of *dharmacakramudra*. The influence of the art of East Java of Majapahit period is evident in the tiara (Satyawati Suleiman, 1980). Thus, its date might be the 13th or the 14th century.

A stone statue of King Adityawarman as Buddhist Bhairava was found at Padang Roco, Sungai Langsat (on the northern bank of Batang Hari, west coast of Sumatra). The statue is now in Jakarta Museum (Height 4.41 metres). The god is standing on a folded-leg corpse, on top of a pedestal decorated with eight skulls. He is showing his demoniacal character: holding a knife in his right hand and a skull-cup in his left, wearing snake armlets and a *kala* head waist band. Skulls and crescents form are the decorative motif of his loin cloth. The image of Akshobhya in it indicates the Buddhist character of the deity represented. Such characters are often shown in the sculptural art of East Java during the Majapahit period (14th century).

Adityawarman, a prince from Halayu, lived for some time in East Java as a court official. He is supposed to be a descendant of Wisnuwardana (the father of Kertanagara). After his return to Sumatra, Adityawarman became king of Halayu. In 1347 he erected the Amoghapasa-group and ordered the enormous statue of himself to be made in his manifestation as Bhairava (Bernet Kempers, 1959:88).

Amoghapasa stone statue from Rambahan, Central Sumatra (Jakarta Museum, Height 1.63 metres) is interesting. The decoration of the base was showing a horse, a chakra, a queen, a jewel, a minister, a general and an elephant. These were being the *saptaratni* or 'seven jewels' of a world ruler or chakravartin (Bernet Kempers, 1959). In Buddhism the so called *saptaratna* are: *hastiratna* (elephant-treasure), *asvaratna* (horse-treasure), *cintamani* (thought-jewel), *striratna* (wife-treasure), *grhapati* (house-lord, i.e. minister), *parinayaka* (Guide, i.e.

general) (Liebert, 1976:259). The lotuses on both side of the deity are the characteristic emblems of a personage from Singhasari in that it is not rising from vases (the characteristic of the art of Majapahit). The main figure, Amoghapasa, is surrounded by thirteen gods, Dhyani-Buddhas and Taras.⁶ Its date is supposed to be the 13th or the 14th century.

On its pedestal an inscription, dated 1286 AD, is written. The inscription described that a group of fourteen with Amoghapasa Lokeswara as the main figure, provided with the seven jewels, was brought to Suvarnavipa (Sumatra) from Java as a gift from Sri Visvarupakumara with the support of Krtanagara to the delight of the people of Malayu and especially of Malayu's King Maulivarmadeva. Krtanagara is the king of Singhasari who reigned in 1268 - 1292 AD. In 1275 AD Krtanagara had sent an expedition to Malayu. In the panegyric poem called *Nagarakrtagama* (written in 1365 AD by Prapanca) the expedition to Malayu was stated (Canto 41:5:3): "*nagasyabhawa saka sang prabhu kumon dumona rikanang tanah rii Malayu*" – "mountains-nine-existences Shaka (1197 = 1275 AD) the honoured Prabhu ordered to take for goal (of a military expedition) the country of Malayu there" (Pigeaud, 1960).

As it has been stated before, in the central chamber of Bahal II a statue has been found. It is Heruka, one of the most terrific god in later Buddhism who was especially worshipped by sorcerers (Bernet Kempers, 1959:77, plate 228). The god dances on the dead body of man. His attributes are a *vajra* (thunderbolt) in his right hand, a skull cup in his left. Character and attributes of the god were expressing the sphere of Tantric ritual.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The archaeological evidences as illustrated before is to show that Buddhism in Sumatra have left its traces in the form of archaeological artifacts. Seen from the temporal dimension Buddhism has developed since the sixth or the seventh century till the fourteenth century. The seventh century is considered to be the oldest date for the spread of Buddhism in Indonesia or maybe in South East Asia. Especially the archaeological evidences scattered from South Sumatra (the older date) to North Sumatra.

It is worth noting that most of the archaeological artifacts (temples, statues and ancient inscriptions) are showing Tantric characters as clearly evidenced by Biaro Bahal (14th century) and Bhairawa statue (14th century). The development of Tantric Buddhism in the late period in Sumatra is in accordance with what have developed in East Java and it might be due to the influence from East Java. It is very interesting that Tantric Buddhism had spread so fast to Sumatra in the seventh century.

⁶ The main figures of the thirteen gods that can easily be recognized: Amoghapasa flanked by Syamatara, Sudhanakumara, Hayagriva, and Bhurkuti. Amitabha is in the crown of Amoghapasa. Several bronze plaque of Amoghapasa surrounded by thirteen gods had been found at Tumpang, near Chandi Jago (East Java).

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