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# ULAMA HILL

Benedict R. O'G. Anderson

Faithful readers of *Indonesia* may well remember how the fourteen-year-old Soetjipto learns from his slightly older, unnamed lover that the pair will have to part after many months of happiness together.<sup>1</sup> The lover's parents have been transferred to a distant town (Malang), and the boy has no choice but to go with them. The melancholy revelation comes at night, after they have climbed to the top of Ulama Hill along with crowds of local people going to make offerings and asking for boons or advice. Below them, the lights of Pandji and Panarukan twinkle brightly.

Happening to be in Situbondo, East Java, on December 3 last year, along with my assistant Edward Manik, his brother Hendrik, Merry Filiana, Mohd. Iqbal, Petrik Matanasi, and Hilman Al-Syafdudin, I thought it would be interesting to "check out" Ulama Hill, eighty-six years after Soetjipto's last tryst. From Soetjipto's account, I imagined a Muslim site, with well-tended tombs of revered Javanese *ulama*, situated on a spectacular crag overlooking the landscape. All these assumptions turned out to be wrong. Hence the following notes.

In Soetjipto's school years, his home was in the village of Pandji, due east of Situbondo (see map, below). Today Pandji is a prosperous suburb of the big city. Ulama Hill is the northernmost of three connected low bluffs due south of Pandji. Soetjipto wrote that the hill was three hundred meters high, and about one kilometer from his home. With only these vague indications, we had to ask around in Pandji. The locals seemed puzzled by the phrase "Bukit Ulama," but quickly said we must mean Peng-gepeng, and gave us directions. Petrik told us that this name was typical of Madurese toponyms, where the final syllable of the root is repeated and placed at the start of the full name. Once climbing this hill meant a thirty-minute gradual ascent, but

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<sup>1</sup> See Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, trans., "First Love: The Opening of Soetjipto's *Djalan Sampoerna*," *Indonesia* 82 (October 2006): 39-74; and Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, trans., "Into the Whirlpool: The Second Part of Soetjipto's *Djalan Sampoerna*," *Indonesia* 84 (October 2007): 97-126.

today, thanks to the modern road system, one only needs climb for perhaps five to ten minutes. Situbondo and Pandji are quite visible from the top, but not in any dramatic way. Ulama Hill is rather bleak and forlorn, covered with rocks and wild shrubs and grasses. You know where the top is from the electricity pylon's location. Near the feet of the pylon are five or six scattered graves, some headed to the north, as is proper, others pointed in different directions. None has any inscriptions explaining who was buried in them. They look run-down, though cracked cement repairs are visible, where "donors" are identified by initials and occasionally residence. Some of the tombs are sheltered in simple bamboo shacks, with zinc roofing and, sometimes, also, siding. There is also a revered footprint sunk about six inches below the ground and surrounded by a small cement "kerb."



Map of Situbondo (Google Map, 2011)

Soetjipto wrote about being briefly interrogated by the *djurukuntji* (caretaker) on that fateful night, and today there is still one, living with his family in a small hut. My friends and I had our first surprise when we asked to interview the elderly *djurukuntji*. His adult son said that the old man spoke only Madurese, so he volunteered to translate his father's words into Indonesian. The old man claimed that he was the sixth in his lineage to occupy the position, and his son would eventually be the seventh. (A rough calculation indicated that the little "dynasty" must have started about 1860.) As for the dead, he mentioned by name only Pandji Anoman Prangkusumo, who lies in the best attended tomb, but didn't explain who the man was. There had been documents about the others, but they had been stolen at the time when Juliana succeeded her mother Wilhelmina as Queen of the Netherlands (1948).

The old man added that, on certain days of the year, the top of the hill would be filled by people from all over East Java, most bringing tents, and coming to pray, make offerings, and, of course, ask for blessings and advice. At the same time, I could not

detect anything at the site that suggested Islam except for the plain flat form of the tombs.

One further oddity. In Soetjipto's account, the young lovers enjoy the nocturnal panorama of twinkling lights in the distance, identifying them as coming from Panarukan, the seaport to the west of Situbondo, and a promontory called Tandjung Tjina (today the senseless Tanjung Pecinan) to the north (see map). But Situbondo itself is not mentioned.

What to make of all this? Four simple conjectures have occurred to me. The first is that Soetjipto, very conscious of his Central Java (Banjumas) ancestors, deliberately concealed the fact that Ulama Hill is a Madurese, not a Javanese, site. It is well-known that after the VOC's (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, Dutch East Indies Company) brutal fourteen-year war (1767–81) against the kingdom of Blambangan, the eastern end of Java became largely a devastated wilderness. Ann Kumar quotes, as follows, a sentence in an 1848 report from Bondowoso by an official named C. J. Bosch: "This region is perhaps the only one in Java where a once prosperous population was entirely wiped out."<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, when big plantations were being developed in East Java, no substantial Javanese labor force existed to work them. Hence a huge and continuous migration from Madura ensued. This is why Situbondo today has a Madurese majority, with the Madurese language the dominant *lingua franca*. Javanese migrating there in modern times had to learn Madurese, but the Madurese did not necessarily learn Javanese. One can be pretty sure that Soetjipto could speak Madurese fluently, but because of his hatred for his cruel Madurese stepfather, he whited all this out from his narrative. Malay, or Indonesian, came to his rescue, so that in his narrative all the intra-family conversations and quarrels are implausibly given to readers in this proto-national language.

The second conjecture is that the absence of inscribed tombstones may have arisen out of the vast illiteracy of the colonial era, perhaps specially among the Madurese. If this guess is correct, then the story of the many documents stolen has to be taken with several pinches of salt. The "theft" may be intended to conceal this now embarrassing earlier illiteracy, or else the actual absence, of dead *ulama*.

The third conjecture is closely connected. If the site was really a sort of *ulama* cemetery, then there should be signs of Islam, with the names of the *ulama* devoutly recorded. But there are plenty of indications that the site is not very Islamic at all, and that it is connected to a secretive animism, or at least what Javanese would call *abangan*-ism. One could then interpret the name Bukit Ulama, or Ulama Hill, as protective camouflage, deflecting interventions from *ulama* in Pandji and Situbondo, as well as those of too nosy outsiders. Soetjipto and his lover decided to climb the hill that full-moon night because it marked the happy, well-fed end of the fasting month, and "everyone" was making the climb to celebrate, bringing offerings, praying for luck in the local lottery, reciting *zikir*, asking for advice, and enjoying the moonlit panorama. Our *djurukuntji* did not mention Hari Raya (the day of celebration marking the end of

<sup>2</sup> See her splendid "Javanese Historiography in and of the Colonial Period: A Case Study," in *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and David Marr (Singapore: Heinemann, 1979), p. 192.

Ramadan) when he spoke of many people making the ascent on special days of the calendar, but doubtless he had this cheerful day in mind.

The fourth conjecture is also related. The most cared-for tomb is that of someone the old man called Pandji Anoman Prangkusumo. The name is definitely not that of any *ulama*. It is most probable that the first two words are a rustic "corruption" of Raden Pandji (Anom), the aristocratic Madurese title equivalent to the Javanese "Raden Mas." The personal name Prangkusumo suggests a warrior, perhaps one who died in battle. But the key thing is that he is understood to have been a Madurese aristocrat. If he existed, then it is possible that he fought against the Dutch in support of non-Islamic Blambangan towards the end of the eighteenth century (see above). But Petrik, after chatting with one of the *djurukuntji*'s relatives, was told that the dead man was the founder of Pandji village. Later on, I received an e-mail from my old friend Arief Djati, who is fluent in Javanese and Madurese. He said that almost everywhere in Java and Madura villagers claim that the founder of their village was an aristocrat. The fact that Soetjipto did not mention R. P. A. Prangkusumo is open to interpretation, too. Did he wish to avoid any trace of Madura in recounting the saddest day of his young life? Or was the name of his village's founder too everyday familiar to be worth mentioning? We will never know.

In Soetjipto's account, there is nothing very special about Ulama Hill. Was this because he was living nearby? All of us outsiders came away with the feeling that there is something uncanny about the site and the secretive people who guard it. So many things without names.



View of Bukit Ulama from below, on the nearest small road



Views of Situbondo from Bukit Ulama (top photograph by Edward Manik)



Tombs atop Bukit Ulama



House of the *djurukuntji* (photograph by Edward Manik)



*Djurukunji (left) and son*



Tomb of Anom Prangkusumo's family (photograph by Edward Manik)



Tomb of Anom Prangkusumo