Indonesian Megaliths

A forgotten cultural heritage

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Cover: Monumental statue of Palindo in Bada Valley (Sulawesi)

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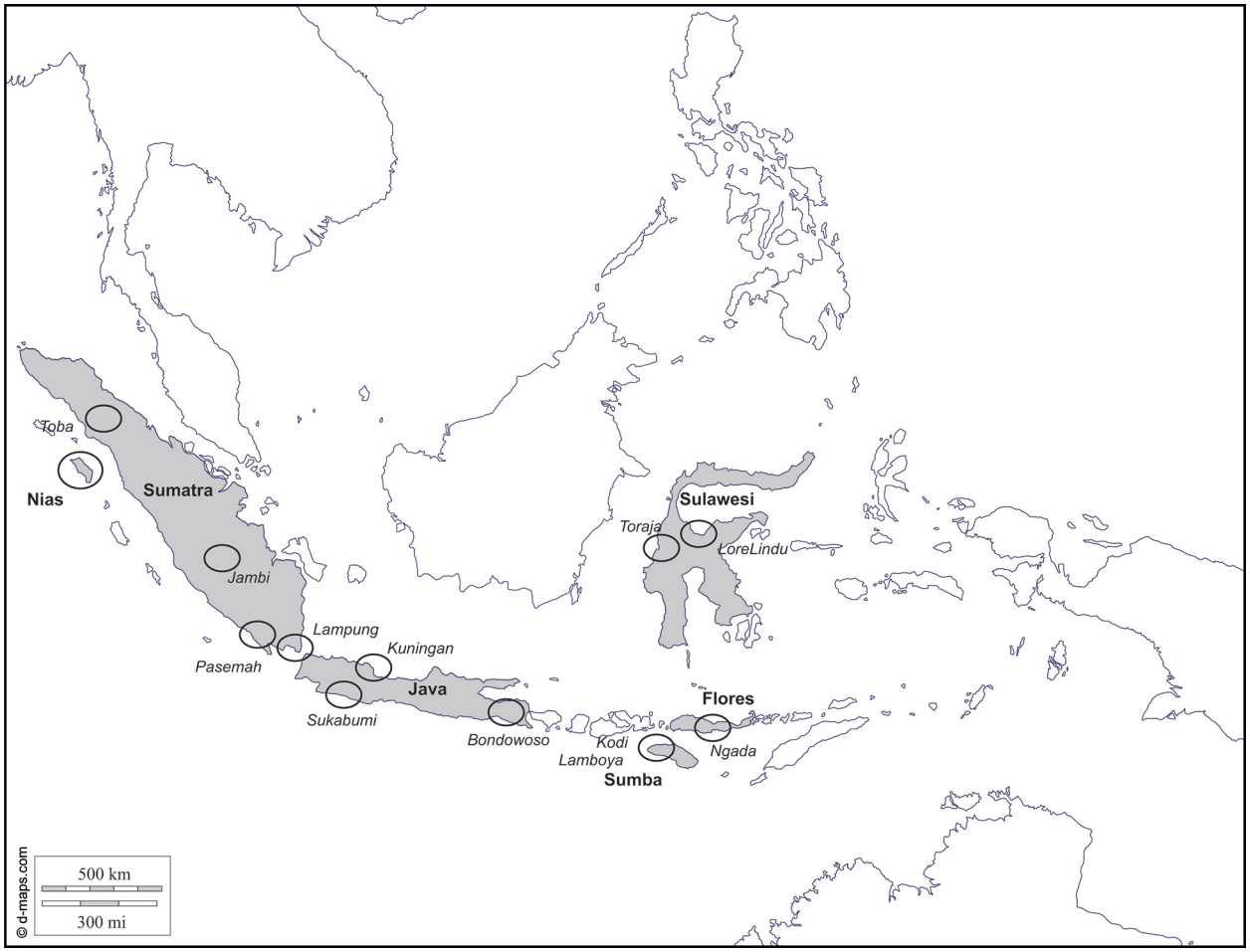
Fig. 1 Monumental statue of Palindo in Bada Valley (Sulawesi)



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Foreword

On the margins of the major Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Sriwijaya, Majapahit and Malayu, indigenous peoples were still living in the forests, mountains, and plateaus of Indonesia. These peoples had religions qualified as 'primitive', based on the cult of ancestors and the spirits of nature. This was a common cultural background they shared from Bondowoso (East Java) to Toba (North Sumatra) as well as Sukabumi, Kuningan, Lampung Pasemah, Jambi and Minangkabau for the most studied regions.

Through the exchange of resources and services with Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms, the indigenous peoples acquired prestige goods leading to social competition. The emergence of leaders preceded the original creation of megalithic monuments, which were used to bury, honor, commemorate and / or communicate with ancestors. For those without a written language, these stones, rough or carved, marked the landscape and transmitted the memory of men from one generation to another. In Java, Sumatra (central and south) and Sulawesi (center: Lore Lindu), the erection of megalithic monuments ceased as soon as the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms lost power. The use of megaliths spread later in the islands of Sumba, Flores, Nias, North Sumatra (Toba) and Sulawesi (Tanah Toraja) under the influence of European traders, and despite massive conversions to Catholicism and Protestantism in these areas this ancient tradition has remained alive.

Ethno-anthropological studies of the three regions examined the pulling of stones, construction of buildings, the arrangement and ceremonies of the deceased, which advantageously complements the archaeological work on megalithic monuments abandoned for several centuries in the rest of the Indonesian archipelago.

Introduction

Spirits of nature and numerous stone statues inhabit the rice fields, forests and mountains of Indonesia. Legend says that the goddess *Pahit Lidah*, a mythical figure of Asia, turns men who transgress moral codes into stone. Thus Indonesians are not surprised to see in their fields statues that intertwine anthropomorphic creatures, buffaloes and mystical animals.

Petrification is not always considered a punishment on the Indonesian achipelago by the numerous indigenous peoples distinguished from each other by language, architecture, clothing and rituals. The people of Nias do not understand those of Flores, or those of Sumba; likewise a Toraja from Sulawesi is as much a stranger to a man from the Bada Valley as an Inuit to a Papuan, though there is only four days walk between the valleys that separate the former. Nevertheless there is among these natives a common cultural background. The community social system is based on a founding ancestor who inaugurated the lineage of a tribe that is divided into clans and castes (nobles, commoners, slaves). Each tribe has a leader. Although in contact with state societies, indigenous peoples forsake writing. They prefer the art of stone steles and tombs erected in honor of either their living leader or leaders who have become ancestral spirits. It is for this reason that the complex set of indigenous cosmological beliefs and their social transcription can be characterized as 'megalithic culture.'

Supported by the data of archaeologists and ethnologists, the indigenous populations in Indonesia constructed megalithic monuments in two periods. The first began in the 7th and 8th centuries in East Java and spread to the rest of the island, South and Central Sumatra and Lore Lindu in Central Sulawesi. It persisted in these regions until the 13-15th centuries. The second period stretches from the 16th century to the present, and in some ways is a continuation of the first but encompassing other islands and regions: Sumba, Flores, Nias, North Sumatra by the Batak and Central Sulawesi with the Toraja. The construction of megalithic monuments intensified as indigenous peoples came in contact with newcomers: Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the first episode and European merchants in the second. The acquisition of wealth, metal tools, fierce competition between tribes and clans, and a willingness to please ancestors gave rise to small local leaders during both periods.

These leaders became sponsors of thousands of statues, standing stones, dolmens, jar (*kalambas*), sarcophagi, platforms, temples, seats and stones with cup-holes (*Dakon*). The collective effort required to construct megalithic monuments contributed to the cohesion of the tribes. The stone monuments, rough or carved, displayed the social status of the sponsor, and additionally in these cultures based on oral traditions, the stones are fundamental communication tools to transmit tribal identity. The construction of megalithic monuments in Java and South and Central Sumatra ended with the decline of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms. In the 15th century, the last monuments erected near Kuningan and Sukabumi (West Java) and around Padang Lawas (Sumatra Centre) were more strongly influenced by Hinduism, a syncretism that would recur five centuries later in the 19th century with the arrival of missionaries in Sumba, Nias, Flores, Toba and in Tanah Toraja.

Mutations in the indigenous tribes occurred quickly: in just a few centuries, and sometimes in as little as fifty years, cultural heritage can disappear or becomes a soulless tourist trap. Although the *Pancasila* (Indonesian constitution) advocates unity in diversity, indigenous religions deemed 'primitive' do not have a place in the new administrative standards of an Indonesia where everyone must choose from one of six permitted religions. Forgotten or forced to adapt, megalithic culture, an integral part of Indonesian heritage, deserves to be described and photographed so that its heritage remains clear: this is the main purpose of this work.